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THE CAMBRIDGE MISCELLANY



VII
ANECDOTES OF JOHNSON

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Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson

by Hesther Lynch Piozzi

Edited, with an Introduction,

by

S. C. ROBERTS

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

P R E F A C E

WORK relating to Samuel Johnson, which was printed four times in the year of publication, surely deserves a reprint at a time when there is a marked renewal of interest in *Johnsoniana*.

In a short *Introduction* I have tried not to propound new theories, but to summarise some of the evidence available for a proper judgment upon the relations between Johnson and the Streatham household. Whether charmed or exasperated by Mrs Thrale, students of Johnson cannot afford wholly to neglect her.

I must add that for the suggestion of this new edition and for much help in its preparation I am indebted to Mr Andrew Gow.

S. C. R.

CAMBRIDGE
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NOTE ON THE *MISCELLANY* EDITION

In this reprint only the biographical portion of the *Introduction* has been retained; some textual errors have also been corrected.

S. C. R.

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

IN the long catalogue of *Johnsoniana*, no volume has aroused more controversy than the *Anecdotes* of Mrs Piozzi. Did Mrs Thrale cultivate Johnson as a literary lion while her husband lived and afterwards show him that he was not wanted? Or, on the other hand, did Johnson presume too far upon his friendship with Thrale and attempt to exercise an intolerable tyranny over his widow? It is doubtful whether the truth can be found in a categorical answer to either question. Certainly the material for even a partial answer must be sought in an appreciation of Mrs Thrale and the Streatham *milieu*.

1. *Mrs Thrale, afterwards Mrs Piozzi*

Hester Lynch Salusbury, the daughter of the 'rakish' John Salusbury of Bachygraig, was born 16 January 1741 at Bodvel in Carnarvonshire. She was, she says, the joint plaything of her parents and, "although education was a word then unknown as applied to females," she was taught to read and speak and think and translate from the French until she was "half a prodigy." Famous people petted her at an early age; she sat on Garrick's knee and was taught by Quin to recite passages from *Paradise Lost*.

While her father continued his rakish career in Nova Scotia under the patronage of Lord Halifax,

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

“quarrelling and fighting and fretting his friends at home,” Hester and her mother lived with relatives—first with “Grandmamma Cotton” at East Hyde, near Luton, and afterwards with her uncle, Sir Thomas Salusbury, at Offley Place. At East Hyde the girl learned to love horses: “When my mother hoped I was gaining health by the fresh air, I was kicking my heels on a corn binn, and learning to drive of the old coachman.” Study, however, was equally delightful to her, and from the age of thirteen she was instructed in Latin, logic, rhetoric and other subjects by her dear Dr Collier, afterwards the preceptor of Sophy Streatfield.

Suitors for Miss Salusbury’s hand came quickly. Each one of them was made to understand her extraordinary value: “Those who could read were shown my verses; those who could not were judges of my prowess in the field.”

One of the disappointed suitors lived to be master of a Cambridge college. This was Dr James Marriott, at that time a lawyer of Doctors Commons and afterwards Master of Trinity Hall. John Salusbury’s treatment of Dr Marriott as a possible son-in-law was in the true Squire Western manner:

Should you continue to insult my poor child...I shall take the Insult to myself; be then most certainly assured that I will be avenged on you, much to the detriment of your person. So help me God¹.

One day Sir Thomas Salusbury (now a widower

¹ Quoted in Broadley, *Doctor Johnson and Mrs Thrale*, p. 105.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

ix

and himself planning a second marriage) returned from London with news of a suitor of exceptional eligibility, “an incomparable young man...a model of perfection, and a *real sportsman*.” When the young man arrived in person, he began, after the manner of wise suitors, by paying compliments to the mother—and with good effect: “There was little doubt of her approving the pretensions of so very showy a suitor.” But Hester herself received no such favourable impression: “Nothing resembled love *less* than Mr Thrale’s behaviour”; and her father was almost as violent in his opposition to the new suitor as he had been against the unfortunate Dr Marriott. He would not, he swore, have his daughter exchanged for a barrel of porter.

Under these doubtful auspices did Henry Thrale enter Hester Salusbury’s life; but the situation was changed by the sudden death of John Salusbury in 1762. Ten months later Mr Thrale accepted what his bride declares to have been her undesired hand.

Born in 1728, Henry Thrale was the son of Ralph Thrale, the wealthy Southwark brewer. His education had been that which befitted an eighteenth-century gentleman—Eton, Oxford, the grand tour with a Lyttelton as companion. His allowance after he left college, says Boswell (perhaps with a touch of envy), was splendid—not less than a thousand a year. Probably it was an allowance which Henry Thrale, a gay man of the town and the boon companion of Arthur Murphy, was

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 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

quite capable of spending. At the age of thirty he succeeded his father as head of the brewery. No wonder that he should appear to Sir Thomas Salusbury as a paragon amongst suitors. To a person of keener sensibility the only ground of offence was his occupation. He had offered his hand and his fortune to several ladies before he came to Offley Place, but all had refused to live in the Borough. *Nonne olet?* was the attitude of the more fastidious.

The story of Mrs Thrale's married life is a curious one. From the familiar passage in Boswell we receive an impression of a scholarly gentleman, an able man of business, a good husband and father who kept a quietly firm hand upon a somewhat frivolous wife:

Johnson had a very sincere esteem for Mr Thrale, as a man of excellent principles, a good scholar, well skilled in trade, of a sound understanding, and of manners such as presented the character of a plain independent English Squire.... 'I know no man (said he) who is more master of his wife and family than Thrale. If he but holds up a finger, he is obeyed....'

Side by side with this there may be quoted part of the *Character of Thrale*, of remarkable but characteristic objectivity, written by his wife:

Mr Thrale's person is manly, his countenance agreeable, his eyes steady and of the deepest blue; his look neither soft nor severe, neither sprightly nor gloomy, but thoughtful and intelligent; his address is neither caressive nor repulsive, but unaffectedly civil and decorous; and his

 INTRODUCTION

xi

manner more completely free from every kind of trick or particularity than I ever saw any person's....Mr Thrale's sobriety, and the decency of his conversation, being wholly free from all oaths, ribaldry and profaneness, make him a man exceedingly comfortable to live with; while the easiness of his temper and slowness to take offence add greatly to his value as a domestic man. Yet I think his servants do not much love him, and I am not sure that his children have much affection for him....With regard to his wife, though little tender of her person, he is very partial to her understanding; but he is obliging to nobody, and confers a favour less pleasing than many a man refuses to confer one. This appears to me to be as just a character as can be given of the man with whom I have now lived thirteen years....

Neither winter in Southwark nor summer in Streatham held at first any attraction for the young bride who had all her life been a spoilt child. Her place, in her husband's view, was either in the drawing-room or the bed-chamber. A pack of hounds was kept, but it was "masculine" to ride; the Streatham table was famous for its profusion, but Thrale would not have his wife *think of the kitchen*.

Certain members of Henry Thrale's acquaintance were introduced to the bride at Streatham; among them were Arthur Murphy, the 'facetious' Georgey Bodens, Simon Luttrell and Dr Fitzpatrick, "a very sickly old physician." Lacking her husband's confidence and discouraged by her mother from plunging into social gaiety, Mrs Thrale had to be content with her books and her

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

children. Still, this period of seclusion (“shut from the world, its pleasures or its cares”), about which Mrs Thrale writes with somewhat insistent self-pity, did not last for long. Johnson was introduced by Arthur Murphy in 1765; the fox-hounds were sold; a seat in Parliament for Henry Thrale was talked of; Mrs Thrale began to feel herself grow useful, ‘*almost* necessary.’

Gradually the Thrale household gained a celebrity which is a matter not of controversy, but of social history. Not only did Mrs Thrale become famous, in Wraxall’s words, as “the provider and conductress of Dr Johnson,” but her *salon* could vie with those of the most distinguished blue-stockings. Mrs Vesey, indeed, “dreamed not of any competition, but Mrs Montague and Mrs Thrale were set up as rival candidates for colloquial eminence and each of them thought the other alone worthy to be her peer.” Clearly, Mrs Thrale was something more than a successful lion-hunter. While she was willing to let her lions roar, she was herself a personality in conversation. The wife of a Member of Parliament, she had both the ability and the income necessary for successful entertaining, and she had also a genuine taste for letters. The entrance into her life of Murphy, Johnson, the Burneys and the others who followed gave her exactly what she needed for the display of her social talent. Her guests were not likely to be squeamish—as the young ladies are said to have

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

 INTRODUCTION

xiii

been—either about Henry Thrale’s occupation or about his residence in the Borough. Whether at Southwark or at Streatham they enjoyed good dinners and vivacious conversation. Boswell, though notoriously jealous of the hold which Mrs Thrale obtained over Johnson, was as keen as the rest to enjoy the hospitality of Streatham, not only because he realised that a successful *Life* of Johnson must include Streatham in its orbit, but because Mrs Thrale was herself a centre of social celebrity. That, in itself, was a sufficient attraction for James Boswell.

As for Johnson, there can be no doubt of the genuineness of his affection both for the Thrales individually and for the Streatham household collectively. He travelled with them in France and in Wales, stayed with them in Brighton as well as in London and, in particular, took a very serious interest in the business of brewing. In commerce Thrale appears to have been a man of one ambition—to outbrew Whitbread. Johnson, with characteristic readiness to interest himself in affairs of which he had no personal experience, enjoyed playing the rôle of consultant. “We are not far,” he wrote on 23 August 1777, “from the great year of a hundred thousand barrels, which, if three shillings be gained upon each barrel, will bring us fifteen thousand pounds a year....”

Similarly in the matter of Thrale’s digestion—and on this matter he might claim to speak with

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

greater authority—Johnson issued his dietary injunctions with brotherly sternness:

If Mr Thrale at all remits his vigilance, let the Doctor loose upon him. While he is watched he may be kept from mischief, but he never can be safe without a rule....

If Mr Thrale eats but half his usual quantity, he can hardly eat too much. It were better however to have some rule....

The rule to which Johnson refers was one of 'alternate diet'¹ to which he had repeatedly challenged his friend. But Thrale disregarded the warnings. The final seizure occurred in April 1781. Johnson had declared that Thrale's voracity was little better than suicide. Thrale replied by inquiring when the lamprey season would come in, and in this royal manner he died.

After her husband's death Mrs Thrale's immediate problems were concerned with her children, her brewery, and Dr Johnson. Between Mrs Thrale and her daughters (her two sons had died) there was, to say the least of it, a lack of sympathy²; as to the brewery, the story of the negotiations for its sale is told in some fulness in the *Letters to and from Samuel Johnson* and in the extracts from *Thraliana* quoted by Hayward; the

¹ Birkbeck Hill conjectures that this meant abstinence from animal food every other day (*Letters*, II, 143).

² The antagonism was, of course, most evident in the matter of the Piozzi marriage. Barette has much to say, in his *Strictures* (*vide* p. xlii), of Mrs Thrale's treatment of her daughters.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xv

Letters may also be taken as a fair guide to the relations between the widow and Dr Johnson.

It was not until the marriage with Piozzi became imminent that the bitter attacks began. Leaving aside, for the moment, the somewhat wearisome minutiae of the controversy, there can be no doubt that in the main Mrs Piozzi cheated the prophets. She married Piozzi because she loved him and it was a happy marriage. Piozzi was very different from the dashing foreigner of fiction who carries off his bride in a whirlwind of passion and subsequently breaks her heart with cruelty, infidelity, and extravagance. When the Piozzis returned from their wedding-tour, the Streatham house was not immediately given up. It had been let for several years, but on 28 July 1790 Mrs Piozzi wrote: "We have kept our seventh wedding day and celebrated our return to *this house* with prodigious splendour and gaiety. Seventy people..." and while the full glory of the Johnson period could scarcely be revived, Mrs Piozzi was very far from being a social outcast. Arthur Murphy, Dr Lort, Sir Lucas Pepys, Mrs Siddons and many others renewed their former friendships and Dr Parr wrote her "very flattering" letters. But Streatham Park was expensive, and after a few years Piozzi resolved to build an Italian villa on the banks of the Clwydd. A musician of simple tastes, Gabriel Piozzi was a man who, in spite of unfamiliarity with the English language, settled down comfortably to the life of

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

a country gentleman at Brynbella. He repaired the village church and built a new vault for his wife's ancestors; he provided the cottagers with warm rugs for the winter; at the same time he showed a certain shrewdness in domestic finance, remarking that "white monies were good for ladies, yellow for gentlemen." He "conformed to English religious opinions" and became English even in his ailments, being "so punished with gout," that he was obliged to spend the winters at Bath.

It was at Bath that Mrs Piozzi's last years were spent. Widowed a second time in 1809, she moved there five years later. From various sources we get glimpses of the old lady's persistent liveliness. Tom Moore was taken to call upon her in 1819: "A wonderful old lady; faces of other times seemed to crowd over her as she sat—the Johnsons, Reynoldses, etc., etc.: though turned eighty, she has all the quickness and intelligence of a gay young woman."

On her eightieth birthday she sent more than six hundred invitations to a Concert, Ball, and Supper in the Bath Assembly Rooms. "The Dancing commenced at two when Mrs Piozzi led off with Sir J. Salusbury¹ and proved to the company that the season of infirmity was yet far distant." A few months later, however, infirmity was hastened by a travelling accident, and in May 1821 Mrs Piozzi died.

¹ Her adopted son.

 INTRODUCTION

xvii

 I. *The Streatham Circle*

In an extract from *Thraliana* quoted by the late Mr Hughes¹ there is reproduced part of “a most remarkable tabular character sketch of the society of Streatham, based on a system of marks for different quantities, 20 being full marks.” Unfortunately Mr Hughes, who had the rare opportunity of reading the whole of *Thraliana*, omitted some of the records of the men², and all those of the ladies, who belonged to the Streatham circle; but, even so, the mark-sheet, with its nine columns headed respectively Religion, Morality, Scholarship, General Knowledge, Person and Voice, Manners, Wit, Humour, Good Humour³ has many points of interest:

Johnson, for instance, gets full marks for Religion, Morality, and General Knowledge, 19 for Scholarship, 16 for Humour, 15 for Wit, and nothing at all for the three remaining subjects; Murphy scores about 75 per cent. for all subjects except Religion, Morality, and General Knowledge, for which his marks are very low; Burney has high marks for everything except Scholarship, Wit, and Humour; Garrick’s average

¹ *Mrs Piozzi’s Thraliana*, by Charles Hughes (1913).

² Reynolds and Goldsmith are notable omissions. Hughes says that “in his [Sir Joshua’s] case the columns of Religion and Morality are left blank.”

³ *I.e.* “the Good Humour necessary to conversation.”

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

is brought down by 3 for Scholarship and 0 for Good Humour; Seward's by 0 for Religion, Humour, and Good Humour; Boswell is bracketed top with Burney in Good Humour (19 marks), but only reaches half marks in two other subjects; Thrale begins well with 18 for Religion and 17 for Morality, but fails to score in Wit, Humour, or Good Humour; Burke's record is very similar to Thrale's; Barette has a miserable score in everything except General Knowledge; James Harris has a low aggregate, but is the only member of the circle to be awarded full marks for Scholarship¹.

While Mrs Thrale need not be taken too seriously as an examiner, her assessments indicate a certain shrewdness. What is noticeable, in particular, is the severity of her marking for Wit and Humour. The only subject, on the other hand, in which a high average is maintained is General Knowledge; that, presumably, was the minimum demanded by an eighteenth-century *salonnière*.

In any event Mrs Thrale must have enjoyed compiling this mark-sheet as much as she enjoyed writing the "little paltry verse characters" for the portraits which hung in the Streatham

¹ James Harris, known as 'Hermes' Harris, being the author of *Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry concerning Universal Grammar*, of which Mrs Thrale was given an interleaved copy. "Harris" said Johnson "is a sound sullen scholar; he does not like interlopers. Harris, however, is a prig, and a bad prig. I looked into his book and thought he did not understand his own system."

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

 INTRODUCTION

xix

gallery. Her lines on Johnson are quoted in the *Anecdotes*¹.

A more important picture of the Streatham circle is that preserved in Fanny Burney's *Diary*. Very naturally, many of the conversations recorded in the period 1778–1784 are concerned with *Evelina* and its authorship, but no one has drawn a truer picture of the Johnson who, in the society of lively ladies, considered himself “a very polite man”:

Dr Johnson (she wrote in August 1778) came home to dinner. In the evening he was as lively and full of wit and sport as I have ever seen him; and Mrs Thrale and I had him quite to ourselves; for Mr Thrale came in from giving an election dinner (to which he sent two bucks and six pine-apples) so tired, that he neither opened his eyes nor mouth, but fell fast asleep. Indeed, after tea he generally does. Dr Johnson was very communicative concerning his present work of the “Lives of the Poets”; Dryden is now in the press, and he told us he had been just writing a dissertation upon “Hudibras.”

Johnson gave the ladies a Latin lesson every morning, but it was his merriment that impressed Fanny Burney:

Johnson has more fun, and comical humour, and love of nonsense about him, than almost anybody I ever saw: I mean when with those he likes; for otherwise, he can be as severe and as bitter as report relates him. Mrs Thrale has all that gaiety of disposition and lightness of heart, which commonly belong to fifteen.

¹ p. 189 of this edition; for the other ‘verse characters’ see Hayward, II, 170.

RJ

b

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

To Johnson, indeed, the Thrale household was primarily not a *salon*, but a home. From the day that he was prevailed upon to quit his close habitation in Johnson's court¹ until the day of Henry Thrale's death, the house at Streatham was for him the first house in which he tasted the continuous joy of solid comfort. Of Johnson's pleasures (and no man, as he said, is a hypocrite in his pleasures) there was hardly one which he could not enjoy at Streatham—conversation, a good library, pretty women, late hours, careful cookery, fruit². How different must the proof-correction of the *Lives of the Poets*, done in consultation with Fanny Burney in the summer-house (near the peach trees), have been from the final labours, performed “amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow,” upon the *Dictionary of the English Language*.

Ⓒ. *Johnson and Mrs Thrale* 1781–1784

When Thrale died, one thing was clear—Johnson could not have the same freedom of the house as before. Furthermore, the loss of Thrale in itself meant much to Johnson. Whatever Henry Thrale's failings may have been, he held a very definite and personal attraction for Johnson: “I am afraid of thinking of what I have lost, I never had

¹ See p. 83.

² “We have not once missed a pine-apple since I came, and therefore you may imagine their abundance; besides grapes, melons, peaches, nectarines and ices.”—Fanny Burney.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

 INTRODUCTION

xxi

such a friend before” he wrote to Mrs Thrale on 9 April 1781; and again, two days later: “I feel myself like a man beginning a new course of life. I had interwoven myself with my dear friend.”

The bitterest critic of Johnson cannot ascribe such feelings as these to mere cupboard-love. Apart from all the Streatham comforts, Johnson, for reasons which it is not wholly easy to discern, loved the man Henry Thrale for himself. Even if, after his death, his widow had given no particle of offence, Streatham could never have been the same to Johnson again¹. Thrale’s death closed an epoch.

For some time Johnson was busy as executor. He was dealing, in the words of Lord Lucan’s famous story, quoted by Boswell, not with a parcel of boilers and vats, but with “the potentiality of growing rich beyond the dreams of avarice.”

If an angel from heaven had told me twenty years ago (wrote Mrs Thrale) that the man I knew by the name of *Dictionary Johnson* should one day become partner with me in a great trade, and that we should jointly or separately sign notes, drafts &c. for three or four thousand pounds of a morning, how unlikely it would have seemed ever to happen.... Johnson, however, who desires above all other good the accumulation of new ideas, is but too happy with his present employment....

Johnson was indeed the only one of the executors who was unwilling to sell the brewery, but Mrs

¹ “I passed the summer at Streatham, but there was no Thrale.” Johnson to Langton, 20 March 1782.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Thrale was overjoyed when “God Almighty sent a knot of rich Quakers” who bought the whole business for £135,000. She had never been wholly free from resentment against her commercial connection, and so she wrote: “I will go to church, give God thanks, receive the Sacrament and forget the frauds, follies, and inconveniences of a commercial life.”

For some time Johnson appears still to have regarded Streatham as his home. Early in June he made a little tour with Boswell to Squire Dilly’s in Bedfordshire, but he spent the summer at Streatham¹, and when he set out on his journey to Oxford, Birmingham, Lichfield and Ashbourne in October, he declared that he hardly knew the motives of his journey.

In the early part of 1782 Johnson was “much out of order” and told Malone that for many weeks he had gone out only in a coach to Mrs Thrale’s², where he could “use all the freedom that sickness requires.”

In April he wrote, with obvious exaggeration, to Mrs Thrale: “I have been very much out of order since you sent me away; but why should I tell you, who do not care, nor desire to know?...”

At the beginning of June, however, he was suffi-

¹ On 9 August at 3 p.m. he retired to the summer-house “to plan a life of greater diligence.” *Life*, iv, 135.

² “Such a place to visit nobody ever had.”—Johnson to Mrs Thrale, 16 February 1782.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

 INTRODUCTION

xxiii

ciently recovered to dine on skate, pudding, goose, and Streatham asparagus; and shortly afterwards he prepared to go to Oxford. On 9 July Boswell wrote to Mrs Thrale in high spirits:

My dear Madam, from the day that I first had the pleasure to meet you, when I jump't into your coach, not I hope from impudence, but from that agreeable kind of attraction which makes one forget ceremony, I have invariably thought of you with admiration and gratitude. Were I to make out a chronological account of all the happy hours which I owe to you, I should appear under great debt, and debt of a peculiar nature, for a generous mind cannot be discharged of it by the creditor.

This is in the true Boswellian vein of gallantry and gusto. The purpose of the letter appears in the next paragraph:

May I presume still more upon your kindness, and beg that you may write to me at more length? I do not mean to put you to a great deal of trouble; but you write so easily that you might by a small expence of time give me much pleasure. Anecdotes of our literary or gay freinds, but particularly of our illustrious Imlac, would delight me¹.

Mrs Thrale was still an important authority for *Johnsoniana*. A phrase in Johnson's letter to Boswell of 24 August 1782 is also worthy of note: "If you desire to meet me at Ashbourne, I believe I can come thither; if you had rather come to London, I can stay at Streatham...."

¹ *Letters of James Boswell* (ed. Tinker), II, 313. This letter was first printed, though not quite accurately, in Broadley's *Doctor Johnson and Mrs Thrale*, p. 143.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

This, as Hayward points out, was two days after Mrs Thrale had decided, according to the narrative in *Thraliana*, to give up the Streatham house. Johnson had thought well of the project and had wished her to put it into early execution. On 6 October he recited the famous prayer:

Almighty God, Father of all mercy, help me, by thy grace, that I may with humble and sincere thankfulness remember the comforts and conveniences which I have enjoyed at this place, and that I may resign them with holy submission....

There is sadness here, but, surely, no bitterness. Mrs Thrale, indeed, affected disappointment at Johnson's cool acceptance of the altered state of things. In a childish outburst she declared:

I begin to see...that Johnson's connection with me is merely an interested one; he *loved* Mr Thrale, I believe, but only wished to find in me a careful nurse and humble friend for his sick and his lounging hours....

However, instead of breaking away, Johnson accompanied Mrs Thrale to Brighton and stayed with her six weeks. Of this visit Fanny Burney gives a fairly full, and rather gloomy, account. Johnson was not, according to her, a *persona grata* amongst Mrs Thrale's Brighton friends. He went once to a ball, to avoid the greater evil of solitude, but was continually excepted from invitations, "either from too much respect or too much fear." Whether or no Mrs Thrale was herself responsible

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

 INTRODUCTION

xxv

for the Doctor's black humour, Miss Burney makes it clear that Johnson was well-nigh unapproachable¹.

On his return to London, he recovered something of his sociability and Miss Burney found him "environed with listeners" at Miss Monckton's assembly on 8 December. About Christmas-time he was ill: "You can hardly think," he wrote to Mrs Thrale on 20 December, "how bad I have been while you were in all your altitudes, at the Opera, and all the fine places, and thinking little of me....I hope however to be with you in a short time...."

In March 1783 Boswell was "glad to find him at Mrs Thrale's house in Argyll St, appearances of friendship between them being still kept up." That there was still a little more than an 'appearance' of friendship is shown by Johnson's letters written to Bath, whither Mrs Thrale had gone in April:

Your last letter was very pleasing; it expressed kindness to me, and some degree of placid acquiescence in your present mode of life, which is, I think, the best which is at present within your reach (13 *June*).

Johnson, it is true, is querulous—he had a paralytic stroke about this time—and uneasy about the future. He hints that Mrs Thrale will pass over his letter of 19 June "with the careless glance of frigid indifference":

You see I yet turn to you with my complaints as a settled and unalienable friend; do not, do not drive me

¹ *Diary* (ed. 1891), I, 459.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

from you, for I have not deserved either neglect or hatred... I am almost ashamed of this querulous letter, but now it is written, let it go.

Had Johnson the specific fear of the Piozzi marriage in his mind when he wrote of being driven away from his old friend? Certainly, he had not been “called in to counsel on matters of the heart¹,” and in June 1783 matters of the heart occupied a large place in Mrs Thrale’s life. Early in the year she had, at the instance of her daughters and of Miss Burney, sent Piozzi away; by June she was sincerely regretting the sacrifice.

On hearing of Johnson’s stroke, she offered to come up from Bath. “Your offer, dear Madam, of coming to me,” wrote Johnson in reply, “is charmingly kind; but I will lay it up for future use.” In a letter of 13 November his tone is still more tender:

Since you have written to me with the attention and tenderness of ancient time, your letters give me a great part of the pleasure which a life of solitude admits.

Miss Burney visited Johnson about a week later and found him “more instructive, entertaining, good-humoured, and exquisitely fertile, than ever².”

¹ Hayward, 1, 197.

² *Diary*, 1, 542. The often-quoted account, given in the *Memoirs of Dr Burney* (II, 360 ff., ed. 1832), of the interview at which Johnson, after hoarsely ejaculating: “Piozzi!” became speechless with indignation, is obviously a much less trustworthy authority than the *Diary*. No specific date is given to the interview in the *Memoirs*, but the context fixes it between 19 November and 30 December. It is hard to reconcile the story with Johnson’s letters belonging to this period.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

 INTRODUCTION

xxvii

The letters written by Johnson to Mrs Thrale in the spring of 1784 abound in medical details, but on 21 April he was able to send intelligence (which he hoped Mrs Thrale would not receive “without some degree of pleasure”) that after a confinement of 129 days he had returned thanks to God in St Clement’s Church for his recovery. His friends made haste to welcome him:

Now I am broken loose (he wrote on 13 May) my friends seem willing enough to see me. On Monday I dined with Paradise; Tuesday, Hoole; Wednesday, Dr Taylor; to-day, with Jodrel; Friday, Mrs Garrick; Saturday, Dr Brocklesby; next Monday, Dilly.

Meanwhile Mrs Thrale had sent for Piozzi¹, and a circular letter announcing her decision was sent to Johnson and the other guardians on 30 June.

To Johnson Mrs Thrale sent a covering letter in which she begged pardon for concealing the connexion with Piozzi.

Indeed, my dear Sir, (she wrote,) it was concealed only to save us both needless pain; I could not have borne to reject that counsel it would have killed me to take, and I only tell it you now because all is irrevocably settled, and out of your power to prevent. I will say, however, that the dread of your disapprobation has given me some anxious moments....

Johnson’s reply was written in sorrowful anger:
 If I interpret your letter right, you are ignominiously

¹ Her daughter Sophia is said to have realised in November 1783 that her mother’s love for Piozzi was incurable and the daughters finally relented in May 1784 (Hayward, 1, 219, 221).

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
Hesther Lynch Piozzi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xxviii

INTRODUCTION

married....If you have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your fame and your country, may your folly do no further mischief....

This was written on 2 July. Two days later Mrs Piozzi wrote a spirited defence both of herself and of her second husband:

Never did I oppose your will, or control your wish; nor can your unmerited severity itself lessen my regard; but till you have changed your opinion of Mr Piozzi, let us converse no more. God bless you.

Evidently this letter made the right appeal both to Johnson's sense of justice and to his sense of gratitude. Common sense told him that it was no business of his to interfere and that, even if it were, the time for interference had gone by; his heart told him that, whatever happened, he could neither forget, nor repay, the happiness which the Thrales had given him. So, in his last letter, the bitterness of resentment gave place to "one sigh more of tenderness, perhaps useless, but at least sincere."

It has seemed worth while to trace this outline of the relations between Johnson and Mrs Thrale from the death of Thrale to the announcement of the Piozzi marriage, in order to do some measure of justice to both sides.

Macaulay's wild account of Mrs Thrale's "degrading passion" and of Johnson "leaving for ever that beloved home [Streatham] for the gloomy and desolate house behind Fleet Street, where the few and evil days which still remained to him were to

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

 INTRODUCTION

xxix

run out¹” has long been discredited. That Mrs Thrale wished to relax some of the ties which had bound Johnson to her household is clear enough. Thrale’s death was, as she quickly realised, a greater blow to Johnson than to herself. She could still amuse and entertain Johnson, but she could not (as her husband, in some mysterious way, had done) command his respect. “There is,” in Hayward’s rather pompous phrasing, “a very great difference, when arrangements are to be made for the domestication of a male visitor, between a family with a male head, and one consisting exclusively of females.”

Furthermore, though she could still discuss her business or her children with Johnson, she did not dare to broach the subject which really filled her mind. It is a poor compliment to be trusted with every confidence except the most important, and the final revelation of *l’affaire Piozzi* was to Johnson both a shock and a humiliation.

Probably Mrs Thrale knew her own business best when she wrote to Johnson on 30 June 1784 that the concealment of her designs was due to a desire to save needless pain on both sides; but it is just conceivable that, had Johnson been made sole confidant, he might have defended Piozzi against the world.

Sir (we can hear him say to Boswell), never accustom your mind to mingle headlong passion with sincere devotion. Here is a lady whose name has been shamelessly

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on Samuel Johnson.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69915-1 - Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson
 Hesther Lynch Piozzi
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xxx

INTRODUCTION

bandied about in the public prints by every scribbler accustomed to lie. To all such slanderers she has replied by conferring her affections upon an Italian gentleman of refined manners and elegant attainments. Sir, when you can earn as much by your pleading as Signor Piozzi by his playing, I shall be very ready to recommend you as a suitor.

The conjecture may seem fantastic, but did not Boswell, by masterly diplomacy, win Johnson to the side of John Wilkes?

From Johnson's point of view, Piozzi's nationality and profession¹ were both unfortunate; had he been an Englishman and, say, a schoolmaster, Johnson might have been his stoutest champion.

Perhaps the most comforting fact in the whole dreary controversy is that neither Johnson nor Mrs Piozzi ultimately bore malice. That Johnson meant what he wrote when, on first receiving the news of the marriage, he declaimed against Mrs Thrale's abandonment of her children and her religion need not be denied; but the truest note was struck when, less than a week later, he wrote:

I wish that God may grant you every blessing, that you may be happy in this world for its short continuance, and eternally happy in a better state; and whatever I can contribute to your happiness I am very ready to repay, for that kindness which soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched.

That, after all, was Johnson's final verdict upon Mrs Thrale, and it may suffice for us.

¹ "And pray, Sir, *who is Bach?* Is he a piper?"—Fanny Burney, *Early Diary*, II, 156.