Distinctions in Delicacy

Literature that laid out the dos and don’ts of virtuous behavior for young men and women was common in 18th century Britain. Often included in this genre of so-called "conduct literature," is Frances Burney’s novel *Evelina*, with its young heroine navigating the pitfalls of her introduction to public life and eventually into the waiting arms of Lord Orville, the novel’s exemplary young hero. Upon the nature of good virtue presented in *Evelina* as well as other conduct literature of the period, Patricia L. Hamilton comments that “the standard for both sexes is to regard the feelings of others and to work to preserve the harmony of the entire group” (431). Although in general, virtue for both sexes in *Evelina* is defined by careful maintenance of and attention to these standards of delicacy, delicacy itself is not presented as a unisex quality in the novel. Rather, feminine delicacy requires a stronger breed of self-abnegation than its masculine counterpart. Furthermore, the maintenance of delicacy, as presented by Burney, carries with it higher stakes for women than for men, which along with the increased fragility of female virtue, places greater importance on delicacy in the behavior of women than in that of men.

Lord Orville stands as the nearly perfect model for masculine virtue amidst a slew of glaring examples of atrocious male behavior in the novel. When he seeks Evelina out with his concerns about seeing her in the company of two prostitutes in the Marybone Gardens, she exclaims at the excellence of his behavior: “Generous, noble Lord Orville! how disinterested his conduct! how delicate his whole behavior! willing to advise, yet afraid to wound me!” (Burney 242). Susan Staves notes that this delicacy of behavior is a central concept in the novel, and she defines delicacy as it appears in *Evelina*: “True delicacy is opposed to cruelty, impertinence, and
pursued, may somewhat vary, and be accommodated to the strength or weakness of the different travelers” (Burney 218). Here Villars acknowledges that masculine and feminine conduct are in line with one another, but in the same stroke of the pen, he both reminds Evelina that gentleness and modesty are her particular attributes as a women and remarks that the manner in which proper conduct is carried out may vary between the sexes.

In her article on Evelina’s innocence, Joanne Cutting-Gray comments on the particular reality of feminine virtue in the world of *Evelina*. Of Villars she says, “The wish of Villars...to have Evelina returned from her social experiences unchanged, still "all innocence," entails sacrificing the seasoning of practical knowledge on the patriarchal altar of pristine ignorance” (46). When discussing the episode in which Willoughby manages to trap Evelina into accepting a ride home alone with him in his carriage, she further comments that “the patriarchal model for female virtue appears to posit innocence merely in order to assault it, so that lecherous Willoughby can silence Evelina’s objections by referring to the code designed to protect her” (47). This model of female virtue relies on a form of delicacy defined by gentleness, modesty, and innocence, which is different from the delicacy present in the male model. Though the carriage incident may serve as evidence provided by Burney of the flaws of the female model of virtue, Cutting-Gray points out that despite this evidence that the model does not always serve her best interests, Evelina persists in her attempts to stick with it unerringly. The result is that “she remains one-dimensional because the representative model has ordained she be so” (Cutting-Gray, 48). Thus Burney’s hero persists in a model of feminine delicacy that at times endangers her and makes her a one-dimensional character.
(269), only manages to insult Merton to little effect. Thus it appears Evelina is stuck in a sticky position, from which female delicacy provides no escape route. Evelina, recognizing her own female powerlessness in the situation, laments that she does not have a brother present to protect her from such behavior: "'would to heaven...that I, too, had a brother!—and then I should not be exposed to such treatment!'" (313). At this point Lord Orville assumes the title of her brother and rescues her from the grip of Lord Merton. Thus once again it seems that Orville's masculine delicacy allows him the freedom to take action in a situation where feminine delicacy demands passivity.

Staves points to the scene when Evelina accompanies the Mirvans to watch Congreve's *Love for Love* as an example of another clear distinction of female delicacy. She notes that Orville appears to like the play, though he later acknowledges that the ladies could not have found it agreeable themselves. And indeed, as Staves points out, the "ladies of delicacy like Mrs. Mirvan and Evelina cannot enjoy themselves. They are obliged to be "perpetually out of countenance," and Evelina has to say that though the play "is fraught with wit and entertainment" she hopes never to see it again" (373).

What is perhaps the greatest difference between male and female delicacy in Burney's novel, is the particular fragility of the feminine version of delicacy. "Female delicacy can be wounded and, if wounded often enough or seriously enough, actually killed. Delicacy is in part like virginity: once lost it cannot be regained. Yet it is still more fragile and precarious than virginity, since it can be eroded by the social ambiance in which one finds oneself" (Staves, 373-374). Given this precarious state of her delicacy, it makes sense that one of Evelina's main concerns throughout the novel is not that she is actually in danger of being indelicate, but that
A more nuanced example of female indelicacy is that of Mrs. Selwyn. Staves argues that Mrs. Selwyn serves as example of the end result of a gradual erosion of modesty and delicacy "by the social ambiance in which one finds oneself" (374). As pointed out earlier, her lack of modesty and delicacy is painted as masculine, and "the culture generally was severe on outspoken, learned, or masculine ladies, and characters" (Staves, 379). It is no surprise then that Mrs. Selwyn appears a mostly ineffectual character. Staves notes that "like Orville, but with a boldness allegedly objectionable in women, Mrs. Selwyn takes it upon herself to rebuke Evelina's persecutors" (378), yet as is the case in the scene when Merton drunkenly accosts Evelina, Mrs. Selwyn's rebukes are often ineffectual. The way that Mrs. Selwyn's masculine behavior is viewed by the male characters in the novel is alluded to by Sir Clement when Evelina asks him if he objects to the freedom with which Mrs. Selwyn speaks. He responds, saying "'in a woman, I do; in a woman I think it intolerable. She has wit, I acknowledge and more understanding than half her sex put together; but she keeps alive a perpetual expectation of satire, that spreads a general uneasiness among all who are in her presence; and she talks so much that even the best things she says, wear the attention.'" (343). Thus in both Madame Duval and Mrs. Selwyn, indelicacy leaves these women somewhat absurd creatures whose presence is merely tolerated by those around them.

The characters who exemplify male indelicacy are also cast in a negative light, but they occupy a different position in the novel. There is a large number of indelicate male figures to choose from. Indeed, it seems that the only male characters who do display any level of delicacy are Orville, Villars, and Macartney. The mass of indelicate male characters surrounding them seems to be in line with Mrs. Selwyn's observation of Orville's character that "'there must have
Works Cited


