

[An excerpt from my dissertation, *Cousins and Lovers: The History of the English Love Plot, 1600-1895*.]

“Again I stood suspended” (c. 1900), Hugh Thomson

(image credit: Elizabeth Hopkinson’s Hidden Grove)



One of the first novelists to power an entire plot on the virtue of modesty – both male and female – was Fanny Burney. Her first novel, *Evelina* (1778), centers on the romance between the upright Lord Orville and the innocent and inexperienced Evelina Anville. Orville meets Evelina at a dance during her first appearance on the London social scene, and is immediately taken with her blushing modesty, though rather alarmed by her extreme reticence. Modesty thus sparks the romance between Orville and Evelina, and modesty proceeds to complicate it. Such is Evelina’s luck, that whenever she finds herself in an embarrassing circumstance, Orville is sure to walk by and look upon her with that grave concern of his that, throughout the novel, causes her even more misery than the rakish persecutions of Sir Clement Willoughby. Matters could easily be cleared up if either of them were willing to speak the word, but Evelina is far too timid, and Orville far too delicate, to ask or answer a plain question. [...] Early in the novel, for instance, Evelina tries to put off Sir Clement at a dance by telling him that she already has a partner, and

implying, when pressed, that that partner is Lord Orville. When Sir Clement craftily exposes her white lie in Orville's presence, Evelina tries to explain, but the effort is quite pitiful: "No, Madam, cried I, d – only – only I did not know that gentleman, – and so, – -and so I thought – I intended – I –"¹ The fact is that she did not want to dance with Sir Clement, did want to dance with Lord Orville, and was hoping that if she kept herself free, the latter might ask her. But how to say so? She longs to give Orville some sort of explanation, and has several good opportunities, but, for Evelina, the thing is impossible: "I was [...] so utterly unable to assume sufficient courage to speak to him concerning an affair in which I had so terribly exposed myself, that I hardly ventured to say a word all the time we were walking."²

The plot of the novel is comprised of a series of such episodes. Evelina finds herself in a compromising situation; Lord Orville happens by; and a misunderstanding ensues. This was Burney's accomplishment: to realize that the narrative value of an embarrassing circumstance, an unwanted attention, a social *faux pas*, could be amplified immensely if it transpired in the presence of a preferred suitor – and especially if that preferred suitor was of a reserved and serious disposition. Lord Merton's hand-fondling at a dinner party is bad enough on its own, but "the more so, as I saw that Lord Orville had his eyes fixed upon us, with a gravity of attention that made me uneasy."³ A ride in Sir Clement's carriage can never be pleasant to a girl like Evelina, but to embark with Orville bowing her farewell, and to show up at home half an hour late, with Orville once again waiting attendance, is a disaster hardly to be born: "All my joy now vanished, and gave place to shame and confusion; for I could not endure that he should know how long a time Sir Clement and I had been together, since I was not at liberty to assign a reason

¹ *Evelina*, vol. I, ch. 13.

² *Ibid.* vol. 1, ch. 16.

³ *Ibid.* vol. I, ch. 23.

for it.”⁴ Burney never tires of the device. Evelina is caught by Orville in the company of a pair of prostitutes, caught with a party demanding the use of his carriage, caught in the arbor with her hand in Sir Clement’s. At one point, she runs into him three times in the course of six pages:

[W]hat, good Heaven! were my emotions, when, a few moments afterwards, I perceived advancing our way, – Lord Orville!

And this was our situation, – for we had not taken three steps when, – O Sir, – we again met Lord Orville!

Listless, uneasy, and without either spirit or courage to employ myself, [...] I indolently seated myself at the window, where [...] I perceived [...] Lord Orville!⁵

The exclamatory “Lord Orville!” appears in the novel twenty-two times, as opposed to a mere three “Sir Clement!”s. Orville’s appearances are without a doubt the most rousing events in the novel, but their dramatic effect would be much less were it not for the system of modesty that Burney had already set up between her two central characters – a silent and exquisitely sensitive heroine, and a polite gentleman who cannot bear to pry. With this system in place, the story reacts to the apparitions of Orville like a gong to a massive blow, unleashing a sudden blast of intense emotion, and then reverberating on for the next several letters as we and Evelina reflect on the encounter. Only when a misunderstanding is cleared up does the story know rest, and between Evelina and Orville, misunderstandings are slow in being cleared up.

While Evelina agonizes over what Orville must think of her, Orville agonizes over what to think of her as well. Appearances are so conflicting – her manners and conversation are universally modest, but the company she seems to keep could hardly be worse. We have seen how Evelina struggles to offer an explanation; here is how Orville struggles to solicit one:

⁴ Ibid. vol. I, ch. 21.

⁵ Ibid. vol. II, ch. 21, 22.

We were then both seated, and, after a short pause, he said, “How to apologize for so great a liberty as I am upon the point of taking, I know not; – shall I, therefore, rely wholly upon your goodness, and not apologize at all? ⁶

He does not simply ask his question; neither does he apologize and then ask the question; no, he finds himself incapable of making any beginning at all, and so ends his speech by asking permission to skip it altogether. It is granted. He makes a second attempt.

I should be extremely sorry to appear impertinent, – yet hardly know how to avoid it.

Again he stops, waiting for Evelina to reply. At this point Orville resembles nothing so much as a hesitant swimmer, dipping a toe in the water and hastily withdrawing it, then trying the opposite toe and finding the water just as cold. Evelina assures him that nothing he says could be impertinent.

“You are very good,” answered he, “and encourage me to be ingenuous –”

Again he stopped.

His situation is growing ridiculous at this point. Gradual measures have failed. At last, with the courage born of desperation, he flings himself into the icy medium of blunt speech.

“Were those ladies with whom I saw you last night ever in your company before?”

“No, my Lord,” cried I, rising and coloring violently, “nor will they ever be again.”

Orville does not escape the chilling shock. More apologies, he finds, are necessary. Evelina is indignant; he is embarrassed. Before long, however, the water does warm, and “The pride which his first question had excited, now subsided into delight and gratitude; and I instantly related to him, as well as I could, the accident which had occasioned my joining the unhappy women with whom he had met me.”

⁶ Ibid. vol. II. ch. 22.

The transfer of information, we see in this scene, is no easy matter between a modest heroine and a modest gentleman. Once that information finally is transferred, however, the sense of relief and resolution is instantaneous. Evelina is no loose woman, Orville finds; on the contrary, her values and sentiments are a perfect match for his own. Here again we see the formal value of the virtue of modesty. At the same time as it delays and retards the union of the central couple, it continually reminds us that they are kindred souls. At the same time as it complicates the plot, it lays the groundwork for the resolution.