

When Fanny Met Germaine – talk for the Burney Appreciation Society 3rd October, 2020

- Many thanks, Miriam for inviting me to talk to you today. Flattered to be invited to join the group, let alone speak at your AGM!
- Hope everyone has kept safe and well through these difficult times.
- Can't speak from any great academic authority, there's many more qualified here today than me. I'm a Burney enthusiast, I have been since first taking a detour, while studying 18th century novels at Oxford. I started as many do, I suspect, with a hunger for more Austen than there is Austen, and Burney – along with Edgeworth - was way more than the next best thing.

To me, she seemed witty and wise, urban in a way Austen wasn't. A girl about town. I liked what others, I soon discovered, mocked about her: her forays into high faluting language. She couldn't resist a long word or three, and I liked that. She was a bit Russell Brand: she loved words and big ideas. I liked her barely disguised scorn for grownups. They were universally silly. I agreed. They were frequently worse – really mean, predatory, dangerous, a French level of cruel intentions. And really terrible things happened on the page, up close and personal: people threaten to top themselves, go bankrupt, caught disfiguring diseases through the stupidity of uncles. And everyone went thoroughly mad. Full on insanity was waiting around the corner for her heroines, not rural obscurity and insignificance. A Lear-like (Hardy like) blasted heath: far more than the (at least superficially) cosiness of Austen, these were characters teetering on the edge of disaster. Socially compromised loners at the mercy of other people's appalling decisions. This was great Young Adult fiction.

The venality of Restoration theatre was here in spades. She was a snob, for sure, but she could really write about class difference in a manner that I totally recognised. I recognised the accents I was reading – proto cockney, Yiddish, French affectations. I could hear her people – she was a dramatist, I soon discovered, and a frustrated one.

Which resonated for me... I'm a very latecomer to writing drama, and there's probably family reasons for that in my life. It was always: write a book. Never go into theatre – despite acting all my life I was sent down a literary path, not to drama school. My performer side wasn't particularly fostered.

I got this woman.

So my relationship with Fanny stood pretty firm. I bought her complete plays at ridiculous expense, determined to do something with them. I never did. I re-read her novels for pleasure, even after I stopped reading big books for pleasure, and I wrote about her and Edgeworth when I came to study for my MA in 18th Century culture literature and society. Something about killing off mothers, I recall, although it was the Daddies needed killing, in my opinion. I liked writing about her. I wanted to do more of it.

She taught me a great deal about storytelling – about going large, writing an entire community, upstairs, downstairs, opera, backrooms, and everything in between. She was a social “floater”, like myself. I liked her humour. She knew about being a young woman in love, in difficult circumstances. About not being able to quite be yourself, ever. I admired the complicated space between her resistance and her repression, and the way she oozed out of the sides of it, ebullient, naughty. A little bit sly. An outsider with access all areas to the inside.

When I first, very late in life, moved into writing drama (I’d previously stuck to poems, a career in songwriting and a truly dire novel), I wrote large too. I wrote about class too. I wrote about women in impossible situations, and often behaving badly. I started with a two parter spanning 4 decades that I sent off to the 2018 BBC Dramaroom, part of their Writersroom scheme. An open competition. I was chosen, one of 15 out of 5,000 or so, and the next year, one of 12 out of 3,000 for the Channel Four Screenwriting Course. In between, I got a very good agent. My luck had really turned – I’d been a struggling actress, songwriter and single mother since 2000.

And there was one story that was coming with me.

I’m not sure I can tell you for certain when I first knew about Juniper Hall. I’d heard about De Staël on my MA in my late 20s – my tutor was fascinated with Bonaparte and their feud was a particular delight to him. I bought a book about the house. I read PDFs online. To me, it seemed utterly mythical. Almost absurd. Coincidentally, the two most lauded women writers of their respective nations wind up neighbours for a brief few months in some rural backwater... and don’t become friends. What?

Both are intimately involved in the royalty and politics of their nations, one dangerously actively, one dangerously (to herself) passively. Both are at crucial

emotional points in their lives – one is losing her lover, has left her kids a thousand miles away. One meets the love of her life, seeks a marriage her family disapprove of, while watching her sister’s marriage devolve into abuse. Both are a little... mad.

I talked about this strange coincidence at every interview and meeting. I’m not sure it did me any favours: an obscure story about an obscure moment involving two obscure and very dead women writers. I don’t think anyone lit up with enthusiasm – certainly not the enthusiasm I had.

And I was part of the problem. Why did this Black woman, of all people, want to do a period piece? It’s still unusual, although I’m hoping to make it less so. It was pretty clear that I wasn’t going to get this germ /gem of a story onto any screen. More about this later.

But it was a story I really wanted to tell... although I’m not sure at that point, I completely knew why.

So, what do you look for when you write a drama?

Time. Place. Person(s).

Often, the collision of these things has been hanging around inside you for a while. Probably not quite glued together into a story. But the protagonists walking around, being, making themselves known; playing with each other in their “precinct” (in this case, a couple of drawing rooms in Surrey), having conversations, saying quite surprising things about their reasons for being there, you come to know that this confluence of things has meaning, is pregnant with.... Something. It’s singing for you. You’re trying to catch the melody like snatches of conversation. Looking for the leitmotif. In really good drama, the thing that is being said, is in every line. So what was the thing that was being said by these two women? I didn’t quite know yet.

So, in 2018, on the BBC course, we were set a really hard task. We had to come up with several pitches for a radio drama, and a dozen producers came in and we had to speed date with them – moving around the room every five minutes, pitching our ideas at them. I have always been a keen radio drama listener, so I was excited, but still hugely daunted. Pitching is not fun. I went around the room, trying to pick the right pitches from my stock for different

producers – there was one who'd done several period dramas, so I hit her hard with my Burney idea – she smiled politely. She never got in touch.

I really liked Jonquil Panting as soon as I met her. I didn't realise at that point (poor research on my part) that she had produced a high proportion of my most admired radio dramas. She was smart, eccentric, naughty.

I had quite a few takers. Not for Juniper. More than anyone else. Producers emailed for meetings, none very urgent. Jonquil leap frogged them all: "Let's meet this Thursday". We met on a rainy day in the Café Nero next to Broadcasting House. Packed (remember those days?) noisy. I couldn't really hear her.

I assumed she was interested in another story I had, called Cleaning. A cheerful tale about a Polish cleaner who disposes of, possibly kills, the ghastly coercive controlling husband of one of her clients. She doesn't speak English. God knows how I thought that was going to work on radio... any hooo. No. It was "Juniper" Jonquil was after! I was stunned.

She hated the name. "When Fanny Met Germaine", we decided, over the hubbub. I confess I thought she was a little crazy. Black woman does English period drama was still thoroughly embedded in me as a big NO. Two things happened in that inaudible conversation.

1. I realised what the story was actually about.
2. Louise Marie was born.

So. I had all these bones and sinews of people, and the bricks and mortar of Juniper Hall to put them in, and a completely crazy time in which people were being beheaded and falling in love and just trying to survive somehow – but why did this story matter? To me. To anyone?

This is what happens when you meet really clever, brilliant people – particularly editors and producers. They coalesce your ... thing... into a THING.

"Germaine lives to write. Fanny writes to live". I said.

It was fundamental. The it. The thing. The implacable obstacle to the friendship that should have, that we desperately want to, that these women deserved to

have emerge out of their time at Juniper Hall together. Working out the why of its impossibility, revealing it, that was the story.

Flashback here to my original idea about this story, when I thought I could write books. Here goes: my attempt at an epistolary novel. I'm not ever going to do it so it's there for the taking. You're welcome.

Fanny, our incorrigible burner of diaries, the unreliable self narrator and inconstant editor, on her ancient deathbed, demands that her niece Charlotte throw nigh on 25 years of intimate, confessional, hugely dramatic (covering the entire Napoleonic Wars etc) correspondence between herself and Germaine (up until Germaine's early death in 1817) into the bedroom fireplace. Chuck it.

And Charlotte, lord love her... doesn't.

Which would have meant, of course, that instead of the unforgiveable, awful "frumping" (friend dumping) that Fanny shamefully enacts on Germaine in the space of a few short months, instead of the void that I had long felt her decision left behind, we (the big canonical WE) would have 2 decades and a half of the most thrilling, argumentative, literary female epistolary document of the early modern age. A discourse between the romantic proto feminist and the repressed... well I don't quite know how to describe Fanny in that regard. Rigorous and practical Do-er. I still find her somewhat Restoration, Royalist certainly, in outlook. You know more than I. Modern, she ain't.

What I do know is this: if such a correspondence had existed and survived, it would have been a game changer. If such a correspondence had existed and survived between two MEN, there'd be an entire academic field dedicated to it. People – men, would have built careers and families and a house in New England on the back of such a literary goldmine.

But it doesn't exist. It never did. And the reasons why not are specifically about femaleness, and class.

And that was the moment in which my story lived. The moment in which that desired, wished for, female story, the conversation between two literary giants who happened to be women stopped, curtailed, suffocated, by all the weight of their woman-ness and the difference of class – and in dramatic terms, need versus wants – crashed and burned.

That was the moment of my 44 minute drama. The what of the why these two women never became the friends and compadres and literary helpmates I wanted them to be – and I hoped, dramatically, my audience would want too.

“Germaine lives to write. Fanny writes to live”.

The difference between romance and survival.

Fanny’s romance depended on her financial survival. Financial independence.

Financial independence (and therefore her marriage to D’Arblay) depended for Fanny, on her writing, and selling, her novels.

Fanny’s commercial viability as a novelist, not to mention her royal pension after her purgatorial years at court, depended on her respectability as a woman.

Germaine, the daughter of God’s Banker, loved to write as much as Fanny, but didn’t need it to eat, or to love where she chose. She did all three without experiencing their consequences other than emotionally (which she did deeply, painfully). Her freedom was already bought and paid for. What she needed, and couldn’t buy, was a woman, a friend, who loved and understood her. Equalled her. She thought she had found that in Fanny. In many ways she did.

But her freedom... and the reputation it entailed, directly threatened Fanny’s. The association would ruin Fanny, everyone said so, costing her pension, and her credibility with the readers of her novels – because novels, and their female writers, in England at least, had to walk a very fine line between romances (with all the ambiguity of that word) and conduct manuals. Fanny walked that line, in her little person, I think at great cost to herself, her imagination.

Germaine’s freedom (manifested in the sexual licence that was afforded to her class) posed an existential threat to Fanny’s. To Fanny’s right to live (apart from her suffocating family) to love, and to write and be read. I am certain that Fanny knew this. Everyone else did. I could read that in every section of her diary from this point.

So, here were my stakes and my obstacles – that’s a drama. And they arose from my favourite issues, womanhood and class.

And the second vital component that I discovered in that inaudible conversation, was Louise Marie.

Neither Fanny nor Germaine were reliable narrators of this story. I didn’t feel that either could understand, or rather, admit to, their actual motivations. Both fell back on their personal forms of snobbery to explain their actions. Barons. Neither really comprehended the other’s actions – Fanny simply didn’t believe that Germaine was “as bad” as everyone said: she was too ugly for a romantic heroine, in Fanny’s opinion, which really says it all. And Germaine was young, and at that point, I think didn’t fully comprehend her profound need for female intimacy and love – wouldn’t, perhaps, until her relationship with Juliet Recamier. And neither could fully admit to their own errors and poor behaviour – Germaine felt shame for lots of things, a lot of the time. Fanny ultimately felt shame for the entire episode.

Unfortunately, neither of my protagonists could be trusted to tell their own story. At least not this one. I thought about Susannah, Fanny’s beleaguered but vital sister. She had too much stuff of her own going on and also, too much skin in the game to be even handed – although she certainly was the glue between the two women, and was often ahead of the game in terms of knowing what Germaine was doing behind doors, and the consequences and decisions for Fanny. It was she, after all who actually urged Fanny to “Write, Fanny. Write, and Publish”.

At this point, Jonquil reminded me of “Cleaning” – remember the Polish murderess? Well she had arisen out of my abiding fascination with maids. How, particularly in restoration comedies, but in all sorts of dramas where higher class women are hampered by... being upper class, maids were the engine of plot, the knowing inside outsiders who understand more about how a story should go than the people in the story. The power of peripherality.

It was a brilliant idea. I could triangulate this story as a battle between equals, favouring neither, by way of the traditional dramatic function of maid-ness.

Well, I couldn’t justifiably assign Fanny a significant maid – there was the housekeeper at Daddy Crisp’s who was incredibly excited about D’Arblay’s

visit, got caught in her undies making a baked ham or something but she didn't really seem up to the job. And she didn't witness the whole story, your honour.

I needed someone super smart, absolutely essential, yet invisible.

I kind of needed... me. Inside the story.

Here, two actual facts came into play.

Firstly – a Louise Marie something or other (I know I read this, I'm not mad, I've just never been able to rediscover her surname in amongst all of the reams of research I did... which damn book! If any of you know, please put me out of my misery) attended Fanny and D'Arblay's second – Catholic - marriage, in the Sardinian Church. She was the witness. She has a French name, but she's mentioned nowhere else. Not amongst the lists of emigrés, the diaries, nowhere I can find. A nobody, but a present and vital one at the final point. Who the heck was this woman that no one ever talked about but signed her name to this unusual marriage?

OK, and sorry, mystery woman, you get to be whatever I decide. You're mine now.

Secondly... well let's just call it blackness. I, a black woman, had inserted myself, intruded upon, decided to be the teller of this not entirely admirable but very revealing story of European white womanhood. European white female storytelling. The Third Woman, the inside/outsider voice of this tale, was going to be black too. A savante noire.

And I had good reason for it to be so. Blackness hovers on the margins of early French and English women's novel writing. It was time to let it in. Let it take up the pen. The first English novel given the name as such, Oroonoko, was the story of a white woman, looking at Black people. (Aphra, I'm coming for you very soon).

It doesn't stop there. Olympe de Gouges lost her head (literally) over her outcries against the slave trade and her conflation of it with patriarchal marriage.

I remember my jaw dropping open when I first read Sanditon – there's a woman who looks like me in this story! What a time to go and die, Jane!

Maria Edgeworth had the temerity to posit a Black man as an eligible suitor in *Belinda*. And not even make it a big deal – he had the money bags.

What was Germaine up to in these margins of Blackness?

In 1786, long before the definitive end of slavery in France, a young Germaine de Staël penned *Mirza ou Lettre d'un voyageur*, an African tale of love and the slave trade recounted by a European narrator. In this novella, Staël boldly challenges neoclassical ideals of beauty through the story of two black Senegambians, Mirza and Ximéo, from warring ethnicities in the Kingdom of Cayor. Through these characters, Staël presents to the European reader a new concept of beauty, a contagious beauty, that she hopes will move her or him to pity and recognition of the basic humanity of slaves. In addition, via this new beauty, (beauty, which Staël knew she signally lacked, by European standards) Staël hopes to dispose the reader to arguments in favour of abolition, both of the slave trade and slavery...

And then we have... Fanny. My favourite of her novels, *The Wanderer* literally introduces her heroine as a black woman. It's a piece of literary daring not repeated until the 1960s in social documents like "Black Like Me" – a white person adjusts their experience in the world, essentially through Blackface, and attains a vexed form of access, by impersonating blackness, by assuming the position of an illicit immigrant, and in doing so, experiences and documents a host of what we would describe today as racial microaggressions (at the very least). The blackness is a manifestation of her female vulnerability.

I have no idea why all these seminal women novelists and dramatists – we are talking six of the best and most important – chose to utilise this device or conceit or point of understanding to reveal something essential about the experience of being a woman, a vulnerable woman, in the Europe of their time. To speak of the inequity of humanity, and the universality of humanity, at one and the same time. Through Blackness. This at a time when their male equivalents simply didn't mention it – at least not in an imaginative or fictional setting. Politically, critically yes. But if there's a white man's novel that does what all these women repeatedly did, I haven't seen it.

Why were women doing this? Did they see – as students of *Mansfield Park* in particular have suggested - where their sugar and chocolate and tea and mahogany, the symbols of their civility, their newly defined genteel femininity (a femininity without hard labour but with all the loss of power and gain of

influence therein) originated from? Did they question it? Did it trouble them? Did they see parallels in the social imprisonment they also experienced?

I don't know. Better brains than mine may well... but I saw a dramatic opportunity, a point of reversal, where the watched became the watcher, where the known (assumed) became the knowing. For me, Louise Marie was a far more reliable narrator.

In truth, I'd imagined a much younger Louise Marie - but radio casting is hard. For starters, there was already a rule of six. The BBC can only afford 6 named actors in an average afternoon play. That made the younger Susannah an actress who also had to play La Dama. It meant that I couldn't fully dramatize the at least 3 ex lovers Germaine travelled over to England with, the entire world of French aristocracy and English literati who were very much part of the story. I really missed the Nortons.

I couldn't fill those drawing rooms with the extent of bi-lingual wit there was at my disposal. But creation comes from limitation and the restrictions helped not hindered what I was trying to do, focused the story on Fanny and Germaine and Louise-Marie's grapple to turn their difficult, resistant, repressed love story into something that fitted into the confines of what we understand as a romantic novel: girl meets boy. Girl meets other boy...or girl in this case – who's rather attractive but fundamentally WRONG. Girl rejects other boy, and fights to make sure of original boy. In essence, that was what Fanny was doing with D'Arblay and Germaine. In novelistic terms, Germaine was the second rate suitor, the one, who despite their obvious charms, had to be resisted in order to maintain sufficient respectability and gain their heart's desire.

Louise Marie, who understands the novelist form better than anyone, because, at least in my understanding, she's been the subject of it, is the one to instruct Fanny how to navigate the novelistic traditions – the antagonistic father figure, the dangerous gossip, the libertine (in this case, in female form) – how to be an existentially threatened heroine and survive and get what she wants – as always, marriage and a nice house. She leads Fanny back to her means of survival – writing and love. Germaine maybe fairs less well, but then, she and her kind are more direct beneficiaries of the Sainte Domingue model that has brutalised Louise Marie, as she hints through the play. Her life is the price that makes these stories possible – and that's why SHE is the expert.

Of course, I understand how autobiographical this all is, solipsistic, really. I the frustrated dramatist very much taught to write by my 18th century literary heroines, picks up the pen and writes them myself – at least through my proxy, Louise Marie. It was fun, it was naughty, a little bit meta, written out of a desire that history was different, but out of gratitude too, that history had given me these stories in the first place.

And the rest is, literally, history. Given this iron cast frame, this set of stakes, obstacles, aims, and a voice from which to tell them, there was very little left to do. I had a diary, documented, edited, from Fanny, and a genius of the bon mot in Germaine. I'm almost embarrassed to tell how much of this play was cut and paste. The ladies really did protest too much. Or spoke for themselves. All I had to do was fit quotes into place. There's very little in the play that one or the other didn't attribute to themselves. My main struggle was in making it understandable to a modern audience – apparently not everyone speaks late 18th century. I had to cut down, unwillingly, and translate, direct quotes from Fanny and Germaine, Susannah and others. And then keep cutting... I believe the original script is on the website.

I was blessed in a brilliant producer/editor/casting director, who went out of her way to find the right voices for my play, and my voice besides.

Right now, Jonquil and I are working on a brand new, two hour radio, epistolary adaptation of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* for August next year. I'm also hoping to be included on the writing team for two more series of *Sanditon*: the inside, outside, black colonial voice once more... wish me luck...