

**EM/BEDDED NARRATIVES:
MARRIAGE, SEDUCTION AND ADULTERY
IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL**

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with embedded stories of seduction in the context of eighteenth-century novels. Although literary history has focused mainly on the novel of courtship, marital and family life has actually had a very important place in literature throughout the century. Within novels about the life of a marriage the tales of chaste wives repeatedly run in narrative conjunction with embedded tales of fallen women. These do not function merely as cautionary contrasts but participate in the process of consolidating the discourse of marriage and love in the period of sensibility. The principal object of analysis is the novel of Frances Sheridan (1724–1766) *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) where embedded tales of seduction problematise traditional concepts of female and conjugal morality. The article relies on recent approaches to the history of the family and on the methods of feminist narratology.

Keywords: Frances Sheridan; novel of marriage; women novelists; eighteenth-century English novel; feminist narratology; love in literature; history of family

In her book *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660–1789*, Susan Staves observes that many “women novelists turn away from the courtship plot to make the relationship of husband and wife within marriage an important subject” (Staves 2005: 339). If the ideal wife, at least according to the prescriptive conduct and religious literature of the time, was to be always chaste and turn a blind eye to the infidelities of the husband, of what interest could the life of a marriage be for a novelist? The married heroine of Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* writes to her correspondent that she has nothing else to write since “comedies and romances [...] always end in marriage, because, after that, there is nothing to be said” (Mackenzie 1999: 116). But as this novel itself proves, the post-marriage plots involve many complications: violence, abuse, economic distress, the return of a first love, even infidelity. The questions posed by such narratives thus bring into focus the whole notion of conjugal love, the role of the family, obedience and morality. Moreover, several major texts of the time include embedded narratives that rehearse a range of alternatives for the heroine. Of significant interest among these are

interpolated stories of seduction, which, as I shall argue, provide insights into the ways the novels' representation of marriage should be read. This analysis shall address seduction tales narrated by married women as embedded stories within their own story. Here, seduced and married women are not at all simply contrasted but actually connected through themes, structural links and other complex narrative interactions. Thus, there is an at least double hermeneutics at play. Embedded tales of women who bedded men other than their husbands provide an invaluable source for the study of eighteenth-century discourse of marriage, love and subjectivity. Although brief excursions into other eighteenth-century women's texts will have to be made, the article intends to concentrate on the developments in the latter part of the century, focusing its attention mainly on Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761).¹

Marriage and Adultery

Although our understanding of the sexual mores of early modern England has greatly advanced in the recent years, relatively little is known in detail about the period from the Restoration to the late eighteenth century. Historians are aware that patterns and ideas of family and domestic relations were undergoing significant changes especially in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. A number of studies about divorce, prostitution, kinship patterns and family relations have begun to make good this neglect, but many gaps still remain in our understanding of the changing cultural, social and intellectual context in which illicit sexual activity was viewed and discussed.² For example, relatively few studies have explored the cultural representation of adultery as a topic in its own right, despite the visibility of marital breakdown as a theme of a wide variety of texts.³

Historians of the family have viewed the early modern period as one of "privatization" of domestic relations. Until the late seventeenth century, society viewed the well-governed patriarchal family as a microcosm of the state. Vice was regulated by church courts and magistrates, together with a range of community-based public shaming rituals. Over the course of the seventeenth century, analogy between familial and political order began to break down. The family was increasingly cast as a private sphere, a refuge of intimacy distinct from the public world of politics.⁴ Harsh strictures on relationships of power and

¹ Frances Sheridan (1724–1766) was an Anglo-Irish novelist and playwright, friend of Sarah Fielding, Catherine Macaulay, Samuel Johnson and David Garrick, who visited her London house very often. Sheridan is now famous for two of her novels: *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, a novel of sensibility, and *The History of Nourjahad*, an Oriental tale published posthumously in 1767. Sheridan's son, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, included several incidents from *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* in his famous play, *The School for Scandal* (1777). Also *Nourjahad* influenced drama. Its theatrical version, a musical called *Illusion, or The Trances of Nourjahad*, was staged at Drury Lane in 1813. Its author was anonymous, but the play was often attributed to Byron.

² Classic texts tracing the history of the family are studies by Lawrence Stone (1977), Randolph Trumbach (1978); challenging views are offered by e.g. Ruth Perry (2004) and Naomi Tadmor (2001).

³ To name just a few examples of novels from the latter part of the eighteenth century: Eliza Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751), Sarah Fielding's *The History of the Countess of Dellwynn* (1759), Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and *Maria: Or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798).

⁴ For such an account see e.g. Amussen (1988) or Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987).

subordination within the family, which had dominated puritan conduct literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, gave way to a marked emphasis on marital love. Its fullest expression came in the cult of domesticity that dominated the discourse of family in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵

In many ways, this is a persuasive account, yet to a great extent it ignores the complexity of the public – private relation. As e.g. McKeon (2005) or Houltbrooke (1995) have shown, gender, family and sexuality continued to be important to the political debate in this period. Not only was it translated into a growing interest in the relationship between private virtue and political probity, marked by an increased attack on aristocratic vice by the middling sort, such as we find in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), but it is even more obviously applied in the so-called amatory novels⁶ of Delarivier Manley, who stages sexual relations within and without the family as a vehicle of political satire and more or less direct political intervention.⁷

The history of early modern family life is best seen in terms of structural continuity, punctuated by changes in the “media of expression” (Houltbrooke 1998: 2). Sex and marriage were topics of great interest, and sexual behavior such as adultery became more public than ever before. As Richetti (1992) rightly argues, the greatly popular genres such as scandal chronicles, memoirs of all kinds and secret histories served up tales of sexual adventures of the upper class, which allowed the readers to experience the thrills of clandestine love vicariously.

Adultery is seen as a key fault line of gender difference in early modern society. Conduct books typically see adultery as a misdemeanour in the husband, while preaching to the wife to not only remain faithful but even turn a blind eye to her husband's failings. As George Savile, Marquis of Halifax puts it in *The Lady's New Year's Gift*:

Remember that the next to the danger of committing the fault your self [*sic*], the greatest is that of seeing it in your husband. Do not seem to look or hear that way: if he is a man of sense he will reclaim himself, the folly of it; if he is not so, he will be provoked but not reformed. To expostulate in these cases looketh like declaring war, and preparing reprisals. (Halifax 1688: 35)⁸

Halifax's advice is famous for its explicit treatment of the double standard: the notion that in a patriarchal and patrilineal society the adultery of wives, with its damaging effects on property transfer, was more serious than that of husbands.⁹

⁵ This was first promoted on the pages of the early eighteenth-century periodicals *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, published by Addison and Steele, and later developed in the cult of sensibility and the domestic novel.

⁶ The term was coined by Ballaster (1992).

⁷ Delarivier Manley (1663–1724) was a Tory propagandist pamphleteer, journalist (she took over *The Examiner* from Jonathan Swift) and novelist. Her most famous work now is an anti-Whig political allegory called *The New Atalantis* (1709).

⁸ This conduct book was originally written as a wedding present to Halifax's twelve year old daughter. It was immensely popular and went through thirteen reprints in the eighteenth century. Its popularity was eventually superseded in 1774 by John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* and Dr James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), ridiculed in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* when Mr Collins tries to read it aloud to the Bennet sisters.

⁹ This idea forms the basis of Keith Thomas's (1959) classic statement of the sexual double standard.

Studies of the gendered nature of adultery have mostly concentrated on the consequences of illicit sexuality rather than its causes. But why did people embark on extra-marital affairs? What were the emotions or moral dilemmas raised by such behaviour? We still know very little about this.

The focus of this article is therefore on the meanings of illicit sexuality, including adultery and extramarital sex as a result of seduction, and the ways in which these were conveyed. If writers of the 1720s and 1730s like Eliza Haywood and Delarivier Manley write about the sexual act in fairly explicit ways, describing, for example, the erotic attractions for women of revealed male bodies, such openness is not to be found in the texts produced by women in the latter decades of the century. Yet, the cult of sensibility demands attention to physical reactions to emotions and feelings. In the discourse of sensibility the heart is the most important organ and feeling is given the greatest authority as a way to truth. If, as I argued above, according to historians of the family the eighteenth century witnesses the gradual emergence of companionate marriage as an ideal, this obviously carries a new imperative for women: to know the heart and make the right decisions based on emotions. Yet, women struggle to decode the new semiotics of courtship and love as this is being constituted and they waver between dilemmas, such as how to square moral social demands, the respect and filial duty owed to parents, and acting on one's own emotional impulse. I want to argue at this point that precisely such conflicts become central to a number of novels from the 1750s onwards. In order to resolve these issues, women writers reach for various narrative strategies, especially repetition and the use of interpolated tales.

Seduction

History and narrative interact: narrative helps to constitute and to resolve conflicts as certain stories are compulsively repeated at various times. The latter part of the eighteenth century seems preoccupied with seduction, as a virtuous heroine is either seduced into believing her lover's false vows and consenting to sex, or, yielding to her emotions actually becomes complicit in the act of seduction. For the first time, women have "a right to a heart," as Clarissa claims (Richardson 1985: 87). The story of seduction is, in fact, a story of women's failed knowledge of this heart. Consequently, it has more to do with a history of emotions than a history of sexuality. The seduction narrative's epistemology of the heart, then, is a part of the larger movement of sentimental philosophy, as advanced in the writings of Francis Hutcheson or Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Seduction also requires the cultural belief that women's consent in sexual relations is necessary. Women then need to be included in conceptions of subjectivity which Lawrence Stone terms "affective individualism" (Stone 1977: 221 and *passim*).¹⁰ Yet it also requires the sexual double standard where female chastity is unequally valued and male sexual freedom accepted.

¹⁰ Stone coined this concept and developed it especially in chapter 6 of *The Family, Sex and Marriage* (1977).

Traditional feminist interpretations of seduction tales assume a mimetic model in which the repetition of this plot functions to indoctrinate women into restrictive ideas of female chastity. They discipline female readers not to have desires, not to go out in public, not to marry without familial consent. Nancy Armstrong (1987) argues that in writing domestic fiction women created for the female her own confinement. Spencer's reading is more nuanced, yet she also explicitly claims that "[b]y idealizing the heroine as an innocent victim of men and fate, the novel of seduction sometimes reinforced rather than challenged the oppressive ideology of femininity" (Spencer 1986: 113).

However, the popularity of seduction tales in the period could be claimed to reflect the absence, rather than the presence, of a clearly formulated dominant ideology that would constrict female desire. In such a reading, seduction tales are not indoctrinating didactic texts, punishing women who act on their feelings, but actually exploratory texts probing the nature of women's affective and erotic lives. Seduction can be understood as a discursive practice where discourse is understood in Foucauldian terms as the system of thought within which knowledge is produced. It produces new objects (romantic love, the heart, a new set of meanings for 'love' etc.) and imbues them with new authority.

How heroines determine the knowledge of their own heart in many later eighteenth-century narratives occurs through their own reading of other seduction narratives. *Clarissa* stands as the *ur-text*, when repetition of the telling of an event from multiple points of view speaks to the absence of firm discursive practices around seduction. Wollstonecraft's *Maria: Or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) or Mary Hays' *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) stand on the opposite ends of the spectrum where the repetition of reading as an event points to a more solidified set of practices. The protagonists (Maria and Emma, respectively) both read Rousseau's novel *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and model their ideas of lovers on the tender hero, St Preux. We move from the *untold* story of Clarissa's unacknowledged love to clear textual articulations of personal emotion which are read and reread over and over again. In between this range, contradictory and competing versions of the tales exist simultaneously and these differences point us toward the untold possible narratives buried under the weight of the ideal of femininity.

There were many different seduction stories exploring the new landscape of love and companionate marriage by choice. But all later eighteenth-century seduction tales pursue a number of questions about women, love and marriage. Should a woman marry a man she does not love out of family duty? Does affective choice constitute a legitimate justification for disobeying parents? Can a woman fall in love twice? Can love without money sustain a relationship? Is love outside the bonds of marriage ethically superior to mercenary sex inside marriage? What is the relation between passion and emotion, love and sex?

Narrative Situations of Embedding

Critics have noted the important influence of women's amatory fiction (such as was written by Manley, Haywood or Aphra Behn) on sentimental writers including Samuel Richardson and Frances Sheridan, but the traditions are crucially distinct in their representation of seduction and in its narration. Seduction in amatory fiction is mostly related

in third-person narration. It functions as part of a plot of intrigue less attuned to characterization than to action, or to interiorized models of subjectivity than to exteriorized ones. However, seduction tales in the sentimental novel almost always dramatize the act of narration. The heroine narrates the telling of her tale repeatedly throughout her tale, both in the frame narrative (often an epistolary address) where she justifies the telling of her story, or in the stories within the story where her story is told to an intra-diegetic listener. For example, Agnes in Amelia Opie's *Father and Daughter* (1801) is seduced and abandoned in the opening pages of the novel and then proceeds to repeat the story of her seduction to multiple listeners with different effect. Through repeatedly staging their own telling as events in the plots, seduction tales incorporate multiple ways of knowing as experiments with the way meanings are determined within a narrative context.

By making the act of narration part of its formal structure and thus requiring attention to the context of enunciation, the interpolated, or embedded, seduction tale presents a particular challenge to narrative theory. Many critics, notably feminists, have argued that narrative theory, especially, in its structuralist form, remains primarily formalist and resists addressing questions of politics and history. Susan S. Lanser was one of the first to introduce contextual material to narrative theory and the attacks on her seminal essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology," published in 1986, demonstrate the resistance to history and determination of narratology to produce a transhistorical science of narrative.¹¹ I build upon Lanser's view of narrative in its dialogue between the formalist terms of narratology and the historical claims of the situatedness of gender: "The study of gender and narrative explores the (historically contingent) ways in which sex, gender, and/or sexuality might shape both narrative texts themselves and the theories through which readers and scholars approach them" (Lanser 2013: paragraph 1). Within this field of enquiry, "feminist narratology" has explored the implications of gender for understanding the "nature, form, and functioning of narrative" (Prince 2003: 65). I also understand narratology through Robyn Warhol's definition as the study of narrative strategies which "consider the influence of gender on the production of certain kinds of narrative structures" (Warhol 1989: 4).¹²

My interest lies primarily in the relation between the digression into a seduction tale and the primary plot of the heroine's life after marriage as presented in novels written by women. What place do seduction tales have in the story of the life of wives? How are both narrated with a view to the context of seduction in the life of wives? Married women, by definition, are no longer sexually innocent and their erotic knowledge should render them beyond the power of seduction. For this reason, married heroines who are victims of seduction are extremely rare,¹³ yet seduction is central to their stories. Wives are sym-

¹¹ Ansgar Nünning summed up these debates in the sense that "though Lanser and other feminist narratologists have incurred the displeasure of those to whom this sounds suspiciously like an ideological balkanization of narratology, the new approaches have raised pertinent new questions which have proved to be of greater concern to a larger number of critics than the systematic taxonomies, typologies and models so dear to the hearts of narratologists" (2000: 354).

¹² The classical foundation texts of this discipline are, apart from Lanser's seminal article, e.g. Robyn Warhol's "Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator" (1986) and *Gendered Interventions* (1989), Susan S. Lanser's *The Narrative Act* (1981) and *Fictions of Authority* (1992), and Kathy Mezei's *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (1996).

¹³ A case in point is Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), where the seduction and moral failing of Lady Elmwood is refused to be narrated at all: "To state the progression by which vice gains a pre-

pathetic listeners to other women's seduction tales, and I read scenes of story-telling to think about what these embedded narratives add to the primary tale.¹⁴

Embedded tales can serve many narrative functions: they can stand as thematic contrast, provide causal explanations for a character's actions or be self-contained digressions, to name a few.¹⁵ The tales of seduction told within novels of marriage do not serve any one single purpose, but their presence forces the reader to ponder the relationships between marriage and seduction, love inside and outside sanctioned bonds, sexual knowledge and sexual ignorance, and chastity and contamination. The way in which a writer deploys embedded tales – as contrast, as frame, with a homodiegetic or heterodiegetic (that is, a first-person narrator who is part of the story versus a third-person narrator who is external to the plot) – reveals much about their attitude towards a woman's new right to her heart. Tzvetan Todorov describes the embedded narrative as “the *narrative of a narrative*” (Todorov 1977: 72). By staging the scene of narration the tale-within-the-tale highlights the narrative act of the novel itself and provides a *mise en abyme* for the text's own reading. “The embedded story,” Mieke Bal points out, “contains a suggestion how the text should be read” (Bal 1988: 147). In other words, the narrative acts of embedded seduction stories provide insight into how the novels' representation of marriage should be understood.

The repeated presence of embedded seduction tales within novels about the life of a marriage could be read as confirming the critical supposition that women have no story to tell once they wed, that their lives end in marriage – and thus their plots must come from elsewhere, from the seduced characters' sexual transgression. The married heroine of Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* makes a similar observation, as seen above. But there are many novels in the period which do write beyond the marriage ending. For instance, Julia de Roubigné herself refutes her own claim when she discovers that her marriage does not shield her from the dangers of love. Evelina's famous last words announcing her marriage in Burney's novel – “All is over, my dearest Sir, and the fate of your Evelina is decided!” – do not hold true for a great number of novels in the period which chart an indecisive fate for women after marriage (Burney 1982: 406). Counter to what the contemporary critical focus on the courtship plot might suggest, novels about marriage are quite common in the later eighteenth century.¹⁶

What does the popularity of embedded tales of seduction within novels of marriage actually imply? One answer is provided by Jane Spencer, who notes their frequent occurrence as digressions within the main plot and interprets this as signifying that fallen heroines are demoted to secondary status. Seduced heroines are marginalized in order

dominance in the heart, may be a useful lesson; but it is one so little to the satisfaction of most readers, that it is not meant to be related here, all the degrees of frailty by which Lady Elmwood fell; but instead of picturing every occasion of her fall, come briefly to the events that followed” (Inchbald 1987: 170). Note how again focus is not on the causes but rather on the consequences of adultery.

¹⁴ The term ‘embedded narrative’ refers here to any tale within a tale. I will not be making a distinction between primary narratives embedded in a frame, and tales which are outside the text's diegesis. For closer scrutiny of such distinctions see Bal (1988).

¹⁵ For a fuller analysis of embedded narratives and their functions see Nelles (1997).

¹⁶ Of note here are especially *Pamela in Her Exalted Condition* (1742), Samuel Richardson's continuation of *Pamela*, Henry Fielding's *Amelia* (1751), Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple, Volume the Last* (1753), Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire's *Emma; Or, The Unfortunate Attachment* (1773), and Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* (1792).

to provide a “foil to the heroine”, contrasting purity with contamination (Spencer 1986: 123). Thus, she assumes the embedded narratives function only as contrasts. But it seems, as I will attempt to show, that there is a more complicated interaction at play between the two narrative levels. Seduced and married women are linked in these novels not only by way of contrast but through thematic overlaps, structural causalities and sympathetic identifications.

Telling and Reading Seduction Tales

Frances Sheridan’s homodiegetic narrator¹⁷ in *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* allows a greater involvement in pursuing the question of love in marriage and a great degree of leniency toward the seduced victim. Sheridan’s message remains ambiguous in the end and the novel relates both the tale of seduction and the place of affective agency in marriage. The choice of narrative voice produces complex and complicated transferences between married female narrators and the seduced “I” of the embedded tale. The identifications and dis-identifications between narrative voices and levels question, in both, the roles and responsibilities of women to their own hearts.

The fates of the married Sidney Bidulph and her seduced counterpart, Miss Burchell, are intimately connected. Sidney’s marriage is caused, in the first instance, by Burchell’s seduction tale: the principled Sidney accepts her mother’s decision that she relinquish all claims to her fiancé, Orlando Faulkland, because her mother believes he has previously seduced and impregnated Burchell, and thereafter Sidney marries Mr Arnold, a man not nearly as attractive as her first love but one recommended by her mother. All the suffering Sidney experiences – her husband’s infidelity, her loss of reputation, her poverty – spring from Burchell’s story of seduction. The interlaced fates of the two women guide the plot: Sidney refuses to vindicate herself from her husband’s accusations of adultery because she is protecting Burchell; Burchell waits until after Arnold’s death to ask Sidney to intervene with Faulkland on her behalf; and Sidney rejects Faulkland’s second proposal because of Burchell’s continuing desire for him. The plot entanglements that repeatedly bring the two women together in an unquestioned bond of female solidarity stem from Sidney’s sympathetic response to Burchell as a victim of seduction and give the novel a feminist undertone, for it repeatedly insists, as Margaret Doody has observed, on “the *rights* of the woman seduced” (Doody 1986: 331). That Burchell turns out to be less-than-seduced, to have been an active agent in her moment of ruin, does not undermine the earlier identification between the wife and the fallen woman. When the truth finally comes out that Burchell was a willing victim, Sidney still supports her prior claim to Faulkland, and the novel refuses an ‘all or nothing’ approach to female virtue,

¹⁷ As Susan Lanser has observed, women writers are far more likely to employ homodiegetic narrators because, and this may seem as a paradox, they are actually far more likely to create a distance between the writer and the internal narrator. That distance is increased by using private forms, such as diaries, memoirs, letters etc. Thus, the narrator never directly addresses the reader; such address is filtered through framing devices, such as epistolary addressees, editor’s intervention in procuring journals or memoirs etc. For more interrogation of such techniques see Lanser (1986).

attempting instead to hold men, as Susan Staves notes, “to standards of good conduct and chastity as strict as those said to be appropriate to women” (Staves 2005: 347).

The novel resists a clear divide between wife and fallen woman. The intimate relationship between the two women and their different fates – Sidney’s life contains misery and poverty whereas Burchell gets the man she loves – twists our expectations of poetic justice.¹⁸ In *Sidney Bidulph* good characters are not rewarded, nor are bad ones necessarily punished. The moral of the story is announced in the extradiegetic narrative, which frames the story of Sidney’s memoir (the editor tells us how he received Sidney’s journal from his friend’s mother, Cecilia, and in turn, Cecilia introduces the journal and tells us how it came into her hands). The male editor and Cecilia agree that Sidney’s story

may serve for an example, to prove that neither prudence, foresight, nor even the best disposition that the human heart is capable of, are of themselves sufficient to defend us against the inevitable ills that sometimes are allotted, even to the best. (Sheridan 1987: 9–10)¹⁹

The rewards for virtue, the frame insists, are given in the next world. If we isolate Sidney’s memoir from its frame and analyse it without the overtly moral extra-diegetic narrative, another lesson is suggested. Should Sidney have relinquished her moral authority to her mother? Had she claimed her right to act on her heart and married Faulkland, could she have found happiness in this world? Such a reading would corroborate Betty Schellenberg’s observation that “Sheridan exposes Sidney’s lack of moral authority because she refused to assume moral agency” (Schellenberg 2005: 38). This refusal is presented by Sheridan as a problem.

The sheer misery Sidney endures serves to counteract the rigid moral code of feminine propriety that the extra-diegetic level of the text tries to establish. Even Samuel Johnson found the lack of poetic justice too despairing and questioned its morality: “I know not, Madam,” he is reported to have told Sheridan, “that you have a right, upon moral principles, to make your readers suffer so much” (Boswell 1934: 390). *Sidney Bidulph* presents a mixed message, and readers have questioned the extent to which passive female resignation is its clear moral. This confusion results from the novel’s inability to answer the central question: how does a woman act on her heart’s choice when there are conflicting claims upon it?

Sidney Bidulph follows a series of plot lines in trying to solve the problem – promoting marriages of esteem over passionate love, obedience to parents over self-interest, dutiful wives over selfish lovers – yet these moralizing lines often lead nowhere and end in misery, ultimately demanding the reader’s skepticism toward strict lines and absolute principles. In doing so, the novel leaves its female readers with little to guide their affective choices.

The first dawning of *Sidney Bidulph*’s moral confusion can be traced to the embedded story of seduction, or, more precisely, to the fact that this story is *not* told. ‘Miss Burchell’s history’ carries all the weight of Sidney’s suffering but it remains untold through most of the novel. The story of Miss Burchell’s seduction has no content, but it

¹⁸ Sheridan actually frames her novel with a debate over the necessity of poetic justice in works of art.

¹⁹ From the very beginning the reader understands that Sidney Bidulph’s efforts will indeed preserve her virtue but will not bring her either fortune or happiness.

has many resonances. As Ross Chambers argues: "It is a story with no intrinsic meaning; it has the form of a story but (in its fragmentary form) does not make sense *except* as a device [...] It is literally uninterpretable *except* within the framework of the total situation" (Chambers 1984: 6). Burchell's story has no content and its meaning derives entirely from its situation but it *acts* in the narrative. Burchell's story is constituted in multiple narrative acts and the situation in which each act occurs brings into focus the hermeneutical limitations and complications of determining female knowledge and agency.

'Miss Burchell's history' first enters the novel in the form of a letter written by Burchell to Faulkland and anonymously sent to Sidney only days before her marriage; the letter informs Faulkland of Burchell's pregnancy and calls upon him to help "the most unfortunate woman in the world" (Sheridan 1987: 37). Because Sidney is ill and unable to act for herself, her mother, Lady Bidulph, assumes hermeneutic authority in determining the letter's meaning: Faulkland is a libertine who seduced a poor woman and his engagement with her daughter must be broken. Her interpretation is grounded in her dichotomous system of sexual difference: she sees the sexes as universally engaged in a battle in which men attack female chastity. Sidney describes her mother's view by saying that she has a "partiality to her own sex, and where there is the least room for it, throws the whole of the blame upon the *man's* side" (45). Lady Bidulph's inflexible hermeneutics result in a fatal misreading. While there are signs in Burchell's letter that the story is not one of simple seduction – Burchell acknowledges "our mutual fault" and blames "my own weakness" (37) – Lady Bidulph reads these only as reflecting how any virtuous woman would blame herself. Also her own past colours her reading of the present. Lady Bidulph's fiancé abandoned her at the altar because he had previously seduced a woman and, thus, she reads her own story into her daughter's. While Sidney knows of her mother's bias, she does not question her interpretation. At this point, on one hand, the novel seems to promote a kind of skepticism about the mother's universal view of men by tracing it to a particular personal experience; on the other hand, the mother's principles seem endorsed by Sidney's consent to break with Faulkland and her assertion that her "mother is severe in her virtue, but she is in the right" (48).

When Burchell first enters the novel, the reader expects clarification: either her story will confirm Lady Bidulph's belief that women are innocent victims, or it will show her mistaken and wrong in enforcing her moral principle. However, as will be repeated throughout the course of the novel, expectations of a clear line between Sidney's virtue and Burchell's vice are frustrated.

When Lady Bidulph pays Burchell a visit, the reader expects a revelation and a reckoning. Yet, the story does not even get a chance to be told. As Kathleen Oliver points out, "Lady Bidulph literally puts the word 'seduce' in Miss Burchell's mouth" (Oliver 2003: 689). It is the situation in which the conversation takes place that leads Lady Bidulph to reach conclusions in keeping with her beliefs: the house is "a very neat box, with a pretty garden" and an "elegant" dining room; Burchell appears "modest" and her tears reflect her sentiment (Sheridan 1987: 92). All these signs point Lady Bidulph to proclaim the case one of seduction:

'Tis as I suspected, said my mother, Mr Faulkland is an ungenerous man. A young lady of your modest appearance, I am sure he must have taken more pains to seduce, than he will

acknowledge. Miss B. blushed exceedingly – Oh! madam, you have a charitable, generous heart, I was *indeed* seduced. I knew it, replied my mother. Did he promise to marry you? She coloured deeper than before. I will not accuse him of that, madam. (93)

Lady Bidulph ignores Burchell's confession that there was no breach of promise involved, and focuses on the claim that Burchell was "*indeed* seduced." This functions for Lady Bidulph as a universal signifier for female innocence; no more telling of the story is required. For Lady Bidulph the story is complete.

However, Sidney's narration of her mother's encounter casts doubt on Lady Bidulph's interpretation. Because the novel is told in the form of Sidney's journal, Sidney remains the narrator throughout and mediates the story of her mother's encounter. In this instance, the reader is given Sidney's narrative of the story her mother told her about the interview with Burchell. And Sidney does provide her own interpretation of the meeting to her addressee, Cecilia, after she had recounted her mother's:

I know not, my dear, whether you will be of my opinion; but I cannot help thinking, that there was something like art in Miss Burchell's behaviour, far from candour which Mr Faulkland seemed to expect from her. My mother mentioned the *pains* that she supposed had been taken to *seduce* her; her deep blush at this hint, makes me suspect that her answer was not dictated by sincerity. She saw my mother was not acquainted with the particulars, and that she was willing to pass a favourable judgment on her fault; it looks to me as if she laid hold of this prejudice – and yet she *owned* that Mr Faulkland had never promised to marry her – I know not what to think. (94)

While Lady Bidulph does not suspect Burchell in the least, the deeper blush immediately registers suspicion in Sidney. Yet, the suspicion does not materialize in any action on Sidney's part, except her sacrifice of the man she loves and the embracing of her mother's opinion. At this point, it may be argued that the gap between Sidney's interpretation and her behaviour is the effect of the novel's desire to question Lady Bidulph's rigid principles and to justify Sidney's choice to sacrifice her desires for another woman's.

The text's confusion over Sidney's response to Burchell's story later translates into confusion over the place of romantic love in marriage. The novel provides signs both to indicate that marrying without love dooms Sidney to misery and to suggest that she is rewarded for her conduct-book resignation of her will. She is both better off for not having her heart's love and worse off for marrying without her heart.

With the knowledge that Arnold is not the chosen one of her heart and that Lady Bidulph's judgement is not to be fully trusted, the reader questions Sidney's perfect resignation. These doubts are justified when disaster strikes after her marriage: she loses her husband's affections, he has an affair with Mrs Gerrarde, accuses Sidney of adultery and throws her out of the house and shortly thereafter loses the family fortune. Marrying without love seems to be represented as a mistake.

Yet another interpretation of the Arnolds' marriage is simultaneously possible, for there are many signs pointing to Sidney's marital happiness. Her decision to marry Arnold initially seems to be a good one. They have children and live happily: "Arnold-abbey seems a paradise to me now," Sidney observes (104). The misery that awaits the marriage finds a tonic in the domestic bliss that accompanies the reconciliation. Though

the Arnolds are reduced to poverty, Sidney has never known such happiness: "I never, since I was married, enjoyed life until now" (247). Sheridan appears to be leading us down a path where marriage founded on conduct-book principles produces the most solid love imaginable.

However, lest we rest with this principle to guide our marriage choice, the novel allows such happiness only a fleeting existence – shortly after the reconciliation, Arnold dies and leaves his wife destitute. Meanwhile, Burchell, the seduced woman, lives a comfortable bourgeois life in London and does not suffer because of her dalliance; even Sidney notes: "The girl's family is not contemptible; her fortune is pretty large, her person lovely; the unfortunate false step she made is an intire [*sic*] secret" (255). Whose virtue is rewarded? How are we to interpret the message?

The moral direction is repeatedly doubled. The reader anticipates that Burchell's seduction story will clarify the novel's moral framework by speaking the truth of her identity. In holding back the whole story, the novel aligns the reader's desire for narrative completion with the desire to hear the full truth of the seduction. Unsurprisingly, our desire for clarification is frustrated and Burchell's final act of storytelling only serves to further complicate the reader's knowledge.

The story is situated at the moment when Sidney can correct her earlier error and change the direction of her life to happiness with her beloved. She finds herself widowed, able to remarry, and Faulkland again offers his hand to her. The doubts cast upon the veracity of Burchell's story come to a crisis and we expect that its final telling will free Sidney to marry her love. Burchell finally admits that she was a willing participant, that Faulkland was "not a *seducer*," and that she was less than truthful with Lady Bidulph (282). Counter to the reader's expectations, the revelation comes with no attending romantic climax. Sidney's response is to deny that Faulkland has any "interest in my heart" (284). Sidney decides to pursue Burchell's claim because she believes Burchell has remained true to her love for Faulkland and that she is properly contrite ("the confession she had made to me had humbled her" [283]). The reader is again disappointed in the quest for clarity in courtship and love. What are the rules of feminine propriety? The knowledge gained from the embedded tale's content does not end in affecting Sidney's plot even though the tale's situation set up the expectation that Sidney would live happily ever after with Faulkland after she hears the truth of Burchell's sexual agency. The disjunction marks a refusal of the clarity that a firm divide between fallen woman and wife would allow the text.

The novel does not end with Burchell's marriage to Faulkland and the final twists in the plot only increase, rather than reduce, the sense of dislocation. The marriage of Sidney to Faulkland does finally take place but the circumstances of the marriage (Faulkland believes he has killed his wife and her lover, and in despair, demands that Sidney marries him) and the subsequent discovery that Burchell, now Mrs. Faulkland, is not dead, turn what should be the climax of romantic courtship into the climax of Gothic tragedy. Marriage to "the chosen of my heart, my first love" does not bring Sidney happiness (412–413).

The moral ambiguity in which the text dwells suggests a different lesson from the one of absolute resignation stated in the novel's prefatory framing. Since there are no absolutes in her world, the lesson Sidney should learn is that she must rely on her own moral

agency and that her moral choices need to adapt to changing circumstances. She needs to give up her “*inflexible heart*” and not rest on outdated principles like the ones she inherits from her mother (410).

What the reader has learned through Burchell’s postponed embedded tale is the importance of situation to acts of meaning and thus the necessity for women to assume the authority to make their own affective and erotic choices. Eve Tavor Bannet argues that “Frances Sheridan uses each position to show up the shortcomings of the other and complicates the issues to the point where it becomes apparent that no simple or single, one-time answer will serve” (Bannet 2000: 111). Sidney’s misery is caused, in part, by her unwillingness to act on the doubts she has after Burchell’s initial seduction tale and by her inability to interpret the specific situation of the tale. By not being an active listener and, instead, applying her mother’s universal answer to the seduction tale, she brings about the traumas of her own situation.

In the last narrative act of the novel, the flower-seller’s story, Sidney is able to revise her response to a seduction tale and to become the active listener she should have been to Burchell’s. The embedded tale of Miss Price, a girl Sidney meets on the street selling artificial flowers, seems, at first, superfluous. Only when viewed as a corrective to Burchell’s unsatisfying tale do we realize the effect of the embedding narrative. The evil son of Miss Price’s father’s benefactor, Mr. Ware, preys upon Miss Price’s virtue and though she successfully fights him off and she and her father escape to London, the younger Ware hunts them down and has the father imprisoned on false charges. The girl tells her own story from beginning to end, but Sidney interrupts her when a particular detail does not make sense. She later rejoices, “I was glad I had interrupted the thread of her story, as by that means she had obliged me with so many interesting particulars” (366). Sidney is determined not to make the same mistake she made with Burchell’s seduction tale, so she pays the father a visit too and solicits the story from him to see “if she [the daughter] has falsified in any thing [*sic*]” (380). Only with these actively sought proofs does Sidney come to aid virtue in distress, not only saving the family from ruin but also marrying Miss Price off to a suitable husband. The telling of this seduction narrative rewrites the happy ending not allowed by Burchell’s story.

Sidney Bidulph’s moral ambiguities do not emerge from a masterful play between narrative levels nor do they indicate that Sheridan intended one thing and the text unconsciously produced another. Rather, the novel’s ambiguities reflect multiple visions circulating in Sheridan’s contemporary culture about marriage, love and a woman’s right to her heart. The narrative situations stage the conflict between affective agency and social duty and never resolve it, ultimately representing the two as incommensurable. *Sidney Bidulph* concludes with Sidney observing: “In my virgin state, when I was a wife, and in my widowhood, I was equally persecuted” (430). Lest a woman think her only fear is seduction, and that if she resists the one false step before marriage, her ending will be happy, *Sidney Bidulph* reminds her that no female role frees her from persecution. The novel does provide, however, a compelling argument for women’s active participation in moral choices, and that abdicating affective and erotic agency to conventional gender rules will certainly not bring women happiness.

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VLOŽENÉ PŘÍBĚHY: MANŽELSTVÍ, SVÁDĚNÍ A CIZOLOŽSTVÍ V ANGLICKÉM ROMÁNU 18. STOLETÍ

Resumé

Článek se zabývá literárním ztvárněním příběhů svedených žen v kontextu románů o manželství (novel of marriage) z 18. století. Ačkoliv stávající literární historie zkoumá zejména romány, které se věnují předmanželskému dvoření (novel of courtship), manželský a rodinný život zaujímá důležité místo v literatuře celého 18. století. Osudy věrných manželek probíhají v zajímavé narativní konjunkci s vloženými příběhy svedených žen, které nefungují pouze jako varovné kontrasty, ale participují na procesu konsolidace diskurzu manželství a lásky v období sentimentalismu. Páteřním textem pro analýzu je román spisovatelky Frances Sheridan (1724–1766) *Příběh Sidney Bidulph (The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph, 1761)*, kde vložené epizody svedení problematizují tradiční pojetí ženské a manželské morálky. Článek za tímto účelem využívá nálezy historiografie rodiny a postupy feministické naratologie.

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