Women, Society and Nation in Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* and Elizabeth Sheridan Le Fanu's *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*

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Abstract

The recent attribution to Elizabeth Sheridan Le Fanu of several novels published anonymously between 1780 and 1803 has significantly altered perceptions of the author, offering the potential to reconsider the relationship between her work and that of her mother, the celebrated novelist and dramatist Frances Sheridan. In this article, I explore the shared concerns with women's role in social progress and improvement that link Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* and Elizabeth Sheridan's *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*. I argue specifically that *Sidney Bidulph* should be recognized as offering a sceptical appraisal of eighteenth-century England's self-conception as a "polite nation" and the associated claims that this quality of politeness afforded English women the ability to influence their society for the better. *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*, in contrast, published at the height of the Patriot movement in Ireland, links its celebration of Ireland's nationhood to women's active contribution as citizens. The article situates its discussion in the context of the need for greater attention to female literary traditions in Ireland, in which the literary canon has been overwhelmingly constructed in terms of a line of male succession.

Keywords: female literary tradition, politeness, Ireland, Patriot movement

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Written in 1824, Alicia Le Fanu's *Memoir of the Life and Writings of Mrs. Frances Sheridan* asserts Frances Sheridan's importance and her worthiness for inclusion within the company of literary greats at the same time as it betrays the author's sense that its subject is already in the process of being forgotten. Sheridan, Le Fanu writes, "certainly deserves some memorial, fuller and more distinct, than those brief and erroneous biographical notices, which alone have as yet appeared before the public" (Le Fanu 2). Le Fanu points to the endorsement of Sheridan's most illustrious contemporaries as evidence of her literary stature, noting that she was "distinguished by the approbation of Richardson, as a novel-writer, and of Garrick, as a dramatist, the

two most flattering distinctions that time could boast attended her career" (216). She is however forced to acknowledge that although *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) "continued for a succession of years to be read and admired by all persons of true taste,""[i]n England, [. . .] it has at length been in some measure superseded by more modern favourites" (112). If Le Fanu's qualifying phrase "in England" is meant to suggest that Sheridan's works remained popular and admired in Ireland, it cannot be said that this partiality endured beyond the nineteenth century. Although there is some evidence in recent publications that Sheridan is making her way back into the eighteenth-century Irish canon (see Oliver, "Frances Sheridan"; Prendergast; Brown 331-34), she has been effectively invisible from the perspective of eighteenth-century Irish studies for decades. She also remains stubbornly marginal in research on eighteenth-century literature in general. Sheridan's masterpiece, *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, is routinely acclaimed as an exceptionally accomplished contribution to sentimental fiction, but it has been discussed by only a handful of critics in the recent decades: in fact, the database *Literature Online* lists only thirty critical sources in total on Sheridan's works since 1990 ("Sheridan, Frances").

If critical interest in Frances Sheridan has been more muted than her impressive career would seem to warrant, new research perspectives have however been created by the attention of researchers to the wider Sheridan family, especially the increasing interest in the literary output of her daughters, Elizabeth ("Betsy") Sheridan Le Fanu and Alicia Sheridan Le Fanu, and her granddaughter, Alicia Le Fanu. In the case of Elizabeth Sheridan Le Fanu, this research activity has resulted in three new attributions of authorship: Aileen Douglas and Ian Campbell Ross have attributed to her two anonymously-published novels of the early 1780s, *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* (1781) and *Emeline; or, The Fairy Ring* (1780); while Anna M. Fitzer has claimed that *Lucy Osmond*, published anonymously in 1803 but attributed variously to Alicia Sheridan Le Fanu and to Alicia Le Fanu, was also written by Elizabeth Sheridan Le Fanu ("Forgotten Daughters"; "Introduction"xiii). Not only do these attributions potentially transform our views of Elizabeth Sheridan as a writer, they also create a significant line of female succession within the Sheridan-Le Fanu family, dominated to date by generations of male writers, from Dr. Thomas Sheridan, the poet and biographer of Swift, to his son Thomas, the actor, playwright and theatre manager and husband of Frances Sheridan, to their son, the acclaimed dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and also including J. Sheridan Le Fanu, the great-grandnephew of Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

R. B. Sheridan is the most celebrated figure in this family network and also a typical figure in terms of eighteenth-century Irish writers, in that his life and career testify to the social, cultural and political interconnectedness of Britain and Ireland in this period. He lived for most of his life in England, represented an English constituency in the House of Commons and wrote and produced works for the theater that enjoyed enormous success and acclaim from the metropolitan London audience—resulting until recently in the routine categorization of his works as classics of "English" literature. These views of Sheridan's work have however been significantly revised, with Fintan O'Toole's biography, *A Traitor's Kiss*, being one of the earliest examples of a "corrective" critical intervention in which both life and work are systematically

contextualized in relation to Sheridan's Irish origins, including suggestive but unproven links to Denis Sheridan (Donnchadha Ó Sioradáin), a seventeenth-century Irish-speaking convert to Protestantism who assisted William Bedell in the translation of the Bible and the Anglican liturgy from English to Irish (2-8). O'Toole thus deploys patrilineal inheritance to link Sheridan to Ireland's Gaelic history and culture and also to assert his place in the Irish literary canon, specifically as the literary successor to Jonathan Swift. O'Toole gives an account of the attempts of Thomas Sheridan to create a public monument to Swift in Dublin, a move prompted by patriotic pride in the greatest Irish writer of the era and also in recognition of his family's connections to Swift, who was his father's close friend and his own godfather. Although the planned statue never materialized, O'Toole posits that Thomas Sheridan nonetheless succeeded in furthering Swift's legacy: through his son, whose "work as a playwright and a politician would become the monument to Swift that his father never managed to build" (16). *A Traitor's Kiss* is of course far from unusual in its invocation of male succession in the service of the literary canon. It is however a particularly striking example of how these structures have operated in an Irish context, in which the recognition of women's literary and cultural production has been further marginalized through an insistent focus on the alignment of literary expression with the imagined nation (Ingman and Ó Gallchoir 3).

Given the dominance of these male-oriented structures and narratives in Irish canon formation, the women of the Sheridan Le Fanu family offer an unusual example of a specifically female line of literary succession within eighteenth-century Irish writing, as has been suggested in Anne Fitzer's discussion of Frances Sheridan, Elizabeth Sheridan Le Fanu and Alicia Le Fanu ("Forgotten Daughters"), and by Aileen Douglas and Ian Campbell Ross's positioning of *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* as a response to *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*. Emphasizing the contrasts between the two texts, Douglas and Ross describe *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* as "a transformation" of the "matrilineal literary inheritance" that Elizabeth Sheridan received from Frances Sheridan (23). They suggest specifically that in the *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*, Elizabeth Sheridan rewrites the narrative of female tragedy that Frances Sheridan had wrought to such compulsively readable heights by creating a heroine who successfully asserts her autonomy and determines the course of her own life. *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* is moreover highly unusual in its overt espousal of a Patriot political position: its alignment of female autonomy with the cause of Irish national self-determination therefore presents a further striking contrast with *Sidney Bidulph*, which with its English characters and settings has usually been discussed in the context of the English sentimental novel. In this article I will argue however that the two novels are linked by a shared engagement with ideas about gender and social change in the period: specifically with ideas about women's influence on the improvement of society. Not only does this focus link the two novels in terms of commonalities rather than contrasts, it also offers a new perspective on the discourse of nation and national identity in *Sidney Bidulph*.

The persistently marginal status of *Sidney Bidulph* within the field of eighteenth-century fiction can in part be explained by the novel's resistance to interpretation along neat ideological lines. As Doody observes, the tragedy in the novel arises

from "ambivalent causes" (332). Although it is often summarized as "the typical sentimental [novel] of female virtue in distress" (Todd 166), the heroine's suffering is not, as one might expect, caused by the actions of a male villain, but as Todd points out, by sentimentalism itself, by Sidney's own "beliefs in delicacy and honour which cause pain but for which there is yet no decent alternative" (166). For Douglas and Ross, "the issue at the heart of *Memoirs of Sidney Biddulph*" is "the proper extent of filial duty," which, they argue further, in *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* "is recast into the heroine's striking insistence on her personal autonomy" (24). Any reader of *Sidney Bidulph* can attest that Sidney's sense of the moral duty of obedience is impossible to overlook. Very early in the narrative for example she says that "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" (28). This is in sharp contrast with Louisa Maunsell, the heroine of *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion,* who describes her friend Emily Rochfort with evident impatience as "a perfect pattern of obedience" (90) and identifies an expectation of "unlimited obedience from his children" (48) as a key character flaw in the case of the Count de Roussillon, one of the overbearing parents whose "obstinacy" (48) threatens the happiness of their children. This reading of *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* as a rewriting of *Sidney Bidulph* is persuasive given just how disastrous Sidney's obedience to her mother proves to be. She firstly conforms to her mother's insistence that she break off her engagement to Orlando Faulkland when it comes to light that Faulkland has seduced a genteel young woman and apparently abandoned her to face the resulting pregnancy alone; she then submits to her mother's request that she accept an offer of marriage from a Mr. Arnold, a man who is apparently a very good match but for whom she feels no personal inclination. These decisions ultimately result in tragedy for the wholly blameless Sidney and also for Faulkland, whose character, it is belatedly realized, has been unjustly blackened.

As Doody, Todd and others have pointed out, however, Sidney's tragedy cannot be attributed solely to parental tyranny. Sidney's obedience is not a matter of mere outward conformity: she is acutely aware that moral behaviour requires a congruence of inner feeling and outward action. Thus, she engages in exhaustive examinations of her mind and her heart in order to identify what virtue and duty require. In both of her critical decisions, not to marry Faulkland and subsequently to marry Mr. Arnold, Sidney not only acts in obedience to her mother, she also demonstrates her awareness of the need for women to exhibit both delicacy and emotional sincerity as well as truthfulness. As she makes clear in her account of her decision to accept Arnold's offer of marriage, internal self-scrutiny weighs more heavily with her than simply performing obedience:

> I have been searching my heart, my dear Cecilia, to try if there remained a lurking particle of my former flame unextinguished; a flame I call it, as we are allowed the metaphor, but it never rose to *that*; it was but a single ray, a gentle glow that just warmed my breast without scorching [. . .] This was a very necessary scrutiny before I would even entertain a thought of Mr Arnold; and believe me, had I found it otherwise than I say, I would rather have hazarded my mother's

> displeasure by owning the truth to her, than injure any man, by giving him my hand with an estranged heart. (86)

It is this sincerity that makes Sidney's story so compelling and disturbing: she commits wholeheartedly to achieving the impossible balance between emotional truth and emotional control that the culture demanded from women and it leads to tragedy, ruin, and death.

In addition to the self-inflicted nature of much of Sidney's suffering, a further complication lies in the fact that Lady Bidulph, the mother to whom Sidney demonstrates such devoted obedience, sees herself explicitly as a champion and protector of the female sex. Her response to the revelation about Faulkland's affair with Miss Burchell is informed by her own experience of having been engaged to a man who broke his vows to a woman to whom he had been engaged and who was subsequently tormented by guilt to the extent that he left his betrothed at the altar, suffered a total mental breakdown and was confined in an asylum for the rest of his life. Lady Bidulph says explicitly to Sidney that this traumatic experience "has given me a sort of horror at the very thoughts of an union between you and Mr Faulkland" (49). Lady Bidulph's response is however not limited to her judgments of Faulkland, as Sidney goes on to explain:

> 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 there is the least room for it, throws the whole of the blame upon the *man's* side; who, from her own early prepossessions, she is always inclined to think are deceivers of women. (50)

Lady Bidulph casts Miss Burchell in the role of a female victim of male desire and entitlement, but as is gradually revealed, her "partiality to her own sex" leads her to be duped by a woman who is, in George Bidulph's words, a "sly rake in petticoats" (387). Her poor judgment also facilitates the schemes of Miss Burchell's aunt, the conniving Mrs Gerrarde, who not only destroys Sidney's engagement by entrapping Faulkland, but also subsequently seduces her gullible husband, Mr. Arnold.

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph is in fact populated by an array of female characters who range from misguided to evil. Although Sheridan's novel is often seen in terms of its relationship to the work of Samuel Richardson, to whom it is dedicated, it contrasts starkly with Richardson's novels in that the heroine's antagonists are not rakish and licentious men such as *Pamela*'s Mr. B and *Clarissa*'s Lovelace, but members of her own sex. Sidney's happiness and safety are repeatedly threatened and destroyed by women, to the extent that Barbara Benedict has identified a series of what she calls "gender traitors" (249) in the novel, chief among them the villainous Mrs. Gerrarde. Mrs. Gerrarde is first described to the reader as a widow and neighbour of the Arnolds at Mr. Arnold's estate in South-Park in Kent. Sidney uses the words "charmed" and "charming" repeatedly to describe Mrs. Gerrarde, as well as describing her appearance, manner, and her home using the words "elegant," "neat," "agreeable," all words that signify genteel femininity. It is however soon revealed that this apparently charming and genteel woman is in fact a rapacious schemer who is

not content with seducing another woman's husband and extracting money and gifts from him but also uses her knowledge of the broken engagement between Sidney and Faulkland to convince Mr. Arnold of Sidney's infidelity, causing him to cast her out of his house. After the revelation that Mrs. Gerrarde has been carrying on an affair with Mr. Arnold for months, and that she engineered matters to throw suspicion on Sidney and Faulkland, Sidney is aghast to find out that this Mrs. Gerrarde is in fact the aunt under whose highly questionable guardianship Faulkland first met Miss Burchell. Little wonder that the horror-struck Sidney describes Mrs. Gerrarde at this point as "my evil genius" (148). While Mrs. Gerrarde is stripped of her genteel façade in the middle of the novel, the final unmasking of the supposedly innocent female victim, Miss Burchell, is delayed until the novel's denouement. Sidney's misery is complete when she realizes that, influenced both by her mother and her own strict moral code, she has persuaded Faulkland to marry a woman who is in many ways a misogynistic stereotype, constitutionally incapable of remaining sexually faithful.

The violent and tragic outcome of the Faulkland marriage appears to vindicate George Bidulph's angry accusation when he first learned of it: "I warned you in time against this woman, but my advice has always been despised. [. . .] I believe you will hardly be able to answer it to yourself, if you find that you have condemned one of the noblest fellows in the world to the arms of a prostitute" (328). But if George as it turns out is "right" about Miss Burchell, this does not mean that he is positioned on the side of "right." The novel does not endorse him as a moral authority, instead portraying him as deeply flawed: his certainty about Miss Burchell's loose morals is for example based on the fact that he himself entered into a sexual relationship with her while she was a guest in his mother's house. In order to try to make sense of this moral confusion, Benedict suggests that one of the underlying causes for the tragic chain of events in *Sidney Bidulph* is that the novel "pits the world of women against the world of men. [. . .] it depicts a chasm between female and male mores and morals, conduct codes, definitions of virtue, honour, and honesty" (235). This "chasm" is portrayed very starkly in the language George uses to describe Faulkland's involvement with Miss Burchell and the almost incredulous derision with which he treats the objections of both Sidney and his mother. Whereas the women feel that the wrong that has been done to Miss Burchell is so great that it can only be remedied by an offer of marriage, both George and Faulkland feel that honour requires merely the practical support and compensation which Faulkland has already supplied. George makes it uncomfortably clear that polite society rests on the tacit and usually unspoken acceptance of these kinds of arrangements as normal for men of the gentry and aristocracy. When for example Lady Bidulph says of George that: "I was ashamed to find, that he, after knowing an incident of this kind, had so little regard to the honour of his sister, as to promote a marriage between her and such a rake" she reports him as answering that "if I kept you unmarried till I found such a man as I should not call a rake, you were likely to live and die a maid" (45). George also addresses Sidney directly saying, "A pretty figure you'll make in the world, when you give it for a reason that you refused such a man, after every thing was concluded upon, because truly you found that he had had an intrigue! Why, Sidney, you'll be so laugh'd at!" (51-52). Benedict argues that this gendered division of worlds was

a central feature of eighteenth-century culture and society and that by crafting a narrative in which this division of values and behaviour leads to tragedy for even the most virtuous, Sheridan's novel is engaging in a critique of gendered codes of behaviour and morality (259-60). What Benedict does not acknowledge, however, is there was a broad consensus that *reducing* the gulf between the world of women and the world of men was seen in this period as an essential indicator of social improvement and progress and was central to what many historians regard as the key to understanding the eighteenth century—the quality of politeness.

"Politeness" in an eighteenth-century context was used to describe an ideal of behaviour in which, in Lawrence Klein's words, "moderation, mutual tolerance, and the overriding importance of social comity" were key values (874). As a social and cultural ideal, politeness extended far beyond manners or decorum, being seen instead as a social formation that was aligned with the new age of economic expansion in which Britain was emerging as a global power. The centrality of politeness to the British national self-image thus called for a new understanding of masculinity in which traits such as agreeableness and refinement were incorporated into new definitions of manliness. Philip Carter describes for example how the polite skill of conversational adeptness, "the need to temper the style of one's delivery or prevent oneself from interrupting others," was framed in terms of traditionally manly qualities of "rationality and self-control" (*Men* 73). In addition to producing new understandings of masculinity and manliness, politeness also gave enhanced status to women in terms of their contribution to social and cultural refinement. As Karen Harvey points out, many writers in this period stressed that "a key component of politeness was mixing with women. Polite conversation could depend on women's presence: they softened the language of men, facilitating smooth social interaction" (301-02). I argue therefore that the gulf between the world of men and the world of women that is depicted in *Sidney Bidulph* must be read not as reflective of the gender norms of the period, as Benedict proposes, but as a critique of a central tenet of eighteenth-century society. As Carter reminds us, the polite behaviours of the eighteenth-century gentleman were not seen merely as outward show, but as "a positive indication of the superiority, moral and physical, of modern modes of social interaction" ("Polite Persons"335). *Sidney Bidulph*, however, depicts a world in which "politeness" is nothing more than a façade of refinement, in which women's influence is either misdirected or ineffective, and in which the ideal of the "polite gentleman" through which the English nation supposedly defines itself is a myth.

From the outset, the novel references the ideals of politeness and polite masculinity, only to find them hollow. The action of the novel begins with the return of Sidney's brother George from a tour in Europe, and his mother's invitation to him to stay at her house in London. This prompts Sidney to anticipate with pleasure the opportunity to experience the mixed-gender sociability that was one of the defining features of polite society. She says: "There is no pleasure in society, without a proper mixture of well-bred sensible people of both sexes, and I have hitherto been chiefly confined to those of my own" (13). George's possession of polite character is however immediately cast in doubt by references to the potential of his lifestyle to disrupt rather than enhance their household. His mother's invitation is conditional on his agreement "not [to]

encroach upon my rules by unreasonable hours, or [by] receiving visits from such as I may not approve of for the acquaintance of your sister" (13). Sidney fears that he might decline the invitation because she knows that some of his friends would in fact not meet her mother's standards. In spite of the fact that both mother and sister are aware of that George's social circle includes people who could potentially compromise his sister's reputation, Lady Bidulph's motivation in inviting him to live with them is so that he may act as a chaperone for Sidney for social events, enabling her to stay at home if she chooses. He is even referred to here as a "proper protector" (16) which suggests that ideas of what is proper and improper depend very much on appearances rather than substance. The undercurrent of sexual impropriety is also made manifest in Lady Bidulph's care to ensure that her son's manservants will be given rooms "as remote from those of our servants as the house will admit" because "she knows our own domestics to be orderly and regular, but she cannot answer for what other people's may be" (16). The arrival of George in the previously all-female household thus *should* facilitate the type of polite social gatherings that demonstrate the superior refinement of eighteenth-century English society, as well as ensuring that Sidney has proper male protection, but this requires the suppression of knowledge about the fact that in other contexts, interaction between the sexes involves danger to women, whether in the form of reputational damage or male sexual misconduct, which is here projected onto servants and the lower class.

Even within his own family circle and when nominally following his mother's rules, George fails to live up to the ideal of polite masculinity. He is described at the outset as "void of any of those refined sentiments, which constitute what is called *delicacy*" (11). His lack of delicacy means that when Sidney first meets Faulkland, instead of the encounter being conducted according to modern norms of polite social interaction, she is oppressed by the realization that this is really a form of inspection:

> My brother endeavoured to draw me out, as he said afterwards. The intention was kind, but poor Sir George is not delicate enough in those matters; I should have done better if he had let me alone. I thought of the conversations we had so often had about Mr Faulkland, and could not help considering myself like a piece of goods that was to be shewn to the best advantage to the purchaser. (19-20)

In spite of George's crassness, Faulkland does propose to Sidney, but when the engagement is called off, George's lack of delicacy and politeness mean that his attempts to negotiate between Faulkland and the women in his family come to nothing. Given the contemporary focus on how conversation with women "softened" men's language, it is notable that George's language and manner of expression are highlighted not only as being coarse, but as contributing to his mother's implacable hostility to Faulkland. We have already seen an example of this when George dismisses his mother's objections to what he calls Faulkland's "intrigue" with Miss Burchell. In addition, the letter he writes to Sidney in which he tries to put Faulkland's case is written in such a way that Sidney cannot show it to her mother, as she explains to Cecilia: "You see this is Sir George himself, my dear, a mixture of petulancy and indelicacy. [. . .]. You find how impossible for me it is to shew such a letter to my

mother: by his strange unguarded manner of writing, which he does not consider, he defeats his own purposes" (91-92). One could say then that not only is Sir George very far removed from the ideal of the polite gentleman, but also that one of the chief reasons for this deficiency is that he is contemptuous of the idea of female influence on male behaviour.

The argument for reading the novel as a sceptical dismantling of the concept of polite masculinity and particularly its status as the defining characteristic of eighteenth-century English society acquires further dimensions when we come to look at the character of Faulkland. In contrast to many critics who focus on Faulkland's impetuosity as an indicator of masculine energy and action, Kathleen Oliver highlights his "display of excessive emotion; [. . .] his passivity and helplessness, [. . .] his silence and being silenced; [. . .] his foreignness; and even [. . .] his one time lapse of sexual control" ("Frances Sheridan's Faulkland" 685) to argue that he is depicted as feminized and emasculated. In stark contrast to George, who disdains women's concerns and influence, one could argue that Faulkland is *excessively* influenced by women, the decisive instance being his submission to Sidney's plea for him to marry Miss Burchell and the misery that results from this. Although this is, in Sidney's view, the morally correct course for him to take, he does so having failed to conquer his desire for her. His deference to her influence on him is not accompanied by mastery of himself, rendering him insufficiently manly according to the delicate balancing act that was involved in the ideal of polite masculinity. As both Oliver and Prendergast have pointed out, there are grounds to see Faulkland not just as "foreign," but more specifically as marked in terms of Irishness: he is certainly at the very least in possession of an Irish estate and, his temperament, particularly his fatal inability to control his temper, includes character traits seen in the period as stereotypically Irish (Oliver,"Frances Sheridan"195-96; Prendergast 195-96). Oliver argues further that Sidney, "whose name and actions associate her with Sir Philip Sidney, the embodiment of English virtue" ("Frances Sheridan" 195-96), represents the ideal of English character and that "the doomed nature" of Faulkland and Sidney's love affair "suggests the tensions between the English and the Irish in the eighteenth century" ("Frances Sheridan" 196). Framing the novel as a kind of national allegory is however of limited value, not only because it overlooks the boorish George, who bears the name of the three successive kings who had reigned over Britain since 1714. This type of reading establishes a binary logic that is inadequate as means of addressing the identity and self-perception of writers such as Frances Sheridan, who, as Rebecca Barr has suggested, are better understood "through reference to their place of birth *and* their migratory mobility" ("Forum Introduction" 334).

In Sheridan's case, it is clear that she identified as Irish whilst also expressing a strong sense of affiliation to England. In a letter to Richardson written from Dublin, she wrote: "I long to see you— I long to return to England. I call it returning; that expression, I think, gives me an idea of a sort of home, and such I must consider it, endeared as it is to me by the friendship of some who hold the warmest place in my breast" (Richardson 163). In these letters, Sheridan also claims her identity as Irish, such as when she describes the public efforts to assist those suffering with food scarcity during a particularly severe winter: "I must say, for the honour of my country,

and Dublin in particular, there now seems to be the most diffusive spirit of charity exerting itself that ever was known" (Richardson 154). For Sheridan and others like her, this apparently flexible sense of belonging in both Britain and Ireland was not without its complications, given that the relationship between the two countries was invariably constructed in terms of Ireland's inferiority and its dependence on Britain. Sheridan's awareness of this imbalance is evident in the way in which her description of poverty and suffering, "such distress [. . .] as is scarce credible," is followed immediately by the need to assert "the honour of my country" and to claim that the people's manifestation of civic virtues is evidence of an increasingly civilized society ("the most diffusive spite of charity . . . that was ever known"). Sheridan's first-hand knowledge of England and English society and her experience of it as "a sort of home" enables her to write novels and plays set in England that are for most readers indistinguishable from the work of other writers who did not share her hybrid identity. At the same time, Sheridan could not fail to be aware of the position of dominance and superiority that Britain occupied in relation to Ireland and of how vigorously this dominance had been contested in the eighteenth century.

As we know, the Sheridan family were closely connected to Jonathan Swift, who earned the title of "Hibernian Patriot" on the basis of his fierce opposition to British policy on Ireland expressed in a series of influential essays and pamphlets, most notably *The Drapier's Letters* (1724-25). In common with many of his contemporaries, Swift's response to the political and economic subordination of Ireland was coloured by "the presumption of a naturalized relation between maleness and power" (Barr, et al. 6). The relative powerlessness of Irish elites therefore frequently involved anxious assertions of masculinity or denunciations of the pernicious influence of women, such as when Swift fulminated against the importation of foreign fabrics such as silk and lace, asserting that: "It is to gratify the vanity and pride, and luxury of the women, and of the young fops who admire them, that we owe this insupportable grievance of bringing in the instruments of our ruin" (168). *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, in contrast, can be read as a female reflection on the role played by gender in eighteenth-century constructions of society and nation. Sheridan subverts British claims to superiority not by attempting to construct an Irish masculinity that is allied with power—her Faulkland may win the reader's sympathy but is self-evidently flawed and complicit in his own tragedy. Instead, she exposes the concept of politeness, and its supposed centrality to British claims to social refinement, as an empty fiction. The novel is therefore not simply a compelling and psychologically acute exploration of an individual character's suffering, or indeed a commentary on the moral double bind in which women found themselves trapped in this period; it is also a sceptical commentary on contemporary discourse about the higher status that women in Britain supposedly enjoyed in the context of social improvement and progress.

Elizabeth Sheridan's *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* was written and published twenty years after *Sidney Bidulph*, in a dramatically altered political context in which Frances Sheridan's pessimistic assessment of women's influence on society is replaced by a confident assertion as to the vital role played by women in political and social reform. Opening with a description of the Volunteer Assembly that took place in Dublin in 1779, the novel positions itself clearly in support of the Irish Patriots,

whose campaigns for free trade and legislative independence for the Irish parliament were reaching their climax at the time of its publication. This emergent sense of national identity is abundantly evident in *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*, which is set very specifically in Ireland and which expresses resentment and hostility towards England's treatment of Ireland, reflecting the heightened political atmosphere of the time. Louisa writes that:

> If we do not watch her [England] with unremitting attention, she will, by some artifice, at the first convenient opportunity, contrive to render every thing she grants of no effect, for they are a selfish, illiberal people, and look with a jealous eye on every advantage enjoyed by their fellow subjects. [. . .] The uniform conduct of the English towards this kingdom, as well as towards America, justifies my opinion of them. (85)

Catriona Kennedy has pointed out that these campaigns for legislative and political independence "were explicitly framed in terms of the assertion of Irish masculinity" such as "the martial display of the Volunteers in the 1770s and 1780s" that is so prominently featured in the opening pages of *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*. Louisa is certainly warmly enthusiastic about these displays, writing that "I was wonderfully delighted to see our men of the first rank and property, as well as our most eminent citizens, voluntarily arming in defence of [Liberty and their country]" (32). However, the novel is equally emphatic about the fact that men cannot necessarily be relied on to make good decisions, and are frequently in need of women's advice, guidance, and influence, in matters both private and public.

Louisa is firmly of the opinion that "the generality of young women have more solid sense than the young men" (38) and the character of Charles Skeffington, Eliza's would-be fiancé, offers a case study in terms of a reversal of gender stereotypes. Charles is depicted as being emotionally unstable and plagued by irrational sexual jealousy, a problem that is treated with practical detachment by both Louisa and Eliza. Eliza is conscious of how Charles's jealousy could make them both miserable and says: "I flatter myself my conduct will cure him of that unhappy propensity; but I will be very sure it has before I think of being united to him" (35). Louisa's verdict on the issue not only makes clear that Charles requires strong female management, but also asserts an authority based on female friendship that undermines the idea of marriage as women's destiny: "I have a high esteem for Charles, but love you still better, and cannot consent to your being his wife till we are quite sure he has recovered his rationality" (63). Such is the confidence in women's character and intellect that the novel expresses, that it is not surprising that the importance of their influence on society and nation is equally emphatically expressed. Eliza writes to Louisa that she is "as public-spirited as any Roman Matron, in the most virtuous ages of the commonwealth" (36) and insists that women can have a decisive and positive role in encouraging civic virtue and patriotism in men:

> I am satisfied, if women were taught disinterested love for their country, there would be more patriots among men than there are at present, for several obvious

> reasons; particularly that, as there are few of them that don't wish to recommend themselves to our favour, they would be very cautious how they acted in their public capacity, if they knew our contempt would be the consequence of their apostacy. (36)

As Padhraig Higgins has discussed, the heightened political consciousness of this period in Ireland created the conditions for a new understanding of women's contribution to society, with "the rhetoric of patriotism repeatedly evok[ing] a dynamic sense of interrelation between women and men in the project of renewing public virtue" (180). The profound differences in tone between *Sidney Bidulph*, with its blameless but suffering heroine, and *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* and its superbly confident young women, can therefore be traced not to differences in their views of female character, but fundamentally to the changes taking place in Ireland in the 1770s and 1780s.

These changes were however contingent and whatever gains were made were far from permanent. This much is signalled by the fact that the women's ideas about their capacity to determine the course of their own lives and to influence the development of their society is shared in a correspondence that is explicitly labelled as private and, in Louisa's words, "ENTRE NOUS" (38). Her opinion that women have more sense than men, she realizes, would not be welcomed if broadcast more widely: "should it be known I thought so, the whole Male Sex would be up in arms against me at once, because good sense is one of the things they believe they have an exclusive patent for" (38). The use of the phrase "exclusive patent" here is an obvious reference to the Patriot campaigns for "Free Trade" that had gathered such momentum in the 1770s, and indicates that although the young women are enthusiastic supporters of the Patriot movement, Louisa is aware that men in their circle do not necessarily support changes to women's status. Dramatic changes had reshaped the Irish political landscape in the twenty years that separated the publication of the two novels, but the belief in women's intellectual inferiority and their lack of civic status remained persistent.

Reading *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* and *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* as an instance of women's cultural transmission highlights both texts' common concerns with contemporary discussions on gender and on women's role in society. Frances Sheridan, I argue, was aware of the importance of the ideal of polite masculinity to Britain's claims of cultural superiority and of the unstable or uncertain status of Irish masculinity as defined in relation to this cultural ideal; the novel's scepticism as to whether this ideal existed in reality however undermines those claims of superior refinement and lifts the lid on the ways in which constructions of gender played their part in a hierarchical ordering of societies and cultures in which Ireland was subordinated to England. *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* offers a specifically female perspective on Patriot politics, claiming that it reveals the hitherto unexplored potential and capacity of women to contribute to social and political reform. Viewed together they make a strong case for much greater critical attention to the contribution of women writers in Ireland to the interrogation of ideas about gender and society in the long eighteenth century.

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