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Burney, Austen,

And "Bad Morality"

ELAINE BANDER

I was astonished to read in the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies' recent Call for Papers, reproduced in the latest *Burney Letter*, the following statement:

> Jane Austen's adoration for the writings of Frances Burney is well-documented, yet Austen continues to be studied, taught, and credentialized as "the" late-eighteenth-century novelist. Although Austen's fictional characters frequently reflect on Burney's actual novels, it is curious that a critical dialogue that examines the relationship between Burney and Austen has been marginalized.

"Marginalized"? Not in this room, surely! The CFP is headlined "A Vegas Title-Fight: The Burney Society vs. The Austen Society [*sic*]," and "proposes to open a critical dialogue between critics of Burney and Austen as individual writers, and also as a pairing that exhibits many "anxieties of influence" (7).

"To *open* a critical dialogue"? I hope that any of you who may wind up on that panel will remind others at ASECS that this critical dialogue has been under way at least since the 1820s. Just about every serious study of Burney or Austen addresses the connections between these two novelists. This society was founded by members of JASNA. My own first, modest publications in 1978 noted Austen's debt to Burney. Juliet McMaster, in her 1996 AGM address on "Body Language in *Camilla*," reviewed Austen's references to Burney's work in some detail and followed that talk with a *Burney Letter* addendum on Austen's allusion to *Camilla* in her last, incomplete novel *Sanditon*. When I proposed this talk, my intention was not to "open" critical dialogue but rather to contribute to a venerable discourse about how Jane Austen defended, criticized, and revised the English novel as she received it from Frances Burney. The projected ASECS panel does not need Las Vegas gimmicks like boxing gloves. A serious, professional symposium would make a more fitting venue for investigating the literary relations between these two very serious, very professional novelists who brought their different but considerable gifts to bear upon the Richardsonian marriage-plot novel's "professional" concerns with issues such as the rival claims of prudence and passion, or the limits of filial duty.

It is this professionalism that I wish to address today. Nothing that I have to say will be news to you, but in the light of that CFP, it bears repeating.

Burney was the trailblazer, of course, venturing to publish serious novels when, notwithstanding the best efforts of Richardson, Fielding and Smollett, novels were held in low esteem—even lower if they happened to be written by women.[1] If those confident male writers suffered anxieties about the reception of their novels—in Richardson's case glossing his epistolary fiction to prevent readers from misreading the self-serving words of his characters, and in Fielding's case unabashedly lecturing his readers on how to read his novels—it is not surprising that the shy, young, self-educated

Burney also felt diffident and insecure, hedging *Evelina* with self-deprecating apologies for her "trifling production of a few idle hours" ("To the Authors of the Monthly and Critical Reviews," *Evelina* 4), presenting *Camilla* to her public as a "Work" rather that a mere novel ("Advertisement" to *Camilla*), and, in her preface to *The Wanderer*, defending the novel genre as a useful didactic tool for the young and foolish: "What is the species of writing that offers fairer opportunities for conveying useful precepts?" she asks rhetorically.

> It is, or it ought to be, a picture of supposed, but natural and probable human existence. It holds, therefore, in its hand our best affections; it exercises our imaginations; it points out the path of honour; and gives to juvenile credulity knowledge of the world, without ruin, or repentance; and the lessons of experience, without its tears. ("To Doctor Burney," *The Wanderer* 7)

This argument-from-moral-utility, however, was already old-fashioned by the time *The Wanderer* was published in 1814. Today, while we recognise the complexity of Burney's novels and appreciate her sometimes bitter indictments of her society's customs and values, we generally agree that Burney's heroic struggle to reconcile her conflicting values of propriety and professionalism limited her achievement as a novelist. She had good reason, certainly, to feel that her claims to propriety were at risk. Apart from the low prestige of the novel genre that she practiced, Burney was socially vulnerable on account both of her personal shyness and her family's precarious social placement. She may have walked with Kings—or at least, have been chased by a King at Kew—but her father's origins were humble indeed. Her intense needs, as a woman, for respectability and privacy were at odds with her professional need to publish her writing. And—perhaps toughest of all—she had to cope with not one but two Daddys to whom she was anxiously compliant. Clearly, Burney was well-versed in female difficulties. Her late marriage may have liberated her from some of these difficulties, but it contributed new ones, including her ten years'

house arrest in France. Thus, while her novels contain some powerful female characters who challenge social conventions—characters like Mrs. Selwyn, Mrs. Arlbery, and the magnificent Elinor Joddrel—Burney does not approve or reward these women who defy propriety. Her novels reward the virtuous, punish the guilty, and provide useful lessons all around. Their explicit "morals," notwithstanding some irony and ambiguity, reinforce conventional values of propriety and respectability.

Burney demonstrates, however, that these lessons are not learned without great risk and suffering on the part of the innocent heroines. How many of us rejoice to reach the happy *éclaircissement* in Book 7, Chapter 5, of *Camilla*, in which Mandibert has *finally* proposed to Camilla, only to realize from the heft of the remaining pages that we are not yet, in fact, hastening together to perfect felicity? Yet Burney does not spin out her plot just for the sake of filling five volumes. Those plot vicissitudes show just how tough it is for a woman to survive with her body and values—not to mention her fortune—intact. For Burney's heroines, the screw keeps turning. They are orphaned or abandoned daughters, denied by their Daddys or exploited by their guardians, their very names called into question. Not until those poor girls suffer rejection, isolation, heartache, calumny, penury, disease, desperation, incarceration and even madness, do the plots finally turn towards resolution: the recognition, reward, and reinforcement of the paragon heroine's conduct-book virtues.

A generation later, Austen carried Burney's domestication of eighteenth-century novels to new levels of realism,[2] especially in her characterizations of her heroines (none of whom are paragon beauties), in the nature of the catastrophes they must endure, and in her revision of the marriage-plot moral. Throughout her career, however, Austen honoured the woman who had shown her the way.

Of course, Austen's Burney is not our Burney, for while Frances Burney remains a seminal figure in the development of the English novel, most recent scholars and readers believe that her

finest writing is found in her plays, letters and diaries. Today, "our" Burney includes not only *Evelina, Cecilia, Camilla* and *The Wanderer*, but also the wonderful comedies (and the slightly less-wonderful tragedies) that Peter Sabor, Geoffrey Sill, and Stewart Cooke have given us, as well as the many volumes of letters and journals that continue to emerge from the Burney Centre. Our Burney, however, is not the Burney that her contemporaries knew. Very few would have attended the single performance of *Edwy and Elgiva*, her only play to reach the public stage. Unlike us, her fellow writers did not have access to *The Complete Plays* or *The Journals and Letters*. Like most of her contemporaries, Austen would have known only the four novels published in her lifetime. Her Burney is thus in many ways a more limited, less complex figure than our Burney, lacking that double-edged voice that Judy Simons discusses: the interesting tension between the public voice of the novels and the private voice of the journals (24). Nevertheless, this "limited" Frances Burney provided the younger writer with a model of just how a modest, respectable lady, possessing neither formal education nor independent fortune, could become a respected professional novelist honoured by the leading artists and intellectuals of the day. As Austen, too, became a respected professional novelist, she in turn defended, criticized, and revised the model that Burney had bequeathed her. Burney may not have nodded in Austen's direction, but Austen, at least in her first and last novels, acknowledged Burney as her professional mentor.

When Burney's writing career was launched with the wildly successful publication of *Evelina* in January 1778, Austen was just two years old. By the time Burney published *Camilla* in 1796, Austen was twenty and herself an ambitious although as yet unpublished author. Miss J. Austen of Steventon was one of the subscribers to *Camilla*[3]. Just two months after its publication, Austen writes to her sister Cassandra: "Tomorrow I shall be just like Camilla in Mr. Dubster's summer-house; for my Lionel will have taken away the ladder by which I came here, or at least by which I intended to get away, and here I must stay till his return" (1 Sept. 1796; she is referring to her brother Henry's absence—he must

escort her home again). A few days later she jokes, "Give my love to Mary Harrison, & tell her I wish whenever she is attached to a young Man, some *respectable* Dr. Marchmont may keep them apart for five volumes" (5 Sept. 1796). In later years, Austen's niece Caroline Austen recalled that her Aunt Jane picked up "a volume of Evelina and read a few pages of Mr. Smith and the Branghtons and I thought it was like a play" (10). These fleeting references strongly suggest that Burney's novels were household staples and conversational currency at the Steventon rectory and, later, at Chawton cottage.

The few other references to Burney in Austen's letters and novels also suggest that young Austen judged others by how they judged Burney. Just after the publication of *Camilla*, she wrote to her sister about meeting a certain Miss Fletcher: "There are two Traits in her character which are pleasing; namely, she admires Camilla, & drinks no cream in her Tea" (15 Sept. 1796). Austen's posthumously published novel *Northanger Abbey*, probably first composed around 1797-98 and revised over the following decade, also reveals her high regard for Burney. It is no accident that two of the three novels cited in the famous "Only a novel!" encomium in *Northanger Abbey* were by Burney. Austen frames this passage in terms of professional courtesy, declaring:

> I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally *** take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? ... Let us not desert one another, we are an injured body. (37)

This is quite a stirring call on the part of a young writer, here claiming professional solidarity with the eminent Mme. d'Arblay. But how different in tone—confident, ironic, unapologetic—from that of Burney's own anxious prefaces!

In *Northanger Abbey,* young Jane Austen praises Burney in superlatives, citing *Cecilia* and *Camilla* as "some work in which the *greatest* powers of the mind are displayed, in which the *most thorough* knowledge of human nature, the *happiest* delineation of its varieties, the *liveliest* effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in *the best* chosen language" (38, my emphasis). In Austen's writings, those who disparage Burney mark themselves as fools or knaves. John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* is both. After first confusing *Camilla* with *The Mysteries of Udopho*, he corrects himself:

> "I was thinking of that other stupid book, written by that woman they make such a fuss about, she who married the French emigrant."
>
> "I suppose you mean Camilla?"
>
> "Yes, that's the book; such unnatural stuff!—An old man playing at see-saw! I took up the first volume once, but I soon found it would not do; indeed I guessed what sort of stuff it must be before I saw it: as soon as I heard she had married an emigrant, I was sure I should never be able to get through it."
>
> "I have never read it."
>
> "You had no loss I assure you; it is the horridest nonsense you can imagine; there is nothing in the world in it but an old man's playing at see-saw and learning Latin; upon my soul there is not." (49)

Clearly, as a young woman Austen admired the novels of Frances Burney and disdained those who did not share her taste.

As she grew more experienced, however, Austen read Burney more critically and set about revising her paradigm. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Marianne Dashwood suffers heartache and a near-fatal illness worthy of Camilla or Cecilia, but her more robust sister Elinor is the novel's true heroine, and Elinor's heroine-ism consists of silence, endurance, and restraint. *Pride and Prejudice* may owe its title and perhaps its plot to *Cecilia*, but portionless Elizabeth Bennet, who, like Evelina, is plagued with vulgar relations, dismisses the snobbish Lady Catherine de Bourgh with considerably more verve than the heiress Cecilia can muster against the Delviles. Harriet Smith in *Emma* seems tailored-made to be a Burney heroine: she is nameless, she is excessively pretty, and she is anxiously compliant. In fact, in Emma's fertile imagination, Harriet *is* a Burney heroine: after all, she is sweet and graceful, she has terrifying adventures from which she is rescued by dashing young men, and her father will surely turn out to be an aristocrat. Nevertheless, she is not the heroine; she is merely the heroine's simple-minded friend, who dares to imagine herself loved by the heroine's destined husband. As such, Harriet Smith probably owes something of her character and role to Henrietta Belfield in *Cecilia*. Austen's joke, of course, is that the really significant plot "events" in *Emma* are not the clichéd intrigues and adventures imagined by Emma but, rather, the simple, everyday occurrences that lead ultimately to self-knowledge.

Persuasion and the unfinished *Sanditon* are Austen's most explicit revisions of Burney. In *Persuasion*, when Anne Elliot encounters Captain Wentworth at the White Hart Inn, she is distressed, fearing that he believes her to be engaged to her cousin Mr. Elliot due to misleading appearances at the concert worthy of *Evelina*. Nevertheless, Austen writes:

> She tried to be calm, and leave things to take their course; and tried to dwell much on this argument of rational dependance [*sic*] — "Surely, if there be constant attachment on each side, our hearts must understand each other ere long. We are not boy and girl, to be captiously

> irritable, misled by every moment's inadvertence, and wantonly playing with our own happiness." (221)

With that reflection Austen liberates Anne from the shadow of a Burney novel plot in which a Dr. Marchmont can keep lovers apart for five volumes. Those accidental, frustrating incidents of misleading appearances that so distress Evelina, Cecilia, Camilla and Juliet will not have power to keep Anne and Wentworth apart for longer than one more chapter. They take charge of their own destiny.

Persuasion's final chapter begins, "Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it in to their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth ..." (*Persuasion* 248). Austen's bracing dose of realism here is an explicit rejection of Cecilia's noble, penitent remark to Mortimer in the final chapter of *Cecilia*: "'The misery of DISOBEDIENCE we have but too fatally experienced; and thinking as we think of filial ties and parental claims, how can we ever hope happiness till forgiven and taken into favour?'" (930). Dr. Lyster redistributes the blame rather more fairly with his "Pride and Prejudice" speech (930), but Cecilia has already been severely punished for her transgression against parental authority. Burney, of course, was far more anxious than Austen about displeasing Daddies. Anne Elliot, uninfluenced by her father's "want of graciousness and warmth," does not hesitate to marry Frederick Wentworth.

In Austen's final novel, the unfinished *Sanditon*, as in her first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, she pays direct homage to Burney, her professional mentor. Like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Charlotte Heywood in *Sanditon* follows the Burney paradigm: she is an outsider, a tourist observing the alien customs of a highly ritualized society. Moreover, Austen explicitly connects her to Burney heroines imperilled by inexperience. Thus when Charlotte

Heywood, newly arrived in the fledgling seaside resort of Sanditon, visits the Lending Library, she is tempted by the various gee-gaws for sale:

> .... Charlotte began to feel that she must check herself—or rather she reflected that at two & Twenty there cd be no excuse for her doing otherwise--& that it would not do for her to be spending all her Money the very first Evening. She took up a Book; it happened to be a vol: of *Camilla*. She had not *Camilla*'s Youth, & had no intention of having her Distress,--so, she turned from the Drawers of rings & Broches repressed farther solicitation & paid for what she bought. (*Sanditon* 390)

Much of the *Sanditon* fragment concerns Charlotte's observations of the quixotic Sir Edward Denham, who has read—or misread—too many novels, and whose goal in life is to become a Lovelace. Amid this satiric portrayal of distempered reading, Charlotte's allusion to *Camilla* reminds us again of the power of Burney's narratives. In *Sanditon*, the heroine of one novel is indeed patronised by the heroine of another. Like Austen herself, Charlotte naturally thinks in terms of novels she has read, assimilating her own experience to fictional models; unlike Sir Edward, however, she puts her reading to a constructive purpose. Austen here shows Burney's *Camilla* serving Charlotte as an object lesson, exactly the purpose for which Burney claimed to have written it.

Charlotte, however, is neither a Camilla, an Evelina, a Cecilia, nor a Juliet. She is, in Jane Austen's words, a "sober minded young Lady, sufficiently well-read in Novels to supply her Imagination with amusement, but not at all unreasonably influenced by them ..." (*Sanditon* 392). She is neither an heiress nor an orphan, neither strikingly lovely nor angelically good. In the twelve extant chapters of *Sanditon* she is neither besieged by suitors nor preyed upon by villains; she does little more than observe, with great interest and amusement, the loves and intrigues of others. Apart from the Library scene, not once is she challenged by a test of

fortitude or morality.[4] If Jane Austen had been granted as long a life as Frances Burney, I think she would have given us an altogether new kind of novel, one freed from vestigial Richardsonian courtship issues and Burneyesque courtesy-book concerns, one that willingly risked "bad morality" in the pursuit of truth. As it was, Jane Austen ended her career as she began it, honouring Frances Burney.

Notes

[1] Typical was the view expressed by Hugh Murray in *Morality of Fiction:* "The invention of printing, and consequent diffusion of books, has given birth to a multitude of readers, who seek only for amusement, and wish to find it without trouble or thought. Works thus conducted, supply them with one which is level to the lowest capacities. How well they are adapted to the taste of this description of readers appears plainly from the extraordinary avidity with which they are devoured" (40).

[2] Margaret Anne Doody might say she sanitized them (2).

[3] In 2003 the Burney Society and the Burney Centre published a limited edition of a facsimile and transcript of *The Subscription List to Frances Burney's* Camilla, with an introduction by Peter Sabor, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Burney Society and the dedication of the new Burney Centre at McGill University.

[4] But see Juliet McMaster's article "*Sanditon*'s Reference to *Camilla*" for another reading of Charlotte.

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