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Captain Mirvan and the Politics of Manners in *Evelina*

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For Evelina, to know Captain Mirvan is to dislike him. Shortly after the Captain's reunion with his family, she writes:

> I have not spirits to give an account of his introduction, for he has really shocked me. . . . He seems to be surly, vulgar, and disagreeable. . . . [T]hat kind and sweet-tempered woman, Mrs. Mirvan, deserved a better lot. I am amazed she would marry him. . . . If he had spent his whole life abroad, I should have supposed they might rather have been thankful than sorrowful. (31)

In her next letter, Evelina goes even further. "I cannot bear that Captain," she insists. "I can give you no idea how gross he is" (40).

Critical discussions of Captain Mirvan have often echoed Miss Anville by focusing almost exclusively on Mirvan's boorishness. Judith Newton emphasizes that the Captain "embodies the most open and most physically brutal expression of male control in [*Evelina*]. . . . He is an image of the violence potential in

patriarchy, even patriarchy in the hands of gentlemen" (51-52). Patricia M. Spacks writes that Burney uses Mirvan as a vehicle for "actions expressing extreme hostility" (180). Ronald Paulson likens Mirvan to the numerous "sea dogs" in Tobias Smollett's novels and posits that he is a comic archetype—the "coarse lout," hopelessly addicted to the planning and performance of violent pranks (285).

Have no fear: my aim is not to suggest that Captain Mirvan has been misunderstood. He is a bully and a brute, a misogynist and a xenophobe—unquestionably a man more sinning than sinned against. I do, however, want to question the assumption that once we have observed that the Captain has appalling manners, there is nothing left to say about him. More specifically, in this paper I would like to depart from past discussions of Captain Mirvan to suggest that Burney sometimes uses him to call attention to the questionable manners of Evelina and other characters in the novel.

To begin with, it is necessary to consider the issue of time. As Lady Howard explains in a letter to Mr. Villars, when the Captain notifies his family that he will soon arrive in London, he is not returning from an ordinary business trip. To the contrary, he has been at sea—completely separated from his family, a commanding officer in a dangerous, hyper-masculine arena—for nearly seven years. In spite of the length and nature of the Captain's absence, however, none of the other characters in the novel suggests that he ought to be allowed a reasonable amount of time to readjust to civilian, domestic life. Instead, long before his assaults on Madame Duval and Mr. Lovel, several characters denounce Mirvan on the ground that his manners do not meet the standards of the period's leisure class. After the evening at the opera, Evelina protests that the Captain's remarks about the music and the performers were "extremely gross" (32). After the trip to Cox's Museum, Evelina recalls that the Captain's coarseness embarrassed everyone in the Mirvan party: "Indeed he laughs and talks so terribly loud in public, that he frequently makes us ashamed of belonging to him" (65). Moreover, "all the ladies" stare at the Captain with "looks of the most ironical contempt" (92) when he insists that he finds Ranlagh dull.

Evelina's failure to recognize that the Captain may need a period of transition and readjustment is understandable. She is, after all, an unusually inexperienced seventeen-year-old, raised in provincial isolation by Mr. Villars, a father figure who represents gentle, respectable masculinity as perfectly as Mirvan represents coarse, violent masculinity that has spun out of control. But what can be said in defense of Burney's more sophisticated and experienced characters who come into contact with the Captain and immediately conclude that he is an egregious brute? It seems curious that none of Mirvan's companions notices that his travels have profoundly affected his behavior. Throughout the novel, the Captain manifests a bizarre kind of personality disorder. As a consequence of his seven years at sea, it appears that he can only interact with people around him the way a naval officer interacts with his crew and his foes. On the day of his return, Mirvan insults his daughter like a drill sergeant berating a private: "Almost the same moment Maria was presented to him, he began some rude jests upon the bad shape of her nose, and called her a tall, ill-formed thing" (31). Mirvan is unable to disagree with Madame Duval and Mr. Lovel and leave it at that; rather, he classifies them as enemies and then launches his notorious "campaigns" to torment them. No source of irritation, it seems, is too trivial to whet his appetite for conflict. When Madame Duval orders Monsieur Du Bois to sit beside her in an already crowded coach, for example, the Captain initiates a potentially deadly confrontation:

> "Look'ee, *Monseer*, this here may be a French fashion, for aught I know,—but Give and Take is fair in all nations; and so now, d'ye see, I'll make bold to shew you an English one." And then, seizing [M. Du Bois's] wrist, he made him jump out of the coach.
>
> M. Du Bois instantly put his hand upon his sword, and threatened to resent this indignity. The Captain, holding up his stick, bid him draw at his peril. Mrs. Mirvan, greatly alarmed, got out of the coach, and, standing between them, entreated her husband to re-enter the house.

> "None of your clack!" cried he, angrily, "what the D---l, do you suppose I can't manage a Frenchman?" (99)

This passage, perhaps even more than the "practical joke" episodes, exposes just how deranged the Captain has become over the course of his sea odyssey. Consider the triviality of the incident that provokes him. Consider the fact that he feels no shame when his misconduct places his wife, the mild-mannered, endlessly patient Mrs. Mirvan, between two angry, armed men on the verge of fighting. Throughout the incident, Burney suggests that as a result of his travels Captain Mirvan, just like Captain Gulliver after his multi-year voyage to the country of the Houynhnhms, has become unfit for everyday domestic life.

Burney insistently uses Mirvan's speech patterns to indicate that "Captain" is not merely his rank: it has become his identity. When the Captain informs Sir Clement and Evelina of his scheme to assault Madame Duval, for example, he seems unable to utter a phrase without drawing on the lexicon of the Navy:

> [T]he Captain stopped me [Evelina writes]; and having first laughed very heartily, said he was going to read his commission to his ship's company. . . . "Now do you see . . . I expect obedience and submission to orders; I am now upon a hazardous expedition, having undertaken to convoy a crazy vessel to the shore of Mortification; so, d'ye see, if any of you have any thing to propose, that will forward the enterprize,—why speak and welcome; but if any of you, that are of my chosen crew, capitulate, or enter into any treaty with the enemy,—I shall look upon you as mutinying, and turn you adrift." (114)

Interestingly, Mirvan does not seem angry in this passage—he seems exhilarated. He evidently views his plot to disguise himself as a highwayman and ambush "the enemy" as an opportunity to cast off

his role in the domestic sphere and return to the military role he knows best and enjoys most.

Burney hints on several occasions that the Captain's travels have changed him. In the opening pages of the novel, for instance, his family is delighted to hear of his imminent return. Lady Howard explains to Mr. Villars that her daughter "just received a letter from her long-absent husband, containing the welcome news of his hoping to reach London by the beginning of next week . . . [It is] needless to say what joy, surprise, and consequently confusion, his, at present, unexpected return has caused at Howard Grove" (17). Later on, Evelina expresses surprise that the Mirvan family "was so rejoiced at his return" (31). Burney strongly suggests, in other words, that the Mirvan women were expecting to meet an affectionate husband and father in London, not a crude, obnoxious, and virtually demented tyrant. Their joy upon learning that the Captain will soon return is displaced by shock and disappointment when they discover that he is no longer the man they knew seven years earlier.

Burney could have precluded questions like the ones I have been raising by indicating that Mirvan had been away for a few weeks. Had he returned from a run-of-the-mill business excursion, there could be no explanation for his conduct other than his own immaturity and poor character. But his absence was not a matter of weeks; it lasted for nearly seven years. Burney, it seems to me, understands that such an experience can transform the ways in which an individual interacts with others. Her characters do not.

Burney makes it clear throughout *Evelina* that none of her characters is even slightly interested in hearing about the Captain's voyages. Like their failure to understand that Mirvan might need time to readjust to life on dry land, this indifference raises questions about *their* manners. Where, exactly, has the Captain been "smoked with a burning sun"? What kind of vessel did he command? Were his voyages financially rewarding? If so, what kinds of cargo did his ship carry? Consumer goods? Transported felons? Slaves? Did he experience combat? Did he bring his crew home safely, or did some of his subordinates perish thousands of miles away from England?

Did he bring home any mementos of his international travels? What, if anything, did he learn about the costs and benefits of England's colonial transactions? Will he be returning to his career at sea? If so, when? If not, why not? The audience never even learns for certain whether Mirvan is a naval officer or a captain of commercial vessels. The length of his most recent absence and his remarks about "convoy missions" and "the enemy" suggest that he has at one time or another been in the British military, but this question, like the other questions I have posed, is left unanswered, possibly because Evelina, Madame Duval, Lord Orville, Mr. Lovel, *et al.* are too unconcerned about the career of a man who derives his income by strenuous labor to bother asking questions about it.

In this sense, Burney's characters are out of step with other fictional characters of the Restoration and the eighteenth century. Generally speaking, it seems to me, the characters of the period are excellent listeners. When Mr. Wilson describes his youthful misadventures in London, Parson Adams listens carefully. When Gulliver describes the customs and institutions of Europe, the King of Brobdingnag is not impressed, but he does listen. When Oroonoko reminisces about his past experiences as an African warrior-prince, Behn's narrator listens. In short, as Barbara Benedict has emphasized, the literature of the period is densely populated with "curious heroes and heroines" (22), characters eager to learn the details of lives that bear little resemblance to their own. That is not the case in *Evelina*. Miss Anville, Lord Orville, and several other characters seem inquisitive in some ways, but when it comes to the Captain's travels, their curiosity vanishes.

Imagine yourself returning from seven years of world travel. You are reunited with your family in New York or London or Montreal and they express no interest in the last seven years of your life—literally none. Instead, they remain focused on their own preoccupations, which revolve around parties, concerts, shopping, the theater, museums, and other aspects of metropolitan culture and fashion. Would you begin to feel indignation and hostility? Again, I do not wish to minimize or pardon the Captain's misbehavior. His reputation as one of the most coarse and brutal characters in

eighteenth-century fiction is well-deserved. The point I want to make is that when it comes to bad manners, the Captain gives *and* receives.

No character places Mirvan on the receiving end of bad manners more often or more vigorously than Madame Duval. As several critics have observed, the Captain and Evelina's grandmother are frequently portrayed as equally unpleasant. Julia Epstein writes that "Madame Duval . . . is matched against Captain Mirvan as a character whose roughhewn sensibility makes it impossible for her to empathize with others" (113). Similarly, Margaret Anne Doody emphasizes that these two vulgar characters often offend in the same ways: "In the conflicts between Captain Mirvan and Madame Duval all the unmentionables are tossed up—rank, nationality, age, looks, religion. They do what we have been told since childhood we should not do—they make personal remarks" (52). The verbal clashes between the Captain and Madame Duval at times resemble a prize fight in which the opponents are evenly matched. Both contestants hit hard, and both are hit hard in return:

> "And pray," said the Captain, "why did you go into a public place without an Englishman?"
>
> "Ma foi, Sir," answered she, "because none of my acquaintance is in town."
>
> "Why then," said he, "I'll tell you what; your best way is to go out of it yourself."
>
> "Pardi, Monsieur," returned she, "and so I shall; for, I promise you, I think the English a parcel of brutes; and I'll go back to France as fast as I can, for I would not live among none of you."
>
> "Who wants you?" cried the Captain: "do you suppose, Madam French, we have not enough of other nations to pick our pockets already?"

> "Pick your pockets, Sir! . . . [T]here's no nation under the sun can beat the English for ill-politeness. . . I hate the very sight of them . . . (41-42)

Exchanges like this one may explain why the Captain subsequently resorts to physical violence. Because Madame Duval counters every verbal blow he strikes, Mirvan apparently concludes that he must go well beyond ordinary rudeness to break the deadlock.

I've chosen to focus on questions relating to manners, but other features of Burney's characterization of the Captain deserve more critical scrutiny than they have received to date. First of all, as Susan Staves has pointed out, Mirvan is a surprisingly discerning theater critic. When his companions disapprove of what they consider the indelicacy of Congreve's *Love for Love*, Mirvan maintains that "it's one of the best comedies in the language" (67). Even more surprisingly, Mr. Villars writes to Evelina that he shares the Captain's opinions of urban "manners, inhabitants, and diversions" (98). Should that confession heighten our opinion of the Captain, or diminish our esteem for Evelina's guardian? I am not sure, but I am convinced that we can strengthen our understanding of Captain Mirvan's functions in *Evelina* if we move beyond disapproval of his manners and consider other questions regarding Burney's gentleman of the ocean.

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