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Frances Burney and Mary Wollstonecraft: Female Difficulties and Feminism

SARAH D. SPENCE

A focus in Fanny Burney's last novel, *The Wanderer: or Female Difficulties* (1814), and in her later diaries, is on women's position in society and their inability to earn a living. In *The Wanderer*, Juliet has difficulty finding employment. She moves through society proving the limitations of a woman's place in the eighteenth century. Elinor Jodrell, the other protagonist is outspoken in her view on "stagnation" in society. As Burney moves away from the manners and morals novel, *Evelina* (1778), of her youth to the historical, political novel of her later years, she instills in her audience the plight of women. In her diaries and letters of 1793, she expresses concern for a place of habitation for her and her husband, Alexandre d'Arblay, an aristocratic liberal and a penniless émigré from France, and their son Alexander (Diaries 368). The proceeds from her novel *Camilla* (1796) literally provide a roof over their heads. At the same time that Burney is writing novels and plays, a contemporary, Mary Wollstonecraft, directs her messages to the public to educate girls. Her views express her concern not only on the education of girls, so they can be better prepared for contributing

to society or help them earn a living, but because as wives and mothers, they can better prepare their children to be useful members of society. Her early work experiences, running a school for girls and serving as a companion and as a governess, all affect her position on how society views women. Wollstonecraft's publications early in her career, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), identify her admonitions on the poor education of daughters. Her opinions are further expounded in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). According to Barbara Taylor, in *Vindication of Rights of Woman* as well as in *Maria* (edited and published after her death in 1798 by her husband William Godwin), "Wollstonecraft's principal concern . . . is less with the institutions that oppress women than with the experience of *being* female, with the emotional violence and intellectual debilitation on which feminine subjectively is founded" (Taylor 55-56). Both authors may not appear to have the same focus on women's concerns because their work represents different genres and the tone of their writing varies. However, both authors also discuss freedom and restraint and women's position in the eighteenth century. Burney expresses the desires of women in undertones in her novels, but her later diaries and letters during her time in France and afterward clearly show her position toward the "barbarous rulers of this unhappy country" [France]. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, produces "unleashed," aggressive commentaries. She discusses men and women's position in society and its ramifications. In Chapter 9, "Pernicious Effect of Unnatural Distinctions in Society" (257-269), she states that rank is one of the causes of societal problems. Women in the higher ranks in society are idle where they should be active. "How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling duty, than the most accomplished beauty!" (268).

Burney's Early Life:

Burney's young life experiences form a background, ripe for observing society. In Dr. Charles Burney's literary circle, she becomes familiar with drama and uses the comic dialogue in the letters in *Evelina*, (1778) her first novel. Burney's successful first

novel, was succeeded by *Cecilia* (1782), another successful novel, which established her as a writer of merit. However, more monetary success could be gained writing plays, and although her father, Dr. Charles Burney encouraged her to write, he censored her accepting some plays for production. Fanny had frequented the theater and Garrick, the Shakespearean actor and a friend of her father, was a regular visitor in their home.

Burney's familiarity with the theater adds much to the wit and dialogue in *Evelina*. Her father's friends recognized her predisposition for writing dialogue. In her Journal letter to Susanna she writes of her introduction to Mr. Sheridan, who praises her for *Evelina*. [. . .] "—he [Sheridan] repeatedly called it a *surprising Book*. And some Time after, he added 'But I hope, Miss Burney, you don't intend to throw away your Pen?'" (Journals 108). She was also encouraged to write for the theater by Sir Joshua Reynolds. After the encouragement from Dr. Johnson, Mr. Sheridan, and her friend Mrs. Thrale, Burney wrote a five-act play, *The Witling*. Her father, at first seemed favorable to production, but after persuasion by Samuel Crisp, ("Daddy Crisp," to Burney), he forbade the production for fear of offending the bluestockings (127). Thus it was that as a young girl, Burney was censored from writing that would have enhanced her talents. At a later time in her life, she lamented that had she been able to have plays produced rather than have novels published, she and her husband would have been in a better position, financially, to remain in England, and he would not have had to accept a post in France, where Burney was forced to remain for ten years because of restrictions on leaving the country. As a young girl, Burney's talent was recognized, but restricted. In her later novels, especially, *The Wanderer*, and in her journals, she voices her opinions on freedom and women's limited options in society.

Wollstonecraft's Early Life:

Mary Wollstonecraft was the eldest daughter of seven children and had a very "unhappy and unsettled childhood" (*Women's Writing* 102). She began her writing career based on her experiences in educating girls. She emphasized that the girls have sporadic training and thus receive no organized education. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* was accepted for publication by the radical publisher, Joseph Johnson, in 1787. Johnson was very supportive of her, and she wrote many articles and reviews for his periodical, *The Analytical Review*. Her early contributions included several genres—conduct books, children's stories, and ladies anthologies. According to Taylor, "The genres [. . .]—were all ones that late eighteenth-century cultural arbiters approved as properly feminine" (Taylor 33). Taylor further adds, however, that, "*Original Stories* is likewise centrally preoccupied with issues of female intellectual authority" (34). In *Original Stories*, according to Taylor "the experiences serve to dramatize the moral lessons of the conduct book" (34). In this tale of two little girls, Mrs. Mason, under whose care they are placed after their mother's death is "determined to replace fashionable frivolity they acquired from their mother with virtuous thought and behaviour" (Taylor 34). Wollstonecraft's career and her prominence as a writer was sealed with her response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* when she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, (1790), followed by *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792.

Gestation Period of Authors' Works:

While Burney's writing was restrained by her father and her status in society, Wollstonecraft's was not. It is difficult to compare the status of Burney's and Wollstonecraft's writing as "early" and "late" writing because Burney wrote *Evelina* (1778) at age eighteen and *The Wiltings* not long after that. She was born in 1752 and died in 1840, so her life span was much longer than Wollstonecraft, who died at age thirty-eight. The volume of journals and letters, novels and plays of Burney span thirty-six years. The gestation period of *The Wanderer* was twelve years, a time during which the author,

living in another country, which had undergone a revolution, and a time during which she had undergone mental and physical anguish. The time of Burney's maturation was much greater than Wollstonecraft.

The time that elapsed between Wollstonecraft's first publication, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, for which she won her notoriety, was relatively short. Wollstonecraft wrote the latter at age thirty-three, only ten years after her first publication. Her aggressive stance on women's education and women's rights took on a forceful movement, perhaps a foreboding of the relatively short lifespan.

Burney's and Wollstonecraft's Views and Later Works:

As the reader delves more closely into the major genres of writing in which both Burney and Wollstonecraft's most effective works show women's rights or lack thereof, women's ability to earn a living in the workplace, and political freedom, he or she forms an analogy between the similarity in the thinking of these two formidable women writers of the "long eighteenth century." Burney formed her destiny by complying with the rules of society while at the same time coercing her audience into analyzing the challenges that women faced in the eighteenth century this period, and Wollstonecraft created the image of strong feminism even before the label indicated its true definition. As Barbara Taylor noted "'Feminism', [. . .] is in some respects a problem-solving label to attach to Wollstonecraft's writings on women, since it appears to assimilate her ideas to a political tradition that did not acquire self-conscious existence until the international suffrage battles of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century" (Taylor 55). Even with as strong a mark on women's rights as Wollstonecraft has made, one cannot identify her as a feminist *in that period*, nor can one apply the term to Burney. However, one must consider the impact that both had on the mindset of men and women who have perused their works. Thinking like theirs has allowed for the later movements for rights of

women. It must be noted that in the century prior to *Vindication*, writings had emerged “by enlightened *literati* of both sexes arguing for a higher valuation of women’s character and enhancement of female intellectual and social status” (Taylor 11). Wollstonecraft forms that bridge between these much earlier writers and her emerging thought on women’s education.

Wollstonecraft died a famed female writer, but after the publication of her husband, William Godwin’s, *Memoirs of the Author of Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the public was focused on notoriety because of her sexual history instead of her creativity. Time lapsed and a century later she was “western feminism’s leading heroine” (Taylor 9). Late nineteenth-century feminists in the Victorian era embraced her as did the suffragettes of the early twentieth century. The 1960s and 70s women’s Liberationists praised her person unorthodoxy, but mistakenly identified her as a “bourgeois liberal,” a term that Taylor insists she does not deserve (10). According to Taylor, describing Wollstonecraft as a feminist is problematic. She maintains that leading examples of texts on Wollstonecraft has left a “widespread neglect of her religious beliefs” (12).

After observing the impact these women authors had, this paper focuses specifically on the more formative of their writing. I place the emphasis on the rights of women from quotes in these later works: Burney’s *Cecilia*, *The Wanderer*, Burney’s *Journals and Letters*; Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and *Maria*.

It is important to note that Burney’s second novel, *Cecilia* (1782), written prior to her service as the Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte (1786-1791) and prior to *Camilla* (1796) aroused the attention of radical writers. Margaret Doody states that Burney’s novel *Cecilia*, was an “intellectual survey of its times, not only of the 1780’s, but an era of fully-developed capitalism meshing uneasily with the aristocracy.” She further states that, “That novel [*Cecilia*] was to influence the liberal and radical writers of the 1790’s including Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William

Godwin, all of whom register reactions in their writing to Burney's works " (Doody xii, xiii). The monetary value placed on the heiress, Cecilia in *Cecilia*, prevents her from finding a suitable suitor, thus causing her to go mad temporarily. Even with money, beauty, youth, education and a name, she is unable to become autonomous in society because of the restrictions placed on her by her guardians, who manipulate her and mismanage her money. (Spence Dissertation 77).

Burney further satirizes society and features the positions of two women in her much later last novel, *The Wanderer*. This historical novel has deeply entrenched political motives. Margaret Doody writes, "By the time it was finished, *The Wanderer* was indeed, ostensibly a historical novel, offering its own contribution to the new genre which had been largely produced by response to the French Revolution "(xiii). This novel was written between 1802 and 1814, a period in which Burney was forced to live in France.

Elinor Joddrell acts as a radical "feminist" heroine in *The Wanderer*. Elinor is a woman of means with some freedom (as opposed to Cecilia). Her irrational behavior demonstrates an unstable woman as she spouts out the "new freedom." She expounds that "the French Revolution just burst forth, into that noble flame that nearly consumed the old world, to raise a new one, phoenix-like from its ashes" (152).

Juliet, the other protagonist, on the other hand, has just escaped the tyrant wrought by the Revolution. She seeks her name and as a refugee without a country, she attempts to earn a living in the newly-defined capitalist society. Burney's view of the capitalist society meshing with the aristocracy surfaces as in *Cecilia*. Juliet cannot earn a living. Her intentions are misunderstood when she tries to earn money giving harp lessons. Miss Arbe takes over Juliet's gift of money and purchases a dress for Juliet, thinking this is for Juliet to blend into society. However, Juliet is deprived of the money that would have solved her immediate financial difficulties. As Margaret Doody explains, "To make one's living as a woman ministering to ladies' wants is a difficult art as the ladies' wants are

so sophisticated and culturally distorted" (xvii). Juliet's next attempt at earning a living was with her girlhood friend, Gabriella (who had also come from France). They procure needlework through the help of the new-found friend, Elinor. Juliet strives for independence throughout the novel and refuses an offer of fifty pounds from Elinor. At another time, she is offered financial assistance from others, but refuses. She accepts the generosity of Lady Aurora, a new-found friend, who ultimately is declared her half-sister. The reader, therefore, will see the attempts of Juliet, a nameless person without a country, to earn a living and become independent.

More so than in her novels, Burney makes forthright statements in diaries and letters about freedom and the aftermath of the French Revolution. In a letter to Georgiana Waddington 3 July 1815, she states:

How is it that my dear Mary can thus on one side be fascinated by the very thing that, on the other, revolts her? How be a professed and ardent detester of Tyranny; yet an open and intrepid admirer of a Tyrant? O had you spent, like me, 10 years within the control of his [Napoleon] unlimited power, and under the iron rod of its dread, how you would change your language! By a total reverse of sentiment! (Journals and Letters 484).

Wollstonecraft's writings also have pronounced motives for *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It opens with vindication of rights and rights-based feminist struggles. She expounds against the French government's exclusion of women from political citizenship. However, Barbara Taylor comments that after the opening statement, *Vindication* seems to lose interest in women's rights (55). Instead, Wollstonecraft discusses the misgivings she has of the way that society is organized and continues with the same opinions as in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*: daughters ought to have the opportunity to be educated and society would look upon them in a different light. In *Vindication*, she states:

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, then they otherwise have been: and consequently, more useless members of society (103).

She cites "[. . .] For the little knowledge which women of strong minds attain is, from various circumstances, of a more desultory kind than the knowledge of men [. . .]. Led by their dependent situation and domestic employments more into society, what they learn is rather by snatches [. . .]" (104-105).

Wollstonecraft does not really abandon the cause for women. In Chapter 9 of *Vindication*, she analyzes the defects in society as she sees it. As she proposes, society is not properly organized since rank and property make men idle. She states, "There is a homely proverb, which speaks a shrewd truth, that whoever the devil finds idle he will employ. And what but habitual idleness can hereditary wealth and title produce?" (257). The author maintains that respectability ought to be attached to discharging of duties and not attached to station in life. She views both men and women of rank as idle (262). She continues in this chapter to enumerate the various means of earning a living that women ought to be allowed to do: "Women might certainly study the art of healing and be physicians and nurses. And midwifery, decency sees to allot to them "They might also study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis" (266). Other examples that Miriam Brody discusses in her Introduction to *Vindication*, were occupations available to women in earlier times, but were no longer because of industrialization. Women had at one time earned a living with a dairy or a small brewery, or in domestic industry (56).

As Wollstonecraft pursues her thoughts on rank in society, she continues her discussion on the restraint imposed upon women. She says "[. . .] for Rousseau and a numerous list of the male writers, insist that she should all her life be subjected to a severe restraint,

that of propriety—blind propriety—[. . .] “(*Vindication* 262). The final paragraph in Chapter 9, summarizes her major thoughts: that society is thus set up, so as not to educate women, but if they were educated, they could contribute more to society as wives and mothers.

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We should then love them with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves; and the peace of mind of a man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife, nor the babes sent to nestle in a strange bosom, having never found a home in their mother’s (*Vindication* 268).

Wollstonecraft is unequivocally the more outspoken of the two women authors. While she declares that women should have rights, her concentration is the psyche on “being a woman”; in *Maria*, the heroine, Maria tells her infant daughter that women are ‘born to suffer.’ Her husband has taken her away from her infant and imprisons her.

Wollstonecraft’s commentaries in *Vindication* relate all aspects of a woman’s life to society, how society is organized, and how women are treated. According to Brody, “Before Wollstonecraft, there were works suggesting reform of female manners or proposals for improving female education, but there was no single-minded criticism of the social and economic system which created a double standard of excellence for male and female and relegated women to an inferior status” (25). *Vindication* is considered a feminist track, but it is “both a sustained argument for emancipation and an attack on a social and economic system.” Brody comments further, “She has lived the hardships of a woman who wanted to earn her own living, and one feels, she is telling it like it is” (37). The issues of earning a living, for the working-class

Jemima, as well as submission forced upon women is revealed in *Maria*, published posthumously. Taylor says that “Jemima is Wollstonecraft’s angriest literary creation: a scream of feminist rage directed at cruel men, self-deluding women, hypocritical social reformers, [. . .]”² (241). However, despite the influence Wollstonecraft has had on feminist movements, Taylor says, “Although she regarded herself as a rebel, she never saw herself as a part of collective female revolt” (238).

Although her tone and genre differ, Burney also continues to place emphasis on women’s inability to be independent and earn a living in society. The guardians try to control Cecilia in *Cecilia*, and Juliet in *The Wanderer* is unable to be independent. Burney also recognizes the “toils and labours” of the poor as in *The Wanderer*:

“were ye to toil with them but one week! To rise as they rise, feed as they feed, and work as they work! Like mine then, your eyes would be open” (701).

According to Doody, “Burney is the first novelist seriously to express sympathy for the working women in their normal conditions of work—and to see how the system of employment, not merely individual bad employers, create conditions of impossible monotony” (xxxix). Burney experienced health problems caused by her role as Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte, and she resigned her position for that reason. Furthermore, her life is a testimony to the struggle for a woman writer to earn a living. Both women have had an impact on society’s view of women’s position and their education.

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