

## ROMANTICISING THE ROBINSONADE: SARAH HARRIET BURNEY'S *THE SHIPWRECK* (1820)\*

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There are not many critical studies on Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844), the half-sister of the acclaimed English novelist Frances Burney (1752-1840). Though in the first half of the nineteenth century she was widely read and translated into French and German, most Burney scholars have neglected her works which are worth analysing as representatives of pre-Victorian literature by women. The aim here is to rediscover a totally forgotten tale, *The Shipwreck*, which appeared in *Tales of Fancy* (1920) and shares many traits with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Sarah Harriet Burney feminises the genre by introducing a romantic plot and directing all her attention to social prejudice and female virtue.

**Keywords:** *Sarah Harriet Burney, women's literature, nineteenth-century, English literature, Robinsonade.*

No existen demasiados estudios sobre Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844), hermanastra de Frances Burney (1752-1840), la aclamada novelista inglesa. A pesar de que durante la primera mitad del siglo diecinueve sus obras fueron muy leídas y traducidas al francés y al alemán, la mayoría de los especialistas en Frances Burney han ignorado sus producciones, que merece la pena analizar como ejemplos de la literatura previctoriana de autoría femenina. Aquí se pretende redescubrir una obra totalmente olvidada, *The Shipwreck*, publicada en *Tales of Fancy* (1920), y que comparte muchos rasgos de *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) de Daniel Defoe. Sarah Harriet Burney feminiza el género

incorporando una trama romántica y dirigiendo su atención a los prejuicios sociales y la virtud femenina.

**Palabras clave:** *Sarah Harriet Burney, literatura femenina, literatura del siglo diecinueve, literatura inglesa, robinsonada.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the most celebrated artistic families in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, the Burneys have a prominent place, not only because Charles Burney was a respected musicologist but because his half-daughter Frances Burney (1752-1840) became the most successful woman writer of her age. With *Evelina* she inaugurated the novel of manners, and this was followed by *Cecilia* (1782), *Camilla* (1786) and *The Wanderer* (1814), which made her a name in women's literature. Frances was admired at a time when women struggled to be authoresses and, since the 1970s onwards, poststructuralist and feminist researchers have noticed her subversive dimension and critique of patriarchy as well as her satiric power (see Sparks, 1986; Doody, 1988 and Epstein, 1989). Scholars are now turning their attention to less popular members of the family, such as Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844), Dr. Charles Burney's younger daughter. We are much indebted to Lorna Clark's effort to rescue the youngest half-sister from oblivion by editing her letters (1997), her last production (*The Romance of Private Life* [1839]) and by writing numerous articles on her life and works (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 2008: xxxiii-xxxv). Still, the number of studies devoted to Frances Burney cannot be compared with the ones on Sarah Harriet.

Educated in Switzerland and an avid reader of Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen, Frances Burney's half-sister was mainly known for having an apparently incestuous relationship with her half-brother, Captain James Burney (1750-1821), who was married to the daughter of the bookseller Thomas Payne (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 2008: xiii; Clark, 2003: 124). Sarah Harriet earned her living as a companion. She looked after Charles Burney in his last years and suffered from what was possibly breast cancer, as did Frances. Thanks to her proficiency

in French, she worked as a governess and had the opportunity to travel to Italy, where she lived for some years. In fact, Italian art always appealed to her and is a recurrent motif in her *oeuvre*.

Sarah Harriet's fiction was known in her time. She even rivalled her half-sister with some readers, and some of her works were, indeed, attributed to Frances (Fernández, 2010a: 173-4). Similarities can be found, since the authoresses belonged to the same family and lived in a historical period marked by the consolidation of capitalism and the middle classes. On the other hand, Frances's defence of women and of literature by women is more open and aggressive than her half-sister's concern with female identity and the oppression of patriarchy<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Margaret Patterson stated that "contemporary reviews comment on the resemblance between Sarah Harriet's characters and situations and those of Fanny Burney, but they note that Sarah Harriet lacks Fanny Burney's raciness of humour and power of painting the varieties of the human species" (qtd. in Spender, 1986: 286). Sarah Harriet's *oeuvre* is characterised by the contradictions and the complexity typical of the works produced in the Romantic period. Though the younger half-sister avoided sexual scenes, her writings frequently depicted dying women and domineering patriarchs, and also contained considerable doses of sensationalism. Art and the production of artistic objects occupy a privileged place too.

The aim here is to analyse Sarah Harriet's *The Shipwreck*, the second story contained in *Tales of Fancy* (1820). If we follow Clark, Frances's half-sister brought elements from earlier fiction (the Gothic novel, for example) to culmination, and, indeed, *The Hermitage* can be seen as a detective novel in its infancy (2003: 177). It is now time to consider how she refashioned the Robinsonade by incorporating into it the ingredients of the novel of manners: social prejudice and the concern for female virtue.

## **2. TALES OF FANCY**

Sarah Harriet composed five works: *Clarentine* (1796), *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808), *Traits of Nature* (1812), *Tales of Fancy* (1816-20) and *The Romance of Private Life* (1839). When she produced *Tales of Fancy*, the

authoress had an economic aim in mind: exotic settings sold well and feminocentric novels were welcome. In her correspondence to Mrs. Charlotte Barrett, 3 October 1815, Sarah Harriet explained:

I must scribble, or I cannot live; and being engaged with a bookseller I like, and who likes me, it is my interest to keep him in good humour. It was originally meant, that two volumes of *Tales* should appear at once; — I could only get one ready this year, having been lazy all the fine summer weather; and that gone, he [the editor Henry Colburn] engaged to print immediately, upon condition I would prepare the second for publication soon after Christmas. That second, I am consequently now at work upon, and it will destroy me to be taken off in the very midst of it, to go gallanting, and making merry, as if I were an independent woman (Clark, 1997: 197).

The two narratives comprising *Tales of Fancy* complement rather than contrast with each other (Fernández, 2011). As we will see, *The Shipwreck* (vol. 1) shows the continuing influence of Captain James Burney, and is based on a well-known literary form, the Robinsonade, with the added appeal of female castaways and a heroine significantly called Viola who dons male attire and succeeds in marrying the hero. According to Clark, *The Shipwreck* was eagerly expected and extensively advertised. The translation into French (*Le Naufrage*, 1816) —with a second edition the same year— was followed by a German version (*Der Schiffbruch*, 1821) (Clark, 1997: 195, note 1). As regards *Country Neighbours* (vols. 2 and 3), it perfectly fits into the best tradition of the novel of manners in which Frances Burney excelled. Sarah Harriet scathingly criticises bigotry and the English gentry in a work which even inspired a sonnet by Charles Lamb and was rendered into French as *Les Voisins de campagne, ou le Secret* (1820) (Clark, 1997: 195, note 1). In general, reviews were positive. *New Monthly Magazine* compared *The Shipwreck* with *The Tempest* and *Paul and Virginie* (1997: 198, note 5). *The Augustan* review appreciated “the marvellous in narrative blending with the natural in sentiment”, and for *The British Lady’s Magazine*, *The Shipwreck* was “a pretty little story [...] well calculated to amuse, not to strike” (qtd. in Clark, 1997: 196). *Monthly Review* defined *Country*

*Neighbours* as “a more natural genre” where “the relation of natural incidents [are] well put together” (Clark, 1997: 218, note 2).

The main text is preceded by a “Dedication” to Lady Crew and a quotation from Ariosto with the English translation. The aim of this paratext is clearly stated: the authoress insists on the verosimilitude of her story —events are not presented as authentic, they are just probable— and explains how she resorted to a naval officer for a description of a place where such a shipwreck could have happened. Undoubtedly, she is referring to Captain James Burney, a great geographer of his day, who kept journals of his voyages with Captain Cook to the Pacific and edited *A Voyage to the South Sea in HMS Bounty, by William Bligh* (1792) and *A Chronological History of the Discoveries in the South Sea or Pacific Ocean*, 5 vols (five volumes 1803-1817) (Hemlow, 1978: 179). Sarah Harriet reveals that, from the moment the story “caught [her] fancy” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: vii), she decided to produce a “fiction less romantic —a tale founded on contrasts of character, and delineations of living manners”, and confined herself to a track “where local description and mere adventure might supply the place of sense” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: vii-viii). The fantastic world in *The Shipwreck* is reinforced by a third-person narrator with an unlimited knowledge of events and characters’ feelings. However, the former are not anticipated, so the reader has the impression of being before a detective story.

### 3. AN UNCOMMON ROBINSONADE

*The Shipwreck* is a hybrid narrative, a *mélange* of literary topics unified in a Robinsonade with a Shakespearean subplot. Sarah Harriet poses some questions typical of science fiction and utopic writing, and she chooses a setting very far from the ballrooms and domestic atmosphere in productions such as *Clarentine*. At the beginning, we are introduced to two English ladies who were travelling to Hindostan to join Sir William Earlingford and find themselves on an island in the Indian Ocean as the only survivors of a shipwreck. Provided with few tools, a chest, a volume by Shakespeare and man’s clothes, Lady Earlingford and her daughter Viola try to make a new life according to European standards and they meet more inhabitants: Felix, a four-

year-old boy whose mother has perished in the shipwreck, and Fitz Aymer, regarded as an unprincipled man. Following her mother's advice, Viola passes for her cousin Edmund and soon falls in love with Fitz Aymer who gradually reveals his worth. When Lady Earlingford dies the victim of an infectious fever, Viola and Fitz Aymer have to rely on each other for support and eventually manage to leave the island. Back in England, Sir William, Viola's father, gives his sanction, so Viola can marry Fitz Aymer.

In *The Shipwreck*, the nameless island means a new beginning, and, in such an environment, one's qualities are important. There are some affinities between *The Shipwreck* and Frances Burney's last and most ambitious work, *The Wanderer*. Though now it is admired in gender studies, *The Wanderer* was rejected by British reviewers, who could not appreciate its merits and thought that Burney would attack French politics while hers is a conciliatory position. *The Wanderer* mixes the sentimental novel, the Byzantine one and the travelogue, and it is indebted to Mary Wollstonecraft since Frances Burney engages in a feminist debate which had been very important in the 1790s. *The Wanderer* deals with a mysterious *émigrée* who arrives in Great Britain and faces social ostracism and incomprehension. After taking several jobs and enduring much suffering, Juliet Granville is recognised as an aristocrat and she marries Albert Harleigh. Towards the end of the novel, Great Britain is seen as a symbolic island isolated from the continent where Juliet struggled to make a living:

“a being who had been cast upon herself; a female Robinson Crusoe, as unaided and unprotected, though in the mist of the world, as that imaginary hero in his unhabited island; and reduced either to sink, through inanition, to non-entity, or to be rescued from famine and death by such resources as she could find, independently, in herself” (Burney, Frances, 1991: 873).

Though it directly refers to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *The Shipwreck* is a special Robinsonade for a number of reasons. First, it means the feminisation of a genre which had developed very quickly and had been variously translated in European and American literatures, and which Lucy Ford (*Female Robinson Crusoe: a Tale of the*

*American Wilderness*, 1837) and Miss Julia Dean (*Female Robinson Crusoe*, 1881) would refashion again. Second, *The Shipwreck* represents Sarah Harriet Burney's contribution to an ideological debate about the role of Great Britain in the world which coincided with the consolidation of the Empire and the discovery of new lands and new markets. Accounts of journeys and expeditions abounded during the eighteenth century—Captain Cook's diaries, for instance, date from 1784—and there was a tradition of women's writing about exotic places represented by Aphra Behn (*Oroonoko; or, the History of the Royal Slave* [1688]), Lady Mary Montagu (*The Turkish Embassy Letters* [1763]), Frances Sheridan (*The History of Nourjahad* [1767]) and, years later, Emma Robertson (*Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society* [1835]) in which Sarah Harriet has to be inserted and analysed. Third, despite the stress on the emotional sphere associated with women's literature, *The Shipwreck* lacks the introspection and ideological depth achieved by Defoe with the protagonist's journal: Lady Earlingford and Viola do not learn from their amazing experiences as much as Robinson does. Furthermore, the story does not attack any economic doctrine and it does not discuss the nature of wealth, mercantilism or human labour. The same happens if we examine nationalism in the story: a Eurocentric vision is appreciated in the possibility of political rivalry with other nations symbolised by the French Lamottes, who can be read as Others competing for the colonisation of the island, but this is not further developed.

However, religion has a remarkable role. The Puritan taste for signs, allegorical and figurative meanings is coupled with mystery in *The Shipwreck*. Secret and over-ruling decrees are everywhere in operation and human actions are judged and weighed. Though a rational explanation for events is provided, the discovery of a bird struck by an arrow shocks Viola and Lady Earlingford since it might indicate that the island is inhabited by unwelcoming natives (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 49-51). The death of the bird is regarded as a bad omen for their fate (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 53). Lady Earlingford tries to comfort her daughter, and soon afterwards Viola encounters Fitz Aymer with some books, arrows and a bow beside him (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 68), so uncertainty disappears. Religion is appreciated differently by the mother and the daughter.

The former does not want Viola to be the prey of savages or to die of famine (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 9-10), and she firmly believes that God will help them (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 12). Therefore, Viola should control her impatience: “all immediate peril is past, and the merciful Protector who suffered us to outlive the dangers of the late awful night, will extend to us his guardianship, and provide for our existence here” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 12). The days on the island are only “a short time of probation” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 20) and Viola should be more optimistic now that they depend on each other:

“Could I therefore see you more resigned, I might, even here, call myself happy; since, of all the feelings I have experienced during a life of nearly unclouded prosperity, none ever satisfied my heart, none ever appeared to me so delicious, as those which I am still blessed with the power of indulging — the feelings of a mother!” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 26).

In Viola’s case, there is a psychological evolution. Unable to cope with the situation, she feels ungrateful and anger leads to despair: “Oh, God of pity [...] impute not to me as a crime these tears, these involuntary repinings! Weak, helpless, stricken as I am, I scarcely can be seemed responsible for any thing I say” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 15). Yet, what she really fears is the lack of social life on the island:

“The light of heaven is odious to me; and all the advantages which endear existence in a state of society, such as youth, health, security, and abundance, I now consider as subjects of the most bitter regret, since henceforward they can serve no other purpose than that of lengthening out the joyless and desolate career to which I seem condemned. Think me not impious — I presume not to prescribe to the Almighty; but, had it pleased Him to leave us one gleam of hope by which we might have been cheered — might have been encouraged to flatter ourselves that, at some future day, this fearful exile would terminate, I could have borne it,

I am sure I could — with constancy and resolution. But, *for ever!* — banished for ever, and in the very morn of life, from father, country, friends! — To be dead to the world, yet still to maintain a miserable existence upon its surface! To wander, perhaps for years, amidst these rocks in solitude, in silence, in utter hopelessness!” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 24-5).

God is never seen in good terms, and Viola’s rhetoric is more archaic than Lady Earlingford’s one when she refers to God: “Thou are content, then, with the victims thou hast ingulfed [sic]; and smil’st, as in ruthless triumph, at thy mightiness to destroy” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 29). However, after Lady Earlingford’s death and when she feels ill, Viola asks of Fitz Aymer exactly the same as her mother asked of her: “If *you* despair, how shall *I* gain resolution to struggle against this attack? Be composed, I entreat you; — the sight of your distress is more painful to me than the severest personal suffering!” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 157).

Living on the island undermines everybody’s stamina. The immediate concern is to make sure that there are neither beasts nor uncivilized tribes around. Unlike her mother, Viola thinks that, if there are any natives, they are perhaps a benevolent race (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 65). The protagonists realise that their fate is the same: “On your life, Fitz Aymer, mine must henceforth depend; — and to know, to feel that I should be unable to survive you, is the only consolation now remaining to me” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 222). A sense of warm fraternal regard is portrayed when the hero opens his heart to Viola. Fitz Aymer points the fact that they have lived the same experiences: they are “partners in calamity” and “participants of the same destiny” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 269). After watching Viola praying, the hero resolves to become a better man when he arrives in England (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 159), which resembles Robinson’s conversion and repentance for having left the paternal home:

“Living,” said he, “as I do now, on a society of angels, the primitive simplicity of the habits to which I am becoming inured, their temperance, their tranquility,

joined to the innocence and rectitude of character perpetually before my eyes, must, assuredly, contribute to influence in the most salutary manner the whole remaining term of my existence. If ever I am restored to society, I shall be restored to it a better man — and to you, Lady Earlingford, will the change, in a great degree, be owing” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 159).

Some symbols add a philosophical dimension to the narrative, which can be read as an allegory. As Viola and Fitz Aymer are digging a grave for Lady Earlingford in an idyllic spot, there is a storm and a European vessel approaches. Realising that her mother will never experience joy and freedom again, Viola interprets the roaring waves as symbols of the transience of life: “[They, too] will be dashed to pieces! — Oh, that I could warn them of their danger! Why, why do they linger near this fatal coast! Poor souls! —I shall see them amidst the billows, struggling against destruction, and have no powers to assist them” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 232-3). As in most Romantic literature, the powers of nature are related to the psychological state. Here death and destruction are in consonance with Viola’s convulsed state of mind, so, when she keeps on digging alone, a magnificent palmetto is struck by a flash of lightning and left “a blackened, bare, and sapeless [sic] trunk” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 247), a sight which only provokes misery. Viola’s desolation and emotional crisis reaches its highest point, since she becomes a woman who has been doubly abandoned, first by society epitomised by her partner Fitz Aymer, and then by God. The language acquires a highly poetic tone:

“The arrows of destruction are still abroad,” cried she, “yet they touch not me! The fires of heaven consume all things around, yet they leave me to be the prey of gradual and slow-killing wretchedness! — Oh, Father of the desolate, take me to thy rest! — Whom have I in heaven or on earth but thee? — *The eye that hath seen me, shall see me no more. — He who was my companion, my guide, mine own familiar friend, hath he not forsaken me! — I am utterly bereft! — I am without hope, — without support, — alone in creation, and the veriest wretch that ever sighed for death!*”

Her head sunk again upon the earth as she pronounced these words, and a species of insensibility crept over her, the united effect of extreme fatigue and sorrow, which for a while relieved her from all consciousness of her forlorn and miserable fate. The rain beat upon her, — the thunder rolled above her, — the lightning glared around her; — she neither felt the one, nor heard or saw the others. Her faculties were totally suspended; her strength subdued; her pulse almost gone (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 248).

Unlike her half-sister Frances, who does not devote much attention to descriptions of nature, Sarah Harriet offers detailed accounts of the landscape, probably because she was a drawing teacher. As a result, her narratives are coloured with a picturesque flavour as, for instance, when the location of their dwelling is portrayed:

Between two masses of stone, richly overhung on either side by woods of every tint, form, and dimensions, flowed a limpid brook; whose course, after having been impeded by intervening crags, over which it dashed with turbulence and impetuosity, at length found a smoother channel, and ran calm, polished, and clear as the brightest crystal. The two wanderers could hear it, as they sat, falling from precipice to precipice with a sound at once vehement, refreshing, and monotonous. Thick clumps of odoriferous orange trees, mingled with tamarinds and palmettos, waved over their heads; and, full in front of their green and lofty retreat, appeared the ocean in boundless and now unruffled majesty, reflecting the beams of a cloudless sun (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 28-9)

Specific information is provided by Fitz Aymer, who, Robinson Crusoe-like builds a passable hut (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 98); he explains how he has arrived on the island (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 73-4), how he obtained fire (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 108) or he informs them that the rainy season will come soon (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 110). However, there is no heroic taming of nature. Lady Earlingford and Viola try to subdue their new environment, to construct a standard of living equivalent to life in their

native England, and daily routine in *The Shipwreck* is always seen in Western terms. This is perceptible when they decide to share meals and play chess in the cave:

[Fitz Aymer] was equally surprised and rejoiced to find in her an adversary worth contending with. Lady Earlingford, whilst they played, sat by at work; and Felix, happy in the enjoyment of his own locomotive powers, ran about from place to place, from friend to friend, with all the gaiety and all the restlessness of capricious childhood (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 143-4).

#### 4. SCRUTINISING WOMEN

Another reason why *The Shipwreck* is not comparable to Defoe's work is because in this particular work love counterbalances religion, and this is where the Shakespearean subplot is most remarkable. The tale incorporates many Shakespearean references and quotations, an invariable characteristic of Sarah Harriet's writings, which testifies to her admiration for the English playwright. More specifically, the character of Viola refers to the heroine of *Twelfth Night*, who also dresses like a man. She inhabits a chimerical world, in which external identity and its trappings vanish into thin air, and she must, as a Female Robinson Crusoe, depend upon her own abilities. One may also trace some parallelisms between Caliban and Watson since the island is also full of magic creatures, spirits, and sounds like in *The Tempest*. Even the noises produced by Stefano, Trinculo and Caliban have a correspondence with the French Lamottes. Everybody who arrives on the island thinks that he is alone. Prospero and Miranda have books in their cave like the ladies in *The Shipwreck*. Undoubtedly, parallels are best observed when we turn to the young couples. Both Miranda and Viola are young, and Viola explains that there are some coincidences between what is happening to them and Shakespeare's story. When Viola is asked by her mother if she feels like Ariel, the sixteen-year-old girl, who has not met Fitz Aymer yet, explains that

"I should grieve now at the association to our banishment of any male companion. You have taught me

to believe, that a man, thus exiled, would be so irremediably unhappy, so disgusted, and so unceasingly repining, that, not even, in my most visionary moments, do I ever admit one into my romance. No: we will have no murmuring Ferdinands here, 'cooling the air with sigh:' we can, alas! Furnish sighs enough of our own!" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 48).

The moment Viola meets Fitz Aymer, there is love at first sight. Lady Earlingford witnesses Viola's "speaking countenance" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 139) and "the interest which Fitz Aymer had awakened in her daughter's bosom" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 157). She suggests that Viola should put on Edmund's clothes to protect her virtue from Fitz Aymer, on whom there are only negative comments: "he is, of all others, the man least fitted to become the friend and protector of a young woman in your position" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 83-4). Fitz Aymer himself admits that in his childhood he should have been better guided ("I have no action to reproach myself for (however appearances may be against me) which the most rigorous moralist could interpret into deliberate criminality" [Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 161]). Debts and the suspicion that he has seduced a young lady are the charges against him, but he rejects the temptress Mrs. Matilda Melross: "few men, and myself at least of all, would, in a wife, desire to meet with such uncontrolled powers of imagination, such misdirected energy of sentiment as she often betrays" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 301). Though passing for a man allows Viola to escape from the limitations of a gentlewoman, the disguise has its disadvantages because she pretends to be a man whose delicacy astonishes Fitz Aymer and she feels devoid of identity:

"Under this odious garb, I have neither the dexterity, alertness and enterprise of a boy; the consequence and dignity of a man; nor the usual claim to deference and attention of a woman. I am a mere cypher; a poor, helpless insect, who, it is evident, will never awaken the slightest degree of consideration" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 117).

In *The Shipwreck*, there are two moral advisors who add a didactic tone to the tale. The mother not only provides maternal wisdom and inspires respect, but she also exposes her view of women as more capable of enduring pain than men:

“they know how to yield to circumstances with more grace, to submit to adversity with more composure than their turbulent coadjutors. Women are timid, yet they resist despair; they shun all active contest, but their fortitude, though passive, is steady. Sudden danger appals them; but sufferings, privations, disappointments, sorrows —women can bear all these, and even display greatness of mind in bearing them; whilst men sink under such tame calamities, and degenerate into helplessness and peevish repiners” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 39).

The father is not regarded as the oppressive despot depicted in other works like *Traits of Nature*, but as a sensible old man who loves his family (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 366). Nevertheless, women’s behaviour is scrutinised by Colonel Beauchamp, Félix’s father, and the voice of patriarchy in the tale. It is easy to assimilate Beauchamp to other woman watchers, such as Dr. Marchmont in Frances’s *Camilla*. Fitz Aymer’s friend insists that Viola must pass a test:

“the best pledge a woman can give of her intention to make a good wife, is that of performing the part of a good daughter [...] applaud her [Viola], for paying due reverence to the father who now mourns her so bitterly as lost, and who will receive her with such rapture when restored [...] If she neglects, or shews a want of proper consideration for such a parent, I shall think her as unworthy of being your wife, as of being the daughter of so excellent a man” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 330-1).

Othello-like, Fitz Aymer is a watcher who sees Mr. Melbourne’s eyes “frequently fixed upon the face of Viola with an expression so closely allied to tenderness, as well as admiration, that his whole soul

took the alarm” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 339). A long conversation takes place between Beauchamp and Fitz Aymer on women’s constancy and their vulnerability to seduction (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 343-45), and the former does not disapprove of Mr. Melbourne talking to Viola because his affections have a different object. On the contrary, this will give Fitz Aymer the opportunity to appreciate her and forget his jealousy:

“Indulgence and attachment will, undoubtedly, upon some dispositions, produce their merited effect: but it must be where there is virtue; where a sense of duty would almost superseded their necessity and stimulate to equal good conduct whether beloved or not” (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 345).

Dead mothers’ words condition Sarah Harriet’s narratives (Fernández, 2010b) and confirm the increasingly matrilineal and matriarchal bent in Sarah Harriet’s later novels (Clark, 2003: 177). A constant element in her narratives is the presence of women at the verge of death who leave their children to the care of other people. In *The Shipwreck*, this is the case of Colonel Beauchamp’s wife, who is ill and prays Fitz Aymer to take care of Félix (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 74-5). Both Lady Earlingford and Viola are infected with a disease and the former dies (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 277). The heroine cannot forget her mother, and this circumstance is technically represented through internal focalisation. As a result, some paragraphs seem to be directly transcribed from Viola’s mind rather than coming from the omniscient narrator’s point of view, and they constitute the most brilliant moments in the story:

Viola’s feeling were so complicated, her amazement at her own orphan state was so extreme — the recollection of Lady Earlingford in full vigour and animation was so freshly present to her memory, that her grief, her horror, were almost suspended by wonder how such a speedy reverse could be possible! Had she not, but a few hours before, felt the pressure of the hand now rigidly immovable? Had she not seen the eye, now closed in death, then turned upon her with even an

augmentation of its accustomed tenderness? Did not the impression of those livid lips still seem warm upon her cheek? And so suddenly, so dreadfully, was every function of vitality at end? (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 212-3).

Sensationalism and morbid scenes recur in Sarah Harriet's *oeuvre*. In *The Hermitage (The Romance of Private Life)*, Ella discovers her brother Frederic's corpse, and, in *The Shipwreck*, Viola observes how her mother's dead body corrupts: "Rapid in its progress under the influence of so fervid an atmosphere, corruption now so imperiously possessed itself of its inevitable prey, that there remained no visible part of the body undeformed [sic] by livid spots, uncontaminated by the most hideous symptoms of mortality" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 244). Lady Earlingford's death means the heroine's traumatic coming of age, a *rite de passage* into adulthood. As Clark points out about *Traits of Nature*, the protagonist learns to accept limits and that "true feminine virtue consists in coming to terms with these and repressing all unavailable complaints" (2000: 130). Lady Earlingford observes Fitz Aymer's behaviour and leaves a letter to her husband: he has shown himself a better man than the world reported and all her prejudices are done away (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 195). The irruption of forgotten texts written by dead mothers or female relatives is a recurrent feature in the stories of the Burney sisters and in Frances Burney's *Evelina* and in Sarah Harriet Burney's *The Renunciation* (1839) it is associated with the vindication of woman. Too weak to give details, Viola's mother defends Viola and Fitz Aymer in her letter "the two inestimable beings now emulating each other in tenderness" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 348). Before Lady Earlingford dies, she consigns Viola to Fitz Aymer's "solemnly-plighted honour" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 349) and insists to her husband:

if he indeed presents her [Viola] to you, innocent and pure as when committed to his trust, what will you not owe him! Banish, in such a case, I adjure you, every vestige of resentment for past offences; take him to your heart, Earlingford — bless, respect, and love him; and should his feelings be responsive to our child, make him your son! (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 349).

At that moment Fitz Aymer becomes Viola's "faithful and devoted brother" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 197). They depend upon each other if they want to survive. Thanks to Colonel Beauchamp's praise of Fitz Aymer, Sir William not only receives him well, but calls the couple "my children" confirming the endogamy of the novel:

"Fitz Aymer, admit me as a father — as a friend, to your generous heart! — I have learned, I hope not too late, to estimate its real worth, — to deplore, my past injustice! — You are now the son of my proudest choice; and had I, in testimony of my full approbation of your union, the whole wealth of that land I had so lately quitted, to accumulate upon your head, joyfully should it accompany the gift of this beloved creature's hand!" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 384-5).

Viola's father reads Lady Earlingford's letter after admitting Fitz Aymer as a son: "I have learned, I hope not too late, to estimate its [Fitz Aymer's generous heart] worth — to deplore my past injustice!" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 384). On the other hand, Viola is not at all a resentful daughter and acknowledges that Sir William does not fit in the idea of father she previously had: "How gentle, how re-assuring is every word he utters! — Oh, what arrears of gratitude must I not pay you, my loved father, to make reparation for my unnatural distrust!" (Burney, Sarah Harriet, 1820, I: 386).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In comparison with other works of the period, Sarah Harriet Burney's production is poised between tradition and innovation. Targeted at female readers, the story depicts a feminised world, which pivots around the heroine's *bildung*, and an overt critique of patriarchal society never appears. Also, sentimentalism is preferred to comedy and the conventional ending does not depart much from nineteenth-century domestic fiction. However, and despite its shortcomings, *The Shipwreck* is far from being simply a novel of manners in an exotic setting and can be interesting nowadays in many respects. Sarah

Harriet deconstructs literary works, but she consciously assumes a gender-based perspective. Therefore, there are some similarities between what Viola undergoes and what Robinson himself underwent. Though wearing a disguise, like the heroine in Shakespeare's comedy, Viola learns that if she wants to be happy, she must modify her sense of self to fit her social environment. *The Shipwreck* is also a philosophical piece of writing about sociability, the inscription of female destiny and women's strength against natural forces and suffering. Other points in the narrative deserve attention, such as development of the mother and daughter relationship, Sarah Harriet's narrative technique and her unusual craft in portraying nature and woman's psyche. On the other hand, the characters have different attitudes towards religion and woman's role in society. Finally, in *The Shipwreck*, Sarah Harriet Burney reformulates our own idea of the East as an idealised space, since the tale deals with survival in symbolic landscapes and the acquisition of a new identity from a Eurocentric point of view. All these features pave the way for a postcolonial reading of the story and confirm a richness which remains to be explored by gender studies and studies on Pre-Victorian literature by women.

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