

## **Traces of Rousseau in Frances Burney's *Evelina***

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As John Richetti explains in *The English Novel in History: 1700-1800*, “eighteenth-century fiction is an important stage in the fashioning and a key tool for the understanding of this evolving entity, the socially constructed self” (4). Indeed, Frances Burney, hailed by Janet Todd in *The Sign of Angellica* as “the most esteemed woman novelist of the period” (273), faced the social initiation that Richetti describes while coming of age in eighteenth-century Britain. As documented in her journals, Burney found her social induction to be awkward and embarrassing. *Evelina* (1778), Burney’s first novel, reflects her socially constructed self through the experiences of the protagonist, Evelina. A social satire, *Evelina* depicts the trials, errors, joys, and triumphs of a young female’s entrance into urban society. Interestingly, the demeanors of Burney’s characters within *Evelina* often reflect Rousseauian philosophies and themes. In particular, Rousseau’s theory of natural man, as specifically described in *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1754) and *Emile* (1762), appears to directly connect with the rural and urban personalities of Burney’s characters. Such a connection leaves speculation as to whether Burney knowingly displays Rousseauian influence or emits, somewhat coincidentally, an archetypal characterization of natural and societal man. Regardless, Burney appears to support Rousseau’s philosophies because her characters degenerate upon societal contact. Within *Evelina*, Burney exhibits the most explicit examples of Rousseau’s philosophies through the moral degradation of Mr. Macartney, the antithetical demeanors of Evelina and the Branghtons, and the opposing actions of the rural Mr. Villars and the urban aristocrats of Clifton.

Due to familial associations between Rousseau and the Burney family, it is probable that Frances Burney read and was influenced by Rousseau's writings. Born in Geneva, Switzerland in 1712, Rousseau spent a fair amount of his time rambling through cities and towns across Europe, partially out of self-interest and partially in search of asylum. Often, Rousseau faced imprisonment, attacks on his dwellings, and book burnings in response to his controversial writings. However, it was through Rousseau's opera, *Le Devin du Village*, that Rousseau and Dr. Charles Burney, Frances' father, initially made contact. As Nicholas Dent documents in *Rousseau, Le Devin du Village*, originally performed and published in France in 1752 and 1753 respectively (xvii), was translated, according to H.V.F Somerset's article "Jean Jacques Rousseau as a Musician," into English by Dr. Burney in 1765 (Somerset 42). Working under the title of *The Cunning Man*, Rousseau's opera was eventually performed in London as well (Somerset 42). Somerset further explains that while Frances Burney may have been critical of her father's translation, Rousseau felt it was "a masterpiece" (42). Thus, Dr. Burney's admiration for Rousseau heightened, and a correspondence between the two men ensued.

The interactions between Rousseau and Dr. Burney further support the claim that Rousseau influenced Frances Burney. For instance, as Somerset notes, Dr. Burney "thought it [was] the greatest honor to be allowed to visit [Rousseau]" during a trip to Paris in 1773 (37). Furthermore, Burney biographer Margaret Doody details in *Frances Burney* that when Rousseau traveled through England, Dr. Burney attempted to get him a pension (413). In addition, Doody reveals that "the memory of Rousseau's praise lingered pleasantly in [Dr. Burney's] mind at the end of his life" (413). Since Rousseau obviously impacted Dr. Burney in such a positive manner, it is highly likely that Dr. Burney's

strong influence over Frances Burney led to conversations with his daughter about Rousseau. For example, Somerset explains that Dr. Burney “thought highly” of and “prais[ed]” Rousseau’s critical writings (41). Additionally, Doody notes that “Rousseau and his works were well-known to the Burneys...” (222). Therefore, the familial associations between Rousseau and the Burney family appear to play an integral role in Rousseau’s influence on Frances Burney.

Besides familial associations, direct evidence of Rousseau’s influence on Frances Burney is apparent in her own praise for Rousseau. Despite her critical stance towards her father’s translation of *Le Devin du Village*, Burney describes the opera as “peculiarly fitted to refine the public taste among the middle class; while it could not fail to give passing pleasure to the highest” (qtd. in Somerset 43). Clearly, Burney felt Rousseau’s opera was a significant contribution to music, but her praise also encompasses his literary endeavors. In the preface to *Evelina*, Burney acknowledges that she is “enlightened by the knowledge of Johnson, charmed with the eloquence of Rousseau, softened by the pathetic powers of Richardson, and exhilarated by the wit of Fielding and humor of Smollett...” (Preface). Such an admission of Rousseau’s influence leads one to believe that Burney was actually well read in Rousseau’s writings. In fact, Justine Crump explains in “Fanny Burney” that “passing comments in [Burney’s] journals” prove that she read Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise* (1). Crump’s explanation leads to an interesting link between *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise* and *Evelina*. As *Julie, ou la Nouvell Heloise* was Rousseau’s first novel and written in epistolary form, so was *Evelina* Burney’s first novel and written in epistolary form. Moreover, the probability that Rousseau’s theory of natural man influences *Evelina* is further supported through

publication dates. Since Burney was fluent in Italian and French, she could have possibly read *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and *Emile* in their original French publications, occurring in 1754 and 1762 respectively. However, if she preferred English translations, she could have read William Kenrick's translations of *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* in 1767 or *Emile* in 1762. Regardless, the French and English versions of these particular works by Rousseau were all published before *Evelina*.

Another aspect of *Evelina* that appears to mirror Rousseau's writing is the fact that both *Emile* and *Evelina* are *bildungsromans*, involving the education of young adults whose names begin with the same letter. Also, *Emile* and *Evelina* both trace Rousseau's theory of natural man. The basic presumption of Rousseau's theory of natural man reflects correlations between nature and purity and between society and corruption. Rousseau originally presents his theory of natural man in *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. However, Rousseau displays the ramifications of his theory in the novel, *Emile*. According to Rousseau's depiction of education in *Emile*, individuals may participate in society, but if they have been educated properly, then they will maintain a natural state of purity. Of course, the influence of *Emile* on *Evelina* is based around speculation and possible coincidences, but the similarities suggest *Evelina* could be *Emile*'s female counterpart. Nevertheless, due to Dr. Burney's influence and Frances Burney's own admission of admiration for Rousseau, it is unquestionable that Rousseau impacted Burney's writing.

As Mr. Macartney morally degenerates upon entering society, he represents Rousseau's theory of natural man by falling from the purity of his natural state. While spending time in the Branghton household, *Evelina* meets the mysterious Mr. Macartney.

The Branghton children explain that he is a poet, and Evelina appears to be drawn to this disheveled and emaciated character, feeling sympathy and curiosity for his current state of affairs. At one point, Evelina believes she awkwardly stifles a suicide attempt by Mr. Macartney. However, Mr. Macartney ultimately reveals his true story to Evelina in a personal letter. As Mr. Macartney details, he was raised in Scotland by a single mother and attended Aberdeen for an education “designed for the church” (Burney 211). Mr. Macartney also notes that he made the acquaintance of a wealthy friend that decided to pursue the Grand Tour. Despite the fact that Mr. Macartney’s friend offered to pay for him to travel as well, Mr. Macartney states that his “affection was as free from meanness as his [friend’s]; and [he] made a determination the most solemn, never to lessen its dignity by submitting to pecuniary obligations” (211). Thus, Mr. Macartney resembles Rousseau’s natural man insofar as Mr. Macartney is originally a rural inhabitant of Scotland, planned to pursue an honest career with the church, and displays unselfish attributes in relation to his friendships.

Mr. Macartney’s ideal Rousseauian character deteriorates, however, when he eventually meets with his friend in Paris. Once in Paris, Mr. Macartney’s entrancement with a young lady leads to secret visitations. When the young lady’s father surprisingly interrupts them, Mr. Macartney fights with the father, and for some time, Mr. Macartney believes he has killed him. Furthermore, Mr. Macartney loses his mother during a second excursion to Paris and requests monetary assistance from both his mother and his friend. Finally, in great debt, Mr. Macartney decides to rob people at gunpoint. Obviously, Mr. Macartney’s disrespectful actions toward the young girl’s father, requests for money, and plans of robbery reveal a distinct deviation from his previously admirable character.

Because the influence of society corrupts his natural state of purity, Mr. Macartney's character supports Rousseau's theory of natural man.

In addition, Rousseau's theory appears in the antithetical demeanors of Evelina and the Branghtons. Evelina, having grown up in the country, approaches situations and people with more respect and care. On the other hand, the city dwelling Branghtons continually behave in a rude manner. For instance, Evelina and the Branghtons react completely opposite towards Captain Mirvan's staged robbery of Madame Duval. Even though Evelina is helpless against taming Captain Mirvan's wild ways, she voices her disapproving opinion of his physical violence and feels sympathy for the treatment of Madame Duval. The Branghtons, however, laugh hysterically upon receiving the story of Madame Duval's robbery, claiming that the incident is extremely funny. Moreover, during Madame Duval's harangue of Sir Clement Willoughby, Evelina stays quiet while the Branghtons struggle with concealing their amusement. Although Evelina does not approve of Willoughby's sexual advances or perverse treatment of Madame Duval, she still understands Willoughby's embarrassment during this incident, and out of respect, she foregoes laughing at him. Of course, the Branghtons, proud of their aunt's ability to "give the beau such a trimming" (195), eventually "burst into loud laugh[ter]" (196). Such opposing approaches towards people reoccur during Evelina's stay with the Branghtons. For example, Evelina is curious about Mr. Macartney, but the Branghtons always treat him disrespectfully. Additionally, Evelina's treatment of the Branghtons and their treatment of her reveal a distinct difference. Although Evelina is embarrassed to be seen with the Branghtons, she never treats them rudely or evades social outings with them. In contrast, the Branghtons abuse their familial association with Evelina by

demanding that because she knows Lord Orville, they should be able to make use of his coach. Clearly, Evelina faces harsh mistreatment in return for her attempted respect of the Branghtons. Due to the varying levels of respect that Evelina and the Branghtons display, Rousseau's theory of natural man blatantly appears as a strong influence on Burney.

Another comparison that exhibits Rousseau's theory of natural man involves the actions of the rural Mr. Villars and urban aristocrats of Clifton. While Mr. Villars' rural characterization portrays a pure state, the urban characterizations of the aristocrats of Clifton reveal a corrupt state. For example, on his deathbed, Evelina's grandfather requests that Mr. Villars raise Evelina's mother. Mr. Villars fulfills his promise by raising Evelina's mother and subsequently raising Evelina on a rather small inheritance. Despite having no true obligation or relation to Evelina and her mother, Mr. Villars ensures that they both obtain the best education and lifestyle he can afford them. Although Mr. Villars' protection of Evelina offers conjecture as to whether he is over-protective or not, it is undeniable that his fulfillment of his promise to Evelina's grandfather supports his good moral character. Furthermore, Evelina often esteems Mr. Villars as her "beloved" and claims that he is one of the best men in the world (295). Therefore, because Evelina displays what appears to be genuine affection for Mr. Villars, it is probable that Mr. Villars' extreme protection of her stems from his own care for Evelina. Mr. Villars' natural affection for and treatment of Evelina represents the pure characterization of Rousseau's natural man.

However, the purity of the rural Mr. Villars starkly contrasts with the horrible deeds of the urban aristocrats of Clifton. Having nothing better to do, Lord Merton and Mr. Coverley decide to bet over some matter. Eventually, the men decide that the most

amusing entertainment consists of racing two elderly women. The men's excitement upon witnessing the race shows that they contain no amount of respect for the elderly or the lower class. Despite the women falling and injuring themselves, the two men encourage the race to continue, and Mr. Coverley "[swears] at [one of women] with unmanly rage..." (294). The heinous actions of these two men clearly display their corrupt moral characters, and the inaction of the remaining aristocrats reveals the moral corruption of the aristocrats as a whole. Evelina, the pure character, is the only person who greatly objects to this horrid scene and attempts to assist the elderly women. Therefore, the stark contrasts between the moral, rural Mr. Villars and the immoral, urban aristocrats of Clifton support Rousseau's theory of natural man.

Through the moral degradation of Mr. Macartney, the antithetical demeanors of Evelina and the Brangthons, and the opposing actions of the rural Mr. Villars and urban aristocrats of Clifton, Burney explicitly depicts Rousseau's theory of natural man. Due to familial associations with Rousseau, personal commendations of Rousseau, and admittance to reading Rousseau, it appears that Burney readily recognized Rousseau's influence on her writing. While Burney could be exhibiting an archetypal characterization of natural and societal man, the convincing evidence concerning the links between her and Rousseau support Rousseauian influence as the stronger argument. Thus, Burney's heavy incorporation of Rousseau's theory of natural man in *Evelina* suggests that she agreed with and supported his particular philosophy concerning societal influence on moral character.

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