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Jayne Elizabeth Lewis

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Abstract
What did Mary Queen of Scots have to do with the rise of historical fiction in Britain? Quite a lot if we picture that fiction as heir to two of the mid-eighteenth century's seemingly opposite accomplishments--the discontinuous idiom of sensibility and the linear, coherent narratives of enlightenment historiography. My epigraphs all place Mary Stuart at a point where modem historiography meets sentimental discourse. Each identifies her with a kind of sign-pictorial, particular, and emotionally provocative--that troubles any dispassionate linguistic structure bent on replicating the seamless passage of chronological time.

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Jayne Elizabeth Lewis

> Her face, her form, have been so deeply impressed upon the imagination, that, even at the distance of nearly three centuries, it is unnecessary to remind the most ignorant and uninformed reader of the striking traits which characterize that remarkable countenance. ... Who is there, at the very mention of Mary Stuart's name, that has not her countenance before him, familiar as that of the mistress of his youth, or the favourite daughter of his advanced age? ... That brow, so truly open and regal—those eye-brows, so regularly graceful, ... the hazel eyes ... which seem to utter a thousand histories ... form a countenance, the like of which we know not to have existed in any other character moving in that high class of life. ... It is in vain to say that the portraits which exist of this remarkable woman are not like each other; for, amidst their discrepancy, each possesses general features which the eye at once acknowledges as peculiar to the vision which our imagination has raised while we read her history for the first time, and which has been impressed upon it by the numerous prints and pictures which we have seen.
>
> Walter Scott, *The Abbot* (1820)

> Being deprived of ... books; to amuse a part of our melancholy leisure, we mutually agreed to invent tales from the many whole-length pictures, which ornamented the best room. ... [We came upon one which] represented a lady in the flower of youth, drest in mourning, and seeming in every feature to be marked by sorrow; a black veil half shaded a coronet she wept over. ... [T]his seemed to call forth a thousand melting sensations; the tears rushed involuntarily into our eyes, and,

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> clasping, we wept upon the bosoms of each other. "Ah, who can these be? cried we both together. Why do our hearts thus throb before inanimate canvas? surely every thing we behold is but part of one great mystery; when will the day come, destined to clear it up?"
>
> Sophia Lee, *The Recess* (1783–85)

> [Mary Stuart's brother-in-law] Charles the Ninth ... never pass'd by her Picture, as it hung in a Gallery in the Palace, but he stopp'd short ... and burst out into the most passionate Expressions.
>
> Eliza Haywood, *Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots* (1725)

What did Mary Queen of Scots have to do with the rise of historical fiction in Britain? Quite a lot if we picture that fiction as heir to two of the mid-eighteenth century's seemingly opposite accomplishments—the discontinuous idiom of sensibility and the linear, coherent narratives of enlightenment historiography.[1] My epigraphs all place Mary Stuart at a point where modern historiography meets sentimental discourse. Each identifies her with a kind of sign—pictorial, particular, and emotionally provocative—that troubles any dispassionate linguistic structure bent on replicating the seamless passage of chronological time.

Eighteenth-century readers knew the historical Mary well. Priding themselves on their impartiality, the most eminent historians had meticulously recounted her public life—a long chain of misfortunes which began with her accession to the Scottish throne at the age of six days, winding through three doomed marriages to the resignation of her crown and her long captivity in England, only to end with her execution in 1587.[2] But for many eighteenth-century writers Mary's "countenance"

1 For recent analyses of on the language of sensibility that spotlight its atomistic, disrupted, and disrupting qualities, see John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986); and Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

2 Mary Stuart's life was inexhaustibly narrated from the sixteenth century forward. Although they are extremely polemicized, the most influential early accounts are George Buchanan's *Detections of the Doynges of Mary Queen of Scots* (1571) and John Leslie's *Defence of the Honour of ... Marie Queene of Scotlande* (1569). William Camden's influential *History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth* (1625) was reprinted in English as late as 1706. Other recent accounts of Mary's life included William Sanderson's *Compleat History of the Lives and Reigns of Mary Queen of Scotland and her Son and Successor* (London, 1656); Samuel Jebb's *History of the Life and Reign of Mary Queen of Scots* (1725); Eliza Haywood's *Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots* (1725); the Tudor volumes of David Hume's *History of England* (1754–62); and William Robertson's *History of Scotland during the Reigns of Queen Mary and King James VI* (1759). For a survey of the contradictions and controversies built into the earliest representations of Mary, see James Emerson Phillips, *Images of a Queen: Mary Stuart in Sixteenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964).

conspicuously resisted supposedly shared conventions of historical narration and interpretation. They found it difficult to depict her as the mother of a political dynasty with an assured place in an unbroken series of narratable events. Turned by her many personal tragedies into a ruler of the private realm, Mary demanded the vocabulary of sensibility. As recent critics have shown, in this vocabulary all signs are as atomistic, and as easily agitated, as the sentient body they aim to affect.[3] They do not easily accommodate themselves to linear narrative.

In Walter Scott's *The Abbot* (1820), for instance, Mary compounds the information gleaned when "we read her history" with impressions already mediated through "prints and pictures," and through private emotional experience.[4] Her eyes consequently divulge not one history but "a thousand," just as in *The Recess*, Sophia Lee's novel of the 1780s, her face evokes "a thousand" uninterpretable "sensations." For Scott, Mary ("the like of which we know not to have existed") is most recognizable amid a constellation of discrepancies ("portraits ... not like each other"). Likewise, when Lee's twin heroines innocently encounter Mary's picture in a subterranean art gallery, they find they cannot "invent tales" about her. "Deprived of books," they know her best in partial terms, as a "half shaded" figure who signifies only as "part of one great mystery."[5] Of course, any number of Gothic characters are enigmatic at first sighting, and Lee's Mary anticipates them, much as she also recalls shadowy and aestheticized female presences like that of Clementina (also Roman Catholic) in Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–54). But Mary cuts the same sort of figure outside novels; in popular biographies such as Eliza Haywood's *Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots* (1725), Charles IX of France "stopp'd short" before Mary's portrait and, overcome with emotion, "never pass'd by her Picture."[6] In eighteenth-century historical writing, both factual *and* fictional, Mary Stuart can be neither sequentially narrated nor properly read. Rather, she embodies the multiple, the

3 Van Sant offers an especially cogent analysis of sentimental language's investment in the presumably atomistic physiology of the reader or spectator (pp. 8–9). For sensibility's complicity with an object-centred mercantile culture, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

4 Walter Scott, *The Abbot*, 3 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1820), 2:181. Epigraph, 2:180–81.

5 Sophia Lee, *The Recess; Or, A Tale of Other Times*, 3 vols (1783–85; 2nd edition London, 1786), 1:9. Epigraph, 1:7–9. References are to this edition. Lee made some changes between the first and second editions of *The Recess*, and where her emendations bear on my argument, I will note them. The first edition is available, ed. Devendra P. Varma (New York: Arno, 1972).

6 Eliza Haywood, *Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. Being the Secret History of her Life and the Real Causes of all her Misfortunes* (London, 1725), p. 4. Epigraph, p. 4. Haywood follows continental treatments of Mary that identified her with erotic portraiture, as for example Marie de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) and Pierre de Bourdeille, abbé de Brantôme's *Les Vies des dames illustres de son temps* (1665). Friedrich Schiller's tragedy *Maria Stuart* (1800) continues the tradition.

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particular, the indeterminate—and ultimately the unreadable—as these qualities interrupt unified, linear, and didactic systems of representation.

I want to focus on *The Recess* because through its depiction of Mary Queen of Scots it both reveals and examines what was at stake when British writers set about reconstructing the historical past in affective terms. Differently exemplified in the rising subgenres of the Gothic and historical novel, but in fact also nascent in the historiographical texts of the mid-eighteenth century, such a narrative strategy naturally solicits figures which can mediate between the disruptive and bodily particularity of affecting signs, and the syntactically and didactically disciplined methods of transmitting cultural information which were explicitly advocated by the most influential historians of Lee's own day. When Lee published her novel, Mary Stuart was already well positioned to become such a mediating figure. In Lee's special case, though, Mary not only permits a *rapprochement* between a piecemeal sentimental discourse and the highly formalized versions of "history" with which, Lee insisted, her story "agree[s], in the outline." She also stands as an expository figure for that *rapprochement*. Collaborating critically as much with Georgian historians as with her fellow sentimental novelists, Lee uses the figure of an injured queen to investigate the secretly twinned structures of historiography and sensibility. Through that figure Lee also presses the implications of their intersection for the production, and textual reproduction, not just of British history, but ultimately of modern sentimental culture itself.

Fittingly, *The Recess* materialized over several years and in different parts: the first of its three volumes was published in 1783, the two last in 1785. Despite its fitful entrance into the world, Lee's "Tale of Other Times" had found its way into five editions by 1804, with a French translation in 1787. Budding novelists such as Ann Radcliffe and Elizabeth Tomlins were only among its more celebrated admirers and imitators.[7] Critical notices meanwhile were largely approving, if also somewhat bewildered, as a contemporary description of the plot suggests:

> The unfortunate Norfolk, who lost his life in the cause of the lovely but deluded Mary, the rival of Elizabeth, is supposed to have been actuated by something more than ambition, by more than humanity: in short, he is represented to have been married to the queen of Scotland, and the adventures of the fruits of this marriage, two lovely daughters, are the subject of the story. They are educated in a gloomy recess, the remains of an abbey; they meet, in one of

7 For a detailed discussion of the reception of *The Recess*, see Varma, pp. xxi–xxv.

their accidental excursions, with Leicester, the favourite of Elizabeth, and the eldest is married to him. The vengeance of the queen pursues them, and they are left in a very interesting situation, when the [first] volume concludes. ... The subsequent volumes contain the adventures of the sisters, after their separation. Ellinor, the youngest, is beloved by Elizabeth's other favourite, the spirited and gallant Essex; but, by the machinations of the jealous queen, to whom their birth is accidentally revealed, by a complication of the deepest policy ... she is married to lord Arlington. After his death, she escapes to Essex, with a mind shaken by misfortunes, and a reason scarcely fixed, after its disturbance by the most cruel insults: she rejoins him in Ireland, and is again separated from him by his sudden return to England. In her progress to rejoin him, the news of his death totally destroys her reason, and she escapes from a fixed and settled melancholy, only to survey once more the picture of Essex, and to expire in the tumult of conflicting sensations. Matilda is scarcely more fortunate. After the death of Leicester she is carried to Jamaica ... by the artifice of a pretended admirer. Her adventures and imprisonment there are gloomy and distressing: at last, she returns to England, to witness the unhappy condition of her sister. Her daughter, however ... grows up, and blooms with all the charms she might have expected to inherit. In her the mother again revives, and in her, expects again to live; but, by a series of adventures well arranged, this darling daughter finishes her days by poison in a prison.[8]

As this précis suggests, *The Recess* was remarkable for its startling assemblage of interruptions, repetitions, "tumult[s]," separations, and "accidental excursion[s]." In it a "series of adventures well arranged" registers as but one small part of a larger whole, not as a governing design. Because Lee's text was supposedly based on a coherent and completed sequence of historical events, eighteenth-century critics naturally noticed the profusion of over-charged minutiae that too amply stocked *The Recess*. Lee's penchant for turning history into a cache of small but touching things may be seen as a feminizing strategy.[9] And one of its effects is thus that the world of *The Recess* has always seemed more Georgian than Elizabethan, and therefore more domestic than courtly.[10] Another is that the novel itself feels paratactic, its different elements jammed together in ways that defy readers to discover logical connections among them. Inevitable if Lee was to render the private and feminine side of national history, this accumulation of detail meant that in its own "Times," *The*

8 *Critical Review* 55 (March 1783), 233; and *Critical Review* 61 (March 1786), 214–15.

9 On the detail as the sign of a feminized aesthetic, see Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

10 J.M.S. Tompkins's foreword to the Arno reprint of *The Recess* notes somewhat condescendingly that "we should not ... be surprised to find in the work of the enthusiastic but far from learned Sophia Lee, traits, manners and conditions which are not drawn from the records of the sixteenth century, but from the tastes, dreams and reveries of the late eighteenth" (p. 10).

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Recess itself was often treated more as an affecting object than as an integrated verbal structure. "First viewed as a curio and a novelty,"[11] it was less likely to be read than perceived as a concatenation of picturesque "little incidents,"[12] distressing images, and pathetic details.

However interesting an object *The Recess* might have been in the 1780s, Lee's "ingenious and affecting novel"[13] has only lately begun to win back the critical attention that it deserves. Recent readers, however, seldom interpret it as a paratactic sign system that approaches the status of the discrete, intimately affecting incidents and objects it describes. Instead, they tend to place *The Recess* in one generic line or another, interpreting it as an early historical novel, or as an early Gothic one, or, as in April Alliston's recent and illuminating analysis, as a key text in the female-authored and largely epistolary literature of sensibility.[14] Lee's own contemporaries experienced her "Tale of Other Times" as an unsettling cross between different signifying conventions: "Fiction is indeed too lavishly employed to heighten and embellish some well-known and distinguished facts in the English history," carped the *Monthly Review*. "We say *too lavishly*, because the mind is ever divided and distracted when the fact so little accords with the fiction, and Romance and History are at perpetual variance with one another."[15] The *Gentleman's Magazine* likewise admitted that "we cannot entirely approve the custom of interweaving fictitious incident with historic truth."[16]

11 Varma, p. xiv. See for example the *Critical Review* 55, which recommends that "the whole should be read together, to make a suitable impression" on the reader (p. 233). The words "curio" and "curiosity" have always attached themselves to Lee's novel, unconsciously placing it in material culture. On the provenance of these terms in the eighteenth century and their place in an evolving mercantile aesthetic that generates certain possibilities and impossibilities of self-possession for the women usually identified with them, see Barbara Benedict, "The Curious Attitude in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Observing and Owning," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 14 (November 1990), 59–93.

12 *Critical Review* 56, p. 215.

13 *Monthly Review* 75 (December 1786), 131.

14 See April Alliston, "The Value of a Literary Legacy: Retracing the Transmission of Value through Female Lines," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 4 (1990), 109. On *The Recess* in the context of early traditions of Gothic and historical fiction, see Margaret Anne Doody, "Deserts, Ruins and Troubled Waters: Female Dreams in Fiction and the Development of the Gothic Novel," *Genre* 10 (1977); David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present* (London: Longman, 1980), pp. 56–59; and Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist, from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 195–201. Part of the genealogizing tendency in recent readings of *The Recess* stems from the fact that, as women's writing, the novel has been ignored and like its heroines has had to be legitimated within established critical paradigms before it can be interpreted.

15 *Monthly Review* 75, p. 134. Two years earlier the same magazine had complained that "*The Tale of other Times* is a romantic title." But "the Preface ... soon broke the *charm* of the title; and we were brought back to our sober senses by an assurance, that the ground we had before us was real and not imaginary: it was founded on fact, and not on fiction; and that what we took for romance was only a history." See *Monthly Review* 68 (January 1786), 455.

16 *Gentleman's Magazine* 56, p. 327.

What marked Lee's novel as a "Romance," then, was what from another point of view would be seen as its most homely and familiar elements—its discontinuous use of "embellish[ment]" and "incident." Lee zealously employs the machinery of veils, castles, portraits, and other imagery of the surface that drives Gothic fiction of the later eighteenth century, translating emotional and psychological states into a vocabulary of charismatic objects. As Terry Castle in particular represents it, it is often superficial devices, anchored in the material world, that generate the ghostly cognitive atmosphere of novels like Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1784), where characters appear to each other more often as ciphers and revenants than as persons with protracted and evolving histories.[17] As in sentimental fiction, this atmosphere does considerable ideological work. In particular, it provides access to a private and interior space which can then be surreptitiously arranged, even built, to suit the needs of the broader cultural order that encompasses it.[18]

Lee is therefore linked to the Gothic and sentimental novelists because she tells her "Tale of Other Times" by means of ornament and image. She exploits "descriptions" that her contemporaries found almost too "animated, and vivid," "incidents varied and numerous,"[19] and anachronisms that render historical incidents transposable, movable things instead of events securely woven into a chronology. Lee places the Armada before the execution of Mary Stuart, for example, and contemporaries noted her jarring use of modern idioms and her "neglect of the peculiar manners" of the Elizabethan age in favour of those specific to her own and hence more easily pictured by her readers.[20]

As those same readers immediately appreciated, though, *The Recess* also aligns itself with a certain historical method. Despite her devotion to the sentimental incident, Lee's "Advertisement" promises that her novel will follow prescriptions for the proper reconstruction of character and event recently expounded by historians like David Hume and William Robertson. Hume and Robertson called for history to be grounded in empirical evidence, causally ordered, sequentially linked, and instructive. Each detail would signify in relation to the details visibly attached

17 On spectral representations in the eighteenth-century Gothic and their relationship to shifting epistemological structures, see Terry Castle, "The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*," *The New Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 231–53.

18 On the resulting "alienation" of the self that accompanies the creation of the spiritualized object and ultimately generates a "new [and bourgeois] fantasy of continuity," see Castle, pp. 242–43.

19 *Critical Review* 61, p. 218.

20 *Critical Review* 55, p. 234.

to it, either as cause or as effect, to form, in Hume's words, one "great chain of events."[21] It is in forging such a chain, Hume implies, that historiographical method becomes a sociolinguistic strategy for cultural consolidation—a fiction of connection continuous with other, similar fictions also meant to transform and stabilize social order.[22]

Lee's "Advertisement" for *The Recess* sought affiliation with Humean discursive method. Here Lee insisted that "the line of which [her invented heroines] came has been marked by an eminent historian," presumably Hume himself, whose *History of England*, published in Lee's childhood, had painted canonical portraits of the historical figures who inhabit *The Recess*.[23] In addition to Mary Queen of Scots, Lee's cast of characters includes a devious and tyrannical Elizabeth Tudor, her differently flawed favourites Essex and Leicester, and Sir Philip Sidney, all of whom manifest the personality traits that had become canonical through the many histories of Elizabeth's reign that had appeared since her death. Lee's plot turns on documented incidents such as Mary's execution and the Battle of Drogheda. As it incorporates heavily chronicled relationships and historically significant places, a sturdy historiographical thread—a social fiction of connection—therefore unites the spectral but insistent images at the heart of *The Recess*, tying them to narrative conventions that favour what is linear, exemplary, and accessible to the generality of polite readers over what is specular, discontinuous, subjective. Lee's advertisement assures her reader that "the characters interwoven in this story agree, in the outline, with history." She justifies the sometimes awkward narrative braiding that results on the grounds that "as painting can only preserve the most striking characteristics of the form, history perpetuates only those of the soul; while too often the best and worst actions of princes proceed from partialities and prejudices, which live in their hearts, and are buried with them."[24]

21 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London, 1755), p. 294. Leo Braudy quotes this passage in his excellent explication of the rhetoric of causality, continuity, and coherence in eighteenth-century historiography, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 33.

22 Jerome Christensen's *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987) elucidates the ways Hume's philosophical, autobiographical, and historical writing work to "induce" fictions of consensus that in turn inculcate cultural order.

23 "Advertisement" to *The Recess* (London, 1786), n.p.

24 The advertisements to the first and second editions of *The Recess* differ, sometimes critically. In the second advertisement, quoted here, Lee emphasized the bodily aspect of the parallel between history and painting; in 1783 she had noted only that "History, like painting, only perpetuates the striking features of the mind." In 1786 Lee took pains to call attention to the possible chasm dividing "form" and "soul," replacing the word "features" with the more precise and, to eighteenth-century minds, far more corporeal "characteristics."

Lee's determination to incorporate normally buried affective details into conventional historical "painting" should be seen not as a radical break with Hume but rather as a nearly parodic exaggeration of another aspect of his historiographical method. As J.C. Hilson and, more recently, Jerome Christensen have suggested, the Humean historian also poses as a man of feeling, one who does occasionally summon up pathetic episodes in order to install general narrative paradigms in his readers, and in order to infuse history with the irenic values of modern sentimental culture.[25] But, as Christensen suggests, in Humean historiography the sentimental details are always subordinated to a broader ideological fabric, and, even as they solicit the feeling female reader, these same details aim to deprive her of the power of assigning meaning.[26] By contrast, Lee does not try to subordinate "striking characteristics" to the fiction of continuity exemplified by the Humean "line." Nor does she subtly disenfranchise her sentimental reader; rather, as her choice of the epistolary style suggests, she writes its feeling readers into her history, even allowing their erratic passions to interrupt the fiction of that history's perfectly smooth and hence perfectly legible passage.

Professing itself the transcript of an archaic manuscript, *The Recess* seeks to imitate both continuous narrative and discrete image. It tenders the story of twin sisters of the Elizabethan age, Matilda and Ellinor. Their story takes the form of a three-volume letter written by Matilda, the dominant twin; part of Matilda's letter in turn transcribes a fragmentary manuscript written by Ellinor. The physical structure of *The Recess* thus keeps the question of how historical experience can be recorded permanently in view. Indeed, Lee's text trumpets its own refusal to choose between different means of recording that experience. Evidently observing a progressive and contiguous model of textual history, Lee reveals at the outset that Matilda's writing has been modernized. Otherwise, "the obsolete stile of the author would be frequently unintelligible."[27] But, posing as editor, Lee also confesses that "the depredations of time have left

25 Christensen charts Hume's use of "the example of the female" and his ambivalent transactions with "feminine" sensibility (pp. 94–119). J.C. Hilson's "Hume: The Historian as Man of Feeling" may be found in *Augustan Worlds*, ed. J.C. Hilson, M.M.B. Jones, and J.R. Watson (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), pp. 205–20.

26 Christensen points out that while Hume's aim in his explicit and implicit transactions with the woman reader was always to "conjoi[n] rational pleasures with the emotional" (p. 108), his success in doing so was more equivocal.

27 Lee revised this declaration in the second edition. The first advertisment announces only that "I make no apology for adapting the language to the present times, since that of the author's would be frequently unintelligible."

chasms in the story, which sometimes only heightens the pathos. An inviolable respect for truth," she adds, "would not permit me to attempt connecting these, even where they appeared faulty." Two temporal structures therefore organize the text. In deference to the changes wrought by the passage of time, and in order to link the present to the past, individual words have been replaced. But at the same time, in allegiance to a different sense of the past, connections between these same words are deliberately omitted. Stubbornly preserved formal lapses correspondingly merge with forged linguistic continuities.

The letters on the page function as figures for the novel's compromised position on the cusp between coherent historical "outline" and a paratactic sign system that eschews legislated form in favour of the incoherent, ahistorical narrative of sensibility. When Matilda describes her own story as "a memorial which calls back to being all the sad images buried in my bosom" (1:2), the text of *The Recess* emerges as a kind of ghost narrative, one in which the most persistent and telling revenants are not human characters but written ones. Ever conscious that its main plot line appears in no history book, *The Recess* achieves what evidentiary force it can by allowing a discontinuous collection of "sad images" to haunt a narrative that espouses compliance with the continuous "line" drawn by "an eminent historian." Thus while recent criticism is inclined to see Lee's novel either as "romance's revenge on recorded history" or as history's oppression of romance,[28] that novel's own editorial and internal commentary insists that these seemingly opposing discourses and modes of evidence are actually implicated in each other. With her novel's verbal texture always testifying to this implication, Lee's plot is free to dramatize and examine it.

So in the story that their strange sentences tell, Lee's twin heroines begin their own lives buried alive. They are raised, in isolation and in secret, in an underground "Apartment"—the "Recess" of Lee's title—by a foster mother, Mrs Marlow, who, as she puts it, "suppl[ies to them ...] every lost relation" (1:13). Mrs Marlow takes the place of the missing mother (the "lost relation") whose identity the twins as yet do not know. But, in bits and pieces, she also supplies her charges with a verbal "relation" of their ancestry. From this relation, divulged mainly on her deathbed, Ellinor and Matilda learn that they are the daughters of Mary Stuart by a secret fourth marriage to the Duke of Norfolk.[29] The notorious jealousy and paranoia of the reigning queen, Elizabeth, have dictated

28 Spencer, p. 200.

29 The fantasy of a love match between Mary and Norfolk evidently tantalized English imaginations, for it also figures in *The Albion Queens* (1704; first published as *The Island Queens*, 1686), John Banks's hugely popular tragedy about Mary and Elizabeth.

that Mary's female offspring stay hidden in the recess while their birth mother yet, if spectrally, survives as Elizabeth's political prisoner. In Mrs Marlow's words, "your mother lives, but not for you" (1:13).[30]

The "recess" of the twins' childhood may be Lee's invention, but as one of many Elizabethan shelters for persecuted Roman Catholics during Elizabeth's reign it is also tightly braided into English religious and political history. While at the level of the plot the recess is a space designed to conceal its occupants, at the figural level it seems to have been invented to reveal its own modes and principles of construction, and its detachment from history aboveground. "This Recess could not be called a cave," Matilda recalls, "because it was composed of various rooms; and the stones were obviously united by labor." She remembers that "our light proceeded from small casements of painted glass, so infinitely above our reach that we could never seek a world beyond" (1:3). Emphasizing its man-made boundaries, Matilda renders the recess a textual image of the competing symbolic forms that mediate the "world beyond." In a plot-resistant pattern of frustrating repetition, both Matilda and Ellinor again and again find themselves back in the recess. As Matilda's letters describe this pattern, the burden of signification shifts away from straightforward linear "relation" to the spatial imagery that that "relation" visibly works to repress.

The twins' own bodies participate in this alternative image system. While there is some written evidence of their identity, their own faces provide much more certain proof. For by a genetic miracle, Matilda exactly resembles Mary Stuart while Ellinor is the image of Norfolk. The sisters' faces share an imagistic mode of transmitting cultural information, doubling as genetic information, that (like the "painting" that "preserves the most striking characteristics of the form") is emotionally impressive, resistant both to interpretive reconstruction and to actual change. But because they make the twins themselves into potential victims of Elizabeth's jealousy, the same countenances must be hidden from scrutiny. Just so, the resemblance to their parents that should establish the twins in a documented family line pushes them out of the linear, volitional, and potentially didactic plot lines that ought to be available to them. Rather, it confines them to a spectral register whose elements must be misread by historically actual others if they are to achieve significance. Matilda's own secret marriage to Elizabeth's favourite, Leicester, recalls them from their live burial in the recess. Subsequently, the twins circulate in Elizabeth's court, which is defined in dramatic contrast to the

30 On the maternal legacies in the novel, of which the undead Mary's is exemplary, see Alliston, pp. 119–20.

private and domestic space of the recess.[31] They live disguised, in constant terror of discovery and retribution. Often forced to behave "more like a spectre than myself," Matilda survives only as a ghost (1:152). "Seen without being known," Ellinor recollects, "we were all an illusion" (2:165). The twins' survival depends on their remaining illegible, unassimilable into the public fictions and artificial interpretive conventions that shape court life.

Throughout *The Recess* Lee's heroines struggle to hide, and after Elizabeth's death to reclaim, the "lost relation" to Mary Stuart that should translate them from private "illusion" into consensually verifiable fact. But that relation is fiction, invented by Lee. It is not continuous with historical narrative even though it stands next to it. Verifying it in conventional terms is impossible for the novelist; life beyond the recess leads only (if slowly) to madness and death for Ellinor, and for Matilda to widowhood, the murder of her own daughter, and imprisonment by her sceptical and power-crazed half-brother James I. At novel's end, Matilda seals her letters in a "casket" and looks forward to the "nameless grave" where her own ashes will be interred (3:356). Caught like their author's body between competing modes of evidence, the letters find a similar fate, their power to disclose identity finally dependent on their repression.

Instead of marking closure and oblivion, however, the end of Lee's novel (and of Matilda's letter) is significant in much the same way as the twins' faces and the recess are. Addressed to a female reader—a "dear and lovely friend" whose "sensibility," Matilda expects, will "lead" her to "retrace" the places she has described (3:356)—Matilda's last sentences devise figures able to meld opposite orders of testimony, one immediate and sentimental, one mediated through a narrative available to a large community of middle-class British readers. Indeed, if anything, Matilda's conclusion contains the latter narrative mode within the former. It anticipates her story's preservation through repetition in the heart and body of its reader, and looks towards a harbour in a literal (burial) plot instead of in a literary (linguistically and temporally extended) one. The novel's end converts Matilda's narrative into a mirroring—thereby perpetuating—image of the letters, poems, and other literary evidence of her life and character that Mary Stuart allegedly left behind in a silver casket of her own and that in fact formed the ambiguous foundation of most historiographical information about her.[32]

31 Lee here shares the antipathy enlightenment historiographers such as Hume and Robertson felt for the aristocratic, court-centred culture of the English past.

32 For a text of the casket letters and poems, and a summary of the controversy that surrounded

Like their revealing failure to find a place in official historical discourse, Lee's twins' original self-concealment may be traced to their obsession with their "lost relation" to Mary Stuart. Even before they know who she is, or who they are, her image dominates their consciousness, and throughout *The Recess* their own fates replicate hers with varying degrees of accuracy. Mary haunts her daughters from the first time that, as children, they stumble across her full-length portrait in a part of the recess they had never visited before. The picture "seemed to call forth a thousand melting sensations" (1:9). Knowable only as "part of one great mystery," this "inanimate canvas" first plunges the twins into the "involuntar[y]," deferred, fragmentary and intensely private way of knowing, and representing, that will govern all of their future engagements with the outer world.

The more the twins learn about Mary, the more they desire to be known by her. As an unattainable and yet ubiquitous object of longing, Mary supplies the matrix of her daughters' cognitive, emotional, and moral universe. Inevitably, she also supports the figural structure of the narrative in which the twins appear—which they indeed write. In this figural system, as we have seen, knowledge and identity are transmitted through discrete images and objects. To the extent that Lee permits them to resist the sequential and progressive verbal articulation that could be shared by a wide interpretive community, we might call these semiotic units anti-historiographical, even anti-linguistic. It is fitting that the twins' first encounter with Mary is an accidental one mediated by a life-size portrait they cannot weave into a "tale." Instead, they must interpret her fractionally, as "part of one great mystery." And as they "with restless imaginations explored the remainder of a mystery which we wept by anticipation," the twins inevitably feel "like links struck from the chain of creation" (1:14).

Viewed against the backdrop of Gothic conventions, the figure of Mary Stuart does not look unique. Many Gothic protagonists, such as Radcliffe's Emily St Aubert, encounter mysterious and compelling portraits of interesting women. But the Radcliffean portrait does not create the subjectivity of its beholder. In *The Recess*, by contrast, knowing about Mary and imaginatively rebuilding their "lost relation" forces Lee's twins to represent, indeed construct, themselves within the atomistic and pictographic vocabulary whose peculiar structure Lee, as editor, laboured to

them, see *The Casket Letters*, ed. M.H. Davison (Washington, D.C.: University of Washington, D.C. Press, 1969). Also useful is Gordon Donaldson, *The First Trial of Mary Queen of Scots* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1969), pp. 67–75.

preserve. Spatial, transposable, and potentially illusory, its terms seem to court their own exclusion from the historical, political, and sociolinguistic order that both resembles and is demanded by sequential narration. Because they are buried visibly beneath that order, these terms allow Lee to probe their relationship to it. Her novel investigates the intricate bond of dependency and alienation that conventional historiograpical discourse only assumes and occasionally exploits.

As a mode of knowledge, and as a model for its transmission, Matilda cherishes "friendship grounded on the maternal and filial tye" (3:215–16) rather than narrative instruction. To her mind, the good mother presents her own heart "as a pure and unflattering mirror to her child" (3:216). She is not exemplary, nor does she offer a causal explanation or an influential point of origin.[33] Matilda first learned about her own mother within the same anti-didactic, and ultimately nonverbal, register: "I would describe the Queen of Scots to you," Mrs Marlow promises during her deathbed narration, "had not nature drawn a truer picture of her than I can give. Look in the glass, Matilda, and you will see her perfect image" (1:57). To the extent that she shares this specular register with "the Queen of Scots," Matilda is also conspicuously unrepresentable outside history's plot, here identified with the connected words—the description that her surrogate mother will not pronounce.

Naturally, then, Matilda lives in terror at Elizabeth's dangerous court. Taught that knowledge is more likely to be a matter of exposure than of analysis over time, she struggles to "guard from others [the] secret my very features betrayed" (1:163), and "fancie[s her]self every moment surveyed" (1:210). It is their shared residence in the specular realm that defines Matilda's "lost relation" to her mother. Matilda's own secret husband, Leicester, falls in love first with the miniature of Mary Stuart that Elizabeth wears on her own breast—a likeness that he "never beheld ... without admiring the finest imitation art could execute of the most finished production of nature" (1:121). Leicester's aesthetic pleasure shades easily into love. And, obeying the laws of sentimental economy, his affection's object-centred origins eventually allow him to transfer it to Matilda, Mary's daughter, and, in Leicester's words, her "breathing" portrait (1:95).

Although Ellinor lacks the uncanny physical resemblance to Mary that in Matilda's case preserves certain forms of cognitive and symbolic relationship, her fate also dramatizes those forms. Indeed, it is Ellinor's story that relates them explicitly and directly to the possiblity of conspiracy between the transmission of "true" history and women's writing.

33 On historiographical conceptions of character—and historians' efforts to prevent their migration from "the analytic realm" to the "impressionistic and metaphoric"—see Braudy, p. 63.

Both Matilda and Ellinor possess written evidence of their ancestry—evidence whose ostensible disappearance of course justifies Lee's own historical fiction. Matilda hides hers. But in an arrangement that prefigures her mother's decapitation, Ellinor wears hers in a "small pacquet suspended to the black ribbon she always wore round her neck" (2:58). After Elizabeth discovers the packet and tears its contents to atoms, she imprisons Ellinor in the recess, demanding that she sign the "forged testimonials of an impossible marriage, and suppositious birth" (2:222). Although Ellinor's signature will deny her ancestry and render her a permanent illusion, it also, if ironically, promises to connect her to historical event, for Elizabeth's henchman brandishes a warrant for Mary's execution that Ellinor's signature presumably will rescind. Ellinor believes her writing can rescue her mother, and thereby shape recorded history. Thus she signs the "confession": after historical record impertinently forces Lee to have Mary beheaded anyway, nothing can link Ellinor to history's chain.

But it is also "at this tremendous crisis" (2:224) that Ellinor embarks on a different trajectory of historical experience. Lapsing into the first of many episodes of madness, she begins to re-enact the death of her mother. Twice she stages her own burial. Mentally, she moves into an autistic world whose tendency to convey itself through "frequently realized scenes and objects that never existed" (2:237) replicates her image-based, ironically discontinuous, connection with Mary. Eventually Ellinor becomes a ghost in the eyes of others, most notably Elizabeth, who believes she is dead and to whom she thus reappears as a spectre. Equally the moved subject and the moving object of uncontrollable emotion, Ellinor perishes in picturesque earnest before the portrait of her lover Essex.

Like Matilda, we learn of Ellinor's spectral fate through a fragmentary manuscript that she has written. Arranged in pieces that are connected only by asterisks, Ellinor's manuscript not only fuses historical and psychological destiny but also transposes them into the field of letters that both share. The page in turn becomes a charismatic image of the atomizing losses that at once produce and are engendered by historiographical convention;[34] it guides written words into an alternative, and uniquely illuminating, mode of "historical" evidence, one whose pathetic force is inseparable from the sociocultural imperative behind it.

34 As it sets itself apart as a self-contained object that reflects on the sign systems around it, Lee's sentimental and self-reflexive page behaves like the miniatures Susan Stewart describes in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

Of the figures who crowd *The Recess*, Mary Stuart most perfectly combines historical and sentimental modes of representation and cognition. And she proves essential to Lee's novel precisely because she is in an important sense not original. From the age of Anne forward, Mary had been busy metamorphosing into a publicly available sign of the private realm. Hume, for instance, admits that "no one was so steeled against all sentiments of humanity, as not to be moved, when he ... considered the surprising train of her misfortunes, beheld her mild but inflexible constancy, recalled her amiable accomplishments, or surveyed her beauties."[35] But long before Hume found himself moved by Mary's "maternal fondness," Haywood's "Secret History" had acknowledged that though Mary's was a "True History," it was more apt to look like a "Romance," thanks to its heroine's notorious "Powers of Charming" and the moving "Agonies," "Tremblings" and "Tears" that so often punctured her sadly truncated life. George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) glossed over her precipitate marriages and alleged weakness for political intrigue to stress her expertise in needlepoint and elegant poetry while the correspondence pages of the leading periodicals displayed diagrams of the Edinburgh house where Mary was rumoured to have shed an "abundance of tears," and described waxwork models of the "scene of sorrow" that prevailed at her execution.[36]

Mary's transformation into a domestic and sentimental icon accompanied and ultimately sped the feminization and domestication of British culture. At the same time, her tragic fate—her captivity, her brutalization by a number of influential men, and above all her persecution by another woman, Elizabeth—were so extreme as to resist mystification or elevation: they kept the abuse of the feminine in view and even demonstrated female complicity in that abuse. Finally, because from the beginning Mary had been shrouded in fiction, all representations of her—as even Hume's anxious appendices to the Tudor volumes of his *History* confess—were unusually conscious of their own imaginative and conjectural status. They were thereby structurally equipped to annex her image to the political process of image formation itself.[37]

Lee, then, imported her twins' "lost relation"—their mother—from a cultural cache where Mary Stuart already both exemplified and potentially complicated the role that the sentimental, the private, and the

35 Hume, *History*, 4:249. Braudy also notes that Hume cannot "quite disentangle the threads of policy and personal emotion in Elizabeth's treatment of Mary Queen of Scots," and that in his representation of Mary, "his sense of the relation of the private to the public life remains uncertain" (p. 72).

36 *Gentleman's Magazine* 58 (1788), 312–13; 59 (1789), 1100.

37 On the intrinsic (and politicized) fictitiousness of even contemporary information about Mary, see Phillips, *Images of a Queen*, *passim*.

feminine played in the construction of British history, and indeed of modern cultural forms. Just so, in Lee's novel, Mary seems to signal women's exclusion from recorded history and the suppression of female lines, both literary and political, their relegation to the status of "illusion." But she in fact also behaves in a more complex way, as a self-reflexive and thus elucidating figure for sentiment's intrusion into history writing and, conversely, for the historical and political foundations of affect. Thus her daughters' "relation" to Mary might confine them to a buried cognitive and emotional realm that releases them only as spectres. But dramatic moments within the same "relation" also permit them, and with them Lee's readers, to witness the formation of significant and affecting figures in their sociopolitical setting.

The twins' closest actual encounter with Mary provides a case in point. After she has secretly married Elizabeth's favourite, Leicester, Matilda learns that her mother has been locked up in a nearby castle. She and Ellinor set off to see her:

> We were to see that Queen whose matchless beauty was her least ornament; to behold her graces withered by eighteen years confinement; to share in her afflictions, and prove how dearly the children, who had never known her, could love their mother.
>
> But, alas! Madam, we were not permitted to realize these visions. [Her keepers would not] suffer any stranger to converse with her, and the only privilege money could purchase, was that of seeing the Queen, through a grated window, take her morning walk in a small garden. ... We were conducted to the window, where we were permitted to remain without attendants; we saw her come down the walk—but oh, how changed, and yet how lovely! Damp rooms had weakened her limbs—her charming arms were thrown round the necks of two maids, without whose assistance she could not move—a pale resignation sat on her still beautiful features: her regal mien could not be eclipsed by a habit of plain purple, nor her fine hair by the veil which touched her forehead.—Her beads and cross were her only ornaments, but her unaffected piety, and patient sufferance, mingled the Saint with the Queen, and gave her charms beyond humanity. (1:194–95)

Though a multitude of feelings converge to find both object and embodiment in her, Mary is first visible to her daughters only as a curiosity, a tourist attraction that they actually pay to see.[38] It is only through the distancing but visible frames of economic and political situation that the twins can construe either Mary's relationship to them or her independent significance. At the same time, and seemingly paradoxically, Matilda asserts that Mary's meaning and value finally depend less on historical

38 This is even more apparent in the second edition of *The Recess* than in the first, for Lee adds the word "stranger" to describe Mary's visitors, thereby underscoring her distance from them.

relation than on the ties—specular, emotional, imaginary, even sacred—that before our eyes bind the saintly queen to her beholders—her true, if lost, relations. Inseparable from its effect on its spectators, Matilda's portrait of Mary Stuart thus also portrays the artist-percipient herself as a split subject, one whose historical knowledge and cultural identity are visibly and instructively inseparable from her emotional life.[39] Matilda's image of Mary ultimately exposes female sensibility as a cultural plot, even as it also exposes the fibre of barely tolerable sentiments and sensations that actually constitutes public cultural formations.

As they look at "that Queen," the twins (who know what it is like to be "seen without being known") witness the construction of a figure, both affecting and evidentiary, out of an array of symbolic possibilities. Mary's erotic, transcendental, political, and biological identities—as "charm[er]," "Saint," "Queen" and "mother"—all attach to the same body. Recollecting this uniquely illuminating enigma, Matilda claims that "our emotions were too rapid and strong for description." But she goes on to describe them in minute detail:

> We wept—we incoherently exclaimed—and striking ourselves eagerly against the bars, seemed to hope some supernatural strength would break them. More afflicted at seeing her thus, than not seeing her at all, I neither could behold her for my tears, or resolve to lose a look by indulging in them. ... [O]ur hands, which we had thrust, in supplication, through the bars, caught her attention.—She raised her fine eyes, with their usual divine composure, to the window—I would have spoke, but my lips denied all utterance. Alas! that blessed—that benignant glance, was the first, the last, the only one we ever received from a mother.—When she withdrew her eyes, she carried my very soul with her. (1:196–97)

Just as, at the beginning of Lee's novel, Mary's portrait elicited passionate and mysterious modes of knowledge that ultimately defied chronology, so here Mary's "first ... last ... only" glance translates a series of relations into a single spatial configuration.

Lee's representation of Mary forces the authors of history to share authority with its subjects and readers. At the same time, this sharing is not idealized as a solution to the problem of how modern cultural authority is arranged. Rather, Lee elucidates a complicity already, and insidiously, in place. It's no accident that, less than ten years after the last two volumes of *The Recess* made their debut, Jane Austen seized on Mary Stuart to make much the same point. In her diminutive "History of England"

39 Matilda's split subjectivity here anticipates one of the key concerns among feminist novelists of the 1790s, whose heroines suffer from their own suspension between competing modes of consciousness. See especially Maria in Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798) and Mary in Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799).

(1791), Austen writes as an ironic chronicler rather than from inside a set of epistolary masks. But she, like Lee, made that "bewitching princess" Mary Queen of Scots a *cause célèbre* in her campaign to feminize English history. Like Lee, Austen conducted that campaign by miniaturizing and domesticating: her "History" is only a few pages long, abbreviates the life of every monarch it depicts, pictorializes its subjects, and is notoriously far more interested in Henry VII's kitchen and Henry VIII's "riding through the Streets of London with Anna Bullen" than in the broad canvas of war and religious upheaval. Like Lee's less ironic but still critical collaboration with Georgian historiography, Austen's little satire on the same makes the "amiable" Mary, brought to an "untimely, ummerited and scandalous death," the centrepiece of modern history.[40] Like Lee, Austen would have the tears that Mary provokes dislodge narrative and interpretive convention. And, like Lee, she aims to show not what historiography has left out but rather how fictions of cultural coherence—particularly historiographical ones—at once commission and denigrate sentimental details.

Meanwhile, *The Recess* remains one of the most complex novels of the eighteenth century. Its complexity is owing less to its Byzantine plot than to the intricacy of the specific figures it constructs before its readers' very eyes. At once evocative and frustrating, these figures include the recess itself. But they culminate in Mary Stuart's half-shaded, only half-seen face. The half of that face that can be seen is not necessarily the half that is visible. But Lee uses it as a figure that uniquely depicts its own political and historical ground. She thereby exhumes an erstwhile buried relationship between sentimental details and the fictions of connection that seek to monopolize the labour of reproducing culture. Historiography itself emerges as the most binding of fictions. It binds, however, not because of its alienation from the private, the domestic, the sentimental—and ultimately the feminine—but rather because it constantly invokes that realm. Like other eighteenth-century cultural forms, it only thereby becomes an agent of social transformation. And it is by recognizing this agency that Lee's fiction comes to function as a true and efficacious history in its own right.

University of California, Los Angeles

40 Jane Austen, *The History of England from the Reign of Henry the 4th to the Death of Charles the 1st*, in the *Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 6:142, 145.