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Burney Fellowship 2015 Report

In August 2015 I had the good fortune of spending a period of research at McGill University's Burney Centre, directed by Prof. Peter Sabor, thanks to a generous month-long Fellowship offered jointly by the American Society for Eighteenth-century Studies (ASECS) and the Burney Centre. I had previously published studies on the relationship between Burney's novels and late eighteenth-century and Romantic theatre, the subject of a monograph (*Backstage in the Novel: Frances Burney and the Theater Arts*, University of Virginia Press, 2012) and several articles, focused mainly on *The Witlings* and *The Woman-Hater*. After the publication of the monograph, however, I became increasingly aware that an important piece was still missing in order to complete my work on the subject. This was prompted by the simple reflection that today we combine, almost without thinking, two terms that just a few decades ago were considered incompatible - *Burney* and *the theatre*. In particular, it has become evident over the last thirty years, and especially in light of Audrey Bilger's *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (Wayne State UP, 2002), that studies of Burney and comedy have become both more numerous and more sophisticated. Burney's dialogic and comic skills are now widely acknowledged by scholars of the period on both sides of the Atlantic, justifying the use of the term *canonical* for her work. It is thus no accident that *The Witlings* was recently chosen to conclude the *Broadview Anthology of Restoration and Eighteenth-century Comedy* (Brian Corman ed., 2013), where it joined the comedies of such top names of the seventeen- and eighteenth-century English stage as Etherege, Congreve and Sheridan. One might also recall the ASECS roundtable held in Vancouver in 2011 during which, under the expert guidance of Margaret Anne Doody, scholars of the calibre of Misty Anderson and Tara G. Wallace addressed "Burney's Comedy: Scenes, Characters, Language, Ideas". More recently, during the conference "Frances Burney and Popular Entertainments: The Business of Pleasure

in Late-Georgian Britain", organized by the UK Burney Society (St. Chad's College, University of Durham, 2016), the speakers gave excellent presentations on Burney's comedies. And for the rehearsed reading that closed the first day's work the organizers unhesitatingly turned once more to a comedy, *Love and Fashion*. But, amid all this enthusiasm for Burney and the theatre, what has become of the historical dramas, those plays to which Peter Sabor, with the help of Stewart Cooke, gave a miraculous second life in a meticulously annotated critical edition published by Pickering & Chatto in 1995?

This was the question I kept asking myself as I prepared my application for the ASECS-McGill Fellowship. What do we really know and understand about these four plays - *Edwy and Elgiva*, *Hubert De Vere*, *The Siege of Pevensey* and the fragment *Elberta* - relegated to the limbo of the unread within an oeuvre that has otherwise never been more flourishing (*Evelina* alone can claim at least 8 editions and reprints since 2000, including one by Oxford World's Classics in 2008 and Penguin Classics in 2012), textual ghosts neglected by most critics (with the enlightened exception of M.A. Doody, B. Darby and J. Pearson) and therefore usually considered little more than unfortunate literary missteps, carefully avoided by even the most perceptive contemporary scholarship?

I had never had an opportunity to delve further into Burney's dramas, their place in the wider context of contemporary tragedy, or their appropriation - and transformation - of the great tradition of European tragedy and historical dramas. Here is an author who undoubtedly had intimate knowledge of European melodrama (let us not forget that Charles Burney published his *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio* in 1796), an author who certainly admired - and quite viscerally so, like all her contemporaries - the greatest of all playwrights, Shakespeare, as evidenced by her masterful appropriation of *King Lear* in *Evelina* or the polyphonic reinterpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* she produced a few years later with *Cecilia*. Consigning the historical dramas to the scarcely flattering category usually employed for writings dismissed as "unfortunate experiments" seemed to me the result of hasty critical

choices or thoughtless retrospective compartmentalization (and, especially, *suppression*). Having just completed a comprehensive study of the world of the stage in turn-of-the-century England - and thus not only, or indeed mainly, its comic production (*The Gothic Novel and the Stage: Romantic Appropriations*, Pickering & Chatto-Routledge, 2015) - I found this assessment rather unfair and, especially, not substantiated by the evidence: by what appeared to be the great absentee in such critical judgments, the "stone guest" haunting the stage - archival research.

From these simple observations, coupled with fresh investigative enthusiasm and the excitement that always accompanies venturing into new fields of research, was born my new project, "Tragedy Unbound: Frances Burney and the Tragic Muse", in which I aim to provide a wide-ranging analysis of the tragic in the author's entire oeuvre, not only the tragedies themselves but also the novels and her private writings. The first phase of research took place during the month spent at McGill, taking advantage of the splendid resources of the library, including the Rare Books and Special Collections division, headed by Dr. Richard Virr. Given the shortness of my stay, I opted to maximize my results by choosing as my paradigmatic study text *Edwy and Elgiva*, written during Burney's years at court and in 1794 submitted for approval to John Philip Kemble, the greatest tragic actor of the era, and manager of the Drury Lane Theatre. The drama, with Kemble himself and the "tragic muse," Sarah Siddons, playing the eponymous protagonists, was staged for a single night on 21 March 1795, with disastrous results. After this unfortunate première it was never performed again, preordaining its subsequent critical eclipse, to the point that Burney's holograph manuscript was first published only in 1995, in Sabor's critical edition. Focusing closely on *Edwy and Elgiva* also provided a second benefit, of longer duration: the tragedy will serve as the imaginative cornerstone for my forthcoming monograph on Burney and tragedy.

Relying on linguistic analysis of the dramatic texts, in this first stage of my research at McGill I established the corpus of printed texts relevant to my investigation - the playtexts approved by

Lord Chamberlain Larpent in the selected period, 1760-1820. This textual corpus includes dramas on historical or loosely Gothic subjects written by male and female playwrights, and mainly focused on the representation - often "feminocentric" or of a private nature - of episodes and characters in the history of England, of the kind made popular in the late eighteenth century by David Hume's *History of England* (1754-61). I paid particular attention to playwrights contemporary to Burney, the authors of tragedies very often excluded from the dramatic canon, such as Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Inchbald and Joanna Baillie.

The resulting corpus consists of over one hundred texts, not exclusively dramas, chosen for their thematic, aesthetic and/or generic affinity with Burney's tragedies. For the most part, these texts are virtually unknown to modern scholars and their popularity at the time, together with the as yet untold history of their critical reception, will help to contextualize *Edwy and Elgiva*, bringing to the surface its actual contextual positioning, on and off the stage. Among them (the brief list here is deliberately intended to give a sense of the different genres and media involved) are *Edwy. A Dramatic Poem* (1784), *Edwy, Son of Ethelred The Second: An Historic Tale by A Lady* (1791), *Edwy and Edilda, A Tale* (1794, by the Reverend Thomas Sedgwick Whalley and, interestingly, "Embellished with six fine engravings from original designs, by a Young Lady"), and *Edwy and Bertha or the Force of Connubial Love*, a historical romance by John Corry (c. 1803), whose review in the *Lady's Monthly Museum* in 1806 featured evaluative adjectives and nouns of great interest for the purposes of my research, especially as concerns the audience Burney was addressing: "fatal contest ... tender interview ... interesting events much sensibility".

I believe it is highly significant that at a time when she needed to produce a work that would ensure quick and certain returns, the mature Burney, now a wife and mother, turned her gaze backward, to the beloved stage, banished many years earlier by her "two Daddys" to the repository of unfulfilled desires. Equally significant is that for a commercial venture that she wished to be safe and profitable Burney

should have chosen, wisely in my view, the story of Edwy, the monarch who was known in popular histories of the time to have "died with grief" (as described in *A New and Impartial History of England*, 1762), and his "amiable princess" whose sad - and unquestionably edifying - fate is sealed in a "dismal catastrophe" (John Gough, *A Collection of Narrative Pieces for Ancient and Modern History. With a Short Introduction to Geography. For the use of the lower classes of the English scholars*, 1793). Even more interesting is Edwy's story as told in a contemporary history textbook addressed explicitly to women: "The heart of the youthful monarch Edwy was enslaved and captivated by the transcendent charms of the princess Egilve [sic]," writes Mary Pilkington in 1799 (*A mirror for the female sex. Historical beauties for young ladies. Intended to lead the female mind to the love and practice of moral goodness. Designed principally for the use of ladies' schools*), who goes on to describe in pathetic detail how the vengeance of the "enraged bishops" fell on the hapless couple: "they tore the terrified Egilve from the embraces of her lord, and delivering her to the infatuated guards, commanded them to destroy with burning irons those charms that had subdued their monarch's heart". Archive research will demonstrate how contemporary audiences reacted to Edwy's story, contextualizing Burney's choice and thus explaining its motivation.

In a subsequent phase of my research, which will take place in 2017, I will reconstruct the reception of the dramatic textual corpus I am calling "Edwy and Elgiva" through historical evidence of various kinds: 1) evaluative or purely descriptive criticism in written sources, both private or para-private (correspondence, memoirs and diaries) and public (magazines, periodicals, the *Theatrical Register*, or billboards and other advertising materials distributed in theaters), and 2) registers and some of the first histories of the theatre, whose influence in the construction and transmission of a "high" and "masculine" eighteenth-century Romantic and dramatic canon has continued unabated at least until the end of the twentieth century. This corpus will enable an initial critical analysis of *Edwy and Elgiva* in its dual dimensions of dramatic text and performative

text and will allow me to address the next phase of the project: the virtual reconstruction of *Edwy and Elgiva's* staging. Inspired by the seminal study by Judith Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice* (University of Michigan Press, 2011), I believe it is feasible to re-create, virtually, the staging of *Edwy and Elgiva*, or how contemporary spectators would have seen the play. The experiment will draw on the imposing mass of extant textual, iconographic and musical/aural testimonies relating primarily to Kemble and Siddons, as well as to the Romantic theatre as a whole. This virtual *Edwy and Elgiva* staging would reproduce fairly faithfully the transactional and interactional conventions of Romantic drama, whose character was predominantly immersive, multisensory and participatory.

This is an advanced stage of research that obviously requires specific, and specialized, tools, involving disciplines as distant as virtual set design, the archaeology of reception, corpus linguistics applied to drama, and visual studies. The seeds of this complex interdisciplinary and intermedia project were sown during my time at McGill University's Burney Centre, a special place where I was able to spend hours taking notes and reading of, in, and around Frances Burney, without the fear, for once at least, of being considered "the strange professor who works on the eighteenth century".

When the period of research at McGill ended I came home even more grateful than I had been on my arrival. The good fortune - truly incalculable for a researcher - of being able to concentrate without interruptions or distractions on a research project begun in a first-rate library was all the greater as I knew that for at least a year and a half I would be intensively occupied by teaching and administrative responsibilities in my home institution. I shall therefore carry the memory of the Burney Centre with me throughout this period, a surreptitious researcher taking refuge on the Romantic

stage, however briefly and only in my thoughts, in the intervals between meetings or at the end of the day's teaching.

I warmly thank the Director of the Burney Centre, Prof. Peter Sabor, for believing in my research and for having supported and followed it over the years with generosity and interest; Dr. Richard Virr, who steered me out of the bureaucratic shoals of the Fellowship with an expert helmsman's hand; Dr. Stewart Cooke for the friendliness with which he welcomed me and the sympathy with which he wished me a good-luck "break a leg" when I explained - to his dismay - that I was going to start working on the tragedies; all Research Assistants and Research Associates of the Burney Centre, especially Megan Taylor, for helping me with patience and good humour. To all of you and to the Burney Centre, *au revoir*.

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