
Introduction

beware then how you chuse, for your first preference makes your destiny

Emma; or, The Unfortunate Attachment

WHEN GEORGIANA SPENCER MARRIED the duke of Devonshire on June 4, 1774,¹ she fulfilled her mother's greatest hope and fear. "My dread is that she will be snatched from me before her age and experience make her by any means fit for the serious duties of a wife, a mother, or the mistress of a family," her mother wrote in January 1774 (Masters 12). Despite her belief that she was facilitating a love-match, Lady Spencer's prophecy proved correct. "Lady Georgiana's marriage was one *de convenance*," her niece Lady Caroline Lamb wrote with typical hyperbole. "Her delight was hunting butterflies. The housekeeper breaking a lath over her head reconciled her to the match. She was ignorant of everything."² In fact, Lady Georgiana received an "exemplary education"³ from her mother. She was a proficient musician, poet, and writer who knew her future husband as early as 1765 and 1766, for he visited Althorp House on frequent occasions (Masters 12).

The difference between Lady Georgiana and her husband is perhaps best shown by a perfunctory note the duke wrote shortly after their marriage. "I am going to sup in St. James's Place and have sent you the carriage that you may come in it if you like it." On the back, Lady Georgiana allowed her high spirits to overflow in verse.

J'aime, je plais, je suis contente,
Tout se joint pour mon bonheur.
Que peut on plus, je suis amante

Et mon Amant me donne son coeur.
 Il est si digne de ma tendresse,
 Il est mon amant, mon ami.
 Loin de lui rien ne m'interesse
 Et tout m'enchanté auprès de lui.
 [I love, I please, I'm full of joy,
 All things conspire toward my happiness.
 What else is there to do? For I'm in love,
 And my beloved gives his heart.
 He is so worthy of my tenderness,
 He is my lover and my friend.
 I care for nothing when away from him
 And everything charms me when with him]⁴

The duchess turned the duke's prose into poetry, as if she could speak for the two of them. But Lady Georgiana's more reticent husband seemed oppressed, at times, by her high spirits. On one occasion, when she sat in his lap in front of company, he pushed her aside and walked out of the room.⁵ Lady Spencer, who witnessed this event, wrote countless letters advising her daughter on how to handle the fifth duke. "When a husband will speak his wishes a wife who loves him will find it by no means difficult to sacrifice her inclinations to his," her mother wrote on April 14, 1775. "But where a husband's delicacy and indulgence is so great that he will not say what he likes, the task becomes more difficult."⁶ Lady Spencer tried to make her daughter more attentive, urging her to learn "his sentiments upon even the most trifling subjects" (Bessborough 22).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The object of all this concern came from one of the first families in England. He could trace his ancestry to William Cavendish, who had been fortunate enough to marry Bess of Hardwick, the richest woman in Elizabethan England after Elizabeth I. Sir William Cavendish advised Henry VIII on the dissolution of the monasteries. He was her favorite husband and the only one by whom she had any children. Bess of Hardwick had fallen out with members of her own family, and bequeathed her enormous wealth and estates to the Cavendishes. Her son, William Cavendish, inherited Chatsworth, Hardwick, and Oldcotes, in Derbyshire, while Welbeck went to another son, the ancestor of the duke of Portland (Masters 16). The defining moment of the Cavendishes' political fortunes came on June 30, 1688. The fourth earl of Devonshire joined

seven Whigs and Tories in inviting William of Orange (William III) to take the throne from the Catholic James II, a man they believed intent on curbing parliamentary privileges. Upon William's arrival in England, the fourth earl accompanied him through the Midlands, suppressing resurrections in Derbyshire and Chesire; for his labors, William III granted him the dukedom of Devonshire in 1694, the same day his political ally William Russell was created duke of Bedford (Masters 17). When George III came to the throne over fifty years later, William Cavendish lost his position as Lord Chamberlain, thus beginning a long period of opposition for the fifth duke of Devonshire and his young wife (Foreman 15).

The fifth duke of Devonshire's father served as prime minister for six months in 1756–1757 which nearly killed him. The son shared his father's political connections and his disinclination to use them. "He was undoubtedly very well read, deeply versed in Shakespeare, and he possessed a shrewd political sense," Lees-Milnes notes of the fifth duke.⁷ He showed a charming side in 1782, when he read portions of *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and *The Tempest* to Lady Elizabeth Foster and the duchess, making them all "Shakespeare mad" (Bessborough 55). Yet to those who did not know him, he did not cut a great figure. "Constitutional apathy formed his distinguishing characteristic," Nathaniel Wraxall observed (Foreman 17). To stimulate his torpid disposition he played whist and faro at Brooks and would conclude the evening at four o'clock by ordering a plate of boiled mackerel. To some, the duke's phlegmatic nature must have seemed a dandiacal affectation; his almost morbid incapacity for enthusiasm, however, became a severe trial to his young wife who found him to be one of the few men she could not charm (Masters 17). With the exception of his penchant for gambling, he could not have been more different than the duchess of Devonshire.

Georgiana was eight years old when she became Lady Georgiana Spencer, due to the ennoblement of her father, John Spencer in 1765 (Foreman 4). An avid book collector, he served as tutor to the duke of Cumberland, a privy councillor, and friend of the dukes of Devonshire (Pearson 92). The first earl of Spencer built his considerable library at Althorp in Northamptonshire, while also enjoying residences at Wimbledon Park and Spencer House, St. James's Place, "one of the finest houses in London."⁸ Lady Georgiana's father made his mark on his eldest daughter when the family and an entourage of servants had set out on a grand tour from Wimbledon in 1772, visiting Calais, Brussels, and Spa, where they met the duchess of Northumberland and Princess Esterhazy. Lady Georgiana and her sister accompanied their father on a boar hunt in Liège, following behind on ponies; they were also instructed in religious tolerance and encouraged to sleep on the floor to

become accustomed to privations. In April 1773, they passed through Lyons and then back to Paris, observing Marie Antoinette at the theater at Versailles. As the highest ranking Englishman in Paris at the time, Lord Spencer took it upon himself to hold a ball for the queen on her birthday that lasted until six in the morning. By June 12, 1773, the grand tour for ladies had been an apparent success. As for “Georgine,” Madame Du Deffand wrote, “sa taille, sa physiognomie, sa gaité, son maintien, sa bonne grace ont charme tout le monde” (Masters 12). The family returned to Spa and then England in June 1773, having been away from England for a full year.

Lady Georgiana most likely completed her novel at the same time as her younger sister, Harriet, was taking copious notes during the Grand Tour. Verse letters between the two sisters give evidence of their literary inclinations. Several years after her father died in 1783, Lady Georgiana wrote “The Crowning Monuments of Spencer’s Fame” (May 1787), so “That Strangers & posterity may know/ How pure a Spirit warm’d the dust below.”⁹ In awe of her father, Lady Georgiana was almost inseparable from her mother, penning a poem on the latter’s seventy-third birthday. “The muse must weep to think how few shall bear / Fruit like the Parent Stem as rich as rare / Feelings unite with reasons strong controul / A Mind enlarged & heaven directed soul,” she wrote.¹⁰ Though she sometimes reinforced a sense of unworthiness in Lady Georgiana, her mother was by her side at her most trying moments: her miscarriages, the births of her two daughters and son, and her marriage to the diffident fifth duke of Devonshire. “I think I shall never love another so well,” Lady Spencer wrote on September 30, 1758. Lady Georgiana clearly reciprocated the feeling. “You are my best and dearest friend,” the seventeen-year-old Georgiana informed her mother. “You have my heart and may do what you will with it” (Foreman 4).

Lady Georgiana’s mother was daughter and co-heiress of General Lewis Mordaunt; her father, Stephen Poyntz, was an upholsterer who became a courtier, diplomat, and favorite of George II. George II served as godfather to the bride. An amateur musician, Lady Spencer married her future husband when he was only twenty-one and wrote that she never regretted the decision. She wore diamonds from the old duchess of Marlborough worth 100,000 pounds; her husband’s shoe buckles, also set in diamonds, were worth 30,000 alone (Cash 81). She was “remarkable in any age for her liberal views, strong sense of *noblesse oblige*, and philanthropic activities,” Hannah More’s biographer notes.¹¹

One of these activities was education. “[S]he founded schools wherever she might be living,” Georgina Battiscombe observes, “supervising and sometimes teaching in them herself, and she assiduously visited schools

run by other people so that she might study the new methods practised by such pioneers as Hannah More.”¹² Her school at St. Albans was a particular source of pride (Jones 152). As a teacher, she was well equipped for the task, for she could read Greek, French, and Italian (Lees-Milnes 43). She passed the French, if not the Greek and Italian, on to her daughter.¹³

Lady Georgiana benefited from her mother’s friendships and literary patronage. David Garrick was a favorite who performed privately at the house; Countess Spencer kept up a correspondence with his wife, sending her a turkey on one occasion. The friendship extended to Lady Georgiana, for in 1778, Garrick wrote an ode to the duchess on learning that she was ill.

When to the Fever’s rage, which Art defies,
Georgiana’s Charms become the Prey,
When the Mother Ev’ry Virtue sigh’s,
And Ling’ring Hope still keeps away:
Shall you alone not feel the gen’ral Woe,
Nor sing the Beauties you adore?¹⁴

This unpublished poem reflects the tone of another that appears in his complete works, mildly rebuking the duchess for waking up at midday. Lady Spencer would have agreed. She rose at five and frequently faulted her daughter for her late hours. Nevertheless, it was the theatrical world rather than evangelical religion that left its greatest mark on Lady Georgiana’s imagination. Her exposure to Garrick finds its way into *Emma; or, The Unfortunate Attachment* in many ways. One of these, perhaps, occurs when Kitty Bishop quotes Calista’s famous speech from Nicholas Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent*, a role David Garrick performed as Lothario in London (see annotations). Another becomes apparent in Lady Georgiana’s successful depiction of her characters’ visually observable responses to tragic news, a stage technique she employs effectively in her novel, anticipating Elizabeth Inchbald’s method in *A Simple Story*.

As a young girl, Lady Georgiana heard Laurence Sterne read privately at Althorp House. Sterne dedicated the “Story of Le Fever” in Volume VI of *Tristram Shandy* to Lady Spencer, “for which I have no other motive, which my heart has informed me of, but that the story is a humane one” (Cash 108). In this section of the novel, Toby and Trim care for a dying officer and his boy. Spencer granted his permission that the whole novel be dedicated to him and Volume VI to his wife. Shortly after, Sterne boasted to assembled guests of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Samuel Johnson was unimpressed.

Tristram Shandy introduced himself; and Tristram Shandy had scarcely sat down, when he informed us that he had been writing a Dedication to Lord Spencer; and sponte suâ he pulled it out of his pocket; and sponte suâ, for nobody desired him, he began to read it; and before he had read half a dozen lines, sponte meâ, sir, I told him it was not English, sir. (Cash 109)

Stung by Johnson's rebuke, Sterne allegedly showed Johnson a pornographic picture. Johnson refused to return to Reynold's home because he had been "much hurt by the Indelicate conversation of Laurence Sterne," that "contemptible Priest" (Cash 109).

That the Spencers could encourage the literary efforts of men with such markedly different sensibilities might seem surprising. In fact, it was characteristic. The Spencers kept a Bible on the table and play cards in the top drawer, as one caustic observer noted. Whatever her true principles, Lady Spencer admired Johnson as "one of the first geniuses we have" (September 16, 1784; Bessborough 93). "By Johnson, I take it for granted he means Dictionary Johnson," Lady Spencer wrote to her daughter on October 11, 1774, "and if he does I am with the Doctor in thinking him a very extraordinary man, he is possessed of an uncommon share of learning, has great talents and ingenuity, and what is very unusual in this age among what are call'd the great men, is a most zealous Christian," vitiated by a "ruggedness and brutality of manners" (Bessborough 17). Lady Georgiana also noted the lapse in decorum when Johnson visited Chatsworth at the age of seventy-five. "He din'd here and does not shine quite so much in eating as in conversing, for he eat much and nastily" (September 4–10, 1784; Bessborough 90).

Like Dr. Johnson, Lady Georgiana was both a writer and patroness. She had nine novels dedicated to her, more than most other women in late eighteenth-century England (Raven 56); only the queen and the prince regent's wife had more. Lady Georgiana owed such flattering attention to her rank, no doubt. On the other hand, her interest in the literary labors of others is more understandable in light of our renewed appreciation of her own.

Lady Georgiana began writing at an early age. At Althorp, she wrote poems and playlets to amuse her family after dinner (Foreman 9). Sometime before the age of fifteen, she penned a drama called *Zyllia*, in which a child discovers that her closest friend is her mother (Foreman 104). On April 14, 1773, her brother George circulated his sister's verse letters at Harrow and proposed that she publish them under the title, "An epistle from a young lady of quality abroad to her Brother at School in England" (Foreman 10). She wrote verses praising her father that inspired

Lord Palmerston's "On Reading Some Poetry of Lady Georgiana Spencer's, Wrote at Althorp-1774." Palmerston praised her "artless song" and concluded by connecting her to her ancestress on her father's side, the countess of Sunderland (d. 1684), who Edmund Waller unsuccessfully wooed as "Sacharissa" in his poetry. Walpole thought enough of Lady Georgiana's verse to collect them in a volume entitled "Ladies and gentlemen distinguished by their writings, learning, or talents in 1783."¹⁵ Various poems by Georgiana, mostly unpublished, can be found at Yale and the British Library: two of these, "The Butterfly," and "The Table," give a sense of her style and are included in Appendix 3.

In 1799, Lady Georgiana composed a prose work entitled *Memorandums of the Face of the Country in Switzerland* (1799)¹⁶ and *The Passage of the Mountain of St. Gothard*, which appeared in a pirated edition in the *Morning Chronicle* on December 20, 1799. Coleridge praised "The Passage" in "Ode to Georgiana," which appeared in the *Morning Post* on December 24, 1799.

Splendor's fondly fostered child!
 And did you hail the platform wild,
 Where once the Austrian fell
 Beneath the shaft of Tell!
 O Lady, nursed in pomp and pleasure!
 Whence learn'd you that heroic measure?

Coleridge celebrated the duchess, but not without some condescension mixed with envy. "Rich viands and the pleasurable wine/Were yours unearned by toil," he wrote. What he did not consider, perhaps, was the pathos that produced the work. Forced to travel the continent by her husband, the fifth duke, because of her affair and child by Charles Grey, Lady Georgiana's separation from her children at this time found expression in her poem. Delivering her child by Charles Grey in France, later named Eliza Courtney, Lady Georgiana wrote what she believed to be her last letter to her son, Hart, in her own blood. Lady Georgiana may have had a taste for melodrama in her life and fiction, but she suffered for every day she had been nursed in pomp and pleasure.

Lady Georgiana learned her "heroic measure," in part, from her friendship with actors and playwrights, who asked her to contribute to or patronize their works. She composed a song for Sheridan's *Pizzaro* in 1799, for example, that was very well received and went into a print run of 30,000. The play was adapted from Kotzebue's *Die Spanier in Peru*, though Lady Georgiana's song title is not known. Sounding a patriotic theme at a time when Britain was at war with the American colonies and

the French, the play opened on May 24 and ran for thirty-one nights. Sheridan's biographer notes that the song was a success in its own right (Foreman 414). When Sheridan wrote *The Stranger*—adapted from Kotzebue's drama of the same name—he called on the duchess's talents once again and she produced "The Favorite Song," for which Sheridan provided memorable lyrics.

I have a silent sorrow here,
A grief I'll ne'er impart.
It breathes no sigh, it sheds no tear,
But it consumes my heart.

The play treated a woman who deserts her husband and children for a lover and then reunites with her husband, a situation very close to Lady Georgiana's own.

In almost every activity she engaged in—even in her romantic adultery—Lady Georgiana caught the temper of the time. It is worth noting that the German drama of Kotzebue became enormously popular between 1796 and 1801—later adapted and translated by Elizabeth Inchbald as *Lover's Vows*. The play then became notorious as the drama proposed by Sir Thomas Bertram in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*.

While cartoonists like Rowlandson and Cruikshank questioned her morals—particularly her gambling and late-night carousing—actresses were indebted to Lady Georgiana for her patronage. She arranged Mary Robinson's appearance as Juliet in 1776 and had a hand in launching Sarah Siddons's career in 1784. "My good reception in London I cannot but partly attribute to the enthusiastic accounts of me which the amiable Duchess of Devonshire had brought thither, and spread before my arrival," Siddons noted. "I had the honour of her acquaintance during her visit to Bath, and her unqualified approbation at my performances" (Foreman 169). Mrs. Nunns served as Lady Georgiana's protégée. *The Morning Herald* reported that "the Duchess of Devonshire, in her patronage of Mrs. Nunns, had behaved with her accustomed liberality. Her Grace not only introduced her to London, and supported her very powerfully on the first two nights of her appearance, but corrected her dress in the *Confederacy* as directed and gave the dress in the *Jealous Wife*" (July 4, 1785; Foreman 174). Even after her eye surgery—when she ventured less often in public—she offered Mrs. Dorothy Jordan two stage boxes on her benefit night in September 1802.

Lady Georgiana responded to the generation of actresses she helped shape by composing songs and epilogues for their works. As early as March 17, 1784, she wrote the concluding march to the opera *La Reine*

de Golconde (Bessborough 77). Her artistic activity continued well into the 1790s, even after she had supposedly retired from public life. "I am guilty of having wrote the epilogue to [Joanna Baillie's] *Montfort* to be spoken by Mrs. Siddons tomorrow," she wrote with characteristic self-effacement to her brother on April 28, 1800. "I did not mean that it should be spoken but Mrs. Siddons had taken a liking to it" (Foreman 331). In 1802, she collaborated with her sister Harriet on a tragedy based on the character of Count Siegendorf in *The German's Tale*, from the fourth volume of Harriet Lee's (1757–1851) popular novella, *The Canterbury Tales*. Lady Georgiana's play (her sister admits she had the principal hand in the production) existed until 1822 but by 1899 all manuscripts were lost or destroyed.¹⁷ Lady Georgiana's grandson charged Byron with basing *Werner* on this adaptation, claiming that Lady Caroline Lamb showed the work of her aunt to the poet in 1812 (Foreman 331, 431n8).

Lady Georgiana's literary interests and extravagant, extroverted behavior attracted the attention of Richard Sheridan, William Combe, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Sheridan was inspired by the conversation of the duchess and her close friend, Lady Melbourne, to write *The School for Scandal*, which he dedicated to Anne Crewe, a member of the Devonshire House circle. Combe, or possibly Lord Carlisle, composed *The Duchess of Devonshire's Cow*, admonishing the duchess for her extravagant behavior. She became something of a favorite with Combe, who wrote long, admonishing letters, encouraging her to mend her ways (Walpole 28:313n4). Her passion for "deep play," inherited from her mother, attracted special comment. The ruin of William Walpole in *Emma*, gambling, also became the main subject of her second novel, *The Sylph*. "You have not as yet, I trust, acquired a taste for gaming," her mother wrote on May 8, 1775. "Play at whist, commerce, backgammon, trictrac or chess, but never at quinze, lou, brag, fardo, hazard or any games of chance, and if you are press'd to play always make the fashionable excuse of being tied up not to play at such and such a game," she wrote when it was already too late (Bessborough 24). A year after her marriage, and shortly after her first miscarriage in September 1775, Lady Georgiana accrued gambling debts of 3,000 pounds (the equivalent of \$270,000 today) (Foreman 42). The Spencers immediately paid them, but tried, in vain, to end their daughter's fashionable activity. A decade later, Lady Georgiana assumed the trait was "innate, for I remember playing from seven in the morning till eight at night at Lansquenet with old Mrs. Newton when I was nine years old" (January 21, 1784; Bessborough 71). Her mother gambled until six in the morning, Lady Georgiana's sister remembered in her diary. Despite her mother's somewhat hypocritical injunctions, Lady Georgiana could not avoid her addiction. In

1804, Lady Georgiana confessed to gambling debts of 50,000 pounds (Foreman 380). After her death, in 1806, her husband found her total indebtedness was 109,135 pounds.¹⁸

Lady Georgiana's anxiety about sharing her gambling debts with her husband plagued her for more than twenty years. She often delayed her confessions to coincide with her pregnancies, hoping against hope that when she produced a male heir all would be forgiven. That her husband was living under one roof with Lady Elizabeth Foster and his own wife at Devonshire House does not seem to have compromised his authority over her. Lady Georgiana's proclivity for pleasing those around her may well have led her to consent to the ménage à trois that characterized her marriage from 1783 to her death in 1806. Under laws of coverture, she had little choice. Yet Lady Georgiana seems to have preferred the company of Elizabeth Foster (at least in the early decades) to her own husband; the loneliness of an aristocratic and arranged marriage is abundantly clear in Lady Georgiana's letters, where she pleads with her mother to allow her to retain Foster as a close friend.

Lady Georgiana had a complex relationship to her social class. An intellectual woman who collected fossils and minerals later in life, she nevertheless had a reputation for flightiness and superficiality as the young wife of the fifth duke. Surrounded by material wealth, she wrote against its dangers. Lady Georgiana portrays her heroine Julia Stanley as a victim of French hairstyles that Lady Georgiana herself popularized. In both *Emma* and *The Sylph*, she criticizes the bon ton, though she was its most prominent member. Her moral critique of her contemporaries succeeded because she exposed their chief failing: a lack of heart. Lady Georgiana exhibited an excess of sensibility in an age of good sense. Caught up in what she characterized as a "vortex of dissipation," she would have agreed with the narrator of Byron's *Don Juan*, who dismissed society as "one polish'd horde, / Form'd of two mighty tribes, the *Bored* and *Bored*."¹⁹ Emma, like Julia Stanley of *The Sylph*, longs desperately to escape such a world. Perhaps novel writing provided the author with one means of doing so.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

Since Lady Georgiana never acknowledged, or denied, being the author of *Emma* or *The Sylph* in print,²⁰ one of the more compelling questions regarding *Emma* is whether she actually wrote it. Seven independent sources list her as author,²¹ including the most recent and definitive work on the subject, *The English Novel*, which attributes the novel to her with

a question mark. “If *Emma* was indeed by the Duchess of Devonshire then it was published when she was sixteen,” James Raven concludes. “Only a year older was Elizabeth Todd when her *History of Lady Caroline Rivers* (1788) [appeared], and Margaret Holford when she published *Calaf: A Persian Tale* (1798)” (Raven 45). “Youth was no bar [to authorship]” at this time, J. M. S. Tompkins explains, “for in 1779 Dodsley issued *The Indiscreet Marriage* by Miss Nugent and Miss Taylor of Twickenham, whose ages together do not exceed 30 years.”²² The *Monthly Review* believed *The Fortunate Blue Coat Boy* (1769) by Orphan Otrohian was really the product of Christ’s Hospital; and in 1793, Anna Maria Porter completed *Artless Tales* at the age of thirteen.

The fact that *Emma* appeared with no name appended to its title page is no argument against Lady Georgiana’s authorship either, for over eighty percent of novels in the 1770s and 1780s were published anonymously (Raven 91). Authors feared public ridicule and the wrath of their families (Raven 41): a woman about to marry England’s most eligible bachelor had more to lose than most by displaying her anxieties about marriage for public inspection. And then there is the question of aesthetic judgment. “The public evaluation of almost all new novels by the periodical reviewers was itself a leading cause of title page disguise and the publication of works anonymously,” Raven notes (43).

Far from being unusual, *Emma* is very typical of novels written for circulating libraries, that “evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge” that Richard Sheridan mocked in *The Rivals*.²³ There were twenty circulating libraries operating in London by 1770 (Raven 84) and they existed to “rent out” books, hence the three-volume format. Many novels were published in editions of 500, expressly for libraries run by the Noble brothers, T. H. Lowndes (publisher of Lady Georgiana’s *The Sylph*), William Lane, and T. H. Hookham (Lady Georgiana’s publisher for *Emma*). *Emma* is unusual because it went into four editions (only forty-two percent went into a second edition) and because it included a frontispiece (Raven 35). “The fashionable novel remained the luxury of a narrow section of society,” Raven observes (111). It is hardly surprising that an arbitress of sartorial fashion would also participate in the fashionable activity of novel writing. “A novel by a lady of quality seems to be now almost as common, and often I believe as bad, a thing, as *verses by a person of honour* was in the last age,” Hannah More wrote disapprovingly on July 20, 1788 (Walpole 31:274): Lady Georgiana may well have set this fashion. On May 8, 1777, the duchess of Devonshire’s circle attended the opening of Richard Sheridan’s *School for Scandal* and were delighted to find themselves lampooned: the dedicatee was Lady Anne Crewe, Sheridan’s current infatuation, while Lady Melbourne and the

duchess appeared, alternately, as Lady Sneerwell and Lady Teazle. Sheridan's character, Charles Surface, stole witticisms from James Hare and Charles James Fox, while Samuel Johnson's love of paradox was suggested in a line that might serve as the play's epigraph: "there's no possibility of being witty without a little ill nature" (Masters 65).

The evidence that Lady Georgiana wrote *Emma* is both external and internal. Unfortunately, the correspondence of her publisher, T. H. Hookham, does not exist for the 1770s, though a pirated Dublin reprint of 1784 states that the novel is "by the author of *The Sylph*" (the only external evidence we have). While this may be untrustworthy—a mere effort to attract more readers to an anonymous novel—the work itself is dedicated to Lady Camden, whose husband was a friend of the family as early as 1774 (Bessborough 292; Foreman 78). Here again, however, evidence is inconclusive. Another writer might have dedicated the novel to Lady Camden in order to give the work cachet. "A particular attraction for the novelist seeking subscribers was association with an illustrious dedicatee," Raven notes (55). Of the 315 novels published in the 1770s, for example, forty-two carried dedications (or thirteen percent of the total) (Raven 56). What makes *Emma* different is that many of the subscribers were close friends of Lady Georgiana, Lady Melbourne being the most prominent. Other members of the subscription list, especially the duchess of Manchester, the countess of Thanet, and the dowager of Westmoreland, have demonstrable connections to Lady Georgiana (Foreman 45, 184, 78). Finally, the subscription list seems to point to a female author. "The gender division of these public supporters was often extreme," James Raven notes. "*Emma; or, The Unfortunate Attachment* (1773:28) listed 16 men and 100 women" (55).

So autobiographical is the novel that it can be read as a *roman à clef*. William Walpole resembles the fifth duke in his fastidious tastes and uncommunicative nature; the previous mistress of Walpole recalls Charlotte Spencer, by whom the fifth duke had a child before marrying Lady Georgiana (who appears as a composite of Emma herself and Harriet). Colonel Sutton could be anyone, but surely Mathilda is Lady Harriet, Lady Georgiana's sister, for this young lady comforts Priscilla in times of grief, showing the warm heart and sensibility that Lady Melbourne sometimes lacked. The kind-hearted father recalls Lord Spencer, whose eccentric ideas about female education resemble Emma's wayward father whose paternal authority destroys his daughter's happiness. Emma experiences life as a series of crises, which she communicates to Frances Thornton (Lady Melbourne), on whom she relied for her good sense and referred to as "the Thorn" because of her sharp tongue. In *Emma*, Lady Noel (Thornton's married name) observes that "she who shows an indiffer-

ence to the opinion of the world deserves the censures of it" (118), a line very similar to one Lady Melbourne actually penned to Lady Caroline Lamb on April 13, 1810.²⁴ Lady Melbourne's cynical comments on marriage appear to humorous effect again in *The Sylph* and, most likely, in Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, which records remarks he heard at Devonshire House (Masters 62–64).

Both *Emma* and *The Sylph* treat similar themes, such as the corruption of London high society, the neglect of tradesmen's bills, and the arrogance of foppish men. These topics recur, with similar political inflections, in Lady Georgiana's letters. The editor of Lady Georgiana's letters, the earl of Bessborough, attributes *The Sylph* based on its inside knowledge of the bon ton (3, 35). In *Emma*, a reference to the word "sylph" appears, which anticipates the title of Lady Georgiana's second novel ("He is Emma's sylph, and cannot afford to attend to me" [150]). In addition, both novels make coy references to a "Georgina" or duchess of Devonshire. Emma notes that "Lady Georgina, not so completely beautiful, is infinitely more charming and the laughing Graces sport in her countenance" (131); in *The Sylph*, William Stanley alludes to a French hairdresser who must "disoblige the Duchess of D— by giving radishes (meant to adorn her hair!) to Lady Stanley."²⁵ Lady Georgiana did more than anyone else to make French hairstyles fashionable in London, as the cartoonists were fond of noting (Foreman 208). Lady Georgiana's unconventional beauty is also suggested in both works. Emma's husband describes her attractions "as much out of the usual style as the rest of her perfections. . . . I have seen features more exactly regular, forms more striking; but never was there such an assemblage of the graces to be found in one person! Her whole soul is to be seen in her countenance, which in every turn expresses all that is desirable in woman" (58). In *The Sylph*, Lord Stanley offers the following assessment of his wife Julia. "She is not a perfect beauty: which, if you are of my taste, you will think rather an advantage than not; as there is generally a formality in great regularity of features, and most times an insipidity. In her there are neither. She is in one word *animated nature*" (20), a phrase Maria Cosway used when she painted the duchess of Devonshire as Diana, bursting through the clouds.²⁶

Like Lady Georgiana, who studied violin under Giardini and dancing with the Italian master Vestris, Emma is musical (Foreman 86). She plays the harpsichord (like Richardson's Clarissa), and her failure to do so after she leaves her father's home is uncharacteristic enough to become a sign of her romantic unhappiness. (She begins to play again, strangely enough, after her father's death and her ill-fated decision to marry William Walpole.) Both Lady Georgiana and her literary creation link their pursuit of culture and self-improvement to a political outlook: "mortals who are indebted to

the dexterity of their tailors alone for all their consequence, are not subjects in which my pen can dwell with any chance of pleasing you or myself," Emma notes of the men she surveys at a ball (3). The frequent references to Whig politicians—including the Spencers (her own family name)—also point to Lady Georgiana's authorship, especially the tendency to apply Whig principles to women's rights (as Kitty Bishop tries to do). The novel appears to have been written by Lady Georgiana, but cannot be conclusively proven to be by her.

THE RECEPTION OF EMMA

In 1773, *Emma; or, The Unfortunate Attachment* appeared in three volumes. It was soon successful enough for a Dublin pirated edition to appear in 1784, for *The Minstrel* to advertise it in a "new edition" with illustrations (1787), and for a third and fourth London edition to appear in 1789 and 1793.²⁷ Any effort to assess its aesthetic value, however, cannot be easily separated from the politics of its reception: the fact that it was written by a woman and published for a circulating library. "Innocent, but not excellent:—yet not contemptible," *The Monthly Review* noted in 1773. "We have characterised fifty such; and are sick of repetition" (Raven 203). The sheer volume of novels may explain the patronizing reviews they often received. "We heartily recommend the perusal of these three volumes to those who are in want of a soporific," the rival *Critical Review* announced, "and we do it very confidently, as we have experienced its effects. The story of *Emma* is told in a series of letters; a mode of writing which Richardson and Rousseau have indeed practised with the greatest success, but which requires too great a share of talents for every dabbler in novel-writing to adopt" (Raven 203).²⁸ This telling comparison between a "dabbler in novel-writing" and Richardson and Rousseau appears, more favorably cast, in *The Universal Catalogue's* notice: "the different characters are well drawn and highly coloured, and there is one, a sprightly young lady, sensible and witty, little in any thing inferior to Richardson's Miss Howe, in his *Clarissa*, or Lady G. in his *Sir Charles Grandison*."²⁸ Modern assessments accord with this review, stating simply that Lady Georgiana wrote "two fine epistolary novels" (Blain 288).

Though the critics seem harsh in their estimate of *Emma*, they faced an almost unprecedented growth in the novel market in the 1770s, which tapered off significantly in the period shortly after the American Revolution. And their opinions mattered: "a novel is a dish I never venture upon without a taster, or some knowledge of the cook," Hannah More confessed to Horace Walpole (35:41). Reviewers complained that "novels spring into

existence like insects on the banks of the Nile, and if we may be indulged in another comparison, cover the shelves of our circulating libraries as locusts crowd the fields of Asia. Their great and growing number is a serious evil, for, in general, they exhibit delusive views of human life; and while they amuse, frequently poison the mind" (Raven *JNW* 68). The Nobles, prominent and somewhat notorious publishers of novels for circulating libraries, accused the "Impartial" *London Review* of "damning every novel we publish and as we have reason to believe, frequently without reading them" (101). This may well have been the case, for novels were reviewed anonymously by six male editors at *The Monthly Review*, including Ralph Griffiths, John Cleland, William Rose, and John Hill,³⁰ whose names were not known at the time. *The Critical Review* made a point of altering the practice of anonymous reviews, but never did, only infrequently appending the initials of reviewers to some, but not all, notices.

In *The Sign of Angelica*, Janet Todd questions why novels such as *Emma* have not been considered part of the literary canon. "Is it a reaction to a literature that constantly declares that it exists to make money? Or is it because our critical assumptions have been fashioned through a particular body of male literature and literary criticism? My answer to both of these questions is a qualified yes," she concludes.³¹ Certainly the predominance of male reviewers may have helped marginalize novels written for the circulating libraries. But does *Emma* deserve to be classified as a novel written for the marketplace? Clearly, Lady Georgiana did not write the novel because she needed money. Self-expression, even fashionable self-expression, seems a more likely motive.

Despite Lady Georgiana's social position, her novel still had to justify itself on moral grounds, especially to evangelical critics like Hannah More. In a perceptive essay written on the sentimental novel, and published fourteen years after his own *The Man of Feeling*, Henry Mackenzie described "The principal danger of Novels, as forming a mistaken and pernicious system of morality, which seems to me to arise from that contrast between one virtue or excellence and another, that war of duties, which is to be found in many of them, particularly in that species called the *Sentimental*."³² *Emma* was lucky enough to escape such censure from *The Universal Catalogue*, which found the subject "excellent, the style is easy and unaffected, and the whole abounds with such noble sentiments, as if properly attended to, must certainly correct the human heart."³³ Perhaps Lady Georgiana's decision to reconcile *Emma* and William Walpole garnered this favorable review from an editor. He may well have appreciated the novelist's tendency to uphold the system of primogeniture, even if it did so in such a strained and improbable manner as to invite an ironic reading.

In *Emma*, William Walpole, a macaroni and fop, indicates the dangers of what Henry Mackenzie called “refined sentimentalists, who are contented with talking of virtues which they never practice, who pay in words what they owe in actions; or perhaps, what is fully as dangerous, who open their minds to *impressions* which never have any effect upon their *conduct*, but are considered as something foreign to and distinct from it” (*Lounger* 34). *Emma* might be regarded as a critique of the traditional sentimental novel, much in the terms that Mackenzie outlines. In *Emma*, Walpole’s vanity outweighs his compassion; he is so mortified to discover his wife had a previous lover that he misses the first six months of his infant’s life, providing no support to the woman who has borne his child. When he realizes his error, he has scruples about returning to his wife until he recoups his fortune (232). George Sutton warns William about “souring your own disposition by imaginary affronts” (125). Unfortunately, he suffers from the same flaw. Both men call themselves feeling but fail at key moments to exhibit true compassion. Thus Walpole complains of Emma’s attachment to her father when he is dying, for example, and Sutton complains of Priscilla Neville’s care for her sister Mrs. Wentworth: “Amiable as her motives for her slighting me were, and thoroughly acquainted as I was with them, I could not help being wounded by her indifference” (107). Not only do these men behave selfishly, but they interfere with women’s roles in caring for their sick or grieving relatives. Foppishness is not only ridiculous, it is socially disruptive.

William and Emma are prone to high feeling, a quality roundly ridiculed by both men and women. Kitty Bishop and George Sutton dismiss William’s “fine scruples” about women’s chastity, while Emma’s reticence leads her husband to misunderstand her as cold. Characters like Kitty Bishop and Lady Noel, on the other hand, use their minds to control their feelings and are happier for this reason. But not without a struggle. Many suffer from an excess of sensibility that leads them to become depressed, if not morbid. Mathilda has withdrawn from society; Emma cultivates her own melancholy after the birth of her daughter (though, with an absentee husband, she has good reason to do so): “That creation of refined and subtle feeling, reared by the authors of the works to which I allude, has an ill effect, not only on our ideas of virtue, but also on our estimate of happiness,” Mackenzie concludes. “That sickly sort of refinement creates imaginary evils and distresses, and imaginary blessings and enjoyments, which embitter the common disappointments, and depreciate the common attainments of life.” Lady Spencer warned her daughter against precisely this sort of overwrought feeling.

Throughout the novel, Walpole’s foppishness betrays his “sickly sort of refinement.” Emma notes how her husband takes an excessive interest

in her wardrobe: “he was in my dressing room twice or thrice during the time allotted to the toilet,” Emma notes. “He did not like this colour—that ornament would best suit my face,—I must put on my *petit-gris*” (131). Such attention to feminine finery bespeaks an effeminacy in Walpole, perhaps a product of his Italian travels, which contrasts with Augustus Sidney, who educates Emma’s mind and pays little attention to cosmetics. (The theme recurs in *The Sylph*, when Lord Stanley repulses Lady Stanley by correcting her conduct in court—much as the duke of Devonshire did when first presenting his wife to Queen Charlotte). He is not a coxcomb, he suggests (105), and Emma agrees (thus showing her lack of insight). Catherine Bishop, by contrast, satirizes a guest who tries to instruct her on the distinction between coxcombs and macaronis: “The common coxcomb has taste enough to like one person better than another, to have his clothes cut fashionably, to frequent the company of the ladies; good humor enough to be easy, and is vivacious enough to amuse: not a melancholy, woe-begone, self important prig, puffed up with affectation of pre eminence in knowledge; too proud for content, too high for ease” (158). In writing about such foibles in her novel, Lady Georgiana anticipates Mackenzie’s fears about “a mistaken and pernicious system of morality”; in fact, she turns the tables on her mother’s favorite, Hannah More, who thought the genre of the novel would corrupt “young ladies” by writing one that exposes the shortcomings of young men.³³ In this sense, *Emma* can be read as a conduct book for men that rivals and perhaps updates Lord Chesterfield’s.

One example of Lady Georgiana’s palpable design occurs through the device of complementarity. Colonel William Sutton, a straightforward if somewhat obtuse man, corrects the excesses of the overly-refined William Walpole. Yet the novel does not blindly prefer English virtue to European cosmopolitanism. Lady Noel, perhaps the most sophisticated of the novel’s heroines, enjoys her visit to Paris and comments on the city’s attractions. Her letters recall Emily Cowper’s to Lady Melbourne, who suspected English jingoists who could not acknowledge the improved Simplon Pass because they despised Napoleon (September 8, 1816; 45549, f. 79; Gross 56). They also remind us that Lady Georgiana befriended Marie Antoinette (for whom she used the code name Mrs. Brown [Bessborough 54]) as a young girl, and understood the attractions of Parisian fashion even as she parodied French excesses in *The Sylph* (1779). Lady Georgiana’s tour of France, shortly before *Emma* was published, did much to shape these views.

During her continental tour, Lady Georgiana imbibed moral instruction from her somewhat didactic father, which may have found its way into *Emma*. If so, such passages take up political topics Henry Mackenzie

also made fashionable through the character of Harley in *The Man of Feeling*. “You tell me of immense territories subject to the English,” Harley exclaimed, two years before *Emma* appeared. “I cannot think of their possessions without being led to inquire by what right they possess them . . . what title have the subjects of another kingdom to establish an empire in India? . . . The fame of conquest, barbarous as that motive is, is but a secondary consideration [to wealth] When shall I see a commander return from India in the pride of honourable poverty? You describe the victories they have gained; they are sullied by the cause in which they fought: you enumerate the spoils of those victories; they are covered with the blood of the vanquished.”³⁵ Though Mackenzie was partly exposing his character’s naivete in 1771, Edmund Burke and Richard Sheridan used similar arguments to prosecute Warren Hastings, director of the East India Company, in 1783 and 1785. In *Emma*, poverty and a lack of worldliness are also “honourable” virtues. Walpole expresses his outrage that his political rival, a “nabob,” can spend a fortune earned in corrupt colonial practices to win an English election. That Lady Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, sympathized with such a political outlook can be shown, in part, by the fact that she helped launch Sheridan’s career as MP for Stafford.

In *Emma*, Walpole reveals his prejudices against opportunistic Englishmen, suggesting that money made in India is somehow tainted. This response to an increasingly globalized economy pits English virtue against more cosmopolitan standards: the old Whigs who protected the country from James II in the Glorious Revolution have been replaced by commercial agents who make ill-gotten gains in foreign countries. They then return to England to corrupt the political process. Emma frequently contrasts the Whigs who opposed royal tyranny with the trivial pursuits of the debased generation of fops and macaronis who have succeeded them. Burke’s claim that the “age of chivalry is over” would be uttered almost twenty years later. *Emma* offers a similar, though more muted, account of dissipated male virtue by portraying William Walpole as unable to understand his own political opportunism.

At times, Emma exhibits a rather conventional moralism. A series of set speeches, for example, recall favorite themes of Lady Spencer (learned, no doubt, from her mentor, Hannah More): the importance of filial devotion (140), the limits of despair and mourning (155), and the dangers of gambling (194). Others reflect Lady Georgiana’s responses: the importance and danger of sensibility (82, 148), the happy state of the unknowing (130), the importance of friendship (113), of keeping appearances (130), and the uselessness of money (27). The rational tone of these Christian homilies resembles More’s *On the Manners of the Great*

and other works. Some monologues prompt debate: George Sutton and William Walpole's remarks on female honor, for example, or Frances Thornton and Emma's comments on whether there "are women inhuman enough to enjoy the pain they inflict" (130). Others may be ironic: Kitty Bishop and the newly married Frances Thornton discuss whether women should contradict their husbands (138), or, to put it differently, on whether there are more pleasures in commanding or obeying. Often these debates contribute to the artistry of the epistolary novel, as they form a running correspondence between two characters. Inspired by Lady Clarendon choosing Lord Clarendon over Mr. D'Arcy, Sutton and Emma discuss whether "women are oftener biased by ambition, than by love in chusing" (153). The importance of making such a choice, however, is never in doubt: "You, Priscy, may be rendered miserable by the carelessness, by the almost unavoidable failings of men," Priscilla's mother warns her (in a letter that Emma, ironically enough, quotes): "beware then how you chuse, for your first preference makes your destiny" (208).

In *Emma*, as in many of the novels that appeared in circulating libraries, men rather than women are held up for moral scrutiny and found wanting (this may be why one reviewer found the novel "insipid"); the women who exhibit admirable conduct are not sanctimonious or priggish, but experienced mothers and wives who must manage their husbands; they do not have the privilege of forsaking them. Though chaste and modest, these same women articulated their views of men with surprising candor (a candor *Emma* exploits, perhaps, more than its predecessors). Emma and Frances's letters exhibit some of this freedom, for they are filled with minute examinations of the visitors to their estates. The justness of their delicate, though pointed, observations on men's shortcomings (the reticence of Augustus Sidney; the self-conceit and narcissism of Walpole) are only reinforced by Kitty Bishop's unbridled responses. Emma, Priscy Neville, Lady Noel, and Kitty Bishop form a continuum in this regard: each letter writer is more self-confident and dismissive of men than the last. Where Walpole or Sutton correct each others' misogyny, Kitty's critique of men remains unanswered—the moral impetus of the novel is toward reforming the "strutting boobies" (168) who believe that they are indispensable to their country's well-being.

EMMA AS AN EPISTOLARY NOVEL

Like other epistolary novels of the period (*Clarissa*; *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*; and *Sir Charles Grandison*), *Emma* explores the familial tension that arises from arranged marriages. "The heroine of *Emma*: or, the

Unfortunate Attachment (1773) by Georgiana Spencer, late Duchess of Devonshire, actually transfers her affections, as Clarissa could not, at the command of her father," Isobel Grundy notes. In addition, Emma imagines her husband 'covered with the blood of Sidney,' coming to stab her with the same sword, just as Clarissa has a dream of being "stabbed . . . to the heart," by Lovelace (Grundy 227–228), "and then tumbled . . . into a deep grave ready dug."³⁶

A more powerful influence still may be Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1763), which Lady Georgiana had read and enjoyed (Masters 68). In the same way that Julie and her tutor St. Preux become intimate by inhabiting the same domestic space as brother and sister, Emma and her instructor Augustus Sidney are raised as siblings, with Emma's father adopting Augustus Sidney after the death of Sidney's father. In both novels, Julie and Emma sacrifice their lover for an arranged marriage dictated by their father. Julie and Emma transform themselves by obeying their father's dictates. Monsieur de Wolmar and William Walpole are comparable characters, whose fastidiousness helps their wives improve their conduct, though Walpole learns from his passive wife in a way that Wolmar never does. Finally, both novels explore a woman's moral development through marriage and child-rearing.

Rousseau was much influenced by Richardson. In Richardson's novel, Clarissa's virtue seems inseparable from "the dairy-house" of Harlowe Place where she is reared. Nicknamed "The Grove," as if to emphasize its rural location, Clarissa's home (and sense of rootedness) forms a marked contrast with the whorehouse in London where she resides, unknowingly, after Lovelace abducts her. *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, and *Emma* follow a similar trajectory. Both novels contrast country and city. Julie's generous nature seems to arise, organically, from Clarens, which St. Preux is pleased to contrast, favorably, with the dissolute city of Paris. Emma's virtue and "reticence," which she shares with Augustus Sidney, are also attributed to her country origins (Kitty Bishop's brashness, which William Walpole enjoys, seems an urban quality by contrast). *Emma* celebrates pastoralism as surely as Rousseau, including a portrait of a grey-headed gardener who becomes a metonymy for lost English virtue: "There is a simplicity and heartiness in him, that charms me prodigiously," Emma writes (114). Walpole owns estates at Spring Park and Rose-Court in Yorkshire; Frances Greville (later Lady Noel) lives at Noel Castle; Priscy Neville lives in London on Sackville Street (then Park Street), where she is miserable, before retiring to Rose-Court; Harriet Courtney resides at Milfield. The residences seem arbitrary, but virtuous characters migrate toward the northern countryside or Yorkshire, while romances unravel in the bustle of balls and masquerades in London