

‘TO BE CHOSEN, NOT OFFERED’: AN INTRODUCTION TO SARAH HARRIET BURNEY’S *TRAITS OF NATURE* (1812)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the social dimension of the family novel *Traits of Nature* (1812), which was written by the half-sister of the celebrated authoress Frances Burney, Sarah Harriet Burney (1775-1844), who also produced *Clarentine* (1796), *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808), *Tales of Fancy* (1816) and *The Romance of Private Life* (1839). For this purpose, we will briefly contextualize this work and follow the approach of gender studies and the Burney Studies. The aim here is to explore how family relationships are articulated and the effect of violent and social ostracism on the heroine. Through a number of repetitions and parallelisms, the novel depicts patriarchal abuses, which is responded with violence and rebellion. In *Traits of Nature*, Sarah Harriet does not only vindicate her female condition, but also offers a grim vision of social relationships, which must be taken into account in the Burney Studies and singles her out from other women writers of the period.

Keywords: Sarah Harriet Burney, gender studies, eighteenth-century studies, British literature, patriarchal violence.

Resumen

Este trabajo analiza la dimensión social de la novela familiar *Traits of Nature* (1812), escrita por Sarah Harriet Burney (1775-1844), hermanastra de la famosa Frances Burney y que también escribió *Clarentine* (1796), *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808), *Tales of Fancy* (1816) y *The Romance of Private Life* (1839). Con este propósito, contextualizaremos brevemente esta obra y seguiremos el enfoque de los estudios de género y Burney Studies. Se trata de explorar cómo se articulan las relaciones familiares y el efecto del violento ostracismo social en la heroína. A través de repeticiones y paralelismos, la novela retrata abusos patriarcales que tienen como respuesta la violencia y rebelión. En *Traits of Nature*, Sarah Harriet no solo reivindica su condición femenina, sino que también ofrece una visión desalentadora de las relaciones sociales, lo que debe tenerse en cuenta en los estudios dedicados a la familia Burney (Burney Studies) y la distingue de otras escritoras del periodo.

Palabras clave: Sarah Harriet Burney, estudios de género, estudios del siglo dieciocho, literatura británica, violencia patriarcal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sarah Harriet Burney (1775-1844) was the daughter of the musicologist Dr. Charles Burney and his second wife, the wealthy widow Elizabeth Allen. She produced four novels: *Clarentine* (1796), *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808), *Traits of Nature* (1812), *Tales of Fancy* (1816) —containing *Country Neighbours, or the Secret* and *The Shipwreck*—, and *The Romance of Private Life* (1839) —comprised of two tales, *The Renunciation* and *The Hermitage*. After some years cast into oblivion, interest in Sarah Harriet has been retaken by the Burney scholars. New discoveries about the Burneys are continually brought to light in the form of books, research papers submitted at the conferences organized by the Burney Society all over the world, and articles (Fernández 2014). In this respect, Lorna Clark, the editor of Sarah Harriet's letters and last novel, has recently published an article about the Burneys revealing that Sarah Harriet was wooed as a contributor when the *New Monthly Magazine* was launched and she might possibly have engaged translation (2013: 151). For Clark, who has devoted many an article to analyze the Burney saga, in Sarah Harriet's *Traits of Nature*,

the domestic scenes of family life are truly horrific, exposing a seething hotbed of malice and aggression. Daughters jockeying fiercely for position while sons, pampered and indulged. Lord it over them freely. Fathers are tyrannical and cruel; the least destructive is a self-indulgent epicure, superficially charming provided nothing interferes with is gratification. Mothers grimly manipulate their daughters in the marriage market, the one sphere where they have influence. (2000: 126)

This scholar argues that in *Traits* there is a movement from the feminine domain to the sphere of the father and making the transition will mark the heroine's successful socialisation. The maternal sphere is figured as a sinful realm, a kind of moral weakness, which must be denied, suppressed and left behind (Clark 2007a: 48). The family was one of the central concerns of nineteenth-century fiction, and it can be considered in two poles: the vertical, meaning the parent-child relationship, and the horizontal or the sibling bond. This paper is inscribed in the framework of the Burney Studies and gender studies, but the work of historicist critics will be taken into account, as well. We want to offer an insight into this very complex work, which has been scarcely explored. The aim is to go deeper into the social dimension of Sarah Harriet's most commercially successful novel, *Traits of Nature*, a family novel selling out before four months (Clark 2000: 126). Though it is difficult not to refer to the *oeuvre* of her famous half-sister, Frances Burney, an effort will be made to consider Sarah Harriet as an authoress who stood on her own in nineteenth-century fiction and deserves a place in women's studies as Maryam Trabelski has pointed out: in Sarah Harriet's *oeuvre* "there is a strong advocacy of a woman's right to love whom she will, regardless of society or the convention which demands a woman must love only

on command, which allies Sarah Harriet Burney with Wollstonecraft and Hays" (2006).

2. SARAH HARRIET BURNEY AND *TRAITS OF NATURE*

A frequent collaborator with her father, Dr. Charles Burney, Sarah Harriet spent some time in Switzerland and Italy. The critic Henry Crabb Robinson, with whom Sarah Harriet corresponded for years, defined her personality in the following terms: "[...] her rather prickly personality seemed rather odd in a woman but was appreciated by men of learning who could savour her sense of humour and provide the intellectual stimulation that she craved" (Clark 2003a: 42-3). Sarah Harriet always stood out for her intelligence and independence and was in charge of taking care of Charles Burney at the end of his life. She uselessly attempted to obtain some love from his father, who was a very selfish man inspiring the old patriarchs in Sarah Harriet's works (Clark, 2000: 131; Fernández 2013a) and never forgave her elopement from the family household to live with her brother, Captain James Burney, who was then married to Sarah Paine. The charge of incest still pervaded for a long time (Burney, Sarah Harriet 2008: xiii; Clark 2003b: 124). Sarah Harriet's productions achieved as much popularity as her half-sister's, and were translated on the Continent. Apart from writing, Sarah Harriet earned her living working as a drawing teacher and being a governess in Italy.

In histories of literature, Sarah Harriet has to be coupled with Jane Austen's feminocentric fiction. Both Burney and Austen inherited the Augustan style and placed their productions in the elegant world of the gentry —meaning the middle class. Nevertheless, Frances's half-sister added some doses of mystery and sensationalism to her works and is as much indebted to Gothic as to sentimental literature, as we shall see. The reader notices great interest to highlight the darkest side of human beings and evil, as well as criticizing social hypocrisy. Sarah Harriet knew her readers' tastes, so she usually included many romantic scenes and never forgot two pivotal themes in her *oeuvre*: female loneliness and suffering.

The British Critic published the most positive review of the novel while *The Monthly Review* considered that the incidents were rather dramatic than natural and the style should have been polished (Clark 1997: 151, note 9). As for *The Critical Review*, they found lots of parallelisms with Frances's *Cecilia* (1782) and *Evelina* (1778) and highlighted the characters of Julius and Barbara as the best ones (1812: 522, 526). The publisher Henry Colburn asked Sarah Harriet to alter the title "Traits of Temper" and she gave him the choices "The Case is Altered" or "Early Prejudice".

Finally, he wanted her to call it “Traits of Nature” though the authoress thought it arrogated too much on her part and would be look conceited (Clark 1997: 157; letter to Charlotte [Francis] Barret, 1st of April). Structurally, the novel is full of doublings and repetitions. Briefly summarized, it deals with two families, the Mordingtons and the Clevelands, and more specifically with Adela Cleveland, the second child of her father’s second marriage. She has a vindictive brother, Julius, and two half-sisters, Alicia and Elinor. Adela is neglected by Mr. Cleveland believing that the girl is like her mother, the sentimental Lady Rosalvan. The protagonist has been brought up by her grandmother, Mrs. Cleveland, and then she goes to live with the Hampdems. In that household, she meets Algernon Mordington, an orphan who only has a sister, Eudocia. Algernon unexpectedly becomes his uncle’s heir and attains an earldom. Though Algernon becomes Lord Ennerdale and gets married to a wealthy woman, he has an unhappy marriage and his wife dies leaving two children, little Algernon and Harriet.

3. THE MOTHER’S CURSE

In *Traits*, the oppression of patriarchy is most dramatically felt by wives, who are unrealistically told to stick to an image of passive perfectibility. Historicist critic Ruth Perry argues that eighteenth-century fiction depicts the cultural shift from kinship based on consanguineal ties to conjugal affinities (2004: 2). Women became secluded in domestic space and detached from her family of origin and from her preexisting friendships and concerns in order to put her at the service of being a companion to her new husband (2004: 193-7). Davidoff and Hall explain that daughters were the traditional means of making alliances and the idea of marriage as an alliance between families was still strong in the eighteenth century though mercenary marriages were discountenanced (1987: 98-9). This situation is reproduced in *Traits*, where the Clevelands are not a model couple:

Unhappily for this last child, their discords had arisen, several months previous to her birth, to a most fearful height. Mr. Cleveland was madly jealous of his inconsiderate young wife; he refused to see his infant daughter, and insisted on her being placed at nurse. Mr. Cleveland murmured, remonstrated, wept and solicited in vain. The child *was* sent to nurse. (Burney 1812, I: 38)

Mr. Cleveland’s frustration for not having a perfect wife does not justify his atrocious action whose consequences will affect the course of the novel. Lady Rosalvan has to fight against patriarchal definitions which were in consonance with

conduct literature of the period. As Nancy Armstrong argues, conduct books suggest that the material body of the woman appeared superficial which also provided a rationale for an educational program designed specifically for women to subordinate the body to a set of mental processes that guaranteed domesticity (1987: 76). Instead of searching to be seen, a woman had to be vigilant (1987: 77, see also Poovey 1984: 22-3). It was the wife's obligation to maintain harmony in the marriage, though whatever degree of sweetness, compliance and self-sacrifice might be necessary. She should never show anger to her husband, and, if she tried to exert influence, it must be through cajolery and tears (Armstrong 1987: 10). This ideal of feminine propriety had a double function according to Mary Poovey: to harness the appetites men feared and associated with women and to protect the property upon which the destiny of both individuals and an entire society depended (1984: 6). Women were charged with maintaining social order because of their special relationship to virtue. For scholar Barbara Zonitch, women were schooled in their new domestic obligations by learning to internalize a patriarchal surveillance that had historically controlled their behavior and now this external regulations would become self-control, self-censorship, self-abnegation and self-violation (1997: 30).

Female portraits are important in Sarah Harriet's novels, and also females themselves, since both in *Country Neighbours* and *Geraldine Fauconberg*, the heroines resemble the dead mothers in two portraits. Throughout *Traits*, Mr. Cleveland has to fight against two real women —Adela and her mother—, and he becomes so desperate that he asks Julius not to mention Adela any more after being introduced to her:

Obscurity will be her best defence from the opprobrium attached to her birth. I will not have her mother's name recalled to remembrance; I will not run the hazard of forgetting what is due to a child who is innocent, and, yet, whose likeness to a guilty woman, might tempt me to loath and curse her every time she'd crossed my path! (Burney 1812, I: 225)

Unlike Lady Belmont in *Evelina*, Lady Rosalvan is alive but estranged from Adela who is very critical to her mother, as it can be seen on two occasions. First, she thinks that a mother should be responsible for her children's acquaintance: "whatever might be the rights and privileges of a parent, it was impossible they should be so unlimited as to authorize the contamination of that mental purity which it was every young woman's duty to preserve unblemished" (Burney 1812, I: 280). Second, on their first encounter, Adela asks Sir Frederick about her mother and finds it difficult to understand how she has not brought her up. These words are daggers to Lady Rosalvan, but Adela has a nerve and questions her parent's behaviour:

Grandmamma *did* love me, and till she died, I never left her. It was grandmamma who asked Dr. Hampden to take me; she told me so herself: she told me to obey him; to make myself contented and happy in his house; to be grateful to all his family, and never to leave them, unless my father sent for me. Grandmamma never

talked to me of my mother; and indeed, sir," added the child, with energy, "I can hardly believe that I have one! (Burney 1812, I: 123-4)

Sir Frederick defends Lady Rosalvan: "[...] you were torn from her with unhuman sternness, and committed to a stranger to be nursed and sheltered [...] she left him for *your* sake, and has never ceased to sigh for your presence" (Burney 1812, I: 124-5). There was another powerful reason to avoid contact with Adela since Mr. Cleveland "would rather tear her from us by force of law, than gratify the mother's anxiety to detain her" (Burney 1812, I: 147). Meanwhile, the lack of parents only creates anxiety in Adela, who is moved when Julius shows her a letter penned by her father: "Had this been addressed by the same writer, to me, should *I* have thus slighted and misused it? Oh, that my father would but once put me to the test!" (Burney 1812, I: 201).

Divorce began as a means of punishing an adulterous wife and protecting the integrity of a lineage (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 123; Armstrong 1987: 8-9). Robert B. Shoemaker explains that, except by statute, divorce was illegal in England until 1857. Formal divorce was obtained by an act of Parliament and required considerable financial and political resources. It was rare even among the rich. However, a married couple could pursue a legal separation, either in the church or by private agreement. A woman who deserted her husband was still considered to be legally married, and therefore, she had no right to any property, nor the custody of her children (Shoemaker 1998: 107-9), as it is Lady Rosalvan's case.

On Adela's first visit to her mother, she finds that Lady Rosalvan's house reveals her social position and was "detached from all contiguous abodes, and surrounded by plantations, chiefly of evergreens, that nearly embosomed, and totally deprived it of all distant or varied prospects" (Burney 1812, I: 248). In a conversation with echoes of Lady Delacour's confession to *Belinda* (1801) in Maria Edgeworth's homonymous novel, Lady Rosalvan unveils that Mr. Cleveland married her believing her "to be an angel, but whom he also expected to find, in temper and understanding, the best and wisest of created beings!" (Burney 1812, I: 254). Adela's mother admits suffering a lot for being forgotten and rejected to the point of regarding herself as a living dead. This type of discourse is by no means unusual in Sarah Harriet's novel (Fernández 2010):

Pain, my poor girl, your wretched mother is now alone qualified to give you. I cannot, as any other parent would — justly proud of such a daughter — I cannot participate in the brilliant visions opening to your youthful fancy. Whatever may be your success in life, *I* shall never witness it. Condemned to ignominious privacy, the prosperity of my children will never, but by rumour, become known to me. The higher they rise, the greater will necessarily be their obligation to sink my name in oblivion. Guilty of my own fall from a honourable station; repulsed by my own frailty from society and public esteem, I yet can acquire no fortitude to support with resignation the consequences of former misdeeds. Murmuring, repining, miserable

as you know behold me, have I invariably been almost from the first hour the ill-fated Rosalvan led me to this retreat. I was not formed for solitude, Adela, though I am compelled to embrace it. Its unwearied tranquillity is to me like a living death — it alternately palls, stupefies, or drives me to the verge of desperation! I loathe the present; look back with agonizing regret upon the past; and the future seems all a dreary blank, presenting to me nothing but the prospect of a friendless, desolate old age, terminating in a dissolution of unpitied [sic] terror! (Burney 1812, I: 256-7)

Even now, Lady Rosalvan does not enjoy a perfect relationship with Sir Frederick who leaves no money for Adela on his will, and who, paradoxically, was continually engaged in the performance of active deeds of benevolence (Burney 1812, I: 268). Unlike the redeemed coquette Lady Delacour, Lady Rosalvan dies the victim of her weaknesses after marrying Mrs. Cameron's brother Mr. Norris, an adventurer who obtains her hand and hates Adela (Burney 1812, IV: 76-80). Norris's connections preyed upon Lady Rosalvan and in the end "she sought refuge from her own misery in the dreadful resource of inebriation [...] [which] conducted her to an unhonoured [sic] grave before she attained her forty-second year" (Burney 1812, V: 246). Confronted with the maternal image, Adela assimilates patriarchal standards and sees the path that is not to be followed, but she still has to feel the consequences of her mother's past in herself.

4. FACING THE WORLD

Social rejection causes Adela to feel the mental pain of shame since the heroine is ignored by polite society or the world. The first one who makes her realize this circumstance is Julius, who accuses her of being a coquette:

She [Adela] was amazed beyond description, and was just beginning to supplicate for a clearer explanation of his meaning, when she felt herself somewhat roughly seized by the arm, and ere she could look round, the voice of Julius, in an accent of impatience, reached her ear. (Burney 1812, II: 165)

Lady Ennerdale talks badly about Lady Rosalvan: "And, above all, for this young Miss Cleveland's mother, who would be glad to marry *her*, poor girl to any body?" (Burney 1812, III: 209). This is Adela's main problem: she is unprovided and the recognition of the father would make her socially eligible to be Algernon's wife. Unfortunately, when she arrives at her father's house in London, she feels alone (Burney 1812, II: 52) and, at a party at Mrs. Elmer, the girl is totally left apart, which provokes the narrator's comment: "Amongst the minor ills of life, few are so wounding and oppressive to the young and keenly susceptible, as wilful neglect, publicly manifested. In private, it is practicable to run away from its infliction, and the

silence and solitude of home, may be beguiled by some interesting occupation” (Burney 1812, III: 20-1).

There are more scenes exemplifying the rejection of the world which is felt by other Burney heroines, as well (Fernández 2011; 2012). Moral and economy go together in the novel since mixing with people of dubious morals implied impoverishment. Jemina accuses Adela of competing with her for Algernon’s attentions and remarks: ““I begin to think you have art enough to do any thing. — You are lately come from a good school, and the lessons which you probably received in Scotland, don’t seem to have been thrown away upon you!”” (Burney 1812, II: 255). This time sorrow is technically reproduced in free indirect speech:

Petulence, or even injustice, might be forgiven — but malice was of a blacker nature, and left traces on the memory almost indelible. To have struck upon the only part where Adela was assailable, — where a wound would rankle, — where the slightest touch would keenly agonize, — this was so far exceeding what the provocation of jealousy could palliate, that she knew not how to attribute it to any thing [sic] short of a thoroughly bad heart. (Burney 1812, II: 256)

Jemina, one of Adela’s cousins, is jealous and wants to make Adela obnoxious to the Clevelands. For this reason, Elinor, Adela’s half-sister, warns the heroine to be “doubly circumspect in manners, and doubly pure and steady in principles” (Burney 1812, III: 154). From the point of view of a mother or a female child, the backing of male kin from her lineage —brother, uncle, cousin, nephew— was often critical in her life, as was the emotional and financial support of her blood sisters (Perry 2004: 113) and women lost power as sisters and daughters as they gained social importance as mothers or wives (Perry 2004: 195). In this regard, secondary characters matter in *Traits*. Alicia considers Adela the best candidate to be Algernon’s wife: ““with beauty, birth and education, a woman is inferior to no man in the universe!”” (Burney 1812, IV: 21) and she proposes marriages between the rich and the poor:

I should have a great notion of telling the rich, that the best thing they can do, is to chuse [sic] wives that are poor and pretty; and to the pennyless, I should think it an act of charity to recommend, a total blindness to every species of beauty but that of a wealthy dowager of three-score. I am sadly afraid, that in the common course of events, the very reverse of this system; heirs marry heiresses, and half-starved boys marry half-starved girls. (Burney 1812, IV: 22)

On another occasion, at Lady Isabella’s, high rank guests comment on the behaviour of women and look down on Adela, who has recently nursed little Algernon. An interesting debate on feminine behaviour arises, and Adela provocatively defends: ““[...] if women, particularly the young and unmarried, are good humoured and affectionate to their own connections, humane to the unhappy, charitable to the distressed, and obliging in society, why must they all be so studious to wear an artificial gloss of exquisite sensibility?”” (Burney 1812, III: 264). The issue

of divorced women is tackled again. Miss Rivers, the daughter of a divorced lady is alluded to, and the heroine gets nervous:

Adela gasped for breath — her hands shook — a cold tremor crept over her frame, and it was with difficulty that she commanded sufficient firmness to avoid bursting into tears. They rushed into her eyes, however, and stole down her burning cheeks, in defiance of all her efforts to repress them; but she sat with her back towards the lady who was speaking; and from Lord Ennerdale, she hoped, the bending position of her head would conceal them. (Burney 1812, III: 269)

While Algernon complains to Isabella about her visitors and adopts the role of a brother rather than a lover like in *Clarentine* (Fernández 2013b), Adela seeks shelter in her chamber, where she prays, and her thoughts are again reported in Austen-like free indirect style:

If malice dictated them [allusions], how could she better assist its gratification, than by betraying the pang that they inflicted? If they were uttered inadvertently, was it not her duty to submit without resentment to an undesigned offence? (Burney 1812, III: 274)

Fraternal aggression is also portrayed in the narrative. Julius tells Adela that he has heard Algernon say that it would be a dishonour to be the offspring of divorced parents, and he asks Adela if she really thinks she has any chance of reaching Mr. Cleveland's heart. The heroine sees now up to what extent her mother's curse has reached her:

The errors of my unhappy mother were far from being thought of with insensibility by me: but I trusted that they were now either little remembered, or, that being guiltless of misconduct myself, the world would not have the harshness to visit them thus strictly upon any head. That hope is over; and with it has vanished almost every sentiment of security with which I used to raise my eyes in society. (Burney 1812, III: 81-2)

Therefore, she begins to suspect of Algernon, who is treated with "a punctilious distrust, a habit of weighing his words, and watching the expression of his looks, which embittered the pleasure of every interview, and constituted her own perpetual torment" (Burney 1812, III: 83), and, despite the Somervilles's efforts to unite Algernon and Adela, the later is persuaded that she will be with a very small fortune and does not deserve a rich high class man. Adela is determined not to marry for money. Her assertion transcends Romantic discourse and becomes a resolution to defend herself as a woman. Adela says so to Elinor:

I never wish or mean to exchange the name of Cleveland for any other, yet, poor as a I am, I am proud; I desire to marry upon the same disinterested principles; to be chosen, not offered; to be sought, not obtruded; — and when thoroughly convinced that the man who thus distinguishes me, is honourable, liberal, worthy — like your Sommerville — I care not whether he has a peeress's coronet, or a cottager's straw

bonnet to offer me! Such a man I would accept with gratitude, and love with fidelity! (Burney 1812, III: 100-1)

In the social world depicted in *Traits* only a few characters are not moved by money, and almost everyone experiences some suffering or trauma. Algernon feels alone too (“[...] I have not a female relation in the world who cares a straw for me. My poor sister was such a baby when I left her, that I dare say she hardly knows she has a brother” [Burney 1812, I: 65-6]), and he realizes that, after the death of Lord Ossely’s heirs, he is simply a pawn while only Eudocia and Isabella care for him: “[...] he was valued, not for himself, but for reasons of family policy” (Burney 1812, I: 159). The novel contains one scene full of symbolism and representative of patriarchal insensitivity. Sarah Harriet’s satiric agency is embodied in the deaf and dumb man who comes to a party and is asked to dance a hornpipe. His eccentric outfit provokes all kinds of reactions. Nevertheless, his performance is applauded. People give him some money, but he prefers a cornelian heart suspended to a gold chain which Adela was wearing round her neck. She finally offers it to the boy and Mrs. Somerville is told that he lives with some thriving relations and is well off though a frolic (I: 189-190). The only visitor accepting his integration in the community is Adela. After offering him some food, the heroine says to Talbot: “This poor creature might be won upon, by a little kindness, to behave like other people! I cannot endure him when he grins and chatters: but his laugh is not unpleasant” (Burney 1812, I: 192). She cannot understand why he prefers her cornelian heart to money. Barbara suspects he is a fictitious character with no meaning in the world they live. The funny man turns out to be Algernon in disguise, showing the real intentions of everybody in the scene.

Traits contains some powerful criticism on the education of children, exposing Sarah Harriet’s pedagogical vein and coming to say that a more direct communication between parents and siblings is needed. John Locke’s *Essay* proposed separating children from servants (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 130) and the behavior of children was compared to that of the other subordinate classes in the patriarchal scheme (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 245). The nursery was “the kingdom of the dependent ruled by the dependent. It was the rule of the irrational by the irrational, in an age when reason was a code name for self-reliance” (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 248). Likewise, *Traits* shows that violence is not combated with violence, especially in the educational realm. Algernon has been an absent father, and his children are afraid of the nurse. Only Elinor sees what happens: “He [little Algernon] once fears and hates her; and if she has not caused, she at least irritates his disposition, by the agitating feelings which her presence excites” (Burney 1812, III: 114-5). It seems that there have been faults on both sides: according to Lady Harriet, little Algernon’s sister, her brother used to throw himself into violent passions, to fight, and to utter the most furious reproaches. To suffocate this reactions, the nurse beat, locked and deprived the boy of amusement, air, light, exercise and even food for whole days and made the

children believe that these severities were commanded by his father, so they hate Algernon (Burney 1812, III: 195-6).

Algernon talks about his love for Adela resorting to the metaphor of a book he once learnt by heart: “every page, as I reperuse it, recurs familiarly to my memory, and brings back the liveliest recollection not only of its contents, but of the time and place when they were first studied, and of the circumstances under which they were so warmly admired” (Burney 1812, III: 239-40). Mr. Cleveland is not the only unhappy husband in the novel. Judith says that Algernon has been the dupe of a beautiful girl, “who, not only to please herself, but to comply with the views of her father, took all the pains she could, to captivate and ensnare him” (Burney 1812, II: 8). For Jemina, Algernon’s wife “always looks as if she was practising to rival the graces of a drill-sergeant” (Burney 1812, II: 239). Besides, “she is immensely proud, and imbibes prejudices and antipathies with as little remorse as the sternest old prude in existence” (Burney 1812, II: 239). A rebel after the failure of his marriage, Algernon says to Lady Ennerdale that he loves Adela and this is the only thing that he really cares:

[...] Shall I forget, that whatever may be the principles of that mother, she has been in no danger of contamination from them, by ever having lived with her? Shall I forget, that her childhood, her youth, nearly her whole life, has been spent under the care of beings the most primitively simple, and exemplary moral? Do I not also know, that Lady Rosalvan herself (were vice hereditary) is less vicious than weak? Her irritability of temper, her shallowness of understanding, far more than her perversity of nature, led her to ruin. Does her daughter inherit these imperfections of judgment and temper? No. Most assuredly; she is, on the contrary, peculiarly distinguished for the excellence of both. Then why should she be supposed capable of transgressions into which nothing but the want of those advantages precipitated her mother? (Burney 1812, IV: 117)

Despite Algernon’s feelings, Mr. Cleveland wants to put an end to the relationship between Adela and Algernon: in a cold letter to his daughter, Mr. Cleveland decides that she cannot accept any proposal during the space of a year and they cannot have any epistolary relationship (Burney 1812, IV: 213-4). When Mr. Cleveland intercepts one of the letters, he wants an explanation from Adela and goes further: “I command you to destroy, in my presence, all his former letters, and to return the one just received (unread) in a blank cover” (Burney 1812, V: 112). The possibilities of romance and happy ending seem almost destroyed. However, Adela still counts with an asset which will facilitate the transition from Adela Cleveland to Lady Ennerdale.

5. THE ALLY IS AT HOME

By the eighteenth century, brothers were increasingly expected to take on the parental functions of protection, advice, regulation, permission, and prohibition – especially for unmarried sisters (Perry 2004: 111). In fiction, readers expected the oldest brothers to be arrogant, profligate and spoilt. The best ones could be reformed in relation to her deserving and long-suffering sisters. Married sisters, especially if they married well, retained a special influence over their brothers in many novels and also preserved their identity as siblings (Perry 2004: 117). According to Mr. Hampden, Julius inherits his father's intolerant personality, so at nine he is a spoilt, unruly, consequential little tyrant: "[...] he had already caused the dismissal of three tutors; — he was the terror and scourge of every servant in the house — and all this while, the idol of his misjudging father" (Burney 1812, I: 41). To Adela, he was "an oppressor the most indefatigable" (Burney 1812, I: 42), and much later, Julius defines himself as a "rash, petulant, headstrong fellow" (Burney 1812, V: 23). As a child, Adela was ignored by both her father and her brother. Apparently, Julius is not Adela's alter ego and he does not protect her to save the familiar estate.

Julius is a torturer of the weak, as much as his father was of women. He addresses his anger against Amy, Adela's black servant, who tells an anecdote describing well his personality: once Julius got angry and attacked a little dog, Frisk, to the point of beating him. Unfortunately, he caught a pair of scissors which fell on one of the legs of Frisk and the dog was hurt, so Amy tried to rescue him without appeasing Julius's anger:

He struck his head, his feet, his hands against the door with frightful vehemence; raved for readmission till his own outcries made him hoarse; and when he found that Amy was alike insensible to his clamour, and to his menaces, he rushed down stairs with frantic speed, and burst in upon his father and Mr. Cleveland in the manner that has been described. (Burney 1812, I: 50)

Against all expectations, Julius does not have a monolithic personality: he is not totally deprived of good qualities though Julius airs his misogynistic views. After witnessing his father's fate, he selfishly maintains that getting married means becoming unhappy and losing his freedom:

A wife! No, faith, that would be a little too serious. Besides, I am such a rash, impetuous fellow, that if I fell sufficiently in love with a girl to wish to marry her, I should allow myself no time to form a just estimate of her temper and her understanding: but, pop! At the very outset of our acquaintance, if she would have me, I should run my head into the noose; and at the end of a few months, recover from my delusion, and find myself, perhaps, wedded to a fool or a shrew. I have known one or two instances of men, generally thought much wiser than I am, who have allowed their discretion to be lulled into a sound nap, from which, when, at

length, they awoke, the earth have not contained more miserable and self-upbraiding wretches! No, no; 'Give wedlock to the winds — I'll none of it'. (Burney 1812, II: 145-6)

The relationship between Julius and Adela probably alludes to James and Sarah Harriet's "improper Attachment" (Clark 2008: xii-xiii, xxxvii). As the narrative progresses, the brother becomes a competitor with the lover. Jemina explains that there was a duel between Julius and Algernon on Algernon's wife's account (Burney 1812, II: 234-8). Besides, Julius briefly disappears from the narrative, which arises all sorts of conjectures. Julius might possibly have eloped with a young lady, but that is not the case. The real elopement in the story is William Hampden and Annabel's. Dr. Hampden's eldest son was destined for the army, but he leaves home with Annabel, the daughter of a Baronet. When Adela and the Somervilles are going for a walk and they meet the couple, Mr. Somerville demystifies poverty since

[it] is no chimerical grievance under any circumstances. I mean not [...] a poverty that merely compels her to repress fantastic wishes, and to withstand extravagant temptations: but I mean, the fear or the reality of wanting bread, fuel, covering, and a home! Such indigence, or its remotest probability, is dreadful, and ought to shame all who dare repine at imaginary privations. (Burney 1812, IV: 97)

Like Sarah Harriet herself, Annabel tries to be reconciled with Mr. Forrester, and Adela identifies herself with Annabel: "let her never renounce the endeavour [to be reconciled with her father]! [...] the loss of an inheritance is nothing in comparison with the loss of a father's blessing and forgiveness!" (Burney 1812, IV: 164). If William Hampden's partner is finally accepted it is because Mr. Cleveland visits Mr. Forrester, who explains that he rejected her because "[...] a young flashy fellow, without name, without rank, without a guinea, save his lieutenant's pay, has put to flight the remembrance of all my kindness for seventeen years; and has even caused her to neglect me as unfeeling since her marriage as if the ties of nature were as completely forgotten as those of gratitude and duty" (Burney 1812, V: 192).

Algernon protects Adela twice against patriarchal imprisonment. When she nearly meets her father in London, everybody addresses him but Adela, who is left apart: "The consciousness, that she alone was an interdicted, a rejected being amidst so many connections, none nearer in consanguinity than herself, totally overpowered her" (Burney 1812, IV: 173-4). Only Algernon's support helps her to recover, and she feels oppressed. On going shopping with Mrs. Somerville, she finds herself harassed by a man —Norris himself—, and Adela desperately runs into the street. Algernon appears and rescues her again (Burney 1812, IV: 186). While in the best Burneyan tradition, the heroine has to court her father and there is a tear-jerking encounter, in *Traits*, Julius makes it clear to Adela that the Gothic tyrant wants to avoid any privacy at their first meeting, so Mr. Cleveland organizes a dinner with several people (Burney 1812, V: 41). Julius is instrumental in the novel in that he is in love with a lady in white and asks Adela not to say anything at home (Burney 1812, V: 80-1).

Their situation is similar, so he consoles Adela and supports her before their father: “[...] take comfort! — Such unconditional submission, such unexampled gentleness, must force its way to the sternest bosom!” (Burney 1812, V: 116-7). Later it is discovered that Julius married Eudocia, the mysterious lady in white, thanks to the Bellamonts, a family who wanted to reconcile the houses of Mordington and Cleveland. Julius is a victim of an impossible love, as Algernon explains: “With what hopes of success could he now apply, either to me or to Lady Ennerdale, for the hand of Eudocia? How could he ever bear to confess to this father the revolution which his sentiments had undergone” (Burney 1812, V: 221). The Elmers also helped Eudocia and Julius to be together and Algernon is aware that this circumstance will facilitate his union to Adela. Thanks to Talbot’s mediation before Mr. Cleveland, the old patriarch consents the union.

6. CONCLUSION

In her book about familiar violence in Frances Burney’s works, Barbara Zonitch argues that the authoress was skeptical about the possibilities for women’s protection in a changing world (1997). Another feminist critic, Patricia Meyer Spacks supports that writers of this period resorted to concealment and indirection (1976). Obviously, *Traits* has a conservative turn since there is a happy ending which is only disturbed by the death of Lady Rosalvan. However, both the atmosphere and themes of *Traits* are directly related to Gothic oppression. The novel is charged with overt social criticism which might not be neglected in a study of Sarah Harriet’s fiction.

As it has been exposed, in *Traits*, violence is coupled with rejection at different levels and there is a radical criticism of patriarchal relations, which remain the ugly kernel of the story. Sarah Harriet bluntly questions the transition from aristocratic to bourgeois society at the same time that she exposes suffering and oppression and does not restrict the latter to women. The pervading feature of main characters is rebellion which is articulated at different levels within the family: wives, sons, brothers and children. More specifically, there is a critique against classism and social hypocrisy, and, in this aspect, Sarah Harriet presents a very personal view of the role of woman in pre-Victorian Britain.

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