

Susan Ferrier's *Marriage*: Lady Maclaughlan as Controlling Architect

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<1> With the publication of *Marriage* in 1818, Susan Ferrier joined those novelists, many of them women, who popularized the genre later known as “the national tale.”⁽¹⁾ As Juliet Shields points out, works that placed emphasis on Scottish scenes and characters were relatively rare during the 1770s, but had proliferated by the 1820s (110). The three novels of Ferrier spring from this literary outpouring, sometimes seen as an offshoot of the Scottish Enlightenment.⁽²⁾

<2> Paradoxically, one of the very characteristics which makes Ferrier of continuing critical interest—her works’ classification as national tales—may in fact inure readers to their value. One might well expect, for example, that a novel named *Marriage*, like so many other national tales, incorporates the trope of “the national marriage plot,” which Katie Trumpener identifies as being “rewritten” or “reincarnated” in multiple forms during the early nineteenth century (136).⁽³⁾ The initial union between Lady Juliana (the English lady) and Henry Douglas (the Scots lover), along with their journey to Scotland, seemingly reiterates this common pattern.⁽⁴⁾ However, Ferrier’s decision to remove the couple as a focal point, instead presenting the aftermath of their unhappy marriage and Juliana’s misery in her new home, upsets expectations of a stereotypical political message about unity between nations. This calculated disruption stands in direct contrast to the idyllic love match ending in the tradition of Owenson’s popular novel *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* (1806), oft-referenced as a prototype of the genre.

<3> Ferrier does in fact incorporate a marriage at the novel’s end. However, recognizing her significance in the context of women writers of Romanticism requires a shift in focus away from the political overtones of the national tale, as well as the didactic messages surrounding the classic conduct book heroine. *Marriage* may indeed be seen as “something of a handbook aimed at young women” (404), as Robert Crawford suggests, but *only* if the reader remains focused on the conduct of two opposing characters, Juliana as deterrent and Mary as model. Instead, the main contribution of *Marriage* emerges from the actions of one character who takes the idea of “disruption” to a new level. Lady Maclaughlan first surfaces late in the storyline, in Chapter IX of Volume I as the flamboyant wife of the diminutive Sir Sampson (42). In contrast to her apparently “minor” role as comic relief or satirical target, Lady Maclaughlan plays a far more important part than anyone realizes: ultimately, she serves as the controlling architect behind the plot. Not only does this behind-the-scenes plotter secure her husband’s entail—by seeing it bestowed on the woman of her choice through the marriage that she machinates—but her event-shaping actions also escape the scrutiny of male characters in the novel, and all but the most discerning readers.

<4> The implications of this phenomenon extend to other female-authored novels of the same period. Critics and scholars have long recognized that the rise of the novel gave women a voice at a time when they had few forums in which to express themselves.⁽⁵⁾ Due to diverse personalities and the pressures of the time, this voice took many different forms. The novel *Marriage* offers a prime example of one

technique (within the framework of the national tale) that enabled the author to comment on women's roles within existing societal restrictions, and to imagine possibilities for future change. Ultimately, *Marriage* deploys humor to envision an alternative to the extant patriarchal structure—a society led by a formidable and strong matriarch, who breaks free of restrictions imposed by intertwined institutions of marriage and the law. In the intersections between humor and secondary characterization,⁽⁶⁾ the true significance of Susan Ferrier's novel emerges.

<5> To explore Lady Maclaughlan's powerful role in shaping the narrative, a brief review of the novel's "rambling" storyline proves helpful.⁽⁷⁾ Volume I introduces the Earl of Courtland and his lovely young daughter, Juliana, along with the novel's first embedded marriage tale.⁽⁸⁾ To all appearances Juliana is the romantic heroine: she refuses to marry the hideous, albeit wealthy duke and elopes with her handsome Scots lover, Henry Douglas, to his ancestral home at Glenfern Castle. It is here that readers first meet the visiting Lady Maclaughlan, all-too-easily dismissed as a "minor" (though memorable) character. However, Ferrier quickly unseats readers' expectations of the supposed heroine Juliana, to reveal that selfishness and vanity undergird her marital choice. By the end of Volume II the author leaves Juliana as a discontented, penniless mother of twins who expresses more affection for her lapdogs than for her own flesh and blood. Juliana abandons one daughter, Mary, with her husband's relatives in Scotland, while she and the other daughter, Adelaide, return to England to live in luxury.

<6> Not until the first chapter of the second volume do readers meet the novel's prototypical romantic heroine, seventeen-year-old Mary (157). Sensible, sweet, pious, and even somewhat boring,⁽⁹⁾ Mary journeys to England, where she proves her virtue on countless occasions in the face of her unreasonable parent. Ferrier concludes Volume III with a long-awaited love match between Mary and Colonel Lennox, whom Mary meets during a charitable visit to Lennox's mother. This visit occurs due to an interference that seems innocuous at the time, but later acquires more importance. Mary receives a sacred trust from Lady Maclaughlan to bear a letter from her to Mrs. Lennox, which introduces Mary to her future mother-in-law and culminates in her happy nuptials. Towards the end of the novel, readers learn through a single enigmatic statement that Lady Maclaughlan has ensured the passing of her husband's entail to Mary's husband Colonel Lennox, despite a long-standing feud between the two families.

<7> This singular interference underscores an unusual contradiction that surrounds *Marriage*. Without Lady Maclaughlan, there would be little plot and no resolution, yet critics typically write her off as a rough caricature that provides comic relief from Ferrier's moments of moralizing.⁽¹⁰⁾ Readers tend to miss the fact that this same laughable Lady Maclaughlan works covertly within the confines of a patriarchal legal structure to pass Sir Sampson's wealth to the recipients of her choice, *against her husband's wishes*. Of all critical perspectives on Lady Maclaughlan, Herbert Foltinek's draws closest to the truth when he identifies her as a "tutelary figure," or secret mentor to protagonist Mary (141). Maclaughlan is thus placed within the fairy-tale tradition; she serves as guide to "the Cinderella-like heroine" and foe to "the evil fairy," Mary's mother Lady Juliana (141). This viewpoint aligns with Nelson Bushnell's astute identification of Lady Maclaughlan as the impetus behind Mary's meeting of her future husband (226). But both perspectives stop far short of considering the consistent, event-shaping agency that Maclaughlan exercises throughout the novel, as well as her function as a matriarchal truth-teller through whom Ferrier conveys unconventional ideas about marital roles, societal structure, and the legal system.

<8> The placement of Maclaughlan at the center of the plot adds coherence to the narrative, while providing a possible third, clandestine alternative to the protagonist that Ferrier discards (Lady Juliana) and the stereotypical heroine (Mary) that she apparently adopts. Maclaughlan's entrance between the

novel's introduction to Juliana and the birth of Mary underscores her role in linking and balancing the novel's messages. A growing awareness of her central function calls readers to re-consider the saturation of humor that too often leads to a dismissal of her character. The direct satire that Ferrier uses to undercut Lady Juliana's authority functions very differently when merged with the powerful matriarch of Glenfern. To this—the central argument about *Marriage*—I now turn. My discussion begins with Ferrier's own introduction to Lady Maclaughlan. In the midst of its humorous treatment of the husband domination theme, this scene forecasts the masterful method in which Lady Maclaughlan remains both before *and* behind the scenes, while shaping outcomes from within.

<9> “Bring him in—bring him in, Philistine! I always call my man Philistine, because he has Sampson in his hands” (43). These words mark the first distinct impression of Lady Maclaughlan in *Marriage*, as readers glimpse an unusual husband-wife relationship that turns expectations of marital roles topsy-turvy. Prior to Maclaughlan's grand entrance at Glenfern, the name of this “exemplary, virtuous woman” has surfaced numerous times (31),(11) forecasting her significance, yet the initial encounter still proves surprising. Ferrier describes her character's imperative tones as “loud, but slow and well modulated” (43), a fitting delineation of the woman behind the narrative; though the vocal volume distracts, other characteristics suggest an underlying deliberateness and intricacy of character that belie initial misimpressions of carelessness. Lady Maclaughlan's humorous flamboyance advertises a powerful presence. It also masks an astounding, event-shaping agency that influences the outcome of the novel's primary marriage plot, which concludes with the memorable words of Maclaughlan to Mary: “You are going to be married to Charles Lennox. I'm glad of it. I wished you to marry him” (463). In speaking these words, Maclaughlan makes a direct statement of fact, in keeping with her role as truth-teller, while indirectly pointing to her own part in bringing the marriage to pass—and with it, the passing of her husband's entail. At a time when women had little say in such matters, a full 52 years before the first of the Married Women's Property Acts in 1870 (permitting retention of property after marriage), Maclaughlan's words show a strength only exceeded by her actions within the narrative itself.

<10> When Maclaughlan first arrives at Glenfern, her “loud, authoritative” accents and unusual attire make her laughable (44), almost a caricature. She is the quirky, manners-driven “lesser” character that one expects to see in a tale of the Scottish Highlands. It proves easy to dismiss her on the one hand as comic relief from Ferrier's characteristic didacticism, and on the other hand as a sort of moralistic deterrent from certain unfeminine and strongly frowned upon behaviors.(12) Though ultimately suspect, these perspectives are also understandable. As Dustin Griffin points out in his critical reintroduction to satire, a long-standing “emphasis on satire's moral function . . . dominates satiric theory from the Renaissance into the mid-twentieth century” (10). It is this very dominance that his work so rightly questions by insisting that “we may arrive at a fuller understanding of the way satire works if we think of a rhetoric of inquiry, a rhetoric of provocation, a rhetoric of display, a rhetoric of play” (39). Though Griffin himself focuses on “literary satire in ‘high culture’” (1), he acknowledges that “the novel, more than any other literary form, has proved extremely hospitable to satire” (4). This in turn emphasizes the need for further exploration—in particular, a better understanding of *how* satire functions in specific works and *why* it seemingly gravitates towards the novel-as-genre.

<11> Ever the flagrant satirist, Ferrier's love of “play” and “display” are clearly apparent in the spectacle-ridden scenes that feature Lady Maclaughlan.(13) The deeper intellectual “provocation” and “inquiry” may be less apparent, but can be “teased out” through careful analysis.(14) Griffin's definitions of the latter terms spring from the following premises: 1) not all satire has the set conclusion assumed by traditional satiric theories, but may be “designed to be more open-ended” in order to encourage inquiry (39), 2) in contrast to the rhetoric of inquiry, “the rhetoric of provocation is ‘negative,’ a critique of false

understanding” (52), and 3) both the rhetoric of inquiry and the rhetoric of provocation prompt questioning (52).⁽¹⁵⁾ The idea of “questioning” becomes highly useful in understanding the satire that permeates characterizations of both Lady Juliana and Lady Maclaughlan. In the case of Juliana, the provocation is clear. Her false understanding makes her a silly, vain character whose foolishness negatively affects the lives around her. The direct satire that leads to rejection of Lady Juliana as protagonist and role model simultaneously raises questions. In first causing readers to reject her character, then removing her from the center of the action, the text questions societal assumptions of value. Lady Juliana is beautiful and rich; she gains marriage and the ideal lover, yet she is not the heroine of the tale. Her daughter Mary wins the ideal marriage in the end, yet her character—notable for its distinct lack of overt satire—also lacks the complexity to fascinate.

<12> Lady Juliana and Mary, linked by blood, may be seen as contrasting book ends that mirror one another; both ultimately challenge expectations and assumptions of the ideal heroine. Whereas Lady Juliana’s character showcases the superficiality of external accomplishments, her daughter Mary functions as a quiet challenge to the internal “feminine” ideal. Mary’s conduct, though laudatory, makes her an additional “smoke screen” or camouflage for the hidden protagonist of the tale, who eventually leads readers to question the values that both Juliana and Mary represent. In contrast to these other possible centers of authority, the satire of the matriarchal Lady Maclaughlan is double-edged: she not only becomes the target of satire (unlike Mary), but she also directs satire against other characters (unlike both Mary and Juliana). Her ability to wield satire in turn grants her the power to prompt provocation and inquiry, since satirists “can provoke by challenging received opinion; they can also provoke by holding up to scrutiny our idealized images of ourselves” (Griffin 60). Maclaughlan thus becomes a challenge to both received opinion (represented by Juliana) and the ideal (represented by Mary) in her role as the novel’s satire-wielding, narrative-shaping truth-teller. The satire that surrounds Lady Maclaughlan prompts inquiry, once her paradoxical positioning at the narrative’s center becomes clear.⁽¹⁶⁾ Biting satire reinforces Maclaughlan’s surface status as a minor figure, even as it detracts attention from two key aspects of her characterization: her domination of her husband and her domination of the plot, intertwined actions that mirror one another.

<13> In the end, these elements of the novel “provoke” the reader into thought, or “inquiry,” about what is and what could be. The sort of misdirection in this first scene epitomizes a major narrative technique that Ferrier uses throughout the novel. Lady Maclaughlan’s allusion to Philistine and Sampson highlights a creative, colorful, and boisterous personality that entertains while it distracts from the odd relationship between Maclaughlan and her spouse, Sir Sampson. What is the story of Samson without Delilah the *femme fatale*? A powerful Delilah figure with dangerous potential, Lady Maclaughlan exercises extreme control over Sir Sampson, even over his very life, for she oversees his medical needs. As she herself puts it, “he must take what I give him” (46-47). The power of choice, so often relegated to the male domain in nineteenth-century society, is appropriated by a woman. This inverted husband-wife relationship thus parodies the popular conception about matrimony expressed so poignantly by Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*: “man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal” (77).

<14> In fact, it is Sir Sampson rather than his wife who desperately needs the ability to refuse; Lady Maclaughlan is the dominant force that drives the actions of those around her, even as she drives the narrative to its conclusion. From the time of her arrival onward, she absorbs readers’ attention. The focus rests on her garb and on her comments, yet she exudes a strong presence as she orders people about and determines the every movement of her husband. Simultaneously, the glitz and glamour that surround the more bodily, satiric aspects of Ferrier’s humor—her descriptions of Maclaughlan’s clothing, for instance—tend to distract from more subtle messages within the text. After telling a servant to bring

Sir Sampson in, Lady Maclaughlan decides where he will be seated, a position which the narrator contrasts with Maclaughlan's standing posture. She responds to her hosts' invitations with short, terse statements that emphasize the word "I": "'I choose to stand—I don't like to sit—I never sit at home—Do I, Sir Sampson?' turning to the little warrior, who, having been seized with a violent fit of coughing on his entrance, had now sunk back, seemingly quite exhausted, while the *Philistine* was endeavouring to disencumber him of his military accoutrements" (43). This merging of dialog with narration shows the delicate balance that the text strikes between a destabilizing satire—in this case, a reversal of expected gender roles—and the more traditional understanding of satire, reinforcing the status quo, which pokes fun at Lady Maclaughlan and thereby dismisses her as an eccentric. Satiric description here prompts indiscriminate laughter, poking fun at both Maclaughlan *and* her husband, while turning focus away from the iconoclastic implications of the former's words. Lady Maclaughlan *determines* to stand, just as she controls her husband's physical body. In contrast to the angelic and stationary ideal of the domestic woman, (17) Maclaughlan also chooses mobility; her friendship with the aunts of Glenfern prompts a visit, and she decides both mode of arrival and time of departure.

<15> Lady Maclaughlan's grand entrance into the novel reveals the complexity of Ferrier's satire. Surface satire that "should" reinforce traditional patriarchal values is undercut when readers consider the scene's details, as well as the implications of Maclaughlan's actions. Aspects of Ferrier's description, such as her martial imagery, illustrate this delicate relationship between satiric re-establishment and satiric questioning of the status quo. For example, the reference to the "little warrior" in his "military accoutrements" draws a parallel between Sir Sampson and the diminutive Napoleon Bonaparte. Ferrier's Bonaparte has his Josephine as well, but she proves the more dominant of the two—and, of course, Ferrier's nineteenth-century British readers happily embrace a chuckle at the French. The author concurrently taps into stereotypes of the shrewish wife, but her technique does not condone these stereotypes or affirm their veracity. Instead, these very stereotypes enable Ferrier to explore alternative roles for women.

<16> The presence of satire in this case serves as a marker, pointing to moments that should evoke inquiry in readers. The embedded reversal of dominant stereotypes (by incorporating a highly developed "stock character" who wields a great deal of power) has the potential to upset traditional gender expectations about the dominant role of the husband. This dominance is, of course, reinforced by the very legal structure of a patriarchal society. As Mary Wollstonecraft's 1798 novel *Maria* dramatically illustrates, this was a time when women were denied even the right to speak in a court of law (ch. 17). (18) However, whereas Wollstonecraft emphasizes the disempowerment of her heroine to make a point, Ferrier presents readers with a vision of empowerment that slips underneath the radar due to her use of satire.

<17> The very names of Maclaughlan and her spouse underscore the disparity in this husband-wife relationship. As Carol Anderson and Aileen M. Riddell have pointed out: "Sir Sampson in *Marriage* is a shrunken parody of the Highland warriors of Jane Porter or Scott, or the dashing heroes of Joanna Baillie or Byron" (191), and Crawford notes humorously: "So much for heroic Highland masculinity" (404). Ferrier uses innumerable details to contrast the physical and mental weakness of Sir Sampson with his wife's strength. A scant two decades after Wollstonecraft called for better mental and physical education for women in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Maclaughlan's robust physical strength forms a stark contrast to the fashionable woman with her restrictive corsets and smelling salts. Throughout *Marriage*, the author recalls the initial encounter with Lady Maclaughlan (and with it, the contrast between male weakness and female strength) through a continuance of martial imagery. (19) In this first encounter the imagery belittles the unwarlike Sir Sampson and foregrounds his truly

intimidating wife. In later instances, martial references resurface to prompt laughter, but also to reaffirm the strength and cunning of the ultimate strategist: Lady Maclaughlan.

<18> Ferrier's satirical introduction to Lady Maclaughlan pushes the discerning reader to look more closely at her character, an impulse which the novel repays in full. A thorough understanding of Maclaughlan's role in the narrative reveals her to be the strongest unifying force behind the story, and her character bears direct responsibility for its successful resolution. This is the most pervasive paradox of the novel: the woman written off as a rough Scottish caricature shapes the narrative from within, providing an alternative not only to a traditional husband-wife relationship, but also to the male-dominated structure of a patriarchal society. The women of Glenfern—ridiculous though they may be—sense Maclaughlan's matriarchal power, acknowledging her leadership in all things.

<19> None dare contradict her, even regarding the day of the week. For instance, though a letter from Lady Maclaughlan to Miss Grizzy clearly invites the family to visit on Tuesday, Maclaughlan insists: "Even if it had been written Tuesday, you might have had the sense to know it meant Thursday. When did you know me to invite any body for a Tuesday?" (106). Grizzy concedes Lady Maclaughlan's position of absolute authority in her response: "I declare it's very true; I certainly ought to have known better. I am quite confounded at my own stupidity; for, as you observe, even though you had said Tuesday, I might have known that you must have meant Thursday" (106). A key indicator of minoriness according to Alex Woloch (167), this repetition of Lady Maclaughlan's words emphasizes her important status, placing Grizzy in a subordinate role. The authority of Lady Maclaughlan is unquestioned at Glenfern, and her opinions reign supreme on all matters—from expected longevity (62), to cleverness in offspring (163), to diseases (180). Even Miss Grizzy, her close friend, fears to disagree with her (50), since the code of the Maclaughlanites consists in idolizing their acknowledged leader.[\(20\)](#)

<20>If *Marriage* presents a sort of matriarchal society where only women play prominent roles, then Lady Maclaughlan is head matriarch, a view reinforced by the "loud authoritative tone" and "stern imperious manner" she perpetually adopts (44-45). As the eldest of the three Glenfern aunts (39), Miss Jacky leads in Lady Maclaughlan's absence, but she abdicates her role to serve as one of Maclaughlan's "handmaidens" when the opportunity arises (48). Her emotional encomium prior to Maclaughlan's arrival shows this matriarch's sway over the Glenfern coterie: "Lady Maclaughlan's character, luckily, is far above the reach of calumny . . . a woman of family—of fortune—of talents—of accomplishments!—a woman of unblemished reputation!—of the strictest morals! sweetest temper! Charming heart! Delightful spirits! So charitable! Every year gives fifty flannel petticoats to the old people of the parish—" (31). The series of exclamation points here highlights the hyperbolic nature of Miss Jackie's words.

<21> However, satire once again points to a moment that should evoke questioning, even as the words emphasize the extent of Maclaughlan's influence. Her characteristic bluntness repeatedly places Maclaughlan in the role of truth-teller, permitting the narrator to relay situational facts to readers, as when Maclaughlan says to Lady Juliana: "Your mother was an heiress, your father married her for her money, and she married him to be a Countess, and so that's the history of their marriage—humph" (44).[\(21\)](#) This alignment of the perspectives of narrator and character could be considered authorial sanction for the statement, as well as for the character herself. Here as elsewhere, Ferrier uses laughter to excuse a straightforwardness usually attributed to lack of decorum. Her narrator soon undermines the previous endorsement of Maclaughlan with a satirical wink at the audience, terming the character's words a "well-bred harangue" (44), but the embedded moment of questioning persists. Using satire as a cover, Ferrier overcomes potential objections while also commenting on the mercenary nature of the marriage market.

<22> As for her interactions with other men on her own matriarchal turf, even the Laird of Glenfern admits that, “though she is a little free in the gab,” “Leddy Maclaughlan is a very decent woman” (32). The laird’s nephew Major Douglas may call her an “insufferable pest” (30), but Maclaughlan’s power at Glenfern far outshines his, another example of the close interaction between satiric re-establishment and satiric questioning. His best recourse is to attempt a retreat from Glenfern, which the laird overrules with a request that he remain and treat the Maclaughlans “discreetly” (32), a laughable statement in light of Lady Maclaughlan’s tendency towards indiscretion. Through Major Douglas and others, Ferrier’s narrator reveals her awareness of potentially negative responses to Maclaughlan from her readers. Nonetheless, the narrator reinforces the worth and credibility of this character by saying, “in spite of her ridiculous dress and eccentric manners, an air of dignity was diffused over her whole person, that screened her from the ridicule to which she must otherwise have been exposed” (45). This statement models the response that Ferrier expects from her audience. The author seemingly targets Lady Maclaughlan through stinging satire, but her characterizations of this figure still demand respect. This in turn leads readers to credit Maclaughlan’s disdain with some merit—even when she expresses disapproval only by an emphatic “humph.”

<23> Similarly, while Lady Maclaughlan’s dress elicits laughter, outward accoutrements cannot outweigh the evidence provided by her physiognomy. Her facial features are “finely formed, marked, and expressive” (45), which indicate both sense and sensitivity, crucial attributes of a nineteenth-century heroine, as shaped by the eighteenth-century “Cult of Sensibility.” The narrator admits that Maclaughlan is not prone to betrayals of feeling (45), but she too feels grief on the occasion of the laird’s death and seeks to ameliorate the sorrows of her friends (170). Prominent eighteenth-century theorist Adam Smith illustrates the value attributed to this quality: “to feel much for others and little for ourselves, . . . constitutes the perfection of human nature” (43-44). Smith writes these words in the first section of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), when discussing the subject of propriety. Lady Maclaughlan may lack key elements of external propriety, but the emotions that motivate her actions show her worth.

<24> Perhaps most importantly, Lady Maclaughlan’s control extends beyond the Glenfern matriarchy; a powerful force behind the plot, she proves crucial to *Marriage’s* resolution, which is of course intertwined with the legal settlement of her husband’s entail. If marriage is seen as the ultimate reward in nineteenth-century society and in the novel of manners, and if Lady Maclaughlan confers that reward, then she again assumes a position of authority to determine acceptable behavioral patterns—a revolutionary prospect in Ferrier’s time. The first subtle indication of Lady Maclaughlan’s contribution to the novel’s resolution appears shortly after her arrival at Glenfern. Miss Grizzy says to her nephew, “Henry, I assure you, Lady Maclaughlan takes the greatest interest in every thing that concerns Lady Juliana and you” (47). This interest presumably extends to heroine Mary at her birth.⁽²²⁾ In the second volume, Grizzy makes a similar statement of Maclaughlan: “she has such a regard for our family, she would go any lengths for us” (165). Though a hint of narrative humor often accompanies Grizzy’s words, Lady Maclaughlan’s later actions (as writer of the letter that introduces Mary to her future mother-in-law) invest this statement with strong importance.

<25> Immediately after Grizzy’s above declaration to Henry, Maclaughlan directs the following tirade at him: “So your wife fell in love with you, it seems; well, the more fool she, I never knew any good come of love marriages” (47). This seemingly anti-romantic statement from the novel’s truth-telling matriarch communicates Maclaughlan’s willingness to meddle in others’ affairs, and even serve as matchmaker when an opportunity presents itself—which she does when Mary leaves for England to improve her health. In keeping with the covert power she wields, Lady Maclaughlan is not cited as the direct impetus

behind the departure, but the Glenfern matriarch does reflect positively on the quality of English air, also remarking on the “great many dissipated young men in England” (182), comments that contain noteworthy implications. First, by this point readers understand the power borne by Lady Maclaughlan’s opinions; her views carry considerable weight with the Glenfern inhabitants, so they undoubtedly influence the decision to send Mary away. Secondly, her statement about England’s young men could indicate anxiety if she already considers Mary a possible match for Colonel Lennox.

<26> Hints of Lady Maclaughlan’s machinations gather strength as the plot progresses, but Ferrier insinuates Lady Maclaughlan gradually into a position of power in the narrative. Continual elicitation of laughter contribute to Lady Maclaughlan’s mask as a minor character, disguising her true prominence. Her power over her husband might be considered unacceptable, were either character less ridiculous. At one point Grizzy inquires into Sir Sampson’s medical options, wondering what he “could take.” Lady Maclaughlan then responds, “*Could* take? I don’t know what you mean by *could* take. He couldn’t take the moon, if you mean that” (46). As the laird snidely comments of her medicinal remedies for Sir Sampson: “She’s doing all she can to send him there [the grave], as she has done many a poor wretch already, with her infernal compositions” (31).

<27> This statement attributes to Lady Maclaughlan an almost supernatural power over life and death, an idea reinforced by the otherworldly description of her with the smoking cauldron—described as an “enormous kettle,” during the surprise visit from Glenfern (105). Twice in the novel, Maclaughlan asks the Glenfern women, “Do you know yourselves?” (105; 109), instances of verbal irony that reiterate an authoritative role reminiscent of the three witches in *Macbeth*.⁽²³⁾ Like the idea of the shrewish wife that Ferrier taps into when introducing Maclaughlan, the association between this character and the witch figure utilizes misogynistic stereotypes for its own ends. On the surface it seems to undermine Maclaughlan’s dignity, but her words work against this idea in their insistence upon truth. In calling the women to self-knowledge and self-examination, Maclaughlan again reiterates her claim to truth and her insistence upon its value.

<28> Whether or not Lady Maclaughlan exercises her power over Sir Sampson to end his life is unclear. In conjunction with other events, however, Sir Sampson’s death immediately after Mary’s wedding seems odd. The narrator exclaims, “when the marriage ceremony was scarcely over, arrived the accounts of the death of Sir Sampson Maclaughlan!” (467). Mary’s union with Colonel Lennox solidifies Lady Maclaughlan’s security, due to the lady’s relationship with her, and because Colonel Lennox inherits Sir Sampson’s property—a circumstance Lady Maclaughlan carefully ensured. Able to manipulate Sir Sampson in every respect, Lady Maclaughlan “contrived to prevent him from ever executing a new entail. She had known and esteemed both General and Mrs. Lennox before her marriage with Sir Sampson, and she was too firm and decided in her predilections ever to abandon them; and, while she had the credit of sharing in all her husband’s animosity, she was silently protecting the lawful rights of those who had long ceased to consider them as such” (462). Lady Maclaughlan’s “silent protection” stands in stark contrast to the outspoken nature that Ferrier presents throughout the novel, but connects with momentary “discrepancies” in characterization, which embed clues in the narrative. Descriptions of Maclaughlan’s voice and physiognomy suggest depth and insight that other, more flamboyant depictions suppress.

<29> Protecting the Lennoxes clearly works to Maclaughlan’s own benefit—based on the benevolence of the couple, mentioned at the novel’s end (468), and her connection with the protagonist. As Grizzy points out, Maclaughlan had always favored Mary (468). Grizzy follows this conclusion with the unwitting remark to Mary: “Not but what I must always think that you had a hand in dear Sir Sampson’s

death. Indeed, I have no doubt of it" (468). On the surface, Grizzy refers to Sir Sampson's decline when he learns of Mary's attachment to his enemy, but her comments have other implications. Sir Sampson's death frees Lady Maclaughlan of her sickly, peevish charge, and its timing ensures that she will never want, since her protégé is now the lady of the house. Previous events in the novel complicate this issue still further, arousing the suspicion that Lady Maclaughlan masterminded the marriage of Mary with Colonel Lennox. Grizzy issues an enigmatic statement to Mary during her visit to London: "to tell you a secret, Lady Maclaughlan has a husband in her eye for you—We, none of us, can conceive who it is, but, of course, he must be suitable in every respect" (192). No other reference to this mysterious suitor surfaces during the novel, leaving readers to wonder the purpose of such an interjection.

<30>Also, Lady Maclaughlan's refusal to reveal the prospect's identity raises the question of whether she considered Colonel Lennox a possibility, but avoids antagonizing her husband by mentioning his name. This silence forms a glaring contrast to her usual outspokenness about most matters, as well as her utter disregard for patriarchal-based decorum. Instead she quietly sows the seeds out of which grow the desired outcome; she gives Mary a letter for Mrs. Lennox, "with the strict injunction to be the bearer of it herself" (262). Aware of Mary's passionate nature, Lady Maclaughlan must realize the probable outcome of her interaction with Mrs. Lennox, who is blind and destitute. She must also know of Mrs. Lennox's strong attachment to her only remaining son, whom she would naturally mention, thus arousing Mary's admiration of his character.

<31> When Grizzy arrives in London, Mary receives a letter from her, in which is indicated Lady Maclaughlan's awareness of the consequences attending Sir Sampson's failing health: "she is not at all Sure how long Sir Sampson may live" (368), writes Grizzy. A woman such as Lady Maclaughlan—particularly one who had been through two prior marriages—must have given thought to her plight upon her husband's death. The narrator indicates Lady Maclaughlan's awareness of the specifics behind Sir Sampson's entail. Were she truly contemplating a match between Colonel Lennox and Mary to ensure her position, Maclaughlan would have desired to speed events along, which would account for her London trip, and also her encouraging Mary to think on matrimonial matters (368-369). Toward the novel's end Mary turns to Lady Maclaughlan to explain the enigmatic family feud between the Maclaughlans and Lennoxes, for she recalls that Lady Maclaughlan precipitated her introduction to Mrs. Lennox (459).

<32> During this conversation, Lady Maclaughlan directly admits that she is aware of Mary's attachment to Charles Lennox, and that she wished the union to occur (463). How long Lady Maclaughlan had desired this outcome, readers do not know, but her statements open the matter to speculation. Maclaughlan's comments at this point seem disparaging, but the narrator offers insight into the true state of matters: "Mary was too well accustomed to Lady Maclaughlan's style, not to comprehend that her marriage with Colonel Lennox was an event she had long wished for, and now most warmly sanctioned" (463). The word "long" again highlights Maclaughlan's interference in the chain of events. That Maclaughlan approves of the match between Mary and Lennox is beyond doubt. Even Grizzy sees this fact finally, and when "convinced of Lady Maclaughlan's approbation of her niece's marriage, she could think and talk of nothing else" (464).

<33> Though Lady Maclaughlan plays many parts in *Marriage*—the domineering wife and widow of three husbands; the matriarch of Glenfern; the truth-telling, cauldron-stirring witch of Lochmarlie; and the shaper of plots—one fact remains certain: she holds power and influence greater than any of the male characters. More than any other figure, Lady Maclaughlan provides insight into the expectations surrounding women's roles, along with the innovative ways that women writers challenged those roles

and the institutions that reinforced them. Maclaughlan's positioning at the novel's end could well lead nineteenth-century readers to question matrimony as a reinforcement of patriarchal values. *Marriage* does conclude with the happy union of Colonel Lennox and Mary, but this utopian veneer only partially obscures a very different story. A new life begins for Lady Maclaughlan not when she marries, but when her husband dies.

<34> Careful textual analysis uncovers Maclaughlan's crafting the circumstances of her new life; she chooses the recipients of her husband's wealth, while guaranteeing her own position in the process. Mary does gain the fairy-tale ending that readers anticipate, but Lady Maclaughlan herself undermines Mary's high expectations. Marriage may be the ideal goal of the traditional romance novel or national tale, but it is not necessarily a perfect or permanent solution. She follows her admission, "I wished you to marry him" with the words "Whether you'll thank me for that twenty years hence, I can't tell—you can't tell—he can't tell—God knows—humph!" (463). Maclaughlan's sarcasm drips with the skepticism of the thrice-married matriarch. It acknowledges the artificiality of societal conventions, both their transience and their separateness from an objective standard of truth.

<35> Within the framework of Ferrier's first national tale, representations of Lady Maclaughlan utilize satirical stereotypes as a means to an end. As Griffin points out, satirists help us "to see" (62), and thereby "leave us with the inescapable burden of the present" (64). Ferrier's readers may have laughed at Maclaughlan's treatment of her husband, or her sway over the people surrounding her, but through her they also discover an alternative to the picture-perfect heroine, the traditional husband-wife relationship, and the patriarchal societal structure. Lady Maclaughlan even manages to manipulate the seemingly incontrovertible legal system of entailment, influenced by coverture, which denied women a legal existence apart from their husbands.⁽²⁴⁾ As a woman Maclaughlan has no direct control over her husband's property, yet she still chooses the recipients of his wealth. More than any other aspect of the novel, the roles of Lady Maclaughlan—narrative-crafting matriarch and controlling architect—make *Marriage* a worthwhile study for twenty-first century readers. Ferrier's novel marks a society on the cusp of change, as Britain moves towards greater legal and economic flexibility for women. The novel's stunning use of satire permits one women writer and her readers to question what is, and through questioning to imagine what could be. Lady Maclaughlan shapes the storyline from within, inviting readers to follow her example with their own lives' stories.

Endnotes

(1)Shields refers to the "predominantly female authors of national tales" (114), locating Ina Ferris and Katie Trumpener among those who identified "the national tale as a genre in its own right" (111). Trumpener herself notes that the "national tale is a genre developed initially by female authors" (132).^(^)

(2)Crawford acknowledges the potentially problematic aspect of this designation, since "some nineteenth-century writers used it pejoratively to refer to eighteenth-century philosophy" (269). However, he goes on to link "Scottish Enlightenment thought" to "creative writing" (270), as well as the interest in both history and the historical novel (297-8). Trumpener sees both "the national tale and the historical novel" as developing "out of Enlightenment comparative political analysis" (137).^(^)

(3)Trumpener identifies a "shift" that influences "both the national tale's marriage plot and its national characters" and results in "national divorce" in several of Ferrier's novels (146).^(^)

(4)Again, see Trumpener, who specifies three characteristics of the national tale: “the journey, the marriage and the national character” (142).[\(▲\)](#)

(5)For example, Showalter characterizes the nineteenth century as “the Age of the Female Novelist” (3).See also Palmeri’s discussion of “Satire, the Public Sphere, and British Women Writers” (220-229).[\(▲\)](#)

(6)In Camden’s 2005 dissertation “The Other Woman: Secondary Heroines in the Nineteenth-Century British and American Novel,” she defines “the secondary heroine” as one who has been forgotten. She further states that this figure exists “outside the primary courtship plot of the novel” (2). I adapt Camden’s definition slightly, based on the premise that secondary figures who appear external to the courtship plot often play an integral role.[\(▲\)](#)

(7)Three times, Cullinan’s *Susan Ferrier* (1984) cites structural and thematic “unevenness” as one of *Marriage’s* key flaws (“Preface”; 46; 119).[\(▲\)](#)

(8)Jack identifies the theme of *Marriage* as “the harm caused by unwise marriages, prudent or imprudent, and the importance of a girl’s early upbringing in helping her to make a wise choice of a husband” (237); see also Cullinan, who shifts the focus slightly to consider the characters themselves, though she agrees about the thematic importance of marriage (52).[\(▲\)](#)

(9)This opinion of the heroine has been voiced in various ways. Though Paxton sees Mary as an “active rather than a passive heroine,” she acknowledges Mary’s tendency towards conventional femininity, particularly in Mary’s relationship with her mother (26). Cullinan calls Mary “a fairly uninteresting (and sometimes irritating) model heroine” (60).[\(▲\)](#)

(10)Views range from the notion that Maclaughlan is “a covert attack on conventional ideas of femininity” (Anderson and Riddell 191), to “a manners-born character” who briefly influences the storyline (Bushnell 226), to a flat and lifeless “hypochondriac” figure (Paxton 22), or a rude “rural bluestocking” with despotic tendencies (Hart 58-60).[\(▲\)](#)

(11)Approximately 12 direct references to Lady Maclaughlan occur prior to her memorable appearance at Glenfern on page 43. One of the Glenfern aunts, Miss Jacky, refers to Maclaughlan as a “virtuous woman” (30), and also states that her character “is far above the reach of calumny” (31).[\(▲\)](#)

(12)The link between the novel and conduct book literature has been well established. See, for example, Gary Kelly (44).[\(▲\)](#)

(13)In particular, Griffin mentions the tendency to become fascinated with the villain, as evidenced in the works of Pope, Browning, and Samuel Richardson (68).[\(▲\)](#)

(14)Griffin remarks of Swift, “It is now a commonplace of satire criticism to note that Swift teases the reader out of (or into) thought. Eighteenth-century satiric theory is not able to explain this process” (28).[\(▲\)](#)

(15)In his discussion of rhetoric within “Satire as Inquiry,” Griffin acknowledges a change in perception that took place: “rhetoric has not always been conceived as persuasion . . . [it] is a means of detecting error” (41).[\(▲\)](#)

(16)Griffin defines paradox as “an apparently self-contradictory statement that may or may not prove to be well founded.” He views paradox as “an opportunity for the display of rhetorical ingenuity, for advancing an unorthodox opinion or (more often) exposing vulgar errors, or for stimulating a thinking temper” (53).^(^)

(17)See Nina Auerbach’s discussion of mobility and the spinster (124-188). Though Auerbach focuses on these ideas manifested in “the Victorian cultural imagination,” her study also has implications for the earlier Romantic period.^(^)

(18)In one of the fragmentary endings to the unfinished *Maria*, the protagonist writes a paper in her lover’s defense that she requests be read in court (133).^(^)

(19)In another instance Maclaughlan actually quotes an excerpt from a sailors’ song (59).^(^)

(20)Maclaughlan sternly reprimands the Misses Douglas, who appear in disarray at dinner time after riding and running races, which places Grizzy in a dilemma: “Miss Grizzy was in the utmost perplexity, between her inclination to urge something in extenuation for the poor girls, and her fear of dissenting from Lady Maclaughlan, or rather of not immediately agreeing with her” (50). Towards the end of the novel, the narrator identifies Grizzy as a “Maclaughlanite” (464), and earlier states of the Glenfern aunts: “Their moral virtues were much upon the same scale; to knit stockings, scold servants, cement china, trim bonnets, lecture the poor, and look up to Lady Maclaughlan comprised nearly their whole code” (160).^(^)

(21)B.G. MacCarthy describes her in this scene as “the terrific Lady MacLoughlin who speaks unvarnished truths and strides rough-shod over all mealy-mouthed efforts at politeness” (458).^(^)

(22)Of Mary, “Lady Maclaughlan pronounced (and that was next to a special revelation) that the girl would be handsome when she was forty, not a day sooner; and she would be clever, for her mother was a fool” (163).^(^)

(23)Ferrier alludes to *Macbeth* directly in the third chapter of volume two (168).^(^)

(24)See Blackstone’s famous definition of coverture in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765): “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: That is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage” (442).^(^)

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