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“[H]is Castle was her Proper Habitation”: Homes and Dwelling Places in Sarah Fielding’s *The History of the Countess of Dellwyn* (1759)

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Fielding’s *The Countess of Dellwyn* tells Charlotte Lucum’s story. Seventeen, beautiful, raised in rural seclusion, her father manipulates her into marrying sixty-five year old Lord Dellwyn, a decrepit, gout-ridden and wealthy peer whose political influence Mr. Lucum hopes to secure in order to revive his own career. Eschewing the potential for the sentimental approach more obvious in some of Fielding’s other work and in near-contemporary novels such as Frances Sheridan’s *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) and others, the narrative voice of *The Countess of Dellwyn* maintains a distinctly critical distance from its heroine, remorselessly identifying her manifold errors in choices and conduct and resisting casting her as a victim, despite the parts played in her story by both her father and Lord Dellwyn himself. Key to the Countess’s downfall is her seduction by fashionable society, a seduction whose effects become most evident when the recently-married couple retire to Lord Dellwyn’s country seat at the London season’s end. In discussing the use to which the narrative puts Lord Dellwyn’s “noble ancient Castle,” swiftly and fashionably redecorated by the young Countess, this article considers how the novel employs houses as a counterpoint to the prevailing critique of its young heroine.

The Countess of Dellwyn (1759) chronicles the fall of its eponymous character, whose fate it is to transform from the blameless seventeen year old Miss Lucum to the culpable and then publicly shamed woman of quality, the Countess of Dellwyn. The novel does so in a manner that eschews the potential for the sentimental approach more obvious in some of Sarah Fielding’s other work and in near-contemporary novels such as Frances Sheridan’s *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), Frances Brooke’s *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763), and others. By contrast, the narrative voice of *The Countess of Dellwyn* maintains a distinctly critical distance from its heroine, remorselessly identifying her manifold errors in choices and conduct.¹ It constantly resists casting her as a victim, despite the nefarious parts played in her story by her father, by Lord Dellwyn himself, and by sundry other unsympathetic and unscrupulous figures, including Lord Clermont, the

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man with whom the heroine contracts a fatal sexual liaison. Divorced by her husband, she ends the novel not as in some way a figure of tragic error but as a negligible presence, socially marginalized and unredeemed.

This article will consider the way Fielding's novel employs homes and dwelling-places of various kinds to provide a counterpoint to the prevailing critique of its young protagonist. Her alienation from domestic spaces throughout the novel allows the narrative to reflect on the structural injustices that frame her experience, while simultaneously insisting on her responsibility for her own actions. Didacticism is thus deftly blended with social criticism, and the narrative finds a way to recognize the complex forces at work in the progress of any single life. It is Lady Dellwyn's resistance to serious reflection on her own part in her downfall, however, that leaves her as so unsettled a figure at the story's close. The Countess avoids thorough self-knowledge as assiduously as she seeks public places of entertainment, and the novel considers the link between homes and the capacity for serious reflection, as well as the ways in which retirement, in the shape of the small cottage to which she temporarily retreats after the divorce, both encourages such reflection and makes it intolerable to one for whom vanity is "her first and last Seducer" (2: 205).²

Fielding opens the novel in the middle of her story, with the wedding of Miss Lucum, age seventeen, and Lord Dellwyn, age sixty-three. The narrative voice dwells with relish on the stark contrast between the decrepit old man, gout-ridden and wheeled around by his servants in an "artfully contrived" machine, and "the natural Glow and Freshness which adorned Miss *Lucum's* Complexion" (1: 4). Miss Lucum is at once described as Lord Dellwyn's "destined Prey" and shown to be a willing participant in the ceremony, preserving "an unalterable Steadiness" throughout and probably in fact, the narrator suggests, distracted by the thoughts of "some future Scenes of Grandeur": "She also obtained her Desire, and became a *Countess*" (1: 7). In its retracing for the reader of the circumstances that led to this striking scene, the narrative sets up Miss Lucum's undeniable moral culpability, something from which it tenaciously refuses to release her, but at the same time it also lays bare the part played by social structures in the unfolding of her downfall, in which the nature of woman's relation to domestic space is caustically examined.

Lord Dellwyn is given no more quarter by the narrator than his young bride: his disease-ridden old age is cast as the inevitable consequence of a pleasure-seeking youth. He is spoilt, selfish, and looking for a pretty young wife to flatter and indulge him now that he can no longer pursue a luxurious life in the fashionable world. He lights upon the beautiful young Miss Lucum as a suitable vessel; her father, an unprincipled politician long out of favor but still desperate to regain influence, is only too delighted to agree. Miss Lucum, however, shocks both men when she "absolutely refuse[s] the Honour intended her. Lord *Dellwyn* was highly disagreeable in her Sight; and she chose rather to submit to any State of Life, than to shine in the highest Sphere on such Terms; she called it Prostitution and heroically defied all such Temptations" (1: 30). Since we already know that she marries Lord Dellwyn willingly, it is evident to us that Miss Lucum's defiance must be shortlived; but it is represented by the narrator as embedded in a genuine, if not properly principled, commitment to her then way of life, which is rural, tranquil, and ordered. Mr. Lucum's perverted parental values are emphasized by the narrator's comment that "he accounted himself an unfortunate Father, because his Daughter could be satisfied with a rural retired life" (1: 32).

Mr. Lucum does not immediately attempt to force his daughter to marry, as in the real-life case of Mary Granville (later Delany), for example, married at seventeen to the fifty-seven year old Lord Pendarves in 1718 in the cause of furthering her uncle's political ambitions. Instead, Mr. Lucum takes his daughter to London and insists that she take a full part in polite social life, to her initial disgust: "the turning Night into Day, the flying from Place to Place, to Routs, Drums, &c. &c. and the being Mistress of no One Moment of her Time, so wearied and fatigued her animal Spirits, that she was always languid" (1: 36). Most importantly, her father is constantly displeased if she ever returns home from these events early, becoming "peevish, morose, and churlish" (1: 37) and "at last [driving] her to seek for Shelter from that almost insupportable Misfortune, a disagreeable Home, by staying more abroad" (1: 39). Fielding had examined the misery of "a disagreeable Home" in her earlier work, such as in the transformation of Camilla's home in *David Simple* from her "Asylum from all Cares, and the Comfort of my Life" into her "greatest Torment" as a result of the schemes of her cruel stepmother Livia (145), and we need not be under any impression that what Miss Lucum experiences in being deprived of the comforts of home is anything but seriously distressing: this is one of the relatively rare moments when the narrator has some sympathy with the protagonist, or at least with her predicament. This is also the first instance of what will become discernible as a pattern as the novel progresses: Miss Lucum is driven from what should be her proper domestic space by the behavior of the men who should encourage her participation in it. She only finds out after her marriage that her father's behavior was a calculated strategy to encourage her absorption of and dependence on the values of fashionable society, with the aim of making her recognize the "*great Advantages*" (1: 58) of marrying a prosperous earl, whatever his age and decrepitude.

Herein lies Miss Lucum's weakness: although her father's unwelcoming and bad-tempered behavior makes home life deeply uncomfortable, it would have been possible to resist the temptations put in her way. The narrator puts it like this:

the being thus in a manner excluded, by the Fears of her Father's Anger, from returning early in the Evening to his Company, instead of a Croud, was highly disagreeable to her; till, by almost imperceptible Degrees, the Force of Custom rendered that Manner of Life tolerable, to which at first she had been so averse; then, the first Step being surmounted, she advanced another, and it became pleasing: And, from thence, it was not long before she was totally wrapped up in it. (1: 40)

"Custom" effects a "Revolution in her Mind and Heart," one that causes her to lose "the Power of Reflection" and is "attended with a new and large Train of Desires" (1: 41). This is a pivotal moment in Miss Lucum's story, for "the Power of Reflection," as the sequence of events indicates, is presented in the narrative as bound up with ideas of home, the loss of one leading to the loss of the other. The narrator emphasizes repeatedly the way in which what it regards as excessive extra-domestic social activity deprives individuals of this power. In her account of Lord Lucum's younger self, she comments, "suddenly some new Idea of Pleasure would strike his Imagination, and drive before it all Power of Reflexion" (1: 16); "Dissipation had banished Reflexion," we're told in a retrospect of Lady Dellwyn's married life (1: 223). Custom is a powerful "Force" that sweeps individuals up in its influence (1: 40). Although it can be counteracted by reflection, by its

very nature it discourages thought. By the time Miss Lucum, once she is Lady Dellwyn, comes to reflect, it is too late and then, as we shall see, reflection is too painful to tolerate or act upon. Having been driven from home, she becomes unable to find her way back.

In her new devotion to a frenzied social life, Miss Lucum finds her father's allowance is now no longer adequate to her wishes, and she begins to long for the material adornments she cannot afford. As a final straw, she is falsely given to believe by Lord Dellwyn and her father that Lord Dellwyn is about to marry her arch-rival Lady Fanny Fashion, at which point she will do anything to supplant her supposed rival, and is thus triumphant when she believes she has succeeded in doing so. The initial flurry of visits to her polite acquaintance on becoming Countess is entirely pleasing to the newly-wed young woman, and she also cheerfully consents to go down to Lord Dellwyn's country seat at the end of the season, considering that there will be no fashionable gatherings in which to display herself for the time being. The country seat is an ancient castle, and Lady Dellwyn is given free rein in its new modeling, throwing herself into its redecoration with energy and "reversing every thing in her Lord's Castle, as totally as her own Mind had been changed" (1: 90).³ The old "substantial" ornamentation is deemed vulgar and replaced with "*China Images, and all manner of Chinese Figures*":

some that stood still, and some that, by pulling a String, might be put into such insignificant Shakings and Motions, as made the Head of the Beholders giddy And thus was the noble ancient Castle, which, in its old Form, struck the Imagination both with Dignity and Simplicity, filled with such trifling Gew-gaws, that it was dangerous to move, lest some of the Clock-work Trumpery should be thrown down and put out of Joint; the constant Consequence of which was a thorough Discomposure of all the Lady's Features. In this manner the Lady of the Mansion was so happy as to rid herself of some small Portion of Time with tolerable Self-satisfaction; whilst the exquisite Elegance of her own Taste was the daily Subject of her Admiration. (1: 90–91)⁴

In a telling example of the association between mental and domestic interiors, this description ties Lady Dellwyn's transformation powerfully to the potential fragility of artificial contrivances: she, like the "Clock-work" (and un-English) "Trumpery" she favors, is easily discomposed; both ornaments and mistress of the house are easily "put out of Joint." The tyranny of "Custom" has set Lady Dellwyn off on a particular course, a course that when "thrown down" is shown to be flimsy, modern and wholly lacking, like the decorations she chooses, in "Dignity and Simplicity."⁵

Such radical discomposure follows close on Lady Dellwyn's re-modeling of the castle's interior. Stuck in the countryside with Lord Dellwyn and with nothing to do, his young wife quickly finds herself alienated from the structure she has superficially transformed but which is still inalienably *his* house. As Francesca Saggini and Anna Enrichetta Soccio have noted, while the interior of a house may belong "to the female universe," its exterior "suggest[s] the position that its male master has achieved in the world" (4), and the ancient castle reflects Lord Dellwyn's social eminence. Lady Dellwyn gradually realizes, as the narrator points out, "that she had not, by marrying a Man of a large Fortune, obtained any great Proportion of Property which she could call her own, or command at her Pleasure" (1: 150). Not only is the castle *his*, whatever she may have done to its interior decorations, but, equally problematically, he is *in* the castle, making it progressively more and more intolerable a space for her to occupy:

When Lord Dellwyn was able to be carried out for the Benefit of the Air, his Lady, under some Pretence of Disorder in her Head or Stomach (for every Part bore its Portion of Falsehood) contrived to be excused bearing him Company, that she might gain some few Hours to herself. Yet those Hours, instead of being spent in her former amusing Employments, were consumed in fruitless Lamentations; but when the loud Rap at the Gate proclaimed the Approach of the Lord of the Castle, then was her Terror again renewed.

The rumbling of the Servants on the Stairs, to convey his Lordship back to his Apartment, was so dreadful in his Lady's Ears, that it almost threw her into a shivering Fit of an Ague; and often on the melancholy Reflexion that she was doomed for Life to endure the Company, and even the Fondness, of a Man utterly disagreeable to her, she wanted Words to express herself. (1: 101)

Lord Dellwyn's temporary absences provide relief simply in allowing her to lament freely and the oblique reference to the misery entailed in the intimacy of the union—in her "Terror" at his approaching return and in her endurance of his "Fondness"—further underscores her powerlessness.

As the mention of "an Ague" portends, Lady Dellwyn falls ill. She retreats to her own apartment, and another interior is poignantly used to figure her psychological state:

There were present many of the Disorders which Virgil so finely and poetically personifies, and places at the Gates of the infernal Shades. There revengeful Cares, inward Strifes, and pale Diseases, had taken up their Habitations; but refreshing Sleep found no Entrance. A small Voice issued from a Bed placed in utter Darkness, where no Ray of Light was admitted; complaining of bad Nerves, low Spirits, and terrible Dreams. (1: 111)

The use of Virgil here serves both to subject Lady Dellwyn's sufferings to mock-heroic derision and to point up their intensity: throughout the novel, the narrator remorselessly finds the protagonist's own flaws responsible for her predicaments, but always acknowledges her pain. Indeed, the responsibility itself accentuates the pain. Reduced to inactivity in the country, "in her Retirement from those gay Pleasures, which had dazed [*sic*] her Understanding and turned her Head giddy," reflection returns only to show Lady Dellwyn the reality of having brought herself "under an Obligation to spend her Life with her Lord" (1: 100), a reality she is desperate to circumvent rather than confront. Fearing his beautiful young wife is "falling into a galloping Consumption" (1: 112), Lord Dellwyn brings in a fashionable doctor who immediately recommends the waters at Bristol as an appropriate cure. Just as the social whirl of London became her retreat from her unhappy home with her father, so that of Bristol then becomes her escape from the misery of her husband's house.

As the Dellwyn marriage deteriorates, Fielding introduces a marriage into the narrative with which to compare it, that of Mr. and Mrs. Bilson. While this is a marriage of love, it is for a number of years far from ideal, as after the first few months Mr. Bilson becomes a mildly affectionate but largely detached husband, spending most of his time, we're told, "in public, and his Evenings at the Tavern" (1: 164), despite his growing family. Mrs. Bilson, however, realizes

that she might, with greater Ease, render Home detestable to her Husband, than renew the Delight he once took in it; therefore her great Study was not to convert his Indifference into Aversion. She always received him with Affection; tho' much of her Tenderness she suppressed, lest he should find it troublesome, as his Heart did not correspond with hers. She never expressed a Desire that he should stay more at home, nor hinted that he had

been too long abroad; secure from Reproaches, his own House had no Fault, in his Opinion, but that of being less lively than a Croud. (1: 164–65)

This assiduous tolerance is following the standard conduct-book advice—as Wetenhall Wilkes recommended in his 1740 *Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady*, “Meekness and Complacency, are the only Weapons wherewith to combat an irregular Husband” (173). What makes Fielding’s use of this trope less relentlessly conservative than it could be is the implicit comparison made between Mrs. Bilson’s “complacent” behavior and the line taken by the irritable Lord Dellwyn when Bristol social life claims most of his wife’s time. Apparently cured with miraculous rapidity by the waters, Lady Dellwyn is horrified when her husband then wishes to return home equally rapidly, “reminding her, that his Castle was her proper Habitation” (1: 135). She is fortuitously saved from this abrupt return by Lord Dellwyn’s suffering a bad attack of gout that prevents his traveling. While the narrator acquits his wife of “an ill-natured Delight in her Lord’s Sufferings,” she also makes it clear that the Countess is overjoyed to be saved from returning home: “For Engagement arose on Engagement; her Imagination was on the Wing, flying daily after new Pleasures; and nothing but absolute Force could have confined her to an Attendance on Sickness and Complaint” (1: 137). In response, “my Lord Dellwyn, in order to engage his Lady to love his Company, grew churlish, morose, and peevish; which had the usual Effect, and made the Entrance under his Roof her absolute Abhorrence [*sic*]” (1: 139). Lord Dellwyn could perhaps himself have benefited from Wilkes’s admonition that “Sullenness, Peevishness, Pettishness, Coolness, Dislike, Jealousy, Rage, or a querulous Temper, will never influence, or regain, a Heart, liable to Wandering or Extravagance” (174).

The description of Lord Dellwyn’s bad-tempered reaction to his wife’s frantic socializing also echoes almost exactly the behavior used by Mr. Lucum—described, as we saw above, as “peevish, morose, and churlish”—to drive his daughter from her home earlier in the story. While the narrative does not in any way exonerate Lady Dellwyn, whose behavior is clearly censured and for which behavior she has the ultimate responsibility, it does suggest that her situation is created and exacerbated by the actions of the men who should, above all, have had her best interests at heart.⁶ She could have responded to the situation differently and could, like Mrs. Bilson, have followed the unworldly assumption that “a Wife’s Scene of Action ought to be in her own House, that there she should spend her Time, and there, or no-where, find her Happiness” (1: 163). This error on the Countess’s part does not, however, make blameless the men who so blatantly fail to encourage her to follow her domestic duty. The seeds of the failure of the Dellwyn marriage are sown, the narrative demonstrates, by the very machinations used to engineer its happening in the first place. A scheme that loosens a woman’s ties to home in order to bring about a marriage is undermining from the outset the very structure that should (as it does in the case of the Bilsons, as we shall see) provide the essential framework for the marriage to work. This structure can be put in place pretty much anywhere, as the progress of the Bilsons’ story goes on to demonstrate.

Mr. Bilson’s extravagant lifestyle eventually lands him in debtor’s prison. Sustaining the shock of both losing her home and discovering that her husband has been supporting an illegitimate daughter little different in age from their own oldest child, Mrs. Bilson

refuses to do as her husband directs and abandon him to his fate. Instead, she and the children (including Mr. Bilson's natural daughter) move into the Fleet to be with him, effectively setting up home in jail:

[Mrs. Bilson] hired a tolerable Room with Two Beds: One of which served for Mr. *Bilson* and his Two Sons; the other for herself, her Daughter, and his natural Child. ...

Here we will stop to view them in their new Situation. Mr. *Bilson* turned School-master to his Sons, the one of Eight, the other Seven Years of Age; to whose Instruction he gave his utmost Application; and at other times reading to, or conversing with, his Wife, wherein he began to find more solid Comfort than he had ever enjoyed while at Liberty. ...

Mrs. *Bilson* rose every Morning before it was light, and sat up pretty late; and managed so well, that her Girls assisted much in her Work, tho' the eldest was little more than Nine Years old; but, by her Mother's Care, had been rendered forwarder in those respects than others of a much more advanced Age. Mrs. *Bilson* went through it all with Cheerfulness; I might say, with Pleasure; seeing herself the Means of making Mr. *Bilson*'s Confinement not irksome to him. (1: 182–85)

Mrs. Bilson's "work," in which her daughters assist her, is the making of fancy goods to appeal to women of the upper and middle classes, goods which she sells at their houses, initially through the kindness of friends and subsequently through rapidly spreading word-of-mouth recommendation. Her creation of a home within the prison, one in which Mr. Bilson finds "more solid Comfort than he had ever enjoyed while at Liberty," confirms the virtuous woman's role in establishing domestic ease and harmony, while her business acumen is carefully tied into the domestic sphere.⁷ The transformation of the prison into a home provides an intriguing contrast to the home that becomes a prison more familiar a little earlier in the century in Richardson's *Clarissa* and later in Gothic fiction such as Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. It suggests a limited and circumscribed kind of agency for women that the Richardsonian and Gothic models may be more liable to shut down.

If in Fielding's novel a virtuous woman can establish a home anywhere, a fallen woman belongs nowhere. Following the revelation of her affair with Lord Clermont (undertaken, it's made clear, out of vanity rather than passion), Lady Dellwyn is divorced by her husband. His determination to divorce her rather than arrange a discreet separation comes as a shock: when "Lord *Dellwyn* declared his Resolution of instituting a Suit in *Doctors Commons*," this "truly startled and terrified her" (2: 133–34).⁸ Given the rarity of divorce in the period, Lady Dellwyn's reaction is understandable: while there were slightly more divorces in the 1750s than there had been in the whole of the preceding half-century, these were, as Bill Overton points out, "still few, but always prominent and scandalous," and "could only be obtained by Act of Parliament" (119). As this suggests, divorce guaranteed publicity and loss of reputation: "Every Newspaper contained an Advertisement of the Process in which she had so large a Share; every Tongue repeated the Evidence against her" (2: 204–05).⁹ Faced with this humiliation, Lady Dellwyn sees no alternative but "Retirement," which "seemed ... to offer little Peace; yet at first View it appeared almost the only Situation to which she could fly" (2: 204).

In *Green Retreats*, Stephen Bending has shown the doubleness of the connotations of rural retirement for women in the eighteenth century, its associations with both virtuous innocence and social disgrace. As he writes, "for all that the country and

retirement is claimed as a place of resistance and challenge to the false morality of society, it is also inevitably about failure in the public world” (94). In *The Countess of Dellwyn*, the failures that lead to rural retreat are shown to be sexual for women and political for men. In the novel, rural living is associated with Lady Dellwyn’s early life as the innocent Miss Lucum, but its lack of proper principle (which enables her easy corruption) can be traced to the influence of her father, whose retirement to the country during her infancy is the result of just such a failure. Foiled in his political ambitions, the narrator explains, “This political Star sat in an obscure Corner, filled with the restless Uneasiness which attends a forced Retirement from the World. Surely Force alone hath the Power to extract from a rural Retreat its sweet, calm Contentment” (1: 21–22).¹⁰ Mr. Lucum has earned “the Contempt of all Parties” for his self-serving behavior, but the experience does not teach him to relinquish his ambition. The superficial contentment he develops in his rural existence is overthrown the moment the possibility of a resumption of his political career appears, in the shape of Lord Dellwyn’s interest in his daughter. Like her father’s, Lady Dellwyn’s suffering stems more from the failure of her ambitions than from repentance for her lapse in virtue: “To be thrown from the highest Admiration to the lowest Degree of Contempt, was a Transition much more afflicting to her than the Fall from Innocence to Guilt” (2: 205). Accordingly, her approach to rural retirement is undertaken in similarly bad faith. For the purpose, she “hire[s] a small Cottage” (2: 206–07), a choice of housing whose implications in the period bear further examination.

In her use of the cottage in her novel, Fielding was in the vanguard of a trend that would gather pace as the century drew to a close.¹¹ In his article on “The Invention of the Cottage as the Comfortable Anglo-American House,” John E. Crowley explains how, in the period 1749–1783,

pattern books for garden buildings flourished as never before. . . . “Grotesque architecture” for “rural amusement” now included an extraordinary variety of types for which the customary generic terms of *temple*, *pavilion* and *folly* hardly do justice. . . . The cottage became the object of architectural design as just one type among a plethora of garden buildings. Its deliberate rusticity mirrored that of vernacular buildings, but the so-called cottage was not a frequent type of building in landscape architecture until the 1760s. Its predecessor among garden buildings was the yet meaner hut. (176–77)

In these decades, cottages were undergoing a transformation, in the course of which they became first the signifiers of a fashionable rusticity on the estates of the aristocracy and landed gentry, and then became more widely the picturesque ideal of English country life.¹² They remained too, of course, at their simplest, the actual habitations of some of the poorest in society. The cottage’s connotations of humility and retirement, alongside an increasing admiration of its potential (suitably improved) for rural beauty and charm, make it a promising choice of residence for Lady Dellwyn in her first attempt to retrieve her shattered reputation. She hopes it will help her to present her fall as the tragic result of “one sole and fixed Attachment” and “she deck[s] it with Symbols of Sorrow and Penitence” (2: 206–07), although tantalizingly we are not told of what exactly these symbols consist.

In the explanation of her choice of location, the narrator makes clear that her protagonist's retirement is first and foremost performative rather than sincere:¹³

Tho' Lady *Dellwyn* chose a small Cottage as most proper for the Execution of her present Plan; yet she was careful that it should be in the Neighbourhood of too many considerable Families to suffer her Conduct to be unobserved; for she could not bear even the Thoughts of total Obscurity. (2: 207)

In this, Lady *Dellwyn*'s approach somewhat echoes that of historical figures such as Henrietta Knight, accused by her husband Robert Knight of adultery and separated from him in 1736. In her book *Women of Quality*, Ingrid H. Tague examines how such women manipulated forced rural retirement in ways that played with conventions of retreat in a bid to retrieve their lost virtue:

[Henrietta] dealt with the inherent shame of her position and the damage to her reputation by creating an image of rural rusticity. Yet this image depended for its effect on both her and her correspondents' recognition that this was strictly a rhetorical gesture, that her position as a woman of quality was still intact. ... Henrietta tried to use her own patterns of consumption, particularly in her extensive landscaping at Barrells [the Warwickshire estate to which she was exiled], to create a persona of virtue in exile by drawing on the images and language of pastoral idylls. (156)

While Lady *Dellwyn*'s symbolic cottage is on a much smaller scale than Henrietta's "extensive landscaping," both share the intent to "create a persona of virtue" in a way that will keep their standing as women of quality "intact." While Henrietta Knight might have found some pleasure and occupation in the landscaping she undertook, however, the narrator makes evident the impatience with which Lady *Dellwyn* performs virtue in her strategically-placed penitential retreat: soon, we're told, "she grew very impatient to know when the World would think she had expiated her Crime, and washed away her Shame, by Repentance" (2: 209). It is, then, "to her utmost Mortification" that she discovers that the message sent to "the polite World" by her cottage has not been the one she intended. Instead, she receives a letter offering a settlement from "a Man of considerable Fashion," "supposing her sufficiently humbled to accept of moderate Terms" and "plainly expressing a Supposition that Poverty was the Occasion of her Retirement" (2: 209–10). The nuances of the cottage's meaning have been lost on her intended audience, it seems, and only the associations with rural hardship remain.

In a novel dense with literary allusion, it is Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1703) that provides the narrator with the parallel she needs at this stage in the narrative. She tells us that Lady *Dellwyn* is sustained through her attempt to perform penitence only by her imagining

the Opinions she thought the World must now necessarily express concerning her; she could fancy them signing her *Quietus* in the Words *Calista* supposes her Father to use. Indeed her Penitence so nearly resembled that of *Calista*, that her Mind was naturally filled with the same kind of Meditations; only, to bring on the tragic Catastrophe, the Poet was under a Necessity to force *Calista* to think and talk more of Death. (2: 208–09)

The comparison here of Lady *Dellwyn* with *Calista* is flattering to neither and suggests that Fielding's view of Rowe's tragic heroine may have chimed with that of her friend Richardson, expressed for him by Belfield in *Clarissa*:

[Calista's] penitence is nothing else but rage, insolence, and scorn. Her passions are all storm and tumult; nothing of the finer passions of the sex . . . Her character is made up of deceit and disguise. She has no virtue; is all pride; and her devil is as much *within* her, as *without* her. (1205)

The tragic necessity to “force *Calista* to think and talk more of Death,” however, is more consequential that the narrator seems to think, and it is bound up with the divergent attitudes of the two protagonists towards penitential retreat. Calista's father, Sciolto, tells her to “Fly with thy Infamy to some dark Cell” and she responds, “Yes, I will fly to some such dismal Place,” continuing,

This fatal Form that drew on my undoing,
Fasting, and Tears, and Hardship shall destroy,
Nor Light, nor Food, nor Comfort will I know,
Nor ought that may continue hated Life. (4: 198, 205, 207–10)

In her cottage, Lady Dellwyn

scarcely suffered the Light of the Sun to enter her Apartment, and never stirred out of her House but in the Face of the all-conscious Moon. She seemed ever bewailing the fatal Effects of a too tender Passion, and declared her Determination to pass all the Remainder of her Days in Penitence and Prayers for her great Offence. (2: 207)

The two fallen women draw on a common vision of penitential retreat, with its rejection of light, its tears and “bewailing.” Yet neither ultimately accepts that they must remain indefinitely in painful retirement waiting for a lingering death. Their rejection takes quite different forms, however. As the editors of Nicholas Rowe's *Plays and Poems* point out, Calista has a “neo-Stoic view of suicide as preferable to a life of ignominy,” and accordingly stabs herself to death, acquiring in place of her virtue, they suggest, “*virtus*, a classical form of masculine, public honour which is proved, rather than undermined, by her bloody end” (Bullard and McTague 1: 46). Lady Dellwyn has no desire to linger in her cottage in penitential retirement, but once she becomes “convinced she had thrown away a great deal of Mortification on an ungrateful World, who made no account of all she had done, and all she had suffered, to please it,” she immediately “resolve[s] no longer to punish herself, by acting a Part so contrary to her Inclinations, in which she was an aukward Mimic of what she had no settled notion” (2: 212). Instead, she casts about for an alternative mode of life that will allow her once more “to get into the World” (2: 212). Rather than looking inside, which is always too painful, Lady Dellwyn looks outwards to the world she longs to re-enter; once again, she craves the activity of social engagement to banish reflection. If Calista's rejection of penitential retreat offers the possibility of some recuperation of virtue, Lady Dellwyn's leads her further from any such hope.

Initially “at a Loss what Course to take” on leaving the cottage, Lady Dellwyn decides, supported by the modest income she has been allotted, to travel to Paris as a “Widow” in an attempt to outrun her reputation and re-marry, an attempt that almost succeeds until the truth about her status reaches the father of the young nobleman who has fallen in love with her (2: 212, 228). The proposed marriage is then promptly prevented. In describing her decision to go to Paris, the narrator comments, “The World was all before her, and

she had no other Person's Consent but her own to consult" (2: 216). This echoing of *Paradise Lost* (specifically in this case the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden in Book 12) is played on in the final chapters of the book to emphasize the Countess's isolation and homelessness, and indeed the impossibility, without radical inner change, of her ever finding home again. As the divorce is looming she is described as "perfectly comfortless both abroad and at home" (2: 195), demonstrating that her former uneasy state, in which she could only find comfort abroad, was still less painful than the state she has entered now. The social world that had been her refuge is one no longer. As the Parisian experiment begins to unravel, "she was perplexed what Part she should act. Sometimes she thought it would be best to leave the Kingdom, before she received any of the Mortification which seemed so imminently to threaten her: But then, to what Place could she go, where Shame would not pursue her!" (2: 241–42). We are told she seeks "an Asylum from Contempt, or at least from public Neglect" (2: 243), but this is not to be found. She ends the novel knowing that "Shame would follow her where-ever she went" (2: 269–70): the "life of ignominy" Calista rejects through suicide is the life that Lady Dellwyn is now destined to lead. Shame is inescapable and makes it impossible for her to settle anywhere: "All Places were now become irksome to her" (2: 273) and "[s]he became a constant Attendant from one public Place to another" (2: 280). This restlessness and state of permanent exile is reminiscent now not of Adam and Eve but of Satan, when he asks,

Which way shall I fly
 Infinite wrath and infinite despair?
 Which way I fly is hell; my self am hell
 ...
 ... is there no place
 Left for repentance, none for pardon left?" (4: 73–75, 79–80)

In a move reminiscent of the treatment of Lady Dellwyn's apartment earlier in the novel, the mock-heroic comparison of a divorced Countess to Satan is both comically hyperbolic and painfully apt.¹⁴ Rather than everlasting torment in hell, she is doomed to a peripatetic but far from indigent life in which gaming becomes her "Refuge from herself, and ... a Method of banishing painful Reflexion" (2: 280). Bending discusses "the potential for retirement to be a place of shameful punishment and *an occasion of unwelcome reflection*" (116, my emphasis), and he draws on Elizabeth Rowe's *Letters Moral and Entertaining* (1729–32), in which the unhappy Aurelia writes, in terms that Lady Dellwyn could be imagined using herself: "No sort of reflection gives me joy; whether I look backwards or forwards, all is darkness and confusion; I am no way qualified for retirement: books are my aversion; thinking is my horror; I am weary of living, and afraid to die" (Bending 120; E. Rowe 84).¹⁵ Yet if hell is within us, Fielding's hints in this direction are done with subtlety, evoking resonantly Lady Dellwyn's permanent state of exile, forever denied the comforts and security of home, at the same time as they underline her own responsibility for this exile. However impossible it is for Satan to repent, the possibility is always there for Lady Dellwyn, who in rejecting retirement and "banishing painful Reflexion" is rejecting her own route to repentance. For Linda Bree, Lady Dellwyn's survival at the end of the text defies "narrative closure and the moral certitude that would have killed her" (134); arguably, however, the uncomfortable

suspended state in which the protagonist remains highlights both moral certitude (she should repent) and wider social failure.

Homes in *The Countess of Dellwyn* demonstrate the paradoxes of women's relation to domestic spaces: gendered feminine in so many ways, they can sometimes offer circumscribed kinds of power for women that, used astutely as in the case of Mrs. Bilson, result in significant influence over the material conditions of their own lives. The limits of this route to limited power are all too clear, however, in the central and contrasting tale of Lady Dellwyn, whose alienation from domestic spaces is in fundamental ways forced upon her and from which she can find no way home. By rendering home intolerable, powerful male figures, chiefly her father and her husband, deprive her of the conventional domestic role the virtuous woman would expect to fill. The narrator of the novel both roundly condemns her protagonist's moral failures and skillfully exposes the structural injustices that precede and provoke them.

Notes

1. As Bill Overton has noted, "the narrative form is impersonal, and the narrative voice ironic" (116).
2. While our discussions take different directions, my approach to "reflection" in *Dellwyn* is in many ways in agreement with Christopher Johnson's valuable examination of its importance in his *Political Biography of Sarah Fielding* (240–42).
3. Interestingly, Mary Delany's first marital home was to be, like Miss Lucum's, a castle, which she was "given licence to decorate and renovate according to her fancy" (Hansen 44). There the parallel ends, however, as Delany endured her marriage stoically until widowed at the age of twenty-five, subsequently re-marrying happily.
4. Karen Lipsedge explains that the eighteenth-century interior was "a social instrument, whose structure, decorative style and function was self-consciously designed to express the position of the owner in society, as well as his taste and learning" (28).
5. Charlotte Grant writes, "The association between the representation in fiction of a character's internal mental state, self-awareness or interiority, and a focus on the interior, specifically the domestic interior, seems pervasive and sustained" (235).
6. Linda Bree points out, in both *The Countess of Dellwyn* and Fielding's final novel *Ophelia*, "the chief forces of corruption are those very males—fathers, lovers, and husbands—who, in a social structure dominated by patriarchy and patronage, should be the prime protectors of the vulnerable female" (123).
7. For further discussion of this aspect of the novel, see chapter two of Skinner.
8. Doctors' Commons was a society of lawyers practising ecclesiastical law (as opposed to common law) based near St Paul's in London. It housed the Court of Arches, a principal venue for matrimonial legislation in the period, and was dissolved in 1857 (Outhwaite 54n23, 92).
9. Isobel Grundy notes, on the Yonge divorce of 1724, "The world and the newspapers talked, and somebody wrote jovially cynical verses 'Upon the Bill to divorce Mr. Yonge'" (423).
10. Compare the retreat to the country of Arabella's father in *The Female Quixote* (1752). The Marquis, however, suffers the pain of "undeserved Disgrace" (17), while Mr. Lucum's downfall is of his own making. Significantly, both Arabella and Miss Lucum are motherless.
11. This is a repeated feature of Fielding's work, so often innovative or anticipatory, as many critics have noted. *The Governess* (1749), for example, is regarded as the prototype of the school story for girls, while the crumbling Gothic mansion in which the eponymous

heroine of *Ophelia* (1760) is imprisoned predates Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* by four years.

12. Queen Charlotte's cottage at Kew, the first mention of which is in 1774, is one of the more famous examples of this trend.
13. See also Christopher Johnson's discussion of the "performative nature" of Lady Dellwyn's actions at the cottage (*A Political Biography* 248).
14. Fielding's analogy between the Countess and Milton's Satan has been noted by Christopher Johnson, who persuasively argues that it is a strategy that both "offers a bit of mock-heroic humor" and "places the epic and novel on equal footing" ("Epic Made Novel" 242).
15. When Lady Dellwyn first recognizes the dreadful error she has made in marrying Lord Dellwyn, she loses her "Relish for her once favourite Amusement of Reading; and mostly she disliked those Authors who have penetrated deeply into the intricate Paths of Vanity in the human Mind; for in them her own Folly was continually brought to her Remembrance, and presented to her View" (1: 102); "Reading was like setting a Glass before her, which represented her to herself in so many deformed Lights, that she could not bear the disagreeable View" (1: 103). As the simile of the mirror foregrounds here, reading leads to uncomfortable reflection on the self and, as with everything else that has the same effect, it then becomes intolerable to Lady Dellwyn.

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