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The Need to Adapt:

Burney's Enactment of Shakespearean Tragedy in her Novels, with a Focus on *Cecilia*

GEFEN BAR-ON

The characters in her novels often speak famous lines from his plays, and yet, Burney's use of Shakespeare has received little critical attention. This paper examines the "enactment" of Shakespearean tragedy, the most popular tragedy on the eighteenth-century stage, in Burney's novels, with a focus on *Cecilia*. Several critics have noted the theatrical nature of Burney's novelistic style. The Harrels' attempt to borrow money from Cecilia while the Shylock-like Jew is on his way (192) is only one of many scenes in her novels that one can easily envision performed on the stage. Burney places quotations from Shakespeare in the mouths of her characters, sometimes to enhance the meaning of their words and actions, at other times to ironically undercut them. She uses the bard to communicate with her readers through a shared body of literary and theatrical knowledge that became increasingly important for the literate men and women of eighteenth-century England.

It was during the eighteenth century that Shakespeare's status was transformed from one of the leading Renaissance playwrights to a supreme genius and national hero. In a 1785 letter to her family, Burney recalls King George's awareness of Shakespeare's superiority: "'it's *Shakespeare*, and nobody dare abuse him'," the king complains. He does enumerate Shakespeare's flaws, but humorously acknowledges that "one should be stoned for saying [them]!" (*Journals and Letters* 228). Burney's use of the bard in her novels, however, is not simply an appeal to cultural authority. Shakespeare's plays are an especially effective resource with which to comment on the difficulties of female independence because of the similarities between what Burney's heroines undergo and what Shakespeare himself underwent during the eighteenth century. The process that I allude to is that of adjustment and adaptation in accordance with the demands of society. Each one of Burney's heroines learns that in order to survive she must modify her sense of self to her social environment. Shakespeare too was reconceptualised, adapted and amended by his editors and actors to fulfil the tastes and sensibilities of the culture that elevated him. By figuring the adaptive process of her heroine with the help of plays that were themselves in the process of being adapted, Burney adds a layer of cultural validity to her characters' inner struggle.

Shakespearean plays and editions, the two vehicles of his rising canonicity, were both intimately familiar to Burney. Garrick, the admired Shakespearean actor, and Johnson, the prominent critic and editor, were both family friends. In her 1752 journal, Burney praises Garrick's performance of Richard III: "Garrick was sublimely horrible!" She writes, "How he made me shudder every time he appeared!" She reports a desire to see the actor "in all his great characters" (*Journal and Letters* 16). Johnson, too, was the object of Burney's admiration. In her 1778 journal she affirms that he has "the most extensive knowledge, the clearest understanding, and the greatest abilities of any Living Author" (*Journals and Letters* 92). In her novels, Burney uses Shakespearean authority in both its theatrical and textual manifestations to explore the difficulties of female identity.

Even in the beginning of *Cecilia*, when the heroine naively looks forward to a future of relative independence, Burney uses Shakespeare to hint at her underlying vulnerability. When Mr. Monckton introduces Cecilia to Mr. Belfield by saying " I bring you ... a subject of sorrow in a young lady who never gave disturbance to her friends but in quitting them" (12), his words recall Shakespeare's most abused female character: Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*. Lavinia is the daughter of the Roman general Titus who is raped and mutilated by the sons of Tamora, queen of the Goths. When Marcus restores the ravished Lavinia, whom he finds abandoned in the woods, to her father, he tells him, "I bring consuming sorrow to thine age" (3.1.61). The parallel wordings in the introductions of Cecilia and Lavinia identify both with sorrow and draw a link between the self-assured woman and the utterly helpless one. Burney thus uses Shakespeare to introduce a sinister hint that Cecilia may become a victim well before the action of the novel makes it clear. While Burney's heroines are never subject to abuse as extreme as that of Lavinia, they do, nevertheless, as Judy Simons notes, experience fear of others' power over them. The "terror" that they feel derives not from an external enemy like the Goths who rape Lavinia, but, Simon contends, from the "miniature of [the] polite society" to which they struggle to belong while maintaining a sense of self (35).

Burney uses Shakespeare to dramatize how individual judgement and social behaviour collide with each other. When Mr. Harrel inquires what Cecilia thought of Sir Robert Floyer who "never quitted [her] a moment while he stayed at Mrs. Mears," Cecilia replies evasively that his stay was "too short ... to allow [her] to form a fair opinion of him," but in turn Morrice confronts Cecilia with the unpleasant truth: "it was long enough to allow you to form a *foul* one" (49-50). This exchange recalls the witches' collective cry in *Macbeth* that "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.11-12). The witches' juxtaposition of foul and fair was a subject of interpretative debate in Shakespeare editions. William Warburton explains it through the folkloric belief that witches "had absolute

power over the weather." Johnson, employing his usual ethical brand of criticism, seeks to find moral content in the paradox. This statement, for him, reveals the witches' malignancy, which regards beauty as ugliness and goodness as badness. The association of the witches with an enigmatic motto that reverses the order of nature enhances their threatening quality. The allusion to *Macbeth* associates Cecilia with the witches. Cecilia and the witches do not share a common moral ground, but they do have a common tendency towards independence: the witches live in an isolated female community, while Cecilia dreams of autonomy. Both forms of independence, however distinct, are nevertheless threatening to society.

The exchange with Mr. Harrel is not the only instance in which Cecilia's autonomous spirit implicates her in the Shakespearean supernatural world. When she pleads with Mrs. Harrel to reform the family's spending habits, Cecilia's determination is contrasted with Hamlet's indecision in responding to the ghost's demand for revenge. Mrs. Harrel's insistence that she and her husband only live "like the rest of the world" is powerless to "blunt [Cecilia's] purpose" in her effort to induce change (188-99). "Blunted purpose" is the expression that the ghost uses when it reappears and tells the undecided Hamlet: "Do not forget: This visitation/Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.110-11). Hamlet was a highly regarded character among eighteenth-century theatre goers. In her focus and determination, Cecilia is identified with the ghost rather than with the beloved hero whose purpose, unlike hers, *is* blunted. Burney "conflates" Cecilia and the ghost once again when Cecilia looks upon Delvile after he abandons her with an expression of "more anger than sorrow" (546). This is a reversal of the words which Horatio uses to describe the ghost's countenance: more sorrow than anger. Cecilia, then, is fiercer than the ghost. Like him, she is a victim who has special powers to impress and intimidate her audience.

What is at the root of Burney's linking of the female heroine with Shakespearean supernatural characters? Eighteenth-century

critics tended to stress the connection between Shakespearean character and universal human nature. For Johnson, Shakespeare's characters reflect "what observation will always find." Supernatural characters pose a challenge to that view because they do not correspond to empirical reality. For Johnson, the purpose of these characters is to show human nature "as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed" (*Works* 7: 65; quoted in Stock 199). In a 1784 letter to Susanna Phillips, a couple of weeks before Johnson's death, Burney records Johnson's view of Shakespeare's supernatural characters as essentially realistic creations. Burney tells Johnson: "Certainly, sir ... there *is* such a thing as Invention? Shakespeare could never have seen a Caliban," to which the doctor replies "NO, but he had see a *man* and knew, therefore, how to vary him to a monster" (*Journals and Letters* 206). Not all critics agreed with Johnson's "naturalistic" view of fantastic characters. George Steevens writes that the ghost in Hamlet "is allowed to be the genuine product of Shakespeare's strong imagination" and that Hamlet's encounter with it should be "regarded as a stroke of dramatick artifice" (602-3). The fantastic nature of supernatural characters is especially evident in the theatrical setting. In *A General View of the Stage* (1759), Thomas Wilkes describes the "awe and surprise" that the reappearance of the ghost creates on the stage (3.4.111) (Derrick 250).

Another function of Burney's supernatural allusions, then, is to generate effects of surprise and awe that alienate the readers and remind them of the relative lack of control that the female heroine has over events that shape her life. Like a Shakespearean hero confronted with the appearance of a ghost or a witch, Cecilia's life is interrupted by events and people over which she lacks full knowledge and control. Mr. Albany, for instance, is identified with Hamlet's ghost when his dramatic entry causes "every body but Sir Robert" to "[move] out of the way" and when he looks upon Cecilia with an expression of "more ... sorrow than anger," the same expression as the ghost's (292). When Cecilia describes how Mr. Marriot is forced upon her by Mr. Harrel, she notes that the young man seems "enamoured even to madness" (384). These words,

signifying lack of restraint, are the same as those which Iago chooses when he tells the audience that he will "[practice] upon [Othello's] peace and quiet/Even to madness." Like Desdemona, Cecilia becomes a victim of male doubt. When Cecilia wonders with "what arts or with what views Mr. Harrel might think proper to encourage" Mr. Marriot's unwelcome interest, her fears recall those of Desdemona's father when he imagines his daughter's marriage to the Moor in terms of black magic. Anxieties about loss of agency pervade both Shakespeare's and Burney's writings. In the novel's second chapter, Belfield quotes from Hamlet to present an idealistic vision of human freedom. He tells Monckton:

> ... your general rules, your appropriated customs, your settled forms, are but so many absurd arrangements to impede not merely the progress of genius, but the use of understanding. If man dared act for himself ... how noble indeed would he be! *How infinite in faculties! In apprehensions how like a God!* (15)

This theatrical speech clashes ironically both with Shakespeare and with what the novel reveals about the female condition. First, while Belfield quotes Hamlet on man's infinite faculties, the confidence with which he delivers his speech contrasts with Hamlet's melancholia and with his growing doubts about human nature. Second, the word "man" reminds the readers that women cannot aspire to the freedom that Belfield envisions for men. Belfield's ideal corresponds to the Romantic view of Shakespeare as a natural genius who transcended method, a view that gained increasing prominence towards the end of the eighteenth century. For the heroine, however, the possibilities of transcendence are extremely limited. The world of the novel, though peopled with characters who speak like Shakespearean ghosts, is in fact firmly grounded in real-life monetary and social constraints to which the characters must adapt. Simons notes that the theatrical elements of Burney's novels mesh with her message that to survive in society, women must learn to play roles (50). Augusta Delvile's letter to Cecilia implicitly figures life as a stage when the mother acknowledges that her

expectations for her son "outstepped the modesty of" nature and promises that she "will no longer play the tyrant." Her apology follows Hamlet's advice to the players: "that you o'er-step not the modesty of nature" because "the purpose of playing" is "to hold ... the mirror up to nature" (3.2.18-21).

It is not only her heroines, but also Burney herself, who had to adapt to "theatrical" standards. The dramatic qualities of Burney's novels compelled her to adjust her style to popular theatrical tastes. Joyce Hemlow contends that Burney fashioned the development of her novels partly "on the mad scenes of eighteenth-century Shakespeare." In the closing chapters of *Cecilia*, she says "the heroine emerges as an Ophelia-like creature of innocence and beauty gone mad with harsh usage and pain" (159). Her depiction assimilates Shakespearean melodramatic performance from the period. The endings of Burney's novels also cater to theatrical tastes by being "happy endings." Burney does for *Cecilia* what the eighteenth-century audience demanded from Shakespearean performance: she provides an ending that rewards virtue. The Lear performance that Evelina records, for instance, is not Shakespeare's original, but a version of Nahum Tate's adaptation of it. Among other alterations, that adaptation ended the play with the marriage of Edgar and Cordelia instead of her death. Garrick, who revised the play to bring it closer to the Shakespeare original, nevertheless retained that revised ending because of its strong appeal for the audience. William Richardson, for instance, wrote:

> Why must innocence unnecessarily suffer? ... Why must Cordelia perish by an untimely fate? The amiable, the dutiful, the innocent Cordelia.... That such a melancholy catastrophe was by no means necessary is sufficiently evinced by the manner in which the same play is now performed. Ingratitude now meets with its proper punishment, and the audience now retire exulting in the mutual happiness of parental affection and filial piety. Such, if practicable, should be the winding up of all dramatic representations, that

> mankind may have the most persuasive allurements to all good actions. (131)

Like a Shakespearean theatrical adaptation, the ending of *Cecilia* provides the audience with the balance that they desire: tragic emotion that generates morally and emotionally valued tears and a final turn that satisfies the basic requirement of justice.

So far I have used adaptation in the sense of compromise. But adaptation can also assume a more creative meaning that signifies the alteration and juxtaposition of materials in refreshing ways. The eighteenth century admired Shakespeare for the originality with which he treated his source materials. Furthermore, Shakespeare was praised for his excellence in both tragedy and comedy and for his ability to occasionally combine them. This hybridity was appreciated because it corresponded to nature. James Beattie, for instance, wrote that "Nature every where presents a similar mixture of tragedy and comedy" like that which is found in Shakespeare (153). Garrick, too, was admired for his ability to convincingly animate both tragic and comic roles. Burney shows similar originality in *Camilla* when she creates a comically poor performance of one of Shakespeare's most admired tragedies—*Othello*. As a tragedy that turns into a comic farce, the disastrous buskins blur boundaries between high and low, beautiful and ugly, profound and stupid. Nestled between the sad chapters detailing Eugenia's emotional struggle with her deformity and the alarming news about the deterioration in Sir Hugh's health that comes at the end of the performance, the disastrous buskins serve as comic relief. Eugenia, the cause of Camilla's sadness, and Shakespeare have something in common: they both contain beauty that has been corrupted. Shakespeare's poetry is beautiful and pure, but it can be corrupted by bad acting. Smallpox has robbed Eugenia of her beauty. The efforts of her family to shelter Eugenia from the social consequences of her deformity cannot go unchallenged for long. Camilla's distress over her sister's humiliation is relieved by the theatrical farce, but this too is interrupted by the alarming news about Sir Hugh. Thus, happiness, like poetic and physical beauty, is

unstable. The performance of *Othello* and the events following it create an atmosphere of confusion and instability that is characteristic both of Shakespeare's treatment by the provincial theatre and of the emotional reality of female youth.

Burney's use of Shakespeare, then, is not clichéd. The endings of *Cecilia* and *The Wanderer* may cater to theatrical commonplaces, but the figuring of the heroine as Ophelia also provides original and sophisticated commentary on her plight. When Ellis is expelled by Mrs. Maple, for instance, Elinor enters her room and, addressing her as "most beautiful Ophelia," presents her with a packet of clothes so that the incognita will "not appear to disadvantage" (110). The term "beautified" with which Hamlet addresses Ophelia in his letter "To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautiful Ophelia" (2.2.109), drew much commentary from eighteenth-century critics because of Polonius's surprising reaction to it. Polonius says: "beautify'd/Is a vile phrase" (2.2.110-11). In the context of *The Wanderer*, Polonius's characterization of external signs of beauty and image as vile does in fact make sense because such externalities are manipulated in the novel to induce misery and injustice. This is what Harleigh has in mind when he reflects on how the tattered garments in which Juliet first appeared sealed her status in the eyes of the ladies in the house (105). Thus, Burney's critique of social injustice throws fresh, socially relevant, light on the Shakespearean association of beautification with vileness. When Juliet, on her part, reflects on Mrs. Ireton's mistreatment of her, she alludes to Portia's speech on the quality of mercy to make it clear that it is not money *per se*, but how humans abuse their possession of it that distorts reality and breeds injustice: "Where superior wealth falls into liberal hands, ... it blesses those who give and those who take—But ... Where it is misused for the purpose ... of oppressing the helpless ... how baneful then is inequality of fortune!" (494).

Juliet's sensitive use of Shakespeare effectively demonstrates her intellectual superiority to those who tyrannize over her. Her observation also recalls the power that human beings

potentially have to shape the economic sphere in the interests of justice. In *Cecilia*, Mr. Harrel paints a pseudo-supernatural picture of the economic work when he appeals to Cecilia with an anti-Semitic description of the Jewish money leaders: "I dread the whole race; I have a sort of superstitious notion that if once I get into their clutches, I shall never be my own man again" (192). This demonic depiction, however, assumes an ironic quality if one keeps in mind that the cause of Mr. Harrel's economic troubles lies in his own actions. Mr. Harrel fears that once he borrows from the Jews, he will not be his own man again. It is, however, precisely his desire to live beyond his means and to construct an identity that he cannot support that places him at risk. Despite the abundance of supernatural allusions, one of the basic ideas that Burney shares with Shakespeare is a belief in the power of human agency and personality, subject to social constraints, to shape destiny. It is the effect that the witches have on Macbeth's emotions and ambitions, not their supernatural power as such, that engenders his tragic transformation. Burney's heroines, like Shakespearean characters, are forced, often quite brutally, to adapt to their environment and undergo rapid changes. And yet, like Shakespeare's characters, they maintain a sense of self which makes them compelling to the readers.

Note: I am indebted to the notes of the editions of Burney's works listed in the Works Cited for identifying the Shakespearean allusions in her novels.

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