

Sophia Lee (1750-1824) and Harriet Lee (1757-1851)
by Rebecca Garwood

Sophia Lee (1750-1824) and her younger sister Harriet Lee (1757-1851) were born in London to a theatrical family. Both parents started as actors; however, their father, John Lee, progressed on to work as an actor-manager, and was involved in the running of the Edinburgh Theatre in the 1760s. Many years later in 1797, *The Monthly Mirror* printed a biography of Sophia that describes her father as a ‘comedian of celebrity’ and at one time a ‘formidable rival of the last master of the scene, Mr. Garrick’[1]. The truth of this is open to conjecture, as there is evidence of much competitive wrangling concerning the eventual management of the Edinburgh Theatre. In 1770, Sophia and Harriet’s mother Margaret Lee died. After her premature death, Sophia as the eldest was elected to look after Harriet, their brother and three younger sisters. Alongside taking on the role as surrogate mother, Sophia was also expected to undertake the education of her younger siblings. Where Sophia obtained her own education is not known, but she was clearly well educated, as her later works of translation attest. This early role as educator may well have influenced her decision later in life to open a school.

Sophia Lee embarked upon her first foray into writing with a play called *The Chapter of Accidents* (1780) that was influenced by Diderot’s comedy *Le Pere de Famille*. The play proved extremely popular and after being initially staged at the Haymarket Theatre in August 1780, it went on to have a run at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Perhaps Sophia Lee’s familiarity with the theatre gave her a shrewd idea of what fashionable audiences might have appreciated. The play was performed numerous times throughout the eighteenth century, and when it was first published a second edition was brought out within a year. There then followed translations of the play into French and German. Because *The Chapter of Accidents* achieved such popularity Sophia was able to invest the profits in a school, which she ran with her sister Harriet. The school was a seminary for genteel young ladies, and was situated in the ‘handsome, spacious, and airy’ Belvidere House in Bath. The school had an excellent reputation, ‘on account of the talent of the ladies, and the ability with which it was conducted’[2]. As with Hannah More and her sisters’ school in Bristol, the venture proved profitable to the Lee sisters and the seminary flourished for over twenty years. Although there is no documented evidence, it seems very likely that Ann Radcliffe attended the Lees’ school. Ann Radcliffe grew up in Bath, and when she began novel writing, her work demonstrated strong echoes of the historical and Gothic themes redolent of Sophia’s best-selling novel *The Recess*. In 1824 *Blackwood’s Magazine* carried an obituary of Sophia that noted the ‘distinction’ of her school, and in reference to her writing observed with approbation that she ‘found relaxation in the indulgence of her genius’[3]. However, with the added responsibility of maintaining a school it is fair to conjecture that Sophia and her sister Harriet continued to write in the hopes of making further profit.

Sophia’s first attempt at prose fiction was not entirely successful. *The Life of a Lover* was a lengthy epistolary novel, a novel in the form of letters, that was eventually published in 1804. In 1783, Sophia published the first volume of her second novel *The Recess, or, A Tale of Other Times* (second and third volumes were published in 1785). The novel is one

of the earliest examples of a historical novel as well as one the first Gothic romances. Themes of mystery, madness and imprisonment surround the two heroines, and are typical features of the Gothic genre. The novel claims to be a true story recovered from an 'obsolete manuscript' saved for posterity, and is set during the reign of Elizabeth I. The heroines are twin sisters, Ellinor and Matilda, who are revealed to be the daughters of Mary Queen of Scots from her secret marriage to the Duke of Norfolk. Elizabeth I is cast as the villain who persecutes Ellinor and Matilda because of their parentage. Ruling a masculine world, the Queen is characterised as having abandoned proper womanly values. The girls are brought up secretly confined in the isolation of the recess, situated in part of an old ruined abbey. Here the Gothic horrors and enclosed spaces appear to act implicitly as imaginative parallels for the position of women in society. Freed from the more restraining subjects of the domestic novel, Gothic fiction had more scope to explore further themes of fantasy and power. Politics and history are reinterpreted as a series of emotional and personal entanglements, as Lee writes her fictional heroines into the lives of real and powerful figures. Matilda marries Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Ellinor is blighted when she falls in love with the ill-fated Lord Essex. *The Recess* was well received by the public, 'which no sooner saw the light than it was read with avidity'[4]. It went into many editions, as well as being translated into French, Spanish and Portuguese. It was also the inspiration behind the play *Maria Stuart und Norfolk* by Christian Heinrich Speiss.

In 1786 Sophia translated and published a piece entitled *Warbeck: A Pathetic Tale*, which was originally penned as *Varbeck* by Baculard D'Arnaud. The imaginative historical setting and sentimental subject echo many of the themes in *The Recess*. In 1787 there followed a ballad consisting of 156 stanzas, called *A Hermit's Tale, Recorded by His Own Hand and Found in His Cell*, that was 'a beautiful and affecting poetical morceau'[5]. In 1796 Sophia had her play *Almeyda: Queen of Granada* staged at Drury Lane. It was a lengthy tragedy, written entirely in blank verse, and the leading role was played by one of the greatest actresses of her day, Sarah Siddons. However it was not a success and only played for four successive nights before closing.

During the same period, Sophia's sister Harriet was publishing her own novels and plays. In 1786 she published a sentimental epistolary novel entitled *The Errors of Innocence*. The novel stands as a warning to young ladies of the possible dangers surrounding sentiment and feeling. The heroine, Sophia Vernon, is tricked into a marriage with a man she cannot love, but whom she pities as she believes him to be dying. This pity leads her to wed the suffering patient on his death-bed. However, her act of sympathetic charity is thwarted when her husband makes a sudden and speedy recovery. Sophia's innocent gesture of goodness offers the sentimental reader the affecting situation of a heroine trapped in an unhappy marriage. Writing to her guiltless friend, Lady Helen laments her act of 'treacherous benevolence' and 'fatal sensibility' that leaves her the victim to 'villainy and art'.

More than a decade later, Harriet Lee began her major work *The Canterbury Tales* (1797-1805). Sophia contributed a few pieces to this collection of original stories, but the bulk of the tales were written by Harriet. Eventually the work ran to five volumes and was

much admired by critics and authors alike. Harriet considered that *The Canterbury Tales* presented a new innovation in literary form, and that the stories exhibited ‘a novelty in the fictions of the day’. The tales are distinct from the sprawl of a three volume novel, and are instead deliberately paced to the speed of a three act play. In her preface to the revised 1832 edition, Harriet terms the tales as ‘gossiping long stories’ and they can be viewed now as a precursor of the modern short story. Harriet’s contributions are considered more compelling and interesting than Sophia’s, and are notable for their psychological qualities and attempts to be socially realistic. The most well known story is the exemplary ‘The German’s Tale: Krutzer’. This is a subtly woven tale that describes the progress of a wholly selfish man. Although he is not evil in essentials, he is totally devoid of self-control. The story was much admired by Lord Byron, so much so he based his tale of domestic tragedy *Werner, or, The Inheritance* upon the work.

Sophia and Harriet Lee acquired a reputation for their lively conversation and sociability. Sophia’s obituaries attest that they were well-respected figures in the literary world, as well as being much admired for their school. Both sisters are largely forgotten today, but their substantial literary output reflected the popular taste of the times, and attracted many admiring readers. Alongside their written endeavours they achieved an unusual degree of independence for women by running a successful school. Sophia Lee died on the 13 March 1824 at Clifton in Bristol, leaving Harriet to live for another twenty-seven years. Harriet Lee died in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, aged a venerable ninety-four years old.

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4 'Biographical Sketch of Miss Lee', *The Monthly Mirror*, 1797, vol. 4 p. 10

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