

## **Satirizing Society: The Dangers of Dressing the Part**

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The eighteenth century in England conjures up stately images of high society, gay balls, frequent entertainment, and a heavy emphasis upon social conduct and propriety. In reality, however, the people of that time lived much varied degrees of this lifestyle, dependant greatly upon the social class into which they were born. Not surprisingly, those writing in the eighteenth century often dealt with issues regarding the social classes. One such writer was the eighteenth century female novelist, Frances Burney. In an attempt to promote social reform, Burney utilized the device of satire to highlight societal short-comings or failures.

In her novel, *Evelina*, Burney employs the story of an innocent young girl, naïve about public roles and expectations, to compare the lifestyles and behaviors of the lower, middle, and upper classes. Upon her first encounters with society, Evelina, a sheltered and inexperienced girl from the country, meets a number of individuals who begin to establish for her the rules of propriety and behavior appropriate to social class. However, what these individuals confess and what they practice are so disproportional that Evelina struggles to find her own steady footing in the ever-shifting social realm. Contrary to what the reader initially expects, Burney does not use these struggles to elevate the behaviors of one social class over the other. In fact, a close reading suggests that Burney's desired effect was not an emphasis on the differences between social classes at all, but rather the unfortunate similarities. Consequently, characters throughout *Evelina*, regardless of social levels, behave with cruelty and violence towards others, including those of not only lower ranking, but also upper ranking society as well.

To fully comprehend the extent to which Burney satirizes eighteenth century social behaviors, one must first take into account the actual life and times of eighteenth century England. Roy Porter's book *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* offers an interesting overview of this period in history and a pertinent perspective regarding the life and times in which Burney writes. In his book, Porter explains that members of society on all levels took a plebian approach to living, gratifying their pleasures as much as their finances would allow. Unlike in previous cultures, the growing commercial aspect of eighteenth century England allowed those of the lower class, who had previously been exempt from such pleasures, to participate as well. Because of this, people of all social classes could now be found enjoying the same types of entertainments, consequently bringing about a plethora of opportunities for interaction between the classes. Nevertheless, Porter argues, the upper class still determined to set themselves apart and did so primarily through their strict claims of propriety and politeness, giving them a perceived level of superiority over the rest of society (249). In *Evelina*, Burney utilizes humor and satire to refute these common misconceptions about the so-called proper behavior of the rich and to show members of society as they truly are, rather than how they wish to be perceived.

While familiarity with the social history of eighteenth century England adds insight and understanding to a reading of *Evelina*, information pertaining to Frances Burney's actual life also offers additional considerations about the novel. Having been introduced to court life at a young age, Frances Burney became personally familiar with upper class attitudes of superiority through her own social experiences. Burney's personal diary entries and notes suggest that Burney, like *Evelina*, was a young girl who

feared being the center of attention and conversation (Doody 59). Doody notes a strong resemblance between Burney and the shy, embarrassed, fictional character of Evelina. Burney's insecurities are mirrored in Evelina's letter to her guardian Mr. Villars concerning her first ball; she writes, "I am half afraid of this ball to-night; for, you know, I have never danced but at school: however, Miss Mirvan says there is nothing in it. Yet, I wish it was over" (Burney 17). This strong resemblance between young Frances Burney and the character of Evelina suggest that, while Evelina begins to form her own opinion about herself and society, or what Margaret Doody calls "social-identity," there is a constant presence of Burney's own socially satiric voice resonating in the background (41). This voice is especially audible in significant episodes throughout the novel when characters desperately fail at adhering to rules of propriety and civility.

Among those who so clearly fall short of approved social behaviors, thereby making Burney's opinions perceptible to the reader, is Captain Mirvan. Captain Mirvan, the obnoxious husband of Evelina's host and good friend Mrs. Mirvan, initially offers great comic relief through his incessant harassing of Madame Duvall and her faithful servant Dupree. However, Mirvan's breach in conduct escalates quickly from mere harshness of words, to actual physical violence against others. At the point in which the Captain and his meddlesome side-kick Sir Clement Willoughby, as a joke, stage a fake robbery and the Captain physically batters and assaults Madame Duvall, Evelina begins to understand that the Captain's high social class far from ensures propriety in his behavior. Evelina moves one step closer to establishing her own social and moral identity when, even while her birthright remains uncertain, she confronts her superior, Captain Mirvan, and requests that he cease with his mistreatment of Madame Duvall.

Furthermore, Evelina herself claims that "...should he [the Captain] make any new efforts to molest her, I can by no means consent to be passive. Had I imagined he would have been so violent, I would have risked his anger in her defence much sooner." (Burney 137). Through the use of such strong words and their implied condemnation of the Captain's behavior, Evelina demonstrates that she has, in fact, begun to form her own opinion about decency and social conduct as characteristics that transcend social class. Thus, the stark contrast between uncultured Evelina's innate understanding of civility, while she is but a young girl, and the Captain's use of cruelty beg the reader to give consideration to his/her own preconceived beliefs about propriety and social class.

In the same way Burney reveals the impropriety of Captain Mirvan's behavior, she also utilizes Evelina's familial relations to give the reader pause concerning societal norms and expectations. However, the reader, as well as Evelina, finds the liberties taken by Evelina's tacky and annoying cousins, the Branghtons, slightly less shocking than those of the Captain, as the Branghtons are indeed of a lower class. Though their specific social class remains unclear, their financial limitations indicate that they are certainly not upper-class. Their relatively crude living conditions and behaviors are the source of much embarrassment for Evelina. When she is forced to spend much time with the Branghtons on her second visit to London, Evelina remarks, "I am sure I have a thousand reasons to rejoice that I am so little known; for my present situation is, in every respect very unenviable; and I would not, for the world, be seen by any acquaintance of Mrs. Mirvan" (Burney 156). Though Evelina's social standing is certainly at this point no better than the Branghtons', her embarrassment with this situation suggests that she considers their behaviors to be beneath her. Evelina's social embarrassment quickly

takes a turn for the worse as she also suffers exploitation by the Branghtons. Not only do they harass poor Mr. MacCartney, a poetic tenant who has suffered financial hardships, but they also take advantage of Evelina, using her familiarity with Lord Orville for their own personal gain. Out of options, Evelina tolerates the Branghtons until their misuse of her own good name and intent to see her married to their son becomes exceedingly more than she can bear. Evelina recognizes that the Branghtons have already shown a willingness to abuse others for their own gain, and she asserts her own will by refusing to marry the young Mr. Branghton and demanding that they never again misuse her name. Thus, what is most surprising about the Branghtons, as compared to the Captain, is not the dissimilarities, but rather the similarities in their behaviors. The most important consistency, however, exists in the character of Evelina, who once again defies the established authorities and asserts her own opinion regarding what is, and is not, considered civil behavior.

Evelina's moral outrage against anti-social behaviors increases with her visit to the upper class resort town of Clifton Heights. Here she witnesses one of the most cruel and critical social interactions of the novel on the day of the great race. This day, Lord Merton and Mr. Coverly agree to settle a wager by racing two elderly women some twenty yards across gravel. The race itself results from the two gamblers' petty desires to win a bet, and to do so in such a manner as to not risk their own safety in a phaeton race. Hence, the very manner of the race demeans the women by forcing them to behave like animals and consequently reflects the value that Coverly and Merton place upon individuals of lower social status than themselves. Compounding the matter, when the women fall and struggle to gain their footing, Lord Merton and Mr. Coverly hesitate to

even come to their assistance while the majority of onlookers take part in the disdainful affair with shouts and cheering. Though Lord Merton stops her, Evelina's instinctive attempts to intervene speak strongly of her courage and innate goodness and symbolically oppose her to the two gamblers and the bystanders. Nevertheless, whereas the reader is quick to recognize this instant in the novel as a necessary point of self-evaluation, the characters guilty of this offense simply move on with the race results without giving any consideration to the appropriateness of their actions. As a result, Evelina's negative opinion of the event is clear and contrasts powerfully with the other involved parties' apparent indifference. Again, Evelina's actions indicate that she maintains a type of goodness that is not found in the others, while suggesting that propriety cannot truly be gauged by social standing.

Similar to the race, the notion of individuals behaving like animals recurs again toward the end of the novel, when Burney introduces a monkey into Evelina's story. The source of this entertainment is introduced by the ever-ready-to-ridicule Captain Mirvan. Returning with a clothed monkey, the Captain claims to have found the foppish Mr. Lovell's twin brother. As a comical minor character who tends to take himself far too seriously, Mr. Lovell is unfortunately slow at catching the jest, adding immensely to the humor of the situation. When he does finally realize the Captain's intent, Mr. Lovell becomes angry and irrationally strikes the poor monkey, which consequently causes the monkey to attack and bite his ear. Though few would deny the hilariousness of this moment, some have questioned Burney's motive for the monkey incident and consider it rather odd. Yet, the very fact that the incident occurs at a somewhat inappropriate or illogical point within the story parallels the fact that upper class individuals are acting in

a manner unbefitting to their social standing. In other words, the only thing more ridiculous than the author's method of satire is the notion of claiming superiority while displaying inferiority. In this case, it is not Evelina who makes the social commentary, but rather, the author who is declaring her final opinion about society. Burney uses the absurdity of the situation to satirize those whose actions neither befit their social standing, nor their humanity. These individuals are ever-ready and willing to either bring about, or benefit from, the cruel mistreatment and mockery of others. Furthermore, because these characters fail to display behaviors reflective of the upper class propriety they claim, they are essentially just as ridiculous as a monkey dressed in human clothing. Thus, no matter how well they dress the part, unless their actions are of like substance, their efforts only draw attention to their true nature.

The dangers of dressing the part, or losing one's own sense of self at the expense of conforming to societal expectations, are apparent not only in the author's voice, but also in Evelina's own words. She laments to her beloved friend Miss Mirvan upon her return to Berry Hill, "I believe you would hardly have known me;-indeed, I hardly know myself" (Burney 239). Fortunately, the novel's heroine, like Burney, escapes class conformity. Unlike those who are seen as merely dressing the part, Evelina achieves superiority of character by learning how to actively participate in society and have an adequate understanding of rules or etiquette, while remaining pure of heart and adhering to simple notions of civility. Emily Allen refers to this achievement as "how to come out and stay in at the same time" (436). Clearly, both Evelina and Burney successfully develop their outward selves without forfeiting their inward selves.

Others do not fare so well. Through the characters of Captain Mirvan and the Branghtons, as well as incidents such as the Race, and the Monkey Escapade, Burney illuminates the disproportional truth regarding both actual behavior among the social classes and claims of propriety. The reader consequently comes away from this novel having safely and vicariously gained an awareness of commonly held misconceptions concerning social classes and the subsequent dangers of accepting and blindly adhering to these misconceptions. Thus, Burney uses Evelina's story, combined with her own personal experiences, as a didactic device, offering the readers a guide for surviving social pressures and exposing them to a critical truth: that actions, rather than station, are the only things that truly differentiate one person from another.

### **Works Cited**

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