

Haunting History: Women, Catholicism, and the Writing of National History in Sophia Lee's 'The Recess'

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Chapter 8

Haunting History: Women, Catholicism and the Writing of National History

in Sophia Lee's *The Recess*

Kaley Kramer

Sophia Lee's *The Recess; Or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783–1785) articulates the fascination that Protestant Britain had with Catholicism late into the eighteenth century. Set during the reign of Elizabeth I, the narrative is located at the fault line between Britain's Protestant future and its Catholic past. Written during the first heyday of British historiography that established the very notion of a “national history”—David Hume, Oliver Goldsmith, and Catherine Macaulay all wrote ‘The History of England’ between 1754–1771—*The Recess* excavates the ‘remainders’ and ‘unsubsumed elements’ of these histories.¹ The titular ‘recess’ is a physical reminder of England's Catholic past—a past that the Henrician Reformation aggressively sought to erase. The “site of vanished cultural territory” is the ruined abbey in Lee's novel, a physical artifact that figures the ‘real’ space of history.² More importantly, the recess in which Lee's narrators, Matilda and Ellinor (the fictional twin daughters of Mary, Queen of Scots) take shelter is also a metaphor for the crisis of representation in the wake of the Reformation for both Protestant and Catholic historians. Lee's choice of an abbey for her setting brings together the particular nexus

between historiography and hagiography: in this specific place both secular and sacred histories can be traced.

For the Protestant reader, narratives about the lives of the saints are tainted with superstition and incredulity. *The Recess* offers the reader a space in which the cultural traces of hagiography (if not strictly hagiographic subject matter) productively complicate the inexorable, progressive, and ontological certainties of histories like Hume's. A "hagiographic document", as Père Hippolyte Delehaye defines it in *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* (1927), must be "of a religious character and should aim at edification": "the term may only be applied therefore to writings inspired by devotion to the saints and intended to promote it".³ This speaks less to the content or form of hagiography and more to its agenda and use. In Delehaye's analysis, the didactic purpose of hagiography must be the "first question" and where this is not a concern (in texts that do not seem to be "inculcating some [moral] truth"), a tale or parable, "fortif[ied]...by the authority of a martyr or an ascetic...offered an element of interest [to the reader] that was not to be despised".⁴ Hagiography, which is not Holy Scripture, occupied a different place in relation to "truth": readers were not required to *believe* in hagiographies – but the connection with scripture obliged readers to acknowledge a deeper "truth" reflected and refracted in saints' lives.⁵ In terms of form, Delehaye implies that the hagiography is unbounded, able to "assume any literary form suitable to the glorification of the saints, from an official record...to a poetical composition of the most exuberant character wholly detached from reality".⁶ The ambiguity of hagiography as a category enabled its dissemination, allowed it to pass from surface to depth, from the universal exegetical system to "one embattled and increasingly defensive denomination of Christianity among others".⁷ Without a clear subject and stripped of its symbolic conventions and motifs, "annunciation, vocation, trial, martyrdom,

iconoclasm, reliquary encryption”, hagiography nonetheless remains detectable as an approach, a method in eighteenth-century literature: a way of *telling* if not necessarily apparent in the story that is told.⁸ In this transformation, it partakes of the characteristics of the Gothic and carries a similar threat of persistence and presence. Like the Gothic, it does not *appear* in ‘novel’ forms or narratives, it is revealed as a part of the foundation of narrative and history.

“The point”, claims Delehay, “to be emphasised from the first is the distinction between hagiography and history”: “the work of a hagiographer may be historical, by it is not necessarily so”.⁹ *The Recess* can be taken as an example of the opposite influence: the work of a historiography may also be hagiographic, where secular history demands a transcendence of ‘fact’ and the fluidity of speculation and probability. Lee’s text demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of the goals of historiography, particularly the Enlightenment-driven emphasis on positivistic methods and frameworks. In an age of reason, scepticism, and Protestant common-sense, Lee’s fictional editor submits a manuscript dredged up from the age of ‘Romance’ that demands faith in truths that are beyond history’s purview: those “partialities and prejudices” that determine the “best and worst actions of princes.”¹⁰ *The Recess* is both reliant on history and insulated from history: it exists in a miraculous, quasi-supernatural state, preserved sufficiently from the “depredations of time” to remain accessible to a select readership of refined sensibilities (5). Matilda’s narrative reinforces this editorial advice to value the truth of human character over the accuracy of historical detail: her story of suffering allows the sympathetic reader “to be juster to his God and himself, by unavoidable comparison” with his milder, more quotidian miseries (5). Yet, in order for her narrative to function in this way, the reader must invest some faith in the events and characters related. Matilda’s story opens up a discursive space that cannot be fully

satisfied by writings like Hume's, and it is in this gap that the hagiographic mode of *The Recess* provides a supplement to the progressive march of history.

When the first volume of *The Recess* appeared to critical praise in 1783, England's Catholic past had recently re-emerged in a spectacular political showdown between Enlightened government ministers who pushed through the 1778 Catholic Relief Act and anti-popery factions who violently protested even the limited extension of freedoms in 1780. In spite of a century of Protestant cultural ascendancy and national narratives that insisted on its annihilation, English Catholicism survived. However, both its persistent presence in the bright future of the Protestant nation and the harsh treatment its adherents received through legal restrictions were sources of embarrassment. Like Lee's "manuscript," Catholicism survived the Reformation in England. By countering the certainty of positivistic historiography through a narrative that not only preserves absences but also cannot be fully assimilated, *The Recess* recognizes the necessary persistence of representational modes that are not simply subsumed and replaced. The recess, "an apartment" that "could not be called a cave," is the narrators' childhood home, later their sanctuary and prison (7). As a space, it is both full and empty: it houses a Catholic priest without a congregation, a mother whose children are not her own, and children whose infamous parents (the Duke of Norfolk and Mary Stuart) exist for them only as full-length portraits. Whenever they leave the recess, Matilda and Ellinor are miraculous: they appear out of nowhere, with no connections, no backgrounds, no context, and (initially) vanish from the world just as quickly. Their spectrality invites speculation and the threat of the supernatural as alternatives to the known and certain trajectory of history. In their own struggles, Matilda and Ellinor call up the spectres of those remainders of history, women and Catholics, whose refusal to be assimilated or annihilated places them outside of the epistemological framework of history. *The Recess* not only

explores the relationship between history and its alternatives but also challenges the necessary dismissal of other narratives that support the ‘plausibility’ of history itself. The historical setting of the novel is key to this reading as it calls up the immediate aftermath of the Reformation and explores narratives/subjects that interrupt the ‘necessary’ transition of Catholic England into Protestant Britain.

The development of historiography in the late eighteenth century emerged in tandem with the growth of a ‘new’ nation. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 confirmed the Protestant future of England, a future that was extended to cover Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1801. That these gestures of inclusion were more political fiats than recognition of any existing common identity became immediately evident at both ends of the century. The Jacobite risings in the first half of the century kept the fear of Catholic invasion via Scotland alive as a direct threat until the death of the Young Pretender (Bonnie Prince Charlie) in 1766; the union with Ireland followed the Irish rebellion in 1798 and quelled fears of invasion from that quarter during the Napoleonic Wars. Bookended by these anxious times and hedged about by threats from abroad, historiography began to formulate a national myth of origin to stabilize a disparate and often antagonistic set of identities. Competing accounts of the nation relied on rational methods of historical analysis; replacing Catholicism with Protestantism undergirded this process. But history as a discipline reflected the “culture of sensibility” that dominated the eighteenth century.¹¹ The classical tradition of history—as—events, focusing on the public actions of public men, was limited in a way that no longer satisfied readers and consumers who increasingly sought access to inward and private dimensions of public lives.¹² Sensibility crept into virtually every discourse over the course of the century, including history; its cultural predominance offered writers models of behaviour that were simultaneously transcendent (based on scientific

observations of the human body) and particular (recognizable in contemporary representations of virtue and vice).¹³ Sensibility lent credibility to fiction by drawing on perceived (but not unproblematic) notions of morality. It also provided a readership familiar with the conventions of sensibility who were primed to respond appropriately to their appearance in fiction.

Hagiography is not fiction. Literally meaning “writing about saints,” hagiography is rarely understood without reference to historiography. Writing prompted by faith, hagiography cannot pretend to the objective viewpoint or positivism that influenced the development of historiography during the Enlightenment. Like Catholicism, hagiography is not foreign to Britain, “until, that is, the world of discourse in which its relics are lodged [was] determined by humanist, rationalist, and Protestant values.”¹⁴ The paradigm shift that displaced the Church of Rome and instituted the Church of England recast the hermeneutics of reading through which readers made sense of and judged the ‘truth’ value of narratives. The eighteenth-century audience that steadily consumed Hume’s, Goldsmith’s, and Macaulay’s national histories could not access the cultural capital or psychological territory that provided the pre-Reformation reader access to the “legendary feats of prophets, martyrs, and saints.”¹⁵ The idea of a “sacred fiction” did not have a place in Protestant Britain; hagiography was at best an embarrassing relic, at worst, heretical. Following on from the positivism of proto-scientific methodologies, historians and intellectuals like Edward Gibbon and David Hume “condemned saints’ lives to the world of popular polytheism and credulity”; their faith in “objectivity” and the ability to recover an authentic past informed their scathing contempt for hagiography.¹⁶ Dedicated to rational inquiry into the past, Enlightenment thinkers could not countenance the conventionally “fallacious biographical details and fantastic phenomena” of hagiographic narratives.¹⁷ Hume associates hagiography with the savagery of pre-Reformation England, locating it—and by extension, Catholicism—with a

primitive past; in Gibbon's *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the worship of saints and relics corrupts the "pure and perfect simplicity" of the Christian model that Luther's Reformation returned to the world.¹⁸ The firm connection between Catholicism, superstition, savagery, and ignorance was, as Charles Dodd wrote in his *Church History*, "nurse's language to all Protestant children."¹⁹ Hagiography, pushed firmly into the past by Enlightenment models of historical inquiry, was the product of a previous age whose faults were corrected by positivistic, 'natural' history.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, hagiography became associated with a particularly pernicious kind of fiction. The energy with which its detractors forced it into the past, insisting on its obsolescence, draws on similarly determined efforts to categorize contemporary forms of writing as distinct from "the fictions of the last age" with their "improbabilities" and "invention."²⁰ Samuel Johnson's discussion in 1750 clearly outlined the parameters for appropriate fiction: they were meant to delight "the present generation." For Johnson, fictions "can neither employ giants to snatch away a lady from the nuptial rites, nor knights to bring her back from captivity; it can neither bewilder its personages in deserts, nor lodge them in imaginary castles."²¹ His distinction rests on an implicit consensus as to what constitutes "accurate observation" and is important precisely because of the emulative potential and didactic nature of any text:

In the romances formerly written, every transaction and sentiment was so remote from all that passes among men, that the reader was in very little danger of making any application to himself; the virtues and crimes were equally beyond his sphere of activity; and he amused himself with heroes and with traitors, deliverers and persecutors, as with beings of

another species, whose actions were regulated upon motives of their own, and who had neither faults nor excellences in common with himself.²²

Johnson makes the mistake of thinking that readers of romantic texts are Quixotes. He underestimates the power of typology; of mapping a textual experience onto a real, lived one in a manner that is instructive but not enslaved by a notion of fidelity. The romance offers an idealized and extreme model for behaviour. The exaggerated plots, characters, settings, style, and language of the romance is precisely the force that allows the reader to recognize similar situations in their own lives; it allows them to ‘read’ lived experiences in light of the text and to draw instructive comparisons between the two. Reading the romance is the analogical step that precedes the anagogical, the transcendent, the saintly truth. Hagiography, as a sacred fiction, was not concerned with the “factual account of human achievement” but with the expression of holiness “so that a mundane audience can have access to...transcendent experience.”²³ Faith in transcendence finds expression in both hagiography and early romances via typology, which Julia Reinhard Lupton argues is due to the “subsumption [of hagiography] into new forms such as the novella, secular drama, and humanist biography...[it] functions then as the consummate model...a generic paradigm.”²⁴ Johnson’s directions for appropriate fiction insist on the particular and the shared, valuing the experience of “general converse” for authors rather than the practice of storing up “some fluency of language...retir[ing] to his closet, let[ting] loose his invention, and heat[ing] his mind with incredibilities”: “a book was thus produced without fear of criticism, without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life.”²⁵ This description of process recalls Protestant stereotypes of Catholic practices, attributes, and ignorance: easily swayed by convincing language, preferring monastic isolation, content with blind faith in church leaders, and woefully resistant to study and (Protestant) ‘knowledge’.

Hagiography shares with “romances formerly written” an apparently cavalier attitude to facts and physical possibility only if understood from outside of its epistemological matrix; it is threatening because it survives “beyond the moment of [its] historical supersedure.”²⁶

History—for both Matilda and Ellinor—is what happens to other people; their narrative, though marked with ‘probability’ is not possible. Both women spend their energies desperately seeking recognition or acknowledgement of who they are. This gradually fades from the desire for a full-scale royal proclamation, complete with a pardon for their imprisoned mother from Elizabeth I, to a private meeting with their brother, then King James I (VI). Ellinor in particular, rages against her enforced anonymity, driven by her own ambition and her anger at being the unwitting dupe of Elizabeth in signing a “confession” denying her identity and that of Matilda, on a promise of freedom for the Queen of Scots. While Matilda’s long suffering provides the novel with its structure, Ellinor’s shorter but considerably more dramatic narrative completes the range of available positions for those excluded from history: Matilda fades away; Ellinor burns out. Neither achieves anything close to their goals of public recognition or, at least, familial reconciliation. Assimilated (married off to various loyal Elizabethan courtiers) or annihilated (Ellinor’s madness, Matilda’s incarceration), they are persistently denied access to or inclusion in ‘official’ history if they insist on their personal histories and identities. And yet, as evident in Matilda’s opening address, at least one has survived. Matilda’s earnest wish at the beginning (which is her ending) is that her “feeble frame be covered with the dust from which it sprung, and no trace of my ever having existed...remain” (7). Her narrative already mitigates this, excavated like a relic and thrust back into public view to be recognized by those readers with “hearts...enriched with sensibility” (5). But her wish also points to the inevitable return of everything buried and the impossibility of leaving “no trace.”

The enigmatic “Advertisement” is thus a parergon, a framing device that is simultaneously inside and external to the narrative,²⁷ a boundary that marks its status both as fiction and as historical artifact. It is precisely at this moment that we can witness Lee’s challenge to the epistemological frameworks that preserve the divide between history and literature—and with that, the dominant Protestant ethos and the beleaguered Catholic minority. The packet of letters prepared and presented by the fictional editor via the Advertisement is written by Matilda and contains Ellinor’s own conflicting version of the same events. A note that barely registers in the Advertisement is that *The Recess* is apparently part of a larger manuscript, from which it has been “extracted” (5). Following Matilda’s story does not lead the reader to any clarity, and the Advertisement insists that the confusion of the text presented is part of its claim to authenticity, preserved due to an “inviolable respect for truth” (5). This is not exactly the “truth” that Johnson might expect from a text; rather, it is an admixture of verifiable ‘fact’ (the existence of Elizabeth and her court) with the imagined (every move that Matilda and Ellinor make in the novel). The imagined destabilizes the real, and the real buttresses the imagined. In this indeterminate space, Matilda concludes her story on yet another mystery: the “casket” that the named reader, Adelaide de Montmorenci, receives as her inheritance from Matilda (326).

Caskets are particularly resonant within the history of Mary, Queen of Scots. In 1767–1768, Mary was implicated in the murder of Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, her second husband, as a conspirator with her alleged lover (and third husband), James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. Mary’s opponents claimed that discovery of a casket filled with letters belonging to Bothwell, incriminated Mary as a willing partner in Darnley’s suspicious death. The documents comprised letters and sonnets, allegedly written to Bothwell by Mary. Their authenticity has been the subject of debate since and has not been conclusively decided.²⁸ These letters provided Elizabeth

with the rationale for keeping Mary in England and “stained [Mary’s] reputation across western Europe.”²⁹ Mary’s long life of incarceration ended with another ‘secret’ correspondence: the Babington Plot. This conviction, like the casket letters and the story of Elizabeth’s ‘accidental’ signing of the warrant for Mary’s death, takes historiography into the realm of speculation and belief. Briefly, the Babington Plot was a conspiracy to assassinate Elizabeth and place Mary on the throne. It originated among a group of English Catholics close to the court, including the Spanish ambassador and had the blessing of Philip of Spain. Anthony Babington, a young conspirator, engineered a correspondence with Mary, Queen of Scots, that was, unbeknownst to either party, monitored closely by Walsingham. After discovery, Babington briefly fled London but was imprisoned and executed. Mary remained ignorant of the failure of the plot, and her exact knowledge of the extent of the conspiracy has not been conclusively ascertained. Mary protested her innocence throughout her trial at Fotheringay Castle, especially of the plotters’ final aim of assassination, but the correspondence with Anthony Babington was sufficient to condemn her.³⁰ Hume claims her willingness to die regardless of her innocence as the result of a life “filled with bitterness and sorrow” and in Mary’s belief that her devout Catholicism threatened England’s reformed religion.³¹ Neither George Buchanan (1506–1582) nor John Knox (1514–1572), old enemies who vilified Mary for her gender, her politics, and her religion, lived to comment on the Babington Plot or Mary’s execution. Their attacks on Mary’s reign before and during her imprisonment in England had already established the characteristics that endured in her reputation after death.³² Adam Blackwood (1539–1613), a Roman Catholic apologist, eulogized Mary and defended her innocence, though from France, which did little to improve the opinion of Catholicism in England.³³ For Hume, Robertson, and Goldsmith, there is little doubt of her guilt. Hume’s portrait of Elizabeth, though admitting her jealousy of the personal

attractions of Mary, Queen of Scots, considers Mary endowed with only the “superficial gestures of court” learned during her residence in France while Elizabeth’s “education” led her to the truth of the reformed religion.³⁴ Goldsmith admits the casket letters are “not free from the suspicion of forgery” but concludes, “the reasons for their authenticity seem to prevail.”³⁵

The need for ‘authenticity’ indicates the anxiety surrounding interpretation, subjectivity, and speculation in historical writing but also demonstrates the neurotic obsession in eighteenth-century national histories to account for those elements that it cannot explain or subsume. The caskets and secret letters that marked Mary’s reign have become fetishized objects for historiographers. Even when the contents of the casket and the letters are categorized, inventoried, and pawed over by generations of historians, the ‘truth’ of Mary’s intentions in either affair remains entirely opaque. Beyond the limit of the casket, lies the unexplained and inexplicable. What carries the reader past this radical indeterminacy is not reason but the acceptance of mystery.

For eighteenth-century historiographers, the persistence of mystery in history is problematic. For example, to admit that Catholicism was not simply the loser in the Reformation, but another participant in a series of reformations challenges the account of that story from the ‘winners’ perspective (Protestantism). But the persistence of Mary, Queen of Scots, as a sympathetic figure into the eighteenth century demonstrates the ways in which Protestantism struggled to contain Catholicism within prescribed boundaries. Even Mary’s eventual resting place, the magnificent marble tomb in Henry VII’s chapel in Westminster Cathedral, gestures towards this national confusion as to her place in history. A convicted traitor and conspirator, Mary was nonetheless buried with some ceremony in Peterborough Cathedral; James I later moved her remains to Westminster Cathedral.³⁶ In spite of Mary’s stained record, she rests in the

spiritual heart of the nation. In the novel, it is Elizabeth who revives Mary almost immediately after her death. With the Queen of Scots and Ellinor safely dead and Matilda exiled, Elizabeth ends her days nonetheless “sunk in the chilling melancholy of despair and hopeless age” (266). Ellinor’s sudden reappearance—a bodily resurrection from Elizabeth’s point of view—precipitates Elizabeth’s final madness and death. Ophelia-like, Ellinor confronts Elizabeth with the deaths of Essex, Matilda, and the Queen of Scots, anticipating her own end and desiring only that Elizabeth allow her to be “buried in Fotheringay; and be sure I have *women* to attend me; *be sure* of that—you know the reason” (267).³⁷ Ellinor has, quite literally for the terrified queen, escaped her casket; she is the return of the repressed, a “being supernatural” who quite undoes Elizabeth’s “mighty mind” (268, 269).

The destruction of the recess and surrounding ruins while Ellinor lives there as the wife of the Duke of Arlington leads to the discovery of “a small iron chest strongly fastened” (208). The servant who proposes the demolition of the ruins to the great distress of Ellinor and pleasure of her husband and gaoler, Lord Arlington, dies after a lingering illness but requests a final meeting with Ellinor, without which he “could not have departed in peace” (208). During the improvement of Arlington’s property, the servant observes a “common labourer turn up something which tried his whole strength” (208). Forcing the labourer to accept him as a partner in the discovery, the servant takes the uncovered “casket” into hiding on the pretence of meeting again with this labourer to open and divide evenly the bounty. Taking the casket “with a purpose God has severely punished,” the servant finds, “under a number of papers and trifles of no value,” a “large sum in gold, and a few jewels” (208). Replacing these with an “iron crucifix and several rusty keys,” he then locks the casket, allows the labourer to wrestle with opening it for no gain. Buying secrecy with twenty nobles, the servant makes plans to escape to London with his “guilty

gains.” (208) But the treasure is not simply there for anyone: “from [that] moment, peace, appetite, and rest have fled me...the idea that my treasure was stolen, has made me often start up...I have flown in the dead of night to convince myself it was safe—imaginary whispers have ever been near my bed, and uncertain forms have glided into my chamber—the dawn of day never gave me relief, every eye seemed to dive into my secret, and every hand to be intent on impoverishing me” (208–209). It is, of course, the papers, not the jewels, that tempt Ellinor to promise a vow of silence about the discovery of the casket.

Like so many items in Gothic novels, the casket dug out of the dust that covers the recess has a will of its own. It is more than a simple relic and only a very specific audience (Ellinor) can properly understand it. The fabulous coincidence of Ellinor’s acquisition of the casket is based on the servant’s remembering, on the point of death, that she was “said to have been brought up in these ruins” (209). That slight memory leads him to the tenuous conclusion that in passing on the casket to Ellinor, he might “only restore it to the right owner” (209). Possessed of a “strange desire to examine the papers,” Ellinor forgets the servant almost immediately and considers the casket a “gift [that] heaven seemed so strangely to have put into my hands” (209). Her “strange desire” is connected by the repetition of the word to the gift’s divine provenance. The jewels and gold might offer “assistance and comfort” to her lost sister, Matilda, and provide the rationale for “receiving and secreting” the casket from her husband, whose wealth she refuses to use for that purpose “had I been the unlimited mistress of it” (209). Her “strange desire” is answered in the discovery that the papers “consisted chiefly of the correspondence between Mrs. Marlow and Father Anthony, while yet they were lovers” (209). Reading the letters “recall[s]” Ellinor to “life and sensibility”:

I raised my eyes to heaven in search of their pure translated souls, and wandering from planet to planet, fancied there must be one peculiarly allotted to lovers now no longer unhappy—A thousand trifles whose value must ever be ideal and local, were preserved with these letters:—cyphers, hair, sonnets, dear perpetuators of those bright hours of youth we look back on with pleasure to the last moments of decaying life. I kissed the innocent reliques of such an unhappy attachment with devout regard, and held them not the least part of my legacy. (210)

Ellinor's attentions to the casket's contents verge on worship. The letters communicate far more than the sentiments of the writers; they allow Ellinor to transcend her suffering, to project her own unhappiness into an imagined community of fellow sufferers. Ellinor later stages her own death, going so far as to "plac[e] herself *and treasure* in the homely coffin" (218). Safely away, she reburies the casket: "To the earth that gave, I have restored the remainder; it is buried eastward under the spreading chestnut tree planted by Edward IV" (219).

There are several caskets and packets throughout the novel, containing secret and potentially treasonous writing that connects Matilda and Ellinor to their various origins, including testimonials of their true birth and parentage. Like their illustrious mother, Matilda and Ellinor struggle with questions of authenticity and forgery, their motivations, like Mary's, extracted from letters, testimonials, and other documents. After narrating the story of her life, and the twins' true parentage and birth, Mrs. Marlow delivers a casket "which contained the papers she mentioned and divers attestations, signed by herself, and the late Lady Scrope" (36). Matilda does not specify whether this casket accompanies them when they leave the recess with Lord Leicester, but Elizabeth uncovers the truth when the testimonials are found on Ellinor's person, as well as her correspondence with Essex (170–171). Matilda, on the verge of meeting

King James, recalls “several caskets” hidden at Kenilworth Castle by Lord Leicester to which she had added “Mrs. Marlow’s papers and the testimonials of my birth” (273). Returning to the now–changed castle, she finds the hiding place secure and the “well–remembered caskets” still in place (275). The casket bequeathed at the end of the novel remains closed, its contents a mystery, but it recalls episodes within each of the fictional sister’s story and with the infamous ‘casket letters’ that initiated the long imprisonment of Mary, Queen of Scots. In *The Recess*, particular objects, carried secretly in caskets or worn close to the body, take on the force of religious relics. The transmission, concealment, and revelation of each casket and packet in the novel, like the documents that incriminated and finally condemned Mary, depend on the intentions of their readers for their meaning and effect. Meaning, in all of these cases, exceeds the moment of production and intended audience. The letters and documents become “caskets” for the meaning that they convey. After their moment, they are buried over time and are excavated alongside other artifacts whose accidental propinquity might be misunderstood as causal. Mary’s sonnets (if she is indeed the author) to Bothwell indicate a connection between them, but it is potentially fallacious to presume that connection implicates her in the plot to kill Darnley. Viewed from this perspective, the historical narrative appears as fabulous as any fiction. The “truth” must lie elsewhere. To some characters, the letters that circulate through *The Recess* are inert (the servant who finds the casket in the ruins of the Abbey), but in the right hands, these same missives are extremely volatile (Ellinor’s transcendent experience of reconnection with the long–dead Mrs. Marlow). The lesson of Lee’s novel is that texts are targeted; not every text is for every reader. Lee’s “editor” recommends the novel to readers of a particular sensibility; likewise, the correspondence between Norfolk and Mary, Father Anthony and Mrs. Marlow require a reader with particular sympathies. Lee’s ideal reader transcends particularities, admits mystery,

and does not mistake 'realism' for the real. In short, the reader trusts the text. This connection to the spirit of the writers, beyond the narrative that the writing contains, verges on the supernatural, or the hagiographic.

Other critics have noted a similar dynamic in the portrayal of Mary, particularly in the descriptions of her from both Matilda and Ellinor. In her study of the afterlife of the Queen of Scots, Jayne Elizabeth Lewis spends some time on the single appearance of Mary in *The Recess* as an example of an encounter with the sublime.³⁸ In Lewis's reading, Mary "belongs very much within the sentimental tradition: she lives and does not live; and the story of her life is that of her death."³⁹ The "sentimental tradition," then, comes very close to the faith required by hagiography. Echoing the trademark of hagiographic narratives, Mary suffers, she is weak, and enters the scene supported by "two maids, without whose assistance she could not move" (75). Throughout, even the mere mention of Mary's name produces sensational results: Ellinor's invocation of her murdered mother leads to Elizabeth's madness and death; the news of their mother's execution renders both Matilda and Ellinor insensible; in exile, the twins find that "Mary" is a cultural shibboleth, indicating the motivations of diverse characters. The twins 'meet' their mother in an episode that establishes the particularly charged power that Mary lends objects that contain and define her. Buried in the recess, the young girls invent stories about the "whole-length pictures" that adorn "the best room" (9). The portrait of Norfolk, who Ellinor strongly resembles, returns Matilda's gaze, "full of a tender sweetness," and inspires a "sentiment of veneration, mingled with surprising softness [that] pierced my soul at once" (9). But it is the next picture that elevates this veneration to "a thousand melting sensations," prefiguring their later response in Mary's brief presence:

If the last picture awakened veneration, this seemed to call forth a thousand melting sensations; the tears rushed involuntarily into our eyes, and, clasping, we wept upon the bosoms of each other. “Ah! Who can these be?” cried we together. “Why do our hearts thus throb before inanimate canvas? surely everything we behold is but part of one great mystery; when will the day come, destined to clear it up?” (10)

The vitality of the portraits makes them far more than simply representations of Mary and Norfolk: they are Mary and Norfolk. The relationship between the twins and these particular portraits grants them access to a “great mystery.” Mrs. Marlow’s narrative, which follows soon after, “clears up” some part of the mystery, but the greater part of it, the “partialities and prejudices” that led to the mystery, remain hidden (5). Ignorant of the subjects of the painting and unaware of any rational reason for their reactions, Matilda and Ellinor nonetheless “lived in the presence of these pictures as if they understood us, and blushed when we were guilty of the slightest folly” (10).

From echo to encounter: early in the novel, Matilda and Ellinor attempt to visit their imprisoned mother. What they find is “the Saint” (75). Mary, Queen of Scots, is not a historical figure or a sublime object. Lee, via Matilda’s narrative voice, sanctifies the renegade queen. Matilda’s reaction has all the hallmarks of sensibility:

Our emotions were too rapid and strong for description; we wept—we incoherently exclaimed—and striking ourselves eagerly against the bars, seemed to hope some supernatural strength would break them...I could neither behold her for my tears, or resolve to lose a look by indulging in them.—She drew near the spot where we stood, when our 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... When she withdrew her eyes, she carried my very soul with her; all my strength failed at once, and I sunk in a swoon in my sister's arms. (75–76)

“Supernatural,” “divine,” “supplication:” this is the language of worship, of rapture, of hagiography. Mary’s entire presence in this scene calls up a particularly Catholic set of images. Mary and her two attendants resemble the three Marys at the crucifixion.⁴⁰ The “habit of plain purple” connects her with Christ, “dressed in a purple robe” by Pilate’s soldiers.⁴¹ The veil, beads, and cross belong to a cloistered nun. Taken as a whole, this portrait of a “weakened” and suffering woman specifically recalls the Marian iconography of the *mater dolorosa*: a touchstone of Catholicism. Lee’s portrayal of the Queen of Scots decisively pushes any possible interpretation of the historical woman into hagiography.

To understand *The Recess*, the reader must hold two contradictory precepts in mind: s/he must acknowledge the facticity of the setting *and* populate it with characters and events that, quite simply, never happened. Lee’s caskets are metonymic for the processes of the novel as a whole. The ways in which characters interact with caskets, letters, mementos, and portraits indicates that objects participate in systems of representation. They become iconic. They invite spectrality and speculation into a positivistic framework. Just as the caskets in the story are more than mere receptacles, and carry within them a mystery that ‘reveals’ by its concealment, and just as the novel contains within it a necessary fiction (that is, that Mary’s daughters survived) without which the novel ceases to make sense (especially to the Protestant mind), so, ultimately does hagiography function. It conceals a truth in the garments of faith, or better still, locates it in the recesses of national history. This is crypto-Catholicism in a Protestant milieu—truth is a question of belief as much as it is the product of Empirical observation. Lee’s novel is an

epistemological bridge between the literary and the historical, the hagio– and the historio–. The Protestant communion – the British nation – at the end of the eighteenth century was an act of faith as much as it was a product of Enlightenment rationality.

Chapter 8 Notes

¹ Julie Reinhard Lupton, *Afterlives of the Saints: Hagiography, Typology and Renaissance Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. xxviii.

² David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body, and the Law* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 1. Punter specifically locates the Gothic on the “site of vanished cultural territory.” The Gothic properties of *The Recess* have been the subject of considerable scholarship, and the novel is now considered part of the Gothic ‘canon’.

³ Hippolyte Delehaye, S.J. *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* (1907), trans. V.M. Crawford; introduction by Richard J. Schoeck (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, reprinted 1961), p. 2.

⁴ Delehaye, p. 63.

⁵ Delehaye, p. 70.

⁶ Delehaye, p. 3.

⁷ Lupton, p. xxviii.

⁸ Lupton, p. xxi.

⁹ Delehaye, p. 3.

¹⁰ Sophia Lee, *The Recess; Or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783–1785), ed. April Alliston (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), p. 5. All further references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹² Mark Salber Phillips, “Adam Smith and the history of private life: Social and sentimental narratives in 18th-century historiography,” in *The Historical Imagination in Early Modern*

Britain: History, Rhetoric, and Fiction, 1500-1800, ed. David Harris Sacks and Donald R. Kelley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 319 [318–342].

¹³ See Barker-Benfield, pp. 1–37.

¹⁴ Lupton, p. xxx.

¹⁵ Linda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 7.

¹⁶ Coon, p. 5.

¹⁷ Coon, p. 5.

¹⁸ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, intro. John Mackinnon Robertson (London: A. & H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1889), n.p.

http://files.libertyfund.org/files/340/Hume_0211_EBk_v6.0.pdf Accessed August 14, 2013;

Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (London: printed for W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776–1789), chapter 25,

<http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/gibbon-decline28.asp> Accessed July 20, 2013.

¹⁹ Charles Dodd, *Dodd's Church History of England, from the Commencement of the Sixteenth Century to the Revolution in 1688; with Notes, Additions, and a Continuation by The Rev. M.A. Tierney, F.S.A*, 8 vols. (London: by Charles Dolman, 1839), vol. 2, p. 106.

²⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, No. 4, Saturday 31 March 1750, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, eds. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, 16 vols. (London: Yale University Press, 1969), vol. 3, p. 20 [pp. 19–25].

²¹ Johnson, p. 20

²² Johnson, p. 21

²³ Coon, pp. xxi, 9.

²⁴ Lupton, p. xxxi.

²⁵ Johnson, p. 20.

²⁶ Lupton, p. xxix.

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 1, part II.

²⁸ A.E. MacRobert, *Mary Queen of Scots and the Casket Letters* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

²⁹ MacRobert, p. 1.

³⁰ The Babington Plot is the necessary ending of any biography of the Queen of Scots: see Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Phoenix, 2009); John Guy, *My Heart is My Own: the Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004); Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *The Trial of Mary Queen of Scots: Sixteenth-Century Crisis of Female Sovereignty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

³¹ David Hume, *The History of England, from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688*, 6 vols. (1754–1762) (London: printed for T. Cadell, 1778), vol. 5, p. 50.

³² George Buchanan was Mary's tutor but later converted to the reformed church and published *Detectio Mariae Reginae* (London: 1571), which accused Mary of involvement in Darnley's murder; John Knox was the author of *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous rule of women* (Geneva: 1558), a text that earned him the ire of Elizabeth I as well as Mary.

³³ Adam Blackwood, *Martyre de la Royne d'Escosse, Douairiere de France; contenant le vray discours des traïsons à elle faictes à la suscitation d'Elizabet Angloise, par lequel les mensonges, calomnies, et faulses accusations dressées contre ceste tresvertueuse, trescatholique et tresillustre princesse son esclarcies et son innocence averse* (Edinburgh [Paris]: Jean Nafield, 1587).

³⁴ David Hume, *The History of England*, vol. 5, p. 8.

³⁵ Oliver Goldsmith, *The History of England: from the earliest times to the death of George II*, 4 vols. (London: T. Davies and T. Cadell, 1771), vol. 3, p. 66. William Robertson also believed that the casket letters were genuine and agrees with Hume's portrayal of Mary's devout faith as the real reason for her execution. William Robertson, *The History of Scotland* (London, n.p. 1759), pp. 175, 264–265.

³⁶ Beside Mary's tomb is that of Margaret, Countess of Lennox, her mother-in-law; at the foot of Margaret's tomb is the kneeling figure of Lord Darnley, Mary's second husband.

³⁷ As Alliston notes in her edition of *The Recess*, Hume, Robertson, and Goldsmith all report Mary's harsh treatment from Elizabeth's deputies including their refusal to allow any of her women to accompany her to the block. See *The Recess*, p. 359, n51.

³⁸ Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Mary, Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 136–146.

³⁹ Lewis, p. 145.

⁴⁰ John 19:25.

⁴¹ John 19:2.