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The Unfallen Woman: Vulnerability and Agency in Frances Burney's *Evelina*

Tamara Agger

“Remember, my dear Evelina, nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman: it is, at once, the most beautiful and most brittle of all human things” (Burney 166). This is the advice that Reverend Villars imparts to his seventeen-year-old charge, the titular heroine of Frances Burney’s novel *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*. And while it may sound rather pretentious and stiff (one gets the sense that he copied it straight out of a conduct book), this passage highlights a fundamental concern of Evelina’s world: that of female reputation. For the protagonist, a young, unmarried woman in 18th-century England, preserving her “reputation” (i.e. chastity) is no laughing matter. To lose it or even appear to lose it—to experience a sexual fall—will make her a social outcast. Evelina, as she makes her ‘entrance into the world,’ is in a very precarious position in regards to predatory men who would lead her towards such a fall. She is vulnerable by virtue of her sex, vulnerable due to the “peculiar cruelty of her situation,” and vulnerable when her relatives and guardians fail to effectively protect her (20). She also lives in an unapologetically brutal world, where she is constantly exposed to “physical violence and threats of violence” from individual acquaintances (such as Sir Clement Willoughby) and strangers alike (Staves 369). And yet, despite all these perils, our “fairy tale heroine” comes through unblemished in the end and is delivered safely into the loving protection of Lord Orville (Bloom 224). It seems a little unbelievable that Evelina should survive so many disadvantages and dangerous situations simply by the power of (what the audience understands to be) her own agency. And when the situations in which she is most threatened are analyzed more closely, it does indeed emerge that Evelina’s agency in

preventing her own sexual fall is less important than the way Burney consistently intervenes to protect and preserve her. These conclusions, in turn, impact our perception of the novel as a coming-of-age tale, as well as how we understand Burney's didactic message to her readers.

To start with, Evelina is vulnerable because of the conventions concerning gender and morality that exist in her society. Evelina lives in a patriarchal society where women are treated as second-class citizens, a society that values men as the repositories of sociocultural knowledge and worth and positions women as man's humble assistant, an empty vessel that exists primarily for his use and benefit. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the world of *Evelina* some men view women as replaceable objects. This is perhaps best exemplified by the episode of the foot race, in which two old peasant women are cruelly exploited for the idle sport of Lord Merton and Mr. Coverley (Burney III.vii). It is precisely Lord Merton's callous attitude towards women--he proclaims that he "[doesn't] know what the devil a woman lives for after thirty"--that makes him dangerous for Evelina, for it implies that, if given the opportunity, he will use and then discard her without a twinge of guilt (275). Societal rules regarding sexual morality also leave Evelina vulnerable to exploitation. As mentioned above, Evelina's society places a high value on female chastity, and the punishment for violating or appearing to violate the proper rules of 'modesty' is social exclusion and ruin. Men, on the other hand, feel no such pressures. Moreover, women bear the moral responsibility for any unchaste activity that they engage in (be it abduction, seduction, or rape), so even if Evelina 'falls' against her will it is she--and not the man--who will be blamed for the loss of her virtue.

Evelina's specific circumstances--her beauty and her inability to claim a family name or inheritance--also increase her vulnerability to experiencing a sexual fall. When initially describing Evelina, Mr. Villars writes to Lady Howard that she has "too much beauty to escape notice" (Burney 20). And while Evelina's looks can be an asset (they are, after all, what first attracts Lord Orville to her), more often than not her distinctive physical beauty proves to be more of a double-edged sword. Evelina's inability to "escape notice" attracts a great deal of unwanted attention, and makes her more vulnerable to being accosted or singled out by all types of unsavory men. Evelina is also made vulnerable by the "peculiar cruelty of her situation," the details of which Mr. Villars explains in the opening correspondence of the novel (20). Since Evelina's mother is dead and her father refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of their marriage, she is for all intents and purposes a bastard and an orphan (17). Evelina cannot expect an inheritance from either side of the family; additionally, she cannot claim a paternal family name and is forced to use the anagrammatic "Anville" instead (26).

Thus, in many ways Mr. Lovel's derisive remark about Evelina being a "nobody" is in fact an accurate representation of her situation in society (37). It is also important to note that the relative visibility or invisibility of Evelina's status as a 'nobody' does not matter, for both perceptions can cause problematic effects. If men are unaware of her status, they may think of her as marriage material and pursue her. If they are aware of her status they may leave her alone (since marrying her will bring them no material or social gain), but they may also decide to pursue her for the purposes of seduction or rape (since they know that because of her relative insignificance in society they will face little to no consequences for their actions).

For a young woman in Evelina's situation, her family would be considered the natural 'first line of defense' in protecting her from a sexual fall. In the novel, that responsibility falls upon Madame Duval (Evelina's maternal grandmother) and the Branghtons (her cousins). Unfortunately, they prove to be woefully inadequate to the task. Madame Duval is crude, flighty and selfish, and seems completely unconcerned with protecting Evelina from predatory men. She "orders [Evelina] to accept ball tickets from a vulgar young man she barely knows," and only excludes Willoughby from her and Evelina's company because she has discovered the part he played in the Captain's prank against her (Staves 380, Burney II.xvi). The Branghtons, especially the younger Branghtons, also embarrass Evelina and increase her exposure to harm. Her terrifying experience at Vauxhall, for example, only comes about because Bidy and Polly Branghton have a foolish desire to enter the dark walks and compel her to come along (Burney 197).

Since Evelina's blood relatives do not fulfill their responsibility to protect her, the next logical step is to consider the role that other guardians or adult authority figures play in her life. There are many such appointed guardians in the novel; but once again, they often prove unwilling or unable to give Evelina the protection and guidance she needs. One key way in which they fail to do this is through their absence at times when she requires them most. For example, although Mr. Villars is present through his letters, his advice and protection are of little value when Evelina faces immediate threats to her physical safety. In the same way, when at the first ball Evelina needs Mrs. Mirvan's guidance, her chaperone is off in another room playing cards (35). Some of Evelina's guardians also seem indifferent to her situation or insensible of her needs. Captain Mirvan, with his "foulmouthed contempt" for "vacuous" women, seems far more interested in his own cruel pranks than in any responsibility he has to protect Evelina--or even his own daughter (Doody 54, Hall 112). Mrs. Selwyn is also rather self-engrossed and coarse in this manner. After the foot race, she does not

see that Evelina clearly dislikes Lord Merton's drunken pawing at her (Evelina's) hands; Evelina must appeal for her help directly, and even then Mrs. Selwyn responds only with gentle humor (Burney 312-313). Therefore, in all the key to Evelina's avoidance of a sexual fall does not lie in the competence of those assigned to protect her. Evelina, then, will have to rely on the resources she herself possesses to defend her reputation.

Evelina's first two experiences of public interaction with the opposite sex--the ball (I.xi) and the ridotto (I.xiii)--show that she is not as hopelessly innocent as she seems to be, and exemplify the strategies she uses to defend herself. In the beginning of the novel, Lady Howard and Mr. Villars position Evelina as an "artless young creature" whose character is saturated by innocence (Burney 20). But when we read Evelina's own account of her first social experiences, we discover that "she is not as devoid of practical wisdom or as unfit for society as she and everyone else assumes (Cutting-Gray 46). While Evelina is a tad over-sensible and clearly ignorant "of [the] rules of social etiquette," she also displays a great deal of "judgment, wit, and quick intelligence" (48). Perhaps most importantly, she is able to form very accurate first impressions of the men she meets. She immediately brands Lovel as a ridiculous fop, and does not miss the depth of Sir Clement Willoughby's "determined boldness" (Burney 30, 45). It is a great point in her favor, then, that while she may underestimate the threat these men present to her, she has a sense of who they are and is aware that her interaction with them must be treated with caution. These first two dances also introduce us to the tactics that Evelina uses to escape male attention that makes her uncomfortable. In these situations, Evelina employs the following strategies: being silent, speaking directly and forcefully, putting physical distance between herself and the man in question, and appealing to a guardian for protection. The effectiveness of these strategies is another matter, one that will be explored below in the context of the specific situations that Evelina faces.

In the specific situations where Evelina is in the greatest danger of a sexual fall from a personalized source (in the form of Sir Clement Willoughby), her escapes seem to be aided by her own actions but ultimately permitted by Burney's interference. The first of these dangerous episodes takes place when Evelina and Sir Clement Willoughby are riding alone in his carriage together (I.xxi). Evelina at first tries being silent, and then is direct in an attempt to deflect his proclamations of love, but her tactics abruptly change when she realizes that not only is the coach going the wrong way, but that Willoughby ordered it to do so. She pulls away from him, tries to open the carriage door "with a view of jumping out into the street," puts her head out the window to tell the coachman to stop, and

does not calm down until he relents and gives the driver the correct directions (Burney 99-100). In this instance, it is possible that Evelina's determined and vocal resistance saves her; her opposition, combined with the presence of the coachman, deter Willoughby from assaulting her. However, his relenting is not the sort of kindness or restraint we expect from his character, and it could very well be that in the end it is Burney's decision to hold Willoughby back that allows Evelina to escape. This impression is strengthened upon an examination of the other critical situation: their time alone in the dark walks of Vauxhall (II.xv). Having thrown herself under Willoughby's protection to escape a group of young men who were harassing her, Evelina notices that instead of leading her back to the public, brightly lit center of the pleasure garden, he is leading her into another of the dark walks. When she asks him where he is going, he replies "where...we shall be least observed" (Burney 198). At this Evelina stops and refuses to go further. He attempts to talk to her, but she begins walking back to safety. Willoughby follows her and compels her to say she forgives him, but he does not prevent her from rejoining her party. Here, Willoughby has much greater incentive to try to seduce or rape Evelina. Although he has known Evelina before, finding her alone in the dark walks may indicate to him that she is the 'sort of woman' who would be open to a sexual liaison. Plus, the very environment of the dark walks (with all its secluded, hidden corners) lends itself to sexual assault, even more so than the carriage. It could be that he truly wishes to earn Evelina's love and consent, but it seems naïve to trust that a man like Willoughby is motivated by such concerns. Even more so than before, then, it appears that Burney's restraining hand has saved Evelina.

In the situations where Evelina is most vulnerable to anonymous violence, her escapes are once again a product of her agency combined with the decisive power of Burney's. In Vauxhall, when Evelina is forced to follow the Miss Branghtons into the dark walks, the young ladies are almost immediately encircled by a group of young men (Burney 197). One approaches and grabs Evelina, but she struggles and breaks free, running up the walk. Here her strategy to reach safety as soon as possible backfires somewhat, for her haste attracts the attention of some other young men. They seize her hands and she is caught, pleading with them to let her pass, until the appearance of Sir Clement saves her (for the moment). Evelina's resistance does free her from the first group of men here--but what about the second? Willoughby's appearance is something of a surprise, but given what we know about him it does not seem very fantastical that he would be hanging around the dark walks. If he had not appeared, however, Evelina very well could have been assaulted, for (as mentioned above) the other men probably take her presence in the dark walks as a sign of her sexual

permissiveness. In Marleybone, the explosion of some fireworks (and everyone's subsequent running) leaves Evelina alone in the crowd. As in Vauxhall, her "disordered haste" and "distress" as she desperately searches for a friendly face "only [furnish] a pretence for impertinent witticisms, or free gallantry" (Burney 234). When a young officer approaches her and takes her hand she screams, pulls herself away, and throws herself on the mercy of two nearby women. They turn out to be prostitutes, which of course leads to a whole other series of discomforts and embarrassments for Evelina, but her choice (however naïve) does protect her from male molestation until she is found by one of her party. Hence, here Burney's agency is less evident (or at least less obvious), and it is Evelina's quick thinking that buys her the time she needs in order to achieve safety.

Because Evelina seems to have relatively less agency than Burney in keeping herself from a sexual fall, it seems unlikely that *Evelina* can qualify as a coming-of-age tale. Although scholarly definitions of 'coming-of-age tale' and 'bildungsroman' differ, most require the protagonist to gain some sort of adult agency or power in the world by the end of the story. Lorna Ellis argues that in a female bildungsroman, women gain agency by learning to manipulate how others see them (Ellis 10). In her analysis, Evelina is largely aware of this process of "self-construction," and is able to use it to her advantage throughout the novel (93). However, to my mind such conclusions ignore the lack of agency Evelina displays in preserving her reputation (when compared to Burney), as well as the incontrovertible fact that throughout her entire growth process she merely moves from the control of one male authority figure to another, ending with Lord Orville. This is undoubtedly a standard pattern of female development given the cultural context, which raises the question: can a female coming-of-age-tale even exist in said context? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must consider the other part of Evelina's 'reward' at the end of the novel. Not only does she win the rich, good, protective male authority figure--she also wins a retreat into the country, away from the moral corruption and danger of London. It seems incredible that *Evelina* could be considered a coming-of-age tale when the ultimate purpose of her 'entrance into the world' seems to be to retreat from it again.

Evelina's lack of agency concerning her ability to preserve her own safety--and Burney's continual habit of stepping in to save her--leave Burney's intended audience of young female readers with a dark warning of life's dangers. In the Preface of *Evelina*, Frances Burney communicates her understanding that her audience will largely be young, impressionable female readers (Burney 9). Because of this, while her novel may not be a positive influence, she wishes that it may be read "at

least without injury” (10). This declaration of intentions is not unexpected, for it fits with academia’s classification of 18th-century literature as largely didactic: “Didacticism was as important as realism for these writers, and they clearly did not see themselves as simply producing credible fictions, for their works include moral exhortation and (often) the claim that moral teaching was the main purpose of writing fiction” (Hall 18). Considering Burney’s purpose, then, the question of Evelina’s agency becomes a question of how Burney is explaining the nature of the world and showing her readers how to act in it. Through Evelina she encourages her young female readers to be active in the defense of their reputations, but the fact that it is her continued benevolence which ultimately preserves Evelina indicates that a young woman’s defense or resistance may not be enough to save her. Ultimately, then, we are left with a very pessimistic message: the world is a harsh place, and for a vulnerable young woman there simply are no guarantees for survival. To come through unscathed (and end up with a husband like Lord Orville), it’s best to have a sympathetic author on your side.

Evelina’s situation of vulnerability in society is both universal to all women, and yet specific to her circumstances. But despite her multiple disadvantages (which also include a host of absent, uncaring, and/or ineffective guardians) she is able to come through all her difficulties without experiencing a sexual fall. Evelina’s “unfallen” status is the result of a combination of her resourcefulness and agency (which lessens the likelihood of her ruin) and Burney’s benevolent interference (which is always there waiting to tip the scales in Evelina’s favor). Evelina’s lack of agency in preserving her own reputation tells us that the novel cannot be classified as a coming-of-age tale. It also implies that Burney is leaving her readers with a chilling warning about the seemingly-inescapable evils of the world. Evelina is lucky to have such a benevolent author in her corner, but young women in the real world cannot and should not expect such protection.

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