Sense and Sensibility in Eliza Fay's *Original Letters*

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Eliza Fay wrote *Original Letters* from India from 1779 to 1815 detailing her journeys and experiences from Europe to India. Not much is known about Fay's life outside of the letters. She was born in 1756 in a middle-class family with siblings who were often the recipients of her letters. When she was 23, she began her journey to India with her husband, who was seeking a position as the "Advocate at the Supreme Court of Calcutta." Fay writes about power in politics, mankind's relationship with nature and God, fine food, and the struggles of travel. More than anything, Fay evaluates feminism; in her letters, she talks about gender roles, expectations in society, and if the women of her time were ready to adopt feminism. Although the use of letters as a mode of narration places *Original Letters* into the epistolary novel genre, Fay further utilizes the genre to develop her argument for feminism. Fay chooses to write an epistle posthumously rather than other publication methods and chooses to critique Indian society rather than European Society, so that she can critique Georgian era patriarchy without alienating her audience. This paper evaluates Fay's brand of feminism as it appears in her choice to write an epistle instead of a travelogue and as it appears in her writing itself. To do so, Fay's brand of feminism will be compared to the works of other feminists in her time. Finally, Fay is notably conflicted about how and when to express her authentic views of feminism. The clash and coexistence of sense and sensibility is a central theme in *Original Letters*. This paper explores how Fay's writing prioritizes sense without completely sacrificing sensibility.

Although Fay's letters can be read as an epistle, it is disguised as a private journal, and intended to be a public travelogue. The ambiguity surrounding *Original Letters*' genre reflects

the patriarchal dominance in 18th century literature, specifically over the public travelogue genre. Travelogue literature was conventionally categorized into quests for the fulfillment of sexual, political, or secularist desires. None of these quests were acceptable for a woman to embark upon to publishers, or as Fay puts it, "literary Lords of Creation" (Fay 4), primarily because these quests require an initial ignition of desire and independence—motivations not acceptable to Georgian era women. For example, in *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe makes the argument that his "thoughts were so entirely bent upon seeing the world that that [he] should never settle to anything with resolution enough to go through with it…" (Defoe 7). Crusoe's crusade to see the world posed no problem for Defoe to depict because Crusoe was a man, and it was completely acceptable for a man to embark upon a journey despite his family needing him. This example is important because Georgian era women would never be able to leave their family behind to fulfill a desire; she would be destroyed by publishers and the public alike. In her preface, Fay points out while men like Defoe could sell clear fiction as non-fiction, women weren't even able to sell non-fiction as non-fiction. To circumvent these biases, Fay deliberately frames her narrative as a private epistle, emphasizing it is, "in its nature, the most unassuming of all kinds of writing, and one that claims the most extensive allowances" (Fay 5). Afterall, Fay's letters are addressed to specific people, not the English population, so publishers could not criticize Fay for misguiding the public. In doing so, Fay participates in the travelogue genre without giving her opponents reason to dismiss her—a choice that establishes Fay as politically astute and deliberately sensible.

Fay's choice to disguise her travelogue as a private epistle was not an uncommon feminist maneuver in the 18th century. Mary Wollstonecraft and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

both write letters as a mode of narrating their writing intended for the public. In fact, critics like Dr. Karen Green claim that although *Letters*, a travel epistle by Wollstonecraft, was deliberately framed as letters, it was most likely intended to be a travelogue. Dr. Green describes Wollstonecraft's choice as "as part of her philosophical oeuvre" (Green 4). Although Wollstonecraft was one of the loudest voices for feminism in Fay's time, even Wollstonecraft recognized that her messages would be most effectively received through the guise of epistolary form. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu also participated in the travelogue genre through letters. In her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, Montagu is only able to openly criticize the orientalist lens by continuously voicing her criticism in private letters. In fact, Dr. Anna Secor writes in her review of *Turkish Embassy Letters*:

> …gender also constrained the production of the Turkish Embassy Letters…Lady Mary's choice to structure her travel narrative around the medium of letters may be seen as part of the gendered dimensions of the text's production; the letter form in general creates a more personal and private appearance and thus may be used to provide a feminine gloss to women's narratives…Montagu's choice to postpone the manuscript's publication until after her death reflects…gendered norms, since many 18th century women writers kept their work private during their lives, recording their experiences in journals and diaries, and many also did assume that their writing would be published after their deaths. (Secor 7)

Given Fay's preface emphasizing the inevitability of public disapproval of women's travelogue writing combined with Fay's letters being published posthumously, specifically in respect to

genre selection, Fay's approach to feminism was conventional to Georgian era feminism. Fay, Montagu, and Wollstonecraft all made the deliberate, political choice to establish their presence in the travelogue genre while circumventing the "literary Lords of Creation," who would stigmatize and dismiss their quests as unacceptably unladylike.

Fay, Wollstonecraft, Montagu, and many other women's choice to circumvent public disapproval was, as briefly mentioned before, a largely political choice. Feminist writers in the 18th century faced two choices: to remain complacent towards public disapproval or to politically maneuver through public disapproval. To analyze their choices and outcomes regarding feminism, it may be useful to view their situation from a behavioral economic perspective. Behavioral economics is the study of decision-making given scarcities—gaps between what is desired and what is possible. While feminist writers would have certainly wanted to publish travelogues in their lifetimes and correct the sociopolitical injustices of patriarchy, they were faced with scarcities of public dismissal and damaging stigmatizations. For example, consider Fay as a decision maker, who is faced with four possible decisions: she can either publish a travelogue while alive or posthumous, or publish an epistle while alive or posthumous. Although publishing a travelogue would allow Fay to adopt an unapologetic, authentic brand of feminism, it would have the immense cost of public dismissal. Lady Montagu, for example, would endanger her relationship with her family and possibly the embassy. The choice then becomes whether to publish epistles while they were alive or posthumous. In publishing letters posthumous, writers not only avoid public disapproval, but they also shield themselves and their familial relationships from any damage. In publishing letters, however, writers sacrifice authentic, unapologetic feminism for a compromising,

cultural brand of feminism. They also lose any chance of receiving credit or fame for their work while they can experience it. Thus, although their decisions were economically minded, their expected outcomes were politically minded.

However, 18th century Europe wasn't ready to openly adopt radical feminism, and the compromise made by writers like Fay set the necessary precursors to correct the sociopolitical injustices of patriarchy—an act of sense over sensibility. Such was the nature of the feminist movement in the 18th century. Dr. Yuliya Ladygina explores feminism and compromise in her book *Bridging East and West*. In the chapter "The Art of Feminist Compromise," Dr. Ladygina introduces Olha Kobylianska, a feminist writer shortly after Fay. Ladygina writes:

> Protesting the patriarchal subjection of women, Kobylianska molded her radical ideas into a liberal compromise by combining elements of progressive and conservative currents of thought. Kobylianska new model is clever, daring, and elegant, and to either condemn her fiction as merely reactionary or to celebrate its emancipatory moments while ignoring its more problematic aspects, such as her support of traditional gender roles in family, would be to obscure the careful balancing act that keeps it poised between either extreme. Placed in historical perspective, Kobylianska early writings thus exemplify the internal tensions of the late 19th century literary tradition that seeks both to disseminate a new middle-class morality, and to protest the restrictive implications of that morality for women. (Ladygina 50)

While authors like Fay and Kobylianska could be criticized for not being feminist enough, Dr. Ladygina argues that their actions kept them from falling into either extremity. Feminists like

Fay were greatly concerned with maintaining a balance acceptable to middle-class morality so that they would have public support in pushing for the protest of patriarchy and creating "a new middle-class morality." Thus, in Fay's choice of writing epistle rather than a public travelogue, she conforms with other feminists at the time to an economically minded decision that began to shift the patriarchal sociopolitical atmosphere of the 18th century.

Because she writes a private epistle rather than a public travelogue, Fay strategically positions herself to completely dismantle Georgian era patriarchy within her writing without losing the public's ear. For example, Fay uses Sati (the custom of a widow throwing herself into a fire alongside her husband) as an opportunity to protest patriarchy rather than just viewing it through the conventional Orientalist lens of the "other" men oppressing their women. Given the social norms of the 18th century, it is completely plausible an editor would not allow a public, non-orientalist perspective of Sati. When Fay sees Sati take place, she immediately notes:

> I cannot suppose that the usage [of Sati] originated in the superior tenderness… since the same tenderness would extend to his [the husband's] offspring, exposing the innocent survivors to the miseries on an orphan state ... personal fondness can have no part here at all, … this practice is entirely a political scheme intended to insure the care and good offices of wives to their husbands. (Fay 293)

First, Fay attempts to rationalize Sati rather than write it off as the barbaric ways of brown men. Rather than immediately invoking a pseudo-anthropological rationale, Fay humanizes the Indians—assuming first Sati could be an act of passion, "superior tenderness"; however, the

same passion would prevent a mother from punishing her children to orphan hood after their father died. Fay adopts a logically inductive style and an unhurried tone as she works through her observations to gradually yet unavoidably reach her point: Sati is simply a mechanism of patriarchy that oppresses women into fear and submission.

By extracting the patriarchal mindset from the culturally exclusive custom of Sati, Fay can claim the patriarchal mindset of Sati is not unique to India but can be seen throughout both the occident and the orient. Fay observes that Sati is just a manifestation of the patriarchal mindset, which exists in many other countries. She writes, "[the maintainers of patriarchy] have not failed in most countries to invent a sufficient number of rules to render weaker sex totally subservient to their authority" (Fay 293). As with her choice of genre, we see a pattern of decentering in how Fay voices feminism. When she writes in epistolary form, Fay decenters herself from the narration of a travelogue. Fay understands that directly criticizing Europe will only alienate her audience. In going to India and focusing on Sati, she decenters European patriarchy from her criticism of most countries rather than directly bashing Europe. Only after decentering does Fay proceed to mention Europe:

> I cannot avoid smiling when I hear gentlemen bring forward the [admirable] conduct of the Hindoo women, as a test of superior character, since I am well aware that so much are we the slaves of habit *everywhere* that were it necessary for a woman's reputation to burn herself in England, many a one who *accepted* a husband merely for the sake of an establishment ... would mount the funeral pile with all imaginable decency and die with heroic fortitude. (Fay 293-4)

While Fay isn't necessarily casting blame on women for being complacent to injustice, she is, at the bare minimum, astutely recognizing that women everywhere value respect perhaps to a fault. Depicting the amplified ramifications of women's value of respect in the form of Sati enables Fay to highlight the absurdity of valuing reputation to a fault. In fact, the obsession over reputation was the biggest impediment to the feminist movement throughout the occident and orient in the 18th century—women who openly protested patriarchy were stigmatized and discredited by publishers and the public alike. However, Fay modifies British women's hypothetical willingness to "mount the funeral pile" with "all imaginable decency" and a "heroic fortitude," a clear example of verbal irony. Therefore, Fay does partially cast blame upon women for being so willing to mount and maintain themselves in positions of weakness. Without explicitly saying so, Fay calls for women to stand up for themselves, or let their life and death be a narrative of meaningless suffering. These sentiments arguably sparked the early waves of the feminist movement. While Fay also protects her reputation by never explicitly criticizing European patriarchy, it was perhaps the most she could do as a Georgian era woman. Rather than remaining complacent to either the public's opinion or to injustices like Sati, Fay manages a careful balancing act that keeps her argument poised between either extreme to protest patriarchy while retaining the public's ear and maintaining dignity.

Although Fay initially avoids placing Sati through an orientalist lens, unfortunately, she merely delays the orientalist lens rather than avoiding it all together. Fay concludes the passage about Sati by arguing that Christianity is better than Hinduism, and thus European culture ought to be above the injustices of patriarchy. Fay writes, "and many such [patriarchal establishments] we have in England, and I doubt not in India likewise: so indeed we ought [to

rid ourselves of unjust patriarchy], have we not a religion infinitely more pure than that of India?" (Fay 294). It is unclear if Fay actually believes Christianity is "infinitely more pure" than Hinduism, or if she is just appealing to her European audience. Either way, Fay's argument operates under the assumption that the oriental religion is far beneath the occident religion, and that the occident must set a proper example for the world to follow. However, throughout the letters, Fay notably respects, appreciates, and often assimilates to other cultures. Throughout her travels, Fay is quick to learn other languages, try new foods, and respect cultural practices—none of which are typical to a purely orientalist mindset. For example, when Fay addresses her servant in India, she kindly asks her to "go to the *bazaar*," rather than her husband asking people on the street where they could find the market. Without a lens of exoticism, Fay also notably admires women's clothes in Egypt:

> she had a handkerchief bound round her head, covered with strings composed of spangles ... you must allow that she was a most brilliant figure. They have a sweet little girl about seven years of age, who was decked out much in the same style ... she really looked pretty ... I was pleased with both mother and child : their looks and behavior were kind, and to a stranger in a strange land … (Fay 41)

Although these examples are not strong enough evidence to make the claim that Fay sarcastically puts Christianity over Hinduism, they are enough to obfuscate whether Fay truly adopts an orientalist lens in viewing the world. Fay could have intended to simply reiterate her argument in orientalist logic as to more effectively appeal to her audience. Thus, given her overall style of decentering and changing her own methods of expression to appeal to a larger

audience, it seems plausible that Fay would temporarily and partially adopt an orientalist lens to protest patriarchy.

In the opening letter of Fay's *Original Letters*, Fay signs off saying, "My constant prayers are that we may be enabled to support this dreadful separation with fortitude, but I dare not trust myself with the subject; my heart seems to melt as I write and tears flow so fast as to compel me to shut one eye while I proceed. It is all in vain, I must leave off" (Fay 33). These words set the tone for the entire book. Fay is constantly bombarded with tragedy after tragedy: her loved ones often fall ill and die, she is robbed, taken captive, starves, stuck with a husband who cannot stand up for himself or for her, and homesick for England. Her pains and struggles mirror her efforts to further feminism as a woman in a patriarchal society. Fay must remain in a loveless marriage with a spineless husband for far longer than she should have, she must resist desires for other men more worthy of her love, she must accept the unjust paradigms of patriarchy enforced by men like Haidar Ali, and most of all, she is robbed of her free will and is forced to follow men, no matter how irrational they are. Given the pain she goes through as a woman, Fay could most justifiably use her writing express her emotions and frivolously lash out against patriarchy to emphasize the need for a feminist movement. This type of reactionary literature is sentimentalism, and Fay was shrewd enough to know that sentimentalism should not be the face of feminism, rather, it would reaffirm men's belief that women are overly emotional. In his dissertation, *Fictions of Empire: British Women's Travel Narratives in India*, Dr. Denis Comer notes Fay's reluctance to write in sentimentalism:

> Despite the difficulty Fay expresses ... where tears prevent her from proceeding, she wills herself to table momentarily her sentimentalism ... : "I will now lay down my pen,

> and endeavor to acquire a calmer set of ideas, for I must either write with more fortitude or not at all" (Fay 34) ... in a world where Fay learns with dismay that she actually has little to no control she strives above all else to maintain control in the one area she can—in her narrative. (Comer 62)

Fay constantly tables her sentimentalism because in the 18th century, sentimentalism was mocked. In his novel *The Pickwick Papers*, Charles Dickens writes "[speaking of sentimentalist literature] We will not wring the public bosom with the delineation of such suffering!" (Dickens 156). By tabling her sentimentalism and making choices such as writing in epistle and decentering Europe while protesting patriarchy, Fay refuses to give her opponents reason to dismiss her—a choice that establishes Fay as politically astute and deliberately sensible.

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