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“That Lady, Sir, is Her Own Mistress”

Evelina’s Condemnation of Rape Culture

RoseE Hadden

The title of this essay may seem problematic. The text of *Evelina* does not contain a single instance of rape. Of course, attention can be drawn to Evelina’s close calls, such as in Sir Clement Willoughby’s carriage, where she recounts that “Never, in my whole life, have I been so terrified” (68). Kenneth Graham has already addressed the overtones of physical male-on-female violence that infuse the text, but I wish to explore Burney’s more subtle violence: the pervasive undermining of Evelina’s personal autonomy. Recent critics have blamed this disempowerment on Evelina herself: Timothy Dikstal calls her “less experienced” (559), and Christina Davidson insists that the goal of the novel is to teach its heroine “who is and who is not to be befriended and trusted” (282). However, this view of *Evelina* as a tale of young womanhood coming to awareness of the evils in the world and finding the power for self-preservation—a glorified, if atypically dark, conduct novel—overlooks a large part of what I believe Burney was trying to accomplish. Rather than decrying the supposed character flaws of the protagonist, I will instead explore the flawed assumptions of her society that make her life so dangerous and the potential solutions to those dangers that Burney presents in Lord Orville.

The problem plaguing *Evelina* is not any character flaw of her own, but a flaw in the character of her society. Far from being bashful, compliant, and naive, *Evelina* demonstrates a remarkably canny sense of character, and she doesn't hesitate to reprimand the untrustworthy with blunt, forceful language or to respond to physical violence with physical reprisals. The most dramatic instance, of course, is her attempt to throw herself out of Sir Clement's carriage, but the narrative is peppered with instances of her snatching back her hands and skirts from unwelcome contact. Yet this intelligent young woman is forever caught up in awkward and often dangerous situations—not because she is incapable of saying no, but because no one around her respects it. Nearly everyone, from the cad Sir Clement to *Evelina*'s dear friend Miss Mirvan, treats *Evelina*'s refusal to do anything as a temporary obstacle rather than an incontrovertible choice made by a free-willed and independent being. No is never allowed to mean no. *Evelina* is a condemnation, not of inexperience and timidity in young women, but in the systematic destruction of their autonomy by a set of dehumanizing societal assumptions that we now label as “rape culture.” Burney may not have known what to call this phenomenon, but the text of *Evelina* clearly demonstrates that she understood how it worked. Moreover, in crafting Lord Orville, Burney anticipated by some two hundred years the current assertion that we must overcome rape culture by teaching men a new model of masculinity in which respect, rather than dominance, is the critical factor of manhood.

Joan McGregor, Director of the Bioethics Program at Arizona State, gives a quick run-down of the fundamental assumptions behind rape culture in her discussion of the flaws in modern Anglo-American rape laws:

The law looks for explicit signs that would inform the man unequivocally that the woman is not consenting to sex at this time; otherwise he can assume consent. And even some resistance and verbal refusal is insufficient to turn the baseline of consent into nonconsent since courts have accepted the notion that women will sometimes say ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes’ and that women often need some physical encouragement, or force, to consent to sex. Consequently, the burden is on the women to say and show that she is not consenting—thereby the default is that the woman is consenting (McGregor 104).

Rape culture is based upon the assumption of consent, often in spite of verbal refusal or physical resistance. Although MacGregor is focusing specifically on the legal ramifications of this assumption, Burney explores the social problems that arise when a society assumes that a woman is, by default, perfectly content

to comply with whatever anyone else chooses to do with her. The problem is compounded by the historical moment: in Georgian England, the right to say “no” was one of a woman’s few legal rights—and, in some ways, her most powerful.

In theory, even a nameless and impoverished British woman like Evelina still has the power of veto in all dealings with the opposite sex. This power appears frequently in novels of the Romantic period as a major force of plot development: Elizabeth Bennet refuses both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy; Jeanie Deans refuses Lord Dumbiedikes; even timid Fanny Price turns down Henry Crawford. Concerning questions of her own body—where it will go, what it will do, and whom it will marry—the poorest and most timid woman is more powerful than the highest-born and most outspoken of men. In *Evelina*, however, society at large (female as well as male) takes every opportunity to undercut this dangerous veto power. Evelina is never permitted to say *no* and get away with it.

When she refuses to dance with Mr. Lovel at her very first ball, Lovel, though he can’t physically drag her onto the dance floor, punishes her for her refusal by publicly humiliating her. He asks “May I know to what accident I must attribute not having the honor of your hand?” (25) in front of Lord Orville, to make sure her current partner knows of her *faux pas*. Still not satisfied, he shames her again at the performance of *Love For Love* by asking, in front of Lord Orville, Sir Clement, and Miss Mirvan, “I hope, Ma’am, you have enjoyed your health since I had the honour—I beg ten thousand pardons, but, I protest I was going to say the honour of dancing with you—however, I mean the honour of seeing you dance?” Evelina correctly interprets this public shaming as “reprisals for my conduct at the ball” (55). Punishment for refusal is a motif of the novel, and it is not a tool used exclusively by men. Evelina’s grandmother, Madame Duval, threatens and humiliates her when she refuses to accompany the Branghtons to the opera: “I order you to follow me this moment, or else I’ll make you repent it all your life” (60). Madame Duval’s involvement reveals that rape culture is not merely an issue of sex: it is the restriction of a woman’s autonomy in all aspects of her life, by all persons of her acquaintance, regardless of their gender.

Sir Clement’s response to the word *no* is much more graceful than those of Lovel and Madame Duval, but also more dangerous. He does not feel the need to punish Evelina for her refusals, because in his mind, her refusals simply do not exist. When she accuses him, “You have forced me from my friends, and intruded yourself upon me, against my will, for a partner,” he responds, “Surely,

my dear Madam, we ought to be better friends, since there seems to be something of sympathy in the frankness of our dispositions" (33). Later, when their carriage is broken down, "I had scarce touched the ground when I was lifted suddenly from it by Sir Clement Willoughby, who begged permission to assist me, though he did not wait to have it granted, but carried me in his arms back to Ranelagh" (45). Sir Clement's behavior follows nicely the pattern articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "The epistemological asymmetry of the laws that govern rape, for instance, privileges at the same time men and ignorance, inasmuch as it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants just so long as the man raping her can claim not to have noticed (ignorance in which male sexuality receives careful education)" (1471). Sir Clement enjoys a studied ignorance of Evelina's refusals, effectively removing her power to say "no" to him. He is most likely not even aware that he is doing it: the unchallenged assumption of female compliance limits and warps his perception of the world. He hears yes whether Evelina says it or not.

Even when Sir Clement does manage to register Evelina's *no*, he refuses to take it seriously, clearly demonstrating a recurring problem that feminist theorists have highlighted in the past decade. "Men are as well versed in the sexual dance as women are, and when they are fully aware that women are expected to say no even when they mean yes, men are less likely to hear 'no' and accept it at face value" (Filipovic 20). At the ridotto, in response to Evelina's extremely direct command "Then, Sir, you must leave me," Sir Clement disappears for a moment, before re-emerging to demand "And could you really let me go, and not be sorry?" (31). The fault here is clearly not in Evelina's communication: it is Sir Clement's culturally conditioned assumption that *no* is just a preliminary form of yes.

Not all the power play in the novel is so overt. Miss Mirvan, who is Evelina's dear friend and, as well as we can judge, quite harmless, plays her part in undermining Evelina's resolutions: "I made many objections to being of the party, according to the resolution I had formed. However, Maria laughed me out of my scruples, and so once again I went to an assembly" (30). Though Maria's persuasion is kindly meant and gently done, it reinforces the pervasive pattern of social interactions in the text: Evelina is not allowed to refuse anything. Her body is not her own; her role in society is to facilitate the pleasure of everyone around her, male or female, friend or foe.

One crucial skill that Evelina lacks, and that is frequently used against her, is the ability to shift the burden of justification away from herself. Elizabeth

Powell highlights this strategy as part of her counsel on how to prevent rape: “In responding to verbal pressure, there are simple skills that can be helpful [. . .] to turn the pressure on the other person: “Why do you keep pressuring me like this?” (Powell 111). This powerful question of ‘Why?’ moves the responsibility of a strong ‘because’ to the other party. Unfortunately, Evelina does not have this skill, and it is consistently used against her to undermine her right to deny consent. When Evelina is reluctant to accept Sir Clement’s offer of a ride home, “He began by making many complaints of my unwillingness to trust myself with him, and begged to know what could be the reason?” (67). As Evelina is unable to think of a polite way to say “Because you are an untrustworthy misogynist,” she ends up riding with him and is assaulted en route. The assault doesn’t begin in the carriage, however: it is already well underway when Sir Clement assumes a default of consent and requires Evelina to justify her refusal. The Miss Branghtons, though they have no interest in sexually assaulting Evelina, pull the same trick when they decide to take her to the opera with them; rather than accepting that she is already engaged for the evening, they demand to know why it’s so important that she honor her engagement, with whom she is engaged, how closely related those people are to her, and where they are going, in a concerted effort to break down Evelina’s refusal of their invitation (59). The burden is on Evelina to produce a reason for refusing, rather than on anyone else to produce a reason for insisting: a strategy of rape culture that we are only now learning to codify and combat.

Behind the question of consent lurks one of blame. As *The Los Angeles Times’s* opinion columnist Robin Abcarian observes, “[J]ustice has been denied for so long and so often to young female rape victims who have been told explicitly or otherwise that they are to blame for being raped: You shouldn’t have worn that, shouldn’t have drunk that, shouldn’t have been out so late.” In the novel, Evelina is not blamed for her behavior: her physical attractiveness alone is considered a deliberate waiver of her right to autonomy and invitation to harassment. The ruffians at Vauxhall explicitly justify their harassment with Evelina’s beauty: “one of them, rudely seizing hold of me, said I was a pretty little creature [. . .] another, advancing, said, I was as handsome as an angel, and desired to be of the party” (131). Clearly being “handsome as an angel” is reason enough to believe that she desires to be of the party, even though she is struggling to escape his compatriot’s grip. Sir Clement repeatedly accuses Evelina of cruelty for being both beautiful and uninterested in him: “It cannot be that you are so cruel! Softness itself is painted in your eyes” (31). Mr. Smith joins

the discourse by asking “Why now, Ma’am, how can you be so cruel as to be so much handsomer than your cousins?” (148). In every case, Evelina’s beauty is interpreted as a deliberate decision intended to inflict suffering on others, as well as implicit consent for men to treat her as they see fit.

Reverend Villars is unintentionally complicit in this victim-blaming. In his advice to Evelina, he places the responsibility for Sir Clement’s behavior squarely on Evelina’s shoulders. “It is not sufficient for you to be reserved: his conduct even calls for your resentment; and should he again, as will doubtless be his endeavour, contrive to solicit your favour in private, let your disdain and displeasure be so marked, as to constrain a change in his behavior” (108). Villars’s advice is well-meaning, but misguided. Evelina cannot constrain Sir Clement to do anything. Yet Villars implies that if Sir Clement continues his unseemly behavior, it is because Evelina failed to protest vehemently enough. Villars’s omission to write to Sir Clement to chastise him, or even to Lady Howard, to request that Sir Clement be dismissed from Howard Grove, speaks volumes. In her guardian’s eyes, Sir Clement’s conduct is Evelina’s responsibility; its continuation is her fault.

This is where the popular view of *Evelina* as a glorified conduct novel truly breaks down. If Burney’s goal were to teach young women how to avoid the dangers of society, as Christina Davidson has asserted, then the novel should include a female character who successfully achieves both personal safety and public acclaim. Timothy Dykstal holds up Mrs. Selwyn as such a character: the embodiment of “a kind of culture—specifically, the culture afforded by novels like [Burney’s] own—[that] can encourage the independence, rather than the conformity, of its consumers” (560). However, Dykstal’s argument overlooks the crucial problem that Evelina (who is firmly established in readers’ minds as a reliable narrator and canny judge of character) doesn’t like Mrs. Selwyn. She describes both the older woman’s understanding and manners as “masculine” (179), and characterizes her sharp repartee as “revenge,” “severity,” and “indulging her humor” and her silences as “contempt” (180–81). In her first conversation (or verbal duel) with Lord Merton, Mrs. Selwyn proves herself to be the kind of woman who can say “no” and force the people around her to take her seriously. Yet her assertiveness appears unfeminine—an embarrassment, rather than a virtue. The other assertive woman in the text, Madame Duval, receives even less sympathy from Burney and her characters. Burney’s argument is not that women should be more assertive; perhaps in some other time and place, such assertiveness might be appropriate, but Georgian society is not equipped

to handle such women or take their assertions of independence seriously. It is not to Mrs. Selwyn that we must look as the hopeful embodiment of a better society: it is to Lord Orville.

Patricia Hamilton has done excellent work exploring Lord Orville as the ideal of English politeness and an embodiment of its limitations; as she points out, Orville's civility cannot provoke reform in Sir Clement, Captain Mirvan, Lord Merton, or any other character (Hamilton 440). But he does provide a stark contrast to them and their paradigm. Burney uses him from the beginning as a standard of civility against which the boorish behavior of others stands out sharply, as at Evelina's first assembly. Evelina makes a poor first impression, tongue-tied from intimidation at Orville's rank and the splendor of the party. Orville spends much of his evening trying to help Evelina feel more comfortable, even leaving her to sit quietly with Mrs. Mirvan after he deduces that it is his attention that makes Evelina so nervous. When Sir Clement teases him for neglecting such a pretty partner, Orville justifies his neglect by describing her as "A poor weak girl!" Sir Clement, clearly already eager to seduce Evelina by any means necessary, responds by summarizing rape culture in one exclamation: "By Jove [. . .] I am glad to hear it!" (27).

Orville, unlike his unsettlingly candid colleague, does not base his social position upon his ability to torment and manipulate those weaker than him. Instead, he gains respect through genuine politeness, his actions always attendant upon Evelina's explicit and voluntarily given consent.

He then, with an air the most respectfully serious, asked if he had been so unhappy as to offend me?

"No, indeed!" cried I; and, in hopes of changing the discourse, and preventing his further inquiries, I desired to know if he had seen the young lady who had been conversing with me?

No;—but would I honour him with any commands to her?

"O, by no means!"

Was there any other person with whom I wished to speak?

I said no, before I knew I had answered at all.

Should he have the pleasure of bringing me any refreshment?

I bowed, almost involuntarily. And away he flew. (24)

This exchange is critical. *Orville respects Evelina's right to say no.* He does not take any action until he has obtained Evelina's willing permission; neither does he challenge any of her refusals with demands for justification. His respect

for Evelina consistently constrains his behavior, both in trivial matters like running errands at a ball and in more serious circumstances. When Evelina makes a private appointment with Mr. Macartney, putting both her safety and her reputation at risk, Lord Orville overcomes his hesitations and honors her right to make this choice for herself (196). Though he is not perfect—he does occasionally pressure Evelina, or act without waiting for her approval—he is learning to overcome the rape culture in which he is immersed.

This radical re-imagining of male power, as manifested in self-control rather than control over women, earns Orville some backlash in the form of teasing and questioning of his masculinity.

“I suppose, my Lord,” said Mrs. Selwyn, when we stopped at our lodgings, “You would have been extremely confused had we met any gentlemen who had the honour of knowing you.”

“If I had,” answered he, gallantly, “it would have been from mere compassion at their envy.”

“No, my Lord,” answered she, “it would have been from mere shame, that, in an age so daring, you alone should be such a coward as to forbear to frighten women” (186).

Though Mrs. Selwyn is being facetious, she is, as usual, entirely correct in her prediction of Orville’s public ridicule. “My Lord Orville!” cried the witty Mr. Coverley, “Why, my Lord Orville is as careful,—egad, as careful as an old woman!” (189). Like Evelina’s punishment for saying no, Orville is punished for daring to allow a woman’s autonomy to limit his behavior. Orville, however, is better equipped to deal with these reprisals. He is able to laugh off Mr. Coverley’s jab by virtue of his higher social standing, his wealth, and his gender—all layers of privilege that assure that mockery poses no real threat to his safety or well-being. Although both men and women are complicit in the pervasiveness of rape culture, it is the men, from their position of privilege, that must lead the way to any real solutions.

This idealistic view of Lord Orville might make the novel’s end problematic. In a discussion of consent, surely it is worth noting that Evelina’s marriage is arranged without any input from her. However, her exclusion is not from gender-based discrimination; rather, it is the only practical response to Sir John Belmont’s inability to be in the same room with her. (As this aversion is a consequence of his failure to respect Evelina’s mother’s autonomy, it is hard to blame Burney for playing up his guilt.) Considering also the need for haste

and secrecy in order to preserve Miss Belmont's reputation, Evelina's exclusion from the arrangements becomes a matter of practical necessity. Confirming this supposition is Evelina's account that "I was obliged to consent to a compromise in merely deferring the day till Thursday!" and Lord Orville's proposal that they spend the first month of their married life on her home turf of Berry Hill (250). These arrangements show that, despite the power difference between Evelina and Orville, they are already learning to compromise and negotiate as equal partners, with mutual respect for personal sovereignty. Burney refers to Orville's skill of treating other people (male and female) with the respect due an equal as "condescension"; I interpret it as freedom from the rape culture that pervades the novel. Orville is Burney's conception of a new kind of man: one whose strength is not used for coercion, but rather for self-control. *Evelina* argues that English women cannot truly be their own mistresses until each Englishman learns to be his own master.

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