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‘More than kin and more than kind’: The Owenson sisters, Lady Morgan and Lady Clarke.

By Claire Connolly

Have I from childhood then, been writing,

And erst I well could write, inditing,

In scribbling ever still delighting;

since first the muse

Did kindly string my infant lyre,

And o’er my mind poetic fire

as kind infuse;

Since first young fancy’s meteor beam,

Did on my dawning genius gleam,

And wrapt me in poetic dream;

as oft I strove

To sing, a sigh, a smile, a tear,

Or haply, an idea dear

of infant love!

What! and no lines to thee addrest,

Thou longest known, and loved the best,

In no frail garb of fiction drest,
not one to thee;
For whom I've oft wept, sigh'd, and smil'd,
My sister, mother, friend, and child,
thou all to me!

Sydney Owenson, 'To Olivia' (*c*. 1800)[1]

Sydney Owenson (*c*. 1783–1859) began at an early age to draw around herself the 'frail garb of fiction', claiming for herself a Celtic temperament that licensed a score of liberties with her life story. Mocking references to her desire to conceal her date of birth recur but feminist critics have noted the gains she made via fiction: as Kathryn Kirkpatrick puts it, 'by constructing for herself the role of professional writer, Owenson crossed boundaries of class and gender, rescuing herself and her immediate family from penury and enjoying a professional and economic success usually reserved for men.'[2] To tell that personal, family and professional story more fully, it is vital to grasp the role of younger sister Olivia Owenson (*c*. 1785–1845) in her life and writings.

'To Olivia' (*c*. 1800), composed when Owenson was in her late teens, is addressed to her sister but in fact celebrates Sydney's own burgeoning commitment to a life illuminated by literature. The lines do linger on the dark spot that is her 'poetic dereliction' of a beloved sibling, with Olivia imagined as 'more than kin and more than kind'[3] in a line that paraphrases Hamlet's

description of his uncle Claudius as ‘A little more than kin, and less than kind’.[4] In Shakespeare’s play, the line is delivered as an aside to the audience, signalling both Hamlet’s resentment of his uncle Claudius and his determination to command the stage. Owenson’s reworking of Shakespeare’s line suggests a happier model of obligation rooted in blood relationships, but shades of age and death are evident too: the ‘Associate of my infant plays, / Companion of my happiest days’ becomes the ‘Sweet friend too of my riper years, / Who kindly shares my hopes, my fears’.[5] The poem ends on a boldly heterodox image of death as a continuation of sisterly life: ‘Nor e’en with life, to part with you, / For in my heavens, Utopia too, / I placed you high’.[6] Placed highest of all in the poem is Sydney’s blazing ambition for authorship — a ‘poetic dream’ of lasting literary fame. Both women went on to lead lives characterised by display and performance, but it is to the older sister’s writings that we most often look for evidence of their lives and relationships.

Background and Family Life

Sydney and Olivia Owenson (who became Lady Morgan and Lady Clarke, on marriage) made their way from backstage life and rented lodgings to dining rooms and salons. Their talents, work and connections came to define Irish romantic culture. They grew up in Ireland, the daughters of actor-manager Robert Owenson, a Roman Catholic from Mayo who converted to Protestantism and Jane Hill, the daughter of a respectable Shrewsbury merchant who practised

an evangelical Methodism. The pair met while Robert Owenson was on a theatrical tour of the Marches. The marriage was marked by their differences in background and outlook and came under strain as Owenson continued to live the precarious wandering life of a jobbing actor. In Lady Morgan's *Memoirs*, their early life is depicted in terms of laughter and fun, the girls singing sentimental tunes with their mother, and Jacobite songs with their father, all part of an ambient 'jingle of rhyme' that included religious recitations, 'the sublime Universal Prayer of Pope', the 'nursery rhyme of little Jack Horner', and 'tags of plays from Shakespeare to O'Keeffe'.[7]

Harder times came but Sydney Owenson went on to achieve literary fame for her novels (mostly published under her married name). If her reputation dimmed in the early twentieth century, it enjoyed a revival following the feminist recovery of her writings in the late twentieth century. As Lady Clarke, Olivia also wrote some songs and a play but the work has received relatively little scholarly attention. Much of what we know comes from Lady Morgan's later life, when she published an impressionistic selection of family and other correspondence in her *Passages from my autobiography* and *Memoirs* (the latter prepared with the help of novelist Geraldine Jewsbury and edited by W.H. Dixon).[8]

We catch another glimpse of the two sisters in a late eighteenth-century poem by their friend Thomas Dermody, 'Advice to Two Adopted Sisters'. The poem imagines young women whose close ties to one another are endangered

by their own beauty and the charms of fashionable life. Putting on the patriarchal manner of an older poet, Dermody exhorts the girls to protect and secure their precious bonds, suggesting that friendship is fragile in the face of pride and that praise may give rise to affectation:

> Dear girls, in youth and beauty's prime
> Despise not friendship's graver rhyme;
> Friendship, that marks your early bloom
> Perfection's brightest tints assume.
> The tints of modest worth divine,
> When sense and harmless wit combine,
> Prompt each low passion to control,
> Or bind in rosy chains the soul.
> Oh, ever charming! let not Pride,
> Usurper bold, your breasts divide,
> Nor fashion beauteous nature hide.[9]

Dermody goes on to mock his own presumption, sounding a welcome note of self-awareness in an otherwise strained and sententious poem and suggesting real fondness behind the boyish bluster: 'Yet, sure, this idly-moral strain / Is both presumptuous and vain'.[10]

The stern moral of Thomas Dermody's poem belies the bonds that tied these young people together. In 1784 Robert Owenson, having previously performed at the Crow Street and Smock Alley theatres, opened his own rival establishment in the old Fishamble Street music hall, with Volunteer support and backing. Sydney later described it as 'The National Theatre Music Hall', though she also tells us that, as a result of a dispute about licensing, Owenson was bankrupted and went to work for Richard Daly, manager of the Theatre Royal at Crow Street.[11] While rehearsing there, Robert Owenson met a young and talented poet, employed by Daly as a stage-hand. He brought Thomas Dermody home, introducing him to his wife as 'the greatest prodigy that has ever appeared since Chatterton, or your own Pope, who wrote beautiful poetry at fourteen'.[12]At eleven years of age, Dermody had already run away from his home in county Clare, intending to make his way as a writer. Sydney Owenson remembered that her mother was shocked at the young man's 'Papist name' but recalls that the entire family came to admire his literary taste and sympathise with his plight.[13] James Grant Raymond's *Life of Dermody* (1806) suggests that Owenson went to considerable lengths to boost the young poet's chances: he took up residence in 'an eminent bookseller's shop, and offered the books for sale to persons who entered, sometimes relating the doleful history of the luckless bard; and even assailed the passengers that passed the door. […] by this mode he procured him considerable relief'.[14] Robert Owenson gave

Dermody lodgings, food and clothing but also arranged for the young poet to meet wealthy prospective patrons wearing rags.

The three people grew close. In her first published book, a collection of poems, Sydney recalled the genius of her ‘some-time brother’ and his influence on her own taste: ‘from thy lips, / My mind imbib’d th’enthusiastic glow; / The love of literature, which thro’ my life / Heighten’d each bliss, and soften’d every woe’.[15] The poem in question is titled ‘Retrospection’, bearing the subtitle ‘Written on the Author’s visiting the home of her childhood, after an absence of ighte [sic] years.’ In it, she remembers a family group that included Dermody:

> Oft does my mem’ry sketch the social group,
> At closing eve, that circled round the fire;
> Sweet hour that fondly knits each human tie,
> Unites the children, mother, friend and sire![16]

Sydney can only have been about twenty years of age when she wrote this poem of ‘dear scenes’ and a former ‘cot’[17] but by then the family group had already broken up following the death of their mother. Dermody continued to correspond with the sisters but died in 1802, aged only twenty seven.

The two girls were educated by their mother at their home in Drumcondra until her death in 1789. Financial difficulties were ever present, but the successful novelist stops only occasionally to give readers a look back at the

troubles of her childhood, which is almost always presented in terms of japes and jollity, amusing stories that often feature the family servant, 'the faithful Molly'.[18] What kind of household did Robert Owenson run following the death of his wife? Later commentators are sometimes defensive, as if rebutting accusations of slipshod parenting. A Counsellor George Stowell admired 'the undeviating regularity with which Owenson, twice a day, would take his little daughters, Olivia and Sydney, out to walk. With a child tenderly held by each hand, Owenson, every inch a model widower, would daily leave the gaities of the city behind, and treat his tiny daughters to a healthful walk in the calm country'.[19] Reports of Robert Owenson's tender care for his children may reveal a pull between his busy professional stage life and domestic duties:

> Although Mr. Owenson was a true Irishman in the art of getting into difficulties, he was a careful parent in all that concerned his daughters. […] He had kept them carefully from all contact with whatever was undesirable in his own position and environments as an actor. In his own manners and bearing he was, by the testimony of all who knew him, a polished Irish gentleman. But, though full of the social talents which made him a delight at every mess-table and barrack-room of the places where he played, he had always been very careful with whom he allowed his daughters to associate. As children, he seldom allowed them to go to the theatre, and was

> strict in obliging them to go regularly to church, whether he accompanied them or not; he considered it a sign of steady and correct deportment […] There never was the most passing thought of allowing either of his daughters to go upon the stage.[20]

That last comment is telling, implying the need to maintain respectability for Sydney and Olivia and to remove the social taint of association with the stage. Certainly the girls often travelled with their father, and there are some suggestions that Sydney Owenson may have acted on the stage: a Dr Joseph Burke recalled seeing her father play Major O'Flaherty in Richard Cumberland's 'The West Indian' in Castlebar, on his tour of Connaught theatres in the 1780s, with his daughter acting alongside him.[21]

Commented [SF1]: play titles expressed between parentheses in Roman (per Acad. rules!)

Following the death of their mother, Sydney and Olivia attended a Huguenot school in Clontarf while their father continued to pursue his career on the stage. At Madame Terson's establishment in Clontarf, they spoke French, read the bible and the works of Oliver Goldsmith and took walks by the sea. Their singing voices and ability to perform in front of audiences earned them friends: the two girls' popularity was secured on their first day at the school — 12 July — by their rendition of a ballad about the Battle of the Boyne. After three years, and following the closure of Madame Terson's academy, the young women went to a 'finishing school'[22] run by Mrs Anderson on Earl Street, built on lands newly laid out by Henry Moore, 3rd viscount Moore, 1st earl of

Drogheda, whose daughters she had taught. Sydney did not enjoy this change 'from the sea-shore of Clontarf to the most fashionable and fussy part of Dublin'.[23] The sisters mixed with 'the daughters of wealthy mediocrities' and walked out every Sunday with their father.[24]

The two girls and Molly lived without their father for periods of time, as he toured Irish theatres. The 'Early Girlhood' chapter of the *Memoirs* includes fascinating letters from Sydney Owenson to her father, detailing the adventures of the small household he has left behind while travelling but also giving an insight into precariously lived years. By Sydney's own account, the letters in this chapter are copies of 'old (or rather young) letters' kept by the family servant Molly and rescued from that 'Pandora's box, after her death, with many curious relics'.[25] A letter with the editorial date of 'probably 1796' regales Sydney's father with a story of a golden bird falling from the sky, glimpsed from their lodgings in St Andrew's Street in Dublin just as their father left them to set off on his theatrical travels. As Sydney tells it, the girls craned out the window to wave their father off. The wheels of his carriage had no sooner turned onto Trinity Street than the clouds opened up above them, and a golden bird descended from the sky. 'See what God has sent to comfort ye', shouted Molly, though in the event the bird turns out to be a pigeon painted yellow by an upstairs neighbour. 'Olivia made great game of Saint Molly and her miracle', and the sisters returned to their usual occupation of socialising, singing and reading.[26] A later letter in the collection gathered in 'Early Girlhood' tells of an

experiment with phosporous that went wrong, resulting in a scorched table, a burnt arm for Sydney and a scolding from the landlady.[27]

Amidst the tales of fun and flirtation can be found ongoing concerns relating to the future of the two young women, called upon by soldiers (despite the best efforts of Molly) and left to negotiate their own school bills. Their father was bankrupt once more and Sydney worried over the immediate future of '*Miss in her Teens*', her arch description of her younger sister.[28] One solution was for them to return to Mrs Anderson's school before the start of term (presumably they had to move out of their existing lodgings), but their father's failure to pay the bills from the previous year proved an obstacle to this plan. Mrs Anderson further refused to take in Molly 'on any terms'.[29] Sydney's response to the situation was to write: outlining their situation to their father, she assured him that she had 'two novels nearly finished', and that she intended 'to go as instructress or companion to young ladies'.[30] With the help of some of her father's own friends, Sydney secured employment with the Featherstone family in Bracklin, county Westmeath. She began her working life as a governess in the winter of 1798, reading widely and beginning to draft her novels.[31] She remained with the family for about three years, including time sociably spent at their Dublin house on Dominic Street.

In her *Memoirs*, Sydney described a meeting with Thomas Moore as a key moment in the lives of the two sisters. Sydney met Sir John Stevenson at Dominic Street and heard him perform Moore's racy song, 'Anacreontique'.[32]

Stevenson, himself newly acquainted with Moore, arranged an invitation for Mrs Featherstone, Sydney and Olivia to a musical evening at Moore's mother's house on Aungier Street, where polite Dublin society gathered to hear the young celebrity perform on his return from legal studies in London. Sydney's *Memoirs* give a breathless account of the effect of Moore's voice and presence, recalling how she and her delighted sister 'both went to bed in delirium, actually forgetting to undress ourselves'.[33]

Olivia at this time attended a school run by a former governess at Madame Terson's establishment, a Madame Dacier who had opened a new school in 'Richmond, near Ballybaugh Bridge', and who was willing to take on Molly 'as upper children's maid to the establishment'.[34] The house was 'within a half an hour's drive' of the Featherstone's home in Dominic Street and the two sisters saw each other regularly.[35] Yet the question of what would happen to Olivia and their family servant Molly was a perpetual matter of concern. Sydney gave this 'home picture' of family life in Dublin in 1801:

> *September 12th.* – Indisposition confines Olivia to her room; it is, thank God, but slight, yet sufficient to awake my anxiety and tenderness. We are seated at our little work-table, beside a cheerful turf fire, and a pair of lights; Livy is amusing herself at work, and I have been reading out a work of Schiller's to her, whilst Molly is washing up the tea-things in the background, and Peter is laying

> the cloth for his master's supper — that dear master! — in a few minutes we shall hear his rap at the door and his whistle under the window, and then we shall circle round the fire and chat and laugh over the circumstances of the day.[36]

Other letters suggest that Olivia was prone to illness, suffering from 'a delicacy that has terrified us with the apprehension of a consumptive habit'.[37] In June 1803 Sydney wrote to her former pupil Miss Featherstone, letting her know that Olivia was unwell: 'a shadow of herself'.[38] Six months later she told her friend Alicia Le Fanu that Olivia was 'paying the tribute of a rheumatic complaint for having too closely adhered to the fashionable costume of the day'.[39] Recommended exercise and goat's milk by her doctor, Olivia was already recovering well enough for her sister to plan a trip to see the walls of Londonderry along with a trip to the races.[40]

It is difficult to reconstruct the exact whereabouts of this fragile family of three during these early years of the nineteenth century, but letters suggest that they continued to visit each other and spend time together, even while Sydney governessed and Olivia remained at school in Dublin. Robert Owenson continued to travel around Ireland and perform in regional theatres, becoming 'for some time stationary at Coleraine'.[41] Sydney visited Olivia and her father there and continued to write warm and enthusiastic letters to her sister, addressing her as 'my dearest darling pet'.[42] In the late 1930s, as part of the

national project run by the Irish Folklore Commission, school teacher Susan Irwin collected a story in Carricknahorna that bears on these years:

> Theatrical performances were frequently given in Ballyshannon and Lady Morgan then a young girl accompanied by her father Owenson performed in the town. After one of these entertainments in the spring of 1802 a dispute arose between Lieutenant Mc. Govern of the Northumberland Regiment of Infantry, then stationed in Ballyshannon and George Henderson an attorney. The quarrel resulted in a duel in a field on the riverside at Laputa in which Mc. Govern was killed.[43]

In the summer of 1802, Robert Owenson took his daughters with him to Kilkenny for the first season of the city's famous private theatricals (1802–19), described by Michael Dobson as 'Shakespeare's finest hour on the Georgian private stage'; 'an important halfway stage between the private theatricals of the eighteenth century and the emergence of amateur dramatic organizations as Britain still knows them'.[44] While Owenson was busy managing actors and performances, Sydney made herself at home in an 'old diocesan library', 'fluttering over a quantity of genuine old Irish books' and laying the groundwork for *The wild Irish girl* (1806).[45]

Publishing and Marriage

Already by 1800, Sydney had published her *Poems*, dedicated to the Countess of Moira, including verses addressed to her father, her sister and her sometime brother, Thomas Dermody. She wrote fondly of her father in a poem titled 'The Picture: on receiving a miniature likeness of my father'. The poem is gushing and repetitive but evocative in its depiction of a household of three, united in loss but bravely facing the future.

These shoulders too I've climbed to steal a kiss,
    These locks my infant hands have oft carest;
These arms I oft have fill'd, and shared the bliss,
    For ah! with me, these arms a sister prest!

Twin objects of the tenderest father's care,
    A mother's loss we rather knew than felt;
Twin objects still of every ardent prayer,
    On whom each thought, each fear, each fond hope dwelt![46]

The poem imagines a living father already framed in memory and the household depicted here continued to be a precarious one.

Around 1807, enjoying the success of *The wild Irish girl* but still on shaky financial ground, Sydney arranged a job for Olivia as a governess with

the family of General Brownrigg in Dublin. In the Brownrigg's home, Olivia met Arthur Clarke (later Sir Arthur Clarke), an apothecary turned physician and 'in those days one of the curiosities and celebrities of Dublin'.[47] Later nineteenth-century accounts stress Olivia's 'delicate health, sensitive nature and remarkable beauty' and present the marriage as her escape from a life as domestic dependant.[48] 'He kept a carriage' recalled Sydney, 'an advantage which a woman must have lived in Dublin thoroughly to understand'.[49] They married in 1808 and she moved into her husband's house in North Great George's Street, joined by her father and Molly. Robert Owenson died there on 27 May 1812. Arthur Clarke's reputation grew on marriage, helped (at least according to her *Memoirs*) by his sister-in-law's fashionable acquaintances and he was knighted in 1811. Clarke earned fame for his advocacy of bathing and other hydropathic cures and founded a 'Medicated Bathing Institution' on Lower Temple Street. Clarke's *Essay on warm, cold and vapour bathing, with practical observations on sea bathing* (1816) went into subsequent editions and he followed it with *The mother's medical assistant, containing instructions for the prevention and treatment of the diseases of infants and children* (London, 1820).

Sydney meanwhile continued to make her way in the world of books. Her career captures some of the complexities of a period that saw a transition from older forms of literary patronage to the burgeoning commercial world of publishing. The permission obtained (via her father) to dedicate a volume of

poems to Lady Moira did not equate to the kind of financial support offered to Dermody some years earlier. Sydney continued to work as a governess while she wrote, making the most of the connections afforded in her roles and famously (as she tells the story) sneaking out from the Featherstone home in Dominic Street with the manuscript of her first novel hidden under the 'market bonnet and cloak' of the family cook, her ambitions 'quickened into development by the success of Moore, the grocer's son'.[50] That novel, *St. Clair*, was one of the few Dublin-published fictions in the years immediately following the Act of Union. Sydney went on to publish *The novice of St. Dominick* (1805) and the aforementioned *The wild Irish girl*. All three share elements of historical romance with sentimental modes and served to fashion a new fictional model, summed up in the subtitle that she appended to *The wild Irish girl:* 'a national tale'. When *The wild Irish girl* was published and enjoying success, Sydney visited their maternal uncle and aunt in Shrewsbury in July of that year. She informed Olivia of a warm reception:

> Every indulgence, every tenderness, even respect that is possible for a human being to receive, is paid to me here. I am carried about as a show, worshipped as a little idol, and my poor aunt says she cannot help crying for joy, when she thinks she has such a niece![51]

It was not only in Shrewsbury that Sydney was ‘carried about as a show’. She visited London following the novel’s appearance and appeared ‘en princesse’ at the salons of Lady Cork, meeting such celebrities as Lord Byron and Charles Kemble and finding herself at one party spending ‘an evening seated on the second flight of stairs between Lady Caroline Lamb and Monk Lewis’.[52]

Sydney’s ability to catch and repurpose literary fashions while making her own literary innovations was helped along by her canny dealings with publishers. No doubt her early experience of impecunious family finances left her determined to make the best of her prospects. Where contemporaries such as Jane Austen or Maria Edgeworth relied upon male family members to assist in negotiations with publishers, Sydney struck out on her own, taking advice from her father and a growing range of literary and cultural acquaintances but remaining solely responsible for her fortunes. Perhaps she was relieved to have some of this burden lifted when, in 1808, she accepted an invitation to live with Lord and Lady Abercorn at Baron's Court, in Campbell, county Tyrone and later at Bentley Priory, Stanmore, Middlesex.

The Abercorns took a hand in her publishing arrangements and also her romantic life: through them, she met [Thomas] Charles Morgan, physician to the Abercorns and friend of Edward Jenner (praised by him for ‘lashing the anti-vaccinists’).[53] The story of their marriage is much mythologised but the resulting union was a long and happy one, with Sir Charles Morgan returning to live in Dublin and the couple setting up home on Kildare Street. Later he

travelled alongside his wife, supporting all of her endeavours. As Lady Morgan, she published *O'Donnel* (1814), *Florence Macarthy* (1818), *The O'Briens and the O'Flaherties* (1826) along with travel books on France and Italy and the ironically titled *Woman and her master* (1840), a sweeping historical review of the subjugation of women across the centuries. In 1837 Sydney was granted a civil-list pension of £300 per year in acknowledgement of her literary role (the first such pension ever given to a woman) and the couple moved to 11 William Street, Lowndes Square in Knightsbridge, London.

Olivia's story is less easy to track though it also had some public dimensions. There was much social traffic between the two households in Kildare Street and North Great Georges Street. Along with Sydney, Olivia became part of the social circle that gathered around Alicia Sheridan Le Fanu (1753–1817), her sister Anne Elizabeth (Betsy) Sheridan Le Fanu (1758–1837), her daughter Alicia Le Fanu (1791–?) and Mary Tighe (1772–1810), author of *Psyche* (1811).[54] She was known for a singing voice characterised by 'infinite grace and humour' and her songs 'in the Irish vernacular set by Sir John Stevenson, long formed the *délices* of musical society in Dublin'.[55] An admiring letter from Maria Edgeworth to her brother in 1815 describes a party at 'Mrs. Power's' in Dublin with 'Lady Clarke (Lady Morgan's sister) as "Mrs. Flannigan, a half gentlewoman, from Tipperary," speaking an admirable brogue, by far the best character, and she had presence of mind and a great deal of real humor — her husband attending her with kitten and macaw'.[56]

Anne Plumptre's Irish tour gives another first-hand account of Lady Clarke in company, where we once again encounter her skills as mimic and *improvisatore*:

> She is very musical, and possesses a singular talent, approaching to ventriloquism, of imitating in singing two very different voices, so that it is scarcely possible to suppose they do not proceed from separate performers. The first time that I was entertained with a specimen of this talent, was in a large party at the house of her sister Lady Morgan, a few days after my arrival in Dublin. The company were in two rooms; and I happened to be engaged earnestly in conversation in the different room from that where the music was, when I heard, as I thought, rather an extraordinary kind of duet, in the form of an eclogue between a man whose voice was become rough from advance in years, and a squeaking little girl. I own this appeared to me rather an odd performance to introduce, since there was nothing in the singing of either party very much to amuse or gratify the company. How was I astonished when I found the whole to be executed by the same person, and that a lady whose natural voice, unlike either of the characters she assumed, is pleasing and melodious![57]

As early as 1807, Sydney had sent some satirical verses (on the topic of shoeblacks) by Olivia to the Dublin actor Richard Jones.[58] In 1826, Olivia got some of her songs into print alongside Sir John Stevenson's arrangements: her *Parodies on popular songs, with a paradotical preface by Lady Clarke* was published by Henry Colburn. In a preface, she presents her work as partaking of the same musical culture as Burns and Moore, albeit with a shift of tone 'from the *major* to the *minor'*, replacing 'the tear with the smile'.[59] The volume was prefaced with a lithograph that illustrated a cabin scene framed by a score of fashionable literary references. Among the songs is one ('A Description of Dublin') that boasts of Lady Morgan's Whig sympathies and mocks the Tory reviews:

> We've a Florence Macarthy,
> So merry and hearty,
> Tho' I shouldn't say it's an elegant artist;
> She paints to the life
> And she causes much strife
> For a radical slut and a great Bonapartist. [60]

A review from the *New Monthly Magazine* (reprinted in the *Freeman's Journal* later that month) praised the 'light gamesome music' of Olivia's songs and recommended that she try her hand at further comic fare.[61] Such a puffing

notice could be expected from a journal owned by the publisher of the *Parodies*, Henry Colburn, also Lady Morgan's publisher. A more critical review in the *Quarterly Musical Magazine* noted some merit to 'the fair parodist's style' but queried the success of parodies based on songs that were not widely known, at least not in London. The reviewer only knew six of the twelve presented; of these, he found two to be worthwhile, suggesting that 'any one could write the rest in twenty minutes'.[62]

That Olivia herself became the subject of satire is no surprise given the 1820s mania for performance, improvisation and parody. Thomas Moore complained in a letter that he was 'solicited from all quarters' to give permission for one of his songs to be used in her *Parodies.*[63] Patrick Maume has identified her as the 'Lady Clarke' mentioned in the still popular Orange song 'The Orange Lily-O':

> And did you go to see the show,
> Each rose and pink a dilly, O!
> To feast your eyes, and view the prize,
> Won by the Orange Lily, O!
>
> *Chorus*
> *Heigh, ho, the Lily, O!*
> *The royal, loyal Lily, O!*

Beneath the sky, what flower can vie

With Erin's Orange Lily, O!

The Viceroy there, so debonair,

Just like a daffadilly O!

With Lady Clarke, blithe as a lark

Approached the Orange Lily, O!

Maume suggests that the Viceroy mentioned is likely to be one of the Whig Lord-Lieutenants of the 1830s while a later reference to 'Sir Charlie' is presumably Sir Charles Morgan, Olivia's brother-in-law.[64]

Throughout these years, Sydney and Olivia were often separated. Even before the elder sister moved to London in 1837, frequent travels by Lady Morgan to London, France and Italy meant long periods spent apart. One such period, lasting about a year, is detailed in *Passages from my autobiography*, which reprints a series of letters written between 1818 and 1819. During this time, Sydney was en route to France and Italy via London, stopping only to work on final additions to the text of *Florence Macarthy*, correcting proofs and making arrangements for its publication. Olivia, meanwhile, was pregnant in Dublin, awaiting the arrival of a son, referred to by his aunt as 'young Sir Arthur'. There are few references to the boy in biographies of the two sisters and he must have died at a young age.[65] Letters from Sydney to Olivia continue

to be fond, addressing ‘my dear and only sister’, ‘my darling Olivia’, ‘my dearest darling pet’, ‘my dear love’ or ‘my dearest Livy’. The letters blend fashion and family concerns, as in this example from 1818: ‘Toques like yours are very much worn. Send me word all about the babies and yourself’.[66] Sydney sent books, scarves, sweetmeats, toys and gossip to her sister, always enquiring after the well-being of ‘our children’.[67]

In an early letter written from Holyhead after ‘a bad passage’, Sydney complains of her own sea sickness but expresses greater concern for her pregnant sister, ‘patiently expecting her *mauvais quart d’heure*’.[68] The breezy French phrase conceals an ongoing anxiety about Olivia’s condition and circumstances. There are long gaps in the correspondence while Sydney worried about her sister’s health and the wisdom of a further pregnancy: ‘our anxiety for you embitters all our pleasure’ she writes from Paris, informing her sister that ‘French women never have more than 2 or 3’.[69] In another letter that summer, still waiting for news from Dublin, Sydney told Olivia that ‘I dream incessantly that I am attending you, and trying to keep the children quiet; but that Molly will make a noise. That is my nightmare’.[70] Finally assured of the arrival of a healthy baby, a letter from ‘Clarky’ to ‘Livibus’ begs Olivia to reflect upon further ‘frolics’ and to ‘take the pains to read three thick volumes of Malthus and Population’.[71] A letter written from Paris and dated ‘Christmas Day, 1818, 7 o’clock’ looks forward to family groups reunited:

> Merry Christmas! and a thousand of them, if it were possible. I trust this is the last we shall spend asunder. We have just drunk all your healths in a bumper of *vin de chablais* and wish we could enclose you a hogshead of it.[72]

As these letters passed back and forth between Ireland and the continent, Olivia was preparing a play for the stage. Her five-act comedy 'The Irishwoman' was performed at the Theatre Royal Dublin in 1819, preceded by a prologue written by her brother-in-law, Sir Charles Morgan. A comedy of manners featuring secrets, disguise and inheritance, along with mocking references to the fashionable practice of craniology, the play opens in London with the cruel plans of Sir Toby to marry off his niece, Miss Timorous, to the aged Lord Ancestor. The uncle's plans are upset by the arrival of an Irish woman who pretends to be his sister, the mother of the heroine, but is actually her old nurse, Mrs O'Gallagher. Aided by a stage-Irish servant character named Terence Macwhack, the newly arrived Irish characters disrupt the planned wedding and enable Miss Timorous to marry a handsome soldier recently returned from the Peninsular wars.

The text of the play was published in London by Henry Colburn, who brought out *Florence Macarthy* (as well as Olivia's songs and her husband's essay on sea bathing). *The Irishwoman* attracted some snide remarks in *The Theatrical Inquisitor*, which noted that the sisters shared a publisher and

imagined that ‘a certain set of journals, magazines, and reviews, hired to trumpet the praises of Lady Morgan, and her periodical publisher, will bedeck it with a set of “ink horn phrases” that mean no more than implicit obedience to their patron’s behests, and a conscientious earning of their appointed stipends’.[73]

Later Years and Legacy

It is difficult to pick up the thread of the sisters’ relationship after Sydney moved to London, though it seems that the Clarkes were regular visitors to London and part of Irish social circles there. Thomas Moore’s *Memoirs* refer to dinner parties held by Lady Morgan, including a ‘pretty party’ at the novelist’s house where he heard ‘some of Rossini’s things sung very well by the Clarkes’. ‘I sung also’, Moore continues, ‘and with no ordinary success’.[74]

Sir Charles Morgan died on 23 August 1843 while Olivia Clarke died in Dublin on 24 April 1845 and was buried alongside her father.[75] Sydney felt these successive deaths deeply, writing to Edward Bulwer Lytton on 29 April 1845 that ‘I ought to have been prepared for the worst & yet I was not! You were witness how *she* supported me under my greatest calamity! … I am alone and my heart is breaking!’[76] Olivia left three daughters, Sidney Jane, Josephine and Olivia. In 1839, the youngest, Olivia, married Marmion Savage (1803–72) author of satirical novels including *The Falcon family; or, young Ireland* (1845). She died in 1843, aged only 26. Her elder sister Sidney Jane Clarke married twice, first the Rev Thomas French Laurence in 1834 and later

Inwood Jones in 1840. As a young widow, Sidney lived with her aunt during the final years of life and among Lady Morgan's papers in the National Library of Ireland is a sketch by the niece depicting her aunt playing the guitar.[77] Josephine married Edward Geale in 1841 and became involved in founding an Irish Academy of Music.[78] On Friday, 6 December 1861, *The Freeman's Journal* noted 'a very sweet song that has just appeared in print' with words by Lady Clarke and dedicated to Mrs Edward Geale, Olivia's daughter, finding in the song 'much of that pathos and peculiar musical rhythm that distinguishes Moore as the greatest lyrical poet of the day'.[79] Lady Morgan had no children and Sidney and Josephine, along with Olivia Savage's son, inherited the majority their aunt's fortune, alongside bequests to the Theatrical Fund for Actors and the Governesses' Benevolent Association. Her nieces assisted W.H. Hepworth Dixon in the compilation of her memoirs, published in 1862.

An early account of the story of the two siblings' is found in *Some fair hibernians* from 1897, written by Geraldine Penrose Fitzgerald under the penname 'Frances A. Gerard'. The account given is highly coloured but has the merit of being written when memories of the two women were still fresh. Since then, we find only passing references to Olivia's part in her sister's life and little notice of her own occasional role amidst the changing cultural scenes of pre-Famine Ireland and Britain. Perhaps new feminist scholarship on women's networks in nineteenth-century Ireland and Britain will recover more of the

intimate texture of a fascinating sibling relationship that played out on private and public stages.

[1] Sydney Owenson, *Poems* (Dublin, 1801), 48–9.
[2] Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Introduction to *The Wild Irish Girl* (Oxford, 1999), ix.
[3] Owenson, *Poems*, 50.
[4] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2016), 200.
[5] Owenson, *Poems*, 49–50.
[6] Owenson, *Poems*, 51.
[7] Sydney Owenson, *Lady Morgan's memoirs: autobiography, diaries and correspondence* (2 vols; London, 1862), vol. 1, 72 ff; 34.
[8] Owenson, *Passages from my autobiography* (London, 1859), 235.
[9] Thomas Dermody, *Selected writings*, ed. Michael Griffin (Dublin, 2012), 212.
[10] Dermody, *Selected writings*, 212.
[11] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 23–4.
[12] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 88.
[13] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 88.
[14] James Grant Raymond, *The life of Thomas Dermody* (2 vols; London, 1806), vol. 2, 8.
[15] Owenson, *Poems*, 95–6.
[16] Owenson, *Poems*, 97.
[17] Owenson, *Poems*, 93–4.
[18] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 209.
[19] W.J. Fitzpatrick, *The friends, foes, and adventures of Lady Morgan* (Dublin, 1859), 22.
[20] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 209.
[21] Fitzpatrick, *Friends*,13.
[22] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 110.
[23] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 110.
[24] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 110–11.
[25] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 123.
[26] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 124.
[27] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 132–3.
[28] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 133.
[29] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 137.
[30] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 134, 136.
[31] Peter Garside, 'Introduction', in Lady Sydney Morgan**,** *St. Clair; or, The heiress of Desmond* (London, 1995; reprint of 1803 edition), xiii.
[32] [Thomas Moore], *The poetical works of the late Thomas Little* (London, 1801).
[33] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 183.

[34] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 135, 152.
[35] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 181.
[36] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 211.
[37] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 235.
[38] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 235.
[39] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 238.
[40] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 235–6.
[41] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 205.
[42] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 280.
[43] The Schools' Collection, UCD, vol. 1028, p.355. https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4428255/4388860. A story of a duel for Sydney's affections was also told to me by Maureen Temple, Maharabeg House, County Donegal. The inscription on the grave of Lieutenant McGovern at St Anne's Church Ballyshannon reads: 'Returned to his native land lieth all that was mortal of Lieutenant Taffe McGovern, late of Northumberland Regiment of the Fencible Infantry. He fell in a duel on the 2nd March 1802, in the 23 year of his age. If the esteem and regard of his brother officers who have erected this stone to the memory could assist his soul in its flight to heaven, its ascent must have been rapid and its reception good'.
[44] Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and amateur performance*: *a cultural history* (Cambridge, 2011), 53, 65.
[45] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 119.
[46] Owenson, *Poems*, 70–1.
[47] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 319.
[48] 'Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan', *Temple Bar: A London Magazine for Town and Country Readers*, 97 (1893), 341–62: 346.
[49] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 319.
[50] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 184–5.
[51] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 280.
[52] Lady Morgan, *The book of the boudoir* (2 vols; London, 1829), vol. 1, 109–10.
[53] Owenson, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 381.
[54] Julia Wright, '"All the fire-side circle": Irish women writers and the Sheridan–Lefanu coterie', *Keats–Shelley Journal* 55 (2006), 63–72: 63.
[55] Fitzpatrick, *Friends*, 45.
[56] Maria Edgeworth to Charles Sneyd Edgeworth, 10 May 1815; *Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, ed. Augustus Hare (2 vols; London, 1894), vol. 1, 247.
[57] Anne Plumptre, *Narrative of a residence in Ireland during the summer of 1814, and that of 1815* (London, 1817), 46.
[58] See Julie Donovan, *Sydney Owenson: Lady Morgan and the politics of style* (Bethesda, 2009), 103, 127n.
[59]Sir John Stevenson, *Parodies on popular songs, with a paradotical preface by Lady Clarke* (London, 1826).
[60] Stevenson, *Parodies*, 15.
[61] Review of *Parodies on popular songs, with a paradotical preface by Lady Clarke*, *Freeman's Journal*, 9 October 1826, 4.
[62] Review of *Parodies on popular songs, with a paradotical preface by Lady Clarke*, *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 8 (31 July 1826), 353-5: 355.
[63] Thomas Moore to James Power [March 1826], *The unpublished letters of Thomas Moore* ed. Jeffrey Vail (London, 2016), 1, 129.
[64] Thanks to Patrick Maume for sharing his unpublished paper; '"Blithe as a lark"': in search of Olivia Owenson Clarke, Dublin Whig wit'.

[65] Owenson, *Passages*, 235.
[66] Owenson, *Passages*, 46.
[67] Owenson, *Passages*, 123.
[68] Owenson, *Passages*, 13–15.
[69] Owenson, *Passages*, 60.
[70] Owenson, *Passages*, 87.
[71] Owenson, *Passages*, 103.
[72] Owenson, *Passages*, 235.
[73] *Theatrical Inquisitor* 16 (1820), 143–5.
[74] Thomas Moore, 16 February 1831, *Memoirs, journal, and correspondence of Thomas Moore. Ed. by the Right Honourable Lord John Russell, M.P.* (8 vols; London, 1853), vol. 6, 172–3.
[75] See the notice of her death and her literary achievement in *The Athenaeum* (September 1845).
[76] Quoted in Donovan, *Sydney Owenson*, 223.
[77] Donovan, *Sydney Owenson*, 102.
[78] Fitzpatrick, *Friends*, 45.
[79] *Freeman's Journal*, 6 December 1861, 2.