MAKING SCENES: SOCIAL THEATRE AND MODES OF SURVIVAL IN BURNEY'S

PERFORMATIVE 'WORLD'

B. SCHAFFNER

MA BY RESEARCH

THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND RELATED LITERATURE

OCTOBER 2011

MLA

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincerest thanks for academic and personal support on this project go to my supervisor Harriet Guest and to Jane Moody. Thanks also to Clare Bond for her perennial competence and generosity, to my fellow CECS students, and to the residents of Constantine House—also known as the best of all possible worlds.

## DECLARATION

All written material and figures, and the ideas therein, are originally conceived and executed by Rebecca E. Schaffner, the author of this dissertation.

**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the use and representation of social theatrics in Frances Burney's early works (*Evelina*, *The Witlings*, and *Cecilia*), as a social force, a tool, and a threat stemming from and contributing to an essentially theatrical 'World.' Characters are analyzed through two functional pairs of characteristics: the imaginative/nonimaginative and the natural/performative. Chapter 1 discusses gossips as the audience for social performance in Burney's works. Chapter 2 studies the affective language of two imaginative social performers, Sir Clement Willoughby and Mr. Harrel. Chapter 3 investigates the performance of 'privacy' by *Cecilia*'s Mr. Monckton. In Chapter 4, the question of moral alignment comes into play through Harrel and Mr. Belfield, regarding both performance and the theatrical 'World' itself. Chapter 5 investigates the effects of social theatre on Burney's natural, nonperformative protagonists, and their effectiveness in a performance-driven society. Concluding, this study finds a universal danger in social theatricality and a limit to viable alternatives for those who wish to escape it.

**Introduction: The Masquerade**

> Thus while the crafty and designing Part of Mankind, consulting only their own separate Advantage, endeavour to maintain one constant Imposition on others, the whole World becomes a vast Masquerade, where the greatest Part appear disguised under false Vizors and Habits; a very few only shewing their own Faces, who become, by so doing, the Astonishment and Ridicule of all the rest. (Fielding, *Miscellanies*)
>
> -Henry Fielding, 'Essay on the Knowledge of Characters of Men'

## 1. Cecilia's Masquerade

Not long after her arrival in London, the heroine of Frances Burney's second novel attends a masquerade. The masquerade takes place in the home of Cecilia's hosts, the Harrels, and draws her out of a brief self-seclusion (proving, unsurprisingly, that it is difficult to maintain hermitage in the middle of London). Cecilia, on the assurances of Mrs. Harrel, chooses to attend the ball out of costume. Very quickly she realises that this puts her in a conspicuous minority; worse, her natural appearance makes her vulnerable, and she is approached and harassed by a masque dressed as the Devil. Unbeknownst to Cecilia, this Devil is her country neighbor, mentor, and 'friend' Mr. Monckton, whose mercenary intentions are a complete secret to her. Fortunately, Cecilia is not long alone: idealistic social climber Mr. Belfield, in the form of Don Quixote, intercedes and meets the Devil in combat—outwardly playful, but effective. A number of other men stand by while they fight, as Cecilia's protectors. Cecilia's eventual husband Mortimer Delvile, who is dressed in the pure but not knightly costume of a white domino, attends her for the first time.

Despite her desire to avoid performances, Cecilia is at the centre of one: the princess in peril, aided by a knight and trapped in a tower of gentlemanly 'fortifications' (Burney, *Cecilia*

116). As Quixote and Devil do battle, the scene attracts outside attention. The rakish Sir Robert

Floyer passes by in the guise of a rapacious Turk, and Cecilia's skinflint guardian Mr. Briggs, as

an authentically filthy chimney-sweep, manages to condescend to everyone. They comment on

Cecilia's difficulty, but do not intercede. Eventually the Devil *is* thwarted—first by Belfield, then

by eager-to-please young Morrice, whose antics destroy a glass awning and bring the ball to a

premature end. Cecilia escapes relatively unscathed.

This scene tangles with a number of narratives and traditions. In an already theatrical

society, real life masquerades further thinned the line between spectator and performer,

sociability and stage. Masquerade balls appeared in novels and occasionally in plays, and are tied

more broadly to a wealth of theatrical forms, public entertainments, and the social theatre of

everyday interaction. Burney's novel arrives in a complicated moment of love and hate for

public masquerade. Masquerades were a popular pastime, the guests, costumes, and decorations

gushed over in the social news. One 1771 periodical declared a Soho masquerade 'brilliant and

beautiful beyond description; every article that Europe could afford, or the most fertile

imagination invent, to gratify every sense' ('Masquerade Intelligence' *Middlesex Journal*). A

1779 issue of *The Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* describes masquerade rooms of 'infinite

ingenuity. . . splendid and beautiful, the illuminations disposed and diversified with an

uncommon share of taste and fancy' ('Masquerade Intelligence' *Morning Post*). The same article

bemoans a scant attendance of some 250 guests; public masquerades frequently hosted over

seven hundred guests in an evening ('Masquerade Intelligence' *Morning Post*).[1] But the glamour

and hustle of a masquerade wasn't without its vulgarities and dangers. The same event deemed

'brilliant and beautiful,' hosted guests who obscured their ranks in the class-crossed costumes of

---

[1] Terry Castle cites several contemporary sources that tally attendance at an average of seven hundred persons, with crowds regularly in excess of one or even two thousand (*Masquerade and Civilization* 349).

gypsies, chimney-sweeps, foreigners of several varieties, scholars, milkmaids, Harlequins, and one 'remarkable droll' beggar ('Masquerade Intelligence' *Middlesex Journal*). The *Morning Chronicle* casually reports an incident in which a 'man of fashion. . . in consequence of his inebriety, had two of his front teeth knocked out by a mask in a fish-woman's habit, and was otherwise so much bruised, as now to be attended by two physicians' (*Morning Chronicle*). The reality of the masquerade was never definitively declared polite or vulgar, dangerous or simply good fun.'

Henry Fielding's opinion was widely known. He displayed a career-long loathing for the masquerade in all forms, which appeared with his first publication, a 1728 poem written under the unworldly name of Lemuel Gulliver.[2] The poem, dedicated to 'C - - - T  H - - D - - G - - R,' expostulates on the foolish and disreputable behaviours that occur at Haymarket and other public masquerade sites (Fielding, 'The Masquerade'). 'Gulliver' derides Heidegger's 'hideous figure,' which he says was 'toss'd out of hell, / And, in return, by Satan made / First minister of's masquerade' (ibid.). Of the attendees, Fielding sneers, 'They'll tell you virtue is a masque: / But it wou'd look extremely queer / In any one, to wear it here' (ibid.). Fielding objected to the masquerade on various grounds in his political life, declaring in 1749 that, 'As to the Masquerade in the *Hay-market*. . . I really think it a silly rather than a vicious Entertainment: But the Case is very different with these inferiour Masquerades; for these are indeed no other than the Temples of Drunkenness, Lewdness, and all Kind of Debauchery' (ibid.). Fielding's disdain persisted in his novels *Tom Jones* and *Amelia*. In *Amelia,* a doctor warns that masquerades, 'may not be. . . such brothels of vice and debauchery as would impeach the character of every virtuous woman who was seen at them; [they] are certainly, however, scenes of riot, disorder, and

---

[2] *Gulliver's Travels* had been published two years earlier, in 1726.

intemperance, very improper to be frequented by a chaste and sober Christian matron' (Fielding, *Amelia* 79). He paints a picture of an entertainment that is at best silly, and at worse, abhorrent.

Fielding's literary masquerade scenes, like *Cecilia*'s, fit into an eighteenth-century literary vogue; masquerades appear in numerous novels of the era. Their blend of popularity and titillating menace made them a rich and provocative setting. The masquerade (real and fictional) provided at least superficial anonymity, and a pass to behave out of character or rank. Authors embraced the potential terror of this notion; in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, the mere possibility of the masquerade provided all the sensation the author required. The event itself is merely a trigger, spurring both the domestic upheaval caused by Miss Milner's attendance, and Dorriforth's moral finger-wagging. Without ever seeing Miss Milner at the masquerade, the reader clearly grasps the moral peril of the situation. In *Cecilia*'s case, the heroine does not have to be physically harmed for the masquerade to be dangerous; she is humiliated, stalked, menaced, objectified, and trapped, and is not properly freed from Monckton until the masquerade ends.

Terry Castle's scholarship on literary masquerades finds it represented as paradoxically dangerous and freeing. The masquerade scene, Castle says, is an anomaly or an inversion, a class- and rank-mixing arena in which the protection of disguise allowed attendees to, '[adopt] the costumes of beings whose natures were antithetical to their own—of a different culture, sex, or sphere of existence' ('Carnivalization' 905). Authors draw attention to the danger of this situation, she argues, but also use it to provide a fleeting and atypical moment of power for heroines, including Cecilia. In Castle's vision, the Harrel's masquerade becomes a temporary feminine utopia (*Masquerade* 277). However, this latter argument, holding up as evidence the adoration of everyone who sees Cecilia ('an orgy of ovation') neglects the obvious and recurrent

notion that Burney finds such attention repellent—as do her heroines (274). Additionally, the idea that costume enables agency in otherwise powerless protagonists better suits Georgian theatre than Georgian literature. Theatre is a willing and obvious arena of disguise and dissimulation, both in its fundamentals and in the narratives it performs. Disguise, and especially beneficial disguise, frequently made its way into the scripts of eighteenth-century comedic plays. In 1718's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife,* Susanna Centlivre's hero disguises himself in four personae most likely to win approval from his lover's four guardians (four guardians mimicked, incidentally, in *Cecilia*). Mr. Oliver, in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, dresses up as a poor man to gauge the characters of the Surface brothers. The heroines of Hannah Cowley's 1783 *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* veil themselves to pass as (more attractive) strangers to woo back their distant lovers. Charles Johnson's 1717 *The Masquerade* is saturated with a range of performances*;* a public masquerade in the third act 'in Imitation of that in the Hay-Market' informs all five acts, and a more informal use of disguise helps to solve the most difficult of the play's sub-plots, involving a young woman whose *best* option appears to be forcing a cold-hearted rake to marry her (33). Cælia's position is practically impossible, but Johnson, like Centlivre, Behn, and Shakespeare, gives a vulnerable protagonist power through disguise, and ultimately she is freed from the rake. On the stage, disguise gave protagonists, quite literally, the freedom to act.

Although Castle argues specifically that *Cecilia*'s masquerade fits the mould for freedom through disguise, this is simply not what happens. It is true that Cecilia is not physically harmed; that, however, is a nearly moot point in determining the masquerade to be dangerous rather than utopian. The lack of physical assault may have to do with the scene's placement in the narrative, or with Burney's own sense of propriety, or, as Catherine Craft-Fairchild suggests, with an

increasing conservatism that prevented later eighteenth-century women writers from writing with the same sexual frankness as their predecessors (11). Although Burney constantly wrote about violation, and particularly female violation, she did not write about rape in the literal physical sense. Even so, *Evelina* and *Cecilia* are rife with often sexually motivated persecution and psychological torment. The lack of physical abuse at the masquerade, therefore, is no indicator of safety. While Cecilia's experience with the masquerade doesn't ruin her reputation or leave her physically or emotionally traumatized, it also fails to grant her the agency that either Castle or stage comedy suggest.

Crucially, Cecilia does not *choose* to participate in the masquerade. While she is cautiously interested, her residency in the Harrel house demands her participation; she is forced into performance by Monckton's proximity. She functions as the 'princess' in need of rescuing because Monckton has prevented her leaving and Belfield has cast her into the role. Belfield kisses the floor, crying 'Most incomparable Princess!' going on to call Cecilia 'irradiant,' 'celestial,' and, again, 'your highness' (Burney, *Cecilia* 109). Cecilia holds court, but as a puppet, the object of Monckton's performance, convenient to Belfield's, while others look on.

Cecilia's situation resembles another kind of theatre: the court masque. Traditionally masques were performed in a court setting, in, like the Harrel's house, 'a private hall full of invited guests' (White, 41). They later appeared on stage, and they frequently appeared as theatre-within-theatre. Shakespeare included masques in several of his plays, including *The Tempest*, as did co-writers Beaumont and Fletcher. M.R. Golding counts over fifty revenge tragedies of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that incorporate a masque scene (45). Though court masques (most famously Ben Jonson's) were primarily written and performed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they experienced a revival in the 1770s as

the rival theatres at Drury Lane and Covent Garden scrabbled for material (Noyes, 427).

Masques were at their core allegorical, drawing on mythology and popular symbolism,

participants 'splendidly appareled in accordance with the characters they represented' (White,

41). In this scene, Burney gives us just that: performance in which everyone is dressed exactly as

themselves. Equipped with a jester (young Morrice), a knight (Belfield), and courtiers (Mortimer

and the other 'protectors'), Cecilia's court is complete.[3] She herself is a wry but uncomfortable

literalism of Erik Walter White's phrasing, the noble at whom the masque was directed, who did

not sit, but 'was placed' at one end (ibid.). She sits by, talkative but passive, attempting to exit

the scene, after her initial flight, only when her persecutor has been distracted, and her protectors

can rush her away.

The scene does not indicate that Burney sees performance as an escape for her heroines.

Instead, it is practically a paralyzing force. For those around Cecilia, the masquerade allows

freedom, but the freedoms of vice and vulgarity, or, at the least, not quite polite gregariousness.

Morrice's destructive capering, Monckton's and Sir Robert Floyer's sexual appetites, Belfield's

posturing all become more acceptable, when dressed up in the guise of *play*. The behaviours of

other guests, if not dangerous, are no less (amusingly) vulgar to Cecilia, who describes

'conceited efforts at wit, the total thoughtlessness of consistency, and the ridiculous incongruity

of the language with the appearance' (Burney, *Cecilia* 106). For Cecilia, whose refusal to wear

disguises or behave disingenuously is typical both of her and of her fellow Burney heroines, this

scene of social theatre is ridiculous to begin with, and dangerous, ugly, and traplike by the end.

It also presents one additionally unsettling problem: her hero. While Belfield, performing

his Don Quixote with gusto, leaps into the fray to protect Cecilia from Monckton's harassment,

---

[3] There is even, in the awning Morrice destroys, a reflection of the proscenium arch White describes as a traditional piece of masque staging (41).

Mortimer Delvile does nothing. His white costuming does not make him a white knight. And he, like Cecilia, and like Burney's other virtuous heroes, refuses to act. Here, at his first meeting with Cecilia, it is immediately suggested how dangerous that might be.

**2. Burney and the 'World'**

Frances Burney had a well-recorded and enduring horror of publicity. Her tenure as a member of the royal court wearied and discouraged her; her desire for praise as a writer—sometimes itself disavowed—was more than matched by her morbid fear of visibility.[4] In their edition of Burney's journals and letters, Troide and Cooke go so far as to describe Burney's attempts at authorial anonymity as 'obsessive' and 'absurdly unrealistic' (x). She was, upon the publication of *Evelina*, 'terrified at the prospect of being thrust into the limelight as its author,' having 'an extreme constitutional shyness compounded by fears of criticism for having transgressed. . . acceptable female behaviour' (ibid.). 'Terror' seems to have been the right word; in one instance of near-discovery, Burney confides to her journal: 'My Heart beat so quick against my stays, that I almost *panted* with extreme agitation, at the dread either of hearing some cruel criticism, or of being betrayed [as the author]' (*Early Journals* 113). Ultimately, Burney herself summarized her outlook succinctly and best: 'Perhaps [*Evelina*] may seem a rather bold attempt & Title, for a Female whose knowledge of the World is very confined, & whose inclinations, as well as situations, incline her to a private & domestic Life' (1).

Burney's heroines—Evelina, Cecilia Stanley (the heroine of *The Witlings*), and Cecilia Beverley (the novel's title character)—all demonstrate a love for privacy and quiet that is shown

---

[4] See Troide and Cooke's edition of *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney,* vol. 3. A critical edition of Burney's court letters and diaries, edited by Peter Sabor, is coming into print at the time of this writing.

to be at violent odds with hectic London society. Evelina and the latter Cecilia each grow up in the country, and both gladly retire there after their marriages; Miss Stanley, threatened by scandal, immediately attempts a discreet flight from England.[5] But in Burney's protagonists, her antipathy for large company and her yearning for privacy take on dimensions larger than personal preference. In her fictions, Burney details a society that not only intimidates her young heroines, but proves to be a constant source of real danger. It is chaotic, fickle, demanding, and disingenuous. The high-ranking behave with vulgarity, while the low-ranking make vulgar attempts at fashion. The general thirst for entertainment, novelty and theatrics manifests in an aggressively cheerful, frenetically performative sociability. When Evelina makes 'a young lady's entrance', this is the 'World' in which she arrives: an urban chaos thick with sociable performance, and demanding all the same from its inhabitants.

Performance is a default behaviour for many of Burney's characters, and a frequent setting in her first two novels. In *The Witlings*, which Margaret Anne Doody calls 'almost necessarily a public affair,' the scenes are not blatantly public, or, as in the case of Mrs. Wheedle's millinery shop, are merely located in the wings ('Introduction' pxii).[6] Performance that takes place in private, however, is public too—designed by the characters to be passed along by gossip, and designed by the author to be set on a real life stage. In all three works, this is one constant: the danger, pervasiveness, persuasiveness, and vulgarity of publicity and social performance.

---

[5] This study will be limited to *Evelina*, *The Witlings*, and *Cecilia,* both due to the constraints of space and because these works frame the period when Burney was least accustomed to (though not necessarily most uncomfortable with) publicity and public life.
[6] E.g., the costume shop.

## 3. The 'World' and Its Participants

The subtitle of *Evelina* presents an idea. The *Young Lady's Entrance into the World* points to novel's heroine, but it also introduces something stranger, and larger, but equally alive: 'the World'. The 'World', the social organism within which Burney sets Evelina, is a constant (if untrustworthy) force in Burney's narratives. Her characters experience the theatrical 'World' both internally and externally; they are passively subject to it, and actively make use of it. This fictional 'World' is reflective of Burney's own perceptions of reality, and it is realistically fluid and chaotic, a mish-mash of polarities, moralities, and performances. The careful delineations scholarship frequently makes use of for this period—the masculine and the feminine, the high- and low-ranking, the polite and the vulgar, the public and the private—can capture threads of this 'World', but not the organism as a whole. As Lawrence Klein points out, particularly in the binary, any set of 'rules' we establish for our subjects constrains what our research makes visible ('Gender' 98). Studied through any of these binaries, Burney's fictions are rich with possibility. However, specifically investigating a performative 'World', I would like to make a slightly different, more than binary distinction, tied less to an individual's status, and more to their capacities in participating in such a world. At the risk of creating new shortcomings through new binaries, I suggest two pairs of opposing traits: the imaginative and the unimaginative, and the natural and the performative.
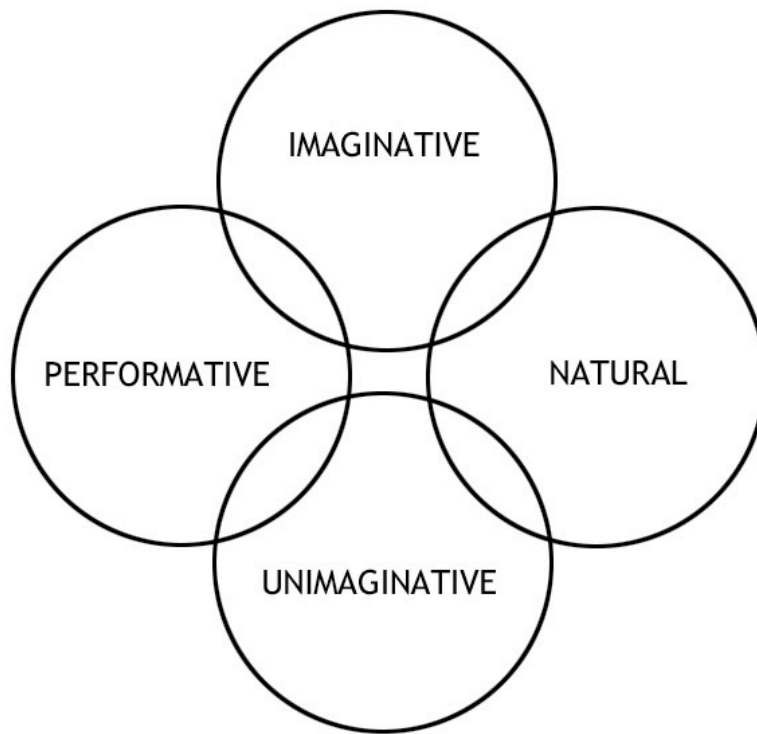
**Figure 1 (R. Schaffner)**

Burney's 'World' is unremittingly theatrical. Her characters, whether or not they wish to engage *in* social performance, have no choice but to engage *with* it; these traits describe how more or less any of Burney's characters do so—*regardless* of morality, gender, rank and so on.

Burney writes many characters who actively attempt to make a performance out of their social interactions; these I label, simply enough, as 'performative' characters. Monckton and Belfield are the clear-cut examples in the masquerade scene, but less intelligent characters like the nominal Witlings may also be performative. On the other end are the characters who do *not* choose to perform: what I have chosen to call the 'natural' characters. In their virtuous form, natural characters are people whose politeness stems, not from hypocrisy or ambition, but from a sincere belief that good manners are valuable for their own sake. Cecilia Beverley exemplifies the virtuous natural character; conversely, someone as sincere in his coolness and pride as Mr. Delvile or as chronically disappointed as Old Codger may also be 'natural'.

There is also, generally speaking, a very clear distinction in Burney's works between characters capable of self-assessment and the assessment of those around them, and those who are self-interested and image-conscious without being insightful. I describe these as respectively 'imaginative' and 'unimaginative'. The imaginative character is the one who, like Evelina's tormenter Clement Willoughby, understands how to successfully manipulate situations through his performance, or, like Evelina herself, is observant of her surroundings and interested in self-improvement without ever being a social performer. The unimaginative character can be seen in *The Witlings'* Lady Smatter, who is obsessed with her own reputation but looks foolish to everyone without knowing it.

Burney's 'World' reflects the world she lives in. It is consummately theatrical, chaotic, dangerous, and, at all social levels, very frequently vulgar. Through her narratives and characters Burney describes the *play* that both contributes to this fundamentally performative society, and becomes the demand this society makes of its parts. She demonstrates, in extraordinary detail, how individuals might navigate its threats and complexities. The following chapters will examine the roles Burney gives to her characters, both performative and natural, the specific techniques that she attributes to social performers, and the ability of non-performers to cope in a theatrical 'World'. This will answer the questions of how—or whether—morality, gender, and other ideological concerns are bound to the alignments of social navigation that have been offered above, and whether there is a benefit to either performativity or naturalness. Finally, I will lead these investigations to answer a broader question: why is performance so dangerous, and is there *any* way to avoid the inherent dangers of a performative society?

## Chapter One: The Rumoured Audience

> 'The TON misses, as they are called, who now infest the town, are in two divisions, the SUPERCILIOUS, and the VOLUBLE. The SUPERCILIOUS. . . are silent, scornful, languid, and affected, and disdain all converse but with those of their own set: the VOLUBLE. . . are flirting, communicative, restless, and familiar, and attack without the smallest ceremony, every one they think worthy their notice. But this they have in common, that at home they think of nothing but dress, abroad, of nothing but admiration, and that every where they hold in supreme contempt all but themselves.' (Burney, *Cecilia* 40)
>
> –Mr. Gosport to Cecilia

Mr. Gosport's summary dismissal of young women of fashion, addressed to a miffed Cecilia (who has just been put off by one such 'TON miss'), introduces both her and us to a vital contingent of *unimaginative* characters in Burney's early fictions. Much of this paper is concerned with the imaginative character; those characters, both social performers and conscientious objectors, are, frankly, too intelligent to fit into the categories presented by Gosport. SUPERCILIOUS and VOLUBLE (which can be as easily applied to the witless fashionable male as to the female, so I will use them accordingly) are of the other variety, shallow characters who follow fashion slavishly and without understanding. To these dedicated navel-gazers, what happens around them only signifies as far as it gives them something to say and do; they, unlike the imaginative characters I will analyze in later chapters, act without circumspection, malice, or pity, even though reputation concerns them deeply. But, like anyone else in a theatrical society, the unimaginative character has a role. What the Volubles say and do has a powerful effect on Burney's protagonists, and is a critical tool for her social performers.

The VOLUBLE are gossips. Burney rarely uses the latter term, but she gives equivalency to 'Voluble' and gossip on more than one occasion; 'voluble' is one of numerous scraps of her discarded play *The Witlings* that Burney recycled after the play's suppression. Although reduced to an idea and a couple of didactic paragraphs in *Cecilia*, Mrs. Voluble is one of the two major gossips of *The Witlings*. That Voluble (the original) is a middle-aged, middle-class woman—the stereotypical gossip incarnate. She is iconic of a character type and a behaviour that plays a frequent part in Burney's early fictions, particularly in *The Witlings* and its offspring *Cecilia.*

Burney's construction of gossip is very specific, a selective thread in the broader discourse of what gossip is, does, and has been. In her case, it is also tightly linked to the dissembling and deception endemic to a theatrical society. The core practice of passing bits of information, with or without verification, within a community or group, is naturally a part of human sociability and communication. What specifically qualifies as 'gossip', and whether it is practically useful or morally acceptable, is far less intuitive and consistent in a broader context than it is in Burney's writings. Scholarship of multiple fields has addressed gossip and rumor in recent decades—however, the arguments and definitions made in such studies may sometimes be formed to fit foregone conclusions rather than vice versa. At the root is a continuing problem of inconsistent terminology. Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine, writing an early treatise on gossip and rumor in the 1970s, distinguish between the two phenomena, defining the former as a type of social interaction which privileges entertainment over fact, the latter as a relief mechanism to ease communal anxieties (4). Rosnow and Fine note that other researchers regard gossiping and rumor-mongering as morally ambiguous, and acknowledge that 'hearsay can be a precious commodity in the marketplace of social exchange. . . it can titillate the imagination, comfort or excite, manipulate or maintain the status quo' (1). However, they also note that

'someone who repeats a rumor is transmitting suspect evidence. . . *rumor is deviant on an ideal level* even while being useful and conforming in practice' (emphasis mine; 11). Nicola Parsons, discussing the *Tatler*, distinguishes between gossip and 'tattle,' but her definition of tattle, the positive form of talebearing she attributes to Steele, applies equally to the dangerous small-talk in Burney's works. 'To tattle,' says Parsons, 'is to disseminate information indiscriminately, with scant attention to the nature of one's audience' (99). Her argument regarding tattle—particularly as it appears in Steele's periodical—touts its positive possibilities, as a 'democratising discourse that emphatically lacks a sense of exclusivity' (98). Her moral conclusions disagree with Burney's emphatically, although they discuss mechanically similar behaviours. Edith Gelles, meanwhile, making 'An Eighteenth-Century Case' for gossip based on the doomed romance of Abigail Adams Junior and Royall Tyler, veers further into the party of pro-gossip, and leniently defines it 'simply as the telling of tales about a person or persons who are not present' (667). Gelles only grudgingly admits gossip's negative potential, building her argument around its capacity for acting as a 'mode of intimacy,' an 'effective conduit' and a tidy cure for family messes (667; 668). This vision of gossip is also in opposition to Burney's, who regarded even gossip's potential as conduit as a threat.

Scholarly approaches to gossip are no more heterogeneous than the ways in which Burney's contemporaries addressed gossip as a daily fact. Some writers were unambiguous; John Burton's 1790s religious tract for schoolgirls, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*, warns strenuously against gossip. 'The gift of Speech,' Burton sermonises, 'was intended for wise and benevolent purposes. But when the Tongue is busily employed in propagating slander and calumny; in exposing the frailties of our Neighbors, and in publishing false reports, it then becomes an instrument of mischief; it destroys the pleasure of social intercourse; and *is a fire, a*

*world of iniquity*' (emphasis his; 376). A more congenial letter from Lady Caroline Dawson to

Lisa Stuart somewhat laughingly advises Stuart to become a gossip on behalf of their mutual

friend: 'By this time you have received a parcel of nonsense. . . from Miss Herbert, who is dying

to know a little more of the gossipry of the world in general, and complains that nobody tells her

any, so do take compassion on her' (156). Dawson's informal response to her news-hungry

friend seems unattached to any moral judgment; she sees gossip as an unexceptional and

unexceptionable brand of social intercourse. And, as Nichola Parsons notes, gossip in one guise

had been formalized *and respectable* since at least the publishing of the *Tatler* in 1709. The

*Tatler* famously introduces itself with promises of intelligence from all the best places of

gossip—coffee-houses and his private home, covering a broad range of topics. The individuals

he describes throughout the papers are, even when they are not directly modeled on a public

figure, just detailed and politely scandalous enough to draw the same attention as any 'real'

gossip. But the dedication of the 'Revised and Corrected' edition of 1733 firmly asserts that

Isaac Bickerstaff's gossip is fighting fire with fire: 'The general Purpose of this Paper, is to

expose the false Arts of Life, to pull off the Disguises of Cunning, Vanity and Affectation, and to

recommend a general Simplicity in our Dress, our Discourse, and our Behaviour' (Steele, *Tatler*

'To Mr. Maynwaring').

Burney, however, maintained a consistent and negative view of gossip. In 1768, sixteen-

year-old Frances complained to her diary that country towns were terrible, for their 'set of tittle

tattle, prittle prattle visitants!. . . these fall lall people! So much dressing—chit chat—

complimentary nonsense. . . all the conversation is scandal, all the attention, dress, and *almost* all

the heart, folly, envy, and censoriousness' (D'Arblay, 15). Mr. Censor—Gosport's harsher satiric

forebear in *The Witlings*—calls Voluble 'A Fool, a prating, intolerable Fool. . . she is infected

with a rage for talking, yet has nothing to say. . . Her tongue is as restless as Scandal, and, like that feeds upon nothing, yet attacks and tortures everything' (Burney, *Witlings* 11). These descriptions are reflected in Gosport's later observations, sharing particularly Burney's indictment of gossip as unfocused verbal violence, an 'attack' on everything it touches. Burney's Volubles may not be malicious; this does not make them harmless. The resemblance between her youthful observations and the later speeches of Censor and Gosport is clear, touching on scandal, vanity, and the harm gossip can do. Burney is not alone in making the connection between gossip, fashion, and superficiality; Anne MacVicar Grant refers in a 1773 letter to Harriet Reid to 'some of our friends; I mean such of them as do, or say, no great harm, but who so bewilder their brains and waste their time among endless mazes of ribbands and lace, and tattle and tales, and "pribbles and prabbles"' (36).

Burney doesn't condone gossip; nor does she write about off as negligibly silly. She certainly does not view it as a community-building device, even amongst her 'tittle tattle' characters. Instead, the Volubles produce all the noise of a swarm, with none of the community. Fresh material provides them something to buzz about, to make them momentarily more interesting to other members of the mass. Information—and non-information—passes among them without valuation or examination by any component individual. Individualism and contemplation are largely reserved for imaginative characters. For the unimaginative, any new piece of information or indeed, individual, is only valuable for the duration of its novelty. Evelina notes the changeless superficiality of the fashionable masses, noting with disapproval that 'time added nothing to their fondness, nor intimacy to their sincerity' (Burney, *Evelina* 33). The Volubles fall generally into this category of shallow, image-conscious, unimaginative characters: Miss Larolles from *Cecilia*, Jack and Mrs. Voluble from *The Witlings,* and *Evelina*'s

Branghtons are all short-sighted, fashion-happy, fairly stupid egotists. *Cecilia*'s Lady Honoria is a peculiar aberration; she is imaginative and intelligent woman who chooses to be a Voluble. She is described by Mrs. Delvile in the same tone as the other Volubles: 'that light sort of wit which attacks, with equal alacrity, which is serious or what is gay, is twenty times offensive, to once that it is exhilarating; since it shews that while its only aim is self-diversion, it has the most insolent negligence with respect to any pain it gives to others' (Burney, *Cecilia* 497). However, Mrs. Delvile is shown to be both proud and prejudiced, and her own sense of dignity should be considered alongside her dismissal of Honoria. Despite this and other of Burney's descriptions of Lady Honoria, as 'airy and unthinking' and 'void of judgment or discretion,' she does distinguish herself from the rest in small hints of knowing humor—evidence of the 'quick parts' with which Burney also credits her (Burney, *Cecilia* 354; 464; 464). While every other gossip seems to take the latest 'intelligence' regarding Cecilia and marriage as gospel truth, Honoria observes more wryly that, 'Every body one meets. . . disposes of Miss Beverly to some new person' (Burney, *Cecilia* 354). She also sees the Delviles very clearly for who they are, although regularly enjoying their company. She acknowledges how suited Cecilia and Mortimer are for each other, surprisingly supportive behind her comparisons to *Romeo and Juliet* and her shameless wonderment that Cecilia could 'give up [her] charming estate for the sake of coming into [Mr. Delvile's] fusty old family!' (933) Silly as Honoria may be, she is one of Burney's witless chatterers only by choice. This is not an ethical acquittal, however; she throws herself wholeheartedly into the role, comfortable in the knowledge that the mischief she creates, like any other Voluble's, is real.

These mischief-makers appear everywhere, but their role among Burney's characters is revealed by one of their most frequent haunts: the legitimate stage. The *World and Fashionable*

*Advertiser* for 5 April 1787 predicts the success of the play *The Way to Keep Him* based on 'the gossip report,' which makes the production 'more and more a favourite' ('Paragraphs of Fashion'). *Evelina* and *Cecilia* are intended for more private consumption than a play like *The Witlings*, but they are rich with public spaces and staged entertainments.[7] In those scenes, Burney similarly conflates gossip, critic, and stage audience. The novels are rife with chaotic crowds, and the Volubles make an entertainment of everything they see. At the opera, Evelina is disconcerted to discover that while she attempts to focus on the performance, the audience around her operates under another assumption: that people like her are the real source of entertainment, and that their critical responses should concern those facing the stage rather than those standing on it. As she and her party make their way to their seats, Evelina is discomfited 'at finding that my dress, so different from that of the company to which I belonged, attracted general notice and observation' (Burney, *Evelina* 90). During the opera itself, she is further observed by her companions the Branghtons, who choose to watch her instead of the play: 'I was the object of general diversion to the whole party; for the Miss Branghtons were tittering, and the two gentlemen making signs and faces at me, implying their contempt of my affectation' (94).

Cecilia's experiences at the opera reflect the same conflation of gossip and formal audience. The first person encountered at Haymarket by Cecilia and her party is Miss Larolles, target of Gosport's sobriquet of VOLUBLE. With this auspicious beginning, Cecilia finds herself amid 'a brilliant assembly of ladies and gentlemen, collected *merely to see and entertain one another*' (emphasis mine; Burney, *Cecilia* 131). Her friend Mrs. Harrel is no more encouraging, as Cecilia suspects her 'love of the opera [is] merely a love of company, fashion, and shew' (131). These first impressions are distressingly realized throughout the course of the opera. A

---

[7] *The Witlings*, intended for the public stage, features only domestic and mercantile settings, and no disguise barring the costumes that actors would wear for a production.

group of chattering young women sit near Cecilia for the first act, discussing such lofty matters as 'descriptions of trimmings, and complaints of hair-dressers, hints of conquest that teamed with vanity, and histories of engagements that were inflated with exhultation' (134). They seem filled with an 'insurmountable antipathy to listening' (ibid.). The distinction between listener and audience should be noted here; Burney frequently invokes the disconnect between a talkative spectator and a concern for attentiveness or truth.

These young women are replaced before the second act by a group of young men, who watch the dancing onstage with encouragingly quiet attention—a satirical trick on Burney's part. At the commencement of the second act, Cecilia's quiet young men 'turned. . . and entered into a whispering, but gay conversation. . . a buzzing which interrupted all pleasure from the representation' (135). They too turn out to be Volubles. Only during the third act does Cecilia finally manage to hear the performance she has come for, sitting near people 'who came to the opera not to hear themselves but the performers' (ibid.). Burney emphasizes the mass of the Voluble crowd, and its frightening ability to disrupt both real politeness and discourse of value: '[they] allowed no one in their vicinity to hear better than themselves. Cecilia tried in vain to confine her attention to the singers. . . and her fruitless attempts all ended in chagrin and impatience' (134). She shows, moreover, that the formal role of audience and the informal social role of gossip are inextricably linked, taking place simultaneously, among the same participants.

*Audience* is what they become in the social theatre of Burney's works. Imaginative performers, like the Volubles, are everywhere—and like Volubles, their relationship to the stage is emphasized by their attendance of formal theatre. One of Clement Willoughby's most daring and difficult pieces of social theatre takes place at the opera at Haymarket, as he tricks Evelina into his company and forces her into his carriage while maintaining the outward appearance of

solicitous politeness; Belfield and Sir Robert Floyer act out wounded honour under similar

circumstances, also at the opera. But location is insufficient; performance, by default, requires an

audience.

Gossip is an active and effective force, a mass of ready talkers, capable of both

propagating and suppressing information. By this token, it is an ideal force for use by Burney's

imaginative social performers. Gossips are the audience of Burney's imaginative performers, and

all of the social performers I will discuss—Clement Willoughby, Mr. Harrel, Mr. Belfield, Mr.

Monckton, and Censor—depend on the weight and power of gossip to support their acts. Not all

of them need the *protagonist* to believe them in order to be successful. They need, instead,

something that can force the protagonist's hand: they need the weight of public opinion. So they

play to the crowd, where the Voluble gossips are already, by name, the audience.

A fairly significant number of the Volubles are social performers themselves. They, like

the imaginative performers who make them into an audience, may see theatrical self-presentation

as a means to an end; but the Volubles see with superficial immediacy, rather than depth or

insight. At the Harrels' masquerade, the Volubles follow the precise rules of concealment and

display. They are, 'Spaniards, chimney-sweepers, Turks, watchmen, conjurers, and old women;

and the ladies, shepherdesses, orange girls, Circassians, gipseys, haymakers, and sultanas'—

engaging in an expected, and therefore accepted, vulgarity (107). It's show without plausibility;

they are terrible actors, but there is no real cost to performing poorly. Conversely, the

imaginative performers, in gambling terms, play a deep game. They choose their moves

carefully, if not always wisely, aiming for credibility where it counts—with the Volubles, or, in

Mr. Monckton's case, with Cecilia and the Delviles. Their goals are more complicated and

delicate than fleeting praise and attention. They negotiate between secrecy and openness with a

constant awareness of how their show affects what their audience will do, and how that, in turn, affects them. Those reactions are what make the Volubles useful, but are, in equal part, what makes careful performance so important.

What makes gossip a truly effective weapon is the sheer scale of its distribution and authority. A single wrongheaded chatterbox is a nuisance, not a menace—but there are *many* gossips. Just as only a few members of the opera house audience are identified, the implied audience of social performance, and the implied network of Volubles, is much, much more extensive than its named characters. Miss Larolles's certainty about the arrangements for Cecilia's marriage to Sir Robert Floyer stems from her awareness that 'all the town knows' they are engaged (329). Honoria remarks later that 'every body' had changed their mind to believe Cecilia engaged to Mortimer (466). Mr. Harrel's performances emphasize what is 'universally expected' in order to lend credence and threat to his demands (162). A mass of social pressure sits behind every rumor. Partly because of this, telling a piece of gossip to its object doesn't render it any less effective. The popularity of an opinion can give it greater power than a single individual's honesty. Cecilia, for example, has extraordinary trouble convincing either Mr. Delvile that she isn't engaged. In Book II Chapter VI, Cecilia finds that Mortimer's father has heard of her 'engagement' to either Belfield or Floyer, and she corrects him. He declares her 'shy' of telling him the truth—that she *is* engaged—and ignores her protests to the contrary (150). In Book IV Chapter IV, therefore, she is called to his house and once again informed that she is romantically involved with Floyer. Despite her best efforts to disabuse Mr. Delvile of this notion, she can't—he has the power of common knowledge on his side. Meanwhile, Mortimer also convinces himself by a combination of her kindness and others' gossip that Cecilia is engaged. She finds in Book III Chapter II that Mortimer 'concluded she was absolutely engaged

to Mr. Belfield,' and seeks to inform him otherwise (185). Again, her own universally recognized honesty is insufficient proof for overturning popular intelligence; Cecilia is still attempting to explain herself in Book IV Chapter IX (308). Once a piece of gossip has been latched onto by the public mind, it's almost completely impossible to shake loose—even from the minds of the self-aware.

The Volubles' behaviour as a formal audience elucidates the dangers they pose and the effectiveness they offer as gossiping observers of social theatre. The specific and consistent form of behaviour that qualifies as gossip in Burney's works is the unempathetic publicising of personal information—information which may or may not be true. It is not by default malicious in its content or its dissemination. It is more a product of unimaginative characters' uncomplicated desire for fun—a diversion made up of cheap, slightly titillating talk that constantly changes in its particulars, offering renewable conversational possibilities for these vigorously sociable and distractible creatures. But they *are* dangerous. The poison of the Volubles comes from two things: a complete void of conscience, and their mass power to reveal or stifle real information. The audience of Volubles possess extraordinarily selective understanding. Again, the 'total thoughtlessness of consistency' allows them to pick and choose information without regard for fact. In the choice between beauty and truth, or passing fad and minor scandal, the Volubles always pick the latter. It is for all of these reasons that the Volubles are a *perfect* audience for imaginative performers. Correcting a single gossip with the truth is completely ineffective. The lie is backed by public opinion, and the Voluble individual is never interested in changing their story to what is, almost certainly, a truth less interesting than the falsehood. When the truth is the most interesting possibility—as in the case of Belfield's poverty—it must be hidden at any length. But when a truth *spoils* an interesting piece of gossip,

it is simply and aggressively ignored out of existence. This power makes Volubles and their

tittle-tattle extremely useful to Burney's imaginative performers, but only as long as they are in

control; the fear of losing that control drives both Belfield and Monckton to deadly violence. As

for the protagonists who suffer at the hands of Burney's less scrupulous imaginative performers,

for them the Voluble audience is a ruthless, mirthful, and silencing majority—one that is

hauntingly ever-present.

Edith Gelles argues that tattle is a thing spoken *outside* the presence of its object (667).

However, the gossip of Burney's works is revealed to the reader because it is carried directly the

protagonist it concerns. Gossip allows imaginative performers to, quite literally, reach their goals

by word-of-mouth. When Burney's female protagonists are targeted, the weight of public

knowledge compromises them psychologically as well as undermining their credibility with

potential allies. Direct encounters with gossip drive the protagonists further into both danger and

plot. Cecilia Beverley, whose host attempts to corner her into a marriage with his friend Sir

Robert Floyer, realises the full extent of the danger of her situation when gossips insist, to her

face and despite her protests, that she *is* engaged to him. Miss Larolles announces quite casually

that Cecilia is not only engaged to Floyer, but that 'the jewels are bought, and the equipages are

built; it's quite a settled thing, I know very well' (329). Cecilia's denial is dismissed, although

she has by this time already openly rejected both Sir Robert Floyer and Mr. Belfield; some time

later still, a more ironical Honoria confirms that the rumours are alive and mutating, intelligence

now claiming that Cecilia will spurn Sir Robert (and Lord Derford) and marry Mr. Marriot (354).

In *The Witlings*, Cecilia Stanley receives the news of her financial ruin from the careless Jack.

Jack is a variation on the Voluble—he is male (as I have noted, Burney was unprejudiced

regarding the gender of gossip), he claims to dislike gossiping, and, instead of savouring the act

of talk, he is in a constant rush to be somewhere else. The different trappings achieve the same net result, however: Jack knows very little, cares very little, and accomplishes very little. His impatience adds to Miss Stanley's distress, and scrambles his information as effectively as another gossip's barefaced refusal to hear the truth. Horrifyingly, he and Mrs. Voluble, two incompetents, are the play's most successful newsbearers. Their relish and verbosity makes them dangerous even when they tell the truth. Censor's attempts at communication, more noble and intelligible, are almost entirely futile, cut off by the emotional outbursts of his objects, the star-crossed Miss Stanley and Beaufort.

Gossip does not even have to be borne by an unempathetic character to be harmful. Evelina is injured by gossip relayed by her friend Maria Mirvan. Miss Mirvan's virtue is never questioned in the book, least of all by Evelina, but the effects of her piece of gossip—that Evelina's new gentlemanly acquaintance Lord Orville was approached about Evelina's low character—are unquestionably negative. She writes in a state of obvious distress, 'I will never again be tempted to go to an assembly. . . I would not live here for the world' (Burney, *Evelina* 38). She is further distressed by Orville's perceived reaction to the tittle-tattle: 'Well, after this, you will not be surprised that Lord Orville contented himself with an enquiry after our healths this morning, by his servant, without troubling himself to call. . . I cannot but be hurt by the opinion he entertains of me' (38).[8] Much of the work of gossip occurs off of the page, but Burney also presents it as confrontational; deliberately propagated 'news' has value and power *because* it comes back to the performers and the objects of their attention.

Gossip is intimidating enough that it does not always need to reach the object—or even be deployed. It is the small-scale social equivalent of a nuclear bomb. The threat of rumour is

---

[8] It is worth observing that, although naïve and distressed, Evelina is also resigned. She immediately draws the conclusion that gossip has more power over Lord Orville's opinions than her own awkward but polite interactions with him.

sometimes all that's necessary to manipulate a person or a situation. After her brief brush with gossip, Evelina decides that it's of first concern to her to 'remain quiet and unnoticed' (174). Belfield's fear of public detection as a fake member of the *Bon Ton* nearly kills him; Mr. Harrel's succeeds in doing so. In *The Witlings,* Mrs. Voluble constantly reassures the people around her that she is *not* a gossip—to protect herself from it. 'Nothing's so improper as talking of private affairs,' she babbles anxiously to Censor, '—it's a thing I never do, for really—' (Burney, *Witlings* 45). Rather than worrying about the fate of her future niece-in-law or the heart of her nephew, Lady Smatter foremost considers how she will look as 'the Eyes of all the World will be upon me' (35). Fear of notoriety is enough to solve the central conflict of the play.

In the next chapters I will discuss a handful of Burney's social actors, their purposes, their theatrics, and in what ways they make use of—and depend upon—Volubles to make their acts. Mr. Monckton, Sir Clement Willoughby and Mr. Harrel all seek financial or sexual gratification; Belfield is on a pilgrimage for his vocation, which may or may not be fashionability; Censor deploys a social performer's trick of blackmail for the sake of two natural and virtuous friends. And, opposite them, is the third part of the equation: the natural, imaginative protagonists. Though they refuse to perform, they are nonetheless drawn into the intrigues of performance and gossip. As Evelina finds herself inescapably the object of general interest while she sits quietly at the opera, neither can Cecilia, Orville and Mortimer completely extricate themselves from the theatrical society in which they live—they cannot avoid notice, or the machinations of imaginative performers. Whether being hunted for marriage, convinced of a genteel identity, or hounded by ruinous publicity, the natural protagonists, like the actors, are driven over and over by the same thing: their gossiping audience.

A sociological axiom states that a collective belief that something is real renders it real in its consequences. A successful performance is one in which the actor both captures the interest of the audience and convinces them that he is playing truth, and not simply role. The reactions of the Voluble audience are the final judgment on a performance in Burney's works, and the final determinate of its effect. Burney's imaginative social performers recognize the power of public opinion and are canny enough to put their efforts into guiding it. The question is whether the audience—and the act—are ultimately beneficial to anyone, or if they are as dangerous to the performer as they are to the character who refuses to act.

## Chapter Two: The Authority of Language

> In order to know people's real sentiments, I trust much more to my eyes than to my ears: for they can say whatever they have a mind I should hear; but they can seldom help looking what they have no intention that I should know. (Chesterfield 105)
>
> –Lord Chesterfield to his son, 1748

Burney's sharp, witty dialogue was what inspired several of her Streatham friends to encourage her to write for the stage. In a letter to her sister in 1779, Burney records a conversation between Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Joshua Reynolds. Reynolds declares, '*Any thing in the Dialogue way, I think, [Miss Burney] must succeed in*'; Sheridan agrees, saying Burney should turn her skill to stage comedy (Burney, *Early Journals* 234). Two of the most relentlessly performative of Burney's early imaginative characters, Sir Clement Willoughby of *Evelina* and Mr. Harrel of *Cecilia*, exemplify Burney's precise attention to spoken language, and her keen understanding of dialogue as performance. Audience and language are their primary weapons. With these they each enact the same basic form of social theatre: an aggressively manipulative oratory that shifts the audience's focus from the performer's actions to a verbally constructed 'reality'.[9]

Both Harrel and Willoughby connect imaginative social performance with villainous masculinity. Willoughby is a classic rake, a sexually motivated villain infamous enough to require little explanation. His motivation in the novel conforms with his archetype: he is exclusively interested in Evelina as a sexual object. Marriage is never suggested, even as a joking possibility, or offered up as a rumour to placate the audience. Willoughby walks the

---

[9] Harrel's primary form of performance in his role as a gamester is explored in Chapter Four.

(very) thin line between demonstrative suitor and undeniable predator, as close to the side as predator as possible. Evelina's situation—unmarried, and unclaimed by her father—gives her no clout and makes her a perfect target. Her inexperience and beauty make her a more appealing one. When John Belmont acknowledges Evelina as his daughter, and Orville marries her, she becomes both less interesting and more dangerous prey. At that point, Willoughby simply drops out of the story, with no indication of heartache or recrimination. His purely sexual goal throws into sharper relief the sentimental and heavily affected language he uses as a weapon.

Harrel's performances arise from a different interest; he is a gamester, a problematic gambler less familiar to the twenty-first century reader than his seductive counterpart, but equally as dangerous. Monckton (though a hypocritical arbiter of morality), derides the gamester in Burney's place: '. . . his disposition varies with every throw of the dice, and he is airy, gay and good humoured, or sour, morose, and savage, neither from nature nor from principle, but merely from the caprice of chance' (Burney, *Cecilia* 369). The character that Monckton sketches is increasingly apt in describing Harrel's erratic behaviour. Outside the novel, gamesters had been causing anxiety for English society throughout the century. An earlier generation bemoaned as 'Gentlemen, that. . . might grow to be considerable in the World, useful to their Country, and a Comfort and an Honour to their Families,' becoming gamesters, thereby suffering debt and creditors, resorting to moneylenders, and risking violence ('An Account' 4). Henry Fielding (unsurprisingly) considered gaming-houses 'Temples of Iniquity' (Fielding, *Increase in Robbers* 26).

Harrel's lusts are for gambling rather than for women, but he, like Willoughby, poses a sexual threat to the heroine. To salvage his increasingly desperate finances, Harrel offers Cecilia up as a sexual and marital prize to his affluent friends, especially the rapacious (but

unimaginative) Sir Robert Floyer. After striking a deal with Floyer, Harrel spreads word of Cecilia's supposed engagement. Cecilia flounders amidst rumours she cannot dispel, and Floyer gains popularly acknowledged entitlement to her person. With the gossip report behind him, Harrel forces his agenda without occasioning comment from the public, herding Floyer as much as Cecilia towards marriage, and, 'notwithstanding the remonstrances of Cecilia, [contriving] every possible opportunity of *giving him access to her'* (emphasis mine; 347). He distances himself from the affair even as he creates it, figures himself in the role of indulgent spectator to Cecilia's flirting ward. Harrel is one of Cecilia's guardians, but while he pretends to guard, his performance silences Cecilia, arms her enemy, and puts her in the way of harm, so that Harrel can save himself.

Harrel's and Willoughby's performances disarm and diminish Burney's heroines, the objects of their theatre, but their language is defensive as well as offensive. It advertises them as sociable, congenial, and sincere. It disguises their motivations and cloaks their objectionable behaviours, and cements their reputations in the public eye. Offensive and defensive may be achieved simultaneously; the same dialogue that disarms their victims transforms the speakers into sympathetic figures, gentlemen and martyrs. They construct through spoken language a palatable 'truth' for consumption by Volubles and the wider public—without pausing in their assaultive and mercenary actions.

The differences in motivation necessitate somewhat different specifics in performance. Willoughby poses a more immediate physical danger to the heroine; his performances occur in Evelina's presence, in the moments he threatens her. Harrel, working more obliquely, performs best to his audience, without Cecilia being present; he reinforces the public act with a more private act aimed at Cecilia and her mislead suitors. Their rhetorical technique and their results,

however, bear close similarities: obstructive language, a rejection of truth, a hypocritical use of gentlemanly speech, and suggestions of playfulness and indulgence that belies the performer's dangerousness, and incapacitates a heroine attempting to communicate her distress. These techniques not only muffle but rewrite the reality of a situation.

Both Harrel and Clement Willoughby affect helpfulness as well as gentility. Neither is truly polite, but their performances disguise them as, at worst, a little wicked. Their language masks their strictly immoral actions; they verbally validate their own decency, to fortify themselves against public disapproval, and as a mechanism for casting doubt on a heroine if she calls his honour into question. But the politeness of their language is not absolute. Though it successfully counteracts the effects of their transgressive behaviour on their reputations, the language of a social performer who is also an unempathetic villain carries a violence of its own. The performers deny—and worse, laugh off—the truth, claim virtue for themselves while forcing vice on others, and define, quite literally, what their objects can and cannot do.

The successful dismissal of truth allows Harrel and Willoughby to create the reality they want in its place. By consistently treating statements of fact as ridiculous, they bring a vital moment of credibility to any contrary assertion they make. They diminish the characters of those around them while promoting themselves. Willoughby uses this tactic casually, as when he secures a coach simply by repeatedly informing the driver that he has reserved it (Burney, *Evelina* 206). When Evelina rejects Willoughby's advances at Vauxhall, he responds repeatedly that she has misled him: 'You have flung me into amazement unspeakable', he claims, implying that *Evelina* is dissembling, and that his own intentions are pure (199). Evelina attempts to fight back against this verbal charge, retorting astutely that 'your doubts, your perplexities,—are of your own creating' (200). Willoughby, however, maintains his pretence. When they return to

Evelina's party, Branghton unintentionally supports him by claiming that young women alone at Vauxhall, 'must all of you have had a mind to be affronted!'(201) Public conceptions of Vauxhall and its dangers give Willoughby false justification for his rejection of truth. He is also clever enough to reverse the tactic: he insists on 'believing' one of Evelina's very rare lies. When Evelina feigns having a partner at a dance to avoid Willoughby, he unkindly pretends to take her at her word, harassing her about the absent gentleman. He demands to know if she can 'really bear ill usage with such sweetness?' and declares the fictional partner 'O, a very savage!—a sneaking, shame-faced, despicable puppy!' while slyly making it clear that he's aware of her deception (43; 46). He hounds her until she gives in and dances with him, but even then continues his cruel display of innocence. 'My shame and confusion were unspeakable,' Evelina relates; Willoughby hammers on past this point, until she collapses (49). 'Overpowered by all that had passed, I had not the strength to make my mortifying explanation;—my spirits quite failed me, and I burst into tears' (ibid.). Willoughby habitually rejects truth until it loses its strength; in the one instance where Evelina does *not* tell the truth, Willoughby harps on it until Evelina is shamed and overpowered. Harrel uses the act of joviality to a similar end, laughing off Cecilia's protests regarding Sir Robert Floyer.[10] In response to one of Cecilia's many rejections of Floyer, 'Mr. Harrel, with his usual levity and carelessness, laughed. . . but denied any belief in her displeasure, and affected to think she was merely playing the coquet' (Burney, *Cecilia* 312). He cuts off a similar protest by laughingly declaring that he 'will have nothing to do with the quarrels of lovers' (234). Cecilia's deep-rooted and serious distress is instantly reduced to a joke, a passing humour.

---

[10] He uses the same technique to stave off the reality of his financial and personal collapse, as I will discuss in Chapter Four.

The heroines struggle to assert themselves against more assertive bullies; those bullies counteract them perfectly. Cecilia's seriousness is already a poor fit with the lighthearted fashionable crowd; Harrel's feigned jollity makes him comfortable for a society centred around superficial entertainment, and it patronizes Cecilia's earnest anger as effectively as a pat on the head. Harrel and Willoughby's narrations present humour to the audience and destruction to their objects. Every truth that the women produce is contradicted; they are told they do not know what they want, what they see, how they feel, whom they love, or have any qualifications in judging the characters of other people. This is particularly dangerous because, as Chapter Five will discuss, natural characters such as Burney's heroines are constitutionally unequipped to fight back against performative violence. The truth is their safeguard, and social performers who can reject and replace reality with a well-placed lie render them nearly helpless.

Having belittled and belied their objects' truths, Clement Willoughby and Mr. Harrel shape reality with another act of speech, verbally redefining the boundaries of reality. Willloughby and Harrel fill their aggressive banter with the words 'can' and 'cannot'—setting the limits of possibility, but also suggesting moral and social censure of an individual who does not comply. Harrel does this to a lesser extent, evoking both public opinion and affective language in telling Cecilia that Sir Robert Floyer 'was universally admired by the ladies, that *she could not possibly* receive a more honourable offer' (emphasis mine; 161). But Evelina's episode with Willoughby at Haymarket, and the carriage ride that follows, exemplify this oppressive technique. Evelina, discouraged by the vulgarity of her companions (the Branghtons and Madame Duval), spots Willoughby at the opera and hopes to use him to join up with the Mirvans' more appealing party. Instead she is stranded with Willoughby, having lost both other groups; despite a brief encounter with Orville, Evelina is wrangled into accepting a ride from

Willoughby—one which demonstrates, frighteningly, his true character. He (pretending that he hasn't) directs the coachman not to drive to the Mirvans' house, and spends the duration of the ride physically and verbally encroaching on Evelina's space. Physical proximity is the goal; language is his weapon.

During their brief meeting inside the opera house, Willoughby uses the word 'can' once and 'cannot' four times. He negates Evelina's concerns about accepting a ride from him, cutting her off and dictating that she 'can have no objection' and that he is 'sure [she] cannot doubt being as safe' (96; 97). He then outmaneuvers both Evelina and Lord Orville by describing his own limitations and moral obligations—he 'cannot send a servant' to find Evelina's companions in the pit, but likewise declares, 'Impossible! . . . I cannot think of trusting you with strange chairmen,—I cannot answer it to Mrs. Mirvan' (97). He corrals Evelina into accepting his offer, and drives Orville away from interceding. Inside the carriage, Willoughby's use of the word continues; there are nine occurrences, of various permutations, throughout the carriage ride. When he is alone with Evelina, their use is altered: every occurrence is part of a question. Willoughby turns from officiousness to—in this dark, enclosed, and unfamiliar space— interrogation. He casts aspersions on her character with several iterations: '. . . is it possible you can be so cruel?' (99) 'Can you think me so much my own enemy?' (ibid.) The complementary opposite to these accusations is a barrage of self-affirmation that completely contradicts his true character. 'Surely you can have no doubts of my honour?' he demands, and 'What can you fear? . . . can you, then, doubt my protection?' (100; ibid.) Finally he strikes on both sides: 'I cannot bear to part with you till you generously forgive me for the offence *you have taken*' (emphasis mine; 100). This remark reinforces Willoughby's sentimental persona. Simultaneously, it both lauds Evelina's goodness and reproaches her for willfully injuring Willoughby—in other words,

for *not* being good. It is a manipulative, complex piece of performance, played flawlessly to a legitimately sentimental object—a victim who will forgive him, and repeatedly does. Long past the point where he has proved his villainy, Evelina informs her guardian, 'At dinner, I must own, we all missed him; for though the flightiness of his behaviour to me, when we are by ourselves, is very distressing, yet, in large companies, and general conversation, he is extremely entertaining and agreeable' (159). She is *still* too innocent to recognize his performance or condemn him for his acts.

These prescriptions are held fast by a third kind of verbal performance: a quick musical chairs of moral identity. The performers rewrite themselves as martyrs and saints, while accusing the heroines of malicious and illiberal behaviour. Harrel uses this rhetorical trick increasingly as he grows more desperate over his debts. Early on, a trip to the opera results in a duel between Mr. Belfield and Sir Robert Floyer; Harrel remarks laughingly that Cecilia's 'calculated' behaviour naturally fed rumours about her relationships with the duelists (Burney, *Cecilia* 233). Later, as Harrel's creditors begin closing in, he asserts that if Cecilia refuses to be seen in public with the Harrels, *she*—not the spendthrift or the gamester—will be responsible for their ruin (273). As his options fail, he makes a last effort to force Cecilia into marriage, by denigrating her character. Cries Harrel, 'it is high time now to give up this reserve, and trifle no longer with a gentleman so unexceptionable as Sir Robert Floyer. The whole town has long acknowledged him as your husband. . . a little frankness. . . in accepting him will. . . do credit to the generosity of your character' (367). At this moment, Floyer is dressed in the guise of the paragon, Harrel becomes the victim, and sensible Cecilia transformed into the heartless coquette; it does not matter that *Harrel* is the one Cecilia knows to possess 'incongruities so irrational, that hitherto she had supposed them impossible' (85). She is unable to summon more than chilly good

manners in retort, because she '[was] almost petrified by the excess of her surprise, at an attack so violent, so bold, and apparently so sanguine, [and] was for some time scarce able to speak or to defend herself' (367). Harrel's adamant accusations, spoken as though completely sincere, are both offensive and baffling; he simply disables any honest act, and so Cecilia cannot crack his façade.

As with most of these behaviours, Harrel essentially reiterates the patterns Burney establishes in *Evelina*; it's Willoughby who is the expert in this maneuver. In their exchanges, it is perfectly clear to the reader, to Evelina, and to Willoughby exactly who is being victimized. Willoughby, however, easily exerts his rhetorical weight and shifts every role one person over. Evelina becomes a cruel tormentor, Orville becomes a cold-hearted rake, and Willoughby himself, of all people, is suddenly a holy victim: 'I almost,' he says, 'suffer martyrdom for the pleasure of seeing you' (342). At the assembly, where Evelina awaits her invented dance partner, Willoughby advises her shamelessly against dancing with any strange gentleman, 'whose name you are unacquainted with,—who may be a mere adventurer' (47). The unscrupulous man he describes is himself, of course, but he baldly recasts himself in the role of tutor, and, by the end of the encounter, *Orville* is cast as the puppy and the adventurer. Willoughby's act can withstand even more ludicrous circumstances; in the very midst of attacking Madame Duval and Evelina in their carriage, Willoughby swoops down on Evelina to tell her how *she* hurts *him*, 'how much I suffer from your absence,—how much I dread your displeasure,— and how cruelly I am affected by your coldness!' (147) In a single sentence, he reduces himself to the role of the victim, and transforms the trapped Evelina into a magisterial monster. At Bristol Hotwells he delivers what is perhaps his masterpiece of verbal warfare:

Good Heaven! What an anxious search I have had. . . Oh, Miss Anville, did you

know what I have endured! The sleepless, restless state of suspence I have been

tortured with, you could not, all cruel as you are, you could not have received me

with such frigid indifference!. . .Cruel, cruel girl! you *know* that I adore you!—

you *know*  you are the mistress of my soul, and arbitress of my fate! (329)

With one blow he declares Evelina's cruelty and his own suffering, his moral fibre and her

carelessness. He defines her knowledge, and the limitations of her actions. He lies aggressively

and with the hope that Evelina will give way to him, whether through shame, guilt, confusion,

collective pressure, or exhaustion.

These performances of politeness and innocence render truth invisible and their objects

mute. Although sometimes outwardly playful, the acts terrify their objects through their dramatic

intensity, their crushing dishonesty, and their ruthless persistence. What they mask, however, is

more terrifying—because verbal declarations of 'play' obscure very real violence and danger. In

the highwaymen episode of *Evelina*, as Clement Willoughby and Captain Mirvan play at robbers

holding up the carriage of an unwitting Madame Duval, Willoughby reassures Evelina that

Madame Duval is coming to no harm by Captain Mirvan. He tells her, more precisely, that Duval

'is perfectly safe' (147). The exact lie in this is revealed almost immediately. Captain Mirvan

also declares that 'the old buck is safe,' but his meaning of 'safe' is contrary to Willoughby's

implication: Mirvan has, grotesquely, tied the elderly woman's feet and left her in a ditch, where

she is reduced to 'sobbing, nay, almost roaring, and in the utmost agony of rage and terror'

(149). What Mirvan calls a 'frolic' is not play at all, but torture. The verbal assurance of the

word 'safe' translates to a reality of restriction and fear authored by an unempathetic bully.

This opposition of language and action defines Harrel and Willoughby. They are actors, lively and aggressively public and emotive, but the physical and personal threat behind their act is not an act at all. Harrel's playfulness is nothing *but* a play, a mediator between socially acceptable behaviour and his true desires. He is a danger to Cecilia, but also, as I will show, to himself; his act of casual good cheer becomes only more manically asserted as he approaches ruin and suicide. His verbal play is all the more frightening for the intensity of its falsehood, and for the way in which it can consume not only its object, but its user: 'feasting, reveling, amusements of all sorts were pursued with more eagerness than ever, and the alarm which so lately threatened their destruction, seemed now merely to heighten the avidity with which they were sought' (Burney, *Cecilia* 346). Harrel's violence does not shift from verbal to physical, however, until his death at Vauxhall; his goals are not in themselves violent, though they are violating and transgressive. Clement Willoughby's verbal performance is a means to an end, however, and that end is *inherently* physical and violent. Joviality and sentiment are Willoughby's easily assumed masks, false indicators of his feeling. Sympathetic emotion is mutable and discardable, useful only as a tool that reshapes the world into a narrative that better serves him. There are, as I have said, no rape scenes in *Evelina*, but Willoughby *is* a rapist. He has the inclination, and, in a tempered form, the actions. His physical aggression in the carriage is overwhelming. He pelts her with accusatory, pleading language and takes her hands over and over; eventually, his behaviour leads Evelina to believe she will be murdered. 'Never,' she says, 'in my life have I been so terrified' (100). His assumptions of her sexual availability at Vauxhall (discussed below) reduce her, with a presumption mirrored perhaps more innocently by Orville, to the status of a prostitute. Even as he claims to his companions that she is no such thing, he leads her into the dark alleys with obviously sexual intentions. Both Willoughby and Harrel use

soothing language to lure and mislead their audiences, while their actions continue to flout morality and kindness.

Willoughby's act alters based on his own keen perception of social contexts, both in terms of space and of company. Evelina complains that he believes 'the alteration in [her] companions authorizes an alteration in his manners' (203). He himself alludes to the importance of social context during the highwayman scene, while Captain Mirvan is busy tormenting Madame Duval and Evelina is trapped in the carriage: 'I could not refuse myself the so-long-wished-for happiness, of speaking to you once more, without so many of—your *friends* to watch me' (148). His physical threats heighten in intensity when Evelina is outside a 'safe' space—either alone, or in a public area where the mutual desire for and acceptance of physical intimacy might be assumed. Evelina's encounters with Willoughby in the carriage after he has escorted her from the opera, and his 'rescue' of her in Vauxhall, are the obvious and alarming examples. Before Evelina and Willoughby enter the carriage, he moves to touch her hand three times: once to hand her out of the box, once (a failed attempt) to lead her from the opera house, and once to hand her into the carriage. Once in, however, he takes her hand—with no functional excuse such as handing her anywhere—and openly demonstrates his control: 'I would fain have withdrawn my hand, and made almost continual attempts, but in vain, for he actually grasped it between both his, without any regard to my resistance' (98). He takes verbal advantage of the change of venue, too. Addresses that were made in the opera house—'my dear Madam'—become more aggressively familiar: 'my dearest life,' 'my sweet reproacher,' and 'my dearest angel' (97; 99; 100). He recognizes the limitations of his language, and hones his actions accordingly.

He also believes, from all evidence sincerely, that some situations legitimize questionable behaviour. In Vauxhall, Willoughby is the chivalrous saviour long enough to lead Evelina away

from the men tormenting her (although even at this point his valour is cast into doubt by his apparent membership in the group of merry prowlers). Once away, however, he ceases to be the protector and becomes the assaulter: 'He caught my hand, and eagerly pressing it, in a passionate voice, said, "O that I had sooner met with thee!". . . he had led me, though I know not how, into another of the dark alleys' (198). When Evelina demands to know where they are going, Willoughby says, as though it is obvious, that he is bringing them where they 'shall be least observed' (198). The sexual implication is clear even to Evelina. It is made clearer still when she objects, and Willoughby indignantly wonders what he was *supposed* to think, when she would 'suffer me to make my own interpretation?—' (199) Vauxhall in this period was open to people of all ranks, and Warwick Wroth, in his classic history of London pleasure gardens, reports that in the years of Burney's youth and *Evelina*'s writing, 'a good deal of rowdyism appears to have disturbed the harmony of Vauxhall, though it. . . had not always been distinguished for urbanity' (305). Miles Ogborn notes that Vauxhall 'had something of a reputation as a place for sexual misadventure' (119). When Evelina appears there alone, Willoughby expects her to live up to its reputation. He making it clear that by her presence, she, too, is acting a part; he is only following her lead. Orville's failure to recognize Evelina in a pleasure garden and in the company of prostitutes exemplifies the way in which imaginative performers like Willoughby may manipulate the perspectives of people around them through appearances and expectations, even when no individual performer is leading them.

Willoughby's most complex and complete performances occur under the public eye: at the opera, at Evelina's first assembly, and in apparently private settings where a slip-up might mean damage to his public standing. In public Willoughby uses a layered and aggressive form of discourse, building a sort of verbal enchantment to obstruct others while he nudges the line

between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. His torment of Evelina and his carefully developed gentleman's role are simultaneous and equivalent. Willoughby fine-tunes his performances based on a keen awareness of the space he occupies. The character is only dropped at all when Evelina and Willoughby are out of sight of anyone else.

Harrel works in public, but largely off the page. The reader knows his manipulations are successful because they appear in the gossip report: the Delviles, Miss Larolles, and Lady Honoria remark on the 'fact' of Cecilia's engagement, the rumour he has most assiduously spread. Only Harrel's posthumous confession lays out the full extent of his schemes. His behaviour in view of the reader is the continuation of his public performance. To Cecilia, he repeats his own rumour as though he is not the performer at its root. Distancing himself from his machinations, he invokes the Volubles as one of their number. He becomes only one of the intimidating mass that makes Cecilia's marriage to Floyer 'universally expected' (Burney, *Cecilia* 162). Not long before his suicide, he tries to bully Cecilia into wedlock through the force of Voluble knowledge. He repeats his own lies as outside information, and equates—as everyone seems to—the proliferation of information with its quality. This authority is treated as almost extraordinary: if rumour doesn't match reality, reality is obligated to match rumour. Harrel does little to change Cecilia's opinion of Floyer. Rather, Harrel consistently treats Cecilia and Floyer as already attached, with the apparent assumption that an enduring insistence will force Cecilia's compliance. Until it does, he treats her protests as girlish coquetry. 'When young ladies will not know their own minds,' he tells her, 'it is necessary some friend should tell it them' (233). This isn't persuasion; it is coercion. Harrel depends on persistence and popular opinion to win his battle. He constantly maintains his pretences, even in private conversation with a woman who

rejects everything he says. The tactic presumes that an unbroken masquerade will be unconquerable, and that Cecilia will ultimately be cornered into compliance.

What allows this behaviour to go on is partly that the books' other residents are of the same mind. They don't particularly *care* if the heroines are distressed or the gentlemen imperfect; they aren't, by and large, beacons of shining virtue themselves. They, too, live in this world of shallow entertainments and self-obsession. The characters who pride themselves as principled, honourable, virtuous—Mr. Delvile, Cecilia's morbidly stingy guardian Mr. Briggs, Evelina's dread relative Madame Duval—are as caught up in petty vice and as blind to danger as anyone else. Madame Duval, in exception to other such characters, faces danger herself, in the form of Captain Mirvan's 'frolics.' She is physically accosted and emotionally wounded; yet even Madame Duval's personal terrors don't translate to empathy. When Evelina reappears after her fright at Marylebone, Duval berates her for being a worry and not thinking about anyone else's feelings (201). She is unconscious of and disinterested in any pain or fright caused by Evelina's foray onto the dark paths alone with a man not even of their party.

The unimaginative and willful blindness of characters sustains Harrel and Willoughby's performances. The men play to their objects and to the crowd in a way Captain Mirvan does not. His performance of the 'highwayman' is a one-off, not intended to trick anyone but Madame Duval, and even that secret is carelessly kept. His other torments, though frequent, are openly enacted and acknowledged. Obfuscation is the modus operandi for Harrel and Willoughby, however, and it is the attitudes of both Volubles and natural characters that maintains them. Willoughby's performance at the opera house stymies Orville in his attempts to extricate Evelina from his care. Harrel's gossip spreads from the Volubles to the Delviles, and largely fuels the miscommunications that keep Mortimer and Cecilia away from one another. Mortimer is

unfortunately susceptible to gossip, spending, as mentioned in Chapter One, the duration of twelve continuous chapters believing the common report over Cecilia's own word—not counting his several relapses.

These characters are believed by their unimaginative audience—and sometimes their imaginative one. They successfully harry and wear down their objects. But does social performance allow these villains to achieve their goals? The answer is, simply, no. Clement Willoughby never seduces Evelina, and she ultimately reflects, 'Good Heaven, what a man is this Sir Clement! so designing, though so easy; so deliberately artful, though so flighty! Greatly, however, is he mistaken, all confident as he seems, for the girl, obscure, poor, dependent as she is, far from wishing the honour of his alliance, would not only *now*, but *always* have rejected it' (347). Harrel fails utterly to marry off Cecilia *or* salvage his finances. Of course, the plot Burney writes in each of these early works dictates that the heroine will emerge, battered but more or less intact, from her gauntlet of persecution and miscommunication, to marry the naturally polite gentleman on the other side. Perhaps moral fortitude saves her from rakes and gamesters— except that until she is married or the tormenter is killed, his persecution persists. But despite the failure that both Willoughby and Harrel suffer in the end, Burney does not argue outright that social performance is—morality notwithstanding—a practically nonviable behaviour. Until one of those two ultimate fates occurs, Harrel and Willoughby's performances *do* succeed. The world's view does shift to their realities. The performers' objects—Evelina and Cecilia—are emotionally and mentally tortured, physically intimidated and violated, rendered helpless and labeled untrustworthy for hundreds of pages. And throughout these performances, no one ever steps forward to wrest the heroine from danger. Marriage and death are the only things that can bring their vicious performances to a close. Until they do, Willoughby and Harrel successfully

act into existence a world where the villain is a martyr, the heroine a rake, and the hero believes her capable of rakishness. Willoughby and Harrel rebuild the world from every direction they can. They define the boundaries of the moral and the possible, proclaim the characters of people who aren't equipped to successfully protest against them, and reject truth outright, with no appeals to or interest in the logical or sympathetic. Their act is performed as play, and read as lighthearted by the Voluble audience which supports it, even as it misleads the hero and disorients the heroine. It masks the shortcomings of the actors' manners and morals, and masks, moreover, the gravity of those shortcomings. It hides the inherent violence of both Harrel's and Willoughby's characters, and the unapologetic manifestations of that violence that occur throughout the books. It allows them to carry on, for a long time, in terrorizing and manipulating the legitimately good. Although neither actor achieves his ultimate goal, their methods are effective in all their smaller particulars. In that regard, Burney shows that a social performance *can* reinvent reality, for all intents and purposes—and that neither intents nor purposes need be for good in order to (at least temporarily) succeed.

Yet while this clearly demonstrates the dangers that a well-executed social performance can bring down on the head of a natural character, it also demonstrates something else: successful performance doesn't guarantee safety. Though Willoughby vanishes without a trace, Harrel dies—and, as I shall discuss, performance proves to be very fickle and nearly fatal for more than one of Burney's imaginative performers.

## Chapter Three: 'Private' Ambition

Clement Willoughby and Mr. Harrel, in their performances and their lifestyles, are emphatically public. Their primary stage is the sociable 'World': the theatre, the masquerade, the assembly, the opera, the pleasure garden. Performances begin in front of a large audience; their clout stems from the credulity and mass social capital of Volubles and other onlookers. When these performers are alone with the heroines who are the objects of their acts, they bring that power to bear, reinforcing public performance and the common knowledge *they* have sparked by refusing candour even in an intimate situation. They do not require the trust of their objects; only repetition and compliance from the Voluble crowd. They orate rather than converse in every context, putting on unabashedly public theatre regardless of their location or their audience.

This chapter revolves around a different genre of social theatre: the play of privacy. The Witlings and Monckton bring social theatre into the ostensibly private realm, performing primarily in the context of exclusive or intimate exchange. The proclamation of both their sincerity and their love of privacy is central to these characters' acts. The unimaginative Witlings, from Burney's play of that name, declare themselves an elite (and therefore exclusive) intellectual society, concerned with study and contemplation. The members, however, are both shallow and foolish, and their occupational privacy masks a preoccupation with fame and reputation. Cecilia's neighbor Mr. Monckton, imaginative and performative, is more successful in his self-presentation as a private man; he denies all connection to the 'World', and disguises himself in discretion, trustworthiness, and discipline. He is, in fact, engaged in a perpetual act of social theatrics.

The Witlings and Monckton are both necessarily endowed with their own ideas of what distinguishes public and private. That there *is* a distinction lies at the heart of their performances. The precise nature of that distinction, however, is not at all a foregone conclusion. 'Binary opposition,' Lawrence Klein remarks, 'does not adequately explain the complexities of discourse, let alone those of human experience in practice' (98). Klein has reason to be cautious; reading public/domestic spheres as oppositional, for example, neglects both the female role in city life and the public life that took place in 'private' homes. Mrs. Cornelys's London house famously hosted masquerades and social gatherings, her private home in direct competition with places like Vauxhall Gardens, requiring, not at all intimately, tickets for entrance (Ogborn 123). Gillian Russell argues that Cornelys's administration of these tickets demonstrates the female hold over 'domiciliary sociability,' but they also emphasize the fact that the domicile *was* sociable—sometimes so far from private as to be a business enterprise for social capital (*Women, Sociability and Theatre* 21). Her enterprise is mirrored in *Cecilia* by the (somewhat less elaborate) masquerade and ball (Book V Chapter I) held by the Harrels—the latter and 'unjustifiable extravagance' blatantly designed to discourage public doubt surrounding a financially failing family (Burney, *Cecilia* 321).

Private theatricals—amateur productions in private homes—also rose in popularity through the eighteenth century. An 1787 periodical anticipates 'when private theatricals come again before the public', highlighting the way in which public and private could be, not jut connected, but conflated ('Paragraphs of Fashion'). Gillian Russell calculates that by the eighteenth century, the amateur performance of plays in English homes was a tradition already several centuries old ('Private Theatricals' 192). These events could range from a group of

family friends to something far more splendid and political, featuring nobles, MPs, and professional actors among their guests and performers (192).

But publicity encroaches even where it is not invited; the private aspects of an at all public life were difficult to protect. Burney's own circle of friends bear witness to this; already a public figure, Samuel Johnson was made more so by his obsessive tagalong and biographer, James Boswell. Boswell's published *Life* and journals publicly illuminated previously personal episodes of Johnson's actual life. This is epitomized in a 1798 compilation called *Johnson's Table-Talk,* which contains, the subtitle claims, a selection of Johnson's 'aphorisms on literature, life, and manners' as well as anecdotes. Boswell distills familiar, personal conversation—one can imagine the title's source in the family breakfast table at Hester Thrale's Streatham home—into palatable public morsels. Boswell and his publishers must have been aware of the very nearly vulgar display of a dead man's private words; 'It may be proper to add,' they assure the reader, 'that this selection was undertaken in the life-time of Mr. BOSWELL, and with his cordial approbation: had that gentleman lived, it might probably have been rendered more acceptable to the reader' ('Advertisement'). But the true degree of trespass is impossible to know; as Patricia Meyer Spacks writes, 'For Samuel Johnson, in the mid-eighteenth century, and for his biographer, James Boswell, writing at the century's end, conversation constituted a mode of public display' (*Privacy* 115). Burney's memoir of her father, her final publication, was likewise uncomfortably revealing; her perhaps age-softened sentiments towards her beloved father would be revealed after her death with the nineteenth-century publication of her journals. Even Burney's scrupulous self-editing did not hide certain discrepancies of feeling. The letter that quietly condemns him for the suppression of *The Witlings* ('You *have* finished it, now,--in *every* sense of the Word') is replaced by her aggressively positive portrait of him in her

*Memoirs*—ostensibly Charles Burney's autobiography, but as Margaret Anne Doody notes, 'she censored him. . . [and] her censorship was all in the good cause of re-creating Dr. Burney as he would really like to be' (Burney, *Early Journals* 347; *Life in the Works* 377). Burney herself, of course, found her rigorous attempts at anonymity thwarted; she too became a public object. Information and space were always at risk of shifting from private into public; between these two not quite separate spheres, individuals and their intentions also wavered.

So a distinction between 'public' and 'private' is difficult almost certain to be partially inaccurate. Klein asserts that no definition of the terms is complete, but he notes that, 'What people in the eighteenth century most often meant by "public" was sociable as opposed to solitary (which was "private"). . . The "public" and the "private" were, thus, aligned with the difference between openness and secrecy, between transparency and opaqueness' ('Public/Private Distinction' 104). The reductive distinction I will draw between public and private is that: 'private' describes any discourse or encounter that carries an expectation of confidentiality, mutually observed by the participants and extending no further than their intimate friends. 'Public' describes any interaction that is observable by non-participants (whether intentionally or not), or is conducted in a private space but treated as non-confidential.

Burney's private actors are social performers who insist on their own candour and detachment from publicity. Patricia Meyer Spacks distinguishes *the private* and *privacy*, saying that the latter 'typically concerns the personal rather than the domestic'—domesticity being her chosen criteria for the private sphere (*Privacy* 1). These character masquerade as non-performative and privately inclined, working from both domestic spaces and personal conversations. A less effective brand of this performance is exemplified in the Witlings: Sapient

the hypocritical advisor, Dabler the 'poet', and of course Lady Smatter, the scholar incarnate, who always has one eye on her audience. The more effective private performer is Mr. Monckton.

Monckton, like Willoughby and Harrel, is imaginative. He is introduced in the first chapter as 'a man of parts, information and sagacity; to great native strength of mind he added a penetrating knowledge of the world, and to faculties the most skilful of investigating the character of every other, a dissimulation the most profound in concealing his own' (Burney, *Cecilia* 7). Monckton's aims are more material than the Witlings'; his goal is to win Cecilia's affections, her hand in marriage, and her fortune. The greatest hitch in Monckton's plan is that he has already married an older woman he does not care for in order to access her fortune. Monckton's private thoughts of her are brutal: newly married, 'eagerly he had watched for her dissolution,' and at the start of the novel, 'his wish for her final decay became daily more fervent' (7; 9).

Monckton is of a fashionable, sociable disposition. His time, 'was either devoted to the expensive amusements of the metropolis, or spent in the country among the gayest of its diversions' (8). Burney must emphasize this early on, because Monckton never displays a love for amusement of any kind during the course of the novel. Monckton's true motives, a composite of Harrel's and Willoughby's, are money, sex, and sociable freedom. His intention in Cecilia is to secure everything he desires with one wedding: intelligent, attractive, perhaps manageable spouse; fortune; and the resources to reenter the high life he has abstained from in order to draw Cecilia's interest. But these intentions *must* be secret; if, as he acknowledges, society would condemn him for mistreating his wife, there is no doubt Cecilia do so (8). His social theatrics, therefore, are an act of rejecting the 'World.' Monckton eschews all appearances of interest in public sociability, in order to gain new resources that will allow him to participate in it.

Willoughby and Harrel (and, as I shall discuss in Chapter Four, Mr. Belfield) perform to a wider crowd. Their style is dramatic; they don't conceal their awareness that the 'World' is a bit of a farce. Monckton, conversely, turns every moment of his life to the act of *not acting*. Monckton's name is, either deliberately or not, an interesting compound of 'monk' and 'town'; although by nature a character of the latter order, he must withdraw into the country life and disguise himself with the cloistered, righteous character of monasticism—first because of his wife, and then because of Cecilia.

The character he adopts resembles a slightly later fictional figure: Elizabeth Inchbald's Dorriforth, from the earlier chapters of *A Simple Story* (1791). Fittingly enough Dorriforth is an inversion of Monckton's true state: a man of the church by choice, who is removed from it by familial obligation. Like Monckton, he is intelligent, and as Monckton appears to be, he is a man of 'prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance' (Inchbald, 3). One is bound to God through the priesthood, and the other through the sacrament of marriage. Neither is a happy man; both must conceal their passions. Monckton's passions, in fact, come in several forms—not least of which is anger. He is granted an internal narrative, as few characters in *Cecilia* are, and the strength of his hidden emotion is startling; his true feelings are described with words like 'rage' and 'dread' (Burney, *Cecilia* 83; 82). Monckton's unhappiness, like Dorriforth's, arises from his own shortcomings—but Monckton's is refocused into anger, at the world in general, and at those who frustrate his schemes. He conceals his passions in order to protect the possibility that he might at some point be allowed to exercise them. Monckton wears the masque of what Dorriforth truly is: the strict, moral mentor and overseer of a young woman who has no family. In Dorriforth's case sternness and taboo (his priesthood) prove no barrier to his ward's affection; Monckton clearly

hopes for the same eventuality. His intention is clandestine from the offset, however, and his good character entirely fabricated.

Monckton maintains perhaps the most complete act of any one of Burney's social performers, an act of politeness and privacy that persists in all situations and settings, and in all company. Burney, introducing his duplicity alongside him, says he 'preserved to the world the same appearance of decency he supported to his wife. . . the world, with its wonted facility, repaying his circumspect attention to its laws, by silencing the voice of censure, guarding his character from impeachment, and his name from reproach' (8). Later, Burney's language, remaining absolute, takes on a harsher tone; Monckton becomes the 'consummate master in every species of hypocrisy' (721). These two tonally distinct statements illustrate Jenny Davidson's introduction to the problems of ambiguity in politeness and hypocrisy:

> When I call someone else a hypocrite, I point to a gap between what she says and what she does. I sometimes also attribute to the hypocrite a broader, more pervasive deceitfulness whose practice can include the insincerities associated with self-control and good manners. In the last case, if the mask of politeness is sufficiently flawless, I may find it difficult to distinguish the hypocrite from any other member of civil society. (1)

Monckton's inclination for a polite persona suits his needs in pursuing Cecilia. Cecilia is polite; her interest in men is also polite. The man who is attractive to Burney's heroines, already demonstrated to readers by Burney's earlier Orville, is intelligent, but also sentimental, modest, and delicate. Orville, Evelina feels, even while she is angry at him, has 'not an air of vanity or impertinence. . . but with a countenance open, manly, and charming!' (Burney, *Evelina* 281). Miss Stanley remarks on her Beaufort's constancy, sympathy and 'affection unalterable'

(Burney, *Witlings* 56). Cecilia herself is immediately drawn to the wit and delicacy of the masked Mortimer Delvile. Monckton reasons rightly that politeness is the most appealing characteristic that, in Cecilia's estimation, a man could have. Monckton's married state and his interest in expensive diversions would render a frankly acknowledged suit automatically futile; to even try for Cecilia's hand, Monckton cannot look like the man he is. Therefore, he gives focus to his character of privacy and politeness, and puts it to use as his tool for seduction.

As a mode of perceiving and reacting to the world, politeness could show true virtue, but that virtue could as easily be—as in Monckton's case—a calculated show. 'Its appeal, after all,' Paul Langford argues somewhat cynically, 'lay in the desire of relatively well-placed people to enable, enfranchise or empower only themselves' (312). Politeness as displayed by Burney's natural characters is by default a truly virtuous behaviour; they do not act, and if they do not like the people they speak to, they still see value in politeness for its own sake. By mimicking it perfectly, Monckton hopes to trick Cecilia into believing he is as sincere as she is. His masquerade is already established and effective among his acquaintance; as with Jenny Davidson's observation of the hypocrite versus the average member of civil society, Michael Curtain notes, 'Most people. . . were superficial observers, easily impressed by a show of good manners but unable to appreciate the more difficult moral virtues. If manners lost something in dignity and moral weight, they gained it back in influence and utility' (401).

Few of Burney's characters are private, and it is very difficult to find a space in which to *be* private. Patricia Meyer Spacks notes that in the eighteenth century, privacy was an upper-class luxury, and even then, 'physical privacy was hard to come by' (*Privacy* 88). A fine example is Cecilia's brief London seclusion, her attempt to pass her time 'in the exercise of charity, the search of knowledge, and the enjoyment of quiet, [serene] in innocent philosophy'

(Burney, *Cecilia* 103). This declaration of intent, sounding very much like Burney's own utopia, appears directly before chapter title for 'A Masquerade'. This event shakes her immediately from her hermitage, and marks its permanent end. Not surprisingly, then, Monckton doesn't try to exert the performance of privacy through space as much as he does by conversation: in what he says, and, as important, what he does not.

Michele Cohen notes adherence to a polite manner 'required self-control and discipline of both body and tongue' (313). There is a great deal that Monckton chooses not to voice. The narration's brief forays into Monckton's thoughts reveal a huge disparity between the reserved gentleman he displays externally and both the tone and content of his true passions. He hears with 'secret rapture' that Cecilia is irritated and worried by Mrs. Harrel (Burney, *Cecilia* 164). When Clement Willoughby asks to join a party of Monckton, Cecilia, and Sir Robert Floyer, Monckton, 'who had heard this proposal with the *utmost dread* of its success, revived at the calm steadiness with which it was denied' (emphasis mine; 82). This is not surprising, since, we are told, Monckton is 'always *enraged* when young men and Cecilia were alluded to in the same sentence' (emphasis mine; 740).[11] The beating he gives young Morrice during the masquerade scene, under cover in his disguise of 'devil', is the conclusion of an earlier exchange. Morrice wonders cheerily, 'what have you married men to do with young ladies?' (83) Monckton's reaction to this unintentional dig was a 'rage. . . [that] almost exceeded endurance; he stopt short, and looking at him with fierceness that overpowered his discretion, was blurting out with "Sir, you are an—*impudent fellow*;" but checked himself. . . concluded with, "a very facetious gentleman!"' (83) He fights down his natural impulses, though he is 'gnawn with a cruel discontent,' and doesn't seek revenge until he is masked beyond recognition at the masquerade

---

[11] In this instance, his outward expression of this rage is to beat a strategic retreat to the solitude of his library (740).

(84). In most highly sociable scenes, Monckton is reticent regardless of his feelings; he becomes talkative only when advising Cecilia or, on two occasions, when debating with Mr. Belfield.

This welcomes the second prop of Monckton's private act: what he *does* say. Attempting what Willoughby and Harrel do not, he makes Cecilia—his object—a part, and the most important part, of his audience. To her he makes a constant performance of trustworthy reserve, designed to win over a polite and verbally discreet young woman. He leaves aside the violent verbal (and physical) coercion of Harrel and Willoughby and turns instead to conversation. Spacks observes that 'conversation is not a meaningless index of moral quality. It is, however, an ambiguous one, because it involves not only relations with others. . . but display of the self' (*Politeness* 123). Monckton's conversation also involves the display of *other* people's selves. His primary goal is to elevate himself to the highest level of attractiveness and esteem in Cecilia's eye. His primary mode of self-elevation involves lowering the standing of everyone around him. He positions himself, doing this, as the moral measuring rod and mentor Cecilia should depend on. Before she travels to London, he is already concerned about the risk of other men, and his campaign has already begun. He asks, 'are there not sharpers, fortune-hunters, sycophants, wretches of all sorts and denominations, who watch the approach of the rich and unwary, feed upon their inexperience, and prey upon their property?' (Burney, *Cecilia* 17) Monckton is obviously a subscribing member of each of these infamous clubs, but by phrasing it as a warning—and by concealing himself—Monckton highlights himself as trustworthy and the 'World' as malicious and opportunistic. Already, he looks like the safest haven Cecilia has. This tactic is Monckton's mainstay, made more powerful by his frequently accurate representations of other equally unpleasant people. Soon he is able to assert, 'What I foresaw has exactly come to pass; you are surrounded by selfish designers, by interested, double-minded people, who have

nothing at heart but your fortune, and whose mercenary views, if you are not guarded against

them. . . ' (70). Interrupted by a shrieking Mrs. Harrel, Monckton has already planted a seed of

distrust for Cecilia's companions, and one of trust for himself. As Cecilia's dissatisfactions with

the Harrels develop, he employs his 'utmost endeavors to strengthen and increase them' (164).

Conversely, when she begins warming to the Delviles, Monckton uses a more delicate version of

Willoughby and Harrel's affective language, saying, aghast, '. . . surely you do not think of

removing into that family?' (166) The language makes less a show of command than of concern;

with Cecilia as the audience, this is effective, especially since Monckton's accusations continue

to prove true. Monckton himself, meanwhile, appears solicitous and trustworthy, offering advice

and taking over the management of her affairs ('Mr. Monckton. . . though a man of pleasure,

understood business perfectly well') (766). He becomes, in essence, an undetected and

specialised Voluble, spreading malicious rumours—but not in public, and not without purpose.

His purpose is performance, 'by his skill and address, leading every one whither he pleased,

while, by the artful coolness of his manner, he appeared but to follow himself' (720). And his

purpose is Cecilia, '[who] was forwarding his favourite pursuit, and only acting the part which

he had appointed her to perform' (721).

How effective is this theatre? In terms of convincing Cecilia of his politeness, very; she

does not catch on to his scheming until Book X, Chapter I, nearly at the end of the novel. Burney

describes her as both 'wholly unsuspicious' and 'wholly governed' (259). She sees 'a safe and

disinterested old friend,' and is comforted by 'his frank and easy friendliness' (836). But as this

language indicates, he fails to capture anything but Cecilia's platonic interest. She sees him as a

tutor, and while her spoken preference is that she would 'rather find a tutor' than a 'pupil' for a

husband, there is no indication that it ever even occurs to her to see Monckton in a romantic light

(465). Her disinterest is not a part of Monckton's plan—his violent jealousy at her attentions to other men indicate that he wants her attention in addition to conjugal rights of all varieties. His obsession is Cecilia, but it is adoration untempered by pity or true respect; his performance is eventually overturned by his decision to denigrate Cecilia to the Delviles employing the same self-elevating conversational tactics he has used to denigrate them to her. Before this, the act is still imperfect. His only goal is to project his own worth strongly enough that he can compel people, especially Cecilia, into doing and believing as he wishes. That Cecilia sees him first as only a friend and then as a disappointment is a bitter failure of Monckton's performance.

For a long time, though, he succeeds in making himself a trusted agent and turning the 'World' into an enemy—in agreement with Carol Stewart's assertion that, in eighteenth-century novels, 'the male hypocrite is responsible for female misery' (107). While Monckton's disguise remains undetected, its main effect is to stall the plot's inevitable outcome: Cecilia's marriage to Mortimer. He does not ultimately prevent their marriage, but he does halt one wedding. Mr. Delvile eats up every calumny Monckton offers about Cecilia, and banishes her from his friendship with the appalling admonishment that, 'young women of ample fortunes, who are early independent, are sometimes apt to presume they may do every thing with impunity; but they are mistaken; they are as liable to censure as those who are wholly unprovided for' (758). His prejudice against her persists until nearly the end of the novel, and is a contributing factor to the two near-fatalities discussed below.

The more direct effects of Monckton's performance on Mortimer and Cecilia's relationship begin far earlier. Cecilia considers leaving the Harrels' hospitality for the Delviles', but Monckton tells her that if she lives with them, she will 'be totally weighed down by their united insolence' (167). Although her next encounter with the Delviles restores her good

opinion, she remains silent on the subject of her residence. Monckton's performance of

solicitude is the reason; she, 'much regretted the prejudice of Mr. Monckton,' because it 'was *all*

*that opposed her* making an immediate effort towards a change in her abode' (171). This

hesitation has dramatic consequences for Cecilia, if no one else; it means she is still living with

the Harrels (whom, incidentally, Monckton also censures) when Mr. Harrel, in his final despair,

drags Cecilia and his wife to Vauxhall and shoots himself. Monckton's later interference is even

greater; he directs a woman to object during Cecilia and Mortimer's first, abortive wedding

ceremony. This—and by extension, Monckton—is the catalyst to 'all her difficulties'—a series

of painful, chaotic episodes of miscommunication and prejudice (680). This ultimately results in

two near-fatal incidents. Their marriage unresolved, Cecilia and Mortimer are left distraught and

vulnerable to further attacks. The most intense protest comes from Mrs. Delvile, whose pleas that

they not marry result in an argument so intense that she suffers an aneurism.[12] Mrs. Delvile

eventually defects to her son's side, and Mr. Delvile eventually consents to the marriage (sans

the change in Mortimer's surname), but regardless of her actions or situation, she remains

delicate for the remainder of the book. At the conclusion of her story, her health is only

'tolerably re-established' (938). The other casualty is Cecilia, who suffers enough cumulative

suspense, betrayal, and uncertainty that a final miscommunication leads her to believe that

Mortimer is dead, and sends her spiraling into madness:

> This moment, for the unhappy Cecilia, teemed with calamity; she was wholly
>
> overpowered; terror for Delvile, horror for herself, hurry, confusion, heat and
>
> fatigue, all assailing her at once, while all means of repelling them were denied
>
> her, the attack was too strong for her fears, feelings, and faculties, and her reason

---

[12] This also produces a very striking physical manifestation of mental distress, in her horrifying declaration, 'My brain is on fire!' (680)

suddenly, yet totally failing her, she madly called out, 'He will be gone! he will be

gone! and I must follow him to Nice!' (896)

This, too, shows where Monckton's performance goes astray—in an attempt to put Cecilia out of

reach of the 'World', Monckton and his machinations exceed their aim and end in a catatonia

that very nearly leads to Cecilia's death.

Monckton sees his performance as necessity, because he is unwilling to give up the prize

of Cecilia or the ambitions she can help him fulfill. Truth, as long as this is the case, cannot be a

viable option. Monckton's sentiments and intentions make him an unrepentant adulterer in spirit.

His admission of this would certainly destroy any chance he had of romantic involvement with

Cecilia. But Monckton's performance is arguably no kinder to him than it is to his object. His

masquerade involves a rigorous daily suppression of his passions, and forces him to modulate his

responses to everything—including men, even immoral ones, who can court Cecilia more openly

than he can himself. The fruits of Monckton's labour are all bitter; he overextends his power

when he performs the same act to the Delviles as he does to Cecilia, and she discovers his

hypocrisy. Her disappointment turns to distance, and her final communication with him is a

brief, exactingly polite letter requesting that he clear her name with her husband's family. Worse

yet, she sends good wishes and forgiveness, 'in remembrance of my former long friendship'

(929). His final *acute* humiliation, 'after many long and painful struggles between useless rage,

and involuntary remorse,' is in obliging her request and making her name good—thus

relinquishing her completely to his rival (929). The final outcome of his avarice and act is more

slow drawn; he becomes 'the wretched Monckton, dupe of his own cunning and artifices, [who]

lived in lingering misery' (929).

Monckton's misery seems to stem from avarice rather than performance itself. Performance is, certainly, a tool to further ambition, and not something Monckton undertakes for enjoyment or as entertainment. On the one occasion that he performs in a setting of pleasurable sociability, at the masquerade, he dresses self-loathingly and too seriously as the Devil—a character he keeps grimly in mind for himself throughout the novel. He refers to his (anonymous) besmirching of Cecilia's reputation to the Delviles as 'a design black, horrible and diabolical! A design which must be formed by a Daemon, but which even a Daemon could never, I think, execute!' (765).

Performance is an auxiliary to ambition and avarice, in Monckton's case, rather than any fun. But the connection between ambition, and particularly obsession, and performance is, I think, consistent throughout Burney's works. Smatter and Dabler's public literary ambitions, Belfield's constant high-minded fluctuations between vocations (see Chapter Four), Harrel's unsupportable lust for gambling, Willoughby's libertine pursuit of Evelina—all share a common thread in the singleminded and often merciless pursuit of a single worldly obsession. Whether performance arises from obsession or vice versa becomes less consequential than the fact that they repeatedly appear in concert. Considering the inverse—Burney's natural characters— reveals a less consistent pattern. Cecilia Stanley refuses an invitation to Lady Smatter's Esprit parties. Cecilia (Delvile) and Mortimer as well as Evelina and Lord Orville retire to the country as soon as they are married. Less virtuous characters like Mr. Delvile and Mr. Briggs dedicate themselves to a status quo rather than the pursuit of some fresh goal. However, a lack of performativity does not equate to a lack of ambition. Belfield's mother's sole interest is the advancement of her son, an obsessive vicarious ambition, that perhaps she would have for him even if he had no ambitions himself. Madame Duval, seeking name and fortune, forces the issue

of Evelina's paternity. It is not clear, therefore, that obsession requires performativity; but from all appearances, performativity in Burney's 'World' does require obsession. Whether obsession is strictly an affair of the unvirtuous is the matter of our next chapter.

**Chapter Four: The Death of Performance**

> The man that seeks the everlasting prize:
> It shows you whence he comes, whither he goes,
> What he leaves undone, also what he does:
> It also shows you how he runs, and runs,
> Till he unto the Gate of Glory comes.
> It shows too who sets out for life amain,
> As if the lasting crown they would attain:
> Here also you may see the reason why
> They lose their labour, and like fools do die. (Bunyan, 'Apology')
> --John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*

One of the central young male figures of *Cecilia* is atypically neither a predator nor a

relation (husband, father, *or* brother). Mr. Belfield's narrative overlaps with the narrative of

Cecilia's emergence into the 'World' and her search for security and marriage, but, in a

departure from most of Burney's fleshed-out characters, Belfield's character is not given its

purpose simply by his proximity to Cecilia. Belfield's purpose is a personal and philosophical

journey with no room for questions of romance or marriage. Born the son of a tradesman, by the

time the novel opens Belfield has been to school at Eton, run away to join the army, left it to

study law, and cast law aside for fashionable dilettantism. By the end of the book, he has thrown

aside patronage, tried his hand at manual labour and settled (apparently) on bookselling. Belfield

is fickle and nomadic, the pursuant of an idealised and individualistic heroism that accompanies

him in every new role; he is also a genius at imaginative social theatre. He spends the course of

the novel trying on new vocations and moving between the social ranks, seeking, in essence, the

secular equivalent of a spiritual 'calling'. He is a successful performer at all of them until he

takes on the 'World': the crisis point of his story occurs in his pride-driven duel with Sir Robert

Floyer, growing financial problems, and the wound from this duel driving him near to death, and into a retirement from the public eye.

Belfield's interest in a goal other than Cecilia separates him from the majority of figures in Burney's main casts, but he also brings something new to the idea of the imaginative, performative character: the idea that this type of character does not in fact need to be morally bankrupt. Belfield is an imperfect character, but he is not wicked. In fact, his most openly acknowledged performance is the recurrent role of Don Quixote—a deluded but well-intentioned and chivalrous idealist.[13] His faults are most usually cited as high spirits and pride; his general goodness is acknowledged at least as frequently as these shortcomings, often performing a sort of canceling out. Belfield's good points come across as his prevailing features. Mortimer defends him to the snobbish Mr. Delvile, saying that Belfield, 'has wit, spirit, and understanding, talents to create admiration, and qualities, I believe, to engage esteem!' (158) These qualities are also praised by Belfield's virtuous sister Henrietta and his overly-devoted mother. His good humour and charisma are repaid in popularity by the 'World', by which he is 'generally caressed and universally sought' (10).  Singular among all the characters in *Cecilia*, Belfield captures the intellectual interest and admiration of Mr. Monckton, who is otherwise alone with his canniness. Monckton enjoys several spirited arguments with Belfield, and refers to his being 'full of genius' on multiple occasions (739). Burney's virtuous (and, Monckton notwithstanding, generally discerning) heroine Cecilia also recognizes Belfield's 'talents and abilities' (658). Without any need for the coercive tactics that Harrel must employ, Belfield earns Cecilia's willing attendance and protection when, after losing his duel against Sir Robert Floyer, he becomes socially vulnerable. Cecilia becomes distracted from 'her own anxieties and sadness, in the concern

---

[13] For more on ideas of chivalry in this period see Michele Cohen's essay '"Manners" Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity 1750-1830.'

which she felt for this unfortunate and extraordinary young man' (667). While she worries over his failings, she never indicates any of the distrust or disdain that she feels for many of the other characters—particularly the performative ones. Belfield is an exception.

Belfield's final character reference comes from Burney's narration, which also touts his goodness. This is worth noting because, consistently, the narrative voice of *Cecilia* acts as a dependable, honest source of information even when the characters lie and miscommunicate. (Monckton is a particularly good example of this, though not the only one.) The narrator, while honest about Belfield's faults, is quick to praise him as a 'young man, whose face was all animation, and whose eyes sparkled with intelligence. . . [a] quickness of parts and vigour of imagination' (11). Belfield's goodness is a reiterated and unquestionable fact. It sets him vitally—a word I use literally—apart from Burney's other social performers.

Belfield's performance and faults entangle with each other. His faults lie in high spirits and unyielding pride, and are as ambiguously 'bad' as his virtues are 'good'; each of these contribute profoundly to his quickchange brand of social theatre, but also to the idealism that accompanies every permutation. Likewise his intelligence is an admirable trait, but one that fuels his flightiness, enabling him to pick up any role convincingly, driving him to drop them—except the fashionable 'World'—for lack of interest. Monckton, a qualified judge of both imagination and performance, notes, 'Were he less imaginative, wild and eccentric, he has abilities for any station, and might fix and distinguish himself almost wherever he pleased' (739).[14] The 'fixing' is, of course, the only difficulty in this statement; Belfield proves his abilities, but each role becomes a casualty of his continual imaginative restlessness. His high spirits send him careening enthusiastically from one act to the next, and his idealism is 'unhappily associated with fickleness and caprice,' leading to 'an unsettled and unprofitable life' (12; 12). His pride is

[14] Monckton, like *The Witlings* Mrs. Sapient, is a hypocrite, but frequently a correct one.

likewise an uncertainty; Belfield is 'tenacious of his honour even more than himself' to the very end of the novel (899). This pride protects him, in his refusal to put himself in debt. It also, stung by Sir Robert Floyer, draws him into his duel and its nearly fatal aftermath. And it manifests, emblematically, in the complicated, slightly tragic and yet heroic figure of Don Quixote.

The Don Quixote persona first appears in its most literal form, as Belfield's costume at the Harrels' masquerade. Dressed with 'tolerable exactness' in false armour and expressing 'with propriety the most striking, the knight of doleful countenance', Belfield takes on character as well as costume and attitudes (108). The character is easily recognized and quickly co-opted by the audience for Cecilia's aid as 'every mask in the room was eager to point out [Cecilia's] imprisonment' (108). Belfield proves equal to the task; he becomes the only active heroic figure in this scene, verbally and physically fighting back Monckton's Devil while everyone else stands to the side.[15] For the remainder of the scene, he speaks exaggeratedly in character, dramatically recasting Cecilia as the princess in peril—yet consciously protecting her from a real imposition. He cleverly balances a socially acceptable response with one that is useful to Cecilia. Mortimer Delvile, in this, his introductory scene, is dressed in princely white, but mostly as a decoration; his language is genteel, but also private, and not protective. Belfield, an actor, *acts*. In the form of a knight both errant and erring, he makes uniquely good moral use of his own social theatrics.

This particular role is not tied to only one rank or vocation; the name reappears at least twice, more prominently when Belfield and Monckton have their second argument near the end of the novel. At this point, physically battered, optimism slightly bruised, Belfield remains an idealist and a philosopher. The Don Quixote has persevered through everything to his incarnation as a bookseller. He attempts to persuade a scoffing Monckton that the battle of ideas and words

---

[15] There is some irony in this scene as well, that Belfield, the one character Monckton respects sees the true Monckton as deplorable and laughable.

is as valiant as any other: 'Our giants may, indeed, be only windmills, but they must be attacked with as much spirit, and conquered with as much bravery, as any fort or town' (736). He concludes, invoking his dangerous pride as a feature of his virtues, 'the assailants of the quill have their honour as much at heart as the assailants of the sword' (736). While the Quixote remains, the nature of the weapon and the tenor of Belfield's conversation shifts; the physical weapon of the duel, and polite language—a careful straddling of courtly chivalry and gentlemanly manners that allows him to balance protection and amusement at the masquerade— are traded in for something more intellectual and honest. His independency, in this particular regard, follows the trend of the times; Robert Shoemaker observes that one reason for the decline of public violence (such as the duel) was the increased use of written materials in conducting and resolving conflict (526). Even so, if Belfield is still performing the Don Quixote, he has dropped much of the worldliness that he made use of before his duel.

The act and metaphor of Don Quixote are offered by the novel, but Belfield's story, and the changes in his character, can also be seen as a secular *Pilgrim's Progress*. Roger Sharrock, in his introduction to Bunyan's work, refers to the book as 'the heroic image of militant Puritansim'; Belfiled is the oddly sentimental, heroic image of Georgian Enlightenment (vii). Kant's 1784 essay 'What Is Enlightenment?' answers its own question with helpful immediacy and simplicity: 'Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere Aude!* (Have the courage to use your own intelligence!) is therefore the motto of the enlightenment' (39). The resemblance between his statement and Belfield's own philosophies is obvious:

. . . your general rules, your appropriated customs, your settled forms, are but so

many absurd arrangements to impede not merely the progress of genius, but the

use of understanding[.] If man dared ask for himself, if neither worldly views,

contracted prejudices, eternal precepts, nor compulsive examples, swayed his

better reason and impelled his conduct, how noble indeed would he be! (Burney,

*Cecilia* 15)

Belfield 'would have *all* men. . . whether philosophers or ideots, act for themselves' (16).

Instead of seeking what Bunyan's Christian does—as Sharrock phrases it, 'a righteousness not

his own by which to be saved'—Belfield seeks a self, a role through which he can express his

independence of being and thought (xi). He finds, as Christian does, that 'in every city, bonds

and afflictions abide in you'; Belfield finds dissatisfaction everywhere, and is seemingly unable

to escape worldly barriers to independence. The reader meets him in his Vanity-Fair. Burney's

'World' is Bunyan's chaotic carnival, where 'there is at all times to be seen jugglings, cheats,

games, play, fools, apes, rogues, and that of all sorts' (79). Belfield ends his journey (or, the

reader last observes him here, and the credulous reader may kindly assume Belfield settles

permanently) in what he calls the Celestial City. It's securely in the middle class, not far, in fact,

from his starting station, giving equivalency to the pamphlet-writer and the hero, the individual

exercise of thought equivalency to spiritual sustenance. In this station, Belfield declares,

"Happy! . . . Oh I am in Paradise! . . . when first I opened a book, after so long an abstinence

from all mental nourishment,—oh it was rapture!' (738) But Belfield's enlightenment is not

perfectly joyful; it is accompanied by a new cynicism regarding the spirit of human-kind. 'There

seems in human nature,' he says uncharacteristically, 'a worthlessness not to be conquered'

(733). Regardless of the Quixotic determination displayed directly after this proclamation ('yet I

will struggle with it to the last'), something falls short when Belfield's euphoric flightiness is transported into a 'paradise' of moderation (733).

Where Belfield's journey ends—and why—are answered by the circumstances directly leading up to his fall from the 'World': the duel and its aftermath. The duel is precipitated by an incident at the opera house, one that has a different set of consequences for Cecilia than it does for Belfield. Belfield and Floyer *seem* to argue over which of them will escort Cecilia to her carriage; the Voluble crowd all see Cecilia's romantic preferment as the bone of contention. In fact, the issue is one of money and performance. Belfield, in order to maintain the act of gentleman, has spent money but made careful use of his financial reserves. His pride has saved him in this respect: 'A high principle of honour which still, in the midst of his gay career, had remained uncorrupted, had scrupulously guarded him from running in debt' (219). His reserves are dwindling, however, as are his options. So that he can be 'still the darling of his friends. . . though his income was lessoned, his expenses increased' (217). He petitions a friend, the uncle of Sir Robert Floyer, for financial assistance. Unfortunately, Floyer has his own plans for the money, and when the two meet at the opera, it's this—hurt pride, uncomfortable preferment, and the more uncomfortable but insistent need for money—that fuels their mutual ire. It is Belfield's performance that puts him in this position at all, and which threatens him with increasingly perilous situations.

At this point it is useful to reconsider another of Cecilia's young gentleman acquaintances: Mr. Harrel. In Chapter Two my focus was on Harrel's performance as directly linked to Cecilia, his bald-faced verbal manipulations aimed to bring about a match with Sir Robert Floyer. However, Harrel's role as a treacherous matchmaker is secondary to his lifestyle as a high-stakes gamester. His precipitously dangerous gambling motivates his attempts to

auction off his ward; when the novel begins, his debts are already daunting. In his capacity (or, perhaps more appropriately, incapacity) as a gamester, Harrel's narrative arc runs parallel to Belfield's. Both young men are fashionable, sociable and lively. Both entertain large groups of friends. Both are social performers. Though perilously close to financial and social ruin, each maintains his increasingly desperate performance of lighthearted sociability, and the pretense that his situation is stable. Belfield, from his sickbed, 'entertain[s] with all the gaiety of a man in full health' (153). Harrel brushes off his creditors, threatens to sent himself 'to hell!' and then coerces Cecilia into joining him and his wife for an evening at the Pantheon (265). This he explains matter-of-factly as necessity, since 'the unfortunate affair' of their circumstances 'is very likely to spread presently all over the town; the only refutation that can be given to it, is by our all appearing in public before any body knows whether to believe it or not' (273). Interestingly, both men see their potential financial redemption connected to the figure of Sir Robert Floyer. Each ends his tenure in the fashionable 'World' with a bullet.

But here lies the vital—again, the *literally* vital—difference between them: Belfield lives, and Harrel dies. Belfield, in a proud rage, engages in a duel that very nearly kills him. Harrel, too far in debt even to flee to the continent, and unwilling to endure the final humiliation of debtor's prison, drags his wife and his ward against their wills to a frightful dinner at Vauxhall, where they are surrounded by vulgar 'mixed company' (412). He puts on 'an air of gaiety', declares himself 'not mad but merry', and then leaps up from the table, dashes out of sight, and kills himself (402).

These acts of worldliness do not rise from morally commendable, or even socially supported, traditions; though fashionably affiliated, both gambling and duelling were transgressive behaviours. The duel was an upper-class ritual, and, Donna T. Andrew says, 'above

all, a formal and well-mannered event'—but it was also illegal, and a perceived threat to both society and civility (411). Lord Kames claimed in 1778 that duels were 'no slight symptom of degeneracy' (qtd. in Andrew, 409). Duels were fought to prove courage; as the elite brand of personal physical conflict, 'in an age where a man's status depended on his money, appearance, and conduct, rather than land and coat of arms,' they could be used to 'confirm [the duellist's] membership in elite society' (Shoemaker, 526). However, it also gave the 'serious affront [of] "giving the lie" or publicly impunging the veracity, honesty, or courage of another gentleman' (Andrew, 411). As violence decreased in the London streets, the duel became, not less elite, but far less acceptable. In fact, Robert Shoemaker says, 'significant numbers in people in London, from all classes, sought to prevent duels from taking place' (537). Writes Erin Mackie, duellists were becoming the 'objects of admonition and reform' (154). Burney's own previous writing about duels took the form of Evelina's sibling Mr. Macartney, who nearly kills (unbeknownst to either party) his *father* in a sword duel. He is so overcome with shame, he tells Evelina, that 'at that moment I could almost have destroyed myself!' (*Evelina* 288)

The gamester, meanwhile, was a grotesque, fearsome, and hedonistic figure. 'Portrayed as an essentially disordered individual,' writes Phyllis Deutsch, 'the aristocratic gamester relinquished reason, choice, and will through his indulgence in games of chance' (638). Gambling was an activity for all classes, but in the same way that bare fist boxing was the poor man's duel; the elite form of gambling was extravagant, excessive, showy, frightening, and sometimes fatal. While Harrel is not quite the notorious MP Charles James Fox, he certainly doesn't play for pittance. Cecilia is horrified to learn that her contributions only put a dent in his debts, which total some £7000 (Burney, *Cecilia* 269). The results of the gambling could be as grisly and grim as those of the duel. Debtor's prison was not a pleasant fate, and while Harrel

chooses for more than one reason to die rather than go there, humiliation was not its only horrific aspect. As Cecilia went into print, Newgate Prison was being refurbished yet again—bureaucracy and a fire had left the prison's conditions in a pitiable the state for decades, and even now they were 'abominable. . . amid filth and vermin' (Kalman 50). The public reception of gamesters was ugly enough already, but cushioned until it was given the official brand of criminality. A writer for the *Gentlemen's Magazine* in 1784 expressed his views on criminals with no niceties: 'And by devising a more dreadful punishment than death—Suppose, instead of death, they were to be condemned to work the mines for life, would that not deter them?' This bitter reaction to criminality of all kinds is not extraordinary; Cecilia herself has her 'whole heart hardened against gaming and gamesters' (381). Even at his death, the sentimental heroine's reaction is 'unmixed with any tenderness or regret, and resulting merely from general humanity' (416). Gambling, furthermore, was '[linked] with the sin of suicide, not only because excessive debts caused people to kill themselves, but also because both gambling and self-murder were acts of individualism that denied social ties and responsibilities' (Russell, 'Faro's Daughters' 484). Harrel carries out the gamester's suicide literally; the irresponsible individualism is something he shares with Belfield.

Putting aside their relative moral standings, Belfield's and Harrel's acts do amount to much the same thing. Belfield, the 'principle figure in the circle', cannot bear to either give up his lifestyle or allow his friends to know it is built on deceit—it's just an act (Burney, *Cecilia* 11). Mrs. Belfield tells Cecilia that her son 'thinks nothing of his hardships, so long as nobody knows of them' (340). His entire status is a lie, but one he risks his life on. Living beyond his means is the first destructive aspect of Belfield's fashionable act—despite his refusal to accrue debt. The act of dueling is the second; the duel belonged to, as Robert Shoemaker writes, 'the

honour culture of elite men'; only Belfield's participation in elite society, and his proud

persistence in acting the part of an elite man, could rope him into this particular form of danger

(Shoemaker, 'Taming the Duel' 526). Belfield's duel with Floyer is an act belonging to a rank he

does not have, over money he needs in order to continue claiming it. He buys too fully into the

theatre of the elite, however, and suffers for it. The increasing privacy of duels is indicated by

Belfield's own duel, consigned, like Harrel's suicide, to a discreet occurrence out of sight and off

the page. Shoemaker sees even this hidden and dwindling duelling tradition as paradoxically and

persistently theatrical, albeit a theatre played 'to an increasingly narrow audience' (539). A large

audience is unnecessary for Belfield, whose dramatic enthusiasm for each of his roles convinces,

foremost, Belfield himself; this particular enactment demonstrates, more than anything,

Belfield's total entrenchment in the performance of elite male sociability. It is also the first half

of his bipartite suicide attempt; the second is his refusal to cease performing and admit the extent

of his injuries, either physical or financial. Fevered and unable to afford a doctor, Belfield shows

the friends who visit his sickbed that he is 'more lively and more entertaining than ever' (219).

As his resources dwindle, and he is forced to move to more economical housing, he takes 'gay

leave of his friends' and tells them he is going to the country to convalesce, while in fact he is

settling back into poverty, to live or die by luck (220).

Even at this point, removed from the wider stage of the 'World', it is Belfield's worldly

performance that is killing him. As his sister Henrietta reports, 'the wound is almost nothing';

rather it is a sentimental malaise, a physical reaction to mental and emotional stress, triggered, in

this case, by Belfield's potential loss of his persona and the lifestyle that accompanies it.[16] His

grip on this act is typically obsessive; Henrietta first tells Cecilia, 'he had almost rather never see

---

[16] Appearing for other reasons, similarly physical manifestations of mental anguish occurs in Mortimer, Cecilia, and Mrs. Delvile, as well as Evelina.

the light again' than be revealed, and then that 'he could ill endure to make a discovery which would at once proclaim his degradation and his deceit' (210; 220). Mortimer tells Cecilia that, 'Disappointed in his higher views, [Belfield's] spirit is broken, and he is heartless and hopeless, scarce condescending to accept relief, from the bitter remembrance that he expected preferment' (303). In other words, his suicide would be as willing and deliberate as Harrel's, and he would commit it to protect his pride—and his act as a carefree entertainer.

Harrel, of course, *does* suicide rather than forego his act and its fashionable receipts. Sinking into debt, he continues staging his performance, carelessly buying masquerades and home improvements and fashionable outings to set himself and his wife within the correct scene. His persona, the jovial socialite, persists until the minute of his death. At home his act slips as the situation worsens, and he alternates between false cheer and a 'look of fierceness most terrifying', accompanied by manipulative but startlingly honest threats of suicide (364). As his final act, however, Harrel chooses to leave his home for a more fashionable stage, and bring his audience along: he drags his unwilling wife and ward to Vauxhall. Meeting several of his creditors there, he ignores his wife's distress and declares that he will 'give them all a supper, to be sure' (402). Sir Robert Floyer passes by their dinner-party, and Harrel charges him to 'Come amongst us and be merry!' (410). His audience complete, 'Mr. Harrel then began to sing, and in so noisy and riotous a manner, that nobody approached the box without stopping to stare at him' (412). Harrel works up the crowd, Cecilia calling the situation unsupportable and Priscilla Harrel calling it cruel, asking her husband, 'did you only bring me here to insult me?' (413) At this point Harrel abruptly leaves the stage—and walks immediately into his death. Harrel, like Belfield, ends his act offstage and with blood.

Despite the equivalencies of gambling and dueling as both elite and criminal behaviours, in *Cecilia* there is one fatality, and one survivor. Belfield and Harrel share an important characteristic in their theatricality. Both paint over negative sentiment and creeping destitution with fashionable high spirits, buying leisure they can't afford. Their performances lead directly to what are both, in essence, acts of suicide. However: Harrel dies, and Belfield lives. It could be argued that, despite Belfield's imperfections, Harrel dies because he is an essentially corrupt character, and Belfield lives because he is essentially noble. More importantly than their morality, however—though not unrelated to it—Belfield does what Harrel cannot, and lets his performance go. At a vital juncture—and driven partially by the once again ambiguous pride— he stops coveting the act and leaves the 'World' entirely, to begin his phase of 'static recuperation' as a day labourer (Sharrock xvii).

The extremity of this initial retreat is important; in order to attempt an escape from his addicting performance in the theatrical 'World', Belfield must escape the 'World' entirely. He has, like the natural imaginative characters who comprise Burney's heroes and heroines, discovered the dangers of a society built on theatre and entertainment, and fled to a country retirement. He seeks to eschew performance completely—and oddly, because none of Burney's other early characters try to give up social performance. Belfield, though, survives theatrical society and his own performance by quitting them both completely. In his brief tenure as a day-labourer, Belfield *embraces* the loss of performance, as the loss of a burden. He asks, 'What can I wish to conceal, where I have nothing to gain or lose?' (660) To Cecilia he evangelizes the value of hard and simple work. He suggests, moreover, that the fashionable 'World' that supports—and is constructed by—social theatre is itself the source of unhappiness. He says, 'it is not the active, but the indolent who weary; it is not the temperate, but the pampered who are

capricious' (664). Although Belfield claims that 'Labour with Independence' is the key to happiness, rather than simply retirement, Cecilia sees his new life as 'total seclusion from the world', and even he admits that he has happily 'quit the whole [human] race' (659). However he words it, Belfield's clear conclusion is that the 'World', its entertainments, and its luxuries are inherently dangerous, and they create dangerous people.

When he rejects the 'World', Belfield aims to become something he is not by design: a *natural* character. As he himself asks, 'Why should I blush to lead the life which uncorrupted Nature first prescribed to man?' (660) But if there is a cost to performance, and danger in a theatrical society, there are also costs to a perfomative being trying to behave otherwise. At the cottage, Belfield's Quixotism is dealt an awful blow—no longer the young man who steps between a lady and a devil and argues the worth of an individual mind, he insists, 'I have done with visits and society! . . . The worthlessness of mankind has disgusted me with the world, and my resolution in quitting it shall be immoveable as its baseness' (660). His idealism is a casualty of the failure of his performance and his removal from the 'World'. So is his intellect: 'Mental fatigue is overpowered by personal; I toil till I require rest, and that rest which nature, not luxury demands, leads not to idle meditation' (665). His violent expulsion from a world that is integrally theatrical saves his life, but strips away two vital qualities of his character, of his embodiment of Enlightenment philosophies: his intellect, the victim of his new 'thought-exiling business', and his love for humanity (665). Retreat is a damaging solution for actors who no longer want to act, even if it is not the retreat Belfield himself fears, of '*having nothing to do*' (emphasis Burney's; 663).

Additionally, Burney suggests that a temperamentally performative, imaginative being cannot simple find satisfaction by *acting natural* as he would act any other part. Belfield cannot

ultimately bear the uncomplicated, thoughtless life of labour, and returns to the 'World'—at a lower rung on the ladder, and a more contemplative one. Belfield is still a social performer as a bookseller, and ultimately he is more apologist than apologetic; he argues to Monckton that etiquette is necessary and—unlike his own experiences with more immersive social theatre—painless. It is, he says, simply socially binding ritual. 'I no more', he says, 'hold him deceitful for not opposing this *pantomimical parade* than I hold him to be dependent for eating corn he has not sown' (735). The somewhat vulgar theatricality of the 'World' is acknowledged, and deemed useful—at least in small doses. The Quixotism that reasserts itself here is tainted by the costs of disastrous performance—by Belfield's belief that, though he 'will struggle with it to the last', humanity is still incurably worthless (733). His attempts to escape the theatrical 'World', along with his own theatricality, are fumbled almost immediately. He is last seen performing an ambiguous role (with not entirely credible resolve) and making excuses for the unavoidable and necessary theatre of social interaction. With this discouraging outcome for Burney's most high-minded advocate for free thought, what can be done by characters who cannot be anything *but* natural in this unnatural 'World'?

## Chapter Five: Heroines Imperiled and Heroes Impotent

The previous chapters have focused on characters who embrace performance, as performers themselves or as gossips and spectators who feed off the public displays of others. Performance itself is, in Burney's fictions, frequently wielded as a weapon, but it is morally ambiguous. The theatrically entrenched society that seeds these performances, however, is shown repeatedly to be fickle and dangerous even towards its most ardent devotees. This leaves one vital group of characters unexplored: Evelina and Lord Orville; Cecilia Stanley and Beaufort; and Cecilia Beverley and Mortimer Delvile. These are the natural and imaginative protagonists around whom each of Burney's early works is based.

In each of these characters is an important combination of features—not only are Burney's central protagonists all imaginative natural characters, but they are, as Philip Carter might put it, ' "polite" in the true sense of the word' (335). Of course, Carter's phrasing is entirely tautological, and endemic of the basic problem with discussing eighteenth-century politeness—one view is only that, in a vast and controversial array of definitions, behaviours, and philosophies. Burney's truly polite characters are, however, consistent to a particular brand of politeness. They do not, as Belfield does and as Laurence Klein generalizes, 'frankly [acknowledge] the necessity, even the virtue, of social artifice' (Klein, 'Politeness' 874). When they disapprove of something or someone, they either acknowledge their disapproval discreetly or remove themselves from the situation. They are generally disinterested in and incapable of using social theatre at all.

Indeed, even the possibility of performance seems outside the scope of these characters. Evelina, the first introduced, is the last to make an attempt at performance. Her few dissimulations are accompanied by humiliation and shame, and nothing more positive. Lying to Clement Willoughby to avoid his advances as a strange and unwanted dance partner only piques his interest and excites his sadistic behaviour. She becomes as afraid of her own lie as his malice: 'I dreaded lest this mischievous man. . . expose my artifice. Fool! to involve myself in such difficulties!' (47) She faces essentially the same difficulty when she becomes aware that Captain Mirvan and Clement Willoughby plan to involve Madame Duval in some sort of 'frolic'. The frolic in question is the highwaymen incident; for her silence complicity, Evelina is again shamed, confessing, 'I could not forgive myself for having passively suffered the deception' (149). Her only experiences as a participant in social theatre are anathema to her character, leaving her 'exposed' and guilty. After Evelina, Burney doesn't write any of her protagonists attempting to act. Instead, they avoid the 'World' in whatever way also allows them to avoid theatrical participation.[17]

The idea of retreat is one recurrent eighteenth-century literature, and for Burney in particular. Camilla Cottage (Burney's marital home, built from the proceeds of the novel), Burney's self-censored diaries, her scrupulously maintained early anonymity as a writer— despite her London adulthood and her retirement to the equally sociable Bath, the images of solitude and country retreat resonated strongly with Burney and is reflected in her heroines. As the Blooms put it, both 'author and protagonist were attracted to an orderly serenity' (227). This devotion to 'orderly serenity' occurs on various scales in Burney's works, in terms of space. Cecilia's early attempt at a London hermitage sequesters her in her apartment at the Harrels'; she

---

[17] This does not apply to staged theatrics; both Evelina and Cecilia are tremendously interested in theatre and opera—more so, as shown in Chapter One, than the average audience.

is compelled by her uncle's will to remain in town, but she is 'weary of eternal visiting, and sick of living always in a crowd' (101). Her desire is to '[consult] nothing but reason and principle in her [conduct]' (101). In Cecilia Stanley, there is an incremental retreat; she arrives at the ostensible safe haven of Mrs. Voluble's house after being dismissed from Lady Smatter's, searching for a place to retire while her finances are troubled. These troubles she considers to be 'insuperable objections to visiting any of my Friends' (Burney, *Witlings* 49).

The most decisive retreats occur at the end of Burney's narratives. Evelina, Cecilia Beverley, and their husbands find security first in marriage, and then in an abrupt and, for all intents and purposes, permanent retreat to the countryside. Evelina's final entry in her epistolary 'history' is a brief, exuberant missive to her clerical guardian, Mr. Villars. She announces her marriage finalized and, last of all, lets him know, 'the chaise now waits which is to conduct me to dear Berry Hill, and to the arms of the best of men' (Burney, *Evelina* 406). Her last words form a declaration of security found in two expressly nonperformative men, and one of relief and happiness at a flight out of the theatrical 'World' and back into the most idyllic of the novel's country settings.[18] Cecilia Beverley retires into the country as a new member of the Delvile family; in her ending, less happy than Evelina's, Cecilia 'surveyed the world at large. . . finding that of the few who had any happiness, there were none without some misery' (Burney, *Cecilia* 941). Some share of misery follows Cecilia to the country, but she leaves most of it to the 'World'. In this regard—the separating of city vice from the virtuous ideal of the country—Burney wrote not at all outside the norm of popular eighteenth-century discourse. The country, Jeffrey Duncan writes, was frequently attributed with 'a certain innocence or virtue, peace, and simplicity' (517). More specifically, Stephen Bending discusses the country as a retreat for

---

[18] Howard's Grove is marred for Evelina by the presence of the vulgar and worldly Captain Mirvan, as well as Clement Willoughby and Madame Duval.

women, and as 'always a retirement *from* something'—which is, he says, 'inevitably the city' (emphasis his, 558).

However, a total avoidance of the 'World' is hopeful thinking at best, and even in her fictional worlds Burney does not make escape easy; indeed, it is frequently impossible. Indeed, the legitimization each of her first three heroines needs in order to gain the authority that gives her choice—the agency to choose genteel retirement—is based squarely in the 'World' they find so uncomfortable and unnatural. Evelina must present herself in person to her very public father—a retired, if not fully reformed, rake—in order to force his audience and gain his acceptance. Her alternative, to stay in the country without ever being claimed by her parent, puts her in the paths of poverty and reduces her choices in marriage. Whether or not his interest would survive her status, she would certainly be outside the acceptable criteria for Orville's wife. In addition, the uncertainty and distress of being called an illegitimate child would continue to afflict her. Letters are unsuccessful in convincing John Belmont that Evelina is his daughter; only direct confrontation (a bit of melodrama) will do. Cecilia Stanley's fate, meanwhile, rests in the vain and self-interested hands of Lady Smatter, whose reaction to Miss Stanley's loss of fortune is to immediately dissolve her engagement to Smatter's nephew Beaufort. Although Miss Stanley *attempts* to flee, as I have recounted above, Beaufort's cynical but principled friend Censor stops her, knowing that remaining in town and combating the performative matriarch is the only way for Miss Stanley to restore her status and engagement. Finally, Cecilia Beverly is bound to town by her guardians (Briggs, Harrel, the older Delvile) who all reside there.[19] She is not only obligated to live with one of them, but forced—her fortune is under their control until

---

[19] The Delvile family live partly in town, partly in the country at Delvile Castle. Cecilia and the Delviles return to the country home again after Cecilia and Mortimer are married, at the end of the novel.

her majority. Her resources out of reach, Cecilia *has* no retreat, until she either claims her fortune or forswears it—as she ultimately does—by marrying a man who won't take her surname.

Trapped in the 'World' as they are, Burney's natural heroines are left with little recourse. They are unable to perform, which leaves them frequently unable to act in any sense. The theatrics of others, and the society that supports those others, are unfettered in their behaviours towards the heroines. The previous chapters have detailed several of the most traumatic clashes between natural heroine and social performer. Evelina's abduction into Clement Willoughby's carriage results in immediate distress, but also longer-lasting fear and guilt, and Clement Willoughby continues his advance. Captain Mirvan's 'frolic' as a highwayman not only afflicts Evelina with guilt but earns her a slap from Madame Duval. Cecilia Stanley is very simply kicked out of house, home, and engagement due to Lady Smatter's desire to be seen in a particular light. Monckton's long-running deception of Cecilia Beverley results in mistrust from her friends, the postponement of her wedding, the disdain of her eventual father-in-law, and is a contributing factor to both Mrs. Delvile's stress-induced aneurism and Cecilia's madness. More obliquely, Belfield's act and his clash with Sir Robert Floyer at the opera house fuel rumours about Cecilia's romantic interests, which are further compounded by Harrel's pretense of her engagement to Floyer. Harrel's other act, of a happy-go-lucky gamester in good financial standing, leads Cecilia to witness a suicide, and puts her in debt to a moneylender—itself ammunition for Monckton, passing on intelligence of Cecilia's faults to Mr. Delvile in apparent good faith. Both Harrel's and Monckton's acts create dissention and confusion that helps repeatedly divide Cecilia from Mortimer, stalling the plot and stirring up anguish for the virtuous members of the cast.

Truth never gives heroines power over performance. In the end, Cecilia is only able to regain any of Mr. Delvile's faith by unconsciously enacting a melodrama herself, in the form of her madness: 'Mr. Delvile, though he would gladly, to have annulled an alliance he held disgraceful to his family, have received intelligence that Cecilia was no more, was yet extremely disconcerted to hear of the sufferings to which his own refusal of an asylum he was conscious had largely contributed' (Burney, *Cecilia* 911).[20] Evelina, though finally protected from him by familial legitimacy and marriage, at last concludes of Sir Clement Willoughby that he 'is an impracticable man, and I never yet succeeded in an attempt to frustrate whatever he had planned' (Burney, *Evelina* 353). Miss Stanley is restored to her station and fiancé, but by Censor's blackmail, *not* truth or virtue. In short, not only does the social theatre of others endanger the heroine, but her natural state affords her no effective countermeasure. But if it renders Burney's heroines vulnerable to be natural characters in a theatrical 'World', it renders her heroes impotent. Beaufort, Mortimer, and especially the paragon Lord Orville utterly fail to convert their good manners into a useful, productive, or protective morality.

Mortimer is somewhat odd as a hero, sentimental or not; he is essentially and peculiarly a male heroine, and specifically a male Cecilia. Their prolonged and tormented courtship is partly so because they share the same characteristics, out of synchronization. For example, as Mortimer decides they must be married, deciding after some struggle that for him, 'the conflict between bosom felicity and family pride is deliberately over', Cecilia inconveniently concludes that she 'will not be responsible for [his] offending such a mother; scarcely can you honour her yourself more than I do' (Burney, *Cecilia* 563; 569). Their characters are marked by similar impulses, too, such as Cecilia's charity towards the Hill family, Mortimer's assistance of a Gypsy woman

---

[20] This also pays into Emily Hodgson Anderson's idea that perfomativity for Burney's heroines occurs mainly in the form of a swoon (46).

and her child, and their mutual, uncoordinated aid of Mr. Belfield. Henrietta also declares them alike, telling Cecilia that Mortimer 'would not distress anybody, or make one ashamed for all the world! *You* only are like him! always gentle, always obliging!' (776) Cecilia, in her madness, driven by a terror that Mortimer is in danger, flees into the street 'with supernatural speed, gliding from place to place, from street to street' (897). Mortimer, finding Cecilia ill, becomes in turn 'half mad with the acuteness of his misery'; briefly, he too '[flies] out of the house' with fear for his beloved (911).[21] So as a hero, Mortimer is out of type to begin with; his attributes are the heroine's attributes, and the possibility of making him into the *tutor husband* rather than Cecilia's literal equal is a somewhat dubious proposition.

With this in mind, what does performance do to Mortimer—and what does he do about it? Once again, the masquerade provides an excellent opening. Mortimer, introduced here only anonymously, dresses simply and elegantly in his white domino. Mortimer is fashionable, later observed to be 'very strikingly elegant in his address and appearance' (139). Like Cecilia, who is 'not the least animated' of those preparing for the masquerade, Mortimer is not indifferent to the appeals of social spectacle; however, in this case, he dresses to the minimum, and performs not at all (103). The minimal disguise symbolically offset Monckton's black Devil, and he does reassure Cecilia that the Devil 'is an evil spirit, and we will surely lay him. If one spell fails, we must try another' (115). However, his reassurance is somewhat groundless; while Belfield performs, 'laying the spirit', Burney is introducing the fact that Mortimer is not a social performer. Here, in performative space, he does not in any way act.

As it concerns most of Cecilia's problems, this remains true. Mortimer is so detached from Cecilia's daily life that a measure of his effectiveness, were he actually present, is difficult to make. His involvement in Harrel's entire decline only begins after the fact; he appears at

---

[21] He, unlike Cecilia, knows where his beloved is, and is therefore quickly recalled to sanity and to her side.

Vauxhall after Harrel has died, and is so far out of the loop that he approaches Cecilia still carrying the 'air of gravity and distance' that has characterized his latest overemotional huff (421). Despite his sentiments once he comprehends the situation—'Amiable Miss Beverley! what a dreadful scene you have witnessed! what a cruel task you have nobly performed!' etcetera—one gets the sense that both his help and his reaction are not quite as useful as they could be (422). Cecilia has been trapped without escape in a nightmarish spectacle, and polite, sentimental Mortimer arrives only just in time to ferry her home afterwards.

Much of the time, Mortimer and his sentiments are dragged everywhere the Volubles lead him, rather idiotically making the repeated assumption that what they say has something to do with the truth. Having overheard Harrel's claim that Cecilia is engaged to Sir Robert Floyer, Mortimer confesses to her that he 'never supposed any mistake, though sometimes I thought you repented your engagement' (309). His reason for never asking, or pushing his own suit, *even though* he suspected she might be 'shackled unwillingly': 'I doubted if this were honourable to the Baronet. . . what, indeed, was my right to such a liberty?' (309) Rather than perform any heroics, Mortimer leaves the woman he loves to a possibly disastrous marriage—one he believes may be analogous to *slavery*—because he is too honest to help her. The natural virtue that makes Mortimer a fine protagonist makes him an abysmal hero.

The problem is exacerbated in Burney's greatest paragon, *Evelina*'s Lord Orville. Orville, as introduced by Evelina, is extremely promising on first impression. Erin Mackie notes that Orville 'has been faulted for his absolute perfection' (Burney, *Evelina* 171). He is, Evelina reports, 'gaily, but not foppishly dressed. . . animated and expressive' (31). Much later, even under the false impression that he has sent her a distressing letter, she says, 'With what politeness did he address me! with what sweetness did he look at me! The very tone of his voice

seemed flattering!' (281) Mackie continues by saying that, 'Without personal complications and abstaining from meddling, domination, and self-authorization, Lord Orville, then, is more purely perfect than even Sir Charles Grandison' (172).[22] Mackie terms this perfection, but these virtuous attributes cripple him as a heroic figure.

Orville is consistently and horrifyingly ineffectual—an attractive and, in practical terms, useless ideal. To begin with, his seeming perfection is in itself harmful to the heroine. Her first encounter with him, entirely proper, leaves her 'tired, ashamed, and mortified' (36). Later, appalled at the possibility that she has behaved incorrectly in Orville's vicinity, she writes, 'the knowledge of his contemptuous opinion haunted and dispirited me, and made me fear for he might possibly misconstrue whatever I should say' (63). She is so anxious to keep his good opinion that, when she is corralled and paraded by prostitutes at 'Marybone-gardens' and he walks past without seeing her, her reaction is 'infinite joy' (233; 235). Being seen at Marylebone at all by her paragon, in the vulgar company of the Branghtons and Madame Duval, is to Evelina's thinking as shameful as actual prostitution: 'had I, indeed, been sunk to the guilty state, which such companions might lead him to suspect, I could scarce have had feelings more cruelly depressing' (235). For Evelina, the natural virtue and honest that makes Orville estimable also makes him a source of anxiety and self-loathing.

Against a performative villain, he proves no better. He manages one oblique off-page victory, over the poisonous fop Lovel. Orville assures Evelina in an alluringly mysterious fashion (through the proxy of her hostess Mrs. Mirvan) that 'she had no future disturbance to apprehend from [Lovel]' (103). But the effeminate fop is not, in theory, a particularly impressive enemy to overcome. Evelina's satirical companion Mrs. Selwyn notes Lovel's dangerous aspects: '. . . though he is malicious, he is fashionable, and may do you some harm in the great

---

[22] Title character of the novel by Samuel Richardson.

world' (294). She does not, however, suggest that he is a physical or sexual threat. He is apparently incapable of being a rake. But Michele Cohen suggests that an emasculated villain is all a polite gentleman could be expected to manage; she writes, 'A critical aspect of polite gentlemanliness was precisely that it was. . . rent with anxieties, in particular the anxiety about effeminacy, because tensions between masculinity and refinement made it difficult for a man to be at once polite and manly' (313). As a protector, Orville certainly proves this point. His victory here is over Evelina's least potent enemy, over a decidedly effeminate man. It occurs off the page, without detail, and is not even related directly to its beneficiary.

Against more over overtly masculine performers, Orville is helpless. While Captain Mirvan and Clement Willoughby force elderly women to race for their entertainment, Evelina is made slightly less horrified by Orville's reaction: 'Lord Orville, who, I am sure, was equally disgusted, not only read my sentiments, but, by his countenance, communicated to me his own' (288). Orville, who elliptically causes the race to begin with through his attempts to smooth conversation, now demonstrates his displeasure at this sadistic and vulgar scene (that is, if Evelina even reads his displeasure correctly) by *exchanging a look* with the heroine. This is the extent of his action. He does not try to assist the women who are being tormented and mocked. The performers (at this juncture, as Vivien Jones observes, in the capacity of 'theatre director[s]') put on their show, and Orville's nonperformance exerts itself in inactive disapproval (xxiv). No one is protected and nothing is accomplished by his politeness.

Orville is most harmfully useless in his politeness with regards to Clement Willoughby. Recalling again the opera scene, where Willoughby uses a barrage of verbal theatrics to wrangle Evelina into accepting a carriage ride, the impotence of Orville's polite nonperformance is clear. As they encounter each other, Evelina of course becomes 'inexpressibly distressed; to suffer

Lord Orville to think me satisfied with the single protection of Sir Clement Willoughby, I could

not bear' (Burney, *Evelina* 97). But she is paralyzed by her own anxiety and manners, and by the

machinations of Clement Willoughby. Noting her distress, Orville attempts straightforwardly,

honestly, to extract Evelina from her situation. He makes his first attempt, offering his coach for

Evelina's use. Clement Willoughby, however, cuts off both his offer and Evelina's affirmative

response; neither of them is able to politely accuse him of being a dangerous escort, and so they

are stymied as his coach arrives. Orville attempts to offer a second time, but after the first rebuff

he is 'unusually softened'; in response to Willoughby's vehemence, Orville's language becomes

*less assertive* (98). His placatory reaction claims that 'To offer [his] services in the presence of

Sir Clement Willoughby would be superfluous', gently offering those services anyway, but

leaving the question dangerously open (ibid.). Despite the lesson Evelina has learned at her first

assembly—that declining one offer and accepting the next is unforgivably rude—Evelina

confides in her letter to Mr. Villars that she would have assented, as per her first inclination, if

Orville had 'then repeated his offer' (ibid.). But he does not. Instead, as Evelina is essentially

abducted by a known rake, he offers more manners: 'Lord Orville, with a bow and a half-smile,

wished me good night' (ibid.).

More ludicrously, while Evelina is driven directionlessly through town at the whim and

in the hands of Clement Willoughby, Orville is exercising his polite, reserved, nonperformative

perfection in the best way he knows how: by sitting up at the Mirvans' and worrying about it.

Evelina sees no problem with this; she rather relates with bemusement and pleasure Mrs.

Mirvan's intelligence 'that he appeared *extremely* anxious, nay uneasy and impatient for my

return. If I did not fear to flatter myself, I should think it not impossible but that he had a

suspicion of Sir Clement's design, and was therefore concerned for my safety' (102). In short,

Orville *knows that he is putting her in danger*. At this point, the 'stranger to all intemperence'

becomes as much a hazard as a help (267). The only security he provides for Evelina is marriage,

which is a question of status, not character. Moreover, their marriage only takes place—

ironically enough—after Evelina's rakish father has chosen to acknowledge her.

The most proactive of Burney's natural heroes is *The Witlings'* Beaufort. Beaufort is 'a

scholar, a man of cultivated talents'; Miss Stanley remarks tearfully on his 'Honour, delicacy and

Worth' (Burney, *Witlings* 37; 56). He reacts to his fiancée's banishment with passionate

loyalty—however, even he can do very little with his straightforward honesty and honour.

Smatter, who dismisses his protests that abandoning Miss Stanley is both reprehensible and

socially inadvisable, declares her performative authority, answering, 'Do you suppose I have

laboured so long. . . to be taught, at last, the right rule of conduct by my Nephew?' (40) Then she

shows her upper hand: that she will disown and disinherit Beaufort if he even sees Cecilia (ibid.).

He is, in other words, better intentioned than Orville—and still powerless.

Censor is the hero of *The Witlings*. He serves as a go-between for Beaufort and Miss

Stanley while they are separated. He prevents them from ruining themselves by meeting against

Lady Smatter's command, advising Beaufort to act, 'not with passion but understanding' (42).

He recalls to them the very real need for social and fiscal security, the 'Basis of all Happiness. . .

will the presence of Cecilia soften the hardships of Penury? Will her Smiles teach you to forget

the pangs of Famine? Will her Society make you insensible to the severities of an Houseless

Winter?' (74) He himself offers Miss Stanley a sum to tide her over, which she turns down.

Finally, he performs his great act: he blackmails Lady Smatter into recanting, presenting her with

a deeply insulting poem and inviting her to disown Beaufort or Cecilia 'if you think such

Lampoons may spread without doing you injury—' (94)

Censor's act of blackmail—cloaked in a pleaded ignorance of the poem's origin—is troubling. Censor is not a perfect gentleman. He is introduced grumbling at being dragged into a millinery shop to meet Miss Stanley. He criticises the intelligence and behaviours of everyone he sees, witness to 'Scenes of the absurdities of [his] Fellow Creatures' (11).[23] The audience *knows* he is the saviour of Miss Stanley and Beaufort, but the threat, and the poem itself, are unnervingly vicious. It contains, among other insults:

> This lady with Study has muddled her head;
>
> Sans meaning she talk'd, and sans knowledge she read,
>
> And gulp'd such a Dose of incongruous matter
>
> That Bedlam must soon hold the Carcase of Smatter. (97)

It is blunt, grotesquely physical, and rich with offensive, assertive language that undermines Smatter's ability to think—or fight—back. It is as much an assault as any of Clement Willoughby's affective language, though it is visceral rather than sexual. It, like Monckton's performances, stems from a powerful passion suppressed for the sake of theatrical advantage. Censor's concern is 'Strong and violent'—but, like Monckton, he 'restrained it, lest a torrent of indignation should have overflowed your future hopes, and laid waste my future influence' (40). Also like Clement Willoughby, Censor enacts a social theatre dependant upon the mass destructive force of the Voluble audience. He teaches Jack Codger the poem as a demonstration of its power, and threatens: 'I will drop Lampoons in every Coffee-House. . . Compose Daily Epigrams for all the Papers. . . Send libels to every corner of the Town. . . Make all the Ballad singers resound your Deeds. . . And treat the Patagonian Theatre with a Poppet to represent you'

---

[23] One of his best lines, in Act III, is a satire directed to Beaufort: 'My good Friend, I am not ignorant that Lovers, Fops, fine Ladies and Chambermaids have all charters for talking nonsense; it is therefore, a part of their business, and they deem it indispensible; but I never yet heard any order of Men so unfortunate as to be under a necessity of listening to them' (43). MIGHT MOVE THIS TO CONCLUSION

(98). At this point, like Evelina bullied at an assembly, Smatter bursts into tears. Burney's most effective hero is, like her worst villains, an imaginative, performative bully. Censor is aware of this; it's the difference he sees between himself and Beaufort that drives him to act. He asks, 'Shall this noble fellow be suffered to ruin himself? no! the World has too few like him' (74). So he embarks on this endeavour, declaring himself 'no Quixote' and becoming nearly a villain in the process (63).

Cecilia, Evelina, and Miss Stanley all find themselves trapped or surrounded by other people's social theatrics, and by the lack of their own. Mortimer suffers the same traps as a heroine; Orville's natural politeness paralyzes him and leaves Evelina stranded amongst horrifying dangers. Beaufort, unaided, would destroy his life without the performative and morally questionable intercession of his less perfect friend Censor. The brief and simple conclusion is this: that in Burney's 'World', nonperformance may be necessary to virtue, but performance is imperative to self-defence, protection, and survival. The lack of it leads to pain, suffering, and retreat, none of it entirely alleviated by the 'fix' of marriage.

# Conclusion

Frances Burney's fictions—particularly the early ones—are often referred to as Cinderella stories. Judith Lowder Newton discusses *Evelina*'s 'Cinderella' plot in 1981's *Women, Power & Subversion*. Huang Mei's 1990 inclusion of *Evelina* in *Transforming the Cinderella Dream* relies entirely on this interpretation. Erin Mackie makes use of the conceit in *Rakes, Highwaymen, and Pirates*, published in 2009, although with the slightly different result of an Orville whose princeliness is no more than 'an idealized projection of female fantasy' (173). Lillian and Howard Bloom more unusually extend the comparison to the heroines of both *Cecilia* and *The Wanderer* in their essay 'Fanny Burney's Novels: The Retreat from Wonder'. The fairy tale comparison works from reasonable material; Evelina is a beautiful, virtuous young woman divested of her parentage and rank, who struggles virtuously against the obstacles of rapacious men and uncouth company, and eventually emerges triumphant, fortune reinstated and marriage to an apparently ideal man secured.

But here the *idyll* of the fairy tale ends.

For all their suffering, none of Burney's heroines are married to a Prince Charming who is any kind of white knight; they are all paralyzed by their own manners and sincerity in a society of performance and deceit. As Judith Lowder Newton chillingly argues of Lord Orville, he 'is indeed too good to be true, and like all Prince Charmings . . . his extraordinary virtues are not only compensation but justification for the way things are' (41). The way things are, in Burney's fictions, binds every individual to a fashionable, sociable 'World' where theatre and dissimulation are at the root of every experience—the formal stage, gossip, their own

machinations and disguises, whether by choice or simply by proximity. Although performance does not equate villainy, Burney's theatrical 'World' is inherently dangerous, threatening the social, financial, physical, and emotional wellbeing of everyone who resides there. It is dangerous for the natural and virtuous protagonists of Burney's works, diminishing their power to communicate or physically protect themselves and each other, providing a medium for torment by an unscrupulous theatrical character.

Villains are also traditional in the Cinderella story; *their* suffering, or rather, their comeuppance, is as integral to the story's ending as Cinderella's shoe. The theatrical villains who torment Burney's heroines, however, don't suffer the traditional ubiquitous violence for their cruelty and vanity. Monckton lingers, bitter and maimed, Harrel commits suicide, but Clement Willoughby simply fades off the page; Captain Mirvan carries on. Though frightened and insulted, there is no indication that wicked aunt Lady Smatter changes her ways; indeed, her reemergence in *The Woman-Hater* grants her a second chance at villainy. It's laughable even to entertain the thought that anything changes for the Voluble crowd. Meanwhile Belfield, the one truly noble social performer, survives his own performances to end his story on rickety middle ground, awkwardly juggling idealism, a performative temperament, and hard-won experience. Suffering, in Burney's works, is not a clear-cut moral issue; the great 'World' is a threat to those residents who refuse to perform, and to those who embrace it wholeheartedly, attempting, with varying degrees of success, to use social theatre as a tool for self-advancement. The theatrical 'World' is indiscriminate in its victims.

The only refuge from this peril seems to be, after all, a 'total seclusion from the world'; but this provides a somewhat hollow existence (Burney, *Cecilia* 659). Belfield's seclusion is cut short by an unsupportable intellectual stupor, and Cecilia, safe, secure, and married, concludes

her 'Memoirs' with disheartening tepidity: 'she checked the rising sigh of repining mortality, and, grateful with general felicity, bore partial evil with chearfullest resignation' (941). After two novels and a play's worth of struggle and persistence, Burney leaves her reader with the uncomfortable sense that there simply is no escape; to a woman whose relationship with publicity and society was as fraught as Burney's own, this was probably the truth.

# Works Cited

"An Account of the Endeavours That Have Been Used to Suppress Gaming-Houses, and of the

      Discouragements that Have Been Met With. In a Letter to a Noble Lord." London: 1722.

      *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. Web. 19 August 2011.

Anderson, Emily Hodgson. *Eighteenth-Century Authorship and the Play of Fiction: Novels and

      the Theater, Haywood to Austen.* Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Andrew, Donna T. "The Code of Honour and its Critics: The Opposition to Duelling in England,

      1700-1850." *Social History* 5.3 (1980): 409-434. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 February 2011.

Bending, Stephen. "Mrs. Montagu's Contemplative Bench: Bluestocking Gardens and Female

      Retirement." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69.4 (2006): 555-580. *JSTOR.* Web. 15

      September 2011.

Bickerstaff, Isaac [Richard Steele et. al.]. *The Tatler.* Vol. 1. London: E. Nutt, 1733. Print.

Bloom, Lillian D. and Edward A. Bloom. "Fanny Burney's Novels: The Retreat from Wonder."

      *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 12.3 (1979): 215-235. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 January 2011.

Boswell, James. *Dr. Johnson's Table-Talk: Containing Aphorisms on Literature, Life, and

      Manners; with Anecdotes of Distinguished Persons: Selected and Arranged from Mr.

      Boswell's Life of Johnson.* London: C. Dilly, 1798. *Eighteenth Century Collections

      Online.* Web. 16 September 2011.

Bunyan, Paul. *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Ed. Roger Sharrock. 1965. London: Penguin, 1987. Print.

Burney, Fanny. *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney.* Ed. Lars E. Troide and Stewart

      J. Cooke. Vol. 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Print.

Burney, Frances. *Cecilia*. Ed. Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody. 1988. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2008. Print.

Burney, Frances. *The Witlings. The Complete Plays of Frances Burney*. Ed. Peter Sabor. Vol. 1.

London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. Print.

Burney, Frances. *Evelina*. Ed. Edward A. Bloom. 2002. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Print.

Burton, John. *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*. 3rd. ed. Dublin: J. Milliken, 1794.

*Google Books*. Web. 11 August 2011.

Carter, Philip. "Polite 'Persons': Character, Biography and the Gentleman." *Transactions of the

Royal Historical Society* 6.12 (2002): 333-354. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 January 2011.

Castle, Terry. "The Carnivalization of Eighteenth-Century English Narrative." *PMLA* 99.5

(1984): 903-916. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 February 2011.

Castle, Terry. *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English

Culture and Fiction.* London: Methuen, 1986. Print.

Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of. *Lord Chesterfield's Letters*. Ed. David Roberts.

1992. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.

Cohen, Michele. " 'Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of

Masculinity, 1750-1830." *The Journal of British Studies*. 44.2 (2005): 312-329. *JSTOR*.

Web. 16 January 2011.

Craft-Fairchild, Catherine. *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in

Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State

University Press, 1993. Print.

Curtain, Michael. "A Question of Manners: Status and Gender in Etiquette and Courtesy." *The Journal of Modern History* 57.3 (1985): 395-423. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 January 2011.

D'Arblay, Frances Burney. *The Early Diary of Frances Burney, 1768-1778, With a Selection from Her Correspondence and from the Journals of her Sisters, Susan and Charlotte Burney.* Ed. Annie Raine Ellis. London: Bell & Son,1889. *British and Irish Women's Letters and Diaries.* Web. 7 August 2011.

Davidson, Jenny. *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

Dawson, Lady Caroline. "Letter from Lady Caroline Dawson, Countess of Portarlington to Lady Louisa Stuart, 1781?" *Gleanings from an Old Portfolio Containing Some Correspondence between Lady Louisa Stuart and Her Sister, Caroline, Countess of Portarlengton, and Other Friends and Relatives*. Ed. Alice Georgina Caroline Strong Clark. Vol. 1. Edinburgh: 1895. *English and Irish Women's Letters and Diaries.* Web. 7 August 2011.

Deutsch, Phyllis. 'Moral Trespass in Georgian London: Gaming, Gender, and Electoral Politics in the Age of George III.' *The Historical Journal* 39.3 (1996): 637-656. 1996. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 February 2011.

Doody, Margaret Anne. *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Print.

Doody, Margaret Anne. Introduction. *Cecilia*. By Frances Burney. 1988. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xi-xxxix. Print.

Duncan, Jeffrey L. "The Rural Ideal in Eighteenth-Century Fiction." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8.3 (1968): 517-535. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 September 2011.

Fielding, Henry. *Amelia.* Ed. David Blewett. London: Penguin, 1987. Print.

Fielding, Henry. *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers and Related Writing.*

    Ed. Malvin R. Zirker. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. Print.

Fielding, Henry. 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men." *Miscellanies*. Vol. 1.

    London: 1784. 180-227. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Web. 21 September

    2011.

Gelles, Edith B. "Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case." *Journal of Social History* 22.4 (1989):

    667-683. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 August 2011.

Golding, M.R. "Variations in the Use of the Masque in English Revenge Tragedy." *The*

    *Yearbook of English Studies*. 3.0 (1973): 44-54. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 February 2011.

Grant, Anne MacVicar. "Letter from Anne MacVicar Grant to Harriet Reid, April 30, 1773."

    *Letters from the Mountains: Being the First Real Correspondence of a Lady, Between the*

    *Years 1773 and 1807*. Vol. 1. London: Longmans & Co., 1807. *English and Irish*

    *Women's Letters and Diaries*. Web. 11 August 2011.

Gulliver, Lemuel [Henry Fielding]. "The Masquerade, a Poem. Inscribed to C- - -T  H- -D- -G- -

    R." *The Grub-Street Opera. As it Is Acted at the Theatre in the Hay-Market. By*

    *Scriblerus Secundus. To Which Is Added, The Masquerade, A Poem.* London: J. Roberts

    and A. Dodd, 1728. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online.* Web. 13 April 2011.

Inchbald, Elizabeth. *A Simple Story*. Ed. J.M.S. Tomkins. 1988. Oxford: Oxford University

    Press, 1991. Print.

Johnson, [Charles]. *The Masquerade. A Comedy.* London: Bernard Lintot, [nd]. *JSTOR.* Web. 27

    February 2011.

Kalman, Harold D. "Newgate Prison." *Architectural History* 12 (1969): 50-61, 108-112. *JSTOR.*

> Web. 23 September 2011.

Kant, Immanuel. "What Is Enlightenment?" *Classic Sociological Theory*. Ed. Craig J. Calhoun

> and Joseph Gerteis. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007. *Google Books*. Web. 25 September

> 2011.

Klein, Lawrence E. "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some

> Questions About Evidence and Procedure." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*. 29.1 (1995): 97-

> 109. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 March 2011.

Klein, Lawrence E. "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century." *The*

> *Historical Journal* 45.4 (2002): 869-898. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 September 2011.

Langford, Paul. "The Uses of Eighteenth-Century Politeness." *Transactions of the Royal*

> *Historical Society* 6.12 (2002): 311-331. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 February 2011.

Mackie, Erin. *Rakes, Highwaymen, and Pirates: The Making of the Modern Gentleman in the*

> *Eighteenth Century.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Print.

"Masquerade Intelligence." *Middlesex Journal or Chronicle of Liberty* 14-16 May 1771. *18th-*

> *19th Century Burney Collection Newspapers.* Web. 30 March 2011.

"Masquerade Intelligence." *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* 28 April 1779: 4. *18th-19th*

> *Century Burney Collection Newspapers.* Web. 29 March 2011.

"Morning Chronicle. London, February 26." *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* 26

> February 1773: [np]. *18th-19th Century Burney Collection Newspapers.* Web. 30 March

> 2011.

Newton, Judith Lowder. *Women, Power & Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction 1778-*

> *1860*. London: Methuen, 1981. Print.

Noyes, Robert Gale. "Ben Jonson's Masques in the Eighteenth Century." *Studies in Philology*

    33.1 (1933): 427-436. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 April 2011.

Ogborn, Miles. *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies 1680-1780.* London: Guilford,

    1998. Print.

"Paragraphs of Fashion." *World and Fashionable Advertiser* 5 April 1787. *18th-19th Century*

    *Burney Collection Newspapers.* Web. 13 August 2011.

Parsons, Nicola. *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century England.* Basingstoke, Hampshire:

    Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. Print.

Pope, Alexander. *The Best of Pope*. Ed. George Sherburn. New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons,

    1931. Print.

Rosnow, Ralph L. and Gary Alan Fine. *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay.*

    Oxford: Elsevier, 1976. Print.

Russell, Gillian. " 'Faro's Daughters': Female Gamesters, Politics, and the Discourse of Finance

    in 1790s Britain." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33.4 (2000): 481-504. *JSTOR*. Web. 30

    August 2011.

Russell, Gillian. "Private Theatricals." *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-*

    *1830.* Ed. Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

    2007. 191-203. Print.

Russell, Gillian. *Women, Sociability, and Theatre in Georgian London*. Cambridge: Cambridge

    University Press, 2007. Print.

Sharrock, Roger. Introduction. *The Pilgrim's Progress*. By Paul Bunyan. 1965. London:

    Penguin, 1987. vii-xxii. Print.

Shoemaker, Robert B. "The Taming of the Duel: Masculinity, Honour and Ritual Violence in London, 1660-1800." *The Historical Journal* 45.3 (2002): 525-545. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 February 2011.

Stewart, Carol. *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics.* Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010. Print.

"Thurs 16." *Gentleman's Magazine* 54.6 (1784): 935. *British Periodicals*. Web. 26 September 2011.

Troide, Lars E. and Stewart J. Cook. "Introduction." *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney.* By Fanny Burney. Vol. 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Print. ix-xvi.

White, Eric Walter. *A History of English Opera*. London: Faber and Faber, 1983. Print.

Wroth, Warwick and Arthur Edgar Wroth. *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century.* 1896. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1979. Print.