

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Frances Burney (1752-1840)

Journal and Letters (A, 1349-1361)

Frances Burney was the daughter of the first British professional historian of music, a man at the center of London culture. From that setting, Mrs. Burney early became addicted to higher culture, especially to writing, and gained acquaintance with many of the literary geniuses dominating the London scene; especially with such men as Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson. She was an active and successful novelist, a long time resident of France, and a cunning observer and commenter on the end of century Napoleonic Revolutionary era. The materials we will be reading, from her *Journals*, give us a glimpse of her intimate and pellucid style, and the original directness of her dealings with life.

Question: What is the Secret of Pure Style?

Sometimes small biopsies of a writer's work enable us to penetrate that work, whereas the sheer mass of a writer's larger fictions, or epic work, may daunt us. Mrs. Burney's *Journal and Letters* put us inside people and places, and reveal them as distinctive discoveries of the author's sensibility. *What makes for the extraordinary sharpness and vigor of, for example, Mrs. Burney's account of her mastectomy?* (This course deals so boldly in centuries and vast themes; we need to pause now and then to look at how literature works on the level of detail.) Looking back on her operation, Mrs. Burney invites us into her victim status, which she both dramatizes and watches from a distance, alongside us. Not only that, but she describes herself putting herself into the minds and hearts of the surgeons operating on her. A subtle psychodrama is created, in the course of which we "feel her pain" keenly. The dreadful events transpiring, and the sequence in which they occur, is artfully (and agonizingly) laid out, are at no point inert, but sing in our scorched feelings.

Comparative Literature

1. We brought up the canon issue in discussing the fresh voice of Equiano, and that same kind of issue is in place now. We are asking (but not answering) the same old question: are texts like these worthy of inclusion in an anthology of literary masterpieces? It was perhaps necessary to await Feminism, a movement rooting in European culture of the early 19th century, to valorize the work of a female writer like Mrs. Burney, whose fictional attention was directed to the growth of women's lives in society. With the Feminist movement attention began to drift toward the voices of women in creating the literary traditions of British literature. Take a look at Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 1987, for a large view of this movement, which has done much to multiply the voices heard in literary tradition.