*The Burney Journal*

Volume 8 (2005) Article 5

# Race, Manners, and Satire in Burney's *A Busy Day*

Alexander H. Pitofsky

**Recommended Citation**
Pitofsky, Alexander H. "Race, Manners, and Satire in Burney's *A Busy Day*." *The Burney Journal*, vol. 8, 2005, pp. 57-69. https://www.mcgill.ca/burneycentre/burney-society/burney-journal/vol8/5.

The Burney Journal, volume VIII, 2005.

# Race, Manners, and Satire

## In Burney's *A Busy Day*

ALEXANDER H. PITOFSKY

The Londoners in Frances Burney's *A Busy Day* (c. 1800-02) express a wide range of views about the people and culture of India.[1] When Eliza Watts returns to Britain after spending several years in Calcutta, for example, she describes the "native Gentoos" she encountered during her travels as "the mildest and gentlest of human beings" (309).[2] The attitudes of Burney's characters without firsthand knowledge of India are far less benevolent. Burney suggests throughout the play that while many of her British contemporaries draw profits from colonial transactions in India, few can speak about the colony's native population without setting their remarks on a foundation of racist stereotypes. These eruptions of bigotry allow Burney to complicate an otherwise conventional comedy of manners with a sustained satirical attack on racial prejudice.

*A Busy Day*'s opening lines are dominated by references to India. Before Eliza is reunited with her wealthy but endlessly vulgar

family, she takes a room in a seedy hotel that functions primarily as a gaming house. When she asks two waiters to help her Indian servant Mungo carry her belongings inside, Eliza is startled by their overtly racist replies:

> Eliza: [P]ray assist my servant in taking care of my trunks.
>
> 1st waiter: What, the Black?
>
> Eliza: Yes; be so good as to see if he wants any help.
>
> 1st waiter: What, the Black?
>
> Eliza: Yes. He is the best creature living. I shall be extremely concerned if he should meet with any accident.
>
> 1st waiter: What, the Black?
>
> Eliza: I shall be much obliged to you for any service you may do him. (295-96)[3]

The waiter's repetitions leave no room for interpretation: he is affronted to find that Eliza expects him to "serve" a dark-skinned native of India. Eliza's request confirms that she has been overseas for a long time; during her absence, she has evidently forgotten that in Britain even the most humble white servant will reject the role of a black man's assistant.[4] After the first waiter "exit[s] sneering" (296), the second steps forward and volunteers his services:

> 2nd waiter: Any commands for me, meme?
>
> Eliza: Only that you will also see if you can be of any use to him.
>
> 2nd waiter: What, this Black—Gentleman?

Eliza: Yes.

2nd waiter: By all means, meme! To be sure I shall! (296)

Eliza is not comforted by this seemingly cheerful reply. "Poor Mungo!" she says. "[M]y care of you shall be trebled for the little kindness you seem likely to meet with here" (296). Throughout this passage, Burney implies that international travel could potentially reshape her British contemporaries' attitudes with respect to race. Because of Eliza's experiences in India, she is saddened to find that in England "Gentoos" are regarded as a despised minority, not as "the mildest and gentlest of human beings." Noticing her employer's dismay, Eliza's servant Deborah offers these words of encouragement:

> "Why, that's very good of you, my dear young lady, to be so kind to him ... but, for all that, these [waiters] mean no harm, I dare say; for after all, a Black's but a Black; and let him hurt himself never so much, it won't shew. It in't like hurting us whites, with our fine skins, all over alabaster." (296)

A few minutes later, Deborah becomes exasperated by the waiters' reluctance to serve Eliza's fiancé Cleveland after the incident regarding the trunks and says, "Well, I must say I was better served by half in Calcutta, little as I like those Negro places" (299). Deborah's remarks suggest that Burney was too familiar with her society's racial politics to view international travel as a panacea. Empathetic, open-minded Britons like Eliza might develop new perspectives through travel, Burney implies, but the bigotry of insensitive, ignorant Britons like Deborah is in all likelihood indelible.

*A Busy Day*'s opening passages highlight the attitudes of working Britons, but Burney's investigation of prejudice does not end there. To Eliza's sister Peggy, India is a jungle crowded with beasts in human form. Do "Indins" wear clothing, she asks, or are

they "all savages?" How much "mischief" do they cause? Are they permitted to "run about wild?" Was Eliza "monstrous frightened" when she first laid eyes on them? (309). Eliza tries to explain that India is populated by human beings, but Peggy pays no attention. "La, nasty black things!" she explains. "I can't abide the Indins. I'm sure I should do nothing but squeal if I was among 'em" (309). Peggy knows virtually nothing about India, but she knows precisely how her own society expects young women to respond when they hear references to what Deborah calls "those Negro places." By insisting that she would be terrified if she found herself in the presence of "Indins," Peggy draws attention to her own female delicacy and tacitly questions the femininity of her sister, who has somehow acquired the ability to speak with admiration about her acquaintances from Calcutta.

Eliza's mother, by contrast, does not give a moment's thought to the *people* of India. To her, India is a warehouse crammed with merchandise for the conspicuous consumption of wealthy European women. Within moments after her reunion with Eliza, Mrs. Watts interrupts her daughter's mournful reminiscences about Mr. Alderson, the guardian who took her along on his travels and subsequently left her an inheritance of eighty thousand pounds, with this non sequitur: "Pray—my dear, have you got over much Indy muslin? I ha'n't bought a morsel since I knew you was coming" (308). And in the imagination of Cleveland's uncle Sir Marmaduke Tylney, India fuses together the attributes of a jungle *and* a place of commerce. He thinks of India as something akin to a Wall Street trading floor, an arena in which ambitious young people compete for money. India might not be a comfortable place to spend one's early adulthood, Sir Marmaduke suggests, but that is beside the point. One goes on an "Indian expedition" simply to accumulate wealth and return to England as soon as possible.

This assumption appears to have been commonplace in late eighteenth-century British society. As Linda Colley observes, British India was widely perceived as a place that gave "the talented [and]

the lucky ... the opportunity to build up a substantial fortune" (129). Roy Porter recounts the rags-to-riches story of an Englishman who found immense prosperity as a trader in India: "William Hickey, in London a ne'er-do-well, had sixty-three underlings as an East India Company clerk in Calcutta. Successful nabobs could hope to bring back a couple of hundred thousand pounds..." (36). Moreoever, as Boswell explains in the *Life of Johnson*, although Samuel Johnson insisted that he did not envy English entrepreneurs who pursued financial success by traveling to India, he granted that the strategy was often quite effective:

> The conversation having turned on the prevailing practice of going to the East-Indies in quest of wealth; Johnson ***. A man had better have ten thousand pounds at the end of ten years passed in England, than twenty thousand pounds at the end of ten years passed in India, because you must compute what you *give* for money; and a man who has lived ten years in India, has given up ten years of social comfort and all those advantages which arise from living in England. The ingenious Mr. [Capability] Brown ... told me, that he was once at the seat of Lord Clive, who had returned from India with great wealth; and that he shewed him at the door of his bed-chamber a large chest, which he said he had once had full of gold.... (1031)

Burney's Sir Marmaduke has listened attentively to similar anecdotes about fortunes amassed in the East Indies. Accordingly, when Cleveland's financial prospects seem uncertain near the conclusion of *A Busy Day,* Sir Marmaduke advises him to return to Calcutta:

> Sir Marmaduke: You are a young man ... [w]hat hinders a little voyage back to India to mend your fortune?

> Cleveland: A little voyage, sir, to the East Indies?
>
> Sir Marmaduke: Why what's half a dozen years, or so, in the life of a young man? ... a voyage more or less to the East Indies—what is it, at your time of life? I hate a fuss about common casualties. (387)

Like Peggy Watts, Sir Marmaduke evidently believes that an individual's attitudes about India reveal how well he or she grasps British society's received wisdom about gender roles. Sir Marmaduke does not explicitly question Cleveland's masculinity in this conversation, but he implies that if Cleveland were a real man he would stop whimpering, go back to India, and finish the task of building his fortune.[5]

* * *

Burney scholars do not appear to have reached a consensus about the implications of *A Busy Day*'s India motif. Margaret Anne Doody argues that Burney's representations of bigotry are one component of the play's broader investigation of ethics and manners. "Racial prejudice," she writes, "is presented ... as a major example of the dominant vice examined in the play, the vice of looking down on and cutting off individuals and whole groups" (298). Similarly, Tara Ghosal Wallace, editor of the first published edition of *A Busy Day*, observes that the play "has to do with manners and character; [Burney] wants to show that bad manners are a manifestation of a selfish heart and that they are not confined to any social class" (1). Other commentators have praised Burney for lacing her comedy with references to British India. Peter Sabor, for instance, characterizes *A Busy Day*'s attitudes with respect to race as "subversive" (xl), and Claire Harmon insists that Burney was "brave" to cast doubt on her British contemporaries' treatment of racial Others (282).

It seems to me that the references to India in *A Busy Day* demand more attention than they have received. This play, which is in many ways a conventional eighteenth-century comedy of manners, contains something that seldom appears in the literature of the period: a sustained satirical attack on racism. More specifically, Burney encourages us to laugh at several characters not because they are fops, pedants, or coffee-house politicians, but because they are bigots. British writers of the late eighteenth century often appear to assume that their audiences will share the racial intolerance of their characters. In *Humphry Clinker*, for example, Tobias Smollett evidently expects readers to roar with laughter when Matthew Bramble assaults a pair of black musicians who have offended him by practicing near his hotel room in Bath. As Jery Melford explains,

> ... snatching his cane, [Bramble] opened the door and proceeded to the place where the black trumpeters were posted. There, without further hesitation, he began to belabour them both; and exerted himself with such astonishing vigour and agility, that both their heads and horns were broken in a twinkling, and they ran howling down stairs to their master's parlour door. (60)

In Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* and *The Duenna*, the audience is invited to snicker at various anti-Semitic comments about Moses, who teaches Uncle Oliver how to pose as a usurer, and Isaac Mendoza, a compulsive swindler. Earlier in her career, Burney herself occasionally failed to keep her distance from some of the intolerant attitudes of her time. In *Cecilia*, Burney's heroine is appalled the first time Mr. Harrel urges her to do business with a Jewish moneylender: "The heart of Cecilia recoiled at the very mention of a *Jew*, and *taking up money upon interest*; but ... she agreed, after some hesitation, to have recourse to this method [of borrowing money]" (189).

In *A Busy Day*, by contrast, Burney suggests that racists, not the objects of their intolerance, should cause the heart to recoil. Several of Burney's attacks on bigotry in *A Busy Day* resemble her attacks on British nationalism and xenophobia in *Evelina*. Readers of that novel will recall the numerous passages in which Captain Mirvan torments Madame Duval by addressing her as "Madam French," "Mrs. Frog," and "the old French hag" (55-57, 59) and by making her the victim of a violent practical joke. Even after he has convinced Madame Duval that her companion Monsieur Du Bois has been arrested and charged with treason, robbed her in disguise as a highwayman, pushed her into a ditch, and lashed her to a tree, the Captain continues to develop schemes to prolong her suffering and express his contempt for France:

> The Captain's raptures, during supper, at the success of his plan, were boundless.... He seems to have no delight but in terrifying or provoking [Madame Duval], and all his thoughts apparently turn upon inventing such methods as may do it most effectively. She had her breakfast again in bed yesterday morning; but during ours, the Captain ... gave us to understand, that he thought she had now rested long enough to bear the hardships of a fresh campaign. (169-70)

Later in the novel, Mr. Branghton and his children repeatedly insult Mr. Macartney, a penniless, emotionally unstable young Scot. Evelina describes her introduction to Macartney, and to the Branghtons' xenophobia, in this passage:

> As we entered the shop, I observed a young man, in deep mourning, leaning against the wall .... As I found he was permitted to go quite unnoticed, I could not forbear enquiring who he was.

> "Lord!" answered Miss Branghton, "he's nothing but a poor Scotch poet."
>
> "For my part," said Miss Polly, "I believe he's just starved, for I don't find he has any thing to live upon"....
>
> "Like enough," replied the brother, "but, for all that, you won't find he will live without meat and drink: no, no, catch a Scotchman at that if you can! Why, they only come here for what they can get." (196-97)

Evelina is taken aback by her cousins' remarks, but their views of the Scots (especially Tom Branghton's assumption that "North Britons" traveled south primarily to take advantage of the expanding English economy) were commonplace in eighteenth-century England. Porter notes that "Macs' ... were the most resented immigrants in Hanoverian England—because of their success" (35), and Colley points out that for followers of John Wilkes and other English nationalists, the Scots "were inherently, unchangeably alien, never ever to be confused or integrated with the English. . . . This line of attack reached its logical conclusion in Wilkite accusations that it was the Scots who finally precipitated war with America after 1775: 'The ruin of the British empire is merely a SCOTISH QUARREL with English liberty, a SCOTCH SCRAMBLE for English property'" (113-14, 116). Burney's heroine listens in silence while her cousins taunt "*the Scotch mope*," but in letters she denounces them with uncharacteristic bitterness ("What principles! I could hardly stay in the room" [207]) and emphasizes the pity she feels for Macartney: "Surely this young man must be involved in misfortunes of no common nature: but I cannot imagine what can induce him to remain with this unfeeling family, where he is, most unworthily, despised for being poor, and most illiberally, detested for being a Scotchman" (198).

Burney increases the intensity of her satire against bigotry in *A Busy Day*. The modes of intolerance represented in *Evelina* are

disturbing, to be sure, but they often seem too puerile to be taken seriously. In a curious way, the bigots described in Evelina's letters seem to take pleasure in their victims' company. Captain Mirvan claims that he detests Madame Duval, yet he pays a tremendous amount of attention to her and clearly finds her presence, which offers him unlimited opportunities to play the role of a swaggering English patriot, exhilarating. Similarly, although the Branghtons never hesitate to express their contempt for the Scots, they also seem to find Macartney's Wertherish dejection entertaining. Mr. Branghton is entitled to evict Macartney when he proves unable to pay his rent, but Branghton never seriously considers that course of action, possibly because his lodger's absence would call unwelcome attention to the tiresome routines of his home and his shop. In *A Busy Day*, by contrast, Burney's bigoted characters consider "black" natives of India beneath their consideration. As Sabor points out, although several white characters mention Eliza's Indian servant, Mungo never appears on stage. Thus, Mungo could be described as a precursor of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man—he is unseen because, with the exception of Eliza, white Britons refuse to see him.[6]

In the early 1970s, television producer Norman Lear and his staff of screenwriters were acclaimed as innovators when they mined comedy from the intolerance of Archie Bunker and other characters in *All in the Family*.[7] Frances Burney developed similar strategies one hundred and seventy years earlier in *A Busy Day*, but for reasons all too familiar to those of us who study Burney's thwarted career as a dramatist, her satire on the racial politics of her time has not received the recognition it deserves.

## Notes

[1] Burney never traveled to India, but she learned a great deal about the colony in conversations with friends and relatives who had spent time there. As Tara Ghoshal Wallace explains, "[Burney's knowledge of India] came from various sources: her half brother Richard Thomas Burney had lived in Bengal; her sister Charlotte married Ralph Broome, who had spent much of his life there; and she took a great interest in the trial of Warren Hastings (for peculation as a governor general of India), attending the proceedings as one of 'the friends of the persecuted man'" (1-2).

[2] Late eighteenth-century Britons commonly used the term "Gentoo" as a synonym for "Hindu." Later in the play, Frank Cleveland suggests that as a consequence of her humble socio-economic background and her travels in India, Eliza has become an unofficial Hindu. As Margaret Doody points out, "Frank equates an 'inferior' race with membership in an 'inferior' class, as is seen in his constant reference to Eliza ... as the 'little Gentoo'" (299).

[3] As Roxann Wheeler explains in *The Complexion of Race,* although Britons found the racial identity of Indians difficult to define, they often referred to natives of the East Indies as "blacks": "Many British writers acknowledged that East Indians with whom they dealt were not black-complected, even though they were often denominated blacks. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the British frequently referred to East Indians as blacks in their letters and newspapers; racial taxonomies, however, generally distinguished between the lighter-complected inhabitants from the northwest and their darker-colored southern counterparts" (160-61).

[4] Wheeler observes that Britons living in India generally viewed Indians in a more favorable light: "East India was one of the very few places [in the British colonies] where marriage with native women was encouraged to create a mixed community supportive of British commercial policies. This encouragement was based on the perceived resemblance between Britain and the East Indies, including a well-ordered, caste-based society, an ancient civilization with visible artefacts, and the commercial savvy of the inhabitants" (166).

[5] Several characters in *A Busy Day* think of India as a source of wealthy husbands for English women. When Peggy Watts insists that she would shriek if she found herself in the presence of "nasty black things," for example, her father points out that his fortune is sufficient to prevent that kind of terror: "There's no need for you to go amongst 'em now, my dear, for I can give you as handsome ... as [Mr. Alderson] gave your Sister" (47). Then Mrs. Watts asks Eliza how she managed to return from Calcutta unmarried:

> Mrs. Watts: It's surprising ... that you didn't get a rich husband ... there: for I'm told the men in Indy all want wives.
>
> Mr. Watts: I'm sure I wish we could send 'em some. I'd spare 'em mine! (half aside) (48)

[6] Barbara Darby observes that Mungo "has none of the power assumed by his white male counterparts and ... is beneath the other servants' contempt, too, because of his race. His nonappearance on the stage simultaneously symbolizes and perpetuates the idea that invisibility is a preferred status for 'undesirable' people who enter an unwelcoming society, city, or family" (144).

[7] As David Marc explains in *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (1997), executives at CBS were at first apprehensive about broadcasting a program that dared to suggest that racist attitudes can be humorous: "*All in the Family* was ready to go into production as early as 1969, but was America ready for it? [CBS] kept the series in cautious abeyance for over a year as research teams studied the reactions of test group after test group" (145).

## WORKS CITED

Boswell, James. *The Life of Samuel Johnson.* 1791. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.

Burney, Frances. *A Busy Day.* 1800-02. Ed. Peter Sabor. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 1995.

———. *A Busy Day.* 1800-02. Ed. Tara Ghoshal Wallace. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1984.

———.*Cecilia.* 1782. Ed. Margaret Anne Doody and Peter Sabor. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.

———. *Evelina.* 1778. London: Penguin, 1994.

Colley, Linda. *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.

Darby, Barbara. *Frances Burney, Dramatist: Gender, Performance, and the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage.* Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1997.

Doody, Margaret Anne. *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1988.

Harmon, Claire. *Fanny Burney: A Biography.* New York: Knopf, 2001.

Mark, David. *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.

Porter, Roy. *English Society in the Eighteenth Century.* London: Penguin, 1982.

Wheeler, Roxann. *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000.