



**"IS THIS A PLACE FOR MISS ANVILLE? – THESE DARK
WALKS! – NO PARTY! – NO COMPANION!"**

SPACE AND GENDER IN FRANCES BURNEY'S *EVELINA*

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From the very first letters of Frances Burney's novel, the eponymous character appears to be constantly in-between two places: in-between France and England (as her grand-mother Mme Duval wants Evelina to be sent to Paris to be with her, which displeases Mr Villars who educated Evelina in England), and in-between the countryside where she spent the first seventeen years of her life (where the closest city was Dorchester), and the big city, London. This in-betweenness is amplified by the fact that Evelina does not seem to have her say in any of it: she is only the object of the first seven letters of the novel, which are constituted by the exchanges between Mr Villars and Lady Howard exposing the history of Evelina's family, but which also and above all, keep *displacing* Evelina as subject and narrator. The reader learns in the incipit that "the child" was "*placed*" with Mr Villars ("you [Mr Villars], with whom she [Mme Duval] understands the child is placed [...]", [14]): the passive form on the concept of place, along with the absence of the mention of Evelina's name ("the child"), suggest right from the beginning of the novel that the interconnectedness between that young woman and space is going to be problematic, and that *namelessness* and *placelessness* put her in a difficult, unsteady, position; when the novel opens, she has no place, no identity, no voice. But Evelina is on a threshold, as the subtitle of the novel mentions the "entrance" of a young lady "into the world" (London standing metonymically for the world), and as is suggested by her transitional age, in-between childhood and adulthood. So identity and space are undetermined and fluctuating entities at the beginning of Burney's novel, and readers can expect a change of some sort.

In the eighteenth century, tradition confined women to the private sphere, the domestic world, while the public sphere – which, according to Jürgen Habermas, developed in the eighteenth century along with urbanisation and the emergence of the notion of private space in the bourgeois society [HABERMAS] – was essentially male, as men were supposed to demonstrate their masculinity through rational political debate in the public sphere. So the exclusion of women from the public sphere would prevent them from taking part in the political debates and discussions. But Burney's novel brings confusion between public and private relationships and spaces, as its main character and narrator Evelina is jockeying for position, negotiating personal space within and between the private and public places she goes through, trying to get a name, a position and a place in society. The many instances in which Burney's female characters must negotiate space in ways which parallel their wider struggles to maintain the "upper hand" in their relationship to men can usefully be examined in relation to the development of eighteenth-century notions of privacy, concealment and individualism. If the gendered boundaries between the private and public spheres of activity, along with the necessity to separate male and female spaces, appear to be somewhat blurred in *Evelina*, Burney examines and criticises how the bourgeois society clings to empirical methodologies and how women and their reputations are constantly looked at, observed, and controlled by the male gaze.

After analysing the to-and-fro movements between the (female) private and (male) public spheres in *Evelina*, along with the power differential generated by this alternation of types of places between male and female characters, this paper aims to show that this gendered conception of space is indeed present in Burney, but maybe less rigid than it seems, as the novel stages a feminisation of the public sphere. This constant play on the public and the private in the novel echoes the paradox at stake in Burney's acquisition of public authority in the public sphere of letters by limiting her female character and narrator to the private sphere.

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Mr Villars educated Evelina in the private sphere, in a "retired place" [21] as he calls it; he talks about "the pleasures of humble retirement" [21] in Berry Hill. But Lady Howard goes as far as using the verb "sequestered" to describe the way Villars is keeping Evelina to himself in his domestic

establishment. This is why she wants Evelina to discover London, to open herself to the public sphere, as she underlines in Letter 3 how Villars has restricted Evelina's perception of the world: "it is time that she should see something of the world" [19]. We are far from the title's allusion to Evelina's "entrance into the world". Here, it would be a good step if she could at least see "something of the world". For him, Evelina should do as Astrea in Manley's *New Atalantis* who says: "I see the world without going into it" [MANLEY : 110]. The consequence of such seclusion is that places have an existence in the imagination of the secluded girl that is given full liberty, and imagined places can tremendously differ from real places, thus bringing disappointment or misrepresentations of places. According to Villars, London is "a place which [Evelina's] imagination has painted to [her] in colours so attractive" [26], and she admits herself that "the houses and the streets are not quite so superb as I expected" [27], either to satisfy Mr Villars or because she actually feels the discrepancy between places in her imagination and in reality.

Because of those two opposite forces – the first trying to keep Evelina in the private sphere, the other inviting her to discover the world – space in *Evelina* appears as fragmented from the beginning, with the alternation Berry Hill/Howard Grove in the first letters exchanged between Lady Howard and Mr Villars. That fragmentation becomes more important when Evelina goes to London, which is the complete opposite of Berry Hill, the countryside in which she grew up, and which puts Evelina in a perpetual state of displacement from one place to another, from one theatre to an opera-house, and she never actually settles anywhere. The fragmentation and multiplication of places echoes the fact that female identity is never really established for good [ROSE : 132] and because of that, a feeling of belonging to a particular place is not really possible for Evelina, or for other female characters like Mme Duval: is the latter French? She (mis)-represents herself as French, whereas she was the English Mrs Evelyn before she married M. Duval, but she seems to be in-between the two countries, and her belonging to one or the other is not clear in the text.

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Mme Duval is not comfortable in public spaces as seen in the horrible time she had at the opera [95]. Evelina seems to fit less securely in the rational-critical sphere than in the private sphere where she grew up, and every time

she panics, she wishes to withdraw to that secure place, that refuge (“I wish I was to go immediately to Berry Hill” [50]), or to her own room, which is the place where she reads and writes (“the moment the letter was delivered to me, I retired to my own room to read it” [258]). She is ill-at-ease at a ball (“I was frightened at the thought of dancing before so many people” [32]) and she remains completely silent amongst the debates: “I was quite frightened; – I made no answer; – I even attempted to rise, and could not, but sat still, mute and motionless” [87]. When she voices her opinion about Mr McCartney being taken out of the debates, the reaction of the assembly is quite telling: “They all looked at me, as if they doubted whether or not they had heard me right: but in a few moments, their surprise gave way to a rude burst of laughter” [193], and Evelina has to leave. Many times she obeys the conventions of female respectability in public and “[takes] her usual place”, remaining an outsider among the crowd, as in Volume III, Letter 14: “disregarded, silent, and melancholy, she sat like a cipher, whom to nobody belonging, by nobody was noticed” [340]. She admits to Orville that she is ignorant of public places and matters (“When he found this, he changed the subject, and talked of public places, and public performers; but he soon discovered that I was totally ignorant of them” [34]), and this sign of innocence can also be the source of an uncomfortable feeling for the young woman.

More than just locations where a woman may feel uncomfortable, public places represent a real danger for a woman, especially if she is not accompanied. The city of London is saturated with threats, especially sexual threats. A very telling example of this appears when Sir Clement tries to get lost in London after having taken Evelina in his coach to take her back home after the opera. Evelina is blamed by Mrs Mirvan for having left Mme Duval, who also tells her off: “Mme Duval assured me that if ever I did so again, she would never take me into public” [104]. A young woman could have access to the public space, but this possibility came with some rules, such as good manners, purity, virtue, restraint and silence – rules that were explicitly asserted by the conduct literature. One might thus wonder what they could actually do in a public place, as they most certainly could not express their political ideas in Habermas’s conception of public place.

When Polly suggests that her sister, Evelina, and herself took “a turn in the dark walks” [197] – the dark walks being shaded areas at the edge of

Vauxhall's garden and the site of sexual encounters – they are instantly followed by a group of gentlemen, which terrifies them, and Sir Clement sermons Evelina: “Why, tell me, –why do I *see* you here? – Is this a place for Miss Anville? – these dark walks! – no party! – no companion! – by all that's good, I can scarce believe my *senses!*” [199]. The severe judgment of Sir Clement relies on his empirical observation of the immediate situation, as is shown in the use of the perceptive verb “see” and the allusion to his “senses”. Similarly, after the quasi-picaresque incident which happens to Mme Duval in Book II, Letter 2 (which is actually not an incident at all, but an attack from The Captain on Mme Duval), Mme Duval wants to get upstairs to change clothes and she asks for Evelina's help, as she wants to “steal upstairs *unobserved*” ; Evelina adds: “In this I succeeded, as the gentlemen thought it most prudent not to seem *watching for* her; though they both contrived to divert themselves with *peeping* at her as she passed” [153]. Even Lord Orville's gaze is omnipresent, although Evelina considers him as “so nice an *observer*” [34]. By the insistence on the lexis of men's observation and scrutiny of women (“see, senses, unobserved, watching for, peeping, observer” etc), Burney critiques bourgeois ideology for continuing to associate female reputation with an observable social performance, thereby suggesting that women can control their reputations, by going for example to an “obscure place” not to be seen, as in the episode at Drury-Lane Theatre (“we would not let Mrs. Mirvan rest till she consented to go. Her chief objection was to our dress, for we have had no time to Londonise ourselves; but we teased her into compliance, and so we are to sit in some *obscure place* that she may not be *seen*” [27], when, in fact, that performance is already mediated by social intelligence.

By doing that, Burney depicts the problematic relationship that women had with space in the eighteenth century. Burney's *Evelina* is traditional on many levels, and the gendering of space is of course not absent from the novel. For instance, in book III, Letter 3, the gender separation is clear and spatial, as women go to one place and men to another place: “When dinner was over, Mrs Beaumont recommended the gentlemen to the care of Lord Orville, and then attended the ladies to the drawing-room” [288]. But Burney's discourse goes beyond that male/female and public/private dichotomy, as Evelina mentions many public places where she goes: In her very first letter, she has just arrived in London and she already mentions two playhouses, the opera house, Ranelagh, the Pantheon [25]. She also signals a number of places

where men and women intermingle: "When the opera was over, we went into a place called the coffee-room where ladies, as well as gentlemen, assemble. There are all sorts of refreshments, and the company walk about, and chat with the same ease and freedom as in a private room" [40]. Of course many places that men and women shared, like (public) *ridottos* and public and private balls provided entertainment and opportunities for women to capture a husband, the motivation for much of the ceremonious socialising of most female characters in *Evelina*. Space is defined in terms of sexuality and gender relations. Indeed, there is some confusion in the book between private and public places, as *Evelina* notices: "a private ball this was called, so I expected to have seen about four or five couples; but, Lord, my dear Sir, I believe I saw half the world" [30]. For *Evelina* the definition of "private" must be different, as the privacy she grew up in was made of two persons: Mr Villars and herself. So privacy and publicity seem to bear the imprint of subjectivity. The novel also describes a growing feminisation of public spaces, and Lord Orville is eager to know the reaction of women to those places: "I am most desirous to hear the opinions of these young ladies, to whom all public places must, as yet, be new" [110]. Indeed Captain Mirvan deplores that feminisation, and considers a man who mingles with all those women in a public place as effeminate: "There i'n't so much as one public place besides the play house, where a man, that's to say a man who is a man, ought not to be ashamed to show his face" [111]. By stating this, Captain Mirvan sticks to the conventions of the eighteenth-century in which, as said by Vivien Jones in the introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Evelina*, "engagement in public entertainments was incompatible with true feminine modesty" [xv]. It is because Burney was aware of those conventions that she published *Evelina* anonymously and that she constantly negotiates between the public and the private.

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Indeed, paradoxically enough, Burney creates her public authority by limiting, apparently, her narrator to a purely private authorship. She accepts the separation of spheres, which does not mean that there is no subversion in her representation of this separation. As we have seen, *Evelina* is innocent and has good manners, but she cannot really take part in the public debates: she either excludes herself from them by daydreaming and keeping quiet, or she is excluded from them by men who laugh at her to underline the

incongruity of her intervention and make her “keep her place” [342]. And yet, the novel criticises the social conventions of her century, especially when it comes to women, and Evelina seems to have a proto-feminist message to convey: “I speak in regard to all the ladies in general” [30]. So how is it possible to deconstruct conventions which oppress women and reduce them to silence without getting out of that silence and submissiveness?

It is precisely the achievement of Burney in this book: Evelina’s strong criticism is confined to the epistolary form, “the space of *private* communication and the textual manifestation of the private sphere” [SWIENCICKI], but in her letters, which are replete with satire and sarcasm, her voice is just as powerful and opinionated as Captain Mirvan or any other male character. Evelina is hardly involved in face-to-face communication but rather in mediated communication: the space in which she is free to express herself is the letter. As Marta Kvande argues: “By focusing on the personal writings of young women, these novels [Burney’s and Sheridan’s epistolary novels] implicitly argue for the public value of women’s writings and women’s experience, despite the letter-journal’s composition in private” [KVANDE 159]. Evelina epitomises the connection between the theory of the public sphere and the function of the (female, domestic) novel in the rise of the public sphere of letters. Women like Burney did have a place in the public sphere, and not only among the Bluestockings which was a group of women writers and scholars who had their own salons. When *Evelina* was published anonymously, it was well received, as if it had been written by a man. Anonymity was a necessary compromise, but it is thanks to that ability to negotiate space that Burney managed to move from private to public spheres, as she recognises when she describes *Evelina* as “a Work which was so lately Lodged, with all privacy, in my bureau [but which] may now be seen by every Butcher & Baker, Cobbler and Tinker, throughout the 3 Kingdoms, for the small Tribute of 3 pence” (March 1778): her privacy seems to have been invaded as her book became public.

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The focus on space and gender in this paper enables the investigation of the nature of the female subject in relation to the bourgeois society of the eighteenth century. The representation of the evolving public sphere in Burney’s novels may to that extent be said to be proto-feminist. Carole Pateman says: “The dichotomy between the private and the public is central

to almost two centuries of feminist struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" [in ROSE : 18]. However, Burney's criticism goes beyond the gender division and questions bourgeois society more globally. What Burney seems to be willing to emphasise is the interconnectedness between the individual and the space around her, and how it is through that connection that the individual can exist and evolve. Space, and more particularly the urban space of London, is not just the background of the novel, it is an experience, and it acts on Evelina who "londonise[s]" herself, who evolves, who gets more mature during her travels through the big city. Correlatively, space changes according to the behaviour or emotions of the character ("I am not half happy here at present, as I was ere I went into town: but the change is in the place, not in me. Captain Mirvan and Madame Duval have ruined Howard Grove" [118]). For Evelina, experiencing the city, experiencing the separation of private and public places, amounts to making an inner search for a personal identity. The representation of space and gender is fluctuating in *Evelina*, just as Burney's text creates a space for play and resists the tendency to put people in boxes or categories according to their gender, social class or national identity.

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