



# Frances Burney, Dramatist: Gender, Performance, and the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage (Approach)

*Barbara Darby*

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The position Frances Burney (1752-1840) holds as a novelist, journalist, and letterwriter is now undisputed, thanks to reevaluations of the canon in recent years. Yet Burney was always intrigued by, and wrote for, the stage. Though only one of Burney's dramas was performed in her lifetime, Barbara Darby places the plays in the context of performance and feminist theory, challenging past assertions about Burney that were based entirely on her novels and journals. Darby maintains that in exposing the failure of such practices and institutions as courtship, marriage, family, government, and the church, Burney's dramas often exceed her novels in the depth of their social commentary.

In her four comedies and four tragedies, Burney uses stage space, dialogue, blocking, and gesture to highlight the ways power is distributed among society's members. According to Darby, these plays show that the eighteenth-century female experience was dominated by physical, psychic, and emotional regulation that included bodily punishment and the limitation of personal choice.

Placing Burney alongside other prominent female playwrights of the period, Darby brings to light a substantial body of work, revealing that Burney's drama was not a casual sideline to her novel writing. *Frances Burney, Dramatist*, expands our appreciation of the extent to which eighteenth-century women playwrights used the stage as a forum.

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