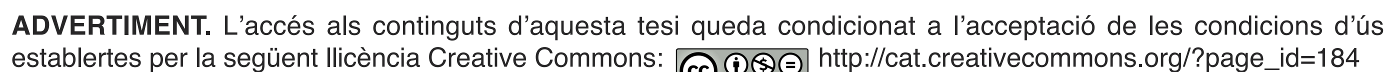
ADVERTIMENT. L'accés als continguts d'aquesta tesi queda condicionat a l'acceptació de les condicions d'ús establertes per la següent llicència Creative Commons:  http://cat.creativecommons.org/?page_id=184

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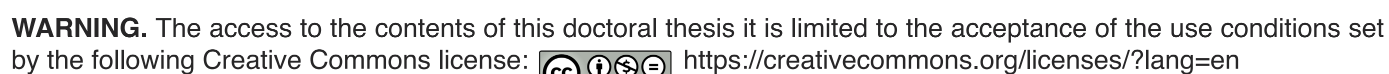
WARNING. The access to the contents of this doctoral thesis it is limited to the acceptance of the use conditions set by the following Creative Commons license:  https://creativecommons.org/licenses/?lang=en

Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona

PhD Thesis
In English Studies

Subtle Subversion: An Analysis of Female Desire in the Works of Frances Sheridan, Frances Brooke, Elizabeth Griffith and Sophia Lee

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A: OVERVIEW

1. Introduction

1.1. The Framework of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to enquire into the ways in which the 'woman question' was approached by lesser-known late eighteenth-century women writers. The main objective of my research is to detect the discourse of desire produced by the women writers I have selected, Frances Sheridan, Frances Brooke, Elizabeth Griffith and Sophia Lee, to determine its characteristics and to assess its possible aims. I focus particularly on the extent to which these writers *incorporate* in their work certain widespread traditions and conventions regarding women's role and expectations and also, crucially, the ways in which these writers *resist* such marked parameters.

The notion of desire is fundamental in my analysis. In my thesis, I understand female desire not simply in the modern sense of the term, with its obvious focus on the *sexual* aspect of such area, but rather as women's eagerness to *comprehend* their own situation and to attempt to surpass certain limitations. Desire, thus, becomes inextricably linked to a *personal* quest, a movement towards self-recognition, towards the attainment of a knowledge of one's self which would *endow* the female individual with a certain level of narrative authority, of control over her own representation.

In *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), Nancy Armstrong notes this *personal* dimension of desire by arguing that:

> during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Foucault has observed, the discovery of the fact of desire hidden within the individual prompted an extensive process of

verbalization that effectively displaced an eroticism that had been located on the surface of the body" (Armstrong 1987: int 12)

Armstrong acknowledges the presence of a kind of desire that goes beyond the "surface of the body", a desire that is not *merely* a representation of an erotic, physical response but rather is that which remains *concealed*, trapped within the individual. In this respect, Armstrong identifies "conflicts within the female character, between her innate desires and the role she was destined to occupy" (1987: 253). Desire becomes associated with an interior battle with oneself, a battle to reconcile one's own intimate desires to societal pressures and demands.

Within this inner struggle that desire entails, the power of *discourse*, that is the ways in which desire can be expressed either verbally or subliminally, becomes essential. Linda Kauffman's *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (1988) sheds some light into this by pointing out the difficulties that the female lover encounters: "the female lover is frequently regarded merely as a madwoman, frigid and furious. No system of discourse seriously considers her suffering, her passion, or the range and resourcefulness of her imaginative powers" (1988: 245-6).

This difficulty to accurately depict the *discourse* of the figure of the female lover is very much felt in the narratives I have included in this thesis. The female who *actively* expresses desire, especially the desire to attain *agency*, such as Lady Anne Wilmot and the marchioness, are portrayed as 'unruly' characters whose discourse is approached with certain apprehension, as they embody an *unapologetic* refusal to comply with the expectation that they deflect their desires and this positions them as 'unruly' characters whose discourse is somehow 'dangerous'.

The representation of an 'authentic' female self, not simply the reproduction of an idealised, 'perfect' standard of womanhood, is a central preoccupation in all the texts

I have included in this thesis. All of these texts allow for an exploration of the female experience by their depiction of diverse female characters, some of which remain traditional and conventional embodiments of what was socially deemed ‘appropriate’ female behaviour whereas others actively *resist* such social control and instead embody a disruption of such social expectations by their utter refusal to comply with what is *expected* from them. The tensions and points of conflict which are created around conventional and non-conventional female characters opens up the way for a deep exploration of the sense of female community created around these female figures, a community in which the struggle between acceptance and dissent is very much felt.

Authenticity, then, gains a centrality in the quest for ‘real’ female representation, for a representation of the female self that includes her most intimate longings, urges and desires. In *Women's Utopias of the Eighteenth Century* (2003) Alessa Johns brings forward the conviction that female utopias ought not to be based on “political upheaval” (2006: int 16) but rather on a *personal* quest and, hence, there is a suggestion that reform needs to come from personal connections. In this thesis, I align myself with this line of thought, as in the texts under analysis the creation of female communities to bring attention to the *need* for social reform is largely based on a personal level, located within the female individual herself.

Narrative authority, directly derived from this concern with ‘authentic’ reproductions of the female self, is yet another term that acquires a special significance in my study. By narrative authority I refer to the female character's ability to assume *control* over their own circumstances, through narrative agency, instead of simply becoming a mere spectator of their own lives, with no degree of agency whatsoever over it. In my thesis I argue that the female authors I have included in my analysis do indeed accord their female characters with narrative authority and what becomes

interesting, then, is the evaluation of what those female characters do with that level of authority and of the ways in which they profit from such 'active' endowment of 'influence'.

Female desire and the 'woman question' have been analysed in great depth and have been the subject of study in the long eighteenth century and beyond. Most studies largely rely on binary oppositions between good and 'bad' women, between angelic, perfectly submissive female individuals as opposed to 'demonic', 'fallen' heroines which somehow deviate from the established (and desired) 'right' path of virtue. Throughout these studies, there is a sense of *polarisation* between these two extremes, which are taken as opposing each other. As Critics such as Vivien Jones and Ingrid Tague have noted in *Women and Literature in Britain: 1700-1800* (2000) and in *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690-1760* (2002), respectively, such binary oppositions fail to fully categorise women, which prompts the *necessary* dismantling of such oppositions.

In my thesis, I propose that such contradictory portrayals of womanhood, the good versus the 'bad woman', the 'complaisant' versus the unruly female, are not as *separate* as one might presume and can be taken as *complementary* representations, each of which provide essential information about the other in an *intertwining* manner.

In the present thesis I follow the line of thought that establishes that binary oppositions, which were frequently used when depicting women in fiction and also in non-fictional accounts such as conduct books, are somehow too straightforward to be effective and that any comprehensive approach to femininity must question such oppositions and attempt to *reconcile* them.

Despite the broad scope of critical material on women writers and on womanhood in general, the level of narrative authority that female characters are

accorded by their authors has not to-date received the critical attention it deserves. Such narrative authority becomes essential to detect the level of *complaisance* these characters actually exhibit to their own subjection and also to determine the amount of *agency* that they are permitted to exert in light of the limitations that surround them. In this respect, the present thesis hopes to make an innovative, significant contribution in this field and to *interrogate* established parameters concerning women's assumed role so as to shed some light as to the ways in which female characters *responded* to (and struggled with) their 'fettered' state.

In light of this, my thesis aims at detecting the extent to which these women writers depict female characters who desire to *resist* the strict configuration of the 'proper' woman and, especially, the *purpose* that lies behind that resistance. It also aims to propose that those women writers depict *apparently* conventional female characters who achieve a significant amount of self-command.

In the main chapters, several conventional frameworks are closely analysed, in order to detect the *effect* that such traditional configurations play in the narratives under discussion. One of these aspects is the well-established notion of female virtue in distress, given novelistic impetus by Samuel Richardson and continued by later novelists, Frances Sheridan included. Amatory fiction is yet another significant tradition which is evaluated. This tradition creates a complicated dynamics in which the role women play in seduction becomes crucial. The notion of female modesty and the extent to which *extreme* display of modesty is actually 'desirable' are also considered.

The present thesis interrogates general assumptions about family life[1] – and its implications for women – and also, most importantly, in its *suspicious* analysis of the

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[1] As I argue in chapter 5, in *The Seduction Narrative in Britain, 1747-1800* (2009) Katherine Binhammer notes Elizabeth's Griffith's interrogation of family life though her *resistance* to the demand for *strict* adherence to duty within marriage. In *The Delicate Distress*, Lady Woodville, though fulfilling the role of a suibmissive wife, nevertheless *questions* certain regulations concerning wifely duty.

figure of the 'heroine, women's cultural and social depictions and the *disorderly* components inherent in femme fatale figures.

As I will fully indicate in chapter 2, mainstream, powerful literary traditions, such as Historical Fiction and the Female Gothic, are also examined. Some elements of psychoanalytical thought, such as Freud's notion of the uncanny or Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, are used to determine the ways in which Psychoanalysis sheds light into certain literary tropes. Maternal absence is yet another traditional framework which is used to detect the *effects* such prominent and continuous literary trope has on the narratives.

Studies prior to the 1970s are not directly associated to the themes I will explore in this thesis and, hence, my critical evaluation starts in the late 1970s, a period in which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) introduces the suspicion that women writers', in order to submit to the demand for their submissiveness and selflessness, must 'murder' their own, *true* identity so as to fulfil the role of angelic women.

The 1980s introduced a careful scrutiny of the tremendous *pressure* exerted on women to comply with certain social and cultural expectations, which is highlighted in Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987). This decade witnessed a flourishing interest around the figure of the heroine. Within women's preoccupation to give a *voice* to their most intimate urges, many women writers made use of the double-heroine formula to explore different *sides* of womanhood. Societal pressures that women found themselves subject to and the ways in which they responded to such pressures has also attracted a considerable amount of critical attention.

In the 1990s and the 2000s, an increasing interest in the passions was observed. The various constraints that women writers ought to face when producing their work continued to attract a significant amount of attention. The notion of female virtue still retains a prominent role in literary criticism. Recent critics have turned their attention to the considerable amount of *desirability* that is generated around the very notion of virtue. The intense uneasiness generated around female transgression – and its consequences – continues to occupy a fundamental position in recent criticism, as shown in Malgorzata Luczynska-Holdys' *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century* (2013).

1.2. Thesis Question

In light of the above review, it is apparent that no study to date focuses closely on the accordance of authority in order to challenge and undermine expected submissiveness and that my critical space has space for development. Therefore, my research addresses this question and makes the following enquiries: **To what extent are these female characters, despite the submissiveness socially expected and conventionally required of them, accorded narrative authority by their authors? Do they show that 'desire' to seek and assume control over their own circumstances?**

To determine this, my thesis is organised as follows. The second chapter provides the historical and conceptual context of my study. The overview I have outlined in this first, introductory section will be thoroughly analysed in my second chapter so as to establish the social, cultural and political context within which my thesis is embedded,

by outlining the major works and critics that have delved upon the tropes and concerns that are central for my research purposes.

My third chapter approaches Frances Sheridan's *Memoir's of Miss Sidney Bidulph* from different perspectives. The first of these if the fundamental notion of virtue in distress, which was assumed by Sheridan and used to highlight femininity's highly mysterious, indefinite nature. Another tradition that is examined in this chapter is that of amatory fiction, paying special attention to the ways in which Sheridan's appropriating of amatory conventions interrogates the role women play in the repetitive pattern of seduction. A final tradition that is considered is female modesty, which proves to be problematic in Sheridan's narrative, especially when *exceedingly* endorsed.

My fourth chapter examines the ways in which Frances Brooke incorporates certain traditions and conventional perspectives in her novel *The History of Julia Mandeville*, including the notion of female transgression, the nature of what was termed 'the passions' and the public assembly of the masquerade. All of this conventions will be used to detect whether they are used to *define* the female experience or to *obscure* and further complicate such female representation.

My fifth chapter considers the theme of the family unit in Elizabeth Griffith's *The Delicate Distress*. This chapter reflects on eighteenth-century widespread assumptions concerning marriage and adultery and also concerning the figure of the heroine, with a special emphasis placed on the disruptive force that fatal women have on both family live and the construction of the heroine. All of these elements will be inspected so as to assess Griffith's stance on the 'woman question' and, crucially, on the tensions generated between different female personas, from 'natural', subordinate women to disruptive, transgressive ones.

My sixth and final chapter analyses the influence of influential literary traditions, such as Historical Fiction and the Female Gothic, by focusing on those elements from these traditions that Lee appropriates to suit her narrative interests. In this final chapter I also make use of elements from psychoanalytical thought, including Freud's notion of the uncanny and Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection and isolation, so as to detect the ways in which psychoanalysis can provide a richer understanding of Lee's text. In this final chapter I have also included the trope of the absent mother in order to determine the significance such absence has in the text. This is followed by my conclusions and consequences, further research sections, and the thesis bibliography.

1.3. Primary Sources

The primary sources I have selected for this study are the following: Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), Frances Brooke's The History of Lady Julia Mandeville (1763), Elizabeth Griffith's The Delicate Distress (1769) and Sophia Lee's The Recess (1783).

In my thesis, these female authors are, first, analysed separately in the main chapters, with their focus on particular conventional parameters which are applicable to each of the texts and, later, are all discussed together in the conclusions section, with its evaluation of how these women writers *all* responded to the main concerns raised in this study.

My criteria selection is based on the fact that these women are writing for the same public at the same time and broadly reflecting similar ideas. I detect in their work a similarity in the notion of desire. In their narratives, there is a shared attempt to shed some light into women's *responses* to their expected role. Thematically, they are also

linked by their *willingness* to accord some agency to their female characters. These women writers provided their own, particular stance on women's position and focused on a variety of themes, *all* of which are of extreme importance to my research purposes and introduce crucial elements that must be evaluated so as to gain a fuller comprehension of these women writers' *responses* to conventional notions of womanhood, especially to the widely-accepted notion of the 'proper' woman.

B: HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT

1. The Development of the Image of Woman throughout the Long Eighteenth Century

This section contains an overview of critical responses to those concepts that will remain at the centre of this thesis, including an assessment of the marked binary oppositions through which women were categorised, and the responses to the widely-established figure of the 'proper' woman configuration as well as its possible alternative representations, through other less 'desirable' female figures, such as female tricksters, femme fatales and unconventional, disorderly women.

This conceptual chapter is organised chronologically as well as thematically, and it includes subheadings that delineate the various themes under discussion.

2.1 The Sacrificing Woman: A Noble Act or a Sign of Entrapment?

In the later decades, from the 1980s onwards, there was a burgeoning interest around notions of femininity and how women were represented through fictional and non-fictional accounts. Yet, this is not the case in the 1970s, where I begin my critical analysis. Throughout the 1970s, though such concern around the notion of womanhood was certainly noted, many of the critical works do not delve into the notions in which I centre my analysis. Thus, I have selected a couple of critical works from the late 1970s, which are relevant to my research purposes.

In the late 1970s, Gilbert and Gubar's authoritative study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) reinforced the sense of uneasiness associated to the ideal image of woman of a submissive, selfless creature. Specifically, they highlighted the fact that, in order to

surrender themselves to the fulfilment of this angelic role, women must to a certain extent 'murder' their true identity so as to conceal it. It is worth noting that, in their analysis, Gilbert and Gubar do not introduce this sacrifice as necessary but rather as something which produces "a life of death, a death-in-life" (1979: 25).

Hence, in their examination they signal that by becoming self-sacrificing, women are not only displaying their noble attributes but they are also somehow 'condemning' themselves to death, trapped in a life in which they can't produce any story or, at least, they find themselves unable to show the story they would produce if they allowed to reveal their true desires and longings. This secrecy to which women's true identity is inevitably linked is intriguing. Forced to play a role in the public eye, their *true* self remains locked away, waiting to be released.

Gilbert and Gubar rightly point that despite the fact that recent feminist analysis has highlighted encouraging role models one should not overlook the "terrible odds against which a creative female subculture was established" (1979: 51). The women writers which are analysed in this thesis all had to find ways to come to terms which such terrible odds and I totally agree with Gilbert and Gubar's claim that only by recognising the problems these women writers had to face will be able to fully appreciate the extent of their literary achievement.

In *the Madwoman in the Attic* one reflects on the remarkable inconsistency that surrounded the female persona in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because of the tremendous pressure on women to display a certain public image of themselves, duplicity was inescapable but, as Gilbert and Gubar affirm, such duplicity is to be taken as hopeful, since it allows women to "create themselves as characters" (1979: 51) and, thus, to explore the multiple possibilities behind their role, however limiting these might appear.

With regards to the texts that will be discussed in this thesis, Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1979) made significant contributions to our understanding of Sophia Lee's *The Recess*. Specifically, Chodorow's analysis of the trope of mothering brings to light the fact that such noteworthy trope, in spite of its tremendous importance in both familial and non-familial settings, has been seldom explored in fiction.

When approaching the figure of the mother, especially women's longing to (re)connect with her, relying on psychoanalytical thought becomes imperative. The way women build relationships with their mother is taken to be a cyclical process in which Chodorow identifies mothers' eagerness to "produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother" (1979: int 7). Such eagerness is crucial in Lee's narrative, as we will see, and it comes to place as an irrepressible force, an inescapable urge to both connect with the mother and take an active part in the act of *mothering* itself.

Chodorow affirms that women acquire the capacity for mothering "through the developmental situation in which they grow up, and in which women have mothered them" (1979: 39). Yet, in *The Recess* such mothering education never takes place, as this figure of the mother-mentor is never found. Such maternal absence, and the absence of the *education* that comes with this maternal figure, is denied to the protagonists of this story, with the subsequent emotional shortages that this lack entails.

In the light of this maternal loss, Chodorow correctly predicts that women develop strong affective ties with other women so as to fulfil those needs that traditionally a mother figure would fulfil. In *The Recess* this proves to be the case, as female friendship is the crucial element that somehow makes up for maternal

disappearance. Only be building – and maintaining – relations with other women, can the female protagonists of Lee's narrative satisfy their *affective* (maternal) needs.

In the 1980s, Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987) identified the multiple conflicts that arose within the female character, as she struggled to reconcile her own, inner, repressed desires to the social role that she was set to engage. Armstrong reflected on the numerous areas that surrounded such inner conflict, including economic, social and cultural dimensions.

From an economic perspective, it became clear that even the most ambitious woman would aspire to achieving "the economic dependency upon the man who valued her for her qualities of mind" (Armstrong 1987: 49). In the social realm, Armstrong notes that for women the acquisition of 'power', of some sort of authority, is not achieved by seeking her *own* desires but rather by "redeeming the male" (1987: 55). The impression that arises from such remarks is indeed that women's desires, in all areas of their lives, is irrevocably *determined* by male prerogative and hence the conviction that only by fulfilling male's desires can women fulfil their own became prevalent in the period.

Consequently, as Armstrong notes, endless conduct books proliferated in the long eighteenth century, all of which perpetuated the idea that women's behaviour ought to be carefully monitored if they were to gain male *acceptance*. Such conduct material, predominantly written by male authors, perpetuated the design that women ought to display certain attributes and behaviours if they were to become *eligible* wives, as Armstrong clearly sentences:

> In their effort to make young women desirable to men of a good social position, countless conduct books and works of instruction for women represented a specific

configuration of sexual features as those of the only appropriate women for men at all levels of society to want as a wife" (1987: 59)

Such pressure to become the perfect embodiment of 'desirable' feminine qualities was very much felt by eighteenth-century young women, and so much so that it become absolutely clear that women who did not display such idealised characteristics would be regarded with suspicion, with a sense that she is not 'proper' or, at least, not properly 'feminine'. This pressure to embody 'desirable', 'proper', feminine qualities lies at the very centre of my research purpose, as my thesis question aims precisely at detecting the extent to which the female characters of the texts under analysis *surpass* expectations and assume narrative authority.

In this respect, Armstrong's views on women's subordination parallel the claims that had been made in the 70s by Gilbert and Gubar, which I discussed earlier, regarding women's relegation to a death-in-life. Armstrong appears to share this vision by observing that "middle-class respectability doomed the woman to a kind of half-life within society because by definition respectability required her sexual repression" (1987: 165).

This concern is a crucial one, as it brings to light the realization that women's submissive role may not be the *willingly accepted* role that conduct material and fictional accounts endorse but rather a socially *imposed* position that most woman resigned to but not without some degree of *resistance*.

Armstrong makes use of Brönte's heroines to exemplify this divergence between what society inculcates and what one *truly* desires, as the Brröntes typically portray heroines who "desire the one man whom society forbids them to marry, giving rise to the notion that social conventions are, in an essential way, opposed to individual desire" (1987: 193). This opposition between society and the self is tremendously significant in

my reading of the texts that will be analysed in this thesis, as such opposition signals women's *defiance*, however limited, to their socially prescribed role.

2.2. Women Writers' Tradition: The Figure of the Heroine

Throughout the 1980s, the figure of the heroine was subject to constant evaluation. Eva Figes *Sex and Subterfuge: Women writers to* 1850 (1982) delved into women writer's employment of alternate 'heroines' so as to express women's imperfections and their anxieties about their prescribed role without 'betraying' the essence that was *demanded* from a heroine. As Figes notes, women writers showed "a tendency to become didactic in order to justify their activity" (Figes 1982: 22). Their primary aim was to instruct, to educate their audience, especially young women, and to do so they ought to shun any sign of imperfection from the heroines of their tales, as to turn them into perfect models to imitate.

In *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (1984), Mary Poovey provides a thorough analysis of the societal demands to which young women were subject to. In her study one can note the extent to which such societal expectations delimited the ways in which women writers approached the subject of femininity in their work. As Poovey rightly points out, women's value was measured in accordance to her ability to be a submissive, passive creature.

Yet, this angelic figure is 'shadowed' by the continuous presence of her sexuality. Female sexuality was taken to be voracious, almost incontrollable, and this prompted the concern to carefully monitor women's sexual appetites so as to keep them under control.

This relation between women's angelic nature and the constant threat of their incontrollable sexuality was paradoxical, as Poovey notes "the middle-class code of propriety defined women exclusively in terms of their sexuality and demanded that their every public action deny that sexuality" (1984: 110). The reconciliation of these two elements was achieved by the desexualisation of women's "real sexuality in highly euphemistic expressions" (1984: 110).

Once again, deviousness was the means to express women's supposedly voracious nature; it appears that only through indirection can their *true* identity be revealed. The same can be applied to the expression of female power. As Schofield notes, such expression "must manifest itself indirectly in order to be effective" (1986: 139), as any *overt* female attempt to seize authority would be interpreted as a defiant act and, hence, would not help her attain some 'power' but rather place her in a suspicious position from which any attempt to obtain some control would prove ineffective.

Anne Schofield's *Fetter'd or Free: British Women Novelists 1670-1815* (1986) introduces the *conviction* that women novelists, embedded within domestic settings, nonetheless *struggled* to find alternative ways to express their concerns and hence "seek to find a more realistic device for representing emotion than the hyperbolic language of sentimental drama" (1986: 95).

Within their domestic portrayals, most leading women novelists of the eighteenth century were "very aware of the trivialization of women" (Schofield 1986: 187) and it was precisely this awareness that prompted them to find ways to voice their uneasiness and thus to "give urgent and meaningful expression to their female consciousness" (Schofield 1986: 216).

Hence, it was becoming clear that certain areas were not permitted for women to analyse and, moreover, in the case that women writers wished to express some sort of

resistance to their society's system of beliefs they found themselves obliged to do so only indirectly, by making use of "strategies of deviousness, using artistic devices which voice their unease without obviously challenging literary or sexual conventions" (Monteith 1986: 154).

Within this conspicuous tension between societal pressures and individual desires, in *The Eighteenth Century Feminist Mind* (1987), Alice Browne notes that women writers, subject to higher demands than their male counterparts, became increasingly aware of the existence of a tradition they could call their *own;* which created a sense of a feminine tradition in which they could embed their work. This obviously augmented the possibilities women writers could benefit from but still limited tended to limit them "feminine genres" (Browne 1987: 27), as their production was expected to revolve around familial and domestic settings, which were believed to pertain a to a 'feminine' realm, in which women could find some expression for their concerns.

A way to achieve such expression was, as Browne notes, by making use of the double-heroine formula. As there were certain expectations with regards to the role of the heroine of the story, women writers found it difficult to embed their heroines with certain qualities which, though perhaps closer to the 'real' eighteenth century woman, were not *appropriate* for a heroine. Hence, it became clear that "if one heroine carries the love plot, the other has more scope to develop other characteristics which might not suit a love story heroine" (Browne 1987: 75). Thus, though the heroine was the one that carries the weight of the story, other less idealised women that surrounded her carried a story of their own, a parallel story that was not separate from that of the heroine but rather an exploration of its alternate – and crucial –*possibilities*.

Linda Kauffman's *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (1988) also revolves around the double-heroine formula by pointing out that any female attitude that deviated from expected modes of behaviour was viewed as suspicious, especially in fiction, in which the figure of the passionate woman was one to be wary about and "frequently regarded merely as a madwoman, frigid and furious" (1988: 245-6). This same idea is reinforced by Spencer, who observes that "the woman who felt sexual desire was shown to be a devil" (1986: 119), which highlights the sense that passionate, desiring females were never placed at the centre of the narrative, and hence their stories were systematically ignored, placed aside so as not to be accused of 'impropriety'.

In *English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789-1830* (1988), Gary Kelly brings forward the pressures to which women writers were subject to, which forced them to *indirectly* express their uneasiness with certain prevailing conventions. In their work one can observe a perceptible mistrust of the social, since in such narratives young women repeatedly find themselves intimidated by male persecutors as they find themselves struggling "to negotiate the various languages of social beings and identity" (1988: 43), all of which are full of ambiguities and contractions that they need to come to terms with.

2.3. The Epistolary Genre: Women writers and the Creation of a Female Community

Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982) highlights the instability of genres, as they "everywhere change, combine, regroup, or form what seem to be new alignments altogether" (1982: 45). This constant evolution of genres makes it extremely challenging to acutely define or categorise them since if we attempt to do so we inevitably "find ourselves coming to grips with local and temporary groupings, perpetually contending with historical alterations in them" (1982: 45).

Thus, Fowler highlights the extreme significance of *understanding* the mutability of genres before one endeavours to set the parameters through which they can be identified. When analysing a particular genre, undoubtedly one distinguishes a set of characteristics that are representative, recurrent elements of that genre but, even so, one must bear in mind that such elements certainly alter through time and, as Fowler observes, "the very elements of literature, even the literary model itself are subject to transmutation" (1982: 47).

Recurrent elements, and their possible interpretations, were crucial in psychoanalytical thought. Within this field, Julia Kristeva's influential work needs to be considered. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Kristeva offers a definition of abjection, and specifically her claim that it is "co-extensive with social and symbolic order" (1982: 68) also revolves around this notion of women's enclosure. Within Kristeva's psychoanalytical perspective, the feminine, far from being a universal category, becomes the 'other', that which is ambiguous, abject. Such 'otherness' of the feminine is essential for my thesis, as in all the texts under analysis women struggle to

attain a subjectivity they can call their *own*, a subjectivity that ultimately proves their capacity to *assume* the control of their own circumstances.

In Kristeva's work, abjection is always identified as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (1982: 2) and, hence, as something which clearly does not respect frontiers, set positions or barriers. The abject becomes associated with a tremendously ambiguous element, that which cannot be easily established.

This abject female subject, enclosed within a domestic setting, is forced to resign herself to an imaginary conception of the 'freedom' she might acquire, as Kristeva argues this:

> ... bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish out societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex" (1986: 207)

Kristeva's argument reflects on the deficiencies of language itself to *voice* women's secret longings and urges. Their confined state also contributes to this silencing of their *true* desires.

Terry Castle's influential study *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* provides an innovative and radical defence of the Masquerade assembly. Castle recognises the enormous fascination that was generated around the masquerade, which became "an established and ubiquitous feature of urban life" (1986: 1) but she also stresses the high degree of condemnation that such gathering received, especially from moralists, who viewed such assemblies as 'immoral' and 'improper'.

One of the main contributions that Castle makes is her ability to display the multiple, often contradictory, possibilities to approach the masquerade as a social and cultural phenomenon. Her interpretation of masquerades as opportunities for a deep exploration of the self and the other provides the ground for the analysis of such public events as the only means through which women's barriers could be trespassed. Frontiers become blurred in masquerades and prescribed gender roles can therefore be reversed. Women were usually advised against attending such assemblies precisely because within the imaginative world that the masquerade provides women can transgress and, what is more, they can momentarily *release* themselves from the social and cultural pressures of their daily lives.

As Castle rightly notes, the main concern about women's attendance to masquerade events was the fear that such gathering "encouraged female sexual freedom, and beyond that, female emancipation generally" (1986: 33). It can be assumed that the source of anxiety was the belief that, the moment women were permitted to go beyond their expected role and freely behave in ways that would not be allowed in any other circumstance, a turning-point would occur and, perhaps, women would no longer willingly *submit* themselves to societal pressures and would wish to continue to experience the 'freedom' they encountered in the masquerade.

Hence, this potential to subvert and destabilize social and cultural conventions that Castle identifies in the masquerade is very much felt in the fiction of the period, in which the masquerade is always a sign of *transgression*.

Given the apparent impossibility to transcend social expectations, the public assembly of the masquerade appears to be the most viable option for women to transgress, violate moral and social codes and finally 'free' themselves from their restrictions.

Another aspect that further complicates women's attempts to go beyond their prescribed roles is the (social) importance placed on impressions. With regards to women's role, impressions become *critical*, as the impression they cause on others amounts to their 'respectability'. The image they display at the eyes of their society will ultimately determine their adherence to propriety and, hence, their 'virtue'.

In Fetter'd or Free, Margaret Anne Doody notes, impressions are unstable and all "judgments of prudence are, after all, founded on assumptions and impressions, and this might betray" (1986: 343). This will prove to be the case in one of the texts I analyse in this thesis, Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, in which appearances prove to be deceitful, as a misreading of the nature of a female character has terrible consequences, as I will discuss later in the chapter devoted to Frances Sheridan.

In the midst of such literary upheaval, Clive T. Probyn's *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1789* (1987), stressed the fact that the principal achievement of the eighteenth-century novel was not so much ameliorating the genre or improving formal elements, but rather the realisation that this novel "examined, for the first time, radical questions of a social, economic, and sexual nature" (1987: 15). Eighteenth-century novels opened up the way for an exploration of crucial aspects that remained deeply unexplored and, for the first time, attempted to provide some insight into those social and cultural elements that determined people's daily lives and the repercussions that societal pressures and expectations had on individual, especially female, experience.

The novels of the period found means to question "the beliefs and assumptions of the patriarchal order" (Probyn 1987: 98) and by so doing they managed to bring to light the "consequences of female constraint" (Probyn 1987: 98). This is tremendously

significant for the purposes of this thesis, as such attempts to dismantle accepted patriarchal ideals that contributed to women's commodification and subjection allow for a deeper exploration of the extent of women's limitations and, crucially, a broader visibility of the results produced by patriarchal impositions on women's daily lives, of what Probyn terms "a dramatic version of the difficulties women encounter as marginalized and often silenced figures of society" (1987: 98).

The epistolary mode became a powerful means through which to give voice to the female experience, to utter in a very direct way the main preoccupations surrounding the female persona. In *The Eighteenth Century Novel: From Sentimentalism to Rationalism* (1989), Flora Palamidesi notes that in epistolary narrations there is an autobiographic element that augments the sentimentality of the experiences described and brings the narrator closer to its recipient, since "the importance assumed by the narrator suggested the choice of the autobiographic form, which on the other hand responded also to the necessity of giving the reader stories of real people" (1989: int 19).

Through a first-person epistolary narrator, the audience becomes much more involved in the events that are being described and, in the case of a female narrator, the level of *identification* with her is also heightened because of the palpable immediacy that the epistolary provides.

Elizabeth C. Goldsmith's contribution in the volume *Writing the Female Voice* (1989) introduced women as possessors of a unique aptitude for epistolary narration, which derived from their "ability to produce convincing and authentic letters of passion" (1989: 48), despite the fact that they were expected not to produce such passional accounts. The female voice was the chosen vehicle of expression in the epistolary, although this did not always necessarily entail the presence of a female

author. The clearest example of this is the fiction of Samuel Richardson, who employed a feminine voice in his acclaimed epistolary novels, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), which became clear exponents of the epistolary, models subject to endless imitation.

Patricia Meyers Spacks also contributed in the volume *Writing the Female Voice*, and she claimed that early epistolary accounts reveal some discomfort with women's circumstances but, in spite of the presence of this 'resistance' attitude, such works nonetheless "implicitly accept the situation as necessary" (1989: 64). Spacks related this early epistolary attempt to introduce the possibility of women achieving some 'control' to Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, in which Susan's narration positions her as a female who seeks authority and exercises her agency "partly by the act of writing letters" (1989: 64). This proves to be the case, as I will argue in my chapter on Frances Brooke, in Lady Anne Wilmot's narration. Like Lady Susan, Lady Anne is also seeking to attain her *authority* and exercise some control, exerting a significant amount of female *agency*.

In epistolary novels, feeling acquires a special significance. In these accounts, the female epistolary narrator relies on feeling to interpret and respond to the events that occur around her and, for her, "feeling constitutes power rather than weakness" (Spacks 1989: 69).

Spacks identifies some anger in these women's epistolary texts, as in their portrayal of their daily experience, which is limited, "everything is not the best in a world which, from a woman's point of view, seems far from the best possible" (1989: 72). Their letter writing allows these women to *utter* their uneasiness with a limiting world that seems unfair to them, a world they are forced to resign to but which is far from ideal. Epistolary accounts permitted women to express some discomfort with their

situation and, crucially, to express their willingness to somehow *surpass* their limitations, a task that proved difficult to accomplish.

Sally Winkle's contribution to *Writing the Female Voice* brings forward the suspicion that religious thought also played a part in complicating women's efforts to surpass their limiting assigned role, since religious theories introduced women as "defined by nature for her position as a self-effacing, gentle, devoted wife and mother" (1989: 78). Thus, Winkle's argument implies that any attempt from women's part to disobey their 'natural' role "was therefore no longer simply unacceptable, but could be denounced as unnatural and degenerate" (1989: 78).

Rosemarie Tong's *Women, Sex and the Law* (1989) also reflects on the notion of female transgression but, in his view, such transgression is not to be found in *external* aspects but rather *within* the female individual herself. He refers back to feminists' discomfort with the perpetuation of a "a malignant image of the male-female-relationship" (1989: 99), in which women are depicted as temptresses whose "body is an instrument of evil, and for this she must be punished" (1989: 99). In this case female transgression is not related to attending certain events or to behaving in certain ways but is rather located in the widespread 'negative' portrayals of women, as the ones who 'corrupt' and tempt males.

Another trope that is usually found in relation to the construction of 'proper' femininity and, as such, in direct opposition to the very notion of transgression is the recurring trope of the absent mother, which gains special significance in some of the texts that I will analyse in this thesis. The mother figure, a nurturing presence that shapes her descendants' process of identity formation, when denied, produces a void that manifests itself in their never ending necessity to remain connected to that (absent) mother figure.

Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989) brings attention to the fact that "maternal absence and silence rob the heroine of important role models for her development, of the matriarchal power which could facilitate her own growth into womanhood" (1989: 44). The mother is the one that ought to guide the heroine into the 'right' path of her life and help her grow, both physically and emotionally, into the woman she will become. Being denied of this role model, it is assumed, results in the heroine's loss of her own identity, as she finds herself lost endlessly searching for a mother figure she can never find.

As Hirsch notes, unable to benefit from the nurturing presence of a 'real' mother, inevitably, such heroines are forced to find solace in substitute figures, since surrogate mothers and male figures of authority are the only 'mothers' they can aspire to. These ideas are in complete accordance with some of the views I will analyse in the chapter devoted to Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, a text in which the trope of the absent mother is a recurrent theme.

Enclosed spaces, and the implications for the female characters that inhabit them, is another recurrent theme that acquires a special significance in the fiction of the period. Throughout the long eighteenth century, women became the guardians of the home, embodying a domestic image that preceded that which in the nineteenth century would be termed 'the angel in the house'. As such, the home became a feminine terrain, a space in which she had the obligation to build a 'proper' space for herself and her family.

In *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (1989), Kate Ferguson notes that enclosed places are not always a safe environment but, actually, "the very opposite, a prison" (1985: int xiii). Women's confinement to the domestic sphere was mirrored in fictional accounts, all of which

depicted females who *understood* that their 'proper' place was the home. However, in the Female Gothic, the home is no longer an invulnerable, guarded place but is rather surrounded by perils that trespass its frontiers and access it and, hence, as Ferguson claims in such cases "enclosure becomes not a restraint upon evil but a sign of it" (1989: 68).

2.4. Resisting the 'Proper' Lady Configuration: The Image of the Female Trickster

In the 1990s, there was a growing emphasis on passion. In the previous decades, the cult of sensibility had already established an overt endorsement of sentiments, which nonetheless prevented the display of *extreme* passionate states.

In *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics: Essays in Honor of Jean H* (1990), Syndy McMillen Conger reflects this demand that women exhibit their capacity for deep feeling without expressing too *strong* emotions was tremendously paradoxical, as women "were acknowledged freely to be men's superiors in the exercise of feeling, but at the same time they were reminded that excess exhibition of feeling demonstrated weakness of character and inferiority to men" (1990: int 15).

The implication that derives from this is that women ought to openly display emotions but carefully avoiding *excessive* displays that would compromise their propriety. This careful self-monitoring was a requisite to be recognised as a 'proper' woman who knows her place and acts accordingly. Conger notes that a 'genuinely' virtuous sensibility is not solely based on women's acceptance of social mores but also on "the consciousness– individual and uncoerced, yet carefully educated and scrutinized – that one is acting and feeling meritoriously when judged against an ideal standard"

(1990: 67). Hence, in order to ‘earn’ the recognition of being truly virtuous, woman ought to fully understand her *necessity* to adapt her behaviour in all areas of her life so as to make it suitable to the ideal standard against which she is constantly judged against.

The sexual double standard has been repeatedly analysed by critics, who have revolved around the marked differentiation that was established between expected male and female behaviour.

In this respect, Elizabeth Bergen Brophy’s *Women’s Lives and the 18th-Century English Novel* (1991) revolves around the prevailing assumption that “sexual desire was proper to the male and unbecoming to the female” (1991: 27). Brophy notes that the cultural expectation was that the woman, because of her presumed tendency towards the unreasonable and the sentimental, was much more “vulnerable to sexual temptation” (1991: 27). This assumed predisposition of females to fall ‘victims’ to their passions was often used to justify the continuous and alert (sexual) monitoring to which women were subjected.

Mary A. Favret’s *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politcs and the Fictions of Letters* (1993), introduces the notion that female inner lives could be *accessed* through letter writing and reading. Their private experience found expression through *public* means, which dismantled the opposition between private and public, as “the letter typically registered private, interiorized moments – domestic details, closed circles of family and friends, the inner workings of the mind” (1993: 12).

This progression from “private expression to published property pulled the letter out of its fiction of individualism and complicated its ‘feminine’ identity” (Favret 1993: 13). The letter was, by definition, a private document that would only be intercepted by its recipient. This is disrupted through the apparition of the epistolary, through which

the private document becomes public knowledge and hence letter-writing ceases to be an individual act and becomes a collective one.

Therefore, as Favret argues, this implied that "the epistolary form was acquiring a public voice: the stories of these fictional individuals and others were the topics of public debate; epistolary characters entered the discourse of the age and became the property of cultural history" (1993: 13).

Laura Brown's *of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (1993) reflects upon these same ideas, as Brown identifies the period's commonplace insistence on identifying "the corruption assigned to the female body and the murderousness attributed to the female figure" (1993: 19). However, interestingly, Brown does not take these widespread assumptions as necessarily putting women at the disadvantage, but actually as those aspects that trigger some sort of resistance because they bring about "the representation of an active female agency" (Brown 1993: 19). Throughout my thesis, women struggle against widespread social assumptions to which they are expected to *willingly* submit. Yet, as I will argue in the chapters about the texts, the women depicted in those narratives, though submissive, nonetheless display a certain degree of *uneasiness* with societal pressures and some *resistance* to social control is present in the texts, in an implicit way in the case of heroines but in a much more 'overt' manner in the case of non-conventional, disruptive female characters.

Brown even notes the presence of some sort of 'violence' within women's subordinate state. Female commodification is introduced as *necessary,* as a "natural and essential extension of female sexuality" (Brown 1993: 85) but, at the same time, the female body behind that commodification is comprised by the violence it elicits, and it is precisely that violence which becomes "a structural product of the implicit allusion to

female power, and thus an ideological assertion of vengeance against the threat of the unruly woman" (Brown 1993: 85).

Brown explores the possibilities that lay behind women's subordination and commodification and revolves around women's potential for disruption and *resistance* against their situation. Their submissive state may very well be the ideal position through which to revolt against their circumstances and become the very unruly, defiant woman they are expected to shun.

Rachel Brownstein's *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (1994) reflects on the concerns which are constructed around the ideal notion of the heroine. In the process of constructing heroines, many elements come into play, as "to want to be a heroine is to want to be something special, something else, to want to change, to be changed, and also to want to stay the same" (Brownstein 1994: int xv). Thus, the heroine is not stable a stable category but a constantly changing one, one that includes many – often contradictory – sources of anxiety that move from the desire to explore other possible representations and the wish to retain the *essence* that is to be embedded to such a characterisation.

The figure of the heroine entails a *questioning* of the system of values around which it is constructed. Such a figure "explores the connections between the inner self and its outward manifestations - between the personal and the social, the private and the public" (Brownstein 1994: int xix). The heroine carries the 'weight' of becoming a perfect role model worthy of imitation and, as such, her inner self must never stand in opposition to the expected outward manifestations of virtuousness she must endorse. Theoretically, the social, the private and the public must be fused into one, into a perfectly suited entity in which no conflict occurs. Yet, such unison is not always

wholly possible, as heroines desires and longings are not always necessarily in complete accordance with public expectations.

The exploration of the lack of accordance between the public and the private, between the inner self and its outward manifestations is a crucial element in my analysis of the texts, both through the figure of the heroine and the secondary female figures that surround her. The detection of *hints* that point towards sources of anxiety and points of conflict with regards to women's struggle to find ways to reconcile their private and public selves becomes imperative.

Within the analysis of women's interior and outward experience, the notion of desire becomes an essential element, as "women, who make the distinctions among feelings as well as inspire them, give the meanings to desire" (Brownstein 1994: 38).

The belief that women are ruled by their emotions turns females into the perfect medium through which to examine the different ramifications, implications and outcomes that desire creates and, hence, to come to a better understanding of the female experience, of their ambitions and yearnings.

Castle's innovative study *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (1995) also contributes to the understanding of the female experience. Opposing the period's emphasis on reason rather than superstition, Terry Castle delved on the invention of a thermometer that *exactly* measured the ladies' passions so as to reinforce the importance of approaching and, especially, *understanding* female passions. This assails moralists' utter refusal of what they identified as "women's purported incorrigibility, licentiousness, and emotional instability" (Castle 1995: 30) and, instead, turns women's passionate states into subjects of analysis, objects worthy of study and careful attention which will provide a *recognition* of the vital role that female passions play.

Edward Copeland's *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England 1790-1820* (1995) gives a significant amount of attention to the economic aspect of women's lives. Women's dependency became especially apparent in the economic arena, as "women found themselves vulnerable as economic beings" (Copeland 1995: 17), which reinforced women's economic dependency on male protection.

Whether married or unmarried, women found themselves "economically at risk" (Copeland 1995: 17) since their whole existence depends on their "possession of a spendable income" (Copeland 1995: 38), without this they are at a loss and they are perfectly aware of that. This preoccupation is reflected in the fiction of the period, since "the yearly income is an obsessive motif in women's fiction at the turn of the eighteenth century" (Copeland 1995: 24).

Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook's *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (1996) stressed the fact that, in the letter form, the monetary subject was one of the most discussed topics, along with a reflection on the possible outcomes of turning heroines into wage-earners. Most authors were reluctant to do so because "the heroine's successful employment would invite the hostility of the very society to which the heroine so earnestly aspires to belong" (Cook 1996: 163). With regards to female employment, the notion of class is essential, as didactic fiction introduce "respectability for those women from the ranks of the pseudo-gentry, the daughters of clergymen and other genteel professionals" (Cook 1996: 163). In those higher stations, female employment is allowed and *respected*.

The familiar letter came to be identified as "the somatic terrain of the emotions, as well as with the thematic material of love, marriage and the family" (Cook 1996: 6). Through letter-writing, women found a means to express their concerns, related to the different areas of their lives, from the affective and personal to the social, economic and

familial. Thus, the letter became a medium through which to negotiate and reconcile all of these aspects.

Within this debate around women's negotiation and reconcilement of the various contradictions that ruled their daily lives, the term female trickster came to be used amongst the critical community to refer to those females who overtly mock convention and unapologetically challenge social mores and traditions.

In *Laughing Feminism Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (1998), Audrey Bilger depicts the figure of the female trickster as a woman who "is the polar opposite of an angel: she is outspoken; she makes people uncomfortable; she willfully violates codes of feminine behavior; and above all, she laughs" (1998: 98). Bilger's interpretation of the trickster character are in total accordance with my own views regarding these female representations, since I completely share his idea that tricksters act out "the heroine's transgressive desires" (1998: 98).

In my analysis of the texts, I do not read female tricksters as *opposed* to the heroine, but rather as an *extension* of the heroine herself; a mirror image she is too afraid to acknowledge but which undoubtedly forms part of her persona.

The trickster's presence does not provide a 'negative' example of those attitudes that heroines ought to evade but actually offers the heroine the opportunity to reflect on her own limiting situation and on the very aspects that perpetuate her fettered state. The comparison established between heroines and tricksters somehow obliges heroines "to question the standards that govern their own behaviour as women" (Bilger 1998: 99).

The culturally accepted, idealised image of the 'proper' woman is destabilised by the presence of tricksters. Tricksters bluntly refuse to become submissive, passive

creatures and they "refuse to be identified by their ability to please; on the contrary, they take pleasure in openly defying patriarchal figures" (Bilger 1998: 108).

Women writers' tricksters allowed them to utter their dissatisfaction with women's role in society without being concerned about the criticism they would have to face if they chose to depict their heroines in this 'improper' way. When reading a novel by a female author, the public would always first and foremost pay attention to the attributes displayed by the heroine of the story and, hence, tricksters, free from those pressures, became the perfect means to 'freely' "stage rebellions against the restrictions on womanhood" (Bilger 1998: 109).

To rightly fulfil the role of the 'proper' lady women were required to conceal certain emotions which were considered to be 'unfeminine', including outbursts of anger or passionate states, all of which deviated from the perfect, angelic image women were expected to display. Under such pressures, as Bilger rightly asserts, women's self-assertion was limited and it became apparent that "the eighteenth-century woman who had independent views of selfhood was required to lead a double life" (1998: 59).

Within this double life, the tension between the public image women ought to present and their intimate, private longings was very much felt throughout the period. This tension is absolutely palpable in all the texts I will analyse in the course of this thesis, all of which revolve around women's anxieties and the concern that is provoked by the lack of accordance between societal demands and their *inner* subjectivity.

This tension was also noticed throughout the work of major eighteenth and nineteenth-century novelists, including Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney. These women writers made use of satire and comedy "as an outlet for aggression and as means of social criticism in their lives" (Bilger 1998: 62). As any direct criticism would have proved ineffectual, women writers resorted to the portrayal

of humorous episodes so as to give some expression to their uneasiness with regards to women's subordinate place in their society.

In *Laughing Feminism,* Bilger also analyses the use of comedy to provide a subtle critique to contemporary manners and conventions was examined. Bilger notes that both women and comedy were suspiciously regarded as "potentionally disruptive to the social order" (1998: 15). The incitement of laughter about widespread assumptions concerning female weakness and male supremacy was a means to both delineate female limitations and hint that such circumstances can be changed or, at least, questioned.

2.5. The demand to Set an Example: Morality and Didacticism in Fiction

The *limitations* women writers ought to face when producing their work became a major preoccupation amongst the critical community throughout the 1990s. Because of the culturally established model of the 'proper' good woman, women writers inevitably found themselves forced to replicate this pattern through their fiction so as to ensure its *acceptance* and, hence, critics continuously reflected on this cultural demand.

This sense of 'freedom' that women writers aspired to bestow on their heroines directly confronts the conduct manual construction of the 'desirable' woman, one who must be instructed into "'natural' femininity in terms of negation and repression – silence, submission […] and are offered an illusion of power based on sublimation and passive virtue" (Jones 1990: 15).

In *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (1990), Vivien Jones reflects on the fact that in conduct literature women's configuration was based on binary oppositions between "women as angels and women as whores, between women as the embodiment of moral value and women as the source of moral disorder"

(Jones 1990: 57). However, as Jones notes, such binary oppositions are too straightforward and, as such, fail to fully categorise women.

In *The Courtship Novel* (1991), Katherine Green Sobba also revolves around women's restrictions by making reference to Lennox's Arabella in *The Female Quixote*, who defies social mores but eventually capitulates back to convention. Green highlights the fact that despite her final acceptance of societal demands, it is "her earlier resistance that compels reader interest" (1991: 56). The fact that Arabella manages to escape convention, even if just temporarily, is enough to bring forward the belief that women were searching for ways to rise above social prescription without losing their propriety.

In *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (1992), Joy Wiltenburg notes writers' pursuit to "serve a serious moral purpose" (1992: 73) and brings attention to the vital importance of understanding the "differing and contradictory meanings" (1992: 73) that are embedded within such moral purposes.

K.G Hall's *The Exalted Heroine and the Triumph of Order: Class, Women and Religion in the English Novel, 1740-1800* (1993) identifies a strong inclination on the part of eighteenth-century writers to "provide some sort of moral or spiritual teaching in a manner which would attract and entertain a large audience is a common feature of many eighteenth-century novels" (1993: int 6). Fiction became a powerful means through which to *influence* its consumers, to reinforce certain values and ideologies through an "imaginative and multidimensional" (1993: int 7) recreation of those aspects in a way that would compel the audience.

Stories were expected to produce a moral point, a reinforcement of those traditions that had been introduced from earlier periods, which assures a certain level of

“continuity with legend, mythology, biblical and folk tales” (Hall 1993: 18), all of which shared the extraction of a clear moral lesson.

The female who could be defined as a “champion of manners and morality” (Hall 1993: 49) would ensure her attainment of respectability from both men and women, who would praise her rectitude. To achieve this goal, women were strongly encouraged against those feminine ‘vices’ which would deviate from the ‘right’ course of morality. Some of these vices include “vanity, envy, inconsistency of affection, encouragement of rakes, coquetry, extravagance and so on” (Hall 1993: 58).

This perpetuated the belief that women’s suffering was provoked not so much by external aspects, such as social or economic disproportions, but rather by the female individual *herself*, by her failure to nurture the ‘right’ moral qualities in herself and by her ‘weakness’ in permitting less desirable traits to take control of her will.

Hence, culturally, the conception of what being a *good* woman entailed was very much based on women’s ability to “conform to the prototypical feminine virtues of gentleness, obedience, premarital virginity and so on " (Hall 1993: 58). Any departure from this marked set of characteristics was interpreted as denoting impurity or, at least, some sort of imperfection. The preoccupation with asserting what being a ‘good’ woman *entails* is crucial in my analysis of the texts. In those narratives, ‘good’ women are surrounded by less ‘desirable’, trickster female figures who ‘threaten’ social stability through their utter refusal to conform to established parameters and social mores but who, nonetheless, assume much more narrative *authority* than those females who ‘unquestionably’ embody prototypical feminine ‘virtues’.

In *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (1994), Catherine Gallagher notes that women writers acquired recognition and status by declaring themselves “the spokeswomen for cultural change” (1994: int

xx) but he notes that they acquired this prestige only by endorsing the culturally accepted set of values that were considered 'appropriate' for women and hence by "constructing a discourse that 'reformed' women by locking them into a disciplinary domestic sphere" (1994: int xx).

In *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18th Century* (1998), Katherine Haggerty shares Green's vision and points out that women writers found ways to "reveal their uneasiness about the cultural situations in which they find themselves; they react to these situations in ways that defy gender expectations – for masculinity as well as femininity; and they challenge the status quo" (1998: int 8). Societal pressures were extremely felt but this did not hinder women writers from *subliminally* defying those.

The Gothic genre allowed its heroines "a surprising degree of initiative and a range of victimization that could be in certain ways described as an attractive alternative to passive femininity" (Haggerty 1998: int 13). This female 'freedom' that the Gothic entailed will be carefully analysed in the section about Sophia Lee's The Recess, a text that surely endows its heroines with a significant amount of *authority*, within their fettered state.

Paul Keen's *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (1999) introduces the political side of this debate by claiming that literature functioned as a kind of group project where the goal was to project the interests of the group so clearly onto the public consciousness that relations of power would give way to questions of morality" (1999: 32). Keen uses this argument to highlight the fact that writers managed to turn limitations or oppositions to their own advantage by "insisting on the need to earn a living as a positive social characteristic rather than a necessary evil, and by highlighting the fact that they did so by means of an intellectual rather than

a manual vocation" (1999: 91). This provided to called-for justification of the act of writing and also bestowed some respectability to their work at a time when writing, especially for women, required special justification.

2.6. Facing Limitations: Heroines struggle to Transcend their Enclosed State

The very act of writing was full of contradictions, as Kowalesky-Wallace observes in *Their Father's Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth and Patriarchal Complicity* (1991) when analysing women writers he refers to as 'daughters of Eve'. These daughters of Eve find themselves in the midst of a paradox, as this entails their struggle "simultaneously to find one's place within a preexistent narrative that dictates women's marginality and to be allowed to adapt the strictures of that narrative" (1991: int 23). Coming to terms with a *preexistent* narrative is a conflict all the women writers I will analyse in this thesis need to face. What is interesting is the ways in which they do so, the manner through which they *adapt* such strictures to suit their own narrative purposes.

Michelle A. Massé's *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism and the Gothic* (1992) reflects on the repercussions this conflict has for writers of the Gothic genre. In the Gothic the notion of trauma acquires a special significance. Such trauma is not something remote, inaccessible but rather something very real "in the present and in the implied future of the narrative, when the heroine 'wakes' from a dream of trauma to find it represented in the real world" (1992: 15). Hence, Gothic heroines must face their 'demons' and find ways to escape an existence that is marked by "silence, immobility and enclosure" (1992: 18).

This proves true not only in Gothic narratives but in domestic fiction as well. Domestic heroines also find themselves trapped within the limits of their narrative, surrounded by the same silence, immobility and enclosure typical of Gothic tales. Domestic heroines, too, must struggle to find ways to cope with such enclosure and also, crucially, to somehow *transcend* it.

Anne Jessie Van Sant's *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (1993) also revolves around the pressure exerted by accepted, culturally prescribed notions of femininity which determined the configuration of heroines. He notes that "women were culturally constrained to exist in an idealised rather than a physicalised sensibility" (1993: 114). Hence, the insistence on women's *need* to openly display their acute sensibility responded to the demands of *idealised* configurations rather than to corporeal ones.

Nicola J. Watson's *Revolution and the Form of the English Novel, 1790-1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (1994) points out that, in the post-revolutionary period, letters in fictional accounts "are always liable to go astray, to engage in duplicity and deception" (Watson 1994: 17). Thus, both the breaking of barriers and the attempt to *oppose* social and cultural expectations appears to be a preoccupation transmitted through the letter form. Letters become mediums through which to voice dissasfaction, to express a desire to reconcile opposed elements pertaining to the tension between the personal and the social.

In her chapter in the volume *Re-Visioning Romanticism*: *British Women Writers, 1776-1837* (1994), Carol Shinner Wilson also analyses the difficult position women find themselves in when the attempt to voice some opposition, as the woman who dissents inevitably "finds herself in an ironically fortuitous position, possessing a political voice without the drawback of belonging to the corrupt interests of established

power" (1994: 92). This was extremely difficult to reconcile, as the mere act of voicing their dissent would place women in a compromising position, a position that did not permit them to actively engage in political debates. Female dissent always needed to be implied, subliminal; otherwise it was viewed as threatening, as a 'violation' of the status quo.

In *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (1996) John Richetti identifies Pamela's difficulties to transcend morality and express the 'true' state of her heart by pointing out that the desire she feels towards Mr.B must remain hidden, even from herself:

> if she were to admit that, she would be lost, falling into the degrading position that Mr.B wants her to assume, and injuring herself deeply. But Pamela's inner as well as outer conflict may awaken inquiry as to why society dictates such conflicts" (1996: 104)

Eleanor Ty's *Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, 1796-1812* (1998) reflects on this demand to deflect passionate states, as he notes that 'good' heroines ought to be sexually contained and "derive their strength from Christian suffering, from having to sacrifice their own feelings and desires in order to submit to parental or spousal duty" (1998: 91). As I will argue in my chapter on Frances Sheridan, this proves to be the case in *Memoirs of Sidney Bidulph*, as Sidney's suffering largely derives from her constant insistence on submitting her *own* desires to filial obedience, with catastrophic consequences.

Warner's analysis of Behn's *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* in her study *The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684*-1750 (1998) highlights the possible ways in which the limitations concerning desire could be transcended. In Behn's narrative love appears to "offer a magical reconciliation of freedom and

necessity, bodily impulse and circulation within a social symbolic" (Warner 1998: 83). The strict code of values that prevented the *free* expression of bodily impulses is 'violated' within this text in ways that provide some sort of *conciliation* between personal autonomy – what the individual desires – and the pressure exerted by social requirements.

2.7. The Self-Conscious Female Narrator: Towards an Authentic Representation of the Female Self

Jean Grimshaw's *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy: A Radical Philosophy Reader* (1990) introduces the belief that conservative figures such as Mary Astell perpetuated such ideals by putting forward the belief that women "are taught merely to please, to be flattered and to obey" (Grimshaw 1990: 14) and, by consequence, any female who resisted such marked configuration was identified as unruly.

In her article ""Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn" (1991), Jacqueline Pearson observes that in some narratives, the female narrator reflects "the empowering of women, or the mockery of men" (1991: 41) whilst, in others, such empowering is hindered by the weight of propriety and hence the female narrator finds herself "embedded within patriarchy and limited by it" (1991: 41). What is significant is that, in both instances, – when she becomes an advocate of empowerment as well as when she finds herself limited by societal restrictions – the female narrator is inescapably surrounded by inconsistencies and ambiguities that she *must* reconcile herself to.

Ros Ballaster's *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to* 1740 (1992) brings about the fact that in women's fiction, the "self-conscious and self-

reflective deployment of the persona of the female narrator habitually questions the rhetorical function of femininity in relation to masculininity" (1992: 84). Female narrators often became a means to dispute the *suitability* of prescribed female and male roles. Self-consciousness was not always a prerequisite but, whenever it was the case, such female narrators opened up the way for an exploration of the *boundaries* of femininity and masculinity and how one might *surpass* those.

The unveiling of such tensions became essential for women writers of the period. In *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women* (1993), Catherine Craft-Fairchild argues that female authors such as Behn, Davys, Haywood, Inchbald and Burney all endorsed dominant ideologies concerning women's subordinate role but they also managed to "highlight the contradictions inherent in eighteenth-century ideologies of gender, thereby subverting the dominant discourse" (1993: int 22). This allowed them to both "construct and deconstruct ideologies of female identity" (1993: int 22), which was a very important undertaking to construct an *authentic* female persona.

Gill Perry and Michael Rossington's *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture* (1994) highlights the endless emphasis on feeling also contributed that this scrutiny of the female self. Wollstonecraft discerned sensibility "as an intrinsically corrupt and corrupting quality" (1994: int 11), which defied the period's endorsement of the cult of sensibility.

This divergence between women's inner subjectivity and its outer manifestations became the subject of psychoanalytical feminist analysis. In his contribution to the volume *Speculations after Freud: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Culture* (1994), Scott argues that in the expected "battle against the dominion of inferior desires, one does battle with oneself […] one sought victory by oneself over oneself in the body's

desires" (1994: 214). What is interesting about Scott's argument is that it does not so much reflect on women's 'fight' with external aspects, such as social and cultural mores, but rather focuses on her *internal* struggle. Women battle against themselves to reconcile inner and outer longings; the main source of tension occurs within her own subjectivity.

Barbara Claire Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (1995) stresses the fact that the demand for social theatricality was also reinforced in women's fiction, as "it would appear that the only way in which a woman author could gain both financial reward and literary commendation was by creating characters who learn to agree to their own victimization" (1995: 78). Female character's acute understanding and 'acceptance' of the *necessity* of their submissive state was reinforced.

In *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (1996), Adela Pinch shares such distrust of feeling, as he argues that "extravagant feelings could cause the greatest acts of benevolence; they could also cause women their ruin" (1996: int 2). The implication that derives from Pinch's reflection is that, when 'rightfully' managed, feelings have the capacity to *prove* one's goodness and hence bear witness to 'true' virtue but these same acts, whenever they are not *balanced*, have the potential to produce *undesirable* outcomes.

Christine Roulston's *Virtue, Gender, and the Authentic Self in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: Richardson, Rousseau and Laclos* (1998) reinforces the fact that sentimental narratives are concerned with producing "transparent and authentic writing" (1998: int xiii) and, as such, revealed a clear willingness to provide "self-revelation and self-examination" (1998: int xiii). In the case of female characters, such act of self-examination became imperative. An authentic portrayal of women ought to include her

careful self-scrutiny so as to reflect on the different ways in which they female self is both revealed and concealed. This triggers an analysis of the tensions between her inner self and the outer persona she is exposes.

In *Plots of Enlightenment: Education and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (1999), Richard A. Barney delves into this double-dimension of feeling, both denoting kindness and disruption, allows for some degree of theatricality. Barney notes the presence of "a kind of social theatricality, in which women must constantly attend to how they are perceived and what standing they have in terms of 'reputation'" (1999: 288). Thus, the attainment of an *impeccable* social reputation highly depended on women's ability to publicly 'feign' certain attributes so as to assert their 'decency'.

2.8. The Paradox of the Desirability of Female Virtue: the Importance of Conventional Notions of Womanhood

In the 2000s, the epistolary continued to be subject to careful analysis by critics. Leah Price's *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: from Richardson to George Eliot* (2000) recognises the epistolary as "a genre that defines writing collectively produced but privately owned" (Price 2000: 14).

Clery, Frankline and Garside also note this appeal associated to virtuous women, as they point out that "for a woman to be attractive it was requisite that she should be sufficiently sensual to attract the gaze, yet also sufficiently modest in order to be able to maintain her allure beyond the first lustful glance" (2002: 107).

This insistence on women's need to attain the 'right' balance between modesty and sexual attractiveness reinforced the commonplace assumption that women ought to arouse male desire without expressing any desire of her *own*. Such concerns were

central in many major novels of the period, especially in Richardson's work, as Bill Ovetone's *Fictions of Female Adultery 1684-1890: Theories and Circumtexts* (2002) notes: "the erotic attractions of the modest, 'non-desiring' female subject, of course, form the core dialectic of both *Pamela* and *Clarissa*" (2002: 5). These concerns are also essential in the novels under analysis in my thesis, all of which revolve around this figure of the modest, 'non-desiring' heroine as opposed to the unruly, defiant female who *resists* this stereotype.

Wandel Torbjörn's article "The Power of Discourse: Michel Foucault and Critical Theory" (2001) establishes the essential notion of power in a positive light by pointing out that " Foucault's greatest contribution to the critical theory project is his conception of power as positive: that power produces, makes, and shapes rather than masks, represses, and blocks" (2001: 369).

In my thesis, the negotiation of power is of vital importance, but such negotiation is not regarded in the Foucaudian sense but rather in the willingness to express desire through the epistolary mode as a means to attempt to *surpass* limitations. In *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (2004), Norma Clarke recognises the direct correspondence that was established between epistolary writing and the expression of desire, as the epistolary "was the most literal way of turning the desire to be noticed, recognised and distinguished" (2004: 330). Through the letter form, desire was given a prominent role; it was placed at the very centre of the narrative and carefully scrutinised. Yet, as Moyra Haslett notes in *Pope to Burney, 1714-1779: Scriblerians to Bluestockings* (2003), the desire depicted through the familial letter was not unambiguous as "such letter should claim to be artless, but therein lies its artfulness" (2003: 107).

In *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840: Thinking the Republic of Taste.* Basingstoke (2005), Peter De Bolla, Nigel Leak and David Simpson claim that the image of the woman as a virtuous, innocent sufferer became a figure which was considered as "exceptionally erotic and appealing" (2005: 132). This conception introduced the sense that female virtue, though denoting passionlessness, created a significant amount of desirability around it.

Boyd and Kvande's *Everyday Revolutions: Eighteenth-Century Women Transforming Public and Private* (2008) also reflects on the acute ambiguity that permeates women's conciliation of "relationship dynamics" (2008: 19), paying special attention to the *split* that is observed between the private and public realms. Thus, they note "the potential disjunction between women's public behavior and private feeling that threatened to destabilize mechanisms of control" (2008: 19).

In their analysis, Boyd and Kvande clarify that being concern with the opposition between public and private does not simply entail *physical* spaces but also those events that occur *within* those, which can be exhibited or concealed. Such clarification proves extremely significant in the texts I will analyse in this thesis, as in those narratives the sense of the public arena undoubtedly goes beyond the mere physical space and is concerned with what that physicality allows or *hinders*.

In *Enlightening Romanticism, Romancing the Enlightenment: British Novels from 1750 to 1832* (2009) Miriam L. Wallace notes that passions, in particular, were seen as "dangerous because they lead women to neglect the duties which should be encouraged by pursuing reason and religion" (2009: 73), a conception that created a distinction between male passion, which was to be encouraged and female one, which was utterly urged against in order for them to remain 'virtuous' and thus *appealing*.

Eugene Stelzig's *Romantic Autobiography in England* (2009) also stresses the importance of the collection of voices embedded within epistolary tales as 'trapped' "between private meditation and public communication" (2009: 18). Within this dilemma, these narrative voices find themselves reflecting on their private concerns, amongst which the expression of their *personal* desire became central.

2.9. Depicting Unconventional Women: The Implications behind the Femme Fatale Figure

Within the analysis of women's reactions to their limiting situation, the notion of 'mixed' characters is somehow viewed with distrust, as such a figure entails a degree of fault that heroines could never exhibit and, as such, mixed heroines were usually taken as negative examples of what would happen if one were to *resist* the ideal configuration that entailed their utmost virtuousness and perfection.

Eve Taylor Bannet's *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (2000) introduces the notion of 'mixed' characters in a positive light. Bannet argues that mixed characters could be "justified on the grounds of probability, verisimilitude, or realism" (2000: 61) and, thus, could be claimed to embody a much a much closer portrayal of a 'real' woman than any idealised heroine, who despite her status as a woman of "rational sobriety and finely tuned sensibility, an exemplar of the emerging middle-class virtues of self-restraint and civilising moral sentiment" (Chaplin 2015: 75) failed to exhibit *realistic* qualities and instead somehow became such an idealised model that it was extremely difficult to live up to this high standard.

Ingrid Tague's *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690-1760* (2002) approaches the commonplace dichotomy of separate spheres and proposes a *resistance* of such differentiation by focusing instead on the "ways in which women could ignore, accept, or even exploit ideals of feminine behavior depending on their particular circumstances, often in ways quite different from the intentions of the theorists who propagated those ideals" (2002: int 6).

Hence, Tague also shares the vision that binary oppositions should be questioned and calls for an exploration of women's particular responses to their specific set of circumstances. Such responses prove crucial to analyse the woman question and try to determine the degree of *compliance* that woman actually 'agrees' to.

In *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing. Interrupting the Harlot's Progress* (2002) Roxanne Eberle observes that some radical writers *resisted* the "'common' sense pragmatism and the domestic woman" (2002: int 4) and, instead, espoused the presence of a "sexually aggressive but articulate speaking subject" (2002: int 4). Their writing put forward the need to *excel* the culturally accepted configuration of the 'proper' lady and propose an alternative to that model, one that would allow for the presence of a *desiring* female subject who could express herself and become the articulate speaking subject Eberle refers to. This *need* to excel the widely accepted figure of the 'proper' woman is vital in my reading of the texts, and lies at the centre of my research question, as to which level of narrative authority females actually *attain* in those texts.

This prompts a (re-) evaluation of previous literary accounts of woman in the search for an *expansion* of those in ways that can reconcile the felt tension between female subjectivity and the pressures that *hinder* its expression.

Ariana Craciun's *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2003) points out that this preoccupation with reputation and the fear of transgression were constant motifs in fiction, especially in fiction produced by women. In such texts, the presence of unconconventional female characters entailed "critiques and interrogations of sexual difference (the 'natural' realm of biological sex) as a historically stable and stabilizing reality" (2003: int 3). Unconventional females were a powerful *destabilizing* force, as they opposed social and cultural mores and *defied* the very definition of 'acceptable' feminine behaviour. Those females who refused to 'willingly' accept their prescribed role and who "did not fit in the 'good' category, not wanting to conform to the requirements that were bestowed upon her" were immediately identified as 'fallen', fatal women.

Femme fatale figures, who clearly cannot be categorised as 'proper' women, are present in some of the texts I will analyse in this thesis, and will prove critical to pose an *implicit* threat to the status quo through their "inherent 'doubleness' as both feminine and fatal" (Craciun 2003: int 7) to The allure of femme fatales resided precisely in their ability to surpass boundaries and appear to be "nebulous, ethereal and impenetrable" (Braun 2012: int 1) as they do so.

Elizabeth Kraft's *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684-1814 in the Voice of Our Biblical Mothers* (2008) argues that works that have traditionally been denoted as 'amoral' are in fact "ethical precisely because of the presence of female subjectivity, desire, and pleasure" (2008: 22). Such presence was traditionally taken as indicative of immorality but, as Kraft rightly notes, desire and pleasure do not *necessarily* entail viciousness and can actually become signals of morality.

The constant 'menace' of being accused of amorality was very much felt, especially from the part of women. There was a constant fear of transgression, of 'violating' those moral codes that would deny them their status as 'proper' females.

In *Lewd and Notorious: Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century* (2003), Katharine Kitredge reflects on the fact that, the moment a transgression occurred, women were perfectly aware of the fact that their destiny was from that moment 'doomed' to social ostracism and that there was no possible way in which they could return to their previous 'virtuous' state. Kitredge argues that women "understand that once they have moved outside society's behavioral/sexual boundaries, there will be no return and no alternative place of safety" (2003: int1).

Alessa John's *Women's Utopias of the Eighteenth Century* (2003) provides an analysis of the role unconventional or 'fatal' women play in the configuration of the female *persona* was sometimes associated with the notion of feminine utopias, in which "innovative visions were not linked to political upheaval, subversion and radical ideology" (2003: int 16). Instead, what these feminine utopias espoused was located in a *personal* level "in order to anticipate deep reforms in the microeconomy of personal relationships and everyday community interaction" (2003: int 16). Femme fatale figures allowed for a reconsideration of the ways in which personal relationships were established in the sense that they called for a reform of the ways in which it was 'acceptable' to behave, both privately and publicly, and brought attention to *alternative* modes of behaviour that defied such established social norms.

Malgorzata Luczynska-Holdys' *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century* (2013) also reflects on the notion of female transgression by paying attention to the appealing figure of the femme fatale. Luczynska-Holdys claims that the irresistible charm of femme fatales is not restricted to

their "sexual allure" (2013: int 6) but on their capacity to go beyond that and *maintain* their "independence, submissiveness, elusiveness, unattainability" (2013: int 6). Femme fatales appear to be impossible to attain and therein lays their *potential*, as the mystery and ambiguity that surrounds their persona reinforce their 'power'

C: CONTENT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3. Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*

3.1. Virtue under Threat: The Ambiguities around the Female Body

Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) exhibits the notion of "sensibility with a virtue under threat" (Hammond and Reagan 2006: 186); a virtue that *needs* to be heightened to the extreme. Such emphasis on presenting virtue endangered introduces another significant component of domestic fiction: "its excitement of readerly compassion" (Hammond and Reagan 2006: 185). Readers needed to be immersed in the narrative, tremendously *moved* by its acute depiction of sentiment. In this respect, the notion of virtue is less linked to the extraction of a moral lesson than to the active involvement of readers in what is termed "luxuriance in the very spectacle of suffering" (Hammond and Reagan 2006: 185) [2].

This constant presence of extreme emotions is linked to bodily expression. Interpreting bodily gestures became imperative, as bodies could 'speak' in ways that language failed to do and hence uncover what otherwise would have remained secret.

[2] Samuel Johnson's observation with regards to Sheridan's Sidney Bidulph, "I know not, madam, that you have a right, to make your readers suffer so much" (Hammond and Reagan 2006: 185), seems to imply that Sheridan took the emphasis on *feeling* a bit too far. Yet, as Hammond and Reagan note, Johnson's assertion signals the "development of 'sentiment' into the 'sentimental novel'" (2006: 185) and, thus, highlights the relevance of producing an *affecting* response in the reader.

The cult of sensibility[3] was sensitive of such *power* of the body, and "grounded in the belief that bodies could not lie, sensibility coded actions with specific intentions" (Kramer 2015: 92).

In the case of women's body, for instance, reading its signals was essential, as it had the capacity to express women's most intimate desires. Propriety dictated that a virtuous woman ought to be silent; and it is precisely in silence where "her body could speak more eloquently than language" (Kramer 2015: 92). Yet, as critics have repeatedly pointed out, the lucidity associated with women's bodies was far from being unequivocal and this prompted many novelists of the period to explore the ambiguities surrounding women's non-verbal expressions, especially those concerning the differentiation between genuine sensibility and mere pretentiousness (Kramer 2015: 192).

Frances Sheridan was amongst those novelists who highlighted sensibility's enigmatic nature by portraying Sidney Bidulph as a truly virtuous heroine of sensibility who "demonstrates the importance of the *display* of suffering in order to affirm women's proper virtue" (Kramer 2015: 92) while, at the same time, contrasting her to another female character, Miss Burchell, whose "sensibility is entirely superficial, but staged on exactly the same lines as Sidney's" (Kramer 2015: 92). Miss Burchell exemplifies the easiness with which a woman can stage her 'virtuousness' so perfectly that everyone around her is convinced of her truthfulness. Even the reader may be inclined to sympathise with a character such as Miss Burchell. Her imitation of sensibility is so convincing that, though doubts may present themselves and shed doubt

[3] With regards to the cult of sensibility, Hammond and Reagan draw attention to the vital significance of works based not on female virtue but rather on *men* of feeling, such as Sarah Fielding's *David Simple* (1744), Richardson *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771). These critics argue that men were encouraged to embody "'feminine' values of modesty, delicacy and sympathy, in an attempt to soften conventional constructions of masculine conduct" (Hammond and Reagan 2006: 186).

to the extent of her sincerity, the reader is ultimately tempted to choose to ignore all suspicion and *trust* her character.

This highlights sensibility's paradoxical nature, as it insists on women being "inherently, naturally virtuous" (Kramer 2015: 92) but also introduces women as "skilful liars, naturally artificial" (Kramer 2015: 92). This intrinsic ambiguity of virtue makes it difficult to categorise women as either virtuous or artificial. Such binary distinction is discarded by the suspicion that if virtue is based on an obligation to please, to keep *appearances* and display certain emotions that are supposedly 'natural' but can be easily feigned, then, virtue and artificiality are not as distanced as it may appear.

Gestures are essential to obtain meaning and hence to determine virtuousness. By contrast, language is viewed as misleading. In women's case, language is regarded with intense scepticism, as their language tends to express "exactly the opposite of the 'truth' expressed through her body" (Kramer 2015: 92). It is non-verbal responses such as weeping and blushing that provide the key to heroines' *real* state of mind. Yet, deciphering 'virtue' was problematic, which reflected "a widespread culture of anxiety over the stability of interpretation that sensibility offered for decoding of individual virtue" (Kramer 2015: 92). In the case of heroines a higher level of demand was imperative as, for them, "sensibility must be detectable in the most minute of characteristics" (Kramer 2015: 92)[4].

In sentimental fiction, the representation of women's fevered bodies served this purpose. Depicting a scene in which the heroine is subject to a life-threatening fever, usually preceded by a distressful event, allows writers to "justify their claims of verisimilitude" (Ward 2007: int 19) as well as their own "authority" (Ward 2007: int 19). The female body was depicted as much more prone to disorders, including ardent

[4] Kramer lists several of those characteristics, which include the ways in which heroines responded to artistic representations and, significantly, their ability to exhibit loyalty towards their families, friends and authoritative figures (2015: 92).

fevers and, although this scenes of illness served a clear narrative purpose, as many critics have noted, it was also problematic, since those fevers were intrinsically linked to "female sexuality and all the anxieties attending it" (Ward 2007: int 24) and hence revealed the recurrent concern for the unruliness of women's desires.

In *Sidney Bidulph*, the heroine's agitated fever signals her fragile state, both physically and mentally but, most crucially, it introduces the notion that, although she cannot exert her agency and react to what occurs around her, her body is the one which is *responding*. Her body displays her state of mind and, unable to cope with such distress, submerges her into a deplorable, feverish physical state which renders her absolutely powerless. Her sharp sensibility proves inefficient in this circumstance, as her disordered state prevents her from delving into the true cause of her distress and, instead, she relies on figures of authority to unveil it to her: "Ah! dear madam, cry'd I, scarce knowing what I said, I rely on your maternal goodness; I am sure you have done what is proper" (42). This way, Sidney renounces her right to attempt to understand the mysterious circumstances around Faulkland's affair with Miss Burchell and trusts that Lady Bidulph has done "what is proper".

Throughout the narrative, as Sidney herself claims, self-sacrifice seems to be her only possible course of action: "I was born to sacrifice my own peace to that of other people; my life is become miserable, but I have no remedy for it but patience" (145). Sydney does not *assert* her narrative authority and, instead, repeatedly chooses to sacrifice her own wishes to that of others. Yet, such willing complaisance only leads to her destruction and incessantly produces tragic outcomes. Sidney's conception of her willingly submissive *self* is problematic throughout the whole novel and it is unclear whether that representation actually represents her *true* self or simply the image she has

created for herself. Ultimately, her refusal to take charge of her *own* narrative produces undesirable effects in Sydney's life.

3.1.1. The Importance of the True Self: Depicting the 'Good' Woman

Sentimental narratives were concerned primarily with the representation of "transparent and authentic writing" (Rouslton 1998: int xiii). The unveiling of the *true* self became crucial, which required a thorough, exhaustive process of self-examination so as to inspect the binary opposition between inside and outside. As Rouslton notes, such fundamental differentiation between inner and outer expression was "no longer tied to rank but to virtue" (1998: int xiii). Sidney Bidulph's self-examination reflects a clear conception of what her virtue ought to be based on:

> I think we ought always to form some laws to ourselves for the regulation of our conduct: without this, what an impertinent dream must the life be of almost every young person of our sex? [...] I have been accustomed from my infancy to pay an implicit obedience to the best of mothers; the conforming to this never yet cost me an uneasy minute, and I am sure never will" (27)

Sidney's awareness of her need for regulation indicates her internalization of the values on which her virtue ought to be sustained, mainly a self-sacrificing attitude, by relying on authority figures and offering her absolute compliance. Sidney's narration introduces the importance of an *authentic* inspection of the self. In sentimental fiction, different strategies were used to produce such effect of authentic portrayal. In epistolary tales, this effect was achieved through the use of the first-person narrator and the

presence of a preface in which the editor stated that a manuscript has been found. As Roulston argues, the epistolary letter provided the perfect medium through which to provide an 'authentic' exploration of the self:

> Through the epistolary form, the question of authenticity is imagined in both senses, as that which is original rather than copied and that which is true to the self. The letter enables the fictional to incorporate the real and to represent it, thereby reproducing the world as it is, creating the illusion of authentic experience. It can include the real within the imagined and, in this way, legitimate the novel form as one that has moved beyond romance toward a burgeois realism (1998: int xvi)

Rouslton's analysis of epistolary narration draws attention to the fact that this narrative form blurs the boundary between reality and imagination. The real and the imagined are so intermingled that they become interchangeable. Hence, in the letter form that which is 'real' contains the imaginary and, at its turn, that which is initially perceived as dreamlike and illusory actually becomes 'real' and authentic. Authenticity is accessed, not by establishing a clear distinction between what is tangible and what pertains to the subject's imagination, but rather by understanding that it is only when such distinction is broken that we gain *access* to the true self that is being described.

Sidney's narrative self "may not be 'real' but is morally authentic and that, in this sense, has the authority to reverse the relationship between the real and the fictional" (Roulston 1998: int xvii). Roulston relates Sidney's moral authenticity to other exemplary heroines, such as Pamela, Clarissa and Julie. The narratives within which these heroines are embedded all display the need to represent a genuine self that

fulfils a very specific role: that of the conduct-book heroine who embodies "models of domestic virtue" (Roulston 1998: int xvii).

However, such role does not constitute a universal parameter through which to categorise women, as the eighteenth-century construction of the feminine self was tremendously paradoxical. Such female representation is subject to marked, non-remitting scrutiny. As Rouslton argues, the difficulty inherent in the portrayal of an convincing female self lies in the fact that "the alienated and resisting self, around which the notion of virtue is constructed and tested, becomes defined exclusively in terms of gender in the process of integrating that virtue into the social framework" (1998: 25)[5].

Sidney Bidulph's virtue is not constructed around an 'alienated and resisting self' but rather around the notion of the good woman, a woman whose "duty and self-denial" (Stewart 2010: 102) are unquestionable[6]. Sidney perfectly exemplifies desirable feminine traits, such as her possession of a "rational sobriety *and* finely tuned sensibility, an exemplar of the emerging middle-class virtues of self-restraint and civilising moral sentiment" (Chaplin 2015: 75)[7]. Throughout the narrative, Sidney refuses to exert any sort of agency and, instead, wilfully refuses her will to that of her mother: "Fain would I bring cheerfully to my mother's will, for I have no will of my own. I never knew what it was to have one, and never shall, I believe" (78). Sidney satisfies the cultural expectation that she ought to renounce her *own* desires and always regard what propriety – and authoritative figures – dictates as the best course of action.

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[5] The difficulty to integrate the notion of female virtue within the social framework is also considered by Schrahmm, who argues that virtue was an immensely contested category, since "contemporary commentators disputed the source of virtue […], its location in the public or private spheres and consequently its gendered expression" (2012: 78).

[6] Such duty and self-denial are culturally viewed as beneficial, not only to women, but to society at large (Stewart 2010: 112).

[7] Hammond and Reagan also indicate it was in the eighteenth century that women were first introduced as "custodians of moral and emotional virtue […] encouraged to think of themselves as queens in a domestic realm" (2006: int 11).

In this respect, Sidney's acceptance of the social role that is expected from her has made it impossible for her to incorporate into her "self-perceptions desires that did not support this stereotype" (Poovey 1984: 15) and she has always found herself unable to discern that such stereotype "was prescription, not description, and thus to renounce it" (Poovey 1994: 15). Sidney's conduct-book reproduction of alluring feminine traits only serves to uncover the limitations of such restrictive configuration. By depicting a perfect, idealised heroine, Sheridan is able to illustrate the conflict inherent in such 'perfect' ideals of femininity. Such conflict is apparent when Sidney acknowledges that she feels the need to *suppress* what she experiences:

> You know my mother is rigid in her notions of virtue; and I was determined to shew her that I would endeavour to imitate her. I therefore suppressed the swelling passion in my breast, and, with as much composure as I could assume, told her, I thought she acted as became her; and that, with regard to Mr Faulkland, my opinion of his conduct was such, that I never desired to see him more. This answer, dictated perhaps by female pride (for I will not answer for the feelings of my heart at that instant), was so agreeable to my mother, that she threw her arms about my neck, and kissed me several times; blessing, and calling me by the most endearing names at every interval. Her tenderness overcame me; or, to deal with sincerity, I believe I was willing to make it an excuse for weeping" (49)

Sidney feels obliged to emulate her mother's virtuous disposition and hence she believes it is imperative for her to *restrain* her own sentiments. The conflict within her is apparent in this quotation, a moment in which her display of filial obedience is in direct opposition with the feelings *hidden* within her breast, feelings she must disguise

in an act of sensibility – her weeping. This scene introduces the sense that her configuration as a proper woman limits her capacity to express the *true* cause of her distress, which she cannot reveal, not even in a private letter written to a confidante[8]. Once again, Sydney *denies* herself the chance to exert her narrative authority and such denial proves problematic.

3.1.2. The Influence of the Richardsonian Model: Is Virtue Rewarded?

Frances Sheridan dedicated *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* to Samuel Richardson and his influence is indeed very much felt throughout the whole novel. Richardson's fiction established virtue as "private, feminine, sincere and sentimentally expressive of the goodness of the heart" (Schrahmm 2012: 77) and reinforced the belief that women's "demonstration of purity required the negation of action – a relatively passive resistance to temptation" (Schrahmm 2012: 78). Sheridan evidently inherited this model by envisioning the exemplary virtuous heroine Sidney Bidulph, whose constant negation of action does indeed verify the purity of her heart but, nonetheless, also proves to be problematic.

In *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), Richardson introduced the notion of "virtue compatible with earthily happiness" (Stewart 2010: int 31). Through the figure of a female character from humble origins, who naturally would desire to rise in the social scale, Richardson appeared to imply that women "needed the incentive of tangible rewards to induce them to accept subordination" (Stewart 2010: 34). Within this socio-economic dimension, another significant element was the intended "moral reform" (Stewart 2010: int 31), which was to be achieved through the figure of Pamela

[8] Mary Poovey argues that "a woman's social contribution was, in essence, self-control, just as her primary antagonist was herself" (1984: 27). This idea is reflected in Sidney's excessive self-control, which appears to be troublesome for her and, indeed, forces her to become her own antagonist.

herself. Pamela is then seen as having the power to convert Mr. B. and hence the roles of gendered power struggle are reversed.

Sidney appears to have no tangible rewards for her subordinate state and she never exerts any sort of power on the hero of the novel, Orlando Faulkland. Once Mr. Faulkland's involvement with Miss Burchell is unveiled, she could, just like Pamela, exert some sort of power over Faulkland to *transform* him but, instead, Sidney chooses to follow her mother's dictates and banish him from her heart, an act which is applauded by Lady Bidulph:

> I was afraid your regard for him might make this a difficult task; but I rejoice to find your virtue is stronger than your passion. *I* loved as well as you, but I overcame it when I found it a duty to do so; and I see your mother's example is not lost upon you" (50)

Sidney distances herself from characters like Pamela in some respects, such as in her incessant refusal to become an agent of moral (male) reform but, in others, she mirrors Pamela, since they both represent a kind of femininity ruled by "subordination willingly entered into" (Stewart 2010: 38). Significantly, despite their willing consent of subordination, both Sidney and Pamela share another crucial aspect: they both call for a "recognition of the value of the self's experience as distinct from social models of value" (Roulston 1998: 25). No matter how willingly they accept their subordination, these female characters' experience of the self is introduced as a unique, deeply personal component[9].

Sidney's personal experience is marked by unremitting episodes of suffering, and yet, despite her intense distress, she never displays a defiant attitude or discerns any

[9] Works such as *Pamela* and *Sidney Bidulph* can be taken as examples of the fact that the sentimental novel acquired "authority over femininity" (Harol 2006: 139), as these texts produced "a discursive space that is less interested in bodily interiors than subjective ones and thus that has the authority to speak about women in ways that science failed" (Harol 2006: 139).

unfairness with regards to her tragic fate. Critics such as Oliver identify Sidney's filial obedience as the primal cause of her suffering, as her "strict adherence to duty leads to little but trouble and hardship" (2003:683)[10]. Sidney herself, despite her passive acceptance of all sorrows that befall her, acknowledges her misery was brought by her strict adherence to duty:

> Had that ill-fated woman died the common way, with what joy, what exultation could I have rewarded his honest persevering love! all my duties fulfilled, obedience to my mother, justice to the woman I thought injured, reverence to the memory of my husband, the respect due to my own character. Should I not, my Cecilia, after thus being acquitted of all other obligations, have been to blame, if, after a series of misfortunes, all brought on by my strict adherence to those duties; should I not have been to blame for refusing at length to do justice to the most deserving of men?" (463)

Sidney's acknowledgement of the devastating consequences that her virtuous disposition has produced introduces the suggestion that preconceived notions of virtue have been undermined. The passivity that virtue entails has produced no reward whatsoever. Sidney's insistence on constantly choosing duty over desire and, hence, her inability to *retain* her narrative authority has brought about her destruction. Sheridan has embedded Sidney with no command over her actions and has denied her the capacity to "assume moral agency" (Schellenberg 2005: 38), with disastrous consequences.

As Binhammer argues, although the conflict between agency and duty is never fully deciphered in the narrative, Sheridan's novel does "provide however, a compelling argument for women's active participation in moral choices and that abdicating

[10] This view is shared by Stewart, who argues that Sidney's misfortune can be interpreted as "the darkest of satires on the duty of obedience" (2010: 122).

affective and erotic agency to conventional gender rules will certainly not bring women happiness" (2009: 95). In this sense, Sidney's tragic tale bears witness to the disturbing effects that virtue and duty could entail when taken to extreme and not rightly balanced[11].

Critics such as Olivier offer yet another plausible interpretation of Sidney's passive obedience and actually discern some degree of power in it. Sidney's refusal of Faulkland is the centre around which most of the narrative revolves but such refusal can be read as the only means through which Sidney can achieve some power, as long as she refuses to marry Faulkland she "has the power to make him her instrument, expressing her rage and enacting her revenge" (Oliver 2003: 697). From this perspective, marrying Faulkland would not be a reward for the heroine, as it "would change this balance of power, subsuming the individuality of woman into the plurality of the family unit, shifting power from woman to man" (Oliver 2003: 697). This reading clearly contrasts with other readings of Sheridan's novel, which tend to focus on Sidney's heightened passivity and filial obedience, and the tragic fate to which both Faulkland and herself are subject precisely because of Sidney's lack of active agency. In Oliver's view, Sidney's refusal to take action is actually a means to achieve power, as it allows her to 'control' Faulkland, remaining the desired object, and all this power would be completely eradicated the moment she became his wife. Hence, in a way, Sidney's inaction is not only desirable but also *necessary*.

However, as I discussed earlier, Sidney's refusal to become an active agent and her insistence on relying exclusively on the figure of Lady Bidulph is problematic. Misunderstanding is a recurrent motif in the novel, as Lady Bidulph, who constantly takes over the role of interpreter in the text, often misreads both situations and

[11] Travers also supports this reading by arguing that "the story reveals that premature judgment and premature happy endings inevitably fail because readers cannot see beyond the appearance of justice and the limitations of present perspective" (2007:47).

characters and hence her personal interpretation only further obscures the narrative and prevents Sidney from accessing what occurs around her, leaving her with a 'version' of events that is enormously subjective and biased. The main source of misunderstanding revolves around Mr Faulkland's letter[12]. Such letter is crucial to achieving a real understanding of Faulkland and Miss Burchell's relationship and yet Lady Bidulph fails to rightly interpret Faulkland's narrative, as Sidney herself acknowledges:

> My mother had not patience to read this letter through; nice and punctilious as her virtue was, she passed a censure on the crime in gross, without admitting any palliating circumstance. But I blame her not; the excellence of her morals, made her scrupulous in weighing that of others (360)

Even when she learns that her mother misread Faulkland's letter, Sidney continues to refuse to place herself in a position to discern events for *herself*, and insists that her mother's moral superiority entitles her to interpret *for* her and that interpretation, no matter how erroneous it might be, continues to be the only *possible* interpretation, hence discarding any other plausible judgment Sidney might form.

Texts are not the only aspects which are misread in the novel. The female body, as previously discussed, is subject to ambiguity and its *proper* reading proves to be a very challenging and demanding task. Thus, the female body, too, is often misconstrued. This is clearly seen through the figure of a female character like Miss Burchell, who stands in complete opposition to Sidney's configuration as a proper

[12] The devastating outcome of Lady Bidulph's misinterpretation of Faulkland's letter is noted by Ward, who argues that "Lady Bidulph's interception and misreading of such critical text proves disastrous" (Ward 2007: 46)

woman. The act of decoding Miss Burchell is no easy undertaking and, most often, 'readings' of Miss Burchell prove inefficient.

Lady Bidulph quickly bonds with Burchell and feels extremely moved by her distressful situation. As a moral agent, Lady Bidulph attempts to make Sidney complicit of her (mis)reading of Burchell, as she "zealously champions Miss Burchell and encourages Sidney to do the same, emphasizing their common suffering at Faulkland's hands" (Ward 2007: 46). However, in the same way that Lady Bidulph proved herself unable to rightly interpret Faulkland's letter, she is victim to the same prejudice when 'reading' Miss Burchell. Prejudiced by the story of seduction in her past, Lady Bidulph instantly believes Miss Burchell's narrative and does not question that she is an 'innocent' victim.

Sidney proves to be a much more careful observer than her mother and she is able to notice certain aspects of Miss Burchell's attitude that make her suspect she is not as innocent as she presents herself to be. As Ward notes, Sydney suspects that "Miss Burchell's passions denote sensuality rather than sensibility" (2007: 47), and is able to note a crucial distinction that Lady Bidulph fails to establish[13].

The constant misreading of both text and character increases the narrative tension that permeates the novel and intensifies the sensation that, in this text, virtue is not rewarded and the happy ending that we might expect from such a sentimental tale will be not be produced. Throughout the whole narrative, a markedly rigid "moral code of feminine propriety" (Binhammer 2009: 85) is enacted, which enhances the suffering the heroine must endure in such a story. The rigid parameters within which Sidney's femininity is embedded are so marked, so restrictive that she is 'trapped' within a

[13] Yet, as Ward rightly argues, in spite of her acute perception Sydney "is blinded by her own virtue to the extent of Miss Burchell's duplicity" (2007: 47). Her virtuous, trusting disposition disqualifies her as a rigorous observer and, despite her suspicions, she *does* trust Miss Burchell.

framework in which her individuality, her capacity to act on her own desires or even to make crucial decisions is denied to her.

As I have argued throughout this section, Sidney's utter failure to analyse and interpret events for herself, her *failure* to exert her narrative authority and her constant reliance on figures of authority that interpret *for* her only complicates the narrative and demotes her to a secondary position, a position in which she is a mere spectator with no voice of her own, as she claims "I am treated like a baby, that knows not what is fit for it to chuse or to reject" (89). It is not uncommon for female figures to rely on authoritative figures for advice and guidance but, in this novel, Sidney's passivity is so severe that she ultimately resigns her *own* perspective and becomes a woman who has no authority whatsoever, with dreadful consequences.

Contemporary critics of Sheridan's novel address the problematic nature of passive resignation in the text, as they identify "a mixed message and question the extent to which passive female resignation is the clear moral [...] demanding the reader's scepticism toward strict lines and absolute principles" (Binhammer 2009: 86). Sidney's tragic destiny would serve as exemplary not of the value of passive female resignation but instead of the troublesome nature strict obedience entails. In this sense, as Binhammer notes, the moral message of the story would not be directed towards endorsing female compliance but rather towards the idea that, when not rightly balanced, such compliance leads to an appalling outcome.

In the section I have analysed the ways in way *Sidney Bidulph* incorporates the notion of virtue and, especially, into Sheridan's use of this crucial notion to draw attention to the ambiguities surrounding femininity. The novelist stresses the crucial importance of the representation of the female self and subtly introduces the suggestion that the novel's tragic ending exemplifies not only virtue not rewarded but also the

dangers that indulging virtuousness presumably entails. I will now focus my attention on yet another significant literary tradition, amatory fiction, to determine the effects that Sheridan's incorporation of this tradition produces in the narrative.

3.2. The Seduction Narrative

In *British Seduced Maidens*, Staves sets out to disclose the motives that lie behind the fascination that both writers and readers felt towards the intriguing figure of the "seduced maiden" (1981: 132) and, crucially, "how contemporary feelings about seduction reflect a cultural stage in which women were on their way to equality" (1981: 132). What his argument uncovers is that the repetitive pattern of the pathos of seduction is not simply concerned with providing literary entertainment but, potentially, reveals significant aspects that would provide a better understanding of the female experience, since such experience is *essential* in such narratives.

The first act of disclosure is the fact that seduced maidens are not easily characterised, as they embed a multiplicity of layers, all equally significant: "loathsome temptresses, damned sinners, sordid criminals, pioneers of sexual freedom, boring fools, or simply as normal" (Staves 1981: 109). A seduced maiden is not simply either friend or foe, innocent victim or condemned sinner[14]; she is all of them at once, both virtuousness and criminality collide in the same persona and stand for the difficulty to signal a *unique* category within this character of the seduced maiden. Such ambiguity that seduction involves is apparent in Sidney's first account regarding Miss Burchell:

[14] Staves calls for a dismantling of binary oppositions regarding women's configuration, as he observes that if women were to be categorized according to binary distinctions, taken as either "good or bad, maiden and whore, then the very idea of seduced maiden seems paradoxical" (1981: 114).

> I know not, my dear, whether you will be of my opinion; but I cannot help thinking, that there was something like art in Miss Burchell's behaviour, far from that candour which Mr Faulkland seemed to expect from her. My mother mentioned the *pains* that she supposed had been taken to *seduce* her; her deep blush at this hint, make me suspect that her answer was not dictated by sincerity. She saw my mother was not acquainted with the particulars, and that she was willing to pass a favourable judgment on her fault; it looks to me as if she laid hold of this prejudice – and yet she *owned* that Mr Faulkland had never promised to marry her – I know not what to think; but there appears to me, upon the whole, something evasive and disingenuous in her conduct (107)

In the eighteenth century a wide variety of approaches towards seduction could be discerned, including "amusement, or to treat seduction with a harsher 'realism'" (1981: 114), that is without romanticising it. The key resided in determining the extent of the woman's *complaisance* in the affair. If she maintained a resisting posture, "yielding only after a protracted siege and under otherwise extraordinary circumstances" (1981: 115), then she could fall into the category of 'seduced maiden' but if, by contrast, she is effortlessly convinced, then this attitude obviously further complicates her status as *seduced*.[15]

Staves also notes that the century's configuration of the desirable woman played a crucial role in stories of seduction. The charm of the seduced maiden resides in her embodiment of "precisely those virtues the culture specially prized in young women" (Staves 1981: 118) and, thus, a direct correlation can be traced between the culture's configuration of alluring feminine qualities and the fatal consequences that very configuration may cause, as "the pretty young girl who is seduced usually finally falls

[15] Staves exemplifies this point by making reference to eighteenth-century well-known, yet radically different, female protagonists, such as Moll Flanders or Fanny Hill who being "easily persuaded" (1981: 115) are not "objects of pathos" (1981: 115).

because she is simple, trusting and affectionate" (1981: 118). Staves highlights that although the woman's fall is lamented, ultimately, her fall is preferable than having women "to be knowing, suspicious, or hardhearted" (1981: 118). Hence, there is the suggestion that in a way the century's high demands on women to keep them unknowing, trusting and affectionate, only increases the possible scenarios in which those same demands actually make them vulnerable and easily targeted.

3.2.1. The Unceasing Pattern of Seduction Stories: Much More than Cautionary Narratives

Most critics interpret the repetitive pattern of seduction narratives[16] as signalling both "that changing historical conditions open up new objects of understanding and that narrative helps to constitute and to resolve conflicts posed by those new objects" (Binhammer 2009: int 1). Thus, seduction tales are regarded as opening new possibilities for the interpretation of narrative objects which, at turn, introduce inconsistencies that must be dealt with throughout the text. Such enrichment brought upon by narrative tales is used not to "naturalize a domesticated de-sexed model for knowing one's heart" (Binhammer 2009: int 1) but essentially to provide a "historical contestation over what it might mean for women to have a right to feel love and erotic desire for their conjugal male" (Binhammer 2009: int 1).

In domestic fiction, desire is usually deflected but, by contrast, in seduction tales such desire is explored and actually taken as a decisive part of women's knowledge not only of their heart but of their own *selves*. Only by understanding the nature of her own desires can the woman truly access such inner awareness.

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[16] Binhammer argues that such repetitive pattern of seduction can be traced endlessly in "fiction, non-fiction, ballads, essays, and miscellanies in the second half of the eighteenth century" (Binhammer 2009: int 1)

Binhammer detects that such understanding is not possible in domestic stories, as they are typically directed towards indoctrinating women "into restrictive ideas of female chastity" (Binhammer 2009: int 2) and hence instructing them "not to have desires" (Binhammer 2009: int 2). In contrast, however, Binhammer regards seduction narratives as being much more complex than simply didactic, cautionary tales:

> I argue that the popularity of seduction tales in the period reflects the absence, rather than the presence, of a dominant ideology that would constrict female desire and that seduction narratives are not punitive and didactic texts, punishing women who act on their feelings, but exploratory and probing texts, pursuing questions about the nature of women's affective and erotic lives […] contradictory and competing versions of the tale existed and that these differences point us toward the untold possible narratives buried under the weight of a bourgeois ideal of femininity that comes to dominate by the end of the eighteenth century (Binhammer 2009: int 2)

Binhammer opposes the belief that seductive narratives are mainly didactic tales urging women to restrain their feelings to avoid punishment and, instead, offers an alternative way to approach such texts: to identify them as "explanatory", whose aim is directed towards detecting the parameters within which women's desires are embedded. This stance regarding seduction stories places them in a position where they symbolise neither "women's "erotic agency nor their passive victimization" (Binhammer 2009: int 3) but, rather, an intermediate area that reveals the intricacy inherent in seduction[17].

[17] Critics have traced the presence of a "dual emphasis on female victimization and female agency, or women as in need of protection and on women with power over their own chastity" (Binhammer 2009: 140). Both victimization and agency are vitally important in seduction stories, as these elements are the ones that the story revolves around. Hence, determining whether the story of seduction is perpetuating female victimization or, rather, espousing for female agency becomes crucial.

Hence, seduction narratives are given tremendous importance, as they become a kind of narrative that “opens up the female heart to knowledge” (Binhammer 2009: int 13) and, consequently, their vital significance lies in their ability to offer women “a hermeneutic frame through which to seek out love’s meanings” (Binhammer 2009: int 13)[18].

The story of seduction is further complicated by writers such as Richardson, who introduce a heroine possessing both purity and sexual determination. In Clarissa’s case, her configuration does not *strictly* imply her being either virtuous or sexually aware, but actually intermingles both elements, as she is a woman “who is chaste while having an autonomous desire, and who knows love without being enslaved by desire” (Binhammer 2009: 26).

Significantly, Clarissa departs from traditional configurations of feminine characters, which were radically split between the unknowing, innocent heroine and the knowledgeable one, who was discarded as a libertine, ‘bad’ woman. Clarissa breaks such distinction, as she “is both innocent *and* knowledgeable” (Binhammer 2009: 31), an unusual combination that threatens to undermine the bourgeois ideology of ideal femininity, which clearly perceives women as “knowing nothing or knowing everything about sex” (Binhammer 2009: 31).

[18] In seduction narratives, the genuineness of the fallen heroines’ love is never questioned; in these kind of narratives it is *love* itself that is doubted, as it is represented “as ineffectual and superfluous to the real issues” (Binhammer 2009: 168)

3.2.2. The Model of Amatory Fiction Established by Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley and Eliza Haywood: Sheridan's Feminist Stance

Writers such as Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley and Eliza Haywood are known for their 'scandalous' narratives, revolving around passion and sexual desire, and delving into the causes and consequences brought upon by seduction.

In Behn's fiction, femininity serves to "reflect masculine desire" (Ballaster 1992: 84) but her plots are further complicated by the figure of the female narrator, who sheds some doubt towards "the rhetorical function of femininity in relation to masculinity" (1992: 84). Behn's narrator usually occupies an uncomfortable position, as she uses her femaleness to acquit herself for "her lack of power as author of events" (1992: 94)[19].

Behn's treatment of gender has generated divided opinions. Some critics identify her as a feminist writer "making suffragette claims for women" (Pearson 1991: 40) while other critics maintain that she cannot be considered as part of the 'combat' for women's cause, precisely because "she compromised with a male-dominated literary establishment" (Pearson 1991: 40). Yet, in any case, the complexity of her work bears witness to both positions. In some of her fiction, the use of a female narrator serves the purpose of reproducing the "empowering of women, or the mockery of men" (Pearson 1991: 41) and, in other texts, the female narrator does not legitimise women's 'power' but rather the opposite, as "the female narrator is depicted, like the female characters, as embedded within patriarchy and limited by it" (Pearson 1991: 41).

[19] Ballaster identifies some power in her stagnation, as "it is this very inactivity that endows her with a privileged position as a writer. Her only 'power' lies in her testificatory writing" (1992: 94).

In *Sidney Bidulph*, gender relations are reversed. Sheridan refuses to replicate traditional gender stereotypes, as shown by her portrayal of unfeminine female characters that disrupt gender roles, as Traver points out:

> Sheridan boldly challenges gendered stereotypes of the rakish villain by presenting Miss Burchell as a 'sly rake in petticoats,' but in doing so, she risks creating and perpetuating new generalizations: men like Arnold and Faulkland seem to be victimized through the sexual predation of women such as Mrs Gerrarde and Miss Burchell or through the biased judgments of Lady Bidulph and Sidney (2007: 51).

Sheridan depicts Miss Burchell as a woman who assumes a masculine role, the rake, but such challenge to gender prototypes only serves to enhance overviews regarding the position of male and female characters. Precisely because Miss Burchell is masculinised, she acquires the mannish 'power' to exert her influence and manipulate others, which proves to be fatal for members of both sex[20]. Unlike Sydney, Miss Burchell does demonstrate a significant amount of narrative authority. She stays in full control of her narrative, which is later revealed as a *false* narrative but which, nonetheless, manages to assure her narrative *dominance* over the Bidulph women. The Bidulph women are both betrayed by this siren-like temptress, who *seduces* them into believing her narrative and makes them feel they are in the right by espousing her 'injured' cause. In the same way, Orlando Faulkland is somehow demasculinised by the character of Miss Burchell, who assumes the male role of dominance in their relationship and actively deprives him from any authority and forces him to resign to

[20] Ward defends that if Miss Burchell is interpreted as taking a masculine role, then, this "perpetuates the perception of 'real' women as passive and virtuous […] woman is presented as passive sufferer at the hands of masculine deceit – even when the deceiver is biologically female" (2007: 47)

her will, which further reinforces the paradoxical nature surrounding Miss Burchell's characterization:

> To the lady herself I must appeal. She will do me justice, and I am sure will be ready to acknowledge that I am no betrayer of innocence, no breaker of promises; that I was surprized into the commission of a fault, for which I have paid so dear a price (59).

The insistence on embedding female characters with paradoxical elements can be traced in female figures from Behn's fiction, particularly in the figure of the female narrator who desperately "seeks male approval by attaching her own sex or by modest self-deprecation" (Pearson 1991: 42) but, at the same time, reflects a critical attitude towards that "male world and its inhabitants" (Pearson 1991. 42), sometimes in a rather forward manner and, others, just subliminally[21].

Thus, Behn's narrator always finds herself trapped between her urge to "endorse the moral system that confines them" (Pearson 1991: 52), as a means to maintain their authority and respectability, but such endorsing coexists with her unrelenting "sympathy towards the female characters who rebel against it" (Pearson 1991: 52). The narrator's inner inconsistency is heightened by her paradoxical sensations, which permeates her narrative and actually enriches it by always introducing a conflicting feeling: that of endorsing a system while still wishing to 'free' oneself from it.

Delarivier Manley also experienced this same conflict but what sets her apart from Behn's narratives is the political dimension her tales signalled. For Manley, the wish to transcend boundaries and obtain access to areas that are usually denied to

[21] Pearson's argument applies not simply apply to Behn but to other women writers as well, as the position they occupied was subject to continuous, intense and, often, contentious inspection, which forced them to "humbly accede to the view that female creativity should be confined to certain fields" (Pearson 1991: 43). Yet, their apparent acquiescence to conventional restraints often "draw mocking attention to them" (Pearson 1991: 43). This signals a potential implicit resistance to the conventional framework that they seem to accept.

women was much more complex than simply opposing patriarchal systems, as she was interested in the "purchase for the woman writer in a world traditionally debarred to her, that of politics and political agency" (Ballaster: 1992: 120).[22] Political affairs were a male arena, and Manley wished to dismantle that barrier to gain admission to that area. As Ballaster points out, "Manley transforms contemporary sexual scandal into political allegory with the purpose of making and breaking political careers, at moments of intense party political crisis" (1992: 128).

If Behn attempted to draw attention to the limitations embedded within the male-dominated ideology by employing a self-conscious female narrator who indirectly mocked those restrictions, Manley focused on a specific set of restrictions, mainly political ones, and attempted to draw attention to those limitations so as to claim the right of women to gain admittance in political affairs. Thus, for Manley seduction tales were not so much about providing an exploration of passions but, actually, about presenting a political metaphor that would agitate political parties.

In Manley's seduction tales, desire is introduced as an inexorable force but what lies at the centre of the narrative is not the unrelenting force of desire, but rather its capability to help individuals "gain power and gratify personal greed" (Ballaster 1992: 137).

Bearing in mind the restrictions that surrounded women's education, women writers such as Eliza Haywood proposed their novels "as sources of information that would protect women from everything from social faux to fraud" (Backsheider 2000: 35). Hence, Haywood's fiction sets out to fulfil the educational needs that women so greatly needed "without the consequences of real-life missteps" (Backsheider 2000:

[22] Manley's interest in political agency has also been noted by other critics, such as Elizabeth Kraft, Kristen S. Saxon and Paula McDowell.

35)[23]. The implication of this is that, through the reading of Haywood's seduction stories, women are able to acquire an education that supplies them with sufficient knowledge to be protected from the various menaces that they could encounter in their lives[24].

At its turn, this insistence on education also acted as a means to justify her work, as her stories of seduction served the clear purpose to enlighten women's mind and make them more aware of the perils that await them. Such 'enlightenment' paradoxically included both a thorough analysis around the nature of passions and a demand for restraint. Eighteenth-century writers consistently insist on the importance of exercising steady self-discipline and Haywood was no exception. Her educative purpose included constant self-monitoring and "statements and dramatizations of this theme are one of the career-long consistencies of Haywood's work" (Backsheider 2000: 35).

In Sheridan's case, her educative purpose is directed towards unveiling and satirizing "the crudity of masculine views of family life, and society's claims" (Doody 1986: 344). The Bidulph women attempt to take a feminist stance "against the restrictions and abasements" (Doody 1986: 344) with the purpose of surpassing the various constraints that surround them. Lady Bidulph's siding with Miss Burchell positions her as "a kind of feminist" (Doody 1986: 331) who displays an uncommon inclination, contrary to contemporary views on seduction, by assuming that the one who should be blamed is the man, not the woman, as Sidney herself claims:

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[23] The educational dimension of Haywood's fiction is also noted by Lubey, who points out that Haywood herself insisted that the aim of her fiction was to "improve readers' capacity to reflect on their interiors and experiences" (2006: 309). Haywood as an educator provides her readers with the tools they need to gain a better understanding of their *interior* lives.

[24] As Comitini observes, the education provided through these tales had a clear 'pleasurable' component, as Haywood's use of different accounts allowed her "to make distinctions between kinds of desire that are available for the reader's pleasurable consumption" (2014: 75). Her narrative aimed not simply at educating her audience but also providing them with a gratifying reading experience. In Comitini's view, pleasure comes from the "aesthetic possibilities of textuality, and the desires that narrative is capable of creating, distancing and reproducing" (2014: 72).

> You may recollect, my dear, that my mother, tho' strictly nice in every particular, has a sort of partiality to her own sex, and where is the least room for it, throws the whole of the blame upon the *man's* side; who, from her early prepossessions, she is always inclined to think they are deceivers of women" (50-1)

Lady Bidulph is convinced that Miss Burchell ought to inspire compassion, not abhorrence, and she undoubtedly defends her and personally takes over the role of protector of her 'delicate' position. Although Lady Bidulph's stance is commendable, as Doody notes, the problem it causes is that, once again, the mother's clear positioning leaves Sidney in a place where she cannot discern and judge events by herself and inevitably has to resign herself to a limiting angle which does not allow her to "absorb her own reactions and decide for herself" (Doody 1986: 331)[25]. Sidney's inability to decide on her own even prompts her to become rival's 'willing' advocate:

> There is less merit, madam, than you ascribe to me in my conduct: I readily acquiesced under my mother's rejection of Mr Faulkland, when he *had* some interest in my heart; but there is no self-denial in what I am about to do for you" (325)

The Bidulphs' unusual defence of the 'female cause' in cases of seduction can be related to the tradition established by chapbooks in which fallen women are not ostracized but rather treated in a fairly positive light:

> In counselling resignation to one's place in the economic hierarchy, these tragic seduction chapbooks are patronizing and moralizing but, significantly, they treat fallen

[25] Doody further develops this point by arguing that both Lady Bidulph and Sidney's insistence on going by principles have led to a destructive outcome, as "Sidney's generosity, prudence, and principle have contributed to her own – and Faulkland's – undoing" (Doody 1986: 340).

> women sympathetically and do not vilify them for their breach of chastity. Instead, they extend responsibility to parents and mentors for selling the bad examples which led to the fall and they appeal to the larger community to show sympathy toward the fallen woman (Binhammer 2009: 129).

In domestic fiction, the usual attitude is the complete opposite of that of chapbooks: although pitiful, fallen women *cannot* be forgiven for their breach of chastity[26]. Chapbooks, interestingly, offer retribution to such fallen heroines, by trying to find the cause of their ruin, a cause that may well be *beyond* their control. These texts require the community to *understand* the fallen woman and bestow some sympathy upon her, something that Lady Bidulph is able to do[27].

Another thought-provoking aspect that can be extracted from chapbooks is their attempt to *extend* responsibility to parents and mentors, thus emphasizing the *vital* importance of women's education. The figures of authority that surround the woman and that, presumably, protect her from peril might be the ones *directly* responsible for her fall, by having either given a deficient example or failed to *properly* educate the woman and hence denied her the means she needed to protect herself from the dangers that may befall upon her. Sidney makes this very reflection and assumes that her mother's partiality towards Miss Burchell is prompted by a deficient education:

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[26] Staves notes the unfairness to which women were subject to in cases of seduction, as they were the ones who received greater reprisal, as "women were subject to such severe and almost unavoidable penalties for having engaged in illicit intercourse while men escaped without any particular consequences" (1981: 116).

[27] In the chapter entitled "The printed penitent" in *Mary Magdalene, Iconografic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, Rachel Geschwind remarks that such sympathetic treatment of fallen women in chapbooks is only valid in the case of *repentant* fallen heroines: "widely circulated and intended for a diverse spectrum of society, chapbooks and their secular counterpart, moralizing broadsheets, contrast the redeemed life of the repentant Magdalene with the miserable ends of unrepentant fallen women" (2012: 108)

> My mother's piety, genuine and rational as it is, is notwithstanding a little tinctured with superstition; it was the error of her education, and her good sense has not been able to surmount it; so that I now the universe would not induce her to change her resolution in regard to Mr. Faulkland. She thinks he *ought* to marry miss B. and she will *ever* think so" (62)

The existence of contradictory attitudes towards women, their education, and most especially towards *seduced* heroines, embeds the Bidulphs' struggle to transcend their limitations with a double dimension: on the one hand, it acknowledges the *need* for an opposition of unfair conditions but, on the other, it also shows that their "higher feminine understanding, these moral views have their own limitations which in turn must be transcended in a larger comprehension" (Doody 1986: 344).

This failure to produce a *durable* opposition to the limitations surrounding female configurations illustrates the fact that Sheridan's work is embedded within contradictory messages, all intermingled within the narrative, as Doody notes:

> Frances Sheridan deals best with ambiguities and questions. The novel is not only a story of loss and disappointment. Its real strength arises from the fact that loss and sorrow have ambivalent causes. The story is interesting not just because it is the story of affliction. It is the story of a life lived around a moral problem. The ensuing actions multiplies the questions surrounding this original moral problem. The characters are interesting because they are capable of moral thought: prefiguring characters in George Eliott. They live in moral complexity (1986: 332).

Doody's remarks on Sheridan's mastery of ambiguities and questions is significant, as this reinforces the notion that her novel *Sidney Bidulph* displays multiple

questions that remain answered throughout the narrative, and remain so after its conclusion. Moral dilemmas are never fully resolved and the ambivalence that permeates this story is never brought to a satisfactory sense of closure. Perhaps this is intentional, reflecting the changeable and unsteady nature of human *frailties*, which only increases the reader's bewitchment with a story that does not aim at producing a clear, permanent solution but instead, offers diverse possible ways to approach and interpret it.

One of the ways in which to approach the text is by observing the curious "feminine code" (Doody 1986: 343) that the Bidulphs subscribe to by insisting on women's responsibility "to and for each other" (Doody 1986: 343). Such sisterhood is dismantled by the figure of Miss Burchell, whose "own piratical code has nothing of the generosity of sisterhood" (Doody 1986: 343). The Bidulphs attempt to sponsor a kind of female friendship in which women can support each other and offer the comfort they need, but women like Miss Burchell, whose own attitude violates the code, do not make such bonding possible and even further distance women from one another[28]. However, as Doody notes, Miss Burchell is able to discern the benefit such feminine code would provide for her and does not hesitate to use it to her own advantage so as to maintain the *control* of her own representation. In this respect, "she is herself an exploiter; she uses others ruthlessly and has no allegiance to inconvenient truth" (1986: 343). As Sir George acknowledges:

> She is only a sly rake in petticoats, of which there are numbers, that you good women would stare at, if you knew their behaviour. She considers men just as libertines of our

[28] Doody notices that in the novel such distancing is even reflected on the masculine side, represented by Sir George, who is able to uncover Miss Burchell's real character but his uncovering does not actually help in any way, as "he can only reveal the truth about Miss Burchell (too late) because he slept with her, and then was disgusted and disturbed to find he had been used" (Doody 1986: 344).

sex do women. She likes for the present; she seduces; her inclinations cool towards an old lover, and are warmed again by a new face" (409)

The Bidulphs genuinely and selflessly offer their feminine support to a woman that, in the end, only manipulates them and convinces them that they are supporting the 'female cause' when, in reality, they are defending a woman who "was able to manipulate a (false) position of Woman wronged, acting for the eyes of the Bidulph women the role of Woman as Eternal Victim" (Doody 1986: 343). The inconsistencies of the roles associated with women are unveiled. If a woman like Miss Burchell is able to display the role of 'wronged' woman so *convincingly* and is able to extract sympathy from virtuous heroines out of her act precisely because "it is so recognizable" (Doody 1986: 343) then, perhaps, such female configuration is not descriptive of *real* seduced woman at all. Women's configurations were prescribed that they were easily feigned by women who had no *genuine* intention at all, and could prompt other women to confuse real from artificial display of feminine traits.

An unremitting presence in both sentimental and amatory texts is precisely the insistence on highlighting the increasing tension between desire and social *constraint*. Such tension is destabilized by Bowers, who takes 'sexual agency' as the combination of sexual desire and the ways in which it can be expressed and, hence, the definition of virtue is no longer characterized by "the absence of desire, or even a refusal to express desire, but the *way* in which desire is expressed" (2000: 49)[29].

One the achievements of writers like Eliza Haywood is precisely her ability to conciliate sexual agency and female virtue. Instead of introducing the two as opposing elements, she manages to merge them in her famous novel *Love in Excess* (1720)

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[29] Bowers notes that the potential threat of feminine desire is not posed by "sexual desire but sexual agency – desire plus expression" (2000: 51).

through the figure of Melliora, a female character who is “a sexual agent at once profoundly transgressive and exemplary of virtue” (Bowers 2000: 51). Interestingly, in a clear departure from the traditional configuration of female protagonists, Melliora’s virtue does not depend on her active deterrence of desire, as her “virtue is exercised within, not simply in response to, transgressive sexual desire” (Bowers 2000: 55).

Haywood subverts conventional patterns by creating a heroine who is able to inhabit a framework in which “resistance is fully complicit with desire just as desire is a constitutive part of virtue” (Bowers 2000: 57). This stance challenges cultural expectation and removes the tension between desire and social constraints. Haywood manages to offer an alternative in which virtue and desire are not mutually exclusive but rather reciprocally dependent (Bowers 2000: 57).

Such coexistence of virtue and desire prompts Bowers to use the term ‘collusive resistance’, which he defines as “a kind of submission that is itself ultimately a form of agency” (2000: 58). Collusive resistance is what marks Melliora as an exceptional heroine who is noticeably dissimilar from other amatory heroines, as she “feels and expresses transgressive lust, and does so without losing her status as virtuous heroine” (Bowers 2000: 58).

In Sidney Bidulph, such collusive resistance can be related the failure to establish a clear differentiation between Sidney as the virtuous woman and Miss Burchell as the fallen one:

> In Frances Sheridan’s novel of marriage, the fates of the married Sidney Bidulph and her seduced counterpart, Miss Burchell, are intimately linked. Sidney’s marriage is caused, in the first instance, by Burchell’s seduction tale […] All the suffering Sidney experiences – her husband’s infidelity, her loss of reputation, her poverty – spring from Burchell’s story of seduction. The interlaced fates of the two women guide the plot […]

> The plot entanglements that repeatedly bring the two women together in an unquestioned bond of female solidarity stem from Sidney's sympathetic response to Burchell as a victim of seduction and gives the novel a feminist undertone […] That Burchell turns out to be less-than-seduced, to have been an active agent in her moment of ruin, does not undermine the earlier identification between wife and fallen woman (Binhammer 2009: 84)

As I argued before, throughout the narrative, Sidney exhibits a compassionate response towards the seduced woman, partly prompted by her willingness to follow her mother's example and partly by her own willingness to do what is *right*. Yet, as Binhammer notes, when Miss Burchell is discovered to be "less-than-seduced" (2009:84), this does not diminish the strong bonding that is established between Sidney and Miss Burchell. Their fates are connected together during the course of the novel, and remain so until the very end. This lack of a real demarcation between both women can be read as their being different embodiments of the *same* kind of person; light and darkness, 'good' and 'bad', virtuous and libertine, all would be just segments that are drawn closer together, intermingled, without clearly delineating where one ends and where the other begins[30].

Miss Burchell's story of seduction is vitally important in the novel, as all significant events in Sidney's life are ruled by this story and its consequences. The mystery around the figure of Miss Burchell and her tale is maintained for most of the narrative and, by withholding Burchell's narrative, "the novel aligns the reader's desire for narrative completion with the desire to hear the full truth of the seduction" (Binhammer 2009: 91). Yet, when the 'truth' of seduction is finally revealed, the reader

[30] Binhammer interprets this lack of differentiation between the two women as Sheridan's "dual intent to write a novel of marriage that speaks to the new claims of a woman's right to her heart yet also to align this plot with a plot of filial duty and social propriety" (2009: 84).

is left with the sensation that such disclosure has not brought any sense of closure, but has actually introduced more unanswered questions around the issue of seduction.

Even after discovering that Miss Burchell was not the victim she had taken her to be, Sidney refuses to act upon such revelation. Miss Burchell's *unveiling* provides Sydney with sufficient ground to, finally, take control of her own narrative and *exert* the authority she could not exert before. Yet, such exertion of narrative authority never occurs. Contrary to expectation, "the knowledge gained from the embedded tale's content does not end up affecting Sidney's plot" (Binhammer 2009: 92), which only reinforces the sense that the novel ultimately declines to ascertain "a clear divide between fallen woman and wife" (Binhammer 2009: 92).

As Binhammer argues, the novel's ultimate stance on seduction appears to be the realization that "since there are no absolutes in her world, the lesson Sidney needs to learn is that she must rely on her own moral agency and that her moral choices need to adapt to changing circumstances" (2009: 92). Sidney's main error relies upon her decision to rely exclusively on figures of authority and hence refusing to take over her 'moral authority', an authority that, presumably, would have allowed her at least to form her *own* judgment on the events that determine her life.

In this section I have reflected on eighteenth-century diverse attitudes towards seduction and on the stance amatory fiction writers such as as Behn, Manley and Haywood took through their writing. All of these aspects contribute to a fuller understanding of the ways in which Sheridan incorporates such attitudes and traditions into her narrative. I will now turn my attention to the role female modesty plays in *Sidney Bidulph*.

3.3. An Exploration of the Feminine Boundaries of Modesty

Women's education was subject to incessant scrutiny in the eighteenth century, and continues to be so even today.[31] The main controversial focus lied on "whether and how women should be educated" (Jones 1990: 98). This debate generated contradictory views, all of which were "always part of wider political debates" (Jones 1990: 98). What most appeared to agree upon was on the need to provide some sort of education for women; some espoused for a limited education and others for a much more inclusive one. In the midst of this controversy a popular genre emerged: conduct literature. Written mostly by male authors, conduct texts were aimed specifically for women and were intended to provide a moralizing as well as educative goal.

Conduct literature was intermingled with another prolific genre, the domestic novel. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from previous scandalous and immoral accounts, sentimental writers produced works that came to be termed 'conduct-book literature', which implied that such texts "were frequently recommended as acceptable reading matter for young women" (Tague 2002: 20) and, hence, that they succeeded in educating women into *proper*, modest models of femininity.

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[31] In *Girl's Education in the Twenty-First Century*, Mercy Tembon and Lucia Fort argue that "women represent a previously untapped source of human capital, and countries that have adopted aggressive policies to promote gender equality in education can be expected to reap higher social and economic benefits […] Well-documented evidence shows that educating girls and women also yields significant social and health benefits" (2008: xviii)

3.3.1. The Flourishing of Conduct Literature: Delineating Women's 'Desirable' Qualities

Conduct Books were primarily written and promoted by male writers[32] were tremendously popular among eighteenth-century readers, especially among female ones, whose interest in such texts was prompted by their desire to acquire "the image of the socially desirable woman" (Jones 1990: 15). By reading conduct literature, it was believed, women could become acquainted with the qualities they needed to nurture to become the kind of woman that would be deemed 'proper' by their society's standards and, crucially, by the male community that they needed to please so as to become 'worthy' of their esteem[33].

The most important lesson that women extracted from such narratives was the need for their modesty, as conduct manuals indoctrinated women into "'natural' femininity in terms of negation and repression – silence, submission […] and are offered an illusion of power based on sublimation and passive virtue" (Jones 1990: 15). As Jones notes, the 'power' women acquire through submissive self-negation is only illusory. They learn how to restrain themselves so as to fulfil the role of the modest, passive woman and they are told that the source of their power is to be found in their submissive acceptance of such prescriptive role but, in the end, no room is allowed for self-command or self-determination, only an illusion that their *choice* of passivity will receive some sort of reward.

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[32] For instance John Essex's *The Young Ladies Conduct: Or Rules for Education under Several Heads; with Instructions upon Dress, both before and after Marriage. And Advice to Young Wives* (1722), James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1767), Thomas Gibson's *An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1799) and John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774).

[33] Armstrong and Tennenhouse argue that "in determining what kind of woman a woman should desire to be, these books also determine what kind of woman men should find desirable" (1987: 5). They observe that, ultimately, conduct literature offers a double dimension about desire: "a desired object, and a subject who desires that object" (1987: 5).

Sidney Bidulph exemplifies such an illusory state. She is a perfect embodiment of the conduct-book heroine, whose adherence to modest decorum is utterly conclusive. Most readings of the text have focused their attention on “Sidney’s passivity, caused by her strict adherence to the rigid societal codes prescribed for feminine behaviour” (Oliver 2003: 683). However, Sidney’s modest and passive attitude prevents her from being able to express her sentiments in their totality, as her servant Patty notes: “my lady keeps up wonderfully, under the load of grief she has at her heart. She does not complain nor lament herself, as I have observed some do, who have not been in half her trouble” (265).

Patty takes over the narration at a time of profound distress, in which Sidney cannot narrate herself, and though the tone in which Patty describes her mistress is embedded with high praise for her lack of ‘complaint’, the undertone introduces the idea that Sidney’s modesty is, in part, causing her desolate state and, what is more, is causing her to *suppress* her suffering even to those dear to her by assuming an appearance of strength, when all is crumbling down.

By contrast, in another occasion, Sidney leaves aside her ‘natural’ disposition to assume a modest stance, and admits that what lies beneath her very soul can be revealed only to Cecilia, her faithful confidante:

> far be reproaches or complaints from my lips; to you only, my second self, shall I utter them; to you I am bound by solemn promise, and reciprocal confidence, to disclose the inmost secrets of my soul, and with you they are as safe as in my own breast” (142)

Even if only momentarily, Sidney’s modest reserve vanishes in the private realm of the letter, a secure medium through which she can proclaim what she would not dare

to mention publicly. Significantly, Sidney addresses her friend Cecilia as her ‘second half’, implying that there is no separation between them, their friendship is so strong that they come to regard the other as a reflection of themselves, as the person that *completes* them. This acknowledgment allows Sidney to admit that her soul does indeed bear secrets, and that she can only confess them to a *female* reader who will not reproach her for that, who will not view such concealment as ‘unnatural’ behaviour. This instance is the only moment in the text in which Sydney, even if only slightly, takes *authority* over her representation and recognises those secret longings that lay hidden within her soul, longings she never before has *dared* to allude to.

The compulsive insistence on ‘natural’ femininity in conduct literature is problematic. If women need to be instructed to achieve that ‘natural’ state, an obvious implication is that such quality is not natural at all, but simply a reflection of a monitored instruction that *produces* it, instead of simply triggering it[34]. ‘Natural’ attributes perpetuate dual oppositions regarding women’s configuration, as they introduce an “opposition between women as angels and women as whores, between women as the embodiment of moral value and women as the source of moral disorder. But the binary categories are too simple” (Jones 1990: 57).

As Jones rightly points out, binary distinctions are ‘too simple’, they fail to rightly categorise *real* women and instead offer a limiting configuration in which woman is reduced to either angel or monster. Angel if she *accepts* the social role she ought to occupy, monster if she *resists* it. No in-between alternative is offered; a middle-ground position of (passive) resistance to social prescription is discarded, as that

[34] Tague points out that conduct book writer Mandeville “explicitly recognized the social construction of gender roles – specifically, the ways in which very young girls learned modest behavior” (2002: 32) and also mentions that many other writers simply declined to acknowledge that female behaviour had to be cultivated in any way.

position would be vilified and taken as *unnatural* response.[35] Gender difference is another aspect that is often used to justify women's position as a modest creature acting on feeling rather than on reason, as Wilpute claims:

> While men professed to be reasonable beings, women were a bundle of feelings – love and revenge, maternal instincts, fear and joy – yet good women were naturally modest and reticent (or ought to be) about expressing their minds and emotions […] the careful self-policing of each sex's natural tendencies could result in the unhealthy repression of one's individual nature (2014: 20)

'Natural tendencies' is applied to both men and women, as they are both interpreted under different parameters – reason in the case of men, and feeling in that of women – and are expected to self-monitor their attitudes and behaviours accordingly. Curiously, Wilpute is careful when using the attribute 'natural', as he introduces the idea that women *ought to be* naturally modest, reinforcing the sense that such naturalness is somehow 'forced' upon them.

In *Sidney Bidulph* such marked distinction between gender's 'natural tendencies' is questioned through the figure of the hero, Orlando Faulkland. He fails to be *merely* a paragon of masculinity and has repeatedly been read as an *effeminate* hero:

> Sheridan's Faulkland – in his constant display of excessive emotion; in his passivity and helplessness; in his silence and his being silenced; in his foreignness; and even in his one-time lapse of sexual control – displays his feminine standing within the novel; more

[35] This is illustrated in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) through the character of Jane Bennet, whose faithful reproduction of the modest behaviour prescribed by conduct manuals works to her disadvantage, as her inability to give any kind of indication, even if just indirectly, of her feelings for Bingley produces the effect that her *true* regard for him is obscured and taken simply as displaying *friendly* feelings.

particularly, his emasculation by various women within the novel confirms his feminine status (Oliver 2003: 685)

Faulkland's story is incessantly disputed by female characters, particularly the Bidulph women, who willingly chose to side themselves with the *female* side of the story and thus disregard Faulkland's attempts to offer his version, as Oliver argues: "alternately suppressed or rendered incoherent by Lady Bidulph and by Sidney, Faulkland's story becomes constantly subject to revision, reinterpretation, and misinterpretation by others" (Oliver 2003: 692). The reader is made complicit in this act of obscuring Faulkland's story and never learns the whole *truth* about it.

Wilpute makes another interesting observation by reflecting on the fact that the display of passions was yet another area in which gender difference was made apparent. In women's case, there was a higher insistence on the demand to keep their passions under control. Wilpute notes that women's passions were notably restrained throughout the eighteenth century to make them into a more adequately tuned sensibility and that "though it could be displayed on the body in the form of tears, trembling, sighs, and fainting to exhibit the extreme delicacy and capacity for sympathy in a person, is still often relegated to the private realm" (2014: 21).

Any display of passionate states was not regarded as 'proper' and thus was unsuitable in a public setting. These overwhelming emotional states were transferred to the private experience of solitude, a tendency that is exemplified in many sentimental novels in which heroines ought to abruptly abandon the room due to a burst of emotion that they desperately need to conceal.

Sentimental writers like Richardson, Sterne and Mackenzie tried to create a language that would reflect the complexity of passions and thus to achieve "a means to make personal, inner experience accessible – a means to transcend physic isolation

through shared sense perceptions leading to sympathetic understanding" (2014: 21). When it comes to reflecting the female experience, establishing a language of the passions becomes crucial, as their experience is usually obscured, trapped behind an impenetrable 'physic isolation'. Such language can help reveal *true,* inner knowledge of women's most covert yearnings.

Thus, acquiring a broader intelligence about the motivations behind women's actions, and the ways in which their passions affect such actions, would "lead to more social sympathy – bridging the gap between interiority and its expression" (Wilpute 2014: 32). In women's case, Wilpute's argument becomes even more significant, as women's interior lives remain hidden, or only indirectly expressed, since the expression that comes to light is motivated by the need to fulfil social expectations and ideal configurations, not so much by the need to *express* their inner selves. Gaining access to female interiority would provide multiple ways to approach 'women's cause', not simply by focusing on the restrictions that surround them, but also by understanding what lies *behind* those restrictions, getting to know the woman that lies on the other side, waiting to be reached. As Wilpute points out "without understanding the causes for people's behavior, and merely judging them according to whether they comply with what is socially, morally prescribed, these objective censures fall short in humanity" (2014: 32)[36].

In *Sidney Bidulph* the reader gains some slight access to Sidney's intimacy in the midst of the reflections she makes to Cecilia with regards to her reaction to Orlando Faulkland:

[36] Wilpute makes reference to Eliza Haywood by pointing out that she "wants us t remember that we are not all angel or monster; we are a mixture of both light and dark" (2014: 34). This remark follows the tendency to try and break the restrictive binary opposition that distinguishes 'good' from 'bad' women, and instead draws attention to the fact that both positive and negative aspects coexist.

> *I* never was so impatient to see any body – But Sidney, have a care – this heart has never yet been touch'd: this man is represented as a dangerous object. What an ill-fated Girl should *I* be, if *I* should fall in love with him, and he should happen not to like me? *Should* happen, what a vain expression was that? *I* would not for the world any one to see it but my Cecilia. – Well, if he should not like me, what then? why, *I* will not like him. If *I* have a heart, not very susceptible of what we young women call love; and in all likelihood *I* shall be indifferent to him, as he may be to me – Indeed *I* think *I* ought to resolve on not liking him (15)

Sidney's struggle between her *inner* self and the outer self that she is aware is *expected* from her is apparent. Her narration seems driven by the separation she establishes between what she *allows* herself to express and what she *yearns* to admit but cannot really acknowledge, as exemplified by her immediate reaction to her supposed 'vanity', in which she censors her thoughts and is glad no one but Cecilia will have access to those. Just like in previous episodes, Sydney's sense of propriety is so heightened that she does not allow herself to *fully* take authority over her narration and opts to *hint* at the inner conflicts that remain within her. The weight of expectations is profoundly sensed by her, and she invokes romantic magnifications of love from which she hastily distances herself by claiming that her heart is not *prone* to respond to romanticised ideals of love.

Yeazell endeavours to delve into female intimacy by paying close attention to the significance of blushes. At a time when modest reserve was strongly advocated, the meaning behind blushes gained a special relevance. A way to approach such bodily display is to consider it as signalling shame and hence "as a wholly social phenomenon" (Yeazell 1984: 71) that illustrated that conflict between inner feeling and outer expression.

Yet, another way to interpret blushes is to regard them as "a sign of the young woman's responsiveness to the judgments – and feelings – of others" (Yeazell 1984: 71). In this interpretation, blushes are not taken as a representation of a social phenomenon but rather a direct *response* to it; they become women's means to offer their social awareness, that is, their understanding of their need to provide a reaction to the social pressures to which they are subject. This is in accordance to moral stricture, since "blushes customarily figured as the 'guard' or 'defence' of her virtue" (Yeazell 1984: 71) but such protector blushes are paradoxical: in the very act of sheltering women's virtue they inevitably reveal sexual knowledge and, thus, *lack* of innocence. As Yeazell notes, "such guardian blushes almost inevitably revealed themselves to be blushes of self-consciousness" (1984: 71) and thus, in a way, betray the very virtuousness or innocence they appear to protect.[37]

3.3.2. Public vs. Private: Dismantling the Division into Separate Spheres

Women's struggle to reconcile relationships taking place both in the private and public sphere has been subject to much controversy, as the ambiguity surrounding this theme is only heightened by factors such as "the potential disjunction between women's public behaviour and private feeling that threatened to destabilize mechanisms of control, and the continuing opportunities for women to shape discourse about them" (Boyd and Kvande 2008: 18). The separation between public and private gains a special significance when dealing with women's position as, in their particular case, such distinction marked a clear differentiation between the way in which they could

[37] This betraying of innocence is further emphasized by the use of cosmetics, as Tita Chico notes in *Designing Women: The Dressing Room in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Culture* (2005). Chico argues that for writers within the satiric tradition "face painting all too easily suggested to such satirists more widespread subterfuge, concern about women's roles, social order, and the value and purpose of artifice" (2005: 108).

introduce themselves in public settings, and the way they actually *felt* in the private, domestic sphere of their household, a feeling that most probably differed from the 'feeling' they could exhibit in public environments.

This marked divergence between public and private displays made it problematical for women to establish a discourse that would *faithfully* represent their experience. To this already problematic scenery, one might add the equally complex task of determining what constitutes 'private' and 'public', as Boyd and Kvande argue "public and private as opposing concepts include not only the sense of physical spaces but also the kind of activities and discourses that are displayed or enclosed" (2008: 19). Physicality is then not the only element at play; what *befalls* in such physical settings, the kind of *discussions* that occur within them, also play a crucial role.

Despite the overwhelming amount of criticism that pleads to maintain the separate spheres archetype, critics such as Boyd and Kvande have observed that such paradigm is not completely satisfactory and fails to "account for the realities of social behaviour and experience for women or for men" (2008: 19). The problem, they argue, lies on the insistence to discern them as entirely separate entities that ought to be taken individually and not collectively. What Boyle and Kvane propose is a much more constructive way to approach the issue of separate spheres that promotes an "intermingling of concerns, activities or persons" (2008: 19) as well as the realization that "nor can public or private be equated simply with men and women" (2008: 19).

This approach is interesting in the sense that it dismantles the separation between public and private as isolated elements, and actually interweaves them so that they become points of contact in which many different elements may co-exist in a satisfying manner. For this approximation to occur, as they proclaim, the first step would be to cease to associate a particular gender to each sphere – public as male and

private as female – and, instead, recognize that both genders are actively present in *both* spheres[38]. In this respect, the act of recuperating women's involvement in the public sphere is crucial, as it "helps to demonstrate to which extent the spheres were not separate *but* interpenetrating" (Boyd and Kvane 2008: 22) and it enhances recognition of the historical *meaning* of women's existence.

This recognition is fundamental if one is to go *beyond* the assumption that women were solely subjugated individuals with no intervention whatsoever in public affairs, a claim that is refuted by the fact that "women's daily lives and work show that they were not simply repressed and silenced, but were active, engaged participants in all spheres of their culture" (Boyd and Kvande 2008: 23). Though restrictions were placed upon women, it is also important to note how, despite these constraints, they still managed to become active participants, not simply in the private sphere but in *other* areas as well.

In Domestic narratives, such authentic female experience was not *fully* reflected, as these texts' purpose "was not to reflect social practices but to intervene in practice by offering a constructed and embodied ideal […] as a model for readers' imitation" (Bannet 2000: 61). Heroines were meant to become models worthy of imitation, exemplary conduct-book females, whose attitudes and behaviours all responded to the cultural expectation that they become 'proper' women that could act as *valuable* role models.

Therefore, the notion of the 'mixed character' was somehow an uncomfortable one, and though necessary "on the grounds of probability, verisimilitude or realism" (Bannet 2000: 61), mixed characters were often relegated to a secondary position, usually standing in direct opposition to the 'perfect' heroine. Their function was simply

[38] Boyd and Kvane provide evidence of this by pointing out that "the effectiveness of this exclusion has been called into question; women certainly did enter public discussions and engage in public activity" (2008: 21)

to display the faults that would *not* be acceptable in heroines and hence to demonstrate the imperfections that needed to be surpassed. Women's writing, subject to higher pressures on terms of morality, was adherent to this pattern. Flawed heroines were found but they all capitulated towards the 'correct' path of virtue and redeemed their past follies. Whenever such follies were too marked, then, such character could not be termed a 'heroine', because writers "tended to center their narratives on characters who exemplified whatever their domestic agendas designated as the most perfect idea of virtue or of vice" (Bannet 2000: 61)[39].

This firmness in portraying exemplary heroines worthy of being imitated is best exemplified through Sidney Bidulph who, upon reflection on her own behaviour, always finds cause to rejoice in her mother's endorsement of her modest disposition:

> I had, notwithstanding, the good fortune to please my mother infinitely. She told me, after our visitor was gone, that my behaviour had been *strictly* proper; and blamed Sir George for his wanting to engage me too often in conversation [...]The man who does not reckon a modest reserve amongst the chief recommendations of a woman, should be no husband for Sidney [...] Sir George agreed with her as to the propriety of her observation, in regard to a modest reserve; but said, people now a-days did not carry their ideas of it so far as they did when his father's courtship began with her; and added, that a young lady might *speak* with as much modesty as she could hold her tongue.
>
> I did not interfere in the debate, only said, I was very glad to have my mother's approbation of my conduct (18-19)

[39] Bannet introduces the notion that such insistence on morality "was unstable because it often served women writers as a mask to conceal their designs" (2000: 67). Their 'acceptance' of morality's demands was their only means to offer any sort of 'resistance' or, at least, to proclaim the message they wanted to bring forward, which was obscured under pretence of conventionality. Thus, the strictest exemplary tale was most probably written "doublevoiced, to disprove the evidence of their own example and seem more conventional than it was" (Bannet 2000: 68).

Sidney's sense of herself, it appears, stems from her behaving in a manner that will earn her mother's *approval*. Sidney's modest reserve and her tendency to retrieve from action and become a passive, mostly *silent,* observant please her mother exceedingly, as that proves her 'proper' behaviour. Sir George, though admitting the fairness of his mother's remark, makes yet another *fair* comment by stating that women may well *express* themselves while still maintaining a proper, modest countenance. Sidney chooses to disregard Sir George's point of view and seems determined to subscribe *exclusively* to what her mother deems 'correct', discrediting all other perspectives, including her *own*. Inevitably, such constant *negation* to take authority over her narrative and her unrelenting reliance on her mother as her *sole* moral compass proves to be less *efficient* than Sidney envisions.

3.3.3. Matriarchal Narratives: Achieving Power through Submission

In the eighteenth century the attributes Nowadays respectability and dignity invoked "a certain propriety of appearance and behaviour" (Bannet 2000: 144). Significantly, the notion of a dignifying woman did not only entail an acquiescence to propriety dictates but also the embodiment of the very quality that allowed women to "acquire 'true worth and excellence'" (Bannet 2000: 144), a quality that would hence enable them to reach a superior state and become highly regarded members of society.

Bannet makes a very relevant remark by pointing out that respectability and dignity were considered as primarily male traits[40] and if women aspired to the *right* to

[40] The Oxford English Dictionary defines dignity as "nobility befitting elevation of aspect, manner, or style; becoming or fit stateliness, gravity" ("Dignity"). The examples following this definition are applied to a male subject: "He uttered this with great majesty, or, as he called it, dignity" ("Dignity"). The Oxford English Dictionary entry concerning respectability defines it as "the state, quality, or condition of being

attain such consideration they had to "develop abilities which would 'raise' them in their own eyes and in the eyes of men" (2000: 145). Thus, the adjectives 'respectable' and 'dignified' were not easily attributed to females and, in case they were identified as such, the implication is that the right to *earn* that consideration has to be worked upon; women are expected to prove that they are worthy of being called 'respectable'.

Such worthiness also needs to be verified in marriage. Women were expected to *demonstrate* that they were admirable, dutiful wives. Yet, matriarchal counsel to spouses introduces a reversal of assumed power relations in marriage, as "the husband was made to placate and obey the wife rather than she him" (Bannet 2000: 201). Such reversal was introduced with the intention to "domesticate their wayward husbands" (Bannet 2000: 201). To achieve that goal women were encouraged to use the very 'powerlessness' that was attributed to them to their own advantage, which would provide them with a significant amount of dominance.[41]

That way, women's assumed 'weakness' ought not to be regarded as something that detains them from achieving authority but, actually, as the very *means* through which to obtain some influence. The key to success in such scheme was the woman's acknowledgment of her husband's "authority and superior means of reason, judgment and wit, while playing relentlessly on her own supposed *lack* of these attributes to block his every move" (Bannet 2000: 201). In this respect, *direct* resistance to patriarchal authority would not be effective. Instead, what is suggested is that *passive* resistance is the way to proceed. Apparent complaisance allows women much more control than any direct confrontation would ever provide.

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respectable in point of character or social standing. Also with a somewhat derogatory implication of affectation or spuriousness" ("Respectability"). Once again, the examples bear a masculine subject: "He is very sensible that there are in all classes of life, men of honour and respectability" ("Respectability").

[41] Bannet refers back to Edgeworth's manifestation of a wife's right to productively "use the weakness men attributed to her as a woman to 'maintain unrivalled dominion at home and abroad'" (2000: 201).

Concealment becomes imperative. Women must assume the disguise of the 'proper woman', a disguise that allows them to hide their supremacy behind what Bannet calls "the seven veils of female propriety: silence, modesty, deference, unwillingness to attract notice, complaisance, dutifulness and obedience to God" (2000: 210). All of these layers allow the woman to apparently resign to her rightful, subordinate place while, privately, *resisting* her relegation to their 'proper' place and secretly endeavour to "obtain all the ascendancy she desired and all the admiration she deserved" (Bannet 2000: 210)[42].

Sidney is effectively a proper woman, selflessly devoted to those figures of authority that surround her; first her mother and later on her husband, to whom she willingly surrenders to. It appears that Sidney fails to achieve the supremacy Bannet envisages, as she does not *hide* behind the image of the 'proper woman' to secretly attempt to seize a certain degree of authority. She simply *is* a proper woman who is unable to offer *resistance* to such restrictive configuration and hence cannot obtain any kind of ascendency through indirect means. Her delicacy proves ineffectual for her:

> I have a delicacy that takes alarm at the veriest trifles, and has been a source of pain to me my whole life-time: it makes me unhappy to think that I am now under an almost unavoidable necessity of sometimes seeing and conversing with a man, who once had such convincing proofs, that he was not indifferent to me (134)

As Sidney acknowledges, her delicacy has only brought her misery. Her *rigorous* embodiment of the proper woman stems from her inability to discern any other

[42] Bannet reinforces the sense that these women are somehow *sanctified* through their illusory subjugation by bringing forth a biblical doctrine that would apply to them: "whoever exhalteth himself shall be abased, and the humbleth himself shall be exalted" (2000: 210).

alternative to her subjugated state, a state she willingly enters into but a state that prevents her from actively positioning herself in the narrative, denies her authority and, ultimately, only drives her to devastating circumstances with unforeseen results.

3.3.4. Women of Quality: Conflicting Perceptions Regarding Women's Role

Tague resists reproducing the pattern of separate spheres and, instead, espouses for a much more inclusive understanding by offering an analysis of "the ways in which women could ignore, accept, or even exploit ideals of feminine behaviour depending on their particular circumstances, often in ways quite different from the intentions of the theorists who propagated those ideals" (2002: int 6).

Instead of relying on restrictive, profoundly marked, female configurations, Tague's approach delves into the possible ways in which women might attempt to *surpass* such configuration and adapt it to their own situation and not simply embodying ideal outlines which are designed based on general terms, not on specific, *personal* traits. Generalizations fail to define the *individual* woman and instead simply provide an overlook set of characterizations that some women might not feel identified with.

Hence, the value of Tague's approach lies precisely in the recognition that women had a *choice* in their embodiment of ideals of femininity; they could welcome widespread attributes and incorporate them but they could also opt to disregard them or even take advantage of these idealised notions, in case they considered such female configuration to be 'unsuitable' for them. Tague's study revolves around the notion of 'women of quality', a notion that, as he acknowledges, is surrounded by tremendous ambiguity, as the term 'quality' clearly entailed "explicitly social and cultural connotations" (2002: int 13) and yet it was not restricted exclusively to the political or

social arena but also to the "participation in a shared range of activities and familiarity with a shared code of behaviour" (2002: int 13). Therefore, women of 'quality' were not simply termed thus in terms of rank or social position but also in terms of their ability to display an accepted 'code of behavior', hence implying that the strictest rules of propriety need to be effectively interiorized if they are to be considered to have 'quality'[43].

In this respect, Sidney undoubtedly fulfils the role of a 'woman of quality', as she continually displays her interiorization of a certain code of behaviour, bearing in mind what both propriety and her mother deem 'acceptable female behaviour'. Modest reserve is a quality she clearly nourishes, being careful not to display any indication of possessing *uncontrolled* emotions:

> Yet certain as the event of our marriage appears to me at present, *I* still endeavour to keep a sort of guard over my wishes, and will not, give my heart leave to center *all* its happiness in him; and therefore I cannot rank myself amongst the first-rate lovers, who have neither eyes, nor ears, nor sensations, but for one object (26)

Once again, Sidney distances herself from other women, who might feel inclined to indicate their preference for the object of their affections, even if just indirectly, and insists that she is resolute to maintain her composure at all times and hence to refuse any willingness to centre all of her attention on her lover.

Women of Quality had a privileged social status, and that social position made it even more *urgent* for them to carefully reveal themselves as proper, worthy women. As Tague notes, since these women were public figures, inevitably, "their choices about

[43] Tague elaborates on this by pointing out that 'quality' included "knowing how to act in social situations, by revealing taste and gentility" (2002: int 13) and hence demonstrating their knowledge of 'expected female behavior' and, most crucially, their *ability* to publicly exhibit such proper female behavior.

how they presented themselves were never strictly private" (2002: int 16). Their public exhibition of acceptable modes of female behaviour allows for an examination of "the complex interaction between ideology and behavior as we witness them negotiating the various, often conflicting, demands of status, gender, and their own desires" (2002: int 17). Because of their position as public figures, these women felt a remarkable pressure to exert a *certain* kind of behaviour and this public exhibition further complicated their attempts to accommodate their *own* desires into their marked, public fulfilment of social and cultural expectations.

Within this framework of 'women of quality', literature designed purposely for women gained a special significance. Eighteenth-century focus on morality prompted the production of an enormous amount of educational works, including "poems, stories, essays, and images[44]" (Tague 2002: 18) which shared a common goal: to acquaint women with "what to do – and what not to do" (Tague 2002: 18). It became imperative to clearly signal what 'proper behavior' entailed so as to make women aware of the kind of conduct they ought to *nurture* in themselves if they are to be considered 'respectable' women 'of quality'.

Within this insistence on morality, women were given a prominent role, as whereas in the seventeenth century women had been considered "dangerous, unstable and sexually voracious" (Tague 2002: 19), the eighteenth century drastically rejected such perspective and introduced the notion of women as "essential in upholding the moral order" (Tague 2002: 19). Women came to be regarded as moral agents of change who held the 'power' to extend an influential authority within their household which, at its turn, had an impact on what occured *beyond* that domestic space. Hence, their influence as moral agents is so valuable because it produces an effect not simply on the

[44] Tague also mentions a tremendously influential Eighteenth-Century periodical: *The Spectator,* whose didacticism was apparent "seeking to reform its reader while it entertained them" (2002: 18).

private realm of the home but also, crucially, on the *public* affairs taking place around it. Hence, as moral agents, women's 'natural' modesty becomes a quality enhanced both private and publicly.

The term 'modesty' itself held a multiplicity of interpretations. It was introduced as embodying a double dimension: not only as "women's preeminent characteristic; it was also portrayed as her greatest protection" (Tague 2002: 33). Modesty is established as women's most *defining* characteristic and, as such, this trait potentially serves the function to offer them solace and security. In consideration to the body itself, modesty presented yet another aspect: "ambivalence toward sexuality" (Tague 2002: 33), as it signalled a refutation of *active* desire and hence an inclination to assume a willing "denial of female sexual desire" (Tague 2002: 33).

In *Sidney Bidulph*, modesty fails to provide any kind of protection for the heroine. As her narrative shows, Sidney's modest reserve, her *strict* adherence to duty and her insistence on not assuming the *authority* of her narration does not protect her from misery and actually is in a way responsible for her miserable state:

> How the scene is changed, my sister! What a melancholy reverse is here, to my late prospect of domestic happiness! I pass my nights in tears, and bitter reflections on my dismal situation. My days are spent in a painful constraint, to conceal the anguish of my own heart, that I may not aggravate that of my poor mother(163)

Sidney's modesty prompted her to accede to marrying Mr. Arnold, and when she becomes aware of her husband's infidelity, in the midst of her own suffering, she continues to rely so deeply on the authority of her mother that a significant amount of

her distress is caused precisely by her fear that her mother will suffer because of her current situation.

In marriage, modesty also played an important part. It was believed that for a marriage to achieve a prosperous and desirable state, women needed to appreciate that "matrimony was both natural and a pleasurable state for them – hence the didactic author's insistence that women marry for love, and their vehement attacks on mercenary or coerced marriages" (Tague 2002: 39). Thus, the modest wife needed to understand that in order for her marriage to be successful, love had to be the reigning passion. Love was considered to be essential to convince women to admit the "natural order of marriage, which demanded their obedience to their husbands" (Tague 2002: 40).

Undoubtedly, wife's dutiful obedience would be provided much more 'naturally' if they felt not simply esteem but also *love* for their husband but, as has been noted, such obedience does not simply entail an utter resignation of their *own* will to their husband's. In fact, such wifely obedience may well serve the purpose to attain command through what critics such as Tague have identified as "abject submission" (2000: 42), an apparently 'feeble' position that actually becomes the very position which provides women "more true power than any attempt to seize authority from her husband" (2002: 42). Direct attempts to grasp command would prove ineffective, only through the indirect position of the 'submissive' wife can women actually attain such command.

In this chapter I have approached Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Sidney Bidulph* from various perspectives, all extremely resonant in the sentimental tradition. The first of these is the notion of female virtue in distress, a notion introduced in Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* and which continued to influence later novelists, Sheridan included. I have assessed the ways in which Sheridan appropriates this tradition of

female virtue and uses it to signal femininity's enigmatic, highly ambiguous nature and thus to suggest that the novel's tragic undertone, based notably around the notion of virtue, confirms the suspicion that, though desirable, virtuousness and passive obedience, when exceedingly indulged, has serious consequences.

Another tradition I have examined in this chapter has beens Amatory Fiction, which sets most of the action in *Sidney Bidulph* in motion. The Bidulph's clear position as defenders of 'the Female Cause', exemplified in their unrelenting support of Miss Burchell's cause, creates a complicated dynamics in which the very tradition of Seduction, and especially the role women play on it, is thoroughly examined.

Last but not least, in this chapter I have also drawn attention to another element that permeates the novel: Female Modesty. Modesty is included within the list of 'desirable' traits for women but, parallel to the notion of Virtue, the extent to which extreme display of modesty is actually desirable is put to question through the figure of Sidney, a modest heroine whose unremitting adherence to unpretentious behaviour and hence to *inaction*, proves to be problematic.

I will now turn my attention to another novel, *The History of Lady Julia Mandevile*, to evaluate the ways in which Frances Brooke embraces certain traditions and conventional perspectives to detect the extent to which they define the 'female experience' and the ways in which they fail to do so and actually obscure such challenging definition.

4. Frances Brooke's *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville*

This chapter has three sections. In the first section, I will analyse the notion of female transgression so as to delve into the consequences that different deviations from established modes of 'acceptable' female behaviour produce. In this first section I will note the implications of having an unconventional female narrator, looking at the instances when Lady Anne Wilmot's narration clearly positions her as an *atypical* female character. In the second section I will focus on the nature of what was termed 'the passions', focusing on the ways of coming to terms with passion that were observed in the eighteenth century. The final section of the chapter will be devoted to the public assembly of the masquerade, an ambiguous gathering that was very prominent throughout the long eighteenth century.

My thesis aims at detecting the extent to which women writers of the late eighteenth century *resist* the strict configuration of the 'proper' woman and, especially, the *purpose* that lies behind that resistance. It also aims to propose that those women writers depict apparently conventional female characters who achieve a significant amount of self-command.

Hence, the importance of this chapter for my research purposes lies in the fact that it draws attention to ways of approaching (and responding to) female deviations from widespread norms and, also, stresses the crucial role that passionate states and public assemblies such as masquerades played in eighteenth century life.

4.1. The Desiring Female: The Figure of Lady Anne Wilmot as an unconventional Narrator

4.1.1. Female Transgression and its Consequences

In the eighteenth century, female behaviour was under constant, careful scrutiny, which reflected the existence of certain expectations regarding what was considered appropriate female conduct and what was clearly not.[45] Under such critical gaze, most women were careful to keep a stance that would portray a favourable image in the eyes of their society. This indicated their acute awareness of the scorn and ostracism they would inevitably be subject to if they decided to openly defy social mores. This fixation on the consequences that female transgression entailed reinforced the innumerable representations of the mockery that 'rebellious' women had to endure, including for instance being regarded as "the whining spinster, the evil murderess, the decaying prostitute" (Kitedge 2003: int 1).

As Kitedge argues, such images of women were usually taken as negative portrayals that appeared to verify sexist views regarding women's attitude and position and, hence, writers' general approach was often to try to establish more encouraging images of women. However, what is significant is that not all scholars take this approach and what frequently occurs is that, instead of rejecting 'negative' portrayals of women[46] they actually embrace such representations and acknowledge the "messages

[45] Mirroring conduct books, critical works like Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (1985) or Vivien Jones' *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (1990) revolve around the types of female conduct that came across as suitable female behavior.
[46] These include images of women that are "frequently painful, grotesque, or pathetic" (Kitedge 2003: int 2)

that these depictions convey and the way this information was interpreted and negotiated by contemporary women" (Kitedge 2003: int 2).

This acknowledgement of the significance of 'negative' images of women proves to be especially relevant in Frances Brooke's *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville*. In this novel, one of the main narrators is a female character, Lady Anne Wilmot, who cannot be described as the 'perfect' embodiment of the dutiful, virtuous heroine but rather as an insubordinate female whose witty narrative style has an undeniable charm to a modern reader.

Lady Anne is far from being a role model to follow and, instead, becomes a clear embodiment of 'what not to do' if one wishes to be a respected woman 'of honour'. Yet, despite her apparent disorderly disposition, Lady Anne's narration manages to bring forward important aspects concerning women's role that make the reader (re-) examine the way they interpret women's attitudes. Lady Anne assumes the control of her narrative and, throughout her epistolary narration, her *authority* is ascertained.

In some instances, Lady Anne adopts a satiric tone in order to mock conventional modes of 'proper' female behaviour:

> Lord! These prudes – no, don't let me injure her – these people of high sentiment, are so 'tremblingly alive all o'er' – there is poor Harry in terrible disgrace with Lady Julia, for only kissing her hand, and amidst so bewitching a scene too, that I am really surprised at this moderation: – all breathed the soul of pleasure […] Well, I thank my stars I am not one of these sensitive plants; he might have kissed my hand twenty times, without my being more alarmed than if a fly had settled there; nay a thousand to one whether I had even been conscious of it at all" (vol i: 51-52)

Lady Anne's mockery of established modes of acceptable female behaviour contrasts with the attitude other women had, as eighteenth-century women tended to

view transgression with apprehension, since they very well knew that once they 'abandoned' the secure area of propriety it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for them to return from that point and feel 'protected' from social criticism. Female transgression possesses a particularly prevailing force precisely because of the fact that it cannot be easily delineated.

The line that separates socially acceptable modes of behaviour from unacceptable ones is by no means unambiguous. Boundaries are often blurred and what was once deemed acceptable becomes less so and vice versa[47]. This complicates the task of defining what transgression *entails* and hence the magnitude of the outcome produced by that transgression cannot be determined in a straightforward manner.

In this respect, Kitedge (passim) proposes that a way to fill this gap is to devote much more attention to anti-ideal female configurations, such as the figure of the 'lewd' or disorderly woman, which have the ability to enrich our understanding of the kind of conduct that was *deemed* transgressive and the repercussions that those transgressions had for the female community.

Female reputation was the main subject around which transgression was defined. The concern was not so much directed towards preventing female sexual transgressions, which as critics like Kitedge note "would have been private and largely undetectable" (2003: int 6). Rather, social monitoring of female 'correct' demeanour was perceived through those 'signs' that indicated that some women were more *prone* to easily deviate from social rules and regulations. Thus, purity and virtue needed to be unambiguously *discernible* in a very evident manner.

As critics have observed, this applied to different areas of women's lives, including "rules dictating dress, comportment, conversation, and even physical response

[47] As Kitedge points out: "the boundaries of acceptable behaviour shift over time, place and circumstance; and the dangers that lie 'beyond' are unspoken" (2003: int 1).

(flushing and blushing)" (Kitedge 2003: int 6). These regulations were gender based and thus, inevitably, a given set of specific attitudes[48] were directly associated exclusively to 'feminine' correctness, which prompted females to go to extreme lengths to make sure that what they publicly displayed were 'feminine' ideal traits that 'proved' their true virtue and that left no doubt as to their total and utter refusal of those attitudes that would indicate that they are not "sexually restrained females" (Kitedge 2003: int 6). Lady Anne's narration often denotes such lack of restriction:

> The heart of a woman does, I imagine, naturally gravitate towards a handsome, well-bred fellow, without enquiry into his mental qualities. Nay, as to that, do not let me be partial to you odious men; you have as little taste for mere internal charms as the lighest coquette in town. You talk sometimes of the beauties of the mind, but I should be glad, as somebody has said very well, to see one of you in love with a mind of threescore" (vol i: 92)

With her openness and apparent lack of disregard for what would be considered 'decent' for a female to express, Lady Anne's narrative authority comes to represent what the critical community have termed a 'lewd'[49] woman. Throughout the eighteenth century, the meaning of the term 'lewd' gradually shifted its original meaning and came to be applied to those females who in some way deviated from established rules of 'proper' behaviour.

Originally, 'lewd' did not necessarily imply an unfavourable conception of women but what it has always indicated has been a failure to fit into established

[48] In these regulations the notion of class becomes particularly detectable, as the rules defining which behaviours were socially acceptable "were instituted by the wealthier and gradually trickled down to the working classes" (Kitedge 2003: int 6).

[49] As can be seen in the OED's definition of the term, in the eighteenth century, lewd did not exclusively denote unchastity; it also had other connotations, such as "bad, vile, evil, wicked, base; unprincipled, ill-conditioned; good-for-nothing, worthless, 'naughty'" ("Lewd")

parameters. During the eighteenth century, the term acquired a gender dimension, as it came to be "linked exclusively to aberrant sexual behaviour" (Kitedge 2003: int 2)[50]. In women's case, sexual transgressions were the more 'serious' ones, as they were those whose consequences were more directly felt. Whenever women's sexuality came to be regarded as intolerable then their 'transgressive' state was noticeably magnified.

Those females who did not display the kind of attitude that was expected from them conventionally had to receive some sort of reprimand for their lack of compliance[51]. One of the most dreaded punishments was social ostracism, by which they would lose not only their personal, individual 'value' but also their sense of 'dignity, as they would very likely be subject to parody and they would then somehow become a caricature of the person they used to be. If a woman was described as 'transgressive', this would annul "all personal value and would place one in a role that denied power and assured victimization" (Kitedge 2003: int 7). Being considered an 'atypical' female had the undesirable effect of removing one's sense of identity, which then becomes unrecognizable. As a 'lewd' woman, the individual ceases to be identified as 'proper' and acquires the identity of an outcast who does not fit into the category 'acceptable'. Lady Anne herself dwells upon this and doubts that she would satisfactorily fulfil the 'proper woman' characterisation:

> Do you know, Belville, I begin to dislike myself? I have good qualities, and a benevolent heart; but have exerted the former so irregularly and taken so little pains to rule and direct the virtuous impulses of the latter, that they have hitherto answered very

[50] The current meaning of the term was acquired in the eighteenth century, the moment it "designated one as 'lascivious, unchaste'" (Kitedge 2003: int 1).

[51] Kitedge notes that this added a "false sense of security to gender-compliant women who wished to deny their inability to determine their social/economic status or physical safety" (2003: int 7).

> little purpose either to myself or others. I feel I am a comet, shining, but useless, or perhaps destructive; whilst Lady Belmont is a benignant star (vol i: 132)

Lady Anne's assertion of her failure to correctly become a 'proper' wife serves the purpose to highlight the inconsistencies and ambiguities that surround such a role. Her declaration introduces her as a woman who, whilst possessing good qualities, ultimately *fails* to become a good wife, which sheds some doubt as to what extent such idealization of wifely duty is actually achievable – or even desirable.

4.1.2. Widening Conduct Literature: Courtship Novels and the Harlot's Progress

In the eighteenth century there was a noticeable reinforcement of the kind of "masculine power that in many ways narrowed rather than expanded the possibilities for women" (Kraft 2008: int 6). However, in spite of this, many women writers successfully uncovered ways to express desire and oppose, even if just subliminally, the marked, culturally assigned roles they supposedly needed to fulfil.

These women writers who did not blindly adhere to the status quo delineated by endless conduct books and courtship novels took a 'radical', dissenting position through which they managed to surpass the image of the 'domestic woman'. Instead, these 'radical' writers offered an alternative position through which women who suffer social ostracism, usually because of their (sexual) transgressions, trigger "social critique rather than self-abasement or violence" (Eberle 2012: int 4). Eberle's argument challenges the narrative expectation that any transgressive act serves mainly as a dreadful warning and, instead, suggests that, without denying the compelling presence of a moral judgment, the focus should perhaps be placed on the type of social *criticism* that can be extracted.

This intriguing remark opens up the way for an exploration of the ramifications that the *departure* from expected 'proper' behaviour might entail:

> As to the opinion of the world, by which is meant the malice of a few spiteful old cats, I am perfectly unconcerned about it; but your Ladyship's esteem is necessary to my happiness: I will therefore to you vindicate my conduct; which, though indiscreet, has been really irreproachable. Though a widow, and accountable to nobody, I have ever lived with Colonel Bellville with the reserve of blushing apprehensive fifteen; whilst the warmth of my friendship for him, and the pleasure I found in his conversation, have let loose the baleful tongue of envy, and subjected my reputation to the malice of an ill-judging world; a world I despise for his sake; a world, whose applause is too often bestowed on the cold, the selfish, and the artful, and denied to that generous unsuspecting openness and warmth of heart, which are the strongest characteristics of true virtue … I would not sacrifice my own passion for him, but his happiness; which, for reasons, unknown to your Ladyship, is incompatible with his marrying me (vol i: 233)

Lady Anne's attitude is unrelenting: she refuses to be subject to 'scorn' by what she considers an *unjust* world that would never *truly* understand her situation. As a widow, she feels her position is secure and 'frees' herself from the restrains that single or married women must submit to. In this passage, Lady Anne's attitude is clearly ironic, playful. This suggests her clear *unwillingness* to become a submissive wife. Once more, Lady Anne manages to assert her narrative authority with a clear, steady tone.

In domestic narratives, whenever a heroine departs from the 'established path' of conduct, especially sexual conduct, the immediate expectation is the presence of a *clear*

punishment that will set the moral of the story in its ‘right’ course[52]. Curiously, in Lady Anne’s case, her disorderly disposition does not meet a clear and indisputable punishment, though at the end of the narrative her situation is far from ideal, she does not *suffer* for her lack of female compliance, which might entail a certain, however limited, lenience from Brooke’s part on this demand for punishment whenever women deviate from ‘their right path’.

In the case of women writers, if this punishment/reward scenario is expanded to an analysis of the possible (implicit) *censure* of the very same rules that are supposedly being endorsed, then, as critics like Eberle rightly note, one feels compelled to “reconsider our historical constructions of women’s writing at the end of the eighteenth century”[53].

Conduct material unceasingly highlight the vital importance of certain modes of (restrained) behaviour which successfully block ‘dishonourable’ urges but, at the same time, these same conduct books “betray anxiety about the perception that manners may provide an impenetrable screen for unacceptable thoughts, feelings and intentions” (Spacks 2003: 12). The preoccupation, then, lies in the *suspicion* that certain manners do not simply erase unacceptable instincts but rather stimulate those even more strongly. Hence the need for constant, unremitting modes of social control that would, supposedly, prevent this presence of improper impulses, especially in the case of women.

[52] A clear example of this is to be found in Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791), in which Miss Milner’s sexual transgression cannot be forgiven. She is severely punished for her deviance from the ‘right’ path. Once she commits adultery, no redemption is possible and her fate is doomed: first, to exile, and then, to death.

[53] Eberle identifies this as proto-feminist in which women writers produce works in which one can distinguish “the ascension of a sexually transgressive but articulate speaking subject” (2002: int 4).

As Green observes, courtship novels produce a fundamental switch in the way women were perceived[54]. Removed from the role of mere 'victim', in courtship narratives women become much more than that, they become "heroines with significant, though modest, prerogatives of choice and action" (1991: int 2). Unlike in other narrative formats, in courtship tales women were analysed as *individuals*, and this allowed for a rich exploration of the various "emotional difficulties" (Green 1991: int 2) that such female individualism entailed from women's perspective. This female individual subjectivity was integrated into a macrocosm of feminine territory, a space in which the preoccupations that surrounded the courtship process were carefully examined and tested. Throughout the courtship process, it was expected that a woman would not give any outward indication of preference towards a man, but lady Anne's acute observation surpasses such propriety-dictated rule and she refuses to believe that what Lady Julia feels towards Henry Mandeville is friendly affection:

> There was a constraint in her behaviour to Harry all evening – an assumed coldness – his assiduity seemed to displease her – she sighed often – nay once, when my eyes met hers, I observed a tear ready to start – she may call this friendship if she pleases; but these very tender, these apprehensive, these jealous friendships, between amiable young people of different sexes, are exceedingly suspicious (vol i: 107-8)

The ways in which women ought to conduct themselves during the courtship process were endlessly reproduced through conduct material. Courtship works, then, became the perfect medium through which express dominant ideologies, such as the ever-present 'proper woman' figure but, significantly, it also offered opportunities to

[54] Green also notes that, thematically, this switch allows for a revisionist perspective that enlarges the parameters within which female characters are inscribed (1991: int 2).

expose the limitations of such prevailing configurations. In this respect, while these work's overt didactic component meant their adherence to conventional modes of female behaviour, mirroring conduct book's vision on modesty and restraint, they also managed to display "the incipient feminism that had begun to question received roles for women" (Green 1991: 13)[55].

Resistance becomes imperative. As Green argues, even within a (masculine) hegemonic environment, there is room for the exposure of points of conflict, such as women's commodification and, especially, "the insufficiencies of masculinist representations of women" (Green 1991: int 7)[56]. Thus, the courtship genre becomes a powerful medium through which to bring to light 'feminist' ideals or, at least, to recognise the importance of the 'woman question', beyond the mere reproduction of established patterns. For instance, the theme of marriage was one that was evolving throughout the eighteenth century and this became noticeable in courtship novels, as these "championed women's rights to choose marriage partners for personal, relational reasons rather than familial, economic ones" (Green 1991: 161). Lady Anne introduces this very idea when she claims that : "Then, as I am a declared enemy to interested marriages, the young people are allowed to chuse for themselves, which removes the temptation to vice, which is generally caused by the shameful avarice of parents" (vol ii: 39)

Another well-established trope regarding the role of the heroine which could be identified within courtship material was known as 'the Harlot's Progress'. This trope focused on the figure of the 'fallen' woman, whose ruin was intended as a warning of

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[55] Green argues that this allowed the disclosure of various elements that somehow menaced women's peace of mind, such as "authoritarian parents, rakish suitors, and even fashionable London" (Green 1991: 14).

[56] Green stresses the vital role language plays in such representations. As he rightly notes, "courtship novelist demonstrate what is now a commonplace, that language has too frequently been appropriated by male hegemony or that women often find themselves, in one way or another, at a loss for words" (Green 1991: int 6-7).

the dangers that indulging into passionate states brought upon. However, the image of the fallen heroine became "an attractive rhetorical tool for early feminists precisely because of its seemingly inevitable trajectory as well as its paradoxical ability to allow for variation" (Eberle 2002: int 4).

As Eberle claims, the Harlot's Progress allows for a thorough assessment of the tensions between moral virtue and chastity[57], as this kind of narrative implies is that sexual transgressions will inevitably be "severely and fatally punished" (2002: int 6). Yet, a revisionist version of this narrative draws attention to the instances where this pattern of 'crime' and subsequent punishment is replaced with an emphasis on "systemic sexism, moral hypocrisy, and patriarchal privilege" (Eberle 2002: int 6).

4.1.3. The Search for a 'True' Female Account: Tensions between Representation and Experience

The strain between the way women were represented and their *actual* experience was reflected through different spaces, some physical and, others, of a much more metaphysical dimension. Among the various physical spaces through which women were represented, the most debated one was the lady's dressing room.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the intense allure generated by the lady's dressing room was tremendously felt. This private, intimate setting attracted an immense amount of attention and became public material. As such, it created

[57] This tension is also a reflection of the anxiety between female mind and body. As Eberle observes, while conservative writers usually sustain that moral rectitude can be detected through the body radical ones sustain that morality is to be found within the mind, and they use this argument to put forward the belief that "a well-educated woman can take an equal place in society regardless of her admitted physical differences from men" (2002: int 6).

conflicting responses[58]. For literary purposes, representing the intimacy that occurs within the dressing room is marked by the conviction that this space is always particularly vulnerable, as it might easily be 'violated' in the sense that, by the mere act of *accessing* this private site some frontiers are inevitably crossed.

This act of crossing what would otherwise remain a hidden place produces certain anxiety. As Chico argues, this anxiety is heightened by the suspicion that the concessions that the dressing room opens up for women might very well be *codified* and, thus, remain somehow inaccessible, which inexorably "fuels much debate about the appropriateness of women's privacy and the ability of literary texts to structure – through their representational strategies – appropriate responses and alternatives" (2005: 27).

This debate around the *appropriateness* of women's privacy reflects the acute conflict between public and private, which was at the centre of the female experience. In the case of the dressing room trope, the main conflict lied in the fact that this physical scenery symbolised "the representation of private life for public's pleasure" (Chico 2005: 29). Women's behaviour in the privacy of their dressing room was believed to be a symbol of their most hidden, transgressive impulses, which hinted at the potential dangers of female sexuality since it "might foreground the liberatory potential of the lady's dressing room as a site of knowledge production and domestic authority" (Chico 2005: 26). Yet, during the second half of the eighteenth century those private parts that were displayed through the dressing room were no longer taken as 'dangerous' symbols

[58] As critics like Chico have noted, the dressing room was "evocative of a web of associations related to concerns about genre, gender, language, representation and authority" (2005: 26). All of these concerns were often taken as representing the kind of female self-rule that the dressing room evoked but, at the same time, this same concerns also raised questions regarding the extent to which the 'license' that the dressing room appeared to grant to females was wholly 'desirable'.

of uncontrolled female sexuality and the dressing room came to be conceived as a "site of moral, social, and personal amelioration" (Chico 2005: 26)[59].

The dressing room trope aligns itself with the various ambiguities that surround female configuration, as it is constantly 'fighting' opposing forces that range "from containment to liberation and from censure to celebration" (Chico 2005: 32). These same forces are the ones at play when defining women's role and level of narrative authority. In the dressing room scenario, women are depicted as conceivably active *performers*, but such potential is ultimately discarded and "subsumed under the rubric of wifely and maternal selflessness" (Chico 2005: 32).

By contrast, a potential that remains stronger is the potential to access individuality. In the dressing room and, extensively, in their lives, women struggle to attain an individual status, a status that will secure their position and endow them with some degree of authority. As Chico argues, "individual physical spaces and locked objects were indelibly linked with the potential for individualism" (2005: 39). Hence, it seems, locked, private places such as dressing rooms, which somehow become public spaces, represent a movement towards the long-desired female individualism, and hence introduce the possibility to achieve of some *influence*, however limited this might prove to be[60]. In Lady Anne's case, her authority is achieved through her constant meddling in the amorous live of those around her:

> I have reconciled my friends: the scene was amazingly pathetic and pretty: I am only sorry I am too lazy to describe it. He kissed her hand, without showing the least

[59] As Chico notes, in Richardson's novels, the dressing room ceases to be viewed through satire and introduces notions of "aesthetic superiority" (2005: 30), which validates the domestic novel's *educative* function.

[60] When accessing the dressing room, objects might still remain locked away, hidden in plain sight, which only reinforces the awaited "promise of disclosure" (Chico 2005: 40), a disclosure that might be extended to women's lives, in general, as part of their identity also remains 'hidden' in plain view, waiting to be exposed.

> symptom of anger; she blushed indeed; but, if I understand blushes – in short, times are prodigiously changed.
>
> And now, having united, it must be my next work to divide them; for seriously I am apt to believe the dear creatures are in immediate danger of a kind of partiality for each other, which would not be quite so convenient (vol i: 117-8)

Metaphysical, spiritual spaces are yet another powerful means through which to achieve some influence. The main conflict arises from the anxiety that is created around representation and *actual* experience. Prescriptive texts, particularly conduct and courtship treatises, assume that "there is knowable and predictable relationship between representation and practice" (Harvey 2004: int 8). However, most often this is hardly the case.

In women's case, in particular, representation and practice are often at odds with one another. The way women are represented through fictional and prescriptive texts does not *fully* reproduce the ambiguities and complexities that surround the 'reality' of their experience. For instance, the fact that women's 'proper' behaviour is based on the widespread "phrase 'Chaste, Silent and Obedient'" (Trill 1996: 31) is not entirely accurate, in the sense that most women who 'proved' their chastity and submissive disposition were "neither silent nor straightforwardly obedient" (Trill 1996: 31).

Hence, as Trill rightfully argues, this 'defiant' attitude evidences that many women *resisted* the marked configuration of 'proper feminine conduct', a resistance that supports the belief that the elements connected to the category 'woman' are "socially constructed, rather than naturalized or universal givens" (1996: 31). Social control was called upon to prevent such lack of conformity to expected modes of behaviour. Women were often "perceived as inherently unruly and intemperate" (Trill 1996: 31) and, in this

respect, religious thought was employed to justify "female subjection and subordination" (Trill 1996: 31).

Yet, many women authors managed to surpass such religious barriers and adapt Biblical references to suit their own narrative purposes[61]. In this same line, speech became yet another significant component of women writer's legitimation of their (narrative) authority. Traditionally, female *silence* has been greatly admired in religious treatises. But, as Trill points out, paradoxically, in order to defend this (female) silence speech was *needed* and, hence, women writers took the opportunity to *openly* make "reference to contemporary assumptions about their supposed 'weakness' in order to legitimise their expression" (1996: 50). Lady Anne employs the argument of the assumed female 'weakness' to justify her lack of strength to break her ties with colonel Belville:

> prudence was never part of my character … am I not enough mistress of my own heart to break with the man to whom I have only a very precarious and distant hope of being united? There is an inchantment in his friendship, which I have not force of mind to break through (vol i: 234)

[61] Trill mentions Aemelia Lanyer's *Judaeorum* (1661) as an example of the way a woman writer managed to rewrite a Biblical text, in this case Christ's passion, so as to "emphasize women's role in Biblical events" (1996: 42).

4.1.4. ‘Proper’ Female Behaviour: Privacy as a Psychological ‘Refuge’

The notion of ‘privacy’ generated an acute sense of uneasiness within eighteenth century thought, since this term bore a strong *psychological* undertone. Physical privacy, though much more visible and easy to ‘manage’, was not the main preoccupation; the focus lied on those secret longings and thoughts that remained *hidden* within a person’s own mind.

That psychological (unnoticeable) shelter produced anxiety precisely because it had the potential to *disrupt* social regulations and hence ‘endangered’ those who were considered to be particularly susceptible members of society, mainly women and children. As Spacks points out: “people might employ masks of various kinds in order to retain control of secret thoughts, feelings, and imaginings. Possibly connected with secrecy and with performance, as well as with seclusion, the very idea of privacy could arouse fear” (2003: 5).

Supposedly encouraging deceitful attitudes in order to stifle one’s secret desires, privacy became a suspicious term that one ought to be extremely *wary* about. The prominent role that individualism was gaining throughout the long eighteenth century only heightened such mistrust of privacy. As Spacks claims, “privacy marks a point of tension between individual and societal values” (2003: 8). What the individual privately desires, especially in the case of women, is most often in direct opposition with the values that society deems ‘appropriate’. *Authenticity*, then, proves to be an enormously delicate matter. The question remains as to the extent to which the ‘authentic’ female self that is presented through fictional and non-fictional accounts alike[62] is actually ‘valid’, since it is primarily based on *societal* rather than personal or private

[62] Spacks observes that “the idea of privacy as authenticity, as a space of self-discovery, proves intensely relevant to the meditations of poets, fictional characters, and diarists of this earlier period” (2003: 8).

representations. Lady Anne reflects on this aspect by pointing out that she utterly refuses to deprive herself of the delightful conversation of colonel Belville simply because the 'prejudiced' world expects her to do so:

> must I give up the tender, exquisite, refined delight of his conversation, to the false opinion of a world governed by prejudice, judging by the exterior, which is generally fallacious, and condemning without distinction those soft affections, without which life is scarcely above vegetation?(vol i: 235)

Lady Anne positions herself as a very *authoritative* figure, one capable of bringing forward her arguments without hesitation. All other authority figures surrounding female characters, including parents, mentors and confidantes, to a certain extent exert some pressure to guarantee the kind of female compliance that is *culturally* demanded. These people act as "agents of society" (Spacks 2003: 6) whose main task is directed towards the monitoring of female behaviour so as to prevent any departure from established (and widely accepted) norms. Yet, the moment the matter of privacy is introduced, this 'quest' becomes much more challenging.

Owing to the fact that one's mind cannot be as easily 'controlled' as one's attitudes or behavioural traits, it can be argued that females are, at least momentarily, 'safe' within their own privacy. However, the 'independence' privacy appears to endow women is somehow limited, as "although the state of privacy implies at least temporary self-sufficiency, it may involve diverse forms of dependence on the public sphere" (Spacks 2003: 5).

The troubles that psychological privacy supposedly introduced were deeply felt at a both social and personal level[63]. At a social level, privacy 'threatened' the social control that was exerted on individuals, by providing them with a 'space' within which to 'escape', or at least partially neglect, marked social parameters. At a much more personal level, privacy allowed people to retain a strong sense of their *own*, personal judgment, a judgment that did not *necessarily* agree with what was advocated socially[64]. Hence, privacy was somehow 'dangerous' as "to seek or to advocate it therefore entailed a degree of threat to the values of a society still hierarchical and still retaining ideas about the importance of the communal" (Spacks 2003: 7). In a clear depature from convention, Lady Anne expresses her wish to retain the 'power' she holds now after marriage, thus refusing to become a submissive and devoted wife:

> Absolutely, Bellville, if I do condescend, which is yet extremely doubtful, we will live in the style of lovers; I hate the dull road of common marriages: no impertinent presuming on the name of husband; no saucy freedoms; I will continue to be courted, and shall expect as much flattery, and give myself as many scornful airs, as if I had never honored you with my hand (vol ii: 126)

Lady Anne's declaration denotes a steady 'insensibility' towards cultural expectations regarding the role of women, before and after marriage. Normally, the presence of an acute sensibility was a *mandatory* requirement to be termed a 'fine' lady. Lady Anne's *conscious* withdrawal from that sensibility 'path' is evident and further evidences her *authoritative* narrative voice.

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[63] Spacks mentions that "textual evidence suggests that the possibility of psychological privacy presented a vexing social and moral issue for many eighteenth century thinkers" (2003: 7).
[64] As Spacks rightly points out, psychological privacy "generates anxiety about the degree to which social prescriptions should control individual lives and ingenuity about ways to avoid the restrictiveness of convention" (2003: 7).

Sensibility's vital importance was highly stressed. Yet, with regards to privacy, sensibility was often taken as *opposing* the very conception of privacy since, by definition, sensibility entails an impossibility to *contain* emotions and, hence, keeping feelings private would prove extremely difficult to attain[65]. Yet, sensibility offers the same possibilities for deception as privacy. Sensibility's open display of 'uncontrolled' emotions is by no means conspicuous. Feelings may be feigned and rendered as 'true' which heightens the palpable "anxiety about what sensibility conceals as well as what it reveals" (Spacks 2003: 11). The mere idea of concealment is the *key* component in both privacy and sensibility. In both arenas, especially when it comes to approaching female characters, what is concealed is even more *revelatory* than that which is made visible, since what is ambiguous, dubious or uncertain contains *crucial* information that, if detected, may lead the reader closer to a 'genuine' depiction of that female character. In Julia's tale, her concealment causes her ruin, as she herself claims:

> I have been to blame; not in loving the most perfect of human beings; but in concealing that love, and distrusting the indulgence of the best of parents. Why did I hide my passion? why conceal sentiments only blameable on the venal maxims of a despicable world? Had I been unreserved, I had been happy: but Heaven had decreed otherwise, and I submit (vol ii: 161)

In this section I have examined the implications of the strict monitoring of female behaviour, and the consequences that digressing from cultural expectations entailed. The significance of the notion of privacy and of the lady's dressing room has also been subject to great debate, a debate that is embedded within the conflicting ideas

[65] Spacks argues that the emotions which are displayed through sensibility "are generally assumed to be those of which the world at large approves: sympathy, pity, delicacy, modesty, tenderness" (2003: 12).

around the definition what is ‘proper’ and ‘lady-like’ and what constitutes a challenge to femininity. In this section we have seen that unruly female characters like Lady Anne Wilmot, though far from ideal configurations of femininity, still manage to attain narrative authority, as her witty, passionate narrative voice undoubtedly *entraps* her audience.

I will now turn my attention to the ways in which the passions were approached (and interpreted) in the long eighteenth century.

4.2. Struggling With Passion

4.2.1. The Intense Power of Feeling

Throughout the long eighteenth century, the way in which feelings were represented in writing introduced the suspicion that emotions had “lives of their own” (Pinch 1996: int 1). Instead of locating sensations within the privacy of the individual experience, and hence within the inner life of individuals, it has been suggested that there was a tendency to depict feelings as flowing “among persons as somewhat autonomous substances” (Pinch 1996: int 1). Thus, there was a certain *movement* attributed to ‘feeling’, a dynamism that implied a fluctuation of feelings that could not be easily contained within boundaries.

As Pinch notes, the conflicting attitudes concerning the nature of feelings are all discussed in Hume’s *Treatise*, which presents the two ‘versions’ regarding the status of sentiments. It holds that feelings are an individual matter and hence defends the person’s *right* to uphold and be responsible for his/her own emotions. Yet, at the same time, it also sustains the opposing view that feelings are “transsubjective entities that

pass between persons" (1996: 19). In Hume's line of thought one of the most important conclusions concerning the nature of feelings is that "it is passion that allows us to be persons, rather than the other way around" (Pinch 1996: 19).

This changeability that was linked to feelings brought about a sense of instability. Towards the end of the century, such sense of unsteadiness was heightened by the belief that feelings were somehow getting out of control. This was even more felt in the case of women, as the 'dangers' of ungoverned feelings were regarded as affecting women much more strongly. The cult of sensibility viewed the display of feeling as desirable, but the moment such display was about 'strong' sensations it ceased to be a positive exhibition to become a perilous 'act' that was "highly dangerous to a woman's virtue" (Pinch 1996: int 2)[66]. A woman's feeling needed to be *shown*, but always cautiously, restraining it so as to ensure it did not come across as *unruly*.

Eighteenth-century concern to truly *understand* feelings opened up the way for an exploration of the ownership of feelings. In this respect, it was observed that, perhaps, "one's feelings may not really be one's own" (Pinch 1996: int 3) because, as I discussed earlier, feelings were often defined as fluctuating forces that did not necessarily correspond to a particular individual but rather "wander extravagantly from one person to another" (Pinch 1996: int 3)[67]. In women's position, this intriguing remark gains a special significance. Frequently, due to societal pressures, what a woman feels is not the result of her *true* sensations but rather a mere reproduction of the kind of feelings that are considered appropriate and, thus, in their particular case, those feelings are clearly not their own:

[66] Pinch makes specific reference to moralist writers such as Hannah More, who warned against the type of sensibility that included vigorous, and hence troubling, feelings (1996: int 2).
[67] Pinch elaborates this point by arguing that "one's feelings may really be someone else's; that feelings may be purely conventional, or have no discernible origins" (Pinch 1996: int 7).

> After an hour spent in vows of everlasting love, he pressed me to marry him privately; which I refused with an air of firmness but little suited to the state of my heart, and protested no consideration should ever induce me to give him my hand without the consent of his father. He expressed great resentment at a resolution, which, he affirmed, was inconsistent with a real passion (vol i: 84-5)

In the above quotation, Anne Hastings response to her lover's declaration is not the result of the *true* state of her heart but rather the consequence of her dutiful disposition, which presses her to refuse when her heart urges her to accept.

Eighteenth-century insistence on feeling was especially felt through the different figures that were created around sensations, mainly "the romantic egoist and the woman of feeling" (Pinch 1996: 17). These figures reflect an 'obsession' with the *authentication* of feelings. 'Pure' feelings were those that spread from the heart, but the moment feelings became too passionate they ceased to be regarded as genuine, as strong emotions' lack of control prevented this legitimacy:

> Oh Lady Anne! how severe is this trial! how painful the conquest over the sweetest affections of the human heart! how mortifying to love an object which one has ceased to esteem! Convinced of his unworthiness, my passion remains the same, nor will ever cease but with life: I at once despise and adore him: yes, my tenderness is, if possible, more lively than ever; and though he has doomed me to misery, I would die to contribute to his happiness (vol i: 89-90)

Conflicting emotions run through the torment Anne Hastings is experiencing and yet her passion remains *untouched*, proving the extreme consistency of her feelings; she

feels strong, uncontrollable emotions which nonetheless remain pure, genuine and *legitimate* signs of affection.

4.2.2. Representing the Passions

Meyers has drawn attention to the fact that, when it comes to representing the passions what is often highlighted are not unmanageable or astounding sensations but rather aspects such as "subjectivity, sexuality or the force of the unconscious" (2003: int 1). The unconscious dimension of the passions is particularly significant. At a time when the individual was expected to actively control and regulate the passions, it could be argued that repression played a *crucial* role in such self-regulation, as the act of keeping passions under control was mainly about restraining and hiding them and not so much about completely eradicating them.

The detection of the *traces* which such repressed passions leave behind, and hence the investigation on the (possible) *effect* such repressive attitude may have on individuals, becomes an intriguing enterprise that, potentially, can enrich one's understanding of the nature of passion and its repercussions:

> How inconsistent is the human mind! I cannot leave Belmont, I cannot give up the delight of beholding her: I fancy a softness in her manner, which raises the most flattering ideas; the blushes when her eyes met mine. Though I see the madness of hope, I indulge it in spite of myself (vol i: 136)

Henry desperately searches for visible signs that will indicate that Julia experiences a passion for him. He attempts to 'read' her bodily signs so as to detect any trace of the state of her heart and is conscious that his interpreting of her bodily manifestations of passion might be inaccurate.

Truly accessing the passions is no easy task, as Meyers points out, since the passions are hardly ever universal but rather "historically specific, and therefore shifting, concepts of human experience and sensation" (2003: int 2). How the passions are conceptualised changes from one time period to another[68], and what was once taken as 'passion' is no longer regarded as such later on. Thus, such malleability that characterises the passions makes it imperative to form one's definition of the term 'passion' in accordance with the ways in which such term was approached at a *particular* time in history.

Despite one's efforts to *define* the passions, there is always an undeniable sense that such definition is not *wholly* possible, as Meyers notes "passions can never be fully classified or contained" (2003: int 6). One might grasp the visible effects of emotions, and the significance or 'meaning' attributed to sentiments, but it is true that the passion per se is hardly ever straightforwardly classifiable.

The passions are closely linked to the idea of performance. The passionate states experienced by an individual are 'performed' in the sense that these extreme emotions become *visible* only when that individual displays any outward manifestation of those inner sensations. As long as the passions are not 'shown' they remain unnoticed but the moment they surface in some way others gain immediate 'entrance' into interiority. The cult of sensibility heavily relies on such conviction; as long as women displayed outward manifestations of their inner virtue they are 'safe' from public disregard but

[68] Meyers makes reference to the fact that "the current status of the passions belies a long and complex history in which the term has variously described states of passivity, extreme suffering, and loss of self-control in the face of overwhelming impulses" (2003: int 1).

they had to be careful not to betray too much knowledge of the passions, a knowledge that would immediately be interpreted as 'lack of innocence'.

The possibility of *feigning* passions further enhances the distrust arisen by extreme (passionate) displays of emotion. As Meyers notes, "a feigned passion, whether in theatrical performance or everyday life, constitutes a form of representation, a self-conscious crafting of an expressive image for an audience of onlookers" (2003: int 4). Detecting the 'authenticity' of a given passion proved extremely difficult, as passions could be feigned, concealed or disguised. Women's bodies in particular attracted an enormous amount of attention, as they were taken as clear indicators of women's inner feelings but, as critics like Meyers have noted, even the body could conceal much more than it actually displayed since women might "use their bodies as a way to conceal or reveal emotion selectively" (2003: int 4). Henry revolves around the charm that lies behind women's bodily language, highlighting the allure that libertines' bodies produce on their beholders:

> To the arts of the libertine, however fair, my heart had always been steeled; but the Countess joined the most piercing wit, the most winning politeness, the most engaging sensibility, the most exquisite delicacy, to a form perfectly lovely. You will not therefore wonder that the warmth and inexperience of youth, hourly exposed in so dangerous a situation, was unable to resist such variety of attractions. Charmed with the flattering preference she seemed to give me, my vanity fed by the notice of so accomplished a creature, forgetting those sentiments of honor which ought never to be one moment suspended, I became passionately in love with this charming woman (vol i: 22-23)

4.2.3. Rationalizing the Passions: The Need for Self-Regulation

Within the debate generated around the passions, David Hume's *Treatise* is an essential text, mainly because of "its provocative claim that reason serves rather than rules the passions" (Kerr 2016: 3). Hume's claim introduces the notion that sentiments can be approached as *social* elements rather than as something which pertains exclusively to the individual. Kerr has dwelt upon such social dimension of the passions by paying special attention to "'emotional economies' or 'emotional communities'" (2016: 4) which establishes the belief that emotions do not simply affect the person that experiences them but actually the whole *community* within which that person is embedded.

The production of 'genuine' modes to express passions, employed by all members of the community, which will then become *authoritative* ways to display emotions, was a main preoccupation. Yet, as we have seen, the term 'authentic' is often unsteady[69] and difficult to dissemble. Many fictional accounts of the passions revolved around the quest for an 'authentic' display of emotions and, curiously, "fiction became a pathway rather than an impediment to passion" (Kerr 2016:6)[70]. Acute replications of feelings were produced in different ways, depending on the format in which these were found. In the case of satirical pieces, feelings were treated rather grimly but in novels, particularly in domestic fiction, emotions were exhibited in a highly sensitive manner, in an attempt to excite readerly sympathy[71]. Anne Hastings' torment is transmitted to

[69] Kerr exemplifies the problematic, and often sarcastic, nature of the term 'authentic' when it comes to interpreting emotional states by pointing out that "if chastity comes to be associated more with a state of mind than mere biological intactness (as in Richardson's *Clarisssa*, for example) or if proper British outrage at the severing of Robert Jenkin's ear provokes war with Spain in 1739, then authenticity of emotional motivation matters" (2016: 6).

[70] Kerr observes that this 'conduit' of passions was present "especially in novels, though also in plays, pamphlets and sometimes newspapers" (2016: 6).

[71] Such reproductions of feelings were often taken as "supplements or even alternatives to the 'real thing'" (Kerr 2016: 6).

the reader through her intense depiction of her suffering: "rage, love, pride, resentment, indignation, now tore my bossom alternatively. After a conflict of different passions, I determined on forgetting my unworthy lover, whose neglect appeared to me the contemptible insolence of superior fortune" (vol i: 87). Inevitably, Anne's intense declaration incites reader's empathy and strong identification.

In the midst of (potentially) ungovernable urges and sensations, the notion of self-regulation becomes imperative. As critics like Parrott note, "an emotion's nature, intensity, duration and expression are modified to suit the circumstances in which it occurs" (2016: 24). Self-regulation of emotions, then, serves the purpose to *adapt* what one is experiencing to suit external elements, a process through which the emotion might be so 'modified' that it mutates completely or, at least, becomes less what it was and more what it *should* be.

Parrott relies on psychological theory to stress the *crucial* role that culture plays when assessing emotion's 'validity', as psychologists suggest that "culture shapes emotions by shaping the self-concept" (2016: 31). The way emotions are *understood* varies from one culture to another, and hence the type of behaviours, attitudes and emotions which are deemed 'acceptable' are often *culturally* determined. Such pressure to comply with societal expectations of 'good' behaviour will inevitably affect "how emotions are expressed, which emotions are considered desirable, and how one ought to feel in a given set of circumstances" (Parrott 2016: 31)[72]. Henry expresses this cultural pressure to regulate one's feelings when he wonders 'closeted moralists' question love so lightly:

[72] Parrott elaborates this point by arguing that "culture influences the aspect of emotions on which people focus their attention and thereby modify their conscious experience" (2016: 31).

> Why do closeted moralists, strangers to the human heart, rail indiscriminately at love? when inspired by a worthy object, it leads to every thing that is great and noble: warmed by the desire of being approved by her, there is nothing I would not attempt (vol i: 141)

In this section I have focused on the intense debate that was generated around 'the passions', paying special attention to the various concerns arisen by the fear that emotions were getting out of hand, which urged an unrelenting insistence to warn against the dangers of indulging *uncontrolled* emotional states.

I will now analyse the public assembly of the Masquerade and its tremendous influence in eighteenth-century culture.

4.3. The Masquerade

4.3.1. Defining the Masquerade: A Multi-Faceted Genre

The masquerade was a highly significant and contested[73] public assembly that held a tremendous significance throughout the long eighteenth century. Terry Castle's Influential study, *Masquerade and Civilisation: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (1986) provides a thorough examination of the Masquerade in eighteenth-century life. In her assessment, Castle captures the main paradoxes that lie at the center of the masquerade assembly, and portrays its irrepressible force as "at once a highly visible public institution and a highly charged image – a social phenomenon of expansive proportions and a cultural sign of considerably potency" (1986: 2).

[73] Castle points out that the masquerade "was universally condemned by contemporary moralists and satirists as a foolish, irrational and corrupt activity perpetrated by irresponsible people of fashion" (1986: 1).

As Castle argues, masked assemblies were an essential, yet ambiguous, part of eighteenth-century culture. When considering the impact generated around Masquerades, one may contemplate its ornamental features, reminiscent of "an imaginary ancient regime" (Castle 1986: 1) or rather focus on the immorality which was usually associated to this kind of event. Lady Anne chooses to focus on the ornamentation part rather than its associations with immortality, as she eagerly proclaims her excitement about the embellishment that is always found in masquerades: "You have no notion what divine dresses we have making for the masquerade. I shall not tell you particulars, as I would not take off the pleasure of surprise; but they are charming beyond conception" (vol ii: 139).

Whichever perspective one takes, what is undeniable is that the Masquerade "was an established and ubiquitous feature of urban public life in England from the 1720s onward" (Castle 1986: 1) which was nonetheless under constant *inspection*, as it was often regarded as an event which induced depravity and (social) licentiousness and, as such, it needed to be under incisive *surveillance*. This surveillance was particularly called upon in the case of females who attended masquerades. As Castle notes, "much of the fear of the masquerade generated throughout the century is related to the belief that it encouraged female sexual freedom, and beyond that, female emancipation generally" (1986: 33). Masquerades 'threat' to the female community was based on the presumption that it allowed women to behave with too much license and hence loosen the regulation that was expected from their conduct. Social concern revolved around the possibility that masked assemblies, with their breaking of barriers, would provoke in women the urge to break away from social norms and hence these women, it was feared, would no longer 'willingly' permit their containment within clear, controlled social parameters.

Within the world of the masquerade, the partition between self and other becomes even more marked. This public gathering provides the perfect opportunity for a profound inspection of the boundaries that separate individuals from societal rules and regulations, as these assemblies became events in which "the true self remained elusive and inaccessible – illegible – within its fantastical encasements" (1986: 4). The danger was believed to lie precisely in this 'freedom'[74] people were granted in masquerades, as in these they could conceal their true identity and portray a completely different persona, one that would allow them to explore alternative social, cultural and even gender positions and hence to 'break' the status quo.

As Castle rightly points out, such reversal of roles[75] which became possible through masquerades "served as a kind of exemplary disorder. Its hallucinatory reversals were both a voluptuous release from ordinary cultural prescriptions and a stylised comment upon them" (1986: 6). Masquerades, then, not only allowed people to temporarily disentangle themselves from social prescriptions it also *crucially* allowed writers to provide a statement about social order, even if just in a subliminal manner. The 'license' associated to masquerades was thus extended to the writers who made use of this trope in their work in order to provide their judgment on certain social and cultural assumptions.

Fiction became a powerful means through which to depict the *destabilizing* force of the masquerade. This public event was never a *simple* gathering act; its effects were much more intense than people getting together for a celebratory event. This intensity could be discerned through fictional accounts of masquerades which "could be said to

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[74] As Castle argues, the freedom that the masquerade entailed was so apparent precisely because "the public masquerades of the eighteenth century were an institutional setting in which different ranks (as well as the sexes) met with a level of freedom seldom achieved elsewhere in eighteenth-century English society" (1986: 33).
[75] As Castle observes, this includes "an intoxicating reversal of ordinary, sexual, social, and metaphysical hierarchies" (1986: 6).

unleash those transgressive forces present just under the ordinarily decorous surface of eighteenth-century narrative" (Castle 1986: 117). Therefore, under a guise of conventionality, eighteenth-century writers fostered the *disruption* that masquerades entailed and released certain urges that society would deem 'improper'. Despite the continuous presence of overt moral condemnations of masked assemblies through fiction, which reinforce the *moralistic* purpose of those works, eventually there seems to be an alluring charm linked to masquerades and, in spite of the warning against its 'dangers', characters cannot resist the temptation to attend such public assemblies. The inherent ambiguity of masquerades allowed writers to maintain this 'double' façade: on the one hand, they openly 'disapprove' of such improper assembly but, on the other hand, they appear to endorse the very same ideology they 'oppose'[76].

Part of the ambiguity of masquerades is based on the mingling of opposing characters and situations, as in these events "the high and the low, the virtuous and the vicious, the attached and the unattached" (Castle 1986: 121) are brought together in a way that threatens to undermine social distinctions. The clear borders that separate these opposed characters are disintegrated to the extent that there is no *discernible* division between them. Thus, what was antagonised becomes 'reconciled' and this menaces to 'destroy' social order.

Lady Anne draws attention to this social aspect of masquerades, assemblies in which people are brought together and in which acts of female coquetry occur:

> the girl endeavoured, at the beginning of the evening, to attract his notice, but in vain: I had the pleasure to see him neglect all her little arts, and treat her with an air of unaffected indifference, which I knew must cut her to the soul. She then endeavoured to

[76] As Castle argues, this implies that "the masquerade may be a way of indulging in the scene of transgression while seeming to maintain an aspect of moral probity" (1986: 126).

> pique him by the most flaring advances to Fondville, which, knowing your capricious sex as I do, rather alarmed me; I therefore determined to destroy the effect of her arts, by playing off, in opposition, a more refined species of coquetry, which turned all of Fondville's attention to myself and saved Harry from the snare she was laying for him, a snare of all others the hardest to escape (vol i: 125-6)

The masquerade provides a scenario in which two females find themselves competing to attract male attention, instead of keeping their 'proper' place and waiting for male advances to take place *first*. In this fierce female struggle to attain some sort of 'power' Lady Anne gloriously declares that her *authority* by making use of 'a more refined species of coquetry' makes her the victor in this rivalry 'fight'. Such female empowerment which masquerades 'triggered' was regarded as a potential threat to the social order, as the impression was that woman were taking certain liberties that took them away from their 'proper' – submissive – place.

Another threat to the social order that the masquerade introduced was the presence of foreign influences, and its disruptive potential. Throughout the eighteenth century, there was a strong association between masquerades and external 'domination' to the extent that masked assemblies "were persistently associated with diabolical foreign influence, imported corruption, the dangerous break of national boundaries, contamination from without" (1986: 7). In *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville,* this foreign 'corruption' is depicted through the character of Lady Anne Wilmot, who represents the dangers of French traditions. Not surprisingly, in the novel it is Lady Anne, the French 'libertine', the 'dangerous' woman, who is depicted as enjoying public assemblies *extremely*:

> I sat a full hour, receiving the homage from both my adorers, my head reclined, and my whole person in an attitude the most graceful negligence and inattention; when, observing the cittadina ready to faint with envy and indignation, turning my eye carefully on her, 'Oh, Heavens! Fondville," said I, 'you are an inhuman creature, you have absolutely forgot your partner.' Then, staring up with Sir Charles, rejoined the dance with an air of easy impertinence, which she could not stand, but burst into tears and withdrew (vol i: 127)

4.3.2. Masquerade and the Shaping of Identity: Psychoanalytical Perspectives

In *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women*, Craft-Fairchild interestingly establishes a parallelism between the masquerade and psychoanalysis by pointing out that "the questions addressed by psychoanalytical theories – those of representation, subjectivity, spectatorship, and gender identity – are the same questions raised by masquerade" (1993: int 7). The psychological dimension of masquerades is a particularly intriguing arena, as the psychoanalytical elements Craft-Fairchild mentions all revolve around the notion of the self as a 'performance' that is shaped by cultural assumptions and also, crucially, by the ways in which others *respond* to one's own representation. In the masquerade, subjectivity ceases to be 'controlled' by cultural pressures and becomes a 'choice'.

Hence, the representation that is introduced in this public event, in a way, could be much more reflective of psychological states than those conscious, outer regulations of inner processes through which one wishes to attain social *approval*. The result of this is a kind of self-representation that *questions* the role (and place) society has appointed for a particular individual. Thus, in masquerades women might dress up as male (or vice

versa)[77] or one might portray the role of a higher-class member of society. This possibility to become someone else turns the masquerade into the perfect medium to generate "an image or spectacle for the benefit of a spectator, and to explore the distance or proximity between the representation and the self beneath in order to determine the significance of the masked moment in fiction" (Craft-Fairchild 1993: int 7). Lady Anne feels absolutely ecstatic at the prospect of a masquerade ball:

> Do you not doat on a masquerade, Bellville? For my own part, I think it is the quintessence of all sublunary joys; and, without flattering my Lord's taste, I have a strange fancy this will be the most agreeable one I ever was at in my life: the scenes, the drapery, the whole disposition of it is enchanting! (vol ii: 139)

The depictions of masquerades through artistic mediums, such as painting and theatre, also created numerous ways to produce *public* representations of women. Such public portrayals echoed widespread assumptions concerning the characterisation of 'proper' femininity and, especially, the role women were expected to fulfil. As Perry notes, such depictions of women were highly influenced by classical female (seductive) figures:

> Many of the allegorical figures such as Nature, History, Poetry which abound in eighteenth century literature, popular mythology, art and sculpture are foreshadowed in the goddesses and female muses of ancient mythology. As Marina Warner has argued, women's suitability for these symbolic roles was usually directly related to their actual roles in society. Although many middle and upper class women in the eighteenth

[77] As Craft-Fairchild observes, "psychoanalysis posits 'feminine' and 'masculine' as physical rather than biological constructions" (1993: int 7).

century had access to learning and education, without comparable professional, political or military roles through which they could be publicly identified, they were more easily transformed into seductive allegorical images than their male counterparts" (Perry 1994: 23)

Therefore, allegorical representations of femininity heavily relied on sensuous aspects that turned females into seductive figures, whose femininity and enchantment 'powers' was heightened to the extreme for the delight of the spectator. This presence of women through art was not restricted to imaginative representations but also included their direct *involvement*. As Russell notes, "women made their presence felt as participants, sponsors and sometimes subjects of a vibrant social scene, as theatre-and opera-goers, as masqueraders, as debaters, as attenders of lectures, auctions, art exhibitions and music concerts, as shoppers and promenaders" (2004: int 4). This female participation is significant because it stressed the fact that, despite being excluded from many areas of life, women *did* manage to make their voices heard and their contribution felt[78].

4.3.3. The Mask as an Unsettling Symbol: Hindering Social Stability

Within the masquerade trope the notions of mask and disguise acquire a special significance. Yet, as critics like Tseëlon point out, a demarcation between these two aspects is necessary, and thus it is important to note that "the mask is partial covering; disguise is full covering; masquerade is deliberately covering. The mask hints; disguise

[78] Russell notes the significance of "the range of activities – balls, assemblies, masquerades, theatricals, dinners, card-parties and general visiting – conducted in the household, by which elite women were able to claim a role for themselves, in mid-eighteenth-century public culture" (2010: 39).

erases from view; masquerade overstates. The mask is an accessory; disguise is a portrait; masquerade is a caricature" (2001: int 2). However, despite this marked differentiation, the distinction that can be traced between these two elements is by no means *definite*, since inevitably "each also shares the attributes of the other" (Tseëlon 2001: int 2).

In a sense, then, the masquerade not only blurs the distinction between appearance and reality but also the whole treatise around the notion of *difference*. Masquerades obscure barriers, unsettles the notion of continuity and, instead, further complicates matters by substituting "clarity with ambiguity, certainty with reflexivity, and phantasmic constructions of containment and closure with constructions that are in reality more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect" (Tseëlon 2001: int 3).

The tremendous uncertainty generated by masquerades hinders social stability; with its enigmatic nature the masquerade produces the sensation that all elements are actually interchangeable, that nothing is permanent and that all categories are subject to *constant* change and adjustment. This visibly "disrupts the fantasy of a coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions" (Tseëlon 2001: int 3) and introduces the uncanny feeling that nothing is ever what it seems, that the senses are not to be *trusted*[79].

This uncanniness is further enhanced by the notion of the mask, real or imaginary, which is linked to one's sense of identity. As Tseëlon argues, different perspectives are at play when interpreting the meaning of 'masks'. One point of view assumes the existence of an 'authentic' self which is *concealed* under the mask. The other perspective refutes the existence of 'authentic' selves and, instead, proposes that "every manifestation is authentic, that the mask reveals the multiplicity of our identity"

[79] As Tseëlon notes, "the paradox of the masquerade appears to be that it presents truth in the shape of deception" (2001: int 5).

(Tseëlon 2001: int 4). Both approaches revolve around the crucial notion of 'selfhood, trying to determine if one possesses a single identity or a multiplicity of them. Either way, what becomes clear is that 'masks', whether physical or figurative, always imply a certain degree of duplicity, a duplicity that aims at disguising part of the self[80].

Lady Anne highlights the fact that Julia's sense of identity depends on Henry's non-verbal manifestations. In their case, there is no mask to conceal and their eyes *must* speak what they cannot utter:

> Did I tell you we were going to a ball to night, six or seven miles off? she has heard it, and intends to be there: tells him, she shall there expect the sentence of life or death from his lovely eyes: the signal is appointed: if his savage heart is melted, and he pities her sufferings, he is to dance with her, and be master of her divine person and eighty thousand pounds to-morrow: if not – but he expires at the idea – she intreats him to soften the cruel stoke, and not give a mortal wound to the tenderest of hearts by dancing with another" (vol i: 119)

As Lady Anne dramatically claims, one look might be enough to condemn or save the lovers. The masquerade becomes an opportunity for them to indirectly declare their passion and, thus, to allow themselves to 'break' social codes by openly declaring the *true* state of their heart and, hence, by openly *asserting* their authority.

Within these endless possibilities, masquerades became a strong cultural emblem through which clashing concepts were merged. An aspect that was usually at the very center of the masquerade was "the experience of doubleness, the alienation of inner from outer" (Tseëlon 2001: 29). This alienation of inner from outer experience

[80] According to Tseëlon, "in European history the masquerade was a space where people could enjoy fleeting liberty from social, sexual and psychological constraints. Here they could discard their private, sexual, social and hierarchical identities and choose whichever identity they desired" (2001: 28).

became particularly significant in the case of those women who attended masquerades. In their daily lives, women experienced an incessant pressure to comply with certain social and cultural requirements but, the moment they entered the world of the masquerade, those pressures were considerably reduced. The conflict between their inner and outer experience is, to a certain extent, 'resolved' in the sense that, at least within the parameters of the masquerade, they are allowed to express inner sensations that would otherwise need to remain unseen.

The anonymity that masquerades entailed was taken as a dangerous aspect with the potential to soften "the safeguards of controls and inhibitions and shield one from one's own morality. For many people their own anonymity or the facelessness washes away their humanity" (Tseëlon 2001: 30)[81]. Clothing was an equally vital aspect of masquerades, as Lady Anne proclaims: "you have no notion of what divine dresses we have making for the masquerade. I shall not tell you the particulars, as I would not take off the pleasure of surprise; but they are charming beyond conception" (vol ii: 139).

In this section I have noted the tremendous influence that the masquerade had in eighteenth-century life. Masquerade's highly ambiguous nature has been examined, in the light of the multiplicity of interpretations that it generated.

[81] Not surprisingly, in the light of these concerns that masquerades raised, there were "ideological prohibitions on women participating in masquerades, as well as real prohibitions put by eighteenth-century masquerade organisers in an attempt to maintain pretensions of exclusivity by limiting access of members of the lower orders to their entertainments" (Tseëlon 2001: 29).

5. Elizabeth Griffith's *The Delicate Distress*

This chapter is about the theme of the 'family unit' in Elizabeth Griffith's *The Delicate Distress*. I will reflect on various eighteenth-century attitudes regarding marriage and adultery and also regarding the construction of heroines, paying special attention to the *disruption* that 'fatal women' cause in such construction.

My Thesis statement aims at detecting the extent to which women writers of the late eighteenth century *resist* the strict configuration of the 'proper' woman and, especially, the *purpose* that lies behind that resistance. It also aims to propose that those women writers depict apparently conventional female characters who achieve a significant amount of self-command.

Hence, the importance of this chapter for my research purposes lies in its interrogation of general assumptions about family life – and its implications for women – and also, most importantly, in its careful analysis of the figure of the 'heroine, women's cultural and social representations and the *disruptive* components inherent in femme fatale figures.

5.1. Marriage and Adultery: Cultural and Literary Representations

In *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain 1660-1789* (2006), Susan Staves rightly points out that Elizabeth Griffith cannot be included in the category 'Bluestocking' unlike many of her contemporaries, such as Frances Brooke and Frances Sheridan. Instead, Griffith is much more clearly defined as a woman writer who clearly "followed Richardson and French novels to produce feminocentric novels of sensibility" (Staves 2006: 343). Thematically, Griffith's novels are closely connected to

those of Brooke and Sheridan, as these women writers constructed their narratives around heroines of sensibility who must overcome several trials in which they must *prove* the virtuous state of their heart. What clearly distinguishes Griffith's novels is her insistence on what happens *after* marriage. In Brooke and Sheridan's narratives, as in all courtship novels of the period, marriage is the 'final destination' of the heroine; the reward she will obtain at the very end of the story.

By contrast, Griffith's production is very much centred on married life *itself*. In her novels, marriage is not what closes the tale but rather what initiates it, as she devotes most of her work to the "pursuit of happiness after marriage and often questions whether conduct-book propriety leads to such marriages" (Binhammer 2009: 100).[82]

Griffith's novel *The Delicate Distress* (1769) puts both marriage and adultery under profound scrutiny. In this story, as I will argue throughout this chapter, Griffith is able to introduce her vision on marriage and adultery, highlighting the disruptive force of *both*, as she offers a critique of "old myths and stories that characterize women as passionate and impulsive and men as rational, capable of controlling themselves and others" (Staves 2003: 343).

Binhammer also notes Griffith's willingness to *resist* a strict adherence to duty in marriage. Although she does depict "a wife's obedience to her husband as obligatory" (2009: 106), Binhammer points out that such wifely acquiescence to her 'obligation' is not merely perpetuating the need for wives to be subordinate to their husbands but, most crucially, such compliance actually becomes "part of her project to create a taboo

[82] Binhammer notes that, for Griffith, "reciprocal affective relations were central and foundational to marriage" (2009: 100). Hence, mutual respect and affection are what determine the 'happy' marriage that Griffith envisions; the presence of such elements are what ultimately determine whether the protagonists' marriage is a companionate one or a simply a mere *contract* in which both parties are rendered miserable.

around marrying without reciprocal love" (2009: 106).[83] I agree with Binhammer's reading, as I, too, believe that Griffith's portrayal of a dutiful, obedient wife is not simply meant to stress the importance of women's due subordination in marriage but actually to offer a subliminal critique of mercenary marriages and stress the vital importance of *love*, an element without which the notion of 'marital duty' would become intolerable. In *The Delicate Distress* this is reinforced through the character of Charlotte, whose love for Lord Seymour is not well-received by her parents:

> She had been bred in the Roman Catholic faith, but had never conversed with bigots, nor once thought that marrying the man she loved, could be deemed a crime, against any religion. The idea first shocked her, on her mother's pronouncing him a heretic; and she resolved to make the difference of opinions a pretext, for postponing their marriage, till she could try to prevail on her parents, to give their consent; which she vainly hoped she would be able to obtain, from their tenderness, and his uncommon merits" (79)

Charlotte is immensely affected by her parents' absolute refusal of her love choice. Her parents' negative response to her feelings becomes utterly troubling for the young woman because their repudiation of the man she loves is justified on the means of religion, which becomes a pretext to indicate the unsuitableness of that match. This places Charlotte in a very difficult position, as her engagement with Lord Seymour would not only be an offence against her parents' will but also a 'crime' against religion, a transgression for which she would be termed a 'heretic', and she very well knows that is not a *guilt* she is willing to take.

[83] Binhammer stresses this point by adding that love is the most important component of marriage in Griffith's work, as "she places the entire weight of a woman's happiness precisely on the marital vow and the necessity for its basis is reciprocal love" (2009: 106).

In spite of her fear that her parents might never accept her love choice, Charlotte maintains some hope that the situation can eventually work in her favour:

> They know the power of love, said she, and will not, like vulgar, and unfeeling minds, attempt to oppose his uncontrollable decrees. – They will regard lord Seymour, for their Charlotte's sake; and his tenderness for me, shall appear, by that love and duty, that she shews to them" (79)

Charlotte's belief that her parents will ultimately accept Lord Seymour as her lover relies on her conviction that the 'power of love' will make all the difference. She firmly trusts that her parents' immense love for her will eventually make them *respect* her decision and has no doubt that love and duty will be her best allies in her current (distressed) situation. Once more, love is presented as the *key* element without which all would be lost and, in this particular case, Charlotte demonstrates a significant amount of self-command and of narrative authority when dealing with conflict.

5.1.1. Marriage: An Unnarratable Theme?

Several critics have noted that marriage, despite its prominent role in literature, appears to resist active manifestations and rarely becomes the actual *subject* of the narrative[84]. In terms of representing desire, for instance, marriage is usually the plot-structure that activates narratives about courtship and adultery, which "put into play either the unattainable and the forbidden" (Roulston 2010: int 1) and, yet, despite its unquestionable role in such narratives, marriage is still a *secondary* element, occupying

[84] Some critics that have observed that marriage, and especially life *after* marriage, is somehow unnarratable are Kay Young (2001), Nicola Diane (1999), Criscilla Anne Benford (2004), Chris Roulston (2010), and Deborah Block (1998).

a minor position behind the much more *prominent* tale of either courtship or adultery. Roulston notes this subordination of the marriage plot and points out that "while getting married has narrative drive, being married requires a different narrative organisation" (2010: int 1). Hence, marriage is usually taken as a topic that requires some re-configuration of narrative techniques to achieve – and maintain – a *central* position within the story[85].

Yet, despite this reluctance to reproduce married life per se, the depiction of marriage, and its reproduction of family life, is directly associated with the rise of the novel form in the late eighteenth century in Britain, as it contains several elements which are directly related to the values the novel sought to reproduce and, hence, the novel "with its focus on realism, its attention to detail and to the everyday, and its engagement with the ordinary individual" (Roulston 2010: int 4) promoted the same bourgeois values that marriage reflected, and both placed a significant amount of importance on the portrayal of "domestic and affective life" (Roulston 2010: int 4).

Another factor that contributed to the greater visibility assigned to married life in fiction was the gendering of the novel, as it gradually became a feminine genre, with an increasing number of women becoming both producers and consumers of novels. Such feminisation of the novel made marital experience much more accessible, and thus "the narration of marriage became a more possible and plausible form of cultural expression" (Roulston 2010: int 11).

The growing emphasis on *individual* experience also facilitated the depiction of marriage in fiction, as the institution showed "a sustained enquiry into the relationship between institutional imperatives and individual desires *after* the period of courtship" (Roulston 2010: int 12). Therefore, marriage became the perfect medium through which

[85] As Roulston rightly notes, on a narrative level, marriage is linked to endings, as "it concludes the narrative of courtship, and it comes to an end through the intervention of adultery" (2010: int 2).

to explore how individuals accommodated their own desires within the institution of marriage, with the cultural and institutional pressures to which they were subject. Their struggle to retain their own subjectivity, constantly tested upon by the demands of married life, is a particularly intriguing one. In marriage, concessions have to be made, but the extent to which such concessions affect individual experience and, particularly, individual *desires*, is an area that is accessible only through a profound scrutiny of marital co-habitation. Such thorough analysis can only be achieved through the narration of what happens *after* the happy resolution of the courtship process[86].

5.1.2. Marital Life: The Impact of the Sexual Double Standard

The notion of the 'rights within marriage' of both men and women has been highly contested[87] , as those 'rights' are often applied in different terms based on gender difference. In this respect, the amount of work devoted to the sexual double standard and how it determines relations is exhaustive, including "literary, prescriptive and legal writings, and studies of numerous defamation cases in the church courts relating to sexual slander" (Bailey 2003: int 5). What brings this wide variety of texts together is the fact that they all seem to "privilege chastity as the key to single, married and widowed women's reputations" (Bailey 2003: int 5-6). Bailey further develops this point by adding that the majority of marriage dissolution claims around adultery involved women, not men, and thus the implication is that "men's extra-marital sexual

[86] Roulston reflects on the fact that the examination of particular marriage tales might disclose "a further underlying anxiety that marriage might become too private, that it might distort the rules or escape the constraints of the social, and hence fail to be an adequate reflection of the values promoted by the state" (2010: int 12). This reflects the profound pressure that individuals felt to accommodate private experience within social and cultural expectations, and the narration of marriage clearly reflects such preoccupation.

[87] The notion of marital rites is discussed in works such as *Marriage Rites and Rights* (2015), edited by Joanna Milles, Perveez Mody and Rebecca Probert; Dixon Mueller's *Population Policy and Women's Rights: Transforming Reproductive Choice* (1993); Roulston's *Narrating Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (2016) and *Domestic Tensions, Global Perspectives on Marriage, Crisis and Nation: National Anxieties* (2016), edited by Kristin Celello and Hanan Kholoussy.

behaviour was unlikely to be punished within or outside marriage, and consequently had little effect on their reputation" (2006: int 6).

Hence, within the domestic ideology of separate spheres, gender difference within marriage was extremely marked. Whenever an 'inappropriate act' was committed, it was always the woman's reputation which was damaged whereas man's remained relatively unharmed. This placed an enormous amount of pressure on wives to avoid committing faults that could destroy their reputation while silently resigning themselves whenever their husbands were the ones at fault.[88] Lady Woodville revolves around this concern:

> What a horrid idea have you conjured up, of a woman who ceases to love her husband! There can be only two causes in nature, that are capable of producing such an effect[…] the first of these, must be a constant series of ill treatment, which I suppose may, at length, conquer the tenderest affection; and the unhappy sufferer who continues to act up to her duty, under such circumstances, deserves, in my mind, a much higher fame, than any Greek, or Roman, that ever yet existed. The other cause may be owing to a shameful and vicious depravity of heart, commonly called inconsistency; which, to the honour of our sex, I think I may say, is not frequent, among us. But when this happens to be the case, there is, generally, some new object, in view; for that despicable wretch, "a woman of gallantry, never changes her first love, till she is engaged in a second." (100)

Lady Woodville makes use of her narrative authority to make a declaration which disrupts the cultural expectation that a wife ought to 'continue to act upon her

[88] Bailey points out that "men's role as husbands only came under sustained criticism in the Victorian era. It is an argument that is surely shaped by the proliferation in legislation pertaining to divorce, wife beating and married women's rights to property and children, which places much emphasis on male cruelty, the class aspects of wife-beating, and the sexual double standard" (Bailey 2003: int 8)

duty', even under the most disturbing circumstances. Though she is alarmed at the thought of a wife who ceases to love her husband, the idea is not totally *unthinkable* for her. She finds some 'justification' for this circumstance whenever ill treatment is *constantly* present, a case which would appear to give the woman the 'right' to cease her attachment. Interestingly, she also reflects on what is referred to as 'inconsistencies' of the heart and claims that such unpredictability is not usually common in the female sex, subtly implying that males are much more easily prone to such inconstant behaviour. In this way, Lady Woodville's successful use of her narrative authority somehow *inverts* the sexual double standard, by claiming that women are not so easily predisposed to being culpable of 'vicious depravity of the heart' and that, whenever that happens to be the case, there is 'good' reason or, at least, the presence of some new object whose affection is so strong that it 'makes' the woman switch her affection from her first love to a second one.

In the same line of thought, O'Brien breaks away from the sexual double standard, especially from its insistence on laying almost all obligations on wives, and attempts to offer an egalitarian account of marriage. To do so, he relies on Hutchenson's view that "marriage constitutes 'an equal friendly society' bringing obligations, on the part of both partners, to sexual fidelity" (2009: 73). Hutchenson's uncommon vision aims to regard the rights and obligations to which men and women are subject as "both equal and reciprocal" (2009: 73). Thus, cooperation is introduced as necessary to guarantee the success of marriage and this cannot be achieved if the rights within marriage are gender-based.[89]

Other responses to sexual difference were offered by both pessimistic and optimistic writers. Pessimistic writers regarded the sexual double standard as what

[89] Hutchenson envisions a "monogamous, faithful, affectionate marriage as the natural moral underpinning 'in all ages and nations'" (2009: 73), which in its time, as O'Brien rightly notes, must have been regarded as "a call for reform" (2009: 73).

"ensured that wives' lives were shadowed by their sexual reputation, which restricted their personal and public activities" (Bailey 2003: int 8). Therefore, pessimists identify the relation between husbands and wives as "oppositional" (Bailey 2003: int 8), as a power struggle in which the spouse is at a disadvantage position. Optimists do not identify marital relations as an oppositional relation but rather as a "mutual and complementary" (Bailey 2003: int 8) alliance[90]. As Bailey notes, optimists rely on conduct literature's advice "that husbands be affectionate, and the cultural demands that men employ self-control, along with wifely 'non-confrontational' tactics" (2003: int 9). This way, optimists refuse to regard marriage as a relation in which one exerts power over the other and, instead, choose to believe that, as long as both parties collaborate, a satisfactory compromise can be reached.

Such conflicting views, endorsed by pessimist and optimistic writers, demonstrated that both facets of marriage were *concurrently* called upon, as there was an endorsement of "an idealised view of harmonious relations between spouses while simultaneously demanding female subjection" (Bailey 2003: int 9). Hence, despite the clear differentiation of pessimistic and optimistic views on marriage, it was often claimed that there was "no inconsistency between male authority and affectionate partnership" (Bailey 2003: int 9). I believe this is entirely right, but only as long as male authority is not used to delegate women to a silent, almost 'invisible' position within marriage, which would prevent the presence of a 'companionate marriage'. In a way, the very notion of partnership in marriage depends on the *tempering* of male authority so as to ensure that both parties are allowed a certain degree of 'authority'[91].

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[90] They might term this marital relationship as "partnership or companionate, depending on the period in which they specialise" (Bailey 2003: int 8).

[91] In *Love, Intimacy and Power: Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland, 1650-1850*, Kate Barclay introduces this belief by suggesting that "happy marriage required male authority to be curbed, yet authors were cautious about defining limits. Love provided a solution to this tension" (61).

This implies a refusal to categorise family connections as "either affectionate or oppressive, observing that they could be many things at different times because relationships changed over a lifetime according to circumstances and priorities" (Bailey 2003: int 10). Thus, a full analysis of family relations does not simply entail lessening patriarchal authority but also understanding that any binary or limiting configuration fails to categorise the dynamics of those relations and that one must take *all* angles into account, not as opposing views, but as *complementary* ones.

Such extensive understanding of family relations sheds some light on women's position within marriage. Any one-sided account "ignores that women's reputations rested upon a broader foundation than just chastity, drawing on their position as housewives, as well as on their occupational status as charitable works" (Bailey 2003: int 10). In the same way, one-sided accounts would also assume that married women had no control whatsoever over property and, yet, "numerous ordinary married women have been discovered organising their own property and participating in the commercial world" (Bailey 2003: int 9-10). What this demonstrates is a need to include all assessments of marital life, and not simply one particular perspective. This all-including approach is necessary if one is to "reassess husbands' and wives' experiences of married life and their understandings of marital roles" (Bailey 2003: int 10).

According to Bailey, there was a clear consensus regarding the type of behaviour that was socially accepted and hence the principles used to determine what enacted a 'good' or 'bad' marriage were widely shared. These assumptions were extracted from a wide variety of sources including religious treatises and conduct material. The impact of such prescriptive representations of marriage and *actual* marital life is worth considering as, though evidence suggests that wives most certainly incorporated such

expected performance, the key resides in understanding that prescriptive guidelines regarding marital life were subject to constant alterations.

It is significant to note that the discrepancy between prescribed behaviour for spouses and their daily experience was very much felt and, frequently, the disagreement that existed between gender roles and daily experience could not be satisfactorily adjusted. This ambiguity inherent in gender roles within marriage often gave rise to what has been termed "marital difficulties" (Bailey 2003: 30), a denomination that refers to conflicted episodes within marital life, both in isolation and repeatedly and, at the same time, is also used to refer to a variety of terms assumed by people in the eighteenth century, which encompassed diverse situations, from mere conflicts and discordances between spouses to much more serious disputes that could lead to the exhaustion of the relationship. [92]

The nature of marital conflict is analysed by Bailey, who suggests that "many people understood and accepted wives' practical authority and contributions" (2003: 199). In this respect, disagreements between partners were perhaps less about a persistent opposition between husbands and wives than about the difficulty to contain "the intrinsic ambivalence between the ideal of manhood and realities of marital life" (Bailey 2003: 199).[93]

In the eighteenth century, such marital difficulties were normalised in the sense that they were usually regarded as a 'natural' part of marriage, since some difficulties were bound to arise at some point during the marital state. As Bailey notes, most people were aware that varying types of oppositions might take place and, within all of those,

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[92] Bailey takes the linguistic level into account and mentions various expressions which were commonly used during the eighteenth century to refer to marital discord, and which were applied specifically to women, as "they referred to spouses 'having some words', or 'quarrels', 'contests', 'disputes' or 'misery' (2003: 30).

[93] This uncertainty between male ideals and daily marital life can be observed in those aspects in which both husband and wife have a shared interest, such as ways to bring up their children or to manage their finances. Those instances, most likely, "create power struggles, leading men to express and attempt to implement patriarchal ideals" (Bailey 2003: 199).

"resolution was perceived to be a possible outcome" (2003: 30).[94] In *The Delicate Distress* marital difficulties are placed at the centre of the narrative, as conflict is what drives the action:

> Chide me, or chide me not, the secret's out; I am undone, my sister! in vain lord Woodville strives, beneath the mask of tenderness, to act a part, which he no longer feels; the piercing eyes of love, detect his coldness – his kind attention is all lost in me, his stifled sighs, belie his face and tongue, and whisper what he suffers, when he smiles. O, Fanny, tell me how I have offended him! how lost that heart, which formed my utmost bliss! let me blot out that passage, with my tears; it cannot, must not be. – I will not live, if I have lost his love. Why are you not now here, to flatter me – to tell me that my fears are groundless, and that he sighs, from habit, or from chance?
>
> Ah, no! since he whom I adore, has failed to blind me, I cannot, if I would, be now deceived. Yes, if I have erred, why does he not speak out, and tell me what I have done wrong? Believe me, Fanny I have tried my heart, examining every hidden thought that's there, and cannot find out one, that should offend him" (141-2)

Having noticed her husband's change towards her, Lady Woodville, in the midst of her desperate state of mind, seeks comfort in confiding her distress to her friend and confidante, Lady Straffon, from whom she wishes to obtain a deeper understanding of what has *caused* her misfortune. She wants her friend to help her detect if there has been something in her behaviour that has brought upon her troubled situation. This relies on the conventional notion that, whenever the husband has erred, the cause *must* be sought in the wife's demeanour. Yet, Lady Woodville's uneasiness is caused precisely by her *inability* to find such a cause. She has carefully examined her 'every hidden thought'

[94] This is what explains the fact that "the link between conflict and resolution marked nearly all forms of assistance given to conflictual couples" (Bailey 2003: 30)

and has found no reason to believe she is to blame in any way. Once again exerting her narrative authority she fails to find culpability on her part, can be read as an implicit questioning of the conception that in cases of marital discord wives need to silently accept the situation and assume their own 'guilt' in that regretful circumstance.

5.1.3. Advice Literature: Towards an Idealised Marriage

Eighteenth-century advice literature intended to introduce marriage "in its best possible light, and to offer recommendations on how to achieve the ideal marriage" (Roulston 2010: 16). However, the prescriptions and suggestions that were extracted from conduct manuals with regards to what constituted an 'ideal' marriage were not entirely consistent and often introduced ambiguous, contradictory messages, usually based on absolute, non-negotiable terms. Advice literature endorsed the patriarchal model of marriage in which wifely obedience was insistently called upon as absolutely *necessary*, as "the legal subjection of wives to their husbands was not only embedded in, but enabled by, the centralised political structures of England's concepts of dutiful citizenship" (Roulston 2010: 16).

The tension between the private and public realms[95] (include "Structural information of the public sphere" 1962) is reflected upon in most advice literature of the period, as marriage was taken as a 'private' matter that "had to be rendered both visible and intelligible" (Roulston 2010: 17). Within the private sphere of marriage[96] wives

[95] This issue is considered by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1989). Habermas suggests that "the process in which the state-governed public sphere was appropriated by the public of private people making use of their reason and was established as a sphere of criticism of public authority was one of functionally converting the public sphere in the world of letters already equipped with institutions of the public and with forums for discussion" (51)

[96] The concept of privacy in marriage was related to the belief that "the heterosexual couple was a private entity unto itself […] the more idealised the representation of marriage, the more it appeared as a closed system" (Roulston 2010: 39).

were encouraged to maintain the moral order of their household by ensuring the maintenance of their own 'private' worth which, in its turn, allowed them to impede their husband's deviance in "more public, and devalued, sexual spaces" (Roulston 2010: 38). In most conduct books, the public sphere is introduced as a dangerous area, a menacing environment that can destroy the foundation of marriage, as the public arena is usually depicted as "a sexualised space, where marriage and virtue can become tainted" (Roulston 2010: 38). This constant portrayal of the 'public' sphere as a an unsafe habitat perpetuates the confinement of women within a domestic, private realm[97], a place where they have the 'mission' to protect themselves and their husbands from the instability and perils inherent in public spaces[98].

The 'ideal' marriage that was promoted through both fiction and conduct material involved a number of elements that signalled the inefficiency of this ideal model, such as "public and private boundaries, the managing of desire, the loss of clear gender roles, the fear of effeminacy, and ultimately, the suspicion that the ideal marriage might be precisely that, and hence, unworkable" (Roulston 2010: 56). In the same way that idealised configurations of womanhood proved problematic, idealised conceptions of marriage also involved complications, which introduced the suspicion that ideal marriages were far from becoming idyllic, perfect models to emulate and actually "threatened to become a burden as much as a site of fulfilment" (Roulston 2010: 56). Therefore, to the difficulty of defining what an 'ideal marriage' actually entails one must add the complication of determining how efficient idealised

[97] Roulston makes an interesting remark by pointing out that such insistence "was not just to keep women inside – at least at a symbolic level – but also to remind men that there should be a consistency between inside and outside" (2010: 54). Rouslton argument highlights the importance that negotiating outside and inside, private and public, had for *both* men and women, as both had to learn to assimilate the underlying points of anxiety between these two distinct realms, and he notes that "in certain conduct books, the emphasis lies in reassuring men of their virility within a domestic context" (2010: 54).

[98] Roulston emphasizes this idea by pointing out that "the more the home was constructed as a self-sufficient space, the more the public sphere increased in its symbolic value as a disruption of that space. In certain cases, the trope of the outside became the only way of describing the inside" (2010: 49).

conceptions of marriage actually are and, most importantly, to what extent such marriages are actually beneficial[99].

5.1.4. Adultery: Linguistic and Semantic Connotations

Adultery has produced an abundant number of vocabulary items, employed for different purposes, "some of it condemnatory, other words more euphemistic, intended to make a light of infidelity or to evade its implications by avoiding explicit mention of it" (Turner 2004: 24). As Turner rightly points out, to fully access the social and cultural dimension of infidelity in the eighteenth century deciphering the terminology that is adopted to debate this notion becomes imperative.[100]

This emphasis on the linguistic connotation of the names used to refer to certain offenses, adultery included, resulted in a careful examination of those terms that were deployed to name both the vice per se and also the person who committed it.[101] Religious expressions were often employed in such cases, as the language of immoral sexual behaviour was taken as having "the power to shame and strike terror into the minds of sinners" (Turner 2004: 26) and thus biblical language was often selected to signal *impurity*[102].

[99] Writers such as Richardson and Rousseau approach the notion of the 'ideal marriage' through the figure of the virtuous wife, who is placed "at the moral center of the domestic sphere; endlessly desirable, and yet entirely virtuous, she bears on her shoulders the responsibility to keep married life compelling and narratable" (Roulston 2010: 58).

[100] This was in accordance with the conviction of moralists and social reviewers that language was "the counterstone of the social and moral order" (Turner 2004: 24) and hence the selection of certain words had a potential detrimental effect on the moral principles of those who made use of those expressions.

[101] Turner notes that the language of adultery was extremely restrictive, as it introduced "no conceptual or linguistic distinction between different types of offense, or between casual sexual encounters and long-term affairs" (2004: 28).

[102] Turner quotes Biblical language that could be found in moral tracts of the period, such as 'adultery', 'whoredom', and 'uncleanness', and indicates that such language "covered a multitude of sexual offenses such as adultery, fornication or incest, but most fundamentally between chastity and unchastity" (Turner 2004: 27).

What was often termed 'adultery' did not simply include activities in the sexual arena but could be expanded to other areas as well, especially in the case of women. As Turner notes, "adultery could thus include anything that stirred up to lust, such as songs, ballads, plays, books, dancing and provocative fashions of clothing" (2004: 27-8). Women were widely regarded as much more prone to uncontrolled emotions than men and hence there was a strong monitoring of their behaviour, especially of those of activities that were believed to 'excite their passions'. Novel reading was among those perilous activities, together with the attendance to certain public activities, such as masquerades, and the display of excessive interest in fashion. Hence, the term adultery , when applied to women, ceased to be refer *exclusively* to extra-marital affairs and began to be actively used to label any activity that was considered to be 'unsuitable' or 'improper' for women to engage in.

5.1.4.1 Narrating Adultery: The Destabilisation of the Family

The judicial persecution of adultery was a constant motif during the middle ages but in the seventeenth century there was a movement away from that 'official' prosecution of infidelity. The role the church courts played in sanctioning adultery gradually declined, influenced by the fact that the political stability that was achieved in late seventeenth-century England "removed some of the impetus on the part of authorities, especially in rural areas, to routinely intervene to uphold the social, moral and gender order by punishing adulterers and other sexual offenders" (Turner 2004: int 4). Consequently, by the 1730s in London the pursuit of adultery cases was terminated due to a change in the way adultery was publicly regarded, as it "came to be viewed by

the legal authorities as a 'private vice', no longer subject to public prosecution" (Turner 2004: int 5).

Yet, the ceasing of the public prosecution of adultery did not entail a total and utter approval of it. The increasing amount of 'indulgence' shown towards cases of infidelity did not diminish the suspicion that surrounded it. In fact, as Turner notes, in the late seventeenth century "the question of whether adultery was a matter of public regulation or a matter of personal conscience was a key topic of debate" (2004: int 6).

Despite this lack of consensus regarding the public or private dimension of adultery, a plausible interpretation is to take such heated debate as signalling the uncertainty of moral management and, what is more, as an indicative of the "'privatisation' of domestic relations in the period" (Turner 2004: int 6).[103] This de-politisation of the family unit became more evident when sex and marriage gradually became more discernible due to "cultural innovations and new genres of print" (Turner 2004: int 8). The proliferation of genres[104] around marriages – including *failed* marriages – facilitated the disclosure of events that formerly pertained to a private, personal experience and that were being 'transported' into the public sphere. Hence, marriage and adultery became a topic of high interest among the population, who consumed such 'public', cultural representations of matrimony and its discontents to attempt in an attempt to delve into the "questioning of how and why marriages failed and what motivated men and women to be unfaithful to their spouses" (Turner 2004: int 9). Lady Woodville authoritatively declares that women and men cope with 'unhappy' passions in different ways:

[103] Turner acknowledges that such 'privatisation' of adultery is surrounded by intricacy, as "the notion that the family was becoming a less 'political' institution needs to be set against what is known about the continuing importance of gender, the family and sexuality to political debate of this period" (2004: int 7)
[104] A wide variety of genres emerged from different formats to offer ways to represent and interpret marriage and its failures "from sermons and works to religious devotion to pamphlets describing domestic homicides, from periodicals answering questions on matrimonial issues submitted by their readers, to scandalous 'secret histories' serving up tales of the sexual adventures of the beaux monde" (Turner 2004: int 8).

> Men more easily triumph over an unhappy passion, than women. Dissipation, change of place, and objects, all contribute to their cure; while perhaps the poor sighing fair one is absolutely confined to the same spot, where she first beheld her charmer, and where every object reminds her, that here he sat, walked, or talked" (144)

Within this debate around marriage and its discontents, some critics have highlighted the significance of the presence of embedded seduction tales within marriage stories. As Binhammer argues, the seduction tales that are introduced in novels about marriage bear a multiplicity of narrative purposes and force the reader to (re-) examine "the relationships between marriage and seduction, love inside and outside sanctioned bonds, sexual knowledge and sexual ignorance, and chastity and contamination" (2009: 73). Therefore, seduction stories enliven marriage tales by bringing in all of those elements that need to be carefully examined so as to critically approach the complex subject of "a woman's new right to their heart" (Binhammer 2009: 73).

During the long eighteenth century, there was the widespread conjecture that women, once they married, ceased to present a *significant* story and that, as a consequence, their stories had to come from another source, mainly from those seduced characters who filled the narrative 'void' of married life by offering their story of "sexual transgression" (Binhammer 2009: 73). Yet, despite this supposition, married life *did* provide a wide variety of narrative dilemmas that kept the story *going* and that needed to be resolved throughout the course of the narrative, such as "a husband's infidelity, a first love returning, the loss of a spouse's affection, a husband's violence and abuse, a wife's adultery, economic distress and male tyranny" (Binhammer 2009). All of these circumstances bear witness to the fact that despite the reluctance to give

marriage (and its failures) narrative *authority*, the marriage plot provided insightful information about a topic that was tremendously significant: what women can *await for* about marital life and its (possible) dissatisfaction:

> I have discovered that lady Woodville has lately wept much; I once suprized her alone, in a flood of tears. I could not bear them; they reproached me, Seymour! but it was with silent anguish. I pressed to know the cause of her distress: had she revealed it, and but once upbraided me, though in the gentlest terms, I fear I should have thrown away the mask, avowed my passion, and quitted her, forever.
>
> But her soft nature knew not how to chide, and seemed alarmed for fear she had offended. Her suffering gentleness unmanned me quite, or rather, on the instant, it restored all that is worthy of the name of man, my reason, and my virtue: and I dare hope, that, from that time, she has been well deceived, and that I only, am the victim, of my own weakness (153)

Lord Woodville's behaviour largely depends on his wife's *reaction* to it. In this sense, her weeping alarms him, and he reprimands himself for causing her sorrow accordingly, but, above all, he fears she might reprimand *him* for his faults in their marriage. He is convinced that, if she were to reproach him, her scolding would be sufficient 'justification' for him to affirm his passion and abandon her. In that crucial moment, his wife's conduct is without reproach, and he identifies her 'suffering gentleness' as the main cause for restoring all his proper reasoning, a logic that urges him to remain by her side, resisting all temptation to leave.

In this section I have tackled several eighteenth-century views on marriage, from how the institution was culturally and socially regarded to the double-standard and gendered stance that rendered different rights and obligations to wives and husbands. I

have also reflected on the failure of marriages and on the ways in which adultery was portrayed and perceived, paying special attention to the ways in which Griffith incorporated the trope of marriage and infidelity to forward her narrative purposes in *The Delicate Distress*.

5.2. Towards a Feminine Utopia: Women's Education and the Movement away from the Image of the 'Temptress'

Women writers, conscious of their restrictions, struggled to find ways to surpass the obstacles they encountered and envisioned their own particular *utopian* view. The utopian novel's significance lied in its capacity to bring forward an eagerness to adapt "a familiar world according to women's desires for greater self-possession" (Johns 2003: int 15). In his discussion of feminist utopias, Johns clearly states that his vision demands a reformulation, or at least some clarification, of the term 'utopia', as the feminist utopias he signals do not entail a "political upheaval, subversion and radical ideology" (Johns 2003: int 16). These utopian tales indicated a predisposition to demand certain adjustments in personal connections that would aid to "redrew the horizon of the public sphere" (Johns 2003: int 16).

As Grimshaw points out, in the eighteenth century there was a growing concern about womanliness, and especially about the role women were culturally expected to occupy. This female role was restricted to obtaining a 'secure' position, which could only be achieved through "a marriage in which she was wholly dependent, and for the woman who was not married, the prospects were bleak indeed: the often humiliating and penurious 'careers' of governess or lady's companion" (Grimshaw 1990: 8). In the midst of this 'enslavement' of women, both inside and outside marriage, there was a

growing opposition to the religious set of beliefs which "had seen women simply as Eve the temptress, the occasion of man's sin" (Grimshaw 1990: 8). Women were no longer taken as 'temptresses' who caused mischief with their uncontrollable passions but, instead, were given another role: that of protectors of moral virtue.[105]

The Biblical reference of Eve in the Garden of Eden culturally introduced woman as "the seductress who destroys man's innocence. Her body is the instrument of evil, and for this she must be punished" (Tong 1989: 99).[106] However, Du Mez offers a radically different approach to the figure of Eve. In an attempt to dismantle traditional conceptions of Eve as the "author of all our woes" (2015: 110), Du Mez provides a sympathetic, unbiased approach to Eve[107] that is able to discern her conduct "above all reproach" (2015: 110) and hence praises Eve instead of *condemning* her.

Bushnell takes a similar stance and attempts to *elucidate* the origin behind the negative portrayal of Eve. Her argument is based on her conviction that the unfavourable portrayal of Eve "had been invented at a particular moment in history, and was therefore 'man-made', not God-ordained' (Du Mez 2015: 110). To support her claim, Bushnell declares that Pagan and Christian Myths became interlaced and that, at some point, Pandora's tale *overshadowed* Eve's narration to the extent that "the true meaning of Genesis had been lost" (Du Mez 2015: 110). Hence, Bushnell undertakes to waive such confusion between the tales and, in so doing, wishes to "provide a new

[105] As Grimshaw notes, this notion of 'female virtue' was centered around two widespread conceptions: "the idea that virtue is gendered […] and that it is female 'sensibilities', women's particular psychological characteristics, which fit women for a specifically female type of virtue (but also disqualify them from that type thought appropriate to male, and render them weaker and potentially easily corruptible)" (1990: 8).

[106] Tong notes that this image of women as temptress distorts rape law and is responsible for the theory of women 'triggering' their rape based on the belief that "whether or not a woman is aware of it, her body is continually speaking to men and especially to potential rapists" (1989: 102).

[107] This sympathetic 'reading' of Eve was present in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* (1895-98), a controversial work that, despite Stanton's wish to promote a radical shift in scriptural dogma, failed to achieve recognition by Bible Scholars of her time.

template for womanhood, and to reframe the course of human history" (Du Mez 2015: 110).

This powerful image of the 'temptress' was also used as a justification for the rigidness of women's education. For instance, Rousseau's conception of women does not totally distinguish it from the notion of 'temptress', as in his particular vision women have certain "power over men, the power of charming and captivating them and of inflaming their senses" (Grimshaw 2004: 9). Yet, this 'innate' capacity to please ought to be redirected towards acquiring a dutiful, obedient disposition, which will render them *pleasing* to the other sex. Rousseau's concern with women's education reflects his dread that women's highly praised qualities, especially their willingness to please, might "easily be corrupted and turned into infidelity, coquetry and false refinement of manners" (Grimshaw 1990: 10). To prevent this, Rousseau's approach to female education is directed towards making women acquire the *habit* of adhering to that which might appear 'unjust' without even the slightest objection:

> I cannot, but would not, if I could, describe the night I passed – my lord remained quite senseless; enviable state! yet, now-and-then, his languid eyes seemed fixed on me. About five in the morning, he fell into a kind of dose, and remained in that situation, till near seven, when he awoke in the most violent delirium – he raved incessantly – but not of me.
>
> In this violent melancholy state he continued, eleven days – "a burning fever, and a broken heart!" O Fanny, it is too much! but should he recover it, I never shall (198)

Lady Woodville is aware of the fact that she must resist all the difficult trials her marriage places her into but, the moment her husband feverishly raves 'not of her', she loses all strength of mind and fears she might never recover from this blow. Her

(expected) role of the dutiful, complaisant wife becomes a troublesome one; it turns into a role she is not certain she can *continue* to fulfil and she authoritatively declares so.

In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft considers this same idea of the 'complaisant' female and the limitations of such viewpoint. Many disparities are offered, mainly between 'corrupted' females and virtuous wives, and especially between those feelings which are decorous and those which are false, simply feigned to mirror 'real' virtue. In this debate, Wollstonecraft argues that love and passion cannot be accommodated with respect and friendship. She also claims that lack of love in marriage might not be such an undesirable state, as if a woman is not contented with her husband, this might prove to work to her advantage in the sense that she will be "more likely to devote herself wholeheartedly to the acquisition of reason and virtue and the exercise of these in bringing up her children" (Grimshaw 1990: 11).

Mary Astell also mistrusted the notion of teaching women *merely* to please and obey, as this "both undermines their capacity for leading useful or rational lives and channels their desires and pleasures into vain and trivial objects and modes such as fashion and fiction" (Grimshaw 1990: 14). Women's capacity for reason was subject to heated debate, as some considered reason to be *exclusively* a male trait, and thus unfit for women, while others, such as Wollstronecraft and Astell, urged women to lead *rational* lives and to avoid that which might prevent them from achieving a reason-driven state of mind.

Mary Daly proposed her particular opposition to women's education, as she strongly believed that what women were instructed was 'erroneous', as her vision seeks to indicate that women's education "undermines female creativity and autonomy, and

almost every facet of female socialization helps to channel female desire into these 'wrong objects'" (Grimshaw 1990: 15)[108].

5.2.1. The Feminine as Spiritual: Gardens as Metaphysical Retreats

In his study *Green Retreats: Women, Gardens and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Stephen Bending stresses the tremendous significance that gardens held in eighteenth-century life, especially in *women's* lives:

> Gardens are places of pleasure and punishment; they are places to read, to dance, to work, to laugh, to study, to labour, to rest [...] they are places to imagine, to make, to own and to visit; they are places which speak of elsewhere and places which signify home; they are places of retirement and ostentation, they are places of transgression, of meditation, of excitement, of boredom, seduction, luxury, and suicide" (2013: int 1)

As the above quotation indicates, the garden was a 'rich' environment, full of endless possibilities and subject to multiple – often conflicting – interpretations. The garden offered women a retreat, a place to 'escape' their existence or, at least, to somehow surpass its limitations. Options are multiplied in a natural landscape which is strongly connected to the home while pulling away from it. In the midst of what appears to be an unfettered space, nature becomes the perfect venue to ponder around existence and its restrictions.[109] The act of finding a physical space, whether indoors or outdoors, inevitably "is the shaping also of identity" (Bending 2013: int 1) and gardens,

[108] In Daly's work, her critique of women's submission is apparent in her choice of language expressions to refer to women, as she makes use of terms such as "'puppet' or even 'fembot'" (Grimshaw 1990: 15).
[109] Bending reinforces this idea by arguing that "gardens are recognised as the opportunity for a self-fashioning engagement with cultural norms and narratives, a space in which the disparate agenda of eighteenth-century culture would inevitably have to be confronted" (2013: int 5).

in particular, are “speaking and reacting to a world beyond themselves” (Bending 2013: int 1).

The idea of ‘female retirement’[110] is a recurrent motif in private letters and diaries, and such retirement illustrates women’s attempt to somehow ‘escape’ the world but, as Bending notes, such attempt is destined to fail, as retreat “can never leave behind the ways in which it is constructed by the world beyond itself and about which it inevitably speaks” (2013: 68). Therefore, the garden proves a powerful space for reflection and successfully provides a space in which women can peacefully meditate on their own selves but this serene retreat proves inefficient as a means to escape the bounds of society to which they must respond, and which continue to be very much present in that isolated space:

> Yes, my dear Fanny, I am now, thank Heaven, safely arrived at Woodfort – would I had never left it! I think even the place, and every thing in it, is altered, during a short absence, of twelve days. The trees have lost their verdure, and the birds cease to sing. But though the autumnal season, may have produced these effects, I begin to fear there is a greater change in me, than in any of the objects that surround me.
>
> Yet am I in the spring of life, not ripened even to summer; while like a blastered flower, I shrink and fade. Say, Fanny, what is this? The animal, and vegetable world bloom in their proper season, youth – while amongst those whom we call rational, grief steals the roses, from the downy cheek, and flowing tears oft dim the brilliant eye. Lord Seymour is unhappy; Thornton sighs; and my loved lord, seems wretched; – need I go on, and close the climax, with my breaking heart! (141)

[110] The physical or metaphorical spaces to which women retire are subject to constant revision, and hence retirement becomes a place “constantly to be constructed and negotiated” (Bending 2013: 67)

Lady Woodville establishes a direct connection between her troubled sentiments and the place she inhabits. Her distorted state of mind has *altered* her surroundings; her sorrow has caused all things in nature to decay: the trees, the birds, all seem to 'feel' her anguish and have lost all bloom because of it. As she acknowledges, her perception of her surroundings is deeply conditioned by her inner feelings and sensations. The bond that is established between herself and the natural world that surrounds her is so prominent that she envisions herself as an element of nature, as a 'blastered flower' that has weakened.

Hence, the garden cannot be understood *exclusively* as a liberating space, as it can often become an oppressive, rather hostile environment. Seduction narratives make extensive use of gardens to either illustrate the *threat* of seduction or to actually *display* the seduction scene. The garden, with its clear Biblical reference to the Garden of Eden, becomes a place of confinement, of pastoral seclusion which, in turn, becomes a means "for others to judge the individual against a claimed social norm and its inequalities" (Bending 2013: int 6). The retirement that gardens entail endows an acute awareness of the distance that exists between individuality, what the individual *truly* desires, and what society *demands* from that individual. Thus, the garden, with its replication of cultural assumptions, can 'entrap' women in a place "that could taunt them with unattainable aspirations, and that as a result could damn them to disappointment, to disillusionment, and to a depressing sense of failure" (Bending 2013: int 7).[111]

The trope of women in gardens was portrayed throughout the eighteenth century, and one of the implications of that trope was the peril of women's 'uncontrolled' sexuality. In this respect, the presence of the woman in the garden exemplifies the fact that "women must be cultivated, governed, controlled, if their naturally conflicting

[111] This notion of the garden as a place of disillusionment is linked to the idea of gardens as "a demonstration of the dangerous delights of society" (Bending 2013: int 20) which women are repeatedly warned against.

desires are to be socially contained" (Bending 2013: int 27). The garden becomes a metaphor for women's 'wild' sexual nature, a nature that must be limited, and purposefully looked after, as one looks after a garden, so as to avoid women's desires becoming dangerous 'seeds'[112].

5.2.2 The Idealisation of the Family: Women as Guarantors of Virtue

Women who were public figures constructed and eagerly advanced an "idealized family in which women 'dignified' themselves through their domestic government and through the capacities they demonstrated by their domestic and philanthropic work" (Bannet 2000: int 1-2). In this way, women's domestic role was enhanced and highly praised as a crucial aspect that had the power to exalt women to a 'superior' position that would grant them society's recognition for their valuable 'labour' within the family unit.

The proper government of the family became women's *primmest* duty; a duty which was highly debated throughout the eighteenth century, as there was no *unambiguous* definition of what a proper administration of family matters entailed, since "different concepts of government, nature and society; different models of economics, religion, duty, and order; different uses of education, virtue and power; and different constructions of gender intersected and converged" (Bannet 2000: int 2).

Due to this growing interest on women's occupations within the private sphere of their household, women were identified as "the new guarantors of social virtue" (Du Mez 2015: 48) and, within this new position, the very notion of virtue itself was

[112] In Richardson's *Clarissa* the theme of the garden as a dangerous place is continuously hinted upon, as in the following scene: "At length your beloved young lady has consented to free herself from the cruel treatment she has so long borne. She is to meet me without the garden door at about four o'clock on Monday afternoon […] I shall have a chariot-and-fix ready in the by-road fronting the private path to Harlowe Paddock" (295)

reconstructed and the concept of ‘female purity’ was elevated. As a consequence, many women saw this ‘advancement’ of their position as an opportunity to rightfully claim “a new source of public authority and social empowerment” (Du Mez 2015: 48).[113]

In works of fiction of the period, there was also a response to this rising appreciation of female purity and virtuous womanhood. In *The Female Quixote* (1752), Charlotte Lennox revolves around the establishment of women’s ‘proper place’ within societal norms by stressing the importance of the relationship between the sexes and reflecting on “what kind of knowledge women should learn from men, and what kind men should learn from women, as well as women for each other and for themselves” (Barney 1999: 258). Women’s education ceases to be *uniquely* about what women should or should not learn but, most crucially, about what they can learn from the bonds they form with both men and women. The notion of friendship becomes inescapably tied to *knowledge*, as most of what is learned is acquired through social interaction:

> I should think lord Seymour in such a state of mind, that no slight, or trivial misfortune, could possibly affect him; for they who have once felt real anguish, may bid defiance to future ills. The arrows of adversity, may glance against, but cannot wound a heart already broken. From sympathy alone, such minds can suffer. – But Oh! far, far be the thought, from Emily’s fond bosom, that lord Woodville’s sufferings should cause lord Seymour’s sorrow! It is impossible! I am sorry I have expressed such a thought, even to you, my sister. I would blot it from the paper, if I could erase it from my mind” (64)

[113] To illustrate this point, Du Mez refers to the fact that “female missionaries, temperance workers, and purity reformers alike all drew upon the social and moral authority derived from this construction of virtuous womanhood” (2015: 48).

Lady Straffon is acutely aware of the *effect* her 'words' might have on her dear friend Lady Woodville and instantly regrets having filled her friend's mind with her *own* ideas and wishes she could erase them to avoid causing her friend any unnecessary torment. This reflects the intense attachment that is established between the two women; their correspondence allows them to confide their deepest fears and worries with significant authority and the valuable advice they provide through their letters might, sometimes, prove 'unsuitable' in the sense that it further *enhances* their apprehensions.

Inner meditation is yet another powerful means through which to access knowledge, in this case knowledge about oneself. Barney intertwine's Pamela and Arabella's personal histories by arguing that both female characters reveal "a genuine sense of her own psychological interiority" (1999: 269) and hence shifting the focus from the kind of knowledge that can be learned externally to that which can be acquired internally, through a careful examination of one's own *inner* life. The richness of inner life is also dealt by Griffith:

> She now sat down to search the book of fate, those fatal Sybil's leaves that told her doom; and while she read, felt every passion, that the human heart is capable of. – Yet still her love, and reverence for her parents, remained predominant; and she determined to sacrifice herself, to their unnatural commands, and pass her days in a cloister, if she could not prevail on them to change their cruel purpose (78)

Charlotte struggles with conflicting passions but, in the end, her reason conquers all the other emotions she is experiencing and the deep love she feels towards her parents urges her to relinquish her inner conflict. Yet, the narrator's choice of words such as 'unnatural' and 'cruel' to refer to her parents' demands indicate Charlotte's

inner (unacknowledged) discomfort with her parents' wishes. She decides to follow their dictates but, underneath, she *resists* such orders.

Arabella also shows a sharp inner *resistance*. In her case, she resists interiorizing – and replicating – prescribed models of femininity. This resistance is made apparent in her particular perception of the image of the Amazon. Traditionally, an Amazon radically disrupts 'proper' feminine qualities and "offers the spectacle of a woman who has lost her natural female identity in the act of perversely seizing men's aggresivity" (Barney 1999: 279). Arabella's Amazon is even more troubling in the sense that she breaks such clear distinction between what is masculine and feminine, and instead becomes "viscerally abject, a being both powerfully masculine and fully feminine, indeterminately occupying both categories in volatile combination" (Barney 1999: 279). In the same way that the image of the temptress disrupts female propriety, the image of the Amazon also destabilizes propriety notions, especially those that set up spaces designed specifically for men and women. The Amazon, by simultaneously occupying a masculine and feminine role undermines the strict configurations of female and male arenas.

In *The History of Betsy Thoughtless* (1751), Eliza Haywood also dismantles certain preconceived notions about expected female behaviour. One of the lessons Betsy learns throughout the narrative is to *detect* the disingenuousness that marks the relationship between private emotions and public display of those emotions[114], and she eventually masters "the ability to engage in a kind of 'honest' theater, in which she assumes the role of self-reflective and virtuous woman" (Barney 1999: 288). This theatrical exhibit allows Betsy to recognize the inconsistencies between 'real' virtue and a conscious 'imitation' of a virtuous disposition. In this sense, Haywood manages to

[114] Barney explicitly mentions the theatricalness inherent in women's public behaviour, as "women must constantly attend to how they are perceived and what standing they have in terms of 'reputation'" (2000: 288)

disclose “a woman’s productive deployment of both complaisance and assertiveness” (Barney 1999: 290).

5.2.3 Negotiating between Subordination and Independence: Matriarchal and Egalitarian Narratives

Matriarchal and Egalitarian narratives both reflected on the terms around which the ‘woman question’ is negotiated but they employed different approaches. Matriarchal writers[115] were resolute in their ‘defence’ of hierarchical structures at the domestic, social and political level and hence “taught ladies how to obtain and deploy ascendancy over men, over their families, and over their inferiors” (Bannet 2000: int 3). By contrast, Egalitarian writers[116] were not entirely comfortable with the presence of hierarchical structures and instead “preached independence from all subordination, both at home and abroad” (Bannet 2000: int 3).

Despite their dissimilar viewpoints on subordination and hierarchical organisation, Matriarchs and Egalitarians shared a common goal: they were both driven by their willingness to “raise women from their inferior standing relative to men in the household, in cultural representations and in prescriptive social norms, and to refashion women’s manners, women’s morals, and women’s education to those ends” (Bannet 2000: int 7). Their main preoccupation lied in determining the amount of ‘self-government’ women were allowed to possess. Within the household, women’s role was becoming ‘prominent’ but the extent to which they actually governed by themselves or “continued to be governed by fathers and husbands playing virtually interchangeable

[115] Writers such as Mary Astell, Lady Mansham, Jane West and Hannah More are usually identified as ‘Matriarchal writers’.
[116] Writers such as Judith Drake, Charlotte Smith, Mary Hays and Mary Wollstonecraft are usually identified as ‘Egalitarian writers’

roles" (Bannet 2000: int 7) was still under negotiation. This reinforces the belief that women's position was not simple measured according to their ability to accommodate certain norms and it was precisely this 'uncertainty' that has provided ways to detect how novels and writers of the period "constructed their positions, debated the extremes, or negotiated between them" (Bannet 2000: int 10).

Matriarchal writers insisted on the importance of favouring spirituality in education and, through their fiction, sought to ensure that young ladies understood the importance of receiving a Christian education. Hence, these writers "taught ladies how to deploy the law of God to their own advantage in the household, where civil law left them without redress" (Bannet 2000: 36). In their view, the 'law of God' would prove extremely beneficial for women, as it gave them the opportunity to 'reveal' "their natural superiority to men in sense and virtue and to realize their very highest ambitions" (Bannet 2000: 37). Immersed in societal prescriptions and pressures that restricted their self-expression, religion and spirituality appeared to offer the perfect medium through which to reinforce their worth.

The Matriarchs' perspective was fundamentally based on the notion of order and subordination, to which they dutifully adhered, but within their defence of dutiful submission, they also stressed the *necessity* for women to "govern their own minds, their own consciousness and their own conduct" (Bannet 2000: 46).[117] This vision was shared by Egalitarian writers, who also sought to "rewrite relations between women and men" (Bannet 2000: 79) and made use of didactic, moralistic conventions to clearly indicate those aspects they believed were 'contaminating' the relations between the sexes and those which "they considered were conductive to happiness" (Bannet 2000: 79). Both Matriarchs and Egalitarians, then, provided ways to re-examine the relations

[117] Bannet argues that Matriarchs discourse around submissiveness and docility "masked a gender politics anchored in the will to power and designed to invert the extant hierarchy between women and men" (2000: 44)

between the sexes and to *highlight* the disparity that lied within those relations. This re-examination of gender relations is also present in *The Delicate Distress*:

> had she been led astray, by an agreeable young man, I could have pitied, nay, perhaps, have loved, and even esteemed her; for I am not such an Amazon, in ethics, to consider a breach of chastity, as the highest crime, that a woman can be guilty of; though it is, certainly, the most unpardonable folly; and I believe there are many women, who have erred, in that point, who may have more real virtue, aye, and delicacy too, than half the sainted dames, who value themselves on the preservation of their chastity; which, in all probability, has never been assailed (166-7)

In the above quotation, a sympathetic attitude is developed towards 'fallen' women. They are introduced as women who ought to inspire esteem and respect on the ground that, in spite of their fall, they have *real* virtue, or at least a kind of virtue that is more *sincere* than that of women whose chastity has never even been assaulted and who, nevertheless, take great pride in their proper safeguarding of their 'virtue'.

In this section I have analysed the ways in which women writers attempted to move away from the image of women as 'temptress' towards a more spiritual conceptualisation of womanhood, based on an idealisation of woman as the guarantor of virtue. I have also dealt with the ways in which Matriarchal and Egalitarian narratives negotiate between women's subordinate position and their achievement of 'independence'.

5.3. Constructing the Heroine: The Tensions between Feminine Disempowerment and Feminine Agency

In early Modern France, women's situation mirrored that of women in Britain, and the certainty of women's inferiority appeared to be 'unquestionable', especially in religious environments, as "for both Catholic and Protestant authorities of the period, the ideal woman was the pious and submissive spouse who accepted her husband's authority without question and spent the greater part of her time in prayer" (McMillan 2000: 4).

In Enlightenment England and France the debate around femininity gained more importance than ever and acquired a prominent position in the discussions of the time. McMillan notes that "Enlightenment thinkers addressed themselves to the question of women's 'otherness' and attempted to explain the essence of sexual difference in the light of the advanced thinking and scientific discoveries of the day" (2000: 5). Women's 'otherness' was tackled in an attempt to determine if their biological *distinctiveness* could be used to clarify their subordinate position or, at least, to find some rationale behind their subsidiary arrangement.[118]

Such conflicted debate around womanhood delineated new ways to assess women's role, and new perspectives were taken to analyse women's *purpose* within the society they inhabited. Hence, the heated discussion around 'women's cause' "transformed the debate around women's nature, not only raising it to a new level but

[118] In her *Declaration of the Rights of Women*, the feminist propagandist De Gourges urged women to "demand their legitimate place in the conduct of public affairs in the name of reason and philosophy" (McMillan 2000: 19). In her proposal, De Gourges employs the widespread stereotype of women's essential *difference* as part of her "rhetorical strategy" (McMillan 2000: 19), as she acknowledged "that women *were* different, which was precisely why they refused to include them within the category of active citizens" (McMillan 2000: 19).

providing a new language and a new frame of reference within which to discuss what would thereafter be known as the 'woman question'" (McMillan 2000: 6). [119]

Critics like Cracium engage in this debate of the 'woman question' and argue that 'natural' subordination of women was cross-examined by several writers who offered "diverse critiques and interrogations of sexual difference (the 'natural' real of biological sex) as a historically stable and stabilizing reality" (2003: int 3).[120] Thus, the 'natural' separation between the sexes is not as easily established – and accepted – as might initially appear and the very notion of 'sexual difference' is a debatable entity that is by no means *absolute*.

The unstable, often contradictory, elements inherent within femininity were deeply analysed in the work of writers such as Mary Robinson and Mary Hays, who "continued to celebrate femininity's associations with sensuality at a time when the public intellectual sphere was increasingly masculinised and rationalized" (Cracium 2003: int 6-7). These writers' ability to accommodate dissonant constituents in their work illustrates their "strategic use of available (and conflicting) gender paradigms to subversive effect" (Cracium 2003: int 7). Instead of avoiding paradoxical notions on gender difference, these writers *embraced* such contradictions and managed to use them for their own narrative purposes.

Eighteenth century's fiction by women 'support' widespread beliefs about women's weakness and, accordingly, depict heroines whose passivity is apparent and who must undergo a series of tests "to ascertain whether or not virtue can control passion" (Freeman 1995: 77). In novels of sensibility, hence, feminine vulnerability

[119] McMillan observes that within this debate around femininity most theorists "viewed women as an inferior creature not simply because of their oppression by man-made laws but because nature had so ordained" (2000: 8).
[120] To stress his point, Cracium claims that Romantic writers "not only have questioned the nature of femininity and culturally constructed gender, but that they also questioned the stability and naturalness of sex itself" (2003: int 3).

"provides the basis for narrative structure" (Freeman 1995: 77) and hence in this scenario the tension between the called-for female disempowerment and the 'undesired' female agency was very much felt.[121]

The suppression of feminine agency became imperative, as Freeman notes, since "it would appear that the only way through which a women author could gain both financial reward and literary commendation was by creating characters who learn to agree to their own victimization" (Freeman 1995: 77).[122]

5.3. 1. A Threat the Family Unit : The Image of the Femme Fatale

The ambiguous, complex figure of the 'femme fatale' is, as Braun notes, "once everywhere yet difficult to pin down" (2012: int 1).[123] This compelling figure's allure depends largely on her ability to disguise her *true* intentions, leaving a trail of mystery around her. Her "nebulous, ethereal and impenetrable" persona relies on the sense of curiosity she creates around her. Inevitable, then, her 'force' disappears the moment "her motives are revealed, and she becomes both obvious and familiar" (Braun 2012: int 1) and so her main purpose ought to be a *maintenance* of the secrecy that surrounds her.

Some critics like Braun consider the femme fatale to be a Victorian 'creation' and identify a large number of manifestations of literary fatal, seductive women who posed a threat to conventional notions of femininity. Braun identifies a progression

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[121] Freeman points out that in novels of seduction, in which a certain degree of feminine agency is present, female agency is nevertheless "almost exclusively reactive: a woman's forbidden passion overrides both her reason and her chastity, and she suffers accordingly" (1995: 77). To further emphasize this argument, Freeman also notes that "the only acceptable form of feminine agency is that the female protagonist employ it to sacrifice herself" (1995: 78).

[122] Freeman highlights this idea by claiming that "a heroine can become a heroine only by suppressing desire, remaining 'virtuous,' and thereby subordinating herself to prevailing social norms and customs" (1995: 78).

[123] Lucynzska-Holdys also reflects on this notion of the 'femme fatale' and points out that "the generic origin of the femme fatale term is not clear, despite growing interest in the topic of dangerous and powerful femininity" (2013: int 4).

through which such alluring women increasingly came to be categorised as 'fatal' towards the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the growing interest in Gothic and folklore tales, which "captured the demand for historically obscure tales of terror created by supernaturally seductive women" (2012: int 7).

However, the conception of women as 'destructive' does not initiate in the Victorian era but was commonplace as far back as the medieval period. In Folk medieval narratives, the conception of 'hairy women' was associated with monstrosity, on the grounds that this physical trait placed women "more clearly outside the realm of human femininity" (Wiesmer-Hanks 2014: 27). In these narratives, women's appearance was what determined if they were truly feminine and also truly *human*. Certain physical appearance traits were deemed inhuman and, even, monstrous.[124] In the sixteenth century, female depictions acquired a more affirmative connotation and images of wild women ceased to imply 'inhumanness' and were regarded as delivering "protection and strength" (Wiesmer-Hanks 2014: 227). Yet, the conception of women as devastating did not fully vanish but rather, surfaced through the figure of witches, whose "uncovered hair was a sign of their uncontrolled sexuality" (Wiesmer-Hanks 2014: 227).

In *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz approaches the aggressiveness that the figure of the femme fatale entails, as Luczynska-Holdys mentions, and delineates certain enduring characteristics of the 'fatal woman', including "her exoticism, irrestibility, sexual cannibalism […] and identifies the femme fatale as a praying mantis, a vampire, a siren or a wanton courtesan"[125] (2013: int 14).

[124] Wiesmer-Hanks mentions the Greek origins of such Folklore tales about female 'monstrosity' by referring to the tale of the Gorgons, "female monsters with snakes as hair, who turned anyone looking at them into stone" (2014: 27).
[125] Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, published posthumously in 1871, exemplifies Praz's delineation of the femme fatale as a praying mantis, vampire, siren or wanton courtesan.

Femmes fatales destabilize narrative structure precisely because their constant association with the bodily represents "marked fears of the unknown, fears that align female sexuality with independence, disease, and the dangerous allure of a non-English other" (Braun 2012: int 4). They disrupt conventional assumptions regarding 'proper' (expected) female behaviour and instead offer a side of femininity that does not adhere to societal rules and takes pride in breaking – and mocking – those regulations. As such, fatal women clearly antagonize virtuous, restrained females, whose submission and strict devotion to propriety prevents them from posing the 'threat' that fatal women present to the social order:[126]

> The marchioness has been a widow, about a year, and does not appear to be above twenty. I am certain that if I were a man, I should be in love with her. I am glad she has left Paris, before my Straffon goes thither – you may read Strephon, if you please. I shall take care to keep him out of danger, while he stays in London; or perhaps, she might keep him sighing, at home, and so mar both his scheme, and mine. The very best of these men, my dear Emily, have hearts nearly resembling tinder, though they would have us think they are made of sterner stuff – a sparkling eye sets them in a blaze (10)

Lady Straffon's account of the marchioness introduces her as a femme fatale whose intense allure is palpable. She is depicted as a woman with enormous powers of attraction, capable of bewitching all the men that cross her path. The degree of *authority* bestowed upon the figure of the marchioness is palpable in the above description and, fearing the consequences of such a commanding female figure, Lady Straffon assures her friend that she will keep her husband 'out of danger' but her discourse denotes that

[126] Braun notes a religious undertone in this contrast of opposing feminine archetypes and argues that that the femme fatale figure "served as a catalyst for revising Biblical and mythical tales: Eve, Salomé, Medea, Circe, the Sirens, and Lilith represented the antithesis of the perception that women were the pristine upholders of virtue and restraint" (2012: int 13).

she is by no means certain that she *can* protect him from such as commanding female charmer.

The peril that femme fatales supposedly posed was not so much about their possibilities for social ascendency but, rather, about their "ability to expose the inadequacies of current gender systems" (Braun 2012: int 12), an anxiety that further emphasized the *need* to intimately monitor female behavior and attitudes and ensure they are contained within those parameters that are deemed socially 'acceptable':

> the ladies informed her that no woman of fashion, ever appeared on horseback at a race [...] she despised all vulgar prejudices, and would be the first to break through this arbitrary rule, if she could engage any lady to accompany her (127)

The marchioness is introduced as a strong-willed, deeply authoritative female who is not easily persuaded into what is deemed 'proper' female behaviour. She openly declares her disapproval of what she considers to be simply 'arbitrary' regulations, to which she refuses to subject herself. Her defiant attitude clearly contrasts with the dutiful, subordinate role of other female characters in the narrative, such as Lady Woodville and Lady Straffon who, despite subtle suggestions that hint at their 'discomfort' with certain expectations regarding women's behaviour, never dare to *explicitly* oppose cultural expectations in the manner in which the marchioness does.

Within the ideology of domesticity, with its endless "references to female idolatry, eternal quests, and willful humiliation" (Braun 2012: int 10), femme fatales occupy a compromising position, as they determinedly place themselves outside the established parameters in an attempt to "exploit the ambiguities of their social status" (Braun 2012: int 10). The femme fatale becomes a means through which to redirect male characters "from reaffirming their unstable social status and waning political

powers" (Braun 2012: int 10). In this way, the femme fatale becomes a plot 'complication', a character that *questions* the role both men and women ought to occupy and exposes the contractions inherent in the relationship between the sexes.[127]

The Femme fatale's dual nature, both womanly and 'lethal', provides a prolific outlook for the analysis of gender difference and, for this reason, the notion of the fatal woman was a especially useful one for narrative purposes, as it became "an ideologically charged figure that both male and female writers invested with a range of contemporary political, sexual, and poetic significations" (Cracium 2013: int 13). Fatal women offered a wider range of possibilities for writers to introduce their stance on the political and sexual debates of the time and, especially, on the debate around the nature of femininity. Precisely because fatal women were not 'traditionally' feminine, they allowed for an interrogation of *both* the benefits and shortcomings of conventional configurations of womanhood and further complicated the debate around what could be termed 'proper femininity':[128]

> Your description of the marchioness, is really alarming, and has already made me jealous, not of lord Woodville, but of lady Straffon. If you should ever become acquainted with her, she will certainly rival every body […] My lord and Lady Harriet, both knew her, in Paris, and both agree that the charms of her person, are inferior to those of her mind; and that she was still more admired, as *un bel esprit,* than as *une belle dame*. Won't you give me credit for the utmost generosity, in furnishing you with this account of my rival, that is to be?
>
> I hope she may come to York races, that I may have an opportunity of examining this phoenix, with a critic's eye; but I shall not be like the modern ones, who are, generally,

[127] Braun claims that the femme fatale, by delaying the expected 'blissful' resolution "challenges the need for improbable adventures and romantic endings" (2012: 10).

[128] Luczynska-Holdys notes that at the center of this debate lies the binary opposition between the 'fatal woman' and the 'ideal woman', an opposition that "can be traced to both the ambivalent myth of the Eternal Feminine and the Christian dichotomy between Eve and the Virgin Mary" (2013: int 1).

> so intent on spying defects that they are apt to overlook the most striking beauties. This, however, may sometimes proceed, rather from a want of taste, than a spirit of malevolence, and I am always inclined to pity those unhappy people, who never seem to be pleased (11-12)

Lady Woodville, despite her apparent apprehensions regarding the marchioness, is willing to offer her the benefit of the doubt and refuses the directly *judge* her character without having met her beforehand. She views the marchioness as a possible rival but, in spite of this recognition, is predisposed to form her definite opinion about her *only* when she has inspected her 'with a critic's eye'. Then she will have enough information to decide if this 'dangerous' woman poses a *real* threat to the stability of her family unit or is simply a creature that she ought to condole. Lady Woodville's attitude introduces the notion that one ought not to apply stereotypical conceptions on others blindly and that one must always rely on what one actually knows or sees about others to form a constructed opinion.

The already complex task of determining what 'proper' femininity entails is further obscured by the image of the fatal woman, who fails to be categorized in *exclusive* terms and, instead, appears to be embedded within a combination of features, all of which make it clear that 'fatal' femininity is not *simply* opposition to 'proper' feminine traits, but rather an interrogation to where the *limits* lie in such 'proper' outline, as Luczynska-Holdys observes:

> the fatal woman is not only an erotic icon or a predatory praying mantis. Her power goes far beyond sexual allure and apart from the authority and control over man's body, she also rules his soul and his imagination. She seems, first of all, indefinable – liminality and ambiguity are vital parts of her charm […] she is not only alluring and

irresistible, but her appeal is conditioned by other features: independence, submissiveness, elusiveness, unattainability (2013: int 6)

As the above quotation shows, Luczynska-Holdys resists providing a *unique*, one-dimensional definition of 'femme fatale' and rejects the marked divide that is usually established between 'fatal' and 'ideal' conceptions of femininity. Such divide is reinforced by the fact that the woman who failed to conform to the social and cultural expectations that were placed upon them was deemed 'unnatural' and hence "quickly denounced either as a femme fatale or a fallen woman (often both)" (Luczynska-Holdys 2013: int 11).[129]

The divide between a mere seductress and a femme fatale is not entirely unambiguous. Critics like Braun make reference to Huvenne and Kees Van Twist's foreword to *Femmes Fatales: 1860-1910*, in which they endeavour to detect what distinguishes a mere seductress from a femme fatale. In this foreword they identify them as "two essentially different species" (2012: int 5) and argue that the difference lies in the motives that *drive* them to act in certain ways. Seductive women employ sexuality as means to an end but this sensual aspect is not so evident in the case of femme fatales, as "the precise motives of the fatal woman are ambiguous, her diverse 'feminine attractions' are rarely 'ends in themselves'" (Braun 2012: int 5).

Braun also reflects on what distinguishes a coquette from a femme fatale. To do so, he relies on Wollstonecraft's definition of the coquette in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft identifies the coquette's "ability to use for feminine wiles deliberately to destroy men (and sometimes other women)" (2012: int 5). Braun argues that the femme fatale "can be unaware of or reluctant to embrace her powers of

[129] A woman who showed a certain degree of 'independence' was considered to be transgressive and "was castigated as unfeminine or even openly presented as masculinised" (Luczynska-Holdys 2013: int 11).

seduction and destruction" (2012: int 5) and that this lack of self-awareness is what clearly separates the figure of the coquette from that of the femme fatale.

When it comes to deciding between the alluring, commanding femme fatale figure embodied by the marchioness and the dutiful, obedient female figure embodied by his wife, Lord Woodville, after much hesitation throughout the narrative, finally makes his verdict:

> the unaffected joy she shewed, at my return, without seeming to be alarmed, at my absence, when contrasted with the violence of temper, which the marchioness had discovered, in the morning, so far turned the scale, as to determine me to remain a slave to the obligations I owe to my wife, and the world" (135-6)

Lord Woodville contrasts the character of the marchioness to that of his wife and discerns a tremendous difference between both tempers: one is excessively violent, uncontrolled, whereas the other is unaffected and pleasing. This reflection is reinforced on another occasion, to further emphasize the reasons behind Lord Woodville's final decision and also to stress the *difference* between Lady Woodville and the marchioness: "the real lustre of my Emily's virtues, has triumphed over the false glare of Isabella's charms, that fatal *ignis fatuus*, which has so long dazzled and misled my benighted senses" (217).

The Marchioness is described as a siren-like character, an enchantress that has blinded Lord Woodville's senses and has blurred his better judgment with what Lord Woodville identifies as "the poison of her charms" (226). Lord Woodville's final recognition of his weakness in falling for the Marchioness's 'charms' and his appraisal of his wife's superior sense of virtue provide a happy resolution for the married couple. This closes the narrative with the sense that, as in the vast majority of sentimental

narratives, virtue has triumphed over all other passions. However, despite the happy conclusion of the novel, one must bear in mind that throughout the whole narrative contemporary attitudes about marriage, infidelity and about the position of women within society have been put to the test through the reflections made by conventional women such as Lady Woodville and Lady Straffon and through the captivating presence of the 'fatal woman' figure of the marchioness who, despite her final defeat, has *interrogated* the role both men and women ought to occupy. Both female figures have been accorded narrative authority and, although apparently the marchioness is the one whose influence is much more easily noticeable, lady Woodville, despite her 'apparent' conventional status as a 'proper' woman, manages to considerably *retain* her narrative authority and interrogative crucial assumptions regarding her marital, 'submissive' role.

In this section I have assessed into the construction of heroines, and the growing interest that the 'woman question' generated, from the various debates around 'natural' femininity and due subordination to the fascination with disruptive, transgressive fatal women who threatened to destabilize the 'natural' order of the sexes.

6. Sophia Lee's The Recess

6.1. History vs. Fiction: Which is More Influential?

Sophia Lee's *The Recess* has received numerous positive reviews[130], which highlight this novel's literary significance and validity. Yet, despite its overwhelming influence, *The Recess* has failed to be truly recognised by the critical community[131]. It is only recently that this tremendously complex work has started to receive the critical attention it deserves[132]. Most readings of Lee's text interpret it in light of its alignment with the Gothic and the Historical Novel, basing all analyses on these two traditions.

In this section I will first draw attention to how the Historical Novel is usually conceived, by pointing out its main features and elements, so as to examine the extent to which Lee actually relies on these formulas in her work.

I will then highlight the ways in which Lee outstandingly manages to account for different historical accounts, both through the inclusion of notorious historical figures and of fictional episodes, constantly obscuring and blurring the boundaries that separate history from fiction.

One of Lee's most notable contributions lies in her ability to provide an acute, believable, fictionalisation of History while still clearly relying on historical evidence. This double dimension creates a relation of co-dependency between history and fiction. They become inseparable elements; one cannot exist without the other. In my analysis, I

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[130] In the introduction to *The Recess*, Alliston claims that a reviewer of the novel writes that "her powers of description are very great; and there is a richness in her style which shows that her genius is ardent and vigorous" (2000: int xvi) and then reinforces this point by adding that he "concludes his evaluation with the highest praise that could be given any writer in a dramatic vein: 'the author [has] studied Shakespeare's Lear with much attention, and copied that admirable model with great success'" (2000: int xvi)

[131] In *British Women and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century*, Barnard notes that critics began to pay attention to The Recess in the 1990s, since that moment marked the beginning of "a growing critical interest in the Lees. Much of this has concentrated *The Recess*, which is now appreciated as a key text in the development of both Gothic and historical fiction" (2015: 159)

[132] Critics such as Kasmer (2013) , Sodeman (2012), Rigilano (2013-2014), and Wallace (2013) offer more carefully balanced readings of Lee's text.

will pay particular attention to the suggestion that *The Recess* makes use of history and fiction in order to recuperate lost female voices[133]. Her use of historical fiction ultimately provides a unique way through which to recuperate women's voice and thus to give expression to their most intimate, suppressed, and silenced desires.

6.1.1. Defining Historical Fiction: A Multifaceted Genre.

In *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors* (1983), Shaw emphasizes the tremendous difficulty one faces when attempting to define what a Historical Novel ultimately *is*, since "because the definition is vague in terms of what counts as historical, it leaves open the possibility that history may mean different things in different works" (1983: 22). As Shaw rightly notes, the term History has no unique definition and the main complexity lies in uncovering what a historical novel entails. Each author might appropriate history in multiple ways and what counts as historical for a particular novel might not be applicable to another one. Lee's version of history is undoubtedly unique. She is able to transport her reader back to Elizabethan time while depicting heroines that are much more easily understood as sentimental heroines than as Elizabethan characters (Sodeman 2012: 266). Thus, to conjecture what the term 'historical' might have meant to an eighteenth-century author like Sophia Lee is not as straightforward as one might assume.

The intricacy of the historical novel is emphasized by Stevens, who sets out a classification of the different camps in which the historical novel has been placed. One of those camps defines "the features of the genre by the Waverly Novels of Sir Walter Scott (published 1814-32) at the expense of previous incarnations of the form" (Stevens

[133] Wallace develops this point in her chapter on Lee's text, entitled "The Murder of the Mother: Sophia Lee's the Recess (1783-5).

2001: 2)[134]. Another is constituted by those who believe that the historical novel has "a much longer history" (Stevens 2001: 2)[135].

There is also an intermediate position; one that shows that the historical novel does not start with the work of Scott and that "the historical novel of the Romantic period is notably different from and discontinuous with the historical fiction of the seventeenth century" (Stevens 2001: 3). Stevens clearly positions himself in this intermediate conception of historical fiction by arguing that the tradition was well-established before Scott and that "the features of the modern historical novel only begin to be elaborated in the second half of the eighteenth century" (Stevens 2001: 3). Historical novels may display a multiplicity of representations and:

> may represent societies, modes of speech, or events that in very fact existed in the past, in which case probability points outward from the work to the world it represents; or they may promote some sort of historical effect within the work, such as providing an entry for the reader into the past, in which case the probability points inward, to the design of the work itself" (Shaw 1983: 21)

The Recess exhibits all of these dimensions, both outward and inward representations of the past are underlined, but the inward dimension is much more felt. In the world of the novel, inward sentiments created around historical events and characters are given prominence. What matters is the reaction; personal feelings are what set the action going. The overflowing sensations of the different characters, fictional and historical, all struggling to gain historical meaning and *authority* through

[134] These critics include Herbert Butterfield, Avron Fleishman, Gerge Lukács, and Harry Shaw (Stevens 2001: 2)

[135] Critics like Margaret Anne Doody, Richard Maxwell, April Alliston (Stevens 2001: 2) argue this point.

an incessant flow of uncontainable emotions provides a very useful narrative effect. Such incessant flow is intensified at a crucial moment when Matilda's desolation over the assassination of her husband, Lord Leicester, is made apparent:

> Indignation throbbed through those pulses grief had nearly stilled, and I gave vent to all the anguish of my soul: abjured with an aggravated contempt the erroneous faith of my ancestors, bewailed too late the credulity inspired by my own – execrated the cruel, the treacherous Lady Mortimer, and demanded my liberty with a spirit that perplexed and surprized the Nuns (142-3).

Faced with such an unforeseen, painful circumstance, Matilda finds it impossible to contain her emotions. The strength she has shown on other occasions has now fled from her. Her reaction is so intense that it even "perplexes" the nuns under which care she is placed, who are shocked at what appears to be 'unlady-like' and 'improper' female behaviour. The damaged state of Matilda's soul becomes a dramatic display of her inner agony, and she *authoritatively* declares her troubled state without much restriction.

Apart from its emphasis on both outward and inward representations, another vital aspect that characterizes historical novels is the necessity to not simply describe the past but actually give *meaning* to it. Historical novels ultimately seek to "understand, evaluate and sometimes to rebel against or accommodate themselves to what they have presented" (Shaw 1983: 101).

This emphasis on the importance of achieving *meaning* is absolutely essential in Lee's novel. Female characters endlessly attempt to give meaning to their existence, to somehow validate their personal, female 'histories'. Throughout the text, these heroines are surrounded by torments, repeated scenes of suffering that shove them to the verge of

their senses and, sometimes, to madness itself. Ellinor's account of how her infatuation with Essex mirrors that of Matilda's with Leicester, which exemplifies the insistence on the repetitive pattern of the extremely disturbing situations that create grief around the twins:

> The suffering of your mind sunk into mine; and profiting by the sad example of a passion imprudently indulged, I called myself to account for cherishing so dangerous a weakness, and resolved by a courageous effort to govern, if I could extinguish it. But ah, how vain is that attempt, when once we are truly touched (185).

Ellinor is aware of the "sad example" extracted from her sister's unfortunate passion towards Leicester and, fearing she might suffer the same catastrophic fate, desperately wishes to extinguish the passion she herself feels. Yet, she learns that ruling her passions is not so easily accomplished, and discovers how ineffective her attempt truly is.

Under this level of both physical and psychic agony, for the twins, giving meaning to their lives and retaining their narrative *authority* becomes imperative. Their history is not so much about describing dreadful events but rather about trying to *understand* them, to find some *purpose* behind the constant pattern of complete loss and (only fractional) revival which seems to rule their existence.

As Shaw proclaims, historical fiction ought not to be interpreted as a "strongly unified, independent genre" (1983: 30) but rather as a genre that relies on multiple other literary traditions as well. *The Recess'* interpretation as a historical novel is valid as long as one bears in mind that this is simply *one* of the traditions permeating this novel and not the most *prominent* one.

6.1.2. Sophia Lee's *The Recess*: A Historical Tale?

As I mentioned before, *The Recess* has repeatedly been read as a historical novel. Yet, not all commentators on the novel agree on such a vision[136]. Some reviewers claimed that the novel lacked real historicity precisely because of the prominent presence of Gothic elements in the text, as Kasmer remarks: "the divergence of Lee's novel from neoclassical realism and didacticism becomes even more problematic for this work as a historical one" (2013: 51). Hence, Kasmer observes that *The Recess*' "overwrought sentimentalism" menaces its establishment as a historical tale (2013: 51). This points out the novel's impossibility to be embedded within a unique genre, and thus advocates for this novel's inclusiveness of different literary tropes and traditions.

The inclusive nature of *The Recess* is further enhanced by the fact that it notoriously relies on earlier works and "rewrites a host of other texts, including earlier novels and major histories"[137] (2013: 28). La Fayette's influence can be traced, for instance, in Lee's detailed psychological exploration of women who find themselves "negotiating between the tortuous intricacies of court politics, and the tension between their status as objects of exchange within dynastic struggles and their existence as desiring objects " (2013: 37).

One of the literary sources that influences Lee's novel is the Gothic tradition, which I will further develop in the next section. The gothic and the historical converge

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[136] Wallace notes the different positions certain critics take. For critics like Richer and Tompkins "the inclusion of the personal ('desire') marks a text out as 'romance' rather than history" (2013: 30). Spencer "argues that Lee reinstates women into history precisely by 'turning history into romance'" (2013: 31). For White "it's worth noting that *The Recess* is not a 'Romance' at all but a 'Tragedy', involving the 'fall of the protagonist'" (2013: 32)

[137] Wallace points out that "*The Recess* reworks themes and motifs from several earlier novels, notably Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), Prévost's *Le Philosophe anglois ou Histoire de Monsieur Cleveland...* (1731-9), Wallpole's The *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron (1777)*" (Wallace 2013: 32)

when in the advertisement Lee claims to have found a manuscript: "not being able to publish the means which enriched me with the obsolete manuscript from whence the following tale is extracted, its simplicity alone can authenticate it" (Lee, 'Advertisement' to *The Recess*).

The mysteriously acquired manuscript is a well-established trope in Gothic tales and in *The Recess* this manuscript actually serves a historical function: as proof of the tale's veracity, which allows Lee to "enhance her political message" (Kasmer 2013: 51). The manuscript hence allows Lee to authenticate her story. The different narrative voices of the novel implicitly reveal "the political message underlying the feared collapse of political and social order" (Kasmer 2013: 51) and the presence of the manuscript further enhances the sense of authenticity of this (implicit) political message.

Yet, at the same time, such manuscript also obscures the story, as there are "gaps in the text where the manuscript is allegedly illegible, obliterated or defaced" (Wallace 2013: 35). As a result, at times the narrative becomes confusing, misleading and deeply fragmented. This fragmentation is often deployed to signal Ellinor's loss of her mental capacity; her narrative gradually becomes a reflection of the poor, deteriorated state of her own mind:

> I dreamt of Essex – Ah, what did I say? I dreamt of Essex? – Alas, I have dreamt of him my whole life long! – Something strangely intervenes between myself and my meaning. No matter, I am too stupified now to explain it (214).

Ellinor's narrative becomes stream-of-consciousness-like and reveals her decline to madness, which somehow hinders her narrative authority. Thus, although the

manuscript embodies a record of history in which the reader can rely, at the same time, it also illustrates how easily such history can become intelligible[138].

6.1.3. Multiple Female Voices: The Unreliability of the narrator.

Traditionally, in historical fiction the use of the third-person narrative was preferred so as to "lend an air of objectivity to their novels" (Stevens 2001: 11). However, this was not always the case and the first-person narrative was sometimes selected precisely because it allowed for "a more immediate, eye-witness account of historical life" (Stevens 2001: 11). Sophia Lee's 'Tale of Other times' purposely makes use of the immediacy of the first person narrator, - through multiple epistolary, female narrators - a formula that allows the novelist "to deepen her exploration of the place of desire in history and its relation to dynastic inheritance" (Wallace 2013: 37).

The Recess is presented as "one extremely long letter" (Stevens 2003: 271) addressed from Matilda to her sister Ellinor, a letter which is interrupted by the latter's journal. Throughout these epistolary exchanges, the female protagonists are able to *authoritatively* express their deepest impressions on the events that make up their 'histories'. The letters allow the reader to gain access to these female's interior life; together, these females form a community that allows them to express that which they could not express any other way. Significantly, their personal histories are not produced to conceive "women as victims but rather a political analysis of the realities of their situation within history" (Wallace 2013: 25-6). Yet, such personal histories point to the constant unreliable nature of the narrator as 'historian', since Lee's use of the epistolary

[138] As Stevens claims, the manuscript also serves the purpose "to instill in the reader a sense of skepticism about historical official accounts" (2003: 283)

genre allows her to "create the effect of scepticism in the mind of the reader" (Stevens 2001: 10).

The main example of this unreliability of the narrator is the fact that Ellinor's journal contradicts Matilda's letter, forcing the reader to re-examine previous accounts, which is noticeable in Ellinor's description of Leicester:

> Unbounded in his projects, timid and subtle in his actions, tyrannic in his pursuits, the object he could not govern, never long attached him. Ambition, pride, and vanity, those leading traits in almost every character, were in his so exquisitely blended, and corrected by the frost of nature, that they might often be mistaken for nobler passions (179).

In the above quotation, through Ellinor's narration, Leicester is transformed from "romantic hero to the shadowy double of Elizabeth" (Stevens 2011: 11). Most of the key episodes that Ellinor describes undermine Matilda's narrative authority. This reinforces the "sense of scepticism about historical accounts" (Stevens 2001: 11) and, under such uncertainty, "a fictitious story may be the best method to understand the past" (Stevens 2011: 11).

Under Ellinor's perspective, characters and events are presented in a completely new light; nothing is what it seemed. Thus, Ellinor's tale involves "a radical shift in perspective" (Wallace 2013: 45). Even Matilda herself questions her own judgment and doubts whether her sister Ellinor is much more perceptive than herself: "Innumerable instances of it flashed on my memory, which I was astonished could at the moment escape me. If *she* was, indeed, more clear-sighted than myself---" (315).

Stevens argues that what causes inconsistencies in the different accounts is romantic love. Matilda and Ellinor, blinded by their passion towards Elizabeth's

favourites, find their vision unclear and are thus unable to "provide a disinterested perspective on all events related" (2003: 285). Wallace takes this notion further and suggests that the twins put their love for men before their sisterly love and hence fail to support each other (2013: 51).

Although romantic love clearly is what often impels the twins' actions (and reactions) throughout the narrative, I do not fully believe that they *fail* to support each other. Their sisterly love is an unbreakable bond that somehow manages to give them courage in the most distressful situations. Under tremendous anguish, Matilda takes refuge in her sister: "I threw my arms round Ellinor, and wept bitterly; her generous tears streamed with mine, and we seemed fully to mingle souls without exchanging one word" (59). The twins' bond is so strong that it surpasses the barriers of language, which becomes totally unnecessary. Their souls are strongly connected and no words are required to voice that which the other fully comprehends in her heart.

6.1.4. Retelling of History: Breaking the Barrier between History and Fiction.

One of Lee's major achievements is her ability to perfectly combine the fictional with the factual, to accommodate those terms together and fuse them as one[139]. Lee manages to "develop a mode of writing which can combine symbolic or mythic level with 'real' (documented) history" (Wallace 2013: 26). In her work, she does not present history and fiction as separate elements but rather as aligned ones and "insists that the novel can show us what history cannot" (Sodeman 2012: 256).

In this sense, fiction becomes a means through which history can represent those aspects that on its own could not reproduce. Fiction complements history in such a way

[139] Stevens argues that "Lee's novel deserves its privileged place in the history of fiction because of its mixture of the factual and the fictional, its blending of generic conventions, and its influence on later novelists" (2003: 265).

that the impossibility to tell apart actually becomes “bound up with the fused fantasies of female authorship and a recovered maternal bond” (Lewis 1998: 138). Lee manages to “make history sentimental and sentiment historical” (Rigilano 2013-14: 232), thus achieving a balance between sentimentality and historiography.

Wallace urges that the changes Lee made to recorded history cannot be attributed to “ignorance or lack of proper respect for historical facts” (2013: 40). Her introduction of the heroines of her tale, the ‘lost’ daughters of Mary Queen of Scots, is not simply an act of imagination but rather a speculation about an element that might find its origin on real historical accounts which claim that “Mary appears to have miscarried twins when imprisoned in Lochleven in 1567” (Wallace 2013: 40).

Hence, the imagined lives of Matilda and Ellinor, illegitimate heirs that are obscured from history, triggers a desire to explore the possible consequences these illegitimate daughters of Mary would have brought to court, had they been born[140]. A fascination is created towards these unusual heroines and their distressed situation and the fact that their narrative, as I previously pointed out, is based on their epistolary narration only amplifies such fascination. The reader is enraptured, ruled by a desire to acquire some intelligence about the distraught state of these heroines’ mind and soul.

When analysing both Matilda and Ellinor’s accounts, one realises that these heroines are portrayed “less as Elizabethan princesses than sentimental heroines” (Sodeman 2012: 266). Their responses are much more sentimental than representative of the Elizabethan age, since they repeatedly exhibit physical signs of extreme sensibility, such as frequently collapsing in the other’s arms, and fainting on numerous occasions. Matilda’s sharp sensibility is apparent in the following scene:

[140] Stevens presents the twins as “both legitimate and illegitimate” and as “both factitious and historical” (2003: 266).

> the suppress swellings of my heart at last conquered my spirits, and I sunk back at this part of his recital, if not fainting, at least senseless [….] when fearing my full eyes would betray my heart, I urged indisposition, and besought his excuse for retiring to my chamber (58).

Fearing the object of her passion might be married, Matilda reacts as a typical heroine of sensibility. She loses her senses completely and is unable to control her swarming emotions. Following the dictates of propriety, affected by such 'improper' emotions, she must retire from the scene in order to secure her feelings and prevent them from being known.

Another unequivocal sign of the twins' heightened sensibility is their constant personification of the life-in-death motif. As Kasmer notes, both sisters are dead by the novel's end but they actually perish sooner; the text is full of allusions to their being "entombed alive" (Kasmer 2013: 59). This is also remarked by Wallace, who interprets such death-in-life experience as a symbol of "the erasure of the feminine within history" (2013: 53).

Trapped within a world that seems to offer no promising place for them, embedded within a narrative that appears to constantly imprison them, and prevented from freeing themselves from the constraints that suffocate them, Matilda and Ellinor struggle to resist their 'prison' but cannot help feeling desolate, desiring so much more and yet acquiring so little: "Severed, at once, from every tie, both of nature and of choice, dead while still breathing, the deep melancholy which had seized upon my brain soon tinctured my whole mass of blood" (211).

Ellinor feels that everything she has ever cared for has been taken from her and experiences the disturbing sensation that she is deprived of "every tie". The intense

emotional content of this scene highlights both the pitiful state of her mind and the dreadful consequences which that loss has had upon her feeble senses.

Apart from the palpable appeal and level of authority of the stories of Matilda and Ellinor, the polarization established between Mary and Elizabeth is also significant. Queen Elizabeth I is portrayed as “a devious and tyrannical” (Lewis 1995: 172) monarch who “acts against both royal propriety and rule in her behavior towards Mary, revealing her true baseness” (Kasmer 2013: 58). Kasmer insists on the ‘illegitimacy’ of Elizabeth’s reign, in contrast to Mary’s ‘legitimacy’. This vision is shared by Wallace, who argues that Elizabeth “as a female monarch is always at risk of being seen as ‘improper’” whereas Mary is the one who would be regarded as ‘proper’ (2013: 43).

Despite this clear differentiation between them, with regards to propriety, Elizabeth’s character is much more developed than that of Mary. Mary remains an ambiguous figure who becomes “an enigmatic symbol capable of endless reinterpretation” (Wallace 2013: 47). The reader only encounters Mary on one occasion, by witnessing the only time her daughter’s see their long-lost mother. Such longed-for interview is so brief and ephemeral that it becomes almost impossible to extract any judgment on Mary’s character based on her own persona. All information about the Queen of Scots is acquired through either Matilda or Ellinor, and one must not forget that *their* knowledge of her is extremely limited.

Having lived in utter ignorance of their mother’s existence, they finally make such revelatory discovery only to be deprived of her presence once again. All of their accounts of Mary’s character are based on their inner longings, on their profound desire to be reunited with her. Yet, there is no interaction between Mary and her daughters and, thus, one might conclude that Mary’s character is indeed subject to ‘endless

reinterpretations', as no *interpretation* of her character is provided. The reader can create his/her own version of Mary.

With regards to Elizabeth, there *is* an interpretation. On countless occasions, the twins interact directly with the sovereign, learn of her through other characters or simply offer judgments which make their interpretation of Elizabeth very evident. The reader is then asked to take sides with either Matilda or Ellinor (Wallace 2013: 45) and share their version of Elizabeth. When Leicester leaves for court, Matilda's apprehensiveness towards Elizabeth is noticeable:

> Where could she hope for justice, when the Sovereign who swears to protect, must find it her interest to condemn her? Overcome with this formidable phantom, I gave myself up for some days to a despair as violent as my love […] I feared it was possible he might be condemned, as a criminal (71).

Matilda's distrust of Elizabeth is transferred onto the reader, who is inevitably influenced by her authoritative, biased, adverse opinion of her. Ellinor shares her sister's disdain towards the queen: "I, therefore, stifled the painful and proud sensations that swelled at my heart, and ventured into the world under the doubtful and mysterious patronage of the Queen" (181). Hence, by taking sides with the twins, readers are predisposed to have an unfavorable opinion about Elizabeth's character and, in consequence, to doubt her 'validity' as a sovereign.

This binary mingling of historical and fictional characters – Elizabeth-Mary, and Matilda-Ellinor, respectively – introduces one of the most significant uses of history in *The Recess:* the recuperation of lost female voices:

> Lee uses fiction to trace and re-imagine forgotten female genealogies, to piece together the fragments of documentary evidence about historical women's lives (inspired by that suggestively elusive record that Mary Stuart miscarried twins) and to reinsert them into 'History' [...] written history, Lee's novel suggests, offers evidence (albeit fragmentary and incomplete) of the victimisation, suppression and erasure of women in the past, but precisely because of that erasure of the female, traditional history can never, *pace* Hume, tell the whole truth. Perhaps only fiction, with its ability to use the figurative language of the Gothic, can do that (Wallace 2013: 56).

Historical accounts have contributed to the containment of women's stories in the past and, as Wallace notes, this constant acts of suppression of women's 'histories' somehow discards History as a valid source to recuperate those lost voices. Only through fiction can that repossession take place. In this sense, *The Recess* can be read as an attempt to restore women's rightful place into History; to give them a voice and allow them to express their most secret, intimate longings.

However, there is a constant insistence that the past is irretrievable, since Lee "interweaves scepticism about the possibility of recovering the past with mournful tributes to it" (Sodeman 2012: 260). Individuals attempt to recuperate the past, mourning all they are dispossessed of, but learn that such retrieval is no longer possible.

Loss is what rules Matilda and Ellinor's existence, as their lives are "battered by repeated losses, partial recoveries and substitutions that appear only to be taken away" (Sodeman 2012: 266). Throughout the course of the novel, the twins are always surrounded by death but one death in particular marks their whole existence: that of their dear mother, which is their most desolate episode of loss:

all sense of gentleness vanished. The first paper I perused confirmed my fears – I saw in the first lines the decided fate of the royal Mary […] I felt she was my mother, my fond, my helpless mother, and my heart floated in tears, which were hours working their way up to my burning eyes" (134) .

In the above quotation, Matilda feels part of her has died with her mother. Knowing that Mary's tragic fate is decided upon Ellinor's false confession only increases her desperation, and surmises her in a melancholy state from which she never fully recovers.

Repetition is another constant in the twins' lives. As Wallace points out, the sisters duplicate Elizabeth's "blindness towards her favourites" (2013: 46) as well as "their mother's failure to judge wisely in her marriage choices" (2013: 46). Even in the third generation Matilda's daughter Mary continues to repeat the mistakes of the past Stuart women. History is doomed to repeat itself, and all of these female narratives "continually throw into question the interpretations we are given" (Wallace 2013: 46).

Matilda and Ellinor's story is permeated with parallelisms to their mother's life. Some critics have read these affinities as vindicating the real Mary Queen of Scots[141]. Others have viewed this alikeness as perpetuating Mary through other women. In all of these interpretations, Mary becomes the ultimate key character in which repetitive patterns concur, through the twins' mirroring of their mother's life and also through Mary's embodiment of a figure that bolsters women's 'history'.

[141] Stevens draws attention to the fact that precisely because "Matilda repeats elements of her mother's life, and because she was innocent of the murder of her husband and forcibly taken away by a villain afterwards, Lee implies Mary's innocence of conspiring with Bothwell in those events" (Stevens 2003: 277)

Such women's 'history' embeds yet another repetition: the endless presence of imprisonment, torture, and poisonings, all of whom dramatise the text's events by providing "a cyclical history produced by a senseless and non-Providential universe" (Stevens 2003: 277). The constant imprisonments to which characters are subject introduce the notion that the ultimate force which controls the heroine's destines is "an unjust and ironic universe" (Stevens 2003: 278) which creates an everlasting pattern of suffering around their lives, as Ellinor herself notes: "Oh, misjudging world, how severely, on the most superficial observation, dost thou venture to decide!" (240).

The recess where the twins grew up, and to which they incessantly return, is both a shelter and a prison. This place offers them both comfort and distress, mingling safety and total despair in one same setting. Apart from their ceaseless journeys to the recess, the twins' constantly "circulate in and out of prisons" (Stevens 2003: 278). Real prisons threaten the mental and physical stability of the heroines but there are other prisons lurking them: psychological prisons they wish to resist. Trapped between the strict norms of court – as well as of society at large – and the secret longings of their heart, these heroines find themselves prisoners of a life they do not wish for themselves and struggle a great deal to *retain* their narrative authority.

In this section I have analysed Lee's relation to the Historical Novel tradition, by highlighting the ways in which the novelist mingles history and fiction, turning them into an inseparable unit. I have also assessed several aspects of *The Recess* that are in close relation to historical fiction, such as point of view, through multiple, often conflicting, female narratives; the retelling of history, through the characterisation of the twins as sentimental heroines; the polarization Mary-Elizabeth; and the role of repetition and imprisonment in Lee's text.

In the next section I will turn my attention to Lee's relation to yet another literary tradition, the female Gothic, paying special attention to how Lee incorporates aspects of the Gothic in her text and the effects that has in the narrative.

6.2. Female Gothic

6.2.1. The Emergence of The Gothic

The term 'Gothic' held a multiplicity of meanings in the eighteenth century – as it does even today. As Watt rightly observes, the term was used in various contexts, which included "styles of architecture, a form of print or type, and anything connected to the Goths themselves, as well as anything generally medieval, or even Post-Roman" (1999: 13-14). Ellis elaborates on this perspective by pointing out that the wide range of possibilities in which the Gothic could be placed also included "national history, civic virtue and the enlightenment" (1998: 17).

Gothicness seemed to resist a heterogeneous, uniform definition. Instead, The Gothic came to be recognised as a multifaceted genre, permeated by endless possible interpretations, all of which emphasised the complexity within this literary convention. This mutability invited a constant revision of the gothic tradition, which "placed increasing value on the significance of gothic history and culture" (Ellis 1998: 23).

Critics generally agree that the emergence of Gothic fiction is to be found with the publication of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), which came to be recognised as the first Gothic novel and, as such, as "a source of one of the major strands of modern literary history" (Ellis 1998: 27). Walpole inaugurated the genre but the appearance of this tradition was influenced by different forces, some intellectual, others technical and

commercial, all of which contributed to the emergence of what came to be known as 'Gothic' (Punter 1996: 40).

There has been a tendency to interpret the Gothic as "an inferior, subsidiary form" in relation to other more dominant literary forms, such as Romantic Poetry (Davison 2009: int 9). Yet Davison also notes that despite this consensual diminishing of the Gothic genre, a strong blending was established between the Gothic and Romantic tradition which actually produced "a powerful and hugely productive synergy that fuelled *both* literary developments" (2009: int 9).

6.2.2. Gothic Readings

Critics such as Punter list some characteristics that came to be directly associated with Gothic fiction. Such characteristics include a constant insistence on depicting a horrifying atmosphere, the reliance of supernatural elements and the inclusion of stereotyped characters (Punter 1996: 1). Although the Gothic ought to rely on "empirical understanding of how the world operates" (Ellis 1998: 21), these novels often resisted empirical readings by depicting elements that cannot be analysed in empirical terms (Ellis 1998: 21). This empirical resistance is further emphasized by the Gothic's choice of setting, a setting that is often "located in the distant past or in a foreign location" (Ellis 1998: 21).

Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, set in the Elizabethan Time, and hence distanced from contemporary customs and traditions, exemplifies the Gothic's resistance to empirical interpretation. The distant setting in which the action takes place prevents any pragmatic reading, as throughout the course of the novel pragmatism is often tested and the limits of rationality explored. The world of *The Recess* is very different from "the

contemporary world of the eighteenth-century realist novel and ruled over by simple, primitive laws and conventions" (Punter 1996: 9).

Lee's distancing is not only achieved through her choice of setting but also through her use of the epistolary mode. It has been noted that Lee was not always successful in maintaining "character cogency" (Punter 1996: 50) within her epistolarity but what is unquestionable is her acute awareness of "the difficulty of designing an inserted letter which will both reflect the persona of its supposed author and carry out the actual author's narrative purposes" (Punter 1996: 50).

The Recess is not interpreted as a pioneering text but rather as a break from tradition, a shift from the way in which history was interpreted. Her predecessors made use of history as a means to explore "individual biography" (Punter 1996: 51) whereas Lee's approach was distinct; she wished to "use personalisation of motive as a way of coming to understand history itself" (Punter 1996: 51). There is certain hazardousness in Lee's work, which brings it close to the Gothic tradition. She does not wish to resolve *all* aspects of her narrative but rather "to allow mystery and contradiction to stand" (Punter 1996: 51). Hence, at this point, even "narrative comprehensibility" (Botting and Townshend 2004: 173) is suspended.

Persecution, a common motif in Gothic texts, is a recurrent aspect in *The Recess*. Interestingly, Punter argues that "Lee originates a trend in treating Elizabeth as a persecutor" (1996: 51) and supports his claim by pointing out that her portrayal in *The Recess* signals her as "unnatural" (1996:51).

As Punter points out, the causes and implications of persecution in Lee's text are never fully resolved due to its use of a first-person narrative. The dreads experienced by the narrator are "partly justified; but they are also partly irrational fears" (1996: 52). In *The Recess*, women are constantly at peril and the figure of "men as protectors" fails to

prevent the dreadful fate they encounter. The Gothic nature of the novel is highlighted by the use of “a suspense sustained through four volumes at an intensity which would have been inconceivable a mere ten years later” (Punter 1996: 52).

The aftermath of this everlasting menace that women must endure is madness itself, which in Ellinor’s case undermines her narrative authority, as she herself claims: “let me snatch a moment of reason and recollection to forward my story” (228). Madness threatens to prevent Ellinor from continuing her narration but she is determined to retain the little senses she has left so that she can finish her story.

Ellinor’s conviction of the importance of telling her side of the story is related to Miles notion of what he calls ‘the Gothic aesthetic’, which “turns to the past, presents an ideal, virtuous picture, a series of dramatic tableaux impressing themselves on the heart of the passive spectator/reader, touching the moral sense, and so turning the Gothic aesthetic into a scene of instruction” (2002: 44). This ‘Gothic aesthetic’ can be traced in *The Recess* through both Matilda and Ellinor’s narration, but especially so in Ellinor’s. Her insistence on ensuring her sister knows her tale embeds the story with a moral sense and a significant amount of narrative *authority*, Matilda must *learn* from her sister’s narration, which provides her with some details that her own narration lacked.

Matilda and Ellinor’s commanding narrations thus complete one another and highlight the subjective nature of the novel. Botting and Townshend indicate the subjective nature inherent in Gothic fiction, a subjectivity that exemplifies the complexity inherent in the subject’s inner life and the intense relation “of the self to the outside world and to God” (2004: 224). In Lee’s text, subjectivity gains a special significance through the twin’s narration of events. Readers obtain the twins’ *subjective* interpretation of what surrounds them and such subjective readings are often so filled

with irrepressible emotions that it becomes extremely problematic to discern their emotional, inner lives from the outside world they describe. Their letters become their only means to voice their inner self, a self that has been silenced and abandoned. The sister's intermingled narration becomes an act of liberation that will allow them to expand their knowledge not only of the outer world but also of their own hidden longings and desires, of their very souls.

Matilda and Ellinor both represent an abject subjectivity that is trapped in "a border zone between desire and super-ego (or symbolic) and is ambiguous in the sense that it partakes both "'enjoyment' and disgust" (Botting and Townshend 2004: 195). The twins' 'enjoyment' is rarely present and, when any sort of enjoyment is introduced, it proves to be ephemeral, disappearing before they can even fully appreciate it. When Ellinor is finally reunited with Essex the tension between enjoyment and disgust is felt:

> the influence you still have over my heart --- an influence virtue alone contests with you. --- Ah! gentle Essex, fix not an angry eye upon me --- you know not the wound you give ---the horrors you may occasion"------ The wild accent of my voice struck my own ear, and not daring to trust it with another syllable, I strove to bury my agitation and sensibility in silence (236)

Ellinor's reunion with Essex ought to have been filled with pleasurable emotions of happiness and instead is dominated by a melancholy feeling, which signals the dreadful recognition that despite her intense, passionate love for Essex, horror and suffering are the only emotions that are awakened.

The sense of horror is heightened by the exploration of the consequences of sexuality. As Markman notes, female virtue "is confronted and tested by experience of the wider world of sexuality" (2000: 84). In The Gothic, the presence of female

sexuality only increases the horrific atmosphere, augmenting the terrors to which heroines are exposed and intensifying their fears to extreme levels. Desire becomes an exemplification of extremes which "is yonked to self-torment or masochism" (Botting and Townshend 2004: 79). In *The Recess*, the heroines experience this self-torment that desire brings. They constantly struggle with passion but their attempts to restrain it are often ineffective:

> charmed alike with the accents of that harmonious voice, and the passion it generously avowed – prepared the openness of his recital to indulge my natural candor, I delivered myself wholly up to the impulse of my heart; and the implied acknowledgement of my affection, made when I condescended to explain your sentiments regarding Sir Philip, lighted up his fine eyes with new softness and gratitude (188).

Ellinor finds herself so bewitched by Essex that she surrenders to the urges of her heart and lets herself, even if only implicitly, acknowledge her affection towards him. She has attempted to lock her feelings away, to dissimulate her true sensations, but all of her efforts have been fruitless.

Another characteristic of Gothic fiction that must be considered is its obsessive pattern of incessant repetition of past events, figuring a return to that which has been lost. This constant revisiting of the past "encodes the unsettling process of the origin's ceaseless return and retreat" (Townshend 2007: 39).

As Townshend notes, gothic characters are often "characteristically cut off, or violently separated from, their origins". Such is the case for the unfortunate Matilda and Ellinor. What sets the narrative into action is their discovery of their lost origin, a heritage they were totally unaware of. Their unexpected detection of their *true* identity threatens to undermine the identity they had assumed until that crucial moment.

Everything they believed to be true is suddenly vanishing, leaving them startled and mystified.

Under such circumstances, a return to the past, or in their particular case, an attempt to *recover* the past so as to *preserve* their sense of narrative authority, appears to be their only option. The twins then "begin to interrogate their origins, be in terms of their parentage or in terms of their incarceration in the recess" (Townshend 2007: 40). They come to feel that only by trying to recuperate their lost origin, and thus being reunited with their estranged mother, can they feel complete again:

> But then, to learn I had a mother yet alive; yet believe I might one day be received to her arms, only endeared by misfortune; full of this melting, this heart-expanding idea, I would have sought her prison; I would have been the companion of it; happy, if all my cares could make her forget, for one moment, the rigor of her fortune; or call to her remembrance, amidst all her complaints against the injustice of the world, that it still contained two beings who were willing to return for her the life she gave (36)

Matilda's reflection triggers her yearning to recuperate her lost mother, a prospect that fills her with hope, not only for herself and her sister, but also for her mother as well. Recovering her lost daughters, Matilda believes, would make Mary recover her faith in the unjust world that took them from her.

In *The Recess,* this longing to recuperate the past is "the occasion of horror and death" (Townshend 2007: 320). Each generation re-enacts the troubles of the previous generation and, thus, the endless repetition of past events is inevitably "attributable to the maternal logic of sad inheritance" (Townshend 2007: 321). What the twins inherit from their mother, Mary Queen Scots, is not the grandeur of a sovereign or the tender love of a mother figure but rather her doomed life, an existence filled with persecution,

suffering and terror. This same “sad inheritance” is transmitted to Matilda’s daughter, Mary, who suffers the same distressed fate as her predecessors.

The Recess “seeks to redress the lacuna it encounters at the center of familial origins” (Townshend 2007: 41) by highlighting the striking physical resemblance between parents – Mary and Norfolk – and their children. Mary and Norfolk’s portraits become a symbol of lost maternity and paternity. As such, these portraits are a constant reminder of the familial lacunas the twins are left with and, ultimately, “a ghostly illusion of presence” (Townshend 2007: 41), a ‘presence’ that only reinforces the sense of loss and the twins’ impossibility to recuperate their so longed-for familial origin and highlights their “alienation in a world of deathly images, in a labyrinthine maze of signs” (Townshend 2007: 42) that they can never fully comprehend.

Townshend interestingly identifies Elizabeth as somehow supplanting the role of the lost father figure and becoming “a woman who features henceforth as a phallic symbolic agent through the masculine functions that she fulfils” (Townshend 2007: 98). Such paternal surrogate is far from nurturing for the heroines. Queen Elizabeth takes over a ‘masculine’ role in the novel, both as an independent, ruthless sovereign and as a dreaded ‘father figure’ that instils the twins with horror and despise. In Gothic novels, typically, the father was an alienated figure that the heroine feared, just like Lee’s heroines fear Elizabeth. This fear prompts them to perform a series of acts of dissimulation aimed at keeping Elizabeth away from their existence. When in the presence of Elizabeth, the twins desperately attempt to hide their striking physical resemblance to their mother Mary:

> the short hour previous to the queen’s arrival was spent by us in schooling our eyes and hearts, lest the spirit of the injured, and pride of the noble, should betray all. Apprehensive, too, least the similitude my features bore to those of my unfortunate

mother, might strike some idle observer, I departed from her mode of dress, and letting my hair curl more over my face and neck, enwreathed it fancifully with flowers (86).

Matilda's preoccupation that their true origins might be discovered by Elizabeth is not just about her evident physical resemblance to Mary but also, interestingly, about her attitude, about what her bodily countenance might betray. Interestingly, she claims to have schooled her eyes and heart, as if the inner injury she must bear as the daughter of Mary could somehow come to the surface through her facial expression. The boundary between the inner state of her heart and her outer appearance is blurred to the extent that the state of one affects the other and hence monitoring both inner and outer self becomes imperative.

6.2.3. The Female Gothic

The term Female Gothic has been employed to signal women's writing in the Gothic tradition but, as Watt rightly argues, it is difficult to discern "a monolithic category of 'Female Gothic'" (1999: 109) without perpetuating an approach to women's writing that ultimately "ignores the potential plurality of context" (Watt 1999: 110). In the Female Gothic dichotomies are taken to extreme lengths and such discourse "depends as much upon longing desire as upon fear and hatred" (Botting and Townshend 2004: 284).

Critics such as Norton defend the value of Female Gothic by questioning the differentiation that is traditionally established between male and female Gothic, which tends to emphasize women writers' reliance on supernatural elements and male writers on reason (Norton 2000: int ix). By contrast, Norton's position voices the concern that if such gendering occurs, then, "the Female Gothic risks falling into sexist stereotypes"

(Norton 2000: int ix) and fails to recognise the numerous murders that can be found in women's Gothic writing (Norton 2000: int ix).

The gendering of Female Gothic is further emphasised by the demands that the genre impose on women writers. In romance novels written by women, for instance, there is an increasing demand for the suppression of desire, as heroines are bound to submit to socially accepted roles and, in the Female Gothic tradition, such acquiescence becomes even more imperative, since in these narratives "the heroine seems compelled to either resume a more quiescent, socially accepted role, or to be destroyed" (Botting and Townshend 2004: 284). Yet, the Gothic appears to faintly broaden the parameters for the expression of female longings.

In *The Recess*, Matilda and Ellinor, despite their submission to conservative, morally acceptable modes of behaviour, always show a disposition to deviate from their socially prescribed female roles and show a significant amount of self-determination and authority: "you have hirthero found me a tender, anxious, fearful woman; but alas, I knew not till now the powers of my own soul. – Abhorrent of shame and dishonour, it tempts me to the most desperate deeds" (113). On this occasion, Matilda strikingly acknowledges her dual feminine nature, a tender disposition which is nonetheless able to carry out "the most desperate deeds" if the situation requires such course of action. Such determination is further highlighted when she herself claims:

> I have a will, which circumstances can neither alter nor bend – delivered up to this abandoned man, it is in his power to make me any thing but his wife, and against that title my soul will ever revolt, and my last breath protest (157)

When held captive in Jamaica, Matilda again proves herself capable of rising against extremely adverse circumstance, taking action and *maintaining* her authority, if necessary. She is not introduced as a passive observer but rather as an active participant that knows her place while *still* willing to break away from it to convincingly defend what she believes in. She refuses to passively submit to her fate and resists it with all her strength.

Matilda perfectly embodies the ambiguity surrounding the nature of femininity, an ambiguity that the Female Gothic deeply explores. In this genre, the contradictions within the discourse of sensibility and the ideology of femininity are surveyed. This examination often acquires a political dimension, as the Gothic "became the site of heartfelt and, at times, bitter debate about the nature and politics of femininity" (Ellis 1998: 48).

One of the achievements of the Female Gothic was its ability to portray "the multifaceted ideology of femininity" (Davison 2009: 85), clearly delineating the boundaries within which women were embedded, particularly "the constraining roles advocated for women and the institutions of marriage and motherhood" (Davinson 2009: 86). Lee's text brilliantly explores all of these feminine dimensions by offering different models of femininity. The twins' intense sensibility is in direct contrast with Elizabeth's 'unnatural' female behaviour. The sovereign's cunningness only stresses her lack of female modesty, while Mary Queen of Scot's – and her daughter's – heightened sense of modesty and virtue introduces them as truly feminine characters.
Leicester establishes a dichotomy between Elizabeth and Mary which clearly displays two very distinct types of femininity:

> Elizabeth's pride was offended, and that was the hardest to appease of all her passions [...] I retired from her presence piqued by her haughtiness, which, though a quality adapted to her rank, is disgusting in her sex. The picture of Mary was yet in my hand – when I remembered the sweetness and affability she was framed for, the infinite superiority of her charms, and the softness of her character (53)

On the above quotation, Leicester presents Elizabeth as an 'unlady-like', capricious, female character, and on other occasions continues to attempt to ensure that Matilda knows that she must beware Elizabeth's persona: "never forget that you constantly act under the eye of a haughty, jealous and revengeful sovereign" (91).

6.2.4. (Re)examining the role of sensibility and the domestic sphere

Women writers adapted formal aspects of the Gothic to suit their own purposes at "an extremely noteworthy historical moment" (Davison 2009 86) that witnessed the upgrading of the ways in which the domestic sphere and the foundation of marriage were understood (Davison 2009 86).

One of these women writers was Anne Radcliffe, whose work is often analysed in close relation to Lee's fiction. Radcliffe's novels are "embeded in a long term and significant contestation of the status of women" (Ellis 1998:54). The role of sensibility and, particularly, the contradictions that surround such term are deeply explored by Radcliffe. The presence of inordinate feeling is always subject to constant self-monitoring (Smith 2007 32). The paradoxical nature of sensibility is further emphasised by critics like Ellis, who note that writers like Radcliffe and Lee succesfully portray women who are the perfect embodiment of the dual nature of sensibility by being "the

virtuous centre of a paternalistic and domestic family" (Ellis 1998:54) while still acknowledging the "deep power of the emotions and the passions" (Ellis 1998:55).

In *The Recess*, such contradiction is emphasised through the twins' characterisation of both exemplary women encompassed with the outmost sensibility and also strongly-willed, authoritative women who show a significant amount of determination, constantly tested by adverse circumstances. When Matilda and Leicester are forced to flee, they leave Ellinor behind, and at that moment, Matilda knows that:

> While Ellinor had the resolution to retain her own secret, we knew the power of the Queen could not reach her, and the strength and foresight she had at many times shewn, persuaded me she was equal even to this hardest of trials (122).

Matilda's faith in her sister's strength of mind is unbreakable, although she does recognise that if Ellinor were obliged to face "insolent interrogatories" (122), most certainly, she would affront them "with a bleeding heart" (122). Thus, Ellinor's sensibility both provides her with the necessary fortitude to address her misfortunes while unavoidably heightening the emotions that threaten to diminish that fortitude.

Radcliffe's Emily and Lee's Matilda and Ellinor can all be interpreted exactly in this light. Emily's sensibility serves a double function, it somehow "restricts her ability to take action in her life, leaves her defenceless against masculine predators" but, at the same time, it also has an empowering effect on her, as it "provides her with a powerful new emotional life, an arena of feeling and action, where heightened passions are recognised, rewarded and explored" (Ellis 1998:55). This same discourse is true to Matilda and Ellinor. Their acute sensibility indeed does leave them unprotected against their multiple predators but it also enriches their affective life, providing them with knowledge of their inner passions and sentiments they would not have obtained

otherwise. The twins' sensibility allows them to understand each other and experience the other's sensations as if it was their own:

> Wanting the courage to mention an incident remote from the cause of your sorrow, I buried the dear impression of my heart, and devoted myself to soothing a mind so deeply wounded. By a strange transition in my own sentiments, I had learnt fairly to judge of yours, and the increasing similarity interwove our souls every day more and more strongly, though not one word escaped me (184-5).

Their sisterly bond is strengthened by their parallel love stories and that strengthening allows them not only to comprehend the other better but, more importantly, to ascertain a level of narrative authority that allows them to unlock the secrets buried in their *own* souls. The bonding of the twins, fortified by their deeply perceptive sensibility, allows these women to express their most intimate longings.

The consequences of such intense sensibility are constantly under scrutiny in Gothic fiction. Writers such as Radcliffe and Lewis portray individuals whose sensibility does not always work to their advantage, as such individual "becomes increasingly unabe to accept the messiness and untidiness of life and sees everywhere the operations of poetic justice" (Punter 1996:66)[142]. In *The Recess*, this notion of poetic justice is crucial. The heroines undergo a series of tormentous circumstances throughout the novel. As Watt claims, Lee's novel "refuses the providential closure characteristic of so many contemporary works" (Watt 1999:108) and depicts a continual pattern of death and imprisonment makes the heroines subject to all sorts of torment. They are pure, virtuous women who nonetheless are never rewarded for it, since "Lee allows her

[142] Punter identifies a ruthless component, as "in their portrayals of their continual defeat of this poetic justice, Radcliffe and Lewis become cruel to the point of sadism" (1996:66).

heroines no refuge from the nightmare of history, save the recess of the title" (Watt 1999:108). Matilda herself alludes to her unceasing suffering:

> You will be astonished, madam, at my surviving such unceasing, complicated misfortunes, and, above all, the loss of my beloved. I regard it myself with wonder, and impute my strength, both of body and mind, solely to the knowing no interval in my sufferings. Driven from one fatigue to another, from one agony to another, lamentation was continually suspended, either by amazement, or that necessity for exertion gives a spring to all but the weakest of minds, and counteracts despondency. Grief, I may affirm from sad experience, cannot be fatal till it stills and condenses every other passion (143).

The twins' excessive sensibility enriches their emotional life but the suffering that sensibility entails provokes a less nurturing effect: an alteration of the way in which they discern the world around them. This distortion of reality is further emphasised by their isolated state, first in the recess and then in the various prisons they inhabit throughout their lives. As archetypal Gothic heroines, Matilda and Ellinor usually "find themselves cutt off – in castle, dungeon – from anything that might help them to correct their mistakes" (Punter 1996 68).

In their secluded existence, they are unable to fully comprehend the world they inhabit and are thus forced to create their own personal, distorted, version of reality. This prevents them from acquiring the clarity of mind they need to endure the harshness in their lives and provokes "madness, the complete dislocation of the mind under pressures which cannot even be accurately characterised as internal or external" (Punter 1996: 68). This 'dislocation of mind' becomes a representation of the captivity of women and can be identified as a subtle critique of the ideology of separate spheres and,

especially, of the *confinement* of women in the domestic sphere. Gothic fiction introduces “houses in which people are locked in and locked out [..] it is when the home becomes ‘a separate sphere’, a refuge from violence that a popular genre comes into being that assumes some violation of this cultural ideal” (Ferguson 1989:3). In the eighteenth century, the Gothic novel “foregrounded the home as a fortress, while at the same time exposing its contradictions” (Ferguson 1989: int ix).

In *The Recess*, the home is hardly ever a refuge from violence. Safety is absent from the ‘separate sphere’ the heroines are confined to. The only place that procures them solace is the recess where they spent their first years, where they lead “underground, anonymous” lives (Watt 1999 104) and yet those underground lives correspond to the moment when they were completely satisfied, a bliss that is broken once they depart the recess: “as much a stranger to the world as just born into it, how could I promise myself years as peaceful as the ones I had experienced in the Recess?” (73). Matilda’s prediction proves truthful as, from the moment they depart the recess, the twins never regain the peace of mind they enjoyed there.

Lee’s portrayal of the recess is encompassed by ambiguity, as this setting is “a place of concealment which is simultaneously a sanctuary and a prison, a place of refuge and a den of horror – the ambivalent ‘sequestered spot’ that is central to the (female) Gothic imagination” (Norton 2000:13). In the Female Gothic, the familiar is defamiliarised, and thus a physical space that was once recognisable – the domestic sphere – is transformed into “unfamiliar territory” (Davison 2009 93). Matilda, after her marriage to Leicester, while she waits for his return, she comes to regard the recess in a completely different light:

> I had now only to contend with the involuntary hatred I now conceived for the Recess. I wandered through every apartment, without finding rest in any: my impassioned fancy followed my love into court, and the silence and confinement I lived in, became more and more odious. I beheld with astonishment the composure of my sister, and I envied her a tranquillity I would not have regained by being unmarried, if I could" (72)

In this section I have analysed the ways in which Lee incorporates certain conventions of the Gothic genre into her novel. Her *Tale of Other Times* is often interpreted as pertaining to the Female Gothic tradition and, as such, one way to approach the novel is to read it as a subtle critique of the ideology of femininity, sensibility and the confinement of women in the domestic sphere. In the next section I will consider the notion of isolation, abjection and the concept of the uncanny which, I believe, are of considerable importance when interpreting *The Recess*.

6.3. Isolation, Abjection and the Uncanny

6.3.1. Women's Studies and Psychoanalysis: The Uncanny

In the ambit of women's studies there has always been a conflicted relation to psychoanalytic thought and, especially, to Freudian analyses. Feminist critics like Mitchell note a "generally anti-Freudian atmosphere of English-speaking feminism" (Gallop 1982:2), which is mainly attributed to Freud's "unpleasant analysis of the feminine position" (Gallop 1982:2). Despite Mitchell's denial of the utility of psychoanalysis to approach women's writing, Gallop points attention to the fact that, in doing so, Mitchell is so focused on making feminine desire "contingent in order to make it impeachable" (1982:12)[143] that she actually forgets the vital role that the unconscious plays, as "in lapses, dreams, etc., always manifests itself as disrupter, a subverter of rationality and utility" (1982:12).

This potential disruption that psychoanalysis uncovers is precisely what interests me in this section. *The Recess'* psychological dimension is vital to fully comprehend the complexity of this work. The tremendous isolation and abjection that the female characters experience as well as the instances of the text that could be termed 'uncanny' provide an approach to the novel that enriches its significance.

Freud stressed the ambiguity surrounding the uncanny by pointing out that "what is uncanny is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (2004:418) and, yet it "is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old –

[143] Gallop further develops this point by making reference to the opposition that is established between female sexuality and masculine desire and argues that "feminine sexuality is not the complement but the supplement of desire" (1982:30).

established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (2004:429).[144] This ambiguity is further enhanced by the notion of the double:

> with persons, therefore, who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike; Hoffman accentuates this relation by transferring mental processes from the one person to the other – what we should call telepathy – so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own – in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or charactertrait, a twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several generations" (Freud 2004: 425).

In *The Recess,* Matilda and Ellinor's strong bond can be regarded as embodying the "double", as they do indeed identify with the other so strongly that, at points, their own selves can become confounded. As I argued in the previous section, their love lives are parallel and, hence, become a repetition of the other's fate. Ellinor tries to resist such repetition and prevent it from coming about but she cannot escape her destiny to repeat her sister's tragic story. Both sisters are capable of experiencing the other's mental states as if they were their own, which introduces this idea that they double, divide and interchange the self.

The sister's indissoluble bond is not the unique uncanny element in the novel. The uncanny is felt by the novel's incessant repetition of the same circumstances and events. All the women in the novel recreate the fate of previous generations and thus

[144] Freud also outlines that repression is an essential term to comprehend "Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light" (2004:429).

there is an everlasting pattern of desolation. The women feel certain that their ancestor's history is doomed to endlessly repeat itself, a certainty that has "awaken an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams" (Freud 2004:426).

Throughout the course of the novel, Matilda and Ellinor, and later Ellinor's daughter Mary, must all endure awfully adverse circumstances that make them lose their direction and no longer feel certain about who they truly are. As Royle mentions, "the uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced" (2003:1). [145] The uncanny also involves "a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity if a self" (Royle 2003:16):

> How often had I flattered my own erring heart with the vain belief that it had acquired strength, purity, and virtue, from its various trials! alas! what but pride, vanity and ambition, still throbbed unalterably there! time had only altered the object, not the passion, and centred them all in my daughter" (342)

Ellinor was convinced that she had always followed the right path of virtue, allowing strength and purity guide her every action. Yet, such certainty of mind eventually evaporates and she is left with the irretrievable feeling that, in fact, what truly ruled her existence were very different traits, mainly pride, vanity and ambition. She resents such fearful suspicion and fears her daughter might suffer the exact same fate. The sense of ghostliness that Royle referred to is very much felt by Ellinor at this point.

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[145] Royle expands this thought by naming it "a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was part of nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world" (2003:1)

This sense of ghostliness and strangeness is also palpable in Hoffman's *The Sandman* (1816), a text that is usually taken to exemplify the Uncanny. Hoffman's tale "deals with the lasting effects of secrecy in the family, a secrecy that, unfathomable and ultimately devastating to a child, disrupts the intimacy and familiarity of the home" (Rand and Torok 1994:189). This disorderly secrecy is also present in *The Recess*. Matilda and Ellinor grew up in isolation, hidden from the world and, vitally, hidden from the ultimate *truth* that would change their existence forever.

Once their secret ancestry comes to light, an uncanny feeling permeates the twins. All they have ever come to know, including the recess where they have always found solace, is utterly changed, disrupted. The familiarity they had always encountered is broken and they must bear the consequences that secret will have on their lives:

> our solitude being deprived of its ornament, appeared uniform, melancholy, and disgusting […] Obliged to hide in our hearts all the little follies and wishes we had been used to reveal to Mrs. Marlow without fear, we conversed with the Father only upon moral and indifferent topics […] Ellinor suggested a scheme which promised some amusement. This was to explore the passage leading to the ruins, where we might at least breathe the fresh air, and, for one hour, have the pleasure of a little novelty" (37-8)

After Mrs. Marlow's death, the only mother figure the twins had ever known, the twins' existence becomes "uniform, melancholy and disgusting". They find themselves unable to cope neither with both that sudden separation and also with the intelligence that Mary is their biological mother. Their lives appear to be paralyzed, having lost its sense of direction. The only satisfaction they can acquire is through each other's company and through 'trifling' adventures, such as the thrill of inspecting the

passages of the recess they inhabit, which somehow allows them to escape the uncertainty surrounding their lives.

6.3.2. Repression and the Power of Visions

In Psychoanalysis, the term repression is used to signal a return to that which has been hidden in the mind, waiting to come to light. One of the ways in which repressed elements can resurge is through dreams and visions. Freud believed that "the energizing force of dreams springs from an unconscious impulse seeking fulfilment, a desire not fulfilled in waking life" (Wright 1998:17). In *The Recess* Ellinor's descend into madness illustrates this "unconscious impulse seeking fulfilment", as in her life what she desires can never be fulfilled so her deluded state is the only one in which she can find peace.

Ellinor's visions become representations of her most intimate wishes, urges that she cannot satisfy in her 'real' existence, so she creates a version of reality in which her longings are not impossible but rather completely plausible. However, her dream-like mental state makes it extremely difficult for her to discern reality from fantasy. What her mind has created is simply a reproduction of a pattern: "an unconscious wish meets up with a preconscious thought and strives for an illusory satisfaction" (Wright 1998:17). That which she envisions is constituted by "a series of images" (Wright 1998:17) and she can no longer distinguish if what she sees is actually occurring or she is 'dreaming' with open eyes:

> my intellects, strangely blackened and confused, frequently realized scenes and objects that never existed, annihilating many which daily passed before my eyes. I sometimes observed the strong surprise of my attendants when I spoke of these visions, but much

> oftener I remained lethargic and insensible. There were moments when I started from a deep sleep, (and oh, how deep a sleep is that of the soul!) turned my dubious eyes around with a vague remembrance – touched my hand, to be convinced that I yet existed – trembled at the sound of my own voice, or raising my uncertain eye toward the blue vault of heaven, found, in the all cheering-sun, a stranger" (211)

Ellinor's hallucinating projections are buried inside her psyche, rendering her unable to discern reality from imagination. Under such distorted mental state, Ellinor's fragile mind would be 'protected' as long as she "does not remain enclosed within it" (Kristeva 1994:15). She is safe from her mental mutation the moment she "*shifts* it through an act of language into sublimation, into an act of thought, of interpretation, of relational information" (Kristeva 1994:15). Yet, in her narrative, Ellinor proves incapable of such shifting into language. She remains confined within her delusive mental state, unable to articulate it through language, which would allow her to interpret what is happening and try to solve her conflict.

Ellinor's delirium serves a double function. It "masks reality or spares itself from a reality while at the same time saying a truth about it" (Kristeva 1986:308). Her hallucinatory visions do not necessarily prevent Ellinor from reaching the truth but might be actually leading her to *her* truth. Ellinor is always introduced as a perceptive, authoritative female; even Matilda herself acknowledges the possibility that Ellinor's perception might surpass hers. Hence, her visions might very well be manifestations of her reality, of her desires and, most importantly, of her "subjugation to the desire to know" (Kristeva 1986:308).

Ellinor's hallucinations might serve yet another function; they might also exemplify women's desire to be part of a freer discourse, as Kristeva notes:

> this identification with the potency of the imaginary […] also bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish out societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex" (1986: 207)

Thus, Ellinor's madness is not just about a woman losing her senses but also about a woman that, through her visions, through her hallucinatory projections, is able to use her narrative authority to give a voice to women's communities, who wish all their enigmas, both good and bad, recognised and heard.

Ellinor's madness can also be read as signalling the potential threat women's desires, especially sexual desires, were believed to pose, as Scott argues, "the early ethical self's life is a process of continuous struggle to maintain itself in relation to the force and danger of desire" (1994:211). Scott also recognises the importance of the word *subjection*, when interpreted in the framework of Foucault's work. In such context, subjection is understood as "the emergence and unfolding of the subject who measures, regulates and knows desires" (1994:213)[146]. The fight is with oneself and, thus, "self-rule, self-mastery and not self-renunciation or purification or integrity were the goals" (Scott 1994:214). Ellinor's fight against herself when she loses her right state of mind is extended to women who are urged to resist their desires. In this battle, women ought not to lose themselves by exerting self-renunciation but rather what they potentially acquire is a self-command that will allow them to gain control of their existence.

[146] Scott clarifies that, in this context, subjection is not a response to "higher authority […] but, rather to a process of discipline by which individuals give themselves a particular self-relation and come to be the selves that they are" (1994:213).

In this battle to control their existence, women are also urged to always seek meaning in their significant other, and visualise themselves "similar, merging with him and even indistinguishable from him" (Kristeva 1986:250): "as the daughter of Mary, my soul rises against Elizabeth; but, as the wife of Leicester, I ought to know no pleasure except his; nor have I had, till this alarming moment, a merit in submission" (86).

Matilda voices her position both as daughter and wife. Her wifely duty lies on submitting her will to Leicester's to the extent that her sole happiness is the result of *his* whereas, as a daughter, her dutiful nature makes her "revolt" against the figure of Elizabeth, who inflicted suffering towards her maternal figure. Hence, while under other circumstances, Matilda is introduced as self-willed, on the above quotation, her configuration is wholly determined by the figures of authority in her life, her husband and her (absent) mother. Such figures are the ones she looks up to and such figures are the ones she *resigns* herself to.

In *The Recess*, the twins' identification with their lovers is abruptly torn apart by the death of their loved ones. Kristeva argues that such separation that death entails makes the surviving lover grasp "the abyss that separates the imaginary death" (1986:252) they endured in their infatuation "from the relentless reality" (1986:252). After Essex's execution, Ellinor is devastated: "[n]either time, care, or medicine ever availed toward the restoration of those intellects which might only have proved an additional misfortune" (309). From the moment of Essex's execution Ellinor's fragile sanity is forever lost. Before that catastrophic event she could occasionally regain her senses, as when she regains the clarity of mind necessary to narrate her story to her sister Matilda. However, once Essex is executed, such partly recuperation of sanity becomes impossible. The "imaginary death" of the lover that Kristeva references

becomes a sad reality for Ellinor; she is dead while still breathing, and nothing of her former self remains.

6.3.3. Melancholia and Abjection

Melancholia constitutes another significant psychoanalytical term that can be used when analyzing the female characters in *The Recess*. Fletcher and Benjamin define melancholia as the result of "an unusual separation from the mother" (1990:34) and hence the psychical disturbance known as melancholic feeling stems from the subject's inability to cope with "the loss of the object" (Lehte 1990:35). Matilda and Ellinor indeed suffer tremendously from the loss of their mother but their melancholia cannot be attributed uniquely to this devastating loss but rather to an accumulation of losses.

Throughout the course of the narrative, as I discussed in previous sections, Matilda and Ellinor's existence is based on a sense of loss. Progressively, the twins sense that all that they believed they had is forever lost: their home, their family, their husbands, each other, even their former *selves*. In their isolated, distressful state melancholia is the only sensation they can rely on.

Happiness has deserted them, and since they are forced to come to terms with sorrow, melancholia becomes their only companion: "here I at last began to breathe, and forming my mind to that melancholy repose, a decided destiny, however deplorable, allows, I called to my aid the sustaining principles of religion and morality" (229). Religion and morality's momentary relief comfort Ellinor. She surrenders to her appalling destiny and learns to coexist with the melancholic state that has taken prevalence. Under such melancholy, Ellinor becomes subject to abjection, a notion that Kristeva thoroughly analyses in "Powers of Horror":

> [n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (1982: 2)

Abjection, understood as a “something” that the subject is able to retain, is present in the twins’ disturbing sense that, despite their disquieting circumstances, their sense of identity, although weakened, is never annihilated to the extent of becoming “nothing”. They do retain a “something”, a sensation that, as Kristeva notes, is not clearly recognizable but, instead, becomes a borderline between reality and imagination, existence and non-existence. This in-between existence becomes a circumstance that, if conceded, has the power to obliterate what remains of them.

Abjection both perturbs and comforts the twins; providing something to clasp on while, still, threatening to destroy their peace, as Kristeva argues, abjection “does not respect borders, positions, rules” and, hence “[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982:4) is all the twins are left with. Abjection of the self is a notion closely linked to the notion of desire, as “there is nothing like the abjection of the self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (Kristeva 1982:5). Hence, abjection becomes a way to display one’s most intimate longings, a way to make them perceptible and somehow ascertain some *authority*. Abject states allow for the recognition of desire and, yet, such recognition is not transparent at all, as “nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of memory” (Kristeva 1982:5).

Ambiguity is constantly present through abjection, a state that allows individuals to delve into their unconsciousness while obscuring that unconsciousness so that

nothing is certain, nothing is absolute. As Kristeva observes, through abjection "the clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) become filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame" (1982:8). Abjection transforms everything; all has mutated beyond recognition:

> Defamed, rejected, and forgotten by all but the generous sisters of the Sydney family, I followed, once more, my fate and Lord Arlington, and reached again the abbey ... I turned with disgust from the desolated scene, and locking myself up in the remotest and most gloomy chambers of the abbey, spent my life in meditating on my every loss" (240)

Ellinor finds herself "defamed, rejected, and forgotten". All has changed, nothing is recognisable. Her abject state is so intense that her only option is to lock herself up, vainly attempting to find solace and, unwillingly, accepting all that she has lost. At that moment nothing is certain anymore.

In the midst of the uncertainty that abjection entails, a re-evaluation of the nature of femininity is required. In the eighteenth century, sexual difference "as an unsolved problematic, or one that is *impossible* to solve, poses itself explicitly" (Kristeva 1990:15). At that time, the question of sexual difference and, particularly, the nature of what was considered "feminine" was under constant scrutiny[147]. In the context of abjection, the definition of what is designed *feminine* is further disarranged, since femininity comes to be regarded as "an 'other' without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity" (Kristeva 1982:58-9).

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[147] Kristeva notes the insistence on establishing a clear distinction between the sexes, a distinction in which women "apparently put in the position of passive subjects, are none the less felt to be willy powers, 'baleful schemers' from whom rightful beneficiaries must protect themselves" (1982:68).

Matilda and Ellinor's abject state turns them into 'other' female individuals whose personal experience is constantly obscured. The interweaving of conflicting feminine traits appears to reproduce an "abject or demonical potential of the feminine" (Kristeva 1982:64), which mirrors the period's preoccupation of the assumed threat that the female subjectivity, if unmonitored, posed[148]. Yet, the paradoxical nature of female selfhood is not necessarily "demonic" but could also be read as an indication of the necessity to address such paradoxes so as to attempt to decipher the mysteries that surround female identity. In *The Recess* the twins' configuration is permeated by enigmatical elements which turn them into fascinating creatures one wishes to elucidate.

In this section I have considered the ways in which psychoanalytic criticism can be applied to Lee's text, focusing mainly on the role of notions such as the uncanny, abjection and melancholy, all crucial terms that illuminate the readings of female interiority offered in the novel. In the next section I will consider yet another crucial element: the figure of the absent mother. This motif is vitally significant in *The Recess*, as the twins' existence is ruled by such a lack. I will now analyse how the absent mother determines Matilda and Ellinor's existence.

6.4. The Disappearing Act of the Mother Figure

In eighteenth-century fiction the mother figure is repeatedly portrayed as "either absent or problematic" (Deakins 2012: 74). Most novels of the period depict maternal absence as "an old persistent narrative problem" (Greenfield 2002: int 18) that insists on

[148] Kristeva makes reference to the conception of the female sex as "synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (1982:70).

the dismissal of the domestic mother[149] while, at the same time, shows female protagonists that become mothers throughout the course of the novel and that, in a way, supply their own maternal lack by becoming mothers themselves[150].

Francus notes that such maternal absence also appears to be fairly common in Gothic narratives, as the mother is "unnarratable in the gothic" (2012: int 8) for she is a figure who enforces a sense structure, regularity and harmony and the Gothic is characterized by a heightened sense of narrative tension, which would be somehow diminished if the mother were a central agent in the story.

In their influential study *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)*,* Sandra Gilbert and Gubar also attempt to explain the repercussions of the repetitive pattern of maternal disappearance in fiction. They rightly argue that, by being deprived from their mother, heroines find themselves vulnerable, disinherited by the role model their mother would set for them to follow in their lives. Gilbert and Gubar identify a "matriarchal power" (Hirsch 1989: 44) that would enable heroines to acquire a certain degree of agency and power, of (however limited) control over their existence. This is an intriguing remark, as it opens up the interpretation of the mother/daughter relationship as central, as the one relationship that has the capacity to determine females' whole future developments. Without maternal authority, heroines cannot achieve their whole potential; only maternal influence can grant them the supremacy of their own lives.

An opposite view is to be found in psychoanalytical thought. If Gilbert and Gubar introduce the mother as a matriarchal figure embedded with the potential capacity to transform their descendants' existence, Freudian family romance analysis discards such potential. Under such analysis, the mother figure MUST be removed so as

[149] Francus exemplifies this absence by making reference to touchstone eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, such as *Pamela*, *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*, all constructed upon a motherless female protagonist, perpetuating the topos of "maternal absence and marginalization" (2012: int 7)
[150] Chodorow shares this vision by pointing out that "women have an investment in mothering in order to make reparation to their own mother or to get back to her" (1979: 204)

to "free the girl's imaginative play" (Hirsch 1989: 56). The mother's presence would not enrich women but would actually force them to "resign themselves to a weak imagination" (Hirsch 1989:56). However, such erasure of the mother confirms "her overwhelming importance" (Hirsch 1989: 57). Both approaches to motherhood, though different, lead to the same conclusion: the mother figure is vitally important. Her constant negation and annihilation only reinforces her decisive significance.

Women's fiction typically revolves around courtship and marriage, which "alone can place women's stories in a position of participating in the dynamics of ambition, authority, and legitimacy which constitute the plots of realist fiction" (Hirsch 1989: 57). In such texts, the absence of mothers is counterbalanced by substituting paternal figures by other men[151], usually a male-mentor that takes the role of the 'mother' in educating the woman.

Yet, all these courtship novels bear witness to the idealization of motherhood (Greenfield 2002: int 13). Such idealization produces an unrelenting desire; a desire for that which has been lost – the mother. Such desire lies at the very centre of the narrative, at the core of all action. Greenfield identifies such desire as "homoerotic and incestuous" and as the "center around which familial relations are configured" (2002: int 19). The mother, though absent, is also a continuous 'presence'. Heroine's longing to be reunited with her or simply to reconnect with her is an unremitting force.

In *The Recess*, Lee takes such central desire and uses it to "symbolise women's 'illegitimate' position within a patriarchal society which denies women their rightful (maternal) inheritance" (Wallace 2013: 33). This denial of their 'rightful inheritance' is made clear the moment Mrs. Marlow proclaims that: "your mother lives – but not by you" (10). At that crucial moment, the twins learn of the existence of a mother they

[151] Hirsch argues that these men are "endowed with nurturing qualities, which might offer an alternative to patriarchal power and dominance" (1989: 57)

never even knew they had and, also, come to understand that all the lineage that comes from their royal mother's position has been denied to them. In their case, their 'inheritance' is not simply determined by their lost mother figure but also by her royal line. They have been denied their mother and also their 'rightful' position in society. Their 'illegitimacy' is a double-dimensional one: both maternal and social[152].

Illegitimacy is not the only outcome of maternal loss in the novel. Another one is profound idealization. Forced to live without their mother, the twins must come to terms with such distressing loss[153]. A way to do this is to 'create' a version of their mother that would satisfy their needs. Due to the lack of a 'real' mother figure, the twins entreat "a symbolic mother who can give them to nurture their lack" (Sterk and Deakins 2012: int xx). The twins' mother never leaves their mind and, hence, the 'symbolic' mother they create after losing her makes an appearance at those moments in their lives in which they long for a maternal figure to support them. On her wedding day, Matilda remembers her mother:

> Scarce had the transports of finding myself happy given place to reason, when my mother recurred to my mind. Unblessed by her matron presence, my nuptials were but half hallowed; nay, unblessed with her consent. I compared, with grief, her fate and mine: a long captivity had impaired her health, and no hope of a release to her spirits. I, although pent in a still narrower prison, beheld it enclose almost every human good, and could have consented to end my days in it; but the honor, the welfare of my lord ordained otherwise (69)

[152] This illegitimacy derives from the well-established topos of the "lost or murdered mother who can neither protect her child nor attest his/her legitimacy" (Wallace 2013: 35). First lost and, then, murdered, Mary proves unable to restore her daughters' denied 'legitimacy'.

[153] Sterk and Deakins note that loss appears in multiple forms, it might flourish "when mothers withhold love, express love poorly, or are no longer present" and it is in such circumstances that daughters need to "find ways to resolve their feelings of loss" (2012: int xx)

Her matrimony vows should endow Matilda with the greatest of happiness and yet she finds her merriness tainted by the 'ghostly' presence of her mother's memory. Matilda does not allow herself to experience happiness as she feels 'unblessed' without her mother there by her side, blessing her union. Her fate and her mother's are fused in one, as Matilda notes that they are both imprisoned. Her mother lies in a physical prison cell while she herself feels imprisoned in a spiritual, metaphysical prison that feels as real as her mother's.

Matilda clearly signals her inability to come to terms with her mother's loss. In a very interesting study, *Mothers and Daughters: Complicated Connections Across Cultures* (2014), O'Neil and Shick tackle maternal loss by conducting a series of interviews among women who had lost their mother. A wide variety of themes emerge from their study, including the image of women as "guardian angels, and spiritual presences and mothers 'just being there'" (2012: 27). These same themes are portrayed in Lee's text. The twins, too, come to regard their mother as their own 'guardian angel', as someone who looks over and protects them.

In this study, an important suggestion that is extracted is that mothers' death does not impede their daughters from "continuing to seek their mothers' counsel or attempting to draw strength from their mothers' presence" (2012: 28). Throughout the course of the novel, Ellinor and Matilda are faced with different trials that appear to test how far they are willing to go or how much they can actually endure. Surrounded by adverse circumstances, and continually tested by tragic twists of fate, the twins continue to seek guidance from the lost mother figure they so desperately long for.

Interestingly, O'Neil and Shick discovered that losing their mother did not diminish women's strength but actually the opposite, as their connections to their absent mother endowed them with fortitude and "were an essential element in these women's

self-esteem, sense of well-being and ongoing process of identity development" (2012: 35)[154]. This same argument comes true for Mary Queen of Scots' daughters. The loss of their mother, an appalling event that marks their whole existence, does not weaken the twins. Such loss provides them with the courage they need to survive their lives' continuous challenging tests.

6.4.1. The Mother/Daughter Bond: The Departure of the 'Good' Mother

The unyielding bond between mother and daughter is usually based on the notion of "identity and knowledge of one's self" (O'Neil and Shick 2012: 35). Both mother and daughter experience an irrepressible yearning to remain connected. They constantly fear the loss of the other or, even, the loss of their own persona, sometimes fusing their two beings into one.

Retaining an inner tie to their mother appears to endow the daughter with a "self-validation" which becomes "an integral piece of herself and her development" (O'Neil Shick 2012: 42). Under this assumption, it seems, the daughter's sense of identity largely depends on her ability to maintain (and retain) a successful relationship to her mother who, in turn, becomes an essential part of her future growth.

Yet, as Benjamin notes, such identification should not be understood as a mirror-like reflection, since the mother "must be something of the not-me" (1988:24) and hence the daughter needs to be able to separate herself from her mother figure, for "her recognition will be meaningful only to the extent that it reflects her own equally separate subjectivity" (1988: 24). The key lies in both mothers and daughters' ability to both recognise themselves in the other while still maintaining some differentiation.

[154] O'Neil and Shick argue that a means to remain attached to their lost mother was based on their "internalizing aspects of their mothers' values, goals, and personalities"(2012: 35)

Achieving the balance between the level of recognition and demarcation is a key aspect that ought to be considered if they are to retain their *own* separate selves[155]. For the twins, such differentiation proves extremely difficult, as they constantly find themselves compared to their mother and her past mistakes:

> Unfortunate children!, cried he, with a deep sigh, "Heaven has at last completed the calamitous circumstances under which you were born: destined to an imprisonment as lasting as your royal mother's, you have but the melancholy advantage of chusing it [...] you now see before you your only friend – a feeble, helpless friend, bending daily towards the grave you alone render displeasing to him (65)

In the above quotation, Father Anthony instils on the twins' the conviction that they are 'doomed', meant to inhabit a prison, like their unfortunate mother. He presents such fate as unavoidable and introduces himself as the one friend the twins can count on under such calamitous circumstances. Matilda herself manifests such apprehension and suspects she may have inherited much more than just her mother's features:

> Oh, just Heaven! have I then inherited my mother's fate with her features? Is a guilty passion ordained to be the crime and scourge of all my race? let me at least bury it in my bossom. Yes," cried I, with conscious dignity, "I may be unfortunate, but not censurable: the daughter of Mary shall be worthy the Stuart line (59).

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[155] The limits between recognition and demarcation are also addressed by Glenn, who mentions a form of union which consists on "treating mother and child as a single entity with unitary interests" (1994: 13). Glenn notes the problems this might entail, as this "fusion denies personhood and agency to both" (1994: 13).

Matilda's greatest fear is to inherit her mother's fate and thus find herself forced to endure the same tragic circumstances that marked her existence. Believing the object of her affection, Lord Leicester, to be married, Matilda, in an attempt to prevent being involved in a 'guilty passion', determinedly assures herself that she will never be censurable, which would jeopardise her propriety and prevent her from becoming the worthy Stuart heiress she wishes to be.

Matilda's reasoning introduces the notion of familial expectations. As a Stuart, Matilda places high expectations on herself, expectations aimed at becoming a kind of woman that would make both her mother Mary and herself proud. In family romances both motherhood and daughterhood's expectations acquire a special significance. In such texts, the reader witnesses the heroine's come-to-age process, a process through which she must (re)consider the multiple ties she has established to both precedent and ensuing generations of women (Hirsch 1989: int 11). The first of these relationships is to her own mother. Whether absent or present, the mother figure inevitably shapes the heroine's journey to adulthood. This vital mother/daughter relationship has the potential to "challenge the notion of woman as a singular, unified, transparent, category" (Hirsch 1989: int 12), for woman is no longer taken as a single entity, but actually as a multiplicity of entities, both mother and daughter, both subject and object, and hence as someone who ought not to be categorized under a *single*, permanent position.

All that is maternal bears a multiplicity of interpretations, all found within domestic environments, as in Lee's *Recess*, a work that "validates female relationships of all kinds, but particularly those based on maternal genealogies" (Wallace 2013: 44). In Lee's text, a female community is constructed; a community that urges for the re-examination of domesticity and femininity, so as to test their validity and to confirm their inclusion (or lack of inclusion) of the female values it advocates.

All female 'agency' and authority, including mothering, occurs within a specific social context that inspects its legitimacy. Thus, "agency is central to an understanding of mothering as a social, rather than a biological, construct" (Glenn 1994: 3). Traditional conceptions of domesticity and femininity introduce a list of female *desirable* qualities, such a tenderness, compassion, virtue, and passiveness, as innate, biologically determined, 'natural' female attributes. Such attributes are presumably what make a *good* mother. Consequently, women who do not fulfil such requirements are excluded from the category 'good'. They are not *good* women and, hence, they are not *good* mothers.

In *The Recess*, female protagonists all fulfil the role of proper, good women. Matilda and Ellinor are virtuous heroines of sensibility, capable of great goodness and tenderness. However, this does not prevent them from embodying other less desirable qualities as well, such as vanity, and shallowness. Matilda acknowledges that, although she despises duplicity, sometimes she has to act in a way that she reprimands in order to achieve her aims:

> To effect any part of this complicated designs, I found it absolutely necessary to stifle, in a degree, my feelings: and submitting to a dissimulation my soul abhorred, I requested to see that woman who was more terrible to my eyes than any thing human, *Elizabeth* excepted (144)

Matilda openly and authoritatively proclaims her discomfort with any act that compromises her integrity but, convinced that her aim cannot be achieved any other way, willingly succumbs to deceitful endeavours. This shows that both 'positive' and 'negative' attributes are applicable to heroines and, nonetheless, they continue to embody valid, worthy roles as mothers and daughters. They all exemplify that

definitions of womanliness "are continually constituted, reproduced, changed, and contested" (Glenn 1994:3) and thus should not be taken as a set of absolute, incontestable attributes.

In the late eighteenth century, domestic ideology introduced mothering as being "located only in the private sphere of the family and involving strong emotional attachment and altruistic motives" (Glenn 1994: 13). Women and children were relegated to the domestic, private sphere of the family household, the place where they supposedly rightly belong[156]. Such encapsulation prevents their expansion to other areas of life, and thus negates their access to the public sphere, a sphere reserved exclusively to male authority. Several binary oppositions are constructed around the notion of motherhood, such as this distinction between private and public, and also the distinction between proper, 'good' women and 'bad' women. As Glenn rightly notes, all these binary oppositions need to be examined and dismantled[157], if one is to critically approach the subject of mothering (1994: 13)[158].

Eighteenth-century society continually insisted on the necessity to maintain women in their 'proper' place, the home, where she could fulfil her familial duties. Non-fiction forms, such as conduct manuals, educational and political tracts, all illustrated the image of the "domestic woman, particularly as wife and mother" (Francus 2012: int 1) and, inevitably, all forms of fiction also perpetuated the principles of domesticity for women by "valorizing women who embodied the characteristics of the

[156] As chodorow points out "women's roles are basically familial, and concerned with affective, ties" (1979: 89). Their role demands their submission to family life, selflessly devoting herself to nurturing all affective relationships within her family household.

[157] Glenn particularly stresses the need to dismantle the private/public opposition with regards to mothering, as "mothering in the 'private' sphere is crucially affected by what goes on in the 'public' sphere of the political economy" (1994: 16) and, hence, such distinction between private/public spheres is not applicable to motherhood, which takes place both in the private and public arenas of life.

[158] Such dismantling revolves around a paradox, as mothering is the only way in which women acquire rank and authority but in order to claim such power women are forced to accommodate the ideology which claims their possession of 'special' qualities for mothering. The problem lies in the fact that "such claims reinforce the very ideology that justifies women's subordination" (Glenn 1994: 23).

domestic woman and demonizing those who did not" (Francus 2012: int 1). Hence, all information women received was meant to 'educate' them and turn them into the image of the perfect, dutiful, selfless and, ultimately, un-willed mother and wife. It was very difficult for women to break with such well-spread standards and the pressure to fulfil such prescribed role was continuously felt in their lives.

Domesticity and femininity were taken as interchangeable elements, both placed at the centre of female experience, imposing the demands they ought to always bear in mind. Yet, such ideology in which women were confined was problematic, as "women were confronted by an ideology in which they were bound to fail" (Francus 2012: int 5). Undoubtedly, some eighteenth-century women probably felt disturbed by such limited configuration[159] but, as Francus notes, it is not clear that *all* women felt this way and perhaps some of them did manage to come to terms with such high standards and found some sort of "compensation in their domestic roles" (Francus: int 5-6). What is most significant is that female experience should not be approached as "uniform and universal" but rather as paradoxical, multiple, and variable.

In eighteenth-century fiction, female experience is tremendously analysed. Endless courtship novels revolve around heroines who must come to terms with ideal configurations and are forced to respond to multiple tests that place them in difficult situations. Yet, as noted before, the mother is suspiciously absent in such narratives. In domestic fiction, "motherhood remains largely unnarated and unnarratable in the cultural landscape" (Francus 2012: int 19).

Maternal absence becomes a requirement, and stories withhold her representation. In *The Recess*, Mary Queen of Scots is a ghostly figure whose mysteries are never unveiled. Her presence is felt throughout the whole narrative, both before and

[159] As Hirsch claims, female narratives always revolve around the "frustrations engendered by these limited possibilities and attempt to subvert the constraint of dominant patterns" (1989: int 8)

after her death but she is only briefly *physically* present. Her absence is tremendously romanticised, as her daughters mourn her when they are away from her and also when she is irrevocably taken from them forever. Mary is somehow sanctified by the twins, who make a long memento mori around their lost mother. The novel becomes an Ode to Mary queen of Scots, a sentimentalised tale around the mother the twins could never have and yet will always yearn for.

Mary is denied to role of the 'good' mother, as she never has the chance to fulfil such role, and instead embodies what critics like Francus have termed the 'spectral mother'[160], a mother who "has the best of both worlds: the desired ideology of the 'good' mother and the narrative fecundity of the 'bad' one" (Francus 2012: int 10). Mary is not a 'real' mother, for narrative purposes, as her *story* is absent from the text, she is not allowed a mothering role and, instead, becomes a spectre-like reminiscent of the possibilities of motherhood, the mother-who-could-have been present but instead is only ever present in the memory of her descendants:

> Oh royal Mary, dear unknown mother, how would the tender yearnings of thy bosom justify the assertions of thy persecuted daughter, did not a cruel tyrant, by a double injustice, enclose in separate prisons the mother and the child? – bring us but together, and you shall find (205)

Finding herself and her daughter both separately imprisoned, Ellinor invokes the figure of her unknown, lost mother who would, by her mere presence, justify the persecution and unfair treatment she is subject to. This yearning is an impossible one;

[160] As critics such as Francus have noted, the spectral mother "could be valorized for embodying eighteenth-century ideals of femininity and maternity" (2012: int 11). Interestingly, Francus notes that this tendency seems to indicate that "the best mother may be a dead mother after all" (2012: int 11) and, hence, somehow, Mary's death 'qualifies' as her achieving her best mothering status, a status she could not have achieved had she survived and been *really* involved in the narrative. Her absence becomes much more powerful than her presence would have ever been.

Mary becomes, once again, a spectral mother, unable to comfort her daughter. However, despite their inevitable lack of 'real' action, in a way, spectral mothers, like Mary herself, manage to broaden the parameters within which motherhood is inscribed. A 'real' mother possesses agency, a will of her own, and thus has the potential to take over the narrative and destabilize the influence of patriarchal authority by claiming the *right* of matriarchal authority. By contrast, the 'spectral' mother poses no such threat and actually "displaces the flaws of real mothers and experiments with emotionally and socially satisfying possibilities of motherhood[161]" (Francus 2012: int 17).

The challenge posed by maternal authority was resolved through supplanting maternal duties by the presence of 'surrogate' figures such as tutors or governesses, a displacement that signalled the "delegation of maternal tasks that shifted the terms of maternal authority and justified that spectralisation of motherhood" (Francus 2012: int 16). This way, maternal absence was justified and dealt with accordingly by introducing substitute figures that would take over the role of 'mother' and would thus fulfil such crucial role without the inclusion of a 'real' mother figure in the narrative.

Critics such as Wallace have interpreted Lee's choice of title, *The Recess*, as her intention to signal the influence of the "figure of the maternal body, as both womb and tomb, which is open to several layers of closely connected interpretation" (2013: 51). Hence, the recess as a location sets up the perfect environment for the expression of the everlasting maternal influence that permeates the novel. Under this interpretation, the twins suffer a double loss, the loss of their mother and also of their 'maternal' space in the recess.

[161] Francus uses this argument to draw attention to the fact that the spectral mother's "powerful presence suggests that the domestic ideology of motherhood was far less secure and monolithic than it seemed" (2012: int 17). Hence, Francus opens the way to reexamine and interrogate the apparently stable domestic ideology of motherhood, an interrogation that might lead to the conclusion that such ideology is by no means stable and actually entails a constantly changing, evolving narrative that is far more complex than it initially seems.

Mary's absence is the decisive element that determines Matilda and Ellinor's whole existence. The profound estrangement the twins experience reflects the novel's fixation on "how Mary might survive in the literal and psychic lives of women who are themselves consigned not just to a bodily death but also to a symbolic one as well" (Lewis 1998: 140). The two sister's life are shaped by the figure of their lost mother and it is around that absence and their continual desire to be reunited with her that the twins "become who they are (not)" (Lewis 1998: 141). Their lives parallel that of their mother and their sense of selves is always measured in relation to that longed-for maternal figure[162].

This longing for a mother figure they cannot attain forces the twins to incessantly attempt to find "refuge in other women as surrogate mothers" (Wallace 2013: 52). Female bonding becomes absolutely essential. The twins deal with their sense of loss by attaining and preserving successful relationships with other female figures. This creates a sense of a female community that satisfies the twins' objective to generate "forms of female-to-female intersubjective communication" (Chodorow 1979: 200), a communication that can provide them with the kind of maternal discourse they lack. Hence, maternal influence is achieved by creating a female community based on relations which "produce 'thought' and mark the world with female difference" (Giorgio 2002: 18).

In this chapter I have first analyzed the influence of mainstream, powerful literary traditions such as Historical Fiction and the Female Gothic, by paying special attention to the ways in which Lee appropriates characteristics from these traditions to suit her narrative purposes. Then, I have used elements of Psychoanalytical thought, such as Freud's notion of the uncanny or Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, to

[162] Critics such as Lewis have noted the difficulty encountered in attempting to differentiate between Mary and her daughter Matilda and also between the twins' lives themselves.

determine the ways in which Psychoanalysis can be used to access Lee’s novel. Finally, in this last section, I have considered the crucial aspect of maternal absence to analyse the effects such influential and perpetual literary topos has on Lees *The Recess*.

7. Conclusions and Consequences

At the beginning of this thesis I stated my research question, which was directed towards detecting the extent to which the female characters portrayed in the texts under analysis, in spite of the submissiveness culturally and conventionally demanded from them, are accorded narrative authority by their authors. In this thesis, I have argued that those female characters are seen to both seek and *assume* control over their own circumstances, thus defying the limitations they encounter.

Throughout my analysis of both primary and secondary sources I have paid careful attention to the ways in which the women writers I analyse respond to traditional configurations of womanhood, by closely analyzing conventional (and widespread) conceptions of womanhood and by perceiving the ways in which those authors incorporated certain well-established parameters while *resisting* others.

One of the well-established parameters that these authors delve into is directed towards **acquiring an acute understanding of the multiple ambiguities surrounding the female body and the negative outcome that is produced by *extreme* female passivity and obedience**. Due to the silence that was culturally demanded from women, learning to interpret the (often codified) signs which were displayed through women's bodies became imperative. In light of this, I conclude that in texts I studied in my thesis, and especially in Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, in the case of complaisant, traditional women non-verbal expressions – the language produced by their bodies – uncovers these women's *secret* longing to acquire some authority, however limited it might actually prove to be. This implies that a much more careful analysis of the sources of anxiety produced by the female body is needed in order to

attempt to *decode* such non-verbal female expressions, which might provide crucial insights into their most hidden, yet crucial, impulses and longings.

By contrast, through my analysis of the signs of the female body, I have observed that non-traditional, 'rebellious' females do not find themselves *obliged* to express their wish to retain authority *only* through bodily signs but resort to direct appeals to their 'right' to that authority. This is intriguing, as these females are allowed a considerable amount of self-expression through *language* itself. In the texts, characters such as Lady Anne Wilmot and the marchioness repeatedly make direct claims that oppose social control and assert their utter refusal to *submit* to it.

In a way, this implies that such direct opposition to patriarchal control is not *limited* to unruly characters but is applicable to conventional ones as well. As I have noted in my analysis of the texts, conventional female characters, though not permitted to *directly* utter any discomfort at their demand for submission, nonetheless indicate their *uneasiness* with such fettered state by *resisting* certain societal expectations.

In the case of Lady Woodville, for instance, she finds it is difficult to *willingly* submit to the demand she assumes *all* the fault in her marital discord and the twins also revolt against their tragic fate and find it hard to come to terms with the limitations they need to face. This involves a *questioning* of the demand that females *eagerly* engage their submissive, passive role without any discomfort.

In the case of Sidney Bidulph, her discomfort is expressed through her body. Her severe fevers and her bodily unrest express what she cannot – and will not – utter: her desire to ascertain her own vision, which usually radically differs from that of her mother. In the narrative, her continuous failure to proclaim her own interpretation of events and her insistence on endowing her mother with *all* authority, whilst relegating herself to the position of a mere observer with no mind of her own proves to be fatal. In

The History of Lady Julia Mandeville, the free-spirited, defiant attitude of Lady Anne Wilmot directly opposes this *blind* submissiveness, and she openly mocks those female characters that refuse to attain authority and simply allow others to decide for them. In Lady Anne's case, her bodily expressions also indicate her willingness to retain control of her narrative but, for her, these are not the *only* means through which to assert her control, as she constantly asserts her influence unapologetically and makes fun of societal conventions and of gender roles expected behaviours.

In *The Delicate Distress*, lady Woodville's anxiousness is emphasized to the extreme, as she embodies the kind of suffering a woman suspecting her husband of being unfaithful *ought* to exemplify and, hence, her bodily distress represents her emotional *drive* to retain some control of her circumstances whereas the marchioness is closer to Lady Anne's depiction, as she embodies as 'freer' female who is not limited by bodily symbols to express herself but actually expresses her desires verbally and openly, without much (expected) restraints.

The twins in *The Recess* embody both aspects, on the one hand, they *do* resort to bodily language and indirectness – with a tremendous amount of emphasis placed on their fevered, sickened responses to adverse circumstances – to articulate their urge to retain some 'power' over their narrative but, at the same time, in some instances, they directly *reveal* their inability to comply with certain social norms and regulations.

Another widespread expectation that these women writers question is the ***absolute* demand for female modesty**. With regards to this expectation, I claim that in the texts female modesty produces no reward whatsoever and, hence, it becomes plausible to assume that a subliminal message that is brought forward in these narratives is that in order for women to both attain and *maintain* authority over their own lives

extreme modesty needs to be avoided and, instead, one ought to opt for a degree of modesty that still leaves room for some self-determination.

As I have argued before, Sidney Bidulph's tremendous modesty prevents her from taking control of her own life. In her case, no self-command is allowed, which only *heightens* her tragic fate. As critics have noted, binary oppositions, between public and private experience, between 'good' and 'bad' women and, crucially, between modest, passive females and unruly, disorderly ones need to be dismantled, if one is to acquire a complete *interpretation* of femininity. An approach that incorporates *all* angles of women's experience is needed, as this approach would break away from the monster versus angelic woman and would, instead, introduce woman as a multifaceted category in which many elements come into play.

Lady Woodville can rightly be termed a modest woman. She is a devoted wife who, nonetheless, struggles with the expectation that she finds blame on herself for her husband's infidelity. She dwells upon this and suffers because, on inspecting her behaviour, she finds no cause for her husband's supposed betrayal.

The marchioness is not a modesty female, and her lack of propriety clearly contrasts with Lady Woodville's selflessness and, yet, she is still introduced as an alluring, femme-fatale figure who manages to seduce both the reader and Lord Woodville with her charm. In the same way, Lady Anne's witty narration has a textual centrality which intrigues the reader and, when assessing her entertaining and passionate narration, it is plausible to suppose that some readers align themselves with such determined, non-conforming female attitude.

The twins also produce this effect. Their double-narration bears witness to their strict adherence to the demand of retaining a modest disposition, whilst somehow

implying certain uneasiness with this role and an (indirect) desire to break away from this one-dimensional female representation.

The notion of **female transgression** is crucial in my thesis. Throughout the long eighteenth-century, female authors and characters displayed a tremendous fear of transgression, because they were absolutely aware of the fact that once a female *dared* to digress from the established 'right' course of action – which demanded their willing, complete adherence to social norms and demanded their passivity and submission – it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for them to regain their status as 'proper', decent women of 'honour' and would inevitably become a 'bad' woman, one that would need to face social ostracism and public ridicule.

This preoccupation is at the very centre of all the texts I analyse. Miss Burchell's 'apparent' preoccupation for the loss of her reputation after her involvement with Faulkland sets many of the events of the novel into motion. Sidney's refusal to *question* Miss Burchell's account of the 'innocent' victim brings about her ruin. As we learn in the novel, Miss Burchell's transgression was deliberate and, hence, the amount of trust that both Sidney and her mother place on her story shows to be totally misdirected.

The multiple transgressions of figures such as Lady Anne and the marchioness are directly introduced as such, willing, deliberate transgressions, under no guise of conventionality whatsoever. Unlike Miss Burchell, these unruly females do not hide under a guise of respectability and choose to present themselves as females who do not fear social ostracism and who refuse to *submit* themselves to the role of the 'proper' woman and, instead, proudly transgress. In this sense, these women, who stand in direct opposition to heroines such as Sidney and Lady Woodville, retain their authority by refusing to publicly display a 'proper', traditional image of womanhood.

The incessant monitoring of female conduct was meant to ensure their compliance which traditional images of womanhood but, by doing so, this control inevitable forced women to resort to duplicity and deception in order to *publicly* display such as role in an evident, overt manner.

Non-conforming characters such as Lady Anne and the marchioness, whilst regarded as 'bad' women at the eyes of their society, nonetheless display a 'real' image of themselves. They retain their authority, their *authentic* self, not the self that their society *expects* from them.

Interestingly, heroines such as Sidney, Lady Woodville and the twins are the ones who are somehow duplicitous in the sense that the image they introduce of themselves is not their true, *personal* self, but a socially constructed one. In the texts, I have observed a certain amount of lenience, however limited, towards insubordinate females, which might implicitly indicate the author's resistance to *blindly* accept socially imposed female attributes.

Marriage and adultery are yet other significant aspects for my study. Most sentimental novels of the period centre on the process of courtship, which culminates in marriage, but married life itself is seldom the *central* subject. This is the certainly the case of *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph, The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* and *The Recess*, in which marriage is narrated, and given an important role, but it is not placed at the *centre* of the narrative. Yet, in Griffith's *The Delicate Distress*, marriage *is* accorded textual centrality.

Griffith's depiction of this often unnarrated subject stresses the troublesome nature of both marriage and adultery, as she provides a critique of the marked traditional distinction between women as possessing a passionate and hasty disposition and men as rational beings with a high degree of self-control. In a clear role reversal, Lady

Woodville is depicted as a tremendously sensitive, rational woman whereas her husband is the one who is passionate and not able to control himself with ease. Suspecting her husband's infidelity, Lady Woodville fails to find guilt in herself, which can be interpreted as an implicit questioning of the assumed belief that, in cases of marital discord, wives ought to resign themselves to such circumstances and assume their culpability.

In *The Recess*, the twins also fail to be categorised simply as embodying a passionate and hasty disposition, though passionate both Eleanor and Matilda are sensible women, and they are able to affront their distressful, adverse lives with courage. Yet, this fortitude ultimately fails them and it proves *insufficient* to efficiently maintain their sanity and their peace of mind, which they eventually lose.

Unruly females in the texts, such as Lady Anne, the marchioness and Miss Burchell, though passionate are nonetheless described as rational creatures, in the sense that they are calculating, scheming females who are able to restrain themselves and keep a clear mind in order to attain their objectives.

With regards to narrative authority, Lady Woodville as a married woman knows her 'proper' place and secures her position by submitting her will to that of her husband whereas Lady Anne Wilmot opposes the role of the devoted wife and refuses to embody this values, openly stating her unrelenting willingness to retain her current 'power' after marriage, in a clear departure from convention. Once again, the only way to retain authority appears to be to *resist* the role society dictates and claim the *right* to preserve the 'freedom' that unmarried life offers.

The ambiguities surrounding different portrayals of womanhood are central to my study, specifically **the tensions between the image of women as temptresses, femme-fatale figures and the image of the 'proper' woman as guarantor of virtue**

and morality. As I have argued throughout my thesis, in the eighteenth century there was a growing concern around the notion of 'womanliness', around the role that women were socially demanded to fulfil. This role, which was largely based on obedience, selflessness, passivity and submission, stood in direct opposed to those less-desirable female roles, such as the image of the temptress and of the femme fatale, both of which were a direct threat to the status quo.

The notion of woman as temptress, which originates with Eve in the Garden of Eden, is usually used as justification for female subordination but, as I have argued in my chapter on Frances Brooke, there have been attempts to break away from that negative image and produce a much more encouraging vision which does not *condemn* her. In the texts, there are several Eves, tempting, alluring female figures who threat to disrupt all the goodness that the heroines introduce. Miss Burchell, Lady Anne Wilmot and the marchioness are siren-like females, whose charms equate them with the notion of the femme fatale figure.

These femme-fatales attain their narrative authority by destabilizing established parameters, by refusing to become an embodiment of the 'ideal' woman. These unconventional females are not heroines but they do not wish to be so, their strong-will and their determination prevents them from willingly submitting to the pressure to become a 'proper' woman. They disapprove of social norms, taking them as unreasonable regulations and their willingness to defy those regulations sharply contrasts with the heroine's non-defiant, conforming attitude. Sidney Bidulph, Lady Woodville and the twins do not *openly* defy social norms and acquiesce to what is expected from them. In the texts, despite the presence of hints at these heroines' 'discomfort' with certain social pressures, propriety triumphs and they never dare to *openly* resist cultural expectations.

The presence of fatal women is decisive in my thesis, as it is precisely these characters that allows the authors to *interrogate* women's assumed role and level of narrative authority and, by doing so, to proclaim their stance on crucial political and cultural debates of their time, especially concerning the role of femininity.

In the novels, conventional women desperately *seek* narrative authority, which they need to give meaning to their existence, but ultimately can only *partly* assume such narrative authority precisely because of the limitations that their role as 'proper', submissive women entails. By contrast, non-conventional, defiant females not only seek but also attain a significant amount of narrative authority. They assume such control of their circumstances by utterly and unapologetically refusing to limit themselves by a *single*, conventionally imposed role and, instead, embrace a *multiplicity* of female configurations, which brings them closer to embodying authentic, meaningful female persona.

Going back to my initial thesis statement, the answer I provide to the question as to what extent these female characters are accorded narrative authority is the following: *all* female characters in these texts seek and assume a certain control of their own circumstances and manage to surpass the limitations that surround them. Yet, the pressures exerted on the figure of the heroine prevents these women from achieving *total* control over their circumstances, whilst non-conventional, unruly female characters assume much more control of their own narration due to their open disregard for social norms and regulations.

Initially, my assumption was that *all* women in these texts assume control of their own representation but, after my analysis, I have realised that such control is by no means absolute and is much more applicable to deviant, non-conforming female characters. In spite of this, I conclude that the essential argument of my initial thesis

statement remains valid, as it can be claimed that the authors accord narrative authority to *all* female characters but only non-conventional female characters *wholly* assume such authority.

8. Further Research

Female desire is a tremendously complex area which covers a multiplicity of aspects related to women's position in society and, crucially, to the ways in which women *respond* to societal pressures, by *incorporating* some widespread assumptions while *resisting* others. Inevitably, my thesis is not a comprehensive study of *all* the aspects that are embedded within the topic.

Any thesis generates a whole body of ideas. Many of those, though relevant, are not central. Several points I have raised in my thesis could be fuller exposed. Hence, this section includes suggestions for those aspects that were not the main focus of my thesis but which, I believe, would serve to provide significant contributions to the field.

In my thesis, I discussed the significance of the notion of privacy and of the lady's dressing room. In this respect, an interesting line of enquiry would **be a fuller focus on the dressing room trope** so as to ascertain the connotations that lay behind such enclosed space and to detect the *impact* such private space had on women's configuration, both privately and publicly[163]. This relates to my research in the sense that what occurs within the dressing room can be used to determine women's *responses* to imposed social parameters; women's behaviours and attitudes in the privacy of their dressing room may shed some light to their level of acceptance (or resistance) regarding social expectations.

An additional and engaging area of research would be **to ascertain the important role gardens play in women's fiction**. In this thesis I have approached the trope of the garden primarily as a retreat, a place in which women can 'escape' their existence and temporarily surpass the limitations that surrounded them. Yet, the trope of

[163] Tita Chico's *Designing Women: The Dressing Room* (2005) is a good point of departure to delve into this topic.

the garden offers scope for many more possible interpretations and, hence, it would be interesting to approach the idea of the garden from other perspectives[164]. The trope of the garden was a recurrent one in eighteenth century narratives and its particular relation to my research purposes lies in gardens' *possibilities* as a site that both 'frees' and enslaves; women might find 'liberation' in the garden but, inevitably, they also feel trapped within it. This perspective could be enlarged further by also including political and social connotations associated to gardens, which might provide a fuller insight into women's mixed sensations within the garden microcosm.

Another possible research path could be to provide **an assessment of the ways in which women's education is portrayed in the period through different mediums**. Throughout the long eighteenth century, women's education was subject to constant scrutiny. In my thesis, I have reflected the period's constant preoccupation to ensure women's 'proper' education by paying attention to the ways in which both fictional and non-fictional accounts became *overtly* didactic and thus turned into powerful means through which to educate their audience, especially their *female* readers.

Both novels and conduct material were used so as to educate women into their 'proper', socially acceptable role. Hence, an intriguing line of enquiry would be to examine the role women's education played in chapbooks, in which, as I argue in my thesis, the image of the image of fallen women is viewed in a fairly positive light. It would be interesting to detect how women education is conceived in such texts precisely because they are not *primarily* concerned with idealised, 'proper' images of women, which are usually reinforced through educational treatises. This approach could establish a comparison between strictly moral, educational texts and other textual formats such as chapbooks to examine whether education is the *crucial* factor that

[164] Tom Williamson's *Polite Landscapes: Gardens and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (1995) and Michael Symes and Sandy Hayne's *Enville, Hagley, the Leasowes: Three Great Eighteenth-Century Gardens* (2006) provide a good starting point.

determines women's attitudes and behaviours. This might introduce new ways to *approach* the subject of women's education[165].

The role morality and religion[166] play when depicting female characters and, especially, when analysing the level of narrative authority these females *assume* can be analysed. In the texts I analyse in this thesis, morality does play an important role when approaching female configurations and the ways in which female characters accept or resist moral, 'proper' female attributes. However, religion does not appear to be a central preoccupation in these texts. It might be interesting to look at texts written by other authors of the period in which religion has a central role. This can *test* whether religious thought has an essential role in allowing – or denying – women to acquire certain *control* of their circumstances[167]. This is directly linked to my research purposes, as the amount of authority accorded to female characters is the *central* preoccupation of my reading of the texts. Hence, the detection of the extent to which religion enhanced or hindered such female agency is in total accordance to my research interests.

Another possible line of research is **the use of cosmetics**. In my thesis, in my discussion of Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, with regards to the ambiguities surrounding blushes, I mention the fact that cosmetics were believed to 'betray' innocence in the sense that they conceal and produce artifice. It would be interesting to provide a fuller account of different ways in which cosmetics were conceived in the long eighteenth century, either as concealers of 'impurity' or as further emphasizing the ambiguities around female physical responses such as blushing and

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[165] In *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, Cultures and Practices* (2009), Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin's note that popular books were frequently brought to schools and that cheaply produced chapbooks were the ones which were regarded with certain apprehension. In this respect, it would be interesting to analyse the role cheaply produced chapbooks played in schools and to examine the possible reasons behind the suspicion they aroused.

[166] The aspect of morality and religion I suggest is an examination of the relationship established between Enlightenment and religious thought.

[167] Knud Haakonssen's *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1996) provides an evaluation of the relation between Enlightenment and religion in England.

flushing[168]. This relates to my research in the sense that it triggers a fuller exploration of the tremendously ambiguous nature of the female persona, an ambiguity which is further emphasized by the appliance of cosmetics, which *cover* physical displays of *disturbed* emotions and sensations.

[168] Veronica Kelly and Dorothea Von Müske's *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century* (1994) has a chapter entitled "Cosmetic Poetics: Coloring Faces in the Eighteenth Century", which provides some information on this issue.

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