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Women in Eighteenth Century London:

Female Coming of Age in Frances Burney's Evelina, Cecilia, *and* The Witlings

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Abstract

The late eighteenth-century author Frances Burney is best known for popularizing the "comedy of manners," a literary style later adopted by Jane Austen. Burney's novels, journals, and plays offer an intriguing commentary on contemporary social customs and etiquette. In particular, she voices the concerns and desires of women, leading scholars to focus on the feminist overtones of her writing. Although she carefully examined female roles in the household and family structure, Burney also provided an insider's perspective into London high life. As an acclaimed author and city native, Burney offers a rare insight into the lives of the urban elite. For these reasons, I have chosen to examine three of her works within the context of their London setting.

In *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *The Witlings*, Burney examines women's struggle for independence in an urban context. These works offer a new interpretation of the female *Bildungsroman*, or coming of age story. Burney shows how London life influences her heroines' expectations, ambitions and desires. Evelina's coming of age centers around the quest for family and social acceptance, while the two Cecilias of *Cecilia* and *The Witlings* confront the financial pressures that accompany their inheritance. Ultimately, the three protagonists learn important lessons that are specific to city life. Although Burney concludes each story with the heroine's marriage, her focus is not on romance, as has been suggested, but on the cultural landscape of the city. Coming of age in her stories is inextricably connected to the diverse challenges and opportunities presented to urban women.

Acknowledgments

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Finally, I owe so much to my family, who has taught me to live by the saying, "To those whom much is given, much is expected."

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Introduction

As one of the most prolific writers of the eighteenth century, Frances Burney is often associated with women in London. Her first two novels, *Evelina* and *Cecilia*, along with the play *The Witlings*, examine the gendered struggle for autonomy in the city. Burney's works offer a critical analysis of London society, particularly in regards to gender and class. She is thus credited with fashioning the genre known as "comedy of manners," a literary style later popularized by Jane Austen. The realism and honesty with which she depicted women's lives made her a *bona fide* female celebrity, unusual for a writer. In many ways, her novels, plays, and journals have contributed to our understanding of women in the eighteenth century.

Many scholars have analyzed Burney's works through the lens of marriage and the family. However, given the central importance of London to Burney's writing, this paper will examine the impact of the city on the female *Bildungsroman*, or coming of age story. In *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *The Witlings*, Burney shows how London directly impacts single women's financial, marital, and social options. Through heroines who must navigate the perils of urban life, Burney explores topics such as the commercialization of leisure, the clash between public and private life, and female vulnerability in the male gaze. For her heroines, coming of age is inextricably tied to London culture.

However, literary works focusing on urban women would not be complete without the theme of marriage. As Jane Spencer observes, "The female *Bildungsroman* is bound to be problematic in a society where a woman's maturity is marked by entering a

marital relationship in which she is considered a perpetual minor." [1] Indeed, Burney presents marriage as both the solution to and the problem with limited female independence. Her society will not allow young women to remain independent without a spouse, thus marriage is a convenient solution to the issue of female autonomy. Nevertheless, her heroines' romantic relationships are not the central focus of her stories. Her female characters voice their innermost desires, fears and ambitions – offering a glimpse into the private lives of single women. Ultimately, Burney's true subject is not the marital conflict of her protagonists, but the ways in which the city influences women's expectations, choices, and experiences.

[1] Jane Spencer, "*Evelina* and *Cecilia*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney*, ed. Peter Sabor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29-30.

Historical Overview

Eighteenth century London was an international hub of government, trade, and industry. Burney's protagonists would have been accustomed to crowds, for when the first official Census was recorded in 1801, London housed 900,000 people. [2] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, London was twelve times bigger than any other city in the world. [3] Rife with amusements and luxuries, the metropolis attracted regional and international visitors. In his 1782 preface to *The Ambulator: Or, a Pocket Companion, in a Tour Round London*, R. Lobb described the city as a commercial paradise:

> No part of the kingdom, perhaps can present more attractive scenes than the environs of London; in which the man of leisure may find amusement, and the man of business the most agreeable relaxation ... rural elegance and rural beauty here appear in their most fascinating forms ... Extensive prospects charm the eye with undescribable variety: the landscape, less extensive invites the pensive mind to contemplation; or the creative powers of Art exhibit an Elysium where Nature once appeared in her rudest state. [4]

The city's reputation as the cultural and commercial epicenter of Britain was solidified at the time of Burney's writing. However, commercial participation largely depended on one's gender and class. For women and the poor, the landscape of the city was considerably different. As James Walvin remarks, "The great bulk of working people had little free time, spare cash or adequate opportunities to enjoy…costly commercial pleasures." [5] While the rich built townhouses in the West End to complement their country estates, the poor flocked to the docks and the East End, drawn by higher urban

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[2] Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 131.
[3] George F. E. Rudé, *Hanoverian London: 1714-1808* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 20.
[4] Elizabeth McKlellar, "Peripheral visions: Alternative aspects and rural presences in mid-eighteenth-century London," *Art History* 22, no. 4 (Nov 1999), 495.
[5] James Walvin, *English Urban Life: 1776-1851* (Dover, New Hampshire: Hutchinson, 1984), 153.

wages. The city became a prime destination for working-class women, who found work as domestic servants, seamstresses and even prostitutes. Urban society exposed inherent class tensions, and the economic gap between the leisured and working classes is all too apparent in Burney's novels.

London's consumer expansion also manifested itself along gender lines. Women of the upper classes were expected to attend the theater, follow expensive fashions, and engage in elaborate social rituals. As Peter Ackroyd observes, "as business and industry grew, the male presence of the city was rendered more powerful. So women were commercial objects, wearing such-and-such an amount of material at such-and-such a price, or they were rendered 'feminine' and 'pretty.'" [6] In a city where "public recreations and pleasures were overwhelmingly male dominated," [7] shopping was viewed as a particularly female pastime. Sophie von La Roche describes the diverse array of wares and services offered to London women:

> We especially noticed a cunning for showing women's materials. Whether they are silks, chintzes, or muslins, they hang down in folds behind the fine high windows so that the effect of this or that material, as it would be in the ordinary folds of a woman's dress, can be studied. Amongst the muslins of all colours are on view, and so one can judge how the frock would look in company with its fellows… Behind great glass windows absolutely everything one can think of is neatly, attractively displayed, and in such abundance of choice as almost to make one greedy. [8]

Burney often satirizes the frivolous consumerism of the female leisured classes. In *Evelina*, she writes, "Poor Miss Mirvan cannot wear one of the caps she made, because

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[6] Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (New York: Random House, 2000), 620.
[7] Walvin, 156.
[8] Porter, 144.

they dress her hair too large for them." [9] Likewise, in *Cecilia*, the *Ton* set idles in fashionable public places, hoping to attract men's attention. The protagonist laments, "Several days passed on nearly in the same manner; the mornings were all spent in gossiping, shopping and dressing, and the evenings were regularly appropriated to public places, or large parties of company." [10] Burney captures the particularly female desire to engage in urban culture through commercial pursuits.

This period also saw the construction of new public spaces where all levels of society mingled. In *Evelina*, the protagonist sees the famous actor David Garrick perform at the Royal Opera House in Haymarket. She also frequents St. James's Park, Kensington Garden, and Vauxhall Gardens. For Burney's protagonists, the emphasis on spectacle and scrutiny often conflicts with women's private lives. The author shows that although public interaction allows women increased mobility, it also exposes women to urban dangers. In *The Witlings*, public knowledge of Cecilia's bankruptcy nearly destroys her impending marriage. Similarly, Evelina and the other Cecilia must face unwanted male advances at the theater and public gardens.

Life in the city came with a unique set of expectations for women. Similar to their rural counterparts, young ladies were expected to carefully guard their virtue while also bowing to male authority. Contemporary literature emphasized female humility and obedience, particularly useful in an urban context. For instance, one review of *Evelina* suggested that the novel "[m]ay prove equally useful and entertaining to the younger part of our *male* as well as *female* Readers; to the latter of whom we particularly recommend

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[9] Frances Burney, *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance Into the World*, ed. Susan Kubica Howard (Broadview Press, 2000), 119.
[10] Frances Burney, *Cecilia, Or Memoirs of an Heiress*, ed. Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52.

it, as conveying many practical lessons both on morals and manners." [11] This hints at the importance of late eighteenth century advice books, designed to provide proper modes of conduct for women. As one author theorizes, "the purpose [of these books] was to restrain or curb the natural power or instincts of women, all the more overtly displayed in the city; a distinction was often drawn between the city wife and the country wife, for example, the latter manifesting all the characteristics of docility and faithfulness which the former noticeably lacks." [12] Burney's heroines struggle to meet standards of docile femininity and at the same time protect themselves against exploitation. Living in the city thus burdened women with new standards of conduct and propriety.

[11] Burney, *Evelina*, 559.
[12] Ackroyd, 620.

Evelina

Overview

Burney completed her first major work, *Evelina*, when she was only twenty-five years old. An epistolary novel, *Evelina* is composed solely of letters between the narrator and her audience. It was published anonymously in 1778, reflecting the social prejudices against female authorship. As Julia Epstein remarks, "For [Burney], overt rebellion against established norms by making public what ought to remain not merely private but utterly unspoken must be conducted by subtlety and subversion, by anonymous publication." [13] *Evelina* met with extraordinary success, attracting the praise of literary patrons such as Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, and Hester Thrale. [14] The widely popular novel cemented Burney's authorship, and she went on to enjoy an esteemed literary career.

Evelina depicts the adventures of a young woman who comes into London society. The heroine, the seventeen year-old Evelina Anville, is the illegitimate daughter of Sir John Belmont. Despite the reservations of her guardian, Reverend Villars, she accompanies Lady Howard and the Mirvans from rural Dorsetshire to London. Burney follows her protagonist through the first six months of her time in the city; therefore, Evelina's coming of age is inevitably linked to London. The heroine experiences much in a short period, encountering strange men, prostitutes in public places, fashionable balls, city nightlife, and even new family members. Through letters to her guardian and friends, Evelina learns to navigate the city by relying on her own judgment and overcoming her

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[13] Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 94.
[14] Burney, *Evelina*, 17.

emotional and social insecurities. Burney depicts female coming of age as inextricably connected to London itself.

Evelina also focuses on coming of age as it relates to lineage. Susan Kubica Howard suggests that the novel's subtitle of "A Young Lady's Entrance Into the World" can be seen as both Evelina's entrance into society and the central institution of the family. [15] The narrator's family history is as follows: her mother, Carolyn Evelyn, secretly married Sir John Belmont to avoid an arranged marriage by Evelina's maternal grandmother, Madame Duval. However, Sir Belmont destroyed the marriage certificate and abandoned Carolyn; she died soon after in childbirth. Although Rev. Villars adopted Evelina per Carolyn's wishes, Sir Belmont has refused to acknowledge Evelina as his heir, making her essentially a bastard. In an environment where the private is made public, Evelina's attempts to obscure her lineage from potential suitors are fruitless. Burney shows that issues of lineage, wealth, and gender become public knowledge in close urban quarters.

The Heroine's Impressionable Mind

The author explicitly states her intentions for her heroine in the preface to *Evelina*. By showing Evelina's initial ignorance of the world, Burney provides her readership with an outside perspective on urban society. Evelina's initial "ignorance" and "secluded retirement" [16] will stand in contrast to the real-world experience she gains in London. However, Evelina's maturation does not stem merely from her change of setting. Rather, her exposure to a wide variety of characters and settings forces her to grapple

[15] Burney, *Evelina*, 21.
[16] Burney, *Evelina*, 95.

with complex issues of gender, class, and female identity. By the end of the novel, she is substantially less "young, artless, and inexperienced." [17]

Reverend Villars knows that Evelina's sheltered upbringing has made her especially vulnerable to London's influence. As he cautions Lady Howard, "The town acquaintance of Mrs. Mirvan are all in the circle of high life; this artless young creature, with too much beauty to escape notice, has too much sensibility to be indifferent to it; but she has too little wealth to be sought with propriety by men of the fashionable world." [18] Villars specifies that it is not Evelina's wealth and experience that will attract men, but her beauty and innocence. However, he realizes that in time, experience may serve as a check against naïveté, noting, "the time draws on for experience and observation to take place of instruction…" [19] Therefore, it is through knowledge gained in London that Evelina will learn to form her own judgments about the world.

Although Villars is apprehensive about Evelina's trip to London, Lady Howard notes the benefits of seeing the city. She specifically connects London with Evelina's coming of age, telling Villars:

> [I]t is time that she should see something of the world. When young people are too rigidly sequestered from it, their lively and romantic imaginations paint it to them as a paradise of which they have been beguiled; but when they are shown it properly, and in due time, they see it such as it really is, equally shared by pain and pleasure, hope and disappointment." [20]

Indeed, Evelina's mind is a *tabula rasa* upon which her London experiences make their inevitable impression. Her first letters from London describe a city of spectacle, beauty, and wonder. She sees the famous actor David Garrick perform at the Drury-Lane Theater,

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[17] Burney, *Evelina*, 96.
[18] Burney, *Evelina*, 107-108.
[19] Burney, *Evelina*, 106.
[20] Burney, *Evelina*, 106.

walks in St. James's Park, attends a private ball, and strolls in Ranelagh Gardens. She describes the latter to Villars, writing, "It is a charming place, and the brilliancy of the lights, on my first entrance, made me almost think I was in some inchanted castle [sic], or fairy palace, for all looked like magic to me." [21] However, Evelina is not as easily seduced as the reader might think. As she tells Villars, "the houses and streets are quite so superb as I expected. [22] Evelina is already reevaluating her initial reactions to the city. Although she relies on her elders to help her navigate London life, Evelina proves she is capable of forming her own opinions about her surroundings.

At first, the protagonist finds freedom through observation; she is content to watch the wonderful sights of the city. Ever the sharp observer, Evelina notes how her appearance differs from the other London women, remarking that her style of dress is not yet "Londonized." [23] As she delights in learning the names of the city's operas and playhouses, [24] she acknowledges her own anonymity, admitting, "As to me, I should be alike unknown in the most conspicuous or the most private part of the [Opera] house." [25] Especially because Evelina does not yet realize her social shortcomings, she is content to remain a detached observer on London life.

However, her status as a rural outsider eventually works to her disadvantage. When she meets the handsome Lord Orville at a ball, she does not know how to dance or even to converse with such an esteemed partner. Evelina laments her ignorance, saying, "But, really, I think there ought to be a book, of all the laws and customs *à-la-mode*,

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[21] Burney, *Evelina*, 130.
[22] Burney, *Evelina*, 116.
[23] Burney, *Evelina*, 116.
[24] Burney, *Evelina*, 114.
[25] Burney, *Evelina*, 116.

presented to all young people, upon their first introduction to public company." [26] Burney further elaborates on Evelina's social insecurity, writing, "[Lord Orville]…talked of public places, and public performers; but he soon discovered that I was totally ignorant of them." [27] Finally, inexperience with upper class etiquette makes her a target for public ridicule. The men at the dance discuss her looks and airs, concluding that she is ignorant or mischievous" and "a poor weak girl." [28] When Evelina mistakenly rejects Mr. Lovel for a dance, he later mocks her, saying:

> 'I think, Ma'am, you was never in town before? So I did presume. Doubtless, Ma'am, every thing must be infinitely novel to you. Our customs, our manners, and *les etiquettes de nous autres* [our etiquette], can have very little resemblance to those you have been used to. I imagine, Ma'am, your retirement is at no very small distance from the capital?' [29]

By characterizing Evelina as a provincial outsider, Mr. Lovel publicly shames her for rejecting him. The narrator quickly realizes that her country upbringing has ill-prepared her for entrance into fashionable London society, concluding, "I am too inexperienced and ignorant to conduct myself with propriety in this town, where every thing is new to me, and many things are unaccountable and perplexing." [30] Thus Evelina learns her first lessons about London – that appearances are critical to one's social reception, and that anonymity is sometimes preferable to public ridicule.

London also forces the protagonist to confront the chaos of city life. Burney highlights Evelina's fear of crowds and strangers – two unavoidable staples of urban culture. Her heroine describes her anxiety at her first ball, writing, "…I was frightened at

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[26] Burney, *Evelina*, 185.
[27] Burney, *Evelina*, 125.
[28] Burney, *Evelina*, 129.
[29] Burney, *Evelina*, 180.
[30] Burney, *Evelina*, 144.

the thoughts of dancing before so many people, all strangers, and, which was worse, with a stranger; however, that was unavoidable, for though I looked around the room several times, I could not see one person that I knew." [31] In a city of strangers and crowds, Evelina never truly gains the confidence to withstand public scrutiny. Evelina often feels paralyzed by public attention; even at the end of the novel she cannot avoid London gossip. When the protagonist visits the spas at Bristol Hotwells, Burney writes:

> We went first to the pump-room. It was full of company! And the moment we entered, I heard a murmuring of, "*That's she!*" and, to my great confusion, I saw every eye turned towards me. I pulled my hat over my face, and, by the assistance of Mrs. Selwyn, endeavoured to screen myself from observation: nevertheless, I found I was so much the object of general attention, that I entreated her to hasten away. [32]

Speculation surrounding the heroine focuses on her uncertain birth, her romantic connection to Lord Orville, and her beauty. Thus Evelina's reception is influenced by her urban context, for issues of class, marriage, and appearance take precedence in public quarters.

Fops, Rakes, and Gentlemen

In London Evelina is also exposed to a wide variety of men, differing in social class and in temperament. The ball serves an important allegory for Evelina's coming of age, for it represents the first time she is largely unsupervised. Unsurprisingly, without Villars or Mrs. Mirvan to protect her she is exposed to a range of unsavory London men. Evelina notices a certain breed of eighteenth century gentlemen known as fops, [33]

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[31] Burney, *Evelina*, 121.
[32] Burney, *Evelina*, 463-464.
[33] Burney, *Evelina*, 121. Howard cites the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines a fop as "one who is foolishly attentive to and vain of his appearance, dress, or manners."

described as follows, "The gentlemen, as they passed and repassed, looked as if they thought we were quite at their disposal, and only waiting for the honour of their commands; and they sauntered about, in a careless indolent manner, as if with a view to keep us in suspense." [34] Chief among them is Sir Clement Willoughby, a predatory figure who repeatedly accosts Evelina in public places. His obsession with Evelina repels and frightens her, and more than once she resolves to "never to be again alone with him." [35] She comes to understand that London men are quick to take advantage of a pretty girl, especially when social custom requires women to remain polite and accommodating. As Villars warns her, "Remember, my dear Evelina, nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman: it is, at once, the most beautiful and the most brittle of all human things." [36] In opposition to her natural trust in male authority, London trains Evelina to become more wary of men's intentions.

Contrasting the fops is the aristocratic Lord Orville, through whom Evelina is exposed to London nobility. Unlike Sir Clement Willoughby, Lord Orville is polite and respectful towards women, interested in Evelina's opinions, and remains impervious to the city's consumer culture. When she first meets him at the ball, she describes him as follows, "His conversation was sensible and spirited; his air and address were open and noble; his manners gentle, attentive, and infinitely engaging; his person is all elegance, and his countenance, the most animated and expressive I have ever seen." [37] Through her friendship with Lord Orville, Evelina learns to judge others by their actions rather than their words. When Evelina separates from her group in Vauxhall Gardens and is

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[34] Burney, *Evelina*, 120.
[35] Burney, *Evelina*, 204.
[36] Burney, *Evelina*, 279.
[37] Burney, *Evelina*, 122.

mistakenly taken in by prostitutes, Orville treats her with unwavering dignity and respect, regardless of her present company. Evelina comes to see Orville's merit by comparing his behavior with that of her other admirers. She says of Sir Clement:

> He seems disposed to think the alteration in my companions authorises an alteration in his manners. It is true, he has always treated me with uncommon freedom, but never before with so disrespectful an abruptness. This observation, which he has given me cause to make, of his *changing with the tide*, has sunk him more in my opinion, than any other part of his conduct. [38]

As Spencer observes, "the impossibly decorous Lord Orville proves his superiority to the heroine's other admirers by his ability to see through apparently compromising social appearances and appreciate her true inner worth." [39] Evelina's ability to find genuine affection amidst artificial relationships speaks to her growing maturity and confidence. Her romantic relationship with Lord Orville is a crucial component of her coming of age.

Reason and Judgment

Perhaps hinting at the importance of women's minds, Burney devotes much attention to Evelina's intellectual coming of age. Throughout the novel Evelina learns to think and act for herself, trading her initial passivity for a more assertive demeanor. She slowly matures into a well-reasoned individual, although she initially relies upon her elders for moral guidance. In one letter, she begs Villars to "think for me," [40] showing deference to male authority and a lack of confidence in her own reason. However, in her guardian's absence, Evelina is forced to make her own moral judgments. The delay in letters means that she cannot rely on Villars for immediate advice, and thus must navigate

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[38] Burney, *Evelina*, 323.
[39] Spencer, 29.
[40] Burney, *Evelina*, 231.

the city on her own. Although she is not without other caregivers such as Mrs. Mirvan and Mrs. Selwyn, Evelina sees Villars as the supreme moral authority in her life. She tells him, "Unable as I am to act for myself, or to judge what conduct I ought to pursue, how grateful do I feel myself, that I have such a guide and director to counsel and instruct me as yourself!" [41] Evelina's intellectual and moral development is a major part of her coming of age.

Villars understands that London will challenge Evelina's ability to reason through moral dilemmas. Before she leaves he tells her, "You must learn not only to *judge* but to *act* for yourself: If any schemes are started, any engagements made, which your understanding represents to you as improper, exert yourself resolutely in avoiding them, and do not, by too passive a facility, risk the censure of the world, or your own future regret." [42] Like most young women, Evelina learns by trial and error. She allows her virtue to become questionable when Sir Clement Willoughby seeks her out alone repeatedly. She also becomes lost at night in Vauxhall Gardens, prompting a group of men to mistake her for a prostitute. Furthermore, she does not learn from her past mistakes, for when she is separated from the Branghtons in Marybone Gardens, she is again associated with the fallen women of the city. In this case, when a pair of prostitutes link arms with Evelina, she writes, "Had I been at liberty, I should have instantly run away from them, when I made the shocking discovery; but, as they held me fast, that was utterly impossible: and such was my dread of their resentment or abuse, that I did not

[41] Burney, *Evelina*, 274.
[42] Burney, *Evelina*, 279.

dare make any open attempt to escape." [43] Thus Evelina allows her urban fears to immobilize her, rather than resorting to the "action" that Villars so urges.

However, Evelina proves her ability to act regarding others' misfortune. Like the protagonist in *Cecilia*, Evelina is spurred to action through exposure to financial hardship. The Scottish poet Macarthur is a boarder at the Branghton household in London. When his poverty motivates him to commit suicide, Evelina listens to her instincts and is able to persuade him otherwise. She describes the harrowing experience, telling Villars, "My first though was to fly to Mr. Branghton, but I feared that an instant of time lost, might for ever be rued; and therefore, guided by the impulse of my apprehensions, as well as I was able, I followed him up stairs…" [44] Instead of being immobilized by doubt and insecurity, Evelina reveals her courage by saving Macarthur's life. Furthermore, she learns to trust her own judgment rather than automatically turning to others to help her navigate problems she encounters in the city.

In *Evelina*, Burney uses the context of London as a backdrop for the heroine's romantic, intellectual and personal development. Through a variety of public mishaps, Evelina learns to act in accordance with societal and moral values. Her self-awareness allows her to see her own inexperience in the city, and she also becomes adept at distinguishing others' intentions—especially in regards to men. Finally, under the guidance of Reverend Villars, Evelina learns to listen to her own intuition. She ultimately attains the life experiences that accompany sound judgment.

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[43] Burney, *Evelina*, 360.
[44] Burney, *Evelina*, 300.

Cecilia* and *The Witlings

Overview

Cecilia and *The Witlings* both focus on the public nature of city life. Specifically, these two works feature unmarried heiresses who must confront public speculation regarding their wealth and marital status. In *Cecilia*, Burney analyzes how London affects her heroine's behavior after the initial shock of public attention has diminished. In *The Witlings*, the protagonist is a London native, taking preventative measures to avoid gossip when she is caught in a financial scandal. However, neither heiress can completely avoid the negative elements of London society. The quintessential conflict between women's desire to experience the city and their need for privacy shape both Cecilias' coming of age.

In *The Witlings*, Burney describes the economic realities of marriage for single women. Cecilia Stanley is engaged to Beaufort, Lady Smatter's nephew and adopted son. When Cecilia loses her inheritance due to the bankruptcy of her guardian, Lady Smatter denies the marriage. Her warning that "London is a dangerous place for Girls who have no Fortune" [45] becomes a harsh reality for the heiress, who anticipates a social fall into the world of servants and milliners. In the end, Censor restores Cecilia's fortune, leaving Lady Smatter with no basis for objection to the marriage.

Burney grapples with more complex issues in *Cecilia*, depicting the explicit dangers of city life. Like Evelina, Cecilia has a father figure in the form of the Dean, her uncle. When he passes away, Cecilia Beverley joins the Harrel residence at Portman-

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[45] Frances Burney, *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*. ed. Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sill (Canada: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), III: 108-109.

Square in Paddington. In addition to money from her deceased parents, Cecilia's uncle leaves her a large inheritance, to be controlled by three guardians: Mr. Harrel, Mr. Briggs, and Mr. Devile. Her fortune gives her marital autonomy, for she can choose her own husband so long as he takes her last name in marriage. However, her guardians waste her inheritance, compromising her engagement to Mortimer Devile. Burney shows that public knowledge of Cecilia's wealth exposes her to specific urban dangers.

Public vs. Private Life

Both *Cecilia* and *The Witlings* are characterized by the merging of public and private life. Single women are the primary actors in a city described as "abounding with opulence, hospitality, and splendour…the principal inhabitants…now almost universally rising in elegance and liberty." [46] Roy Porter uses the phrase "commercialization of leisure" to describe a public life "that revolves around the town itself, its streets, public spaces, and entertainment." [47] In *Cecilia*, young women create their own diversion in public spaces. For instance, when Cecilia visits the Royal Opera House in Haymarket, she notices how the young women in the crowd become part of the entertainment itself. Burney writes, "[Cecilia] heard nothing but descriptions of trimmings, and complaints of hair-dressers, hints of conquest that teemed with vanity, and histories of engagements which were inflated with exultation." [48] The single women's desire for entertainment is only matched by their *own* need to be admired and envied.

The commercialization of leisure means that single women become an active part of public spectacle. However, such social engagement is not without risk. Burney

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[46] Burney, *Cecilia,* 374.
[47] Porter, 168.
[48] Burney, *Cecilia,* 134.

showcases women's particular vulnerability in the public gaze. When Cecilia first arrives at Portman-Square, she is shocked to find a group of strangers waiting for her. Like Evelina, her rural upbringing has not prepared her for the public scrutiny of London society. Burney writes, "The ladies took an exact inventory of her dress, and internally settled how differently they would have been attired if blest with equal affluence. The men disputed among themselves whether or not she was painted…a debate ensued, which ended in a bet…" [49] From the very beginning, London intimidates the heiress, for living at the fashionable Harrel residence ensures constant public exposure. Cecilia complains to Mrs. Harrel that "she was…sick of living always in a crowd." [50] However, speculation follows Cecilia even when she retreats from the public eye. As Mr. Gosport tells her, "…when you have lived some time longer in this commercial city, you will find the exchange of patience for mortification the most common and constant traffic among [its] inhabitants." [51] Burney presents women's loss of privacy as an unavoidable aspect of city life – and one that Cecilia never truly reconciles with.

The author artfully portrays how Cecilia Stanley's sheltered upbringing affects her expectations of London. Before she leaves her home in Suffolk Cecilia predicts her own anonymity, exclaiming, "It is happy then, for me, that neither my actions nor myself will be sufficiently known to attract public observation." [52] She cannot anticipate that her financial autonomy and beauty will captivate the *bon ton* crowd. Her friend Mr. Monckton correctly predicts that Cecilia's "[b]eauty and independence, rarely found

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[49] Burney, *Cecilia*, 23.
[50] Burney, *Cecilia*, 101.
[51] Burney, *Cecilia*, 44.
[52] Burney, *Cecilia,* 14.

together, w[ill] attract a crowd of suitors at once brilliant and assiduous…" [53] Like Evelina, Cecilia wants to stay out of the public eye. However, her society will hardly allow that, for Cecilia underestimates the power of public interest. Like Evelina, she is literally silenced by the city's gaze. Burney describes Cecilia's apprehension at a masquerade ball, writing, "Cecilia now became seriously uneasy; for she was made an object of general attention, yet could neither speak nor be spoken to." [54] The gendered nature of urban life ensures that women are objectified in the public eye.

Cecilia and the *Ton* Misses

Once Cecilia arrives in London, she discovers that commercial participation encourages artificiality in human relationships. In short, money overrides friendship. Miss Larolles begs Cecilia to accompany her to the estate sale of the bankrupt Lady Belgrade, saying, " 'O, but do go, for I assure you it will be the best sale we shall have this season. I can't imagine, Mrs. Harrel, what poor Lady Belgrade will do with herself; I hear the creditors have seized everything…' " [55] Rather than viewing other women in the context of their shared disenfranchisement, London's fashionable young women, or the *Ton* crowd, compete with each other for men, clothes, and status. As Mr. Gosport advises Cecilia, "But this they have in common, that at home they think of nothing but dress, abroad, nothing but admiration, and that every where they hold in supreme contempt all but themselves." [56] Eventually Cecilia comes to understand the artificiality of polite

[53] Burney, *Cecilia,* 10.
[54] Burney, *Cecilia,* 111.
[55] Burney, *Cecilia*, 31.
[56] Burney, *Cecilia*, 40.

society, realizing that London's commercial influence erodes traditional values and morals.

Cecilia also must reevaluate her friendship with her childhood friend, Mrs. Harrel. Like many others before her, Mrs. Harrel is not impervious to London's commercial culture. Upon her arrival in London, "[Cecilia] found [Mrs. Harrel] insensible to friendship, indifferent to her husband, and negligent of all social felicity. Dress, company, parties of pleasure, and public places, seemed not merely to occupy all her time; but to gratify all her wishes." [57] In time, Cecilia comes to understand how leisured society fosters artificiality in female friendship. Of the *Ton* crowd Cecilia says:

> She found that time added nothing to their fondness, nor intimacy to their sincerity; that the interest in her welfare which appeared to be taken at first sight, seldom, with whatever reason, encreased, and often without any abated; that the distinction she at first met with, was no effusion of kindness, but of curiosity, which is scarcely sooner gratified than satiated; and that those who lived always the life into which she had only recently been initiated, were as much harassed with it as herself, only less spirited to relinquish, and more helpless to better it; and that they coveted nothing but what was new, because they had experienced the insufficiency of whatever was familiar. [58]

Cecilia uses her experiences with leisured society to form her own opposing values. Instead of wasting her fortune on luxuries, Burney writes of Cecilia, "A strong sense of DUTY and a fervent desire to ACT RIGHT, were the ruling characteristics of her mind: her affluence she therefore considered as a debt contracted with the poor, and her independence, as a tie upon her liberality to pay it with interest." [59] Indeed, it is Cecilia's moral responsibility that motivates her to help the poor widow Mrs. Hill. Her disapproval

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[57] Burney, *Cecilia*, 33.
[58] Burney, *Cecilia*, 54.
[59] Burney, *Cecilia*, 55.

of the *Ton* crowd allows her to be guided by her own values, rather than by those of consumer society.

Wealth in the Commercial City

In *The Witlings*, Cecilia Stanley must confront the merging of public and private life. Her impending marriage to Beaufort is public knowledge; even her milliners know of her romantic history. Mrs. Voluble recounts the story of Beaufort and Cecilia's engagement to anyone who will listen, saying, "…this young lady came to spend the Winter in Town with Lady Smatter, and so she fell in Love with my lady's Nephew, Mr. Beaufort, and Mr. Beaufort fell in love with her, and so…" [60] she continues on in earnest. Cecilia's financial affairs are made equally as public. When she loses her fortune in the economic crisis of the 1770s, she hides out with Mrs. Voluble in the knowledge that polite society will soon discover her failures. She even considers leaving the country and finding independent employment as a Lady's companion or seamstress. Cecilia admits, "I see I must hide myself from the World…" [61] Although Cecilia anticipates the public's reaction to her bankruptcy, she does not predict Lady Smatter's cruel dismissal of her engagement. Cecilia's well-known position in London actually works to her disadvantage, for Lady Smatter denies the marriage for fear that her own reputation will be harmed. In the end, Burney shows that Cecilia's marital options are drastically limited by public knowledge of her bankruptcy.

The author also connects London's commercial influence to women's financial power. With the city's emphasis on wealth, it is little wonder that Burney presents

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[60] Burney, *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*, I: 86-90.
[61] Burney, *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*, V: 275-276.

women as commercial products themselves. Both Cecilias are publicly equated with their inheritance; their wellbeing is bound up in the profit of the city. In *The Witlings*, within the first few lines Cecilia is described as "a young Lady with a Fortune all in her own Hands." [62] Even Cecilia's own marriage to Beaufort hinges upon her lucrative financial position. Without her inheritance, she is expendable. As Lady Smatter warns Cecilia, "London is a dangerous place for Girls who have no Fortune." [63]

In *Cecilia*, single women are also disadvantaged by the city's conspicuous consumption. Mr. Harrel's gambling debts (and eventual suicide) waste Cecilia's fortune and leave both Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Harrel without husbands. Mrs. Hill voices the particular concerns of widows, telling Cecilia, "a widow, madam, is always hard to be righted; and I don't expect to hold out long myself, for sickness and sorrow wear fast: and then, when we are both gone, who is to help our poor children?" [64] Burney shows how women are publicly equated with their wealth, and furthermore, how the city disenfranchises single women who are lacking in financial resources.

Working Girls

Burney also depicts how London factors into women's fear of depravity. Both heiresses' financial concerns mask a deeper fear of a moral fall, for they understand that London has little sympathy for poor women. In *The Witlings*, Burney points out the limited occupations for bankrupted heiresses. Though Cecilia considers joining the working classes as a seamstress, Lady Smatter believes Cecilia will find another solution to her financial troubles. In a letter to Cecilia, Lady Smatter warns her to stay away from

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[62] Burney, *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*, I: 81-82.
[63] Burney, *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*, III: 108-109.
[64] *Cecilia*, 86.

Beaufort, writing, "…and therefore, if you do not continue in Town with a view to attract his notice, or, by acquainting him with your retirement, seduce him to follow you…" [65] Cecilia is horrified by such a suggestion. She replies, "Attract his notice? seduce him to follow!—am I already so Sunk? already regarded as a designing, interested Wretch?" [66] Although Cecilia is no longer an heiress, she is still defined in financial terms. Lady Smatter equates Cecilia's fiscal bankruptcy with a moral failure. In doing so, Burney shows that single women's vulnerability can easily force them to turn to extreme solutions, such as seduction.

In *Cecilia*, Burney includes the themes of prostitution and female madness to show how easily women may succumb to urban dangers. Shortly after Cecilia loses her fortune, Albany tells her how "he had been the instrument of ruin of a teenage girl; when he had found out her sexual fall, he had brutally rejected…her." [67] According to the story, the young woman then became a London prostitute. Albany's tale is a strange foreshadowing of Cecilia's own foray into madness and transgression. Overcome by financial and marital pressures, she runs through the city streets alone at night, searching for her husband Mortimer Devile. When she finally collapses on a stranger's doorstep she is at first mistaken for a prostitute and then a madwoman. Burney shows how Cecilia's distrust of the city itself, along with her anxiety about her marital status, manifests itself in a fit of insanity. She cries to Albany, "I am married, and no one will listen to me!" [68] Burney reveals the oppressive qualities of city life for single, and even married women, by portraying the negative effects of romance. Cecilia's mental unraveling is a byproduct

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[65] *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*, V: 188-190.
[66] *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater*, V: 225-227.
[67] *Cecilia*, xxii.
[68] *Cecilia*, 903.

of the unrelenting pressure to marry, engage in commercial pursuits, and reclaim her fortune. Burney ultimately proves that London's influence is inescapable, even for those lucky enough to be heiresses.

Cecilia and *The Witlings* highlight the unique position of heiresses in London. Burney shows that both women face issues similar to those confronting Evelina, suggesting that London may have specific implications for women, regardless of financial status. For instance, Cecilia Beverley resists the objectifying nature of city life, opposing speculation concerning her marital status and finances. She also is subject to manipulation by the men in her life, although they are her guardians and not her romantic admirers. Cecilia Stanley of *The Witlings* also must endure her private issues brought into public life, when she loses her fortune in a financial crisis. Burney ultimately proves that London women share similar experiences—that their coming of age is comparable across social class.

Conclusion

Frances Burney offers a critical view of London society in her first major works – *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *The Witlings*. These pieces examine the gendered struggle for autonomy in the city, particularly in regards to young women's intellectual, moral, and romantic development. Through the characters of Evelina Anville and the two Cecilias, Burney shows how urban quarters influence female expectations and decision-making. She also proves that while her heroines are often lacking in commercial and social power, they can enact change on the individual level. Although Burney conventionally resolves the issue of female independence with her heroines' marriage, she shows that women's ultimate goal is not necessarily finding a husband. Rather, her novels and plays show the complexities of female maturation in eighteenth century London.

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