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A Study of the Language and Style of *Betsy Sheridan's Journal*

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I

Elizabeth (Betsy) Sheridan was the famous eighteenth century playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan's younger sister. She grew up in a wandering life without a settled home. She was born in Henriett Street, Covent Garden, in 1758. Betsy kept a journal from September 1784 to September 1786 and from July 1788 to March 1790. She kept it in her late twenties and early thirties. It was sent in the form of weekly letters, while she was in England, to her elder sister Alicia LeFanu in Dublin.[1] Alicia "was a typical cultivated eighteenth-century lady, her round of little duties enlivened with letter-writing, versifying, and amateur theatricals."[2]

Betsy's father Thomas Sheridan had been a successful actor-manager in Dublin till his theatre was wrecked in a political riot in 1756.[3] Her mother Frances was a minor novelist and playwright.[4] The father was an earnest person, too conscious of his social and intellectual rights. He was a scholar of Westminster and Trinity, Dublin, and advocated a thorough reform of education. In Betsy's letters, the picture of her father she gives us is of a generous, intelligent person, kindly to her and sensible in ordinary affairs, though peevish and ill-tempered in relations with his sons.[5] It was her father who made her intelligent and sensible. She was very close and loyal to her father, too. She writes, "My papa was so full yesterday I could not say all I wish'd. In the evening My Father and I had a great deal of conversation." (23)[6] "Woman's role was to listen rather than to speak."[7] Actually, the young woman frequently describes her father's speech and behavior in her letters.

"Women, as a group, continued to be underprivileged in the eighteenth century."[8] Especially, "the vast majority of middle-class women unquestioningly conformed to the role assigned to them."[9] However, if some were aware how restricting and limited was their prescribed role in the then-society, and yearned for more education, expanding employment opportunities and greater freedom, they were brutal and scornful in their

reaction to such nonconformity. Betsy was a learned fashionable woman who could not only appreciate literary works but produce them. She was sometimes puzzled at "the fashionable expression for feeling of any kind." (160)

In this thesis, we will discuss Betsy's language and style through her letters in order to explore the intelligent and sensible lady's letter writing in the eighteenth century.

II

The literary history of women's epistolary writing is a fascinating survey of cultural views of both the female gender and the letter genre. Since the seventeenth century, when the familiar letter was first thought of as a literary form, male commentators have noted that the epistolary genre seemed particularly suited to the female voice. Newly educated women could easily learn to write letters, and, as epistolary theory became more adapted to worldly culture, women's letters began to be considered the best models of the genre.[10] In the background, "The products of the charity schools and the newly-founded grammar schools made the profession of letters,"[11] too.

The word *journal* is defined by the *OED* as "A daily record of events or occurrences kept for private or official use." (s.v. *journal* 4) Betsy kept recording her daily personal events or occurrences of her interest and feelings through the journal. It was sent in the form of weekly letters to her sister.

Before the telegraph and telephone arrived, the correspondence of friends, when travel was difficult, played a far larger part in personal or social relationships as a whole than it does at present. "Furthermore, modern readers will require an effort of the imagination to appreciate the value of friendship itself"[12] in those days. One's correspondent's gratitude is interpreted as a sign of his or her virtue as a friend.[13] Betsy respects a friendship with Alicia by ending her letter with "God bless you dear my love."

Letters are the products of spontaneous writing. They are not primarily intended to be read by others, and therefore tend to be relatively un-self-conscious in their language and style. Some letters were written which are not literary artifacts. These letters may be referred to domestic letters, written, for example, to inform a wife of the condition of the children or to inform a future husband of an elopement.

Occasionally, Betsy is even aware of this spontaneity. She observes, "But as I scribble a great deal of I am forced to write the first word that occurs, so that of course I must write pretty nearly as I should speak." (57) Moreover, in the journal, she writes

"To you my dear Love I write as I talk in all modes and tempers." (123)

An analysis of such letters as Betsy's journal letters provides important evidence of an author's more spontaneous styles of writing.

III

In this section, we will explore several remarkable examples of Betsy's language and style in her letters, according to four categories.

Betsy wrote to Alicia about her daily events and feelings. The beginning of her first letter is as follows:

> *My dear Love*
> My papa was so full yesterday I could not say all I wish'd. In the evening My Father and I had a great deal of conversation. He has no objection to my seeing Dick and his Wife as he is convinced I will in all act perfectly properly but for his part he never will. This was no time to urge him to it but I said enough to convince him it was a point I had much at heart, our conversation ended in perfect good humour. (23)

Here we find her language and style simple with a simple vocabulary and syntax. She followed the conventions of the letter form with the opening of a letter *My dear Love.* The temporal phrase *in the evening* is put on the initial line. Letters are firmly set in time and space, their background is definitely and even narrowly geographical and historical.[14] At the end of her letter above, she finishes with a certain greeting goodbye: "We sup'd pleasantly together and parted at Twelve tho' now past One so God bless you my dear creature." (26)

Linguistically speaking, we especially note the adverb *properly* meaning "In a goodly fashion,"[15] because performing *in a goodly fashion* was essential for the fashionable people in the eighteenth century. They respected *form.* The words *perfectly* and *perfect* are her favorite intensifiers. Syntactically, the verbal noun phrases like *my seeing Dick* are a favorite expression, too.

1. Vocabulary

(1) Women's vocabulary

Betsy was a woman letter writer, and her writing is full of women' vocabulary. Women are said to be very familiar to "wearing apparel and fabrics."[16] Betsy writes about "Spanish hat" in detail. (October 1, 1784)

—upon gathering the Voices I found a Spanish hat was what I must bye—It is of the

form of that in my picture but made of azure blue silk (the exact color of our Poplin) trim'd with white ribbon and a plume of white feathers. They are also made of black silk and of straw in the same form—without feathers for undress. Even silk Balloons are almost out—I have seen a Cap since I came. (26)

We see some clothing terms *azure blue silk*, *Poplin*,[17] *white ribbon*, *white feathers*, *black silk*, and *silk Baloons*. To read those terms, Alicia could imagine what the hat is easily. The fashionable women were very interested in furnishings. She had her own theory about fashions: "Certainly Ease and assurance are more the striking distinction of a Woman of Fashion than polish'd manners or elegance of deportment." (140)

Though Betsy used simple vocabulary like the above, she often used abstract words and polysyllables, too:

but to my astonishment She spoke...in the most disrespectful tones (68)

A long interruption my dear Love but quite unavoidable. (96)

we have not to apprehend the machinations of art or malice (112)

Betsy adds something to the plain and womanly goodbye that ends a letter, something of her own affection or gratitude. She also writes goodbye in French like the last example below.

Good night my dear love. (43)

God bless you my love it is late. (64)

Good night my dearest Woman. (67)

God bless you dear my love. The clock says it is time to dress. (73)

Bon soir ma toute chère (32)

(2) Sentimental vocabulary

Betsy has certain favorite adjectives and adverbs, such as *kind*, *honest*, *sensible*, *melancholy*. Those words are often found in popular sentimental literature.[18] The literature of the kind emphasizes the importance of the individual's emotional state and benevolence to the weak at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and was criticized as a soap-opera at the end of the century.

More and more women and girls were fond of literature of the kind in the eighteenth century. And "women readers increased—particularly after the spread of circulating libraries brought books within reach, financially and geographically, of many middle-class women."[19] Actually, Betsy was a woman who was in the habit of reading books. In her letter, she wrote, "I have been part of the evening reading his life of Swift. The works I find are dedicated to Grattan." (29) We have examples of sentimental

vocabulary.

She ... bid me assure you of her kindest wishes (25)

He enquired kindly for you and yours. (26)

indeed I should rather say melancholy than grave (25)

I think her very pretty and my Father assures me she is a very honest fellow. (26)

She enter'd on the subject with great warmth (27)

The former is grown a sensible pleasing young Man (29)

Charles very sentimental (48)

Tickell marries Miss Lee next week and so ends his sentimentalising. (184)

Especially, we see the words *kind* and *kindly* above many a time in her letters. They are Betsy's favorites and she respected *kind* persons. Interestingly, we see the verbal noun *sentimentalising*[20] in the last example. The *sentimental* had already been well-established in Betsy's time.[21]

In her letters, when Betsy writes about people she met, she evaluates him, her or them with such adjectives as *fine*, *beautiful*, *handsome*, *elegant*, and *pretty*. The adjectives are often found in sentimental literature, too.

I saw Harry's wife and children—they are beautifull, but I do not think her Handsome as I expected. I was introduced there to a Mr. Marriot whom I think you know and also saw Mrs Wyndham (the famous Miss Hartford)—I think her rather an Elegant than a pretty Woman. (28-29)

The Masquerade is given by Mrs Sturt (a very fine Lady) at Hamersmith, where it seems She has a very beautiful House and gardens. (166)

The adjective *fine* frequently appeared in eighteenth-century women's speech. Suzie Tucker observes about *fine*, "*The Critical Review* rebukes a novelist for the indiscriminate use of *fine*—'the true criterion of a female pen.'"[22]

2. Hyperbole

The eighteenth-century women were accused of emotional speech with a great number of cliché and specific intensifiers.[23] We find Betsy's favorite hyperbolical phrases like *a thousand questions* and intensifiers *greatly*, *strikingly* and *perfectly*.

She ask'd me a thousand questions about you (24)

She made me a thousand offers of service (26)

Mrs Hamilton desires a thousand loves to you (29)

Poor Mrs Angelo has suffer'd greatly these two days (29)

they are greatly shock'd (31)

I will in all act perfectly properly (23)

I only want you and our Emily to be perfectly satisfied. (24)

She is strikingly Elegant in her appearance (29)

The intensifier *greatly* is collocated with *suffer'd* and *shock'd*. By contrast, the intensifier *perfectly* is collocated with *properly* and *satisfied*.

3. Spelling

It is common for eighteenth-century writers to use a kind of spelling in their informal writing (private letters, but journals as well) which differs considerably from that generally found in private texts of the time. Betsy wrote in such rare spellings as *bye* for *buy*, *staid* for *stayed* and *morn* for *morning*.

I must bye (26)

but had I staid (29)

The morn was rather fine (151)

Betsy often writes words beginning with capital letter in the middle of a sentence. The form of past tense ending *–ed* changed into the contracted form *'d*.

I would sing dance or play Chess (37)

She is an interesting Creature (34)

We had a young Gentleman with us (77)

her mind is depress'd and tho' pretty and accomplish'd (133)

4. Syntax

Betsy sometimes writes an elliptical sentence without the verb *be* or the subject *I* in her letters.

the Evening not pleasant (90)

Saw young Lister who married Miss Bourroughs .... At nine return'd, drudged picquet till ten, retired at eleven. (91)

She uses *free indirect speech*, where the actual words spoken are put in indirect sentence. She was free to produce sentences in her letters: "He said very true and immediately turn'd the conversation." (27)

Betsy was fond of verbal noun constructions. The verbal noun clause is nonfinite and has a nominal function—subject, object, and prepositional object.[24]

She complained of not being very well and of having been bled (24)

She regrets much not having seen you when you were here (25)

the weather prevented our keeping our appointment (167)

Last, Betsy on the whole writes highly 'correct' grammar, but we see some instances of non-standard English. We presume that she would have used non-standard English

unconsciously writing private letters.

but as my Father don't *like* speaking French. (33)

All the World gives their shilling to see it. (24)

The phrase "All the World" above means "everybody in the community, the public."[25] The verb form is singular even though the implication of the phrase is that the presence of more than one person is indicated. However, the phrase can have the grammatically plural indefinites *they, their, them* as anaphoric continuation.[26]

Thus, Betsy's language and writing style in her letters sound educated and simple to the readers. They really reflect her social background, and show a clear example of letter writing by an intelligent and sensible woman letter-writer in the eighteenth century.

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1 William LeFanu notes "The Journal is not quite complete, for she occasionally refers to a letter which has not survived, and there are a few gaps in the weekly sequence. The large gap, 1786-1788, occurred because the sisters were then in Dublin together." William LeFanu, editor's note, *Betsy Sheridan's Journal: Letters from Sheridan's sister 1784-1786 and 1788-1790*, ed. William LeFanu (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Prs., 1960) xi.

2 LeFanu 11-12.

3 LeFanu 9.

4 Arnold Hare, *Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (Windsor: Profile Books Ltd., 1981) 5.

5 Introduction 9-10

6 The edition used throughout is Betsy Sheridan, *Betsy Sheridan's Journal: Letters from Sheridan's sister 1784-1786 and 1788-1790*, ed. William LeFanu (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Prs., 1960). Hereafter the page number is cited parenthetically.

7 Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1984) 17.

8 Gorlach 56.

9 Hill 3.

10 Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, introduction, *Writing the Female Voice Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Prs., 1989) vii.

11 J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950) 31.

12 Carey McIntosh, *Common and Courtly Language: The Stylistics of Social Class in 18th -Century English Literature* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Prs., 1986) 82.

13 McIntosh 83.

14 Irvine 3.

15 The *OED* (s.v. *properly* 4).

16 Otto Jespersen notes, in *Language*, "The group into which the largest number of the men's words fell was the animal kingdom; the group into which the largest number of the women's words fell was wearing apparel and fabrics." Jespersen, *Language: its Nature, Development and Origins* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1921) 248.

17 The *OED* defines *poplin*: "A mixed woven fabric, consisting of a silk warp and worsted weft, and having a corded surface," with the first citation (1710).

18 Sentimental literature emphasizes the importance of the individual's emotional state and benevolence to the weak at the beginning of the 18th century, and was criticized as

a soap-opera at the end of the century.

[19] Hill 46.

[20] The sentence is the first citation of the verbal noun *sentimentalising* in the *OED*.

[21] Suzie I. Tucker says,"Sentimental began of course as the adjective of *sentiment*, whose earliest sense was simply Opinion, Judgment, as it still is when we say 'these are my sentiments on that matter'....in the 'sixties and 'seventies sentiment may tacitly imply the finest feelings—a delicate sensibility—and then a sickly sentimentality." *Protean Shape. A Study in Eighteenth-Century Vocabulary and Usage* (London: Univ. of London The Athlone Pres, 1967) 247.

[22] Tucker 79.

[23] Gorlach 57.

[24] David Denison, "Syntax," *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. Vol.IV. ed. Suzanne Romaine (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1998) 268.

[25] The *OED* (s.v. *world* 21)

[26] Denison 105.