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Frances Burney's Anger

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In *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing,* Julia Epstein claims to have "uncovered" in Burney's writings, "the masked simmering rage of a conflicted but self-conscious social reformer." For over two centuries, critics and readers overlooked, according to Epstein, Burney's "obsession with violence and hostility," overlooked in Burney "the gulf between social self/proper lady and private self/angry writer" (4). As the discoverer of "these reservoirs of Burneyan anger and frustrated desire" (5), Epstein joined other feminist critics—most notably Margaret Ann Doody and Kristina Straub—in their attack upon those nineteenth-century men-of-letters who categorized Burney as, in William Hazlitt's phrase, "a mere common observer of manners" (41).

This nineteenth-century assessment of Burney held well into the twentieth. In his 1903 volume on Burney for the—this is always a bit confusing—British Men of Letters series, Austen Dobson confidently placed *Evelina* as a work which "carries the novel of manners into domestic life, and prepares the way for Miss Edgeworth and the exquisite parlour-pieces of Miss Austen" (204).

In Chauncey Tinker's Introduction to his 1911 volume, *Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney*, he describes Burney as both "the timorous maiden" and the "keen-sighted observer of manners" (x). Even for a Burney critic as astute as Joyce Hemlow, writing almost fifty years after Tinker, the "manners" category still exerts a powerful hold. She describes *Camilla* as "A hybrid produced by modifications or variations of the courtesy-book and the novel of manners, to which Fanny already had made significant contributions; *Camilla* may be described as a courtesy novel" (249).

Camilla, of course, includes as one of its central events the physical disfigurement of Eugenia Tyrold in an accident owing to her uncle's feckless carelessness. In the course of the novel, Lionel Tyrold will repeatedly offer physical abuse to his sister, the eponymous heroine, and she will be driven to madness and near-death after her encounter with the corpse of Alphonso Bellamy, the brutal husband of her sister, accidentally dead by his own hand. So much for manners and courtesy.

Any reader of Burney can recall memorable acts of violence: the physical brutality that Juliet witnesses during her flight through the New Forest in *The Wanderer*; the pushing and tearing of the crowd that surrounds Cecilia Beverly before her breakdown; the physical punishments that Captain Mirvan visits upon Madam Duval in *Evelina* or, perhaps more significantly, the cruel race between elderly and infirm women that, near the story's end, two spoiled gentlemen use to settle a bet. Whether or not we agree with Epstein that Burney, rightly read, reveals her "obsession with violence and hostility" (I do not), these events place Burney outside, far outside, that "exquisite parlour" in which Dobson imagines her. If she is not in that "parlour," however, then where is she? In Epstein's reading, Burney is underground, in disguise. Burney's fictions "are subversively feminist ideological productions" (195), and she must hide what she is about. Burney "wrote of pain and anger ... out of a need to protect herself by exposing the social codes she pretended to live by" (225).

Rather than in a parlour or underground, I will place Burney in a library, locating rich and powerful precedents for her anger in earlier eighteenth-century literature. On 8 July 1778, six months after the publication of *Evelina,* Burney signed a letter to her father "Francesca Scriblerus" (*Early Journals* III, 51). I suggest that we look at the most famous members of the Scriblerus Club, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, to account for Burney's anger. Epstein's understanding of that anger finally is anachronistic, albeit influential. A late twentieth-century feminist, Epstein finds in Burney a kindred spirit. The following account is decidedly old historical. It traces Burney's anger through the writers whom she read, read voraciously by all accounts.

Swift's Latin epitaph, as Englished by William Butler Yeats, describes the "savage indignation" that lacerated his breast (131). Burney inherited a large portion of that "savage indignation." She, however, opened her career more than fifty years after the publication of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Pope's *Dunciad.* She lived in a world that Swift's and Pope's satires had failed to mend. Her heroines all face destruction by economic and, consequently, social innovations against which the Scriblerians railed unsuccessfully. Tellingly, her novels offer increasingly smaller roles to characters associated with satire, the genre's power having declined.

Kristina Straub in her *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy* rightly reminds us that "Burney, like most of her household, was a fan of Swift" (91). Straub limits Swift's influence upon Burney, and Pope's as well, to their satires upon women—Pope's *Epistle to A Lady and Rape of the Lock,* Swift's "Cadenus and Vanessa." Insofar as Pope and Swift built on and reinforced "strong cultural associations between women and time wasting" (12), their "misogyny" pointed Burney, so Straub's argument runs, to the self-contradictory, self-defeating role eighteenth-century patriarchy granted to women: "Like other women of her class, she learns to see herself in part through the performance of ritual social occupations that she is, in turn, discouraged from seeing as

valuable" (82). Straub, as she herself admits, also proceeds anachronistically, reading Burney through "my own feminist, politicized aesthetic" (182). Like Epstein, she finds what she is looking for, but she also narrows—although she does not completely overlook—the Scriblerian basis for Burney's anger.

That Pope and Swift offer more than "misogyny" to Burney is clear in the range and reconditeness of her references to them. As a young woman, she thinks of Pope's poem "To Mrs. Martha Blount on her Birth-day"—not the more famous *Epistle to a Lady*—as a precedent for her journal-writing (*Early Journals* I, 180). As an older woman, she contemplates the unlikeliness of her husband's being paid for his service after the Battle of Waterloo and, with no books at hand, makes a stunning reference to Swift's "Seventh Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated": "... the expenses of such situations are so great, that unless some happy *suite* takes place, he will be apt, in the end, to say to those who have thus distinguished him, like Swift to Harley and Bolingbroke, `Well—Friends—since you have done your worst/Pray leave me—where you found me first'" (*Journals* VIII, 253). As a much older woman and worried mother of a son who today would be a strong candidate for a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder, Burney repeatedly describes herself as equivalent to the flappers in Book III of Gulliver's Travels.[1] She organizes her life around keeping her son focussed and on task. Defending her text for the Memorial to her father in Westminster Abbey from the criticism of her brother Charles, Burney cites Samuel Johnson's praise for Pope's Memorials (*Journals* IX, 397). Wry humor leavened with some despair characterizes these references to some of the Scriblerians' more obscure works and minor characters.

The affinity between Burney's anger and Scriblerian anger appears most powerfully in her descriptions of money matters, in her portrayal of the pernicious impact of debt and credit upon her heroines' lives. The central precursor Scriblerian text for her is not the *Epistle to a Lady*; rather, it is Pope's *Moral Epistle III, To Allen, Lord Bathurst.* The topic of the Epistle to Bathurst—"Of the Use of

Riches"—sets a specific precedent for Cecilia. In its bitter and angry commentary upon "paper credit," *Bathurst* proleptically limns the sad fate the heroines of *Camilla* and *The Wanderer* share with Cecilia—that is, anxiety about and ruin by debt. With its companion piece *Moral Epistle IV, To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington*, which also takes "the Use of Riches" as its topic, the *Epistle to Bathurst* describes a dangerous dialectic between miserliness and extravagance, a dialectic that, with one exception, the virtuous Man of Ross, finds no synthesis.

The opening lines of *Bathurst* set a question that will haunt Cecilia Beverly:

> Who shall decide, when Doctors disagree,
>
> And soundest Casuists doubt, like you and me?
>
> You hold the word, from Jove to Momus giv'n,
>
> That Man was made the standing jest of Heav'n
>
> And Gold but sent to keep the fools in play,
>
> For some to heap, and some to throw away. (176, II. 1-6)

Pope here anticipates the conflict between the miser Briggs and the spendthrift Harrel that will make Cecilia's life, despite her beauty and virtue, miserable. Pope's anticipation of Burney is even more precise in the opening lines of the *Epistle to Burlington:*

> 'Tis strange the Miser should his cares employ,
>
> To gain those Riches he can ne'er enjoy:
>
> Is it less strange, the Prodigal should waste
>
> His wealth to purchase what he ne'er can taste?

(190, II. 1-4)

In his satiric portrayal of the misuse of riches in the *Epistle to Bathurst,* Pope offers a crucial, for Burney, brief history of modern innovations in the conveyance of wealth. In his account, life becomes far riskier as wealth becomes subject to representation. Pope refers to Sir William Colpeper, who lost an ancient family fortune at the gambling table, and asks,

Had Colpeper's whole wealth been hops and hogs,

Could he himself have sent it to the dogs? (178, II. 53-4)

This leads to an absurd, even surreal vision of gambling conducted with actual rather than represented stakes:

His Grace will game: to White's a Bull be lead,

With spurning heels and with a butting head.

To White's be carried, as to ancient games,

Four Courses, Vases, and alluring Dames.

Shall then Uxorio, if the stakes he sweep,

Bear home four Whores and make his Lady weep?

Or soft Adonis, so perfum'd and fine,

Drive to St. James's whole herd of swine?

(178, II. 55-62)

Represented wealth, in Pope's account, increases the opportunities for vice to flourish. Gold, however dangerous, is tangible, material. Lines on paper are much less so. Thus, Pope complains angrily:

Once, we confess, beneath the Patriot's cloak,

From the crack'd bag the droppings Guinea spoke,

And gingling down the back-stairs, told the crew,

"Old Cato is as great a rogue as you."

Blest paper-credit! Last and best supply!

That lends corruption lighter wings to fly!

Gold imp'd by thee, can compass hardest things

Can pocket states, can fetch or carry Kings;

A single leaf shall waft an Army o'er,

Or ship off Senates to a distant Shore.

(178, II. 65-74)

In *Cecilia,* Burney not only counterpoints the spendthrift Harrel to the miser Briggs, she also traces the ways in which "Blest paper credit" insinuates itself into her heroine's life and nearly destroys her. While Evelina is granted a comic exemption from the problem, all of Burney's other heroines, no matter how prosperous their initial circumstances, wrestle with and suffer through indebtedness. This indebtedness comes easily. Despite debt being traditionally, even legally, debarred to them as underage single women, easy credit makes debt seemingly inevitable. All one needs is a reputation as an heiress to begin the cycle of credit-debt-more credit.

In Burney's portrayal of it, the debt that befalls her heroines is particularly insidious because it occurs apart from their willing. In these novels, debt happens. It comes to Burney's heroines despite their virtue and moderation, despite their willingness to live (this is

particularly true of Juliet) in straightened circumstances. It comes to them through the bad offices of social climbers who make their access to credit a means to social standing: Mr. Harrel brings debt to Cecilia, Mrs. Mittin (a social cross-dresser) to Camilla, Mrs. Arbe to Juliet. In these later novels, the upward mobility sought comically by the Branghtons in *Evelina* still receives criticism but now can threaten the heroines' very beings. Burney's is the difficult position of recording the accomplishment of Pope's and Swift's dark vision. In her novels, however, paper credit lends corruption lighter wings to fly in intimate domestic scenes rather than in the purchase of kings or senates.

As paper credit insinuates itself in the economy and culture of Georgian England, satire, as Pope predicted in his *Epilogue to the Satires 1738*, "dies." In *Evelina*, Mrs. Selwyn is described repeatedly as "our satirical friend" (269, 284). To Merton and Coverley, the two dissipated young men who, unable to race phaetons, seek another wager, she suggests they stake a thousand pounds on "who can repeat by heart the longest ode of Horace" (290). But they, like the product of English education described in Book IV of Pope's *Dunciad* (365-7, II. 282-330), have lost all "Classical learning" and instead set up the cruel race between the octogenarian women. People fear and respect Mrs. Selwyn, but they do not like her: "She is not a favourite with Mr. Villars" (269). She brings about the novel's climactic event, the meeting between Evelina and Sir John Belmont that Villars could not arrange and had given up trying to arrange. But this wins her scant praise and little thanks from the meeting's principal beneficiary, Evelina, who will continue to associate Mrs. Selwyn with "severity" (274) and categorize hers as an "understanding ... [that] may be called masculine" (269).

Mrs. Selwyn does not enter *Evelina* until the narrative is well past its mid-point. She is a minor, albeit crucial figure. In *Cecilia*, the satirist's role is assumed by Mr. Gosport. Having described London as "this commercial city" (44) and offered a Popeian counter-point of the "SUPERCILIOUS" Miss Leeson to the

"VOLUBLE" Miss Larolles (45)—a critique of eighteenth-century women that Straub might rightly emphasize—he disappears. The professional skill of Dr. Lyster will rescue Cecilia from her breakdown, not a satiric intervention. In *Camilla*, Mrs. Arlbery possesses a "spirit of satire" (89), but her social critique is indirect and inefficacious. Her advice to Camilla is nearly fatal.

As the role that she imagines for "satirical" characters narrows, how can Burney's anger about the city and its commerce make itself known? How can her admiration for and grounding in the works of the Scriblerians manifest itself? Harrel's posthumous wish, "Had I a son, I would bequeath him a plow" (431), offers his belated recognition of Pope's wise commentary upon the dangers of paper credit. The punishments that Burney visits upon her characters, the cost that the world exacts from them, bespeak her discontent, her anger. None of her heroines deserve the evil that befalls them. And her narrative voice can (and does) take up the satiric role that her characters cede.[2] Given the triumph of an economy built upon "paper credit," given the pervasiveness of debt, Burney—permit me to take a page from Epstein's "underground" reading here—also brings the Scriblerians into her narrative indirectly through a brilliant adaptation of her prose style.

At a point fairly late in her exchanges with her brother Charles about the wording of her father's Memorial, Burney writes in her defense against his "Pedagogeryshipness": "For though the Inscription is neither in Rhyme nor blank verse, it is not in *plain* prose, but in measured prose" (*Journals* IX, 419). Burney brings Pope's poetry (Swift's as well) into her prose by measuring it into lines that approximate heroic couplets and that echo the antithesis and balance for which Pope is so justly honored. In this space, I can give only three examples, but I encourage all students of Burney to add to my collection of prose couplets as they return to the novels.

Having observed the tension created by the possibility of Cecilia's marriage to Mortimer Delvile, Dr. Lyster attempts to calm the situation. He proposes, "The true art of happiness in this most

whimsical world seems nothing more nor less than this—Let those who have leisure, find employment, [/] and those who have business find leisure" (696). While his lines do not rhyme, they do scan, and his placement of caesurae has a distinctly Popeian ring. While her couplet is not measured quite as precisely as Lyster's, in a passage that predicts how difficult the romance between Edgar and Camilla will be, Mrs. Tyrold notes of him, "Neither a mistress nor a slave can make him happy; [/] a companion is what he requires" (221). Near the mid-point of *The Wanderer*, Juliet has found work she badly needs at a milliner's, but her quickness angers the other seamstresses. Once she realizes the reason for their anger, she also realizes how impossible her situation now is: "—to toil beyond her fellow-labourers, was but to provoke ill-will; [/] to allow herself any repose, was but to excite disapprobation" (453).

As the "uncoverer" of her anger, Epstein made an important contribution to Burney studies. After reading Epstein, no serious critic will blithely categorize Burney as a comedian of manners and writer of pieces for the "parlour." However, Burney's marriage was far too happy and far too important to her, and her loyalty to George III and his family was far too powerfully and persistently expressed for me to agree with Epstein that Burney spent her life stewing in "the masked simmering rage of ... a ... social reformer." Burney was angry all right, but so was her great mentor and friend, the decidedly non-feminist Samuel Johnson. They were angry about the rise to social prominence of characters like the Branghtons and Mr. Smith, like Mr. Dubster and Mrs. Mittin, angry about the weakening of social subordination and the rise of an economy based so completely upon credit and debt that the only social stain came from the seizing of one's home. Burney's anger was not that of a late twentieth-century feminist; rather, it was that of an early eighteenth-century Scriblerian. And even when the triumph of "blest Paper credit" was complete and the Scriblerian voice stilled, Burney still found ways—ways in equal parts quiet and brilliant—to bring that voice into her writing.

Notes

[1] Burney uses this comparison so frequently in the later volumes of her *Journals and Letters* that a list cannot do justice to its pervasiveness. For a small sample, see Volume IX, 112, 149, 174n., 216, 231, 246, 281, 317n., 362, 403 and 441.

[2] Epstein has described how, in *Cecilia*, Burney "experiments with a vocally rich and multilayered third-person omniscient narrator," claiming of Burney's description of Cecilia's consciousness immediately before her collapse, "No one had written like this before Burney" (170). Burney's "rich" narrative voice is heard in her novels after *Cecilia* and modulates between direct and indirect references to Scriblerian satire. For one example of this voice's satiric range, early in *The Wanderer,* Ellis and Lady Aurora Glanville read "the penetrating Pope" (116). Shortly thereafter, Sir Marmaduke Crawley appears as an example of bad taste, a spoiled young aristocrat who, like Merton and Coverley in *Evelina,* has returned unimproved from his Grand Tour (230-35).

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