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# Artlessness: A Disturbing Ideal in Fanny Burney's Evelina

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Before the Enlightenment, the psychological symptoms which are now associated with autism were rationalized through a lens of religion and folklore. Post-Enlightenment, the term "autism" and its classification as a neurodivergence were first recorded midway through the 20th century (Zeldovich). Between these two explanations is a two-hundred-year gap in which faith-based rationalizations were shunned in the name of science, yet science had not developed a label for autism—nor was that label perhaps yet necessary, given the relative simplicity of the world compared to today. What, then, was the social appraisal of autistic-coded symptoms during those two hundred years, and how does it live on in the modern day? The answer can be found in literature of the time such as Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, whose titular character exhibits many symptoms now associated with autistic women. Evelina is not autistic, but reactions to her social deficits termed "artlessness" expose the values and vulnerabilities that 18th-century society glorified in their women, ideals which can still be easily recognized in modern media.

Before Evelina's time, parents rationalized deformity and abnormality in children through stories of changelings and feral children (Albury). Children whose eyes stared, who didn't like to play with toys, or who were unusually fussy did not fit in with regular society (Haffter 55), and thus were sometimes considered otherworldly. However, their abnormalities were not always viewed negatively: in his article on historical depictions of autism, William R. Albury writes,

> the changeling may be a creature who is ethereally beautiful…When positively valued, [these metaphors] convey a sense of aloofness and may be used to explain why attempts at integration are unsuccessful: these exceptional people are welcome to be like us, but they have no wish to do so.

This positive association with autistic qualities is supported by philosopher Ian Hacking's observation that even though the eyes of many autistic children abnormally stare or avoid contact with others', they "seem positively cherubic when they are at peace" (52). His comparison to an angelic entity is especially potent, as it implies that abnormal children were religiously valued, perhaps that they were considered holy. Consequently, Albury further writes in "From Changelings" that when children were valued positively, the reaction "promotes a passive resistance to measures that might facilitate their social inclusion." Similarly to saints, abnormal children could serve as "models of virtue," foils for normal people, and should not be brought down to a human level of sin. It's worth noting that children were only viewed in this way when they were aesthetically beautiful; when they were ugly, they were viewed in the opposite light, like "Luther's devil." Thus, the perception of abnormal children was left largely up to genetic chance and was just as objectifying as it was deifying.

The objectification of pre-Enlightenment abnormal children is relevant today in connection to the perception of autistic women. The DSM-5 defines the social component of autism as "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction" such as "difficulties adjusting behavior to suit social contexts" (American Psychiatric Association 31), and while autistic women certainly exhibit symptomatic social deficits, autism in girls and women is unique to and often more subtle than male autism, especially in girls and women without intellectual disabilities (Rynkiewicz 737). Autistic females have a greater ability to mask their symptoms, allowing them

to mimic neurotypicals and thus hide their confusion and exhaustion in social contexts (738). Additionally, they may appear to be more intelligent than autistic males due to the fact that their "intense interests" often lie in arts such as literature and theatre (747). If they are found to be attractive, what abnormal behavior autistic females do display is perceived more positively, so that their social deficits may translate to Albury's previously mentioned "sense of aloofness," and they may be perceived as cherubic, angelic, or in any other manner of deity-centric glorification. Burney's Evelina is this angel.

In the original preface to *Evelina*, Burney describes the titular character as "the offspring of Nature in her simplest attirement." In the book itself, she often condenses this description down to the word "artless." Artlessness is defined and redefined by multiple characters, often lengthily. Lady Howard writes,

> Her character seems truly ingenuous and simple; and at the same time that nature has blessed her with an excellent understanding and great quickness of parts, she has a certain air of inexperience and innocency that is extremely interesting.

The Rev. Mr. Villars says further,

> …I saw that her guileless and innocent soul fancied all the world to be pure and disinterested as herself, and that her heart was open to every impression with which love, pity, or art might assail it.

Sir Clement describes her in flowery poetry:

> Downcast eye and blushing cheek,
>
> Timid air, and beauteous face,
>
> Anville, -whom the Graces seek.

Evelina's artlessness is expounded upon by almost every character; her beauty, simplicity, and understanding are constantly praised. What they all describe are similar to symptoms once associated with changelings, and now associated with autism in women and girls. Evelina is intelligent, but seemingly has no intention of using that intelligence for her own gain, or even the awareness that she could. She's reserved, but she's beautiful enough that her reserve is construed as that praised "aloofness." She takes great interest in literature, writing detailed letters about her life, and in opera, which she describes as "of all entertainments, the sweetest and most delightful." The combination of these attributes garners her the interest and appreciation of almost every man in the book, many of whom associate her with Heaven. Sir Clement refers to "the Graces" in his poetry about her, and both he and Lord Merton call her an "angel" on multiple occasions. Mr. Villars and Maccarthy also refer to her as an angel, though neither in a romantic context. Even when she makes mistakes, such as rudely turning down a dance at a ball, her behavior is excused within the context of her virtue.

Harkening back to Albury's observation of abnormal children as foils for normal people, Sir Clement remarks that Evelina's "perfection" causes the faults of other women to be "glaring." She reflects back the flaws of society, much as those pre-Enlightenment children did. What exactly is being praised? There is the obvious: sophistication and artifice are linked to deceit. Evelina, with her country origins, is a foil for the sins of the city, in this case the pretension of her cousins and the dishonesty of most people around her (Closter 892). But there is more. In his poem, Sir Clement lauds Evelina's "power unknown," implying that she is made better for her lack of awareness of the ability to manipulate. While her guardian Mr. Villars acknowledges that her artlessness "unfit[s] you for the thorny paths of the great and busy world," his solution is not that she learns how to navigate those paths, but that she comes back home. Moreover, he hopes that she returns

from the city "all innocence"; he wants her to remain blissfully unchanged by the baseness of her acquaintances, just how abnormal children were discouraged from becoming like other people. Along with the Evelina's artlessness, the men around her also value her ability to *remain* artless.

It could be argued that these two attributes are, in fact, virtuous. Certainly, it is more honest to refrain from artifice and manipulation, and the determination to keep to her morals despite the influence of her surroundings is something that defines many strong women. However, simple value assessments of these attributes overlook their downfalls. Evelina's inability to understand other people enough to manipulate them makes it much easier for her to *be* manipulated, as she is by Sir Clement—for example, when he leads her into an alleyway under the guise of rescuing her. And to remain completely unchanged by her experiences is to not learn from them, the consequences of which are illustrated in each of her unsuccessful attempts to fend off unwanted male attention. As author Joanne Cutting-Gray says in her article "Writing Innocence: Fanny Burney's *Evelina*," the possibility of Evelina remaining exactly the same "entails sacrificing the seasoning of practical knowledge on the patriarchal altar of pristine ignorance" (46). In remaining artless, she remains vulnerable.

Additionally, attributes valued or wished for in Evelina conflict with each other:

> Correct social appearance itself includes a contradictory comportment of innocence: unworldly enough to appear guileless or diffident, yet sophisticated enough to recognize dissimulation and artifice, subtle enough to discern deception and fraud, and poised enough to withstand male aggression. (Cutting-Gray 47)

Evelina is supposed to remain intelligent but must never learn. She must remain not only uninterested in, but unaware of manipulation tactics, but she must also avoid them from her male suitors. She is held up as a beacon of virtue among her cousins and acquaintances, but not once

does she acknowledge this to them for fear of being rude. But how is Evelina expected to know what is rude if she is to remain so artless? Amidst all of these impossibly conflicting expectations of her, who is she supposed to be? Perhaps, as Kristina Straub suggests in her article on "Eighteenth Century Female Life," Mrs. Selwyn is correct when she says that "'young ladies' might be 'nowhere,' treasures too fine, too ethereal to even take up physical space…" (230). Perhaps the ideal woman is one who doesn't exist. Conflicting expectations of women are not new, nor is it surprising that none of the men in *Evelina* are subjected to similarly impossible expectations. But further contemplation of the concept of artlessness leads the reader to a darker conclusion, one that follows us into the modern day.

The social deficits of modern female autists, although they may be better masked than those of males, still expose them to uncomfortable social, emotional, and physical situations. Says Agnieszka Rynkiewicz in her article "Girls and Women with Autism," "Females with autism are prone to abuse and sexual victimization and even those who are high-functioning need substantial support to become healthy and independent adults" (738). The inability of autistic women to analyze nonverbal body language or to extricate themselves from an uncomfortable situation can put them in a very dangerous position, so it is essential for their own safety that they learn from their own experiences and that they are able to rely on others to keep them safe when they cannot do so themselves. Contrary to this necessity, Villars does not want Evelina to learn, and the other men around her similarly esteem her ignorance; in his forged letter, Sir Clement calls her "my sweet girl," a childish epithet, and Evelina is constantly called a child, even thinking of herself using the same term. This nicknaming is not indicative of anything on its own—Evelina is a young woman and may well be perceived as more childish by those older than herself—but when the praise of her artlessness is placed connection with her being perceived as a child, and then when

that perception of her as a child is placed in connection with men's constant pursuit of her, the desire for Evelina to remain ignorant exposes a disturbing ideal expressed best by Cutting-Gray when she says, "The patriarchal model for female virtue appears to posit innocence merely in order to assault it" (47).

Evelina is assaulted multiple times throughout the novel; Sir Clement grabs her hand on numerous occasions. Once, when he has just tried to lead her into a dark alleyway,

> this most impetuous of men, snatching my hand, which he grasped with violence, besought me to forgive him with such earnestness of supplication, that, merely to escape his importunities, I was forced to speak, and in some measure to grant the pardon he requested…

On another occasion, after he has insulted all other women compared to her,

> I then rose and was going, but he flung himself at my feet to prevent me, exclaiming, in a most passionate manner, "Good God! Miss Anville, what do you say?—is it, can it be possible, that, so unmoved, that, with such petrifying indifference, you can tear me from even the remotest hope!"

Sir Clement clearly disapproves of other women: of Mrs. Selwyn, who "has wit, I acknowledge, and more understanding than half her sex put together; but she keeps alive a perpetual expectation of satire"; of Louisa, "a mere compound of affectation, impertinence, and airs"; and of Madame Duval, "a creature so horrid…as to partake of the worst qualities of all these characters…a monster." However, it is doubtful that any one of these women would have tolerated his inappropriate behavior or accepted his apologies. Moreover, the women Clement is not attracted to, he calls "women;" Evelina he only calls "angel." He does not value wit, satirical human, or airs

affected for the purposes of social communication—what he values is an angelically beautiful, vulnerable woman, a "girl" who is perfect in her "permanent naivete."

As Cutting-Gray notes, "The most intelligent men, Willoughby and Orville, appreciate [Evelina's] understanding in spite of her inexperience" (48). In fact, Lord Orville presents himself as the support Evelina requires to keep her safe. Says he, "She does not, I believe, see the dangers to which she is exposed, and…I feel a strong desire to point them out." He recognizes her "artlessness" as a detriment for which her intelligence cannot fully compensate. He refers to her, not as a "sweet girl" or an "angel" who instantly enamors with her naivete, but as a "modern young lady" whose "modest worth, and fearful excellence, require both time and encouragement to show themselves." His acknowledgement of her need for development is a breath of fresh air among her manipulative, exploitative suitors, but it calls into question his desire to marry her. Perhaps he is not predatory in the same overt way as Sir Clement, but his appraisal of Evelina as a bright soul who needs his guidance speaks more to the role of a father than that of a husband. Is this what an artless woman had to decide between in Enlightened society, a father or an abuser? Were these the choices provided to autistic women of the time, to be eternally a child under male guidance or a victim of male predation? Ironically, Evelina's artlessness does exactly what her acquaintances claim: it exposes their own dark ideals for her.

Just as the technological and scientific mindset of the Enlightenment continues into the modern day, so does the glorification of artlessness, though it is now more often referred to as naivete. In 2017, the film analyst who creates under the name "Pop Culture Detective" made a video essay titled "Born Sexy Yesterday" (BSY), a term he coined to describe a female character archetype commonly found in sci-fi and fantasy genres:

> Through the use of scientific conventions, they're brought into the human world already fully formed. The mind of a child manifeste [sic] in a mature female body. She may be an android, a computer program, a mermaid, an alien, a magical being, or otherwise raised in an environment isolated from the rest of human society. (3:23)

The catchphrase which encapsulates the personality of the BSY archetype is taken from the movie *Tron: Legacy (2010)*: "profoundly naïve, unimaginably wise" (1:05). This definition is a synonym for Evelina's artlessness and would not be out of place in the mouth of one of her acquaintances. Additionally, Evelina fits the technical description of a BSY woman—although she isn't a robot or a magical creature, she has been raised isolated from society, and thus her interactions with the world and the men around her are dictated by her naivete in the same way as if she were magically born yesterday.

The BSY trope is an archetype which serves a specific purpose to endear the female character to the male gaze. The woman who understands nothing of the world, who is confused by basic social conventions and overwhelmed in urban settings, will naturally find comfort in whoever does understand, the same way Evelina initially found comfort in Sir Clement when he rescued her from a confusing and overwhelming experience in an alleyway. Additionally, the BSY woman will think her guide intelligent because he understands something she does not, even is the knowledge she lacks is common to him. Her naivete is taken advantage of in order to raise her esteem of her male love interest. The man she's attracted to is usually one of the first people she meets in her new world, the first person who presents himself as an ally ("Born Sexy Yesterday" 6:00). Note Evelina's lack of options in respectful men. Lord Orville, with his polite manners and non-threatening presence, is the obvious choice when compared to Sir Clement or Mr. Lovel, but

this does not mean he is on his own remarkable; Evelina believes him to be remarkable because of her lack of experience. Rather than protecting her vulnerability, Lord Orville is taking advantage of it by immediately marrying her rather than helping her grow into an independent woman who may someday choose him because she prefers him to the wide variety of men she has met, not because he is the politest out of the half-dozen predators in her immediate social circle.

The BSY comparison does not stop at Evelina. Changelings and feral children, so long as they were aesthetically beautiful, were viewed in the same way. As previously explained, their integration into the rest of human society was discouraged on the basis that they were ethereal, otherworldly beings more virtuous than humans. But besides the established analysis that an inability to learn is an inability to defend oneself against uncomfortable and unsafe situations, the only beings who are objectively, ethereally virtuous are faith-based. A person who is as pure and uncorrupted as Evelina is said to be is non corporeal, because to live in the world is to be changed by it. A grown woman who has not been influence by anything or anyone is inherently unreal, which is why BSY characters are so common in sci-fi and fantasy stories, which can make explanations for their existence. There are similarly fantastical explanations of BSY-type characters stretching back to the ancient Greeks, whose Aphrodite rose out of sea foam, fully formed. Aphrodite is the goddess of love and beauty.

The ideal woman, impossibly artless and dangerously naïve, has been the fantasy of men for millennia because of her inherent vulnerability. A 2012 research study by Cari D. Goetz showed that out of 22 exploitability cues in women, 19 were considered attractive to men, and furthermore that the recognition of exploitability in women prompts men to utilize “exploitative strategies” against women they perceive as more accessible (424). Evelina is constantly taken advantage of by men who are sexually attracted to her, who use her lack of social knowledge to overstep her

boundaries. Furthermore, I would argue she is also taken advantage of by her guardians and caretakers, who will her to remain as pure and unchanged in their eyes as she always was. Burney's criticism of the latter category is subtler than that of the former, but traces of it appear throughout Evelina's journey. After she receives the forged letter which she believes to be from Orville, she is no longer able to distinguish his intentions from those of Sir Clement, and though his polite nature gives her pause, she more strictly avoids his company than she does Clement—both of which imply that his overall mannerisms are not actually, significantly different from those of the recognized predator. Additionally, Mr. Villars, although lauded as the best of men, has a name which sounds like "villain"—admittedly a thin connection, but Evelina's determination to fulfill his expectations of her and make him proud put her in constant danger from male predators because of her inability to do anything which may be construed as impolite.

Whether romantically or platonically, Evelina's artlessness is exploited for the satisfaction of her male suitors, just as pre-Enlightenment children's abnormalities were exploited for the sake of religious symbolism and modern autistic women's social deficits are exploited for the pleasure of male predators. The constant cultural redevelopment of the ethereal child, from changelings to artless country girls to sci-fi and fantasy inventions, exposes men's desire for a beautiful woman who is grown enough to choose him willingly, but naïve enough to have no real choice at all.

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