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Sophia Burney Mss.

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Keeper of the Bodleian Library. From the Bodleian comes too, as an "exchange," the valuable *Strawberry Hill Accounts kept by Mr. Horace Walpole*, handsomely printed at the Clarendon Press, with beautiful illustrations in collotype from contemporary prints and drawings.]

SOPHIA BURNEY MSS.

By DR. JOHN C. MENDENHALL

For all lovers of the eighteenth century the name Burney has many peculiarly delightful associations. For although she lived a great part of her life as Madame D'Arblay and is always described under that name in dictionaries and library catalogues, the author of *Evelina* is still remembered by the world as Fanny Burney, as the cross-references prove. Her father, the Doctor of Music, was a man of great personal charm; her brothers, Charles, the Greek scholar, and James, the rear-admiral, who brought home Captain Cook's ship; her nephew, the amiable and learned Archdeacon of St. Albans and Colchester, further endowed the name with lively distinction. They were a numerous brood, gifted, all of them, with personality and the art of self expression, either in their own right or by the dramatizing pen of the talented Francis, and their history is the history of an age, whose charm, indeed, vanished in the whirlwinds that beat upon it, but whose loyal conservatism, so well exemplified in them, brought it through its troubles still alive.

An interest naturally attaches to any discovery concerning so remarkable a family. It seems fitting, therefore, to describe for the Friends of the University Library a little sheaf of manuscripts written by one of the name which was recently purchased as an addition to the Godfrey Frank Singer Memorial Collection. They are contained in a leather-backed case, made up like a small quarto volume, lined with old-fashioned brown paper, and neatly labeled on the back, in gold on red, *Works of Sophia Elizabeth Burney*. Written on a fine quality of gilt-edged paper in a late eighteenth century hand, they comprise about thirty leaves in all. Several of the pieces, and notably the two little dramas, are copied out a second time more clearly on larger paper but without noticeable alteration. The bulk of them are bound up as a

little duodecimo in the stiff marbled paper used as binder for the ephemeral novels and pamphlets of the time. It bears this amusing title page :

The Works of
Sophia Elizabeth Burney
aged 13
Written for the Instruction
of young people
and humbly Dedicated
Without permission
to
Mrs D'Arblay
Vol. I

A "List of the Contents" follows, announcing ballads, tales, a novel, a comedy, and a tragedy. Of these, unfortunately, the novel, *Philadelphia*, is lacking. The high purpose of the youthful author is further emphasized by an

Address to the reader
Whoe'er you are that read this book
Do not fail in it to look
Here you'll find some lessons wise
Which may be to you a prize
Keep them ever in your head
And dont forget them till you're dead.

The date of composition of these little pieces may be fixed close to 1793. The young author's famous aunt did not become Mrs. D'Arblay until July of that year, and in the same year the ill-starred Apollo Gardens, alluded to as a place of resort in one of the tales, the *History of Walter Scarecrow*, seem to have been suppressed by the magistrates; they had not been opened until 1788 and in 1795 were described as deserted and ruinous. Whether some of the pieces were written much earlier or later (probably this was *not* the case), the date is generally corroborated by such other evidence as we have. For the writer was, we may be certain, a niece of Madame D'Arblay, the youngest daughter of her sister Esther and her cousin Charles Rousseau Burney, who were married in 1770. On a visit to her Aunt Susan in 1788 she is so described as to seem a very young child. An extant sketch of her by another uncle, Edward, vividly supplements the remarks of her Aunt Susan concerning her naiveté, *gaieté de coeur* and freedom from affectation. The costume is that

of the 80's of the century; a brother and older sister are standing, while she, child fashion, is bending near the ground, as if intently interested in something there, but intensely aware also of all about her. A little smile as of secret amusement, one little hand touching her forehead, she seems at once demure and knowing, so remarkably has the artist uncle placed the little black blob which represents the eye.

For the curious reader I transcribe as a specimen of the young lady's talent the following ballad, which closes the volume.

The fatal Walk

A Ballad

1

One Monday morn as thro the park
my evening walk I took
The weather proving very dark
I tumbled in a brook

2

Thus grieved within and wet without
I spoilt my Sunday clothes
but what was worse in scrambling out
I spoilt my grecian nose.

3

thus wet without and grieved within
my home I quickly sought
far better had I broke my chin
my nose is now too short.

The child-like humor of inverted contrast here displayed is characteristic. With other simple and readily learned devices of carefully regulated anticlimax and ludicrous parallelism, it is deftly employed in all the writing. We learn in *The Brimstone Matches* how Clarinda, Dorinda, Lucinda and Orinda, who are briefly but tellingly described *in diminuendo*, "were very famous for their musical Talents of which I will give you a sketch.

"The first was ingenious, & sang with her voice,
The double bass was the second's choice
The third did on an Organ strum
While the youngest beat a Drum
And thus they would a Concert make
Enough to cure the worst headache.

Much company attended these concerts," among them four young gentlemen named Clarindus, Dorindus, etc., who after ten years' courtship married the ladies, "no objection being started by the Father, who had been dead many years. They

lived after this fashion fifty years at the end of which time they ceased to exist, and thus ended the Brimstone Matches.”

Of all the pieces, the most entertaining are the two tiny dramas—*The Dregs of Wit*, a comedy, and the so-called *Royal Tragedy*. It is worth noting that an older sister, named Francis, after her famous aunt, published in 1818 *Tragic Dramas Chiefly Intended for Representation in Private Families*, with a *Tragedy from the Italian*. A modest preface urges the advantages of dramatic performances in the family circle, with “plot and scenery of a simple, or at least, not complicated description; and characters, few in number, or if otherwise, attired in a *costume* easily adopted by either sex.” The little plays that follow are said to have been circulated already in manuscript copies among friends, and to have been “more than once represented by the junior members of a Family of distinction, and of the first respectability.” *Eheu fugaces!* Such customs have little place in these days of diminutive families. But who does not recall Louisa Alcott’s *Little Women*, and the contemporary example of the Austen family circle, together with the delightful satiric scrap of burlesqued genteel comedy published by J. Austen Leigh in his *Memoir* of his (in both senses) great Aunt Jane? Indeed, with that author’s lately published *Juvenilia* these manuscripts inevitably invite comparison. There is the same verve, even something of the same technique. The “beauteous stranger” of young Miss Austen’s *Love and Freindship*, who would not allow it to be said of him that he would ever do anything to oblige a father, is next of kin to young Miss Burney’s Princess, whose mother died without her pardon for bringing on her death by obstinacy in wilfully disregarding daughter’s superior advice! A more explicit comment than Miss Austen’s satiric thrust at the absurdity of the attitudes involved is the mortal dagger-thrust of the scandalized suitor-Prince to rebuke such arrogance. To finish her tragedy, of course, Miss Burney naturally has the King avenge this murder and then commit suicide, because the boredom of which he has been complaining throughout the play is now complete. Is not the logic of childhood ruthless? And all this because the “Queen, Wife to King,” *would* have her last tooth pulled by a “Dentist, who,” according to the List of Persons, verified by a reading of the Tragedy,

“does not appear.” Are we to see in this reticence deference to Horace’s precept, at first or second hand, that bloody spectacles should not be shown upon the boards?

What came of all this youthful talent? I had thought the moving elegy, written in another hand *On the death of a beloved and ill-fated Daughter* and found with the manuscripts, indicated a tragedy indeed, but that is dated January, 1800, and almost certainly refers to the shocking death of Mrs. Molesworth Phillips (the author’s Aunt Susan) and the hand is probably the father’s own, the famous historian of music, Dr. Burney’s. I find it recorded in 1811 and in 1828 that Sophia Elizabeth Burney was living quietly with a widowed sister in the mellowed atmosphere amid the slowly fading charms of Bath, the brilliant pleasure capital of Britain in her youth. What round of visits, what music, embroidery or painting, what conversation or correspondence, what lengthening memories filled her days, we cannot tell. Like her aunt, who survived until 1840, almost unreal and ghost-like in a world all alien from that of her girlhood and young womanhood, happiness and bright new fame, the niece too belongs forever to youth and the eighteenth century. She stands as a new and unexpected example for us of its finesse, its charm of graceful order, the vanished *politesse* of the *ancien régime*.