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Susan Ferrier: "The Scottish Jane Austen"

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Abstract

The paper delves into the life and literary contributions of Susan Ferrier (1782-1854), a Scottish writer contemporary to Jane Austen. Despite the initial popularity of her novels, Ferrier's works have largely been overshadowed by Austen's enduring fame. The article examines Ferrier's literary output and compares it with that of Austen to reveal both similarities and differences.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in Ferrier's works among readers and scholars, leading to a modest revival of her literary reputation. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing critical reassessment of Ferrier's literary legacy and highlight her distinct voice in early 19th-century fiction.

Keywords

Susan Ferrier, novel of manners, Regency Era, Scottish literature

Susan Ferrier: „Szkocka Jane Austen”

Abstrakt

Artykuł omawia życie i wkład literacki Susan Ferrier (1782-1854), szkockiej pisarki współczesnej Jane Austen. Pomimo początkowej popularności jej powieści, twórczość Ferrier została w dużej mierze przyćmiona sławą Austen. Artykuł przygląda się twórczości literackiej Ferrier i porównuje ją z twórczością Austen, ukazując zarówno podobieństwa, jak i różnice. W ostatnich latach wzrosło zainteresowanie zarówno czytelników jak i literaturoznawców twórczością Ferrier, co doprowadziło do skromnego ożywienia jej reputacji literackiej. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przyczynienie się do trwającej krytycznej oceny dziedzictwa literackiego Ferrier i podkreślenie jej odrębnego głosu w literaturze z początku XIX wieku.

Słowa kluczowe

Susan Ferrier, powieść społeczno-obyczajowa, era Regencji, literatura szkocka

1. Introduction

In 1813 Jane Austen published one of her most popular and much-loved novels – *Pride and Prejudice*. Five years later, in 1818 in Edinburgh, a Scottish writer Susan Edmonstone Ferrier[1] published her first novel *The Marriage: A Novel*.[2] It was

[1] I have previously written about Ferrier and her status of “forgotten writer” in a blog post (see Sienkiewicz-Charlish 2023). This article is a revised and extended version of that blog entry.

[2] The novel exists in different versions. The first edition was published by Blackwood in 1818 in three volumes. The second edition published in 1819 contains a number of changes. In 1841 the novel was revised with a number of changes and some additional sections and published by Richard Bentley in his Standard Novels series. Bentley’s 1881-1882 edition of *Miss Ferrier’s Novels* in 6 volumes goes back to the first, 1818, edition (For this and more information on the differences between the different editions see the critical edition

immensely popular and sold 1,500 copies within the first 6 months. The French edition appeared in 1825. Big sales meant that the publisher was willing to pay £1,000 for her second novel *The Inheritance* (1824) and a remarkable £1,700 for the third, *Destiny, or the Chief's Daughter* (1831). Today Austen remains one of the most popular writers and a focus of academic study whereas Ferrier's works have largely been forgotten. In recent years, however, there has been a renewed interest in Ferrier's first novel, *Marriage,* which was reissued first by Virago in 2018 and next by The Association for Scottish Literary Studies in 2020. In 2022 as part of Women's History Month a celebration of Scotland's "forgotten Jane Austen" was held at an Edinburgh hotel that was once the townhouse where the author lived with her family (Campsie 2022).

2. Who was Susan Ferrier?

Susan Ferrier was born on the 7th of September 1782 in Lady Stair's Close in Edinburgh's Old Town. She was the youngest of 10 children of James Ferrier and Helen Coutts. Her father was a Writer to the Signet (a society of Scottish solicitors) and at one time a principal clerk at the Court of Session (together with Sir Walter Scott), her mother was the daughter of a farmer. She was educated at the family home in Edinburgh's New Town. Since her father was a factor to the Duke of Argyll, Susan was often a visitor to Inveraray. Thus, Susan Ferrier came from a family that was well-known in Edinburgh "society" and early on she became acquainted with different members of Edinburgh's literary circle including Robert Burns, Henry MacKenzie, Joanna Baillie and Walter Scott who became her close friend (Yeo 2006). In Inveraray, she also became friends with the Duke's niece, Charlotte Clavering, and together they decided to write a novel; however, they quickly discovered that their styles and approaches to writing differed too much – Susan thought that

of *Marriage* by Dorothy McMillan, especially "Notes on the text" l-lii and "Appendix A: The 1841 Edition" 469-488).

writing should not only be entertaining, but also didactic. In a letter to Charlotte, she wrote:

> Part of your plot I like much, some not quite so well – for example, it wants a *moral* – your principal characters are good and interesting, and they are tormented and persecuted and punished from no fault, of their own, and for no possible purpose. No, I don't think, like all penny-book manufacturers, that 'tis absolutely necessary that the good boys and girls should be rewarded, and the naughty ones punished. […] But as the only good purpose of a book is to inculcate morality and convey some lessons of instruction as well as delight, I do not see that what is called a *good moral* can be dispensed with in a work of fiction. (Ferrier, Ferrier and Doyle 1898: 75)

In the end, Charlotte only contributed one short sub-chapter to Ferrier's first novel *Marriage* entitled "The History of Mrs. Douglas" [the only chapter with the title] (Yeo 2006). The novel was published anonymously in 1818 – perhaps because some of her fictional characters were based on real and recognizable people of her acquaintance, but more likely it was connected with the position of women in Georgian Society and the fact that their role was confined to the domestic sphere. In another letter to Charlotte, she urged her to keep their plans for writing a novel secret: "One thing let me entreat of you: if we engage in this undertaking, let it be kept secret from every human being. If I was suspected of being accessory to such foul deeds, my brothers and sisters would murder me, and my father bury me alive […]" (Ferrier, Ferrier and Doyle 1898*:* 77). Even after her first novel was successful and met with positive reviews, she was determined to keep her authorship a secret, writing in her diary: "I never will avow myself […] I could not bear the *fuss* of authorism!" (Ferrier, Ferrier and Doyle 1898: 178).

All her novels were published anonymously, and it was not until the Harper&Bros American edition of 1847 and Richard Bentley's UK edition of 1852 that her name appeared on the title pages of her works (Ferrier 2020: xi). At the time of their

publication, there was a lot of debate as to who the author of the novels was; in fact, many readers attributed them to Sir Walter Scott. Ferrier refers to this in one of her letters to Miss Walker, adding: “Whose ever it is, I have met with nothing that interested me since!” (Ferrier, Susan, John Ferrier, and John Andrew Doyle 1898: 144). Scott might have not written the novels but is known to have appreciated and supported her writing. In his diary entry of March 27, 1826, criticizing a new work that he had been reading, he wrote, "The women do this better. Edgeworth, Ferrier, Austen, have all given portraits of real society far superior to anything man, vain man, has produced of the like nature." And in his conclusion to *A Legend of Montrose* (1819), Scott went as far as calling Ferrier his "sister shadow" (Scott 1819) Her last published novel was dedicated to him.

Ferrier visited Scott first at Ashiestiel Farm on the banks of the River Tweed in the Scottish Borders (in 1811), and later at his new residence, Abbotsford House (in 1829 and 1831). Her account of the visits entitled “Recollections of Visits to Ashestiel and Abbotsford” appeared posthumously in the magazine *Temple Bar* (1874) and it includes some lines that Scott wrote impromptu in her autograph album.[3]

Ferrier never married and kept house for her father until he died in 1829. Beginning in the early 1830s, she began to suffer excruciating headaches and vision loss, which kept her confined to the house for long stretches. By the time of her death in 1854, she was almost blind. She left the beginning of a fourth novel, *Maplehurst Manor*, unfinished. She is buried in the family plot in St Cuthbert’s Churchyard in Edinburgh (Yeo 2006).

[3] Ferrier’s autograph album shows that she was well-acquainted with some of the most prominent writers of the time. It includes contributions from Joanna Baille, Thomas Campbell, Maria Edgeworth, James Hogg, Mathew Gregory Lewis, Henry Mackenzie, Sir Walter Scott and William Wordsworth among others. Microfilm of the album is held in the National Library of Scotland (See “Appendix B: Susan Ferrier’s autograph album” in: Ferrier 2020: 497–505).

Despite their initial popularity, by the late 19th century the novels of Susan Ferrier had fallen out of readers' favour. In 1893, Charles Townsend Copeland wrote in *The Atlantic*:

> As happens with most writers who do not at first give their names to the public, Miss Ferrier has paid the price of anonymity by being twice unknown: for a long time, she was not found out […] and now for many years she has been forgotten. It has been my lot, and doubtless others have had the same experience, to find any mention of *The Inheritance*, or even of *Marriage*, received with a blank look, followed by the eager inquiry of who wrote it, and at last by the civil subsidence of interest which commonly greets a reference to old novels.

In recent years Ferrier's work has met with greater scholarly interest, which also contributed to a modest degree of critical rehabilitation. In 2017, a Scottish crime writer Val McDermid said she was hoping to revive Susan Ferrier's reputation as one of Scotland's great novelists and included the writer in her Edinburgh-wide literary-art installation, "Message from the Skies" (Thorpe 2017). In 2020, a new critical edition of *Marriage* edited by Dorothy McMillan was published by the ASLS. If one considers the number of online reader reviews of *Marriage* on *Goodreads*, there is also a noticeable rise in recognition of the writer among non-academic readers – this change, in my opinion, can be attributed, at least partially, to Val McDermid's endorsement of the writer. The label of "the Scottish Jane Austen" also helps here as it is a common marketing strategy to sell new or "forgotten" writers by aligning them with popular writers.

3. Ferrier vs. Austen – similarities

At first glance, the obvious parallels drawn between Ferrier and Austen's novels are understandable. First of all, both writers provided a satirical, often amusing critique of high society in the late 18th and early 19th centuries focusing in particular on the female experience. Moreover, they share an interest in similar

themes: love, marriage, social class, and female education. The opening line of *The Inheritance* also sounds rather familiar: "It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that there is no possession so deeply rooted in human nature as that of pride."[4]

In Ferrier's novels, just like in Austen's, marriage is portrayed as a fundamental social institution. It is often seen as a means of securing one's social status and financial stability. The characters in her novels struggle with the pressure to marry well and have to face the consequences of making good or poor marital choices. Love is frequently pitted against societal conventions and norms. The meddling of family members in the romantic lives of the characters is also a recurring theme.

Similarly to Austen, Ferrier employs satire and humour to critique the superficiality and even absurdity of the institution of marriage. However, her tone is much more moralistic, and throughout her novels, Ferrier repeatedly explores the consequences – both positive and negative – of the characters' marital choices. She highlights the impact of these choices on individuals, families, and society as a whole, demonstrating how marriages can shape the course of one's life.

Moreover, just like Austen, Ferrier provides keen observations of the character of her protagonists. Consider the following examples:

> Mr Adam Ramsay was a man of a fair character and strong understanding, but particular temper and unpleasing manners – with a good deal of penetration, which (as is too often the case) served no other purpose than to disgust him with his own species. (*Inheritance,* vol.I, ch. XVII)

> Mr M'Dow's principal object in this world was self…He was no dissembler; for a selfish dissembler is aware, that, in order to please,

[4] Ferrier read and admired Austen. Her letters mention both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* which she thought was "excellent" (Ferrier, Susan, John Ferrier, and John Andrew Doyle 1898: 128). In her Introduction to *Marriage* Dorothy McMillan argues that the opening line of *The Inheritance* is "a kind of homage to Austen, but a rather clumsy one" (Ferrier 2020: xlvi).

> one must appear to think of others, and forget self. This fictitious politeness he had neither the tact to acquire, nor the cunning to feign. (*Destiny*, vol.I, ch. VI)

Arguably, these examples are reminiscent of character descriptions that we can find in Austen's novels.

4. Ferrier vs. Austen – differences

However, there are also notable differences between the two writers. First of all, whereas Austen uses wit and subtle irony to criticize the norms and conventions of Georgian Society, Ferrier's style tends to be more overt and comical. Her characters and situations are often exaggerated for comical effect. For example, in *Marriage,* there is a doctor who talks about nothing else but food, there is a woman who hosts a literary circle where the ladies do nothing but try to out-quote one another, and a woman of charity who gives none of her own money or time to the poor, but instead hustles all her guests for their money. Not to mention three spinster aunts who are remarkably ill-bred and ignorant but convinced that they move in the best society and possess wisdom no one else does. Indeed, some of the more comical scenes of the novel involve them. Thus, Ferrier's approach to satire can be seen as more direct and less subtle. Moreover, her style is at times much more sentimental. For example, when in *Marriage* Mary meets her estranged mother, we read:

> "I am now to meet my mother!" thought she; and unconscious of every thing else, she was assisted from the carriage, and conducted into the house. A door was thrown open; but shrinking from the glare of light and sound of voices that assailed her, she stood dazzled and dismayed, till she beheld a figure approaching that she guessed to be her mother. Her heart beat violently – a film was upon her eyes – she made an effort to reach her mother's arms, and sank lifeless on her bosom! (vol. II, ch. XII, 200)

The moral-didactic tone of the novels combined with sentimental scenes puts Ferrier's fiction much closer to the fiction of Frances Burney or Henry Mackenzie rather than that of Austen.

Secondly, Ferrier is also notable for her focus on religion: the characters that we are supposed to think are the finest have strong faith, but the shallow, self-centred, and dishonest characters are agnostic. The narrator typically exhibits the same moralism. For example, in *Destiny* when Reginald, up until this moment the hero of the book and betrothed to his gentle childhood sweetheart Edith, makes a secret declaration of love to the worldly, dazzling, but superficial Florinda the narrator thus describes this scene:

> And again he pressed her hand to his lips, and a long silence ensued; each seemed as though they feared to break the spell which blinded their hearts and senses to the self-delusions, which all unregulated minds, and selfish spirits, so passionately love to indulge. (vol. II, ch. XLVII)

Finally, Austen's novels are predominantly set in rural or provincial England, with a focus on the countryside and small villages. Her characters are members of the English gentry and the plot usually revolves around a relatively small group of characters that belong to one community. Ferrier's novels are less spatially limited – we move between Scotland and England and between rural and urban places which allows the writer to explore another theme implicit in her narratives: the contrast between Scottish and English cultures. Her characters often travel to/from England (and also France), and this feature of the narrative means that we can look at both countries through the eyes of different protagonists. The motif of travel provides many opportunities to describe various characters and social and economic aspects of life together with the panorama of the Scottish country. Although her fiction contains passages describing (and contrasting) English and Scottish landscapes, her primary interest lies in the contrast between English and Scottish man-

ners and customs, which she often presents comically as when Lady Juliana demands beefsteak at breakfast (Ferrier 2020: 31) or experiences "horror and amazement at the hideous sounds" of bagpipes (Ferrier 2020: 250).

Thus, the novels of Susan Ferrier are centred on problems of contact and communication. They create a model of the world in which the most important factor is culture. Although Ferrier is clearly biased towards Scottish manners and attitudes, her novels are not built on a simple opposition of virtuous mistreated Scots vs. amoral imperialistic English. Her novels feature good and bad characters both on the North and the South end of the border. She establishes links between different individuals whether they are English, Scottish, or a combination of the two. The character flaws that she portrays stem from deficiencies in her characters' moral, intellectual, and spiritual growth rather than from their country. For instance, in *Marriage,* the polite and well-educated Mrs. Douglas is contrasted with the ill-bred Scottish aunts whereas in *The Inheritance* the virtuous Black sisters, who are Scottish, contrast sharply with Mrs. St. Clair, who is a cunning character. Moreover, Ferrier deromanticizes the Highlands by focusing on domestic themes of daily life and consequently painting a more realistic picture of the place that goes beyond wild moors and tartan.

If Ferrier's acute social satire and humour resemble the writings of Burney and Austen, then in her construction of narratives that explore issues of regional and national identity she is closer to Maria Edgeworth's Irish novels (though I think Ferrier's engagement with issues of national identity is less prominent than in Edgeworth's novels) and there is also an echo of Scott's writing in her depiction of Scottish character types and dialect. Because of these features, some scholars including Juliet Shields (2005) and Benjamine Toussaint (2016) have suggested that Ferrier's novels can be seen as examples of the "National Tale". As Toussaint argues, "Ferrier uses domestic fiction to rewrite the story of Scotland outside of the colonial discourse of Samuel Johnson and the romantic discourse of male Scottish

writers" (Toussaint 2016: 45-46). However, Toussaint's discussion of Ferrier's first novel *Marriage* shows that casting it as the "National Tale" might be too reductive and she underlines a polythonic and polythematic character of the novel. Dorothy McMillan in her Introduction to *Marriage* wonders if it helps to call the novel a National Tale (Ferrier 2020: xxxiii) suggesting that "Ferrier is perhaps less interested in nation than in relationships between birth and nurture and nurture and place" (Ferrier 2020: xxxv). Indeed, this thematic interest of Ferrier becomes evident if we consider all three novels. Her novels might explore multiple meanings of nationhood, but they always do so within the context of domestic relations. In her novels marriages that are based on romantic sentiment or are arranged on impulse lead to disappointment and resentment of one another. On the other hand, marriages formed with reason and mutual understanding tend to be more enduring and powerful for both partners. In her treatment of the themes of love and marriage (but also education) Ferrier reveals herself as a shrewd commentator on human nature and a keen observer of manners.

5. Conclusion

Although Ferrier's fiction shares many similarities with that of Jane Austen there are notable differences between the two writers. To read Ferrier simply as "Scottish Jane Austen" is to do her injustice. She was a writer in her own right. She did for Scotland what Jane Austen did for England and Maria Edgeworth for Ireland – left a literary portrait of a country and its people during the Regency Era. If such a thing as 'literary canon' really exists it should include Susan Ferrier as well as Mary Brunton, Elizabeth Hamilton, Catherine Sinclair, and others.

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