

ANNE ELLIOT'S AFTERLIFE IN SARAH HARRIET BURNEY'S

COUNTRY NEIGHBOURS (1820)¹

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La vida posterior de Anne Elliot en *Country Neighbours* (1820) de Sarah Harriet Burney

Resumen: Sarah Harriet Burney sigue siendo una escritora menos conocida que su hermanastra, la famosa Frances Burney, aunque alcanzó la fama en su época y produjo bastantes obras de ficción. Este trabajo analiza *Country Neighbours, Or the Secret* (1820) de Sarah Harriet Burney como una reescritura muy personal de *Persuasion* (1818) de Jane Austen tomando como base las diferencias y paralelismos a nivel de técnica narrativa y temas. Veremos cómo ambas escritoras usaron la figura de la mujer soltera para mostrar su preocupación por la marginación de la mujer en la Inglaterra del siglo diecinueve.

Palabras clave: Sarah Harriet Burney, estudios de género, estudios del siglo diecinueve, literatura británica.

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Abstract: Sarah Harriet Burney remains less known than her half-sister the celebrated Frances Burney though she was successful at her time and produced a good deal of fiction. This paper analyzes Sarah Harriet Burney's *Country Neighbours, Or the Secret* (1820) as a very personal rewriting of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818) drawing on their differences and parallelisms at the level of narrative technique and topics. We will see how both writers used the figure of the spinster to show their concern about the marginalization of women in nineteenth-century England.

Keywords: Sarah Harriet Burney, gender studies, nineteenth-century studies, British literature.

1. Introduction: Sarah Harriet Burney: another literary daughter and an Austen fan

Despite the success of Sarah Harriet Burney (1770-1844) in her day—her works were translated into French and fared quite well (Clark 1997: 195, note 1; 217, note 2)—, she still remains in the shadow of her half-sister, the literary icon Frances Burney, as the number of articles and research devoted to Frances within the field of Burney Studies shows. It is time to turn attention to her youngest sister, whose *oeuvre* comprises five works: *Clarentine* (1796), *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808), *Traits of Nature* (1812), *Tales*

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of *Fancy*—composed of *The Shipwreck* and *Country Neighbours, or the Secret*— (1816-20) and *The Romance of Private Life* (1839), which includes *The Renunciation* and *The Hermitage*. Nowadays, the rehabilitation and rediscovery of Burney has been accomplished thanks to scholars like Lorna J. Clark, who is the editor of Burney's letters and who considers her as paramount for later novelists for two reasons: Burney built on the conventions of the eighteenth-century novel and carried them forward pointing towards Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens or George Eliot; and Burney also cultivated a new kind of fiction close to the detective story (Clark 2008: xxi-xxii).

Burney's life is somewhat tinted by scandal. During her childhood, Burney spent some years in Switzerland (1781-3), which made her fluent in the French language, and, on her return to England, she became her father's housekeeper and amanuensis. However, she always had a difficult relationship with Dr. Burney: she used to complain of his severity, coldness and bitter raillery (Doody 1988: 278) and preferred to live with her half-brother, Captain James Burney, who was married to Sarah Payne and with whom "Little Sally" eloped.³ The rebel daughter returned home by 1807 after spending four years as a governess in the Wilbraham household and later she was in charge of the education of Lord Crewe's grand-daughters (Clark 1997: xlvi).⁴ Burney also travelled to Italy, a country she loved and which recurs in her fiction. Her return to England took place in 1833 and she settled down in Cheltenham.

The connection between Burney and Austen was already noticed by Clark and has recently been updated. In a ground-breaking article, Clark maintains that Burney owned copies of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* (1995: 22). Besides, both authors had the same publisher, Henry Colburn, who punctually sent Burney copies of Austen's works, "perhaps sensing a kindred spirit" (Clark 1997: lxi). For Clark, "Sarah Harriet and Jane Austen were competing for the same market; unlike the more famous Miss Burney whose trail-blazing works belonged to a previous generation, Burney was an exact

³ Dr. Burney would never forgive this action: according to Clark, "[i]n a household which revolved around his own comfort, the self-abnegation of a female relative was essential, and Sarah's true sin was dereliction of duty, subversion of the true feminine character" (2000: 125).

⁴ As a matter of fact, *Tales of Fancy* has a "Dedication" to Lady Crewe, the daughter of one of Dr. Burney's patrons.

contemporary of Jane Austen's" (2007: 18). Scholars keep on insisting on establishing bonds between Austen's late fiction and Burney's novels (Fernández Rodríguez 2015b), and Elaine Bander's review of John Wiltshire's *The Hidden Jane Austen* reveals that Burney praised *Pride and Prejudice* enthusiastically in a letter dated from 1813: "Sarah Harriet may have been one of the first readers to feel that the freshness of Jane Austen's novel would not fade with re-reading" (2015: 15). The purpose of this paper is twofold: by paying attention to the narrative technique and the similarities between characters, I suggest a reading of Burney's *Country Neighbours* as a rewriting of Austen's *Persuasion* (1818) within the framework of gender and Burney Studies. Indirectly, this paper also throws some light on Austen's most modern and controversial work.⁵

2. Too old for romance

At plot level, Austen's and Burney's works focus on conventional love stories frustrated by pride and economic interest. In *Persuasion*, the narrator tells how Captain Frederick Wentworth comes into Somersetshire in the summer of 1806 and meets Anne, the second daughter of Sir Walter Elliot. They fall in love to the point of receiving reciprocal declarations and proposals. Everything is fine until they face Sir Walter's and Lady Russell's negatives.⁶ The latter has prejudices "on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them" (Austen 1837: 223, my italics) while Sir Walter thinks the alliance very degrading and has a bias against a young man of a most uncertain profession. Anne refuses Wentworth's marriage proposal and almost becomes a spinster for life. Pride prevents Wentworth from proposing again until he comes back and his regard for Anne awakens again. *Country Neighbours* focuses on Blanch Stavordale, the presumable daughter of George Stavordale and Aurelia Castelli, an Italian opera singer of low

⁵ In *The Quarterly Review* Walter Scott complained about the way Austen handles romance. Though Maria Edgeworth and Robert Southey saw good parts Austen's novel; *Persuasion* was harshly attacked by later critics —especially Marxist, postcolonial and some feminist critics (see Todd 2006b: lviii-lxxviii).

⁶ In this sense, *Persuasion* registers how the hierarchy struggles to keep their position against those who are being elevated in status through their work ethic (Tanner 1986). It shows the strength and manipulation of public opinion, the very little control people had over their own lives (Waldron 1999: 151).

extraction. Blanch—who has inherited her mother's beauty and was reared as a Protestant in Lausanne—falls in love with an aristocrat, Mr. Horace Tremayne, and heir of Sir Reginald Touberville. She instantly faces the opposition of Lady Earlsford, Tremayne's mother, who would prefer a wealthy heiress, such as her niece Jane Touberville, for her son. The young couple can marry once it is discovered that Blanch is not really George Stavordale's offspring.

Both *Persuasion* and *Country Neighbours* are symmetrical manor house stories and both feature the lack of a male heir. Austen locates her story in Somerset and Bath and tells about the Elliots from Kellynch Hall and the Musgroves from the Great House and Uppercross; Burney also chooses Somerset and the families of the Stavordales, the Earlsfords and the Toubervilles inhabiting Hazleford, Bovil Court and Eastvale, respectively. Additionally, like the Elliots leaving Kellynch hall for humbler habitation, the Stavordales have recently left their wealthy home at Meadthorpe for Hazleford and the matriarch in *Country Neighbours*, Lady Stavordale, is as spendthrift as Sir Walter Elliot, Anne Elliot's father. In *Persuasion*, the title will be kept by Mr. Elliot though Captain Wentworth might be appointed baronet (Austen 1837: 279). In the same way, when Sir Reginald dies, the title will go to another branch of the family, the Earlsfords and their heir, Tremayne, the son of a military man “not so amply provided with the gifts of fortune as his liberal spirit deserves; but he is perfectly independent, and extremely well-disposed” (Burney 1820, II: 161).

There is one point in which Austen and Burney differ, and that is the narrative point of view since Austen chooses a third-person narrator. According to Janet Todd, Austen writes about the subjectivity of time and the malleability of memory (2006a: 121).⁷ This feature has been considered a technical flaw in *Persuasion* in that it is a nineteenth-century novel of inner life and an eighteenth-century novel in search of a centre.⁸ However, this tendency to introspection—which obviously aroused Burney's interest—gives a special colour to the narrative and places it apart from Austen's previous

⁷ Likewise, Gene W. Ruoff states that “the novel's audacious contribution to literature is to give woman a memory, the faculty which is the key to a continuous emotional and moral existence” (1984: 61).

⁸ Butler explains that “The world of her [Anne's] consciousness is so all-absorbing that it is not clear whether the outer world (the farmer's outer world, for example) has objective existence or not” (1975: 279).

fiction. After so many years Anne Elliot regrets the effect of over-persuasion: “Now they [Wentworth and she] were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement” (Austen 1837: 268-9). The consequence of her step is that Anne “had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older: the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning” (Austen 1837: 239). What remains to her is simply her invisibility in the Elliots household.

Blanch's story in *Country Neighbours* is told through the main correspondent in this epistolary tale, her aunt Anne Stavordale, whose current situation certainly echoes *Persuasion* and the author's since Burney described herself as “mortal old maid” or “a craving spinster” (qtd. Clark 1995: 20; see also Fernández Rodríguez 2011b). *Country Neighbours* opens when Anne Stavordale is reperusing her “long-neglected journal” (Burney 1820, II: 3). Instead of a life full of adventures, Anne's has been characterized by a “paucity of striking and solemn events” (Burney 1820, II: 4). Burney's character still fantasizes at the same time that she feels frustrated and far from the possibility of romance and this detachment explains for her particular stance towards events:

The preposterous vanity with which the commonest attentions from a young man are construed into admiration; the silly disdain with which they are ridiculed; the impertinent pity affected for girls who seemed to be less noticed (but many of whom have since contracted the most advantageous alliances) – the airs, the self-complacency, the paltry attempts at wit – all, all set before me a picture of myself when young, that now, at forty, I shrug over it with contempt, and cannot but allow, that with a mind so constituted, I should but ill have deserved the splendid destiny which I had presumed to anticipate (Burney 1820, II: 4-5).

If Anne Elliot is the dupe of others, Anne Stavordale has a greater agency in her fate. The latter's cautionary role represents female obligation and friendship, a sisterhood not based on blood ties but on extra-familial ties between women which does not exist in Austen's novel with the exception of Mrs. Smith. It seems that Anne awoke a passion in Colonel Ashford and romance was not possible because Anne showed little feeling for him: “I never gave satisfactory and *comfortable* credit to the flattering suggestions which my mother held out to me on this subject [...] Events have proved that he merely entertained an unpassionated [sic] undesigning friendship for me” (Burney 1820, II: 5-6).

Her unconventional behaviour in courtship and the passage of time—a paramount theme in *Persuasion*—have rendered Anne too old for romance, so she makes her niece Blanch the protagonist of a story which will be told with some narratological limitations, lack of objectivity; and which will be conditioned by the fact that she cannot turn the time back and change events related to her own experience.⁹

The loss of youth proves not to be an excuse to engage in a love story once more, as the mother figures of the stories maintain. Though Lady Russell's hopes are placed on Elizabeth—Sir Walter's favourite—, she is certainly partial to Anne and wants to take her to Bath in order to make her better-known. Aware of the marriage prospects of each sister, Lady Russell thinks Anne has been marginalized: “she had been repeatedly very earnest in trying to get Anne included in the visit to London, sensibly open to all the injustice and all the discredit of the selfish arrangements which shut her out” (Austen 1837: 227). In Burney's tale, Lady Russell's censuring role shifts to Lady Stavordale, who shines in this gynocracy¹⁰ and is undoubtedly one of Burney's best creations. Virginia Woolf already highlighted that Austen had left many silences in *Persuasions* (1968: 180-3) and Burney fills in those gaps by elevating irony to sarcasm. Once ambitious as a mother and now only ambitious as a grandmother, Lady Stavordale considers herself “a superannuated Venus and her three neglected graces” (Burney 1820, II: 136), a clear reference to her three daughters: Philippa, Martha and Anne. With unsurpassed wit, she portrays family policies to Anne:

“You remind me of the last survivors at a game of Commerce. One,— that is yourself, has, I am afraid, lost her sole remaining chance by apathy and inexpertness; — Philippa will lose hers by *overfinesing*; — and Martha may as well throw up her hand without playing at all; for the cards which she holds bode nothing but inevitable failure. Now, my little Blanch, who cut in at the table later than any of you, and still retains her three lives entire, has been so favoured by the dealer, that she can hardly miss the pool, unless tricked out of it by some juggling competitor” (Burney 1820, II: 136)

⁹ For Lorna Clark, “[t]he voice of the spinster remains front and centre, watching the ebb and flow of life around her, vividly recording it and acerbically commenting upon it; weddings and deaths are simply strands woven into the fabric of the whole community and contained within her consciousness” (2003: 47).

¹⁰ Henry Crabb Robinson, who was unimpressed by *Country Neighbours*, made a distinction in this regard: “The characters are feeble, except of the mother, and she is a shrew” (qtd. Newman 2010: 2).

Patriarchal strictures permeate Burney's works as a reminder of the price of a *faux pas*: spinsterhood and unhappiness. Lady Stavordale is positive regarding Anne and hints she could still get married: "The stake which was once set before you, may, perhaps, be again placed within your reach; and, with better skill, and more experience, you may now have a greater chance of securing it, that when you first faintly struggled for its possession" (Burney 1820, II: 137). However, Anne's unfeminine behaviour and insufficiency in courtship are continually in Lady Stavordale's mind and one of the differences with Austen is that similar bitter remarks are never openly addressed to Anne Elliot. Through her lessons about female behavior, Lady Stavordale clearly refers to Colonel Ashfort: "It is unfair to expect that men, without observing any symptom of being preferred, should risk a refusal by formal declarations. The regard that waits for an offer to be kindled, must appear too calculating to deserve much gratitude" (Burney 1820, II: 300-1).

For Lady Stavordale, her daughter's behaviour is not the only one which should be objected to. Blanch reproduces the same pattern and does not know what she risks if she does not change. Blanch's coldness to Mr. Tremayne is condemned: "I will not call her a flint – for, from a flint you may elicit sparks – from her —nothing!" (Burney 1820, III: 288-9), as well as her demeanour. However, Lady Stavordale's attitude is grounded on practicability and, more interestingly, her own experience: "Tremayne is the man; and the more rigorously she treats him, in these early days of her power, the more confirmed I shall be in my hopes. 'Tis the nature of half our sex to love to revel a little in the first certainty of absolute dominion. *J'en puis parler, mon enfant, avec connoissance de cause!*" (Burney 1820, II: 304). In Burney, Lady Stavordale's admonitory remarks to Anne are reversed and newly interpreted by Anne, who seems to be Lady Stavordale's counterpart in that she embraces sincerity between lovers as the best way to preserve passion from those around, and she tells Tremayne not to play with Blanch: "an ardent, animated girl, whose friends confide her tranquillity of your honour; and whose misery, should you be compelled to resign her after securing her regard, you would be the first to detest yourself for having caused!" (Burney 1820, II: 343). Anne's rebellion against her

mother will prove to be more beneficial to Blanch's happiness than Lady Stavordale's manoeuvring philosophy.

3. Restoring the mother

One of the most remarkable aspects in both *Persuasion* and *Country Neighbours* is the role of the lost mother. D.H. Harding maintains that Austen brings the idealized mother back to life in the well-meaning but ultimately inadequate Lady Russell (1940: 360-2). As a matter of fact, Anne has inherited Lady Elliot's dignity and superior character, and she is delighted at the idea of restoring Kellynch Hall: "having the precious name of 'Lady Elliot' first revived in herself; of being restored to Kellynch, calling it her home again, her home for ever" (Austen 1837: 355). Joan Klingel Ray follows that line by stating that Lady Russell thinks that Anne is acting like her mother, the young woman who twenty-two years earlier had foolishly married Sir Walter Elliot. For this scholar, Lady Russell sees Anne –her "mother's self"– potentially repeating her mother's error, so she tries to save her from making a mistake. In addition, Lady Russell's opinions of Anne's two suitors were based on their respective "appearance" and "manners," not on their "rank and consequence" (1993: 208). The problem is that Lady Russell's advice would hold Anne in social bondage as if it were a spell on her and Ray sees no solution to that.

Amorous attachments are among the many correspondences between the two works. When the charismatic Mr. Elliot proposes to Anne, Lady Russell could have some influence on Anne again concerning Mr. Elliot. Nevertheless, there is some tension between the simple dignity of Anne's given name and the corrupt distinction of her surname Elliot like in *Country Neighbours*, which prevents Anne from accepting her bewitching suitor since "The names which occasionally dropt of former associates, the

allusions to former practices and pursuits, suggested suspicions not favourable [sic] of what he had been” (Austen 1837: 355).¹¹

In *Country Neighbours* lovers see their difficulties multiplied. Firstly, Tremayne might marry his cousin Jane Touberville, an idea he loathes (Burney 1820, II: 416). Burney creates a wealthy doubling of the heroine in the orphan Jane Touberville, who is in love with Mr. Lloyd and both are afraid of offending their parents (Burney 1820, III: 101). Though Jane is not rejected by Lady Earlsford —as Blanch is—, she is frowned upon by Sir Reginald. Secondly, Tremayne does not have one, but two rivals: both Lord John Alcester and Mr. Touverville make him feel jealous (Burney 1820, III: 28-9, 156), so he feels unable to compete with the former, as he confesses to Anne: “A monopolizer, such as he is, there is no contending with. – I could neither out-talk, out-stare, nor out-flatter him. I could not charm her, as he does” (Burney 1820, III: 28-9). He also thinks Blanch is playing the coquette with Charles Touberville (Burney 1820, III: 156), Mr. Elliot’s equivalent in *Country Neighbours*. Charles’s surname is not a coincidence in Burney’s canon since it contains a sound similar to “devil” (Fernández Rodríguez 2015b) and Lady Stavordale interestingly describes him as such: “you must observe diligently whether he has a cloven foot; you must take notice whether the candles burn blue when he is in the room; and whether a strong smell of sulphur is perceptible in every place through which he passes” (Burney 1820, III: 60). Regarding Charles Touberville, he does not like simple things: “[...] in the society of women of real refinement, however, young, however beautiful, he is so little disposed to be dangerously courteous, that had, it soon became apparent, quite as good a chance of arresting his attention as the most blooming and engaging female in the room” (Burney 1820, III: 163), and, as the narrative progresses, it will be revealed that he has been encouraging Lord John’s passion for Blanch. Anne distinguishes between Mr. Tremayne and Lord John and tells Blanch off for flirting with the latter, but, rather than making a reproach, Anne warns Blanch: “it is equally your interest and your most imperious duty, to guard against the remotest

¹¹ Janet Todd argues that *Persuasion* both shows the destructive folly of romantic, self-sacrificial love, and reveals its supreme value (2006: 131).

probability of destroying his and your own peace, by any inconsiderate, or even playful defiance of his master passion” (Burney 1820, III: 459).

Burney strategically places Blanch in the same position as Anne Stavordale years ago and adds an economic and cultural dimension which does not appear in Anne Elliot's case. There are two objections to Blanch's mother on the basis of her profession (a singer, and thus a woman exposed to public scrutiny) and nationality (an Italian). Blanch's marriage to the Toubervilles clearly had no future though Anne does believe in Blanch's sincere passion for Tremayne:

[...] a mere fancied passion generally leads to a romantic desire of depositing in the bosom of a sympathizing friend a confidential avowal of exaggerated hopes and fears, the suggestions only of girlish self-importance: – but the feelings of Blanch are of a higher, a more genuine description; they are not the exaltations of imagination; she has not talked herself into a belief that she is in love; her enthusiasm is in her heart, not in her head; and any allusion to the state of that heart, whether made incautiously by herself, or officiously by another, would touch her too sensibly not to excite vexation and distress (Burney 1820, III: 48)

As we can see, Austen's and Burney's heroines remain quite silent throughout the narratives, but they have a very powerful voice at dramatic moments, when their words directly address patriarchal oppression, a pervading topic in Burney's previous works (Fernández Rodríguez 2015a). The moment that Anne Elliot comes to recognize the emptiness of her aristocratic position represents her awakening and detachment from Lady Russell: “It was now some years since Anne had begun to learn that she and her excellent friend could sometimes think differently” (Austen 1837: 343).¹² She is immersed in a process of self-definition and has much to say in a debate on constancy between Anne and Captain Harville.¹³ In fact, her acceptance of Wentworth without asking for patriarchal permission does not seem surprising after she has exposed her views

¹² Anne is led by passion, not principle, in her decisions and there is not an anxious debate like in Burney or Edgeworth (Waldron 1999: 143). As Todd explains, “[she] is clear that, whatever she had properly accepted as a young girl, she now thinks passion, sexual passion, more important than anything else in her life, certainly more than security, rank, and kinship” (2006: 127).

¹³ In this regard, Isobel Grundy thinks that Austen chooses a heroine who blames society for women's confinement at home and not for biological reasons (1996).

on male and female socialization and her justification of why men's attachments are not so strong:

We certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions (Austen 1837: 422).

Man is more robust than woman, but he is not longer lived; which exactly explains my view of the nature of their attachments. Nay, it would be too hard upon you, if it were otherwise. You have difficulties, and privations, and dangers enough to struggle with. You are always labouring [sic] and toiling, exposed to every risk and hardship. Your home, country, friends, all united. Neither time, nor health, nor life, to be called your own. It would be too hard, indeed, (with a faltering voice,) if woman's feelings were to be added to all this (Austen 1837: 422).

During this conversation, the comments of the third-person narrator are reduced to a minimum. Anne's openness touches Wentworth, who stops writing the note declaring his feelings the moment when Anne talks about men and exertion: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing" (Austen 1837: 423).¹⁴ Without resorting to flowery discourse, Anne fights emotions and still has enough strength to state: "All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it), is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (Austen 1837: 424).

In *Persuasion*, Lady Elliot's death is related to the social decay of the family, whose expenditure must be reduced, while Burney gives a different turn to Aurelia's absence in *Country Neighbours*. Blanch's mother is evoked in a picture inspired on William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* at Eastvale, the cold manor house epitomizing

¹⁴ For Tony Tanner, Anne speaks for herself and other women and this scene means a remarkable change: "It is as if he is open to a more (unscripted) relationship in which the old patterns of dominance and deference are abandoned, deleted — dropped" (1986: 241), echoing Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's idea that "Anne triumphs in a marriage that represents the union of traditional male and female spheres" (1979: 181). Other scholars analyze this episode as Anne's final desperate effort to enlighten Wentworth (Waldron: 152).

Blanch's encounter with Sir Reginald and the entrance in the patriarchal order. No ornaments are to be seen in Eastvale and Blanch will only face rejection there:

Every table was in its proper place, and perfectly unencumbered [sic]; the sofas all stood with their backs close to the walls, and the very fire-screens [sic] were of so ponderous and magnificent a description, that they seemed to be stationed on each side of the chimneys rather as things intended, like the fender and rug to be permanent occupants, than to be removed, on any occasion from their place (Burney 1820, II: 389-90).

Those present—including Sir Reginald, who is attracted to Blanch throughout the narrative (Fernández Rodríguez 2011a: 9)—are shocked at the resemblance between the woman in the picture and Blanch, who holds childhood memories of her mother, the grace and elegance of her manners, and the extraordinary diversity of her accomplishments, as she had revealed to Anne: “she was, besides, though *I* never knew her till her health and spirits were much impaired, the most beautiful creature the world ever looked upon” (Burney 1820, II: 129-30). Aurelia's description in the painting as a perfect beauty (Burney 1820, III: 175) provokes Blanch's panic at the negative reaction of those around, especially Sir Reginald's who calls Aurelia “a scourge too fatal to be forgiven” since his son became an outcast and the victim of a duel on her account (Burney 1820, III: 184). The girl finds it very difficult to reconcile the image of her mother with calumny and urges Sir Reginald to tell her the story behind the picture.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it will be Anne who unveils the past: the daughter of an Italian artist, Aurelia got married to Jocelyn Touberville, Sir Reginald's eldest son, but no document confirming the marriage remains, so Aurelia's second marriage to George Stavordale, Anne's brother, is illegitimate. This revelation provokes the most intense scene in the tale, when Blanch defends her mother:

But that noble countenance is now laid in the dust; that virtuous life is ended; and my solitary testimony, against accusers so powerful, must weigh as nothing in the contrary scale [...] when all who listen to this tissue of depravity, give faith to it, and despise me as the child of such a parent, I shall still have the secret, but inestimable gratification, of believing, that could every particular connected with so vile a story be accurately known, its heinousness would vanish [...] Over this

¹⁵ For Clark, “In discovering the secret of her birth, she [Blanch] must leave behind the matriarch family which had sheltered her, to claim her aristocratic inheritance; losing the comfort of her female relations, she experiences a very real sense of loss and dislocation” (2007: 48).

part of the story [her mother's second marriage], would that I could cast a veil too thick to be again ever penetrated even by myself! (Burney, 1820, III: 235-6).

The happy ending and denouement of the novel is possible after the hero and George Stavordale have discovered that Charles Touberville, Sir Reginald's youngest son, did his utmost to conceal the documents legitimizing Blanch in order to keep the family estate for him and protect a bastard son. Therefore, Blanch turns out to be the daughter of Sir Jocelyn, the eldest son of Sir Reginald and heir of his patrimony. Austen's revolutionary defense of the individual and woman is retaken by Burney by adding a specific scope and pointing at class and woman's virtue. If the main problem in both *Persuasion* and *Country Neighbours* is status, Blanch's manifesto acquires a powerful meaning after her mother's reputation has been cleared:

Whether rich or poor, if Mr. Tremayne will accept me, – now my descent from a blameless mother is so clearly proved, – my hand shall be his as freely as my heart. – Poverty will neither disgrace, nor, I hope, make him unhappy; but he had married me before the charges against her were refuted, *they* would have done both. (Burney 1820, III: 426-7)

4. Conclusion

Both *Persuasion* and *Country Neighbours* empower Anne and Blanch, but not Anne Stavordale, who fairy tale-like abandons the narrative by discreetly summarizing the fate of each character: Blanch gets married to Tremayne, Charles Touberville dies and Lady Horatia wants Sir Reginald to accompany her in Hampshire to help him forget his sorrow. In spite of the differences between the two novels, there is a series of displacements and parallelisms suggesting that Burney had Austen in mind and that she consciously refashioned *Persuasion*. From the point of view of narrative technique, Burney branches off Austen's love story into Anne Stavordale's experiences and Blanch Castelli's love story. This becomes a laboratory to test the narrator's own experience by making Blanch the protagonist of Anne's journal.

Both narratives are tales of family and social restoration and vindicate feminine desire. *Persuasion* means a change in Austen's style and treatment of passion and it has provoked heated debates among scholars, but it is undeniably a novel about female restraint and marginalization like *Country Neighbours*. The use of the spinster's story as a framework for romance is the way to introduce typical ingredients of Gothic fiction by women and of the novel of manners, like the appearance of villains, jealousy and mystery. However, Burney personalizes the Austenian pattern by incorporating a witty matriarch and some distinct features of her *oeuvre*: legitimization, which was also dealt with in Frances Burney's *Evelina* and *The Wanderer* (1814); art, constituting a realm as suspicious as the navy was in *Persuasion*; and interculturalism.

Literary scholars like Katharine Nadeau (2006) maintain that Austen had some influence on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and perhaps we should look for other possibilities of transmission from Austen to later novelists. This paper has shown that *Persuasion*, an uncomfortable guest in Austen's corpus, had a great impact Burney and that the influence of Austen on Burney's work is not restricted to literary themes. The intensity of ideological protest is similar, and gender studies cannot neglect this aspect of Frances Burney's half-sister as a political writer, who has to be given greater scope in the realm of literature by women and who was deeply engaged in the social changes taking place in nineteenth-century England.

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