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**A "COMMUNITY"
OF WOMEN:
FEMALE
CHARITY AND
FRIENDSHIP IN
FANNY...**

June 2001

A "Community" of Women: Female Charity and Friendship in Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*

by

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ABSTRACT

In my paper, I propose that Fanny Burney's novel, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, offers a communal model of female charity and friendship that grants women the possibility of better lives in a stifling patriarchal society. This model takes the form of a "community" of women, arranged by Cecilia and consisting of several important friendships. I examine in depth the assistance Cecilia gives Mrs. Hill and the intimate friendships between Cecilia and Mrs. Delvile and Cecilia and Miss Belfield. Ultimately, I show how this "community" of women is utopian in nature, in that it offers Cecilia and other "lively" women not only a sense of their own worth and a means to provide for themselves but also a true pleasure in friendship and a chance for improved, more enjoyable, lives.

A "Community" of Women: Female Charity and Friendship in Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*

What many critics have noticed about Fanny Burney's novel *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* is both its bleak portrait of eighteenth-century society and the equally dismal portrait of the lives of the women in it. According to Julia Epstein, "*Cecilia's* world...bristles with absolute menace" and nothing can mask Burney's "stark world view" or the fact that "young women live inside an envelope of continual material threat to their individual selfhood and to their social and economic survival."¹ Margaret Anne Doody reflects on the life and accomplishments of the novel's heroine, Cecilia Beverly, arguing that "Cecilia may be a survivor after all, but she is not much of a success."² Cecilia survives her illness but marries and compromises, according to Doody; she is able to "do some good" but forced to abandon "her Glorious Augustan dreams, which have now been shot through with Georgian realities."³

Despite Doody's rather harsh critique of the end of the novel, I would argue that Cecilia has done something important: she has attempted an independent life and is somewhat successful at least for a portion of the novel. She has managed to achieve a certain amount of agency through her philanthropy and her ability to decide in what manner she uses her money. For a time, Cecilia acts as free agent, assisting Miss Belfield and the Hills, even rescuing Mr. Harrel from financial trouble; at these points, the novel temporarily suspends the marriage plot and subdues the control her guardians have over her. For a time, as critics like Epstein and Doody admit, Cecilia is able to grasp independence by acting charitably and thus publicly in society. I am adding to this argument an investigation of the charity Cecilia performs, a discussion of the particularly

“feminine” charity she shares with the women in her society, and what this type of feminine interaction affords her and the others. I contend that in response to a patriarchal society that has little regard for both its women and its poor, Cecilia envisions a better place for herself and establishes a community of women, poor and well-to-do, young and old, which I ultimately argue is utopian in nature. By establishing this “community” of women, Cecilia offers the means to better deal with society and provide for themselves as well as the means to enjoy self-confidence, true friendship and pleasure in their lives.

Cecilia is first witness to the injustice and ugliness of society in the unsympathetic treatment of Mrs. Hill by Mr. Harrel. Mrs. Hill attempts several times to get the money her dying husband has earned in order to provide for her family, and Cecilia witnesses time and again how she is coldly refused what’s due her by an ungracious and inhumane Mr. Harrel. Cecilia is disgusted by Mr. Harrel and shocked “that a young man could appear so gay and happy, yet be guilty of such injustice and inhumanity” (85).⁴ Mrs. Hill explains how difficult it will be for her to provide for herself and her family, and ultimately, Mrs. Hill’s account of her family’s suffering and the injustice and inhumanity they must endure “open[s] to Cecilia a new view of life” (85). Cecilia vows to give Mrs. Hill what is due her, but she is also determined to begin a new life, one that includes bettering the lives of those who are suffering. Cecilia recognizes the injustices of society and is compelled to respond because a “strong sense of DUTY, a fervent desire to ACT RIGHT, were the ruling characteristics of her mind” (56), and thus she becomes “an agent of charity” (57) in her society.

Cecilia’s charitable offerings and the assistance she gives are dependent upon her investment in the person receiving her help. Knowing that Mrs. Hill and her family and

Miss Belfield are good, gracious people seems to be a prerequisite to Cecilia's desire to assist. In response to Mrs. Hill's appreciation and humility, Cecilia immediately recognizes that she is a "good woman" (72) and a "poor worthy woman" (73), and her eyes "filled with tears of compassion" (73). Cecilia knows her generosity for the Hills is justified because "their worth was without suspicion, and their misfortunes were not of their own seeking; the post in which they had been stationed they had never deserted, and the poverty into which they had sunk was accidental and unavoidable" (393).

Furthermore, that the women are capable of being independent and industrious also seems important to Cecilia. She visits Mrs. Hill and finds "all her children, except the youngest, hard at work" and their "honest industry so much strengthened her compassion, that her wishes for serving them grew every instant more liberal" (203). Likewise, upon meeting Miss Belfield, Cecilia is astonished to find that Miss Belfield isn't "some helpless creature in sickness" (207) as she had expected, but "fair, young and delicate" (207). She is "genteely dressed" and "employed in washing some china," which means willing and able to work to provide for herself, and it is Miss Belfield's attempts to hide her distress and appear self-sufficient that make Cecilia desire to help her.

As her mentor, Albany seeks out Cecilia's charitable cases, and he is responsible for bringing Cecilia to Miss Belfield. Albany makes very clear as he introduces the women to each other that he is doing so because Miss Belfield is one of the "poor not impoverished by their own guilt" (206). He seeks women who he determines are worthy, women who won't be degraded by their acceptance of alms. The text explains that these women are "selected with discrimination" (939) by Albany; he discriminates between the

poor that deserve help, cleanly industrious women, and the poor that don't fall into this category, and brings Cecilia to the former of these.

This discrimination might be an answer to a controversial eighteenth-century question: how is one to be charitable and yet not encourage dependency? Donna Andrew explains that the attempt to discourage dependency was a crucial characteristic of a new charity of the eighteenth-century, but that there was a disagreement over how to be charitable and at the same create independent individuals. She explains that later eighteenth-century social critics agreed that the best form of charity is one that doesn't offer services or money, but one that finds employment for the poor.⁵ If this is the case, the poor must be industrious, must show the promise of being self sufficient, and Albany selects Miss Belfield who does both. Cecilia too selects a determined, persistent and hard working woman in Mrs. Hill, and she immediately realizes the importance of finding employment for her. She wants to teach Mrs. Hill to be self-confident and independent and offers her the sum of money she needs to enter "into partnership in a small haberdasher's shop" (200).

I've suggested that Cecilia has been just as careful as Albany in her selection of her beneficiaries and that she has encouraged employment, and thus it may seem that she is participating in the "new" eighteenth-century charity encouraging industriousness, independence and employment. Her charity, though, is actually quite different from Albany's charity, for his, like that which Andrew describes, is a top-down, intrusive, and even patronizing charity.⁶ Albany surprises an embarrassed Miss Belfield, "advancing to her with quickness" (205). "Look here" he demands of her, "pointing," interrupting the young woman, speaking with "his usual austerity" (206), and finally taking their hands

and “joining them between his own” (206) without their consent. Even Cecilia is startled by and fearful of his “strangeness” and his “flightiness” as well as “his authoritative manner” (205). When he leaves and the two women are left alone, Cecilia takes a much less offensive and patronizing approach. Cecilia speaks “with a gentleness...the most soothing” and is able to calm Miss Belfield, and most importantly Cecilia does not force her assistance upon the woman. She gives Miss Belfield “expressions of comfort and kindness” (212) and then takes leave.

Cecilia is practicing a charity that is more “feminine” and thus more humane than Albany’s, and another major difference between the two lies in her investment in bettering society, her visions of improving not only her own life but that of those around her and that of all who suffer in the world. Cecilia enjoys scenes of bestowing comfort and beneficence:

Many and various, then, soothing to her spirit and grateful to her sensibility, were the scenes which her fancy delineated; now she supported an orphan, now softened the sorrow of a widow, now snatched from iniquity the feeble trembler at poverty, and now rescued from shame the proud struggler with disgrace (55).

Cecilia envisions supporting, comforting, and rescuing children and adults. She has an urgent desire to make a difference in the lives of those who suffer. Albany is her “romantic new ally” and she is “determined to wander” (711) with him because he will “lead her, and ... spare neither fortune, time, nor trouble, in seeking and relieving the distressed” (711). She dreams something even more grand:

In her sleep she bestowed riches, and poured plenty upon the land; she humbled the oppressor, she exalted the oppressed; slaves were raised to dignities, captives

restored to liberty; beggars saw smiling abundance, and wretchedness was banished the world (711).

In this dream, Cecilia “supported by angels” (711), has the ability to give to those who lack money and food, but she also has the desire to “right” all societal wrongs. Andrew explains that a renewed concern for the good of the nation, for eradicating the vices of society, for easing peoples’ miseries, arose during the last two decades of the eighteenth-century. Furthermore, she argues that people became aware that bettering society called for serious moral regeneration and that if the nation were to attack poverty and crime, a new form of charity, a systematic approach was needed.⁷ Cecilia’s plan to be an “agent of charity” seems very close to this project but, again, the difference lies in her kindness, her gentleness, and her investment in those she helps as individuals.

Cecilia’s charity differs from later eighteenth-century institutionalized charities in that she wants most to help women who she comes to love. The capacity to love, to be emotionally invested, seems a prerequisite. Albany clearly encourages their love by joining their hands and entreating them: “Young as ye both are...lighten the burthen of each other’s cares by the heart-soothing exchange of gratitude for beneficence (206). He asks, “why should ye not love, why should ye not cherish each other?” (206). Yet while Albany clearly recognizes Cecilia’s capacity for love, Miss Belfield’s potential to receive it, and the good it will do, it is something Albany himself doesn’t do and can only encourage. Cecilia almost immediately accepts Miss Belfield for she has “extremely interested her; her youth, and the uncommon artlessness of her conversation, added to her melancholy of situation, and the loveliness of her person excited in [Cecilia] a desire to serve, and an inclination to love her” (212).

Upon meeting Mrs. Hill, Cecilia experiences a similar emotional connection. Cecilia's heart goes out to Mrs. Hill and while she is speaking of her deceased son Billy and their hardships, Cecilia cries out "I can not bear this...you must tell me no more of your Billy" (87). Cecilia even emphatically offers to take care of the children if something should happen to Mrs. Hill: "*I will!*" cried the generous Cecilia: 'I am able, and I am willing'" (87). Cecilia offers Mrs. Hill "general advice" and help with her husband, but most importantly "promise[s] to continue her friend" (90). Cecilia wants to help those she feels connected to, those she can reach out to in friendship or sisterhood. She wants to help those society might not encourage her to help: single women, widows, and children. Mrs. Hill clearly understands the trouble she will have securing a way to support herself and her family once widowed, knowing that for a widow it is "always hard to be righted" (86). Cecilia, in response, offers to help Mrs. Hill's children, giving her money to "clothe them all decently and enable her to send two of the children to school," but offers to pay for the children's education only until Mrs. Hill "should be established in her business, and have the power to save money" (203). In this way, Cecilia isn't just giving money to Mrs. Hill but she is "assisting her to undertake some better method of procuring a livelihood" (200); she is giving her and her young children a means to be independent and provide for themselves in the future.

Cecilia's develops a "scheme of happiness" (56) that involves bettering the lives of the poor, but her "scheme" also takes into consideration bettering the lives of women, particularly the "good" and "worthy" women that Cecilia's plan of "intellectual philanthropy" (56) calls for. What this plan entails is a careful selection of her patrons and of her friends as well. She decides "to drop all idle and uninteresting acquaintance"

(55) and select only those that by “their piety could elevate her mind, by their knowledge improve her understanding, or by their accomplishments and manners delight her affections” (55). Cecilia is disgusted by a society that is well-to-do and neither useful nor “contributing to pleasure” (55), and plans to enhance her life and that of her companions by choosing them carefully and choosing friends that mutually “improve” or “delight” (55). Her “scheme” extends beyond the poor to women not in need of and charitable assistance. Cecilia meets and instantly finds in Mrs. Delvile, the wife of her guardian, an interesting individual:

Her carriage was lofty and commanding; but the dignity to which high birth and conscious superiority gave rise, was so judiciously regulated by good sense, and so happily blended with politeness, that though the world at large envied or hated her, the few for whom she had herself any regard, she was infallibly certain to captivate (155).

Although “lofty” and “commanding,” Mrs. Delvile possesses a “dignity,” “good sense” and “politeness” that Cecilia immediately admires. This admiration is mutual for Mrs. Delvile is instantly impressed by Cecilia’s intelligence and good manners:

thus mutually astonished and mutually pleased, their first salutations were accompanied by looks so flattering to both, that each saw in the other, an immediate prepossession in her favour, and from the moment that they met, they seemed instinctively impelled to admire (155).

A friendship between these two admirable women ensues, and Cecilia and Mrs. Delvile value it immensely. Mrs. Delvile even owns that “she had not made any acquaintance she so much wished to cultivate, nor enjoyed any society from which she had derived so much pleasure” (358).

It is through her careful selection of friends that Cecilia creates a “community” of “worthy” and “lively” women, and her initial aspirations are clearly communal in nature. Cecilia desires to put this “society she meant to form...in a house of her own” (56), and she finds Miss Belfield “as deserving as she seemed engaging” and decides that “if her distress continu[es], to receive her into her own house in future” (212). Cecilia resides for a while in Delvile Castle and here she finds and experiences real community and fulfillment:

Here, therefore, Cecilia experienced that happiness she so long had coveted in vain: her life was neither public nor private, her amusements were neither dissipated nor retired; the company she saw were either people of high rank or strong parts, and their visits were neither frequent nor long...all was smooth and serene, yet lively and interesting (238-9).

Keeping company with Mrs. Delvile is pleasurable for Cecilia for “with such a woman, subjects of discourse could never be wanting, nor fertility of powers to make them entertaining” (160).

The text, then, comes closest to recognizing Cecilia’s “community” as a literal community at Delvile Castle, which ironically is a place that stands for the worst in patriarchal society. The fact that the community exists at all, though, is a testament to its being something substantive, and the substance of it is the particularly exclusionary and intimate friendship between Mrs. Delvile and Cecilia. Both women revel not in its existence but what seems to be its existence outside of or away from others and the men in their lives. Cecilia and Mrs. Devile spend a day together without Mr. Delvile, who, “to the infinite joy of Cecilia, was out” (170) and that day was “greatly to her satisfaction” for “there was not interruption from visitors, she was tormented by the discussion of no

disagreeable subjects” (170). The day was only marked by “a reciprocation of good-will and pleasure” (170) of the secluded couple. Cecilia and Mrs. Delvile dine together after reuniting and “neither of the Mr. Delviles spent the day at home, and nothing, therefore, interrupted those glowing and delightful sensations which spring from a cordial renewal of friendship and kindness” (359). The passage emphasizes the intimacy between Cecilia and Mrs. Delvile marked by “glowing and delightful sensations” but also emphasizes the importance of their being alone or secluded to share this intimacy.

The friendship between Cecilia and Miss Belfield is another exclusionary relationship within a patriarchy that generally works to alienate women from each other. Cecilia and Miss Belfield must keep their friendship separate from society, in particular, Miss Belfield needs to hide their friendship and the assistance Cecilia offers her from Mr. Belfield. She insists that Cecilia must “decline calling upon her again until her brother was gone” (345). Yet Miss Belfield can not bear to be apart and begs Cecilia to meet her at Portman-square. Eventually, “hardly a day passed in which she did not call in Portman-square” (346). Cecilia and Miss Belfield share the same intimacy, Miss Belfield “disguising from her neither distress nor meanness and...equally ready to make known to her even the most chosen secrets of her own bosom” (346).

So what this community affords the women in the novel most explicitly is pleasure in this exclusion, intimacy and friendship. Miss Delvile and Miss Belfield, Cecilia’s closest friends, both enjoy her friendship. Miss Belfield enjoys an obvious and even uncontainable pleasure in her friendship with Cecilia. Upon seeing Cecilia, Miss Belfield “almost screamed at her sight, from a sudden impulse of joy and surprize, and, running up to her flung her arms round her neck, and embraced her with the most

rapturous emotion” (724). Amidst a stunned Mrs. Belfield and Mr. Hobson, Cecilia gives Miss Belfield the “warmest thanks ... doubling the kindness with which she returned her caresses” (725). She returns Miss Belfield’s emotional response, encourages it, and accepts it. She is physical, intimate with Miss Belfield, and the interaction of the women is evidence of their joy in friendship and the love they have for one another.

Cecilia has much to gain from these friendships. As already discussed, Miss Delvile’s lively and interesting conversation serves to entertain and develop Cecilia. Mrs. Hill’s story of success and happiness leaves Cecilia so “delighted by the power of giving such pleasure” (770) that she forgets the “cautions and promises in the generosity which she displayed” (770). With a friend in Miss Belfield,

Cecilia had her share in all the comfort she bestowed; she had now a friend to oblige, and a companion to converse with. She communicated to her all her schemes, and made her the partner of her benevolent excursions...and her constant presence and constant sweetness, imperceptibly revived her spirits, and gave a new interest to her existence (794).

Despite what Cecilia gains – entertainment, delight, and a new partner in benevolence – her motives aren’t entirely selfish and her friendships are ones that mean more to her than what she gains; her community is foremost in her mind. Cecilia’s friendships are ones she is loyal to no matter what, and the emotional well-being of her friends is utmost in her mind. When Cecilia discovers Miss Belfield’s love for Delvile, she ponders using her to get information about him, but Miss Belfield’s feelings come first. Cecilia cannot hurt the “sweet, but unhappy girl...betrayed already by the tenderness of her own heart” (352). The quality of Cecilia’s character is one that keeps her loyal even to friends she admits would not have been that of her choice, women like

Mrs. Harrel and Mrs. Charlton, women without "bright parts" and "much cultivation"

(712). Even though Cecilia:

became known to both before discrimination made her difficult, and when her enlightened mind discerned their deficiencies, they had already an interest in her affections, which made her see them with lenity: and though sometimes, perhaps, conscious she should not have chosen them from many, she adhered to them with sincerity, and would have changed them for none (713).

Both Mrs. Harrel and Mrs. Charlton are women Cecilia would not have chosen, but both women, Mrs. Charlton in particular, care about Cecilia, and this fact alone is enough to keep Cecilia loyal to them. Cecilia's fondness for Mrs. Charlton, for example, has "never known abatement" and the love she has for this mother-figure was "strengthened and confirmed by confidential intercourse" and is "as sincere and affectionate as if it had originated from sympathetic admiration" (713). Cecilia is a true and loyal friend, traits limited to and enjoyed by the friendships in Cecilia's community, and the loss of Mrs. Charlton for Cecilia is "irreparable" and mourned "with bitterness" (713).

Aside from the friendship and pleasure in it, the defining characteristic of this community is Cecilia's desire that its members have better, more fulfilling lives. With the most urgent needs of the women taken care of, monetary support and more importantly the means to be independent and provide for their families, Cecilia is able to offer women something else in this community: moral and emotional support. Cecilia can provide both much better than Albany because of her intimate, personal investment in women through real relationships and friendships. She offers Miss Belfield not only this happiness in friendship but also a sense of self-confidence and the ability to enjoy a good

life. Because of the close and gentle relationship Cecilia has with her and her willingness to invite Miss Belfield into her life, Cecilia grants her a means to get over her shame:

Henrietta now tasted a happiness to which as yet her whole life had been a stranger; she was suddenly removed from turbulent vulgarity to the enjoyment of calm elegance; and the gentleness of her disposition, instead of being tyrannically imposed upon, not only made her loved with affection, but treated with the most scrupulous delicacy (794).

Miss Belfield moves from “turbulent vulgarity,” an unstable, ugly life to one of “calm elegance,” and she can do this because of Cecilia’s “gentleness of disposition” and because she is loved and treated with “delicacy.” Mrs. Hill’s life is also greatly improved. Cecilia is pleased to find the Hill family in “prosperity” (770). Mrs. Hill, however, “wept for joy in recounting how well she succeeded” (770). Her success, which Cecilia merely encouraged, is something Mrs. Hill has done for herself, and the pride and happiness of having accomplished her own prosperity moves her to tears.

These exhibitions of self-confidence, these sincere and intimate connections, and these “pleasurable” moments are Cecilia’s response to a cold and cruel society. These are moments of real connection between women and they occur throughout the novel, but they are just that: fleeting moments challenged frequently by Delvile, the Harrels, Cecilia’s guardians, and others. These moments are at odds with the novel’s romance plot. Cecilia’s relationships with both Mrs. Delvile and Miss Belfield are threatened by the existence of Cecilia’s love for Delvile. Delvile’s affection for and desire to marry Cecilia (and Cecilia’s returned affection and desire to marry) drive a temporary wedge between Cecilia and Mrs. Delvile. Cecilia’s affection for Delvile also seems to rob her of her concern for her friends. At one point Delvile takes leave of Cecilia and she is “almost

stupefied with sorrow” (684), and she “forgot Mrs. Delvile, she forgot Mrs. Charlton, she forgot her own design of apologizing to one, or assisting the other” (684). This seems to suggest that there are two opposing threads in the novel, that of Cecilia’s independence, which is intricately tied to her community, and that of the traditional, patriarchal romance including her dealing with her suitors and her pursuit of Delvile. Kristina Straub has argued similarly that the heroine “is involved in the working out of two plots”⁸ that “interfere with and frustrate each other.”⁹ But for her, these two plots consist of a plot of love and a plot of searching for a course of life that is appropriate for a middle-class, affluent young woman.¹⁰ I’d argue that Cecilia’s isn’t searching for an appropriate course of life; in fact, her intimacy and pleasure in female friendship are characteristics of an inappropriate life according to the society in which she lives, and it is for these that she searches. Mr. Hobson illustrates this inappropriateness and the incompatibility of the plot of love with the plot of female friendship that I’ve offered when, in response to a passionate embrace between Cecilia and Miss Belfield, he says ““these young ladies...have a mighty way of saluting one another till such time as they get husbands: and then I’ll warrant you they can meet without any salutation at all”” (725).

In fact, it is partly in response to this dissatisfying and superficial world of courtship that Cecilia runs to her charity and the pleasure she receives from it. For Cecilia, her generosity is a solace in a world that appears ugly and too concerned with its rich. Often the only thing that makes Cecilia happy is either her charitable plan or her friends. The plan Albany presents her “of good works was consonant to her character and inclinations; and the active charity in which he proposed to engage her, re-animate[s] her fallen hopes, though to far different subjects from those which had depressed them”

(710). The pleasure she receives from her charity and her friendship allows her to escape from an otherwise miserable existence in society marked by, among other things, three oppressive guardians and the frivolity and vanity of the upper class. Miss Belfield's companionship is a huge comfort for Cecilia, who sees her company as "relief from her society" in Suffolk, which seemed to be too busy "being courted" to spend time with Cecilia. (793).

To see Cecilia's investment in her charity and friendships as merely an escape or an alternative to a life in that society, however, is not entirely accurate. Although they do provide her much comfort and relief, her charity and friendships are not simply an escape for Cecilia. They are moments in the novel that seem to interrupt and thereby disrupt the dominant patriarchal oppression depicted in the novel through Cecilia's guardians and the traditional marriage plot.

The fact that Cecilia imagines a more pleasurable experience for herself and the women in her life begs an interesting question: are Cecilia's attempts to better the lives of the women in her world, as depicted by Burney in the novel, the blueprints for a female utopia? Clearly, the novel doesn't contain traditional elements of utopian literature.¹¹ The communal aspirations that Burney proposes in *Cecilia*, however, do seem to be utopian in nature. Cecilia expresses a utopian impulse, what Lyman Tower Sargent and Gregory Claeys call "that need to dream of a better life, even when we are reasonably content."¹²

According to Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg, utopian literature involves "the creation within the existing society of communities which operate independently according to different standards."¹³ These communities, she argues, can be found in

Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interests*, Sarah Robinson's Scott's *Millennium Hall* and Clara Reeve's *Plans of Education; with Remarks on the Systems of other Writers*. According to Schnorrenberg, the authors of these novels, which, in her opinion, are the closest thing to eighteenth-century female utopias, proposed two important things: "a secluded community of women" and "the training of other women and girls."¹⁴ I've already argued that Burney attempts to establish these in the novel. Cecilia builds a community of women, a community that exists within the society at large, that operates "independently" and according to standards completely different from those of the patriarchy in which she lives, namely independence and pleasure for women. Her community operates through very different means, friendship and emotional connection, and what Cecilia strives to do is enable women to experience pleasure through friendship. She also wants to better the lives of women, and to do this, she relies heavily on "training." She trains women, like Mrs. Hill, to provide for themselves; she trains women, like Mrs. Belfield, to rid themselves of shame; she trains women, like herself and Mrs. Delvile, to entertain and enjoy each other. Cecilia's utopian impulse lies in the form of aspirations for greater social equality, particularly for women and for the poor. And this equality will come about as a result of enhancing the lives of women, giving them "lively" and "interesting" companionship and conversation, allowing them friendships and pleasure in this "community" which exists to do just that. Cecilia does something rather radical. Even though it isn't political, or highly visible or structured, she creates a space that, despite a stifling male patriarchy, can and does exist, a space where female pleasure and friendship are allowed to flourish and have real meaning.

Finally, I would like to return to the question of Cecilia's success. Considering that which I propose to be Cecilia's utopian endeavor – to establish a “community” in which to gain independence and experience pleasure in friendship – can one still say that by the end of the novel, as Doody suggests, Cecilia hasn't been successful? Is it true that she has relinquished her independence by marrying Delvile, by gladly accepting Albany as her mentor in charity, by tempering the limitlessness of her charity? I believe it isn't true, that I've offered something else to gauge her success or failure by, and I'm offering a different reading of the end of the novel, a reading in which Cecilia is indeed a success. First, despite marrying Delvile, she is still allowed to continue her work and retain her role as philanthropist. After recovering from her illness, her passion for giving that she so enjoys is revived: “The strong spirit of active benevolence which had ever marked her character, was now again displayed” (939). After recovering from her illness, she intends to remain the philanthropist and she makes it known. She summons her beneficiaries and gives them the money that she couldn't give during her illness. Surprisingly, her husband doesn't foil her plan; rather he recognizes her goodness, her beneficence, with nothing but what appears to be the love and compassion of a husband. Mortimer sees “with new wonder the virtues of her mind, and [his] admiration of her excellencies, made his gratitude perpetual for the happiness of his lot” (940).

Many do view Cecilia's marriage as the end of her independence and are dismayed to see Cecilia marry Delvile. For Epstein, the “vision of Cecilia ‘immured’ in Delvile Castle – despite all that propriety and a loving husband can offer – remains a grim vision.”¹⁵ It may be equally “grim,” given my argument, to see Miss Belfield's “gentle gratitude” and “soft and feeling heart” (940) no longer seeking Cecilia's heart but

Mr. Arnott's. These "grim" visions seem ones, at first glance, that undo all of the work Cecilia has done throughout the novel and undermine my argument – that Cecilia has established something real and communal that grants women pleasure, friendship and higher quality lives. However, some particularly redeeming events animate the conclusion of the novel. Cecilia begins an important new friendship with yet another "woman of high spirits and strong passions" (939), Mrs. Delvile's sister, who "intimately connect[s] herself with Cecilia" (939), just as Mrs. Delvile herself has or even Miss Belfield. In her final days, Mrs. Delvile's sister is "so much charmed with her character, and so much dazzled by her admiration of the extraordinary sacrifice she [has] made" (939) that she leaves Cecilia her fortune. Mrs. Delvile's sister becomes Cecilia's benefactor and enabler, in that it is her fortune that enables Cecilia to regain her independence and continue to relieve the distresses of those to whom she has promised help. It seems that charity is born in the heart of one passionate woman and at the end of the novel is facilitated by a compassionate donation between "intimate" friends.

Understanding friendship to be the key to Cecilia's utopian efforts, the fact that the ultimate female friendship, that between Mrs. Delvile and Cecilia, is preserved at the end of the novel proves that what Cecilia's values most, the core of her "community," remains intact. This important friendship and that of Cecilia and Mrs. Delvile's sister, although only briefly mentioned, testify to the strength of Cecilia's plan to improve women's lives with intimacy and friendship. It has succeeded and, furthermore, it can and will last and will continue to serve to better women's lives. Cecilia will have access to Lady Delvile and, we are told, though she finds "all the happiness human life seems capable of receiving" in the "unremitting fondness" (941) of her husband, she finds this

same happiness in the even more important and beneficial “warm affection of Lady Delvile” (941).

While the utopian movement Cecilia instigates, her “community” with its emphasis on the empowering and pleasurable effects of female friendship and charity, won’t change the whole of society, she does hope to change the lives and thoughts of the women who are a part of her “community” just as Schnorrenberg contends that the utopian communities of Astell, Reeve and Scott do. Burney, like Astell, Reeve and Scott, offers a model that allows women to deal better with society as it is, and this is a first step, a step that Schnorrenberg calls a “modest utopian beginning for a [women’s rights] movement not even yet fully realized.”¹⁶ Cecilia and the other women have found happiness, a sense of their own worth and the means for providing for themselves. Thus they have succeeded in, at least for a while in the novel, resisting male patriarchy. Cecilia and the others have established something real that does remain at the end of the novel. The money Delvile’s aunt bestows on her patronizes Cecilia’s independence and her philanthropy, and this example of charity between women is particularly empowering for the recipient. Cecilia’s relations with her patrons and friends are reestablished and endorsed by her own renewed desire for them. Maybe even more importantly, she receives the support and blessing of her husband Delvile, a representative of the very male patriarchy that her efforts resist. The survival of Cecilia’s desire and her ability to continue it promise, at the very least, continued resistance, but may even suggest that more radical strides in the fight for female equality will also prove imaginable and successful.

Notes

¹ Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen, Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Madison, Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) p. 155.

² Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney, The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1988) p. 142.

³ *Ibid.* p. 142

⁴ Fanny Burney, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999). All subsequent citations are taken from this edition.

⁵ Donna Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989) p. 152-153. Andrew explains that many worried, however, that even though the poor would need to work to support themselves, there was still no way to guarantee that they would continue to work and be independent. Critics argued that the poor needed to work in response to something more, some sort of passion for self-betterment. Political economists, Andrews explains, were concerned that the poor work in order that they better serve the commerce and manufacture that political economists looked to introduce and encourage in England. As a result, Andrew explains, the philanthropic movement between 1770 and 1790 questioned the charitable institutions that had been established in the earlier part of the century and was determined to eradicate what they considered a degrading and debilitating dependency of the poor.

⁶ Andrew traces the move during the eighteenth-century from relieving the poor to reforming the minds and morals of the laboring poor in order to serve the nation's preoccupation with "national regeneration" and battling sin. (See p. 201-202). Andrew explains that the "charitably inclined" (201) of the later eighteenth-century preferred to give assistance to the poor that was of "real and permanent value" (201), rooted in (what appear to be) patronizing activities, such as "a personal inspection of their conduct and management... to encourage and stimulate their habits of industry" (*The Philanthropist*, 1:215)

⁷ Andrew does state, however, that because "charitable opinion turned to the improvement of public morale...the old discrimination between the able and impotent would not be enough" (200). Charity must be given, Andrew explains, to everyone in "the manner most conducive to the improvement of manners and morals" (200). Again, it seems, she's indicating that charity became a force in society because it could potentially prove to battle vices and create docile workers within society.

⁸ Kristina Straub, *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy* (Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky P, 1987) p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 110.

¹¹ Lyman Tower Sargent and Gregory Claeys, in the introduction to *The Utopia Reader*, Claeys and Sargent, eds. (New York: New York UP, 1999), explain the traditional elements of utopian literature to be the following: the existence of human control over individual destinies, the existence of festivals or the like in which the world is tuned upside down, the existence of sensual gratification, and, most importantly, the existence of complete human control over every aspect of social order. p. 2.

¹² Sargent, Claeys, p. 2.

¹³ Barbara Shnorrenberg, "A paradise like Eve's: three eighteenth-century English female utopias" *Women's Studies*, 9 (1982), 263-73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 271

¹⁵ Epstein, p. 173

¹⁶ Shnorrenberg, p. 271

About the Author

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