



Reading with the Burneys: Patronage, Paratext, and Performance

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BOOK REVIEW

Reading with the Burneys: Patronage, Paratext, and Performance, by Sophie Coulombeau, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024 ("Elements in Eighteenth-Century Connections" series), 86 pp., open access (online), ISBN 9781009439480

Within the by now vast landscape of *Burneyana*, two episodes are most commonly associated with Reverend Charles Burney, D.D. (1757–1817), son of the eminent musicologist and scholar Dr. Charles Burney (1726–1814). The first event dates to his adolescence, when he played a crucial role in preserving the anonymity of his sister Frances (1752–1840) during dealings with the publisher Thomas Lowndes, who would go on to publish the epistolary *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* to universal acclaim in 1778. On that occasion, Charles acted as his elder sister's literary agent, a key figure in the sensitive negotiations that led to the novel's publication. (In light of Coulombeau's study, I cannot help but notice how the pseudonym Charles used in his interactions with Lowndes – Mr. King – seems curiously anticipatory.) The second episode, less commendable but equally revealing, concerns Charles's expulsion from Cambridge for stealing around one hundred rare library books – a delinquency that Frances later attempted to excuse as the result of a "mad rage for possessing a library" (62).

Charles Burney's youthful bibliographic practices – including physical alterations to books, marginal annotations, and informal sub-lending, sometimes crossing into dubious legality – can be seen as early signs of his later career as a collector and curator. This retrospective lens offers useful insight into the formation of the unique collection of early modern books, newspapers, and news ephemera during his lifetime, later the basis of the Burney Collection in the British Library ("Afterword").

In *Reading with the Burneys. Patronage, Paratext, and Performance*, Sophie Coulombeau adds another layer to the portrait of the bibliophilic Charles – reckless in his youth, but a highly respected classical scholar and collector in later life. Coulombeau draws on Charles's manuscript poetry, letters, and marginalia, along with illustrations and circulating library archives, to tell the remarkable story of how he attempted to control and exploit the early reception of his sister's best-selling *Evelina* to bolster his own socio-literary standing. The transition from undergraduate book poaching to the creative repurposing of the various *Evelina* sets in his possession becomes the basis for a fascinating micro-history in the print ecology of the long Romanticism, reconstructed with critical acuity.

Coulombeau's volume makes three central claims about Frances's novel and Charles's rage to possess it, focusing on the period 1777–1781. Charles spent those three years at the University of Aberdeen pursuing a degree in Divinity. The analytical corpus includes three sets of the published *Evelina* that were in

his possession, examined in their full textual completeness – including markings, illustrations, frontispieces, and marginalia – a paratextual level that often escapes critical attention. These volumes were used in several ways and for different purposes, all aimed at furthering his own advantage through his active curation of the physical copies of *Evelina* and supervised circulation among selected friends.

Coulombeau's volume is structured into five brief sections, three of which focus on specific aspects of Charles Burney's acquisitive relationship with the novelistic fame of his well-known sister. The first claim is that Charles, seeking to recover from his Cambridge shame, attempted to control the reception of *Evelina* by staging his sister's imaginative world within local reading communities of his own making – all designed to serve his own private and more public purposes – thus raising questions about post-publication possession and collaboration.

Next, Coulombeau introduces the concept of “identified performance” to show how Frances Burney's fiction encouraged readers – specifically her brother Charles – to inhabit and perform fictional identities beyond private reading. In Charles's case, the sustained performative engagement whereby he modelled his language and behaviour on characters in *Evelina* served personal aims, such as his search for social affirmation and his lifelong belletristic ambitions. Finally, Coulombeau's book examines the financially strained Charles's reading practices within the context of the circulating library's loan economy. She clearly shows how the ambiguous possession of circulating library books by Charles Burney – an economically precarious, yet socially ambitious reader – enabled their strategic use to his own advantage while forging social and affective connections at limited cost. Through his unusual reading, loaning, and appropriative practices, he managed to share the page with his famous sister while redefining his own identity and shaky social standing.

In each of these phases, one of Charles's many masks emerges, reflecting the multifaceted ambiguity tied to the notion of book *possession*: not only to possess a book but also be possessed by it. At times, Charles appears as a prefixer, at others as a reader, and sometimes as an informal loaner of the novel (5) – each role representing a different shade of identification and purpose. In all these guises, Charles's own derivative fictions and his sister's master fiction blurred into reality, sub specie of the forms of the sociable network he established during his life in Northeast Scotland. It is thanks to this careful and strategic reading approach – which the author describes as “3D reading” (3), where the biographical, bibliographical, and literary levels converge – that the case study of one reader (Charles Burney Jr.) and a specific cultural product (his sister's best-selling novel, *Evelina*) gains broader resonance and becomes a useful lens through which to reinterpret an entire cultural landscape, caught at a specific moment in its Enlightenment evolution. Controlling the materiality of *Evelina*, as Coulombeau argues, allowed Charles Burney to build his own cultural capital – encompassing both reputation and literary authority. In this respect, the long shadow of literary rivalry between siblings emerges clearly from Coulombeau's account, and I cannot help but look toward the very end of Charles's life, when he entered into competition with his sister over the wording of the

inscription to be placed on their famous father's tombstone, as recounted by Frances in *Memoirs of Dr Burney*.

If the macro-level of epistemological appraisal is convincingly addressed by Coulombeau, despite her methodological concerns about the unrepresentativeness of Charles Burney's case (74), the more granular dimension of her investigation also brings to light several noteworthy findings. Her research has involved substantial archival work (e.g., at the University of Aberdeen Special Collections or in the records of Alexander Angus's Circulating Library in Aberdeen) and the analysis of previously unpublished documents, which are of obvious relevance to scholars of Frances Burney.

For one, Charles's by-proxy celebrity appropriation – or what might be called readerly poaching – is particularly intriguing. He did not hesitate to preface or accompany the copies of *Evelina* he lent to those he sought to impress, accompanied by brief poetic contributions of his own – some, it seems, expressly intended to woo. It is a crucial paratextual level, often overlooked in criticism, to which Coulombeau restores dignity (Section 2). These poetic endeavours also aimed to associate Charles with the character of Mr. Macartney, the poet saved by the kind-hearted Evelina, who is later revealed to be his sister (Section 4). A further point of interest is the discussion of several previously unpublished letters, which open new perspectives on Charles's social ambitions, his pursuit of patronage and advancement, and his nuanced attitude toward both his classical learning and his sister's more lowbrow fame (Section 1).

But the interest of Coulombeau's analysis and discoveries in the life and deeds of Charles Burney is not the most remarkable quality of this concise study. The book is thoroughly enjoyable for the quality of the author's prose, which is both elegant and precise, as she lays out, with clarity and confidence, the reasons underpinning her choice to closely examine young Charles's unusual relationship with his sister's work.

The addition of a concentrated 'minigraph' – a brief but analytically dense study – devoted to Charles Burney, D.D., represents a welcome contribution to current scholarship beyond the Burneys. Thanks to Lorna Clarke's research on Sarah Harriet Burney, Geoffrey Sill's investigations in James Burney's voyages, the very recent completion of the first complete scholarly edition of Charles Burney, M.D.'s letters (under the general editorship of Peter Sabor), and now Coulombeau's work on Charles Jr., the expression – until recently almost disembodied – "*Burney and her circle*" is gradually acquiring sharper contours and vivid definition. It is no longer merely a literary and cultural label to identify a handful of intellectually inclined individuals. It is an increasingly recognisable learned network gaining clarity, whose familial, affective, and diversified authorial dynamics offer a privileged lens through which to view late eighteenth-century English culture at large. It is also through Coulombeau's insightful examination of these interactions that the phrase now emerges as a powerful critical avenue to illuminate the interconnections between literary production, reading practices, and the material transformations of book history during a pivotal phase in editorial and cultural modernity.

Overall, Coulombeau's volume makes an important contribution to current scholarship – one that goes beyond the private (micro)history of the Burney family, whose biographical trajectory nonetheless intersected with key cultural, and to some extent historical, developments across the long eighteenth century. The way she anatomises the various relationships Charles Burney maintained with *Evelina* – over a relatively short period and across different sets of the novel (be they gifted, shared or inscribed) – with questions of authorship and authority taking centre stage, resonates far beyond this specific case and sheds light on the broader print ecology of the period. The only remark I would make is that, for the reader, a more streamlined system of notes – with references integrated directly into the text, at least for the predictably numerous quotations from *Evelina* – might have been more user-friendly than traditional footnotes. That said, I assume this is a matter of house style.

While *Reading with the Burneys: Patronage, Paratext, and Performance* deftly explores the multiple performative uses to which a book can be subjected by a particular reader – in this case, the notorious book thief/book lover Charles, who might more accurately be described as a lifelong masterful manipulator and mediator of other people's texts – it also offers an original and meaningful perspective on both the history of reading and the material culture of the late eighteenth century. *Reading with the Burneys'* inclusion in the "Cambridge Elements" series comes as no surprise. Ultimately, Coulombeau's work stands as a concise yet substantial contribution to Burney studies as well as to the wider field of eighteenth-century book and reading history. It offers an original model for how Charles Burney's micro case study and a close paratextual focus can help reframe canonical texts.

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