The Escritoire:
Content and Form in *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*

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Frances Sheridan is not abashed to admit her indebtedness to Samuel Richardson in her 1761 epistolary novel *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*. Published in three volumes and dedicated by Sheridan's fictional editor to "THE AUTHOR OF CLARISSA AND SIR CHARLES GRANDISON," the novel is primarily composed of the letters Sidney Bidulph writes to her absent bosom friend, Cecilia.[1] Like Clarissa Harlowe, the exemplary yet persecuted heroine of Richardson's *Clarissa, or the History of the Young Lady (1747–8)*, Sidney is a lady "educated…in the strictest principles of virtue; from which she never deviated," even in the most trying circumstances (11). But, unlike Clarissa, Sidney's ever-deepening miseries are not caused by one indefatigably rakish suitor. Orlando Faulkland, Sidney's steadfast admirer and one-time fiancé, is as much an exemplar among men as Sidney is among women. First described by his friend and Sidney's brother, Sir George Bidulph, as "the *best behaved* young man [he] ever saw," Faulkland makes an immediate impression on Sidney (11). In the first letter after their meeting, Sidney calls him "a perfectly handsome and accomplished young man" (19).

But events falsely render this exemplary gentleman unworthy of Sidney's hand. A series of accidents and misapprehensions cast doubt on his virtue. Upon learning of the pregnancy of Miss Burchell, a young woman whom Faulkland meets in Bath, Sidney is urged by her mother, Lady Bidulph, to sever her engagement to Faulkland and marry Mr. Arnold instead. Yet she soon finds her husband adulterous, and over the course of the novel, endures separation and reconciliation, widowhood and poverty. Although Sidney is close to marrying Faulkland in the end, their reunion is thwarted when Mrs. Faulkland—formerly Miss Burchell and, in truth, a female libertine—is found alive, despite Faulkland believing her dead in his fatal confrontation

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[1] Frances Sheridan, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), edited by Patricia Köster, and Jean Coates Cleary, (Oxford University Press, 1995), 3. Further reference to the novel will be abbreviated as *Memoirs*.

with her lover. Consequently, Faulkland takes his own life, whereas Sidney abruptly ends her correspondence and retires to "her quiet retreat in the country" (456, 466).

In the tide of swirling confusions and quick reversals, one might ask, what, exactly, constitutes this "wide gulph fixed between" Sidney and Faulkland (310)? How is truth, elusive to begin with, further distorted at moments of seemingly compelling revelation? And why is poetic justice ultimately denied? This essay is a musing on what an escritoire can do to help answer these questions. Twice in *Memoirs* this unobtrusive piece of furniture takes central stage: one belongs to Faulkland and appears early on in the novel; the other shows up later and belongs to Mrs. Gerrarde, Miss Burchell's scheming aunt. By examining how *the escritoire* operates in these scenes and how its protean implications conceptually structure the novel, I suggest the escritoire, designed to safeguard yet easily violated, underlies the novel's fascination with opening and resistance, access and denial, clarity and chaos. Like an escritoire itself, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* is constantly revealing truth by suppressing, complicating, and shelving its arrival. Sheridan's novelistic escritoire stores the record of what a restrictive gender code exacts.

I. Faulkland's Escritoire Pilfered: Does Truth Fall Out?

The word "escrutoir" first appears as a crucial plot device that enables Faulkland's sexual lapse to surface.[2] When the pregnant Miss Burchell learns that Faulkland is to marry Sidney, she writes to inform him of her condition, hoping to delay a match that would irrevocably undermine her name. Unexpectedly though, her message falls out of his hand. A disgruntled servant, seeking revenge for his dismissal after alarming Sidney's horse into throwing her off,

[2] This is in keeping with the spelling Sheridan uses.

"rob[s] his master" and "take[s] out of [Faulkland's] escrutoir" the pocket-book that contains Miss Burchell's letter (43). The fellow then forwards it to Sidney, appending a malicious superscription that accuses Faulkland of "throw[ing] away" "a fine and beautiful young lady that he decoyed" (41). Sidney, fallen ill, does not open the letter herself. Lady Bidulph reads it on her behalf. Herself jilted by her first love, Lady Bidulph prematurely concludes Faulkland to be guilty, and her daughter's dilemma an echo of her past. Only a fortnight later, when Sidney recovers, does Lady Bidulph recount to her daughter "every thing relative to this affair" (42).

Revelation seems deceptively straightforward in hindsight, whereas its narrative presentation suggests anything but. To allow truth to emerge, Sidney gives up the controlled ease that marks her journal up till this "dreadful fortnight's intermission" (36). Before, her own voice prominently sounds on each page, and events, recorded chronologically, are rarely left unresolved to the second day. Interludes occur, but none of such magnitude at first report. Faulkland's letter from Bath to George is only mentioned in passing, nor does Lady Bidulph's tale of her "disappointed…*first* love," which spans but a page, displace Sidney's voice like those longer stories-within we are to encounter. By contrast, the journal takes a different shape once Sidney "reassume[s] [her] pen" (36). Voices multiply: Miss Burchell's letter is transcribed in entirety, and Lady Bidulph's explanation of its origin and aftermath occupies nearly seven whole pages. These competing narrative centers not only sideline Sidney, but they also bend the journal's chronology into what Margaret Anne Doody has called "annihilated time."[3] To have time annihilated is to license repeated inroads from the past into the narrative present, and for the time being, this recursive pull stalls the linear advancement towards the appointed day of Sidney's marriage. Miss

[3] Margaret Anne Doody, "Frances Sheridan: Morality and Annihilated Time," from *Fettered or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670–1815*, edited by Mary Anne Schofield, and Cecilia Macheski, (Ohio University Press, 1986), 324.

Burchell's letter recounts an event prior to Faulkland meeting Sidney, whereas Lady Bidulph, as we shall see in greater detail, filters her daughter's crisis through that of her own.

In this light, Faulkland's pilfered escritoire is more than a plot point. The texture of Sidney's journal changes to absorb the shock it creates. When we finally hear Sidney again after Lady Bidulph's unrelenting account, "the unexpected blow" has inscribed a sustained, audible silence on her body. We hear from Sidney what Lady Bidulph doesn't: "a heavy sigh burst[s] from my heart, that gave me a little relief" (Sheridan 48).[4] Her body speaks against her will. Though "ready to melt into tears," Sidney "suppresse[s] the swelling passion in [her] breast" and concurs with her mother's rejection of Faulkland (48, 49).

The loss of Sidney's narrative control primes the novel for a favored trope in sentimental literature's warehouse— "a plot of sudden reversal."[5] More specifically, the reversals in *Memoirs* are not random and discrete, though they must so appear in their individual revelation. Sheridan is invested in a particular kind of reversal that concentrates on the instability of truth, and is interlinked with one another such that the moral implosion resembles a chain reaction. In the breach of Faulkland's escritoire alone, more pitfalls are laid than can be discerned right away. What Lady Bidulph considers a "discovery, providentially" timely, is not so much an act of good faith but a distortion of truth (Sheridan 43). In her letter, Miss Burchell insists that what passed between her and Faulkland was the result, not just of her "weakness," but also of his "ungoverned…love" (41). This is not the truth. Facts extend only insofar as both Miss Burchell and Faulkland are manipulated by Mrs. Gerrarde, who capitalizes on her niece's foolish passion

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[4] Sighs are one of the crucial tropes Sheridan uses to register where Sidney's heart inclines. We recall here Anne Finch's poem "A Sigh," whence the poet writes, "GENTLEST air, thou breath of lovers / Vapours from a secret fire, / Which by thee itself discovers, / Ere yet daring to aspire" (lines 1-4).

[5] Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, (Methuen, 1986), 4.

and honor. Having lured Faulkland into Miss Burchell's sick bed, Mrs. Gerrarde settles on him three hundred pounds in total. But from the beginning, Faulkland is "far from wishing to improve" her regard (337). On numerous occasions, written as well as spoken, he emphasizes that he, too, is a victim, that he is "no betrayer of innocence, no breaker of promises," and that he was "surprised into the commission of a fault" (58, 46).[6] In answer to Sidney's plea for Miss Burchell's interests when Faulkland intends to resume his suit after Arnold's death, Faulkland declares, more directly than ever, "she has no claim to my vows" (302).

But none of us would have known in the moment. The thoroughness with which Sheridan blinds us marks *Memoirs*' structural ingenuity. Contrary to the expectation that opening Faulkland's escritoire would unlock truth, revelation is compromised by distortion, and liability is hard to place. Miss Burchell's aim is to persuade Faulkland. Little did she know that her letter would be stolen, and the gross indecency made known to more people than the immediately involved. Faulkland, too, is at fault in part. There is, at the bottom of his lapse, a question about "male rape," or, pace Sandra Macpherson's more provocative term, "the rape of the cock."[7] The ethical impasse necessarily demands more reversals and more revelations before truth is less

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[6] This latter phrase repeats three more times throughout the novel. I list them chronological as follows. In his letter to Sir George from Bath, he writes, "I am ashamed of having been surprised into a folly" (339). Shortly after the quotation, Faulkland again emphasizes his innocence before Lady Bidulp, "'tis most certain, that I was surprised into the fatal error" (44). And finally, he "appeal[s]" to Miss Burchell herself, hoping that "She will do [him] justice…, that I was surprised into the commission of a fault" (58).

[7] Sandra, Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 137, 135.

I agree with Macpherson's claim that "Sheridan asks us to see Faulkland as simultaneously a victim and a perpetrator of harm, simultaneously faultless and at fault" (165). Her legal reading through the law of deodand, or "thing liability," also illustrates how liability is attributed in many other accidents in *Memoirs*. However, I take issue with the suggestion that "Sheridan conflates person and things," and that she "is asking us to look at persons…as causes *rather than* agents" (138, 165). This reading deflates Faulkland's complicity. Although he is a "male rape victim," Sheridan, as I read it, never means to suggest that "Faulkland is not an agent at all" (137). In perhaps all characters except Mrs. Gerrarde, Sheridan is exploring the amatory middle ground in which their faults are committed to some extent knowingly and thus independent of the messy circumstances. In Faulkland's case, the real problem is that even though Faulkland is legitimized in claiming that he does not love, and hence the refusal to marry Miss Burchell, he must be punished because "the rape of the cock" is an incident in which he fails to control his desire. His intentionality is non-negotiable.

mercurial in shape. Reversals unfold like Russian dolls: only by opening each in turn can we discover how many are nested within. Any presumption will be refuted, and everyone in the novel is taken in, including all first-time readers. Even before we begin, instability has crept in at the level of sign.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "escritoire" as "A writing-desk constructed to contain stationery and documents; in early use, often one of a portable size; more recently, chiefly applied to a larger piece of furniture, a bureau or secretary" ("escritoire" n.). This somewhat circular definition captures the laxity with which these terms were used. In their entry on "bureau" in the 1924 *Dictionary of English Furniture*, Percy Macquoid and Ralph Edwards note, "The word has never been clearly defined, and to many of the examples illustrated the terms scrutoire, escritoire, scriptor, or secretary would have been applied by their original owners."[8] Thomas Sheraton, an eighteenth-century furniture designer, similarly explains in his 1803 *Cabinet Dictionary*, that "In England, [the word] has generally been applied to common desks with drawers under them, such as are made very frequently in country towns."[9] Sheridan, of course, is not interested in the debate over furniture terminologies as such; "escrutoir" is her preferred term in *Memoirs*. Rather, she leverages the pragmatic ambiguity of escritoire to show the mutable nature of appearances.

On the very day Sidney falls ill with an "ugly sore throat" (Sheridan 35), Faulkland relates the then seemingly innocuous robbery in detail. The word he invokes not "escrutoir," but "bureau":

> when the family were asleep, [that servant] contrived to pick the lock of a bureau in my dressing-room, where I sometimes keep money. I believe what induced him to it was, his

[8] Percy Macquoid and Ralph Edwards, *Dictionary of English Furniture*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), 117.
[9] Thomas Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary*, (W. Smith, 1803), 111.

> having seen me yesterday morning, when I was going to ride (a precaution which I generally use) put my pocket-book into this place, and I suppose he concluded there were bank notes in it, for he took *that* (I presume without staying to examine it) and all the money he could find besides, and very cleverly made his escape out of a back window, which was found open this morning. (35)

The shift in signifier suggests the slipperiness subtending the signified. Be it "the escrutoire," or "a bureau," a writing desk only houses one's personal papers and money with nominal security. In actual practice, it is vulnerable to intrusion, tempting ignoble attention and yielding to alien hands. Private correspondences meet the eyes of unintended audiences, and measures of "precaution" slide into, as Faulkland acknowledges, a "careless" slip on his part "for suffering a servant, whose fidelity he was not sure of, to see where he deposited his money" (36). To the servant's disappointment, Faulkland's escritoire is no treasure trove, not in its literal sense. Neither the escritoire nor the pocket-book he seizes "without staying to examine" delivers what he expects. The money he finds is paltry, "but twenty moidores." This want of "a better booty" incites him to make full use of the letter he did get (43). The escritoire thus calls attention to the disparity, not just between appearances and truth, but also between perspectives. Just as Faulkland overestimates the security his escritoire affords, so does the pilfering servant mistake the value of its contents. As furniture, the escritoire is not made to deceive. But once it is removed from a purely private context, misplaced expectations and partial knowledge collude to make it a site where unverified assumptions result in disappointment.

What characterizes the signified redounds back upon the signifier. Whereas selecting "bureau" over "escritoire" might typically be an arbitrary substitution within a set of near synonyms, Sheridan crafts a context that renders this selection significant. At this early "bureau" stage, Faulkland still has reason to believe that "The affair" might "fortunately for…all" not to "take[] wind, as Miss Burchell's letter is of no material interest to his servant (380). Under these

circumstances, withholding the exact contents of his pocket-book from the Bidulph women seems a strategic choice. And yet, conflicting feelings are typographically registered. In the passage quoted above—where Faulkland explains the theft of "*that* (I presume without staying to examine it)" pocket book—the italicized "*that*", together with the parenthetical explanation that follows, signals noticeable, and most likely vehement, tonal shifts and bodily gestures that catch Sidney's eye as Faulkland speaks. While shortly before, Sidney describes him to be "quite cast down," retelling the double betrayal by his servant and escritoire fuels "the natural impetuosity of his temper" (35, 339). Even as he strains for control, the shape of the text, under Sidney's exact penmanship, quietly seethes with an undercurrent of turmoil.

If Faulkland still foots a precarious line of hope with "bureau," "escrutoir" sweeps him off balance.[10] No longer Faulkland, but Lady Bidulph, commands our attention; Miss Burchell's muddy account passes for credible truth through the escritoire's rhetorical force of revelation; and any endeavor to explain is caught in a postlapsarian state of confusion. Lady Bidulph describes a flustered Faulkland:

> The loss of this letter had alarmed Mr Faulkland so much, that he put an advertisement into the papers next day, worded in so particular a manner, as shewed how very fearful he was of that letter's coming to light; for, no doubt, he suspected the man might make a dangerous use of it. The advertisement said, that if the servant, who had absconded from his master's house in St James's Square the night before, would restore the papers which he took with him, they should be received without any questions being asked, and a reward of twenty guineas paid to any person who should bring them back. This advertisement, which, to be

[10] The difference Sheridan makes is not without literary precedents. The pragmatic difference of "bureau" and "escritoire" might have subtly altered their meaning. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "bureau" as "A writing desk of compact design, fitted with drawers or pigeonholes for storing papers and other items, and typically having a writing surface which can be folded up or (in more recent designs) stored within the desk when not in use" ("bureau" n.II.3.). The definition seems close to that of the escritoire. But interestingly, all nine quotations of "bureau" emphasizes its storage function: "My Diamond Buckle...Miss Nancy will find in the inner Till of my Bureau" (1741 *S. Richardson, Pamela vol. IV. xiii. 79*). The seven quotations under "escritoire" are more varied; two involved theft and forced entry. "Captain Gibbet…had made bold…with your Study and Escritore" (1707 G. Farquhar, *Beaux Stratagem* v. 72); "She...accordingly departed herself, having first broken open my Escrutore" (1742 H. Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* vol. II. iii. iii. 40). There is reason to believe that for men and women of letters, "bureau" possesses greater stability than "escritoire."

> sure, the fellow either did not see at all, or had not time enough to avail himself of it, shews you to what sad resources people are driven, who, having done unwarrantable actions, are often in the power of the lowest wretches. I own this circumstance gave me a very ill impression of Mr Faulkland. Your brother says, he remembers this man was one of the servants he took with him to Bath, and, without doubt, he knew of his amour. The advertisement has since been changed, by Sir George's advice. I find this man is named, his person described, and a reward of fifty pounds offered for the apprehending him; but I take it for granted he has got out of reach. (44)

We need not count the adverbial intensifiers to see how thoroughly Lady Bidulph marshals them to cement her judgment with emphatic certainty. With "so much," "very," "no doubt," "to be sure," "without doubt," nailed to almost every turn of her phrase, she does not so much depict what has happened as reshape it to better fit her bias—what she "take[s]…for granted" to be true. This impulse contrasts with the cautious interpretive strategy Faulkland employs in his account of the robbery. Despite the surge of sentiment, he clearly flags his inferences through tags such as "I believe," "I suppose," and "I presume" (35). With Lady Bidulph, however, intensifiers blur the line between the interpretive and the factual. The lessening of self-reference lends to the former a weight of the latter, creating the effect of objectivity without remotely meaning so. Her "very ill impression of Mr Faulkland" is not a hedge of her moral condemnation, but a license she wields to persist unchanged. Even when she provides seemingly unsullied evidence—enumerating, first in near verbatim, the contents of the advertisement, and then its revision—they are ultimately subsumed into Lady Bidulph's predetermined verdict: Faulkland, "having done unwarrantable actions," has fallen "in the power of the lowest wretches." Although he is "fearful…of that letter's coming to light," his "sad resources" fail to take effect before the culprit "has got out of reach."

To have Lady Bidulph complete the switch from "bureau" to "escrutoir" is thus a deliberate thematic choice. Sheridan's subtle hand translates this minor and apparently unmotivated lexical

shift into an apt figure for the larger interpretive problems with which *Memoirs* is concerned. New meanings accrue as events, like words, travel through shifting frames of reference. Now that the flimsy escritoire is opened, distorted truth invites further misinterpretations.

Lady Bidulph's relation of Faulkland's lapse rehearses her past. Early in the novel, Lady Bidulph reveals before her children the details of "the unlucky event which blasted her own early love" (60). It turns out that what is blasted is more than ardent feelings. For, having confessed to Lady Bidulph his former engagement through letters, her fiancé plunges into "absolute madness," soon after which the lady who has his first vows also dies of a broken heart (31). Although Lady Bidulph "b[ears] [the disappointment] with becoming resolution," "this melancholy story" exerts lasting impact (31, 32). Not only does its revival engross her thoughts—Sidney observes that she "continued thoughtful for a good while" after recounting it—but as such, Lady Bidulph's failure to fully recover therefrom affects her way of seeing Faulkland's alleged crime (32).

The "parallel" she draws between Faulkland and her dishonest first love is hasty, given that the credibility of Miss Burchell's letter remains unclear (49). Those intensifiers, as effective in persuading the mother as they are in bearing down on the daughter, are not the only instance in which the anxiety that events might turn otherwise is palpable in Lady Bidulph's rhetoric. A few pages earlier, she dashes Sidney's reasonable doubt about whether "this letter is…forged, with a design to injure Mr Faulkland." "[T]oo well convinced that the letter is genuine," she advises Sidney to stop "catch[ing] at so slender a twig" (42). When opportunities to look into the affair most readily present themselves, fear impels her to push them away. She has "no[] patience to read…through" Faulkland's letter from Bath, the critical evidence Sir George supplies. "[A]fraid

of meeting, at every line, something offensive to decency," she but "run[s] her eye in a cursory manner over it" (45). She further owns, upon Sidney agreeing to renounce Faulkland, "that the recollection of that melancholy event which happened to me, has given me a sort of horror at the very thoughts of an union between you and Mr Faulkland" (49).

This ingrained fear expresses itself in stronger ways. When Faulkland refers her to Miss Burchell, "trust[ing] to [Miss Burchell's] generosity to deal openly" and "do him justice," Miss Burchell is quick to pick up "[Lady Bidulph's] prejudices against Mr Faulkland" (59, 58, 307). Convinced that "in vindication of [her disposal of Sidney's marriage], she d[oes] not wish to be undeceived," Miss Burchell does not confess until nearly 250 pages later, when Sidney, looking out for her interests, confronts her on this point in private (307). With Lady Bidulph's traumatic past reawakened through Miss Burchell's letter, and an appearance of ease once again an excuse to indulge her avoidance, cracks begin to appear in the certainty she insists. Whereas Faulkland's supposed fear is a reasonable speculation, the emphasis she places on it reflects her own anxieties more than it does his state of mind.

Unbeknownst to herself, Lady Bidulph falls victim to youthful overcompensation. As Sidney observes, "[s]trong and early prejudices are insurmountable" (60). With "a sort of partiality to her own sex," her mother instinctively "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). But however similar the present situation is to the past, they are essentially different from one another. The more Lady Bidulph takes pains to fortify what she wishes to see, the faster truth slips out of view. The suggestion is strong that Lady Bidulph's mind operates in a way Faulkland's escritoire does not. When the latter gives away, perhaps all too easily, under

external force, the former closes in upon itself like a little strongbox.

Rigidity early becomes Lady Bidulph's brand. Faulkland knows that he is dealing with "a lady of…rigid delicacy" in his interview with her in attempt to clear his name (46). Sidney also frequently reminds Cecilia, that her "mother is severe in her virtue" and "strictly nice in every particular" (53, 50). In fact, in the account of the Bidulph family prefixed right before the journal, these remarks are shrewdly anticipated. The opening portrait of Lady Bidulph is telling:

> Lady Bidulph was a woman of plain sense, but exemplary piety; the strictness of her notions (highly commendable in themselves) now and then gave a tincture of severity to her actions, though she was ever esteemed a truly good woman. (11)

The hint of disapproval is mild; "a tincture of severity" peeped through the fissure between "plain sense" and "exemplary piety." Neither of the latter two phrases counts as a defect: "exemplary piety" is apparently a compliment, while "plain sense" connotes a middling, unexceptional understanding. And yet, implied in the coordinating "but" is a nuanced contrast spelled out after the semicolon.[11] Though "the strictness of her notions" is "commendable" when locked in parentheses, this "strictness" phrase itself sits outside that typographical constraint. Thus, the progression of the sentence suggests that Lady Bidulph's moral rigor does not merely coexist with but overtakes and recalibrates her judgment. Syntax reinforces meaning. Coordination turns into subordination. The fact that "she was ever esteemed a truly good woman" reads as a concession to a not infrequent piety excess.

A number of critics have remarked that not Lady Bidulph herself, but Sidney, bears the brunt of her mother's categorical rigidity. Barbara M. Benedict notes that Lady Bidulph's "authoritarian control over Sidney…results in tragedy," and that the mother's "partiality against

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[11] "Introducing a statement which is not contrary to, but is not fully consonant with, or is contrasted with, the preceding one (which may be affirmative or negative): nevertheless, yet, however" (*OED* "but" conj. III.11.b.i.).

Faulkland" is "illogical," because she later excuses Arnold's adultery.[12] Eve Taver Bannet similarly ascribes Sidney's ruin to "Lady Bidulph's obstinate championship of the cause of 'virtue' and of women in the person of Miss Burchell."[13] But, as Bannet observes, this tension between generations also pivots on the shifting cultural attitude towards marriage. The 1753 Marriage Act, "a watershed for sexual politics and family life," exerted a "cruelty to the fair sex" in making Miss Burchell's claim to victimhood possible (94, 97).[14] Bannet's reading expands the import of Lady Bidulph's fascination with the past. First, the traumatic memory makes Lady Bidulph a staunch believer in "the virtue of the old law of marriage," and "a pregnant woman's moral right to marriage," ideals tied to the ecclesiastical tradition of consensual union (115, 113).[15] Second, her alliance with Miss Burchell is close, too close, that the mother, as we will see in greater detail, is alienated from the daughter. Her mind a strongbox carefully sealed, and herself a woman of strong personality and strong opinions, Lady Bidulph deigns not to probe the cache of the "escrutoir" she invokes. Partial truth is mistaken as truth proper, and the consequence of her fault, now buried, is passed down upon her daughter, who, in turn, struggles to discern the cost of her virtuous submission.

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[12] Barbara M. Benedict, "Toxic Love: Gender and Genre in Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*," from *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 35, no. 2, (2023): 243.

[13] Eve Taver Bannet, *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminism and the Novel*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 114.

[14] The Marriage Act make church ceremonies legally mandatory for a valid marriage. To slightly qualify Bannet's insight, I think it benefits us also to remember that the 1753 Act, as Rebbeca Prober suggests, "the 1753 Act did not constitute such a radical break with the past as has been claimed, was almost universally observed, and was not subject to harsh interpretation by the courts." Rebbeca Prober, *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.
Additionally, while Bannet does not mention this, a clear anachronism in Sheridan's novel. Sidney's story begins on April 2, 1703, during Queen Anne's reign. This date matters. As Heidi Hunter and Nicole Garret note, drawing on Toni Bowers' *The Politics of Motherhood*, Queen Anne's inability to produce a royal heir renders "the maternal" a figure for "the distance between political agency and female experience." Queen Anne's failure helps create "a split version of motherhood throughout the rest of the century" (26). Lady Bidulph's failed motherhood hereby acquires historical significance. Heidi Hunter and Nicole Garret, "Introduction," from *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, by Francies Sheridan, edited by Heidi Hunter, and Nicole Garret, (Broadview Editions, 2011), 26.

[15] Macpherson lucidly explains ecclesiastical consensualism: "sex *was* marriage" (150).

II. Delicacy, or Pride? Escritoire as Formal Allegory of Sidney's Suppression

If Lady Bidulph all too speedily identifies with Sidney's crisis, the daughter seems no less ready in taking on her mother's view of things. Rarely does Sidney come across otherwise, and even when she does, efforts to muster obedience are redoubled. Sidney's compliance, of course, is largely motivated by the filial duty she owes to Lady Bidulph. She protests that Lady Bidulph "has ever been despotic in her government of me," and that "the universe would not induce her to change her resolution in regard to Mr Faulkland" (Sheridan 50, 60). But what she pens, she cannot realize. It is Lady Bidulph who pens her in. In Sidney's "endeavour to imitate her" mother, she covers remarkable lengths. The moment she assembles along Lady Bidulph's gendered line of defense, she partakes of— "dictated…by"—her mother's "female pride (for I will not answer for the feelings of my heart at that instant)" (49). Parentheses add extra security, stifling her inner tumult when Sidney's words, cast in the negative, already sidestep direct admission of her heart.

What escapes Sidney is that in fortifying her heart, self-command hardens into a rigidity that tugs her towards her mother, who "is not extremely penetrating, and in general, but a superficial observer" (325). Lady Bidulph's problematic partiality for Miss Burchell she cannot unsee. Sidney early detects artifice from Lady Bidulph's description of their encounter: "She saw my mother was not acquainted with particulars, and that she was willing to pass a favourable judgment on her fault." Her sense that there is "something evasive and disingenuous in her conduct" is confirmed in the suspicious "looks that [Miss Burchell] cast at [her]" when the two finally meet (103, 155). And yet, as on several other occasions, Sidney's delicacy furnishes

extenuating circumstances. Never once does she discuss these observations with Lady Bidulph openly. When Sidney has secured Faulkland for Miss Burchell, and Lady Bidulph at last begins to see Miss Burchell's "ungoverned" levities, Sidney seeks to smooth things over by "whisper[ing]" to Miss Burchell a hint of "restrain[t]", that "[her] mother might not have fresh cause of dislike towards her" (325). Again and again, strict adherence to delicacy annuls Sidney's insight at their slightest clash. Unlike Lady Bidulph, who is unaware of her gendered bias, and of the harm an undifferentiating openness toward Miss Burchell could cause her daughter, Sidney chooses passivity, even when she intuits danger. The observing eye that should help her avoid her mother's fault hastens her down the same miry path. Hence the poignancy of her tragedy.

Beginning with her insights and her heart, suppression becomes structural. Lady Bidulph is not the only propelling force, though she is doubtless the most direct one. The abuse of maternal authority comes into focus under the framing hand of Sheridan's editor. In "THE EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION," the editor records how he comes across "the manuscript" he publishes as Sidney's story, "without any alteration, excepting the proposed one of a change of names" (9). Cecilia's real-life counterpart, now "a lady pretty far advanced in years" (5), tells him that "in copying [her friend's] papers," she "selected the most material parts of her history, and connected them so as to make one continued narrative" (9). As the extradiegetic Cecilia, not the editor, makes the editorial intervention and writes the prefatory family introduction, authority is signaled indirectly. The editor rests content with a secondary and spectral role. The framing narrative he pens displays a like translucent quality. His intention to set Sidney's journal in frame most willingly blends into and becomes an extension thereof—we are already one foot inside Cecilia's escritoire before we realize it.

Cecilia's hand is unmistakable. Intervals of up to "thirteen months" are bracketed off liberally, during which we are told "nothing material to the threads of the story occurs" (419). If wholeness characterizes other in-set narratives included, such as that of Mrs. Vere's, where her modest marriage, lacking her mother's approbation, irrevocably detaches the two, or that of Mr Main's, who secures his childhood love, a lady of fortune, by circumventing a mastectomy with his medical prowess, these breaks deviate from that approach in their brevity and narrative emptiness. Refrain-like, they punctuate Sheridan's novel into lengthy verse paragraphs. The first two of the four we encounter in the novel's course read:

> [*The following is writ in the hand of the lady who gave the editor these papers: 'Here follows an interval of four months; in which time, though the Journal was regularly continued, nothing material to her story occurred but the birth of a daughter; after which she proceeds.*'] (116)

> [*Here ensues another interval of nine months, in which nothing particular is related, but that Mrs Arnold became mother to a second child. This last circumstance, with a few preceding and succeeding that event, are related in the Journal by her maid Patty; after which Mrs Arnold herself proceeds.*] (119)

Two but's plainly undercut the downplaying rhetoric of Cecilia's. Her double feint that "nothing material to her story occurred," and that "nothing particular is related," folds high drama into the formal corrugation it produces in the unbroken surface of Sidney's journal. Repetition is deliberate. For the formal delight a learned reader would take cannot be separated from the tremor of painful nerves; Sidney's dilemma stares back at us the moment dots are connected. Aptly enclosed in escritoire-like square brackets, this compact, phrase-length story-within spills at its report much like Faulkland's physical escritoire, and branches off, even more overtly, into multiple tangents. The first childbirth anticipates the second. But more suggestively, in twice sliding over the throes of Sidney's delivery and the immediate joy of motherhood, the narrative recalls two other births reported a handful of pages earlier. Those, too, are closely conjoined, appearing three pages apart. However, unlike Sidney's births, both are spared from pruning. On

February 28, 1703-4, Sidney writes: "At length the poor Miss Burchell is happily rid of her burthen; a pretty little boy" (110). On May 6, 1704, she mentions yet another "important birth," that "the widow Arnold," wife of Arnold's late brother, "has produced a young miss" (113). The widow forges a case around the illegitimate child and trumps Arnold's claim to his brother's estate. One case thereby showcases a makeshift domestic happiness, for Lady Bidulph is present at the baptism of Miss Burchell's son. The other serves as a necessary prelude to Sidney's legal and financial woes. The emphatic minimization, near absence if you will, of the birth of Sidney's children, more than confirms Cecilia's editing principle.

This typographical permutation of the escritoire motif forms a complex formal allegory for Sidney's position in the novel. Degradation impends. These bracketed announcements of Sidney's childbirths portend the number of times Sidney must reconcile with her "late prospect of domestic happiness" (157). She discovers Arnold's adultery with Mrs. Gerrarde exactly two months after she picks up her pen again. Not long after, Mrs. Gerrarde's wiles convince Arnold that Sidney has rekindled her affection for Faulkland. The unfaithful husband then expels a most faithful wife. Although Faulkland intervenes to repair this breach, the succeeding deaths of Arnold and Lady Bidulph hurl Sidney yet again into solitude. This time, into stark destitution too.

The domestic space Sidney occupies reduces as her predicament grows. When the initial breach occurs, confinement remains largely metaphorical. Leaving Arnold's house at South-park, Sidney settles "in very handsome lodgings in St Alban's-street" (152). Her sense that she is both "a prisoner and a fugitive" stems from her double displacement from home and society as a married woman. Like the news of her own motherhood, isolated from other "material" events in

her journal, Sidney and her mother "keep [them]selves intiredly [sic.] concealed from the knowledge of all our acquaintance; not a mortal visits [them], but now-and-then, Miss Burchell." But for the letter from Patty carrying the news of her children's well-being, Sidney's "comforts are circumscribed within a very narrow compass" (159). Circumstances are different once she is widowed, and "[her] brother possesses all when [Lady Bidulph] die[s]" (331). Sidney is "shocked" to find "the whole of [her] apartment" composed but of "a room two pair of stairs high, with a closet, and a small indifferent parlour" (341). Constriction becomes overt, recalling, with dreadful literalness, what Cecilia's editing hand does to Sidney's journal. Temporal compression is mapped onto spatial constriction. Sidney, Patty, and the two children remove to this "very humble habitation," just as large swathes of time are squeezed into fewer than three lines. The editorial implication of immaterialities forays into Sidney's immediacy: the material ground on which Sidney treads has long been thin.

This shrinking physical space mirrors Sidney's diminishing mental resources. We have seen that rejecting Faulkland impels a train of reflection on Lady Bidulph's character. When Arnold's matrimonial application is forced before her, Sidney comes closest to rebellion. Lively is her frustration and affirmative is she in asserting her needs: "I could cry for very vexation to be made such a puppet of" (84); "I knew a man once that I liked better…I am positive, if I were let alone, I should be happy as ever" (83). Marriage and a train of adversities soon strip her of this residual channel to voice resistance. Responding to Arnold's adultery with grace, she keeps censure minimal: "Mr Arnold adds cruelty to—but let it be so" (136-7). Reproach only half-slips from her lips; to seal the secret back in the box is her task instead. Her wish is to "disappoint the malice of my stars…the secret shall die with me in my own bosom" (137). Her means, patience:

"I was born to sacrifice my own peace to that of other people…, but I have no remedy for it but patience" (139). She "bid[s] adieu to South-park" only two days after Arnold orders her removal, her immediate concern being that "[her] presence banishes Mr Arnold from his home" (151, 145). When Lady Bidulph dies, resignation, as before, is her response. Sidney's hope that "[her] latter end be like [her mother's]" impels full identification: "No murmurings, no, no my sister, I will be patience itself" (332).

But patience in Lady Bidulph's vein inevitably prescribes its own undoing. As the neutral but passive waiting veers towards the moralized and etymological sense of "the calm, uncomplaining endurance of pain, affliction, inconvenience," Sidney repeatedly fails to reckon the destructive potential of her delicacy (*OED* "patience" n. 1.a.)—a patient she willingly becomes.[16] She can afford this neglect initially because her conscience is not compromised by conformity. Marrying Arnold, as Lady Bidulph cruelly suggest, lets Miss Burchell "stand the better chance for having justice done to her" (Sheridan 85). Sidney "made not [her]self accessory to" Miss Burchell's disgrace (87). Her submission continues to match what is demanded of her. Patty Main's remark is already apt: "my lady's courage increases with her troubles" (351). But it is the reverse that gives the game away—Sidney's troubles magnify in step with her ever more courageous and determined self-sacrifice.

Sidney's problem is phrased more explicitly by the women in her proximity. On the evening Sidney is to receive Arnold again, Lady V—, Faulkland's relation and Sidney's faithful friend, is plain with him: "your lady's misfortune was intirely [sic.] owing to her great delicacy, and the nice regard she had to your peace and honor" (264). Sidney seems to miss out on this much-needed

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[16] "A sufferer, *esp.* one who endures suffering without complaint. *Obsolete*" (*OED* "patient" n. 2). The last quotation of this usage dates 1795.

pat on the head. Her sensibility roused, she "change[s] the conversation", unable to "bear such a description of [her] poor Mr Arnold's deep contrition" (265). After Miss Burchell becomes Mrs Faulkland, she further removes to a no man's land. Even Cecilia, "whose sensibility is as strong as [Sidney]," does not "enter[]…into [her] sentiments" as Sidney would like. Cecilia thinks Sidney "*could not do otherwise*" than "promote [that] marriage" because of the "solemn promise given to Miss Burchell." Had Miss Burchell "been out of the question," other "punctilios" Sidney has marshalled in persuading Faulkland "*might* have been got over" (333). But Sidney's punctilio cannot tolerate punctilios unobserved. For her, Lady Bidulph's "firm[ness] in her first resolves," a respect for Arnold's memory to not marry the man who occasions him "so much uneasiness," and Sidney's own impaired health, languid spirits, and weathered beauty ought not be circumvented (316). Rather, they make up "a variety of circumstances…that strongly forbad [her] union" with Faulkland (335). It is therefore of no avail, whether pointing out to Sidney her penchant for "anticipat[ing] misfortunes" as Cecilia used to do, or showing Sidney, in the present instance, that "[her] heart has *again* done itself some violence" (281, 334). Sidney stands on points too tall to be brought down with words. In her admission that "I now feel my own unhappiness in its full extent" lurks a note of morbid pleasure attendant on self-inflicted violence (334). The bound between self-denial and self-indulgence begins to blur.

Indeed, control over her action proves much easier than control over her heart. Feelings linger longer with Sidney than she allows them on the page. Much like Lady Bidulph's contrived interpretive certainty, in allowing external impositions to override her sensibility, Sidney only undermines the poise she seeks to sustain. Coerced into marriage, she thoroughly "search[es] her heart,"

> 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 that; it was but a single ray, a gentle glow that just warmed my breast without scorching: what it might have arisen to I will not say; but I have the satisfaction to find, that the short-lived fire is quite extinct, and the mansion is even chilled with cold. (86)

Careful as she is in curbing the contagion with words—her passion is not "scorching" but "short-lived," not "a flame" but "a single ray"—residual heat persists. When "quite extinct" borders on not quite, "chilled with cold" seems to stretch the metaphor a bit too far. Despite her best of efforts to conceal, metaphorical leaps carry this revelatory momentum forward. What she "will not say" is given wings as her figurative language waxes more playful. The process of reduc[ing] [her] mind to this frame" reads like an allegory. In an imaginary "little tribunal" whence Faulkland is "arraigned…in [her] breast", Sidney's "Trifler" heart risks the distraction of "The little felon, love," were it not that her heart "had the virtue to submit" to "reason," and that "justice kept [love] out." Though Faulkland is "at length cast," the verdict, emerging from "a long (and I think a fair) trial," needs strengthening. Sidney must "forbid [her heart] to interpose" with "palliating circumstances in Mr Faulkland's favour," and stands firmly by the "arguments…deduced from the evidences against him" (86). The dubious legal force of this courtroom—an escritoire transposed at once inside her body and her mind—consists in a conscious misreading. So wanton are her feelings that they are, after all, barely ordered in place.

In what Gerard A. Barker describes as "a struggle of egos" between Sidney and Faulkland, indirection, if negative affirmation, becomes Sidney's chief strategy to discover her genuine feelings.[17] Denial and punishment facilitate this quest. The triumph of her moral exactitude, what turns out also a means of legitimizing her desire, must accompany the loss of her desired

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[17] Gerard A. Barker, *Grandison's Heirs: The Paragon's Progress in the Late Eighteenth-Century English Novel*, (University of Delaware Press, 1985), 65.

object. Faulkland sees this before Sidney does. In his response to Sidney's second letter, he charges "her rigid heart" for "build[ing] up those barriers…that heaven itself ha[s] overthrown" (Sheridan 314). Still, he is up for the game. When he finally capitulates and accepts Miss Burchell, his concession, that Sidney is "born to conquer," is calculated to make "make [Sidney's] proud heart acknowledge, spite of itself, that Faulkland [is] not unworthy of it" (318). Delicacy cannot do without pride.

Months pass before Faulkland's words settle, and Sidney's alarm heightens when she finds Faulkland already waiting at the moral high ground that she long assumes to be her personal retreat. Right after she dismisses Cecilia's speculation on what "never *can* happen," realization comes that she has been playing a losing game:

> Yet how deceitful is the human heart! this very act which I laboured with so much assiduity to accomplish, and on the accomplishment of which, I had founded, I know not how, a sort of contentment for myself, has been the very means of destroying what little peace of mind I was beginning to taste before. (335)

Sidney's composure gives way to a vexed probing of her inmost recesses. Now that the "triumphant sacrifice" he makes "raise[s] himself in [her] esteem superior to every thing," Sidney feels "punish[ed]," left "without any resource"—not even her "pride," "the innocence of [her] self-acquitted heart." This language of punishment then shades, most intensely, into enchantment and attachment. As she "gaze[s] after him with grateful admiration," the sigh that once bursts forth as exception returns with quiet regularity. She "sometimes perhaps…sigh," that their "fates rendered it impossible for [them] to meet." Their "souls have something congenial in them" (335).

Irony yet intensifies and multiplies. This time, Sheridan resolves not to let Sidney off the hook. Faulkland's Bath letter lies in ambush on the next day, and soon after, she will learn from

Sir George of "the horrid secret" that her brother "[is] as much obliged to Miss Burchell's favour, as Mr Faulkland was" (386, 383). Sidney's worst nightmare comes to pass: her moral rectitude is compromised. She is "the means of making Mr Faulkland unhappy," and she "should not indeed forgive [her]self" (329).

A finer distinction puts Sidney's liability into relief. In previous cases, submission is forced out of her. Sidney remains ignorant of the peril ahead despite having a hunch for it. She little knows that the promise Lady Bidulph exacts, that she will "use her whole influence (whatever that might be)" to unite Miss Burchell to Faulkland, shall put her in a double bind (290). Only in undertaking this task can she realize what she has put her name to. Here, the situation is different. Sidney does not flinch from her promise, even though Miss Burchell "hurt[s]" her in belatedly admitting the "former perverting of facts" (314). She acquiesces to Miss Burchell's request to conceal this unpardonable delay from Faulkland, Lady Bidulph, and Sir George, thinking her own tears proof of a lack of "self-denial" in forwarding Miss Burchell's interests.

Yet, however cautious "of relenting," Sidney cannot help but lament Faulkland's "wayward fate." The epithet "poor" that endears her to Arnold before, is readily applied to Faulkland (309). Although she clings to the last to-be-cleared fact that Faulkland has "paid the price of [Miss Burchell's] innocence to the wicked aunt" to "b[i]nd herself to [Miss Burchell] by stronger ties," the last word of *Memoirs*' second volume is accorded to Faulkland (309, 310). Asking whether promoting Miss Burchell's happiness is the right thing to do, Sidney extorts her own leap of faith: "I will, I must; my word is given. Yet Faulkland deserves—oh, he deserves a worthier lot" (310). Suggestive is the dash, as it hovers with composure between the opposing vectors of thought that torment Sidney's mind. It indicates, on the one hand, Sidney's reluctance to lay bare

her thoughts, deferring the disclosure of what Faulkland truly merits to the phrase's second coming. Meanwhile, it registers the ineluctable, tide-like momentum of her sympathy for Faulkland—the phrase practically slits through Sidney's well-walled bosom, the dash standing in for the resulting wound.

Thus, it is less that Cecilia does not feel for Sidney wholeheartedly, than that she picks up, as Sheridan hopes we shall too, what Sidney's pages divulge without the pen's full knowing. Such is the untenability of delicacy, that when Sidney is given the wiggle room to negotiate, to potentially back out less harmed, if unharmed, she does not stir. She takes everything in, just as Cecilia's editorial equivalent describes, "a martyr expiring in tortures" (7).

The implications of Cecilia's editorial gestures hereby broaden. In the hierarchy that brackets create, enclosure swoops on Sidney early. Its mercilessness speaks for *Memoirs*' politics: for women, delicacy too earnest stands no chance against the strategic deployment of that virtue, and an aggressive lookout of situational advantage. Sidney is doomed to be defeated by Miss Burchell and widow Arnold in Cecilia's retrospection. But brackets more than parallel Sidney's physical and emotional confinement. Their visual bluntness serves to illustrate the very horror of Sidney's obedience to these constraints without complaint. It is worth noting that, what Cecilia considers expendable is precisely the bread and butter of female correspondence, the scrutiny of trivia that nonetheless composes small, comforting pleasures. Benedict suggests that Cecilia "support[s] the repressive conduct codes that oppress Sidney" because she "never proffers ameliorative advice" (252). This binary, however, risks being too neat. Sheridan includes more nuances in staging Cecilia's relationship with Sidney. Even in Cecilia's repression of the intervening stories that are "either foreign to the main scope of [Sidney's] story, or too trivial to

be recorded," her preservation of Sidney's births marks a gesture of quiet redemption. The problem is rather that Cecilia's agency is likewise limited. She is "instructed in [her] early days" to see "evils which befall us, as equally temporary" punishments as "the others are for rewards" (Sheridan 6). The "unhappy fate" of her friend only reinforces her faith in this doctrine. "What then are we to conclude," she asks, "but that God does not estimate things as we do" (7). The rhetorical question forecloses other possibilities.

Cecilia acts as a pawn to ensure Sheridan's critique of delicacy hits hard, since anything short of that is an insufficient release for Sidney and for the women she represents. For this purpose, Cecilia must be left in the backwater with her friend, even though the life she leads, as far as the novel inclines us, is far less turbulent. Thus, her intervention smothers in spite of and because of an intention to redeem. Only by foregrounding "affliction" as Sidney's whole "portion" might redemption for the delicately proud come from within (7).

III. Revenge! Faulkland's Enchantment and Mrs. Gerrarde's Escritoire

But *Memoirs* does not rush headlong into despair's precinct. Even when everything curiously conspires against Sidney, Sheridan gives us respite, however fleeting, and whatever greater trials she has in store. Whereas Sidney's "good intentions" hardly ever escape Sir George's assertion that they produce "nothing but evil," Faulkland receives the opportunity to redress and revenge (328). The means Faulkland picks to "restor[e], to the most amiable of women, a besotted husband's heart" puts everyone in shock: he stages an elopement with Mrs. Gerrarde (170). Although Sidney is at first pleased to find herself "not so grosly [sic.] mistaken in believing him a loose man," she receives from Sir George two successive packets of Faulkland's letters, in which

he details his exact exchange with Mrs. Gerrarde. Having falsely kindled her favor, he kidnaps her at a ball, brings her to France, tricks her into confessing her affair with Mr. Arnold, dictates to her a letter urging him to make amends to his wife, and eventually marries her off to Mr. Pivet, his genteel-looking footman. Though gallant is the very scheme as well as the style with which he communicates his designs, this time, Faulkland's letters mark a rare moment of clarity. Confusion, as always, stamps the beginning. But most unexpectedly, Faulkland achieves what he sets out to do.

The formula is familiar. Sheridan makes sure that the situation mirrors, as much as possible, the one occasioning Faulkland's downfall in the first place. Like Miss Burchell's pregnancy, another sexual indecency, elopement, pulls the trigger. Sir George again presents Faulkland's writing as evidence, and even escritoire is again featured as a curio. The difference, however, is that mother and daughter exchange roles. With Lady Bidulph "cough[ing] almost the whole night," Faulkland's "bundle of papers," this time, comes straight into Sidney's hands (169).

Realization does not come till later, but Faulkland's letters pose a more formidable challenge to Sidney than what his Bath letter did to Lady Bidulph. First, explanation bulks up and arrives in sequels. The Bath letter spans only a little over three pages, punchy and brisk compared with the long-winded narration Sidney now confronts. For Faulkland's voice resounds at the structural center of *Memoirs*. The first packet, containing "at least, four sheets of paper, written on every side," already runs twenty pages, and the second installment doubles that number (169). Second, the stylized rhetoric, one of the crucial reasons that shuts Lady Bidulph off, bloats to greater absurdities. A hallmark of the correspondence between men of fashion, this ensnaring theatricality can make things heady at first sight; so dependent is it on exaggeration of the

problem and delayed explanation. In his letter written in Bath, Faulkland imagines Sir George questioning him on what he first calls "a slight lapse…, a flying affair": "Are you fallen so low as that, Faulkland, say you? to *buy* the favour of the fair? No, George, no" (336). The initial denial, however, is thrown over by a taunting, yet misleading admission that follows: "faith, I did *buy* it too, for it cost me three hundred pounds; but the lady to whom I am obliged knows nothing of this part of her own history" (337). Although Faulkland unpacks this claim in the rest of his letter, but "a paragraph which *looks* like it" is enough for Lady Bidulph to "pass[] a censure on the crime in gross" (340).

Faulkland does not know the exact manner in which Lady Bidulph reads his letter. Nor does he expect that his present account will be shown to the ladies. Twice he cautions Sir George to not show Sidney the letter proper: "'Tell her as much of this wild story as you think proper; but do not let her see it in my wild rambling language; that is only fit for your own eye" (188); "Let your sister and my lady Bidulph know in what manner I have disposed of Mrs Gerrarde, but be sure you do it discreetly, and take care not to mention that paultry circumstance of her settlement, or any other private agreement with Pivet" (231). Yet, in a recklessness typical of George, Faulkland's words are not taken seriously. Paradox greets Sidney head-on, for the language Faulkland adopts to sketch the situation is rich in ambiguities. Having imagined seeing Sidney's "beautiful scorn at hearing I had carried off Mrs. Gerrarde," he playfully continues:

> And yet I *have* carried her off, and she is now in my possession, not displeased with her situation; and I might, if I would, be as happy Mrs Gerrarde can make me: but I assure you, Sir George, I have no designs but what are for the good both of her soul and body; and I have hitherto treated her like a vestal. What a paradox is here? say you. But have patience till I tell you the story of my knight-erranty. (170)

Repeated and's weave a dreamy parataxis. Meaning accrues, and each clause seems to build on top of what goes before, and yet, when Faulkland is in earnest, and when playful, conveniently

slips out of sight. Amidst the smooth grammatical surface Faulkland manages to inch a space for different grammatical levels, even though the distinction between them is deliberately kept small. Subordination loops us in the moment we let down our guard. First, it is the conditional "if I could." Then, the clause beginning with "but I assure you" tentatively veers into the hypotactic with colon's visual aid, before the second "but" embeds the relative pronoun "what" tighter under the semantic field of "designs." Artful yet is the way Faulkland concludes this passage. The temporal condition makes the readerly paradox of reading Faulkland's explanation clear: none is certain before he tells us the full story.

Paradox proliferates and spirals in undulating intensity as Faulkland's letters progress. Comedically, he is all over the place. For a while he "sail[s] before wind," but is then overtaken by illness, his "soul…racked with suspense and uncertainty" (186, 193). Feigned terms of intimacies and desiderated transgression also go hand in hand with visceral expressions of his hatred for Mrs. Gerrarde. This pairing should suit his purpose. The "two difficulties to surmount" are, first, not to give Mrs. Gerrarde "the least room to hope" for a marriage, and second, "to keep up such an appearance of gallantry" as to make her suppose marriage is in view (187). These principles, governing his behavior with Mrs. Gerrarde, apply less strictly to his writing. Imprudence is noticeable even as misogynistic epithets are paraded with relish: "silly toad," "cockatrice," "charming vixen," "crocodile," "scorpion," "Amazon" (170, 173, 179, 196, 198, 211). When Faulkland "gain[s] [his] material point" in having Mrs. Gerrarde confess to Arnold via letters the injury she has done to Sidney, the spirits he hardly contains on the spot rings louder on the page: "I could have kissed Mrs Gerrarde; a liberty which, I assure you, however I never presumed to take" (205). Similarly, his final celebration of "getting rid of that woman" requires whitewashing

his opponent to accentuate his "virtue": "I, who have had one of the finest women in England in my possession for so many days (and by the way was not her aversion) to yield up her (by me) unpolluted charms to the arms of another" (231). In stringing together these extremes, Faulkland's letters take on a brittleness. As he says himself, "it is not every one, Sir George, whose hearts are enlarged enough to suppose a man may now-and-then take a little pains from disinterested principles" (193). Excess might tend his good intention to rebuke.

The resonant return of the escritoire shows how much Faulkland's plan gets on his nerves. In the first volume, out of the escritoire are sown the seeds that set misfortune in motion for him and Sidney alike. In the second volume, Faulkland wishes to rewrite his failure by reconfiguring and reclaiming what erstwhile betrayed him, even though his theatrical revenge is not unattended with obstacles. His first packet of letters renders the escritoire a site of gendered control.[18] On the evening of the ball, Faulkland slips away to "Mrs Gerrarde's house" and orders the maid "to get all her ladies trinkets together, and whatever money and bills she might have in her escrutoir" (175-6). He gives her maid Rachael "a parcel of small keys, which [he] ha[s] carried in his pocket for the purpose." Although Mrs. Gerrarde remains unaware of what Faulkland has in mind, Rachael raises no suspicion, convinced of Faulkland's intimacy with her mistress. This little episode of Faulkland's masterminding ends with a little flick:

> Whether any of the keys I gave her would fit the locks or not, I was not much concerned; if they did not, I concluded she would think her mistress had made a mistake, and that she would force them open rather than fail. (176)

Paraleipsis is the sleight of hand, and the alleged unconcern dissolves in Faulkland's sensual

[18] Writing desk is clearly a gendered object in the period. See, for instance, Thomas Sheraton's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book: In Four Parts* for an array of gendered desk designs. Although Lady Bidulph evokes "escriotire" in describing Faulkland's "bureau," Faulkland's consistent use of "escritoire" to refer to Mrs. Gerrarde's portable writing desk, in contrast to his "bureau" at home, keys into the gendered nature of this episode.

imagination of how the maid would grapple with the escritoire. The possible mismatch of keys and locks, after all, concerns him too much. That the same episode repeats confirms Faulkland's fascination. After Rachael joins Mrs. Gerrarde and Faulkland at the Rochester inn the morning after the ball, her rehearsal of how she carries out Faulkland's order, in turn, is reiterated by Faulkland, despite its apparent trivial bearing on the state of affairs. Having packed "some of the best of her lady's cloaths piece by piece," Rachael

> went to examine her lady's escrutoir; but was a long time puzzled in endeavouring to open it, as none of the keys I had given her answered. She endeavoured to force it open with as little noise as possible, but in vain. She then had recourse to a second trial of keys, when one of them, which probably had been passed by before, luckily opened the lock; and she secured all the money and jewels she could find. (183)

Third time's the charm, but second time suffices just as well. The escritoire opens, not only at "a second trial of keys," but also upon its second appearance in Faulkland's letters—at the rerun of a charged sequence, where "force" is worth a go since the more controlled means have failed. But reality turns out messier than Faulkland would like. Contrary to Faulkland's expectations, violence is "in vain." The "second trial of keys"—a third and final step in the sequence as Rachael presents it—subtly corrects his two-step imaginary. Violence, even in its quietest, gentlest form, is only viable in Faulkland's fantasy. *Memoirs*' social world sublimates its unruly energy into chance, whose aid enables the anaphoric, thrice-repeated "she" to tame the mildly resistant, twice-repeated "it." Instead of sealing the deal, violence becomes a symbolic detour, an interruption to what would be a smoother choreography. Faulkland's control is maintained tenuously. Despite the opportunity to reverse-engineer the events through letter writing, the dissonance between the desire to attain his heart's wish unobstructed and the inevitable complications attending the fulfilment of that desire reveals just how deeply the inherent slipperiness of events engrosses Faulkland's mind. He learns the lesson the hard way. The trauma

of losing Sidney is not easy to get over. Responding to Sidney's refusal of his renewed courtship, Faulkland describes how his hopes are crushed the first time, after they are "raised to such a pitch," with "the day, the hour fixed," "when an avenging fiend snatched the promised blessing from [his] grasp" (302).

Still, violence's appeal to Faulkland is evident, especially given that Mrs. Gerrarde's escritoire is in question. For Faulkland, he has "known her to [his] cost"; she is "the cause of Miss Burchell's misfortune; and therefore the remote cause of [his] losing Miss Bidulph" (170). Though his fantasy is not realized, brooding over the possibilities of making bold with Mrs. Gerrarde's property obviously brings him cathartic satisfaction. By the close of the first packet, Faulkland's bravado tips into the romantic and the allegorical, whence he assumes the character of "an ungentle knight":

> You may soon expect to have the second part of this my delectable history; 'Shewing how Orlando, not being able to prevail, with all his eloquence, on the as fair and beautiful, as fierce and inexorable Princess Gerrardina, to put the finishing hand to his adventures and most wonderful exploits, did, his wrath being moved thereby, like an ungentle knight, bury his sword in her snow-white, but savage and unrelenting breast; whereat, being stung with remorse, he afterwards kills himself.' (188)

Loaded is the tension between the "adventures and most wonderful exploits" that have happened and a "second part" that is yet to be written. Faulkland's position bears structural similarity with his aborted union with Sidney. Here, as then, everything is in place. Only "the finishing hand" is wanted; "this identical devil" he has "*known*…to [his] cost" is "in [his] power" (170). All that is yet to be figured out is how to make Mrs. Gerrarde confess and prevent her return to England. But the prospect of success can teeter at any moment into utter failure. Subtending the rhetorical flourish is a deep-seated fear of not plucking the low-hanging fruit once again, and a sense of collapse fuels the drama. What briefly delights, disgusts. The volleys

of epithets piled to describe "Princess Gerrardina" are quick to pull away from their point of departure. In the phrase "as fair and beautiful, as fierce and inexorable," and "snow-white, but savage and unrelenting breast," agreeable physical traits land obliquely, displaced and overthrown by gross, militant combinations that intensely shade into Mrs. Gerrarde's moral depravity, which Faulkland learns from an all too intimate prior acquaintance. The whole story arcs the same decline. The fraught word "delectable" fractures and contradicts its own connotation. Though the history is strictly Faulkland's, it ends with an imaginary suicide "delectable" to its recipient at the expense of the penner. The mood swings precipitate his undoing. The "wrath" that ousts his "eloquence" tumbles swiftly into stinging "remorse." The exact moment he unleashes his vengeance without restraint, the enabling means of allegory disables by showing the limit of his substitutional logic. Well might Faulkland take Rachael's role while consigning Mrs. Gerrarde to her escritoire's position, but he cannot escape scot-free. The unstoppable streak of violence must implicate himself, at which point plausibility jumps ship, exposing the fictionality of this all-destroying fancy possible only within single quotation marks.

The real delight for Faulkland, then, is of an apotropaic kind. His hope is rather that "my knight-errantry will not end so tragically" (188). The effectiveness of his strategy takes us by surprise. While narrative pressure warps the close of his imagined tale, what first appears as pure fantasy exerts a retrospective hold on the story world. In the second packet, this motif Faulkland has been playing, first in literal repetition, and then in allegorical rewriting, prophetically charts the means he effects Sidney's rescue.

"During [his] illness," he describes a consultation with himself, in which "Several methods presented themselves, but none of them pleased [him]." After a series of rejections, Faulkland

writes,

> to tell you my mind honestly, I was almost resolved on using compulsion, and frightening the poor woman into compliance: for I preferred even this to artificial dealings. I had already used more than I could have possibly brought myself to on any other occasion in the world; and I think I should have threatened her with a nunnery, the Bastillle, or even an inquisition, sooner than have failed, if she herself had not beyond expectation, beyond hope, almost beyond the evidence of my senses, led me as it were to request the thing of her, which of all others I most despaired of her consenting to, or even hearing proposed with patience. (194)

Like Rachael fumbling with her mistress's escritoire, Faulkland starts by testing the means at hand and finds them falling short. A more violent measure appears as a tantalizing alternative. Rachel adopts it, whereas for Faulkland, it remains a passing impulse. His streak of luck comes earlier. Something "beyond expectation, beyond hope, almost beyond…senses" opens the way. The metaphor he chooses highlights this parallel too. Substitution, earlier buried, is made explicit. Faulkland describes Mrs. Gerrarde's assumed "air of a penitent" as "the master-key to her behavior," and laying hold of that makes "unlock[ing] her breast" an "easy" task (195). The imprint of his allegorical foray yet deepens. To triumph over Mrs. Gerrarde entails his paradoxically withstanding a no less taxing corporeal ailment. While Mrs. Gerrarde is "thunder-struck" after Faulkland tells her that marriage is never his motive to carry her all the way to France, while she feigns disease where there is none, Faulkland's body undergoes a nervous breakdown (209). This additional torment, however, clicks everything into place, a turn that strikes Faulkland as at once "strange[]" and "natural." In hammering home his plan, Faulkland turns a melancholic obsession in the first packet into a blueprint, even as he, so burdened with "fears…intrely [sic.] on Mrs Arnold's account," narrowly avoids a collapse into "mad[ness]" (193).

That the meandering unfolding of Faulkland's scheme consummates in such a suspiciously

convenient way prompts an important question. If Faulkland's escritoire, a bureau in essence, has been a site of precarious revelation, where access breeds confusion rather than clarity, how should we understand the function of Mrs. Gerrarde's escritoire, when it timely facilitates a local triumph? Terry Castle has suggested that the didactic surface of the masquerade in eighteenth-century novels belies a twofold pleasure: it shifts the narrative "to the estranging realm of the carnivalesque" and at the same time invokes a larger "euphoric pattern" because intrigues, while dangerous, serve to unite the hero and heroine.[19] Admittedly, Faulkland's ball at "V—hall" is not masked, but Castle's insight helps us put it into perspective, as it shares with the masquerade meaningful similarities despite their difference. The public dimension is the common ground where the two meet. Faulkland notes, briefly but pointedly, that "not a person of any fashion [is] left unasked," and the evening manages to assemble "a very large company" (Sheridan, 175). Moreover, as we have seen, the subsequent plot is electrified by the subversive energies that Castle attributes to the masquerade. An implied incursion of irrationalism cooperates, mysteriously, with Faulkland to bring about his plan. The difference here is that Sheridan needs no masquerade as such to disrupt everyday boredom. Faulkland intervenes at a juncture when too many disruptions have occurred. The novel is already saturated with upheavals. Since Faulkland's pilfered escritoire catapults the plot, a theatre is burnt, Arnold's adultery is discovered, and Sidney is expelled. Faulkland's ball thus partly inverts the typical function of the masquerade trope. Rather than strike out a path towards the irrational and the incredible in contradistinction to the polite world, the ball restores moral order, at least momentarily. Evil is

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[19] Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*. (Methuen, 1986), 119, 122.

punished to pacify our sense of justice, and the fissures between goals and outcomes are finally mended for once.

To say that Sheridan inverts the masquerade trope is also to see the inevitability of tragedy. For a conventional masquerade to work its magic on plot, the virtuous heroine falls prey, so that the upright hero can appear like a knight in shining armor. Think of Sir Charles Grandison's rescue of Harriet Byron from Sir Hargrave Pollexfen's coach. Or of Evelina extricating herself from a group of badgering prostitutes at Lord Orville's return. But ironically with Faulkland, the upright knight assumes an "ungentle" character, channels his inner Lovelace, and tarnishes his reputation—not to save the heroine, but to elope with a woman he despises, for "nothing [i]s farther from [his] heart than a thought of gallantry" (181).

If, through the stylized pattern of something akin to a masquerade, Sheridan opens a space for wish-fulfilment, then Faulkland's wish is romantic only in its anti-romantic bent. He renounces the prospect of union with Sidney in order to reunite her with someone unworthy of her, one who has already failed her. His love, as well as his sacrifice, knows no bounds. This most noble wish is nevertheless enmeshed in desire. The recursive variation soundingly suggests melancholy, even though the object of mourning is still clear. Sidney hovers in the background every time sexual overtones intensify—when he imagines to "bury his sword in her snow-white, but savage and unrelenting breast," when the "master key to her behaviour…unlock[s] her breast," when he at last boasts of "yield[ing] up her…unpolluted charms to the arms of another" (188, 195, 231). The referent of *her* is inevitably Mrs. Gerrarde, however desperately Faulkland wishes it were Sidney instead. Recursion becomes an echo chamber for irony, and misdirection the only option for Faulkland's desire.

IV. The Novelistic Escritoire: Gender and Epistolarity

This enforced separation of love and desire invites us to rethink the novel's politics of gender. Focusing on Sheridan's women, Jean Coates Cleary argues that in *Memoirs*, two forms of affection, *cupiditas* and *caritas*, vies for dominance over the female heart. Miss Burchell is for Sidney "the object-lesson…that the consummation of an ardently felt, passionate love, even if it is sanctioned by marriage, is to be feared and must be avoided lest it lead to a sensual debasement synonymous with prostitution."[20] Faulkland, of course, is not held hostage to the same morality. He never considers his sexual lapse "a capital crime," and he is free to love, both in the sensual sense and the chastened sense of the word (Sheridan, 170). But his struggle on the other side of the gender divide shows just how much the idea of a pure and tempered love foredooms the possibility of its realization.

However skewed and questionable its terms, feminism is a force to reckon with in *Memoirs*' world. Women not only outnumber men, and their voices are heard more than men, but more important, with them resides the hermeneutic authority. Authorial women have the final say. From Sir George's defense of Faulkland, to Faulkland's self-justification, and then to Arnold's courtship that is endorsed by Lady Bidulph's equally rigid-minded friend Lady Grimston, matriarchs rebut men's reading of the world and preside over younger women's fate. The younger women, in turn, find a breathing space in form; their hand stamps Sidney's journal at every level. Sidney's penmanship is only replaced by her maid Patty Main, and Cecilia's editorial decisions preempts the agency of the unnamed male editor, who, after all, is a surrogate persona

[20] Jean Coates Cleary, "Introduction," *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, by Frances Sheridan, edited by Patricia Köster, and Jean Coates Cleary, (Oxford University Press, 1995), xxviii.

of Sheridan herself.

Even when Faulkland manages to "put those flights of fancy into act," the success has as much to do with what he has done as with the reading Sidney performs (232). Without her penetrating those hermetic seals Faulkland's rhetoric has wrapped about his admirable disinterestedness, and without her screening the inappropriate when presenting to the unwell Lady Bidulph "the substance of what he said", his plan could go awry at every amatory and ambiguous knot that his writing braids (189). In the correspondence between the younger generation of women, matriarchy reproduces itself, despite its blustering force obviously curtailed. I think Katherine Blakely is right to remark that duty for women "is an expression of free will."[21] However, in arguing that because the duty to another woman, rather than to man, converts "compulsory self-abnegation" to "freely chosen bonds," the apparent tragedy in *Memoirs* is "largely beside the point," Blakely might have pushed her claim to far (565). To suggest that Sidney receives a happy death in *Memoirs*' sequel, *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, which Sheridan writes seven years later and published posthumously, seems to me a repetition of Cecilia's blinkered reliance on heavenly management to abate the shock of Sidney's miseries. I agree broadly with Margaret Anne Doody's claim instead, that "this higher feminine understanding, these moral views, have their own limitations which in turn must be transcended in a larger comprehension" (344). Additionally, I do not wish to move on "beyond feminism" too quickly. Granted, this novel, like Doody suggests, "open[s] out the complexities that arise in human life whenever human beings try to do right" (345). But, as I have shown, these "complexities" are in part derived from and conditioned by the escritoire motif. What

[21] Kathryn Blakely, "Feminine Duties and Happiness Deferred in Frances Sheridan's *Sidney Bidulph* Novels," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, vol. 62, no. 3, (2022): 573.

Faulkland's ball occasions is not independent of Faulkland's inability to move over his trauma. The intensity with which the novel's hero and heroine is afflicted, the absence of a way out, trenchantly holds us in custody.

A few remarks on *Memoirs*' epistolarity help tie the splintered formalist readings I have been performing every so often, and clarify how form interacts with and strengthens a perverse kind of female dominance. If it is a tautology to say all epistolary novels, in one way or another, are borne out of escritoires, *Memoirs* distinguishes itself in that the escritoire's imagistic, symbolic, and plot-level significance is carried over, and indeed permeates, the kindred discourses surrounding Sidney's journal. All that is unseen does not vanish for good. Letters that seem lost returns to restore clarity, though not all at once, and frequently one beat off. Contrary to how truth frays and distorts in transmission, written words on paper abides amidst what The Critical Review mesmerizingly termed "a thousand little previous formalities."[22] Like Donnean compass, they stray, but are never lost. Miss Burchell's letter informing Faulkland of her pregnancy is neither lost nor perverted as changes hands to the disappointment of all. Likewise, the letter Faulkland writes from Bath to Sir George—the very one Lady Bidulph glosses over, tossing "to George with indignation" and leaving it "fallen on the floor" (Sheridan 45)—recurs years later to Sidney's absolute grief. Whereas letters repeatedly come under duress in Richardson's novels: now intercepted, then tampered with, here blotted by tears, there torn; the figuration of such tropes is sparse in *Memoirs*. The conventional fragility of letters turned on its head, a fatal sense of ill-timing does the actual trick instead.

However abiding and free from drama are *Memoirs'* letters, irrecoverable losses cannot be

[22] *The Critical Review* II, March, (1761): 186.

prevented. The letter Faulkland sneaks to her right after the theft's revelation, one that Sidney hands to Lady Bidulph unopened, is "put…directly into the fire" and hence lost forever (55). But in instances like this, loss is not Sheridan's main object. The rerouting of truth both within the novel and on the readerly end interests her more. Delayed rug-pulling does not affect immediate understanding. In the moment, one might infer that the letter might be a plea, or a reiteration of the Bath affair from Faulkland's perspective. And yet, only a revisiting suggests the possibility that it could contain a most timely reminder for Sidney to fact-check on her part. Instead of sealing off knowledge, erasure provokes, and ought to provoke, inquiry. Its tacit warning, like writing on the wall, becomes legible only in retrospect.

The formal paradox that stamps *Memoirs*' epistolarity, then, ultimately resides in a peculiar combination of what J. Paul Hunter terms "a peculiar unity" and "a peculiar looseness."[23] The presiding epistolary sturdiness benefits from Sheridan's commitment to absence, not just at the narrative level, but as a structural principle. Where her goal parts way from that of Richardson's is that totality is not high on her list. In Sheridan's own memoirs published by her granddaughter, Alicia LeFanu records Sheridan's dissatisfaction with "the unreasonable length of [Richardson's] productions."[24] Sheridan wryly observes that "In the novels of Richardson, the Bookseller got the better of the author"' (LeFanu 109). For Sheridan, prolixity is bound up with the seamy connotations of an author's less than desired financial status, and the perchance burdensome expectations of the literary market. While it is economic pressure that motivates *Memoirs*' composition, epistolary economy is the rubric under which she corrals her work.[25] Sidney's

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[23] J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction*, (W. W. Norton, 1990), 24.
[24] Alicia LeFanu, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mrs. Frances Sheridan*, (G. And W. B. Whittaker, 1824), 108.
[25] As Hunter and Garret note, Thomas Sheridan's theatre was burned in 1754. By 1758, "Thomas's theatre failed and they incurred a debt of seven thousand pounds from which they did not recover while Frances lived."*Memoirs* is thus written "with the hope that she could ease the family's financial woes" (12).

journal as we see it is not an exhaustive record. Source material arrives pruned, stalling searches for a complete, untarnished whole at the start, whereas its porous rigor nonetheless constitutes a condensed, pithy punch. Sheridan toys with Richardsonian legacies. Overwhelming reversals not only domesticate Richardson's "non-narrative" with a thorough plotline, but they also preserve in a less-than-Pamela length a pathos comparable of that of *Clarissa*'s (Hunter 51).

This intervention is crucial. Sheridan, I think, can be read as an important pivot between Richardson and, say, Frances Burney. The narrative, if we are to follow the teleological vision as Nancy Armstrong has painted, will be one that of the taming of Clarissa's recalcitrant virtue through form.[26] To move from *Clarissa*'s formidable bulkiness, both of its letters and the editorial apparatuses, to the minimal framing and a more naturalized account we get in Burney's *Evelina*, requires a work like *Memoirs*, whose framing device, as I have argued, is a more immediate part of the story, and whose editorial principles signify an obvious intention to sanitize and to economize the epistolary form.[27]

Terry Castle has shown that *Clarissa* is about contested readings. There, "the letter can be seen not just as an attempt to articulate, for oneself, a reading of experience, but as a mode of imposing this reading on the other."[28] This is not the effect Sheridan cultivates in *Memoirs*. The arrangement of letters recalls more closely the early volumes of *Sir Charles Grandison*, where

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[26] In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong suggests that the internalizing move as performed by the novel from eighteenth-century to the Victorian period coincides with a simplification of political power from "the conflict between male and female" to "conflicts within the female character, between her innate desires and the role she was destined to occupy." Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel,* (Oxford University Press, 1987) 253.
""The political conflicts that the novel represents

[27] Of course, paralleling this formal line is a thematic line where *Memoirs*' exploration of female agency, particularly as it played out intergenerationally, find abundant successors. To name a few, consider, for instance, Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, and Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray*.

[28] Terry Castle, *Clarissa's Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson's "Clarissa"* (1982), (Cornell University Press, 2016), 56.

Harriet Byron's voice takes charge. Again, optics is the novel's million-quid question. In the absence of an internal diegetic counterpoint, we do not, as in *Clarissa*, have Lovelace's deceits unfolded in his letters ahead of Clarissa's experience. Instead, first-time readers are largely trapped within the heroine's perspective, as anxious to know whether Sir Charles Grandison is able to return Harriet's feelings as whether Sidney is merely sounding sensibility's false alarm—be it in her scruples over Miss Burchell's disguise, or her instinctive distaste for Arnold, whose first entrance provokes "a sort of dislike" she cannot explain (Sheridan 64). The quandary, rather than of *Clarissa*'s "hermeneutic *libertinage*," is one of hermeneutic dearth (Castle *Ciphers* 55). Although we clearly perceive the limit of this almost violent feminine ordering of the world, we must follow its logic, proceeding half-blind as we are. The governing textual economy, Cecilia's emphasis on materiality, leads to an experiential void. We are kept in prolonged suspense.

As with other examples I have been tracing, form not only mirrors, but catalyzes content. *Memoirs*'s architectural form resembles that of a bureau. Faulkland's halved explanation, itself the centerpiece of Sidney's journal, envelopes the tumid and unproductive gender dynamics that constitutes Sheridan's prime object of critique. Like the two physical escritoires featured along the way, these apparently symmetric pairs cannot hold their promises. Hierarchy is unstable. The nests of words extend into one another, collapse on top of each other, and expose what they are designed to obscure. And yet the exposition itself wreaks havoc. The gender trouble that exudes from the porous novelistic container spells Faulkland's perpetual loss in mazy waters. His nominal freedom to assume Lovelace's habit before Sir George misfires. He becomes for the Bidulph women another Lovelace regardless of his actual affinity with Sir Charles Grandison.

In the end, Faulkland inhabits both sides of the gender divide. Every major female

character can be said to have wronged him.[29] Mrs. Gerrarde entraps him; Miss Burchell abuses his trust for her honesty and chastity; Lady Bidulph absorbs his sexual fault into her unresolved trauma; and Sidney, though ultimately left no means to escape the recognition that she has been "a fatal wretch" to him, has steered him into the city of destruction (Sheridan, 391). The consequent psychic expense is cumulative, until Faulkland's mind splits into halves. By the time he shows up before Sidney in the third volume, thinking himself already a murderer of Mrs. Faulkland and her then lover Major Smyth, we find him in "phrenzy" (438). With verve at an insurmountable height and frittered to depletion at once, Faulkland assures Sidney that "you shall soon be rid of this fatal—hated—betrayed—abandoned wretch," before "striking his breast, burst[ing] into tears, and rushing suddenly into his closet, he shut[s] the door violently, locking it on the inside" (436). The voluntary incarceration stands as an inverse cognate of Letter 264 in *Clarissa*. Suffering from insomnia after the rape, Lovelace reports his "look[ing] through the keyhole of my beloved's door."[30] The door separates action from inaction, and metaphorically, life from death. Within, "the charming injured can sweetly sleep," despite "a sleepy lifelessness." Without, "the varlet injurer cannot close his eyes; and has been trying to no purpose, the whole night, to divert his melancholy, and to fly from himself" (904). What takes two in Richardson, merges into one. Faulkland bears the double toll of Lovelace's restlessness and Clarissa's debility. Richardson's voyeuristic vignette contours, too, the strikingly aural and introspective quality that underlies Sheridan's scene. In *Clarissa*, we follow the arch-rake's gaze inwards; the female apotheosis appears so close to yet so far from his reach in her locked-up

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[29] For a gendered reading of Faulkland, see Kathleen M. Oliver, "Frances Sheridan's Faulkland, the Silenced, Emasculated, Ideal Male," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 43, no. 3, (2003). Oliver's reading is sharp, but sometimes it risks downplaying Faulkland's agency and masculinity.

[30] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady* (1947-8), (Penguin, 1985), 904.

room. *Memoirs* rejects voyeurism, and spectacle is kept outside of the door. Once Faulkland locks himself in, the aural replaces the visual. His cry emanates without, piercing through the door: "He wept aloud, and his agonies reduced me almost to the same condition with himself" (Sheridan 436).

This ever-volatile careening between his inner Lovelace and Clarissa culminates in his closing maneuver. Faulkland's integrity, and the belief that "[Sidney] and [her] brother slight[] him in his misfortunes" give him enormous moral and emotional leverage that he no longer hesitates to exploit (442). He soon breaks off and flees, launching towards self-annihilation were it not that Sidney's marriage vow "ransom this desperate self-devoted victim" (440). Though Sidney's "heart strongly impels [her] to consent," she feels the threat of "consequences too dreadful to be thought on" (446). Transaction and contest imbue this long-awaited, illusory union, and come through in Sidney's words: "I owe him a great sacrifice, and I am about to pay it" (448). Retaliation dictates the logic of gendered interaction by the novel's end, whence Faulkland's final gambit amounts no more than a bitter parody of his legitimized and celebrated revenge upon Mrs. Gerrarde.

Memoirs is therefore as much about women's suffering from the straitjacket of nicety as about women turning the very strictures patriarchy devised to constrain them into powerful tools for punishing men. The "curious aggressiveness" and "bite" of the novel's sentimentalism, as Patricia Meyer Spacks observes, eventually finds in Faulkland's body a most supple, easy target.[31] He and Sidney are "mutually fatal to each other," as the suit that turns him into her implicit rival of delicacy concludes with their shared victimhood (Sheridan, 435). This reversal marks

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[31] Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth Century English Novels*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 134, 140.

sentimentality's capacity, not to move, but to wound.

For a novel born out of the escritoire, this end note cannot be more fitting. Alicia LeFanu records how Sheridan writes *Memoirs* "with a small trunk or chest placed beside her, into which she put her manuscript, if Mr. Sheridan chanced to enter the room while she was thus employed." This domestic chest, containing and concealing, not only enables Sheridan to hone her work before *Memoirs*' eventual entrance into the world, but also literalizes the tension that ripples across Sheridan's novel. The fragile, well-meaning secrecy bore fruit for the authoress; "the merit of the progressive work" came into full bloom, and *Memoirs* was enormously popular in England as well as in France (109). Her characters, on the contrary, are not as fortunate. Betrayals careless and calculated harmonize to increase the damage done to the promising would-be wedded couple. The ferocious belaboring of circumstances, in the last analysis, cements the escritoire as *Memoirs*' operative emblem. Its spectral, near marginal role, does not cripple its malleability and metaphorical reach. Oscillating between the impulse to hide and to show, before giving over, bit by bit, its prized contents, the multivalent escritoire exhibits the bleak void that has been prescribing the fate of exemplary men and women. Fate might be wayward and ills inevitable, but "the best disposition that the human heart is capable of" certainly has not made the best decisions within her compass. This very discrepancy, Sheridan suggests, is not merely a matter of stars. Female agency *ought to* find its one way to avoid the self-imposed distortion, repression, and misdirection. And then, perhaps not unlike the escritoire Faulkland wills open, what has long lodged in Sheridan's own escritoire will prove apotropaic to all its readers.

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