

First Letters in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

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Edited by

Alain Kerhervé

and Catherine Thomas-Ripault

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INTRODUCTION

CATHERINE THOMAS-RIPAULT
AND ALAIN KERHERVÉ

The first letters of a correspondence are particularly suitable for reflecting on the specificities and challenges of epistolary writing, considered in its interactive, rhetorical or generic dimension. This collection of articles sets out to explore what is started, what is expected and what is shaped in letter writing, be it fictional or authentic. To begin with, the very status of the “first letter” can be examined: in a novel by letters, as in a genuine correspondence, “first letters” evokes the idea of an original instance of writing, making us naturally think of childhood letters which, most often in a familiar setting, represent a first writing experience. This is the case for the rough copies of letters by the seven-year old grandson of picturesque theorist William Gilpin, which show the alterations made to the texts by his mother, her corrections written in a much more steady hand than that of the child’s. We will see a form of practice in these first epistolary steps, which raises the formal question of the relationship to the epistolary genre and of the learning of codified writing, particularly through epistolary textbooks. Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac has underlined how teachings in the art of letter writing, which involves drawing inspiration from existing models, played a highly significant role in Voltaire’s training and the development of his own correspondence.¹ In the case of literary or artistic correspondence, these childhood letters are frequently considered in their relationship to a work, which they foretell through meta-textual comments, biographical revelations, and discursive processes revealing a future style. Sometimes with close links to the handwritten document, they can even be part of a creative process that fully integrates them into the work, as Brigitte Diaz has shown about Stendhal, whose own childhood letters were “a writing matrix leading to

¹ In *Voltaire dans ses lettres de jeunesse (1711-1733). La formation d’un épistolier au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris : Klincksieck, 1992).

literary creation through alternative routes”.² But by “first letters” we also mean all those which, regardless of the age of the letter writer, initiate a new relationship, accompany the first steps of a meeting, and mark the arrival of a new recipient in a correspondence. Whether it is an exercise in writing, the start of an artistic work or of an exchange, the first letter seems to mark a new beginning, the learning of a new form of communication, a break with an initial silence.

Yet in a correspondence, even between two regular letter writers, there may be several first letters: the first travel letter, the first love letter, etc. The letter is then the first step in a cycle that is constructed not on one of the two focal points of letter writing that is initiated by writing or enters for the first time into the field of the recipients, but on a particular experience, a specific context. It signals the beginning of an ensemble more than it marks a renewal; suggests the originality of a situation more than the start of an exchange. Far from leading to a scattering of problematics, it seems to us that these different statuses of the letter, coupled with disciplinary, geographical and cultural variations, can point us towards convergences and constants that reveal what is at stake in epistolary writing: if “every letter is a draft of a correspondence”,³ as Benoît Beugnot notes, the one that marks the very beginning of an exchange or a series could well prove to be particularly decisive in understanding what is constructed in the epistolary discourse, and how the thread of a correspondence is gradually woven. Is it not the first letter that lays the foundations of a new story or cycle, sets its tone, its rhythm? This first letter highlights the need for the notion of a pact or an epistolary “contract” to be better defined, as is often discussed in correspondence studies. Formulated or drafted at the beginning of an exchange, it can be validated, nuanced but also transgressed by subsequent letters: the exchange can indeed tend towards the destruction of an intimacy that was announced and was expected to be maintained, and the letter, far from developing bonds, can sometimes set out the reasons for a future distancing.

² Brigitte Diaz, “Comme une lettre à un ami...”. Dispositifs génétiques dans la correspondance de Stendhal”, *Genèse et Correspondances*, textes réunis et présentés par F. Leriche et A. Pagès (Paris : Editions des Archives contemporaines, 2012): 16.

³ Bernard Beugnot, “De l’invention épistolaire : à la manière de soi”, *L’Épistolarité à travers les siècles. Geste de communication et/ou d’écriture*, actes du colloque de Cerisy, sous la direction de Mireille Bossis et de Charles A. Porter, n° 18 (Stuttgart : Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990): 31.

To question what characterizes the first letters is also to try to better understand the question of the letter writers' place and identity: the pact that commits them to a role or position that must then be adjusted. The stakes are particularly high in correspondence between writers, since it is not only their relationship with the recipient that is at stake, but also the status they may be assigned in the field of Letters: correspondence is an effective vehicle for earning an image worthy of esteem and for the construction of the self as a writer. Then, in these writings, we will look for the origin of an identity that is found and constructed in the letters, or the elaboration of an imaginary position that the letter writer will produce in many fictional variations of themselves. Letters by novel maintain the same identity play, but often reveal a character more effectively than authentic letters reveal a letter writer: a tool of fiction to support an effect of reality, they are most often based on a rhetoric of intimacy and secrecy that allows their author to be characterized. Consider, for example, the two protagonists of Balzac's *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*, whose letters convey different characters and worldviews in their nuances, from the very first pages of the novel.

This inaugural status further highlights the particular temporality of epistolary writing and discourse: a first letter is calling for more, creates expectations, prepares for future writing; the "fatal letter" that Saint-Preux addressed to Julie in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* inexorably leads to subsequent letters: "I would never have written that one, had I not written the first" Saint-Preux had already acknowledged in his second letter. The first letter itself is never untouched by the past, and can introduce variations in the canvas that precedes it. All the more so as the "first letter" often means less "first encounter" than "first separation": just as the latter may announce not a separation but an actual coming together that no longer justifies the need for writing. As Sylvie Crinquand pointed out,⁴ the first letter may mark not the beginning of a story but the first absence within an already well-established relationship, an absence that one tries to compensate for by writing, even if one knows, particularly thanks to Vincent Kaufmann's studies,⁵ the extent to which the letter can distance rather than bring together. The letter, even if it comes first, is thus rich in a past whose traces are visible, and it gradually weaves a story whose

⁴ See the preface to the volume *Dernières lettres, textes réunis et présentés par Sylvie Crinquand* (Dijon : Editions universitaires de Dijon, coll. "Kaléidoscopes", 2008).

⁵ See in particular "Relations épistolaires", *Poétique* n° 68 (novembre 1986): 391 sq.

recurrent language and themes underline the self-referential dimension of correspondence.

Finally, as we will see, the status of the first letter also raises the question of editing a correspondence: it highlights the serial dimension of the correspondence, which only really appears once the letters have been assembled into a corpus that needs to be read as a whole. The first letter makes sense in the light of those that follow, but the chronological linearity of modern editions⁶ raises other questions: does publishing impose a continuous vision of what is, in essence, a certain instantaneity and discontinuity? Does the epistolary framework emerging from these collected letters offer a reading of the exchange that is extraneous to its true nature, based on other rhythms and other issues? Not to mention that the correspondence may be incomplete, and the critic not always one hundred per cent sure of having identified the very first letter of a letter-writer or of a series.

The approach begins with the investigation of letters from youth, starting with a chapter on the Burney family in which **Lorna Clark** shows how the receipt of a first letter may be influential to a child or juvenile writer, through the analysis of letters written by the composer and music historian Charles Burney, his daughter Frances Burney, the celebrated diarist, novelist and letter writer and other members of their family. It continues with **Anne Boutin**'s study of the first letters written by Benjamin Constant, the French novelist and politician, when a child, to his grand-mother and other family members. It ends with **Yann Mortelette**'s analysis of the early letters written by José-Maria de Heredia, one of the main Parnassian poets from 1848 to 1862 when he was, between the age of five to twenty, learning how to write letters, choosing his signature, building his literary culture and starting his own production.

The next part of the book focuses on first letters in fictional works. It begins with a chapter on *Les Fourberies de Vénus* (1714), considered to have been the first epistolary novel in France, in which **Caroline Biron** shows that the programmatic value of the first letters not only concerns the diegesis of the novel but also the principles of epistolary fiction. Then, **Emrys D. Jones**'s study of Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard" (1717) and two anonymous texts, *The Epistles of Clío and Strephon* (1720) and

⁶ On this subject, see J.-P. Beaulieu, "Postures épistolaires et effets de *dispositio* dans la correspondance entre Marguerite d'Angoulême et Guillaume Briçonnet", *Etudes françaises*, 38 (3): 44.

The Correspondents, an Original Novel (1775), deals with the unteachable expression of platonic love. **Alexandra Schamel**'s reading of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos illustrates how the first letters empower the metaphoric network of the wound as a catalyst for producing a new notion of the subject.

A third part focuses on the way a writer's persona can be defined in his first letters. The study by **Eric Francalanza** of the successive editions of Voltaire's first letters shows how important the arrangement of letters by editors can be to the definition of the image of a writer. **Odile Richard-Pauchet**'s analysis of the incipit of Denis Diderot's correspondence with Sophie Volland also suggests that the image of the writer depends on the editorial process, in which he may have participated himself. The composition process of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's first letters to his wife Sara, as **Kimberley Page-Jones** demonstrates, explains the complex literary and political function of his writings.

The last part of the book assesses the role of first letters in a correspondence. It opens with **Sylvie Crinquand**'s questioning of the art of entering into correspondence from Robert Burns to Thomas de Quincey. Pierre-Jean Dufief shows how the first letters between Edmond de Goncourt and Alphonse Daudet served as substitutes to brotherhood. **Anne Chamayou** investigates into the origins of the love letter in the correspondence of the comtesse Eléonore de Sabran and the chevalier Stanislas-Jean de Boufflers. Love, conversely, results in a failure in the first letters written by Stendhal to Matilde Dembowski as **Catherine Mariette** explains. Nonetheless, **Gaëlle Le Corre** shows that the first letters written by the Civil War soldiers share many informational and stylistic similarities with the remainder of their correspondence.

PART 1.

LETTERS FROM YOUTH

FIRST LETTERS AND FIRST WRITINGS IN THE BURNEY FAMILY ARCHIVE

LORNA J. CLARK

In addressing the topic of “first letters,” the immediate tendency is to focus on the writing or the writer of the letter. The term “first letters” is often applied to the first ever penned by a particular author, or the first written in a series, perhaps to a new correspondent, or even the first epistolary communication attempted by a child. However, in this paper, I shall be interpreting the subject rather differently, shifting the focus to place more emphasis on the receipt of a first letter, and the impact it might have, particularly on a child or juvenile writer. Receiving a first letter from a trusted adult or mentor can be a formative experience that encourages the practice of reading and writing and can lead to a lifetime of creative endeavour. My remarks will relate particularly to the Burney family, several members of whom were involved in the literary, musical or artistic culture in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These were the children or grandchildren of music historian Charles Burney (1726-1814), whose Europe-wide reputation was established by the publication of his two musical tours (1771, 1773), and *A General History of Music* (1776-89). Among his large family of eight children, there were several authors: two novelists, Frances Burney (1752-1840) and Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844);¹ the prolific classicist Charles Burney Jr (1757-1817); and the maritime historian James Burney (1750-1821). His extended family contained members who excelled in other creative arts, notably music (three nephews, including the virtuoso performer Charles Rousseau Burney),² and artists (another nephew, Edward F. Burney (1760-

¹ Burney’s step-daughter, Elizabeth Meeke, has also been identified as an author, in Simon McDonald, “Identifying Mrs. Meeke: Another Burney Family Novelist,” *Review of English Studies* 64, Issue 265 (2013): 367–85. Meeke was not a blood relation, however, and did not really spend much time in Charles Burney’s household.

² Charles Rousseau Burney (1747–1819), son of Charles Burney’s elder brother, Richard Burney (1723–92). As a composer, performer and teacher of music, he was especially impressive on the piano and harpsichord, as Frances Burney

1848)). There were also writers among his descendants, especially women writers—several generations' worth, as I have traced elsewhere.³ Besides their published work, Burneys also left behind numerous letters, musical compositions, poems, plays, and stories that remained in manuscript and can be found in archives located around the world.

The success of the Burney family in print and manuscript culture could be seen as a model of the kind of “family authorship” identified by Michelle Levy as “a cultural formation of the Romantic period” in which “sociability” was key.⁴ It raises interesting questions about the roles played by nature and nurture, and points to a familial atmosphere that was conducive to creative ventures. Catherine Gallagher notes that, “Cultivating talent, polishing performance, making and improving contacts, and collecting and disseminating knowledge were the economic activities of the Burney family.”⁵ The question then arises—how was this productivity encouraged; how was a climate created that fostered the development of creativity within the family group? In this paper, I shall be looking at several examples of “first letters” which played a role in nurturing and encouraging the creative writing talents of young Burneys.

Charles Burney believed his children should lead productive lives, and led by example. He was known for his indefatigable industry, putting in twelve-hour days teaching music and then working late into the night on his publications (writing, doing research or correcting proofs);⁶ he would

records. See for example her *Early Journals and Letters*, ed. Lars Troide (Montreal & Kingston and London: McGill-Queen's and Oxford University Press), vol. 2, 131: “He Fired away, with his usual successful velocity, to the amazement & delight of all present, . . .” (c. 22–5 May 1775). At his death, the obituary in the *New Monthly Magazine*, placed him in “the highest rank of musical Professors” (1 December 1819).

³ Lorna J. Clark, “Hidden Talents: Women Writers in the Burney Family,” *Women, Gender, and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Memory of Betty Rizzo*, ed. Temma Berg and Sonia Kane (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Lehigh Press, 2013), 145–66.

⁴ Michelle Levy, *Family Authorship and Romantic Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

⁵ Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 216.

⁶ Rogers Lonsdale, *Dr. Charles Burney: A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 159.

steal the extended hours from, as he put it, “this Sinking Fund, Sleep.”⁷ Neither illness nor exhaustion would stop him. He was probably what might be referred to today as a workaholic: driven and ambitious, Burney groaned under the weight of the demanding writing projects that he set himself (like his *General History* or articles for Rees’s *Cyclopaedia*) but was even more restless without one. As Roger Lonsdale has noted, “[u]nremitting industry” became “a habit,” and his main source of pleasure was “the contemplation of all that he had achieved.”⁸

He also gave practical aid to those of his adult children who did try to publish, making use of his own contacts. Although opinions may differ as to the benefits (or otherwise) of his involvement on the literary careers of his daughters, he did, at various times, contact publishers, negotiate contracts, and try to arrange for good reviews.⁹ Even his reliance on a succession of young female relatives over the years (four of his daughters, four grand-daughters, and a niece) as his librarians and “amanuenses” (which he referred to as an “apprenticeship”)¹⁰ offers a model of the kind of “domestic literary labour” described by Levy in which “family members participated in literary production not only as copyists and editors, but also as creators of literary texts themselves.”¹¹ In order to improve writing skills or simply for enjoyment, Charles Burney stressed the importance of writing regularly, urging younger family members to maintain a correspondence. As Alvaro Ribeiro has remarked:

The central glory of the vast archive of Burney family papers that has been preserved shines in the series of correspondences which passed between members of the family. Burney fathered a large and talented brood in whom he instilled the importance of writing informatively and entertainingly to one another. . . . Joyce Hemlow has observed that the family correspondence constitutes a ‘saga more dramatic, more varied,

⁷ The phrase is used in several of Charles Burney’s letters; see, for example, a draft letter from Charles Burney to Lord Lowther, July 1804, James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁸ Lonsdale, *Dr. Charles Burney*, 483.

⁹ His efforts on behalf of Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* and *Camilla* can be traced through her letters. He probably paved the way for his youngest daughter to publish her first two novels with his own publishers and friends, the Robinsons.

¹⁰ See Clark, “Hidden Talents,” 149 and n. 26. The word “apprenticeship” is used in a letter from Charles Burney to Charlotte (*née* Burney) Francis, 25 February 1786, British Library, Egerton MS 3700A, f. 2–3v.

¹¹ Levy, *Family Authorship*, 7.

interesting, and moving than fiction' . . . Part of this family saga is to be found in Burney's letters to his children."¹²

The nature and tenor of Burney's advice can be found in some of his "first letters" to children or grandchildren; we shall now turn to consider some examples and explore the impact on those who received them. The first can be found in a commonplace book kept by the youngest daughter of Charles Burney's first marriage, Charlotte Ann (*née* Burney) Francis (1761-1838).¹³ The lines were sent to her twelve-year-old daughter, Charlotte Francis (later Barrett) (1786-1870), after she had written a first letter to her grandfather (which has not survived). Charles Burney replies to it with a first letter of his own, written playfully in verse:

Verses by D^r Burney—addressed to his Granddaughter
CF on receiving her first letter May 19th 1798.
My much lov'd Charlottine
You write like any Queen
Nor could an Empress beat
Your letter fair & neat. (ll. 1-4)

While the lines sound like doggerel to an adult, they are well-pitched to appeal to a child, especially one with a sense of humour.

If thus ingenious Girl
Your talents you unfurl
You'll be so great a Scribe
You'll frighten all your tribe. (ll. 5-8)

As an affectionate mentor, Charles Burney offers her kindly advice and encourages her persistence, urging her to rise through the use of her talents:

But try my little Fairy
By steady strokes & wary
By constant pains & care
To make them all despair. (ll. 11-14)

Appealing to her dreams and ambitions, Burney (the self-made man) encourages her to study and especially to write, which he presents as the key to winning admiration:

¹² Alvaro Ribeiro, "Introduction," *The Letters of Dr Charles Burney*, vol. 1, 1751-1784 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), xxvii.

¹³ Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Eng 926.

When first & fair your hand
 Let mental pow'rs expand
 And study then intense
 Extend to stealing sense
 Thus will your future days
 Be crowned with well earned praise (ll. 17–22)

The literary qualities of the lines are certainly not brilliant, as these quotations show, yet the poem is of interest in that it marks the occasion of receiving a first letter as a cause for celebration, and uses the experience to urge the young author to persevere. In his response, Charles Burney models the kind of behaviour he is trying to encourage: he takes the materials of every-day life, and shapes them into literary form to communicate with his intended audience (the recipient) who is thus projected and incorporated into the text (so he offers all the ingredients of a good letter). In his choice of form to embody his message, his “Verses,” he also evokes an element of play. Humour is seen in the grandiosity (“You write like any Queen”) and exaggeration (“You’ll be so great a Scribe / You’ll frighten all your tribe”) of the lines. Thus, besides urging her to cultivate her talents by writing, Burney conveys a sense of enjoyment in his play with words.

The underlying message—that authorship is a key component of social advancement—was part of the family ethos. Charles Burney was convinced of the power of writing, which had helped to establish his career and elevate his own status. Besides his published work, he also valued the epistolary form as a way to practice his craft; in stressing its importance, he certainly followed his own prescription, as, despite the destruction of large quantities of his letters, no fewer than 1000 still survive (which are currently being edited under the direction of Peter Sabor).

The effect on Charlotte Francis of receiving this poetic response to her first letter is difficult to gauge because no other letters from her childhood survive; the first extant letter was written almost ten years later, around the time of her marriage (to Henry Barrett).¹⁴ However, she herself would later be known, not only as an entertaining correspondent but also as a rhyming one who could versify the family news skilfully. One of her poetic missives ends with a rhyming couplet that manages to include her

¹⁴ The earliest surviving letter from Charlotte Francis is undated but judging from its content, was probably written between January 1806 and June 1807, the month that she married. It is located in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

signature: “From the girls in the parlour to boys in the Garrett / Your very affectionate niece Charlotte Barrett.”¹⁵ Evidently, she had successfully absorbed her grandfather’s lesson. As for “unfurl[ing]” her talents to become a “great” Scribe: she did later pursue some literary activities, and is known to have tried to publish a translation in 1810.¹⁶ But she was also destined to play an important role in the epistolary culture of her family, for she was entrusted, in the will of her aunt Frances Burney, with all of her private writings, including her voluminous letters and journals that spanned seventy years, with permission to publish whatever she chose.¹⁷ The responsibility of this bequest occupied Charlotte Barrett for years, as she read through all the material—editing, selecting, and censoring it—to produce seven volumes’ worth of highlights.¹⁸ Prefaced by a memoir (the first and only family-authored biography of Frances Burney), Charlotte Barrett’s edition of *The Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay* (1842-46) established her aunt’s reputation as one of England’s great letter-writers.¹⁹ In this sense, her grandfather’s words of advice in the first letter she ever received from him were indeed fulfilled.

Besides being a great letter and journal-writer, of course, Frances Burney was a best-selling author who published four works of fiction (*Evelina* (1778), *Cecilia* (1782), *Camilla* (1796) and *The Wanderer* (1814)), and for whom Charles Burney’s support and encouragement were

¹⁵ Charlotte (*née* Francis) Barrett to Sarah Harriet Burney, 18 April 1826, British Library, Egerton MS 3702A, ff. 149–50, cited in *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Lorna J. Clark (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 264 n. 2.

¹⁶ Charlotte Barrett’s approaches to publishers through an intermediary are outlined in *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Clark, 111. She has also been credited by Percy A. Scholes with the authorship of a *Handbook to the Marbles, Casts and Antiquities in the Fitzwilliam Museum* (1855) and a book of *Charades, Enigmas, and Riddles* (1859) but these attributions have not been verified.

¹⁷ The will and the instructions to the executors are published in vol. 12 of *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Joyce Hemlow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 973–81.

¹⁸ For a description of Charlotte Barrett’s editorial activities, see Joyce Hemlow, “Introduction” to vol. 1 of *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Joyce Hemlow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), xlv–lv.

¹⁹ Austin Dobson, in his biography, *Fanny Burney* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1903), ranked the *Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay* (which he re-edited, 1904–5) with “the great diaries of literature” (296). Nomenclature has been a problem for the epistolary form she used. Frances Burney often used a hybrid-form; after the earliest entries she wrote as a diary, she began to write long journal-accounts which were sent off as letters and shared with a circle of intimates.

essential, given her emotional dependence on him. She too received a “first letter” from him, which evidently had an impact and which she preserved all her life. She received it at the age of ten, five years before she began writing her journal (on 27 March 1768) with its famous address “To Nobody”.²⁰ Like the one sent to his grand-daughter twenty-five years later, Charles Burney’s first letter to his daughter was also written as a poem. Dated mid-June 1763, it is written in a comical vein:

My Fanny shall find
That I have in Mind
Her humble Request & Petition,
Which said, if I’d write her
A Line, ’twould delight her
And Quite happy make her Condition.

I’m not such a Churl
To deny my dear Girl
So small & so trifling a Favour;
For I always shall try
With her Wish to Comply;
Though of Nonsense it happens to savour.

Tho’ little I say,
I beg & I pray
That careful you’ll put these lines rare by;
For well they’ll succeed
If my Love they should plead—
So now you’ve a Letter to swear by.

CB²¹

This light-hearted poem is a clever metafictional construct in that the text accounts for its own writing and purpose which it also embodies. As the first verse makes clear, the letter was written in response to a plea from Frances herself, who said it would “delight” her to receive a letter—which shows that she had been taught to treasure writing, even at a tender age. The second verse states that Frances would consider it a “Favour” to receive a missive, and that her affectionate father wishes to “comply” with such a request; when considered in the light of her own massive epistolary

²⁰ *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Lars Troide, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), 2.

²¹ *The Letters of Dr Charles Burney*, vol. 1, ed. Ribeiro, 36–37.

output later (twenty-five volumes' worth in the modern edition),²² these remarks suggest that her own constant letter-writing might be seen as a fulfilment of her father's expectations, or a seeking of his approval. In the third verse, Charles Burney instructs her to "put these lines" by, *i.e.* to keep and value them as an expression of his affection, a request with which she complied. Frances did preserve his "first letter" for the rest of her life, even labelling it as though it were a precious relic. She carefully docketed it with the date and place of writing, and later annotated it: "From my dear Father, / When I was 10 years old" and numbered, "N^o 1." The numbering system was the one she used when, as an elderly woman, she pored over her private papers in preparation for their possible future publication; evidently, she intended to give this "first letter" from her father (which was probably the first letter she had ever received), pride of place at the beginning, which surely suggests its importance to her. The two themes that are sounded in the poem (the writing of a letter as an act of love and its preservation as a memento) carried throughout her life, and that of her family. Indeed, the "scribbling" as well as the "hoarding" habit were so characteristic of the Burneys (according to Joyce Hemlow),²³ that some 10,000 family letters have survived the vicissitudes of time and were listed by Hemlow in her ground-breaking *Catalogue of the Burney Family, 1740–1878* (1971).²⁴ For such a huge cache of material to survive from a middle-class family is highly unusual.

Frances Burney followed her father's footsteps in her productive habits and volume of output which shows that she took his example and lessons to heart: besides her letters, she produced four novels, eight plays, a political pamphlet and a three-volume memoir of her father, as well as occasional poems, and much more that has been lost (for instance, an

²² All the material, including that left out of Charlotte Barrett's edition, has been re-edited in several multi-volume projects: *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d'Arblay), 1791–1840*, ed. Joyce Hemlow et al., 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972–84); *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Lars Troide et al., 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988–2012); *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney, 1786–91*, ed. Peter Sabor et al., 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011–); and finally, *The Additional Journals and Letters of Frances Burney*, vol. 1, ed. Stewart Cooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and vol. 2, ed. Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²³ See Hemlow, "Introduction," *Journals and Letters*, vol. 1, xxi.

²⁴ Joyce Hemlow, *A Catalogue of the Burney Family Correspondence, 1740–1878* (New York: New York Public Library, 1971).

entire novel, which she destroyed at the age of fifteen).²⁵ While one might argue that her life-long love of writing, which amounted almost to a compulsion,²⁶ could not be attributed wholly to parental influence, the message contained in her father's first letter can nevertheless be taken as an indication of the affectionate and encouraging climate that surrounded her during her formative years. It was evidently an environment that was propitious for fostering a propensity to write, promoting enjoyment in writing, and attaching value to these efforts by carefully preserving that writing.

That Frances Burney absorbed these lessons and appreciated their importance is suggested by the fact that, when she grew to maturity, she, in her turn, would make the effort to pass on the message to the next generation, and try to instill a love of writing. Some thirty years later, after she had made her mark as an author, she wrote to a young niece, encouraging her to send off “a *Sheet a Week*”, “containing whatsoever she can compose—beg—borrow—or steal.” This letter was written to Sophia Elizabeth Burney (1777-1856), (third daughter of Frances' elder sister Esther) when Sophia was fifteen, probably the first letter (in fact the only surviving letter) that Frances ever sent her. It is written on a narrow strip of paper, just one inch wide, perhaps folded into a letter sent to Sophia's mother, to add a postscript. Written in October 1792, it reads,

To Miss Sophia Burney

This is to certify That Miss Sophia Burney is formally & indispensably under engagement to send to Miss F: Burney spinster, All the News, & All the Nonsense she can either suggest, by ‘collecting her scattered senses’, or gather, by summoning all manner of Persons to lend their aid. She has leave to summon all her brightest ideas, & to beg the brightest of all the House—& she has leave to transmit all the most stupid & groveling that

²⁵ Frances Burney's story of burning all her writing in a bonfire on her fifteenth birthday, is told in the dedication to her last novel, *The Wanderer* (1814), and repeated in her *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*, 3 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), vol. 2, 124–5.

²⁶ Critics who are particularly astute on the compulsive nature of Burney's writing are Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989); Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988), especially in her discussion of the tragic plays, 150–98; and Claire Harman, “‘My immense Mass of manuscripts’: Fanny Burney as Archivist, Biographer and Autobiographer,” *Writ From the Heart?: Women's Life Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century* 90.2 (2014): 15–26.

occur to her, & all of the same stamp she hears uttered. And she is hereby enjoined to send off a *Sheet a Week* to Aylsham, according to this agreement, containing whatsoever she can compose— beg—borrow— or steal.—All will be welcome. Witness my Hand.

F.B.

This first letter, like those of Charles Burney, also indulges in literary play: in this case, Frances Burney imitates the style of a formal legal document with its elevated language “This is to certify” “under engagement” “according to this agreement,” “Witness my Hand”. The playful use of “legalese” creates a sense of obligation that would overcome any shyness that Sophia might have in complying. In urging Sophia to send “a *Sheet a Week*,” Frances stresses the importance of writing regularly, and assures her that, “All the News, & All the Nonsense . . . All will be welcome.” One could well imagine the impact on the young Sophia Burney on receiving this first letter from an aunt who was a celebrated novelist. Frances Burney includes the work of Sophia’s family or siblings in her commands, when she suggests that the others might “lend their aid” or that Sophia might “beg the brightest of the House.” The letter arrived at a propitious moment in family history for literary production. Before exploring the impact, we will examine the context in which this light-hearted missive was received.

The letter was found glued to the cover of a manuscript entitled *The Juvenile Magazine*, a joint production of Sophia and her sixteen-year-old sister Frances (named after her aunt), of which six issues survive, dated January to June 1792. An early family-produced magazine, it was patterned after one of the first periodicals aimed at children, John Marshall’s *The Juvenile Magazine* ran for twelve months in 1788.²⁷ Of a similar size and appearance, with a title-page printed carefully to imitate a real publication, the Burneys’ production was, like its prototype, a miscellany of stories, poetry, plays, riddles, and news items, although it eschewed the overt didacticism that marked much of children’s literature of the day.

The mastermind appears to have been Sophia’s elder sister Frances who, as Editor, welcomed contributions from siblings and friends, identified sometimes by initials or pseudonyms. Some contributions she apparently

²⁷ For more detail on the Burneys’ *Juvenile Magazine*, see Lorna J. Clark, “‘Teaching the young idea how to shoot’: the Juvenilia of the Burney Family.” *International Journal of Juvenilia Studies*, 1 (2018): 20–36.

rejected (whether in reality or only in jest); she was known for her rather “overbearing” personality.²⁸ Young Frances also wrote much of the material, experimenting with a variety of genres: eastern tales, patterned after the Arabian Nights, or pastoral dialogues that imitated classical models. Her poetry and fiction are self-consciously literary, suggesting that she was a good reader. The other main contributor was Sophia, whose writing is rather satiric in tone, compared to that of her sister. She wrote several stories, poems and plays, although her greatest poetic contribution, “Egbert and Ellen,” may in fact be a joint production with her sister.²⁹ This medieval-style ballad features a strong heroine who rescues the hero, which underlines the empowering nature of juvenilia, as Christine Alexander has noted.³⁰

Working on *The Juvenile Magazine* evidently stimulated these young Burneys to write, and it is into this milieu that the “first letter” to Sophia was sent, as a message of encouragement from a published author to an aspiring writer. In writing such a letter, Frances Burney acts as mentor to a protégée who shared her sense of fun, who was described as “a merry little thing” as a child.³¹ The timing is suggestive; the letter was written in October 1792, probably around the time that the last issue of *The Juvenile Magazine* was completed, or just afterwards.³² Frances may have felt that Sophia was being overshadowed by her elder sister, although she does leave the invitation open, suggesting that she might get help with her writing from “all manner of Persons . . . the brightest of all the House,” so it seems that she was aware of the literary activities of her two nieces.

²⁸ She was described as “generally harsh and overbearing” to her younger sister, in a letter from her aunt, Susanna (*née* Burney) Phillips to Frances Burney, dated 17 January [1788], printed in R. Brimley Johnson, *Fanny Burney and the Burneys* (London: Stanley Paul, 1926), 200.

²⁹ Although this poem is signed “Sophia Eliza” in the *Juvenile Magazine*, it is given joint authorship in the Commonplace book, and the use of literary imitation is more characteristic of Frances than of Sophia.

³⁰ Christine Alexander, “Play and apprenticeship: the culture of family magazines,” *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31–50, on 37.

³¹ In a letter from her aunt Susanna (*née* Burney) Phillips to Frances Burney, dated 20 January [1788], Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, quoted with permission.

³² Although the six issues were dated January to June 1792, there was a lag in their production; the May issue was not completed until late August at the earliest. It would be reasonable, therefore, to suppose that the June issue was not finished until September or October, which was the month in which Frances Burney’s letter was written.

The effect on Sophia Burney on receiving this “first letter” was immediate. She responded by gathering together a number of her poems, stories and plays, copying them out in a fair hand, “Works,” and “Stories, Plays and Poems,” both dedicated to her famous aunt. Although the title-pages both state that the works were composed when she was thirteen (i.e. between September 1790 and 1791), they were evidently copied and presented later, and certainly not before July 1793, the month in which Frances Burney was married (as her married name, “Madame d’Arbly” is used on the title-pages).³³ There are three surviving manuscripts with some overlap between them, containing in all three poems, four plays, four tales, and two short stories.³⁴ The existence of multiple copies reflects the depth of Sophia’s response to Frances’s encouragement and also suggests that they were shared more widely around the family.

In some ways, Sophia’s work is similar to Frances Burney’s writing, as issues of gender and class predominate, and both show characters trying to rise above their class. For example, Sophia’s Walter Scarecrow is a hapless country bumpkin who tries to pass for a gentleman but earns only mockery for his efforts (like Frances Burney’s Tom Watts),³⁵ perhaps as a sly dig at the social aspirations of the Burneys. Known as the jokester in her family, Sophia Burney usually writes in a comic vein, yet often includes violence in scenes that are reminiscent of parts of *Evelina*. This raucous sense of humour in works geared for family consumption is in itself suggestive.

Although Sophia is not known to have published any of her work, she continued writing into adulthood (some of her later poems survive in manuscript). Both she and her sister Frances were later employed as governesses, in which capacity their love of writing and creativity would have stood them in good stead. They may have continued writing for their pupils: Frances Burney (the niece) later published a set of three *Tragic Dramas*, which she claimed had been “represented by the junior members

³³ Frances Burney married Alexander Jean-Baptiste Piochard d’Arbly on 28 July 1793. However, to avoid confusion, I shall keep calling her Frances Burney throughout this essay, as that is the pen name under which she is now known.

³⁴ The three manuscripts have been published by Lorna J. Clark, with the help of Sarah Rose Smith, as, “Works,” and “Novels, Plays, and Poems” (Sydney, Australia: Juvenilia Press, 2016).

³⁵ In Sophia Elizabeth Burney’s “The History of Walter Scarecrow,” and Frances Burney’s play *A Busy Day*, respectively.