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“Avoid every species of particularity”: Universality in Frances Burney’s *Camilla*
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Abstract: In the conclusion of *Camilla: or, A Picture of Youth* (1796), the narrator attributes the suffering experienced by Edgar Mandlebert and Camilla Tyrold to the two extremes of too little and too much experience. Using the narrator’s verdict as an entry point, this article reads Burney’s third novel as a critique of contemporary polarized ideals of female character formation, which I relate to organizing principles of “particularity” and “universality.” Dr Marchmont’s advice to Edgar famously enforces an over-particular ideal of female virtue, but I argue that Mr. Tyrold’s universalist cultivation of Camilla is equally dangerous, since his advocacy for a sort of female behavior calculated to universally appeal is tantamount to encouraging deceit. Though Marchmont’s approach was perceived by contemporary reviewers and readers to be more poisonous to moral behavior and marital happiness than that of the Tyrolds, and has accordingly generated more critical attention, I suggest that critiques of both approaches to female education are firmly embedded within Burney’s narrative and are crucial to her pedagogic purpose.

When the narrator finally marks the cessation of the long sufferings of Camilla Tyrold and Edgar Mandlebert in the final paragraph of Frances Burney’s *Camilla*, they attribute the pair’s tribulations to the two extremes of too little and too much experience:

Thus ended the long conflicts, doubts, suspences, and sufferings of Edgar and Camilla; who, without one

inevitable calamity, one unavoidable distress, so nearly fell the sacrifice to the two extremes of Imprudence, and Suspicion, to the natural heedlessness of youth unguided, or to the acquired distrust of experience that had been wounded. Edgar, by generous confidence, became the repository of her every thought; and her friends read her exquisite lot in a gaiety no longer to be feared: while, faithful to his word, making Etherington, Cleves, and Beech Park, his alternate dwellings, he rarely parted her from her fond Parents and enraptured Uncle. And Dr. Marchmont, as he saw the pure innocence, open frankness, and spotless honour of her heart, found her virtues, her errors, her facility, or her desperation, but A PICTURE OF YOUTH; and regretting the false light given by the spirit of comparison, in the hypothesis which he had formed from individual experience, acknowledged its injustice, its narrowness, and its arrogance. What, at last, so diversified as man? what so little to be judged by his fellow? (913)

The narrator here positions the conditions of having *too little* experience and *too much* experience as antagonistic inverses along a spectrum of character development. Such positioning was common practice in educational, moral, and philosophical discourse of the 1790s. Moreover, it was frequently gendered, as Mary Wollstonecraft argues in her preface to *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), which was published just two years after *Camilla*. In many novels, Wollstonecraft observes, men are allowed to “become wise and virtuous as well as happy” through experiences that develop their character, while women are expected to somehow “be born immaculate” without experience (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 67). It is constructive to begin this article by briefly comparing *Wrongs of Woman* to *Camilla* since,

like Wollstonecraft, Burney's novel locates the source of such asymmetry in the inequitable kinds of educations received by young men and young women. The prodigious length of *Camilla*, and its stated objective to display a "Picture of Youth," invites excavation and dissection of Burney's treatment of the cultural pressure for the kind of "immaculate" birth in the young female subject to which Wollstonecraft objects.

In some respects, the topic of experience in Burney's work, and its relation to contemporary prescriptive models of gendered behavior, is very well-trodden ground. As Stephanie Hershinow points out, the earliest published critics of *Camilla* "often attempted to understand Burney's novel in the tradition of the conduct book, as a means of educating young women about proper behavior" (64-65). In 1950 Joyce Hemlow first provided a biographical basis for such speculation by examining Burney's evidenced engagement with such sources. Since then, Susan Fraiman has considered how conduct books provide "discursive context" and "narrative models" for the *female bildungsroman*, including Burney's *Evelina* (13), whilst Margaret Doody has explored the ways in which Burney's "story of female education" challenges many central maxims of such literature (206). Such scholarship has often lamented the contradictory nature of conduct books such as James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) and John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy To His Daughters* (1761), which expect young women to render visible their "essential qualities of mind" while foreclosing the kinds of experience which might cultivate those same qualities (Armstrong 4), also for good measure condemning any appearance of what Fordyce calls the "mask" or "disguise" of a "violent affectation of virtue" (55). This double bind produces the "claustrophobic situation of the [sentimental novel's]

heroine” described by Mary Poovey; she is barred from directly expression for fear of appearing affected or coquettish, and she must instead resort to an equally reviled practice of “indirection or even deceit” to make herself known (43). Many of the pains and mortifications suffered by Burney’s heroines arise from the fact that they are generally under intense scrutiny from those who seek to fault them in one of these respects. As Fraiman puts it, young women’s characters are almost entirely outside of their own making in this sense; instead, they are “foisted upon them ... they are largely what other people, what the world, will make of them” (6).

Within this broad field, the present article seeks to contribute specifically to a smaller core of scholarship that addresses (in)experience within *Camilla*. Specifically, I argue that Burney intends her narrative to critique two polarized ideals of female character formation, which I relate to organizing principles of “universality” and “particularity.” Camilla’s initial education under her parents is predicated on the objective of infinite malleability, a kind of blankness of character, which is designed to appeal indiscriminately, but has the unwanted side effects of leaving her not only “unguided” and subjected to the “prepossessed” observations of Edgar and others (F. Burney 913, 558), but also inevitably making use of Fordyce’s “disguise” (55) or Poovey’s “deceit” (43). This approach, which I call “universality,” instructs Camilla to avoid “every species of particularity” (F. Burney 360). Particularity might be understood as an opposite mode of behavior to universality: one that can be detected not only in the dreaded preference of Camilla for a particular young man, but in the behavior of that man himself. Edgar’s conduct towards Camilla, as dictated by Dr. Marchmont, is founded on extreme

singularity, the calcification of experience which generates an entirely *particular* view of the world.

In this article I am more concerned with universality than particularity, since Margaret Doody, Stephanie Hershinow, and Kristen Pond, among others, have already amply demonstrated how Marchmont's past experiences with women have bred a predisposition to over-particularity and suspicion which clouds Edgar's insight into Camilla's character (Doody 246; Hershinow 64-65; Pond 320). Hershinow's work is particularly instructive for my argument, since she contends that "experiences are nontransferable," and points out that, since an individual's observations are entirely shaped by their own subjectivity, any attempt to directly apply them to another individual's unique circumstances is not only ineffective, but actively harmful (121). However, Hershinow emphasizes the dangers of particularity, caused by over-experience, in order to assert the privileged "special insight" of *inexperience*, arguing that the plot of *Camilla* suggests "that inexperience of the world affords better access to the human heart" (62-63). I argue instead that Burney finds such inexperience, founded on an attempt to produce universal appeal, just as troublesome and harmful for the young pupil as particularity. The clash of experience and inexperience does not produce a faultless victor. Burney takes pains to emphasize that the different approaches towards the education of Camilla and Edgar exemplified by Mr. Tyrold and Dr. Marchmont both contribute to the misunderstandings which form between them.

Building on these two strands of criticism—the range of studies which focus on the sufferings of Burney's naïve heroine who must navigate strict codes of behavior, and the more specific group which consider the limitations of an over-

particular worldview in *Camilla*—I here suggest that Burney sees the troubles that arise from both too much and too little experience as two sides of the same epistemological coin. Too much experience calcifies character into rigid particularity so that one becomes wholly incapable of seeing the vicissitudes of human experience. Equally troubling, too little experience enforces an over-malleable kind of ignorance and naivety that does not discriminate sufficiently. Young women, taught to reject experience as corrupting, but encouraged to present themselves as the already finished product of that experience, must sustain and contain the contradictions of these cultural expectations as they emerge into the world. As a critique of education, *Camilla* expresses the growing pains of moving through and between expectations of universality and particularity which young women endure in an effort to become eligible on the marriage market.

I first outline the underpinning pedagogical principles of the Tyrols, who, through Mr. Tyrol's sermon delivered "in our joint names" (F. Burney 362) instruct their daughter to remain inexperienced, maintain universal appeal, and develop no distinguishing characteristics that might unsettle marital harmony. I then demonstrate, through brief readings of some important scenes which create misunderstanding between Edgar and *Camilla*, how such guidance in fact leaves *Camilla* practicing deceit and vulnerable to misinterpretation. Finally, I return to reconsider the closing paragraph of the novel, with which this article opened. While I contend that Burney censures the extremes that arise from both the guidance of Dr. Marchmont and the Tyrols, I acknowledge that the doctor is singled out by the novel's conclusion for more spirited rebuke than *Camilla*'s parents—a sentiment which also resonated with

contemporary readers and critics. By way of conclusion, then, the article weighs the asymmetry of Burney's criticism and the novel's reception—including the verdict of Mary Wollstonecraft herself—asking what this might tell us about the context within which Burney drew her "PICTURE OF YOUTH" and the largely unrealized radicalism of her pedagogical critique.

In the character of Camilla Tyrold, Burney presents a young woman who has been educated to be entirely impressionable but is expected to receive no impressions until she is married, a strategy that leaves her dangerously vulnerable as she enters a world eager to form impressions *of* as well as *on* her. Though the reader receives hints within the first few pages of Volume I that the Tyrolds have "imperfections" as parents (F. Burney 8-9), it is in the "discourse" or "Sermon" delivered to Camilla in the third volume that the reader is given a full and clear description of their parenting philosophy (F. Burney 355). As Mr. Tyrold explains in his "sermon," his daughters "have been brought up... without any specific expectation" (F. Burney 357). Marriage is assumed to be their certain fate, and, in the name of "delicacy", they exist in a social space in which they are to be chosen by a husband, rather than to choose one, since choice can "belong only to one" party (F. Burney 358). They have the negative power to refuse a proposal, but little positive power to seek someone who may meet their own standards. The problem is that the character and situation of the hypothetical future husband are unknown, and therefore the Tyrold girls are raised to be elastic, chameleon-like generalists who can mold themselves to suit the "humour of the husband into whose hands she may fall" (F. Burney 357). The Tyrolds' attempt to avoid rounding their daughters into beings with any sense of individual preference for, say, "the great world," or the

country[side], which their husbands may find “all turbulence” or “distasteful” (F. Burney 357). Furthermore, they encourage them to develop no personal talents or accomplishments which might make their “turn of mind” anything but “ductile to the new sentiments and employments” and “submissions” required of them in married life (F. Burney 357). This form of education produces what Sarah Austin, channeling Catherine Gallagher, calls “impersonal nobodies” (283). To use a rather Lockean image, Camilla’s education essentially treats her as a bit of red seal wax which must be kept warm and pliable in the hands of her parents until she can be passed onto her husband who will (hopefully) make intelligible the impression he considers most appropriate to secure their mutual happiness. Marriage is the act which hardens the character of a woman and allows for a self to develop and particularize.

A key part of Mr. Tyrold’s universalizing system of education for Camilla is the principle that her romantic desires must remain indecipherable since she is the chosen, and therefore choiceless, party. Instructing Camilla to silence her desires, to “avoid every species of *particularity*” (emphasis mine), Mr. Tyrold echoes a sentiment familiar from conduct literature (F. Burney 360). Because young women know “so little of the world,” Hester Chapone explains in her *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, “they are every way unqualified to choose for themselves, upon their own judgement” (Chapone 1:197, qtd. in Fraiman 17). Any suggestion of desire, indeed even of preference, betrays that “discreet reserve” required in a young woman whose only power comes in either refusing or accepting the hand of the chooser (Fordyce 67). This, of course, directly contradicts Marchmont’s insistence that Edgar obtain a true understanding of Camilla’s character by

watching her intently for the moment her mask drops, and she reveals her true feelings and particular preferences. Although such transparency would make it possible for Edgar to judge Camilla's nature, by exposing Camilla's pre-existing affections it would directly contradict Mr. Tyrold's advice that Camilla banish any particularizing or exclusive affection for Edgar. In language that one might use to persuade an obsessive person to give up their infatuation, he tells Camilla to "vary those thoughts that now take but one direction, and multiply those interests which now recognise but one object" (F. Burney 359). Encouraging his daughter to appear as indifferent as she was "in the days of your unconsciousness," Mr. Tyrold opines that proper femininity requires the utter disregard of her own desires and sense of self in favor of the self that others imagine for her (F. Burney 360). Particularized love in a young woman, it seems, becomes an obsession that forces the mind down a dangerously singular avenue which must be diversified by other thoughts of other men while remaining entirely imperceptible to all spectators. This is a conviction that Mr. Tyrold shares, perhaps surprisingly, with Mrs. Arlbery, who laments that love of Edgar has made Camilla almost too dull to endure: "for the tender passion has terribly flattened her" (F. Burney 366).

Although stemming from a desire to protect Camilla from uncharitable interpretations of her character and behavior, Mr. Tyrold's epistemology instructs Camilla to view herself through others' eyes. She must continually work to position herself to be positively received. As she learns to conduct herself in the way she speculates Edgar would find most pleasing, Camilla performs a kind of mental gymnastics. She must step outside of herself to consider how Edgar would judge what he observes in her behavior and adjust her conduct accordingly

to achieve his approbation. While watching a production of *Othello*, for example, Camilla finds herself improperly chaperoned, left with General Kinsale and Major Cerwood after Mrs. Arlbery's early departure. Although pleased that she could arrange a ride home with an acquaintance's mother so that she could continue watching a spectacle which so much entertained her, Camilla soon discovers Edgar in the box opposite, observing her and Lavinia as they sit as far out of sight as possible, devoid of proper supervision. When she notices Edgar watching her, Camilla evaluates her behavior through his eyes: "She had thought only of the play and its entertainment, till the sight of Mandlebert told her that her situation was improper; and the idea only occurred to her by considering that *it would occur to him*" (F. Burney 321, emphasis mine). Imagining her actions as they would appear to Edgar, Camilla forms an idea of the way he would be affected by such a sight, and only then becomes painfully aware of how he might misconstrue such an appearance as improper. In learning to subject herself to "a review of her own conduct, as it related or as it might seem, to himself," Camilla exports her sense of moral judgement and social propriety to Edgar (F. Burney 680). He becomes a kind of "promoter of ideological femininity" whose evaluations determine how she sees herself and her actions (Todd 283). Viewing Edgar's judgement as a kind of standard, Camilla thus internalizes an illusion of objectivity — those (men) who have experience become a benchmark of character despite the fact that their experience excludes them from such disinterested observation.

Even more damagingly, Mr. Tyrold's recommendation of diffused or varied attention (to avoid the pitfall of betraying a preference) requires Camilla to act the part of the coquette,

particularizing no single individual and instead loudly declaring her generality. Unaware of the way her behavior might invite accusations of distasteful behavior, Camilla dutifully works to distribute attention indiscriminately, paying attention to and talking cheerfully with Major Cerwood so that she may prove herself “unmortified and disengaged” to Edgar and other spectators (F. Burney 290). Burney is careful to signal that, despite her unawareness of the implications of her conduct, Camilla’s dissimulation shares some ground with both deception and dishonesty: “Camilla talked on with the Major, as if not hearing she was called” and “pretend[ing] to be too much occupied in watching the motions of the Major... [to] attend to anything else” (F. Burney 290-91). A similar dissimulation occurs, alongside a multiplication of misunderstanding when “the whole [Camilla] could command of her attention was bestowed upon Sir Sedley,” even though “her thoughts were all upon Edgar” (F. Burney 461). This scene, like many others, takes place in a theatre: Camilla is forced to play an actress’s part in the performance of unhearing, unseeing, and unfeeling that has been encouraged by her father.

In these scenes, then, we find such behavior equated with deceit in Burney’s careful descriptions of Camilla’s divided self; yet the titular protagonist is not the only female character who incurs harm from practicing such principles. One reason to characterize the Tyrols’ approach to educating girls as “universal” (rather than general) is that the word “universal” is often used, elsewhere in the text of *Camilla*, to signify a sort of shallow and quintessentially feminine form of indiscrimination which often indicates a corrupted character. From the vain Indiana’s hopes to “meet with *universal* homage” in London (F. Burney 53) to the promiscuous Mrs. Berlington’s aim “to be

universally alluring” (F. Burney 810) we repeatedly see Burney characterizing an abundance of universality as equally damaging as an excess of particularity (emphasis added). This is just one way in which she embeds throughout her narrative implicit critiques of the “universalist” approach to the education of girls, as exemplified by the Tyrolts’ educational manifesto.

Yet the key word here must be “implicit.” For the final paragraph of the novel, with which I began this article, undoubtedly lets the Tyrolts off the didactic hook. They are merely referred to as “fond parents,” while the narrator squarely admonishes Marchmont for his “injustice,” “narrowness,” and “arrogance,” and has him recant his suspicions of Camilla. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that the Tyrolts were received with far greater favor than Marchmont (and his protégé Edgar) by Burney’s first readers. The *Critical Review*, for example, considered Camilla’s education “not neglected by her excellent parents” (27) while Edgar’s “penetration degenerates into suspicion” (28)—and one of the extracts selected for quotation in the review is from Mr. Tyrolt’s sermon, badged “the admirable instructions of a father to a daughter, on her first entrance into life” (31). The *English Review*, likewise, laments Edgar’s “injurious misconstructions,” while praising “the dignified father of Camilla, and her no less excellent mother,” who “merit imitation” (179). The *British Critic* describes the Tyrolts as “parents so very able, and so attentive to their children,” while scoffing at Edgar’s willingness to be “guided by the prejudices of an old man” (535-36). Interestingly, although the *Monthly Review* views Marchmont as “harsh, distrustful, and severe” (157) and judges Mr Tyrolt’s sermon as “deserv[ing of] marked commendation” (163), it also judges the novel to point out “the dangers arising from *the two extremes* of

severely watchful suspicion, and thoughtless imprudence” (163, emphasis added)—replicating the narrator’s sentiments in the opening, rather than the closing, lines of the final paragraph. This hints that at least one reviewer may have judged the sufferings of the novel to be the result of two equally culpable “extreme” modes of behavior, even if the parenting philosophy of the Tyrolts did not strike them as a source of one of them. Nonetheless, this is the exception rather than the rule.

We find the same tendency in more informal contemporary reader responses. Burney’s father Charles, for example, writing privately to his son Charles Jr., describes Mr. and Mrs. Tyrold as “as perfect in their situation as humanity will allow,” while deeming Edgar “properly punished for his too fastidious system of ideal perfection” (C. Burney 160). Overall, he concluded, “the moral tendencies are so numerous, delicate, & free from severity & cant, that the work seems to me the best & most impressive system of female education that I have ever seen” (*LCB* 3:160). Other readers less closely connected with the author apparently felt similarly, at least with regard to Dr Marchmont’s influence on Edgar. As Margaret Doody points out, Jane Austen scribbled in a few additional lines at the end of her personal copy of *Camilla* which kill the doctor off entirely, “Since this work went to the press a circumstance of some assistance to the happiness of Camilla has taken place, namely that Dr. Marchmont has at last died” (qtd. in Doody 272). Perhaps the most compelling evidence that Burney’s critique of the universalist approach of the Tyrolts passed under the readerly radar lies in Julia Epstein’s observation that Mr. Tyrold’s “sermon” to Camilla was itself reprinted in anthologies of conduct literature marketed towards young women (Epstein 127-28).

None of this should be taken to imply that Burney's authorial decisions in her closing paragraph to highlight Marchmont's culpability and to sideline that of the Tyrols was solely responsible for the reception outlined above. Rather, such a decision and such a reception seem to be twin symptoms of a widespread disparity in cultural palatability. To Burney as well as her readers, the behavior of Marchmont and Edgar was clearly ungenerous; author and readers alike encountered no difficulty in saying so. The parenting philosophy of the Tyrols, conversely, seems to have been fundamentally attuned to the mores of her readership. The fact that it nonetheless caused Burney some consternation, resulting in the subtle textual critiques I have outlined in this article, should make us reappraise her radicalism as a pedagogical innovator.

Since this article began with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman*, it seems fitting to close it with Wollstonecraft's own verdict on *Camilla*, when she reviewed the novel for Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*. For the most part, Wollstonecraft addresses the technical proficiency of the novel rather than reflecting on its content, let alone its attitude to the education of girls. Neither Marchmont nor the Tyrols are specifically mentioned by name. Tantalisingly, however, she does comment that "[t]he illustrating sentiments are often excellent, and expressed with great delicacy, evincing the sagacity and rectitude of the author's mind, reflecting equal credit on her heart and understanding" (Wollstonecraft, Art VI 142). Such a line indicates a broad agreement between Wollstonecraft and Burney in terms of general "sentiments," "heart" and "understanding." It is not too far-fetched to speculate that such approval may derive from a sharp reading of Burney's treatment of gender and experience via the doctrine of universality: a topic

that Wollstonecraft herself would broach only two years later in her own treatment of the wrongs of woman.

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