

Dating the Undated: Layers of Narrative in Frances Burney's *Court Journals*

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In a fireproof box in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, among the thousands of manuscripts loosely referred to as the “Burney family archive” are several unsigned sheets in the handwriting of Frances Burney with the enigmatic title, “Answers.”¹ Directed to Burney’s closest sibling, Susanna,² they are headed “for 1786,” and even more explicitly “From July 18–,” which was the fateful day that Burney joined the household of Queen Charlotte as Keeper of the Queen’s Robes. These yellowing leaves with their chronological subtitles on subsequent pages (July, August, September, 1786) respond to questions and comment on letters, most of which have vanished. Burney’s “Answers” trace the history of her feelings from the point of her “entrance into the Monastery, & the taking the Veil,” which was to her a “truly deep & piercing Trial!” as she came to terms with the confining nature of her duties, her separation from family and friends, and her relinquishment of the dream of being rescued by the reluctant knight-errant George Cambridge. The tone of these responses is truly anguished.

The date “for 1786” is ambiguous, for while it is the date attached to her retrospective ruminations, it is certainly not the date of writing,³ which—given their intensely introspective nature—is not easy to pinpoint.

The challenge of trying to establish the date for these “undateds,” the inscrutable “Answers,” and the “explanatory cahiers” has raised questions among editors of Burney’s private writings and has inspired a reconsideration of their chronology in this paper. This exploration sheds new light on Burney’s practices in composing her so-called *Journals and Letters* and even casts doubt on their right to such an appellation in the first place. The new evidence, I shall argue, helps to redefine the kind of narrative that Burney is constructing in her epistolary exchanges with her two closest confidantes (Susanna and her intimate friend Frederica Locke) and could lead to a reevaluation of her practices and development as a writer. Moreover, the period that she spent at court, far from representing a hiatus in her literary life, could instead be seen as the crucible in which her talents were developed and her later fictional techniques were formed.

In the first place, the title *Journals and Letters* may be somewhat of a misnomer. It is inherited from Joyce Hemlow who between 1972 and 1984 published twelve volumes of correspondence dating from 1791 to 1839, taking as her purview the later material that had been severely truncated in the earlier Victorian editions.⁴ Lars Troide followed, in 1988, with the first volumes of *Early Journals and Letters*, beginning with the diary Burney began at the age of 16 and aiming for the date on which she began her court employment.⁵ The current editorial project, with a team of five editors headed by Professor Peter Sabor of McGill University, aims to complete the circle and bridge the gap from 1786 to 1791, the five years spent by Burney at the court of George III, which represented an emotional and professional watershed. Far removed from the brilliant London assemblies that had crowned her literary success, transplanted into an alien environment based on rank and privilege that followed a rigid protocol, Burney languished in a menial position in which she was regularly summoned by a servant’s bell. The court years have been seen as an arid period, marking a hiatus in her literary career that scarred her as a writer and separated the sprightly comedy and verve of *Evelina* and *Cecilia* from the later darkness and complexity of *Camilla* and *The Wanderer*. But, as I hope to show, her literary energy was not in fact dormant during the court years; rather, it was being channeled into her private writings, in which she created a layered narrative whose subtle complexity has not been adequately defined and recognized.

It is worth noting that despite the similarity of titles in the multi-volume set, the form and genre in which Burney writes changes over the years—which is hardly surprising for records that span seven decades of life.

The playful device that opens the juvenile diary in 1768, the ironic address “To Nobody,”⁶ is evoked from time to time, as an adolescent *jeu d’esprit*, over a five-year period. In 1773, the first “journal” is written to Susanna during a long summer sojourn at the seaside; later, these vivid accounts were shared with a family friend, Samuel (“Daddy”) Crisp, and through him, with a wider circle that helped her develop a keen sense of audience.

When Burney entered the Queen’s employ, she outlined a plan to communicate with her closest kin; the system described in the earliest entries has been accepted at face value as typical of the whole five years, although her actual practice soon deviated sharply from her original intentions. At the start, she promised “to give my beloved Susan a Journal of my proceedings.” But by the end of the first week, she confessed, “I am more than a week in arrears, but I have kept memorandums in my pocket Book, & I shall contrive the same practice, & draw out my accounts for my Susan from them, when ever I can find leisure” (FB to SBP, [17] July–9 August 1786, Berg). The entries for 10–11 August 1786, a month later, open, “I shall now begin a new pacquet, from my Pocket Book memorandums, which are minutely faithful, & which I set down every Morning from the events or the no events, of the preceding Day” (FB to SBP, 10–11 Aug. 1786, Berg). A few days later, under the entry for 15 August, she notes, “My memorandums I make Daily” (FB to SBP, 15–21 Aug. 1786, Berg). These early descriptions of her practice have been accepted at face value as defining the entire court journal, which is far from the case; that is, the assumption that they are written “to the moment” (FB to SBP, 1 Mar.–Apr. [1787], Berg), when events were still fresh in her mind, or from the full notes taken in her memoranda. This norm is far from her actual practice, as I shall try to show.⁷

In the first place, the journal memoranda I have seen are pretty minimal—not very full at all.⁸ Secondly, given the limited time Burney had at her own disposal, that is, time not taken up with her duties both to the Queen and her irascible colleague, Mrs. Schwellenberg, she was soon far behind schedule. Before she had recorded three months, the system had begun to break down: “I shall now give the rest of October without Daily Dates,” she wrote “though all from Daily memorandums & try if that will bring me on a little faster: for to be sure I am terribly belated” (FB to SBP, [1]–2 Oct. 1786, Berg).

“Terribly belated” is rather imprecise, and the date the entry was written is not specified, but the pattern of being behindhand apparently continues; in the closing days of December 1786 comes a clear indication of the date of writing that is quite startling in its implications. Under the entry

for 28 December, Burney remarks, “from that Day to a Twelvemonth after,—that is to *this* Day, in which I am writing,—I have never read to her once!—” (FB to SBP, 1–31 Dec. 1786, Berg). So, although the entries for 1786 had continued to be ordered chronologically (as though written up day by day or soon thereafter), the last entries for December 1786 were in fact written a year later, in December 1787. Even in the first half year, then, although presented in the form of a “journal” written “to the moment,” Burney’s accounts may be described as “emotion[s] recollected in tranquillity.”

The long lag does raise questions about the precise details and minute circumstantiality of the entries, which give them the vivid lifelike qualities so praised by reviewers and critics. The gap in time also lends some credence to the skepticism voiced by the reviewer John Wilson Croker and others as to the reliability of Burney’s memory in claiming to recall entire conversations verbatim. Croker’s suggestion that Burney was writing a fiction in which she cast herself as heroine does not seem too far off the mark.⁹ Any detailed account written a full year after the events it describes will raise doubts as to its authenticity; one feels it must be to some extent invented or imagined—in other words, fictionalized.¹⁰

Burney’s remark, quickly brushed over by the reader, may shed new light on her so-called “journal writing” and the nature of that exercise. When, if ever, does the narrative catch up to the life it describes?

The possibility of a long time lag between Burney’s experiences and her writing about them, allowing for a retrospective view, has, I confess, begun to change my own views of the material I am editing, the two volumes of *Court Journals* for 1788. Thus, a certain cloying quality that had at first seemed to me a sign of emotional excess in Burney’s descriptions of the elderly Mary Delany (prematurely beatified into a guardian angel) would be understandable if it should prove that they were written after her revered friend’s death in April 1788. Burney’s memories of the precious moments they shared in her fleeting evening visits would, quite naturally, be sanctified by her subsequent sense of loss and grief.¹¹

I have similar doubts about the Royals’ summer sojourn in Cheltenham, for which the breeziness of the journal entries (assuming they were written at the time of the events they describe) seemed to speak of the beauty of the rural surroundings and the sense of liberation from the soul-deadening constraint and monotony of Burney’s usual routine. However, even though Burney stresses in the text that she “again kept a regular Journal” at this time, she seems to be referring only to the memoranda

which apparently had fallen into abeyance in previous months (“till that Time, I scarce kept a minute”) (FB to SBP, 1–12 July 1788, Berg). The change of atmosphere that she conveys in her accounts would be even more of a literary tour de force should it prove that she is actually writing them long after the event.¹²

In addition, this new understanding of her actual practice makes complex the powerfully suspensive and fraught accounts of the King’s illness in November and December of 1788, whose darkening tone and claustrophobic atmosphere had seemed to mirror the conditions of Burney’s life at the time. For a period of several months, she claimed never to have set her foot outdoors, but to have lived wholly confined to a stuffy, overheated room or the drafty corridors leading to the Queen’s bedroom.¹³ Her striking depiction of the terrible suspense that hangs over the court about the King’s fate and the uncertainty of the outcome would be the more remarkable if it should prove to have been written long after that outcome was known.

Finally, the discovery of a long gap between the events recorded in the “journal” and the time of their writing would shed new light on Burney’s account of a relationship that flourished in the heady days of summer and grew more intense over the course of the stressful winter when the court was sequestered at Kew. In Burney’s journal, the attentions paid to her by Colonel Stephen Digby, younger son of a wealthy aristocratic family,¹⁴ begin to slacken with the King’s recovery, although he still hovers. Burney is puzzled by his inconsistencies, which remain the focus of her accounts until the grand *éclat* of a revelation in November 1789 that he has become engaged to someone else. “[T]he instantaneous effect of this sudden conviction, which forced its way all at once upon my mind, would infallibly have been immediate Death by an apoplectick stroke,” writes Burney (FB to SBP, Nov. [1789], Berg).¹⁵ So effectively is the impact of the shocking news conveyed, that it would be even more startling to discover that Burney may have known how it all turned out before she wrote the earlier sections and was deliberately aiming at this endpoint. It would seem then that the whitewashing of Digby’s character, who is likened to an angel of mercy sent by a benign Providence,¹⁶ is deliberately heightened to contrast to his later perfidy, with the revelation that he has been simultaneously courting a rich and beautiful lady-in-waiting who accepts the offer of his hand.¹⁷ Burney’s account of the affair, if written with the benefit of hindsight, would call to mind the skillful building of suspense towards a surprising discovery in the Louisa episode in Boswell’s *London Journal*.

In other words, although the dated entries of Burney's narrative imitate the form of a diary kept daily, the history of its composition is at odds with that impression. While mimicking *Pamela* and other epistolary novels in which a sense of life is recreated as a series of moments and the narrator has no idea of what the future might bring (the later plotlines are unknown), Burney's *Court Journals* are actually closer to the memoir form of *Moll Flanders*, where the past is ordered selectively because seen through the shaping lens of hindsight.

Once alerted to this possibility, one begins to notice subtle traces of retrospection throughout that alert the wary reader: the odd admission that Burney is writing up "many months after," from "loose undated memorandums" (FB to SBP, May 1787, Berg);¹⁸ the explanation that she will have to "briefly record some circumstances, which I want no memorandums to recollect,—& then tie my accounts concisely together, till I find my minutes resumed" (FB to SBP, 1 Mar.–Apr. [1787], Berg); a remark about "the distant time in which I am now drawing out my memorandums" (FB to SBP, 1–16 Jan. 1787, Berg). The reader needs to resist the pull of the storyline created by the relentless and regular datelines added by Burney, and the natural tendency to impose a chronological shape onto the narrative, reading into it a more seamless and immediate record than is warranted. The revelation of a retrospective writing of the journals actually implies a much greater mastery of narrative technique—to account for their immediacy, sense of authenticity, and power—than is currently recognized. The diary form could then be admired as a clever construct, a fictional framing device; the successful creation of a sense of realism would then be recognized as a literary tour de force, something deliberately written into the material, as, in order to answer her own inner needs, Burney in effect rewrites her own history.

Although there are some hints of a truly retrospective self-fashioning, so skillful is Burney's imitation of a daily journal that there is little solid evidence in her text to which to appeal,—but there is another side to the correspondence, that of the two recipients Susanna and Frederica Locke. Correlating the dates of the responses of Burney's two dearest correspondents and the journal entries is instructive, for the system involved not only the exchange of journals but also that of responses. Burney had asked, writes her sister, "to hear whatever *Strikes* us in these lectures" (SBP to FB, 13–29 Oct. 1789, Barrett). So much was this commentary insisted upon, that Burney would hold back the continuation of her narrative until she had received feedback on her previous missives.¹⁹

There are unequivocal indications in Susanna's letters of the journals lagging far behind the events described: "When (if *ever*) we arrive at present dates," she remarks in February 1789 (SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789, Berg). Elsewhere, she confesses that some of the news related would have had more effect "had I not heard of this before I read it" (SBP to FB, Oct.–15 Nov. 1789, Barrett), or exclaims that "How w^d it have interested us—how elated we sh^d have felt, how filled wth fair hopes & expectations had we rec^d it 18 months ago!" at the time the news was current. "—Now alas!—it Saddens & afflicts—those hopes have long been crushed—" (SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789, Berg). In effect, Susanna's prior knowledge of the events about which she was reading interfered with their impact.²⁰ Sometimes her complaints are more subtle and indirect, as when she reassures Burney that the quality of the presentation makes up for its tardiness: "This Cahier, tho' so long expected, presents a scene so entirely unlike all that has preceded that if it contained the events of the last 3 days, it c^d scarce be more new to us," Susanna writes. She also suggests that the time lag actually benefits the narrative, offering an extra perspective added by hindsight: "how sorry I sh^d [be] to miss such little strokes—w^{ch} where we are not writing absolutely to the moment can never occur" (SBP to FB, Sept. [1789], Barrett).

However, these comments pale beside the startling realization of the amount of time between the dates of the responses and those of the journal entries, which shows just how far behind they lag. For instance, the "packet," or "Sweet Peas," as Susanna calls them (SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789, Berg), containing the account of Burney's first Christmas at court in 1786 was received by Susanna in January 1788, more than a year later. In April of 1788, Burney was still sending journal entries for the early months of 1787. By the end of 1788, the writing has progressed up to the spring of 1787; the accounts for the early summer of 1787 arrive on 28 January 1789 and so it goes; Frances is often as many as 18 months behind. On 17 February 1789, the packet catches her sister up for August and September 1787 and on 3 April 1789 the three last months of 1787, together with the beginning of January 1788, arrive.²¹ In June 1789 Susanna is reading accounts from March to the previous summer; the end of July 1788 she reads in September 1789. On Christmas Eve 1789, a month after the shocking news of Digby's engagement has broken, Susanna is still reading about the summer idyll in Cheltenham that begins the affair, up until October 1788.²² The last part of 1788 is not received until well into 1790; it is July 1790 before the accounts Susanna is reading move into 1789.

There may, of course, have been some lag between the writing and the sending of the packets, which often contained several months' accounts at once but, that lag is probably less than that between the events and their writing up: "I am now writing to the present moment," Burney claims in the entry for 4 June 1787, "though it will be *past* long enough e'er it reaches its destination" (FB to SBP, 4–[30] June 1787, Berg).²³ Susanna responds to this comment in her entry of 2 February 1789, that "It was indeed truly Said [. . .] yet we Seem now proceeding *rapidly* compared to what we have been used to; & [. . .] may have *Some* hope of approaching the present period un *de ces jours*—."²⁴ The conclusion is inescapable that most of the court journals were probably composed long after the events they narrate: that is to say, from December 1786 through to 1790, Burney is probably never less than a year behind and often more.

It would be difficult to overestimate the implications of this discovery on our understanding of the nature and purpose of Burney's journals—and the commentary on them, for that matter. By way of illustration, although Susanna was actually visiting Frances on the day that Mary Delany died and able to offer solace in her first outburst of grief, it was not until a year later that she would receive journal accounts about a minor ailment from which the octogenarian had suffered the previous year, in July 1787. In Susanna's commentary, however, she expresses her concern at this "affecting" description and gives "grateful thanksgiving" for the recovery, despite the fact that she was writing in the full knowledge of Mary Delany's subsequent death.²⁵ Similarly, in one of her own journal-letters, Susanna describes the celebrations in her village on 19 March 1789 to celebrate the recovery of the King's health.²⁶ Several months later, she begins to read her sister's accounts of the onset of his illness in October 1788 and the intricate negotiations for a Regency, all breathlessly recorded by Burney. To her great credit, Susanna manages to appear interested in the outcome and anxious to read the next installment (SBP to FB, 22–24 Dec. 1789, Barrett).

Occasionally, Susanna's later knowledge, as I have suggested, does seem to color her commentaries. Her strong positive responses to the early mentions of Digby had seemed out of key at the time, when he was a relatively minor player in Burney's journal. Presumably, it is Susanna's knowledge of his later importance to the diarist that piques her interest. Similarly, her reactions in the commentaries written after the news of Digby's engagement is known are conditioned throughout by her later knowledge. She cannot resist venting her anger at his behavior, even though the journal accounts she is then reading are dwelling on the heady days of

his early gallantry, still ripe with possibilities. Her reading of one such scene “filled me with such a feeling of depression as I c^d not describe,” Susanna writes (SBP to FB, 22–24 Dec. 1789, Barrett), which marks a striking departure from her usual practice of trying to keep her later knowledge out of her responses. It is curious, though, that while Susanna could not contain herself, Frances Burney did, and in her journal entries leading up to the great revelation, she gives no hint that would anticipate the discovery of Digby’s duplicitous behavior before it bursts into the text.²⁷

Clearly, the *Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney* are neither true “journals” nor do they fulfill the purpose of “letters” in communicating in a timely fashion with loved ones. What kind of narrative are they? What purposes do they fulfill? The mystification felt by the reader—and the sense of disconnection created by the time lags—make understandable and sympathetic Susanna’s efforts to encourage her sister to catch up in her writing to the present date: “nothing c^d exceed the interest of these Parties,” [she writes] “unless it were what they w^d have produced had they been rec^d at the time when they were written—then indeed I believe they w^d have turned my head—Perhaps it was better not—but let us now go on, on, on—my dearest Girl—the Past is charming—but I long for the present!” (SBP to FB, 13–29 Oct. 1789, Barrett).

For the most part, though, Susanna restricts herself, as any good literary critic would, to responding to the text as a literary artifact; that is, she separates the narration from the events, commenting on and evaluating its effectiveness. Thus she praises its technique, or compliments her sister on how vividly she writes: “This was a singularly interesting day!—” she exclaims “& how beautifully—how eloquently narrated. [. . .] how touchingly [. . .] described!” (SBP to FB, 13–29 Oct. 1789, Barrett). It “struck & affected me almost as much as if I had been present—” She describes the effect on the audience and points out the places where they laughed,²⁸ much as she did when she listened through the wall to her father reading *Evelina* aloud.²⁹ In fact, Susanna does at one point, explicitly refer to Burney’s journal as a novel: “Well—this first volume of *the novel* does end in a most interesting place—it is impossible not to desire the sequel—” (SBP to FB, Sept. [1789], Barrett).

This sense that Burney’s epistolary narrative is a kind of fiction is reinforced when Susanna uses emblematic names to discuss the people who dot the narrative. A popular misconception is that the elaborate code-names printed in the first Victorian edition had been adopted by Burney as an exercise in discretion to protect the identities of the originals. Burney’s

biographer, Kate Chisholm, for example, claims that “she used code-names for everyone at Court: the King was the Oak, for example, while the Queen was the Magnolia” (143), which is not quite true.³⁰ Generally, the code-names do not appear in Frances’s journals but in Susanna’s. Moreover, the invention of the name “Mr. Fairly” to mask the identity of Col. Digby, attributed by Chisholm to Frances Burney is neither hers nor Susanna’s but appears for the first time in the printed edition of Charlotte Barrett’s, presumably to avoid offending Digby’s descendants. The flower names used in Susanna’s letters for the Royal family were probably agreed upon ahead of time, but apparently, Frances was more worried about letters coming into—rather than letters going out of—the royal household, for her own letters refer to the King, Queen, Princes and Princesses quite openly by name. In her responses, Susanna used an elaborate system of code-names for a wide cast of characters, which sometimes changed and mutated without warning and whose signification must have been guessed by Frances.

Most are not difficult to figure out. Sometimes she reverts to French: Miss Baker is “Miss Boucher,” Mr. Fisher is “Le Pecheur” and the servant Columb (French for dove) is “Pigeon.” They may work by analogy, substituting something similar: Fauconberg Hall is “Hawkesbury Hall,” Mr. Cambridge becomes “Mr. Oxford,” Mr. Raikes is “Mr. Libertine.” Some indicate the Burney sisters’ views of their holder’s inner nature: thus the estranged Prince of Wales is “Gonerillo,” after Lear’s disloyal elder daughter; Warren Hastings at his trial is “l’Opprimé,” or “the Oppressed,” the tactless Jeremiah Crutchley is “Jeremiah Blunt.” Some speak clearly of the two sisters’ attitudes: the code-words for Mrs. Schwellenberg express their detestation; she is likened to a she-monster (“Cerbera”) or an animal (“Hyena” or “Tygress”). Meanwhile, the hapless Colonel Gwynn cuts a poor figure as “Stupido.” Some names are lifted right off the stage or out of a novel, such as “Sir Brilliant Lovemore” (the code-name of Arthur Murphy) or “Mr. Falkland,” one of Susanna’s “favourite” names (taken straight out of Sheridan’s *The Rivals*) which she uses to christen Mr. Digby in his hero phase.

In fact, the metamorphosis of Mr. Digby’s name illustrates the function of naming and mirrors his trajectory in the narrative. At first, he is referred to by Frederica Locke as “il Vedovo,” the widower, but is rechristened by Susanna when he steps into the role of romantic lead. “I long to find a name more to my mind for him,” she remarks, and she soon finds one in Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, “Mr. Falkland,” which in mid-1789, she thought suited Digby’s “very amiable & charming Character” (SBP to FB, 21 June–19 July and Sept. [1789], Barrett). But after his apparent defection,

Digby morphs into “Mr. Feignwell” signifying his consummate hypocrisy, and making him sound like a libertine rake. Susanna makes explicit that her literary reference contains an accusatory judgment on his conduct when she explains that she has named him for the villain in Congreve’s play, *The Double Dealer*.³¹

After a while, readers would be excused for beginning to feel almost as though they are caught up in a virtual reality, in which the narrative purporting to be a journal is actually fashioned long after the fact, and the commentary on it tries to ignore all knowledge of subsequent events and respond to it solely as a text. The whole process appears to be a purely literary exercise. Are there any fixed points, or any relation to external reality at all?

It is easy to lose sight of the fact that the events narrated do unfold in time and that there were visits back and forth between the correspondents when, presumably, verbal communications were made. There are also written messages, constituting another level of narrative incorporated into the system, that of the “alives” which were, as their name suggests, an exchange of brief messages to reassure the recipient that the writer was indeed alive and well.³² The “alives” to Susanna and Frederica Locke join other occasional letters of a much more conventional kind written to family and friends that function as basic communication. Written to a broad range of correspondents, they reach out to a social circle, commenting on current events or local news, issuing dinner invitations or making arrangements to meet: the ordinary stuff of daily life. Their dates are more easily ascertainable, whether by dateline or postmark; they represent the fixed points in Burney’s web of correspondence.

This web is multifaceted, and the literary representation of her life experience complex. At any moment in time, at least three levels of epistolary narration can be peeled away, like the layers of an onion. First, at the surface is the occasional correspondence, the “alives.” The second level consists of the journal accounts, which are essentially literary or semi-literary productions; highly selective, they are written up from memos or from memory about events that had happened many months before, and often function on the level of social comedy. Meanwhile, even as Burney is drawing from memory to compose these accounts, she is simultaneously receiving from Susanna commentary on journals, which she in turn responds to—in the “explanatory cahiers” or “answers.” The only analogy I can think of to this elaborate and continual documentation in a multilayered correspondence is the paperwork involved in operating a small

business,³³ and it is the business of writing—or rewriting—the history of her life that seems to be the true occupation—and preoccupation—of Burney’s time at court.

A concrete illustration appears in December 1788. Burney is leading an increasingly isolated existence, which gives her time to catch up her journal for many months previous. Meanwhile, she receives Susanna’s journal for November–December (Susanna was often more up to date than she) which includes commentaries on much earlier material which Frances had recently sent in April and May of 1787. Add to this complexity the fact that in a letter written on Christmas Eve of 1788, Susanna asks her sister to continue a story she had begun, at their last face-to-face meeting in October, about events of the previous spring: in some chance meetings with her erstwhile admirer George Cambridge, he had seemed embarrassed and anxious to avoid her. Burney launches into her description of the “Bond Street rencounter,” complete with exhaustive analysis of her emotional reactions and speculations.

For the editor of Burney’s correspondence, the question is, at what point of the narrative should this response to Susanna’s Christmas Eve, letter be inserted? Should it be placed by date of writing (December 1788 to January 1789), or by date of reading, together with the accounts that Susanna was commenting on at the time (dating by reader-response), or with the events described? Should it be juxtaposed with the journal for May 1788 which, it may be noted, had not yet been written? Burney would not get around to writing up her May journal until months later,³⁴ and when she does, she decides to “say nothing” of the “Bond Street rencounter,” and was “most glad to have done with it,” presumably since she has already dealt with it so fully. Would it not make the most sense of the text for the reader to place the undated answer there, embedded within the journal chronology, with all of its artificiality, so the reflection appears together with its stimulus, the event described?

This is not an easy question to answer; no solution is perfect, but my own view is that these “undateds” represent the third and deepest level of discourse and would only make sense if placed with related material, so that the order of the narrative is dictated by the dates of the events they describe. To pluck them from Burney’s literary universe, and order them chronologically would be to equate them with the “alives” which form the most superficial level of Burney’s correspondence, whereas this third level is even more detached from reality and chronology than the other two. “I have received your answers and here are the responses to the responses” reads

one of Burney's undated cahiers, creating a kind of endless loop of self-referential metafictional commentary.³⁵

These "undateds" retrace Burney's feelings at the deepest emotional level. Placed together with the journal accounts to which they relate, they provide a fascinating perspective. For what they reveal is the turmoil going on beneath the level of day-to-day existence and deeper even than the events explored in the somewhat contrived and self-conscious literary accounts of the journals, which often operate, as I have said, at the level of social comedy. They reveal Burney's inmost concerns even while she is spending hours of her time writing up descriptions of the King's illness, or the stilted and, apparently completely imaginary account of a wooing by Colonel Digby, which forms an inset sentimental story in the last half of 1788. For all the while, in the "answers" and "explanatory cahiers," Burney demonstrates that throughout the court years she remains deeply traumatized and fixated on the failure of her first love affair, and her rejection by George Cambridge; she seems unable to come to terms with that rejection. She reveals her continuing anguish over the failure of her wished-for champion to declare himself, to step forward as her lover, and rescue her from her fate; her most private writings obsessively and endlessly analyze her emotions, going over the same ground, interpreting every nuance exhaustively and twisting facts to read optimistic signs into his total avoidance of her. In the tangled web of correspondence, the "answers" and "explanations" are not only undated but essentially timeless. Arguably, they represent the fundamental core of her being, giving an even deeper hidden subtext to the letter-journals' textual representations of Burney's life and concerns at court. They reveal a deep and ongoing source of pain that helped, eventually, to precipitate the nervous breakdown that led to her resignation.

Boswell once remarked that his ideal was to live no more than he could write. Burney, living under the sequestered conditions of court, came close to that equation in conditions ideal for an epistolary heroine, which may explain the intensity and power of her writing when there. After an apprenticeship served with the juvenile diary and early journals, Burney found a voice. Through an elaborate system of interlapping "alives," journals and commentary, and their "answers," she created a multilayered and multifaceted representation of life that cuts through chronology to create an air of authenticity. Essentially, she was able to construct a narrative from the raw material of her own life, applying and honing her fictional techniques.

To conclude, studying the exchange of correspondence between Susanna and Frances Burney casts new light on the extent of her literary activities during her time at court and questions the nature and genre of the “journals and letters.” I have tried to show that the web of correspondence stemming from these years is incredibly complex and far-reaching, and that the surface of that web has barely been touched.

Heretofore, critics have interpreted Burney’s literary silence or lack of publication in these years as indicating a drying up of creative capacity under the pressures and stresses of court life.³⁶ It has been pointed out that no novel was produced between the publishing of *Cecilia* in 1782 and *Camilla* in 1796; Burney’s only literary work dating from this time, the tragedies, have been written off as documents of psychological interest but little literary merit, even by revisionist critics.³⁷ Yet, apparently inexplicably, after her resignation in 1791, Burney blossomed into an incredibly fertile period, penning three sparkling comedies and the “multifarious” rich and complex novel, *Camilla*.³⁸ Was this creative blossoming purely the result of the relief of her resignation, the happiness of marriage and motherhood, and the impetus of financial necessity? Or could the confidence and ebullience with which she wrote be seen as more than a sudden phenomenon, in fact the culmination of careful preparation? I would suggest that the maturity and mastery of her craft was effected through a literary apprenticeship; her accomplishment was the byproduct of the multifarious literary activities practiced at court when Burney turned the material of her life into fictional form at several different levels of representation.

Throughout the years 1786–91, far from taking a holiday from writing, Burney was actively involved in making fiction to an extraordinary degree. In the three levels of narrative—the alives, the journals, and the “answers” and explanations (the commentary on the commentary)—she created a multilayered text to reflect reality and to construct a representation of her life in a nuanced and complicated way. Essentially, she was rewriting the history of the past in a way that answered her own inner needs.³⁹ If Burney has succeeded in convincing readers for more than 200 years that the accounts written so long after the fact render the experience of life so realistically as to resemble a daily journal written “to the moment” in ignorance of future events, then she has succeeded indeed. Her accomplishment is truly remarkable. In the *Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney*, Burney has created her most powerful—and enduring—fiction.

Notes

1. The “Answers” and “explanatory cahiers” are housed in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox & Tilden Foundation. I am grateful to the curator, Dr. Isaac Gewirtz, for permission to quote from these documents and other correspondence between Frances and Susanna (Burney) Phillips. I am also indebted to the Trustees of the British Library for permission to quote from the Burney manuscripts in their possession, held in the Barrett collection. A transcript of the Court Journals is being prepared for publication under the general editorship of Professor Peter Sabor, Director of the Burney Centre at McGill Univ.; I would like to thank Prof. Sabor for allowing me to quote from the transcripts prepared there, and to the editors of individual volumes for verifying the quotations in their years. All references to Burney papers will use the abbreviations that have become standard in Burney studies: FB (for Frances Burney), SBP for Susanna (Burney) Phillips and FL for Frederica Locke, and Berg and Barrett for the collections named above.

2. Born on 7 January 1755 and christened Susanna Elizabeth, Burney’s sister was two and a half years younger than she. They remained very close all their lives.

3. From internal evidence, it can be ascertained that the “Answers” were written after a meeting with an acquaintance at a concert (in the spring of 1788) and the death of Mrs. Delany (on 15 April 1788).

4. The first edition of Burney’s letters, entitled *Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay*, was edited by her niece Charlotte Barrett and published in seven volumes, 1842–46. It was followed in 1904–5 by Austin Dobson’s edition in six volumes.

5. The original tidy scheme of twelve volumes of *Journals and Letters*, preceded by six of *Early Journals* and six of *Court Journals*, is in the process of being modified, with the addition of two volumes of *Additional Journals and Letters*. The first of these volumes is really the last volume of *Early Journals*, covering the years 1784 to 1786, which will be published instead as a prequel to the *Court Journals*. The second volume will consist of those letters from 1791 to 1839 that were not available (for whatever reason) when Hemlow’s twelve volumes of *Journals and Letters* were being published. The first of these volumes will be edited by Stewart Cooke, the second by Peter Sabor. The total number of volumes for the entire run will now be twenty-five.

6. “To Nobody can I be wholly unreserved—to Nobody can I reread every thought, every wish of my Heart.” Burney, *The Early Journals* (1988–2012), 1:2.

7. In 1788, Burney herself still refers to her practice of keeping memorandums and writing up a full account later, though more often than not, she confesses that she has failed to make any notes, for various reasons: she was preoccupied ([post-13] Feb.), her friends were in town (March), she felt “bereft” (April) or she was “out of spirits” (May–June). At times, though, she referred to the old habit as keeping her “usual memorandums” (30 July–4 Aug. 1788), and she expresses regret for not

keeping to the original resolution: “I wished I had written & sent off regular journals to my dearest & ablest Friends.—” At the end of the year, she describes following the old practice: “I write every morning at Breakfast memorandums of the preceding Day, which I keep by me, till I have opportunity to draw out more intelligibly.” Nevertheless, this same journal, that of 1–[12] December 1788 would not be sent off until many months later. All these journal-letters for 1788 are held in the Berg.

8. In the Berg collection, a small almanac of the kind Burney described using for her “minutes” is preserved, with brief notes scrawled inside in her handwriting. It seems possible that this almanac may be a surviving example of the “minutes” or “memoranda” she speaks of, but it is impossible to know for certain.

9. John Wilson Croker made the charge that she had substituted for her father’s memoirs highly colored and factually inaccurate accounts that focused on her own role, in his review of *The Memoirs of Dr. Burney*, by Madame d’Arblay, in the *Quarterly Review*.

10. In his review of the *Diary and Letters* in the *Quarterly Review*, Croker expressed his skepticism of Burney’s ability “to give, *verbatim*, all the details of long conversations—sometimes many days old—which the readiest pen and the quickest apprehension could not have done even on the instant,” and noted that “we have little amusement and less faith in the details of these elaborate dialogues, which occupy, we believe, more than half her volumes—their very minuteness and elaboration sufficiently prove that they cannot be authentic” (1842, 246–47). Moreover, he noted and deplored the element of exaggeration in her journal accounts: “Her innate propensity was to *make mountains of mole-hills*. That is a leading defect in her novels, and is still more prominent in these memoirs; and though we do not accuse her of downright fabrication, we see that she frequently inflates and discolours her anecdotes into something very like falsehood [. . .]” (1842, 271).

11. For example: “The sweet soul,—all Heart, all tenderest sensibility, unhackneyed by the World, uninjured by age & Time,—[. . .] sweet & most venerable of Women!—” (FB to SBP, 1–31 July 1787, Berg).

12. Opening the journal for July 1788, FB announces “I shall now briefly collect a few scattered memorandums up to the 12th of this month.” The first twelve days are indeed outlined briefly, and a new journal is started for the trip to Cheltenham. Beginning with the entry for 13 July, and continuing to the end of the Cheltenham episode (16 Aug.), the entries are full of minute and circumstantial detail, even though they were probably written up much later, judging by the fact that they were not received until September 1789 (FB to SBP, 1–12 July 1788, Berg).

13. In the entry for Tuesday, 27 January 1789, Burney writes, “I then took an Hour’s walk,—for the first time since last October,—10 minutes, in Kew Gardens, are all I have spent without Doors since the middle of that Month” (FB to SBP, 19–27 Jan. [1789], Berg).

14. The Digbys were an ancient gentry family, mentioned in the Domesday Book, and elevated to the peerage in 1620; their principal seat was at Sherborne

Castle. Stephen Digby was grandson to the 5th Baron Digby and brother to the 6th and 7th Barons; his elder brother Henry (1731–93) would be created 1st Earl Digby in 1790. Stephen Digby had married his first cousin, the daughter of an earl. Through his mother, he had powerful political connections; another of his cousins was the orator Charles James Fox.

15. Burney, who has ignored rumors throughout, even from Digby's close associates, that he was corresponding with and paying court to Charlotte Gunning, nevertheless claims to disbelieve the news that he was engaged to her until the Royal family extended their congratulations. Burney is melodramatic about the effect of the sudden realization that the rumors were in fact true. The entire passage reads as follows:

So great, however had been my incredulity, so unspeakably [. . .] extraordinary was my astonishment, that I feel perfectly satisfied, if my *Heart* had been engaged in this affair, if my affections had been touched beyond gratitude & esteem—the instantaneous effect of this sudden conviction, which forced its way all at once upon my mind, would infallibly have been immediate Death by an apoplectick stroke.

(FB to SBP, Nov. [1789], Berg)

16. In the entry for 20 Nov. 1788, Burney writes, “it seemed to me, in this isolated situation, that Providence had benignly sent in my way a character of so much worth & excellence, to soften the rigour of my condition, by kindest sympathy, & most honourable confidence.” Again, in December she writes. “I now regarded the Friendship of Mr. Digby as the mercy of Providence!—” She explicitly refers to him as an “angel of Heaven!” in March 1789 (FB to SBP, 1–30 Nov., 1–[12] Dec. 1788, 1–15 Mar. [1789], Berg).

17. Hemlow (1958, 211). Throughout the journal for 1788, Burney builds up Digby's character (like that of Shakespeare's Brutus) as an “honourable” man, a word repeatedly used in connection with him. She is “firmly impressed with a belief that I shall have in him a true, an honourable, & even an affectionate Friend, for life” (9 Aug.). After a friendly visit from him, she feels her wish “confirmed of steady & honourable regard from this most highly amiable Character” (18 Oct.). She believes, “his true & honourable regard to be truly & honourably mine for his life” (20 Dec.). Although later she does hear gossip from the servants that Digby “pays his addresses to a Lady in Town,” she claims never to have paid any heed to it since she considered “Mr. Digby as incapable of a duplicity so base almost as an angel of Heaven!” (10 Mar. 1789). The last sentence rings so ironically after the truth is known that it is hard to avoid seeing it as an exaggeration made deliberately (in the full knowledge of subsequent events) in order to heighten the drama of the shock of disillusionment yet to come in the narrative (FB to SBP, 5–16 Aug., 1–31 Oct., 20–[31] Dec. 1788, 1–15 Mar. [1789], Berg).

18. Further, she writes “This much was scribbled after my first return from sweet Norbury—; but I find, on reexamination now,—many months after,—only loose undated memorandums, till the 4th of June, when I wrote at the moment. Take, therefore, my Dearest Friends, the contents of these memorandums such as I can give them” (FB to SBP, May 1787, Berg).

19. Susanna’s journals contain such remarks as “Our Fanny promises us a new treat as soon as she received our *strictures* on the last” (SBP to FB, 21 June–19 July [1789], Barrett). Elsewhere, she writes, “I rejoice—ill as I have answered this Tresor, to feel entitled to another, w^{ch} will I trust be shortly in my hands—” (SBP to FB, 13–29 Oct. 1789, Berg).

20. See also SBP to FB, 13–29 Oct. 1789, Barrett.

21. A sheet housed with the “Answers” indicates that it was sent together with “the Three last months of the year—87—which were so short, that I add 2 Books of Jan^y—88 as a make weight.” Judging from the detailed comments in Susanna’s journal, this large packet would be identical with that received on 3 April 1789 that contained these months, but it is also clear that it is rather the sheet containing “*Response to the Responses*” that is enclosed with it. See SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789, Berg.

22. Susanna does find it hard to stomach the positive descriptions of Digby in the earlier accounts which may have been written before the news broke; but which she receives afterwards; when she reads of “a high character” given to Digby by a fellow equerry, she finds it “*mortifying* [. . .] to hear!—” (SBP to FB, 22–24 Dec. 1789). For other instances, see below.

23. This is a curious remark: the phrase “to the present moment” seems to refer to the time of writing, though, and certainly not to the entries of June 1787. Burney was catching up, summarizing quickly a period for which she had kept no memoranda, which gives a retrospective slant to the entries. For example, “In this time I made one visit to poor Mrs. Vesey,—whom I had not been able to see since my Court residence.” However, in the next paragraph, she announces, “And here ends all the irregularity of 1787, for from the 8. of June, I have full minutes to the very end of the Year” (FB to SBP, 4–[30] June 1787, Berg), which proves she was writing no earlier than December 1787 and very likely much later. The packet containing June 1787 was not sent until a year and a half later, in January 1789.

24. Susanna responds to her remark under the entry for 2 February 1789, when commenting on a “packet” of letters which she said had been delivered on 28 January, “It was indeed truly Said on that *memorable* day, that tho’ written at the present moment, it w^d be long ere it reached its destination.—*how* long!—yet we Seem now proceeding *rapidly* compared to what we have been used to; & thanks to the new adopted conveyance may have *Some* hope of approaching the present period un *de ces jours*—” (SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789).

25. “But how affecting is all that is written of the beginning of this month—(July)—the Sickness of that angelic friend, whom She was yet not to lose, & whose

humble, yet *fervent* hopes of future happiness are So edifying, & So touchingly described—we joined with our Violetta in grateful thanksgiving that this precious life was yet a little Spared!” (SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789, Berg).

26. The festivities in Susanna’s village on 26 March 1789 to celebrate the restoration of the health of King George III are described in detail in the same letter (SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789, Berg).

27. There seems to be a certain stiffness and brevity to Burney’s references to Col. Digby as she gets closer, in her accounts, to writing of her discovery of the engagement: in October 1789, she writes, “I heard nothing more of him whatsoever, not even his name once spoken” (FB to SBP & FL, Oct. [1789], Berg). However, she gives no hint of her knowledge of what was to come, going so far as to seem to exaggerate her total disbelief of the news heard from various quarters of Digby’s becoming engaged. Presumably, she felt that her inability to credit such a report stood as proof of the perfidy of the equivocal behavior that had given rise to her skepticism.

28. The journals were marked by Frances to indicate what could not be read aloud to William Locke, Frederica’s husband. Susanna describes one such reading, noting all “the effects produced on M^r Lock.” She describes his “eagerness,” points out the parts where he was “immensely diverted” and where he was “laughing extremely.” The appreciation of such an auditor provided direct encouragement to Burney to continue her literary activity of journal writing (SBP to FB, 4 Jan.–11 Apr. 1789, Berg).

29. Soon after the publication of Burney’s first novel, *Evelina*, in 1778, Susanna listened through the wall to Charles Burney reading in bed to his wife and reported their reactions to her sister, who was convalescing in the country. The series of letters from Susanna to her sister dating from June and July 1778 are printed in *The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1768–1778*, ed. Annie Raine Ellis, 2 vols. (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), 2:222–47.

30. It is inaccurate in two senses: first, it was Mary Delany who was the Oak, rather than King George III; second, it is Susanna’s letters, for the most part, which contain the cryptic references, circuitous phrasing and code-names, enough to baffle any unintended reader. Frances seems to have counted on the delivery of her letters through trusted agents by direct means (often Susanna’s husband acted as go-between); her journal-letters do not, as a rule, show any evidence of passing through the postal system. She felt free, therefore, to write freely and explicitly about the people around her, referred to by their proper names, though occasionally she, too, uses favorite code-names.

31. It is difficult to date this remark of Susanna’s but it seems to have been written on 19 December 1790.

32. For example, “Quite alive & quite well” (FB to SBP, [20 June 1787], Berg). The “alives” were intended to be a weekly bulletin.

33. Susanna relates how, when she was busy sorting her previous year’s letters and “burning” those that were “not worth keeping,” Mr. Locke came in and told her

that the table “looked like that of a *Secretary of State’s*” (SBP to FB, 4–6 Jan. 1790, Berg).

34. Susanna commented on the meeting in Bond Street in her letter of June 1789.

35. Susanna’s 123-page letter, which was kept open from 4 January to 11 April 1789, contains her own journal accounts, her detailed commentary on Frances’s and her own response to the “*Response to the Responses*” sent by her sister. It is at this level of communication that the responses function; the material that Susanna is commenting on in the same letter is in the journals dating from the last months of 1787 and the first two of 1788.

36. Kate Chisholm remarks that “her arrival at Windsor reawakened her urge to write” and she “was aware that this was an opportunity for her to flex her skills as a ‘journalist’” (1998, 137). Claire Harman sees her journalizing as “the only outlet she allowed herself” in an increasingly fragile mental state, which produced some of her “most acute writing” (2000, 208–9).

37. For example, Margaret Anne Doody in *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (1988) treats the tragedies primarily as “psychological documents in Burney’s emotional history” though also important “to her future development as a writer” (178). Very few have seen any intrinsic literary merit in them; Claire Harman’s comments that they “have little claim to literary or dramatic merit but have attracted critical attention on account of their vivid symbolism and the clues they offer to their author’s subconscious feelings” (224). This would accurately describe the focus of Barbara Darby’s exhaustive analysis of them.

38. Doody had much to do with the revival of critical interest in this novel. See her discussion, 199–238.

39. For an exploration of the inner compulsion of Burney to write out of her system, “pain recollected in tranquillity,” see Julia Epstein (1989). Also relevant are articles by Lorna J. Clark (2001) and Judy Simons (1998).

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