

Spotlight: Frances Burney and *Evelina* *Carla Frazer*



Frances Burney is most well known for her novel *Evelina*, but the publication of other novels and plays defined her writing style as something new and revered for the 18th century. Burney did much to promote women fiction writers – herself included – and succeeded in giving them a place in British literature. Burney was the fourth of six children of Charles Burney and Esther Sleepe Burney. Born in June 1752 in Kings Lynn, Norfolk, Burney spent most her time with her grandmother after Esther’s death. Called “Old Lady” by her father, Burney considered herself rather

backward because of her shyness and inability to read by the time she was eight. Her inward personality around her family encouraged her to write in her diary soon after her mother’s passing. Five years later, Burney anonymously wrote the manuscript “The History of Caroline Evelyn” but burned it in a bonfire with other pieces of her work. Her father had just remarried Mrs. Stephen Allen but for the most part kept the clandestine relationship even from his children. Allen had two children, one of whom, Maria, became very close with Burney but Allen herself never bonded with her husband’s children and for the most part, relationships were strained in the household.

After her father received his doctorate and published a couple of books on music, Burney became her father’s research assistant, secretary and amanuensis, all the while learning about the publication process. This continued to open up doors for Burney; because of her father and his peers, she had the advantage of learning about foreign lands, travel, music and other things many girls her age never would.

A story told in letters, *Evelina* is about a girl finding her place in society. In 1778, with help from her brother Charles, Burney published *Evelina* anonymously and it was

popular from the start. Dr. Burney had no knowledge his daughter wrote it until six months after the original publication. The plot of *Evelina* is expanded from “The History of Caroline Evelyn,” which was lost to the bonfire, and the first four letters in *Evelina* retell Burney’s first book. The protagonist, Caroline’s daughter, is raised by her mother’s guardian and she learns early on that her world does not value women as much as she expected. Through various events, some even humorous, Evelina grows and learns somewhat how to navigate 18th century England. Her grandmother, Madam Duval, had not been a part of Evelina’s life before then. She is taken in by her grandmother and relatives, the Branghtons, and there, she witnesses a new kind of social class, the boorish aggressiveness of climbing the social ladder. She meets Lord Orville, a charming, well mannered man who displays his attentiveness and engaging features enough that she becomes infatuated with him. She is embarrassed of her crass family and that they are interested in his wealth. Eventually, they are married and Evelina feels she is finally where she belongs in her world.

The success of *Evelina* allowed Burney to write and publish other novels and plays. Though Burney never was never really in the canon of her time period, she was exactly out of it, either. *Evelina* and its position in literature pushed Burney through the threshold of women writers. Though the novel was taken by critics at first as a family story, it is still read and analyzed today in academic atmospheres. At the time of publication, one could read it as lessons on how to act in public, as well as it being a satirical look on society and the perils one must go through in order to find somewhere they belong. Even though Burney clearly pointed out all the restrictions of women, both obvious and subtle, people were eager to read everything she produced. The shyness she was known for didn’t reflect in her bold writing that explored the inner workings of society much to some people’s displeasure. Always willing to dig deeper into the convoluted problems women faced in coming to terms with society and their own identities, Burney could turn it into a meaningful, enjoyable, and widely accepted work.

Works Cited

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