

## ENGL 3041: Adventures in the Literary Marketplace

### Assignment 1.3: Author Biography

Susannah Gunning (née Minifie) was born around 1740. She was the daughter of the Reverend Dr. James Minifie, D.D in Fairwater, Somerset, where she resided at the time of the publication of her first novel in 1763. She published a number of novels with her sister, Margaret Minifie (there is often confusion as to which sister wrote which novel, including *The Cottage*) up until 1768 when she married Captain John Gunning of the 65<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot. He later became Lieutenant – General Gunning.<sup>i</sup> Her marriage to John Gunning broke down when she opposed his choice of son in law.<sup>ii</sup> In *Letter for Mrs Gunning to His Grace the Duke of Argyll*, she writes that she ‘regretted twenty-two out of twenty-three years of marriage’ to John Gunning.

When Susannah married John Gunning in 1768, she stopped publishing her work. He was the grandson of the sixth Viscount, Mayo, and distinguished himself in the Battle of Bunker’s Hill. According to Janet Todd, he was ‘articulate and spoiled.’ Hence, it is probable that she ceased publication because he was able to financially support her. John Gunning’s three sisters were well known for their beauty and lively existence in the Court of George III. Maria married the Earl of Coventry, but came to an untimely end as the result of using lead based make-up in 1760. Elizabeth was the widow of the Sixth Duke of Hamilton, married the Fifth Duke of Argyll in 1759, and died in 1790. Catherine married the plain Irish esquire, John Travis, and died in 1775.

In 1769, Susannah gave birth to her only child. Elizabeth Gunning was beautiful and accomplished and it appears her mother and aunt spurred her onto publish three novels during the period in which Susannah Gunning published nothing. These three novels were *The Packet*, *Lord Fitzhenry* and *Memoirs of Mme. de Barneveldt*.

Elizabeth was clearly influenced by her mother's writing techniques. For example, in the 1790s, they both wrote books set in Wales. However, she eventually surpassed her mother in quantity and quality, and published nine novels, two children's stories and five translations of French novels as well as a French play, *The Wife with Two Husbands*. She leaned towards the gothic, rather than the satiric like Susannah. For example, *The Packet* features a classic Gothic sequence where the heroine is abducted and hidden in an unnamed country, inhabited by tigers and wolves.

Elizabeth Gunning was also famous for her part in what Horace Walpole calls the 'Gunningaid.' Raven cites this as 'one of the most salacious scandals of the age.'<sup>iii</sup> Elizabeth was supposedly courting the Marquis of Blandford as well as the Marquis of Lorne. This resulted in a series of allegations and forgeries. Susannah Gunning defended the allegations that her daughter had written a forged letter, in a published 'Letter' to the Duke of Argyll, as mentioned earlier. Although it appears as though she had a close relationship with her father (she translated Fontanelle's *Plurality of Worlds* for him, one of his favorite works), General Gunning shunned Elizabeth from his house during the scandal. Susannah Gunning went with her daughter. Ironically, mother and daughter were sheltered and looked after by the Duchess of Bedford, Blandford's grandmother. John Gunning eventually fled to Naples with his mistress and was fined five thousand pounds for 'criminal conversation' with his tailor's wife. In 1792, he wrote the unusual *Apology*, which boasted of his affairs with aristocratic

women. However, close to his death he altered his will and left eight thousand pounds to his wife and daughter, Elizabeth also inherited his Irish estate. Elizabeth Gunning eventually married John Plunkett, an Irish major, in 1803. In *Anecdotes of the Delborough Family* the heroine suffers because of a forged letter, but Susannah Gunning denied including any family detail. However, it seems her writing was most pungent when she fictionalized her own experience, although the innocent nature of some of her novels does not reflect the distressing complications and results of her marriage to John Gunning.

The novelist was well known for her use of hyperbole, this habit causing Lady Harcourt to coin the term ‘minific’, which related to her maiden name Minifie. Susannah Gunning wrote thirteen novels altogether, publishing some collaboratively with her sister, Margaret. Six were epistolary novels and one was a long poem, *Virginus and Virginia*. Her first novel was published in 1763 with Margaret, *The Histories of Lady Frances S – and Lady Caroline S --*.<sup>iv</sup> The plots of the novelists’ early works are fairly conventional, concerning distressed virgins, aristocratic marriages and formal language. However, after her marriage broke down, the satiric element in her language had increased and marriage itself was the occasional object. This is evident in *Coombe Wood* (although this has been attributed to Margaret as well). Lady Lucy in the novel considers marriage to be an encumbrance, but she settles on a two hundred thousand pound man even though he resembles ‘a frightful bird.’ She describes his hands as ‘claw like’ but ‘glittering with diamonds’. It is interesting to consider whether life, or literature, taught her this satiric mode. According to *The English Novel 1740 – 1850*, Susannah’s thirteen novels were:

- 1764** – *Family Pictures – By a Lady - A Novel containing Curious and Interesting Memoirs of several Persons of Fashion in Wa-e.* Two volumes.
- 1768** – *Barford Abbey – A Novel in a Series of Letters.* Two volumes.
- 1769** – *The Cottage – In a Series of Letters.* Three volumes.
- 1780** – *The Count of Poland.* Four volumes.
- 1792** – *Anecdotes of the Delborough Family.* Five volumes.
- 1795** – *Memoirs of Mary.* Five volumes.
- 1796** – *Delves.* Two volumes.
- 1796** – *The Forests – A novel Adapted from the French by Miss Gunning.* Four volumes.
- 1707** – *Love at First Sight.* Five volumes.
- 1799** – *Gypsy Countess.* Four volumes.
- 1800** – *Fashionable Involvements.* Three volumes.
- 1802** – *The Heir Apparent.* Three volumes.
- 1803** – *The Union.* Three volumes.<sup>v</sup>

The fact that Susannah ceased publication of her work whilst she was married to John Gunning could be due to legal reasons. During this period, married women were not allowed to be their own separate legal entity. Hence, the profit from her published work would have gone directly to John Gunning. Perhaps, as mentioned earlier, John Gunning's financial situation meant that Susannah did not need to her own financial backing. However, she may not have wished to have her works published whilst she was not her own legal entity, as her novels were too personal. This speculation can be backed by the claim that she referenced and fictionalised her own private life in some of her novels, as her sister did. Hence, her work was too personal not to be published

entirely under her name. When Susannah Gunning died in 1800, she left an unfinished novel, *The Heir Apparent*. Elizabeth revised and published it two years later, thus preserving her mother's name.<sup>vi</sup>

### **1015 words.**

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<sup>i</sup>Ed. Janet Todd, *The Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1600 – 1800*, p.144 -5 (Routledge London, 1989.)

<sup>ii</sup> Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy, *The Feminist Companion to Literature* p.469 (B.T. Batsford Ltd, London, 1990.)

<sup>iii</sup> James Raven, *British fiction, 1750-1770: a chronological checklist of prose fiction printed in Britain and Ireland*, p.22 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987.)

<sup>iv</sup>Ed. Janet Todd, *The Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1600 – 1800*, p.144-5 (Routledge London, 1989.)

<sup>v</sup> Andrew Block, *The English Novel – 1740 – 1850, A Catalogue*, p.93 (Dawson, 1939.)

<sup>vi</sup> Ed. Janet Todd, *The Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1600 – 1800*, p.144-5 (Routledge London, 1989.)

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