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Ideas of property, history, and subjectivity converge in Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) and Elizabeth Griffith's *The History of Lady Barton* (1771). Both novels explore the centrality of property in the creation of a viable identity – one that lends authority to history and the law as culturally and individually determining narratives. At the level of form and content, these texts demonstrate the connections between textual authority and women's lived experience. For the novel's protagonists—Sidney Bidulph and Louisa Barton—the act of writing preserves individuality separate from these dominant narratives. Their continued inscription of their own experiences works as a form of witnessing or testimony that refuses the erasure imposed by legal and historical models. Sidney's "memoirs" and Louisa's "history" problematize the relationship between the assumed subjectivity of fiction and the assumed clarity and objectivity of historical writing. Written in the same period that produced Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1764-1769) and national histories by David Hume (1754-1763) and Catharine Macaulay (1763-1783), these novels challenge a gendered separation between culturally valuable literary production and excessive, wasteful products of 'feminized' genres such as the novel and romance. The concern in both novels is not the historically-produced subject but the process by which historiography flattens and erases alternatives to dominant narratives. This essay argues that these novels reveal the ways in which history and the law, while seeming to occupy a position beyond manipulation, exist as narratives vulnerable to textual misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and misreading. By creating "histories" and "memoirs" through romantic, Gothic, and sentimental conventions, Sheridan and Griffith use the generic authority of history to evaluate the cost of women's exclusion from legal and historical lineages of subjectivity and personhood.

The History of Lady Barton includes letters to and from Louisa Barton and her sister, Fanny Cleveland, as well as other exchanges between various characters. The main narrative concerns Louisa's growing affection for the worthy Lord Lucan and her dissatisfaction with her husband, Sir William Barton. While Lord Lucan returns her affections, Louisa remains faithful to Sir William but allows her guilt to eat away at her psyche and her health. Sir William suspects much and accuses Louisa of orchestrating a miscarriage to deprive him of a legitimate heir. Confined to her house, Louisa becomes William's prisoner until her innocence is proven through the confessions of the dastardly Colonel Walter, a man who has imprisoned and deserted his own wife and daughter. Repentant, Sir William returns to Louisa, whose delicate decline is irreversible: she dies, having recognized her love for Sir William, in the presence of her husband and sister. Yet, the 'history of Lady Barton' is not *just* the history of Louisa Barton. The text includes other exchanges that detail Fanny's own courtship and eventual marriage, a kidnap plot involving their brother's finacée, a woman escaping from unjust imprisonment, and the experiences of a young Englishman abroad. The letters concern courtship and marriage, family responsibilities, literature, and morality. They also illustrate the many and varied functions of letter writing: the letters communicate, inform, entreat, and make explicit demands on the reader; they justify the writer's position and decisions and enable dialogue between characters divided by situation and setting. This plurality of "histories", similar to Sidney Bidulph's layered "memoir", is crucial to the ways in which this text enacts a resistance to the normalizing force of historical and legal narratives.

The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph carries the distinction of having caused Samuel Johnson to enquire whether Sheridan had the "right, upon moral principles, to make . . . readers suffer so much" (qtd. in Boswell 1: 210). A paragon of sentimental virtue, Sidney Bidulph begins her memoirs on the cusp of a sound and happy marriage to Orlando Faulkland, her brother's

best friend. When an anonymous tip reveals that Faulkland has ruined a young woman named Miss Burchell, Sidney's mother calls off the engagement and takes Sidney away from the city. In the countryside, she meets and marries Mr Arnold. Their marriage is content and Sidney has two daughters before Arnold is seduced into an affair by a Mrs Gerrarde. Patient to the last, Sidney removes from her marital home and lives on a strict economy with her two girls until the affair is resolved, through Faulkland's efforts, and Mr Arnold returns. Forgiven, Mr Arnold dies but not before a claim on his family's estate is decided against his favour and Sidney is left with two children in dire straits. The appearance of an uncle, Ned Warner, earns Sidney an inheritance that enables her to demonstrate her benevolence. Faulkland has, in the meanwhile, married Miss Burchell to prove his character to Sidney – a testament to his unchanging love for her. The new couple go to Faulkland's estate in Ireland. Eventually, Miss Burchell reveals her 'true' character and intentions: she takes a lover and is discovered with him by Faulkland, who kills both by accident. Returning to Sidney, Faulkland demands her hand in marriage, to which she assents; they are married, but Faulkland departs the country to avoid the law almost immediately. A letter arrives that informs Sidney that Miss Burchell (Mrs Faulkland) is *not* dead. When Faulkland hears the news, he commits suicide. Sidney's narrative, picked up by her correspondent and friend, Cecilia Rivers, winds down the main story before ending by projecting further misfortunes and breaking off suddenly. In spite of the single narrative voice, Sidney's memoirs actually contain, through reported speech and action as well as through included letters from various characters, the stories of a wide variety of characters including Sidney's mother, Faulkland, Miss Burchell, and Mrs Gerrarde.

The difference between the titles of these two texts is vital. The *history* of Lady Barton immediately presents the protagonist as a legal subject and inscribes her with a legal identity that fits a broader historical narrative. The *memoirs* of Sidney Bidulph, on the other hand, insist on the protagonist's birth-name, though she becomes Mrs Arnold very early on. History and law construct women's roles chronologically and linearly as a procession from daughter to wife to mother to widow; memory, however, reveals the disjointed psychic trauma that such narratives perpetrate on the bodies of women. Louisa Barton is an illustrative example: unhappily married and in love with another man, Louisa miscarries. Sir William, distraught and already suspicious of Louisa's affections, accuses her of plotting to deprive him of an heir, of deliberately miscarrying. Perversely, Sir William reads Louisa's body as resistant to the narrative – her miscarriage signals her "refusal" to progress from wife to mother, a move which also confirms her status as property. Her death, which occurs shortly after the miscarriage (from which she does not recover), follows as a consequence of this refusal: her only remaining option is to abdicate her role entirely – an act that renders her value as an abstraction and admits the impossibility of narrating the physical, material remains of her existence. In *Sidney Bidulph*, the text manifests the trauma experienced by the protagonist: the title only initially correlates with the heroine, but her marriage to Mr Arnold distances her from her own story. Neither the law nor history can possess memory, which adheres precisely where such objective narratives lose traction and fall away: the body becomes the irreducible and unutterable site of individual subjectivity.

The same discourses that would celebrate this emancipatory possibility of the flesh, however, are also brought to face with the body-as-object. Thus, the question of subjectivity becomes oddly located in a discourse of objectification as the site of conflicting pressures of history and memory. Louisa's particular history is subsumed into the universalising abstract role of "wife"; as Lady Barton, she has a history without memory; as Louisa, her memories are excessive, unnecessary, extraneous to the position of wife offered as choice but presented as

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destiny. The lineage of legal practice based on a record of precedent and chronology provide both history and law with form and structure; the folds of personal memory are more appropriate to the creative heterogeneity of 'fiction'. Form and content, story and story-teller: Louisa and Sidney become metonymic of their own narratives, creating a deeply embodied and multifaceted *mise-en-abyme*. By disrupting and disregarding linearity, both novels threaten the sanctity of lineage and inheritance crucial to the authority of history and law. This same disruption also enables moments whose affective power comes from transience rather than permanence. Thus, where the traditional sentimental narrative spends its energy in making the moment of marriage a symbolic climax, these texts disperse that force and examine the effects of this event. Both Sidney and Louisa insist on the persistent return of a complex subject that extends beyond the available ideological container for "wife". Memory locates the origin of experience in the body, but, as evidenced by these heroines, participation in history requires a traumatic disembodiment.

This tension between the material and the abstract location of experience is evident in Sir William Blackstone's four-volume *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, which made its first appearance in the decade between the publications of *Sidney Bidulph* and *Lady Barton*. Blackstone's *Commentaries* grants women a body in order to demonstrate the extent of the law's power over the material world. The first volume treats the "Rights of Persons" and places the chapter "On Husband and Wife" between chapters detailing the reciprocal duties of masters and servants, and of parents and children. This syntactical positioning reflects the uncertainties and convictions of mid-century legal representations of wives as subjects to the authority of men in relationships determined by commercial and private ties. "Servant", "wife", and "child" in the same position in each chapter title display through a coincidence of grammar the perception of the analogous state of dependency of each. Blackstone's discussion of the laws pertaining to wives is the most explicit example of how the *Commentaries* come dangerously close to undermining the authority of the law by bringing it within the authority of text. While history ratifies and confirms law, it also threatens to subject the law to its own processes. Similarly, the legal position of wife shows the "favour" shown to English women, but that position is immediately taken back, since the wife is "subsumed" by the husband through marriage. The creation of legal subjects requires the erasure of individuals; women, as already only tenuously "individual", enable the law to disguise violence as preference. Women are recognized as subjects of the law only to be removed active agents altogether. It is the second volume, "Rights of Things", that Gothic scholars have particularly claimed for their own, particularly the metaphor of England's constitution as an "old Gothic castle" (Blackstone 2:221). While it has become standard for Gothic criticism to point out Blackstone's structural metaphor for the law, less attention has been paid to how Blackstone conceptualizes the law as inheritance with its own lineage.

The interest in creating grand-scale histories – of the nation, of the nation's laws, of the nation's literature – is an important feature of the ideological landscape in which Sheridan and Griffith wrote and published. This period of nation-building is bracketed by the "year of victories" (1759) and the first decade of the nineteenth century which saw the Act of Union with Ireland and the end of the French Revolutionary Wars. Success on the world stage (with the notable exception of the American colonies) translated into optimistic, Enlightenment versions of history as evidence of the ongoing process by which society would arrive at perfection. As Harriet Guest and Devoney Looser have discussed, women figure frequently as an index of progress in eighteenth-century histories: they are the necessary victims of barbarian societies and a luxury of enlightened civilization. The role of women *in* history, however, remains marginal. They are largely absent (except when appearing as queens) from

both Hume's and Macaulay's histories, both of which perform a similar feat to Blackstone's work on the law: ordering history into a linear narrative of cultural progress. While the origin of national history is, perhaps, less fraught than that of law, Hume's history suggests the same desire to establish the nation through difference by positing the origin of England outside of and antecedent to the history of the nation itself. Thus, his history begins with the invasion of Julius Caesar and ends with the Glorious Revolution of 1688: when, exactly, "England" emerges, or what precisely constitutes "England", remains ambiguous.

As Sue Chaplin argues, "the law must be grounded in some certain principle" in order to beget a "legitimate chain of succession" (23). To speak of the lineage of the law is to engage in precisely the work that Blackstone set out in his *Commentaries*, and more broadly the kind of work done by national and literary historians in the latter half of the century. Locating the present incarnation of law as simultaneously ancient and modern, Blackstone comes precariously close to exposing the foundational myth of authority upon which the law depends. Crucially, the law does not exist *in* his *Commentaries*, which are supplemental; the law can only be demonstrated through its affective regulation of material bodies. To speak of the law as text "deprives it of its origin in the spoken word . . . the paternal principle . . . meant to guarantee its transcendence, rationality, and distance from myth" (Chaplin 28). In Blackstone's introduction, oral tradition imparts an almost familial intimacy between the law and its subjects; it is "handed down by tradition, use, and experience", unwritten and therefore immemorial and universal (1:17).

The connections I wish to draw are between the physicality of the law as expressed through the bodies of listeners, the proximity demanded by a system based in orality, and the paradoxical abstraction created through materialising language in text. The oral nature of Common Law creates a linguistic community that establishes its borders at the limits of language: "foreign clergy" did not "relish" English Common Law as they were "utter strangers to our constitution *as well as our language*" (1:17, my emphasis). Establishing juridical lineage as protected from "strangers" by the natural phenomenon of common speech ensures that the lineages produced by law are similarly protected. The law for Blackstone is the battleground between the private and the public, where "private" is understood in a broader context of the national and domestic versus a "foreign" (i.e. Papist) continental interest. For Sidney and Louisa, correspondence provides an alternative, textual, location that never attempts to usurp the authority of the spoken (paternal) word. Their histories and memoirs are not records of reported *speech* but, written from the point of view of a subject silenced culturally by gender and legally by *coverture*, are instead records of embodied experience that can *only* be traced through text and have no "paternal principle" based in speech. Furthermore, the careful presentation of both texts through a network of friends and family ensures that the texts continually construct the relationship with the reader as intimate and private. Their 'listeners' are always sympathetic and the dangerous materiality of their bodies is protected by their discretion and veiled appearance in text.

Sidney and Louisa appear resolutely domestic: both shun public situations and are most secure (if not content) in their conjugal homes. Their containment within male properties represents their "containment" within safely conventional female roles. Yet the creation of "authentic" texts made up of private journals and intimate letters challenges the distinction between the private and the public, between the objectified objects and the active subjects of the legal discourses of possession and marriage. *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* creates an intradiegetic network of concerned friends, culminating in the reader, who are engaged in bearing witness to Sidney's misfortunes. Correspondence, in Sidney's case, emphasises the

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distance between herself, a wife – thus a "privatised" property – and her audience. *The History of Lady Barton*, on the other hand, plays with the possibility of correspondence *as action*. Unlike *Sidney Bidulph*, Louisa's story occurs as the narrative unfolds – it is not already an historical artefact. As novels, the texts participate in an economy of literature as commodity, earning both material and cultural property for Frances Sheridan and Elizabeth Griffith. Both authors rely explicitly on the public/private dynamics of reading. Readers as participants, a model encouraged and sustained in eighteenth-century periodical literature, inform the structure of both texts. Cecilia Rivers, while unable to directly assist Sidney (as a married woman with her own family concerns, one assumes), collects and preserves the memoirs, enabling more sympathetic readers by providing the necessary context for Sidney's story. Lady Barton's primary correspondent is her sister, Fanny. As a *feme sole* for most of the novel, Fanny illustrates the confinement of *coverture* through her comparative freedom in responding to letters with direct action – most notably, her ability to go to Delia Colville's aid and to resolve the situation herself. Her action complicates the assumed passivity of reading and demonstrates the active virtue inspired by textual example; Fanny is not "Miss Howe . . . content . . . with poorly lamenting the unhappiness of my friend" (*LB* 3:251).

Critics of women's reading habits, particularly women's perceived fascination with novels, focus often on the threatening continuity between character and reader; fearing the damage to "useful" and modest women through their consumption of sentimentally affecting literature. Edward Gibbon, David Hume, and James Boswell particularly despised women's demonstration of "false taste" in reading materials, as well as women's rush to skip past prefaces to get to a "picturesque scene, or a tender letter", which, to them, implied a defiance of the authority of the author's choice in setting out a text in a certain order (Pearson 5). These three critics are also historians; reading directed by the reader's intentions, skipping randomly through a narrative, violates the chronology of progress so marked in eighteenth-century histories (Pearson 5). Women *writing* demonstrated, on a material level, the radical potential for symbolic or cultural capital to become material wealth, even for those excluded by juridical processes of property inheritance. While moral authority pretended to an analogy with real property, the transition from abstract possession (education) to physical property in the literary marketplace was far more certain, in some ways. The ambiguity of how "literature" could be defined and regulated as a legal property, or what part of a "book" could be controlled by law, allowed a space in which women could explore a wide range of discourses. Commentators from the margins, women could read and write any text subversively (Pearson 6). By creating credible characters of public authority (lawyers, priests, fathers, and husbands, for example), women could explore through fiction the real exercise and effects of power. Its commitment to "realism" granted the novel a privileged place from which to launch critiques of social, political, and legal "realities" by calling attention to the narrative foundations of patriarchal power – namely, history.

Novelistic realism presents Sheridan and Griffith with the space to explore believable situations and characters, reflecting lived experience through narrative conventions borrowed from both fictional and historical models. Verisimilitude was a critical element of a "good" novel; not only did this differentiate it from the romance, it enabled the reader to recognize the particulars as well as the general. More insidiously, verisimilitude manipulates readers' recognition and approval of details into acquiescence to the larger "reality": the general environment that produces the details is supported through tacit recognition of the symbolic power of those details. This same critical preference for verisimilitude produces strategies of resistance. Griffith, while remaining firmly within the boundaries of sensibility in terms of language and plot, explores female incarceration, emotional and psychological blackmail, and

spousal abuse. Her adherence to convention establishes the perceived "realism" of *The History of Lady Barton*: because she is working with genres already privileged by their natural resemblance to "reality" (history and the novel), the events of the narrative are already believable. The critic for the *Monthly Review* notes that the novel "abounds with affecting incidents, interesting situations, and . . . rational observations . . . expected from a person *who converses with, and knows, the world*" ("Art 28" 165, my emphasis). The mutually supportive relationship between history and the novel is evident in process as well as product: both "grow out of other forms and methods, [and] make use of them while at once cancelling and preserving them but without themselves being contaminated or changed" (Langbauer 33). Yet, the anxiety caused by possible generic contamination remains prevalent in these examples of women's novels.

One of the key differences between *Sidney Bidulph* and *Lady Barton* is the kind of relationship the eponymous protagonist imagines between herself and her text. Both Louisa's "history" and Sidney's "memoir" can be understood in terms of (auto)biography; the connotations of each, however, make it impossible to reconcile them to one definition. Calling the epistolary development of one character a "history" elevates that character and re-establishes the instrumental purpose of history to reconcile the individual to a common narrative. Conduct literature and periodicals obviously recognized the educational value in publishing brief biographical sketches of exemplary women as role models for female readers and fictional biographies assume that edifying purpose. That a woman *could* have a history challenges the virtually absolute erasure of women from legal and political systems in the eighteenth century. Rather than establishing a private narrative niche within literary culture and, from there, champion the separation of the personal from the political (as perhaps a "memoir" might suggest), Griffith's project at once claims to be read as a history and, in so doing, demonstrates the processes through which history earns its validity. Through its narrative structure of layered testimony and repetition, *Lady Barton* explores the potential for communities of women to create more democratic and vibrant histories, challenging the basis of their exclusion from broader narratives. Containing male-authored romances with a female-authored history, Griffith's text disrupts the traditional gender/genre hierarchies of cultural value, subsuming masculine narratives within a feminine "history". As precedents and models for behaviour, both male and female characters draw on romance characters and fables, illustrating the rich, open discourse of cultural production that embraces both historical "fact" and romantic "fable". The range of secondary material cited in the various correspondences gestures towards the cultural education of the characters and Griffith's own command of a wide range of literary and historical material.[1]

In Griffith's novel, several different voices take up self-directed, internal correspondences within Louisa's history; Louisa has access to only some of these. *The History of Lady Barton* recognizes competing and conflicting interpretations of history and creates a space for several "versions". Thus, Fanny and Louisa's disagreements over wives' duties and Louisa's conduct emerge as the products of particular situations. Fanny's advice on her sister's conjugal woes can be read as the product of her particular social position as an independent *feme sole*. This is certainly how Louisa herself reads them, noting early in the text that Fanny is "very differently situated; mistress of leisure, and yourself" (*LB* 1:75). Similarly, Louisa's letters reveal a specific set of circumstances that she uses to justify her actions not as a model for other women but as the result of her particular "history". After avowing her love to Lord Lucan, Louisa inadvertently admits the limits of romance and history to adequately describe her own experiences. Interrupted by Colonel Walter, who jokingly inquires whether Lucan has "been relating the melancholy story of Eloise and Abelard, or the more disastrous loves

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of Hero and Leander", Louisa rejects such historical literary models: "we need not go so far back, for melancholy tales; for . . . I was acquainted with some persons now living, whose sufferings far exceeded those of the unfortunate ladies [Colonel Walter] had mentioned" (*LB* 2:103). Louisa's own experiences, her awareness of her friends' histories, become more relevant than those of recognized "official" histories. In denying the power of history to express and contain women's stories, Louisa exercises a moment of power over Colonel Walter. Knowledge of women's real history (in this case, Mrs Walter's story, but later Fanny exercises the same authority with her knowledge of Delia Colville's case) is power for women in Griffith's text. The ability to deny masculine representation in favour of women's accounts of their own experience enables Louisa to (albeit briefly) exercise ownership of history.

Control of history briefly collapses into a struggle for origins when Louisa accuses Fanny of forgetting details of family history due to her youth and inexperience. In this sense, Griffith's sense of history resists closure and ownership because the limits and boundaries cannot be known. Each character understands each other, and history, through the mediating lens of their own experiences. Though George and Fanny Cleveland make appropriately sentimental marriages, taking their lessons from Louisa's history, the investigation of a married woman's *history* denies these sub-plots definite closure. *Sidney Bidulph*, on the other hand, reveals the authorial impulse towards control and ownership of history. Told only through Sidney's voice and letters, *Memoirs* condenses various interpretations and experiences into one individual's history. Sidney acts as mediator, gathering anecdotes and resources and repositioning them in relation to her own experiences. Faulkland's romance-history (an interpretation of events) absorbs Mrs Gerrarde's letter (a male-mediated example of female self-expression) and is, in turn, absorbed by Sidney's letters (first-person, eye-witness accounts of personal "history"). Only Cecilia, whose letters do not appear in the text, exists outside of Sidney's memoirs. All of the other characters suffer the same fate as women in traditional patriarchal histories: their experiences are pressed into the service of one dominant narrative and they are silenced. *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* illustrates the illusion of history as an object with clear and identifiable boundaries. This is the same point at which *Lady Barton* crumbles into fragments: what part of the narrative comprises Lady Barton? What parts are separate? As an excess of narratives and letters, *Lady Barton* refuses to fit into one interpretation; it is impossible to represent as a coherent whole.

The same illusion of wholeness allows both authors to question the inflated value of masculine cultural property compared with other, equally representative accounts of experience and expression. It is crucial that *Lady Barton* contains no dates – the letters are organised in order of writing and receiving (with some overlap) and are marked only by *where* they were written. In this sense, Griffith's text resists traditional historical narration in favour of a more embodied representation of the writer; that is, a date does not reflect anything about the writer whereas a location contains the writer and determines the physical context for their writing. As the story progresses, this method increasingly measures place through property and ultimately divests itself of either. The third volume separates the letters by the order of their appearance ("Letter LXXI") and the writer and receiver's names. Significantly, the first letter in the novel is written from Bangor Ferry. Implicating both Louisa's uneasy identity as Sir William's wife, and the project of women's history, *The History of Lady Barton* begins in a liminal space. The space Louisa inhabits throughout the text remains geographically and politically marginal, placing her in the position of constantly writing from the physical margin to the centre (Fanny in London). This spatial relation finds a correlation in Griffith's project of presenting the life of a fictional woman as a "History". The

recipients and writers of each letter suggest the play between margin and centre: Fanny moves increasingly out of the centre position as she takes on more physically active roles in discovering women obscured by history (actually travelling to France to find Delia Colville, Maria, Mrs. N--). As Fanny moves clearly outside of the socially acceptable position of female philanthropist (sentimentalizing a morally-valued financial transaction) into a more direct engagement with oppressive systems of law and politics, she physically moves away from the geographical capital, London. Organizing the *History* according to space also allows the temporal trajectory to remain productively obscure. Rather than obey a diachronic model of history, Louisa Barton and her fellow *her*storians create a sense of synchronicity: all of the stories are happening at once. This denial of historical progress charted against linear time denies history any transformative power. Because of their isolation from authoritative, progressive, patriarchal history, women repeat the same narrative, creating a text that constantly doubles back on itself and begins again and again.

Interfering with the linear cause-and-effect progression of history affects other narratives that rely on strict chronological accumulation as a fundamental support. Blackstone's use of familial metaphors for the relationship between lineage and law also suits the process by which the law comes into being. In both texts, the protagonists are the result of political, juridical, and personal lineages, but gender causes an irreparable breach where otherwise these narratives should produce a continuous, viable subject. Juridical and political lineage creates the space into which the desired subject fits. Authoritative history, for example Hume's *The History of England*, culminates in the triumph of the (Protestant, male, white, Tory) citizen, an identity with a known ancestry and a known future. Thus, political lineage stretches in both directions from the zero-point of the present; narratives that do not fit the teleological structure of patriarchal history fall away as irrelevant, excessive, and *personal*, therefore cannot be universal, applicable, or instrumental. Denied a public role, Louisa Barton suffers from a lack of legal and historical subjectivity and an excess of subjectivity: her legal self is "subsumed" by *coverture*, yet she remains, stubbornly, a separate being. In its legal definition, marriage is an unbalanced equation and the remainder cannot be satisfactorily abstracted away. The law requires wives only insofar as they ensure lineage, in order that property, position, and power continue down established channels of inheritance. Women, however, extend the parameters of lineage well beyond legal and political functionality. The affective kinship created *through* reading letters extends outwards, laterally, and disseminates cultural capital widely. Sidney and Louisa's personal experiences are beyond the "control" of any owner, whether the writer, the editor, or the author.

At the level of form, these texts enact exchange and reciprocation between available literary models in the late eighteenth-century marketplace; both works also engage questions of property, ownership, and belonging at the level of content. Narrative plots involving property and law in both texts equally reflect the authors' engagement with historiography and legal writing. Thus the models of resistance enacted at the level of text resonate in the decisions taken by the characters in reaction to their particular situations. Sidney, for example, is explicitly family property, bartered on the marriage market to the highest buyer. Sidney's brother, George, ensures the preservation of family lineage, signified by the already-determined inheritance of family property. Sidney's passivity, she has "no will of her own", should negate the emphatic self-expression within her memoirs, yet it is through her careful circumspection of her own and other women's stories that she attains a self-hood (*SB* 85). Sidney also carefully maintains her marginality within a system of legal property inheritance: her family's property – that is, her husband's property – flows smoothly down family lines through conventionally legal channels. It is liquid wealth and mobile chattels that Sidney

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moves outside of linear, consanguineal family inheritance to a broader network of friends and philanthropic causes. The only time she accepts wealth in her own name, it is as the result of self-denial and her properly sympathetic response to Ned Warner's plea for assistance. Thus, Sidney's "memoirs", her private history, are an extension of her desire to keep property (including herself) private.

This desire for privacy motivates Sidney's most intense articulation of belonging, which comes after Mr Arnold's abandonment of his wife and children, when she is forced to maintain herself in property belonging to her mother. Sidney is never happier than when she is "a queen . . . in the house of my nativity" (*SB* 265). Her subsequent journal-letters include a proud inventory of "her" property – vitally it is *hers* through her own recognition of *her* labour: "I am grown a perfect farmer's wife, and have got a notable dairy: I am mistress of three cows, I assure you, which more than supply my family; then I have the best poultry in the country, and my garden flourishes like Eden" (*SB* 268). Not only does Sidney proudly describe the extent of her holdings, she also notes that her management creates excess. Named after her mother's dower house, Sidney clearly represents frustrated female ownership and women's frustration at being *owned*. Sidney's name emphasises her status as her mother's property and simultaneously questions the authority behind Mrs Bidulph's ownership. Mrs Bidulph, as a woman and as a wife, can only ever be a surrogate father and "as such always improper, a substitute, a usurper" since "by the laws of patrimony, a mother has nothing of her own to pass on" (Alliston 116-17). Morbidly, Sidney's mother's death is the limit of Sidney's sojourn in her happy home: as her dowry, Mrs Bidulph's house passes to her son, as part of the family property. In a similar way, Louisa Barton's independence before marriage – she is described by her sister as "[y]oung, beautiful, rich, and accomplished" – also contrasts sharply with her dependence as a wife (*LB* 2:117). The female possessive self can only ever be a temporary lease from the "real" (male) owner; Mrs Bidulph's possession of Sidney-castle and of Sidney herself depends on the (good)will of her dead husband and her future son-in-law.

Significantly, Sidney's first daughter is named for Sidney's mother, Dolly, suggesting another way of preserving lineage beneath the notice of legal conveyance. Speaking of her daughter, Sidney's assertion that she has "a right to all the duty, all the filial love that this creature can shew me, in return for my fondness" is equally applicable to the relationship she has with her mother (*SB* 117). This expression of maternal love as exchange lays bare the contractual nature of sentimental ties but also reveals the inadequacy of legal language to cover the contingencies of sentimentalised family relationships. This transaction is outside of legally binding contracts but partakes of the same language and solemnity. As a sentimental contract, its terms remain unquantifiable, yet Sidney's experiences in the marriage market expose the ease with which sentimental value could translate into material worth. Sidney's value as a virtuous, sensible and "*very* good girl" enables her to demand more than a "bare equivalent" in her future husband's estate (*SB* 15). Mrs Bidulph recognises Sidney's virtue and sensibility as property, with value in excess of Sidney's real financial worth (£4,000). Sidney's declarations of self-possession, her refusal to obey her brother's wishes, particularly once "free" of both Arnold and her mother, alienate her from her remaining consanguineal family. Yet, it is only through her insistent refusal to partake of Sir George's wealth and participate in a purely economic system of exchange that Sidney retains her sentimental virtue and, by extension, the reader's sympathy. By refusing to insist on her due as Sir George's sister and challenge Lady Sarah's position in his priorities, Sidney silently confronts the primacy of the conjugal family unit and her own inferior position as consanguineal kin.

While Louisa is never under financial stress, as Sidney often is, her generosity as "Lady Bountiful" is a threat to her husband's property. The incident she relates to Fanny as proof of "the uncouthness of [her] present situation, with regard to [Sir William]" implies the extent to which female philanthropy was connected to men's financial resources (*LB* 1:68). As Gillian Skinner suggests, the limits of sensibility become evident in this clash between Sir William's fiscal and managerial practicality and Louisa's desire for a conventional sentimental experience (91-116). His hyperbolic projection of the effects of Louisa's charity, that it will inspire his tenants to "fire every cottage on his lands, and he should be run into gaol by [her] generosity", comments on the incompatibility of female sensibility and economic responsibility, but also more generally on the gullibility and foolishness of sensibility (*LB* 1:69). Sidney's philanthropy is considerably more cautious than Louisa's whose unquestioning generosity with money and property reflects negatively on her care for her husband's other property: namely, herself. For Sir William, sensibility is an economic liability in a wife. His own management and assessment of the actual amount the impoverished family requires trumps Louisa's impulsive sentimental impulse – his generous £20 dwarfs her offering of 10 guineas. It also serves to remind Louisa of her station as a wife and her object-status as part of Sir William's property, not as an equal sharer in its distribution.

Sheridan suggests the same anxiety over women's dissemination of family property in Mrs Bidulph's negotiation of Sidney's jointure. Securing an estate "detached intirely" from the rest of Arnold's property as Sidney's portion, Mrs Bidulph removes any possibility for Sidney to spend money properly belonging to her husband's heir (*SB* 94).[2] By controlling his wife's dissemination of money, Sir William also reinforces his control of her body and person; his request that Louisa "put up [her] money" is accompanied by a physical restraint that serves to alienate Louisa from her social role as "Lady Barton" by refusing her the "virtuous pleasure of bestowing charity" proper to the wife of a wealthy landowner (*LB* 1:68, 69). While Sidney's sensibility is allowed to shine through her careful philanthropy (particularly in the case of the aptly named Miss Price) once she is a widow, Sir William stifles Louisa's attempt to exercise this "vital component of . . . so many eighteenth-century definitions of virtuous femininity" because of his anxiety over the potentially unlimited nature of this generosity (Skinner 95). Like the romances with which her sister and her husband associate her, Louisa might not know when to stop.

As a wife, Sidney's financial and emotional generosity is properly focused inward, onto her own conjugal family. Though ostensibly it is her decision to rescind her control over her jointure to her husband to repay debts accrued during his affair with Mrs Gerrarde, Sidney is still arguably "kissed" out of property by her husband.[3] Sheridan contrasts Sidney's wifely selflessness and explicit disregard for material wealth in favour of the sanctity of the sentimental conjugal family with representations of predatory, acquisitive women outside of affinal bonds. In both Mrs Gerrarde and the widow Arnold, desire for material property is linked to sexual impropriety: Mrs Gerrarde is not only involved in an illicit sexual affair with Mr Arnold, she also negotiates the fatal affair between her niece, Miss Burchell, and Faulkland; the widow Arnold lived separately from her husband and launches the (possibly fraudulent) lawsuit with the assistance of her long-time lover. The lawsuit that eventually ruins Arnold depends on the widow establishing her own sexual fidelity to prove the legitimacy of an heiress born *after* her husband's death. Because she has not produced an heir before her husband's death, the widow Arnold is effectively pushed out of her conjugal family – she has no consanguineal tie to naturalize the contractual tie of marriage. All of the

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women whose fortunes converge around Mr Arnold serve to illustrate women's vulnerable position in terms of family, property, and inheritance: that is, neither Mrs Gerrarde nor the widow Arnold apparently has any consanguineal family to whom they can apply for assistance. Sidney's pride keeps her from approaching Sir George but it is evident that she has no claim on any property belonging to her consanguineal family. Sidney makes a point of noting that the few jewels she has were her mother's "when she was a maiden": "The greatest part of [Mrs Bidulph's jewels], and by much the finest, were presented to her by my father; but those she reserves for Sir George, against the time of his marriage, as a present for his lady; *for they are family jewels*" (*SB* 32, my emphasis). Sidney's marriage carries her out of the family, but her right to property belonging to the "family" is already tenuous given that Sir George's future wife has a greater claim to family property than she does at any time. Later in her memoirs, her repeated and vocal devotion to Mr Arnold, despite his open adultery, underscores her acceptance of her own status as property and tests the propriety of her emotional and financial generosity. Mrs Gerrarde and the widow Arnold, on the other hand, demand recognition as *owners* of property through their command over propertied men. Women outside of marriage represent a parasitical threat to family security and property inheritance. Even when acting within the law, women attempting to control real estate are trespassing on property belonging, at least in a sentimentally "deserving" sense, to another character.

In Griffith's splintered text, Louisa and Fanny (and Griffith herself), illustrate the uncanny ability for a democratic approach to history to produce unlimited stories and interpretations. Women deny their status as property by refusing to be contained – in marriage, in death, in convents. Louisa Barton's history unlocks the silence traditionally covering these particularly feminized experiences. Indeed, the boundaries between these experiences collapse: Louisa's history ends in death; both Delia and Olivia Walter experience all three in some form or another; even Fanny Cleveland's history explores the freedom and potential for a young, wealthy, and virtuous woman outside of parental or conjugal control. History, as property, becomes communal and because of this produces more histories, more "wealth". As the first in a series of narratives collected by Louisa, Mrs Walter's story repays her attention by producing more stories. Rather than being "above economy", *The History of Lady Barton* participates in a virtual economy of words and stories (Skinner 93).[4] While this metaphor seems to elevate the novel unproductively above the level of direct interest or involvement in social, political, and legal issues, it is important to note that these stories are *recorded* (in many cases, *re*recorded) and therefore become material products of labour. They turn into cultural and sentimental commodities for the historian-sisters and, through inclusion in the novel, circulate as commercial commodities as well. The formal and structural challenge within the text to both capitalist commodification and hegemonic history exists in the community of historians and the democratic nature of their project. The structure of the text allows the different voices equal and autonomous space in the narrative: the interpolated narratives are not judged by Fanny and Louisa for historical truth, but rather for the subject's suffering, which is never quantified in the assistance offered of the space devoted to the narrative. The novel as a whole can be seen as a model for Louisa's "protestant monastery", performing the essential function of providing a refuge and a community in which women "reciprocally vouch" for one another's conduct (*LB* 2: 57). Louisa and Fanny constantly suggest alternative spaces for women's histories, only to find them essentially flawed (for practical and ideological reasons). The novel itself offers space and community for women's histories outside of patriarchal models of omission and dominance through the cultural ambiguity of the term "history" and exploiting the generic instability of both history and novel.

Significantly, Louisa's history will "push Madame de Scuderi from the shelf she has so long usurped in a lady's library" (*LB* 1: 38). Fanny's assessment of her sister's narrative implicitly questions the propriety of women writing history, reflecting the associations between gender and genre. Her concerns for Louisa rest on the disjunction of "a married woman's meeting with adventures of the *novel* kind" (*LB* 1: 171). As the story of a married woman, *Lady Barton* challenges generic assumptions about the place for wives in romances, sentimental novels, and histories. *The History of Lady Barton* begins after this generic story – after that "most solemn and hazardous act" of marriage – and deals almost entirely with the relationship between husband and wife (*LB* 2:294). Unlike typical sentimental novels, the supporting narratives detail courtship and marriage, while the heroine's story explores the nature of "wife". Parents, particularly fathers, are curiously absent in the present moment of *Lady Barton*: the narratives of Olivia Walter and Maria feature benignly good mothers, while Delia Colville's story (told through Fanny's letters) contains the problematic figure of Mrs Colville who fakes her daughter's death to take her place as George Cleveland's wife. Thus mothers, while not completely absent, are ineffective: either deified for their adherence (after their husbands' deaths) to "chaste connubial love" or actively perverting their daughters' progression to wives (*LB* 3: 218). None of the women in the text question who their parents are and the withdrawal of paternal authority makes space for women's project of history.

As part of Sheridan and Griffith's critique of property and inheritance, both texts focus on sibling relationships, suggesting a shift away from vertical, progressive lineage to a lateral, synchronous model. *Lady Barton* dispenses with the traditional imperative to demonstrate progress as evidence of history; the novel does not "make progress" and there is no epiphany waiting at the conclusion. For a project of "history", *Lady Barton* covers the space of only twenty-five years, including the inset narratives, and takes place within no more than two or three years.[5] This suggests the extent to which women have no access to records establishing a historical pattern for female experience – a point that brings these sentimental novels closer to the Gothic model with its circular depiction of time and inheritance. Louisa's history can only be the history of her particular moment; lacking a historical or public identity, she cannot participate in the extension of the self into a matrix of belonging founded in history and legal narratives. History, for women in Griffith's novel, is a negative sum game: closed by the death of the historian-heroine, the text replaces Louisa's unhappy marriage to Sir William with a model of sentimental conjugal felicity in Fanny and Lord Hume. The "lesson" of Louisa's history, like the unravelling narrative of *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* remains in the continued existence and constant *presence* of the text. Louisa opens her history with a quotation that "expressed [her] present feelings, so much better than [she] could" herself; the end of the novel leaves Fanny with "no words [to] paint the grief and distraction" of her family at Louisa's death (*LB* 1:1, 3:308). This is the silence of *coverture*; the paradoxical experience of women as the centre and the abject frontier of sensibility, history, and the law.

The critique of the inextricable nature of property from a progressivist concept of history is also evident at the end of *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*. Sidney's history culminates in property ownership and wealth; the reader has followed her from wealth without autonomy, through autonomy without wealth, to a position of circumscribed legal autonomy (as a widow) accompanied by wealth. The sudden ending, followed by Cecilia's brief supplement that falls into incoherence, resists closure as surely as Lady Barton's fragmented narrative. The form and structure of Sidney's memoirs are ultimately insufficient as an expression of her experience. Nine years later, the publication of *Conclusion of the Memoirs*

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of Miss Sidney Bidulph (1770) illustrates the extent of anxiety the original text created in its readership. The editor's fruitless investigation to "recover any more of the (original) manuscript" reopens in the *Conclusion* when he discovers Patty Main's daughter "in possession of some papers, which contained the whole story" (1-2). In both of Sheridan's texts, women's history resides with women; it is their particular property – a legacy that Sheridan and Griffith expand by including their readership in the transmission of cultural capital. The heroines of their works become more than the private property of one tyrant or one system; dead, fictional, and silenced, Sidney and Louisa gesture towards an ontological truth about women's experience as always-already consumed, already owned by someone else. Nonetheless, Sheridan and Griffith's novels are not descriptions of women's failure to project themselves into narratives of cultural, social, and legal belonging, nor are they purely pessimistic views of women's relations with patriarchal power structures. As conduct and anti-conduct books, history and romance, these texts encourage strategies of resistance and an awareness of the limitations of genre.

Notes

1. Briefly, directed and credited citations include: Pope (*The Rape of the Locke*, *Eloisa to Abelard*), La Rochefoucauld, Swift ("Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift"), Mozart (*The Marriage of Figaro*), and Milton (*Paradise Lost*); characters also drop names from contemporary British literature, as well as from ancient history and classical mythology.

2. Mrs Bidulph's legal cunning is obscured beneath her spoken considerations for the "proper" estate for a widow to inhabit: Sidney's jointure comes from Arnold's personal estate, which keeps it from inclusion in the law-suit prepared by the widow-Arnold (Arnold's sister-in-law) for control of the family estates (*SB* 111).

3. See Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833*, particularly chapter 5, 'Pin Money and Separate Property' (131-61).

4. Skinner notes that Lady Barton inhabits a space where management of resources is not an issue though this is possibly because Sir William controls the family's finances, believing his wife to be 'too young' to be trusted with money (Skinner 91; *LB* 1: 68-69). Skinner's comment raises the question of what is being managed. The text ultimately reveals Louisa's careful economy of histories and how she and Fanny are able to turn these virtual economies into material products and enter a cultural economy of ideology and identity.

5. This estimate takes into consideration the ages of Louisa Barton and Fanny Cleveland and the fact that all of the women in the text seem to be of an age. No story reaches further back than the birth of its narrator and the end of each narrative brings it to the present moment of Louisa's writing.

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