

2013 ASECS-McGill Fellowship Report

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I applied for the ASECS-McGill Fellowship because I needed to study the Centre's holdings of Burney family correspondence from the years 1779-1785 as material relating to the composition and reception of Frances Burney's second novel, *Cecilia*. My aims at the beginning of my Fellowship were twofold. First, I hoped to identify likely candidates for the "Name-compelling wills" that Burney claimed to Samuel Crisp were the direct inspiration behind *Cecilia*, in which the will of the heroine's uncle compels any prospective husband to take her surname.ⁱ I hoped that this identification would enable new understandings of how Burney adapted material from her own life and the lives of her circle to inform and shape her work, and of how far she conceptualised and designed her fiction as an intervention into public debate around a specific contemporary phenomenon of surname change. Second, I hoped to refine my impression of the manner in which *Cecilia* acted as a catalyst for debate in polite metropolitan society during the early 1780s, particularly with regard to what the Duchess of Portland called 'the point of the name.'ⁱⁱ Analysis of surviving records of these discussions can reveal much, in light of recent theories of conversability,ⁱⁱⁱ about the ways in which Burney's fiction was utilized as a conversation piece during this era, and what the implications might be for scholarly understanding of gender, learning and sociability. While most of Burney's correspondence is now available in

scholarly editions, and the correspondence of her father Charles and sister Susan is also starting to be published, there are still many hundreds of letters to Burney herself - not to mention those written between her lesser-known family and friends - that remain generally unavailable. The Burney Centre contains the most comprehensive collection in the world of this material, which is stored either on microfilm or in filing cabinets of chronologically arranged letters, some helpfully transcribed by former or current members of the Centre.

I am currently a fourth-year doctoral candidate in English Literature at the University of York, studying the relationship between personal name change and identity formation in British literature of the period 1779-1800. I argue that in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, across a variety of generic discourses, the personal proper name operates as a site upon which anxieties about kinship, gender relations, political affiliation and social classification are negotiated and problematized. My project aims to historicize the embryonic study of literary names, argue for the importance of an onomastic angle to the study of eighteenth-century identity formation, and provide new perspectives on how various writers engage with eighteenth-century nominal philosophy in their fiction.

Frances Burney is the most important single writer for my thesis. My second chapter focuses on the ways in which the hereditary name is highlighted across various discourses

during the early 1780s as an arbiter of kinship and belonging, most notably through interrogating attitudes towards the process of surname change. Alongside my analysis of how Burney interrogates this process in *Cecilia*, and how her earliest readers re-interrogate it in their discussions of her work, I also examine the historical phenomenon of surname change by testamentary injunction. Initial research in the Parliamentary Archives and the College of Arms in London suggests a remarkable spike in applications for changes of surname by Royal Licence in the early 1780s - precisely the time at which Burney was planning and writing *Cecilia*. There was, it would appear, particularly acute anxiety among the social elite at this moment in time about the relationship between surname, identity and social composition.

Over the course of my Fellowship at the Burney Centre, I made several discoveries that broaden and enrich the picture I'm currently developing of the surname change scene in 1782-3. By cross-checking a list of surname changes by Royal Licence or private Act of Parliament (obtained on previous research trips to London) with the Burney Centre's microfilm catalogues, searchable H:drive and collection of transcribed letters, I built up a snapshot of just how pervasive the name change phenomenon was within the Burney family circle of the 1780s. Burney and her father were personally acquainted at the time that she wrote *Cecilia* with at least twelve people who used one of these mechanisms to change their surname, or to compel somebody else to do so by testamentary injunction. Three of these acquaintances used the mechanism in between 1776 and

1782, and are thus reasonably likely candidates for the 'Name-Compelling Wills'. As I write my thesis over my fourth year, I will attempt to find out more about these candidates in the hope of constructing a more detailed picture of the circumstances and public opinion surrounding their surname changes, which may well have influenced Burney's composition of *Cecilia*.

I also found a number of unpublished descriptions of the reception of *Cecilia* in the Centre's holdings. To the oft-cited reviews by Edward Gibbon, Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke, or even the lesser-known responses of the Duchess of Portland, Mary Delany, Hester Chapone and Hester Thrale which are available in the *Early Journals and Letters*, I can now add the never-published verdicts of Catherine Coussmaker, Charlotte Ann Burney, Thomas Twining, William Bewley, Lady Hales and Francesco Sastres, and published but obscure reviews by Horace Walpole and Hugh Blair. Some of this material has already been addressed in Catherine Parisian's excellent recent publication history of *Cecilia*,^{iv} but in a work of such broad chronological scope it would be necessarily difficult to consider the nuances of every single one of these reactions. I hope that my thesis can ultimately add to the body of knowledge that scholars including Parisian, Janice Thaddeus and Stewart Cooke have provided in recent years about the composition and reception of Burney's second novel.

Many of the unpublished reviews of *Cecilia* fortify my initial hypothesis that whereas *Evelina's* reception can best be

characterised by amusement and approbation, the range of responses to *Cecilia* are far more complex. They are frequently characterised by violence of some sort, whether by the physical pulling back and forth, hiding or locking up of the book itself, or by heated and often contentious discussion of the 'point of the name'. This indicates a remarkable degree of emotional investment among these readers; and, when viewed alongside Burney's own detailed and rather proud reportage of many of these conflicts, the possibility emerges that she actively attempted to provoke debate, if not dissension, by means of her carefully constructed surname change scenario. Responses to *Cecilia* can be read as transactional instances of what Harriet Guest has called the 'small change' of 'public opinions being formed and disputed' across women's leisure activities of the eighteenth century^v.

Exposure to a wonderful archive often posits more questions than it answers, and I sometimes found it hard to stick to the original task in hand. Having always been interested in links between the largely conservative Burney family and radical novelists, I was intrigued to find that Charles Burney's unpublished letters contain references to Mary Wollstonecraft's educational theory, and a fuller correspondence with Charlotte Smith than I had hitherto been able to discover. These are even more interesting in light of his vehemently anti-Jacobin 1790s correspondence with Frances Crewe, and all this material may well prove useful for a later chapter in my thesis. I have also found some interesting leads for an article I am planning about Frances Burney and Hester

Thrale's acquaintance with the Linnaean naturalist Daniel Solander.

It would have been impossible to encounter a more welcoming or well-resourced research environment than the Burney Centre. I would like to thank Peter Sabor, Stewart Cooke, Richard Virr, Elaine Bander, Anna Lewton-Brain, Hilary Havens, Megan Taylor and Laura Cameron for scholarly guidance, stimulating conversation, access to important work-in-progress, support in my eternal war with the microfilm machine, and excellent advice on Montreal's culinary scene. I am very grateful to everyone involved in the decision to award me the ASECS-McGill Fellowship 2013, and look forward to acting as an enthusiastic publicist for both the Fellowship and the Burney Centre, at home and abroad.

ⁱ "Besides, my own *End* will be lost, if I change the conclusion, which was chiefly to point out the absurdity & shortsightedness of those *Name-compelling wills*, which make it always *presumed* a Woman marries an *Inferior*, since *he*, not *she*, is to leave his own Family, in order to be incorporated into hers." Burney to Samuel Crisp, 6 April 1782, *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (1768-1783)*, ed. Lars E. Troide, 5 vols 1782-1783, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, V, 43-44

ⁱⁱ Frances Burney to Susanna Burney Phillips, January 1783, Troide V, 290-291

ⁱⁱⁱ See in particular Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011

^{iv} Catherine M. Parisian, *Frances Burney's Cecilia: A Publishing History*. Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2011

^v Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 14