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Frances Burney's *Evelina*: A Critique of the *Ancient Regime* and Plea for its Moral Reform



by Mary Dengler

When an ingénue entered 18th-century London society, she faced an onslaught of suitors at every gathering. How was she to decipher, through their courtly manners and language, the sincere from the predatory? In *Evelina: Or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance Into the World* (1778),¹ Burney uses *Evelina's* correspondence with her guardian to examine not only the perils of young lady's social education but also the *ancient regime* of pre-Reform England in the incoming tide of Lockean individualism. *Evelina's* social education—first among upper and lower gentry during the London “season,” then among commoners at High Holborn in summer, and finally among upper gentry of Bristol Hotwells and Clifton Hill in autumn—forms her

perceptions of different societal groups. She and the reader learn that those groups are also evaluating her according to her apparent status. Since *Evelina* must base her perceptions of gentry and commoner on their responses to her perceived social standing, she learns to distinguish the sincere from the fraudulent, allowing Burney to imply the threat of individualism and the necessity of resisting this threat in order to protect the integrity of language and marriage. Such resistance could come about only through belief in the “Redeemer,” who removed Burney's fear of death, and through “Providence,” who released her from the misery of court life, as her diary explains.² Through *Evelina's* correspondence with Rev. Mr. Villars, Burney decries individualism and validates the one-class society, but only with moral reform, based on her faith in the Redeemer of Anglicanism and the Providence of Calvinism. Only such a context will assure the prerequisites for a marriage of moral and spiritual equality—education and integrity guided by the Christian faith.

Historians offer conflicting views of Burney's 18th-century context: either that pre-Reform England remained a stable regime until the 1832 Reform Bill, or that 18th-century England, as a whole, was evolving toward modernity. Representing the first view, J. C. D. Clark argues that the “old society” of “gentlemen, Church of England, and crown” maintained its “intellectual and social hegemony” from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 until the Reform Movement of 1828-1832, when it attempted to appease radicals and dissent-

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ers and forestall their encroachment; according to this view, English society did not divide itself into classes until 19th-century reform changed the make-up of parliament.³ Instead, writes Asa Briggs, members of society continued to see themselves as part of a hierarchy, “from the elite to the common people,” in which a “chain of connection” implied place and social obligation, and a “bond of attachment” implied duty... [and] deference.⁴

Like Clark and Briggs, Peter Laslett describes 18th-century England as a “one-class society” since it included “a large number of status groups but only one body of persons capable of concerted action over the whole area of society, only one class in fact.”⁵ This powerful body, or class, consisting of upper and lower gentry, were bound by obligation to the commoners, who were bound by duty and deference to them. However, Evelina discovers that both gentry and commoner violate this “chain of connection” and “bond of attachment,” as Burney urges gentry to reform themselves and guide their imitators.

The second view, held by social historian Roy Porter, assumes that “the Georgian century teetered on ‘modernity’” in its growing pursuit of “liberty and individualism.”⁶ As the “intelligentsia’s liberal and optimistic religion affirmed free-will, salvation for all, the goodness of mankind and its capacity for progress,” it replaced the “earlier Calvinist theology of original sin and depravity”; and because it affirmed an individual’s “right to moral autonomy and self-realization,” it didn’t treat “egoism, and even greed...as sinful and anti-social, but as natural.”⁷ This is certainly the mindset of Sir Clement Willoughby when he recklessly pursues Evelina for his own pleasure. The same view had motivated Sir John Belmont to pursue Evelina’s mother, Caroline Evelyn, for her beauty and fortune, then to deny the marriage, relegating her to a pregnant outcast until Rev. Villars gave her asylum before her untimely death in birthing Evelina.

According to Clark, however, characterizing 18th-century England with “[bourgeois] individualism” ignores the “religious dimensions in which all moved,” dimensions defined by the hierarchical creation order, “premised on Pauline Trinitarian theology.”⁸ This general belief, according to Clark, opposed the natural-right theory of

Locke, since Locke was considered an “advocate of theological heterodoxy,” even if “not yet...democracy.”⁹ According to D. D. Devlin’s *The Novels and Journals of Fanny Burney*, Burney too supported the one-class society, as her diaries and letters contain “little political comment,”¹⁰ other than her admiration of emigrant French Constitutionalists for their “loyalty to [their]king” and endurance of dangers.¹¹ She also resisted a marriage of material security and later married the “Roman Catholic, impoverished Constitutionalist d’Arblay” for his “simple ‘openness’” and his grief over the king’s execution.¹² After she married d’Arblay, the *Critical Review* called her political views “too aristocratic.”¹³

Even though Burney’s letters express “aristocratic” political views not promoting women’s autonomy, Kristina Straub detects several paradoxes in Burney’s *Evelina* that suggest otherwise. According to Straub’s article “Evelina: Marriage as the Dangerous Die,” one such paradox is the “contradictory ideological value” of marriage for mid-18th-century women—one that seems to promise security and happiness but offers a “static” life devoid of development and happiness.¹⁴ For Evelina’s mother, it meant “powerlessness,” “loss of integrity... even personal destruction.”¹⁵

The other paradox, writes Straub, in “The Young Lady Makes Her Entrance,” is the set of prerequisites—virtue, innocence, beauty—needed to attract a gentleman, as these are the very qualities that lead to a young lady’s undoing: “the exclusively domestic upbringing that gives the young lady value in the form of innocence” also fails to “prepare her for the experiences of public life.”¹⁶ Straub concludes, in *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategies*, that while the “socially acceptable modes of feminine behavior promise the heroine security” and “value through romantically conceived marriage,” they “simultaneously [limit] the extent of her social and economic power.”¹⁷ Still, in *Divided Fictions*, Straub asserts that Burney’s “doubleness” is not a “deliberate attempt to subvert,” or encourage female self-empowerment, but is Burney’s “[honest] response to ideological conflicts in the culture and a strategy for female psychic survival.”¹⁸

Certainly Burney’s novel depicts the beginning of ideological warfare in England, between the

still male-dominated, Anglican-oriented, one-class society and the spirit of individualism; between “female powerlessness” and the desire to “assert self-worth”¹⁹; between the romantic ideal of marriage and its unromantic reality. However, Burney doesn’t play out this warfare in Evelina’s thinking or use Evelina’s actions as an example “strategy for female psychic survival” or empowerment. Instead, Evelina’s navigating her way through social language to distinguish truth from falsehood uncovers, for readers, the threat of self-seeking individualism. Through her ordeals, Evelina learns, and

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Burney suggests, that in order to survive, gentry women and society itself must be guided by virtuous gentry—in manners, speech, actions—as “Providence”²⁰ designed it. For if Burney believed in Calvinist theology, as her letters attest, she believed that only a Christian, or virtuous, gentle man/woman respects another’s intrinsic worth as divine image-bearer and thus adheres to obligation and duty over desire, based on accountability to the Redeemer. Only a Christian, or virtuous, gentleperson speaks and acts disinterestedly to promote spiritual (intellectual, moral) welfare in society.

Because Rev. Villars’ disinterested guidance was ignored by the infatuated Mr. Evelyn, two generations have ended tragically, and all the elements are in place for a third tragedy as Evelina enters the same “world.” Mr. Evelyn’s unwise marriage to an attractive but greedy French tavern maid (the eventual Madame Duval), resulting in Caroline Evelyn’s birth, ended Mr. Evelyn’s life early; then, Caroline’s avoidance of a mercenary marriage to a commoner, arranged by her mother, ended in betrayal and abandonment by financially disappointed Lord Belmont, but not before Evelina was conceived and disowned by her father. Now that Rev. Villars has lovingly shaped Evelina through the same educa-

tion as that of her mother and grandfather, he and readers fear a third tragedy, especially as Villars feels compelled by duty to allow Lady Howard to introduce Evelina to London society as the first step toward a gentry marriage, a step that could throw her in the path of her treacherous grandmother, Madame Duval. But as with his previous wards, he lovingly guides Evelina, this time with letters, until his role can be assumed by another virtuous gentleman, as it is by Lord Orville, who will be motivated initially only by “an unaffected interest in [Evelina’s] welfare.”²¹

This interest should characterize all members of society, but Burney shows its tenuous hold on both commoner and gentry. The aggressively entrepreneurial Branghtons and Madame Duval defer to the gentry—as when the ostentatiously fashionable Mr. Smith “shrink[s] into nothing” in the presence of Sir Clement,²² and the Miss Branghtons try to impress “Miss” with their clothes and knowledge of London life. Still, no sense of duty prevents Madame Duval from trying to force another ruinous, financially motivated marriage, this time between her granddaughter Evelina and her commoner nephew; nor does it prevent Tom Branghton from using Evelina’s name to usurp Lord Orville’s coach and enter his house, nor Sir Clement and Lord Merton from objectifying and pursuing Evelina.

These depictions, which clearly warn against encroaching individualism, not only to the gentry but to society as a whole, are misinterpreted, by Straub, as Burney’s recipe for a woman’s psychic survival between conflicting ideologies. If Burney’s *Evelina* were written as such a strategy in a male-controlled world, the words of protagonists Evelina and Lord Orville would carry more satirical intent, like those of Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett. Instead, we read of Evelina’s anguish in disappointing Lord Orville by her social ignorance, and Lord Orville’s anguish in misconstruing her ignorance. That these events don’t prevent their further interest in each other doesn’t suggest a strategy for winning suitors; they do suggest that sincerity can lead to trust and respect. Also, even without the motive of self-empowerment, Evelina retains her sense of self-worth, wins the reverence of Mr. McCarthy, wins the respect and affection of M. Du Bois, and wins the

frustrated love of Sir Clement. She eventually gains her rightful fortune, from both Madame Duval and Sir John Belmont, by *not* pursuing it through strategy, and she secures Lord Orville's devotion and proposal, even *without* status, fortune, or con-
niving.

In other words, reading an implied satirical contradiction in *Evelina* (i.e., in Burney)—between Evelina's ostensible integrity and her strategy for securing Lord Orville—ignores the evidence of historiographers, Evelina's letters, and Burney's correspondence. According to Clark, echoed by opponent Porter, the "champions of patriarchalism" vastly outnumbered those of "individualism" and "persisted long into the eighteenth century..."²³ If anything, Burney warns of the latter as a reason to preserve gentry integrity and authority, but she promotes their reform to a higher moral/spiritual standard.

Burney's advocacy for moral reform develops through Evelina's three-part journey—her "entrance" into a leisure world of men, entertainment, and trade from the secluded domestic world of guarded innocence.²⁴ Straub calls this journey a variation of the Cinderella narrative, in which the meanings of "young lady" and "entrance" are derived from their usage in the then contemporary narratives of "female innocence and the inevitability of marriage."²⁵ More significant than these narrative usages is the biblical directive to raise a child the way she should go so that she doesn't depart from it when she is older,²⁶ when she enters what Augustine calls the "Worldly" city, a self-centered, not a God-centered world.²⁷ On this journey, Evelina learns the gentry's proprieties as well as the distinctions between gentry and commoner and between moral and immoral gentry. In so doing, she validates, the "old society," in which true gentles were to rule, by providential design, for society's good.

Burney's support of the duty and deference among gentry surfaces as soon as the novel begins, when Rev. Villars defers to Lady Howard's request to send Evelina to London with Mrs. Mirvan. For though he fears Madame Duval's treachery if she encounters Evelina, and worries about Evelina's future discontent in a lower station, he yields to Lady Howard and even allows Evelina to visit her

treacherous grandmother, advising Evelina to show "the respect and deference due to" her grandmother without imitating her misconduct.²⁸ This visit to Howard Grove and London acknowledges a necessary preparation for gentry membership, to which (Burney suggests) Evelina belongs by inheritance and integrity, cultivated by Villars' moral education. These qualities will help Evelina distinguish the sincere from the false.

As she appraises them—recognizing Mr. Lovel as a fop, Lord Merton as a reprobate, Sir Clement as a predator, and only Lord Orville as a true gentleman—they appraise her on the basis of apparent status and manners. When Evelina violates rules of etiquette at her first private ball, she notices how Mr. Lovel vindictively accuses her [the "rustick"] of "ill manners" while Lord Orville inspires her confidence with "sensible and spirited" conversation and "gentle...engaging" manners, then protects this "weak creature" from Lord Merton's curiosity.²⁹ In her second blunder, when she uses Lord Orville's name to protect herself from Sir Clement at a public ball, she distinguishes Lord Orville's sensibility from Sir Clement's insensitive boldness, a distinction between obligation and self-interest. When Evelina must explain her behavior, Lord Orville understands her dilemma, insists she has honored his name, and leads her "tormentor away."³⁰ While Sir Clement constructs her as an ingénue to be toyed with, Lord Orville respects her as a moral/spiritual equal.

At places of public amusement, including Ranelagh, the Pantheon, and the opera, Evelina contrasts Lord Orville's civilizing influence to the confusion and pain inflicted merrily by Captain Mirvan, Sir Clement, and Lord Merton, all examples of encroaching individualism. Captain Mirvan verbally and physically attacks Madame Duval for vindictive amusement, Sir Clement encourages the Captain's schemes for his own advantage, but Lord Orville evokes "restraint."³¹ And at the opera, when Evelina escapes from Madame Duval and the Branghtons, Sir Clement takes advantage of her altered status by forcing her into his carriage and terrifying her with improper behavior. Meanwhile, Lord Orville hastens to Queen-Anne Street to confirm her safe arrival.³²

Throughout her harrowing initiation to London

society, Rev. Villars applauds her judgment and urges her to maintain strict social boundaries and duties. Even though he recognizes Lord Orville's nobility, compared to Sir Clement's "artfulness," he never suggests Lord Orville as a suitor for his impoverished ward, Evelina.³³ Even so, he allows Lady Howard to claim Evelina's patrimony from Sir John Belmont but forbids the conniving grandmother, Madame Duval, from taking Evelina to France. All of Rev. Villars' efforts and fears for Evelina, Burney warns, are essential for her survival during this first phase of social education/testing.

In the second phase, among Madame Duval's shop-keeping relatives of High Holborn, Evelina discovers life un-tempered by noble/Christian influences. She finds her cousins' curiosity offensive, their conversations loud, ill-mannered, and shallow. In her reduced status, she quickly distinguishes moral from immoral gentry, according to the way they now construct and respond to her. She discovers that both gentry and commoner deconstruct her public persona, happily recognizing the disparity between her character and her circumstances. At Snow Hill, the Miss Branghtons' deference turns to sarcasm: they hadn't expected "Miss" in the summer, for it's not at all the *fashion*";³⁴ they also subject her to improper displays of affection with Mr.'s Smith and Brown. This behavior and its accompanying moral atmosphere, which she compares to a "desert,"³⁵ causes Evelina's psychical suffering. Such suffering heightens her awareness of Mr. Macarthy, the object of the Branghtons, and compels her to assist him: she not only prevents his self-destruction but restores his hope through unobtrusive charity.

By contrast, Madam Duval's and Sir Clement's concentrated attempts to seize Evelina for their own designs warn of individualism's destructive power unless restrained by a moral gentry. When Sir Clement intercepts Evelina's letter to Lord Orville and forges an improper reply, he temporarily destroys Evelina's physical, psychical, and spiritual health. The supposed degeneracy of even Lord Orville corrodes Evelina's faith in the Anglican patriarchy, the created order, and her own perceptions: "I lament to find myself in a world so deceitful" that we "must suspect what we see, distrust what we hear, and doubt even what we feel!"³⁶

Shocked at this discrepancy between appearance and character, writing and speaking (305), signifier and signified, Evelina and Rev. Villars each deconstruct and interpret the text of events. Rev. Villars believes that Orville's note, even if written under the influence of alcohol, reveals his true character; Evelina believes that Lord Orville's consistent moral behavior, in spite of his written note, reveals his true character. Villars privileges his writing; Evelina privileges his speech and behavior.

The third phase of Evelina's education, at Bristol Hot Wells and Clifton Hill, proves that Evelina's interpretation is correct: Lord Orville "is still himself! Still...all that is amiable in man!"³⁷ For, in him, what appears to be (his speech and behavior) represents what is. With his assistance, faith in her innocence, and marriage proposal (let alone his innocence in the matter of the forged note), he restores her faith, completes her education, secures her legitimacy, rewards her innocence, and ends her internal conflict, one not shared by Burney herself. By contrast, Mrs. Beaumont treats Evelina with "mechanical" condescension; Lady Louisa ignores her as "no one"; and Mr. Lovel predictably constructs her as a "toadeater" until he learns of

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her true lineage. Only Lord Orville remains a true gentleman in his "politeness" and "sweetness";³⁸ his self-deprecation over his suspicions of her; his efforts to bring about Mr. McCarthy and Evelina's reunion with each other and with their father; and his plan to mitigate the embarrassment of Sir John's assumed daughter, Miss Belmont, through the two marriages at once: her marriage to Mr. Macarthy and Evelina's to Lord Orville.

As to the motives of Lord Orville's gentility, certainly his "arbor" dialogue with Sir Clement, more than any other dialogue, serves as Burney's warn-

ing against individualism, against its disregard of reason and morality. When Lord Orville asks Sir Clement his “intentions” with Evelina, their opposing ideologies determine their evaluations of her worth. Lord Orville declares his intention to protect her well-being as a friend; Sir Clement declares his intention to “persevere” with her, though not for marriage. Lord Orville verbally constructs Evelina as a woman of quality in her education and “natural love of virtue and...mind”; Sir Clement constructs Evelina as an autonomous, free agent and tells Orville to “let Miss Anville look to [or protect] herself”; Lord Orville implies a belief in moral absolutes, constructing Evelina as a person of intrinsic “worth” and “excellence”; Sir Clement implies a belief in self-interest, constructing Evelina as a person of extrinsic worth, “whose...dowry is her beauty” and the object of his desire.³⁹

Subsequent to this reported conversation, Evelina becomes the object, not of Sir Clement’s passion, as she would have been if not for Lord Orville, but of Lord Orville’s confession of selfless love that recognizes her equality: “I revere you! I esteem and I admire you above all human beings! You are the friend to whom my soul is attached as to its better half!”⁴⁰ Even when she admits to being “a child of bounty...an orphan from infancy...disowned forever by [her] nearest relation,” he asks only to seek her guardian’s consent immediately so that their “fates may be indissolubly united” and he can devote his life to alleviating the burden of her past and preventing her “future misfortunes!”⁴¹ Good to his word, he intercedes for her with Lord Belmont, ending Evelina’s alienation, Mr. Macarthy’s misery, and Miss Belmont’s false identity, but in a way that brings restoration to everyone.

When Evelina expresses her gratitude to Rev. Villars, for committing her in prayer to her “real parent [God],” divine Providence receives the credit for all that has transpired. Lord Orville has announced his “devotion” to Evelina⁴² without knowing her lineage and effects a reconciliation with her father and brother, as if to confirm Burney’s Anglican belief in prayer’s efficacy, her Calvinist belief in Providence, and Clark’s idea of the “religious dimension in which all moved.”

Lord Orville’s recognition of her worth, as a human being and lover of virtue, suggests the possibil-

ity of moral equality in marriage, at least between the virtuous, or Christian, gentry. Those who believe in Providence and the Redeemer perceive not only others’ worth and equality but the inability of courtly clichés to express love’s depth. When he describes Evelina as his superior in worth, his soul’s “better half,” he states that she is “dearer...than language has the power of telling.”⁴³ And Evelina, instead of resenting or dreading her hasty marriage to Lord Orville, intends to “express better than by words” her “sense” of his “benevolence and greatness of mind”—she too finds language insufficient to express her love and “contentment.”⁴⁴ For both Lord Orville and Evelina, love transcends courtly language.

By contrast, Sir Clement betrays his self-interested pursuit of Evelina by contradicting his courtly language with uncourtly behavior. His hope, to win Evelina’s physical submission by making her doubt Lord Orville’s integrity redounds on itself, leaving him without dignity or the appearance of sense. His rudeness to Mrs. Beaumont and his earlier participation in Captain Mirvan’s despicable pranks warn us of his contempt for every social group, including his own. Without Rev. Villars’ counsel, Mrs. Selwyn’s assistance, and Lord Orville’s intervention, Sir Clement would have destroyed the future of Evelina, Mr. Macarthy, and Lord Belmont, whose redemption was yet incomplete.

Moral leaders such as Rev. Villars and Lord Orville, suggests Burney, work to un-do the fall; or, as Abraham Kuyper would later explain, Christians are called to transform culture, bringing it to a “higher stage,” in “accordance with God’s ordinance.”⁴⁵ In that transformed world, manners and language mean what they represent, marriages of equality are possible, innocence and integrity are rewarded; and virtue (moral goodness), not individualism, is the goal; otherwise, courtship and marriage hold only deception, betrayal, disillusion.

Endnotes

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