

“But I Do My Own Way”: Mrs. Mittin’s Autonomy and Quest for Respectability in Frances Burney’s *Camilla*❖

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ABSTRACT

Though a minor character in *Camilla*, the obsequious and acquisitive Mrs. Mittin not only constantly surprises the heroine but also unfavorably impresses readers with her impertinence and disregard of decorum. The popularity she seeks and partially enjoys in the fictional world does not seem to be matched by responses among readers in the real world over the last two centuries. However, by the laconic statement, “But I do my own way,” she lays claim to autonomy; the ways in which she demonstrates her status as a free agent within the novel provide us with a fresh viewpoint on the works of Frances Burney.

This article investigates how Burney’s invention of Mrs. Mittin provides an early instance of a phenomenon discussed by Marilyn Friedman in her account of autonomy in *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. It links Mrs. Mittin’s acquisitive desire and autonomy to her quest for respectability, and attributes her ability to climb the social ladder to these two dominant characteristics. It also examines Burney’s skepticism about contemporary conduct book teachings for women on modesty,

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and observes that Burney deems the notion of modesty ineffective for women who, like Mrs. Mittin, live at the bottom of the social hierarchy and have to confront the “gothic economics” of the world on a daily basis. This article shows that Burney’s portrayal of Mrs. Mittin illustrates her belief that women can take control of their own affairs and offers us an alternative picture of eighteenth-century Englishwomen.

KEY WORDS: Frances Burney, Mrs. Mittin, autonomy, respectability, acquisitive desire, modesty

「但我依照我的方式」： 法蘭西絲柏尼《卡蜜拉》中 米頓女士的自主與社會地位的追尋

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摘 要

在《卡蜜拉》中雖然是個次要角色，那善於諂媚奉承且物慾旺盛的米頓女士，除了時常出其不意地使女主人翁感到詫異之外，她的鹵莽無禮和無視禮儀的態度，也在讀者眼裡留下不佳的印象。她在小說的虛擬世界裡所追求和部份感受到的群眾魅力，與過去兩個世紀以來讀者對她的看法似乎大相逕庭。然而，米頓女士藉由簡短明確的陳述——「但我依照我的方式」——聲明她的自主性。在小說裡她所展現的一切操之在我的自信，提供我們法蘭西絲柏尼作品所蘊涵的另一面。

本文首先檢視柏尼筆下米頓女士的自主如何呼應弗萊德門在《自主、性別、政治》書中，對「自主」一詞所下的定義。本文將連結米頓女士的物慾和自主與她對社會地位的追尋，並將其社會地位的提升歸因於前述兩項主要特質。文中亦探討柏尼對當代行為指南強調女性謙遜美德，所抱持的懷疑態度，並指出柏尼認為對和米頓女士一樣，隸屬社會階級底層，必須每天面對外在世界殘酷可怕經濟問題的女性而言，此謙遜特質根本毫無效用。本文主張柏尼刻劃的米頓女士不僅闡明她相信女性能夠掌控自己大小事物的理念，更提供我們十八世紀英國女性的另類描繪。

關鍵詞：法蘭西絲柏尼、米頓女士、自主、社會地位、物慾、謙遜

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“But I do my own way,” continued she, “and nobody knows a word of the matter: for I keep a large bonnet, and cloak, and a checked apron, and a pair of clogs, or pattens, always at this friend’s; and then when I have put them on, people take me for a mere common person, and I walk on, ever so late, and nobody speaks to me; and so by that means I get my pleasure, and save my money; and yet always appear like a gentlewoman when I’m known.”

—Frances Burney, *Camilla, or, A Picture of Youth* (1796)

[M]y basic account of personal autonomy [is] a feature of choices and actions that reflect and are the result of wants, desires, cares, concerns, values, and commitments that the actor has reflectively reaffirmed and that she can sustain even in the face of some minimal opposition from others.

The term “autonomy” is largely a term of philosophic art, yet it encompasses an array of notions familiar to ordinary people, notions such as being “true to myself,” doing it “my way,” standing up for “what I believe,” thinking “for myself,” and, in gender-egalitarian reformulation, being one’s own person.

—Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (2003)

The obsequious and acquisitive Mrs. Mittin, though a minor character in *Camilla, or, A Picture of Youth*, constantly surprises the heroine and unfavorably impresses readers with her impertinence and disregard of decorum.¹ The popularity she seeks and partially enjoys in the fictional world does not seem to be matched by responses among readers and critics in the real world over the last two centuries. Julia Epstein mildly terms Mrs. Mittin as “the social hanger-on” (133) whereas Barbara Zonitch vehemently condemns her as “a shrewd, calculating capitalist speculator” (105). However, by the laconic statement, “But I do my own way” (C 424), Mrs. Mittin lays claim, specifically, to autonomy. The ways in which she demonstrates herself as a free agent within the novel, to some extent, disclose the radical view of Frances Burney

¹ The epigraphs above are quoted from page 424 of *Camilla* and from pages viii and 3 of *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. Hereafter *Camilla* will be cited parenthetically as *C*.

(1752-1840) on female autonomy.

With the catchphrase, “But I do my own way,” openly and unashamedly asserted by Mrs. Mittin, the first epigraph at the beginning of this article betrays the speaker’s feelings of self-congratulation and satisfaction with her self-contrived chameleon-like identity. Devised by Burney as a self-made social climber, Mrs. Mittin well understands the advantages such a dubious identity would bestow on her. For it allows her the flexibility she needs the most on her road to respectability during the transitional period between her humble origin as an apprentice to a country milliner and her self-appointed role as a gentlewoman, before she can stand firmly in her presumably acquired new status. Besides the aforementioned double roles, this female character, as she confesses, hoping to be taken for “a young widow” rather than for “an old maid,” deliberately adopts the title “Mrs.” as a cover to protect herself from any disagreeable situation, the humiliation Judy Simons suggests, her true marital status may put her in (92). The dubiety of her identity and her willfully adopting the title of a married woman renders it feasible for her to cross class boundaries whenever circumstances require and to come and go freely and safely amidst people of different ranks at her pleasure and by her choice.

In fact, having an autonomous life, being her own mistress, was what Frances Burney worked consistently and diligently for in her life, a fact willfully neglected by her father, Dr. Charles Burney (1726-1814), and less noticed by her contemporaries.² Growing up and educated in a time when the ideology of femininity was overwhelming in England, Burney, in her youth, put on a widely applauded front, appearing like a docile daughter at home and a modest lady in public. However, her ways of managing her own affairs on many notable events of her life—her insistence on recording daily events and conversation (regardless of the vehement objection from her stepmother) to preserve “living proof” of all stages of her own life (*Early Journals* 14),³ the

² Frances Burney’s iron will was not noticed by most of her contemporaries. Take her resigning from the position at court for example. She did not bring up the issue to her father. The urge for her release from a life of servitude came from the literary club in London.

³ See Frances Burney’s *Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, hereafter cited parenthetically as *Early Journals*. Burney wrote down in her journal about the reason why it was necessary to keep a journal. She recounted:

I cannot express the pleasure I have in writing down my thoughts, at the very moment—my opinion of people when I first see them, & *how* I alter, or *how* confirm myself in it—& I am much deceived in my *fore sight*, if I shall not have very great delight in reading this *living proof* of my manner of passing my time, my sentiments, my thoughts of people I know, & a

clandestine scribbling of her first novel *Evelina* and its anonymous publication in January 1778, her resignation from the position as Queen's Keeper of Robes after a five-year service, as well as marrying a penniless Catholic French emigrant when she was forty-one without her father's attendance at the wedding—clearly reveal Burney's embodiment of qualities far removed from those of the celebrated eighteenth-century model of the submissive Englishwoman. These life episodes unambiguously attest to Frances Burney's lifelong persistence in having her own way and taking control of her own life.

It is likely that Burney's early experience of succumbing to her stepmother's will, spending daytime doing needlework and ostensibly giving up her scribbling habit,⁴ initiates her into recognizing the significant role autonomy could play in a person's life and further perceiving its grand value for not only her own self but also for other women. Throughout her long literary career, she kept on exploring the issue of female autonomy in her creative writing. Among her literary representations of autonomous female characters, Mrs. Selwyn in *Evelina* and Mrs. Arlbery in *Camilla* for instance, Mrs. Mittin is the least privileged so that readers easily fail to notice her as one of Frances Burney's remarkable portrayals of female independence.

Mrs. Mittin's humble origin or "social marginalization," as Marilyn Friedman would have it, plays as a key factor that leads to her frequently "unrecognized" autonomy (23). Nevertheless, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace's illustration of Mrs. Mittin's subversive power in the context of shopping calls our attention to the fact that Mrs. Mittin also has a story to tell (98). A single woman of working-class origins, Mrs. Mittin is neither as educated or intelligent as Mrs. Selwyn nor as beautiful or rich as Mrs. Arlbery.⁵ Her

thousand other things in future.—there is something to me very Unsatisfactory in passing year after year without even a memorandum of what you did, &c. And then, all the happy Hours I spend with particular Friends and Favourites, would fade from my recollection. — (*Early Journals* 14)

⁴ Burney figured out a strategy to deal with her stepmother's ill will in interfering in her writing habit. She wrote in her journal:

I make a kind of rule never to indulge myself in my two *most* favourite pursuits, [r]eading & writing, in the morning—No, like a good Girl I give that up wholly, Accidental occasions & preventions excepted, to [needle] work, by which means my Reading & writing in the afternoon is a pleasure I am not blamed for, & does me no harm, as it does not take up the Time I ought to spend otherwise. (*Early Journals* 14-15)

⁵ I have noticed that this sentence appears contradictory while I call "a single woman" "Mrs.," however, this is the solution I have found for addressing the character whose identity is too complicated to be

freedom to make choices, nevertheless, appears as distinct as that of the two women who enjoy such superior intellectual, social, or physical advantages. With the little annuity, about thirty pounds, derived from the legacy of an old gentlewoman, grateful for Mrs. Mittin's care in her last days, she quits her employment as a milliner, bustling around optimistically and courageously to seek all the chances she can grasp in the great world in order to attain a life she aspires to. No matter whether we approve of Mrs. Mittin's opportunist ways or not, we, as readers, do, somehow, participate in the process while she wields her power over the low and great and witness her progress towards the respectability, her upward social mobility, she aspires to. [Later in this article, I will explicate the notion of respectability and examine it in the eighteenth-century English social context].

Indeed, Burney's invention of Mrs. Mittin in the end of the eighteenth century defiantly stands as an illuminating instance of women's ability to be free agents, capable of handling their own affairs. It happens to provide us with an early instance of a phenomenon discussed by Friedman in *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* in the beginning of the twenty-first century. From the epigraphs above, the phrases and words Burney voices through Mrs. Mittin, as well as the free will and confidence demonstrated by the latter, have a striking similarity to Friedman's modern version of autonomy. Mrs. Mittin acts purposefully in accordance with her "practical orientation"—"wants, desires, cares, concerns, values, and commitments" (Friedman 3, 59). As Burney sets her wandering among cities to find patrons and patronesses in order to reach her ultimate goal of sustaining a comfortable life as a true gentlewoman, Friedman's study sheds light on our understanding of the insatiable acquisitive desire and propensity for self-interest of this pioneering example of female autonomy in late Georgian England.

This article begins by showing how Friedman's ideas provide a way to link Mrs. Mittin's acquisitive desire and autonomy to her quest for respectability,

presented by a single title. Yet, since "Mrs." is the very title attached to this female character in the novel, I will keep on using it in my discussion to avoid causing any confusion. In addition, the age of Mrs. Mittin remains a mystery in *Camilla*, and the conflicting descriptions of Mrs. Mittin's age in the novel far more unsettle the case. As the character confesses that she is, in fact, unmarried, but takes the title just because she has "a mind to be taken for a young widow," Miss Denell proclaims that the former looks so "monstrous[ly] old" that she must be extremely old (C 468-69). However, based on the research of Deveney Looser on women and old age of Great Britain in the long eighteenth century, Mrs. Mittin might be "associated with a peculiar category of 'old' in [English] culture—that of the 'old' maid" (28), whose numerical age as most sources have shown might be designated between thirty and forty (81). The "old maid" is a term Mrs. Mittin rather detests and hopes to avoid being regarded as one.

and attributes her ability to climb the social ladder to these two dominant characteristics. It proceeds to examine Burney's skepticism about contemporary conduct books: she considers their notion of womanly modesty impracticable for women who, like Mrs. Mittin, live at the bottom of the social hierarchy and have to confront the "gothic economics" (Copeland 35) of the world on a daily basis. This article will show that Burney has endowed her creation with characteristics that seem designed to express the author's ambiguous attitudes. Burney has chosen to make Mrs. Mittin autonomous, vulgar, and self-interested, but she, being a proper lady, is not allowed to unconditionally endorse her. Nevertheless, Burney's portrayal of Mrs. Mittin illustrates her belief that women can take control of their own affairs and offers us an alternative picture of eighteenth-century Englishwomen.

Marilyn Friedman's Content-Neutral Conception of Autonomy

In the first few pages of *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, Friedman blandly points out that her book "focuses on women" and "presents, defends, and applies one conception of the ideal of personal autonomy" (vii, 3). Underlying the deliberately "gender-egalitarian" wording of "personal" autonomy, "female" autonomy is, indisputably, the main concern of Friedman's work related to feminist philosophy (3). Friedman equates autonomy with "self-determination" (4). In her view, an autonomous person is "the choosing and acting self," that is, "the particular self," who plays "an active determining role in the choices she makes and the actions she undertakes" and whose choices and actions reflect the deeper concerns and values she has self-reaffirmed (Friedman 3-14). Besides, Friedman observes that "non-interfering conditions" are necessary to realize autonomy, for autonomy requires "the absence of *effective* coercion, deception, manipulation, or anything else that interferes significantly with someone's behaving in a way that reflects her wants and values" (6). Furthermore, as Friedman explains in her insightful book, stripped of all the philosophical terms intimately associated with it, autonomy is a commonplace idea, encompassing "an array of notions familiar to ordinary people" (3). These notions, according to Friedman, include "being 'true to myself,' doing it 'my way,' standing up for 'what I believe,' thinking 'for myself,' and, in gender-egalitarian reformulation, being one's 'own person'" (3). Overall, Friedman asserts that there is "profound value" lying in "the opportunity and the capacity to live according to one's own sense of a life worth living" (vii).

Instead of upholding the more limited and elitist model of autonomy, the so-called "substantive conception of autonomy," Friedman emphasizes the "more widely applicable" "content-neutral conception of autonomy" in the book (19, 23). She explicates:

On a content-neutral conception, a person is autonomous so long as the manner in which she reaches and makes her choices, or the relationship between her choices and her substantive concerns accord with certain criteria as specified by the account in question. The substance of her choices and commitments does not matter. She might still be choosing autonomously even if she chooses subservience to others for its own sake, so long as she has made her choice in the right way or it coheres appropriately with her perspective as a whole. Someone can autonomously give up her own future autonomy, for example, by entering a religious order requiring unconditional obedience to church authority. She will become nonautonomous in her behavior after making and adhering to that sort of choice, but this does not mean that she was nonautonomous when first making the choice. (Friedman 19)

Whereas according to the substantive account of autonomy,

[S]omeone choosing subservience would not be autonomous unless she did so for some higher nonsubordinate purpose which continued to be her own purpose even in the condition of her servitude. Substantive accounts of autonomy are more demanding than content-neutral accounts. Someone must reflect on her choices and actions in certain ways and, in addition, must make choices that, at a minimum, avoid conflicting in their *content* with the ideal of autonomy. (Friedman 19-20)

In Friedman's view, compared with the substantive conception of autonomy, the content-neutral conception of autonomy allows more groups of people to practice this liberal notion. For the latter's "fewer requirements" have "valuable political implications," which give the content-neutral conception of autonomy "the advantage of promoting a more inclusive sense of equal

worth” (Friedman 23). In addition, the inclusiveness of the content-neutral conception of autonomy inevitably reaches far to the more exclusive substantive conception and makes the latter one of its subcategories. According to this view:

A substantive conception requires someone to be committed to autonomy itself as a value or, at least, to have no values that conflict with this commitment. . . . A person who cares about her own autonomy cares about her own activity of reflecting on her deeper, self-defining concerns without impediment and acting accordingly. She cares about her own self-reflectiveness, and the wants and values she reaffirms thereby, as ends to promote. She wants to be able to reflect on and discern her own values and concerns without manipulation or coercion and to be able to act accordingly and with some capacity to persist in doing so in the face of opposition from others. This commitment is a commitment to nothing other than *content-neutral* autonomy! (Friedman 21)

Consequently, Friedman’s content-neutral version covers all accounts of autonomy and is applicable to all groups of people. Throughout *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, she maintains the position that autonomy is “an ideal worth valuing, especially by members of socially subordinated or oppressed groups” (29).

Mrs. Mittin’s Autonomy

Frances Burney’s 1796 portrayal of Mrs. Mittin tellingly exemplifies the all-inclusive content-neutral conception of autonomy. Mrs. Mittin’s simple and straightforward exclamation, “But *I* do my own way,” particularly coheres with Friedman’s simplified and egalitarian version of autonomy, encompassing familiar notions, such as “being ‘true to *myself*,’” “standing up ‘for what *I* believe,” “thinking ‘for *myself*’” (Friedman viii, emphasis added), as the phrases simultaneously apply first-person pronouns to show that the exercising of autonomy emphatically centers on the ego, *I*, for all the actions involved. According to Friedman, this first-person perspective is the best way to appreciate the ideal of personal autonomy because it is “the presumption that

there is value in a life lived in accord with the perspective of the one who lives it” (56). Three particular aspects of autonomy, which are manifested in Mrs. Mittin, and which will be discussed in this section, are her maintenance of control over every situation in which she is involved, the unwavering determination with which she seeks to attain her chosen goals, and her freedom to make decisions that suit her own purposes.

Firstly, and most importantly, Mrs. Mittin is always “the choosing and acting self;” that is, she is what Friedman terms as “the particular self,” who makes the decision on whatever she does. An excellent illustration of this very character’s self-determination could be found in Chapter XII, Book III, Volume IV of *Camilla*, wherein the narrator gives a concise description of Mrs. Mittin’s history, current situation, and character. The narration concludes that whatever task this female character does, she does it mainly for her own self-interest, out of “simple egotism,” to borrow Burney’s words:

Mrs. Mittin had begun life as the apprentice to a small country milliner; but had rendered herself so useful to a sick elderly gentlewoman, who lodged in the house, that she left her a legacy, which, by sinking into an annuity, enabled her to quit her business, and set up, in her own conception, for a gentlewoman herself; though with so very small an income, that to sustain her new post, she was frequently reduced to far greater dependence and hardships than she experienced in her old one. She was good-humoured, yet laborious; gay, yet subservient; poor, yet dissipated. *To be* useful, *she* would *submit* to any drudgery; *to become* agreeable, *devoted* herself to any flattery. *To please* was her incessant desire, and her rage for popularity included every rank and class of society. The more eminent, of course, were her first objects, but the same aim descended to the lowest. *She* would *work, read, go* of errands, or *cook* a dinner; *be* a parasite, a spy, an attendant, a drudge; *keep* a secret, or *spread* a report; *incite* a quarrel, or *coax* contending parties into peace; *invent* any expedient, and *execute* any scheme . . . all with the pretext *to oblige* others, but all, in fact, for *simple egotism*; as prevalent in her mind as in that of the more highly ambitious, though meaner and less dangerous. (C 688-89; emphasis added)

Evidently, as the sketch shows, Mrs. Mittin is the unambiguous agent who makes decisions on all the tasks she undertakes. The third-person singular female subject pronouns leading a series of active verbs in the passage quoted above conspicuously expose Mrs. Mittin's very role as the initiator—"the choosing person," "the acting person," and "the behaving person"—of all the actions she takes upon herself (Friedman 5-6, 8).

Some might argue that Mrs. Mittin sometimes appears subservient to others' wills. However, according to Friedman's theory, Mrs. Mittin is autonomous as long as she makes the choices and her temporary subservience does not conflict with her "perspective as a whole" (19); in her case, the prospect of reaching a higher social level is her unspoken wish. Therefore, her assisting Camilla with her dress, her parroting the miserly economy of Mr. Dennel, her temporarily circumscribed servitude to Mrs. Berlington and her aunt, Mrs. Ulst, as well as her frequent interactions with trading people could all be regarded as some of her numerous ways of widening her present circle of connections to gain various short-term advantages, which will ultimately help her to achieve her long-term aims. Apparently, in these cases, she is the free agent who chooses to be serviceable to people, both high and low, in the first place.

Secondly, Mrs. Mittin's choices and actions reflect her deep concerns and values; all her actions are designed to contribute to the attainment of her ultimate goal of being a gentlewoman so as to enjoy the concomitant life of comfort and convenience. Her brain, though "barren of intellectual endowments" (C 742) as the author points out, may not be capable of profound speculation, but as a woman self-educated and trained in the great world, a world Lord Chesterfield and many of his contemporaries all agreed to be full of shams and difficulties,⁶ she perfectly knows what she wants, and where her interests lie.

According to Kowaleski-Wallace, Mrs. Mittin is "adaptable and flexible in the extreme, versatile in her talents, creative in response to her society" (97). Her "creative," or, I would say, her rather singular responses to her society owe much to what Burney calls her "simple egotism" (C 689). These can be seen at work in her dress, her selective memory, her "rage for obliging" (C 619), her obsequiousness, her deliberate neglect of decorum and her obliviousness to the reactions of other people.

⁶ See "Lord Chesterfield and Eighteenth-Century Appearance and Reality" by Charles Pullen.

Mrs. Mittin’s utilization of sumptuary codes serves her purposes in many ways, not least by providing her with opportunities to avoid associations with inconvenient connections from her previous life. She subverts the conventional sartorial practices of the polite world to serve her own needs. Equipped with two sets of clothes for different purposes, one for appearing like a working woman with “a large bonnet, and cloak, and a checked apron, and a pair of clogs, or pattens” and the other for being taken for a gentlewoman with her “embroidered and flounced” white muslin apron (C 424), this extremely practical woman dexterously adapts her wardrobe to suit the situation. In fact, the confusion of rank in the society she belongs to provides her with a perfect milieu to play freely with sumptuary codes.⁷ She takes the world simply as a colossal stage and changes her role at her pleasure. As Margaret Ann Doody points out in *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works*, Mrs. Mittin uses her clothes to demonstrate her “alternate identities”—“her good clothes for a higher appearance beneath the everyday wear” (258). To Doody, Mrs. Mittin’s “existence as a ‘gentlewoman’ is a piece of play-acting” (258); so is her role as a working woman. While her checked apron gives the onlookers the impression that she is “a mere common person” (C 424), the one made of white muslin, her “respectable dress” (Berg 218) that distinguishes her from the laboring poor, associates Mrs. Mittin with her presumably new identity. In addition, Mrs. Mittin’s unwillingness to admit her lowly past in front of gentlemen is blandly disclosed in one of the conversations between her and Mr. Dubster as she metaphorically requests the latter not to mind his “old coat” (C 435). As Mrs. Mittin leads Mr. Dubster a few paces away from the group they have initially joined, she instructs the latter about the art of pleasing in the genteel world, assuring him that he needs to be able to discern what subjects would be agreeable. Obviously, she deems her friendship with people like Mr. Typton, a tallow chandler, and Mrs. Purdle, “a very good sort of woman and the best friend [she has] in the world, perhaps, at the bottom,” an inappropriate and unappealing topic to talk about while the gentlemen are around (C 436, 478). Without doubt, these specific responses of Mrs. Mittin are choices and actions derived from her reflective reaffirmation of those modern accouterments—“wants, desires, cares, concerns, values, and commitments”—Friedman has theorized (3). They serve Mrs. Mittin

⁷ In “Home Demand and Economic Growth: A New View of the Role of Women and Children in the Industrial Revolution,” Neil McKendrick points out that a blurring of class lines prevailed in eighteenth-century England, which was particularly shown in dress (192-93).

extremely well as she tries to put her humble past behind and steadily move up the social ladder.

Thirdly, because Mrs. Mittin is not a gentlewoman by birth and is consequently free from genteel family ties, custom and relationships seem to have little chance to interfere in any of the decisions she makes. Some might argue that, due to the obscurity of her birth, we do not know exactly which class Mrs. Mittin was born to. However, owing to her addictive aspiration to genteel status, we may presume that she was born to a class lower than the middling ranks, a class covering “the lowest mechanics and artisans, and the whole peasantry of the land” and placed as the seventh class at the bottom in the list of social ranks provided by Clara Reeve (1729-1807) in *Plans of Education* (1792) (69), or categorized as the fourth class composing “the labouring poor” by Priscilla Wakefield (1751-1832) in *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798) (63). Wakefield reminds us that in the society Mrs. Mittin belongs to “the rank of women being determined by the accident of their birth, or their connections in marriage, a correspondent arrangement is, with equal propriety, applicable to them, as to the other sex” (63-64). A woman’s rank, then, depended on her father’s before marriage and on her husband’s after marriage; therefore, what she chose to do for a living had no direct connection with her class.

Furthermore, as we can perceive in the novel, Mrs. Mittin is by no means restrained by the decorum of society nor held back by emotional ties, but single-mindedly braves the impediments lying on her road to respectability. It is likely that Burney intentionally creates Mrs. Mittin as a socially underprivileged, vulgar, and self-interested character to divest her of the constraints coming from within and without in order to see what benefits such a woman may acquire through unreservedly doing what comes to her mind. Indecorously, Mrs. Mittin spies on the people and activities of the house Mrs. Arlbery rents at Mount Pleasant when visiting Southampton, bursts into Camilla’s room without permission, reads Eugenia’s letter and tells its contents to many others without a second thought. Unlike Camilla, who is forbidden to take control of her own affairs and nearly dies because of her overwhelming sense of guilt, Mrs. Mittin’s lack of sense of decorum and of emotional bonds turns out to her advantage as she adamantly moves towards her goal. Without any sense of decorum, she is free from the invisible but potent grips of the man-made ideology of femininity. Without a family or any

other emotional tie, she has only herself to consider, which renders it much easier for her to be a free agent. In fact, the term "friend" does not come with its conventional associations in Mrs. Mittin's case. Instead of indicating her desire to form permanent emotional bonds, friends serve as instruments to enable her to improve her circumstances. As the narrator points out, Mrs. Mittin does everything out of "simple egotism" (C 689). As a result, from time to time she chooses to have "no recollection" of her friends lower down the social scale, deliberately losing her memory and claiming that it is no good "ripping up old stories about nothing" (C 436, 478) because these people can provide no profit for her. At other times, she would initiate a new "friendship" with the shopkeepers, "the good people" (C 606) in her words, at the places she visits, showing that she is motivated by utility rather than affection. "By hook or by crook," she would cajole her well-off patrons or patronesses into visiting the shops to which she has already gained access, so that the small tradesmen will do her "many odd services" in return (C 517). As Camilla realizes later, Mrs. Mittin is "not a character to leave self out of consideration in her transactions for others" (C 768). Even romantic love, which Friedman worries may result in women's loss of autonomy, serves instrumentally to Mrs. Mittin's upward social mobility. Her marriage to Mr. Dannel near the end of the novel speeds her on her way to the fulfillment of a major life goal, since she finally becomes a gentlewoman by marriage.⁸ Whatever her moral shortcomings are, she is a superb exemplar of modern autonomy: she works single-mindedly to achieve her life goal, does everything in her own way, and makes decisions on all matters without succumbing to the coercion and manipulation of others.

Acquisitive Desire

This literary representation of female autonomy by Burney also offers us a picture of how it might look for a single and insufficiently provided woman to satisfy her acquisitive desire in a society socially and economically hostile to women—a society where women had to confront varieties of difficulties, where female autonomy was a luxury, and wherein a woman

⁸ Friedman "worries about women's loss of autonomy in heterosexual romantic love" (117). She admits that the merger of identities in romantic love can be good, but there are dangers and risks underlying it, for it may diminish the autonomy of one while enhancing that of the other (Friedman 120).

needed to pay a dear price if she insisted on demonstrating her autonomy. As Edward Copeland blandly points out, a “woman without access to cash might have no place at all” in eighteenth-century English society (37). Mrs. Mittin’s inheritance, no doubt, provides her with the key to open the door to the genteel world, and her not inconsiderable cash in hand supplies her with partial means to act like a gentlewoman in her own perception. This income is the decisive factor that frees her from a life of “incessant toil” (Wakefield 176) and provides the opportunity to make her own choices. Most importantly, to a great extent, Mrs. Mittin’s ability to have her own way helps to satisfy her desire for advancement in material and social terms in the highly stratified world depicted in Reeve’s *Plans of Education* and Wakefield’s *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex*.

Recent research on eighteenth-century England and on acquisitive desire in various disciplines indicates that acquisitiveness is strongly related to a person’s social aspirations and shaping of his or her identity and can result in beneficial social mobility. Indeed, acquisitive desire not only motivates talented, ingenious, and ambitious individuals in disadvantaged groups to yearn for positive life goals, but also assists them to acquire respectable social status in the end. For instance, the Burneys were once deemed by Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi (1741-1821) as “a very low Race of Mortals” (368n), but their indefatigable ambitions ultimately enable them to attain success, and nearly all of them excelled in the fields they had gifts for.⁹

Historian Maxine Berg’s investigation into the middle classes of eighteenth-century Britain associates the acquisitiveness of the Georgians with their ideas of self. She claims that both men and women then were susceptible to acquisitive desire and that shopping, a way of demonstrating one’s identity, was a practice common to both genders. Berg further argues that acquisitive desire affected all classes, and consumer goods were “bought to satisfy desires for fashion, respectability, sociability, or for convenience and comfort” (246).

Berg challenges the tendency, prevalent among eighteenth-century English essentialists and a few modern historians, of equating women exclusively with acquisitive desire. She does this by making use of the

⁹ Frances Burney herself was a celebrated novelist in her time. Her father, Charles Burney, was a famous historian of music, and his *General History of Music* established him as the foremost writer on music” in England (“Burney, Charles”). In addition, her younger brother, Charles Burney (1757-1817) was a classical scholar and collector of books. Moreover, Frances Burney’s half-sister, Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844) was also a novelist, though not as well-known as Frances.

memoirs of William Hutton and James Bisset, who went to Birmingham and found their way in the city's middling classes in the second half of the eighteenth century. Hutton's and Bisset's memoirs stand as living testimonies to the two men's preoccupation with personal possessions and to their acquisitiveness. Berg also defies the myth of "gendered consumption" (245), asserting that there is no direct connection between consumption and sex, and that "the gendered stereotypes of the female consumer" owe their existence to works such as "To a Lady on her Passion for old China" (1725) by John Gay (1685-1732) and *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) (234-35). Apart from Hutton's and Bisset's memoirs, Berg also uses the consumption of chinaware to show that the conspicuous image of English women presiding over eighteenth-century tea tables cannot prove that only women purchased china. As the historian discovers, eighteenth-century English men, too, were "avid consumers of chinaware," for "Masculine art and print collections and vase mania" attest to "this acquisitive consumerism" (Berg 245). According to her investigation, Georgian Englishmen purchased "specially chosen gifts" for family members and friends on many occasions (Berg 245-46).

Amanda Vickery, concurring with Berg's view, observes that in Georgian England consumption practices were by no means gendered behaviors. Vickery's research, too, examines men's acquisitive desire in that very era. Her study reveals that men and women in eighteenth-century England executed different patterns of shopping, which inevitably resulted in disparate degrees of visibility of their consumption practices. For, while the purchase of daily household necessities was taken care of by women, men's shopping was less frequent and visible. The consumption practices exercised by both men and women in eighteenth-century England, according to Woodruff D. Smith, had much to do with the individual's wish to be distinguished from the masses. Moreover, in Smith's view, the things one purchased conveyed images of the social status the purchaser would like to acquire in the eyes of the world. The psychotherapist Jeffrey Kottler agrees that the desire for increased social status is a powerful motive for consumption. He considers the "acquisitive desire for material things" a "social disease" common to all groups of people and deems that material "objects" comprise "tangible possessions" as well as "material 'experiences' or 'services'" (Kottler 4). He cites a Harvard education as an example of material experience, while a

resident housekeeper provides a material service (Kottler 4). In the materialistic world, as Kottler notes, people “define themselves by the things they own,” his so-called “possession identification” (13). Given Berg’s, Vickery’s, Smith’s, and Kottler’s accounts of acquisitive desire, we can perceive that it is widely agreed that a close interplay goes on among one’s acquisitiveness, possessions, image and identity.

This broadly acknowledged assumption about acquisitive desire in the real worlds of eighteenth-century England and of modern America precisely coheres with and theorizes Burney’s fictitious account of Mrs. Mittin’s acquisitiveness in *Camilla* near the end of the eighteenth century. It manifests itself flagrantly in her aggressive and decidedly upward mobile social aspirations, as well as in her accumulation of material possessions and experiences. In the novel, Burney implicitly uses the example of Mrs. Mittin to show how acquisitiveness works alongside autonomy in the quest for respectability.

Before we look into the ways acquisitive desire facilitates Mrs. Mittin’s upward social mobility, it will be sensible to examine what the word respectability signifies in this context. According to Smith’s thorough and insightful research on the culture of respectability, such a culture emphasized a person’s moral competence over high birth status (210). Smith observes that the culture of respectability was in the making throughout the eighteenth century and became prominent in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the concept of respectability came much earlier before the word itself came into being and before the discourse evolved into maturity (Smith 189). It burgeoned in as early as the seventeenth century and was still in the process of formation during the course of the eighteenth. As Smith’s research shows, the word respectability was newly coined in the late eighteenth century, and “its first citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates from 1785” (189). In fact, before the whole discourse of respectability reached its maturity in the nineteenth century, the idea of it was under constant redefinition, and people understood it in various aggregations of contexts.¹⁰ In the eighteenth century,

¹⁰ The culture of respectability, according to Smith, was “an aggregation” of many cultural contexts, including those of gentility, of luxury, of virtue, of rational masculinity, and of domestic femininity. He further points out that the aforementioned contexts “intersected or were more or less deliberately attached to each other to form a new, very broad, and well-defined cultural context to which the name *respectability* is most commonly given. Respectability became, by the nineteenth century, probably the primary factor defining consumption in Western economies. It also constituted a substantial part of the general phenomenon of modernity” (24).

the notion of respectability had much to do with one's social status and did not necessarily demonstrate his or her moral superiority. Smith points out that respectability's adjectival form, respectable, "did not convey a predominant emphasis on character or morality" and was not frequently used before the late eighteenth century (189). Rather, it was then directly linked to status, and "could also be used in the way we would say 'respectful'" (Smith 189).

Instead of using the modern definition of respectability with its heavy moral connotations,¹¹ I have applied one of the notion's eighteenth-century common usages to my discussion of Mrs. Mittin's quest for respectability. Varying from the orthodox signification of the word, the respectability Mrs. Mittin seeks for is mainly associated with her aspired role of a gentlewoman and its external signs, namely, the material objects she obtains (Kottler 4). The clothes she wears, the shows she watches, as well as the places she visits, can all contribute to constructing the image she contrives to show the world and hopes to be recognized as. After she quits her business as a milliner and before she becomes a gentlewoman by marriage, Mrs. Mittin, as the narrator sarcastically remarks, sets herself up as a gentlewoman "in her own conception" (C 688). To Mrs. Mittin, respectability manifests itself in her own self-image, the image she sees as herself and hopes to appear as in the eyes of the world.

Mrs. Mittin's self-presumed image of a gentlewoman is supported by the material objects she gains along the way to respectability. Frances Burney allows the adventurous Mrs. Mittin to profit from her freedom by wandering about towns and resort spas, "doing her own way," choosing patrons and patronesses, and serving them in order to receive various little things and "many an odd service" (C 517) in return, or theater tickets, transport, and lodgings, at no cost to herself. In this way, Mrs. Mittin accumulates "tangible possessions" and material experiences and services (Kottler 4). The material "objects" she thus acquires turn out to become symbols of her identity and the embodiment of her desired image (Kottler 4). It is clear that Burney recognizes their underlying functions, since she links Mrs. Mittin's self-constructed identities and images with her possessions. Mrs. Mittin's white muslin apron, apparently a "positional object" (Kottler 14), not only projects her occasionally-required

¹¹ Smith cites from *Oxford English Dictionary*, stating that respectability is defined as "Worthy of respect, deserving to be respected, by reason of moral excellence"; "Of good or fair social standing, and having the moral qualities regarded as naturally appropriate to this. Hence, in later use, honest and decent in character and conduct, without reference to social position, or in spite of being in humble circumstances" (190).

image of a gentlewoman but also serves as a symbol of her presumably new social status, whereas her checked apron and pattens are associated with her other role as a working-class woman. In addition, both the amusements she enjoys and the trips she takes, being part of the material “objects,” or more precisely, the material experiences, she accumulates, also facilitate her image construction. However, these project a splendid, but false image which Mrs. Mittin creates by emulating the extravagant lifestyle of the fashionable ladies.

As the narration says, Mrs. Mittin is “Poor yet dissipated” (C 688). She moves about and pursues her amusements based on the calendar of fashion followed by the fashionable ladies, whom I would call “fashionable nomads,” for they rarely stay home, but alternate their place of residence between towns, resorts, and fashionable spas, according to the season.¹² In the novel, Lord O’Learney observes:

[T]hat the search of public recreation in the winter is, from long habit, permitted without censure; but that the summer has not, as yet, prescription so positively in its favour; and those who, after meeting them all the winter at the opera, and all the spring at Ranelagh, hear of them all the summer at Cheltenham, Tunbridge, &c. and all the autumn at Bath, are apt to inquire, when is the season for home. (C 471-72)

Mrs. Mittin’s yearly timetable closely corresponds with this schedule. But, without adequate means, her indiscreet emulation of her social superiors seems likely to endanger her hard-won independence.

¹² See Maura A. Henry’s “The Making of Elite Culture” in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Concerning the forming of the two Seasons in Georgian England, Henry explains:

The Season (complete with the definite pronoun and a capital S) called the landed elite from their country estates to London and helped to make the elite “amphibious” by linking the country house (with its rural and sometimes parochial pursuits) to the arguably more cosmopolitan life of the townhouse. The Season, which was tied to parliamentary sessions, powerfully represented the political and cultural dominance of the landed ranks. The Season began in November with the presentation of the daughters of the landed elite to the monarch and to elite society as a whole. In this way, the London Season served as a marriage market for eligible young gentlemen and ladies. While many attendees (both male and female) hoped to exchange wedding vows, all engaged in seven months’ worth of parties, balls, visits, gambling, eating and drinking. By the later half of the eighteenth century, the Season had been elongated on both ends and formed into two Seasons, the Spring Season (which ran from March to June) and the Winter Season (which started in September and closed in December). (325)

In the second half of the century, the elites not only travel between their country seats and London, but also started exploring their own country. They traveled among towns and resort spas and made their use of the two Seasons more freely and flexibly.

The resourceful Mrs. Mittin, however, finds solutions that enable her to satisfy her dissipated disposition without incurring expense. Unlike those fashionable nomads, Mrs. Mittin does not come to the pleasure resorts merely to see and be seen, but bears practical concerns in mind. Driven by “commercial opportunism” (Porter 32), she travels around primarily to take her chances among her superiors, yet gratifies her acquisitive desire at the same time. As Kristina Straub puts it, Mrs. Mittin invents all sorts of undertakings to scrape up “a subsistence” (201). What Straub terms as Mrs. Mittin’s undertakings, in my view, are exactly her singular ways of gratifying her acquisitive desire. Her multiple talents enable her to perform many tasks at one time, so that she can have her pleasure without diminishing her financial resources. She proactively seeks her chances in the great world to meet her needs. Sometimes, she serves as a self-employed itinerant milliner or fashion consultant, entering many households, uninvited, either to take on some needlework or to help the ladies sorting out their wardrobe problems. At other times, she acts as a proxy shopper to save the ladies from the annoyance of bargaining and shopping. Indeed, she seems to run “a small-scale industry” (Straub 201) as she works like an agent between genteel clients and all sorts of shopkeepers, mercers, milliners, as well as haberdashers, and gets her commission from both parties in various forms including free trips or lodgings, pieces of cloth or handkerchiefs, or even a guaranteed cheaper price in future dealings. The subsistence she assiduously scrapes up arises directly from these tangible and intangible profits she earns as her patrons and patronesses, both high and low, return favors in exchange for her unsolicited assistance.

Among the many singular solutions Mrs. Mittin invents, proxy shopping gratifies her acquisitive desire the most. Besides getting hold of tangible possessions vicariously by purchasing goods for others, she is, ultimately, able to acquire pleasures, visually and psychologically, and parlays her errands into multifarious forms of material objects in the end. Indeed, in her shopping trips, whether she is doing the “practical” “shopping for” or going on “the recreational shopping around,” she is able to derive visual pleasure from continually gratifying her eyes with the novelties of goods arranged most splendidly in the world-renowned English shops (Falk and Campbell 6).¹³ Psychologically, the seeming respect paid to her by the

¹³ See Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell’s Introduction to *The Shopping Experience*. Berg points out that many contemporary foreign tourists were highly impressed by the glittering windows, interior decorations, and arrangement of goods in the English shops (263-64).

proprietors flatters her vanity as she shops on behalf of the gentry. Furthermore, to some extent, proxy shopping empowers Mrs. Mittin, and her autonomy is by no means lessened because of her being an intermediary between the shopkeepers and her patrons and patronesses. This is different from the shopping conducted by slaves and servants discussed by Ellen Hartigan O'Connor: their freedom in choosing goods was limited and they were seldom entrusted with cash for payment. Mrs. Mittin is endowed with certain "economic power" when she voluntarily gets herself involved in all the four stages—shopping, selection, delivery, and payment—of purchase suggested by Hartigan-O'Connor when doing the shopping, especially for the inexperienced Camilla (126, 128). She imagines that the twenty-pound note she does not return to Camilla gives her much consequence in the eyes of people with less means (*C* 693). Moreover, Mrs. Mittin's authority is also displayed as she designs the images of her patrons and patronesses by selecting clothes and accessories for them. Most of all, she turns her proxy shopping to her own social advantage. Mrs. Mittin's proxy shopping, along with the networks of shops—the amateur fashion business she seemingly forms—and the circle of connections eventually leads her to the advantageous marriage to Mr. Dennel, which fulfills her ultimate wish for respectability.

Given the illustrations above, I do not mean to state that Burney endorses all Mrs. Mittin's singular ways of commerce with the world. With her portrayal of this adventurous lowly-bred woman, the author explores an unorthodox manner of living. Mrs. Mittin's obsequiousness and taking the liberty of handling others' business may appear vulgar to readers and characters who boast of their high moral standards. However, Mrs. Mittin still leads the life she chooses even if she may be viewed as a nuisance by the self-righteous Edgar, the misogynist Dr. Marchmont, and many others who themselves, as Burney indicates, cannot be entirely exonerated from moral weaknesses. In addition, Mrs. Mittin is not a character wholly without merits. Indeed, she may not embody the virtues appreciated by Camilla, the social elites, and the proper ladies and gentlemen in the novel, but her industriousness and practicality are positive characteristics despite her peculiar ways of demonstration. Besides, Mrs. Mittin's care wins the heart of the old lady who leaves her a legacy which contributes to her independence. Further, her professional help is sought by Miss Dennel when the latter shops in London for her "wedding purchases" (*C* 744). Moreover, it is very likely

that Mrs. Mittin is relatively popular among petty shopkeepers because of her easygoing manner and custom (though her purchases are mostly done on behalf of others).

Obviously, in *Camilla*, Burney does not follow the tradition exemplified in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* in directly denouncing acquisitiveness as a bourgeois vice (Lin 9-10, 21), nor does she condemn Mrs. Mittin for her excessive acquisitiveness. She associates it with Mrs. Mittin's self-image and her assumed social role, as well as the advantageous results it contributes to the very character. Though the purchases Mrs. Mittin makes on Camilla's behalf almost ruin the heroine, she does not seem to receive any punishment or repent her actions. She has her fun and eventually fulfills her goal of being a gentlewoman. Most importantly, her frequent business transactions with petty shopkeepers may result in the promotion of domestic industry and facilitate economic growth.

The Impracticability of Modesty

Portraying Mrs. Mittin as an adventurous and audacious woman, who takes control of her affairs, pursues her life goal in her own way, and achieves it in the end, Frances Burney investigates this middle-aged woman's boldness. By so doing, Burney, now middle-aged, makes her third novel, *Camilla*, a site for tacitly indicating her distrust in contemporary conduct book teachings on modesty.

Modesty is defined as "Not arrogance; not presumptuousness"; "Not impudence; not forwardness"; "Moderation; decency"; "Chastity; purity of manners" in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755-56) by Samuel Johnson (1709-84). It was overcharged with romantic sentiments in a great number of English writings in the eighteenth century. In *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), James Fordyce (1720-96), one of the virtue's most fervent advocates, invented a series of florid phrasal equivalents to enhance its attractions for his readers. Modesty, under Fordyce's scrupulous manipulation of words, became a "lovely" and "enchanted" quality, "the amiable reserve," "the beautiful grace," and "the finest ornaments that can adorn [women]," just to name a few (86, 88, 113, 116).

As Ruth Bernard Yeazell demonstrates, the discourse of modesty, which attracted wide attention from advice writers, novelists, and even naturalists in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, centered on women. She points

out a fundamental paradox, for although most writers laid heavy emphasis on the idea that modesty was an innate female characteristic, they simultaneously insisted on the necessity of its strenuous and unremitting cultivation.¹⁴ In accordance with Yeazell's observation, the discussion of modesty most concerned questions related to middle-class marriage, and novels focused particularly on the period when heroes and heroines were choosing their partners. These "narratives of courtship"—the representations of "female resistance and female choice"—are termed by Yeazell "the fictions of modesty"; their central subject was "the modest woman" (ix-x, 4).

Yeazell also observes that the fictions of modesty best illustrate the confusion and contradictions existent in the constructed image of the modest woman. The conflicting pressures generated by her outward reserve and magnetic charms are clearly illustrated in *Fables of the Female Sex* (1744) by Edward Moore (1712-57):

To wiser heads attention lend,
And learn this lesson from a friend.
She, who with modesty retires,
Adds fewel to her lover's fires. (X. 63-66)

With the same conviction of the modest woman's attractiveness, Thomas Marriot (d. 1766) wrote, "Modest concealments please a Lover's Eye, / The Charms you hide, his Fancy will supply" (811-12). According to Yeazell, with the modest woman's "downcast eyes, her head turned aside, and above all by the blush that suffuses her cheek," she "never puts herself forward, and female modesty restrains and controls the violence of masculine love; but a modestly clothed body is more seductive than a merely naked one, and *modesty creates love in the very act of restraining it*" (5-6, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Yeazell's research stresses a strong link between the discourse of modesty and marriage; it informs us that the modest woman was constructed for marriage, that the modest woman's unconsciousness of

¹⁴ Yeazell observes the contradictions underlying the discourse of modesty, stating with a sarcastic tone:

Writers of popular conduct books and philosophers alike long insisted on the importance of female modesty, even as they contradicted one another—and themselves—on the nature of the virtue. It is a commonplace of the advice literature that women's modesty is instinctive, but the very existence of the literature testifies to the belief that the "instinct" must be elaborately codified and endlessly discussed: woman's "natural" modesty must be strenuously cultivated, the argument goes, lest both sexes fall victims to her "natural" lust. (5)

sexuality was meant to serve the end of courtship, and that “modest blushing” was “the most familiar token of that seductive innocence,” which also leads to marriage (33-80). As courtship and marriage were the main concerns of the literature of modesty, together with the emphasis by the titles of many representative advice books, Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* for example,¹⁵ we can easily find that instead of addressing women in general, this very discourse targeted primarily a particular group of women, that is, the women who are “in the flower of their youth and beauty” (Hume 573). It specifically addressed the young women whose blushes, as Yeazell’s research evidently shows, while most engaging men’s fascination, manifested their own virtue and attractiveness at the same time. Nonetheless, by focusing mainly on the young female, this discourse inevitably marginalized women who had passed the period of bloom and were least competitive in the marriage market, including those of middle and advanced age, and old maids (Loose 28).

In his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), David Hume (1711-76) plainly demonstrated that the construction of the notions of modesty had much to do with reproduction. In his view, it was in the interests of patriarchal inheritance that men inculcated the idea that modesty was a specifically female characteristic. So the application of this notion to older women was simply a matter of prejudice and lazy thinking:

But speculative reasonings, which cost so much pains to philosophers, are often form’d by the world naturally, and without reflection: As difficulties, which seem unsurmountable in theory, are easily got over in practice. Those, who have an interest in the fidelity of women, naturally disapprove of their infidelity, and all the approaches to it. Those, who have no interest, are carried along with the stream. Education takes possession of the ductile minds of the fair sex in their infancy. And when a general rule of this kind is once establish’d, men are apt to extend it beyond those principles, from which it first

¹⁵ There are many examples bearing witness to my statement: for instance, *The Young Ladies Conduct: or, Rules for Education, under Several Heads; with Instructions upon Dress, both before and after Marriage. And Advice to Young Wives* (1722) by John Essex (n.d.); *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally for Young Ladies* (1777) by Hannah More (1745-1833); *Letters to a Young Lady on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects Calculated to Improve the Heart, to Form the Manners, and Enlighten the Understanding* (1789) by John Bennett (n.d.); and, *Letters to a Young Lady* (1811) by Jane West (1758-1852).

arose. . . . And tho' all these maxims have a plain reference to generation, yet women past child-bearing have no more privilege in this respect, than those who are in the flower of their youth and beauty. Men have undoubtedly an implicit notion, that all those ideas of modesty and decency have a regard to generation; since they impose not the same laws, *with the same force*, on the male sex, where that reason takes not place. . . . But as the case is not the same with regard to the different ages of women, for this reason, tho' men know, that these notions are founded on the public interest, yet the general rule carries us beyond the original principle, and makes us extend the notions of modesty over the whole sex, from their earliest infancy to their extremest old-age and infirmity. (572-73)

Hume's account suggests that middle-aged women would be well advised to consider that there was no good reason why they should adhere as strictly to the rules of modesty as young girls, especially if breaking away from these conventions could yield some material benefit.

The sensible Burney certainly perceived how modesty discourse discriminated against women who are "not young," a term preferred by Jane Austen (1775-1817) in describing women who have passed their youth (Yeazell 77). At the same time, Burney's life experience also reminded her of the impracticability of the notions of modesty for women whom nature seems to forsake, no longer endowing their faces with the enchanting and seductive "transient coloring" of a blush (Yeazell 65). It was all very well to write about heroines who charmed the whole world with their modest mien, downcast eyes, and blushes when Burney published *Evelina* and *Cecilia* (1782) and was under thirty and unmarried. However, when she published her third novel, she was a wife, a mother, and the breadwinner for her new family. The motivation behind its publication was far more practical than just to see her book published or to hold on to her success. She needed the money to build a house that could shelter her new family.

A woman in her "ripe middle age" (Doody 201), Frances Burney was about forty-four years old in 1796: the central concerns of modesty discourse clearly no longer applied to her. It is certainly not a far-fetched assumption if we attribute Burney's recognition of single middle-aged women's unenvied position in the marriage market to a few incidents she had just experienced

before she looked into the issue of female middle-agedness. As we can remember, Burney herself led a life resembling that of an old maid for a certain period of time before she married Alexandre d'Arblay (1754-1818) at the age of forty-one in July 1793. During their courtship, Burney was no longer as passive and backward as she had been when involved in romantic relationships with George Owen Cambridge (1756-1841) in the early 1780s and Colonel Stephen Digby (1742-1800) in her years at court. Having learned the lessons from her previous love trials, Burney took an active role in nourishing the new relationship and determined to see the fruit it would bring forth. Furthermore, she courageously defied the world's opinion to defend her long-awaited love. In comparison with her former frustrating experiences, Frances Burney must have found her active participation in forming and fortifying the relationship with d'Arblay more realistic and rewarding.

Mrs. Mittin's middle-agedness, autonomy, self-knowledge, and pragmatism, I believe, are not randomly inserted in the novel. This fictitious character, to some extent, not only reflects on how a woman's perspectives of the world may be affected by her age, but also shows the life wisdom a woman may gain from her experience and increasing age.

Apparently, being a middle-aged married woman during the creation of her third novel, to some extent, changed Burney's perspectives of old women and those who, like her, are in their middle age. She is different from the Burney who in *Evelina* (1778) makes Lord Orville praise Mrs. Mirvan for her femininity while having the heroine, echoing Mr. Villars's opinion, cast aspersions on Mrs. Selwyn's assertiveness and "masculine" understanding (268-69, 289).¹⁶ Mrs. Selwyn's "want of gentleness" is described as the lack of a virtue extremely essential to the female character (*E* 269). In *Camilla*, with the portrayal of Mrs. Mittin, the author expresses progressive views on middle-aged women and their assertive behavior, and takes up the role of a critic of modesty. Though the much younger Burney showed a commonplace disapproval of middle-aged women's assurance in her debut novel, eighteen years later, when composing *Camilla*, she could not be more conscious of the significance of women's self-confidence.

Over a period of eighteen years, Burney's love experiences had taught her the impracticability of excessive modesty and the effectiveness of

¹⁶ See Frances Burney's *Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, hereafter cited parenthetically as *E*.

exercising her autonomy. Consequently, in *Camilla*, besides employing the well-received theme of young women's education by the representation of the young, ignorant, and fallible heroine, Burney also reflects on the difficulties many unsupported middle-aged women would encounter as well as on some practical and practicable responses they may have to daily hardships. However, no matter how much the author was concerned about the female situation and difficulties, in practice, it was not possible for her to place Mrs. Mittin in the central role of the novel. For she still needed to keep an eye on the market, even though publishing *Camilla* by subscription had secured profit before its publication. Admittedly, in eighteenth-century England, people would not be sufficiently interested to purchase a novel concerning a middle-aged woman who is not only socially underprivileged but lacks a strict moral code and embodies many shortcomings in her physical appearance.

Burney certainly does not mean to create Mrs. Mittin as a conduct book exemplar of feminine modesty. Like her creator, this character is also excluded from the central discourse of modesty because of her "chronological age."¹⁷ As illustrated earlier in this article, it is Mrs. Mittin's autonomy and acquisitiveness that attract our attention. Straightforward and vociferous, Mrs. Mittin is modeled after the assertive woman, a type of woman severely decried by Fordyce and the misogynist Richard Polwhele (1760-1838). Both insisted on drawing a distinct line between genders; modesty was reckoned by them an inherent characteristic of women.¹⁸ Fordyce relentlessly condemned "impudent" women, calling them "destructive Syrens" (98, 100). In his view, these women had "forgotten to blush," their foreheads were "hardened into shamelessness," and their eyes, "formerly soft, virtuous, and downcast" and

¹⁷ Deveney Looser indicates that there are two ways to estimate age. One is by "the chronological age; the other, by the "physical condition" (81).

¹⁸ Fordyce argues that a distinction should be made between men and women in their dress and behavior:

But what though the dress be kept ever so distinct, if the behaviour be not; in those points, I mean, where the character peculiar to each sex seems to require a difference? There, a metamorphosis in either will always offend an eye that is not greatly vitiated. It will do so particularly in your sex. By dint of assiduity and flattery, fortune and show, a Female Man shall sometimes succeed strangely with the women: but to the men an Amazon never fails to be forbidding. (I. 105)

In *The Unsex'd Females*, Polwhele associates modesty with women's nature. He criticizes eight contemporary women, including Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), Mary Robinson (1758-1800), Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), Helen Maria Williams (1762-1827), Ann Yearsley (1756-1806), Mary Hays (1760-1843), Angelika Kauffmann (1741-1807), and Emma Crewe (1787-1818) (Polwhele 91-106). According to him, these women are "A female band despising NATURE'S law, / As 'proud defiance' flashes from their arms, / And vengeance smothers all their softer charms" (Polwhele 12-14).

effusing "the soul of innocence," had "learnt to stare, and roll with unbounded wantonness; to dart nothing but unholy fire" (Fordyce 101). Fordyce made it clear that the women, who were "lost to shame," would only excite detestation in men (103). To the reactionary Polwhele, who castigated a band of literary women led by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), the assertive women were "the Unsex'd Females" who exchanged "the blush of modesty" for "the bronze of impudence."¹⁹

In fact, Burney's criticism of decorum lies more in the notion's impracticability for middle-aged women than in any direct condemnation of it. For, as the model of the modest woman aims at teaching young women the ways to lure a potential husband, it may serve well for them. However, for middle-aged women with no claim to youth or beauty, and especially those who share Mrs. Mittin's low social rank, Burney's picture of the forward and presumptuous middle-aged woman, who actively participates in shaping her own life, appears more reassuring and practicable. For, to some extent, it shows how individual effort and persistence may help a person's life turn for the better. Emphatically, it assures such readers that they can take part in framing their own lives.

Burney endows Mrs. Mittin with qualities, which help the latter confront ubiquitous economic difficulties. For instance, Mrs. Mittin is characterized as a woman of action. Her action, however, is not confined in the domicile or "the calm of retreat" which Fordyce believed to be congenial to the modest woman (vii). Rather, her action is and needs to be performed in the great world, for it is the place where individual industriousness is more likely to make dreams come true. In the process of shaping her life, Mrs. Mittin creates chances for herself; instead of passively waiting for things to happen, she makes them happen. Since she cannot be satisfied with an income which can afford her only a very low standard of living, she travels from town to town, looking for opportunities and seizing whatever comes along to enhance the quality of her life. As has been shown earlier, this strategy may expose her to occasional hardships, but it enables her to satisfy her desires and have fun in the process. Furthermore, Mrs. Mittin is a character who would not succumb to her fate as a vulnerable gentlewoman would when unexpectedly caught by

¹⁹ As its preface to the 1800 American edition indicates, Polwhele's poem, *The Unsex'd Females*, owed its origin to a passage in *The Pursuits of Literature* (1796) by Thomas James Mathias (1754?-1835) (v), wherein Mathias condemns women writers, stating: "Our *unsexed* female writers now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves in the labyrinth of politicks, or turn us wild with Gallick frenzy" (238).

misfortune in Wakefield's account:

There is scarcely a more helpless object in the wide circle of misery which the vicissitudes of civilized society display, than a woman genteelly educated, whether single or married, who is deprived, by any unfortunate accident, of the protection and support of male relations; unaccustomed to struggle with difficulty, unacquainted with any resource to supply an independent maintenance, she is reduced to the depths of wretchedness, and not unfrequently, if she be young and handsome, is driven by despair to those paths which lead to infamy. (66)

Unlike the genteel woman described by Wakefield, who would passively meet the inadvertence of life and unheroically yield to circumstances, Burney's Mrs. Mittin would undauntedly confront the difficulties.

Mrs. Mittin is not less affected by the "gothic economics" prevalent in the fictitious world. She lives on an annuity of about thirty pounds, which, according to Copeland's competence ledgers, is just above the income of the laboring poor and could barely support the life of a humble curate (24-25). Such a man, as Anne Plumtre (1760-1818) admits in *The Rector's Son* (1798), has no leisure to appreciate the beauty of nature, for he "could just but live" (I. 5). The statistics listed in Copeland's remarkable work shows us how Mrs. Mittin's inclination to the dissipated lifestyle, a living style popular among the people of fashion, renders her income insufficient to support her life. However, Mrs. Mittin is neither intimidated nor defeated by this disagreeable situation. Her enterprising spirit and energy make the life she yearns for possible.

Moreover, being a middle-aged woman, Mrs. Mittin has come to know herself better than in her youth. The self-knowledge she acquires with age enables her to follow her own way and shape her life. She recognizes her pragmatism and fully understands her own wishes and desires. Mrs. Mittin's daring to have her own way, industriousness, and persistence are the main reasons that she does not just barely survive, but lives reasonably well and according to her wishes. With all the illustrations above, I am not indicating that Burney approves of all Mrs. Mittin's conduct. As I have recounted earlier in this article, Burney creates Mrs. Mittin as an experimental character by deliberately making her vulgar and self-interested. The author removes from

Mrs. Mittin all possible constraints coming from within and without. By so doing, this character is allowed to exercise her autonomy and do whatever comes to her mind with no hesitation and no sense of guilt. The narrator tells us that “simple egotism” (C 689) is the only motivation behind Mrs. Mittin’s conduct. Consequently, it is not surprising that we find Burney’s disapproval of this very character’s forwardness, vulgarity, and impropriety through the reactions of Camilla, of Edgar, and of Dr. Marchmont.²⁰ Nonetheless, despite the high moral tone of her novel, Burney never completely condemns Mrs. Mittin’s morality. Sometimes Mrs. Mittin may be depicted in a manner that invites readers to despise her and laugh at her vulgarity, but on other occasions, the author shows the character as being free from any criminal thinking. As the narration testifies, Mrs. Mittin keeps Camilla’s money simply “with a view to give herself consequence . . . but wholly without any design of imposition or fraud” (C 693).

In *Camilla*, Burney exposes to the world the impracticability of modesty for the middle-aged disadvantaged women. Burney does not equate Mrs. Mittin’s boldness with the shamelessness or monstrousness that many contemporary conduct book writers attributed to women whose behavior deviated from the rules prescribed for the modest woman.²¹ Rather, she deems female boldness the outcome of a mature woman’s rational exercise of mental power; it is also the realization of the ancient Greek aphorism, “Know Thyself.” This female boldness, in her view, is the manifestation of a mature woman’s self-knowledge when she recognizes her desires and aspirations, understands the milieu she is in, and determines to staunchly confront all the trials she may encounter in this world. This female boldness well attests to its effectiveness and constitutes the *sine qua non* for the exercise of a mature woman’s autonomy.

Conclusion

With the portrayal of Mrs. Mittin, Frances Burney reveals the value of autonomy for a woman. Through reading Burney’s biographical materials and

²⁰ See pages 606, 610-11, 623, and 734 of *Camilla*.

²¹ Writers who sang for the virtue of modesty tended to morally blackmail women who insisted on asserting their wills; they stigmatized women who fought with men in the competitive economic world. For example, Richard Allestree (1619-81) in *The Ladies Calling* (1677) vehemently stated: “an Impudent woman is lookt on as a kind of Monster, a thing diverted and distorted from its proper form” (70).

imaginative works, we can perceive that she, no doubt, recognizes autonomy's great value for herself and for the kind of life she shaped for herself at different times.

It is a pity that Burney does not persist in exploring the issue of female autonomy by allowing the underprivileged Mrs. Mittin to enjoy her independence till the very end of the novel. Apparently, Burney's portrayal of Mrs. Mittin's autonomy has its limitations. For Mrs. Mittin's ultimate life goal relies greatly on her marital status: although marriage provides the comfortable life she has longed for, it unquestionably subjugates her to another mode of servility in a domestic economic unit set up by men. Cutting short the duration of this unconventional woman's autonomy by sending her off to the altar, Burney conveniently avoids accusations of endorsing vulgarity and self-interest and of attempting to turn the world upside down. Burney has endowed Mrs. Mittin with the qualities and talents necessary for a successful businesswoman. She could have ended her narrative in a more enterprising fashion by allowing her creation to save enough money to set up a business of her own. This would have further reinforced an already radical portrait of an eighteenth-century Englishwoman, extended the range of Burney's contribution to women's writing, and partially rewritten the history of English fiction.

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