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Deciphering Identity through Letters in Frances Burney's *Evelina*

In *Evelina* (1778), Frances Burney employs the epistolary form to comment on the fluidity of the self and to illustrate the machinations and inevitable complications of constructing a stable identity in eighteenth-century England. Because *Evelina* follows the trajectory of a bildungsroman, a novel that tracks the psychological progression of the main character, the heroine's identity is constantly in question as she makes her entrance into the world and attempts to situate herself within a social group. During this period of transition, Evelina is able to navigate the private and public realms most notably through her letters. It is through writing that the heroine wrestles for control in crafting her own identity, for many are quick to attach her to ephemeral, distracting doubles of herself that capture only a partial glimpse of her true character and ultimately amplify her sense of confusion. While Evelina certainly achieves a more stable identity by the novel's conclusion and arguably plays an active role in acquiring it, her secure existence is nevertheless dependent on the actions of the male personages around her. Thus, Burney imagines a strenuous journey through the letters to self-realization that remains partly unsatisfied by the necessity of attachment to stable figures in a mobile and male-oriented world.

The complete title of *Evelina* includes the subtitle, *or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World in a Series of Letters*, which immediately primes the reader to consider Evelina's social development as one mediated through epistolary relationships. Because Burney immediately draws one's attention to the novel's form in the title, it is important to consider what effect it has

on the narrative flow and the text's overall meaning. The epistolary novel is inherently fragmentary, as it constitutes a collection of discrete letters bound together by their physical proximity to each other on the page. Burney's fragmentation of the narrative in *Evelina* not only effects the reading experience, making the reader a more active participant in tying together the plot strands, but also reflects the titular character's own sense of confusion that leads to her segmented self-conception that she attempts to unite throughout the novel. Thrust into an entirely new world with elaborate "common customs" (126), Evelina cannot find any resemblance of order and considers "many things [as] unaccountable and perplexing" (144). Following moments of extreme confusion, like the experience detailed at her first ball in London, Evelina describes herself as being "too much confused to think or act with any consistency" (123). Her inconsistency in character is most easily discernable in the variations to her self-presentation, as depicted in each letter.

As Evelina reacts to the changing world around her and journalizes her story to various people, there are minor but notable differences in the way she presents herself in each letter. To Mr. Villars, Evelina purposefully writes in the position of a daughter and student. After recording her daily movements, she typically concludes with a desire to hear his opinion of her actions and occasionally excuse her misbehavior: "This moment, my dearest Sir, I have received your kind letter. If you thought us too dissipated the first week, I almost fear to know what you will think of us this second" (208-209). The expectation of instruction arguably leads her to longer descriptions of her activities and reaffirms her social situation as a dependent. Contrastingly, in her letters to Miss Mirvan, she engages in more "raillery" (389) which corresponds to a more equal relationship. Rather than simply accepting Miss Mirvan's commentary, she occasionally challenges it, at one point claiming in a letter to her that, "[her]

suggestions are those of *fancy*, not of *truth*" (389). In the string of letters to Miss Mirvan, there emerges a more assertive and independent version of Evelina. While these distinctions in her self-representations are present, as she performs different duties in her letters to Mr. Villars (acting as a daughter) and Miss Mirvan (acting as a friend), they do not necessarily stray far from her true sense of self.

Evelina's numerous identities do not end with her multiple self-representations. Throughout the novel, peripheral characters present diverging claims to her selfhood which create a spectrum from nothingness to virtuousness that, in turn, highlights the fluidity of her unsettled identity. When living with Madame Duval and the Branghton family, Evelina's view of herself as an outcast is reaffirmed by their unrelenting identification of her as "miss." By assigning her a generic name, they strip Evelina of her individuality. She becomes metaphorically untethered from a family as her surname remains unmentioned. Their ignorance of her true identity, confirming her position as a nobody in society, is further reinforced by Mr. Brown's reference to her as "miss what's her name" (361), a phrase that makes the absence painfully present and identifies the main concern in the novel. On the other end of the spectrum, Mr. Macartney views Evelina as an angel, which imagines her identity in an unattainable realm (301). His poem, "The Beauties of the Well," extends this comparison by creating a poetic identity, Venus, that embodies distinctly Petrarchan ideals of female virtue, which of course is impossible to embody in the real world. As neither end of the spectrum represents a sustainable identity, Evelina continues to remain in a liminal space until she can find a point on the spectrum to which to attach herself.

While Evelina is bombarded by imposing characterizations – including "pretty little creature" (317), "ornament of the world" (232), and many others – Mr. Villars and Lady Howard

present a more attainable and positive version of herself that she attempts to maintain throughout the novel. In letters to each other, Mr. Villars and Lady Howard construct an idea of Evelina that stems from her innocence. Repeatedly throughout the text, Mr. Villars describes Evelina as “innocent as an angel, and artless as purity itself” (110). Lady Howard further bolsters that depiction as she agrees in a letter to Mr. Villars that, “[Evelina] has a certain air of inexperience and innocence that is extremely interesting” (111). In Mr. Villars’ correspondence to Evelina, he imposes both his and Lady Howard’s sentiments with respect to her character on her and reminds her of the danger of an identity founded in innocence: “Alas, my child, the artlessness of your nature, and the simplicity of your education, alike unfit you for the thorny paths of the great and busy world” (223). While both Lady Howard and Mr. Villars participate in constructing these identities outside of the real Evelina and without her awareness, she ultimately chooses to accept their joint view of her as innocent and inexperienced, which can be seen when she describes herself as “simple rustic” (122). Evelina’s concern for preserving her virtuousness can also be read in her repeated attempts to have Mr. Villars guide her: “Unable to act for myself, or to judge what conduct I ought to pursue, how grateful do I feel myself, that I have such a guide and director to counsel and instruct me as yourself” (274) By describing Mr. Villars as a “director,” Evelina situates herself as a character in a play who simply reads the lines given to her in their correspondence. As a result, her identity becomes more complicated as it is nearly impossible to distinguish the agency of her actions. With that being said, she nevertheless *chooses* to adhere to Mr. Villars and Lady Howard’s representation of her because she respects both them as well as the social circles they represent.

Evelina’s identity is not only dependent on connecting herself to worthy external representations of herself but also is layered by the multiple “second selves” that emerge

throughout the text (230). The epistolary form allows for some of these layers to be permanent fixtures in Evelina's identity through the inclusion of enclosures, or letters that are sent inside of other letters. Evelina first recognizes a double when she describes Miss Mirvan as her "second self" (230). While they both certainly share many similarities, including their innocence, beauty, and age, there are subtler doubles that play a larger role in the composition of Evelina's identity, namely her mother and Mr. Macartney. As Evelina's appearance is a substantial part in how others distinguish her, it is significant that she almost exactly resembles her mother, leading Sir Belmont to exclaim, "Oh Evelina! thy countenance is a *dagger* to my heart! – just so, thy mother looked,— just so —" (531 italics added). Despite not having an active role in the text, Lady Belmont appears in the suspended form of a letter that Mr. Villars includes in his correspondence with Evelina, notably when he is affirming her legitimacy. In receiving Mr. Villars letter which envelops her mother's, Evelina's identity becomes firmly and tangibly tied to both. The language Sir Belmont uses in the aforementioned quote also works to tie Evelina to her other double, Macartney, for they both put a "dagger" in their father's heart – the former metaphorically and the latter literally. In a letter to Mr. Villars, Evelina includes Mr. Macartney's story, which symbolizes the connection and overlap between their lives and ambiguous social standings. Overall, Evelina's accepted doubles serve as one means by which she solidifies her identity while also allowing for its dependent qualities.

Evelina can also affirm aspects of her identity by capitalizing on the social function of letters to materially tie herself to groups that affirm her own ideals, namely Miss Mirvan and Mr. Villars. Throughout the novel, social circles represent a major source of anxiety for the heroine because they possess the potential to jeopardize her reputation, as Lord Orville reminds her, "such near relations must always reflect credit or discredit on each other" (422). In an effort to

connect herself to the virtues she perceives in the characters of Lady Howard, Mrs. and Miss Mirvan, Mr. Villars, Lord Orville, and Mr. Macartney; Evelina noticeably maintains a regular correspondence with individuals who can serve as points of contact into those respectable social realms that she identifies. While it is crucial to note to whom Evelina regularly corresponds, it is equally important to recognize those to whom she does not write, like Madame Duvall and the Branghtons, Sir Clement Willoughby, and temporarily Lord Orville. For these characters who she considers it would be damaging to be too closely attached, she furthers their divide by physically separating herself from them in person. For example, in the notorious carriage ride with Sir Willoughby, Evelina describes that, “I was so much alarmed at the idea [of his deceit], that the very instant it occurred to me, I let down the glass, and made a sudden effort to open the chariot-door myself, with a view of jumping into the street” (202). Here, she attempts to literally remove herself from his association by keeping her head outside of the carriage, a symbol of social intimacy. Therefore, letters serve as a means to highlight or negate associations she cannot otherwise avoid, which points to her limited, but nevertheless existing, control over her own identity.

Another feature that makes the letter the perfect means for the heroine to negotiate her fluctuating identity is the signature. Because signing one’s name requires a degree of intentionality, Evelina must consciously reflect on what she wants to be called (and by extension who she is) after every letter. While some letters simply end with her name, others hold more complicated complimentary closures. For example, in her one letter to Lord Orville, she concludes it by signing, “I am, my Lord, / Your lordship’s most humble servant, / Evelina Anville” (378). Despite the otherwise hastily written letter, Evelina chooses to take the time to include a formal signature that recognizes her respect for him and includes a feigned sense of

stability with her self-appointed name, Anville. Overall, tracking her signatures offers a glimpse into the fluctuation, but ultimate affirmation, of the heroine's identity. In her first letter, Evelina's uncertainty as to her position in society leads her to write, "I am, / With the utmost affection, / gratitude, and duty, / Your / Evelina —," which she follows with, "I cannot to you [Mr. Villars] sign Anville, and what other name may I claim?" (115). Because Evelina lives in a patriarchal society, the only way she can conceive of her identity is in relation to a stable male figure. Without being claimed by her father or bestowed upon another man, she sees herself as blank, symbolized by the dash that follows Evelina. As the novel progresses, Burney draws attention to the multiple name changes Evelina undergoes: first to Belmont and finally to Orville. In her final letter, Evelina finally possesses the ability to sign the name, "Evelina," without feeling an impulse to position herself in society, for her identity is already confirmed by her proximity to respectable men, Lord Orville and Sir Belmont.

Overall, Burney effectively captures the laborious process of crafting an identity by framing Evelina's development in an epistolary narrative. Due to the fragmented form of a letter, the inherent social aspects of epistolary correspondence, and the consciousness required in writing, letters prove to be the perfect arena in which Evelina fights for her sense of self against those of competing and distracting versions. In attaching herself to noble characters, signified by letter enclosures and correspondence trails, Evelina achieves a more stable, albeit dependent, identity. By the end of the novel, her identity is further confirmed by the combined claiming from both her father and Lord Orville. In having both men receive her, Burney exaggerates the necessity of men's acceptance of female identity in order for women to become established following their entrances into the world.

Works Cited

Burney, Frances. *Evelina*, edited by Susan Kubica Howard. Broadview Press, 2000.