Throughout history, the imagination of female sovereignty has relied heavily on a rhetoric of legitimation and endorsement in order to make the improbable acceptable. Yet, as it is argued throughout this book, the continuous and explicit need for approval and authorization was not just a matter of politics stricto sensu. For queens, be they regnant, regent or consort, court life as such was also constructed as an intricate web of rules and obligations, often in turn based on processes of reciprocal endorsement and approval. Yet focusing solely on the position of the queen may at times blur the view of the numerous courtiers who served and attended queens and were part of this mechanism of sovereignty. In this chapter, I propose to shift focus by studying the construction of female sovereignty in relation to Queen Charlotte, wife of King George III, exclusively from the – highly imaginative – point of view of one of these courtiers: English novelist, diarist and playwright Fanny (Frances) Burney (1752–1840). After the anonymous publication of her first novel, *Evelina*, in 1778, Burney reluctantly made her way into the world of letters. *Evelina* was received with much critical acclaim, and Burney went on to write three more works of fiction (*Cecilia*, published in 1782, *Camilla* in 1796 and *The Wanderer* in 1814) and a number of plays, both comedies and tragedies. Today, however, Burney is most famous for the
elaborate journals and letters she kept and wrote during her lifetime, starting at the age of fifteen until her death in 1840. As a diarist, Burney was a particularly prolific writer, leaving behind seven volumes of letters and journals, which she revised and polished with an eye to posthumous publication.²

Burney spent many years at the English court, and her *Court Journals and Letters* (1786–1791) are a source of information on this important period in her life and career. For a long time, Burney refused to comply with the pressing encouragements of her friends, among whom fellow courtier Mary Delaney, to be engaged at the English Court, yet in 1786 she finally accepted the invitation to become Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte. This changed her life drastically. She was an established author at that time and her reputation as a novelist had risen quickly after the publication of her first novel, but allegedly she succumbed to the increasing social pressure to conform her situation as an unmarried woman with neither high birth nor great fortune.³ In particular, her father, the famous musician and composer Dr Charles Burney, was convinced that taking a position at court was an honour not to be refused, even if it meant that it would leave her almost no time for writing.³ While her years at the court indeed implied that her profession as a published writer would come to a halt, the journals and letters she produced during these years are instrumental to reconstruct and understand how Burney (unenthusiastically) spent her life at the English court. They are a testimony to the private and public challenges she faced seeking her place in a strictly hierarchical social and cultural order. Once appointed Keeper of the Robes, Burney emerges as an avid documenter of the royal family, justifying her zealous writing by referring to her patrons’ exemplary role: ‘the private conduct of the Royal family is all so good, so exemplary, that it is with the greatest pleasure I take, from time to time, occasion to give my Susan some traits of it’ (*CJL*, vol. I, 74).

In the past, Burney’s court journals and letters were mostly examined for the particular information they offered on some major political events and personal dramas she witnessed first-hand. In line with recent insights in the fields of social network and authorship analysis, however, this chapter brings into focus the singular dynamics that were at play in the relationship between Fanny Burney, a celebrated author cast in a subservient role, and the court’s most influential female person, the Queen Consort. Burney’s specific role at court and her relationship with the Queen was recurrently reported – or rather staged – in the early
Court Journals and Letters and they develop in the course of her story. The often dramatic descriptions of her conversations with Queen Charlotte reveal new dimensions when looked at from the angle of Burney’s efforts to negotiate and shape her newly imposed position at court, within the royal household yet also with an eye to her position as a female writer and intellectual in the society of her time. As I will argue, these dialogues and encounters are more than just historical documents of the English Court. They bring out Burney’s sharp awareness and use of, on the one hand, the inherent authority provided by the Queen and, on the other hand, the social mechanisms of female propriety and self-display. From this angle, Queen Charlotte appears not only as a conversation partner in Burney’s self-positioning process – the author continuously engages in conversations with other characters of varying prominence at court – but the queen appears as a unique point of reference. Even more so because their relationship is not only expounded in her journals and letters from that period, but is also readdressed in later accounts. The following excerpt, for instance, entitled ‘Sketch of the Queen’s Character’, was included in one of Burney’s later ‘Memorandum Books’ (notebooks) and was written on the occasion of Queen Charlotte’s death in November 1818.

When I was alone with her she discarded all royal constraint, all stiffness, all formality, all pedantry of grandeur, to lead me to speak to her with openness and ease. And so successful was her graciousness, that from the moment the Page shut us up together, I felt enlivened into a spirit of discourse beyond what I felt with almost any one. All that occurred to me I said, said it with vivacity, but any enquiries which she made in our Tête à têtes never awakened any idea of prying into affairs, diving into secrets, discovering views—intentions—or latent wishes, or causes: No! she was above all such minor resources for attaining intelligence: what she desired to know she asked openly:—though cautiously if of grave matters, & playfully if of mere news or chit chat; but never failingly beginning with ‘If there is any reason I should not be told, or any that you should not tell—don’t answer me!’—nor were these words of course; they were spoken with so visible a singleness of sincerity that I have availed myself of them fearlessly […], as it was a delight to me to be explicit & confidential in return for her partiality and unspeakable condescension. But whenever she saw a question painful, or evaded, or that it occasioned even hesitation, she promptly, & generously started some other subject.
At first sight a testimony to the Queen’s exceptional character and importance, the eulogy also illustrates the recurrent practice of relational self-representation and legitimation that permeates Burney’s elaborate court letters and journals. Peter Sabor points out that, as such, the ‘Memorandum books’, which have been less the object of study than Burney’s famous journals, are of particular importance because they were written ‘to the moment’ and thus offer ‘perspectives on Burney that the carefully revised, retrospective journals close off’.7 Burney’s ‘Sketch’, then, was meant as a tribute to the Queen, written ‘while fresh upon [Burney’s] mind at this moment of her recent loss’ (AJL, vol. II, 361). In this, she recollects her first encounter with the Queen and retraces the gradual evolution towards a productive ‘reciprocation both of ideas & of communication’ (JL, vol. VI, 731), based on a bond of mutual trust that continued long after the author’s stay at court. Interestingly, the portrait insists on Charlotte’s moral strength, her ‘unspeakable condescension’ and ‘sincerity’, creating an (unexpected) intimacy that allowed Burney (in particular, it seems) to speak ‘with openness and ease’ in spite of all courtly decorum. In other words, the portrayal of a highly distinctive ‘spirit of discourse’ is remarkable precisely because it is shown against the backdrop of a world governed by formally codified and detached conversation.

Through the character of the Queen, we are reminded that, in this world, sharing thoughts and feelings is exceptional and never without risk, especially for women. Burney’s numerous accounts unfold a multifarious portrait of the Queen that reveals conversation as a means of connection, while equally (be it sometimes painfully) demonstrating the value of silence. As the excerpt accentuates, even years afterwards, she still recalls how even in private, unreserved conversation, the Queen was acutely aware of the need for silence and discretion. At the same time, through explicit focus on the private scene in this sketch (‘when I was alone with her’, or ‘in our Tête à têtes’), a privileged connection between both women is suggested and, as such, Fanny Burney’s respected position at court. From that perspective, Burney’s claim to feel ‘enlivened into a spirit of discourse beyond what [she] felt with almost any one’ (in that she emphasizes her conversations with the Queen, rather than the daily practicalities8) also reads as a distant reminder of her own specific position at court as a respected intellectual.
Relational Authority and Epistolary Self-Fashioning

Against this backdrop, the present analysis will focus on Burney’s agency as a privileged witness at court, and more precisely on the ways in which specific narrative strategies shape this particular self-image. Especially during the period when King George’s mental sufferings first deteriorated and showed potential signs of insanity, some interesting changes in Burney’s representation of the Queen’s position – and her relation to the King – reveal the author’s permanent self-positioning and depiction.

Indeed, Burney does not just position herself as an acute observer with a witty pen. The queen’s position and attitude are frequently written into a life account that also serves to corroborate the writer’s own particular established role as a respected intellectual and as one of the Queen’s confidantes. Burney’s narrating skills and their effect on the ‘empowering nature’ of her writing in the Court Journals has been addressed previously, yet never in terms of her self-fashioned relationship with the Queen. In these accounts and ‘narrative performances’, Burney highlighted matters of the mind as a way to surpass the social distinction between the Queen and herself, be it always with due respect. She describes how shared ideas were shaped and reshaped through dialogue, for instance when summoned to read out books, periodicals or letters to the Queen and to discuss their content. These conversations contribute to a process of self-elevation as an equal discussion partner, it seems, both on moral and intellectual grounds. At times, it appears that Burney used the Queen’s unquestionable aura as a means of self-promotion through carefully shaped self-images. Yet, the relation between the two women is both more complex and dynamic than that. Burney shows Queen Charlotte both as an authoritative and fragile, at times even self-effacing, figure which can also be read in the light of the author’s self-representation. Throughout the court journals, an intricate web of relational dynamics of authority between Queen Charlotte and Fanny Burney unfolds. While the Queen is frequently staged as a delicate, yet real source of authority, especially in Burney’s early days at court, at a later stage attention shifts to Charlotte’s mental suffering, which allows for a more vigorous, affirmative self-depiction of the writer.

To fully understand the intricacies of Burney’s position at court, it is important to bear in mind that, for many reasons, this was a life-changing and challenging period for a woman who, by that time, had an
established position as a writer in British society and whose works were met with critical acclaim both in England and abroad. Although at the end of the century the creation of a public authorial persona gradually became more acceptable, women writers were perceived as having less cultural and social authority. Search for fame and recognition through association with other, more renowned writers and intellectuals was a general practice. Yet, it seems that for women, authority was more often the result of a complex process that required different sets of strategies in order to carve out a more established position as a female intellectual. This is not to say that the literary scene of the 1770s and early 1780s was generally unreceptive to women's writing. As Betty Schellenberg states in her analysis of professional authorship in the early career of Frances Burney, ‘the question was no longer whether a respectable woman author might have a public identity. Rather, it was a matter of what sort of identity she should pursue’. Not all public personae were equally acceptable, and for women writers, it was a matter of finding the right balance between social demands and personal accomplishments. In Burney’s case, her continuous display of shyness and apparent reluctance to accept fame as a debuting writer initially led scholars to a ‘disproportionate concentration on her desire for anonymity’. Since then, however, it has been convincingly argued that Burney was far more conscious, if not strategic, in her authorial self-fashioning than her utterances of self-effacement would lead us to believe. Both the paratexts to her novels and her early journals and letters mark a conscious recourse to other, more established, mostly male writers in her process of building her own authorial reputation. Schellenberg argues that, in the early days of her career, ‘to get herself talked about, [Burney] aligned herself with the largely masculine Streatham circle of literary professionals, in the process writing her numerous female colleagues out of the canon while earning a prestigious rank for herself in the developing literary hierarchy’. Yet, even as an established author, some major events challenged her position in society. Burney’s appointment at court introduced her into a hierarchical world with constellations and rules of conduct with which she was unfamiliar. While court life made her acquainted with an international circle, it also confronted Burney with ‘a far more complex network of prohibitions and regulations’ than the bourgeois intellectual circles of her time. What is more, as Peter Sabor mentions in his introduction to the Court Journals (vol. I), Burney’s position as ‘Keeper of the Robes was a misleadingly dignified title. In practice,
the post entailed helping the queen to dress in the early morning and
again at midday, being at her beck and call at other times, and acting
[...] as a tea-table hostess’. To Burney, becoming ‘Keeper of the Robes’
was an unnatural choice, as one can imagine from a woman who had
previously relished in the intellectual support of the Streatham literary
circle, and had been publicly acknowledged by intellectuals such as
Samuel Johnson. It meant being cut off from the society she frequented.
She looked upon this position as an ‘arranged marriage’, as she points
out that ‘I was averse to forming the union, and I endeavored to escape
it. [...] the knot is tied. What then now remains but to make the best
Wife in my power? I am bound to it in duty, and I will strain every nerve
to succeed’ (CJL, vol. I, 8). She remained a vigorous and imaginative
writer and obsessively documented everything that happened at court,
from daily quarrels with other staff to meticulous accounts on major
events of political importance.

It then becomes interesting to see how she navigates her own
position in this world of strict decorum and political manoeuvring.
The concept of authority helps to understand the argumentative
intricacies of Burney’s court journals and letters and the entwinement
of social, political and cultural matters. Authority relates not only to
political mechanisms but also to social and cultural power relations
as well as to the acknowledgment of specific knowledge or expertise
by peers, or by society at large. Both Kojève19 and Cléro20 have pointed
out the ‘interactive’21 and ‘relational’ dynamics at play in authority
– and authorship – construction. Pierre Bourdieu, in turn, argued that
authority, in the sense of ‘credibility’, can be seen as a ‘credit contributed
by a group of agents whose relational ties are made all the more valuable
by the fact that they have more credit themselves’.22 Authority is thus
designated as a symbolic credit negotiated and achieved through
association between different types of connections, ranging from highly
positioned peers in literary or social circles to persons with political
profiles considered important.

Letters are particularly interesting in this respect, since they help to
reconstruct the different networks an author builds over the period of
a lifetime. Not only by providing details on specific dates, names and
places but also through their content, letters can reveal the multiple
modes of relational self-representation. Important elements in this
process are descriptions of different types of private or social rendezvous
or social circles. These written encounters were enlivened with detailed
accounts on the social status of the parties involved, the purpose of the
visits, words of praise or criticism, all of which were designed to describe not only the ‘others’ but also the author’s self. Thus, letters can be a subjective, highly performative textual space that articulates ‘a double logic’ (*une double logique*), as argued by Brigitte Diaz and Jürgen Siess, whereby the writers both express (*diction de soi*) and shape themselves (*fiction de soi*) in the process of writing. In Burney’s case, there are the shorter letters to her family, many of which were addressed to her father Charles and her sister Susan, complemented with long journal accounts (also sent out to relatives and friends later on) that reveal this multilayered practice of self-positioning. True to her literary interests as a novelist and playwright, Burney indeed seems to have been constantly tempted by the idea to ‘construct[ing] a narrative from the materials of everyday life’. Many of her accounts read as vivid scenes from a play, which suggest that much reflection and revision was put into the writing. These revisions also resulted from significant delays in the writing process. Especially in the court journals, Burney struggled to record the numerous events and conversations ‘to the moment’, admitting that she had a system of ‘keeping daily notes in pocket memorandum books, which she later reworked into full-fledged journals’. Knowing that Burney was approximately a year behind schedule when she compiled her court journals, it becomes all the more relevant when analyzing her depictions of Queen Charlotte to be aware how the Queen served as ‘material’ for a narrative universe in which Burney played the main role.

**Moral Compass**

To fully understand the relation between the two women, some biographical information is required. When Fanny Burney first arrived at court in 1786, the life of Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (1744–1818), Queen of England, did not seem all that eventful. As described in Joanna Marschner’s chapter ‘Becoming British’, Charlotte was brought up in a north-German region and received a modest upbringing with miscellaneous education. She only learned English when she married George in 1761. Apart from the King’s periods of mental illness, the exact nature of which is still a subject of debate, the couple seemed to have had a fairly harmonious and certainly fertile marriage, out of which fifteen children were born, of which thirteen survived. Within their royal household, George and Charlotte were known to cultivate an ‘aristocratic counter-culture of rational domesticity’. In the early days
of their marriage, the King even strongly advised his wife not to make too many acquaintances, which seemed to suit Charlotte’s rather shy character and ‘taste for domestic retirement’. Yet, as a Queen Consort, Charlotte was supposed to take on a public role, and she soon followed into the footsteps of previous queens at the English court in publicly cultivating her scientific interests: she developed a passion for botany and zoology and entered the world of intellectual sociability, where she was acquainted with learned societies such as the Bluestocking circle. As has been pointed out, Charlotte’s work as a patron of arts, sciences and letters was also reflected in her choice of readers in French and German, such as the Genevan writer and scientist Jean-André Deluc and the German-French translator and writer Marie-Elisabeth de la Fîte.

Burney had been involved with learned societies before she joined the Court, which could also explain why, initially, she described her encounters with the Queen as an intellectual connection in which Charlotte was a conversation partner. In her later accounts, when the King started showing the first signs of mental illness, she evokes a sympathetic female bond in reaction to the Queen’s silent suffering and self-imposed isolation. Frequently, the early court letters document conversations, either private ones between Burney and Charlotte or intellectual exchanges involving other members of the royal household, but all with reference to the Queen’s rational and contemplative nature. Initially lost in a ritualized and coded world, Burney clearly seeks guidance from Queen Charlotte, whose moral and intellectual authority she takes – and uses – as a point of reference. Burney finds an ally in the Queen both in observing the rules of propriety and in exhibiting an aura of intellectual merit. From very early on in her court journals, Burney’s conversations with the Queen raise the impression of an intellectual bond based on mutual interests and a common moral stand, despite a scrupulously guarded difference in rank (noticeable in the recurrent term ‘condescension’ in Burney’s Sketch of the Queen’s Character quoted above). As the Queen embodies an exceptional – almost saintly – power based on moral superiority in Burney’s portrayal, part of this is passed on to the author herself. This becomes apparent in scenes in which Burney meticulously – and, one could say, too consistently – describes Queen Charlotte’s signs of approval, when she hesitantly seeks advice on how to respond and reject unsolicited visitors or correspondents. For instance, in several journal accounts, Burney rehearses her attempts to publicly disentangle herself from her French fellow writer Stéphanie-
Félicité de Genlis. Genlis was by that time famous for her literary work, in particular for her didactic novel *Adèle et Théodore ou lettres sur l’éducation* (1782), but she was in the public eye because of her illegitimate affair with the Duc de Chartres, later Duc d’Orléans. Burney had met Genlis in London in 1785, shortly before joining the English court. But in her journal entry of 20 August 1786, she elaborates on her refusal to engage in a correspondence that, although private, could at some point become public:

> I think of her as of one of the First among women, I see her full of talents & of charms,—I believe her good, virtuous, & dignified,—yet, with all this, the Cry against her is so violent, & so universal, & my belief in her innocence is so wholly unsupported by proof in its favour, or any other argument than internal conviction, from what I observed of her conduct & manners & conversation, when I saw her in London, that I know not how to risk a correspondence with her, till better able to satisfy others, as well as I am satisfied myself […] (CJL, vol. I, 144)

Burney shows an acute awareness of the moral restrictions imposed by public opinion, especially concerning women who are part of the intellectual and social scene. While firmly stating her personal viewpoint (note, for instance, the recurrence of the personal pronoun ‘I’ throughout the paragraph), she also recognizes the limited value of personal (and more favourable) views in relation to the ubiquity of public opinion. At the same time, Burney’s observations also underscore the particular value of personal connections and the necessity to manage these carefully, since letters are never really private and are also monitored by society. Burney sees her own constant concern to guard her impeccable reputation confirmed in Queen Charlotte’s moral example. Yet, the Queen not only serves as a moral compass in principle, at some point she even becomes involved in Burney’s intricate strategies to publicly distance herself from her former contact. Because Genlis was such a high-profile writer, Burney reached out for Charlotte’s moral and institutional support to refute the request to engage herself in this correspondence.

Burney’s report of this conversation is elaborate, and the particular attention she pays to visual signs of approval from the Queen, which function as a prerequisite for the actual conversation, shows the novelty of their acquaintance in 1786. Freshly appointed as Keeper of the Robes, Burney clearly ‘dreads’ to ‘put [her]self under [the Queen’s]
direction, as if presuming she would be pleased to direct [her]’ (CJL, vol. I, 148). Thus, the importance of authority construction through dis/association permeates the topic of not only the conversation Burney has with the Queen, but also the negotiation that takes place before. Used to remaining silent, Burney describes her approach to the Queen as a defining – and empowering – moment of interaction: ‘for […] it was the novelty of my own situation, the new power I was calling forth over my proceedings [that affected me]’ (CJL, vol. I, 148). The Queen, Burney describes, ‘assent[s] in silence, but with a look of the utmost softness, & yet mixed with strong surprise’ (CJL, vol. I, 148). Thus, in this single scene, a silence related to the servant who dreads to speak is transformed into a shared characteristic of both Burney’s approach and Charlotte’s reaction (who, as will become clear, often guides through silence). In seeing her own struggle to speak reflected in the Queen’s tactfulness, Burney seems to mark the foundation of the female bond that will unfold in the years to come and is referred to in the ‘Sketch’ quoted above.

Once the conversation is established, Burney first repeats her ‘admiration’ for and ‘personal knowledge’ of Genlis’s goodness, and validates the French writer’s intellectual authority. Yet she cleverly anticipates her refusal to communicate with Genlis by immediately introducing the pressing need for external support to her formal refusal:

> With many pauses, and continuous hesitation, I then told her I had been earnestly pressed by Mme de Genlis to correspond with her. […] I felt such a request from such a Woman as Madame de Genlis as an honour, & therefore not to be declined without some reason stronger than my own general reluctance of that sort. (CJL, vol. I, 148)

Even if Burney mentions her ‘general reluctance’ to write letters, her conversation with the Queen functions to raise a more general shared apprehension of the risks of corresponding with a public persona as (in)famous as Mme de Genlis. Given the French author’s status, both women, so Burney writes, consider letter writing – even of supposedly personal letters – to be a public, performative act which cannot be undone once it is set into motion: ‘a few lines answer the same purpose as a few sheets’, Burney says, ‘since once her Correspondent, all that I am hesitating about is completely over, right or wrong, as if I wrote to her weekly’ (CJL, vol. I, 145). In Burney’s account, Queen Charlotte
figures as moral compass and functions as institutional affirmation that makes Burney’s refusal to communicate with a high-society figure as Genlis socially acceptable. In other words, the Queen is the ultimate corroboration of a decision that was in fact her own, while it is at the same time meticulously documented that the Queen’s ethical affinity mirrors her own moral stance:

The Queen talked on, then, of Madame de Genlis with the utmost frankness; she admired her as much as I had done myself, but had been so assaulted with tales to her disadvantage, that she thought it unsafe and indiscreet to form any connection with her. [...] Having thus unreservedly explained herself, she finished the subject, and has never started it since. But she looked the whole time with a marked approbation of my applying to her. (CJL, vol. I, 149)

At the same time, the scene serves to affirm Burney’s stance as a distinguished conversation partner at court. This narrative construction of respectful interchange is maintained through frequent references to the intimate setting of their conversations. Even years after her retirement from Court, Burney refers to the ‘Royal Circle’ she had been ‘condescendingly admitted to’, as described in this excerpt from the ‘Dunkirk Journal’, which she compiled during her prolonged stay at the French seaside while waiting for permission to cross the English Channel.36

And never without veneration do I recollect the Hours I have passed with Her Majesty, Queen Charlotte of Mecklenbourg, who, when I had the Honour of a lengthened Tête à Tête with her, deigned not merely to permit but to invite a reciprocation both of ideas & of communication that drew Formality from Respect, & Awe from Deference, giving a freedom to the intercourse, in point of opinion, that disembarrassed it from the subjection of Etiquette [...]. (LJ, vol. VI, 731)

It is important to note how this self-image is constructed relationally, quite literally so by virtue of the conversation scene and the specific mentioning of a ‘reciprocation both of ideas & of communication’ (my emphasis). Yet, even if throughout her journals and letters Burney continues to cultivate this bond in her self-portrayal, it also entails a specific image of the Queen. Charlotte is never depicted as a character
of great political importance but rather as someone who reinforces her distinguished position at court through a particular aptness for well-formulated thoughts and ideas and respectful dialogue, despite the rules of propriety and conversational constraints imposed upon her.

Unspeakable Condescension

Other parts of Burney’s journals and letters confirm this particular cautiousness of the queen, as a woman and as a consort to the nation’s most powerful political figure, to the potentially damaging effect of words, not written but uttered in the supposedly discrete environment of her private chambers. They illustrate how Queen Charlotte made a clear distinction between what was appropriate to say in her role as a queen and (the few) private matters she could discuss in specific circumstances.

To a certain extent, one could argue that the references to these conversations in Burney’s letters are also part of her attempt to model her (epistolary) self-representation, be it in accordance with the queen’s seemingly masterful dissociation between private self and public persona. More than once, Queen Charlotte’s acute sensibility to decorum is indeed explicitly staged as an example worthy of imitation. Yet, on more than one occasion and increasingly so once the King’s crises become more frequent, Burney’s letters also show us the cracks in the carefully crafted façade that reveal Charlotte’s personal struggle and her tragic, self-imposed silence. As Burney describes, when the queen had to face personal and family matters that were not in line with her own moral standards or public opinion, she could not discuss these directly, not even in private conversations. In a powerful section of Burney’s journal account of 1 November 1786, we read how Charlotte, in an attempt to reach out to Burney, uses the mediating role of fictional storytelling to share her concern over the licentious behaviour of her eldest son, the Prince of Wales. ‘I was […] much touched with a sort of unconscious confidence with which she relieved her Mind’:

When she was Dressed, & seated in her sitting Room, she made me give her the Book, & read to me this paper. It is an account of a young man of a good heart & sweet disposition, who is allured by pleasure into a libertine life, which he pursues by habit, but with constant remorse, & ceaseless shame & unhappiness. It was impossible for me
to miss her object; all the mother was in her voice while she read it; & her glistening Eyes told the application made through-out.—

*My mind sympathized sincerely, though my tongue did not dare allude to her feelings*;—she looked pensively down when she had finished it, & before she broke silence, a page came to announce the Dutchess of Ancaster [...]. (*CJL*, vol. I, 232; my emphasis)

Before the diplomatic contact breaks off in the banality of everyday courtly activities, a lot has been said. Although Burney frequently portrays Charlotte in family scenes with her daughters, this is one of the few occasions in the early court journals in which the Queen is not cast in her role as consort but in which her vulnerability as a mother is addressed. Burney’s remark on the Queen’s ‘unconscious confidence’ at first seems to suggest that the Queen’s message was a rather intuitive response to a pressing need for self-expression. Yet Charlotte’s clear directions in preparing the unexpected reading session indicate a conscious attempt to connect, which is immediately interpreted and reflected in Burney’s self-proclaimed empathetic gesture. Whereas the Queen takes control of the narrative itself by choosing a specific account that bears enough resemblance to that of her son, her physical appearance, and tellingly both her voice and eyes, betray the inner struggle she cannot put into words. Moreover, the Queen’s non-verbal communication reverberates in Burney’s emotion-driven inner voice (‘my mind sympathized sincerely’), thus adding to the idea of a shared belief in restraint and self-control where matters of the hearts are concerned. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that what we read is in fact Burney’s interpretation of the Queen’s appearance, an interpretation, moreover, that corroborates her own desirability and her position as one of the queen’s designated confidantes.

At the same time, this passage attests to the central and often mediating role of reading and literature in the intellectual and moral affinity between the writer and the Queen. It is something Burney emphasizes frequently. Even if, as Keeper of the Robes, intellectual and cultural education was not initially one of her duties, from the very beginning Fanny expected somehow that ‘[the Queen] meant [her] for her English Reader; since the real duties of [her] office would have had a far greater promise of being fulfilled by thousands of others than by [her]self’ (*CJL*, vol. I, 137). When she does get the chance to read to the Queen, Burney appears very hesitant and self-conscious at first, considering this task a performance to be judged: ‘for I cannot arrive at ease in this exhibition
RELATIONAL AUTHORITY AND FEMALE SOVEREIGNTY 123
to her Majesty; and where there is fear or constraint, how deficient, if not faulty, is every performance!’ (CJL, vol. I, 280) As the reading sessions increasingly become part of her courtly duties, so is Burney’s projection of her shared taste in reading and staging with Queen Charlotte as a patron of the arts. Indeed, as Joanna Marschner shows in her chapter on the Hanoverian queens, Queen Charlotte was an active promotor of the arts. She lent books to her personnel – something frequently mentioned by Burney40 – but also supported literary accomplishments financially.41 These signs of promotion are again not wholly disinterested; they emphasize Burney’s distinguished position as an intellectual and compensate for the reality of her subservient courtly role. When Burney published her novel Camilla in 1796, she described in a 31 August letter to Hester Maria Thrale how the King and Queen ‘united, in a manner even touchingly sweet, to subscribe each for 50 sets of the little work, & when [she] begged leave, if her Majesty, on its perusal, found nothing exceptionable, to be indulged in presenting it to the Princesses, the Queen gave immediate permission’. Whereas Burney herself explicitly draws attention to the Royal couple’s interest, adding that ‘this is a trust that, of its sort, has been never before shewn’ (AJL, vol. II, 32–33), Peter Sabor rightly emphasizes that ‘[f]or the King and Queen to order 100 copies of a novel that they had not even read’ is ‘a clear sign of their approval of Burney’s enterprise’ and as such ‘highly unusual’ (AJL, vol. II, xx).

‘The Queen is my physician’42

The tone and focus of Burney’s accounts change drastically when, in 1788, due to George’s illnesses and the ensuing constitutional crisis, Queen Charlotte becomes the subject of critical public opinion. For some time, she is even ‘pitted as a rival to the possible regency of the son and heir’, the Prince of Wales, even if it would only be much later, ‘[d]uring the actual regency starting in 1811, [that] she was in charge of the King’s household and person, while the Prince of Wales acted as head of state’.43 In the past, Burney’s journals and letters of this particular period have been studied for their documentary value on George’s illness, but also more generally because of ‘her powers of subtle observation, and the remarkable ability she had to recreate imaginatively the scenes she describes’ (Clark in: CJL, vol. III, xxix).44 Moreover, in her introduction to volume 3 of Burney’s Court Journals, Lorna Clark
rightly argues that Burney’s account of the king’s illness stands out because it ‘conveys vividly the women’s viewpoint of these historic events—displayed to the margins, watching and waiting and trying to gather what is going on’ (xxxii; my emphasis). Even the Queen is at some point banned to another room and kept uninformed of her husband’s mental condition (CJL, vol. III, 523). These public, political events influence the relational dynamics between Queen Charlotte and Burney, whose agency undoubtedly increases, at least as it is documented by the author herself. While she still eagerly capitalizes on her personal connection with the Queen, this is clearly redefined in the process. In response to the tragic circumstances, her depictions of the Queen become at least temporarily more driven by pathos and take on an apologetic tone, even if they are still based on an unremitted faith in Charlotte’s moral superiority, as well as on a shared sensitivity to the protection of the private self from the pernicious effect of public opinion.

Yet one should be aware of the rhetorical ambiguity that is at play in Burney’s reports of the crisis: they are prolific, detailed and create an impression of accuracy, but they were in fact written down in full at least a year after the fact. Tellingly, her initial claim, dated 1 November, that she is reluctant to write an account of the events, is immediately countered by the observation that ‘though the very prospect of the Task involuntarily dejects [her], a thousand things are connected with it that must make all that can follow unintelligible without it’ (CJL, vol. III, 506). A strong sense of urgency and importance is present in the diary entries that relate the early days of the crisis. They are highly crafted narrative scenes, driven by dramatic tension. They are also mostly focused on Burney’s own emotions and reactions as the narrator who witnesses the drama first-hand. In the account of a particularly eventful night, her skilful storytelling is on full display:

Two long Hours I waited—alone,—in silence,—in ignorance,—in dread!—I thought they would never be over; at 12 o’clock I seemed to have spent two whole Days in waiting.
I then opened my Door, to listen, in the Passage, if any thing seemed stirring.—Not a sound could I hear!—my apartment seemed wholly separated from life & motion!—whoever was in the House kept at the other end, & not even a Servant crossed the stairs or passage by my Rooms.
I would fain have crept on myself, any where in the world, for some enquiry—or to see but a Face—and hear a voice,—but I did not dare risk losing a sudden summons.
I re-entered my Room—and there passed another endless Hour,—in conjectures too horrible to relate!—
A little after one, I heard a step—my Door opened—and a Page said I must come to the Queen. I could hardly get along—hardly force myself into the Room,—Dizzy I felt, almost to falling. (CJL, vol. III, 515)

While she is only indirectly concerned, Burney stages herself as if she were involved (‘in conjectures too horrible to relate!’). Her description is strikingly self-centred, stressing the long hours she spends nervously waiting for news. The lack of information coming from the crisis’ epicentre is dramatically emphasized by multiple references to a threatening silence, which endures even when she is finally admitted to the Queen’s chambers:

My poor Royal Mistress!—never can I forget her Countenance,—pale, ghastly pale she looked,—she was seated, to be undressed, & attended by Lady Elizabeth Waldegrave & Miss Goldsworthy—her whole Frame was disordered,—yet she was still & quiet. (CJL, vol. III, 515)

There is a certain continuity with other scenes highlighting the Queen’s silent posture, but this time quietness does not express the usual ideal of regal composure and self-restraint, but is caused by deficiency, shock and the incapacity to communicate. In accounts of the events leading up to the crisis, the Queen’s silence was indeed mostly designated as a sign of her regal dignity and superiority, which was the opposite of the King, whose loss of self-control was characterized by a verbal trop-plein, a nonsensical abundance of language: ‘He was begging her not to speak to him, when he got to his Room, that he might fall asleep, as he felt great want of that refreshment. He repeated this desire I believe at least an hundred times, though, far enough from needing it, the poor Queen never uttered one syllable!’ (CJL, vol. IV, 504–505) Burney perspicuously contrasts the ‘hoarse, raging voice’ of the King with the Queen’s continued silence. During the first days of the crisis, however, Burney observes how the Queen, burdened by desperation and anxiety, ‘struggles to support serenity’, emphasizing Charlotte’s ‘equal
forbearance & quietness, during a period of suspensive unhappiness, never have I seen, never could I have imagined!’ (CJL, vol. IV, 448) But her reserved composure changes into a different kind of silence that reflects the deep loss for words of a truly shocked woman, overwhelmed by the situation. A portrayal that epitomizes the signs of human suffering in isolation which Burney sensed in previous encounters.

Charlotte’s self-imposed urge to master thoughts and feelings and refrain from speech is repeatedly described as a burden which can only find relief in tears. Burney’s account of the queen’s personal crisis during the night of 5 November is particularly illustrative: much surprised when the Queen enquires after her own state of mind (‘Miss Burney? – how are you?’ is the first thing to the Queen’s mind), Burney relates how, ‘in trying to speak, [she herself] burst into an irresistible torrent of Tears’, after which ‘the Tears gushed from [the Queen’s] own Eyes, & a perfect agony of weeping ensued’. ‘I thank you, Miss Burney,—you have made me cry!—it is a great relief to me. I had not been able to cry before all this Night long!’ (CJL, vol. IV, 517), the Queen then adds. Not only does the ‘perfect agony of weeping’ reverberate the continued idea of a deep connection between the two women across difference in rank, it shows Charlotte’s gratitude, portrayed by Burney, as an echo of the writer’s pivotal position within the Queen’s inner circle.

This passage is indeed the prelude to the story of a long night of uncertainty and despair in Burney’s account of 6 November, when the Queen was removed from the immediate surroundings of the King (‘since the King would undoubtedly be worse from the agitation of seeing her’), which gives way to a disorderly scene in which Burney is ‘allowed to stay with [the queen] till she was in Bed, which [she] had never done before’ (CJL, vol. IV, 527). The scene holds a strong symbolic value as it depicts a moment of deep crisis at court, but from the (admittedly constructed) point of view of the Queen Consort and done so in explicitly bodily terms. The fairly intimate portrayal of the Queen’s state of dishevelment seems to express her ultimately ex-centric status in times of emergency.

The somewhat transgressive character of the passage is addressed with much detail by Burney: ‘I never, indeed’, she notes ‘had even seen her in her Bed Room till the Day before. She has always had the kindness & delicacy to dismiss me from her Dressing Room, as soon as I have assisted her with her night Cloaths’ (CJL, vol. IV, 527). Burney concludes the paragraph, again, by highlighting her own role as one of the queen’s elected confidantes: ‘It was a satisfaction to me, however,
now, to leave her the last, & to come to her the first’ (CJL, vol. IV, 527).
A few months later, with a royal court still in crisis and a Queen under
suspicion of having influenced the news reports on the King’s health
(CJL, vol. V, 11), Burney’s account to her sister Charlotte also stresses
how much her moral support is required at court: ‘To leave my Royal
& suffering Mistress at such a time would be truly barbarous; since
however little comfort or use she may find in me, when present, she
would feel it a great additional wretchedness to be now attended by a

While the court journals and letters provide a detailed inside view of
court life with a frequent focus on Queen Charlotte’s position, Burney’s
much valued report is also a process of continuous self-representation
that informs this particular narrative. Thus, a well-staged female bond
between sovereign and writer comes into sight that takes form through
an – often silent, self-censored or indirect – exchange of ideas. These
‘relational’ images function, to a certain extent, as a testimony to the
inherent complexity of female sovereignty, yet they are skilfully developed
by the main interpreter in a wish to write herself into the narrative and
to foreground her position as a distinguished and particularly skilled
conversation partner.

Whereas Burney’s court journals display numerous attempts of
disentanglement from female literary authorities such as Mme de
Genlis, in her depictions of Queen Charlotte, Burney indulged in an
empathetic and self-asserting portrayal of the Queen, which at the same
time left enough room for imagination.

Even long after she left the royal court, Burney’s letters and journals
remain interspersed with references to Charlotte, not in the least
because the Queen actually supported Burney’s personal life and
career in various ways on several occasions, as Burney does not fail
to mention.16 The Queen provided her, for instance, with a lifelong
annual pension of 100 pounds. Yet apart from this financial and – one
could argue – ‘institutional’ support, it is most striking that Burney
portrays the Queen consistently as the embodiment of moral authority,
grounded in a particular sensibility to the intricacies of conversation
in public as in private encounters. In her Dunkirk journals, the
events of which occurred in 1812, before the Queen’s death, but were
documented and revised in the 1820’s, Burney once again brings to
mind her conversations with the Queen in much the same way as they
were described in the Early Court Journals:
I had the opportunity to see that August personage was as superior in understanding, in character, & in her motives of conduct, as in her station & Royal dignity. Her speaking Eyes [...] detailed her own Meaning, where she cared not to pronounce it, & sought, most penetratingly, that of others. This gave a poignancy to her discourse that kept it always on the alert, & gave it a zest the most singular & pleasing. (JL, vol. VI, 730–731)

Burney’s tribute to the Queen’s conversational grace, marked by moderation, timing and empathy, is thus informed by her own mastery of discourse and, more importantly, of the written word. Her narrative skills allow her to entangle her own life story with that of the Queen and promote her own position and status both as an intellectual and as one of the Queen’s confidantes. Looking upon court life as a marriage forged against her will, she emphatically scripts her intellectual and moral affinity with the queen throughout – and long after – her court years, in an alliance of symbolic authority.

Notes


3 A few years after leaving the English court, Fanny Burney married General Alexandre d'Arblay, who was part of a group of French exiles living at Juniper Hall in 1792–1793.

4 See also Clarissa Campbell Orr, ‘Introduction. Court Studies, Gender and Women’s History, 1660-1837’, in Queenship in Britain 1660-1837: Royal Patronage, Court Culture and Dynastic Politics, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 35: ‘Crucially, the one place where women of the right social status could have salaried public position was at court’.

5 For an overview of Burney’s Journals and Letters, see the information provided on the Burney Centre website.

6 ‘Sketch of the Queen’s Character’ (found in a Memorandum Book of Made d’A’, 18 November 1818 in AJL, vol. II, 2018, p. 362). Throughout this chapter, the Court Journals will be referred to as CJL; the Additional Journals and Letters as AJL and the Journals and Letters as JL.


8 By the end of Fanny’s first year at court, the Queen opened up to her regarding her own disinterest in matters of dress and pomp: ‘In the Morning I had the honour of a conversation with the Queen the most delightful, on Her part, I had ever yet been indulged with. It was all upon Dress […]. She told me, with the sweetest grace imaginable, how well she had liked at first her Jewels & Ornaments as Queen, — “But how soon,” cried she, “was that over!—Believe me, Miss Burney, it is a pleasure of a Week,—a fortnight, at most, & to return no more!”—I thought, at first, I should always choose to wear them; but the fatigue & trouble of putting them on, & the care they required, & the fear of losing them,—believe me, Ma’am, in a fortnight's time I longed again for my own earlier Dress, & wished never to see them more!—’ (CJL, vol. I: 236–7).


12 In a letter to Susanna Burney Philips (December 1786), Burney clearly shows some constraint in reading to the Queen: ‘Again I read a little to the Queen – two Tatlers, both happened to be very stupid; neither of them Addison’s; and therefore reader and reading were much on a par: for I cannot arrive at ease in this exhibition to her Majesty; and where there is fear or constraint, how deficient, if not faulty, is every performance!’ (*CJL*, vol. I, 280)

13 This is also illustrated in the Court Journals and Letters, through references to other writers, both male and female (such as Sophie von la Roche), whose eagerness to meet Burney at court is depicted with an emphatic disdain.


16 Brock, *The Feminization of Fame*, p. 113.


19 In referring to the ‘conditioned’ birth of authority (la genèse conditionnée), different from its ‘spontaneous’ birth (la genèse spontanée), Kojève emphasizes the transmissive nature of authority construction: ‘l'Autorité elle-même est déjà là (c'est-à-dire qu'elle est déjà “reconnue”), et il ne s'agit que de changer son “support” matériel (humain), en le faisant passer d'un individu (ou groupe) à un autre, de sorte qu'ici encore il est question d'une transmission d'Autorité’. Alexandre Kojève, *La notion de l'Autorité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 96.

20 In his essay *Qu’est-ce que l’autorité?* (2007), Jean-Pierre Cléro builds his theory of authority on two other concepts that are of interest to our analysis: drawing on a long rhetorical tradition, he strongly emphasizes the (symbolic) incarnation of authority, be it in the sense of poses and roles (des positions supposées), rather than their physical presence (l’individualité empirique). Rather than fully adhering to the ‘relational’ nature of authority, Cléro in turn also refers to the idea of ‘transmission’: ‘Qu’il y ait constamment


27 As Lorna Clark explains in her introduction to the third volume of Burney’s Court Journals and letters, both mental (‘madness’; ‘mental illness’) and physical (‘porphyria’) causes have been suggested in the past. One of the most recent hypotheses ‘reasseses the King’s malady as a “bipolar disorder with recurrent manic episodes” throughout his life, of which the crisis of 1788-1789 was one of four’. (CJL, vol III, xxvii).

28 Campbell Orr, *Queenship in Britain*, p. 22.

29 Campbell Orr, *Queenship in Britain*, p. 240.

30 By way of definition, an interesting quote from Mme de Genlis’s *Memoirs*, from the time she visited Windsor in 1782, gives an idea of the particularly demanding nature of readers at Queen Charlotte’s service: ‘It is well-known that in general the title of reader to a prince is merely an honorary title; but the Queen of England really loved reading, and at Windsor, where that princess lived in complete privacy, M. DeLuc was daily summoned to read for three or four hours; he always found the queen alone in her cabinet, and read while she embroidered or worked tapestry […]’, quoted in Clarissa

31 See e.g. De Luc’s Lettres physiques et morales sur les Montagnes, et sur l’Histoire de la Terre, adressées à la Reine de la Grande Bretagne (1778).

32 ‘Her Majesty then bid me not be alarmed, for there was nothing that could seriously hurt me; yet I saw her fully of the same opinion’ (1 November 1786, in CJL, vol. III, 233).

33 See also the strong image of Genlis being ‘encircled with such powerful Enemies’ (CJL, vol. I, 148).

34 See also Campbell Orr on the role of royal women as ‘gatekeepers of moral conduct’: ‘A court is both an institution and a place, it is constituted by various sets of personnel, and governed by its own ethos. [...] it is an intangible entity that involves people from the top to the bottom of society and requires to be understood holistically’ (Orr, Queenship in Britain, p. 24).

35 Let me refer to Burney’s quote of her friend Mrs Delaney, to whom she owned her court appointment, and whose advice she sought before approaching the Queen: ‘Made. De Genlis is so public a Character, you can hardly correspond with her in private, & it would be better the Queen should hear of such an intercourse from yourself, than from any other’ (CJL, vol. III, 145).

36 The ‘Dunkirk Journal’ refers to an extensive journal account, from 4 July to 20 August 1812, in which Burney describes the difficulties she encounters upon her return to England with her son Alexander. The journal is included in vol. 6 of the Journal and Letters (France 1803–1812), ed. J. Hemlow.

37 In her 6 January 1788 journal entry, Burney speaks about ‘unexpected condescension’.

38 See, on Burney’s part: ‘I felt myself inexpressibly obliged; & I have entreated my dear Mrs. Delany to make my humblest acknowledgements by the very first opportunity. My Heart is too full to make them for myself; I prefer to say but little, & make that little as satisfactory & concise as possible. Yet I cannot bear not to make known to Her Majesty my sense of her great goodness’. (8 January 1788, in CJL, vol. IV, 37); in the same journal entry, reference is again made to the Queen’s meaningful glance: ‘Indeed, cried she, with Eyes strongly expressive of the complacency with which she heard me, I have always spoke as little as possible upon this affair’.

39 ‘This little matter has proved, in the end, very gratifying to me; for it has made clear beyond all doubt her desire of retaining me, & a considerably increased degree of attention & complacency, have most flatteringly shewn a
wish I should be retained by attachment. I can hardly tell you how sweet was her whole manner, nor how marked her condescension’ (*CJL*, vol. III, 287).

40 See e.g. *CJL*, vol. 5, 11.

41 See also Campbell Orr, *Queenship in Britain*, p. 40: ‘As well as helping women to identify with scientific pursuits, Charlotte was also something of a figurehead for the Bluestockings, most obviously Frances Burney, but also Mrs Montagu, Elisabeth Carter and Hannah More’.

42 This phrase is uttered by the King during one of his crises, leading Burney to comment: ‘How the Queen commanded herself I cannot conceive; but there was something so touching in this speech, from his hoarse voice, & altered countenance, that it overset me very much’ (*CJL*, vol. III, 504).

43 Campbell Orr, *Queenship in Britain*, p. 23.


45 On the same note, see the following quote from her letter to Charlotte Burney Francis on 11 January 1789: ‘Heaven be praised, however, All Hope is before us of the most favourable conclusion to this Tragedy; & when the Catastrophe is happy, my dear Charlotte knows the intermediate distresses may be supported with patience’ (*CJL*, vol. V, 20).

46 See *CJL*, vol. 5, p. 3, n. 14.