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# ‘Taking Sides with the Princess’: Sarah Green’s *Private History of the Court of England* (1808) between Scandal Fiction and Historical Novel

*Abstract*: Sarah Green’s *Private History of the Court of England* is, in L.M. Wilson’s words, a “political-social satire in the ‘secret history’ or satirical *roman-à-clef* mode”, which was published anonymously in 1808. Under the cover of its fifteenth-century setting, the novel presents the reader with the secret history of contemporary celebrities. More interestingly, by drawing parallels between the early reign of Edward IV and the present, the narrative engages with the Delicate Investigation into the conduct of Princess Caroline of Brunswick, which took place in 1806. In spite of its countless naiveties and anachronisms, this work is still worth studying, as it inventively and intriguingly fuses two novelistic modes that were extremely popular at the time: the scandal novel, which had its brief heyday in the years 1806-1811, and the newly formed historical novel. In so doing, it offers a valuable insight into the socio-cultural and, even more remarkably, the *literary* panorama of the politically turbulent pre-Regency years.

*Keywords*: Regency. Scandal Fiction. Historical Novel.

*The Private History of the Court of England* is a historical novel set in the fifteenth century that, by drawing parallels between the early reign of Edward IV and the present, engages with the Delicate Investigation into the conduct of Princess Caroline of Brunswick, which took place in 1806. The work was published anonymously in 1808 and, though its modern editor, Fiona Price, asserts that the critical reaction was “divided”,[1] reviewers almost unanimously condemned the novel. *The Monthly Review* decreed it to be a “clumsy fiction” that “[might] be safely left to itself”.[2] *The Satirist* found it “disappoint[ing]”, and described it as “a mutilated, dull, and disjointed history concerning the rival houses of York and Lancaster, most awkwardly interlarded with trite allusions to events of modern times”.[3] *The Critical Review*, on its part, went so far as to declare: “this is one of the few instances in which we are almost induced to form a wish for new restrictions on the liberty of the press”.[4]

Actually, the only positive assessment came from *Flowers of Literature*, whose reviewer thought it was “an ingenious satire” and called it “a *mathematical* book; for it treats wholly of parallels”. This critic recognised that there was “considerable ingenuity displayed”, but, at the same time, he admitted that “unless the reader [was] intimately acquainted with the memoirs of the great world, he [would] frequently stumble in his judgment and err in his applications; the real events of both ages being so mingled”. Then, he proceeded to “con-

[1] S. Green, *The Private History of the Court of England*, ed. F. Price, London and New York, Routledge, (1808) 2011, p. vii.

[2] *The Monthly Review; Or Literary Journal, Enlarged*, 58, January 1809, p. 101.

[3] *The Satirist, or Monthly Meteor*, 2, May 1808, pp. 288-89.

[4] *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature*, 3rd ser., 14, June 1808, p. 218.

fess" candidly that his "ignorance of many events of several preceding years disqualifie[d] [him] from forming a competent opinion of the work, as its merit must rest chiefly upon the truth of the various incidents and comparisons".[5] Thus, quite ironically, the only favourable review was written by an avowedly incompetent critic. Besides that, both *Flowers of Literature* and *The Private History* were published by the same printer – B. Crosby and Co. of Stationers' Court – who obviously had an interest in promoting his novels.

However, despite such adverse criticism, the book proved popular in its time. It underwent a second edition in the same year, and it was the first published work of an author who went on to write at least sixteen novels between 1808 and 1825, and became "one of the most prolific women writers of satirical novels in the early nineteenth century".[6] Unquestionably, due to its prolixity, repetitiveness and relentless moralising, The *Private History* proves challenging for today's reader. Nevertheless, in spite of this and of its countless naiveties and anachronisms, this work is interesting insofar as it intriguingly fuses two novelistic modes that were extremely popular at the time – the scandalous secret history and the historical novel – and offers a valuable insight into the cultural and, even more remarkably, the *literary* panorama of the pre-Regency years.

First of all, it is important to highlight the connection between scandal fiction as a narrative mode and the rise of modern celebrity culture. Thanks to the media's expanding reach and the development of an "apparatus of celebrity",[7] the late eighteenth century witnessed an explosion of this phenomenon, which stemmed specifically from "the interplay between individual and institutions, markets and media".[8] In Joseph Roach's words, at this time "celebrity culture fully emerged as a quasi devotional force in the secular public sphere".[9] The popularity of scandal fiction in the period under scrutiny fed on celebrity culture, and a novel like *The Private History* – which owed its success to the public's appetite for the secret history of royals, aristocrats and actresses – would not have been written if those figures had not already acquired by that time a celebrity status. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody open their study on celebrity by defining their subject as "the condition

[5] F. BLAGDON, "Introduction: Novellists [*sic*]", in *Flowers of Literature, for 1808 & 1809*, London, J.G. Barnard for B. Crosby and Co., 1810, p. lxx.

[6] L.M. WILSON, "British Women Writing Satirical Novels in the Romantic Period. Gendering Authorship and Narrative Voice", *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780-1840*, 17, Summer 2007, p. 29. For biographical information on Sarah Green, see *The Corvey Novels Project at the University of Nebraska — Studies in British Literature of the Romantic Period* —, http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/Corvey/html/Projects/CorveyNovels/Green/BridegroomBio.htm (last accessed on 20 August 2020), and http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/Corvey/html/Projects/CorveyNovels/Green/Gretna%20Green%20Marriages%20bio.htm (last accessed on 20 August 2020). According to the compilers of the website *Orlando*, "Sarah Green wrote most fictional forms available to her" and "was one of the ten most prolific novelists of 1800-19" (*Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*, Cambridge, CUP Online, 2006, http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=greesa [last accessed on 29 October 2020]).

[7] T. MOLE, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 16. "The term [*apparatus*] encompasses the individual, the industry and the audience that combine to produce the celebrity phenomenon and acknowledges that these elements come together at a specific historical moment" (*ibidem*, p. 6).

[8] M. LUCKHURST and J. MOODY (eds), *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 1.

[9] J. ROACH, "Celebrity Culture and the Problem of Biography", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 65 (4), Winter 2014, p. 471. According to Tom Mole, the genesis of modern celebrity culture "is historically specific. […] we've had celebrities since the late eighteenth century and a celebrity culture since the beginning of the nineteenth" (T. MOLE, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity*, p. 1).

of being much talked about",[10] and scandal fiction, which had its brief heyday in the years 1806-1811, *throve* on gossip. Scandal fiction also prospered on "notoriety", another concept explored in celebrity studies and related to terms such as "controversy […], scandal […] and sensation".[11] However, when approaching this narrative mode, the most useful concept is a *third* category, which stands between celebrity and notoriety. I am referring to what Clara Tuite has called "scandalous celebrity" and applied to George Gordon, Lord Byron, a personality who played a central role in the Regency period. Indeed, those narratives flourished thanks to this "new form of ambivalent fame that mediate[d] between notoriety and traditional forms of heroic renown".[12]

In what has been called "the novelistic age", demand for and production of novels increased exponentially, also because of the change in copyright law that took place in 1774. Prices dropped, and the circulating library system widened the reading public in an unprecedented way. New popular subgenres, like the gothic and the sentimental novel, emerged.[13] These novelties in the production and consumption of printed materials – first and foremost the spread of circulating libraries – were also crucial in the formation of "a celebrity culture in the modern sense", since this required precisely "the growth of a modern industry of production, promotion and distribution, and a modern audience, massive, anonymous, socially diverse and geographically distributed".[14] As far as that peculiar, popular, novelistic subgenre called 'scandal fiction' is concerned, "selling celebrity"[15] became a productive business primarily thanks to the publisher James Fletcher Hughes, who reinvigorated the tradition of the political satirical *roman à clef* inaugurated in Britain by Delarivier Manley's *The New Atalantis* (1709), a Tory "secret history" that exposed members of the Whig cabinet (whose real names were revealed in a "key") by presenting a combination of political and love intrigues.[16]

Hughes specialised in *topical* scandal fictions, which Walter Scott labelled as "Tale[s] of the Times" in his *incipit* to *Waverley* (1814), and described as "a dashing sketch of the fashionable world, a few anecdotes of private scandal thinly veiled, and if lusciously painted so much the better".[17] The prototype of the so-called 'season fictions' was T.S. Surr's *A Winter in London; or, Sketches of Fashion*, published in 1806. Numerous imitations followed, which similarly boasted 'season' titles: *A Summer at Brighton* (1807) by Mary Julia Young, who also authored *A Summer at Weymouth* (1808); the pseudonymous

[10] M. LUCKHURST and J. MOODY (eds), *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*, p. 1.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[12] C. TUITE, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*, Cambridge, CUP, 2015, p. iv.

[13] See A.H. STEVENS, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 1-2.

[14] T. MOLE, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity*, p. 10. On circulating libraries, see A.H. STEVENS, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, ch. 3.

[15] M. LUCKHURST and J. MOODY (eds), *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*, p. 8.

[16] See C. TUITE, "Celebrity and Scandalous Fiction", in P. GARSIDE and K. O'BRIEN (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English. Volume II: English and British Fiction 1750-1820*, Oxford, OUP, 2015, p. 388. A precedent for this kind of fiction were the *chroniques scandaleuses*, which originated in France in the second half of the seventeenth century and became extremely popular not only in France, but also in England, where, during the reigns of Charles II and James II, writers both translated the French romances and produced their own variants. The Tory polemicist Delarivier Manley continued the tradition into the reign of Queen Anne, and, in *Memoirs of Europe, Towards the Close of the Eighth Century* (1710), "related present-day scandal about her political enemies such as Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough under the cover of a historical setting" (A.H. STEVENS, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, p. 25).

[17] W. SCOTT, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, ed. C. LAMONT, Oxford, OUP, (1814) 2015, p. 4.

Orlando's *A Summer by the Sea* (1807); the anonymous *A Winter in Bath* (1807) and Mrs E.G. Bayfield's *A Winter at Bath* (1807); the fictitious Charles Sedley's *A Winter in Dublin* (1808); J.P. Hurstone's *An Autumn at Cheltenham* (1808) and Honoria Scott's *A Winter in Edinburgh* (1810).[18] All these novels focused on the secret lives of the rich and powerful, and claimed "to unfold the mysteries of high life, not least the secret origins of 'illegitimate' children".[19] This is the judgement that Scott, again, passed on this fictional mode in *The Quarterly Review* of May 1810:

> We have now the lowest denizens of Grub-street narrating, under the flimsy veil of false names, and through the medium of a fictitious tale, all that malevolence can invent and stupidity propagate concerning private misfortunes and personal characters. We have our Winters in London, Bath, and Brighton, of which it is the dirty object to drag forth the secret history of the day, and to give to Scandal a court of written record.[20]

Crammed with innuendos and featuring the names of fashionable people in lightly disguised form, these works were unsurprisingly considered slanderous. In the "Postscript" to Sedley's *The Faro Table*, Hughes described an assault in his shop carried out by one of the personages Sedley (whom Hughes declared "was a fictitious person") had victimised in *A Winter in Dublin*.[21]

*The Private History* is a "political-social satire in the 'secret history' or satirical *roman-à-clef* mode".[22] Under the cover of its fifteenth-century setting, the novel presents the reader with the secret history of contemporary celebrities. As its author declares, "anecdote is the principal subject of [her] work"[23] and, alongside the central plot, focused on the dissipated life of Edward IV and the unfortunate, rejected, Princess Bona, the novel features a crowded pantheon of high society figures. Undoubtedly, many parallels were so specific to the time that they are lost on the modern reader. The novel is replete with instances of depraved, cruel men and deceived, abused women who are often responsible for their own misfortunes. The episodes related are chiefly connected to the sex-lives of upper-class society, and are full of details that would have certainly been familiar to readers of gossip columns or 'paragraphs', as they were called at the time.

The "Preface", starting from the immutability of human nature, sanctions the compari-

[18] According to Jacqueline Belanger and Peter Garside, Honoria Scott "may or may not be a pseudonym for Susan Fraser" (J. Belanger and P. Garside, "The English Novel, 1800-1829: Update 4 (June 2003-August 2004)", *Cardiff Corvey; Reading the Romantic Text*, 12, Summer 2004, p. 113, http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/romtextv2/files/2013/02/engnov4.pdf [last accessed on 31 August 2020]).

[19] P. Garside, "J.F. Hughes and the Publication of Popular Fiction, 1803-1810", *The Library*, 6th ser., 9 (3), September 1987, p. 249. On season fictions see also, by the same author, "Popular Fiction and National Tale: Hidden Origins of Scott's *Waverley*", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 46 (1), June 1991, pp. 30-53.

[20] W. Scott, "*Fatal Revenge; or, the Family of Montorio: a Romance*. By Dennis Jasper Murphy", *The Quarterly Review*, 3, May 1810, p. 341.

[21] See P. Garside, "J.F. Hughes and the Publication of Popular Fiction", p. 250. For hypotheses regarding the identity of the prolific writer of scandal fictions who published under the pseudonym of Charles Sedley, see J. Belanger and P. Garside, "The English Novel, 1800-1829", pp. 104-109. The authors think that "the name most probably derives from the Restoration rake, Sir Charles Sedley (1639-1701)", and note how "Sedley was also commonly used as a name for licentious characters in contemporary fiction". Then, they concentrate on three possible contenders "for the dubious credit of authorship".

[22] L.M. Wilson, "British Women Writing Satirical Novels in the Romantic Period", p. 29.

[23] S. Green, *The Private History of the Court of England. In two Volumes*, London, J.G. Barnard, 1808, vol. I, p. 65. Page numbers given parenthetically for subsequent quotations from the novel refer to this edition.

son between the past and the present: "If princes and nobles in days of yore, were weary of their lawful and chaste wives, and wasted their patrimony and that of their people in the society of those women, who were some of them outcasts from polished society, do we not witness the same fatal propensities in succeeding reigns?" (vol. I, pp. x-xi). The concepts that "human nature is, in every age, the same" (vol. I, p. xiv) and that vice and depravity ruled sovereign in the fifteenth as in the nineteenth century are reiterated over and over, substantiating the author's satirical intent. Approaching the end of the narrative, for example, the reader is again reminded that "the above instances, which happened in the fifteenth century, are only mentioned to shew, that human nature is in every age the same. Little are the innovations in morals, since the wise Solomon advised us not to ask, 'Why were the former days better than these?'" (vol. II, p. 155). Then, in the "Conclusion", the writer restates her point and declares that "Both court and city were devoted as much to dissipation as they are at present" (vol. II, p. 246).

On occasions, virtuous examples among the nobility are apparently commended, but either the irony of the eulogium is soon discovered, or the favourable judgement is immediately reappraised. "Nobility" (ch. VII, vol. II), for instance, deals with vicious old aristocrats who corrupt youth, but opens with the following words of praise that, retrospectively, highlight the satirical intent of what follows:

> Though vice and depravity of morals in a great measure predominated, yet England, nevertheless, could boast of many great and philanthropic characters: the foundation of several public charities, of the most laudable nature, were planned in this reign, and youth and unprotected innocence often found an asylum under the habitation, and the peculiar patronage of some of the virtuous nobility. (vol. II, p. 80)

Similarly, "Exalted Virtue" (ch. XVI, vol. II), which presents "Mary, a lady of the blood royal of Scotland" (p. 202) as a positive model of "feminine virtue", is followed by "Female Degradation", which features the corrupted Countess di Ladona (ch. XVII, vol. II).

However, when the contemporary celebrities portrayed in the narrative held key roles in politics and society, instead of being simply representatives of fashionable life, they are still recognisable to the modern reader. This is true for the actress and writer Mary Robinson, the first known mistress of the young Prince of Wales (afterwards George IV), who appears in the novel as Maria de Rosenvault. Maria is an accomplished player on the lute and singer, and a talented composer of poetry and songs. Just as the Prince was enraptured on seeing her acting as Perdita in David Garrick's adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, *Perdita and Florizel*, so Edward falls in love on seeing her playing in a pageant, "attired in the habit of a Danish Princess" (vol. I, p. 10). The name itself is similar, since Maria's maiden name is "Denbigh", while Mary Robinson's was "Darby". The name is revealing in the case of Mrs Ellinor Danjour too. She becomes the mistress of the Duke of Clarence, who is "first captivated [...] at a public kind of theatre, where she appear[s] to peculiar advantage" (vol. I, p. 98). Danjour is a quasi-perfect anagram of the surname adopted by the actress Dorothea Jordan, the mistress of the Duke of Clarence (later William IV) who bore him ten children.[24]

[24] The presence of the many theatrical celebrities who people the novel, which could seem anachronistic to the reader, is thus justified: "at this period of history we find no regular licenced theatres: yet places of public amusement were magnificently decorated, and, at their masques, pageants, and tournaments, no expence was spared to render them splendid" (vol. II, p. 146).

Other notorious princely mistresses who appear under cover in the novel are Mrs Maria Fitzherbert and Lady Jersey. Mrs Maria Fitzherbert was the twice-widowed Catholic the Prince of Wales secretly married in 1785, without the King's consent. This marriage was invalid under the 1772 Royal Marriages Act, which prescribed that no member of the royal family under twenty-five could marry without the King's consent. Had this marriage been valid, it would have excluded the Prince from the succession to the throne under the terms of the Act of Settlement of 1701, which decreed that no English monarch could hold the throne if married to a Catholic. In the novel, Edward's secret marriage to Elizabeth, a Lady "in her wane" widow to Sir John Grey, is presented as "a marriage, without witnesses, hurried over by an itinerant priest" (vol. I, p. 71). The author, however, is at pain to introduce the religious issue, and, in order to create a distinction in creed, she asserts that Lady Elizabeth is bigoted, superstitious and "at the Head of all the rigid Catholics", while Edward "favour[s] the creed of Wickliffe and his followers" (vol. I, p. 68).

A few pages later, we are told that "by a strange infatuation in a young and beautiful prince, Edward seemed possessed of a kind of mania for the charms of elderly ladies" (vol. I, p. 79). In fact, all the Prince of Wales's mistresses were older than he was. One of the most notorious was Lady Jersey (*née* Villiers), a grandmother in her forties and a mother of ten children. In the novel, she appears as Lady Conyers, "a lady who expected every day to become a grandmother; she was, indeed, older than the mother of Edward; and her youngest children were marriageable" (*ibidem*). The peculiarity of the Prince's sexual liaisons had, possibly, a part in making him the favourite target not only of verbal, but also of visual satire, as the countless caricatures published over the years show. Two of them – portraying the couple formed by Florizel and Perdita with Mary Robinson's cuckolded husband (Fig. 1), and Princess Caroline discovering her spouse's adulterous affair with Lady Jersey (Fig. 2) – are worth including as they bear witness to the amused irreverence that characterised such works.

Fig. 1: The Prince of Wales and Mary Robinson as Florizel and Perdita, broadside ballad dated 10 November 1780. © The Trustees of the British Museum, released as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

The national hero Horatio Nelson, first Viscount Nelson, appears in Green's narrative as "the matchless" Lord Fauconberg,

Fig. 2: The Princess of Wales discovering the Prince and Lady Jersey. James Gillray, hand-coloured etching, 24 May 1796. © The Trustees of the British Museum, released as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

> a hero, whose name was a terror to the French, both by sea and land; brave as a lion, indefatigable in the cause he served, he performed those achievements which would seem fabulous, if told as the prowess of ancient knights; yet this undaunted warrior was possessed of every amiable, every christian, virtue in private life. (vol. I, p. 58)

Admiral Nelson, however, was fatally shot in the course of the victorious battle of Trafalgar, whereas the “undaunted and successful hero” Lord Fauconberg, “whom no danger could intimidate, or numbers overawe”, does not die at sea, but is killed at Tewkesbury. The blatant discrepancy is explained by the author in the following way: “our navy, then, did not approach, in any degree, to that zenith of glory it at present boasts; for though Lord Fauconberg frequently protected the sea, against the intrusions of our gallic neighbours, he was also often called into the field, during the combats of civil war” (vol. I, p. 192).

Another political personality who is presented under an extremely positive light is the former Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, *alias* Lord Cobham, “a great and intrepid statesman, [who] has been aptly compared to a POLAR STAR, to guide the English to wealth and happiness” (vol. I, p. 59). Unfortunately, however, we are told that the foolish Edward “never appeared sufficiently grateful to *him*, or attached to *his* cause, to whom he owed his throne and life” (*ibidem*). Inexplicably, the Prince is “infatuated” with his “false friend” (vol. I, p. 60) Lovelace, “a man of noble family, eminent abilities, but of the loosest morals,

and most famed for the quantity of wine he could drink at a banquet" (vol. I, p. 55). In a chapter aptly titled "Mistaken Confidence", we are told that:

> Lovelace was a disgrace, in some respects, to [the] noble family [of York], stimulated Edward to drink to excess, and led him into every haunt of vice; and he might, with truth, be said, by his ill example and precepts, at the time the princes were in their nonage, to have corrupted the morals of them all, and to have sown those seeds of vice in their minds, which promised no fruit of perfection in maturity. Indeed it seemed to be as much the delight of this thoughtless and inconsiderate man, to train the princes to every species of licentiousness, as a virtuous Spartan would feel in seeing his offspring become every thing great and good. (vol. I, p. 56)

Under the name of Lovelace, Green is depicting the leader of the radical Whigs, Charles James Fox. The connection becomes clear for the modern reader when Lovelace is defined as "THE MAN OF THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE" (vol. I, p. 61), a title Fox acquired after the July 1780 election. Lovelace is both "the avowed defender of the House of Lancaster"[25] and a friend of the heir of York (see vol. II, pp. 24-25), and, for the author, this is as paradoxical as the Prince of Wales's support of the foxite Whigs. Indeed, we are told that "both in his boyish days, and in maturer age, [the Lancastrians] were generally the chosen companions of him, who, from the house of York, was destined to fill the throne of England" (vol. II, pp. 140-41).

The concept is reiterated a few pages later and connected, this time, to another easily recognisable celebrity: the lexicographer James Knowles. He appears in the novel as Sir Thomas Knollys, the scholar who "carefully revised the English language, and brought it, in comparison to what it had heretofore been, to a state of purity and elegance" (vol. II, p. 148). As the reader is informed, "to the proper accentuation of words, we are entirely indebted to this master and reformer of the English tongue" (*ibidem*). The statement that Sir Thomas is "a great favourite of Edward's, and, like all his other favourites, attached to the cause of Lancaster" (vol. II, p. 147) is obviously absurd when read in its fifteenth-century context. It only makes sense if we think that, in this way, the author intends to chastise the Prince of Wales's closeness to those who did not vote with the King's government and supported, instead, the prerogatives of Parliament against the Crown's authority. According to Green, this is highly risky when the country is at war, since dissension at home inevitably helps the enemy. This danger becomes reality in the novel: "as the English were now at war with France, Louis, the eleventh of that name, who was of an intriguing and politic genius, took advantage of our dissensions at home, and gained over, by bribery and other stratagems, many of the Lancastrians to his party" (vol. I, p. 57). What happened in the fifteenth century is still a valuable lesson, since the English, again, are at war with France.

This is far from being the only instance in which the author explicitly engages with politics. In Volume I, we find a chapter that is titled "English Rebellion, and French Policy" and that, according to the footnotes, would be based on David Hume's *History of England* (see p. 121) and on "Rapin, Smollet, and others" (p. 131). This section relates the plan of the "French Machiavel" De Commines to debauch the English (who, however, are already depraved) to conquer them the better:

[25] We are even told that, on Lovelace's death, "some papers [were] found in possession of the deceased, which proved how dearly he was attached to the interests of the house of Lancaster" (vol. II, pp. 30-31).

Knowing also, how the English had, of late, given themselves up to every species of expensive and luxurious pleasure, in which only they were excelled, in a very small degree, in France, he trusted that, by a sojournment in that depraved country, he might still improve that love of voluptuousness and public amusements, so as to dwindle the hardy English into effemimacy, and enervate them sufficiently to make them an easy conquest, whenever they should find their army sufficiently weakened by the slothful rust of peace. (vol. I, pp. 129-30)

Other chapters fully devoted to politics are "A Change of Ministry" (ch. XVIII, vol. I) and "The Dissolution of a Corrupt Parliament" (ch. VI, vol. II). In a thinly-veiled manner, they deal with the formation first, and then the dissolution of the Ministry of All the Talents, a broad coalition government that was formed following the death of William Pitt the Younger, in 1806, by the newly-appointed Prime Minister Baron William Grenville. The coalition included Charles James Fox and is described in the novel as composed of greedy and profligate men:

That virtuous parliament, which had stood for so long a time under Edward's excellent father, were now all out of place; which was filled up by men, who sought not the good of their country, like Cobham, but only how to fill their own coffers, give expensive entertainments, and lay the nation under fresh taxes and contributions to support their own unbounded extravagance. (vol. I, pp. 231-32)

After the collapse of the Ministry of All the Talents, Pitt's supporters returned to power, with the Tory William Cavendish-Bentinck, Duke of Portland, as Prime Minister. The event is thus commented upon in the narrative: "a dissolution of parliament soon followed, and a new ministry, firm friends to the interests of the house of York, were chosen in the place of those venal men, whose chief aim appeared to be directed to the erecting the house of Lancaster on the ruins of that of York" (vol. II, p. 79). Although politics, like satire, at the time was still considered a largely masculine discourse, Green appears really keen on discussing and passing judgement on political issues. When, in 1810, she published – anonymously – *The Reformist!!! A Serio-Comic Political Novel*, the critic for *The Monthly Review* could not believe "that the experience of a lady could have furnished all the scenes which [were] […] delineated", and claimed that he could not "attribute to a female pen the great illiberality which occasionally display[ed] itself" in the script.[26]

As already stated, at the core of *The Private History* we find Edward's rejection of the "sublime" Princess Bona. Actually, this event was extremely marginal to the life of the future Edward IV, and its centrality in the novel can only be explained when we understand that the two fictional characters are in fact figures for the Prince and Princess of Wales, whose matrimonial vicissitudes were notorious at the time. Alongside scandal fictions, in the years 1806-1810 Hughes published an equally topical body of "royal" titles that exploited, precisely, the public's quasi-morbid interest in the separation of the princely couple. Such an interest had reached a new intensity with the Delicate Investigation into the conduct of the Princess, an inquiry by four key members of the Whig administration set up in May 1806 and instigated by rumours concerning Princess Caroline's adoption of a three-month mysterious child: William Austin.

Public opinion firmly believed that Caroline had withheld from publication an account containing her version of the events. This view is also advanced in Green's novel, where we

[26] Quoted in L.M. Wilson, "Women Writing Satirical Novels in the Romantic Period", p. 27. In the Preface to *The Reformist!!!*, however, the author "honestly confessed" that "politics [was] not [her] *forté*" (*ibidem*, p. 32).

find an explicit reference to an alleged vindication, whose suppression is imputed to a conspiracy: "this cruel calumny having reached her ears, she submitted to an impartial public a defence, which, from party intrigues, we are sorry to say, is irrecoverably lost: for Edward, aided by his female mentor, entirely suppressed its publication" (vol. I, p. 250). However, Hughes's publications promptly filled this editorial gap. *The Royal Investigation, or Vindication of the Princess of Wales*, published in 1807, wanted to offer an account of "[Caroline's] Acquittal on twenty-four supposed charges" and "a complete refutation of all the calumnies circulated to her prejudice". In the same year, *The Royal Eclipse; or, Delicate Facts Exhibiting the Secret Memoirs of Squire George and His Wife*, by the pseudonymous Diogenes, came again from Hughes's press and was bitterly criticised by the *Critical Review*:

> The late allusions to delicate facts and delicate enquiries, whether in the discussions of newspapers, or in the more diffuse and elaborate nonsense of satirical romances, are all impositions on public credulity. For the true state of the question is a secret; and it seems to be the opinion of a great personage, and a committee of his privy council, that it should remain a secret.
>
> As long as it does not involve any consideration affecting the succession, the public have no concern in the business, but as it may sympathize with the private felicity of the heir to the throne.[27]

Again in 1807, one of Sedley's novels, *The Infidel Mother: or, Three Winters in London*, was devoted to the subject. This is the newspaper advertisement for the second edition, which was published in the same year:

> MR. HUGHES has the honour of announcing the Second Edition of this singularly interesting Work: it embraces correct details of fashionable life in all its varied forms, and rescues from undeserved obloquy an Illustrious Personage, who silently smarts under the noble sacrifice of truth and delicacy; and completely develops a certain delicate mystery that has so long agitated the fashionable world.[28]

In 1808, besides *The Private History of the Court of England*, a good number of royal titles saw the light of day: J.P. Hurstone's *Royal Intrigues: or, Secret Memoirs of Four Princesses*; the anonymous historical novel *The Royal Legend. A Tale*, which used as a cover the profligate youth of the future Henry V, and the equally anonymous *The Royal Stranger. A Tale*, where the protagonist is thus introduced: "The Stranger was possessed of every accomplishment which could draw admiration and love from mankind".[29] Actually, when the reviewers attacked *The Private History*, it was this conspicuous and popular body of scandal fiction they wanted to indict. The critic for the *Monthly Review* declared:

> Those who attend to the lighter productions of the press cannot fail to have observed the mischievous taste for libels on individuals, which has for a long time prevailed; gratifying at once the too general love of indiscriminate detraction, and the vulgar thirst after fashionable anecdote, by the mixture of a small portion of truth with a great share of falsehood and malignity.[30]

*The Critical Review* was likewise categorical in condemning the genre:

> It is a sign of great depravity of manners when such books as that before us are encouraged and multiply. The court of France (the most dissolute in the universe) has abounded with them in her

[27] *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature*, 3rd ser., 11, August 1807, pp. 428-29.
[28] *The Morning Chronicle*, Saturday, 6 June 1807.
[29] Anonymous, *The R___l Stranger. A Tale*, London, J.F. Hughes, 1808, p. 3.
[30] *The Monthly Review; Or Literary Journal, Enlarged*, 58, January 1809, p. 101.

most dissolute periods; and the court of England under Charles the second followed the example. We have been tolerably free from similar pests during the reigns of the Brunswicks, till within the last few years, when the very weak and unguarded conduct of some persons of the highest rank in the country has opened again the floodgates of scandal.[31]

Lord Byron was similarly convinced of the detrimental nature of this kind of fiction, as the letter he wrote on 14 December 1813 to Thomas Ashe, the author of one of the titles I will mention next, shows:

Whatever may be your situation, I cannot but commend your resolution to abjure and abandon the publication and composition of works such as those to which you have alluded. Depend upon it, they amuse *few*, disgrace both *reader* and *writer*, and benefit none. It will be my wish to assist you, as far as my limited means will admit, to break such a bondage.[32]

The vogue for the royal titles, however, was to continue in the following years. John Agg's *The Royal Sufferer; or, Intrigues at the Close of the Eighteenth Century. A Fashionable Novel. Interspersed with Anecdotes, Connected with the British Court* was published in 1810, and Thomas Ashe's *The Spirit of "The Book"; or, Memoirs of Caroline, Princess of Hasburgh, a Political and Amatory Romance* came out in 1811. The latter work was still advertised referring the prospective reader to the allegedly suppressed "Book": "this interesting work embraces the subject matter of the extraordinary and momentous suppressed Book, known by the name of the 'Delicate Investigation' and comprehends Memoirs of many of the now distinguished and illustrious personages of the age".[33] *The Royal Sufferer* was reissued in 1813 as *The Secret Memoirs of an Illustrious Princess; or, The Royal Sufferer*. This was a crucial year because the findings of the Delicate Investigation were finally made public, and published with the following, hyper-detailed, title: *The Genuine Book. An Inquiry, or, Delicate Investigation, into the Conduct of Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, Before Lords Erskine, Spencer, Grenville, and Ellenborough, the Four Special Commissioners of Inquiry, Appointed by His Majesty in the Year 1806. Reprinted from an Authentic Copy, Superintended through the Press by the Right Hon. Spencer Perceval*. Its "Advertisement" read:

So many and so various have been the impositions on public credulity with regard to "The Book" that it has been deemed advisable to resort to an infallible proof of the authenticity of the following pages, and place beyond a question the fact of the whole being a correct copy of the original suppressed "Book" prepared for publication by the late Mr. Perceval.[34]

*The Genuine Book* had been preceded by the publication of a letter – dated 14 January 1813 – that Caroline had written to her husband. The missive was reported in full by *The Morning Chronicle* on 10 February, and then re-published in most British newspapers. As

[31] *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature*, 3rd ser., 14, June 1808, p. 217.

[32] T. MORE (ed.), *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life*, 2 vols, London, John Murray, 1830, vol. I, p. 493.

[33] *The Morning Chronicle*, Tuesday, 30 July 1811. A previous advertisement claimed that the work was "*formed upon the basis* of the suppressed 'Book'" (*The Star*, Monday, 27 May 1810; emphasis added). In his *Memoirs*, Cyrus Redding claimed that Ashe "wrote false memoirs of living people, to get paid for their suppression" (C. REDDING, *Fifty Years' Recollections*, 3 vols, London, Skeet, 1858, vol. III, p. 67).

[34] S. PERCEVAL, *The Genuine Book. An Inquiry, or, Delicate Investigation, into the Conduct of Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales, […] Second edition*, London, R. Edwards, 1813, p. i.

Jane Robins puts it, "it caused a furore"[35] and further increased popular support for Caroline. A few days later, Jane Austen wrote in a letter to a friend: "I suppose all the world is sitting in judgement upon the Princess of Wales's letter. Poor woman, I shall support her as long as I can".[36] Among the Princess's new fans we find *The Times*, which after its declaration for Caroline saw its sales shot up.

The obsession with the royal marriage reached its climax in 1820, with George's desperate (and pathetic) attempts to divorce his wife to prevent her from being crowned Queen. As the only legal grounds for divorce were adultery, the King requested that Parliament might dissolve the marriage and deprive Caroline of the title of Queen, citing her alleged infidelity with Bartolomeo Pergami when travelling on the continent. Even during what took the appearance of a state trial, Caroline remained immensely popular.[37] Actually, she was seen as the representative of "the people". She appealed to republicans, radicals and reformers alike, and was paradoxically transformed into the symbol of opposition to the unpopular monarch and his government.[38] Predictably, two new royal-title novels were published in 1820, both by Edward Barron: *The Royal Wanderer, or Secret Memoirs of Caroline* and *The Wrongs of Royalty; Being, a Continuation of The Royal Wanderer, or, Memoirs of Her Present Majesty Queen Caroline*.[39]

Going back to the *à clef* defence of Princess Caroline in *The Private History*, Bona of Savoy is unvaryingly presented as a paramount of beauty and an epitome of virtue. She is first introduced as "a princess then in the bloom of early youth, lovely in her person, matchless in virtue, and possessed of every elegant acquirement" (vol. I, p. 66). The eulogy is reiterated in very similar terms later on: "the Princess of Savoy [was] adorned with all that youth, innocence, blooming health, and innate modesty could combine to make her lovely and alluring among women" (vol. I, pp. 160-61), and again in the "Conclusion", where her victory over calumny is celebrated: "the fame of the virtuous and accomplished Princess of Savoy rose more resplendent, in snowy whiteness, since the insidious attacks of her calumniators" (vol. II, p. 246). Contrariwise, the author's judgement of Edward is extremely harsh. He is repeatedly accused of dissipation, lasciviousness, gambling and drunkenness. The episodes relating his depravity abound, and his profligate conduct is time and again remarked upon: "[Edward] gave way to the natural bent of his mind—the love of pleasure; and again wooed dissipation in every form" (vol. I, pp. 247-48). Edward's mistress is not spared, and is made the target of offensive jests that, exploiting a self-defensive strategy authorised by the *à clef* mode, are imputed to the barbarity of the times (see vol. I, pp. 248-49). The people hope that the marriage with Bona will reform Edward (see vol. I, p. 113), and we are told that the prince at first "evinced no aversion to this match, but shewed rather a more than ready acquiescence to it". To this, the author adds: "what

[35] J. ROBINS, *The Trial of Queen Caroline: The Scandalous Affair that Nearly Ended a Monarchy*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006, p. 41.

[36] Quoted *ibidem*, p. 42.

[37] For a curious episode at Drury Lane bearing witness to Caroline's popularity with radicals, see *ibidem*, p. 97.

[38] On Caroline's popularity in 1820, see *ibidem*, p. 94 and *passim*.

[39] In 1815, a novel with a similar title written by the pseudonymous Algernon had been published: *The Royal Wanderer, or the Exile of England*. However, as the *Critical Review* observed, the adventures related were mostly invented, and only slightly connected to "the heroine, whose misfortunes have ever been regarded with compassion by the British nation" (*The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature*, 3$^{th}$ ser., 2, Dec 1815, p. 652). As should be evident by now, scandal fiction thrived on similarity in titles.

could be his motive for this duplicity, posterity has yet to learn" (vol. I, p. 66). This indeed appears a disingenuous move on her part, since the reasons for the Prince of Wales's initial acceptance of the marriage were well known to public opinion, as were the reasons for his subsequent rejection. The judgement the author officially passes on the Prince is that of impulsiveness, but she explicitly says that she is minimising: "the ungrateful conduct of the prince is sincerely to be deplored; and the mind naturally perceives how dangerous and imprudent, not to give them an harsher term, were the steps which he took in binding himself to Lady Elizabeth Grey" (vol. I, p. 78).

However, apart from such similarities in characterisation and situation, as the novel proceeds, numerous precise parallels that refer the reader directly to the Delicate Investigation can be found. Princess Bona is presented as "a deserted mistress, a bride affianced and neglected, [whom] no other prince could seek […] in marriage" (vol. I, p. 249), and this only makes sense in view of the fact that, after the separation, the Princess of Wales was not permitted to have an amorous liaison under penalty of death. Like Caroline, Bona after being abandoned is unjustly attacked – "the most virtuous of her sex was stigmatized with the character of a female libertine" (vol. I, p. 250) – and public opinion turns against Edward for his contemptuous neglect of the Princess (see vol. I, pp. 204 and 251).

The second volume opens with an "Injured Princess" who, "in an almost total exclusion from society, [weeps] in solitude, over her misfortunes" (pp. 1-2). Just like Caroline, who was "refused the basic standards of a common court", was not "given the chance to appear before the enquiry and defend herself", and "had no chance of an appeal, as the report's findings were devoid of any legal framework",[40] Princess Bona has "the mortification of seeing a public testimony of her worth denied to her" (p. 1). William Austin, the three-month child that Caroline took with her after her separation from the Prince and was the starting point for the Investigation, finds a parallel in the "beautiful infant in [the] neighbourhood" who, "during [the] voluntary seclusion" of Princess Bona, becomes an orphan and is "brought home to her, nursed, and reared at her expence". This circumstance "giv[es] fresh licence to the unhallowed tongues of her enemies" – credited by Edward – who allege that the child is the "illicit offspring" she had by her presumed lover (p. 4).

All historical cover is then abandoned when we are told that "a chosen committee [is] appointed to investigate the conduct of the princess" (p. 4). Before relating, in a chapter that is unsurprisingly titled "The Investigation" (ch. II), the *proceedings* of "the most ridiculous and absurd investigation of the Princess Bona's conduct" – which consists in "the domestic examination of the different portioning out her time in the interior of her household concerns" (p. 4) – the *results* of the enquiry are anticipated. The committee evidences

> by every corroborating circumstance, in the most strict inquiry of the disposal of her time, how deeply she ha[s] been injured in her heretofore fair reputation. Her every leisure moment [is] proved to have been devoted to study, and to the practice of those accomplishments she ha[s], in her early youth, been taught; in planning schemes to promote public charities, and in an universal series of acts of beneficence towards worthy individuals (pp. 4-5).

This, of course, is a biased account, since it was well known that Caroline's lifestyle, after the separation, had not been irreproachable. In support of her assertions, however, the author goes so far as to give what is presented as the "remarks" of "a writer of those times

[40] J. Robins, *The Trial of Queen Caroline*, p. 33.

[…] in his own words" (p. 5), but is actually an invented insert, as the clumsiness of the pseudo-fifteenth-century language proves.

Afterwards, a scandal reported by all the major London newspapers is introduced: in May 1796, a letter written by the Princess to her family was intercepted by the Prince's mistress, Lady Jersey. The letter included rude comments about the royal family and, in particular, about Queen Charlotte, who was called "Old Snuffy". The newspapers, however, were incensed at such an infringement of privacy, and rushed to support Caroline.[41] In the novel, the circumstance, which is presented as an event occurred during a past visit of Princess Bona to England, is thus related:

> [The innocent girl] wrote to an intimate friend every thought, as it presented itself to her lively imagination. The chief subject of this sprightly letter treated of her reception at the English court. The person of her future mother-in-law underwent something of a caricature description; yet so strikingly like the original, that it could not be mistaken, The perfidious Lady Conyers got hold of this fatal letter, and gave it into the hands of her for whom this picture, so far from a flattering one, was designed. The offence was of too flagrant a nature to be pardoned; […] Still the exalted conduct of the amiable Bona gained her the love and veneration of the whole kingdom, and its discerning majority saw how deeply she was injured. (pp. 8-10)

As far as the Investigation itself is concerned, Princess Caroline's main accusers, the Douglases, feature in the novel under an extremely thin disguise as "Sir Douglas Malcolm and his lady" (p. 14). The only defensive strategy the author adopts when presenting the couple is referring the reader, in a footnote, to "Rapin, Hume, & c." (p. 15). Sir Douglas is straightforwardly presented as a traitor. He is a coward, and acts out of offended pride and resentment. His Lady is similarly described in far from flattering terms. The couple became, indeed, a favourite target of satire, as can be seen from a 1813 cartoon that followed the publication of the results of the "Delicate Investigation", and showed Sir John and Lady Douglas being led to a pillory erected outside Montagu House, Blackheath (the residence of the Princess of Wales), after their evidence against the Princess had been discredited (Fig. 3).

As regards the woman's role in the Investigation, in the novel we are told that "no scheme or artifice was left untried, which might add to the slander already thrown on [the Princess's] character. Her tongue made use of the most virulent calumny and invective against her; alledging, that she, who had been her bosom friend and confidante, could vouch for the truth of all she said" (p. 18). Just like in the actual enquiry, the interrogation of the servants "who were placed as spies on [the Princess's] conduct" (p. 20) is made central. We are told that, "separately interrogated" (p. 19), they found "her demeanor so correct, her conversation so pure, that they adored, and joyfully cleared by their testimony, a character, the most ennobled, the most virtuous, that had ever condescended to ally itself to the throne of Great Britain" (pp. 20-21). As a matter of fact, the testimony given by Princess Caroline's servants was ambiguous, since they said that she had been flirtatious, though they did not offer any proof of an affair.

Green's unremitting defence of the Princess is sealed in Chapter VIII, where we find "A Letter" allegedly written by Blanche of Bretagne, a relation of the Princess of Savoy, which is a long expostulation in favour of Princess Caroline, formulated as an impassioned

[41] See *ibidem*, pp. 20-21.

Fig. 3: Sir John and Lady Douglas being led to the pillory, hand-coloured etching, 1 April 1813, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anticipations_for_the_Pillory.jpg#globalusage; https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode

plea to present a defence. In this "exhortation to the princess to render her cause public" (p. 89), all disguise is again thrown away, and, as the following brief excerpt shows, the script results utterly incoherent if applied to Princess Bona: "It is due to the future QUEEN OF ENGLAND, that she be restored, at least, to those public honours, which, (by that title) and her just prerogative, through intrigue and cruelty, have denied her those private rights which, her relative situation and individual merit entirely command" (vol. II, p. 92). In the "Conclusion", the author declares that this twenty-page insert that bears witness to "female friendship and virtue" was written by a "literary friend" (p. 252).

Although the historical setting is chiefly an excuse to deal with topical issues, and anachronistic inconsistencies abound,[42] *The Private History* interestingly shares numerous

[42] The most evident anachronisms are connected with religion and with the author's anti-French sentiments. The novel counts many anti-Catholic tirades. For instance, we are told that, at the time, "more than half of the civilized world, were sunk in popish superstition" (vol. II, p. 233). This is obviously anachronistic, since *all* the civilised world was Catholic in the fifteenth century. Equally absurd is transforming all the positive characters in "disciples of Wyckliffe" or Reformed militants (see vol. I, pp. 68 and 241 and vol. II, p. 61). Anachronistic is also the treatment of Louis XI, who is presented in terms that are reminiscent of contemporary British descriptions of Napoleon: "the arbitrary and tyrannical ruler of France, was rapidly extending his territories, and acquiring, by treachery, plunder, and cruelty, an immensity of riches" (vol. II, p. 231). In the same chapter (titled "Prophecies"), the French king is even identified with the Antichrist through numerological evidence based on the *Book of Revelation* (see vol. II, pp. 236-40).

features with the newly formed historical novel, which the author exploits with a considerable degree of self-awareness. Green uses paratextual devices, such as the preface and footnotes, which historical novelists copied from antiquarian publications. The footnotes in particular, directing the readers to respected works of history, displayed the authors' learning and lent the appearance of authority to what was a popular fictional genre. Actually, in these formative years, the historical novel "aim[ed] to raise its status in the generic hierarchy, appealing to a higher class of readers by associating itself with historical and antiquarian publications".[43] In *The Private History*, however, the reference to valued historical texts, like Hume's *History of England*,[44] is often a stratagem either to mask dangerous contents or to support a partisan argument.

In the novel, we also find the same sceptical, doubting attitude that antiquarians manifested towards documents and historical generalisations, and found its way into fictions like Sophia Lee's immensely successful *The Recess, or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783-85).[45] This is already made explicit in the *incipit*, where the unreliability of historical accounts is asserted, and the authority of history is questioned:

> In treating of ages long gone by, the pen, while it endeavours to be faithful to truth, should be ever impartial. The historic page is too frequently clouded with error; and though some facts are conspicuous to conviction, by agreeing authors, or well preserved manuscripts, all the events we read of are not to be too implicitly credited. (vol. I, p. 1)

The "offended monkish writer" mentioned at the close of Volume I (p. 261) stands for the prejudiced and partial historiographer the reader of history should distrust. In addition to such a scepticism about the *truth* of historical accounts, it is their *adequacy* to interpret reality that is utterly questioned. According to Green, historical records do not catch the real essence of things because they only look at the surface: "it is strange that historians, like some ill judges of painting, look only on the lustre of false colouring which appears on the surface, and examine not closely into the intrinsic worth of the piece" (vol. I, p. 70). In spite of such an avowed sceptical attitude, the author ambiguously insists that her account is founded on history,[46] and refers the reader to historical works in the footnotes. As already hinted at, this amounts to a strategy of self-defence, and the circumstance that, on occasions, she unabashedly changes history to support her point – as in the case of her anti-French argument, for example – confirms such an impression. Green shrewdly declares that she is interested in anecdote, and in so doing she asserts her right to introduce anachronisms, if they serve her purpose:

> As anecdote is the principal subject of this work, it is to be hoped that a trifling anachronism, to accomplish that design, will be forgiven; and if, in the course of this history, we may be sometimes obliged to refer back to some peculiar circumstances, which happened in this eventful reign, criticism will not, we trust, assail us with severity. We are not writing a chronological history of England; and though the mention of wars and politics must, of course, be slightly touched upon, yet the domestic scenes of the court and nation form the chief plan of these volumes. (vol. I, p. 65)

[43] A.H. STEVENS, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, p. 98.
[44] See vol. I, p. 121, and vol. II, pp. 77 and 78.
[45] On Lee's use of history in *The Recess*, see A.H. STEVENS, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, pp. 40-47.
[46] She writes, for example, "we are assured, from respectable historians, that…" (vol. I, p. 76).

In the quotation above, we find the novelists' usual habit of anticipating the reviewers' accusations that, as we have already appreciated, could be very harsh.[47]

Although reviewers almost unanimously condemned *The Private History*, chiefly because scandal-mongering secret histories were considered as "the very lowest form of satire: the personal (and potentially libellous) attack",[48] Green was proud of what appears to have been her first novel. Following a convention that characterised satirical novels and was to continue well into the 1830s, the book was published anonymously.[49] However, all her subsequent titles, either satirical or non-satirical, were advertised as "by the author of *The Private History of the Court of England*", and in later works, the indication "by Mrs Green" preceded the statement. The "Preface" to her best-known novel, *Romance Readers and Romance Writers: A Satirical Novel* (1810), reports:

> The following volumes are avowed to be written by the author of "The Private History of the Court of England!" Various conjectures having arisen as to the writer of that work, the Author, who has reasons for yet concealing her name, will affix the real initials of that name to this advertisement. Her merits, as a writer, are small; the mercy, the forbearance of a British Public, ample; to such she looks up for support and protection.[50]

Here, Green appears as the proud author of what she nevertheless deems a risky kind of narrative. But why did she glory in avowing authorship of a work that reviewers saw as a product of the worst trend of contemporary novel writing? All the more given the fact that uncovering fashionable scandals was dangerous, since libel suits were a real possibility? This incongruence is explained when we realise that Green, actually, did not see herself as a despicable scandal-mongerer, but as that moral satirist who, in scourging vice and promoting virtue, had always held a crucial role in any society. The abundance of edifying observations gives evidence of such an intention, and the explicit warning expressed in the "Preface" leaves no room for doubt: "Ye, who find the likeness of this picture stop, while time puts it in your power!" (vol. I, p. xii). The chapter mottoes, which comment upon the narrative through quotations from familiar authors, likewise absolve a moralising function.

In approaching the author's chosen role as a moral satirist, we must again deal with paradoxes. Taking as a premise the unchanging quality of human nature, she nevertheless encourages a moral reformation. Similarly, whereas the continuous comparisons between past and present would imply a view of history as essentially static ("there is nothing new under the sun", we are told),[51] she nonetheless advocates social improvement. The key to the solution of these contradictions lies, this time, in her belief in the interconnectedness of the private and the public spheres. A reformation of morals within the private arena can open a space for change in society at large, especially so when leading figures are concerned. As Price notes, "Green's work illuminates a developing reformist strand of conservatism. Although wholesale social change might have seemed undesirable to conservative loyalists, cautious moralists like Jane West, Elizabeth Hamilton and Sarah Green increasingly emphasized the need for the reformation of the upper ranks".[52] Royals, more than

[47] See A.H. Stevens, *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, pp. 142-44.
[48] L.M. Wilson, "Women Writing Satirical Novels in the Romantic Period", p. 30.
[49] See *ibidem*, p. 26.
[50] Quoted *ibidem*, p. 30.
[51] Vol. I, p. 144.
[52] S. Green, *The Private History of the Court of England*, ed. F. Price, p. xiv.

anyone, should set an example to their people: "what must a nation look for amongst the manners and morals of a people, when those of their prince are so vitiated?" (vol. I, p. 80). In the novel, we are shown how Edward's "rooted aversion" (vol. I, p. 179) to the Princess of Savoy leads to political turmoil, and the comment the author affixes cannot but signify, out of allegory, that the Prince of Wales's lack of discrimination in sexual affairs calls into question his judgement on national matters and puts the country in danger: "how often thus do we see private iniquities, and the profanation of sacred vows, bring on an increase of national calamities!" (vol. I, p. 183). Her task as a moral satirist would be to bring the Prince to his senses and show him his responsibilities as future head of the nation.

Another field where Green sees progress as possible and necessary, and where she endeavours, through her novel, to give a contribution, is the feminine condition. While reaffirming her vow to impartiality, she vehemently posits herself as the professed protector of her sex: "to a sex, subject to many oppressions, the author of this work has endeavoured to shew every possible protection. Yet, never let the reader imagine, that a blind or mistaken partiality can ever guide a pen, devoted to the cause of candour, and a fair investigation of the manners of the age it treats of" (vol. II, p. 217). Actually, though the narrative is overflowing with gender clichés, the sexual double standard is passionately exposed and condemned: "we affect to abjure Turkish principles, but in fact we cherish them; and, whatever freedom is pretended to be accorded to woman, she is yet amenable, in the severest degree, to those laws, which man, who formed them, daily and hourly transgresses" (vol. II, p. 119). The victims of such a despicable system (the "deluded female[s]") are unvaryingly treated with sympathy in the novel. It is men who misuse women who are responsible for their fall, we are told (see vol. II, pp. 134 and 153). Thus, it is men more generally, and not just the aristocrats, who need to reform their behaviour. Even more, (limited) rights for women are overtly requested, and are deemed a priority in the political agenda:

> The arbitrary laws above-cited, are not peculiar to the fifteenth century; they still hold unlimited sway. The generous Colonel H*****, had it in contemplation, if he ever obtained a place in the English senate, to propose an amelioration of our laws, as far as they related, to use his own words, "to weak and oppressed woman." Why does not some liberal-minded senator, in a land that triumphs in its freedom, step forward and obtain for them a small portion of those rights, which reasonable beings demand, and which tyrant man usurps, and appropriates solely to himself? (vol. II, pp. 120-21)

Indeed, apart from its gossiping content, Green's novel is a complex work, and could have appealed to contemporary readers in a number of ways. For example, in the story of the beautiful Elfrida, furtively raised by the Duchess of York and then entrusted to a convent, which concludes Volume I, we find the same fascination with secret royal offspring and the same gusto in filling the gaps of history that characterised, again, Lee's novel and had given rise to many "alternative or supplementary 'histories'".[53] In fact, in Volume II it is revealed that Elfrida is the fruit of the doomed love between a fictional sister of Edward IV ("a younger female branch of the house of York", p. 159) and the Lancaster heir, Edward. Unfortunately, as we are told in the conclusion of "A Mystery Elucidated", of "the fate and fortune of this offspring of the youthful branches of the opposite parties, history has left us yet in the dark" (p. 189). History is incomplete, and thus it is the novelist's duty to supplement it.

[53] I. Ferris, "Historical Romance", in P. Garside and K. O'Brien (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English. Volume II*, p. 303.

*The Private History of the Court of England* was severely censured by reviewers at the time of its publication and is much neglected in contemporary criticism. Still, as this article has argued, in spite of the challenges it undeniably poses to the modern reader, this novel is highly significant as a social and literary product of the pre-Regency years. Using history as a veil for present-day scandal, its author ingeniously fused two novelistic trends contemporary readers adored, and such an operation makes the book representative of its culturally and politically eventful times.

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