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Frances Burney's French Archive: Insights and Avenues  
KATIE GEMMILL

On the 17th of April, 1802, Frances Burney d'Arbly alighted at the port of Calais with her young son after an uneasy crossing from Dover. She was following her husband, Alexandre d'Arbly, who was already installed in Paris; when the Peace of Amiens was signed in 1801, the expatriate career soldier had promptly returned to his native country where he hoped to obtain his army pension and the rights to his family's sequestered estate. Though the d'Arblys intended to stay for only a year or so, war resumed between Britain and France in May 1803; thus, what was initially intended to be a temporary stay in France was protracted into a decade-long residency, until August of 1812.<sup>1</sup> Barred by the Napoleonic blockade from corresponding with family and friends in England, Burney instead produced copious journals, not only in English but also in French. Little known and mostly unpublished, Burney's French journals are extant in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. The present paper will describe these four French notebooks and outline the ways they can be useful for fresh Burney scholarship.

Burney's four French notebooks, housed at the Berg Collection, cover the years 1802 through 1806. This body of manuscript material, amounting to more than 500 pages, is unpublished, with the exception of a handful of excerpts that Joyce Hemlow deemed worthy of inclusion in volumes five to seven of her edition.<sup>2</sup> These French writings find their formal origins in Burney's well-known written courtship with Alexandre d'Arbly. The couple's initial correspondence in 1793 includes a series of bilingual musings—or *thèmes*, as they called them—which they would exchange and correct for each other as a learning exercise. Burney would write to d'Arbly in French, and he would respond to her in English; they would then emend each other's grammar and style in the form of footnotes and marginalia before returning the *thème* to its author. Thus, their initial epistolary relationship was both romantic and tutorial in nature, the latter function becoming all the more essential as the former paved the way for what would be a 25-year bilingual marriage.<sup>3</sup>

The entries in Burney's French exercise books have a similar format to these early *thèmes*; indeed, in the first volume, she tells her husband that she strongly feels a need to take up their former practice: "Oui, oui, je

... ne sens que trop la nécessité de renouveler mes thèmes" ("Yes, yes, I ... feel only too strongly the need to renew my *thèmes*") (Notebooks I). A cursory perusal of the notebooks indicates that Burney conceived of the term "*thème*" in the most general sense. They include diaristic entries recounting events of daily life, worries, hopes, and general musings; letter drafts on which she sought her husband's editorial feedback; grammatical exercises focusing on syntactic constructions or verb tenses she found difficult; and what Burney calls "*quelques petites histoires*"—essentially, her own narrative dramatization of events that she had either witnessed or heard about from members of her new French acquaintance and her old friends in England (Notebooks III). No matter what the type of *thème*, one feature is consistent in them all: corrections are always carefully marked in the form of footnotes in a space at the bottom of each page left blank expressly for this purpose.

Before examining the French journals in detail, it will be helpful to make some contextualizing remarks about their English counterparts, which represent what we might call the "standard" account of Burney's time living in France. Spanning volumes five to seven of Hemlow's twelve-volume edition,<sup>4</sup> these journals paint vivid tableaux of Parisian life at the turn of the nineteenth century, and as such, they constitute an immensely valuable cultural artefact. Burney's first glimpse of France and its people is striking for how clearly it conveys her sense of cultural defamiliarization:

the quay was lined with crowds of people, men, women, Children, & certain amphibious females, who might have passed for either sex, or any thing else in the world, except what they really were, European Women!—Their Man's Hats, man's Jackets, & man's shoes, their burnt skins & most savage looking peticoats, hardly reaching—nay, not reaching their knees, would have made me instantly believe any account I could have heard of their being just imported from the wilds of America. (*Journals and Letters* 5: 228)

Aside from the robustness of their portraiture, these journals also include some of the writer's best-known set pieces, namely the disturbingly visceral account of her mastectomy, which she underwent in 1811, with no anaesthetic.<sup>5</sup> In short, the English Paris journals are alternately readable and powerful: the work of a diarist who had truly mastered the genre.

At this point in her career, Burney was aware of the possibility that her diaries would one day be published, and it is fair to assume that

this knowledge informed her writing practice; she took great care in deciding which details to include and how to present them. During her tenure as joint Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte from 1786 to 1791, she mastered a system to this effect. Every day, she would sparsely record details of events and conversations in memorandum books and retrospectively expand these notes into full journal entries as she had the time to do so (Sabor, "Introduction," xx). This effort to ensure that her accounts of the prominent people she encountered at court were accurate bespeaks an awareness that she was writing not just for herself but also for an audience. The English journals that she wrote while living in and around Paris are certainly shaped by the same self-consciousness and crafted with a readership in mind. While this particular circumstance of their production does not detract from them, it is valuable to have a less formal and more private counterpart for the purpose of comparison: namely, her French journals.

The French notebooks provide two major avenues for pursuing fresh insights in Burney scholarship. The first and most self-evident one is their potential to supplement our current biographical knowledge of the author. Her journalistic entries in the notebooks often recount the events and activities around which her Paris life revolved. Their topical references to places and people make them a valuable source for understanding her participation in public life, and a careful cross-referencing of this content with her English journals would almost certainly bring new biographical details to light. Perhaps more intriguing, however, is the window that these diary entries open onto Burney's inner life. Unlike the English journals, the French ones are written for an audience of only one: her husband and editor, whom she addresses affectionately as "mon ami" ("my friend"). Burney often muses to d'Arblay about private topics: her ongoing grief over the loss of her dear sister, Susan; her obsessive anxiety about lacking facility with French; her feelings of deep isolation in a country where she was never quite socially at ease. These notebooks make us privy to the intimate confession of fears and hopes from a wife to her husband, supplementing Burney's biographical profile with a new, distinctly personal dimension.

Also relevant for Burney's biography are the letter drafts recorded in the French journals. Many of these drafts can be found in the first of the four notebooks; indeed, in its opening pages, Burney cites her need to practise French correspondence as the premise of this book of *thèmes*:

Il me semble, mon ami, qui n'y est rien dont j'aurai plus souvent besoin que d'écrire de petits billets de société, car comment puis-je esperer que vous seriez toûjours à mon coté quand j'aye à repondre à des invitations, des souvenirs, des recherches sur nos santés et à tant d'autres choses.

(It seems to me, my friend, that there is nothing that I will need more often than to write little social notes, since how can I hope that you will be always at my side when I have to reply to invitations, to tokens, to inquiries about our health and so many other things.)

(Notebooks I)

These social notes clearly delineate the circle in which Burney moved in Paris, which included such distinguished women as Madame de Tessé, an aunt of Madame de Lafayette; the *ci-devant* princesse d'Hénin; and Madame de Staël, whose friendship Burney famously rejected because of awkward feelings about the French authoress's extra-marital affairs. Burney's letters to Madame de Tessé and the princesse d'Hénin convey a sense of the intensely polite and deferential mode in which she engaged with most of her French acquaintance; every favor is acknowledged with an almost hyperbolic gratitude, and she perpetually apologizes for her deficient skills in correspondence and conversation. Indeed, writing in a second language appears to have amplified Burney's characteristic diffidence considerably. A handful of the drafts exist in multiple versions in the notebooks, allowing us to see Burney experimenting with different modes of expression as she tried to master French and to feel more at ease in her written social exchanges. Some of the letters have fair copy counterparts that Burney actually sent to their intended recipients while others are translations of English originals that she wrote in French simply for practice. When such counterparts are extant, the French notebooks present the possibility for fruitful comparisons. If not, the notebooks can simply supply new letters for future editions of Burney's correspondence. Taken together, these letter drafts contain a number of points of biographical interest, adding shape to our knowledge of the author's social life in Paris and the way it intersected with and informed her training in the French language.

Finally, the grammatical exercises in the notebooks provide an unusual biographical source. Burney often imposes restrictions on what verb tenses and sentence constructions she may use in a given *thème*. The most common of these strictures is to use words that demand that the central verb be in the subjunctive mood. Indeed, all four of the notebooks

are interspersed with pages of sentences in which she devises hypothetical scenarios that require this form of conjugation. Often, it is clear that Burney is drawing the content of these sentences from the events of her daily life, such as her references to a visit paid her by a Russian diplomat, one M. Marcoff (Notebooks I). In other cases, however, it is less clear whether the content is rooted in truth or whether she fabricated it solely for the purpose of satisfying the grammatical exercise. One particularly mysterious example has to do with burning papers:

Quand je déchirai cette Lettre, la brûlerai-je?

Quoique je déchire mes papiers, je ne sais où les brûler

Quoique je déchirasse mes papiers, cela ne les détruisent pas

(When I will tear up this letter, will I burn it?

Though I tear up my papers, I do not know where to burn them

Though I tore up my papers, that will not destroy them) (Notebooks III)

The practice of burning papers was by no means unfamiliar to the author; she famously cast all of her juvenilia into a bonfire on her fifteenth birthday, including a novella entitled “The History of Caroline Evelyn,” which would have been the prequel to her first published novel, *Evelina*. This grammatical exercise recalls Burney’s past practice of destroying her papers and asks us to wonder whether she continued to resort to it at this later stage in her career. Fittingly tucked away in an exercise book that has drifted to the periphery of Burney’s massive archive, these sentences invoke the spectre of all of the other papers written by this prolific writer that may now be lost to us.

The second and less obvious view one might take of these French notebooks is as a context for the fiction that Burney was writing concurrently, namely her final novel, *The Wanderer*. A particularly important feature of the notebooks is the fact that they are not static in their form. Though the four volumes are similar insofar as they all contain a miscellany of different types of entries, it is also true that the projects Burney undertakes become increasingly more ambitious from the second

notebook onwards. Specifically, she starts writing what she terms *quelques petites histoires*—essentially, her own narrative dramatization of stories she had heard or experienced first-hand. Her subjects for these narratives range from prominent figures from her old circle in England, such as Hester Thrale Piozzi and Arthur Murphy, to acquaintances she shared with her new French friends.<sup>6</sup> In style and form, these *petites histoires* resemble the kinds of *mise-en-scènes* that one would find in a work of fiction. In spite of Burney's reiterated diffidence about her skills in French, she appears to be trying out her professional genre of writing in this second language. One could readily link Burney's self-training in the French notebooks to her narrative technique in *The Wanderer*, which she began to write around the turn of the century and worked on throughout her ten years in France. Significantly, she chose to compose entire passages of this novel in French.<sup>7</sup> By examining Burney's notebooks in conjunction with the French portions of her last work, one might tell a compelling story of the author's self-education, as she faced the challenges and rewards of transposing her craft into another language.

The *petites histoires* also provide a fascinating thematic context for *The Wanderer*. The subject of one of these tales is a Spanish woman named Madame de Souza, whom Burney first met in 1802.<sup>8</sup> As the remainder of this paper will show, this woman's peculiar story seems to have presented Burney with a creative opportunity to develop her ideas, in terms of both plot and character, for her final novel. While Burney's French account of Madame de Souza is certainly the longest, the first known record of this figure in Burney's writings is in a letter to her old Court acquaintance, Margaret Planta, of 19 December 1802. Burney writes:

The second acquaintance to which I have alluded is a Lady Madame de Souza. She soon found the road to my good will & regard, for she told me that she, with another lady, had been fixed upon by M. del Campo, my old Tea-visitor<sup>9</sup>—for the high honour of aiding him in his reception of the first Lady of our Land & her lovely daughters, upon the Grande Fête which he gave upon the dearest & next memorable of occasions, & she spoke with such soft sensibility of pleasure & gratitude of the sweet condescension she then experienced, that she charmed & delighted me, & *we struck up an intimacy* without further delay. Our Theme was always ready, & I only regretted that I could see her but seldom, as she lived 2 or 3 miles out of Joigny, at Cesy, in the small chateau of la *cy-devant*

Princesse de Beaufremont, a lady with whom I had had the honour of making acquaintance in Paris. . . . Made de Souza has spent the whole summer with these Ladies [Made de Beaufremont & her youngest & now only daughter Mlle de Listenois]. She told me she liked England, so very much, & was so happy during the 6 weeks she passed there, that she wept bitterly in quitting it. She was received, she says, at court, in the most bewitching manner: & she delights in retracing her honours, & her sense of them. She is still so very handsome, though sickly & suffering, that I imagine she must then have been exquisitely beautiful. I am told, by a French officer who has served in Spain, M. de Moulan, that when she left that country she was reckoned the most celebrated beauty of Madrid. (*Journals and Letters* 5: 400–03)

Within two years of writing this favourable letter, Burney would hear a parallel account of Madame de Souza and the summer that she spent at Cézzy with Madame de Bauffremont and Mademoiselle de Listenois; this time, however, the tale would appear in an entirely different light. As Burney states in the third French notebook, she heard this expanded version of the story from two separate sources: first, from Monsieur d'Albisé, later to be confirmed by Madame Beaussorg. According to these two French acquaintances, Madame de Souza's sojourn at Cézzy was not incidental; on the contrary, seized by a violent and illicit passion for Madame de Bauffremont's married son, Monsieur de Listenois, de Souza had apparently followed him to France from Spain. He, in turn, applied to his mother and sister to receive the young woman at their seat at Cézzy, emphasizing that he was indebted to her for having shown him hospitality in Spain and omitting, of course, his romantic interest in her. Subsequently, Madame de Souza's sweetness and elegance captivated mother and daughter while her mysterious melancholy won their sympathy. In a detailed French *thème* addressed to Alexandre d'Arblay, Burney recounts this new and more scandalous version of the young woman's story, culminating with her ultimate confession to, and unlikely friendship with, her lover's mother and his sister:

Concevez vous que cette dame, si tranquille, si douce, avec un air si serein, et des manières si calmes, est la martyre, la victime, d'une passion la plus violente que jamais n'a brulée dans le coeur d'une femme? Concevez vous—hélas !—je l'écris avec peine,—concevez



vous que cette dame, si bien élevée, si honnête, avec tant de dignité dans son maintien, et une attention qui sembloit toujours éveillé aux bienséances féminins, des regards modestes, des propos réservés, et de la decence en tout—concevez vous, mon ami, que cette passion qui l'avoit immolée au bonheur, l'avoit aussi arrachée de l'innocence? que c'étoit, enfin, une passion criminelle? . . . Elle est venue en France ou avec, ou suivant M. de Listenois, qui l'a ou accompagné, ou reçu, Je ne me rapelle pas au juste comment cela avait été: Mais elle avait besoin d'amis et de protection, & M. de List. écrivait à sa mere, que cette dame, d'une haute naissance, et pleine de talens, de virtus, et d'agrémens, étoit ici, très mal à son aise, et il prioit sa mere d'avoir la bonté de voir, comme il devoit infiniment d'obligations à son amitié pour lui pendant son séjour en Espagne. Sur cela, Me. de Beauffremont et Mlle. de Listenois allerent la voir; elles étoient tout deux enchantées, et de sa personne, et de ses manieres, et Me. de Listenois, la trouvant d'une grand melancholie, la prioit de venir chez elle, passer quelques jours. Elle accepta, avec beaucoup de grace et de reconnoissance, cette invitation, et se rendit à Sezy. Là, elle les charmées, mere et fille, tous les jours davantage, par sa douceur, ses connoissances, son esprit et son elegance; pendant qu'elle les interressoit au delà de tout expression par une melancholic mysterieuse et touchante. (Could you believe that this lady, so mild, so sweet, with an air so serene, and such calm manners, is the martyr, the victim, of the most violent passion that has ever burned in the heart of a woman? Could you believe—alas! it pains me to write it,—could you believe that this lady, so well-bred, so honest, with so much dignity in her manner, and an attention that seemed always attuned to feminine propriety, to modesty and reserve, and decency in everything—could you believe, my friend, that this passion that had sacrificed her happiness, had also snatched her from innocence? that it was, in fact, a criminal passion?. . . She came to France either with, or following M. de Listenois, who either accompanied, or received her, I do not remember exactly how it was: But she was in need of friends and protection, and M. de List. wrote to his mother, that this woman of high birth, and full of talents, virtues and charms, was here, most ill at ease, and he prayed his mother to have the goodness to see, how much he was infinitely obliged to her friendship to him during his sojourn in Spain. With this, Me.

de Beaufremont et Mlle. de Listenois went to see her; they were enchanted, both by her person, and by her manners, and Me. de Listenois, finding her very melancholy, prayed her to come to their home, to spend a few days. She accepted this invitation with much grace and gratitude, and went to Sezy. There, she charmed mother and daughter more every day, with her sweetness, her knowledge, her mind and her elegance; while she intrigued them inexpressibly with her mysterious and touching melancholy.) (Notebooks III)

As this excerpt from the narrative indicates, there are a number of parallels between the characters in this novella and those in *The Wanderer*. The violent, criminal passion burning in Madame de Souza's heart that inspired her to follow her lover to France recalls Elinor Joddrel's fervent passion for Albert Harleigh. In turn, Monsieur de Listenois's pleas to his mother to take pity on the young Madame de Souza, a woman who is clearly well-bred but without connections and in need of protection, echo Harleigh's own suit on behalf of the friendless Ellis. Madame de Souza's impeccable manners, her natural elegance, and the mysterious sense of melancholy produced by the grave secret of her heart resemble similar characteristics in Ellis; just as Madame de Souza rapidly enchants Madame de Beaufremont and Mademoiselle de Listenois, so does Ellis earn Lady Aurora's warm affection after only a short acquaintance. Even Madame de Beaufremont's Christian compassion for Madame de Souza, after learning that she is her son's mistress, recalls Lady Aurora's faith in Ellis's goodness in spite of frequent accusations against Ellis's character that she is powerless to disprove.

These general parallels exist between multiple characters and events in the two tales; however, the links between the two female protagonists, Ellis and Madame de Souza, are certainly the clearest. Particularly interesting is the question of de Souza's namelessness. She is never more than Madame de Souza because no one, including Burney it seems, knows her first name; the same is true of Ellis, whose slippage from one name to another is a theme throughout the novel. Indeed, Burney's odd shortening of the name Souza to Souz is comparable to the name changes in *The Wanderer*: LS, the cryptic address on the incognita's letters, is converted to Ellis before she becomes Juliet and eventually reclaims her surname, Granville. Both women's passages, to and from France, respectively, are shrouded in secrecy. The principal difference between Ellis and Madame de Souza is that the latter committed a major transgression of infidelity;

Burney, however, does play within that territory with Lord Melbury's invitation to Ellis to be his mistress, an invitation which, although declined, follows her through the remainder of the novel. For Burney, the process of fictionalizing this woman's purportedly true story appears to have provided a creative opportunity, helping her to ponder and develop plot points and character traits that would later, whether by conscious endeavour or not, appear in *The Wanderer*.

Burney's French notebooks have a certain fractured quality to them; they constitute a strange sort of formal mosaic with no apparent structuring principles. But they are all the more interesting for their miscellany; their contents are so various that they prompt a range of different lines of inquiry, which this paper has only surveyed in cursory terms. In short, there is much work to be done, and we may all look forward to discovering more about these idiosyncratic and fascinating manuscripts as we use them to supplement and build on the current corpus of research in Burney studies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further details about the d'Arblay family's decision to go to France, their respective voyages, and their eventual residency, see the introduction by George G. Falle to Burney, *Journals and Letters* 5: xix–xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> The only portion of the journals that has yet been transcribed and published in full is Burney's lengthy French account of her friendship with, and eventual estrangement from, Hester Thrale Piozzi. This *petite histoire* appears as an appendix to volume VII of the *Journals and Letters*, edited by Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom. As Peter Sabor has noted, however, readers who consult the Blooms' transcription should be aware that it is misleading in several ways. First, they state that the corrections to the French in the notebook are by Burney herself; in fact, they are in the minute and very distinctive hand of Alexandre d'Arblay. Also misleading is their presentation of the account as a discrete entity when it is, in fact, interspersed with much additional material. The first instalment is dated 20 May 1804, and the final instalment is dated 27 January 1805; Burney was thus writing it for over eight months. Finally, the Blooms give no indication that the account is broken off and that material is obviously

missing at the end (Sabor, “Frances Burney on Hester Thrale Piozzi: a ‘*petite histoire*.””). A footnote in volume 5 of *The Journals and Letters* contains a paraphrased English translation of the *petite histoire* of Madame de Souza; see *Journals and Letters* 5: 401n.

<sup>3</sup> To read the d’Arblays’ bilingual epistolary courtship, see Burney, *Journals and Letters*, vol. 2 (Courtship and Marriage 1793).

<sup>4</sup> See *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d’Arblay)*, ed. Joyce Hemlow et al., 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972–84).

<sup>5</sup> See Burney’s journal entry for 30 September 1811 in *Journals and Letters*, 6: 596–616.

<sup>6</sup> Burney’s *petites histoires* about Hester Thrale Piozzi and her Spanish acquaintance Madame de Souza can be found in volume 3 of the French notebooks while her lengthy account of playwright Arthur Murphy is located in the fourth and final notebook. See Frances Burney, *Holograph notebooks: themes in French, 1802–1806* (4 vols., MS Berg Collection, New York Public Library).

<sup>7</sup> Juliet’s initial conversation with Gabriella at the outset of volume 3 is written in French with English translations in the form of footnotes at the bottom of the page. The French is both grammatically correct and elegant and was almost certainly corrected by Alexandre d’Arblay at some point before the novel’s publication in 1814 (Sabor, “Frances Burney on Hester Thrale Piozzi: a ‘*petite histoire*.””). It is interesting to note that the English translations are considerably more stilted than the French and that they fail to convey, at times, the full sense of the original. See Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties*: 385–93.

<sup>8</sup> The Spanish Madame de Souza must be distinguished from another woman, a French novelist named Madame de Souza-Botelho, whom Austin Dobson and others have confused with her Spanish namesake. See *Journals and Letters* 5: 401n. For further details about Burney’s wary interactions with the French de Souza-Botelho, with whom she was also acquainted, see *Journals and Letters* 5: xxx.

<sup>9</sup> Burney’s ‘old Tea-visitor’ is Madame de Souza’s uncle, Bernardo,

marquis del Campo, Spanish ambassador to England from 1783 to 1795. Present at the Court of Queen Charlotte during the first two years of Burney's tenure as Keeper of the Robes, he is now and again named in her Court journal among the roster of men present in the tea-room over which she occasionally, though reluctantly, presided. The marquis figures most prominently in her account for 2 August 1786, after he played a minor role in the events following Margaret Nicholson's attempted assassination of King George III. See *Court Journals and Letters* 1: 60.

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