

“Who is Severe Upon the Ladies Now?": The Tri-Tiered Construction of Female Agency in Frances Burney's *Evelina*

Sophia Eve Rink*

Abstract

Frances Burney's novel *Evelina* follows a young woman through a series of mortifying social interactions, all of which point to a layered concept of women's agency and the popular perceptions of autonomy during the eighteenth century. Women's agency in *Evelina* can be classified as physical agency, emotional agency, or elite agency. Each form of agency is then characterized by the female characters of the lower, middle, or upper classes within the novel. Burney's uncouth characterization of the lower classes corresponds with physical agency, or the physical ability to create agency outside of social expectations, while elite agency allows upper-class and aristocratic women to act as they wish without public censure. Middle-class *Evelina*'s emotional agency, accessible to readers through the epistolary format of the novel, relies on her understanding of propriety, sensibilities, and interpersonal connections as a means of navigating social situations and class mobility. Burney's tiered construction of women's agency reinforces the importance of sensibility and emotional honesty across highly gendered class lines.

Keywords: Frances Burney, *Evelina*, 18th century literature, class relationship, propriety, bildungsroman, women's agency

I. Introduction

Moving through eighteenth-century London and the fashionable spa town of Clifton Heights, *Evelina Anville*'s existence in the social world beyond Berry Hill is heavily influenced by the company of a diverse array of women and their extremely different notions of agency. A young country lady with virtuous morals who lacks a comprehensive social education, *Evelina*'s gradual ascent through the class

spheres is shaped by the social actions of her companions, many of whom are women exerting their own personal powers – often in direct contrast to the social rules of *Evelina*'s newly-acquired education and her own feelings. Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) contains an arresting portrait of female agency as a multi-layered social system rooted in sensibility and sentimentality. Previous scholarly treatment of the text has largely focused on the novel as a *bildungsroman* and its themes of politeness, legal and social

*Department of English, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada
Correspondence: kar707@usask.ca



identities, marriage and romantic love, familial structure, femininity, and eighteenth-century letter-writing; however, criticism of Burney's portrayal of female agency has been consistently overlooked. Agency is generally defined as one's power over oneself, or the ability to exert power over others or others' perceptions of and relationships to oneself (Emirbayer and Mische 973). Keeping the constraints of Burney's polite society in mind, as well as her quiet feminist turn, this study proposes three distinct classes of female agency and self-governance in *Evelina*: physical agency, elite agency, and emotional agency, all of which correspond to Burney's conspicuous characterizations of class lines: the crude lower class, the overindulgent upper class, and the virtuous upper class. Differing motivations linked to the demonstrations of agency also play a role in Burney's dynamics of female agency, significantly altering the effects and the manifestation of these categories of agency. The changing nature of female agency in *Evelina* is thus formulated around the three pillars of influence – personal gratification, social expectations, and emotional expression – which are then superimposed over Evelina's education in discernment, propriety, and her own agency.

Women in Burney's fiction have been recognized as the products of "covert feminism," appearing to conform to expectations of silence and obedience even as the reader extrapolates their true and supposedly improper emotions, yet relatively little attention has been paid to Burney's concept of female agency, particularly in the way she links emotion and sensibility to differing perceptions of social agency (McMaster 237). By itself, emotion and the discussion of finer feelings in *Evelina* are naturally accessible to the reader and have been studied accordingly, but a major aspect which has been overlooked is Evelina's ability to reflect on and learn from her own emotional state even as she is exhibiting acts of sensibility before her companions. Christina Davidson's 2012 doctoral thesis explores the idea that the "moral qualities deriving from the states of mind which nurture them are given articulation through language, or agency through behaviour," but the bulk of her study veers away from agency as an outcome of both the performance of sensibility and private sentiment (43). This study proposes the marriage of sentiment and sensibility as a means of exploring a form of agency not previously attributed to Evelina: her own emotional agency, an autonomous personal state which allows her to succeed socially by appearing to conform while simultaneously giving her the ability to form candid opinions and maintain her own sense of integrity. Not all of Burney's characters are so introspective, however: her elite agents manipulate their status and privilege in order to create agency through measured social force but lack a refined emotional side. Furthermore, her expression of violent, vulgar comedy through female characters has been read as a "response and a challenge to oppressive conditions" and continues to be

one of the most popularly examined facets of the novel (Bilger 323). Physical agency in *Evelina*, assumed through the means of violence, vulgarity, and a vivid departure from polite manners, is framed as the antithesis to Evelina's emotional agency (and therefore her virtue) despite offering more freedom to the agent. Here, propriety is thrown into contrast with the broad view of agency. Evelina is one of only two women in the novel who maintain a balance within this binary, underscoring the difficulties Burney faced in writing a young woman (and, critically, a young woman with agency) who remained socially acceptable, relatable, and who functioned as a fictional role model without raising criticism over her personal freedoms.

II. Frameworks

The visible women of *Evelina* define their own agency and ability by choosing actions and emotional responses which suit their individual personal needs, rather than calculating their responses to appease the requirements of polite society. Rarely do these sets of motivations overlap; Burney is careful to keep Evelina's inherited emotional virtues (and what is therefore transformed into her uniquely virtuous mode of agency) separate from the novel's caricatured greedy lower class and the indolent, insolent upper classes (476). Her three tiers of agency – physical, elite, and emotional – each have distinct outcomes and origins. Physical agency, which I argue consists of the choices one makes in simple pursuit of immediate gratification (whether social, sexual, or material) without concern for consequences or poor impressions, is troublesome to Evelina's preconceived ideas of propriety and genteel behaviour. Elite agency, typically associated with the fine ladies of the novel, allows many of Evelina's upper-class acquaintances to engage in similar choices or behaviours for their own gratification while their higher status protects them from the perceived crudeness of physical agency. Finally, emotional agency is the determination to act and express thoughts as representations of one's mental and emotional state of mind rather than as the performance of sensibility, the other-oriented expression of strong physical emotions. Emotional agency allows one to make and communicate decisions independent of social demands without disrupting the status quo in the same ways that physical and elite agencies do; it creates a broader, intersectional space of gratification and propriety, sense and sensibility. Evelina's lower-class female relations help to exemplify this theory. While her relatives' careless actions and responses indicate a certain physical agency, they are denied elite agency. Throughout the text, Madam Duval and the Branghton sisters can make choices as they please, but they lack the capability to situate themselves favourably in the public sphere by having a safety net of perceived propriety via class or wealth.

Evelina seeks to undermine the socially detested physical agency through the emotional agency she constructs by educating herself through letter writing. By creating and maintaining interpersonal bonds with Arthur Villars and Maria Mirvan, Evelina creates a space of emotional agency which allows her to express and examine her personal thoughts and actions in an environment which does not require the performance of sensibility, and which therefore allows her to act with greater freedom (Bray 81). The moral implications of Burney's tri-tiered system notably work against the majority of her characters; only those who self-righteously shun both physical and elite agencies emerge from the text rewarded for their virtues. The epistolary format of the novel helps underscore the development of Evelina's emotional agency through her letter-writing and growing expressive capabilities, while the evolving concept of agency in the text is explored through Evelina's contact with women who utilize their social and physical agencies to various effects and reactions. Twentieth-century feminist critiques of Burney's novels have drawn out a long thread of female struggle and oppression, but they have also uncovered her "growing rebellion against the restrictions imposed upon women" (Cutting 519-520). The characters who engage with physical and elite agencies – Burney's "defiant women," those who move in the world without the imposed crippling fear of wrongdoing – are ridiculed and despised in the novel by Evelina, whose own understated emotional agency misdirects her audience to a reading of the text as the story of a perfect, socially-compliant heroine (Cutting 528).

III. The Pillars of Agency In *Evelina*

The physical agency depicted in *Evelina* is clearly delineated along class lines. Uncouth and ill-educated, Evelina's embarrassing relatives, Madame Duval and the Branghton sisters, are afforded agency through their ignorance alone. Evelina protests to Villars, "indeed this family is so low-bred and vulgar that I should be equally ashamed of such a connexion in the country, or any where" (Burney 198). The Branghton sisters' private and public antics are characterized by a marked inability to look beyond themselves and their present situations or interests. What Davidson terms the "middle-class emulation" of an aristocratic ideal is affected by Miss Biddy Branghton and her younger sister Polly, who manifest this emulation through their desire to be seen in fashionable locales such as the opera and their wish to be thought of as young ladies of interest rather than of virtue (34). During the Vauxhall expedition, Polly's suggestion that the young ladies turn into the disreputable "dark walks" furthers this idea of lower-class ignorance-as-agency (Burney 316). Of course, objectively, any individual has the ability to roam around Vauxhall as it is a public space, but social rules ensure that the only women in the dark walks and

unlit areas of the pleasure gardens are those who are presumed to be open to sexual advances (Conlin 729). To ignore this widely-accepted piece of etiquette is to assert, or even flaunt, one's defiance and agency by choosing to bodily locate oneself in a venue typically forbidden to polite ladies. Polly very likely understands the dark walks' purpose yet proposes a jaunt down the alleys as a practical joke despite the impropriety it presents for three young, unchaperoned women. The sisters' dubious beaux, their boarder Mr. Smith and Mr. Brown, act as extensions of Miss Branghton and Polly's agency; they gratify the sisters' urge to be desirable in a locale where "looking at other people and being looked at oneself" is paramount (Conlin 722). Particularly in Polly's case, simply having beaux communicates the sisters' shared ability to act within the world rather than merely observe it. To Evelina, the Branghtons' narrow-minded and covetous view of achieving "a *little pleasure*" through their physical agency and their ignorance of social rules appear to be a marker of their class (Burney 316).

Madame Duval creates her own composite physical-elite agency through a radically different process of pretension and posturing. Given her low English birth and extremely fortuitous first marriage, Duval's pretentious aristocratic French airs were assumed long before her introduction to Evelina. It is inferred that Duval's first taste of elite agency was not easily parted with upon the death of Mr. Evelyn; it is because of her social elevation via marriage to Evelyn that she came into contact with her second husband, Monsieur Duval. Duval's idea of elite agency mimics the ability of the upper classes to act and interact on their own terms while simultaneously perceiving a superiority over the agency or displays of agency of those considered below them, armed with the knowledge that they will not be publicly rebuked by polite society. As such, her subsequent behaviour in *Evelina* may be read as an attempted continuation of elite agency through physical agency. Returning almost completely friendless in England, Duval's manners are grossly out of place; her "improper behaviour [...] reflects an inconsistent, emotional, and difficult character" in a woman whose sense of physical agency is almost violent in its representation (Isaacson 86). Duval's relationship with Monsieur Du Bois is a glaring example of her social ineptitude. As a wealthy and twice-widowed woman well into middle age, Duval does not require a chaperone for her travels, yet she chooses to keep a male companion who is not a paid servant and to whom she has no apparent biological relation. Her physical agency and insistence on gratification is the basis for Du Bois' presence in London, but it is her false sense of elite agency which convinces her that she has some form of ownership over the choices made by Evelina and Du Bois, particularly in the marriage arena. Du Bois' interrupted proposal invokes Duval's "extreme wrath"; as Evelina later opines in her letter to Villars, "her reproaches convinced me that she had herself

proposed being the object of his affection" (Burney 381). A woman "incapable of controlling her passions by reason," Duval's characteristically poor understanding of her perceived dual agencies and her lack of limits thus transform her into a caricature of eighteenth-century sensibility (Hamilton 438). Unlike Evelina, Duval lacks the ability to process, refine, and reflect on her emotional state; there is no sentiment behind her actions, merely an outward sensibility made grotesque by the forced agency that Duval claims from her outbursts.

This emotional agency that Duval bypasses may appear less convincing as a form of female agency because it is not immediately discernable in the presentation of the text: for example, Duval's physical agency is consistently noticed by Evelina, who rarely references her own agency outright. Evelina manifests her self-power by way of the emotions she processes and conveys through her letter-writing, and her capacity for emotional agency. By constructing a space where she can formulate private opinions and sentiments, Evelina is then able to self-question her public actions and self-direct her future choices. Her emotional agency differs from the eighteenth-century understanding of sensibility defined by Janet Todd as "an innate sensitiveness or susceptibility revealing itself in a variety of spontaneous activities such as crying, swooning, and kneeling" in circumstances when one is taxed emotionally (7). Todd writes that sensibility also "appears to be physically based" and is the result of a "cultural movement devoted to tear-demanding exhibitions of pathos and unqualified virtue" (8). By this definition, Evelina is then a heroine of sensibility, especially considering her interactions with the impoverished and despairing Mr. Macartney. At the moment of her impassioned intervention in Macartney's planned suicide, Evelina manifests her distress by "flinging [herself] on the first chair" as she "[gives] free vent to the feelings [she] had most painfully stifled, in a violent burst of tears, which, indeed, proved a happy relief" (Burney 301). However, Todd also provides a secondary, less obtrusive definition of sensibility as "the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering," a set of principles which corresponds with Evelina's typical mode of self-expression (7). Evelina's emotional agency departs from the eighteenth-century understanding of the cult of sensibility in that her letters are not directed solely towards the grandiose aesthetic and emotional gratification of others, which would limit her agency by forcing her into further performativity beyond what is already expected of her as a young lady coming into society. Instead, Evelina's letters to close friends and family members are used as a means of processing her own experiences in order to inform her future actions and as a means of connection.

In both in the private and public spheres, Evelina's relationships are central to her emerging sense of agency.

The narrative introduces Evelina as a naïve country girl with an underdeveloped awareness of what is expected of her as a young lady in London, yet by the novel's end she must shed her timidity and become capable of articulating her interests and decisions in order to move upward socially and claim her birthright. This growth is largely dependent on both the positive support and the negative influences she encounters throughout the novel. While her relationships with Villars and Maria Mirvan foster her intellectual and emotional development, her dissatisfying encounters with the Branghton family and Duval spur Evelina to reject their crude ideas of physical agency as a means of satisfying an immediate desire. The relationships which Evelina maintains throughout the text are shaped by her emotional agency, something that she has possessed from her introduction; by consciously bringing Villars and Maria into her confidence, she extends the boundaries of her emotions by bringing external actors into an arena dominated by her personal thoughts and actions. Evelina's intentional gesture of deciding whom to bring into this arena in turn binds Villars and Maria to her as a "most beloved father," and as a "friend of [her] heart" respectively, with Lord Orville eventually becoming a third confidante (Burney 114, 274). Yih-Dau Wu further confirms the importance of Evelina's cherished interpersonal connections and their association with her emotional agency, arguing that "this is because Burney wants to connect long-term relationship with powerful feeling, a connection overlooked by the preoccupation of the sentimental culture with impulsive reaction" (6). Of course, Burney's acquiescence to propriety demands the transference of Evelina's affection from man to man, from Villars to Belmont and Orville (McMaster 236-237). While this retreat to an "ethic of fear" on Burney's part initially clouds the audience's ability to read Evelina's agency in the text, by situating her heroine's worth in her marriage and paternal relationships, Burney allows Evelina's emotional life to be her driving motivation, and therefore her agency remains intact throughout the scenes of transfer (McMaster 236). Wu's argument also serves to underline a deficiency in the natures of the Branghton sisters and Duval, as Burney's portrayal of their physical agency appears to preclude significant emotional connections and their collective ability to form lasting relationships based on emotional exchange (6).

However, even Evelina's overconcern for propriety does not impede her personal gratification, only mellows its presentation. She strives to amend her social performances while maintaining emotional agency through her expressive letters beyond the view of her societal circle. What is written as Evelina's strength in a patriarchal society – that she is a "silent angel" who is always bound by her love for a man, whether that man is her adopted father, her lover, or her birth parent – adds a dimension of feminist rebellion to her letters (McMaster 246). Her feelings are consistently

exposed to Villars, who attempts to quash them. Evelina's refusal to repress on demand and defiantly continuing to write to an audience about her as of yet-unrequited love strengthens her emotional agency in a situation where she, the imitable heroine of sensibility, is expected to struggle without utterance (McMaster 236, 247). Even though Evelina does not express her love for Lord Orville until midway through the third volume, the reader remembers that she has been in love with him for most of the novel; however, because of a "Richardsonian ethic," she cannot in good conscience begin to love until she is explicitly told that she is beloved by the hero (McMaster 238). While she appears to capitulate to novelist Samuel Richardson's framework of virtuous womanhood by obediently repressing her heroine's desire following her great realization, Burney subtly pushes back: Evelina's letters undermine Richardson in that she, unlike Pamela Andrews, is acknowledged to love the hero before the male revelation permits this love (Burney 443-445; McMaster 238-240). Villars' overzealous cry for withdrawal is only required in order for Evelina to put a name to her feelings, rather than alerting her to their existence. As discussed, the mirror scenario of female romantic confession between Duval and Du Bois during his proposal to Evelina culminates in a very different outcome: as Duval's overwrought and violent display of sensibility does not contain any self-reflection or repentance, it is represented as a gross mockery of Evelina's emotional agency. Ultimately, Duval's physical agency and demands for gratification are intended to be interpreted as improper specifically because she publicly breaks the imposed social code, whereas Evelina is more cautious yet more candid in her agency and her emotional expression, and is overtly rewarded for it. Burney, interested in her heroine's abilities and shortcomings as a woman, is careful in signposting Evelina's emotional attachment and creating a precedent for her love – and through this, creating emotional agency – in a way that Richardson avoids in *Pamela* (1740).

The peripheral female characters who populate *Evelina* fall along various points on Burney's scale of agency, broadly ranging from consummate elite agency to a diminished elite or physical agency. The less-observed women in Evelina's circles, the female characters who populate the fringes of Burney's imagination such as servants or aristocratic acquaintances, cannot be properly divided along class lines, nor can they be fully categorized by their relationships to Evelina. However, each individual character can be aligned with one or more interpretations of agency. Apart from Evelina herself, very few female characters have the capacity to recognize and engage with emotional agency. Evelina, her mother Caroline Belmont, and, to an extent, her friend Maria use their letters to communicate more than just society gossip; they express their bonds and their own emotional states. Emotional agency forms the north point of Burney's moral compass in

Evelina. Caroline Belmont's emotional agency informs the entirety of the plot and affects its central players, most notably her daughter and her estranged husband, by setting her surviving family members on an emotional collision course. Her ardent plea for Sir John Belmont to "take her child to [his] bosom" facilitates Evelina's ultimate acceptance into the Belmont fold, but this appears to be the extent of Caroline's agency (Burney 530). Though she makes the conscious decision to flee to Villars and places Evelina with him for protection, she is stripped of her elite agency through her secret marriage and Belmont's ensuing actions; ultimately, it is her emotional agency which forms her legacy to her daughter.

Unlike emotional agency, elite agency includes multiple characters but is only viewed from a limited perspective within the novel. Lady Louisa Larpen's elite agency is certainly apparent: she lolls about when in company "without noticing any body else," yet she remains unreprimanded for her surprisingly poor behaviour, especially when compared to her brother Orville's desire to please (Burney 410). Louisa is the sentimental antithesis of Evelina: any violence of emotion that she displays is overtly directed towards the notice of others. She screams, flushes, and takes up her salts upon the news of a gentleman's phaeton accident, despite the fact that the very gentleman is standing uninjured before her and delivering the news himself without any obvious concern (Burney 419-420). Apart from Orville (and silently, Evelina), Louisa's dramatic and ill-bred freaks go unchecked by anyone. Unlike Duval, Louisa has the security of her station to pad her decisions and shield her from reproach. Her impropriety and pursuit of gratification is continually recorded by Evelina, but with markedly less horror and pain and with more attention paid to her privilege. Like the Branghton sisters, much of Louisa's self-worth comes from the attentions paid to her by men; her engagement to Lord Merton generates jealousy and "infinite vexation" when his attentions are paid to the unwilling Evelina instead (Burney 450). It is true that "the habitual rudeness of Lady Louisa and Lord Merton precludes any simple equation of high birth with innate good manners," but it is also made clear that Louisa's rudeness is excusable where Duval's is not: Louisa's position as a member of the peerage gives her the right to rewrite certain social expectations because she is not considered a dependent within that society (Hamilton 430). In contrast, Lady Howard personifies a positive representation of elite agency. Well-educated and genteel, her rank and fortune allow her to act in a similar manner though she chooses restraint in her actions and expressions, particularly when presented with the question of her daughter Mrs. Mirvan's ungovernable husband.

Mrs. Mirvan and Maria are outliers in Burney's tiered system of agency; while both women are ostensibly well-educated and born into a respectable bloodline, only Maria

appears to have any form of agency. Like Evelina, her power is in her emotional connections rather than the agency of her birthright, though she is typically represented by her replies rather than by her original emotional expressions. She is an extremely agreeable conversational partner for Evelina, but she is rarely depicted as a young woman with the desire to speak for herself and does little more than follow her parents from London to the country. It is her emotional attachment to her friend which sets her apart from Mrs. Mirvan; she is able to confide in Evelina and makes a conscious decision to continue a relationship through letters once Evelina departs from Howard Grove. Any view of Mrs. Mirvan's agency is swallowed up by her husband's aggressive presence. Described by Evelina as a "kind and sweet-tempered woman," Mrs. Mirvan appears to be constantly smoothing away the negative effects of her ill-bred husband's indiscrete comments and rude practical jokes (Burney 132). She is "ashamed of his rudeness," but is apparently unable to express her true opinions to him or to others (Burney 163). As the child of Lady Howard, Mrs. Mirvan should in theory have at least some comforts of elite agency, but she is so subsumed by her husband's domineering presence that she appears to have given up the mastery of herself in all respects. Mrs. Mirvan's entire character revolves around the pillar of social expectations; her movements and company are mostly dictated by the captain. Any emotional expression she may articulate is not entrusted to Evelina and is thereby absent from the text; Evelina only observes that Mrs. Mirvan "never speaks to the Captain when he is out of humour," making excuses or apologies instead (Burney 266). Mrs. Mirvan is perhaps the most oppressed woman in *Evelina*; conveniently, she is also one of the only married women in a novel of unmarried young ladies and women with deceased or absent husbands. She is given Evelina's "entire confidence" during their time together but will not or cannot claim agency through a return of Evelina's emotional exchange (Burney 270). By placing the reactive Mrs. Mirvan in the captain's shadow and taking away her capacity for elite and emotional agency, the novel comments quite effectively on the pressures of patriarchy on female agency. Like Duval, Mrs. Mirvan has the choice of simply doing and taking what she wants, but only at great personal risk to her social standing. For Burney's contemporaries, there were many ways to lose agency and few ways to independently gain it, especially in a manner that would not result in the ostracization of a woman by polite society.

Mrs. Selwyn may be the strangest, most polarizing representation of women's agency in *Evelina*. Described by Evelina as "masculine" and in "want of gentleness," Mrs. Selwyn acts as a curious middle ground (Burney 400). As a woman of the genteel middle class, she has connections to members of the upper class and comports herself in the haughty fashion of one with elite agency, yet her harsh manners and satirical bent are reminiscent of lower-class

physical agency and the desire for entertainment. Though generally downplayed, her wealth is recognized to the extent that she is granted the ability to move about higher society with very few consequences despite her actions. Straining to oppress any streams of impropriety that might reach his foster daughter, Villars does not like Mrs. Selwyn and "has often been disgusted at her unmerciful propensity to satire," but Burney is more sympathetic (Burney 400; McMaster 236). Mrs. Selwyn is unafraid to "speak out loud thoughts and feelings that Evelina suppresses or feels unable to utter," and verbally and straightforwardly attacks the rudeness of Louisa and Orville's friends where Evelina cannot (Hopes 320; Cutting 522). The reader is moved to agree with Mrs. Selwyn's condemnation of the rude elite, highlighting that Evelina's "unease in the presence of a woman like Mrs. Selwyn," with her unrestrained mockery and cutting remarks, "is the result of social conditioning" (Hopes 319). As an elite actor herself, Mrs. Selwyn is as unstoppable as Louisa; however, her volleys against the young gentlemen of the Bristol Hotwell party appear more in line with Duval's inability to restrain herself. Mrs. Selwyn's agency is a very vocal one, and her ventures into physical agency serve to alienate Evelina:

I have never been personally hurt at her want of gentleness; a virtue which, nevertheless, seems so essential a part of the female character, that I find myself more awkward, and less at ease, with a woman who wants it, than I do with a man (Burney 400).

In combining physical and elite agency, Mrs. Selwyn is by far the novel's most liberated woman, but she is also criticized as the most masculine, which in Evelina's mind nearly removes her from the equation of female agency. In this sense, her agency is not undermined but transformed: Mrs. Selwyn's masculine approach to the social world lends her a rare self-confidence in her status as an agent, and a better protection than even Louisa's elite agency. Burney's undercover feminism emerges most strongly in Mrs. Selwyn, but by conforming to social expectations herself she is forced to paint her most "unconventional" and "intelligent" picture of female agency as a satirical and satirized curiosity who cannot morally best the emotional agency uncovered in Evelina herself (McMaster 236).

IV. Conclusions

The understanding of female agency in *Evelina* is complex in its layered formulation of personal, social, and emotional bases. Burney's depictions of agency act as a moral guide for the disoriented Evelina as she gradually learns to adapt to her new position in wider society while exploring her own

expressions of agency through her interpersonal connections with those who validate and engage with her ability to act on her own terms. Evelina's interactions with the women in her circle of acquaintance serve to further her education in propriety and agency. Burney provides a wide range of characters with extremely different identities and situates them so as to force Evelina to reflect upon her own abilities to act according to her perception of society. The three pillars of female agency structure the narrative around the differences between proper and improper choices and behaviours: motivation matters, the reader learns, as does the ability to express oneself privately while remaining publicly in line. Evelina's lower-class relations, designed to expose Evelina to the indecency of physical agency, are crass and act in their own interests without regard for their reception. The novel's peripheral characters with elite agency, characterized as socially respectable due to their places in society, are typically flawed as social actors or tethered to husbands. Only Evelina's own emotional agency is depicted as a truly rewarding state. From the internal consideration to the external support offered by the creation of the emotional arena, her growth is encouraged by her capacity for private emotional articulation, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to reassess her performances so as to continually renew her agency in a social and emotional context. By demonstrating the versatile nature of female agency in the eighteenth century via the three-pillar model, Burney's gendered discourse on social perceptions and the virtues of sensibility and emotional engagement underlines the feminist value of *Evelina*.

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