

University of Mary Washington

**Eagle Scholar**

---

Student Research Submissions

---

Spring 3-22-2022

## **Rank versus Romance: The Relationship of Class and Courtship in Burney's Evelina**

Lucy Clark

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.umw.edu/student\\_research](https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Clark, Lucy, "Rank versus Romance: The Relationship of Class and Courtship in Burney's Evelina" (2022). *Student Research Submissions*. 514.

[https://scholar.umw.edu/student\\_research/514](https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/514)

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact [archives@umw.edu](mailto:archives@umw.edu).

Lucy Clark

Dr. McAllister

English 447K

22 March 2022

Rank versus Romance: The Relationship of Class and Courtship in Burney's *Evelina*

There are many ways in which power and love can intersect, but perhaps the most common intersection present in 18th-century societies was the connection between class and courtship. As author Francis Burney was well aware, women were left in a vulnerable position when on the "marriage market," which she was on at the age of 23, "just two years before the main portion of *Evelina* was written" (Straub 241). In Frances Burney's novel, *Evelina*, class and perceptions of class status determine the amount of respect men give Evelina in courtship. For the purposes of this essay, courtship may be understood as a process through which one seeks to gain romantic favor or amorous affection from another, often, though not inherently, with hopes of marriage. Burney explores this reality of 18th-century courtship in *Evelina* while also presenting an idealized plotline of a love-based marriage to challenge reality. This exploration occurs as Evelina—the heroine of the novel—experiences the world through middle-class, working-class, and upper-class perspectives.

When Evelina is first introduced to society at a private ball, she is initially perceived as a respectable, middle-class woman based on her appearance, countenance, and party. However, her ignorance of societal norms soon reveals her as an outsider and leaves her exposed to the ridicule of men. Evelina refuses to dance with Mr. Lovel, the first man who asks her because he acted in

a presumptuous and condescending manner towards her. While it was considered rude to accept one offer after refusing another, Evelina was unaware of this unspoken rule and accepted Lord Orville's invitation to dance after rejecting Mr. Lovel. Enraged at Evelina's snub, Lovel then confronts her. Evelina, clearly suffering from severe social anxiety, could not help but respond with unrestrained laughter at Mr. Lovel's arrogant assumptions about her. This causes Mr. Lovel and Lord Orville to assume Evelina is a product of "ill-breeding," perhaps just a "country parson's daughter," which therefore disqualifies her as a serious candidate for courtship (Burney 37). This scene, introducing Evelina and the reader to society, functions to mock the unjust expectations women are faced with in the world, foreshadowing Evelina's further entrance into the world. In "Fanny Burney's 'Evelina' and the 'Gulphs, Pits, and Precipices' of Eighteenth-Century Female Life," Kristina Straub argues that Burney believed "female power would be more reliably grounded in human relationships that were less lopsided, that gave authority to women as well as to men" (Straub 232). This would explain Burney's open mockery of lopsided relationships due to a lack of female autonomy in society.

Burney continues to critique the lack of autonomy women were allotted in 18th-century society through her male antagonist, Sir Clement Willoughby. When he first meets Evelina, Willoughby not only presumes her lack of authority and autonomy, but denies her clear and open demand for it. She earnestly explains, "You have already destroyed all my happiness for this evening...You have tormented me to death; you have forced me from my friends, and intruded yourself upon me, against my will, for a partner" (Burney 46). And yet, he continues to follow and ridicule Evelina until she is forced to give in to his persistence and dance with him. Shaffer explains that Evelina is particularly vulnerable to Willoughby's pursuit at this point in the novel

because she still feels lost without the explicit guidance of her male guardian. In "Not Subordinate: Empowering Women in the Marriage-Plot," she writes, "The novel suggests...that men retain power where they ought not, and that they will retain it as long as women do not recognize that their male mentors do not have access to the knowledge that women need and which they may possess innately" (Shaffer 61). In addition to Evelina's lack of guidance, her position in society causes Willoughby to feel entitled to continue with his advances. Since he perceives her as a middle-class woman, he feels he has power over her because of his higher societal status. As he comes to understand Evelina's true societal status or lack thereof, he becomes more brazen in his courtship attempts because he feels the power imbalance tip more and more in his favor.

When Evelina is then placed in a lower-middle-class or working-class setting, Sir Willoughby begins to take more liberties in his pursuit of her. Evelina, in turn, takes more risks to avoid harming her reputation by associating with people such as Madame Duval and the Branghtons. On her first outing with Madame Duval, M. Du Bois, and the Branghtons, she feared being associated with them. Evelina worries, "Sir Clement approached nearer to us...I only considered how I might avoid immediate humiliation" (Burney 95). And so, she leaves her party to preserve her social status. This puts her in a precarious situation when she is left alone with Sir Clement Willoughby who demands to take her home in his personal carriage. Upon their return home, Evelina discovers that Willoughby "had himself ordered the carriage to go the wrong way" (Burney 99). He took advantage of her situation to isolate her in a carriage under the pretense of a favor. While he does not assault Evelina, she is still caught in a dangerous situation which would also put her reputation at risk. Burney includes this scene to signify how class

association can directly affect a woman's safety in society, particularly making them more vulnerable to the pursuits of men. As Evelina's status in society decreases, Willoughby's power over her increases.

Other suitors also attempt to court Evelina while she is living in a working-class setting. Mr. Branghton, for instance, hopes to marry Evelina "for her potential inheritance" from Madam Duval (Davidson 42). This reveals the first and only circumstance where Evelina is courted for her economic status rather than dismissed because of it. Madame Duval, who is fully aware of this case, encourages Evelina to "neither wholly to discourage, nor yet accept Mr. Branghton's offer" because she is unsure if Evelina could receive a better offer (Burney 242). This emphasizes how economics may play a more important role in lower-middle and working-class marriages. When Evelina dismisses this offer because she does not like the Branghtons, she is still courted by Mr. Smith, their friend. He is represented as Evelina's opposite in many ways, but particularly in his language and in his unnatural and unsuccessful attempts to appear wealthy and sophisticated. In "'To Speak as Others Speak': Privileged and 'Vulgar' Voices in *Evelina*," by Frances Burney," Christina Davidson explains how Mr. Smith exposes how power works through language, disseminating its values insidiously through the willing members of different ranks, who emulate their social superiors in linguistic as well as material ways" (Davidson 34). And yet, "Evelina and Mr. Smith may as well have been speaking two different languages, so loud is the clash of their sensitivities and the social incommensurability that it implies" (Zunshine 110). Neither Mr. Smith nor Mr. Branghton measure up to the level of sophistication or class that Evelina desires in her partner, and so their courtships are ultimately futile.

Once Evelina is more firmly situated in a working-class setting, Willoughby grows more conceited and condescending in his courtship of her. When he imposes on her carriage ride home with Madame Duval and the Branghtons, he retorts, "Where the devil is the man driving to?-- why we are in Broad St. Giles's!" (Burney 207). He is shocked and even disgusted to discover that they live in an area of the city that is primarily occupied by working-class people. And, when they are rude towards him, he asks Evelina, "For Heaven's sake, my dearest creature, who are these people? And how came you so strangely situated?" (Burney 213). This attitude clearly reflects Willoughby's lack of manners, despite his class. As Jessica James points out in "Virtunomics: Class, Virtue, and Moral Authority in *Pamela*, *Henrietta*, and *Evelina*," "For Burney, the commodity that trickles down from the aristocracy is not fashion or titles, but simply manners. Of course, it is important to distinguish between the genuinely virtuous manners of Lord Orville and the affectations of Sir Clement Willoughby" (James 61).

When Evelina encounters Willoughby while situated in an upper-class setting alongside Lord Orville, Willoughby begins to show signs of desperation as she moves above him in social rank. He begins to realize that Evelina is slipping out of the realm of his power; therefore, he makes a final, unsuccessful attempt to retain control over her by pushing her away from Lord Orville. However, since Evelina is no longer a realistic prospect, Willoughby finally concedes his courtship attempts with a confession to Lord Orville. He admits, "I believe that not even the philosophy of your Lordship would recommend to me a connection of that sort, with a girl of obscure birth, whose only dowry is her beauty, and who is evidently in a state of dependency" (Burney 347). This reveals the dishonorable intentions behind his courtship of Evelina; it also displays the important role her class status plays in her eligibility for honorable

courtships. Jessica James further identifies that "Sir Clement Willoughby, who abuses his noble status and misuses the manners that are attached to his class to attempt to ruin Evelina, thus apparently differentiat[es] nobility from virtue" (James 65). Lord Orville's treatment and courtship of Evelina, in contrast to her other suitors, remains consistently virtuous throughout the text, despite her change in class settings. From the very beginning of the novel he insists, "I shall ever think my name honored by your making use of it" (Burney 49). Orville never fails to treat Evelina with dignity throughout the text. He views her more as a person than an object to pursue or have power over. Evelina even states, "But far different was his conduct" compared to Willoughby's (Burney 329). After only a few brief and respectful encounters with Lord Orville in a middle-class setting, Evelina is embarrassed to meet him when she is living with Madame Duval. When Orville encounters Evelina while she is living in a working-class setting, he politely "forbore to ask any further direction" about her living arrangements or circumstances so as not to further her embarrassment (Burney 239). While he was "much surprised...it was benevolently, not with insolence" as Willoughby was (Burney 239). He calls on her without making mention of her housing or her company with Madame Duval and the Branghtons, unlike Willoughby who rudely mocked both.

Evelina's ultimate marriage to Lord Orville at the end of the novel seemingly acts as a traditional marriage plot to teach that "marriage is both the best goal and only imaginable reward for good women" (Shaffer 52). A true love match, Orville is "'willing, nay eager' that the union take place even after he has been told her story" (Copeland 27). However, the marriage between Orville and Evelina also rewards her rightful inheritance, title, and rank in society, through a deal made with her birth father, Sir Belmont. In her article "Fanny Burney's 'Evelina' and the 'Gulphs,

Pits, and Precipices' of Eighteenth-Century Female Life," Straub argues "The social formations of eighteenth-century female life, the expectations of what kind of course or structure it might follow, tend to define the age past courtship as the beginning of a continuous decline in personal power and social control for women" (Straub 236). However, the end of *Evelina* reveals an increase of personal power and social control for the heroine once she is married because she is not only able to improve her social class through a marriage based on love and trust, but she is also able to receive her rightful birth title and inheritance. This reveals that a partnership of equals in both morals and social status is the most ideal ending to satisfy both personal and societal expectations of courtship and marriage.

This plot line, however, does not appear to reflect Francis Burney's reality. Straub questions that while "Burney chose to escape the genteel horrors of a marriage," perhaps "spinsterhood" did not offer "a prospect much brighter than marriage" (Straub 241). Could the idealist character, Lord Orville, be Burney's wish that life had offered her a partner that fit her personal ideal for a marriage based on love and her society's ideal for a marriage that would have improved her rank? Copeland further discusses this notion in their article "Money in the Novels of Fanny Burney." They write, "*Evelina* had been written under her father's roof and shows, I think, the marks of that security. Once when her friend, and later her literary adviser, Samuel Crisp pressured her to reconsider her refusal of a well-to-do admirer, Fanny had replied, 'My father and Mr. Crisp spoil me for every other male creature'—not the best solution for 'an unprotected, unprovided woman,' but one that she transposes into her first novel by providing her heroine with a father-husband in Lord Orville" (Copeland 27).



While her personal life may have played a significant part in her characterization throughout *Evelina*, some scholars also suggest that the novel reveals Burney grappling with larger societal changes occurring in the late 18th century. When Burney was writing *Evelina*, her society was beginning to shift from a feudal state to a mercantile state which, in turn, renegotiates the role of the individual person in society as opposed to the role of a class of people (James 69). James asserts in their essay "Virtunomics: Class, Virtue, and Moral Authority in *Pamela*, *Henrietta*, and *Evelina*," that "Burney can be understood as both building on and reacting against this move toward individualism" (James 70). While she seems to place the emphasis on the individual, especially when it comes to courtship and love, Burney did not discount the important and realistic role economics plays in 18th-century marriage. James further explains, "Evelina's inability to claim her noble relations does not appear to lessen her value as an individual;" however, Burney still affirms Evelina's noble relations and social status by the time she marries Lord Orville (James 70). Perhaps Francis Burney struggled to see how marriage can be successful and hopeful in spite of an economic disparity between partners.

Overall, Francis Burney maintains class as a key component in courtships throughout her novel *Evelina*. A marriageable woman's social and economic status clearly correlates with the level of respect she is given by suitors. In the novel, Evelina is not seen as a woman eligible for courtship, let alone marriage, by most men who rank above her, as displayed in the first ball scene of the novel. The lack of respect she is given is also portrayed through Sir Clement Willoughby's ever-changing attitude towards Evelina based on the class setting he encounters her in. Although he is persistent in his courtship of Evelina throughout the novel, he makes it clear that his intentions are not honorable because she is not of a class high enough to consider for

marriage. His behavior is contrasted with Lord Orville's consistent respect for Evelina throughout the text. Her ultimate marriage to Lord Orville reveals that Burney idealizes marriages based on love and respect in spite of class differences. However, when Evelina is able to assume her rightful position in society as daughter and heiress to Sir Belmont, Burney recognizes that, in reality, marriages between economic equals are more accepted in society during this era.

## Works Cited

- Burney, Francis, and Edward Bloom. *Evelina, or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Copeland, Edward. "Money in the Novels of Fanny Burney." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 8, no. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, pp. 24–37.
- Davidson, Christina. "'To Speak as Others Speak': Privileged and 'Vulgar' Voices in *Evelina*, by Frances Burney." *Women's Writing : the Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, vol. 23, no. 1, Routledge, 2016, pp. 33–52.
- James, Jessica. "Virtunomics: Class, Virtue, and Moral Authority in *Pamela*, *Henrietta*, and *Evelina*." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2011.
- Shaffer, Julie. "Not Subordinate: Empowering Women in the Marriage-Plot— The Novels of Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen." *Criticism (Detroit)*, vol. 34, no. 1, Wayne State University Press, 1992, pp. 51–73.
- Straub, Kristina. "Fanny Burney's 'Evelina' and the 'Gulphs, Pits, and Precipices' of Eighteenth-Century Female Life." *The Eighteenth Century (Lubbock)*, vol. 27, no. 3, Texas Tech Press, 1986, pp. 230–46.
- Zunshine, Lisa. "Bakhtin, Theory of Mind, and Pedagogy: Cognitive Construction of Social Class." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 30, no. 1, University of Toronto Press, 2017, pp. 109–26.