

“An Unsullied Reputation in the Midst of Danger”: Barsanti, Propriety and Performance in
Burney’s *Early Journals and Letters*

On the evening of her arrival in London, Evelina sees David Garrick in Benjamin Hoadly’s *The Suspicious Husband* (1747). Later that night, she writes rapturously to her guardian, Mr. Villars:

I would have given the world to have had the whole play acted over again. And when he danced – O how I envied Clarinda. I almost wished to have jumped on the stage and joined them. I am afraid you will think me mad, so I won’t say any more [...] ¹

In the world of Burney’s *Evelina* (1778), it would of course be “madness” for a young woman of gentle birth and upbringing to wish to “jump on the stage”. When Evelina visits Vauxhall with her vulgar relations and becomes separated from her party, “actress” and “prostitute” are assumed to be synonyms:

Another [...] exclaimed, “Heaven and earth! what voice is that? – ”

“The voice of the prettiest little actress I have seen this age,” answered one of my persecutors.

“No, – no, – no, –” I *panted* out, “I am no actress, – pray let me go – pray let me pass – .” ²

James E. Evans draws attention to the way in which Burney, while giving due prominence to the celebrity of Garrick in *Evelina*, simultaneously expunges the equally celebrated actress Frances Abington from her narrative. In the performance of *Love for Love* she attends, Evelina could only have seen Abington in the role of Miss Prue, and Evans argues that “[i]n her first novel, Burney [...] was not ready to question female roles openly by identifying with, or even identifying, an actress.” ³ Notwithstanding her unwillingness to praise Abington by name within the text of *Evelina*, Burney developed a friendship with an actress during the very period in which she was writing the novel. Despite the recognition that drama and the

theatre were of key importance in Burney's life and writing,⁴ the regular presence of Jane Barsanti's name in her journals and letters from 1769 to the late 1770s has remained almost wholly unremarked upon.⁵ Hardly comparable in intensity and importance to the friendships Burney had with figures such as Mrs Thrale or Frederica Locke, Burney's relationship with Barsanti was nevertheless warm and sympathetic, and sufficiently supportive that she appears to have written an epilogue for her, a detail to which I shall return.⁶ Burney's interest in and attitudes towards Barsanti are particularly helpful in considering how contemporary discourses about the actress affected Burney's developing understanding of her own potential position as a creative professional. In this article, I want to set the hitherto unexamined friendship between Burney and Barsanti centre-stage and argue for its importance in the formative years of the writer's professionalism, flourishing as it did in the period during which she composed and published *Evelina*, and went on to write the first of her comedies, *The Witlings* (1779).

Barsanti, as contemporaries noted, was an actress in Frances Abington's style:⁷ many of the roles Abington made her own were also played by Barsanti, such as Estifania in John Fletcher's *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* (1624), Widow Bellmour in Arthur Murphy's *The Way to Keep Him* (1760) and Charlotte Rusport in Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771). They also both played Clarinda, the role so envied by *Evelina* as she watches Garrick on her first night in London. Barsanti had been first cast in the part at Covent Garden for her benefit on 5th May 1775. Illness prevented her from appearing, something that Burney mentions with concern in letters to family friend and second "Daddy" Samuel Crisp.⁸ Recovering, Barsanti left London at the end of May to spend the summer season acting in Bristol. Given that *Evelina* envies the role Barsanti herself was initially unable to play, and that both heroine and actress end up in Bristol following their ill-health, not to mention the challenges both must overcome in maintaining their reputations as virtuous women in the

face of the assumptions of others, it is tempting to speculate that her friend was much in her mind as Burney composed her novel and that Barsanti, as much as Abington, is a unspoken presence in the work. While it is impossible to know whether Evelina was in any concrete way modelled on Barsanti, Burney's interest in her fledgling career and the precarious position of the young actress has a particular relevance for a novel explicitly concerned with a young woman's "entrance into the world", with all the theatrical reference this phrase implies.⁹ It is, moreover, intriguing that Barsanti's talent for comedy was strengthened by a particular flair for mimicry, a flair that links the actress with the author, whose early ability "to take the actors off"¹⁰ was recalled by her father and was further confirmed by the ear for dialogue evident in her first novel. The "Danger" referred to in my title quotation was of a complex kind, going beyond a simple concern with the requirements of feminine propriety and to the heart of the specific challenges faced by women who took up careers in the arts.

Shortly after the publication of *Evelina*, and during the period when she composed *The Witlings*, Burney responded to Crisp's concerns about the incompatibility of writing comedy with respectable femininity:

I would a thousand Times rather forfeit my character as a *Writer*, than risk ridicule or censure as a *Female*. I have never set my Heart on Fame, & therefore would not if I *could* purchase it at the expence of all my own ideas of propriety. You who *know* me for a *Prude* will not be surprised, & I hope not offended at this avowal, – for I should deceive you were I not to make it.¹¹

Such a comment should be taken as shaped by the addressee – Burney was hardly likely to claim otherwise to Crisp. Indeed, she knew that whoever her letters and journals were addressed to, they would probably be read by others (Crisp derived "High entertainment" from her journal to her sister Susanna detailing her second extended visit to Streatham in

September 1778, for example).¹² Her letters and journals can rarely, if ever, be read (if any ever can) as an uncomplicated outpouring of her innermost thoughts and views, and acute attention to audience and suppression of uncomfortable material were perhaps second-nature.¹³ Burney's characterisation of herself as a "*Prude*" is in keeping with other comments she makes in the *Early Journals and Letters*, and with the impressions of others, but the *Early Journals and Letters* also demonstrate that such a characterisation is too reductive. Burney was acutely aware of the difficulties creative professionals had to overcome in establishing themselves, and very much alive to the nuances of social acceptance – her own and that of her family as well as that of others.¹⁴ As Barsanti set out in her professional life, her situation must have had personal resonance for a young woman whose family was so involved in the world of creative professionalism, and who was contemplating creative work of her own.

Burney's friendship with Barsanti flourished in the early and mid-1770s; when the Burney family moved to St Martin's Street in 1774, Barsanti's proximity is something she notes with pleasure about their new situation: "I am more & more pleased with our House; [...] we are surrounded with acquaintance; the Stranges in Castle Street, Barsanti in Queen Street, Miss Davies in Pall Mall, Mrs. Brooke in Market Lane" (*EJL* II, 94). Her family circumstances allowed her to observe, and often meet and converse with, many women involved in theatre and performance: she also refers here to the singer Cecilia Davies and the novelist and theatre-manager Frances Brooke. Even as she worked on the manuscript of *Evelina*, and began to consider, if it were to be published, "how a production of my own would figure in that Author like form" (*EJL* III, 32), Burney had plenty of opportunities to experience at first-hand how women in the public eye conducted themselves, and to consider the extent to which their behaviour was well- or ill-advised. Her views were informed by a pervasive concern about the degree to which an active – professional – creative life was compatible with the requirements of feminine propriety. Of Davies, for example, Burney

commented, making an unfavourable comparison with the Italian soprano Lucrezia Agujari: “Modesty, & an unassuming Carriage, in people of Talent & Fame, are irresistable [*sic*]. How much do I prefer for an acquaintance, the well bred & obliging Miss Davies, to the self sufficient & imperious” Agujari (*EJL* II, 80). Meeting Brooke for the first time, Burney revealed similar kinds of concern, noting that although she was “short & fat, & squints”, “[s]he is very well bred, & expresses herself with much modesty, upon all subjects.– which in an *Authoress*, a Woman of *known* understanding, is extremely pleasing” (*EJL* II, 5). In both women, Burney valued the combination of female creative talent and modesty, a combination significant too in her approval of Barsanti, as we shall see.

Such an attitude is obviously part of the “sexual suspicion” that dogged performers, but more especially actresses, in the period.¹⁵ Yet as the eighteenth century progressed the possibility that women could pursue a career in the public eye, including on the stage, and maintain their virtuous character, undoubtedly became greater. First appearing at Covent Garden in 1772, Jane Barsanti made her acting debut at a time of particular significance in the history of the actress. James Boaden (the playwright and biographer of Kemble and Siddons, among others) wrote that by the 1770s, “the profession [of acting] did not disgrace a woman of virtue”,¹⁶ while Laetitia Matilda Hawkins saw Barsanti herself as both indicative and constitutive of the changing mores: “Miss Barsanti was one of those – I hope I may say of the many – who have contributed, by the correctness of their conduct, to render the English stage and those who perform on it, respectable”.¹⁷ Gill Perry has commented that by the end of the eighteenth century, “the historic association between the actress and prostitution was breaking down”, and work by scholars such as Sandra Richards, Nora Nachumi and Felicity Nussbaum confirms that the status of the actress in the period was in many respects improving.¹⁸

Yet many writers on the subject also recognise that, despite improvements, the status of an actress remained complicated. If the actress/whore equivalency was breaking down, it did not simply disappear, as the easy use of “actress” as a synonym for “prostitute” in *Evelina* suggests. However, as Laura J. Rosenthal writes, “while moralists in the period may have divided women sharply between the virtuous and the disreputable, the theatre offered a third possibility of glamorous, independent woman with a mixed sexual reputation.”¹⁹ This possibility is clearly exemplified in the figures of star actresses such as George Anne Bellamy or Frances Abington – figures who also possessed, in Nussbaum’s helpful term, “exceptional virtue”: a virtue in the performance of interiority that, as she writes of Bellamy, “restores her virtue in spite of her unseemly reputation”.²⁰ Nussbaum sets against this, however, the virtue of alternative circles of women in the public eye, such as the Bluestockings with whom Mrs. Thrale at this time identified herself; the women in her social circle, she noted in *Thraliana*, “must possess *Virtue* in the contracted Sense, or one wd not keep em Company, so that is not thought about”, and in her rankings for the women of her set (in which sexual virtue was taken as given) eminent women such as Mrs. Montagu, Mrs. Carter and Hannah More scored highly.²¹ The “contracted” virtue of women such as Thrale and the Bluestockings is “in many ways opposite to the exceptional virtue actresses could claim”.²² Burney’s relationship with Barsanti, however, is precisely underpinned by her desire for Barsanti to avoid such exceptionality. Exceptionality would mark Barsanti out as belonging in the third possibility outlined above; both as a moralist and as a young woman with her own ambitions towards creative professionalism, Burney wished her friend to remain clearly in the ranks of those who possessed “*Virtue* in the contracted Sense”.

Barsanti appears first in the *Early Journals and Letters* in relation to Burney’s father taking “a Doctor’s Degree in Musick” at Oxford in June 1769 (*EJL* I, 73). Charles Burney’s “favourite pupil”, she was the daughter of Francesco Barsanti, an Italian instrumentalist and

composer.²³ As the principal singer in the anthem Charles Burney had composed for the occasion, “poor Barsanti was terrified to Death”, but she “came off with *flying Colours*” (*EJL* I, 74) and her career as a professional singer appeared to have been launched. When illness affected her voice, however, her parents determined on acting as an alternative livelihood. A “great favourite” of Burney’s elder sister Esther and step-sister Maria Allen, Barsanti was invited to join a party at Chessington, home to Crisp, in the summer of 1771, and Dr Burney asked him “to hear her *spout*” while she was there (*EJL* I, 158-9). Burney, Allen and Barsanti learnt some scenes from Colley Cibber’s *The Careless Husband* (1704) and performed them for the assembled company. Barsanti performed the part of Edging “with great spirit, & spoke very well”, and the private theatrical was a precursor to her attempt to secure a professional audition. Dr Burney would have preferred this to have been at Drury Lane, “having a superiour regard for Mr Garrick” who was a family friend, but “Drury Lane Theatre has 2 actresses already in Barsanti’s style”. (Burney probably had in mind Jane Pope as well as Frances Abington, as Lars Troide notes [*EJL* I, 177 and n.].) Instead George Colman at Covent Garden was approached, and he was sufficiently impressed that Dr Burney negotiated a three-year contract for her. Colman proceeded to write an *Occasional Prelude* to open the 1772-3 season at the theatre, especially to showcase Barsanti’s talents.

These talents were not simply those of a comic actress: Colman specifically exploited Barsanti’s flair for mimicry in his *Prelude*. In meta-theatrical vein, the piece took that season’s opening of the Covent Garden theatre as its subject, and Barsanti’s role was that of a Young Lady hoping to impress the Manager with her ability to take off a variety of performers and styles. It proved very popular, being repeated at intervals throughout the season, and Barsanti’s first reception by the reviewers was encouraging. The *General Evening Post* commented that

she imitates the manner of the Italian opera very strongly, gives us a tolerable idea of Miss Younge in the character of Viola, and in one of the spirits from King Arthur dishes up Miss Hayward with uncommon felicity. The applause Miss Barsanti met with was prodigious; and if her own natural talents are equal to her imitative powers, she cannot but make a capital figure in the annals of the theatre.²⁴

Barsanti went on to forge a successful career, first in London and then, from the late 1770s, in Dublin. Among other noteworthy parts, she created the original Lydia Languish in Sheridan's *The Rivals* and became known as a comic actress of "infinite taste, spirit, and variety", as one contemporary put it.²⁵

Burney's letters and journals in the 1770s refer regularly to Barsanti. She (and her family more generally) followed the early stages of the young actress's career closely.²⁶ At a performance of the *Occasional Prelude* in 1773, Sir Richard Bettenson asked Burney how she liked it, "little thinking that I have seen it near a Dozen times" (*EJL* I, 232). The journals at this period suggest many visits between the two women. In April 1772, noting that "Barsanti <has come> here often lately", she goes on:

She has talents that I am sure will in Time, in the style of life she is designed for, raise her to the highest pitch of Fame & I have the greatest Hope that she will deserve the noblest of Commendation, namely that she will preserve an unsullied Reputation in the midst of Danger, for she is a very good Girl, she has formed herself the most amiable relations, & listens with a determination to profit, to what her friends form for her. [...] She has the art of mimickry in the greatest perfection I ever saw. I doubt not that not a soul, even of our Family, has escaped it – it is a dangerous talent but in her profession, it will be a very shining one. (*EJL* I, 197)

Burney's comments highlight two, not unrelated but nonetheless discrete, sources of "danger" for the young actress: first, the ever-present possibility of a sullied "Reputation" and

second, the potential for offence inherent in her talent for imitation. In the event, both turned out to be very real threats, albeit threats Barsanti was able to deflect and defuse, in part with help from Burney.

Confirming Burney's anxieties, once Barsanti's stage career had commenced, the "Danger" of her situation became plain. When she called on Burney in October 1773, Burney learnt with indignation that "she has received two very provoking & insolent offers, to both of which she has given answers that are spirited & praiseworthy" (*EJL* I, 315). The following month a cheerful account of another visit – "The charming Barsanti [...] spent a whole Day with Susy & me" – is dampened by the observation that "Mr Crisp sometimes terrifies me, as he asserts that, sooner or later, she *must* fall." Crisp's confident pessimism is probably representative both of an older generation's attitude to actresses and of the continuance of such attitudes into the 1770s. A subsequent journal entry in March 1775 takes on a more pointed character as a result of this earlier prophecy:

Susy & I frequently see Barsanti at present [...] she <continues> so good a Girl, living wholly with her mother & being almost always at Home, except when obliged to be at the Theatre, that I think she deserves calls, the attention & kindness which can be paid to her, & upon this consideration, I have at length given up my former *delicacy* of not visiting her privately, partly tempted by the great pleasure I have in her Conversation & partly by a kind of Hope that the continued & manifold regard shown her by those friends whom she retains, & wishes to be thought well of by, will have some influence in encourageing & repaying her perseverance in meriting their Regard. (*EJL* II, 81)

Burney represents Barsanti as an essentially domestic woman for whom attendance at the theatre is only undertaken "when obliged" and she seems to regard her visits as both a social pleasure and a moral duty in helping Barsanti to continue her irreproachable ways. Here, too,

Burney writes of her “former *delicacy* of not visiting her privately”, probably a reference, as Lars Troide notes, to an earlier decision to keep Barsanti at a distance, presumably because of her choice of profession. In a partially obliterated passage in the journal for 1771, it seems to be Barsanti to whom Burney is referring when she writes, “[?She cannot] possibly visit at our House, & we can only see her by accident” (*EJL* I, 164). Such apparent scruples about continuing a close friendship with an actress clearly did not last long, although equally clearly Barsanti’s maintenance of a spotless reputation was of continual concern.

The hazards of a career in the theatre were not restricted to “insolent offers” from “Admirers”: well-known performers were the subject of intense public scrutiny. In *Evelina*, the newly-arrived heroine tells Mr. Villars of the conversation of the young Branghtons, in which “the merits and defects of all the actors and actresses were discussed”.²⁷ In addition to comments and reviews in newspapers and periodicals, many other publications helped to feed public curiosity about performers.²⁸ In this critical environment, Barsanti survived remarkably well, but on 27th September 1775 she called on Burney “very full” of a letter in that day’s *Morning Chronicle* “which attacked her for *Ill Nature*” (*EJL* II, 162) and was signed “INDIGNATION”. Her talent for imitation was the target: in a *New Prelude* for the opening of the season, Barsanti had been given a “Tragedy speech” and had been asked “to take off Mrs. Yates & Miss Younge”. She had refused with “propriety and good manners”, citing the “abuse & ill will” her imitations had provoked, but “the Tragic speech notwithstanding all her desire to avoid it, was reported to be marked to *Miss Younge*” (*EJL* II, 161). (The first reviews of her imitations were very positive but, although I have not so far been able to find evidence of earlier condemnation of Barsanti on their account, it appears from this that “INDIGNATION” was not the first to criticize her mimicry.) Burney helped her to compose an earnest and quite lengthy response, in the course of which she declared “that I had not the most distant thought of aiming at Miss Younge, or any other performer I

had ever seen”, and averred that even in the *Occasional Prelude* in which her imitations had first been seen, “it was never my intention to *burlisque*, but only to *imitate*”. The letter was duly published in the following day’s *Chronicle*.²⁹

In the *Occasional Prelude*, the Young Lady tells the Manager that “every thing affords matter for observation, and imitation. Publick places and private life are equal scenes of study for a theatrical genius”.³⁰ Burney helped Barsanti craft her letter to the *Chronicle* the autumn before she began to work on *Evelina* in earnest.³¹ It must have been fairly obvious to her that what she was undertaking bore some similarity in method to the mimicry Barsanti and the Young Lady perform, and that it required a not dissimilar “theatrical genius”. The response to *Evelina* overwhelmingly confirmed this characterisation of Burney’s talent and revealed the extent to which she, too, possessed a gift perceived by her audience to be potentially dangerous. Sir Joshua Reynolds’ niece, Mary Palmer, explained to Mrs Thrale at Streatham within Burney’s hearing that

“...though we all want so much to know the Author, both Mrs. Cholmondeley, & my uncle himself, say they should be frightened to Death to be in her Company, because she must be such a very nice observer, that there would be no escaping her with safety.” (*EJL* III, 141)

Mrs Thrale herself teased Burney, remarking to Dr Johnson, “if *this Rogue* is like her Book; – how will she *trim* all of us by & by!” (*EJL* III, 154). The comic genius for imitation, whether performed on stage or in words on the page, had a potential for social satire of a more or less pointed kind, a potential that placed the performer/author herself in a vulnerable position – as Barsanti found and as Burney herself experienced when *The Witlings* was deemed by her father and Samuel Crisp to come too close to satirising well-known Bluestockings such as Elizabeth Montagu.³² Satire as a mode was disclaimed by Burney in her journals, just as Barsanti disclaimed deliberate “*burlisque*”; when Mrs Thrale comments,

“There is nobody [...] tempers the satirist with so much meekness as Miss Burney”, she exclaims to her sister, “Satirist, indeed! is it not a satire upon *words*, Susy, to call *me* so?” (*EJL* III, 173). Yet the satirical edge in *Evelina* (and indeed in subsequent writings) is evident, even if we now have no means of judging Barsanti’s performances. Whatever she intended, INDIGNATION’s reaction suggests the fine line between “imitation” and “burlesque” can be easily misinterpreted. Burney’s profession offered the possibility of a greater distance between the artist and her creation, a distance she hoped would – but feared would not – shield her from attacks such as Barsanti experienced in the *Morning Chronicle*: as she wrote to Susanna: “Let them Criticise, cut, slash, without mercy my *Book*, – & let them *neglect me*, – but may God [...] avert my becoming a public Theme of Ridicule” (*EJL* III, 163). The epilogue Burney wrote for Barsanti to perform in Dublin in January 1777 played on the actress’s ability to perform in a variety of styles, and included these lines:

For my own part – I hope you’ll all agree –
 I like the smiles of laughing comedy;
 In which the verbal muse most sweetly sings,
 Than when she bellows thro’ the throats of kings – (*EJL* IV, 542)³³

In practice, the talents of both women bore witness that “laughing comedy” sang not always “sweetly” but sometimes satirically, and brought with it dangers accordingly.

When Barsanti married a young Irish aristocrat, John Richard Kirwan Lyster, later that same year, it might have been imagined that she had arrived at the safe harbour of “a union from affection with a man who deserves her!”, as Burney had written somewhat romantically in relation to the singer Elizabeth Linley some years earlier (*EJL* I, 251). Lyster’s family strongly disapproved of the match, however, and he himself died less than two years later in January 1779, leaving her with a daughter, born posthumously, to support. Later that year she married Richard Daly, an actor, who became the manager of the Smock

Alley Theatre in Dublin in November 1780. If Barsanti's reputation was spotless, Daly's was the reverse: a notorious womaniser, he seems to have preyed regularly on the young women he employed.³⁴ Burney believed Barsanti to have had "9 or 10 Children" and there is unsurprising evidence that pregnancy or ill-health curtailed her acting career between 1786 and 1793, but she did return to the stage before her death in 1795, and she also appears to have had no small role in the success of Daly's career as a theatre manager.³⁵ Satirical journalist John Williams, who wrote pseudonymously as Anthony Pasquin, described Richard Daly's marriage to her as follows:

On his visiting his native country in the summer, he had the good fortune to attract the notice of the amiable Mrs. LISTER, formerly Miss BARSANTI, whom he married, and to whom he stands indebted, most highly, for his professional advancement. She was an excellent Comic Actress, and, what is far more estimable, A GOOD WOMAN!³⁶

If, as Rosenthal comments, contemporary biographies of actresses had to position their subjects "somewhere on (or off) the spectrum of female virtue", Barsanti prompted contemporaries, in writing of her, to make clear her virtuous standing.

There is no evidence of contact between Burney and Barsanti between 1779 and Barsanti's death.³⁷ In July 1779, when she had clearly learnt of the death of Barsanti's first husband, Burney wrote to Susan:

I hope you sent my Letter, – &, if you wished it, added some lines of your own. I am not sorry, now, that I never saw Mr. Lister, since I could see him no more, – but pray, my Love, the moment any answer comes from poor Jenny, let it be *instantly* sent me. (*EJL*, III, 337-8)

It is not impossible that Burney thought it unsuitable to keep in touch with Barsanti once she had married Daly, but it is also not unlikely that some contact between them was kept up and

has been lost (as has the letter referred to in this passage). Burney makes no further reference to Barsanti in extant material until, in a letter written fifty years later, her concern about the actress's union of artistic and moral virtue resurfaces. The name Daly in one of Esther's letters prompts Burney in her answer "to tell you that a Daughter of poor Jane Barsanti – that exquisitely agreeable Girl – has lately sent to me, beseeching some pecuniary aid...." (*J&L* XI, 491-2). Burney's letter quickly moves from the present generation's money troubles to re-tell Barsanti's history:

Miss Barsanti had first married Mr. Lyster, a Gentleman whose family prohibited their name appearing in the play bills: and she had the understanding & courage equally to prohibit a *false* name from being printed: she therefore called herself, in the Play bills, *The late Miss Barsanti*; & she was respected by every body as the known *wife* of the Gentleman, who died soon after [...]. She afterward married Mr. Daly, the manager of the Dublin Theatre – & continued to play with great applause [...]³⁸

Long after Jane Barsanti's death, Burney's narrative concerning her is still implicitly defensive – even to her own sister, who knew Barsanti at least as well as Burney herself and presumably knew her history. The subtext of the letter is an anxious reassurance that despite her stage career, Barsanti was a thoroughly respectable woman whose reputation remained unimpeachable.

As John Williams' praise of her shows, the need to underscore Barsanti's union of artistic and professional talent with moral excellence is not simply a fetish of Burney's. She could, however, be unrepresentative in the degree to which she worried about such things. In 1774 an invitation to the opera from Frances Brooke resulted in an unwilling meeting between Burney and the actress Mary Ann Yates, Brooke's friend and business partner. Burney claims not to be able to "understand how a woman of Character & reputation, such as Mrs. Brooke, can have reconcil'd herself to becoming intimate with one whose fame will

bear no scrutiny” (*EJL* II, 55). Yet Burney’s puzzlement appears arguably disingenuous and outdated in a period when, as Nussbaum explains, “actresses mixed easily in polite company and in semiprivate social gatherings”, while “star women players – including Barry, Clive, Pritchard, Abington, Yates, and Sarah Siddons – openly infiltrated the private gatherings, concerts, and fashionable soirees given by ladies and gentlemen of quality.”³⁹ As Troide notes of her doubts about keeping up Barsanti’s friendship, “Perhaps [Burney’s] ideas on the social punctilios involved here were excessively severe at this point” (*EJL* I, 164).

Yet her disapproval also reflects the way in which, despite the “infiltration” of polite society by actresses and other performers, the anxiety about the status of such groups never disappeared.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the social success of the “star women players”, women in the arts (however unimpeachable their reputation for virtue) were still figures of uncertain social standing, as indeed were their male counterparts. The terms under which they were received into polite society were not necessarily those of straightforward acceptance: admiration for talent certainly did not necessarily translate into an acknowledgement of social equality, even when performers were invited into private homes as guests. The ease in mixing socially that Nussbaum identifies was not uncomplicated. The singer and composer Michael Kelly (1762-1826), for example, recounted an anecdote about ‘the great oboe player’ Johann Christian Fischer (1733-1800). A nobleman insisted that the musician should “sup with him after the opera”; taking no denial, he

assured Fischer that he did not ask him professionally, but merely for the gratification of his society and conversation. Thus urged and encouraged, he went; he had not, however, been many minutes in the house of the consistent nobleman, before his lordship approached him, and said, “I hope, Mr. Fischer, you have brought your oboe in your pocket.” – “No, my lord,” said Fischer, “my oboe never sups.” He turned on

his heel, and instantly left the house, and no persuasion could ever induce him to return to it.⁴¹

Fischer's reaction suggests the sensitivities at play in social interactions between professional performers and the higher echelons of their audiences. The Burney family's own social position was negotiated, of course, in precisely that zone of sensitivity. Charles Burney was initially invited into the Thrales' home as their eldest daughter's music teacher; when he proved more generally entertaining, he was paid a stipend to "visit Streatham once a week and, after giving Queeney her lesson, dine and stay the night there".⁴² His ambiguous status as at once employee and friend makes Burney's own hypersensitivity, as described less than sympathetically by Mrs Thrale, the more understandable (she was, Thrale complained, 'so restlessly & apparently anxious lest I should give myself Airs of Patronage, or load her with the Shackles of Dependance').⁴³ Burney's own friendship with Barsanti needs to be read in the light of such sensitivities, and a comparison of Laetitia Matilda Hawkins's account of the young actress with Burney's journal entries reveals tellingly the differing ways in which an actress – however much she may have been agreed to be morally irreproachable – could be accepted into one's social circle.

Hawkins gathered her memories together in a "Memoir of the family of Barsanti", included in her *Anecdotes, Biographical Sketches and Memoirs* (1822). Her account of the Barsantis follows a "Memoir of Musical Professors" and the tone is set from the opening sentence:

I must now introduce my reader to a person of much lower rank in the profession of music – a little old man, a Lucchese, of the name of Barsanti – for whom my father had that species of considerate regard, which, when bestowed by the affluent upon the indigent, warms the frozen heart of age....⁴⁴

Hawkins invites her reader to consider the Barsantis as a collective curiosity, a family “patronized” by her own: the grateful “little old man”; the fat, garrulous mother whose deceased lapdog preoccupied her as much as her daughter’s ill-health: “the poor dear Jenny Barsanti! – And so Sir John, we had her skin stuffed – the poor dear Jenny Barsanti!”; and finally the talented daughter “whose profession brought us [Hawkins and her siblings] a new species of amusement, and obtained us the extraordinary gratification of seeing a play”.⁴⁵ Hawkins approves of Barsanti – as her commendation of her respectability, quoted above, testifies – but she also makes it clear that respectability is not the same as gentility. She comments that the “singularity” of Barsanti’s “walk in life made her very amusing”, emphasising the actress’s social distance from the Hawkins family and her role as entertaining social inferior; when Hawkins tells the story of Barsanti’s marriage and early widowhood, the social inequality of her first marriage is underlined by her final comment that Barsanti “remained in Ireland, and there remarried in her own natural rank”: “From this time we lost sight of the once interesting Miss Barsanti [...] she became entirely absorbed in the drudgery of her profession”. Where star actresses may have challenged social distinctions by carrying their exceptional virtue into fashionable gatherings, Jane Barsanti’s interaction with the Hawkins family seems to leave those distinctions firmly in place: her “discretion and religious conscientiousness”, as well as her entertaining personality and talents, make her an acceptable visitor, but her social inferiority, and that of her family, is never questioned.⁴⁶

Burney’s tone towards Barsanti is not without a certain degree of social superiority – the casting of her visits to the actress as partly moral duty savours somewhat of the “patronizing” relationship Hawkins emphasises. Clearly, too, Dr Burney functioned in a very practical way as Barsanti’s patron. But he was also her teacher, and a trained musician (like her own father) as Sir John Hawkins was not.⁴⁷ The narrative of Barsanti’s visit to Chessington, for example, suggests a guest received on equal terms, and she is appreciated by

Burney (and her family) for her agreeable company, not simply for her entertainment value. By contrast, her respectability enables Hawkins to regard her with condescending amusement and to indicate to her reader the superiority and philanthropy of Sir John and Lady Hawkins. Hawkins merely sketches the Barsanti family's foibles from her position of "affluence"; Burney wants Barsanti, for her own sake but also for that of her friend, to prove a point – that an active, professional life in the public eye is compatible with the "prudish" version of feminine propriety Burney favoured.

Where Barsanti is simply a curiosity for Hawkins, for Burney she represented something much more urgent. At a time when "the tensions between the proper lady and the actress" were being actively negotiated,⁴⁸ Burney's friendship for Barsanti signals her desire to re-draw the distinctions. This desire is then implicit in her own attempts to write for the stage and, especially, in her exploration of the social position of the creative professional in her final novel, *The Wanderer* (1814), in which Juliet's attempt to make her living as a music teacher allows the probing of the liminal and uncertain status of such professions.⁴⁹ Barsanti (along with other women such as Frances Brooke and Elizabeth Griffith, and subsequently Sarah Siddons) represented the possibility that delicacy and the theatre could co-exist and that women in the arts could display their "shining" and even "dangerous" talents without necessarily relinquishing their hold on propriety. Just as importantly, she also reflected Burney's own, and her family's, struggles with their status as creative professionals within polite society in the eighteenth-century, which in turn represented a wider social anxiety about the nature of the acceptance into polite circles of those who worked in the arts.

¹ Frances Burney, *Evelina* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 28.

² *Evelina* 198.

³ James E. Evans, “*Evelina*, the Rustic Girls of Congreve and Abington, and Surrogation in the 1770s,” *The Eighteenth Century* 52.2 (2011): 157-171 (165).

⁴ Recent decades have seen this once-neglected area of Burney’s work re-presented and assessed in much valuable scholarly work. See for example Peter Sabor’s edition of Burney’s *Complete Plays*, 2 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1995), Margaret Doody’s groundbreaking attention to the plays in her *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1988), Barbara Darby’s *Frances Burney, Dramatist: Gender, Performance and the Late-Eighteenth-Century Stage* (Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky P, 1997) and discussion of the plays in Janice Farrar Thaddeus’s *Frances Burney: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

⁵ Barsanti is either not referred to, or is only mentioned briefly in passing, in all of the biographies of Burney published to date. In her notes to the Oxford edition of *Evelina*, Vivien Jones refers to Barsanti in relation to the moral status of the actress (Burney, *Evelina* 441).

⁶ The epilogue was identified by Betty Rizzo and Lars Troide, and reprinted in *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, 5 vols., ed. Lars Troide et al. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1988-2012) IV, 541-2. All citations of Burney’s *Early Journals and Letters* in my text are to this edition.

⁷ In his *Candid and Impartial Observations, on the Principal Performers, Belonging to the Two Theatres Royal* (London: Printed for the Author [1774?]), William Hawkins noted that Barsanti “is a smart, handsome figure, and not much unlike in stature, the favourite Mrs. Abington” (24). The Irish playwright John O’Keeffe wrote in his *Recollections of the Life of John O’Keeffe, Written by Himself* (2 vols, London: Henry Colburn, 1826) that Barsanti “was capital in all Mrs. Abington’s parts” (II, 43).

⁸ *EJL* II, 114 and 135. Barsanti actually played Clarinda for the first time, as far as I can ascertain, for her benefit at the Crow St Theatre, Dublin, in May 1778.

⁹ The dramatic qualities of *Evelina* were apparent to its first audience and led to many readers encouraging Burney to consider writing for the stage. For an analysis of the “embedding of eighteenth-century theater” in the novel, see Francesca Saggini, “Teaching *Evelina* as a Dramatic Text”, *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (New York: MLA, 2010) 223-36.

¹⁰ Madame D’Arblay, *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*, 3 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1832) II, 168, quoted by Vivien Jones in the introduction to *Evelina*, ix.

¹¹ *EJL* III, 212.

¹² *EJL* III, 186.

¹³ A tendency maintained in Burney's editing of her journals and letters in later life, and then continued by her niece, Charlotte Barrett.

¹⁴ For a helpful analysis of the complexities of the Burney family's social position, see Betty Rizzo, "Frances Burney and the Anatomy of Companionship," *Companions Without Vows: Relationships Among Eighteenth-Century British Women* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1997) 83-111, especially 83-5. For further discussion of professionalism in relation to Burney's life and work, see Betty Schellenberg, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 141-161.

¹⁵ Laura J. Rosenthal, "Entertaining Women: the Actress in Eighteenth-Century Theatre and Culture," *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830*, ed. Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 159-173 (159). This phrase derives from Kristina Straub's major study *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992); of particular relevance here is Chapter 5, "The Construction of Actresses' Femininity", 89-108. See also Elizabeth Eger, "Spectacle, Intellect and Authority: The Actress in the Eighteenth Century," *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 33-51.

¹⁶ James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons* (1827), quoted in Nora Nachumi, *Acting Like a Lady: British Women Novelists and the Eighteenth-Century Theater* (New York: AMS, 2008) 20.

¹⁷ Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Anecdotes, Biographical Sketches and Memoirs* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1822) 217.

¹⁸ Gill Perry, "Ambiguity and Desire: Metaphors of Sexuality in Late Eighteenth-Century Representations of the Actress," *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture 1776-1812*, ed. Robyn Asleson (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2003) 57-80 (57); Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) – see for example 24, 38-9, 42-3; Nachumi 18-20, and Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2010) *passim* but see for example 29-30, 271.

¹⁹ Rosenthal 162-3.

²⁰ Nussbaum 116.

²¹ Nussbaum 273, and see Katharine C. Balderston (ed.), *Thraliana*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952) I, 330-1. The "Mrs. Burney" listed (who achieves only an average score) is not the novelist but her stepmother; when Thrale composed these lists in July 1778 she did not yet know Burney personally (see Balderston I, 329, n.2).

²² Nussbaum 273-4.

²³ Lars E. Troide, *EJL* I, 73, n.63.

²⁴ *General Evening Post*, 19-22 Sept. 1772, *British Newspapers, 1600-1900* (Gale, 23 May 2012).

²⁵ C. W. Briscoe, *Clerimont, or, Memoirs of the Life and Adventures of Mr. B****** (Liverpool: Charles Wosencroft, 1786).

²⁶ Troide notes that Barsanti's is one of four names in Burney's "List" for 1774 not in the extant journal for that year, but comments "FB and her family no doubt attended Barsanti's benefit at Covent Garden on 23 April" and goes on to say that her brother Charles listed this and other performances by Barsanti in 1773-4 "on several MS leaves preserved" in the British Library, as well as writing a verse letter to Burney in May 1774 in which he praises Barsanti "in the roles of Maria (in Arthur Murphy's *The Citizen*) and Lady Brumpton (in Sir Richard Steele's *The Funeral*)" (*EJL* II, 3).

²⁷ *Evelina* 71.

²⁸ Examples include *Theatrical Biography: or, Memoirs of the Principal Performers at the Three Theatres Royal* (Dublin: H. Saunders *et al.*, 1772), William Hawkins' *Candid and Impartial Observations* (see n.6) and Joseph Haslewood's *The Secret History of the Green Rooms: Containing Authentic and Entertaining Memoirs of the Actors and Actresses in the Three Theatres Royal*, 2 vols (London: J. Ridgway, J. Forbes and H. D. Symmonds, 1790).

²⁹ *Morning Chronicle*, 27 and 28 Sept. 1775, *British Newspapers, 1600-1900* (Gale, 23 May 2012).

³⁰ George Colman, *An Occasional Prelude, Performed at the Opening of the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden. On the Twenty-First of September, 1772* (London: T. Becket, 1776) 18-19.

³¹ See *EJL* II, xi.

³² Significant as this disapproval was, I have argued that it is not a sufficient explanation on its own for the failure of *The Witlings* to be staged. See "'My Muse loves a little Variety': Writing Drama and the Creative Life of Frances Burney", *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34.2 (2011): 197-208 (199-200).

³³ While this epilogue to John Jackson's tragedy, *Gerilda*, described in *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* in January 1777 as "written by a Friend, and spoken by Miss Barsanti", has been identified as the "silly thing [...] which I wrote, and which was spoken upon the Dublin Theatre" (*EJL* IV, 541 & 299-300), no further details are known about its composition. In their introduction to *The Witlings and The Woman-Hater* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview P, 2002), Peter Sabor and Geoffrey Sill comment, "Regrettably, Burney destroyed all of her journal and most of her correspondence for 1776" and go on, "This material might have provided information on the

circumstances that led Burney to write an epilogue to be spoken by Barsanti on the Dublin stage, before she had begun work on *The Witlings*” (291-92).

³⁴ During their marriage Daly seduced or raped the 18-year-old Dorothy Jordan, who became his mistress “in an unhappy and subservient relationship” and had a child by him (Paul Ranger, “Jordan, Dorothy (1761-1816)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004]; online edn Jan 2006, accessed 17 May 2012); subsequently he had an affair with the singer Elizabeth Billington (*ODNB*) and also propositioned Elizabeth Inchbald unsuccessfully, according to James Boaden (*Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald* [London: R. Bentley, 1833] I, 171). These probably represent a fraction of his liaisons. Troide and Cooke comment that Barsanti “apparently was swept off her feet by the handsome Daly, as she initially settled an income of £20 a week on him. For the rest of her life she had to endure the philanderings and financial extravagance of her husband, whose charming manner concealed a brutal nature” (*EJL* III, 337).

³⁵ According to Highfill, “She was still acting in Dublin in 1786-87 and 1787-88; and she acted at Cork, as Mrs Daly, off and on nearly every year from 1780 through 1793” (Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, 16 vols. [Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1973] I, 361.) However, the *World* for Thursday, 17 November 1791 reported that “Mrs. DALY intends returning to the stage; more than five years have elapsed since her retirement, which has been severely lamented in our Sister Kingdom; and with justice [...]”. That “One of Mrs. Daly’s characters, since her re-appearance on the Dublin stage is that of Signor Arionelli, in the Son-in-law [by O’Keefe]” is subsequently noted in the *Public Advertiser* for Thursday 7th February 1793 (*British Newspapers, 1600-1900* [Gale, 23 May 2012]).

³⁶ Anthony Pasquin [John Williams], *The Pin-Basket to the Children of Thespis* (London: H. D. Symonds and T. Bellamy, 1797) 218.

³⁷ Troide and Cooke note that the journal for July 1779 “contains FB’s last known mention of Barsanti until 1824” (*EJL* III, 337, n.51).

³⁸ Joyce Hemlow, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d’Arblay)*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1972-84) XI, 492.

³⁹ Nussbaum 272-3.

⁴⁰ As Nussbaum clarifies, while actresses and Bluestockings shared a “woman-centred fashionable society”, the Blues also “invested in a particular kind of decorous, learned feminism” that “served as a counterforce and a rebuttal to actresses’ questionable definitions of virtue” (273).

⁴¹ Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences* (1826; ed. and intro. Roger Fiske: London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975) 4-5.

⁴² Roger Lonsdale, *Dr. Charles Burney: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) 234.

⁴³ *Thraliana* I, 400.

⁴⁴ Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Anecdotes, Biographical Sketches and Memoirs* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1822) 215.

⁴⁵ Hawkins 218, 222.

⁴⁶ Hawkins 219, 224.

⁴⁷ Hawkins's family was probably no grander than Dr Burney's – the *ODNB* concludes that his father was probably a carpenter – but it seems that Sir John and his daughter were at least as determined as the Burneys to assert their claim to gentility. Family tradition claimed descent from an English admiral; Sir John trained as a lawyer, a profession whose status in the mid-eighteenth century easily outranked that of musician, and wrote his *General History* of music as a scholarly amateur.

⁴⁸ Nussbaum 280.

⁴⁹ See my 'Professionalism, Performance and Private Theatricals in Frances Burney's *The Wanderer*', *Romanticism* (forthcoming, 2012), especially my discussion of the nuances in the ways in which music teachers were accepted into the households of the polite classes.