Chapter Four

“Dark and Ambiguous”: The Masquerade in *Cecilia* (1782)

Fresh from her success of *Evelina* (1778) the young Frances Burney decided to venture into the theatre with her satiric play *The Witlings* in 1780. A ruthless portrayal of aristocratic and genteel society, the play also mocked the noted bluestockings including Elizabeth Montagu. Dr. Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp, two of Frances’s mentors perceived the dangers of such a text, dependent as the entire Burney family was on social acceptability for their living. The play was suppressed and Dr. Burney advised Frances to return to fiction: “In the Novel way, there is no danger”.

Burney’s ensuing novel *Cecilia* (1782) was marked by a closure that promised marriage but no poetic justice. When she was urged (again by Dr. Burney and “Daddy” Crisp), Frances refused to alter the ending. Fanny argued:

> I must frankly confess I shall think I have rather written a farce than a serious history, if the whole is to end like the hack Italian operas, with a jolly chorus that makes all parties good and all parties happy! …you find, my dear daddy, I am prepared to fight a good battle here.

The two separate episodes offer a fascinating insight into the bind that the mid eighteenth century woman novelist in general and Burney in particular, was caught in. On the one hand, she was dictated and controlled by patriarchal norms of content and genre; on the other the agency of the writer pulled her towards independence and social critique. It is this ambiguous position of the eighteenth century woman that the masquerade in *Cecilia*
probes and thereby explores the representation of both the eighteenth century woman and novelist.

It would be however useful to contextualise Frances Burney’s peculiar position in the print culture of eighteenth century London. Burney’s father, Charles Burney was a noted musician, music teacher, composer and author, but he had few secure credentials and even lesser financial stability. His introduction to Fulke Greville fetched him numerous contacts and friendships with gentlemen and the intelligentsia; but his status was ambiguously between music teacher and guest. The Thrale family for example, paid him a salary of £100 for “dining once a week and remaining for the evening, departing as early as he wished in the morning”. His family was conscious of literary and musical skills as essential to their survival in fashionable society and Frances especially acted as a scribe for many of her father’s writings. Dr. Burney’s friendships introduced him to Hester Thrale and to Dr. Johnson, whose recommendations further ensured his acceptance. In fact, his house quickly became a gathering place for musicians, painters, actors, authors and patrons. The stimulating intellectual climate and the presence of Dr. Burney spurred the Burney children into creativity and marketing of their skills. As Catherine Gallagher notes:

Cultivating talent, polishing performance, making and improving contacts, and collecting and disseminating knowledge were the economic activities of the Burney family … they puffed each other, sought patronage for each other … The social significance of the family name, however was not given … the family was self consciously engaged in the project of creating it. The writings of other families might have been imagined as second order realities, as accomplishments indicating a past or present economic
independence, but the writings of the Burneys were the business of their lives.⁴

Burney’s initial work *Evelina* was thus written from deep within the shadows of her father and of Dr. Johnson. Interestingly, Burney copied the manuscript in a “disguised” hand (because booksellers knew her handwriting through Dr. Burney’s manuscripts) and published it anonymously. Only when her father approved of it later, did she own authorship. Her dedicatory poem acknowledges the deep filial impact:

Oh author of my being! – far more dear
To me than light, than nourishment, or rest,
Hygieia’s blessings, Rapture’s burning tear,
Or the life blood that mantles in my breast!

If in my heart the love of Virtue glows,
‘T was planted there by an unerring rule;
From thy example the pure flame arose,
Thy life, my precept – thy good works my school. ⁵

As *Evelina* attained fame, Burney acquired more confidence. Yet, *The Witlings* was suppressed and her father’s negotiation with the publisher Payne meant that she was severely underpaid for an enormously successful *Cecilia*. Frances was pressurized by Dr. Burney to accept the post of the Keeper of Royal Robes at an annual salary of £200. This took an enormous toll on both her health and her creativity and she resigned the post in 1791. Her secret affair and marriage to Alexander d’Arblay reveals a more rebellious Frances, spurning the wishes of her family. Her last two novels *Camilla* (1796) and *The Wanderer* (1814) were mediocre but, by now, she had shrewdly manipulated her publishers to work out lucrative financial deals for the books.
Burney’s position thus reveals a deep contradiction. As a Burney sibling, she was brought up deep within the patriarchal ambience of the family. Her initial hesitation in publishing *Evelina* and her journal entries provide the tone of trepidation that she felt in her act of writing for the public. At the same time, the act of writing was clearly an act of empowerment that provided her opportunities of social critique and creating women imbued with a degree of agency. The later Burney’s handling of financial issues also shows her acting with more resolve and independence in the print market. Frances was thus constricted within the boundaries of patriarchal expectation: though she never rebelled against them, she sought to explore the fallacies and the injustice within it.

Frances also had to contend with a major transition in the form of the novel and with the expectations from a woman novelist. Cheryl Turner notes that between 1730 and 1780 the number of women novelists had risen sharply from nineteen to seventy five. But the major event had been the publication of Richardson’s *Pamela* that sought to legitimise the passionate romances of Haywood through the imposition of the moral content. What Richardson had done was interesting – he had accepted the erotic underpinnings of the seduction plot and transferred the energy to the moral content. The move provided the novel with moral legitimacy and the story of the young man/woman’s *bildung* thus interacted frequently with the form of the conduct book. The cult of sensibility further restricted the range of the novel’s content. The woman novelist thus moved away from the expression of the erotic to the exploration of the domestic and the moral. At the same time, the enactment of the Marriage Law in 1753 restricted the independence of the woman substantially. It legitimised the status of the woman’s transferability from one patriarchal figure to another, divesting her of any real financial autonomy. All these issues must have been alive to Frances as she embarked on her career as a novelist.
Burney’s hesitation about the process of writing can be located in her first private journals of 1768 where she dedicates it to the fictional “Nobody”:

> to whom … must I dedicate my wonderful, surprising and interesting adventures? – to whom dare I reveal my private opinion of my nearest relations? my secret thoughts of my dearest friends? my own hopes, fears, reflections and dislikes? – Nobody?

> … From Nobody I have nothing to fear, (the) secrets sacred to friendship. Nobody will not reveal … ?

Burney then proceeds to identify Nobody as female underlying her status of powerlessness:

> but why, permit me to ask, must a female be made Nobody? Ah! my dear, what were this world good for, were Nobody a female. ?

The repeated allusion to Nobody thus underlines Frances Burney’s acute sense of her status at this point. In terms of class and economic independence, she was Nobody; and as a woman her agency was severely restricted. Yet in opening up this communication through the process of writing, she could flesh out alternative possibilities of Nobodies who could raise issues that would reflect her opinion in the public sphere of print and culture.

This is evident in Burney’s choice of the novel form as a way of reaching out to the widest possible audience. In a letter the possibility of the novel to penetrate the public sphere was exhilaratingly mentioned by the young Burney:
I have an exceedingly old sensation, when I consider that it is now in the power of any and every body to read what I so carefully horded even from my best friends, till this last month or two, and that a work which was so lately lodged, in all privacy of my bureau, may now be seen by every butcher and baker, cobbler and tinker, throughout the three kingdoms.9

However, Burney was intensely conscious of the difficulties of representation both as a member of the precariously positioned Burney family and as a disempowered woman. Her preface to *Evelina* reveals this hesitation.

Burney begins her Original Dedication to “THE AUTHORS OF THE MONTHLY AND CRITICAL REVIEWS” (p. 4) by referring to her text as “the trifling production of a few idle hours, (which) will, doubtless move your wonder, and, probably, your contempt”. (p. 4) Her status as a nobody is highlighted in her tone of supplication, “Without name, without recommendation, and unknown alike to success and disgrace, to whom can I so properly apply for patronage”. (p. 4) The language here is interesting. She seeks “protection” because of her “sins” and pleads her “sacred ties of integrity the most spirited impartiality, and to which your suffrages should carry the marks of pure, dauntless, irrefragable truth – to exert to appeal for your MERCY”. (p. 4) At the same time there is a cheeky reminder that: “you were all young writers once, and the most experienced veteran of your corps may, by recollecting his first publication, renovate his first terrors, and learn to allow for mine.” (p. 5) In the original preface Burney acknowledges her debt to “Rousseau, Johnson, Marivaux, Fielding, Richardson, and Smollett”. (p. 6) She is conscious of the hostility to the novel as a genre of corruption but pleads that “all attempts to contribute to the number of those which may be read, if not with advantage, at least
without injury, ought rather to be encouraged than contemned.” (p. 7)

Therefore, the diet that Burney recommends in *Evelina* is clearly charted out for her readers:

Let me, therefore, prepare for disappointment those who, in the perusal of these sheets, entertain the gentle expectation of being transported to the fantastic regions of Romance, where Fiction is coloured by all the gay tints of luxurious Imagination, where Reason is an outcast, and where the sublimity of the Marvellous rejects all aid from sober Probability. (p. 7)

The preface documents Burney’s awareness of the difficulties and hostilities faced by the woman novelist and her determination to restrict herself within the patriarchal codes of propriety and decorum. The preface needs to be read together with the dedicatory poem to her father which reveals the tone of supplication of the budding novelist.

With *Cecilia*, Burney initially wrote a similar draft introduction. Initially, the tone is one of supplication and there is the same anxiety about approval and the fear of lapsing into ridicule, despite the success of her earlier novel:

How strange is the infatuation by which we are seduced! How cruel the enchantment by which we are beguiled! When warmest in the pursuit of Glory, we are liable to Dishonour, & when we think ourselves rising to the summit of Fame, we are most in danger of sinking into the abyss of Ridicule!\(^{10}\)

Burney underlines her mediocrity and humility, adding:

I plead not, alas! for venturing into the World, that I am transported by the wild effusions of Genius; yet I should be
most unwilling to suppose myself influenced by the egregious folly of vanity. I am sensible that the Mediocrity of my Talents has distanced me from the first, but I hope that the humility of my Sect has at least guarded me from the second. (p. 945)

The last paragraph however reminds the reader of her earlier success and once again cheekily pleads for his careful attention: “I may sometimes, perhaps, admit a ray of that Hope which my first Publication wholly obscured from me; yet it shines but faintly.” (p. 945) Interestingly, Burney rejected this draft in favour of a shorter and much more confident Advertisement written in July, 1782:

The indulgence shewn by the Public to EVELINA, which, unpatronized, unaided, and unowned, past through Four Editions in one Year, has encouraged its Author to risk this SECOND attempt. The animation of success is too universally acknowledged, to make the writer of the following sheets dread much censure of temerity; though the precariousness of any power to give pleasure, suppresses all vanity of confidence, and sends CECILIA into the world with scarce more hope, though far more encouragement, than attended her highly-honoured predecessor, EVELINA. (p. 3)

Why did Burney delete her preface? Was it because she felt that the success of Evelina had given her a degree of empowerment where she could less apologetically comment on public affairs? Do we notice a new Burney who can raise the issue of the woman’s bildung with more confidence? Does the text reveal areas of subversion where patriarchal oppression is revealed and critiqued? Burney’s advertisement suggests that she was now ready to explore and interrogate the position of the woman far more critically than
she had in *Evelina*. Her exploration was never radical and she did not seek
to overhaul the structures of patriarchal control, but her exposition of the
follies of such domination raised interesting positions of critique.

The mid-century women novelists shared a difficult predicament. They had to conform to the established stereotype, writing domestic novels about viable marriages and family adjustments. In fact, they were writing in the background of conduct books that prescribed rigid codes of behaviour for women. In *The Pleasures of Conjugal Love Explained* (1740) the anonymous author wrote: “women are hotter, because they have a greater quality of blood ... Inconstancy of their imagination, has made them serve us as Playtoys ... in short, she is only to Conceive, to give suck and to breed up children.” Of course, not all conduct books were so banal. In John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy of His Daughters* (1774) the tone is much more sophisticated; women, Gregory argues, should “aspire to virtue”, “to knit, to blush often and to bring up children … one of the chief beauties in a female character is the modest reserve, that retiring delicacy which avoids the public eye and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration.” In an interesting passage, Gregory adds: “Be even cautious in displaying your good sense. It will be thought you assume superiority over the rest of the company. But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret.”

Nancy Armstrong has argued that “the rhetoric of eighteenth-century conduct books produced “a [female] subject who in fact had no material body at all. This rhetoric replaced the material body with a metaphysical body made largely of words”. This subject or rather the “Proper Lady”, Mary Poovey similarly argues, defined the ideal of feminine behaviour that culminated in the nineteenth century paradigm of the Angel of the house:
Most clearly of all, we can see in these women’s works the shadow of a demure young woman, with eyes downcast and lips pressed into a faint and silent smile. She is the Proper Lady, guardian and nemesis of the female self.¹⁴

Around the middle of the century the conduct books and the novel together had succeeded in developing what Lawrence Stone has called “the logic of sexual contract” where in companionate marriage the female relinquishes political control to the male in order to acquire exclusive authority over domestic life, emotions, taste and morality.¹⁵ These male and female domains were mapped out in terms of binaries – the man gets goods by travelling, the woman gathers them together by staying at home, the man acquires, the woman serves; the man deals with society by dealing with many, the woman talks with few. This witnesses a virtual split – the man in the public sphere, the woman in the private, domestic sphere. Thus, the new category of domestic fiction emerged, indulging in fantasies of political power played out within a domestic framework where the subordination of the female to the male was played out. This preoccupation with marriage and conformity creates a strange succession of antiseptic novels that filter out female sexuality, denying the women any sense of agency.

At the same time, the very act of writing was still an act of agency by itself. The novelist was conscious that she was stepping into the public arena where her books were to be viewed and scrutinised. It was only here that she could still register her protest, still create a sense of subversion against patriarchy. Thus, within the domestic novel, are to be found shades of subversion and these novels surreptitiously oscillate between acquiescence and protest.

The young Frances was constantly underestimated and “Daddy” Crisp patronisingly marvelled:
If she can win gold at such a Rate, as to sit by a warm Fire, and in three or four months ... gain £250 by scribbling the inventions of her own brain – only putting down ... whatever comes into her own head ... she need not want money.\textsuperscript{16}

Here was a young novelist who had felt firsthand the pressures of patriarchy, whose desire for self-dependence and agency had been cruelly stifled. She transformed the unwritten play into the novel \textit{Cecilia} and through the ending conformed to the patriarchal set up. But the novel seethes with a desire for agency and a sense of subversion. This sense of subversion can be located within the masquerade episode.

The novel begins with the strange proposition laid down by Cecilia’s uncle that stipulates that she inherits a considerable sum from her father and his uncle, which passes on to her husband only if he accepts her family title of Beverley. The “name-clause” is an ambiguous and extremely interesting clause of power in society. It is not fully liberating, since it is bequeathed by her uncle and father, who themselves are agents of the patriarchy – she is always the daughter who bears the name of a particular family. But it is a direct affront to masculine hegemony and a challenge to the legal and moral codes of patriarchy because it forces the man to transform himself in terms of her identity. By the name clause, Cecilia has effectively been put into the position of a pseudo-male; since name in the novel is treated as a magic talisman of power. A surname is the male portion of a woman’s name, a reminder that women are supposed to blend in with a masculine social arrangement. Ironically, it is this name clause that leads to both her independence and her suffering.

Burney was not alone in recognising the significance of the surname as a symbol of power and control. The question had been raised earlier by Samuel Richardson in \textit{Sir Charles Grandison} when he wrote:
For does not tyrant custom make a daughter change her name in marriage and give to a son, for the sake of name only the estate of the common ancestor of both. 17

Hence, Cecilia’s “name clause” effectively repulses prospective suitors – it is a trap that encloses her in a peculiar situation in the novel. As Mr. Hobson laments in *Cecilia*:

> here’s a fine fortune, got as a man may say, out of the bowels of one’s mother country, and this fine fortune, in default of male issue, is obliged to come to a female, the law making no proviso to the contrary. (p. 878)

To Delvile, Cecilia’s future husband, the clause is a curse that forbids their association and he rails against it in no uncertain terms:

> Oh cruel clause! barbarous and repulsive clause! that forbids my aspiring to the first of women, but by an action that with my own family would degrade me for ever! (p. 512)

But the fact that an estate is bequeathed upon Cecilia, puts her, at least in the beginning of the novel in a situation of power. In the initial sections of the novel she decides:

> … to make at once a more spirited and more worthy use of the affluence, freedom and power she possessed.

> A scheme of happiness at once rational and refined soon presented itself to her imagination. (pp. 54-5)

Her personality is marked by a sense of charity, reflective of her agency and financial independence:
A strong sense of DUTY, a fervent desire to ACT RIGHT, were the ruling characteristics of her mind: her affluence she therefore considered as a debt contracted with the poor, and her independence, as a tie upon her liberality to pay it with interest.

Many and various, then, soothing to her spirit and grateful to her sensibility, were the scenes which her fancy delineated; now she supported an orphan, now softened the sorrows of a widow, now snatched from iniquity the feeble trembler at poverty, and now rescued from shame the proud struggler with disgrace. The prospect at once exalted her hopes, and enraptured her imagination; she regarded herself as an agent of Charity, and already in idea anticipated the rewards of a good and faithful delegate: so animating are the designs of disinterested benevolence! so pure is the bliss of intellectual philanthropy! (p. 55-6)

The rhetoric here plays upon Cecilia’s sense of empowerment:

In her sleep she bestowed riches, and poured plenty upon the land; she humbled the oppressor, she exalted the oppressed; slaves were raised to dignities, captives restored to liberty; beggars saw smiling abundance, and wretchedness was banished the world. (p. 711)

As Catherine Gallagher points out it is Cecilia’s sense of charity that is key to her sense of agency since it begins with “the believing that she owes whatever she owns”. Catherine Keohane argues that Cecilia’s giving empowers the heroine, suggesting that the novel offers the possibility of female agency through charitable participation in the public sphere. Keohane states that the novel’s focus on charitable giving signifies Cecilia’s
“authority to distribute money while single” and her “belief that she has a right to choose what to do with it”. Despite the overt connections in the novel among violence, coercion, and giving, Keohane and others align all of Cecilia’s acts of giving with a “traditional model of hospitality” and responsible charity. These critics hold open the possibility of the disinterested gift as an alternative — even if only an idealized one — to an exploitative, masculinist, and capitalist economy.

To understand how Cecilia forms her assumptions about her social and familial obligations to give and how these assumptions are defeated, it is helpful to understand the status of women’s charity in the eighteenth century. As historian W. K. Jordan notes, the number of female donors to charitable organisations in England rose steadily before the eighteenth century. The limited legal status of women and their restricted involvement in public life, however, make any specific number unreliable. Jordan observes that the numerous gifts from women were “in all cases ... credited to the husband”. A deeper issue at stake here is the issue of the female control over money and charity. As per the new marriage law the woman had little control over her estate or her property until and unless she was a widow. In Cecilia’s desire for charity, Burney was probing whether the woman could have control over her own economic resources. However, the novel asserts continually the indebtedness of single women and demonstrates that their socioeconomic identities are their only means of repayment: fortunes do not belong to women but are “property she holds in trust for her future husband”. This indebtedness, though, does not enact itself in a particular moment, such as in marriage, but is an ongoing responsibility. The impossibility of Cecilia’s adequately reciprocating a gift, traps her in a narrative that evades resolution. As Cynthia Klekar points out: “The novel’s conclusion proves what has been demonstrated throughout:
Cecilia may be authorized to occupy a feminized space of generosity, but she never is authorized to act or to give freely”.

The issue of female economic independence is closely related with the issue of Cecilia’s independence over her choice of suitor. Just as Cecilia decides to disburse her money as she pleases, she undertakes a conscious decision to spurn the approaches of a number of suitors including Sir Floyer, and Mr. Belfield. Her own desire and subsequent affair with Mortimer Delvile is also a matter of choice that will determine her future. In fact, the novel offers a tantalising possibility of female agency by creating a possibility of independent female decisions regarding both the woman’s self and her finances.

The latent irony within the novel however makes us aware of the difficulties of such a situation. Much as the money may lie with Cecilia, her father’s wishes bind her to the wishes of her three guardians; Mr. Briggs, Mr. Delvile and Mr. Harrel. Between them the trio represents three aspects of patriarchal behaviour. Mr. Briggs, the sooty miser believes in conserving Cecilia’s riches until she can effectively hand them over to her husband. When she learns of Cecilia’s desire to improve herself through books, he considers it a sheer wastage of time. For Mr. Delvile Cecilia is a minor irritant and his pomposity cannot make him understand why such a simple girl has been foisted upon. Once he understands that Cecilia is a threat to his family name, he behaves with unbelievable cruelty against her. Cecilia’s other guardian figure, Mr. Harrel together with Mr. Monckton represents the predatory aspect of patriarchy that feeds upon and exploits the young woman to service their motives. Mr. Monckton is trapped in an unhappy marriage and Burney ruthlessly exposes his designs on Cecilia. It is Monckton who attempts to thwart Cecilia’s marriage and betray her trust. Mr. Harrel, on the other hand, sees Cecilia as a potential source of money, sponging upon her inheritance to meet his immediate luxuries. He abdicates
his responsibilities as guardian, first by attempting to coax her into a relationship with Lord Floyer and then leaves her deep in financial troubles by his suicide, foisting his widow upon Cecilia’s care. Even the didactic Albany constantly urges Cecilia on the paths of charity, ignoring financial prudence and hastens her state of poverty. Albany, with “vehemence and authority,” demands Cecilia “seek the virtuous, relieve the poor” (p. 68), but he fails to acknowledge that his idealized notion of charity requires that she get nothing in return, an omission that eventually contributes to her financial ruin. He coerces Cecilia through verbal assault and guilt so that even generosity becomes exploitative — another gift that is compelled. As Klekar points out:

Likewise, Albany, who verbally abuses Cecilia into parting with her money through gifts of assistance, is driven not by a genuine sense of sympathy for the poor or a natural inclination to benevolence, but by guilt. After breaking a marriage vow to a fifteen-year-old girl of a lower class, Albany revels in his newly attained paternal inheritance only to find later that by abandoning the girl he has forced her into a clandestine affair, prostitution, and her untimely death. As a means of alleviating his overwhelming remorse, Albany converts himself into a philanthropist. The purpose of his gift giving is twofold, however: he attempts to rid himself of guilt and he secures himself in a masculine economic tradition as a giver, or as one who has an abundance to give. For Albany, gift giving reinstates the fallen into positions of power—determining who will receive his gifts of charity and who will not—thus covering up his moral and spiritual defects with an idealized masculine economic authority.  

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Hence, in their own ways, each guardian creates a series of traps within which Cecilia’s sense of agency is severely cramped. Gallagher underscores the point that Cecilia’s assistance to Harrel is; precisely the opposite of the spectacle of transcendent goodness she fantasizes: instead of floating above the world and watching the spectacle of her heroic and invulnerable self, she recoils from the dimly understood exchange: instead of seeing herself exalted, she is forced to sully herself by contracting a voluntary addiction and thus changing places with the villain of the piece.25

Despite this misjudgement of character, Cecilia’s action remains voluntary and an exercise in agency. As Margaret Anne Doody points out, “Cecilia’s charity depends on her own power to act as an independent agent”.26 For Straub, “Cecilia’s plans for social responsibility are attempts at self empowerment, schemes to enable her to act and initiate rather than being acted upon.”27 For Zomitch, “practicing charity” is the key to female self-empowerment in Cecilia.28 Thus, in the initial sections of the novel, Cecilia looms as a threat to the patriarchal order – her fortune is something which she voluntarily disburses rather than something which she holds for a future husband. Cecilia at this juncture is a woman who steps out into the public sphere, assumes control and is presented as a woman of personality, blessed with the power of money.

Cecilia’s attempt to wrest control over her marital destiny is also problematised severely. The young Delvile, who wins her consent, also proves to be strangely wavering when he has to make a choice between his family name and Cecilia. He cannot effectively let go his patriarchal prerogative. The case of Mrs. Delvile is even more interesting. Having submitted herself to the patriarchal dictates of Mr. Delvile, she realises the
innate goodness of Cecilia, but cannot accept her because of the name clause. Although she consents at a later time, the episode where she forces Cecilia to initially reject the marriage is one of great emotional significance not merely for Cecilia but also for Mrs. Delvile. Burney’s portrayal of Mrs. Delvile is at once a representation of patriarchal control and a critique against the helplessness it creates.

Cecilia’s progress in the novel is thus one of progressive stripping of her prerogatives, both personal and financial. As she loses her estate and is threatened with separation from Delvile she is rendered insane. She lands up in a pawnshop where she is imprisoned. This episode is significant in reducing Cecila to what patriarchy wants the woman to be – a mere pawn in its power. She recovers from this situation no doubt, but she can be reconciled to Delvile only when she has forsaken her fortune and the name clause. As she laments: “no one will save me now! I am married, and no one will listen to me! ill were the auspices under which I gave my hand! Oh it was a work of darkness, unacceptable and offensive!” (p. 903). Even after Albany rescues her and she returns to the paternalist fold, she continues to pay interest on her debt by living a domestic life that is “imperfect” and only with “cheerfullest resignation”. (p. 941) Burney’s ending is laced with a devastating irony as Cecilia settles down onto domesticity, shorn of any grandiose dreams of charity or romantic love: the secret marriage culminates in her complete loss of agency and recourse. As Julie Park points out:

Though her novels work especially hard to smooth away untoward contortions by sustaining a hyper-expository and objective narrative voice, violent and unseemly images of feminine suffering saturate the novels’ surfaces nevertheless, thus producing not the material excess of ornament, but its corporeal face of abjection. This vision is most salient in her
pictures of female characters as bleeding, drooling, and gibbering statues and machines throughout *Cecilia* and *Camilla.*

The irony of the novel is at this moment significant. The helpless Cecilia has been thrust into a situation of independence through a patriarchal stipulation and the course of her *bildung* has been to realise the patriarchal boundaries within which she is circumscribed.

However, the very presence of irony and the terms of this representation empower Frances Burney to explore and expose the brutal and indifferent aspects of patriarchy alike. Cecilia’s fate alerts the reader to the systems of injustice that trap her and the collective incompetence of her guardians exposes the predicament of contemporary women. Burney’s satire is implicit, it raises no possibilities of revolt or radical action but in its exposition of injustice and exploitation it does raise subversive possibilities. As Mary Poovey analyses:

women are able, through writing, to master their life-experience in at least two ways: they can avoid reality, as many eighteenth century novelists did, by means of fantasy; or they can mine their limited sphere for the wealth of concrete details that enable them to master experience. As we have seen in the case of Fanny Burney, women can even turn the frustrations of their social position into the rich stuff of comedy or high drama. By objectifying the details of ordinary behavior, then women can transform even passivity, self-denial, and resignation into a kind of heroism.\(^\text{30}\)

The novel thus wavers with a degree of complexity between compliance and subversion. It represents the failure of female agency as Cecilia accepts her progressive disempowerment, yet the latent irony
provides an authorial voice of protest. It is noteworthy that Burney has moved substantially from the purely representational to the subtly ironic mode as she ekes out Cecilia. It is these ambiguous possibilities and these issues that the masquerade episode in *Cecilia* adumbrates.

**Burney uses the trope of the masquerade early in the novel and falls back upon the masquerade as an initiator of plot.** It serves as a point of entry of Mortimer Delvile and initiates the romance plot in *Cecilia*. The uninvited Delvile and the young Cecilia immediately strike up a rapport. As Cecilia escapes from the attention of one masquerade figure to another in search of Delvile, the future plot of the novel is anticipated. Castle points out that:

> Burney’s carnivalesque episode incorporates like Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet the fateful meeting on which all else in her story hinges … the masquerade marks the spot where aristocracy and the bourgeois come together in a problematic union.³¹

Interestingly, the masquerade episode in Cecilia occurs in the initial sections of the novel. Cecilia has come to live in with one of her guardians, Mrs. Harrel and arrives to find the house abuzz with preparations for a masquerade ball. The Harrel house is already notorious as a movement of improvidence, a pleasure mansion steeped in debt. The masquerade is an additional drainage and Cecilia notes with disapproval the financial consequences of the event:

> The whole house was then in commotion, from various arrangements and improvements which were planned for almost every apartment that was to be opened for the reception of masks. Cecilia however was herself little pleased with the attendant circumstances of wantonly accumulated unnecessary debts ... she was a stranger to
every diversion of this sort, and from the novelty of this scene, hoped for uncommon satisfaction. (p. 103)

The masquerade, as Terry Castle has noted, is not merely a sexual threat for Cecilia but also a symbol of luxury and improper use of riches – there is a perceptible shift from the erotic to the fiscal. In fact the masquerade is antithetical to all notions of charity and philanthropy that Cecilia has conceived. It is thus apt that the masquerade is bestowed initially with suggestions of opulence and the grotesque. The ornamentations of cut glass and the multitude of coloured lamps appear to have “fantastic forms” (p. 103) to Cecilia. Burney uses Mr. Harrel as an example of a man of the town and Mrs. Harrel a female fop seriously caught in the restless whirlwind of fashionable life. Her description of the Harrels’ wanton pursuit of pleasures, thoughtless expenditure as well as their unjustifiable acts of taking advantages of their acquaintance not only attests to her aversion to her contemporaries’ blind pursuit of fashion and acquiescence in the culture of conspicuous consumption, but also unambiguously provides substantial illustrations of her castigation of male and female acquisitiveness.

The duplicity of fashionable life is under Burney’s attack in the novel wherein she deems such a life merely a show where people assume an appearance different from or opposite to the truth, a nature underlying the masquerade. The Harrels’ conspicuous consumption is inserted by Burney to emphasize the shameless frauds practised every day in the dazzling world of fashion. All the “various arrangements and improvements”—“a flight of steps,” (p.100) “a little light gallery,” and “the coloured lamps” (p. 103) — in the Harrels’ masquerade function to set a fog of luminance to create a fantasy-like world of unreality corresponding to their equally shamming social identities as an opulent man of the town and a lady of fashion. The Harrels’ love of public diversions and continual spending on luxuries, are merely facades of wealth, which not only help them delude the public into
believing in their living in affluence but also prevent the public and the creditors from detecting their insidious pecuniary situation. As Catherine Keohane has pointed out, the Harrels defraud the industrious tradesmen and labourers and “feed on the works, goods, and resources of others without compensation”.33 Even the seeming pleasure Mr. Harrel and his wife acquire from the domestic masquerade, the renovation of the countryseat, the banquet, and etc. is but some luxury they do not deserve, for that is the fruit of the exploited and unpaid labour of their creditors. In the novel, though having neither taste for music nor love of company, the Harrels frequent public places, such as theatres, opera houses, and pleasure gardens, only because they desperately need to be seen in public to defer the inevitable financial execution, which could take place in any minute at their house. Further, in order to dispel the rumors of his impending ruin, Mr. Harrel strives to outwit the world by continuing putting on a good face that he spends more than ever before on parties at home and on entertainments in public places, such as the Pantheon and Vauxhall Gardens. Hence, the occurrence of the masquerade in the Harrrel residence locates Burney’s oblique satire of fashionable society, reminding us of her similar abandoned project in The Witlings.

Frances Burney thus deftly turns the occasion into “a specimen of vulgar consumerism”34 where credit economy helps creating an illusion of wealth and confidence. Castle argues:

For the Burney heroine the masquerade is no longer primarily a sexual threat; it has become exclusively an emblem of luxury and the improper use of riches … By turning her attention from sexual to economic dangers, Burney makes the masquerade less interesting to the reader in a sense; she depathologizes it.35
Interestingly, in deleting the sexual content of the masquerade episode, Burney can restrict herself within the moral codes imposed upon the female novelist and add legitimacy to her fiction. The masquerade episode thus empowers her to act as a social commentator against fashion and luxury.

Burney’s masquerade is a topos of plot no doubt; but she also uses it as a critique of a culture of consumption and excess that was characteristic of eighteenth century patriarchal society. It is this culture against which Cecilia’s feminine sensibility and desire for charity is pitted. If Harrel represents patriarchal excess, Monckton represents patriarchal predatory instincts; it is only the feminine Cecilia who insists on well intentioned, if not financially sound charity. Even Albany’s charity is an expiation of a former guilt; Cecilia’s by contrast is unpremeditated. What we would like to emphasise is that Burney’s *Cecilia* introduces female sensibility and a desire for charity as a possible alternative to the rapacious greed and excess of a patriarchal culture that takes money and luxury as its moral centre. The very possibility of a female alternative is raised by Cecilia’s (and by default) Burney’s satiric, ironic presentation of the masquerade. It is this purpose that is served by the details of her representation of the masquerade.

Burney’s presentation of the masquerade is extremely detailed and accurate. In fact, one can argue that in terms of details this is probably the most accurate scene of masquerade described in a novel:

the variety of dresses, the medley of characters, the quick succession of figures, and the ludicrous mixture of groups, kept her attention unwearied: while the conceited efforts at wit, the total thoughtlessness of consistency, and the ridiculous incongruity of the language with the appearance, were incitements to surprise and diversion without end. Even
the local chant of, *Do you know me? Who are you?* and *I know you*; with the sly pointing of the finger, the arch nod of the head, and the pert squeak of the voice, though wearisome to those who frequent such assemblies, were, to her unhackneyed observation, additional subjects of amusement.

Soon after nine o’clock, every room was occupied, and the common crowd of regular masqueraders was dispersed through the various apartments. Dominos of no character, and fancy-dresses of no meaning, made, as is usual at such meetings, the general herd of the company: for the rest, the men were Spaniards, chimney-sweepers, Turks, watchmen, conjurers, and old women; and the ladies, shepherdesses, orange girls, Circassians, gypsies, haymakers, and sultanas. (p. 106)

Cecilia incidentally appears in the masquerade without a costume, having been advised by Mrs. Harrel. She soon regrets the decision and wishes she had been one amongst the incognitos. The lack of disguise effectively implies that Cecilia bares her true personality in a world of dissimulation and allows her to be taken hostage by a variety of poses. Her lack of disguise also suggests her innocence and a degree of naivety in this patriarchal world of schemers. Even Delvile who arrives in the white domino is unable to fully reveal himself, suspended as he is with his love for Cecilia and the love of his family name. While Cecilia is taken up by the novelty of the masquerade Burney underlines the ways in which she is on display:

At about eight o’clock the business of the evening began; and before nine, there were so many masks that Cecilia wished she had herself made one of the number, as she was
far more conspicuous in being almost the only female in a common dress, than any masquerade habit could have made her. The novelty of the scene, however, joined to the general air of gaiety diffused throughout the company, shortly lessened her embarrassment; and, after being somewhat familiarized to the abruptness with which the masks approached her, and the freedom with which they looked at or addressed her, the first confusion of her situation subsided, and in her curiosity to watch others, she ceased to observe how much she was watched herself. (p. 106)

The most significant function of Burney’s masquerade episode is the clue it provides to understand the major characters. The masquerade costumes and the consequent action outline the motifs and foibles of each of the major protagonists of the novel. In this depiction Burney was probably influenced by a pamphlet that announced in 1777:

Everyone at the masquerade divests himself of his borrowed feathers, and following his natural propensity, assumes the character which suits him best. In short, everyone humours his own genius so exactly that whoever are well acquainted with the temper and disposition of our nobility in public life will have no difficulty tracing them out.36

The same is partially true in the masquerade in Cecilia. Of course, there are exceptions – Miss Larolles, the vacuous down voluble appears disguised as Minerva while an illiterate rake arises dressed as Cicero. But the major characters all choose masks that reveal their personality.

Mr. Monckton is a key player in this scene, appearing as the black Devil who pursues Cecilia with some determination. Monckton is presented throughout the novel as an evil schemer after Cecilia’s body and wealth,
and even in her madness Cecilia is terrified of him. Monckton, one must remember, is presented as abjectly cynical, for whom marriage and relationships are strictly guided by financial interest. He is described as “a man of parts, information and sagacity” but “impatient for wealth and ambitious for power” (p. 7) and has consequently married a rich dowager, “whose age, though sixty-seven, was but among the smaller species of her evil properties, her disposition being far more repulsive than her wrinkles.” (p. 7) He is the truly sinister character in the novel whose propensity for evil is significant. His black dresses, his growlings, his persistent following of Cecilia, all indicate his single-minded pursuit of her body and her money. It is through these partial signals that we are warned about the personality of Monckton.

Sir Robert Floyer, Cecilia’s lascivious suitor, is presented as a Turk; a disguise true to his rhetoric and personality:

Here a Turk, richly habited and resplendent with jewels, stalked towards Cecilia, and, having regarded her some time, called out, “I have been looking hard about me the whole evening, and, faith, I have seen nothing handsome before!”

The moment he opened his mouth, his voice, to her utter astonishment, betrayed Sir Robert Floyer! (p. 117)

Belfield, the dilettante and failed poet, appears as Don Quixote suggesting the imaginary world that he creates for himself. Like Don Quixote he is a failed lover:

This Don Quixote was accoutered with tolerable exactness according to the description of the admirable Cervantes; his armour was rusty, his helmet was a barber’s bason, his shield, a pewter dish, and his lance, an old sword fastened to
a slim cane. His figure, tall and thin, was well adapted to the character he represented, and his mask, which depictured a lean and haggard face, worn with care, yet fiery with crazy passions, exhibited, with propriety the most striking, the knight of the doleful countenance. (p. 108)

Like the characters in *Rasselas*, he speaks a language of Johnsonian balance and gravity while remaining lost in the “vanity and absurdity” he moralises on; like them, he keeps on expecting to find the true secret of happiness. It is no surprise when, shortly after this, Cecilia learns that Belfield has abandoned his present profession for yet another new hope. Burney is at her most Johnsonian as she reveals the inevitable failure of Johnson’s morality to reform even a well-meaning man who believes he understands life. Belfield moves from one project to another, never satisfied, always beginning again, till Delvile helps him to a post in the army – ironically returning him full circle to the first employment he abandoned. The last we hear of him, “his hopes were revived by ambition, and his prospects were brightened by a view of future honour” (p. 940). Mr. Gosport, who educates Cecilia in social etiquette makes an appearance as a schoolteacher, foregrounding his role in the novel.

The presence of Mr. Briggs is equally startling. An embodiment of miserliness and frugality, Briggs does not buy soap and is presented as a repulsive character observed within the solipsistic world of money. His is a state of pure being and true to his self he makes his appearance as a chimney sweeper, using soot and mud to save on the cost of the costume.

The appearance of Delvile is much more problematic. Delvile appears uninvited, in the hope of meeting the beautiful heiress. In this appearance he is dressed as a Domino. One of the most popular of masquerade costumes, the domino usually symbolised no specific
personality. True to his costume, Delvile is a man marked by a pronounced absence of personality. He loves and desires Cecilia no doubt, but hates to relinquish his family title. In fact, Delvile seems singularly overshadowed by the personality of his father – he rails against the “name clause” but is strangely silent about his father’s conduct. He is also hesitant about the marriage and deserts Cecilia in her dire need. He makes an appearance as a romantic hero, but as his costume suggests, his role is restricted and his personality is truncated. Burney makes a significant use of irony when Delvile says “you will find me as inoffensive as the hue of the domino I wear”. (p. 112) In reality, it is Delvile, who with his weakness and suspicion imperils Cecilia more than any other character. Significantly, his name in the novel is Mortimer, suggesting his lineage. It could also symbolise Mortality - he brings death, is himself mortified and moribund. The masquerade costumes are therefore suggestive – Burney seems to use the masquerade as a point of departure in the novel where the identities of the major characters can be conveyed to the readers. It therefore forms part of the technique of exposition.

In terms of plot, the masquerade plays a significant part in *Cecilia*. There are two dimensions operating here. In terms of the plot of the female *bildung*, the masquerade is part of Cecilia’s invitation into urban social life - it is a topos where the young heroine is introduced to a cross section of society. It is also here that she forms initial but deep-rooted impressions of character. Her fear of Monckton, disapproval for Mrs. Harrel, and her sense of revulsion towards Mr. Briggs are initiated here. In that sense, the masquerade becomes a process of education for Cecilia, both in terms of social etiquette and character appraisal. The masquerade as *bildung* is also important in context of the woman’s initiation into the public sphere. In *The Rambler*, Dr. Johnson had identified; “Operas, fashion, frolics, routs, drums, hurricanes, balls, assemblies, ridoffos, masquerade, auctions, plays,
puppet shows and bear gardens” as locations available to the woman for entering the public sphere. Consequently, part of Evelina’s education is an appearance at the opera. At the opera, Evelina is actually conscious that she is a critically scrutinised object of male gaze. One can relate this to the same sensation within Frances Burney, the female author who was continuously within the patriarchal gaze. Burney’s novels are about the woman stepping out into the public sphere and the masquerade performs the initiation of Cecilia into the public sphere.

But of course, the masquerade has a much more significant impact in the plot of romance and intrigue. It is the masquerade which initiates the plot of romance in *Cecilia*. Significantly, the choreography of events within the masquerade is a microcosm of the events about to follow. The single-minded pursuit of Cecilia by Monckton and the fear that he causes in her, anticipate the future plot of intrigue. The conflict between Monckton and Delvile, where Delvile successfully repulses him, anticipate their future conflict where Delvile will wound Monckton and flee the country. Cecilia herself is hardly comfortable throughout the masquerade: she is chased by a barrage of suitors, wanders around from one room to the other and subsequently surrenders herself to the protection of Delvile. The sequence anticipates her future madness, her wandering across the city of London and her ultimate surrender to the wishes of the Delvile family.

But the most significant aspect of the masquerade in *Cecilia* is its foregrounding of gender equations in society. It is here that *Cecilia* as a novel stands out from the representation of the masquerade in Fielding or Defoe. The fact that Cecilia enters the masquerade as an identifiable character alters many premises of the masquerade. In the representations of the masquerade in the male novelists, the woman is disguised: hence she becomes a mystery, a quest, a sexual object to be probed; the focus is on
displaying the sexual mystery of the woman rather than her desire for power.

In Burney’s novel the masquerade apparently places Cecilia in a position of unquestioned power. The masquerade occurs at the beginning of Cecilia’s history, one might argue, because it serves an inaugural emblematic function. It externalises that fantasy of autonomy with which Burney’s novel itself begins – the transgressive female aspiration after an unlimited power, the dream of the heiress itself. At the end of course it is precisely this dream that will be given up. Other women tend to drop out of sight, leaving Cecilia as the beloved object even at the outset of an exclusively male pack. Thus, for the young heroine, the moment of the masquerade is “a gynesium as utopian in its arrangements as the masquerade itself. The dream of female narcissism, one might say, can go no further”.38 Young, beautiful and rich, she is at this point placed within a charmed circle – the subject of admiration and obeisance. Because she has not committed herself, she finds herself in a rare seat of power, where the male submit to her. The masquerade details are significantly ritualistic in the gesture of submission – Monckton is most formal and elaborate: “he cleared a semi-circular space before her chair, thrice with the most profound reverence bowed to her, thrice turned himself around with sundry grimaces, and then fiercely planted himself at her side.” (p. 107) Belfield as Don Quixote too makes subservient gestures “kissed his spear in token of allegiance”. (p. 108) Even Delvile as the Domino acknowledges Cecilia’s power. He claims that Cecilia has the power, “to doom your deliverer to bondage”. (p. 112)

The fact remains that Cecilia is an independent agent, as yet untamed by patriarchy. She is also armed with the clause where the man has to sacrifice his own name and identity to embrace her status. It is a strangely subversive position - like Fantomina, Cecilia seems to have inverted the
entire patriarchal position. She embarks on a personal quest that Kristiana Straub calls, “a Rasselas like search for occupations and employments best suited to genteel female happiness.” Thus the masquerade embodies her status in a utopian zone where control over her own self is possible. Rose Marie Cutting elucidates that Burney’s heroines pos sess an “independence of judgement that reflects their intelligence, common sense and good principles of their education.” The masquerade thus, creates a possibility of subversion of male hegemony. Cecilia as the woman at the point has agency, has power, money and the freedom to choose. In exerting her instinct for charity she is the master of the situation, and as the rituals in the masquerade foreground, she is the centre of power to whom the other characters pay homage. Klekar makes the point that:

Her fortune and autonomy situate her as a culturally conspicuous parodic male: her plain dress at the masquerade signifies the complicated dual role that the title of “heiress” entails by placing her simultaneously outside and within the confines of traditional systems of exchange. While she does not appear literally in masquerade dress, the scene dramatizes the process of unmasking Cecilia.

Ultimately however, the masquerade remains only a potential utopia. The entire novel then proceeds to strip Cecilia of her property, her personality and even her sanity. The moment she surrenders her property and title to Delvile, her fate is sealed. Cecilia’s sacrifice for Delvile is met with almost callous disregard as he suspects her for infidelity. Cecilia is cast out onto the street and wanders as a vagabond and destitute all over the city of London:

She called out upon Delvile ... She scarce touched the ground; she scarce felt her own motion; she seemed as if
endued with supernatural speed, gliding from place to place, from street to street; with no consciousness of any plan, and following no other direction than that of darting forward where-ever there was most room, and turning back when she met with any obstruction; till quite spent and exhausted, she abruptly ran into a yet open shop, where, breathless and panting, she sunk upon the floor, and, with a look disconsolate and helpless, sat for some time without speaking. (p. 875)

She is thus stripped off the fiscal control over which she had prided herself. Once the dispenser of charity, Cecilia has now become the subject of charity. But the next transformation is even more grotesque. She loses grip over her sanity, receiving her marriage to Delvile as “a work of darkness, unacceptable and offensive”. (p. 822) She loses her personality altogether, hovering on the brink of death. In her madness she is only a paragraph of advertisement in a newspaper: she is rendered into a pure object. She is rescued no doubt, but undergoes a radical transformation – she becomes a “pale image” (p. 938) of her former rebellious self. The woman with personality and agency is reduced to a nervous, convalescent wreck. Cecilia’s mock death is a parody of the masquerade scene. Here too, she is on display but her status has altered considerably. Ironically, it is in this state that she earns the pity of Mr. Delvile and the grudging consent to marriage. It is only when the erstwhile independent heiress is made completely abject that she will be acceptable to patriarchy. Her determination has collapsed and though she receives an inheritance from an aunt of the Delvile family who is dazzled by her sacrifice, the Cecilia of now never recovers her former self-esteem. As John Richetti points out:

Cecilia is systematically humiliated and stripped of her financial and emotional stability, and the narrative balances
its admiration for her resistance to female stereotypes with an extended punishment that relieves her of those defining strengths and transforms her into a suffering physical entity.  

“Through Fanny Burney’s novels”, says Patricia Meyer Spacks, “she conveys her private self more emphatically, more explicitly … Not needing to exercise reductive moral control over every character, she can use her fantasies to communicate her feelings and her conflicts, the interior drama that her decorous life largely concealed”. The conflicting fantasies of self assertion and self deprecation drain the work of artistic coherence as the utopic vision of feminine authority is turned into a dystopic vision of female abjection. For these critics the masquerade in Burney’s text (contrary to Castle’s interpretation) denies Cecilia the power of choice and offers her as the one who is chosen and made compliant to the desires of the men who surround her: “her masquerade is submission to, not subversion of, the dominant economy”. Even Castle is forced to acknowledge:  

With this figurative demise, Burney brings her retrograde plot of female disenfranchisement to its tortuous conclusion. In the moment of ambivalent recovery Cecilia is reborn – as the docile, impoverished female, stripped of power and plenitude, a sacrifice to the traditional script of female Bildung … For Cecilia is ultimately an antilibertarian fable suggesting the impossibility of individual transcendence.

The role of Mrs. Delville here is interesting. She is probably the only intelligent and sensitive character in the novel, one who could have responded to Cecilia’s predicament. She is kind, intelligent and elegant and yet she has been conditioned into surrendering her judgement: “high spirited ... She saw in her, indeed, some portion of the pride she had been
taught to expect, but it was so much softened by elegance, and so well tempered with kindness, that it elevated her character.” (p. 160) But marriage to the pompous and tyrannical Mr. Delvile has rendered her fragile and helpless. Augusta Delvile has become what Cecilia will be a decade from now – one who has surrendered her agency to patriarchy, one whose self has been completely effaced and devoured by the demand of devotion to the family.

Cecilia thus aspires to the status of an independent woman with moral integrity and self-control. In the course of the novel she degenerates into confusion, perplexity, sorrow and anguished suffering. As Doody observes:

Cecilia’s dreams are neither common sense nor folly. They have been shaped by her own situation, including immediate psychological needs, but her entire situation is not just her psychological state, or her personal background . . . Every character in Cecilia is affected by social circumstances more profound than he or she can grasp.46

The reality that the book delivers is the ideological vicious circle that the middle class novel specialises in, revealing whereby free individuals are simultaneously produced by their social circumstances. Burney’s novels do end with consolation but the consolation is that of the charm and irresponsibility of the dependent child. Burney reveals the process through which patriarchy gradually strips the woman of identity and personality.

The masquerade in Cecilia thus foregrounds this tension between self-determination and self-deprecation, between control and submission. Itforegrounds the inherent rebellious self of Cecilia that seeks agency. It is initially a utopian enclave, holding out promise of feminine control,
resisting patriarchal domination. At the same time, the masquerade itself adumbrates the events to follow. Despite being the subject of obeisance, we are always conscious of Cecilia less as an individual and more of an attractive prize. She is always a prey, pursued by patriarchal agents with a wide range of desires. In fact, the masquerade is presented with a sense of fear and horror and grotesque that borders on the gothic – a strain that runs through the novel. The stay is one of deprivation and panic, inexorable alienation, sickness and death. The episode seems to be torn between two contrary impulses – of submission and control. The two versions of womanliness portrayed seem to be at conflict. Ultimately, it is the version of submissive womanliness that seems to prevail.

It is important here to locate Burney’s stance vis-à-vis that of the fictional Cecilia. The rebellious Cecilia is reduced from agency to madness and submission. But in representing her, the female novelist can expose the cruelty that a dominant male establishment inflicts upon her. The terms of the reference thus open up a female perspective that can obliquely, yet systematically expose the hypocrisies and inadequacies of the patriarchal ideology. We need to thus, closely scrutinise the version of womanliness that the vantage point of the female author opens up. Moreover, far from being submissive, this vantage point is cleverly critical.

Burney emerges as an extremely perceptive critic of the entire gender situation. As she outlined in the preface to *Evelina*:

> Let me, therefore, prepare for disappointment those who, in the perusal of these sheets, entertain the gentle expectation of being transported to the fantastic regions of Romance, where Fiction is coloured by all the gay tints of luxurious Imagination, where Reason is an outcast, and where the
sublimity of the Marvellous rejects all aid from sober Probability.  

The novel is thus about the ideological tensions inherent in the lives of eighteenth century middle class women and the strain of writing them into consciousness. As Katherine Rogers points out, Burney’s novels deal “with the psychological problems of women” and present “the anxiety, the frustration, the painful ambivalence felt by woman imprisoned in a patriarchal ideology which makes them suffer but which they are not equipped to challenge”. Julia Epstein in fact locates within the text, “the naked simmering rage of a conflicted but self conscious serial reformer and her obsession with violence and hostility”.  

Burney’s heroines are proper, decorous and innocent, yet aware of their social danger; different yet finely self-protected; publicly self-effacing, yet bent on independence of thought and action, ambiguously presented as to class and yet adhering to upper class ambitions; apparently unknowing about social moves and expectation, yet actually observant of others and conscious of their own desires. Burney uses her novels to foreground rebellious female desires and their subjection to patriarchy. But she faced the same ambiguous situation. As a woman she was aware of patriarchal limitations and had notions of rebellion and agency. As a female author she had the privilege of representing and enacting this agency within the public sphere – in the very act of writing she was usurping what was considered a male privilege. Simultaneously, she was still guided and controlled by patriarchal forces – her parents, her advisors who had summarily stopped her career as a playwright. Additionally, she was aware that she was writing for a patriarchal audience conditioned by conduct books who demanded submission and passivity from the woman.
Burney’s use of the narrative technique of free indirect discourse also alerts us to several possibilities within *Cecilia*. As Burney moves from the intimate epistolary technique of *Evelina*, the new narrative technique allows her a greater degree of flexibility in releasing the irony. The behaviour of the predatory males who circulate around her incites a degree of ironic laughter at the ways in which their conduct is completely distorted by the desire of money. Burney’s persistent undercutting of Cecilia’s male guardians reveals her awareness of the inadequacy and selfishness of patriarchal control. The grotesque masquerade saturnalia thus becomes an ironic commentary in a “world upside down” that is solely guided by mercantile interest. This is most pronounced in the rich ironic nuances of Burney’s representation of the senior Delvile. Delvile talks constantly of being “overwhelmed with business” (p. 60); but that business typically consists of giving a few directions to his servants (p. 65). He believes himself “surrounded by people who can do nothing without my orders” (pp. 268-69), when in fact everyone wishes he would stay out of their way. Burney misses no opportunity to contrast Delvile’s pretensions to awe-inspiring power with his actual inability to impress anyone, nor to show his pomposity deflated by his own need to assert his dignity. When he descends upon a middle-class mother in hopes of discovering scandal about her son and Cecilia, he will not divulge his name. When she lets drop some rumour about “old Mr. Delvile”, he cuts her off with indignation — “a person of his rank and consideration, is not lightly to be mentioned upon every little occasion that occurs”. (p. 782) Then she innocently protests:

“I don’t care for my part if I never mention the old gentleman’s name again! I never heard any good of him in my life, for they say he’s as proud as Lucifer, and nobody knows what it’s of, for they say—”
“They say?” cried he firing with rage, “and who are they? Be so good as inform me that?”

“All he can do is sputter, “Then everybody is extremely indecent ... to pay no more respect to one of the first families in England”. (p. 782)

Compared to Delvile, the representation of Mr. Briggs is less conspicuously ironic. Burney seems to recoil at Briggs’s miserliness and love for dirt, rather than critique any innate fault. Despite her hatred of vulgarity, Burney shows the self-made man, who has at least the ability to make money, coming off better than the man whose distinction comes from no intrinsic quality whatsoever. As Kay Rogers points out:

> These writers were keenly aware of male patronage and domination, but in general not prepared to attack directly either the fact of male authority or its theoretical rationale. What they did do was notice the weaknesses of those who assumed they ruled by right of natural wisdom and virtue.50

The presentation of Delvile is equally ironic. Despite the genuine liking for Cecilia, he too cannot shrug off the dominant patriarchal image of the woman as the cruel mistress:

> “O, depend upon it,” cried he, “there are many who would be happy to confine you in the same manner; neither have you much cause for complaint; you have, doubtless, been the aggressor, and played this game yourself without mercy, for I read in your face the captivity of thousands: have you, then, any right to be offended at the spirit of retaliation which one, out of such numbers, has courage to exert in return? (p. 112)
Frances Burney had experienced for herself, and in an acute form, a relationship in which expression was painfully inhibited: The young clergymen George Cambridge paid her marked attentions; Frances responded, and everybody expected them to make a match of it. But, for whatever reasons, he failed to exercise his male prerogative of choice. Agonised under the scrutiny of curious onlookers, Frances had to act as though she didn’t care, and treat him with a proud aloofness, as Cecilia treats Delvile. According to her biographer, Joyce Hemlow, the situation was painful on both sides; “even torture” on hers.51 The Cecilia-Delvile relationship foregrounds the problematic aspect of a woman in this situation of courtship. However, for Burney the novelist (unlike Burney the woman or Cecilia the character) the potent weapon of irony allows her the power to critique male inadequacy.

Underscoring the social obstacles involved for women in writing novels, not least the belief that “a woman is not to be judgmental”, Margaret Anne Doody constructs a narrative in which Burney’s switch from a first-person epistolary model in Evelina to a third-person narrative voice constitutes a courageous advance in allowing women writers to assume textual authority. For Doody:

Fanny Burney’s novels provide a record of the women’s struggle toward the creation of a tone which is neither whispering nor arch. She is the first woman writer in this period to show with marked success what could be done by creating an authoritative and persuasive omniscient author.52

In prior novels, Burney and other women writers found “the journal-novel” a “safe feminine form”. They “tended to hide themselves modestly behind their characters” for in doing so, “responsibility for judgments ... belongs to the characters, and the novelist can always admit that they might be wrong”.53 To appear at all in print entails becoming identified with one’s
product, Doody points out, but Burney’s choice to write *Cecilia* in the third-person is an act of “daring”. So much so that Doody goes as far as to say: “The seven veils are cast off and the author seems to be dancing naked before us. That which dances on the page is not the human being who is born and dies, but the critical distinction is of no practical comfort to the author”. Thus, Burney is linked to Austen and Dickens as a social critic who “attacks society’s principles” and “offers not a reflection, but an examination of her society in its structure, functions and beliefs”.

In writing *Cecilia*, in fact, Burney was coming into her own, asserting an independence from the two “daddies” whose views had been so influential. Following Richardson and Fielding, whose work had raised the status of the novel in a previous generation, she was aiming to give a new moral and philosophical weight to the feminine novel of a young girl’s experience of society. In doing this she took on a different daughterly role, staking her claim to be the literary heiress of Samuel Johnson, “the acknowledged Head of Literature in this kingdom”.

By using this style for relating the adventures of a marriageable young woman, Burney helped alter readers’ perceptions of the gender of rational discourse. The balanced structure and elevated diction of Johnsonian sentences gave an air of authority to the narrative, making it seem perfectly natural that the experiences of a young girl in London society should carry the weight of general moral reflection. Burney’s style encouraged readers to attach a new seriousness to the young woman’s moral existence, and to the novel of contemporary life which gave it expression. Isobel Grundy has noted how much of Johnson’s authority derives from his use of maxims, a habit of style which, she acutely notes, expresses a certain humility: the general pronouncement appears as the distilled wisdom of many thinkers, a collective voice. Such an impersonal voice, not strongly
marked by gender, became for Burney a way of taking authoritative control of her narrative without sounding like a man.

This is coupled with what Audrey Bilger calls the “goblin laughter” of Fanny Burney that exposes the cruelty of the patriarchal institution in a tone of black humour:

Burney’s fiction contains more violent comedy than … any other writer of her day. Unlike Austen, whose violent comedy virtually disappears in her later works … Burney includes scenes in every novel that continue to shock readers. Not all of Burney’s violence is comic, ... Burney’s obsession with violence and hostility (is due) to her position in a society that: placed strict controls on women … Surface propriety was purchased at the price of internal rage, a rage which then erupts in Burney’s fictional scenes of assault and moments of disguised anger. We can also see in her violent comedy a desire to communicate a sense of solidarity with other women.58

The guise of Cecilia as a model of womanliness leads to a subversive Frances Burney especially in her style. Apparently Cecilia’s representation fulfils the patriarchal requirements of the “Proper Lady” as Cecilia’s attempts to carve a space of financial and romantic autonomy is progressively stripped. But the deeper question remains – within this guise of a submissive womanliness, where is Burney’s location? Her use of the mode of the free indirect discourse, the presence of the ironic and the grotesquely comic representation of a ruthless patriarchal society provides her with a space of empowerment. It is as if the novelist’s masquerade as Cecilia presents her with the opportunity to expose the cruelties of the institution. It is to be noted that she was writing as the successful female
author and therefore could convey her critique to a wider audience. Thus Burney’s use of the free indirect discourse provided her with a dual economy – to expose the fashionable world (her initial project in *The Witlings*) and at a deeper level, to reveal the rapacious and cruel nature of patriarchy. The representation of Cecilia then becomes a clever and subtle subversive masquerade – the presentation of Cecilia’s womanliness is a mask behind which the novelist operates as a systematic critique, empowered with language and irony. Cecilia thus has no artless narrator, but a sober strong and ironic third person narrator daring to speak out with authority about the nature of the people of the world and of the world itself. To dismiss *Cecilia* as an allegory of female agency collapsing under patriarchal pressure would thus generate only an incomplete reading. Burney cannot realistically dispel patriarchy’s actual power, but she can relieve her own and her readers’ feeling by showing how ludicrously undeserving the exercise of power is.

Keeping this duality in mind, it is interesting to observe the political readings of *Cecilia*. Burney was neither seen as conspicuously Jacobin or anti-Jacobin in her sympathies. Her novels were politically correct as the status quo was maintained and patriarchal power retained. Yet the note of protest and injustice was latent within these novels. It is difficult to agree with Castle’s claim about *Cecilia* as a markedly radical text:

… it is also specifically a theatre of female desire. It has a political content. It dramatizes the unfulfilled wishes for power and authority lying just under the surface of this otherwise intensely well-behaved feminine narrative. These wishes have a gender: they express the deep structure of women’s fantasy life within patriarchy. What is fantasied here is the derangement of the status quo – becoming captor instead of captive, Heiress instead of a Woman.59
Rather it perches on a more ambiguous position, as Jacqueline Pearson points out:

Perhaps Burney’s appropriability by all political positions is an indication of her own ambivalence about women’s place in society: *The Wanderer* (1814) explicitly rejects Wollstonecraftian feminism and yet forcefully dramatises the social injustices caused by women’s lack of rights and indeed is influenced by Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*, and although neither *Cecilia* nor *Camilla* presses for social change, both depict vividly the emotional and economic problems for women caused by conditions as they are. One can see how both Wollstonecraftians and Westians might have found something to appeal to them in these novels.  

However, it can be reasonably claimed that Burney was redefining the role of the female novelist in finding a more independent voice that could explore the intricacies and disempowerment of the situation of the eighteenth century woman. It is this sensitivity and maturity that was noted by Jane Austen when she took the title of *Pride and Prejudice* from Burney’s *Cecilia*, and in a rare moment in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) where the novelist apparently speaks for herself, Burney appears alongside Edgeworth as an author whose work displays “the greatest powers of the mind ... the most thorough knowledge of human nature ... the liveliest effusions of wit ... in the best chosen language”. For women novelists from the 1780s to the 1820s, Burney offered an exhilaratingly enabling model of female authorship, not only promising cultural and financial capital, but also suggesting that genteel respectability and novel-writing and reading were by no means incompatible.
Burney’s *Cecilia* was written in the aftermath of the suppression of her satirical play *The Witlings*. Apparently the young Burney had surrendered to her father and guardian and decided to write a domestic novel. But in choosing a different narrative trajectory, she created a possible version of female independence and explored how it was ruthlessly suppressed by patriarchy. Burney’s ironic stance, her use of humour and ridicule, her projection of male greed and improvidence, suggests a very subtle critique in the novel. The masquerade episode participates in this dark and ambiguous critique of male hegemony. The episode is used as a trope to initiate plot and highlight traces of power. But it positizes versions of womanliness that is marked by empowerment which patriarchy must erode. In the representation of this cruel stripping of agency, the woman novelist’s satiric exposition comes into play. *Cecilia* is not only a text where the representation of the masquerade is detailed; it is also a text where the masquerade initiates different versions of womanliness and their reception in a patriarchal system. For the woman novelist the masquerade has thus been transferred from a zone of spectacle to a zone of power. The same process is repeated by Inchbald.
Notes


18. Gallagher, p. 244.


20. Ibid., p. 385.


22. Gallagher, p. 244.


24. Ibid., p. 123

26. Doody, p. 116
30. Mary Poovey, p. 41.
32. Ibid., p. 267.
33. Keohane, p. 382.
34. Castle, p. 261.
35. Ibid., p. 261.
36. As quoted in Castle, p. 263.
38. Castle, p. 271.
41. Klekar, p. 117.


46. Doody, p. 118.


51. Hemlow, p. 89.


