An awful stillness thence pervaded the apartment, and so soft became his breathing, that I dropped my head by the side of his pillow, to be sure that he breathed at all! – Frances Burney writing about her father, 1814, *Memoirs* 3:432

When I first came into the world, it was thought but a poor compliment to say a person did a thing like a lady

– Sir Joshua Reynolds, as quoted in *Memoirs* 2:236

We were as merry, and laughed as bonnily as the Burneys always do when they get together, and open their hearts, and tell old stories, and have no fear of being quizzed by interlopers.

– Dr Burney, 1799, quoted in *Memoirs* 3:283

Madame d’Arblay … conceals from her readers, and perhaps from herself, that it is her own *Memoirs*, and not those of her father that she has been writing.

– John Wilson Croker, review in the *Quarterly Review* 49 (April 1833) 106–7

Two weeks after the publication of *The Wanderer*, in April 1814, Burney had watched over her dying father in his residence at Chelsea College. Writing her *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* nearly 18 years later when she was nearly 80, she evoked this scene. The sky was illuminated with ‘the brilliancy of mounting rockets and distant fire-works’ celebrating Wellington’s victories in France, and her mind was suspended between ‘joy and sorrow’ (*Memoirs* 3:429). Although her father was dying, she would soon see her husband again after a
separation of a year and a half. Meanwhile her father was sinking fast. Dr Burney’s death as she describes it was consistent with his life. He was even more in control of the situation than most of his contemporaries, schooled as they all were in the art of a proper death. But for her it was an agonizing mixture of inflexible rejection, theatrical gestures, and private tenderness. When, hearing from her son Alex that ‘his grandfather had passed an alarming night’ (3:424) and that her brothers had been sent for, Burney first hastened to her father’s room, he sat ‘immoveable; and not a muscle of his face gave any indication that I was either heard or perceived!’ (3:425). This was so distressing that she rushed out of the room, but she was soon called back to see her father standing, straighter than he had stood for years, and staring out of his window, where he could see his second wife’s grave. He raised his arms, extending them in a kind of double waving motion, and said to himself, ‘distinctly, though in a low, but deeply-impressive voice, “All this will soon pass away as a dream!”’ (3:426).

Although his daughter allows this scene its full magnitude, she was always alive to incongruities of gesture and feeling, and she provides them here. The others in the room seized the opportunity to pull his dressing gown off his extended arms, and he was soon ‘put to bed’ (3:427). He did not say another word, and would not. Those had been his last words, and either by chance or by design he would not diminish them by others. She wanted to tell him that Wellington had won the war, but at first she could not, knowing that he would no longer respond with the vivacity she loved in him, never again show ‘the ecstatic enthusiasm that would have hailed it with songs of triumph’ (3:428). When she did tell him, he turned toward her, and though his eyes remained closed, she thought (or at any rate she wrote) that he gave her ‘a look of vivacious and kind surprise’ (3:430), but then as she continued to inform him about the situation she realized that he did not really believe her. Finally, ‘An awful stillness ... pervaded the apartment, and so soft became his breathing, that I dropped my head by the side of his pillow, to be sure that he breathed at all!’ (Memoirs 3:432). His servant George cried out, but Burney did not move.

Her father had died so quietly that she would not believe that he was dead. She insisted on staying by his body, watching for an hour, hoping to see one last sign of life. This need to watch has seemed to her contemporaries and to twentieth-century commentators excessive, but the belief that someone’s spirit lingers about the body after death has always been widespread. Those who would hurry the watchers away from a