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Reading Female Bodies:  
Deformity, Gender and Fortunetelling in Frances Burney's *Camilla*

The introduction to "Every Lady's own Fortune-Teller," published in 1791, outlines the procedure for reading the future for others in astrological signs, palms, faces, and cards, before suggesting that "A looking glass will supply your own occasions, if you consult for yourself." Several fortunetelling manuals directed to women were published in the late eighteenth century, and their popularity points to a cultural anxiety concerning the difficulty of predicting and controlling women's lives<sup>1</sup>. As fortunetelling manuals and games from the period suggest, popular imagination often linked the futures of individual women to signs on their bodies, equating their physical traits with their intellectual or moral capacities. This kind of reading makes women vulnerable not only to false ideas about their own futures but also to exposure and seduction as they become objects of a scrutiny that is both scientific and voyeuristic.

In *The Cherub*, a collection of short tales published in 1792 that warns young women of the dangers of unscrupulous boarding school directors, milliners, and fortunetellers, the homes of fortunetellers are described as "private apartments" with "apertures for visual inspection" that have a "carnal observatory" for voyeurs to hide in (39, 44). In one episode, a woman who is paying for her future to be read is required to remove her garments in order to allow the fortuneteller to get at the truth of her individual future. The fortuneteller requires that the woman remove the clothing that signals her own attempts at identity manufacturing in order to get at the "pure" source of signs indicating her character: her naked body. This moment of unveiling in

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<sup>1</sup> In a longer version of this paper, I argue that anxiety concerning women's futures, and their tie to the future of the nation, was especially acute in the wake of the French Revolution. For these ideas I am in debt to Linda Colley's *Britons* and Angela Keane's *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s*.

turn excites a hidden male viewer as her body is presented as an erotic, commodified object. In this moment, the fortuneteller engages in a double trade: she sells the unveiling of the woman's body to the voyeur, while simultaneously selling an authoritative reading of this body to the woman herself. This moment of double selling and double seduction relies upon two authoritative cultural fictions about the female body—that it contains upon itself signs indicating unproblematically the mind or character of a woman, and that its future is always determined by how attractive a commodity it is.

Writing four years after the publication of *The Cherub*, the novelist Frances Burney presents the characters of two sisters, Eugenia and Camilla, in her novel *Camilla* in order to help examine and dismantle these cultural fictions about the female body. The two sisters, although similar in spirit, have very different courses of life because, while Camilla has a healthy body, Eugenia's is disfigured early in the novel and challenges definitions of normality. Eugenia's presence in the novel renders ridiculous and outmoded the connections between appearances and possible futures that formed the basis of many contemporary fortunetelling manuals for women. Her disfigured body cannot be read according to a fortuneteller's code, and, because of this illegibility, helps unlock a wider variety of possibilities for women's individual courses of life. By presenting the diverging lives of the two sisters, Burney not only critiques particular modes of reading the future but also throws a troubling light on the impulse to control an individual's future at all.

As children, the sisters Camilla and Eugenia are very similar in beauty and goodness. They are also similar because they are characters who, unlike other stereotypes who populate the novel's margins, are not "fixed" from the novel's beginning. Eugenia has not been inoculated, leaving her vulnerable to any kind of public social interaction; her parents take care to "ke[ep]

her from all miscellaneous intercourse in the neighbourhood” (22). Similarly, at the novel’s inception Camilla’s parents are worried that her character is not yet fully formed and that she should therefore be carefully monitored in social situations. Burney’s metaphors of disease that describe the operations of Camilla’s interior life further point to the parallels between the physically diseased daughter and the daughter who is vulnerable to a kind of social infection, or “contagion of example.” Both daughters face a problem with inoculation—they are vulnerable to disease, whether literal or metaphorical, supposedly because they have not been “hardened” or “fixed” by preventative medical or educational measures. This parallel, however, falls apart as the novel traces the paths of life that each sister takes—paradoxically, the physically healthy daughter becomes increasingly paralyzed by others’ expectations that she achieve fixity in her course in life while the deformed daughter moves fluidly between gendered expectations and opens up new possibilities for understanding the shapes that women’s lives can take.

Camilla’s flexibility is seen as a moral weakness because everything she does is read metonymically, as a sign of her character.<sup>2</sup> Others read her as fortunetellers would, taking small signs and expanding them to predict her character’s future. Dr. Marchmont, the tutor of Camilla’s love interest, Edgar, continually insists that Camilla’s inward character can be read from without: “a very little observation will enable you to dive into the most secret recesses of her character,” he insists to Edgar (59). When Camilla moves her attention from a fashionable raffle and toward sentimental philanthropy, Edgar “saw, in the change, yet brightness of her countenance, what passed within” (95). Because Camilla is supposedly legible (and therefore predictable), Edgar has the idea that reading her exterior actions will help him understand her

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Doody writes incisively about the way the novel unfolds according to paradoxes involving reading and misreading characters according to cultural codes (212-238). Deidre Lynch argues more specifically that Burney uses the novel to critique the ways in which women’s characters are understood as unproblematically represented by their choices as consumers (164-206). My argument about the misreadings of Camilla draw from both of their arguments.

inclinations and, therefore, her future with him. However, Burney undermines Edgar's assumption over and over by showing that Camilla's actions are forced, and that they do not represent her own choices or reflect her own agency. In public settings, it is often not possible for Camilla to be consistent; there are multiple points of pressure insisting that she act in different ways. Neither Marchmont nor Edgar leaves any room for these multiple expectations and instead comprehend her flexibility as moral disease.

Eugenia's course of life in the novel evolves very differently than her sister's. On her first visit to a shop in the suburbs, she contracts smallpox and, in the next chapter, falls while riding on a seesaw with her careless uncle. As a result of the accident and disease, Eugenia remains throughout the novel "diminutive and deformed" (33). Immediately after this accident, it seems that her changed body will directly dictate her future. Her uncle rewrites his will so that Eugenia will be the sole beneficiary, promising to give her "a guinea for every pit in that poor face" (30). His promise attempts to tie her fortune to her physical body, much like Camilla's is tied to her actions and their appearances. It soon becomes clear, however, that Eugenia's body defies common modes of categorization, forcing her to be read in different ways than her sister is. Unlike Camilla, whom Dr. Marchmont suggests is a sequel to his own wives, claiming, for example, that his first wife was "another Camilla" (643), Eugenia is understood as unique, and not representing an entire gender: Edgar "reverence[s] the respectable singularity of that charming character" (341). Felicity Nussbaum calls Eugenia a "'cultural third term,' both 'the opposite of the masculine figure' and 'the antithesis of the normal woman,'" and asserts that, "As a triangulated gender anomaly, her character transforms disability to empower her to escape the usual trivial feminalities" (125).

This singularity shows up in no place more clearly than in her education. After Eugenia has become deformed from her accident and smallpox, Sir Hugh develops a scheme to provide her with an education to match that of his intended husband for her, her cousin Clermont. He says, "I shall make her a wife after his own heart . . . for I intend to bid [her tutor] teach her just like a man, which, as she's so young, may be done from the beginning, the same as if she was a boy" (48). Because her body has become something other than the typical female's, Eugenia can simply start over in her intellectual development. The particular composure of her mind, combined with her atypical body, allows her to overcome the usual limits placed on female education; here, she retroactively seems to be "born . . . a practical philosopher." Furthermore, unlike Camilla, Eugenia's body is not understood as conflated with her intellect or actions. Sir Hugh admits that Eugenia's virtues cannot be seen: "there's no more Greek and Latin in one body's face than in another's," he claims (563-4). While in public, Eugenia is often not noticed or even "perceived," thus escaping the scrutiny and expectation that haunt Camilla (656). Eugenia's frequent disappearing act from the text, as well as her fluidity of character, suggest alternatives to Camilla's ever-diminishing choices and immobility.

In one of the novel's most harrowing scenes Camilla has a dream in which she is haunted not only by the past but also by an overdetermined future, as a personified figure of death asks her to "read [her] doom" in letters that her own hand writes without her control (875). Her paralysis presents a counter-image to the woman in "Every Lady's own Fortune-Teller" who is empowered by special knowledge to use a mirror to read her future; here, the future Camilla sees represents a complete lack of power over her own destiny. While Camilla is asked to read her doom in writing that she cannot control, Eugenia controls her future by writing her memoirs. Late in the novel Eugenia writes the introduction to her own autobiography, a text meant to share

her experiences and to warn readers about the danger of valuing “external attractions” over internal ones (905). When Camilla tries to get Eugenia to stop writing, suggesting that it might be too painful to have such thoughts, Eugenia responds that “they aided her . . . in her task of acquiring composure for the regulation of her future life” (906). Camilla becomes paralyzed because of the ways other conflate the appearance of her actions with her intention, but Eugenia becomes empowered—even to the point of gaining the ability to “compose” her own life—because she defies cultural expectations.

While the events in Eugenia’s life are by no means ideal or utopian, her character does upon up new possibilities for female futures by rendering ridiculous old modes of predicting and controlling these futures. The novel makes it clear that Eugenia’s ability to escape common expectations for women is only because she has a body that has become something other than the normative female’s. Eugenia’s presence in the novel helps to resolve some of the ideological conflicts that Kristina Straub argues Burney herself had to struggle with as a writer: Burney “grew up with an ideological double standard, a set of assumptions about what the shape and day-do-day texture of *human* life should be—or was—and a somewhat different set of assumptions about what the shape and day-to-day texture of *female* life should be” (4). Paradoxically, by having a deformed body, Eugenia is allowed to be more fully human than other women, in both the education she is given and the expectations that others have of her. She is allowed to progress, to study, to *write* (905-6), while Camilla grows increasingly static. Although the two sisters are understood as having “mutual compassion” and “mutual sorrows” even late in the novel (720), it is their varying afflictions—one understood as physical, the other as social—that reveal the contradictory and constraining expectations for women’s futures that end up paralyzing young women rather than preparing them.

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