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Frances Burney and protective self-erasure in early nineteenth-century Britain

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Erasure as protection

In July 1768, a 16-year-old Frances Burney documented the risks inherent in her nascent life-writing project. Reporting how she had left her journal unguarded on the piano, she explained her father's response to having "Read & pocketed it". Having eventually worked up the courage to ask for her "papers" back, Burney's father had returned them with the apparently jocular warning that "if I ever find any more of your Journals, I vow I'll stick them up in the market place!" (Burney 1988, 1:19).¹ Managing public exposure, and the desire to maintain control over her personal documents, would prove a significant dimension in Burney's subsequent career as a novelist, memoirist and editor. This had already been evident in an earlier episode when she "made over to a bonfire" all her youthful attempts at fiction (Burney 1832, 2:125); it would later be central to her curatorial efforts in preparing her papers for posterity, when she painstakingly decided what ought to be preserved and what needed to be destroyed. Indeed, such a dynamic of revealing and concealing – of making parts of her writing available while prudentially shielding and destroying others – was characteristic of her personal archiving practices. In deciding which version of herself to leave for future publics, Burney devoted considerable energy to erasing those elements of her archive that she wished to be forgotten.

The concern with protecting personal data is often regarded as particular to our present moment: a product of novel anxieties about the reach of information storage in an age of digital memory (Ghezzi, Guimarães Pereira, and Vesnić-Alujević 2014; Jones 2016; Mayer-Schönberger 2009; Öhman and Floridi 2017). Yet there is a longer history to these fears beyond the advent of digital media ecologies. As the instance of Burney suggests, apprehension about the fate of personal papers existed in an earlier era of print culture. With shifting configurations of publicity and memory enabled by the proliferation of print around the turn of the nineteenth century, a heightened interest in posthumous reputation had emerged. This prompted an increase in deliberate erasure, as public figures began removing those aspects of their documents they feared might tarnish their legacy, with Samuel Johnson's panicked bonfire shortly before his death a notable early example (Boswell 1791, 575; D'Israeli 1794, 66). While such figures could

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hardly conceive of themselves as “data subjects”, their efforts to protect themselves from unwanted future attention constituted a form of *self-erasure* that resonates with contemporary concerns about data control (Zuboff 2019). Bringing into focus these historical attempts at legacy management provides perspective upon our current preoccupation with the politics of “the right to be forgotten” (Rosen 2012).

In studying historical practices of erasure, this article interweaves literary studies and cultural history with insights from archival science, memory studies and media history (Edquist 2021; Hoskins 2017; Klik 2021). Broadly, it draws on a recent trend highlighting the centrality of forgetting to any understanding of the making of cultural memory (e.g. Assmann 2014; Beiner 2019; Connerton 2009; Plate 2015). More specifically, it builds upon the argument that “erasure studies” focused on the materiality of erasure – its traces, residues and spectral marks – can form suggestive new lines of critical enquiry (Fredrikzon and Haffenden 2023). There has been a pervasive tendency to examine this subject in negative terms, as the “repressive erasure” of authoritarian or colonial regimes that should be guarded against and reversed (e.g. Connerton 2008; Ovenden 2020; Schindel and Colombo 2014; Trouillot 2015). Yet the deliberate destruction of personal documents constitutes a markedly different notion of erasure than oppression. Rather than being state-centred or imposed on those lacking the power to resist, the erasure I explore here was pre-emptive and self-willed. In contrast to repression, self-erasure thus proved a sort of agency: an attempt to control the shape and limits of the future archive – a deliberate form of *protection*. By tracing the expansion of these practices in the Romantic period, I examine how protective self-erasure was the product of a specific set of historical conditions.

Burney constitutes a pertinent case study to explore such a history. Firstly, because her archive provides an exception to the methodological challenges otherwise complicating erasure studies, insofar as significant material traces have actually survived. This is due partly to the sustained work of Burney scholars in reversing the obliterations made to her letters and journals – which has unveiled what she sought to conceal (Sabor and Cooke 2018) – and partly to the commentary she provided on her dilemmas relating to erasure in her extensive life-writing. Secondly, because the example of Burney, as a female author in the emergent public space of Romantic celebrity culture, allows consideration of the role of gender in engagements with practices of self-erasure. While previous studies have delineated a connection between archival silencing and the marginalising of women’s voices in the nineteenth century (e.g. Carter 2006, 218; Lootens 1996; Wolf 2018), I emphasise rather the enabling potential of erasure for Burney’s attempts to control her posthumous reputation. Far from silencing her against her will, self-erasure suggested a means of balancing publicity and protection beyond the grave.

Analysing Burney in terms of protective self-erasure demands various approaches. The first part of the article presents a broader contextualising argument about the conditions of possibility for practices like Burney’s, highlighting shifts in both posterity and collecting practices around the turn of the nineteenth century amid the emerging “modern nexus of history, media and memory” (Mole 2017, 10). The second part zooms in on Burney’s deliberations in ordering, editing and, by turn, destroying her papers, to pursue an ethnography of the personal archive (Decker and McKinlay 2021; Douglas and MacNeil 2009; Eichhorn 2013). Doing so helps to bring into focus the

degree to which erasure was a proactive solution for Burney to a particular set of problems. The concluding section situates her project in relation to an emerging Romantic concern with posthumous privacy, before reflecting upon the place of protective self-erasure in our digital present.

A market for posthumous lives

Chiding herself for neglecting her diary-writing, the young Burney had playfully feigned shock “for Posterity”, since “But for my Pen, all the Adventures of this Noble family might sink to oblivion!” (Burney 1990, 2:4) This appeal to the interests of an imagined future readership might have been an ironic act of self-dramatisation when it was written in 1774, but the notion of writing specifically for posterity – either through literary works or life-writing – would become increasingly commonplace over the course of Burney’s life (Jackson 2015). To understand how this impacted her later commitment to document destruction, we need to consider how large-scale media change was creating a heightened preoccupation with posthumous reputation by the opening decades of the nineteenth century.

The shifting conditions of publicity that enabled Burney’s rise as a literary celebrity also shaped the formation of a particular Romantic “culture of posterity” (Bennett 1999). With the development of industrialised print production and improved distribution infrastructures, this period witnessed both a proliferation in the volume of printed material available and a significant expansion of the reading public (Franta 2007; Mole 2007, 9–11). One effect of this rapidly expanding publishing market was the consolidation of celebrity as a form of contemporary recognition, as widening groups of readers sought close contact with the new icons of public life. But as various scholars have argued, another reaction to the appearance of a mass anonymous readership – derided by Coleridge as “the multitudinous PUBLIC” (1817, 60) – was the rejection of present audiences in favour of future reception. Certain authors, especially male poets – ridiculed by Byron as “the foster-babes of Fame” (Byron 1821, 121) – responded to the perceived failures in judgement of a mass public by appealing to the consoling prospect of the canon: contemporary neglect would be compensated by posthumous recognition. According to this account, the turn to posterity emerged in opposition to popular renown, with celebrity and the canon entrenched as distinct and competing regimes of value (Bennett 1999; Braudy 1986; Newlyn 2000).

A key proponent for such a dichotomy was William Hazlitt, in his reflections upon the problem of value in an age of mechanical reproduction. Not only had he provided a justification for the essential division of celebrity and canon – juxtaposing “the idle buzz of fashion” of present popularity with the “undying and imperishable” merits of lasting “fame” (Hazlitt 1967, 144) – Hazlitt also elaborated upon the contrasting material practices of these forms of renown. This was evident in his account of Byron in *The Spirit of the Age*. Having framed this portrait as a “strain of somewhat peevish invective”, one focused on public personality as much as poetry, the news of the poet’s death forced an abrupt shift in perspective (Hazlitt 1967, 77–78). The closing part of the essay therefore moved away from treating Byron as a living writer to reflect on the process of posthumous canonisation. Rather than the emphasis on “the personal” and “the pageant” he associated with celebrity, Hazlitt insisted that what mattered for canonical worth was the literary text alone, since

Byron's "monument is to be found in his works" (Hazlitt 1967, 78). This austere vision aligned with his arguments elsewhere about the flaw of presuming to assert one's own canonicity, as those "always trying to lay violent hands on reputation, will not secure the best and most lasting" (Hazlitt 1967, 144). Turning towards posterity, he suggested, demanded renouncing the artefacts and urge to be seen of celebrity culture.

But the commercial sphere of celebrity and the otherworldly claims of the canon actually became successively entangled in this period, producing a sharpened awareness of posthumous attention (Haffenden 2021; Van Krieken 2019). Despite Hazlitt's strictures to the contrary, personal details beyond the works assumed a growing significance in the establishing of authorial afterlives. This was connected to the broader fascination with the private lives of the great and famous that both underpinned and fuelled the emerging celebrity system in an era of print publicity (Eckert 2022; Haffenden 2024; Lilti 2017). Such a desire for intimate contact with public personalities – an alleviating mechanism for readers in a mass public, torn between a celebrity's "widespread visibility and their actual remoteness" (Roach 2007, 3) – had stretched beyond the living to the dead. This was particularly evident in the range of practices associated with literary tourism (Watson 2006; Westover 2012). With these pilgrims seeking out the homes, milieus and graves of venerated names from the past, current authors also came to be regarded as hallowed sites to be visited and variously worshipped by their followers. While dead authors were retrospectively subjected to the intimacy effects of contemporary celebrity, figures in the present were being transformed into living monuments. The instance of Wordsworth receiving admirers in his study at Rydal, with his bust on display alongside Scott's and Burns', suggests how far authors were conscious of the attention likely to be focused on their bodies, homes and lives once they were departed (Westover 2012, 22). For those with the longevity of Wordsworth or Burney, this amounted to a foretaste of posthumousness; as Macaulay summarised for Burney, "she lived to be a classic" (1843, 523).

The prospect of publicity beyond the grave prompted various considerations among those who had become living classics or – *pace* Hazlitt – dared to presume their own lasting value. One strategy was in seeking to shape the material form upon which future reception would be based. With the rapid expansion of anthologies and collected works enabled by the proliferation of print, the publisher's canon became a pertinent focal point for authorial self-fashioning. As Michael Gamer has argued, the practices of re-collecting and self-canonising necessary to produce a final "unified [textual] body capable of standing in for the author" (2017, 7) implicated the culture of posterity in the worldly concerns of commercial publishing. Actively engaging with the "business of poetry" – i.e. in the design, form, marketing, and present and future profitability of their (re-)collected works – these authors were often far from the disinterested figures they professed to be (Gamer 2017, 9). To the degree that this involved taking practical steps towards making their own monuments, self-canonisation formed part of a broader Romantic engagement with the possibilities of self-monumentalising – encapsulated by the bust of Sir John Soane on display at the centre of his eponymous, self-made house museum. Understood in terms of the "political economy of immortality" (Bauman 1992, 53), such projects were characteristic of a novel memorial regime in which individuals took increasingly proactive steps to claim lasting reputation, rather than simply trusting in established institutions or the test of time (Haffenden 2018).

Yet just as Soane's museum also included an archive of personal paraphernalia, there was more to planning for posthumous recognition than dealing with the published works alone. Beyond attending to the publication form for their professional output, public figures also needed to consider what type of material traces of their personal lives they might be leaving behind them (Palmer 2015). This was an effect of the increasing popularity of celebrity biography, where the desire among readers for close contact with celebrities was simultaneously producing a heightened demand for posthumous lives (Altick 1965, 44–45; Eisner 2009; Lynch 2015). Burney had been closely connected to this personalising of the biographical genre through her involvement in the Streatham circle, with her sometime mentor, Samuel Johnson, advocating a life-writing focused on “domestick privacies” and “the minute details of daily life” (Johnson [1750] 1969, 321), and her acquaintance, James Boswell, seeking to persuade her to share her “choice little notes of the Doctor's” for the biography he was working on (cited in Wiltshire 2007, 75–76). The considerable commercial success of his *Life of Johnson* (1791), along with the various competitor volumes that appeared in its wake, indicate that the “new marketability of private life” emerging in this period also extended to publications about the deceased (North 2009, 29). Such an expanding market created both opportunity and threat. While it became possible to imagine one's biography attracting attention into the future, awareness of the public's desire for revealing personal information raised pressing concerns about just what should be made available for posterity (Eckert 2022). The pressure to reveal was also producing a powerful catalyst to conceal – a dilemma particularly pronounced for female celebrities, “[c]aught between self-promotion and self-effacement” in a public culture expecting both intimate access and feminine restraint (Mole 2009, 186–187).

By the turn of the nineteenth century, when Burney came to direct her energies towards her personal archiving project, posterity had become a more immediate concern than the distant site of judgement outlined by the likes of Hazlitt. The presence of a growing market for posthumous lives enabled by shifts in print capitalism meant that public figures – accustomed to the demands of reputation management in an expanding celebrity culture – were becoming more conscious of the type of attention they might be exposed to after their deaths. On the one hand, this pointed towards the increasingly open and competitive character of posthumous reputation in the memorial regime taking shape in this period. As Zygmunt Bauman characterised the combative logic of this recognisably modern regime, “[t]omorrow's immortals must first get hold of today's archives” (1992, 57). Yet on the other hand, the awareness that “[f]uture immortality will grow of today's recordings” (Bauman 1992, 57) also provided the basis for protective practices of self-erasure. Knowing your documents were likely to become objects of interest when you were no longer around to control them was a potent incentive to pre-emptive culling. The prospect of posthumous attention therefore impacted how “today's recordings” were dealt with in a very practical sense, as we will shortly see.

Archival consciousness and the will to erase

With the market forces of celebrity placing a premium on posthumous reputation, the impulse towards self-erasure was further strengthened by a new conception of history

and the various collecting practices this gave rise to. The decades following the French Revolution involved dramatic and often violent upheaval, of which Burney was all too aware through her first-hand experience of war and displacement (Wiltshire 2019, 30–32). Contemporaries understood these events as constituting a profound shift in the relations between past, present and future, as the separation of experience and expectation intensified (Hartog 2015; Koselleck 2004; Sachs 2018). Dorothea von Schlegel encapsulated this feeling of disorientation in the face of temporal acceleration when she bemoaned, in 1809, that “it is no longer possible to keep up” (cited in Fritzsche 1998, 105). With the future increasingly conceived of as open, unbound and essentially unpredictable, history could not sustain its former role as authoritative guide to present action or future development. Instead – once the principles of historical movement, difference and distance were normalised – the past came to be refashioned as a precarious site of loss: a perishable entity on the brink of disappearing forever, characterised as the “melancholy of history” by Peter Fritzsche (2004). The advent of modern time was thus leading to sharpened memorial anxieties about all that was *not* being remembered from a rapidly receding past (Mole 2017, 10).

This sense of the past as something fragile and under threat prompted significant practical effects to secure its preservation. Faced with the seismic ruptures of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, commentators like Chateaubriand worried that cultural memory was in danger of failing altogether (Westover 2012). If the remnants of the past were subsiding all around them, how would the records of the present be made available for posterity? The collective response to this challenge was the proposal of various heritage initiatives (Swenson 2013). One striking instance was William Godwin’s *Essay on Sepulchres*, where he suggested a novel commemorative infrastructure to venerate “the illustrious dead” by installing a “very slight and cheap memorial” on “the spot where their remains have been interred” (1809, 7). Such a scheme, he explained, would help “rescue from impending oblivion” the graves of all those at risk of being forgotten (Godwin 1809, 27). Although Godwin’s vision would not be realised until later in the century (Mole 2012), the early decades of the nineteenth century saw a wide range of projects geared towards collecting and preserving the material traces of history, focused precisely upon such “rescue” work. From the anthologising of fairy tales and the publication of historical source editions, to the forming of antiquarian societies and the foundation of historical museums, the desire to counter loss was creating a pressing will to assemble and safeguard memory (Bann 1984; Bodenstein 2011; Crane 2000; Lowenthal 1985; Nora 1989; Widén 2016).

These successively institutional initiatives to protect the past led to productive tensions for particular memorial actors. Such organised heritage-making efforts could be accompanied by striking individual attempts to check the fear of being forgotten that was intensifying with the order of modern time. Notable examples include Thomas Jefferson’s fastidious use of copying machines to ensure his outgoing correspondence was recorded for posterity (Klein 2013), and Soane’s deployment of ruins as a representational device to enshrine the survival of his own architectural output in a projected future (Haffenden 2018, 145–160). While the cases of Jefferson and Soane embodied the aspirational effects of the cult of the *grand homme* (Bonnet 1998), this memorial work was also evident in more familiar settings, and in response to more immediate threats of destruction.

The instinct to preserve was especially pronounced among those who had personally experienced disruption and loss in the period's revolutionary upheavals, and who therefore understood in concrete terms what this unstable and dynamic sense of history might entail (Fritzsché 1998). For Burney, having lived in exile in France for over a decade, the unpredictable turn of contemporary events produced significant archival insecurities at a personal level. When Napoleon returned for the Hundred Days in the spring of 1815, she had been forced to flee Paris immediately with but a change of clothes in her possession (Harman 2000, 334, 346). Though she would return to her apartment in Rue de Miromesnil six months later to find her precious papers intact, she had nonetheless been forced to reckon with their loss: expressing her horror, in a letter to her husband, at the thought of losing “my Trinkets – papers – letters – all the family papers & Memoirs & Letters, & all of my own inedited mss.! – of my whole life!” (Burney 1980, 8:70) Burney's endeavours to prevent her personal papers from sinking to oblivion thereby resonate with Paul Connerton's argument about the emergence of modern memory practices, that “the threat of forgetting begets memorials” (2009, 29).

Yet given the reciprocal and fluid relations between memory and forgetting (Assmann 2008), this captures only part of the story. While anxiety about the precarity of the archive provoked memorial labour aimed at ensuring its survival (Allen 2015), the opposite could also apply, since “the construction of memorials begets forgetting” (Connerton 2009, 29). In making this point, Connerton was referring to how sites of memory tend to conceal as much as they cause aspects of the past to be remembered. But rather than the elusory character of memorials, the case of Burney worrying about the fate of her papers suggests another sense in which remembering might induce particularly active forms of forgetting.

Returning to the example above, a striking aspect of her response was her concern with the unedited state of her manuscripts, rather than solely with the possibility of their disappearance. Beyond worrying about the loss of her archive, Burney appears to have been anxious that these personal records might circulate before she could edit them (Gitelman 2013; Harman 2014). As she confided to her sister, the possibility of having such material exposed to a wider public prompted a “variety of uneasy sensations” (Burney 1980, 8:279). In this letter, Burney's explicit concern was focused on the potential loss of papers intended for the projected edition of her father's letters, and on the regret that time which might have been devoted to preparing that edition had been wasted. At the same time, the language of unease hints at a broader anxiety about the vulnerability of private papers once they leave her immediate control. While reputational risk is not articulated directly in this passage, this affective register points to a wider response to unintended exposure. Such anxiety likely encompassed financial, familial, and editorial concerns, as well as reputational vulnerability.

This underscores how the prospect of archival attention was creating fear about the security of potentially sensitive personal information, which in turn led to a concern with editing – or, taken to its logical extreme, destroying – such material. To rework the terms of Connerton's formulation, the threat of future memorialising was now begetting erasure.

Burney's unease about the loss of control over her personal papers was indicative of an expanding archival consciousness by the opening decades of the nineteenth century (Friedrich 2016). Such anxieties were far from being confined to Burney. With efforts

to counter the fragility of the past dovetailing with the growing curiosity for posthumous lives in a burgeoning celebrity culture, public figures were becoming increasingly aware of how they might be preserved for posterity. Byron proved a pertinent example of such awareness, given his sustained engagement with the contemporary public drama of celebrity and claims to the lasting value of canonicity (Tuite 2015). Writing to his publisher John Murray in 1821, for instance, he had warned against the use of “smart postscripts which would not adorn our mutual archive” (Byron 1978, 187). While characteristically ironic – the point was made in a postscript no doubt intended to be smart – Byron’s comment also suggested his alertness to the possible afterlife of his correspondence: both in terms of his archive as a material object to be preserved, and the attention it might attract as part of any future past (Koselleck 2004). That this sense of being heritage in-the-making could produce significant effects, not least anxiety about the contents of material to be shared with future audiences, was evident from the eventual fate of his memoirs – perhaps the most renowned act of literary erasure in the nineteenth century (Hamilton 1992). In the case of Byron, the decision to destroy had been taken posthumously by concerned friends and acquaintances, but it could also be made into a prospective project: a form of anticipatory erasure to preclude future damage (cf. Craps 2017). As a protective response to this period’s pervasive will to memory, destroying documents provided a means of opting out and subverting the commemorative gaze of the future. The desire to preserve was prompting a counteracting urge to erase.

Self-erasure and female diffidence?

Burney had experienced the conflicting demands of preservation and erasure in acute terms. Having struggled to re-assemble the parts of her personal archive that had been dispersed over various storage sites, as well as inherited the paper legacies of several family members, she came to accumulate a large volume of potentially sensitive material: a collection she wryly described, sometimes despairingly, as “my immense hoard of papers” (Burney 1982, 9:43), including the “Letters, Diaries, Journals, Dramas [and] Compositions in prose and in rhyme” produced and acquired over the course of a long life (Burney 1984, 12:980). With her manuscript journals and letters alone covering over 10,000 pages, the scale of this archive posed pressing informational challenges – in short, how to avert overload and assert some form of control (cf. Blair 2010)?

Burney’s response was to devote the final quarter of a century of her life to reviewing and organising the material; in Peter Sabor’s terms, “she began her literary career as a novelist and dramatist but ended it as an editor” (2021, 56). As several of her comments on this archival labour suggested – for instance, in reflecting on her youthful correspondence with her sister, “how few dare I keep from the flames” (Burney 1984, 11:424) – a significant part of this project was focused upon erasure, on destroying, concealing and safeguarding her papers. The extent of these destructive efforts would later be all too evident to the scholars at the Burney Centre, McGill University, who, in compiling the definitive edition of her writings, established that certain years of the earlier journals had as much as half or more of the writing destroyed, beyond the persistent redactions present throughout the material (Troide 1988, 1:xxv; see Figure 1).

Burney’s practices of erasure have often been understood in terms of feminine submissiveness, as “a last instance of her fearfulness and prudery” (Sherman 1996, 272). Seen

oft-cited instances of her early authorial anxieties and reservations about being exposed to a mass audience: for example, in pondering the “odd *sensation*” upon the publication of *Evelina* (1778) that the novel “so lately Lodged, in all privacy, in my Bureau, may now be seen by every Butcher & Baker, Cobler & Tinker, throughout the 3 kingdoms” (Burney 1994, 3:5, original emphasis); or the insistence that she “would a thousand Times rather forfeit my character as a *Writer*, than risk ridicule or censure as a *Female*” (Burney 1994, 3:212, original emphasis). Aligning her later archival redactions with her earlier timidity towards public display, this interpretation makes Burney’s erasure an effect of the gender constraints of being a woman author in a male-dominated public sphere. On this basis, the destructive work she conducted was motivated principally by “female fear” (Spacks 1976, 158).

Taken to its extreme, the model of fear-driven erasure could effect a radical form of self-effacement (Khalip 2009). If the Romantic culture of posterity was centred upon masculine poets turning away from contemporary recognition towards posthumous survival, Bennett also identified a female “counter-discourse” focused rather upon ephemerality and the “desire for oblivion” (Bennett 1999, 66). A paradigmatic example of this gendered disavowal of posterity was Mary Shelley’s pledge, when faced with the prospect of a biography being written about her deceased husband and the public attention this would likely generate, that “I only seek to be forgotten” (Shelley 1983, 72).

Given Burney’s apprehension of manuscript overload, and her increasing sense of frailty while struggling to cope with the scale of the task, she had occasionally flirted with the scorched-earth policy suggested by such a counter-discourse. In joking that her personal and family archive – “the multitude of MSS. that have fallen to my mournfully surviving lot to select, or destroy” – would “make a Bonfire to illuminate” the way to Penzance, she speculated that “this might be the wisest way to dispose of such materials” (Burney 1984, 11:206). Likewise, in later agonizing over what should be done with the papers of her newly deceased son, she poignantly wondered: “Shall I Burn them?” (Burney 1984, 12:954). Insofar as these instances resonate with Shelley’s instinct “to wrap night and the insignificance of obscurity around me” (Shelley 1983, 72), they suggest an internalising of the sort of repressive erasure that has subsequently been explored as a “silencing” of the past (Connerton 2008, 60; Trouillot 2015). Viewed in these terms, self-erasure amounted to the practical expression of an oppressive and gendered self-censorship, as opposed to the masculine presumption of futurity in projects like Soane’s house museum.

But despite her youthful claims to have “*always sought concealment*” in response to a fear of “publishing my name” (Burney 1994, 3:194, original emphasis), the mature Burney – the widowed Madame d’Arblay – had not ultimately pursued such a self-effacing approach to legacy. On the one hand, and unlike Shelley’s wish to be forgotten completely, Burney’s orientation toward posthumous recognition rested on a deliberately modest conception of remembrance that precluded complete self-erasure. While she rarely articulated such ambitions in relation to herself, Burney instead framed this stance obliquely when describing others, contrasting Mary Delany’s willingness to see her name “amongst the Records of those who had not lived to die unremembered” with a more self-effacing reserve (Burney 1984, 11:164). By extension, rather than obliterating all traces of her own life, Burney asked whether she might “so modify a division as to spare for future times various collections that may be amusing & even instructive”

(Burney 1984, 12:955). Posterity thus emerged not as disappearance, but as a matter of careful selection and modification.

On the other hand, as Claire Brock has shown, Burney was far from passive in the construction of her career as a literary celebrity. In spite of her initial fears of “discovery” as a debut author (Burney 1994, 3:194), she had been acutely attuned to the machinations of the literary marketplace and her growing renown, exercising towards her audience what Brock describes as “a calculating, professional stance” (Brock 2006, 114). Though this assertiveness was tempered by her consciousness of the tenets of female propriety, Burney was keenly aware of her status and consistently sought to steer how her name and image became available to the wider public (Paluchowska-Messing 2020). In preparing her papers for the amusement and instruction of posterity, she was applying the strategic acumen acquired in establishing contemporary recognition to the management of her posthumous reputation.

Burney’s project of curating her archive for future attention formed part of a shift towards the posthumous publicity of personal papers. Since Alexander Pope’s contrivances to promote himself through publishing his letters (Brant 2006; Rose 1993), the second half of the eighteenth century had witnessed a growing epistolary market, which in turn informed the appeal of novels such as *Evelina*. By the end of the century, following the appearance of works like William Mason’s *The Poems of Mr. Gray* that included the poet’s correspondence so Gray might “become his own biographer” (Mason 1775, 5), an intimate connection had been established between the biographical genre and personal letters (King 2018, 135). The notion that a life might come to be represented by letters – and the awareness of the likely future demand for such material noted above via Byron – created a sharpened interest in self-archiving among epistolary agents ahead of anticipated publication (Gamer 2017). A key example was Horace Walpole who managed the preservation and organisation of his correspondence with a keen sense of its presumed value to future historians (Ellis 2018, 606).

While this use of the archive for posthumous self-fashioning may initially have been restricted to the aristocratic circles Walpole or Elizabeth Montagu operated in, by the turn of the nineteenth century it was becoming more widespread as a preparatory component for especially what Ellis terms “the afterlife of writers” (2018, 609). In contrast to the notion of feminine self-effacement, this was an approach towards posterity adopted by male and female authors alike, with Anna Seward, for instance, investing a considerable amount of time assembling her letters so that they might serve as her future monument (Barnard 2009). An expected afterlife for public recognition was contributing to the increasingly proactive management of personal archives.

This was one element in the modern “democratization of history-making” posited by Bauman, where the elite’s “monopoly” was being challenged and superseded by a more open “struggle for historicity” in which anyone might seek to be made immortal (Bauman 1992, 170–171). Deploying personal papers to buttress “historical capital” (Nora 1989, 7) in this more accessible, yet increasingly competitive, memorial regime was especially relevant for an author like Burney, who variously understood herself, and her family, as *self-made* (Burney 1832, 1:ix; Gallagher 1994, 215–217). Given the concerted efforts she – and her father before her – had devoted to establishing a reputation, she was a committed participant in this struggle to be remembered. Far from the self-effacement of oblivion, she sought to ensure her and her family would not “die

unremembered”. This perspective informs the extent and intensity of her archival labour in reviewing, ordering and editing the “countless hoards” of manuscripts that came to define her final decades – an accumulation encompassing her own papers alongside family correspondence and other materials, much of it undertaken in the course of preparing her father’s *Memoirs* (Burney 1984, 11:206). It also helps in making sense of the central place of protective self-erasure in her editorial project – including her willingness to commit certain papers from this accumulated archive “to the Flames” (Burney 1984, 11:191) – a practice we now turn to consider in closer detail.

Burney’s erasure as control

In the context of increasing curiosity about celebrity lives, Burney made erasure a pertinent tool for reputation management. Her use of destruction as a means to assert control over posthumous reputation needs to be situated in relation to how she retrospectively framed her father’s papers when assuming responsibility for his literary estate. Having taken on the task of compiling his memoirs and collected correspondence from what she described as an “enormous load” of papers (Burney 1984, 11:184), Burney repeatedly characterised Charles Burney’s approach to posterity as insufficiently selective. She presented herself as unimpressed by what she portrayed as his failure to cull material, remarking that her “dear Father ... burnt nothing, – not even an invitation to dinner” (Burney 1984, 11:206). Burney’s disparaging characterisation of her father’s papers should be read as retrospective and positionally motivated, shaped by her need to justify extensive editorial intervention rather than as a neutral assessment of the archive’s contents.²

Yet this framing also registers Burney’s own commitment to strategic preemption in managing personal material. She believed that sensitive papers such as her father’s could expose “to the publick view a species of Family degradation”, with potentially harmful consequences for “the Name of Burney” (Burney 1984, 11:189). This risk had been exacerbated by Charles not appointing a literary executor in his will; an “omission that has often astonished me”, she suggested, “considering the unexamined state of his private memorandums, & the various papers that could not have been spread ... without causing pain, or Confusion, or mischief” (Burney 1984, 11:186). To someone who had worked so hard to safeguard her reputation, this apparent failure to protect future renown amounted to negligence. Indeed, Burney claimed that the painstaking project of working through her father’s papers led her to commit to doing her own legacy work: “For the rest of my life I shall take charge and save my own executor the discretionary labours that with myself are almost endless; for now I regularly destroy all letters that either may eventually do mischief, however clever, or that contain nothing of instruction or entertainment, however innocent” (Burney 1984, 11:443). She described this as a matter of judgement rather than concealment, arguing that it would be “wrong to make over to any other judgement than my own” decisions about the “danger or the innoxiousness” of the papers entrusted to her (Burney 1984, 11:443).

The need for such pre-emptive erasure was driven by the changing conditions of publicity outlined above, particularly the growing demands of a “memoir-mad public” (Eisner 2009, 1). Burney had connected the necessity of a prudential approach to legacy with a shift in how personal papers were treated and made public during her

lifetime. This affected both what she was prepared to write to others and what she dared to keep in her archive. In contrast to the “free, spontaneous, heart-glowing” letters of her youth, she regretted that “the times now are such as to make all correspondence in some degree circumspect, or in a great degree dangerous & imprudent” (Burney 1984, 11:423). Such a change, she believed, reflected the emergence of what she termed “the press” as a new source of reputational risk (Burney 1984, 11:443), together with the commercial publication of personal letters (Burney 1984, 11:237; see also her horror at “making money by revealing the secret effusions of unsuspecting friends” (Burney 1984, 11:163)). While her juvenile correspondence had been “written and received with as little fear as wit”, she regretted that by the early nineteenth century “every body seems obliged to take as much care of their writing desks as of their trinkets or purses, – for thieves be abroad of more descriptions than belong to the penniless pilferers” (Burney 1984, 11:443). This sense of apprehension in the face of predatory interests informed the heightened concern with the return of sensitive letters in this period (The Multigraph Collective 2018, 157), witnessed in the prolonged exchange between Burney and Mrs. Waddington about the burning of her old friend’s correspondence (see, for instance, Burney 1982, 10:568, 613–614; Burney 1984, 11:236–237). With letters now a potentially lucrative source of value, managing one’s correspondence as part of what Burney termed “funereal prudence” became a pressing priority for those at risk of posthumous exposure (Burney 1982, 10:613).

The practices of protective erasure prompted by these conditions could vary according to the scale of the possible audience. Burney applied different degrees of erasure to her personal papers, depending on who might come to be granted access – a question that shifted over the course of her project. When conceived principally as a family legacy for imagined future descendants, her focus had been upon shielding sensitive details via textual concealing: for instance, in “erasing *passages* of *Letters* that I wished not *wholly* to destroy, but leave for Alexander’s children” (Burney 1984, 11:412, original emphasis). This helps explain the “series of interlocking and obliterating *o*’s, *e*’s or *m*’s” used to cover such passages that are present throughout the material (Hemlow 1972, xl; see Figure 2). Yet the prospect of a wider, anonymous public – what she elsewhere imagined as exposure in “every magazine, newspaper and gossiping pamphlet”

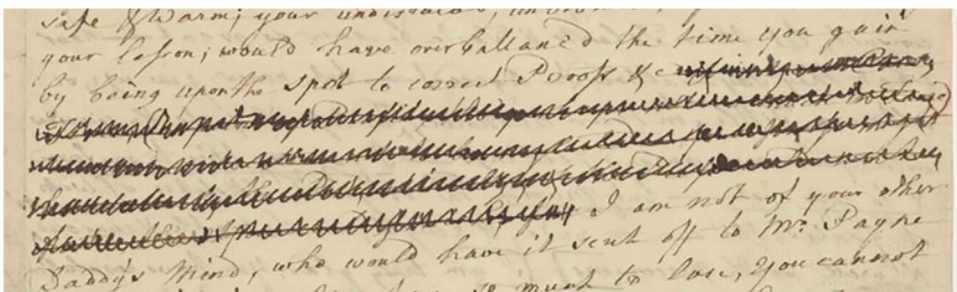


Figure 2. The scrawling protection of ink. ‘Letter of 25 February 1782 from Samuel Crisp to Burney’, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1778–1823. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/61419260-ab52-0133-1f5f-00505686a51c>

(Burney 1984, 11:237) – prompted more permanent and effective measures of destruction, as evidenced by the frequent editorial comments about “missing” or “mutilated” manuscripts in the modern scholarly edition (Hemlow 1972, 1: xxxviii – xl; e.g. Burney 1972, 1:181). While the narrative of a private manuscript culture being superseded by the print marketplace has rightly been challenged and nuanced – with manuscript and print interacting beyond any rigid private/public dichotomy (King 2020; Levy 2020) – this was a case where the possibility of manuscript becoming print produced distinct anxieties about loss of reputational control (St Clair 2004, 48). Burney’s perception of the greater “informational vulnerabilities” (Hoskins 2017, 2) of the published letter meant that, in looking over her “eternal MSS.,” she made “it a rule to *Leave* no single paper or Letter on which it is written ‘*Burn this*’”, since she “should think it culpable” (Burney 1984, 11:432, original emphasis).

Burney had been keenly aware of the posthumous attention her manuscripts might attract. It is a critical commonplace that she composed significant parts of her life-writing “with a half-conscious eye to the future” (Wiltshire 2007, 75; cf. Hemlow 1958). This focus created a filter between what she was prepared to divulge “for my Son’s Fire-Side Rectory” as opposed to a broader audience – “My dear Rectorites! were this meant for the Public Eye, instead of yours, I must forthwith expunge it” (Burney 1975, 6:730–731). But when it came to dealing with her archive – and the more explicit emphasis upon posterity it necessitated – events conspired to make such a distinction increasingly strained. In particular, the early death of her son and a growing sense of her physical frailties produced a dilemma for the ageing Burney: lacking the capacity to continue with the “discretionary labours” of redacting specific details, how might she best safeguard her archive ahead of future public scrutiny? Having first suggested appointing a trusted custodian and leaving specific “directions” for the material (Burney 1984, 12:954),³ her sister Charlotte had offered astute advice on this challenge, advocating careful deliberation between stewardship and destruction:

So celebrated as your name is, it strikes me that, *sooner*, or *later* [...] when *they* [her custodians] are *departed* to the next world, it is very likely they [the manuscripts] may fall in to the hands of some one who will sell all to a Bookseller to publish – therefore, if there are any M.S.S. that you *really* wish *never* to be published – the *only safe* way will be to Burn those *particular* M.S.S. (original emphasis).⁴

Given the expectation of market interest, it was better to take active control over what should be revealed and concealed than leaving things to chance. In applying this approach to her legacy, Burney was furthering the particular brand of “private professionalism” pursued throughout her authorial career (Ulph 2015). By burning sensitive manuscripts, she sought to ensure personal details that she deemed not “apt & appropriate” for public circulation would not be shared with any audiences beyond her design (Burney 1975, 6:731). Such protectiveness resonates with Rodney Carter’s observation that “[t]he power to exclude is a fundamental aspect of the archive” (2006, 216). Rather than being a point of submission – or female diffidence – her practices of erasure thus amounted to a striking claim upon posthumous privacy.

In removing that which she wished to remain private, Burney made self-erasure a distinctive, if constrained, form of *agency*: an exertion of archival power intended to shape and control future reputation. The proactive, strategic character of these efforts needs to

be highlighted, given the tendency to regard her practices as somehow regrettable – a source of weakness and reticence that modern scholarship should reverse through systematic “uncensoring” (Sabor and Cooke 2018; cf. Sutherland 2022, 113–114). This reflects a continued tension in the concept of “self-censorship”, between conceiving of the self-censor as author of a “freely chosen act of self-restraint” or as merely the instrument of an (internalized) coercive censorial logic (Horton 2011, 91). Self-erasure thus emerges here not as weakness, but as a mode of agency under conditions of exposure – an attempt to exert control within an asymmetrical memory regime.

To help shift the emphasis in understanding Burney’s practices from the passive and oppressed towards the agential, we can note that when her diary and letters appeared in print a few years after her death, they constituted one of the earliest instances of a “woman’s diary to be published in English” (Civale 2019, 19). Through using erasure to enable the possibility of posthumous publicity, she was strategically balancing the conflicting demands of female propriety and professional ambition, the expectation to conceal while simultaneously asserting a public profile. Her archival efforts can therefore be grasped, in Stuart Sherman’s apt terms, as “a final assertion of autonomy and authorial power” (1996, 272). According to the label inscribed on her earliest notebook – its contents already redacted – what Burney determined to leave for posterity was a personal archive “Curtailed & erased of what might be mischievous” (Burney 1988, 1:1).⁵

Protective self-erasure in a longer perspective

While the extent of her efforts might have been extreme, Burney was far from unique in turning to protective self-erasure. Though impossible to quantify, it suffices to note that the burning of sensitive personal material was becoming more widespread around the turn of the nineteenth century (Thaddeus 2000, 203). In the face of a novel market for posthumous lives and the concomitant increase in archival consciousness, these practices offered a strategic means of preparing for future audiences, particularly for celebrities who had good reason to expect the scrutiny of posterity. The subversive character of this erasure becomes evident when considered in relation to a broader Romantic context of biographical resistance (North 2009). Here we can recall Wordsworth’s arguments against the invasive commodification of private life he identified with biography in an expanding celebrity culture and “the coarse intrusions into the recesses, the gross breaches upon the sanctities of domestic life, to which we have lately been more accustomed” (Wordsworth 1897, 233). Protective self-erasure proved a pre-emptive response to the future threat of “idle curiosity”, a way of resisting the trend he disparaged of “calling back the recently departed to become the object of trivial and familiar gossip” (Wordsworth 1886, 23). Projects of destruction like Burney’s can thereby be grasped as a concrete manifestation of Wordsworth’s plea that “[s]ilence is a privilege of the grave, a right of the departed” to be respected by prospective biographers (Wordsworth 1897, 231–232). Insofar as it constituted a pointed claim upon posthumous privacy, self-erasure forms part of the intersecting history of modern celebrity and privacy that has recently started to be written (e.g. Cowan 2017; Fawcett 2016; Igo 2018; Mole 2018; Richardson 2017; Spacks 2003).

As the case of Burney demonstrates, there was a pertinent gender dimension to the emergence of these practices (Huffman 2023). For women navigating the gendered

space of nineteenth-century celebrity culture, protective self-erasure was enabling: allowing investment in posthumous self-fashioning through the deliberate assertion of archival power. In an influential study, Clifford Siskin suggested this period witnessed “*The Great Forgetting*” (1998, 23, original emphasis): a process of institutional silencing that saw women’s writing excluded from the emerging discipline of literature. Alongside such large-scale processes of repression, though, female authors were also engaging in deliberate acts of erasure that exemplified a markedly different sort of forgetting. While women’s works were being withheld from the canon, there were authors with sufficient resources actively working to shape their future reception by removing any personal details they wished to remain private. As a strategy for balancing the expectation of future publicity with a desire for posthumous privacy, protective self-erasure would become increasingly naturalised over the nineteenth century for authors and public figures of both sexes. But highlighting how it formed an integral part in female legacy projects is necessary to avoid the denial of agency otherwise lurking in broader accounts of enforced forgetting. Alongside exclusion from the canon and the will to self-efface, some nineteenth-century women were consciously using erasure to protect their future reputations. In preparing for posterity, they were also asserting something like a right to be forgotten.

The understanding of self-erasure as a distinct form of agency has implications for how we approach and manage potentially sensitive cultural heritage material today. For canonical authors like Burney, the scholarly apparatus of “the-life-and-the-work criticism” (Foucault 1998, 205) has long since implemented a biographical right to know – a tendency critiqued in “The Aspern Papers” (1888) by Henry James, another author averse to personal intrusion (Pascoe 2006). Yet as Wordsworth had been keen to point out, neither the access nor the drive to publicise such details were a given for scholarship. Making the case for the rights of “the departed”, he recognised the need for a trade-off between “the claims of the deceased [...] and of the present age and future generations” when dealing with the reputation of the dead (Wordsworth 1897, 232). While the very possibility of memory institutions depends on the storing and making available of material for present and future generations, it is worth reflecting upon the degree of protection accorded to the “private dignity” of the deceased (Wordsworth 1897, 233). Indeed, as Janet Malcolm noted in relation to Sylvia Plath’s biographers, “[i]n any struggle between the public’s inviolable right to be diverted and an individual’s wish to be left alone, the public almost always prevails” (1994, 8). Together with the contemporary shibboleth that “memory is necessarily a good thing [...] and that anything that is not brought into the open is by definition hidden or repressed” (Rigney in McIvor et al. 2017, 179), this might prompt reflection on what is at stake in any project of “recovering” and “uncensoring” previously hidden personal material. Is it part of our imaginative remit to know and explore such details, or do we risk trampling upon the wishes of past individuals in reversing their protective self-erasure? Who gets to adjudicate in the delicate balancing of revelation and privacy at work here, between the public value of an open archive and the interests of the departed?

These questions have become particularly pressing in an age of digital media, where the “afterlife of data” has emerged as a vexed concern (Öhman 2024). As Andrew Hoskins has argued, the rise of a digital memory ecology means that “the unrecorded areas of our lives are shrinking fast”, producing “a newly uncertain future in which

the archive has eclipsed the individual” (2017, 3). This “datafication” of personal life (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger 2013, 29) is better understood as an intensification of existing pressures rather than a rupture introduced by the digital. For nineteenth-century memorial actors such as Burney, the prospect of future scrutiny already demanded careful and anticipatory intervention.

One imagined response to such conditions is the fantasy of total oblivion, embodied by Lila, the elusive protagonist of Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels, who seeks to “disappear without leaving a trace” (Ferrante 2012, 20). Yet such willed disappearance is increasingly difficult in an age of digital memory infrastructures. While exercising a right to be forgotten can lead to certain details being excluded from the public search results, this information often remains captured within the privatised, unaccountable global archive established by corporations like Google and Meta (Öhman 2024, 130). The prospect of a digital afterlife in this unforgiving and unforgetting regime of commercial memory might encourage us to recall the “discretionary labours” proposed by Burney almost two centuries ago.

Rather than aspiring to withdrawal from memory altogether, her sustained practices of erasure aimed to manage future exposure under conditions where complete control was neither possible nor expected. Understood in these terms, Burney’s project clarifies the ways in which individual agency operates within – and remains constrained by – broader regimes of archival power. Her case demonstrates that protective self-erasure operates not as mastery over the archive, but as a modulation of risk within systems of retention. Shaping archival afterlives demands careful attention to the creation of absence as much as to presence.

Notes

1. Quotations from Burney’s journals and letters refer to the texts as established in the respective critical editions; the wording cited is Burney’s, while the textual form and contextual framing are editorial.
2. Recent scholarship suggests that Charles Burney’s papers were more extensive and varied than Frances Burney’s retrospective characterisation implies; see Lonsdale (1965), and the ongoing edition of Charles Burney’s correspondence.
3. The quotation derives from a letter by Charlotte Broome dated 26 April 1838, cited in the editor’s annotation accompanying Burney’s letter (Burney 1984, 12:954), and does not form part of Burney’s own correspondence.
4. The subsequent quotation derives from a later letter by Charlotte Broome dated 15 May 1838, likewise cited in the editor’s annotation accompanying Burney’s letter (Burney 1984, 12:954).
5. The quotation is taken from Burney’s own later annotation on the cover of the journal, rather than from the main body of the letter; this annotation is recorded in the editorial notes accompanying the text in the modern scholarly edition.

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