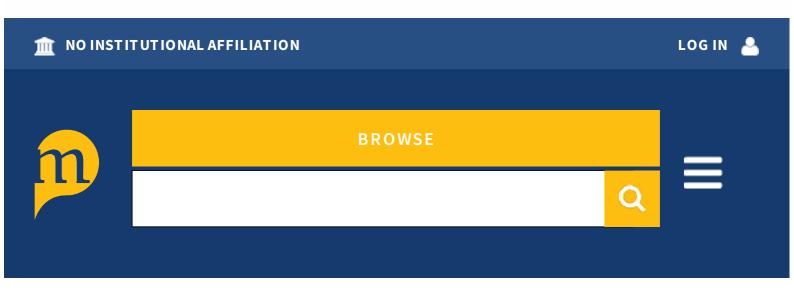
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Oh Dear Resemblance of Thy Murdered

Mother: Female Authorship in Evelina.



"Oh Dear Resemblance of Thy Murdered Mother": Female Authorship in Evelina

Susan C. Greenfield

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"Oh Dear Resemblance of Thy Murdered Mother": Female Authorship in Evelina Susan C. Greenfield Frances Burney's first published novel, Evelina (1778),1 is a story about an orphan girl's quest for identity and her development as a writer. The novel traces the heroine's search for a parental author who can name her and establish her position in the world; at the same time, since the text is epistolary and most of the letters are written by Evelina, the heroine herself is an author. In this essay I examine Evelina's representation of authorship in each sense of the term and argue that identity and literary power are depicted as matrilineal gifts. I also suggest that the book's female-centred family romance parallels both Burney's personal myth about her own writing and her culture's narrative about the origins of the novel as a genre. Such claims may

seem puzzling because, on the surface, Evelina focuses on the heroine's longing for a patriarchal name.
Patricia Spacks correctly points out that the "identity she cares about most is given her 1 Frances Burney,
Evelina; or The History ofa Young Lady's Entrance into the World, ed. Edward A. Bloom (London: Oxford
University Press, 1968). References are to this edition. I would like to thank the following for reading earlier
drafts of this essay and offering valuable suggestions: Allyson Booth, Robin Bower, Rebecca Bushneil,
Stuart Curran, Christopher Flint, Elizabeth Gitter, Ellen Pollak, and John Richetti. EIG HTEENTH-CENTURY
FICTION, Volume 3, Number 4, July 1991 302 EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION from without by husband and
father."2 What studies of Evelina have not yet revealed, however, is that there is also a subtext that undercuts
the patriarch and privileges Evelina's dead mother's authority. Surprising as it may seem, the account of the
heroine author's search for her parental author suggests that identity, title, and the power of writing all
descend through me maternal line. In the climactic recognition scene, for instance, when Evelina finally
meets the father who abandoned her and precipitated her mother's death, she gives him her mother's last
letter. After reading the text, he exclaims: "Oh my child, my child! Oh dear resemblance of thy murdered
mother! Oh thou representative of my departed wife, speak to me in her name" (pp. 385-86). In part, the
moment represents the culmination of Evelina's efforts to gain paternal legitimation, to have her father
describe her as "my child." And yet, it is ultimately the dead mother who signs the daughter's body
(stamping Evelina with herown physical features) and she who writes the letter that defines kinship
relationships. The father must acknowledge his familial history, but the mother's posthumous ability both to
name the daughterand enable the daughterto speak in hername eclipses his authorial power. I am not
claiming that Evelina is a radical text, for every reference to female control is balanced by a contradictory
position and the work concludes by glorifying the patriarchy. Indeed, as Kristina Straub points out, the novel
is divided between its emphasis on "the autonomy of female consciousness" and its "deference to
masculine authority."3 In terms of the problem of authorship, there is always a tension in the work. Clearly,
Evelina appropriates hegemonic values, but it also subverts these values in its representation of female
creativity. It is useful to begin by examining Burney's stories about the family dynamics of her own early
writing career,4 for the conflicting representation of patriarchal authority in the novel also surfaces in
Burney's accounts 2 Patricia Meyer Spacks, Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century
England (Cambodge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 179.3 Kristina Straub, Divided Fictions: Fanny Bumey
and Feminine Strategy (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), p. 1.4 I deliberately use the word
"story" here. Bumey's autobiographical descriptions may be based on "true" events, but she develops a
narrative about her history that has become legendary among those interested in her work and bears
re markable similarity to the story told in Evelina. FEMALE AUTHORS HIP 303 of her relationship with her author
father, Dr Charles Burney

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¹ Fizzares Burtory, Ending or The History of a Yearsy Larly's Entrance into the World, ed. Edward A. Shann (Leaning: Clarind University Fress, 1968). References not to this edition, I would like to them; the following for reading regiler dealth of this cases and offering valuable suggestions: Allysia: Books, Robin Blown, Release Bushnell, Sunct Curran, Christopher Flins, Elizabeth Guner, Filter Pollak, and John Richelli.



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