

Review of Frances Burney's *Evelina* (Broadview)

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Review

Frances Burney. *Evelina, or, A Young Lady's Entrance Into the World. In a Series of Letters.* Edited by Susan Kubica Howard. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Literary Texts, 2000. ISBN 1-55111-237-X

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Evelina, Frances Burney's bestselling first novel, has long remained a favourite with the reading public. The tale of an adolescent who seeks love and a sense of identity against a backdrop of contemporary settings in town and country, was an instant success. First published in January 1778, in a print-run of some 500 copies, it quickly ran through five editions (one pirated) before the end of 1779. No less than eighteen British editions were published within Burney's lifetime, and there were numerous reprints throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Recent scholars and editors have also favoured *Evelina*. Margaret Doody underlined its continuing popularity, in a "Special *Evelina* Issue" of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 3:4 (July 1991). The point is reiterated by Peter Sabor in the *Burney Journal*, 1 (1998), 25-43, "for all the current interest in Burney, the focus of most discussions of her fiction is still *Evelina*." There are at least six editions of the novel currently in print, which include a World's Classics paperback edited by Edward A. Bloom (1982); a Penguin edition (1994), edited by Margaret Anne Doody; a Bedford Cultural Edition (1997), published by St. Martin's Press and edited by Kristina Straub; and a Norton Critical Edition, edited by Stewart J. Cooke, in 1998. All of these are available in paperback and suitable for the general reader or undergraduate audience. It is thus a crowded field into which two new editions have now to make their way, one edited by Susan Kubica Howard for Broadview Press (2000) and, even more recently, a reprint of the Modern Library text (published by Random House), with a new

introduction by Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, and notes by Audrey Bilger (2001).

The Broadview Press is an innovative publishing-house based in Canada; although a commercial publisher, it has succeeded in filling a niche usually occupied by academic presses. The Literary Texts series, in which *Evelina* appears, is (to quote from its own publicity) "a distinctive series that embraces both established literary classics and lesser-known works deserving of a broad readership." That is, in combination with the bread and butter of more canonical texts such as Austen, Dickens, or Hardy, it also ventures into new territory, publishing lesser-known works, often by women writers, bringing them back into print after a lapse of centuries. "Most volumes" (we are told) "present the text together with a variety of documents from the period, enabling readers to get a rich sense of the world out of which it emerged." This is also the case with the Bedford Critical Texts, clearly aimed at the undergraduate market, which embed the text in its historical and cultural context. The idea is to historicise various issues to engage the student.

A hallmark feature of the Broadview paperbacks is the cover, which uses nineteenth-century photographs unrelated to the text and intentionally anachronistic. The cover of *Evelina* features a sepia-coloured family group of three generations which picks up on a central issue in the editor's presentation of the novel.

Susan Howard's edition of *Evelina* certainly dares to be different. The first editorial decision of importance (particularly when there are so many possibilities to choose from) is which edition to use as copytext. According to W.W. Greg's classic formulation, the first edition, as the one set from the author's own manuscript, will resemble most closely the author's "intentions." Where later editions deviate from the first, these "variants" will be indicated in notes or apparatus. Another school of thought favours the last edition published during an author's lifetime, on the theoretical grounds that it represents the last possible text with which the author may have had some involvement. A more empirical approach looks at each case individually, considering evidence, such as corrections to proofs, to select the edition containing the author's "last" intentions for his work (or at least for one version of it).

The individual textual history (and surviving documents) of the novel is therefore of relevance. For *Evelina*, there exists a partial holograph of the manuscript with corrections made by Burney prior to printing. Joyce Hemlow first described these and the way in which the verve and spontaneity of the first draft were polished into something more genteel and refined. After receiving the first proof-sheets from publisher Thomas Lowndes, Burney suggested further changes; these were printed as an "Errata" sheet in the first edition, but most were incorporated into the second edition and a few waited until the third. The publisher or compositor also apparently made changes to these later editions.

For close to 200 years, most editions of *Evelina* reproduced the third edition, or a combination of the second and third, to incorporate all of Burney's changes. More recently, in Edward Bloom's edition for Oxford University Press in 1968, the first edition was chosen as copytext, with the changes suggested on the original "Errata" sheet incorporated. A table of Textual Notes details all the variants, showing improvements of syntax or grammar (e.g. "that" to "which"), corrections of spelling, emendations of phrasing, and the odd inserted passage. Even taken as a whole, the changes hardly create a radically different version of the text.

Other recent editors (Cooke, Doody) have preferred the third edition, which incorporates all of Burney's "Errata" into the text. Howard's decision to base her text on the second is a curious one. She defends it on the grounds that "Burney did no substantial revisions for the third or subsequent editions of the novel published during her lifetime" (84). This obscures the fact, though, that some of Burney's own requested changes (4 of the original 33 "Errata") were not corrected in the second, but had to wait until the third. (These four are not drastic: "them" to "him," "to" to "of," "months" to "weeks," and "him" to "Sir Clement"). Howard mentions these four cases in her introduction and incorporates all of them into her own version, noting accordingly. It is hard to see, then, how the second version of the text is being privileged.

In one startling way, though, the second version is retained, against Burney's explicit wishes, making this text unique among current editions. Those used to reading, *Evelina*, or, *The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (the title, as it appeared on third and

narrative in which a masterful masculine authorial voice reflects upon the omniscience of the epic writer turned novelist and upon the moral duties of author, character and readers in a naughty world.

And now, as they say in *Monty Python*, for something completely different:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost: ----- Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly, ----- I am verily persuaded I should have made quite a different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me.—

As in *Clarissa*, the first word is 'I'. In this case, though, the 'I' is the hero himself—an elusive, jester-like figure. Tristram takes a third of the novel to be born. The reader only glimpses him in a self-description late in the book, which the Russian formalist, Victor Shklovsky described as the 'most typical novel in world literature', because it is about itself.³ Sterne plays with the parallel between the difficult (metaphorical) birth of Tristram's narrative and Tristram's literal difficult birth going on upstairs. This is perhaps the playfulness of a male writer—an outsider to the experience of giving birth (although Sterne and his wife suffered the pain of losing a child). Indeed, you will have noticed that so far, with the exception of Jane Austen, the novelists and critics cited have been male. The structures that I have been describing can be related to the venerable patriarchal structures of western thought and religion. Feminist approaches to the philosophy of religion are profoundly revisionary, displacing a preoccupation with violence, sacrifice and death with models that begin with birth, with 'natality'—our shared condition of being human beings, born of a woman—and of creation, nurturing and human flourishing.⁴ Could it be, then, that beginnings are of even greater significance in women's fiction than in novels by male authors?

As a way of addressing that question and in further preparing for a consideration of Frances Burney, let me briefly consider the

misreadings, one would like to know if they were at least considered and if so, the reasons why they were rejected.

There are also three readings unique to the second edition, affecting the order or choice of words, or the insertion of a word. Again, it would be worth remarking on these moments of divergence in the notes, so that the reader can savour the full effect of the choice of copytext. Howard's presentation of the second edition is an interesting experiment, but one feels that much of its interest and value is lost, by a failure to follow through.

The editor's second, and perhaps most important role, is providing meaningful annotation, to help bridge the gap between Burney's day and our own. Footnotes or endnotes can give useful background information—on word-usage which has changed, historical events or cultural practices, the delights of eighteenth-century pleasure-gardens or health spas, etc. In a well-annotated edition, the editor accompanies the reader as a knowledgeable but unobtrusive guide, elucidating or amplifying wherever necessary, so that the subtleties of the text are appreciated to the full.

Howard's notes are reliable and helpful, evidently pitched to the general reader or student rather than the specialist, which is in keeping with the targeted audience for Broadview texts. Her most frequent interventions are to gloss eighteenth-century words or usage from the *OED*; for the historical or cultural context, she tends to rely, somewhat disappointingly, on general reference books. Her notes on the attractions of London, for instance, rely heavily on *The London Encyclopedia* (1983); the term "lettres de cachet" is glossed from the *Story of Civilization*, Vol. 9, published by Simon and Schuster of New York.

Previous annotators, such as Edward and Lillian Bloom, provided vivid and colourful detail on such subjects as subscription prices for the opera or the attractions of Ranelagh and Vauxhall; Margaret Doody's edition was remarkable for her knowledge of the Burney family context with which she illuminated many passages. An editor following these footsteps would understandably find it hard to make a distinctive contribution. Howard certainly shows herself aware of all her predecessors, for instance when she discusses the controversy over the meaning of "Broad St. Giles." Somewhat surprisingly, she sometimes relies on them as authorities for her own annotation without

further verification. For instance, Doody is cited for the location of the post office at Clifton, the practice of ticket-selling in the opera house, and the legal niceties of disinheritance; the Blooms are the source for the performance history of Congreve's *Love for Love*, which might rather have come from *The London Stage* or contemporary newspapers. One such contribution I think has gone unacknowledged; on Evelina's gaffe at her first ball (accepting a later offer after first refusing to dance), Stewart Cooke (Norton, 1998) referred the reader to a little-known article. No other editor does so but Howard, who should at least have mentioned Cooke's prior citation.

Finally, one comes to the distinctive feature of the Broadview edition, the full contextualisation of the novel in both introduction and appendices. This would be most useful in the classroom to help the instructor situate the text, using contemporary sources to clarify or amplify, without recourse to the library. The introduction to *Evelina* consists of three parts which are mirrored by the divisions of the appendices, focusing on certain issues and then providing material as a basis for further class discussion. Part One on the "Genesis, Composition, Publication, and Reception" of *Evelina*, is backed up by reprints of important contemporary reviews. The second section discusses family relations and female education in eighteenth-century England, supported by several excerpts, ranging from the personal correspondence of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough to Hester Chapone's didactic *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*. A third section addresses comedy and eighteenth-century comic theory; here, the selection of (roughly) contemporary sources includes Joseph Addison, Eliza Haywood, Christopher Anstey and William Hazlitt. Some care has been taken in selecting the best edition for these excerpts, which are also annotated, and it is helpful to have them easily available. Other supplementary material includes a brief chronology of Burney's life and a selected bibliography of works by and about Burney, on the family and on comedy. Here, surely, is sufficient material to start anyone off on a study of *Evelina*, and which certainly adds to the bulk of the volume, extending its length by half. The question, though, in any reader's or instructor's mind will be, whether all this extra material is worthwhile, how useful it is, in understanding and appreciating Burney's text.

The background discussion of the family serves to highlight important movements in the novel, Evelina's quest for a sense of "belonging," her entering into the social sphere. The material is divided into sub-headings: "The Family in the Conduct Books"; "The Family in Literature"; "Non-Fiction Accounts of Family Life"; "Relationships with Extended Kin"; "Foster Parenting and Adoption"; "Illegitimacy"; and "Inheritance." It reads as a distilled version of class notes, and could be used to construct a series of lectures on the subject; essentially, it is a simplified and synthesised version of the secondary literature in the field. All the recognised authorities are there: Laurence Stone, Randolph Trumbach, J.H. Plumb, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, etc. While it is certainly useful to have these references gathered in one place, a word of warning is in order: these works already have a generalising tendency, so to combine and summarise them further risks reduction to a level of generality which becomes almost meaningless. Sentences such as "In general, accounts of family relations in diaries written by both parents and children during this period present the family in a positive light" illustrate the problem. This is a broad brush indeed.

Moreover, such over-simplification can be misleading and even misrepresent the nature of research in this field. Making such positive assertions about intangibles such as the strength of sibling affection across all counties and all classes in a broad period known as the "eighteenth century" is problematic, to say the least. While social historians may study patterns of inheritance or migration, the median age or frequency of marriage, fertility rates, the composition of households, etc, their analyses are based on surviving documents which pertain to individuals (of a particular age, gender, geographic location, religious, ethnic or class origin, and financial circumstances). Secondary works interpreting such evidence range from very specific analyses to those which blur over distinctions to try to suggest wider trends. The chronological and geographical sweep of these general studies can be very wide (perhaps stretching from the Middle Ages to the present, over all of Western Europe) and they do not often completely coincide, so combining them is neither as seamless nor as simple as Howard makes out. This introduction would be appropriate for an undergraduate class only if one intends to persuade one's students that historical research and interpretation is a lot less complex than is

the case, and that theories about social trends and structures are not themselves subject to further debate and interpretation.

The blurriness of focus also affects the discussion of comic theory, though less acutely. Focused more on the novel, this section addresses the raucousness, even cruelty of Burney's humour, and places in perspective such problematic episodes as the humiliation of Madame Duval and the race of the two old women, both which have long puzzled critics. A glance at the authorities cited, however, raises questions. Can one really bring together seventeenth century jest books, Anstey's *The New Bath Guide* (1766), Addison's *The Spectator* (1711), and Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819) as neutral historical documents or "background" in this way? Are all these works not equally in need of their own explication and full contextualisation in order to be properly understood? And finally, one begins to wonder, what is the point of it all? Can one really assign students to read another 250 pages on top of a 450-page novel, which already represents a text of challenging length? Is it really a help—or more of a distraction? At what point does the context begin to overwhelm the novel; does it not seem as though somewhere the freshness, laughter and vigour of the voice of Evelina herself has somehow got lost?

In Susan Howard's edition of *Evelina*, much effort appears to have been misdirected, based perhaps on a faulty assumption of what would be of most benefit in the classroom. In presenting one instructor's thematic approach and materials so fully, there is the danger of "overdetermination"; a more open and wide-ranging introduction which evokes a number of approaches or issues might be more helpful. Channelling the students' reading to one or two pre-selected issues blocks off other interpretations and may not answer the needs of individual courses, instructors or students. Every class is different; it is a truism to say that one never teaches the same text twice. How a novel like *Evelina* will be approached in any given year will depend on a number of variables, including the other texts on the course and connections made between them. For teaching purposes then, a more open-ended approach seems preferable, like that offered by the *MLA Approaches to Teaching* series, which includes many voices and a variety of suggestions, some of which are likely to resonate. The Norton Critical Edition to *Evelina* can also be useful, in providing a

multiplicity of critical viewpoints from contemporary reviews to the present.

For those who prefer a minimalist approach to *Evelina*, another option is provided in the newly-published Modern Library edition of Random House, which features a brief but clear introduction by Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace and notes by Audrey Bilger, which do not detract from Burney's text. The text, however, is an issue here, as there is nothing to indicate which edition has been used, presumably a reprint.

Ultimately, which edition of *Evelina* one prefers will be a question of taste and perhaps of price (prices range from the Penguin at \$8.99 to Broadview's \$13.95 and Random House's \$17.95, in Canadian dollars). Burney enthusiasts may like to collect all of them for their shelves, if only to demonstrate how an editor can influence our reading of the text; a slightly different *Evelina* is encountered in each version. One thing, however, remains certain; since the recent explosion in Burney studies, *Evelina* will not lack for editors or interpreters as she steps forward hesitantly onto the wider stage of the world.

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