

“A Philosophical Gossip”: Science and Sociability in Frances Burney’s *Cecilia*¹

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In Frances Burney’s second novel *Cecilia: or, Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), the social taxonomist Mr Gosport educates the heroine in the ways of the *bon ton* by applying classificatory principles to metropolitan polite society. In this article, I argue that Gosport’s methodology derives principally from the discourse of Linnaean botany, with which Burney was familiar through the personal tutelage of the botanist Daniel Solander (1733-1782). The fact that Gosport’s methodology exercises a powerful but ultimately pernicious effect on Cecilia’s developing judgment indicates Burney’s interest in exploring the ethical implications of empirical observation and classification. She is an important early contributor to the body of fiction that scholars of literature and science have recently argued “offer[s]... direct criticism of... sciences that pretended to be able to read the inside of the body by looking at its surfaces.”²

To date, Burney’s engagement with scientific culture has gone largely unexplored. The notable exception is the argument - made by Claudia Johnson, Julie Park and Andrea Haslanger - that in her novels Burney uses automata as figurative parallels to “demonstrate the paralysis women experience in the face of maltreatment and social difficulty.”³ Park argues most explicitly that Burney’s character sketches are conceptually indebted to contemporary scientific discourse, asserting that the “new standard of lifelikeness” demonstrated by Burney’s characters “also motivated the making of such machines as the celebrated automata of Jacques Vaucanson [1709-

1782]” (148). The suggestion that Burney’s character sketches are conceptually indebted to scientific discourse is valuable, but neither Park, Johnson nor Haslanger offer evidence that Burney was actually familiar with the work of Vaucanson or any other engineer. Conversely, this article operates on the premise that cultural anxieties and attitudinal shifts – such as an interest in “the order of things” or in scientific culture more broadly – make their presence felt through traceable textual or verbal conduits.⁴ I suggest that Burney’s interest in taxonomy was stimulated by her personal acquaintance with Solander, which was in turn enabled by the sociable networks that her family helped to create.

My emphasis on the role of sociability in disseminating scientific knowledge seeks to extend a growing body of work on eighteenth-century women’s engagement with scientific culture. Martin Willis identifies a tendency in literature and science scholarship of this period to “investigate connections between specific scientific organisations... and particular literary figures, genres and philosophies” (11). But this approach presents a problem when it comes to women writers, since in a post-Habermasian age we must acknowledge that ‘public’ institutions such as the Royal Society or the Linnaean Society excluded women from scholarship and debate.⁵ In recent years, some scholars have therefore turned to evidence of more informal sociable interactions in order to examine how women were personally mentored by male acquaintance into scientific expertise. Particularly useful here are the brief sketches of Hester Thrale and Maria Edgeworth’s “scientific education[s]” in Patricia Phillips’ *The Scientific Lady*, and Beth Tobin’s acknowledgement of the curatorial partnership between Daniel Solander and Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, Duchess of Portland in *The Duchess’s Shells*.⁶ My examination of Burney’s relationship with Solander, like Phillips’ and Tobin’s vignettes, suggests that it was often through

informal verbal interactions, in polite social spaces, that genteel women acquired scientific knowledge. In doing so, it draws on the recent critical turn towards sociability as a “key form of cultural work” during the Romantic period.⁷

In making this argument, I diverge from the methodological approach of accounts that have largely stressed the *textual* nature of eighteenth-century women’s engagement with science. Botanical culture, in particular, has proved a particularly fertile site for investigations of how women were targeted as a scientific audience, and how, in turn, they played important roles in the dissemination of scientific theory.⁸ But Burney has been largely absent from these conversations, for two reasons. The first is that we have no explicit textual record of her personal interest in botany; no poem scribbled on the flyleaf of Linnaeus’s *System of Vegetables* like Anna Seward’s; no popular guide to botany like Priscilla Wakefield’s.⁹ The fact that Burney’s engagement with taxonomic theory took place through verbal rather than textual conduits has meant that its influence on her fiction has gone untraced. With the publication of the final volume of Burney’s *Early Journals and Letters* in 2012, the textual traces of these verbal conversations have for the first time been made widely accessible. In presenting evidence of Burney’s sociable influences and exchanges over the period during which she wrote her second novel, the journals and letters of 1780-1782 enable new readings to be made, and new conclusions to be drawn.

Second, Burney’s interest in how Linnaean taxonomies might be adapted to foster certain interpretations of ‘character’ fits uncomfortably with the dominant narrative about women’s engagement with botanical discourse, which, using Erasmus Darwin’s influential poem *The Loves of the Plants* as a touchstone, largely addresses what Schiebinger calls “the sexual politics of... botany” (123). Where critics have

addressed traces of botanical discourse in eighteenth-century and Romantic women's fiction, they have largely assumed that the author was interested in developing a "botanical vernacular" primarily in order to covertly negotiate ideas about female sexuality.¹⁰ I argue, conversely, that Burney's interest in taxonomy provides her with a language for doing something entirely different; namely, reflecting on the taxonomized literary marketplace within which she operates. In suggesting that she uses the terminology of botanical taxonomy to express anxieties about authorship, I want to apply to new chronological and conceptual territory Leah Knight's recent interest in the "ways in which a culture of plants and a culture of texts met" in the early modern period.¹¹ Knight primarily addresses the material interstices between books and botany – the ways in which "[e]ven in their sheer raw materials, plants and books were remarkably intertwined"(8). I suggest that by the late eighteenth century – when, according to Michel Foucault, resemblance rather than individuality had become an organising principle across numerous discourses – the semantic zeugmas that most insistently link botanical and print cultures are derived from taxonomic discourse (*The Order of Things*, 256). *Cecilia* and its author are both frequently subjected to forms of classification by reviewers and readers, who use the vocabulary of "class", "cast", "genus", and "species" to place them on axes of particularity and generality. This suggests a new dimension to Burney's preoccupation with the ethics of classification in *Cecilia*. Ultimately, in inviting the reader to both class her characters and to resist such an impulse, she expresses ambivalence towards her own footing, and that of her text, within an increasingly taxonomized literary marketplace. In short, the taxonomic logic of *Cecilia* suggests that Burney's knowledge of botanical systems informs her understanding of literary systems.

Gosport's taxonomies: '...pray, of what sect?'

Initially introduced as “a man of good parts, and keen satire” who “make[s] the minutiae of absurd characters [his] study”, Gosport makes his first appearance at a party organised for Cecilia on her first night in London.¹² It becomes apparent that he habitually observes the comportments and behaviours of members of his social circle, classifies them, and predicts their future behaviour accordingly. He explains his methodology with reference to Cecilia’s new acquaintances, the garrulous Miss Larolles and the silent Miss Leeson:

“Are you then, yet to learn,” cried he, “that there are certain young ladies who make it a rule never to speak but to their own cronies? Of this class is Miss Leeson, and till you get in her particular Coterie, you must never expect to hear from her a word of two syllables. The TON misses, as they are called, who now infest the town, are in two divisions, the SUPERCILIOUS, and the VOLUBLE. The SUPERCILIOUS, like Miss Leeson, are silent, scornful, languid, and affected, and disdain all converse but with those of their own set: the VOLUBLE, like Miss Larolles, are flirting, communicative, restless, and familiar, and attack without the smallest ceremony, every one they think worthy their notice. But this they have in common, that at home they think of nothing but dress, abroad, of nothing but admiration, and that every where they hold in supreme contempt all but themselves.”

Gosport divides his objects of study into two “class[es]” or “division[s]” (later also described as “character[s]” and “denomination[s]”), the SUPERCILIOUS and the VOLUBLE. He ascribes certain characteristics to each class (“silent, scornful, languid, and affected” and “flirting, communicative, restless, and familiar”), and

describes the behaviour that suggests these characteristics (“disdain all converse...” and “attack without the smallest ceremony...”). Furthermore, Gosport claims that his system allows entry into the very thoughts of the women: they “think of nothing but dress... [and] admiration”, and “hold in supreme contempt all but themselves”. After explaining his methodology, he proceeds to give Cecilia “full directions” as to how she might take practical steps to identify a SUPERCILIOUS or a VOLUBLE herself. With a SUPERCILIOUS, she must raise “three topics of discourse... Dress, public places, and love... These three topics... are to answer three purposes, since there are no less than three causes from which the silence of young ladies may proceed: sorrow, affectation, and stupidity” (41). Cecilia, amused, confesses herself “obliged... for these instructions”, and they part. Upon their second meeting, the same method is repeated, with reference to the fashionable Mr Meadows (an INSENSIBILIST) and the inane Captain Aresby (a JARGONIST).

Cecilia is initially a willing pupil in the science of social taxonomy. She actively solicits Gosport’s tutelage: “You must ... be somewhat more explicit, if you mean that I should benefit from your instructions”; and at their third meeting she takes the initiative to demand, “And pray of what sect... is this gentleman?” (280). Later, she notes how “perplexed” she would have been by the behaviour of those around her had it not been for Gosport’s “explanatory observations” (323). Moreover, the methodology shapes Cecilia’s own principle of sociability, by encouraging her to form judgments and conduct relationships based on empirical evidence. She is initially inclined to be courteous to Larolles, but following Gosport’s disparaging verdict, she subsequently receives her “compliment[s]... rather coldly” (27). Later, she uses the words “SUPERCILIOUS” and “VOLUBLE” in conversation (45), and still later the terminology is woven into her own interior monologue (286). Gosport,

therefore, exercises a powerful pedagogical influence over the way Cecilia comes to conceptualize character, which is symbolised by the costume he selects for the masquerade, that of a schoolmaster.

In the manuscript of *Cecilia*, the early Gosport scenes contain striking instances of strategic capitalisation, which suggest that Burney was keen to draw attention to Gosport's influence typographically as well as thematically.¹³ Originally, Burney wrote the names of her categories – “Supercilious” or “Volatile”, for example – in lower case letters. But she subsequently scrawled “Caps”, encircled, above each usage of the words – thus indicating, presumably, that she wished to have them printed in capitals when the manuscript went to press. Capitalization, of course, fulfils numerous functions in eighteenth-century typography. Within her manuscripts, it is a device that Burney otherwise uses exclusively to draw attention to a novel's moral axioms – for example, the reference to “PRIDE AND PREJUDICE” at the end of *Cecilia*. Her decision to highlight the banter of a minor character therefore acquires a particular significance. Either she considered her taxonomic coinages so important that they merited prominence alongside “PRIDE AND PREJUDICE”, or else she was emulating a specific sort of capitalization; using typography to draw attention to Gosport's methodology as a form of a particular practice or discourse. In fact, these two possibilities should not be considered mutually exclusive.

Gosport's geneses: Witlings and Withering

Several scholars have previously noted that Gosport exercises a pedagogic function that contributes towards Cecilia's intellectual and moral development. Margaret Anne Doody, for example, describes the “edgy” Gosport as “an amused cicerone of satire, initiating Cecilia into London ways”.¹⁴ Francesca Saggini, similarly, regards Gosport

as “something of a classical *didascalus*, or teacher, but in the comic vein best suited to a satire on manners.”¹⁵ Anthony W. Lee argues for an even more positive interpretation: “Gosport... approaches the ideal of the mentor [since he is] knowledgeable and experienced, insightful and articulate.”¹⁶ The full importance of Gosport’s distinctive register, however, has not been addressed in detail. In order to account for Gosport’s typographic and thematic influence, it is worth considering its dramatic and scientific geneeses.

One important strand of Gosport’s literary lineage lies in Burney’s play *The Witlings* (1779), which, due to the disapprobation of Charles Burney (1726-1814) and Samuel Crisp (1707-1783), was never performed during her lifetime.¹⁷ Hilary Havens has remarked the resemblance between *The Witlings*’ “professed Satirest” Censor (74), and *Cecilia*’s “man of keen satire” Gosport (39), noting that these correspondences are even more marked in Burney’s original manuscript for *Cecilia* than in the published version.¹⁸ Censor’s drily misanthropic register foreshadows Gosport’s, with the clearest correspondence between the two being their disparagement of a talkative character called “Mrs. Voluble” in *The Witlings*, who, in *Cecilia*, has been refashioned into “Larolles” or the “VOLUBLE”.

In characters such as Mrs Voluble and Mrs Wheedle, we can trace the forbears of *Cecilia*’s VOLUBLES, INSENSIBILISTS, SUPERCILIOUS and JARGONISTS. The important difference, of course, lies in the characters’ names. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt argues that the eighteenth-century novelist eschews characteristic names, preferring to “indicate his intention of presenting a character as a particular individual by naming him... as particular individuals are named in ordinary life.”¹⁹ Burney’s shift from antiphrastic names such as “Mrs Voluble” and “Censor” in the play to realistic names such as “Miss Larolles” and “Gosport” in the novel fits neatly

with Watt's thesis. Moreover, in her insistent inclusion of Gosport's classificatory activity, Burney metatextually weaves this focus on the interplay of particularity and generality into her narrative. When Gosport assimilates "Miss Larolles" into the category of a "VOLUBLE", and when Cecilia (as I later suggest) ultimately rejects his methodology in favour of an individualistic approach, they both perform functions analogous to that of the writer making creative choices about character names.

However, the development in character naming between *The Wiltings* and *Cecilia* can also be ascribed to another discursive influence. The subjugation of individuality to class is the central principle of the taxonomic method recommended by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) in his *Systema Naturae* (1735), to which Gosport's methodology of description, extrapolation and classification bears a marked correspondence. Many scholars have noted that by the early 1780s Linnaeus's system was being translated, paraphrased and marketed for polite female readers in Britain, in publications such as William Withering's *Botanical Arrangement* (1776). Upon a brief examination of Withering's adaptation, it is possible to detect similarities between the system of botanical classification that was fashionable in Burney's London and the sociable taxonomy that Gosport advocates to Cecilia.

In the Preface to his first edition, Withering states his aim to explain natural taxonomy in a "familiar language", "endeavour[ing] to obtain an idea of Classes, Orders, &c" and comparing "the vegetables upon the face of the globe, as analogous to the inhabitants":

VEGETABLES resemble INHABITANTS;

CLASSES ... resemble NATIONS;

ORDERS... resemble TRIBES;

GENERA... resemble FAMILIES;
SPECIES... resemble INDIVIDUALS;

And VARIETIES are the same *Individuals* in different dresses.²⁰

Withering then establishes that “Characters” are ascertained by observing “particulars”, “appearances” and “peculiarities” in the appearances of the plants (xxiv), and provides detailed examples. His “Rules for Investigation” begin from the premise that “when a plant offers itself to our inspection, the first thing to be determined is the Class to which it belongs”, followed by identifying the order, genus and species. The novice botanist must gather specimens of a plant, and consult the book in order to identify its categories correctly.

This system has clear parallels with Gosport’s social taxonomy. In the first lesson he selects Miss Leeson as a subject, tries three different experiments upon her to determine whether her reigning principle is “sorrow”, “affectation” or “stupidity” and, having settled on affectation, consigns her to the class of “SUPERCILIOUS”. The “sects”, “divisions”, “races”, “characters” and “classes” of Gosport bear parallels with the “species”, “orders”, “genera”, “characters” and “classes” of Withering.²¹ Finally, Withering’s names for plants – “CROWFOOT” or “WALLFLOWER”, for example – share a typographic quirk with Gosport’s “SUPERCILIOUS” and “VOLUBLE”; they are inevitably capitalised. The capitalisation of taxonomic classes is a constant practice throughout popular botanical abridgements published in the 1780s, which take their example from the original Linnaean texts that they modify.

Linnaean typology, binomials and indeed botanical taxonomy were of course not entirely settled or secure entities by the 1780s. As Sam George has pointed out, a name such as “WALLFLOWER” was an innovation on Withering’s part (85).

Linnaeus was famous for his binomial nomenclature, whereby each kind of plant had a two-part name denoting both the genera and the species. These “shortened biverbials”, which frequently replaced “long phrase descriptions”, were in themselves an important form of simplification (King, 33). But Withering simplified Linnaeus’s binomial names even further, by converting them to single words – so the *Erysimum Brassicaceae*, for example, becomes the WALLFLOWER. This is precisely what Gosport does with the classes he identifies in the metropolitan drawing-room; a Miss Leeson or a Mr Meadows becomes a SUPERCILIOUS or INSENSIBILIST, enabling Cecilia to streamline the mass of information available to her, and to tailor her sociable relationships accordingly. Gosport’s onomastic work here is, of course, really Burney’s: *Cecilia*’s editors remark that “the use of these substantives appears to be Burney’s own invention” (n. 979).

Daniel Solander, ‘Philosophical Gossip’

Despite these correspondences between Burney’s Gosport scenes and a text such as Withering’s, I want to suggest that the most important source of Burney’s knowledge of botanical classification was oral rather than textual, and sociable as well as scholarly. Her journals and letters offer ample evidence that over the period 1780-1782, when she was planning and writing *Cecilia*, she was also spending a significant amount of time with the botanist Daniel Solander. Furthermore, parallels between contemporary appraisals of Solander and the language Burney uses to describe Gosport suggest that the friendship exercised a significant influence over her creative process.

Having been traditionally neglected in favour of his mentor Linnaeus and his friend Joseph Banks (1743-1820), Solander has recently been rehabilitated as an

important figure in botanical history.²² In a valuable biography, Edward Duyker argues that Solander's relative paucity of print publications has led critics to underestimate his influence. His expertise, Duyker suggests, was often disseminated via oral instruction, whether in official consultations at the British Museum, in his work cataloguing private collections, or in informal lectures and conversations in polite social spaces. He was, Duyker argues, the "taxonomic oracle" of polite London (*Nature's Argonaut*, 276). Beth Fowkes Tobin's impressive study of the Duchess of Portland's shell collection also acknowledges Solander as "Britain's leading taxonomist" (212), and stresses his "involved" and "very dynamic" relationship with the Duchess as intrinsic to her success as a collector (118, 254).

Contemporary descriptions of Solander support Duyker's contention, and indicate that Tobin's study should be the first of many to take seriously Solander's mode of transmitting scientific knowledge. Repeatedly, these descriptions emphasize Solander's sociable as well as his scientific skills, and his amiability as well as his learning. John Lightfoot (1735-1788), the Duchess of Portland's librarian, saw him as a unique "composition" of philosophy and politeness: "Such a fine Composition of the Philosopher & the Gentleman is hardly to be found in a Century."²³ Similarly, Banks recalled after Solander's death how he took every opportunity to blend science and sociability. On the one hand, when he "was free from duties at the museum, he used his time to assist his friends who much desired his help in everything that concerned natural history." On the other, "His gift to describe with taste the rare specimens of the British Museum was so unusually charming that both men and women chose the hours which they knew Solander was accustomed to display the collection." Sharing his scientific expertise in sociable spaces, then, was a key

component of Solander's appeal. Conversely, in his place of work he drew visitors more attracted by his "charm" than by the "collection".²⁴

Intellectual facility and verbal aptitude were both central to the sociable milieu of the 'Streatham Worthies', the circle of intelligentsia revolving in the early 1780s around the home of Hester Thrale (who relished scientific knowledge and acquaintance (Phillips, 156)). It is therefore unsurprising that Solander should ultimately be welcomed into her set. According to Thrale (1741-1821), she first met Solander on 5 January 1780 – "This Day Doctor Solander was introduced to me... I feel willing to expect Pleasure from his Acquaintance" – and a mere couple of days later, she noted that "[Dr. Charles] Burney pretends to be jealous of Dr Solander's growing favour".²⁵ Charles Burney had been inducted into the Streatham clique in 1776, before introducing his daughter in 1778 – and Streatham was to become the scene of Frances Burney's first meeting with Solander.

It is worth noting, however, that Burney made Solander's acquaintance not only under the patronage of Hester Thrale and through the acquaintance of her father, but also via the rather different circle of her "inexpressibly dear" brother James (1750-1821). James Burney, as Ruth Scobie notes in her more extended analysis of his Oceanic networks in this collection, sailed with James Cook (1728-1799) as able seaman and second lieutenant. Frances Burney reported his appointments and acquaintances with obvious pride: she noted in 1775 that James had "so honourably increased his friends, & gained reputation, that it is not in the power of his forbearance or modesty to conceal it".²⁶ These friends included Banks and Solander. Though they had not travelled together, all three men had sailed with Cook, and were conversant with South Sea languages and cultures. Indeed, Frances Burney had almost met Banks and Solander, long before she met Hester Thrale. They had brought

the Tahitian traveller Mai (1751-1780) to the Burneys' house for dinner in 1774; Frances stayed upstairs while the botanists were present, but later on, as recorded in the famous episode in her diary, she came down to meet the exotic visitor.²⁷

Thus, when Burney finally met Solander at Streatham in 1780, she recorded the meeting in her journal with an air of satisfied curiosity: "Dr. Solander, who I never saw before, I found very sociable, full of talk, information & entertainment. My father has very exactly named him a *Philosophical Gossip*" (Frances Burney to Samuel Crisp, 22 January 1780, *EJL*, 4:13). With this description, Burney immediately places emphasis on Solander's sociability, on his verbal facility, and on his ability – so often noted – to instruct *and* to entertain. Having established Solander as a "Philosophical Gossip" – a term that hybridizes scientific expertise with light-hearted sociability – the rest of the letter recounts a long anecdote whereby Burney tries to listen to him speak, but is repeatedly distracted by the irritating garrulity of the playwright Arthur Murphy (1727-1805), who is still trying to persuade her to stage *The Witlings*.

This anecdote, it seems to me, marks a rupture in the trajectory of Burney's sociable and literary aspirations. In earlier letters and journals, she records admiration of Murphy, and gratitude for his attentions to her dramatic efforts. But by early 1780, after the Daddies' suppression of *The Witlings*, she is beginning to relinquish her interest in the project in favour of returning to fiction, and his exhortations therefore cause her only irritation. Closely linked to her annoyance at Murphy's continued championing of the dramatic form is exasperation at his inappropriate model of sociability. Murphy "made at her" and "attacked her", an aggressive form of garrulity that recalls and foreshadows the tactics of Mrs. Voluble and Miss Larolles (who, in Gosport's previously quoted words, "attack[s] without the smallest ceremony").

Burney contrasts this to the discursive urbanity and “particular[ity]” of Solander, to whom she wishes to listen; but to no avail, for “Mr. Murphy would not let me hear a Word”. The subject of Solander’s conversation, tellingly, is South Sea exploration; he speaks of letters from Captain Charles Clerke (1741-1779), and finally brings the conversation around to the travels of James Burney himself. Solander’s mode of sociability, and the subject of his discourse – which unites South Sea culture with the kinship network of the Burneys – makes Murphy’s talk of “Stage Tricks” and “Galleries” seem rather provincial.

A postscript to Burney’s description of the encounter suggests that Solander’s conversation, on this occasion and others, may well have involved botany. Burney finishes her letter by noting: “Dr. Solander invited the whole Party to the Museum the Day Week ... This was by all accepted., - & I will say some thing of it hereafter”. No account of the expedition to see Solander’s collections survives, though it did apparently take place (*EJL*, 4:14 n). Further mentions of Solander follow on 26 February 1780, when Burney “past a most delightful Evening with [him]” (Frances Burney to Samuel Crisp, [c.26] February [1780], *EJL*, 4:19), and in February-March 1782, when in a “violent crowd of company” at the house of one Mr. Paradise, “there was nobody else I knew but Doctor Solander...” (Frances Burney to Susanna Burney Phillips, late February-March 1782, *EJL*, 5: 22).

No record survives of the precise subject of Burney and Solander’s conversations. But, judging by her allusion to the “information” and “entertainment” he imparted, and his blending of “Philosophy” and “Gossip”, it seems likely that Solander was inclined to discourse on both botanical and sociable subjects. We know that he enjoyed explaining the principles of Linnaean classification to female acquaintance. In a letter to Horace Walpole (1717-1797), Mary Berry (1763-1852)

recollects: “I was early initiated into all the amours and loose manners of the plants by that very guilty character, Dr Solander, and passed too much time in the society and observance of some of the most abandoned vegetable coquettes”.²⁸ If similar conversations took place with Burney (and based on the available evidence, this must remain a speculation only), then they occurred over the precise period when she was planning and writing the scenes where Gosport “initiates” Cecilia into London society; where together they describe and classify coquettes as if they were vegetables.²⁹

There are, then, marked correspondences between Gosport’s scientific sociability and the characteristics ascribed to Solander. Moreover, his acquaintance with Burney corresponds chronologically with her composition of *Cecilia*, and there are semantic and typographical echoes in her manuscript of the taxonomic discourse for which Solander was acknowledged to be an “oracle”. Taken together, these facts suggest that the Gosport scenes were shaped by their acquaintance. Moreover, as I will show by returning to *Cecilia*, the notion of taxonomic sociability was sufficiently important to Burney that, despite Gosport’s relatively minor status within the novel, his system became an organising principle of her narrative and crucial to her conception of character.

Taxonomising Cecilia: ‘Appearances are so strangely against her’

Francesca Saggini points out that “structurally, [*Cecilia*] is composed of two parts”, respectively set in London and Suffolk and reflecting Cecilia’s residences with different guardians (144). It seems to me that this bipartite structure also reflects two stages of Cecilia’s intellectual and moral development, with the second half symmetrically reversing the momentum of the first. In the first half, Cecilia learns to

apply Gosport's taxonomic methodology to others. In the second, she becomes the object of that same methodology, which is now portrayed, in its impulse to classify, describe and extrapolate, as insufficiently respectful of particularity.

The key scene that demonstrates this transition is the chapter called 'A Torment' in which, rushing towards London to be secretly married to Mortimer Delvile in the second half of the narrative, Cecilia encounters her old social set. Here, the affable Gosport has taken on a darker aspect: his quips are "sarcastic" and his "malice" is emphasised (596). Janice Thaddeus rightly suggests that the "Torment" of the chapter's title refers to "Gosport's pointed questions" about the purpose of her journey, which hint that he suspects she is romantically involved with Mortimer.³⁰ Under the elaborate pretence of a metaphor about Delvile Castle, he quizzes Cecilia about the "havock" that "time" (her time there, with Mortimer) has wrought:

'The internal parts of a building are not less vulnerable to accident than its outside.... Many a fair structure have I seen, which, like that now before me,' (looking with much significance at Cecilia,) 'has to the eye seemed perfect in all its parts, and unhurt either by time or casualty, while within, some lurking evil, some latent injury, has secretly worked its way into the very *heart* of the edifice, where it has consumed its strength, and laid waste its powers, till, seeking deeper and deeper, it has sapped its very foundation...' (598)

Thaddeus reads the subtext of this metaphor as "clearly tied to loss of virginity and accidental pregnancy" (83). But the insistent interplay on exteriority and interiority also highlights Gosport's previous tendency to draw surmises based on (outer) physical appearances and extrapolate from them a verdict on (inner) character;

a classificatory methodology that the reader is now supposed to find disturbing rather than comic. Cecilia, though deeply affected by Gosport's charge, remarks that his "meaning" is "obscure," leading him to "illustrate it by an example", which brings their skirmish to a point. "'No, no,' interrupted she, with involuntary quickness, 'why should I trouble you to make illustrations?'" In the first half of the narrative, Cecilia welcomed Gosport's illustrations as instructive and entertaining. His attempt to categorise her as he might a plant – underlined by his pun on "sap" and her critique of his "florid" language – is now viewed as an indicator of prejudice and instigator of pain.

This is the last that either Cecilia or the reader sees of Gosport. In the narrative's climactic scenes, however, his empiricist methodology seems to have coloured the behaviour of her various antagonists, reinforcing her status as observed specimen. To a certain extent, as Saggini observes, Cecilia is depicted as subjected to a degree of scrutiny and surmise from the novel's beginning (146-7): for example, relatively early on in the narrative, she is frustrated by the judgments of those who assume that her attempts to prevent a duel are indicative of romantic attachment: "appearances", she complains, "are so strangely against her," and "unaccountable obscurity" clouds her "affairs" (243). But it is from the halfway point in the novel that she is most insistently framed as an object to be observed, analysed and classed accordingly, from Mortimer warning her that their clandestine meetings must "be food for conjecture, for enquiry, for wonder" (619) to Mr Delvile accusing her of sexual impropriety, based on his observation of her movements (759). Cecilia laments his "inferences... draw[n]... from circumstances the most accidental and unmeaning", but Delvile is satisfied with his Gosportian methodology, and disowns her. These accusations of impropriety play an important part in the climactic and traumatic scene

in which “[Cecilia’s] reason... suddenly, yet totally fail[s] her” (896) and she is imprisoned in a pawn shop and advertised in the newspapers under the label “MADNESS” – the ultimate objectification. The reader is therefore invited to recognise true character as unascertainable by means of empirical observation. In other words, *Cecilia* provides an essential step in Burney’s authorial commitment to what Deidre Lynch calls “a brave new world of female interiority” (167).

In *The Economy of Character* Lynch identifies an “agoraphobic inflection in... English novels of manners... which regularly send their heroines into marriage markets where they are misrecognized and objectified and which then go on to reanimate and redeem them from this commodification” (6). At the root of this tendency, Lynch suggests, is the replacement of “...the pictorialist episteme that associated “characters” with exoteric, highly visible information” with “truths that mattered about the character” (26-27). The emergence of this replacement can be traced to anxieties about the commodification of elite literary culture. Enjoying an ineffable character “became a way of asserting that one did not belong to the sort of indiscriminating audience that would take pleasure in... caricatures’ (57). Lynch characterises Burney’s understanding of “character” as “agoraphobic”, and argues that she envisages a form of subjectivity for her protagonists that can operate outside the logic of “exchange relations” (167).

However, Lynch’s analysis of how Burney sets “character” in relation to commercial value (which draws on *Evelina* (1778), *Camilla* (1796) and *The Wanderer* (1814)) makes no mention of *Cecilia* – an omission which, in light of the novel’s sustained tension between generality and individuality, seems curious. It appears to me that in Burney’s second novel, the calibration of character is driven by the organising logic and lexis of taxonomy rather than that of commercial value, and

that this may reasonably be traced back to the social and pedagogical influence of Solander. In the final section of this article, therefore, I add a new dimension to Lynch's claim that Burney's anxiety about assigning character on the basis of "highly visible information" can ultimately be traced back to her concerns about her position within the literary marketplace. Showing that this marketplace itself was in fact frequently described in taxonomic terms, I suggest that Burney's ultimate resistance to a classificatory theory of "character" also reflects anxieties about her own place within "casts" and "classes" of novels and of authors. I ultimately suggest, therefore, that when considering Burney's episteme of character, it may be beneficial to consider how she draws upon other discourses than merely the commercial – particularly, in this case, the taxonomic.

'Quelque chose extraordinaire': Taxonomies of authorship

In 1765, Charles Burney wrote to Samuel Johnson: "it is the Business of a Critical Botanist to class & desc[rib]e & not to praise or Censure indiscriminately."³¹ In making this statement he was echoing Johnson's own observation, in his 'Preface on Shakespeare', that Shakespeare's corpus contains "oaks" and "pines", but also "weeds" and "brambles". The two men were clearly conversant with a discourse of "Critical Botany" that viewed the tasks of the botanist and the critic as broadly synonymous, and which is still evident, twenty years later, in responses to *Cecilia*. The reviewer in the *British Magazine*, for example, professed himself "happy to acknowledge, that the novel before us is of a *cast* infinitely superior to most of the modern Adventures, Histories and Memoirs".³² The writer for the *Critical Review* declared that "we think it but justice *to class* this work among the first productions of the kind".³³ And William Bewley, writing to Charles Burney, described the novel as

“full of charms of all kinds, belonging to the *genus*”.³⁴ The vocabulary used to classify plants (as well as other entities) inflected the ways in which Burney’s novel was assessed, located, and praised.

The urge to classify the novel apparently extended, too, to its author. Jane Spencer and Betty Schellenberg have both argued that Burney frequently displays anxiety, amidst “the increasing typology and hierarchization of forms of authorship” (Schellenberg, 13) about where, as a writer, she might be placed. Spencer contends that “the female intellectual... arouses in [Burney] intense anxiety, and she distances herself from this figure... The man of letters [conversely], is seen as ultimately benevolent to the properly gentle and unpretentious woman”.³⁵ Schellenberg argues, similarly, that Burney was drawn to the “professional rather than amateur model of letters, identifying the Streatham circle with Johnson at its literary apex with the former, and Elizabeth Montagu’s bluestocking circle with the latter” (21). Both Spencer and Schellenberg suggest, too, that Charles Burney’s status as professional author (which, as Peter Sabor shows in his contribution to this collection, was fully consolidated by the mid-1780s) influenced his daughter’s identification with a male literary tradition (Spencer, 49; Schellenberg, 172).

It seems to me, however, that Burney’s own accounts of the reception of her work suggest not a desire to belong to a professional male tradition of writing exemplified by Richardson, Fielding, Johnson and her own father, but instead to stand alone as an unclassifiable literary phenomenon. As Saggini has noted, Burney’s paratextual presentation of *Cecilia* (especially her wish to appear on the title page not as ‘Miss Burney’ but as ‘THE AUTHOR OF EVELINA’) indicates her *unwillingness* to class herself as a Burney, against the grain of her father’s machinations to forge a familial authorial identity by publishing their works simultaneously. This urge to

“dissociate her own identity as author from the family name” (Saggini, 137) can, however, be observed not only in Burney’s reluctance to identify as a member of a biological family, but also of a figurative literary patriarchy. In her letters and journals, she repeatedly emphasizes the responses to her work that place her *above* Richardson and Fielding, rather than alongside them. See, for example, the letters in which she smugly quotes Johnson comparing her favourably to Fielding – “Harry Fielding *never* drew so good a Character!” (Frances Burney to Susanna Burney Phillips, [21] August [1778], *EJL*, 3:90) and quotes the Duchess of Portland reporting herself delighted with *Cecilia* but “disgusted with [the] tediousness” of Richardson’s writing (Frances Burney to Susanna Burney Phillips, January 1783, *EJL*, 5:290). Perhaps the most telling is her letter from October 1782, in which she boasts to Susanna, “you would suppose me some thing dropt from the skies. Even if Richardson or Fielding could rise from the Grave, I should bid fair for supplanting them in the *popular Eye*, for being a *fair female*, I am accounted *quelque chose extraordinaire...*” (*EJL*, 5: 132).

As an author, Burney aspired to singularity, rather than subordination to a class; to being “dropt from the skies” rather than taking her place in a literary pedigree or lineage. Her desire was to be told, as her friend Anna Ord (c. 1726-1808) did: “You stand, indeed, upon such ground as nobody stands but yourself” (Frances Burney to Susanna Burney Phillips, November – December 1782, *EJL*, 5:179). This preoccupation with authorial classification was no fleeting phase: on the contrary, it shaped Burney’s attitude towards her authorship for the rest of her writing career. In the 1790s, for example, she was still arguing against classification: “I own I do not like calling [*Camilla*] a *Novel*: it gives so simply the notion of a mere love story, that I recoil a little from it. I mean it to be *sketches of Characters & morals, put in action*,

not a Romance.’³⁶ And in her Preface to *The Wanderer*, published in 1814, she was still reflecting on her early disposition to “fasten... degradation to this *class* of composition... this *species* of writing [the novel]”.³⁷

I am not, of course, the first to suggest that Burney rejects attempts to “place” herself and her work. Catherine Gallagher, for one, has pinpointed the early 1780s as the period when Burney’s fame and her family’s dependence on “soft patronage” “taught her that her relationships must be to Everybody simultaneously. Since her acceptance among the dominating classes relied on her successful address to Nobody, her lack of defined “place” became the very condition of her social relations...”. Gallagher also identifies manifestations of this ‘universal obligation’ within *Cecilia*: “the specific social, economic, and psychological conditions surrounding both Cecilia and Cecilia – placelessness, endless circulation, and a sense of general indebtedness – are the circumstances of a universalist subjectivity”.³⁸ However, like Lynch, Gallagher privileges economic discourse (in this case, the expansive trope of debt) as Burney’s organising metaphor for the rejection of categorisation. The role played by taxonomic discourse in Burney’s attempts to perform this rejection, however, is equally important. If Burney’s understanding of character can be characterised as “agoraphobic”, it can also be understood as “taxonomophobic”.

Burney’s preoccupation with taxonomic character in *Cecilia*, then, should not be read as simply a creative imprint of her acquaintance with Solander – a moment when the parameters of their conversations shaped the way that Mr. Gosport’s social taxonomies were organised. Rather, the discourse to which Solander introduced her suggested a way to articulate concerns about a cultural tendency to organize expressions of selfhood taxonomically. Burney’s engagement with Linnaean classification influenced and nurtured her understanding of the “character” of her own

authorship. Her acquaintance with Solander - a direct achievement of the Burney family's fervent sociability - was crucial to the development of this understanding, even when, ironically, that understanding led her to draw back from public identification as a Burney. Mapping the practice of this sociability, and taking seriously the light textual traces of formative conversations, are both essential steps towards achieving full understanding of Burney's engagement with taxonomic culture – and the ways in which it inflected her self-image and self-fashionings.

¹ I would like to thank the attendees of the symposium “New Perspectives on the Burney Family” (Cardiff University) for their astute and insightful questions when I delivered this paper in 2015. I would also like to thank Martin Willis, and two anonymous readers, for their helpful remarks on previous drafts of this article. Finally, I am grateful to Hanna Hodacs for setting me off down the paper trail after Daniel Solander.

² Martin Willis, *Literature and Science* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 95.

³ Andrea Haslanger, “From Man-Machine to Woman-Machine: Automata, Fiction, and Femininity in Dibdin's Hannah Hewit and Burney's Camilla”, *Modern Philology*, 111: 4 (May 2014), pp. 788-817, 790 n. See also Julie Park, “The life of Burney's clockwork characters”, *The New Science and Women's Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein*, ed. Judy A. Hayden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 147-164 and Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s; Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 154.

⁴ My terminology is drawn from Michael Foucault's, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ For an overview of the ‘separate spheres’ thesis, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). For considerations of women's exclusion from scientific institutions, see Marina Benjamin, “Introduction”, in *Science and Sensibility: Gender and Scientific Enquiry, 1780-1945*, ed. Marina Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 4.

⁶ Patricia Phillips, *The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Women's Scientific Interests, 1520-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990), pp. 155-178; Beth Fowkes Tobin, *The Duchess's Shells: Natural History Collecting in the Age of Cook's Voyages* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁷ For an overview of the importance of sociability to Romantic studies, see “Introducing Romantic Sociability”, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840*, eds. Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

⁸ Londa Schiebinger, “The Private Life of Plants: Sexual Politics in Carl Linnaeus and Erasmus Darwin”, in Benjamin (ed.), *Science and Sensibility*, 121-143; Sam George, *Botany, Sexuality and Women's Writing 1760-1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007).

⁹ Anna Seward, “The Backwardness of Spring Accounted For”, in *Linnaeus, A System of Vegetables*, 2 vols (John Jackson, 1783), II, manuscript in endpapers (British Library, 447.c.18); Priscilla Wakefield, *Mental Improvement, or, the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art, conveyed in a Series of Instructive Conversations* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1794).

¹⁰ Amy King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

¹¹ Leah Knight, *Of Books and Botany in Early Modern England: Sixteenth-Century Plants and Print Culture* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2009), xi.

¹² Frances Burney, *Cecilia, or, Memoirs of an Heiress*, eds. Peter Sabor and Margaret Doody (Oxford, 2008), 39, 327.

¹³ *Cecilia; or, Memoirs of an Heiress*. New York Public Library, Berg Collection (BC), Frances Burney D’Arblay Collection, MSS Arblay, *Cecilia; or, Memoirs of an Heiress*.

¹⁴ Margaret Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988, 120

¹⁵ Francesca Saggini, *Backstage in the Novel: Frances Burney and the Theater Arts*, trans. Laura Kopp (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 166.

¹⁶ Anthony W. Lee, “Allegories of Mentoring: Johnson and Frances Burney’s *Cecilia*,” *Eighteenth Century Novel* 5 (2006), 249–76, 263–4.

¹⁷ For general overviews of the suppression of *The Witlings*, and of some correspondences between the play and the novel, see Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sill, “Introduction”, in *The Witlings and The Woman Hater*, eds. Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sill, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), 12-15, and Saggini, *Backstage in the Novel*, 131-135.

¹⁸ Hilary Havens, “Revisions and Revelations in Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* Manuscript”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 55:3 (Summer 2015), 537-558; p. 541, 544-5.

¹⁹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), 19.

²⁰ William Withering, *A Botanical Arrangement of all the Vegetables Growing Naturally in Great Britain with description of the Genera and Species according to the system of the celebrated Linnaeus* (Birmingham: T. Cadell, P. Elmsley, G. Robinson, 1776), p. xxiii.

²¹ I do not mean here to imply a linear derivative relationship between Withering’s text and Burney’s, whereby words such as “sects”, “divisions”, “races”, “characters” and “classes” derive exclusively and simply from botanical discourse, of which Withering’s text is a perfect exemplar. As I acknowledge in the paragraph that follows, botanical terminology was itself undergoing many mutations and innovations at this point, and was far from fixed. Furthermore, these words – and others, such as “species”, “orders”, “genera” and “characters” are themselves metaphors drawn from cognate disciplines and discourses. For example, the OED records that the word “class” was used to refer to political and economic categories of citizen (first recorded usage 1533) long before it was used to refer to categories of organism (first recorded usage 1667). Likewise, the word “genus” has an earlier usage in the field of logic (1551) than in the fields of zoology and botany (1608).

²² See *Archives of Natural History* (11: 3 (1984)), Edward Duyker, *Nature’s Argonaut: Daniel Solander 1733-1782: Naturalist and Voyager with Cook and Banks* (Miegunyah Press, 1998), and *Daniel Solander: Collected Correspondence 1753-1782*, eds. Edward Duyker and Per Tingbrand (Oslo, Copenhagen and Stockholm, Scandinavian University Press, 1995).

²³ John Lightfoot to Sir John Cullum, 14 June 1782, in *John Lightfoot: His Work and Travels by Jean K. Bowden* (The Bentham-Moxon Trust and Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Kew and Pittsburgh, 1989), 39.

²⁴ Joseph Banks to Johan Alströmer, 16 November 1784, in Duyker and Tingbrand, *Correspondence*, 411.

²⁵ Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, *Thraliana; the diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776-1809*, ed. Katherine C. Balderston. 2 vols (Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2005), 1:416.

²⁶ Frances Burney, Journal for December 30th, 1775, in *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney* (hereafter *EJL*) ed. Lars Troide (5 vols), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 2:198.

²⁷ For the Mai letters, see *EJL*, 2:40-45, 57-63, 193-197.

²⁸ Mary Berry to Horace Walpole, 29th April 1789, in *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis and A. Dayle Wallace, 31 vols (London: OUP and New Haven, Yale University Press, 1937-61), xi:12. Beth Tobin also regrets that the Duchess of Portland's "practices of classification" in partnership with Solander "can only be inferred from their written communications", Tobin, *The Duchess's Shells*, 69.

²⁹ See Catherine Parisian, *Frances Burney's Cecilia: A Publishing History* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 2-3.

³⁰ Janice Farrar Thaddeus, *Frances Burney: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 82.

³¹ Charles Burney (CB) to Samuel Johnson, 14 October 1765, in *The Letters of Dr. Charles Burney, Volume 1, 1751-1784*, ed. Alvaro Ribeiro (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 49.

³² "Cecilia: or, Memoirs of an Heiress, by the author of *Evelina*", *The British magazine and review*, 1 (1782-1783), 48.

³³ "Cecilia, or. Memoirs of an Heiress", *Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature*, 54 (December 1782), 420.

³⁴ William Bewley to CB, October 21 1782. Yale University, Beinecke Library, Burney Family Collection, OSB MSS 3, Box 2, Folder 118. Italics are mine.

³⁵ Jane Spencer, *Literary Relations: Kinship and the Canon, 1660-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62.

³⁶ Frances Burney to Charles Burney, 18 June 1795, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay), 1791-1840*, ed. Joyce Hemlow *et al*, 12 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972-84), 3:117.

³⁷ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer: or, Female Difficulties*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody, Robert L. Mack and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 8. Italics are mine.

³⁸ Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 231, 233.