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“Injuring Her Beauty by Study”: Women and Classical Learning in Frances Burney’s Novels

STEPHANIE DIEHL

Eighteenth-century author Frances Burney uses her novels as vehicles to engage in contemporary discussions about methods of education. Seen as inferior tools for self-education, novels were, according to Samuel Johnson, “written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life” (176). To such thinkers as Johnson, an education from a novel could never compete with the classical education available to the privileged men at university. However, this education was denied to women, and it was a popular belief that a classically educated woman was “injuring her beauty by study” (*Camilla* 46). Thus women, as both authors and readers, mostly had access to the marketplace of novels. Aware of her contemporaries’ pejorative view of the novel, Burney hesitates to even refer to her first work, *Evelina*, as a novel, fearing the rejection of male critics. Her treatment of the classics in *Evelina* reflects the dominant views of her contemporaries. The narrative voice echoes the prevailing opin-

ion of men during this time period: classically educated women were unappealing and unfeminine. However, as Burney matures as an author, her third novel, or, as she calls it “prose epic,” *Camilla*, demonstrates a measurable shift from this point of view. The focus in *Camilla* departs from the disparaging attitude toward learned women, and instead points to the failures of the classical education for both men and women. An analysis of the evolution between her first and third novel, as well as her rejection of the classical education, demonstrates Burney’s endorsement of the novel as an appropriate vehicle for education.

18th century philosophers, moralists, and conduct book authors actively discouraged women from pursuing a classical education because it would be detrimental to their femininity. Jonathan Swift writes in his *Letter to a very young Lady on her Marriage* that a woman, because she is a woman, will never excel at learning: “after all the pains you may be at, you never can arrive, in point of learning, to the perfection of a school boy” (qtd. in Kamm 117). Likewise, Samuel Richardson, in a letter to Lady Bradshaigh, writes that a learned woman should not be “an object of fear,” but that if a woman ignores her domestic duties in order to learn, then “she is good for nothing” (qtd. in Kamm 118). A woman’s feminine duties as a wife take precedence over learning. These opinions were not restricted to men only. Even the Bluestockings, a social group of highly educated women, including Lady Mary Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, and Hester Chapone, deterred other women from pursuing such a course of study. Lady Mary Montagu encouraged her eldest granddaughter to “conceal whatever learning she [attained] with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness” (qtd. in Kamm 103). Hester Chapone

warned of “the danger of pedantry and presumption in a woman . . . of her exchanging the graces of imagination for the severity and preciseness of a scholar” (196). Unlike Swift and Richardson, both of these women are concerned not with the effects of learning, but with the appearance of learning. Lady Mary does not actively discourage her granddaughter from being educated; instead, she encourages her to hide it. Hester Chapone, too, is concerned with the loss of a woman’s “graces.” In other words, if a woman appears educated, she becomes less eligible as a marriage partner. Burney seems to join in the concerns of these women, and when she abandons her study of Ancient Greek, she writes: “‘I am sure I fag [sic] more for fear of disgrace than for hope of profit. . . . To devote so much time to acquire something I shall always dread to have known, is really unpleasant enough, considering how many things there are that I might employ myself in that would have no such drawback’” (qtd. in Kamm 104). To Burney, the benefits of learning Greek do not outnumber the social consequences associated with such an education.

Burney’s early, conservative views on classically educated women are reflected in her first novel, *Evelina*, published in 1778. The novel, which tells the story of the eponymous heroine’s quest to be acknowledged by her father, contains one learned woman: Mrs. Selwyn. Older, unmarried, and relentlessly sarcastic, Mrs. Selwyn is unanimously hated by the other characters in the novel, specifically because of her education. She has a fondness for the odes of Horace, and Evelina calls her “our satirical friend” (*Evelina* 284, 290). Burney, in keeping with the views of her contemporaries, portrays Evelina as looking down on Mrs. Selwyn because she has lost the appearance of femininity through her education. Evelina writes to one of her friends, saying,

“[Mrs. Selwyn] is extremely clever; her understanding, indeed, may be called *masculine*, but, unfortunately, her manners deserve the same epithet; for, in studying to acquire the knowledge of the other sex, she has lost all the softness of her own. . . . I have never been personally hurt at her want of gentleness; a virtue which, nevertheless, seems so essential a part of the female character, that I find myself more awkward, and less at ease, with a woman who wants it, than I do with a man” (*Evelina* 269). Evelina highlights the effect of learning on Mrs. Selwyn’s feminine appearance; she has lost her “softness” and “gentleness,” things that Evelina sees as essential for femininity (*Evelina* 269). This commentary about Mrs. Selwyn, made by the heroine of the story, endorses the concerns women had about learning the classics. Mrs. Selwyn has lost her feminine graces through her education.

However consistent Burney’s views are with the condemnation of classically educated women in *Evelina*, she demonstrates a dramatic shift by the time *Camilla* is published in 1796. In fact, she moves from criticizing learned women to critiquing elite male forms of classical education. She uses the classics themselves to accomplish this, as *Camilla* is Burney’s novel that is most dependent on the classical tradition. Even the title evokes the female warrior from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Burney makes a direct reference to this connection, when the narrator describes that “[Camilla] ‘*skimmed*,’ like her celebrated namesake” (*Camilla* 849). This is a reference to Virgil’s Camilla, whose father, when she was a baby, fastened her to a spear to send her “whizzing” over the river Amasenus in an effort to escape his town’s rebellion (648-67). Camilla, the heroine of Burney’s story, also has a sister named Lavinia, another name borrowed from the *Aeneid*. The novel contains

thirty-seven allusions to classical Greek and Roman texts, and a large part of the plot centers on the outcome of a classical education, for both male and female characters.

This abundance of allusions to classical literature aligns with Burney's desire to write a "prose epic." In a letter to her father, Burney describes her work as being written in "*the prose Epic style*" (*Camilla*, Introduction, xiv). Referring to her work as an epic carries with it certain implications, especially when it comes to the portrayal of education. Margaret Doody argues that *Camilla* is a didactic novel, meant to satirize the popular 18th-century conduct book. She writes that "[Burney uses] the simple notion of the didactic story of education as an ironic background or weft against which she wove her tale" (218). Since Burney intended to write an epic, however, education becomes more central than an "ironic background," since Greek and Roman epic poetry was a foundational part of education for centuries (Doody 219). It is impossible to separate the epic from its educational objective. Thomas Maresca, in *Epic to Novel*, writes that epic poetry has traditionally served didactic purposes: "Wisdom, whether conceived as knowledge of philosophy or theology, politics or ethics, has been the core of epic from the Hellenistic allegoresis of Homer forward. Renaissance criticism and practice intensified this element by heavily emphasizing the didactic purpose of epic and fitting it out as a tool to teach man about, and to help him obtain, felicity" (182). The epic has been used to teach young people for generations.

In fact, Burney's choice of the *Aeneid* as her source material, instead of one of Homer's epics, points to her educational purpose. Virgil wrote his epic with a "conscious desire to instruct" the Roman people, a

desire not present in Homer's works (Thornbury 22). Not only was the epic used to instruct people in antiquity, but it is at the center of the 18th-century classical education. Men at university were required to read both the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad* (Clarke 53). Similarly, the 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau uses the relationship between Telemachus and Mentor, characters from Homer's *Odyssey*, to demonstrate the ideal education in his treatise *Emile, or on Education* (414). And yet, Burney uses the didactic function of the epic to lead not to wisdom, or felicity, but rather to a questioning of an education dependent on classical learning. In *Camilla*, she not only uses the epic for a new didactic purpose, but she questions the utility of the vehicle itself.

Burney accomplishes this questioning through her approach to the prose epic. She writes that her work will "[be] more multifarious in the Characters it brings into action,—but all *wove* into *one*, with a one *Heroine* shining conspicuous through the Group" (*Camilla*, Introduction, xiv). Burney's ideas are consistent with 18th-century thought on the prose epic, best explained by the founder of the genre: Henry Fielding. He argues in the preface to *Joseph Andrews* that if a literary work contains all the aspects of epic, including similar action, characters, and sentiments, and it only lacks poetic metre, then it should be considered a "prose epic" (qtd. in Thornbury 98). And yet, Fielding does not deviate from Aristotle's original understanding of the epic; Fielding maintains that the plot should have a "unity of action" (qtd. in Thornbury 114). Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, explains that "[a] story is not a unity, as some people think it is, simply by being about a single person" (1451a 15-20). In other words, in order for an epic to have unity of action, it is dependent on several characters, instead of

just one, with one overarching movement through the plot. Aristotle uses Homer's *Odyssey* as his example, demonstrating how the different elements and characters in the epic turn "about a single action," the action of Odysseus' return home (1451a 25). Fielding employs this concept in *Joseph Andrews*, loosely connecting the events in the plot, and Burney does likewise in *Camilla*. For Burney, the unity of action centers on the union of the "shining conspicuous" heroine Camilla Tyrold with the hero Edgar Mandlebert, and the "multifarious" characters who are "all wove into one" play a significant role in this action (*Camilla*, Introduction, xiv).

These diverse characters working toward a unified goal are integral to the novel's designation as a prose epic, but, surprisingly, Burney uses most of these characters to covertly critique an education dependent on the epic: the classical education. The first of these characters is Camilla's uncle, the well-meaning Sir Hugh Tyrold. Burney's portrayal of Sir Hugh mocks the way a classical education is privileged among men. Sir Hugh, having neglected his studies in his youth, comes to believe that he suffers from apathy in his old age due to his lack of knowledge. The narrator comments that "he soon fancied that every earthly misfortune originated in a carelessness of learning . . . even inevitable calamities he attributed to the negligence of his education, and construed every error, and every evil of his life, to his youthful disrespect of Greek and Latin" (*Camilla* 34). Sir Hugh's negligence has not caused a few problems in his life; it has brought about "every error" and "every evil" (*Camilla* 34). Burney deliberately exaggerates the consequences of a man ignoring the classics, and, in doing so, she highlights the absurd level of importance often given to such an education.

Sir Hugh's overestimation of the importance of

the classics takes an almost sinister turn when it comes to his niece, Camilla's sister, Eugenia. After suffering an injury from a fall, as well as the ravages of smallpox, Eugenia is left physically disabled and scarred from an early age. Sir Hugh is responsible for these calamities, and he decides to make amends by giving her a classical education through a tutor, Dr. Orkborne. Refusing to let anyone tell Eugenia that she is disfigured, Sir Hugh imagines that the classics will restore to her what she has lost. And she has lost a lot—the people who observe her from a distance describe Eugenia as "[a] little lame thing," "an ugly little bod[y]," and a person with "such a hobble in their gait" (*Camilla* 77). She has lost any chance at physical beauty. She no longer has those graces so essential to a woman. She cannot walk without a limp, and the narrator at one point comments that "Eugenia could only have served as a foil, even to those who had no pretensions to beauty" (*Camilla* 58). Eugenia is not an appealing marital option; she only serves to make other women seem more attractive. And yet, Sir Hugh believes that the classics will make her marriageable. Her knowledge of Greek and Latin will replace her beauty; Homer and Horace will mask her limp. Sir Hugh believes that this education will make Eugenia the ideal wife for his nephew Clermont Lynmere, who is himself studying the classics at Eton College. When Sir Hugh first resolves on educating Eugenia, he says, "'I shall make her a wife after his own heart'" (*Camilla* 48). This implies that Sir Hugh imagines a classical education to have a transformative power. The amount of importance he places on the classics leads him to think that they are capable of making Eugenia marriageable, an idea that proves disastrous for Eugenia.

Burney uses this marriage plot to criticize the attitude toward classically educated women she origi-

nally perpetuated in *Evelina*. When Eugenia, after years of learning, is finally presented to Clermont, he cruelly rejects her, telling his uncle: “‘what have I to do with marrying a girl like a boy? That’s not my taste, my dear sir, I assure you. Besides, what has a wife to do with the classics? Will they shew her how to order her table? I suppose when I want to eat, I may go to a cook’s shop!’” (*Camilla* 592). Again, the concern with a woman learning the classics revolves around femininity; in this case, Eugenia’s ability to provide a proper home for Clermont. He argues that she cannot perform her duty as a wife because of her learning, and, to Clermont, she is no longer even a woman: she is a “girl like a boy” (*Camilla* 592). This critique, however similar to *Evelina*’s sentiments about Mrs. Selwyn, is different because of Clermont’s character. It is no longer the heroine of the story offering these viewpoints; instead, it is the insipid, vain Clermont who reflects these views. Burney is no longer critiquing an educated woman—she is critiquing the attitude of the male character and his viewpoints.

This critique of Clermont’s attitude introduces more of Burney’s criticism toward a classical education as a whole. She confronts the perceived benefits of a classical education for men. Historically, during this time period, the universities of Britain were questioning the same issue. At the University of Oxford, English began to replace Latin as the spoken language in class lectures. Students were supplied with an individual tutor, who was to “form not only the mind but the man” (Evans 192). Teachers began to place more emphasis on shaping the character and behavior of their students. Some questioned whether or not a knowledge of the classics truly benefitted a person’s morality. The essayist William Hazlitt wrote that “Any one who has passed through the regular gradations of a classical

education, and is not made a fool by it, may consider himself as having had a very narrow escape” (qtd. in Evans 200). Burney’s portrayal of classically educated men in her novel explores this concept, as the educated men are either socially inept or morally bankrupt. Clermont, who has been educated at Eton College, certainly mishandles his relationship with Eugenia, and his education has done nothing for his social ability (*Camilla* 44). In fact, he returns from school ready to indulge “both the natural presumption and acquired luxuriance of his character” (*Camilla* 583). The “acquired luxuriance” implies that Clermont has gained this character trait while away at Eton. Likewise, Camilla’s brother, Lionel, has developed detrimental habits while at university. His bad behavior comes directly from his “bad scrape at Oxford,” for which he requires a large sum of money (*Camilla* 225). With the encouragement of his friends, Lionel writes a threatening letter to his uncle, demanding money. Eventually, Lionel is found out, and he repents of his behavior (*Camilla* 227). And yet, he quickly reverts to his old ways, and exclaims to Camilla that “the deuce of study is, there is no end of it! And it does so little for one! one can go through life so well without it!” (*Camilla* 243). Certainly, Lionel has not benefitted from his classical education, nor does he see the value of it.

These two young men are not the only examples of a failed classical education. Burney often portrays the older, more influential male characters in a similar light. Their failures are even more dangerous because these men serve as mentors to younger characters. The role of the mentor has its roots in classical Greek mythology; in fact, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Mentor is the older man assigned to counsel Odysseus’ son Telemachus (Cooper 113). The goddess Athena disguises herself as

Mentor, and she is an essential influence for Telemachus, guiding him through the transition from childhood to manhood, and leading him to success (*Odyssey* 1.273-9). The mentor acts in a similar way as the Oxford tutor: they are meant to “form not only the mind but the man” (Evans 192). Helen Cooper writes that, in the 18th century, “the device of a mentor in a novel was traditionally a means of showing conventionally approved behavior to the heroine” (116). And yet, Burney deviates from both the classical model, as well as the model of her contemporaries, by representing the dangers of an incompetent mentor throughout *Camilla*. Camilla’s father, Mr. Tyrold is revered by those around him due to his extensive learning and his kindness. His brother, Sir Hugh, admires him exceedingly, and Mrs. Tyrold obeys his every command. Lionel, when lamenting his own study habits, exclaims, “My father, you know, is firm as a rock. He minds neither wind nor weather, nor fletcher nor sneerer: but this firmness, look ye, he has kept all to himself; not a whit of it do I inherit; every wind that blows veers me about, and makes me look some new way” (*Camilla* 241). Lionel realizes that his father has gained a moral strength of character from his studies, but that he has not passed on this knowledge to his son. Mr. Tyrold has failed to properly guide Lionel. Mr. Tyrold’s deficiencies as a mentor extend even further when it comes to his advice to his daughter Camilla. When he realizes that Camilla is romantically interested in Edgar Mandlebert, but that Edgar’s affections are uncertain, he advises Camilla to conceal her feelings. He tells her to “Carefully, then, beyond all other care, shut up every avenue by which a secret which should die untold can further escape you. Avoid every species of particularity; neither shun nor seek any intercourse apparently” (*Camilla* 360). This advice, while popular enough

to become part of an actual conduct book, is ultimately disastrous for Camilla (Doody 231). Edgar, based on the advice of his erring mentor, is waiting for a sign of Camilla’s affection. She withholds that sign based on her mentor’s guidance. The results are devastating for both characters, and the damage done by these inept mentors is only resolved five hundred and thirty-seven pages later, in the closing of the novel.

Perhaps the most damage done by a mentor in *Camilla* is perpetrated by the man most associated with classical education: the learned Dr. Orkborne. A highly educated scholar, Dr. Orkborne is obsessed with studying the classics. When first introduced as Sir Hugh’s tutor, the narrator comments that “Application, operating upon a retentive memory, had enabled [Dr. Orkborne] to lay by the most ample hoards of erudition; but these, though they rendered him respectable amongst the learned, proved nearly nugatory in his progress through the world, from a total want of skill and penetration to know how or where they might turn to any account” (*Camilla* 36). In a reversal of the concerns about learned women, who could lose the appearance of femininity through education, Burney presents Dr. Orkborne as appearing “respectable,” while lacking any personal graces (*Camilla* 36). His classical education has prevented him from developing any social skills. In fact, he barely has any control over his own emotions. After a maid mistakenly discards a scrap of paper from Dr. Orkborne’s desk, he loses his temper, and shouts, “I wish you had been all of you annihilated ere ever you had entered my room! I had rather have lost my ears than that manuscript! I wish with all my heart you had been at the bottom of the sea, every one of you, before you had touched it!” (*Camilla* 210). His passionate outburst is disturbing to the family, and Sir Hugh muses

upon Dr. Orkborne's education, saying "I must fairly own I don't see the great superiority of learning, if it can't keep a man's temper out of passion" (*Camilla* 212). The classics have not helped Dr. Orkborne learn to reign in his passions, and Sir Hugh, who prizes the classics more than anyone else in the novel, begins to question the value of a classical education. When he fails to educate Sir Hugh, Dr. Orkborne turns his attention to Eugenia, which produces even more dire consequences.

Burney uses the disastrous relationship between Eugenia and Dr. Orkborne to further highlight the dangers of an education solely dependent on the classics. Dr. Orkborne is Eugenia's tutor from a young age, and is clearly incapable of teaching her any social graces, as he does not understand them himself. The narrator describes Eugenia's artlessness: "Early absorbed in the study of literature and languages, under the direction of a preceptor who had never mingled with the world, her capacity had been occupied in constant work for her memory; but her judgement and penetration had been wholly unexercised" (271). In other words, as a direct result of Dr. Orkborne's ineffective mentoring, Eugenia has no ability to function in society. She knows her Latin grammar, but she cannot make judgements or decisions for herself. Eugenia is determined to follow her mentor's model, and she becomes so invested in her studies that her brother Lionel begins to call her "little Greek and Latin" instead of Eugenia (*Camilla* 500). While this nickname highlights Eugenia's absorption with the classics, it also echoes concerns about the classical education first voiced by the philosopher John Locke. Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, expresses his anxieties about the mentor-mentee relationship, saying that the mentor must value virtuous

behavior over the pedantry of the classics. He goes on to address parents directly, writing, "you must confess that you have a strange value for words, when preferring the languages of the ancient Greeks and Romans to that which made them such brave men, you think it worthwhile to hazard your son's innocence and virtue for a little Greek and Latin" (Locke 46). For Locke, innocence and virtue, the admirable qualities of the Greeks and Romans, are more valuable than simply learning the languages they spoke. Burney seems to support Locke's viewpoint when Lionel refers to Eugenia as "little Greek and Latin," since Eugenia's limited knowledge endangers her innocence and virtue (*Camilla* 500).

Burney stresses the danger of this "strange value for words" even more when Dr. Orkborne's obsession with the classics directly places Eugenia in physical danger (Locke 46). At one point he becomes so absorbed with "a verse in one of Virgil's Eclogues," that he completely abandons Eugenia in a field with an angry bull (*Camilla* 131). He also fails to protect the women of the household when a fight breaks out, choosing rather to meditate on "the pugilistic games of old . . . the games of antiquity" (*Camilla* 668). More importantly, Dr. Orkborne is a contributing factor to Eugenia's eventual violent kidnapping by the fortune hunter Alphonso Bellamy. When Bellamy first writes to Eugenia speciously expressing his love, Eugenia has the opportunity to completely rebuff him. She writes a letter in response, and Sir Hugh insists that her mentor read it over for her. The narrator describes that "Dr. Orkborne, being called upon, slightly glanced his eye over the letter, but made no emendation, saying: 'I believe it will do very sufficiently; but I have only concerned myself with the progress of Miss Eugenia in the

Greek and Latin languages; any body can teach her English” (122). He does not give the content of the letter much consideration, only “slightly” glancing at it. Dr. Orkborne is more concerned with making a snobbish comment implying that English is inferior to Greek and Latin. In doing so, he completely ignores the fact that the letter is too kind—it is not strongly worded enough to dissuade Bellamy.

This lack of proper mentoring by Dr. Orkborne leads to Eugenia’s downfall when she is finally kidnapped by the greedy Bellamy. She cannot fathom that anyone would have ill-intentions, and when she is first approached by Bellamy, the narrator comments, “Having read no novels, [Eugenia’s] imagination had never been awakened to scenes of this kind; and what she had gathered upon such subjects in the poetry and history she had studied with Dr. Orkborne, had only impressed her fancy in proportion as love bore the character of heroism, and the lover that of an hero. Though highly therefore romantic, her romance was not the common adoption of the circulating library; it was simply that of elevated sentiments, formed by animated credulity playing upon youthful inexperience” (*Camilla* 315). Eugenia cannot see through Bellamy’s flowery, romantic speech. She imagines that, because he is expressing the “elevated sentiments” she understands from the classics, he must actually love her. What would be obvious to any patron of the circulating library is incomprehensible to Eugenia. As a result, she is violently kidnapped and forced to marry Bellamy. Her classical studies have not prepared her for real life—she cannot recognize Bellamy’s scheme. A classical education has failed Dr. Orkborne, and he, in turn, has failed Eugenia. This moment in the novel captures both of these failures, and at the same time, endorses the novel as a use-

ful learning tool. Burney states that, had Eugenia read novels, she would have been able to realize Bellamy’s treachery.

This moment in *Camilla* underscores Burney’s changing beliefs about classical education, for both men and women, as well as her beliefs about the role of the novel. In *Evelina*, Burney begins her novel with an apology for having written a novel. She endorses the beliefs of her contemporaries about women and classical education, and portrays Mrs. Selwyn in a negative light. Burney demonstrates more confidence as an author in *Camilla*, and she uses the classical tradition to question the benefits of a classical education. In depicting the classics as ultimately failing both male and female characters, Burney presents the reader with a new mode of effective education for the 18th century: the novel.

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