

Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. *The Sylph*. Intro. Amanda Foreman. York: Henry Parker, 2001. viii + 223pp. £9.99. ISBN 1-904069-00-2.

*The Sylph* was first published by T. Lowndes in London on 1 December 1778 (though the date on the title-page of the novel indicates 1779). It furnished yet another illustration of the intrigue and debauchery common in London's upper circles. For the uninitiated, it was "an instructive tale" promoting virtue (*London Magazine*); those in the know, however, read it as a *roman à clef*. This epistolary novel—by "a young lady"—resembles in many respects Frances Burney's *Evelina*, published early in the same year and by the same publisher. It too describes how a virtuous young lady (Julia), bred in the country, does her best to resist the temptations of the fashionable society in town. Yet important differences—artistic merits aside—exist: whereas *Evelina* looks from outside in, Julia looks from inside out; consequently, what is offered by *The Sylph* represents an inside scoop and, as such, yields much immediacy and horror. *The Sylph*, with its uninhibited portrayal of the sordidness and viciousness of the fashionable society in London, reminds one of Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, which opened at Drury Lane the year before, the tragic twist excepted (Lady Stanley is not as lucky as Lady Teazle). The graphic exposé of the shockingly depraved world, in which nothing was permitted but everything was allowed, offended the sensibility of some contemporary readers. Mrs Thrale called the novel "obscene"; the reviewer for the *Gentleman's Magazine* thought it displayed "too great a knowledge of the *ton*, and of the worst, though perhaps the highest, part of the world, to be the work of a young lady." Highlights include the scene in which Lady Stanley is decorated for her presentation at St James's Palace with "feathers, pins, wool, false curls, chignon, toque, pomades, flowers, wax-fruit, ribband" and by a French "dresser of the actresses" to boot, and the dissipated Sir William (Julia's husband), who has run up his gaming debts to the staggering amount of £14,600, who then steals his wife's jewels and later forces her to resign her marriage articles so that he can raise cash to honour his debts, who then as a last resort signs his conjugal rights over to Lord Biddulph—a villain in the guise of "friend"—who has been eyeing Sir William's beautiful young wife for some time and even attempted to rape her on one occasion. The shocking effects are nevertheless assuaged by a series of improbabilities and by inconsistent characterization. In short, the novel recaps what is well-known about fashionable living in eighteenth-century London. As such, it is not really remarkable and can hardly be called "a great success" (introduction). The book did see a second English edition a few years later (1783), supplemented by three "pirated" Irish editions, and graced by a German (1779) and a French translation (1784).

Many parallels exist between the fictional life of Julia Stanley and the real life of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806). Georgiana had been born into an illustrious family and married, when barely seventeen, into an even more illustrious house (the fifth Duke of Devonshire was regarded as the first match in England). Despite the anonymity of the authorship, *The Sylph* was imputed to Georgiana, though the Duchess of Devonshire herself never publicly admitted authorship. There has been from time to time a lingering doubt about the identity of the author. The biographical sketch in the *DNB* does not list *The Sylph* as one of the Duchess's literary exploits. Brian Masters's biography, *Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire* (1981), found it "almost incomprehensible" that "in all the mountain of letters written by Georgiana to

her mother and others, there is not so much as a whisper about *The Sylph*.” Amanda Foreman’s recent biography asserts that Georgiana wrote this “thinly disguised autobiographical novel” as a gesture to reform her dissipated lifestyle (*Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire*, 1998). But Foreman’s most suggestive evidence is a quotation from one of Georgiana’s letters to her mother, Lady Spencer: “I should be very happy if I could borrow some friendly Sylph (if any are so kind as to hover about Hardwick) and a pair of wings that I might pay you now and then a visit.” But the letter in question was written in October 1774, four years before the publication of the novel. Any possible connection between this remark and the conception of the novel is further questioned when Foreman supposes that “Georgiana obviously wrote the novel in a hurry.” Indeed, it seems uncharacteristic for the communicative Georgiana not to have even alluded to her novelistic ambition to her mother, who had favoured her eldest child and maintained a very close relationship with her—through letters and visits—even after her marriage to the Duke of Devonshire in June 1774. Besides, it is highly unusual that the twenty-one-year-old Duchess, following a busy social schedule and receiving numerous visitors, should have written a fairly interesting novel (the *Critical Review* saw “ingenuity in the plan of this novel”) without anyone catching a glimpse of her in the act.

The recently published *English Novel 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles* (2000) notes that the authorship of *The Sylph* somehow remains an issue: “Some doubt on authorship is cast by a receipt for 12 gns. Paid by Lowndes on 29 Oct 1778 to S. Briscoe; the word ‘Sylph’ is written in the lower left-hand corner (BM Add. Mss. 38, 728 fol. 35). Possibly Sophia Briscoe, author of *Miss Melmoth* (1771:37) and *The Fine Lady* (1772:31), also published by Lowndes.” Since *The Sylph* was advertised in the *London Chronicle* on 26 November 1778 as forthcoming on “Tuesday next,” the close proximity of the payment date and the publication date deserves some attention.

Finally, I have reservations about some of the arbitrary changes in the text and typography of this new edition. It is curious that Foreman (or her publisher) should have chosen the “pirated” 1779 Dublin edition, instead of the first London edition of 1778, as copy-text for this edition. Although strictly speaking the Dublin edition was an unauthorized but legal edition, because the English copyright law did not then extend to Ireland (which was yet to become part of Great Britain), the setting of the types by the Irish compositor inevitably resulted in textual corruption (I noticed errors in the Dublin edition which did not exist in the London edition). The current edition, twice removed from the original, is further corrupted; it contains over a dozen typos (for example, “though” for “thought,” “arised” for “arisen,” “you hands” for “your hands,” “out affairs” for “our affairs,” “lose of charm” for “loss of charm,” “you cannot know not how” for “you know not how,” etc.), the majority of which are not found in the Dublin edition. These erroneous alterations are readily detectable, but other textual and typographical changes, silently made, are less easy to distinguish. As a result, they are more worrisome. For example, the salutation of “My Dearest Sister” was part of the text of letter 30 in the London edition; in this present edition it becomes part of the designation of the letter, printed in the same large and florid font on the right-hand side of “To Lady Stanley.” There is also the unannounced systematic decapitalization of the authors of the letters (for example, “Julia Stanley” for “JULIA STANLEY”). Moreover, the London edition (also the Dublin one) contains sixty letters in all, but Foreman’s edition

has, oddly enough, sixty-one letters. The reason is that at one point in the epistolary narration Lady Stanley wrote three letters in a row to her sister Louisa Grenville, still residing in the Welsh countryside. These three letters—"To Miss Grenville," "To the Same," and "To the Same"—are numbered letter 12, letter 13, and again letter 13 in the London edition (the Dublin edition followed suit). It is not clear why "13" governs both "To the Same" letters. What is clear, however, is that the writer of these letters, Lady Stanley, stood at a critical moral junction. She was under siege by two scandalous personages, Lady Besford and Lady Anne Parker, who wanted to convert the country-girl-turned-lady into a practitioner of their dissolute ways of life. The idea of having a round number of letters for the book might also have played a role. But I am speculating. Yet another change, also silently made, further undermines the integrity of the original text representing authorial intentions. The London edition (also the Dublin edition) opens with an epigraph featuring ten lines of poetry from Pope's *Rape of the Lock* ("Ye Sylphs and Sylphids, to your chief give ear, / Fays, Fairies, Genii, Elves, and Demons hear! ..."). This thematically significant epigraph is inexplicably dropped in the present edition. In view of these changes, scholarly minded readers may hesitate to quote from this new edition of *The Sylph*, which would otherwise have provided some welcome convenience.

Nevertheless, it is agreeable indeed to have this novel once more in print.

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