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Beginnings in the Eighteenth Century

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Illustration de couverture :
William Hogarth, Frontispiece to *Tristram Shandy* (London ca. 1761).
Droits réservés

“Yes, Novels”: *Evelina*, *Cecilia* and *Belinda*,
or, the beginning of the novel of manners, revisited

While *Evelina* is not included in Austen’s encomium of novels in *Northanger Abbey*, this article aims to demonstrate that, despite its epistolary form, Frances Burney’s first work of fiction contains many of the elements that Austen identified as making “a novel.” This article uses a corpus-based approach to revisit the beginnings of the “novel of manners” by analysing some lexical characteristics of Frances Burney’s and, to a lesser extent, Maria Edgeworth’s early fiction through comparison and contrast with other texts from the long eighteenth century—most notably those of Austen. Three aspects will be examined: “species”—that is to say, the way in which Burney and Edgeworth used the term “novel,” the meaning of “manners,” and the dynamics created by the process of reading and misreading.

Bien que l'éloge du roman par Austen dans Northanger Abbey ne mentionne pas Evelina, cet article s'efforce de démontrer que, malgré sa forme épistolaire, le premier texte de Frances Burney comporte de nombreux éléments qu'Austen identifiait comme constitutifs d'un « roman ». Une approche de corpus permet de revisiter les débuts du novel of manners par l'analyse de plusieurs caractéristiques lexicales des premiers romans de Frances Burney et, dans une moindre de mesure, de Maria Edgeworth en les confrontant à d'autres fictions du long XVIII^e siècle, notamment celles d'Austen. Trois aspects sont examinés : l'utilisation du mot « novel », la signification de « manners » et la dynamique créée par le processus de lecture, parfois fautive.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen cast Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth in the role of forebears in her celebrated encomium on the novel in *Northanger Abbey*. Although her list of novels does not include *Evelina*, my contention here is that, despite its epistolary form, Frances Burney’s first work of fiction contains many elements of what Austen identified as “a novel.” Virginia Woolf’s bending of time in her claim that “Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney” (65) strengthens this literary argument, while also reminding us that Burney’s place as a major canoni-

cal author is a recent one. The corpus-based approach of this article revisits the beginning of what Henry James first called “the novel of manners” (Brothers and Bowers 5) by analysing some lexical characteristics of Frances Burney’s and, to a lesser extent, Maria Edgeworth’s early fiction through comparison and contrast with other texts of the long eighteenth century, notably Austen’s. Most focus on a female protagonist or a small community of characters. Three main aspects will be examined: “species,” manners, and the process of reading.

Species

Both Burney and Edgeworth had already grappled with the term “novel,” anchoring their fictions to earlier works which they designated by this term, rather than using it straightforwardly for their own texts. Two years before Austen’s “Yes, novels,” Edgeworth made a statement of “not wishing to acknowledge a Novel,” opting rather to designate *Belinda* as “a Moral Tale” in the 1801 *Advertisement*, at once distinguishing “novels like those of . . . miss Burney” (and three other writers including Mrs Inchbald) from the mass of “books classed under this denomination” (3), and legitimising her contemporary’s earlier fictions. Her ambivalence about novels ends the text: “shall I finish the novel for you?” Lady Delacour is made to ask the other characters when the reader only has two more pages to go. Edgeworth then employs paralipsis and generic variations through “the huddled style of an old fairy tale” and “stage effect” to end on a caper: “Our *tale* contains a *moral*, and no doubt, / You all have wit enough to find it out” (477-78).

Some twenty-three years earlier, Burney had not used the term “novel” in her text, but had apologised rhetorically in the preface to *Evelina* about “rank[ing] the authors of *Rasselas* and *Eloïse* as Novelists,” climbing on the shoulders of these and a few other giants “for the dignity of [her] subject,” while showing that she knew the lingo and the tricks of the trade. Asserting the place of “the humble Novelist” in “the republic of letters” and decoding the term “public” enabled her to designate herself and her readers as partners in acknowledging the interest of “this species of writing.” With some insistence, she associates Fielding’s phrase and the word “novel”: “for such, by novel writers, novel readers will be called” (9). Because her novel is epistolary, she hovers between the figure of a Richardson-style “editor,” and that of an inventor of fiction who puts a book on the market, at the mercy of a set of reviewers whom she acknowledges by dedicating it to them (5-7), and whose cavilling she mimics in her paragraph on the impossible “total extirpation of novels”—the fifth and last occurrence of the word, or its cognate “Novelist” in the preface. Despite “elements of the formulaic” such as “the Petrine *humble Novelist*,” argues Geoffrey Day, Burney asserted both “a tradition of distinction” in which she positioned herself and an awareness of being “attuned to

[the] basic shift in critical attitudes” concerning originality which took place during the period when she was writing her juvenilia (Day 29-30). As Johnson, Rousseau, Richardson, Fielding and Smollett had “culled the flowers” and “left [the path] barren,” she could only ambition originality—while disclaiming brashness—in her male impersonation of a preface writer (*Evelina* 10-11).

From the vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century, after some thirty years of intense critical analysis of Burney’s fiction as part of the general reassessment of women’s writing (not least the 1991 special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* on *Evelina*), this “canny transvestism” (Thaddeus 172) may be seen either as “complicit in subsuming her female predecessors,” contrary to Austen (Schellenberg 165), or as “disingenuous” (Batchelor 85). The point of this article is that Burney winds her argument around the key terms of her predecessors, and puts some of these words to new uses in order to express her ambition of writing out of the path “left barren.” While Henry Fielding had stated “I describe not Men but Manners, not Individuals but a Species” as one of the explanations for his “hitherto unattempted” way of writing in *Joseph Andrews* (168, 8), Burney announced that she intended “to mark the manners of the times” (9), which narrows the meaning and implications of “manners.” Her second use of the term in the same paragraph of the preface makes it clear that she saw manners as codes, which must be learnt by *Evelina*—mere “forms,” the term with which she parallels “manners”: “her ignorance of the forms, and inexperience in the manners, of the world” (9). The book goes on to trace the “progression of the life” of its eponymous heroine, whom Burney endows with the qualities requisite to succeed, like Smollett before her but in a female version: “a virtuous mind, a cultivated understanding and a feeling heart” (9) as opposed to Roderick Random’s “advantages of birth and education” (xxxv). Joseph F. Bartolomeo details the similarities and differences between Smollett’s and Burney’s “stories of initiation” (124), yet he does not particularly focus on the echoes between the prefaces to the three beginners’ novels, *Joseph Andrews*, *Roderick Random* and *Evelina*. “Manners,” in Smollett’s initial sketch of his hero’s world, are those of Scotland, valued for their “simplicity” that will clash with the hostile world in which he is set to roam (xxxv). This provides a slight variation on Fielding’s “inferior Manners,” which are used to contrast the “grave Romance” and the “comic Romance” he proposes (4). Yet, if Smollett’s adjective entails less judgment than Fielding’s, both male authors clearly employ “manners” to mean “behaviour” rather than codes (*OED*, Spacks 16).

Like most of their contemporaries, both Smollett and Burney latched onto the term “romance” as a foil for their own fictions, the first probably influencing Johnson’s *Rambler* 4 and the second paying allegiance to it. Smollett opted for the more respectable genre of “satire” to distance his text from the “ignorance, vanity and superstition” of romance

(xxxiii). Burney reformulated Johnson's "the comedy of romance . . . is . . . precluded from the machines and expedients of the heroic romance" (175) in terms of thwarted expectations of the "fantastic" and "the sublimity of the *Marvellous*" to present her heroine as "the offspring of Nature and of Nature in her simplest attire" (10). "Nature" and "life" combined were also obligatory terms in such a coded exercise as a preface to a first novel. Contrary to Fielding and Smollett, Burney differentiates the words to state openly that what she writes is fiction: "to draw characters from nature, though not from life" combines with "to mark the manners of the times" as her agenda (9). Yet the "progression of the life" to be narrated is qualified as "natural," which may be a way to indicate that suspense cannot come from the outcome of the plot. From the middle of the eighteenth-century century onward, any reader of a book with a personal name as a title expected it to end with the hero or heroine's marriage (despite the fruitful variation of an intermediary marriage in *Betsy Thoughtless*). As a development novel, *Evelina* uses the "structure of romance incorporating data from the literal social world"—a "combination [which] characterizes many novels of manners and helps to account for their appeal" (Spacks 168). Inventiveness therefore resides in variety ("all the little incidents which these volumes record"), a common argument inherited from the prefaces of Defoe and Richardson, through which Burney provides "a full spectrum of manners" (Spacks 162). The verb "record" suggests either fiction or its opposite: the *OED* notes, as synonyms, her earlier "mark" along with "represent." When Smollett claims "I have attempted to represent modest merit struggling with every difficulty to which a friendless orphan is exposed" he specifies that "circumstances are altered and disguised to avoid personal satire" (xxxv) which did not work, since he was moved to add a disclaimer in *The Apologue* to the fourth edition. By opposing nature and life, Burney dispels this ambiguity, and claims that she is writing what Austen identified as a novel rather than a variation on pre-existing "species."

Manners

Like the heroine at the end of her story, the new writer showed in her preface and in her tale that she could master the rules. Contrary to her creation, however, Burney twisted the rules to create something new, largely by focusing on "manners." In a corpus of texts from 1748 to 1834, mainly narrating tales centred on women (with some telling men's stories at either chronological end as control texts), *Evelina* is the first in which the word "manners" stands out for its relative frequency (Fig. 1). With the corpus used as a norm, the term appears a third more often than expected in a text of this length, according to the null hypothesis that the distribution of the word or list will equate with the relative size of the texts within the corpus. A previous study has shown that the

increased presence of the word “manners” is concordant with that of terms expressing abstract interactions between characters, emotional states and networks of sociability (Bandry-Scubbi). “Manners” is thus taken here as an emblem of these other terms. Its strong presence in Austen’s fiction, represented in this corpus by *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, foregrounds the importance of “manners” as a word in itself for this “species of writing.” There are 44 occurrences rather than the expected 17 in *Pride and Prejudice*, and 53 rather than 26 in *Emma*, i.e. more than twice than what the corpus would lead us to expect (another corpus consisting of Austen’s six novels shows no significant variation in the frequency with which she uses the term). Such an insistent presence of the word probably explains its relative decline after Austen, since it was too strongly associated with her writing to be used with such frequency for a certain period afterwards. This assertion would, of course, require a much vaster diachronic corpus: for the moment I can state that, in my corpus comprising texts from 1748 to 1834, “manners” is one of the substantives with a high relative frequency, compared with the British National Corpus. This is only partly satisfactory as the BNC is “designed to represent . . . British English from the later part of the 20th century” (“What is the BNC?”). Yet, if the date of the first texts is pushed back to 1719 (*Robinson Crusoe* and *Love in Excess*), and earlier female stories are taken into account, “manners” does not stand out (Fig. 2).

The texts preceding *Evelina* in the 1748-1834 corpus not only contain fewer occurrences of “manners” but they also mostly use the word in a normative sense. *Betsy Thoughtless* has “good” as the first word on the left of “manners” in 12 out of the 18 occurrences of the substantive, and “ill” for 3. In *Roderick Random*, 7 of the 8 uses of “manners” have to do with their improvement. A pattern for stories focusing on females is suggested by the reformed Mr. B.’s repeated collocation of the term in 2 of the 7 occurrences in *Pamela*: “till I can bring my Manners, my Sentiments, and my Actions to a Conformity with her own” (408) becomes “by a Conformity of my Manners to your Virtue” (432). The word finally conjoins them: “they charm’d every one . . . by the Sweetness of their Manners, the regular Order and Oeconomy of their Household” (499). As the many reactions to Richardson’s text proved, not all readers agreed with advocating such “conformity” of the wicked high to the virtuous low—and as Figure 2 shows, “manners” are scarce in *Pamela*, which contains only a third of the 21 occurrences that would be expected in the 1719-1782 corpus.

Figure 1 (Hyperbase): Manners in the 1748-1834 Corpus
(Roderick Random, Betsy Thoughtless, Evelina, Cecilia, Belinda, Helen [M. Edgeworth], Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Marriage [S. Ferrier], Isabella [F. Jacson], Waverley, and Rob Roy).

Figure 2 (Hyperbase): Manners in the 1719-1782 Corpus
(Love in Excess, Moll Flanders, Roxana, Pamela, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, Betsy Thoughtless, The Female Quixote, Evelina, and Cecilia).

In *Evelina*, “good” and “manners” only come together in 2 of the 38 occurrences: the combination of “manners” with 18 different terms to its immediate left shows that Burney is using it as a pivot around which to articulate her tale, a perspective akin to that of the “hub” from which Burney constructs her texts, according to Thaddeus (8). As other words with a high relative frequency show, good manners should not be taken for granted: “impertinence” and “impertinent,” “disagreeable,” “frightened,” “uneasiness” and “provoking” all feature among the terms that distinguish *Evelina* in the 1748-1834 corpus. Burney associates “manners” with “the town” and with “high life” through the use of the possessive “its,” which never appears with “manners” elsewhere in the corpus (117, 240): the story consists in an identification of the codes which govern these environments rather than a simple assessment of behaviour according to the rules of decorum.

Burney establishes the connotations of “manners” by making the Rev. Mr. Villars the first and last user of the word, thereby illustrating the conduct-book quality of the advice he gives to his ward in keeping with his calling. “Manners” for him serve as a “moral gauge” (Spacks 166). In the second letter of the book, Burney has Villars write of Madame Duval that she is “by no means a proper companion or guardian for a young woman: she is at once uneducated and unprincipled; ungentle in her temper, and unamiable in her manners” (I.2, 15). Such a swarm of negative terms identifies Evelina’s grandmother as one of the story’s villains, and makes the reader expect a reversal of them in an idealised good character—hopefully that of the heroine. Indeed, Lady Howard’s first report of Evelina provides a judgement based on a positive version of the same terms. Her education is praised, and “ungentle” reversed describes the girl’s manners:

She has the same gentleness in her manners, the same natural grace in her motions [as her mother]. Her character seems truly ingenuous and simple; and at the same time that nature has blessed her with an excellent understanding, and great quickness of parts, she has a certain air of inexperience and innocence that is extremely interesting. (I.6, 23)

The final adjective announces the potential for a story, especially as Evelina’s “striking” and “complete beauty” makes her an ideal prey (22). The positive connotations of “ingenuous,” “inexperience” and “innocency” are contrasted with the negative prefixes of the adjectives earlier applied to Mme Duval.

Burney uses “manners” for the last time when she has Villars play his only trump card and give Evelina the letter from her deceased mother to her father, Lord Belmont, along with his recommendations: “May’st thou, in this change of situation, experience no change of disposition! . . . May thy manners, language, and deportment, all evince that modest equanimity, and cheerful gratitude, which not merely deserve, but dignify prosperity!” (III.12, 337). Manners have become a means, and

the end must be achieved by the heroine alone. As the reader still has two thirds of the last volume to go through, this inevitably generates suspense. "Manners," in Villars's traditional meaning, will not suffice. The word does not appear again, as restraint gives way to emotional intensity. Evelina has to evade both Villars's control and his language (Doody 47).

In between these uses of the term by the Reverend, Burney developed some other meanings for "manners," which mainly appear in two clusters of letters: the heroine's discovery of fashionable London (I.11-23), and the reunion of the high-society characters in Bristol Hotwell and Clifton (II.30-III.12). 9 of the 38 occurrences of the word are used to characterise Orville through Evelina's comments about him to Villars, wherein the association with "gentleness" prevails. This common trait unites them semantically: "his manners gentle, attentive, and infinitely engaging" forms the centre of her first assessment of him, the idealisation of which Burney foregrounds by having Evelina describe herself as "but . . . a school-girl" just before (I.11, 31). Later in the same letter, Evelina puts Orville's "understanding and his manners" above his "rank," which she perceives as "his least recommendation." This positively characterises them as ideal partners (34), for *her* "excellent understanding" reinforces the value of *her* manners in Lady Howard's evaluation (quoted above). When recapitulating his qualities in answer to Villars's injunction to "quit him," Orville's "sweetness of manners" features in the middle of her enumeration (III.11, 322). The echo between Villars's "You must quit him!" (309) and her "Why have I ever quitted you!" (322) suggests that the Reverend's rules should not apply in her new environment.

New rules are provided by her new guide, Mrs Selwyn, who turns traditional values on their heads. Burney reverses gender attributions in Evelina's description of this character to her friend Maria: "her understanding . . . may be called *masculine*, but unfortunately, her manners deserve the same epithet." They are characterised by "her want of gentleness; a virtue which seems . . . so essential a part of the female character" (II.30, 269), but was repeatedly attributed to Orville, whose demasculinisation by Evelina came only a few pages earlier: "so *feminine* his delicacy, and so amiable his nature" (italics in text, II.28, 262). Mrs Selwyn will transform her from idealised deprived sibling ("As a sister I loved him," *ibid.*) to spouse, the object of Volume Three, in which the second cluster of "manners" occurs.

Mrs Selwyn is an arbiter of manners, who counters the rules imposed by Lovel the fop in the London cluster by ridiculing him in the Clifton one. His judgements of Evelina as "guilty of ill-manners" (I.11, 35) and "ill-breeding" (I.12, 37), of himself as "not totally despicable a judge of good or ill manners" (37) and of Evelina's manners giving her out negatively as "a country parson's daughter" (37) are cancelled in part by his use of French, the language of despicable Mme Duval: "our customs,

our manners, *et les étiquettes de nous autres*” (I.20, 80). He is checked by Orville (the valiant knight ready to defend the insulted damsel in a duel, I.22, 103) before his complete humiliation by Captain Mirvan in the monkey episode. His use of the term “manners” in Clifton has actually become an OED quotation: vulgar Coverley has “committed an outrageous solecism in good manners” by putting Evelina over Lady Louisa (III.7, 313). Mrs Selwyn also validates Evelina’s earlier evaluation of Merton (“the nobleman whose manners so evidently announced the character of a confirmed libertine” III.1, 276) and protects her by threatening the high with the low: “I should be sorry to give my servant the trouble of teaching you [Merton] better manners” (273). She thus gives Evelina a legitimate status in high society which makes her worthy of becoming Lord Belmont’s legitimate daughter.

Orville’s ideal manners serve to contrast the lesser value of other characters. Evelina’s growing appreciation of her Prince Charming after their first comfortable *tête-à-tête* (“his manners are so elegant, so gentle, so unassuming” I.18, 74) highlights her dislike of her vulgar relations, reinforced during her stay with them in Volume Two when “manners” are associated to “high life,” an idealised world to which she no longer belongs and which Orville’s visit, his “grace” and “elegance,” serve to recall (II.22, 240). Orville’s manners also serve as a standard against which to assess those of the other male characters: Merton and his “look of libertinism towards women” (I.23, 115), Willoughby, Lovel and Captain Mirvan. In Volume III, Orville’s “gentleness of manners” and “delicacy of conduct” are set off by Willoughby’s “obtru[sive] attention” (III.11, 331) and the vulgarity of his sister, which justifies her match with Merton (III.1, 277). As the manners of the high are bad, the paragon looks for other values and appreciates in Evelina “the novelty of meeting with one so unhackneyed in the world, as not to be yet influenced by custom to forget the use of reason” (III.4, 295), which her last letter suggests Orville will protect by preventing the “yet” from becoming more than a potentiality. The intermediary level of male characters are little better than the high or the low, as evidenced by the two close occurrences of “manners” for Captain Mirvan: the concurrence of his genteel wife’s “apologies for [his] ill-manners” (II.3, 155), and Mme Duval’s opinion that “he has no more manners than a bear” (156). This brings these opposite female characters together. Yet Evelina’s observations display more curiosity than condemnation, and enable the young author to “mark the manners of the times” in a lively comedy: “In all ranks and all stations of life, how strangely do characters and manners differ!” Evelina writes to Villars in her “London journal” (I.23, 114).

The same combination starts off Burney’s second novel (“the little knowledge of fashionable manners and of the characters of the time of which Cecilia was yet mistress” 8). The term is, however, used far less in this much longer text (there are 42 occurrences rather than the 57 expected) and is often taken as an absolute: Burney seems to have

explored its potential to the full in *Evelina*. Half of the occurrences are combined with other substantives as Cecilia moves from one environment to the next: “life and manners”; “mind and manners”; “accomplishment and manners”; “disposition and manners”; “alike in person, manners and conversation”; “talents and manners”; “looks and manners”; “no pleasant aspect or manners”; “singularity/ negligence/ rigidity/ indolence of manners”; but also “openness,” “simplicity,” and even “admiration of his manners.” The first of the uses quoted above endows the term with negative connotations, since the heroine’s “little knowledge” has come to her through Mr. Monckton—a character whose long list of qualities are discredited for the reader, but not for the characters, by the addition that his life is ruled by the “appearance of decency” (8). Edgeworth also combines half of *Belinda*’s 31 occurrences of “manners” with one or two other substantives. One striking adjective draws the term out of ubiquity: Harriet Freke’s “harum scarum manners” influence Lady Delacour, who tells Belinda that she “found it necessary to change [her] manners” (43) and to lead the unruly life that will nearly destroy her. The term mainly serves as a synonym for “behaviour.”

Not so with Austen, who, like Burney, distributes “manners” among her characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. In this text, however, the principal function of the word is to emphasise the perceptions that the characters have of one another. When she unites Elizabeth and Darcy in the final chapters, she employs the first-person possessive in order for each of them to present their former behaviour negatively, a rare collocation in the 1748-1834 corpus (5 of the 7 occurrences belong to Austen). Such reciprocity starkly differentiates them from Mr. B and Pamela. Darcy utters the phrase first, to state the effect of Elisabeth’s use of the singular in “had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner” (II.11, 215) with the more general plural: “the recollection of what I then said, of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it” (III.16, 408). Later in the same dialogue Austen has Elizabeth respond to his “I believed you to be wishing, expecting my addresses” with “my manners must have been in fault, but not intentionally, I assure you” (410). She then reformulates “my manners—my behaviour to *you*” as “my impertinence” (III.18, 421), which can be put in resonance with his “my vanity” (410). *Pride and Prejudice* is the only text in the 1748-1834 corpus where both “manner” and “manners” stand out quantitatively: the singular is very frequent in eighteenth-century fiction (more so than at present, considering the BNC as a comparison), but the repetition of Elizabeth’s “reproof” nonetheless makes it noteworthy. Austen has her heroine use the plural with the second-person possessive (also a rare collocation, with only 7 occurrences in the whole corpus) to encapsulate all she dislikes in her future match when he first proposes: “your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others” (215).

The terms “impressing” and “belief,” along with her use of the superlative, signal the subjectivity of her diatribe all the more as adjectives that qualify the 44 occurrences of “manners” are mainly positive: “unaffected” for Bingley, “captivating” for Jane and Fitzwilliam, “happy,” “easy,” “pleasing,” “easy and pleasant,” “engaging” for various other characters. Negatives are reserved for Darcy in the first two volumes (“till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity,” “his manners, though well-bred, were not inviting,” “proud and repulsive as were his manners”) and for Lady Catherine (“her manners . . . dictatorial and insolent” in Wickham’s view and “beyond anything I can describe” in that of Collins). Like Lovel’s judgments in *Evelina*, the Bingley sisters’ evaluation of the heroine backfires on them (“her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed” I.8, 38) after the reader has been privy to Darcy’s emotions through the third-person narrator’s positive assessment: “in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness” (I.6, 26). Manners as exclusionist codes belong to pride and prejudice, a direct emanation from *Cecilia*:

“The whole of this unfortunate business,” said Dr Lyster, “has been the result of PRIDE and PREJUDICE. Your uncle, the Dean, began it . . . Your father, Mr Mortimer, continued it. . . . Yet this, however, remember; if to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination. (930)

Emma, the “imaginist” (III.3, 362), resents manners as coded behaviour, which is how Austen has Jane Fairfax use the term: “not a syllable of real information could Emma procure as to who he really was. ‘. . . Manners were all that could be safely judged of, under a much longer knowledge than they had yet had of Mr. Churchill. She believed every body found his manners pleasing.’ Emma could not forgive her” (II.2, 181). Yet, the recurrent use of a name before “manners” in this novel (“Mr. Elton’s” twice, “Robert Martin’s,” “Miss Smith’s,” “Mrs Weston’s”) participates in making a mutual evaluation of the characters the main force driving the story, through the external manifestation of “manners.” Nowhere else in the 1748-1834 corpus does this collocation appear with such a frequency. The 5 occurrences of “manners to” or “towards” a person show how Austen organizes her network of “four or five families” with combinatorial logic of one-to-one relationships. The last of the 53 occurrences in *Emma* illustrates this: “I know what my [Jane’s] manners were to you . . . I had always a part to act” (III.16, 501) seals the reconciliation between the two young ladies. If manners can be acted, passing judgements based on them becomes precarious. This makes for the rather different ending from *Pride and Prejudice*. Here, the hero and heroine do not come to terms by retrospectively dovetailing their respective manners and the interpretations

they have of them. Instead, only Emma uses “manners” with the first-person possessive, in response to Knightley’s second-person “I could never . . . from your manners, assure myself as to the degree of what you felt” [for Frank Churchill] (III.13, 464-65). She has to realise that she too is subject to interpretation: “since my manners gave such an impression” (465). Here and elsewhere, the delight she takes in manipulating other characters is the object of a *mise en abyme* from the part of the third-person narrator.

As Michael McKeon demonstrates, the use of epistolary fiction in *Evelina* initiated a “third-person effect . . . achieved when characters are explicitly depicted in the process of construing the meaning of letters” (699). In showing us her heroine gradually becoming “a more practiced virtual reader” (McKeon 702), Burney explored the potential outcomes of reading and misreading, be it letters, characters or manners.

The process of reading

Reading is presented as a problematic activity from the start of *Evelina*. Despite the heroine’s suggestion to the contrary, what is read cannot be “un-read”: “pray forget that you have read it, if this journey is displeasing to you,” she writes when trying to convince her tutor to let her go to London (I.7, 26). This is embedded within a web of comments about writing, with the heroine seemingly restating Tristram Shandy’s “—ask my pen,—it governs me,—I govern not it” (VI.6, 500). Evelina’s “ignorance of the forms, and inexperience in the manners of the world” (Preface 9) come with a naivety about the medium she is made to use. This tension between parental prudence and the hero or heroine’s will to discover the world, and themselves in it, animates most development novels, but Burney gives it the additional force of energising the medium itself.

Reading serves as a recurrent metaphor for understanding a situation or a person. After her initial blunders, Evelina yearns for “a book of the laws and customs *à-la-mode*, presented to all young people upon their first introduction into public company” (I.20, 84). Instead, she must learn through trial and error. Her wish literally to behave “by the book,” and avoid mistakes such as choosing her partner at a ball or laughing at a ridiculous man, contrasts with the set template through which the *Female Quixote* Arabella reads the world, “her mind being wholly filled with the most extravagant expectations” from “very bad translations” of French romances (7-8). Like Arabella, however, Evelina needs to learn how to read through appearances. In the 1719-1782 corpus, Lennox’s novel stands out for its use of *appear* and related words, and Burney’s first text is noteworthy for the high frequency of the term *seem* and its related forms, while *suppose*, *interpret* and their derived words or forms characterise both books. If Burney stages her heroine’s

mis-readings as less extravagant than Lennox's, she also provides her readers with the means not to misread in the same way as Evelina, or at least to enjoy having been misled if they were. Reading takes on a more positive value than in *The Female Quixote*, since Evelina's love of books protects her from the company of dissolute people: "for the young lady *reads*," Mrs Selwyn answers to enquiries from the Bristol Hotwell rakes about the way Evelina passes her time (III.1, 275).

The story makes this proficient reader become somebody (finally contradicting the "nobody syndrome" that runs through it), and teaches her to put herself in a position to be "read" to her advantage. One of Burney's constructions to this effect involves the letter, supposedly written by Orville, in response to the note penned by Evelina to differentiate herself from her vulgar cousins. Burney signals the embedding process with clear framing and variations on the theme of appearances. After focusing on the recipient's projected reactions (her friend Maria Mirvan) and the difficulties of writing this particular letter, Evelina introduces the problematic "note" with "Never, never again will I trust to appearances—never confide in my own weak judgment" (II.27, 256-57) and concludes the letter with a "lament to find myself in a world so deceitful" (259). Her tutor is made to close the episode with a double use of the initial term: Orville "had the appearance of infinite worthiness, and you supposed his character accorded with his appearance" (II.29, 268). Reading through appearances requires more social skills than either Villars or Evelina possesses at that point. Trusting the written word, Evelina reads the letter three times (257-58) and Villars four (267). Over-reading results in misreading; because they both focus intensely on the content and the language of the letter, rather than interrogating its status, they both fail to take into account that the message it supposedly answers may have been purloined. Burney gives her readers the means to anticipate Dupin's "there is such a thing as being too profound" (Poe 153) by crowding too many people into the scene (a maid, a porter and Willoughby, 250) yet obfuscating this by giving more immediately important information both when the note is sent and when the supposed answer is received. The very language of the spurious letter should also alert the reader, as it echoes with terms used by rakes throughout the novel.

Despite finally disproving Villars's interpretation of "this most extraordinary performance" (267) by the supposed intoxication of its writer, Burney does not discredit him for it. She later demonstrates the plausibility of his hypothesis by casting Merton in the role of the inebriated rake and confirming Orville as the defender of the heroine from such a character. Burney pairs the heroine with her worthy suitor in a dance-like movement: Merton's bride-to-be, Orville's sister, "tak[es] hold of [her brother's] arm" so as to walk away from her future husband who is "detaining" Evelina's hand; Orville's proposal to answer Evelina's wish for a protecting brother is fulfilled by his positioning

her as the equal of his real sister, first “disengag[ing her] from Lord Merton, and handing [her] to Lady Louisa,” then “desiring [Lady Louisa] to take hold of one arm, and begging [Evelina] to make use of the other” (III.7, 314). As the reader already knows that Lady Louisa is to marry Merton, the rest of the choreography is implicit: Orville will keep Evelina for himself and hand his sophisticated sister over to his negative double. Indeed, Lady Louisa does not misread the situation, as Burney makes her jealous at this point. Burney doubles the central marriage with that of the heroine’s sibling McCartney rather than with that of her suitor’s sister, thus centring the text on Evelina right to the end rather than rewarding the negative doubles.

In the earlier episode of Captain Mirvan’s prank against Mme Duval, which should serve as a warning against misreading, Burney again focuses on the conditions in which a spurious letter is designed and delivered. Burney has Evelina comment on the signature of this letter and summarise its contents, rather than transcribe them for Villars, and thereby gives more importance to the transmission of the letter than to its message. Burney places her heroine in a position to judge the mis-reader: “When I heard the letter, I was quite amazed at its success. So improbable did it seem” (II.2, 143). But what Evelina misreads is the sexual threat which the violence exerted on Mme Duval both involves and suggests. The two women are separated, purportedly for Evelina’s protection. The attack deprives the old woman of her dignity by divesting her of all the artifices which make her appear feminine, to the extent that “she hardly looked human” (150). Destroying this semblance of femininity exposes Willoughby’s desire for the real thing, the body of the young woman whose beauty is repeatedly mentioned.

In the final reconciliation, the reader is the one Burney forces to misread. She contrives to make Belmont read two partial pieces of evidence together. The first is Evelina herself, whose striking likeness to her dead mother is stressed; the second is her mother’s posthumous letter. Belmont quotes the letter Evelina has handed him “unsealed” (384) but which the reader has encountered as “Letter XIII” of Volume Three some fifty pages earlier. Three narrative levels coexist when Belmont quotes Caroline: Evelina’s description of the scene for the benefit of Villars as Letter XIX of Volume Three, Belmont’s address to Evelina between quotation marks, and Caroline’s letter in italics. The reader of the novel knows more than Evelina, who ignores the contents of the letter. When encountered as “Letter XIII,” it is simply labelled as “[Inclosed in the preceding Letter]” (338) and thus appears in the same guise as the other eighty-three. Such an example of dramatic irony makes readers aware of their own tendency to misread. Because the letter is actually quoted by its fictional reader, one is prompted to go back and read properly what one could not but misread, much like Sterne’s “inattentive” reader (I.20).

Yes, novels

Burney wielded misreading and manners as tools with which to hew her first novel, and thereby to sketch out the potentialities of a new species of fiction. As McKeon points out, “reading letters provides a powerful figure for reading people” (701), a figure Austen put to good use with her own version of the third-person narrator adopted in Burney’s three later novels (1782, 1796, 1814), while adjusting manners to less boisterous companies. No such transformation occurred in *Liaisons dangereuses*, an exact contemporary of *Cecilia*. A “misreader of Richardson” like Burney (Koehler 17), Laclos reviewed her second novel with another encomium of the novel:

De tous les genres d’Ouvrages que produit la Littérature, il en est peu de moins estimés que celui des Romans ; mais il n’y en a aucun de plus généralement recherché et de plus avidement lu. [...] Quel est donc ce prétendu affranchissement de toutes règles qu’on présente comme un si grand avantage ? [...] Et de ce qu’aucune route n’est prescrite pour parvenir à ce but nécessaire, en conclura-t-on qu’il est plus facile de ne pas s’égarer ? Nous serions tentés de croire cependant que peu d’Ouvrages demandent une plus grande connaissance de l’esprit et du cœur de l’homme, et cette connaissance ne nous paraît pas si facile à acquérir. Elle seule, sans doute, peut faire le mérite d’un Roman, mais quand elle s’y trouve, nous pensons que l’Ouvrage devient à la fois agréable et utile. Ce dernier mot ne passera pas sans réclamation ; mais qu’on nous dise donc où l’on peut apprendre ailleurs à connaître les mœurs, les caractères, les sentiments et les passions de l’homme ?

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