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Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi

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Abstract

Often considered a contradictory character herself, Hester Thrale Piozzi, now best remembered as a Bluestocking hostess and biographer of Samuel Johnson, embodies some of the contradictions of eighteenth-century sociable lives: a wealthy society lady, she went through periods of financial instability and even poverty. A central part of fashionable society, she also experienced loss and loneliness. A glittering hostess, she was ostracized by society on account of her second marriage. A writer who introduced the anecdotal biography, she was mauled by literary critics for her works. However, Hester Thrale Piozzi is also noteworthy for the European influence she brought to British sociability both by means of her social gatherings and through her literary works.

Born into a Welsh family proud of its ancestry, Hester Lynch Salusbury spent most of her early years in poverty due to her father's financial inaptitude and quarrelsome nature. Her mother was a victim of domestic abuse, Hester claimed, and having suffered various miscarriages before her only child was born, she 'nursed up her Infant Daughter my simple Self, to play a thousand pretty Tricks, & tell a Thousand pretty Stories and repeat a Thousand pretty Verses to divert Papa'.¹ A precocious child, her ambitious parents encouraged her to court their wealthy relatives by means of her sociable and poetic powers, and she succeeded so well that she was considered an heiress first to one rich but childless uncle, and then to another, but her expectations were ultimately disappointed twice. Her uncles' money, however, enabled the family to enjoy occasional trips to London, where they moved in illustrious circles, including William Hogarth, and to expand Hester's education to include Latin, Italian and even Spanish. Hester's own ingenuity saw some of her early poems published in various journals (Franklin 20-21, 25).²

While Hester remained a lifelong believer in the superiority of good birth, both of her husbands, the wealthy brewer Henry Thrale (c. 1724-1782), actually her mother's choice, and the singer and music master to her daughter Gabriele Piozzi (1740-1809), were self-made men, though of different social standing. For the first few years after her first marriage in 1763, Hester seems to have been at a loss how to deal with a husband who was not impressed by either her wit or her verse but spent his evenings among rakish friends (Franklin 36).³ Presumably due to her father's bad example, Hester had not expected much from marriage, and decided never to make any demands on her husband. On marrying Henry Thrale, thus, Hester did not seem predestined to become a glittering *salonnière*: on the contrary, her life seemed confined and dreary, and her husband was widely known to be a womanizer even then – he even let himself be seen at the theatre in company of his illustrious mistress, Kitty Page, while his wife duly stayed at home in the company of her mother. Frequent pregnancies generally kept Hester at their country seat, Streatham Park, which was gradually being expanded and embellished to attract London visitors. Her life changed with the advent of Samuel Johnson in their circle in 1765: introduced by Arthur Murphy, he soon became a regular house guest and an intimate friend of both husband and wife. He conferred a respectability on the couple that they had lacked before, and they were accepted into polite society, with even their Southwark home – partly built on the ruins of Shakespeare's Globe, or so Hester claimed – now alluring some well-known visitors into an area previously considered out of bounds to fashionable society (*Autobiography*, vol.2, 33). Hester also came to know commercial sociability through her growing involvement in the brewery business to avert financial ruin, a move that Samuel Johnson had advised and in which he supported her, and by canvassing for her husband's seat as a Member of Parliament for Southwark (Franklin 43, 63).

Gradually, the Thrales developed a working relationship: Streatham's 'domestic' sociability – that is, at home with numerous guests – suited both husband and wife. They relished conversations that were less polite perhaps than in other circles, but no less learned, rousing both in different ways whenever there was a chance of 'combative conversation', with Hester enjoying a voluble, sparkling lead, and Henry Thrale happy to encourage a war of words among his guests (Franklin 40). Hester revelled in her role as the fashionable hostess of a literary salon (including a lavish dinner table), vying with, and accepted by, the Bluestocking queen Elizabeth Montagu, who frequently visited at Streatham, and who was vice versa visited by the Thrales at her home in Hill Street.⁴ Nonetheless, Hester's frequent pregnancies exacted a toll, and Johnson, too, frequently kept her awake into the small hours by his need for companionship. A tour to her native Wales with Johnson, her husband, and daughter Queenie in 1774, meant to restore her spirits, failed mostly because their surroundings did nothing to impress her companions, whose lack of politeness on this occasion exasperated her. However, a trip to France the next year was quite a success, and introduced her to the French *salonnière*, Mme du Boccage, and her circle, as well as to French theatre and French art (Franklin 80-82).⁵

The next year would have seen them travel as far as Italy, but the death of their eldest boy, Henry, cruelly upset their plans. An exacting mother, Hester spent years trying to teach her children only to see them die one after another: of fourteen children, only four would survive. As usual, she suppressed her grief, and tried to regain her health by sociable visits to Bath and Brighton. She added more attendees to her circle at Streatham, some of whom would rise to fame, or had already achieved eminence, such as Oliver Goldsmith, David Garrick, Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, or Dr Charles Burney, who was engaged as Queenie's music tutor but quickly gained a place at the famous dinner table. In 1777, Hester, an ardent Tory, was introduced at Court. A year later, she began to patronize Dr Burney's daughter, the young Frances Burney, whose first novel, *Evelina*, had made such a splash. Frances, an inveterate diarist, would chronicle many of the debates at Streatham, and provided a female friendship that filled a gap in Hester Thrale's so far male-dominated life.⁶ Hester later added Helen Maria Williams and Anna Seward to her growing list of female friends.

She also continued to write, though on a modest scale. Apart from writing down Johnson's memorable sayings, she composed impromptu and occasional verse, and envisioned her friends' conversations concerning her own death in three dialogues modelled on the then fashionable 'Dialogues of the Dead', depicting in this piece three different social circles: literary, commercial, and familial. It remained unpublished during her lifetime.⁷ In 1776, Henry Thrale presented his wife with six handsome blank quarto volumes, the *Thraliana*, in which Hester began to jot down her own English 'ana': a collection of anecdotes and observations, gossip and stories, historical and etymological speculations, part family history, part diary, a depository of mostly unpublished poetry written by herself or picked up from friends and acquaintances – all in all, a medley from which many insights into eighteenth-century sociable practices can be gleaned. The second volume particularly focuses on interesting *bon mots*, anecdotes, and conversational snippets concerning Samuel Johnson, and Hester characteristically begins by highlighting her own role in *Thraliana*'s presentation of Johnson: unlike other literary women, Hester had young children, a fact that posed both practical problems and anxieties about the proper role of a mother, but also an excuse for any lack of accuracy: her children's demands quickly drove out of her memory any conversations concerning 'Wit, Science or Sentiment'. The role of a literary hostess frequently clashed with that of a mother, she declared, while at the same time subtly insinuating that being a 'female Parent' was more important than writing down great men's

and write all Morning what one has heard; where will be the Time for tutoring, caressing, or what is still more useful, for having one's Children about one' (*Thraliana* I, 158).

In 1780, Hester engaged the handsome Italian singer Gabriele Piozzi as a tutor to her eldest daughter, and quickly came to consider him 'a prodigious Favourite' (*Thraliana* I, 452). Within months, Piozzi would sing Italian songs of love to her which she joyously translated into English. Henry Thrale meanwhile deteriorated rapidly: suffering a series of strokes but refusing to listen to his physicians, he died in 1781. Hester's romantic feelings for Piozzi blossomed, but a massive setback of disapproval on the part of her daughters and almost all of her friends, including Samuel Johnson, almost prevented their union. Having married for convenience once, Hester now decided to marry for love and to pay the social price for her perceived *mésalliance* exacted: ostracized by her old circles on account of her marriage to a Catholic music teacher, she defiantly embarked on a three years' Grand Tour to Italy with him in 1784.

Hester Piozzi's social circles now changed considerably: Johnson had broken off all connections on hearing of her marriage, and would die in 1784, a few months after her departure. On her tour, Hester met various other English travellers and was introduced to Italian, French, and German society, connections which actually enabled her to write both by providing her with subjects to write about and by personal encouragement. Not only did she publish the *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson* (1785), and their correspondence in 1788, books which were widely read but for which she would be heavily criticized in the English press, but also an edition of English and Italian Poetry (*The Florence Miscellany*, 1785) and a well-received book about her travels in Italy and France (*Observations and Reflections*, 1789), in which she outlined, discussed and praised Italian sociability especially, using a colloquial, conversational style that exasperated her critics but ensured a large and enthusiastic readership.⁸ Hester especially admired the Italian art of impromptu verse in sociable gatherings, which she linked to Welsh harpers' practices. Her lifelong delight in such verse seems to have been more pronounced now that she was no longer relegated to the place of a listener whose task was to stimulate talk among the great men.

On their return to Britain in 1787, the Piozzis continued to be sociable, hosting dinners for their still numerous acquaintances, inviting friends first to a rented house in Hanover Square, then to Streatham, which proved to be too expensive to keep up, and finally to their newly built seat in Wales, Brynbella. Country life did not deter the Piozzis, who liked to invite friends for a game of cards after a sumptuous dinner, but to alleviate Gabriele Piozzi's annual sufferings from gout, they also spent at least a month per year socializing at Bath. Hester's relationship with her surviving daughters remained fraught. An inveterate enemy whenever she felt betrayed, she cut ties with most of her old friends but was never at a loss to gather new ones, Italian visitors and writers such as Samuel Rogers as well as the novelists Harriet and Sophia Lee. She formed a lifelong friendship with the great actress, Sarah Siddons, and even tried her hand at playwriting but neither of her attempts ever made it onto the stage.

To make money, she contemplated writing a novel instead, but finally settled on *British Synonymy* (1793), a work of direct interest to the study of eighteenth-century European sociability because Hester, in the guise of a Bluestocking hostess, explains British (linguistic) habits and distinctions to a readership she conceived of as foreign. Savagely mauled by critics at the time, the book does not claim to be a learned study of synonymy or etymology, though she was interested in both, but an introduction to a genteel use of language, also including less than subtle hints concerning the author's political leanings. A proud Welshwoman, Hester nonetheless adopted the stance of an English patriot, and the 1790s and early 1800s would see her an active pamphleteer in the cause of the British Crown against the French Revolution and the threat of a Napoleonic invasion.

To her contemporaries, Hester Thrale Piozzi was an intelligent, charming, lively, and witty hostess, but this display of brilliancy came at a cost, or so she maintained in 1797 in a lengthy entry in *Thraliana*. Asked whether she would like to invite company to divert her, she told Piozzi: 'The Company replied I, never divert me at all, – 'tis I divert the Company [...] Visitants do nothing for me but at best keep my Mind in Exercise, my Spirits in Motion' (*Thraliana* II, 975-76). She likened it to canvassing, a duty she had undertaken repeatedly for her first husband: 'Life *is* a Toil, & Visitants increase it -- a London Life, keeping up one's Acquaintance as 'tis called, I consider as setting out upon a regular Canvass:-- The fatigue is the same, & the Pleasure the same, *to me*. I can make no *Diversion* out on't, -- I am forced to give up my *Diversion* for this *Business* of keeping up Acquaintance'. It had to be done, she declared, indeed it was part of a married woman's 'Business', any wife who cared about her reputation and her husband's constancy had to invite company, but for her own part, she could not see why people enjoyed it: 'they do nothing to delight one, & how they contrive to delight each other is my everlasting amazement' (*Thraliana* II, 976). It may be, as Michael Franklin contends, that 'familial encouragement and expectations had weighed so heavily upon the child that performativity and theatricality were [...] at the heart of her own self-fashioning', a coping strategy that may ultimately have prevented her from feeling at ease in society (Franklin 21). Nonetheless, Hester's outburst against the burden sociability imposed on wives serves as a useful reminder that the literary salon, as part of eighteenth-century domestic and polite sociability, was frequently a woman's achievement, and that such achievements required not genius, but dedication, determination, and exacting social skills on the part of the hostess.

After her second husband's death in 1809, Hester settled at Bath and once more became a member of the sociable throng, enjoying new friendships with actors in particular, and celebrating her 80th (in fact, her 79th) birthday in style at the assembly rooms. She died a year later, in May 1821.

1. Michael J. Franklin, *Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi* (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2020), p. 12. *Thraliana* : The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale, 1776-1809, in ed. Katharine C. Balderston, 2 vols (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 2nd ed., 1951), vol.1, p. 281.

2. For her education and early poetry, see also William McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), ch. 1.

3. See also *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs. Piozzi (Thrale)*, in ed. A Hayward, 2 vols (London: Longman, Green, and Roberts: 1861), vol.2, p. 23.
 4. For her connections with Elizabeth Montagu, see McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
 5. *The French Journals of Mrs. Thrale and Doctor Johnson*, eds. Moses Tyson and Henry Guppy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1932), p. 91 ff.
 6. See *The Early Journals and Letters of Frances Burney*, 4 vols, eds. Lars Troide, Steward Cooke and Betty Rizzo (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990-2003).
 7. *Three Dialogues on the Death of Hester Lynch Thrale: From the hitherto Unpublished Original Manuscript now in the Possession of the John Rylands Library*, ed. M. Zamick, *John Rylands Library Bulletin*, 16 (1932), p. 77-114.
 8. Some discussions of her Italian experiences of sociability can also be found in *Autobiography II*, p. 64-67; her as yet unpublished Italian and German Journals are kept at the Rylands Library, Eng. MS. 618.
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