Laughter not Tears: Jean Marishall's Sentimental Fiction

By JoEllen DeLucia

By the end of the eighteenth century, British women novelists were out-publishing their male contemporaries, yet Scottish women were contributing relatively little to this outpouring of female-authored fiction. The eighteenth-century Scottish writer Jean Marishall's description of her mother's shock upon learning that her daughter had turned author confirms scholars' sense of this imbalance and the awkward position of the Scottish woman novelist:

> *My mother, who had a great share of common sense and a good heart, was not much given to reading, nor do I believe at that time had ever heard of a female author in her life. On reading my letter, she burst into tears concluding that I had lost my senses. My father, brother, and sister had the greatest difficulty in the world to compose her; assuring her there was not a single word in the epistle which in the least indicated insanity. A lady coming in was immediately shown the letter; and she corroborated a circumstance which my brother and sister had in vain endeavoured to make my mother believe, viz. that there was nothing more common in England than ladies writing novels.*[1]

Although Scottish women wrote less than their counterparts in the rest of the British archipelago, there were women such as Marishall who were a part of this surge of female novelists. Marishall, in particular, has much to contribute to evolving understandings of women writers and eighteenth-century print culture. In the 1760s, she left Scotland for London to earn a living as a writer. In addition to writing two novels *The History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart, and Miss Fanny Renton* (1766) and *The History of Miss Alicia Montague* (1767), she also worked on a short-lived periodical and contributed to John Newberry's growing list of children's titles.[2] Eventually, she returned to Edinburgh and maintained herself by teaching young boys, who she also boarded in her home. Her *Series of Letters* (1789) builds on her experience as a teacher and boldly presents a moral critique of Lord Chesterfield's famed system of education. The second volume of her

Series of Letters also includes a rare autobiographical account of her struggle to make a living as a woman writer and the obstacles she encountered in her interactions with publishers, patrons, and theater managers, including some of the most famous literary figures of the days, such as Lord Lyttelton, David Garrick, and Samuel Foote.

In her *Series of Letters*, she positions her first novel as an attempt to improve upon typical circulating library fare. Although Marishall describes her *History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart, and Miss Fanny Renton* as a 'better novel' than the 'nonsense' typically found in circulating libraries[3], she adopted the formulaic plot of the sentimental fictions that flooded the print market and published with the fashionable London circulating library proprietor John Noble. At the same time, her satiric heroine and direct attacks on the sentimental novel complicate her relationship to the genre. Like better-known Scottish novelists from the latter part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Mary Brunton, Elizabeth Hamilton, and Susan Ferrier), Marishall deploys more risible feelings, particularly ridicule, emotions rarely addressed in studies of sentimental culture. In this essay, I take seriously Marishall's turn to ridicule, in order to raise question about humor and the Scottish woman novelist's place within the sentimental tradition.

Historians and literary critics often read sentimental fiction by Samuel Richardson, Lawrence Sterne, and Henry Mackenzie as developing in a fictional register the theories of sympathy and sentiment advanced by the moral philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Although Scottish women novelists are not often included in these discussions, their connections to the intellectual culture of the Scottish Enlightenment are much more direct than that of their English contemporaries. Notably, the subscription list of Jean Marishall's play *Sir Harry Gaylove, or Comedy in Embryo* (1772) included David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Lord Kames, and Thomas Reid. Later Scottish women writers were also closely linked to major figures in the Scottish Enlightenment: Mary Brunton's husband was a professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Edinburgh, and they were known to study philosophy and history together, particularly the work of Thomas Reid and William Robertson; and Elizabeth Hamilton's correspondence with the Common Sense philosopher Dugald Stewart and her study of Lord Kames and Reid has also been well-documented by scholars.[4]

However, Marishall and her successors' reliance on ridicule as a moral corrective draws attention away from the theories of sentiment and sympathy developed by Hume and Smith and towards Lord Kames' turn to ridicule in his rhetorical theory and, even more importantly, Thomas Reid's defense of ridicule as both a useful emotion and a tool of moral judgement. As Mark Towsey argues, Thomas Reid's Common Sense philosophy and its critique of Hume's skepticism made him popular with Scottish male and female readers who were looking to reconcile their faith with contemporary philosophy and natural science.[5] Reid's Common Sense philosophy appealed to women, in particular, not only because it was compatible with their faith but also because it did not require specialized training or knowledge. Reid describes the first principles or innate moral ideas that separated his approach from Hume's skepticism as 'purely natural, and therefore common to the learned, and the unlearned; to the trained, and the untrained.'[6] He goes on to position these first principles as dependent on the 'ripeness of understanding and freedom from prejudice, but nothing else'.[7] Reid's definition of Common Sense recalls Marishall's own description of her mother in the quotation that opens this essay as 'not much given to reading' but having 'a great share of common sense and a good heart.'

In his *Elements of Criticism* (1762), Kames describes ridicule and the laughter it inspires as 'unbending the mind'.[8] A complex sentiment, ridicule is both 'mirthful and contemptible', a feeling in which 'the pleasant emotion of laughter […] is blended with the painful emotion of contempt; and the mixed emotion is termed the emotion of ridicule. The pain a ridiculous object gives me, is resented and punished by a laugh of derision'.[9] Like Kames, Reid saw ridicule as an affective 'weapon' that 'when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument'.[10] Although Reid mentions ridicule in his earlier work and he developed its importance in the influential lectures he gave as professor at Aberdeen and later Glasgow in the 1760s-70s, his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) includes his fullest articulation of its function.

Reid understands the sentiment of ridicule as combining both judgement and sensation. In defining common sense, he begins by recalling Shaftesbury's 'Sensus Communis; an Essay on the freedom of wit and humour, in a letter to a friend' and develops Shaftesbury's idea that ridicule can be used to appeal to

common sense and counteract what Reid understands as the absurdities that skepticism introduces.[11] He goes on to say that 'opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this; that they are not only false, but absurd: And, to discountenance absurdity, Nature hath given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule, which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice'.[12] Reid's understanding of ridicule and its application by Scottish women novelists complicate the emotional register of the sentimental novel, 'unbending', to borrow from Kames, the genre, and making room for laughter as well as tears.

Certainly, Marishall and the Scottish women novelists who followed her used ridicule as Reid did to separate themselves from skeptics and align themselves with a Christian worldview. However, their application of ridicule, an emotion that mixes contempt and laughter, can also be read as condemning the gendered social structures the sentimental novel lays bare and denaturalizing the inherent connection Smith, Hume, and other Scottish philosophers saw between dangerous sentimental excess and a female sex whose vulnerability to feeling made self-control all but impossible to maintain without at least some male guidance. Instead of asking readers to weep in response to the 'virtue in distress' narrative—a narrative for which the public seemed to have an endless appetite—Marishall, encouraged her readers to laugh.

Reid's influence can be seen in both Marishall's *Series of Letters* and her novel *Clarinda Cathcart and Fanny Renton*. In her *Series of Letters*, which Rosalind Carr has described as 'a rare piece of philosophical and political writing from a Scotswoman during the Enlightenment',[13] she encourages her nephew to embrace 'common sense' and 'good principles' in order to guard against a 'mind […] staggered with doubts'.[14] She goes on to argue that a man of good and common sense will never 'become a slave to his passions'.[15] Interestingly, throughout the *Letters*, Marishall appeals to humor, employing a self-deprecating form of ridicule to deal with the disappointments she suffered as a female author, who had to write and teach to maintain her precarious social position. In describing her disappointment at receiving the news that Queen Charlotte, the dedicatee of *Clarinda Cathcart*, had only sent her a ten guinea acknowledgment, Marishall describes a series of personified virtues, who arrive to counteract the 'little

malevolent passions' which destroy the human heart.[16] 'Prudence' comically gives her a 'slap on the shoulder' and the 'angry maiden' Reason scolds her repeatedly.[17] Marishall's derisive account of her own struggle to subdue her passions in the face of adversity mirrors her approach in her fiction.

Like many other sentimental novels, Marishall's epistolary *Clarinda Cathcart* borrows the form and the plot of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. Yet, the comic effect she creates, through borrowed plot elements and direct references to Richardson, creates an awkward distance between her novel and the sentimental tradition. Early on in a letter to her friend, Clarinda embraces the designation 'tragi-comic epistle(s)' for her letter-writing style and repeatedly jokes throughout the narrative about her story's commercial potential and the unoriginality of its developing plot.[18] In one letter she suggests to a friend that 'some girl, who is wiser than the rest, with a little addition of her own, will dispose of them [her letters] to a bookseller'[19]; she tells another friend that she will 'expect to see it advertised, The History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart, and Miss Fanny Renton' and accuses the same friend jokingly of 'think(ing) her ambitious of such a task'.[20]

After spending the first volume contrasting Clarinda's own relative boredom in the country with the adventures of other sentimental heroines, the second volume's plot begins to mirror that of the novels Marishall both imitates and mocks. She finds herself with two suitors, Fanny's brother, the kind and admirable Sir Harry Renton, and the rakish Lord Darnly. In describing her situation, Clarinda employs the paradox of Buridan's ass, portraying herself as an 'ass between two bundles of hay'.[21] Because the novel has already established the superiority of Harry Renton to Darnly, the paradox is falsely applied and might best be understood as mocking sentimental novels that establish a false equivalence between the figure of the reformed rake and the more virtuous suitors encountered by their heroines. The novel compounds the ridiculousness of understanding these two types of suitors as equally attractive by having Clarinda pretend indecision and exploit sentimental tropes to deride her false choice. She playfully imagines Sir Harry taking 'the lover's leap' and Lord Darnly 'hang[ing] or drown[ing] himself,' leaving her to flee to a 'huge rock at the sea-side,' which commands a view of 'the gentlemen's seats for many miles around'.[22] Once on this precipice, she promises to 'beat her breast' and 'plunge headlong into the sea'.[23]

Although none of this happens, right after she formally and without any real qualms accepts Sir Harry's proposal, Lord Darnly, taking a page from sentimental fiction himself, hires someone to stop her carriage and abducts Clarinda and a companion.

Disconcertingly, Clarinda takes the same wry approach to her capture as she did to her courtship. Instead of being overcome by fear or sadness at the damage her abduction might do to her reputation, she gamely plots her escape and continues to mock the conventional sentimental plot that now literally traps her. During her imprisonment, she simultaneously scorns and adapts the behavior of the similarly circumstanced heroines she has encountered in novels. She navigates the 'virtue in distress' plot by using what she learned reading sentimental fiction to avoid its traps and dodge Darnly's advances without damage to her person or reputation. When Darnly first offers her food, she writes, 'I was too deep read in novels, Nancy, to venture to take any of his wine'.[24] When he removes her to a remote country seat, she describes 'a middle-aged, ugly looking woman' meeting them at the door, and she satirically imagines her as a Richardsonian 'Miss Jewkes, I suppose' –a characterization that creates immediate and warranted distrust.[25] After days under Darnly's control, she begins to lose faith in her difference from her fictional counterparts and decides to stop resisting and behave as fiction mandates:

> *I began to think, Nancy, I was destined for a heroine, and wanted of all things, to act up to the character. I could think of no scheme of my own invention, likely to relieve us. At last I fixed on one that had succeeded with a sister in romance, I forget whom—I rummaged in my pocket and found a blank cover; so taking out my pencil, I wrote the following words, without telling Betsy what I meant, till is was finished.*[26]

This borrowed stratagem fails, reinforcing the futility of the sentimental heroine's actions. Fortunately, soon after, she is rescued by a friend of the Renton family. She goes on to marry Sir Harry without equivocation and bizarrely accepts an apology from Lord Darnly who admits that if she hadn't been rescued his 'passion would have made [him] force what [he] could not gain by persuasion'.[27]Throughout, Clarinda mocks the sentimental formula, yet she remains subject to it. Her abduction and near rape seem absurd, but they are absurdities that she is

forced to countenance.

Where most sentimental novels offer endless tears, Marishall encourages us to laugh at the sentimental plot, the cultural stereotypes, and the philosophical ideas, such as those promulgated by Adam Smith and David Hume, that positioned women as naturally more vulnerable to excessive and dangerous sentiment. Instead, in a fictional turn to Scottish Common Sense, Marishall illustrates how women might also use humor and reason to maintain self-control and navigate the gendered inequities presented by everything from the print marketplace to the plots of sentimental fiction. Marishall and the Scottish women's novelists who followed her suggest a literary historical byway, one that complicates recent and important accounts of sentimental fiction and women writers. For example, Melissa Sodeman has read sentimental fiction as not only engaging with women's position in society but also their position in literary history. She has argued persuasively that the proliferation of sentimental novels at the end of the eighteenth century marks not just the rise of commercial or trade fiction and its separation from literature with a capital L, but the 'cultural dispossession' of the woman novelist who in the emerging master narrative of literary history became associated with low formula and genre fiction. She understands English novelists such as Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe as using inter-textual allusions, quotations, and formulaic plots to comment on 'the emergence of a national literary canon' and 'the arrival of notions of authorship privileging originality and genius'; she concludes by positioning the English writers she studies as mourning their loss of status and their exile from literary history.[28] The autobiographical sangfroid Marishall displays in her account of her life as a female writer and the equally composed approach of her heroine Clarinda Cathcart to the absurdities and dangers of the sentimental plot suggest a potential alternative. Jean Marishall and the satiric novels of the Scottish women novelists who wrote after her, including Mary Brunton, Elizabeth Hamilton and Susan Ferrier, make room for a more emotionally complex history of the female novelist—a history that includes laughter as well as tears.By the end of the eighteenth century, British women novelists were out-publishing their male contemporaries, yet Scottish women were contributing relatively little to this outpouring of female-authored fiction. The eighteenth-century Scottish writer Jean Marishall's description of her mother's shock upon learning that her daughter had turned author confirms scholars' sense of this imbalance and the awkward position of the Scottish woman novelist:

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