

## Frances Burney: the "Mother of English Fiction"

By [Kate O'Connor](#) [1]

Before there was Jane Austen or even the gleam in Mr. Bronte's eye that would engender his three novelist daughters, there was Frances (Fanny) Burney, master of the novel of social courtship, and according to Virginia Woolf, "the mother of English fiction."

Born in 1752, Burney grew up with her devout musician/writer father, a temperamental stepmother, six siblings, three stepsiblings, and a half-brother. She kept a fascinating [diary](#) [2] from the age of 16, rife with literary experimentation, and in 1778 published her first novel, *Evelina, or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* [3].

*Evelina* was remarkable for several reasons: its quality (it gained the admiration of the Burney's family friend Samuel Johnson); its having been written by a woman (her identity was discovered despite Burney's extensive and hilarious mechanisms to disguise the novel's authorship even from her father); and especially for its skilful portrayal of the voices of multiple characters. An epistolary novel, all letters present the first-person perspectives of a variety of characters regarding the trials and tribulations of Evelina, a young woman who grew up in the countryside now entering London society. Burney would go on to write many novels and plays, though her novels [Cecilia](#) [4] and [Camilla](#) [5] would achieve much more critical success than her dramatic works.

Burney's dramatic life belied the social niceties of her writings. Burney's parents forced her to attend on Queen Charlotte at court, and during this service mad King George III chased Burney around the gardens of Windsor Castle, his Majesty still clad in his nightgown. Against her family's wishes Burney married Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste D'Arblay, a poor Frenchman who had fled to England to escape Jacobin retribution. Often Burney joined her husband in his travels to and from France even once hostilities broke out with the rise of Napoleon. When diagnosed with breast cancer, Burney underwent a mastectomy without anaesthetics.

Yet despite these personal distractions, Burney laid the groundwork for female novelists to come. She improved the respectability of the female writer. The contents of her books were proper even for the eyes of young ladies, and she displayed modesty in her personal life (especially when compared to her predecessors like Aphra Behn or Eliza Haywood, who were women of scandal with writing to match). Burney's works have more in common with Samuel Richardson's [Pamela](#) [6] than Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess*, but her novels depict more realistic female heroines than those of Richardson.

Anne Radcliffe, Maria Edgeworth, and [Jane Austen](#) [7] were all subscribers to the serialization of Burney's *Camilla*, and all owe Burney a debt for advancing the popularity of the courtship novel and the possibility of women being considered as novelists of worth.

Want to know more? A great starting-point is the Burney Centre at McGill University (see <http://burneycentre.mcgill.ca>)

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