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Susan Ferrier's *Marriage* and Inveraray

Susan Ferrier is usually thought of as an Edinburgh writer. Susan Ferrier's Edinburgh was a sophisticated city and her own social and intellectual education was of a high order: she was very well-read and had a wide literary acquaintance. But her novel *Marriage*, 1818, was not only written out of Edinburgh; it was also written out of Inveraray. Susan Ferrier first came to Inveraray in 1797 when she was fifteen. Her father, James Ferrier, of whose difficult and unusual early life Susan Ferrier wrote a fascinating account, was a lawyer and his remit included the management of all the Argyll estates. He was frequently at Inveraray and members of his family were often with him. When she was 15 Susan Ferrier met here an 8 year old girl who was to become the friend of her life. Charlotte Clavering was the daughter of Lady Augusta Clavering and grand-daughter of the 5th Duke of Argyll. House parties here at the castle were often literary or semi-literary in character. Lady Augusta and her sister Lady Charlotte Campbell (later known as the novelist Lady Charlotte Bury) liked private theatricals and also for a time produced a weekly journal. *Marriage* was initially conceived by Susan Ferrier and Charlotte Clavering as a joint project, but the final version included only a short passage by Charlotte, 'The History of Mrs Douglas', which it is customary to disparage, although I will take issue with this. In her letters to Susan Ferrier Charlotte Clavering offers both delightful encouragement and sometimes valuable censorship as, for example, when she counsels Ferrier to avoid novelistic clichés:

I don't like those high life conversations; they are a sort of thing by consent handed down from generation to generation in novels, but have little groundwork in truth. (*Memoir*, 115)

A number of the novel's most amusing eccentrics also derive from Inveraray encounters. Lady Maclaughlan of Lochmarlie Castle, based on Inveraray Castle, is identified by Charlotte Clavering, who was 'quite transported by her' as in dress like Mrs Damer, her cousin the celebrated sculptor (and lesbian) and in manners like Lady Frederick Campbell (whose first husband Lawrence Shirley, 4th Earl Ferrers had, incidentally, been hanged at Tyburn for murder and who herself was burned to death

in a terrible accident). The famous Aunts Grizzy, Nicky and Jacky are based on the Edmonstone sisters; they lived in Edinburgh, but they too were related to the Argylls.

Unsurprisingly, then, given the importance of Charlotte and the Campbells, the plot of *Marriage* is driven by friendship as well as marriage, family relationships as well as love between the sexes; and the novel also manages to mock national stereotypes and to investigate, laugh at and work towards the reconciliation of, cultural misunderstanding and prejudice. The germ of the novel is famous:

I do not recollect ever to have seen the sudden transition of a high-bred English beauty, who thinks she can sacrifice all for love, to an uncomfortable solitary Highland dwelling among tall red-haired sisters and grim-faced aunts. (*Memoir*, 76)

And so the initial cultural clash occurs when Lady Juliana, a vain, shallow aristocrat, who fancies herself romantically in love, marries handsome, impecunious Henry Douglas against her father's wishes. The couple are forced to seek refuge with Henry's father in Glenfern Castle in the Highlands. Lady Juliana has a series of rude awakenings when she transports her menagerie of fashionable pets – two dogs, a tame squirrel, and a mackaw to dreary, unromantic Glenfern Castle (possibly based on Dunderave Castle, a decaying tower house on the lochside). Lady Juliana gives birth to twin girls, Adelaide and Mary; subsequently Henry and Juliana return south with, Adelaide, the less difficult twin (although in truth Lady Juliana never loves any of her children as she loves her pets – 'you cannot expect to be loved like a dog') leaving rejected Mary to be brought up in the Highlands by Mrs Douglas, Henry's childless, intelligent, and English, sister-in-law. The death of her father and the adulterous elopement of her sister-in-law opens the way to Lady Juliana being received by her easy-going brother, now Lord Courtland. Henry deeply in debt because of his wife's extravagance, is packed off to a regiment in India and never sees his family again. The years pass: Adelaide grows up to be even more selfish and vain than her mother; Mary is educated to be good and dutiful by the sensible Mrs Douglas, but fortunately not so good that she is incapable of levity and even malice. She mimics and caricatures her Aunts, Sir Sampson and Lady Maclaughlan, and the family retainer, Old Donald. And she doesn't even feel bad about it, until she is about to leave her childhood home. When Mary is 18 it is deemed wise for her health and her social

development that she leave the Highlands and enter the world. She is sent to join her mother who is horrified at the thought of being stuck with a countrified daughter:

What can I do with a girl who has been educated in Scotland? She must be vulgar – all Scotchwomen are so. They have red hands and rough voices, they yawn, and blow their noses, and talk, and laugh loud, and do a thousand shocking things. Then, to hear the Scotch brogue – oh, heavens! I should expire every time she opened her mouth!’ (*Marriage*, vol.2, ch.6, 189)

Neglected by her mother and sister, Mary makes friends with her cousin Lady Emily Lindore. The friendship is based perhaps on Susan Ferrier’s own loving friendship with Charlotte Clavering and it is beautifully and unsentimentally chronicled. Emily is witty, irreverent, even abrasive, while Mary is generally quiet, obedient and self-effacing. But each modifies the other, just as I am about to claim, the novel’s various styles interact and modify each other. The friendship of Emily and Mary thus presents a paradigm for the novel’s narrative strategies. Emily finally marries Mary’s brother Edward, who is not her intellectual equal but who is good-natured and whom she has loved since she was six (and this strikes me as rather a modern take on matrimony); Mary marries Colonel Lennox, heir it turns out in a complicated way to Lochmarlie, in spite of an old feud. Mary’s is a romantic and rational match which, in a pleasant subversion of the novel cliché, is nearly prevented, not by parental opposition, but by the over-zealous match-making of Lennox’s blind old mother.

But the glory of *Marriage* is as much in its wealth of character and incident as in its plot. One need scarcely do more than list its characters to get a sense of the novel’s profusion. Lady Maclaughlan and the Aunts I have already mentioned; there is the comically appalling, Mrs Gawffaw, a Mrs Maclarty with attitude, the more than outspoken Mrs Violet McShake; here she is ‘thanking’ Douglas for his gift: ‘Gin your roebuck’s nae better than your last, atweel it’s no worth the sendin’; poor dry fisinless dirt, no worth the chowin’; weel a wat I begrudged my teeth on’t.’ And then there is Baillie Broadfoot, the egregious, monomaniac gourmand, Dr Redgill, Mrs Downe Wright, a splendid monster of malice masquerading as candour, and Mrs Pullens and Flora Macfuss and Mrs Bluemits and – and – and.

Now I love all this excess but it is not universally popular. Susan Ferrier has not been entirely well served by her critics, even her most attentive and admiring ones. They are rather given to identifying and separating the good and bad bits in the novel. This is largely because the sensed superiority of Jane Austen always hovers around, and hovers around even the perfectly correct claims that the two writers aren't very like each other. John Doyle, the editor of Ferrier's correspondence, and still, I think, one of her best critics, is quite clear about the difference between them and emphatic about the things that Ferrier could do that were beyond Jane Austen's competence, but even he believes Austen was the greater artist. Unlike Ferrier, Jane Austen has been thoroughly done over by the critical and theoretical academy – she has been accorded the attentions of old and new historicists, post-colonialists, feminists, deconstructionists and queer theorists. Not all this attention has been benign, but it does mean that Austen is now everywhere understood as a major writer and an experimental writer, establishing many of the strategies in the novel that we now take for granted; I should like tonight to suggest that it is time that *Marriage* too is considered an experimental novel. We must begin to praise Ferrier, by recognising what is tough and uncompromising in her method, in her strategic appropriation of whatever narrative trick will suit her purpose. In this way we will see that the heterogeneity of narrative styles and the rather miscellaneous plotting of *Marriage* are marks of its daring and experimental modernity, rather than, as has sometimes been felt, of her lack of real professionalism. Susan Ferrier arrogates to herself the right to do what she likes and the delight of *Marriage* is that we live in it from moment to moment, waiting restlessly for the next *bonne bouche*, as Dr Redgill might say.

When I speak of the heterogeneous and the miscellaneous, I do not intend to suggest careless or artless composition. All Ferrier's novels were a long time in gestation and went through a number of revisions before they reached the press; the imaginative abundance is far from uncontrolled. Although Ferrier may use excess as a strategy, it is not an accident. She is herself a stringent critic of formal incompetence:

I have also read M. Simeon's 'Tour Through Britain,' a compilation

of old newspapers, travellers' guides, Joe Miller jests,¹ impertinent gossip, and vulgar scurrility, all tacked together in the most grating, disjointed style that sets one's teeth on edge, and makes them feel as if they were trotting on the back of a donkey. (Letter to Charlotte Clavering, 1816, *Memoir*, 128)

In contrast the journey through *Marriage* is a delightfully varied one but not an uncomfortably bumpy one.

I have been suggesting that this narrative variety is a mark of Ferrier's modernity but it is perhaps more accurate to say that she modifies and combines earlier narrative styles and new modes. Thus she utilises the qualities of the picaresque, to provide a series of encounters with different types of urban and rural, Highland and Lowland, Scottish and English figures, like the encounters in Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*. But Ferrier modernises Smollett's coarseness by filtering it through the lens of feeling and sensibility, which was already fashionable, but also combining it with the less self-congratulatory comedy of manners and morals which points forwards to the Victorian novel. Elsewhere her method is close to the satiric dramatic comedy of Peacock, as in some of the exchanges with the monomaniac Dr Redgill, or among the would-be intellectuals at Mrs Bluemits. She even manages to exploit the techniques of epistolary fiction in the hilarious admonitory letters that the Aunts write to Mary, when she is in England. And she celebrates the beauties of nature and exploits the linguistic variety of urban and rural vernaculars. Of course, she is didactic, too, and this is perhaps the aspect of her eclecticism that readers now find it most difficult to take. I prefer, however, to applaud the way in which she modifies didacticism, too, makes it her own kind, transforms it, interrogates it, we might say. We know from her comments on Maria Edgeworth that she was suspicious of 'grateful little girls' and quite prepared to laugh at them. For example, when Mary first encounters her mother, she is so overcome with emotion that, to Lady Julinana's horror, she sinks lifeless on her bosom. Coming round she 'slowly unclosing her eyes, stretched out her hands, and faintly articulated, "My mother!" "Mother! What a

¹ *Joe Miller's Jest's or the Wit's Vademecum* (1739). The volume was actually compiled by John Mottley, but was supposed to contain the jests of the comic actor Joe Miller (1684-1738). A Joe Miller jest had by Susan Ferrier's time come to signify any hackneyed joke.

hideous vulgar appellation!” thought the fashionable parent to herself.’ You can see here that Mary, as the ‘daughter of feeling’ as it were, is actually just as much a comic butt as Lady Juliana.

Given this kind of even-handedness, I think we can be sure that the formal variety of *Marriage* is the result of art not chance. The novel is indeed peculiarly receptive to variety, to different narrative kinds: it demonstrates Susan Ferrier’s desire to be inclusive, to take pleasure in the hybrid and the freakish. And these things too Susan Ferrier derived from her experience of Inveraray, its castle and its family. In many ways her experiences here must have helped her to celebrate unity in heterogeneity in both personal and political relationships.

It may seem as though in putting the matter in this way, I am merely looking for an appropriate thing to offer as a compliment to the place and to its local people, seeking that is for an angle on the novel that is merely occasional for this evening and does not have that wider truth that would make it work as an approach to the novel suitable for any place and audience. But I do believe that Susan Ferrier’s experience of Inveraray and the Campbells in the early 1800s must have done much to foster her joy in variety and inclusiveness, and her ability to reconcile heterogeneous elements. Here is Nicholas Wraxall writing about his visit to Inveraray castle in 1813, right in the middle of the period when *Marriage* was being written:

The famous Seat of Inveraray, the Versailles of the Western Highlands is ... neither a Castle, a Palace, nor an Abbey, but a strange, barbarous Mixture of all three ... there never was anything more hideous or barbarous ... neither Grecian nor Gothic. (Lindsay and Cosh, *Inveraray and the Dukes of Argyll*, 1973)

But, of course, it is exactly the refusal of formal simplicity, that Wraxhall deprecates, that makes the Castle the exciting architectural whole that it is. That and the inimitable co-operation of its architectural styles with its natural setting.

The material world of Inveraray with all its natural beauty, promiscuous architecture, cultivation and neglect (for its roof was leaking badly in the early 1800s) is one of the paradigms of *Marriage*. Then there is the extraordinary and sometimes grotesque variety of Susan Ferrier’s acquaintance, many of them also associated with Inveraray, but including, too, the ‘old tabbies’ of Edinburgh, and the Scots and

English cosmopolites to whom she had access through her more travelled acquaintance, and her experience of other writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

The last structural paradigm I should like to adduce is her unfortunately lost scrapbook which apparently contained such titbits as political caricatures by Gilray and which she valued, she said, as ‘the apple of my eye’. But, although the scrapbook is lost, her autograph album does remain and gives us some insight into what the scrapbook must have been like: indeed, the album is a scrapbook of sorts, filled with verses and sketches by the great and the good, as well as her less well-known acquaintance. In her album Wordsworth and Brougham rub shoulders with Mungo Park and Mme de Staël, John Wilson, Scott and Hogg and Southey are interspersed among the verses of her brother-in-law, James Kinloch, and one is not privileged over the other. *Marriage* too is a kind of generic scrapbook, which happily includes didacticism, satire, comedy, pathos and even flirts with, although it refuses, tragedy. But it seems to me that, although this makes it miscellaneous, it is not as a consequence lacking in control. A number of its admirers, as I indicated at the beginning, would wish bits of it away, feeling that pruning and tighter control would improve the artistic quality of the whole. But Susan Ferrier elsewhere shows herself quite aware of the need for narrative control and I think we must consider her wholly conscious of what she was trying to do: the whole, like her autograph album, is unified by her own sensibility.

Now, of course, it may seem merely perverse to talk about unity in, for example, a large number of the relationships in *Marriage*, since the novel begins with a delightfully bad marriage between the selfish English beauty, Lady Juliana and the put-upon, but impecunious and careless, Scottish Henry Douglas, and much of the novel’s humour depends on incongruity, selfish exclusiveness and division. But the novel’s energy is directed towards inclusion and even the most wickedly egotistical characters come to no very bad end. Susan Ferrier is more interested in a wide appeal than an exclusive one and, although she claims a moral purpose, she burlesques the claim even as she makes it. Here she is writing to Charlotte Clavering:

I expect it will be the first book every wise matron will put into the hands of her daughter, and even the reviewers will relax of their severity in favour of the morality if this little work. Enchanting sight! Already do I

behold myself arrayed in an old mouldy covering, thumbed and creased, and filled with dog's-ears. (*Memoir*, 76)

The interpolated 'History of Mrs Douglas' written by Charlotte Clavering has always been regarded as one of the novels more unfortunate inclusions: Charlotte herself remarked that it constituted 'the only few pages that will be skipped'. But I contend that the few pages are not at all without interest and testify to the capacity for expansion and inclusion that is the central characteristic of the novel. In the first place it is in these pages that a picture of the nature of Edinburgh society at the time is given, a society at once social, intellectual and democratic:

There, the ranks and fortunes being more on an equality, no one is able greatly to exceed his neighbour in luxury and extravagance. ...Private parties for the actual purpose of society and conversation are frequent, and answer the destined end; and, in the societies of professed amusement, are to be met the learned, the studious, and the rational. (*Marriage*, 1, 14, 88)

Nor is Alicia Douglas's story merely conventional. When she submits to her capricious aunt and guardian, Lady Audley, who has threatened to curse her son should he defy her and marry Alicia, Alicia seems at first merely to be conforming to the lifeless, good girl pattern. But in truth her role is transformed into an active rather than a passive one, when to protect her lover and herself from his ceaseless importunity, which she feels can only result in future misery, she decides to marry, where she does not love: 'My fate then is fixed ... I must finish the sacrifice' (*Marriage*, 1, 14, 91). And she does the best she can: she accepts her least objectionable suitor and retires with him to his small country estate to live 'in the calm seclusion of domestic life' (92). The closest that Jane Austen gets to the recognition that many people live their lives in this useful and unromantic manner is, of course, in Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr Collins but Austen's Collins is a comic monster married to a real woman, while Alicia's union with Mr Douglas has a very modern kind of ordinariness about it. Between them Charlotte Clavering and Susan Ferrier give Mr and Mrs Douglas a surprising depth, Charlotte Clavering by devising the sensible marriage in the first place and Susan Ferrier by fleshing out Mr Douglas so that he becomes a believable husband and a believable father for Mary. Douglas is

unattracted at first by his wife's idea of caring for 'a squalling sickly infant – and a girl too!' but he responds with angry family pride when he considers that as his brother's child, baby Mary is after all a rejected Douglas:

then hang me! If she [Lady Juliana] shall have any child of Harry's to hate, as long as I have a house to shelter it and a sixpence to bestow upon it,' taking the infant in his arms, and kindly kissing it. (*Marriage* , 1, 19, 122)

Mr Douglas later develops as rather grumpy and unpolished, but as a modern man who is amusedly critical of the more sentimental romantic effusions of his 18 year old niece.

In its treatment of personal and familial relationships *Marriage* is, then, generally inclusive and celebratory; the late scene at Mrs Bluemits may be taken as exemplary. There is no need for this episode: the plotline does not demand it – Mary and her lover have reached an understanding and their affairs could be relatively quickly wound up, by the removal of the paper tiger impediments of Lady Juliana's selfish vanity and Sir Sampson's senile resentments against the Lennox family. But Ferrier digresses to chart the clash of a bunch of futile English learned ladies with Aunt Grizzy's stolid Highland ignorance. The whole is imagined through Mary, and her embarrassment gives the scene much of its piquancy, just as her ability to relate it next day to Emily gives Mary herself a pleasing spice of comic malice. Mary and her Aunt are expected by the blue-stockings to be ambassadors from Scotland, the land of poetry and romance, a clichéd version of Scottishness that *Marriage* both endorses and undermines. Mary, who is well-educated, cannot shine because she does not believe that learning should be displayed and Aunt Grizzy who longs to shine, doesn't have any learning to display. Yet, Aunt Grizzy gets the best of it in the end. Mrs Bluemits is rhapsodising on the title of 'Billows of Love', the insufferable Miss Griffon's latest work:

'The title is most musical, most melancholy, and conveys a perfect idea of what Dryden terms "the sweeping deluge of the soul;" but I flatter myself we shall have something more than a name from Miss Griffon's genius. The Aeonian graces, 'tis well known, always follow in her train.'

‘They have made a great hole in it then,’ said Grizzy, officiously displaying a fracture in the train of Miss Griffon’s gown. (*Marriage*, 3, 22, 421)

Like many satirists, Susan Ferrier is, of course, in love with the absurdities she exposes: her comic satire is not really a negative or exclusive mode, it accommodates the socially freakish as well as the rational elements of life. Ferrier recommends restraint but does not practise it, only meanness and selfish vanity are beyond her forgiveness, only lady Juliana and Adelaide are exiled, and even they are simply packed off to France. At the end of the novel Lady Maclaughlan is permitted to articulate the philosophy that underpins it:

There are plenty of fools in the world; but if they had not been sent for some wise purpose, they wouldn’t have been here; and since they are here, they have as good a right to have elbow-room in the world as the wisest. (*Marriage*, 3, 22, 463)

And this generosity has, I think, a political as well as a moral message. Recent readings of *Marriage* generally do incorporate the political dimension of the novel, do recognise that Ferrier wittily corrects Southern clichés about both urban and rural Scotland and in doing so asks about Britishness. But I think they sometimes insufficiently recognise the position of cultural superiority from which these criticisms are made. Thus Kathryn Kirkpatrick in the 1997 Preface to the Oxford edition:

As a woman from a sometimes exoticized, often degraded cultural periphery, Ferrier was by gender and ethnicity, twice othered. (*Marriage*, xxiii)

But it is confident cultures that are inclusive in the manner of *Marriage*. I think it is a serious error to imagine that Susan Ferrier felt herself and her very brilliant Scottish acquaintance to belong to the cultural margins. The generosity of *Marriage* derives from a strong sense of cultural ease, the ease of a society absolutely intellectually secure. Nor did Susan Ferrier need public accolades to secure her own sense of self. She insisted on anonymity because, she said, she could not bear the fuss

of authorship. This is actually a self-confident reason for keeping quiet: she knew who she was and did not want to have to live with other versions of herself as author. She was a cultivated woman in a cultivated society and *Marriage* makes it quite clear that she was very well aware of this: we can hear her voice through that of Mr Douglas. Mr Douglas is explaining to Mary that Mrs Gawffaw and Mrs Macshake should not be taken as typical of Scottish women. Mrs Gawffaw, he explains, is a freak of nature and not specific to any single culture, Mrs Macshake belongs to an earlier generation of racier Scottish women, before female education had reached its current high standard. The new Scotland, the new Edinburgh, is different:

Had your time permitted, you could have seen much good society here [in Edinburgh]; superior, perhaps, to what is to be found anywhere else, as far as mental cultivation is concerned. (*Marriage*, 2,11, 221)

And Edinburgh's new women had much to do with that mental cultivation.

William Smellie of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* famously quotes John Amyat, the King's Chemist on Enlightenment Edinburgh:

Here I stand at what is called the Cross of Edinburgh, and can, in a few minutes, take fifty men of genius by the hand.

Twenty years later he might also have taken the hands of several women of genius, a group that must surely include Susan Ferrier.

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