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Frances Burney and William Havard's *Scanderbeg*: An Unidentified Reference in Burney's *Journal and Letters*

ROBERT L. MACK

Only a tiny handful of the many literary references made by Burney in her collected diaries, letters, and journals remain unidentified or unattributed. In their recent, excellent edition of the *Journals and Letters*, Peter Sabor and Lars E. Troide—following of course in the footsteps of earlier Burney editors such as the author's niece, Charlotte Barrett, in the nineteenth century, and Austin Dobson and later Joyce Hemlow in the twentieth century—have more than ably documented the range and significance of the novelist's often pointed textual allusions.

One of the very few such references that has until now eluded Burney's editors, however, occurs in a Journal Letter written by the author to Susanna Phillips and Frederica Locke in the early summer of 1791. The precise date of the document (5 June) reminds us of the fact that the letter was written almost one month to the day that Burney was to leave the Royal Household and formally to conclude in her "Court Annals" on 7 July 1791.[1] Although Burney's release from the self-described imprisonment of Royal Service was by the spring of that year already perceived to be only a matter of time, Burney herself would not be officially informed by the Queen that a new Second Keeper of the

Robes had been appointed until 3 July; she was therefore still, when she wrote the Journal Letter to her sister and her friend "Fredy," in a state of some suspense with regard to the precise manner in which her situation was finally to work itself out. As she wrote that 5 July:

> Her Majesty, the Day before we left Windsor, gave me to understand my attendance would be yet one more fortnight requisite, though no longer. I heard this with a fearful presentiment I should surely never go through another fortnight, in so weak and languishing and painful a state of Health. However, I could but accede—though I fear with no very courtly grace. (325)

As a means of combating the seemingly endless stress and anxiety of her position, Burney confided that she had countered the melancholy irresolution of her own situation by attempting to write the tragedies of others. "So melancholy, indeed, was the state of my mind, from the weakness of my frame, and the never-ending struggles for the rest I sighed after," she wrote, that I was never alone but to form scenes of "*foreign woe*," when my own disturbance did not occupy me wholly. I began—almost whether I would or not—another Tragedy! The other three all unfinished! not one read!—and one of them, indeed, only generally sketched as to plan and character.—But I could go on with nothing; I could only suggest and invent. And the other work which I have mentioned is of another sort—in a style my dear friends all around will most wish me to cultivate: but that was not dismal enough,—and away it went from Pen, Hand, and Head to give place to a plan of the deepest Tragedy, which first had occurred to me in the worst part of my illness in January, but which I had not thought of since my quitting my room (325-26).

The italicized phrase—"*foreign woe*"—that was hitherto remained untraced would appear to find its original source in William Havard's *Scanderbeg: A Tragedy*. Havard's play was first performed in March 1733, and had been published very shortly thereafter. Set in Constantinople, *Scanderbeg* tells the story of the struggle between the titular "Christian Hero" and his adversary, the Sultan Amurat. In the play's fourth act, Scanderbeg confides in his friend Lysander, who was confessed an admiration for his commander's seemingly unflinching

courage in the face both of an up-coming, decisive battle, and an unresolved affair of the heart:

> Oh my Friend,
> Thou can'st not think but I must feel my Woes;
> I were not Man,
> Were I not sensible of Pain and Sorrow:
> 'Tis generous ev'n to feel *foreign Woe*,
> In a responsive sympathy to others,
> I am but to the World, in some Degree,
> A better Hypocrite—a gay Dissembler.
> Of this enough—Do thou, my dear Lysander,
> Study to make thy Happiness appear
> Less than it is, as I to make my Woes
> Seem lighter—'Tis a virtuous task!—
> (IV, xi, 17-28; emphasis added)

Scanderbeg's tragedy had been a popular one among English audiences in the eighteenth century; Havard was in fact only one of three well-known dramatists in the period to adapt the story for the stage. Burney's lively and long-standing connection with David Garrick, however, perhaps made it inevitable that Havard's version was the version with which she would have been most closely acquainted. Havard, who began his long career as an actor on the London stage in the 1730s, was a colleague of Garrick's who had appeared alongside the famous actor-manager in plays such as *Albumazar* and *The Rehearsal*, and had even, in 1746, taken over the part of Hotspur from Garrick in a popular production of *Henry IV, Part One* when the latter fell ill; he later followed Garrick to Drury Lane.[2]

In the passage from which the phrase "*foreign woe*" has been drawn, Scanderbeg is obviously drawing a distinction between the contemplation of his own, personal misfortunes, on the one hand, and a consideration of the "Pain and Sorrow" of others, on the other. He is

also, to some extent, extolling the virtues of an enabling and even sustaining hypocrisy in the face of adversity. Burney's own theatrical sense of "acting a play" while in service at Windsor had of course extended, as her letter vividly reminds us, to the composition of a series of tragic dramas herself. In many respects each of these plays—*Edwy and Elgiva*, *Hubert De Vere*, and *The Siege of Pevensey*,—had attempted, in the words of Margaret Anne Doody, the "representation of the central problems of [Burney's] life in the court imprisonment" (188). The final work undertaken by Burney while yet serving within the Royal Household—the "deepest Tragedy" of *Elberta*, the specific composition of which she refers to in the letter—unfortunately survives only a series of autograph manuscripts; we remain in the dark as to precisely what Burney finally intended to make of the tragedy of the orphaned Elberta, "Captive daughter of the late Ethelbert." It is clear, however, that the author had at least seriously considered the possibility of depicting her central female character as descending into a situation of extreme isolation and despair.[3] Contemplating Elberta's behavior in her terror, Burney wrote: "She never weeps, yet frequently wails, tho' in terms unintelligible from the wildness" (*Complete Plays*, 232). There is no one, in other words, to understand the language of Elberta's pain. The distinction drawn by Scanderbeg in Havard's early tragedy between the morally healthy histrionics of public display and the even more compelling imperatives of private torment may well have echoed in Burney's consciousness when she came to consider the plight of a heroine who is confined to an incomprehensible idiolect of despair; the "foreign woe" generously contemplated by Scanderbeg might at the same time have glanced in her mind as the very model for the imaginative work that Burney needed herself to undertake in the face of her seemingly endless confinement to the dreary, diurnal routines of the Royal Court.

Burney concluded her Journal Letter of 5 June by confessing:

> The power of Composition has to me, indeed, proved a solace, a blessing!—When incapable of all else, that, unsolicited, unthought of, has presented itself to my solitary leisure, and beguiled me of *myself*, thou it has not, of late, regaled me with gayer associates. (326)

Even in the days immediately prior to Burney's final liberation from the Queen's House, it is likely that the "foreign woe" of fictional others yet remained the only consolation for the persistent and intensely personal reality of her own.

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NOTES:

[1] On the immediate circumstances surrounding Burney's departure from the Royal Household, see Chisholm, 157-59.

[2] See McIntyre, 128, 139, 142.

[3] On Burney's possible intentions with regard to *Elberta*, see *The Complete Plays*, II 231-33.