

FEMALE DIFFICULTIES: PROPRIETY AND VIOLENCE IN FRANCES BURNEY'S WORLD¹

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ABSTRACT

The novels of Frances Burney have been held up by some traditional critics as models of that delicacy which, in her time, was a quality inherent to the feminine nature. From her very first novel, *Evelina, or a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, the concern about the proper behaviour for a female in society is ever present. The quasi-obsessive preoccupation with propriety shared by all Burneyan heroines and her creator led some to consider Burney the epitome of feminine narrative in its narrowest sense. Yet, this feminine world of norms and rigid etiquette coexists with episodes of extraordinary violence. Frances Burney and her heroines lived in a world which had imposed the severest behavioural strictures for those of their sex. In this article I consider the relationship between the violence existing in Burney's novels and the violation of women's freedom both in her novels and in her own cultural background. The female difficulties in Burney's life and those of her heroines are, indeed, a matter of propriety, but far from being a negligible, little feminine business, propriety becomes a claustrophobic world which conveys the outbursts of violence a most disturbing significance.

1. INTRODUCTION: WOMEN AND NOVELS

Despite the diversity of fictional motifs and subsequent varied classifications of late eighteenth-century narrative - e.g. "sensibility", "manners", "gothic", "oriental", etc.- there is, nevertheless, an ever recurring theme in most of these novels which, to some extent, acts as a connecting thread, namely, the difficulties that the heroines invariably encounter precisely because they belong to the female sex. I am consciously using the word "difficulties" euphemistically while echoing Frances Burney's title for her fourth novel, *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties*, because, actually, many eighteenth-century heroines were continually threatened with social disgrace, sexual assault, suffered tormenting terrors, excruciating helplessness, were forced to accept unbearable suitors and some were even in danger of losing their lives, or did, in fact, lose them. It is no doubt meaningful that a great deal of these novels, besides Burney's *Evelina*, *Cecilia* and *Camilla*, have a woman's name for title, sometimes with surnames or nobility titles included or with added information: *Memoirs of Mary*, *The History of Lady Barton*, *Olivia, or the Deserted Bride*, *Ellen Doodley*, *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman*.² All these novels, and many more, were written by women, since this period of English narrative underwent so striking a feminization as to give rise to several analyses concerning its causes. It is a well-known fact

¹ There has been a tendency, since Margaret Anne Doody's 1988 biography, to restore Burney's full name and avoid the more infantilized "Fanny". The name "Frances" is also to be found in the Oxford World's Classics editions of her novels.

² *Memoirs of Mary*: 1794, Susannah Gunning. *The History of Lady Barton*: 1771, Elizabeth Griffith. *Olivia, or the Deserted Bride*: 1787 and *Ellen Doodley*: 1790, Elizabeth Bonhote. *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*: 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft.

that the number of women readers was constantly increasing. Feminine pre-eminence was such that some men wrote under the pretence of being women. We cannot be surprised, then, at the sarcastic scepticism shown by one reviewer of *The Critical* (April, 1.778) concerning *The Memoirs of the Countess D'Anois*:

We suspect that Madame la Comtesse may be found in some British garret, without breeches, perhaps, but yet not in petticoats. (Tomkins: 1932)

If we were to look for a summary of the diversity of characteristics of late eighteenth-century narrative, I dare say that it was a narrative mainly written by women and about women, and, more concretely still, about women's troubles.

From the suffocating atmosphere of sensibility, the claustrophobic world of social pressure, to the terrors and perils of Gothic fantasy, the heroines' lot was indeed an unenviable one. It is true that men novelists had been also offering a vision of femaleness as the tender victim of male predation. Our recollections of Fanny in *Joseph Andrews* bring inevitably to our mind an image of innocence in almost constant danger, particularly sexual danger. Pamela's troubles, despite her "virtue rewarded", arise from her feminine and subordinate condition, and Clarissa Harlowe's tragedy is a woman's sexual tragedy. But for women novelists these women's troubles were more than a narrative motif: they were, albeit not necessarily in the same degree, the troubles of their own sex. A woman in the second half of the eighteenth century was submitted to the strictest behavioural patterns, had nothing like self-determination and knew that her body and actions belonged more to the world than to herself. The relentless emphasis on feminine virtue as a synonym of chastity was the main pattern of female behaviour. A woman's happiness depended on something so brittle as reputation. Women needed protection: a name, a family, a father, a husband, "What is woman, -with the most upright designs, the most rigid circumspection, what is woman unprotected?" (*The Wanderer*: 2: 367). Woman was indeed a vulnerable creature. Novelists like Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Griffith, Susannah Gunning, Mary Hays or Mary Wollstonecraft, among many others, reveal either in a veiled and apparently conformist way or with a critical and denouncing attitude, a remarkable concern for the difficulties of their own sex.

This vital dependence on something so fragile as reputation must perforce have triggered off anxiety in women and made them adhere to a rigid code of propriety. In Frances Burney's case, as in that of several other women novelists, authorship increased the tension and the necessity to conform outwardly to the prevailing notions of proper womanhood. Hence, Burney's quasi-pathological dread of public exposure, not so much as a writer, but as a woman:

Let them criticise, cut, slash without mercy my book, and let them neglect me; but my God, avert my becoming a public theme of ridicule! (*DL* 1: 76)

Reading Burney's diary we become aware of her extreme concern for the question of propriety. Propriety was Burney's point of gravitation and that of her heroines. It is noteworthy that the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites precisely Burney's second novel, *Cecilia*, as its first source for one sense of the word "propriety": "Conformity with good manners or polite usage, correctness of behaviour or morals; becomingness, decency".

A close-knit association of Frances Burney with and almost neurotical concern with propriety is at the base of that traditional image of the novelist as the prudishly shy female, passive, obsessed with norms of conduct, imprisoned by punctiglio¹; a woman, in the

¹ Punctiglio: an eighteenth-century term for rigid etiquette.

words of Patricia Meyers Spacks (1974: 633): "...Whose self-created image of extreme propriety has long encouraged readers to underestimate her".

As in the case of so many, not to say all of her contemporary women novelists, Frances Burney and her heroines did not find it easy to be a woman in their time. Her difficulties and those of her heroines were primarily female difficulties. Despite some traditional criticism which for some time established the Burneyan image of the bashful virgin (Macaulay, Hunt, Hazlitt) Burney's obsession with propriety is the result of the social and even physical constraint that she, as a woman, had to endure and which, at times, manifests itself in the crudest outbursts of violence.

2. PROPRIETY: A WOMAN'S WORLD OR A WOMAN'S PRISON?

Indeed, for Burney's heroines it is precisely their own public image of propriety what constitutes the key of their social legitimation. Evelina Anville progresses from her modest economic position and her ambiguous social standing by the acquisition of a status wrought through her gradual understanding of the worldly norms and patterns of behaviour established for a young lady. Camilla Tyrold, who, unlike Evelina, enters the world treading upon the solid ground of birth and position, is made to feel throughout the novel the close scrutiny of Edgard Mandlebert, her Cerberus-suitor, whose obsessive distrust is the origin of Camilla's difficulties, her constant nervousness and ultimately her temporary state of madness. Cecilia Beverley's experience makes Lady Honoria's words only more real:

You can do nothing at all without being married; a single woman is a thousand times more shackled than a wife (*Cecilia*: 465).

Juliet Granville's troubles arise from the slandering misconstructions of her actions. Forced to earn a living by her talents, her accomplishments are considered shameful when presented publicly and for money. The very hero of the novel, Albert Harleigh, wields the word "propriety" over her as if it were a sword, with the severe admonition that if she persists in going astray from "the received notion of the world" she will be haunted "for deviating, alone and unsupported as you appear, from the long-beaten track of female timidity" (*The Wanderer*: 365).

The heroines of Burney's narrative world are, either mentally or physically, trapped in feminine convention, immured within the patterns of behaviour prescribed for their own sex. This is what made William Hazlitt accuse Burney of "consciousness of her sex" (1.815: 336):

The difficulties in which she involves her heroines are indeed, "Female Difficulties"-they are difficulties created out of nothing...they (her ladies) will not abate an ace of their punctiglio, in any circumstances, or in any emergency. They would consider it as quite indecorous to run down stairs though the house were in flames, or to move off the pavement though the scaffolding was falling.

Interestingly, Hazlitt introduces a gender element in his literary analysis which would, much later, constitute the standpoint of feminist criticism. He was correct, ironically, in acknowledging the sex of the difficulties ever present in Burney's novels. But those female difficulties, far from being "created out of nothing", were the unavoidable result of the strict prescriptive behaviour set up for women in Burney's own lifetime. For Burney's heroines the abiding by the norms of propriety was not a question of free election, but of survival. Far from being negligible and ridiculous, the compulsion of the heroine to appear publicly unimpeachable is her only way to acquire or maintain a place in the social world

and to satisfy the demands of those men of her circle, either father, guardian or suitor. Having come to this point, I would like to stress the fact that these men of the heroine's circle are the staunchest bulwarks of the established order and their severest oppressors. Endowed with the authority of their sex and their love these male characters never fail to remind their women their real place in the world. Evelina's guardian, the Reverend Arthur Villars, who has to be informed by her guard of every little step she ventures to take in the social world, addresses young Evelina with a threatening tinge in his admonition:

Remember, my dear Evelina, nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman: it is, at once, the most beautiful and most brittle of human things. (*Evelina*: 164).

Cecilia Beverley, the heroine of Burney's second novel, continually meets her beloved Mortimer Delville in the most suspicious-looking circumstances. Cecilia's dread of his misconceptions painfully exposes his proneness to conventional judgement. In Burney's third novel, *Edgard Mandlebort*, the neighbour whom Mr. Tyrold hopes to marry her daughter Camilla, shows from the beginning a severe and priggish disposition. His tutor Marchmont's advise to study Camilla closely before ever thinking of proposing is by no means alien to his nature:

Whatever she does, you must ask yourself this question: "should I like such behaviour in my wife?" Whatever she says, you must make yourself the same demand. Nothing must escape you... the interrogatory, Were she mine? must be present at every look, every word, every motion... even justice is insufficient in this period of probation and instead of inquiring, "Is this right in her?" you must simply ask, "Would it be pleasing to me?"... to be scrupulous is not enough; to avoid all dangers of repentance, you must be positively distrustful (*Camilla*: 159-60).

It is this distrust that oppresses Camilla to the extent of rendering her unable to speak to Mandlebort, stammering or speechless when she has been misinterpreted and ill-judged. As that unorthodox, clear-sighted, and fascinating female character, Mrs. Arlbery, tells Camilla: "He (Mandlebort) is a watcher; and a watcher, restless and perturbed himself, infests all he pursues with uneasiness" (482). Camilla's own father, Augustus Tyrold, a fond parent and a good man, with the best intention, we must not doubt, in structs his daughter with an affectionate sermon of patriarchal ideology. Notwithstanding his acknowledgment of both men's and women's freedom for their affections, Tyrold states that "When there are two parties, choice can belong only to one of them" (358) and his aim is that his beloved Camilla, being a woman, abides by the virtues of discretion and prudence: "What you would rather perish than utter can never, since untold, be suspected" (360). Camilla must be willing to accept people's scrutiny as she accepts "the all-viewing eye of our Creator" (361). She, as a woman, must avoid "imprudence" and "indulgence" and behave with "modest propriety" (362). As for Juliet Granville, let us only remember Albert Harley's emphatic counsel against her "entering into a career of public life", something alien to "propriety" and "female timidity".

The norms of decorum entrap the Burneyan heroine and cripple her. She lives in a claustrophobic world: clothes, balls, conversations, social occasions, and the continuous apprehension of misconstruction of her actions, plus the rigid monitoring of those men she loves, constitute her prison. Hazlitt was right as well when he detected in Burney "a consciousness of her sex", but while for the nineteenth-century critic this was an almost unforgivable flaw, gender-based, feminist criticism of our time sees that sex consciousness as the unavoidable result of a historical moment, a most promising point of departure to find out and analyse the implications - cultural social and literary - which may derive from it. As

Patricia Meyers Spacks (1.974) points out, Burney's novels read as a commentary on woman's restricted life in the late eighteenth-century.

Frances Burney has left an image of herself in her Diaries which corresponds, in essence, to that of her own heroines: "Was there any one who, in her books and in her life, began, continued, and ended more narrowly a woman than she?" asked the critic J. C. Bailey,

A shyness that is almost morbid, a shrinking from notice that is almost ridiculous, a timidity in speech and action that is almost contemptible -such is her character as it is laid bare in her Journal...(1.906: 89-90).

There is no denying that Burney was almost pathologically afraid of public opinion and obsessively concerned with her own propriety as a woman. Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom (1.979: 215-35) have argued that Burney's importance as a literary figure, her power as a novelist, derives precisely from her own personal powerlessness, from her psychological sense of imprisonment, from her outward submission to social rules.

Both Burney and her heroines lived immured in their time and gender, but both, and this is perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of Burney's life and work, underwent nightmarish episodes of violence (if we except *Evelina*, whose experience, despite her dependance and difficulties, is never so dramatic). Burney's mastectomy without anaesthesia, which took place in Paris after a diagnosis of cancer in the right breast, is given full detail in her own letter to her sister Esther. This letter, itself a most valuable document of medical history and an excellent piece of narrative, testifies to Burney's own exposure to violent suffering. But perhaps more extraordinary is the fact that such a "morbidly shy woman", as Bailey adjectivised her, a female contemptible for timidity in speech and action, in his opinion, could have faced such an operation so bravely, without even having told her husband about it in order to spare him suffering, and could have been able to recount her ordeal without sparing the indignity of having to undress, a woman alone, before a group of male doctors - "Seven men in black"- and the torture of the ruthless knife with all its crudest consequences:

When the wound was made and the instrument was withdrawn, the pain seemed undiminished, for the air that suddenly rushed into those delicate parts felt like a mass of minute but sharp and forked poniards that were tearing the edges of the wound - but when again I felt the instrument describing a curve, cutting against the grain, if I may so say, while the flesh resisted in a manner so forcible as to oppose and tire the hand of the operator who was forced to change from the right to the left, then, indeed, I thought I must have expired ...

The instrument this second time withdrawn, I concluded the operation was over - Oh no! Presently the terrible cutting was renewed - and worse than ever, to separate the bottom, the foundation of this dreadful gland from the parts to which it adhered -Again all description would be baffled- yet again all was not over, - Dr. Larry rested but his own hand, and - Oh Heaven! - I then felt the knife rackling against the breast bone - scraping it! (*J. L.* 6: 612-13).

This is only a part of the tremendous description, but in the midst of all this horror, Burney's concern with propriety becomes unsurpassable dignity when with the greatest courage she offers to hold her own breast, while lying on the bed, for the doctor who would remove it: "Qui me tiendra ce sein?" asks Dr. Larrey when the ordeal is about to begin, "C'est moi, Monsieur! and I held my hand under it". (*J. L.* 6: 611).

The extraordinary mixture of propriety and violence which pervades this letter is but a mirror of Burney's novels. There are astonishing episodes of violence in her narrative. The clue to this violence is perhaps to be found in the behavioural strictures suffered by both

novelist and heroines. In any case, the violence existing in the works of a woman who, for so long a time, was considered the epitome of female delicacy is, indeed, worth considering.

3. VIOLENCE FROM THE DELICATE FEMALE PEN

It is surprising that only until quite recently, with the works of Julia Epstein (1.989), Susan Staves (1.976), Cristina Straub (1.986) or Patricia Meyer Spacks (1.976), the violence in Burney's novels did not move critics to reconsider their image of her as the prudish, timid and decorous female writer which had survived for such a long time. Violence is, actually, a pervading element in Burney's narrative. Let us remember Harrel's suicide in *Cecilia*, in which neither the heroine nor ourselves are spared the gory details of his slow agony. But perhaps more remarkable is the fact that Cecilia, like the rest of Burney's heroines, finds herself in an equivocal situation which becomes her physical prison as well, and which ultimately provokes a frantic reaction in her, a violent breaking of the norms of propriety, a temporary state of madness:

The inebriety of the coachman became evident; a mob was collecting; Cecilia, breathless with vehemence and terror, was encircled, yet struggled in vain to break away... (2: 428)

Meanwhile, terrified with the idea that her husband will leave the country, mistaken about her feelings, she suddenly screams: "He will be gone! he will be gone! and I must follow him to Nice!" and "with a strength hitherto unknown to her, she forcibly disengaged herself of her persecutors". Cecilia's distracted rush through London is described thus:

Meanwhile the frantic Cecilia escaped both pursuit and insult by the velocity of her own motion. She called aloud upon Delvile as she flew to the end of the street. No Delvile was there!- She turned the corner yet saw nothing of him; she still went on, though unknowing wither, the distraction of her mind every instant growing greater, from the inflammation of fatigue, heat, and disappointment. She was spoken to repeatedly; she was even caught once or twice by her riding habit; but she forced herself along by her own vehement rapidity, not hearing what was said, not heeding what was thought (2: 429-30).

Cecilia enters a pawnshop where she collapses. There she is imprisoned once more, locked up inside a room while the owners advertise for her in *The Daily Advertiser* with a notice entitled "Madness".

The above quoted text and the situation it conveys are of extraordinary importance because they contain the most characteristic types of violence of Burney's work. In the first place, the violence inflicted upon the heroine by the rigidity of the behavioural patterns she is forced to follow, which makes her powerless even to clear up the misunderstandings that could ruin her prospects of happiness. Secondly, the omnipresent sense of danger lurking upon any heroine who, like Cecilia, finds herself alone and unprotected in the outer world, having strayed, circumstantially, out of the domestic realm. Cecilia follows her husband to a coffee-house trying to prevent his duel, but the men have just left. The coachman of her carriage drunkenly and loudly demands to be paid. A crowd gathers around and Cecilia is encircled by a curious mob among which a "protector" emerges: "... and the stranger gentleman, protesting, with sundry compliments, he would himself take care of her, very freely seized her hand". The unaccompanied woman in the street, that is, she who, albeit temporarily, does not outwardly keep the prescribed rules of behaviour for her sex, will immediately be the subject of abuse. Not only the coarse abuse of being addressed mockingly or aggressively, but that of those who present themselves as her protectors. The lack of respect of these latter is shown by the stranger's readiness in seizing Cecilia's hand.

When all this violence can no longer be endured, Cecilia, like Camilla, suffers a breakdown, explodes and becomes deranged.

In Frances Burney's novels violence is a male prerogative and women the victims. The novelist, like her heroines, lived in a man's world which had prescribed crippling rules of behaviour for women. A fact that makes us remember Patricia Meyer Spacks's statement that "female innocence is male oppression" (1974: 31). This violation of women's freedom is the starting point of other manifestations of male violence which appear in a cruder form: any time a Burney heroine inadvertently crosses the boundary of her own world of female seclusion and decorum and finds herself physically within the masculine realm, she is made to feel her sexually dangerous situation. It was precisely Frances Burney, the traditionally prudish authoress, who overtly exposed the fallacy of the 'gentleman' ideal. It is the gentlemen in her novels, that is, those men whose social position and education make the world expect "gentlemanly" behaviour from them, who do not hesitate to abuse or harass helpless women. To avoid the stares of the Southampton shopkeepers, Camilla and Mrs. Mittin hide in the bathing room of the quay, where they:

Saw the door violently flung open, and three persons *dressed like gentlemen*¹, force their way into the small dwelling place. Boisterously entering, Halder addressed at once to Camilla, such unceremonious praise of her beauty, that affrighted and offended, she hastily seized the arm of Mrs. Mittin... (*Camilla*: 624).

"Physical assailants of women in Burney's novels are not usually things or people of the middle or lower classes", affirms Julia Epstein (1989: 149):

Significantly, the imposers of force are power-mongers and gentlemen, frequently even titled... This scene (the bathing-room scene) examines a social ideology that privileges male assertions of superiority and control. Women physically retreat in its presence, and can use only speech - the polite speech of self-command - to countermand violation.

Young Evelina, like Juliet Granville in *The Wanderer*, learns that men are not to be trusted in an emergency and, significantly, it is not any gentleman but two prostitutes at Marylebone to whom she appeals for help when she loses her companion after the fireworks and finds herself alone among the multitude. Evelina sees basically that they are women and she trusts them for that reason more than "some bold and unfeeling man" (*Evelina*: 233).

Burney's heroines can only be either repressed or insulted and harassed. They are made to suffer from the violation of their freedom and from men's sexual encroachment. Their difficulties are derived from violence against them, a violence which emerges powerfully and disturbingly in all Burney's works:

The conventional social themes of Burney's surface plots are not themselves available for narrative representation, her writing suggests, except through abrupt interventions of violence. Burney needs to get beneath the facades of politeness, decorum, and propriety in order to tell her story. Writing and violence operate together for Burney: she continually ties language to eruptions of dread, delirium, and the tyrannies of social convention (Epstein: 1989: 90).

Even Burney's first novel, *Evelina*, generally read as a good-humoured novel of manners, presents us with a situation disturbing enough in itself: the protagonist, the young and in-expert Evelina, who has not even a surname due to the obscure origin of her birth, young

¹ My italics.

and inexpert, badly needs to learn the ways of the world to be considered acceptable, she must learn from her own errors (which are errors of form but yet of a dangerous nature) and must submit to the implacable and even threatening guidance of the Reverend Villars, who being her only support she cannot dare to anger or disappoint. Understandably, Susan Staves sees more opprobrium and anxiety in the novel than comic description (1.976: 81). It is precisely in two passages of *Evelina* where violence appears in its crudest, shocking form. One shows us captain Mirvan's brutal attack on Madame Duval. Not only physical injury but violation of a woman's dignity are contained in the vivid description. The old woman ends up wigless in a ditch, smeared with mud and her feet tied together with a rope attached to a tree:

Her head-dress had fallen off; her linen was torn; her negligee had not a pin left in it; her petticoats she was obliged to hold on; and her shoes were perpetually slipping off. She was covered with dirt, weeds, and filth, and her face was really horrible (148).

The victim's own description of her assault not only challenges, but shatters the assumption of honourable behaviour in all gentlemen:

He lugged me out of the chariot by main force, and I verily thought he'd have murdered me. He was strong as a lion; I was no more in his hands than a child. But I believe never nobody was so abused before, for he dragged me down the road, pulling and hawling me all the way, as if I'd no more feeling than a horse (149).

The other passage concerns two eighty-year-old women who appear in the novel's final volume. The fashionable men at Bristol, their mind always occupied with competitions against one another, decide to compete with "a race between two old women" (295). This footrace scene pulsates with violence. The women first run into each other and fall on the gravel. Afterwards they "hobbled... stumbled and tottered" until one of them, slipping "with great force came again to the ground... too much hurt to move". When Evelina tries to help her she is stopped by a cry of "No foul play!" from Lord Merton. Coverley, for whom the injured woman is racing, "was quite brutal; he swore at her with unmanly rage, and seemed scarce able to refrain even from striking her" (312). It is impossible not to agree with Julia Epstein when she states that "the footrace represents the apotheosis of both physical violence and social violation against women" (1989: 115). Deprived of sexual appeal by their age, these octogenarian women are the victims of a callous kind of violence from men: they are reduced to an animal condition, and like horses, or dogs, they are made to compete for the profit and vanity of their sponsors.

In her diaries and letters Burney has conveyed an image of herself as a woman anxious about her female decorum, anguished about authorship and its possible damaging consequences to her respectability as a woman. A superficial reading of her novels can easily corroborate this image of almost obsessive concern with feminine propriety. Nevertheless, the compulsive quality of her writing (let us remember her dedication of *The Wanderer* to her father) and the violence pervading her narrative have a powerful subversive dimension because they reveal the tension of the woman torn between her need to conform outwardly to the established vision of proper womanhood and the even deeper need to articulate her own conflictive experience. Any Burney scholar knows that the years passed in the Court of George III as second keeper of the Queen's Clothes (1786 to 1791) were, together with the ordeal of the 1811 mastectomy, the most traumatic experience in her life. This extract from her letter to her sister Hetty, written under the heading: "Directions for coughing, sneezing, or moving, before the King and Queen", is worth citing because, despite its humourous tone, the brutality of its contents epitomizes the other-

imposed but self-inflicted violence of a woman who must, *at all costs*, behave with propriety:

In the first place, you must not cough. If you find a cough tickling in your throat, you must arrest it from making any sound; if you find yourself choking with the forbearance, you must choke- but not cough. In the second place, you must not sneeze. If you have a vehement cold, you must take no notice of it; if your nose membranes feel a great irritation, you must hold your breath; if a sneeze still insists upon making its way, you must oppose it by keeping your teeth grinding together; if the violence of the repulse breaks some blood-vessel, you must break the blood-vessel, but not sneeze.

In the third place, you must not upon any account, stir either hand or foot. If by chance a black pin runs into your head, you must not take it out. If the pain is very great, you must be sure to bear it without wincing; if it brings the tears into your eyes, you must not wipe them off; if they give you a tingling by running down your cheeks, you must look as if nothing was the matter. If the blood should gush from your head by means of the black pin, you must let it gush... If, however, the agony is very great, you may, privately, bite the inside of your cheek, or of your lips, for a little relief... if you even gnaw a piece out, it will not be minded, only be sure either to swallow it, or commit it to a corner of the inside of your mouth till they are gone - for you must not spit (*DL* 2: 53-55).

The decoding of this parodic text reveals Frances Burney's own female difficulties at the Court. The text is a paradigm of the gruesome, even gothic violence which was the inevitable product of propriety taken to its ultimate, surreal and yet logical consequences.

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