

Freedom and Captivity in Frances Burney's *Evelina*

Charmaine Falzon

charmaine.falzon@um.edu.mt

Abstract: Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1779) is, as the novel's subtitle states, 'The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World'. Upon publication it created an immediate sensation – indeed, with Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), it is still the most popular English epistolary novel of the eighteenth-century. In 'entering' the world, Burney's young heroine Evelina Anville leaves the sheltered abode where she was brought up to experience the 'gaieties of a London life'.

Knowing that the Reverend Mr Villars will (initially, at least) be against any proposal to take Evelina into society, his aristocratic friend Lady Howard advises him that it is time for his cherished ward to visit the capital, and that young people who have been 'too rigidly sequestered' from the world eventually feel wronged by those who have prevented them from enjoying its pleasures. When an occasion arises for Lady Howard's daughter Mrs Mirvan and the latter's adolescent daughter to visit London, Lady Howard urges the reluctant clergyman to allow Evelina to accompany them. Many 'inducements', Lady Howard hints, 'conspire to make London the happiest place at present [Evelina] can be in', and it would be unfair to force 'retirement' upon the girl when her friend Miss Mirvan is enjoying the pleasures of the town. Mr Villars, of course, finds it impossible to resist the combined 'urgency' of Lady Howard and pleas from Evelina and, keenly aware of Evelina's 'impatience to fly to a place [her] imagination has painted in colours so attractive', gives her permission to go.

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Given the enthusiasm for the pleasures of the town which Evelina's early letters to Mr Villars exude, it is ironic that so many of Evelina's experiences both in London and the fashionable watering resort of Bristol, where she goes to recover her health in the third volume of the epistolary novel, see Burney's protagonist facing difficult and unpleasant situations, often in the role of captive. Captivity, indeed, is a key theme in all four of Burney's novels, the often unhappy protagonists of which are constantly the victims of both social and physical restraint, probably the worst instance of which is the protagonist Juliet Granville's persecution at the hands of her vicious French husband in *The Wanderer* (1814).

Throughout *Evelina* the protagonist, an *ingénue* desperately trying to preserve her respectability in the midst of hypocrisy and ruthlessness, is often the victim not only of gross liberties on the part of others, but also of crippling feelings of guilt and self-doubt. She is a captive both physically and emotionally. Physically, she is subjected to dreadful coercion both at the hands of the men she meets in London and at those of her socially objectionable and extremely selfish maternal grandmother Madame Duval and the latter's family. Emotionally, the heroine is almost constantly the victim of feelings of self-doubt, outrage, guilt, and bafflement.

At Berry Hill, Evelina Anville's guardian gives her a sound though unsophisticated education. The girl's good upbringing, however, proves to be scant preparation for the challenges she has to face in the outside world. Apart from the first two, none of the letters Evelina writes to Mr Villars from London show us the heroine in a serene frame of mind. She is constantly asking her guardian to give her advice as to how she ought to behave in the face of this or that adversity or to imagine how confused or upset she was by a given mishap. At one point, 'terrified' that Mr Lovel, a man who obstinately insists on posing as one of her suitors, might challenge Lord Orville to a duel on her account, she confides 'really, I think there ought to be a book, of the laws and customs *à-la-mode*, presented to all young people upon their first introduction into public company'. She frequently expresses shocked surprise at the nonsensical way city folk live ('We sleep with the sun, and wake with the moon') and dismay at their moral degeneracy ('What a world is this we live in!

How corrupt! How degenerate! Well might I be contented to see no more of it!'). She is often in a quandary, anxiously wondering whether or not a step she has taken to get out of a difficult situation will be the source of further difficulties and misunderstandings: 'I doubted whether, to clear myself from one act of imprudence, I had not committed another ...'.

Several of Evelina's comments to Mr Villars about the ways she and other women are treated in town make it clear to the reader that women in the outside world do not generally enjoy the reverent respect Evelina had been accorded at Berry Hill. Even the rich peeress Mrs Beaumont is made fun of by her male guests behind her back. Captain Mirvan is a brute who does not curb his vulgarity even in the presence of his wife and daughter. He is a constant source of embarrassment to his wife and makes fun of his daughter's appearance in public. In her fourth letter to Mr Villars, in which she provides him with a description of the first assembly ball she attends, Evelina complains that the men at the ball (all of them gentlemen of fashion) eye the women 'as though they thought we were quite at their disposal, and only waiting for the honour of their commands'. These 'gentlemen' are unwilling to give the women the satisfaction of being asked to dance, so they 'saunter[...] about in a careless indolent manner, as if with a view to keep us in suspense'. Both Mr Branghton and Captain Mirvan blissfully unaware of their own prodigious ignorance and vulgarity repeatedly express contempt of women's understanding.

The world Evelina is introduced to in London (like that of Cecilia Beverley, the heroine of Burney's second novel) is one where respectable women are constantly exposed to the disagreeable 'gallantry' of importunate men, to the vulgarity of the ignorant, and to the censorious judgement of those who fancy themselves respectable. Each of Evelina's actions, no matter how innocent or well-meaning, is liable to be misinterpreted or exploited for someone else's selfish ends. Most of Evelina's letters in Volume III chronicle her acute anxiety about Sir Clement Willoughby and Mr Macartney's eagerness to spend time alone in her company. She makes huge efforts to avoid them both, fearing that Lord Orville, her love for whom she gradually comes to acknowledge, might think she is in love with one of them or conceive a bad opinion of her for consorting with men in private.

For a female newcomer to society, Evelina discovers, life is one big obstacle race. One might fend off an importunate man at a dance by saying that one is disinclined to dance. Having done this, however, one cannot agree to dance with another man – even if he should enjoy our good opinion – for fear the former suitor might feel offended. A suitor’s taking offence might lead to a duel which would damage the reputation of the woman over whom it was fought (presumably, she had flirted with both thus putting them at odds with one another) as well as killing or injuring one of the two duellists, and so on and so forth. At Berry Hill, Evelina has been taught that one ought to behave with reserve in the presence of strangers, especially people with whom one is totally unacquainted. When she first meets Sir Clement Willoughby, however, he immediately attaches himself to her and ‘with the greatest ease imaginable’, begins ‘a conversation, in the free style’ which, Evelina has been taught, ‘only belongs to old and intimate acquaintance’. Evelina is filled with anxiety as to how to react to this ‘freedom’. In the course of the novel, Evelina encounters a myriad such difficult situations, being duly distressed by each. As she exclaims in exasperation in one of her letters to Villars: ‘my intentions are never wilfully blameable, yet I err perpetually’.

It is not only women of good breeding who are treated disrespectfully by men in the novel. Madame Duval, though she is not entirely blameless in the matter, is treated with great brutality by Captain Mirvan and Sir Clement, and is laughed at by young Branghton when she dances at the Hampstead Assembly. On his first meeting with her, Captain Mirvan unceremoniously ‘seiz[es] her wrists’ and addresses her as ‘Mrs. Frog’ (she lives in France). He proceeds to treat her unkindly and engage in loud quarrels with her whenever they meet. Lord Merton considers all older women to be useless and worthy only of being laughed at (‘I don’t know what the devil a woman lives for after thirty: she is only in other folks’ way’). In Volume III, a silly rivalry between Lord Merton and Mr Coverley is solved by means of a race between two old and miserable women (Volume III, Letter VII).

In the course of the novel, Evelina is not only entrapped by contemporary manners and convention (manners which some of the male characters disregard with impunity) but she is also frequently the

victim of acts of physical restraint. Some of these are perpetrated by women – who either wish her no good or mistakenly think they are acting in her best interests. Other episodes in the novel see the heroine being held, touched, or squeezed against her will by men, and while these (like innumerable analogous episodes in the prose literature of the time) must have been (consciously or unconsciously) intended by the writer to provide an element of sexual thrill, they also show how susceptible women at the time were to being treated as mere sexual objects, even by men whose birth and education should have taught them better.

In this context, Evelina's hand acquires metonymic significance. In the course of the novel, men who seek to subject her to their sexual attention against her will constantly try to gain possession of her hand. Evelina's letters to her mentor reveal how her hand is grabbed and kissed innumerable times by men who are repulsive to her. Mr Lovel, the first of these, comes up to Evelina when she is alone and, without even introducing himself, 'offer[s] to take [her] hand', but she 'dr[a]w[s] it back'. Mr Smith, one of the Branghtons' lodgers, is constantly 'offering to take [Evelina's] hand', and she is equally assiduous in keeping it out of his grasp. While Mrs Beaumont's guests are taking a walk in her garden, Lord Merton, heedless of the fact that his betrothed is present, pays Evelina 'the most high-flown compliments' and, 'hastily following' her, 'seiz[es]' her hand and, 'vowing the *day [is] his own*', swears he will not let Evelina go. Finding her alone in an arbour, Sir Clement Willoughby grasps her hand and ignores all her pleas to be set free. He lets her go only after the desperate heroine has called for Lord Orville's help.

In Burney's novel, apparently innocent places such as a coach, a public garden, an arbour, or a parlour can become prisons in which one is subjected to verbal importunity, humiliation, or unwanted sexual attentions. Several episodes in the novel see the heroine and her female companions accosted or trapped by groups of men or, in one case (Volume II, Letter XXI), two prostitutes. When she first meets him and refuses to dance with him, Evelina expects Sir Clement Willoughby to leave her. Instead, he remains by her side the whole evening, causing the unfortunate girl (who doesn't even know his name) no end of embarrassment. In the episode in which Evelina and the Miss

Branghtons are surrounded by a group of young men in a dark alley at Vauxhall Gardens, we are told that the three women are ‘for some minutes ... kept prisoners’, so that Evelina is ‘terrified to death’, and, ‘with a swiftness which fear only could have given me, I flew rather than ran up the walk, hoping to secure my safety’.

The most common means of road transport for the members of the upper-middle and upper classes in eighteenth-century Europe was the carriage or coach. The coaches of the day were narrow and unwieldy. In Volume III, Lady Louisa Larpent complains that she has been ‘half killed ... with terror’ riding in Lord Merton’s phaeton. The lack of comfort the coach afforded its passengers is amply brought out by Burney. On many an occasion in the novel, Evelina is forced to make coach journeys against her will, trapped within the narrow confines of the carriage in the company of people whose company is repulsive to her, subjected to unwanted amorous attentions under cover of the proximity a crowded coach imposes upon its passengers, and, indeed, as the terrified victim of the breakdown of a coach. One of Mr Villars’ scruples in letting Evelina go to London was the fear that she might meet her maternal grandmother there. Lady Howard assures him that he ‘ha[s] no reason to be concerned about Madame Duval’, but this proves not to be the case – Evelina *does* meet her grandmother in London and becomes aware of the lady’s identity while riding with her in a coach!¹ A few pages on, the coach in which Evelina, her friends and her grandmother are riding breaks down, providing Sir Clement with the opportunity to ‘rescue’ Evelina.² A few minutes earlier, Madame Duval had become wet through by sitting in a coach which was ‘in a dismal condition’ as ‘the rain had ... made its way into the carriage’.

Carriages are also susceptible to being waylaid by thieves. Mr Macartney confides to Evelina that, in the depths of his despair, he had

1 ‘... amazed, frightened and unspeakable shocked, an involuntary exclamation of *Gracious Heaven!* Escaped me, and, more dead than alive, I sunk into Mrs. Mirvan’s arms’. Vol. I, Letter XIV.

2 ‘I had scarce touched ground, when I was lifted suddenly from it, by Sir Clement Willoughby, who begged permission to assist me, though he did not wait to have it granted’. Vol. I, Letter XVI,

'formed the horrible plan of turning footpad' in an effort to solve his financial difficulties. When, in Volume II, Captain Mirvan determines to play a rough trick on Madame Duval, he does this by pretending to be a highwayman. He and Sir Clement waylay the coach (though not before Evelina and Madame Duval, who are riding in it, have left their money and jewels in the custody of an honest farmer) on the open highway. Madame Duval is carried off by the Captain, given a dreadful 'shake', and left tied up in a ditch, while Evelina remains in the coach at Sir Clement's mercy. Later, Sir Clement uses a silly excuse to get into the same coach Evelina, Madame Duval, and the Branghtons are sitting in. In this coach, under cover of darkness, 'Sir Clement perpetually endeavour[s] to take [her] hand'.

A carriage can also be a means of abduction. In Volume I, Sir Clement purposely distances the heroine from her friends at the Opera so as to force her to accept a ride home in his chariot. He makes the utmost use of what he calls his 'little moment' alone in the coach with Evelina until the exasperated heroine, certain that the coach is not going in the right direction, threatens to 'open the chariot door [herself], with a view of jumping into the street'. 'Never, in my whole life', Evelina later confides to Mr Villars, 'have I been so terrified.'

Another source of entrapment for Evelina in the novel is her grandmother and the latter's family. Burney's correspondence³ provides ample proof of the fact that, at the time, single women were at their families' mercy. At the opening of the novel, Lady Howard writes to Mr Villars telling him that Madame Duval (in her youth a waiting-woman in a tavern) has discovered that she has a grandchild and tells him that he 'may send it to Paris, where she will properly provide for it'. Madame Duval's preposterous and untimely offer – and the insolent letter in which she makes it – give rise to a discussion of her character by Lady Howard and Mr Villars in which the reader discovers what to expect from her. Lady Howard describes Madame Duval's letter as at once 'abusive' and 'wicked' and the

3 *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Joyce Hemlow *et al.* (Oxford, 1972–84).

woman herself as ‘vulgar’ and ‘illiterate’. Mr Villars states that it is his belief that Evelina’s maternal grandmother is ‘by no means a proper companion or guardian for a young woman’, being ‘at once uneducated and unprincipled; ungentle in her temper, and unamiable in her manners’. This criticism is shown to be well-deserved when we actually encounter Madame Duval. She is selfish, loud, dictatorial, and ignorant. Though her opinions are often ill-judged, she is ‘violent’ and intransigent in their support. She also does not learn from her mistakes, mainly because she does not admit that she has done any. In the past, she treated her daughter Caroline ‘with the grossest unkindness and threatened her with poverty and ruin’ if she refused to marry a relative of Monsieur Duval’s, her second husband. She thus drove the poor girl into the arms of Lord Belmont, a heartless rake. Yet, as both Lady Howard and Mr Villars admit, Madame Duval has more of a legal right over Evelina than Mr Villars and she exercises this right with the utmost determination. Thus, Evelina, for her own good, is forced to obey her and must constantly seek to appease her wrath. On one occasion, when Evelina refuses an invitation to accompany her grandmother to the opera, Madame Duval appears at Mrs Mirvan’s lodgings ‘in a great rage’. ‘Her face’, we are told, ‘was the colour of scarlet, and her eyes sparkled with fury.’ She pays no attention whatsoever to Mrs and Miss Mirvan, who are having tea with Evelina, and loudly scolds her granddaughter for ‘dar[ing] to disobey’ her. Evelina’s reaction to this behaviour is one of horrified terror: ‘I was in such extreme terror, at being addressed and threatened in a manner to which I am so wholly unused, that I almost thought I should have fainted.’ Later, Evelina says of her grandmother that she ‘did not dare dispute her commands’.

Madame Duval’s relatives, the Branghtons, are no better than her. As their name suggests,⁴ they are loud and much given to quarrelling. When, in Volume II, Evelina is compelled to spend a month in

4 The name Branghton (which did not exist in 18th-century Britain) was an invention of Burney’s. In her introduction to the 1994 Penguin edition of the novel, Margaret Anne Doody suggests that it may be based on the slang word ‘to brangle’, which, at the time, meant ‘to brawl’ and ‘to wrangle’ (p. xxviii).

London with her grandmother (she had been unable to refuse the latter's invitation) she sees much of the Branghtons and becomes increasingly disgusted with their lack of breeding and their cruelty to their poor lodger Macartney. She is worried about being seen by her London acquaintances in the Branghtons' company,⁵ bitterly resents having to obey them, and is constantly conscious of the fact that their thoughtlessness and rudeness might seriously compromise her: 'I find all endeavours vain to escape any thing which these people desire I should not.' In Madame Duval and the Branghtons' company, London has shed its previous brilliance and become a city in which 'the air seems stagnant, the heat is intense ... the inhabitants illiterate and underbred'. In view of how unhappy the month Evelina's stay with her grandmother had been, her reunion with Mr Villars at the end of Volume II has all the flavour of the reunion of a newly-liberated captive with a beloved relative after a long period of captivity: 'I beheld the dearest, the most venerable of men, with uplifted hands, returning, as I doubt not, thanks for my safe arrival ... I sprung forward and, with a pleasure that bordered upon agony, I embraced his knees, I kissed his hands, I wept over them ...'.

In all but a very few episodes of Burney's novel, the protagonist is portrayed as a captive, constantly at the mercy of people and forces beyond her control. It is thus interesting to analyse the use she makes of some words relating to captivity and freedom in the novel. The word 'captive', though current in the eighteenth-century, is not used once in the novel. The word 'prisoner' is used once (in the plural) in Volume II. What a prisoner desires most is freedom. In the eighteenth-century, the words 'free' and 'freedom' had a number of meanings they still have today and others which have gone out of use. 'Free' could mean 'exempt from or not in slavery' (being a free man/woman), 'to be a manumitted (freed) slave', 'not being subject to foreign rule or to despotism' (of nations), 'to be free of cost', and 'acting without self-restraint, reserve, or decency' (as in 'free conduct', 'free and easy behaviour', etc.).

5 'As to myself, I must acknowledge, nothing could be more disagreeable to me, than being seen ... with a party at once so vulgar in themselves, and so familiar to me ...'. Vol. II, Letter XLVI.

It interesting to note, given that *Evelina* is a novel which sees the heroine constantly being denied the right to make her own choices and decisions, that the word ‘freedom’, when used in the novel, is always used in its negative detonation, to describe the loose and licentious behaviour of which Evelina, so often in the novel, is a victim. Evelina is shocked when, in Volume I, Sir Clement, then a complete stranger to her, accosts her at a ball and begins ‘a conversation in the free and easy style which only belongs to old and intimate acquaintance’. Lord Merton is not to be outdone by Sir Clement. When he first meets Evelina at the Pantheon (and before he has even introduced himself to her), he takes her hand and, despite her many attempts to withdraw it, ‘he frequently, in the course, of conversation, contrived to take it again, though it was extremely disagreeable to me’. Commenting on this behaviour in a letter to Mr Villars, Evelina uses both the word ‘free’ and the word ‘liberty’ to signify unrestrained behaviour: ‘And surely, my dear Sir, it was a great liberty in this Lord, notwithstanding his rank, to treat me so freely ...’. When, in Volume II, the protagonist describes Mr Smith’s behaviour at the Hampstead Assembly, she interestingly uses the words ‘free’ and ‘serious’ as antonyms: ‘... he thought proper to importune me, very freely, not to be so cruel; and I was obliged to assume no little haughtiness before I could satisfy him I was serious.’ Later, when Evelina describes her experience of getting lost in Marybone Gardens, she bemoans the fact that her pleas for help to the people around her only ‘furnished a pretence for impertinent witticisms, or free gallantry’.

Another word Burney’s use of which reflects interestingly upon the heroine’s predicament in the novel is ‘mad’. Etymological dictionaries show us that three meanings of the word ‘mad’ were current in the eighteenth-century. These are: being insane or out of one’s mind, being greatly provoked or irritated, and being wildly excited or confused. In the novel, Burney makes frequent use of the word ‘mad’, but generally not in its clinical sense, to denote a mentally disturbed person. The word ‘mad’ is mainly used in the novel to denote over-the-top behaviour, behaviour which goes beyond the bounds of contemporary manners, be it excessive enthusiasm about something or excessive anger. In this, Burney appears to be following Samuel Johnson’s well-known

definition of madness: 'Madness frequently discovers itself merely by unnecessary deviation from the usual modes of the world'.⁶

In the novel, in fact, anyone whose manners do not demonstrate strict conformity to what is required by society, or who allows himself to be carried away by his feelings, is described by the heroine as 'mad'. This word is first used by Evelina with reference to her own reaction to a play. On her first evening in London, she is taken to a performance of Hoadly's *The Suspicious Husband*, in which the actor David Garrick plays the main role. Evelina is so thrilled by Garrick's performance that she fears her mentor will find her effusions excessive. 'I'm afraid you will think me mad', she remarks, 'so I won't say any more; yet I really believe Mr. Garrick would make you mad too, if you could see him'. 'Mad' is often used in the novel to denote anger. It is first used in one of Evelina's early letters to Mr Villars, in which she describes her (uncharacteristic) reaction to a visit by the impertinent Branghton sisters: 'I was extremely mad at this visit.' Sir Clement describes the irascible Madame Duval as 'a mad woman' ... 'for what else', as he tells the shocked Evelina, 'can you call a creature whose passions are so insolent?'. Owing to her lack of self-restraint, Evelina's grandmother often has to be 'brought to reason' by those around her. Another character whom the protagonist describes as mad is the fop Mr Lovel who, upon first meeting Evelina and without even knowing who she is, launches into effusive praise of her appearance and graces: "'O my Lord!" cried the madman, "she is an angel.'" In Volume III, Sir Clement Willoughby, in a hypocritical attempt to pass off his destruction of 'Lord Orville's letter' (which Sir Clement himself had written) as the act of a lover beside himself with jealousy, describes himself as 'half-mad' with despair, attributing his impetuosity not to his desire to destroy the evidence of his villainy before Lord Orwell's arrival, but to unrequited love.

In her Preface to *Evelina*, Burney describes the book as the story of a young girl's first appearance 'upon the great and busy stage of life' in which 'her ignorance of the forms, and inexperience in the manners, of the world' give rise to the events the novel records. As this paper has

6 As reported by James Boswell in *The Life of Johnson*, Vol. I (London, 1989).

attempted to show, Evelina's world is a cruel one in which, despite the protagonist's good intentions, she is always prone to becoming the target of unfair criticism or worse. It is indeed interesting that the depiction Burney provides of mid-eighteenth-century manners shows them up as being at once restrictive and threatening to the weak elements of society and totally ineffectual in restraining the excesses and transgressions of the powerful, the cynical, and the vulgar. While laying it down that 'a woman's reputation is as brittle as it is beautiful', the manners of the time, as these are depicted in the novel, gave women few means, legal or otherwise, to protect themselves from insolence, unwanted sexual attentions, and even abduction. It is significant that, when Madame Duval approaches a magistrate in London to attempt to gain satisfaction for the way Captain Mirvan had treated her, little is done to help her – indeed she is told that any legal action she may decide to take against him would be useless. In the light of her experiences in London and Bristol, it makes sense that, once she has recovered her fortune and got married, Evelina's only wish is to leave London for 'dear Berry Hill'.