
Female Voices in Frances Sheridan's Novels: From Repression to Transgression*

Kobiece głosy w prozie Frances Sheridan. Od represji do transgresji

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Abstract. Most female characters in Frances Sheridan's novels are seemingly paragons of virtue complying with the modesty expected of 18th-century women who know how to hold their tongue, so much so that her works could at first be construed as a mere fictionalization of the popular normative conduct books of the time. Yet a detailed analysis of the language and the syntax of women's reasoning and narration shows to what extent this reserve is imposed rather than chosen or innate. Another voice can then sometimes be heard in these woman-to-woman confessions, the narration turning dialogic and questioning the heroines' modest attitudes.

Keywords: women, conduct books, reserve, restraint, confession, Frances Sheridan

Abstrakt. Bohaterki powieści Frances Sheridan wydają się uosabiać wszelkie cnoty, wcielając w życie postulat skromności zgodny z oczekiwaniami sformułowanymi wobec osiemnastowiecznych kobiet. Do tego stopnia potrafią „trzymać język na wodzy”, że prozę Sheridan można na pierwszy

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rzut oka postrzegać niczym literacką wersję popularnych wówczas poradników dobrego wychowania. Niemniej szczegółowa analiza języka, składni, toku rozumowania i kobiecej narracji powieści Sheridan ukazuje, do jakiego stopnia powściągliwość i opanowanie bohaterki są wybrane czy wrodzone, na ile zaś zostały zewnętrznie narzucone. W wyznaniach formułowanych przez kobiety w powieściach epistolarnych Sheridan można nieraz usłyszeć inny głos, wówczas narracja przybiera formę dialogu kwestionującego pełną rezerwy postawę bohaterki.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiety, poradniki dobrego wychowania, powściągliwość, opanowanie, wyznania, Frances Sheridan

“One of the chief beauties in a female character is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye [...]. This modesty, which is so essential in your sex, will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company” (Gregory, 1774, p. 26, 28). This is how John Gregory, one of the most well-known 18th-century conduct book authors, defines the reserve expected of young women at that time: an apparently innate modesty, which constitutes an essential part of their femininity and which is reflected in their physical and verbal “withdrawal.” Reserve, one of the most certain seduction assets of women, is therefore for John Gregory, as for most of the authors of conduct books, inherent in women. Although some did not regard it as an innate quality, everyone advocated it at the time. The question arises as to whether this quality is equally praised in the novel, which is a less overtly didactic genre. This article aims to examine how Frances Sheridan’s novels¹ fictionalize the

¹ Frances Sheridan (1724–1766), an 18th-century British author, wrote three plays, an oriental tale, poems, as well as three novels which are the subject of this study: *Eugenia and Adelaide* belongs to the romance genre, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, her major work published in 1761, widely praised in the 18th century, translated into several languages, notably by l’Abbé Prévost, is a single-voice epistolary novel in which the eponymous heroine recounts her life and her misfortunes to her friend Cecilia. And that novel’s sequel, *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, posthumously published in 1767, is an epistolary novel with several voices which, although less acclaimed than its famed companion text, enjoyed some success. In the 19th century, the author faded into oblivion to be mentioned mainly as the mother of the famous Richard Sheridan. Critics showed an interest in the writer anew in the 1980s. Her work is mainly, but not exclusively, studied from a feminist angle, an approach initiated by Margaret Anne Doody (*Frances Sheridan: Morality and Annihilated Time*), Janet Todd (*Novelists of Sentiment: Sarah Fielding and Frances Sheridan*) and Felicity A. Nussbaum (who suggests a reading of the oriental tale in “The Empire of Love: the Veil and the Blush of Romance” from a feminist perspective). Others have questioned the role of sensibility and more broadly of the body, its desires and its sufferings (see, for example, “The Virtuous in Distress: *David Simple*, *Amelia*, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*” by Barbara M. Benedict, or “‘Cruel Disorder’: Female Bodies, Eighteenth-Century Fever Narratives, and the Sentimental Novel” by Candace Ward). The author of this article has written a thesis on the importance of temperance in Frances Sheridan’s writings (*Ethique et esthétique de la tempérance dans l’œuvre de Frances Sheridan*) [*Ethics and Aesthetics of Temperance in the Writings of Frances Sheridan*]. More recently some critics have focused on Frances Sheridan’s underlying political engagement as a writer, in particular in her oriental tale (“Frances

ideological and normative discourses of the conduct manuals of the period, which fettered and framed women's behaviour, while at the same time trying to subtly question those rules. We will first look at the different ways in which a female model marked by restraint is characterised, in conduct books as well as in their fictional counterparts, by the control of the body, passions and language of women who confine themselves to the "domestic sphere," as well as the depreciation of those who refuse to follow the prescribed standards. Thanks to a more detailed analysis of the rhetoric characteristic of reserve, we will then be able to see how it is understood and claimed, or imposed as a form of repression and submission to an external and normative voice. Finally, we will examine the possible role which another voice that is liberated and transgressive might have within confessional writing.

18th-century conduct books did not constitute so much a new genre as a developing genre. Heirs to the courtesy books of the 16th and 17th centuries, above all intended for the nobility, and precursors of the politeness and etiquette books of the 19th century, the conduct books played a major role in the 18th century as they were mostly aimed at the bourgeoisie, which stood out as a dominant social group wishing to know how to behave, without necessarily emulating the nobility.² Conduct books reflected changes in society by rendering them visible and directing them,³ and to perform this task they were accompanied by a new literary genre, that is the novel, with several studies showing how closely the two were interlinked.⁴ In addition, it was in the 18th century that publication of conduct manuals for women surpassed those of conduct books for men (Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 1987, p. 4). In this respect, Frances Sheridan's novels seem particularly interesting as

Sheridan's *The History of Nourjahad* and the Sultan of Smock-Alley" by Sonja Lawrenson), while others have concentrated on the representation and symbolic function of domestic space, and more generally, on public and private spheres (*Domestic Space in Eighteenth-Century British Novels* by Karen Lipsedge and *Frances Burney and Frances Sheridan: Epistolary Fiction and the Public Sphere* by Marta Kvande), opting for a more sociocultural approach.

² "Conduct material of all kinds increased in volume and popularity after the 1740s, in keeping with the increased emphasis on domestic education and the growing number of middle-class women readers" (Poovey, 1984, p. 15).

³ Nancy Armstrong goes even further in her reasoning in this respect: "by virtue of its apparent insignificance, a body of writing concerned with devising a special kind of information for women in fact played a crucial role in the rise of the new middle classes in England [...] such writings as the conduct-books helped to generate the belief that there was such a thing as a middle-class with clearly established affiliations before it actually existed" (Armstrong, 1987, p. 58, 66).

⁴ For more on this subject, see the thesis of Jennifer Claire Georgia, who puts conduct books on the same footing as the novel, by distinguishing them as two new genres which emerged, in part, due to the fact that new social classes in England needed some rules and guidance on how to behave (Georgia, 1994).

their main protagonists are women whose choices are constantly guided or called into question by reasonings based on the precepts of conduct literature.

There are few differences between these conduct books intended for women.⁵ One of the things they share is the fact that they praise reserve. They recommend that women adopt a measured and discreet attitude and make it their duty to instil, thanks to different pieces of advice that might be followed in various situations, a modesty which, paradoxically, is supposed to be an innate trait of the so-called weaker sex.⁶ Officially women must conform to a single model, and must prove that they master themselves, their bodies and their passions in all respects, which is illustrated recurrently in Frances Sheridan's novels. A lexicon of restriction is to be found in all her novels ("constraint," "moderate,"⁷ "govern,"⁸ "guard," "chasten,"⁹ "restrain," "check," "confine,"¹⁰ to name just a few). The constraint might be placed on oneself ("Adelaide [...] had laid the most violent constraint upon herself to hide the tumult in her bosom" [Sheridan, 1791, vol. II, p. 193]), on a body part via a synecdoche ("I kept so rigid a guard over my eyes" [Sheridan, 1791, vol. I, p. 144]), or on one's disposition: hence the eponymous heroine Sidney, always faithful to her desire to live in moderation, tempers the prodigality of her cousin ("but begged he would restrain his generosity, and suffer me to live in that moderate state, which if I had ever so much riches, would be my choice" [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 366]).

What is more, female modesty, which keeps any ostentation or shamelessness at bay, is demonstrated by one's attire, which needs to be discreet as it is perceived as a direct reflection of women's moderation. This is what is explained by John Gregory in his conduct book *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*: "Accustom yourselves to an habitual neatness [...]. – You will not easily believe how much we consider your dress as expressive of your characters. Vanity, levity, slovenliness, folly appear through it" (Gregory, 1774, pp. 56–57). Now exemplary heroines in Frances Sheridan's novels observe this rule meticulously, avoiding all sorts of

⁵ Cornelia Dahmer has pointed out the evolution that took place over the century in the way conduct books extolled female silence, but it is more about nuances than a real change (Dahmer, 2016, p. 141).

⁶ On this subject see, among others, the anthology by Bridget Hill, who in the chapter devoted to the 18th-century perception of female perfection, highlights the pivotal role conduct literature played at the time. Even though it had existed for a very long time, it started growing in importance after 1740 and redefined the role of women according to very strict rules, with modesty, submission and restraint used as key words (Hill, 1984, p. 16).

⁷ "Moderate your joy" (Sheridan, 1791, vol. II, p. 216).

⁸ "[G]overn the impetuosity of his wishes" (Sheridan, 1791, vol. II, p. 228).

⁹ "But there are some considerations which ought to have made her chasten that joy into a sober, and, at least seemingly, moderate satisfaction" (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 324).

¹⁰ "[B]ut checked as they now are, they content themselves with confining their ardor within the bounds of esteem" (Sheridan, 1767/1770, vol. I, p. 59).

luxury or pomp. The link between sartorial reserve and linguistic reserve is such that transgression in the way someone dresses becomes a tool to get out of the conversational modesty expected of women. Hence the female character called Clementina, in *Eugenia and Adelaide*, breaks a deep-seated taboo when she disguises herself as a man and pretends to be Don Clement. She causes confusion in the palace of the marquis, with whom she is in love, as her gender usurpation enables her to infringe the rules of appropriate behaviour normally preventing her from talking with the marquis freely and on her own, which she acknowledges *a posteriori*. "How many happy hours, my Lord [...] have we past together; when your ignorance of my sex gave me the liberty of discoursing with you without reserve!" (Sheridan, 1791, vol. II, p. 29). To be able to rejoice over talking freely with a man represents, in a way, proto-feminist demands of equality.

However, such a transgression by a woman whose attitude is not even criticized is unique in Frances Sheridan's writings and it only appears in a youth "romance," an inherently extravagant genre that she quickly abandoned when a few years later she devoted herself to her major works. Such a shameless crossdressing is therefore far from being a model in any way. The paragons of virtue in her following novels do refrain themselves from any carnivalesque excesses and, quite the contrary, at first sight, they seem to serve the purpose of a fictional defence of educational books. Thus the restraint adopted leads to a repression of feelings which cannot surface. All passions are held in check, especially love. They suppress it ("I therefore suppressed the swelling passion in my breast" [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 49] confides Sidney), or more often, they stifle it: "I loved Falkland from my childhood; but conscious that we were not meant for each other, I endeavoured to stifle a fatal passion, the consequences of which I had reason to dread" (Sheridan, 1767/1770, vol. II, p. 321), Dolly explains.

Female reserve leads to withdrawal, withdrawal from feelings and from bodily signs of feelings, ending eventually with their complete erasure, which is illustrated by Sidney's story. Not only does she refuse to follow her heart, but she also makes it a matter of honour not to express her anger when she is wrongly accused: her silence is truly exemplary when she does not reproach her husband in any way while he is the one being unfaithful to her, accusing her of infidelity, and finally hounding her out of their marital home. By demonstrating unfailing equanimity, and by managing to suppress her anger and her indignation, the young exemplary heroine, a new Griselda, becomes thus an intratextual spokesperson for conduct books. They indeed make a clear distinction between what is expected of a man and of a woman in similar situations, with anger being described as much more damaging to the fair sex because it is clearly supposed to be unnatural for them. Richard Allestree presents this innate aspect of female moderation:

Now nature hath befriended women with a more cool and temperate constitution, put less of fire and consequently of choler, in their compositions. [...] Besides women have a native feebleness, unable to back and assert their angers with any effective force, which may admonish them 'twas never intended they should let loose to that passion, which nature seems by that very inability to have interdicted them. But when they do it, they render themselves at once despised and abhor'd; nothing being more ridiculously hateful, than an impotent rage. (Allestree, 1763, pp. 43–44)

The portrayal in *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* of a female counter-model, Mrs Gerrarde, who does not hesitate to express her indignation vociferously, constitutes a perfect fictional illustration of the pitiful outbursts of the atrabilious ladies described by Allestree:

She started off the chair with the looks and gestures of a fury [...] she cried with a voice answerable to her looks [...]. I would trample on you like dirt! and she stamped on the floor with the air of an Amazon. [...] A burst of malignant tears now gushed from her eyes. [...] I let her give vent to her passion. (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 211)

The description of this angry woman is imbued with ridicule (she seems to be a fallen Amazon), but also with horror since the woman gives way to a monster (“fury”). Elsewhere in the novel, she is also compared to another infernal creature, the basilisk (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 173), and is animalized many a time (among others, she is referred to as a “scorpion,” a “snake” [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 198, 339]). The becoming-animal¹¹ of this hybrid woman who does not know how to stick to the reserve expected of her exemplifies the monstrous character of this defect.

This brings us to yet another recurring argument used in conduct literature: the teratological transformation of immodest women. Wetenhall Wilkes resorts to this very image to expose yet another different form of immodesty, namely lust: “Chastity is so essential and natural to your Sex, that every Declination from it is a proportionable receding from Womanhood. An immodest Woman is a kind of Monster, distorted from its proper form” (Wilkes, 1740, p. 77). By contrasting in this respect the exemplary heroine with her much less chaste rivals, the novel presents two antithetical representations of the female body. It is no coincidence that Sidney is admired for her angelic and sacred beauty, while Mrs Gerrarde is described at length as a witch who has cast a spell on Sidney’s husband Mr Arnold.¹²

¹¹ “[D]evenir-animal” (becoming-animal), according to Gilles Deleuze’s terminology. See Chapter 4 entitled *Le corps, la viande et l’esprit, le devenir-animal* [*Body, Meat, and Spirit, Becoming-Animal*] in *Francis Bacon: logique de la sensation* [*Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*] (Deleuze, 1981).

¹² She is an evil witch (“the cunning sorceress” [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 199], “the mercenary witch” [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 170]) and a hellish spirit (“a persecuting daemon” [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 145], “this identical evil” [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 170]).

These analogies are part and parcel of the literary clichés of the period, which on the one hand equated chastity with beauty, and on the other licentiousness with monstrosity. Immodest women were teratological cases that escaped the sanction of a norm related to a social and patriarchal construct. According to Suzan O. Weisser, there was indeed no middle ground for women's sexuality at the time: it could be either extravagant or restrained (Weisser, 1997, p. 9). The opposition between the two forms of sexuality through which women are portrayed, illustrated in Frances Sheridan's novels by the antagonistic couple of Sidney and Miss Burchell, is to be seen more generally in relation to the conflict between body and reason embedded in the philosophical and epistemological questions of the 18th century. A virtuous woman restricts her body, whereas a courtesan gives in to its demands.

The so-called weaker sex is therefore inscribed in a Manichean opposition, ranging from an angelic woman who is all about reserve, but a reserve synonymous with erasure, to a monster or a witch who dares to abandon her feminine modesty. To sum up, these fictional representations seem to be in line with the image of a retiring woman and with the social construct underlying a patriarchal society. However, even though Frances Sheridan's representation of female paragons of virtue seems to mimic the models exalted in conduct books, she does not necessarily call for the same ideological framework. First in the diegesis of the novel the virtuous heroine sees herself transformed into a martyr overwhelmed by misfortunes; consequently there is no poetic justice, which raises a doubt. The latter is further reinforced by a subtle use of the lexical field of confinement threatening both Sidney¹³ and her antithesis, Miss Burchell.¹⁴ Judging by the inherent ambiguity of confining women to the domestic sphere, we can see in Frances Sheridan a pioneer of feminine writing, as described by Ina Ferris: "feminine writing is constructed in the language of enclosure and decorum" (Ferris, 1991, p. 52). Finally, the precepts of conduct books are challenged, even if only relatively, if one examines how the writing and the rhetoric question the supposedly innate character of feminine reserve.

Thus the characters' reserve underlines a gap between on the one hand gesture and words, as they could possibly be expressed, and on the other hand their actual representation, which is most often understated. It is this gap that discloses

¹³ When Sidney's future husband finds her busy reading Horace, he reproaches her for that intellectual activity, which causes her to neglect her embroidery "frame": "My charming Miss Bidulph, said he, do you prefer this to the agreeable entertainment of finishing this beautiful rose here, that seems to blush at your neglect of it? He spoke this, pointing to a little piece of embroidery that lay in a frame before me" (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 80).

¹⁴ "No, no, she meant not to confine herself. Her passion for Faulkland, whether real or pretended, gave a colour to her preserving that liberty, in the licentious use of which she placed her happiness: nor would she in the end have confined herself within the bounds of marriage, if an immense fortune had not sweetened the restraint" (Sheridan, 1761/1995, pp. 387–88).

a second female voice, more authentic, not yet restricted by the norms imposed on women. The distance is demonstrated in the rhetoric and the very syntax of the sentence, which denounce the ventriloquism of which women are victims when forced to conform to a model, and reveal the heteronomy¹⁵ of their thoughts. In this regard, the recurrent use in the novels of the deontic semi-modal verb “ought to” to express an obligation of a society that speaks through the heroine is very significant since it accounts for the external and not innate origin of this reserve. As a matter of fact, unlike other modals, such as “must” or “should,” the semi-modal in question expresses, in linguistic terms, the incongruence between the subject of the utterance and the predicate; it excludes the subjectivity of the enunciator and therefore presents the obligation as a factual observation, as if it were about an external moral obligation.¹⁶

Therefore, when Sidney tries to persuade herself to give up her romantic feelings in order to marry a man to whom she is indifferent, it is through her use of the semi-modal in question together with other modals, that is “can” and “will,” that she manages to emphasize the gap between the two female voices available to her: “Now, my Cecilia, the mischief of it is, there *can* be no reasonable objection made to him: he is a very tolerable man; but I knew a man once that I liked better – but fie, fie upon him! I am sure I ought not to like him, and therefore I will not” (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 83). The very structure of this passage as well as its typography reveal the way in which both reason and norm wield authority over Sidney. Sidney gives vent to her feelings for a moment (“but I knew a man once that I liked better”) before cutting them off abruptly, as the dash suggests, and trying to push those thoughts away by appealing again to the model imposed on her as a point of reference (“I ought not to like him”). The conduct book instructions which become orders (“and therefore I will not”) impose a choice contrary to the feelings of the subject, who is metaphorically gagged.

¹⁵ Heteronomy (in Greek “other law”), the opposite of autonomy, is defined in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (“Autonomy and heteronomy,” 1995) as follows: “moral law is commanded from without. [...] Among heteronomous theories are those that see moral imperatives as commands of the state or of society [...] heteronomy, in any form, entails that we are passive under some command or impulsion which we do not, cannot, initiate.”

¹⁶ “With regard to **should**, the constraint comes only from the enunciating subject’s own criteria, with no reference to the situation as such, whereas with **ought to**, to take stock of the situation, the enunciator relies on external institutional and conventional rules. There exists an objective constraint [“Alors qu’avec **should**, la valeur de contrainte provient uniquement des propres critères du sujet énonciateur, sans autre référence à la situation, au contraire, avec **ought to** l’énonciateur s’appuie sur des règles extérieures de type institutionnel, conventionnel, pour constater un état de fait. Il y a constat d’une contrainte objective.”] (Bouscaren, 1991, p. 56).

Reserve is also shown by the use of the hypothetical past indicating the fanciful aspect of any outburst or desire to derogate from norms and restrictions, which we can observe when Sidney confesses to her childhood friend: "You know my mother has ever been despotic in her government of me; and had I even been inclined to dissent from her judgement in a matter of importance, it would have been to no purpose; but this was really far from my thoughts" (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 50). It is important to notice that the possibility for the young girl to express a different opinion is modified by the adverb "even" and mentioned in the conditional perfect. The latter is reinforced by the antithetical and emphatic conclusion ("really," "far from"), which proves to what extent the young girl refuses to acknowledge such brazen thoughts. The idea of rebellion is not completely ignored: it is evoked, but in the hypothetical mode, and in the end refuted. Such passages make the reader wonder about the way in which the epistolarian is deprived of her voice. Do the psittacism and muzzling of young heroines have to result in a failure of the utterance? Can reserve leave an audible place for the unsaid?

The answer is generic because it is related to the sub-genre of Frances Sheridan's major novel, that is to say the confession genre. In fact, the novel comprises only letters from Sidney and, despite its title, is more in the form of a journal than memoirs.¹⁷ Sidney does not share her private thoughts to reread them secretly at her leisure; instead, she writes them down to be read by someone she trusts, her childhood friend Cecilia, who is a perfect confidante. She is such a reliable recipient that Sidney can truly open her heart to her. The journal becomes her outlet: expressions disclosing her secrets are recurrent in the passages where Sidney addresses Cecilia directly ("you know that heart too well for me to attempt to hide from you its secret workings" [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 334]), and the rhetoric of confession runs through all Sidney's letters ("I will acknowledge to you, my sister, that it was not without struggle I reduced my mind to this frame" [Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 86]). Consequently, the metaphor of outpourings and unrestrained confessional writing liberates the narrator from her usual reserve and allows her to reveal her intimate thoughts. "Far be reproaches or complaints from my lips; to you only, my second self, shall I utter them; to you I am bound by solemn promise, and reciprocal confidence, to disclose the inmost secrets of my soul, and with you they are as safe as in my own breast" (Sheridan, 1761/1995, pp. 136–137). This confession highlights the duality of the young girl whose conventional silence in the diegesis ("far be reproaches or complaints from my lips") is indeed broken,

¹⁷ Sidney always refers to her letters as her "journal," and the ending added by Cecilia after Sidney gives up writing is entitled "Cecilia's Narrative, & c. Being a supplement to Mrs Arnold's journal" (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 459).

and gives way to confessional prolixity (“shall I utter them”). Actually, they two complement each other as it is thanks to this narrative freedom of the narrating-I that the narrated-I can maintain her usual reserve. Through her confession, the thoughts that are repressed and concealed in order to conform to the ideal of a silent young girl can now be expressed. Sometimes this happens subtly: when, for instance, Sidney describes her marriage to Mr Arnold as a happy event, her comment is ironic: “a gentleman who came from London on purpose to be present on this (as it is called) joyful occasion” (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 98). She goes against the clichés and the voice of society (which is the implied agent in the passive voice “it is called”); the parentheses define a space where a different voice can be expressed: the actual voice of Sidney as an epistolarian.

The purpose of the journal is not only to confess fears, it also serves as a place of liberating words that provide justification. Even when wrongly accused Sidney refuses to give up her reserve to defend herself in the eyes of the world, and yet her silence in the story is offset by her confession thanks to which she can exonerate herself in the eyes of the intratextual recipient of her letters, an avatar of the empirical reader. Thus, while she is in despair because of the change in her husband’s attitude towards her, she admits that she does not dare to raise this delicate subject with him, but justifies herself when she writes to Cecilia:

Coldness and indifference have at length succeeded to love, to complacency, and the fondest attention – What a change! but the cause, my dear! that remains a secret locked up in his own breast. It cannot be that a whisper, an idle rumour should affect him thus. What if he has heard that Mr Faulkland loved me once? That we were to have been married? Cannot he ask me the question? I long to set his heart at ease – yet cannot mention the affair first after so long a silence; it would look like a consciousness. A consciousness of what; I have nothing to accuse myself of. (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 131)

Her reasoning and her questions arise from her need to argue and justify herself. Given that in everyday life she is gagged and under guardianship, letters, and more generally the narrative, are liberating. Sidney can express herself freely, without restraint; the journal-confession becomes her outlet. Indeed, as Françoise Simonet-Tenant underlines in her critical study on the diary genre, “in a personal journal we disgorge, we empty ourselves of the overflow of emotions, of the irrepressible violence of feelings, [...] it appears to be an anchor/ink of salvation” “[d]ans le journal, on dégorge, on se vide du trop-plein des émotions, de la violence irrépressible des sentiments, [...] il apparaît comme une ancre/encre de salut” (Simonet-Tenant, 2001, p. 87). For example, the loss of her own identity and personality, which is a real threat to Sidney in her life as a woman, is abolished when the diarist finds her voice, in the figurative, if not literal, sense: “My mother likes

him better even than before – Thy *mother* – disingenuous girl! why dost thou not speak thy own sentiments? (There is an apostrophe for thy use, my Cecilia.) Well then, my sentiments you shall have” (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 23). The apostrophe betrays the duality of the young girl who does not yet dare to free herself from the fetters of her daily life and proceeds step by step to assert her personality. The self that bowed down under the weight of self-sacrifice and submission can therefore appear without its united face (that of respectful obedience), but on the contrary with all its tensions. There is a disjunction indicating a division between the social and the narrative selves of Sidney.

Similarly, when Sidney gets married against her will, she adopts, without daring to rebel against her mother’s decision, false indifference and feigned calm. “She purposes going to town next week, that the wedding – (bless me! whose wedding is it that I am talking of so coolly?) well – that it may be celebrated in her own house” (Sheridan, 1761/1995, p. 94). The aposiopesis, a dilatory figure of speech which underlines her reluctance to reveal her true feelings, marks the transition from giving an account of her adventures to examining her conscience when she presents another, more authentic facet of herself. In the context of a reassuring female sisterhood, the connection between the two women reveals the fight between reserve and outpourings and allows the narrative to become dialogical, suggesting another voice and another way for women.

To conclude, France Sheridan’s exemplary heroines seem to be *a priori* fictional incarnations of the female reserve extolled in conduct books, in so far as they demonstrate moderation in their expenses, in their attire and in their activities, and as they repress their passions and feelings. At the same time, the counter-models who do not respect the norms are portrayed as monsters, sowing ontological doubt concerning their very nature. Yet the more detailed study of the rhetorical and syntactic ways in which reserve imposes itself in the discourse of protagonists, who fall victim to heteronomy, shows that in case of those female characters reserve is more a social construct than an innate female quality. It also suggests that the novel does not completely echo this precept. The ambiguities inherent in a reserve synonymous with self-effacement are brought to light both in the diegesis (given the absence of poetic justice and real punishment of counter-models, who refuse to be confined to the domestic sphere) and in the narrative. This happens by allowing the diarist to find her voice and by giving some room, even little, for a dialogic exchange between the social self and the narrative self, between the submissive

self and the rebellious self, and shows that writing is a space of freedom where the epistolarian is sovereign. She can abandon her reserve and express herself freely in an almost shameless or even subversive way.

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