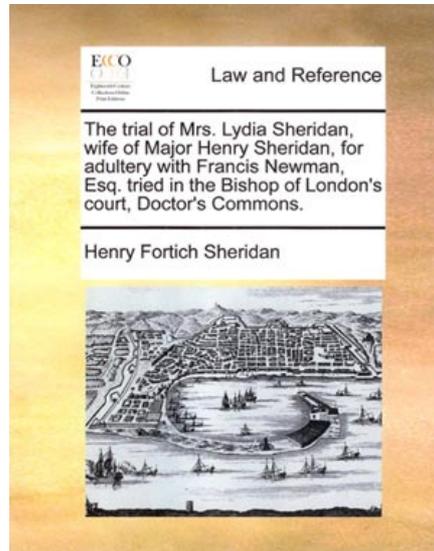


## The Trials of Lydia Sheridan



1. The trial of Mrs. Lydia Sheridan, wife of Major Henry Sheridan, for adultery with Francis Newman, Esq., tried in the Bishop of London's court, Doctor's Commons.
2. House of Lords' Bill of Divorce.
3. Town and Country Magazine, 1790

**The trial of Mrs. Lydia Sheridan, wife of Major Henry Sheridan, for adultery with Francis Newman, Esq., tried in the Bishop of London's court, Doctor's Commons. Published by Gale Ecco.**



The book records the submissions from five witnesses or 'deponents' together with the final judgement in which a divorce was awarded against Lydia Sheridan. The five deponents' testimonies are summarised as follows:

- **Thomas Sell**, given on 23 May 1787: Thomas was a gardener employed by Mrs Sarah Barker at her home in Green's Row Chelsea. Thomas reported that the "articulate Francis Newman Esquire" and a lady who he understood to be the wife of Francis Newman boarded with Mrs Barker from around 2<sup>nd</sup> Nov 1784 until the end of November, when they moved to Osborne's Hotel at the Adelphi [*in London*]. They returned to Mrs Barker's rooms in Feb 1785 for about 10 weeks before leaving for France in April of that year.
- **Sarah Barker**, given on 22 Nov 1787: Mrs Barker confirmed Thomas's testimony, making the same reference to the "articulate Francis Newman Esquire". She included reference to the fact that Francis and Lydia were living in Lowerbank's Hotel in St. James's Street when she was approached by Newman's servant about providing rooms for the couple at her house in Green's Row, Chelsea. She also gave the date of their departure for France as on or about 29 April 1785. She said that at the time the couple first took rooms with her, she thought they were man and wife, but subsequently discovered the truth when Francis Newman was away for a few days during which time Lydia "became so much agitated that [Mrs Barker] was fearful of leaving her alone" and that she gradually "drew from her a confession that she was not married to Mr Newman." Newman's servant subsequently explained to Mrs Barker that he had not lied to her when he had told her that his master and the lady were married because "they were married; the said lady to an officer in the army, by name Sheridan, by whom she had two children living; and his master, the said Mr Newman, to another lady." When Mrs Barker hinted of her knowledge to Lydia, she confessed it was true and that afterwards she would converse with Mrs Barker about her children.

Mrs Barker went on to say that after the couple left for France, she had received many pressing invitations to visit them there, and that in July 1786 she went to visit them in their apartment about 12 miles from Moulins, and stayed with them for about four months. The day after her arrival, Lydia gave birth to a male child. She reported that Lydia “constantly went by the name of Mrs Newman and at Moulins they were constantly looked upon, treated and addressed as man and wife. She concluded by reporting that “from letters [she] had lately received by foreign post from such lady, [she] understands and believes they still live and cohabit together somewhere in France. She added that “the last time the said Mr Newman and such lady lived at [her] house, the said lady seemed under continual apprehension and repeatedly gave [her] strict charge that if Major Sheridan or any strange gentleman should enquire for her, to say that [she] knew nothing about her”.

- **William Loveridge**, given on 30 Nov 1787: Loveridge confirmed that he was a solicitor who had been approached by Major Sheridan around the end of 1785 or early in 1786 concerning the conduct of his wife, who had during Sheridan’s “absence upon his duty in America, contracted an adulterous relationship with a gentleman, by name Francis Newman, and that about the time of his return from America, they had left England and gone to France” since when he had been unable to determine which part of France they had gone to. Around February 1787, Loveridge had gone to see Francis Newman’s bankers, Sir Richard Hoare and Company, who told him that they directed their mail to Francis Newman to a Monsieur Perregaux, a banker in Paris. Perregaux gave Loveridge Francis Newman address in Moulins. There Loveridge learned that Newman passed himself off as a married man living with his lady. When he approached Francis Newman and enquired about Lydia Sheridan, “Francis Newman appeared much embarrassed and said that he knew of no such person”. However when Loveridge threatened to leave the documents that he had come to serve upon her with the Moulins authorities “by which means it would become generally known that he and the said Lydia Sheridan were not man and wife”, Francis, after “pausing for some little time, acknowledged that the said Lydia Sheridan then lived with him”. Francis then introduced Loveridge to Lydia, allowing Loveridge to serve his papers on her, after which the couple invited Loveridge to stay and dine with them, when they acknowledged that they had cohabited together as man and wife for some years and had a child, which they showed to Loveridge. Lydia “repeatedly in conversation said that she was determined to live and die with the said Mr Newman, and never again live with her husband”. Loveridge observed that Francis and Lydia “in all respects behaved to each other as man and wife and were so treated by their servants. He remained in Moulins for two more days “during which he as several times with the said Mr Newman and Mrs Sheridan and they both repeatedly entreated [him] not to divulge their situation, for that they were looked upon as husband and wife at Moulins and visited, and were visited, by the principal people of the place”.
- **James Brewer**, given on 27 Feb 1788: Brewer was the landlord of the Swan and Two Necks Inn in Ladlane, London. He testified that he had been born in Devon and had lived there until 1785, and that from 1780 to 1785 he had kept an inn in Plymouth known as the London Inn. Through his “public line of life, he had some knowledge of the principal families who lived in the county”, and that he had “a particular knowledge of the chief families residing at Tiverton, having married his wife from thence and its not being above seven miles from his native place”. He

stated that about eight or nine months ago [*perhaps he meant eight or nine months before he took over the London Inn*] he “was pretty much at Tiverton and by that means came to have a personal knowledge of a Mrs Fergusson and family, who then resided there; that her family consisted of Captain Fergusson her son, and several daughters, one of whom [he] was informed was married to a Mr Sheridan, an officer in the army” and that he had become acquainted with her. He stated that in the summer of the year before the conclusion of the last war [*presumably the American War of Independence, i.e. the year 1782*], “there being several regiments camped in the neighbourhood of Plymouth, the said Captain Fergusson, Mrs Sheridan and the two Miss Fergusson, her sisters, came to the London Inn and continued there a week, ... and from general conversation [Mr Brewer] understood that Mr Sheridan was abroad on his duty as an officer in the King’s service ...”.

Mr Brewer went on to record that “about three years ago [*c.1785*] he was “informed that Mrs Sheridan had left Tiverton and had eloped and gone to France with one Mr Newman, a gentleman of Tiverton whom [Mr Brewer] had before heard of by name but had then no knowledge of”. However he did come to know Henry Fortick Sheridan Esquire “about two years ago [*viz: 1785/6*] by his frequenting the Carleton Coffee House and Hotel in Pall Mall which Mr Brewer] kept until last Christmas, that in the course of conversation with Mr Brewer, Mr Sheridan, understanding that he came from the neighbourhood of Tiverton, asked him if he knew Mrs Sheridan and what was become of her”. Brewer told Sheridan that he knew her very well and that what he had heard relating to her elopement, whereupon Sheridan told him that he was her husband. Subsequently, from time to time, Sheridan had conversed with Brewer and about a fortnight since [*before the date of deposition?*] Sheridan called upon him in Ladlane and told him that Mrs Sheridan and Mr Newman were living in lodgings at a house in Brompton Row, Hyde Park and asked him to call upon them and identify Mrs Sheridan and see her with Mr Newman. Thus on 20<sup>th</sup> [*February 1788*] Brewer had visited the house and was introduced to Mr Newman and Mrs Sheridan who he asked “if she had any commands in Devonshire to which she replied in the negative” whereafter he took his leave and went away.

- **Martha Brewer**, wife of James Brewer, given on 11 Mar 1788: Mrs Brewer confirmed that she was born in Tiverton and lived there until “within the last 10 years” when she married Mr Brewer and went to live in Exeter. About four or five years before she left Tiverton [*c.1775?*], Captain (as he was then) and Mrs Sheridan had come to live there and she had got to know them personally. They had lived with Mrs Fergusson (Mrs Sheridan’s mother) for two or three years until Major Sheridan had been sent on service abroad [*to America*] after which Mrs Sheridan continued to live with her mother at least until Mrs Brewer left Tiverton. Then about three years later, when Mrs Brewer and her husband “being at the time removed from Exeter to Plymouth where they kept an inn known as the London Inn”, Mrs Sheridan, accompanied by her brother Captain Fergusson and two of her sisters, stayed at the inn for several days in order to see the [*military?*] encampments in the neighbourhood of Plymouth. Also, from time to time, when Mrs Brewer had gone to see friends in Tiverton, she had seen Mrs Sheridan and her brother and sisters until about three years ago [*c1785*] she had been informed that Mrs Sheridan had left Tiverton and eloped with a Mr Newman who she understood had for a short time resided there, and that the couple had gone to France.

Mrs Brewer confirmed her husband's testimony by saying that from about August 1785 until about Christmas 1787, they had kept the Carlton Coffee House and Hotel in Pall Mall which Major Sheridan often frequented during this time. Once or twice he had questioned them about his wife, Mrs Sheridan, and had asked Mrs Brewer to write to her brother in Tiverton to ask if he had heard anything about her, to which he had replied that he had heard nothing since she had eloped to France and was still living there. Mrs Brewer confirmed that during the time that Major Sheridan and his wife lived in Tiverton prior to his being sent abroad, they lived together as man and wife in the house of Ms Fergusson and that she understood that they had had two children one of whom was a boy who Mrs Brewer remembered seeing when they first came to live in Tiverton.

The trial concluded in May 1787 when Major Sheridan was awarded the divorce that he sought.

From the above, the following deductions may be made:

- The affair between Francis and Lydia began in September or October 1784 before or at the time that they moved into the Lowerbank's Hotel in St. James's Street.
- In early November 1784, the couple moved into rooms at Sarah Barker's home in Green Row Chelsea, where they remained until the end of April 1785 barring a couple of months spent in Osborne's Hotel at the Adelphi.
- At the end of April 1785, the couple moved to apartments near Moulins in Central France where they remained until the end of 1787 or early in 1788. During that time, Lydia had fallen pregnant (around October 1785) and given birth to a son in early July 1786.

From the above, the following observations may be made:

- Francis is twice described as "the articulate Francis Newman". Did the adjective "articulate" have another meaning in those days? Or was he simply being described as someone who spoke well and perhaps persuasively?
- It appears that Lydia was madly in love with Francis, being unable to maintain her composure when he absented himself for a few days from Mrs Barker's lodging, and protesting vehemently to Mr Loveridge that she was "determined to live and die with Francis and never again live with her husband". Yet Lydia was perhaps seven or eight years older than Francis, a mature woman in her early or mid-thirties at the time of her elopement and mother of two boys. Was she beguiled by his silver tongue or by his social ranking (which appears to have been a degree or two higher than her own)?
- Francis and Lydia's affair was no passing liaison. Francis must have been as devoted to Lydia she to him, as evidenced by his willingness to throw aside his status and reputation by remaining with her through so many tribulations before starting a new life with her in America. No doubt she provided an escape for him from an unhappy marriage and from what appears to have been a difficult relationship with his uncle and father-in-law (though it must still be wondered whether the relationship was made difficult through his uncle's actions or his own).

## House of Lords' Bill of Divorce

It seems that Lydia's divorce had to be ratified by the passing of a Divorce Bill by the House of Lords. This seems to have taken place the following year, in Feb or Mar 1789. Two records have been found relating to this Bill, one being a brief summary published in the Gentleman's magazine (a scandal rag of the period) and one taken from the House of Lords Journal.

**From The Gentleman's Magazine, 1789 page 1107 – ref:**

[http://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_Gentleman\\_s\\_magazine.html?id=D17PAAAAMAAJ](http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Gentleman_s_magazine.html?id=D17PAAAAMAAJ)

In the House of Lords, on *Tuesday*, the 17th<sup>1</sup>, the divorce bill was read. It stated, that Henry Fortick Sheridan, Major of the New-York volunteers, now of Bond Street, in July, 1770, intermarried with Lydia Fergusson, daughter of John Fergusson, of Chigwell, in Essex, Esq. and they cohabited as man and wife from that time until 1776, when he was ordered to America, since which time he hath not cohabited with the said Lydia Fergusson, and there is issue of the said marriage two sons. That in November, 1784, the said Lydia Fergusson carried on an unlawful familiarity with Francis Newman, of Tiverton, in the county of Devon, Esq., with whom she eloped and went to France, where they lived as man and wife, and, during such residence, she was delivered of a male bastard child. That in May, 1787, Mr. Sheridan exhibited a libel in the consistory court of the Bishop of London, and on the 7th of May, 1788, obtained a definitive divorce from bed and board. That in Easter term<sup>2</sup> 1788, he brought his action in the Court of King's Bench against the said Francis Newman, and obtained judgement for £2000 damages. That the said Lydia Fergusson, by her adulterous behaviour, had dissolved the marriage on her part; and the petitioner stands deprived of the comforts of matrimony, and is liable to have a spurious issue imposed on him, unless the said marriage be declared void. He therefore prayed, that the bond of matrimony between them might be dissolved, and that he might be enabled to marry, &c. The bill, upon motion, was ordered to be committed for Monday; till which time the House adjourned.

**Sheridan's Divorce Bill - from the House of Lords Journal Volume 38 – ref:**

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=116852>.

A Mr. Pigot appeared as Counsel for the Bill. No one appearing as Counsel for Mrs. Sheridan.

The first testimony was heard from **William Walker** who testified that: "That on the 16th of February last, he called at the House where Mrs. Sheridan and Mr. Newman lodge, when he saw Mr. Newman, and asked him whether Mrs. Sheridan was at home and told him he came to serve her with a Copy of the Bill and the Order of the House for the Second Reading of it, and that he gave them to him, that Mr. Newman said, "She was not at home;" upon which the Witness ran up Stairs into a Room, where he saw a Person whom he now knows to be Mrs. Sheridan, who upon seeing the Witness immediately quitted the said Room: That shortly after Mr. Newman brought word that Mrs. Sheridan did not choose to be served with the Copy of the Bill and Order of the House, to which the Witness answered that he must then petition the House of Lords, that Service of the said Copy and

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<sup>1</sup> This must have been Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> Feb or 17<sup>th</sup> Mar 1789 –see <http://1789.calendardonkey.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Easter term covers the months of April and May in legal jurisdiction.

Order at the House of the said Mrs. Sheridan, might be deemed good Service upon her: That Mr. Newman then told the Witness to call again, which he did, when Mr. Newman introduced him to a Person, and told him that she was Mrs. Sheridan, who, upon Witness asking whether she had received the Copy of the Bill, and the Order of the House for the Second Reading of it, made answer that she had."

A **Mr. Thomas Bund** then testified to say that: " he was present at the Marriage of Major Sheridan and Miss Lydia Fergusson some Time in the Month of July 1770, in the Parish Church of St. Helen's, in the City of Worcester, which marriage was had with the approbation of the said Miss Fergusson's mother, (her father being dead before that time;) that he knows the said Lydia Fergusson very well; that he was a subscribing witness to the register of the said marriage; and drew the marriage settlement."

Then **Mr. John White** was called in who produced a copy of the register of the marriage of Henry Fortick Sheridan and Lydia Fergusson, which said as follows:

"Henry Fortick Sheridan of this Parish, a Bachelor, and Lydia Fergusson of this Parish, single Woman, were married in this Church by Licence, this Twenty-ninth Day of July in the Year One thousand seven hundred and seventy, by me, John Pearkes Curate. This Marriage was solemnized between us Henry F. Sheridan (and) Lydia Fergusson in the Presence of Susanna Bund, Thomas Bund, Pashey Arntill and William Fergusson.

The above is faithfully extracted from the Parish Register of Marriages of St. Helen, in Worcester, by me, T. Bedford, Rector. 29th April 1788."

Then **Mr. Mark Holman**, Deputy Registrar of the Consistory Court of the Bishop of London, was called in, and being sworn, produced the Original Definitive Sentence of Divorce of that Court of the 7th of May 1788, against the said Lydia Sheridan, for Adultery committed by her with Francis Newman.

Then **Mr. Andrew Edge** was called in and produced a copy of the record of the court of King's Bench of a judgement given in that court in Michaelmas Term<sup>3</sup> 1788 against Francis Newman for criminal conversation with Lydia Sheridan for £2,000 damages, besides costs of suit, which he had compared and examined with the original in his custody.

Then **Mrs. Sarah Sell** (the same Mrs Barker who testified in Lydia's 1788 trial) testified that: " in the Year 1784, she lived at No. 1, Green's Row, Chelsea; that she knows Mrs. Sheridan very well, and was first introduced to her at Lowesback's Hotel in St. James's Street, where she found her in company with Mr. Newman, upon occasion of the latter sending for her (the witness) to know if they could lodge at her (the witness's) house; that the first time they lodged with the witness they continued with her about nine weeks, during which time they lived as man and wife, and slept in the same bed; that she received general directions from them to say, when anybody called to enquire after them, that no such persons lodged there; that during the above nine weeks Mrs. Sheridan did not tell the witness who she was, but after their coming to lodge with the witness a second time, which was

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<sup>3</sup> Michaelmas Term under English Law runs from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> November – see <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Michaelmas+terms>

about Christmas 1784, Mrs. Sheridan one day in great distress of mind, and after making the witness promise not to disclose the conversation, told her she was not the wife of Mr. Newman, but the wife of another gentleman; that they left the witness's house on 26th April 1785; that the witness afterwards on the 15th August 1785, saw Mrs. Sheridan and Mr. Newman at a place called Caen, about Twelve Miles from Moulins<sup>4</sup>, in France, and the next Day (videlicet) the 16th of August, Mrs. Sheridan was brought to-bed of a Son."<sup>5</sup>

Then the said Bill was read a Second Time.

Ordered, That the said Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Ordered, That the House be put into a Committee upon the said Bill on Monday next.

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<sup>4</sup> Caen is located in Normandy some five hundred kilometres north of the city of Moulins which is located in central France. There appears to be a tiny hamlet called Moulins in Northern France but even it is over 100 km from Caen. Presumably Sarah Sell was confused when she mentioned seeing Lydia in Caen.

<sup>5</sup> It may be noted that Sarah Sell's testimony differed from her earlier testimony (under the name Sarah Barker) in several places, post particularly in saying that she had travelled to France in August 1785 when she saw Lydia the day before Lydia gave birth to her son. In her previous testimony she had said that she travelled to Moulins in France in July 1786 at Lydia's invitation and arrived the day before Lydia gave birth. Also in her earlier testimony, she said that Lydia had told her that she was not married to Francis during their first stay at Green's Row, whereas in this later testimony, she said it was during their second stay.

**Francis Newman and Lydia Sheridan as pictured in Town and Country Magazine, 1790**  
(presumably reporting on or alluding to her divorce proceedings)



Caricatures said to represent Lydia Sheridan and Francis Newman. Lydia is dubbed “The Female Deserter” and Francis “The Chemical Lover”. From the “Histories of the Tête-à-Tête Annexed” in the *Town and Country Magazine*, published by A. Hamilton, Fleet Street, 1 Oct. 1790, p. 387.<sup>6</sup>

The following description of the “tête-à-tête column” in the *Town and Country Magazine* is borrowed from a [fashion study thesis by Petrine Knight](#):

*The “tête-à-tête column” in the Town and Country Magazine is described as a gossip column which had a popular run from 1769 to 1792, where it included satirical takes on the top stories currently running through the rumor mill. The column featured two portraits of the couple involved (usually well-known figures in London society) encased in oval frames situated like pendants (hence the origin of the name “tête-à-tête”). It also included an “article or ‘history’ of the heroine’s and/or hero’s romantic and sexual history.” Portraits had to be more or less representative of the subjects, as the subtitles rarely contained full names, but usually made use of witty monikers that described the couple in question.*

The title “The Female Deserter” was no doubt applied to Lydia because of her desertion of her husband and children. However until a copy of the relevant article can be found, it can only be speculated as to why the sobriquet “The Chemical Lover” was given to Francis.

<sup>6</sup> Image taken from <http://images.library.yale.edu/walpoleweb/oneitemg.asp?itemid=lwlpr06995>