

# Improper Ladies

## Gender and language in Frances Burney's *The Witlings* (1779)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes Frances Burney's representation of the relationship between language and gender in her play *The Witlings* (1779). Through an analysis of verbal exchange and the written word in *The Witlings*, I argue that in this work Burney revealed a good deal of her own approach to literature and her idea of woman at the end of the eighteenth century, and more specifically of the woman writer, as trapped in patriarchal culture and conditioned by her social image.

**Keywords:** Frances Burney-eighteenth-century British drama- gender studies-English literature.

### 1. Introduction

Frances Burney (1752-1840) was the eldest daughter of the acclaimed musicologist Dr. Charles Burney (1726-1814), who had entered the most distinguished eighteenth-century circles thanks to his friendship with the aristocrat Fulke Greville. Frances was also part of a family saga which included Captain James Burney (1750-1821), the painter Edward Francesco Burney (1760-1848), and the not less famous Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844), who was also a successful writer with an interesting life and work. Burney spent some time at Windsor Court as Second Keeper of Robes to Queen Charlotte and fell in love with the French General Alexandre D'Arblay, whom she married defying parental authority. Throughout her *oeuvre*, Burney was a sponsor of feminism; she was highly aware of the position of the novel and the power of women novelists at that time, when many women — like Susana Centlivre, Elizabeth Inchbald, Joanna Baillie, Frances Brooke or Hannah Cowley— wrote plays and novels opposing the prejudice of being called 'novelists' and at the same time they vindicated the verisimilitude of their fiction (Lorenzo 26). Both in the prefaces to *Evelina* (1778) and *The Wanderer* (1814), Burney expressed her commitment to writing and insisted that her characters came "from nature" (Burney *Evelina* 7). Her comparison of male critics with censors from Antiquity not only empowered female novelists but it was also a reminder: "you were all young writers once" (Burney *Evelina* 5). Burney's first literary achievement, *Evelina*, inaugurated the novel of manners that Jane Austen would elevate to perfection and placed Dr. Burney's daughter in a privileged position among British authors. Other feminocentric novels would follow (*Cecilia* [1782], *Camilla* [1786], and *The Wanderer*), as well as an essay (*Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy* [1793]), some comedies (*The Witlings* [1779], *Love and Fashion* [1798], *A*

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*Busy Day* [1800-2], and *The Woman Hater* [1802]), and tragedies (*Edwy and Elgiva* [1788-9], *Hubert de Vere*, *The Siege of Pevensey*, and *Elberta* [1789-91]).

Already a canonical author, Burney is the protagonist of a good deal of research by eighteenth-century scholars and those interested in gender studies. Regarding her dramas, we are particularly indebted to Joyce Hemlow and Peter Sabor for their editorial work, and to critics like Barbara Darby, who has focused on Burney's dramatic corpus. We owe to Hemlow the seminal work "Frances Burney: Playwright", where the scholar published the first research on Burney's dramatic texts until her contribution was retaken by Peter Sabor. Both the Burney's studies and eighteenth-century literature studies have to be grateful to Sabor for his admirable edition of Burney's plays based on the Berg Collection at the Public Library of New York. More recently, Darby has examined Burney's drama from the perspective of gender studies and has placed Burney in a broader context. Darby states that "late eighteenth-century women writers used the stage and its conventions to analyze the position of women in their society and their gender-specific experiences of such institutions as the family, government, and marriage", and she stresses their effort to depict "alternative modes of existence for women both on and off the stage" (3). Besides, The Burney Society promotes the study and appreciation of Burney's works and regularly meets at conferences in Europe and North America sponsoring *The Burney Letter* and *The Burney Journal*. Interest in Burney's drama has lately arisen in other parts of the world, and there is even a translation into Spanish of *The Witlings* and *A Busy Day* (Burney 2017).

In this paper I analyze *The Witlings*, a comedy by Burney that has never been the main focus of the Burney studies (for criticism on Burney's drama, see *El ridículo* 27-33). I argue that in *The Witlings* Burney tackles the troubling relationship between sex and language, and she explores how opinion constructs woman socially. Burney not only represents the power of the spoken word but also how the written word conditioned female reputation and her own reputation as a woman writer at the end of the eighteenth century. The connection between discourse and women in Burney's *oeuvre* has been stressed by feminist scholars (see McMaster and Bilger). Nevertheless, though it is an issue that permeates Burney's novels, it has never been examined in her work for the stage so far.

## 2. Comedy and women writers

Burney turned her eyes to the theatre at the early stages of her career, when few authors wrote purely classical dramas and many theatrical forms—including tragedies and sentimental comedies—satirized fashion and depicted domestic trials with romantic love scenes having in mind a middle-class audience. There was a tradition of female playwrights, like Frances Sheridan, Elizabeth Griffith, Elizabeth Inchbald, Hannah Cowley, Hanna More, Sophia Lee, or Joanna Baillie. As Felicity Nussbaum points out, female dramatists were attracted to the burgeoning business of writing for the newly feminized stage and women's indispensability to the commercial theatre was firmly established during the eighteenth century ("Actresses" 149). Most of these authors favoured variations of social comedy "to participate in topical debates without alienating those

audiences who would be resistant to the idea of an ‘unfeminine’ —that is, politically serious— woman writer” (Burroughs 4). The theatre was then appealing since it provided money and plays could be written more quickly than novels. It also offered the possibility to pose challenging questions about power in English society in different ways. Firstly, the fact of composing for the stage was not in accord with the image of the proper lady. Secondly, cultural prescriptions excluded women from professions regarded as male. Thirdly, the theatre was a place of public display and artifice which stood for everything a woman should not be and do. The perfect lady sketched in conduct literature and sermons was a mixture of modesty, devotion to her family, propriety and cleanliness (see Rogers and Poovey). Any attempt to rebel against patriarchy, to affirm oneself and to become independent, was severely criticized and condemned.

Both the social context and the status of the female writer have to be born in mind in the analysis of *The Witlings*, which was written just after the publication of *Evelina* and is easy to relate *The Witlings* to Molière’s *Les femmes savantes* (1672) (Doody 80). In Peter Sabor’s words, *The Witlings* would even have changed the history of the English theatre if it had been represented at the end of the eighteenth century (Clark 148). Critics support the argument that, despite the appreciation of the piece on the part of the playwrights Richard B. Sheridan and Arthur Murphy, *The Witlings* was rejected by the monitors of Burney’s career, Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp, because the protagonist in *The Witlings*, Lady Smatter, could be too easily identified with two remarkable ladies (Darby 23-4; Doody 80-1). The first was the salonist and literary critic Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800), whose London home hosted large literary assemblies including Samuel Johnson, David Garrick or Edmund Burke. Lady Montagu had published *Essay on Shakespeare* (1769) and she patronized Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Hannah More, Sarah Fielding, or Burney herself, who had been encouraged to attack Montagu (Gallagher 229). Another possible source for Lady Smatter is Hester Thrale (1741-1821), a celebrated author and also Burney’s good friend. Burney had entered society hosted by Thrale, who was jealous of Dr. Burney’s control over his daughter. The young author became Thrale’s companion and widened her contacts at the same time that Burney observed how the aristocracy both cherished and despised artists. The possibility of portraying the Streatham circle from a satiric point of view certainly came to Burney’s mind, but the young author decided to sacrifice her career as a playwright: “[...] there are plays that are to be saved, and plays that are not to be saved! So good night. Mr. Dabbler! — good-night, Lady Smatter, — Mrs. Sapient, — Mrs. Voluble, — Mrs. Wheedle, — Censor, — Cecilia, — Beaufort, and you, you great oaf, Bobby! — good-night! good-night!” (Hemlow 138). Nevertheless, effacing the self and affirming it are typical features of Burney as a writer, so if *Evelina* was born out of the ashes of *The History of Caroline Evelyn* which Burney burnt on her fifteenth birthday, this time Burney capitalized on her failures again, and, as Darby observes, many characters in *The Witlings* migrated to *Cecilia* (25), a very perceptive insight into human follies and a study of the condition of woman at that time.

Burney always had a very intense relationship with writing and the physical printed text. She felt simultaneously proud and ashamed of her productions to the point of repeatedly editing her works (Fernández 67), where the role of

language is paramount. Thus, *Evelina* and *The Wanderer*, Burney's first and last novels, hinge on the protagonists' identities and names, and Cecilia's tragedy in Burney's homonymous novel is triggered by the obsession of the protagonist's uncle with preserving the surname Beverley. In *The Witlings* Burney also shows her awareness of the power of language in a very special way by linking it to female reputation. Not coincidentally, within Burney's corpus, no other piece contains so many characters bearing names allusive to their function in the play and the choice of the diminutive "witling" for the title simultaneously suggests the anxiety for fame, the importance of verbal intercourse and the lack of real talent when real genius is despised.

### 3. 'Fine ladies Seem to think their Words are made of Gold': flatterers in *The Witlings*

Under the guise of a new version of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Witlings* hinges on a rich heiress, Cecilia, desirous to marry Beaufort, the nephew of the literary patroness Lady Smatter who reigns over a group of pseudo intellectuals called the Spirit Party. This society has periodic meetings to study certain subjects, but its main goal is to flatter and entertain Lady Smatter, who likes manipulating sources and pretending to be a scholar. News arrives that Cecilia's money is lost since her banker, Stipend, is ruined. At that moment, not only does Cecilia's position in the world change but also the way she is regarded as a woman. Lady Smatter opposes the marriage between Cecilia and Beaufort and tries to send the former to the countryside. Though unwillingly, Cecilia accepts losing Beaufort, who also despairs. Meanwhile, Mrs. Wheele, the milliner who comes to be Cecilia's temporary landlady, gets a post for Cecilia as a companion of a lady who is about to travel abroad. Problems are solved when Censor, Beaufort's friend, blackmails Lady Smatter: if she does not consent to the union and thus change her regard for Cecilia, he will spread some satiric verses about her all around London which will destroy Lady Smatter's reputation.

Burney's comedy begins in a gendered space where appearances matter. The milliner's shop is a "Region/ of Foppery, Extravagance and Folly" (Burney *The Witlings* I. 129-30) and the first professional setting of the play. Sandra Sherman accurately maintains that *The Witlings* elaborates an encounter between emergent industrial discourse in which time, production and money are imbricated (the shop-people), and a leisured class which appropriates this discourse but produces nothing (the witlings) (401). Burney populates her work with characters who feed on pleasing others verbally and are duplicitous, hypocritical, disrespectful and even vulgar. Besides, they are polarized into those who idolize the written word and those who privilege opinion and gossip and insert the play in the comic tradition. Though they have a difficult relationship with each other, pseudo intellectuals and busybodies are closely related: Lady Smatter and Mrs. Sapien traffic with the written word by misusing it while Mrs. Voluble constructs and destroys reputations with her tongue. Therefore, Censor's negative description of Mrs. Voluble evokes disease:

CENSOR. A Fool, a prating, intolerable Fool. Dabler lodges at her House, and whoever passes through her Hall to visit him, she claims for her acquaintance.

She will consume more Words in an Hour than Ten Men will in a Year; she is infected with a rage for talking, yet has nothing to say, which is a Disease of all others the most pernicious to her fellow Creatures, since the method she takes for her own relief proves their bane. Her Tongue is as restless as Scandal, and, like that, feeds upon nothing, yet attacks and tortures every thing; and it vies, in rapidity of motion, with the circulation of the Blood in a Frog's Foot (Burney *The Witlings* I. 156-64)

As for Mrs. Sapient, Censor insists on her obsession to pass the words and quotes of famous authors as her own. In the course of the comedy it is shown that the written word is no better than opinion and discredits itself. Lady Smatter and Mrs. Sapient's symbiotic relationship is revealed in that Mrs. Sapient flatters people and Lady Smatter likes to be flattered:

CENSOR. She [Mrs. Sapient] is more weak and superficial even than Lady Smatter, yet she has the same facility in giving herself credit for wisdom; and there is a degree of assurance in her conceit that is equally wonderful and disgusting, for as Lady Smatter, from the shallowness of her knowledge, upon all subjects forms a *wrong* Judgement, Mrs. Sapient, from extreme weakness of parts, is incapable of forming *any*; but, to compensate for that deficiency, she retails all the opinions she hears, and confidently utters them as her own. Yet, in the most notorious of her plagiarisms, she affects a scrupulous modesty, and apologizes for troubling the Company with her poor opinion! (Burney *The Witlings*, I. 215-23)

An incompetent authority rejected by everybody, Mrs. Sapient attends the unsanctioned reading of Dabler's poems and is later hidden in Mrs. Voluble's closet. Throughout the play, Mrs. Sapient pretends to have an opinion, but she cannot stop saying self-evident statements. Once discovered, she tastes her own medicine, according to Lady Smatter: "Those who conceal themselves to hear the/Counsels of others, commonly have little reason to be satisfied with/ what they hear of themselves" (Burney *The Witlings* V. 937-9). Clearly, Burney's aim is not to present perfect female characters, but self-centered superficial women who rub shoulders with the quality.

In fact, class and sex also determine the role of words in *The Witlings*. Like in Lady Smatter's case, Mrs. Voluble's house is open to both sexes. A link between the upper and the lower classes, Mrs. Voluble feeds on news about people and is "hospitable if slovenly, kind in her own way to all saved her snubbed son and overworked maidservant" (Doody 83). Her ethics are exposed when she enters Dabblers' room to spy on his manuscripts and later she does not hesitate to allow her maid Miss Jenny and her son Bob contemplate the poet's writings. The written word which is patriarchally produced, the cherished basis of Dabler's profession which is kept hidden by the poet as something intimate, becomes the object of display and despise of a woman. The relationship between the sexes is inverted in *The Witlings*: the middle classes are no better than the well-off. Mrs. Voluble's curiosity is as offensive as Lady Smatter's arrogance. From that perspective, Burney points out the fact that social position can become more valuable than knowledge and being a man.

There are no exemplary women in *The Witlings* where Burney dismantles the idea of female solidarity and portraits aggressive and frustrated women, even

bullies, who lose power and their language at some point in the play. The women who have some degree of independence, like Lady Smatter, Mrs. Voluble or Cecilia herself, change their attitude as they face misery. Cecilia is the best example of this phenomenon. When Darby examines the first act of *The Wiltings* in terms of the economic exchange between characters, she maintains that “[t]he strongest mark of distinction between Burney’s figures lies in how they participate conversationally with others” (29) and points out Cecilia’s verbal passivity: “the heroine’s verbal and physical acts are ineffectual, dictated by others, or simply assumed” (32). I argue that Cecilia’s poor ability to communicate echoes Burney’s feelings as a creator. A puppet in Charles Burney’s and Crisp’s hands, Burney was aware of her frail and lonely status as a writer, and she foresaw the oblivion and despise she would face if she turned to the stage. Therefore, Lady Smatter’s compliments at the beginning of act two and Cecilia’s aura as an heiress disappear as soon as Lady Smatter opposes Beaufort’s marriage to Cecilia because the latter is deprived of her fortune and a girl without a penny is no good match. Cecilia’s reputation sinks and so does the opinion others have about her. From being a coveted single woman, she becomes an ordinary girl searching for a room and a job as a lady’s companion. Even Mrs. Wheedle’s nice words change at hearing the news that Cecilia is penniless now and the milliner quickly demands to be paid. Having nowhere to go, Cecilia is socially punished and faces social alienation and silence. At the textual level there is a quantitative difference between the speech flow of powerful women, who are free to speak to anybody and impose their opinion on sons and strangers, and those who are unable to express themselves, like speechless Cecilia when asked about her money, or when she desperately asks for “Pen and Ink” to write to Beaufort and communicate her affairs to him, which never happens. Darby calls Cecilia’s speech locutionary since it does not achieve the second or third levels of a speech and the request or command she tries to make produces no response from the listeners (35).<sup>1</sup> The play reveals that a woman without a voice has no place in the world and has to struggle hard to be respected.

#### 4. ‘Shall be recorded by the Muses’: reputation and the written word

In her illuminating book about satire, *The Brink of All We Hate*, Felicity Nussbaum argues that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a long satirist tradition including poems and pamphlets in which the female scholar was depicted as a threat to the patriarchal order. One of the myths she comments on is the learned lady, which is parodied and identified in Burney’s work with the Bluestocking Lady Smatter. Gary Kelly defines the Bluestocking circle as the mid-eighteenth-century group of men and women around Elizabeth Montagu and her close friends, who were important because they enabled increasing numbers of women to escape ‘confinement’ in the domestic sphere and to pursue work and knowledge within a wider and supposedly superior sphere of intellectual work and sociability (175-6; see also Rogers 32-6). Other authors like Emily Boscawen, Hester Chapone and Hannah More also published for profit and public esteem and preserved their unimpeachable reputations. In her play, Burney is interested in the relationship between language and the representation of the literary lady in the world. The latter solely depends on social discourse to

appear in the world and be respected by others, and she keeps her status as long as her reputation is unstained. Any attempt to surpass the limits of womanhood and compete with men destroys the literary lady.

The play does not only revolve around the young lovers Cecilia and Beaufort, but also around Lady Smatter who fetishizes the written word in a special way and departs from the image of the domestic lady in many aspects. Firstly, she has turned the private sphere of her home into a cultural space open to the Spirit Party where men can enter. Secondly, Burney creates a character who wants to compete with men publicly, which no conventional women would aim to do. Thirdly, finding satisfaction in being praised for her achievements, Lady Smatter does not really care about real knowledge, but public opinion, and she just wants to keep her social image as a stronghold.

Lady Smatter's main goal is to pass for a scholar, which makes her feel socially realized. The fatigue of reading does not overcome her desire to exhibit her achievements, and that is why she has organized her Spirit Party, where authors bring new works and critics comment on old compositions with two premises: the pursuit of sincerity and the avoidance of flattery. However, in the course of the comedy, the written word connected with patriarchy is totally manipulated and never taken seriously because neither attribution nor literary intentionality is respected. Lady Smatter finds mistakes in Shakespeare and Pope (Burney *The Witlings* II. 45-6) —even though she has not read half their works—, and she also mistakes Swift for Pope (Burney *The Witlings* III. 79-82, III. 133-4). In *The Witlings* the impossibility to achieve real knowledge does not matter. Lady Smatter just wants the world to believe she is a scholar and she also reveals the limits of her scope: “For where can be the pleasure of reading Books, and studying authors, if/ one is not to have the credit of talking of them? (Burney *The Witlings* II.i. 25-6). If read literally, Burney's satire implies that the female writer deserves no praise and has no merit. A woman who is associated with the production of discourse and culture is just a liar because not only does she enjoy trafficking with speech but she is also a Nobody entering the realm of men and pursuing undeserved admiration.

There is another trait in Lady Smatter's personality that makes her despicable to the audience and she exhibits with pleasure. She lives in a world of her own, unable to realize the feelings of others and insensible to the news arriving from Yorkshire. First, she tells Codger that she would not let Beaufort marry a poor woman (Burney *The Witlings* II. 501-2); then she declares her pity for Cecilia (Burney *The Witlings* II. 534); and finally she downgrades the young lady to the most insipid thing: “if she [Cecilia] can make a/ Cap, 'tis as much as she can do, — and, in such a case, when a Girl is/ reduced to a Penny, what is to be done?” (Burney *The Witlings* II. 556-8). In fact, Beaufort's anger at Cecilia's departure seems downright blasphemy to Lady Smatter because, according to Beaufort, it is not the time to read books and this feature is stylistically marked in the Spanish translation (*El ridículo* 91-2). Feeling totally detached from the world around, Beaufort's proud aunt threatens with disinheriting him precipitating the climax of the comedy.

## 5. 'Self-dependence is the first of Earthly Blessings'

*The Witlings* is not a tear-jerking eighteenth-century comedy. It deals with serious matters, like property and propriety, and with female victims of patriarchy, like Cecilia. Economic dependence is more important than the fact of being a man or a woman, but there is something else. For Darby, this play depicts the triumph of censorship and subjugation over independence, and it is women who are publicly censored or confined financially, physically, and intellectually (22). There is even a biographical component in its two major female characters: “*The Witlings* externalizes and focuses Burney’s internal war between the modest, private woman who seeks only domestic security and the intellectual woman who desires public recognition” (Thompson 17). As Peggy Thompson explains, in *The Witlings* there are many dependencies at various levels: Bob Voluble, like Burney, suffers a parent who keeps her offspring silent and wretchedly submissive; Dabblers strives to maintain his privacy while he writes; and Burney also represents herself in Beaufort —who is dependent from Lady Smatter (21-2). At this point in her career, Burney realizes she is in Charles Burney’s hands while striving to be independent as a woman writer. Under this light, *The Witlings* would have become Burney’s most open feminist manifesto, but Burney was also aware of the dangers of voicing the truth on stage. Surprisingly, in *The Witlings* dependence makes possible the happy ending and language plays a paramount role here.

The fact that neither Voluble nor Lady Smatter can understand men’s language reveals Burney’s awareness of women’s lack of formal knowledge, but also the absence of real communication since people do not listen to each other. While Doody considers that both Lady Smatter and Mrs. Voluble are important in their own circles and that they desire to control and to gossip (83), that is, to create false linguistic expectations, there are many differences between them. Mrs. Voluble is Dabblers’s landlady and she gives shelter to Cecilia temporarily too. This is the only example of female solidarity in the whole play. Mrs. Voluble feels compassion for Cecilia in act five and her invitation to partake in her meal represents an invitation to enjoy life while Lady Smatter has a dark side she uses to intimidate and impose herself on others.

In *The Witlings* the originally patriarchal written word becomes feminine, so neither women nor the written word is respected. Female plagiarism is attacked while men are free to proceed as they please with an exception. Like in *Evelina* with MacCartney, Burney introduces the figure of the ill-treated poet Dabler, who, unlike Lady Smatter, struggles to make a name for himself through his effort. His social position is uncertain since he depends on his patron, Lady Smatter, as much as Beaufort depends on his aunt. If he feels frustrated, it is because he is not allowed to be free and creative. Far from being supervised or guided, Dabler manipulates discourse in order to earn his living: he lives on a woman and he trades with words like the milliners trying to satisfy the upper-class ladies’ whims and depending on them. Plagiarism and his bad use of the written word are conditioned by necessity.

*The Witlings* is a very pessimistic play about independence and it shows that self-realization does not exist for any sex. For Doody, Burney shows her skepticism about the power of literature to soften customs and instruct the heart



(82). My argument is that Burney was deeply aware of the power of literature indeed and vindicated the value of the written word through satire. Burney always revered knowledge and equated the respect for the written word with the respect for woman, so Dabler voices one of the most revealing messages of the piece: “we men do not suffer in the World by/ Lampoons as the poor Ladies do; — they, indeed, may be quite/— quite ruined by them” (Burney *The Witlings* V. 741-2). A comedy was the best means to show that the real poet has no place in *The Witlings* and feels as exploited and abused as Burney felt as a woman writer and as Dabler in *The Witlings*.

In the play the learned lady lives in false world of *dilettanti* and ultimately deceives herself. Lady Smatter simultaneously loves words and is afraid of them because she knows their potential when applied to women, whose social status changes depending on how language is applied to them, which never happens to men. Instead of a creator, Lady Smatter is a usurper who distorts the father’s word and lacks a language of her own. Like the Bluestockings and Burney herself, she wants to enter a masculine realm when women did not have access to scholarly culture. Lady Smatter defies patriarchy because she feigns to have knowledge and Burney herself vindicated the voice of the female writer and considered herself a Sister of the Order, a woman writer entering the male realm. Nonetheless, *The Witlings* is a comedy and Lady Smatter’s final punishment is not connected with her boldness, but with her ethics as an improper lady.

Lady Smatter’s patriarchal punisher comes to be eccentric Censor, who suggests Dabler composing some extempore verses on slander. The poet initially objects to the proposal since it is a most illiberal subject, but later he accepts to obey. If the lines are carefully put together, Dabler’s supposed piece is introduced as a lampoon against Lady Smatter’s fame and it runs as follows:

Yes, Smatter is the Muse’s Friend,  
 She knows to censure or commend;  
 And has of Faith and Truth such store  
 She’ll ne’er desert you—till you’re poor.  
 Were madness stinted to Moorfields  
 The world elsewhere would be much thinner;  
 To time now Smatter’s Beauty yields —  
 She fain in Wit would be a Winner.  
 At Thirty she began to read,—  
 At Forty, it is said, could spell,—  
 At Fifty, ‘twas by all agreed  
 A common School Girl she’d excel.  
 Such wonders did the World presage  
 From Blossoms which such Fruit invited, —  
 When Avarice,—the vice of Age,—  
 Stept in,—and all expectance blighted (Burney *The Witlings* V. 661-5, 694-6,  
 698-700, 705-6, 708, 711-4)

Shortly afterwards Jack arrives singing a new ballad against Lady Smatter which is ready to be printed. The piece reminds Augustan satirical poetry and unveils what Lady Smatter’s dreads more, her lack of deep knowledge and the sycophant world she inhabits:

I call not to Swains to attend to my Song;  
Nor call I to Damsels, so tender and young;  
To Critics, and Pedants, and Doctors I clatter,  
For who else will heed what becomes of poor Smatter.

With a down, down, derry down.

This lady with Study has muddled her head;  
Sans meaning she talk'd, and Sans knowledge she read,  
And gulp'd such a Dose of incongruous matter  
That Bedlam must soon hold the Carcase of Smatter.

With a down, down, derry down.

She thought Wealth esteem'd by the foolish alone,  
So, shunning offence, never offer'd her own;  
And when her Young Friend dire misfortune did batter,  
Too wise to relieve her was kind Lady Smatter.

With a down, down, derry down.

Her Nephew she never corrupted with pelf,  
Holding Starving a Virtue — for all but herself  
Of Gold was her Goblet, of Silver, her Platter,  
To show how such ore was degraded by Smatter.

With a down, down, derry down.

A Club she supported of Witlings and Fools,  
Who, but for her dinners, had scoff'd at her rules;  
The reason, if any she had, these did shatter  
Of poor empty-Headed, and little-Soul'd Smatter.

With a down, down, derry down (Burney *The Witlings* V. 772-6, 778-82,  
787-91, 794-803)

Both pieces attack Lady Smatter's literary anxiety but also her ruthlessness. Obviously, Censor is responsible for both pieces since he took advantage of the poet's neglect and inadvertently picked up Dabler's verses, his words, from the floor. That moment represents Censor having both Lady Smatter's and Dabler's reputation in his hands, just as Mrs. Voluble usually spies on and touches Dabler's manuscripts. Ironically, Dabler's extempore piece against Lady Smatter and Jack's ballad are eventually turned into panegyrics through Censor's blackmail as Lady Smatter is incapable to hide the truth. She unwillingly yields to the evidence and accepts restoring Beaufort to his position in exchange of becoming "another Sacharissa, a Second Sapho — a tenth muse" (Burney *The Witlings* V. 863). This unsatisfactory ending makes sense when we turn our attention in another direction.

In *The Witlings* the literary matron Lady Smatter is a punisher who will be punished. Lady Smatter faces Cecilia and Beaufort joining together and despairs at their alliance against her authority. Her only consolation is that Beaufort depends on her and has no profession: "[...] young men, you know, are mighty apt to be rash; but/ when they have no independence, and are of no profession, they should/ be very cautious how they disoblige their Friends" (Burney *The Witlings* II. 633-5). On another occasion she hypocritically tells Censor that Cecilia has left mysteriously when Lady Smatter has really expelled her and Beaufort exposes Lady Smatter's double dealing by pointing to the obsession with reputation of this "hard-hearted, vain, ostentatious woman" (Burney *The Witlings* IV. 633).

*The Witlings* is based on *Romeo and Juliet*, where Friar Lawrence helps the lovers to achieve happiness. In Burney's play this role is performed by Censor, an intriguing satirist, who has two conversations with the protagonists expressing his willingness to help them and his aim to punish Lady Smatter for having intruded the male temple of knowledge. The old bachelor defines himself before Cecilia as "a fellow who can wish you well without/ loving you, and, without any sinister view, be active in your Service; a/ fellow, in short, unmoved by beauty, yet susceptible of pity, — invulner-/ able to love, yet zealous in the cause of distress" (Burney *The Witlings* III. 640-3). It is tempting to consider that Censor understands the lovers' difficulties and that Beaufort's happiness directly depends on Lady Smatter. However, Censor's motivation is not fair. He even deprecates proudly against women's participation in culture:

CENSOR. Heavens, that a Woman whose utmost natural capacity will hardly enable her to understand the History of Tom Thumb, and whose comprehensive faculties would be absolutely baffled by the Lives of the Seven Champions of Christendom, should dare blaspheme the names of our noblest Poets with Words that convey no ideas, and Sentences of which the Sound listens in vain for the Sense! — O, she is insufferable! (Burney *The Witlings* III. 176-81)

Censor gives Lady Smatter a taste of her own medicine and blackmails Lady Smatter for Beaufort and Cecilia's benefit. He enjoys humiliating Lady Smatter and encourages Beaufort to rebel against her by instilling into him the idea that otherwise he will depend on her forever and will never be happy. Thus, the play turns into a vindication of freedom as the only way to affirm oneself and in Burney's case this constitutes her awakening as a woman writer. Revealingly, Burney is not ruthless to Lady Smatter in that Censor never forces Lady Smatter to dissolve the Party Spirit. That is just his final thought and something he hopes will happen at the end. In spite of everything, it seems that the female genius has the right to exist.

## 6. Conclusion

Though undemocratic and a misogynist, Censor looks like a restoring force to facilitate the *denouement* of the play under the pretence of presenting himself as a free man, not a poet that depends on everybody else: "and therefore [I] may be allowed to have an opinion of my own, to act/ with consistency, and to be guided by the light of Reason; you, for/ which I most heartily pity you, are a Lover, and, consequently, can/ have no pretensions to similar privileges" (Burney *The Witlings* I. 123-6). He despises female realms, the milliners and literary ladies. Curiously, he is not punished at the end, but rewarded. Should he represent Burney's daddies, Censor shows that Burney was not able to detach herself from patriarchy yet and that *The Wanderer* was still to be written. As a matter of fact, Cecilia's success depends on sticking to rules and the end of the play confirms Burney's moderate politics since Beaufort and Cecilia get married thanks to Lady Smatter's consent and Censor's letter containing five thousand pounds. Still, Burney deals with very uncomfortable truths in her satire though apparently she endorses a conservative view.

*The Witlings* is about the power of language in modern society. When Lady Smatter's reputation is about to be the object of slander in pamphlets and songs, Burney envisions how words lead to the erosion of female reputation and they guarantee the existence of patriarchy. Like *Cecilia*, *The Witlings* was to be Burney's second vindication as a writer after *Evelina*, but, realizing her position, Burney already decided to suppress *The Witlings* and the preface to *Cecilia* in which she dealt with Genius's retreat from society. Burney's split self felt simultaneously guilty and satisfied with *The Witlings*. Up to a point, she identified herself with Lady Smatter. However, privately Burney felt that writing was a sacred activity that was being denied to her because her daddies could not stand young female scribblers and Genius could not be female. In *The Witlings* Burney identifies herself with Cecilia, dispossessed of her riches and trapped by her daddies' decisions, but also with Lady Smatter, an alien in patriarchal culture. Burney faced her desire for literary fame and saw the dangers of public exhibition. All her frustration and fear are recorded in *The Witlings* where gender and language are closely related as I have tried to argue. The total lack of respect for the written word parallels the role of women at that time and the frustration of the woman writer haunts the whole work. Behind Lady Smatter's façade, Burney depicts the aspiration of so many women who wanted to conciliate the desire of being praised with entering men's realm and saw themselves frustrated.

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