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Fanny Burney's Mr. Macartney: A Gilded Solution to the Socio-Economic Problems of the London Literary Market

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Fanny Burney and Thomas Chatterton had age, precocity, and talent in common. They were both born in the year 1752 and both developed a passion for writing at a young age. Burney had “amassed a considerable pile of her own literary works” by the age of fifteen (Farr 15). Chatterton was also writing prolifically by his fifteenth year. It was in that year that he published his first work, a topical piece on the opening of a new bridge in Bristol (Pitcock 67). He began writing poetry at least by the time of his apprenticeship to a Bristol lawyer, and by the age of seventeen, he ventured to London to make a name for himself in the literary world (66).

Despite these parallels, the relative success of these two writers in the literary milieu of London could not be more convergent. With the success of her first novel, *Evelina*, Burney gained entrance to the prestigious blue-stocking salons of Mrs. Thrale and Mrs. Montagu (Farr 43). And although her publisher Mr. Lowndes paid her only £20 for *Evelina*, she claimed larger sums for her later novels that publishers paid only to writers of reputation (37).

Chatterton, on the other hand, managed only to publish less prestigious works, such as periodical stories, and political and social satires (Pitock 75–76). He did, however, publish some pieces of lyric poetry (75). Yet, even with these moderate accomplishments, Chatterton lost most hope for success after the rejection of his major work, his supposed translation of the Rowley poems, at the hands of both Horace Walpole and *Town and Country Magazine* (77). When the government constricted the publishing venues for his political writings and other occupational opportunities fell through, Chatterton abandoned hope and committed suicide. Many attribute Chatterton’s fate to his disadvantaged socio-economic status in the
tough London literary market of his day—a fate far removed from the glittering salons of Burney's literary, financial, and social success (Pittock 64).

Yet, Burney was not completely unacquainted with the difficult circumstances of struggling writers like Chatterton. In contrast to the prominent literary figures of her blue-stocking acquaintance, she also conversed with less-prominent writers at her father's musical soirées. Here she heard firsthand the injustices of the mercenary publication industry. Burney went so far as to impute the untimely death of one of these acquaintances, John Hawkesworth, to the "abuse he has of late met with from the newspapers" (Farr 37; *Early Diary* 262). She had also witnessed the decline of other despairing writers, in particular that of Christopher Smart. Note her compassion in a journal entry from 1768: "[Mr. Smart] is one of the most unfortunate of men—he has been twice confined in a mad-house [. . .]. How great a pity so clever, so ingenious a man should be reduced to such shocking circumstances" (Farr 35; *Early Diary* 127).

Burney's consequent indignation for the reviewers, coupled with her compassion for Smart, drew an interesting response from her pen. In *Evelina*, which she began only a year after Hawkesworth's death, she draws striking parallels between the impoverished poet, Mr. Macartney, and Christopher Smart, as well as between Macartney and Chatterton. This second comparison is less obvious because Burney's knowledge of Chatterton was slight at best, yet it heightens the previously established link between their divergent lives. Burney carries the comparison only to the point of Macartney's attempted suicide. The succeeding events in Macartney's life provide an alternate solution to the sad fates of Smart and Chatterton. Burney's solution enjoins charity, humility, and virtue—an optimistic but unrealistic approach, for the fairy-tale ending to Macartney's story does not correspond to the historical realities of the market. Burney's gilded solution only scratches the surface of the complex problem of socio-economic discrimination in the London literary market.

**Comparisons**

Burney's depiction of Smart in his decline bears strong resemblance to her description of Mr. Macartney's melancholy outlook, wild behavior, imputed insanity, and position as the object of Evelina's compassion. In the above-mentioned entry of September 12th, Burney writes, "[Mr. Smart] is extremely grave and has still a great wildness in his manner, looks, and voice" (qtd. in Farr 35). Evelina likewise notes Mr. Macartney's grave manner, remarking that upon their first meeting he had "his eyes fixed on the ground, apparently in profound and melancholy meditation" (176; vol. 2, letter 11). She recounts how he cast his eyes "wildly" towards her after her successful attempt to prevent his suicide (182; vol. 2, letter 12). In addition, he gazes at her with "eyes of wild wonder" before asking her why she tried to save him (183; vol. 2, letter 12). In another passage from her journal, this time from 1769, Burney alludes to the Critical Reviewers "rancorous
observations” on Smart's poor state of mental health (Early Diary 60). The Branghrons similarly comment that Macartney is “half-crazy” because of the scraps of poetry found in his room (177; vol. 2, letter 11). Finally, in the same letter of September 12th, Burney manifests the “utmost pity and concern” for Smart, similar to Evelina’s wish “to procure alleviation to [Mr. McCartney’s] sufferings” (Farr 35; Early Diary 127; Evelina 184, vol. 2, letter 12).

The similarities between Macartney and Smart merely indicate the poor mental health of two men in desperate circumstances who have earned the pity of two kind-hearted women, but the parallels between the socio-economic circumstances of Macartney and Chatterton most forcefully substantiate the characterization of Macartney as a poor, struggling poet. First, in regard to their social status, Joan Pittcock relates that Chatterton lacked social connections in Bristol, and his literary connections in London did not carry the influence necessary for the degree of fame that Chatterton sought. He consequently appealed to Horace Walpole, a more “worthwhile patron” (67–68). It is probable that Macartney, likewise, had little acquaintance in London as he lodged in the home of strangers (229; vol. 2, letter 20). Popular stories about Chatterton attribute his poor social standing to the early death of his father (Pitcock 65–66). Macartney’s impoverished state is, likewise, due to the failure of his father, a nobleman living in France, to acknowledge his marriage to Macartney’s mother (228; vol. 2, letter 20). As a result of their low social standing, both experienced incidences of social injustice. Pittcock calls Walpole’s rejection of the Rowley poems an explicit “clash between lord and low-born apprentice,” and Evelina repeatedly laments that Macartney’s misfortunes “only rendered him an object of scorn” with the Branghtons (Pitcock 69; Evelina 192, vol. 2, letter 14).

Second, most scholars attribute Chatterton’s death to his impoverished economic circumstances, which closely resemble Macartney’s situation when Evelina first meets him. Joan Pittcock reports that Chatterton’s landlord, Mrs. Angel, claimed that the young writer had not eaten for two or three days before his death (Pitcock 77). The Branghrons also report that Macartney, initially having paid for board in addition to his lodging, had ended his meals at their home, and they “believed he had hardly ever tasted a morsel of meat since he left their table” (176–77; vol. 2, letter 11). Pittcock also lists an increase in Chatterton’s rent as a cause of his desperate state. She states that the “near 50 percent increase in his rent must have been the final blow to his finances” (77). Mr. Macartney also struggled to pay his rent. He had defaulted for the three weeks previous to his introduction to Evelina, and shortly after his suicide attempt, Mr. Branghton demanded payment in full (177, 185; vol. 2, letters 11, 13). Finally, as previously mentioned, both men resort to suicide, but only after attempting other dishonest money-making schemes: Chatterton in plagiarism and the fraudulent translations of the Rowley poetry, and Macartney in armed robbery (Maitland 55; Evelina 230; vol. 2, letter 20).
As a side note on their deaths, several accounts report that before taking a dose of opium, Chatterton scattered small scraps of paper, supposed to be bits of poetry, all over the floor of his apartment (Maitland 68–69). In Macartney's case, the Branghtons show Evelina "scrap s of poetry" on small pieces of paper discovered in his room. All of these details considered, the accounts of these two young poets carry strong parallels, and the fact that Burney was most likely unaware of the details of Chatterton's tragic experience in London makes the similarities even more remarkable.

An Alternate Solution

From these comparable beginnings, Chatterton and Macartney's lives drastically diverge, for Mrs. Angel did not prove the saving seraph that Evelina did. Chatterton died an obscure death in destitute conditions, while Macartney, on the other hand, found reconciliation with his father and, consequently, obtained a more comfortable living, movement in higher social circles, and marriage with his true love.

This fairy-tale alternative is made possible by three factors that are absent in Chatterton's case: the charity of others, the poet's humility, and his virtue. First, the charity of Macartney's wealthy friend and that of Evelina enable him to rise from depression and poverty, while the only evidence that Chatterton received aid is the reported offer of a meal from his landlady on the day of his death (Evelina 298, vol. 3, letter 5; Pittock 77). Second, Macartney eventually "curbs his pride" in order to accept both his benefactors' aid and his fate as a poor minister in Scotland, while Chatterton rejects his landlady's offer and runs from his fate as a lawyer (Farr 34; Evelina 298, vol. 3, letter 5, and 226, vol. 2, letter 20; Pittock 75, 77–78).

The final factor in Macartney's success is his turning from vice. In a letter to Evelina, Mr. Villars implies that Evelina should withhold her generosity from Macartney should he prove to be a person of bad character (217; vol. 2, letter 18). Evelina, consequently, tests out his character and discovers that despite some mistakes his intentions are not truly villainous, and her charity gives him the hope to turn from the life of a "foot-pad" (230, vol. 2, letter 20; 297–98, vol. 3, letter 5). Chatterton, by contrast, fails to turn from forgery, even doggedly submitting for publication shortly before his death another Rowley ballad, this time one with the ironic theme of charity (Pittock 77).

Problems with the Solution

With this fairy-tale ending, Burney provides a tidy solution to the socio-economic problems of the publishing industry of her day, but her pat answer does not correspond to the complex reality of the problem. Several scholars confess that London reviewers and publishers wielded an intimidating influence over the general stock of writers, especially the poor, provincial poet, like Macartney or Chatterton. For example, Farr explains that "offending those stern arbiters of
literary opinion, the reviewers, was a perilous business” (35). She also refers to Burney’s “shabby treatment” from publishers who had paid her ridiculously small sums for her first two best-selling novels despite her upper-middle-class status (37). Pittock seems to draw the same conclusion about the situation when she labels Chatterton’s death a “martyrdom of the poet by the materialistic society of his time” (64).

In specific reference to the situation of the provincial poet, and even more particularly to that of the Scottish poet, Peter Murphy uses the motif of boundaries to describe four ways in which these writers are disadvantaged. The border between Scotland and England represents “the border between local and literary culture, between oral and written, between backward and refined,” as well as the “invisible but intractable boundaries between classes” (1). Murphy expands this metaphor with the example of Robert Burns entering the literary world of Edinburgh. He states that his “most obvious challenge is that of class difference, as manifested in . . . lack of acquaintance, a rustic accent, lack of money, stained and work-spoiled clothes” (3). Burns’s poetry reflects the same distinctions, except in literary form, in terms of “politeness, decency, propriety, rustic interest and dress” (3). It seems logical to project these same challenges for Macartney, for Miss Branghton describes him as “nothing but a poor Scotch poet” (176; vol. 2, letter 11). And although Chatterton came from the more affluent town of Bristol, Pittock still reports that Walpole’s rejection of the Rowley poems “reveals the antagonism of cosmopolitan sophistication versus provincial authenticity” (69).

Burney’s three-fold solution falls apart in the face of these economic realities. First, actual charitable attempts were not always effective. For example, Fanny’s father, Dr. Burney, obtained a commission for Dr. Hawkesworth to write up one of Captain Cook’s voyages, yet this very project proved his downfall (Farr 36). Likewise, the charity of Dr. Burney, Samuel Johnson, and David Garrick did not restore Christopher Smart to mental health (35). Second, a poet’s humility rarely brought him the success he desired. For example, Farr attests that if “promising authors” could “curb their pride and manoeuvre successfully through the snares of patronage, they could find themselves a comfortable niche in society” (34). But many writers did not want a “comfortable niche”; they wanted “notice,” “distinction rather than absorption in the crowd” (Murphy 11). Finally, London publishers rarely rewarded virtue. In fact, in the case of James MacPherson, they encouraged vice, for this literary forger achieved fame and fortune and rose to the level of a landlord (Murphy 9). What changes Burney could have effected in the market if all charitable and virtuous ventures panned out as nicely as they did for Mr. Macartney.

Burney Vindicated

Although I have argued that Burney’s solution is ineffective, I do not mean to say that it was not well intended. Burney’s position is understandable when we consider her own socio-economic position and her experiences in the Burney home. Her solution could stem from a lifestyle somewhat sheltered from the truly
poor and provincial, or from the aristocratic values of her society. It could also reveal the wishful thinking of a kind-hearted twenty-six-year-old who had too often seen the failure of her father’s charity to prevent the demise of talented writers like Smart and Hawkesworth. Add her youth to all of this and Burney’s solution seems the only plausible one for a girl of her age and background.

It is true that, like Evelina, Burney may have seen some of London’s bawdiness, but it did not correspond to the ultimate reality of her circumstances. Consequently, she succeeded in at least identifying the socio-economic problems of the literary market, but, ironically, her own socio-economic reality screened her from a “growing awareness of political ideas, individual potentialities, class differences, and the stultifying narrowness of provincial life” that would have informed a more mature solution (Pitlock 65). In her portrayal of Macartney, Burney failed to bridge the gap between her blue-stocking world and Chatterton’s bleak reality. She did not prove the best advocate for disadvantaged poets, who would have to wait upon the work of proponents of the new Romantic poetic.

**Works Cited**


