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The life and times of Fanny Burney

by [Jeremy Bernstein](#)

My sister then played another duet with my father; but Dr. Johnson was so deep in the Encyclopedie that, as he is very deaf, I question if he even knew what was going forward. When this was over, Mrs. Thrale in a laughing manner said, "Pray, Dr. Burney can you tell me what that song was and whose, which Savoi sung last night at Bach's concert, and which you did not hear?" My father confessed himself by no means so good a diviner, not having time to consult the stars, though in the house of Sir Isaac Newton. However, wishing to draw Dr. Johnson into some conversation, he told him the question. The Doctor, seeing his drift, good-naturedly put away his book, and said very drolly, "And pray, Sir, who is Bach? is he a piper?"

—*The Early Diaries of Frances Burney*

If you look up "Frances Burney" in an encyclopedia you are likely to find two listings. One w ...

Jeremy Bernstein is the author of *Nuclear Weapons: What You Need to Know* (Cambridge University Press).

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