

## Fanny Burney



Frances (Fanny Burney). Engraving by C.Turner © Reproduced by courtesy of the Dr Johnson's House Trustees

# *Fanny Burney: Jane Austen's literary Godmother*



In the first of two articles Maggie Lane introduces us to Bath's less well-known literary heroine.

It is a fact not sufficiently acknowledged, that the first time Jane Austen's name ever appeared in print was in the list of subscribers in the front of Fanny Burney's 1796 novel, *Camilla*. Indeed, it was the *only* time Jane's name appeared in print during her lifetime, since even when her own novels were later published, it was anonymously. Fanny Burney too published anonymously, as did most women novelists of the period and not a few men. In the relatively small society of the day, however, secrets of authorship soon leaked out, especially when, as with Fanny Burney, they lived in London and mixed with the artistic world.

Fanny was the third of nine surviving children of Dr Charles Burney, a prominent musicologist and friend to Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds and Sheridan, among others. Her first novel, *Evelina*, published in 1778 when she was just 26, had been an instant success, followed in 1782 by the almost equally popular *Cecilia*, bringing her fame and acclaim. Yet because she had disposed of the copyright, neither work had made her much money.

The late 1780s were years of romantic disappointment and literary frustration for Fanny. A promising playwright, she was discouraged in that direction by her father and other male mentors, and instead pushed into a stultifying five years' service at the court of George III and Queen Charlotte. By the time she emerged, all the joyous spontaneity that had produced

*Evelina* had vanished and it seemed as if she might never write a novel again. Then events in this remarkable woman's life took another of their extraordinary turns. In the early 1790s she fell in love with and married a penniless French *émigré* and, at the age of forty two, gave birth to their son.

She was desperate to earn money in the only way open to her, through her pen. By publishing *Camilla* by the subscription method, she kept all of the profit herself. Such was her reputation that the reading public,

including 'Miss J. Austen, Steventon', hastened to send in their one and a half guineas (£1.57) before the book was even printed. With over 300 names on the subscription list, several of them ordering multiple copies (Edmund Burke ordered 15), this

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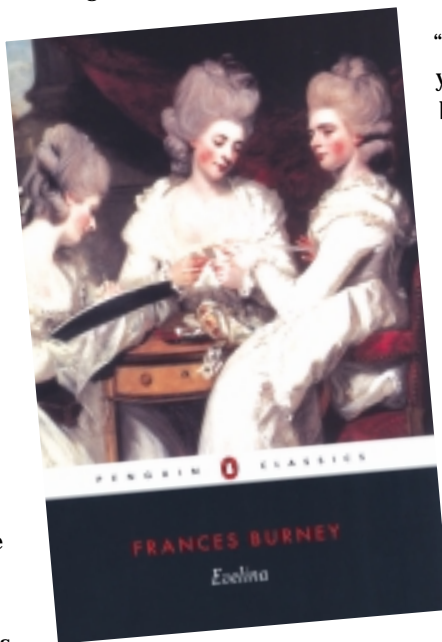
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raised over a thousand pounds, enough for Fanny to build Camilla Cottage in West Humble, Surrey.

Having known and loved *Evelina* and *Cecilia* since childhood, the twenty-year-old Jane Austen must have been thrilled by the announcement that her favourite author was to publish another book after such a long interval. That it was Jane, not her father, mother or elder sister, who personally subscribed, out of her very small annual allowance, is telling. There can be no doubt that in her formative years Jane Austen was deeply influenced by Fanny Burney's novels. They were the nearest things, until her own works surpassed them, to stories of ordinary, recognisable English life in the middling levels of society. This was why they were so popular with the public at large, who saw their own society reflected back to them. And as the titles suggest, each one was seen through female eyes. Burney pointed the way, Austen saw that it was rich in possibility, and in her hands the courtship novel reached perfection.

The sub-titles of Burney's first three novels indicate concerns that Austen was to make her own. *Evelina* is sub-titled 'A Young Lady's Entrance into the World', making us think especially of Catherine Morland, Fanny Price and even, at the very end of Jane Austen's writing career, Charlotte Heywood. *Cecilia*'s sub-title is 'Memoirs of an Heiress' – evocative of Emma Woodhouse, perhaps, though family inheritance does not cause Emma the problems it causes Cecilia Beverley – while *Camilla* sets out to give us 'A Picture of Youth', as do all Jane Austen's novels except perhaps *Persuasion*. Burney's plots, which her contemporaries found so entertaining, are driven by a series of social difficulties, misunderstandings and embarrassing relations keeping hero and heroine apart. Austen too applies this formula, but with greater realism and a more satisfying sense of her young people's moral growth.

Just as Janeites today think of Austen's characters almost as people we know, so Jane Austen's familiarity with Fanny Burney's characters is clear from the throw-away remarks and comparisons that are sprinkled throughout her lifetime's letters to



Cassandra. "Take care of your precious self, do not work too hard, remember that Aunt Cassandras are quite as scarce as Miss Beverleys" is just one example of many that could be quoted. One such reference even makes it into *Persuasion*, where Anne Elliot, manoeuvring to sit at the end of a row at a concert (hoping Captain Wentworth will be able to approach her there), cannot do it without comparing herself to 'Miss Larolles, the inimitable Miss Larolles'. Evidently Jane Austen expected her readership to know whom she meant - today a footnote is required.

Two of Fanny Burney's titles are featured in Jane Austen's spirited defence of the novel at the end of Chapter V of *Northanger Abbey*. Stepping outside the story for a moment, the narrator begins by supposing a young lady discovered with a book in her hands.

' "And what are you reading, Miss?" "Oh! It is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. "It is only *Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda*;" or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed in the best chosen language.'

Quite some tribute from one writer of fiction to another.

We even owe the title of one of the best-loved novels in the English language to Jane Austen's literary predecessor. At the end of *Cecilia*, the difficulties that have beset hero and heroine are summed up by one of the characters: "The whole of this unfortunate business ... has been the result of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE". Jane Austen must one day have realised how well this phrase fitted the story she had written - and even submitted for publication, unsuccessfully - under the title *First Impressions*.

Again in *Northanger Abbey*, an extended passage pays tribute to her famous predecessor. John Thorpe, who is boorishness personified, on being questioned by Catherine about the novels he has read, declares,

'I was thinking of that other stupid book, written

by that woman they make such a fuss about, she who married the French emigrant.'

'I suppose you mean Camilla.'

'Yes, that's the book; such unnatural stuff! I took up the first volume once, and looked it over, but I soon found it would not do; indeed I guessed what sort of stuff it must be before I saw it: as soon as I heard she had married an emigrant, I was sure I should never be able to get through it.'

This curious passage is not only an early example of racial prejudice that condemns Thorpe out of his own mouth, but the only time in her fiction that Jane Austen refers to a living contemporary in an identifiable way but without naming her. One wonders whether Fanny Burney - or Madame d'Arblay as she was by then - got to hear of it.


In all the millions of words Fanny committed to her letters and journals, there is no mention of her having read any novel by Jane Austen. This is all the more perplexing given that Fanny was living in Bath, with ready access to bookshops and book gossip, from 1815 to 1818, just the years when Austen's novels were being published and gathering readership. Fanny's half-sister, Sarah Harriet Burney, also a novelist, certainly read and greatly admired *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. (Jane Austen could not return the compliment, since she found the younger Burney's novel *Clarentine* did not bear a third reading.)

Another connection was that while she was living in Surrey, Madame d'Arblay was a friend and neighbour of the Reverend Samuel Cooke, Jane Austen's godfather, and his wife Cassandra, Mrs Austen's cousin, who lived at Great Bookham. It was Mr Cooke who christened the d'Arblays' baby son, Alexander. Cassandra Cooke herself had literary ambitions and published a novel, *Battleridge*, in 1799. The Cookes were in Bath in 1816 and 1817 and are known to have visited their old friends the d'Arblays. Did Mrs Cooke have nothing to say about her young relation's publishing success?

Madame d'Arblay published one more novel, *The Wanderer*, in 1814, but she had lost her touch, the public was disappointed, and Jane Austen, who does not mention it, was by then at the height of her own powers. Burney, who had been born 23 years before Jane Austen, survived her by another



Above: 23, Great Stanhope Street in Bath, where Fanny lived contentedly with her husband Alexandre d'Arblay from 1815-1818

23. Her last literary efforts were preparing her father's memoirs for publication and preserving her own papers for posterity. Her journals are as important and as entertaining a testament to the age she lived in as her novels. Born in the reign of George II, she lived to see his great-great-granddaughter Victoria on the throne. She died in London in 1840, and her body was brought back to Bath to lie beside that of her husband and son, whose early death was the final tragedy of a long and eventful life lived with courage and enterprise. Fanny Burney achieved many remarkable things for a woman of her time, but for lovers of literature not least amongst her achievements must be counted that she brought pleasure and inspiration to one of the world's greatest novelists. 

*In the next issue Maggie Lane writes more about the Burney family and their friends. Maggie Lane is the author of A City of Palaces: Bath through the eyes of Fanny Burney, Millstream, £3.95, 0948975539.*