



The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing

Julia Epstein

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Best known as a novelist and social satirist whose work anticipated Jane Austen's, Frances Burney (1752-1840) has also been recognized as an important writer in the history of feminist literature. Julia Epstein now offers a new interpretation of Burney and her work: that Burney's anger at the economic and social conditions of women emerges in her writing in moments of barely contained violence, and that her representations of violence and hostility provide a key to Burney's literary power.

The Iron Pen situates Burney's writings within the sociopolitical context of the late eighteenth century and proposes a new approach to the development of the novel of manners. In addition, Epstein presents a comprehensive study of the reception of Burney's work from its original publication to the present. This study illuminates the history of popular book reviewing and of academic literary scholarship as political enterprises.

Beginning with an examination of Burney's journals and letters, including an account of the mastectomy she underwent without anesthesia while in exile in Paris in 1811, Epstein then offers readings of Burney's four novels, paying close attention to the depiction of repressed anger and violence that characterizes all her work. The final section traces critics' responses to Burney's published writings from 1778, when her first novel, *Evelina*, appeared anonymously, to the present in readings informed by psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and feminist literary theory. Drawing upon the work of critics of eighteenth-century culture such as Mary Poovey, Ellen Pollak, Ruth Perry, and Margaret Doody, Epstein is successful in two ways: in combining an analysis of a set of texts with an analysis of a particular set of cultural assumptions and in her intentional underscoring of the complex nature of critical practice.

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