

“THE DARTS TO WOUND WITH ENDLESS LOVE!”
ON HANNAH COWLEY’S RESPONSE TO FRANCES BURNEY’S
*EVELINA*¹

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ABSTRACT

The paper traces the intertextual echoes of Frances Burney’s debut novel, *Evelina*, in *The Belle’s Stratagem*, a play by Burney’s contemporary Hannah Cowley. The latter was certainly an avid admirer of Burney. In one of her poems she pays tribute to the novelist and praises her ability to achieve uncommon subtlety in the depiction of characters in her writing: “What pen but Burney’s .../... draws from nature with a skill so true” (Escott 2012: 38). The paper, however, argues that the connection between the writers and their literary productions goes much further than the obeisance paid to Burney in Cowley’s admiring verses. The congruence between the plots of *Evelina* and *The Belle’s Stratagem*, and, in some instances, the very wording used in the two texts, poses immediate questions about its significance in Cowley’s popular play (which was first produced in 1780, two years after the publication of Burney’s debut). The conclusions suggest that Cowley deliberately drew Burney’s novel into a discussion on viable models of femininity and matrimony in contemporary society. But they also point to a wider phenomenon, namely, the extent to which the relationship between the eighteenth-century theatre and novel was reciprocal. While several recent studies discuss the influence of the theatre on the novel, little has been said on the importance of the novel for the development of the contemporary drama. This new reading of Cowley’s *The Belle’s Stratagem* as a response to Burney’s *Evelina* shows the immediacy with which a literary dialogue could be opened by authors and appreciated by audiences on the vibrant eighteenth-century cultural scene.

Keywords: Eighteenth-century novel; eighteenth-century drama; women writers; Frances Burney; Hannah Cowley.

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1. Introduction

The eighteenth-century playwright Hannah Cowley was certainly an avid admirer of Frances Burney. In one of her poems she pays tribute to the novelist and praises her ability to achieve uncommon subtlety in the depiction of characters in her writing: “What pen but Burney’s .../... draws from nature with a skill so true?” (quoted in Escott 2012: 38).³ I would like to argue, however, that the connection between the writers and their literary productions goes much further than the obeisance paid to Burney in Cowley’s eulogizing verses. In her play *The Belle’s Stratagem*, for instance, when the hero, Doricourt, observes the portrait of his intended but as yet unloved bride, Letitia, he sighs: “*Ma foi!* The painter has hit her off. The downcast eye—the blushing cheek—timid—apprehensive—bashful” (III, 1, 35).⁴ His words seem to recall the poem written in Burney’s *Evelina*, in which the heroine was commended as the perfect beauty and the queen of belles in Bristol Hotwells:

See last advance, with bashful grace,
Downcast eye, and blushing cheek,
Timid air, and beauteous face,
Anville, - whom the Graces seek.

(Burney 2004 [1778]: 370)

The congruence poses immediate questions about the significance of Doricourt’s words in this popular play, which was first produced in 1780, two years after the publication of Burney’s *Evelina*. But it also poses a wider question: although a fascinating discussion has recently explored the influence of theatre on the eighteenth-century novel, few studies have examined whether the relationship was reciprocal. This paper sets out to open a debate on the possible ways in which Frances Burney’s *Evelina* may have played a role in Hannah Cowley’s writing for the stage. Firstly, it examines the implications of the striking similarity between the poem in Burney’s *Evelina* and Doricourt’s words in *The Belle’s Stratagem* for the interpretation of the play. Secondly, it investigates this intertextual relation between the novel and the play as a means of immediate literary reception and an important characteristic feature of the late eighteenth-century artistic scene in London.

³ The poem in this version remains in the manuscript form, housed by the British Library. It is quoted by Angela Escott in her biography of Hannah Cowley, where Escott estimates it to have been written before 1793. A different version of the poem can be found in *The Works of Mrs Cowley, Dramas and Poems* (Escott 2012: 108).

⁴ All quotes from the play are cited from the 1782 edition of *The Belle’s Stratagem* by Hannah Cowley (London: T. Cadell). The parenthetical references to the play provide the number of the act and scene, followed by the page number.

It is, of course, impossible to determine whether Doricourt’s words in *The Belle’s Stratagem* are a deliberate echo of the poem in *Evelina*, but circumstances certainly tempt us to make such an interpretation. Cowley’s play was written soon after *Evelina* had come out and became an instantaneous bestseller among the London *bon ton* and literary circles. It is fair to suppose that Cowley read it. The question remains whether in 1780 she could indeed count on her audience to pick up this reference to the acclaimed novel, and if so, what significance it would have carried. One answer to this last question might be that with her play Cowley was entering an on-going literary discussion over the definition of the most desirable characters in women and men, and the plausibility of two such social perfections being joined in a companionate marriage. Perhaps she was acknowledging that Burney had voiced an opinion on this subject by presenting the story of *Evelina* and Lord Orville. If so, perhaps Cowley wanted her audience to keep this story in mind while watching her own rendition of the love theme between a man of the *ton* and an innocent girl. Both the novel and the play close with a happy ending and a marriage of the worthy couple, yet – and especially when read as a literary dialogue – their cheerful conclusions seem rather less reassuring than they may initially seem. The contrasting and complementary histories of Letitia Hardy and *Evelina* Anville, as we shall see, combine to show that the companionate marriage with which both heroines are eventually rewarded is in fact more of an illusory mirage than a real possibility. Such a reading of Cowley’s *The Belle’s Stratagem* as a response to Burney’s *Evelina* not only points to new interpretations of the play, but it also shows the immediacy with which a literary dialogue could be opened by contemporary authors and appreciated by their audiences.

2. What are “the darts to wound with endless love”?

The first meetings for both Orville and *Evelina*, and Doricourt and Letitia are rather unpromising. The ladies’ modesty reveals itself in both young women as silent bashfulness, and is promptly read by the gentlemen as unattractive awkwardness. Both Letitia and *Evelina* are awed by the fashionable men who are presented to them as prospective partners (Lord Orville at first only as a dancing partner). Orville’s initial assessment of *Evelina* does not speak much interest on his side: “A poor, weak girl”, he describes her to Sir Clement Willoughby, though he allows her to be “pretty” and “modest-looking” (Burney 2004 [1778]: 39). *Evelina* soon recognizes that she had not made much of an impression on her fashionable partner when the next day he finds it sufficient to enquire after her health through a servant, and sees no need to trouble himself with a visit. In fact, had chance not thrown them together several more times,

their acquaintance would have very likely ended with this one dance, and with no regrets on the gentleman's side.

Doricourt is, of course, in a very different situation. Letitia's hand was promised him when they were both children by the agreement of their fathers, who wished to combine their separate fortunes. Further, a clause was added for security which stated that whoever broke the engagement would lose their fortune. Thus money bound the couple together and made it in their interest to like each other. While Letitia does indeed like Doricourt when they meet for the first time as adults, Doricourt is decidedly less impressed. He can find no fault with the lady's person, but then beauty is, according to him, a less important asset in a woman. He would have agreed with Lord Orville that a woman may look like an angel, but it signifies little if she is a silent one (Burney 2004 [1778]: 38).

What both Doricourt and Orville need to learn in the course of their stories is that the veil of passive modesty which a woman presents to the world is only a veil, and with skill it can be lifted. In *Evelina*, as Gina Campbell points out, Burney contrasts three men's ways of reading the heroine: those of her guardian Villars, the rake Willoughby, and Lord Orville. Both Mr Villars and Sir Clement err in different ways in their interpretation of Evelina, and their main fault is that they make over-rash judgements based on her outward behaviour without enquiring into the conflicts of her heart. Only Lord Orville (and only after a few meetings) shows true gentlemanly delicacy by allowing time to explain the circumstances which cast doubt on Evelina's moral conduct (Campbell 1990: 557–583). But even he, as we have seen, would have dropped Evelina's acquaintance after one evening and remembered her merely as a pretty little rustic.

Evelina's extreme bashfulness may have perplexed readers in the same way as it confounds the characters who form her acquaintance in the novel. In the first months after the anonymous publication of *Evelina*, Burney recorded the responses to the book of all the readers who shared their views with her, while they were still unaware who its author was. In March 1778, for instance, her cousin Richard, Burney reports, "could talk of nothing else! His Encomiums gave me double the pleasure ... because I was sure they were sincere, as he convinced me that he had not the most distant idea of suspicion [who the author was], by finding great fault with Evelina herself for her bashfulness with such a man as Lord Orville, 'a man, continued he ... who is so elegant, so refined'" (Burney 1994: 7). Burney's cousin Richard truly admired the book, but he found Evelina's extraordinary timidity quite unaccountable even after he had finished the book and read all the effusions of the heroine's heart. Richard Burney, perhaps as well as other readers (Hannah Cowley possibly among them), may have felt it unlikely that, in real life, a well-bred young man would have displayed as much patience and perseverance as Lord Orville to decipher the character of a timid young girl met by mere chance. Of course, in Burney's novel, the young people are granted

time and opportunity for such disclosures in the series of coincidences which throw them together, allow them to renew their acquaintance, and correct their judgement of each other. As a result, Evelina’s reward in Lord Orville’s heart seems gained as much by the strength of her own character, as by his ability to discern it, and by the lucky chance which gives her time to reveal it. But what if the woman cannot count on extra time for unfolding the loveliness of her inner self? Or, if the man, though he may have all the potential of Lord Orville, has not yet his maturity, and there is no time for such maturity to develop?

It is precisely these questions that Hannah Cowley seems to be posing in her *The Belle’s Stratagem*. The hero of the play, Doricourt, like Lord Orville, is a perfect young man of fashion: nice in his manners, witty in conversation, steady in his friendships, and honourable in his notions. But on his travels to the Continent, he seems to have acquired foreign tastes not only in fashion, which “set the whole Ton in a ferment [to become] a la mode de Doricourt” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* I, 1, 4), but also in his appreciation of women. Female beauty he holds to be of little importance if unaccompanied by the charms of wit and vivacity. “English beauty”, he smirks, “[t]is insipidity, it wants the zest, it wants poignancy”. And he goes on to explain to his friend Saville, that in Italy and France, a woman “indebted to nature for no one thing but a pair of decent eyes” could “make ten conquests in stepping from her carriage”, and command a train of admirers “which would satisfy three dozen of [English] first-rate toasts” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* I, 3, 9). Little wonder that Doricourt is disappointed with the bashful Evelina-like figure that he sees in Letitia on their first meeting.

It is during the second appointed visit to the Hardys, while waiting for Letitia, that Doricourt observes her portrait and makes his outburst: “Ma foi! The painter has hit her off. The downcast eye—the blushing cheek—timid—apprehensive—bashful” (*The Belle’s Stratagem*, III, 1, 35). Significantly, the “ma foi” expression is – in Burney’s novel – a trademark utterance of Madame Duval, Evelina’s grandmother. She also comes to London after years spent in France, and she too reads her granddaughter’s artlessness as awkward country airs. Of course, Doricourt’s “ma foi” could be just a trite phrase of the kind an Englishman might use to persuade his company of his cosmopolitan skills. He could just as well have inserted *Sacré bleu* or *Alors* elsewhere in his speech. But he does not, and it may be that *ma foi* had by 1780 become so much connected with Burney’s character of Madame Duval that for the polite audience of the theatre it immediately brought the association to mind. Burney’s journal entries for the years 1778 and 1779 suggest that such could have been indeed the case.

Once her novel became a truly fashionable bestseller, Burney meticulously reported all the reactions of the bon ton she could hear of. Along with instances of lavish praise, she recorded that some of the London fashion setters amused themselves by impersonating characters from *Evelina*. On 20th July 1778, for

instance, she mentions that her father's letter from Streatham describes the hostess, Mrs Thrale, as "full of *ma foi's* jokes" (Burney 1994: 57). Hester Thrale, who was later to become Burney's close friend, did not at the time know who had written the novel. By September of the same year Burney had already been revealed as the author of *Evelina* to Charles Burney's close acquaintance, and Frances herself became part of the Streatham circle. In a letter from Streatham to her sister dated 16–21st September, she notes that Mrs Thrale described to Samuel Johnson how "Mrs. Cholmondeley was acting Madame Duval all over the Town" (Burney 1994: 149). By the end of the year Burney had also become acquainted with Mary Cholmondeley, a fashionable London hostess, and could see for herself what Hester Thrale meant. In January 1779 she noted a conversation between Mrs Cholmondeley and Lord Harcourt as follows:

Upon Lord Harcourt's again paying Mrs. Cholmondeley some Compliment, she said "Well, my Lord, after this I shall be quite sublime for some Days! I sha'n't descend into common Life till—till Saturday,—and then, I shall drop into the vulgar style,—I shall be in—the *ma foi* way (Burney 1994: 230).

It appears that *ma foi* had become by 1780, at least in the London fashionable circles, a phrase easily associated with Burney's character of *Evelina's* vulgar grandmother. If so, it is tempting to suppose that Hannah Cowley deliberately used the phrase to create a multilayered reference to Burney's novel. But for what purpose?

The truly elegant Doricourt is not, of course, to be straightforwardly compared to Madame Duval who, after all, is merely a "frenchified" English barmaid and passes for a Parisian gentlewoman largely thanks to expensive lace, pin-on curls, and affectation in her speech. But at this point in the play, Doricourt's attention to surface graces and his inability to look deeper into the person's character show him to be guilty of similar faults as *Evelina's* grandmother. During his travels on the Continent, he has acquired some superficial French airs and phrases that make him snobbishly critical, but they have failed to teach him to discern the true character and virtues of a woman like Letitia. His impromptu verse spoken in front of Letitia's portrait, almost like an answer to the poem in Burney's novel, acquires rather interesting undertones:

Give me a woman in whose touching mien
A mind, a soul, a polished art is seen;
Whose motion speaks, whose poignant air can move.
Such are the darts to wound with endless love

(*The Belle's Stratagem* III, 1, 35).

Doricourt clearly wishes for one of the “Marquizas” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* I, 3, 9) or fashion lionesses from the “circle dans la place Victoire” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* II, 1, 20), and dismisses Letitia’s artlessness as awkward, rather rustic, and decidedly unappealing. Madame Duval is similarly disappointed with Evelina’s manners, and insists that her granddaughter should accompany her to Paris to have her rough country edges rounded off, and to acquire some true polish in her deportment. Of course, Madame Duval is, as all readers of *Evelina* know, beyond the reach of reason, and her notions cannot be reformed. Doricourt, on the other hand, is merely over-rash in his judgements, and has yet to learn that first impressions, or even second impressions, are often very misleading. Letitia, by contrast has the maturity and penetration to perceive that this fault in Doricourt’s understanding can be amended with time and by experience. But there is no time for Letitia and Doricourt to meet on numerous occasions so that he could discover the true value of the lady’s character. The couple have only one day in which to make a decision whether to marry. In such circumstances, Cowley seems to say, it is best if the woman takes matters in her hands. Letitia needs to shed the bashfulness and timid air, dismiss the blushing cheek, and keep her eye straight on the target, rather than downcast.

To win Doricourt’s heart, Letitia contrives an interesting plan: she intends to first disgust him by assuming the character of a vulgar country girl, only to charm him with elegant conversation later, during a masquerade. Her reasoning in adopting this risky scheme is that it is much easier to arouse in a man passionate admiration for an unknown woman (Letitia meets Doricourt in disguise during the masquerade) when she is contrasted with an object not merely of tepid indifference but of his active abhorrence. The stratagem, needless to say, proves successful, mainly thanks to Letitia’s acting skills, but also because she can command the help of her well-wishing family and friends: her father plays a crucial part in the game. With such support, it appears, a woman can take risks and “emerge ... from [her] natural reserve: she can throw off the veil that [hides her]” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* V, 5, 81).

It is interesting to observe further how Letitia explains her metamorphosis to the incredulous Doricourt in the final section of the play. When they first met, she asserts, “[t]he timidity of the English character threw a veil over [her], [which he] could not penetrate” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* V, 5, 81). Doricourt, like Lord Orville during his first dance with Evelina, could not discern the true character of the woman he saw before him because it was hidden beneath a veil of bashfulness. Modesty in a woman proves a useful mask she habitually wears to remain respectable. Such a mask may be convenient because it wards off potential charges of misdemeanour in its wearer but, on occasion, it may ward off a potential admirer, too. If everyone speaks and acts by the rote of prescribed manners, any social interaction becomes a peculiar masquerade where all wear

the same outfit. This is precisely the diagnosis of the fashionable world presented by Sir George Touchwood in Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*: "In the same select party, you will often find the wife of a Bishop and a Sharper, of an Earl and a Fiddler. In short, 'tis one universal masquerade, all disguised in the same habits and manners" (II, 1, 27). Sir George may be somewhat old-fashioned in his notions, particularly regarding the preservation of rank, but his words seem to repeat the same conclusion which can be drawn from the story of Letitia and Doricourt: a mask of bashful modesty can be worn by all, and by its very sameness it has become meaningless, and, crucially for a woman wishing to attract an intelligent man, uninteresting.

The question then remains: how can a woman reveal her own intriguing character from beneath the veil of modesty without risking her reputation. Both Cowley and Burney present their own answers to this dilemma. Cowley's Letitia chooses how and when to show herself to Doricourt. The conventions of stage comedy allow Cowley to concoct the most unlikely of plans and make it work for her heroine. The main trope of the most popular late eighteenth-century English comedies comprised of schemes and counter-schemes contrived by the characters, and weaved around misunderstandings between them. All, of course, ended happily, usually with a marriage. The striking difference in Cowley's plays is that the main controlling agents in her plots are women. As one of her contemporary critics observed in 1783: "[i]t is rather an unfair, though perhaps allowable prejudice in Mrs Cowley, always to make her women her great objects".⁵ It was, apparently, "allowable" in a woman playwright to let her imagination loose and think up fantastical plots, where the most fantastical of all is the fact that a woman is in control. Thus, Cowley's women-centered comedies at once perpetuate and challenge the patriarchal status quo when they conclude that only in a comedy can a woman choose her husband to her liking, and be supported in her schemes by her family.

The exhilarating freedom with which Letitia plans and executes her stratagems contrast poignantly with Evelina's struggle to remain behind the veil of modesty and yet do justice to her own character. Burney's heroine has far too much of what Letitia calls "the natural reserve", and "the timidity of the English character" (*The Belle's Stratagem* V, 5, 81) to contrive any plot. Even the final meeting between Evelina and her reformed father, Sir John Belmont, is effected almost against her will. Burney has Evelina reveal herself to the readers through the content and art of composition she exhibits in her letters.⁶ But it is very

⁵ From the review in *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 3 March 1783. Quoted by Angela Escott in *'The Celebrated Hannah Cowley': Experiments in the dramatic genre, 1776–1794* (2012: 42).

⁶ Many scholars have explored Burney's rendition of the epistolary form in her debut novel. Perhaps the first to point out Evelina's conscious self-creation in her letters to Arthur Villars was Julia Epstein in *The Iron Pen. Frances Burney and the Politics of Women Writing* (1989).

interesting also to observe how she shows her true self to the world around her and to Lord Orville in particular, who, of course, has no access to her writing.

In the first place and most commonly, Evelina’s feelings manifest themselves in the involuntary reactions of her body, such as blushing, fainting, or even laughing. Such was, for instance, the case when she could not suppress a burst of laughter on seeing the confusion of Lord Orville contrasted with the ludicrous foppery of the affronted Lovel during her first meeting with them both. These bodily signs, when observed by Lord Orville, indicate to him that some thoughts and feeling traverse through Evelina’s head and heart underneath the modest veil of silence, but they are not easy to interpret. In fact, as we later find out, Orville could not quite determine whether Evelina’s burst of laughter should be classed as ignorance or mischievousness (Burney 2004 [1778]: 39). It was, of course, neither: it merely showed her quick sense of humour, and intelligent judgement, which she felt too constrained to display earlier, when Orville attempted a conversation with her and “fatigued [himself] with fruitless endeavours to entertain her” (Burney 2004 [1778]: 39). On other occasions, Evelina’s unconscious responses display her true sensibility and moral backbone.⁷ The two instances when she acts most courageously and without regarding the company around her, she does so on impulse, without thinking. Such is the case when she involuntarily stands up to help the old woman who tripped during the infamous footrace initiated by Lord Merton; and again when she follows the hapless Macartney, wrenches the pistols out of his hands, and saves his life.

Lord Orville, luckily, is on hand to observe most of these spontaneous manifestations of Evelina’s character, and in time, puts them all together to interpret correctly her truly elegant and well-informed mind. The final happy ending of the novel brings relief to the readers, who have been keenly anticipating a conclusion which would unite the young couple. However, just as in Cowley’s play, the gratifying resolution of Evelina’s perplexities points to the slim chances of such a finale to take place in real life. The favourable combination of time, chance, and the gentleman’s sagacity, are as likely to coincide as Letitia’s fantastical plan to end in success. Thus contrasted with Cowley’s play, the conclusion of Evelina’s story seems more bitter than it is sweet. Letitia’s boldness could only win Doricourt’s heart in a play, and Evelina’s modesty could only captivate Lord Orville in a novel. In other words, a woman can truly execute her plan, or display her true character only in a work of fiction.

⁷ In her study on Burney’s investment in the theatrical dramas, Emily Hodgson Anderson explores the key trope of fainting performed by each of Burney’s heroines. She then discusses these moments of unconsciousness as forms of silent expressions of the heroine’s feelings, which Burney chose not to pronounce in the more explicit form of an organised speech by the protagonist, or of the narrator’s assessment of the situation (2009: 46–76).

Reading Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* alongside Burney's *Evelina* shows the two literary works in a dialogue over the question of the chances for a happy union between two truly deserving young people. Cowley's play seems to complement *Evelina's* message with additional commentary, to more forcibly demonstrate that a happy marriage is more a literary trope than part of daily life. And *Evelina* is by no means the only literary production evoked in the play. Gillian Russell argues, for instance, that *The Belle's Stratagem* is aimed as a challenge to the representation of women in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (2007: 222–223). Cowley herself often claimed that her comedies continued the celebrated tradition of Farquahar, Cibber, and Congreve.⁸ The references in *The Belle's Stratagem* to Burney's *Evelina* may in fact create an interesting double layer of intertextual allusion to Congreve's *Love For Love*, the play *Evelina* sees in London with her fashionable friends. In Burney's novel, as James E. Evans suggests, the heroine's, Lord Orville's, and Mrs Mirvan's comments on the performance contribute to the wider process of reworking and re-appropriation of the reformation comedy for late eighteenth-century audiences. Evans shows how Burney in *Evelina* and Richard Brinsley Sheridan in his plays successfully adopted Congreve to create literary products more attuned to their contemporaries' tastes: the indecencies were deleted, cuckolding only hinted at, and the witty repartees softened in their acerbic satire (2011: 157–166). Of all Congreve's characters, only Angelica is commended by *Evelina's* party in the theatre box, but even her spirited raillery against her foolish uncle is seen as blot on her otherwise admirable character. Miss Prue, a vulgar and uneducated country girl in Congreve's play, is compared to *Evelina* only as a nasty joke by the fop Lovel. In fact, as Evans points out, for any of Congreve's characters to be viewed sympathetically and gain *Evelina's* or Lord Orville's approbation in the novel, they would need to undergo a considerable revision (2011: 159–160).

In *The Belle's Stratagem*, Cowley seems to present her version of just such a revision: her Doricourt is a more honourable and more innocent version of Congreve's Valentine (they even both feign madness to gain the woman they love, though with somewhat different effects), and Letitia, though she can enact a convincing rendition of Miss Prue if needs be, may also appear a bashful *Evelina* to the world, or charm as a softened but highly eloquent Angelica during the masquerade. Thus, Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*, by means of a multi-layered literary dialogue, allows for the following conclusion to be drawn: however commendable the character of Burney's *Evelina* may be, a woman who emulates it at all times, who can never reveal any traits of Congreve's Angelica, or threaten with a hint of Miss Prue, may in fact diminish her chances of attracting an intelligent man. The "veil of timidity", if it is never lifted, enshrines women and denies them any power of action. Then, Cowley's reasoning goes further to

⁸ For instance, in the preface to *The Town Before You* (Cowley 2015 [1795]: x).

insist that in the patriarchal society where timidity and bashfulness straightjacket women in daily life, not only must women forgo their chances of happiness in love, but men, too, must lose out on domestic comfort.

Letitia in Cowley’s play makes a powerful case for a companionate marriage as not merely an answer to the woman’s romantic notions but also as a means of long-lasting happiness for the man. An unloved and unfulfilled wife will make it the business of her life to plague her husband. “If my Husband should prove a Churl, a Fool, or a Tyrant, I’d break his heart, ruin his fortune, elope with the first pretty Fellow that ask’d me”, Letitia teases Doricourt during the masquerade. She then goes on to paint a tantalizing picture of the delights awaiting the man who is loved by his wife: she would be “anything – and all! ... live with him in the eye of fashion, or in the shade of retirement, feast with him in an Esquimaux hut ... join him in the victorious war-dance on the borders of Lake Ontario, or sleep to the soft breathings of the flute in the cinnamon groves of Ceylon—dig with him in the mines of Golconda, or enter the dangerous precincts of the Mogul’s Seraglio” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* IV, 1, 58–59).

An unhappy wife, it may be concluded, will play the stereotypical part of a prude turned harlot, and plunge herself and her family into disrepute.⁹ By contrast, a wife in love with her husband will defy stereotypes, and will “be anything and all”: ready to display the masculine strength of a warrior or a miner if needs be, or lovingly soothe her husband into the state of earthly paradise. In the closing scene of the play, Letitia repeats to Doricourt: “I can be anything, chuse then my character—your taste shall fix it” (*The Belle’s Stratagem* V, 5, 81). It seems a promise of delightful felicity, but it is also a warning of hell on earth, should the man deserve it. In patriarchal society, Letitia seems to say, marriage is a double-edged sword: while only the man has the power of choice, he always gets his just desserts. Thus, discerning men gain the bliss of affectionate companions, and fools pave the way for their own ruin.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that a woman’s character, despite the fixed mask of modesty and bashfulness displayed to the world from an early age, is far from set. On the contrary, it is malleable and will be moulded by circumstances. The less control a man exerts over his wife and the more freedom he gives her to make her own choices, the more likely she is to remain in love with him and ensure that their domestic happiness continues. To demonstrate this point,

⁹ Interestingly, this point is much more seriously argued later by Mr Bennet in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, when he advises Elizabeth against a union with a man she could not love or respect. It is of course impossible to determine whether Austen consciously develops Cowley’s point in her novel, although we know that she was familiar with the playwright’s output – Hannah Cowley’s plays are familiarly referred to in Austen’s letters (Amy 2015: 268) and they were performed during Austen’s youth in Steventon home theatricals as it is asserted by her biographers, the Austen-Leighs (2006 [1913]: 50).

Cowley compliments the plot of Letitia and Doricourt with a subplot of a recently married couple just arrived in town: Sir George and Lady Touchwood.

Sir George, as his surname indicates, would rather err on the side of caution than take the risk of allowing his wife to roam the London jungle of the bon ton unassisted. His excessive fondness for Lady Frances, moreover, is apt to turn into jealousy of all objects she might favour with her attention, or even into cruelty towards them. He did, we are told, let his wife's favourite bullfinch out of its cage and allowed it to fly off into the London sky. Predictably, the bird, used only to captivity, soon met its death. The fate of the hapless bullfinch is, of course, a metaphor for the lot Sir George is preparing for his own wife by denying her any freedom of choice, and by screening her from any experience she might use to develop her own mature judgement of the world. In fact, the guileless Lady Frances only narrowly escapes the snares of the libertine Courtall, who schemes to abduct and rape her, merely to win a bet.

Luckily, Sir George sees this experience as a lesson which proves that excessive caution may court more danger than trust and freedom ever do. A woman whose judgement is trusted will trust herself to use it. And there is no better guardian for the woman's virtue than her own self, as Seraphina, another of Cowley's strong female characters, proudly pronounces in *A School for Greybeards* (V, 4, 71). Lady Frances, as Saville explains to Sir George, "was born to be the ornament of Courts" (*The Belle's Stratagem* V, 5, 77). The same could be said about Letitia and Evelina. But for all these virtuous women to survive in the fashionable circles of high life, and with their reputation unscathed, they need to daily employ shrewd judgement. Mere artlessness and innocence will not save them from the likes of the unprincipled Courtall, rakish Willoughby, or brutal Lord Merton. They need to think and act for themselves. Sir George and Doricourt both learn to accept this as part of their marriage agreement in *The Belle's Stratagem*, just as Lord Orville finally recognizes that he needs to give up the claims of superior judgement and submit to Evelina's discernment when he exclaims: "Miss Anville, I am sure, cannot form a wish against propriety, I will ask no questions, I will rely upon her own purity, and uninformed, blindfold as I am, I will serve her with all my power" (Burney 2004 [1778]: 354).

3. Conclusions

In *The Belle's Stratagem*, Hannah Cowley combines two plots: of Letitia and Doricourt, and of the newly married Touchwoods, to argue more powerfully for the need of the woman's intellectual emancipation within a companionate marriage. Moreover, as we have seen, the play, by means of intertextual relations, draws into the discussion, as allies, other contemporary texts. This

wider context shows both the plays and the novel in a dynamic interaction with each other. The references to *Evelina*, as present in *The Belle’s Stratagem*, not only enhance the interpretation of the play itself, but point to the eighteenth-century literary scene in London as a very close-knit circle of artists and audiences. It is perhaps no wonder, especially when we consider that only two theatrical venues were in possession of the royal license at the time, and that the newly emerging genre of novelistic publications, which, though steadily growing in number, still comprised relatively few titles.¹⁰ The fashionable audience enjoyed both novels and plays, and spent a significant proportion of their daily routine on leisure. Inevitably, the same people read the new publications and attended the theatre. Both the theatrical audience and readers in their homes could be then counted on to read the intertextuality between novels and plays, and enjoy it.

Further, the very claim that dramatists and novelists often made at the time – that their texts aim to delineate contemporary “life, manners and characters” (Burney 1991 [1814]: 4) – perhaps meant that intertextuality and self-reference were necessarily part of the literary production and reception processes. This immediacy in the response of one genre to the other resulted most spectacularly in the evolution of the novel, which at the time developed new techniques of narrative construction and character depiction. Burney, for instance, as Francesca Saggini (2012) and Emily Hodgson Anderson (2009) have recently shown, was very much indebted to theatre in structuring both the sequence of events and dramatic effects of her narratives.¹¹ Her successful experiments with free indirect discourse, Marcie Frank maintains, owed much to the contrasts achieved in plays between the characters’ speeches addressed to each other and the asides spoken out of each other’s hearing (2015: 625–627). These important formal solutions notwithstanding, Burney’s very characters and plot lines, as Saggini demonstrates, are often infused with allusions to and influences from the contemporary drama (2012: 77–80). But, if the novel, as the modern scholarship amply testifies, drew so much inspiration from theatre, it is only fair to suppose that dramatists, in turn, would refract the novelistic plots and characters back onto their own productions. Hannah Cowley certainly admired Burney’s debut novel. She may have seen it as a tribute to Burney and a challenge for herself to engage by means of her own new production in a dialogue with this fashionable contemporary bestseller. If Cowley’s audiences

¹⁰ John Feather has recently estimated that “in the 1770’s, the annual average output [of novels published in Britain] was about thirty; in the 1780’s it rose to forty, and in 1790’s it rose to seventy” (2016: 292).

¹¹ See especially Saggini’s full length study *Backstage in the Novel. Frances Burney and the Theater Arts* (2012).

recognized the references to *Evelina* at the time, it would have certainly added to their enjoyment of the play. Perhaps then Frances Burney had some share in promoting the popularity of *The Belle's Stratagem*, which became one of the most frequently played mainpiece performances in London for decades after its first production.¹²

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¹² Angela Escott maintains that Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* was among the twelve most frequently acted plays, of which only five were "new plays" written by contemporary authors (2012: 33).

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