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Margaret Anne Doody, University of Notre Dame

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The Fantastic in the Work of Frances Burney
MARGARET ANNE DOODY

Frances Burney's four novels are usually discussed under the rubric of the realistic English novel. Various aspects of her work have been treated: comedy, dramatic quality, feminism. The relation between her work and her life has been explored not only by myself but also by other scholars, such as Janice Thaddeus. I now wish, however, to focus on a particular aspect or quality of her work not given much attention in the past. I want to look at what I call "the Fantastic Burney." Fantasy and fantasias of various kinds play a decided role in Frances Burney's work, rendering her puzzling, perhaps even off-putting, to some readers who wish her to be "just like" Jane Austen, if a shade inferior. The use of fantasy sets her works apart from Austen's. Their novels are not in the same mould; the two writers are saying different things.

Evelina and the Repudiation of Fantasy

Burney's best-known novel, her first (and shortest) published work, exhibits fewer traces of the fantastic than any of the later novels. The plot, or rather myth-story, is schematic and stylized, but that is different from being fantastic. The use of well-known plot patterns to probe deep psychological and moral complexes has been known to us since the Greeks. The story of the child who is lost or abandoned, an Oedipus or Ion, is deeply familiar to us from Sophocles and Euripides. Lighter treatments are given to similar material by later comic dramatists like Menander. If in the older classical tragedies the displaced child is usually male, in the later Greek, Roman, and medieval comedies the displaced child is often female, like Evelina. Such stories are recycled through the ages. They may not strike us as entirely "realistic" although there are "real-life" instances

of recovery of the lost child. (Elian Gonzales, for example, who seems like a living replay of the "Child of the Sea" motif in *Amadis de Gaula.*) Rather than providing "realism," an aesthetic quality or element that cannot exist without a good story, such oft-recycled classic or even mythic stories provide good material to think with. Burney in *Evelina* uses the lost-child story overtly as a way in which to examine society at various levels, as the heroine acquires a multitude of relatives. There is a certain Oedipal content displaced in her narrative; the heroine's bastard brother Macartney unwittingly nearly marries his sister and almost kills his father. Such elements might better be called "mythic patterns" rather than "fantasy," and they are important to novels in general, even if when they make their presence overtly felt they seem to militate against realism.

"Realism" is in any case, I think, a snare and a delusion, if we imagine that any full-length fictional narrative can or should shuck both myth and fantasy in giving us straight "reality." It is not possible not to write myth. It is possible to avoid the fantastic. In picking up a term like "fantasy" or "the fantastic," I realize I am faced with a problem of definitions. How do I set the "fantastic" off, not only in contrast to the "realistic" (easy), but also in distinction from "myth"? I take "myth" (though originally the Greek word *mythos* only means "story") as meaning a story of a religious nature or a foundational public legend having to do both with the structure of personality and with the structure and fate of a whole society. "Fantasy," by contrast, I take to be a piece of playful experiment, playing against expectations of realism and playing off myth. I am certainly refusing to accept the terms "fantasy" or "fantastic" as referring only to post-Romantic works, which has been a confounding appropriation of it by Todorov and others.[1] "Fantasy" is recognizable in dramatic or narrative devices overtly and consciously presented or performed and never intended to be accepted as real—unlike legends or religious stories, which have at least at one time been validated by sincere belief. The story of *Oedipus* and the story of the Fall of Troy would both be myths. Aristophanes' dramatic story *The Birds* provides a genuinely classic example of the Fantastic. Nobody thinks Cloud-Cuckoo-Land a real place. The fancy recognizes the kindred quality in a variety of other works of different

periods, e.g., Perrault's telling of Sleeping Beauty. Mythic stories in sophisticated eras may be turned into the fantastic—one of the best examples being Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a fantastic post-mythic treatment of various myths. A deliberate departure from what is usually recognized as sensibly normal and intellectually rational is entailed in the consciously creative work of fantasy. The work signals to the reader that we all know that we have departed from the commonly logical or rational—from the ordinary; we accept that this is so and prefer it that way, for now.

The eighteenth century, the "Age of Reason," is also the great "Age of the Fantastic." We can recognize this as true if we think for a moment of some of its best-loved productions: *The Rape of the Lock*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Candide*, and *The Magic Flute*. Writers of the early eighteenth-century superintended the advent into French and then into English of the *Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*), and "Oriental tales" began to abound.[2] From the late seventeenth century, literary culture opened to cleverly retold fairy tales like Perrault's "Cendrillon" and "La Belle au Bois Dormant" or even newly-invented fairy tales and tales of metamorphosis, e.g., Mme. D'Aulnoy's "The White Cat." The era also invented or redrew gnomes, sylphs, and flying people (*Peter Wilkins*); it engaged in Voyages to the Moon, as well as talking lap-dogs, guineas and shoes. In a single work we may move abruptly from what seems like grim realism through broad farce to pure fantasy (as in Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, which swerves into the fantastic Lucianic voyage of the virtuous Mrs. Heartfree).

Evelina almost self-consciously holds itself at arm's length from fantasy though it may knowingly and quietly refer us to performative works with an element of the fantastic, such as Congreve's *Love for Love*, or the opera. Fantasy seems in the main, however, to be repudiated almost entirely, especially in one short highly visual scene. I refer of course to the scene in Cox's Museum with the wonderful simulacra of living things made by the goldsmith, including inanimate objects made to operate by clockwork as if animate. "Just then, our attention was attracted by a pine-apple, which, suddenly opening, discovered a nest of birds, who immediately began to sing. 'Well,' cried Madame Duval, 'this is prettier than all the rest! I declare, in all

my travels, I never see nothing eleganter.'"[3] Evelina remarks to Sir Clement, "It is very fine, and very ingenious . . . and yet—I don't know how it is,—but I seem to miss something" (76). What Evelina misses in this nursery-rhyme scene of cooked birds beginning to sing is breath. These artificial constructs are simulacra of fantasies rendered lifeless, so the true animation of the fantastic is missing. Life and breath are missing in this strange, unnecessary art. It is as if Burney is saying, "this is where I am *not* going to go."

Yet there are other more off-putting fantasies in this novel, ugly fantasies cooked up in the dirty imaginations of brutal character. We have the fake highway robbery, with its concomitant attack upon Madame Duval carried out by the middle-aged Captain Mirvan and the younger Sir Clement Willoughby. We are also shown the old women's race devised by two aimless young aristocrats. Both of these are enactments of violent fantasy, inner misogyny and contempt merging with ugly story-making as the men play with their own violence, connecting with the real (real human beings) through physical abuse. Fantasy almost seems a kind of disease or delinquency. Burney seems to warn us and herself of the abusive potential of fantasy itself. Yet her own imagination consorts very readily with the violent as she may have been somewhat uncomfortably aware. Near the very end of the novel, Captain Mirvan, unrestrained joker and brutal fantasist, intrudes a dressed-up monkey into the company to mock the fop Lovel and, by implication, the whole of elegant society, which is no more than monkeys dressed up. Burney here seems to be playing with (among other things) Swift's fantasy of the Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels.* The frightened monkey bites Lovel viciously on the ear. Captain Mirvan says "it only looks as if you had been in the pillory," a jeer which the satiric middle-aged Mrs. Selwyn immediately caps: "'Very true,' added Mrs. Selwyn, 'and who knows but it may acquire you the credit of being an anti-ministerial writer?'" (402). This is adding insult to injury; Lovel would never dream of crossing those in high places. The pillory as entertainment is recreated in a brutal fantastic riff on the bleeding ear of Lovel, who is mockingly metamorphosed into a kind of Defoe.

Indeed, all in all, *Evelina*, often thought the sweetest of Burney's stories, harbors a good deal of violence and unease in its customarily contained moments of fantasy. Yet throughout *Evelina* the fantastic is almost entirely repudiated, officially at least. Fantasies seem the offscouring of low souls or, at least, the offspring of minds (like that of the goldsmith or even Mrs. Selwyn) not subject to the highest discipline of the greater good. Fantasy is associated with the cruel, the brutal, with sporting at others' suffering. The good mind apparently does not admit fantasy, which tends to be either lifeless, like a golden bird, or bloody.

Cecilia or the Invitation to Harlequin

In her second and more ambitious novel *Cecilia*, Burney seems not only more conscious of fantasy than she is in *Evelina*, but also more favorable to it and more willing to admit the value of fantasy. In this novel, both unsympathetic and sympathetic characters have a certain play of mind and openly exhibit their own attraction to fantasy, an attraction visibly shared by their author. The question of fantasy itself is opened up by the consistent allusion to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the knight who famously lives in a fantasy set off by reading fantastic works. Don Quixote is almost always a very sympathetic figure; he certainly is so in *Cecilia*. Belfield, the young man of talents, comes to the masquerade appropriately attired as Don Quixote:

> This Don Quixote was accoutered with tolerable exactness according to the description of the admirable Cervantes; his armour was rusty, his helmet was a barber's bason, his shield, a pewter dish, and his lance, an old sword fastened to a slim cane. His figure, tall and thin, was well adapted to the character he represented, and his mask, which depictured a lean and haggard face, worn with care, yet fiery with crazy passions, exhibited with propriety the most striking, the knight of the doleful countenance.[4]

Belfield is able to sustain the character of the literary idealist who is indeed a fantasy representation of himself to himself. He utters appropriate speeches and acts as the chivalrous deliverer when he offers to save Cecilia from the unwanted attentions of a person attired as the devil who is hovering about her: "Report, O most fair and unmatchable virgin! daringly affirmeth, that a certain discourteous person, who calleth himself the devil, even now, and in thwart of your fair inclinations, keepeth and detaineth your irradiant frame in hostile thraldom" (109). Sustaining the fantasy-play, Don Quixote addresses the devil in characteristic language "that the honour of Don Quixote de la Mancha may not be sullied by thy extinction, I do here confer upon thee the honour of knighthood, dubbing thee, by my own sword, Don Devil, knight of the horrible physiognomy" (109). The two characters (it is indicated that the Devil is also, like Cervantes' hero, a fictional entity) then do battle: "a mock fight ensued, conducted on both sides with admirable dexterity" (110).

Belfield is indeed a quixotic personality. Poet, wit and dreamer, he is the son of a linen draper, elevated by education but without money or rank to stand by him in his struggles in the world. Belfield is at first insufficiently aware of the social forces arrayed against him. Cecilia is likewise unaware of the forces arrayed against her; her guardian has secretly "sold" her to Sir Robert Floyer, who appears at the masquerade attired as a Turk. Worse, Cecilia's apparently benevolent elder friend Mr. Monckton, suavely conservative and eloquent in a neo-Johnsonian style, privately plans to marry the beautiful heiress himself—as soon as his aging and ill-tempered wife is dead. Therefore, Monckton constantly schemes to keep the heiress away from other suitors. At the masquerade party, Monckton appears as the well-disguised devil. Here he impersonates himself, faithfully acting out his secret plan to keep suitors at bay. Far from being eloquent or Johnsonian, and in decided contrast to the ornately verbal Don Quixote, Monckton-as-devil only makes brute noises.

The reader may be flattered at clearly understanding the nature and function of Don Quixote in the masquerade scene, but part of the point in the scene just quoted is that *Don Quixote* is not alluded to on its own. Rather, the total fantastic effect lies in the encounter of Don

Quixote and the Devil. This encounter reflects characters in a Harlequin stage presentation. In this second published novel, Burney throws open her narrative to admit a fantastic theatricality and adapts the style of the contemporary fantasias of the stage. The doings of the world, she shows us, are dangerous and absurd, products of unstable fancies. Theatricals and masquerades are valuable insofar as they call attention to the fantastic and constructed nature of what is taken as serious reality.

Throughout *Cecilia,* Burney shows that the public structures of money and birth are unwholesome and tyrannical fantasies. Mr. Delvile is wrapped in imaginary importance, which he has to keep insisting upon, an airy edifice made of his notional rank and only basely reflected by Delvile Castle, the one outward and visible sign of his significance. No wonder he takes umbrage when Lady Honoria suggests he sell it:

> ". . . it is only to take out these old windows, and fix some thick iron grates in their place, and so turn the castle into a gaol for the county. . . . I dare say the sheriff, or the mayor and corporation, or some of those sort of people, would give him money enough, for the use of it, to run him up a mighty pretty neat little box somewhere near Richmond." (505)

Mr. Delvile protests:

> "If I thought my son capable of putting such an insult upon his ancestors . . . I would banish him my presence for ever."
>
> "Dear sir," cried Lady Honoria, "how would his ancestors ever know it?" (505)

Delvile cannot exactly explain what makes Delvile Castle a unit of supreme value beyond all other values; he can only exclaim at and anathematize anyone who cannot see what he imagines as the irreplaceable and exalted aura. The fantasticated possession

dominates personality, and property of all kinds (even lands and houses) enters the realm of rational or emotional meaning only in the guise of fantastic props.

Burney is a great artist in examining how people live in what we now call "an imaginary." The Burney-observed imaginary is commonly not a personal construction but has something to do with what society in general has agreed should be called real and of value. Characters individually may be capable of diagnosing the fantasies of another person, but not of themselves, largely because their fantasy is shared and thus respectable. The man of money (like the vulgar miser Briggs) is easily capable of insisting to the man of birth (Compton Delvile) that blue-blooded grandeur is nothing but a dream—a dream derived from soothing the fact of death with the promise of earthly immortality through continuity of name and inheritance:

> "Why all them old grandfathers and aunts you brag of; a set of poor souls you won't let rest in their coffins; mere clay and dirt! fine things to be proud of! a parcel of old mouldy rubbish quite departed this life!" (454)

The aggressive miser will not let up, telling Delvile that if he had been born poor he would not have done as well as the self-made Briggs:

> "And as to ringing a bell," [i.e., for a servant] continued Mr. Briggs, "you'd never know what it was in your life, unless could make interest to be a dust-man. . . . why not one dust as well as another? Dust in a cart good as dust of a charnel-house; don't smell half so bad." (456)

Mr. Briggs, vulgar, dirty, and wealthy, can readily deconstruct the false structure of imagination which is Mr. Delvile's claim not only to superiority, but to any identity at all. The man of money, however, does not see that his solid worth is likewise chimerical and that he cheats his own life and the lives of others in living religiously by his

fantastic belief. Briggs comes to the masquerade as a chimney sweeper. His mind runs on dirt and garbage collection.

In creating the masquerade at the Harrels, Burney shows herself poised and openly able to enjoy the employment of the fantastic. She later takes her new power to new heights in the grimly playful description of the evening at Vauxhall, which culminates in Mr. Harrel's suicide. Harrel, who has not paid his bills and now is deep in debt, has destroyed others with his carelessness and now destroys himself, but a real act is carried out in a kind of dark fantasy—as he imagines his debts can all be "*paid . . . with a* BULLET" (430).

Throughout *Cecilia,* Burney is very aware of how people ruin themselves and injure others through acting out certain unwholesome but largely accepted social fantasies, which are not called into question because they are so familiar and are taken as describing the "real." Class, fashion, appearance (we might say making a *bella figura*), reputation, and wealth are pseudo-realities that can only be properly initiated and honored as fantasies. The heroine's three guardians each exemplify one form or another of negative fantasy. So, too, does Mr. Monckton who dreams of Cecilia as his future wife even though he has a wife living. Fantasy and madness are also near allied—as we see when the heroine herself is driven mad and believes things that are not so. Belfield's fantasy of being a gentleman almost kills him when he fights Sir Robert Floyer in a duel. Yet Belfield's fantasy is not exposed as the result of simple error or pride; his talents require exercise beyond the counter of the linen draper's shop.

Athough in *Cecilia* the fantastic is associated with mistake, erroneous values, and even self-destruction, it is not repudiated as it is in *Evelina.* The mature Burney enjoys the changefulness that fantasy can bring to the fore, the whirling quality of excess and social motion. These are expressed in Mr. Morrice the young lawyer, who is the Harlequin of the piece. It is Harlequin who helps an unknown gentleman in a white domino counter the devil who is tormenting and bothering Cecilia:

> . . . a white domino, who for a few minutes had been a very attentive spectator, suddenly came forward, and

> exclaiming, "*I'll cross him though he blast me!*" rushed upon the fiend, and grasping one of his horns, called out to a Harlequin who stood near him, "Harlequin! do you fear to fight the devil?"
>
> "Not I truly!" answered Harlequin, whose voice immediately betrayed young Morrice, and who, issuing from the crowd, whirled himself round before the black gentleman . . . giving him, from time to time, many smart blows on his shoulders, head and back with his wooden sword.
>
> The rage of *Don Devil* at this attack seemed somewhat beyond what a masquerade character rendered necessary. . . . (111)

In this scene Burney draws on what might be called the full Harlequinade. Fighting the devil is rather a speciality of the English stage version of Harlequin. It is noticeable that the fun-loving young lawyer is called "Mr. Morrice," which brings to mind the associations of Morris-dancing, country "Morris" games, and rural folk-plays of mischief and shape-changing.[5] In producing her pert young English lawyer Mr. Morrice dressed up as the lively Harlequin (so disconcerting to the respectable but diabolical Monckton), Burney borrows the comic force of the fantasy figure of Harlequin so popular on the English stage.

Harlequin is the comic power that displaces things and ideas. It should be noted that much of the literary influence upon Burney comes from the theatre and not just through prose fiction—or non-fiction. She was always a dramatist, if seldom staged, and stage afterpieces and farces evidently appeal strongly to her imagination. The eighteenth-century English stage adopted and adapted from the Italians the Harlequin figure, a personage in the *Commedia dell'arte* going strong after many centuries. Georgian audiences developed a fresh fondness for Harlequin, loving his farcical actions and the extraordinary stage effects surrounding him. (Writers complained about this taste as Pope does in *The Dunciad.*) The stage produced a series of comic and spectacular stage pieces celebrating the colorfully dressed Harlequin,

an alert wise fool, as the chief character. Such short plays were the acme of theatrical extravaganza and broke through theoretical boundaries of all kinds, not only gender boundaries but also the division between persons and animals, animate beings and inanimate objects, fictional entities and realistic ones. In *The British Stage, or The Exploits of Harlequin: A Farce* (1724), the first characters to enter are an Ass, an Owl, a Dragon and a Windmill. (The dancing Windmill is ultimately connected with Don Quixote.) These characters in *The British Stage* are evidently taken from a very popular piece called *Harlequin Doctor Faustus*, of which the *Exploits of Harlequin* is partly a critique, partly a continuation. Other characters include the Devil, a chorus of Ghosts, and Punch and puppets. Harlequin is not fazed by the Dragon but able to put it through his paces, to the accompaniment of meta-theatrical and other comic commentary:

> *Ass.* Here's Wit in Perfection!—Observe the Grin of this *Dragon*, his Head, and his Tail! What mortal Man but the famous *Harlequin*, or some great *Conjurer (sic)*, could have thought of this exalted Invention for the *British* Stage?
>
> *Harl[equin]*. You know my Head is turn'd this way, Sir—And now you shall behold what he'll perform at a single word of Command.—*Dragon*, rise upon your hind Legs.—
>
> (*The* Dragon *rises on his hind Legs.*
>
> *Ass*. Prodigious! . . .
>
> *Harl[equin]*. Dance a Jig, Mr. *Dragon.*—
> (*The* Dragon *dances.*
>
> *Ass.* How nimble he is!—I have a month's mind to dance a Minuet with him.
>
> *Harl[equin]*. Let me hear you sing a Song.—
> (*The* Dragon *sings.*

Ass. He sings like an Eunuch—I presume he belongs to the Opera Theatre.

Harl[equin]. Now take your flight, *Dragon* —

Ass. Hold, Mr *Conjurer.*—Let me mount him first, and fly with him.—

(*He endeavours to mount the* Dragon, *falls down, the* Dragon *is drawn up in the Air by Wires.*

(*The Audience ring with Applause.*

We can note that part of the pleasure of the Harlequin game is making a big mess, which the audience at first may take for a real accident:

Harl[equin]. Descend again, at my Command—

(*To the* Dragon.

(*The* Dragon *descends, and with his long Tail wisks (sic) down one of the Stage-Boxes.*

Audience. O lord!—O Lord!— Murder!—Murder! Dragons! Furies! Huzza—huzza—huzza—Ha—ha—ha.—

(*Some laugh and clap, and some cry out aloud.*

Harl[equin]. Open behind, Mr. *Dragon.*

(*The* Dragon *opens his Tail, and evacuates a Dancing-master, and then flies out of sight.*[6]

Harlequin later persuades Punch to leave off tragic strains and remember he's "to act a Part in Comedy":

Punch. I've done—Give me my Wheelbarrow, and I'm content.

Harl[equin]. Wheelbarrow, appear—

(*Enter Wheelbarrow.*

Punch. Come, Brother Puppets, we'll climb this Vehicle, and *Harlequin* shall be our Driver.

(Harlequin wheels Punch and the Puppets about the Stage, and at length oversets them.

. . .

Punch. You've broke my Head—Is this the Comedy I'm to act?

Thus to attempt the Chariot of the Sun, And thus fall down, like Phaeton.

Harl[equin]. Hold—I bar Heroicks—. (19-20)

In enjoying this defiantly unrealistic enactment, we are able to recognize that concepts and possessions—property, that is, both intellectual and material—serve as fantastic props.

In a later more Aristophanic "Harlequin" piece, Charles Dib-din's *The Mirror: or Harlequin Every-Where,* Harlequin is dragged to Hell in fulfillment of a Faustian bargain:

> *Harl[equin].* Why, to be sure, I did make a sort of a foolish promise, that if his diabolical highness would suffer me to leap and skip about, turn men into jack asses, and rocks and trees into dancing devils, I would finish my career by paying a visit to his gloomy majesty's hellish dominions, but I did not expect to be sent for so soon. . . .[7]

Harlequin is in constant battle with the devil and never conquered; he wins his contest over the Underworld and those who would send him there. In this play, hellish visions are presented satirically; images of contemporary sinners undergoing suitable punishments in Hades mingle with farcical songs, and nonsense refrains:

Punch: Can't you see by my bunch, Sir,
Faddledy, daddledy, dino,

I am master Punch, Sir?
Riberi, bibieri, bino.
. . .
Then let me pass, old Grecian,
Faddledy, daddledy, dino
To the fields Elysian,
Bibery, bibery, bino. . . . (10)

Frances Burney herself has a fondness for such wordplay, for we see that rhyme words and semi-nonsense phrases such as "whisky frisky" and "pinky-winky" turn up in her writing: Language is metamorphosed and made absurd. Burney constantly enjoys and employs characters who will create change and absurdity.

Harlequin is a figure of metamorphosis who always avoids regulations. The perennial darling of the eighteenth-century theatregoer, he may get into trouble, but he always avoids real punishment. So too does the Harlequin figure of *Cecilia*, Mr. Morrice. In the chapter entitled "A Masquerade," Burney uses Morrice to treat us to a real Harlequinade, a comic mess:

> . . . Harlequin, in consequence of being ridiculed by the Turk for want of agility, offered to jump over the new des[s]ert table, and desired to have a little space cleared to give room for his motions. It was in vain the people who distributed the refreshments, and who were placed at the other side of the table, expostulated upon the danger of the experiment; Morrice had a rage of enterprize untameable, and therefore, first taking run, he attempted the leap.
>
> The consequence was such as might naturally be expected; he could not accomplish his purpose, but, finding himself falling, imprudently caught hold of the lately erected Awning, and pulled it entirely upon his own head, and with it the new contrived lights, which in various forms were fixed to it, and which all came down together.

> The mischief and confusion occasioned by this exploit were very alarming, and almost dangerous; . . . splinters of the glass flew yet further; and as the room, which was small, had been only lighted up by lamps hanging from the Awning, it was now in total darkness, except close to the door, which was still illuminated from the adjoining apartments.
>
> The clamour of Harlequin, who was covered with glass, papier machée, lamps and oil, the screams of the ladies, the universal buz of tongues, and the struggle between the frighted crowd which was enclosed to get out, and the curious crowd from the other apartments to get in, occasioned a disturbance and tumult equally noisy and confused. But the most serious sufferer was the unfortunate fiend. . . . (124–25)

Harlequin makes a big mess in deconstructing the party. But Harlequin-Morrice is later fully forgiven by the Harrels and keeps turning up as if nothing had happened. Burney certainly exhibits an attraction towards the liberating comic anarchy of Harlequin and Punchinello. There are moments when Cecilia and Mortimer Delvile come close to sharing in it. Burney craves access to this comic power of displacement; she desires to set spinning the colorful kaleidoscope of social appearance so that in abrupt combination and absurd motion what is and what ought to be may become ridiculed or questioned—or just seen differently. Satire itself will not work without active fantasy, and rational satire may be too limited, merely pointing out failure on the social level. Burney is consistently interested in the interface and interconnection between public social fantasies (the things we all agree to believe in, the idols of the marketplace) and private psychological imaginings and disturbances.

Camilla or the Invasion of Fantasy

In the sequence of the four novels, Burney develops the fantastic a little more each time. In *Cecilia* she let the Harlequinade into the

narrative. In *Camilla* she goes much further. The fantastic begins to invade, diffusing itself within the narrative, assuming multiplex forms. Why is Frances Burney noticeably more interested in giving fantastic power its head as a narrative force here, rather than in either of the two novels preceding it? What happened? I would suggest that something important happened between *Cecilia* and *Camilla.* That "something" was a serious and grotesque form of suffering: Burney's incarceration in the court of King George III as Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte from 1786 to 1791. She had not in the least wanted this "honour"—it came upon her as a horrible bolt from the blue, a poisonous favor concocted up by her aged friend Mrs. Delany and enthusiastically seized by Charles Burney, her ambitious father. Burney had already noted the fantastic nature of court etiquette, which she treats as a meaningless exercise in masochism:

> In the first place, you must not cough. . . . In the second place, you must not sneeze. If you have a vehement cold, you must take no notice of it . . . if a sneeze still insists upon making its way, you must oppose it, by keeping your teeth grinding together; if the violence of the repulse breaks some blood-vessel, you must break the blood-vessel—but not sneeze.
>
> In the third place, you must not, upon any account, stir either hand or foot. If, by chance, a black pin runs into your head, you must not take it out. If the pain is very great, you must be sure to bear it without wincing; if it brings the tears into your eyes, you must not wipe them off. . . . [8]

Plunged into this absurd and masochistic world, as strictly dedicated as a nun going into a convent, Burney was supposed to renounce writing fiction. Queen Charlotte expected the novel writing to be given up, like some other base money-grubbing practice that a person in Burney's newly exalted condition would not have to do any more.

Frances Burney's imprisonment was the more difficult as she was under the control of the other Keeper of the Robes, the irascible Mrs. Schwellenberg. Court life became even more painful during George III's first prolonged bout of insanity in 1788-89, when the whole household was strictly secluded from the world. In this period, Burney began desperately writing again, not novels but blank-verse tragedies, expressive of her own sense of being doomed to live like a Gothic heroine in a medieval prison. By the time she reaches *Elberta*, which survives only in fragments, one can see that the fantasies are useful only in assisting her to lament her own psychic death but have practically ceased to enable her to tell stories. Furthermore, as Frances Burney's health got steadily worse, she was prescribed laudanum, the Valium *de ces jours*. She was thus for a while an opium taker, and the opium affected her writing. Fantasy and inward reality unite in strange dreams. In writing an "Ode" for the death of her heroine Elgiva in her tragedy *Edwy and Elgiva*, Burney lets her feelings about her own life-in-death escape. On the page the poem is a hectic scrawl in staggering handwriting, indicating the effect of the wine and opium she had been prescribed:

> Many a Day, & many a Night
> Deep in the Clay-cold Earth she laid;
> They forc'd her from her Husband's Sight,
> While yet she Liv'd they call'd her Dead,
> And Funeral Honours paid.
>
> Low in the Church-yard lies her Head;
> Within the Tomb
> She will consume,—
> Worms & Maggots must be fed.
>
> See she shivers!—hark ! she shrieks!—
> Big are the Tears that wet her cheeks,
> Loud & piercing is her cry!— [9]

Burney certainly reached the edge of some kind of inner precipice. She was lucky—she got out sane and alive. Her bad health was a blessing to her as she was able to get free of her imprisonment without offending the Queen. When she left the service of Queen Charlotte, she received a pension of one hundred pounds per annum. She also had some new hard experience and a deeper understanding of the importance of fantasy as a resort of the mind during times of such stress that adapting to immediate "reality" was spiritually suicidal. Her two later novels allow a much wider sphere to the fantastic. Indeed, *Camilla* and *the Wanderer* might be said to be based in fantasy.

Camilla begins with the children's plays and games and conducts itself throughout in terms of playing, make-believe, and games. Though these become sequentially sharper and more discordant, they are disconcerting from the beginning, the celebration of Camilla's ninth birthday:

> Sir Hugh . . . entered into all their plays . . . and suffered his darling little girl to govern and direct him at her pleasure. She made him whiskers of cork, powdered his brown bob, and covered a thread paper with black ribbon to hang to it for a queue. She metamorphosed him into a female, accoutring him with her fine new cap, while she enveloped her own small head in his wig; and then, tying the maid's apron round his waist, put a rattle into his hand, and Eugenia's doll upon his lap, which she told him was a baby that he must nurse and amuse.[10]

This is the novel's first game of gender uncertainty, its first set of instructions about acting a gender role. The period of celebratory play culminates in the near destruction of Eugenia, who is first (contrary to her mother's instructions) suffered to go to the fair where she contracts smallpox and then dropped by her uncle from the seesaw and crippled for life. Sir Hugh then forces his household to enter into a pretence that Eugenia isn't deformed to please his own fantasy whereby if something is not spoken of, it hasn't quite happened. In her

teens Eugenia has to face the fact that she is considered homely and deformed.

Throughout the story various people keep trying to make reality conform to their idea of how it should be. Hence, the importance of comic Mr. Dubster the retired wig-maker—who can "dub" anything what he wants it to be. He shows off his vulgar little half-built villa by the roadside with its comically small grounds, a property in which his imagination revels in creating would-be imposing effects and objects of beauty:

> He then led them again to the front of the house, where he desired they would look at his pond. "This," said he, "is what I value most of all, except my summer house and my labyrinth. I shall stock it well; and many a good dinner I hope to eat from it. . . . I shall have a swan."
>
> "A swan? why sure you won't be contented with only one?"
>
> "O yes, I shall. It will only be made of wood, painted over in white. There's no end of feeding them things if one has 'em alive. Besides it will look just as pretty; and won't bite." (278)

Dubster, though comically emblematic, is not alone in this activity of self-defining. Nor is he alone in the half-finished state of his project. Many things are unfinished here—the Doctor's great book, Sir Hugh's Latin lessons, Lionel's education. The novel is subtitled *A Picture of Youth*, and Youth is the time of uncertainty; a personality is just coming into shape, a mind finding itself, the life project not possible to be yet shapely or finished. The self is incomplete, developing along lines of various "imaginaries" including the (sometimes very pernicious) precepts and models provided by elders.

In *Camilla*, fantasy is not something one can choose or escape. The world's structures and injunctions, good and bad, are all fantastic, and everything goes on inside the busy mind. The long frustrated courtship/non-courtship of Camilla and Edgar is an exercise in various forms of fantasy as each character is enjoined by a male

mentor and model to test the other before committing the self. Yet the fantastic advisors think they are being "realistic" and telling the young people to attend to facts. There is no fact that cannot be interpreted, nothing that is not partly created by the imagination. "Love" is a condition of the spirit and a set of mental reactions, not a "reality" that can be put in field and tested. Like Dubster, we may "dub" something or anything—what we will.

The motto of *Camilla* might be this: *All relationships are necessarily built on fantasy.* This applies not only to "bad" relationships but also to "good" ones. For we have only our fantasy and imagination with which to make each other out. Our "judgment" must be partly composed of fantasy. We don't have "self" without having a fantasy (or set of fantasies) about that self. Without fantasy, "love" is nothing. A life lived without love is folly. The notion that one can and should test love in order to make sure that it is absolutely true and worthy and non-fantastic is the biggest and most dangerous of all lovers'—and moralists'—fantasies. Eugenia is misled by the fortune hunter who for the sake of her inheritance abducts her in marriage because she believes her honor demands she keep her word and go through with this marriage. Her self-destructive ideals are not derived from pernicious novel reading but from her classical reading of the Greek and Roman epics. All literature, including "great" literature, is mixed with fantasy—and so is life. Burney gets very rich effects in showing us her characters' infinite perversity in endeavoring to fashion a world that will suit them. No character escapes this habit of mind—certainly not the clergyman father, good Mr. Tyrold, whose name resonates uncomfortably with *Caleb Williams*'s Tyrrell, or with "tyrant old."

The fop Sir Sedley, the anti-hero (who seems to me partly modeled on William Beckford), offers elegantly playful fantasies, a relief after the earnest self-loving, self-tormenting fantasies of Edgar. Edgar, the unsatisfactory apparent hero of this disconcerting "love story," is a victim of anxieties that make for unwholesome fantasies; when he tries to make reality checks, he is pointed towards further solipsism and disconnection. Self seems sundered from self, not as a result of unwholesome habits like reading bad fiction, but as a condition of life which only fantasy can begin to express and explore. In the last part

of this third novel, Burney explores areas of fantasy and madness productive of acute distress. The mind can play cruel tricks on the body. A self can become further divided from its construction, falling into various parts—as in modern versions of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—that threaten never to unite. We see this in Camilla's nightmare in the late chapter called "A Vision":

> Every vein was congealed; every stiffened limb . . . was hard as marble: and when again she made a feeble effort to rid her oppressed lungs of the dire weight that had fallen upon them, a voice hollow, deep, and distant, dreadfully pierced her ear, calling out: "Thou hast but thy own wish! Rejoice, thou murmurer, for thou diest!" . . .
>
> A voice from within, over which she thought she had no controul, though it seemed issuing from her vitals, low, hoarse, and tremulous, answered, "Whither I go, let me rest! Whence I come from let me not look back!. . . . A force unseen, yet irresistible, impelled her forward. She saw the immense volumes of Eternity, and her own hand involuntarily grasped a pen of iron. . . . (874-75)

In Camilla's vision, the self splits open and disintegrates. A fantasy of judgment is all that is holding together (by threatening further to split apart) this divided and uncontrollable being. The self can never be understood "realistically"—so it would appear. In a world of painful fantasy, the mind is reduced to playing cruel tricks on the body, and the self gets divided further from the self, splitting off into various parts that threaten not to unite. The masquerade vision of Cecilia now enters the body itself with the cruelty we saw in fantasies in *Evelina*. Fantasy is the gainer, but here it is no playful Harlequin-healer. After this insight, any end of the novel efforts at social reintegration or reassurance seem themselves like sinister and distorting imaginings.

The Wanderer: Ovid, Sylphs and Fairies

The Wanderer is Burney's most important and thoroughgoing exploration and use of fantasy. In *The Wanderer*, fantasy is not kept off in a region in any sense separate but is part of the texture of the main narrative. It is a thick texture in different layers. The limits of comfortable domestic realism are themselves defined by and illustrated in the nightmarish—but historically perfectly real—work of the guillotine. What once would have been deemed not only sensational but also impossible is the possible. Boundaries of all kinds, good or ill, are put into question. We begin the novel by crossing a boundary—the Channel—a crossing which means different things to different people. The boundary between France and England becomes less certain as French invades the English narrative with the arrival of Gabriella. Juliet, both French and English, both black and fair, both rich and poor, both high-born and a nobody, occupies all sorts of social and ethnic spaces, and none.

This last novel includes important reference to Ovid. Traditionally, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are invoked over the centuries at moments when we wish to question definitions, boundaries, and identities. In Ovid's stories, the boundaries between human and animal, between human and plant (Daphne, Syrinx), between inorganic (Pygmalion's statue) and organic, are all questioned. Ovid introduces us to a fluid world of many changes. It is by no means certain that the changes aim towards stasis or satisfactory final settlement. Nothing rests. Rather, the twisting and twining of transformation seems to indicate that there is no end to metamorphosing; thus, the desire for a settled state and tranquillity may be a false desire. Or, if it cannot be termed precisely false—being real insofar as it is a real *desire*—it seems doomed to remain forever ungratified.

"Metamorphosis" is the term early used (by Mrs. Ireton) in relation to Juliet:

> "O! what, you have some other *metamorphosis* to prepare, perhaps? Those bandages and patches are to be

converted into something else? And pray, if it will not be too great a liberty to enquire, what are they to exhibit? The order of Maria Theresa? or the Empress of all the Russias?"[11]

Elinor uses the same term: "I have told them all . . . that you are arrived, though I have revealed nothing of your *metamorphosis*" (53; emphasis added). Much later, the rough-spoken Riley exclaims and expatiates on the same subject:

> "What a rare hand you are, Demoiselle . . . at hocus pocus work! . . . But you metamorphose yourself about so, one does not know which way to look for you. Ovid was a mere fool to you. His nymphs, turned into trees, and rivers, and flowers, and beasts, and fishes, make such a staring chaos of lies, that one reads them without any ray of reference to truth; like the tales of the Genii, or of old Mother Goose. He makes such a comical hodge podge of animal, vegetable, and mineral choppings and changes, that we should shout over them, as our brats do at a puppet-shew, when old Nick teaches punchinello the devil's dance down to hell . . . if it were not for the sly rogue's tickling one's ears so cajolingly with the jingle of metre. But Demoiselle, here, scorns all that namby pamby work." (771)

Ovid is only a cut above the Punchinello show or a Harlequinade in which the Devil and the clown dance down to Hell. But Juliet is the thing itself, a "real fantasy," the perpetually metamorphosing reality at which even Ovid himself can but hint.

Categories keep failing. Juliet, the Wanderer, is the agent of categories' failure and of metamorphosis. In this novel the good are centers of the questionable magic of fantasy. That is, fantasy, far from being embodied in personages officially negative (like Mirvan) or the officially inferior and vulgar if cheerful (like Morrice), is here embodied in the heroine herself. Around her cluster references to the

world of make-believe and fantastic survival. To survive in itself comes to seem a fantastic feat or delirious chore. The heroine, at first nameless, an Incognita, is compared to the Wandering Jew (485). Sir Jaspar likens himself to "the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, who took a nap of forty years" (502), but it is Juliet on whom the old man dotes who is in some sense the Sleeping Beauty. She can also be identified with those non-survivors, the lost children in the popular ballad "Children of the Wood" or "Babes in the Wood." The ballad is sung by the dame who keeps the little dame school in the New Forest (669).

Sir Jaspar Harrington, Juliet's elderly admirer, is used by the author as a fount of reference to the unreal. He represents himself as surrounded by imps, fairies, and sylphs: "The benevolent sprites, who have urged me hither . . ." (504). "Would not one have thought 'twas some indulgent sylph that directed me? that inspired me with the idea . . . by contriving that my arrival should take place at the critical instant, when that syren was to be found alone?" (540). Later, he explains his role in reuniting Juliet with her family by the use of a deception as a sort of fairy plot:

> "And never . . . did my delectable little friends serve me so cogently, as in suggesting my stratagem. . . . you will fix the matchless Wanderer in her proper sphere; if they protest against it,—what giant stands in the way to your rearing and protecting the lovely flower yourself?—This was the manner in which these hovering little beings egged me on; but whether, with the playful philanthropy of courteous sylphs . . . or whether, with the wanton malignity of little devils . . . is still locked up. . . ." (757)

The love of a man of seventy for a young and beautiful woman is an embarrassment that ought to be hidden, and Sir Jaspar, though he does not hide it, chooses to have it covered by the fiction. But the fiction has its own reality, and Sir Jaspar himself always invoking the sylphs, participates in their nature. Burney has obviously read the Duchess of Devonshire's novel *The Sylph*, which came out in 1779, the year after *Evelina* (and was attributed by some readers to Burney). In

that story, a young, beautiful, and naive woman from the country is married to a rich and worldly man who tries to make her as worldly as himself. She is protected from adultery by the attentions of one who introduces himself as a human sylph and insists on remaining invisible:

> I am a Rosicrucian by principle; I need hardly tell you, they are a sect of philosophers, who by a life of virtue and self-denial have obtained an heavenly intercourse with aerial beings;—as my internal knowledge of you (to use the expression) is in consequence of my connexion with the Sylphiad tribe, I have assumed the title of my familiar counsellor. . . . when I thus expressed myself, it should be understood, I spoke in the person of the Sylph, which I shall occasionally do.
>
> . . . I am never one moment absent from you in idea, and in my *mind's eye* I see you each moment; only while I conceal myself from you, can I be of service to you. . . .[12]

Georgiana Cavendish's "Sylph" succeeds in keeping the heroine from the worst of dangers, and after the death of her husband, the lady unites with her discovered "Sylph." Sylphs are asexual and strongly sexual—according to the Rosicrucian lore as promulgated in *Le Comte de Gabalis*, sylphs pine to have sex with mortals and, thereby, secure themselves a soul. There is a strong shot of sexuality in the "internal knowledge" suggested from the outset. In *The Wanderer* Sir Jaspar acts the true role of the Sylph in rescuing Juliet from her horrible husband/non-husband and in hovering about her. He does what the stiff and proper Albert dares not do; no wonder Sir Jaspar would like to claim the final "internal knowledge" though he knows—or almost knows—that age prevents this.

Not only a guardian of the young woman and preventer of false sexual union or horrid marriage, the sylph as an idea invites exploration of the personality as multi-faceted and difficult to categorize. Sir Jaspar is a hobbling old man, yet part of him is a sylph—a grotesque and uneasy sylph, but a sylph nonetheless. Burney

seizes upon an eighteenth-century interest in what we might call "Sylphing the Self." To "sylph the self" is to re-present the self in a metamorphosed form of inner airiness and instability, unfixed from universal categories (commonly presumed to be ineluctable, uniform and regular) such as Nation and even Time. The Sylph implicitly asks questions about the soul, questions such as Elinor Joddrel poses in another way—and Elinor receives from Albert Harleigh the frightening idea that after death, sensation and consciousness of a sort may persist in the very atoms of dust.

On the farm, Juliet has already noted the close relation and similarity between animals and birds and man (695). She does not believe they are very different from us in their desires or behavior, and she notes there are differences between individuals. Animal and human melt into each other as qualities or attributes hover uncertainly around substantives—as when she refers to the "lightness" of a Gothic building, such as we are used to hear termed "massy" and "stony." Spirit, flesh; man, animal; stone, spirit—these may all exchange qualities and interpenetrate each other. There seems no clear way in which existence itself can be defined as not fantastic. Our "rules" or assumptions about the real and the uniform and regular seem no more powerful than rules of etiquette. Characters like Mrs. Maple insist on ruling things according to their own little ideas, but then Mrs Maple is but a tree. So too is the cranky but well-meaning Giles Arbe, another tree—an Ovidian touch. The silly and seducible little milliner is Flora, a flower (easily plucked). Juliet's sister is the Dawn (Aurora). In this Ovidian world, which is also a world of fairies, sylphs and demons, there is no space to be declared off-limits to the fantastic. Having kept fantasy at the border and under chastisement in her first published novel, Burney invites it in everywhere in her last completed work of novelistic fiction, where all our realities are capable of being dissolved or subsumed into the fantastic.

NOTES

[1] As appropriated by Tzvetan Todorov (and others), "the Fantastic" is a Romantic post-Romantic concept, a combination of elements of the age of belief with the dominant and coming age of unbelief. (See Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1970, translated by Richard Howard as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, [Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975]; see especially chapter 2.) According to this theory, stories about ghosts are among the best candidates for the fantastic, and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* represents the ideal "fantastic" narrative, as both the superstitious and the rationalist interpretations are tacitly embedded in it. According to Todorov's theory the "correct" or ultimately triumphant interpretation implicitly must be the modern rationalist reading , but the text need not and should not announce this openly.

In my usage, "the Fantastic" refers to a conscious employment or evocation of elements of cosmos or narrative that are known (by artist and audience) *not* to be "real." The elements employed, while importantly not expected to be received as real, are felt by the artist and reader or spectator to have significance. The lively employment of fancy is or ought to be witty and insightful, though not without emotional appeal; a fantastic creation can move in various ways. Pope's sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock* would be a perfect example of an Enlightenment fantastic creation (or appropriation, out of Paracelsus and the Rosicrucians). Either I or Samuel Johnson might be open to the reality of a "ghost," but not to the real existence of Brobdingnagians. Baruch Spinoza (in an odd way and inadvertently) seems to make room for the conscious fantastic when he decries the belief in stories, such as religious or national myths, and thus implicitly seems to give some value to illustrative stories and images that no one is called on to believe in. The "long eighteenth century," so I have come to believe, specialized in producing stories with lively and willful entities that do not demand any literal credence, that in fact repel it and even repel Coleridge's famous "willing suspension of disbelief" or credence other than the poetic. This is not to say that the fantastic vision does not uncover deeper realities and disconcerting hitches within what we term "reality." The eighteenth century invents the "Gothic" that modern critics such as Todorov try to separate from other eighteenth-century imaginative phenomena.

[2] See the introduction by Robert L. Mack to his eighteenth-century collection in *Oriental Tales* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992).

[3] *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, ed. Edward A. Bloom (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970): 76-77. Subsequent references will be to this edition by page number.

[4] *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, ed. Margaret Doody and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988): 108. Subsequent references will be to this edition by page number.

[5] "Morris" always has the sense of special play. A place of play or game could be referred to as "a morris": "The nine mens' morris is filled up with mud," Titania complains of wet weather in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.1.98 (Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 317). Although the origin of the word "morris" for game and that for the dancers and mummers (thought to be derived from "Moorish") may be different, they are always conflated. "Morris dancers" enact plays or rituals at special times, customarily the first of May or Christmas tide, as dancers and players or "mummers" (see Hardy's *Return of the Native*). Dorothy L. Sayers, in a story set in the eastern fen country (but an instance of dialect speech that may be a reminiscence of her early childhood in Oxford), employs "morrissing" as synonymous with committing mischief, being up to no good (*The Nine Tailors*, 1934). Burney's irritating and entertaining character "Morrice" is the impish folk-player, the mischievous human counterpart to a non-human entity like Shakespeare's Puck.

[6] *The British Stage, or The Exploits of Harlequin. A Farce* (London: T. Warner, 1724), 14-15. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

[7] Charles Dibdin, *The Mirror: or, Harlequin Everywhere* (London: G. Kearsley, 1779): 2.

[8] Frances Burney in a letter to her sister Esther Burney Burney, quoted from Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 168-69.

[9] "Ode" on the death of Elgiva, from a manuscript in the Berg Collection, as quoted in *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works*: 196.

[10] *Camilla, or a Picture of Youth*, ed. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983): 18. Subsequent references will be to this edition by page number.

[11] *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody, Peter Sabor, and Robert L. Mack (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991): 44; emphasis added. Subsequent references will be to this edition, by page number.

[12] [Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire], *The Sylph: A Novel*, 2 vols. (London: T. Lowndes, 1779), 1: 195-97.

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