

Sarah Harriet Burney 2008: *The Romance of Private Life*. Ed. Lorna J. Clark. Chawton House Library Series. London: Pickering and Chatto. xxxv + 403 pp. ISBN: 978 1 85196 873 2

Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez
IES Moncho Valcarce
cfernandezr@udc.es

New editions of eighteenth-century texts are always welcome, especially when they are of outstanding women writers scarcely known today. Pickering and Chatto have embarked in this venture through the Chawton House Library Series with the aim of making available certain rare texts in new scholarly editions. The series itself, which is organised into three areas ('Women's Memoirs', 'Women's Travel Writings' and 'Women's Novels'), has as its fourth title, within the area of Women's Novels, *The Romance of Private Life* (henceforward *TRPL*) (1839) by Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844). The scholar responsible for this edition is Dr. Lorna J. Clark, a Research Adjunct Professor at Carleton University (Ottawa), who has already edited Sarah Harriet's letters (Clark 1997).

Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844) was the half-sister of the acclaimed Frances (Fanny) Burney or Mme. d'Arblay (1752-1840). The time has come to re-evaluate the literary merit of a woman who is sometimes simply mentioned by the biographers of Frances as the daughter who had a supposedly incestuous relationship with her brother James. Sarah Harriet collaborated with her father, the musicologist Dr. Charles Burney, and her travels to Switzerland and Italy found a place in her four novels: *Clarentine* (1796), *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808), *Traits of Nature* (1812) and *TRPL*, the culmination of her literary career and the object of the present review. *TRPL* is comprised of two tales, *The Renunciation* and *The Hermitage*, written between 1830 and 1839. The first deals with the experiences of Agnes Danvers, a girl who is kidnapped to lead the life of an aristocrat until she decides to support herself as an artist in Italy and the mystery surrounding her existence is unravelled. *The Hermitage* represents a quite different tale hinging on love, fear and murder, much in the line of Anne Radcliffe's well-known Gothic productions.

Though Sarah Harriet Burney was popular in her day, it must be recognised that the number of books and articles devoted to Frances shows that the former has remained in the shadow of a literary icon cherished by male authors and reviewers since the publication of *Evelina* (1778). Nowadays, Frances's status as a classic in women's literature in English has been affirmed by different critics. Following Joyce Hemlow's (1958) and Margaret A. Doody's (1988) biographies presenting a picture of the Burney household, Tracy Edgar Daugherty (1988) offered the first structural approach to Frances Burney. It was then that feminist criticism – splendidly represented in Burney's case by Julia Epstein (1989) and Katherine Rogers (1994) – took up the cause of vindicating her craft. Later critics, such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984) studied the relationship between father and daughter in their influential work. In recent

years, the researchers' interest has focussed on biographical work (Kate Chisholm 1998; Hester Davenport 2000), the edition of Frances's early journal (Steward J. Cooke and Lars E. Troide 1994), her merit as a dramatist (Barbara Darby 1997) and contacts with other cultures. For instance, the upcoming conference of The Burney Society (TBS) – an affiliate of The American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) with about one hundred members from all around the world – will be held in Paris, 10-11 June 2010, under the title *Women and the Revolution* to examine Frances's years as Madame d'Arblay, the wife of the French chevalier Alexandre Jean-Louis Piochard d'Arblay, and more generally, focussing on women as journalists, witnesses and victims of the Revolution. Still, Sarah Harriet's work remains apart.

This new edition of Sarah Harriet's *TRPL* is faithful to the original edition and worth praising in many respects. After the Acknowledgements (vii-viii) and a brief explanation of the abbreviations used (ix), the Introduction (xi-xxvii) is divided into three sections devoted to highlighting biographical information and the most remarkable features of the tales, which had originally appeared in three volumes. In *The Renunciation*, the editor focuses on the meaning of names (*Emily/Agnes*), images and plot structure, and, when she deals with *The Hermitage*, Clark pays attention to the heroine's suffering and the sensationalist elements in the story. There follow other paratexts: a Select Bibliography (xxix-xxxii), also classified in Works by Sarah Harriet (xxix), Primary Material (xxxiii-xxxv) and Secondary Material (xxxvi-xxxvii), together with a Note on the Text (xxxviii-xxxv) which contains information on the stages of writing, the dealings with the publisher Henry Colburn and the literary responses in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, *The Athenaeum* and *The New Monthly Magazine*.

The editor makes clear her intention to preserve as far as possible the spelling, punctuation, capitalisation and italicisation of the first and only English edition (xxxv). The page endings in the original are indicated, and, after the text itself (3-370), we find a section of many pertinent and illuminating Endnotes (371-98) referring to literary and historical allusions, as would be expected in a critical edition. It is worth remarking that Sarah Harriet loved Shakespeare, the eighteenth-century poets (William Cowper, John Gay and William Collins, among others), as well as playwrights (Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher); hers is a work full of intertextual references duly annotated, together with the quotations of other famous authors (Chaucer or Voltaire) which open the chapters, and the translation of numerous French expressions and words with particular connotations in English at that time; such is the case of *protégée* (15) or *rouge* (187). There is an extensive use of secondary sources, and any philologist will greatly appreciate the list of Silent Corrections (399-403) grouped into three categories and placed at the end of the volume as Substantive Corrections (399-400), Corrections to Punctuation (400-01) and Hyphenated Forms at Line-Ends (401-03).

One of the issues faced by the editor when she prepares such an edition is whether or not to draw parallelisms between Frances's and Sarah Harriet's work, since comparison with Frances is unavoidable. It is worth remembering that during the nineteenth century both sisters were mistakenly taken to be the same person. In 1831, for instance, M. Chasles thought that the authoress of *Evelina* also produced *Cecilia*, *Les Voisins de Campagne*, *Ma Tante Anne*, *La Femme Errante* (French translation of *The Wanderer*), *Clarentine* and *Miss Fauconberg*. An anonymous novel in French, *Seraphina*

(published in 1809), was also attributed to Sarah Harriet Burney, who was always concerned with woman's place in society and handled her themes very subtly. Feminist critics have stressed the value of women's writing, and one of Clark's merits is precisely that, while in the Introduction she makes occasional reference to Frances's *oeuvre*, she is more concerned with those features of Sarah Harriet's writing which establish her *separate* identity. Any perceptive reader will notice that in Sarah Harriet the love plots are not prominent – she even wrote “I never insert love but to oblige my readers” (qtd. xvi) – and that there is neither didacticism nor references to the historical and political events of the time, such as the Napoleonic wars, but there *is* a critique of the establishment. From the point of view of narrative technique, instead of facing a moralising omniscient narrator typical of many eighteenth-century narratives, what we have is a more direct access to the character's mind through free indirect speech. It is no coincidence that Sarah Harriet was an enthusiastic reader of Jane Austen and an admirer of Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott. A focus on woman in the family group recalls previous women writers, such as Elizabeth Haywood or Elizabeth Inchbald, but we are confronted with a more modern writer who uses intrigue and “focuses on the family, with various aspects refracted as in a kaleidoscope” (xxi). A new picture of the Burneys appears before us.

Thanks to her knowledge as a scholar, Clark draws contrasts and parallelisms with other works by the same authoress, while emphasising that Sarah Harriet turned to the *bildungsroman*, where alienation is a central theme. Frances's half-sibling felt it personally and was somewhat isolated from the family circle (xii). In her *oeuvre* there is also a sense of rebellion against Charles Burney's favourite, Frances. Another point that the editor stresses is that Sarah Harriet's protagonists tend to be practical, self-disciplined and unsentimental (xix). For Clark, Sarah Harriet portrayed woman's identity and the fragility of woman's psyche, a point which makes her fiction of particular interest for eighteenth-century studies. This is precisely what Clark highlighted in an article as one of the main themes in *The Hermitage*: “her [Ella's] silence and immobility, the wide-eyed stare, is a powerful image for passive female suffering” (Clark 2004: 173). In addition, Sarah Harriet's handling of traditional motifs (the lost child, the journey), classical references, shades of the Gothic and twists of the plot craftily used to create suspense make us realise how well she understood the novelistic genre towards the mid- nineteenth century. Far from linking Sarah Harriet to the Fathers of the English Novel, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, the editor perceptively places Sarah Harriet in the mainstream of literature in English, and relates her to later authors: “Burney is a pivotal figure who builds on the conventions of the eighteenth century novel and carries them forward; with echoes of Austen, her work points towards Hardy, Dickens and Eliot” (xxi). Thus, *The Renunciation* is related to George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), while *The Hermitage* is considered the first detective story in English before Wilkie Collins and Edgar Allan Poe (xxii).

There are some remarkable passages in Sarah Harriet's work, which is packed with irony and lively dialogues at the beginning of her stories, as in *The Hermitage*. Here, she builds up tension when Ella approaches her brother to kiss his forehead (finding it unnaturally chill) and makes a painful discovery in a scene which suggests a psychoanalytic interpretation (286). In *The Renunciation*, Agnes's thoughts after

reading Lucy de Vere's mysterious letter are represented in direct speech, and the character directly addresses the unfortunate heiress by using archaisms, such as *thy* or *ye* (46). An important scene takes place when Agnes resolutely states before Lady Glenfield her desire to be economically independent, which turns into a powerful defence of working women:

“Have I any choice?” [...] “it is by no means indispensable that I should become a shop-woman. I have no pride that would revolt against such an exercise of the talents I may have acquired; – on the contrary, a maintenance thus earned would re-animate and cheer me; and I should be still in possession, and applying to honourable use the only advantage resulting from Mr. Wharton’s profusion which it would not be disgraceful to retain”. (80-1)

Clark’s enterprise contributes to open new paths for literary researchers because Sarah Harriet’s merits are not restricted to renewing the femino-centric romance with sensationalist elements and satire. Many points have not been properly assessed so far, such as her positioning towards the novel when women writers still struggled to be *authoresses*. It is striking that Sarah Harriet never used self-effacement as a strategy to vindicate the novel and her craft, for instance, and that generosity and feelings occupy a major role in her stories. A Clark points out with regard to Agnes in *The Renunciation*, “she has won their [her family of origin’s] affection on her own merits” (xx). On the other hand, *TRPL* offers an interesting insight into how men and women approached art and, likewise, a glimpse into the aesthetic debate on ‘the Sublime and the Beautiful’ from the privileged point of view of an artist’s daughter. Sarah Harriet also depicted urban life in pre-Victorian Great Britain and how different European cultures contemplated each other in novels set outside England. Likewise, her vision of the British Empire and defence of Englishness coincided with a moment of intense Gallophobia in the British Isles after the French Revolution. This needs revision and can be compared with the views of other British novelists who also wrote on the topic. Finally, we must notice that Sarah Harriet always regarded the father as an instrument of oppression in the line of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature by women. In *The Renunciation*, Agnes Danvers resembles Antigone in the Greek tragedy; Sarah Harriet delineated woman’s mind with unusual delicacy, offering a memorable account of the protagonist’s mixed feelings towards her father which is difficult to be found in other authoresses:

The affection with which he spoke of her, bore all the appearance of sincerity, and for ever put an end to the most distant idea of foul dealing. When she was mentioned herself, it was done with so much temper, that considering the catastrophe she had brought upon him, his moderation and placability [sic] surprised and touched her. She *had* hated him, no doubt; but less at the moment when by her flight, she effected his ruin, than at most other periods of her life; the knowledge of what he would suffer, had then mollified her aversion, and it had been with true regret she came to the conclusion, that his prosperity and her sense of right could never be made compatible. (123)

All in all, the rediscovery of Sarah Harriet Burney is worthwhile and interesting, contributing as it does to the project of rescuing from oblivion some part of women’s unacknowledged history as authors. In this sense, the reader misses a contextualisation

of Sarah Harriet within the framework of women's literary pursuits at that time. Apart from this minor aspect, we find before us an impeccable edition for scholars which will certainly draw the attention of those concerned with women's literature and its evolution during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *TRPL* is an outstanding narrative based on woman's experiences in modern England that any reader interested in the Burney saga in particular or the period in general should know. Undoubtedly, Sarah Harriet Burney is another name to take into account in the development of English literature.

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Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez teaches English and French in IES Moncho Valcarce, (A Coruña). She obtained her PhD at the University of A Coruña in 2007 with a dissertation on Frances Burney's and Maria Edgeworth's narrative work. She is a member of The Burney Society and has published articles in *The Burney Letter*. She has taken part in the research network "Rede de lingua e literatura inglesa e identidade" (2007/000145-0), funded by the Galician Government and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and in the research Project "O papel da muller na prensa inglesa no inicio da idade moderna: estudio sincrónico e diacrónico" (PGIDTOPXB212149PR) funded by the Galician Government (Xunta de Galicia). Her article entitled 'The Cervantine Influence in Burney's Works' is soon to appear in a volume of essays on world literatures edited by Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal (Jaipur: Bookenclave, 2010).

Address: IES Moncho Valcarce. Rúa José M. Penabad López s/n. As Pontes de García Rodríguez. A Coruña. Tel.: +34 981 451351. Fax: +34 981 440748.