

Doc Chat Episode Thirty-Seven Transcript

Recovering Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (November 4, 2021)

IAN FOWLER: Welcome to Doc Chat, everyone. I'm Ian Fowler, Curator of Maps for New York Public Library. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Carolyn Vega, curator of the Berg Collection here at New York Public Library is joined by Hilary Havens, Associate Professor in the Department of English, University of Tennessee in Knoxville and author most recently of *Revising the 18th century novel*, authorship from manuscript to print. Carolyn and Hilary will discuss the manuscripts and creative practices of the groundbreaking 18th century novelist Frances Burney. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments, but make sure you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees, so everyone is included. Once we begin the question-and-answer segment, please use Zoom's question-and-answer function, you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. We would also like to know a bit about you, so that we can tailor programs more to our audience. So I'm going to launch a poll right now. Please take a moment to fill that out for us and that's all for me. I will now hand it over to Carolyn.

CAROLYN VEGA: Thanks so much, Ian, and thank you so much, Hilary for agreeing to do this today. I'm really excited to chat with you about Frances Burney. Ok. So Frances Burney was an English novelist, diarist and playwright. She is best known for her satirical novels featuring strong female leads, still relatively a rarity in the 18th century. The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American literature, which is one of many special collections here at the New York Public Library, holds what we could today consider Frances Burney's archive. So drafts of her novels and plays, several of which remained unpublished during her lifetime. Hundreds of pieces of correspondence, reams of her journals that were heavily reworked and edited for publication. And even an intriguing collection of vellum documents and portrait miniatures on ivory. So in the drafts, we find evidence of Burney's creative life and working practices. So the very like actually physical way that she wrote and canceled and cut and pinned and inserted and analyzed her novels and plays. Overall, the collection is an incomparable resource for scholars working on Burney's life and what a life it was, not only was she a successful and well regarded novelist in her own day, she was also -- She also held a royal posting as Keeper of the Robes by Queen Charlotte, married a French exile at the age of 41, which was then considered pretty late for the time, and underwent a mastectomy without anesthetic in the year 1811. So on the screen, we're looking at a portrait of Frances Burney's. Seated in a high back chair, her arms are crossed in front of her and she's wearing a pretty large plume hat. This black and white mezzotint is a 19th century copy of an old painting by the

author's cousin, Edward Francis Burney and it was made in 1784, '85. So just a couple of years after the publication of the novel *Cecilia*, which is the work that we're going to focus on today. So she's considered the mother of English fiction by none other than Virginia Woolf, and Burney's witty, comic and incisive writings were critical to the development of the English novel of manners, popularized most notably in the 19th century by Jane Austen. And with that, Hilary, I'll ask you to weigh in a bit.

HILARY HAVENS: Thank you so much, Carolyn and thank you for having me here. This is such a pleasure to be here. This slide, I thought we'd start off with Jane Austen -- I, looking at the audience, I don't think Burney needs an introduction for many of you but for those of you who are not familiar with her, she was one of Jane Austen's very favorite novelists. And then, Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*, one of the few times when the narrator actually inserts herself within the novel, she calls you know *Cecilia* along with Burney's *Camilla* and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, a work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. That's high praise indeed. Burney -- Burney's novel *Camilla* had a list of subscribers and that was one of the few places on which Jane Austen's name appeared in print during Austen's lifetime. And the origins of the title *Pride and Prejudice* from Jane Austen's 1813 novel, are actually from *Cecilia*. It appears in caps three times in a paragraph towards the end of the novel and *Pride and Prejudice* is sort of seen as the origin of the whole of this unfortunate business, the horrible events that happened later in the novel. But this is not about Burney -- This is not about Austen. This is about Burney. So I'd like to maybe give you a little bit more background on Burney herself and turn to the memorandum book image. And Carolyn can weigh in too, but the *Transport of Sensibility* for those of you who are not familiar with the term *sensibility*, this is a significant term in the 18th century. It's linked to feeling -- being able to perceive things through the senses -- but also having a sort of emotional responsiveness that reveals your morality or your inner worth. You know, if you have a lot of *sensibility*, you'll be moved or you'll feel certain emotions in response to, you know, tragic or happy events. And, in this case, *Cecilia's* *sensibility*, she's helping out the Hill family. This is an impoverished family that her guardian, Mr. Harrell, has refused to pay and *Cecilia* is stepping in and serving as a benefactress and helping them out. And you can see their pleasure at her charity and this, you know, displays her *sensibility*. I don't -- I don't know if you wanted to say anymore about this, Carolyn.

VEGA: Yeah. One of the things that we chatted about ahead of time too was the -- the transmission of images from the books. So the first edition actually wasn't illustrated, I believe, but you could buy sort of like popular prints from bookstores. And so, this is a pretty early illustration, right, that was used as kind of a merchandise sort of like a tie-in for a memorandum book or a day calendar.

HAVENS: Exactly. And it's sort of a marker of the novel's success. A novel would not receive illustrations, unless it were a best-selling one or a popular one. So --

VEGA: Yeah, let's see. Ok. Shall we --

HAVENS: Yeah, let's move on to --

VEGA: To the next one? Ok. So we're -- So now I think we're going back in time just a little bit. So this is a page from the autographed manuscript of *Evelina*, which is actually written in a disguised hand, which I can sort of set up -- Or if you want to take it from here, too.

HAVENS: Yeah. I mean -- And I mean, you could also give context because, Carolyn -- This is located at the Morgan, actually, and not at the New York Public Library and Carolyn has worked at the Morgan and is super familiar with this as well. But as you'll see in the following slides, where you actually see Burney's handwriting, this is not her usual handwriting. It's upright, it's more compact and the reason she wrote in this disguised hand was because her father, Doctor Charles Burney, was a famous music historian and wrote the first history of music and she frequently prepared her father's writings for the press. So her handwriting was well-known by the printers. She was fearful of the novel's reception, so she submitted it secretly and her father didn't know that she was the author of *Evelina*, this is the novel she published before *Cecilia*, until six months after it had been published. Yeah, and I don't know if you want to add to that, Carolyn.

VEGA: He guessed, right? Did he guess? That's the story. Ok, yeah. And so, just to give a little context about how this relates to the library's holdings as well. So this is the only surviving page of the manuscript in this so-called feigned hand. And at the Berg collection here, we actually have the complete original manuscript that she would've, I guess, made this kind of copy from. So just a couple of years ago, one of my colleagues from the Morgan, actually, came over to sort of look closely at how the two manuscripts kind of compare. But what I think is really interesting about looking at this right now is, well, we're looking at Burney's creative practice sort of right at the moment that it's heading to the publisher. And I think as we, like, step earlier in time in the creative process, it'll get even more sort of interesting. But, yeah. Everyone, if you can just take a sort of a, like, memory note of the handwriting that we're looking at here because it'll change pretty soon.

HAVENS: Yeah. So -- And this is -- That's a good segue to her practice of textual recycling. And especially with Burney's early and draft works, she used scrap paper to write her manuscripts because of the expensive cost of paper. And paper back in the 18th century was made by hand. It was made from pulped linen rags. So I did a calculation today and to adjust for inflation and a worker's purchasing power, a pound of paper in 18th century prices today would cost the equivalent of \$138. So that's tremendous. I mean, we could -- I mean, you could technically afford it, but if there was a bunch of paper floating around, you know, why not? And paper prices would drop significantly later in the 18th -- In the 19th century, when paper was made by a machine and by using wood pulp. But this was a very strong motive for Burney to recycle. And she used discarded letters, that we'll show you very shortly, that she and her father had received. She used scrap pages from her manuscripts, from her father's manuscripts and also

paper that she was given through other sources like opera playbills. And I don't know if Carolyn wants to touch on what's at the bottom of this.

VEGA: Oh, sure. So this is the first opening of one of five little booklets of a play that Burney wrote. Yeah, which was never staged during her lifetime. So just to give you a little context about like what we're actually looking at here because it's a pretty complex object, I guess. So this play is actually written in five individual hand sewn notebooks, where the covers are actually recycled from a large sort of like packet that would've sent documents, I believe. And then, as you open it up -- Again, this is the first page. So, on the left-hand side of the screen you can see sort of right in the gutter and those have sort of like threads. So this is like part of the binding that we're seeing here. And then, so Burney took this notebook that she sort of like compiled and drafted the text. And then, all of these scraps are additions or revisions that she was incorporating into the text. I really enjoyed opening up the box to look at this in person. There's a kind of hilarious little slip of paper about this big with a typewritten note from an early librarian on it that just says -- What does it say? Beware of straight pens followed by three exclamation points. And you can see, I hope -- I'm not sure if you can see my mouse, but you can see some of the straight pens here in the page. So these are actually fastening on, these little like strips of paper. So Hilary mentioned that, you know, she was recycling letters and other like playbills and other sorts of things and done at the very bottom. So in the lowest part of the page, there is this little strip. So if you sort of turn your head sideways to read, you can see a fragment of what this came from. So it's memorandums, observations and appointments for the year 1788, and little scraps from this like day calendar, sort of appeared throughout these little booklets. And if you take a close look, you -- Well, here's another one of the pens right here. And then if you, again, turn your head sort of sideways, you can see like one of those old appointments. So this was a notebook that was actually used by someone. I think the handwriting looks different than Burney's, but that's, neither nor there for this, so it's sort of canceled. And then, she's turned it to the side and then it's -- It's called cross writing, when you take a piece of paper and like turn it to the side and write against it. So you can still read more easily, I guess, the kind of new text here. So this is just one example of having found and unmoved a sort of like notebook.

HAVENS: And the New York Public Library has a lot of her memorandums. And I know -- I know we're on a quick time schedule. So I'll touch on this letter quickly and then I want to get to the coup de grace. So this letter is from Burney's close family friend, Samuel Crisp, and it's an example of this practice of textual recycling because it's -- Burney actually wrote a sheet of Cecilia on the backside of this letter. And, you know, about a year before Cecilia was published, Samuel Crisp and Burney's father convinced her to suppress her play *The Witlings*, which is actually a very good play. And the fact that Burney's -- That Crisp's letters are actually physically part of the Cecilia manuscript, I think, is material evidence of his significant impact on the text. And he was continuously giving Burney advice on Cecilia. So if we move to the next bit, I don't want to ruin the novel for those of you who haven't read it, but some of the material that Crisp wanted Burney to change had to do with the novel's bittersweet ending. It's a great book, by the way, and you should read it if you haven't. And Burney famously refused to change the ending. But as these heavily deleted passages show, she did change other things probably at Crisp and

her father's behest. And the deleted sections of the manuscript comprise a long episode from the novel's masquerade scene. And in an 18th century masquerade, people would come dressed in costumes and masks. And in the scene, the heroine, who is not in a costume, is surrounded by admirers and one of these is Mr. Monkton, who is already married but wants to marry her anyway when his older wife dies. And he's dressed in a devil costume. And so his, you know, behavior to her is sort of described in a short sentence in the published text, but in the deleted passage, we see this long approximation of satanic rites and it's a really important passage in the Cecilia manuscript and we've recovered it. I recovered it using image manipulation software, similar to that used in Peter Sabor's Oxford edition of the court journals and letters of Frances Burney. And if Carolyn, if you would want to advance it a little bit, we can see some of it on the recovered slide and we see waving this one, as he advanced towards Albina, he pretended to describe around her a magic circle solemnly and with the deep hoarse voice, repeating during the action this incantation. I'm not going to try to approximate that. And then, here a young shepherdess who is watching his motions whispered to a haymaker -- I believe he's talking Latin. Without, however, paying any attention to this remark, he continued to perform his rites. And this is really a tremendous find because there's nothing like it in any of Burney's novels. And imagine if, you know, something like this turned up in an Austen manuscript. It's so strange and weird and wonderful and it really stands apart from Burney's other deletions. She often censored her own satire, her -- you know, fixed her grammar and her characterizations, but that's not the case. It's this detailed expansion of this act of satanic ritualism, set alongside, you know, these sort of comically confused speeches of the other revelers. And within the context of the whole scene, the conversations of the onlookers show that they are indifferent to Monkton's mistreatment of Cecilia. And I think you can read this as a larger criticism of the forms of 18th century society that allowed such things to happen to women. And as far as the language goes, if you look through some of the deletions from the first line, you might recognize the name Albina. Burney had changed the heroine's name from Albina to Cecilia after initial composition. And her imitation of the Coptic language, I would say confirms her almost scientific fascination with exotic linguistic systems and this is something she explored as she helped her father with work such as the present state of music in Germany, the Netherlands and the United provinces. And I'm sure we're getting overtime. So I know we want to save some time for questions.

FOWLER: Yes, we do have one question. I have a question about this fascinating -- the last part -- everything is fascinating but I'm especially fascinated by this last part. Obviously these manuscripts have been around for a couple hundred years. What advances in technology, like you were just speaking about, like specifically, how is that increased -- the level of research you're able to do and the type of research that you're able to do?

HAVENS: So how has the -- How is technology, you know -- Oh, tremendously. I mean, even just having these digital copies of the manuscript. I mean, it's tremendous. I don't have to go to the New York Public Library every time I want to look and see -- see the manuscript. But the high-quality images, the magnification. I mean, if you use image manipulation software, you can change the image contrasts and that can help you recover some of this deleted text. I mean, if

you're really fancy, I was reading about, you know, Marie Antoinette's letters, you know? You can use sort of like special x-rays. I don't know if you guys have those yet, but that's -- Maybe that's sort of the future.

FOWLER: That's fantastic. Thanks. Can you speak a little bit with what the opportunities are for teaching with 18th century manuscripts?

HAVENS: Absolutely. That's a great question. I often have in my 18th century classes, my students do a transcription of a page or two of 18th century writing and I treat it as an editing assignment. It's a -- an exercise in, you know, reading handwriting and paleography. But also, you know, finding things that are unclear and sort of noting them or glossing them as many critical editions do today. And I also teach some digital humanities and sort of digital approaches to the humanities. And I am -- Next semester, we'll have an assignment like that but also include a component where the annotations and sort of the tagging that the students have to do is through the special software called Oxygen XML editor that allows it to then be displayed as a, a sort of a website or in HTML.

FOWLER: That's excellent. Thank you. Paleography is definitely hot down here in the Map Division as well, lately. We have some questions from the audience. This might be for either of you. Are there any records at the Morgan of where the feigned hand manuscript of Evelina came from? I wish we could track down the remainder.

VEGA: Sure. So, I don't have the catalog record in front of me right now, but I looked at it just very recently and there is a note that it was acquired by Pierpont Morgan, I believe, in the first 10 years of the 20th century. But if you're interested in learning more about the feigned hand, you can go to their website which is www.themorgan.org and then just do a quick keyword search for Evelina manuscript and it should come up with an image in the catalogue description as well.

FOWLER: Great. Thank you, Carolyn. Hilary, this is definitely for you. How will you handle these complicated variations in your addition of Cecilia?

HAVENS: Yeah. And I don't know if I mentioned it. I'm one of a few editors, and a number of them are here too, editing Burney's novels for a new edition with Cambridge University Press and I'm working on Cecilia. And I think my answer to the question is to be determined. I have to, I think -- I think the group of editors have to decide how much of this we want, if we want an entire transcription of the manuscript. I think having the deletions is really interesting, though. And if we don't include all of them as sort of part of, you know, a full transcription of the manuscript, I think at the very least, some of the best parts, I'll put it in an appendix. So, you know, recovering this text, though it's time consuming. So there's sort of a balance, but definitely the deleted masquerade scene, I think it's wonderful.

FOWLER: That's all very fascinating. I love those glimpses into the broader societal and cultural things that kind of don't make it into the final version. Here's a question about the Norfolk ladies memorandum book. Is it unique? Are there other memorandum books? Can you just tell us more about them in general, I guess?

HAVENS: I mean, maybe this is more for Carolyn. But I think it's -- I think it's a -- I think it's a pretty common practice to sort of like combine sort of the best images and sort of snippets of text. It's sort of like a mixtape, right? Is that --

VEGA: Yeah, I think that's a nice way to describe it. And there's also -- I'm just looking back at my notes because the engraving is actually like advertised on the title page of the memorandum book as -- As being embellished with a beautiful descriptive play representing an interesting scene from Cecilia, designed by Burney and engraved by Walker. So this is -- a fairly common kind of component to enliven a memorandum book like this.

FOWLER: We have a great question here. We only have a few minutes but I feel like this could be a whole panel discussion. Should the revisions to F.B.'s works after initial publication be seen as different works, especially in the case of *The Wanderer*, where the changes were substantial?

HAVENS: And maybe -- And maybe this person who asked the question, maybe they mean *Camilla* because that was the one I think Burney revised the most significantly. But I think, you know, again, I think it's important to, you know, keep being mindful of, you know, author's changes. But you're right, the *Camilla* edition is really substantially different and I'll be interested to know how George Justice, who will be editing *Camilla* for Cambridge, will do it. I would say I would still consider the same book, but I think there have been some really good examples of great additions, especially through Cambridge. But of Stern, of Richardson, of Austen, that have been mindful of changes made before publication and after publication and they've been able to track them through the notes ends and appendices, especially the Cambridge edition of Jane Austen has like full transcriptions in the later manuscript section of what exactly those manuscripts look like. So yeah, I think -- I think doing it that way would be sort of a mindful way to balance, you know, to give people a taste of those revisions while, you know, doing them within the context of the initially published work. Yeah.

FOWLER: That's great. Any closing remarks before I wrap it up? Ok. Thank you everyone for joining us for Doc Chat. This has been, as always, an amazing episode. I'm putting a bunch of links in the chat. This is where you can watch our past Doc Chat episodes. Make sure to sign up for next week's episode, which I will ease in just a little bit. We have a research newsletter where you can keep track of all goings on throughout the three research Libraries here at NYPL. And also, please follow us on social media. That is it for this episode. We will also be sending links to these collection items and other resources, along with a video and a transcript of today's episode to your email, shortly after we get it all together. And then, we'll give out to all registrees. All previous episodes can be found at the link that I just provided in the chat. And

Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. In our next episode, the Mapleson cylinders, listening to a treasure. Jonathan Hiam of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and Jon Samuels, audio engineer and owner of Recorded Legacy, discuss the Mapleson cylinders featured in the library's newly opened Polonsky exhibition of the New York Public Library's treasures. Hiam and Samuels will discuss the preservation and restoration of the many historical audio formats held by NYPL. And the link register for that is in the chat. Thank you all so very much for coming and we will see you next week for some treasured cylinders.