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# Introduction

(RONNIE YOUNG)

*The Inheritance* is Susan Ferrier's second novel and is the most critically successful of her works. Popular on its initial publication in 1824, the novel has since found a number of prestigious admirers including Sir Walter Scott, *The Edinburgh Review* and the great Victorian critic George Saintsbury, who declared it Ferrier's 'masterpiece'.<sup>i</sup> It is a novel which shows Ferrier's skills as a satirist and caricaturist in their best light and that remains moreover one of the greatest examples of domestic fiction in the Scottish literary tradition.

*The Inheritance* tells the story of Gertrude St Clair, heiress apparent to the estate of Rossville in Scotland who, on the death of her father, returns from France to take up residence with her grandfather, the present Lord Rossville. As Gertrude's guardian, Lord Rossville subjects the young heiress to a tyrannical regime based around the strictest codes of conduct and the performance of 'duties' that are wholly unreasonable in nature, not least the expectation that Gertrude should one day marry his nephew, the aspiring politician Mr. Delmour. Gertrude naturally rejects Rossville's demands and instead bestows her affections on the younger nephew, Colonel Delmour, a romantic but inappropriate suitor. When Gertrude finally inherits the estate of Rossville, Colonel Delmour exposes her to the corruptive influences of London society, where she quickly adopts a 'fashionable' –that is, excessive – lifestyle and proceeds to neglect her duties as a landowner. At the same time, information emerges to cast doubt on Gertrude's true parentage, thus her right to inherit, causing her fashionable suitor to abandon her and Gertrude to seek salvation in the arms of another. *The Inheritance*, then, contains familiar elements of nineteenth-century fiction: the choices facing a young woman in a male-dominated society; the satire of fashionable life; and even 'gothic' elements such as dark family secrets, intrigue and blackmail. Yet beyond the generic building blocks we are presented with a unique and accomplished work of fiction. *The Inheritance* is a great example of the novel of manners and is remarkable for its satirical portrait of early nineteenth-century society. It raises issues about social class, gender, and the nature of authority, it reveals much about the development of domestic fiction in early-

nineteenth-century Britain, and it ultimately forces us to re-assess Ferrier's standing as a novelist.

Susan Edmonstone Ferrier was born on the 17 September 1782 at Lady Stair's Close just off Edinburgh's High Street. Susan was the youngest of the ten children of Helen Coutts, a farmer's daughter from Montrose, and James Ferrier, a Lawyer with close connections to Edinburgh society. As principal Clerk of Session, James worked next to Sir Walter Scott, a family friend whom Ferrier maintained an intimate connection with throughout her life. The Ferriers associated with the family of Henry Mackenzie, author of *Man of Feeling* and one of Edinburgh's leading critics, and James Ferrier also had significant connections with the fifth Duke of Argyll, who both helped him obtain the Principal Clerkship and appointed him as manager of the Argyll estates. It was this latter connection that first led Susan Ferrier towards literary authorship as she accompanied her father on visits to Argyll's property, visits which exposed her to the varied characters and scenes of fashionable life at Inverary Castle and which were to provide her with much of the material for her later novels. Through these visits, Ferrier formed a firm friendship with Charlotte Clavering, Argyll's niece and the original co-author of Ferrier's debut novel *Marriage*. Although Charlotte only contributed the short, unsatisfactory section detailing the history of Mrs. Douglas – the rest of *Marriage* being penned by Ferrier – this collaborative venture acted as the spur to Ferrier's writing and helped launch a career that was to produce a further two fictional studies of polite society, *The Inheritance* and *Destiny: or the Chieftain's Daughter*. Ferrier led a relatively secluded life. Following the death of her mother in 1797, she devoted herself to the care of her father, and spent most of her time staying between the family home at 11 George Street in Edinburgh's fashionable New Town and East Morningside House on the south side of the city. Ferrier was in no way a prolific writer, and her oeuvre pales in comparison to the great workhorses of nineteenth-century Scottish fiction, Sir Walter Scott and Margaret Oliphant. Her entire output consists of three novels published within a period of 14 years: *Marriage* was first published in 1818, *The Inheritance* in 1824, and her final novel *Destiny* appeared in 1831, after which she remained more or less unproductive until her death. She evidently started, but never completed, a further novel *Maplehurst Manor*, but failing eyesight may have mitigated this decline in literary productivity. Ferrier died at Albany Street on 5 November 1854 and was buried the churchyard of St. Cuthbert's near Edinburgh's Princes Street.<sup>ii</sup>

Out of Ferrier's three novels, *Marriage* is perhaps her best-known work, one which brought her immediate success on publication and which, unlike *The Inheritance*, has gone through numerous editions in the recent past. *The Inheritance* may therefore have been eclipsed by Ferrier's debut novel in terms of popular success but it is in no way eclipsed in terms of financial gain, stylistic achievement, and even critical recognition. For the copyright to *The Inheritance*, William Blackwood paid Ferrier £1000,<sup>iii</sup> a marked increase on the paltry £150 he had offered her for *Marriage* (and only surpassed by the £1700 the author later received for *Destiny* when, in a deal brokered by Scott, Ferrier finally quit Blackwood for another publisher). Letters to the author around the time of the publication of *The Inheritance* recognised its superiority over *Marriage*, as in glowing comments on the draft manuscript by Blackwood, who at various stages in its final composition pronounced it 'a hundred miles above "Marriage"' and 'a more elaborate work...better told, with greater variety, and displaying improved powers'.<sup>iv</sup> Correspondence from friends showed a similar preference. One enthusiastic sister even went so far as to praise it over not just Ferrier's first literary effort but also over some of Scott's recent work:

...I am enchanted with 'Inheritance' and you must be sensible that it turns the 'Red Gauntlet' *quite pale*; there's no comparison, and it's neither partiality nor flattery that makes me say so. It sells much better, the booksellers say, and is altogether a very superior work. Mr. K. says he prefers it infinitely to 'Marriage,' and there he is at it till two o'clock in the morning weighing every word and sentence. He was impatient to get home from Mrs. Edmonstone's grand ball last night to finish a volume...<sup>v</sup>

Ironically, this figure of the avid reader who is hooked on every sentence of Ferrier's work parallels the character of Uncle Adam Ramsay in the novel itself, a figure who at least displays better taste in becoming addicted to Scott's work and in developing a secret relish for *Guy Mannering*.

Dubious taste and the untrained judgement of family members, then, may say as little about the relative merits of *The Inheritance* over *Marriage* as the flattery of a publisher anxious to remain in the author's favour, but these sources do gesture towards a general preference for one novel over the other that has in fact been supported by later critical evaluations of Ferrier's writing. In a favourable re-assessment of Ferrier's work in January 1842, *The Edinburgh Review* noted the 'advance made in artistic skill and dexterity' in *The Inheritance* over *Marriage* (even

if the review, rather surprisingly, notes a similarly marked improvement in *Destiny*, which is arguably Ferrier's least popular work).<sup>vi</sup> George Saintsbury likewise pronounced *The Inheritance* 'as a novel, infinitely better' than *Marriage* and 'a book which really deserves a lot of praise'.<sup>vii</sup> In his study of Ferrier and fellow Blackwoodian John Galt, William A. Parker suggested that *The Inheritance* offered a 'fulfilment' of the 'rich promise' shown by *Marriage*, offering a 'central unity, a well-knit plot, and a better style'. As a confirmation of the perceived superiority of *The Inheritance* over Ferrier's other works, it is interesting to note that the two latter critics remark upon a decline in Ferrier's writing between this novel and *Destiny* or what Saintsbury calls a 'falling off' of Ferrier's literary 'verve' after this point.<sup>viii</sup>

Critics and pundits alike, then, have generally viewed *The Inheritance* as Ferrier's best work, and indeed the later novel arguably shows a stylistic maturity that is largely absent from her first novel and showcases a keen satirical edge that reveals the development of Ferrier's art in the six years since the publication of *Marriage*. But we must view this 'success' in relative terms; that is, in relation to broader traditions in Scottish Literature, English fiction, and women's writing in general, and in relation to a critical heritage that has tried – albeit too infrequently – to situate Ferrier within some of these contexts. Ferrier was applauded in her own day and received favourable notices from critics as notable as Henry Mackenzie and Francis Jeffrey, and Scott was also an ardent admirer who offered her the following tribute in postscript to *A Legend of Montrose* (1819):

I retire from the field, conscious that there remains behind not only a large harvest, but labourers capable of gathering it in. More than one writer has of late displayed talents of this description; and if the present author, himself a phantom, may be permitted to distinguish a brother, or perhaps a sister shadow, he would mention, in particular, the author of the very lively work entitled MARRIAGE.<sup>ix</sup>

In context, Scott is discussing a successor in his own venture of displaying varieties of the 'Scottish character' and in showing the 'peculiarities' of his countrymen in new lights to the Southern reader. In the light of these plaudits, it may be fitting to regard Ferrier as a significant player in Scotland's rich literary scene during the Age of Scott and as a major participant in the fictional representation of national character emerging from post-Enlightenment Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century.<sup>x</sup> Ferrier was after all published by the literary powerhouse of nineteenth-century Scotland,

William Blackwood, and although unlike the other major Blackwood's authors she did not contribute to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, she has long been regarded a fully paid-up member of the 'Blackwood's group' alongside such luminaries as Hogg and Galt. While the degree of prominence given within this company can alter – Francis Russell Hart relegated Ferrier to the company of the 'Other Blackwoodians' Moir, Lockhart and Wilson<sup>xi</sup> – such strategic placing has informed important studies such as William Parker's *Susan Ferrier and John Galt*, and more recently Ian Duncan and Douglas Mack's essay on 'Hogg, Galt, Scott and their Milieu' in the *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, has mentioned Ferrier within the context of post-Enlightenment Edinburgh as a whole.

Such studies should be applauded for the way in which they have taken Ferrier seriously as a female novelist among distinctly male peers, even if they also acknowledge that, even within a fairly limited sphere and traditional periodisation of Scottish literary history, Ferrier is not the most noteworthy writer Scotland has produced. There are other limitations to such contextualisation: for example, Ferrier herself considered fellow Blackwoodians vulgar,<sup>xii</sup> an attitude that leads one to wonder about the degree to which *The Inheritance* would actually fit in with the tradition of radical Presbyterianism represented by Hogg and Galt. Where the main male Blackwoodians appear innovative in their transferring of narrative authority to subaltern voices and, by doing so, actively challenge the views of North Britain's elite and the conservative defence of the political status quo in works by authors like Scott,<sup>xiii</sup> Ferrier keeps narrative authority in the hands of an omniscient narrator, and subaltern voices – although often heard in Ferrier's fine rendering of vernacular – never really escape from the margins. One may except Gertrude St. Clair from this statement when her real roots are taken into account: Gertrude, after all, turns out to be from the same family as groundsman's daughter Lizzie Lundie, and her eventual appropriation of the Rossville estate could thus be read as a revolutionary transference of power to the lower classes. Yet Gertrude spends the most of the novel firstly as a privileged heiress and then as Lady Rossville, therefore her marginalisation is largely one of gender (which she cannot escape through marriage) rather than social status. Rather than acceding to the status of individual subjects, as in Hogg's first-person narratives, the social 'subalterns' of Ferrier's novel remain the objects of elite benevolence. During Gertrude's visit as the new Lady Rossville to cottagers on her estate, Burney-esque benevolence may be confounded by the 'tragi-comic scene'

(p.278) of the Scottish gudewife, who, in her premature attempt to have her husband buried before he is dead, ironically undercuts romanticised views of a pure and honest peasantry held by Lady Rossville, but it is also a scene that re-invests the elite views of Edward Lyndsay and the satirical narrator with authority.

This is not to say, however, that Ferrier espouses political and social conservatism. As Carol Anderson and Aileen M. Riddell have pointed out, *The Inheritance* is a novel in which ‘class attitudes are probed’,<sup>xiv</sup> and there is much in the text that exposes the workings of class ideology and even challenges the traditional views of Britain’s elites. When Lyndsay chides Gertrude for failing to fulfil her promise of giving the living of Rossville to young Leslie, the reader, like Gertrude, is forced to reflect on the use and abuse of power by landowners (pp.365–70). That the situation leading to this reflection relates to the question of patronage is particularly significant: Ferrier was later to join the Free Church following the 1843 Disruption, and her views on the appointment of ministers by landowners are as evident here as they are in the famous portrait of the Reverend McDow, the wholly inappropriate appointment to the Glenroy living in *Destiny*. The manner in which Ferrier dispatches the old Lord Rossville – led to a sudden shock demise by the shame of seeing a near relation hitch a ride from the radical distiller’s hearse – also shows her willingness to prick satirical holes in the pretensions of the gentry:

There was something in having a hearse, and the hearse of Mr. McVitae, the radical distiller, this forced within his walls, he could not away with. Death, even in its most dignified attitude, with all its proudest trophies, would still have been an appalling spectacle to Lord Rossville; but, in its present vulgar and almost burlesque form, it was altogether unsupportable. (p.244)

However, any ‘radicalism’ implicit in such passages must be set against a frequently priggish response to vulgarity, particularly in the exchanges between Gertrude and the novel’s American representative of the lower classes, Mr. Lewiston:

To thus be braved in her own house — her resentment mocked — her power, as it were, annihilated — her mother trembling before a menial, or at least one whom she herself only recognized as the husband of a menial — her brain felt as on fire. (p.383)

Whereas Lord Rossville's encounter with the radical's hearse is skilfully exploited for satirical purposes, the future Lady Rossville's frequent encounters with Lewiston are not so expertly handled, and even after accepting that Gertrude's viewpoint is essentially that of a spoiled, pampered, and decidedly flawed character, one still feels that the novel shares Gertrude's view that mingling with the lower ranks is degrading. Ultimately, one is inclined to agree with Saintsbury's view that despite 'some excellent sentiments on the vanity of rank and fashion' Ferrier would have been more comfortable 'to walk down her literary St. James Street on the arm of an earl than on that of a simple commoner'.<sup>xv</sup>

It can be difficult, therefore, to identify Ferrier squarely with either the Tory values of *Blackwood's Magazine* or with the implicit radicalism of fellow Blackwoodians such as Hogg. Furthermore, such studies that have focussed on Ferrier as (junior) member of the Blackwood's group have tended to remain silent on crucial issues such as gender. Ian Duncan and Douglas Mack at least acknowledge the masculine bias of publishing in post-Enlightenment Edinburgh, noting the 'rarity of female voices at the feast glosses the comparative weakness of the feminine tradition of domestic fiction in Scotland'.<sup>xvi</sup> Ferrier would seem in this context a rather solitary feminine voice within a world of male authors. A corrective to this position perhaps appears in the form of Ferrier's inclusion in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, which has placed her within a vibrant tradition of women's fiction in early nineteenth-century Scotland.<sup>xvii</sup> Although authors Elizabeth Hamilton, Mary Brunton, Christian Isobel Johnstone, and Ferrier herself – who comprise the 'Other Great Unknowns' of Anderson and Riddell's survey – are largely ignored today, their popularity in their own day is noteworthy and shows that we cannot take the 'comparative weakness' mentioned by Duncan and Mack as a sign that Scottish women's fiction was in any way unsuccessful during the period. The kind of recognition that Scottish women authors are now receiving from such sources is long overdue even within the field of women's studies, and it may serve to point out that Ferrier has often been overlooked by studies of women's fiction in English, including pioneering works by critics like Elaine Showalter and even more recent texts like *Women and Literature in Britain 1800–1900*.<sup>xviii</sup> Although in dealing with Ferrier within the context of Scottish literature alone we are discussing a relatively localised context, it could be argued that the recognition of regional and cultural difference implied therein is as crucial to understanding Ferrier's work as the recognition of gender difference, given her



frequent focus upon particular Scottish locations and the contrast between Scottish and English culture. This is not to say that Ferrier is doubly disadvantaged as both a women writer within a mainstream male literary culture and as a 'subaltern' Scot marginalised against 'English' traditions in women's writing; rather, it is to suggest the (if you like) 'hybrid' aspects of Ferrier's writing, the fact that her novels explore the encounters between different cultures, Scots and English, masculine and feminine, upper and lower class. Similarly, although Ferrier is not usually considered an innovator in form, her works show the progress of the early nineteenth-century novel as an encounter between different forms and traditions, from the satirical novels of manners by Fanny Burney and Jane Austen through to the regional variants of domestic fiction pioneered by Maria Edgeworth and developed in post-Enlightenment Scotland.

It is perhaps understandable that Ferrier has an uncertain position in relation to women's studies. At best, she is as an expert satirist of contemporary manners who deftly anatomises the state of marriage and exposes the tyrannical nature of patriarchal authority; at worst, she could be read as an overly-evangelical apologist for the status quo who spent most of her life resisting the badge of female authorship (her three novels were, of course, originally published anonymously) while fully devoting herself to keeping house for a sick father. Her views on marriage are complex but frequently conventional: arranged matches of the kind Lord Rossville attempts between Gertrude and Mr. Delmour are justly criticised but so too are 'romantic' marriages when rashly consummated by Lady Juliana in *Marriage* and Glenroy in *Destiny*; and only the pious improvers like Mrs. Douglas in *Marriage* and *The Inheritance*'s Edward Lyndsay, with all their stultifying conventionality, seem to offer models for marital success.

If Ferrier's plots are conventional, as critics often argue, then perhaps so too are the gender politics implied by the structure of *The Inheritance*. After all, Gertrude's 'sins' are ultimately redeemed by Edward Lyndsay, who represents an enlightened Christian value-system which may stand in direct contrast to the authoritarian outlook of Lord Rossville, but which still demands female dependency in marriage and submission to patriarchal structures. Anderson and Riddell have suggested that a 'covert attack' on convention appears among the 'peripheral' characters of Ferrier's novels such as the formidable Lady MacLaughlan or Miss Pratt.<sup>xix</sup> This may be the case, for both are strong characters who appear to subvert

traditional feminine roles to some extent and who break out of the margins that would confine them to take centre-stage in *Marriage* and *The Inheritance* respectively. Still, in reading Miss Pratt – who always defers to the patriarchal opinions of her absentee nephew Mr. Anthony Whyte – as a type of feminine subversion, we perhaps go too far in stressing the radical import of Ferrier's text and instead show that subversion for its own sake can be a theoretically problematic criterion for evaluating the importance of women's writing. Ferrier's novel may not be fully subversive of gender norms but it does reveal the injustices of patriarchal ideology in early nineteenth-century society and does offer important forms of resistance to authoritarian strictures. Take, for example, Gertrude's resistance to Lord Rossville's marriage schemes:

“I here lay my positive injunctions upon you to refrain from speaking, thinking, or acting any farther in this most faulty and improper transaction; and I shall, at the same time, signify to the other party concerned that, from this time, he likewise must cease to consider you in any other light than that which the present relationship by blood warrants. I here positively annul any engagements, or contract, by which this clandestine, and consequently unlawful and improper correspondence, has been—”

“No, my lord,” cried Gertrude, in her turn roused by such opprobrious epithets – “you cannot annul the affections of the heart. I am not a slave, to be thus bought and sold!” explained she, giving way to her long-suppressed tears. (p.172)

Lord Rossville, the representative of tyrannical patriarchal authority in *The Inheritance*, turns to the legal language of injunctions, transactions, contracts, and annulments to silence Gertrude, censor her thoughts, and police her actions; Gertrude's – and Ferrier's – response is radical in that it rejects this outmoded authoritarian discourse in favour of an enlightened, progressive and modernising discourse of liberty, and places sentiment rather than social contract at the heart of human social relations.

It is not however any lack of radicalism in her writing that has left Ferrier still largely ignored as an author. What criticism exists has frequently tended towards grudging recognition and has been all too ready to point out Ferrier's flaws: her laboured moralising, her paper-thin plots. Ferrier does have a tendency to set up characters as the leaden bearers of normative eighteenth-century morality (Mrs Douglas in *Marriage* or *The Inheritance*'s Edward Lyndsay), whereas her plots, as Wendy Craik has remarked, remain clichés already used by novelists like Burney and

Edgeworth on which incidents are loosely hung.<sup>xx</sup> Plot, then, may not be Ferrier's strong point, and her moral viewpoint may sometimes hover uncomfortably over her texts, yet even given these limitations it is notable that the memory one takes away from *The Inheritance* is neither one of flimsy storylines nor of lumpen moralising but of sharp humour and an often incisive satirical view of early nineteenth-century society. Lord Rossville's stuttering outrage following Miss Pratt's grossly improper entrance in a hearse – this is one of the novel's most memorable blends of satire and humour, all the more remarkable as it involves the death of a major character and a crucial turning point in the plot yet can still prompt a degree of mirth. Regarding the plot as a whole, we could say that it is not so much weak as it is secondary to the sketching of character, Ferrier's main skill as a novelist. So much so, in fact, that the blackmail sub-plot and the rather unsatisfactory mystery surrounding the menial Lewiston almost seem a gothic superfluity when considering the abundance of rich characters in the novel. In *The Inheritance*, action is secondary to character – a subservience that is most apparent during Gertrude's stay in town. This trip provides occasion for Ferrier to explore moral dissolution against the standard backdrop of London society, where her representation of the excesses of city life and the effects of luxury appear hackneyed even for a novel published in 1824. Cliché aside, Gertrude's stay in London and inevitable moral decline generally occur too late in the novel – well into volume three – for the whole to hang nicely together. Yet, if Gertrude's fall is too unexpected, too rapid, from a structural point of view, it has a psychological plausibility that shows Ferrier's real skill as a novelist in delineating character: Gertrude, after all, has already been set up as a passionate, self-deceiving and easily manipulated character in the first two volumes of the novel; given the scheming manipulation of her companion Delmour and the tumultuous excesses and rapid pace of the life she is suddenly cast into, it is understandable that she should fall as quickly as she does.

Like Smollett, then, to whom she is sometimes compared, Ferrier excels not in action but in the presentation of what Saintsbury called her 'gallery of originals',<sup>xxi</sup> or her array of character portraits ranging from the idiosyncratic to the grotesque. In *The Inheritance*, it is not the main players – the heroine Gertrude, her selfish mother Mrs St. Clair, her deceitful suitor Colonel Frederick Delmour, her eventual 'saviour' Edward Lyndsay, nor even the stiff, haughty, overbearing Lord Rossville – who make the most lasting impression, but the bit-part actors: Gertrude's embarrassing near

relations the Black family and their daughter Bell, who through her engagement to Major Waddell and constant reference to her 'situation' offers a fine comic portrait of social pretension. In many respects, the most successful characters in *The Inheritance* are the ones who provide such occasion for Ferrier to exercise her satirical wit; main characters, by contrast, help progress the plot but can appear the standard types frequently encountered in late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fiction. Gertrude St. Clair is a typically flawed heroine who is led by her own excessively romantic sensibilities into an inappropriate engagement with Delmour, a snobbish and cruel representative of the 'man of fashion' who naturally stands in direct contrast to the novel's 'man of sense' (thus the proper match for Gertrude) Edward Lyndsay. Mrs St Clair is that demonised female, the 'unnatural' mother; the pompous Lord Rossville is mechanically magisterial and only redeemed by the opportunities his class-bound automatism provides for satire.

Why *The Inheritance* succeeds in terms of 'portraiture' is because it contains two of Ferrier's most celebrated characters, the interfering busy-body Miss Pratt and Uncle Adam Ramsay. Miss Pratt is the poorer relation of Lord Rossville, to whom she is a recurring source of irritation and embarrassment. A consummate gossip, Pratt (derived from 'prattle') is one of the dominant voices in the novel. At times, the characterisation is almost too successful and one is forced to share in the tedium and dismay experienced by Lord Rossville when his poor cousin turns up at Rossville yet again. Yet Pratt is an important player in the novel who, despite her ironic protestations to the contrary, interferes in others' affairs in ways that motivate the story: for example, her suspicions of an attachment between Gertrude and Edward, though initially unfounded, are portentous and first introduce the idea of Edward as potential suitor. Her character has its humours – seen in her constant references to her ever-absent nephew Mr Anthony Whyte (the novel's Mrs. Grundy) – but she is much more than simply a humorous character, and instead achieves a notable complexity, particularly in her surprising relationship – or, rather, 'understanding' – with Adam Ramsay. Uncle Adam Ramsay himself is arguably the greatest of 'originals' in Ferrier's work. It is well known that Ferrier drew her characters from life and that, following the publication of *Marriage*, with its veiled versions of the individuals met with in the society of Inverary Castle, her readership liked to speculate on their real identity. Readers recognised *The Inheritance*'s Adam Ramsay as a fictional version of

Ferrier's father James. Scott, for example, on hearing of the death of James Ferrier, paid him the following tribute:

He was a man with strong passions and strong prejudices but with generous and manly sentiments at the same time. We used to call him Uncle Adam after that character in his gifted daughter's novel of the Heiress.<sup>xxii</sup>

The simultaneous mixture of passions, prejudices and generous sentiments mentioned by Scott describes Adam Ramsay perfectly. At first we are presented with a rather alienating character, a plain-spoken, brusque, and apparently miserly old Scotsman; but we quickly learn Adam's sentimental side in his generosity to Gertrude, in whom he recognises the image of his long-lost love Lizzie Lundie, and in the touching episode where he deliberately prolongs his stay at Rossville so he can secretly finish reading Scott's *Guy Mannering*. Ferrier's achievement is in convincingly combining these opposed traits, and in sustaining them throughout rather than, say, taking the comparatively standard approach of portraying the gradual reformation of a misanthrope.

Ferrier's position as a master of fictional characterisation has been noted by critics, but her reputation as a novelist has suffered in comparison to more celebrated contemporaries from Scott through to Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen. Such comparisons have not always been unfavourable: indeed, Scott himself placed Ferrier in the company of Austen and Edgeworth to praise their greater ability at painting 'portraits of real society far superior to anything Man vain Man has produced of the like nature'.<sup>xxiii</sup> When commenting on the manuscript of *The Inheritance*, Ferrier's publisher William Blackwood presented the similarity of the writing with that of Austen as a mark of its merit and excitedly passed on a friend's comment that 'It reminds me of Miss Austen's very best things in every page'.<sup>xxiv</sup> They were not the only commentators to set up Austen as the touchstone against which Ferrier must always be measured. *The Edinburgh Review*'s reassessment of all three Ferrier novels generously placed them on par with Austen (but above the work of Fanny Burney) and commentators ever since have been mulling over the similarities between the two. As near contemporary exponents of domestic fiction who offer satirical and often deflatory sketches of society and manners – while, it must be added, facing all the difficulties that accompany female authorship – perhaps Ferrier and Austen can and

should be directly compared. We also know that Ferrier read and admired Austen, as her letters mention both *Emma*, which she thought ‘excellent’, and *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>xxv</sup> Of course, the opening line of *The Inheritance* famously echoes *Pride and Prejudice*, substituting Austen’s “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”<sup>xxvi</sup> with “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that there is no passion so deeply rooted in human nature as that of pride” (p.1) – a less ironic view of human nature grounded more in the tradition of Scottish Enlightenment psychology. This allusion has led critics such as Parker to speculate that Ferrier had Austen in mind when writing the novel, and commentators have further suggested that Miss Pratt is based on Miss Bates from *Emma*.<sup>xxvii</sup> Still, two allusions do not equal imitation, and closer inspection of *The Inheritance* may not allow us to overstate the degree of Austen’s influence. On a superficial level, one could argue that the triangular relationship between Gertrude, Colonel Delmour, and Edward Lyndsay bears passing similarity to the triumvirate of Marianne Dashwood, Willoughby and Colonel Brandon in Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). We have Gertrude’s excessive sensibility, the character flaw that throws her into the arms of the dashing, romantic Delmour, who, despite signs of genuine affection, ultimately deserts her (for largely financial reasons, of course), thereby leaving the way clear for her union with a symbolic embodiment of sense, Edward Lyndsay. Have we not read all this somewhere before? But one might just as well argue that *The Inheritance* is a reworking of Burney’s *Cecilia* (1782) because they both have an heiress as their central figure. That Ferrier appreciated the work of Austen is well-documented; that she was simply an imitator of that work is open to question.

What the present volume shows is that Ferrier should be remembered as a major writer of domestic fiction in her own right. Rather than seeing her as the Scottish Jane Austen, then, it is time to pay serious attention to the way in which she plays a key role in developing the national mode of domestic fiction. Indeed, in studying the way in which national difference and national character operate in early nineteenth-century fiction, Ian Duncan has identified a ‘Scottish school of national domestic fiction’ of which Ferrier can be said to be a key member. Crucially, this school takes its lead not from Austen but from Ireland’s Edgeworth and the ‘satirical combination of “national tale” and “tale of fashionable life” founded in *Ennui*’.<sup>xxviii</sup> While *The Inheritance* may, in some respects, be the least ‘Scottish’ of Ferrier’s

novels, it still fits such a designation. Unlike *Marriage* and *Destiny*, which both concentrate on the contrast between Scottish and English culture and, in doing so, set Highland life in marked topographical, economic, and moral opposition to London, one could get the impression that *The Inheritance*'s Rossville estate could just as well have been set in an English county for all that this change of locale would have affected the moral trajectory of the story and its nod towards 'country' virtue as an antidote to metropolitan vice. Are we presented then with a portrait of an indifferently 'British' county society that simply suggests the ongoing Anglicisation of Scottish culture during the early nineteenth century? I do not think so. Ferrier still deliberately chooses to set the fictional world of Rossville in Scotland, to include canny auld Scots characters like Uncle Adam Ramsay, to experiment in idiomatic speech, and to generally include enough of what Ian Duncan calls 'thick description' to qualify *The Inheritance* as a prime example of national domestic fiction. Take, for example, the following encounter between Gertrude and the local peasantry:

“Oo, ‘deed he’s very ill, my leddy,” cried a voice from behind; and presently advanced a stout, blooming, broad-faced dame, clad in a scanty blue flannel petticoat and short gown. She was encompassed by a *girr* or hoop supporting two stoups\*, a piece of machinery altogether peculiar to Scotland. (p.15)

Ferrier kindly informs the reader in a footnote that a stoup 'is neither a bucket, nor a pitcher, nor a jar, nor anything but a stoup', an addendum that not only gestures towards an expanded national readership but also underlines the way in which the many things 'peculiar to Scotland' represented in the novel cannot be simply translated into other cultures. This includes the rich description of dress, manners, and, above all, the rich accents that permeate the novel. Wendy Craik, for instance, has noted how sensitively Ferrier uses 'idiom to suggest accent', limiting non-standard spelling only when dealing with broader characters, and how this contrasts with her 'formal, if rather lifeless, English'.<sup>xxix</sup> Indeed the comparative vitality of Scots is most revealed in the novel when it comes as a response to Gertrude's stiff expressions and clipped modes of address:

“Pray let me know what things are most wanted for your husband's comfort,” said Miss St Clair, “and I shall make a point of sending them—a bit of carpet for instance,” looking upon the damp clay floor.

“Wud you like a bit carpet, Tam, the leddy asks?” roared his wife to him; then, without waiting for an answer,  
“Oo, ’deed he disna ken what he wud like; an he’s ne’er been used till a carpet, and I daur say it wud just be a inconvenience to him, noo that he canna be fashed wi’ ony thing...” (p.16)

While Ferrier’s representation of idiom may not reach the level of achievement of Lewis Grassie Gibbon a century later, and while she often lapses into a comic portrayal of the ‘Scots character’ as in the above passage, it yet manages to paint a convincing portrait of regional Scottish life.

Key to this mode is not a romanticised Scotland that is home to an idealised virtuous peasantry or the subject of picturesque tourism but a metonymic realism that confounds the exercise of taste and sensibility:

The beauty of the morning — the interest each object excited — the song of the birds—the smell of the opening flowers—the sound of the waters—all combined to lull her visionary mind into an Elysium of her own creating; and as she walked along, in all the ideal enjoyment of her Utopian schemes, she found herself at the door of one of those cottages whose picturesque appearance had charmed her so much at a distance. A nearer survey, however, soon satisfied her that the view owed all of its charms to distance. Some coarse, lint-haired, mahogany-faced, half-naked urchins, with brown legs and black feet, were dabbling in a gutter before the door; while some bigger ones were pursuing a pig and her litter, seemingly for the sole purpose of amusement. (p.14)

There is no longer opportunity for Waverley-esque dreaming when one confronts the reality of Scottish peasant life. In this respect, Ferrier’s later description of Gertrude’s ‘romantic expectation of finding elegant distress in mud cabins’ dwindling away when facing ‘the homeliness of matter-of-fact poverty’ (p.275) could be taken as an index of the novel’s promotion of realism over romance in general and its assault on picturesque views of Scotland via a discourse grounded in localised detail as opposed to universalising aesthetics. Even in deference to innovators like Scott and Edgeworth, then, Ferrier deserves to be recognised as both a leading explorer of Scottish character and manners and as a significant figure in the tradition of national domestic fiction. Above all, she deserves to be read and re-read for her portraits of Scottish domestic society and for some of the most memorable characters in nineteenth-century literature.



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- <sup>i</sup> George Saintsbury, 'Miss Ferrier' in *The Collected Essays and Papers of George Saintsbury 1875-1920*, 4 vols. (London & Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1923), I, 302–5 (p.319).
- <sup>ii</sup> For biographical accounts of Ferrier, see W.M. Parker, *Susan Ferrier and John Galt* (London: Longmans, 1965), pp.8–23; and Elspeth Yeo, 'Ferrier, Susan Edmonstone (1782-1854)' in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, 60 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), XVI, 442-444.
- <sup>iii</sup> See William Blackwood's letter to John Ferrier, September 19 1823, in *Memoir and Correspondence of Susan Ferrier 1782-1854*, ed. by John A. Doyle (London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, 1929), p.171.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Memoirs and Correspondence*, p.174, p.176.
- <sup>v</sup> *Memoirs and Correspondence*, p.180.
- <sup>vi</sup> 'Miss Ferrier's Novels', *The Edinburgh Review*, January 1842, pp.498–505 (p.502).
- <sup>vii</sup> Saintsbury, p.320.
- <sup>viii</sup> Parker, pp.14–15, p.18; cf. Saintsbury, p.321.
- <sup>ix</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *A Legend of Montrose* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1893), p.357.
- <sup>x</sup> For a recent critical discussion of Ferrier and the representation of national character during the period see Ian Duncan, 'Economies of National Character', in *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp.70–95.
- <sup>xi</sup> Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel From Smollett to Spark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp.53–84.
- <sup>xii</sup> Hart, p.57.
- <sup>xiii</sup> See Ian Duncan and Douglas Mack, 'Hogg, Galt, Scott, and their Milieu' in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume Two: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707–1918)*, ed. by Susan Manning (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp.211–220 (pp. 219–220).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Carol Anderson and Aileen M. Riddell, 'The Other Great Unknowns: Women Fiction Writers of the Early Nineteenth Century' in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp.179–195 (p.192).
- <sup>xv</sup> Saintsbury, p.305.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Douglas and Mack, p.215.
- <sup>xvii</sup> See Anderson and Riddell, pp.179–195.
- <sup>xviii</sup> See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (London: Virago, 1977); *Women and Literature in Britain 1800–1900*, ed. by Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- <sup>xix</sup> Anderson and Riddell, p.191.
- <sup>xx</sup> Wendy Craik, 'Susan Ferrier', in *Scott Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Alan Bell (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), pp.324–25 (p.324).
- <sup>xxi</sup> Saintsbury, p.321.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by W.E.K Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.507.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Journal*, p.121.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Memoirs and Correspondence*, p.174.
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Memoirs and Correspondence*, p.128; Parker, pp.13–14.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994 [1813]), p.5.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> See Parker, p.14; Lady Margaret Sackville, 'Introduction' in *The Inheritance* (London: Eveleigh, Nash & Grayson, 1929), pp.v–ix (p.vi).
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Duncan, p.78.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Craik, p.331.