

**Adventures in the Literary Marketplace**  
**Assignment 2: Critical Essay**

Published in 1796, *Clarentine* is the first of Sarah Harriet Burney's five moderately successful novels and an excellent indication of her abilities as a writer. Although occasionally simple in form and narrative, Sarah Harriet Burney's description of eighteenth-century society must be highly commended. The epistolary fragments of her first novel are particularly useful as a means of exploring the life of the protagonist, Clarentine, and her relationships with friends and family in a predominantly middle-class society. Furthermore, Burney's attention to conversation and the use of third-person narration encourages the reader to examine the novel both as a participant and observer of events. As an avid reader of Jane Austen's novels, it is clear that much of Sarah Harriet Burney's own writing is consistent with that of her contemporary. As suggested by Simon Finch, Sarah Harriet Burney's novels do appear to echo Jane Austen's work but with 'scandalous overtones'.<sup>i</sup> *Clarentine* was written during a period in which 'increasing numbers of women novelists were entering the literature market without threat to their respectability' and a period in which literature was 'becoming an easier target for feminine ambition'.<sup>ii</sup> Rita J. Kurtz and Jennifer L. Womer suggest that the rise in female purchases was a result of 'more disposable income and leisure time' as well as an 'increasing desire on the part of women readers to engage in this politically charged decade'.<sup>iii</sup> Among familiar novelists such as Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Charlotte Smith, Sarah Harriet Burney can be recognised as an example of the great writers that established the growth of eighteenth-century women's fiction.

Although there is little advertisement and critical analysis of Sarah Harriet Burney's success as a writer, her novels were well received by society and on the whole by contemporary critics at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century. Her most famous supporter was her own half-sister Frances Burney. In her diary and letters she speaks very highly of Sarah Harriet Burney's work and passes on compliments from other sources with great enthusiasm. Her recollection of a conversation with the King, for example, upon the subject of her younger sister's first publication indicates that Sarah Harriet Burney's novel was read and enjoyed by high society. Frances Burney states, 'I was very much pleased then when the Queen said, "I have seen it, sir, and it is very pretty".'<sup>iv</sup> A letter to Doctor Charles Burney, in which Frances Burney proclaims, 'Princess Elizabeth spoke to me in high terms of Sally's last work, & with much praise, though not equal, of *Clarentine*', illustrates further evidence of the success of the novelist and of *Clarentine*.<sup>v</sup> Contemporary reviews of the period suggest that the general response to Sarah Harriet Burney's work was noticeably diverse. In the *Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, for example, Lorna J. Clark states:

The *Analytical Review* recommended it for "harmless amusement", the *Monthly Review* found "much adroitness of composition, vivacity of dialogue, and morality of sentiment", while the *British Critic* saw promise in a first performance.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite Sarah Harriet Burney's own claims that *Clarentine* is simply 'a little production', a critical analysis of the novel indicates that it is a far superior study of eighteenth-century society rather than purely a novel for amusement.<sup>vii</sup> Although the

author cannot be commended with the same admiration that is given to novelists such as Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, it is clear that Sarah Harriet Burney's novels have not been given the critical attention they deserve. Among the familiar subjects of romance and political events surrounding the French Revolution, the novel excels in its portrayal of the 'manners and follies' of eighteenth-century society.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, the *Critical Review*, dated 1798, suggests that the novel is compared to the work of Frances Burney and concludes that *Clarentine* exhibits 'education, early virtues, taste and sensibility, and the more mature sentiments, independent spirit and chastened affection of Caroline'. The novel emphasises the predominant arguments posed by both Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, both of which demonstrate their concerns for female education.

*Clarentine* explores the life of an orphan girl who, after the death of her French mother, is forced to endure a life of turmoil as she is sent from one home to another. The events following the birth of Clarentine are conveyed in significant detail, enabling the reader to place the remainder of the novel in the context of her early life. This description indicates that before departing to Bengal to join the military service of the East India Company, Clarentine's father appeals to his brother Sir James for help. However, upon the death of Sir James' own wife, Clarentine is taken into the care of his sister, Mrs Somerset. Consequently, Mrs Somerset's own husband becomes jealous of the affection his wife and son have for Clarentine and at six years old she is transferred to the Delmington's mansion in the countryside of Devonshire.

Clarentine remains a resident at Delmington House for much of her early life.

She sustains a remarkable relationship with every member of the Delmington family. Having been accepted as another daughter and sister to Lady Delmington and her children, Clarentine is commended by each for her beauty and her polite nature. After the death of her father at the battle with the Mahrattas, Clarentine's cousin William Somerset pays her a visit. Although very rarely at home when Clarentine was under the guardianship of his parents, William Somerset acquires a particular attachment to the child and vows to protect and provide for her whenever the necessity arises. He leaves her with a pocket book in which he provides details of Mr Lenham's home, a retreat to which she is welcome to attend if any disagreements are to occur during her stay at Delmington House.

The optimistic and kind-hearted nature of the young Clarentine leads her to overlook the possibility that anything could disrupt her life with Lady Delmington and her children. Oblivious to the growing affection of her cousin Edgar, Clarentine remains loyal and respectful to her surrogate family. However, as a result of the growing suspicions of Mrs Harrington, a hostile relation of the family and a frequent visitor at Delmington House, tensions manifest and eventually lead to the exile of the young Clarentine.

There is a significant shift from the first volume of the novel to the second and third, which I feel is necessary to explore in greater detail. The beginning appropriately identifies the life and manners of the protagonist. She is portrayed as the idealistic heroine, who behaves honourably towards her surrogate family. Much of her time is spent reading and conversing with her cousins Edgar and Frederick. As the suspicions of Mrs Harrington develop, however, Clarentine's calm and relatively

isolated life is dramatically changed. Clarentine is continually outcast from the life with her cousins. The only place of solitude is with Madame D'Arzele, a French émigré whom Clarentine befriends while she is still a resident at Delmington House. The changes arise when Clarentine is sent to Mr. Lenham's house in London. The transference from the country to the town signifies the protagonist's initial entry into the world, a notion that is characteristic of the work of Frances Burney (D'Arblay). This is particularly relevant in relation to Frances Burney's first successful novel, *Evelina*, published in 1778, otherwise recognised as *The History of A Young Lady's Entrance into the World*. The epistolary novel depicts the life of a young heroine who, after the abandonment of her father and the subsequent death of her mother, is forced by necessity into the 'perils of London society'.<sup>ix</sup> Despite her model of virtue Evelina remains ignorant of the world. Consequently, she can 'go but few places indeed without being forced, intruded upon, seized, kidnapped, or in some other way violated by men'.<sup>x</sup> Subsequently, the heroine's only escape from the monotonous scenes of a consumer society and in order to live a prosperous and virtuous life she must ultimately marry. The novel is an indication of Frances Burney's views upon the dependency of women during the eighteenth century. Having experienced the pressures of being forced to marry by her own father and having observed the behaviour of women in society, Frances Burney's novels can be read as illustrations of eighteenth-century life. This view is emphasised by the ways in which Frances Burney's novels appear to collaborate with the events described in her own personal diary and letters. Burney's novels are therefore predominant examples of conduct literature, which 'provide a key means of understanding established roles and patterns

of authority in the home, the market-place, the assembly room and even the bedchamber'.<sup>xi</sup>

In the *Early Women's Journal*, Amanda Vickery provides significant details in relation to the role of women's literature and the rise of feminist criticism during the eighteenth century. She states that, 'for too long we have presumed that domesticity hogged the discursive stage unchallenged.' Novelists such as Frances Burney, however, indicate that although the subject of 'domesticity' was still respected as an appropriate form of women's literature she began a radical movement in which underlying tones of feminist criticism were stored. It is suggested, for example, that Frances Burney's attention to the 'Comedy of manners' was a source through which she could incorporate feminist criticism into her writing. By sustaining 'a sharply satirical eye and an ear for dialogue' Burney could explore the role of women in society with far greater authority than is initially acknowledged by the reader.<sup>xii</sup> Frances Burney's attention to the importance of marriage, virtue and domesticity ensure that her novels remain within the boundaries of women's literature. Her heroines are eventually forced to marry in order to escape their desolate lives and can only do so if they reveal themselves to be respectable, virtuous and therefore appropriate for marriage. Judith Lowder Newton, for example, states that, 'all a respectable young woman could really do to ease the strain of her dependency... was to marry'.<sup>xiii</sup> However, there remains an underlying tone in which Burney criticises the ways in which women are displayed as commodities, destined to live a life of domestic bliss. Interestingly, Newton further states that Frances Burney's portrayal of her heroines displayed on the market establishes her as 'one of the few writers in the

century to describe the experience in a way as to emphasise its discomfort and oppression' (p. 27).

The views established by Frances Burney are convincingly echoed in the work of Sarah Harriet Burney, particularly in regard to *Clarentine*. During her exile to London, the heroine experiences unfamiliar scenes, which signify notable contrasts to her former life. Having led a rather solitary life at Delmington House the attention to public events, such as balls, plays and the opera are significantly obscure to her. Sarah Harriet Burney presents similar satirised scenes in which 'the insipidity of fashionable life' is conveyed.<sup>xiv</sup> These fashionable events are observed from Clarentine's perspective in which she demonstrates an awareness of the over-crowded and self-indulgent scenes of monotonous gossip. Furthermore, the heroine is forced to endure the violations of both male and female acquaintances, the former who observe and intrude upon her purely as an object of affection and the latter with whom she is forced to endure idle gossip.

The attention to satire in Sarah Harriet Burney's *Clarentine* is predominantly demonstrated by the characterisation of Miss Barclay, a young lady who 'looked at once vulgar, blunt and familiar'.<sup>xv</sup> Miss Barclay appears in the novel as Clarentine's conflicting opposite. This is clarified immediately by Clarentine's observation that the girl 'appeared more like a monstrous caricature, intended to excite, ridicule and surprise' (Vol. 2, p.130). Her behaviour is described more astonishingly as a mixture of manners in which she displays the 'rudeness of an unformed romp' and 'the freedom of a pert coquette' (Vol. 2, p. 136). The author's initial description of Miss Barclay and the illusion of the young girl flying from one room to another adds to the

satirical portrayal of her character. Furthermore, the author emphasises the foolishness of her character by a scene in which she ironically proclaims that Clarentine evidently had too much freedom in her youth. Miss Barclay is a primary example of a society that has undergone a drastic change, a change that emphasises the birth of a consumer society, the evidence of which is demonstrated by her continuous excitement for fashion and ceremony. Her determination to be 'introduced into fashionable society' and to 'move only in the most elegant circles' illustrates her inability to display the righteous virtues of our heroine (Vol.3, p. 242). Miss Barclay's anticipation of the 'envy, which amongst her less fortunate acquaintances should excite' is a further indication of the pride with which she indulges her thoughts (Vol. 2, p.242). The satirical element of the scene is further enhanced by the response of other characters, who observe and ridicule Miss Barclay and her appearance, which ironically she remains oblivious to. The significant contrasts between Clarentine's innocence and Miss Barclay's flamboyant demeanour are excellent indications of the disparity between idealistic and satirical feminism. Although it can be argued that the attention to satire in Sarah Harriet Burney's first novel does not meet the standards set by Frances Burney, she does appear to demonstrate a valuable effort, which I feel deserves substantial recognition.

Morality is a fundamental theme within the novel, which is applied in order to distinguish between worthy characters and their counterparts. Clarentine exhibits early virtues in which she ascertains a distinct level of respect for her elders and her guardians. For this reason her behaviour throughout the novel must be acknowledged as a significant representation of her character. The latter half of the novel, however,

demonstrates the importance of sustaining a moral position in order to increase the chances of a prosperous life. Clarentine enters the world, as is demonstrated by *Evelina*, with ‘a perfectly unjaundiced eye and an unsullied if modest sense of her own consequence’.<sup>xvi</sup> However, she is forced to endure the detrimental consequences of the corruption of others, which leads to an evaluation of her own response to their behaviour. Clarentine’s dominant rival is the antagonistic portrayal of Mrs. Hertford; a woman who will go to any lengths to claim what she believes is rightfully hers. Mrs. Hertford’s treatment of Clarentine is particularly distressing, causing the heroine to suffer the damaging consequences of her schemes. However, her function in the novel is important for two reasons. She exists as a predominant rival to Clarentine and therefore helps to distinguish the heroine’s virtuous character in conflict with her own. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, Mrs. Hertford is the cause of Clarentine’s own conflict with herself and the extent to which her own emotions can be justified.

Clarentine’s feminine innocence is distinguished throughout the novel, particularly by the observations of other characters. The most valued of these characters is Mrs. Denbigh, who is a representation of the more mature sentiments. Her presence in the novel illustrates the voice of reason as she proposes to educate Clarentine with regard to her emotions and her prospects of domestic bliss. Mrs. Denbigh’s role in the novel is initially conveyed by her ability to observe Clarentine in who she discovers ‘the most manifest symptoms of perturbation and uneasiness’ and who spoke with ‘such unusual rapidity and incoherence’ (Vol. 2, p. 286). Mrs. Denbigh’s surprise at this rapid change of behaviour leads her to question the

heroine's own morality. By representing a sympathetic ear to Clarentine's 'bursting heart', Mrs. Denbigh illustrates the detrimental consequences of such self-indulgent behaviour (Vol. 2, p. 287). She proclaims, with the utmost sincerity, 'you must curb it...or greatly do I fear, that of the most benevolent human beings, it will teach you to become the most unjust and illiberal' (Vol. 2, p.288). Furthermore, the characterisation of Mrs. Denbigh emphasises that Clarentine is only young in the world and states that, 'in a short time [her] virtuous efforts will be prosperous and successful' (Vol. 2, p. 294). Mrs. Denbigh demonstrates society's more conventional arguments towards marriage, which she proposes to teach to the young naïve heroine. Her argument dismisses the value of romance and poses a significant argument for the importance of 'rational enjoyment...that [of] sober common sense' (Vol. 3, p. 69). Mrs. Denbigh's reiteration of the vocabulary of sentimentalists, such as, 'sensibility', 'susceptibility' and 'enthusiasm', determine the need with which Clarentine must conduct herself with decency and decorum if she is to be successful in both marriage and domestic bliss (Vol. 3, p. 69).

The most ambiguous part of the novel is the change in Clarentine's behaviour when she realises that Somerset is in love with her and does intend to marry her. The shift in her attitude towards him is questionable. Having suffered the belief that Somerset is in love with another woman, Clarentine initially resolves to remain devoted to him despite the arrangement that keeps them physically apart. However, once the true events are revealed and Clarentine learns of Somerset's true feelings for her everything appears to be resolved and the reader's expectations of their intimacy are concluded. Ambiguity arises, however, during the events prior to their marriage.

Clarentine's behaviour does not comply with her former behaviour and with the enthusiastic response portrayed by Somerset. Clarentine's former regard for Somerset as her 'counsellor, guardian and protector all in one' and the indication that 'she loved him with the most artless tenderness' is rapidly displaced by feelings of obligation. (Vol. 2, p. 192). Her response to Mrs. Delmington's letter of approval, for example, states that she 'fought to gain time by prolonging its perusal' and that she was 'at length compelled to own she had concluded it, and obliged to answer [Somerset's] eager supplications' (Vol. 3, p. 228). Clarentine's hesitation and continued embarrassment is perhaps a result of the mature sentiments she has endured by her education with Mrs. Denbigh and also an indication that the marriage is based upon necessity rather than passion. It has been suggested that Somerset is a fictionalised view of Sarah Harriet Burney's own half brother James Burney, whom she supposedly eloped with shortly after the publication of *Clarentine*; the evidence of which is suggested in the letters of Sarah Harriet Burney and also in the diary and letters of Frances Burney. Lorna J. Clark states that the protective guardian in the novel has been 'identified boldly by some Burney scholars as "idealised portraits of J[ames] B[urney]"'.<sup>xvii</sup> Furthermore, Clark suggests that 'it is worth remarking that the sense of warm fraternal regard is more convincingly portrayed than the supposed passion' (Iviii). Somerset's disposition throughout the novel is acknowledged as that of guardian to Clarentine. The growing affection between them cannot be denied. However, the authoritarian language used towards the end of the novel implies that the marriage is a result of necessity rather than passion. The use of words such as 'compelled', 'obliged' and 'gratitude' in regard to Somerset are further indications of

the kindness that Clarentine owes to him as her protector. Furthermore, Sarah Harriet Burney's novel appears to strongly echo Frances Burney's convictions towards the prospect of marriage. After a very short indication of their marriage, Clarentine receives a letter from her beloved cousin Sophia, in which she states her urgency to undertake a private conversation with her. Somerset's reaction to the letter, however, is an indication of the claims that a husband bears upon his wife. He proclaims:

If I endeavour, however...to draw from you the secrets of so mysterious an interview, you must not be surprised: husbands you know, are privileged to be curious, and the privacy of this appointment is such as to excite my curiosity very strongly (Vol. 3, p. 262).

This statement does not only indicate a husband's authority over his wife but demonstrates the extent to which a woman's privacy is completely denied to her. Clarentine's response to Somerset's interrogation is a further indication of the agitation experienced by the heroine. She proclaims that, 'by thus reminding me of your privileges you put me on my guard, and teach me the necessity of being cautious' (Vol. 3, p. 262). Furthermore, she states, 'I shall now come home so well prepared to dissemble, that all your interrogations will be useless' (Vol. 3, p.262). The compulsion in this speech is a rather subtle but significant indication of the oppression suffered by women as a result of marriage. Furthermore, Sarah Harriet Burney once again disguises the reality of marriage behind a mirror of satire.

In *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800* Janet Todd draws significant parallels between the work of Sarah Harriet Burney and her

half-sister Frances Burney. Todd confirms that, 'contemporary reviews comment on the resemblance between Sarah Harriet Burney's characters and situations and those of Fanny Burney's', but that they acknowledge that 'Sarah Harriet Burney lacks the raciness of humour and power of painting the varieties of the human species' (p.67). Sarah Harriet Burney's novel demonstrates an underlying tone of feminist criticism but is conveyed in an extremely subtle way. What at first is perceived as a simple story of romance is in fact the story of a young virtuous girl abandoned by her father and left to rely upon the kindness of others and upon the gentleness of her character alone. When transported to London she must suffer the detrimental effects of a consumer society in which she must learn to govern her own emotions in order to live a life of domestic bliss. Sarah Harriet Burney's attention to love is rather ambiguous and appears to disguise the feminist argument that criticises society's attitude towards women and their role within marriage. However, the novel is an exceptional portrayal of existing society, in which she places particular importance upon the existence of virtue and the education of obedience.

The climax of the novel is somewhat limited by its superficial restoration to what must be assumed as normality with regard to marriage in the eighteenth century. Sarah Harriet Burney rapidly closes her novel with a brief description of the lives of each of the characters, ensuring that only those who exhibit virtue or have in some way reclaimed their virtue are privileged to lead a life of domestic bliss. However, this hasty conclusion to the novel leaves the reader disappointed with regard to events described in the first volume of the novel. Having explored her characters in immense detail at the beginning of the novel, the author's brief conclusion of their lives at the

end is rather obscure. Perhaps this is an indication of the abrupt conclusion of marriage, as suggested in the novels of Frances Burney.

Although the narrative of Sarah Harriet Burney's first novel cannot be attributed with the level of maturity that exists within the work of Frances Burney, it must nevertheless be commended as an extraordinary example of eighteenth-century literature. The care with which the novel has been written is demonstrated by the author's attention to detail. The incorporation of letter writing ensures that events in the novel are continually unravelled. The act of letter writing, as stated by Lorna J. Clark was a 'social convention' that was performed as 'a sense of duty, an obligation to maintain contact'.<sup>xviii</sup> Its function in the novel is particularly important as a means of sustaining an awareness of minor as well as major characters. Furthermore, it demonstrates the ways in which men and women, although often situated miles apart, were continually observed by society.

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<sup>i</sup> Finch, Simon, *Burney's Austen*, (Simon Finch Rare Books Limited 2003), <http://www.simonfinch.com/Catalogues/Victorian05.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 53.

<sup>iii</sup> Rita J. Kurtz, et al, 'The Novel as Political Marker: Women Writers and their Female Audiences in the Hookham and Carpenter Archives, 1791-1798', Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text 13 (Winter 2004). Online: Internet (date accessed):

[http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc13\\_n02.html](http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc13_n02.html)

<sup>iv</sup> Frances Burney, *Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay (1778-1840)*, Vol. V, ed. by her niece Charlotte Frances Barrett, (London: MacMillan & Co., 1904)

<sup>v</sup> Frances Burney, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay)*, ed. by Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), VII, 61. NB. Sally is a name used by Frances Burney in reference to Sarah.

<sup>vi</sup> Lorna J. Clark, A Footnote in *Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Lorna J. Clark, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 29

<sup>vii</sup> Sarah Harriet Burney, Letter to Charles Burney Jr, *Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Lorna J. Clark, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 90.

<sup>viii</sup> Critical Review, vol. 23 (1798): 471-2, provided by Julie A. Shaffer, (Sheffield Hallam University: Corvey Women Writers, 2000)

<sup>ix</sup> Justine Crump, 'Evelina' (The Literary Encyclopaedia: The Literary Dictionary Company Limited), <http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=5268>

<sup>x</sup> Judith L. Newton, 'Evelina' in *Women, power, and subversion: social strategies in British fiction, 1778-1860*, (New York: Methuen, 1985), p.23.

<sup>xi</sup> Amanda Vickery, ed. 'Women Advising Women: Early Women's Journals, c1700-1832' in *Advice Books, Manuals and Journals for Women, 1450-1837*, (London: Adam Matthew Publications Ltd, 2005), [http://www.adam-matthew-publications.co.uk/collections\\_az/Women-Adv1/editorial-introduction.aspx](http://www.adam-matthew-publications.co.uk/collections_az/Women-Adv1/editorial-introduction.aspx)

<sup>xii</sup> Joanne Shattock, *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 79.

<sup>xiii</sup> Judith Lowden Newton, 'Evelina' in *Women, power, and subversion: social strategies in British fiction, 1778-1860*, (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>xiv</sup> Janet Todd, *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800*, (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 66.

<sup>xv</sup> Sarah Harriet Burney, *Clarentine. A novel. In three volumes*, London, 1796. 3 vols. (Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Gale Group), <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>, Vol 2, p. 130, (Subsequent quotations identified in brackets)

<sup>xvi</sup> Judith Lowden Newton, 'Evelina', p. 43.

<sup>xvii</sup> Lorna J. Clark, 'General Introduction' in *Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Lorna J. Clark, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. Iviii.

<sup>xviii</sup> Lorna J. Clark, 'General Introduction', p. Ivi.

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