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0521619823 - Edmond Malone Shakespearean Scholar: A Literary Biography

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Irish beginnings

1

The Malone family name, Malone told his kinsman Charles O'Connor in December 1787, derived from some ancestor with a bald head: 'Moil I know is bald, but I know not the Irish for head; and rather suspect that the gentleman's name was *Owen*, and that he was called ... *Moil Owen* which was afterwards easily corrupted into *Malone*.'¹ The extensive Malone lands in County Westmeath, many of which were still in the family in Malone's lifetime, had been won by the Kings of Conaught in their wars with the Kings of Meath towards the end of the eleventh century. From that time on, Malone stated in the *Irish Peerage* of 1789 for which he wrote the history of his family, 'the family have continued possessed of the lands, where they were originally settled, a period of more than six hundred years.'²

In his account of his family history, it was the oratorical brilliance of his relatives that appealed to him most. His grandfather, Richard Malone, whose father had established the principal family seat at Baronston in the late seventeenth century, was like most of the Malones a successful, even celebrated, lawyer.³ His son, Anthony, the great family political success story, matched his father in fame as an orator but won even greater distinction as an Irish patriot in the British House of Commons. Lionel Cranfield Sackville, first Duke of Dorset, it was believed, had compared Anthony Malone favourably with two of the greatest speakers in the realm: 'the three ablest men I have ever heard were Mr Pitt [the Elder], Mr Murray [subsequently Lord Chief Justice], and Mr Malone; for a popular assembly I would choose Mr Pitt; for a Privy Council, Murray; for twelve wise men, Malone.'⁴

Malone's father, Edmond Senior, also chose the law. He was educated at

¹ Letter to Charles O'Connor, 12 December 1787, fols. 2–3, Huntington Library, STO 816.

² John Lodge's *Peerage of Ireland*, ed. M. Archdall, VII (1789), pp. 280–93. See J. K. Walton, 'Edmond Malone: An Irish Shakespeare Scholar', *Hermathena*, XCIX (1964), 5–26; and James Woods, *Annals of Westmeath* (Dublin, 1907), pp. 292–303.

³ On Richard Malone's diplomatic and legal achievements, see W. J. A. Taylor, *History of Dublin University*, p. 394.

⁴ Cited by W. E. H. Lecky, *The History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, I (1896), p. 463, n. 1.

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Oxford and the Inner Temple in London and called to the English Bar in 1730, but in 1740 his English practice failed and he was compelled to return to Ireland where, by contrast, he was distinctly successful and eventually entered politics. It was perhaps Malone's mother, though, who accounts most for his having turned his gaze, at an early age, toward a career in England. Formerly Catherine Collier, daughter of an Essex family, she was the niece of Robert Knight, whose wife was Henrietta Knight, Lady Luxborough, half-sister of Alexander Pope's close friend Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, and the poet William Shenstone's correspondent and patroness.

Malone himself was born in Dublin on 4 October 1741,⁵ a second son, the year after his parents had taken up residence at their country estate, Shinglas, in County Westmeath, a beautiful though modest Georgian house that still stands today in extensive rolling acreage. Virtually nothing is known of his childhood and adolescence except that in 1747 he was sent to Dr Ford's preparatory school in Molesworth Street, Dublin, where his brother Richard had already been enrolled for two years. In July 1757, not yet sixteen, Malone entered Trinity College, Dublin, where a year earlier his father had received an honorary LL D.⁶ Again, his brother had preceded him by two years but would leave the next year to study at Christ Church, Oxford – a privilege that financial constraints brought on later by his mother's illness denied to Malone. He turned out to be an exemplary student, naturally diligent, consistently at the top of his class. In his very first examination at Christmas, the first of four in the academic year, he shared top honours with James Drought, subsequently Fellow and Professor of Divinity at the College, and John Kearney, later Fellow and Provost and lifelong friend. He also earned the first of several premiums: books stamped with the College Arms.⁷ We know little more about his undergraduate career than that he wrote some poetry and, more noteworthy, some literary history, including a manuscript translation in prose of *Oedipus*, 'To which is prefixed an Essay on the Origin and Progress of Tragedy & on the Office & Advantages of the Antient Chorus.' The translation is accompanied by surprisingly erudite annotations and explanatory notes, while the essay (some twenty pages) includes both a brief comparison of Sophocles and Euripides and an enthusiastic argument in favour of the restoration of the Chorus in modern drama. 'The motive which induced the author to undertake this work', he writes in his preface, was his desire to explain the origins of tragedy to 'those persons who have not studied the Antient Poets.' After a few pages, he apologizes for not continuing with his comparison of the two tragedians and launches into an analysis of 'the

⁵ Malone's birth is registered as 1 November 1741 in the Register of St Peter's Church, Dublin.

⁶ See *Alumni Dubliniensis*, 1756.

⁷ See Walton, 'Edmond Malone: An Irish Shakespeare Scholar', 7–9.

Antient Chorus’, which he says ‘has been entirely rejected by all the modern tragick writers’, with the result that ‘few but those who converse more with the dead than the living, have any ideas of its use & advantages.’⁸ Though he never pursued his argument for choruses, these pieces are early signs that he already had a taste for conversing with the dead.

We also know from the letters of John Chetwood, his friend and classmate at Trinity, that as an undergraduate he was not a little romantically inclined. In the next few years the two young men would find themselves exchanging poems and confidences over their romances, real and imaginary. His teasing letters to Chetwood – now lost, we know of them only through Chetwood’s replies – during the summer holidays, either in 1761 or 1762, were full of the latter’s having fallen in love with a young ‘Eliza’ known to them both who they were convinced would soon prove fickle. In one of his replies, which alludes to Malone’s prior statement that a mutual friend was about to steal Eliza from him, Chetwood hints that Malone too has been in love and apparently with someone who did not return it: ‘How cou’d you be so cruel as to blast all my present bliss with such a prophetick, such a deathful Sound: ... In short, wou’d it not my Dear Ned (for you can inform me) deaden & damp my spirits, & convert my attention from present Enjoyment to the thoughts of future Misery?’⁹ It is a pity we have only Chetwood’s side of the correspondence at a time when Malone’s thoughts of love were young and hopeful, not yet disillusioned. Chetwood’s phrase, ‘for you can inform me’, seems to imply that Malone experienced some early disappointment, but his general good cheer during these last days at Trinity signals confidence. Four years later, that confidence would be shattered, and his thoughts about himself and his future would be correspondingly darkened.

2

The only shadow in Malone’s otherwise bright and successful undergraduate career was his mother’s health. It had been deteriorating for some time and she increasingly found it difficult to walk. Since a favoured eighteenth-century treatment for almost all forms of malaise was a change of air, it was decided a stint in England might be tonic, and so in the summer of 1759, midway through his Trinity days, Malone accompanied his mother and father to London.

His brother had been at Oxford for a year by then, but it was his own first visit to London and, notwithstanding the alarming reason for the trip, certain to be impressive. Here was the intellectual centre of Europe, and he was about to enter it. Unfortunately, no letters survive from that visit, nor

⁸ Ms. Malone 40, fol. 92. See also James Prior, *The Life of Edmond Malone*, 1860, p. 6; and Ms. Malone 40, fols. 63–68, 90–109. Most of Malone’s exercise books and juvenilia have been lost.

⁹ BL Add. Ms. 147. Probable date for this letter is 1761.

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did he and his father stay long once they had deposited his mother at Highgate, moving on soon to the Midlands where his father had business. We may infer there was time to visit the London bookshops, however, to pick up needed volumes difficult to come by in Dublin; time also, one may guess, for theatres and coffee-houses, where he and his father might catch sight of eminent theatrical, political, and literary figures. They left for home in October, too late for him to resume his studies in the winter term.

His mother soon removed from Highgate to Bath, from where on 15 November she wrote the first letter we have to Malone, her 'dear nedy':

I received a letter from you on sunday last which gave me great pleasure & for which I thank you [;] it gives me also great pleasure to hear you are safe in Dublin after so long a journey & so dangerous a voyage as the Irish one is at this time of year [.] I wish you had been more particular as to your sickness[,] company[,] & fears but that will serve for another letter.

Drinking the supposedly health-giving waters 'constantly', brought to her at her lodging because she 'almost always [*sic*] got cold' at the Pump Room, does not appear to have done much good yet, but she assures him she will persevere. She has done a 'heroick action' by telling Richard at Oxford that he need not visit her until the entire family joins her for Christmas. Why did he not write about Harriet and Kitty, his sisters? 'I long to see you', she concludes, 'but what signifies wishing[?] It cannot be but the time will I hope come when we shall all meet & till then shall never enjoy [*sic*] perfect hapiness ...'¹⁰

Alone in Ireland, father and son consoled themselves with each other's company at Shinglas until the new year, while Malone occupied himself with studies. In January, he was back at the University, a step which in deference to his dejected father he very nearly did not take. It was the right thing to do, however, as his father urges in a January letter 'from this lonely place', where he was doing a bit of farming and living in one room plus his bedroom and eating some simple mutton every day. 'I often wish for your company', he writes, 'but at the same time am glad that you made the choice you did, of sitting down to read for next examinations, as you will by that means soon recover the time lost by our English expedition last summer.' He assures his son that if it ever comes in his power to reward him for his academic diligence, he would show him 'all the affection and kindness the most deserving child can expect. But as human events are so precarious, there is no trusting to that chance. Continue, therefore, my dear child, the same course of industry you are in, in order to qualify you to get your own bread, and to make your own way in the world.' Since God had been pleased to endow him 'with a good understanding', he cannot fail.¹¹

¹⁰ Arthur O'Neill Collection. See also *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 28 August 1759.

¹¹ Prior, pp. 8–9.

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It probably did not occur to either the son or his parents at this point that he might make his way in the world in any other profession than the law. The expenses at Bath left little money to spare, and the family legal practice presented the best route to a secure future.

During the spring, the news from Bath was worrying, although his mother's letter on 11 March brought some happy if temporary relief: 'I just begin to use my limbs with a can[e] after very near 3 months confinement', she writes; 'If I have many more such fits they will soon wear me out ... I shall not repine at a severe one provided I have you & *all* my children with me.'¹² One piece of news that eased the financial strain came on 2 June when, after a special examination, Malone won a scholarship at Trinity, becoming a Scholar of the House.¹³

3

Malone took his final examination at Trinity in Michaelmas term, 1761, and received his BA degree at the first Commencement after that on 23 February 1762.¹⁴ He had finished, distinguishing himself as one of only three to earn the top mark, *valde bene*. He also knew where he was going next. He had long since decided to follow his uncle's, father's, and grandfather's footsteps to the Inner Temple in London to become an Irish barrister. The preceding year he had been given 'Admittance into the House' on payment of £3 6s 8d. By a coincidence which literary historians cannot fail to wonder at, the Inner Temple records show that he was admitted the same year as James Boswell.¹⁵ Since he did not intend to begin his law studies until the following year, he decided to remain in Dublin and read – possibly law although probably also literature¹⁶ – a useful thing to do at home as his father was away on the legal circuit for much of the time and he was in total command of his own time.

If Malone learned from his father's example and distaste, the prospect of becoming a barrister and travelling for long periods as a circuit judge through the countryside may have preoccupied him at this time. His father had always dreaded leaving family and home, enduring the vagaries of weather and transport together with fatiguing and often unpleasant legal business. It was the sort of duty from which he was often grateful to return undamaged: 'I got safe home, my Dear Ned, yesterday, after a long circuit, without any ill accident to myself, or to my chaise & horses ...'¹⁷ But the

¹² Catherine Malone to Edmond Malone Senior, Arthur O'Neill Collection.

¹³ This was announced in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 3 June.

¹⁴ He signed the Trinity College Registry of Degrees on that date.

¹⁵ Inner Temple Records, 14–20 November 1761, pp. 88, 133.

¹⁶ He quickly applied to become a Reader of the Trinity Library, a privilege not normally accorded to undergraduates. See J. K. Walton, 'Edmond Malone: An Irish Shakespeare Scholar', 8.

¹⁷ 11 April, Add. 9.

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family finances were still tight and a barrister could earn a respectable income; moreover, the opportunities for political activity were always available. It was best to proceed along that course.

He entered the Inner Temple probably in the new year, 1763. Little survives for the years in London that followed. Except for his father, his family apparently saw little reason to keep his letters, though surely one of them must have recorded the events of that exceptional day (10 May 1763) when he was 'invited to come to the bench table' in Commons.¹⁸ To become a 'Bencher' was comparable to becoming a Warden in a Guild – within the student body it was a governing elite who were awarded the right to nominate their successors. From that day until the autumn of 1766 he remained in London except for brief visits to Bath to see his ailing mother.¹⁹ In order to be called to the Bar, a law student had to 'keep' (or attend) twelve terms. There were only four terms per year, each three weeks long, so that a barrister's curriculum extended over three years.²⁰ That left plenty of time for other things, but what they were in Malone's case we can only guess except for several fugitive satirical articles that he published on Irish politics and the abuse of the English language, and his corrections of a new edition of Swift's correspondence.²¹ It stretches the imagination that even the young Malone would while away the hours correcting the text of Swift's correspondence for his own amusement. Someone must have asked him to do it, but who or why is unknown.

He had rooms in the Inner Temple and doubtless took most of his meals in the Commons as they were both excellent and cheap. Though he failed to meet his fellow matriculant Boswell who was soon off to study law in Utrecht, his rooms were only a stone's throw from Samuel Johnson's lodgings on Inner Temple Lane, and on an unspecified day in 1764, when he was twenty-two, the old moralist and the young Templar met. As Malone later wrote in his copy of Johnson's *Prayers and Meditations*,²² Edmund Southwell, the father of his good friend Thomas, took Malone along to Inner Temple Lane and introduced him. The Southwells were a prominent Anglo-Irish family well known to the Malones. This was probably the most important meeting of Malone's life. For the rest of his days he became an ardent follower of Johnson's and, Boswell excepted, the most enthusiastic defender and celebrator of Johnson's writings and life.

¹⁸ Inner Temple Records, p. 155.

¹⁹ See his mother's letter to his father on 11 December 1764 about her deteriorating health (Add. 11).

²⁰ Robert J. Blackham, *Wig and Gown: the Story of the Temple, Gray's, and Lincoln's Inn* (1932), pp. 163–64.

²¹ See Prior, pp. 470–71; Ms. Malone 41, f. 70; *St. James's Chronicle*, 883 (28–30 October 1766), 2.

²² 'This Edmund Southwell first introduced me to Dr. Johnson in 1764, when he had chambers in the Middle Temple Lane', Malone wrote in his copy of *Prayers and Meditations* (cited courtesy of Mr W. R. Batty).

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As in Boswell's case, Malone's first meeting with Johnson led to others. We can only speculate about what they discussed. Literature, almost certainly, and more than likely, Shakespeare, came into play for Johnson was just then finishing the great edition which he had begun in 1756. What is regrettable is that Malone, though he wrote of his meetings with Johnson in letters to John Chetwood and perhaps to others – none of which have been found – failed to keep a record of their conversations. It is perplexing as well as regrettable that even in later years he never wrote down his recollections of these early encounters with the greatest author of the age – although he did make notes about his meetings with Johnson in the late 1770s and early 1780s.²³

He was, nevertheless, in his own way, already becoming one of Johnson's intimates. Returning to Ireland from a visit with Malone in 1765, Chetwood envied his friend's 'Intimacy with the Editor of Shakespeare, & the opportunities you have by your Situation in London of collecting books. I wish you have sufficient influence over Mr Johnson to urge him to continue his writings.' Chetwood had trouble crediting Malone's discovery that indolence was one of Johnson's personal devils: 'You amaze me by accusing him of Indolence; I imagin'd from the perusal of his Dictionary, that his Application was at least equal to his Abilities.'²⁴ At about this time, in the autumn of 1765, his Shakespeare edition complete, Johnson resolved to study law with a view to rousing himself to a new sense of purpose.²⁵ To this end, he was about to start work as private secretary to William Gerard Hamilton, whose writings, together with unpublished notes on the Corn Laws that Johnson compiled for Hamilton at about this time, Malone would publish in 1809 under the title, *Parliamentary Logick*. For years Hamilton had employed Burke as his private secretary, but Burke had resigned and Hamilton again needed someone who, as Malone was later to write, would 'furnish him with sentiments on the great political topicks that should be considered in Parliament.' Johnson's project to study law can only have made Malone additionally interesting to him both because of Malone's legal training and because of his Irish connections. For years Hamilton had been an eminent Irish politician and still was Chancellor of the Exchequer for Ireland. Malone was thus well placed to give Johnson information. Given the brief experience Malone had already had in politics and his lifelong interest in the subject, he would also have been impressed with the idealism shown by a major literary figure who wished to have a positive influence on political thinking in his time. Johnson's example stayed with him for the rest of his life.

He was also well placed to pass on to Trinity College information about

²³ See Malone's note about Johnson's household in this early stage of their friendship, *Everyman* edition, I, p. 260 n.2.

²⁴ Ms. Malone 38, fols. 180, d-e.

²⁵ Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (1977), p. 408.

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Johnson, though it is not known whether he had anything to do with Trinity's awarding Johnson an honorary Doctor of Laws in July of 1765. Boswell in his *Life of Johnson* sees this surprising and 'unsolicited mark of distinction' as joining well with what he calls Johnson's 'temporary fit of ambition, for he had thoughts of both studying law and of engaging in politicks.'²⁶ But Malone knew better. 'Mr. Boswell was certainly mistaken in this respect', he wrote about thirty-five years later in his edition of the *Life of Johnson*.²⁷ From first-hand experience, he knew that Johnson was not studying to go into politics and that the honorary degree was a totally unrelated expression of Trinity College's esteem. Whether the award was a surprise to him as it was to Johnson Malone failed to say.²⁸

4

Two events occurred early in 1765 that shattered the Malone family. The first was that Catherine Malone died in January. Owing to her continued invalidism in Bath, it is unlikely that members of the family had held out much hope; nonetheless, her death deeply demoralized them. The other shock was that an expected legacy from a relative named Mrs Weaver did not materialize; she had died in March without leaving them a penny. 'We may bid adieu to the prospect of any share of her personal fortune', Malone informed his father on 26 March.²⁹ The father was equal to the disappointment: 'By not suffering the events of life to affect us', he told his son, 'we shall by degrees become superior to all calamities. I well know that one thousand pounds a-piece to my children would have been a great benefit; but after all, their happiness depends more on the wisdom and virtue of their own minds than on that or any other sum. So let us, my dear child, think no more of it.'³⁰

5

Always interested in politics, English as well as Irish, Malone throughout his life took pleasure in reporting the most recent political events in London to his father and friends. Like most young men with political and literary interests who were new to the city, he quickly made a habit of spending hours at a coffee-house where he could make the acquaintance of 'the town'. It was indispensable that a young man be aware of the latest political, stage, literary, and social gossip. Malone picked up much of what he needed to know at his favourite coffee-house, The Grecian in Devereux Court, whence in April 1766 he regaled his father with news of Pitt's

²⁶ *Boswell's Life of Johnson, LL. D., together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, eds. George Birbeck Hill, rev. and enl. by L. F. Powell, I, p. 489.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

²⁸ One of the signatories of the honorary LL D. was Michael Kearney, a lifelong friend.

²⁹ Adam Collection, University of Rochester, J. R. 2.228.

³⁰ Prior, p. 12.

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misfortunes with the gout, adding perhaps boastfully: 'I am at present writing in a coffee-house, in the midst of so much noise and bustle – the celebrated anti-Sejanus (Mr. Scott) on one side and Mr. [Charles] Macklin [the actor] on the other – that I can't add anything more at present.'³¹ He was also now scribbling verses and composing essays. More than anything else about Malone in these early years, Chetwood admired his 'poetic' fire. On 26 November 1765, he referred feelingly to the rival demands of law and literature between which he supposed, probably on good evidence, Malone was torn. A 'Man of imagination, possess'd with a Passion for the Nine', he told him, 'shou'd never be licentious in the indulgence of either if he means to be deeply learn'd in the Intricacies of Law. Such is the severe tax upon you, & the Ingenious of your Profession.'³²

In a letter just ten days earlier, Chetwood also alluded to several of Malone's poems. He wishes he could see him, if for no other reason than 'to examine the recesses of your escritoire.' 'That warm brain of yours', he added, 'can never find enjoyment in inaction. The forms of beauty, either moral or personal, solicit it too strongly to suffer it to be at rest.' There is little in the legal world, as Chetwood prophetically saw it, to content a mind like his: 'No law jargon, no collection of statutes, not all the Pandects in the world, can ever avail to extinguish the passion for the muse when she has taken legal possession.' If Malone insisted on suppressing his poetic compositions, then 'Shakespeare's curse attend you.'³³ Shakespeare's curse aside, perhaps wisely Malone suppressed all his poetry.

In the summer of 1765, staying in the English countryside near Chester, Chetwood tried to pry Malone away from the city, where he felt he was becoming too sedentary. 'The Situation of this place', he wrote on 30 July, 'wou'd inspire you with that exalted Enthusiasm, that a fine rural scene so naturally suggests. But You have been so long an Englishman, that the hanging Grove, the opening Lawn, the winding River, the distant Sea, are Objects that perhaps from their frequency have lost their force upon you.'³⁴ Perhaps, perhaps not, but clearly the city had cast a spell on Malone and he was reluctant to leave it. Chetwood even wrongly suspected that a new love affair was detaining his friend: 'some happy fair one, possess'd of all the Beauties, Accomplishments... enslav'd my friend's Affections'. He knew Malone's soul was 'as impregnated with fire as the Flint, & that both when struck are equally prone to produce flame', but he misjudged him this time.³⁵

³¹ Prior, p. 23.³² Ms. Malone 38, fol. 180.³³ 15 November 1765, Osborn Files, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.³⁴ Ms. Malone 38, fols. 180b-c.³⁵ 13 August, OFB.

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We have it from Chetwood that Malone had neglected his correspondence in the first half of 1766. His father thought so, too. With his mother now dead for more than a year, his father ached to see and hear from his sons: 'I can't express to you, My Dear Ned', he wrote in June, 'the uneasiness I am under at not hearing from you or Dick for so long a time; you are both now the principal objects of my affection & attention...' Malone was completing his studies at the Inner Temple and his father had to know his plans for the summer as well as when Dick was returning from his own excursion to France. Something also was in the wind regarding an improvement of the family's fortunes. A meeting between Malone Senior and Lord Worthington would soon decide whether the former would receive a judgeship. 'I can with great truth say', he added, 'my children are more essentially interested in the event, than I am myself; for I want very little for myself; my great anxiety is, for the present easy support of my children.'³⁶ Perhaps with the new confidence that sprang from the likelihood that his father would be appointed Judge of the Court of Irish Common Pleas, Malone found himself quickly winding up his affairs in London during the summer and preparing for an entirely new experience: an autumn sojourn in the south of France with his close friend Southwell and Southwell's father Edmund, who had introduced him to Dr Johnson.

They travelled first to Paris and then continued on to Avignon, arriving in early November.³⁷ After one month in Avignon, which he disliked – 'old, straggling, ugly' – Malone with a heavy heart heard from his father that the prospects for the judgeship were dimming. His bitterness was tempered by philosophy: 'It shall be a lesson to me, never to believe in any great man's word, unless coupled with performance, & to aspire by every truest means at the greatest blessing of life, independence.' 'I mean to go next week', he added, 'for a few days to Marseilles, with a gentleman of this town, who has offered me a place in his chaise.'³⁸ At last, towards the end of the month, he received the happy news in Marseilles, that his father had in fact succeeded to the bench.

While he was in France, Malone began to have second thoughts about a legal career. His correspondence with his father hints at some emerging tension between them over the matter. Finished at the Inner Temple, he still needed further study for the Irish Bar. Could he muster the enthusiasm for that, especially since at the end of it, and very soon, lay the dismal prospect of leaving London? In a letter describing Marseilles, he tried to

³⁶ Add. 13–14.

³⁷ Malone took with him a set of instructions in French telling what should be done in case of a fever. They have survived in Malone's handwriting, Ms. Malone 39, fol. 378.

³⁸ Bodleian, Ms. 31753, d.3, fol. 2.