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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Mary Berry

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Keywords

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Abstract

Mary Berry (1763-1852), renowned traveller, author, and salonnière, friend of Horace Walpole's, headed sociable circles in London but also spent time in the vicinity of Strawberry Hill. She became the posthumous editor of Walpole's correspondence, and authored two plays as well as historiographical works. She met a large number of literati, artists, and politicians and cultivated friendships with Walpole, the sculptor Anne Damer, and the playwright Joanna Baillie, documented through letters, which provided her with support.

Mary Berry (1763-1852) headed and participated in sociable circles in London and on the continent, was a scrupulous editor, a prolific writer, and an enthusiastic traveller. She and her sister Agnes (1764-1852), with whom she lived, both remained unmarried and undertook journeys to the continent, especially Italy and France. In contrast to Mary, Agnes remains

shadowy.

Since the Berry sisters and their father Robert only had a small income, their drawing-room sociability was more modest than the entertainments provided by some aristocratic places such as Devonshire House and Holland House. Although ‘no great celebrity’¹, Berry, like other salonnières, knew a large number of literati, politicians, and artists, and through her sheer longevity, remained a decades-long presence in London's society. That, like other women writers before her, she largely disappeared from public consciousness after her death is probably at least partly due to her habit of avoiding putting her name on the title-pages of the books she had authored or edited. Moreover, Berry did not write poems and novels but preferred the genres of history and biography.² This does not mean that she was not acknowledged as an author and editor within her fairly large circle of friends, acquaintances, writers, critics, and readers.

By the time she had reached her eighties, Berry was considered an institution. Contemporaries described her as modest and unpretentious.³ Not *grandes fêtes* but smaller invitations, especially breakfasts and dinners, were the kind of entertainments that she hosted. When she and her sister were in London, they lived and entertained in North Audley Street, later, from 1825 onwards, in Curzon Street. Berry, herself an avid reader, who studied Greek, stood in the tradition of the bluestockings, which she helped to preserve into the nineteenth century, but she was not close enough to the original bluestocking circles to be counted as one of them.

After her friend and patron [Horace Walpole](#)'s death in 1797, a box with his papers was nominally left to Robert Berry, Mary's father, but it was the daughter who posthumously edited the five-volume *Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford* (1798), albeit not under her own name.⁴ She later also edited Madame du Deffand's letters (1810) and Lady Rachel Russell's letters in combination with a biography that she had authored (1819).⁵ Her play, *Fashionable Friends*, was first privately performed at Strawberry Hill in 1801 and then in 1802 in [Drury Lane](#), where it received bad reviews and was taken off the stage; a second play, a farce, was written but no manuscript has survived.⁶ Her *Comparative View of the Social Life of England and France, from the Restoration of Charles the Second to the French Revolution* (1828) and *Social Life in England and France, from the French Revolution in 1789 to that of July 1830* (1831) map out political as well as social and cultural history.⁷ In 1844 she published her complete works.⁸

The main source about her sociable life at home and abroad, her encounters, and her journeys is the three-volume *Extracts from the Journals and Correspondence* (1865), a posthumous edition for which she had given directions and prepared the material.⁹ It is ordered chronologically by years and contains a mixture of extracts from her diaries, letters, descriptions of events and people, landscapes and architecture she had encountered on her journeys, notes about visits to the theatre, and books she had read and discussed. While Berry herself remains in the background and rarely gives a voice to her emotions, she appears as an astute chronicler, who met Napoleon, was overwhelmed by [Germaine de Staël](#), spoke to the Duke of Wellington, befriended William Makepeace Thackeray, and was acquainted with

Lord Byron.

Three exemplary social contacts can serve to highlight her networks: [Horace Walpole](#), Anne Seymour Damer, and Joanna Baillie. The Berrys' friendship with (or patronage through) Walpole – writer, collector, author, creator of the mock Gothic mansion Strawberry Hill – whom they met in 1788, helped the two young women and their father Robert to become established in society. Part of their interaction is documented through letters that Walpole sent them, which are contained in two volumes of the monumental Yale edition of Walpole's correspondence.¹⁰ Their friendship took the form of a gallant game: in a series of playful and gossipy letters, Walpole addressed the young women as his 'twin wives', pretending to be enamoured with both of them, while acting the role of the jealous lover.¹¹ He also rented out Little Strawberry Hill to them, which was in the vicinity of his own house, and left it to them in his will. Mary not only edited his works but also made herself a defender of his posthumous reputation.

The sculptor Anne Seymour Damer (1749-1828), repeatedly accused of harbouring 'sapphic desires' for women¹², met Mary Berry through Walpole, who was her father's cousin.¹³ After [Walpole's](#) death, Damer, who had inherited Strawberry Hill and who had previously been an active agent in private theatricals, participated in the private staging of Mary's play *Fashionable Friends* in Twickenham. This comedy centres on a love and marriage plot while satirically unveiling intrigues, seduction, and greed as motivating factors among London's social elite. Damer and Berry were friends for life; their close relationship was food for gossip, which they must have been anxious to avoid.¹⁴ Damer created a bust of Mary Berry; they travelled together. Since Damer destroyed most of her papers before her death, a lot of material about their intense friendship has been lost.

With the playwright Joanna Baillie Mary Berry also shared a life-long friendship (Schmid, 2013, 40-43, 65-66; Culley). Their interaction and mutual support are documented through journal entries and epistolary exchanges, demonstrating that the two women read one another's manuscripts and supported each other's careers by helping one another to establish contacts. The letters also document that they spoke about their private lives as well as their plans. Being avid readers, they debated literary texts they had enjoyed as well as theatrical performances. Both Berry and Baillie were thus part of a larger network of women artists and writers promoting one another. It is noticeable that their friendship as well as their literary communication lasted over decades: Baillie died in 1851, one year prior to Berry, but having been an acknowledged author, she remained more present in the public awareness, whereas Mary Berry, her circles, and her writing lost much of their visibility.

These three rather different friendships exemplify the type of networks which Berry created for herself and of which she made use. They provided her with contacts, intellectual stimulation, feedback, and advice on writing as well as publishing. Like other authors, she tried to influence the way in which her posthumous *persona* would be perceived, yet since she left no tangible works of art (like Damer) and no literary works in the genres favoured by other women writers, she eventually became the hostess of days gone by.

1. Anon, '[Review of] Extracts of [sic!] the Journals and Correspondence of Miss Berry from the Year 1783 to 1852', *British Quarterly Review* (vol. 43, 1866), p. 60-86.
2. Susanne Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 53, 67-68; Amy Culley, 'Aging, Authorship and Female Networks in the Life Writing of Mary Berry (1763-1852) and Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)' in Andrew O. Winckles and Angela Rehbein (eds.), *Women's Literary Networks and Romanticism: 'A Tribe of Authoresses'* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p. 99-136, p. 76.
3. Horace Walpole, 'To Lady Ossory, Saturday, 11 October 1788' in W. S. Lewis (ed.), *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 48 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983, vol. 34, 1964), p. 22-26, p. 24-25.
4. Peter Sabor, 'Introduction', *The Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford*, [ed. Mary Berry], 5 vols (London: Robinson and Edwards, 1798), reprint Peter Sabor (ed.) (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999, vol. 1, x-xxxi). On her writing see Schmid, 2013, p. 65-69.
5. Mary Berry, *Some Account of the Life of Rachael Wriothesley Lady Russell Followed by a Series of Letters* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1819).
6. Mary Berry, *The Fashionable Friends; a Comedy, in Five Acts* (London: Ridgway, 1802); see also Susanne Schmid, 'Mary Berry's Fashionable Friends (1801) on Stage', *The Wordsworth Circle* (vol. 43, no. 3, 2012), p. 172-177. This article lists several reviews (p. 176-177). One of them, which attributes the authorship of the play to Walpole is: Anon, 'Art. 37. The Fashionable Friends', *The Critical Review* (vol. 36, November 1802), p. 353-355.
7. Mary Berry, *A Comparative View of the Social Life of England and France, from the Restoration of Charles the Second to the French Revolution* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1828); Mary Berry, *Social Life in England and France, from the French Revolution in 1789 to that of July 1830* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1831).
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10. Horace Walpole's Correspondence with Mary and Agnes Berry and Barbara Cecilia Seton, vol. 11, and Correspondence with Mary and Agnes Berry, vol. 12 of *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, W. S. Lewis (ed.), 48 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983, vols 11 and 12, 1949).
11. George E. Haggerty, *Horace Walpole's Letters: Masculinity and Friendship in the Eighteenth Century* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011) p. 137-158; Yvonne Louise Matthews, 'The Relationship of Horace Walpole and Mary and Agnes Berry', unpubl. PhD (Beaumont: Lamar University, 1986).
12. Emma Donoghue, '“Random Shafts of Malice?": The Outings of Anne Damer', *Lesbian Dames: Sapphism in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. John C. Beynon and Caroline Gonda (London: Ashgate, 2010), p. 127-146); Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 91-124.
13. See a recent study: Jonathan David Gross, *The Life of Anne Damer: Portrait of a Regency Artist* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).
14. For a recent fictional evaluation of their friendship, see Emma Donoghue, *Life Mask* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004).

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[To Mary Berry \(1795\)](#)