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Evelina; or, Female Difficulties

Susan Staves

There is a remarkable degree of critical consensus on the merits of *Evelina*, Fanny Burney's popular novel.¹ This consensus is for the most part sound, but it has one aspect which strikes me as peculiar. Descriptions of the novel make it appear to be a combination of the usual romance with cheerful, albeit occasionally malicious, satire. The primary criticism of the book is that it is hopelessly trivial. Yet *Evelina*'s predominant emotion seems to me to be an acute anxiety which is painful, real, and powerful.

Traditional approaches to *Evelina* stress Fanny Burney's place in literary history as a transitional figure between the major novelists of the mid-eighteenth century and Jane Austen. Critics also seem to agree that her plots are perfunctory, simply "wood and wire" on which to hang the true attraction of her work, the humorous characters and delightful comic episodes. The plots, Macaulay wrote, "are rudely constructed and improbable, if we consider them in themselves. But they are admirably framed for the purpose of exhibiting striking groups of eccentric characters, each governed by his own peculiar whim, each talking his own peculiar jargon, and each bringing out by opposition the oddities of all the rest."²

The most intriguing note repeatedly struck in the criticism, however, is the claim that *Evelina: Or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* is somehow a quintessentially feminine book. It exhibits, we are told, the peculiar strengths and weaknesses of the feminine mind. On the one hand, there is a praiseworthy accuracy and minuteness in the observation of manners. On the other hand, the book's concerns are ultimately lacking in significance. Discussing Fanny Burney in his *Lectures on the Comic Writers*, Hazlitt offers a remarkable statement of this position:

Women, in general, have a quicker perception of any oddity or singularity of character than men, and are more alive to every absurdity which arises from a violation of the rules of society, or a deviation from established custom. This partly arises from the restraints on their own behaviour, which turn their attention constantly on the subject. . . . They have less muscular strength; less power of continued voluntary attention—of reason, passion, and imagination: but they are more easily impressed with whatever appeals to their senses or habitual prejudices. . . .

There is little other power in Miss Burney's novels, than that of immediate observation: her characters, whether of refinement or vulgarity, are equally superficial and confined. The whole is a question of form, whether that form is adhered to or infringed upon. It is this circumstance which takes away dignity and interest from her story and sentiments, and makes the one so teasing and tedious, and the other so insipid. The

1/Austin Dobson, *Fanny Burney* (London, 1903); Edwine Montague and Louis L. Martz, "Fanny Burney's *Evelina*," in *The Age of Johnson: Essays Presented to Chauncy Brewster Tinker* (New Haven, Conn., 1949), pp. 171–81; Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (London, 1954), pp. 89–91; Ernest Baker, *The History of the English Novel* (New York, 1957), 5, chap. 7; Gabrielle Buffet, *Fanny Burney: Sa vie et ses romans* (Paris, 1962), vol. 2; Kemp Malone, "Evelina Revisited," *Papers on Language and Literature* 1 (1965): 3–19; Michael E. Adelstein, *Fanny Burney* (New York, 1968), pp. 28–44.

2/Macaulay, "Madame D'Arblay," in *The Works of Lord Macaulay: Essays and Biographies* (London, 1898), 4:60–61.

difficulties in which she involves her heroines are too much "Female Difficulties"; they are difficulties created out of nothing.³

Writing in 1945, Lord David Cecil agreed with Hazlitt, "By nature, women are observers of those minutiae of manners in which the subtler social distinctions reveal themselves." Fanny Burney's "thinness" also was to him "symptomatic of a fundamental lack of mental distinction."⁴

Hazlitt was undoubtedly right to feel that contemporary women were likely to be sensitive to social decorum because of the restraints on their own behavior, and right to say that the difficulties in which Fanny Burney involves her heroines are "Female Difficulties." In fact, her final novel, *The Wanderer*, uses that phrase as its subtitle. We may, though, disagree that such difficulties are created "out of nothing" and find it worthwhile to analyze exactly what they are. Such an analysis may also suggest a more vital relationship than has previously appeared between the much-abused plot of the novel and the incidental comedy.

We may notice immediately that *Evelina's* anxiety is partly provoked by physical violence and threats of violence. She is subjected to assaults which—though they could happen in Richardson—could not conceivably be made on heroines in Jane Austen or even in Dickens. When she tries to rescue her grandmother from a ditch, Madame Duval suddenly hits her "a violent slap on the face!"⁵ Returning from the opera, she is trapped alone with Sir Clement Willoughby in his coach. She tries to withdraw her hand from him, "but in vain, for he actually grasped it between both his, without any regard to my resistance" (p. 86). More and more terrified and certain Sir Clement has lied to her about ordering the coachman to drive her home, she makes "a sudden effort to open the chariot-door" to jump from the moving coach into the street. He catches hold of her, continuing his declaration of love until she puts her head out of the window and shouts. Sir Clement pursues *Evelina* throughout the novel, seizing her another time in Mrs. Beaumont's garden until she is released by Lord Orville. Shortly thereafter he tears the forged letter out of her hand, ripping it into "a thousand pieces" and catching hold of her gown to prevent her escape.

Evelina's progress through the public places of London is about as tranquil as the progress of a fair-haired girl through modern Naples. Every time she is accidentally separated from her protectors she is addressed with indelicate freedom, pursued, and usually grabbed. Walking with the Miss Branghtons down a long alley at Vauxhall, she encounters a rout of drunken men (she does not, of course, call them drunken):

By the time we came near the end, a large party of gentlemen, apparently very riotous, and who were hallooing, leaning on one another, and laughing immoderately, seemed to rush suddenly from behind some trees, and, meeting us face to face, put their arms at their sides, and formed a kind of circle, which first stopped our proceeding, and then our retreating, for we were presently entirely enclosed. The Miss Branghtons screamed aloud, and I was frightened exceedingly; our screams were answered with bursts of

3/*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1931), 6:124.

4/David Cecil, "Fanny Burney's Novels," in *Essays on the Eighteenth Century Presented to David Nichol Smith* (Oxford, 1945), pp. 214, 221.

5/*Evelina*, Norton Library (New York, 1965), p. 133; all quotations are from this edition.

laughter, and for some minutes we were kept prisoners, till at last one of them, rudely seizing hold of me, said I was a pretty little creature. [Pp. 180–81]

Evelina struggles to free herself from these men, only to run headlong into another group who treat her with equal roughness. Sir Clement appears to “rescue” her, but, putting the worst possible construction on her presence unescorted in the dark alleys of Vauxhall, he in his turn forces her to exert all her strength to push him away.

Some weeks later at Marybone Gardens Evelina is separated from her party when everyone is frightened by the fireworks accompanying a dramatization of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. She seeks the others immediately, but “Every other moment I was spoken to by some bold and unfeeling man; to whom my distress, which I think must be very apparent, only furnished a pretence for impertinent witticisms, or free gallantry” (p. 218). Away from London in the quieter precincts of Bristol Hotwells, Evelina and Mrs. Selwyn nevertheless find their way along the Avon blocked by three rude men. On still another occasion, seeking safety in the company of two other young ladies, Evelina does not go “three yards” before being followed by yet another group of impertinent young men (p. 308).

It must be acknowledged that Richardson’s heroines suffer at least as much physical violence as Evelina does. In *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison* alike there is much pushing and shoving back and forth between the heroines and the men who would seduce them: Pamela and Clarissa are virtually imprisoned, Clarissa is raped, and Harriet Byron is abducted. In *Grandison*, the book that seems closest to *Evelina*, even the relatively mild Greville bruises Harriet. He snatches her hand, crying, “You shall give it to *me!*—And the strange wretch pressed it so hard to his mouth, that he made prints upon it with his teeth.”⁶ During the extended episode of Sir Hargrave Pollexfen’s abduction of Harriet, which resembles Sir Clement’s briefer coach ride with Evelina, both Sir Hargrave and Harriet grow quite violent. She struggles and screams, dashes the prayer book from the Fleet parson’s hands, and uses both her own hands to push away Sir Hargrave when he tries to kiss her “undefended neck.” He hugs her, throws himself at her feet to embrace her knees “with his odious arms,” and accidentally slams the door on her, giving her a bloody nose and bruising her stomach. Most memorably, he muffles her up in a cloak in the coach and forcibly stuffs a handkerchief in her mouth to prevent her screaming.

The effect of the assaults on Richardson’s heroines, however, is quite different from the effect of the violence toward Evelina. For one thing, Richardson’s heroines spend very little time in public places and so are not subjected to the pervasive anonymous violence Evelina encounters. More important, Harriet is twenty, and a much cooler, more poised woman who early establishes her superiority. Although she is, of course, physically weaker than Sir Hargrave, she is heroic enough to know that she will die rather than submit to him. Even in her fright, she has the presence of mind to reason with his underlings and to

6/Samuel Richardson, *Grandison*, Shakespeare Head edition (Oxford, 1929–31), 1:150; all quotations are from this volume.

rebuke her enemies magisterially: "I adjure you, Sir," she says to the minister, "by that God in whose sight, you read, 'we are gathered together,' that you proceed no further. I adjure you, Sir Hargrave, in the same tremendous Name, that you stop further proceedings. My life take: With all my heart, take my life: But my hand, never, never, will I join with yours" (p. 236). The melodramatic language in which Harriet speaks and in which she describes the scenes distances us from the reality of a woman's terror. More self-conscious and more self-regarding than Evelina, Harriet also repeatedly heightens the pathos of her situation in the telling. "He had the cruelty," she complains, "to thrust a handkerchief in my mouth, so that I was almost strangled; and my mouth was hurt, and is still sore, with that and his former violence of the like nature" (p. 249).

Evelina's terrors seem more immediate and more real. The God who was a shield and bulwark to Richardson's heroines is outside of her awareness. Unlike Harriet, Evelina is also often partly responsible for her own distress and so must suffer the confusion of guilt. Most important, Evelina is usually too frightened to provide dignified condemnations or moral analyses of her persecutors' vices—or, indeed, to do much more than haltingly beg them to release her. Sir Clement is a strong and experienced man of thirty, Evelina a weak and naive girl of seventeen. Fanny Burney makes us feel that difference. When Evelina is alone in the coach with Sir Clement, he preserves his *savoir faire* while she is gradually reduced to stammering and speechlessness:

"For Heaven's sake, what is the matter?"

"I—I don't know," cried I (quite out of breath), "but I am sure the man goes wrong; and if you will not speak to him, I am determined I will get out myself."

"You amaze me" answered he (still holding me), "I cannot imagine what you apprehend. Surely you can have no doubts of my honour?"

He drew me towards him as he spoke. I was frightened dreadfully, and could hardly say, "No, Sir, no,—none at all: only Mrs. Mirvan,—I think she will be uneasy. . . ."

Sir Clement, with great earnestness, endeavoured to appease and compose me: "If you do not intend to murder me," cried I, "for mercy's, for pity's sake, let me get out!" [P. 87]

The disingenuous Sir Clement knows perfectly well that Evelina doubts his honor, but he also calculates that she will be too embarrassed and too terrified to admit it. Obviously she does not really think he is interested in murdering her, yet her vocabulary can hardly include terms directly descriptive of sexual assault and rape. Harriet has a clearer notion of Sir Hargrave's intentions: first he will try to marry her forcibly, then if he is made to despair of that purpose, he will simply rape her and may or may not marry her afterward. Evelina does not know exactly what Sir Clement wants to do to her. How could she? Perhaps he only wants to declare his admiration, hold her hand, and take her home. Perhaps her anxieties are those of a silly girl who badly misjudges a worldly but honorable gentleman. So Evelina worries about being foolish as well as about the assaults which, to her, remain terrifyingly nameless.

Evelina's anxiety, however, is more often provoked by psychic threats than by the possibilities of physical assault. She worries constantly that her delicacy will be wounded or that it will appear to be compromised. "Delicacy" seems to be a central concept in the novel and is worth trying to define. As a positive virtue

it arises from awareness of the sensibilities and needs of others. Lord Orville, "the most delicate of men" (p. 287), appreciates the potentialities for pain in various situations and invents subtle ways of diminishing them. When Evelina is separated from her friends after the opera, Sir Clement boldly offers to take her with him in his coach, while Orville simply offers his coach and servants, making it clear that he himself will go home in a chair. Evelina is moved to exclaim, "How grateful did I feel for a proposal so considerate, and made with so much delicacy!" (pp. 84–85). After she has been seen with the two whores at Marybone Gardens, Orville seeks to caution her without suggesting that he suspects her virtue and without actually saying that the women were whores. (Evelina in describing the women to Mr. Villars in an early draft calls them "2 women of the Town"; in the final version they become "two women of such character.")⁷ Marveling at Orville's kindness on this occasion, Evelina cries, "How delicate his whole behaviour! willing to advise, yet afraid to wound me!" (p. 226).

True delicacy is opposed to cruelty, impertinence, and boldness; it is also superior to artificial decorums. False delicacy invokes lesser conventions to ignore the real needs of others. Orville, writes Mr. Villars, shows that he is above "a false and pretended delicacy" when he goes to Mrs. Mirvan's to secure Evelina's safety in the coach incident (p. 104). Evelina would be guilty of false delicacy were she to shrink from entering Mr. Macartney's room as he is about to shoot himself. The Macartney episodes have generally been regarded as gratuitous; they do, however, give Evelina a chance to show that her delicacy is superior to mere convention and, since Macartney is impoverished and friendless, that she is not quite such an egregious snob as some critics would have us believe.

Delicacy becomes more problematic when we think of it as implying weakness and modesty or when we ask whether the same delicacy is being recommended for both sexes. Like many other eighteenth-century novels, *Evelina* sometimes seems to deny significant differences between its masculine ideal and its feminine ideal. Mr. Villars is pleased with Evelina's intrepidity in saving Mr. Macartney from suicide: "Though gentleness and modesty are the peculiar attributes of your sex, yet fortitude and firmness, when occasion demands them, are virtues as noble and as becoming in women as in men: the right line of conduct is the same for both sexes, though the manner in which it is pursued may somewhat vary, and be accommodated to the strength or weakness of the different travellers" (p. 202). Similarly, in *Cecilia* the heroine's refusal to collapse on the traumatic occasion of Mr. Harrel's suicide and her pragmatic exertions to ensure that the corpse is properly attended are offered as exemplary.⁸

On the other hand, though, Fanny Burney sympathized with the general eighteenth-century desire to feminize the masculine ideal. Lord Orville is certainly being praised when, after Evelina's receipt of the forged letter, she laments, "I could have entrusted him with every thought of my heart . . . so steady did I think his honour, so *feminine* his delicacy" (pp. 246–47). The boldness, activity, independence, and aggressive sexuality which had earlier been associated with

7/Joyce Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney* (Oxford, 1958), p. 83.

8/All the novels concern themselves with female delicacy; see, e.g., *Camilla* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 358–62; *The Wanderer* (London, 1814), 2:230, 363–67.

masculinity were all objects of incessant attack. Propaganda against dueling was symptomatic and pervasive: it was criticized by Steele in *The Christian Hero*, attacked by Fielding's Dr. Harrison in *Amelia*, repeatedly preached against by Grandison, and numbered among George Primrose's sins by Sir William Thornhill. Orville is not known ever to have engaged in a duel; Edgar Mandelbert in *Camilla* rather seeks to prevent other men's duels than to fight his own; and even Mortimer Delville, the only hero in Fanny Burney who does fight, repents his action immediately. Other late-eighteenth-century novelists went further still in forcing the renunciation of masculine aggressiveness and the assumption of modesty. In Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, the hero faints when the heroine confesses her love and then actually dies of the shock.

Nevertheless, female delicacy does have some discrete identity, and Fanny Burney regards it with the utmost seriousness. Many things which may be the proper object of a man's attention must be hidden from women. In the *Early Diary* we read of the strange gentleman who is forbidden Dr. Burney's tea table because he does not understand this and of the kind Mr. Rishton, who reads Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to Fanny and his wife, "in which he is extremely delicate, omitting whatever, to the poet's great disgrace, has crept in that is improper for a woman's ear."⁹ Of particular interest in *Evelina* is the early scene in which the heroine, Orville, Captain Mirvan, and their friends watch Congreve's *Love for Love*. Captain Mirvan proves an excellent critic of the drama, asserting, "it's one of the best comedies in our language, and has more wit in one scene than there is in all the new plays put together" (p. 69). Lord Orville, though later acknowledging that Congreve cannot be pleasing to the ladies, appears to like the play himself; during the performance he is observed to be "in excellent spirits, and exceedingly entertaining" (p. 67). (In his defense, it must be noted that it is undoubtedly the expurgated version of *Love for Love* prepared by Thomas Sheridan in 1776 which he sees.)¹⁰ Still, ladies of delicacy like Mrs. Mirvan and *Evelina* cannot enjoy themselves. They are obliged to be "perpetually out of countenance," and *Evelina* has to say that though the play "is fraught with wit and entertainment" she hopes never to see it again. Since even in the expurgated act 1 the hero Valentine is dunned for money for one of his bastards and visited at his lodgings by Mrs. Frail, it is not hard to discover offenses against female delicacy. Indeed, the heroine Angelica, though singled out by Orville as "the only female in the play worthy of being mentioned to the ladies," expresses sentiments and uses language which must have been shocking by late eighteenth-century standards. In her first appearance she teases her uncle Foresight, warning, "I can neither make you a cuckold, uncle, by going abroad; nor secure you from being one, by staying home."

Female delicacy can be wounded and, if wounded often enough or seriously enough, actually killed. Delicacy is in part like virginity: once lost it cannot be

9/*The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1768-1778*, ed. Annie Raine Ellis (London, 1889), 1:243; all quotations are from this volume.

10/See Emmett L. Avery, *Congreve's Plays on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (New York, 1951), chap. 7 and appendix 1; *Bell's British Theatre* (London, 1780), vol. 8, includes *Love for Love*, . . . *Distinguishing also the Variations of the Theatre as Performed at the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane. Regulated from the Prompt Book.*

regained. Yet it is still more fragile and precarious than virginity, since it can be eroded by the social ambiance in which one finds oneself. Dr. James Fordyce, in his famous *Sermons to Young Women*, paints in lurid colors the gradual death of modesty: "For a while they [young women] are shocked at signs of rudeness. Their ears are wounded by the language of vice: Oaths, imprecations, double meanings, every thing obscene fills them with disgust and horror. But custom soon begets familiarity; and familiarity produces indifference. The emotions of delicacy are less frequent, less strong. And now they seldom blush, although perhaps they often affect it . . . their minds are already debauched."¹¹ Part of the romance of Fanny Burney's fiction is that though her heroines suffer repeated attacks on their modesty, the laws of a romance world keep them from becoming actually contaminated. The emancipated women like Mrs. Selwyn and Mrs. Arlbery, however, show the end result of the process Dr. Fordyce describes.

Evelina begins as a delicate young girl and seems to think her problem is principally that she will be thought to be indelicate, rather than that she will actually become so. After her error at the ridotto, for instance, she is "inexpressibly concerned" that Orville will think her "bold or impertinent." She writes to Mr. Villars that she could almost kill herself "for having given him the shadow of a reason for so shocking an idea" (pp. 60-61). For a woman, though, being thought to be indelicate is a serious social reality, not something to be dismissed as mere appearance. Knowing how pure her nature is, Mr. Villars nevertheless cautions his ward against Sir Clement: "The slightest carelessness on your part will be taken advantage of by a man of his disposition" (p. 147). Assured safety lies only in obscurity and absolute punctiliousness; merely to frequent public places is to be exposed to risk. Dr. Fordyce offers the same warnings Mr. Villars does, making the dangers still more explicit:

. . . if a young person (supposing her dispositions in other respects ever so good) will be always breaking loose through each domestic inclosure, and ranging at large the wide common of the world, these destroyers . . . will consider her as lawful game, to be hunted down without hesitation. . . . With regard to the better sort of men . . . if in the flutter of too public a life you should at any time so far forget yourselves, as to drop that nice decorum of appearance and manner, which is expected from your sex . . . they will be tempted to harbour suspicions which I dare not name . . . [Pp. 108-9]

In *Evelina* the epistolary form makes Orville's possible suspicions a subject of surmise, but in *Camilla*, where there is an omniscient narrator, Edgar Mandelbert's doubts about another pure heroine occasionally betrayed into the appearance of impropriety are carefully described.

Mr. Villars and Dr. Fordyce make the roots of Evelina's anxiety clear: if she offends against the decorums of the ballroom by rejecting one partner and then dancing with another, or if she is seen with the vulgar Mr. Smith's hands on her shoulders, people will think that she is a coquette lost to all true feminine feeling, a proper object of insult, and if not physically, then mentally, promiscuous. "Is it enough for a young woman to be free from infamy, from crimes?" asks

11/*Sermons to Young Women* (London, 1792), 1:94; Joyce Hemlow, "Fanny Burney and the Courtesy Books," *PMLA* 65 (1950):732-61, discusses FB's familiarity with Fordyce and courtesy books generally.

Dr. Fordyce, "Between the state of pure virgin purity and actual prostitution are there no intermediate degrees? Is it nothing to have a soul deflowered . . .?" (pp. 94-95). The slightest breach of decorum subjects *Evelina* to being thought a lost woman; men's liberties with her will be justified, she will be in greater danger of rape, and, of course, no Lord Orvilles or Edgar Mandelberts will want to marry her. Hazlitt's complaint that Fanny Burney centers on the question of whether forms are adhered to or infringed upon is fair enough as a description, but the forms themselves are by no means trivial; they have the gravest implications for the women characters. Significantly, at least one contemporary reviewer who was fond of *Evelina* seems to have considered the heroine's breaches of decorum as equivalent to Tom Jones's drunkenness, whoring, fighting, and being kept by Lady Bellaston. In the *Critical Review* of 1788 he longs "to see a female character drawn with faults and virtues, to see her feel the effects of misconduct, which does not proceed from a bad heart or a corrupted inclination, . . . in short to see a female Jones, or another *Evelina*, with faults equally embarrassing, yet as venial."¹² As Mr. Villars wrote, "Nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman; it is at once the most beautiful and most brittle of all human things" (p. 150).

Evelina's fears are objectified when, to her "inexpressible horror," she finds herself walking arm in arm with the whores in Marybone Gardens. Escaping from a young officer, she darts unsuspecting to seek their protection. Lord Orville passes once without noticing her, and then a second time, seeing her, almost causing her to faint, "so great was my emotion, from shame, vexation, and a thousand other feelings, for which I have no expressions" (p. 221). Contact between the pure maiden and fallen woman is, in fact, nearly an obligatory scene in certain kinds of eighteenth-century novels. Trapped for weeks in Mrs. Sinclair's brothel, *Clarissa* is also visited at Hampstead by Bab Wallis and Johanette Golding, whores *Lovelace* has coached to impersonate his relations; *Sophia* and *Olivia Primrose* are invited to come to live with Lady Blarney and *Carolina Wilelmina Amelia Skeggs*; *Emily St. Aubert* distinguishes female voices mingling with the brutal laughter of *Montoni*'s confederates and is appalled to learn that *Signora Livona*, whose manners had so charmed her at Venice, now appears at *Udolpho* as her persecutor's mistress. The whores *Evelina* meets remain nameless and appear only briefly, but her fear of being confused with them is vivid and immediate.

Although Fanny Burney's romance plot has generally been considered a rather adventitious element of her novel, the importance of delicacy lends interest to her choice of the sensationalistic cliché of a clandestine marriage. How can a girl who is supposed to be a bastard establish herself as a young lady of delicacy? It is really inconceivable that a *Harriet Byron* or an *Elinor Dashwood* should have such sordid origins. For *Richardson*'s taste, even the idea of a young man who was a bastard was hopelessly vulgar.¹³ Probably the only strictly delicate course

12/Quoted in J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1961), p. 168.

13/T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford, 1971), p. 297.

open to Evelina—if there are any delicate courses open to female bastards—would be to remain in retirement with Mr. Villars and to die unmarried. Certainly it takes the very indelicate boldness of Madame Duval and Mrs. Selwyn to bring about her legitimization by Sir John Belmont.

But the special circumstances of Evelina's birth do have several functions. First, though proper young women were expected to remain almost entirely within their own domestic circles, the controversy over Evelina's legitimacy serves to force and to justify her contact with a much wider society. Like Juliet Granville in *The Wanderer* she is required by a sense of duty to forsake the protection of her genteel guardian; she does not improperly seek experience for experience's sake. Then, as is also true for Juliet, Evelina's birth leaves her particularly vulnerable to the physical and psychological threats to which women generally were subjected and, therefore, exposes those threats with great clarity. Finally, her origin is in itself an additional threat to delicacy, one which allows Madame Duval to terrify Evelina just as thoroughly as the strange men at Vauxhall do. When Madame Duval announces the scheme to resort to law to claim her granddaughter's birthright, Evelina is speechless with "surprise and terror" (p. 109). Like Clarissa, who will not litigate with her father for her estate and who will not prosecute Lovelace for rape, she recoils at the impiety of accusing her father, at the scandal of reviving her mother's story, and simply at appearing publicly in a law court. Mr. Villars immediately stigmatizes the plan as "violent, . . . public, . . . totally repugnant to all female delicacy" (p. 116).

The real tension in *Evelina* lies between the heroine's struggle to preserve her delicacy under these extraordinarily difficult conditions and the multitude of comic characters who constantly threaten it. These characters are not incidental to the romance plot; they are blocking characters with a closer relationship to the romance heroine than is usual. Madame Duval, Captain Mirvan, the Branghtons, and the others achieve their full comic effect because they are projections of Evelina's anxieties. They actually commit all the solecisms she is afraid of committing or of being thought to have committed. They are vulgar; they are immodest; they are ignorant of social decorums; they are openly satirical and contemptuous. Incident after incident is generated by an arrangement of circumstances which make it appear that Evelina is guilty of some indelicacy and therefore simply another member of the group of comic characters. At the performance of *Love for Love* Mr. Lovel makes the threat explicit by suggesting that there is not much difference between Evelina and Miss Prue.

As long as Evelina is alone with the vulgar characters she is able to observe their antics with some amusement and only occasional irritation. She can dissociate herself in her own mind from the Branghtons by branding their behavior as rude, pretentious, and unfeeling, whether the world thinks of them as her connections or not. Even if the vulgar Mr. Smith does conspire with Madame Duval to force her into the impropriety of accepting tickets to the ball from him, she can establish her mental superiority by sarcasms to Mr. Villars at his "elegant speech" (p. 164). But as soon as her association with such characters threatens to become known to a member of polite society, she becomes genuinely anxious. Letter 54, for example, reports with horrible fascination the words and deeds of

Madame Duval and the Branghtons as they work their way to asking for Lord Orville's coach in *Evelina*'s name. The passage attains its effect not so much through *Evelina*'s protestations of "dread" and "agony" as by suspense built through such painfully minute recording of the characteristic remarks of her persecutors as their obtuseness tramples down her refinement (pp. 229–30). So "frantic" is *Evelina* at their success that, like someone thrashing about in quicksand, she herself becomes guilty of the probable impropriety of writing an apologetic letter to Lord Orville.

The most interesting comic characters who function as projections of *Evelina*'s fears are Captain Mirvan and Mrs. Selwyn. An analysis of their relation to her leads to some insights into the relationship between *Evelina* and Fanny Burney and into the consequences of eighteenth-century ideas about delicacy for Fanny Burney as an artist. In the *Early Diary* we discover a Miss Burney who is more boisterous, more ironic, and more sympathetic to laughter than the decorous *Evelina*, though certainly not without her own worries about delicacy. At Chessington, she describes the *Treatise upon Politeness* she promised to Miss Simmons, Mrs. Moore, and Kitty: "All this was taken as it was said, in sport, and we had much laughing in consequence of my scheme, which I accompanied by a thousand flighty speeches and *capricios*, for you know what my spirits are at . . . Chessington." The book, to be dedicated to Miss Notable of Swift's *Polite Conversation*, will be severe upon indelicate noises like coughing and laughing:

"Not to *cough*?" exclaimed every one at once; "but how are you to help it?"

"As to *that*," answered I, "I am not very clear about it myself, as I own I am sometimes guilty of doing it; but it is as much a mark of ill breeding, as it is to *laugh*; which is a thing that Lord Chesterfield has stigmatized."

. . . "And pray," said Mr. Crisp, making a fine affected face, "may you *simper*?"

"You may *smile* Sir," answered I; "but to *laugh* is quite abominable; though not so bad as *sneezing*, or *blowing the nose*."

. . . "But pray, is it permitted," said Mr. Crisp, very dryly, "to *breathe*?"

"*That* is not yet, I believe, quite exploded," answered I; "but I shall be more exact about it in my book of which I shall send *you six* copies. I shall only tell you in general, that whatever is natural, plain, or easy, is entirely banished from polite circles." [1:315]

Another episode in the *Diary* shows Fanny Burney seriously concerned about delicacy, but enjoying an atmosphere markedly less stuffy than anything with which *Evelina* or such later heroines as Fanny Price could feel comfortable. With Miss Allen and Miss Barsanti, she works to present scenes from Cibber's *The Careless Husband* at Mr. Crisp's house. Cibber was still more refined than the expurgated Congreve, but even his sentimental drama contains "a few exceptionable speeches" which Fanny Burney, playing Lady Graveairs, insists on omitting.¹⁴ In the days before the Evangelical piety which pervades the atmosphere of *Mansfield Park*, Mr. Crisp does not have any objections to private theatricals. Fanny Burney's step-sister, Miss Allen, goes so far as to borrow an entire suit of dark blue velvet from one Mr. Featherstone for her role as Sir Charles Easy.

¹⁴*Early Diary*, 1:123; earlier she had been asked to play Tag in Garrick's *Miss in Her Teens*, but refused, finding it "quite shocking" (1:99).

(Readers of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* will recall that Lucy Snow, impressed into performing a male role in a school theatrical, refuses to injure female delicacy by wearing pants.) Miss Allen's appearance in the ill-fitting men's clothes raises outrageous mirth, provoking the admirable Mr. Crisp to "hollowing." Both Miss Austen and Miss Brontë would perhaps find it significant that Miss Allen later disgraced her family by engaging in a clandestine correspondence, marrying secretly at Ypres, and finally separating from her husband.¹⁵

The more demure, more anxious regions of Fanny Burney's consciousness were appropriate to the character of a young lady heroine, but the lively, critical spirit of a satirist, which society and the marriage market found unappealing in young ladies, she disowns in the novel, splitting it off into figures like Captain Mirvan and Mrs. Selwyn. Though eighteenth-century readers tended to single out the Captain as the one unacceptably coarse note in an otherwise satisfactory novel, the author contrives to offer some support for his point of view. The saintly Mr. Villars confesses, "Shall I own to you, that, however I may differ from Captain Mirvan in other respects, yet my opinion of the town, its manners, inhabitants, and diversions is much upon a level with his own?" (pp. 104-5). Like Congreve's Ben, to whom he is compared, the Captain is a brave and essentially good-hearted man; he exposes sham and administers his corporal punishments only to those who deserve them. Fanny Burney must have enjoyed inventing his monkey parody of Mr. Lovel, which concludes the novel, though upon the entrance of the monkey "full-dressed, and extravagantly *à la mode*," a meeker Evelina jumps up on the seat of her chair. At her first ball Evelina had struggled unsuccessfully with her laughter. When Lovel advanced to her and Orville, she interrupted his speech with laughing at his "stately foppishness," blushed for her folly, and actually caused the polite peer to stare. Now she knows better. Loud laughter belongs to the drunken men at Vauxhall and to the whores in Marybone Gardens.

The most articulate satirist is Mrs. Selwyn, who along with the Captain, Lord Merton, and Mr. Coverley, bursts into "a loud, immoderate, ungovernable fit of laughter" at the sight of the monkey (p. 382). Fanny Burney sometimes uses Mrs. Selwyn as a satiric spokeswoman but preserves Evelina's respectability and her own by criticizing her freedom. Like Orville, but with a boldness allegedly objectionable in women, Mrs. Selwyn takes it upon herself to rebuke Evelina's persecutors. Affected by jealousy, Orville watches from a distance "with earnestness" while Lord Merton tries to make love to Evelina; Mrs. Selwyn advances to demand her release. Lovel, now Lady Louisa's sycophant, complains that Coverley has slighted her and committed "an outrageous solecism" in implying that Evelina is the best young woman there. Mrs. Selwyn retorts, "And pray, Sir, under what denomination may your own speech pass?" (p. 295). We are nevertheless encouraged to feel that Mrs. Selwyn has been placed by Evelina's characterization of her manners as "masculine" (p. 254), Mr. Villars's disgust at "her unmerciful propensity to satire" (p. 254), and even by the bad baronet's declaration that, "she has wit . . . and more understanding than half her sex put together;

15/*The History of Fanny Burney*, pp. 41, 42, 276, 282.

but she keeps alive a perpetual expectation of satire, that spreads a general uneasiness among all who are in her presence . . ." (p. 325).

In fact, Mrs. Selwyn could almost be a character in Dr. Fordyce's *Sermons*. "A masculine woman," he advises, "must be naturally an unamiable creature. . . . To the men an Amazon never fails to be forbidding" (pp. 104–5). The culture generally was severe on outspoken, learned, or masculine ladies, and characters like Mrs. Atkinson in *Amelia* and Miss Barnevelt in *Grandison* were also contrasted with more modest heroines and criticized for their pedantry or freedom. In ordinary life Fanny Burney seems to have shared this distaste, disapproving, for example, of the twenty-six-year-old Miss Bowdler, who was innocent, "very sensible and clever," but possessed of wit which spared "neither friend nor foe" and guilty of openly preferring the company of men.¹⁶

All the resources of Fanny Burney's art are used to exorcise from *Evelina* and Lord Orville those qualities which give life to the book and to embody them in characters who are then criticized for their boldness. Even the revisions of this first published novel show her struggling to make the sympathetic characters use increasingly dignified language—striving, ironically, for the imitation Johnsonese of *Camilla*, which almost all readers have deplored. Lord Orville must "fatigue himself" instead of "wear himself out"; *Evelina* must say, "I was so much disconcerted at this sneering speech that I said not a word" instead of "I was so mad at this sneering speech that I had hardly patience to make any reply."¹⁷ The later novels do not allow their young heroines to present their stories without the mediation of a narrator. So long as Fanny Burney had her anonymity, she could feel comfortable with simply criticizing the comic characters who failed to approach the standards of delicacy set by the humorless hero and heroine she endorsed. But, as Joyce Hemlow has suggested, when that anonymity was lost after the publication of *Evelina*, Miss Burney inevitably became still more inhibited: "I should certainly have been more finical, had I foreseen what happened," she declared: "I would rather a thousand times forfeit my character as a writer, than risk ridicule or censure as a female."¹⁸

What, finally, are the female difficulties which are a subject of *Evelina*? First, there are the physical limitations which make women too weak to resist men who grab them and even too slow to run away. Then, there are the psychological restraints which force real and pretended ignorance about subjects from sexuality to money. Lord Orville wants to tell *Evelina* about the marriage settlements, but like all her sisters in the family of heroines, she assures him she is "almost ignorant of the word" (p. 362). Violations of the code of female delicacy, however minor, lead to anxiety that a woman will become a sort of outlaw who has lost her claim to the protection of society, protection which young women desperately need. Of course, many of *Evelina*'s embarrassments seem all too familiar to anyone, male or female, who has memories of a sensitive adolescence.

16/*Early Diary*, 1:221; this is the sister of the Dr. Bowdler who was later to become famous as the first bowdlerizer—a fact which attracted Virginia Woolf's imagination in her essay, "Fanny Burney's Half-Sister" (*Collected Essays* [London, 1967], 3:153–54).

17/*The History of Fanny Burney*, pp. 78–84.

18/*Ibid.*, p. 108.

Indeed, many female difficulties were rapidly becoming human difficulties as the passivity and modesty here required of Evelina were shortly to be required of the romantic heroes of Scott and Cooper. Nevertheless, the special vulnerability of a young woman in traditional society gives her anxieties a sharper edge.

Evelina tells and shows how difficult it is to be a young lady. With the sincerest desire for correctness, the heroine is forced into situations where she must offend punctilio. Her own grandmother orders her to accept ball tickets from a vulgar young man she barely knows. Her supposedly wise guardian abandons her to the authority of such a woman—and then warns that Madame Duval's judgment is poor and her associates of a kind likely to compromise Evelina. Beginning to know the world, Evelina reflects bitterly, "But I knew not, till now, how requisite are birth and fortune to the attainment of respect and civility" (p. 276). In short, much of the novel dwells upon the special helplessness of women to determine their own fates.

Yet the romance plot attempts to deny these novelistic truths. Lord Orville, "almost as romantic as if he had been born and bred at Berry Hill" (p. 351), refuses to draw the terrible inferences Evelina fears and, ignoring prudence, forgets to make his inquiries into Evelina's mysterious origins before declaring his love. *Cecilia*, *Camilla*, and *The Wanderer* similarly allow their heroines to be compromised in the eyes of their mentor heroes and then proceed to dissolve the serious complications in favor of romance conclusions. Many good, popular novels use this formula. Consciously and with philosophical sophistication, Fielding allows *Tom Jones* to rest on comparable contradictions; Smollett, too, denies the harshness of his picaresque tale at the end of *Roderick Random* when the hero is allowed to discover his beneficent and wealthy father in South America. *Pride and Prejudice* devotes much effort to teaching Elizabeth that the conditions of the marriage market are stern and that her imperfect relatives are significant facts about herself in the social world, then ends by letting her marry Darcy anyway. In *A Tale of Two Cities* a bleak view of human motives and abilities in the large social world is combined with the central romance of Lucie Manette and Charles Darney, creatures of magical simplicity and goodness. In the case of *Evelina*, the imposition of romance does not seem fully satisfying. The dichotomy between romance and realism is not acknowledged clearly, as it is in Fielding. We seem to be invited to accept the romance as a solution to evils for which Fanny Burney knows she does not really have a remedy. As Mr. Tyrold says more frankly in *Camilla*, "The proper education of a female" is "still a problem beyond human solution" (p. 357). The possibility of romance is present from the beginning in *Evelina*, as it is not in the early picaresque adventures of Roderick Random. Still, just as modern readers find it difficult to share Roderick's assumption that the world owes him specially favorable treatment because he has been born a gentleman, so it is hard to see just why Fanny Burney's heroines should receive the careful deference they seem to think is their due. Juliet Granville is certainly more irritatingly conscious of the deserts conferred upon her by her birth than Evelina is, but even Evelina seems a trifle huffy, especially when on the demotion of "poor Polly Green," the genteelly educated "bantling of Dame Green, wash-woman and wet nurse," she reports without comment and without

comparison with her own fate Mrs. Green's feeling that the match with Mr. Macartney, though "inadequate to the pretensions of *Miss Belmont*," was "far superior to those *her daughter* could form after the discovery of her birth" (pp. 360, 357). Fanny Burney's notions of propriety would seem to leave open to criticism ladies who make friends of strangers not properly introduced and not properly connected, yet when her own heroines whose connections are not impeccable are coolly received, she endorses their grievances.

It is the novelistic truths in *Evelina* which seem especially worthwhile, the faithful rendering of recognizable experiences which are nowhere to be found in Richardson, Fielding, or Smollett. As good as the descriptions of manners are, as precisely as she catches the obnoxious Branghtons and the enervated Lady Louisa, Fanny Burney's exploration of *Evelina*'s own embarrassments and anxieties is still more vivid and more valuable. Yet she could not finally deny the self-abnegation society required of ladies, and so, in rejecting the laughter, the irony, the satire, and the spirit of criticism, which seem to have been her natural gifts, she ultimately weakened her art.

Brandeis University

