

THE MEMOIRS OF
MISS SIDNEY BIDULPH

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series editor: L.W. Conolly

THE MEMOIRS OF
MISS SIDNEY BIDULPH

Frances Sheridan

edited by
Heidi Hutner and Nicole Garret



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Introduction

Frances Sheridan

Frances Chamberlaine Sheridan, the only daughter of Anastasia Whyte and the Reverend Dr. Philip Chamberlaine, was born in 1724 in Dublin, Ireland, and raised there. Until recently, she has been known primarily as the mother of the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. In the eighteenth century, however, her work was greatly admired by Samuel Richardson, Dr. Johnson, and James Boswell, among others. *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) was a best seller, and her popular play *The Discovery* (1763) was regarded by David Garrick as one of the best comedies of the age. She wrote other novels: *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1767), *The History of Nourjahad* (1767), and *Eugenia and Adelaide* (1791), as well as two additional plays, *The Dupe* (1763), and *A Journey to Bath*¹ (1765); she also wrote poetry.

Sheridan's mother died soon after the birth of her daughter, and Frances was raised by a repressive, paternalistic father who, according to Sheridan's granddaughter Alicia LeFanu, "was with difficulty prevailed on to allow his daughter to read; and to write, he affirmed to be perfectly superfluous in the education of a female."² But Frances Chamberlaine was blessed with three "affectionate brothers" who went against their father's prohibitions. Walter, like Sidney's brother Sir George in *Sidney Bidulph*, "privately instructed her in writing ... and proceeded to impart to her a knowledge of the Latin language"; Richard Chamberlaine taught her botany.³

At fifteen, Sheridan wrote a two-volume novel entitled *Eugenia and Adelaide*, which remained unpublished until after her death. The work was written on paper intended for housekeeping accounts and kept a secret from her father, who vehemently opposed female authorship. Around this time she also wrote two

1 Three acts of this play were published in *Sheridan's Plays Now Printed as He Wrote Them and His Mother's Unpublished Comedy 'A Journey to Bath'* (1902). The full text is no longer extant. See Robert Goode Hogan and Jerry C. Beasley, Introduction to *The Plays of Frances Sheridan* (U of Delaware P, 1984), 27.

2 Alicia LeFanu, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mrs. Frances Sheridan* (London: G. and W.B. Whittaker, 1824), 2.

3 *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

sermons (now lost), which LeFanu asserts were “successful.”¹ Years later, Sheridan showed *Eugenia and Adelaide* to her friend Samuel Richardson and he “encouraged [her] to try her powers in a work of higher importance and greater length.”² The result was the popular epistolary and sentimental novel, *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761).

Dr. Chamberlaine died in the early 1740s. After his death, Sheridan had more freedom to do as she wished, such as attend the theatre, which her father had opposed as much as female reading and writing. At the theatre she first encountered her future husband, Thomas Sheridan, a leading actor at Dublin’s Theatre Royal. Born in 1719, Thomas Sheridan held a Master’s degree from Trinity College Dublin and honorary Master’s degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. His father had been a collaborator with and companion to Jonathan Swift, Thomas’s godfather. By 1743, Thomas Sheridan was a well-known actor in Dublin, considered to be a rival to the famed English actor and theatre manager David Garrick. In addition, Sheridan was a distinguished theatre manager at the Theatre Royal. Unfortunately, his career as theatre manager was negatively impacted by public uprisings, riots, and finally by the destruction of the interior of the Theatre Royal in 1754.³ After the first of such uprisings, the “Cato Affair” in 1743, Frances Sheridan wrote and published a defense of her future husband in an anonymous pamphlet, *A Letter from a Young Lady to Mr. Cibber* (1743),⁴ and in the poem “The Owls.”⁵ Frances Chamberlaine and Thomas Sheridan were introduced later in 1743 and they probably married in 1747, at the end of her twenty-second year. Frances Sheridan’s brother Walter officiated at the wedding.

1 *Ibid.*, 9.

2 *Ibid.*, 87.

3 For a brief description of these events, see the Chronology.

4 Colley Cibber (1671-1757) was a playwright, actor, dramatic critic, and miscellaneous writer.

5 The publication date of “The Owls” is somewhat unclear. As Hogan and Beasley explain, LeFanu gives the poem a publication date of 1747, yet the poem seems to have been written much earlier. They argue: “Le Fanu omitted one of the ten stanzas of ‘The Owls’ [in her work], and that stanza refers clearly to an earlier brouhaha, of the ‘Cato affair’ of 1743, in which Sheridan refused to perform the part of Cato, supposedly over a missing costume. Indeed the entire poem has been discovered ... [in] the 1743 pamphlet *Cibber and Sheridan*” (15). This would put the meeting of the Sheridans earlier than LeFanu claims—1743 instead of 1747.

Frances Sheridan gave birth to six children: Thomas was born in 1747 and died in 1750; Charles Francis, born in 1750, became a diplomat, political pamphleteer, and public servant; Richard Brinsley, born in 1751, became the famed playwright, theatre manager, and politician; Alicia, born in 1753, wrote several literary texts; Sackville was born in 1754 and died three months later; and Anne Elizabeth (Betsey) born in 1758, also published several literary works. Thomas Sheridan built a house for his family in Dorset Street near his wife’s uncle Samuel Whyte, to whom she was strongly attached. The house was far from Thomas Sheridan’s theatre, however. He also kept a house nearer to Dublin, at Quilca.¹

After the Kelly riots of 1747,² Thomas ran his theatre successfully until the riot of 1754, when the interior of the Theatre Royal was burned and destroyed. The destruction of the theatre damaged the Sheridans economically, and Thomas was forced to seek work in England as a principal actor at Covent Garden Theatre.³ In London, the Sheridans became part of a lively literary circle that included Samuel Johnson, Frances Brooke, Sarah Scott, Sarah Fielding, Edward Young, Mrs. Cholmondeley, and Samuel Richardson. Frances Sheridan and Richardson⁴ became close friends and their friendship made a tremendous impact on her future writing career. It was during this time that Sheridan showed Richardson her romance, *Eugenia and Adelaide*.

1 Thomas inherited the house from his father, the Reverend Dr. Thomas Sheridan; it was here that the reverend entertained, among others, Jonathan Swift, godfather to the young Thomas. Swift elegizes the estate in his poem “To Quilca, a Country House not in Good Repair,” though by all accounts the house was in much better condition than Swift described.

2 The Kelly Riots of 1747 were named for one of the “Galway Gentlemen,” a group of men who were offended by Thomas Sheridan’s attempt to end the practice of allowing male spectators access to female actresses backstage during theatrical performances.

3 Covent Garden Theatre opened in 1732 in Covent Garden, London. The first play to be performed at the theatre was William Congreve’s *Way of the World*. The theatre was the site of performances of ballet and opera as well as drama. Covent Garden Theatre burned down in 1808.

4 Samuel Richardson, an important eighteenth-century printer, publisher and writer, was the author of *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*. He is well known for his development of the epistolary novel form in these works. Sheridan and other novelists of the eighteenth century were greatly influenced by his fiction.

The Sheridans returned to Ireland two years later in 1756, when Thomas Sheridan regained his position as manager of the Theatre Royal. They lived part of the year in Blind Quay, Dublin, and part of the year in Glasnevin, about three miles north of Dublin city center. In 1757 they returned to Quilca. Frances Sheridan resided there primarily alone with her three small children. It was difficult for her to live in such social isolation. In a letter to Richardson in 1757 she wrote, "For my part, I have taken up my residence in the chimney corner, and should lose the use of my speech, if I did not find pretty constant employment for it with my little ones, for I scarce ever see a mortal besides."¹ Other troubles contributed to Sheridan's difficulties: the manuscript of *Eugenia and Adelaide*, which she had given to Richardson "to dispose of as [he] thought proper," was rejected for publication in 1758;² Thomas's theatre failed and they incurred a debt of seven thousand pounds from which they did not recover while Frances lived.

The Sheridans returned to London in the fall of 1758, where Thomas performed as an actor at Drury Lane Theatre. In addition, Thomas gave lectures on elocution in Oxford, Cambridge, London, and Edinburgh. In the winter of 1759–60, while living at Windsor, Frances Sheridan secretly began writing *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, with the hope that she could ease the family's financial woes. LeFanu states that Sheridan kept "a small trunk" next to her while she wrote so that "if Mr. Sheridan chanced to enter the room while she was thus employed" he would not know she was writing.³ Richardson probably read the novel in progress.⁴

1 *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* (1804; Reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1966), 165–66.

2 *Ibid.*, 144.

3 LeFanu, 109. It is not clear why Sheridan would have kept her writing a secret. LeFanu does not suggest that Thomas Sheridan would have objected to her writing. One explanation is that LeFanu describes her grandmother as a woman of good conduct and moral excellence, modest and selfless, who only took up the pen in an effort to earn money for her family. Announcing to Thomas Sheridan, or others, that she has been busy writing might have been construed as boasting. Sheridan might have confided in Richardson because he was in the position to assist her with publishing the novel.

4 Margaret Doody, "Frances Sheridan: Morality and Annihilated Time," in *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670–1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio UP, 1986), 325.

Miss Sidney Bidulph was published anonymously (although its author was no secret) in March 1761, just a few months before Richardson died. The novel was enormously successful; as LeFanu explains, "the book became an immediate and permanent favorite."¹ It was praised by Johnson, Smollett, and Richardson among others. In a now-famous quote, Johnson stated, "I know not, Madam! that you have a right, upon moral principles, to make your readers suffer so much."² Contemporary reviews were mostly positive. *The British Magazine* declared that *Sidney Bidulph* "[w]as written ... in the manner of the celebrated author of *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*; a manner which she hath adopted with great success."³ *The Critical Review* stated: "if a copy drawn with the most exquisite skill and heightened with the nicest touches of art, can be allowed merit equal to a justly admired original, *The Memoirs of Miss Bidulph* may deservedly claim a place in our esteem with the histories of *Clarissa* and *Charles Grandison*."⁴ In the early nineteenth century, Anna Maria Lee called *Sidney Bidulph* "admirable ... and justly esteemed by the public."⁵ Some reviewers critiqued the novel for its moral message, however. *The Monthly Review* found that "the Author seems to have had no other design than to draw tears from the reader by distressing innocence and virtue, as much as possible." Yet, the critic remarked, "We had prepared a few slight criticisms on the performance; but being assured that it is the work of a Lady, we shall only add, that, in our opinion, it is, upon the whole, greatly superior to most of the productions of her brother novelists."⁶ *The Monthly Catalogue of the London Magazine* claimed that although the novel is based on "the too popular doctrine of predestination ... every arrow of criticism was unpointed[,] charm'd as we were, with the lovely picture of Sidney.... May our fair readers, however, never want the example of a Sidney Bidulph to inspire and direct them!"⁷ The negative

1 LeFanu, 110.

2 Quoted in LeFanu, 113. Indulgence in vicarious suffering, along with the confirmation of conventional morality, is the *raison d'être* of sentimental fiction. This comment from Johnson, therefore, is high praise.

3 *British Magazine* 2 (1761): 212.

4 *Critical Review* 11 (1762): 186.

5 Anna Maria Lee, *Eminent Female Writers of All Ages and Countries* (Philadelphia: John Grigg, 1827), 163.

6 *Monthly Review* 24 (1761): 260, 266. "Brother novelists" refers to male novelists.

7 *London Magazine* 30 (1761): 168.

criticism of *Miss Sidney Bidulph*, then, had to do with the moral instruction of women and the question of predestination.¹ Some worried that the novel was too fatalistic: Sidney had done no wrong, yet she was punished severely. Was her fate sealed regardless of her behavior? If so, what kind of message would this send to young women learning how to conduct themselves in the world?²

Miss Sidney Bidulph was enormously popular with its readers, nonetheless. *The Monthly Review* (1824) claimed: "in the circulating libraries it retained undisputed supremacy long after its appearance, and even down to a period comparatively recent."³ There were at least seven editions of the novel by 1800. It was favored by Charlotte Smith, who referred to *Miss Sidney Bidulph* in her novel *Desmond* (1792), and it influenced a number of other eighteenth-century novelists.⁴ The Abbé Prévost translated *Miss Sidney Bidulph* into French in 1762. Ned Warner's story and character were used in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's comedy *L'Habitant de la Guadeloupe* (1786), and the Warner episode was used in Henry Brooke's novel, *Juliet in Grenville* (1773).

In 1762, after the success of *Miss Sidney Bidulph*, Frances Sheridan wrote her first play, *The Discovery*. In a letter to her uncle Sam Whyte, on 29 November 1762, she explains:

The truth is, since my return to town from Windsor, I have been employed though often interrupted by intervals of bad health, which of late have frequently returned on me. I have however mustered up spirits enough to write ... what do you think? Why a Comedy! Which is now in rehearsal at Drury-lane. I had formed my plan, and nearly finished the scenes last summer at Windsor (the place of my inspiration), when I came to town and showed it to a few people, what was said to me on

the occasion encouraged me to take some pains in the finishing of it. Mr. Garrick¹ was pressing to see it, and accordingly I read it to him myself. What his opinion of it is, you may judge by his immediately requesting it to be put into his hands, and undertaking to play the *second* character, a comic, and very original one. Mr. Sheridan is to play the first, one of a graver cast, and a great deal of variety, and which requires a considerable actor to perform. My first theatrical essay has so far met with an almost unprecedented success; most of us, poor authors, find a difficulty in getting our pieces on the stage, and perhaps are obliged to dangle after Managers a season or two; I on the contrary was solicited to give mine as soon as it was seen. It is to come out early in January (the best part of the winter) and as it is admirably well cast, I have tolerable expectations of its succeeding.²

The Discovery was indeed successful—running seventeen nights (a long run for that period) at Drury Lane in 1763. Garrick played the comic role of Sir Anthony Branville, and Thomas Sheridan played Lord Medway. Boswell was critical of the opening night performance (he had a personal reason to be: the prologue he had written for it—at Sheridan's request—had been rejected by her), but Oliver Goldsmith and John O'Keeffe admired it greatly.³ The play was revived repeatedly throughout the eighteenth century, and was published throughout the nineteenth.⁴

In 1763, after the success of *The Discovery*, Sheridan wrote another play, *The Dupe*. It played only three nights and was deemed a failure.⁵ Thomas Sheridan had been acting in Dublin during the production of *The Dupe*, but he returned in the spring of 1764, and he and Frances Sheridan traveled to Bristol and

1 Predestination, popular with Calvinists from the sixteenth century onwards but distasteful to much of mainstream society, is a doctrine that states that only those preordained or "elected" by God will be saved. In its wider sense, predestination refers to the idea that all actions and events are preordained. This concept is difficult to reconcile with the principles of conduct literature, which propounds that one's behavior determines the extent of one's earthly happiness. See Appendix A.

2 The reviews of *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* are included in Appendix B.

3 Quoted in James R. Foster, *History of the Pre-Romantic Novel in England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1949), 144.

4 Foster, 144.

1 David Garrick (1717-79) was an actor, playwright, and manager of the theatre at Drury Lane from 1747 to 1776.

2 Quoted in Hogan and Beasley, 21.

3 Oliver Goldsmith was an Irish poet, writer, and physician. He is best known for his novel *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), the pastoral poem *The Deserted Village* (1773), and his comedic play, *She Stoops to Conquer* (1771). John O'Keeffe was a successful Irish playwright whose farcical plays were immensely popular in late eighteenth-century London.

4 Hogan and Beasley, 22-23.

5 Hogan and Beasley cite the play's "prosiness" as a possible reason for the failure (25). According to Ann Messenger, Sam Whyte blamed the actresses who played the lead roles. Ann Messenger, "Frances Sheridan 1724-1766," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* online.

Bath as Thomas gave lectures on oratory. They returned to London for a few weeks during the summer and then went to Scotland, where Thomas Sheridan acted in Edinburgh. They could not evade their debts, however, and the family was forced to flee to Blois, France. Only Richard Brinsley remained behind, studying at Harrow School. While in France, Thomas Sheridan worked on his dictionary of English, published in two volumes in 1780. Frances Sheridan wrote a third comedy, *A Journey to Bath*, which she submitted to Drury Lane—however, Garrick did not approve of it. While at Blois, Frances Sheridan also wrote the Oriental novel, *The History of Nourjahad*, which Johnson considered to be her best work. In addition, she wrote the two-volume *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*.

On 13 October 1766, Thomas Sheridan wrote the following letter to Sam Whyte:

Often I have sat down to write to you an account of the most fatal event that could befall me in this life, and as often have thrown aside the pen. Oh, my dear SAM! the most excellent of Women is no more. Her apparent malady was an intermitting fever, attended with no one bad symptom 'till the day before her death, when she was suddenly deprived of her senses, and all the fatal prognostics of a speedy dissolution appeared. She died the death of the righteous, without one pang. Without a groan. The extraordinary circumstances attending her case made me resolve to have her opened; when it was found that the whole art of medicine could not have prolonged her days, as all the noble parts were attacked, and any one of four internal maladies must have proved mortal. If the news of this event has not yet reached Dublin, break it to my Sister as gently as you can. I set out from this in a few days for St. Quintin, a town about half way between this and Calais, where I purpose to leave my children, in the hands of Protestants, to whom they are strongly recommended. As soon as I have settled them, I shall set out for London, and thence proceed to Dublin as speedily as possible. I thank you for your last letter and remittance without which I should not have been able to make this arrangement—SAM! You have lost a Friend who valued you much. I have lost what the world cannot repair, a bosom Friend, another self. My children have lost—Oh their Loss is neither to be expressed nor repaired. But the will of God be done.¹

1 Quoted in Hogan and Beasley, 29.

In August 1766, Thomas Sheridan had made plans to return to Dublin so he could restore his financial affairs. Frances Sheridan had always been subject to fainting fits and illness, and she had been lame since childhood, but just a few days before her husband's intended departure, she suddenly grew ill and Thomas was prevented from leaving. Frances Sheridan took to bed and died almost two weeks later, on 26 September 1766. She was forty-two.

Frances Sheridan's son, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, followed in his mother's literary footsteps with *The Rivals* (1755) and *The School for Scandal* (1777). Richard Brinsley's plays draw on characters familiar from his mother's work: the famous Mrs. Malaprop in *The Rivals* and Sir Oliver Surface in *The School for Scandal* are reminiscent of Mrs. Tryfort in *A Journey to Bath* and Ned Warner in *Sidney Bidulph*, and *The Rivals* includes a character by the name of Faulkland, the surname of Frances Sheridan's tortured hero in *Memoirs*. There were other writing descendants—Sheridan's daughter Alicia, married to Joseph LeFanu, wrote two plays and one novel, and she was grandmother to the successful novelist Joseph Sheridan LeFanu. Frances Sheridan's daughter Betsey, married to Joseph LeFanu's younger brother Henry LeFanu, wrote several novels and kept an important journal that was published in the mid-twentieth century.¹ Alicia LeFanu, granddaughter to Frances Sheridan, was a poet and novelist, and she wrote the only full-length biography of her grandmother.²

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph is a rich and complex work that tells us much about the history of the novel, women's history, and mid-eighteenth-century English culture. It is a heartfelt, painful tale of a young woman's coming of age in a repressive patriarchal culture. Sheridan reveals the cost to women in such a male-dominated period—when women were not supposed to speak or act on their desires, when they had little opportunity to earn a living, and when they had few legal rights.

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph follows in the Richardsonian tradition of the conduct novel. Indeed, the novel is dedicated to Richardson, the "distinguished Genius" and "author of

1 William LeFanu, ed., *Betsey Sheridan's Journal: Letters from Sheridan's Sister, 1784-1786 and 1788-1790* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1960).

2 *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mrs. Frances Sheridan* (1824).

CLARISSA and SIR CHARLES GRANDISON" (43).¹ *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* is written as a series of letters from Sidney to her childhood friend, Cecilia. Sidney adheres to the patriarchal rules of the day for women, as expressed in conduct books such as George Savile, Marquis of Halifax's *Advice to a Daughter* (1688), Wetenhall Wilkes's *Letters of Genteel and Moral Advice* (1740), Samuel Richardson's *Letters Upon Important Occasions* (1741), James Fordyce's *On The Folly, Infamy, and Misery of Unlawful Pleasure* (1760), Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters* (1761), Dr. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), and Hester Chapone's *Letters of the Improvement of the Mind* (1773), among others.² Eighteenth-century conduct books advocate strict sexual chastity and the repression of sexual desire, filial obedience (to parents—especially the father—before marriage, to the husband during marriage), female delicacy (refined and controlled feelings and judgments), an economically well-regulated household in marriage, and the channeling of all desires into religious piety and emotion. Despite (or because of) Sidney's dutiful compliance with these rules, however, she suffers endlessly, and the novel ends tragically.

Late twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism of *Miss Sidney Bidulph* has centered primarily on whether the novel is in part an anti-conduct book and, hence, potentially feminist. As Jean Coates Cleary suggests, there is a double message in the novel—"a promotion of conduct ideology and an aggressive exposure of its unfortunate effects."³ For Margaret Doody, "[t]he novel satirizes the crudity of masculine views, and of the world's views of family life, sexuality, and society's claims. It makes us feel that it is time someone took a feminist stand against the restrictions and debasements, time that someone worked through these limitations."⁴ Marla Harris writes that "the novel raises questions about the conventional notion that a virtuous woman should be silent by presenting a sequence of events in which

Sidney's silence, for reasons of modesty, consideration, and obedience to parental authority, is shown to be, ironically, self-destructive, or at least, inefficacious." For Harris, "Sidney's plight is a result of her obedience to cultural definitions of the 'good woman' and the 'good daughter'" and her "powerlessness" also functions as a "claim over herself and others."¹ For these critics, then, *Miss Sidney Bidulph* wrestles with the repressive patriarchal ideology of conduct-book discourse that advocates highly restricted behavior for women.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics also debate the meaning of Sidney's endless suffering and the novel's complex vision of predestination. Gerard Barker explains that out of "financial necessity" Sheridan exploited the "popularity" of "pathos" in this era, and "[s]ince the pathos is all the greater if the heroine is innocent of the cause of her suffering, Bidulph was meant to become ... a novel of virtue in distress, combining 'propriety in conduct' and 'irresistible pathos'."² Yet, Doody wonders, if the moral of the book is only about virtue being rewarded in the afterlife, then Sheridan "seems to be betraying the cause of women, and even of morality—those causes Richardson said were the same."³ Janet Todd states that the novel presents a confused image of predestination; she points out that Sidney herself questions the fairness of Faulkland's suffering, what Sir George calls "a series of fatal events, each of which was occasioned by motives in themselves laudable" (489). Ultimately, Sidney is set up as a Christ-like mark, "but this is cold comfort."⁴ Patricia Meyer Spacks, on the other hand, argues that Sheridan critiques Sidney's "suffering, [and] present[s] a tyrant God, [and offers] no visions of a blissful 'hereafter' as in *Clarissa*."⁵ Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics, like Sheridan's contemporaries, are

1 All references to *Miss Sidney Bidulph* are from this Broadview edition. They will be cited parenthetically in the text.

2 Selections from Halifax, Wilkes, Richardson, Pennington, and Gregory are included in Appendix A.

3 Jean Coates Cleary, "Introduction," *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, ed. Patricia Köster and Jean Coates Cleary (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), xix.

4 Margaret Anne Doody, "Frances Sheridan: Morality and Annihilated Time," *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio UP, 1986), 344.

1 Marla Harris, "Strategies of Silence: Sentimental Heroism and Narrative Authority in Novels by Frances Sheridan, Frances Burney, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Hannah More" (PhD Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1992), 36, 40.

2 Gerard A. Barker, *Grandison's Heirs: The Paragon's Progress in the Late Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1985), 68.

3 Doody, 343; Doody argues that Sheridan seems to betray Richardson's causes because, as its earlier critics have pointed out, virtue is not rewarded in *Memoirs*; furthermore, Lady Bidulph's campaign against rakishness and the sexual double standard only "comes to grief" (343).

4 Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660-1800* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 174, 175.

5 *Ibid.*, 174, 175.

not quite sure what to make of predestination as it is presented in the novel. Is Sheridan critiquing the Richardsonian coupling of female chastity with a reward in the blissful afterlife? Or does she support it?¹

Whether *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* endorses or undermines the notion of predestination or eighteenth-century conduct-book ideology is unclear, then, as the disputes among these various critics suggest. It should be remembered, however, that conduct-book discourse was itself often quite contradictory and conflicted, holding women to impossible and confusing standards. From our contemporary point of view, Sidney Bidulph may not appear to be a feminist, with all her silent, passive suffering and adherence to the codes of piety, chastity, and parental and spousal authority. And, in comparison to earlier Restoration and eighteenth-century bawdy women writers such as Aphra Behn, Mary Manley, and the early Eliza Haywood, Sheridan's work seems, on the surface at least, complicit with the repressive patriarchal discourse of the age. Yet it should be remembered that women's novel writing shifted a great deal in mid-century. Samuel Richardson's epistolary fiction ushered in a new model of novel writing in which female characters were punished for sexual desire and rewarded for its repression, and women writers were now expected to create a distinctly "feminine" writing, with an emphasis on sentimentality and delicacy. As Todd rightly points out, female authors had to "write moral, didactic or sentimental works suitable, above all, for the perusal of other women." The woman novelist, always linked with her work, "had to be virtuous and domestic, writing from necessity, or from a desire to teach virtue to the unformed."² In Sheridan's case this is evidenced, not only in *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* itself, but also in the eighteenth-century critiques of the novel, which were aimed specifically at its moral message. Interestingly, LeFanu's biography, written in the nineteenth century, repeatedly reminds us that Frances Sheridan, the author, was a self-controlled and devoted wife who wrote *only* out of financial necessity. LeFanu, like her eighteenth-century predecessors, feels the need to convince Sheridan's readership that her grandmother was indeed a "proper"

1 For a related discussion on the problem of poetic justice in *Miss Sidney Bidulph*, see John C. Traver, "The Inconclusive Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph: Problems of Poetic Justice, Closure and Gender," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20.1 (Fall 2007): 35-60.

2 Todd, 126-27.

woman—"proper" according to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century patriarchal codes of acceptable female behavior.

While perhaps not feminist, then, by our contemporary standards, the novel registers the problematic and unstable cultural, social, political, and economic conditions for middle- and upper-class English women in the eighteenth century. For this reason, it is important to remember the sociohistorical contexts in which women lived in this period. Should women need or want to earn their own bread, they had little opportunity to do so. Women had no independent legal status, as they belonged to their fathers before marriage and their husbands after. Children legally belonged to their fathers. As victims of rape or domestic violence, women had little means of recourse (although rape was technically illegal, it was difficult to prove, and men were rarely punished for it). In marriage, unless specifically designated in the marriage contract, women's property automatically became their husbands'. Married women were assigned pin money (an allowance for apparel), and a jointure (an inheritance), which they would receive upon their husband's death (in most novels, as in real life, this was often less than their dowries or "portions"). Male heirs acquired family titles and estates; women did not. Upper-class women were, as Ellen Pollak argues, merely "pawns in the struggle for estate accumulation,"¹ and this was put into effect through marriage contracts that benefited men—fathers, fathers-in-law, and husbands. For the landed classes, in order for property to be transmitted to the legal male heir of the father, female chastity was extremely important. This contributed to the sexual double standard. An upper-class woman was expected to uphold a strictly chaste role in order to ensure that her children were her husband's progeny. Male and female educations were vastly different; women were not educated in ancient languages, the sciences, mathematics, law, philosophy, religion, or medicine (indeed, during this period, they were being shut out of midwifery and female healing traditions). Most women were minimally educated, and only very lucky ones (like Sheridan) had brothers or male relatives who taught them beyond the rudimentary female arts. Many outspoken women writers of the century, such as Ann Finch, Aphra Behn, Mary Manley, Mary Astell, and Mary Wollestonecraft, cried out

1 Ellen Pollak, *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985), 31.

against the oppressed condition of the eighteenth-century English woman.¹

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph demonstrates the socio-economic constraints and contradictions of eighteenth-century women's lives. In particular, the novel exposes contemporary fears about female sexuality and desire. As Cleary rightly points out, the late Georgian period was an age in which there was renewed anxiety about female power and sexuality. Rousseau's promotion of the feeling of the heart and internal sentiment as natural law, as exhibited in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and *Emile* (1762), climaxed in the French Revolution. Women gained a great deal of authority through this system of sensibility and feeling; it allowed them to reclaim a kind of power that was threatening to the sociopolitical order.² Conservative responses to the feared anarchy of female power "took the form of sermons, letters of advice, educational tracts, and works of fiction." This peaked in the "cult of feeling and the sentimental novel in the 1770s" and resurged again after the French Revolution.³

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph was written at the beginning of the reign of George III and it exhibits, in large measure, the Richardsonian and eighteenth-century conduct-book obsession with female self-regulation and fear of female anarchy. Sidney herself remains chaste to the end, but other female characters in the novel do not. Miss Burchell is overcome by her desire for Faulkland, and Mrs. Gerrarde settles a debt with him in exchange for sex with the niece. Burchell becomes pregnant and pretends to repent for her sin with Faulkland, but repeatedly and uncontrollably desires men with whom she has affairs—including Sidney's brother Sir George, and the engaged Major with whom she carries on an adulterous affair after her marriage to Faulkland. In contrast to Sidney, she passionately desires men and blatantly exhibits and acts on this desire. Sir George claims that Burchell "considers men just as libertines of our sex do women. She likes for the present; she seduces; her inclinations cool towards an old lover, and are warmed again by a new face" (396). On several occasions in the novel, Burchell is called a prostitute.

The figure of the prostitute in *Miss Sidney Bidulph* points to a heightened tension about female sexuality in this period. Of

course, in the eighteenth century prostitution had a different meaning than it does today. A prostitute could be a fallen woman or a kept woman, as well as someone who sold her body sexually to multiple customers in high-class houses, specialized brothels, or on the street. During the eighteenth century, prostitution and promiscuity flourished; illegitimacy increased from two percent to six percent by the end of the century.¹ All classes of men had relations with prostitutes, and many poor unwed women were recruited for the task. Women generally turned to selling themselves sexually out of necessity, as it was very difficult for a woman to earn a living wage if she could not find work as a governess, teacher, or domestic servant.

Over the course of the century promiscuous women were shown increasingly negatively, especially in women's novels. In early eighteenth-century fiction—in such work as Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724), and Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* (1725)—the figure of the prostitute was not chastised, controlled, and eliminated as she would be in mid-century Richardsonian conduct fiction that followed *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. Other than in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), prostitutes and promiscuous women were depicted in less detail and in far more negative, regulated ways as the century progressed. In mid- to late eighteenth-century fiction, the need to distinguish the domesticated and upper-class lady from the fallen woman became more and more important.² In Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), Frances Sheridan's *Miss Sidney Bidulph*, and Eliza Haywood's *Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751), for example, pros-

1 E.A. Wrigley, "The Growth of Population in Eighteenth-Century England: A Conundrum Resolved," *Past & Present* 98 (1983): 132.

2 Todd argues similarly: "As the image of the lady became more genteel and sexless, the difference between her and the prostitute widened until by the end of the century a respectable lady could busy herself with reforming the fallen without fear of contamination. As humanitarian sentiment increased, there was a desire to see prostitutes—a group which often included simply 'fallen' women or women living with men outside of matrimony—not as professional women but as victims of society in need of help and encouragement to reform. So the Magdalen Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes was set up as a refuge and it soon became a visiting place for Londoners much like Bedlam hospital for the insane. Although many praised the hospital as liberal and enlightened, others criticized it as simply a convenient place for men to deposit their cast-off mistresses. And, in fiction at least, there continued to be some warning that sentimental sympathy for the fallen might be misplaced" (116).

1 For an excellent and concise explanation of women's historical conditions in the eighteenth century, see Pollak's *The Poetics of Sexual Myth*, Chapter 2.

2 Cleary, xviii.

3 *Ibid.*, xviii.

titutes and sexually profligate women are firmly distanced and distinguished from domestic, virtuous wives. Burchell might seem the exception to this rule, for a great deal of the novel, while the Bidulph mother and daughter duo befriend and aid her. But this is before they come to understand that Burchell voluntarily “gave” herself to Faulkland, and that she desires him sexually and uncontrollably. Sidney later discovers how Burchell repeats this behavior again and again with other men. Once Sidney comes to understand the term “prostitution”—to believe her brother’s claim that Burchell is a “monster, a female libertine, a rake in the worst sense of the word” (392)—Sidney banishes Burchell completely from her heart and life.

If promiscuity was synonymous with prostitution, then Mrs. Gerrarde fits the bill as well. Gerrarde is the “diabolical ... Amazon” who must be forced into “submission” (233). Gerrarde first sells Burchell and throws her at Faulkland; she later becomes the woman with whom Sidney’s husband has an affair. She purportedly bewitches Mr. Arnold, and tempts him into sexual profligacy and complete economic loss. When their affair ends (due to Faulkland’s machinations), Arnold claims she is a “vile sorceress” who had him in her thrall, and that the year of their relationship was like a “dream, a horrid delirium” (267). This conflation of sexual dissipation and economic loss is common in the novels of this period, and it is exemplified through the relationship of Gerrarde and Arnold. Gerrarde gambles, she spends much of Arnold’s money on personal luxuries and excesses (including furnishings, food, gardens, dress, and jewels), and she is sexually “wild.” In effect, Gerrarde is the temptress, the witch who is blamed for all his losses, personal and financial. Interestingly, Gerrarde’s sexual profligacy is orientalized: she is, for example, compared to “the first sultana in the grand seignior’s seraglio” (230). Here, as is typical of eighteenth-century literature, women of the orient are stereotyped as prostitutes, and English promiscuous women are identified and conflated with them.¹

There is another significant promiscuous woman in the novel, Sidney’s sister-in-law, the elder Arnold brother’s widow, the “harlot” who supposedly tricks the younger Arnold and his

family out of their rightful inheritance. The widow cheats Arnold out of his estate and income through her own wanton behavior by producing a false heir. Gerrarde once again manages to participate in sinking Arnold in this story line as well. Arnold’s elder brother, the heir to the family estate, died shortly before Sidney met her husband; with the elder brother’s death, the family property passed to the younger Arnold, Sidney’s spouse. Arnold the elder left a widow behind, from whom he was separated and estranged. However, after the death of Arnold the elder, the widow declares that she is pregnant with her dead husband’s child. As it turns out, this is a lie; she has been carrying on an affair with Gerrarde’s brother, a man whom Arnold the younger (Sidney’s husband) saved from imprisonment, at Gerrarde’s request. The widow brings a lawsuit to try to win back the estate on behalf of her unborn child, and she eventually wins the Arnold family property. Arnold and Sidney become destitute as a result and are forced to live on what little Sidney has left from her jointure (a substantial portion of which was earlier mortgaged to support Mrs. Gerrarde).

In this story, the production of a false heir draws attention to an important concern of the age—that women, especially wives of upper-class men with property—must remain chaste in order to ensure that estates are passed down to legitimate paternal heirs. The only means of ensuring this, as the novel makes clear, is through strict female sexual virtue. Female chastity, therefore, is crucial to the transmission and maintenance of money, land, and titles. The Arnold widow’s promiscuity wrests the Arnold estate from legitimate heir(s) who are related genetically to the family “fathers.” The moral of the story is that uncontained female sexuality undermines patriarchal economic, political, and social power.

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph also registers the complications and politics of motherhood in the eighteenth century. The novel sets up the metaphor of failed motherhood, or motherhood-in-crisis, as crucial to the tale in a number of significant ways. The novel opens by stating that Sidney’s story takes place at the beginning of Queen Anne’s reign (1702–14). The choice of Queen Anne as ruler for the period of the story is significant, as there are a number of important similarities in the familial structure of the novel with the (familial) politics of the age. Anne was the daughter of James II, who abdicated his throne in 1689. Anne had fifteen pregnancies, yet none of her children survived to adulthood. As Toni Bowers writes in *The Politics of Motherhood*,

1 On the relationship between female sexuality and imperialism in the eighteenth century, see Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

Anne used motherhood as a metaphor for her political power, yet this proved unsuccessful for a woman who could not produce a royal heir. For Queen Anne, the maternal came to represent the distance between political agency and female experience. Anne's representation of herself as a model wife and mother, instead of increasing her authority, complied with the construction of Augustan ideals of economic, political, and cultural interests. Bowers finds that Queen Anne's failed maternal metaphor played into a split version of motherhood throughout the rest of the century. Eighteenth-century novels, for example, render mothers dichotomously: as either virtuous, passive, powerless, self-effacing, and subordinate to the husband/father; or monstrous—self-determining, authoritative, independent, and selfish (putting her own needs before those of her offspring and spouse).¹ Eighteenth-century novels, especially those written by women, typically render the virtuous domestic mother as crucial to the stability of her immediate family and society at large. Conversely, monstrous mothers need to be reformed or killed off; they are figured as destructive to the common good.

Miss Sidney Bidulph exhibits the politics of failed motherhood. Mothers as absolute rulers are rendered as ineffective (at best), dangerous, and destructive. There are two overly authoritative mothers in the novel: Lady Bidulph, who is "rigid in her notion of virtue" (84) and Lady Grimston, who lives up to her name. Both of these women are depicted in overtly negative terms. Lady Bidulph is not deliberately malicious but she rules her daughter with a misguided iron thumb. Sidney says her mother is "despotic in her government of me" (85) and Sir George says Lady Bidulph's will is as "absolute as that of an Eastern monarch" (122). That rigidity and power becomes the mother's downfall: it overtly "others" her. Lady Bidulph fails to discern people's characters and situations correctly, and this, coupled with her absolute power over Sidney, proves disastrous. She misreads and misunderstands the characters of Faulkland, Burchell, and Arnold. Lady Bidulph does not read Faulkland's letter—which would have led her to make a vastly different decision about her daughter's fate—and she makes a marriage contract that leaves Sidney very little money at her husband's death. Again and again, Lady Bidulph's choices for her daughter are off the mark, and this results in Sidney's endless misery. At the start of the novel,

Lady Bidulph claims: "I am seldom mistaken in my judgment" (58). This misperception proves to be the bane of Sidney's existence.

Lady Grimston, Lady Bidulph's beloved and admired childhood friend, is a monstrous and "unmaternal" mother (99). Grimston is described as a "tyrant" who rules the "government in her family" (109); she is unused to being "controul'd" (101) by anyone. Sidney and her mother go to recuperate at the Grimston estate after breaking off the engagement with Faulkland. It turns out that Lady Bidulph turns to the wrong person for advice, as Lady Grimston thrusts Sidney into a horrific marriage with the duplicitous and heartless Arnold. While at the Grimston estate, an important story is told to Sidney by Grimston's estranged daughter, Mrs. Vere. Mrs. Vere's story reveals Grimston's failings as a mother: Lady Grimston wanted her daughter to marry a wealthy older man, but the daughter loved a young Mr. Vere of little means. Lady Grimston would hear nothing of it, and cared only about making a good financial match (she had done the same with her other daughter, whose marriage has failed. Lord Grimston was sympathetic to his daughter's feelings, but he was afraid to go against his wife's wishes. He therefore secretly sanctioned his daughter's marriage to Mr. Vere and made a financial arrangement with the groom's father. Immediately after the marriage was consummated, Lord Grimston died suddenly. Just after his death, when Lady Grimston discovered that her husband and daughter acted against her wishes, she became outraged and "filled with resentment" (101). She refused to see or speak with Mrs. Vere ever again and she battled vigorously to retain the money that Lord Grimston left for his daughter. It was not until much later, when the widowed Mrs. Vere was close to death after delivering "a dead female child" (107), that Lady Grimston reunited with her daughter.

Lady Grimston's monstrosity is exacerbated by the fact that she rules her husband as well as her children. She does not exhibit "meekness and forgiveness" (109) and is too austere, according to Sidney. In Lady Bidulph's case, while the mother controls her daughter absolutely, there is no living father with whom she battles; however, she does have a son, and she does not adhere to his suggestions regarding Faulkland, but instead follows her own misguided notions. Thus, for different reasons, both families are weakened because of incapable, incompetent, and misguided mothers who dominate their husbands and children. The story of Mrs. Vere's sister makes this abundantly

1 Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996). See especially part one.

clear: her sister is married to a man who will not let his wife control him—he stands up to her and tells both Lady Grimston and the daughter that she is a tyrant like her mother, and that he does not want his wife exposed to Lady Grimston because she “made a very obstreperous wife to a very peaceable husband” (145). Of the rational and “decent” men married to tyrannical women in the novel, he is the only one to stand up to his wife and prevail.

As monstrous as these mothers are, however, they are set up as important characters in the novel in a number of crucial ways. They are given leading and guiding roles in their daughters’ lives. Both Mrs. Vere and Sidney live for their mother’s love and approval, and they cannot bear to be separated from them. On her deathbed, after the death of her own child, Mrs. Vere is healed by her mother’s visit, even though Lady Grimston remains by her side for only fifteen minutes and is cold in her demeanor. Vere gives up half her small jointure (and lives in poverty) to please Lady Grimston, and does everything in her power to restore the mother/daughter relationship for the rest of her life. Vere’s love for her mother is never returned, yet she persists. Lady Bidulph also subjects her daughter to hard and unfair tests. Through it all, Sidney remains loyal and devoted to her mother, even when she knows Lady Bidulph is in the wrong. The longing for maternal or sororal (in the novel, the two terms overlap) female bonds is also expressed in Sidney’s relationship with her best friend Cecilia, from whom she has been separated. It is with Cecilia, playing as virgins in the symbolically maternal garden of the Bidulph estate, that Sidney says she was happiest. It is there she longs to return throughout the story. In *Conclusion of The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*,¹ Sidney tells Cecilia, “I love you, I am almost tempted to say as well as ‘your husband’ does.” With Lady V——, whom Sidney loves second to Cecilia, she feels a “tenderness, a maternal kindness in her behaviour” (152). The maternal or sororal bond, therefore, is constituted as a powerfully important relationship for women in the novel. The agony of the daughters separating from their mothers (and the tensions therein) pervades the story.

The novel also registers the legal problems of powerless mothers in the eighteenth century. The inequity of parental rights is raised when Sidney’s children are taken forcibly from her. Sidney’s story resembles Lady Sarah Pennington’s which was

published earlier the same year. Lady Pennington’s public letter to her daughters (1761),¹ describes a woman whose husband falsely accused her of adultery, threw her out of the home, and took her children from her. Lady Pennington’s only means of communicating with her children was to write to them publicly. Of course, this provides Pennington with the perfect conduct-book vehicle, and she offers a lengthy description of proper female behavior to her children. In *Memoirs*, Sidney is completely innocent while her husband Arnold is an adulterer; yet she loses her children to him because as a woman she is powerless to defend herself, or retain legal guardianship of her children. Sheridan’s depiction of Sidney’s unfair punishment in *Memoirs* calls attention to a complex legal problem for mothers during this time. During the eighteenth century, children were held as the sole property of their fathers, so mothers had no legal recourse to fight their husbands’ claims over their children, no matter how unfair or unjust. Yet Sidney’s version of a mother’s plight is different from Lady Pennington’s, as Pennington’s letter writing might be taken as a bold political act. Pennington *publicly* claims a relation to her children, attempts to communicate with them, and voices the unfairness of the claims made against her. Sidney, in contrast, takes no action of retribution, makes no public statement, and does not attempt to communicate with her children. She leaves Arnold without defending herself, hides in her mother’s home, sees few people, and even insists that her brother take no action against Arnold on her behalf.

Sidney is the archetypal passive, domestic, virtuous wife by eighteenth-century standards. Although Arnold abuses Sidney in every way—he takes a mistress, throws her inheritance away on Gerrarde, separates her from her children, and publicly humiliates her—when he is abandoned by Gerrarde, Sidney willingly takes him back and they live in domestic bliss for two years until he dies. She is able to survive economically for a short period after he dies, as Sidney’s mother continues to help her out financially. But once Lady Bidulph dies (and all of her money goes to her male heir), Sidney is left destitute with her two girls, yet she never once resents her deceitful, cruel, and ungrateful husband.

Indeed, Sidney’s passive acceptance of her fate ultimately works in her favor. Sidney does nothing to defend herself against

1 Frances Sheridan, *Conclusions of The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (London: G. Faulkner, 1767).

1 Lady Sarah Pennington (1746-83) is the author of *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughter* (March 1761), included in Appendix A4; she is not to be confused with Frances Sheridan’s friend, the poet Elizabeth Pennington (1734-59).

Arnold's false accusations, to pursue Arnold's or her children's return, or to save herself from poverty after the death of her husband and mother, yet she is saved on all of these occasions despite, or perhaps because of, her passivity and acquiescence. Sheridan thus suggests that as a virtuous wife and mother she should take no action, and by being passive, a good wife will be rewarded. In Sidney's darkest hour, Ned Warner, her rich cousin from the West Indies, rescues Sidney and makes her his heir. Sidney thus lives in material splendor at the end of the novel and she dispenses gifts to help the needy. A model conduct-book lady, Sidney's power lies in her giving to the less fortunate. This seems to be her greatest reward.

The importance of maternal passivity as a model of ideal behavior for mothers is repeated in *Conclusions of The Memoir of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1767). It stands in stark contrast to the strong and monstrous maternal figures in *The Memoirs*—Lady Bidulph and Lady Grimston—who relentlessly dominate, control, and destroy their daughters' lives. Indeed, the second work is void of overpowering maternal figures: *The Conclusions* recounts a long horrific tale of things *happening* to Sidney's daughters—abductions, lies, near rapes, madness, yet, through it all, Sidney remains unaware and inactive. She is quite oblivious to the cruel and evil violence done to her daughters by the male rakes in the tale, as she remains absent throughout most of these dangerous events, taking care of the troubled Lady V—in her blissfully benevolent way. Miraculously, Sidney's daughters are restored to their mother and saved from their abductors. In effect, the evil male figures are cast out and rendered powerless without Sidney *doing anything*. She dies in a kind of glorified inert state—the passive angel longing for the hereafter.

Sheridan's rendering of the politics of motherhood includes depictions of the physical dangers of childbirth. On three occasions in the novel, women die or nearly die from childbirth, or childbirth-related causes: Faulkland's footman's wife, Ned Warner's first wife, and the aforementioned Mrs. Vere. The death of Faulkland's footman's wife is poignantly and horrifically portrayed. The midwife who attended the birth is said to have "robbed [the family's] lodgings: and locked up the living children and the newborn infant, with the corpse of their mother" (66) and fled the scene. The dead mother's corpse in this portrait reminds the readers of the dangers of childbirth, pregnancy, and postpartum illnesses during this time. As most women bore multiple children in the eighteenth century, their chances of

dying in childbirth or from causes related to childbirth were high.¹ Further, during the eighteenth century, female midwives were viewed increasingly negatively as male midwives and male doctors took over the profession.² Thus the death of the footman's wife reflects and participates in contemporary constructions of mothers and female midwives as incompetent, failed, and corrupt. The horrific image of the abandoned dead mother's corpse surrounded by her starving children is contrasted with Faulkland's paternal benevolence: he takes the servant's children into his home, allowing them to live with him until they are old enough to go to school. Faulkland's charity in this instance strengthens the importance of the upper-class patriarch as the proper replacement for the absent or failed maternal figure: he saves the poor footman's family from destitution, and functions as the charitable and wealthy upper-class caregiver.

If *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* is searching for good, strong patriarchs, however, they are hard to come by. Faulkland would make a good father, but his only son is illegitimate, and Faulkland kills himself before having the chance to father him properly. Sir George is rash, selfish, and immature; he and his equally selfish wife never have children. Lord Grimston cannot manage his wife, and he dies before he can settle things properly for poor Mrs. Vere. Lord Bidulph dies while Sidney is a small child. Lord V—, the "good" patriarch, dies before he can complete his project to help Sidney and Arnold. The lack of strong paternal figures in the novel may have something to do with the instability of the male throne in England beginning in the English Revolution (in the seventeenth century) and continuing on through the Restoration and eighteenth century.³

1 Edward Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 98.

2 See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* (New York: Feminist Press, 1973).

3 From the regicide of Charles I and the subsequent republican rule of England to the parliamentary checks on the restored monarchy of Charles II and James II and the abdication of James II, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries experienced the authority of kings as limited, unstable, and prone to untimely termination. The power of the English monarchy was increasingly circumscribed under the constitutional monarchies of the eighteenth century. For more on the political upheavals of seventeenth-century England, see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Viking Press, 1972) (continued)

The only semi-successful father figure in the novel is paradoxically constituted in Sidney's cousin Ned Warner. Warner is the stereotypical prototype in the eighteenth century of the Englishman who has gone to the New World penniless, and after years of toil comes back wealthy, but of course tainted—no longer quite *English* anymore. He is dark skinned, rough spoken, and crude. Warner has no heirs, and luckily for Sidney, he is looking for one. Warner visits his two cousins—Sidney and her brother Sir George—separately, and tests them to see if they are deserving of receiving his bounty. He visits each sibling dressed as a pauper, pretends he is impoverished, and asks for their help. Sidney passes with glowing colors: starving and weak from her recent illness, she offers him her last guineas. The wealthy and spoiled Sir George, in contrast, shuns Warner. As a result of Sidney's altruism (and George's selfishness), Warner makes her his sole heir. Warner, who possesses "a likeness in his face to Sidney's father" (369), comes to replace the absent father in the novel. In Ned Warner, the "good" father returns, and he attempts to reunite the widowed Sidney with Faulkland—as things should have been from the start—and although this fails, because it is too late, he nevertheless saves Sidney and her children from poverty and death. He also restores the relationship between brother and sister.

Warner is important to the story for other significant sociohistorical reasons. Throughout the eighteenth century, England acquired tremendous wealth and international political power through colonization, the slave trade, and imperial expansion. Symbolically, Ned Warner represents these various economic systems which, while bringing tremendous wealth to England, were regarded ambivalently by the English. For example, in most literature of this period, English people who spent extended periods of time living in the colonies or engaged with the slave trade are viewed as corrupted by their association with hot climates, "wild" cultures, and nonwhite "heathen" peoples. Because

and *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714* (New York: Routledge, 2001). For studies on limited monarchy in the eighteenth century, see Richard Pares, *Limited Monarchy in Great Britain in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Historical Association, 1957) or, for a recent study on the influence of the Georgian monarchs on eighteenth-century life and politics, see Hannah Smith, *Georgian Monarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006). For more on the limited power of Queen Anne, see Toni Bowers "Royal Motherhood: Queen Anne and the Politics of Maternal Representation" in *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 35-50.

of their contact with other cultures, the colonists themselves become "other"—they are presented as no longer "purely" English. Those who live in the West Indies become white Creole or West Indian. Yet these semi-outsiders provided great wealth and power for the English empire. In effect, there was a need to assimilate these wealthy English turned "other," and to gloss over where and how their wealth was acquired. Warner's relationship with Sidney makes that possible.

Sidney is the idealized Englishwoman of the period—chaste, silent, economical, self-controlled, benevolent, religious, passive, and self-effacing. Despite her "perfect" behavior, she suffers endlessly, and she above anyone deserves to be rewarded. In addition she, above anyone in the novel, would do morally "good" things with Warner's money if she had it. Sidney therefore represents the pious face of England that can turn the evils of imperialism into something noble and morally elevated. Sidney's rise to riches translates the dark side of Warner's colonial associations into a benevolent project. While we do not see how Warner's wealth is acquired—presumably through the horrific exploitation of African slaves and indigenous peoples and their land—we do see the miraculous recovery of the impoverished and abandoned Sidney and her innocent children. Through Warner's extraordinary gifts to Sidney, she is restored and given new life. We are given detailed descriptions of the oriental luxuries Warner buys for her—which in her mansion become symbols of good taste—and we see the morally good deeds she performs with her new wealth. In effect, Sidney's inheritance metaphorically cleanses Warner's property of its real material associations, which the English viewed as dirty, dangerous, and morally questionable. By redirecting this wealth, displacing it onto the perfectly humble, chaste, passive, benevolent, and deserving Sidney, English guilt could be assuaged, and England's imperial project could be morally justified.

In an important symbolic moment in the novel, Sidney is caught in a fire in the theatre; she sprains her ankle and cannot walk. She is abandoned by her friends and cannot escape the flames. Faulkland, who by coincidence happens to be at the performance, saves Sidney from possible death: he sees Sidney fall and he helps her to leave the burning theatre. The pain Sidney suffers as a result of this fire is much more than physical, however. As a result of the incident, she learns of her husband's affair with Gerrarde, and Gerrarde uses this opportunity to plant the seed of jealousy in Arnold's mind by pointing out that she saw Faulkland and Sidney together at the theatre. From this moment

on, Sidney's life falls to pieces. Sidney's powerlessness in this section of the novel signifies the enormously oppressive social and ideological pressures eighteenth-century women were trapped by and within.

The fire in the theatre is also an obvious symbol of the raging sexual passion in the novel that cannot be extinguished. Despite Sidney's self-denial, she is repeatedly faced with the return of Faulkland; she cannot escape him or her love for him. Faulkland dies because of his love for Sidney, which he cannot quell. Arnold cannot resist Gerrarde, and he becomes engulfed in the heat of physical passion. Burchell is driven by her sexual desire, and so on. In other words, the conduct-book discourse, which suggests that if a wife is virtuous and represses her desires, then the evils in the world around her will be righted, proves untrue in *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*. All of Sidney's self-denial cannot right the wrongs of the world or extinguish passionate feelings, and Lady Bidulph's strict conduct-book rules prove ineffective in the end.

Another significant way of looking at this incident of Sidney's suffering might be biographical. Sheridan herself was lame and often ill, hence Sidney's sprained ankle in the burning theatre might be linked to the author's own sense of physical weakness. In addition, the "real" fire in the Dublin theatre caused the Sheridan family a great deal of stress—it led to the extreme debt that haunted them throughout Frances Sheridan's life. The pathos of the novel, as exhibited in the fire scene, then, may have been drawn, at least in part, from Sheridan's own first-hand experience of physical, emotional, and economic strain.

Conclusion

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph endures as an important work in the canon of English literature and women's literary history. It is often overlooked by twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers in favor of mid- to late eighteenth-century works such as Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* or Frances Burney's *Evelina*, but it is high time that serious critical attention be paid to Sheridan's fascinating work. *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* offers its readership great literary, historical, sociological, political, and psychological complexity and depth. It should be read along with the sequel, *Conclusion of the Memoirs*, which traces the story of Sidney's daughters and Falkland¹ Jr., and is forthcoming from Broadview Press.

1 In *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, the spelling of the Faulkland surname changes to Falkland.

Frances Sheridan: A Brief Chronology

- 1724 Frances Chamberlaine is born in Dublin, the youngest of five children. Her mother, Anastasia Whyte Chamberlaine dies shortly after Frances is born. Her father, Philip Chamberlaine, a Dublin cleric in the Church of Ireland held various titles, including prebend of Rathmichael in the Diocese of Dublin, Archdeacon of Glendalough, and Rector of St. Nicholas Without in Dublin.
- 1739 Writes *Eugenia and Adelaide*.
- 1743 Meets Thomas Sheridan, a leading actor and theatre manager at the Theatre Royal, Smock Alley, Dublin. Just after his debut, Thomas Sheridan (1719-88), refuses to perform the part of Cato in Joseph Addison's tragedy of the same name. He attempts to dismiss the audience over a missing costume. Ordering the curtain raised, Colley Cibber (1671-1757), a famous English dramatist, actor, and poet, assumes Sheridan's role as well as his own part as Syphax. This results in a public battle, rioting, and accusations of libel on both sides. Frances Sheridan defends Thomas for his role in what came to be known as "the Cato affair" in a poem, "The Owls," and in a pamphlet, *A Letter from a Young Lady to Mr. Cibber*. She is introduced to Thomas by his sister shortly thereafter.
- 1747 The Sheridans marry. Frances's brother, Walter Chamberlaine, officiates. The couple divide their time between Dorset Street in Dublin and Thomas's estate at Quilca. The theatre sustains damages during the Kelly riots, named for one of the "Galway gentlemen" who claims that Thomas Sheridan assaulted him backstage at the Theatre Royal.
- 1747 The Sheridans' first child, Thomas, is born. He dies in 1750.
- 1750 Charles Francis Sheridan is born in July.
- 1751 Richard Brinsley Sheridan, one of the eighteenth century's greatest playwrights, is born in October.
- 1753 Alicia Sheridan is born in January.
- 1754 Riots over a politically charged speech in *Mahomet the*

Imposter destroy the interior of the Royal Theatre in March. Frances Sheridan is told that the theatre has burnt to the ground, but this is false. During Frances Sheridan's lifetime, the family never recovers from the financial losses sustained during the riot. Thomas Sheridan quits the theatre and Dublin, and moves his family to London in November 1754. They live in Henrietta Street in Covent Garden, and Thomas Sheridan acts at Drury Lane. While in England, the Sheridans become part of a literary circle that includes James Boswell, Samuel Richardson, Catherine Macaulay, Sarah Fielding, and others.

The child Frances is carrying, Sackville, dies from convulsions three months after he is born.

- 1756 The Sheridans return to Ireland. Letters to Samuel Richardson in 1757 reveal concerns about finances and Frances's isolation at Quilca.
- 1758 Anne Elizabeth (Betsey) Sheridan is born. The Sheridans return to London. *Eugenia and Adelaide*, which Frances had turned over to Richardson, is rejected for publication, and remains unpublished until 1791, when it is printed without attribution.
- 1759 The Sheridans move to Windsor, where Frances Sheridan begins writing *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*.
- 1760 The Sheridans return to London.
- 1761 *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* is published in two volumes. A three-volume edition comes out later in the year.
- 1762 Writes *The Discovery*, a comedy, which runs for seventeen nights in February 1763 at Drury Lane. The Abbé Prévost translates *Miss Sidney Bidulph* into French.
- 1763 Writes *The Dupe*, also a comedy, which runs for only three nights at Drury Lane in December.
- 1764 The Sheridans travel to Bristol, Bath, London, and Scotland, where Thomas Sheridan gives lectures on oratory and performs at the Edinburgh Theatre. Unfortunately, they are unable to stave off creditors and the Sheridans flee to Blois, France. While at Blois, Frances Sheridan writes a third comedy, *A Journey to Bath*. David Garrick rejects the script, even after her vehement defense of it. *A Journey to Bath* will later influence Richard Brinsley Sheridan's famous play, *The Rivals* (1775). While at

Blois, she also writes two more novels, *The History of Nourjahad* and *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*.

- 1766 Frances Sheridan dies at Blois in September. The Sheridan Banshee is heard wailing at Quilca.
- 1767 *Nourjahad* and *Conclusions* are published posthumously. *Nourjahad* is translated into Russian, French, and Polish.