

# Introduction

## FOCUS 2024: English and Irish Women Writers of the Long Eighteenth Century

The present collection of essays comprises a selection of papers stemming from a conference the Department of English Literatures and Cultures of the University of Pécs, in association with the Irish Studies Research Centre at the University of Pécs and the English Studies Work Group of the Regional Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Pécs, hosted to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Margaret Cavendish's birth in 2023 and the 300th anniversary of Frances Sheridan's birth in 2024. Thus, the theme of this issue is the work of female authors in England and Ireland during the period 1660-1837, commonly referred to as the long eighteenth century.

Given the scarcity of published women writers in the era, Cavendish's literary output was truly incredible both in terms of quantity and versatility. She made her first appearance in print with a collection of poetic pieces and essays (*Poems and Fancies*, 1653), produced an autobiography (*A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life*, 1656), epistles (*CCXI Sociable Letters*, 1664), philosophical treatises (*Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 1666), not to mention her work as a prolific experimental playwright with two printed collections of plays (*Plays*, 1662; *Plays, Never Before Printed*, 1668), which were never put on stage in her lifetime. Her most famous work is *The Blazing World* (1666), a unique generic hybrid containing elements of romance, utopia, and drama. Recent scholarship recognises Cavendish's achievement from many perspectives: some see her as a biographical and literary exile, some focus on her hidden literary debts and her unique techniques of mixing genres, while others are more interested in her self-representation techniques and her role as a public female intellectual involved in the philosophical debates of her time. Her influence goes beyond the world of academia, as testified by contemporary adaptations of some of her plays (like *The Unnatural Tragedy*, staged in 2020 in Vienna, or the frequent stagings/readings of *The Convent of Pleasure*), literary works explicitly modelled on her persona (like Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World*, published in 2014), or even popular histories (like John Healey's *The Blazing World. A New History of Revolutionary England*, published in 2023).

In the present issue, one extensive article, a shorter essay, and a review are devoted to Cavendish. By offering insightful analogies between the authoress and the heroine of the studied work, Bence Kvéder's substantial study of Cavendish's "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity" (published in *Natures Pictures* in 1656) employs the widely spread biographical method. He studies the early manifestation of ideas and topics that became the staple of the "mainstream" works published in the 1660s, most notably *The Blazing World*, with the respective themes of travel, marriage, military conflicts, and colonisation. Kvéder also theorises about the aspect of virtue in the work, lending an ethical dimension to his reading, and he offers an interesting take on the

conundrum of the seemingly conventional ending (marriage). The background for the paper by Alexandra Barta is the first (partial) Hungarian translation of Cavendish's most popular work, *The Blazing World*. Published in 2023, the translation covers the "romancical" beginning of the text, and Barta's essay documents a few of the challenges of translating the work. Her observations, however, offer more than a simple translator's diary: they provide interesting insights about the text for anyone interested in the unconventional fictional-geographical background of Cavendish's utopia, and her heavy reliance on the contemporary maritime lexicon. The insider perspective of the translator is a meaningful departure point for a potential later study of the Hungarian rendering of the text from the perspective of translation studies. Signalling the enduring interest in Cavendish in Hungary, the Reviews section contains a book review by one of our PhD students working on the author's texts, Dorina Gyenis, who gives a balanced treatment of the most recent Cavendish biography by Francesca Peacock.

Another group of essays is devoted to the also rather versatile work of Frances Sheridan (1724-1766), who was born in Dublin as the child of an Anglo-Irish Protestant family. She married actor and theatre director Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788) and in 1758 the couple moved to London permanently. Her literary career began with the writing of novels, the first of which was *Eugenia and Adelaide* (published only in 1791). In London she was introduced to Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) and showed him her manuscript. Richardson encouraged her to pursue the writing of fiction. The influence of Richardson's *Pamela* can be seen in her most successful novel, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) which, like its model, is also written in diary form. Sheridan scholarship is more vibrant in this century than ever before. The continuation of her novel, *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, was published by Broadview Press in 2013. Later she turned to the genre of drama and had two of her plays premiered in Drury Lane Theatre by David Garrick's Company: *The Discovery* (1763) and *The Dupe* (1764). A third piece, *A Trip to Bath* (1765) did not make it to the stage at that time but English playwright Elizabeth Kuti (1969) adapted and re-titled it as *The Whisperers* in 1999; thus refashioned, the drama went into production by Rough Magic Theatre Company in Ireland. Frances and Thomas Sheridan's son, Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), who later became a widely acclaimed playwright, wrote his first works drawing inspiration from his mother's literary achievement.

Clíona Ó Gallchoir's essay offers a fresh evaluation of Frances Sheridan as a female writer through her daughter's work *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*. She explores the link between Elizabeth Sheridan's novel and Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, examining women's roles in social progress and reform. She argues that while *Sidney Bidulph* offers a critical perspective on eighteenth-century England's self-image as a "polite nation," challenging the notion that this supposed politeness empowered women to positively influence society. In contrast, *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion*, published during the height of Ireland's Patriot movement, associates its celebration of Irish nationhood with women's active participation as citizens. Mária Kurdi's essay examines Elizabeth Kuti's comedy *The Whisperers* (1998) as a unique adaptation of Frances Sheridan's unfinished play *A Trip to Bath* (1765),

completing the fragment in the spirit of the original. This essay explores how *A Trip to Bath* demonstrates eighteenth-century comedic traditions and how *The Whisperers* reworks the play to create a distinctive piece of collaborative theater. By continuing Sheridan's exploration of social and emotional complexity, Mária Kurdi argues, Kuti preserves the hallmarks of the best English comedies of the period. The analysis also addresses themes of dual authorship, adaptation strategies, and the textual and dramaturgical coherence of the resulting work.

Other papers in the issue address some female literary contemporaries of Cavendish and Sheridan. The theme of intergenerational female relationships appears in Roslyn Joy Irving's essay on *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), which she exposes as a case study to show how Ann Radcliffe portrays these kinds of relationships as well as critiques the limits of sensibility and conduct literature. The paper explores Radcliffe's dual stance on female sensibility, both as a source of poor judgment and a tool for navigating relationships, as exemplified by Madame La Motte. It is through the character of Madame La Luc that the role of conduct literature is shown; she is an idealized role model. The essay demonstrates how the mother-daughter dynamics provide young women with patterns to redefine their behaviour. Importantly, this study contributes to research on Radcliffe's politically engaged writing and the Female Gothic. Filip Krajník's essay compares Aphra Behn's largely forgotten novella *The History of the Nun* (1688) with its more successful theatrical adaptation by Thomas Southerne, *The Fatal Marriage* (1694). Compared to its original, Southerne's version introduces a comic subplot which was for a long time faulted by critics of the theatrical piece. In his meticulous analysis of the sources and the dramaturgical techniques harnessed by Southerne, however, Krajník convincingly demonstrates that what was seen as an incompatible mixture by many is actually a very carefully executed combination of several sources and theatrical practices pursued by Behn herself, and results in a work with much more unity than critics would previously have assumed.

Boróka Andl-Beck's paper undertakes a detailed examination of lower-class female poet Ann Yearsley's (1753–1806) "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade" from the perspective of intersectionality. The essay argues that Yearsley's authorial position as a female author and someone from the working class provided a unique sensitivity towards the oppressed slaves, whose liberation she urges in the poem by appealing to human compassion. This connection and its resulting more empathic attitude are interestingly juxtaposed with not only contemporary (David Hume, Adam Smith) but also modern (Judith Butler) theorists of fellow-feeling. Ljubica Matek offers a fresh reading of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" (1724) as an early feminist work, highlighting its critique of gender-based double standards in sexuality and freedom. By subverting the conventions of the heroic epistle, traditionally the lament of an abandoned woman, Matek argues that Montagu creates a layered commentary on the failed marriage of the Yongs and a broader societal critique. Her essay argues that, contextualized within Montagu's life and her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, the poem affirms Montagu's role as a progressive voice advocating for women's rights in the early eighteenth century. Bálint Gárdos's essay examines Helen Maria Williams's *Letters Written in France* (1790), focusing on her account of Madame Brulart's medallion made from

a Bastille stone, symbolizing liberty. By alternating between grand historical events and intimate personal narratives, Gárdos points out that Williams's work exemplifies how sentimental, novelistic history intertwines with individual lives. Building on Mark Salber Phillips's concept of "sentimental history" from *Society and Sentiment* (2000), this essay explores how the classical rhetorical model of "exemplary history" persists in modern narratives, seeking to connect personal stories with larger historical events in an open-ended yet meaningful way.

Apart from Dorina Gyenis's above mentioned review, five other books are introduced in the Reviews section of *FOCUS* 2024. Among them, Andrew C. Rouse writes about Dick Holdstock's work, *Again With One Voice: British Songs of Political Reform, 1768-1868*, which is a valuable compilation of political ballads representing an important segment of British culture, contemporaneous with most of the themes and authors discussed in the Essays section. Özlem Demirel's review of *Neo-Victorian Things: Re-Imagining Nineteenth-Century Material Cultures in Literature and Film* takes the reader to works in the present, exploring their respective views and artistic treatments of the past. In his critical piece, Taha Al-Sarhan brings to the reader's attention an edited volume, *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe: Context, Directions, and the Legacy*, which is a substantial contribution to books about an English author's reception outside the Anglophone world. Adding also to the Reviews part, two authors introduce noteworthy theoretical works: Arthur Muhia writes about an indispensable sourcebook for researchers, *The Routledge Companion to Intersectionalities* edited by Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto, while Dávid Papp discusses the merits of Kyle Parry's *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes*.

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The Editors

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