

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH
ANGLOMANIA AND CHAMPIGNY'S
MÉMOIRES DE MISS FANNY PALMER

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ONE OF the joys dear to any scholar's heart is that serendipitous discovery of a unique item which, seemingly inconsequential in itself, adds one more note of confirmation about a literary and historical trend. And Rutgers possesses just such a work: the only known copy of the *Mémoires de miss Fanny Palmer, histoire galante, politique et morale. Par Le Colonel Chevalier de Champigny*, issued in three parts in London in 1769. Lively, realistic, and impeccably moral, it is a perfect specimen of the pseudo-English fiction which was produced by, and also fed, the growing anglomania of the French reading public of its time.

Exactly who the chevalier de Champigny was is not easy to determine. J.-M. Quérard in *La France Littéraire* (1800) gives nothing but his first name—Jean—and a list of his works which impress chiefly by their heterogeneity. His most notable publication seems to have been the *Etat-présent de la Louisiane* (1776, with a second edition in 1781). Originally published in 1773 under the more provocative title *La Louisiane ensanglantée* ("Bloody Louisiana"), it was, according to Champigny's preface, edited from a manuscript by a deceased English officer who had lived there; it has particular reference to the revolt against Spanish authority in 1768-69. This was not his only translation: he also turned into French an examination of Pitt's ministry by John Almon and a history of the kings of Denmark by the German Schlegel. Other diverse productions include histories of Sweden and England; *Réflexions sur le gouvernement des femmes* (1770); another novel in six volumes, *Lettres angloises ou les époux à la mode* (1771-75); and two curious pamphlets, "Réveries d'un habitant de Lilliput, à Londres, à un de ses compatriotes" (1773), purportedly translated from the Lilliputian, and a "Supplément" the following year. That most of the title pages indicate the works appeared "at the author's expense" strongly suggests a man living as best he could as a grub street hack.

Nevertheless, the *Mémoires de miss Fanny Palmer* is an entertaining story, engagingly told. Sir Charles, having learned all too well from his

father's impecunious demise the necessity of economy, practices it with a fervor that borders on miserliness; indeed, he chooses for his wife a girl who, having lost the boy she loved, resigns herself to living in frugal isolation on their Cornish estate. She dies when Fanny is young, and Sir Charles lovingly educates his daughter. But faced with the expense of sending the thirteen-year-old away to school, he opts instead to offer a home to his sister, the avaricious and coquettish Miss Harlow, and her goddaughter, Miss Blake, so they may serve as companions for Fanny.

From this Cinderella-like situation proceed all Fanny's woes. Sir Charles rents a house to Seymour, an aristocrat impoverished by gaming, and his son Will. Miss Harlow and Miss Blake immediately regard their new neighbors as appropriate candidates for matrimony; the Seymours make no effort to undeceive them, for Fanny and Will have fallen passionately but chastely in love and thus manage to see one another discreetly during the frequent exchange of visits. The lovers also carry on a clandestine correspondence by means of a hollow tree, but disaster strikes when Miss Blake discovers a letter and reports all to Sir Charles. He, outraged, as well as apprehensive that the son has inherited his father's penchant for expenditure, pays Tom Williams, a boyhood friend, to abduct Will to Tom's home in the Scilly Islands; then he encourages a rumor that the boy has drowned. Meanwhile, two newcomers establish themselves in Cornwall. Mylord Spendriff eyes Fanny's person and more particularly her prospective inheritance, while Captain Complaisant sets his sights on the newly-rich Miss Harlow; together they make themselves so agreeable to Sir Charles that he enthusiastically endorses the matches.

All travel to London—Sir Charles and his sister grumbling over costs—where the father hopes to persuade his reluctant daughter to marry Spendriff. Fanny, pining for Will, sees quite clearly the intentions of the scheming young lord. When Miss Harlow, to hasten her own nuptials, successfully presses her brother to satisfy Spendriff's demands for a considerable dowry, Fanny secretly flees to Cornwall. Her action is all but superfluous: Sir Charles and Miss Harlow overhear a conversation between Miss Blake and the Captain which reveals their sordid financial machinations, and relations are abruptly terminated. Chastened, the father and aunt return to his estate, where both fall into a decline. To Fanny's joy, Will reappears. But though contrite, Sir Charles still opposes their marriage, due to his concern that Will will discover his own role in the abduction and despise him. At last a compassionate curate calms the dying man's fears. Fanny and Will are united, and the loving couple (and others who have figured in sub-plots) journeys to London for the whirl of social activities which conclude the novel.

The novel's literary merits are inseparable from the historical milieu in which and for which it was written: the *Mémoires* is a first-rate product of the phenomenon known as anglomania. While the French had for centuries regarded England as "perfidious Albion," during the eighteenth century distrust and suspicion were gradually replaced by curiosity about, and an ever-growing admiration for, the only country which could rival France in power and prestige. Many elements contributed to this revision of received opinion: the philosophes' praise of British freedom of thought, economic stability, and religious liberty (Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* in 1734 was one of the first salvos of propaganda in their favor); travelers' accounts and guidebooks which explained customs and behavior long considered incomprehensible; translations of English novels—particularly those by Samuel Richardson—which depicted people of all social classes and which emphasized moral intent. The term anglomania, pejoratively encompassing all aspects of this new attitude, was coined by conservative critics who feared (not without reason) that esteem for the English necessarily entailed denigration of their own nation.

The public paid little heed to these carpers, however, and enthusiasm for things English was so lively that entrepreneurs of all stripes—including garden designers, couturiers, and importers of race horses—turned a pretty penny by catering to it. Among them were writers who reasoned that imitations of the novels now flowing in translation across the Channel might very well prove a profitable venture. And so they co-opted British decors, characters, and concerns, seasoning their works with topical trivia and a suitably moral tone. Champigny's *Mémoires de miss Fanny Palmer* is the quintessence of the French pseudo-English fiction which from the sixties on inundated the literary marketplace.

The English settings are varied: Cornwall (the British were known to be fond of their country residences); London (an opportunity to introduce celebrated amusements, like Drury Lane and the gardens of Ranelagh, and to discourse on the famous, like David Garrick); the Scilly Islands (a bit of exotica, this—Tom Williams' home comes close to being a rural and domestic utopia). The cast comes from every walk of life: the rural aristocracy, like Sir Charles; the peasantry, like Tom Williams; the merchant class, like the parents of Tom Hartley, Will's friend; the town fops and ladies of fashion who mock the provincials, like Spendriff's cohort Mylord Knowingworld and his sister Lady Sarah Worthless; extraneous characters of all descriptions, such as the benevolent doctor who delivers a baby in a shoemaker's shabby garret, and the modish painter who executes Fanny's portrait.

Politics—a notable preoccupation of the islanders—occupies consider-

able space. At the opera Fanny sees the King's brothers, the Dukes of Cumberland and Gloucester; the former is actively engaged in the Royal Navy in order to be "useful" to his country, the latter is equally versed in the military. The radical politician John Wilkes, a frequent topic of conversation, is much praised for his patriotism; Sir Charles sends him thirty pounds and asks the favor of dining with him occasionally at his club. Encounters with, or conversations about, foreign dignitaries occur: the King of Denmark, the Chevalier d'Eon (the celebrated French transvestite spy), the Russian ambassador (to whom, incidentally, Champigny dedicates the novel). Not forgotten among the eulogies of the eminent are the common people, so important an element in the British political process: is it not they "who form the principal strength of a State? Is it not from them that we draw our sailors, our soldiers, and our craftsmen who, without contradiction, are the mainstream of the Nation?" (II, 74-75)

This wealth of detail is skillfully crafted to create the proper national ambiance; beneath it lies a simple story entirely in keeping with the moral tone considered peculiarly English. No startling coincidences or horrendous catastrophes mar the plot, which is generated basically by the psychology of the principal characters. If sympathy for Fanny and Will makes one impatient with Sir Charles and Miss Harlow, the latter are never truly bad but only blind, and they redeem themselves satisfactorily at the end by recognition of their errors. The purity and tender attachment of young love is illustrated not only by the heroine and her lover but also by Sukey, Tom Williams' daughter, who becomes enamored of Will, and Tom Hartley, who gently coaxes her to exchange a hopeless passion for his assured and steadfast affection; the last image of this happy union is the christening of their baby. The one cautionary tale concerns the fate of Miss Blake: the treacherous Captain, with whom she runs away, abandons her; she is confined to debtors' prison, its misery described in detail; the man who rescues and keeps her is unmasked as married; at last she returns to the forgiving bosom of Miss Harlow. Kindness, consideration for others, of whatever station, and the importance of modesty and virtue are the values extolled by the *Mémoires*; morality is taught not by tedious sentimental effusions but by example.

The positive presentation of England and the English in the work has a curious negative complement; for the astute reader may easily perceive between the lines an unwritten portrait of contemporary French society. One need only reverse the image: in France, the country is disdained for the city; none but the noble or the rich deserve attention; politics is jealously confined to regions impenetrable to the ordinary citizen; relations

between men and women, founded on caprice, disintegrate; the ties which bind parent and child are tenuous. This pseudo-English novel and its multitudinous cousins were precisely what the opponents of anglomania feared: seemingly inoffensive—and hence all the more dangerous—purveyors of notions, certain of which were hostile to their own social system. Champigny was unwittingly contributing to forces gathering a momentum which would culminate on July 14, 1789.