

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

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

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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 of a 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 Bushnell, Stuart Curran, Christopher Flint, Elizabeth Gitter, Ellen Pollak, and John Richetti. EIGHTEENTH-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 the 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 her own 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 daughter and enable the daughter to speak in her name 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* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 179. 3 Kristina Straub, *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), p. 1. 4 I deliberately use the word "story" here. Burney'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 remarkable similarity to the story told in *Evelina*. FEMALE AUTHORSHIP 303 of her relationship with her author father, Dr Charles Burney...

**“Oh Dear Resemblance of
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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.

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