

Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844)*
by Lorna J. Clark

Sarah Harriet Burney has been marginalised by her family, her society and the literary establishment. Yet she was a successful writer in her day, whose five works netted enough to supplement a modest income and earned praise from reviewers and readers, some of whom preferred her novels to those of her famous half-sister, < link to Frances Burney biography >**Frances (Burney) d'Arblay**. She was read and appreciated by Jane Austen (her almost exact contemporary), for whose works Sarah Harriet Burney was an early and life-long enthusiast. An avid reader, Burney moved in literary and musical circles in London, recording her impressions in lively letters to family and friends, including the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson. Her writing evinces that force and charm of her personality, as well as her strength of mind, courage and wit, inspiring one acquaintance to call her 'one of the most agreeable and intelligent women I have met'.[1]

She was born in King's Lynn, Norfolk on 29 August 1772, the second and youngest child of musician Charles Burney (1726-1814) and Elizabeth (Allen) Allen (1728-96), his second wife. Sarah Harriet was much younger than her six half-siblings, who included novelist Frances, circumnavigator James, and classical scholar Charles. As daughter of the hated step-mother, she inherited some of the resentment expressed by Charles Burney's first family; their strictures on her character should be read in the context of the fraught atmosphere of a combined household.

Her formal education consisted of two years in Switzerland under the tutelage of a governess (1781-83) which gave her fluency in French. She also acquired some skill in music; otherwise, she ranged freely through her father's extensive library, publishing her first novel in 1796, at the same time as her half-sister's *Camilla*. (While fervently promoting the latter, her father lightly dismissed Sarah Harriet's first literary venture.) The only child left home, she acted as companion and nurse to her mother until the latter's death in 1796. Thereafter, she remained alone with her elderly father, becoming a 'steady & prudent house-keeper'.[2]

The removal of the baleful influence of Mrs Burney did not create the domestic bliss predicted by Frances (Burney) d'Arblay. Tension developed as Sarah Harriet suffered from her father's 'Severity and Coldness... *Bitter raillery* - or Harshness'.[3] Part of his discomfiture may have been caused by her closeness to her half-brother James, who left his wife in 1798 and proposed to board with his father. When Dr. Burney refused, Sarah Harriet left her uncomfortable home to set up house with James. While the arrangement was somewhat unconventional, the charge of incest appears to have been unfounded. Nevertheless, Dr. Burney resented being abandoned and never entirely forgave his two wayward children.

While initially liberating, her life with James also had its strains, including his rather hasty temper. They lived an itinerant life between London and Bristol under considerable financial constraint, which required her to perform humble household duties. She shared expenses, making inroads into her small capital. After five years, in 1803, James

suggested that his daughter should join them. Expressing concern for James' wife, Sarah Harriet instead found employment as a governess with the Wilbraham family. She described with relief her luxurious surroundings and refined domestic pursuits, such as drawing and etching.

Life as an upper servant palled, however, (imparting knowledge into 'Miss's thimble-full of brains', and in 1807, through the mediation of her half-sister Esther, she returned to her father's Chelsea apartments. Caring for the peevish octogenarian was not an easy task; he required her constant attendance as housekeeper, nurse, companion and private secretary.[4] Her letters describe conflicts, loneliness and self-imposed restraint; however, she tried to keep up a brave front and sought solace in books. Her second and third novels were published during these years; she also developed the practice of writing 'little private reviews' (p. 116) and may have performed other literary hackwork, such as editing and translating, to supplement her meagre resources.

Charles Burney's death in 1814 made retrenchment necessary; in his will, he distributed his property unevenly and left Sarah Harriet little to live on; moreover, he failed to pass on to her some maternal property. Moving to another apartment in the hospital, she remained among the 'proud militaries' (p. 230) but found their society uncongenial. 'There are no bookish people here' (p. 141). She had difficulty finding someone to comment on her manuscripts and felt ashamed to her literary employment: 'as I reckon scribbling by trade *very* ungenteel, I never set too with comfort, till candles come, & visitors cease.' (p. 198). Nevertheless, to ease her financial situation, she published a set of tales, oversaw new editions of her old works, and gave private lessons. All these endeavours helped to pay for medical expenses (for a possible breast cancer) and restorative visits to health spas.

To break the monotony of her 'solitary paradise' (p. 221), she took a post in 1821 as companion to a young heiress in a house owned by William Hamilton and decorated with the Elgin marbles. Inspired by her charge's well-travelled aunt, Burney developed an interest in classical Rome and foreign travel. But the death of her beloved half-brother James overwhelmed her with 'heart-piecing' grief.[5] Suffering from ill-health, she was let go (very tactfully) in the summer of 1822. Nevertheless, she retained the respect and friendship of her former employers, a pattern which recurs throughout her life.

Late that year, a new scene opened, when an old family friend, Lord Crewe, hired her to supervise the education of his two grand-daughters with the salary of £300 a year, making 'the present prospects of poor dear Aunt Sarah better than any she has ever had'[6] Life at Crewe Hall held some discomforts, being isolated as a dependent in a crowd of 'superfines' whose '*unlooking look[s]*' (p. 251) disconcerted her. Her time with the Crewes may have been complicated by two affairs of the heart: an elderly clergyman proposed and was 'denied'[7] and a young widower showed flattering attentions for a while, but later defected, leaving her to comment scathingly on his behaviour. Meanwhile a power struggle developed with her pupils' worldly aunt, who chaperoned them in London. When the girls' West Indian property dwindled in value, Sarah Harriet was

manoeuvred into resigning in 1829. Her financial position was not greatly improved; from her small property, she could draw an income of £100 a year instead of £80.

Burney then developed a new plan, that of living abroad where the weather was warmer and the living cheaper. She travelled alone by public conveyance over the Alps, a mode of travel which appeared somewhat disreputable to Henry Crabb Robinson, a friend of her brother's encountered en route. His acquaintance proved invaluable to Sarah Harriet in Rome. Crabb introduced her to a group of young travellers who enjoyed sightseeing together. These 'pedestrian expeditions' with all her 'Merry Men'[8] kept her 'wonderfully well and gay'[9] all winter, but the party broke up in the spring. Sarah Harriet continued on to Florence to join her former employers, the Wilbrahams. That summer she stayed at the Baths of Lucca with her favourite niece, Charlotte Barrett, who was nursing a consumption daughter. Friction developed between them, leading to a coolness which lasted for years.

Burney lived in Florence for three more years, experiencing increasing isolation. The novelty and delight of speaking Italian wore off. Finding that the expatriate community socialised on a grander scale than suited her budget, she withdrew from society. She lodged with two Italian ladies for a while joined their evening circle which included the poet Giuseppe Niccolini. As her social circle narrowed, she compensated by voluminous reading and by writing fiction. Absorbed 'in a little ideal world' of her own, she could abstract herself from 'the humdrum of surrounding realities' (p. 227). She was soon forgotten, even by those at home, and had the shock of learning of a family death from the newspaper.

Thoroughly homesick, she returned to England in 1833 and retired to a ladies' boarding-house at Bath. There, she chafed at the society of narrow-minded widows and spinsters and the tedium of formal visiting; she described herself as a 'Hermitess' (p. 432) and complained that Bath society was not 'intellectual' enough (p. 400). Her health suffered in the cold English winters and her sight and hearing deteriorated. To help defray medical expenses, she published her last work in 1839. She enjoyed annual visits to Cheltenham so much that she moved there in 1841. From a cheerfully situated house on the Promenade, she could watch 'all the Cockney doings' (p. 445) from the window and enjoy the company of gentlemen as well as ladies.

Happily, the breach with Charlotte Barrett was healed and they took a holiday together just months before her death. Back in her Cheltenham boarding-house, she penned a wistful farewell. She died of 'natural decay' on 8 February 1844,[10] far from family and friends. In her will, she divided her small property between James's son Martin and an unmarried niece. The *Gentlemen's Magazine* noted her passing, mentioning her literary career and family connections.[11] Although she was buried in Cheltenham, her gravestone has since disappeared (p. 485).

Her letters reveal a forthright and intelligent woman who chafed at the social and economic constraints of her role as a spinster of limited means. Courageous and proudly independent, she refused help from relatives. She was often solitary, yet flouted social

customs such as formal visiting, and preferred the more stimulating company of males, who were more likely to appreciate her acerbic wit. When no company was available, she read voraciously, keeping abreast of current developments; her comments on contemporary authors were astute. She admired the moral didacticism of Maria Edgeworth and the originality of James Fenimore Cooper, but her enthusiasm was reserved for Sir Walter Scott and her 'prime favourite' Jane Austen (p. 201). It was her publisher, Henry Colburn, who sent her Austen's novels, perhaps sensing a kindred spirit.

Her own works were fairly popular, the first editions often selling out; they were also translated and pirated abroad. In *Clarentine* (1796) two male cousins fall in love with a beautiful orphan they have known since childhood, and one of them wins her heart. An open and manly sailor, like James Burney, he is a protective guardian to the heroine. But the family contains malignant characters who act on motives of 'inexplicable hatred', and the lovers are no match for a malicious 'fiend'[12] whose machinations almost succeed in separating them.

Geraldine Fauconberg (1808), an epistolary novel, explores a match planned from birth. Pride prejudices the hero against the intended bride, whose sweetness and unselfishness win him over. He must then make up for his own former reserve. Misunderstandings abound as the tale unfolds in the letters of a sprightly sister. The last volume, with echoes of the Gothic, is set in the picturesque mountains of Wales.

Tales of Fancy comprises two tales. In *The Shipwreck* (1816), a mother and daughter are castaways on a tropical island. They owe their preservation to a young man who has previously aroused the family's resentment. His merits convert the mother, who dies, leaving her bereft daughter fearing that a reunion with her authoritarian father will separate her from her beloved protector.

In the second tale, *Country Neighbours* (1820), a beautiful Italian niece is introduced into a family of English gentry. Orphaned, she exalts the memory of her deceased mother, whose equivocal behaviour has destroyed the peace of a neighbouring family. The heroine's faith in her lineage is justified in the end and her noble descent confirmed by birth as well as marriage. A spinster-narrator and the dominance of women are unusual features of the work, which inspired a sonnet by Charles Lamb.

Burney's last work, *The Romance of Private Life* (1839) also consists of two tales. In *The Renunciation*, a little girl is kidnapped for a life of imposture abroad; her homesickness and desolation are conveyed vividly. Later, she renounces her false position as an heiress and travels to Italy in quest of kin. Her wish is fulfilled in unexpected ways, but not before she has supported herself as an artist. This unusual tale draws its local colour from Burney's travel experiences.

Finally, *The Hermitage* is a gripping tale involving a ruined country maiden and an unsolved murder. The heroine suppresses her suspicions of the guilt of her beloved, who is an orphan and outsider, as are many of Burney's characters. She is the only heroine whose mother survives to the end of the novel, though hardly exemplary, her temper

soured by disappointed ambition. There are many orphans and few good parents in Burney's work; heroes and heroines suffer either from isolation or oppression.

A dysfunctional family takes centre stage in Burney's best-seller, *Traits of Nature* (1812), a comedy of manners set in fashionable society. The heroine is an exile from her father's house but longs for reconciliation (the situational resemblances to her own life are strong). Implacable resentment mars her father's unamiable character and sibling relationships are rife with jealousy and malice. The heroine endures the pain of loss and desertion, a recurrent motif in Burney's fiction. The quest for loving kindred often overshadows the romance; somehow the conventional happy ending, conferring fortune, marriage and social acceptance on a deserving heroine, fails to dispel the sadness suffused throughout. A yearning for fulfilment runs through Burney's fiction as well as through her letters.

Burney underestimated her skill as a novelist, dismissing her efforts with self-deprecating modesty and claiming to write only for money. This claim is not entirely convincing. In her letters, she discusses her literary preferences and shows a keen interest in developing her stories. She works with single-minded intensity until she can report with satisfaction the completion of her manuscript. She seeks feedback on her drafts and takes an active role in seeing her work through the press. Several extant letters respond to appreciative comments from fans and she was kindly treated by reviewers - though she was taxed with a 'family likeness'[13] and remained within the shadow of her half-sister's reputation. She would have been gratified to learn of one discerning reader: a letter of Jane Austen contains the remark that she was reading one of Sarah Harriet Burney's novels for the third time,[14] which places Burney at least implicitly among the 'injured body' of sister-novelists whom Austen famously defends.[15] New editions of Burney's work would allow today's readers to appreciate her insights.

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Bibliography

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1 Walter Savage Landor made the remark to Henry Crabb Robinson in a letter dated 6 November 1831, published in *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. by Thomas Sadler (London: Macmillan, 1869), 2, p. 521.

2 Charles Burney to Frances (Burney) d'Arblay, 2 Dec. 1796, Berg.

3 Maria (Allen) Rishton to Frances (Burney) d'Arblay, [3 Sept. 1798], Barrett Collection, British Library, Eg. 3697, ff.276-77v.

4 The letter is located in the Henry W. and Albert A Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, and is published, with permission, in the *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. by Lorna J. Clark (Athens [GA] and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 62. All further references on this edition will appear in the text

5 *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d'Arblay)*, ed. by Joyce Hemlow, vol. 11 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 340.

6 Charlotte (Francis) Barrett to Frances (Phillips) Raper, 22 Sept. [1822], British Library, Barrett Collection, Eg. 3706D, off. 45-47v.

7 *Journals and Letters*, 12, p. 574.

8 Charlotte (Francis) Barrett to Frances (Burney) d'Arblay, 28 Kan. 1830, Berg.

9 *Journals and Letters*, 12, p. 740.

10 Death certificate, 8 Feb. 1844, General Register Office.

11 *Gentlemen's Magazine*, NS 21 (1844), p. 442.

12 [Sarah Harriet Burney], *Clarentine* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1796), 2, p. 46; 3, p. 159.

13 *Monthly Review*, 2d ser. 21 (1796), pp. 452-56.

14 *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1, p. 180. The date of the letter is 8 Feb. 1807.

15 Jane Austen makes her famous defence in Ch. 5 of *Northanger Abbey* (1818).