

Magdalena OŻARSKA
(The Jan Kochanowski University of Humanities
and Sciences, Kielce, Poland)

***“I am married, my dearest Susan, – I look upon it in that light”:
Fanny Burney’s court experience followed by reintegration with society***¹

The journals and letters of novelist Frances Burney (1752-1840) have attracted increasing attention on the surge of revisionist approaches to English literary canon and feminism-driven rediscovery of the somewhat forgotten female authors of the past epochs. My intention is to demonstrate that Burney's journals and letters covering the periods before, during and after which she stayed at the royal court of King George III and Queen Charlotte (1786-1791) as Second Keeper of the Robes to the latter, provide ample illustration of the writer's mental isolation while seemingly finding herself in an environment particularly conducive to sociability.

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¹ Part of this paper was delivered at the *From Queen Anne to Queen Victoria. Readings in 18th and 19th Century British Literature and Culture* Conference, organised by The British Studies Centre of the University of Warsaw (17-19 October 2007) in Warsaw, Poland.

after Patricia Meyer Spacks – that “*the interpretative structure that forms [Burney's] account of her life's happenings depends upon strategies of concealment*”.²

To begin with, it is interesting to take a quick look at the period immediately preceding Burney's court experience. It offers several insightful glimpses into the stage to come, while the author seems painfully unaware of the significance of what she records almost until the moment when the die is cast and she cannot withdraw. Biographers draw attention to the fact that right before her entering the Queen's service, the novelist had been explicitly courted by a certain Rev. George Cambridge who nevertheless failed to propose, despite various forms of encouragement received both from Burney herself and an anonymous author who sent in a passage to a newspaper in which the names of Burney and Cambridge were linked.³ In a journal letter to her sister Susanna (March 1785), Frances Burney expresses her delight in the attentions shown to her by Cambridge. In view of this, it seems quite telling that one of the final letters (June 12, 1786) written by Frances before entering the court was that to Miss Cambridge, her suitor's sister. It contains subtle suggestions that the company of a person close to her heart would rescue Burney from her forthcoming loss of liberty: “*O my dear Miss Cambridge, what a life for me, who have friends so dear to me, and to whom friendship is the balm, the comfort, the very support of existence!*”⁴ The ending is perhaps the most dramatic: “*Could I but save myself from a lasting bond, – from a promised devotion! – that is the greatest point of all, my dearest Miss Cambridge – in which if you can help me to suggest something that will not sound disrespectful or improper you will serve me indeed!*”⁵ Needless to say, Miss Cambridge has not been one of Fanny's most regular correspondents until that moment.

There have been, however, certain early signs that the Royals are interested in having the famous novelist under their roof, all of which are light-heartedly dismissed by Fanny.⁶ One of those is making the acquaintance of Mrs. Delany, a person close to the court, who resembles “*my sweet Grand mother Sleepe [= Burney's maternal grandmother]*” (19 January 1783),⁷ and thus finds it easy to gain Fanny's confidence. Naively, the latter is flattered and excited by incidents like, for exam-

² Patricia MEYER SPACKS, *Dynamics of Fear: Fanny Burney*, in: *Modern Essays on Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. Leopold Damrosch Jr., New York and Oxford 1988, pp. 455-488, here p. 456.

³ Margaret Anne DOODY, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works*, New Brunswick – New Jersey 1988, pp. 152-153; Katherine M. ROGERS, *Frances Burney: The World of Female Difficulties*, New York – London – Toronto – Sydney – Tokyo – Singapore 1990, p. 68. Interestingly, Cambridge may have failed to propose due to the class difference (cf. Betty RIZZO, *Burney and Society*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney*, ed. Peter Sabor, Cambridge 2007, p. 143).

⁴ Frances BURNEY, *Journals and Letters*, eds. Peter Sabor, Lars. E. Troide, Stewart Cooke and Victoria Kortes-Papp, London 2001, p. 232.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 234.

⁶ Claire HARMAN, *Fanny Burney: A Biography*, New York 2001, p. 192.

⁷ F. BURNEY, o. c. in note 4, p. 198.

ple: "The Queen has told Mrs Delany, upon her expressing her thanks to her Majesty for her new house, and saying how very comfortable a dwelling she found it, that she wished it was larger, that she might be able to accommodate her friend Burney – in it. – Seriously, my dearest Padre, how sweet and gracious this was!" (24 September 1785).⁸ Then there are the King and Queen's visits to Mrs. Delany's, which seem like "acting a Play" (16 December 1785)⁹ to the diarist. This is probably how the Queen's designs were beginning to take shape: after all, at that time, Burney had already become a celebrity novelist, and despite her relatively low social origin, she would have made a welcome addition to the Queen's court. As Harman has it, "Fanny had taken up her position at Court in the hope that her real function would be to read to the Queen and discuss literature".¹⁰ In fact, however, being the Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte proved hard physical labour, involving gruelling working hours (6 a.m. till midnight), and hardly any privacy for oneself, as Burney was soon to discover. At the same time, meticulous rules of court etiquette had to be observed, including the initially ridiculous ban on coughing, sneezing or walking with one's back to the monarch when leaving the room (17 December 1785).¹¹ Needless to say, the court becomes a place where isolation and alienation set in; an environment of the Other with which it becomes impossible to integrate despite a reverent attitude towards its function and representatives. And, of course, employment at the court is considered an extraordinary favour, capable of elevating one's social status.¹² The curious thing is that most of the satire of court conventions comes before Burney's own entrapment, so to say, when the diarist is still blissfully unaware of the royal plans towards her, already noticed by others (her sister Phillips or friend Frederica Locke). As Margaret Ann Doody ironically puts it, Burney's pre-court satire is "*strangely prophetic*".¹³

Undoubtedly, as can be learnt from the novelist's records, a lot of compulsory socialising does go on at the court, including her regular attendance on the Queen (Burney is hardly a competent Keeper of the Robes, unable to tell when particular elements of the monarch's garment ought to be put on or how, but she has been hired – also – to keep the Queen company, read aloud to her and offer intelligent conversation: after all, she is a best-selling author of her time); there is a lot of meeting and conversing with the Princesses, not-infrequent encounters with the King, as well as social intercourse with other court employees (most of them representing higher social status than herself; some of them friendly, some – hostile, jealous of her position, and spiteful, like the most notorious Mrs. Schwollenberg, nicknamed 'Cerbera' in the diaries). What is notable here is Burney's respectful attitude towards the entire royal family. The Queen is invariably referred to as

⁸ Ibidem, p. 210.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 213.

¹⁰ C. HARMAN, o. c. in note 6, p. 208.

¹¹ F. BURNEY, o. c. in note 4, p. 230.

¹² M. A. DOODY, o. c. in note 3, p. 172; C. HARMAN, o. c. in note 6, p. 194.

¹³ M. A. DOODY, o. c. in note 3, p. 169.

“charming”, “sweet”, “gracious”, etc. Even when the monarch is not in a good mood, the same adjectives are used, sometimes modified by “solemn”, “serious”, and the like. Her heavy German accent is never mocked or criticised.¹⁴

All the above-mentioned compulsory socialising takes on dimensions of a ritual, witness passages like: “At 5 we have Dinner. Mrs Schwellenberg and I meet in the Eating Room. We are commonly Tête à Tête: when there is any body added, it is from her invitation only. Whatever right my place might afford me, of also inviting my friends to the Table, I have now totally lost, by want of courage and spirits to claim it originally.”¹⁵ Mrs. Schwellenberg tends to terrorise other court employees, not just Frances. On one occasion (27 November 1787), when Schwellenberg, Burney, and a couple of others take a coach journey during which – because Schwellenberg insists – the window on Burney's side is open and her eyes become badly inflamed, “Mr De Luc and Miss Planta both looked uneasy, but no one durst to speak”.¹⁶

But there are also some attractive characters at the court: “Lords Chesterfield, Harrington and Cathcart drank Tea with us almost constantly. The two latter I liked extremely, and shall be glad if hereafter I should meet them” (5 June 1791).¹⁷ There were also opportunities to meet famous people of the day: “Her Majesty ... told me Mrs Siddons had been ordered to the Lodge, to read a Play, and desired I would receive her in my Room” (15 August 1787).¹⁸ And of course there was the years-long infamous trial of Mr. Warren Hastings, accused of corruption in his office as Governor General of Bengal: Frances went to several hearings enthusiastically, having received complimentary tickets from the Queen, as it was also another social occasion affording an opportunity to meet celebrities of the epoch, Sir Joshua Reynolds included.

Yet despite the above, for Fanny Burney, the court soon becomes a place of de-socialisation as she begins to feel growing resentment and an increasing sense of personal isolation. Rooted out of her familiar milieu, fatigued to the limits of physical endurance, she grows more and more frustrated at her inability to follow social engagements of her choice rather than those imposed on her by her function at the court. Occasional visits from friends, such as the Lockes, or family members – Dr. Burney or her sister Phillips – only aggravate, rather than alleviating, her sense of confinement and loss of personal liberty. Under these circumstances, mixing with others does not serve to substitute for Burney's previous social contacts to her satisfaction. Instead, the enforced socialising and court etiquette which she ridicules several times breed bitter regrets and longing to be reintegrated with the out-of-court community. Significantly, all those feelings set in as early as her first hours and days at the court. The July 1786 journal letter to Susanna

¹⁴ C. HARMAN, o. c. in note 6, p. 207.

¹⁵ F. BURNEY, o. c. in note 4, p. 242.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 253.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 325.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 250.

*"I am married, my dearest Susan, – I look upon it in that light":
Fanny Burney's court experience followed by reintegration with society*

Phillips is quite telling on that score: "*I assured him [my father] I would, from that moment, take all the happiness in my power, and banish all the regret. I told him how gratifying had been my reception, and I omitted nothing I could think of to remove the uneasiness that This Day seemed first to awaken in him. Thank God! I had the fullest success; his hopes and gay expectations were all within call, and they ran back at the first beckoning. ... I am married, my dearest Susan, – I look upon it in that light. – I was averse to forming the union, and I endeavoured to escape it; but my friends interfered, – they prevailed – and the knot is tied. What, then, now remains, but to make the best Wife in my power? I am bound to it in Duty, and I will strain every Nerve to succeed.*"¹⁹

It seems that the court experience of Burney's is best summarised in this anticipatory marriage metaphor which she uses to describe her service to the royal family at the very start. Unclaimed by a hitherto interested admirer, she is pushed into royal employment by the ambitions of her upwardly mobile father. Seemingly satisfied with her position, referring to the royals in nothing but superlatives, invariably eager to stress their good nature and kindness towards her, the novelist nevertheless forfeits her freedom, health and general well-being. It is the separation from the community that she well knew, family members, friends, acquaintances, as well as exclusion from social life that renders her court existence a time of futility and despair, which – as she has rightly anticipated – comes to resemble the constraints of contemporary marriage of convenience. This unsolicited bond, and the methods employed to deal with it, are soon elaborated on in greater detail in the 20 August 1786 letter to her sister Susanna: "*To wean myself from myself; – to lessen all my affections, – to curb all my wishes, to deaden all my sensations? – This design, my Susan, I formed so long ago as the first day my dear Father accepted my offered Appointment: I thought that what demanded a compleat New system of Life required, if attainable, a new set of feelings for all enjoyment of New prospects, and for lessening regrets at what were quitted – or lost. ...*"²⁰; "*The die is cast; and that struggle is no more: – to keep of every other, – to support the loss of the dearest Friends, and best society, and bear, in exchange, the tyranny, the exigence, the ennuie, and attempted indignities of their greatest contrast, – this must be my constant endeavour*".²¹

Yet, frustrated as she is, the writer does not omit to keep a meticulous record of her experience in the way in which her contemporaries documented their Grand Tours (which, strictly speaking, she never took). Paradoxically, she is rescued from this distressing situation by a health crisis which generates her father's reluctant consent to ask the Queen's permission to quit, and the latter's even more reluctant consent to let Frances go. In keeping with the novelist's early, but very firm, ideas concerning long-standing relationships, the excessively long involve-

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 239.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 247.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 248.

ment with the royal family must be terminated, or else the writer faces her own annihilation. In a letter written to a friend shortly after her marriage at age forty, she says: “*I remember ... when I was thirteen, being asked when I intended to marry and surprising my playmates by solemnly replying, 'When I think I shall be happier than I am in being single'*”²²; and so when she finds her court experience draining her powers and destroying her, she withdraws as soon as she has decided she will be better off without it.

And another aspect: just like Frances was abandoned by Mr. Cambridge immediately before her court years, during the court period – when she thinks she has found a friend in the friendless milieu, and a possible candidate for wedlock with whom to share her time and opinions – it appears once more that the gentleman in question has just been creating all the appearances of friendship and possible deeper emotional involvement while surreptitiously courting another woman. The gentleman who misleads her this time is a Colonel Stephen Digby, who – to Burney's humiliation – goes on to marry a Miss Gunning with £ 10,000, a Maid of Honour, a younger woman of better connections and fortune. Even the Queen sympathises with poor Fanny: “*The Queen never names him, never! –*”, writes Burney in her journal letter to Phillips of 18-27 November 1789.²³ Thus the story repeats. In that sense, it may be said after Doody, that “*the entrance into court life continued to seem like a wretched enforced marriage, or alternatively, like that other kind of marriage, entering a convent and taking the veil. The ghastly mock-marriage to the court had also signalled to the world her renunciation of marriage and sex forever – a renunciation not willed by Burney herself. Leading an unnatural 'dead and tame life', she was always conscious of the mental and physical sterility of her 'monastic destiny'*”²⁴ Marriage of convenience or taking the veil: either seems an apt metaphor for the experience. Plus, as Rizzo puts it, Burney was not comfortable with aristocrats: “*she preferred amusing people of more stringent morals, a more sincere Christianity and less antipathy to work*”²⁵ Speaking of work, the critic suggests that while at the court Burney was supposed to carry out amounts of work not expected of others who were of properly aristocratic origin.

The ensuing health crisis has been variously commented on by Burney's biographers. For example, Joanne Cutting-Gray says: “*At odds with herself, caught among her father's wishes, her duty to the queen, her own misery, and worst of all, cut off from others, Burney's resolution fails her. No longer friends with herself, well-being disrupted, she becomes her own adversary. Nonetheless, her deep*

²² After Barbara G. SCHRANK and David J. SUPINO (eds.), *The Famous Miss Burney: the Diaries and Letters of Fanny Burney*, New York 1976, p. 19.

²³ F. BURNEY, o. c. in note 4, p. 298.

²⁴ M. A. DOODY, o. c. in note 3, p. 173.

²⁵ B. RIZZO, o. c. in note 3, p. 143.

*"I am married, my dearest Susan, – I look upon it in that light":
Fanny Burney's court experience followed by reintegration with society*

unhappiness and even the poor health resulting from it are a tribute to her earlier strength in adversity."²⁶

As Claire Harman has it, "*Fanny felt herself dwindling away, both physically and mentally.*"²⁷ She may have been concerned that she was going mad and possibly thought death a respectable way of escaping her confinement.²⁸ The symptoms Burney is experiencing, while definitely worrying, do suggest a psychosomatic ailment, and – significantly – are gradually removed with the passing of time, time away from the court. Time and again does she confide her health problems to her diary: "*My loss of Health was now so notorious, that no part of the House could wholly avoid acknowledging it. ... Frequent pains in my side forced me 3 or 4 times in a Game to creep to my own Room for Hartshorn and for rest. And so weak and faint I was become, that I was compelled to put my Head out into the air, at all Hours, and in all weathers, from time to time, to recover the power of breathing. ...*" (December 1790 – March 1791).²⁹

Once, she was consulting a doctor about "*my corporeal complaints, – my sleeplessness, pain in the side, etc., – and he ordered me opium, and 3 Glasses of wine in the Day, and recommended rest to me, and an application to retire to my friends for some Weeks, as freedom from anxiety was as necessary to my restoration as freedom from attendance. During this consultation, I was called to Mrs Schwellenberg. – Do you think I breathed as I went along? – no!*" (December 1790 – March 1791).³⁰

Passages like these are representative. In her predicament, the writer herself admits, "*the power of Composition has to me, indeed, proved a solace, a blessing! – When incapable of all else, that, unsolicited, unthought of, has presented itself to my solitary leisure, and beguiled me of myself, though it has not, of late, regaled me with gayer associates*" (5 June 1791).³¹ Anyway, the bodily complaints seem to bring the desired effect: everybody, including her father and stepmother, begins to insist that she take a break, and Frances – relieved – finally plucks up her courage to hand in her resignation. When she breaks free from the destructive atmosphere and drudgery of the court, and becomes reintegrated with her relatives and friends, she gradually restores her health and spirits. However, she would have made no move without the approval of her daddy, Dr. Burney.³²

Appropriately, Burney's experiences of these times of restraint and mental oppression are mostly recorded in the journal form (addressed only to her sister Susanna Phillips and close friend Frederica Locke), which provides an adequate

²⁶ Joanne CUTTING-GRAY, *Woman as 'Nobody' and the Novels of Fanny Burney*, Gainesville – Tallahassee – Tampa 1992, p. 125.

²⁷ C. HARMAN, o. c. in note 6, p. 205.

²⁸ M. A. DOODY, o. c. in note 3, p. 194.

²⁹ F. BURNEY, o. c. in note 4, p. 308.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 314.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 326.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 303.

vehicle to merely hint at private views which stand in contrast to the high opinion that others in society have of her position. Yet the journal form ceases to be sufficient once she is out of the golden cage. At that moment, alongside the already familiar diary, comes a burgeoning of correspondence to reflect the writer's joy over ordinary pleasures, such as travelling, sightseeing and socialising with individuals of her choice. Her domestic tour features localities such as Salisbury, Winchester, Plymouth, Bristol, Stonehenge, Exeter, Bath where over a month is spent, and others.³³ In the course of the journey in the company of a female friend, Mrs. Ord, Burney's health improves, as she never fails to note with satisfaction, but socialising can still be tiring. She says, "*I was travelling ... for my Health, & should visit no Theatres, Ball Rooms, &c.*"³⁴ Indeed, on arriving in Bath on August 31, 1791, she is initially wary of social encounters. Witness the following comment: "*I found I had no acquaintance here, except Dr. Harrington, who is ill, Mrs. Hartley, who is too lame for visiting, & the Vanbrughs: & though Mrs. ord [sic], from her frequent residence here, knows many of the settled Inhabitants, she has kindly complied with my request of being dispenced from making new visits*".³⁵ Yet soon visiting does begin, and – the reader feels – Burney could repeat after Robinson Crusoe – "*not either to my disadvantage or dissatisfaction*".³⁶ A detailed record of visits and re-visits, breakfasts and dinners follows. This reintegration with society seems to be beneficial to her. "*My Health gains ground, gradually, but very perceptibly*",³⁷ she continues to note after her return home; her father's company nourishes her and gives her a sense of stability and security: "*I now live with him wholly; he has appropriated me a place, a seat, a desk, a table, & comfort, & he never seemed yet so earnest to keep me about him.*"³⁸ This is perhaps not that much, one would say, but such a huge change from the court frustration, stress and loneliness. And Frances is "*more & more thankful every Night – every Morning – for the change in my destiny*".³⁹ As she says at a later point, "*I have escaped all return of serious complaints, & my Health is very near at its general state of robustness.*"⁴⁰ Plus the people she meets express their gladness to see her no longer a courtier, free from "*thraldom*", and congratulate her on her improved health and looks.⁴¹ Even in June 1792, when Burney is asked to take up her courtly duties once again as a temporary replacement which she is quite happy to do, the King congratulates her on having grown "*quite fat since he had seen me*".⁴² The climax of her social reintegration,

³³ Fanny BURNEY / Madame d'Arblay, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, vol. 1: 1791-1792, eds. Joyce Hemlow, Curtis D. Cecil and Althea Douglas, Oxford 1972, pp. 6-66.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

³⁶ Daniel DEFOE, *Robinson Crusoe*, Harmondsworth 1994, p. 297.

³⁷ Fanny BURNEY / Madame d'Arblay, o. c. in note 33, p. 72.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 98, 101, 103-112.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 188.

*"I am married, my dearest Susan, – I look upon it in that light":
Fanny Burney's court experience followed by reintegration with society*

like her completely good health, is still to come. But Frances Burney's social isolation among the numerous members of the royal family and their courtiers has already come to an end.

In documenting the following period in the novelist's life, extremely significant are Burney's 1792-1793 journals and letters, written while she is befriended and later – courted by Alexandre d'Arblay, despite their seeming lack of assertiveness, as they trace her self-development by enabling the ultimate transition from the Nobody of her youthful diaries and the easily manipulated, dutiful daughter of the court years to a self-aware subject in pursuit of her own goals. All of this happens in the context of a growing romantic relationship with her husband-to-be. Alongside providing an illustration of the novelist's personal transformation, these narratives reflect the gradual change in the status of contemporary women, and the increasing popularity of companionate marriage, while not disregarding the obstacles posed by the still conservative society. Hence Burney's resumed relationship to and position in her immediate society need to be examined.

Much has been said about the meaning of the magical "Nobody", whom the fifteen-year-old Fanny chose for the addressee of her first attempts at narrative self writing. Attention has been drawn to the fact that this was a *female* Nobody,⁴³ and that eighteenth-century women could only enjoy a limited degree of privacy, hardly allowing them to develop their talents or other artistic inclinations.⁴⁴ Much has also been said about the dubious status of diary writing as an occupation for young ladies, as exemplified by Dr. Burney's response to the finding of his daughter's private scribbling when he seriously threatened to expose her to the public at a local marketplace.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, the predominance of the Nobody in the novelist's private life has been discussed, culminating in her marital union with the French refugee from the Revolution, himself metaphorically reduced to nothing (*réduit à rien*) and forced to sojourn in a foreign country,⁴⁶ i.e. England. Similarly, Fanny's dedicatory poem, preceding her novel *Evelina* and addressed to her father – "the author of my being",⁴⁷ has been interpreted as part of the writer's failure to perceive herself as an independent, valuable individual.⁴⁸ Clearly, it seems relatively easy to deprecate Burney's powers of self-assertion and label her actions with phrases like "the docile need to 'please papa' in everything", "desire to be

⁴³ Patricia MEYER SPACKS, *Privacy. Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self*, Chicago & London 2003, pp. 190-191; Catherine GALLAGHER, *Nobody's Story. The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*, Oxford 1994, pp. 203-205.

⁴⁴ Stuart SHERMAN, *Telling Time. Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660-1785*, Chicago & London 1996, pp. 247, 253, 255-257.

⁴⁵ Judy SIMONS, *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf*, London 1990, p. 3; S. SHERMAN, o. c. in note 43, pp. 254-257.

⁴⁶ C. GALLAGHER, o. c. in note 42, p. 255.

⁴⁷ Frances BURNEY, *Evelina*, ed. Margaret Ann Doody, London 2004, p. 3.

⁴⁸ C. GALLAGHER, o. c. in note 42, pp. 211-212.

everything her father most admired”,⁴⁹ or “It is not her life so much as the scenes to which she happens to be a witness that continue to be the staple of her diary-letters”.⁵⁰ Statements like the above need not be understood as final and ought to be taken as springboards to understanding the personal growth of the writer-protagonist and evidence of her gradual shedding of the overpowering family influence over her life. As Spacks succinctly puts it, “the entire mass of Fanny Burney’s writing forms itself [...] centrally in relation to female fear – not of the absence of power but of failure of goodness and consequent loss of love”.⁵¹ This familial control has not escaped modern critical notice,⁵² and neither have the services of copyist and secretary that Frances performed for her father, or her lack of financial independence despite the financial success she repeatedly achieved with her novels.⁵³ Thus, apart from society-related issues, the subservient condition of contemporary women appears to be amply illustrated by the novelist’s biography.

Yet this very same, easily manipulated Fanny Burney, was – as she tells her diary – capable of refusing an undesirable candidate for wedlock at the tender age of 23 (Mr Barlow, in May 1775), despite her nagging worry that should her father insist strongly enough, she would probably comply with his wishes. This is not to say, however, that in her early twenties she was a strong-minded and emancipated woman, but only that some seeds of the forthcoming change had already been planted. Then there were several other moments in her life when she resigned her own goals to the benefit of the Burney family (cf. when she embraced her father’s choice of the publisher for her novel *Cecilia* in 1782 on account of future family connections: publisher Payne’s daughter was the object of one of Fanny’s brothers’ attentions; or when she reluctantly made her 1786 decision to become Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte). Interestingly, when talking about the two sides to Fanny Burney’s personality, or the two periods of her life – court and non-court, similar phrasing is usually employed to describe aspects of the self constructed in Burney’s pre-courtship diaries: “clandestine delight”,⁵⁴ “double identity”, “conformist surface”, “subversive and rebellious depths”,⁵⁵ or “open secrecy”⁵⁶ (this is particularly true about the method of writing employed by Burney while producing *Evelina*: pretending to be writing letters to her sister, Susanna). So, pretence and concealment of multifarious kinds seem to be the tools used to achieve some degree of selfhood and space of her own. Or, as some choose to see

⁴⁹ Kate O’BIEN, *English Diaries and Journals*, in: *Impressions of English Literature*, ed. W. J. Turner, London 1944, pp. 185-226, here p. 210.

⁵⁰ Robert A. FOTHERGILL, *Private Chronicles. A Study of English Diaries*, London – New York – Toronto 1974, p. 54.

⁵¹ P. MEYER SPACKS, o. c. in note 2, p. 455.

⁵² K. O’BIEN, o. c. in note 48, p. 210; Linda COLEMAN (ed.), *Women’s Life-Writing: Finding Voice / Building Community*, Bowling Green 1997, p. 31, et al.

⁵³ C. GALLAGHER, o. c. in note 42, pp. 250-251.

⁵⁴ L. COLEMAN (ed.), o. c. in note 51, p. 25.

⁵⁵ J. SIMONS, o. c. in note 44, p. 23.

⁵⁶ S. SHERMAN, o. c. in note 43, p. 259.

it, "the action of Fanny Burney's vast collections of journals and letters, like that of most women's writing in her century, derives from her attempt to defend – not to discover, define, or assert – the self."⁵⁷ Interestingly, it is only against the background of society that the self gains importance.

It does indeed seem weird that the transformation of the shy and self-effacing Miss Burney into the self-aware woman of success did not come with her first literary achievement (*Evelina*, 1778). In fact, it did not come until much later, when the novelist was aged ca. 40, in the years 1792-1793, which is when she embarked on a romantic relationship with her French husband-to-be, Monsieur d'Arblay. Earlier on, during the very writing of *Evelina*, as Judith L. Newton states, "Burney was [...] self-educated, evidently destined for marriage, interested in love, but harbouring some distaste for the awkward rituals of courtship."⁵⁸ Soon after the success of *Evelina*, to use the words of Kristina Straub, "she was [...] old enough, as a spinster of twenty-six to begin to doubt her feminine worth."⁵⁹ As she goes on to consider Fanny Burney's "choosing carefully and knowledgeably among the admittedly few options presented by female experience",⁶⁰ i.e. marriage or non-marriage,⁶¹ Straub uses the notion of "perpetual babyism",⁶² which, as she claims, was imposed on young women of the eighteenth century, with the "dark cloud" of sexual adulthood looming on the marriage horizon.⁶³ So perhaps what critics generally fail to verbalise is the occurrence, at this point – in Burney's life at least, of a certain "rite of passage" into maturity that was provided by this earnest courtship, complete with the wedding ceremony, which successfully removed all the well-guarded secrets.

Yet for the time being strategies of concealment and/or deception are many. In the first place, it may be interesting to note Fanny's response to a rumour circulating while still at the royal court, concerning her allegedly forthcoming marriage to an unspecified clergyman. She made several notes of it in her May 1792 journal entries. Faithfully recording each fragment of conversation with individuals who either seek confirmation of the news ("I hear it bin really true you will Marry! –", as exclaimed by the German gossip-monger, Chief Keeper of the Robes, Mrs. Schwollenberg⁶⁴), or simply attempt to politely show their well-meaning kindness

⁵⁷ P. MEYER SPACKS, o. c. in note 2, p. 457.

⁵⁸ Judith Lowder NEWTON, *Women, Power and Subversion. Social Strategies in British Fiction 1778-1860*, Athens 1981, p. 24.

⁵⁹ Kristina STRAUB, *Divided Fictions. Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy*, Lexington, Kentucky 1987, p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁶¹ As memorably put by Samuel Johnson, "whether they [=the female sex] embrace marriage, or determine upon a single life, are exposed, in consequence of their choice, to sickness, misery, and death." (*The Rambler*, 31 July 1750, p. 107).

⁶² K. STRAUB, o. c. in note 58, p. 34.

⁶³ Actually, this is exactly what Mary Wollstonecraft so strongly disapproved of in her 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

⁶⁴ Fanny BURNEY / Madame d'Arblay, o. c. in note 33, p. 152.

under the circumstances (“*Ma chere Mlle Berni – don't be affront – but – I must to wish you joy!*”, as exclaimed by Mlle Jacobi after she “took me to a window and we were alone a few minutes”⁶⁵), Fanny considers what methods would be best to put an end to the rumours: “*I was more serious & down right in my denial than I had ever been yet, for I have always feared too much solemnity would be misconstrued*”, or “*It is time, however, to try new ways, after such utter failure in old ones*”.⁶⁶ The comment that follows is also telling: “*So here was a new business of undeceiving to go through. How tiresome & fatiguing is this perpetual rebound of the same thing!*”⁶⁷ “*Undeceiving*”, i.e. delivery from deception or mistake, can become exhausting, if it needs to be performed at regular intervals. This very need arises from repeated misconceptions, generously passed around, to the annoyance of the individual concerned. A subtle suggestion behind all this might be the social assumption that, to paraphrase Jane Austen's famous dictum, a single woman at a certain age, in possession of social skills but not many other assets, must be in need of a husband. Frances, as we have seen, is merely annoyed at having her name linked to a prospective wedding. The talk does not frustrate her or remind her of her age, well past what was considered marriageable. Despite Burney's being interested in affairs of the heart as much as she used to, her concerns are different at this stage of her life: they centre around revisiting the court where she is no longer employed, emotional meetings with members of the royal household (January 1792, April 1792, May 1792, 4 June 1792),⁶⁸ her own health problems and the medication applied (February 1792, mid-March 1792, 15 April 1792)⁶⁹ or her step-mother's serious illness (6 August 1792).⁷⁰

This attitude will soon be subject to change, though. Shortly after her introduction to the Juniper Hall circles of French émigrés (through her friends, the Lockes), Fanny's principal topic becomes her own self, own interest, own plans for the future, and – own doubts and anxieties typical of a more or less youthful person in love. I claim that it is this very self-absorption that sheltered her from the demands of her relatives and gave her instant lessons in self-assertion. To start with, Burney is deeply attached to the royal family, and she cannot quite imagine a country ruled otherwise. This feeling is strong enough to make her go into a sort of mourning on hearing the news about the King of France Louis XVI's execution. She worries about having no black silk to wear at Juniper Hall, where the atmosphere soon becomes very heavy. Yet her first mentions of the camp of French émigrés located at Juniper Hall show an interest in M. d'Arblay, who soon transpires to be a constitutionalist, i.e. a moderate liberal (as she later puts it, constitutionalists were “*the decided Friends of the King*” – a nice attempt at self-deception this time,

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 154.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 152.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 155 (my emphasis).

⁶⁸ Ibidem, pp. 110-114, 135, 149-153, 187-188.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, pp. 127, 129, 133-134.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, pp. 221ff.

22 February 1793).⁷¹ Consequently, she does not see anything improper in her growing attraction to this place and its inhabitants, one of them in particular, but this is enough to arouse the suspicions of her father and friends. The series of letters in which Fanny's admiration for Mme de Staël is expressed is well known ("she is a woman of the first abilities [...] I have ever seen. She is more in the style of Mrs. Thrale than of any other celebrated Character; but she has infinitely more depth, & seems an even profound politician & metaphysician", 16-19 February 1793).⁷² This is followed by her father's reply concerning de Staël's dubious moral status resulting from allegedly too close a relationship with M. de Narbonne (the letter ends: "If you are not absolutely in the House of Mad^e de [Staël] when this arrives, it w^d perhaps be possible for you to waive the visit to her", 19 February). In response, Frances admits being "hurt & astonished at the acrimony of malice" (22 February).⁷³ This is, in turn, followed by a well-meaning letter to Dr. Burney from a family friend called James Hutton who overtly forbids Frances to enter into any acquaintance whatsoever with that lady, with which Miss Burney generally complies ("I do not wish our Fanny to have the smallest Connection with such an Adulterous Démoniac, much less Intimacy", Hutton writes on 21 February 1793),⁷⁴ and a closing message from d'Arblay who claims all the above to be mere calumny. Anyway, she stays home with her sister Susan instead of visiting de Staël due to her allegedly sore throat (24 February 1793).⁷⁵ The society's opinion still has to be taken seriously and appearances have to be maintained among the few individuals close to one.

There are several undeceptive introductory remarks on Fanny's part concerning M. d'Arblay's good looks ("a very fine figure & good face", 28 January 1793),⁷⁶ spotless character and favourite pursuits (cf. passages like "He has a sincerity, a frankness, an ingenuous openness of nature that I had been unjust enough to think could not belong to a French Man. [...] He is passionately fond of literature, a most delicate critic in his own language, well versed in both Italian & German, & a very elegant Poet", 16-19 February);⁷⁷ "one of the most delightful Characters I have ever met, for openness, probity, intellectual knowledge, & unhackneyed manners", 4 February⁷⁸). He even likes English weather: "This enchanting M. d'Arblay will murmur at nothing" (9 February).⁷⁹ In this potentially love-conducive atmosphere, d'Arblay makes his first move and insists on teaching Fanny real

⁷¹ Fanny BURNEY / Madame d'Arblay, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, vol. 2: Courtship and Marriage 1793, eds. Joyce Hemlow and Althea Douglas, Oxford 1972, p. 22.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 19, my emphasis.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11, my emphasis.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

French, seconded warmly by de Staël, who “*cried [...], 'he is the best of men' ”* (9 February).⁸⁰ So, the mutual tutoring in the two languages, French and English begins, referred to as “*scholaring*” and “*mastering*” (14 February),⁸¹ and both Burney (in French) and d'Arblay (in English) write short letter-exercises (called “*thèmes*”) to be read and corrected by each other, thus allowing themselves a safe ground for some innocent flirtation. “*It is a precious morsel of elegant broken English*”, comments Fanny on his writing at one time (16-19 February).⁸² On 15 April, we learn, d'Arblay “*chatted, in broken English, but fluently & amusingly*”,⁸³ so clearly the learning has come to take second place by that time, even though Frances overtly praises her student's diligence in a letter to Dr. Burney (8-10 June),⁸⁴ and an earlier one to Mrs. Phillips, saying that her charge studies English for six hours a day in order to obtain some employment in England (31 May).⁸⁵ Nota bene: this very letter is called “*a safe*”, which – as editors of Burney's letters and journals elucidate – meant a piece of correspondence safe enough to be shown to eyes other than her immediate sister-confidante.⁸⁶

The French refugee does not waste his time. Through the “republic of letters” between himself and Burney, he tends towards resolution in his French letter of 31 March, 1793, which contains a veiled marriage offer. The agitated Fanny Burney, before saying yes to her admirer, writes an equally agitated letter to her sister, Susan Phillips, in which she gives vent to typical lover's frustrations: “*I wish him a younger Partner. I do not wish myself richer – grander more powerful, or higher born, – one of his first attractions to me his superiority to all those considerations – no, I wish myself only to be younger*” (2-3 April),⁸⁷ followed by a list of d'Arblay's virtues, asking her sister for advice, and almost openly professing herself in love. The advice is to the effect that it is not the age that should be the reason to worry, but the financial affairs: he is penniless, and she has only the pension given to her by Queen Charlotte, amounting to £100 per annum. A whole correspondence in its own right ensues on the financial subject, and fears arise that the Queen might withdraw Fanny's annuity if she learnt about the marriage of one of her favourites to a French Catholic bankrupt aristocrat, not even a proper royalist. From now on, the real progress of the courtship must remain the secret of the two people concerned plus the confidante in the person of Susan Phillips. “*Fortunately I received and read it quite alone*”, Fanny sighs with relief over the proposal letter (2-3 April),⁸⁸ but such privacy is hard to come by in those days. On

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 14.

⁸² Ibidem, p. 19.

⁸³ Ibidem, p. 80.

⁸⁴ Ibidem, pp. 144-145.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, p. 135.

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 133.

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 42.

⁸⁸ Ibidem.

another occasion, when Fanny receives a message from her lover, she is almost petrified by the possibility of her father's finding out as he shows interest in the letter she has been brought: "*I felt almost ready to die [...]. I would not [...] give him my confidence for the worlds – yet the smallest added question would have revealed the whole – for I never, never could prevaricate with my dear Father*" (5-8 April 1793).⁸⁹

At points like this, I believe, we are witnessing an unprecedented change in the nature of Burney's loyalty to her father: on the one hand she says that she would not withhold the truth from him, on the other – this is precisely what she does. The well-deceived father does not suspect anything. On 13 April, "*O see them [d'Arblay's letters], then!' cried he, most-good humouredly, - & I am sure I could have blessed him for the Words*" (8, 13 April).⁹⁰ So, the loving daughter's deception works effectively. Un-deceiving the situation and cluing daddy in would be tiresome, fatiguing, or – worse – dangerous. As for d'Arblay himself, although his beloved cherishes very warm feelings for him, by 13 April (i.e. a fortnight later) she has still avoided giving him the answer to his proposal, while all the time she seems almost certain that she wants to become his wife. In the meantime, Frances grows more and more emotional, if not sentimental, about her imagined future with d'Arblay, fantasizing about the two of them sharing bread and water, and – necessarily – happiness. An embarrassing situation occurs when she worries that he will insist on an answer which she wishes to withhold although she seems rather keen on persuading her sister that in fact his proposal is an honour for herself ("*I must eternally be obliged to him That he has wished me to be his Life's Companion*", 8-13 April).⁹¹ In conversation, she bids him to be silent by saying "*Ne parlez pas de ça!*" (13 April), at which point they are joined by a Louise Cuenod, labelled by the writer as "*that wearisome Gossip*". No wonder they "*spoke no more alone –*".⁹² Successful deception of society continues.

At this juncture (8 April) Fanny Burney's correspondence with the outside world ceases to a large extent and, until 8 May, she turns to writing her journal instead ("*diarizing*" as she calls it, 3 May)⁹³ to be sent to her sister, Mrs. Phillips, exclusively, with few letter interludes. This switch to longer narrative writing seems a consequence of the insufficient privacy that is to be had at Chelsea College where Burney resides with her father. Needless to say, the epistolary courtship through the written exercises in French and/or English acquires a different dimension thanks to which the epistolary is transformed into the real world and personal contact. This is why the place of letters is taken by a seemingly private journal,

⁸⁹ Ibidem, p. 48.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 53.

⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 52.

⁹² Ibidem, p. 56.

⁹³ Ibidem, p. 100.

meant only for Susanna's eyes. In the journal, the writer resumes where she has left off before, at the entry of "*the unwelcome Guest*" – Louise Cuenod (8 April).⁹⁴

The matter becomes more serious as d'Arblay insists on speaking to Burney's father who is known to disrespect constitutionalists, the stepmother fleeing the scene hastily, which does have a comic ring to it. Apparently, no true design of the Frenchman is successfully communicated to Dr. Burney, but tension grows at dinner, when Frances admits: "*I was horribly embarrassed how to behave naturally! M. D'Arblay was pleasant & lively – but never spoke to me*" (10 April).⁹⁵ "*Horribly*" is a strong word to describe her mortification. Pretence continues. Confusion rules the emotions of Frances Burney: "*what to manage relative to M. D'Arblay*" (10 April),⁹⁶ or: "*The next Day I passed I know not how –*" (11-13 April).⁹⁷ On 18 April, she writes to d'Arblay saying he could find himself a richer, prettier or younger partner, and he responds by discussing the financial issues concerning their prospective marriage "*pour dire à mon ami dans toute la sincérité de mon ame*"; she asks him again to reconsider the situation.⁹⁸ Deception continues as Fanny has to pretend that her father is of high opinion of her fiancé and holds him in high regard (on 13 April, following the delivery to Dr. Burney of d'Arblay's descriptive list of French political parties, she has to invent the former's thanks and words of approval).⁹⁹

To better conceal the progress of the love affair between the two, Frances insists on a certain code which would enable her to preserve the little secrecy that remains to be preserved. On 12 April, she writes to d'Arblay: "*I wish the Miss [i.e. the title in her address] to be with a long & short s. as the Postman always calls out to Sam. Here's a foreign Letter. I hear him from my Room – which would be nothing, if there were not another Room as near*".¹⁰⁰ Clearly, even a "*room of one's own*" does not guarantee the requisite privacy although we have many times wondered why the novelist makes so scant use of the eighteenth-century invention, the closet, which seems to be perfectly well suited to at least some of her writing needs. Still, when forced to be in company, her bodily responses to the sensations experienced are not so easily disguised. When d'Arblay happens to mention setting up his new home in England, she blushes so deeply that despite bowing her head and pulling a veil down, she confides to her journal: "*I do not believe I could else have remained in the room*".¹⁰¹

The effectiveness of the implemented deception, even if it does not concern her immediate family, clearly brings Fanny instant satisfaction and peace of

⁹⁴ Ibidem, p. 58.

⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 66.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 67.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, p. 74.

⁹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 82-83.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 76.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, p. 92.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 96.

mind: "I am a little consoled [...] that M^e de Staël has no real information or insight into the state of affairs" (7 May).¹⁰² Her projected destiny of sharing "a crust of Bread, with a little Roof for shelter" (31 May)¹⁰³ draws nearer and nearer. "I cannot picture such a fate with dry Eyes", says Fanny and goes on to discuss the hopes for a future preferment for her husband-to-be (31 May).¹⁰⁴ The "great YES!" finally comes within two months of the proposal, in a letter of 3 June.¹⁰⁵ After that, events unfold quickly. In reply, her fiancé writes again to discuss financial issues, and finishes with "Je suis à vous pour la vie" (8 June),¹⁰⁶ having determined to share her vision of a secluded and unsophisticated abode and existence. "His scruples [...]", Fanny confides to her sister on the occasion, "fill me with admiration & affection for him!" (9 June).¹⁰⁷

Yet the father proves an obstacle. Prolonged negotiations are necessary before he can finally give his reluctant consent to the marriage while his daughter and her prospective husband continue to feed him with assurances of her future happiness (3 July).¹⁰⁸ Notwithstanding the above, on 11 July, Dr. Burney addresses d'Arblay, suggesting that the union be postponed somewhat longer, as "you are not unacquainted, Sir, with the precarious Tenure of my daughter's Pension",¹⁰⁹ and reports this to a family friend, Mr. William Locke (10 July).¹¹⁰ By 20 July old Burney agrees, and Frances writes to her brother Charles, asking for secrecy in the affair lest the news should reach the Queen before due time (23 July).¹¹¹ The latter text is a masterpiece of understatement, starting with a reference to circumstances beyond her control, and an invitation for the recipient to guess who the Gentleman in question might be, down to the "dear Father's" stance in "the transaction".¹¹² Almost at the last moment, D'Arblay writes to Captain James Burney, another brother of Fanny's, asking him to be his best man during the ceremony, which is to be held "demain matin, à sept heures précises" (27 July),¹¹³ the following week Fanny writes to a friend, Mrs. Waddington, declining to provide the much wanted piece of information for about six paragraphs, finally saying that "last Sunday – Mr. & Mrs. Lock – my sister & Captain Phillips, & my Brother Capt. Burney – accompanied us to the Altar, in Mickleham church" and excusing the absence of her father with his parental worry about her future (2 August),¹¹⁴ thus concealing his genuine aversion

¹⁰² Ibidem, p. 112.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p. 136.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, pp. 136-137.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 140.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 143.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, p. 147.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, p. 165.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 169.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 170-171.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, p. 176.

¹¹² Ibidem, p. 175.

¹¹³ Ibidem, pp. 176-177.

¹¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 178-179.

to and disapproval of her marriage. On the other hand, it should be remembered that “*in France, d'Arblay would not have considered for a moment marrying an unmonied, unfamilied, non-Catholic professional author, and their love affair, if it had developed, would have resembled the Cambridge or Digby affairs*”.¹¹⁵

As has been demonstrated, paradoxically – for Frances Burney – socialisation occurs only outside the ultimate place of socialization for upper classes, i.e. the royal court. The court itself proves a place of alienation and isolation, mainly because in terms of social class she is an outsider, but also because of the self-inflicted and escalating pain of being isolated from her friends and immediate family. It is after the novelist's discovery of the value of her independence that she can fully enjoy her regained freedom. Her diaristic/epistolary courtship, begun – notably – after her release from royal service, can finally be brought to a satisfactory conclusion, the moral being that the celebrated companionate marriage was not so easily concluded in the late eighteenth century as we might like to think. The transformation that Burney needs to undergo by hiding – or striving to hide – things first from herself, and then from others, mainly – her closest relatives, who are used to seeing her primarily as a commodity out of whom as much profit as possible is to be derived, is indicative also – in a wider context – of the approaching change in the status of women and their subsequent recognition as human beings in their own right, ready and able to pursue their ideas of happiness. This is the significance of the transformation of Fanny Burney the obedient victim of her father's social ambitions into Frances Burney the independent-minded author, appreciative of her own selfhood.

¹¹⁵ B. RIZZO, o. c. in note 3, p. 145.