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“The Future Arrives Late”: Queering the Ladies of Llangollen

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the Australian National University

June 2007

I declare that this thesis is my own original work, and that all sources are cited fully.

(- 15/6/01

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Abstract

“The Future Arrives Late”: Queering the Ladies of Llangollen

Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby are central figures within the historiography of female same-sex desire. Butler and Ponsonby eloped together from Ireland in 1778 and retired to the North Welsh village of Llangollen. Transforming a small cottage into an elaborately-improved Gothic ‘mansion,’ they shared a home until Butler’s death in 1829. My thesis examines the figuration of Butler and Ponsonby’s cultural project from the eighteenth- to the twentieth-centuries, exploring both their own self-fashioning and how they were represented. Drawing on archival manuscripts, some of which have been unexamined by previous scholarship, literary texts, and material culture, the project traces the literary, material and sociable practices through which Butler and Ponsonby transformed themselves from sexually suspect Irish exiles to virtuous Welsh indigenes. It describes how their performative assertion of both a substantive public image and a zone of opacity rendered their relationship a cipher upon which a protean array of cultural meanings have been projected, allowing them to be figured as romantic friends, bluestocking scholars, prototypical lesbians, Romantic domestic archetypes, and feminist modernists. Rejecting attempts to locate them within a single, historically-legitimated subject position, the project characterizes their definitional resistance as central to their enduring fascination, their performative self-fashioning and figurative plasticity marking them as quintessentially queer.

Butler and Ponsonby’s foundational status within the historiography of female same-sex desire has been subject to limited critical reflection. Redressing this omission, my thesis contextualizes their figuration as emblems of the romantic friendship paradigm and traces their alternative depiction as a gender-differentiated masculine-feminine pair. The project interprets their transformation of their cottage as central to their efforts to dispel rumors of their sexual intimacy, allowing them to mask the anomalous nature of their retirement through the material assertion of landed Welsh gentility. Drawing upon William Cowper’s 1785 *The Task*, it locates Butler and Ponsonby within eighteenth-century discourses of bluestocking feminism, illuminating the historical context of their earliest reception and the broader significance of sociably-integrated retirement to Bluestocking culture. The project describes the citation of their enduring same-sex domesticity as a relational ideal in Anna Seward’s 1796 “Llangollen Vale,” the poetry of William Wordsworth and the letters and life-writings of Lord Byron and Anne Lister. In so doing, it establishes Butler and Ponsonby’s central place within Romantic cultural history and the sociable and performative nature of Romantic era self-fashioning. The project’s final section demonstrates Butler and Ponsonby’s centrality to twentieth-century queer representations with reference to Mary Louisa Gordon’s 1936 novel *Chase of the Wild Goose*, in which Butler and Ponsonby are figured as the proleptic embodiments of queer modernity. Gordon’s portrayal of Butler and Ponsonby as ghostly revenants whose lives engender their self-appointed “spiritual descendents” thus offers a fitting figure for the enduring significance of their cultural project, their performative self-fashioning enabling both their own queer narrative and those of a protean array of successors.

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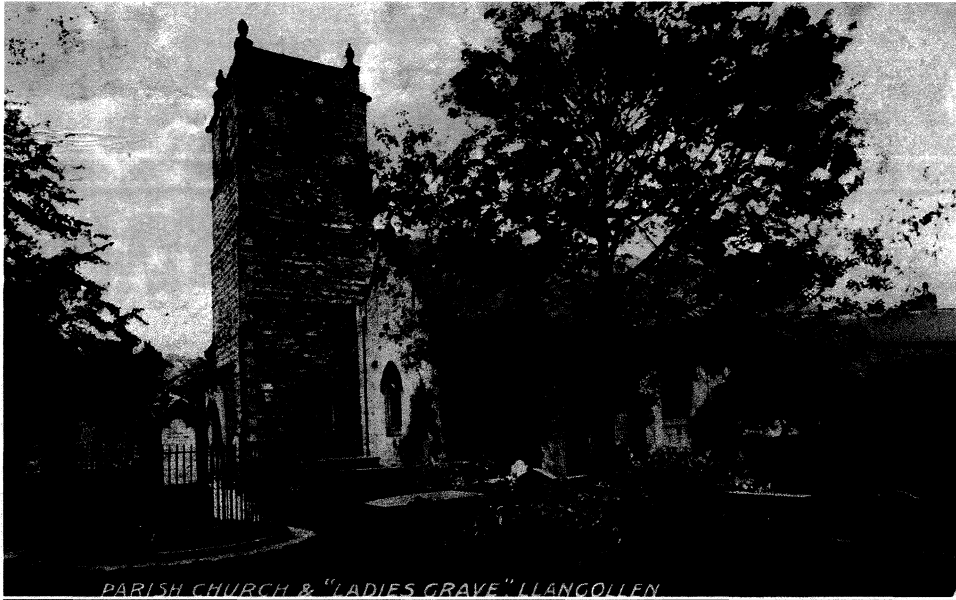
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Introduction

Casting Butler and Ponsonby: Before ‘the Ladies of Llangollen’



Postcard depicting the Ladies' triangular tombstone, c.1930

The churchyard of St. Collen's Church, Llangollen, is dominated by a fenced, three-sided Gothic monument, in which Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby are interred with their housemaid of thirty-one years, Mary Caryll. This tombstone stands with their elaborately improved Gothic cottage, *Plâs newydd*, as a physical testament to the enduring domesticity established in the years following Butler and Ponsonby's 1778 elopement from Ireland to North Wales. This apparently straightforward object, bearing the conventional pieties of an early nineteenth-century gravestone, uncannily thematizes many of the concerns of the present project. As an inscribed material object, erected in a carefully staged public performance, the tombstone attests to the textual, material and

performative practices through which Butler and Ponsonby crafted their public personas throughout their lives and beyond. As this thesis explores, Butler and Ponsonby's decision to settle in Wales was influenced by the region's prominence within the discourses of the picturesque into which they were later incorporated. In order to ameliorate the stigma of their status as unmarried and sexually-suspect exiles, they established a place within the networks of the local Welsh gentry through carefully orchestrated sociable and epistolary practices. These included cladding their cottage in Welsh oak that recalled the timber that marked the class and wealth of local landowners. Their establishment of a carefully selected and displayed private library was similarly strategic, locating them within the literary and sociable networks linking local landed estates, and distancing themselves from the social and sexual mobility associated with public circulating libraries. They also cultivated friendships with prominent literary, cultural and political figures of late eighteenth-century Britain including Anna Seward, Edmund Burke, Hester Thrale Piozzi, and William Wordsworth, thereby ensuring that accounts of their inscrutable intimacy circulated widely in print and epistolary form.

Butler and Ponsonby's defiant assertions of their geographical and class-bound social fixity – of their very identity *as* 'the Ladies of Llangollen' – protected their Welsh ménage by distancing them from the putatively metropolitan vice of sapphism. Throughout their fifty-one year retirement, Butler and Ponsonby were unable to escape persistent insinuations that their relationship was sexual in nature, manifest in newspaper reportage, travel writings, epistolary accounts and life-writings. Their sociable and material assertions of landed Welsh gentility nonetheless allowed them to deflect the

overt assertions of such suspicions that were levelled at contemporaries including the rakish Yorkshire heiress, Anne Lister (1791-1840), and prominent sculptor and Whig socialite, Anne Damer (1749-1828). As the Ladies were transformed over the course of their retirement into central, and increasingly eccentric, features of the Welsh cultural landscape, they also came to embody the productive slippage between fame and notoriety, rendering their corporate identity a form of the commodified cultural production that Clara Tuite terms “scandalous celebrity.”¹

Butler and Ponsonby’s elaborate tombstone not only thematizes the material and sociable practices through which they maintained their Welsh ménage, but the performative practices that ensured their cultural afterlives. Their assertion of social fixity, class status and sexual virtue epitomizes the “audience-oriented privacy” that Jürgen Habermas dates as emerging in the early eighteenth-century, in which forms of intimacy are elaborated for public consumption.² In light of Judith Butler’s influential theory of performativity, these acts may be seen to incorporate both agentive acts of self-stylization, and the compulsory repetition of norms through which subjectivity is instantiated.³ The material qualities of Butler and Ponsonby’s memorial – an obdurate surface upon which particular meanings have been inscribed – reflect the determined nature of their assertions of virtuous, landed gentility, as it does their Romantic preoccupation with the production of their own posterity.⁴ The plastic possibilities of the

¹ Clara Tuite, “Tainted Love and Romantic Literary Celebrity,” *ELH* 74 (2007): 59-88. 78.

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1989) 51.

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 95.

⁴ As Andrew Bennett describes, Romanticism describes a mode of literary production in which the poet “writes so that his identity, transformed and transliterated, disseminated in the endless act of reading, will

stone mason's art further anticipate the Ladies' historiographic status as the emblems of a frequently disparate range of desires and identities, the lush proliferation of such possibilities enabled by the ontological hollowness of their purportedly originary personas. The performatively-constituted figure of the "real" Ladies of Llangollen can be described as a form of cipher-like space upon which Butler and Ponsonby were only the first to project a protean array of cultural meanings. This project explores the way in which the impossibility of reducing Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project to a single, stable signification constitutes their 'queerness,' or their productive resistance to identitarian containment that is imbricated within, yet not reducible to, their same-sex attachment. While their ceaseless sociability offers an unlikely corollary to Greta Garbo's fabled reclusiveness (itself a paradigmatically queer performance), this project thus explores the way in which their performative self-fashioning constitutes a penumbra of possibility, upon which a complex and contradictory array of meanings have been projected from the eighteenth- to the twentieth-centuries.

While rarely subject to sustained analysis, Butler and Ponsonby feature centrally in accounts of same-sex desire in the long eighteenth-century. In recent scholarship, the corporate entity 'the Ladies of Llangollen' operates as convenient shorthand for the presence and putative impunity of female same-sex desire throughout this period. In his 2000 Blake and Homosexuality, for example, Christopher Z. Hobson argues that female same-sex intimacy was a cultural commonplace within eighteenth-century Britain, citing Butler and Ponsonby's celebrated Welsh ménage alongside the scenes of "foolery from

survive. [...] Romanticism might itself be described in terms of a certain value accorded the theory and practice of writing for posterity." (Andrew Bennett, Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 2.)

woman to woman” depicted in John Cleland’s 1749 Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure.⁵ Fiona MacCarthy’s 2002 biography, Byron: Life and Legend, similarly employs the Ladies as exemplars of Romantic sapphism, suggesting that the pageboy costume in which Lady Caroline Lamb called upon Lord Byron may have reflected the ‘lesbian tendency’ she shared with her Bessborough cousin, Sarah Ponsonby.⁶ These texts employ Butler and Ponsonby as convenient shorthand for female same-sex desire. The familiarity upon which they rely, however, derives paradoxically from their depiction as chaste romantic friends in Elizabeth Mavor’s 1971 biography The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship;⁷ and Lillian Faderman’s 1981 Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present.⁸ The romantic friendship model is also invoked in the opening lines of Eva Mary (G.H.) Bell’s 1930 The Hamwood Papers of the Ladies of Llangollen and Caroline Hamilton, a text that crucially underpins much twentieth-century interest in the Ladies.⁹ Bell was a novelist, travel writer, and educator, who came into possession of the Ladies’ papers through her cousin and brother-in-law, Charles Hamilton, the great-grandson of Ponsonby’s niece, Caroline Hamilton.¹⁰ The volume, priced at one guinea, included a

⁵ John Cleland, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, ed. Peter Sabor (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 152.

⁶ Fiona MacCarthy, Byron: Life and Legend (London: John Murray, 2002) 170.

⁷ Elizabeth Mavor, The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973).

⁸ Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981).

⁹ G.H. Bell, ed., The Hamwood Papers of the Ladies of Llangollen and Caroline Hamilton (London: MacMillan, 1930).

¹⁰ Eva Mary Bell *née* Hamilton (OBE), d. 1949, was the daughter of Robert Graigie Hamilton and the widow of Lt-Col George Henry Bell (d. 1916). She lived for thirteen years in India, where she studied the women of the ‘martial classes,’ a pseudo-ethnographic term employed by the British to describe the supposedly warlike inhabitants of North West India. Under the pen-name ‘John Travers,’ Bell published several novels in the first decades of the twentieth-century set in British India (Sahib Log (1910); The Mortimers; Safe Conduct; The Foreigner), as well as a teaching textbook for use in Indian schools, accounts of Indian life, and The Hamwood Papers. In 1949, she lived as a widow in Hampton Court as

biographical account of Butler and Ponsonby's initial elopement, letters from Ponsonby's guardians, extracts from Butler's journal, and Hamilton's nineteenth-century diary. Bell declares, "Prince Puckler Muskau termed Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby the 'most celebrated virgins in Europe'. And a hundred fifty years later the question, 'why celebrated?' is not to be answered with any glib certainty."¹¹ Bell offers an answer to her own rhetorical puzzle, suggesting that Butler and Ponsonby offer hermeneutic access to an otherwise alien past: "Here is the riddle of personality, the mystery of the spirit of an age other than our own."¹² Bell figures the Ladies as bringing disparate eras into proximity. She thus anticipates my account of their trans-temporality, or the way in which they move across temporal designations without erasing them. Her language of ambiguity and uncertainty also gestures towards the conceptual elusiveness that I identify as emanating from the Ladies themselves. While the hypostatized entity 'the Ladies of Llangollen' masquerades as immediately and unproblematically legible, its incoherent operations are more accurately identified with the critical modality described as *queer* – an oppositional relationship to heteronormativity that may include same-sex object choice, but is nonetheless irreducible to a single meaning or identity position.¹³ Upon such a reading, the zone of opacity or undecidability that surrounds their relationship may be seen to constitute, rather than confound, their scholarly significance, their performative self-fashioning initiating an abundant array of historical iterations.

"grace and favour" tenant, a privilege extended by the Crown to those who had offered distinguished public service to Great Britain. See Sarah E. Parker, Grace and Favour: A Handbook of Who Lived Where in Hampton Court Palace 1750 to 1850 (Surrey: Historic Royal Palaces, 2005) 134.

¹¹ Bell, ed., Hamwood 1.

¹² Bell, ed., Hamwood 1.

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," Tendencies (Durham: Duke UP, 1993): 1-22. 8.

Butler and Ponsonby's cultural mobility is revealed by their invocation in contexts ranging from nineteenth-century American newspaper accounts of "lesbian love-murderers" to 1930s British advertisements for domestic tourism endorsed by the Shell Oil Company.¹⁴ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Ladies were hailed as the historical antecedents of members of both the American lesbian organisation the Daughters of Bilitis, and the international genealogical association, The Butler Society.¹⁵ In 1982, Karen M. Keener identified them amongst the closeted lesbians of eras past, describing them as "referring to one another in terms usually reserved for sexual endearment but insist[ing] that their mutual affection was Platonic."¹⁶ By May 2004, however, they were being celebrated in the Australian lesbian magazine, LOTL, as "two remarkable women who openly pioneered single sex relationships" alongside articles on lesbian parenting, Leather Pride Week, and the importance of physical activities for the over-fifties.¹⁷ In his 2004 monograph, Strangers: Same Sex Love in the Nineteenth Century, Graham Robb cites Butler and Ponsonby to evidence his assertion that same-sex relationships were neither excoriated nor publicly avowed in nineteenth-century Europe, leading a reviewer in Britain's Telegraph to observe, "The Ladies of Llangollen were not campaigning for Gay Pride - indeed, they threatened to sue a newspaper which insinuated that they lived as husband and wife."¹⁸

¹⁴ Lisa Duggan, Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000) 9-11.; Anon., Drive Britain (Shell Oil); Visual Display, Plas newydd, Denbighshire County Council, Llangollen.

¹⁵ Marian Evans, "The Ladies of Llangollen," The Ladder 7-8. May (1963): 4-7.; Sara Pugh Jones, "Plas Newydd and the Ladies of Llangollen," Journal of the Butler Society 1 (1977): 530-33.

¹⁶ Karen M. Keener, "Out of the Archives and into the Academy: Opportunities for Research and Publication in Lesbian Literature," College English 44.3 (1982): 301-13. 304.

¹⁷ Anon., "Lesbian Legends," LOTL 15:5.173 (2004): 9. 9.

¹⁸ Noel Malcolm, "The Gay Past Was a Bit Sad," Telegraph 10 Nov. 2003.

The enduringly protean nature of Butler and Ponsonby's public personas is demonstrated by the range of critical responses to the 1930 publication of The Hamwood Papers. Bell's volume was reviewed widely in newspapers and periodicals throughout the British Commonwealth, its high textual profile contributing to the growth of interest in Butler and Ponsonby in the first decades of the twentieth century. In its review of the volume, the English News Chronicle described the Ladies as having "Spent fifty years in Llangollen reading, knitting, gardening, visiting, and, in fact, leading as humdrum an existence as if they had been heroines of Jane Austen – with no Wickhams or Darcys to distract them," thereby erasing the engagement with the politicized discourses of sensibility, domesticity and female sexuality apparent throughout both the Ladies' lives and Austen's fiction.¹⁹ In sharp contrast, the Leeds Mercury mused, "[Butler and Ponsonby] were given a pension by the British Government. Why? What services, secret or other, did they render to this country?"²⁰ While not going as far as to suggest that the Ladies had been employed in espionage, the Church of England Newspaper was not impervious to their charms, remarking, "after a century and a half, this correspondence presents them so intimately to us that we feel almost as if we would like to take a ticket and see them in their cottage there."²¹ The sculptural metaphors suggested by the St. Collen's tomb thus convey the plasticity of Butler and Ponsonby's cultural presence, anticipating their identification as models of strikingly disparate forms of intimacy, identity and activism, including romantic friends, sapphists, radical suffragettes,

¹⁹ E.E. Kellet, "Review of the Hamwood Papers," The News Chronicle 20 Nov. 1930: (clipping located NLW ex 1364).

²⁰ Anon., "Review of the Hamwood Papers," Leeds Mercury 23 Nov. 1930: (clipping located NLW ex1364).

²¹ Anon., "Review of the Hamwood Papers," Church of England Newspaper 26 Sept. 1930: (clipping located NLW ex1364).

repressed bourgeoisie, butch-femme pioneers, English gardeners, Irish aristocrats, Welsh indigenes and globalized lesbian icons. It is this plasticity that leads me to term them queer, reframing the undecidability that shrouds the precise content of their legacy as constituting their continuing fascination, rather than their resistance to productive critical consideration. No definitive set of empirical facts may be fully extricated from such saturation of signification. Rejecting this Sisyphean endeavour, this project instead offers a literary and cultural history of representations of Butler and Ponsonby from the late eighteenth-century to the early twentieth-century, tracing the textual, sociable, and material elements of Butler and Ponsonby's self-fashioning, as well as the patterns of desire, identification, repudiation and mythologization through which they have been variously construed.

The interdisciplinary designation "literary and cultural history" reflects the capacious boundaries of my archive, which incorporates manuscript letters, life-writings, literary texts, newspaper reportage, material culture, sociable practices and historiographic representations. It also reflects the hybrid nature of my analytic method, in which literary works are read as textual traces of historically specific times and spaces, and historical materials are read as figurative representations as well as documentary sources. This methodology is particularly useful in relation to Butler and Ponsonby, whose textual output is as much constituted by sociable and material practices as it is by more traditionally defined literary works. My methodology thereby draws upon the work of scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich, who describes the contents of the queer archive as incorporating traditionally devalued texts such as material culture and ephemera, as well

as the affective investments manifest by the production and reception of such collections.²² It also draws upon the account of sociability as a form of cultural production, rather than contextual backdrop, outlined by Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, thereby challenging both the text-based definition of the Romantic public sphere, and the putative ‘authenticity’ of the solitary (and implicitly male) Romantic self.²³ In commencing my discussion at the end of Butler and Ponsonby’s life, I seek to resist the biographical framework within which their story has been traditionally situated. While this project is crucially informed by the expansion and reappraisal of Butler and Ponsonby’s vast archive, I do not aim to offer a new or revised biography of the Ladies. Indeed, I am less interested in offering alternative readings or an augmented biography than I am in exploring the performative practices that have rendered their relationship a peculiarly charged site on which a protean array of cultural meanings, such as the ones already sketched here, have been projected. This is not to suggest that one may easily escape engaging with their archival legacy or biographical representations, a series of engagements with which animate key parts of the ensuing work. In so doing, however, I seek to read such representations as elements of Butler and Ponsonby’s continuing cultural project, rather than competing sources of biographical data from which a definitive life story may be distilled.

My first chapter, “‘Sketched by Many Hands’: Narrating Butler and Ponsonby”, offers a prehistory of the Ladies, focussing on the biographical methodology through which they have been considered for over thirty-five years. Having offered an overview

²² Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003) 7.

²³ Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, “Introducing Romantic Sociability,” *Romantic Sociability*, eds. Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 1-23. 4.

of their archive and its history, I turn to Elizabeth Mavor's 1971 biography, The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship. Mavor's biography serves as a principal source for most scholarly examinations of the Ladies, and has played a central role in popularizing their narrative throughout the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Examining its operation as a textual artefact, I situate Mavor's depiction of the Ladies within the cultural context of the 1970s, at which time both Ireland and issues of gender were culturally prominent. I trace the textual strategies through which it constitutes its culturally literate audience, and its role in disseminating the romantic friendship thesis to which Butler and Ponsonby remain emphatically tied. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of 'unknowing,' I describe its deployment of strategically asserted forms of sexual innocence, allowing it to cultivate its prurient fascination with the same 'lesbian' possibilities it ostensibly denies.

Chapter two "Engendering the Ladies: Romantic Friendship, Gender Difference and Queer Critical Practice", explores the conceptual frameworks within which the Ladies have been situated from their elopement until to the present day. Offering a genealogy of female same-sex desire, I analyse their function as a historiographic test case, the evidence of their experience cited in support of a widely divergent range of historiographic and political positions. In particular, I trace critical responses to the publication of the diaries of Anne Lister, whose embodied sexual practices have led the Ladies to be figured since the late 1980s as the passé prudes of the long eighteenth-century. Tracing the critical emergence of the romantic friendship thesis, I demonstrate that their figuration as chaste feminine friends elides an equally compelling tradition in

which they are represented as a gender differentiated and sexually transgressive pair. Setting aside attempts to specify their sexual practices, I instead identify their indeterminacy as constitutive of their continuing fascination, their resistance to stable signification revealing them to be quintessentially queer.

My third chapter, “Ladies/of/Llangollen” takes seriously the primacy of place asserted by their designation as ‘the Ladies of Llangollen.’ I examine the manuscript journal in which Ponsonby’s detailed their first Welsh tour, situating their tour within the literary picturesque, and exploring the textual strategies through which Ponsonby asserted their corporate identity. I analyze the way in which eighteenth-century travel narratives present Llangollen Vale as the epitome of the picturesque, eliding the humble town in order to celebrate its surrounding landscape. I suggest that Butler and Ponsonby echoed this same elision in settling a quarter of a mile beyond the village’s eighteenth-century limits. Accordingly, I contend that their presence nonetheless worked to define the village of Llangollen in relation to its romantic periphery, in turn rendering themselves synonymous with this newly resonant name.

Chapter four attends to Butler and Ponsonby’s extensive improvements of their Llangollen home, particularly those undertaken in the wake of a hostile newspaper report that appeared in the General Evening Post in 1790. Turning from the analysis of written to material texts, I read their modification of their built environment as a crucial element of their public self-fashioning. In particular, I contend that their Gothic motifs, oak panels, and extensive private library allowed them to identify with the social and

geographical fixity of the local Welsh gentry, thereby attending to Edmund Burke's advice to "keep yourselves in your own persons, where you are." In so doing, I suggest that they masked their stigmatized status as unmarried and sexually suspect Irish exiles, while their performance of local fixity also served to distance them from the social and sexual mobility of rumoured metropolitan sapphists.

My fifth chapter poses the question of whether Butler and Ponsonby may be considered Bluestockings. Although they did not participate in the metropolitan salons of hostesses including Elizabeth Vesey and Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, accounts of their literary and sociable activities emphasized characteristics closely associated with these cosmopolitan circles. From the 1790s onwards, their social and epistolary networks came to incorporate friendships with second generation Bluestockings including Mrs. Piozzi and Hannah More, while their provincial 'salon' recalled that of Montagu's sister, Sarah Robinson Scott. Citing the model of domestic sociability lauded in William Cowper's The Task (1785), I defend Butler and Ponsonby against disgruntled accounts of their highly sociable 'retirement.' I moreover suggest that their 'retired' fame gestures towards a broader conception of Bluestocking sociability, this queered category incorporating both Montagu's fashionable display and Scott's provincial charity.

In chapter six, "Love, above the reach of time": Butler and Ponsonby and the Performance of Romanticism," I consider the Ladies' place within the Romantic canon. Describing their thematization of the Romantic trope of temporality, I explore the way in which the longevity of their relationship led them to be characterized in the 1820s as

anachronistic eccentrics by Romantic commentators including Sir Walter Scott, Thomas de Quincey and the comic actor Charles Mathews. Rather than merely marking their datedness, I suggest that their ability to appear as caricatures of themselves may be seen to mark the success of their earlier efforts to rehabilitate their compromised reputations. The latter section of the chapter turns to figurations of their relationship in the works of William Wordsworth, Anna Seward, Lord Byron and Anne Lister. Seward's 1796 poem "Llangollen Vale" figures the Ladies as instantiating the enduring domesticity she was unable to share with her foster-sister, Honora Sneyd. Seward's poem textually distinguishes Butler and Ponsonby from the sexualized associations of exile, the metropolis and Catholic 'superstition' by means of a Welsh pastoral masquerade, thus disclosing, by way of a queer analysis, the same threats it seeks to foreclose. Turning to Wordsworth's 1824 sonnet, "To the Lady E.B. and the Hon. Miss P," I examine the way in which Wordsworth's poem recalls Seward's "Llangollen Vale" in both symbolizing and screening the Ladies' relationship, revealing the cottage to be a central prop through which they staged their 'authentic' Romantic selves.²⁴ Butler and Ponsonby's domestic self-fashioning may thus be seen to underpin the Romantic nexus between the construction of domesticity and subjectivity.²⁵ Their relationship to Plâs newydd further emphasizes the material means through which the deep Romantic self was publicly constituted, as domestic spaces came to stand as symbolic instantiations of the 'authentic' Romantic subject.

²⁴ Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1997) 189.

²⁵ Kurt Heinzelman, "The Cult of Domesticity: Dorothy and William Wordsworth at Grasmere," *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988): 52-78. 53.

Moving to twentieth-century figurations of the Ladies, the final chapter of this thesis, “‘The Future Arrives Late’: Butler and Ponsonby and their ‘Spiritual Descendents,’ 1928-37” demonstrates their centrality to forms of articulations of queer modernity throughout the period 1928-37. It traces the anxieties that were attached to female same-sex desire throughout a maelstrom of social changes including the campaign for women’s suffrage, the emergence of the ‘New Woman,’ the dissemination of sexology, and the prominence of texts such as Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness. It then turns to reconfigurations of Butler and Ponsonby’s narrative in Woolf’s 1928 Orlando and Mary Louisa Gordon’s fictional biography Chase of the Wild Goose, published by the Hogarth Press in 1936. Within these texts, Butler and Ponsonby are figured as spectral presences, their trace-like persistence allowing same-sex desire between women to be articulated in the first decades of the twentieth-century. Gordon figures Butler and Ponsonby as having anticipated and enabled the lives of the women Gordon termed their “spiritual descendents,”²⁶ thereby anticipating recent critical calls to queer the heteronormative logic of linear temporality. Depicting Butler and Ponsonby as ghostly revenants who literally reappear in the present day, Gordon further literalizes recent calls to attend to the affective bonds that place historians and their objects of enquiry in emotional contingency, thereby troubling any account of the absolute alterity of the past. Gordon’s portrayal of Butler and Ponsonby as spectral presences whose lives engender a ‘queerer’ future thus offers a fitting figure for the enduring significance of their cultural project, their performative self-fashioning enabling both their own queer narrative, and those of a protean array of successors.

²⁶ Mary Louisa Gordon, Chase of the Wild Goose: The Story of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby, Known as the Ladies of Llangollen (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1936) 17.

Chapter One

“Sketched by many hands”: Narrating Butler and Ponsonby

Biographers and historians have told Butler and Ponsonby's story in a variety of contexts, their twentieth century 'rediscovery' initiated by the 1930 publication of The Hamwood Papers. Several textual memorials to Butler and Ponsonby were produced throughout the nineteenth-century, including Charles Hicklin's 1847 amalgam of various published accounts, The Ladies of Llangollen, as sketched by many hands;¹ the Rev. J. Pritchard's 1887 An Account of the Ladies of Llangollen; and articles in periodicals including Britain's Long Ago (1876)² and the American digest publication, Littell's Living Age (1895).³ Ponsonby's descendent, Arthur Ponsonby, included extracts from Butler's journal in his 1923 English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century, identifying her as a 'minor' eighteenth-century life-writer, a designation belied by the inclusion of her writing alongside that of Byron, Fanny Burney and Samuel Pepys.⁴ The Hamwood Papers was nonetheless the first volume offering substantial extracts from Butler's record of daily life at Plâs newydd. It served as a point of reference and departure for the twentieth-century literary representations of Butler and Ponsonby discussed in my final chapter, which exist as textual traces within Virginia Woolf's 1928 Orlando, are extended by the Ladies' appearance in Colette's 1932 account of the Parisian erotic *demi-monde*, Le pur et l'impur, and reach their

¹ Charles Hicklin, The Ladies of Llangollen, as Sketched by Many Hands, with Notices of Other Objects of Interest in 'That Sweetest of Vales' (Chester: Thomas Catherall, 1847).

² Anon., "The Ladies of Llangollen," Long Ago (1876): 239-40.

³ Anon., "The Ladies of Llangollen: Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby," Littell's Living Age 1895.

⁴ Arthur Ponsonby, English Diaries from the 16th to the 20th Century (London: Methuen, 1923).

imaginative zenith in Mary Louisa Gordon's 1936 'biography' of Butler and Ponsonby, Chase of the Wild Goose.⁵

The Hamwood Papers constituted the first significant publication of Butler and Ponsonby's textual archive. This archive was nonetheless rendered significantly more accessible over the course of the twentieth-century. The most readily available scholarly source of Butler and Ponsonby's papers remains the 1997 microfilm collection, Ladies of Llangollen: letters and journals of Lady Eleanor Butler (1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831) from the National Library of Wales.⁶ This collection, published by Adam Matthew Publications, includes the six volumes of Butler's journal held by the National Library of Wales (1788-91; 1799; 1802; 1807; 1821; and her diary for 1784); Ponsonby's account of the Ladies' first Welsh Tour (A Journey Performed in Wales by Two Fugitive Ladies); five volumes of correspondence; Ponsonby's 1792 Library Catalogue; manuscript poetry by authors including Mary Tighe and William Wordsworth; and accounts including lists of books read and visitors received at Plâs newydd.⁷

⁵ Gordon, Chase.

⁶ Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, Ladies of Llangollen: Letters and Journals of Lady Eleanor Butler (1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831) from the National Library of Wales (Marlborough, Wiltshire: Adam Matthews Publications, 1997).

⁷ Significant holdings of Butler and Ponsonby's letters and papers are located at the National Library of Ireland (including accounts of their initial elopement, correspondence with Hester Thrale Piozzi and Anna Seward, and diaries and commonplace books from 1806 and 1819); the National Library of Wales (including Ponsonby's Account Book 1788-90 and correspondence with the Myddletons of Chirk Castle and the Lloyds of Aston Hall); the Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin (including Ponsonby's correspondence with the Parkers of Oswestry; original watercolours of Plâs newydd, and the legal wills of Butler, Ponsonby, and their housemaid Mary Caryll); the Bodleian Library, Oxford University (correspondence between Butler and Harriet Pigott; Pigott's recollections of the Ladies); and the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester (correspondence with Hester Thrale Piozzi). Individual letters and documents are also held in collections including the Beinecke Collection, Yale University; the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University; the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford; and the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

In spite of this range of material, scholarship on Butler and Ponsonby has been determined over the last three decades by Elizabeth Mavor's 1971 biographical study, The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship.⁸ First published by Michael Joseph, Mavor's biography was reprinted by Penguin in 1973, and promoted in 2001 to the matte-gold covered ranks of Penguin's 'Classic Biography' series, alongside texts such as Lytton Strachey's 1928 Elizabeth and Essex. Born in Glasgow in 1927, Mavor first achieved prominence as a novelist, publishing Summer in the Greenhouse in 1959. In 1964, she produced a biography of the bigamous Duchess of Kingston, The Virgin Mistress: A Study in Survival: The Life of the Duchess of Kingston, describing her interest in cultural history of the long eighteenth-century as arising from her reading of the correspondence of Horace Walpole.⁹ Her continuing interest in this period is further demonstrated by her publication of edited collections of the travel narratives of Fanny Kemble and William Beckford, as well as early nineteenth-century travellers Katherine Wilmot and Maria Graham.¹⁰ Mavor's keen eye for the sexually scandalous is demonstrated by her interest in Beckford and Kingston. In relation to the latter, eighteenth-century scholarship and tabloid rhetoric collide in comments such as: "What had she really been like? Was she the good-time girl, the gold digger that everyone suggested?"¹¹ Mavor's shrewd identification of historical figures likely to incite reader cathexis appears grounded in her own sense of affective investment in her subjects. Of

⁸ Mavor, Ladies.

⁹ Elizabeth Mavor, The Virgin Mistress: A Study in Survival: The Life of the Duchess of Kingston (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964) 12.

¹⁰ Fanny Kemble, Fanny Kemble: The American Journals, ed. Elizabeth Mavor (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980)., William Beckford, The Grand Tour of William Beckford, ed. Elizabeth Mavor (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986)., Katherine Wilmot, The Grand Tours of Katherine Wilmot, ed. Elizabeth Mavor (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1992)., Maria Graham, The Captain's Wife: The South American Journals of Maria Graham, ed. Elizabeth Mavor (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1993).

¹¹ Mavor, Virgin 14.

Kingston she writes: “I must stop looking for her, otherwise I should never lead my own life again. [...] I might even table tap her, and this would not do. I have written this book instead.”¹² This desire to establish a spiritualist connection with her subject echoes Mary Louisa Gordon’s 1936 description of her encounter with a reanimated Butler and Ponsonby, discussed in chapter six.

Mavor’s biography appealed to a wide academic and general audience, her accessible style and vivid historical tableau lent gravitas by her impressive archive, much of which was held privately during the period of her research. Mavor’s text was central to the twentieth-century diffusion of the romantic friendship thesis, which characterized eighteenth-century women’s same-sex relationships as affectively intense, yet sexually chaste. Rejecting “enterprising” efforts to distinguish “between the homo-erotic and the homo-sexual” she declares, “I have nevertheless chosen to portray the relationship between the two women in terms other than Freud’s. I have preferred the terms of romantic friendship (a once flourishing but now lost relationship) as more liberal and inclusive and better suited to the diffuse feminine nature.”¹³ Leaving romantic friendship to be considered in detail in the following chapter, one cannot overstate the extent to which Mavor’s text has been reified as the definitive account of the Ladies’ shared life. The Ladies of Llangollen has been extensively employed by ensuing scholars, including those committed to challenging the chaste underpinnings of its romantic friendship model. Its utility as a biographical source is evidenced by my own employment of it at points of the present study, despite referring to original materials whenever practicable.

¹² Mavor, Virgin 19-20.

¹³ Mavor, Ladies xvii.

Mavor's status as the keeper of Butler and Ponsonby's legacy was reinforced by her authorship of the revised entry on the Ladies in the 2004 edition of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.¹⁴ Indeed, her persistence throughout more than thirty years of scholarship upon Butler and Ponsonby might lead her to be considered a kind of ghostly revenant who has 'table tapped' her way into their Llangollen home.

Mavor's text is distinguished by its evocation of a class-specific and culturally literate readership, its alignment with the conservative values of a "green England"¹⁵ indicated by its prefatory acknowledgment of "All those who so kindly responded to my letter in *Country Life*."¹⁶ Mavor describes Butler and Ponsonby's cultivation of Plâs newydd as a *ferme ornée* as reflecting the style that "which the poet, William Shenstone, had made famous at his farmhouse, the Leasowes."¹⁷ Knowledge of eighteenth-century history is similarly presumed by her introduction of figures such as "General Hervey" via apparently self-evident footnotes: "Brother of Frederick Augustus, 4th Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry."¹⁸ Mavor orients her readers less possessed of such cultural literacy with the grace of a seasoned hostess, glossing a reference to "the heady if inauthentic wine of Ossian" with a discreet note detailing James Macpherson's celebrated forgery.¹⁹ In retelling Butler and Ponsonby's narrative, she thereby offers a Burkean invocation of eighteenth-century Britain as a place warmly familiar to a select class of latter-day descendents, who are both identified and constituted through their reading of her text.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Mavor, Butler, Lady Eleanor (1739-1829), 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/41827>>, 12 Dec. 2005.

¹⁵ Clara Tuite, Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 100.

¹⁶ Mavor, Ladies xix.

¹⁷ Mavor, Ladies 105.

¹⁸ Mavor, Ladies 59.

¹⁹ Mavor, Ladies 40.

The initial popularity of Mavor's biography reflects the complex political and cultural contexts of the early 1970s. While its celebration of a cultivated upper class stood in tension with the race- and class-based coalition movements of the period, Mavor's reclamation of 'lost' women's lives resonated with the project of second-wave feminism. Interest in the eighteenth-century roots of the feminist movement was heightened in this period by Claire Tomalin's 1974 biography The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft.²⁰ Mavor's account of Butler and Ponsonby's same-sex attachment also coincided with the burgeoning of the North American gay and lesbian liberation movement: in June 1969, transgender, lesbian and gay patrons of the West Village Stonewall Bar fought back against police brutality; Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's Lesbian/Woman was published in 1971; and homosexuality was removed from the U.S. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973. Mavor's narrative attracted the attention of gay and lesbian readers with its detailed rendering of "A love affair that triumphantly defied convention",²¹ its *prima facie* denial of the sexual suggestiveness of Butler and Ponsonby's narrative encouraging a range of determinedly contrary readings.

While apparently welcoming a broad readership, Mavor's biography is firmly located in a latter-day gentry milieu. Mavor's class position is asserted by the standards of cultural literary demanded by the text, as it is by the sociable networks indicated by her acknowledgements: "The journal for 1785 is in possession of Lady Eleanor Butler's

²⁰ Claire Tomalin, The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974).

²¹ Mavor, Ladies Back Matter.

kinsman, the Marquis of Ormonde, and I must thank him for his true kindness in entrusting me with that precious possession, and also for his and the late Lady Ormonde's kind hospitality."²² Her commitment to a social order preceding the modern welfare state is also apparent; while acknowledging that Butler and Ponsonby's reliance upon governmental support indicates that "the notion of pensions was not invented by modern radicals," she quotes Lord Hardwicke: "I look upon such pensions as a kind of obligation upon the Crown for the support of ancient noble families, whose peerages continue after their estates are worn out."²³ Notes of wistful elegy and genteel distaste are struck by her description of the former residence of Ponsonby's guardians, Sir William and Lady Betty Fownes: "The Fownes had an elegant property in the most fashionable part of Dublin. The houses in Dominick Street are now slum property: the beautiful fanlights have lost their glass, and in what is reputedly 37 Dominick Street, where the Fownes lived, the drawing-room is divided across by grimy screens to make two rooms for the lodger who now lives there."²⁴ Mavor's text may thus be seen as continuing the process, which reached its zenith in the 1930s, of reclaiming derelict Ascendancy properties such as Dublin's Powyscourt. The melancholic nature of Mavor's evocation of an idealized Irish past was further underscored by the political context of the early 1970s, with 1968 witnessing the re-emergence of political violence in Northern Ireland. Events of the following years, including the 1969 formation of the Provisional IRA and the 1972 civilian massacre of Bloody Sunday inspired interest in the genre of the elegiac

²² Mavor, *Ladies* xviii.

²³ Mavor, *Ladies* 57.

²⁴ Mavor, *Ladies* 20.

Ascendancy memoir.²⁵ Mavor's text echoes this contrasting of an idealized Irish past with a turbulent present, its first page describing Ponsonby's Irish home of Woodstock as having "burned down in the Troubles."²⁶

Central to the popular appeal of Mavor's text is its preoccupation with the same queer possibilities it pointedly disavows. While declaring herself to have "chosen to portray the relationship between the two women" in non-sexual terms, Mavor's narrative remains preoccupied with this *unchosen*, rather than conceptually dismissed, possibility. Her narrative thus embodies the strenuously maintained ignorance that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms "the privilege of unknowing," in which the disavowal of sexual knowledge allows desire to be sated with moral and epistemic impunity.²⁷ Mavor characterizes romantic friendships as encompassing "a dimension of sympathy that would now not be possible outside of an avowedly lesbian connection," declaring that the absence of binary sexual taxonomies rendered such relationships "idealistic" and "blissfully free."²⁸ She thereby presents the political advances with which her text historically coincides as narrowing, rather than expanding, the range of women's sexual and emotional possibilities. Although denouncing the language of sexual orientation as giving rise "to that false Duessa of categorization", Mavor does not shy away from evoking the most stigmatizing of medical taxonomies. Describing, from the vantage point of the 1960s, the ruined site of Ponsonby's former home outside the village of Inistiogue,

²⁵ Examples of this genre include Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court* (London: Longmans, 1964), and David Thomson, *Woodbrook* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1974).

²⁶ Mavor, *Ladies* 1.

²⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Privilege of Unknowing," *Tendencies* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993): 23-51. 38.

²⁸ Mavor, *Ladies* xvii.

she observes, "In July spotted orchids of a freakish inverted variety spring from the crumbling walls of the neglected offices."²⁹ Ponsonby is thus implied to manifest a similar form of enduringly perverse fecundity, her sexual object choice as misdirected as are the symbolically laden blooms.

Mavor makes much of the most overt threat to Butler and Ponsonby's domestic felicity, that is the July 1790 publication of an article describing their relationship as "Extraordinary Female Affection."³⁰ Drawing a chapter title from the "Impossibilities..." Hester Thrale Piozzi declares in 1795 to be "common to suspect [...] whenever two Ladies live too much together",³¹ Mavor devotes a lengthy discussion to such improbable events, her fusion of pious denial and knowing prurience rivalling that of Piozzi herself. It is thus unsurprising that Lisa Duggan describes Butler and Ponsonby as representing "an aristocratic British tradition at the intersection of 'female husbands' and 'romantic friends'", citing Mavor as evidence of this ambivalent positioning.³² As is explored in more detail in chapter four, the General Evening Post article described Butler and Ponsonby's relationship in terms reinforcing the sexual innuendo of the title. Their relationship is characterized as chosen in explicit opposition to heteronormative union: "Miss Butler, who is of the Ormonde family had several offers of marriage, all of which she rejected. Miss Ponsonby, her particular friend and companion, was supposed to be the bar to all matrimonial union..."³³ The Ladies are further figured as perverse parasites on

²⁹ Mavor, Ladies 1.

³⁰ Anon., "Extraordinary Female Affection," General Evening Post July 20-22 1790.

³¹ Hester Lynch Thrale, Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776-1809, ed. Katherine C. Balderston, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942) 2:949.

³² Duggan, Sapphic 265n10.

³³ Anon, qtd. in Mavor, Ladies 73.

the national purse: "In Mr. Secretary Steel's list of Pensions for 1788, there are the names of Elinor [sic] Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, for annuities of fifty pounds each." As the article continues, anticipating the aggrieved tone of tabloid investigative journalism, "We have reason to believe that these are the Ladies of the Vale." The scene closes with the observation, "Two females are their only servants,"³⁴ thereby evoking a tantalizing scene of cross-class sapphic polyamory. Attempting to clarify the context of this account, Mavor describes the separate gender spheres of the eighteenth-century as rendering companionate marriage impossible. Rather, she declares, "what we would now associate solely with a sexual relationship; tenderness, sensibility, shared tastes, coquetry; were then very largely confined to friendships between women."³⁵ She underscores the apparent perils of anachronistic interpretation by the use of strategic quotations: "Miss Talbot is absolutely my passion; I think of her all day, dream of her all night, and one way or another introduce her into every subject I talk of." As Mavor continues, "What time of day is it? 1741. And who is speaking? Is it perhaps some lover of Miss Talbot's? No, it is Miss Carter, twenty-two, a clergyman's daughter, fated to be the learned translator of Epictetus."³⁶ Mavor presumes that such exchanges are governed by the logic of the closet, within which affective openness is presumed to denote asexuality.³⁷ She further invokes the scholarly Anglicanism of the first generation Bluestockings as presumptive proof of their asexuality. She nonetheless underscores the suggestive excesses with which the Ladies' close friend, Anna Seward, dwelt upon the renowned tragedian, Sarah Siddons. As Seward describes her fears of losing her seat in Drury Lane,

³⁴ Anon, qtd. in Mavor, *Ladies* 74.

³⁵ Mavor, *Ladies* 81.

³⁶ Mavor, *Ladies* 81.

³⁷ Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003) 4.

“Oh, even when the siren spoke with all her graces and melting tones, I wished to have the speech over, so ardently did I long for the moment when possession of the night might become secure.” As Mavor continues, “The sexual imagery is unconscious, but it is unmistakable.”³⁸

Mavor’s psychoanalytic vocabulary figures her as possessing interpretative insight unavailable to her eighteenth-century subjects, through which the language of sensibility may be seen as an unmistakably sexual ruse. She canvasses the hermeneutic possibilities suggested by Butler and Ponsonby’s archive, reflecting on whether Butler’s detailed record of her physical ailments and Ponsonby’s devoted care might be read “as the only permissible expression of a yet more intimate relationship; or as the unconscious expression of the desire for such a relationship.”³⁹ In nevertheless choosing to characterize their intimacy as a romantic friendship, Mavor disavows the epistemic implications of her own much-vaunted insights. By her own admission, she does not lack the knowledge with which to conceive of Butler and Ponsonby’s bond as “yet more intimate.” This does not prevent her from projecting the burden of such suppositions onto both the Ladies and their latter day readers, who “after reading the extracts from the journals [...] will know as much as I.”⁴⁰ Paying lip-service to a chaste model she actively undermines, Mavor demonstrates the profound utility of unknowing, through which her narrative is animated by the same sexual fascination she ostensibly seeks to dispel. As she observes with satisfaction, “But for all that, the unhappy innuendo made by the

³⁸ Mavor, *Ladies* 88.

³⁹ Mavor, *Ladies* 98.

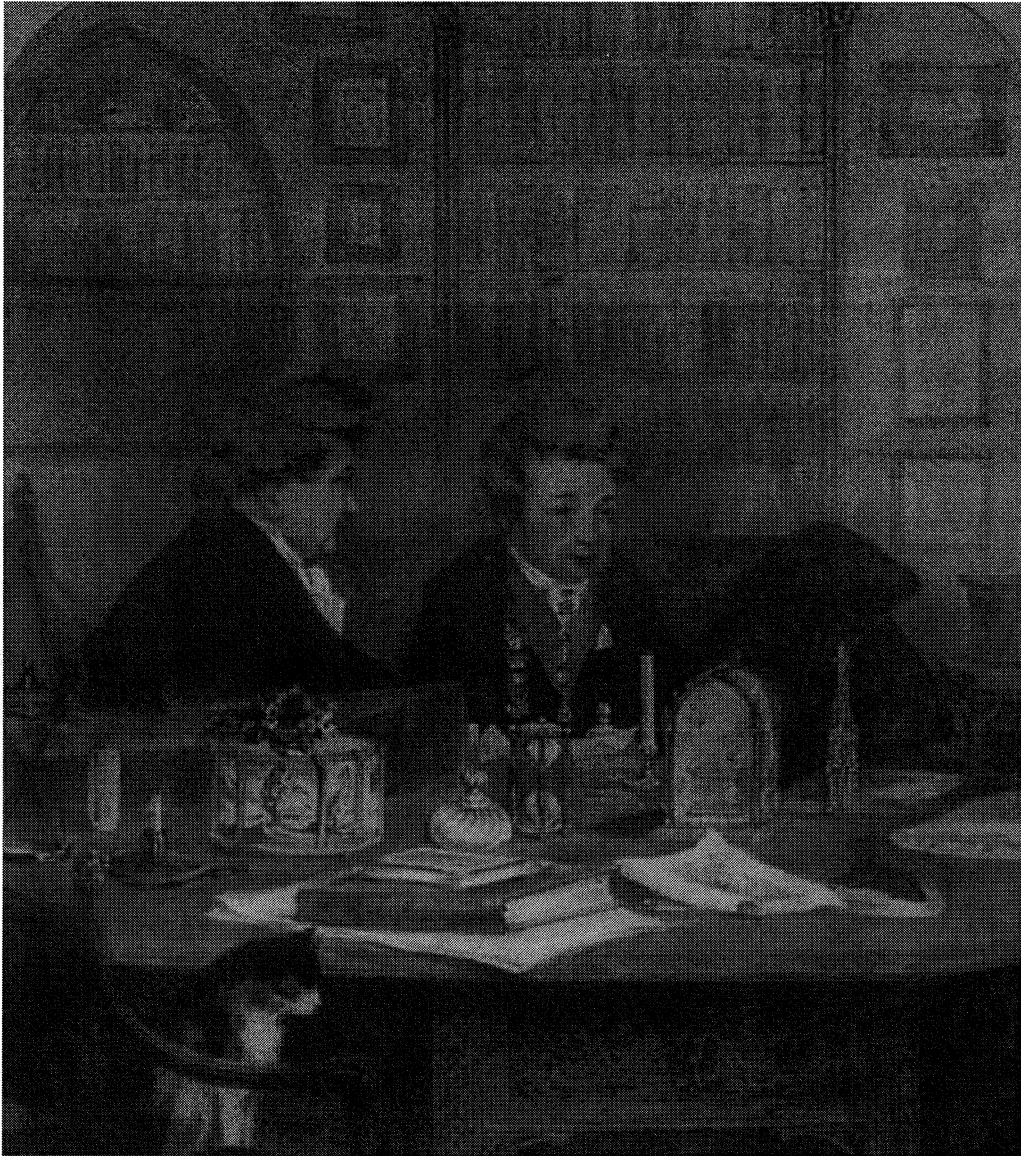
⁴⁰ Mavor, *Ladies* 99.

General Evening Post stuck and was to stick,” – crucially assisted by her own text – “that Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby were Lesbians.”⁴¹

Even if one sets aside the egregious operation of such disavowals, Mavor’s biographical method renders her text unable to explore fully the performative nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s life practices. Mavor’s text further fails to engage with the ubiquitous, yet strikingly diverse nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s presence in public culture, artificially separating their ‘life-story’ from both their contemporary and posthumous cultural representations. Approaching Butler and Ponsonby as biographical subjects occludes the way in which the locus of their fascination resides, not in what is or can be known about them, but what elements of their story remain occluded, or subject to constant reinvention. The modern privileging of the relationship between subjectivity and sexuality as enshrined in biography obscures alternative elements of Butler and Ponsonby’s narrative, reducing the salient facts of their relationship to a crude genital determinism. It also masks the way in which historians of sexuality have rendered Butler and Ponsonby cultural barometers through which to argue and articulate models of same-sex desire, failing either to interrogate Butler and Ponsonby’s archival record, or to reflect upon their figuration as a historical test case. Although often working from primary sources, the following study thus replaces biographical methods with those of cultural history, offering a genealogy of Butler and Ponsonby’s various figurations, and exploring the way in which their own performative strategies initiated and enabled this iterative array.

⁴¹ Mavor, *Ladies* 77.

Who were Butler and Ponsonby?



Butler and Ponsonby in the library of Plâs newydd. Engraving after a sketch by Lady Leighton

While distinguishing my own methodology from Mavor's biographical approach, I do not wish to deny the importance of biographical and historical context. In the remainder of this chapter, I therefore offer an account of Butler and Ponsonby's families,

their initial intimacies, and their 1778 elopement, before turning in chapter two to the two main representational frames through which the Ladies have traditionally been perceived. Butler and Ponsonby's life stories have been recounted in contexts ranging from the genealogical newsletter of The Butler Society to contemporary gay and lesbian websites ranging from the highly catholic glbtq: a encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, & queer culture⁴² to the more separatist The Old Dyke.⁴³ Their ubiquity has nonetheless served to obscure, rather than elucidate key aspects of their shared life. Certain biographical facts are invoked frequently, such as Butler's Roman Catholic upbringing and the sixteen year difference in their ages.⁴⁴ The specificities of these 'facts' nonetheless vary widely, with Butler's seniority represented as varying between thirteen and eighteen years, and her mature religious convictions characterized in terms ranging from secret Catholicism and fervent anti-clericalism.⁴⁵

While seeking to distinguish my approach methodologically from those of the Ladies' earlier biographers, it is nonetheless necessary to offer salient facts about their family backgrounds and early years. Butler and Ponsonby were both born into extremely well-established families. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth-century, the Ponsonbys established themselves as the most prominent members of the Irish Protestant

⁴² Susan S. Lanser, Butler, Lady Eleanor, (1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831), 4 Jan. 2005, Online, Available: <www.glbtq.com/literature/butler_ponsonby.html>, 20 Nov. 2006.

⁴³ The Old Dyke, An Outing in Wales, May 2001, Online, Available: <<http://www.theolddyke.co.uk/ladiesllangollan.htm>>, 10 Mar. 2003.

⁴⁴ This does not prevent Ellen Crowell from describing Butler and Ponsonby as "unmarried members of the eighteenth-century Protestant aristocracy"; (Ellen Crowell, "Ghosting the Llangollen Ladies: Female Intimacies, Ascendancy Exiles, and the Anglo-Irish Novel," Eire-Ireland 39.3-4 (2004): 202-27.)

⁴⁵ Hicklin's 1847 The Ladies of Llangollen, as Sketched by Many Hands acknowledges this diversity of opinion, remarking, "It has been said that on religious subjects, these ancient friends were divided in opinion; one being a Roman Catholic and the other a Protestant." He nevertheless continues, "but the parish clerk, an intelligent old man who knew them well, assured us they both regularly attended the services in the Church of Llangollen, and received the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, both there, and at their own cottage during the last illness of Lady Eleanor Butler, from the vicar." (Hicklin, Ladies 26.)

Ascendancy, their electoral interests in Co. Kilkenny and Co. Down bolstered by their familial ties with the dukes of Devonshire, the denizens of British “high Whig aristocracy”,⁴⁶ who controlled land in Cork and Waterford.⁴⁷ The first John Ponsonby (1608-1678), a minor Cumberland squire, moved to South-East Ireland in 1649 after his services to Cromwell were repaid in confiscated lands in Kildaton, Co. Kilkenny. Sarah’s great-grandfather, William Ponsonby (1658/9-1724) commanded a Protestant garrison during the 1689-90 siege of Londonderry. He stood as a member of the Irish parliament, was called to the Privy Council in 1715, and was appointed Baron Bessborough in 1721 and first Viscount Dungannon in 1723.⁴⁸ Upon his death in 1724, he was succeeded by his son, Brazabon Ponsonby, who continued his father’s political rise by being appointed the first earl of Bessborough in 1739. His second son, Henry Ponsonby, died in 1745 at the Battle of Fontenoy, reputedly decapitated while handing his watch and ring to his son, Sarah Ponsonby’s father, Chambré Brazabon Ponsonby. Chambré Brazabon Ponsonby married Elizabeth Clarke, who bore him a daughter, Frances.⁴⁹ Upon Elizabeth’s death, Ponsonby re-married Louisa Lyons in 1752, the daughter of John Lyons of Belmont, a clerk of the Irish Council, who gave birth to her only child, Sarah Ponsonby, in 1755.⁵⁰ Ponsonby’s mother died when Sarah was three, after which her father entered into a third marriage with an heiress, Miss Mary Barker, who bore him a third daughter. Her father died in 1762, prior to the birth of his son and heir, also christened Chambré Brazabon Ponsonby. Ponsonby’s stepmother remarried Sir Robert Staples, but herself survived only

⁴⁶ Peter Mandler, qtd. in Tuite, “Tainted.” 67.

⁴⁷ P.J. Jupp, *Ponsonby, William Brabazon, First Baron Ponsonby (1744–1806)*, 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/22506>>, 3 Mar. 2005.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Spain, *Ponsonby, Henry (D. 1745)*, 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/22496>>, 18 Mar. 2006.

⁴⁹ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 4. Frances Ponsonby later married Georges Lowther of Kilrue.

⁵⁰ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 4.

until 1768. Sir Robert entrusted the now-orphaned Ponsonby to the care of her father's cousin, Lady Elizabeth 'Betty' Fownes, and her husband Sir William Fownes of Woodstock, who dispatched her to Miss Parkes's boarding school in Kilkenny.⁵¹ Lady Betty's brothers included William Ponsonby, later the 2nd Earl of Bessborough, who in 1739 married the eldest daughter of the 3rd Duke of Devonshire, Lady Caroline Cavendish, and held political positions including Postmaster General and Lord of the Treasury. Lady Betty's brother was the Rt. Hon. John Ponsonby, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, who married the Duke's second daughter, Elizabeth, in 1743.⁵² Under the patronage of such powerful connections, Lady Betty and Sir William resided in the village of Inistiogue, twelve miles from Kilkenny, where Sir William received a sinecure of twelve hundred pounds a year.⁵³

It was while boarding in Kilkenny that Ponsonby met Eleanor Butler (1739-1829). The Butler family were established in Ireland long before the Ponsonbys, having arrived in Ireland in 1185 with Prince John and received large land grants in Co. Tipperary.⁵⁴ The family's founder, Theobald Fitzwalter (d. 1205) was appointed the first chief butler of Ireland. His profession constituting his family's name, he was charged with ensuring supplies of food and drink whenever the English court visited Ireland. The post carried with it the right of the Prisage of Wine, or the right to approximately 15% of the wine imported into Ireland, a privilege that ensured the family's fortune.⁵⁵ James Butler was

⁵¹ Mavor, *Ladies* 4-5.

⁵² Lady Betty was thus aunt by marriage of William Cavendish, the 5th Duke of Devonshire, and his wife Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, the leading woman of fashion. (Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) xx-xxi.)

⁵³ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 8-9.

⁵⁴ John Bradley, *Discover Kilkenny* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2000) 29.

⁵⁵ Bradley, *Discover* 30.

created the first Earl of Ormonde in 1328, and the family flourished throughout the Middle Ages. The twelfth earl, James Butler (1610-88) was appointed lord lieutenant of Ireland in 1643. Following Cromwell's invasion of Ireland, he went into exile with Charles II, for which he was created duke of Ormonde and re-appointed lord lieutenant after the Restoration, bearing the crown at the coronations of both Charles II and James II.⁵⁶ The second duke, James Butler (1665-1745) was more politically ambivalent, entertaining James II at Kilkenny Castle between 1689 and 1690 before changing sides to fight for William of Orange in the Battle of the Boyne. He replaced the duke of Marlborough as commander-in-chief of Queen Anne's forces during the 1702-13 War of Spanish Succession. Following French victories in Flanders, however, he was stripped of his command. His involvement in a West Country Jacobite uprising led to his impeachment in 1715, and a Bill of Attainder was passed against him in 1716. Forced to forfeit his estates and Irish titles, he fled to Prince James' exiled court and died in Avignon in 1745.⁵⁷ His estates were purchased by his brother Charles, earl of Arran (1671-1758), who settled them on his Catholic cousin and 'cadet' member of the Bessborough line, John Butler of Kilcash. John Butler was succeeded by Eleanor Butler's father, Walter Butler of Garryricken (1703-83).⁵⁸ Eleanor Butler (1739-1829) was the third daughter of Butler and Eleanor de Montmorency Morres (1711-94). The Garryricken Butlers were politically active Catholics. Eleanor Butler's great-grandfather sheltered persecuted members of the faith; her grand-uncle Christopher Butler, Archbishop of Cashel, continued his episcopal duties throughout the passage of the anti-

⁵⁶ Bradley, *Discover* 83.

⁵⁷ Stuart Handley, *Butler, James, Second Duke of Ormond (1665-1745)*, 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/4139>, 12 Nov. 2005.

⁵⁸ Bradley, *Discover* 87.

Catholic Penal Code in 1703; and her paternal grandparents openly supported the Jacobite succession.⁵⁹ The family's status was diminished throughout the eighteenth-century by the harsh operation of the Penal Code, which forbade Catholics from purchasing land, holding political office, inheriting an undivided estate, or educating children in the Catholic faith. Many prominent Catholic families therefore spent periods of time in France, where Walter Butler was educated at a Douai seminary. As an only son, Walter Butler inherited an undivided, albeit diminished, estate in 1768, which included the imposing structure of Kilkenny Castle overlooking the River Nore. He was a failure at business, however, to the frustration of his ambitious and reputedly 'masculine' wife, who was deeply committed to the Catholic faith and the restoration of the lost Ormonde titles. The family's ambivalent status thus echoed that of Butler and Ponsonby's Irish compatriot and later friend, Edmund Burke, whose literary and political prominence belied his middling origins and the 'stain' of maternal Catholicism, just as the Garryricken Butlers' established name and lineage belied their impecuniosity and Catholic faith.

Eleanor Charlotte Butler was born in Cambrai, France, in 1739, her birth following those of two elder sisters, Frances and Susan. Any position Butler may have held within the family was supplanted by the birth of a son and heir, John Butler, in 1740, after the family had returned to Garryricken, Tipperary. As was customary amongst members of the Catholic gentry, Butler's sisters were sent to France as pensioners or convent boarders, residing at the fashionable Parisian house of the Blue Nuns. Butler was sent to the humbler English Benedictine House at Cambrai, which was nonetheless known for its

⁵⁹ Mavor, *Ladies* 7.

high standards of education. While records of Butler's education have not survived, Mavor notes that the average stay was two years in length, although travel restrictions imposed by the Continental Wars may have lengthened Butler's stay to eight years.⁶⁰ Butler's time in France appear to have been happy, fostering a deep commitment to what she was to describe to her friend Harriet Pigott in 1814 as a nation prone to inspire "a sort of *Maladie du Payes*."⁶¹ Her aversion to conventional marriage may also have been encouraged by the intensely homosocial nature of convent life, recalled fondly in the memoirs of Madame de Genlis, and depicted as a hotbed of disavowed sapphic desire in Denis Diderot's 1760 *La Religieuse*. Butler returned to Kilkenny in 1768 to witness her brother John consolidate his 1764 conversion to the Established Church (a precursor to the reinstatement of the Ormonde titles) with his 1769 marriage to society heiress, Lady Anne Wandesford. Butler's two sisters had previously married Morgan Kavanagh of Ballyhail and 'Monarch' Kavanagh of Borris, leaving the twenty-nine year old Butler, described as "masculine" and "satirical," awkwardly unmatched.⁶²

It was during this period that Butler first met the thirteen year old Ponsonby. Sarah Ponsonby was a shy and studious child, described by Caroline Hamilton as "nice, slight looking," who applied herself to the genteel feminine accomplishments of drawing, handwriting, map-making and embroidery taught at Miss Parkes' establishment.⁶³ Hamilton reports that Lady Betty asked Butler's mother to keep watch over Ponsonby's progress at Miss Parkes', facilitating Ponsonby's friendship with her twenty-nine year old

⁶⁰ Mavor, *Ladies* 12.

⁶¹ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Harriet Pigott 15 Jan. [1814], Bodleian Library Western Manuscripts, Oxford.

⁶² Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 12.

⁶³ Caroline Hamilton, *Memoirs of Caroline Hamilton*, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

daughter. Little is known of their early intimacy, although Mavor frames it in terms of literary emulation, speculating that it grew from their shared love of Samuel Richardson's novels of sensibility, and admiration of Sarah Scott's 1762 novel of philanthropic female retirement, A Description of Millenium Hall.⁶⁴ There is, however, no explicit evidence of the Ladies having read Scott's novel, which Mavor interprets as essentially autobiographical, linking it to Scott's own establishment of a poor school with "her friend, Lady Barbara Montagu,"⁶⁵ and characterizing it as "the *vade mecum* of romantic friendship."⁶⁶ Such conjecture about Scott's novel, which is discussed in more detail in chapter five, reflects Mavor's desire to locate Butler and Ponsonby within a highly ambivalent framework of both chaste romantic friendship and sexually suggestive literary history. In May 1773, the eighteen year old Ponsonby left Miss Parkes's School to live with Sir William and Lady Betty at Woodstock. Lady Betty welcomed the arrival of a young woman in the place of her recently married daughter, Sarah Tighe, and Ponsonby appears to have been initially happy. The Fownes kept a house in Dublin, where Ponsonby attended balls and assemblies during the season, while Sir William's membership of the Irish parliament and Privy Council ensured their close ties with fashionable society.⁶⁷ Ponsonby, however, was soon writing to a family friend, the widow Mrs. Lucy Goddard, to inform her of Sir William's unwanted sexual advances, her horror expressed in terms of her deep loyalty to her female guardian: "neither my pride, resentment, nor any other passion shall ever be sufficiently powerful to make me give

⁶⁴ Sarah Scott, A Description of Millenium Hall, ed. Gary Kelly (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 1995) 19.

⁶⁵ Mavor, Ladies 49.

⁶⁶ Mavor, Ladies 83.

⁶⁷ Mavor, Ladies 20.

Lady Betty any uneasiness in my power to spare her [...] I would rather die than wound Lady Betty's heart."⁶⁸

Butler was similarly discontent, her mother seeking to ameliorate both her son's conversion and her eldest daughter's spinsterhood by once again dispatching Butler to a Cambrai convent. Butler and Ponsonby confided their mutual unhappiness in a secret correspondence dating from at least 1777, forming a plan to elope to England and take a house together. On the night of the 30 March 1778, they escaped from their respective homes wearing men's clothes and carrying pistols, meeting in a Woodstock barn before travelling twenty-three miles towards Waterford, from where the English packet sailed to Wales. As Lady Betty scrawled to Mrs. Goddard:

My dear Mrs Goddard I cant Paint our distress. My dr Sally lept out of a window last Night and is gon off. We learn Miss Butler of the Castle is wt her. I can say no more. Help me if you can. We are in the utmost distress and I am sure you pitty us. God Bless you. ever Yours E.F.⁶⁹

Lady Betty's misspelt and heavily blotted note offers material evidence of her obvious fondness for her ward, as well as the anxiety evinced by Butler and Ponsonby's departure. Its melodramatic brevity and the "pitty" she assumes Mrs. Goddard extends to the family frame Butler and Ponsonby's actions within the context of heterosexual elopement, anticipating Jane Bennett's report of Lydia having "gone off to Scotland" with *Pride and Prejudice*'s Wickham.⁷⁰ While the note is written in the present tense, the sentence "My dr Sally" shifts to the past tense, the historicizing of Ponsonby's 'leap' further anticipating Mary Bennet's grim declaration, "loss of virtue in a female is

⁶⁸ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 20.

⁶⁹ Lady Elizabeth Fownes, Lady Betty Fownes to Mrs Goddard 31 Mar. 1778, NLI Wicklow Ms, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

⁷⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Tony Tanner (London: Penguin, 1996) 222.

irretrievable” – in emphasizing the ineradicable consequences of Ponsonby’s actions.⁷¹

The sexual implications of this analogue are underscored both by Lady Betty’s displacement of the threat to Ponsonby’s virtue away from her husband, Sir William, to “Miss Butler of the Castle,” as they are by Lady Betty’s refusal to name the precise threat represented by Butler’s presence – “I can say no more” – her foreclosure registering a specifically sexual open secret. From its inception, Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship may be seen to have been characterized by the unspoken, yet palpably present, threat of sexual transgression, which is only held at bay by the most active of cognitive refusals.

Following their departure to Waterford, records of Butler and Ponsonby’s movements do not indicate whether they missed the English packet or it failed to sail. They were forced to shelter overnight in a barn, where Ponsonby caught a severe cold. Continuing towards Waterford, it is claimed they were intercepted the following morning “in a Carr in Mens Clouths,” by Lady Betty and Butler’s brother-in-law, Morgan Kavanagh.⁷² Butler begged to remain with Ponsonby, and they were granted a further half hour together before Butler was forcibly removed to Monarch Kavanagh’s Borris residence, having been forbidden to return to Kilkenny Castle. Ponsonby returned to Woodstock with Lady Betty, where she was confined to bed with a fever. On the 2 April, Lady Betty wrote to Mrs. Goddard, “We hear the Butlers are never to forgive their daughter and that she is to be sent to France to a convent.”⁷³ Initiating the erasure of Ponsonby’s agency that is discussed further in the following chapter, Butler was identified as having instigated the intrigue. As Lady Betty continues, “I wish she had

⁷¹ Austen, *Pride* 234.

⁷² Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 28.

⁷³ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 31.

been safe in [a convent] long ago, and she would have made us all happy.”⁷⁴

Significantly, however, Lady Betty’s wish for Butler’s ‘safety’ may be read as suggesting that Butler’s uncloistered status threatens her own wellbeing as well as that of her young companion, implying that she possesses a peculiarly dangerous form of sexual subjectivity. Ponsonby defended her co-conspirator with ardour, writing to Mrs. Goddard on the ninth of April, “Spare and vindicate [Butler] from the unmerited reproach of being the Principal Cause of Our Common misfortune, which her Generosity makes her take pains to load herself with,” signing her entreaty “Poor S.”⁷⁵ Ponsonby’s stubborn endorsement of her and Butler’s plan to take a house together only increased Lady Betty’s concern as to the motives underlying their elopement. As she alluded to local gossip in a letter to Mrs. Goddard, in spite of being again unable to name a specific charge: “I hear they say these two friends must not live together. I cant help thinking as they do.”⁷⁶

Contrary to such palpable misgivings, Lady Betty arranged for Butler and Ponsonby to be allowed a final interview at Borris before their final separation. This brief meeting allowed them to formulate a plan, according to which Butler fled from Borris on the evening of Sunday 18 April, travelling the twelve miles to Woodstock where, with Mary Caryll’s cooperation, she was concealed in a cupboard in Ponsonby’s room until Monday evening. Ten days of communications between the Fownes and Butlers ensued, during which Lady Betty and Sir William sought resolution, and the Butlers refused to alter their

⁷⁴ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 31.

⁷⁵ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 33-34.

⁷⁶ Lady Elizabeth Fownes, Lady Betty Fownes to Mrs. Goddard [5 Apr.] 1778, NLI Wicklow Ms, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

plan to commit their daughter to a convent. On the 28 April, however, Butler's father reversed his decision, sending his solicitor to make financial provision for Butler and Ponsonby to depart together. In an effort to avert this end, Sir William insisted that his partiality towards Ponsonby "was not meant as she understood it," renouncing his past 'follies' and promising to double her thirty pound annuity should she remain at Woodstock.⁷⁷ Mrs. Goddard also counselled Ponsonby in private, displacing the threat of transgressive desire from Sir William to Butler. As she reported of her conversation with Ponsonby: "I spoke to her with harshness and freedom, said [Butler] had a debauched mind, no ingredients for friendship that ought to be founded on virtue."⁷⁸ Ponsonby responded with serenity to this intimation of perversity, reiterating her desire to "live and die with Miss Butler." Recognizing the scandalous leverage gained by her first dramatic departure, she also suggested that any obstacle placed in the path of her desire "would provoke her to an act that wd give her friends more trouble than anything she had yet done."⁷⁹ The Ladies' obstinacy was eventually rewarded. On the 3 May 1778, the Woodstock company gathered to play the popular pastime, 'Game of the Goose,' its title anticipating Mary Louisa Gordon's 1936 description of the Ladies' elopement as a 'wild goose chase.' The following morning, Butler and Ponsonby departed from Woodstock by post-chaise with their families' grudging blessing. While the vagaries of maritime schedules led them to remain in Waterford for four days, they sailed from there to Wales on the 9th May 1778, never to return to Ireland.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 38.

⁷⁸ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 38.

⁷⁹ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 39.

⁸⁰ Muriel Bradbrook, "The Elegant Eccentrics," *Modern Language Review* 19.2 (1949): 184-98. 185.

Most travellers from Ireland to Wales took the half-guinea government packet that sailed from Dublin to Holyhead, its turnpike road providing the principal source of Butler and Ponsonby's later Irish visitors.⁸¹ The Ladies chose instead the fifteen guinea Waterford crossing,⁸² this decision foreshadowing the lack of fiscal restraint that was to plague them throughout their shared life. They disembarked at the North Welsh port of Milford Haven, commencing a Welsh tour akin to that taken by William Gilpin in 1773, and popularized by Thomas Pennant's 1778-81 A Tour in Wales. The Ladies' first tour is documented in Ponsonby's journal entitled "An Account of a Journey in Wales, Perform'd in May 1778 by Two Fugitive Ladies, And Dedicated to Her most tenderly Beloved Companion By The Author." The self-conscious title of this text heightens the theatrical singularity of their flight, belying the fact that their families had grudgingly condoned and assisted their departure. Their journal keeping may thus be understood as a retelling of their life together, and as an act of daily self-validation in the absence of an approving and approved social model for their relationship. Ponsonby's narrative demonstrates a keen awareness of place, detailing the distance to London from the various towns visited, suggesting that Butler and Ponsonby located themselves in relation to the city that was, at the time, the largest in the Western world.⁸³ Rather than betraying an ultimately unfulfilled desire to install themselves within the metropolis, this document presages their lifelong efforts to identify with their provincial location, allowing them to maintain their social and intellectual precedence by avoiding the more demanding stages of London's bluestocking salons and literary societies.

⁸¹ The Holyhead packet, a ferry service linking Dublin and London, was commissioned by Elizabeth I in 1579 to transport state papers and travellers between the two capitals.

⁸² Mavor, Ladies 39.

⁸³ Sarah Ponsonby, A Journey Performed in Wales by Two Fugitive Ladies, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

Butler and Ponsonby first visited the Denbighshire village of Llangollen on the 25 May 1778. While Pennant describes Llangollen as “a small and poor town,” he continues, “I know no scene in *North Wales*, where the refined lover of picturesque scenes, the sentimental, or the romantic, can give a fuller indulgence to his inclination.”⁸⁴ Its grand location, enclosed by the Trevor Rocks and Eglwyseg and Berwyn Mountains, was augmented by its situation as a key staging post on the Holyhead road. Butler and Ponsonby were not impressed with the town in which they were to live for over fifty years, Ponsonby’s tour journal merely describing “a pretty village on the river *Dee*.”⁸⁵ By the end of the month, the abrupt cessation of Ponsonby’s journal suggests that they had received news from Ireland of Sir William’s sudden death, which was followed only three weeks later by the equally sudden death of Lady Betty.⁸⁶ Recognizing that their itinerant lifestyle was economically unsustainable, the Ladies’ rejected their initial and more expensive plan to settle in England, the uncertainty that characterized their search for permanent lodgings being marked by the fragmentation of their previously linear travel narrative. They appear to have spent the winter in Baen Blanche, an isolated village in the Cuffleyman Valley.⁸⁷ The 1840 daybook of their later intimate, Harriet Pigott, however, claims they had returned to Llangollen by 1779, where they rented “little low lodgings” from the Llangollen postman,⁸⁸ supporting themselves by means of a two hundred pound annuity from Butler’s father, and eighty pounds from Lady Betty’s

⁸⁴ Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Wales*, 2 vols. (London: Benjamin White, 1778) 295.

⁸⁵ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

⁸⁶ Mavor, *Ladies* 43.

⁸⁷ Mavor, *Ladies* 44.

⁸⁸ Harriet Pigott, Ms Pigott F1-2, Bodleian Library Western Manuscripts, Oxford, 198.

daughter, Sarah Tighe.⁸⁹ In early 1780, they relocated half a mile from the Llangollen village centre, paying a half-yearly rent of 11l.7.6 to rent a five room stone cottage on four acres of land.⁹⁰ Its square, two storey frame was romantically surrounded by the Eglwyseg mountains, a small ravine and rushing brook, behind which the peak of Dinas Brân rose sharply, topped by the ruins of Crow Castle. Somewhat exaggerating the cottage's dimensions (later described by Wordsworth as a "low roof'd cot")⁹¹ they christened their new home 'Plâs newydd,' Welsh for 'New Hall.'

Butler and Ponsonby's highborn poverty and spinster status rendered them marginal amongst the Llangollen community, comprised of the Welsh-speaking lower orders, who worked in local industries including the production of tanned leather, flannel, woven wincey and tweed,⁹² the merchant classes who provided goods and services to coach travellers, and the aristocratic and gentry estates dotted throughout the local landscape. Butler and Ponsonby established themselves within North Welsh gentry circles through the patronage of Anne Hill-Trevor, Lady Dungannon (1715-99), widow of Arthur Hill-Trevor, and matriarch of the Denbighshire mansion of Brynkinalt.⁹³ Grandmother to Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington, the Irish-born Lady Dungannon was friends with both the Fowneses and Mrs. Goddard. Ponsonby's securing of this connection therefore serves as an important reminder of her crucial role in ensuring the success of her and Butler's retirement. As Pigott asserts in her 1840s daybook, "Old Lady

⁸⁹ Mavor, *Ladies* 44-45.

⁹⁰ Sarah Ponsonby, Account Book 1788-90, Ms, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. 1 Apr. 1790.

⁹¹ William Wordsworth, "To the Lady E.B and the Hon. Miss P," *Last Poems: 1821-1850*, eds. Jared Curtis, Apryl Lea Denny-Ferris and Jillian Heydt-Stevenson (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1999): 41. 41.

⁹² Gordon Sherratt, *An Illustrated History of Llangollen* (Llangollen: Ceriog, 2000) 69.

⁹³ Arthur Hill Trevor was the Viscount Dungannon and chancellor of the Irish exchequer 1754-5.

Duncannon (grandmother of the present) announced by visiting them that they were women of high respectability. Mrs Mytton followed her example & progressively their virtues and same Espirit & talents became generally known & highly appreciated.”⁹⁴

Butler and Ponsonby soon befriended the Myddletons of Chirk Castle, while their acceptance into local society was marked by their dining at Brynkinalt and calling upon Chirk when Mrs. Goddard visited Llangollen in 1782.⁹⁵ The Myddletons were also closely linked to the Wynns of Wynnstay, headed by the leading Tory and rumoured Jacobite, Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, whose political sympathies may have influenced his welcome of the exiled Butler. Lady Dungannon introduced them to the “handsome graceful”⁹⁶ Francis Seymour Conway (1718-94), who held politically prominent posts including the positions of Ambassador to France, lord lieutenant of Ireland in 1765–6, and lord chamberlain. Mrs. Mytton of Aston introduced them to her niece, Harriet Pigott, with whom they established a close friendship, as they did with the sisters Harriet and Letitia Barrett of Oswestry. By August 1789, Butler describes herself and Ponsonby receiving numerous members of the local gentry at Plâs newydd before departing for an evening visit to Valle Crucis Abbey. As she reports with evident satisfaction:

...The Barretts came at one. Lovely day, Mr Mrs Kynaston, Mrs Miss Mytton, Miss Bell Pigott,. Mr Llydedale of Aston arrived at two. Superb day. Went the home Circuit. Walked. Strolled out sat under the trees ‘till Dinner. at Five the Carriages arrived. We all went to the Abby. Mrs Kynaston Miss Mytton with Mr Llydesdale in his Chaise, the Barretts in their own Mrs Mytton, Miss Pigott. My beloved and I, with Mr Kynaston in his Carriage....the ruins Solemn and Magnificent.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Pigott, Pigott F1-2, 198.

⁹⁵ Mavor, *Ladies* 51-52.

⁹⁶ Mavor, *Ladies* 67.

⁹⁷ Eleanor Butler, Journal of Lady Eleanor Butler 1788-91, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, 28 Aug. 1789.

They called upon the homes of such local gentry, reporting in May 1789 having “Breakfasted and Suped at Halston, dined at Hardwicke,” enjoyed coffee with the Owens of Porkington,⁹⁸ and paid turnpike taxes to Oswestry.⁹⁹ They also extended small kindnesses to humbler members of the local populace, with Ponsonby’s 1788 account book noting gifts to individuals including a “Poor Lame Woman 1s” and the “Weaver’s Poor Sister in the workhouse 1s.”¹⁰⁰ The unconventional nature of their circumstances may have further encouraged them to sympathize with women accused of gendered transgressions, with Ponsonby noting in February 1788 the gift of two shillings to “Tho[mas] Owens Wife for Unfortunate Daughter 2s,”¹⁰¹ who had been accused of infanticide the previous month.

Ponsonby’s half-siblings Chambré Ponsonby and Frances Lowther corresponded with the Ladies and called upon Plâs newydd during the initial years of their ‘retirement’; Chambré continued to call upon the cottage when *en route* to Ireland, and to provide occasional monetary gifts.¹⁰² In 1788, Lady Anne Butler, wife of Butler’s brother John, also paid a visit, leading Butler to remark in her journal, “Sat most comfortably over the fire talking of old Times and laughing”¹⁰³; such sociable interactions cast a more complex

⁹⁸ Butler, Journal 1788-91, 23 Jul. 1789.

⁹⁹ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 17 May 1789.

¹⁰⁰ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90.; 9 Feb. 1788; 15 Feb. 1788.

¹⁰¹ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 18 Mar. 1788.

¹⁰² On the 27 Sept. 1788, Butler notes the receipt of a “Letter from Mr Chambré Brazabon Ponsonby [...] a letter from a Brother worthy of such a Sister as my Sally.” (Butler, Journal 1788-91. 27 Sept. 1788). In September 1788, Ponsonby’s account book details the receipt of fifty pounds, “By a Bill on London a Gift from C.B. Ponsonby.” The next month, she further credits “Lord B’s Gift of L50.” Their income was supplemented in December 1788 by two loans of a total of 46*l.* from their solicitor, Mr. Chambré, bringing their annual income to 444*l.* 13.2. (Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 32-43.)

¹⁰³ Butler, Journal 1788-91. 26 Jan. 1788.

light upon the Ladies' oft-reported estrangement from their families of origin.¹⁰⁴ In spite of having characterized Butler as "debauch'd", Mrs. Goddard called upon Plâs newydd in 1782, and was addressed by Butler as "Poll dear" in an affectionate letter of the late 1780s. Indeed, the letter is amongst the most playfully extravagant of the Ladies' extensive correspondence, declaring Butler and Ponsonby to "Hunger & thirst for [Goddard's] presence." Both the Ladies' agricultural improvements and their knowledge of the *ton* is evidenced by their offering of culinary enticements including "new laid Eggs from our Jersey Hens who are in the most beautiful Head which the D[uchess] of D[evonshire] would not disdain to wear"; dinner of "boiled chicken from our own Coop, Asparagus out of our own garden, Ham of our own Saving and Mutton from our own Village"; and supper of "gooseberry Fool, Cranberry Tarts, Roast Fowl & Sallad." As Butler demands rhetorically, "Doesn't this tempt you[?]"¹⁰⁵

In 1793, Ponsonby wrote to Sarah Tighe underscoring her and Butler's physical and emotional estrangement from their Irish home, which was held to symbolize the perceived injustice of Lady Butler's provision of only scant financial support to her exiled daughter. As Ponsonby declares, "nothing could induce us ever to revisit Ireland, except the Dowager Lady Ormonde were to make it a point of duty with My Better Half to go for her last blessing."¹⁰⁶ This is not to suggest, however, that they wavered in their commitment to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, or failed to make strategic use of the sociable networks to which their ancestry provided access. Having met Wellington as a

¹⁰⁴ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 45-47.

¹⁰⁵ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Mrs. Goddard [N.D], National Library of Ireland, Wicklow Collection, Dublin.

¹⁰⁶ Ponsonby, qtd. in Mavor, *Ladies* 113.

young man, they were to receive him in subsequent years as young military officer, Irish Secretary, hero of the Battle of Waterloo, and Member of the House of Lords.¹⁰⁷ Prior to his departure to the Peninsula Wars in 1806, Butler presented him with a Spanish translation of the Book of Common Prayer, from which he is reputed to have learnt the language.¹⁰⁸ Sir Watkin Williams Wynn accompanied Richard Brinsley Sheridan and his wife, Elizabeth Linley Sheridan, to visit in 1785, while when their pensions fell into arrears, they appealed to Wellington's colleague, Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, to petition on their behalf to the Irish Secretary of State.¹⁰⁹ As an old woman, Butler proudly sported a diamond-set Irish harp brooch, her Loyalist affiliations reinforced in 1822 by the addition to their yearly income of an additional 60*l.* provided by her nephew James Wandesford, the new Lord Ormonde.¹¹⁰ During the 1780s and 90s, Ponsonby's account books also indicate their employment of an "Irish woman" to run errands to the nearby towns of Oswestry and Wrexham in exchange for one shilling, her impersonal designation marking their continuing commitment to both their homeland and the class-inflected identity of the Anglo-Irish gentry.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ They also used their connection to Wellington to strengthen their social and epistolary ties, with the Duchess of Richmond writing c.1812-13 to thank them for "the very fine Print you have been so willing to send me of Lord Wellington." (Duchess of Richmond, Lady Richmond to Eleanor Butler 20 Sept. [1813/4], National Library of Ireland, Wicklow Collection, Dublin.)

¹⁰⁸ Following Butler's death, the Duke presented the volume to his friend Lady Georgiana de Ros. The volume is now held within the De Ros Papers (D/638 and MIC/573) of the Northern Ireland Public Record Office.

¹⁰⁹ Bradbrook, "Elegant." 196.

¹¹⁰ Mavor, *Ladies* 181.

This support appears to have been carefully cultivated; on the 11 Sept. 1819, Ponsonby writes to Mr. J. Nicholson of Liverpool, requesting that the name of "The Honble James Butler M.P" be added to the subscription list for an upcoming publication. (Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to J. Nicholson 11 Sept. 1819, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.)

¹¹¹ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 13 Feb. 1788.

In the 1949 article, "The Elegant Eccentrics," Muriel Bradbrook likened Butler and Ponsonby's heightened sensibility to that of Edward Lindsay, the ridiculous hero of the young Austen's Love and Friendship,¹¹² who scorns "the vile and corrupted Palate[s]" of those unable to "conceive the Luxury of living in every Distress that Poverty can inflict, with the object of [one's] tenderest Affection[.]"¹¹³ Lindsay resists his father's insistence that he contract a strategic marriage with the noble and wealthy Lady Dorothea, instead entering into an "imprudent connection" with the Welsh cottager, Laura. Lindsay rejects his sister's suggestion that he apply to their father for pecuniary support, declaring with passion, "Never, never Augusta will I so demean myself. (said Edward) Support! What Support will Laura want which she can receive from him?" Augusta's riposte is withering: "Only those very insignificant ones of Victuals and Drink,' (answered she)."¹¹⁴

Butler and Ponsonby might be seen to share Lindsay's endorsement of sensibility over financial sense; in the letter to Mrs. Goddard quoted above, Butler described themselves, with only partial jocularly, as "two poor Spinsters With Something less than Nothing."¹¹⁵ Her 1785 journal similarly opens with an epigraph from Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" that frames their narrative as "the short and simple annals of the poor."¹¹⁶ The Ladies' perception of their poverty was nonetheless relative to their expenditure on such essentials as books, butter, "best purified & perfumed Windsor

¹¹² Bradbrook, "Elegant." 193.

¹¹³ Jane Austen, "Love and Friendship," Catharine and Other Writings, eds. Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1993): 75-106. 82.

¹¹⁴ Austen, "Love," 81.

¹¹⁵ Butler, Butler-Goddard [N.D.].

¹¹⁶ Butler, qtd. in Mavor, Ladies 59.

Soap”,¹¹⁷ and “the best & most fashionable White Wines”,¹¹⁸ their income ranging between five and six hundred pounds a year during a period in which the average Welsh labourer earned six to ten pence a day.¹¹⁹ Their income was nonetheless incommensurate to their class position, falling far below the three thousand pound annual income of members of their gentry social circle such as the Wynns of Wynnstay,¹²⁰ and towards the lower end of the annual income of Welsh gentlemen and their families.¹²¹ Butler and Ponsonby’s economic vulnerability was highlighted by the 1783 death of Butler’s father, depriving them of both their 200*l.* annuity and the generous inheritance to which Butler believed herself entitled. They therefore diverged from the belief of Austen’s Lindsay’s that the “exalted mind” was untroubled by such “mean and indelicate employment[s]” as eating and drinking,¹²² devoting considerable resources of time and energy into the solicitation of financial support.

In a further demonstration of the significance of their Irish connections, Butler’s brother granted them an additional 200*l.* annuity in 1784, in addition to 500*l.* with which to pay their debts. This gift came about following the solicitation of Butler’s relative, Lodge Evans Morres, who served in the Irish Parliament alongside Ponsonby’s relation William Brabazon Ponsonby.¹²³ The Ladies’ families thus refused to allow them to

¹¹⁷ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mr Bouchier 11 Nov. 1818, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹¹⁸ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Henry Hesketh 1 Sept. 1817, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹¹⁹ Keith Wrightson, Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000) 312.

¹²⁰ Richard Brown, Society and Economy in Modern Britain (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 281.

¹²¹ Brown, Society 275.

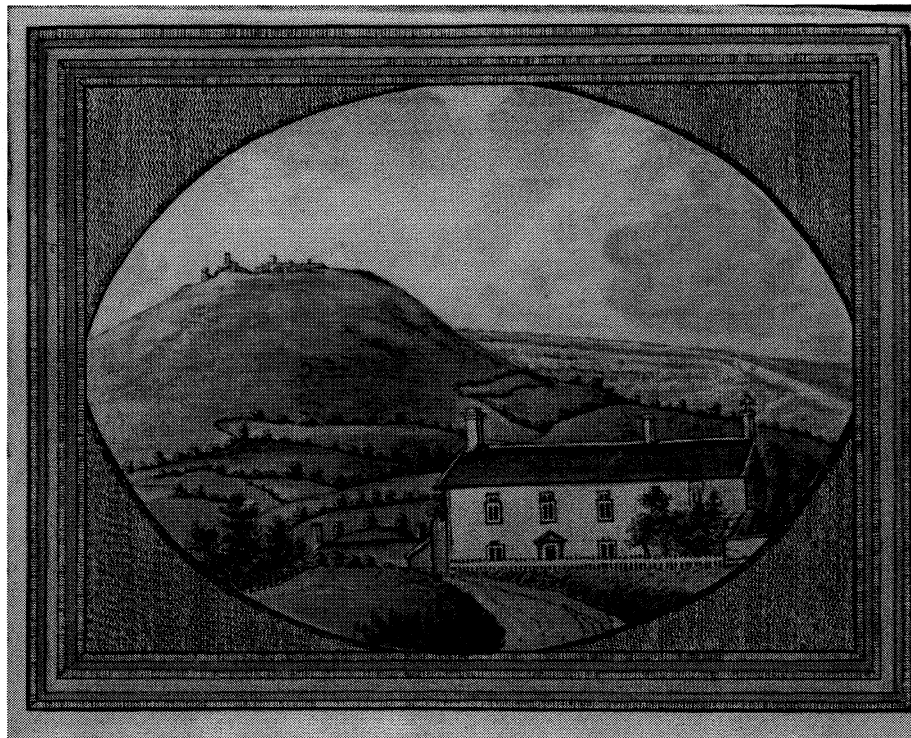
¹²² Austen, “Love,” 82.

¹²³ Mavor, Ladies 54.

disgrace their connections, maintaining them at a level of gentility, if not the comfort, to which they believed themselves entitled. Refusing to restrain their expenditure on books, postage and extravagantly-rich meals, they struggled to live on less than three hundred pounds a year until 1787, when the daughter of the Duke of Buccleuch, Lady Frances Douglas, succeeded after nearly two years of supplication in having them placed on the Irish Civil List, from which they received a pension of 100*l.* per annum.¹²⁴ The grateful Ponsonby crafted for their benefactor a souvenir portfolio entitled “Memorandums of a Cottage,” binding watercolour views of Plâs newydd in an embroidered silk case alongside a delicately crocheted silver purse (see plates).¹²⁵

¹²⁴ As Ponsonby wrote to Sarah Tighe on the 4 June 1787, “I am sure you will forgive my writing but a short letter – when I inform you that His Majesty’s Bounty has granted us a Pension of One Hundred a Year for which We are wholly indebted to the Interest of Lady Frances Douglas.” (Ponsonby, qtd. in Elizabeth Mavor, *A Year with the Ladies of Llangollen* (Great Britain: Penguin, 1986) 109.)

¹²⁵ Both Ponsonby’s portfolio and purse are held in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. (Sarah Ponsonby, *Memorandums of a Cottage*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Boston.)



Sarah Ponsonby, 'Memorandums of a Cottage,' 1778

Their one hundred pound annuity was paid only erratically, however, requiring Lady Douglas to appeal on their behalf to Richard ‘Conversation’ Sharp, a member of the glittering Holland House Set, friend to Coleridge and Wordsworth, and one of the most powerful and popular of Regency figures.¹²⁶ Butler herself addressed Sharp on the 30 December 1792, describing the belated payment of the previous two years of their pension as a matter “Most peculiarly important to me.”¹²⁷ Sharp’s intervention was unable to ensure the continuation of regular payments, as is attested by a letter of 1801 in which Butler assures him that his news of their imminent receipt of seven unpaid instalments has earned their “unbounded Gratitude”. As she continues, “We can only beg you to imagine what must be the feelings of Persons, restored to the prospect of comfort & affluence – in the moment when almost despairing of being ever again possessed of either...”¹²⁸ Their continuing retirement was nonetheless enabled by loans and irregular gifts from benefactors including Ponsonby’s father’s powerful cousin, Lord Bessborough; Ponsonby’s half-brother, Chambré; and anonymous donors. Ponsonby’s accounts for 1788 indicate the receipt in September of 50*l*. “By a Bill on London a Gift from C.B. Ponsonby”, followed soon after by “Lord B[essborough]’s Gift of L50”.¹²⁹ In December of the same year, Ponsonby’s records indicate the receipt for two loans totaling 46*l*. from their solicitor, Mr. Chambre, which were paid back in part in February 1789 from the proceeds of Butler’s quarterly annuity installment: “Repaying Mr. Chambre 22.5.”, Remains 27.15.” The following page of Ponsonby’s records offers the satisfied entry,

¹²⁶ David Knapman, *Sharp, Richard (1759–1835)*, 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25217>>, 4 Dec. 2006.

¹²⁷ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Richard Sharp 30 Dec. 1792, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹²⁸ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Richard Sharp 28 Nov. 1801, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹²⁹ Ponsonby, *Accounts 1788–90*, 27 Sept. 1788.

“Now out of Mr. Chambre’s Debt”,¹³⁰ this discharge allowing the ensuing weeks’ expenses to include payments to locals including the Llangollen cooper, to “Workmen Gravelling the Gardens & 5 days 5s10d”, and the charitable donation of 6s. to a “Poor French man.”¹³¹ Ensuing years brought increases in both their pension and Mrs. Tighe’s annuity. Upon her death in 1802, Mrs. Goddard bequeathed them 100l. as well as a 30l. annuity,¹³² while Mary Caryll left Ponsonby Aber Adda field, purchased from her receipt of vails or tips from their visitors, upon her death in 1809.¹³³ From the late 1790s, they further supplemented their income from small sums from the sale of barley, hay and potatoes. In a move further evidencing their enduring Irish connections, the Duke of Wellington, by then leader of the Tory opposition and soon to be Prime Minister, secured Ponsonby a pension of 200l. to replace the income that was extinguished upon Butler’s death.¹³⁴

Butler and Ponsonby’s narrative carries with it extraordinary varied cultural valencies, its citation within an array of literary and historical contexts demonstrating its highly mobile significations. In being figured as broadly familiar to many such audiences, however, it is frequently reduced to the simplest of biographical elements, the circulation of which has become essentially detached from their vast archive. This chapter has traced the most salient features of Butler and Ponsonby’s familial histories, contextualizing their outlandish elopement against the backdrop of their families’ Irish prominence, and the continuing importance, both social and material, of their numerous Irish connections. It

¹³⁰ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 10 Feb. 1789.

¹³¹ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 20 Mar. 1789.; 26 Jan. 1789.

¹³² Mavor, *Ladies* 133.

¹³³ Anon., Last Will and Testament of Mary Caryll, Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin.

¹³⁴ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 381.

has further examined the earliest accounts of their relationship, within which their first commentators invoke the tropes of chaste friendship and transgressive desire with which they remain identified. Having described the influence of Elizabeth Mavor's 1971 The Ladies of Llangollen, I have analysed the textual work of this volume, which remains preoccupied with the same sexual possibilities it so adamantly denies. The enduring authority of Mavor's account thereby underscores the political commitments that run throughout their representational history, and to which I now turn.

Chapter Two

Engendering the Ladies: Romantic Friendship, Gender Difference and Queer Critical Practice

Ponsonby's epitaph, inscribed on her tombstone after her death on the 9 December 1831, at the age of seventy-six, begins, "She did not long survive her beloved companion LADY ELEANOR BUTLER with whom she had lived in the valley for more than half a century of uninterrupted friendship."¹ In defining Ponsonby with reference to the life shared with her "beloved companion," Ponsonby's epitaph anticipates Butler and Ponsonby's critical status as exemplars of physically chaste and inherently coupled romantic friendship. In suggesting that Ponsonby was unable to survive without her partner, however, the epitaph also gestures towards the persistent portrayal of Butler as the dominant and masculine member of their Llangollen ménage, and Ponsonby as her younger and emotionally pliant feminine companion.

In her 1992 article, "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong: The Historical Roots of Modern Lesbian Identity," Martha Vicinus observes that lesbian historiography has characterized romantic friendship and butch-femme "roles" as "the two major" – and implicitly opposed – "paradigmatic forms of lesbian behavior."² Vicinus's article replaces this historical binary with a more nuanced taxonomy, incorporating the figure of the cross-dressed actress, the occasional lover of women, and the passing woman. She subsequently revises this initial binary in Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women,

¹ Qtd. in Hicklin, Ladies 38.

² Martha Vicinus, "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity," The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993): 432-52. 434.

1778-1928, in which she argues that women's same-sex relationships were identified as either sensual romantic friendships or "sexual sapphism" during the second half of the eighteenth-century, the latter category employing the late eighteenth-century term for sexual contact between women. Vicinus nonetheless acknowledges the tenuous nature of the period's distinction between chaste romantic friendship and embodied desire, observing of the interpenetration of these categories, "the Sapphic contained the romantic and vice versa."³ As explored throughout the following chapter, the two "paradigmatic" categories from which Vicinus departs are those most characteristic of Butler and Ponsonby's representational history throughout both their lifetimes and historical afterlives. The category confusion that Vicinus describes may be further traced throughout scholarship of the last thirty years as a tension between conceptualizations of Butler and Ponsonby as embodying either the feminine gender similitude of romantic friendship, or the gendered difference of the respectively feminine and masculine female couple (the designation I employ in place of the more temporally- and culturally-specific designations of 'butch' and 'femme'). This chapter explores the gendered frameworks within which the Ladies have been situated from their elopement to the present day. In particular, it describes how their persistent association with the romantic friendship model of mutually feminine chastity has elided the equally compelling tradition of their representation as a gender differentiated and sexually transgressive pair. In tracing the historical contours of these competing frameworks, I do not seek to adjudicate as to which possesses the greater empirical veracity or representational significance. Rather, I interpret the dialectical recurrence of these diverse models as being of constitutive

³ Martha Vicinus, Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004) xvii.

significance, suggesting that the intractable tensions of this dialectic comprise Butler and Ponsonby's continued fascination and appropriability. The irreducibility of this debate may be moreover read as a prototypically queer resistance to determination.

Characterizing Butler and Ponsonby as queer serves to complicate their presumptive status as the mascots of any single identity position. The "wrenching sense of recontextualization"⁴ provided by the language of queer reveals that their historiographic significance exceeds the role suggested by their deployment in a series of dated critical debates. In characterizing Butler and Ponsonby as queer, I do not seek to merely render them in more recent or fashionable critical parlance, or to obscure the Burkean underpinnings of their social conservatism by retrospectively incorporating them into a politically radical project. In outlining, in the final section of this chapter, the queer methodology that guides this project, I instead seek to demonstrate the ways in which the conceptual complexities of such commentary offers a fitting framework through which Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project may be perceived anew. Such a methodology further discloses the ways in which their cultural project stands, perhaps unexpectedly, in productive proximity to some of the most exciting developments in recent critical and cultural history.

From the earliest days of their elopement and retirement, Butler and Ponsonby have been characterized as either chastely feminine exemplars of the romantic friendship model, or a gender-differentiated and presumptively sexual pair. These two models not

⁴ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?," *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 343-49. 345.

only reflect the two dominant models of lesbian historiography, but the two paradigmatic ways of conceptualizing same-sex desire. These paradigms are respectively described by Sedgwick as a gender separatist model, in which gender and sexuality are collapsed so as to render “the woman-loving-woman and the man-loving-man each at the ‘natural’ defining center of their own gender”; and the trope of inversion, in which same-sex desire is seen to locate individuals between or across genders.⁵ In a disparity significant to the present project, these two models do not stand in a straightforwardly oppositional relation. The characteristic couple of the gender separatist model is a mutually feminine pair, whose relation is underpinned by the diacritical primacy of gender, rather than sexuality. Sexual desire is thus easily evacuated from this relational model, as is it within the romantic friendship thesis, substituting affective intensity for sexually embodied specificity. The characteristic couple of the inversion model is not that of a mutually masculine pair, however, but a sexualized masculine/feminine dyad. This conceptual imbalance reflects the perceived disjuncture between femininity and agentive sexual desire, the latter model equating the cross-gendered identification of the masculine woman with the presence of sexuality as such. It also reflects a presumptively heteronormative model of desire. As Sedgwick describes the inversion model:

one vital impulse of this trope is the preservation of an essential *heterosexuality* within desire itself [...] desire, in this view, by definition subsists in the current that runs between one male self and one female self, in whatever sex of bodies these selves may be manifested.⁶

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction: Axiomatic," Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1990): 1-63. 87-88.

⁶ Sedgwick, "Introduction," 87. Alan Sinfield refers to the later model as a “cross-sex grid”, which reflects the belief that every sexual encounter requires an active or masculine and feminine or passive partner. (Alan Sinfield, "Uses of Effeminacy," The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 25-51. 42-43.)

Within the terms of this heteronormative compact, the presumptive linkage between ‘maleness’ and sexual agency not only serves to erase desire from the mutually feminine female couple, but to render the mutually masculine female pair a conceptual impossibility, their relationality only reducible to a form of gay male identification. These gendered assumptions might be seen to render the feminine invert culturally legible, as the inversion model replaces a subordinate male figure with that of a woman. The skewed logic of this substitution nonetheless renders the feminine invert a form of deconstructively stubborn excess; and the ways in which she confounds a framework in which desire for women is concatenated with masculine identification form the subject of my final chapter. Following Sedgwick, the following chapter does not seek to adjudicate between these competing etiologies of same-sex desire, or to clarify the oxymoronic, yet powerfully explanatory, persistence of these models which together comprise “a field of intractable, highly structured discursive incoherence at a crucial node of social organization.”⁷ This chapter instead explores the main features of these competing representations, and the ways in which Butler and Ponsonby have been figured within them. It then describes the way in which a queer methodology allows one to grapple successfully with this constructive incoherence, attending to its intractable tensions as constitutive of, rather than detrimental to, Butler and Ponsonby’s continuing prominence within critical and popular discourses.

“[T]he great success story”: Butler and Ponsonby and the Romantic Friendship Model

After Butler and Ponsonby’s initial elopement was intercepted at Waterford, Lady Betty’s daughter, Sarah Tighe, wrote to Mrs. Goddard:

⁷ Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 90.

The runaways are caught and we shall soon see our amiable friend again whose conduct, although has an appearance of imprudence, is I am sure void of serious impropriety. There were no gentlemen involved, nor does it appear to be anything more than a scheme of Romantic Friendship.⁸

Tighe suggests that Ponsonby's flight was the mere semblance of recklessness, her dismissal of the scheme suggesting that 'Romantic Friendship' constituted a benign and pre-existing category of fanciful female affection. Tighe's reassurance ("nor does it appear to be anything more") draws upon the eighteenth-century application of the term "romantic" to the fictitious, quixotic, or impractical,⁹ while also echoing seventeenth-century use of term to describe the non-existent or purely ideal.¹⁰ Tighe's relieved observation about the lack of gentlemanly involvement implies that affectively intense female friendships such as Butler and Ponsonby's were not perceived as a substantive threat to the social order; and that sexual transgression was viewed as necessarily constituted by the presence of a man. Her remarks appear to endorse Lillian Faderman's claim that women's emotionally intense yet physically chaste relationships were viewed as innocuous within eighteenth-century Anglo-American society, their impassioned assertion held to trouble the social order only when chosen in opposition to normative 'adult' nuptials.¹¹ Tighe's invocation also reveals the extent to which Butler and Ponsonby's relationship has been tied closely to the romantic friendship model throughout the entirety of its representational history. Indeed, while the model was powerfully popularized by critics such as Mavor and Faderman, this identification might be seen as always and already in place. This is not to suggest, however, as does

⁸ Fownes, qtd. in Bell, ed., Hamwood 27.

⁹ Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2007, Oxford University Press, Available: <http://dictionary.oed.com/>. ('romantic' I:1. 2.a)

¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary. ('romantic' I:2b).

¹¹ Faderman, Surpassing 16.

Faderman, that romantic friendships were viewed without concern in the long eighteenth-century. The range of contemporary accounts of Butler and Ponsonby's elopement discussed below nonetheless suggests that contemporary responses to their relationship reflected the ambivalence that lurks beneath Tighe's account of Butler and Ponsonby's "scheme," with its associated implications of forethought and shadowy intent. The following discussion highlights the way in which this ambivalence has been manifest throughout scholarship of the past thirty years as a tension between conceptualizations of Butler and Ponsonby as a pair of chaste feminine friends and as a sexualized masculine/feminine dyad. It thereby traces the various frameworks within which the Ladies have been historically situated, while also exploring the ways in which the Ladies themselves might be seen to initiate these same paradigms.

Throughout the early twentieth-century, the concept of romantic friendship was used to denote the sexually charged male intimacies that flourished in British public schools and universities.¹² While same-sex practices were officially denounced by elite schools such as Eton, Greek love was conceived as "a form of heroic comradeship, a prototype of the brotherhood of the trenches or the football team,"¹³ a conception that does more to reveal the homosocial nature of such masculine institutions than to purge 'Greek love' of its underlying erotic charge. Mavor's The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship, however, bypasses this male tradition and its homoerotic

¹² Fictional depictions of such attachments include Evelyn Waugh's 1944 Brideshead Revisited, in which Lord Marchmain's mistress, Cara, observes of the attachment between the Oxford undergraduates Charles and Sebastian, "I know of these romantic friendships of the English and the Germans. They are not Latin. I think they are good if they do not go on to long." (Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945) 101.

¹³ Clive Fisher, Cyril Connolly: The Life and Times of England's Most Controversial Literary Critic (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 48.

implications, instead re-asserting the intimate association between Butler and Ponsonby and the romantic friendship model that is underscored by her subtitle. Mavor stresses her desire to consider Butler and Ponsonby “in terms other than Freud’s,” whose language she identifies with the twentieth-century’s ostensibly exhaustive taxonomies of sexual identities.¹⁴ She instead details the following “symptoms” of romantic friendship:

‘retirement’, good works, cottages, gardening, impecuniosity, the intellectual pursuits of reading aloud and the study of languages, enthusiasm for the Gothick, journals, migraines, sensibility and often, but not always, the single state.¹⁵

Mavor’s apparently general list is in fact a catalogue of Butler and Ponsonby’s characteristics, which not only identifies them as archetypal romantic friends, but as Tim Hitchcock notes, renders them constitutive of the same category in which they are located.¹⁶ Mavor further emphasizes Butler and Ponsonby’s emblematic status by linking her recuperation of them from the historical margins with the recuperation of romantic friendship itself: “a once flourishing but now lost relationship,” in which female affection could flourish to a degree “that would now not be possible outside of an avowedly lesbian connection.”¹⁷ In seeking to asexualize the Ladies, Mavor’s account stands in contrast to the postwar emergence of gay and lesbian liberation in Britain and the United States. By 1956, Butler and Ponsonby were identified amongst the literary and historical figures identified within Jeanette H. Foster’s privately printed Sex Variant Women in

¹⁴ Mavor, Ladies xvii.

¹⁵ Mavor, Ladies 80.

George E. Haggerty observes of Mavor’s catalogue, “The condescension implicit in such a description, which medicalizes an entire range of social behavior and attempts to render ‘symptomatic’ the few activities that women were free to pursue without censure, reads into the period—perhaps rightly—a distrust of the cultivated homoptatonism that goes deeper than what Faderman suggests.” (George E. Haggerty, Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18th Century (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998) 90.)

¹⁶ Tim Hitchcock, English Sexualities, 1700-1800 (Basingstoke and London; New York: MacMillan; St. Martin’s Press, 1997) 82.

¹⁷ Mavor, Ladies xvii.

Literature, in which they are included in the speculative biographical chapter devoted to women about whom “persistent rumour or conjectural evidence strongly suggests variance”¹⁸ to “heterosexual adjustment.”¹⁹ In 1963, they were celebrated within the pages of The Ladder, the nationally-distributed newsletter of The Daughters of Bilitis, the “homophile” club founded in San Francisco in 1955.²⁰ Contributions to The Ladder were frequently published under pseudonyms. The account of Butler and Ponsonby was ascribed to “Marian Evans,” a pen name recalling the name adopted by George Eliot. As The Ladder declared of their elopement and domestic arrangements, with highly evocative rectitude, “That they could even think of such an undertaking is remarkable in itself. [...] The Eighteenth Century had rather strict notions of how young women in such circumstances should conduct themselves – notions which did not include leaving the country and setting up housekeeping with another woman.”²¹ Mavor’s professed reluctance to consider Butler and Ponsonby as lesbians therefore stood in tension with political and literary events across the Atlantic. In 1969, New York’s Greenwich Village witnessed the Stonewall uprising, in which the transgender, lesbian and gay patrons of the Stonewall bar fought back against police brutality. It also brought about the publication of Alma Routsong’s historical novel A Place for Us, which was privately printed on Bleeker Street and distributed, under the *nom de plume* Isabel Miller, from street corners and Daughters of Bilitis meetings. Routsong’s narrative was inspired by her discovery of the life story of the early nineteenth-century American painter Mary Ann

¹⁸ Jeanette Foster, Sex Variant Women in Literature (Tallahassee FL: Naiad Press, 1985) 14.

¹⁹ Foster, Sex 11.

²⁰ Evans, “Ladies.”

The name of the Daughters of Bilitis was derived from Pierre Louÿs’s 1894 song cycle, Les Chansons de Bilitis. The text was fraudulently claimed to have been written by Bilitis, an ancient Greek courtesan and contemporary of Sappho; the exposure of their true authorship did little to diminish their scandalous fame, or to rebut critics who asserted their literary value. (Foster, Sex 112.)

²¹ Evans, “Ladies.” 4.

Wilson, who shared a “romantic attachment” with her companion Miss Brundidge, in New York State. Routsong’s novel, set in 1816, depicts the transformative relationship shared by the masculine farm worker, Sarah, and the conventionally feminine Patience, a painter of religious scenes, who leave their families to establish a life of shared domesticity on the American frontier.²² Retitled Patience and Sarah, the novel was re-released in 1971 by McGraw-Hill, where it received the inaugural American Library Association Gay Book Award. In its depiction of an emphatically sexual, yet religiously sanctioned, same-sex union, Patience and Sarah underscored the political critique constituted by utopian historical models, its original title recalling the hopes embodied by the “star cross’d lovers” of Sondheim and Bernstein’s 1957 musical, West Side Story. Its narrative confronted and recast the cultural conflation of gender inversion and same-sex desire. Sarah’s sister, frightened of abandonment by her closest companion, declares with bitterness, “I used to worry about you. That no man would have you. I never thought to worry you *was* a man.” Sarah responds unflinchingly, “I’m not. I’m a woman that’s found my mate.”²³ Routsong’s novel underscored the imaginative possibilities evinced by the historical excavation of the lesbian and gay past, the back matter declaring of the historical Willson and Brundidge, “We are provoked to tender dreams by a hint. Any stone from their hill is a crystal ball.”²⁴ The popularity of Routsong’s text may be seen as shaping the American reception of the Ladies’ narrative in the 1970s, encouraging readers to interpret Mavor’s “hints” through the crystal ball of a desired history. In rejecting the category of lesbian, Mavor nonetheless echoes Anna Seward in figuring Plâs newydd as a pre-lapsarian paradise, destroyed, as Gayle Rubin suggests, by “an expulsion

²² Isabel [Alma Routsong] Miller, Patience and Sarah (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).

²³ Miller, Patience 36.

²⁴ Miller, Patience Back Matter.

from Eden engineered by nasty sexologists.”²⁵ Mavor’s wistful depiction thus endorses Frederic Jameson’s account of nostalgia as the collective desire for an imagined and irretrievable past, positing Butler and Ponsonby as the first couple of a now-lost relational form.²⁶

As explored previously, Mavor’s text inspired extraordinary academic and popular interest, shaping late twentieth-century attitudes towards both Butler and Ponsonby and feminist historiography in a manner she could not have anticipated. Subsequent studies of Butler and Ponsonby have nonetheless failed to attend to the reception history of Mavor’s text, such omissions reflecting its distillation of a geographically scattered archive into an accessible, if neither entirely accurate nor unprejudiced, biographical narrative. The initial reception of Mavor’s biography was influenced strongly by by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s 1975 article “The Female World of Love and Ritual.” Smith-Rosenberg’s article was the first to be published in the inaugural issue of the feminist journal Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, its prominence indicating the foundational nature of debates over women’s historical same-sex relationships within second wave feminism. Smith-Rosenberg argues that the separate gender spheres of the nineteenth-century American middle class constituted “a female world” linking women through the shared social and biological experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and menopause.²⁷ She thus stresses the primacy of maternal bonds, consolidated by an

²⁵ Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler, “Sexual Traffic,” differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies Special Issue “More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory” 6.2-3 (1994): 62-99. 75.

²⁶ Frederic Jameson, The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern: 1983-1998 (London and New York: Verso, 1998) 10.

²⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1 (1975): 1-29. 9.

apprenticeship system in which younger women were trained in domestic skills by older female relatives, and young girls were fostered by older female friends and relatives.²⁸ Smith-Rosenberg claims that “deeply felt, same-sex friendships were casually accepted” within this homosocial milieu, their language and intensity paralleling those of cross-gendered relationships.²⁹ She importantly affirmed women’s same-sex relationships as legitimate objects of historical study, and diaries and personal correspondence as crucial scholarly sources.³⁰ In stressing that past relationships were structured by unfamiliar social and sexual norms,³¹ Smith-Rosenberg also anticipated the ensuing significance of the social constructionist thesis, as well as later calls to defamiliarize both past sexual practices and what is presumed to be known of sexuality in the present-day.³²

Smith-Rosenberg foregrounded the intensely physical nature of the desire expressed in her sources, arguing, not that such relationships were asexual, but that they were located in a historical period prior to the belief that the hetero/homosexual binary “efficiently and additively divide[s] up the universe of sexual orientation.”³³ As she declared, “The essential question is not whether these women had genital contact and can therefore be defined as homosexual or heterosexual.”³⁴ Smith-Rosenberg’s analysis thus offers an important precursor to my own project, in which I set aside any attempt to determine the precise nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship, instead attending to

²⁸ Smith-Rosenberg, “Female.” 18.

²⁹ Smith-Rosenberg, “Female.” 1.

³⁰ Smith-Rosenberg, “Female.” 1.

³¹ Smith-Rosenberg, “Female.” 3.

³² Molly McGarry, “Female Worlds,” *Journal of Women's History* 12.3 (2000): 9-12. 1, Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 48.

³³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” *Tendencies* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993): 109-29. 115-16.

³⁴ Smith-Rosenberg, “Female.” 8.

the performative strategies through which they represented their relationship, and have been represented throughout their historical afterlife. Smith-Rosenberg's model was nonetheless critiqued throughout the 1990s and beyond for denying the significance of embodied sexual practices. In her 2003 Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity, Kathryn R. Kent claims that Smith-Rosenberg's linkage of the structures of biological kinship with those of romantic friendship threatens to collapse a range of women's relationships into a "rosy, undefinable world," erasing the inherently sexual nature of both female intimacies and the familial realm.³⁵ Describing relationships shared by women ranging from adolescence to maturity, Smith-Rosenberg declares, "Paradoxically to twentieth-century minds, their love seems to have been both sensual and platonic."³⁶ Kent's concern about the desexualizing effects of Smith-Rosenberg's framework is borne out by the terms of this false dichotomy, in which neither option admits the possibility of frankly sexual desire. This elision is similarly noted by Melissa Solomon, who wryly critiques Smith-Rosenberg's juxtaposition of "genital contact" with "emotional interaction," "as if Victorian genitals were automatically estranged from the Victorian subjects being studied."³⁷ The prescience of Smith-Rosenberg's decision to analyse nineteenth-century women's relationships outside of the twentieth-century hetero/homosexual binary is thus shown to be inflected by assumptions about the "secure and empathic" world of nineteenth-century female domesticity that are as distorting as the anachronistic binary she seeks to avoid, casting any consideration of genitality as a crass twentieth-century preoccupation.

³⁵ Kent, Making 5.

³⁶ Smith-Rosenberg, "Female." 4.

³⁷ Melissa Solomon, "The Female World of Exorcism and Displacement (or, Relations between Women in Henry James's Nineteenth-Century Portrait of a Lady," Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997): 444-64. 462n4.

While Smith-Rosenberg attempted to set aside questions of genital sexual practices within romantic friendships, Lillian Faderman's 1981 Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present influentially claimed that such relationships were almost certainly chaste, declaring, "romantic friendships were love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital."³⁸ Characterising Butler and Ponsonby as "the great success story of romantic friendship," Faderman ensured their exemplary status within lesbian historiography, invoked throughout the 1980s and beyond in order to both prove and disprove the romantic friendship hypothesis.³⁹ Faderman declares:

[W]omen in centuries other than ours often internalized the view of women having little sexual passion. Thus they might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of overwhelming love and promises of eternal faithfulness, and yet see their passions as nothing more than effusions of the spirit. If they were sexually aroused, bearing no burden of visible proof as men did, they might deny it even to themselves.⁴⁰

³⁸ Faderman, Surpassing 16.

³⁹ As Betty T. Bennett observed of Butler and Ponsonby in 1991, "The 'two most celebrated virgins,' renowned in their time as paragons of sisterly love, were held up as paragons of good taste and moral behavior; their accustomed 'semi-masculine' costume, merely eccentric. No one in that era, at least openly, raised the question of sexual love between the fair virgins." (Betty T. Bennett, Mary Diana Dods: A Gentleman and a Scholar (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994) 101.)

⁴⁰ Faderman, Surpassing 16.

While Faderman's notes that the adoption of male prerogatives of dress and demeanour rendered women of this period subject to particular scrutiny, she claims this merely registered the transgression of social norms, denying that gender may have also operated as a code through which to conceptualize unorthodox sexuality (17). Faderman's denial of the social threat represented by romantic friendship is reflected by her account of the 1790 General Evening Post article about Butler and Ponsonby, suggestively entitled "Extraordinary Female Affection." As discussed further in chapter four, the article employed tropes of gender difference to suggest that Butler and Ponsonby's relationship was sexual in nature. Faderman, however, remains unruffled by her material, commenting mildly, "There may have been some slight suspicion, perhaps fostered by Eleanor's near-transvestite appearance, that their relationship was unorthodox." (124)

Faderman's vividly imagined female lovers echo the 'frictionless' sexual union of Milton's angelic host, their intimacy accomplished "Easier than Air with Air."⁴¹ The undoubtedly pleasurable consequences of such naïveté – whether that of romantic friends or their latter-day apologists – illustrate Sedgwick's account of the sexual possibilities enabled by the strenuous maintenance of such sexual 'ignorance,' which is interleaved with the same knowledge it seeks to resist.⁴² The passage is also notable for its contrasting of a reified feminine innocence against the masculine domain of sexuality, echoing Mavor's likening of the advent of the masculine-defined domains of sexology and psychoanalysis to the descent into sexualized knowledge of the Biblical fall. As Faderman declares of Butler and Ponsonby: "Since they had no sexual duty to a husband, who, as they would have seen it, would be 'driven' by his male nature to initiate the sex act, they probably would have been happy to be oblivious to their genitals."⁴³

Although Faderman echoes Mavor's assertion that romantic friends did not express their love through sexual contact, their underlying rationales are notably divergent, with Faderman characterizing such women as lesbian: "'Lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each other. Sexual contact may be part of the relationship to a greater or a lesser degree, or it may be

⁴¹ John Milton, "Paradise Lost," *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998): 296-710. 8:625-26.

⁴² Sedgwick, "Queer," 25.

⁴³ Faderman, *Surpassing* 123.

Within many articulations of the romantic friendship model, this 'fall' is figured as a descent into both sexual knowledge and prejudice. Noting this historical erasure of queer shame, censure and secrecy, Heather K. Love observes, "The cultures of same-sex love that were central to the post-liberation historical imaginary were notably free of homophobia as we know it." (Heather K. Love, "'Spoiled Identity': Stephen Gordon's Loneliness and the Difficulties of Queer History," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7.4 (2001): 487-519. 492.)

entirely absent.”⁴⁴ Faderman’s account thus echoes Adrienne Rich’s influential account of the ‘lesbian continuum’ in which the definitional core of lesbianism is located in “woman-identified experience,” rather than sexual desire or practice.⁴⁵ Faderman’s emphasis on Butler and Ponsonby’s gendered similitude moreover reflects lesbian-feminist critiques of butch-femme ‘roles,’ which are claimed to uncritically reproduce the structural inequality of heteronormative gender.⁴⁶ Faderman rejects Smith-Rosenberg’s injunction against reading social or sexual identities across the epistemic gulf of modernity, identifying the nineteenth-century domestic sphere as the socially enforced corollary of the voluntary gender-separatism of the 1970s and early 1980s: “I venture to guess that had romantic friends of other eras lived today, many of them would have been lesbian-feminists; and had the lesbian-feminists of our day lived in other eras, most of them would have been romantic friends.”⁴⁷ Faderman identifies Butler and Ponsonby as virtual participants within the lesbian-feminist movement of the 1970s, asserting a dynamic relationship in which the transposability of the eighteenth- and twentieth-centuries is modified only by the apparently greater numbers of lesbian-feminists (“most

⁴⁴ Faderman, *Surpassing* 17-18.

In an 1989 essay, members of the London Lesbian History Group cite Mavor’s refusal to view Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship as lesbian as indicative of “the extremely limited and frequently negative definition of what ‘lesbian’ means.” (Avril Rolf, Linda Kerr and Jane Allen, “An Introduction to Books for Lesbian History Studies,” *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985*, ed. Lesbian History Group (London: The Women’s Press, 1989): 188-227. 188-89.) Such comments underscore the political divergence separating Mavor and Faderman’s accounts of romantic friendship.

⁴⁵ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 227-54. 239. Also see Rich’s “It is the Lesbian in Us...” in Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: Norton, 1979. 199-202; and Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (Volcano CA: Volcano Press, 1991). As Martin and Lyon declare, “A Lesbian is a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in a member of her own sex, even though that interest may not be overtly expressed.” (1)

⁴⁶ See Sheila Jeffreys, “Butch and Femme: Then and Now,” *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985*, ed. Lesbian History Group (London: The Women’s Press, 1989): 158-87.

⁴⁷ Faderman, *Surpassing* 120.

Faderman’s privileging of ties of gender over those of sexuality has been widely criticized. For a analysis relevant to the present discussion, see Lisa L. Moore, *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997) 9-10.

of them would have been romantic friends”) who would endorse this exchange.⁴⁸ This appropriation exemplifies Butler and Ponsonby’s cultural and temporal mobility, asserted most strikingly in Mary Louisa Gordon’s 1936 account of their ghostly re-embodiment.

The metonymic linkage of the Ladies and romantic friendship led each to fall from favour as critical consensus turned against the romantic friendship model in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This development served to modify, however, rather than diminish, their central role in debates of the history of female same-sex desire, as they continued to operate as the critical test case through which scholars marked their position in the bitter debate that developed between proponents of chaste romantic friendship and those emphasising trans-historical lesbian desire. The evidentiary basis of the romantic friendship model was challenged profoundly by the 1988 publication of extracts from the diary of Yorkshire heiress Anne Lister, whose coded diaries described her as having engaged in an indefatigable array of relationships and flirtations.⁴⁹ Lister and the Ladies were soon placed in critical opposition. Reviewing Helena Whitbread’s first edition of Lister’s diaries in the London Review of Books in 1988, Mavor downplayed the empirical challenge Lister’s diaries posed to the romantic friendship model. In the

⁴⁸ As discussed below, Doris Grumbach published her novelisation of Butler and Ponsonby, The Ladies, in 1984. Writing to Grumbach in the months following its publication, Judith Danes echoed Faderman’s figuration of Butler and Ponsonby as antecedents of contemporary lesbian feminists. As she writes, “Though it took our local bookstore over four weeks to fill our special order for the LADIES, it did finally arrive and was devoured faster than a plate of green chile enchiladas (a favorite of ours) and was enjoyed as much, if not more so. It’s a welcome addition to our library of lesbian/feminist literature, sensitively documenting a life style that many of us in many ways endeavor to duplicate today.” (Judith Danes, Judith Danes to Doris Grumbach 1 Nov. 1984, Doris Grumbach Collection New York Public Library, New York.)

⁴⁹ Anne Lister, I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister 1791-1840, ed. Helena Whitbread (London: Virago, 1988) 145.

In 1991, Bennett identified the Lister diaries as central to the rejection of the presumptive asexuality of female same-sex relationships in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, observing “If other nineteenth-century instances such as ‘Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon’ equivocated about the possibility of a sexual relationship between two women, Lister’s actions and narrative leave no doubt at all.” (Bennett, Mary 14-15.)

opening paragraphs of her review, she describes Lister's text as "a daily memoir of so extraordinary a candour that it was difficult not to think it a forgery," thereafter giving content to its 'astonishing' nature by noting Lister's striking masculinity. It is nonetheless not until significantly later that she refers to "certain sprightly immodesties of feminine behaviour" articulated in the works of Juvenal, and still later that she clarifies this coded reference – her deployment of which mirrors Lister's own use of classical references to constitute communities of sexual knowingness – by noting the exclusively female nature of Lister's sexual object choices.⁵⁰ Mavor observes Lister's interest in whether Butler and Ponsonby shared "possibly more than friendship", and notes the lack of clarity characterizing the concept of romantic friendship.⁵¹ She does not, however, engage directly with the challenge Lister's diaries pose to the central tenets of the romantic friendship thesis she influentially endorsed, despite the antagonistic relationship implied by her role as reviewer.⁵² Lister's well-documented desires were nonetheless soon to render Butler and Ponsonby the unlovely mascots of what Terry Castle termed the "no-sex-before-1900 myth,"⁵³ needing only to be dismissed *en route* to discussion of Lister.⁵⁴ Lister's rakish sexuality and Byronic masculinity further resonated with the critical celebration of gender transitivity and performativity throughout the 1990s, her desire to seduce a Miss Greenwood in the garden shed by means of male dress and a penis

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Mavor, "Gentleman Jack from Halifax," London Review of Books 10.3 (1988): 18-19.

⁵¹ Mavor, "Gentleman." 19.

⁵² Mavor, "Gentleman." 18-19.

⁵³ Terry Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 96.

⁵⁴ Castle, Apparitional 93-95.

The recuperation of working-class women's relationships also led to Butler and Ponsonby being dismissed as emblematic of the middle-class and gentry women whose narratives have dominated lesbian historiography. Accordingly, the co-founder of the American Lesbian Herstory Archives, Joan Nestle, called upon lesbian historians to tell the stories of lesbian sex workers, rather than those of pensioned Irish aristocrats and American expatriates of the Parisian Left Bank. (Joan Nestle, A Restricted Country (Ithaca NY: Firebrand Press, 1987) 166).

understandably eclipsing the sexual circumspection of Butler and Ponsonby's "sweet and delicious retirement."⁵⁵

Writing in 1993 of the palpable urgency of Lister's representation of sexual desire, Castle declares, "Here [is] indeed an alternative to the Ladies of Llangollen and the lugubrious myths of lesbian asexuality."⁵⁶ The critical juxtaposition of Lister and the Ladies reified Butler and Ponsonby's apparent normativity, obscuring the ways in which their gendered self-fashioning was also highly performative, and how their elopement and subsequent retirement were profoundly shocking to many of their contemporaries. It further reinforced their status as a litmus test with which to gauge past and present attitudes towards female same-sex intimacies. Lisa L. Moore's 1993 Dangerous Intimacies: Towards a Sapphic History of the British Novel illustrates the tension between eighteenth-century attitudes towards romantic friendship and sapphism by juxtaposing Hester Thrale Piozzi's horror of "female Fiends" with her friendship with Butler and Ponsonby.⁵⁷ Moore argues that accusations of gender transgression were used to register fears of unorthodox sexuality with reference to prurient reports of the Ladies' allegedly masculine dress and demeanour, the force of her example emphasizing the belief that if *they* could be suspected of sapphism, so could any female couple of the period. Moore's reference to Lister's belief that Butler and Ponsonby's relationship was "surely...not platonic" similarly invokes the alleged contrast between Lister and the Ladies' sexual practices in order to emphasize the rhetorical force of its collapse.⁵⁸ The

⁵⁵ Lister, Know 151.

⁵⁶ Castle, Apparitional 106.

⁵⁷ Moore, Dangerous 1-2.

⁵⁸ Moore, Dangerous 84.

paradigm shift effected by evidence of Butler and Ponsonby's *suspected* sexuality – a shift figured to be as counterintuitive as the hypothetical revelation that Liberace was enthusiastically heterosexual – was further marked by its invocation in later rebuttals of the romantic friendship model, including the work of Liz Stanley and Marylynne Diggs.⁵⁹

As Lister was celebrated for supplying proof of the sexual nature of women's relationships in history, Butler and Ponsonby were denigrated for their role in upholding the rhetoric of romantic friendship, the vitriol of the attacks suggesting that they were viewed as embodying the denial of female same-sex sexuality in the present as well as the past. In her 1993 The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture, Castle implicitly revises what she terms the "masculinist bent" of Sedgwick's 1990 Epistemology of the Closet, countering Sedgwick's influential axioms "for anti-homophobic analysis" with a set of alternative axioms with which to reveal the culturally occluded lesbian subject.⁶⁰ Castle's first axiom declares that the lesbian subject "is not asexual."⁶¹ She thereby rejects the romantic friendship paradigm by foregrounding a specifically corporeal account of female same-sex desire characterized by the "incorrigibly *lascivious* surge towards the body of another woman."⁶² Noting the fact that the Lister diaries were immediately rumoured to be hoax (the possibility of which Mavor

⁵⁹ See Liz Stanley, "Epistemological Issues in Researching Lesbian History: The Case of Romantic Friendship," Working Out: New Directions for Women's Studies, Eds. Hinds, Hilary, Ann Phoenix and Jackie Stacey. New York and Washington DC: The Falmer Press, 1992. 161-73.; and Marylynne Diggs, "Romantic Friends or a 'Different Race of Creatures'? The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America." Feminist Studies 21:2 (1995) 317-40.

⁶⁰ Castle, Apparitional 13.

⁶¹ Castle, Apparitional 8.

⁶² Castle, Apparitional 11.

raises only to deny in the London Review of Books),⁶³ Castle suggests that the inability to imagine historical women engaging in same-sex sexual activity reflects the similar inability to imagine contemporary women engaging in such acts, “as if lesbianism and ‘not doing it’ were somehow perversely synonymous.”⁶⁴ Castle thus offers an implicit explanation of the fevered nature of the debate between advocates of romantic friendship and trans-historical lesbian practices, suggesting it to be a war waged, not only over past identities and practices, but current possibilities for the instantiation and recognition of lesbian sexuality. Her perceptive account of Butler and Ponsonby’s persistent desexualization discloses her obvious dislike of “the insufferable pair,”⁶⁵ the animus underlying her remarks suggesting that she views them as undermining more recent assertions of lesbian sexuality. Castle notes that Butler and Ponsonby anticipated the bowdlerization of their biography, befriending figures such as Seward who were likely to promulgate their ‘sisterly’ devotion in print and epistolary form.⁶⁶ She nonetheless neglects the subversive implications of the sheer necessity of the Butler and Ponsonby’s “discreet public relations campaign,” or their successful protection of their relationship, regardless of its nature, for over fifty years. She instead chides their capitulation to social

⁶³ Annamarie Jagose describes the historiographic desires and conjunction of ostensibly disparate literary and narrative styles that led scholars to suspect that Lister’s diaries were simply too good to be true: “As a publishing event, Helena Whitbread’s *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840* so took the form of a wish-fulfillment that inevitably it seemed to have the whiff of the hoax about it. Thrown by the contrast between the diary’s invocation of the plots of, say, a Jane Austen and a John Cleland, more than a few readers (myself included), questioned the diary’s authenticity. [...] Specifying bodily parts and their narrative conjunction and electrified by the always eroding distinction between the sexually inexperienced and the initiated, Lister’s drawing on a conventionally male pornographic tradition raised the suspicion that her diary was a literary fake.” (Annamarie Jagose, Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2002) 14.)

⁶⁴ Castle, Apparitional 11.

⁶⁵ Castle, Apparitional 93.

⁶⁶ Castle, Apparitional 93-94.

scrutiny, linking their successful self-defence with the ensuing resonance of the romantic friendship model.⁶⁷

More recent work has sought to reify Butler and Ponsonby's foundational link with romantic friendship. Vicinus's 2004 Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women 1778-1928 employs Butler and Ponsonby's elopement as an historical ur-text, initiating both modern lesbian history and a narrative that concludes with the equally over-determined event of the publication of Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness. Vicinus distances her account of female intimacies from the desexualizing work of earlier scholars,⁶⁸ moderating her claim that the second half of the eighteenth century distinguished between sensual romantic friendship and sexual sapphism by noting the uncertain contours of these categories.⁶⁹ Unable to argue simply for the unproblematic social acceptance of chaste romantic friendships, Vicinus echoes Moore's account of the way in which transgressions of gendered norms of dress and demeanour both raised and registered fears of sexual intimacy between women. Vicinus's commitment to a more complex category of romantic friendship leads her to incorporate the gendered framing she terms the "husband-wife" model within the category of socially accepted female intimacy, a move again accomplished with reference to Butler and Ponsonby. This assimilation, however, disguises the way in which the incorporation of gender disparity into the romantic friendship model also marks the compromising of its ostensible asexuality, giving way to the alternative gendered paradigm stressing Butler's role as masculine partner to Ponsonby's feminine counterpart, a figuration to which I now turn.

⁶⁷ Castle, Apparitional 94.

⁶⁸ Vicinus, Intimate xx.

⁶⁹ Vicinus, Intimate xvii.

Gender Trouble: Butler and Ponsonby and the Masculine/Feminine Dyad

Ponsonby's epitaph: "She did not long survive her beloved companion LADY ELEANOR BUTLER," gestures towards a tradition extending from reports of Butler and Ponsonby's elopement to those of twenty-first century commentators in which Butler is figured as the dominant and masculine partner, and Ponsonby as her pliant feminine companion. Looking beyond Butler and Ponsonby's metonymic linkage with romantic friendship reveals a significant counter-tradition in which the language of gender difference has been used to imply that their relationship was sexual. The tension between these two models constitutes an impasse that has yet to be identified critically, and still less worked through. This conflation of gender transitivity and same-sex desire accords with the mid eighteenth-century paradigm shift traced in Susan S. Lanser's 2003 essay, "'Queer to Queer': the Sapphic Body as Transgressive Text."⁷⁰

Lanser claims that British accounts of the genesis of female same-sex eroticism underwent a paradigm shift in the mid-eighteenth century, replacing theories of anatomical abnormality with those of social transgression.⁷¹ The earlier figure of the tribade, whose desires were marked by her masculinized anatomy, was thus supplanted by the sapphist, whose conventionally female body was overlain with masculine gender attributes. In her 2002 The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England, Valerie Traub's analysis of sixteenth and seventeenth century European medical,

⁷⁰ Susan S. Lanser, "'Queer to Queer': The Sapphic Body as Transgressive Text," Lewd and Notorious: Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century, ed. Katharine Kittredge (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003): 21-46.

⁷¹ Lanser, "Queer," 23.

literary and legal texts indicates that while female homoeroticism was outlawed under sodomy statutes in nations such as France, such practices tended only to be prosecuted when the ownership of “illicit devices” was held as proof of penetration.⁷² By the early seventeenth century, this “logic of supplementarity” led French and British writers to pathologize anatomical, as well as prosthetic, supplementation of the female body, identifying body parts with behaviours in a manner Traub terms “anatomical essentialism.”⁷³ Accordingly, Helkiah Crooke’s 1615 Microcosmographia describes women’s “unnatural” homoerotic desires as being caused by an enlarged clitoris:

[S]ometimes [the clitoris] grows to such a length that it hangeth without the cleft like a mans member...and so strutteth and growth to a rigiditie as doth the yarde of a man. And this part it is which those wicked women doe abuse called *Tribades* (often mentioned by many authors, and in some states worthily punished) to their mutual and unnatural lusts.⁷⁴

The source of female homoeroticism was thus located within the body of the tribade, whose anomalous physiology leads her to usurp the male act of penetration.⁷⁵ As Traub observes in distinguishing between the early modern figure of the tribade and the contemporary lesbian, “the logic of modern homophobia [claims] *lesbians* hate (or fear) men; in contrast, according to the Renaissance psychomorphology of the clitoris, the tribade enacted the sincerest form of flattery: emulation.”⁷⁶ Lanser stresses that this period nonetheless failed to identify female homoeroticism with social or sartorial signs

⁷² Valerie Traub, The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 42. Traub comments, “Neither a French woman’s desire for another woman nor any non-penetrative acts she might commit were necessarily crimes [...] Rather, within the early modern logic of crime and punishment, the prothetic supplementation of a woman’s body, when used to penetrate the body of another, unambiguous grounds for execution.” (Traub, Renaissance 194.) The greater social anxieties raised by the use of “artificial objects” in female-female sexual acts is also noted by Faderman. (Faderman, Surpassing 31-2.)

⁷³ Traub, Renaissance 194.

⁷⁴ Crooke, qtd. in Traub, Renaissance 194.

⁷⁵ Traub, Renaissance 42.

⁷⁶ Traub, Renaissance 220.

of masculinity (as opposed to biological 'maleness'), citing the 1620 pamphlet Hic Mulier; or, the man-woman in which cross-dressed women are held to behave "loosely, indiscreetly, wantonly, and most vnochastely" [sic] with men, rather than other women.⁷⁷ While external signs of female masculinity were identified with the usurpation of masculine social prerogatives, they were yet to signify the correlative usurpation of *sexual* prerogatives, as indicated by accounts of female soldiers and sailors who adopted male personas in order to follow their male lovers into battle, rather than to pursue homoerotic desires.⁷⁸

By the middle of the eighteenth century, literary representations of same-sex desire reveal the progressive displacement of the figure of the tribade by that of the anatomically female sapphist, whose sexual desires are marked by her masculine gender attributes. In 1746, Henry Fielding anonymously authored a twenty-three page pamphlet, The Female Husband, or the Surprising History of Mrs. Mary, alias George Hamilton, elaborating on the facts of a 1746 case overseen by his jurist brother and reported in a Bath newspaper. The 'husband' of Fielding's title, Mary Hamilton, is a naïve young woman. Echoing the cultural association of religious enthusiasm and sexual transgression, Hamilton's Methodist neighbour introduces her into the sexual intimacies she had "learnt and often practiced at Bristol with her methodistical sisters."⁷⁹ Upon being abandoned for a "very zealous" gentleman of the same sect,⁸⁰ Hamilton dresses as

⁷⁷ Qtd. in Lanser, "Queer," 25.

⁷⁸ Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe (Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan, 1989) 27-30.

⁷⁹ Henry Fielding, "The Female Husband: Or, the Surprising History of Mrs. Mary, Alias Mr George Hamilton," The Female Husband and Other Writings, ed. Claude E. Jones (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1960): 27-51. 31.

⁸⁰ Fielding, "Female," 32.

a preacher and travels to Ireland, her adoption of male dress and identity differing from earlier accounts of female transvestism in proceeding from, rather than occasioning, her homoerotic desires. Hamilton marries a wealthy widow, who boasts of her new husband's sexual accomplishments, achieved by means "which decency forbids [the author] even to mention."⁸¹ Hamilton's female body, however, is unable to sustain her gendered performance, her smooth chin and lack of "wherewithal" to satisfy her partners' "unseasonable" demands leading to her unmasking by a succession of female lovers.⁸² In the guise of a doctor, Hamilton marries a young woman, who initially "had not the least suspicion of the legality of her marriage."⁸³ Within a fortnight, however, the young woman becomes aware of her husband's lack of either a beard or male member. Failing to be pacified by Hamilton's assurance that she will enjoy "all the pleasures of marriage without the inconveniences," she denounces her husband as a fraud, but not before Hamilton escapes and successfully courts Molly Price, an eighteen-year old woman "of extraordinary beauty."⁸⁴ Molly's praise of Hamilton's sexual skills nonetheless lead to her the latter's unmasking, for which she is publicly whipped and imprisoned for fraud.⁸⁵ The inevitability of Hamilton's exposure marks the emergence of the modern faith in the ontological priority of sex over gender, the harshness of her public flagellation leading Fielding's narrator to note:

[T]hose persons who have more regard to beauty than to justice [and] could not refrain from exerting some pity towards her, when they saw so lovely a skin scarified with rods in such a manner that her back was almost flead [sic].⁸⁶

⁸¹ Fielding, "Female," 37-38.

⁸² Fielding, "Female," 39.

⁸³ Fielding, "Female," 41.

⁸⁴ Fielding, "Female," 43.

⁸⁵ Fielding, "Female," 42.

⁸⁶ Fielding, "Female," 50.

The conjunction of Hamilton's feminine 'loveliness' and unconventional desires marks the historical move away from biological accounts of female same-sex desire, entailing the corollary possibility that *any* woman could desire her own sex.⁸⁷ In the wake of this shift, female friendships were thus subjected to particular scrutiny, with Elizabeth Robinson Montagu writing to her sister, Sarah, in 1750: "I cannot think what Mrs L- & Miss R mean by making such a parade of their affection, they might know it wd give occasion to Lies." Montagu declares:

[T]hose sort of reports hurt us all And fall in their degree on the whole Sex. And really if this nonsense gains ground one must shut oneself up alone; for one cannot have Men Intimates & at this rate the Women are more scandalous. So we must become Savages and have no friendships or connexions.⁸⁸

Montagu claims potentially excessive female intimacies pose a threat to the very possibility of human sociability by rendering all forms of interaction liable to sexual interpretation. Lanser thus suggests that the apparent slippage between female friendship and sexual intimacy led mid-eighteenth century commentators to identify female same-sex desire with external signifiers of masculinity such as clothing, stance, character and skills, marking the sapphist as clearly as did the tribade's genital abnormality.⁸⁹

The spectre of the anatomically monstrous tribade was only incompletely exorcised during this period. Her persistence, however, was predicated upon her geographical banishment from Britain and Europe, intensifying the identification of clitoral hypertrophy with India and the Middle East found in Jane Sharp's 1761 The Midwives

⁸⁷ Lanser, "Queer," 32.

⁸⁸ MO5719; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Sarah Robinson [Later Scott], Ms, Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

⁸⁹ Lanser, "Queer," 34.

Book – “I never heard but of one in this Country” – and minimizing the rhetorical rebound through which such apparently alien phenomena reappear within a British context: “if there be any they will do what they can for shame to keep it close.”⁹⁰

Accordingly, in the oft-cited 1810 case *Woods and Pirie v. Cummings Gordon*, in which two Scottish schoolteachers were accused of sexual intimacy, a judge held the charges to reflect the “Hindoo” upbringing of the half-Indian witness, Jane Cumming, declaring “the crime of one woman giving another the clitoris” was “impossible in this country to commit.”⁹¹

While the British Mary Hamilton was distinguished from her tribadic ancestors by her female morphology, her male dress is figured as functional in nature, its voluntary adoption offering her the gendered means with which to pursue her female lovers. Hamilton’s literary heir, however, was the masculine woman whose inherently inverted desires are marked by her correlatively inverted gender.⁹² Literary manifestations of this model include Miss Barnevelt of Samuel Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54):

[A] lady of masculine features, and whose mind bely’d not those features...Nobody, it seems, thinks of an *husband* for Miss Barnevelt. She is sneeringly spoken of rather as a *young fellow*, than as a woman; and who will one day look out for a *wife* for herself.⁹³

Miss Barnevelt is shown regarding the novel’s heroine, Harriet Byron, “with the eye of a Lover.” Her tendencies are thus held to require no ‘methodistical’ persuasion, her

⁹⁰ Qtd. in Traub, *Renaissance* 203.

⁹¹ Qtd. in Lanser, “Queer,” 29.

⁹² Lanser, “Queer,” 34-35.

⁹³ Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Jocelyn Harris, 3 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1972) 1:10:42-43.

masculine gender attributes marking her membership of a specific sexual type.⁹⁴ In Maria Edgeworth's 1801 Belinda, the pointedly-named Harriot Freke similarly competes with the virtuous Mr. Vincent for the heroine's affections, her inverted desires marked by her "Stentorian" voice,⁹⁵ pistol brandishing, and ensnarement in a "Man trap" which leads her "to become quite outrageous when it was hinted, that the beauty of her legs would be spoiled, and she would never more be able to appear to advantage in man's apparel."⁹⁶ The operation of this gruesome device thus enacts Freke's symbolic castration, her maimed legs marking the similarly 'deformed' relationship between her female morphology and 'masculine' desires.⁹⁷

Such literary conflations of gender transitivity and same-sex desire elucidate the way in which Anne Lister was publicly excoriated for her appropriation of masculine prerogatives, in terms of abuse – "That's a man...Does your cock stand?" – that leave their sexual implications in no doubt.⁹⁸ The importance of distinguishing between nascent lesbian identity and cross-gender identification, even when coupled with an exclusive erotic preference for other women, has been nonetheless asserted by critics including Amanda Berry and Annamarie Jagose.⁹⁹ As Jagose observes, "[T]here is a seemingly

⁹⁴ Maria Edgeworth, Belinda, ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 309-12.

⁹⁵ Edgeworth, Belinda 59.

⁹⁶ Edgeworth, Belinda 309-12.

⁹⁷ The use of masculinity as a sapphic signifier is similarly apparent in late eighteenth-century representations of sculptor Anne Damer, discussed further in chapter four, who was accused of sexual relations with women in both the print press and private record. As Joseph Farington observed in 1798, "She wears a Mans hat, and Shoes, and a Jacket, also like a mans—thus she walks ab[ou]t, the fields with a hooking stick." (Joseph Farington, The Farington Diaries, eds. Kenneth Garlick and Agnus Macintyre, 16 vols. (New Haven: Yale, 1978-84) 3:1048.)

⁹⁸ Lister, Know 49.

⁹⁹ Amanda Berry, "The Lesbian Focus," Lesbian and Gay Studies Newsletter (1994): 25-26.; Jagose, Inconsequence 16-23. This point is also made by Judith Halberstam. (Judith Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke UP, 1998) 72.)

slight but significant distinction to be made between Lister's sexual subjectivity and lesbianism, a distinction that follows the distinction between an identity characterized by gender deviance and female-female desire, and one constitutively structured by object choice."¹⁰⁰ Lister reports in May 1820:

Musing on the subject of being my own master. Of going to Buxton in my own carriage with a man & a maidservant. Meeting with an elegant girl of family & fortune; paying her attention; [...] staying all night; having a double bedroom; gaining her affections, etc. Mused on all this but it did not lead to anything worse.¹⁰¹

Lister's fantasy here is not characterized by the articulation of a sexual 'identity,' but the possession and exercise of the social and sexual freedoms accorded men. She further appears to desire the public stage accorded heteronormative courtship, the "double bedroom" upon which she muses differing only from her frequent access to her lovers' sleeping quarters in its shared, rather than single, nomination. Lister considered her class-inflected gender presentation to be central to her sexual charisma, observing on the 4 October 1820: "[M]y manners are certainly peculiar, not at all masculine but rather softly gentleman-like. I know how to please girls."¹⁰² Lister's juxtaposition of her gentlemanly manners against the feminine charms of the "girls" to whom they were directed leads Jagose to observe that Lister did not understand her sexual encounters to be enacted between subjects of the same gender or sexual identity, thereby suggesting that even documented evidence of genital contact between women is insufficient to demonstrate the existence of 'lesbians' in history.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Jagose, *Inconsequence* 16.

¹⁰¹ Lister, *Know* 123.

¹⁰² Lister, *Know* 136.

¹⁰³ Jagose, *Inconsequence* 21.

Lister's gender presentation threatened to expose her sexual practices to uncomfortable scrutiny, her journal of 1823 describing the discomfort experienced while holidaying in Scarborough, "I seem to have no proper dress. The people stare at me. My figure is striking."¹⁰⁴ She discusses this with her married lover, Mariana Lawton, who is increasingly aware of the gossip occasioned by Lister's unorthodox appearance: "M- came up to me for a few minutes before dinner... We touched on the subject of my figure. The people staring so on Sunday had made her feel quite low." While Mariana elsewhere identifies Lister's masculinity as central to her appeal, she responds in the affirmative to Lister's enquiry: "'Yet,' said I, 'taking me altogether, would you have me changed?' 'Yes,' said she. 'To give you a feminine figure.'"¹⁰⁵ The ease with which Lister engaged the affections of neighbourhood "girls" nonetheless endorses Lanser's contention that by 1800 female masculinity was viewed as a necessary, rather than merely sufficient sign of sapphism, rendering the feminine partner in such an exchange one for whom homoeroticism was "a temporary excursion inspired by the absence or ill behaviour of men."¹⁰⁶

In tracing the emergence of the modern conflation of gender transitivity and same-sex desire, Lanser suggests that those of Butler and Ponsonby's contemporaries who viewed them as chaste friends emphasized their femininity, while those who suspected

¹⁰⁴ Lister, *Know* 295.

¹⁰⁵ Lister, *Know* 295-96.

¹⁰⁶ Lanser, "Queer," 38.

The feminine invert may be seen as an historical analogue to Havelock Ellis's "situational invert," who is discussed further in chapter seven. Describing the broader challenge to the notion of fixed sexual identities constituted by the demonstrable flexibility of sexual identifications and practices, Lisa Duggan observes, "In the lexicon of contemporary sociology, 'situational' homosexuality occurs among 'heterosexual' people under special circumstances – in prisons or other same-sex institutions, for example." As she acutely continues, 'Situational' heterosexuality is seldom discussed." (Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review* 22.1 (1992): 11-31. 19.)

their intimacy of being sexual in nature depicted them as peculiarly masculine.¹⁰⁷ While masculinity has indeed been employed to mark Butler and Ponsonby as sexually intimate, accounts depicting them both as masculine are outnumbered by accounts in which they are framed as a masculine and feminine couple. Accounts of their mutual masculinity, moreover, work less to mark their unconventional sexuality than their flouting of both social and sartorial norms. John Lockhart offered the following account of Butler and Ponsonby on the occasion of his 1825 visit to Plâs newydd, undertaken in the company of Sir Walter Scott:

Imagine two women ...dressed in heavy blue riding habits, enormous shoes, and men's hats with their petticoats tucked up so that the first glance of them, fussing and tottering about their porch in the agony of expectation, we took them for a couple of hazy or crazy old sailors."¹⁰⁸

While Lockhart drolly emphasizes Butler and Ponsonby's appropriation of masculine dress and occupation, he does not imply their relationship to be anything other than socially and stylistically anachronistic. He mocks their eagerness to exhibit Plâs newydd ("for we must see everything to the dressing closets") and their fawning over "the author of *Waverly*," but is nonetheless sympathetic towards their gendered eccentricities: "Yet it is too bad to laugh at these good old girls; they have long been guardian angels of the village, and are worshipped by man, woman and child about them."¹⁰⁹ Lockhart thus locates Llangollen's "good old girls" within a peculiarly British tradition of genteel spinster couples, whose virtue is enshrined by their centrality to the local social order.

¹⁰⁷ Lanser, "Queer," 36.

¹⁰⁸ John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 8, 10 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable for T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1902) 44.

¹⁰⁹ Lockhart, *Life* 45-46.

While Lockhart's readers may have imputed a sexual significance to Butler and Ponsonby's allegedly shared masculinity, their relationship was most clearly sexualized by the depiction of Butler as the masculine precursor to the twentieth century's congenital invert, and Ponsonby as her reluctant feminine companion. Eighteenth-century accounts repeatedly describe Butler as 'masculine' and 'satirical,' likening her, in a simultaneous appeal to both nature and nurture, to her overbearing mother.¹¹⁰ Butler's masculinity was also emphasized by her close friend, Harriet Bowdler, whose correspondence with the Ladies referred flirtatiously to Butler as "my *Veillard*" or 'old man.'¹¹¹ Butler's putative masculinity was further held as proof of her concomitantly 'male' desire for women. In her nineteenth-century memoir, Ponsonby's niece Caroline Hamilton declares that Butler "could not be called feminine," having "reached the age of thirty without having had, I understand, one lover."¹¹² Butler thus recalls such queerly masculine figures such as Richardson's Miss Barnevelt, who are figured as inimical to the institution of heteronormative marriage.¹¹³ Hamilton's account of Ponsonby stands in stark contrast:

Miss Ponsonby's pleasing looks, & refined manners had gained her two lovers, with either of whom she might have been happy, in the common acceptance of the word, but she despised a common lot in

¹¹⁰ Hamilton, *Memoirs*.

¹¹¹ Harriet Bowdler, Harriet Bowdler to Sarah Ponsonby 13th June, Beinecke Special Collection, Yale University, New Haven.

¹¹² Hamilton, *Memoirs*.

¹¹³ These figurations also anticipate that of Henry James's Olive Chancellor in his 1886 *The Bostonians*, whose 'romantic' desire for Verena Tarrant evokes the emergent spectre of sexological invert. James's narrator declares: "Miss Chancellor was a signal old maid. That was her quality, her destiny; nothing could be more distinctly written. There are women who are unmarried by accident, and others who are unmarried by option; but Olive Chancellor was unmarried by every implication of her being. She was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet, or as the month of August is sultry." As Jagose observes of this passage, "Both a mark of her peculiar character ('her quality') and her inevitable fate ('her destiny'), Olive's being unmarried is not a simple declaration of her marital status – married or unmarried – but an indication that she is altogether beyond the institution of marriage, with its organizing of affect and kinship, its authorizations and its dispensations." (Jagose, *Inconsequence* 69.)

life, & conceived the project of running away from Woodstock with Lady Eleanor Butler urged on by a powerful reason.”¹¹⁴

Ponsonby’s feminine appeal to her lovers and guardian, whose advances formed the “powerful reason” to which Hamilton refers, are held as evidence of her potential sexual normalcy, from which she was diverted by what Mavor describes as Butler’s “dark influence.”¹¹⁵ Lady Betty also viewed Butler as having corrupted Ponsonby, writing to Mrs. Goddard in the aftermath of the initial elopement, “poor Soul if she had not been so fond of her pen so much would not have happened.”¹¹⁶ Through use of a double negative, Lady Betty asserts the innocence of Ponsonby’s youthful investments even as she rues their consequences, which are acknowledged only in wishing them undone. Ponsonby is thus presented as a Clarissa-like subject of epistolary seduction, whose sexual agency is erased by the projection of sapphism upon the masculinized Butler. Such tropes also characterize ensuing accounts, with Bell declaring “It is impossible to believe that Sarah...with eyes like speedwells, a piquant mischievous face, arched brows and jolly little nose” was as unhappy at home as was her masculine counterpart, suggesting that Ponsonby “turned, distracted, to Eleanor Butler” in a desire to shield Lady Betty from knowledge of Sir William’s pursuit.¹¹⁷ Accounts of Butler and Ponsonby’s chaste friendship are thus imbricated from the outset with the tropes of sexualized gender difference they seek most strenuously to resist.

The conflation of gender transitivity and same-sex desire nonetheless left the emergent model of the queer sapphist unable to account for the phenomenon of the

¹¹⁴ Hamilton, *Memoirs*.

¹¹⁵ Mavor, *Ladies* 37.

¹¹⁶ Fownes, L.E.F-Goddard [5 Apr.] 1778.

¹¹⁷ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 12.

feminine lover of other women. While identified with this categorical impossibility during her lifetime, Ponsonby was nonetheless sexualized through her association with Butler, as their appropriation of 'heterosexual' gender difference was also read to signify their appropriation of its sexual prerogatives. Gender differentiation formed the vehicle for the most overt public attack on Butler and Ponsonby's relationship, a 1790 article in the General Evening Post whose suggestive title, "Extraordinary Female Affection," recalls the "very extraordinary Friendship" shared by the homoerotic heroines of the 1744 The Travels and Adventures of Mademoiselle de Richelieu.¹¹⁸ The article declared Butler to be "tall and masculine, she wears always a riding habit, hangs her hat with the air of a sportsman in the hall, and appears in all respects a young man, if we except the petticoats which she still retains."¹¹⁹ One is again reminded of Richardson's Miss Barnevelt, about whom "one almost wonders at her condescending to wear petticoats."¹²⁰ Ponsonby was termed, by contrast, "polite and effeminate, fair and beautiful."¹²¹ The article's status as rhetorical act, rather than reliable reportage, is revealed by the fact that the equally-rotund Ladies dressed habitually in identical riding habits, in which Ponsonby stood as the taller of the two. The article nonetheless employed public gender difference as evidence of private sexual behaviour, suggesting that Butler and Ponsonby reproduced the sexual roles, as well as gendered attributes, of a husband and wife. Butler and Ponsonby recognized the sexual implications of this ostensibly gendered attack, immediately cancelling their subscription to the Post "for very Essential reasons."¹²² They also appealed to Edmund Burke, who was known for his 1780 parliamentary stand against the

¹¹⁸ Lanser, "Queer," 31.

¹¹⁹ Anon., "General," 2.

¹²⁰ Richardson, Grandison 1.10.42

¹²¹ Anon., "General," 2.

¹²² Butler, Journal 1788-91, 24 Jul. 1790.

barbaric treatment of convicted sodomites Theodosius Reed and William Smith, and who had himself bought successful cases for defamation in 1780 and 1784 against press claims that he was either sodomitical or sympathetic to such practices.¹²³ I will discuss this article further in chapter four, paying particular attention to the Ladies' connections with Burke.

The late eighteenth-century identification of the 'true' masculine sapphist led to her more feminine partner to be seen as merely a temporary inhabitant of Lesbos. In 1785, Ponsonby expressed to Sarah Tighe her exasperation over rumours of her impending marriage "to I know not whom," which Mrs. Goddard perceived as plausible.¹²⁴ Depictions of Ponsonby thus anticipate the sexological 'problem' of the feminine invert who, like The Well of Loneliness's Mary Llewellyn, will eventually leave her lover for a man. The linkage of female masculinity with same-sex desire further led to Ponsonby being figured as being dominated by Butler and wishing to return to Ireland. Indeed, Maria Edgeworth's depiction in Belinda of Miss Morton, "a slight figure in a riding-habit"¹²⁵ dragged reluctantly through the countryside by the masculine Jacobin, Harriot Freke, echoes contemporary accounts of Ponsonby's ostensible domination by Butler, her decision to remain in Llangollen for over fifty years constituting an advanced form of Stockholm Syndrome. Ellen Colwell has argued that Edgeworth would have been familiar with Butler and Ponsonby through her acquaintance with their mutual friend,

¹²³ Isaac Kramnick, The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 84.

¹²⁴ Qtd. in Mavor, Ladies 56.

¹²⁵ Edgeworth, Belinda 250.

Mrs. Powys, and her 1804 meeting of Lady Betty Fownes in Dublin.¹²⁶ She thereby argues that “the masculine, satiric ‘female outlaw’ Harriot Freke is a dead-ringer for Eleanor Butler,”¹²⁷ offering a literary endorsement of the late eighteenth-century linkage between female masculinity and sapphic subjectivity. Writing to his wife in 1805, Irish judge Charles Kendal Bushe declared of Butler and Ponsonby’s conversation: “every thing that they said [...] was pointed, naïve, polish’d and interesting—sometimes satirical always witty,” tempering his praise with the caveat, “(I should have said *she*, Miss P. is but an accompanist).”¹²⁸ Their sociability is thus likened to a musical performance, in which Ponsonby contributes only a supporting line. Class disparity is also used to assert Ponsonby’s ostensible subservience, with Sir Walter Scott’s 1816 account of their elopement describing Ponsonby donning leather breeches only to act as a footman to Butler’s gentleman.¹²⁹

Later accounts of Butler and Ponsonby reinscribe their respectively masculine and feminine attributes to widely varied effect. In 1892, Butler and Ponsonby were invoked in American newspaper reports of the murder of the Memphis teenager, Freda Ward, by her friend Alice Mitchell, who claimed that she wanted to marry Ward, who she would rather kill than live without.¹³⁰ Declaring the case “not entirely unprecedented,” the article cited ‘analogous’ cases including the 1878 murder in Maryland of Ella Hearn by Lily Duer, and the 1778 elopement of Butler and “Miss Sarah Parsonby [sic]”, suggesting that the

¹²⁶ Crowell, “Ghosting.” 205.

¹²⁷ Crowell, “Ghosting.” 214.

¹²⁸ E. OE Somerville and Martin Ross, An Incorruptible Irishman: Being an Account of Chief Justice Kendal Bushe (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1932) 170.

¹²⁹ Walter Scott, The Letters of Sir Walter Scott 1815-1817, ed. H.J.C Grierson (London: Constable and Co., 1933) 224.

¹³⁰ Duggan, Sapphic 9-11.

narrative conjunction of a masculine woman, a feminine partner, and the desire for a shared life constituted a form of sexual violence.¹³¹ Less sensationally, a 1930 review in the Canadian newspaper The Hamilton contrasted the “gentle Sarah,” with “the stronger-minded Lady Eleanor,” whose masculine sexual agency self-evidently animated their elopement: “[A]t the suggestion of Lady Eleanor (we are sure!) they decided to leave home secretly and find some place where they could live in peace and happiness.”¹³² Mary Louisa Gordon’s Chase of the Wild Goose also presents Butler and Ponsonby as respectively masculine and feminine. As discussed in chapter seven, Gordon employs the recurring category of camp in describing Butler as resembling her uncle, a stately archbishop.¹³³ Ponsonby, by contrast, is rendered the centre of male attention when they attend a Dublin ball, her pale pink dress, a gift from Butler, contrasting with the latter’s tuxedo-like choice of cream “with a bold touch of black.”¹³⁴ Gender difference is similarly emphasized in Foster’s Sex Variant Women in Literature, in which Butler is described as a “boyish young woman [...] given to wearing men’s clothes” and Ponsonby as an “adolescent girl.”¹³⁵ Ironically, however, it was not until the emergence of second wave feminism proclaimed women’s sexual liberation that Ponsonby’s sexual agency was again confined to the closet. Contemporary reports indicate that Ponsonby did not attend Butler’s funeral in June 1829, a decision many would view as the reasonable act of a bereaved partner.¹³⁶ Mavor, however, employs Ponsonby’s absence from this event to end substantively her account of the Ladies’ life, anticipating the familiar narrative in

¹³¹ Duggan, Sapphic 135.

¹³² Anon., “Review of the Hamwood Papers,” The Hamilton 13 Dec. 1930.

¹³³ Gordon, Chase 92.

¹³⁴ Gordon, Chase 80.

¹³⁵ Foster, Sex 123.

¹³⁶ Anon., Recollections of the Ladies of Llangollen Chiefly Related to Those by Jane Thomas Who Was in Their Service & Knew Them Well, Ms, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

which the femme is literally unable to appear unless flanked by her masculine counterpart.

This narrative conclusion is echoed by Anna M. Curren's 2001 self-published account of Butler and Ponsonby, comprising an unproduced screenplay and historical narrative. In Curren's screenplay, Ponsonby is comforted after Butler's death by 'Nigel,' a once-spurned lover who reacted angrily to her youthful refusal. Entreating forgiveness for his "cruel sensitivity" of fifty years previously, Nigel expresses his concern for Ponsonby's wellbeing, while she directs her attention to Butler: "She didn't suffer...And she'll not be long without me."¹³⁷ Such narratives parallel the erasure of Ponsonby's crucial role in establishing and maintaining her and Butler's retirement, from her documentation of their first tour to her facilitation, through her connection with Lady Dungannon, of their entrée into the local Welsh gentry. Moreover, in one of the most intriguing moments within Butler and Ponsonby's textual apocrypha, Harriet Pigott reports that Ponsonby saved Butler from drowning in the River Dee during their first Welsh tour.¹³⁸ While Mavor acknowledges this anecdote, she interprets it as an unconscious assertion of Butler's refusal to return to Kilkenny, reiterating Ponsonby's apparent position as acted upon, rather than acting: "Sarah knows where [Eleanor's] heart

¹³⁷ Anna M. Curren, Love, above the Reach of Time (San Diego: LadyePress U.S.A., 2001) 128. Curren depicts Nigel as narrating Ponsonby's demise: "I lost my beautiful Sarah for the second time on December 8th 1831. Her precious heart could support her grief no longer." Nigel thereby displaces Caryl from Butler and Ponsonby's life story, her place within their equilateral tomb replaced by a close-up of his "tear stained face." As he intones over the closing frames of the projected film, "In my dreams, and waking, I see them still. Young, vibrant, and happy. On the brink of that glorious union which was to last for over half a century. A commitment in loving that may serve as an example for all of us." (Curren, Love 129-30.)

¹³⁸ Pigott, Pigott F1-2, 198.

lies, and there will be no going back to Ireland.”¹³⁹ Curren also recontextualizes this event. Instead of Butler being rescued by Ponsonby, it the young Arthur Wesley¹⁴⁰ who is dragged to safety to by Butler, having fallen in the Dee after rebuffing his companion’s claim that the Ladies eat small boys. As he retorts, with the judgement that will serve him at Waterloo, “Rubbish, Timmy! Have any boys been missing?”¹⁴¹ The future statesman’s friendship with Butler and Ponsonby is then consolidated, as is the support of Lady Dungannon, as Wesley is revived by Caryll’s hot chocolate and the attentions of Ponsonby’s small dog, Frisk.¹⁴²

Ponsonby’s agency is diminished still further in Doris Grumbach’s 1984 novel The Ladies, in which Butler’s parents anticipate the arrival of a son, and raise their disappointing daughter as such.¹⁴³ In this account, influenced strongly by Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, Butler’s father is depicted as dressing his disappointingly-female progeny in male garb: “If she were not a boy, to him she was at least a credible semblance of one.” Butler only discovers herself to be female at the age of seven, the age by which the Jesuit maxim declares one’s life-path to be irrevocably established:

‘If I do not allow my hair to grow I will never be a girl,’ she told herself.
 ‘If I refuse to wear dresses as ladies do, I will always be a boy.’ As for the other, less well-defined differences, her fine flat chest and the bare opening between her legs for her necessary occasions: surely these places could make no difference. They would be well-hidden from

¹³⁹ Mavor, Ladies 44.

¹⁴⁰ The Duke of Wellington was born the Honourable Arthur Wesley; his family changed their surname to Wellesley in March 1798.

¹⁴¹ Curren, Love 112.

¹⁴² Curren, Love 115.

¹⁴³ Doris Grumbach, The Ladies (New York: Norton, 1993) 11-14.

Grumbach’s novel is included in Barbara Grier’s addenda to the 1985 reprint of Foster’s Sex Variant Women in Literature detailing “the surge of Lesbian literature” released in the 1970s and early 1980s. (Foster, Sex 364.)

public view by her shirts and knickers. She would be a boy, and then a man. She saw no difficulty at all.¹⁴⁴

In Grumbach's account, it is Butler, rather than Ponsonby, who details their first Welsh journey, and whose marked masculinity is figured as a necessary correlative to Ponsonby's timorous nature.¹⁴⁵ Ponsonby is marked by hysteria, her desire to escape her chosen life revealed by her suicidal ideations: "[Butler] had noticed her friend's tendency to dwell overlong at cliffs, bridges and threatening streams, as though the prospect of falling from them was enticing."¹⁴⁶ Grumbach's correspondence reveals her readers to have been divided over this depiction. Praising Grumbach's novel, Sally Fitzgerald remarked, "I was much interested by the fact that the two personalities emerged as being exactly as they would have been, whatever the sex of the personae, and no matter 'how' each woman married." As she asserts:

Sarah would have been a 'Japanese' wife to anyone, man or woman, surely, and Eleanor an overbearing and rather coarse-grained man if she had just one more x chromosome. Indeed, it seemed to me that she simply overbore a frightened and miserable child-woman when she moved into Sarah's life and took it over, dominating the vulnerable personality just as a roughly protective (and at the same time dependent) husband might have done.¹⁴⁷

Fitzgerald gestures towards a Hegelian model of dominance and submission, in which the exercise of power also constitutes a form of inverted dependency. Ponsonby is nonetheless figured as an Orientalized ward, whose commitment to Butler is constituted by emotional coercion. May Sarton also recognized the gendered underpinnings of Grumbach's representation, yet was more sceptical as to its accuracy. As she asked

¹⁴⁴ Grumbach, *Ladies* 15.

¹⁴⁵ Grumbach, *Ladies* 80.

¹⁴⁶ Grumbach, *Ladies* 95-96.

¹⁴⁷ Sally Fitzgerald, Sally Fitzgerald to Doris Grumbach 8 Jan. 1985, Doris Grumbach Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

Grumbach, "Was Eleanor really such a choleric macho person?"¹⁴⁸ The femininity of all of these representations nonetheless achieves a common end in marking Butler and Ponsonby's relationship as sexual when viewed alongside Butler's masculinity, the return of this representational tradition indicating the conceptual impasse that has characterized Butler and Ponsonby's depictions for over two hundred years.

"Our Matchless Mary": Mary Caryll's Place at Plâs newydd

The preceding discussion has disclosed the ways in which Butler and Ponsonby have been modelled as both romantic friends and a gender-differentiated female partnership. Their triangular tomb, however, stands as a stubbornly material reminder of Mary Caryll's role in their elopement and retirement, marking the way in which their emblematic status in the history of female coupledness is confounded by their tripartite domestic ménage. Acknowledging Caryll's role as what Bradbrook in 1949 termed "a great power in the [Ladies'] household,"¹⁴⁹ thus offers the promise of Butler and Ponsonby's conceptual uncoupling. It reveals the way in which they exceed the binary figuration of both the romantic friendship and gender-differentiated traditions, and allows the analysis of their individual, as well as corporate identities. Consideration of Caryll's membership of Butler and Ponsonby's household-family further complicates the gentry status that they took such pains to produce and promulgate, just as their public mourning of Caryll's death discloses the inherently performative nature of their self-fashioning.

¹⁴⁸ May Sarton, May Sarton to Doris Grumbach 15 Sept. 1984, Doris Grumbach Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁴⁹ Bradbrook, "Elegant." 185.

Caryll, who was housemaid at Woodstock to Lady Betty, contributed crucially to the Ladies' initial intimacy, assisting Ponsonby in concealing Butler in a cupboard after her second escape from Kilkenny Castle.¹⁵⁰ Archival sources do not indicate whether Caryll accompanied them on their departure from Ireland, as is asserted by Mavor, or was later summoned from Ireland to Wales, as claimed by Caroline Hamilton. This uncertainty indicates the way in which later commentators have resisted fully incorporating Caryll into the narrative of Butler and Ponsonby's elopement and retirement, despite her enduring presence throughout their lives, implicitly acknowledging the challenge she poses to the traditional paradigms of both romantic friendship and gender differentiated female coupledness. While Mavor and Hamilton offer opposing accounts of Caryll's role in Butler and Ponsonby's journey from Ireland and initial Welsh tour, each portray Caryll in such a way as to de-emphasize the class and gender disruption posed by their elopement. In claiming that Caryll accompanied their flight from Ireland, Mavor inserts an attendant into the narrative of the 1778 Welsh tour of Ponsonby's "two fugitive ladies."¹⁵¹ Mavor thus erases the class and sexual connotations of the social stigma represented by gentry women travelling unaccompanied by either a male family member or a female chaperone. In foregrounding Caryll's former role as housemaid to Lady Betty, Mavor downplays the familial breach represented by Butler and Ponsonby's departure, emphasizing that it was not prevented (although also not condoned) by their respective families. Hamilton claims that Caryll travelled to Wales after Butler and Ponsonby, having been dismissed for "throwing a candlestick at a fellow servant, wounding him severely," a crime earning her the epithet 'Molly the

¹⁵⁰ Hamilton, *Memoirs*.

¹⁵¹ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

Bruiser.’¹⁵² This anecdote was to colour interpretations of both Butler and Ponsonby and their companion, with J.M. Bulloch commenting in the Sunday Times review of The Hamwood Papers: “Though [Butler and Ponsonby’s] enterprise, started when they were nearing forty, seemed bold, there was nothing masculine about their menage, except, perhaps, their maid Mary Caryll.”¹⁵³ Such accounts displace the class and gender disruption represented by Butler and Ponsonby’s elopement, as well as their Irish ethnicity, onto Caryll’s masculinized and violent body, this projection again allowing Butler and Ponsonby to stand as unsullied exemplars of chaste romantic coupling.

The St. Collen’s tombstone materially marks Caryll’s place within Butler and Ponsonby’s family unit. The tomb was originally erected to house what Ponsonby described as the “loved and respected remains” of “Our Matchless Mary,” whose centrality to their ostensibly coupled existence was marked spatially by the tomb’s equilateral arrangement.¹⁵⁴ Insofar as she resided under Butler and Ponsonby’s roof and collective authority, Caryll could have been considered a dependent member of their household family,¹⁵⁵ an eighteenth-century grouping that Naomi Tadmor distinguishes from contemporaneous models of the kinship family of birth and marriage, the lineage-family secured by blood ties, and the nuclear family, defined by its “conjugal core.”¹⁵⁶ Caryll’s burial in the St. Collen’s tomb, however, suggests that Butler and Ponsonby valued their household-family over their competing familial ties, her corporeal presence

¹⁵² Hamilton, Memoirs.

¹⁵³ J.M. Bulloch, “The Hamwood Papers Etc, Reviewed by J.M. Bulloch,” Sunday Times 21st Sept 1930.

¹⁵⁴ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 23rd Nov 1809, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin.

¹⁵⁵ Naomi Tadmor, Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 21-23.

¹⁵⁶ Tadmor, Family 39.

within the equilateral tomb contesting the priority of the aristocratic lineage asserted by Butler's headstone. Caryll's ambivalent status, traversing that of both household dependent and kin, is indicated by the fact that she did not receive the wages paid to Butler and Ponsonby's other staff, elevating her in class terms by rendering her role closer to that of a kin-related female housekeeper.¹⁵⁷ It is further marked by Butler and Ponsonby's provision of funds for Caryll to entertain the higher orders of the local help, thereby asserting a position of elevation in relation to her peers analogous to their own. One on occasion, the Ladies provided 2s. for supper for Caryll's guests, and 8s.6d. for rum, ale, lemons and cards.¹⁵⁸ They also employed the local apothecary, Thomas Jones, when Mary was unwell, paying him 10s. 6d. for attendance and medicines in July 1790¹⁵⁹ (a benevolence admittedly slightly lessened by an ensuing entry in the credit column, "Thos Jones for Changing the Bill 3s").¹⁶⁰

Caryll's transcendence of her dependent role was indicated by her ascension to the status of landholder, using the vails received from visitors to purchase the Aber Addas field adjacent to Plâs newydd, on which the Ladies' grazed cows and cultivated small crops. Caryll further asserted her familial relationship to Butler and Ponsonby by bequeathing the field to Ponsonby (a decision seemingly reflecting Caryll's awareness that it was Ponsonby who managed Plâs newydd's finances). This gift stands in contrast to Caryll's wry bequest of one shilling to each of her surviving brothers and sisters, should they "demand that sum in person" from the Ladies, who were named as joint

¹⁵⁷ Hamilton, *Memoirs*.

¹⁵⁸ Bradbrook, "Elegant." 197.

¹⁵⁹ Ponsonby, *Accounts* 1788-90, 8 Jun. 1790.

¹⁶⁰ Ponsonby, *Accounts* 1788-90, 21 Jul. 1790.

Executors of her will.¹⁶¹ Caryll's liminal role is also disclosed by her prominence within Butler and Ponsonby's correspondence, and her familiarity with their sociable networks. Writing in 1809 to a member of their local gentry circle, Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Ponsonby describes the tomb as "the last abode of three of [Mr. Parker's] friends," the repeatedly underlined number emphasizing the extent to which she wished their household to be recognized as tripartite.¹⁶² Ponsonby acknowledges the potential impropriety of identifying Caryll as Mr. Parker's friend even as she diffuses its possibility, indicating the deftness with which Butler and Ponsonby engaged in subversion: "He will not I am sure be offended – at Our placing – Our deeply lamented precursor in the 'narrow house' – in that number."¹⁶³ However, she again indicates Caryll's position as near-equal in citing social permission for this inclusion as stemming from "the high respect [Caryll] always felt for his Character," rather than Mr. Parker's benevolence towards a social inferior.¹⁶⁴ Butler and Ponsonby's own accounts thus indicate the importance of viewing their relationship as incorporating three, rather than two individuals, as well as examining the representational investments that have led Caryll's presence to remain so persistently suppressed.

Butler and Ponsonby and the new Queer History

The sculptural nature of the St. Collen's tombstone renders it an apt symbol of Butler and Ponsonby's performative self-fashioning. Its encapsulation of a range of

¹⁶¹ Caryll made the same stipulation in relation to her mother, bequeathing her, "if living at the time of my decease, the sum of five pounds provided she will demand the same of my Executrixes." (Anon., Caryll Will.)

¹⁶² Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 16 Dec 1809, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry.

¹⁶³ Ponsonby, Ponsonby-Parker 16 Dec 1809.

¹⁶⁴ Ponsonby, Ponsonby-Parker 16 Dec 1809.

interpretative possibilities further conveys the plasticity of Butler and Ponsonby's cultural presence, or the cipher-like status that has allowed them to be invoked since 1778 as exemplars of an often-contradictory range of subject positions. Celebrity may be defined as the state in which an individual's private life engages public interest.¹⁶⁵ Butler and Ponsonby 'went public' as celebrities in the early 1780s, as fascination surrounding their elopement coalesced into enduring interest in their shared life. Throughout the first decades of their retirement, they employed textual, material and sociable means to style themselves as landed and virtuous Welsh landholders, this anodyne public image working to dispel the opprobrium appended to their unconventional relationship. By the first decade of the nineteenth-century, their narrative circulated widely throughout the Romantic cultural marketplace, their relationship both protected and reified by texts such as Seward's 1796 "Llangollen Vale." As I argue in chapter six, their increasing social and material security paralleled the passage of the years, rendering their social performance anachronistic to Romantic commentators such as Sir Walter Scott. They may thus be seen to capitalize, in their later years, on the "ambivalent affective charge" of their public personae,¹⁶⁶ the excessive nature of their rhetorical production capitalizing on the fascination surrounding their relationship while also shielding its precise nature from public scrutiny. Butler and Ponsonby's tomb thus thematizes their discursive production of both a substantive public image and a zone that may be described as one of opacity or undecidability.

¹⁶⁵ This definition is proposed by Clara Tuite, adapting Graeme Turner's formulation. (Tuite, "Tainted." 60.)

¹⁶⁶ Tuite, "Tainted." 78.

The performatively-constituted figure of the “real” Ladies of Llangollen may thus be seen as a form of cipher-like space, upon which Butler and Ponsonby themselves were only the first to project a protean array of cultural meanings. In light of this opacity, I propose ‘queer’ as a singularly useful concept to the analysis of Butler and Ponsonby. David Halperin declares that queer “acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.*”¹⁶⁷ As Carla Freccero elaborates, “Queer is what is and is not there, what disaggregates the coherence of the norm from the very beginning.”¹⁶⁸ While the term ‘queer’ may refer to same-sex desire or object choice, it also describes the productive instabilities that fracture the presumptive alignments of attributes, investments and identifications. Its adjectival use is supplemented by its employment as a catalytic verb, through which different kinds of histories, as well as futures, are rendered visible, productive and possible. The critical practice of ‘queering’ does not seek to identify a stable object of analysis, but to shed light upon a constitutively indeterminate conceptual field.¹⁶⁹ It allows one to analyse Butler and Ponsonby’s resistance to eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century marital, reproductive, class and gender norms, while refusing to ascribe determinate or identificatory content to the nature of their intimacy. It further recognizes the centrality of their production of both a substantive public image and a zone of undecidability, through which they concurrently defended and obscured the precise nature of their relationship. In thinking differently about Butler and Ponsonby, one is further able to identify the ways in

¹⁶⁷ Halperin, qtd. in William B. Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000) 134.

¹⁶⁸ Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006) 18.

¹⁶⁹ Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120.5 (2005): 1608-17. 1608.

which they have been crucially imbricated within critical and cultural discourses including those of lesbian and gay history and historiography, first and second wave feminism, and the so-called 'Sex Wars' of the 1980s.

Butler and Ponsonby's place within the self-making narratives of lesbian community is thematized in Sarah Waters's 1999 novel, Tipping the Velvet, in which they feature amongst the hackneyed historical rôles portrayed at a nineteenth-century sapphic fancy dress ball. As the young heroine observes:

Diana's friend Evelyn arrived as Marie-Antoinette – though another Marie-Antoinette came later and, after her, another. That, indeed was one of the predicaments of the evening: I counted fully five separate Sapphos, all bearing lyres; and there were *six* Ladies from Llangollen – I had not even *heard* of the Ladies from Llangollen before I met Diana.¹⁷⁰

The disciplinary enshrinement of queer theory is clearly indebted to the pioneering work of scholars of gay and lesbian history and literature who first articulated an academic space for the exploration of non-normative sexualities. Insofar as the queer critical project has been posited in opposition to both 'straight' criticism and the identificatory impulses of gay and lesbian liberation, its genealogical linkages with such earlier political and scholarly movements have been nonetheless occluded by way of an historical inattentiveness that Rubin terms "generational hubris".¹⁷¹ The critical framework of the history of sexuality has nonetheless shifted profoundly since the late 1970s, at which time scholars including Jeffrey Weeks and Jonathan Ned Katz offered the first accounts of the emergence of a homosexual identity in the nineteenth-century West. As Foucault's The

¹⁷⁰ Sarah Waters, Tipping the Velvet (London: Virago, 1999) 307.

¹⁷¹ Rubin and Butler, "Sexual." 89.

History of Sexuality: Volume One brought the history of sexuality “out of the ghetto”¹⁷² and David Halperin’s One Hundred Years of Homosexuality came to be critiqued more for its historicizing impulse than its constructivist premise,¹⁷³ few scholars dared to risk the unfashionably banal crime of historical anachronism. While gay and lesbian history was initially predicated on the identification of ‘family’ members across time (the coded term is here instructive), queer theory is instead predicated on the radical provisionality of all such identifications. As Julian Carter observes, early gay and lesbian history affirmed the validity of contemporary sexual identities by projecting them upon figures of the past,¹⁷⁴ a move exemplified by Faderman’s identification of romantic friends as prototypical lesbian feminists. Conversely, as some strands of gay and lesbian history reduced Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality to a form of crude nominalism, the ‘commonsense’ assertion of transhistorical and straightforwardly legible gay and lesbian identities was rendered an act of critical defiance.¹⁷⁵

What Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have termed the “radically anticipatory” nature of the queer project might suggest it to be better suited to the conceptualization of an incalculable future than the apprehension of historical subjects already located upon a progressive trajectory of lesbian and gay liberation.¹⁷⁶ Scholars such as Kathryn R. Kent and Henry Abelove nonetheless articulate a method Susan McCabe terms ‘queer

¹⁷² Duggan, “Making.” 167.

¹⁷³ Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 44-48.

¹⁷⁴ Julian Carter, “On Mother-Love: History, Queer Theory, and Nonlesbian Identity,” Journal of the History of Sexuality 14.1-2 (2005): 107-38. 115.

¹⁷⁵ This position was exemplified by Castle’s 1993 identification of herself as a “closet Wittgensteinian,” contrasting her critical – and political – pragmatism against the “dizzying” deconstructive feints of figures such as Judith Butler, for whom the term ‘lesbian’ remains a perpetually unstable signifier. (Castle, Apparitional 13-14.)

¹⁷⁶ Berlant and Warner, “What.” 343.

historicism,' in which the plasticity of queer allows the recognition of non-normative sexual 'identifications' (rather than identities) within historical contexts.¹⁷⁷ Writing about the nineteenth-century American middle-class, Kent employs the term 'queer' to designate acts and identifications that resist heteronormative sexual and gender norms, yet without cohering in a single oppositional identity.¹⁷⁸ To characterize Butler and Ponsonby as queer is not to deny the way in which their story has been reified as a creation-myth of contemporary lesbian subjectivity. It is moreover not, in accordance with Kent's careful articulation, to ascribe to Butler and Ponsonby the same politically radical significations conveyed by the term's contemporary deployment,¹⁷⁹ but to draw attention to the way in which such contemporary resonances offer a peculiarly apt set of conceptual tools with which to analyse their cultural project. The rubric of queer offers a decisive intervention into past analyses of Butler and Ponsonby's intimacy, rejecting the very terms of the binary opposition of romantic friendship and trans-historical lesbian identity. This in turn allows the theorisation of Butler and Ponsonby's central role within the articulation of these categories, as it does the critical consideration of the intractable nature of the ensuing debate.

Butler and Ponsonby's persistent association with romantic friendship has until recently foreclosed their sustained analysis under the rubric of queer. In her 2002 article "Bluestocking Sapphism and the Economies of Desire," Lanser gestures towards a queer analysis of the Ladies by arguing for the analysis of the governing commitments manifest

¹⁷⁷ Susan McCabe, "To Be and to Have," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11.1 (2005): 119-34. 120.

¹⁷⁸ Kent, *Making* 2.

¹⁷⁹ Kent, *Making* 2.

publicly by women's same-sex relationships in history, rather than often-indeterminate sexual practices.¹⁸⁰ She nonetheless designates Butler and Ponsonby "gentry sapphists," despite the applicability of a queer paradigm implied by her acute observation that it makes no sense to conceive of them as either heterosexual or undesiring.¹⁸¹ Lanser's shift from the analysis of private acts to that of public representations is undertaken within an explicitly queer framework by Jill H. Casid, whose chapter on the Ladies in her 2005 Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization offers a perceptive account of Butler and Ponsonby's agricultural improvements as an integral element of their public self-fashioning.¹⁸² This critical reorientation from private acts to public images may explain the recent re-ignition of academic interest in Butler and Ponsonby, as their elaborately performative lifestyle is seen to disclose critical insights inaccessible via the analysis of their indeterminate sexual practices.¹⁸³ This shift from the analysis of the occluded to the publicly displayed nonetheless differs from Castle's movement from the analysis of lesbian invisibility to visibility, instead constituting a heuristic shift from the analysis of 'ghosted' sexual acts and agents to that of public representations and counter-representations.

Sedgwick describes the history of sexuality as characterized by the methodological paranoia that Paul Riceour elsewhere terms a "hermeneutics of

¹⁸⁰ Susan S. Lanser, "Bluestocking Sapphism and the Economies of Desire," Huntington Library Quarterly 65.1-2 (2002): 257-75. 261.

¹⁸¹ Lanser, "Bluestocking." 261.

¹⁸² Jill H. Casid, "Some Queer Versions of Georgic," in Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization. Minnesota and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005. 129-90.

¹⁸³ Such interest is evidenced by the convening of the first academic panel devoted exclusively to Butler and Ponsonby. Held in July 2004 at the Women and Material Culture 1700-1830 Conference, Chawton House Library and Study Centre, Chawton, U.K., the panel comprised of recent work on Butler and Ponsonby presented by Nicole Reynolds, Geraldine Friedman and Fiona Brideoake.

suspicion.”¹⁸⁴ Such a method assumes that the surface or literal meaning of a text works to conceal its political interests and operations, and views the task of interpretation as the unmasking of such hidden commitments. Asserting the value of reparative, rather than paranoid reading practices, Sedgwick claims that the perception of systematic oppressions and silences – such the patterns of denial of same-sex desire she dubs “*Don’t ask; You shouldn’t know*”¹⁸⁵ – does not necessarily entail specific epistemological consequences.¹⁸⁶ Applying this insight to Butler and Ponsonby’s historiography suggests that to recognize the way in which they have been rendered the stolid spokeswomen of chaste romantic friendship does not require one to view their relationship as an undoubtedly sexual intimacy sanitized by homophobic historians. Sedgwick further rejects what she dubs the paranoid faith in the epistemological and political efficacy of “knowledge in the form of exposure [...] as though its work would be truly accomplished if it could finally, this time, somehow get its story fully known.”¹⁸⁷ A reparative reading, by contrast, rejects the assumption – one motivating many accounts of Butler and Ponsonby – that the greatest scholarly prize would consist of indubitable evidence of their status as either “down and dirty”¹⁸⁸ dykes or asexual spinsters. It further denies that the content of any such potentially exposed knowledge would be of greater interest or import than the performative effects clustering around Butler and Ponsonby’s epistemologically uncertain relationship, from Anna Seward’s identification of their relationship as embodying lost hopes for queer community, discussed in chapter six, to

¹⁸⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You,” *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997): 1-37. 4.

¹⁸⁵ Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 53.

¹⁸⁶ Sedgwick, “Paranoid,” 7.

¹⁸⁷ Sedgwick, “Paranoid,” 17.

¹⁸⁸ Castle, *Apparitional* 93.

Mavor's persistent invocation of the same lesbian 'taint' her account of their romantic friendship seeks ostensibly to eradicate. Queering Butler and Ponsonby thus allows their relationship to be examined without recourse to either the universalizing rhetoric of a 'female world' or the presumption of normative heterosexuality. It further circumvents the intractable debate between proponents of chaste romantic friendship and trans-historical lesbian identity and practice, which has led to Butler and Ponsonby's repetitive reduction to historical test-cases. Indeed, the irreducibility of this debate may be seen as a prototypically queer resistance to determination, revealing the opacity encapsulating their relationship to instead constitute both their continuing fascination and appropriability.

The discourses of both romantic friendship and gendered difference frame Butler and Ponsonby as an indissoluble dyad, reflecting the tendency of lesbian historiography, noted by Emma Donoghue, to focus on the privileged cultural form of the monogamous couple.¹⁸⁹ This tendency, as we have seen, erases the persistent presence of Mary Caryll; by contrast, her centrality to any queer analysis of Butler and Ponsonby offers a decisive rejection of the claim that queer theory entails the elision of class politics and other forms of economically and racially marginal identities. Sedgwick's claim that 'queer' may refer to the ways in which the multiple elements of an individual's gender and sexuality "aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" offers new ways of conceptualizing the presumed contradiction between Butler and Ponsonby's public partnership and Caryll's more private role in their retirement by refusing to incorporate

¹⁸⁹ Emma Donoghue, Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801 (London: Scarlet Press, 1993) 222.

their multiple relational roles and configurations into a single dominant narrative.¹⁹⁰

Sedgwick also observes that queer offers crucial critical tools with which to consider ostensibly non-sexual dimensions of being such as nationalism and geographical location.¹⁹¹ Queering Butler and Ponsonby thus allows theorization of aspects of their lives that have inspired comparatively little concern, such as their concurrent and contradictory national identifications as Irish exiles, Welsh indigenes, British worthies and, in the twentieth century, globalized lesbian icons. Butler and Ponsonby's elaborate stylization of their Llangollen cottage – their architectural assertion of landed Welsh gentility seeking to cover over the specifically sexualized secrets of their elopement and ambiguous intimacy – may be identified as what Sedgwick terms 'shame performativity.'¹⁹²

A productive queer reading of Butler and Ponsonby needs not commence with the question, "Were they queer?", which risks merely recasting the familiar demand, "So, were they lesbians?" in more recent or fashionable critical parlance, but a consideration of the rhetorical utility of such an intervention. It further requires that 'queer' be used to designate more than an empirically diffuse form of sexuality, as is apparent in Celia A. Easton's "Were the Bluestockings Queer? Elizabeth Carter's Uranian Friendships," in which 'queer' is employed to designate 'lesbian' relationships in which evidence of sexual activity (whatever this may comprise) is indeterminate.¹⁹³ To put the point

¹⁹⁰ Sedgwick, "Queer," 7-8.

¹⁹¹ Sedgwick, "Queer," 8-9.

¹⁹² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's the Art of the Novel," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003): 35-66. 36-38.

¹⁹³ Celia A. Easton, "Were the Bluestockings Queer? Elizabeth Carter's Uranian Friendships," *The Age of Johnson* 9 (1998): 257-94.

differently, while 'queer' has been held to designate an indeterminate horizon of possibility akin to the deconstructive *l'avenir*, one must ensure that resistance to the ascription to determinate content does not equate to the evacuation of such content.

In his introduction to the 1993 collection, Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, Warner declares that 'queer' must be defined in contrast to not only heteronormativity, but received modes of academic enquiry:

Nervous over the prospect of a well-sanctioned and compartmentalized academic version of 'gay and lesbian studies,' people want to make theory queer, not just to have a theory about queers. For both academics and activists, 'queer' gets its critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy.¹⁹⁴

It is this dissent from received models of conceptual 'tidiness' that lead Warner and Berlant to elsewhere refuse the term 'queer theory,' suggesting that the practice they rechristen 'queer commentary' "cannot be assimilated to a single discourse, let alone a propositional program."¹⁹⁵ My endorsement of this oppositional stance might be seen to reassure those queer theorists who greet the knowledge that I am working on the Ladies of Llangollen with the ennui of an *avant garde* musician greeting the news that one's favourite artist is Neil Diamond. Ann Cvetkovich's An Archive of Feelings further suggests that queer historiography is necessarily shaped by the fact that its objects of analysis have been frequently erased or neglected: "Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced,

¹⁹⁴ Michael Warner, "Introduction," Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993): vii-xxxi. xxvi.

¹⁹⁵ Berlant and Warner, "What." 343.

gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces.”¹⁹⁶ Cvetkovich thus defines her objects of analysis in opposition to traditionally privileged texts and collecting practices, asserting her interest in the emotions embedded within cultural texts such as material objects, photographs and oral testimonies, and the affective investments manifest by the production and reception of such archives.¹⁹⁷ In gathering discursive objects including Butler and Ponsonby’s material remains and sociable practices as well as their more familiar epistolary and print records, I thus echo Cvetkovich’s desire to “as much produce an archive as to analyze one.”¹⁹⁸ From such a queer perspective, Butler and Ponsonby might be seen to suggest that the history of sexuality must be traced throughout both a genealogy of discourses *and* of cultural practices – “in a lived, rather than written cultural project.”¹⁹⁹

In the wake of Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality, the crime of historical anachronism was rendered an unfashionably banal methodological lapse. More recently, however, queer critics have turned their attention to the issue of temporality, describing the way in which linear historical and narrative frameworks reproduce a heteronormative logic of generational transmission. Rejecting this conceptualization of history as a series of sequential temporal units structured by cause and effect, Carla Freccero declares, “the rhetorical term *metalepsis* could be seen to embody the spirit of queer analysis in its wilful perversion of notions of temporal propriety and the reproductive order of

¹⁹⁶ Cvetkovich, *Archive* 8.

¹⁹⁷ Cvetkovich, *Archive* 7.

¹⁹⁸ Cvetkovich, *Archive* 8.

¹⁹⁹ David Collings and Michael O'Rourke, "Introduction: Queer Romanticisms: Past, Present, and Future," *Romanticism on the Net*.36-37 (2004-2005). 38.

things.”²⁰⁰ In their influential introduction to the 1996 volume, Premodern Sexualities, Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero call upon critics to reject what Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon term “the compulsory heterotemporality of historicism,”²⁰¹ instead acknowledging the identificatory cathexes that link contemporary scholarship with its historical objects.²⁰² Carolyn Dinshaw similarly articulates a model of queer historiography committed to tracing erotic and affective connections across time, her theorization of the relationship between the historian and his or her objects of study suggesting the significance of attending to scholarly, as well as textual, desires.²⁰³ Such affective investments, which are charged with a particular intensity within the field of sexuality, complicate any insistence on the absolute alterity of the past, as they do the ascetic disavowal of the pleasures, as well as rigours, of intellectual enquiry.²⁰⁴ Freccero thereby employs the Derridean concept of spectrality to describe the uncanny ‘haunting’ of the present by both the past and the future, a figure I suggest offers a peculiarly apt figure for Butler and Ponsonby’s trace-like persistence throughout their varied cultural afterlives.²⁰⁵ This ghostly metaphor, along with Dinshaw’s account of historical figures ‘touching’ across time,²⁰⁶ moreover offers a strikingly resonant model through which to read Gordon’s 1936 account of Butler and Ponsonby’s corporealized ‘arrival’ into a future they have themselves engendered. Like the Ghost of Old Hamlet, one of the

²⁰⁰ Freccero, Queer 2.

²⁰¹ Goldberg and Menon, “Queering.” 1616.

²⁰² Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, “Introduction: Caxton, Foucault, and the Pleasures of History,” Premodern Sexualities, eds. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: 1996): xvii-xix.

²⁰³ Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Durham: Duke UP, 1999). For a further explorations of this shift in queer scholarship, see Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” New Literary History 31 (2000): 727-44; Judith Halberstam In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives. New York: New York UP, 2005; and Valerie Rohy, “Ahistorical,” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 12.1 (2006): 61-83.

²⁰⁴ Fradenburg and Freccero, “Introduction,” xvii-xix.

²⁰⁵ Freccero, Queer 69-70.

²⁰⁶ Dinshaw, Getting 39.

animating presences of Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx, Butler and Ponsonby may thus be seen to be continually 'out of joint,' charged with anachronism during their lifetime, and persisting in strikingly embodied form throughout a variety of contemporary discourses and material traces.²⁰⁷

As evidenced above, a central motivation of this project is my fascination with the way in which Butler and Ponsonby have figured centrally in the arguments articulated by successive generations of feminist, lesbian and queer scholars. With thematic appropriateness, I am also interested in the implications of extending the temporal bounds of the new queer history, which has predominantly emerged from early modern studies, to individuals who refuse to be stably situated within either the eighteenth-century or Romantic periods. This generational awareness also indicates the importance of historicizing my own methodology. As Sedgwick speculated in 1993, "maybe the queer moment, if it's here today, will for that very reason be gone tomorrow."²⁰⁸ My desire to set aside questions of Butler and Ponsonby's sexual practice marks my belated relationship to the 'Sex Wars' and the excoriation of identity politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, my relationship to these debates, which I first encountered as an undergraduate in the late 1990s, is characterized with discomfiting precision by Molly McGarry's description of teaching Smith-Rosenberg's "Female World of Love and Ritual" in 1999:

Equally surprising was students' complete disinterest [sic] in the debate that has consumed my colleagues and me in graduate school over whether these relationships were sexual. They simply bracketed the question,

²⁰⁷ Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) 1-3.

²⁰⁸ Sedgwick, "Queer," xii.

assuming that [Smith-Rosenberg's] female worlds were sexual places; but were wholly uninterested in interrogating the specificities. In some ways, Smith-Rosenberg's notion that nineteenth-century women might have moved along a continuum encompassing "a wide latitude of emotions and sexual feelings" suited the slippery, anti-ontological ground of 'queerness' more than it did the identity politics of years before.²⁰⁹

Such bracketing may be seen as a successive generation's political disengagement from the consuming debates of previous years. However, one may also conceive it as the expansion of a critical community's terms of reference, from the narrow and presumptively determinative question of genital sexuality to broader questions of affectivity, community, performativity, representation and counter-representation. Just as Sedgwick suggests that "something about *queer* is inextinguishable," so too are the multiplicity of desires, disavowals and identifications that cluster around Butler and Ponsonby's lives and afterlives, and are rendered accessible through a reparative queer methodology.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ McGarry, "Female Worlds." 2.

²¹⁰ Sedgwick, "Queer," xii.

Chapter Three

Ladies/of/Llangollen

Having explored Butler and Ponsonby's pivotal position within debates over the history of female same-sex sexuality, the following chapter turns to the physical location and material constitution of their Llangollen retirement. Accounts of Butler and Ponsonby have traditionally failed to interrogate the significance of their location in either the environs of Llangollen or the broader context of Wales, although 'The Ladies of Llangollen,' the collective title with which they have been known since the mid-nineteenth-century, indicates the extent to which their identity and location have been rendered mutually determining. The ubiquity of Mavor's biography has served to naturalise this designation, rendering Butler and Ponsonby, alongside the Llangollen Bridge (first built in 1345) and the National Eisteddfod amongst the tourist attractions with which the North Welsh village has been inextricably linked. The designation 'the Ladies of Llangollen' has been employed through recent critical work on Butler and Ponsonby, including the present project, to describe them throughout the course of their lives. Such usage nonetheless erases the temporality of the iterative process through which their identification with North Wales was instantiated. Butler and Ponsonby are, of course, not the only literary and cultural figures closely associated with a particular location. While the town of Stratford-upon-Avon inextricably linked Stratford, however, it is the Bard who gives the town of his birth its identity as "Shakespeare's Stratford," rather than the inverse. William and Dorothy Wordsworth's association with Grasmere might be seen as analogous to Butler and Ponsonby's link to Llangollen, insofar as they remain firmly identified with their adopted, rather than native homes. This parallel is nonetheless

strained by the way in which neither sibling is known as “Wordsworth of Grasmere”; nor did they remain in comparatively humble situation of Dove Cottage, instead relocating the more bourgeois setting of Rydal Mount during William’s years of fame. Butler and Ponsonby instead remained constantly in Llangollen from 1780 until their respective deaths in 1829 and 1831, venturing no further than border towns such as Shrewsbury. Their collective designation ‘The Ladies of Llangollen’ moreover elides their individual names, masking the disparity between their powerful families and their anomalous social situation, and displacing their exiled status with the identity of landed locals. While the gradual accretion of their status as the Ladies of Llangollen may thus be understood as linguistically performative, this cultural work has not been attended to, an elision I here redress.

This chapter traces the development and implications of this association, suggesting that Butler and Ponsonby’s association with their Welsh home marks the success of their refashioning from exiled Irish spinsters to indigenous elements of the Welsh cultural and geographical landscape. Framing their decision to tour and settle in Wales within eighteenth-century figuration of the Welsh nation, I explore the prominence of Wales within the late eighteenth-century and romantic cultural imagination. I then turn to Ponsonby’s 1778 travel journal, “An Account of a Journey in Wales, Performed in May, 1778, By Two Fugitive Ladies,” which details the first six weeks of Butler and Ponsonby’s Welsh residence. This text has been utilized by Mavor and others as biographical record of their initial movements. As part of my move from biographical to textual analysis, I instead consider it as evidence of their investment in textuality as a

form of performative self-fashioning. The chapter then proceeds to discuss the significance of their Llangollen location, examining the way in which travel narratives of the 1790s present Llangollen Vale as the epitome of the picturesque aesthetic mode, eliding the small town in order to emphasize the grandeur of its surrounding landscape. My argument explores the way in which Butler and Ponsonby echoed this same elision, settling a quarter of a mile beyond the village's eighteenth-century limits. In so doing, they helped define Llangollen in relation to its romantic periphery, rather than its impoverished centre, in turn rendering themselves synonymous with its newly resonant name.

Having sailed from Waterford with their families' grudging blessing on the 9 May, 1778, Butler and Ponsonby crossed St. George's Channel to land in Haking, on the north shore of the Welsh village of Milford Haven, on the 10 May 1778. They commenced their tour of Wales the following day, an enterprise recorded as they travelled in Ponsonby's "An Account of a Journey in Wales, Performed in May 1778, By Two Fugitive Ladies."¹ Butler and Ponsonby's decision to tour Wales was to some degree a matter of expediency. Their initial elopement made it impossible to remain in Ireland, where Butler's family were insisting that she be disposed of in a French convent, and William Fownes was urging Ponsonby to remain under his overly attentive guardianship. North Wales offered the most obvious location for their flight by water. Their decision to settle in Wales also reflected the fact that its cost of living was significantly lower than that of their original destination of England. Indeed, while their first tour led them to briefly visit the English border town of Oswestry, they immediately crossed back into

¹ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

Wales, where they slept for the first night in Llangollen on the 25 May 1778, and soon commenced searching for more permanent accommodation. The passage from Dublin to the more northerly port of Holyhead formed the most common itinerary from Ireland to the British mainland, with the 'Great Road' from Holyhead to London conveying travellers and mail between the two cities, as well as the growing industrial centres of Northern England.² Llangollen's status as a key staging post on the Holyhead Road thereby ensured Butler and Ponsonby a steady stream of fashionable visitors without either compromising their status as retirees or incurring the cost of a carriage.³ This route also joined them with friends such as Seward, their intimate from the mid-1790s, whose home of Lichfield was another important staging post, as well as the Midland centre of culture and industry. On the 27 January 1788, Butler's recorded a visit from Lady Dungannon, who was accompanied by her grandson Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington.⁴ As Butler observed of the nineteen year-old, "A charming young man handsome fashioned, tall and Elegant. He staid 'till Ten then proceeded to Ireland."⁵ Ponsonby similarly wrote to their friend Mrs. Wingfield of Rhiwabon, circa 1802-3: "[we are] compelled to deny Ourselves the happiness of waiting upon you and Mr. Wingfield at Dinner – by One of those unexpected arrivals, to which from living upon the High-road, to & from Our native Country, We are Occasionally Subject."⁶ Far from being an

² Mervyn Hughes, "Thomas Telford in North Wales, 1815-1830," *Wales in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Donald Moore (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1976): 152-68. 152.

³ Writing to Henry Crabb Robinson in 1826, Wordsworth offers him an itinerary for a proposed tour of North Wales, suggesting that he travel along "the whole line of the great road to Ireland from Llangollen including Capel Kerrig to Bangor." (William Wordsworth, "William Wordsworth to Henry Crabb Robinson 30 Jul. 1826," *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, eds. Alan G. Hill and Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd. ed., vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967): 477-78. 478.)

⁴ Butler, Journal 1788-91, 27 Jan. 1788.

⁵ Butler, Journal 1788-91, 27 Jan. 1788.

⁶ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Wingfield [N.M. 1802], National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

isolated hamlet, Llangollen was an important market town and staging post, especially for members of the Irish and Anglo-Wesh gentry, offering Butler and Ponsonby as numerous and distinguished a social set (if not more so, given the reduced cost of living) than they could have enjoyed in more cosmopolitan centres such as London or Bath.

Butler and Ponsonby's decision to tour Wales also reflected the region's prominence in the eighteenth-century cultural imagination. Following the 1707 union of England and Scotland, the emergent power of Great Britain asserted increasing control over its assimilated Celtic fringes. Over the course of the eighteenth-century, the production of tinsplate, copper and coal became concentrated in Wales, this increasingly dominant industry developing as "mercantile-imperial in character", with ownership and profits flowing back into England.⁷ The transition to market capitalism transformed rural Wales into a thriving export economy, in which women played a central role. It splintered the country into highly divergent regions, distinguished by differing forms of production and loci of imperial control.⁸ The Denbighshire and Shrewsbury regions became important location of the cloth trade, and the North Welsh economy was increasingly controlled from Liverpool.⁹

In the early eighteenth-century, English tourists scorned the mountainous Welsh landscape, the harshness of which repelled Daniel Defoe, whose 1722 Tour of Great Britain described Wales as "a Country looking so full of horror that, that we thought to

⁷ Gwyn A. Williams, When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985) 143.

⁸ Williams, When 182.

⁹ Williams, When 145.

have given over the Enterprise, and have left *Wales* out of our Circuit.”¹⁰ By the mid eighteenth-century, however, the middle-class proponents of the Welsh cultural revival employed the printing press, first introduced to Wales in 1718,¹¹ to disseminate images of Wales’s prehistoric and medieval monuments, drawing English tourists to previously neglected areas of the Welsh countryside. In 1751, the London-based brothers, Richard, Lewis and William Morris founded the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in London, a patriotic organisation designed to disseminate Welsh history, language and literature.¹² In 1757, the poet Thomas Gray, then resident in Cambridge, described a performance of Parry Ddall, known as ‘Blind Parry,’ official harper to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, as having “set all this learned body a’dancing.”¹³ This led to Gray to complete his Ode, “The Bard,” based upon the story of Edward I having put the Welsh Bards to death following his thirteenth-century conquest of Wales. While the poem’s dense literary references rendered it less popular than Gray’s 1751 “An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” it stimulated interest in Welsh verse and popularized Welsh beliefs including the idea that “long-lost Arthur” of Camelot lay merely sleeping, and would be restored as leader of the British Isles. From the 1750s, the Welsh painter Richard Wilson (1713?-1782) popularized his nation’s rugged terrain as an atmospheric setting for prehistoric and medieval ruins, his idealised landscapes ‘adjusting’ topographical features for the greater compositional good. Characteristic of Wilson’s style was his “Llyn Peris

¹⁰ Defoe, qtd. in Shannon L. Rogers, “From Wasteland to Wonderland: Wales in the Imagination of the English Traveler, 1720-1895,” *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 2 (2002): 15-26.

¹¹ The first Welsh printing press consisted of a small establishment founded by Isaac Carter in Carmarthenshire in 1718. (Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992) 40.)

¹² Prys Morgan, “Welsh Cultural Revival,” *The Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, eds. Iain MacCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 754-56. 754.

¹³ Thomas Gray, *The Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, eds. P. Toynbee and L. Whibley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935) 2:502.

and Dolbardran Castle" (c.1762-4) depicting the lake near Mount Snowdon reflecting the thirteenth-century tower in which Llewellyn the Great imprisoned his brother for twenty-two years. His 1770-71 "Dinas Brân from Llangollen" further celebrated the conical hill and the thirteenth-century ruins that loom over Llangollen, later forming an imposing backdrop to many images of Plâs newydd. Wilson's dramatically heightened representations of the North Welsh landscape were not only conditioned by the artist's eye, but in turn conditioned the responses of the travellers they drew to Cambria. Indeed, while Samuel Johnson was unimpressed by the region during his 1774 journey with the Ladies' later friend and confidante, Hester Thrale (later Piozzi) – "we climbed [the remains of a large fort] with great labour. I was breathless and harassed"¹⁴ – his Welsh-born companion, a descendent of Katheryn of Berain (1535-1591), the "Mother of Wales", revelled in the sounds of a "Welch" harper and how Mount Snowdon "tower[ed] over the neighbouring hills with all the dignity of barren magnitude."¹⁵ Wilson's 1774 "Lyn-y-Cau under Cader Idris" similarly depicted the North Welsh landscape as embodying the immensity and awe characteristic of the Burkean sublime, the painting's stimulus of tourist interest in the region leading the lake to be renamed "Wilson's Pool."¹⁶ Henry Penruddocke Wyndham's 1781 Tour Through Monmouthshire and Wales declared that: "The romantic beauties of nature [in Wales] are so singular and extravagant in this principality...that they are scarcely to be conceived by those who have confined

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson, "A Journey into North Wales in the Year 1774," Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrales Tour in North Wales 1774, ed. Adrian Bristow (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 1995): 29-86. 49.

¹⁵ Hester Lynch Thrale, "Journal of a Tour in Wales with Dr. Johnson," Dr Johnson and Mrs Thrale's Tour in North Wales 1774, ed. Adrian Bristow (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 1995): 87-142. 117.

¹⁶ R. Paul Evans, "Mythology and Tradition," The Remaking of Wales in the Eighteenth Century, eds. Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1988): 149-73. 157.
J.R. Watson, "Wordsworth, North Wales and the Celtic Landscape," English Romanticism and the Celtic World, eds. Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003): 85-102. 89-90.

their curiosity to other parts of Great Britain.”¹⁷ Wyndham nonetheless continued, “the Welsh tour has been strangely neglected, for, while the English roads are crowded with travelling parties of pleasure, the Welsh are so rarely visited, that the author did not meet with a single party of pleasure, during his six-week’s journey.”¹⁸

Butler and Ponsonby’s tour thus took place on the cusp of Wales’s emergence as an accessible and fashionable domestic tourist destination, anticipating their later status as both barometers and embodiments of cultural taste. ‘Parties of pleasure’ travelled to Wales in greater numbers throughout the later 1780s, as travel throughout the northern part of the country was simplified by the building of turnpike roads during the second half of the eighteenth-century.¹⁹ The clergyman, writer and theorist of the picturesque, William Gilpin, also contributed to the Welsh tourist influx, popularizing its irregular topography by outlining the perceptual techniques through which it could be imaginatively recomposed according to the principles of picturesque beauty. His 1782 Reflections on the River Wye, found on Butler and Ponsonby’s bookshelves alongside his other major works, celebrated the Welsh landscape’s variety and irregularity of landscape, winding waterways, and the location of noble ruins within singular and tranquil settings.²⁰ North Welsh tourism was similarly stimulated by naturalist Thomas Pennant’s three volume A Tour in Wales (1778-83), which exercised the most significant influence upon Welsh domestic tourism in the late eighteenth-century.²¹ Pennant’s Welsh Tour built upon the popularity of his Scottish Tours published in 1771 and 1774-6,

¹⁷ Watson, "Wordsworth," 89.

¹⁸ Wyndham, qtd. in Hughes, "Telford," 154.

¹⁹ Watson, "Wordsworth," 89-90.

²⁰ William Gilpin, Observations on the River Wye (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1991) 32.

²¹ Watson, "Wordsworth," 90.

elucidating Britain's outer reaches in the same manner as geographical and historical accounts of the South Sea Islands.²² His observations were strengthened by insights of local specialists such as the botanist the Reverend John Lightfoot and draughtsman Moses Griffith, with whom he undertook his second Scottish tour.²³ He also took with him travelling companions fluent in the Scottish and Welsh vernacular.²⁴ The Welsh Tour is suffused with pride in Pennant's place of birth, the first volume emphasizing the martial heroism of the author's "native country, celebrated in our earliest history for the valour and tenacity of its liberty."²⁵ Owain Glyndwr, leader of the Welsh resistance to the thirteenth-century invasion of England's Edward I, is represented as a Welsh national hero, rather than traitor to the English crown, leading the Dee Valley in which the Ladies were to settle to be dubbed "Glendower country" by ever-increasing numbers of English travellers.²⁶ In 1792, the stonemason Iolo Morganwg (b.1747) declared the revival of the *gorsedd* or Order of Bards, an elite group of "people's remembrancers" convened in London's Primrose Hill. Morganwg studied lexicography and antiquarianism, declaring the Welsh poets to be "the rib cage of the body politic" and himself "an Original Bard out of the Celtic Twilight," an image he assiduously promulgated to an enthusiastic Romantic audience.²⁷ During the same year, William Jones of Llangardfan announced the discovery in Missouri of 'Welsh Indians' descended from Madoc, the Welsh Prince claimed to have travelled to North America in 1170; this narrative was further disseminated by Robert

²² Charles W.J. Withers, Pennant, Thomas (1726-1798), 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21860>>, 5 Apr. 2005.

²³ Withers, Pennant.

²⁴ Pennant's Scottish tour was undertaken with the Gaelic scholar, the Reverend John Stuart, while on his Welsh tour he was joined by his Welsh-speaking friend and companion, the Reverend John Lloyd of Caerwys. (Withers, Pennant.)

²⁵ Pennant, Tour 1:1.

²⁶ Evans, "Mythology and Tradition," 155.

²⁷ Williams, When 165-66.

Southey's 1804 Madoc, in which Spain's violent conquest of America is overwritten, in the political aftermath of the Warren Hastings trial, by an account of a peaceful Welsh settlement.²⁸ As described in chapter six, Seward's 1796 "Llangollen Vale" capitalized on such assertions of Welsh liberty, figuring Butler and Ponsonby as the apotheosis of a heroic tradition instantiated by Glyndwr and the Celtic Bards. Ponsonby's 1792 library catalogue indicates the Ladies' ownership of a 1778 two-volume edition of Pennant's Tour in Wales. While it is unclear whether they had read or obtained this work prior to their first Welsh tour, their itinerary incorporated several of Pennant's most lauded sites, including the "exalted pile" of Chirk Castle, Wrexham, the style and features of which Butler and Ponsonby later echoed in their improvement of Plâs newydd.²⁹ Should the Ladies have read Pennant's Tour prior to their departure, they would have found themselves among the first travellers to emulate Pennant's journey, undertaking the same itinerary of notable sights of North Wales in which they themselves were later to feature. If, as appears more likely, Butler and Ponsonby purchased Pennant's text after having settled in Llangollen, they would nonetheless have found it to offer important validation of both their journey and the Welsh geographical and historical landscape with which they were to increasingly identify.

English travellers were further drawn to previously neglected regions of Britain after the 1793 advent of war with France, which prevented travel to the Continent and

²⁸ Rebecca Cole Heinowitz, "The Allure of the Same: Robert Southey's Welsh Indians and the Rhetoric of Good Colonialism," Romantic Praxis: Sullen Fires Across the Atlantic: Essays in Transatlantic Romanticism, 28 Apr. 2007 (2006).

²⁹ Pennant, Tour 2:288.

fostered the nationalistic underpinnings of the British heritage industry.³⁰ Butler and Ponsonby differed from their fellow gentry tourists in both in the dramatic circumstances of their departure, and their intention of never returning to their Irish homes. Their Welsh tour thus combined the desire for intellectual and social self-improvement that motivated both domestic and continental travel with the pressing need to find a home in exile. Ponsonby's record of their tour reveals a similar tension between the public discourse of gentry tourism and the more personal exigencies underpinning her and Butler's journey. The tradition of the Grand Tour has been described as a primarily literary phenomenon, undertaken by individuals whose itineraries, attitudes and observations were conditioned by travel journals, guidebooks, collected letters and works of popular archaeology.³¹ By the second half of the eighteenth-century, records of domestic tourism also comprised a major literary genre, incorporating both private records such as the Welsh tour journal of Hester Thrale Piozzi, which was written as a private memoir, and published accounts such as Henry Penruddocke Wyndham's 1781 Tour through Monmouthshire and Wales in the months of June and July 1774.

The frontispiece of Ponsonby's manuscript journal recalls elements of both domestic life-writing and published travelogues. Analysis of the textual labour it undertakes reveals its performative invocation of features of both public and private literary genres. Ponsonby's title, "Account of a Journey in Wales," echoes those of published works by Pennant and Guiseppe Baretti, while her narrative similarly structures

³⁰ Clara Tuite, "Domestic Tourism," An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832, eds. Iain MacCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 733-34. 733.

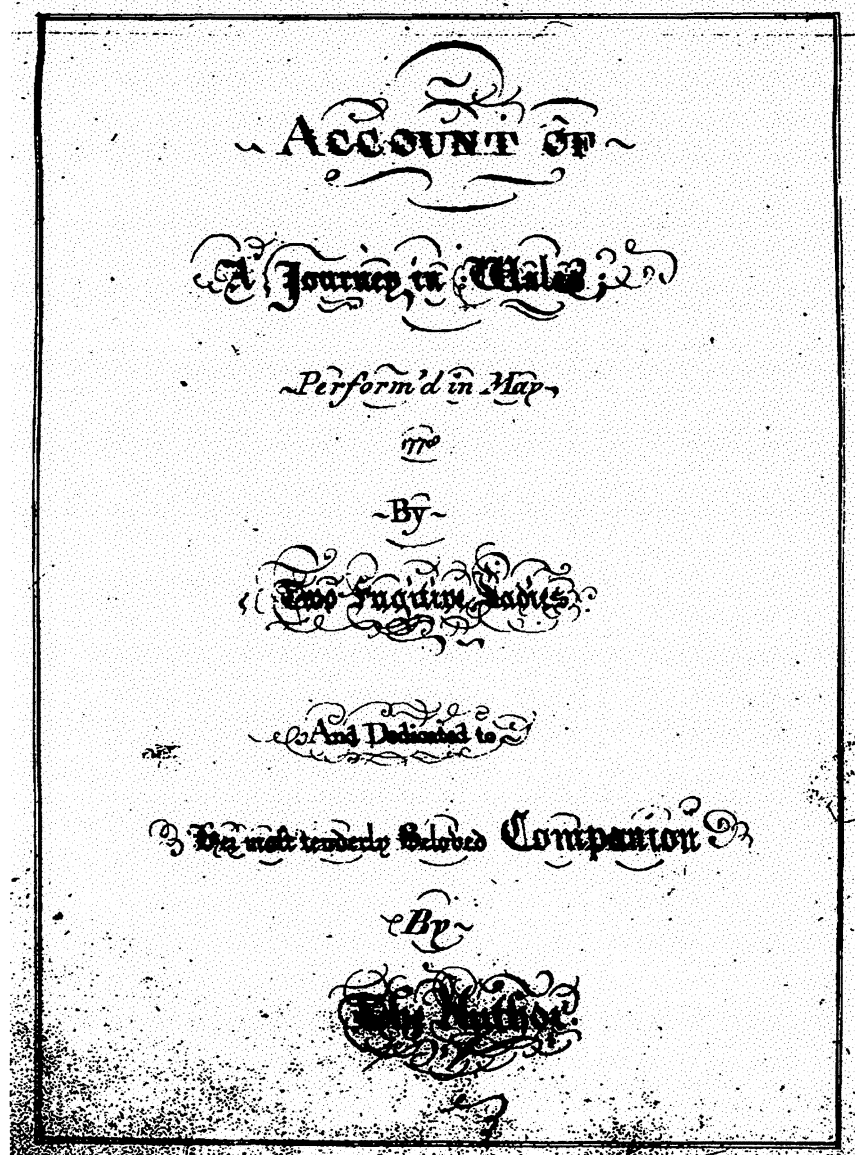
³¹ John Wilton-Ely, "'Classic Ground': Britain, Italy and the Grand Tour," Eighteenth Century Life 28.1 (2004): 136-65. 159.

her and Butler's itinerary as a series of sights to be looked upon.³² Her travelogue further conforms to the generic ideal of responding sensitively and intelligently to alterity, displaying her knowledge of local and monarchical history and her appreciation of architectural and topographical beauty.³³ The layout of Ponsonby's title page, in which the title, date, author and dedication are divided into successive lines, evokes the title pages of eighteenth-century printed works, as does its elaborate and varied lettering and neatly ruled border (see image below).³⁴ Ponsonby's dedication "to her most tenderly Beloved Companion By The Author" echoes a published author's acknowledgment of his or her patron or prominent admirer. Her authorial self-description similarly identifies herself as a member of the emergent category of the respectable professional writer, whose singular creativity excuses his or her receipt of literary income. Ponsonby's invocation of Butler as her "Beloved Companion" offers the first recorded example of the tender epithets that the pair would employ throughout their enduring retirement; Butler's reciprocal description of Ponsonby as her "Beloved" in her journal accrued still greater marital connotations following its modification to "My Better Half." Such textual assertions of their partnership underscore the considerable difficulties of fully incorporating Caryll into Butler and Ponsonby's narrative, her potential, yet significantly undocumented presence throughout this first tour reiterating her status as a form of deconstructive excess that is unable to be absorbed within the couple form.

³² Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography 1600-1830* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1999) 16-17.

³³ Chard, *Pleasure* 17.

³⁴ Ponsonby's dutiful sketch of Benton Castle, Milford Haven, further recalls the artistic productions of Austen's Fanny Johnson, which are tactfully described as "very beautiful, tho' perhaps not such exact resemblances as might be wished, from their being taken as she ran along." (Jane Austen, "A Tour through Wales," *Catharine and Other Writings*, eds. Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993): 170.



Sarah Ponsonby, 'Account of a Journey in Wales,' 1778.

Ponsonby's employment of public literary discourses is also apparent in the text's celebration of the region's picturesque ruins and Gothic architecture. On their first evening in the Llangollen area, they visited Chirk Castle, Wrexham, the thirteenth-century seat of parliamentarian Richard Myddleton (1724-96), with whose family the

Ladies were later to establish a cordial friendship.³⁵ Ponsonby's narrative reflects the picturesque appreciation of "the elegant relics of ancient architecture; the ruined tower, the Gothic arch, the remains of castles, and abbeys."³⁶ She highlights the name of the Castle and its inhabitants in the same florid Gothic text she employs to emphasize keywords such as "Ruins," "Priory," "Dungeon" and "Monks," recalling the ominous medieval locations and fantastical events popularized by the fashion for Gothic novels such as Horace Walpole's 1764 The Castle of Otranto.³⁷ Johnson and Thrale visited the site during their 1774 tour of the North Wales region of Thrale's birth, with Johnson's diary offering only the brief observation, "We came to Chirk Castle."³⁸ The more willingly susceptible Ponsonby, by contrast, refers reverentially to its towers, chapel and dungeon, "where it is almost totally dark."³⁹ Ponsonby's description of herself and her companion as "Two Fugitive Ladies" similarly discloses a desire to view themselves as imperilled gothic heroines, although her often bland descriptions of their itinerary – "The remains of an old Castle...and two Churches neither of which are very well worth visiting" – suggests that she at times joined with Austen's Catherine Morland in ruing the disjuncture between the worlds of fiction and reality.⁴⁰ Butler and Ponsonby's first day of touring took them to Hoketon, which Ponsonby described as "a Village prettily situated with an old Church, where are several tombstones with rustick Inscriptions." Their attention to the churchyard's simple plots recalls the "frail Memorial[s]" and "uncouth Rhymes" of Gray's "An Elegy Wrote in a Country Church Yard," which celebrated the

³⁵ The Myddletons were in the eighteenth-century the owners of Castell Dinas Brân, the conical ruins of which formed a dramatic backdrop to Plâs newydd. (Sherratt, Illustrated 46.)

³⁶ (William Gilpin, Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: To Which Is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting (London: 1794) 46.)

³⁷ Horace Walpole, The Castle of Otranto, ed. Andrew Wright (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1963).

³⁸ Johnson, "Journey," 52.

³⁹ Ponsonby, Journey.

⁴⁰ Ponsonby, Journey.

humble dignity of Britain's "unhonoured Dead."⁴¹ Further remarks, however, combine Gray's celebration of the sequestered virtues of the rural poor with the grander gothicism of his close friend, Walpole, noting Pembroke Castle as the birthplace of Henry VII, and the church of Carmarthen Castle as containing "some pretty Monuments: an ancient one of a **Welch Prince** of the **Tudor** Family with the Effigies of him, his wife and children."⁴²

While Ponsonby's text thus incorporates elements of public literary discourse, it is nonetheless a personal document, dedicated to her travelling companion, rather than a prominent patron or appreciative audience, its construction promising a form of textual self-validation, rather than material support or public prominence. Chloe Chard argues that romantic commentators present the allure of travel as consisting in the opportunity to escape one's conventional identity. As she quotes William Hazlitt in 1822: "The *incognito* of an inn is one of its striking privileges – "lord of one's self, unencumbered without a name...to lose our importunate, tormenting, everlasting personal identity in the elements of nature, and become the creature of the moment."⁴³ Butler and Ponsonby's Welsh tour undoubtedly freed them temporarily from their roles as spinster daughter and impoverished ward, the pleasures of gentry tourism standing in stark contrast to threats of French cloisters and incestuous gallantry. Ponsonby's journal nonetheless frames their journey as enacting not merely the dissolution of their previous identities, but a self-conscious fashioning of alternative social roles. Ponsonby's role as author of this

⁴¹ Thomas Gray, "An Elegy Wrote in a Country Churchyard," British Literature, 1640-1789: An Anthology, ed. Robert Demaria (Oxford UK and Malden MA: Blackwell, 2000): 971-74. 973.

⁴² Ponsonby, *Journey*.

⁴³ Hazlitt, qtd. in Chard, Pleasure 216.

foundational and often overlooked record of her and Butler's retirement also acts as a rejoinder to her figuration as passive dupe to Butler's charismatic masculinity, who longed from the outset of their adventure to return to Inistogue. The precarious nature of the authorial identity here asserted may also explain Ponsonby's employment of the literary picturesque. Elizabeth A. Bohls notes the conservative tendency of Gilpin's picturesque aesthetics, which came to prominence during the period of rapid enclosure of formerly common lands, in which the picturesque tourist substitutes the actual ownership of property with its imaginative apprehension.⁴⁴ Bourgeois viewers were thus reassured that they possessed cultural, if not legal, title to increasingly privatized lands. According to the same logic, however, the display of an appreciation for one's surrounds could also act as an assertion of landed entitlement. Ponsonby's responsiveness to the picturesque thus anticipates Fanny Price's implicit assertion of landed entitlement in Mansfield Park, in which her liminal position within Sir Bertram's household family is ameliorated by her sensitive apprehension of natural and architectural beauty.⁴⁵ In recalling published travelogues, Ponsonby's journal again overreaches her and Butler's current social position, audaciously suggesting that she and Butler *could* be published authors, whose lives might possess significance beyond their marginal status as unchaperoned, impoverished and unmarried exiles. The virtuosity of Ponsonby's title page further asserts the genteel possessions of leisure time, expensive materials and penmanship – a skill for which Miss Parkes' school was particularly known – with which to create such a detailed manuscript artefact. While Felicity Nussbaum has described eighteenth-century life-writing as constructing subjectivity through “repetitive serial

⁴⁴ Elizabeth A. Bohls, Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 91.

⁴⁵ Tuite, Romantic 141.

representations of particular moments held together by the serial 'I',"⁴⁶ Ponsonby here constructs selfhood through the assertion of material form, as well as content, her painstaking capitals and curlicues revealing her faith in textuality as a form of willed self-creation, foreshadowing the textual labour required to sustain her and Butler's ensuing public personas. Similar efforts are apparent throughout the body of her travel journal, in which geographical regions are lettered in Gothic script and red ink, and coloured ink used to indicate the date. Ponsonby's title, describing the Ladies' first journey as 'performed,' rather than 'undertaken,' is fitting insofar as eighteenth-century meanings of the term include acting upon a theatrical stage (4c), executing a public artistic performance (4b), and bringing a particular state of being into effect.⁴⁷ The former meanings thus encapsulate the conscious artistry with which Ponsonby's text asserts their assumed identities as gentry travellers, while the latter anticipates critical transformations of J.L. Austin's concept of performativity, by Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and others, in acknowledging her text's illocutionary force.⁴⁸

While Ponsonby's diary may be understood as a form of textual self-creation, the subjectivity it fashions is nonetheless notable for its lack of interior depth. Ponsonby offers an opinionated account of the Ladies' surroundings, describing a local church as "a poor Building and in a very bad Condition."⁴⁹ She similarly asserts an independence of judgement in distinguishing their perceptions from those of other travellers: "Came to

⁴⁶ Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1989) 18.

⁴⁷ Ponsonby, *Journey*; *Oxford English Dictionary*. ('perform' 2.b)

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," trans. Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982): 307-30.; and Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991): 13-31.

⁴⁹ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

Caermathen which is esteemed the principal city in Wales but did not answer our expectations.”⁵⁰ The tone of her narrative, recalling Johnson’s perfunctory account of Chirk Castle, offers detailed records of the churches, country houses, ruins and natural sites visited, rather than any subjective description of their physical journey, levels of comfort or accommodation. Ponsonby thus styles herself as the kind of disinterested and implicitly privileged observer endorsed by eighteenth-century aestheticians including Addison, Shaftesbury, Hume and Kant.⁵¹ Ponsonby’s text thereby recalls the travel narratives that functioned as guidebooks to future travellers, suggesting itineraries and features of the natural and built environment, often without their authors having undertaking the troublesome effort of actually visiting the places described. She further fails to describe the Welsh men and women encountered, obeying Gilpin’s dictum that the picturesque tourist should view human figures as “mere / Appendages, & underparts” within a compositional landscape.⁵² A contrast to Ponsonby’s emotionally-restrained account is formed by Thrale’s Welsh diary which notes crossly that she was “all stuffed in one filthy room” in Bangor with her husband and daughter Queeney.⁵³ Displaying the intensely self-reflective nature of her maternal mode, displayed elsewhere in the ‘Children’s Books’ she kept between 1766 and 1778, Thrale is reduced to frustrated tears in Gwaynynog by a local officer’s wife’s apparent superiority as a mother:

I have not Mrs. Cotton’s even sweetness of temper, so I am come into my own room to cry. She loves her children as well as I do, but she would not have cried from fretful impatience like me. Why does every body on some occasion or other perpetually do better than I can?⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

⁵¹ Bohls, *Women* 69.

⁵² Gilpin, qtd. in Bohls, *Women* 96.

⁵³ Thrale, “*Journal*,” 111.

⁵⁴ Thrale, “*Journal*,” 107.

The disparity between Thrale and Ponsonby's accounts mirrors the disparity between their social situations, the former the wealthy wife of Southwark brewer Henry Thrale, travelling to her Welsh estates with her husband, child and the celebrated Samuel Johnson,⁵⁵ the latter one of two high-born but impecunious Irish spinsters, travelling without chaperones, settled lodgings, or plans to return to their respective homes. In distancing herself aesthetically from figures in the Welsh landscape, Ponsonby avoids potentially humiliating encounters with the Welsh gentry, while also asserting the couple's social distance from the labouring poor. Ponsonby thus invokes recognisable features of public literary genres in order to mask her textual fashioning of a contrived, and notably unrevealing, privacy. What I have described as the inherent queerness of the Ladies may thus be discerned within Butler and Ponsonby's earliest text, creating an opaque representational surface upon which a variety of effects are in turn projected.

Responding to an inquisitive Anne Lister in 1822, Ponsonby revealed her and Butler's conscious efforts to perform the role of exemplary coupledness for the numerous visitors they received from the early 1780s. As Lister reports in her journal:

Asked if, dare say, they had never quarrelled. 'No!' They had never had a quarrel. Little differences of opinion sometimes. Life could not go on without it, but only about the planting of a tree, and, when they differed in opinion, they took care to let no one see it.⁵⁶

The evidentiary value of Lister's account is problematized by the fact that she herself was one of the visitors to whom Ponsonby publicly enacted her and Butler's relationship, as it

⁵⁵ Michael J. Franklin, *Piozzi, Hester Lynch (1741–1821)*, 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/22309>>, 15 Jan. 2007.

⁵⁶ Lister, *Know* 204.

is by Ponsonby's care in admitting differences of merely aesthetic, rather than moral, value. The sincerity of Ponsonby's disclosure is nonetheless suggested by her willingness to acknowledge the care with which she and Butler managed not only the kind of performance their guests witnessed, but also those from which they were excluded. Written forty-four years earlier, Ponsonby's Tour suggests that she and Butler similarly performed the roles of ideal partner for each other. Dedicated to her "Beloved Companion," Ponsonby's stoic narrative, in which the uncomfortable coaches, poor roads and inhospitable habitations of Thrale's diary have no place, may be read as assuring Butler that she accepts the potential privations of their retirement. Ponsonby's record also imposes spatial and temporal coherence on their tour, marking her undertaking of an active role in ensuring the success of their unlikely adventure. Ponsonby's Tour thus foreshadows Butler and Ponsonby's enduring faith in a particularly opaque form of textual performativity, apparent, for example, in Butler's declaration that they enjoyed "a day of peaceful retirement" on the same day they read of their allegedly sexual relationship in the General Evening Post.⁵⁷ The Tour also asserts Butler and Ponsonby's status as a social unit, Ponsonby's autobiographical account asserting a corporate 'we,' rather than Nussbaum's performatively instantiated 'I.'

Becoming the Ladies of Llangollen

Before examining the significance of Butler and Ponsonby's choice of Llangollen as a place to settle, I must explore the designation 'the Ladies of Llangollen' by which they are now commonly known. As we have seen, Susan S. Lanser's work on gentry sapphism has focussed attention on the class privilege indicated by Butler and

⁵⁷ Butler, *Journal* 1788-91, 24 Jul. 1790.

Ponsonby's collective appellation as 'the Ladies of Llangollen.' Lanser argues that the latter part of the eighteenth-century witnessed the shift from biological to social accounts of female homoeroticism, replacing the figure of the anatomically masculine tribade with that of the sapphist, whose female morphology belied her 'masculine' sexual desires.⁵⁸ She also claims that the unprecedented publicity accorded female friendship in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries reflected the role of such intimacies in furthering bourgeois female agency and consolidating gentry-class interests. Such discourses, according to Lanser, defined female friendship as a sign of an individual's status and social connections, substituting class privilege for that of gender.⁵⁹ As passionately physical expressions of such love contained at least the potential of homoeroticism, tropes of class and national difference were used to distinguish the virtuous female friend from the monstrous sapphist, displacing female homoeroticism onto working class and non-British bodies.⁶⁰ Eighteenth-century western Europe thus witnessed "the bifurcat[ion of] friendship and sapphism along class lines," as social status, rather than anomalous physiology, came to distinguish female friends from their dangerously desiring others.⁶¹ As Lanser declares of Butler and Ponsonby, "it was the extent to which they could be defined *as* ladies that saved the 'Ladies of Llangollen.'"⁶²

Lanser's argument draws important attention to the social status asserted by Butler and Ponsonby's description as 'the Ladies of Llangollen.' Her argument

⁵⁸ Lanser, "Queer."

⁵⁹ Susan S. Lanser, "Befriending the Body: Female Intimacies as Class Acts," Eighteenth-Century Studies 32.2 (1999): 179-98. 186.

⁶⁰ Lanser, "Befriending." 186.

⁶¹ Lanser, "Befriending." 185.

⁶² Lanser, "Befriending." 184.

nonetheless fails to fully account for the different treatment accorded Anne Damer, who was also of gentle birth, and is more saliently distinguished by her prominence within visual and theatrical culture and the mobility of fashionable metropolitan society, a point examined in detail in chapter four. Lanser's attention to the class position asserted by Butler and Ponsonby's designation as 'Ladies' also highlights how 'Llangollen' has also failed to receive commensurate critical attention. From the late twentieth-century, commentators refer interchangeably to 'Butler and Ponsonby' and 'the Ladies of Llangollen,' the preponderance of the latter reflecting its greater ease of use, but more markedly the influence of Mavor's biography of the same name. Such unmarked substitution, however, implies that the latter title would have been familiar to Butler and Ponsonby, masking the fact that this designation was used only rarely during their lifetimes, first appearing in print in John Hicklin's 1847 memorial volume, The Ladies of Llangollen, as sketched by many hands, and not achieving common currency until the 1870s.⁶³ Accordingly, I maintain that conjoining Butler and Ponsonby's now-ubiquitous designation, 'the Ladies of Llangollen,' with their avoidance of hostile scrutiny during their lifetimes risks de-historicizing their appellation and masking the utility of their association with a location from which they initially sought to distance themselves. The critical reiteration of the name, 'the Ladies of Llangollen,' also acts to reiterate the dense array of meanings which have accumulated to the title, rendering the invocation of Butler and Ponsonby's common name itself an hypostatizing cultural effect. To trace the genealogy of Butler and Ponsonby's common name is also to trace their employment of place as a marker of identity. Throughout the latter section of this chapter, I thus explore

⁶³ See Anon., "Long Ago."; Anon., "The Ladies of Llangollen," The Globe 8 Nov. 1888.; and John Ferrar, A Tour from Dublin to London, in 1795, through the Isle of Anglesea, Bangor, Conway...And Kensington (Dublin: 1796) 23.

Butler and Ponsonby's employment of their Llangollen location as an integral element of their self-fashioning, focussing on their efforts to identify with the romantic celebration of its picturesque surrounds.

While Llangollen came to offer the peripatetic Butler and Ponsonby and social geographical anchor, they initially identified themselves with its picturesque environs, rather than the village itself. Located in Denbighshire in North Eastern Wales, Llangollen sits within the Dee Valley, between the Berwyn and Egwyseg mountains. Travellers *en route* between Dublin and London were served by several local inns and a twice-weekly market fair, while other industries included leatherworking, several lead mines,⁶⁴ and a cornmill established in the thirteenth century and rebuilt in 1786.⁶⁵ Ponsonby's account of their initial visit was not overly effusive, noting on the 25 May 1778: "Lay at Llangollen a pretty village on the river Dee." While she observes that the Llangollen bridge is "esteemed one of the wonders of Wales," she offers no personal account of its beauty or function, and describes the parish church of St. Collen's, where she and Butler were eventually lain to rest, as "contain[ing] nothing remarkable except the tomb of a Knight of the Owens Family."⁶⁶

Pennant's Tour anticipated Butler and Ponsonby in dismissing Llangollen as "a small and poor town." His ensuing remarks, however, indicate that Llangollen's

⁶⁴ Ferrar, Tour 23.

⁶⁵ Sherratt, Illustrated 69.

⁶⁶ Ponsonby, Journey.

Like the Myddletons of Chirk Castle, the Owens of Porkington were amongst the local families encountered on Butler and Ponsonby's initial tour who were later to become their firm friends.

attraction lay in the grandeur of its location, rather than that of the town itself, which is de-emphasized in favour of its striking surroundings. Pennant describes Llangollen as:

seated in a most romantic spot, near a pretty common watered by the *Dee*, which, emblematic of its country, runs with great passion through the valley. The mountains soar to a great height above their wooded bases; and one, whose summit is crowned with the antient castle *Brân*, is uncommonly grand. I know no scene in *North Wales*, where the refined lover of picturesque scenes, the sentimental, or the romantic, can give a fuller indulgence to his inclination. No place abounds more with various rides or solemn walks. From this central spot, he may (as I have done) visit the seat of *Owen Glyndwr*, and the fine valleys of the *Dee*, to its source, beyond the great *Llyntegid*: or pass the mountains to the fertile vale of *Clwyd*.⁶⁷

Pennant presents the region's soaring mountains and "antient" monuments as offering a prospect suitably composed to the picturesque eye, while its "pretty common" evokes a landscape unaffected by the enclosure acts that were rapidly transforming the English countryside. The description of Llangollen as a "central spot," however, reveals his elision of Llangollen itself in favour of its more aesthetically pleasing surrounds. The picturesque elision of the material reality of the labouring classes is also apparent in a 1799 text, A Collection of Tours in Wales, or, a Display of the Beauties of Wales. The volume's anonymous author invokes key features of picturesque aesthetics, praising the region's "finely varied" mountains and their "woods, rocks and torrents."⁶⁸ Echoing Pennant's invocation of Owain Glyndwr, the author emphasizes the scene's Welshness by observing that this "celebrated spot" was once home to Lady Mifanwy Vechan, the fourteenth century noblewoman celebrated by the Welsh Bard, Hoel (who is himself celebrated in Gray's 1757 "The Bard"). The region is then incorporated into a British

⁶⁷ Pennant, *Tour* 1:295-96.

⁶⁸ Anon., A Collection of Tours in Wales; or, a Display of the Beauties of Wales: Selected Principally from Celebrated Histories and Popular Tours, with Occasional Remarks (London: Printed for C. W. Leadbeater, Chester. Also sold by Lackington, and Co. London; Mundell and Co. Edinburgh; and J. Mundel, Glasgow, 1799) 108.

narrative as the author quotes Gray's account of Edward the First's conquest of Wales, before being subsumed within a pan-national discourse of the European picturesque: "It has been universally allowed by gentlemen of distinguished taste, that Llangollen may rank in picturesque beauty with either Italy, Spain, or Switzerland."⁶⁹ The disparity between the town and vale of Llangollen is similarly emphasized in the Rev. William Bingley's 1800 A Tour Round North Wales, performed during the Summer of 1798. Bingley echoes the poetic effusions of Ann Radcliffe in describing Llangollen as "romantically embosomed in mountains, whose rugged summits pierced the clouds," before returning abruptly to a prose register: "To these elegant scenes, the dirty, ill-looking town, having scarcely a good house within it, formed afterwards a not wretched contrast."⁷⁰ For Bingley, writing in the late 1790s, Butler and Ponsonby were themselves part of the picturesque 'scenery' of Llangollen Vale: "About a quarter of a mile from Llangollen is Plâs newydd, the charming residence of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Ponsonby. It is situated on the south side of the vale of Llangollen, and commands a mountain prospect."⁷¹ The extent to which the distinction between the town of Llangollen and its environs was one of class is further reiterated in the 1799 The Itinerant; a select collection of interesting and picturesque views in Great Britain and Ireland, which describes the neighbourhood as boasting "a number of Gentleman's seats of elegant modern structure. Of the town itself little can be said, its distance from London is about 186 miles, from Shrewsbury 32."⁷² Llangollen Vale is thus linked with the stately homes

⁶⁹ Anon., Collection 109-10.

⁷⁰ Rev. William Bingley, A Tour Round North Wales, Performed During the Summer of 1798: Containing Not Only the Description and Local History of the Country, but Also...An Essay on the Language, vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: E. Williams and J. Deighton, 1800) 116.

⁷¹ Bingley, Tour 117-18.

⁷² Anon., The Itinerant; a Select Collection of Interesting and Picturesque Views, in Great Britain and Ireland, Engraved from Original Paintings and Drawings, by Eminent Artists (London: John Walker, 1799).

of local gentry, while the town itself is defined only by its distance from more important population centres.

Ponsonby's tour journal indicates that she and Butler also differentiated the illage of Llangollen from its surrounding landscape, identifying themselves with the latter by settling a strategic distance from its centre. In disassociating the name of Llangollen from the humble dwellings clustered around its main streets, Butler and Ponsonby were later able to identify themselves with this newly expansive signifier. This had the effect of masking their exiled status and rendering them elements of Llangollen's picturesque surrounds. Having slept in Llangollen for the first time on the 25 May 1778, Butler and Ponsonby walked the next morning to the outlying Crow Castle (Castell Dinas Brân), "Built before the Birth of Christ," Ponsonby's narrative further praising the geological grandeur of the Trevor Rocks and the imposing mountains commanding "an extensive Prospect over the Beautifullest Country in the World."⁷³ Indefatigable, they travelled a further two miles to Vale Crucis Abbey, the future setting of their "rural dinners," where they admired the "ancient Monuments ...supposed to be of the Abbot or Monks to whom it belongs."⁷⁴ Butler and Ponsonby's elision of the town of Llangollen is also apparent in their eventual decision to settle a crucial quarter of a mile from the village centre, under the "finely picturesque" shadow of Dinas Brân.⁷⁵ The walk from Llangollen's main street to Plâs newydd is now lined by houses clustering narrowly along the edges of the posthumously named 'Butler Hill.' Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century descriptions of the cottage nonetheless note its location on the outskirts of Llangollen proper. Indeed,

⁷³ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

⁷⁴ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

⁷⁵ Bingley, *Tour* 116.

Bingley not only distinguished “the rugged and woody banks of the Dee” from the dismal town it bifurcated, but stressed Butler and Ponsonby’s distance of “About a quarter of a mile” from the town.⁷⁶ Butler and Ponsonby’s correspondence of the late 1790s reinforces this distancing effect, their letters echoing the title of Seward’s 1796 pastoral poem Llangollen Vale, in identifying the Ladies with the more expansive limits of the celebrated Vale, rather than the humbler town.⁷⁷ Indeed, while letters written from the early 1800s identify their residence as “Plâs newydd Llangollen,”⁷⁸ this may be argued to indicate that Butler and Ponsonby now secured the identity of the town with which they were eventually rendered synonymous, rather than the town securing their status as local residents.

While Butler and Ponsonby initially sought to distinguish themselves from the village of Llangollen, they became irrevocably linked to the Llangollen region within the first years of their retirement. The unconventional nature of their elopement rendered them scandalous topics of Irish conversation throughout the ensuing decade, with Mrs. Goddard recording in her diary on the 4 April 1784, “At home. Wrote to Mrs. Hamerton that I would answer no enquiries concerning Miss Ponsonby and Miss Butler.”⁷⁹ The precarious nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s position is here underscored by Goddard’s reference to ‘Miss’ Butler; the attainted Ormonde family titles were not restored until 1791. The Ladies’ establishment of a permanent home at Plâs newydd in 1780

⁷⁶ Bingley, Tour 117-18.

⁷⁷ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Mrs Myddleton Biddulph [1798], National Library of Wales, Aberwystwyth.

⁷⁸ Butler and Ponsonby, Butler and Ponsonby to Mrs. Wingfield 15 Apr. 1803, National Library of Ireland, Aberwystwyth.

⁷⁹ Goddard, qtd. in Bell, ed., Hamwood 51.

nonetheless enabled them to make an entrée into the social circles of the local Welsh gentry, as is explored further in the following chapter. Their ties with local gentry such as the Williams Wynn (“the kings of the north”⁸⁰) linked them with figures of national prominence; in October 1785 Sir Watkin and Lady Williams Wynn called upon Plâs newydd accompanied by Richard Brinsley Sheridan and his wife, the singer Elizabeth Linley Sheridan, in whose reputed beauty Butler noted her disappointment.⁸¹ The 1780s also marked their debut as national celebrities, whereupon they were subject to both prurient interest and laudatory fascination. At the same time as rumours circulated about Ponsonby’s desire to return to Ireland and marriage, they incited the interest of no less a personage than Queen Charlotte, who in 1785 requested plans of Plâs newydd and its gardens.⁸² Their public profile was only consolidated as respectable through their ensuing identification with the newly rehabilitated Llangollen region. Writing to Mrs. Mary Powys on the 17 November 1795, Seward describes her travels in North Wales: “This excursion has given me the honour and happiness of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Ponsonby’s friendship, the celebrated Recluses of Llangollen.”⁸³ Butler and Ponsonby are further characterized as “Recluses” in Hester Thrale Piozzi’s correspondence of the early nineteenth-century, despite her enjoyment of their expansive hospitality, which included their 1804 transportation of a piano on horseback across Bwlch y Rhw Glen for her new husband, the musical Mr. Piozzi, to play, “a feat,” as Butler and Ponsonby observed, “never attempted much less Performed – before, as We believe, since either Mountains or

⁸⁰ Williams, *When* 149.

⁸¹ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 58.

⁸² Mavor, *Ladies* 59.

⁸³ Butler, qtd. in Anna Seward, *Letters of Anna Seward, Written between the Years 1784 and 1807*, ed. Archibald Constable, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1811) 4:120.

Piano fortes were in existence.”⁸⁴ Mrs. Piozzi’s description discloses the perceived lack of tension between Butler and Ponsonby’s sociability and their ostensible ‘Retreat,’ a point explored further in chapter five. She declared them to be “sought, in their beauteous retirement, by the great, the literary, and the ingenious.”⁸⁵ Butler and Ponsonby’s metonymic link with the Llangollen region was further forged by Seward’s “Llangollen Vale,” the title of which links Butler and Ponsonby’s nomenclature with Llangollen and its surrounds. Nonetheless, she notably refrains from describing them as either ‘the Ladies of Llangollen’ or by their family names, which are acknowledged only in editorial footnotes, employing instead ‘Eleanora’ and ‘Zara,’ the names of tragic roles played by Sarah Siddons.⁸⁶ Seward’s avoidance of Butler and Ponsonby’s family names may reflect the fact that such titles not only marked their membership of major Irish families, but may have also drawn attention to both their marginal status within such genealogies and the Ormondes’ fraught political history. Indeed, while Butler’s family continued to utilise their extinguished titles, her nobility was unsecured until the restoration of the Ormonde titles, just as Ponsonby’s name, held by the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, only rendered her poverty more anomalous. Butler and Ponsonby’s Welsh location thus literally constituted their identity, eliding their Irish origin and ambivalent class status and standing as both sign and signifier of the genteel local identity they were to assert. Indeed, the extent to which a culturally-refigured Llangollen was to prove an essential element of their public profile is demonstrated by the scantiness of information regarding their first winter in Wales, possibly spent in the nearby Cuffleyman Valley. With

⁸⁴ Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, Butler and Ponsonby to Hester Thrale Piozzi 24 Nov. 1804, Ms., John Rylands Library Special Collection, University of Manchester, Manchester.

⁸⁵ Seward, *Letters* 4:120.

⁸⁶ Anna Seward, “Llangollen Vale,” *Llangollen Vale with Other Poems* (London: G. Sael, 1796): 7.

contemporary records of their shared life only commencing with their 1780 return to Llangollen, the genesis of the public figures now dubbed ‘the Ladies of Llangollen’ may thus be seen as contemporaneous with their identification with the picturesque beauty of Llangollen Vale and their subsequent refiguring of its associated village.

As explored in chapter six, Seward’s poem publicized Butler and Ponsonby throughout overlapping social and epistolary networks. Published in London and reviewed in periodicals such as the Gentleman’s Magazine, it rehabilitated their claim to their distinguished patronyms and asserted the legitimacy of their Welsh residence. Thomas Suffield wrote to Charlotte, Lady Bedingfield, in October 1796: “My respects to Mr. Patterson; tell him Miss Seward of Litchfield [sic] has published a short pastoral Poem entitled Llangollen Vale...as a tribute of respect to her...friends, Lady E. Butler & Miss Ponsonby, who have lived in Llangollen upwards of 15 years.”⁸⁷ Such was their fame in their Irish homeland throughout the 1790s that John Ferrar’s publication of the same year, A Tour from Dublin to London, in 1795 did not even refer to Butler and Ponsonby by name, instead declaring of a piece of stained glass “representing our SAVIOUR in his agony” fitted in St. Collen’s church: “This was a gift of the recluse ladies, who have happily chosen this enchanting spot for their residence.”⁸⁸ The presumptive legibility of this reference to an Irish audience thus complicates any straightforward account of either their reclusivity or national identity, their invocation as

⁸⁷ Thomas Suffield, Thomas Suffield to Charlotte, Lady Bedingfield 21 Oct. 1796, *Aristocratic Women: The Social, Political and Cultural History of Rich and Powerful Women* (Marlborough, Wiltshire: Adam Matthew Publications, 1998).

⁸⁸ Ferrar, Tour 20.

the familiar 'ladies' of the Llangollen parish marking both the durability of their Irishness and their identification with their Welsh habitation.

Mrs. Piozzi's letters to Butler and Ponsonby echo Seward's elision of their family names. In August 1800, she enquired of her Welsh neighbours, "And how did my dear Ladies get home? Safely, I hope—" ⁸⁹ This elision is repeated in her effusive conclusion, with its echoes of Ophelia's farewell to the court of Elsinore, "Adieu dear and lovely Ladies, & believe that no one is more Admiringly Your true & faithful Serv than is H:L: Piozzi." ⁹⁰ In collectively designating Butler and Ponsonby as 'Ladies,' Mrs. Piozzi draws upon the term's ambiguous eighteenth-century denotations of both a woman of noble rank and the female head of a gentry household, ⁹¹ generalizing Butler's nobility to her merely 'Honourable' companion while also acknowledging their anomalously shared and female headship of their Llangollen home. Mrs. Piozzi's possessive appellation ("my dear Ladies") may be seen to reflect Butler and Ponsonby's deference to their newfound literary friend, whose presence at Plâs newydd they assured her in 1796 stood as "an important object in their ambition for many years past." ⁹² Mrs. Piozzi's admiring epithets may also be seen to indicate her gratitude for a friendship to take the place of the Bluestocking connections severed by her 1784 marriage to Gabriel Piozzi, with Piozzi's

⁸⁹ Hester Thrale Piozzi, Hester Thrale Piozzi to Eleanor Butler 27 Aug. 1800, National Library of Ireland, Wicklow Ms, Dublin.

⁹⁰ Piozzi, Piozzi-Butler 27 Aug 1800.; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 4:5:71-72.

⁹¹ Fanny Burney, *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, ed. Edward A. Bloom (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1990) 13.

⁹² Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby to Hester Thrale Piozzi 20 Sept. [N.Y.], Ms, John Rylands Library Special Collections, Manchester University, Manchester.

status as an Italian Catholic and former music master to Queeney Thrale scandalizing friends including Dr. Johnson, Fanny Burney and Elizabeth Montagu.⁹³

Butler and Ponsonby's twentieth-century designation is anticipated closely in an 1801 letter from Mrs. Piozzi to Penelope Pennington, in which she observes, "The Ladies at Llangollen enquire much after you. [my emphasis]"⁹⁴ The care with which Mrs. Piozzi demurs from describing Butler and Ponsonby publicly as the Ladies 'of' Llangollen distinguishes them from local landed families such as the Myddletons 'of' Chirk, whose designation asserts the extent to which their social position is marked and secured by their ancestral seat, which had been held, as Ponsonby noted in her tour journal, since the thirteenth century. In a letter of the early 1800s, Butler and Ponsonby's friend Mrs. Lloyd of Aston writes to Louisa Harvey, "My dear Louisa – I am quite atriste with the idea of you being alone at this moment [...] I hope you will go over to the Ladies and ask them to come over to you." As she reiterates in her close, lest the identities of the 'ladies' lies in doubt, "what lovely weather we have, it will be a comfort to you, and I trust you will go to Llangollen."⁹⁵ Butler and Ponsonby's company is again advocated as a social tonic in a letter of c.1806; "My papers say Ldy Sarah Saville is to be married to a Mr. Vanneck [...] I hope you take long rides, and visit the Ladies and go to Wynstaye."⁹⁶ Butler and Ponsonby's public *éclat* is here marked by their invocation alongside the Williams Wynn and newspaper reports of Sarah Saville, Lady Mexborough, who in 1767 performed the

⁹³ MO 3997; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Elizabeth Carter 9 Jun. [1788], Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

⁹⁴ Piozzi, qtd. in public display materials, Plas newydd, Llangollen (operated by the Denbighshire County Council)

⁹⁵ Louisa Harvey, Louisa Harvey to Mrs. Lloyd 'Friday Night', Letters of the Lloyd Family of Rolls Park, Chigwell, Essex Records Office, Chelmsford.

⁹⁶ Louisa Harvey, Louisa Harvey to Mrs. Lloyd [1806], Letters of the Lloyd Family of Rolls Park, Chigwell, Essex Record Office, Chelmsford.

role of Lavinia in a private theatrical production of Nicholas Rowe's The Fair Penitent overseen by the Duke of York.⁹⁷ In June 1801, Piozzi closes a gossip letter to Butler and Ponsonby with the question, "What say the charming Ladies of Llangollen to all these stories?"⁹⁸ In September 1801, Piozzi repeats this flattering designation in order to express her gratitude for Butler and Ponsonby's correspondence: "The charming Ladies of Llangollen Vale bid Dr. Myddleton tell me I am Indebted for two letters thence, since I wrote last. This Paper brings my Acknowledgment for One worth Two of any other correspondents; it was franked, but I forget the outside in grateful Recollection of what was within,"⁹⁹ while her diary of 1810 similarly records her as having "wrote to the Ladies of Llangollen."¹⁰⁰

The first notable instance in which Butler and Ponsonby are described to a third party as being 'of' Llangollen occurs in a 1795 letter from Seward to the Rev. Henry White of Lichfield, in which she describes them, with characteristic sensibility, as "the enchanting unique, in conduct and situation, of which you have heard so much [...] the celebrated Ladies of Llangollen Vale."¹⁰¹ Anticipating her poem of 1796, Seward here associates Butler and Ponsonby with the Vale of Llangollen, her extended epithet

⁹⁷ Lady Sarah Savile (d. 1821) was the daughter of the 2nd earl of Mexborough. The Duke of York's production was staged at the Westminster home of Sir Francis Blake Delaval between Dec. 1766 and May 1767. The role of Calista (the adulterous wife and later penitent of Rowe's title) was played by the Duke's rumoured mistress, Anne Delaval, Lady Stanhope, thereby incurring the disapproval of George III. Savile married John George, Baron Monson, in 1807; and Henry Greville, 3rd earl of Warwick, in 1816. (Matthew Kilburn, Edward Augustus, Prince, Duke of York and Albany (1739–1767), 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/66551>, 22 May 2007.)

⁹⁸ Hester Thrale Piozzi, Hester Thrale Piozzi to Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby 14 Jun. 1801, Microfilm.

⁹⁹ Hester Thrale Piozzi, Hester Thrale Piozzi to Eleanor Butler 23 Sept. 1801, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

¹⁰⁰ Hester Thrale Piozzi, Hester Thrale Piozzi 1810 Pocketbook: Volume 4, John Rylands Library Special Collection, Manchester, 4.

¹⁰¹ Seward, qtd in Mavor, Year 172.

gesturing towards the lingering opprobrium attached to the village itself. By 1802, however, Sir Walter Scott writes to Seward, “I Rejoice that you have met the ladies of Llangollen, of whom I have heard so much that I think you must have found them kindred spirits”,¹⁰² his usage indicating the extent to which Seward’s “Llangollen Vale” rehabilitated the village and its now well-known residents. Scott’s phrasing reflects Butler and Ponsonby’s now-metonymic association with Llangollen Vale, which Seward’s 1796 poem did so much to instantiate. It may also be said to reflect his interest in the literature of the medieval and courtly tradition, in which the formulation ‘Lady of...’ designates both feudal homage and chivalrous devotion.¹⁰³ The phrase is later repeated by Scott, with the additional capitalization of the term ‘Ladies,’ in an 1816 letter to Matthew Weld Hartstonge, in which he responds to Hartstonge’s “account of the Ladies of Llangollen” with a picaresque report of “their first escape (I think they made two) from their friends in the Green Isle.”¹⁰⁴ Scott’s designation suggests that the title “the Ladies of Llangollen” had been achieved by 1816, confirmed in 1847 by Hicklin’s memorial volume. As I have shown here, however, it was neither naturally nor ahistorically constituted, but iteratively constructed and confirmed.

While their designation as “the Ladies of Llangollen” gives obvious prominence to Butler and Ponsonby’s geographical location, the history and function of Butler and Ponsonby’s corporate designation has received scant critical consideration. As the previous discussion has demonstrated, Butler and Ponsonby’s 1778 Welsh tour marks their prescient participation in the Welsh cultural revival. Ponsonby’s first tour journal

¹⁰² Scott, *Letters 1815-1817* 224.

¹⁰³ *Oxford English Dictionary*. (‘lady’ I:2.a. and c.)

¹⁰⁴ Scott, *Letters 1815-1817* 224.

displayed her familiarity with the aesthetic and stylistic traditions of domestic travel writing, her daily narrative working to instantiate a textually-constituted corporate identity for herself and her “Beloved Companion.” In settling outside of Llangollen proper, Butler and Ponsonby identified themselves with the picturesque landscape of Llangollen Vale, rather than the grubbier habitations and businesses of the bustling town. Through their incorporation into the same tourist narratives that first drew them to North Wales, they nonetheless helped define the village in relation to its romantic periphery, rendering themselves synonymous with its newly evocative associations. Having thus explored the geographical resonances of Butler and Ponsonby’s Welsh habitation, I now turn to the materiality of their Welsh home, through which they asserted their performatively-constituted identity as landed and sexually virtuous Welsh locals.

Chapter Four

“keep yourself in your own persons, where you are:” Butler and Ponsonby’s transformation of Plâs newydd

Terry Castle has described Butler and Ponsonby’s use of letters and the published tributes of friends as a “back-and-fill operation” through which they publicly asserted the propriety of their relationship by means of the circulatory mechanisms of Romantic print culture.¹ Castle’s construction metaphor, referring to the process of refilling excavations or trenches, is highly suggestive, evoking the quarrying and entombment of the secret knowledges that Sedgwick describes as the most sexually saturated of epistemic forms.² Indicative of her sceptical view of the apparent asexuality of Butler and Ponsonby’s ‘romantic friendship,’ Castle’s metaphor also gestures towards their material, as well as textual, construction of a substantively respectable public image. And indeed, their architectural improvement of Plâs newydd was as significant as textuality in subsuming their status as exiled and sexually suspect spinsters beneath an edifice of chaste provincial friendship.

Accounts of Butler and Ponsonby have traditionally focussed on their written texts, an exception being Jill H. Casid’s 2005 Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization. In her chapter on the Ladies, “Some Queer Version of Georgic,” Casid examines the Ladies’ agricultural improvement of Plâs newydd, suggesting that they undertook landscaping and farming activities in order to mask the inherent queerness of their relationship, styling themselves conversely as “the happy heterosexual cottagers of imperial national

¹ Castle, Apparitional 93.

² Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 73.

myth.”³ As Casid perceptively argues, they crafted the landscape of the *ferme ornée* as a public surrogate for their private relationship. Figuring reading as productive of knowledge and gardening as productive of both beauty and crops for consumption and sale, they identified the landscape of Plâs newydd with the heterosexual imperatives of the traditional georgic, while its geographic enclosure evoked the virtuous sequestration of the retired cottager.⁴

The following discussion similarly attends to Butler and Ponsonby’s material, rather than written productions. Turning from the examination of Plâs newydd’s garden to the cottage itself, I characterize the Ladies’ architectural improvements as a form of queer performativity, through which their social marginality was both ameliorated and expressed. Butler and Ponsonby’s elopement estranged them from both their families and homeland, the absence of social recognition reflected in Ponsonby’s tour journal suggesting their ensuing self-fashioning to be structured by the desire to cover over the extent to which they were quite literally not at home. I suggest that this shame-inducing rupture of social connectivity underlay their ongoing efforts to mask and repair the lingering scandal surrounding their elopement and exile. In particular, I contend that the Gothic features and oak cladding they appended to Plâs newydd constituted crucial elements of their self-stylization, allowing them to identify with the social and geographical fixity of the local Welsh gentry. In so doing, they masked their shameful status as unmarried and sexually suspect Irish exiles and distanced themselves from the social and sexual mobility of rumoured metropolitan sapphists. Closing my discussion

³ Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005) 175.

⁴ Casid, *Sowing* 175-79.

with an examination of their private library, I describe it as equally central to their assertion of geographical and moral steadfastness, acting to distance them from the sexualized associations of circulating libraries and secure their place within private networks of literary exchange. Butler and Ponsonby's material efforts to assert their virtue suggest that the dissolution of the distinction between fame and notoriety described in chapter two had yet to arise in this period, in particular for women lacking stable sources social and financial support. While the fame of their later years and afterlife rested upon their skilful deployment of the profitable public frisson Tuite terms the "economy of sensation,"⁵ their ability to indulge their eccentricities in later years was literally built upon their earlier assertions of landed virtue. Their embodiment of what Sedgwick terms "shame consciousness and shame creativity"⁶ constitute another way in which Butler and Ponsonby may be perceived as queer, their defensive assertions of sexual propriety through this materiality marking their departure from heteronormativity without recourse to genital 'proof.'

'Two Fugitive Ladies': On the Road with Butler and Ponsonby

Ponsonby's account of her and Butler's first Welsh tour ceases abruptly on 25 June, 1778: "Went to Oswestry and in search of Lodgings to Llanwryneck a small Village disagreeably situated on each side of the road and in the neighbourhood of..."⁷ The fragmentation of Ponsonby's account discloses the precarious nature of their position that her narrative works so assiduously to conceal, their forty-five days of travel having depleted their scant monetary resources and yielded no permanent home. Details of

⁵ Tuite, "Tainted," 78.

⁶ Sedgwick, "Shame," 63.

⁷ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

Butler and Ponsonby's ensuing movements are scarce and contradictory, with the daughter of their servant of twenty years, Jane Thomas, asserting that they lived "first in Chester & after-wards in Denbigh."⁸ Harriet Pigott equivocates even within her own narrative, her assertion that "they drove about the Country arrived at Ebistock" later modified to "Llanwryneck." Her narrative eventually coincides with that of Jane Thomas, however, detailing their removal to Llangollen and rental of "little low lodgings in a narrow street."⁹ Thomas describes this property as a two room house opposite the Hand Hotel, which Mavor claims was owned by Mr. Jones, the local postman.¹⁰ The peripatetic existence of these apparently rootless gentry ladies, however impoverished, carried with it the threat of sexual, as well as spatial, mobility. William Cowper's 1785 poem The Task rails against the metropolitan figure of "the adultress," who "In guilty splendour, shake[s] the public ways."¹¹ Spatial mobility and sexual transgression are similarly linked in Lady Susan, in which Austen's protagonist is forced to shelter with her brother and sister-in-law after her attempt to seduce the husband and potential son-in-law of the Mainwaring family forces her from their home. As she writes to her confidante, Mrs. Johnson, "You were mistaken, my dear Alicia, in supposing me fixed at this place for the

⁸ Anon., *Recollections*.

⁹ Pigott, *Pigott F1-2*, 198.

¹⁰ Mavor, *Ladies* 44.

Jane Thomas's manuscript memoirs suggest that Butler and Ponsonby remained grateful for the provision of their first habitation in Llangollen. Recalling Butler and Ponsonby in 1885, Ann Walker, the daughter of the first servant they employed in Llangollen, recounts that 30 sovereigns were found in an old teapot by Jane Thomas after Mary Caryll's death. As Walker's narrative continues, "She took them to the Ladies, & they, knowing that they must have belonged to Mary Carrol [sic], wd not keep them but gave them to the Postmaster at the little house they have inhabited while Plas Newydd was preparing for them." (Anon., *Recollections*.)

¹¹ William Cowper, The Task (Ilkley, Yorkshire and London: Scolar Press, 1973) 75.

rest of the winter,” her enforced removal and rootless condition confirming her status as “the most accomplished Coquette in England.”¹²

Establishing Plâs newydd was therefore crucial in fixing Butler and Ponsonby in material, social and sexual terms. Pigott’s account emphasizes the importance of the dwelling to Butler and Ponsonby’s entrée into North Welsh gentry circles. She dates Butler and Ponsonby’s acceptance within local society to their friendship with Lady Dungannon, who “announced by visiting them that they were women of high respectability” only after they exchanged their “little low lodgings” for the establishment of their own household.¹³ This took place in 1780, when Butler and Ponsonby rented “the mean cottage” of Pen-y-maes, a slate-roofed two-story structure of five rooms on four acres of land, for which they paid a half-yearly rent of 11.7.6l.¹⁴ In the mid eighteenth-century, the term ‘cottage’ referred initially to a small dwelling occupied by the labouring poor. By the 1780s, however, cottages were “discovered to be picturesque,” as Gilpin’s aesthetic theories stimulated interest in weathered, irregular and sequestered dwellings.¹⁵ Two competing versions of the cottage thus arose, the first the rural home the labouring poor, the second, the cottage *ornée* or ‘ornamented cottage,’ the idealized site of

¹² Jane Austen, “Lady Susan,” *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, the Watsons and Sanditon*, ed. John Davie (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1998): 207-75. 211.

¹³ Pigott, Pigott F1-2, 198.

In an important account of the Wordsworths’ concatenation of domestic and literary labour in Grasmere, Kurt Heinzelman describes Dorothy Wordsworth’s “architectonic, spatially precise daydream of owning a piece of property.” Heinzelman traces Dorothy and William’s figuring of domestic labour as a precondition of literary productivity, observing of their daily exertions, “They strove to write their household into being, even as they were in the material process of shaping a rather unpromising, smoky, dark and overgrown cottage into a home.” (Heinzelman, “Cult,” 56.) Heinzelman’s description could also apply to Butler and Ponsonby, whose anticipation of the Wordsworths’ Romantic domesticity is discussed further in chapter six.

¹⁴ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 18 Feb. 1788.

¹⁵ Michael Reed, *The Landscape of Britain: From the Beginnings to 1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 251.

retirement and conjugal love.¹⁶ The latter version reflected the fashion for *ferme ornée*, or ornamented farms such as Leasowes, the West Midlands home of poet William Shenstone (1714-63), which featured ivied grottoes, a ruined Gothic chapel, poetic inscriptions (echoed by the poetic inscriptions Butler and Ponsonby hung on their trees),¹⁷ and a winding "Circuit Walk."¹⁸ A tourist site since the mid eighteenth-century, Leasowes was also familiar to Butler and Ponsonby, their 1792 library catalogue containing a 1775 edition of Shenstone's collected letters.¹⁹ While a cottage *ornée* was a mark of refined sensibility, a traditional cottage signified only poverty, as indicated by Austen's description of the Dashwood family's new home in Sense and Sensibility:

As a house, Barton Cottage, though small, was comfortable and compact; but as a cottage it was defective, for the building was regular, the roof was tiled, the window shutters were not painted green, nor were the walls covered with honeysuckle.²⁰

With its orderly architecture, unthatched roof and walls bereft of climbing plants, Barton Cottage marks the Dashwood women's straitened finances, rather than picturesque taste, its size and distance from their Sussex connections linking female retirement with poverty and social marginality. As the venal Fanny Dashwood argues, an all-female household possesses no claim to social recognition or material need. She exclaims of the Dashwood women, "They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will have no company, and can have no expences of any kind."²¹ In transforming their cottage according to picturesque principles, Butler and Ponsonby thus sought to render

¹⁶ Sarah Lloyd, "Cottage Conversations: Poverty and Manly Independence in Eighteenth-Century England," Past and Present 184, August (2004): 69-108. 76.

¹⁷ Seward, qtd. in Mavor, Year 174.

¹⁸ Casid, Sowing 134-46.

¹⁹ Sarah Ponsonby, A Catalogue of Our Books: Mdccxcii, Adam Matthew Publications, Marlborough, Wiltshire, 1997.

²⁰ Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 23.

²¹ Austen, Sense 9.

their humble dwelling a sign of taste, its rural location serving to endorse, rather than belie, their claim to social recognition.

Cultivating Identity

The eighteenth-century celebration of the rural cottage mapped onto the literary tradition of the Georgic, the celebration of the daily rhythms of agricultural labour and productivity located in contrast to the pastoral celebration of leisured ease. The British Georgic tradition derived from Virgil's Georgics, written between 30 and 37 BCE, which gained a wide English readership following John Dryden's 1697 translation of Virgil's collected works. Described by Dryden as "the best poem by the best poet," the Georgics celebrated the quotidian tasks of tending crops and raising livestock, initiating a literary mode stressing the conservative values of dedicated labour, land ownership and nation-building.²² The British Georgic flourished in the early decades of the eighteenth-century, its combination of rural observation and civic instruction characterizing poems such as James Thomson's The Seasons (1726-30, rev. 1744) and Robert Dodsley's "Agriculture" (1753). Following England's abolishment of perpetual copyright in 1774, the Scottish clergyman Hugh Blair collected the works of Milton, Swift, Addison, Thomas, Gray and Dryden (including his translations of Virgil), the wide circulation of these works rendering them deeply entrenched in national reading culture.²³ Echoing this tradition, Butler and Ponsonby undertook a range of agricultural improvements to their four acres of land throughout the 1780s. Employing a local man as a gardener, they established peach trees, asparagus beds and a range of shrubs and flowers in the four gardens to the

²² Rachel Crawford, "English Georgic and Nation Building," ELH: 65.1 (1998): 123-58. 123.

²³ William St Clair, The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 525.

south-east of the cottage.²⁴ They also acquired a dairy cow they christened Margaret, and built a circular stone dairy-house in which Seward notes that they “manufacture[d] half a pound of butter for their own breakfast,” a daily repast that doubtless added to their ever-increasing girth.²⁵ Despite the precarious nature of their finances, they instituted picturesque touches including a private pathway, which, echoing Shenstone, they dubbed the “Home Circuit,” “its gravel smooth as marble” and its surroundings “enriched with curious shrubs and flowers.”²⁶ They also established a shrubbery and a rustic seat overlooking the mountain stream that ran behind Plâs newydd. The highly contrived nature of this bucolic scene is evidenced by Butler’s observation, “Sat in the rustic seat, disliked the appearance of the Stones over which the Water falls, thought it appeared too formal. Sent our workmen to it with a spade and mattock.”²⁷ Lady Mary Leighton’s watercolour sketches of Plâs newydd, completed in the 1820s and 1830s, depict the garden entrance crowned by a stone gothic arch surrounded by shrubbery and incorporating a leadlight window and a bell with which they would summons their gardener.²⁸ Leighton also depicts Butler’s thatched reading bower, its gothic windows overlooking the mountain stream forded by a rustic bridge.²⁹ Figuring their home as an element of their public personae, Butler and Ponsonby thus engaged in an extensive range of improvements asserting their picturesque taste and refined sensibility, transforming

²⁴ Mavor, *Ladies* 59.

²⁵ Seward, qtd. in Mavor, *Year* 174.

²⁶ Seward, qtd. in Mavor, *Year* 174.

²⁷ Mavor, *Ladies* 66.

²⁸ Mavor, *Ladies* 103.

²⁹ Lady Mary Leighton, *Watercolour Sketches of Plas Newydd*, Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry 1809-16, Denbighshire Records Office, Ruthin.

their prosaically-described “two and a half acres of turnip ground” into what Seward was to characterize as “a fairy palace amid the bowers of Calypso.”³⁰

The Georgic mode celebrated the natural world in terms of growth and productivity, its utilitarian underpinnings rendering picturesque details such as shrubberies liable to appear mere fashionable accessories.³¹ Butler and Ponsonby therefore also undertook more pragmatic agricultural activities. By the time of Margaret’s “Accouchement” in 1778, they were raising Turkey Hens and numerous chickens, which were displaced from the stable by the return of Margaret and her “Great Son.”³² In the early 1790s, they supplemented the four acres adjacent to Plâs newydd with the rental of two additional fields, in which they grew over half an acre of lucerne, while by late 1796 they were renting the nearby Aber Adda field from the local vicar.³³ Within five years, they were also growing hay in fields rented from Sir Thomas Mostyn,³⁴ grazing a total of four cows, and providing haymaking suppers for a seasonal team of fourteen farm labourers.³⁵ Butler and Ponsonby’s agricultural activities were necessitated by the irregular payments of their pensions throughout the 1780s and 1790s, their production of saleable crops and

³⁰ Seward, *Letters* 4:101.

³¹ Lloyd, “Cottage.” 433.

³² Butler, qtd. in Mavor, *Year* 112.

³³ Mavor, *Ladies* 120.

³⁴ Butler, qtd. in Mavor, *Year* 139.

³⁵ Mavor, *Ladies* 131.

Butler and Ponsonby wrote to Mrs. Wingfield on the 4 July 1812, describing their difficulty in balancing their hay harvesting with an expected visit from the Duchess of Richmond and Lady Mary Lennox. They write, “if the Weather is favourable the Boys will be of great use in tossing our hay about. We had relied upon having them as the making Our Stack - & still trust you will be able to give us that indulgence.” (Ponsonby, Butler & Ponsonby-Mrs. Wingfield 15 Apr. 1803.)

Such agricultural activities continued throughout Butler and Ponsonby’s residence. In a letter of July 1831, written on the black-edged mourning paper employed after Butler’s death, Ponsonby informs Mrs. Parker that “The three Great Meadows on this great farm were Cut yesterday – by Only Eighteen Mowers”, her final emphasis suggesting her relief at the smaller than expected number of labourers to be paid. (Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 5 Jul. 1831, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Records Office, Ruthin.)

comestibles such as cowslip wine and “Ale brewed from our own Barley” allowing them to reciprocate the edible gifts received from neighbours such as the Parkers and the Wingfields of Rhiawbon.³⁶ The correspondence accompanying such gifts offers important evidence of the tripartite nature of their domestic ménage. As they comment in a letter to the Wingfields, “The Tea Pot is absolute perfection - & Mary is in ecstasies of admiration & Gratitude – inspired [by your...] most Condescending Generosity to Her.”³⁷ This is not to suggest that Caryll’s inferiority of class remained unmarked, however, as the resonances of the term ‘condescension’ suggest. The Georgic tradition allowed Butler and Ponsonby to figure their labour as a genteel manifestation of the Horatian notion of that which is both beautiful and useful. As Seward wrote to Butler in 1796: “So you have farming improvements on your hands at present... You, I am sure, will unite the *dulce* with the *utile*.”³⁸ Such references allowed Butler and Ponsonby to dignify their agricultural activities without compromising their class credentials. Their interest in landscaping also advanced their place within the sociable networks of the local gentry. In letters of 1810, Ponsonby requests the gift of cauliflower plants from Mrs. Parker of Oswestry. Following a delay in the delivery of the solicited gift, she demonstrates her mastery of codes of social deference and respect:

I believe that from what the Cyclamens & Cauliflowers may have heard of the Asperity of a North Wales Climate – they will thank you for the suffering them to enjoy the shelter of your Green house and Gardens a little longer -- & I know that the earlier day you appoint – for being yourself their chaperon – the more Lady Eleanor & I shall be Oblidged [sic] for the double favour.³⁹

³⁶ Ponsonby, Butler & Ponsonby-Mrs. Wingfield 15 Apr. 1803. The town of Rhiwabon is known in English as Ruabon.

³⁷ Eleanor Butler & Sarah Ponsonby, Butler and Ponsonby to Mrs. Wingfield 5 Apr. 1803, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

³⁸ Seward, *Letters* 1:149.

³⁹ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 13 Feb. 1810, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin.

Butler and Ponsonby also exchanged cuttings of fruits and flowers with gentry families including the Myddletons of Chirk Castle and the Lloyds of Aston Hall. Butler's diary of 1819 records the receipt of "A large collection of cuttings from Some Curious Irish Apple left at the Kings Head for us by the Servants of Mr & Mrs Robert Gun,"⁴⁰ the envisioned transplantation and domestication of this Irish import echoing Butler and Ponsonby's grafting of themselves onto the sociable branches of the local Welsh gentry. A letter from Ponsonby to Louisa Lloyd of November 1831 (one month before Ponsonby's death) similarly provides a list of "plants sent" to Aston Hall including "Reel [sic] Roman Stock, Very fine Bumpion, Oriental Poppy [and] Sweet Williams."⁴¹ In transforming Plâs newydd into a *ferme ornée*, Butler and Ponsonby thus identified themselves with the conservative values of Georgic productivity, while simultaneously consolidating their place within the social networks of local familial estates.

While Butler and Ponsonby's agricultural activities worked to establish their place within the North Welsh gentry, the associations of the *ferme ornée* were nonetheless problematic. The conventional Georgic asserted male-headed agricultural production and

⁴⁰ Eleanor Butler, *Eleanor Butler's Journal 1819*, NLI Wicklow, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, 24 Jan. 1819.

⁴¹ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Louisa Lloyd 5 Nov. 1831, Aston Hall Correspondence, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.
Butler and Ponsonby both welcomed and reciprocated gifts of plants, cuttings, books and curios, with Butler observing in her diary of November 1785, "Note from John Jones with compliments and 8 newspapers from young Myddelton. Wrote thanks." Her tone alters markedly, as she continues, "Present of Fish from the Lyon [Inn]. I hate culinary presents." (Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 63.) Edible gifts would have been of doubtless use to Butler and Ponsonby's housekeeping budget, which accommodated both their sizable appetites and constant entertaining. Butler's specific disdain for such gifts nonetheless reflect the class hierarchies emphasized by English Game Law of the period, under which landholders gave a proportion of game to the non-landed in order to limit the market in poached game. (Susan Staves, *Books Given, Borrowed and Bought - and the Women Writers Who Read Them*, *Women and Material Culture, 1660-1830* (Plenary Paper: Chawton House Library and Study Centre: 2004).) Butler and Ponsonby's receipt of gifts such as pheasants, fish and rabbits thus underscored their status as non-landed tenants, a position they were anxious to de-emphasize.

heterosexual reproduction as the basis of the good family and state. Ornamented farms, by contrast, threatened to subordinate utility to pleasure, replacing organic virtue with its perverse simulation, and an implicitly heteronormative model of reproduction with sterile representation.⁴² Such anxieties are evidenced within Austen's *Sanditon*, in which the "downright silly" Sir Edward Denham, his conversation bloated with poetic commonplaces,⁴³ is described as "running up a tasteful little Cottage Ornée, on a strip of Waste Ground Lady Denham had granted him," this fashionable activity implied, like Sir Edward's conversion, to yield no substantial fruits.⁴⁴ Shenstone's contemporary biographers struggled to account for his bachelor status, and his figuration of Leasowes as a retreat from the social and sexual obligations of marriage and parenthood.⁴⁵ Ornamented farms were also linked to unlicensed sexuality via Marie-Antoinette's infamous *Hameau*, where the Queen played as a milkmaid amongst eleven rural cottages designed to appear old and crumbling. The Hameau was built at the Petit Trianon between 1783 and 1786, during the period in which rumours of the Queen's sapphic and incestuous practices intensified throughout Britain as well as France.⁴⁶

In transforming Plâs newydd into an ornamented cottage from the early 1780s, Butler and Ponsonby may thus appear to have invoked the spectre of sexual transgression with which they have been persistently haunted. Attention to the specific resonances of their improvements nonetheless reveals their efforts to mask the queerness of their

⁴² Jill H. Casid, "Queer(Y)Ing Georgic: Utility, Pleasure, and Marie-Antoinette's Ornamented Farm," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30.3 (1997): 304-18. 305-06.

⁴³ Jane Austen, *Sanditon*, ed. John Davie (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 351-52.

⁴⁴ Austen, *Sanditon* 333.

⁴⁵ Casid, *Sowing* 139-46.

⁴⁶ Casid, "Queer." 305-06.

relationship, overwriting their shameful status as sexually suspect Irish exiles with symbols of the social and geographical fixity of the local Welsh gentry. Karen Sayer suggests that the fashion for the picturesque caused audiences to view cottages from outside as part of the pastoral landscape,⁴⁷ by implication encouraging viewers to read such structures by attending to their external signs, rather than the internal workings of their domestic interiors. Accordingly, I claim that Butler and Ponsonby employed picturesque and Gothic aesthetics in order to ensure the inscrutability of their domestic relationship, and to mask their Irish origins and Butler's Roman Catholic upbringing with signs of assimilated Welsh historicity. Bohls and Casid have described the colonizing impulse of picturesque tourism, through which aesthetic appropriation naturalized both unfamiliar landscapes and their imperial incorporation.⁴⁸ While Gilpin framed the picturesque pose as a thought experiment – “We suppose the country to have been unexplored”⁴⁹ – this fantasy also underpinned the annexation of the ‘wilds’ of Scotland, Wales and the West Indies, as it did the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* under which indigenous Australians were dispossessed. Imperial rhetoric also underlay the Gothic revival, the Anglo-Celtic ancestry of Welsh and Scottish ruins distinguishing them from the classical sites of the Grand Tour and authorizing their incorporation into a unified Britain nation. As the ‘Queen of the Blues,’ Elizabeth Montagu, wrote to Elizabeth Carter in August 1762: “I find you are a true Britten. I will willingly consent to carry you to

⁴⁷ Karen Sayer, Country Cottages: A Cultural History (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2000) 22.

⁴⁸ Bohls, Women 94.; and Casid, Sowing 1-93.

⁴⁹ Gilpin, Three 47-48.

every Gothick Castle, every remains of Saxon antiquity, nay even to the Pict's wall, before we set out for Classick ground."⁵⁰

In improving Plâs newydd according to picturesque and Gothic principles, Butler and Ponsonby asserted both their proprietary relationship to the North Welsh landscape and their own belonging *to* it. In so doing, they masked both their exiled status and the Roman Catholic connections that marred the eighteenth-century fortunes of the Butler family. As described in chapter one, Butler's family suffered under Ireland's Penal laws, under which Catholics were barred from holding public office or inheriting an undivided estate. Throughout Britain, Catholicism was further associated with support of the Jacobite succession, a political position with which the Butler family were similarly tainted. With the decisive defeat of the Jacobite rebellion at Culloden in 1746, anti-Catholic sentiment Britain lessened throughout Britain, as did the perception of Catholicism as a plausible political threat. Linda Colley nonetheless observes that anti-Catholic sentiment was easily incited throughout the eighteenth-century, especially during the extended period of conflict with Catholic France. Major anti-Catholic riots erupted in the Scottish lowlands in 1778.⁵¹ In June 1780, mobs incited by Lord George Gordon attacked Catholic chapels and property in London when parliament refused to repeal legislation liberalizing the legal position of Catholics, the resulting riots wreaking more property damage than Paris suffered throughout the French Revolution.⁵² Noting

⁵⁰ MO3080; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

⁵¹ Colley, *Britons* 22.

⁵² Iain McCalman, "Introduction: A Romantic Age Companion," *The Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, eds. Iain McCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999): 1-11. 526.

that anti-Catholic sentiment served as a powerful unifying force in the consolidation of a precariously united Britain, Colley observes, “The slang adjective most commonly applied to Catholics was ‘outlandish’, and this was meant quite literally. Catholics were not just strange, they were out of bounds. They did not belong, and were therefore suspect.”⁵³ Butler and Ponsonby did not deny their Irish ancestry; Butler described Ireland as “our Native Isle” in letters of the early 1800s to friends such as Mrs. Piozzi,⁵⁴ and Ponsonby anxiously solicited Sarah Tighe in 1798 for news of her family’s welfare during the Irish uprising: “Once more I beseech you to relieve me from this inherently painful ignorance – just to name any one for whom you know I am particularly anxious.”⁵⁵ Piozzi’s opinion, confided in Thraliana after staying with Edmund Burke, that “Irish Roman Catholics are always like the Foreigners somehow: dirty & dressy, with their Clothes hanging as if upon a Peg,”⁵⁶ nonetheless discloses the imbrication of religious, class and national prejudices that led Butler and Ponsonby to seek to mask the latter’s religious origins.

In an 1800 letter to Butler and Ponsonby, Piozzi refers to a London attorney, Mr. Butler “who possibly your Ladyship may know, as he is Irish - & a Roman Catholic,”⁵⁷ her emphasis on the lawyer’s similarity of nationality and creed, rather than family name, implying a form of provincial clannishness, rather than familial closeness or metropolitan sociability. In order to mark their exiled status and Butler’s Catholic heritage, they not

⁵³ Colley, Britons 23.

⁵⁴ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Hester Thrale Piozzi, Ms, John Rylands Library Special Collection, Manchester University.

⁵⁵ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Sarah Tighe 8 Aug. 1798, NLI Wicklow, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

⁵⁶ Thrale, Thraliana 1:475n3.

⁵⁷ Hester Thrale Piozzi, Hester Thrale Piozzi to Butler and Ponsonby 2 May 1800, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

only attended Anglican services at the Parish churches of St. Collen's and nearby Llantysilio, but echoed the class status and national traits of surrounding Welsh country homes.⁵⁸ As seen in the previous chapter, Butler and Ponsonby's first Welsh tour included a tour of Chirk Castle, Wrexham, the fourteenth-century seat of parliamentarian Richard Myddleton. Upon settling at Plâs newydd, Butler and Ponsonby set about masking their exiled status by emulating the long-settled lineage marked by Chirk Castle's Gothic architecture. Ponsonby's 1778 journal describes Chirk's two "State Bedchambers, one furnish'd with Crimson, another with Yellow Damask Very Old-looking."⁵⁹ The title given to these grand chambers was later applied to Plâs newydd's guest bedroom, its four-poster, carved oak bedstead covered with "a Fawn colour Cloth."⁶⁰ The disparity between this grandiose epithet and the modest scale of their cottage discloses the inherently camp nature of Butler and Ponsonby's assertion of landed status, camp being defined by Susan Sontag as an aesthetic sensibility in which extravagantly stylized cultural productions undermine their own seriousness by being "too much."⁶¹ This is not to suggest that Butler and Ponsonby's improvements were not undertaken earnestly; by contrast, Sontag declares, "The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious."⁶² In echoing the Gothic features of their landed Welsh neighbours, Butler and Ponsonby sought to assert their possession of similar temporal and geographic ties. As we have seen, Ponsonby's 1788 drawings of "A Cottage in Llangollen Vale" emphasized the imposing bulk of Dinas Bran and the installation of a

⁵⁸ The Ladies' attendance at the parish of Llantysilio was also of social benefit, with Butler's journal of June 1798 describing "the residence of Our Loved Mrs Bowdler – whom we call upon and accompany to Llantysilio Church every Sunday." (Butler, qtd. in Mavor, Year 121.)

⁵⁹ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

⁶⁰ Butler, *Journal* 1819, 30th Apr. 1819.

⁶¹ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," A Susan Sontag Reader (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1982): 105-19. 112.

⁶² Sontag, "Notes," 110.

gothic-arched bay window in the north-east of the library.⁶³ The new window was also emphasized in a 1794 engraving in The European Magazine entitled “Plas newydd, A COTTAGE near Llangollen Denbighshire,” this textual engagement with print culture paradoxically publicising their provincial fixity upon a mobile and metropolitan stage.⁶⁴ Marie-Antoinette’s *hameau* attempted a downward form of class transvestism, its deliberately-aged cottages playfully masking her aristocratic status with that of industrious poverty within the defined boundaries of Versailles. As Casid notes, however, the disparity between the Queen’s *faux* productivity and the labour of the working poor was read as both a class transgression and a sexually suspect form of sterile representation.⁶⁵ In cloaking Plâs newydd in signs of age, Butler and Ponsonby instead engaged in an upwards form of class performance, masking their marginal social status and suspect sexual relationship with the material signs of Welsh landed gentility.

The claimed assimilating effect of Butler and Ponsonby’s improvements may appear to be compromised by the Roman Catholic connotations of Gothic revival design, which echoed the pointed arches, elaborate stonework, carved oak and vaulted ceilings of medieval religious architecture. They might appear further problematized by their collection of Catholic *objets*, which included an illuminated Missal, a medieval high cross souvenired from the nearby village of Chester, and a stone font and assorted stained glass purloined from Valle Crucis Abbey.⁶⁶ Their treasures also included a portrait of the

⁶³ Ponsonby, Memorandums.

⁶⁴ J. Thomas, “Plas Newydd, a Cottage near Llangollen Denbighshire,” The European Magazine 1794.

⁶⁵ Casid, “Queer.” 305.

⁶⁶ George Robins, Auction Catalogue of Plas Newydd Contents, Denbighshire Records Office, Ruthin, 59.

political hostess Lady Crewe,⁶⁷ who worked with Edmund Burke for the relief of French clergy, and a relic described in George Robins's Sale Catalogue as "*a LOCKET containing a lock of MARY QUEEN OF SCOT'S HAIR,*"⁶⁸ which recalled the Catholic faith and Jacobite politics for which the second Duke of Ormonde was attainted. Both Gothicism and Catholicism also carried dangerous associations of sexual deviance. In Between Men, Sedgwick observes that:

something recognizable related to one modern stereotype of male homosexuality has existed at least since the seventeenth century – at least for aristocrats. The cluster of associations about this role (the King James Version?) include effeminacy, connoisseurship, high religion, and interest in Catholic Europe – all links to the Gothic.⁶⁹

Observing the use of Catholic and particularly monastic settings in British Gothic texts such as Matthew Lewis's 1796 The Monk, George Haggerty notes that the imaginative link between Catholicism and sexual deviancy required no explanation to Lewis's contemporary readership. Indeed, while reviewers were critical of narrative excesses of Lewis's sprawling tale of incest, necromancy, matricide, cross-dressing and same-sex desire, "they never suggested that his portrayal of Catholic monastic life was inappropriate," instead presuming, in light of texts such as Diderot's 1760 La Religieuse, that such events were characteristic of continental convent life.⁷⁰ The act of collecting also carried with it potential linkages with same-sex desire, the collector's transformation

⁶⁷ Butler, Journal 1819, 7 Oct. 1819.

⁶⁸ Robins, Auction, 17.

⁶⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 91.

⁷⁰ George E. Haggerty, "The Horrors of Catholicism: Religion and Sexuality in Gothic Fiction," Romanticism on the Net.36-37 (2004-5).

of use value into the purely aesthetic mirroring the shift from the realms of procreative to purely pleasurable desire.⁷¹

The Gothic possessed clear associations with the ostensible excesses of Roman Catholicism. Anne Janowitz and Ann Bermingham nevertheless recall that the picturesque was preoccupied with temporal processes of ruin and decay, suggesting that the aestheticization of Catholic imagery and objects also marks the diminishment of the political danger of the restoration of a Catholic state.⁷² Michael Charlesworth further suggests that the celebration of buildings such as ruined abbeys disclosed a nostalgic attitude towards a creed that ceased to pose a credible political threat after the 1746 Battle of Culloden, as architectural decay was read as a metonym for the dissolution of the monasteries.⁷³ The Protestant history of the Reformation depicted the appropriation of Catholic lands and properties as replacing institutionalized charity with individual acts of piety that benefited the ministrant more than they did the recipient.⁷⁴ As Marjorie Levinson observes, the dissolution of the monasteries also released large tracts of property for private purchase, supporting the establishment of a landed gentry class whose increased wealth was figured as both materially and morally improving.⁷⁵ In Austen's Emma, Mr. Knightley's home of Donwell Abbey is built on the site of former

⁷¹ Andrew Elfenbein, Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role (New York: Columbia UP, 1999) 46.

⁷² John Whale, "Romantics, Explorers and Picturesque Travellers," The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landcape and Aesthetics since 1770, eds. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994): 175-95. 189.

⁷³ Michael Charlesworth, "The Ruined Abbey: Picturesque and Gothic Values," The Politics of the Picturesque, eds. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994): 62-80. 68-69..

⁷⁴ Marjorie Levinson, Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 25-6.

⁷⁵ Levinson, Wordsworth's 26.

religious house.⁷⁶ This leads Jonathan Bate to suggest that Knightley's estate marks the reconfiguration of a formerly vertical relationship between humanity and God into a horizontal model in which ritualized Christian observance is replaced by secularized charity. As Bate argues, Emma's description of the estate's prospect, "It was a sweet view--sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort,"⁷⁷ locates national identity in the harmony of natural verdure and genteel culture, in which "A place that was once consecrated to the spiritual good life [...] is now consecrated to the social good life."⁷⁸ Butler and Ponsonby's Catholic *objets* may thus be seen as denuded of specifically religious resonances, instead affirming the values of an historically situated landed gentry whose ethics of improvement, social harmony and political conservatism resonated with Butler and Ponsonby's own. Their Catholic, Gothic camp can therefore be seen as yet another performance, through which they asserted an enduring relationship to the North Welsh landscape.

A similar process of refiguration of the suspect into the normative was constituted by the Ladies' cladding of Plas newydd with carved Welsh oak. Their efforts to mask their marginal status in this fashion might at first be seen to have been confounded by the conflicting political and religious significations of such timber. During the English Civil War, supporters of both Cromwell and Charles I affirmed the British oak as a symbol of patronage and protection.⁷⁹ Charles II was held to have sheltered in the famous Boscobel or Royal Oak after being defeated by Cromwell's forces at the 1651 Battle of Worcester.

⁷⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Kristen Flieger Samuelian (Peterborough: Broadview Editions, 2004) 66.

⁷⁷ Austen, *Emma* 315.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Bate, "Culture and Environment: From Austen to Hardy," *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 541-60. 545.

⁷⁹ Tuite, *Romantic* 120.

Following the Revolution of 1688, when the Catholic James II was deposed by William and Mary, oak boughs were employed by supporters of the Stuart Crown, which was held to derive from Aeneas, the classical founder of Britain and Rome.⁸⁰ In the early decades of the eighteenth-century, oak boughs were worn by English Jacobites to mark the 1660 Restoration of the Stuart reign of Charles II.⁸¹ However, while Welsh Jacobites carried oak boughs through Wrexham in June 1716, the Whigs worked throughout the 1730s to reclaim the symbol of the oak, supplanting its associations with classicism and Catholicism with those of Druidic antiquity.⁸² During the latter half of the eighteenth-century, oak timber was used to fashion the ships of the British navy, leading it to be figured as a patriotic resource symbolizing national security, commercial profit and Empire. Oak plantations were central to the inheritable property transferred through the practice of primogeniture, while judicious felling offered a significant source of estate income.⁸³ Accordingly, Tuite observes that the Romantic period witnessed the reconfiguration of the British oak as a symbol of a conservative nationalism based upon familial and political inheritance, as Cowper, Burke and Austen all asserted the synecdochic identification of British timber with “a particular English nationalist romance of patriliny.”⁸⁴ The “very young plantation” surrounding Trafalgar House in Austen’s *Sanditon* thereby marks the Parkers’ identification with a commodified mode of fashionable mobility, the instability of its nomination – “I almost wishes I had not named it Trafalgar – for Waterloo is more the thing now” – contrasted with the stable social

⁸⁰ Murray G.H. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789* (Basingstoke and New York: MacMillan Press and St Martin's Press, 1997) 36.

⁸¹ Paul Kleber Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688-1788* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 204-9.

⁸² Pittock, *Inventing* 104-07.

⁸³ Sarah Lloyd, “Amour in the Shrubbery: Reading the Detail of English Adultery Trial Publications of the 1780s,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39.4 (2006): 421-42. 434.

⁸⁴ Tuite, *Romantic* 119.

order represented by the abandoned home of his forefathers.⁸⁵ Butler and Ponsonby's use of Gothic oak may have been noted approvingly by Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, who was known for his Jacobite sympathies. Reflecting the recent rebadging of 'Jacobite' oak as a symbol of Hanovarian imperial power, their Gothic improvements instead both project and contain threats of disaffection.

Butler and Ponsonby were not the first to employ Gothic architectural tropes to achieve the effect of long-settled lineage. In 1747, Horace Walpole, earl of Orford, purchased a small Twickenham cottage on five acres of land. The cottage, built in 1698, had been inhabited by figures including Colley Cibber, the Marquess of Carnarvon and the London toy-shop owner, Mrs. Chevenix. Learning that the accompanying land was known as 'Strawberry Hill Shot,' Walpole set about transforming the unprepossessing property into the "little Gothic castle" of Strawberry Hill. Appointing architects Richard Bentley and John Chute to a "Committee of Taste," Walpole renovated the cottage through the addition of Gothic revival features including arched windows, an armoury, grand library, portrait gallery, "great cloyster" and notoriously ephemeral cardboard battlements, while also extending the estate by forty-one acres of land.⁸⁶ Although Walpole was the son of Whig Prime Minister Robert Walpole, his father's eminent status failed to reflect the family's comparatively recent prominence. Undeterred, he filled his home with the material markers of longstanding British nobility, its entrance hall "hung with gothic paper from the screen of prince Arthur's tomb in the cathedral of Worcester"

⁸⁵ Austen, *Sanditon* 335-36.

⁸⁶ Horace Walpole, *Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole* (Twickenham: Strawberry Hill Press, 1784) 1-2.

and decorated with the 1567 arms of Elizabeth I.⁸⁷ Walpole also promulgated his own family name, evoking a chivalric lineage by ornamenting the armoury with “quarterings of the family of Walpole” and “Two suits of armour, on one of which is the mark of a bullet.”⁸⁸ His grand library was similarly decorated, its ceiling featuring the Walpole family shield, ensigns and motto, and its pieced Gothic bookshelves, laden with presentation copies and “exceedingly rare” volumes, designed after the choir of St. Paul’s Cathedral.⁸⁹

Butler and Ponsonby were familiar with Walpole’s transformation of Strawberry Hill: Robins’s 1832 sale catalogue indicates their ownership of John Pinkerton’s 1799 recollections of Walpole, while they also subscribed to magazines such as the World and Annual Register in which Walpole featured frequently.⁹⁰ Their improvement of Plâs newydd may thus be seen to echo Walpole’s Gothic alterations and assertion of dynastic perpetuity through the collection and display of portraits. Tuite claims that Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France presents the family portrait as “a synecdoche of the sacral aristocratic pedigree as conservation, inheritance and improvement.”⁹¹ In filling Strawberry Hill and Plâs newydd with portraits of ancestors, royalty and distinguished friends, Walpole and the Ladies thus styled their homes as distinguished family seats,

⁸⁷ Walpole, Description 2.

⁸⁸ Walpole, Description 32.

⁸⁹ Walpole, Description 33.

⁹⁰ Robins, Auction, 51.

Walpole did not reciprocate Butler and Ponsonby’s interest; in a letter to Lady Ossory on the 30 August 1790, he replies to her account of her North Welsh tour, seemingly referring to the General Evening Post article of the previous month: “I am as little acquainted with Miss Ponsonby and Miss Buttershaw [sic]; I think I read something in a newspaper about them, but I mind so little what I read there, that it made no impression, nor did I recollect to inquire; so your Ladyship has told me more than I can possibly tell you of them.” (Horace Walpole, Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence, ed. W.S. Lewis, 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1937-83) 34:III:94-95.)

⁹¹ Tuite, Romantic 102.

secured by the “pedigree and illustrating ancestors” that Burke claimed for the British state.⁹² Walpole’s fifty-six foot long portrait gallery displayed portraits of Walpole ancestors and distinguished figures including Henry VII, Sir Francis Walsingham and Henry Carey, Lord Falkland, whose image inspired the animated portrait of Walpole’s Otranto.⁹³ Walpole’s portrait collection performatively constituted a noble family line, while Butler and Ponsonby’s collection worked to both recover their respective families’ past prominence and to reconstitute their place within such genealogies. Well-established by the 1790s, Butler and Ponsonby’s portrait collection was hung principally in the library in which they received their numerous visitors, leading Lister, who had her family history read aloud bi-annually to her household at Shibden Hall, to term them approvingly “great pedigree people.”⁹⁴ The longevity of the Butler family was asserted by images including portraits of the late Marquis and Countess of Ormonde and a miniature of James, the First Duke of Ormonde. Ponsonby’s noble connections were similarly emphasized by portraits of Lord Ponsonby and the Countess of Bessborough, the physical presence of such images working to instantiate visually the familial connections ruptured by Butler and Ponsonby’s elopement. Their Bourbon commitments were asserted by their possession of miniatures of Madame Stéphanie de Genlis and her

⁹² Tuite, Romantic 102.

⁹³ Walpole, Description 51.

⁹⁴ Lister, Know 205.

Lister’s anxieties about rank and self-conscious assertion of dynastic perpetuity are in many ways analogous to Butler and Ponsonby’s. As Anira Rowanchild observes, the Lister family seat of Shibden Hall had only been acquired by her family by marriage in the seventeenth century, and she viewed her father’s “vulgarity” and her mother’s excessive drinking as sources of acute embarrassment. Upon the death of her brother, Lister lived in Shibden Hall as the guest of her uncle from 1816. As his presumptive heir, she sought to distinguish her “drooping” family and its estate from the new wealth of the Halifax mercantile classes, describing Shibden Hall in 1834 as “my own place where my family had lived between 2 & 3 centuries, I being the 15th possessor of my family and name.” (Anira Rowanchild, “‘Everything Done for Effect’: Georgic, Gothic and Picturesque in Anne Lister’s Self-Production,” Women’s Writing 7.1 (2000): 89-103. 90.)

natural daughter, Pamela painted by Genlis and her pupil Louis Phillipe, duc d'Orléans;⁹⁵ their even greater commitment to the British Crown was evidenced by their 1798 dissuading of Pamela, by then the wife of Irish revolutionary, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, from sheltering with her infant at Plâs newydd (“principally for her own sake and a little for ours”) in the wake of the 1798 Irish uprising.⁹⁶

Mavor observes that the stained glass featured in Butler and Ponsonby's Gothic library was echoed by that of Fonthill Abbey, the Gothic mansion of Romantic author, traveller and collector, William Beckford.⁹⁷ Beckford was immensely wealthy, having inherited at a young age capital of over a million pounds derived from his great-grandfather's slave plantations in Jamaica. While his father was a Whig MP and Lord Mayor of London, he nonetheless lacked an aristocratic or even a gentry background. He was moreover excoriated as a sodomite following the 1784 publication of letters to his young cousin, William Courtenay, and the 1786 publication of Vathek, which presents the boy Gulchenrouz, “the most delicate and lovely creature in the world,” as a sublime object of pederastic desire.⁹⁸ Upon retiring to the gothic sublimity of Fonthill Abbey,

⁹⁵ Robins, Auction, 7.

⁹⁶ Ponsonby, qtd. in Mavor, Year 121.

Butler and Ponsonby followed news of George III's health closely, their concern reflecting both patriotism and concern for the continuance of their governmental pensions. In March 1789, Butler's journal describes their ordering of a sheep to be roasted for the jubilant populace, bells to be rung and a “Bonfire to be illuminated to Celebrate the happy Restoration of His Majesty's health, our Benefactor.” These festivities were undertaken at the not inconsiderable cost of 1l.6s. (Butler, qtd. in Mavor, Year 61.) On the 15 Nov. 1798, Butler reports of the arrival of the Oswestry stagecoach, “Sent to enquire of the Passengers from London what account they brought of his Majesty – very ill if alive, which we most sincerely lament, not from interested motives solely but concern for loss of a Good Man.” The following day she reports, “Prayers offered up at church this day for the King's recovery. I hope they may be heard.” (Butler, qtd. in Mavor, Year 208.)

⁹⁷ Mavor, Ladies 108.

⁹⁸ William Beckford, Vathek (New York: Creation Books, 2000) 72.

In a letter of 1828, Butler and Ponsonby enquire as to the whereabouts of a copy of Beckford's Vathek they have lent Mrs. Parker. (Mavor, Ladies 187.) While the absence of further comment suggests that they

designed by James Wyatt and built in Wilshire between 1796 and 1801, Beckford echoed the Ladies' use of portraiture to cover over his family's recent history with the material markers of an elevated pedigree, employing George III's court painter, Benjamin West, to create aristocratic portraits of his mercantile grandparents.⁹⁹ As Mark Madoff observes, having noted that the wide range of meanings conveyed by eighteenth-century usage of the term "Gothic," "one finds a common meaning for all variants: the gothic is *ancestral*."¹⁰⁰

The gothic parallels between Plâs newydd and Strawberry Hill were noted by Butler and Ponsonby's contemporaries; Captain Frances Grose wrote of Plâs newydd in 1791, "don't you think that same cottage somewhat of the Strawberry Hill Kind, Could Houses Marry & propagate I think a Cottage like Langothlin [sic] would be the progeny of a Match between Strawberry Hill & Thicknesses Cottage near Landguard Fort."¹⁰¹ Grose refers to Felixstowe Cottage, the former fisherman's hut rendered the whimsical summer home of quarrelsome socialite and travel writer, Captain Phillip Thicknesse. Thicknesse's claim to have introduced Thomas Gainsborough to Bath did not outweigh his reputation as a libellous blackmailer and sadist, his unsavoury reputation tainted by his public disputes with members of the Suffolk militia, his reputation for excessive gambling, and

did not include the book amongst the scandalous texts they took pains to distinguish themselves from, this may reflect the fact that Beckford's text was considered more notorious upon its initial publication. As Hester Thrale Piozzi notes in *Thraliana* in 1791, "Mr. Beckford's *favourite Propensity* is all along visible I think; particularly in the luscious Descriptions given of Gulchenrouz." While declaring "'tis a mad Book to be sure, and written by a mad Author," she admits, "yet there is a Sublimity about it—particularly towards the Conclusion." (Thrale, *Thraliana* 2:799.)

⁹⁹ Elfenbein, *Romantic* 43.

¹⁰⁰ Mark Madoff, "The Useful Myth of Gothic Ancestry," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* Vol. 7 (1979): 337-50. 338.

¹⁰¹ Captain Frances Grose, Captain Frances Grose to Anon. 22 Apr. 1791, Bodleian Ms Eng Letters, Oxford.

his enthusiastic support of the slave trade.¹⁰² By the late 1770s, he was also known for the increasing oddity of his architectural improvements, which included the ornamental display of human skeletons uncovered during landscaping.¹⁰³ Grose's architectural figure nevertheless demonstrates the way in which properties of the period operated as metonyms for the same genealogical lineages they consolidated, and were themselves incorporated into the fantasies of aristocratic reproduction through which property was secured. Plâs newydd is depicted as the illegitimate child of the improper coupling of Thicknesse's cottage and Strawberry Hill. It is nonetheless absorbed within the family circle, like Fanny Price, as the appropriate heir and regenerator of the morally bankrupt nobility. While Butler and Ponsonby could not literally claim the Myddleton's long association with Llangollen Vale, they echoed Walpole in asserting their eminence through the self-conscious deployment of signs of familial and temporal stasis. As Ponsonby informed Lister in 1822, "We tried to make everything look as old as possible."¹⁰⁴

Something more tender still than friendship?

Butler and Ponsonby's performance of landed gentility was crucial in distancing them from the charges of sapphism levelled against members of the metropolitan *ton*. Eighteenth-century British sources frequently identify sapphism as a continental or Roman Catholic practice.¹⁰⁵ In 1726, the English critic John Dennis traced the "execrable

¹⁰² Catherine Turner, "Thicknesse, Phillip (1719-1792)," *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew, Brian Harrison and Lawrence Goldman (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2004).

¹⁰³ Turner, "Thicknesse, Phillip (1719-1792)."

¹⁰⁴ Lister, *Know* 203.

¹⁰⁵ Male sodomy was also characterized as a continental practice, with a 1772 contributor to the *General Evening Post* (the publication in which Butler and Ponsonby's sexual connection is also inferred) asserting in a letter to the editor: "This country is now degenerating into such an *effeminacy of manners* – such

Vice” of sapphism to the idolatry of Rome.¹⁰⁶ Two years later, the anonymous pamphlet Plain Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy in England warned that this “contagion” had spread to France, declaring, “the Ladies (in the *Nunneries*) are criminally amorous of each other, in a *Method* too gross for Expression.”¹⁰⁷ Such views persisted throughout the century, as is demonstrated by Piozzi’s 1789 denunciation of Marie Antoinette as “the Head of a Set of Monsters call’d by each other *Sapphists*.”¹⁰⁸ The 1797 English translator of Denis Diderot’s *La Religieuse* similarly explained his excision of one of the novel’s more explicitly sapphic scenes as reflecting his reluctance to “shock an English reader,” continuing, “The French writers...in this respect, are permitted a latitude which the English taste has forbidden.”¹⁰⁹

As important as the alleged distinction between English and French women, however, was the moral gulf asserted between provincial and metropolitan women, particularly those associated with the theatre and visual arts. In 1774, The Westminster Magazine described the lives of court ladies as characterised by “*charming scandal* – to gambling – to dissipation – to noise, and to confusion.” So-called “City Ladies” do little better, described as “Humble awkward copies of Court folly and frippery.”¹¹⁰ Country ladies, by contrast, are likened to Milton’s prelapsarian Eve: “*Grace is in all their steps*,

shocking vices have been imported from France and Italy, and *such* crimes are hourly committing, that the times really *call loudly for an example* to deter people from the infamous courses which otherwise *ought* to end in their own ruin, rather than the contagion should be suffered to rage in too extensive a circle.” (Rictor Norton, The First Public Debate About Homosexuality in England: The Case of Captain Jones, 1772, 27 May 2006, Available: <http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/jones1.htm>, 4 Jan. 2007.)

¹⁰⁶ Donoghue, *Passions* 257.

¹⁰⁷ Donoghue, *Passions* 258.

¹⁰⁸ Thrall, *Thraliana* 2:740.

¹⁰⁹ Donoghue, *Passions* 193.

¹¹⁰ Anon., “Pictures of the Times,” Westminster Magazine; or, the Pantheon of Taste May 1774: 235.

Heaven in their eye, In all their gestures dignity and love."¹¹¹ Cowper's 1785 The Task, described by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall as the most frequently read text in middle-class English households of the 1780s and 1790s,¹¹² also frames the moral gulf between the country and city as a contrast between divine perfection and the corrupt work of human hands: "God made the country, and man made the town."¹¹³ Cowper's epic opens with the declaration, "I sing the Sofa," tracing the evolution of places of repose from the "rugged rock / Wash'd by the sea," through the humble joint stool to the "luxury" of the "accomplished Sofa."¹¹⁴ Cowper declares "The Sofa suits / the gouty limb" of "libertine excess,"¹¹⁵ affirming the superior virtues of "the rural walk / O'er hills, through valleys, and by river's brink",¹¹⁶ and anticipating Austen's satirical depiction of Lady Bertram, whose languishment on Mansfield Park's sofa marks the aristocratic family's moral decline.¹¹⁷ Moral decay is also feminized within Cowper's text, in which pleasure is personified as "That reeling goddess with the zoneless waist / and wandering eyes, still leaning on the arm / Of Novelty, her fickle frail support," an image of unbounded female excess recalling the figure of Milton's Sin.¹¹⁸ Cowper's sexualized depiction of metropolitan vice nonetheless incorporates the artifice of fashionable "sinners of either sex," for whom to be "Well dress'd, well bred, Well

¹¹¹ Anon., "Pictures," 236.

Milton's description of Eve is also quoted in Dr. Gregory's 1774 conduct book, A Father's Legacy to his Daughters, in which he asserts the value of modest and unadorned femininity: "I wish you to possess the most perfect simplicity of heart and manners. I think you may possess dignity without pride, affability without meanness, and simple elegance without affectation. Milton had my idea, when he says of Eve, Grace was in all her steps, Heaven in her eye, In every gesture dignity and love." (John Gregory, A Father's Legacy to His Daughters (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974) 45-46.)

¹¹² Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 157.

¹¹³ Cowper, Task 1:40.

¹¹⁴ Cowper, Task 1:12-13; 19; 88.

¹¹⁵ Cowper, Task 1.106-07;106.

¹¹⁶ Cowper, Task 1.113-14.

¹¹⁷ Tuite, Romantic 112.

¹¹⁸ Milton, "Paradise Lost," 2:649-53.

equipaged, is ticket good enough.”¹¹⁹ Cowper’s text thus asserts the associations of provincial virtue and metropolitan vice that underlie the association of urbanity and same-sex desire found in texts as disparate as Cleland’s 1748-49 Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (in which the Lancashire villager Fanny succumbs to the embraces of the metropolitan Phoebe with the mild reflection that this “might be the London way to express [kindness]”¹²⁰) and Hermann Melville’s nineteenth-century American novella Billy Budd, in which Sedgwick observes that “*knowledge of the world* [...] is linked to the ability to recognize same-sex desire.”¹²¹

Liking one’s own sex in a Criminal Way: Suspensions of Sapphism

A contemporary type of the ‘sapphist’ was Anne Damer. As noted previously, Lanser’s class-based analysis is unable to account for the disparity between the harsh scrutiny directed upon Damer’s relationships and the comparative acceptance of Butler and Ponsonby’s intimacy. Emma Donoghue, however, suggests that Damer was subject to particular opprobrium because of her prominence within the visual arts, private theatricals, and the metropolitan *ton*. Damer (1749-1828) was born into a prominent Whig family, the daughter of Field-Marshal Henry Seymour Conway and Lady Ailesbury and god-daughter to Walpole, who acted as her guardian during her parents’ frequent travels. At nineteen, she married John Damer, son of Lord Milton and heir to a 30,000*l.* fortune. The couple spent little time together, and Damer instead appeared throughout London with Lady Melbourne and the Duchess of Devonshire,¹²² with whom she

¹¹⁹ Cowper Task 3:96-98.

¹²⁰ Cleland, Memoirs 10.

¹²¹ Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 100.

¹²² Elfenbein, Romantic 96.

campaigned publicly for Charles Fox in the controversial 1784 Westminster election.¹²³

John Damer proved to be a compulsive gambler, his debts worsened by his wife's lavish expenditure, and he shot himself through the head above a Covent Garden tavern in August 1776, leaving his wife debts of 70,000*l.* and an irregularly paid jointure of 2,500*l.*¹²⁴

As Andrew Elfenbein has shown, John Damer's death was attributed to his wife's sexual 'irregularity.' William Combe's 1777 satire The First of April; Or, the Triumphs of Folly lists Damer amongst the morally-compromised women who frequented the masquerade balls at Pantheon and Carlisle House. While the poem's assertions of sapphism are veiled, Damer is depicted as being comforted by female friends with whom she will enjoy the "joys which blooming Widows share."¹²⁵ Such assertions were rendered explicit in the 1778[?] A Sapphick Epistle, from Jack Cavendish to the Honourable and Most Beautiful Mrs. D***, in which the Whig politician, John Cavendish, is presented addressing Damer as a potential wife while acknowledging the greater attractions for her

¹²³ Foreman, Georgiana 142.

The extraordinary public profile of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, is detailed in Amanda Foreman's 1998 biography, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Georgiana's public canvassing in the 1784 Westminster Election led her to be denounced as sexually promiscuous, the symbolic resonance of her incursion into the normatively masculine realm of politics registered by the proliferation of satirical prints depicting her trading sexual favours for votes (Colley, Britons 242-48.). Butler expressed the public's simultaneous fascination with and moral condemnation of Georgiana, observing of a conversation with a Mr. and Mrs. Bunbury in February 1788, "Lady E.F. [Georgiana's close friend and lover of the Duke of Devonshire] and the D. of D., her annoying extravagances abroad, always sent her letters by expresses." (Bell, ed., Hamwood 77.) Georgiana's hectic sociability, role as a Whig hostess, compulsive gambling, and compelling sexuality all identified her with the metropolitan dissipation from which Butler and Ponsonby sought to distinguish themselves.

¹²⁴ Elfenbein, Romantic 98.

¹²⁵ Elfenbein, Romantic 98-99.

James Perry's 1779 Mimosa; Or, The Sensitive Plant listing Mrs. "DAM—R" in the group of sexual outcasts including sodomites, masturbators and sapphists.

of sapphic sex.¹²⁶ In the voice of Cavendish, the narrator describes marriage as “hell on earth / The iron shackle of all mirth,”¹²⁷ and praises Damer’s ability to “resign a husband’s life / To raise a Sapphick name,”¹²⁸ the elevation of her sexually-marked profile supplanting the ‘natural’ growth of the erect penis. Initially promising to distinguish himself from his “rough” and “unwieldy” fellow men,¹²⁹ the narrator closes by reasserting violently the primacy of phallic desire: “But if obdurate you will prove / Deaf to the language of my love, / Take *that* you cannot give.”¹³⁰ Rumours of Damer’s sexual practices persisted throughout the 1780s. The 1789 print The Damerian Apollo depicts her in her studio, dressed in a fashionable gown, rather than the masculine jacket usually worn while sculpting.¹³¹ Her arm is nonetheless raised vigorously above a mallet aimed at Apollo’s buttocks, her penetrative abilities suggesting an inversion of the sexual order embodied by the male and female statues in the foreground, their mutual gaze reinforced by the pointed inscription, “Studies from Nature.”¹³² While Apollo’s genitals are masked by Damer’s young female assistant, his spear is pointedly erect, its base extending as if emerging from Damer’s groin, conflating artistic and sexual transgression in a single act.

Damer’s papers reveal the sexualized intensity of her relationships with women such as Walpole’s protégé, Mary Berry, who she befriended in 1788. Damer’s notebooks

¹²⁶ Elfenbein, Romantic 100.

¹²⁷ Anon., A Sapphick Epistle, from Jack Cavendish to the Honourable and Most Beautiful Mrs. D*** (London: M. Smith, [1778]) 11.

¹²⁸ Anon., Sapphick 14.

¹²⁹ Anon., Sapphick 8.

¹³⁰ Anon., Sapphick 23.

¹³¹ Anon., The Damerian Apollo, William Holland, London.

¹³² Elfenbein, Romantic 111.

of 1791-97 contain transcriptions of their letters, apparently authored by Berry, one of which details the central claims of Aristophanes' speech in Plato's Symposium:

[T]he idea of souls being always created in pairs but sent into existence in very different ways, & those only enjoying true happiness who passing through the world are lucky enough to meet with their tally, which immediately constitutes perfect friendship.¹³³

While Berry here invokes the language of friendship, her knowledge of Greek would have provided access to the homoerotic implications of the original passage, which offers an etiology of same- and opposite-sex desire according to the constitutive sexes of the original pairs from which individuals are severed.¹³⁴ Elsewhere, Damer and Berry's letters invoke the language of the wedding service, with Berry declaring, "...however you will take me, I know for better & for worse – would to heaven that my better was more worthy of you, and my worse less oppressive to myself—.”¹³⁵

Such passages offer evidence of the private intensity of Damer's same-sex intimacies. Public charges against her were nonetheless either imprecise or demonstrably false,¹³⁶ her vulnerability reflecting her prominence within the artistic and theatrical *ton*. Elfenbein argues that Damer used her artistic abilities to offer an alternative image to that offered by her scurrilous critics, opening her studio to members of the Whig elite,

¹³³ Anne Seymour Damer, *Anne Damer's Notebooks 1791-97*, Ms, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Farmington CT, 1.

¹³⁴ Plato, The Symposium, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951) 58-65. Aristophanes declares, "Each of us then is the mere broken tally of a man, the result of a bisection which has reduced us to a condition like that of a flat fish, and each of us is perpetually in search of his corresponding tally. Those men who are halves of a being of the common sex, which was called, as I told you, hermaphrodite, are lovers of women, and most adulterers come from this class, as also do women who are mad about men and sexually promiscuous. Women who are halves of a female whole direct their affections towards women and pay little attention to men; Lesbians belong to this category. But those who are halves of a whole pursue males, and being slices, so to speak, of the male, love men throughout their boyhood, and take pleasure in physical contact with men. Such boys and men are the best of their generation, because they are the most manly." (Plato, Symposium 62.)

¹³⁵ Damer, *Notebooks*, 2:5.

¹³⁶ Elfenbein, Romantic 95.

exhibiting at the Royal Academy and executing public art including a bust of Nelson for the Corporation of London and a statue of George III for the Edinburgh Registry Office.¹³⁷ Her skill as a marble and stone sculptor was nonetheless viewed as a sign of transgressive masculine physicality,¹³⁸ in contrast to the feminine practice of soft wax sculpture.¹³⁹ Elfenbein suggests that Damer participated in private theatricals in order to rebut scurrilous rumours, the aristocratic audiences of Richmond House and Strawberry Hill serving to rehabilitate her reputation.¹⁴⁰ He argues that Damer's performance in Mary Berry's 1800 play Fashionable Friends implies that she chose roles strategically. In Berry's play, Damer's character, Lady Selina, enters into a romantic friendship with a Mrs. Lovell, played by Berry, in order to gain Mr. Lovell for herself. While the play may be read as a critique of romantic friendship, Elfenbein argues that it also figures female intimacy as a mask for heteronormative intrigue, thereby challenging the presumptive linkage of sexual secrecy and same-sex desire, by figuring the text's coded heart as that of normative, rather than transgressive desire.¹⁴¹

Damer's theatrical activities were widely publicized, the Public Advertiser commending her performance in a mainpiece play and farce performed before nobles, including the Prince of Wales in February 1788.¹⁴² As Elfenbein observes, such publicity offered an implicit challenge to Damer's critics, demonstrating her construction of an

¹³⁷ Elfenbein, Romantic 105-6.

¹³⁸ Elfenbein, Romantic 120.

¹³⁹ Marjan Sterckx, Daughters of Sisyphus, Women and Material Culture, 1660-1830 (Conference Paper: Chawton House Library and Study Centre: 2004).

¹⁴⁰ Elfenbein, Romantic 106.

¹⁴¹ Elfenbein, Romantic 107-8.

¹⁴² Anon., "Richmond House," Public Advertiser 9 Feb 1788: 9 Feb 1788:4.

alternative public sphere in which to appear to advantage.¹⁴³ In April 1787, The World detailed Damer's dress and "diamond necklace of prodigious proportions" worn during a performance of Arthur Murphy's The Way to Keep Him,¹⁴⁴ commenting in May that Damer's heads of Lady Aylesbury and Lady Melbourne adorned the stage of Richmond House.¹⁴⁵ Elfenbein nonetheless observes that Damer's theatrical pursuits not only linked her with elite court circles, but the ranks of morally suspect eighteenth-century actresses.¹⁴⁶ Damer's public profile was undoubtedly double-edged; Butler recorded the impressions of Joseph, the second Earl of Milltown in 1788, suggesting her interest, manifest from a safe distance, in the metropolitan *ton*: "Performance at the Theatre, Richmond House execrable except Lord Henry Fitzgerald [...] Mrs. Damer detestable."¹⁴⁷ Reports of Damer's "prodigious" diamond necklace also recalled the Diamond Necklace Affair of 1785-6, in which Marie-Antoinette was fraudulently claimed to have withheld payment for a valuable piece of jewellery. As Sarah Maza observes, reports of the ensuing trial located many of the alleged events of the scandal at the Petit Trianon, concatenating reports of the Queen's frivolity and dissipation with those of her alleged sexual transgressions.¹⁴⁸ Newspaper reports noted approvingly that Damer's private theatrical performances were overseen by the Drury Lane comic actress, Elizabeth Farren.¹⁴⁹ Farren's status as the companion and later wife of the then-married Earl of Derby nonetheless reflected the highly permeable boundaries between the realms

¹⁴³ Elfenbein, Romantic 108.

¹⁴⁴ Anon., "The Dresses in the Play at Richmond House," The World 23 April 1787.

¹⁴⁵ Anon., "Richmond House," The World 18 May 1787: 3.

¹⁴⁶ Elfenbein, Romantic 120.

¹⁴⁷ Bell, ed., Hamwood 139.

¹⁴⁸ Sarah Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785-1786): The Case of the Missing Queen," Eroticism and the Body Politic (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991): 63-89. 63-89.

¹⁴⁹ Anon., "Richmond House," Morning Chronicle 23 April 1787: 23 Apr 1787:3.

of theatre and fashion,¹⁵⁰ and was the subject of both printed satire and Thomas Lawrence's painting Portrait of an Actress, which was displayed at the Royal Academy in 1790.¹⁵¹ Charles Pigott's 1794 satire The Whig Club further presented Damer and Farren as lovers, declaring the latter was "supposed to feel more exquisite delight from the touch of the cheek of Mrs. D__r, than from the fancy of any *novelties* which the wedding night can promise,"¹⁵² the Earl considering such rumours sufficiently damaging to Farren's reputation to prohibit any contact between the two women. Mrs. Piozzi's assertion, "Bath is a cage for such unclean birds, and London a sink for every sin"¹⁵³ echoes Pigott in locating sapphism within the mobile and theatrical metropolis, rather than the socially and geographically fixed provincial gentry with whom Butler and Ponsonby identified. This in turn explains the apparent contradiction between Mrs. Piozzi's denunciation of Damer in Thraliana – "a Lady much suspected for liking her own Sex in a criminal Way"¹⁵⁴ – and her concurrent friendship with her Welsh neighbours. It may further explicate the logic of Piozzi's lurid report of Mrs. Siddons's sister being pursued by such a "female fiend"; while Siddons's eminent respectability shielded her from such allegations, the taint of the public theatre, in which both her brother and sister were also involved nonetheless rendered her sister susceptible.¹⁵⁵ Accordingly, Mrs. Piozzi's epistolary accounts of "the Recluses of Llangollen," assert Butler and Ponsonby's

¹⁵⁰ Gillian Russell, "Farren, Elizabeth, Countess of Derby," An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832, eds. Iain MacCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 505.

¹⁵¹ Russell, "Farren," 505.

¹⁵² Elfenbein, Romantic 120.

¹⁵³ Thrall, Thraliana 2: 948.

¹⁵⁴ Thrall, Thraliana 2:770.

¹⁵⁵ Thrall, Thraliana 2: 948-9.

rejection of society, publicly distinguishing them from the sexual taint of metropolitan social and sexual circulation.¹⁵⁶

The necessity of Butler and Ponsonby's assertion of provincial virtue was demonstrated by the publication 1790 of the damningly-titled article, "Extraordinary Female Affection." The article first appeared in the London newspaper the General Evening Post on the 20-22 July 1790, and was reprinted the following month in the St James's Chronicle, or British Evening Post.¹⁵⁷ It thus conformed to the form of textually circulating libel that Kathryn Temple terms "print spectacle."¹⁵⁸ The General Evening Post was identified with the opposition Whig party, and had in 1772 defended the pardoning of Captain Robert Smith after his being sentenced to death as a sodomite.¹⁵⁹ The article nonetheless figured Butler and Ponsonby's relationship as undertaken in opposition to heteronormative marriage: "Miss Butler [...] has had several offers of marriage, all of which she rejected. Miss Ponsonby, her particular friend and companion, was supposed to be the bar to all matrimonial union, it was thought proper to separate them." The article also claimed that Butler and Ponsonby maintained a strict division of domestic tasks – "Miss Ponsonby does the duties and honours of the house, while Miss Butler superintends the gardens and the rest of the grounds"¹⁶⁰ – this gendered division

¹⁵⁶ Hester Lynch Piozzi, The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784-1821 (Formerly Mrs. Thrale), eds. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, vol. 3 (Newark: London and Toronto: U of D Press; Associated University Presses, 1993).

¹⁵⁷ Anon., "Extraordinary Female Affection," St James's Chronicle, or British Evening Post 17-20 July 1790: 4.

¹⁵⁸ Kathryn Temple, Scandal Nation: Law and Authorship in Britain, 1750-1832 (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003) 3.

¹⁵⁹ Norton, First.

¹⁶⁰ Anon., "General," 2.

of labour suggesting that the ladies enacted the sexual, as well as domestic, roles of husband and wife.

Echoing the conflation of sexual irregularity and gender transitivity traced in chapter two, the General Evening Post employed gendered tropes to attribute same-sex desire. Butler is described as invariably dressed in a riding habit, leading her to appear “in all respects a young man, if we except the petticoats which she still retains.”¹⁶¹ Riding habits were worn in the later eighteenth-century by women travelling on horseback or by carriage. Fashioned of heavy, dark cloth, their hardwearing, economical nature also led them to be worn more frequently by provincial women, and to be particularly favoured by members of the Anglo-Irish gentry. Butler and Ponsonby’s riding habits may thus be read as reflecting both their Irish heritage and a somewhat uncharacteristic attentiveness to matters economical. The masculine styling of ladies’ riding habits nonetheless led them to function as a potential signifier of both sapphism and transgressive heterosexual desire. The 1779 print Kitty Coaxer driving Lord Dupe, towards Rotten Row depicts an elaborately-coiffured brunette clad in a fashionable riding habit. ‘Kitty’ stands upright at the reins of a coach and wields a whip with energy as her enervated male escort folds his arms defensively across his body. A church and rural scene is visible in the background, as the couple travel towards the Hyde Park thoroughfare where members of the *ton* would engage in fashionable display and dissipation.¹⁶² The association between horse-riding and disruptive heterosexual desire is further disclosed by Donna Landry’s reading of the role of horse-riding in Austen’s Mansfield Park. As Landry argues, Edmund’s provision

¹⁶¹ Anon., “General,” 2.

¹⁶² Anon. (after John Collet), Kitty Coaxer Driving Lord Dupe, Towards Rotten Row, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington (London: Carington Bowles, 1779).

of Fanny's mare to Mary Crawford constitutes a strikingly literal staging of the Fanny-Edmund-Mary sexual triangle. The natural ease of Mary's posture in the saddle, "with all it implies about spinal pliancy and hip flexibility and aerobic aptitude" displays both her body and the sexually-charged fearlessness with which she initially banishes Mansfield's "creepmouse" from erotic contention. Mary's failure in the "management of the bridle" nonetheless discloses the lack of sensibility with which to respond sensitively to either her equine mount or potential husband. She may thus be identified with metropolitan "Amazons" such as the fictional Kitty Coaxer and real-life analogues such as Laetitia, Lady Lade, the colourfully-spoken "whip" and riding companion of the Prince of Wales, rather than the robustly wholesome daughters of the country gentry.¹⁶³ Butler's riding habit thus acts as a signifier of transgressive sexuality, evidencing an equation of unfeminine dress and queer desire that persists to this day. Ponsonby is instead described as "polite and effeminate, fair and beautiful," her figuration echoing that of inscrutably feminine sapphist made visible by her masculine partner.

Having noted the suggestive nature of Butler and Ponsonby's depiction in the General Evening Post, Faderman avers that, "no one among their acquaintances seemed to believe that their relationship was of the forbidden variety."¹⁶⁴ Butler's diary, by contrast, suggests that she and Ponsonby did not view this unwanted publicity so sanguinely. One month after the publication of the article, the London landscape painter Thomas Walmsley wrote seeking permission to sketch Plâs newydd. Butler's diary entry indicates their sudden diffidence: "*Monday, August 9 th.*—Note from Mr. Walmsley, an

¹⁶³ Donna Landry, "Learning to Ride at Mansfield Park," The Postcolonial Jane Austen, eds. You-me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 56-73. 66-67.

¹⁶⁴ Faderman, Surpassing 124.

artist from London, desiring to see this place. Desired to be excluded. We have appeared in the Newspapers. Will take care not willfully to be exhibited in the Magazines.”¹⁶⁵ In the immediate wake of the article’s publication, Butler and Ponsonby appealed to Edmund Burke for legal redress. They had first met him in 1785, most probably as he travelled through Llangollen between London and Dublin. Their library contained his 1757 A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,¹⁶⁶ and Butler employed his aesthetic vocabulary throughout her daily journal – “glorious gloomy day – winds and frequent rain.”¹⁶⁷ In September 1788, Burke wrote requesting permission to “wait on” the Ladies at Plâs newydd with his wife and son Richard.¹⁶⁸ They were accordingly gracious hosts to Burke’s family, permitting them the honour of walking the Home Circuit, and offering the somewhat confusedly Burkean observation in Butler’s diary, “the country in the most sublime Beauty and majesty.”¹⁶⁹ The following August, Burke paid another visit to Plâs newydd, of which Butler observes, “A rap at the Door. To our agreeable surprise Mr. Burke came who we had not seen these five years. Just returned from France. Had been in Paris in all the Riots.”¹⁷⁰ One may assume that this first hand account of the Revolution to some degree allayed Butler’s anxieties, expressed earlier in the month, at failing to receive the newspaper, this lack of reliable reportage proving most “provoking at this Critical time for France.”¹⁷¹ In

¹⁶⁵ Bell, ed., Hamwood 260.

¹⁶⁶ Ponsonby, Catalogue.

¹⁶⁷ Butler, Journal 1788-91, 2nd Aug 1790.

¹⁶⁸ Bell, ed., Hamwood 134.

¹⁶⁹ Bell, ed., Hamwood 134.

¹⁷⁰ Mavor, Year 150-51. While Burke was initially ambivalent about the events he witnessed in France in the summer of 1789, by late September he declared France to be “a Country where the people along with their servitude, have thrown off the Yoke of Laws and morals.” (Edmund Burke, The Correspondence of Edmund Burke: 1789-1791, eds. Alfred Cobban and Robert A. Smith, 10 vols. (Cambridge; Chicago: Cambridge UP; U of Chicago P, 1967) 5:25.)

¹⁷¹ Mavor, Year 150.

spite of such visits, Butler and Ponsonby did not continue to correspond with Burke, who lamented in responding to their 1790 appeal that “our correspondence should begin on an occasion so disagreeable.”¹⁷² In applying to Burke, Butler and Ponsonby sought assistance from a public individual similarly marked by Irish ancestry and Catholic sympathies, the famed orator’s accent described as “never [having] quitted the banks of the Shannon.”¹⁷³ While Burke’s father had conformed to the Established Church, his mother remained a Roman Catholic and raised her daughter in the faith. Although Burke himself was raised as an Anglican, he published a spirited critique of the anti-Catholic Penal Laws in 1765, and was instrumental in the 1778 passage of the Catholic Relief Bill.¹⁷⁴ Butler and Ponsonby’s initial letter to Burke has not been preserved. Their decision to write to him for legal assistance may have possibly reflected his successful cases for libel against claims that his parliamentary speeches of 1780 urging leniency towards accused sodomites offered evidence of his own sexual proclivities.¹⁷⁵ Another interpretative context is suggested by the scandal surrounding Burke’s longstanding intimacy with William Burke, companion of his so-called ‘lost years,’ whose description as Burke’s “cousin” and “kinsman” veiled the absence of any genealogical link between the two men.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Burke, Burke's Correspondence 6:131.

¹⁷³ Pittock, Inventing 55.

¹⁷⁴ Edmund Burke, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, eds. Paul Langford, T.O. McLoughlin, William B. Todd and James T. Boulton, vol. 9 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 416.

¹⁷⁵ Kramnick, Rage 84.

¹⁷⁶ Amanda Berry, "Edmund Burke, Public Eye," Romantic Generations: Essays in Honor of Robert F. Gleckner, eds. Ghislaine McDayter, Guinn Batten and Barry Milligan (Cranbury, NJ and London: Bucknell University Press and Associated University Presses, 2001): 43-63. 54.

The affect of shame has taken a prominent place in recent queer analysis.¹⁷⁷ Rita Felski defines shame as the self-conscious awareness of the disparity between one's behaviours and those of one's peers, observing "The opportunities for experiencing shame increase dramatically with geographic and social forms of mobility, which provide an infinite array of chances for failure, for betraying by word and gesture that one does not belong to one's environment."¹⁷⁸ Drawing on the work of psychologists Michael Franz Basch and Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick further describes shame as stemming from the inability to elicit a positive response from another, replacing interpersonally-conferred identity with painful self-consciousness.¹⁷⁹ As she suggests, shame is therefore paradoxical in its operation, simultaneously seeking to obscure itself and constituting an intrinsically theatrical form of display.¹⁸⁰ While the experience of shame stems from social isolation, Sedgwick nonetheless claims that it is constitutive of both individual and social identity. Witnessing the maltreatment of another person can flood an otherwise passive observer with shame, creating both excruciating individuation and identification with the maltreated other.¹⁸¹ The reiterated and communal experience of shame may be thus seen as constitutive of stigmatized minority groups, forging a collective identity untethered by essentialist conceptions of subjectivity.¹⁸² As Sedgwick suggests, shame may also be seen as a structuring characteristic of the ambivalent, excessive and on-going

¹⁷⁷ See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (New York: Free Press, 1999).; and Sedgwick, "Shame."

¹⁷⁸ Rita Felski, "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class," *PMLA*.115 (2000): 33-45. 39.

¹⁷⁹ Sedgwick, "Shame," 37.

¹⁸⁰ Sedgwick, "Shame," 38.

¹⁸¹ Sedgwick, "Shame," 36-37.

¹⁸² Sedgwick, "Shame," 62-64.

identity performances gathered under the rubric of 'queer,' ranging, in the twentieth- and twenty-first century, from butch abjection to kitsch religiosity.¹⁸³

Such contemporary queer poses may appear unrelated to Butler and Ponsonby's Welsh retirement. These associations of shame, performance and social recognition suggest that nonetheless suggest that the shame-inducing rupture of social connectivity underlay Butler and Ponsonby's ongoing efforts to mask and repair the lingering scandal surrounding their elopement and exile from Ireland. They sought to elicit from Burke both legal redress and personal acknowledgement, their appeal forming a particular instance of their ongoing efforts to recuperate their shamefully broken social bonds. Burke's response was apparently non-committal, undertaking in what Mavor describes as "an exceptionally disappointing letter"¹⁸⁴ to encourage the newspaper editors to "attend to their behaviour in future" and declaring, "Your consolation must be that you suffer only by the baseness of the age you live in."¹⁸⁵ Close attention to Burke's claims for leniency towards convicted sodomites further shows his appeals to be based, not upon his liberality towards their "detestable" practices, but upon the fact they constituted a crime "of the most equivocal nature and the most difficult to prove."¹⁸⁶ As Amanda Berry observes, "To follow this logic, the punishments should be less severe – in one case Burke argued after the fact of an accused sodomite who was stoned to death on the pillory – because the conviction stood more than a decent chance of being

¹⁸³ Sedgwick, "Shame," 63-64.

¹⁸⁴ Mavor, *Ladies* 75.

¹⁸⁵ Burke, *Burke's Correspondence* 6:132.

¹⁸⁶ Kramnick, *Rage* 84.

unwarranted.”¹⁸⁷ Accordingly, Burke’s cryptic advice to Butler and Ponsonby, “keep yourselves in your own persons, where you are,”¹⁸⁸ suggested that Butler and Ponsonby maintain a public performance that, while open to prurient speculation, warranted leniency by overwriting apparent signs of illicit sexuality with those of provincial virtue.

The form of shame performativity elicited by the General Evening Post article and Burke’s subsequent advice can be extrapolated to Butler and Ponsonby’s project as a whole.¹⁸⁹ Acknowledging Burke’s admonishment to remain in both character and place, they redoubled their deployment of Gothic style as a sign of fixity and sexual virtue. In 1791, Butler’s family regained their Irish titles, leading Butler and Ponsonby to engage in a flurry of renovations asserting Butler’s newly confirmed nobility.¹⁹⁰ Their 1792 account book records payment for the carriage of new library doors, while by 1795, Seward observed that the library was “fitted up in the Gothic style, the door and large sash windows of that form, and the latter of painted glass, ‘shedding the dim religious light’” of Milton’s Il Penseroso.¹⁹¹ Such pious representations worked to overwrite the charges levelled by the newspapers. In so doing, Butler and Ponsonby again echoed both the material tropes and performative effects of Walpole’s transformation of Strawberry Hill. Walpole was widely identified as effeminate, a characteristic identified then as now with

¹⁸⁷ Berry, “Edmund,” 57.

¹⁸⁸ Burke, Burke’s Correspondence 6:132.

¹⁸⁹ Sedgwick, “Shame,” 38.

¹⁹⁰ Ponsonby wrote to Tighe on the 30 Apr. 1791: “Though we have known [Butler’s] right to the Appellation of Ladyship, a considerable time past – It was only the day before I last wrote to you that she was induced to accept it from a report being propagated in Kilkenny...that she disapproved the restoration of her truly illustrious family to their Hereditary Honours.” (Ponsonby, qtd. in Mavor, Year 82.) Ponsonby’s detailing of a payment of 10s.6 to bellringers to celebrate the elevation of “my dst. Lady Eleanor” nonetheless suggests that Butler’s reputed reluctance to accept her title was somewhat disingenuous. (Sarah Ponsonby, Household Accounts, Denbighshire Records Office, Ruthin. 12 Apr. 1791)

¹⁹¹ Seward, Letters 4:99.

male sodomitical behaviour.¹⁹² In 1764, Walpole authored an anonymous pamphlet defending his cousin Henry Seymour Conway after his dismissal from a government position. The published response claimed ignorance of the text's author, yet emphasized Walpole's gender indeterminacy, asserting, "the attack must have been from a neutral quarter, from a being between both, neither totally male or female...by nature maleish, by disposition female...that it would very much puzzle a common observer to assign him to his true sex."¹⁹³ Walpole's effeminacy was also emphasized in Charles Pigott's 1794 The Female Jockey Club, in which he was described as "the Right Honourable Lady Horace Walpole, Countess of Orford."¹⁹⁴ Walpole anticipated Butler and Ponsonby's use of Gothic tropes as defensive symbols of landed virtue, his library featuring a large window and two rose windows filled with stained glass images of Faith, Hope, Charity, fifteen figures dressed in Elizabethan costume¹⁹⁵ and "a large shield with the arms of England, and head of Charles 1st and Charles 2nd."¹⁹⁶ Their library similarly featured armorial bearings and patchworked fragments of stained glass purloined from Valle Crucis Abbey.¹⁹⁷ Their installation of a "priasmatic lantern [...] of cut glass variously coloured" in their library door similarly echoed Bentley's design of such a lantern for Strawberry Hill,¹⁹⁸ Seward describing its enchanting gloominess as banishing the "always chastised

¹⁹² Randolph Trumbach, "London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture," Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (London and New York: Routledge, 1991): 112-41. 114.

¹⁹³ Raymond Bentman, "Horace Walpole's Forbidden Passion," Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures, ed. Martin Duberman (New York and London: New York UP, 1997): 276-79. 82.

¹⁹⁴ Charles Pigott, The Female Jockey Club, or a Sketch of the Manners of the Modern Age (London: D.I. Eaton, 1794) 195.

¹⁹⁵ George Robins, Catalogue of the Classic Contents of Strawberry Hill Collected by Horace Walpole (1842) 239.

¹⁹⁶ Walpole, Description 34.

¹⁹⁷ Hicklin, Ladies 6.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Bentley, Bentley's Design for a Lantern for Strawberry Hill, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington CT.

day-light.”¹⁹⁹ Strawberry Hill is frequently described as whimsical, the campness of its cardboard battlements appearing a seeming parody of the structural and historical solidity of Gothic form. Comparison of Strawberry Hill and Plâs newydd instead suggests their common employment of Gothic tropes as signs of landed virtue, their heraldic flourishes and deliberate gloominess reflecting, not satirical self-possession, but the anxious reassertion of social connectivity characteristic of shame performativity.

Butler and Ponsonby furthered their performance of both local fixity and sexual virtue after 1790 by intensifying the project of covering their cottage with the Welsh oak characteristic of local country homes. In 1814, Ponsonby reported being “seized” with “the Oak carving mania,” although their rented fields yielded the more typically Irish crop of potatoes, rather than the timber that marked the class and wealth of local Welsh landowners.²⁰⁰ Butler and Ponsonby were mere leaseholders of Plâs newydd, which they did not purchase until 1819, and from which their landlord threatened their removal in 1800.²⁰¹ Seeking to mask the precarious nature of their tenure with a literal historical veneer, Butler and Ponsonby purchased and bartered for wood eagerly stripped from local buildings. In 1814, Butler informed Harriet Pigott that they had “remove[d] every

¹⁹⁹ Seward, *Letters* 4:99.

²⁰⁰ In *Emma*, Mr. Knightley’s status as a quintessential gentleman is reflected in the established landscape of Donwell Abbey, “its ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream, of which the Abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect, had scarcely a sight—and its abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up.” (Austen, *Emma* 313.)

²⁰¹ In August 1800, Hester Thrale Piozzi wrote to Butler and Ponsonby, “I could not last Sunday express my Concern about the Difficulties with Regard to that dear and Celebrated Cottage – which never never must slip from the Possession of the Ladies which have made its very Name Immortal. Miss Ponsonby mentioned Ten Years as secure I think: In that Time some Method will surely be hit upon for perpetuating the quiet and unalienable Tenure.” (Piozzi, Piozzi-Butler 27 Aug 1800.)

article of furniture from the lower to the Upper regions,”²⁰² cladding the hall, staircase, lower rooms and exterior in oak panels. The resulting gloomy reception spaces echoed Strawberry Hill’s heavily-panelled entrance hall, leading an uncharitable nineteenth-century commentator to compare the cottage to “an enormous wardrobe.”²⁰³ News of their oak fetish spread, with their former servant, Jane Thomas, recalling in 1885 that “everybody who had a piece to sell used to bring it to them.”²⁰⁴ Pieces of oak are also described as having constituted a form of payment or ticket with which to obtain admission to the cottage, a material consideration akin to the tickets of admission that Walpole issued to the domestic tourists that converged upon Strawberry Hill.²⁰⁵ While this system appears not have been systematized as was Walpole’s, this claim has nonetheless entered into the Ladies’ mythology, with a 1964 touring guide observing, “Each visitor was expected to make a gift of a piece of carving or a curio.”²⁰⁶ Butler’s 1819 journal reports locals carrying oak to Plâs newydd, the May offerings including: “A square piece of deep carving purchased from a poor Woman.” On the 11th June she observes, “The Press in our State Room turned from its original place Covered with old oak Carving,” while the following day they receive delivery of “Two...bed Posts from John Bowen...an oak Cupboard for inspection – three pannels to purchase from Edward the Marble mason.”²⁰⁷ The rate of deliveries did not cease throughout the year, with Butler noting in November, “The son of poor John Hughes brought us two old oak

²⁰² Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Harriet Pigott 5th May [1814], Bodleian Library Western Collection, Oxford.

²⁰³ Catherine Sinclair, qtd. in Hicklin, *Ladies* 16.

²⁰⁴ Anon., *Recollections*.

²⁰⁵ Horace Walpole, Strawberry Hill Admission Ticket 12 Aug. 1774, Walpoliana Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT.

²⁰⁶ Reginald J.W. Hammond, ed., *North Wales (Southern Section)*, 15 ed. (London and Melbourne: Ward, Lock and Company Limited, 1964) 154.

²⁰⁷ Butler, *Journal* 1819.

Carved Pieces.”²⁰⁸ Butler’s emphasis on the poverty of the local dealers might suggest that their purchases were acts of charity. However, the sheer bulk of wood purchased, and its prominent placement at Plâs newydd, suggests a more equal commercial transaction, in which Butler and Ponsonby’s neighbours traded surplus signs of Welshness in an exchange recalling a colonial encounter. Just as Fanny Price’s echo of Cowper’s lament for “ye fallen avenues” marks her entitlement to the landed inheritance symbolized by the British oak,²⁰⁹ Butler and Ponsonby’s singular decorating scheme asserted their status as established landowners, rather than exiled tenants. In her daybook of 1803-6, Butler observes, “London the best place to Live – where you may torment [and] exhaust the largest Patrimony – the most promising Health – and your whole stock of Credit, Character and Morals.”²¹⁰ Plâs newydd’s architectural improvements thus distanced them from such reputed scenes of metropolitan dissipation, while the sheer materiality of their renovations distinguished their provincial fixity from the sapphic taint of the *ton*.

“The Saloon of the Minervas”: Butler and Ponsonby’s Private Library

At the centre of Plâs newydd was Butler and Ponsonby’s private library. Writing in 1795, Seward declared, “This saloon of the Minervas contains the finest editions, superbly bound, of the best authors, in prose and verse, which the English, French and Italian languages boast.”²¹¹ Their library room, in which they received their many guests, was thus seen to combine the sociable space of the saloon, in which balls, concerts and receptions were held, with the intellectual attributes of Minerva, the Roman goddess of

²⁰⁸ Butler, Journal 1819.

²⁰⁹ Tuite, *Romantic* 141.

²¹⁰ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler’s Daybook, National Library of Ireland Wicklow Collection, Dublin.

²¹¹ E.V. Lucas, *A Swan and Her Friends* (London: Methuen, 1907) 269.

wisdom.²¹² The epithet “Minerva” also recalls the name of William Lane’s publishing house, established the same year, which was to become synonymous with the Gothic novels it published prolifically throughout the 1790s.²¹³ Butler and Ponsonby are here identified with a classical scholarly ideal, rather than its more mercenary contemporary manifestation. Located on the south-eastern end of the cottage, their library room was the newest in the house, having been added prior to their tenancy in 1778.²¹⁴ It possessed the highest ceiling in the house, their Gothic renovations also giving it the largest windows.²¹⁵ Its furnishings were similarly impressive, with Plâs newydd’s sale catalogue listing furnishings including six built-in book presses, four semi-circular bookcases, an octagonal mahogany table, a sofa, work table, several Gothic chairs and stools, “A VERY CURIOUS INDIA CABINET OF EBONY, INLAID WITH IVORY” and a carved oak strong box, “*once the property of his Royal Highness the late Duke of York, whose name is on a brass plate inserted in the lid.*”²¹⁶ Such prominently treasures worked to mask Butler and Ponsonby’s social and economic marginality, with the Irish judge, Kendal Bushe, writing to his wife in 1805: “I was shewn into the library where I waited for more than half an hour: I peep’d at every thing, prints, bronzes, ornaments, books and drawings, etc. without reserve, and positively there is no such library of its size in the World.”²¹⁷ The extent of their book collection also required volumes to be shelved in

²¹² In Hays’s Memoirs of Emma Courtney, Emma is presented to the family of her uncle, Mr. Morton, in the saloon of Morton Hall. As she declares, “I will attempt an imperfect sketch of the groupe, assembled in the saloon, to whom I was severally presented on my entrance, by the lord of the domain.” (Mary Hays, Memoirs of Emma Courtney (London: Pandora Press, 1987) 33.)

²¹³ St Clair, Reading 244.

²¹⁴ Mavor, Ladies 107.

²¹⁵ Janet Ashton, “Delightful Retirement: The Ladies of Llangollen,” M.Lib., University of Wales, 1993.

²¹⁶ Robins, Auction, 66.

²¹⁷ Somerville and Ross, An Incorruptible Irishman: Being an Account of Chief Justice Kendal Bushe 170.

their 'Boudoir,' their Sale Catalogue describing its "NOBLE LARGE BOOKCASE, *with massive oak sliding doors, richly carved.*"²¹⁸

Butler and Ponsonby's library was central to their assertion of independent prerogatives generally held by landed gentlemen. Throughout the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, private libraries were viewed as an integral element of an aristocratic estate, established and maintained for the benefit of one's heirs.²¹⁹ The very space of such libraries was gendered male, in contrast to the feminised domain of the drawing (or *withdrawing*) room.²²⁰ Sale catalogues reveal that first generation Bluestockings such as Elizabeth Vesey and Elizabeth Montagu established extensive private libraries.²²¹ However, these women gained a degree of license from their status as widows or wives, which allowed them to distinguish their libraries from those founded solely for female use. As a gentleman declares in Maria Edgeworth's 1795 Letters for Literary Ladies, "From academies, colleges, public libraries, private associations of literary men, women are excluded, if not by law, at least by custom, which cannot easily be conquered."²²² This custom is illustrated by Ponsonby's account of her and Butler's first Welsh tour. Ponsonby offers a detailed account of the interior of Chirk Castle, including the saloon, "the Ceiling of which is beautifully finish'd in Compartments (formed in very fine Stucco) of the Heathen Gods & Goddesses" and "the Breakfast

²¹⁸ Robins, Auction, 67.

²¹⁹ Mark Purcell, "The Country House Library Reassess'd: Or, Did the 'Country House Library' Ever Really Exist?," Library History 18 (2002): 157-74. 168.

²²⁰ Jill Franklin, The Gentleman's Country House and Its Plan 1835-1914 (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 43.

²²¹ Sylvia Harcstack Myers, The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in the Eighteenth-Century (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford UP, 1990) 251.

²²² Maria Edgeworth, Letters for Literary Ladies, ed. Gina Luria (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1974) 7.

Parlour finish'd within Indian Paper."²²³ While Ponsonby's narrative suggests that their tour was comprehensive, there is no mention of its library, which Mrs. Piozzi described as "the best Library we have been shown in Wales," when she and Johnson visited in 1774.²²⁴ Butler and Ponsonby's status as unaccompanied female travellers appears to have marked them as uninterested in, and inadmissible to, the Castle's library. By contrast, the then Mrs. Thrale was traveling with her husband and the famous Doctor, who was fawned over by the Castle chaplain.²²⁵ Butler and Ponsonby mitigated their marginal status through the establishment of their own private library, in which they later received Mr. and Mrs. Piozzi. Their library thus marks both their desire for the license of landed wealth, and the success of their claim.

The claim that gentry women were excluded from private libraries has been challenged by recent work in library history. Mark Purcell cites the women's names inscribed in library books in Springhill, County Derry, as evidence that eighteenth and early nineteenth-century personal libraries were not solely masculine preserves.²²⁶ This is argued in part, however, on the basis of the Springhill's holdings of "lighter fare" including novels, plays and 'improving treatises,' demonstrating the hierarchical gendering of literary genres.²²⁷ One is reminded of Catherine Morland's assertion to Northanger Abbey's Henry Tilney, that novels "are not clever enough for you – gentlemen read better books."²²⁸ Butler and Ponsonby's library contained histories,

²²³ Ponsonby, *Journey*.

²²⁴ Hester Lynch Thrale, Dr Johnson and Mrs Thrale's Tour in North Wales 1774, ed. Adrian Bristow (Wrexham, Wales: Bridge Books, 1995) 120.

²²⁵ Thrale, Tour 120.

²²⁶ Purcell, "Country." 168.

²²⁷ Purcell, "Country." 168.

²²⁸ Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, ed. John Davie (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 82.

letters, geographies and political treatises, demonstrating that women did not confine themselves to intellectually 'flimsy' fare, just as Tilney's response indicates that men also partook in ostensibly 'female' literary forms.²²⁹ Austen's fictional exchange thus demonstrates, not the rigid delineation of masculine and feminine genres and spaces, but the increasing contestation of such boundaries. Butler and Ponsonby also participated in the 'masculine' realm of newspaper reading, with Sir Walter Scott remarking in 1824, "Their tables were piled with newspapers from every corner of the kingdom, and they seemed to have the deaths and marriages of the antipodes at their fingers' ends."²³⁰ Butler and Ponsonby's private library thus laid implicit claim to what Barbara Benedict terms the "gentlemanly ideal of the contemplative life of cultivated leisure."²³¹

While Butler and Ponsonby did not purchase Plâs newydd until 1819, the scale of their book collection suggested them to be wealthy landowners, while its sheer materiality lent a defiant permanence to their retirement.²³² They incurred accounts averaging 35*l.* a year at what Butler termed the "filthy booksellers"²³³ of Shrewsbury and Wrexham, a sum far exceeding their rent, due twice yearly, of 11.7.6*l.*²³⁴ The regularity with which their book purchasing exceeded their income is suggested by the satisfaction with which Ponsonby details a payment in June 1789: "Mr. Salter Bookseller in full

²²⁹ Austen, *Northanger* 82.

²³⁰ Qtd. in Lockhart, *Life* 45.

²³¹ Barbara M. Benedict, "Jane Austen and the Culture of Circulating Libraries: The Construction of Female Literacy," *Revising Women: Eighteenth-Century 'Women's Fiction' and Social Engagement*, ed. Paula R. Backscheider (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 2000): 147-99. 158.

²³² Butler, *Journal* 1819, 5 Jan. 1819.

²³³ Mavor, *Ladies* 57.

²³⁴ Sarah Ponsonby, *Sarah Ponsonby's Account Book 1778-90*, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, 17 Feb. 1788.

3.17.6.”²³⁵ The voracity of their literary appetites is similarly suggested by an 1808 letter to Mr. Durlan, bookseller, in which Butler encloses “a List of Books with a request that Messr. Durlan & Co. would send them as many as were to be had of the Number – from their Catalogue for 1806 – and having written again the 30th of last Month – to request that a Small Edition of Don Quixote in Spanish might be sent with or after the others.”²³⁶

Butler and Ponsonby lacked the financial means to pursue the antiquarian editions pursued by wealthy collectors such as Sir Hans Soane and the 6th Duke of Devonshire. They nonetheless positioned themselves at the upper end of the literary marketplace by amassing what Pigott termed “a library containing the proof books chiefly of the best Authors.”²³⁷ Byron dispatched Butler and Ponsonby a presentation copy of The Corsair at the height of his celebrity,²³⁸ an exchange discussed further in chapter six. In 1819, the Duchess of Northumberland similarly presented them with a copy of the “Earl of Northumberlands Household Book in the Most Splendidly Magnificent Binding,” this handsome volume delivered, as Butler notes proudly, “by Coach.”²³⁹ Robins’s sale catalogue also notes their possession of a “private copy” of Psyche²⁴⁰ by Sarah Tighe’s daughter-in-law, Mary Tighe, who visited Plâs newydd in 1795; the Princess of Wales further augmented their library in 1808 with a handsomely bound volume of Scott’s Marmion.²⁴¹ Butler and Ponsonby masked their poverty and averted questions about their relationship by insisting that they had the money to buy books, and the genteel ability to

²³⁵ Ponsonby, Accounts 1788-90, 17 Jun. 1789.

²³⁶ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Mr. Durlan, Ms, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

²³⁷ Pigott, Pigott F1-2.

²³⁸ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 7th Feb 1814, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin.

²³⁹ Butler, Journal 1819.

²⁴⁰ Robins, Auction, 51.

²⁴¹ Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby to Hester Thrale Piozzi, Ms, John Rylands Library Special Collections, Manchester University, Manchester.

read to pass the time. Their library, the hub of Plâs newydd, thus allowed them to style themselves as landed readers, rather than *déclassé* and sexually suspect spinsters.

Butler and Ponsonby further located themselves within a local literary network by cataloguing and displaying their book collection.²⁴² The cataloguing of private libraries was common among eighteenth-century landed families, with some collectors following French fashion by printing limited editions of their catalogues.²⁴³ The act of establishing a library catalogue marks a book collection as functional, rather than merely ‘entertaining’ in nature, as the institutional use of catalogues suggest. A library catalogue further marks a collection as being of a sufficient size and significance to warrant such an act, suggesting it to be a coherent and complex collection of interest to individuals other than its founder. Ponsonby’s manuscript “A Catalogue of Our Books 1792” thus indicates they perceived their library as a shared material legacy (see image below).²⁴⁴ The catalogue is divided in two parts, the first a subject classification and second a guide to shelf arrangement. Library historian Janet Ashton describes Ponsonby’s subject classification as basic, her entries lacking either alphabetical order or author’s names.²⁴⁵ The catalogue further lacks temporal order, with new books added to the bottom of the columns as they are acquired. Ponsonby nonetheless takes care to note the provenance of the various volumes, with books received from friends entered in blue ink and roman text, presentation copies marked by ‘Italicks’ and red ink, and self-purchased books

²⁴² In the early nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle declared, “A library is not worth anything without a catalogue.” (qtd. in Purcell, “Country.” 160.)

²⁴³ Purcell, “Country.” 163.

²⁴⁴ Ponsonby, *Catalogue*.

²⁴⁵ Ashton, “Delightful.”

entered in cursive script and mundane black.²⁴⁶ In so doing, she distinguishes their books from the generic textual objects perused by common readers, instead locating them within an interpersonal literary network and gift economy comprised of local gentry and visiting nobility.

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		↓
<i>Sutton's Pedigree of England.</i>	Oct.	2
<i>Douglas's Pedigree of Scotland.</i>	Pol.	1
<i>Baronage of England.</i>	Duo.	3
<i>Sutton's Pedigree.</i>	Duo.	1
<i>Bottom's edited Pedigree.</i>	Oct.	1
<i>Clasby's Pedigree.</i>	Duo.	3
<i>Manners of the Nobility &c.</i>	Duo.	1
<i>Hamlin & Johnson's Baronage.</i>	Oct.	3
<i>Permy's Heraldry.</i>	Oct.	1
<i>Heasley's Pedigree of England Scotland & Scotland.</i>	Duo.	1
<i>Booth's Catalogue of Kings &c.</i>	Qu.	1

Sarah Ponsonby, 'A Catalogue of Our Books: MDCCXCII', 1792

²⁴⁶ Ponsonby, Catalogue.

The symbolic function of Butler and Ponsonby's library is further revealed by their shelf arrangements, with Ponsonby's entries noting the size and number of volumes comprising each work. Matching these records to their shelving guide indicates that they displayed their books according to size, rather than subject matter, suggesting they favoured aesthetic display over scholarly access. This view was held by Lister's neighbour, Emma Saltmarshe, whose contempt for Plâs newydd is noted in Lister's journal: "Beautiful morocco-bound books lain about in all the arbours, etc., evidently for shew [sic], perhaps stiff if you touched them & never opened. Everything evidently done for effect."²⁴⁷ While Butler and Ponsonby's shelving practices indeed sought to achieve a particular effect, it was not simply to display their scholarship or rustic reading practices. Analyzing the 1757 catalogue of William Barthoe's circulating library, Edward H. Jacobs notes that particular book formats were associated with particular literary genres. Folios were associated with historical and classical subjects, while the smaller and more portable octavo and duodecimo volumes were dominated by the modern class of "Romances, Novels and Other Books of Entertainment."²⁴⁸ Examining the selection practices depicted in a print of Hall's Library in Margate, Jacobs further argues that small-format books were associated with the socially unattached women who were viewed as their most common readers.²⁴⁹ Ashton suggests that the books held in Butler and Ponsonby's boudoir were selected at random.²⁵⁰ They were all duodecimos and octavos, however, suggesting, in Jacobs's terms, the Ladies' desire to distance

²⁴⁷ Lister, *Know* 212.

²⁴⁸ Edward H. Jacobs, "Buying into Classes: The Practice of Book Selection in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33.1 (1999): 43-64. 52.

²⁴⁹ Jacobs, "Buying." 58.

²⁵⁰ Ashton, "Delightful."

themselves from formats and genres that potentially highlighted their female gender and unmarried status by hiding such lesser-ranked texts away from public view. They further asserted their genteel virtue by placing their sober and expensive folios in their library room, these “furniture books”²⁵¹ displayed on shelves lacking the “massive” doors that hid their ‘merely’ entertaining texts.

Butler and Ponsonby were fluent in the modern languages in which young women were encouraged to obtain a polite familiarity, their library containing works in French, Italian and Spanish. Butler’s French was particularly strong due to her education in Cambrai, with her journal of the 20 March 1819 recording the receipt of the untranslated works of Madame de Genlis and historical and genealogical texts including the Almanac Royal pour 1819 and Claude-Carloman de Rulhière’s 1783 Petit Tableau de Paris.²⁵² Significantly, however, Butler and Ponsonby did not translate their linguistic flair into the study of Latin or Greek, despite owning Italian translations of Ovid. While Butler’s diary notes their desire to learn Latin in mid-1780s, this activity is not incorporated into their scholarly activities, in seeming endorsement of Hester Chapone’s 1770 advice, in her Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, against women studying “the learned languages.”²⁵³

Lister’s 1822 report of Ponsonby’s self-proclaimed “freedom” from classical knowledge suggests the latter’s awareness of the gender transgression such study would constitute, as it does her recognition of Lister’s use of classical allusions as coded

²⁵¹ St Clair, Reading 193.

²⁵² Butler, Journal 1819, 20 Mar. 1819.

²⁵³ Chapone, qtd. in St Clair, Reading 280.

references to same-sex desire.²⁵⁴ Mrs. Piozzi refers to Juvenal's Sixth Satire when railing against the "set of Monsters call'd by each other *Sapphists*."²⁵⁵ Similarly, Lister's sexuality is teasingly evoked during her 1824 Parisian tour when she is asked "Êtes-vous Achilles?", referring to the hero's female disguise, in which he seduced and impregnated one of King Lycomedes' daughters.²⁵⁶ Butler and Ponsonby were further shocked to learn that Seward preferred Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman to Dr. Gregory's A Father's Legacy to his Daughters, which advises women to keep their intelligence "a profound secret."²⁵⁷ Butler and Ponsonby thus avoided texts that could compromise their public personas, instead endorsing normative literary values they did not feel obliged to obey.

One could question this claim, however, by noting that the seven of the thirty five English novels listed in Ponsonby's 1792 library catalogue were by the politically liberal Charlotte Smith, whose friends and correspondents included radical writers including Mary Hays and William Godwin. They also owned Helen Maria Williams's 1790 pro-revolutionary Julia, the author of which had been ostracized from British society after travelling alone to revolutionary France, and was imprisoned in the Luxembourg for her Girondist beliefs. Butler's diary nonetheless eludes any simple equation of their book collection and either literary or political leanings, declaring of Smith's novel (which was admired by Scott) in 1788: "Finished that 'Emmeline,' a Trumpery novel in four volumes. If I can answer for myself I will never again undertake such a tiresome,

²⁵⁴ Lister, Know 202.

²⁵⁵ Thrall, Thraliana 2: 740.

²⁵⁶ Anne Lister, No Priest but Love: The Journals of Anne Lister from 1824-1826, ed. Helena Whitbread (New York: New York UP, 1992) 26.

²⁵⁷ Mavor, Ladies 165.; Gregory, Father's.

nonsensical business.”²⁵⁸ One may further wonder why Butler, who wore the Bourbon Croix St. Louis and in September 1789 described talking with her nephew “of the Things in the World but most particularly poor France,”²⁵⁹ would own works such as Smith’s 1792 epistolary novel, Desmond, which was sympathetic to the Revolution it depicted with vivid immediacy. This seeming disparity nonetheless serves as a reminder that Butler and Ponsonby’s retirement was socially and materially supported by a network of literary acquaintances and well-read peers; their performance of literary sociability thus required familiarity with texts opposing, as well as confirming their staunchly conservative politics. Smith’s adherence to a similar policy is marked by the competing political voices in her novel, which Angela Keane describes as summarising the revolutionary pamphlet debate.²⁶⁰ Keane further notes that Desmond was the only English novel to comment on the events of the Revolution “as they took place,” its account of the “conditions of exile” constituting a further appeal to Llangollen’s expatriate pair.²⁶¹ The necessity of being well-informed is further evidenced by Butler and Ponsonby’s ownership of Burke’s 1790 Reflections on the Revolution in France, Thomas Paine’s 1791-2 response, Rights of Man, one of the many replies to Paine published throughout 1791-2 (by “C. Burke, Esq.”) and a copy of the Constitution of the new French Republic.²⁶²

²⁵⁸ Bell, ed., Hamwood 113.

²⁵⁹ Butler, Journal 1788-91.

²⁶⁰ Angela Keane, Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 82.

²⁶¹ Keane, Women 81.

²⁶² Ponsonby, Catalogue.

In the present age of literary megastores featuring bestsellers alongside flavoured espresso, reading is generally conceived of a leisure activity or personal indulgence. The varied inventories of such establishments are strikingly reminiscent of their eighteenth-century forbears, which purveyed tooth-powders alongside Gothic novels and political tracts. Eighteenth-century readers frequently differed from their contemporary counterparts, however, in conceiving reading as a utilitarian and communal activity. The 1790-95 book of the London gentrywoman, Anna Larpent, figures reading as an element of household management, with her reading of novels, travel narratives and texts such as “Mrs Burnet’s Method of Devotion” taking place alongside activities such as “drawing up my Accounts” and “teaching My children.”²⁶³ Reading was similarly construed as a communal practice, with Larpent noting her husband’s habit of reading aloud from works ranging from “Mrs. Trimmer’s Sacred History” to “Townsend’s Travels into Spain.”²⁶⁴ Reading also served as an important constitutor of political engagement, with Larpent noting her study of James Mackintosh’s Defence of the French Revolution as an answer to Mr. Burke. As she observes, “As far as I am a judge, I think this work very well Understood. The Author is Master of his Subject, & has the art of rendering others so. He is not scurrilous – he argues Well [and] seldom begs the question.”²⁶⁵ Such annotations also facilitated conversational recall, thus contributing to sociable practices that sustained the household as did more overtly ‘useful’ practices such as bookkeeping and pedagogy.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Anna Larpent, *The Diary of Anna Larpent 1790-95*, Huntington Library, San Marino, 2 Jan. 1790.

²⁶⁴ Larpent, *Diary 1790-95*, 16 Jan. 1790, 30 May 92.

²⁶⁵ Larpent, *Diary 1790-95*, 20 Jan. 1792.

²⁶⁶ Ian Jackson, “Approaches to the History of Readers and Reading in Eighteenth Century Britain,” *The Historical Journal* 47.4 (2004): 1041-54. 1047.

Butler's detailing of books received and read evidences the similar domestic utility of her and Ponsonby's reading practices. Their strongly-held political and literary opinions offered rich epistolary and conversational resources. On the 13 March 1788, Butler notes Mrs. Tighe's "Excellent thoughts on the Slave Trade," which she summarizes as follows,

Those who remain in their native country are treated worse than in the Islands, where, under most of their Masters, they meet with good treatment and are instructed by the Catholic and Moravian missionaries in the Christian religion. A reformation in the manner of bringing them over, and a general attention to their morals, manners, and health afterwards, and having them well instructed in Religion and after some years set free, appears better than an abolition of the Trade.²⁶⁷

A degree of moral disquiet is apparent in Butler's caveat that not all slave owners extend "good treatment" to their human possessions, as it is in her acknowledgement of the necessity of "a reformation in the manner of bringing them over." Such disquiet renders her endorsement of Mrs. Tighe's anti-abolitionist sentiment all the more troubling to a contemporary reader. It also marks, however, the social currency of the abolitionist debate, its role as a topic of opinion and sociable intercourse underscored by their possession of several texts on the slave trade. Butler's journal of April 1819 also notes having discussed "Lord Byrons Vampire Miss Godwins book and that of the Physician – all dreadful – but Miss Godwins succeeding all Horrors that were ever Horrible Charlotte Smith her misery & Extravagance..."²⁶⁸ The sweeping nature of Butler's judgement suggests that she had probably not yet read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; William St Clair notes that only one thousand copies of the novel existed throughout the first fourteen years of its textual life, "fewer than most of the works of Byron and Scott sold

²⁶⁷ Qtd. in Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 85.

²⁶⁸ Butler, Journal 1819, 30 Apr. 1819

on publication day.”²⁶⁹ Butler’s familiarity with the text’s dangerous reputation may be thus seen to evidence the depth of her and Ponsonby’s immersion in Romantic literary culture.²⁷⁰ Butler’s reference to Shelley as “Miss Godwin” omits mention of her marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley in December 1816, suggesting her disapproval of the pair’s 1814 elopement, which occasioned the abandonment of Shelley’s pregnant wife, whose suicide enabled Shelley to re-marry within weeks. Butler’s reference to Smith similarly gestures towards the potential degradations of marital heterosexuality. As discussed further in chapter six, Smith disclosed the “real calamities”²⁷¹ of her private life in order to authorize her public literary persona, with details of her abandonment by a profligate husband and struggle to support their nine fatherless children underpinning her poetic identity as a tragically beleaguered woman.²⁷² As Judith Pascoe notes, however, the size of Smith’s family threatened to signify not only her perilous situation, but her sexual appetite, a tension contained with Butler’s account of both her “misery” and “Extravagance.”²⁷³ Another text referred to in the April 1819 journal entry is “Lord Byrons Vampire” – presumably John Polidori’s The Vampyre, for which Byron served as

²⁶⁹ St Clair, Reading 365.

²⁷⁰ Butler may have discussed Frankenstein with Mrs. Piozzi; in January 1818, while residing in North Wales, Piozzi observes in her diary, “Read a frightful new Romance **Frankenstein** horrible impiety!” (Hester Thrale Piozzi, *Hester Thrale Piozzi 1818 Pocketbook: Volume 6*, John Rylands Library Special Collection, Manchester.)

Butler and Ponsonby’s correspondence with Piozzi reflects their shared interests in contemporary literary culture; in 1801, Piozzi writes to Plâs newydd following a seabathing holiday at Derwent Rocks, “Mr Piozzi said it was fine Scenery for the Novel Writers; and I do think with a Storm & Shipwreck & a Lady in Distress &c...one might form one of these new fashioned Tales that at a Moment such as We live in, when everybody seeks to be agitated, and nobody to be instructed might serve to gain Attention for an Hour – Then dully take its turn & be forgotten.” Having dismissed the contrived dramatics of the literary Gothic, Piozzi continues, “Apropo’s have your Ladyship and Miss Ponsonby read Harriet Lee’s last work? a German Tale very impressive & in some respects a Performance of no small Merit. The Abbè Edgeworth’s Sister has written a Story called Belinda, very much liked, but I have not yet seen it.” (Hester Thrale Piozzi, *Hester Thrale Piozzi to Eleanor Butler 23 Sept. 1801*, National Library of Ireland Wicklow Collection 4239, Dublin.)

²⁷¹ Pascoe, Romantic 17.

²⁷² Pascoe, Romantic 16-17.

²⁷³ Pascoe, Romantic 24.

both character study and presumed author. It was published the same month as Butler's April entry, while by the 6 May, Butler records receiving a copy of the work from Mrs. Tighe, its presentation "in Sheets"²⁷⁴ suggesting it to have not received the page trimming and leather binding normally following a book's purchase.²⁷⁵ Butler's familiarity with the most recent literary publications, as well as the circulation of such texts within local and national sociable networks, is further demonstrated by an entry from July 1819, describing the incapacitated Mrs. Cunliffe's request for "Emma & any other light reading," as it is by Butler's prompt dispatch of both Austen's novel, first published in December 1815, along with Smith's "trumpery" novel, Emmeline: the Orphan of the Castle.²⁷⁶ While Butler and Ponsonby distanced themselves from the sexualized implications of the classical texts read by Lister and Damer, their knowledge of the most topical of recent publications indicates their familiarity with authors including those whose politics were anathema to their own. Their catholic literary consumption enabled the literary conversations, book lending and critical opinions essential to their ongoing performance of literary sociability.

Butler and Ponsonby asserted their geographical fixity and sexual virtue by patronising private literary networks, rather than local circulating libraries. Circulating libraries were public, commercial book collections that allowed members to borrow for an annual fee, charging non-members a fixed price per volume.²⁷⁷ They rendered literature accessible to those who had previously been unable to afford the high price of

²⁷⁴ Butler, Journal 1819, 6 May 1819

²⁷⁵ St Clair, Reading 192.

²⁷⁶ Butler, Journal 1819, 18 Jul. 1819

²⁷⁷ William Christie, "Circulating Libraries," An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832, eds. Iain McCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 453-54. 454.

books, and encouraged the growth of literacy and literary culture, especially among female readers and writers.²⁷⁸ They were therefore central to the commercialization of culture throughout the latter decades of the eighteenth-century, their modernity indicated by the location of Sanditon's circulating library on the fashionably new terrace of Austen's fictional spa town, flanked by the "best Milliner's shop," the hotel and billiard room.²⁷⁹ Circulating libraries were by definition mobile collections of texts, whose equally mobile patrons possessed no necessary connection to either the proprietors or their fellow readers.²⁸⁰ By contrast, landed families were identified with their fixed, albeit numerous, estates, as were their physically immovable libraries. Membership of a circulating library was not cheap, with Bell's Library at the Strand charging 12s. per annum in 1778.²⁸¹ As book prices rose throughout the last quarter of the eighteenth century, many genteel readers nonetheless borrowed, rather than bought.²⁸² The perpetually impecunious Butler and Ponsonby made only minimal use of local public libraries, however, instead denying their precarious finances and émigré status by locating themselves within the literary networks of local gentry. In an 1810 letter to their friend, Mrs. Parker, Ponsonby asks that she return "Mrs. Galindo's pamphlet" on Mrs. Siddons on their behalf to the Oswestry circulating library.²⁸³ While the letter indicates

²⁷⁸ Christie, "Circulating Libraries," 454.

²⁷⁹ Austen, *Sanditon* 340.

²⁸⁰ Benedict, "Austen," 164.

²⁸¹ David Ogilvy, *At the London and Westminster Circulating Library*, vol. 1651 (London: Research Publications Inc., c1800).

²⁸² In September 1784, Mrs. Goddard's diary details her energetic participation in the Dublin social round, with activities including social calls, admiring "the Volunteers and Army firing round King William," and "Subscrib[ing] a quarter at Jackson's circulating library." (Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 50.) Austen's 1817 *Sanditon* underscores the continuing fashionability of such social spaces; on his arrival into his beloved seaside town, Mr. Parker "could not be satisfied without an early visit to the Library, and the Library Subscription book," his desire to peruse the list of patrons underscoring the sociable function of such public book collections. (Austen, *Sanditon* 344.)

²⁸³ This document, which Ponsonby describes as a "Vile & Vulgar Libel", accused Sarah Siddons of pursuing an adulterous relationship with Mrs. Galindo's husband, who instructed Siddons in fencing and

that she and Butler were known to the librarian Mr. Kinshall, Ponsonby physically distances themselves from the establishment, giving precedence to the private circulation networks linking local country houses.²⁸⁴ Such networks were not without their tensions, with Butler complaining in 1819 that their neighbour Miss Wingfield had not only failed to promptly deliver their copy of Lamb's Glenarvon, entrusted to her by the Duchess of Northumberland, but returned Lamb's *roman à clef* "carelessly packed and without a letter – not over Civil in the Whole."²⁸⁵ This incident suggests that their books were invested with a particular lending history and function, advertising their intimacies and encouraging their friends, many of whom were linked through their own social and epistolary connections, to constitute an ever-expanding – and influential – circle. Butler and Ponsonby's functional investment in their volumes is further indicated by Butler's ensuing report that Miss Wingfield had "sufficiently account[ed] for her silence" suggesting that the tardy volume allowed both the testing and reconstitution of their literary and social bonds.²⁸⁶ The Ladies' efforts to overwrite the operations of commercial literary networks with those of affective exchange are indicated by a letter of March 1825 in which Ponsonby acknowledges to Mrs. Lloyd of Oswestry "the return of Our Books (in which we were very happy that you found some amusement) safely returned by Mr. Price," the Oswestry bookseller.²⁸⁷ Their private literary connections

appeared as Laertes to her Hamlet in an 1802 performance of Shakespeare's tragedy. Ponsonby continues, affirming a mode of verbal rectitude recalling the Ladies' response to the General Evening Post: "my hopes [are] that you will detest it as such – I approve of Mrs. Siddons's determination 'to let the Pamphlet speak for itself & make no reply whatever—.'" (Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 2nd Feb 1810, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin.)

²⁸⁴ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 16th Dec 1809, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin.

²⁸⁵ Butler, Journal 1819, 8 Apr. 1819.

²⁸⁶ Butler, Journal 1819, 9 Apr. 1819.

²⁸⁷ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Lloyd 19 Mar. 1825, Essex Records Office, Chelmsford.

were further consolidated by the epistolary exchange of pamphlets and prints, with a September c.1815 letter from Lady Lennox, the Duchess of Richmond, offering “ten thousand Thanks for the very fine Print” they had dispatched of Wellesley in the wake of the June 1815 Battle of Waterloo.²⁸⁸ Butler and Ponsonby’s textual networks thus echoed their catalogue in distancing them from the class mobility of circulating libraries, instead locating them within an emphatically private literary community.

Butler and Ponsonby also distanced themselves from the sexual connotations of circulating libraries. While women comprised only a minority of their patrons, circulating libraries were culturally associated with unchecked female desire.²⁸⁹ As the heroine of Mary Hays’s 1796 Memoirs of Emma Courtney observes of her neglected education in the wake of her guardian’s demise: “a deep gloom was spread over our once cheerful residence: my avidity for books daily increased; I subscribed to a circulating library, and frequently read, or rather devoured – little careful in the selection – from ten to fourteen novels in a week.”²⁹⁰ Public libraries allowed women both access to books, and the ability to select from amongst them, as Fanny Price’s pleasure at being a “renter, a chuser” of books, suggests.²⁹¹ In the latter half of the eighteenth-century, commentators viewed the promiscuous choice enabled by circulating libraries as both intellectually and morally suspect. Euphrasia, the authorial spokesperson of Clara Reeve’s 1785 The Progress of Romance, declares, “A Circulating Library is indeed a great evil,—young people are allowed to [...] read indiscriminately all they contain; and thus both food and

²⁸⁸ Duchess of Richmond Lennox, Charlotte, Duchess of Richmond to Butler and Ponsonby Sept. 20 [1815], NLI Wicklow Papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

²⁸⁹ Benedict, “Austen,” 164.

²⁹⁰ Hays, Memoirs 17.

²⁹¹ Jane Austen, Mansfield Park (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 363.

poison are contained to the young mind together.”²⁹² As her interlocutor Hortensia affirms of such reading, “The seeds of vice and folly and sown in the heart,—the passions are awakened,—false expectations are raised,”²⁹³ leading young women to reject suitors whose charms fall short of those of literary heroes. Such views persisted throughout the Romantic era; Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1817 Biographia Literaria employs the figure of the *camera obscura* to claim that the literature of circulating libraries comprised a form of ghostly and intellectually barren representation.²⁹⁴ Circulating libraries were further decried for spreading the pernicious habit of novel-reading amongst women and the “middling and lower ranks of people.”²⁹⁵ From their advent in the 1750s, they were also viewed as sexualized spaces, enabling women to display their bodies and taste through the selection of books and consumer items.²⁹⁶ As a father exclaims in George Colman’s 1760 play, Polly Honeycombe: “a man might as well turn his daughter loose in Covent-garden,” – known for its flourishing sex trade – “as trust the cultivation of her mind to a CIRCULATING LIBRARY.”²⁹⁷ Such fears would not have been assuaged by Lister’s diary of 1818, in which she describes employing the works of Byron – as famous for his sexual allure as for his literary output – in order to seduce a Miss Browne in the Halifax circulating library. Browne willingly engages in Lister’s flirtatious banter. As

²⁹² Clara Reeve, The Progress of Romance through Times, Countries and Manners, 2 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1970) 2:77.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge viewed circulating libraries as undermining the author’s inalienable ownership of his self-identity and its literary expression, claiming that the “promiscuous company” of such establishments accepted without question the anonymous opinions of literary critics, whose parasitic role within literary culture counterfeited “what an author means.” See Coleridge Biographia Literaria Ed. J. Shawcross. 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1907.30); also Sonia Hofkosh, Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 13-18.

²⁹³ Reeve, Progress 2:78.

²⁹⁴ Karen Swann, “Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on the Character of Christabel,” ELH 52.2 (1985): 397-418. 411.

²⁹⁵ Reeve, Progress 2:84.

²⁹⁶ Benedict, “Austen,” 171.

²⁹⁷ Benedict, “Austen,” 153.

Lister reports, “[S]he said, when I asked her if she liked Lord Byron’s poetry, ‘Yes, perhaps too well.’”²⁹⁸ As Tuite observes, Browne’s response thus “performs the requisite knowingness that is the recognition and acknowledgement of a code,” rendering Byron’s poetry a figure for a sexual desire at once literally unspeakable and mutually avowed.²⁹⁹ Several days later, Lister encounters Browne at the Halifax circulating library, despite Browne’s insistence that she did not attend such establishments.³⁰⁰ The library’s role as a place of assignation is emphasised as Lister wonders whether to send Browne a Cornelian heart bound in Byronic verses (echoing the Cornelian ring given to Byron by Cambridge choirboy, John Edleston, and commemorated in the poem of the same name),³⁰¹ and notes her request for a copy of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage: “I have been thinking ever since (for somehow or other, this girl haunts my thoughts like some genius of fairy lore) how to get it and offer it for her reading.”³⁰² Lister read and courted in public, and was harassed for her masculinity and sexual style. By contrast, Butler and Ponsonby participated within genteel and non-commercial networks of private literary sociability, rather than selecting from commercial copies, and themselves ‘circulating’ in sexually charged locations.

Having explored Butler and Ponsonby’s material, as well as textual construction of their public image, one is tempted to paraphrase Burke in praising their success in ‘keeping their own persons where they were.’ In transforming Plâs newydd from a humble cottage to Gothic ‘mansion,’ Butler and Ponsonby sought to redress the shameful

²⁹⁸ Lister, Know 41.

²⁹⁹ Clara Tuite, “The Byronic Woman: Anne Lister’s Style, Sociability and Sexuality,” Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840, eds. Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 186-210. 193.

³⁰⁰ Lister, Know 41-42.

³⁰¹ MacCarthy, Byron: Life and Legend 59.

³⁰² Lister, Know 42.

isolation of their initial elopement, subsuming their status as exiled and sexually suspect spinsters beneath an edifice of chaste provincial friendship. Employing Gothic architecture, heraldic tropes, Welsh oak and the sociable networks enabled by their private library, they styled themselves as virtuous and long-settled members of the Welsh gentry, eliding Butler's Catholic ancestry and their status as Irish exiles, while also distancing themselves from the ostensibly metropolitan vice of sapphism. Paradoxically, these same extravagant efforts may now be read, as I suggest, as signs of their queerness, their stylized surfaces speaking more volubly than any form of genital 'proof.'

The contemporary success of Butler and Ponsonby's counter-representation is nonetheless marked by their now-common designation as 'the Ladies of Llangollen.' As we have seen, Butler and Ponsonby were not commonly accorded this title until after their deaths, this fact indicating the importance of their lifelong efforts to identify with the Llangollen region. Butler's obituary, published in The Gentleman's Magazine in August of 1829, announces the death of, "LADY ELEANOR BUTLER. *June 2*. At Plasnewydd Cottage."³⁰³ While her former home is described as being located in "the Vale of Llangollen," Butler is not deemed a lady 'of' Llangollen, the obituary text describing her scandalous elopement, rather than her ensuing efforts to assert her respectability. By the late 1830s, however, an anonymous newspaper clipping bears the title "The Ladies of Llangollen," the familiarity of this epithet suggested by the author's ability to adapt it to his or her purpose: "I addressed a line to 'the Lady of Llangollen,'

³⁰³ Anon., "Obituary of Lady Eleanor Butler," The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle 99 (1829): 175-76.

the now solitary inhabitant of that elegant and classic abode, Plas Newydd.”³⁰⁴ In 1847, Hicklin’s volume was published under the title, The Ladies of Llangollen, this designation gaining common currency throughout the later nineteenth-century. Writing in 1877, Jane Roberts, née Hughes, their servant of twenty years, asserts a specifically Welsh perspective in describing them as “the Plasnewydd Ladies” when authenticating their 1788 account book as being “in the handwriting of the Honble Miss Ponsonby.”³⁰⁵ Roberts’s endorsement does not, however, indicate the futility of their performative efforts to identify as virtuous landed gentry. Rather, it foregrounds the material means through which they defended their relationship from hostile scrutiny, even as the traffic in their remains marks the queerness of this defence.

³⁰⁴ Hamilton, *Memoirs*.

³⁰⁵ Qtd. in Ponsonby, *Accounts 1788-90*, 1.

Chapter Five

‘The spirit of blue-stockinging’: Were the Ladies of Llangollen ‘Blue’?

Following the exploration of the centrality of Butler and Ponsonby’s library, social networks and literary sociability, one is led to the question of whether they may be considered bluestockings. This question is complicated by the conceptual mobility of the term ‘bluestocking,’ the protean nature of which anticipates the Ladies’ own shifting historical figuration.¹ Butler and Ponsonby were not expressly identified during their lifetimes with the metropolitan Bluestocking circles centred around hostesses Elizabeth Vesey and Elizabeth Robinson Montagu. Eighteenth-century accounts of their literary pursuits, taste and sociability nonetheless emphasized characteristics closely associated with these circles, Anna Seward describing them in 1795 as “women of genius, taste and knowledge.”² From the 1790s onwards, their social and epistolary networks also incorporated close friendships with second generation Bluestockings including Piozzi and Hannah More, who called upon them 1812.³ After having visited Plâs newydd in 1825, John Lockhart declared, “I shall never see the spirit of blue-stockinging again in such perfect incarnation.”⁴ Lockhart’s observation is accurate in several ways, with Butler and Ponsonby’s 1778 elopement taking place at the apogee of the public prominence and

¹ Following the practice adopted by Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg, I use the term ‘bluestocking’ to refer to the general sense of a learned woman, while the use of an upper case spelling indicates an historically-specific reference to the eighteenth-century circles constituted around Montagu, Vesey and Scott.

² Seward, *Letters* 4:120.

³ Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 292.

⁴ Lockhart, *Life* 45.

patriotic celebration of the first generation Blues.⁵ The elegiac tone of Lockhart's remark ("I shall never see...again") further underscores the shift in attitudes towards educated and publicly-prominent women in the last decade of the eighteenth-century, as the claims for women's education and rational participation in the public sphere articulated by Wollstonecraft's 1792 Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Mary Hays's 1798 Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Women were opposed by counter-revolutionary sentiment and the rise of domestic ideology.

The term 'bluestocking' is absent from late nineteenth-century and subsequent accounts of Butler and Ponsonby. In his 1923 publication of excerpts from Butler's diary, Arthur Ponsonby describes their extensive correspondence and possession of the feminine accomplishments of reading, drawing and modern languages. He acknowledges their "cultivat[ion]...charm and originality," yet subordinates their sociable and scholarly achievements to their "very singular" appearance and "remarkable" devotion to one another, "which not only stood the test of time, but was kept up all through at an almost ecstatic pitch."⁶ By contrast, the category of 'bluestocking' offered an important, if ambivalent, interpretative context through which they were conceived in the twentieth century. Writing in the context of women's admission to full membership of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge between 1917 and 1924, commentators of the period employed the term to describe a form of retired female scholarship figured as distinct from fashion and sociability, with many invoking the term in relation to Butler

⁵ For an account of the patriotic celebration of the first generation Bluestockings in the 1760s and 1770s, see Harriet Guest's Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000). This issue is also examined in the following chapter.

⁶ Ponsonby, English 242.

and Ponsonby only to question the validity of its application. Characteristic of this approach is a review of The Hamwood Papers in the 1931 Contemporary Review:

The tales of scholarship and romanticism which surround the Ladies of Llangollen have given them to history as veritable blue-stockings who fled the world for the solitude of learning. In fact, Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby were omnivorous readers and believers in intellectual occupations, but they were not great scholars; also they were lovers of society, and society was sufficiently devoted to them to visit the Llangollen cottage whenever opportunity afforded.⁷

The Madras Mail was similarly unimpressed by the level of intellectual acuity disclosed by Bell's extracts from Butler's diary, observing on the 21 October 1930, "The diary may, as its editress claims, give a vivid account of rural life in Wales in the XVIII century; but from these famous blue-stockings one would have expected something more critical and philosophical. Even when Mr. Burke, 'the great orator' stops with them, the only entry is "Sat in the library. Three dinner. Roast goose. Roast kidney.""⁸ The term 'Bluestocking' is here associated with the rigorous scholarship of classical translator and commentator, Elizabeth Carter, or the prodigious textual output of Hannah More. Sociability is further assumed to be inimicable to the life of the mind, despite the constitutive imbrication of the literary and sociable realms evidenced by Montagu and Vesey's metropolitan salons. From such a perspective, Butler and Ponsonby are dismissed as mere 'ladies who lunch,' their detailing of their dietary habits, rather than their observations of the great Whig statesman, marking their narrowly domestic compass.

⁷ Anon., "Review of the Hamwood Papers," Contemporary Review (1931). (clipping located NLW ex 1364).

⁸ Anon., "Review of the Hamwood Papers," The Madras Mail 21 Oct. 1930: (clipping located NLW ex 1364).

The unjustness of this observation is revealed by examination of the unabridged entry in Butler's manuscript diary, which details members of the Burke family party, their enjoyment of Plâs newydd's 'Home Circuit,' and the fittingly "sublime Beauty and majesty" of the surrounding countryside. For a more detailed account of this 1788 visit, see the previous chapter.

Accounts such as these present the term ‘bluestocking’ as a stable descriptive category, despite its evolution from a term of celebration in the 1760s and 1770s to one marked as pejorative by the time it was applied to Butler and Ponsonby in the 1820s. It is further assumed to describe a discrete set of social and literary practices, despite its application in the eighteenth-century to both Montagu’s dazzling metropolitan displays and the female provincial community and philanthropic activities established by her younger sister, Sarah Scott. While the term ‘bluestocking’ is not strictly analogous to the constitutive indeterminacy of the term ‘queer,’ its significations are similarly diffuse and contradictory. First employed in the seventeenth-century to describe the simple dress worn by members of the Little Parliament, it was used from the mid eighteenth-century as both a noun and an adjective, nominating members of Vesey and Montagu’s circles as well as characterizing their intellectual, social and political commitments. In a letter to Carter in 1783, Montagu quotes a newspaper article describing her and Vesey’s guests as “ye blue stockings,” the collective identity conferred by this designation simultaneously undercut by the article’s description of a dispute between the “2 parties of ye blue stockings.”⁹ Employed as a modifier, the term was also used to characterise a particular convergence of ideological, class and gender commitments, a 1765 letter from Montagu to Carter describing the “blue stocking doctrine” of “rational entertainment.”¹⁰ The indeterminate nature of the term ‘bluestocking’ is also apparent in contemporary literary and historical studies, Gary Kelly and Harriet Guest having recently described

⁹ MO3565, qtd. in Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg, “Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65.1-2 (2002): 1-20. 2-3. (In this and future references, the prefix ‘MO’ indicates the manuscript number of a document held in the Montagu Collection of the Huntington Library and Research Center, San Marino, CA).

¹⁰ Myers, *Bluestocking* 8.

“Bluestocking feminism” as endorsing the eighteenth-century ‘feminization’ of culture according to gentry and middle-class values.¹¹ Susan S. Lanser compellingly claims that the primacy of the first generation Bluestocking’s same-sex affective bonds suggests that “true Blue might itself be a little bit queer.”¹² The constitutive indeterminacy of the term ‘bluestocking’ therefore suggests the importance of queering, not only the heteronormative biographical presumptions of previous scholarship, but the designation of ‘bluestocking’ itself.

The following discussion demonstrates that the public prominence of the first generation Bluestockings constituted an important context against which the Ladies of Llangollen were conceived by their contemporaries. It further claims that Butler and Ponsonby would have been impossible without the Bluestockings, insofar as their public prominence was authorized by the feminization of public culture in the middle decades of the eighteenth-century, a process in which figures such as Montagu and Carter played a prominent role. Throughout the ensuing analysis, I trace salient features of the diverse cultural phenomenon gathered under the rubric of ‘bluestockingism.’ I explore how Butler and Ponsonby styled themselves as provincial bluestockings, legitimating their sexually-suspect relationship by echoing the social, epistolary and print cultural practices of the metropolitan blues without being accorded full membership of their sociable or epistolary networks. Rather than viewing this as a sign of failed self-fashioning, however, I suggest that Butler and Ponsonby’s equivocal relationship to the public phenomenon of bluestockingism reflects the forms of community respectively identified

¹¹ Harriet Guest “Bluestocking Feminism.” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65: 1-2 (2002) 59-80.

¹² Lanser, “Bluestocking.” 275.

with Montagu's metropolitan gatherings and Scott's provincial community, characteristics of each were echoed in Butler and Ponsonby's Llangollen home. I claim that the recognition of such a 'hybrid' form of bluestocking practice refutes the critical contrast between Scott and her elder sister, and locates Butler and Ponsonby within a broad range of cultural practices now recognized as blue. I further suggest that William Cowper's 1785 poem The Task offered a model of sociably-inflected retirement, its celebration of a zone of privacy located on the geographical penumbra serving to authenticate their North Welsh location as both 'rural' and linked socially and geographically to Bluestocking metropolises such as London, Dublin and Bath. In bringing Butler and Ponsonby into critical conversation with the Bluestockings, I thus seek to not only demonstrate their position within bluestocking historiography, but reveal the ways in which they clarify our perspective on the blues. Scott's 1762 Millenium Hall has been influentially cited as the literary exemplar of romantic friendship, this assertion locating the bluestockings within the exclusive purview of eighteenth-century studies.¹³ Asserting Butler and Ponsonby's place within bluestocking history, however, reveals the interpenetration of sociability and solitude within the cultural practices of both Butler and Ponsonby and the first generation Blues. It further reveals the importance of Romantic texts and contexts to a richer conception of bluestocking historiography, within which Butler and Ponsonby and the first generation Bluestockings may be seen to be mutually elucidating.

A Bluestocking Genealogy

Bluestocking gatherings drew upon the ideals and practices of the salons of Enlightenment France, hosted in the first decades of the century by Parisian salonnières

¹³ Faderman, Surpassing 103.

such as Claudine-Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin, Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin and Julie de Lespinasse.¹⁴ In contrast to Thomas Hobbes's characterization of individuals as inherently self-interested, pre-Revolutionary French thinkers proclaimed a doctrine of innate sociability, augmenting this argument from natural law with a teleological account of polite sociability as a historical attainment.¹⁵ By the mid-century, Daniel Gordon claims that a "politics of sociability" sought to supplant traditional power hierarchies with those of polite exchange.¹⁶ In valuing principles of equality and reciprocity over those of absolute or military power, this new politics appeared incompatible with a monarchical state. Dena Goodman suggests that this tension was resolved by identifying a female salonnière as the head of this paradigm, whose subordinate gender differentiated her power from that of the King.¹⁷ Women's 'gentler' personas and comparative lack of social power were further held to moderate the exercise of authority, their transformative social force converting masculine tyranny into feminized equality.¹⁸

During the same period in Britain, the term 'Bluestocking' came to be applied to the female-centred social and intellectual circles that formed in Britain of the 1750s around Vesey, Montagu and Frances Boscawen.¹⁹ Having established a spa friendship, Vesey and Montagu convened late-afternoon Bluestocking gatherings during summers spent at Tunbridge Wells, before presiding over their winter instantiation in their respective

¹⁴ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 74-75.

¹⁵ Goodman, *Republic* 5.

¹⁶ Goodman, *Republic* 5.

¹⁷ Goodman, *Republic* 6-7.

¹⁸ Goodman, *Republic* 6-7.

¹⁹ Pohl and Schellenberg, "Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography." 2.

London residences of Hill Street and Bolton Row.²⁰ As Sylvia Harcstark Myers details in her pioneering 1990 work, The Bluestocking Circle: Women Friendship and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England, which remains the only single-author volume devoted exclusively to the eighteenth-century Blues, Vesey and Montagu respectively established Bluestocking salons in Dublin and Bath. Guests, including Elizabeth Carter, Catherine Talbot, Lord Lyttelton, Horace Walpole, David Garrick and Hannah More, joined select professionals to engage in the civilizing influences of “rational conversation,” polite sociability, patronage and philanthropy.²¹ As a response to the excesses of fashion, Bluestocking gatherings set aside the fashionable pastimes of gambling, card-playing and courtly wit, emphasizing elegant conversation and reciprocal intellectual exchange on topics of cultural substance.²² Bluestocking salons were exclusive affairs, their participants drawn from the ranks of the gentry, professional and upper middle-classes. The theoretically universal claims of human reason nonetheless led Bluestocking hostesses to select guests according to their ability to participate in lively and rational conversation, rather than their rank or wealth, establishing discursive reason as the basis of a limited form of meritocracy.²³ Montagu and Vesey’s Bluestocking salons differed in style and organisation, leading Montagu to report an “absurd” newspaper report declaring that “there are now 2 parties of ye blue stockings, Mrs. M^u at ye head of ye suceders,”²⁴ the language of secession acknowledging Vesey’s initiation of

²⁰ Deborah Heller, “Bluestocking Salons and the Public Sphere,” Eighteenth-Century Life 22.2 (1998): 59-82. 62.

²¹ Pohl and Schellenberg, “Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography.” 2-4.

²² Gary Kelly, “Bluestocking Feminism,” Women, Writing and the Public Sphere: 1700-1830, eds. Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona O Gallchoir and Penny Warburton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001): 163-80. 165.

²³ Heller, “Bluestocking.” 68.

²⁴ MO 3565; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Montagu to Carter 15 Nov. [1783], Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

Bluestocking gatherings and provision of the circle's collective name. Frances Burney observed that Montagu arranged her guests in an unbroken semi-circle arranged "with a precision that made it seem described by a Brobdingnagian compass," seating herself at the upper end of the room adjacent to the most highly ranked and talented guests, with whom she presided over the flow of conversation. Vesey, by contrast, arranged her furniture "pell mell about the apartments," placing chairs back to back in order to encourage informal exchanges and moving between conversations in which she participated with the assistance of an ear-trumpet.²⁵ Vesey and Montagu's differing social styles were also reflected in their respective literary and public careers, with Vesey engaging in an lively private correspondence,²⁶ while Montagu supplemented her epistolary activities with works including her 1769 An Essay on the Writing and the Genius of Shakespear; With Some Remarks upon the Misrepresentation of Mons. De Voltaire, which was commended by Burke, James Beattie, Sir Joshua Reynolds and David Garrick.²⁷

The name given to eighteenth-century Bluestocking gatherings was held to derive from Vesey's 1756 assurance that writer and naturalist Benjamin Stillingfleet was welcome at her literary salons in cheaply-produced blue worsted stockings, rather than the white silk customary for evening wear.²⁸ As James Boswell declared, "Such was the excellence of his conversation that it came to be said, we can do nothing without the

²⁵ Mrs Elwood, Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1843) 154-55.

²⁶ Deborah Heller, "Subjectivity Unbound: Elizabeth Vesey as the Sylph in Bluestocking Correspondence," Huntington Library Quarterly 65.1-2 (2002): 215-34. 216.

²⁷ Elizabeth Eger, "'out Rushed a Female to Protect the Bard': The Bluestocking Defense of Shakespeare," Huntington Library Quarterly 65.1-2 (2002): 127-51. 132.

²⁸ Pohl and Schellenberg, "Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography." 2-3.

bluestockings, and thus, by degrees, the title was established.”²⁹ Throughout the 1760s, Montagu and her correspondents used the term ‘Bluestocking’ to describe both the men supportive of women’s intellectual development, and the idea that women required cerebral diversion. Underscoring the Bluestockings’ admiration of Milton, the ideals Montagu described around 1765 as the “bluestocking doctrine” of “rational conversation” thus recalled the language and sentiments of Milton’s concept of “rational delight,”³⁰ in which relations between the sexes are secured by the reciprocal exchange manifest in “meet and happy conversation.”³¹ Bluestocking doctrine further echoed the French salonnières in emphasizing the complementarity of the sexes, the civilizing role of hostesses such as Montagu and Vesey recalling the figuration of female sociability as a transformative cultural force. The use of the term ‘Bluestocking’ to refer to both men and women persisted into the late 1780s, with Hannah More’s 1786 “Bas Bleu, or Conversation” referring to Lord Lyttelton, William Pulteney and Horace Walpole as well as “BOSCAWEN sage, Bright MONTAGU.”³² By the late 1770s, however, the term was also employed to refer more specifically to female members of such networks.³³

Bluestocking principles of equality, rational friendship and intellectual exchange between the sexes derived from both the French salon tradition and that of female

²⁹ A. W. Ward, A.R Waller, William Peterfield Trent, John Erskine, Stuart Pratt Sherman and Carl Van Doren, The Cambridge History of English and American Literature: An Encyclopedia in Eighteen Volumes, 1907-1921, Putnam's Sons and Cambridge UP, Available: www.bartleby.com/cambridge/, 19 Nov. 2006. 18 vols. Vol. 11, section 2.

³⁰ Milton, "Paradise Lost," 8:391.

³¹ John Milton, "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing, 2003): 796-15. 707.

³² Hannah More, The Bas Bleu: Or, Conversation, 1787, Available: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~curran/250-96/Sensibility/morebas.html>, 2 Aug. 2005.

³³ Pohl and Schellenberg, "Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography." 5.

The narrowing of the term ‘bluestocking’ to refer only to women paved the way for its later pejorative employment, Gary Kelly suggesting that this usage was first employed by individuals who felt excluded from Bluestocking society. (Pohl and Schellenberg, "Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography." 5.)

scholars within Renaissance humanism.³⁴ They further drew upon the example of seventeenth century female intellectuals such as Mary Astell, whose 1694-97 A Serious Proposal to the Ladies rejected marital inequity and anticipated Mary Wollstonecraft in advocating female education as a means to provide women with “those Advantages with the want of which they are afterwards reproached.”³⁵ The cause of women’s education was furthered by George Ballard’s Memoirs of Several Learned Ladies of Great Britain, published by subscription in 1752, and later held within Butler and Ponsonby’s library.³⁶ While Ballard’s text details the lives of sixteenth and seventeenth century figures such as Mary Astell and Anne Killigrew, he presents the *querelles des femmes* as having been long concluded, asserting the correctness, not of female education *per se*, but of the national virtues displayed by recognizing learning as a properly feminine accomplishment.³⁷ The contemporary implications of Ballard’s argument were further underscored by his dedication of his text to the Bluestocking Catherine Talbot, whose letters, poetry and essays asserted the intellectual equality of men and women, and the dignity of pious female celibacy.³⁸

The first generation Bluestockings have been traditionally analyzed by twentieth-century commentary in terms of literary sociability rather than literary professionalism, Harcstark Myers claiming that Montagu, Chapone and Carter were all reluctant to be

³⁴ Kelly, “Bluestocking,” 14.

³⁵ Mary Astell, A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, 1694-97, Available: www.bartleby.com/221/1510/html, 12 Nov. 2006.

³⁶ Ponsonby, Catalogue.

³⁷ Harriet Guest, Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810 (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2000) 59.

³⁸ Anna Miegou, “Biographical Sketches of Principal Bluestocking Women,” Huntington Library Quarterly 65.1-2 (2002): 25-37. 34-35.

viewed as seeking financial gain or professional status through print publication.³⁹ They nonetheless published a significant body of work between 1758 and 1775,⁴⁰ ranging from the feminized genre of advice books to young ladies to incursions into the masculine realms of classical scholarship and professional publishing such as Carter's acclaimed 1758 translation of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus. Harriet Guest observes that Carter's correspondence frames her publications as a means to attain an independent living, her translation of All the Works of Epictetus that are now Extant earning her the 1000*l* in subscriptions with which she purchased her home at Deal.⁴¹ Carter's publications also included her An Examination of Mr. Pope's Essay on Man, translations of French and Italian contemporary texts, essays in Samuel Johnson's The Rambler (Numbers 44 and 100), and a collection of poems published before her twentieth birthday, the epigraph to which – "These things are nothing" – was belied by her citation of Euripides' Greek text.⁴² Montagu contributed three dialogues to Lord Lyttleton's 1760 Dialogues of the Dead and achieved prominence with her 1769 An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear. Hester Chapone's 1773 Letters on the Improvement of the Mind was commended by the Queen and influenced the education of the Princess Royal, while her 1775 Miscellanies in Prose and Verse was also highly praised in newspaper reviews. While Talbot was reluctant to circulate her manuscripts either publicly or privately, her posthumous fame was secured by Carter's 1770 self-funded publication of Talbot's

³⁹ Myers, Bluestocking 155.

⁴⁰ Myers, Bluestocking 10-11.

⁴¹ Guest, Small 127-8.

⁴² Rev. Montagu Pennington, Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, with a New Edition of Her Poems; to Which Are Added, Some Miscellaneous Essays in Prose Together with Her Notes on the Bible and Answers to Objections Concerning the Christian Religion, 2 vols. (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1816) 11.

Having read Carter's "Ode to Wisdom," Samuel Richardson reprinted it without her permission, attributed to "a Lady," in Clarissa. (See Samuel Richardson, Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) Letter 54, 231-34.)

Christian meditation, Reflections on the Seven Days of the Week, which went through several editions throughout 1770 and sold 25,000 copies by 1809.⁴³ The first generation Bluestockings thus employed the burgeoning of eighteenth-century print culture as a means to establish a public profile, their use of epistolarity, newspaper reportage and publication importantly anticipating Butler and Ponsonby's use of print culture to achieve fame.

Bluestocking networks were also distinguished from the closed nature of the court system and associated patronage networks, advocating informality and a limited form of meritocracy through which upper and middle-class professionals could advance socially and materially.⁴⁴ They nonetheless distanced themselves from both the supposed “‘superstition,’ fecklessness, and improvidence” of the labouring classes and the consumer culture of the middle-classes, reasserting their discursively-marked class identity as fashionable consumption threatened to obfuscate social distinctions.⁴⁵ The emergence of what Gary Kelly terms ‘bluestocking feminism’ thus reflected the convergence of class and gender interests as women of the gentry and upper middle-classes participated in the challenge to inherited privilege by an emerging meritocracy. Such women were further identified as guardians of social welfare,⁴⁶ their philanthropic activities softening the impact of gentry capitalism on the working classes while simultaneously asserting the class disparities distinguishing benefactresses from the objects of their largesse.

⁴³ Myers, *Bluestocking* 222-23.

⁴⁴ Kelly, "Bluestocking," 12.

⁴⁵ Kelly, "Bluestocking," 12.

⁴⁶ Kelly, "Bluestocking," 13.

Bluestocking networks were importantly sustained by epistolarity as well as salon sociability and print cultural publication. In critical usage, the term “Bluestocking” is most commonly held to refer to metropolitan assemblies such as Montagu’s gatherings at her London residences of Hill Street and Portman Square. Networks of epistolarity and patronage nonetheless facilitated the formation of provincial communities around Scott and Sarah Fielding in Bath, Lady Miller in Batheaston, and Seward in Lichfield, where the latter was detained by her father’s ongoing ill-health.⁴⁷ Scott’s 1762 novel Millenium Hall further promulgated a model of charitable and scholarly female retirement on a national and international stage, which she attempted to instantiate in her 1769 efforts to create a short-lived domestic community at Hitcham. Montagu and Scott thus exemplify the various, albeit overlapping, forms of Bluestocking society and cultural practice, a point I return to in arguing that the seemingly contradictory nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s sociable ‘retirement’ reflects the broad range of activities gathered under the expansive designation of ‘bluestockingism.’ Montagu and Scott remained in constant epistolary exchange. Made rich by her 1742 marriage to Edward Montagu, grandson of the Earl of Sandwich, Montagu supplied her sister with subsidized supplies of newly released novels, dictionaries and London goods, in spite of Scott’s insistence that she “keep a better account of what you lay out for me, or I can never trouble you to buy me any thing; it will be down-right begging or cheating if I do.”⁴⁸ This interpenetration of metropolitan and provincial communities complicates the figuration of bluestockingism

⁴⁷ Pohl and Schellenberg, “Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography.” 5.

For a more detailed account of Seward’s participation and pre-eminence within Lichfield literary society, see the following chapter.

⁴⁸ MO5238; Sarah Scott, Sarah Robinson Scott to Elizabeth Robinson Montagu [Jan. 1754], Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

as an essentially metropolitan phenomenon, indicating instead the highly permeable boundaries between ‘town’ and ‘country.’

While politics as such was forbidden as a topic of bluestocking conversation, the role of hostesses such as Montagu in facilitating civilized debate and a modified form of social inclusivity reveals the feminization of the ideals of disembodied reason and civic virtue attributed to the Habermasian public sphere. Bluestocking sociability thus marked the way in which the vaunted division between the public and private spheres was neither stably gendered, nor analogous to the distinction between home and ‘not-home.’⁴⁹ In October 1760, Montagu wrote to George, Lord Lyttleton, rejoicing at his daughter’s “smooth and soft” virtues: “I congratulate you that your son is fit to grace publick life, your daughter to bless [the] domestick.”⁵⁰ Montagu’s gendered binary disconcertingly echoes conduct literature such as James Fordyce’s 1765 praise of “that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye,”⁵¹ or Hannah More’s 1777 Essays on Various Subjects Principally Designed for Young Ladies, which advised women to “follow [their] natural modesty, and think it your greatest commendation not to be talked of one way or another.”⁵² However, just as More contradicted her own insistence on female domesticity with her publication of poetic, dramatic and evangelical texts, Montagu’s bluestocking salons, while held within her progressively grander private residences, were grounded in the public ideal of civilizing conversation, their carefully

⁴⁹ Gillian Russell, Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 11.

⁵⁰ MO1403; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to George, Lord Lyttleton, Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

⁵¹ James Fordyce, Sermons to Young Women, 2 vols. (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, J. Dodsley, and J. Payne, 1766) 1:45.

⁵² More, qtd. in Stott, More 36.

staged forms of public display inspiring avid reportage in the newspaper and periodical press.

Montagu's correspondence reveals her acute awareness of her public profile, a 1762 letter to Carter urging her not to distribute copies of a character sketch depicting herself and Lord Bath. Having described herself as delineated "with fine imagination," Montagu demurs,

You may shew it to any of your friends, but do not give any copy, for it will get into the newspapers. I should not like to see myself in print; I fancy I should look like one of the insects in the Museum in Spirits of wine preserved by the strength of the element it is put into[;] it appears more apparently insignificant than it does on its native cabbage leaf. I think I make a passable figure in common life; but immortalized in divine verse I seem but a poor object for the virtuosi.⁵³

Montagu's stated wish to avoid print fame is undermined by her implicit acknowledgement she is an object of public interest, akin to the exhibits of the newly opened British Museum, and only withheld from circulation by the discretion of her friends. She further admits that her desire for discretion does not stem from her wish to remain in obscurity, but to avoid appearing to less advantage than she does within her personal domain, even as she declares her desire to be "consider'd in my original and natural form, to which obscurity is the best friend."⁵⁴ The formulaic nature of her assertion to Carter that she would make "such a figure in print as an insect does in spirits of wine in the Brittish [sic] Museum" is further disclosed by its near-verbatim repetition in a letter to Vesey composed the following month, accompanied by a helpful transcription of the ostensibly non-circulating characterisation, this deliberate

⁵³ MO3080; Montagu, Montagu-Carter 8 Aug 1762.

⁵⁴ MO3080; Montagu, Montagu-Carter 8 Aug 1762.

dissemination standing in tension with her admonishment that it be held close: "I am glad you received the vision safe, & beg of you not to let it go out of your hands."⁵⁵ Members of the first generations Bluestockings thus maintained a careful balance between literary prominence and 'properly' feminine reticence, their astute management of their public image offering an important antecedent to Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project.

The activities of the first generation Bluestockings occurred within the context of the outpouring of female literary and cultural production that Paul Langford has described as "a full blown revolution for women."⁵⁶ Guest describes how a select group of learned women achieved unprecedented public prominence throughout the 1760s and 1770s.⁵⁷ In June 1776, The Westminster Magazine published an article entitled "Observations on Female Literature in General, including some Particulars Relating to Mrs. Montagu and Mrs. Barbauld," opening with a poetic comparison between the enslavement of women in seraglios and the intellectual and artistic liberty of "British Nymphs."⁵⁸ The celebration of learned ladies as signs of British progress and superiority was noted by Montagu, who wrote in 1777 to Carter, "Unless we could be all put into a popular ballad, set to a favourite old English tune, I do not see how we could become more universally celebrated."⁵⁹ The 1770s also witnessed the rise of a second generation of Bluestockings including Montagu's protégés More and Frances (Fanny) Burney, as well as Chapone, Seward and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. This variously-aged group,

⁵⁵ MO6365; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Elizabeth Vesey, Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

⁵⁶ Paul Langford, A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 603.

⁵⁷ Guest, Small 101.

⁵⁸ Myers, Bluestocking 276.

⁵⁹ Guest, Small 101.

distinguished also by their commitments to the Church of England (More) and rational Dissent (Barbauld), was hosted by Mary Delany, with whom Burney was close, while Hester Thrale also presided over gatherings at her Streatham home.⁶⁰ Burney's Evelina was published in 1778, the critical and financial success of her account of a young woman's progress in society securing the friendship and patronage of Thrale and Dr. Johnson. The same year also saw the publication of Richard Samuel's engraving, The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain, distributed in Johnson's Ladies New and Pocket Memorandum for 1778, and exhibited in a painted version at the 1779 Royal Academy exhibition, which depicts Montagu, Carter, Barbauld and More alongside historian Catherine Macaulay, painter Angelica Kauffman, singer Elizabeth Linley Sheridan, actress and playwright Elizabeth Griffith, and novelist Charlotte Lennox.⁶¹ In 1786, More celebrated her Bluestocking friends in the poem, "The Bas Bleu: Or Conversation," describing civilized and witty gatherings in which men were "not bound by pedant rules / Nor Ladies *Precieuses ridicules*." In particular, she asserted the virtuous nature of the ideals promoted by Bluestocking sociability, declaring "CONVERSATION, wisdom's friend, as "the object, and the end / Of moral truth, man's proper science, with sense and learning in alliance."⁶² Her 1782 "Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle to the Hon. Mrs. Boscawen" had nonetheless presented Boscawen's superior powers of sympathy as an "untaught goodness," ("To those who know thee not, no words can paint / And those who know thee, know all words are faint!"),⁶³ reasserting the cultural association between

⁶⁰ Myers, Bluestocking 259.

⁶¹ Stott, More 50.

⁶² More, Bas Bleu.

⁶³ Hannah More, "Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle to the Hon. Mrs Boscawen," British Literature 1640-1789: An Anthology, ed. Robert Demaria Jr (Oxford UK and Maldon MA: Blackwell, 1998): 1135-36. 247-48.

women and sensibility and undermining female Bluestockings' claims to prerogatives of language and learning.⁶⁴

The public prominence of female Bluestockings rendered them subject to critique, with Montagu's fame, elegance and conspicuously public philanthropy leading her in the 1770s to be deemed unfeminine and vain.⁶⁵ Resentment of female scholarship was also expressed in the narrowing of the term 'bluestocking' in the late 1770s to refer solely to women, with Mrs. Thrale describing the first generation Blues in 1779 as "a formidable Body, & called by those who ridiculed them, the *Blue Stocking Club*,"⁶⁶ a designation that linked them with the same excesses of luxury and fashion from which they sought to distinguish themselves. As Harcstarck Myers observes, the Bluestocking ideals of rational conversation, philanthropy and polite taste were rendered less viable by the cultural upheaval of the French revolution and the evangelical revival.⁶⁷ Charles Pigott's 1794 anti-Whig satire The Female Jockey Club described the Bluestockings as seeking to establish "an Aristocracy in the republic of letters," satirizing their fusion of literary and class identity in observing, "Vanity, or rather a consciousness of the *just* deference due to their *rank* and *fortune*, encouraged them to hope that they should soon be able to pluck from plebeian brows the laurels and the bays."⁶⁸ Pigott also criticized the paltry and notably public nature of Montagu's philanthropy, declaring, "Let us hear no more then, of

⁶⁴ Elizabeth A. Fay, A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism (Oxford UK and Malden MA: Blackwell, 1998) 155.

⁶⁵ Guest, Small 99-100.

The perception that female scholarship contravened the gendered order was expressed throughout the second half of the eighteenth-century, with Johnson's harsh criticism of Montagu's Essays on Shakespear in part reflecting discomfort with the concept of a woman critiquing a male-authored text (as opposed to Carter's more self-effacing acts of translation).

⁶⁶ Thrale, Thraliana 1:381 n3.

⁶⁷ Myers, Bluestocking 269.

⁶⁸ Pigott, Female 188.

Mrs. Montagues's public chimney sweeper *festival*" – an event held each May Day in the forecourt of her London residence – "a subtraction of five pounds, from an income of 8000*l.* a year."⁶⁹ The meritorious and philanthropic bases of Bluestocking ideology were thus figured as self-aggrandizing displays, their temporary provision of a day's plenty only causing "famine [to] be more cruelly felt the next."⁷⁰

By the 1790s, the epithet 'Bluestocking' therefore carried largely pejorative connotations. While first generation Blues such as Carter and Talbot were distinguished by their pious Anglicanism and monarchical politics, the aftermath of the French Revolution led the cause of female scholarship to be associated with the generation of radical women writers including the dissenter Mary Hays and supporters of the Revolution such as Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Smith. Richard Polwhele's 1798 The Unsex'd Females attempted to distinguish first generation Bluestockings from 1790s radicals, claiming that Wollstonecraft's demand that women be properly educated not only sought to ameliorate women's inferior position, but invert the natural order: "See Wollstonecraft, who no decorum checks, / Arise, the intrepid champion of her sex; / O'er humbled man assert the sovereign claim."⁷¹ Second generation bluestockings such as Seward attempted to articulate a more nuanced political stance, her endorsement of Wollstonecraft's critique of prevailing systems of female education being tempered by the assertion that the latter's "ideas of absolute equality are carried too far, and [...] certainly militate against St. Paul's maxims concerning that important compact," which

⁶⁹ Pigott, Female 190.

⁷⁰ Pigott, Female 190.

⁷¹ Richard Polwhele, The Unsex'd Females, 1798, University of Virginia, 18 Oct 2004.

endorse male headship of both spiritual and domestic domains.⁷² The Bluestocking assertion of female rationality was nonetheless tainted by association with 1790s radicalism, with many commentators unwilling to echo Seward's separation of Wollstonecraft's republican politics from her pedagogical theories. Female scholarship was further identified with social and sexual transgression in the aftermath of William Godwin's posthumous 1798 Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft, in which he detailed her extra-marital relationship with Gilbert Imlay, the birth of their illegitimate daughter, Fanny, and Wollstonecraft's attempts to take her own life. While in the 1770s Carter and Montagu were held to embody British moral and cultural superiority, by 1801 Harriot Freke of Edgeworth's Belinda operated as monitory figure, her Blue tendencies (described in a chapter entitled "Rights of Women") embodying the conflation of female learning, political radicalism and sexual transgression.⁷³

Early nineteenth-century commentators attempted to re-establish the reputations of the first generation Bluestockings, distancing them from the radical politics of the 1790s and locating their learning within the feminized domains of Christian education and philanthropy.⁷⁴ In 1808, Carter's nephew and literary executor, Montagu Pennington, published his Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, with a New Edition of Her Poems, his acknowledgment of the didacticism of nineteenth-century life-writing also gesturing towards his revisionist treatment of his aunt's life and work: "The great end of biography is not so much to amuse the fancy, as to instruct and improve the mind."⁷⁵

⁷² Guest, Small 273.

⁷³ Edgeworth, Belinda 225-34.

⁷⁴ Pohl and Schellenberg, "Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography." 7.

⁷⁵ Pennington, Memoirs A3.

While Pennington celebrated Carter's scholarly activities, he stressed that she acknowledged the scale of her achievements only within the domestic sphere: "for no person spoke less of herself, and her own acquirements, in company."⁷⁶ He further insisted that her scholarly rigour did not prevent her from pursuing properly feminine accomplishments such as modern languages and "the common branches of needle-work" although he scrupulously notes her lack of "considerable progress" in music.⁷⁷ Carter's piety is nonetheless presented as the crowning achievement of her scholarly career:

But among her studies there was one which she never neglected; one which was always dear to her from her earliest infancy to the latest period of her life, and in which she made a continual improvement. This was that of Religion, which was her constant care and greatest delight.⁷⁸

Carter's remarkable skills as a classical translator, commentator and poet were thus rendered subservient to the properly feminine pursuit of private virtue, with Pennington's emphasis on her unshakeable piety echoing the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith, rather than by intellectual assent or good works.⁷⁹ Carter's piety was also emphasized in Pennington's 1817 edition of her letters to Mrs. Montagu, while his 1810-1813 edition of Montagu's correspondence similarly defended both women's participation in public intellectual and print culture as a reflection of their religious and philanthropic practices. Pennington's defence of the first generation Bluestockings required them to be sharply delineated from radical women writers of the 1790s, with Carter's admiration of Burney's novels contrasted with her disapproval of the novels of Smith: "she thought some of their morality at least defective, and in some of them very

⁷⁶ Pennington, *Memoirs* 13.

⁷⁷ Pennington, *Memoirs* 10.

⁷⁸ Pennington, *Memoirs* 17.

⁷⁹ Stott, *More* 80-81.

bad.”⁸⁰ Echoing conduct book accounts of women’s susceptibility to literary corruption, Pennington thus depicts Carter as refusing to read any books possessing “the least tendency towards levelling and democratic principles, either in the publications themselves, or in the characters of their authors of them [...] (if she had been told the tendency of them beforehand).”⁸¹ While such assertions of literary non-engagement cannot be taken at face value, they nonetheless indicate Carter’s possession of a greater degree of economic freedom and social position than Butler and Ponsonby. As we have seen in the previous chapter, their performance of literary sociability required them to be familiar with the same texts Carter supposedly pre-emptively rejected.

Such emphasis on the piety and domesticity of the first generation Blues did not prevent the pejorative associations of bluestockingism from persisting throughout the nineteenth-century. In Pride and Prejudice (1813), Mary Bennet styles herself as a learned lady in order to ameliorate her status as “the only plain one in the family.”⁸² Figured as a vulgar and empty form of self-display, Mary’s highly public exhibition of her “knowledge and accomplishments” serves to render her the target of social disdain at the Netherfield Ball and the butt of her father’s wry critique: “What say you, Mary? for you are young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts.”⁸³ Published in the wake of editions of Montagu and Carter’s letters in 1810 and 1817, Byron’s 1821 The Blues: A Literary Eclogue presents male relationships with learned ladies as inevitably doomed, such sentiments possibly inflected by the mathematical

⁸⁰ Pennington, Memoirs 441.

⁸¹ Pennington, Memoirs 444.

⁸² Austen, Pride 71.

⁸³ Austen, Pride 55.

interests of his estranged wife, Annabella Milbanke, whom he dubbed “the Princess of Parallelograms.” The First Eclogue presents Tracy, a visitor to a London lecture-room, expressing interest in courting a Miss Lilac, only to be dissuaded by his friend Inkel:

“Pray get out of this hobble as fast as you can. / *You* wed with Miss Lilac! ‘twould be your perdition: / She’s a poet, a chymist, a mathematician.”⁸⁴ The exchange continues:

Inkel: I say she’s a Blue, man, as blue as the ether.
Tracy: And is that any cause for not coming together?
Inkel: Humph! I can’t say I know any happy alliance
Which has lately sprung up from a wedlock with science.⁸⁵

Byron’s depiction of “Lady Bluebottle,” whose passion for “Grand Shakespeare” identifies her with Montagu,⁸⁶ is similarly harsh, her name recalling that of the stinging sea-creature, while his description of her learned “collation” echoes her reputation for pride by suggesting both the gathering together and critical assessment of her guests. Sir Richard Bluebottle’s description of the company – “the numerous, humourous, backbiting crew / Of scribblers, wits, lecturers, white, black, and blue”⁸⁷ – further suggests a multitudinous mob of talentless pedants, whose camaraderie is as illusory as that of Satan’s “industrious crew.”⁸⁸

Painting the Town Blue: The Ladies of Llangollen and the Canonical Bluestockings

Butler and Ponsonby became associated with the first generation Bluestockings during their lifetimes, Hannah More writing in 1811, “I have hardly since the loss of my dear Mrs Montagu met with so much spirit, sense and animation, so much knowledge of

⁸⁴ George Gordon Byron, *The Blues: A Literary Eclogue*, 1821, Available: http://www.faculty.umb.edu/elizabeth_fay/byblues.html, 12 Dec. 2006. 1:64-66.

⁸⁵ Byron, *Blues*. 1:69-72.

⁸⁶ Byron, *Blues*. 2:115.

⁸⁷ Byron, *Blues*. 2:16-17.

⁸⁸ Milton, “Paradise Lost,” 1:751.

the world and of books with a vivacity peculiarly her own as in Lady E. Butler.”⁸⁹

Lesbian-feminist accounts of Butler and Ponsonby such as Faderman’s emphasize the feminine nature of their Llangollen milieu, its gender separatism reportedly extending to their choice of female domestic and farm animals. Butler’s journals, by contrast, indicate that from the 1780s their social and epistolary networks echoed the mixed-sex sociability of the first generation Blues, incorporating a range of literary, political and gentry figures as diverse as Byron and Burke. In rendering Plâs newydd a conversational salon, Butler and Ponsonby’s sociable practices echoed those of the first generation Blues in taking place at the juncture of Habermas’s “conjugal family’s intimate space” and the public intellectual sociability of the Republic of Letters.⁹⁰ Insofar as their cultural production consisted of the material fashioning, sociable circulation and print promulgation of reports of their home and personas, they similarly recalled the first generation Blues in asserting a female literary presence outside of the realms of print publication and the novel. From the 1790s, Butler and Ponsonby further established close friendships with second generation Blues including Thrale, More and Seward, whose 1796 “Llangollen Vale” ascribed them the Bluestocking virtues of “genius, taste and fancy.”⁹¹ They were also known to members of provincial Bluestocking circles. Sir Walter Scott learnt of them from the Scottish moral philosopher, Dugald Stewart, whose wife Helen D’Arcy Stewart was an accomplished poet, the first reader of Stewart’s philosophical tracts, and the host of bluestocking gatherings in Edinburgh that “happily blended the aristocracies

⁸⁹ Stott, *More* 293.

⁹⁰ Russell, *Women* 14.

⁹¹ Seward, “Llangollen.”

of rank and letters.”⁹² Such connections moreover persisted across generations, Ponsonby’s correspondence with Mrs. Parker detailing in October 1811 a visit from “Lady Katherine Douglas, Miss Stewart (daughter of Mr. Dugald Stewart) & Miss Maitland who stayed ‘till Saturday.”⁹³

Butler and Ponsonby are also linked to the first generation Blues by their resistance to marriage and the primacy of their same-sex commitments, as they are by the critical conundrum such commitments have posed to later commentators. Resisting the attentions of the scholar and clergyman Thomas Birch⁹⁴ and the urgings of her friend Catherine Talbot, Elizabeth Carter maintained that marriage involved women’s subjugation to male authority and was thus inimical to a life of independent scholarship.⁹⁵ Despite marrying in 1751, Sarah Scott separated from her husband within a year and settled in Bath with her companion Lady Barbara Montagu. Accordingly, the defence of marriage offered by the retired gentrywomen of Millenium Hall – “We consider matrimony as absolutely necessary to the good of society” – is undercut by their desire to “much more promote marriage than we could do by entering into it ourselves.”⁹⁶ Montagu’s primary emotional commitments were similarly directed towards women. Writing to Carter in 1762, she declares, “our welfare is so joined, so individual, I defy the splitters of a hair, & the dividers of a polype to disunite them.”⁹⁷ By contrast, a 1760 letter to her husband tells of reading Dr. Campbell’s Revolutions in Bengal: “I don’t think it my interest to send you

⁹² Pam Perkins, Stewart, Helen D’arcy (1765–1838), 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/6618>>, 13 Aug. 2005.

⁹³ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 7 Oct. 1813, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Records Office, Ruthin.

⁹⁴ Miegou, “Biographical.” 26.

⁹⁵ Myers, Bluestocking 111.

⁹⁶ Scott, Millenium 115.

⁹⁷ MO3091; Montagu, Montagu-Carter [31 Dec. 1762].

amusements to Newcastle when I want you here, but if I like it I may send it to you to read on the road. I wish I had a pair of wings & I wd meet you at yr Inn every evening.”⁹⁸

While her stated desire for closeness exhibits the fondness expected of a dutiful wife, Montagu’s statement is notable for the absence of the desire to study or live alongside her husband, embedding the independence of separate residences and intermittent reunions even within a fantasy of togetherness.

Butler and Ponsonby are further linked to the first generation Bluestockings by critical concern over the nature and classification of their female intimacies. In Surpassing the Love of Men, Faderman links Butler and Ponsonby and first generation Blues such as Carter and Talbot under the rubric of romantic friendship, identified, as we have seen, as the key precursor to twentieth-century lesbian feminism.⁹⁹ Myers implicitly endorses Faderman’s account of the non-sexual nature of such romantic friendships. She nonetheless rejects the “distortions” of Faderman’s characterisation of the Bluestockings in terms of both sexual unknowingness and an asexual proto-lesbianism, claiming that the Blues were aware of female intimacies, but suspicious of sexual desire in all of its manifestations.¹⁰⁰ Rejecting both Faderman and Myers, recent work emphasizes the corporeal preoccupations of Bluestocking texts and practices. Celia Easton’s “Were the Bluestockings Queer? Elizabeth Carter’s Uranian Friendships” employs ‘queer’ as a synonym for genitally indeterminate sexuality, arguing that Carter’s Platonic commentaries transform Plato’s homoerotic aesthetics into a model of female same-sex

⁹⁸ MO 2414; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Edward Montagu [Jan 1761], Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

⁹⁹ Faderman, Surpassing 85-102.

¹⁰⁰ Myers, Bluestocking 18.

desire. Taking Easton's provocative title at face value, Susan S. Lanser in turn augments Faderman's account of the hermeneutic importance of women's emotional allegiances by maintaining the importance of embodiment, asserting the critical significance of "desires and penchants that give primacy – even momentary primacy – to same-sex bonds through words and practices amenable to an erotic rendering."¹⁰¹ Implicitly acknowledging the corporeal anxieties evinced by accounts of Carter rising before dawn, binding her head with wet rags and chewing green tea to facilitate her study regime, Jane McGrath's "Negotiating the Body in Bluestocking Letters" explores the corporeal intensity of much Bluestocking correspondence, quoting a 1759 letter in which Montagu characterizes her desire for Carter as that of an infant weaned from the breast.¹⁰² As McGrath details, Montagu initially likens Carter to the "soft nectar" imbibed by infants, identifying her presence and nourishing and maternal, but also a physical necessity. Montagu's image then shifts to characterize Carter as the breast itself – "we older children who have stronger passions & more discerning palates must not indulge complaints but be placid in disappointment, & when our nectar'd bowl is taken from us" – deepening the inherent eroticism of the image by emphasizing the corporeal pleasure as well as biological imperative of Carter's presence.¹⁰³

In a parallel with important implications for Butler and Ponsonby's characterization as both bluestockings and prototypical queers, their relationship bears striking similarities to that shared by Sarah Robinson Scott and Lady Barbara Montagu. Rendered ineligible

¹⁰¹ Lanser, "Bluestocking." 259-60.

¹⁰² See Jane MacGrath, "Negotiating the Body in Bluestocking Letters" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65 (2002) 1-2. 235-56.

¹⁰³ MO 3024; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, Ms, Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

for a dazzling match such as her sister's by contracting smallpox at the age of twenty, Sarah Robinson travelled to Bath with her sister and brother-in-law in 1747 as a twenty seven year-old spinster. There she met Lady Barbara 'Bab' Montagu (no relation to Edward Montagu), the unmarried daughter of the Earl of Halifax, with whom she formed an immediate and lasting bond.¹⁰⁴ Robinson was courted by George Lewis Scott, a charismatic, albeit impecunious, mathematician and musicologist. Having engaged Robinson in a clandestine correspondence, his appointment as subpreceptor to the future George III allowed him to marry her in 1751, with Lady Bab accompanying the newlyweds on their honeymoon.¹⁰⁵ Robinson's father and brother removed her from George Scott's home ten months later. Eve Tavor Bannet traces this breach to George Scott's obstruction of the court career of one of Robinson's poor cousins;¹⁰⁶ Betty Rizzo, by contrast, claims that the dramatic nature of Sarah Scott's removal suggests that George Scott was suspected by his wife's family to be a sodomite.¹⁰⁷ While the couple did not divorce, Montagu later described her sister as a virgin in their private correspondence.¹⁰⁸ Robinson Scott (hereafter Scott) and Lady Bab established a home together, sharing a country house in Bath Easton and wintering in Bath until 1762, when the costs of their yearly relocation led them to take a house on the outskirts of Bath – "considerably higher than the Square yet convenient in regard to the Town" – where they remained until Lady Bab's death in 1765.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Betty Rizzo, "Two Versions of Community: Montagu and Scott," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65.1-2 (2002): 194-214. 200.

¹⁰⁵ Miegion, "Biographical." 33.

¹⁰⁶ Eve Tavor Bannet, "The Bluestocking Sisters: Women's Patronage, Millenium Hall, and 'the Visible Providence of a Country'," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 30.1 (2005): 25-55. 33.

¹⁰⁷ Rizzo, "Two." 198.

¹⁰⁸ Rizzo, "Two." 198.

¹⁰⁹ MO5294; Sarah Scott, Sarah Robinson Scott to Elizabeth Robinson Montagu 5 Jun. [1762], Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

Butler and Ponsonby's relationship echoes both the enduring nature of Scott and Lady Bab's commitment, and many of the economic, social and geographical features of the earlier ménage. Scott's marginal status within an otherwise well-connected family may be likened to Ponsonby's (Elizabeth Montagu's wealth was obtained through her marriage to Edward Montagu, rather than the support of the Scott family). Like that of Butler, Lady Bab's title belied her precarious position as the sole spinster of the Earl of Halifax's six daughters, rendering her reliant upon the generosity of her father and brother, Lord Halifax. Upon settling with Scott, Lady Bab received an annual income of approximately 200*l*, which Scott supplemented with the interest earned from her 1000*l* marriage settlement, quarterly payments of 25*l*. from George Scott,¹¹⁰ and gifts of books and household supplies from her sister.¹¹¹ Having learnt of Scott's inability to maintain her Bath Easton home, Montagu solicited their father to grant Scott an additional 20*l*. per annum. Montagu's request was unsuccessful, however, leading her to report to Scott:

My Father flew into a passion & said it was a monstrous proposal & unreasonable, & he could not afford to comply with it [...] He said he could not be justified in giving an allowance to William and Charles that once grown up a Father shd not have any more to do with them that he never gave a shilling to his other sons after they were in proffessions [sic].¹¹²

In likening Scott's position to that of his younger sons, Mr. Montagu denies the economic exigencies of his daughter's anomalous position as a separated gentrywoman, unable to either establish herself in a masculine "proffessions" or support herself through an economically strategic marriage. Rizzo's observation that Scott and Lady Bab were

¹¹⁰ MO5791; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Sarah Robinson Scott [N.D.], Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

¹¹¹ Rizzo, "Two." 198-9.

¹¹² MO5791; Montagu, Montagu-Scott [N.D. Mo5791].

maintained in a style “just sufficient to prevent them disgracing their connections” could just as easily be used to describe Butler and Ponsonby’s economic situation, which although comfortable by general social standards, was insufficient to comfortably maintain the lifestyle of London gentrywomen.¹¹³ While the costs of maintaining their Bath Easton home and winter residence in town forced Scott and Lady Bab to relocate to the periphery of Bath,¹¹⁴ their location allowed them to maintain themselves far more comfortably than would have been possible in London, a consideration of similar significance in Butler and Ponsonby’s decision to settle in North Wales. The town’s status as a spa destination, again analogous to Llangollen’s position on the Holyhead road, further allowed Scott and Lady Bab to maintain social connections with their family and friends without themselves keeping a carriage or incurring the expense of travel outside of their local area.¹¹⁵

While Butler and Ponsonby recall the first generation Bluestockings, they also differ in several respects. Although they presided over what may be characterized as a provincial salon, they never attended metropolitan Bluestocking gatherings such as those hosted by Vesey and Montagu, nor the more limited gatherings of “Bath Ladies” hosted by Scott and Lady Bab.¹¹⁶ In restricting their sociability to either Plâs newydd or the homes of Welsh gentry, Butler and Ponsonby may be argued to have avoided both the sexual connotations of metropolitan sociability and unfavourable comparison to the intellectual and social stature of first generation Blues such as Carter and Talbot. While

¹¹³ Rizzo, “Two.” 199.

¹¹⁴ MO5294; Scott, Scott-Montagu 5 Jun. [1762].

¹¹⁵ Rizzo, “Two.” 200.

¹¹⁶ Tavor Bannet, “Bluestocking.” 27.

they established close friendships with figures associated with the second generation Bluestockings, such intimacies arose only after the reconfiguration of the group Hannah More referred to as “the old set.”¹¹⁷ As indicated by the letter quoted above, More befriended Butler and Ponsonby only after the ‘old set’ had suffered the deaths of Montagu and Carter in 1800 and 1806, as well as Vesey’s decline into senility prior to her death in 1791. Butler and Ponsonby viewed their friendship with Hester Thrale Piozzi as a literary and social coup, describing her visitation of Plâs newydd in 1796 as “an important object in their ambition for many years past.”¹¹⁸ Their opportunistic attitude towards their new Welsh neighbour was arguably matched by Piozzi’s courting of them. Her interest in Butler and Ponsonby was manifest only after their fame was secured by the publication of Seward’s “Llangollen Vale,” and Piozzi’s 1784 marriage to Gabriel Piozzi led her to be shunned by the first generation Blues. As Montagu wrote to Vesey in July 1784:

Mrs Thrale’s marriage has taken such horrible possession of my mind I cannot advert to any other subject. I am sorry and feel the worst kind of sorrow that which is blended with shame [...] I bring in my verdict lunacy in this affair.¹¹⁹

Butler and Ponsonby’s intimacy with Thrale also appears to have been secured at least in part by the exchange of critical commentary regarding mutual bluestocking acquaintances. Writing to Thrale in the late 1790s, Butler’s statement, “We reflect with sorrow that the Brilliant Fame of Mrs. H. More is in danger of being Tarnished if not Consumed in the Holy War Her own zeal or that of her Partizans has so unfortunately

¹¹⁷ Ward, Waller, Trent, Erskine, Sherman and Van Doren, Cambridge.

¹¹⁸ Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler, Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler to Hester Thrale Piozzi, Ms, John Rylands Library Special Collection, University of Manchester, Manchester, 28 Jul. 1796.

¹¹⁹ MO6583; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Elizabeth Vesey, Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

Kindled” thus reflects both her disdain for religious enthusiasm (evidenced by her insistence that housemaids refrain from humming Methodist hymns) and the forging of a new social alliance through the discarding of the old.¹²⁰

Butler and Ponsonby are further distinguished from the first generation Bluestockings by their lack of involvement with the Anglican church. As Susan Staves has detailed, ecclesiastical patronage offered many first generation Blues access to forms of classical and theological education otherwise restricted to university men.¹²¹ In supporting scholarly women, Church of England clergy not only discharged their charitable duties, but “mixed pastoral care with apologetics” by promoting the lives and works of virtuous exemplars of female scholarship and piety.¹²² Carter learned Latin, Greek and Hebrew from her father, a Doctor of Divinity. Talbot, also born into a clerical family, joined her widowed mother in the household of her father’s former colleague, the Rev. Thomas Secker. She moved to Lambeth Palace when Secker was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury in 1758, where Secker and his colleagues supported her work as a scholar and translator was supported by supplying books and educated interlocutors. Seward was similarly educated by her father, Canon-Residentiary of Lichfield Cathedral, and flourished amidst the ecclesiastically-centred intellectual and cultural activities of the thriving Midlands town.¹²³ Butler and Ponsonby possessed no such familial links with the established church. They attended English-language services at St. Collen’s parish

¹²⁰ Eleanor and Sarah Ponsonby Butler, Butler and Ponsonby to Hester Thrale Piozzi 25 Feb. [N.Y.], John Rylands Special Collection, University of Manchester, Manchester.

¹²¹ Susan Staves, “Church of England Clergy and Women Writers,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65.1-2 (2002): 81-103.

¹²² Staves, “Church.” 88.

¹²³ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997) 591.

church, and were friendly with William Davies Shipley, Dean of St. Asaph's Cathedral.¹²⁴ Butler's lifelong interest in Roman Catholicism derived from her time in Cambrai,¹²⁵ while Ponsonby's commitment to the Established church was assayed by her increasing interest, to Butler's chagrin, in the Methodism espoused by Sarah Tighe and their Welsh neighbours. Their religiosity, such as it was, may be therefore seen as a form of social practice, rather than pious conviction, a fact reflected by its minimal role within their varying representations.

Butler and Ponsonby are also distinguished from the first generation Bluestockings by the comparatively more feminized and domestic range of their literary activities. Montagu's significant interventions into public print culture have been elided by her primary historical figuration as a Bluestocking hostess. In her 1769 An Essay on the Morality and Genius of Shakespear, Montagu stridently rejected Voltaire's depiction of Shakespeare's "barbarism,"¹²⁶ her emphasis on the dramatic qualities of Shakespeare's verse also implicitly critiquing Johnson's 1765 edition of the plays. Montagu contrasted Shakespeare's ability to "[copy] nature as he found it in the busy walks of human life"¹²⁷ with "the tediousness, languor, and want of truth" of French neoclassical drama,¹²⁸ invoking a retaliatory letter from Voltaire and an invitation to a 1776 meeting of the *Académie Française* at which the influence of a new French translation of Shakespeare

¹²⁴ Butler, *Journal* 1788-91, 30 Jan. 1788.

¹²⁵ Robins, *Auction*, 59.

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, An Essay on the Writing and the Genius of Shakespear, Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets. With Some Remarks Upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. De Voltaire (Dublin: H. Saunders, J. Potts, W. Sleater, D. Chamberlain, and J. Williams, 1769) B2.

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Eger, "Luxury, Industry and Charity: Bluestocking Culture Displayed," Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods, eds. Elizabeth Eger and Maxine Berg (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003): 190-206. 138.

¹²⁸ Montagu, Shakespear B2.

was discussed. As Elizabeth Eger describes, Voltaire's epistle received only equivocal support from his countrymen, with Montagu's triumphal participation in this literary-nationalist *mêlée* leading her to be hailed as an English national heroine.¹²⁹ Carter's role as a public intellectual was similarly secured by her 1758 translation of Epictetus, its demonstration of Carter's classical learning constituting a more dramatic intervention into public print culture than the more properly 'feminine' genres of advice manuals, works of piety and translations of modern languages. Scott's The History of Cornelia (1750), Millenium Hall (1762) and The History of Sir George Ellison (1766) were published under male pseudonyms. They were nevertheless read with admiration by Carter, Talbot, and Lords Bath and Lytteton, leading Tavor Bannet to suggest that Scott's 'anonymity,' like that of the ostensibly veiled author of Evelina, "merely served to draw the line of demarcation between the world at large and those privy to the author's real identity."¹³⁰

While Butler and Ponsonby were not published during their lifetimes, their daily activities appear to support their status as learned ladies, including as they do the reading of a range of literary and scholarly works, transcriptions of poetry, engravings of heraldic images and the tracing of maps. Butler's journal of 3 February 1788 describes their reading of "Sonatto 37-8-9 di Pettrarca," the completion of the epic romance L'Orlando Innamorato of fifteenth-century Italian poet Matteo Maria Boiardo and the reading aloud of Pietro Metastasio's melodramas "L'endimione" and "La Galetea."¹³¹ While such activities may appear prodigious to contemporary readers, modern languages formed a

¹²⁹ Eger, "Luxury," 150-51.

¹³⁰ Tavor Bannet 45.

¹³¹ Butler, Journal 1788-91, 3 Feb. 1788.

central tenet of the sensibility-enhancing “accomplishments” that Wollstonecraft described in her Vindication of the Rights of Women as “the only improvement [young women] are excited, by their station in society, to acquire.”¹³² Lister’s neighbour Emma Saltmarshe was moreover not only scathing in her summation of Plâs newydd (“A little baby house and baby grounds”), but sceptical of the extent to which Butler and Ponsonby’s performance of literary activity reflected genuine understanding or engagement with their prominently-displayed tomes. Saltmarshe’s opinion of Plâs newydd, as reported by Lister – “Beautifully morocco-bound books laid about in all the arbours, etc., evidently opened for shew, perhaps stiff if you touched them & never opened”¹³³ – presents Butler and Ponsonby, not as Bluestocking scholars, but self-conscious bibliophiles who employ books as merely material signifiers of picturesque taste. Their bluestocking identity can thus be seen as one of their many masks, possessing a social utility as did their material assertion of landed Welsh identity

Were Butler and Ponsonby Blue?

The question of whether Butler and Ponsonby may be properly defined as bluestockings therefore begs the broader question of how to define bluestockingism *per se*, a debate in part conducted through competing accounts of sisters Montagu and Scott. While the young Montagu and Scott were described as “two peas in a pod,” recent debate has focussed on their similarities and differences as adults. Betty Rizzo contrasts the social elitism of Montagu’s London salon against the practical Christianity espoused by the Bath community including Scott, Lady Bab, the author Sarah Fielding and spinster

¹³² Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, ed. Miriam Brody Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 5:28.

¹³³ Lister, Know 211.

gentlewomen Elizabeth Cutts, suggesting that it “most fruitfully be viewed as an anti-salon.”¹³⁴ Eve Tavor Bannet, by contrast, rues the “persistence of the notion that the sisters’ lives took different, if not actively antagonistic, courses,”¹³⁵ describing both Montagu’s “estate philanthropy” and Scott’s participation in “all the reasonable pleasures of Society” including plays, assemblies and balls.¹³⁶ The alleged contrast between Montagu and Scott is complicated by the fact that each sister has been identified as the centre of the Bluestocking movement, with Montagu described as the ‘Queen of the Blues,’ and Scott’s novel of philanthropic female retirement, Millenium Hall, as “the manifesto of bluestocking feminism,” their respective figuration as presiding monarch and textual metonym reflecting their divergent reception history. As Tavor Bannet reveals, the claimed disjunction between the communities formed by Scott and Montagu is belied by their overlapping membership, with Lady Bab possessing a prior friendship with Montagu’s confidante Lord Bath,¹³⁷ Scott visiting members of Montagu’s circle including Carter, Talbot and Lord Lyttleton, and Montagu belonging to Scott’s short-lived female community at Hitcham.¹³⁸ Their critical contrast nonetheless suggests the need for a more complex conception of bluestocking practices, refuting the false dichotomy between both Montagu’s metropolitan circles and Scott’s provincial community and between the discourses of sociability and retirement. The resulting model would not only bridge the critical tension between emblematic bluestocking texts and figures, but locate Butler and Ponsonby as located firmly within the broad range of cultural practices now recognized as blue.

¹³⁴ Rizzo, “Two.” 194-5.

¹³⁵ Tavor Bannet, “Bluestocking.” 25.

¹³⁶ Tavor Bannet, “Bluestocking.” 27.

¹³⁷ Tavor Bannet, “Bluestocking.” 27.

¹³⁸ Tavor Bannet, “Bluestocking.” 44.

Identifying Butler and Ponsonby as second generation bluestockings therefore requires them to be located within a reconfigured model of bluestocking practice incorporating both the provincial retirement advocated by Scott and the intense sociability of her elder sister. Mavor notes the relevance of Scott's Millenium Hall, yet primarily contextualizes Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project in relation to the tradition of literary female retirement exemplified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1761 Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse. From the perspective of a cultural historian, the models of retirement espoused by the novels of Scott and Rousseau may be seen as mutually implicated, each endorsing an ideal of privately-situated and intensely homosocial female subjectivity. While Rousseau's novel is generally considered from the perspective of literary studies, however, Scott's is located within the historical archive of the first generation Blues, its fictional status elided by the association of its utopian community with the Hitcham experiment. Moreover, while Rousseau's novel offers an overtly eroticized model of female same-sex relationality, the Bluestockings were identified at the time of Mavor's publication with an insistently non-corporeal model of female scholarship. In locating Butler and Ponsonby within a tradition of Rousseauvian sensibility, rather than bluestocking scholarship, Mavor thus figures Butler and Ponsonby as literary, rather than biographical figures, this generic relocation also reflecting her shaping of their narrative as one of chaste friendship tinged with an unmistakable air of sexual innuendo. As Mavor emphasizes, Rousseau's tale of Julie's love for her tutor Saint-Preux and devotion to her cousin Claire resonated with Butler and Ponsonby's highly sensible natures, rendering

Butler prone to read the lengthy tome aloud for three hours at a time.¹³⁹ The triangulated desires linking Rousseau's central figures allows Mavor to identify Butler and Ponsonby's relationship with those of both Julie and Claire, and Julie and Saint-Preux.¹⁴⁰ Julie and Claire's bond offers a fittingly ambiguous model of romantic coupling, the intensity of their attachment anticipating Lister, herself a devotee of Rousseau, in suggesting "something more" than friendship.¹⁴¹ As Christine Roulston observes, Claire tells her future husband that her bond with Julie renders her a perversion of normative femininity: "As a woman I am a kind of monster, and I don't know what quirk of nature makes me prefer friendship to love" (*NH*, 121).¹⁴² Saint-Preux's status as Julie's tutor further resonates with Mavor's depiction of Ponsonby as unwillingly subject to pedagogical Butler's sway. As Julie writes to her teacher:

Everything feeds the ardor with which I am devoured; everything gives me up to myself, or rather, everything gives me up to you. The whole of nature seems to be your accomplice. All my efforts are in vain; I adore you in spite of myself.¹⁴³

While Mavor does not press the analogy, Julie's futile efforts to resist Saint-Preux thus reinforces the representational tradition in which the feminized Ponsonby is figured as prey to Butler's masculine desires, just as the restoration of Julie's virtue implicitly absolves Ponsonby of complicity in her own fall.

Butler and Ponsonby further problematize their identification as bluestockings by locating themselves within classically- and religiously inflected models of rural

¹³⁹ Mavor, *Ladies* 61.

¹⁴⁰ Mavor, *Ladies* 61.

¹⁴¹ Christine Roulston, "Separating the Inseparables: Female Friendship and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century France," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32.2 (1999): 215-31. 217.

¹⁴² Roulston, "Separating." 218.

¹⁴³ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Heloise: Julie or the New Eloise*, trans. Judith H. McDowell, ed. Judith H. McDowell (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1987) 33.

retirement. Butler's 1788 journal entries are framed by an epigraph from Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" (c.1650). Marvell's poem imagines an Eden in which Adam's solitude is undisturbed by Eve. Butler, however, selectively quotes and reorders his lines to frame her and Ponsonby's life together as a shared and feminized retreat from society into nature:

Society is all but rude,
To this delicious solitude
Where all the flowers and Trees do close,
To weave the garland of repose.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, Butler's journal of the following year commences with an epigraph from the "Ode to Solitude" of the seventeenth-century Irish poet, Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon (1633-85):

Here may we always on this downy grass,
Unknown, unseen, our easy minutes pass:
'Till with a gentle force victorious death
Our Solitude invade,
And stopping for a while our breath,
With ease convey us to a better shade.¹⁴⁵

In thus framing their Llangollen home, Butler presents herself and Ponsonby as anonymous and unobserved, their "a deep Recess of Thought" located at a distance from both society and the passage of history. Significantly, Butler does not quote the second stanza of Dillon's Ode, in which he reconciles companionate existence with the ideal of solitude, revising Plato's *Symposium* to figure friendship as a union of souls, and privileging this amalgamation over the 'multiplication' of heterosexual reproduction:

Nor is it for my Solitude unfit,

¹⁴⁴ Butler, Journal 1788-91, iii.

¹⁴⁵ Butler, Journal 1788-91, 1060.

See Wentworth Dillon Roscommon, Earl of, *Ode Upon Solitude*, 1717, 1996-2006, Literature Online, Available: <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=739.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2res.id=xr_i:lion-us@rft_id=xri:lion:ft:po:z200339151:2>, 17 Nov. 2006.

For I am with my friend alone,
As if we were but one;
'Tis the polluted Love that multiplies,
But Friendship does two Souls in one comprise.¹⁴⁶

Distancing herself from the homoerotic potentialities of the union of souls, Butler instead frames their retirement as a virtuous departure from the dissipated world, which will achieve its apotheosis, not in the queer possibilities of Platonic union, but the spiritual ravishment of death.

Unsurprisingly, Butler and Ponsonby's status as retired scholars was sharply criticized during their lifetimes, the scornful nature of such denunciations suggesting that their assertions of the value of rural solitude were taken at face value. In an 1810 manuscript diary detailing his Welsh tour the Oxford don, Corbet Hue, declares:

I am surprised that so much should have been said & written of Lady EC. Butler's & Miss Ponsonby's Cottage [...] The grounds are badly laid out – the fences near the house have all the formality & stiffness of a Dutch Garden. Added to all of this – a public path by the gable end & right in front of the house across the lawn, where all the world may pass. And this is the spot to which Lady E.B. and her sister have retired, disgusted with the vanities of life, & seeking an entire seclusion from them. Oh my Ladies, this is not a real, but only an affectation of retirement, & that a most paltry one.¹⁴⁷

Hue figures retirement as constituting a complete removal from the social world, his designation of Butler and Ponsonby's lifestyle as affected, rather than real, reflecting a Romantic investment in the value of subjective authenticity. He is nonetheless untroubled by the tension between his horror at the "public path...where all the world may pass" and his own prior knowledge of the Ladies' retirement, anticipating later commentators in

¹⁴⁶ Roscommon, *Ode*.

¹⁴⁷ Corbet Hue, *Journal of a Tour through North Wales, July - Sept 1810*, Ms, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, 104-5.

denying the spectatorial nature of Romantic culture.¹⁴⁸ In describing Butler and Ponsonby as simultaneously “naïve” and “polished,” the Irish judge Charles Kendal Bushe further implies that their retirement is undercut by their worldly manners, just as their status as learned ladies is undercut by their comprehensive knowledge of the *ton*. As he writes to his wife in 1805:

They gave me all the news of Dublin, London, Cheltenham, Paris, and everywhere, in a moment:—They are surely witches [...] The Kilkenny Theatre, all the performers, their different merits, the Miss Vernons are going to be married; – I going to be presented: – the King’s state of health, the expedition to the Continent, the Blaquiens, the Piozzis, Lady Gifford, Lord Wycombe, Grattan, Tom Hume and his wife: Dr. Glass’ 2nd marriage the other day, are a miserable minority of the topic, which they gallop’d over my brains till near twelve o’clock.¹⁴⁹

Kendal Bushe drolly likens Butler and Ponsonby to supernatural beings or Shakespearean hags, their comprehensive knowledge of England, Ireland and the Continent confounding the laws of space and time. His staccato reportage conjures the cumulative effect of their conversation, its dizzying array of names and events suggesting a dynamically social existence far removed from Dillon’s “unknown, unseen” existence. Their knowledge of both the monarch’s health and the private theatricals performed at Kilkenny Theatre further marks the comprehensive nature of their sociable investments, which like Butler and Ponsonby themselves, traverse both national borders and the delineation of the public and private realms.

¹⁴⁸ For a discussion of the performative constitution of the ostensibly authentic Romantic self, see Judith Pascoe’s *Romantic Theatricality*. This issue is further analyzed in chapter six.

¹⁴⁹ Kendal Bushe, qtd. in Somerville and Ross, *An Incorruptible Irishman: Being an Account of Chief Justice Kendal Bushe* 170.

Butler and Ponsonby's worldly engagement is further evidenced by a letter of 1801 in which Mrs. Piozzi closes an account of the marital plans of the "pretty Miss Ormsby" and "Sir Watkin's Brother"; Lord Kirkwell and the Marquis of Thomond with the disclaimer, "But all this is Stuff your Ladyship & Miss Ponsonby have heard from twenty People," located as they are within "a Cottage all the World wishes to arrive at."¹⁵⁰ In a letter of circa 1814-15, Butler similarly apologizes for her failure to write more promptly to Harriet Pigott:

I verily believe the Demon of Procrastination Abides in my pen – the moment I attempt to employ it – you would be terrified to behold the multitude of persons who are Conjured up to prevent me from writing – persons of whose existence I had no idea persons I thought had ceased to exist Ages past – Sir John Cotterell & his three Most hideous daughters come introduced by Lady Dungannon – Mr, Mrs Brecker, he a german of immense Opulence. She, built on a very large Scale – with a Magnificent face – in the Rubens Stile a Flemish beauty.¹⁵¹

Butler's remarks suggest her and Ponsonby's ambivalent relationship to their public prominence, the anonymous 'multitudes' at once confirming their celebrity and diverting them from the elevated circle of confidants to which such acerbic observations are dispatched. Her correspondence nonetheless confirms the accuracy of Kendal Bushe's account of their wordliness, containing detailed observations on the movements of nobles including the "quite barbarous" Lord Cliffden, who "never [calls] upon us tho' he goes through the village at least twice every Year," and an archly pragmatic dismissal of the millenarian prophetess, Joanna Southcott, who claimed in 1814 to be pregnant with Shiloh, the New Messiah of Genesis 49:10: "I quite dread the name of Joanna Southcote

¹⁵⁰ Piozzi, Thrale-Butler 23 Sept. 1801.

¹⁵¹ Butler, qtd. in Harriet Pigott, Ms Pigott D.9, Bodleian Library Western Manuscripts, Oxford.

[sic] – it terrifies me Suppose she produces a daughter? What’s to be done then?”¹⁵² The trans-national scope of their sociable exertions is further indicated by Butler’s advice to Pigott, who was considering travelling on the continent: “your Letters are at present delightful what will they be from Paris – dear dear Paris – if you hear of any English being there likely to prove useful or pleasant to you let us know & tho’ they should not happen to be of your Acquaintance – we will Contrive to get at them.”¹⁵³ In October 1813, Ponsonby apologizes by letter to Mrs. Parker for having not responded more promptly, describing both her reply and her perusal of a loaned work of Southey as having been delayed by a “perpetual and rapid succession of visitors.”¹⁵⁴ She is not unaware of the tension between such activities and their ostensible social retreat; in a letter to Mrs. Parker of October 1813, she describes a three day visit from Mrs. Butler, followed, over the course of three days, by “Sir John Lady Williams of Bodelwyddan & family, Mrs Lewis & Mrs. Price, Mr Brook and his Brother-in-Law [...] Sunday the 19th Our nephew William Ponsonby, all day, Lady Abdy & the two Miss Abdys to dinner & till very late. Monday 20th William Ponsonby, Sir William & Lady Barker to breakfast and dinner.” As Ponsonby wryly frames this litany, “I am going to name a little host of abettors that [...] will] show you the sort of life we sometimes lead in our strict retirement.”¹⁵⁵ The relentlessness of the Ladies’ social round is further evidenced by a food order, submitted less than four months prior to Butler’s death in 1829, in which they request of a Mrs. Tompkins “as Much Fish of any Kind – as will serve for a small Dinner party on Saturday - & another on Sunday next with One or two Lobster – half a hundred

¹⁵² Pigott, Ms Pigott D.9.

¹⁵³ Pigott, Ms Pigott D.9.

¹⁵⁴ Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby-Mrs. Parker 2 Aug. 1813, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbigshire Records Office, Ruthin.

¹⁵⁵ Ponsonby, Ponsonby-Parker 7 Oct. 1813.

of Oysters & a Couple of Pounds of Sausages,” noting that “it will add to the Obligation if the Above Articles are accompanied by a line of information that their good friend Mrs. Tompkins is in good health?”¹⁵⁶

Hue and Kendal Bushe’s reports are underpinned by the idea that social engagement was incompatible with bluestocking retirement. This dichotomy is nonetheless undermined by Montagu’s reports from her rural estate of Sandleford, from where she wrote to Carter on the 17 June 1762:

I am at last deep bosom’d in tranquillity, far from the busy humming of men & all the bustle of the World [...] I am quite alone which I always consider as the second blessing in life; the first is the society of those we love.¹⁵⁷

In affirming her predilection for both solitude and society, Montagu suggests that these seemingly divergent ideals may be likewise gathered under the rubric of Bluestocking philosophy. The extent to which epistolarity creates a virtual proximity dissolving any clear distinction between these two states is further demonstrated by the remainder of Montagu’s report, in which she juxtaposes news of the countryside’s “fresh morning walk[s]” and “bright meridian glories” with details of the recent activities of Mrs. Boscawen, Mr. and Mrs. Vesey, Miss Talbot and Archbishop Secker, the latter of whom she reports is suffering particularly from gout.¹⁵⁸ Butler and Ponsonby’s gregarious retirement is thus congruent with a more comprehensive model of Bluestocking cultural practices, in which solitude can be understood to be performative and audience-oriented,

¹⁵⁶ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Mrs. Tompkins, Fitzwilliam Museum John Rylands Library Special Collection, Cambridge.

¹⁵⁷ MO3077; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Elizabeth Carter 17 Jun. 1762, Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

¹⁵⁸ MO3077; Montagu, Montagu-Carter 17 Jun. 1762.

enabled by a sociability that publicized Plâs newydd as a place of retreat from the world it both required and rejected.

Another context for the model of retirement practiced by Butler and Ponsonby is offered by William Cowper's 1785 The Task. Cowper's poem offers a literary affirmation of both Butler and Ponsonby's highly sociable retirement and the more expansive model of bluestocking practices in which they participate. Identified as the first autobiographical narrative poem, Cowper's epic offered a model for both Wordsworth's Prelude and Butler and Ponsonby's instantiation of the bluestocking principles of sociable retirement. Cowper's influence upon Butler and Ponsonby has received scant critical attention. Ponsonby nonetheless recommended the poem to Sarah Tighe, while Butler commenced her 1789 journal with an epigraph from Cowper's 1782 "Retirement," in which "the deep recess of dusky groves" are figured as luxuries "excelling all the glare / The world can boast, and her chief fav'rites there."¹⁵⁹ Butler and Ponsonby's interest in Cowper is evinced by their ownership of his portrait, as well as William Hayley's 1803 Life of Cowper, published three years after the poet's death at the age of sixty-nine.¹⁶⁰ The publication of Cowper's epic in the mid-1780s coincided with the Ladies' assertion of their place within the local Welsh gentry, their integration initiated, as we have seen, by their establishment at Plâs newydd. By choosing to retire on a major thoroughfare, Butler and Ponsonby were able to establish a distinctively sociable mode of rural 'seclusion.' They may thus be seen to demonstrate the mobility of bluestocking ideals of scholarly retirement. They further amalgamate divergent forms of

¹⁵⁹ Qtd. in Butler, Journal 1788-91.

¹⁶⁰ Robins, Auction.

Bluestocking cultural practice, complicating, as does the practice of epistolarity, the alleged disparity between the metropolitan display with which Montagu has been rendered synonymous, and the provincial retirement attributed to Scott.

Throughout his life, Cowper suffered from debilitating depression and periods of insanity, perceiving himself as an outcast from both society and his Creator.¹⁶¹ Cowper's sense of his own damnation led him to identify with the Bluestockings' favoured literary referent, John Milton, whose physical blindness did not deter him from undertaking to illuminate God's "holy Light." Cowper thus viewed The Task as continuing the project of Paradise Lost, the beauty of which he described as having "surpass'd / The struggling efforts of my boyish tongue / To speak its excellence," employing Milton's blank verse rather than the heroic couplets popularized by Pope and Dryden.¹⁶² Cowper's epic nonetheless inverts Milton's narrative, presenting the spiritual autobiography of an individual who returns to Eden, his narrator rediscovering prelapsarian contentment in the rural retirement that the poet established in the village of Olney: "Domestic happiness, thou only bliss / Of Paradise that has survived the fall!"¹⁶³ Cowper figures the city as an "unwholesome dungeon," its "vapors dank" contrasting with the country's "liberty and light."¹⁶⁴ He nonetheless qualifies the apparently simple binary of town and country, affirming the specifically comfortable and sociable form of rural retirement being instantiated in the 1780s Butler and Ponsonby. Cowper affirms "the rural sounds / [That]

¹⁶¹ James King, William Cowper: A Biography (Durham: Duke UP, 1986) 89.

¹⁶² Cowper, Task 173.

¹⁶³ Cowper, Task 93.

¹⁶⁴ Cowper, Task 24.

Exhilarate the spirit,”¹⁶⁵ describing “the low roof’d lodge the *peasant’s nest*” and its distance “From such unpleasing sounds as haunt the ear / In village or in town, the bay of curs / Incessant, clinking hammers, grinding wheels”:

Oft have I wish’d the peaceful covert mine.
Here, have I said, at least I should possess
The poet’s treasure, silence, and indulge
The dreams of fancy, tranquil and secure.¹⁶⁶

Just as Butler and Ponsonby responded angrily to the implication of poverty contained in Wordsworth’s 1824 description of Plâs newydd as a “low roof’d cot,” Cowper resists the peasant’s ‘dear obtainment’ of such refuge, in which he is forced to dip his water bowl “into the weedy ditch” and mourn the consumption of his “last crust”.¹⁶⁷ As he declares, “If solitude makes scant the means of life / Society for me!”¹⁶⁸ Cowper further complicates the apparent bifurcation of metropolitan vice and rural virtue, concluding his sorrowful observation of a “rural lass [...] her tottering form / Ill propp’d upon French heels” with the declaration, “The town has tinged the country.”¹⁶⁹

Rather than marking the obsolescence of his pastoral ideal, Cowper’s acknowledgment of the interpenetration of sociability and solitude suggests another context for Butler and Ponsonby’s distinctive ‘retirement,’ and a more expansive understanding of Bluestocking practices. Cowper does not affirm the rejection of material pleasures, but rather their relocation from the public to the private realm, contrasting the sweaty tedium of the crowded metropolitan theatre with an evening spent at home

¹⁶⁵ Cowper, *Task* 10.

¹⁶⁶ Cowper, *Task* 13.

¹⁶⁷ Cowper, *Task* 13-14.

¹⁶⁸ Cowper, *Task* 14.

¹⁶⁹ Cowper, *Task* 164-65.

enjoying “cups / That cheer but not inebriate”.¹⁷⁰ Aligned with the wholesome celebrations of the country hearth, Butler and Ponsonby’s retirement may thus be viewed as uncompromised by their divergence from the diet of the rural poor, in spite of their prodigious consumption of mutton and butter. Indeed, Butler and Ponsonby’s familiarity with Cowper may be seen to exemplify the mutual imbrication of ‘town’ and ‘country,’ their perusal of Cowper’s texts and image being predicated upon dissemination of metropolitan print culture throughout provincial literary and commercial networks. In a 1760 letter to Carter, Montagu declares that “it is merely the love of idleness that brings people thus constantly together,” contrasting such dissipated passivity with “the improvement of virtue & knowledge & the great pleasures of contemplation.” She remarks, “There seems too much pride & ill nature in living retired where other people are mixing in society, & I will never affront any particular set of people by doing so.”¹⁷¹ Her critique of idle sociability nonetheless anticipates Cowper’s endorsement of convivial and industrious ‘solitude,’ through which he suggests that the morally refined activities of country life needs be gauged by a similarly refined measure: “How various his employments, whom the world / Calls idle, and who justly in return / Esteems that busy world an idler too! (3: 352-54). The Task further affirms Butler and Ponsonby’s paradoxical status as celebrated retirees in presenting rural life as the sole preserve of a particular elect:

How many self-deluded nymphs and swains
Who dream they have a taste for fields and groves,
Would find them hideous nurs’ries of the spleen,
And crowd the roads, impatient for the town!¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Cowper, Task 139.

¹⁷¹ MO3039; Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu to Elizabeth Carter 24 [Oct. 1760], Huntington Library Montagu Collection, San Marino.

¹⁷² Cowper, Task 107.

Cowper's narrative thus provides a literary context endorsing Butler and Ponsonby's sense of their own singularity, while also redeeming the same concurrence of bluestocking rhetoric and metropolitan display for which Montagu was pilloried. Read in relation to Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project Cowper's poem not only recuperates a peculiarly individual model of gentlemanly domesticity,¹⁷³ but a model of female retirement marrying, as did the blues, "heart[s] / Susceptible of pity" with minds capable of "Cultured and capable of sober thought".¹⁷⁴

Until recently excluded from literary history, the first generation Bluestockings stand as important antecedents to Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project. The metropolitan salons of Montagu and Vesey served to domesticate the ideals of the French salonnières, legitimating sociability as a form of cultural production that unified the masculine Republic of Letters with the feminized domestic domain. Publicly lauded in the 1760s and 1770s as emblems of English national superiority, Montagu and Carter asserted a cultural space for the virtuously public eighteenth-century woman. Scott's literary model of provincial Bluestocking retirement provided a further lens through which Butler and Ponsonby's provincial salon was read by their contemporaries, the good works of the ladies of Millenium Hall offering a religious and philanthropic apology for their more secular Welsh sisters. As we have seen, the highly sociable nature of Butler and Ponsonby's "seclusion" has led to their more recent exclusion from the annals of bluestocking retirement. Critical emphasis upon the differing lifestyles of Montagu and

¹⁷³ For a suggestive analysis of the association between Cowper's "suburban man" and the emergent category of the male homosexual, see Elfenbein's Romantic Genius 63-90.

¹⁷⁴ Cowper, Task 107.

Scott has further obscured the interrelation of the sisters' social circles and cultural practices, leading scholars to emphasize either Montagu's metropolitan gatherings or Scott's provincial community as an encompassing a singular Bluestocking ideal. Surveying the spectrum of Bluestocking practices instead suggests that Butler and Ponsonby's status as second generation bluestockings was secured by both their distinctively sociable retirement and the range of guests and conversational topics brought together in their provincial salon. Cowper's 1785 The Task further serves to legitimate their seemingly paradoxical status as celebrated retirees, figuring retirement as constituted by the rejection of vain and commercialized pleasures, rather than the spurning of the sociable activities, rational conversation, and domestic comforts endorsed by the first generation Blues. Read in light of Cowper's model of sociable 'seclusion,' Butler and Ponsonby must be taken seriously as members of the second generation of bluestockings who rose to prominence in the 1790s, their friendships with More and Thrale standing as evidence of the period's enduring networks of bluestocking sociability. Their inclusion within bluestocking historiography further demonstrates the conceptual and temporal endurance of bluestockingism. Embodying the 'spirit' of bluestockingism and its uncanny endurance, Butler and Ponsonby's prominence throughout the long eighteenth-century underscores the continuity between the Bluestocking feminization of culture, and the cultural formation that came to be known as Romanticism.

Chapter Six

“Love, above the reach of time”: Butler and Ponsonby and the Performance of Romanticism

Central to the recasting of Butler and Ponsonby's reputation in this thesis as the chaste exemplars of bourgeois female retirement is the queering of the conceptual and scholarly categories within which they have been traditionally bound. In order to address Butler and Ponsonby's relationship to the category of Bluestocking retirement, the previous chapter traced the way in which Bluestocking practices included both their professed scholarly retirement and the networks of sociability through which they secured their societal and material maintenance. In this chapter, I pose the question of whether Butler and Ponsonby may be considered Romantics. Responding in the affirmative, I argue that Butler and Ponsonby's inclusion within Romantic literary history not only sheds critical light on their textual production and significance to the canonical Romantic writers, but furthers the recent complication of the category of Romanticism itself.

Butler and Ponsonby's retirement maps precisely upon the chronological limits of the Romantic age, generally figured as stretching from the American Revolution of 1776 to the 1832 Reform Act. Their identification with Bluestocking ideals of scholarly sociability and Rousseauvian sentimentality, as well as their persistence within late-Georgian and early-Victorian print culture also aligns them with the temporal designation William Galperin and Susan Wolfson term “the Romantic century,” spanning the period

1750-1850.¹ The fascination which Butler and Ponsonby held for writers of the Romantic period is suggested by the range of figures who traveled to Llangollen between 1795 and 1824, including Thomas de Quincey, Mary Tighe, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Southey.² Previous discussions by Mavor and others have implicitly asserted Butler and Ponsonby's Romantic credentials by describing their biographical intersections with major figures of the period such as William Wordsworth and Lord Byron. Such discussions have nonetheless tended to focus on either Butler and Ponsonby's reactions to, or the perceptions of them by, such famous (and generally male) figures, rather than considering such encounters as moments of mutual Romantic engagement. Redressing this occlusion, I suggest that the sincere or authentic Romantic subject constitutes only one of the modes of subjectivity available throughout the period. Rather than viewing Butler and Ponsonby's production of a stylized model of feminized Romantic domesticity as antithetical to the authentic disclosures of the confessional Romantic subject, I instead contextualize such representations within a dynamic field of Romantic self-fashioning, within which they stand as merely one example of the period's complex modes of sociable and performative selfhood.

The following discussion also attends to the varying ways in which writers of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century employed the Ladies' relationship to

¹ William Galperin and Susan Wolfson, *The Romantic Century*, 1998, Online, Available: <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/misc/confarchive/crisis/crisisa.html>>, 2 May 2005 2006.

² Southey visited Butler and Ponsonby in 1811, later sending them "a little manuscript extract from the poem in which he is now engaged." (Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker 29 Oct. 1811, Ms. Letters from Sarah Ponsonby to Mrs. Parker of Sweeney Hall, Oswestry, Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin.). This honour was to inspire a spate of enthusiasm for Southey's works, including the perusal and exchange of works including his 1796 *Joan of Arc*. The Ladies also read Southey's 1803 translation of the knight-errantry tale, *Amadis de Gaula*, of which Ponsonby observed, "besides the magic of Mr. Southey's name to our eyes & ears, it contains many curious passages & some particularly suited to Lady Eleanor's literary taste." (Ponsonby, Ponsonby-Parker 2 Aug. 1813.)

thematize the Romantic trope of temporality. The Romantics' fascination with temporality is manifest in the period's picturesque aestheticization of the passage of time. It is similarly apparent in Wordsworth's figuration of memory, in works including Tintern Abbey and The Prelude, as a redemptive force that compensates for the loss of the past, enabling a return to a pure communion with nature. Butler and Ponsonby's retirement lasted for over fifty-one years, encompassing the Gordon riots, the French Revolution and continental wars, the Regency, the Bourbon restoration and the parliamentary debates presaging the Reform Act. As explored in the first section of this chapter, the sheer length of their retirement led them to be characterized by Sir Walter Scott, Thomas de Quincey and the comic actor Charles Mathews as anachronistic eccentrics, whose social performances were oriented towards an outdated cultural milieu. The latter section of the chapter then considers the varying figurations of Butler and Ponsonby's relationship offered by William Wordsworth, Anna Seward, Lord Byron and Anne Lister. Seward's 1796 poem "Llangollen Vale" figures Butler and Ponsonby as the apotheosis of Enlightenment sociability, their enduring relationship instantiating the feminine domesticity she was unable to share with her foster-sister, Honora Sneyd. Adapting Elizabeth Fay's concept of "sapphic poetics," I argue that Seward's poem attempts to shelter Butler and Ponsonby from the sexualized associations of exile, the metropolis and Catholic 'superstition' by means of a Welsh pastoral masquerade, thus disclosing, via a queer reading, the same threats it seeks to foreclose.

Subsequently turning to Wordsworth's 1824 "To the Lady E.B. and the Hon. Miss P.", I explore the poem's displacement of the corporeality of Butler and Ponsonby's

relationship by means of the picturesque celebration of their cottage, Plâs newydd. Writing after the domestic and creative changes wrought by Wordsworth's breach with Coleridge, his marriage to Mary Hutchinson, and resettlement with Dorothy at Rydal Mount, his poem recalls the creatively productive domesticity of Dove Cottage in celebrating the Ladies' sororal "love, above the reach of time." Examining the way in which Wordsworth figures Plâs newydd as both symbolizing and screening the Ladies' relationship, I suggest that the poem reveals their cottage to be a crucial stage prop through which they publicly staged their 'authentic' Romantic selves.³ Butler and Ponsonby's domestic self-fashioning may thus be seen to underpin the Romantic nexus between the construction of domesticity and subjectivity, anticipating the home- and self-making of William and Dorothy Wordsworth.⁴ Their metonymic relationship to Plâs newydd, anticipating Wordsworth's persistent identification with Dove Cottage, further reveals the material means through which the deep Romantic self was publicly constituted, as domestic spaces came to stand as symbolic instantiations of 'authentic' Romantic subjectivity.

As I explore in the latter part of this chapter, Byron and Lister shared their contemporaries' fascination with the endurance of Butler and Ponsonby's retirement. However, while the publicly-circulating poems of Seward and Wordsworth celebrated Butler and Ponsonby's enduring friendship, the private correspondence and journal entries of Byron and Lister lauded the persistence of the Ladies' presumptively embodied relationship. I argue that Butler and Ponsonby's appropriation by such self-conscious

³ Pascoe, *Romantic* 189.

⁴ Heinzelman, "Cult," 53.

fashioners of Romantic subjectivity demonstrates the plasticity of their public image, as it does a performative model of subjectivity that is evidenced by both its textual construction and Romantic iteration. This iterative genealogy suggests that Butler and Ponsonby not only circulated as a detachable Romantic trope, signifying a protean range of same-sex desires, but constituted key figures in the performative fashioning of Romantic subjectivity. Rather than being marginal or occluded figures in Romanticism, this chapter therefore suggests that Butler and Ponsonby played a constitutive role in what are now recognized as crucial aspects of Romantic cultural formation.

Contriving Romanticism, or why consider Butler and Ponsonby Romantics?

In the wake of the critical projects of New Historicism and cultural materialism, scholars of British Romanticism have manifested a newly skeptical attitude towards the received truths of High Romanticism. Attending to the suppression of the social in High Romantic critiqued in the 1980s by Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, David Simpson, Alan Liu and others, scholars have subsequently explored the elision of history within the lyric sublime, the displacement of the feminine by the idealized figure of the solitary male poet, and the presumptively constative nature of Romantic self-representations.⁵ The critical interrogation of the exclusions and absences of traditional formulations of Romanticism was marked throughout the 1990s by titles such as Stephen Copley and John Whale's 1992 edited collection Beyond Romanticism and Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson's 1994 At the Limits of Romanticism, which describes its "impulse

⁵ See works including Jerome McGann The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983; Marjorie Levinson Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986; David Simpson Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement. London and New York: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1986; Alan Liu Wordsworth: The Sense of History. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989.

towards recovery of the lost, the marginal, the outsider” of the Romantic centre.⁶ While the spatial metaphors of such titles mark the critical expansion of the contours of the Romantic canon, Laura Mandell suggested in 1997 that critical anthologies and undergraduate survey courses had undertaken only tokenistic gestures of inclusion, the language of the incorporation of “marginal” texts and authors disclosing the implicit retention of traditional conceptual geographies. Mandell notes that although the sixth edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature proudly states its inclusion of forty previously excluded writers including Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Felicia Hemans, they are not located alongside William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the primary section entitled “The Romantic Period.” They are instead grouped in the category of “Romantic Lyric Poets,” Wordsworth’s exclusion from this group disclosing its implicit connotation of “Other” or “Minor” Romantics.⁷ This additive, rather than reconstructive, methodology also apparent in what William Galperin and Susan Wolfson termed in 1998 as:

the essential monism that lurks (at least teleologically) in the dialectical constitution of romantic studies currently in vogue, where ‘and’ is invariably the keyword: margin ‘and’ center; past ‘and’ present; self ‘and’ society; along with the host of rubrics that beginning with “romanticism and”⁸

This methodological tendency suggests the need to reconceptualize, rather than merely broaden the parameters of the ‘properly’ Romantic, thus doing more, as Iain McCalman dryly suggests, “than simply recruit[ing] Wordsworth’s obscurer friends or Jane Austen’s

⁶ Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson, “Introduction,” At the Limits of Romanticism, eds. Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson (Bloomington and Indianapolis: U of Indiana P, 1994): 1-19. 13.

⁷ Laura Mandell, “Canons Die Hard: A Review of the New Romantic Anthologies,” Romanticism on the Net 7. Aug (1997). On the relationship between the Romantic centre and its margins, also see Margaret Russett’s De Quincey’s Romanticism: Canonical Minority and the Forms of Transmission (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).

⁸ Galperin and Wolfson, *Century*.

relatives.”⁹ A similar point is made by Sonia Hofkosh, whose stated goal in analyzing the gendered ideological and material contexts of canonical assertions of Romantic authorship is not merely to offer alternative applicants for Wordsworth’s position at the summit of the Romantic critical landscape, but “implicitly to examine those postulates and desires which invest the monumental and measure the lay of the land, mapping it into a knowable and known topology.”¹⁰ Accordingly, the following discussion suggests that Butler and Ponsonby’s incorporation into the Romantic canon offers not only to supplement its membership by recruitment from the margins, but to remap the territory, disclosing the constitutive exclusions of sociability, performative forms of Romantic subjectivity, and non-print forms of cultural production from the Romantic centre.

The ways in which Butler and Ponsonby exceed the traditional limits of Romanticism resonate with much of the most dynamic recent work in the field. In the introduction to their edited collection, Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture, 1770-1840, Russell and Tuite identify sociability as a significant form of Romantic cultural and textual production, rather than a mere source of contextual detail or historicist anecdote. They claim that attention to the role of conviviality in constituting Romantic texts and identities problematizes the Romantic archetype of the male poet withdrawn in productive isolation.¹¹ The significance of groups and affective

⁹ Iain MacCalman, "Introduction: A Romantic Age Companion," An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832, eds. Iain MacCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999): 1-11. 2.

¹⁰ Hofkosh, Sexual 9.

¹¹ Russell and Tuite, "Introducing," 4.

affiliations, also explored in the work of John Worthen and Jeffrey Cox,¹² similarly complicates the ideal of Romantic singularity. Accordingly, I contend that Butler and Ponsonby's corporate public identity and sociable lifestyle disqualify them from neither bluestocking retirement, as seen in the previous chapter, nor a more descriptively nuanced category of Romanticism. A critical methodology which displaces the assumed primacy of lyric poetry discloses the significance of the sociable forms of Romantic textuality in which Butler and Ponsonby engaged, including their extensive correspondence and authorship of journals, travel writings and commonplace books. A shift from the Habermasian emphasis on the male homosocial spaces of the eighteenth-century club and coffeehouse to spaces more conducive to female modes of sociability highlights the significance of Plâs newydd status as a provincial salon, as does Butler and Ponsonby's participation in local social, literary and theatrical culture, including cards and private theatricals at Wynnstay and public performances at the Oswestry theatre.¹³ Attention to the significance of non-textual and material forms of Romantic cultural production also reinforces the importance of Plâs newydd, an elaborate and self-conscious construction that, like Walpole's Strawberry Hill, has come via the logic of synecdoche to stand for the entirety of Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project.

Recent critical work also challenges traditional characterization of the authentic Romantic self. Henderson argues that the received model of the "deep" self constituted

¹² Jeffrey N. Cox, Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 4, John Worthen, The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons and the Wordsworths in 1802 (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001).

¹³ On the 27 Jan. 1819, Butler's journal records traveling to Wynnstay "in rain – the road very bad," where she and Ponsonby "dined played cards and Staid 'till twelve night dark but mild home at quarter past one." The company included the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland, Lady Morgan, and Mr. and Mrs. Madelocks. (Butler, Journal 1819.)

only one of the ways of understanding subjectivity during the Romantic period.¹⁴ In Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship, Judith Pascoe similarly displaces the presumptive centrality of the authentic Romantic subject, employing the self-consciously constituted public personas of figures including Sarah Siddons, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith to claim that Romanticism is crucially grounded in theatrical modes of self-representation.¹⁵ Pascoe explores examples of both the imbrication of the literary and dramatic spheres in the lives of figures such as Robinson and Elizabeth Inchbald, and the promulgation of theatrical enactments of subjectivity by Romantic figures including the putatively authentic Wordsworth.¹⁶ In an analysis strikingly germane to Butler and Ponsonby's self-fashioning, Pascoe suggests that Smith and Robinson echoed Siddons in deploying edifying accounts of their personal circumstances in order to authorize their public personas. Pascoe claims that Smith's allusions to the "real calamities" of forced marriage, debtors' prison, spousal abandonment, and the care of nine children worked to mitigate the danger represented by her extravagant poetic sensibility. The increasingly self-disclosing prefaces to successive editions of her Elegiac Sonnets authorized her concomitantly expanding fame.¹⁷ In the

¹⁴ Analyzing the often comically flat characterizations found in Gothic texts such as Radcliffe's The Italian, Henderson suggests that such depictions represent the repressed other of the visionary, essentialized subject of the Romantic ideal. (Andrea K. Henderson, Romantic Identities: Varieties of Subjectivity, 1774-1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 3.) Linking the rise in the perceived bifurcation of the 'true' self and its superficial social other to the growth of market capitalism, Henderson suggests that these competing models of selfhood thematize the tension between the essential value of selfhood presumed by a static social order and the publicly-displayed and relational exchange value of the new meritocracy. (Henderson, Romantic 38-9.) The significance of the feminized commercial context within which the 'singular' textual expressions of Romantic identity emerged is similarly emphasized by Hofkosh, who claims that the ideally transparent relationship between the Romantic subject and the his artistic interiority is problematized by the articulation of this nexus within a commercial culture perceived to be powered by "what women read and write, what they buy and sell, [and] how and where they look for pleasure." (Hofkosh, Sexual 8.)

¹⁵ Pascoe, Romantic 7.

¹⁶ Pascoe, Romantic 2-6.

¹⁷ Pascoe, Romantic 17.

wake of her highly public liaison with the young Prince of Wales, Robinson's invocation of her personal history in the 1790s functioned more complexly, overwriting the scandalous residue of the relationship and her subsequent rejection by the Prince, while also offering her readers the pleasure of recognizing her personal circumstances in her depictions of female desire and loss.¹⁸ Such theatricality was not the sole preserve of Romantic women. Pascoe describes the performative underpinnings of Wordsworth's public persona, revealed through his audience-oriented compositional practices, his efforts to identify his poetically fruitful practice of walking with domestic labour, rather than with the strolling of itinerant actors, and his employment of Dove Cottage as a stage prop supporting his assertion of rustic identity.¹⁹ Pascoe thus figures the Romantic period as one in which the public and private realms are mutually implicated, and in which the most seemingly sincere subject position is produced by its performative instantiation.

Pascoe's critique of the deep Romantic subject reflects an implicitly deconstructive methodology, in which the contamination of Romantic authenticity by its theatrical other discloses the performativity characteristic of the entire binary field. Such a method is also apparent in Tuite's richly generative account of Anne Lister's deployment of Romantic masculinity, in which Lister is shown to appropriate Rousseauvian life-writing as a model of performative style, rather than one of sincerity.²⁰ At the outset of his monumental Confessions, Rousseau asserts his intention to disclose himself as "in every way true to

For a discussion of Smith's personal circumstances and their deployment in her poetry, novels and letters, see Stuart Curran, "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered," Romanticism and Feminism, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988): 185-207. 199-201.

¹⁸ Pascoe, Romantic 25-6.

¹⁹ Pascoe, Romantic 184-228.

²⁰ Tuite, "Byronic," 198.

nature.”²¹ The truth-value of his text is not only asserted by Rousseau’s confidence in his singularity and self-knowledge, but also by the presumptive identity of the literary work and its author, the virtues of which may be decided upon only “after the reading of my book.”²² Lister’s adoption of Rousseau’s confessional style has been taken at face value by critics, reflected in the use of the Rousseauvian reference, “I know my own heart,” as the title of the first published volume of her diaries.²³ Writing in her journal, Lister nonetheless declares of the Confessions, “I read this work very carefully for the style’s sake. Besides this, it is a singularly unique display of character.”²⁴ The insouciance of Lister’s “Besides this” renders the display of Rousseau’s “character” subordinate to the artifice it ostensibly eschews, evoking the term’s literal denotation of a replicable brand or stamp, as well as its figurative sense of an individual’s enduring traits or qualities. As Tuite suggests, Lister’s appropriation of the Rousseauvian sexual confessional renders it a detachable and fetishized accessory, its prior signification within the context of Rousseau’s Republican politics subverted by its redeployment in relation to Lister’s feminized Tory Anglicanism.²⁵ This prosthetic supplement thereby discloses the

²¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, trans. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1953) 17.

²² Rousseau, The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau 17.

²³ Lister, Anne. I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister 1791-1840. Ed. Helena Whitbread. London: Virago, 1988.

For a different reading of Lister’s relationship to Rousseau, see Susan S. Lanser’s “Put to the Blush”: Romantic Irregularities and Sapphic Tropes.” Having observed Butler and Ponsonby’s employment of domestic tropes as a cover for their potential sapphic irregularity, she claims that they also “allowed themselves numerous eccentricities that set them apart from the norms of women imagined by Rousseau.” Lanser continues, “Anne Lister, indeed, as much as *becomes* Rousseau: in her journal Lister quotes from the *Confessions* that “I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world” and fashions herself as a “soft, gentleman like” and a quite self-consciously irregular figure.” (Susan S. Lanser, “Put to the Blush”: Romantic Irregularities and Sapphic Tropes, 2006, Available: <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/sexuality/lanser/lanser.html>>.)

²⁴ Tuite, “Byronic,” 198.

²⁵ Tuite, “Byronic,” 199.

phantasmatic status of its Rousseauvian ideal, or the sociable and performative aspects of the most seemingly 'authentic' of Romantic representations.

Such analyses foreground the connection between performativity and sexuality, the imbrications of which have been so powerfully disclosed by the work of queer theorists including Judith Butler, Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.²⁶ Indeed, the centrality of post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity to much queer scholarship might lead one to ask whether the critical resistance to performative Romanticism displayed by scholars such as Diane Long Hoeveler reflects an interrelated resistance to queer Romanticism,²⁷ in which a Wildean attentiveness to the superficial threatens to reveal – as does the sexual punning of Austen's "*Rears, and Vices*" – that which has been most studiously ignored.²⁸ Tuite's analysis of Lister suggests that it is the commodification of tropes of masculine Romantic style as fashion that allows them to be appropriated as elements of Lister's sexual self-fashioning.²⁹ In a wry gesture towards early misreadings of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, in which the subversive potential of gender performativity was held to be negated by the commodification of clothing ("The same

²⁶ Judith Butler's account of gender performativity has been obviously central in critiquing the naturalized status of both heterosexual gender norms and essentialized sexual identities. The foundational links between performativity and queerness are powerfully elaborated by Sedgwick in works including *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003); and her co-written (with Andrew Parker) introduction to their 1995 collection, *Performativity and Performance*. As Parker and Sedgwick observe, J. L. Austin's description of the performative utterances excluded from his speech act theory as "*etiolations* of language" links ostensibly 'parasitic' theatrical citations with notions of the perverted, effete, diseased and abnormal, suggesting that "the performative has thus been from its inception already infected with queerness." (Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 5.)

²⁷ See Diane Long Hoeveler, "Historicizing Austen," *Clio* 33.3 (2004): 305-15.

²⁸ Austen, *Mansfield* 54.

²⁹ Tuite, "Byronic," 190.

decade that gave us “dress for success” also produced the “butch/femme aesthetic”),³⁰ one might assert a connection between shopping and queer subject formation, as Lister’s purchases of Byronic texts and costumes serve to both constitute and display her female masculinity. Butler and Ponsonby similarly disclose the connection between the marketplace and queer subject formation. In 1781 Butler describes a conversation at Plâs newydd: “Talked of Rousseau... the exquisite pleasures of retirement and the Luxury of Purchasing Books.”³¹ Butler’s conjunction of self-sufficient simplicity with the pleasures of exerting commercial privileges suggests the fetishistic nature of the Rousseauvian ideal, its social circulation here operating as both marker and mask of the queerness of Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship.³²

Butler and Ponsonby may thus be seen to resonate with a newly-visible range of performative Romantic subjectivities. Their public relations campaign echoes those of the figures discussed by Pascoe in their construction of their public personas with reference to a carefully staged domesticity. While visitors travelled from throughout Britain in the hope of viewing both Plâs newydd and its mistresses, those lucky enough to encounter the latter witnessed a performance no less contrived than the cottage’s picturesque topography. Butler’s 1803-6 daybook records a range of conversational anecdotes with topics ranging from the natural sciences (“it has lately been discovered that wax is made

³⁰ Kath Weston, “Do the Clothes Make the Woman?: Gender, Performance Theory, and Lesbian Eroticism,” *Genders* 17.Fall (1993): 1-21. 11. For a discussion of the political context of such critiques, see Heather K. Love, “A Gentle Angry People: The Lesbian Culture Wars,” *Transition* 9.4 (2000): 98-113. 102.

³¹ Bell, ed., *Hamwood* 65.

³² The imbrication of sexuality and performativity thus endorses not only Henderson’s linkage of exchange value and the performative Romantic self, but Elfenbein’s account of how Beckford’s collecting of both objects and boys “foreshadowed shopping for beautiful things as a distinctively gay option.” (Elfenbein, *Romantic* 41.)

by bees from honey”), to witty amalgams of political gossip and literary allusion displaying both their erudition and sociable connections:

Buonaparte at one of his Levees addressed himself to an English gentleman who had been presented to him - & whose name was Lovelace. Sir said I read of one of your Relations in an English Novel - Sir - replied Mr Lovelace I have not the honor to be of that Family.³³

Butler’s entries encompass the realms of both fashion and empire, with observations on Royal transport (“The Coachmaster of the Princess of Wales – told a Friend of Lady Bradford – that the Princess drives at the rate of fifteen Miles an Hour & her Barouche is as light as a feather”) followed by accounts of Captain Arthur Phillip’s journeys to Brazil and Botany Bay. The trade-driven interrelation of empire and fashion is also disclosed in the following account of the nascent forces of globalization:

Mr. Biddulph told us – there was in London a person of some Consequence in the East Indies – who had Come over from Motives of Curiosity –he was a Sensible man - & a keen Observer – he Said that in the Course of a few years – the English will become East Indians - & the East Indies will be like England – as every thing worth cultivating is exported from hence to that Country.³⁴

Butler’s collation of anecdotes, *bon mots* and news of scientific discoveries reflects the conventions of the emerging genre of the ‘ana,’³⁵ a collections of memorable sayings, literary trifles, gossip and personal reflections exemplified by collections such as Walpole’s 1800 Walpoliana. The use of such collections to negotiate the tensions between the competing demands of feminine domesticity and literary production is demonstrated by Mrs. Piozzi’s posthumously published Thraliana, in which she textually asserts her identity both against and in concert with Johnson and her successive

³³ Butler, Daybook.

³⁴ Butler, Daybook.

³⁵ Nussbaum, Autobiographical 213.

spouses.³⁶ While Piozzi states her intention to “put down every Occurrence of her Life, every emotion of her Heart,”³⁷ Butler’s daybook instantiates a sociably-, rather than subjectively-oriented form of self-fashioning, detailing the provenance of notable citations and scoring her entries with a cross when conversationally employed. Butler’s daybook is thus primarily utilitarian rather than expressive in nature, its textual apparatus disclosing the theatrical underpinnings of her domestic performance.

The performative nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s public personae is further disclosed by Butler’s 1789 account of a visit paid to Plâs newydd by a group of gentry tourists. She reports:

The Man at the hand brought up a note from Mr [and] Mrs Harvey & Miss Ives desiring permission to See this Cottage. [O]ur compliments. [T]hey Were Very Welcome to see it. We remained in the dressing room ‘till they Were Come & gone. Observed them from the Window. The Harveys Were in Black, Miss Ives in blue. [T]hey appeared genteel and fashionable.³⁸

The visitors’ request to view the cottage, rather than its inhabitants, marks Plâs newydd’s metonymic relationship to its mistresses. Its apparently organic relationship to the Welsh landscape further renders it, as Pascoe suggests of Wordsworth’s Dove Cottage, “an essential stage prop in the performance of authenticity.”³⁹ Butler and Ponsonby’s withdrawal to the dressing room may be seen as an assertion of class superiority, marking the visitors’ lack of a letter of introduction and their status as tourists, rather than invited guests. It further underscores the privilege constituted by admission to Plâs newydd’s interior, a privilege denied a “Mrs & Miss Aspinall – also Mr. James a Family” who

³⁶ Nussbaum, *Autobiographical* 216.

³⁷ Thrall, *Thraliana* 1:464.

³⁸ Butler, *Journal* 1788-91.

³⁹ Pascoe, *Romantic* 189.

viewed the grounds in May 1819,⁴⁰ but extended to Lister in an 1822 encounter analyzed in the latter section of this chapter. Butler's scrutiny of the Harveys and Miss Ives nonetheless reveals the self-consciousness of her and Ponsonby's domestic pose; the surreptitious reversal of the gaze marks both their self-awareness and ongoing evaluation of their domestic performance.⁴¹ Adapting Derrida's claim that the parasitic nature of explicitly theatrical performative utterances discloses the generalized iterability characteristic of all speech-acts,⁴² Butler and Ponsonby's public personas may thus be seen as fundamentally performative, their breach of their personally erected fourth wall marking an ontological rule, rather than its exception. Read through the work of Pascoe, Hofkosh and Nicola J. Watson, Butler and Ponsonby's performative domestic pose, their identification with their Welsh location, their scrutiny of their public audience, and their pre-emptive fashioning of their own funereal monument might be thus seen as the ultimate proof of their Romanticism, through which they fashioned themselves as their most resonant of Romantic 'texts.'

The Romantics 'do' the Ladies

Locating Butler and Ponsonby within Romanticism illuminates not only the properly Romantic performativity of their cultural project, but that of the figures who

⁴⁰ Butler, Journal 1819, 28 May 1819..

This gesture of welcome forms an arguable element of Ponsonby's tacit acknowledgement of Lister's dreams of female same-sex domesticity, a point developed later in this chapter.

⁴¹ The mutual scrutiny that passed between the Ladies and their guests are further indicated by Butler's qualified admiration of Mr. Algernon Greville expressed in an 1814 letter to Harriet Pigott: "we have had the Algernon Grevilles [to visit] – we like them very Much – if he could be convinced how much more becoming it is to Stand erect than to Lounge – & sweep the Carpet with his head he would be very handsome Graceful & pleasing – it seems he is highly Accomplished Musical – draws finely – in short *rempli de Talents* – would you believe it from his Manners and Appearance?" (Butler, Butler-Pigott 15 Jan. [1814].)

⁴² Derrida, "Signature," 325.

employed the Ladies' relationship to thematize the Romantic trope of temporality. In her 1804 Memoirs of Celebrated Female Characters, Mary Pilkington emphasizes the longevity of Butler and Ponsonby's Welsh *ménage*, "where they have now resided in the harmony of true friendship upwards of twenty years." Gesturing dismissively towards Michel de Montaigne's account of enduring friendship as an exclusively male phenomenon, Pilkington avers,

Those who have asserted that females are incapable of a permanent attachment, must now certainly acknowledge that their opinion was ill-founded:... why should that sex, allowed to possess a superior degree of sensibility, be disqualified from feeling a passion, which is calculated to dignify the human mind?⁴³

While varied in their emphases, Butler and Ponsonby's Romantic commentators are united in their fascination with the endurance of their relationship. Thomas De Quincey first encountered Butler and Ponsonby in 1802, after he absconded from Manchester Grammar School at the age of seventeen and explored North Wales on foot, often sleeping in the open air. The Ladies are absent from the first edition of his Confessions of an Opium Eater, which was serialized in 1821 and published in book form in 1822, its chronicle of addiction earning its author immediate, albeit scandalous, fame. They nonetheless appear posthumously in De Quincey's writings of the 1840s and 1850s, including his expanded 1856 edition of Confessions. De Quincey's text of 1856 is striking in its narrative determinism, his recounting of apparently trivial childhood events and postulations of hypothetical biographical trajectories serving to figure his path to addiction as simultaneously gradual and inexorable.⁴⁴ Joel Faflak describes these

⁴³ Mary Pilkington, Memoirs of Celebrated Female Characters Who Have Distinguished Themselves by Their Talents and Virtues in Every Age and Nation (London: Albion Press, 1804) 64.

⁴⁴ Katherine Blake, "The Whispering Gallery and the Structural Coherence of De Quincey's Revised Confessions of an Opium Eater," Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 632-42.13 (1973): 4. 639.

autobiographical dilations as reflecting De Quincey's desire to justify the structural and moral "luxuriance" of his narrative of continued addiction, his 1821 commitment to ending his opium dependence undercut by his 1856 acknowledgement of his failure to renounce the drug.⁴⁵ De Quincey's representation of Butler and Ponsonby is thus implicated within his autobiographical reparations, as his description of their sociable encounter attempts to offset the melancholic repetitions of his textual and biographical corpus. In marshalling Butler and Ponsonby to participate in his own belated public-relations campaign, De Quincey nonetheless endorsed their Victorian status as endearing curiosities. Their moral elevation is similarly asserted by the nineteenth-century publication of memorial volumes including John Hicklin's 1847 The ladies of Llangollen, as sketched by many hands and the Rev. J. Pritchard's Account of the Ladies of Llangollen (1887), in which the Ladies' posthumous appropriability marks the enduring success of their own "back-and-fill" crusade.⁴⁶ Writing in 1856, De Quincey opines that his lack of connections and unconventional mode of tourism rendered him a guest of only passing interest, describing their affectations of courtesy as failing to mark their "very slight interest in myself or my opinions."⁴⁷ His 1840 Literary and Lake Reminiscences nonetheless offers a respectful account of the 1796 journey of a certain Smith family, who "paid a visit to those sentimental anchorites of the last generation whom so many of us must still remember – Miss Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler [...] whose hermitage stood near Llangollen."⁴⁸ In this latter text, De Quincey presents Butler and Ponsonby as

⁴⁵ Joel Faflak, "'Re-Collecting De Quincey' – a Review-Essay of the Works of Thomas De Quincey," Romanticism on the Net 40 (2005). 17.

⁴⁶ Castle, Apparitional 93.

⁴⁷ Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium Eater, De Quincey's Collected Writings, ed. D. Masson, vol. 3, 14 vols. (London: A & C Black, 1897) 321.

⁴⁸ Thomas De Quincey, "Literary and Lake Reminiscences," De Quincey's Works, ed. D. Masson, vol. 2 (London: A & C Black, 1897): 113-454. 410.

figures retained in living memory, their image vital and familiar. They are nonetheless figured as if they were pieces of antiquated furniture, their datedness attesting to both the historicity of De Quincey's narrative and the stubborn materiality of their memory. In describing Plâs newydd as a "hermitage" and its mistresses as "anchorites," De Quincey overwrites his own account of their sociability with associations of Catholic-tinged religious seclusion.⁴⁹ The epithet "sentimental" further associates them with a superseded affective aesthetic; in 1823 Southey described Rousseau's "sentimental" adherents as "persons of ardent or morbid sensibility, who believe themselves to be composed of finer elements than the gross multitudes."⁵⁰ Like De Quincey's addiction, Butler and Ponsonby are thus figured as both historically anachronistic and doggedly contemporary, their earliest public figurations casting an enduring representational pall.

Butler and Ponsonby were also figured as curiosities during their lifetimes, with nineteenth-century reports variously emphasizing their age and indeterminate gender presentation. As we have seen, the Ladies' material improvements of Plâs newydd worked to dispel the social unease surrounding to their status as unmarried exiles. While their increasing eccentricity might at first appear a digression from their careful public performances of the 1790s and early 1800s, it can also be interpreted as marking the success of these earlier self-assertions, through which they earn the social license to flaunt their increasing oddity. It may further be seen as evidence of a late-Romantic era shift from the positive public recognition of fame to the more ambivalent state of celebrity; one which encompasses, as Tuite argues, affective states ranging from

⁴⁹ De Quincey, "Literary," 410.

⁵⁰ Oxford English Dictionary. ('sentimental' I:1).

celebration to notoriety.⁵¹ The zone of opacity with which Butler and Ponsonby occluded the precise nature of their relationship thus underpinned, not only the startling range of their queer various afterlives, but the enduring frisson that maintained them, as if conserved against bodily decay, in the public eye. In 1820, they travelled to Oswestry to see the famous comedian and impersonator, Charles Mathews, perform at the local theatre. Mathews scrutinized their sociable performance as closely as they did his stagecraft, exclaiming in a letter to his wife, a fellow actor, "Oh, such curiosities! I was nearly convulsed. I could scarcely get on for the first ten minutes after my eye caught them."⁵² Mathews's professional eye emphasized both their fame and gendered idiosyncrasies:

Though I have never seen them, I instantaneously knew them. As they are seated, there is not one point to distinguish them from men: the dressing and powdering of the hair: their well-starched neckcloths: the upper part of their habits, which they always wear, even at a dinner party, made precisely like men's coats; and regular black beaver men's hats. They looked exactly like two respectable superannuated old clergymen; one the picture of Boruwlaski.⁵³

Mathews's immediate identification of Butler and Ponsonby is linked to their distinctive gender presentation, their visual correspondence to aging male professionals functioning, according to the logic of the closet, as an open secret presumed to be more legible to onlookers than to those to whom it pertains.⁵⁴ With an emphasis echoing that of the General Evening Post article of 1790, Mathews pays particular attention to the masculine cut of Butler and Ponsonby's riding habits. Their sartorial transvestism was again reiterated by Prussian Prince Fürst Hermann von Pückler-Muskau when he visited in

⁵¹ Tuite, "Tainted," 78.

⁵² Anne Mathews, Memoirs of Charles Mathews, Comedian, vol. 3:1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1839) 151.

⁵³ Mathews, Memoirs 151.

⁵⁴ Sedgwick, "Introduction," 225.

1828, describing each as wearing “a man’s cravat and waistcoat,” a short petticoat and boots and “a coat of blue cloth, of a cut quite peculiar—a sort of middle term between a man’s coat and a lady’s riding habit.”⁵⁵ As seen in chapter four, Butler and Ponsonby’s equestrian styling functioned as a potential signifier of both sapphism and sexually excessive corporeality. Mathews further emphasizes the oddity of their appearance by likening the latter to Józef Boruwlaski (1739-1837), the Polish-born dwarf musician who was presented to Hapsburg Empress Maria Theresa, and toured Scotland and Ireland between 1783 and 1786. Mathews’s emphasis on the verisimilitude of the Ladies’ gendered performances (Butler is described as “the picture of” Boruwlaski) is of further significance given Mathews’s fame as a ventriloquist and impersonator, whose earliest performances consisted of imitations of prominent actors such as John Kemble.⁵⁶ Mathews’s account thus offers a fellow-professional’s account of their performative abilities, figuring their aged appearance as a constitutive element of their gendered pose, rather than an objective account of their advancing years.

In emphasizing Butler and Ponsonby’s effect of gendered verisimilitude, Mathews also gestures towards the potentially discomfiting truth-effects of their performance, behind which no prior subjectivity may be discerned. At the time of Mathews’s first ventriloquist acts, performers had yet to incorporate the use of a dummy into their shows, leading their ability to project ‘thrown’ voices from inanimate or inhuman entities to attract charges of public nuisance. As Amanda Berry argues, ventriloquism also raised concerns as to the body’s performative possibilities, the severing of the connection

⁵⁵ Anon., “Long Ago.”

⁵⁶ Richard L. Kiepac, *Mathews, Charles (1776-1835)*, 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18329>>, 10 Oct. 2006.

between the male form and its 'natural' voice destabilizing the presumptive linkage of the sexed body and its gendered attributes.⁵⁷ Like the ventriloquism for which Mathews was known, Butler and Ponsonby's gender presentation problematized the attribution of voice and identity, while the latter's resemblance to Poland's touring dwarf further foregrounded the question of whether the "presiding residents"⁵⁸ of Llangollen Vale were real people or a parlour trick.⁵⁹

Butler and Ponsonby's stylistic anachronism was also underscored by Mathews's reference to their dressed and powdered hair. Worn almost universally by members of the gentry and aristocracy, hair powder was the most commonly-used cosmetic in late eighteenth-century Britain; the vertiginous hairstyles of the late 1770s and early 1780s often required more than a pound of scented and coloured powder each time the hair was dressed.⁶⁰ Applied with a machine "something between a concertina and a balloon-pump," its tendency to cover furnishings with a fine dust led to the invention of the "powder closet," one of which may be found adjacent to Plâs newydd's State Bedchamber, its door featuring a large cut-out circle through which powder was applied to the sitter within.⁶¹ The popularity of hair powder declined throughout the 1780s, the European Magazine and London Review declaring in July 1784, "The Ladies will still continue to wear their Hair without Powder [...]. In short, nothing is Fashionable but the

⁵⁷ Amanda Berry, "Romanticism and Its Intimate Public: Sexuality and the Public Sphere in British Romantic Writing," PhD Diss, Duke University, 1998, 167.

⁵⁸ De Quincey, Confessions 321.

⁵⁹ This tension is registered in Coleridge's use of the term 'ventriloquism' as both a description of literary imitation and as a figure for the transcendent voice. See John A. Hodgson, "An Other Voice: Ventriloquism in the Romantic Period," Romanticism on the Net 16. Nov (1999).

⁶⁰ John Barrell, The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 147-48.

⁶¹ Barrell, Spirit 149.

Straw Hats.”⁶² Its use was virtually abolished in 1795 by Pitt’s introduction of a guinea hair powder tax, exempting only members of the court, clergymen earning under 100*l.* per annum, magistrates and members of the army.⁶³ As the highest quality hair powder was comprised of wheat starch,⁶⁴ the tax was endorsed by advocates of the poor, with John Donaldson declaring in 1795 that powder “raises the price of bread, and deprives the people of Great Britain of more than thirty millions of quartern loaves annually.”⁶⁵ Speaking against Pitt’s bill in the House of Lords, the Earl of Moira nonetheless argued that the tax would be disproportionately borne by financially distressed members of the gentry, whose use of powder bolstered their continuing claims to genteel status.⁶⁶ Butler and Ponsonby’s continuing use of powder may thus be read as an element of their ongoing performance of gentility, the precarious nature of their class position underpinning their stubborn adherence to a sartorial marker rendered a “relatively arcane sign of specialized professions.”⁶⁷ On the 3 June 1788, Butler records retiring for half an hour to “Powder and dress our hair” before traveling to a gathering at Hardwick.⁶⁸ Ponsonby’s account book further records a payment of 3.6*l.* of powder tax in April 1796.⁶⁹ Their Titus haircuts, popular at the turn of the century, were marginally more modish, yet were definitively passé by the time of their respective deaths in 1829 and 1831.⁷⁰ Mathews’s description of their resemblance to “respectable superannuated old clergymen” reflects their peculiar combination of genteel feminine manners and the

⁶² Anon., *Drive Britain*.

⁶³ Lynn Festa, “Personal Effects: Wigs and Possessive Individualism in the Long Eighteenth Century,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 29.2 (2005): 47-90. 79.

⁶⁴ Barrell, *Spirit* 147.

⁶⁵ Festa, “Personal.” 81.

⁶⁶ Barrell, *Spirit* 158.

⁶⁷ Festa, “Personal.” 82.

⁶⁸ Butler, qtd. in Mavor, *Year* 110..

⁶⁹ Ponsonby, *Accounts 1791-1800*, 100.

⁷⁰ http://www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/enlightened_elegance/head.htm Accessed 4 Feb. 2003.

eccentric garb of aging male professionals. Writing in 1825, Sir Walter Scott further concatenates Butler and Ponsonby's age and gender transitivity. His description of them "fussing and tottering about their porch" like "a couple of hazy or crazy old sailors" likens them to aged and unwitting drag kings, their faculties clouded by dementia or drink.⁷¹ On encountering them again in 1823, Mathews described them as "dear antediluvian old darlings, attired for dinner in the same mummified dress."⁷² The comedian figures Butler and Ponsonby as predating the Biblical flood, their sartorial mummification suggesting them to be simultaneously stifled and sustained by their dated dress and demeanor. The epithet "dear...old darlings" nonetheless figures them as harmless and amusing, akin to a peculiarly British pair of eccentric maiden aunts.

Butler and Ponsonby's Romantic commentators are united in their emphasis on the Ladies' seeming obliviousness to the passage of time. Their various responses are nonetheless distinguished by their visitors' own subject positions, with Prince Pückler-Muskau's figuration of them as authentic emblems of a lost age of nobility contrasting sharply with Mathews's depiction of them as fellow professional thespians. After visiting Plâs newydd in 1828, Pückler-Muskau described Butler and Ponsonby as characterized by "that agreeable *aisance*—that air of the world of the *ancien régime*, courteous and entertaining, without the slightest affectation, speaking French as well as any English woman of my acquaintance."⁷³ While the term '*ancien régime*' was originally employed pejoratively by Enlightenment critics, it here describes Butler and Ponsonby's aristocratic

⁷¹ Hicklin, *Ladies* 13-14.

⁷² Anne Mathews, *The Life and Correspondence of Charles Mathews, the Elder, Comedian*, ed. Edmund Yates (London: 1860) 232.

⁷³ Anon., "Long Ago."

bearing, which is held to recall, along with their polyglot status, the European nobility with whom Pückler-Muskau also identified.⁷⁴ The term had further accrued nostalgic connotations by the early nineteenth-century, the French statesman Charles Maurice de Talleyrand observing in the wake of the Revolution: “those who had not known the *Ancien régime* would never be able to know how sweet life had been.”⁷⁵ Butler and Ponsonby were thus figured by Pückler-Muskau, not as estranged from time, but as relics of an eighteenth-century golden age, their “cheerful manner of the good society” of eighteenth-century European nobility contrasting with the subsequently ‘decayed’ manners of the “serious hard-working age of business.”⁷⁶ Butler described herself to Harriet Pigott in October 1814 as “fervently attached to the Bourbons,”⁷⁷ who had been restored to the French throne the previous April. Her allegiance to the Bourbons was further demonstrated in 1823 when she refused the gift of a lock of Napoleon’s hair.⁷⁸ Pückler-Muskau observed that her constancy was marked by her wearing of the *Croix de St. Louis* and a golden lily, “of nearly the natural size, [...] all, as she said, presents of the Bourbon family.”⁷⁹ Mathews was similarly struck by their bold accessorizing, featuring

⁷⁴ Pückler-Muskau inherited the “Standesherrschaft” or barony of Muskau in 1811, located in what is now the East of Germany.

⁷⁵ “*Ceux qui n'ont pas connu l'Ancien Régime ne pourront jamais savoir ce qu'était la douceur de vivre.*”

⁷⁶ Anon., “Long Ago.”

⁷⁷ Butler, Butler-Pigott 15 Jan. [1814].

⁷⁸ Mavor, *Ladies* 185.

In 1805, Butler’s daybook describes Napoleon as “the Tyrant,” her hatred of the self-proclaimed emperor reflected in her and Ponsonby’s uncharacteristic refusal of an additional treasure to Plâs newydd’s collection of *objets*. (Butler, Daybook.) Describing Mrs. Piozzi’s belief that Napoleon was a harbinger of the end times, Oriane Smith notes that Piozzi employed numerology to identify him with the Beast of Rev. 13:18. Smith notes that Piozzi’s papers also include a diagram given to her by Butler and Ponsonby in which Napoleon’s titles are arranged to spell out the Biblical “Six hundred threescore and six” (Oriane Smith, “Unlearned & Ill-Qualified Pokers into Prophecy”: Hester Lynch Piozzi and the Female Prophetic Tradition,” *Eighteenth Century Life* 28.2 (2004): 87-112. 111n30.)

⁷⁹ Anon., “Long Ago.”

“orders, and myriads of large brooches, with stones large enough for snuff-boxes, stuck in their starched neckcloths.”⁸⁰

Pückler-Muskau suggests that Butler and Ponsonby are unaware of their own anachronism, describing them in the following terms: “Imagine two ladies, the eldest of whom ...begins to feel her years a little, being now eighty-three; the other...esteems herself still youthful, being only seventy-four.”⁸¹ He thus figures their retirement as having separated them the temporal markers of the fashionable world, their ignorance of their advancing years suggesting a form of unworldliness or naïveté. Their apparent artlessness is further emphasized as the Prince describes offering them the compliments of his late grandfather, who visited Llangollen in the earliest years of their retirement. Pückler-Muskau reports, “they... immediately produced a memorial of him, and expressed their wonder that such a young man was dead already.”⁸² The Prince’s account obfuscates the campness of Butler and Ponsonby’s social performance, their prompt location of his ancestor’s portrait suggesting that it was placed close to hand when his request to call upon them was first received. Their expression of wonderment at their earlier guest’s passing further suggests his grandson’s youthful vigour, an imputation no doubt flattering to the Regency traveller.

Insofar as their longevity was a source of fascination to their Romantic commentators, one may speculate that Butler and Ponsonby viewed their performance of nostalgia as another element of their multi-faceted performance of selfhood, one oriented,

⁸⁰ Mathews, *Life* 260.

⁸¹ Hicklin, *Ladies* 15. Butler was actually 91 at the time.

⁸² Hicklin, *Ladies* 16.

with their customary shrewdness, to the audience at hand. While Mathews emphasized the performativity of the Ladies' social pose, Pückler-Muskau instead depicted them as authentic embodiments of the *ancien régime*, succumbing to the bittersweet pleasure of their performance even as he endorsed its verisimilitude: "I was [. . .] affected with a melancholy sort of pleasure in contemplating [the *ancien régime*] in the persons of the amiable old ladies who are among the last of its living representatives."⁸³ Butler and Ponsonby's performance of pastness thus queers the operation of linear chronology, the irony of their being figured as *ancien régime* underscored by the extent to which they had renounced ideals of aristocratic stability in 1778. The Prince's sympathy may also be seen as misguided, insofar as their ability to appear as "comfortable caricatures of themselves"⁸⁴ implicitly endorses the success of their earlier assertions of landed virtue. Their performance of pastness is thus contingent upon their previous performances, through which they contrived the historicity they later embodied.

Sir Walter Scott's "Great Romance"

While Pückler-Muskau figures Butler and Ponsonby as estranged from the currents of the fashionable world, such worldliness recurs as a persistent trace throughout Scott's account of his 1825 visit to Plâs newydd. Traveling with his biographer, John Lockhart, Scott specifically sought out Llangollen's "celebrated Ladies," finding "everything about them and their habitation odd and extravagant beyond report."⁸⁵ Their surpassing of his expectations begs the question of what he expected to witness, clues of which are

⁸³ Hicklin, *Ladies* 16.

⁸⁴ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 145.

⁸⁵ Lockhart, *Life* 44.

revealed in his epistolary account directed to his daughter in 1825. Scott figures Butler and Ponsonby's relationship as having been forged in the fires of heteronormative disappointment: "having been one or both crossed in love, [they] foreswore all dreams of matrimony in the heyday of youth, beauty and fashion, and selected this charming spot for the repose of their now time-honoured virginity." Scott describes the Ladies as renouncing the fashionable world, their provincial location working over time to gain them "implicit credit for being the innocent friends they really were."⁸⁶ Just as his insistence on what they "really were" introduces the spectre of what they might mistakenly be thought to be, Scott's account reveals the endurance of their connection to the fashionable world which they had ostensibly renounced. Recounting Butler and Ponsonby's elopement, Scott reverses their usual figuration as a respectively masculine and feminine pair, describing Butler as arriving in Wales "in the natural aspect of a pretty girl," while "Miss Ponsonby [...] condescended to accompany her in the garb of a smart footman in buckskin breeches."⁸⁷ Scott thus anticipates Mary Louisa Gordon's more complex figuration of their gender roles by over one hundred years, underscoring Ponsonby's full participation within their initial flight, as well as Butler's reliance upon the younger woman's assistance. Ponsonby is depicted as inverting her class, as well as gender identity, her rural costume recalling the breeches roles portrayed at Drury Lane by actresses such as Dorothy Jordan. Their youthful renunciation of fashion is shown to be similarly compromised, suggesting that their rural "repose" was thoroughly permeated by the trappings of the *ton*. Scott observes:

Great Romance (*i.e.* absurd innocence of character) one must have looked for; but it was confounding to find this mixed up with such eager

⁸⁶ Lockhart, *Life* 44.

⁸⁷ Lockhart, *Life* 44.

curiosity, and enormous knowledge of the tattle and scandal of the world they had long since left. Their tables were piled with newspapers from every corner of the kingdom, and they seemed to have the deaths and marriages of the antipodes at their fingertips.⁸⁸

Scott stresses the ravages of time, declaring of Butler, “the elder lady is almost blind, and every way much decayed.”⁸⁹ He suggests that Butler and Ponsonby’s days of youthful fashion are long past, their provinciality attesting to the inscrutability of their “innocent friends[hip].”⁹⁰ They are nonetheless shown to be deeply familiar with the fashionable world, which is placed literally at their fingertips through the textual circuits of print culture. Scott’s perplexity reflects his inability to reconcile the Ladies’ assertion of both innocence and experience, the tattle in which they trade threatening to discredit the “innocent friendship” he claims time to have legitimated. His inability to assimilate the various facets of Butler and Ponsonby’s performance of Romantic pastness thus stands as a fitting symbol of the ways in which they confound their Romantic commentators, whose shared fascination with their age and gender transitivity contrasts with their divergent accounts of the authenticity of the Ladies’ social pose. The constantly-shifting nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s Romantic figuration may thus be read as indicative of their underlying queerness, their figurative plasticity also constituting their resistance to stable definition.

The “coy scene” of Sapphic sociability: Anna Seward’s “Llangollen Vale”

“One of [Butler and Ponsonby’s] visitors was Anna Seward, the eulogist of Maj. Andre. She kept up a correspondence with the ‘recluses’ and wrote queer poetry about them.”

Memphis Commercial 24 Feb 1892.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Lockhart, *Life* 45.

⁸⁹ Lockhart, *Life* 45.

⁹⁰ Lockhart, *Life* 44.

⁹¹ Anon, qtd. in Duggan, *Sapphic* 135.

The endurance of Butler and Ponsonby's relationship is similarly central to their figuration in Anna Seward's 1796 poem "Llangollen Vale." Echoing the scholarly treatment of its subjects, Seward's poem is frequently cited within biographical narratives, yet it has been only rarely subject to sustained critical scrutiny.⁹² Produced in collaboration with its eponymous heroines, Seward's "Llangollen Vale" figures Butler and Ponsonby as the apotheosis of a Welsh historical trajectory initiated by Owain Glyndwr's fifteenth-century resistance to English domination. Seward's poem distances the Ladies from the sexualized associations of exile, the metropolis and Catholic "superstition," instead figuring them as indigenous elements of the Welsh natural and political landscape.⁹³ Accordingly, they are identified as heirs of British liberty and progress, their scholarly and sociable retirement transforming the region's martial past through the rise of politeness and the feminization of culture. Building upon Elizabeth Fay's concept of "sapphic poetics"⁹⁴ the following discussion suggests that Seward identified Butler and Ponsonby's enduring same-sex domesticity as the ideal manifestation of the life she yearned to share with her foster-sister, Honora Sneyd. Seward's textual celebration accordingly protected both her friends' shared home and the domestic ideal it embodied, of which Butler and Ponsonby came to stand as Romantic emblems.

⁹² Elizabeth Fay's *Romantic Medievalism* offers a powerful account of Seward's "sapphic poetics," employed in the analysis below, but does not offer a close textual reading of "Llangollen Vale" or other of Seward's works.

⁹³ Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk: A Romance*, ed. E.A. Baker (New York and London: George Routledge and E.P. Dutton, 1907) 2.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Fay, *Romantic Medievalism* (Great Britain: Palgrave, 2002) 31.

Anna Seward (1742-1809) was amongst the most lauded literary figures of late-Georgian literary firmament. As we have seen, Seward resided in Lichfield, a provincial centre and staging post on the Holyhead Road.⁹⁵ Her father was canon residentiary of Lichfield Cathedral, and she lived in the Bishop's Palace with her sister, Sarah, and Honora Sneyd, whom her family adopted in 1756.⁹⁶ Seward and Sneyd became increasingly close after Sarah's death in 1764, sharing daily activities until Sneyd returned to her father in 1771. Seward's father fostered his daughter's literary precocity, introducing her to Erasmus Darwin, who encouraged her sentimental poetic style.⁹⁷ Seward's mother died in 1780, leaving her to care for her ailing father. While claiming that domestic responsibilities curtailed her literary activities, she established a national reputation throughout the ensuing decade. Her "Elegy on Captain Cook" was published in 1780, its expression of both the national and personal dimensions of grief over Cook's death receiving favourable critical reviews.⁹⁸ She also won admirers with her 1781 "Monody on Major André," memorializing her friend's hanging as a spy during the American Revolution; published in four American editions, the poem led George Washington to dispatch an emissary to England protesting his lack of involvement in André's death. In 1783, Seward published the "verse novel" Louisa, a Poetical Novel, in four epistles.⁹⁹ She also established a friendship with William Hayley, described by Southey as "the most fashionable of living poets," who wrote to her in praise of her

⁹⁵ Jenny Uglow, The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made History (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 40.

⁹⁶ Sylvia Bowerbank, Seward, Anna (1742-1809), 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25135>>, 28 June 2006.

⁹⁷ Bowerbank, Seward, Anna (1742-1809).

⁹⁸ Anna Seward, Elegy on Captain Cook, 1780, Available: http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z300482066&divLevel=3&queryId=../session/1151646333_24778&trailId=10B88F9B3A7&area=Poetry&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=19Kb2006.

⁹⁹ A further two editions appeared in 1789 and 1792. (J.R. de J. Jackson, Romantic Poetry by Women: A Bibliography 1770-1835 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 293.)

“Elegy on Captain Cook.”¹⁰⁰ Echoing the situation of women writers such as Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans, Seward’s current placement on the lower reaches of the critical summit thus fails to convey an adequate sense of her central place within the Romantic period, during which her provincial residency belied her national fame.

The Rev. Seward died in 1790, bequeathing his daughter a four-hundred pound annuity, a sum comparable to Butler and Ponsonby’s income.¹⁰¹ Seward rejected entreaties to move to London or Bath, declaring her desire to remain “in an abode which [...] breathes of nothing above the level of mere common and stileless life.”¹⁰² John Brewer argues that her decision to remain in Lichfield demonstrates her shrewdness, rather than temerity. The town boasted an established literary community, while Britain’s efficient postal system and press encouraging of contributors allowed her to translate provincial activities into national prominence.¹⁰³ In her extensive correspondence, which she revised and edited for publication, Seward emphasized her status as the embodiment of genteel literary taste, insisting that literary criticism belonged properly to provincial amateurs, rather than metropolitan professionals.¹⁰⁴ She nonetheless utilized the resources of the metropolis, publishing in London periodicals and expressing bitterness over her 1791 exclusion from accolades accorded those who immortalized Cook in print.¹⁰⁵ Although she expressed conventional concerns as to the wisdom of female publication, her reluctance reflects her suspicions of “the Gothic mantle, now spread over poetic

¹⁰⁰ Brewer, *Pleasures* 605.

¹⁰¹ Anna Seward, Anna Seward to Edward Jerningham [1790], Jerningham Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino.

¹⁰² Seward to Chris Smythe Esq. (7 Apr. 1796), Seward, *Letters* 4:196.

¹⁰³ Brewer, *Pleasures* 577.

¹⁰⁴ Brewer, *Pleasures* 497.

¹⁰⁵ Guest, *Small* 257.

taste,” rather than the inherent impropriety of such an activity. As she described a collection of her sonnets to Butler in December 1795, “I certainly mean they should one day appear. I know their poetic worth, and dare trust their fame to posterity[.]”¹⁰⁶

Seward defused the potential threat posed by such feminine self-assurance by identifying her literary activities with the prevailing rhetoric of middle-class feminine domesticity. She asserted her prioritization of domestic duties over “the idle business of the muses,”¹⁰⁷ describing her nationally-circulating poetry as inspired by a feminized scene of “provincial tranquility.”¹⁰⁸ Harriet Guest nonetheless argues that her presentation of her literary activities as subordinate to the exercise of sensibility worked to authorize her extensive correspondence, published poetry and commentary, and lively social round.¹⁰⁹ Guest further suggests that Seward’s promulgation of a domesticated model of literary production allowed texts such as her “Elegy on Captain Cook” to express a distinctively feminine form of patriotism throughout the 1780s, a decade in which national confidence was severely diminished by American independence, the Gordon riots and the social upheavals of population expansion, industrialization and enclosure.¹¹⁰ Seward’s combination of national celebration and personal consolation led her to be celebrated by the mid-1790s as “th’immortal MUSE of Britain,”¹¹¹ at a time in which women’s prominence in the public sphere was subject of virulent critique. Her

¹⁰⁶ Seward to Butler (9 Dec. 1795), Seward, Letters 4:134.

¹⁰⁷ Guest, Small 256.

¹⁰⁸ Brewer, Pleasures 611.

¹⁰⁹ Guest, Small 256.

¹¹⁰ Guest, Small 254.

¹¹¹ H.F. Cary, “Sonnet,” Llangollen Vale, with Other Poems (London: Sael, 1796): 1.7. 1.7.

Also see the Rev. F.H. Cary “Verses by the Rev. H.F. Carey, on reading the following paraphrases,” 1.10, in Seward’s Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace (London: Sael, 1799) and a letter between Ponsonby and Seward c.1805 in which Ponsonby addresses Seward as “Queen Muse of Britain.” (Ponsonby to Seward c.1805)

figuration as the public embodiment of national sentiment and female propriety thus reflects her successful occupation and subversion of the 1790s discourse of feminine domesticity, rendering her cultural project peculiarly resonant with that of her Llangollen friends.

Seward first met Butler and Ponsonby in August 1795, when she visited the Rev. and Mrs. Roberts of Dinbren.¹¹² Their amalgam of sentimental friendship, literary taste, cultural prominence and feminine domesticity was highly gratifying to Seward's heightened sensibility. Writing to Mary Powys in November 1795, she declares:

This excursion [to Wales] has given me the honour and happiness of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Ponsonby's friendship, the celebrated Recluses of Llangollen Vale [...] They are women of genius, taste and knowledge,--sought, in their beauteous retirement, by the great, the literary, and the ingenious.¹¹³

Alluding to their guests of the 1780s and early 1790s, which included Burke, Sheridan, Elizabeth Linley Sheridan and Josiah Wedgwood, Seward implicitly locates herself within such distinguished ranks.¹¹⁴ The 'honour' Seward avows similarly marks her identification with the Ladies' sociable litany, anticipating the strategic use to which each party would press their relationship. In August 1795, Seward wrote proudly to the Rev. Henry White of Lichfield, "By [Butler and Ponsonby's] own invitation I drank tea with them thrice during the nine days of my visit to Dinbren."¹¹⁵ Seward also relished an

¹¹² Mavor, *Ladies* 123.

Seward most probably knew of the Ladies prior to their meeting, with their overlapping social circles including Mrs. Powys of Beswick, Josiah Wedgwood, and the Rev. Richard Whalley of Llangollen, the brother of Seward's friend the Rev. Thomas Sedgwick Whalley.

¹¹³ Seward to Powys (30 Nov. 1795), Seward, *Letters* 4:120.

¹¹⁴ Vivienne W. Painting, *Hayley, William (1745–1820)*, 2004, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12769>>, 6 Aug. 2006.

¹¹⁵ During this first visit, they also introduced her to Ponsonby's kinswoman Mary Tighe. The two writers continued to correspond, with Ponsonby writing to Seward around 1805 of "The sweet & interesting

invitation, issued at Butler and Ponsonby's request, to "a rural dinner" given at Valle-Crucis by Mrs. Ormsby.¹¹⁶ The melancholy grandeur of the ruined abbey was heightened by the strains of a female harper, whom Butler and Ponsonby paid two shillings and sixpence to entertain the guests, while after dinner the company partook of tea and coffee at Plâs newydd.¹¹⁷ The gathering's fashionable status was suggested by its size ("Our party was large enough to fill three chaises and two phaetons"¹¹⁸) and title, which echoed 1792 newspaper reports of "Mrs. Hobart's Rural Breakfast,"¹¹⁹ a gathering of four hundred guests including the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Gloucester and the Duchess of Rutland.¹²⁰ Seward's first meeting with Butler and Ponsonby thus foregrounded their assertion of both picturesque provinciality and fashionable sociability, as it did their embodiment of enduring female domesticity.

From its earliest inception, Seward's career was bolstered by her shrewd identification and poetic celebration of national figures such as Cook and André. Her critical acumen was similarly evidenced by her enthusiastic courtship of Butler and Ponsonby's friendship, followed swiftly by her 1796 "Llangollen Vale." The poem was written and dispatched to its subjects in the latter months of 1795, with Seward acknowledging the Ladies' approbation in December of the same year. Butler and Ponsonby responded to Seward's request for a "vignette for Llangollen Vale" by

Songstress who lately presented her Psyche to you." (Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Anna Seward [1805], Ms. Bod. Ms Eng. Letters 144 fol. 224-25, Oxford.)

¹¹⁶ Seward, qtd. in Mavor, *Year* 156.

Also see Seward to Rev. T.S. Whalley (30 Nov. 1795), Seward, *Letters* 4:129.

¹¹⁷ Ponsonby, *Accounts* 1791-1800, (27 May 1796) 102.

¹¹⁸ Mavor, *Year* 156.

¹¹⁹ Mrs. Albinia Hobart, countess of Buckinghamshire, who campaigned in the 1784 Westminster election for her Pittite relative Sir Cecil Wray, and whose obesity led her to be contrasted satirically with the Foxite Duchess of Devonshire.

¹²⁰ Anon., "Mrs. Hobart's Rural Breakfast," *The Times* 30 June 1792 1792: 2.

providing the engraving reproduced on the volume's cover, for which they insisted on discharging the bill.¹²¹ Butler and Ponsonby's involvement in their own celebration might thus be seen to render the poem jointly-authored, its genesis and production attesting to its sociable source.

Matching Honora: Seward's Celebration of Butler and Ponsonby

Seward's enthusiasm for Butler and Ponsonby not only reveals their shared sensibilities, but also her desire to honour a publicly acceptable model of flourishing female affection. As seen above, Seward was fourteen when her family adopted the five-year-old Honora Sneyd, with whom Seward bonded intensely after her sister's death. As Seward's biographer Hesketh Pearson observed in 1937, "Anna grew strangely attached to this child [. . .] and eventually made her the object of a romantic devotion which, in happier circumstances, might have been bestowed upon a member of the sex more likely to profit by it."¹²² Seward's desires for Sneyd were manifest complexly, with her "Monody on Captain André" allowing her to eulogize Sneyd's former suitor after his death dispatched him as a marital prospect. When Sneyd's suitor, Thomas Day, determined that her rejection of absolute male authority rendered her an unsuitable marital prospect, Seward came to anticipate a life shared with Sneyd, and believed that

¹²¹ As Seward wrote to Butler, "I have already expressed to Miss Ponsonby my delight in the scenic fidelity, and elegant execution of the vignette for Llangollen Vale; but I cannot cease to feel pain, in the idea that my receiving it as yours and Miss Ponsonby's present, must render the publication so expensive to you. If you will have the goodness to permit me to discharge the engraver's bill, you will extremely oblige me. The kind trouble you took in procuring the drawing at my wish, is an obligation which I can cheerfully receive. It is yet in your power to render that pleasure unalloyed." (Seward to Butler (4 Feb. 1795), Seward, *Letters* 4:150.)

¹²² Hesketh Pearson, *The Swan of Lichfield: Being a Selection from the Correspondence of Anna Seward* (New York: Oxford UP, 1937) 14.

such hopes were reciprocated.¹²³ She was devastated when Sneyd married Day's friend, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, in July 1773 becoming stepmother to future novelist Maria Edgeworth. Seward's poetry mourned Sneyd's exchange of "plighted love" for "cold disdain,"¹²⁴ asserting in the wake of the nuptials, "Ingratitude, how deadly is the smart / Thou givs't, inhabiting the form we love!"¹²⁵ The depth of Seward's sorrow has troubled her biographers. As Margaret Ashmun wrote in 1931: "It is not easy to analyze [Seward's] emotions. Did she perhaps desire to marry Edgeworth herself?" Ashmun continues, with unwitting irony: "[Seward's] desire for marriage with Edgeworth, if it existed, was well suppressed."¹²⁶

Honora Sneyd died of consumption in 1780 at the age of forty-nine, leading Seward to attribute her demise to neglect at the hands of "the murderous Edgeworth, who [. . .] crushed to death, the finest of human flowers."¹²⁷ In poems following Sneyd's death, Seward figures Edgeworth as the cause of her beloved's "early hasten'd tomb," likening him to Milton's Satan, his evil instantiated through charismatic duplicity: "Behold him now his genuine colours wear, / That specious false-one, by whose cruel wiles / I lost thy amity."¹²⁸ While Sneyd's letters describe her love for her husband, one is tempted to concur with Seward's judgment upon learning that Edgeworth married Sneyd's sister,

¹²³ Uglow, *Lunar* 189.

¹²⁴ Donoghue, *Passions* 120.

¹²⁵ Anna Seward, "Sonnet. Ingratitude," *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1989): 313-4. 313.

¹²⁶ Margaret Ashmun, *The Singing Swan: An Account of Anna Seward and Her Acquaintance with Dr. Johnson, Boswell, & Others of Their Time* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1931) 61.

¹²⁷ Pearson, *Swan* 21.

¹²⁸ Faderman, *Surpassing* 136.

Elizabeth, within six months of her death.¹²⁹ Edgeworth appears to have viewed this marriage as a way in which to retain possession of Honora, describing the unfortunate Elizabeth as “the Sister of the beloved, the unrivalled object of my affections.”¹³⁰ Seward preserved her love for Sneyd with more obvious constancy, remaining unattached, despite her later infatuations with Elizabeth Cornwallis, Sarah Siddons, and married men including the Lichfield vicar John Saville.¹³¹ She nonetheless yearned for the “matchless Honora” throughout her life, seeking to preserve Sneyd’s memory through her poetic defence of Butler and Ponsonby.

Read in resistance to the heteronormative presumptions of earlier biographers, Seward’s celebration of the Ladies suggests that their relationship embodied that she planned to share with Sneyd. Seward sought to incorporate Sneyd materially within Plâs newydd, presenting Butler and Ponsonby with J.R. Smith’s engraving of George Romney’s “Serena Reading Burney’s Evelina,” for which Sneyd was the model.¹³² As she wrote of its prominent placement, “I am excessively gratified that you think dear Honora lovely; that you honour her with a situation so distinguished [...] All the obligation of her establishment in the Lyceum of Llangollen Vale is on my side.”¹³³ Seward identified Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship as mobile model of enduring Romantic domesticity, figured as a metaphorical frame in which to locate Sneyd’s memory. In an important early reconsideration of Seward’s same-sex attachments,

¹²⁹ While this union reportedly accorded with Sneyd’s dying wishes, it was forbidden by the Bishop of Lichfield and inspired a flurry of scandalized correspondence in the local newspapers, leading the couple to separate before the banns were called and the marriage officiated in Holborn. (Uglow, Lunar 318.)

¹³⁰ Richard Lowell Edgeworth, Richard Lowell Edgeworth to Mrs Ruxton, National Library of Ireland Edgeworth Papers, Dublin.

¹³¹ Pearson, Swan 17-18.

¹³² Brewer, Pleasures 607.

¹³³ Ashmun, Singing 226.

Faderman suggests that Seward's gift was "perhaps [Seward's] way of living out a fantasy," allowing her to locate Sneyd's image, if not the woman it represented, within Plâs newydd.¹³⁴ Seward's identification of Sneyd's portrait with its deceased subject is revealed by her use of the present tense when discussing the Romney portrait and her failure to distinguish between the absent individual ("dear Honora") and her representation. Seward's preservation of an eternally youthful Sneyd is also apparent in her account of her ritual shrine, which was subject to annual observances: "Another striking likeness of my lost Honora [. . .] stands opposite my bed, and has stood there from the time she left this house in her nineteenth year."¹³⁵ In metonymically bringing Sneyd to Plâs newydd, Seward identified Butler and Ponsonby's relationship as a mobile Romantic model, one able to incorporate literally her own disappointed domestic desires.

The connection between Seward's desire for Sneyd and her celebration of Butler and Ponsonby is similarly noted by Elizabeth Fay. While not offering a close reading of "Llangollen Vale," Fay suggests that Seward's celebration of Butler and Ponsonby reflects a form of literary sensibility specifically associated with female same-sex desire.¹³⁶ Refiguring McGann's distinction between the experiential naïveté of poetic sensibility and the performative self-consciousness of sentimentality, Fay describes Seward's poetry of sensibility as located within a sentimental tradition "whose self-consciousness is directed towards protective disguise."¹³⁷ Beneath their sentimental pose, Fay thus suggests that Seward's texts perpetuate a literally Sapphic tradition, defined as a

¹³⁴ Faderman, *Surpassing* 137.

¹³⁵ Ashmun, *Singing* 227.

¹³⁶ Fay, *Medievalism* 31.

¹³⁷ Fay, *Medievalism* 34.

discursive space “in which history [is defined] as the loss and recapture of the female beloved.”¹³⁸ Taking up Fay’s figure of “sapphic poetics,” Seward’s poem may be read as an exercise in textual refashioning, through which Butler and Ponsonby transform Wales’s bloody and superstitious past through the feminized rise of politeness and progress. Seward’s sapphic poetics may thus be seen to protect Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship and the domestic ideal it embodies, while simultaneously disclosing the queer desires it seeks to conceal.

The opening invocation of Seward’s poem’s is addressed to Llangollen Vale itself: “Luxuriant Vale / thy country’s early boast, / What time great GLENDOUR gave thy scenes to Fame.”¹³⁹ A central figure of Seward’s epic vision, Owain Glyndwr (c.1359–c.1416) was a North Welsh nobleman descended from the princely houses of Powys and Gwynedd, whose family titles included the lordship of Glyndyfrdwy, encompassing land situated in the Dee valley between Corwen and Llangollen.¹⁴⁰ Glyndwr’s family was connected through marriage to English and Anglo-Welsh border families, and Glyndwr studied law in London, married an Englishwoman and served in the English army. Returning to Wales in 1400, Glyndwr found himself amongst the Welsh lords whose land had been seized by the English Reynold Grey of Ruthin (d.1440). Rejecting his family’s

¹³⁸ Fay, *Medievalism* 34-5.

¹³⁹ The opening term characterizes the North Welsh landscape as abundant and prolific, its exoticism carrying resonances of non-English wildernesses brought under colonial control. Indeed, the term was employed in George Anson’s 1748 *Anson’s Voyage Around the World* to describe the “truly luxuriant” soils encountered on Anson’s 1740 voyage to the East Indies, during which he rounded Cape Horn and successfully captured a valuable Spanish trading ship. Such invocations of colonial power are nonetheless counterpoised against images of this fertile landscape giving rise to Glyndwr’s unification of Welsh patriots against the excesses of English rule. The resistance of “Primeval Britons” to annexation is thus paradoxically figured as underpinning an emergent idea of the unified and powerful British nation, of which Butler and Ponsonby stand as steadfastly virtuous feminine embodiments.

¹⁴⁰ Llinos Smith, *Glyn Dwr, Owain (C.1359–C.1416)*, 2004, Oxford UP, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10816>>11 Oct. 2006.

traditional cooperation with the English Crown, Glyndwr gathered members of the Welsh *uchelwyr* or squirearchy to rise against Henry IV, attacking Ruthin and English-identified towns including Denbigh, Rhuddlan, Flint, Oswestry, and Welshpool.¹⁴¹ Glyndwr's guerilla tactics allowed him to incite insurrection throughout North Wales; his uncanny ability to escape capture led to tales of his ability to transmute his shape and travel upon the winds.¹⁴² From 1402, Glyndwr adopted the role of national leader, winning decisive battles against Henry IV, attempting to form a Franco-Welsh alliance, convening a national parliament in Machynlleth, and accepting the title of King Owain IV of Wales in 1404. From 1406 onwards, however, his precarious unification of his country began to falter, with the loss of the castle of Aberwystwyth in 1408 and the siege and capture of Harlech, Glyndwr's capital, in 1409. Sources suggest that Glyndwr went into hiding in 1415, but was by 1417 presumed dead, and Wales was once again brought under the full control of the English crown.¹⁴³ Glyndwr was celebrated as "Glendour" in Shakespeare's Henry IV and rendered as semi-divine in Pennant's Tour (Seward's main historical source), in which he is linked with the Arthurian Uther Pendragon.¹⁴⁴ Tales of his birth and military valour were further disseminated by Welsh Bards such as Iolo Goch, who "mention[ed] a Comet, which marked the great deeds of Glendour, when he was in the Meridian of his glory."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Smith, Glyn Dwr, Owain (C.1359–C.1416).

¹⁴² Phillip Warner, Famous Welsh Battles (Great Britain: Fontana/Collins, 1977) 110.

¹⁴³ Smith, Glyn Dwr, Owain (C.1359–C.1416).

¹⁴⁴ William D. Brewer, "Felicia Hemans, Byronic Cosmopolitanism and the Ancient Welsh Bards," English Romanticism and the Celtic World, eds. Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003): 167-81. 178.

¹⁴⁵ Seward, "Llangollen," 1.

Seward's narrative figures Denbighshire as the crucible of Welsh history, the site of Glyndwr's resistance to Henry IV and his encroaching English troops.¹⁴⁶ Wales's subjugation is described in terms recalling the Book of Revelation: "'DEATH, on his pale Horse,' with baleful smile, / Smote with its blaring hoof the frightened plains."¹⁴⁷ Seward's poem emphasizes the masochism of England's colonial domination, declaring that Henry IV's "scarce-hop'd crown imperfect bliss supplies, / Till Cambria's vassalage be deeply felt." It further underscores the bloodiness of the confrontation between the English and Welsh, with Cambria overlooking "The check'd waves eddying round the ghastly dead."¹⁴⁸ Seward's narrative fuses Celtic nationalism and Romantic individualism, figuring Henry's forces as an arrogant colonizing mass, their superior strength overcome by individual valour. She describes Glyndwr as having "Taught the proud numbers of the English Host, / How vain their vaunted force, when Freedom's flame / Fir'd him to brave the Myriads he abhorr'd, / Wing'd his unerring shaft, and edg'd his victor's sword." Seward's Welsh nationalism is nonetheless as ambivalent as that of Hemans, whose poetic oeuvre included both "Owen Glendwr War-Song" and "The Stately Homes of England."¹⁴⁹ While "Llangollen Vale" asserts an establishing myth of Welsh nationalism, this violent and masculine defence of Welsh liberty is figured as bringing forth, not Glyndwr's independent Welsh nation, but Butler and Ponsonby's idealized and enduring feminine retirement. Seward depicts the Vale's battlegrounds as sanctified by the "milder lustre" of feminized patriotism, the Ladies' "letter'd ease" and "Friendship's blest repose" recalling the amateur versifying and genteel sociability with which Seward

¹⁴⁶ Seward, "Llangollen," 1-3.

¹⁴⁷ See Rev. 6:8 "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and hell followed him."

¹⁴⁸ Seward, "Llangollen," 4.

¹⁴⁹ Brewer, "Felicia," 167.

herself identified.¹⁵⁰ Butler and Ponsonby are thus figured as heirs of British liberty and progress, their “genius, taste and fancy”¹⁵¹ transforming the region’s martial past through the rise of politeness and the feminization of culture.

Seward’s citation of Butler and Ponsonby as feminine heirs to Glyndwr’s Welsh heroism is further supported by her complex employment of Shakespearean intertexts. Shakespeare operated as a mobile signifier in the Romantic period. David Garrick’s 1769 Stratford Jubilee triumphantly asserted Shakespeare’s status as the “blest genius of the [British] isle,” the Bard’s poetry infamously displaced by Garrick’s assertions of Britain’s national superiority.¹⁵² Garrick thus echoed Elizabeth Montagu’s 1769 assertion of Shakespeare’s superiority over his Gallic competitors, assuring skeptics that a perusal of Montagu’s An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear would convince them “that England may justly boast the honour of producing the greatest dramatic poet in the world.”¹⁵³ During the early 1790s, the authority of Shakespeare’s imprimatur was paradoxically emphasized by William Henry Ireland’s 1794 forgery of ‘Shakespearean’ letters, deeds and promissory notes. Like the 1761 works of James Macpherson’s ‘Ossian,’ Ireland’s forgeries were initially deemed genuine, and their discovery championed by liberal scholars who claimed Shakespeare as a poetic democrat. Ireland’s fraud was nonetheless brought to light in the wake of his ‘discovery’ of the lost Shakespearean plays Henry II and Vortigen; Sheridan immediately booked Vortigen for performance at Drury Lane, despite John Kemble expressing suspicions as to its

¹⁵⁰ Seward, “Llangollen,” 7.

¹⁵¹ Seward, “Llangollen,” 7.

¹⁵² Michael Dobson, The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 218.

¹⁵³ Dobson, Making 224.

authenticity. The text was exposed as a fake two days before opening night by the Shakespearean scholar and Burkean conservative, Edmond Malone, and closed, after a single performance, to widespread derision.¹⁵⁴

Seward cites the mobile Shakespearean signature set in circulation by such events, ‘forging’ Butler and Ponsonby’s place in Welsh history in order to figure them as the apotheosis of feminized Enlightenment progress. Recounting the bloody omens that prefigured Glyndwr’s victory, Seward describes “The steeds paternal, on their cavern’d floor / Foaming and horror-struck, ‘fret fetlock-deep in gore.’” The quoted clause is taken from the aftermath of the Battle of Agincourt in Henry V, as the French ambassador Montjoy asks the victorious Henry for permission “to book our dead and then to bury them.”¹⁵⁵ Shakespeare’s description of the siege of Harfleur is also echoed in Seward’s lines, “Loud, in the rattling cars, the neighing steeds; / The doubling drums, the trumpet’s piercing breath, / And all the ensigns dread of havoc, wounds, and death.” Such references are profoundly ambivalent in effect. Seward’s evocation of Henry IV’s attack is achieved with reference to Shakespeare’s Henry V, whose “Welsh plood” did not prevent him from attacking Glyndwr.¹⁵⁶ Her depiction of the enmity between Glyndwr and Henry IV is rendered more complex by her citation of martial imagery from Shakespearean passages expressing the mutual respect shared by Henry V and Montjoy. The national commitments of her martial scene are similarly complicated by her citation

¹⁵⁴ Iain MacCalman, “Ireland, William Henry,” An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832, eds. Iain MacCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Oxford: Oxford, 1999): 559-60. 559-60.

¹⁵⁵ William Shakespeare, Henry V, Oxford World Classics, ed. Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 4:7:68.

¹⁵⁶ Shakespeare, Henry V 4:7:61.

of the Anglo-French battle of Agincourt in order to describe Glyndwr's attempts to mobilize the French against the English.¹⁵⁷

The divided duties of by such intertexts are masked by the authorizing effect of their Shakespearean imprimatur. Seward's evocation of Celtic heroism figures Butler and Ponsonby as heirs of a unifying British liberty, rather than colonial opposition to English rule, her Shakespearean citations identifying them with the patriotic female defence of Shakespeare established by Montagu's 1769 Essay. As Guest observes, Montagu was held to exemplify a distinctively British model of Enlightenment progress, her feminine "Genius" rendered coextensive with "Albion's Coast."¹⁵⁸ Montagu's defence of Shakespeare presents his linguistic "irregularities" and democratic characterisations as evidence of his moral vision,¹⁵⁹ the refining effect of her critique emblemizing the role of eighteenth-century women in civilizing Britain's barbarous past through politeness and taste.¹⁶⁰ In forging Butler and Ponsonby's Shakespearean identity, Seward thus figures them as heirs to British liberty and progress, eliding their Irish and Catholic marginality and identifying them with the feminized British patriotism of the 1770s and 1780s, rather than the "sex panics" of the ensuing decade.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ These tensions further map onto the divided loyalties that characterized early Romantic responses to the French Revolution, such as Wordsworth's 1793 visit to a Welsh church, described in Book Ten of The Prelude, in which he finds himself unable to pray for an English victory over the French Republic. (Watson, "Wordsworth," 96.)

¹⁵⁸ See Ann Penny's lines "Addressed to the Author of an Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare" (Guest, Small 90-1.)

¹⁵⁹ Montagu, Shakespear 68.

¹⁶⁰ Guest, Small 91.

¹⁶¹ Katherine Binhammer, "The Sex Panic of the 1790s," Journal of the History of Sexuality 6 (1996): 409-34. 409.

"Llangollen Vale" therefore both protects and publicizes its subjects, the tension between exposure and concealment disclosing the ambivalent operation of Seward's sapphic poetics. The Vale is described as "[S]creen'd by mural rocks," its geological mask allowing it to display "Beauty's romantic pomp" with asserted pride.¹⁶² This tension is reiterated in Seward's description of the valley's "coy Scene, by deep'ning veils o'drawn,"¹⁶³ the shrouding of dusk enacting the Foucauldian logic through which the repression of sexuality also serves as its elaboration and disclosure.¹⁶⁴ Seward's association of Butler and Ponsonby with feminine chastity is apparently unambiguous:

Now with a Vestal lustre glows the VALE,
Thine, sacred FRIENDSHIP, permanent as pure;
In vain the stern Authorities assail,
In vain Persuasion spreads her silken lure,
High-born, and high-endowed, the peerless Twain,
Pant for coy Nature's charms 'mid silent dale, and plain.¹⁶⁵

Distancing Butler and Ponsonby from the connotations of sexual cosmopolitanism, their "sacred FRIENDSHIP" is located emphatically within the historicized landscape of North Wales.¹⁶⁶ Their virtue is further asserted by a resistance to the rhetoric of "Persuasion," with its connotations of being drawn unwillingly into collective opinion, and the "silken lure" of fashionable society.¹⁶⁷ While the purity of their relationship is mirrored in the landscape they so strongly desire, the assault of "stern Authorities" simultaneously suggests it to represent a threat incommensurate with its vestal glow. Seward's narrative thus demands that it be read against its most strident assertions, its veiling of Butler and

¹⁶² Seward, "Llangollen," 6.

¹⁶³ Seward, "Llangollen," 8.

¹⁶⁴ Clara Tuite, "Cloistered Closets: Enlightenment Pornography, the Confessional State, Homosexual Persecution and *the Monk*," *Romanticism on the Net* 8 (1997). 5.

¹⁶⁵ Seward, "Llangollen," 6.

¹⁶⁶ Seward, "Llangollen," 6.

¹⁶⁷ Seward, "Llangollen," 6.

Ponsonby's relationship beneath the sign of progress simultaneously disclosing its status as something more questionable.

The double movement of Seward's poetics is further apparent in the poem's evocation of a Welsh pastoral masquerade. *Plâs newydd* is described as sheltered by "Arcadian Bowers,"¹⁶⁸ this pastoral motif distancing the Ladies from the sexualized taint of the city. Seward's correspondence echoed the poem's depiction of the Ladies' pastoral idyll, describing them as the "the Rosalind and Celia of real life."¹⁶⁹ In so doing, Seward identifies them with the coupled and cross-dressed heroines of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, whose gendered transgressions are safely contained within the theatrical realm. Rather than containing sapphic desire within the heterosexual mode of the pastoral, Seward's coded reference nonetheless recalls, to the knowing reader, the roguish female masculinity typified by Dorothy Jordan's performances of Rosalind at Drury Lane between 1787 and 1814.¹⁷⁰ Siddons also employed the names "Rosalind" and "Celia" as a code for female same-sex desire, addressing Anne Damer's paramour, Mary Berry, as "Rosalind in her mannish dress."¹⁷¹ In dubbing Butler and Ponsonby "Eleanora" and "Zara," Seward recalls the tragedy heroines popularized by her beloved Siddons, but emphasizes their less tragic teleology.¹⁷² She instead suggests that Llangollen's rustic pair

¹⁶⁸ Seward, "Llangollen," 7.

¹⁶⁹ Seward, *Letters* 4: 200.

¹⁷⁰ Alan Brissenden, "Introduction," *As You Like It*, ed. Alan Brissenden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993): 1-86. 53. Jordan also appeared at Drury Lane in the similarly cross-dressed role of Shakespeare's Viola.

¹⁷¹ Sarah Siddons, Sarah Siddons to Mary Berry July [N.Y.], Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington. Mary Caryl's role in sustaining their domestic ménage is further emphasized in the Ladies' correspondence with Seward, in which she is described as Euryclea, after Odysseus's nurse, who is the only person to recognize him upon his return from Ithaca. (Sarah Ponsonby, Sarah Ponsonby to Anna Seward [1804], Ms, Bod. Ms Eng. Letters 144 fol. 224-25, Oxford.)

¹⁷² Seward, "Llangollen," 7. Siddons played the tragic roles of Zara in William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride* and Eleanora in James Thomson's *Edward and Eleanora*.

remain in Arden with their faithful female “Adam,” her narrative forestalling the heterosexual closure of both Shakespeare’s play and Sneyd’s short life. Seward’s Welsh pastoral distances Butler and Ponsonby from the sexualized metropolis, attempting to protect both her friends and the relational ideal they embodied. The queerness of their relationship is nonetheless disclosed by its denial, the poem’s textual effects erasing their queerness no more successfully than do Shakespeare’s fifth acts.

The ambivalent effects of Seward’s sapphic poetics are similarly disclosed by her attempts to distance Butler and Ponsonby from the sexualized threat of Catholicism. Addressing the “ivied VALLE CRUCIS, time decayed,” Seward declares,

Say, lonely, ruin’d Pile, when former years
Saw your pale Train at midnight altars bow,
Saw SUPERSTITION frown upon the tears
that mourned the rash irrevocable vow.¹⁷³

As noted by the Monthly Review, such lines evoke the “voluntary miseries” of Catholicism, which the poem identifies directly with the personified figure of Superstition.¹⁷⁴ The association of superstition and the Roman Church is similarly asserted in Mathew Lewis’s Gothic novel, The Monk, also published in 1796, as it is in the British anti-Catholic denunciations that flourished throughout the Romantic period.¹⁷⁵ The Monk figures the cloister as characterized by polymorphous perversities, including clerical cross-dressing, pederasty, orgiastic heterosexuality and unwitting infanticide.¹⁷⁶ Seward’s narrative seeks to distance Butler and Ponsonby from such horrors, declaring of the abbey’s novitiates, “Wore one young lip gay ELEANORA’S smile? / Did ZARA’S

¹⁷³ Seward, “Llangollen,” 10.

¹⁷⁴ Anon., “Miss Seward’s Llangollen Vale,” Monthly Review June 1796: 558.

¹⁷⁵ Tuite, “Cloistered,” 1.

¹⁷⁶ Lewis, Monk 330-31.

looks serene one tedious hour beguile?"¹⁷⁷ Seward's reports of the sociability now animating the abbey further identifies the Ladies with a feminized model of Enlightenment progress, their vitality contrasting with the "breathing Corse[s]" of its superstitious past.¹⁷⁸ However, just as their "outlandish" status might be seen to invoke both Catholicism and its alleged perversions,¹⁷⁹ the poem's "rash irrevocable vow[s]" might also figure the promises that sealed Butler and Ponsonby's elopement. The persistent nature of this Popish threat is further evidenced by Wordsworth's 1824 description of Butler as being "so oddly [...] attired that we took her, at a little distance, for a roman Catholic priest."¹⁸⁰ Seward seeks to shield Butler and Ponsonby from the political and sexual 'taint' of Rome, in so doing defending the Romantic domestic ideal they exemplify. Endorsing Sedgwick's claim that the Gothic cowl both masks and represents queer desire, Seward's veiling of their suspected sexuality nonetheless serves as its simultaneous specification.¹⁸¹ Seward's poem thus stands as a fitting emblem of Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project, throughout which their self-fashioning at once effaces and exposes, through a queer lens, the transgressive nature of their domestic milieu.

¹⁷⁷ Seward, "Llangollen," 10.

¹⁷⁸ Seward, "Llangollen," 10.

¹⁷⁹ Tuite, "Cloistered," 9.

¹⁸⁰ Lanser, *Blush*.

¹⁸¹ Sedgwick, *Between* 143. Describing the "lip-smacking slippage from veil to flesh," Sedgwick declares elsewhere, "The veil [...] is also suffused with sexuality. This is true partly because of the other, apparently opposite set of meanings it hides: the veil that conceals and inhabits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it, both as a metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified." (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York and London: University Paperbacks and Methuen, 1986) 143.)

Depth and Domesticity: William Wordsworth's depiction of Butler and Ponsonby

Seward was until recently located on the critical margins of Romanticism, the near mythic status she achieved in her lifetime overshadowed by her compromised credentials as a female poet of sensibility.¹⁸² Her literary significance has been diminished by her depiction as a figure of primarily biographical interest, her tenuous relation to the Romantic centre offering the Ladies scant support of their own claim to recognition as 'Romantics.' In sharp contrast, Butler and Ponsonby's place within literary studies is often asserted with reference to their connection to William Wordsworth, who visited Plâs newydd with his wife Mary and daughter Dora in September 1824.¹⁸³ Wordsworth's name is prominent among the list of their friends circulated in the documentation accompanying the 1997 Adam Matthews microfilm of their papers located in National Library of Wales, the value of the product implicitly endorsed through their connection to the *sine qua non* of Romantic canonicity. In his account of Wordsworth's Welsh tour of 1824, J.R. Watson declares that this journey, which consisted of polite sociability, rather than the physical and poetic exertion of Wordsworth's Cambrian journeys of 1791 and 1793, is of "of little interest to the student of Wordsworth's poetry," suggesting that his

¹⁸² Guest, *Small* 253.

¹⁸³ William Wordsworth, "William Wordsworth to Sir George Beaumont 20 Sept.," *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: Iii the Later Years Part One 1821-1828*, eds. Alan G. Hill and Ernest D. Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1824]): 275-79. 277. Writing to Lady Beaumont on the 18th Sept. 1824, Dorothy Wordsworth describes herself having received news of this journey from Dora Wordsworth, "who gives a most lively account of what she has seen, especially of the ladies at Llangothlin (I cannot spell these Welsh names), with whom they spent an evening; and were well pleased with *them* and their entertainment." (Dorothy Wordsworth, "Dorothy Wordsworth to Lady Beaumont 18 Sept. [1824]," *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: Iii the Later Years Part One 1821-1828*, eds. Alan G. Hill and Ernest D. Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 273-74.) William's letter to Sir George Beaumont (20 Sept. 1824) indicates that the Beaumonts had themselves called upon Plâs newydd, describing Butler and Ponsonby's expression of the hope "that you and Lady B. had not forgotten them; they had certainly not forgotten you, and they begged us to say that they retained a lively remembrance of you both." (William Wordsworth, "William Wordsworth to Sir George Beaumont 20 Sept. 1824," *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: 3 the Later Years Part One 1821-1828*, eds. Alan G. Hill and Ernest D. Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press): 275-79.)

interest in the Ladies marked the final stage of his transition from poetic revolutionary to social conservative.¹⁸⁴ The significance of Wordsworth's intersections with Butler and Ponsonby is nonetheless apparent upon reading these encounters as events of cultural significance in their own right. Butler and Ponsonby's domestic self-fashioning may thus be seen to underpin the Romantic nexus between the construction of domesticity and subjectivity, anticipating the home- and self-making of William and Dorothy Wordsworth.¹⁸⁵ Wordsworth's concatenation of the Ladies' space and subjectivity recalls the gesture underlying Seward's poetic representation of 1796, disclosing a Romantic genealogy both feminine and queer. The Ladies' metonymic relationship to Plâs newydd, anticipating Wordsworth's persistent identification with Dove Cottage, further reveals the material means through which the deep Romantic self was publicly constituted, as domestic spaces came to stand as symbolic instantiations of 'authentic' Romantic selfhood.

Wordsworth's 1824 meeting with Butler and Ponsonby is memorialized in his sonnet, "To the Lady E.B. and the Hon. Miss P.," which was composed at its heroines' request in the grounds of Plâs newydd.¹⁸⁶ The sonnet reads:

A Stream, to mingle with your favourite Dee,
 Along the Vale of Meditation flows;
 So styled by those fierce Britons, pleased to see
 In Nature's face the expression of repose;
 Or haply there some pious hermit chose
 To live and die, the peace of heaven his aim;
 To whom the wild sequestered region owes,
 At this late day, its sanctifying name.
 Glyn Cafaillgaroch, in the Cambrian tongue,

¹⁸⁴ Watson, "Wordsworth," 101.

¹⁸⁵ Heinzelman, "Cult," 53.

¹⁸⁶ Wordsworth, "W. Wordsworth-G. Beaumont 20 Sept. 1824," 277.

In ours, the Vale of Friendship, let this spot
 Be named; where, faithful to a low-roofed Cot,
 On Deva's banks, ye have abode so long;
 Sisters in love, a love allowed to climb,
 Even on this earth, above the reach of Time!¹⁸⁷

Wordsworth's poem figures Llangollen Vale as a place of retreat, its isolation pleasing to both the "fierce Britons" of Pennant's *Tour* and the "pious hermit[s]" of yet another ruined Abbey. Echoing Seward's evocation of the deep history of the place, its closing couplet echoes other Romantic commentators in describing Butler and Ponsonby's relation to temporality. Rather than depicting them as embodying a superseded era, however, the poem figures them as transcending the passage of time, the linkage of temporality and corporeality underscoring the presumptive chastity of Wordsworth's sororal metaphor.¹⁸⁸ Susan S. Lanser observes that the sonnet's figurative strategies not only render Butler and Ponsonby subordinate to the landscape of the "Vale of Friendship," but displace them almost entirely, this topographical substitution working to erase the potential corporeality of their relationship.¹⁸⁹ Mentioned only twice via pronouns before the sonnet's penultimate line, they are figured as faithful to their "low-roof cot," rather than to one another, this affective displacement erasing both their forty-seven years of shared domesticity and the architectural pretensions of their increasingly-

¹⁸⁷ Wordsworth, "Lady E. Butler."

¹⁸⁸ Kathryn R. Kent has warned against presumptions of the asexuality of familial bonds in nineteenth-century texts. She suggests that the association of openness with asexuality may constitute too hasty an imposition of the twentieth-century figure of the closet, within which sexuality and secrecy are mutually implicated. (Kent, *Making* 4-5.) William Wordsworth's own relationship with his sister embodies such an unabashed slippage between the familial and erotic, demonstrated by both Dorothy's famous account of safekeeping his wedding band the night before his nuptials – "he slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently" – and the epithet "Beloved," used in both Dorothy Wordsworth and Butler's journals to designate the object of their affections. (See, for example, an entry of "[23 Mar 1802] 'It is about 10 o'clock, a quiet night. The fire flutters, and the watch ticks. I hear nothing save the breathing of my Beloved, and he now and then pushes his book forward, and turns over a leaf.'" (Dorothy Wordsworth, "The Grasmere Journal," *Dorothy Wordsworth: Selections from the Journals*, ed. Paul Hamilton (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992): 17-162. 104.)

¹⁸⁹ Lanser, *Blush*.

grand home. Lanser observes of the poem's rhetorical displacements: "Instead of the 'mingling' of Butler and Ponsonby, we get the 'mingling' of stream and river; the women 'favour' the river rather than one another; they 'have abode so long' not with each other but 'on Deva's banks.'" In its transcendence of the temporal, Butler and Ponsonby's love thus achieves immortality only at 'the body's expense.'"¹⁹⁰

An alternative to Lanser's account of the sonnet's corporeal displacement is suggested by attending to the longevity of Butler and Ponsonby's relationship, and in particular by acknowledging Wordsworth's indebtedness to Seward's earlier poetic representation. In simultaneously symbolizing and screening their intimate relationship, Wordsworth's sonnet recalls the textual 'veiling' employed in Seward's epic. Read in the context of the *longue durée* of their retirement, it thematizes the representational strategies through which they sustained their enduring queer relationality. Its focus on Plâs newydd further underscores its place as an essential set upon which they publicly staged their 'authentic' Romantic selves.¹⁹¹ As we have seen, Butler and Ponsonby's architectural improvements of Plâs newydd worked to identify them as virtuous and long-settled locals, their performance of the values of fixity and place asserting a Burkean connection between domestic and political virtue. The Romantic association between the construction of domesticity and subjectivity is importantly theorized by Kurt Heinzelman, who describes Dorothy Wordsworth's belief, expressed in her Grasmere journals, that household maintenance is predicated on the equation of domestic labour

¹⁹⁰ Lanser, *Blush*.

¹⁹¹ Pascoe, *Romantic* 189.

and creative production.¹⁹² Describing the period of the Wordsworths' residence at Dove Cottage (1799-1807), Heinzelman characterizes William's domestic ideal as one in which domestic husbandry enables creative production, his desire to be "The Master of a little lot of ground" reflecting a dream of owning his own literary labour.¹⁹³ As Heinzelman demonstrates, Dorothy's ideal was more materially pragmatic, not merely in the darning, cooking and cleaning with which she supported William's writing, but in her desire for enduring legal possession of land and property. As she declares, "if we could erect a little cottage and call it *our own* we should be the happiest of all human beings."¹⁹⁴

The specificity of Dorothy Wordsworth's aspiration, which could be plausibly attributed to either Butler or Ponsonby, reflects women's tenuous relationship to property within a system of male primogeniture; this inequity is underscored in Sense and Sensibility by the Dashwood women's displacement from the aptly-titled Norland Park.¹⁹⁵ It also gestures towards the use-value of Romantic domesticity, this utilitarian incursion directing one to consider the cultural labour that Wordsworth and the Ladies exacted from their cottage homes. Drawing upon the late eighteenth-century figuration of the household as sanctified site for the production of individuals, Butler and Ponsonby's improvements of Plâs newydd may be seen to style them as both virtuous locals and authentic Romantic subjects. Butler and Ponsonby's cottage thus works less to displace their corporeal relationship than to shield it from scrutiny. Substituting architectural for bodily specificity, Wordsworth's sonnet similarly employs a domestic imprimatur to

¹⁹² Heinzelman, "Cult," 53.

¹⁹³ Heinzelman, "Cult," 54-6.

¹⁹⁴ Heinzelman, "Cult," 56.

¹⁹⁵ Austen, Sense 2-20.

attest to the authenticity of this exchange, thereby enabling, as much as eliding, the Ladies' queer relationality.

Butler and Ponsonby's engagement with Wordsworth has been primarily employed as evidence of their place within Romantic cultural history. Read in conjunction to their extensive architectural improvements, it may instead be seen to mark their place within the genealogy of Romantic domesticity as well as that of same-sex desire. The sleight-of-hand with which Wordsworth substitutes Plâs newydd for its mistresses' bodies may be further seen as a constitutive part, rather than cover-up, of Butler and Ponsonby's queer relationality, underscoring the material and rhetorical means through which their chaste edifices of Romantic selfhood were erected.

'Doing the Ladies': The Llangollen Ideals of Lord Byron and Anne Lister

"Now, if I know myself, I should say that I have no character at all....But, joking apart, what I think of myself is, that I am so changeable, being everything in turn and nothing long." Lord Byron, in conversation with Lady Blessington.¹⁹⁶

I now turn to Byron and Lister's encounters with the Ladies. Byron and Lister are linked not only by their identification of the Ladies as queer antecedents, but by the constitution of their sexual selves in reference to the figuration of Butler and Ponsonby as queer domestic archetypes. Butler and Ponsonby's circulation throughout Romantic culture may thus be seen to demonstrate both the performative construction of Romantic subjectivity and their particular citation as mobile signifiers of enduring same-sex desire.

¹⁹⁶ Qtd. in Frances Wilson, *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture* (London and New York: MacMillan Press and St. Martin's Press, 1999) xii.

Lord Byron features prominently within recent accounts of the performative constitution of Romantic subjectivity. Peter L. Thorslev, for example, describes his public persona as self-consciously derived from a literary genealogy, his textual forebears including Milton's Satan, Richardson's Lovelace and Laclos's Valmont.¹⁹⁷ Byron also employed his own poems as tools of "bibliogenesis,"¹⁹⁸ the overnight fame following the 1812 publication of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage stemming in part from public identification of author and protagonist. The sheer artificiality of the character of Childe Harold drew attention to the presence of Byron's narrative voice within the poem, leading him to be associated with his brooding and exiled protagonist.¹⁹⁹ The narrator's efforts to distinguish Harold from people such as the "open, artless soul[s] / That feel relief by bidding sorrow flow" served to attribute extravagant content to the "strange pangs" with which Harold was afflicted,²⁰⁰ leading Byron to describe his figuration as "a sort of sublime misanthrope, with moments of kind feeling" as "my favourite rôle."²⁰¹

The cult of "Byromania," in which the poet became a public commodity identified with his textual creations, subject to an array of competing representations, and radically estranged from his own self-conception, has been elucidated by critics including Watson,

¹⁹⁷ Qtd. in Frances Wilson, "Introduction: Byron, Byronism and Byromaniacs," Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture, ed. Frances Wilson (London and New York: MacMillan and St. Martin's Press, 1999): 1-23. 7.

¹⁹⁸ Wilson, "Introduction," 7.

¹⁹⁹ Peter W. Graham, "His Grand Show: Byron and the Myth of Mythmaking," Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture, ed. Frances Wilson (London and New York: MacMillan and St. Martin's Press, 1999): 24-42. 31.

²⁰⁰ George Gordon Byron, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt, Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. 2, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) Canto 1:8.

²⁰¹ Wilson, Byromania xii.

Frances Wilson and Ghislaine McDayter.²⁰² As Wilson argues, the cultic value of Byron's poems rested upon the author's imputed presence within his works, even as this authority was fraudulently circulated within the plethora of Byronic representations that characterized the nineteenth-century literary marketplace. In the dramatic wake of her and Byron's flagrant *affaire*, Ponsonby's cousin Lady Caroline Lamb forged Byron's signature in order to extract her favorite miniature of him from his publisher John Murray.²⁰³ Lamb further appropriated Byron's imprimatur in offering her own account of their affair in her 1816 Glenarvon, in which Byron's letters to Lamb are reproduced under the seal of her treacherous protagonist Clarence de Ruthven, Lord Glenarvon.²⁰⁴ Byron appeared in at least three further fictional works during his lifetime. In 1819, his personal physician John Polidori published The Vampyre, an appropriation of Byron's tale recounted during the famous exchange of ghost stories at the Villa Diodati from which Frankenstein also emerged. Just as Lamb's Glenarvon enacted literary revenge against her former lover, The Vampyre constituted a highly public form of retaliation against Polidori's at-times deliberately cruel master, its central character, Lord Ruthven, referencing Byron via his figuration as Lamb's Clarence de Ruthven.²⁰⁵ Like Victor Frankenstein, Byron's counterfeiters constructed Byronic subjectivity from the discarded remains of his textual corpus, their galvanized existence in turn threatening to supplant the ostensible original.

²⁰² See Wilson and McDayter in Frances Wilson (ed.) Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture. London: MacMillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, and Nicola J. Watson's "Trans-figuring Byronic Identity" in At the Limits of Romanticism. Eds. Mary J. Favret and Nicola J. Watson. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994.

²⁰³ Tuite, "Tainted." 66.

²⁰⁴ Caroline Lamb, Glenarvon, ed. James Ruff (Delmar, NY: Scholar's Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972).

²⁰⁵ John Polidori, The Vampyre: A Tale, ed. Russell Ash (Aylesbury: Gubbelecote Press, 1974).

While Byron sought to regain control of his pirated subjectivity, his literary and sociable oeuvre was based upon an inherently performative model of selfhood. His impersonators thus engaged in a form of “mimicry imitating nothing,”²⁰⁶ rendering his defense of his own originality at once deeply ironic and inevitably futile.²⁰⁷ Watson suggests that Byron’s extravagant staging of his literary and biographical personas rendered his identity a form of simulacrum or “paper money.” While this evacuation of authenticity sought to immunize his identity from counterfeit, she claims that it also rendered him subject to radical appropriation by female readers, who adopted for themselves the same Byronic masquerade with which Byron himself was clothed.²⁰⁸ Lister was one such appropriator of Byronic masculinity. Clara Tuite describes the way in which Lister constructed her sexual subjectivity from the prosthetic tropes of masculine aristocratic gallantry, the figurative circulation of “an always already fetishized Byron” rendering Lister’s masculinity a legible social performance.²⁰⁹ As seen in chapter four, Lister employed references to Byron’s work as a sexualized cipher in her “agreeablizing” of women including Miss Browne, her enquiries into Browne’s opinions of Byron’s poetry operating, as did Byron and John Cam Hobhouse’s allusions to same-sex eroticism, with the “conspicuous visibility and cryptic formality of a code.”²¹⁰ Echoing Byron’s acute consciousness as to the importance of cutting a figure, Lister’s diaries address the “difficult subject” of dress in the self-devised crypt hand she also used

²⁰⁶ Jacques Derrida, “The Double Session,” trans. Barbara Johnson, *Dissemination* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981): 175-227. 206.

²⁰⁷ Wilson, “Introduction,” 6-7.

²⁰⁸ Nicola J. Watson, “Trans-Figuring Byronic Identity,” *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist and Materialist Criticism*, eds. Nicola J. Watson and Mary A. Favret (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994): 185-206. 196-97. The appropriation and circulation of ‘Byronism’ is discussed further in Tuite, “Tainted.”

²⁰⁹ Tuite, “Byronic,” 197.

²¹⁰ Tuite, “Byronic,” 193.

to detail her sexual and financial affairs.²¹¹ From 1817, she sought to solve the perennially-vexed question of gender-transitive clothing choice by wearing only black, a decision distinguishing her sharply from the fashionable white-clad young women of the period.²¹² Lister's austere expensive wardrobe recalled Joshua Reynolds's popularization of a 'uniform' for male poets, consisting of black or dark clothing enlivened by white linen at the throat and wrists, a costume rendered synonymous with Byron after Thomas Phillip's "poetic" portrait was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1814.²¹³ Lister further asserted "a rather gentlemanly sort of style"²¹⁴ through the use of masculine accessories such as braces and an umbrella strap, these genteel touches working to distinguish, as did Byron's own obsessive grooming, her family's established pedigree from the social and sartorial claims of the new gentry and mercantile classes.²¹⁵ Lister's appropriation of Byron's social, sexual and literary style thereby discloses the phantasmatic status of the trope of Byronism itself, through which both Byron and his impersonators fashioned their social and sexual subjectivity.

Although Lister's self-stylization was crucially indebted to the public circulation of Byronic social and sexual style, the temporal logic of this citation is complicated by Lister and Byron's mutual characterization of Butler and Ponsonby as ideals of enduring same sex-desire. Byron included Butler and Ponsonby within the pantheon of faithful

²¹¹ Trumbach, "London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture," 290.

²¹² Lister, *Know* 14. On "Lister's fashion story," see Tuite, "Byronic," 189-90.

²¹³ Christine Kenyon Jones, "Fantasy and Transfiguration: Byron and His Portraits," *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*, ed. Frances Wilson (London and New York: MacMillan Press and St. Martin's Press, 1999): 109-36. 113-14.

²¹⁴ Lister, *Know* 330.

²¹⁵ Tuite, "Byronic," 194-95.

friends he invoked to characterize his love for Cambridge choirboy, John Edleston. In 1807, he wrote to his Southwell confidante, Elizabeth Pigot:

I certainly *love* [Edleston] more than any human being, & neither *time* nor Distance have had the least effect on my (in general) changeable disposition. We shall put *Lady E. Butler*, & Miss *Ponsonby* to the *Blush*, *Pylades & Orestes* out of countenance, & want nothing but a *Catastrophe* like *Nisus & Eurylus* to give *Jonathan & David* the 'go by'.²¹⁶

The Ladies are here located within esteemed company, their nineteenth-century female partnership commencing a male genealogy incorporating both classical and Biblical references. Lanser notes the gendered emphasis on Butler and Ponsonby's imagined embarrassment, suggesting that their defiant, yet feminine, blush reflects the period's figuration of female same-sex couplings as simultaneously virtuous and socially transgressive.²¹⁷ This emphasis also suggests the ambiguity of the trope of the female blush in novels as diverse as Richardson's *Pamela*, Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and Burney's *Evelina*, in which the blush potentially indicates both the innocent self-consciousness of the pre-lapsarian Eve and the hermeneutically unstable boundary between inscrutable interiority and publicly legible corporeality.²¹⁸ Extending Lanser's gendered reading of Byron's pantheon, I suggest that refocusing interpretative attention away from the Ladies' relationship to Byron to Byron's relationship to the Ladies clarifies the erotic content of Byron's analogies still further, as it does the complex teleology of this web of queer citations. Reflecting his immersion at Harrow in both classical study and sexually-charged homosociality, Byron's litany locates Butler and

²¹⁶ George Gordon Byron, "*in My Hot Youth*": *Byron's Letters and Journals 1798-1810*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, vol. 1, 13 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1973) 124-25.

²¹⁷ Lanser, *Blush*.

²¹⁸ Katie Halsey, "The Blush of Modesty or the Blush of Shame? Reading Jane Austen's Blushes," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 42 (2006): 226-38. 228.

Ponsonby alongside Orestes, son of Agamemnon, and his ward, Pylades, who are described in Lucian's Amores within a speech extolling the virtues of pederasty. Butler's relationship to Ponsonby is thus placed within a tradition equating seniority with a form of pedagogical and erotic dominance that is figured as pleasurable to both parties. Byron employs the name 'Pylades' in the poem, "To Romance," in which it denotes a male friend whose charms equal that of a beloved woman.²¹⁹ The Biblical David and Jonathan are similarly depicted as both physically passionate and joined in a covenanted union of souls. As David famously declares of Jonathan, "thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."²²⁰ Byron's analogies thus operate as a sexually open secret, the legibility of the erotic scope of such relationships foreshadowing the legal rejection of Oscar Wilde's 1895 defense of the chaste underpinnings of "such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan."²²¹ Byron's invocation of Butler and Ponsonby reifies the authenticity and durability of the Ladies' relationship even as he boasts that his love for Edleston will cause them embarrassment. His suggestion that they will be shamed by their usurpation further figures them as self-conscious emblems of enduring same-sex desire, who color, not from feminine delicacy,

²¹⁹ Louis Crompton, Byron and Greek Love (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1985) 102-03.

²²⁰ 2 Samuel 1: 26.

In Walter Scott's 1824 Redgauntlet, the effeminate Darsie Latimer similarly claims that his love for Alan Fairford "surpasses the love of woman." Claiming that the character of Latimer demonstrates the emergence of the "species" of the homosexual prior to Foucault's late nineteenth-century dating, Rick Incorvati notes his catalogue of enduring male friendships, which strongly resembles Byron's earlier list. The list, which includes Orestes and Pylades, David and Jonathan, and Damon and Pythias, closes with what Incorvati describes as a "facetious celebration of the British postal system" which offers Latimer and Fairford "a distinct advantage over their predecessors since 'neither David and Jonathan, nor Orestes and Pylades, nor Damon and Pythias [. . .] ever corresponded together.'" See Rick Incorvati, "Darsie Latimer's 'Little Solidity,' or the Case for Homosexuality in Scott's Redgauntlet," Romanticism on the Net 36-37 (2004-5). 7.

²²¹ <http://library.anu.edu.au/search/cPR5819.M3+1971/cpr+5819+m3+1971/-2,-1,,E/browse>
Accessed 10 Oct. 2006.

or their 1790 'outing' by the General Evening Post, but from their displacement from Byron's queer pedestal.

Byron's relationship with Edleston did not outlast that of his Welsh ideals, Edleston dying of consumption in 1811. Byron's grief was expressed in his "Thyrza" cycle of elegies, the protagonist of which was assumed to be a woman; Thyrza's gender is nonetheless revealed by Byron's composition "On a Cornelian Heart Which Was Broken," which references the modest ring with which Edleston presented him in 1805.²²² Byron's enduring interest in Butler and Ponsonby is indicated by the fact that he sent them a presentation copy of The Corsair in February 1814. As a satisfied Ponsonby confided to their neighbor, Mrs. Parker, "May we not be proud?"²²³ Butler wrote to thank Byron for his gift, declaring, "the Gratification of possessing a Work of which Miss Ponsonby & Herself had been extremely desirous to obtain must be unspeakably enhanced by the circumstance of being indebted for it to the politeness of its highly admired Author-." ²²⁴ Butler's tone, although obsequious, is more muted than that of her and Ponsonby's first letters to Seward, her use of the conditional "must be" suggesting an uncharacteristic rectitude potentially gesturing towards Byron's lesser propensity to celebrate them in verse. Butler's letter nonetheless acknowledges the symbolic capital of

²²² George Gordon Byron, "On a Cornelian Heart Which Was Broken," Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981): 12.

²²³ Ponsonby, Ponsonby-Parker 7 Feb 1814.

During their 1822 meeting, Ponsonby informs Lister that "Lord Byron had been very good in sending them several of his works." (Lister, Know 203.)

²²⁴ Eleanor Butler, Eleanor Butler to Lord Byron 25 March [1814], Ms, Byron-Lovelace Papers; Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Butler and Ponsonby nonetheless echoed the public turn against Byron following the rumors of sodomy and incest that led to his 1816 exile, which were compounded by his frank depiction of sexuality (in particular female desire) in his 1819 Don Juan. Butler's journal of 27 Aug. 1819 observes approvingly, "The Sale stopped of that Horrid Don Juan." (Butler, Journal 1819.)

Byron's celebrity, the 'unspeakable' enhancement of the volume effected by its Byronic provenance attesting more volubly to his fame than does her stated obligation. Although unaware of her and Ponsonby's citation within Byron's roll of enduring same-sex couples, Butler's letter thus hints at an awareness that they are of more use to Byron than he is to them; that while Byron stands as the embodiment of Romantic literary celebrity, she and Ponsonby embody a celebrity of a sexually specific kind.

"The Byronic Woman" and her Llangollen Ideals

As explored in chapter two, Lister and the Ladies have been critically figured as the mascots of antithetical accounts of female same-sex relationships in history. The Ladies' status as the poster-girls for chaste romantic friendship was enthusiastically rejected in the wake of the 1988 publication of the first volume of Lister's diaries, the abundant evidence of Lister's sexual practices being held to trump the evidentiary vacuum enclosing Butler and Ponsonby's shared bed.²²⁵ While similarly seeking to trouble the conceptual distinction between Lister and the Ladies, my reading of Lister's 1822 meeting with Butler and Ponsonby rejects earlier critical emphases on their respective sexual practices. Rather, I suggest that the narrative Vicinus describes as their "triumphal plot"²²⁶ served as an ideal of the queer Romantic domesticity that Lister longed to share with her greatest love, Mariana Belcombe. In a generic reworking of Seward's gesture, Lister thus generates a form of 'sapphic prosaics' through which she thematizes the loss and recapture of the female beloved, her appropriation of Butler and Ponsonby adding

²²⁵ Fiona Brideoake, "'Extraordinary Female Affection:' the Ladies of Llangollen and the Endurance of Queer Community," *Romanticism on the Net*.36-37 (2004-5). 3-4.

²²⁶ Vicinus, *Intimate* 6.

another dimension to her repertoire of “performative sexual style[s].”²²⁷ Reading Lister’s encounter with the Ladies as a Romantic text reveals their figuration as sexual exemplars by both Lister and the Byron whose persona Lister herself appropriated. Rather than indicating their status as the untheorized source text of Romantic same-sex desire, however, these varied renderings of Butler and Ponsonby’s cultural project underscore their conceptual mobility within the period, the indeterminacy of their sexual affect allowing them to be figured as both enduring domestic companions and courageously committed lovers. Butler and Ponsonby’s recuperation from the Romantic margins thereby exposes the performative constitution of the period’s center. It further exposes the inherent sociability of sex within the Romantic era, during which time the sexuality later identified as the truth of the self was importantly articulated in relation to others.²²⁸

Lister met Mariana Lawton in York in 1812 at the age of twenty-one; and the two women became lovers in 1814.²²⁹ While Lister anticipated inheriting her family’s Halifax seat of Shibden Hall, Mariana was one of five unmarried daughters of a York doctor.²³⁰ Having failed to gain financial independence by 1816, Lister encouraged Mariana to enter into a pragmatic marriage with the wealthy Cheshire widower, Charles Lawton, in an arrangement Lister likened to a form of legalized prostitution. In the years following this union, however, Lister and Mariana renounced neither their relationship nor their hope that Charles’s premature death would allow them to establish a shared home. In February 1821, Lister assured Mariana of her constancy, writing to her, “I can live upon

²²⁷ Tuite, “Byronic,” 188.

²²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990) 155-56.

²²⁹ Jill Liddington, *Female Fortune: Land, Gender and Authority: The Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings 1833-36* (London and New York: Rivers Oram Press, 1998) 16.

²³⁰ Helena Whitbread, “Prologue,” *No Priest but Love: The Journals of Anne Lister from 1824-1826*, ed. Helena Whitbread (New York: New York UP, 1992): 3-8. 5.

hope, forget that we grow older, & love you as warmly as ever. Yes, Mary, you cannot doubt the love of one who has waited for you so long & patiently.”²³¹ Their “promise of mutual faith” was solemnized in July 1821 by the exchange of gold rings and mutual partaking of the sacrament of communion, a practice Alan Bray describes as recalling the formation of same-sex kinship ties within the early Christian church.²³² In January of the following year, Lister wrote of Mariana in her journal: “Our hearts and minds are mutually & entirely attached. We have [. . .] promised ourselves to be together in six years from this time. Heaven grant it may be so.”²³³ Lister’s telling supplication was not satisfied, however, as Mariana became increasingly uncomfortable with their anticipation of her husband’s demise.²³⁴ As Lister confided to her journal in July 1822:

When I asked [Mariana] how long it might be before we got together [. . .] she seemed to fight off answering [. . .]. She seemed as fond of me as ever, yet all the night when I was almost convulsed with smothering my sobs, she took no notice, nor was affected at all apparently.²³⁵

Lister had read of Butler and Ponsonby in the fashionable magazine La Belle Assemblée around 1810.²³⁶ Her decision to travel to Plâs newydd twelve years after this first information thus implies a connection between her Llangollen pilgrimage and her growing fears of Mariana’s inconstancy. Just as the cult of Byronism rendered Lister’s masculinity a coherent social and sexual style, Butler and Ponsonby’s retirement

²³¹ Lister, Know 145.

²³² Lister, Know 159-60.

For a detailed discussion of the historical and liturgical antecedents of this practice, see Alan Bray, The Friend (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) 205-88.

²³³ Lister, Know 177.

²³⁴ Lister, Know 198.

²³⁵ Lister, Know 197-98.

²³⁶ Lister, Know 204.

In October 1823, Lister also reports, “Just before tea...read from p.126 to 168, *Collections and Recollections*. The last article a pretty well done account of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Ponsonby. (Lister, Know 304.)

rendered Lister's domestic dreams both legible and demonstrably achievable, their cottage a testament to the endurance of female desire against seemingly insuperable odds.

Accompanied by her Aunt Anne, Lister travelled to Llangollen in July 1822, at which time the eighty-three year old Butler was seriously ill. Lodging at the King's Head Hotel, Lister provided the requisite introduction by note, requesting that she and her aunt be granted permission to view Plâs newydd's grounds, and Lister be allowed to meet with the Ladies alone: "Miss Lister, at the suggestion of Mr Banks, had intended the honour of calling on her ladyship & Miss Ponsonby, & hopes she may be able to express her very great regret at hearing of her ladyship's disposition."²³⁷ An invitation to inspect the grounds was granted to both parties, and Lister prepared by harvesting information from their gardener, whom she described as "much attached to his mistresses after having lived with them 30 years."²³⁸ Lister wrote of his report: "it excited in me for a variety of circumstances, a sort of peculiar interest tinged with melancholy. I could have mused for hours, dreamt dreams of happiness, conjured up many a vision of . . . hope."²³⁹ Lister's "peculiar interest" may be argued to reflect her interest in whether Butler and Ponsonby shared her sexual practices. Her melancholia may be further seen to express her recognition that their relationship paralleled that which she longed to share with Mariana and appeared increasingly unable to achieve. As she later declared, "There is one thing without which my happiness in this world seems impossible. I was not born to live alone.

²³⁷ Lister, *Know* 195.

²³⁸ Lister, *Know* 196.

²³⁹ Lister, *Know* 196.

I must have the object near me & in loving & being loved, I could be happy.”²⁴⁰ Lister’s association of her visit to Plâs newydd with her dreams of domesticity is indicated by her detailing of her experience to her absent lover, her epistolary effusions leading Mariana to term her narrative “the prettiest I have ever read.”²⁴¹ Lister’s association of the two relationships is further revealed by her expression of concern that Butler’s ill-health would prevent Mariana from observing such domestic felicity at close hand: “I do indeed feel anxious & interested that these Ladies should live together at least a few years longer. I should like to see them both together & should like M- to be with me.”²⁴² Mariana also figured the Ladies’ relationship as potentially analogous to their own, asking Lister whether she believed the Ladies’ attachment “[had] always been platonic,”²⁴³ an issue upon which Lister’s skepticism has been previously observed. Like Byron, Lister affected an aristocratic disdain for class manqué, dismissing the female members of the Halifax mercantile class with the observation, “Vulgarity is a bad concern with me.”²⁴⁴ She nonetheless transcribed the epitaph beneath which Butler and Ponsonby buried their Irish housemaid, Mary Caryll, in 1809, the triangular tombstone declaring itself to have been “reared by Two Friends who will [Caryll’s] loss bemoan / ‘Till with Her Ashes Here shall rest their own.”²⁴⁵ Lister’s class-consciousness was apparently outweighed by her admiration of the stability of Butler and Ponsonby’s chosen family, leading her to compare Mariana’s perceived inconstancy with their devotion to Caryll’s memory, represented by the equilateral funerary monument in which

²⁴⁰ Lister, Know 250.

²⁴¹ Lister, Know 210.

²⁴² Lister, Know 215.

²⁴³ Lister, Know 210.

²⁴⁴ Lister, Know 185.

²⁴⁵ Hicklin, Ladies 40.

they were later interred.²⁴⁶ Having privately surmised that the Ladies' relationship was most probably "cemented by something more tender still than friendship," she continues, "But much, or all, depends upon the story of their former lives, the period passed before they lived together, that feverish dream called youth."²⁴⁷ Lister thus distinguishes youthful aspirations from their enduring instantiation, echoing Byron's identification of Butler and Ponsonby as emblems of unwavering and embodied same-sex desire.

Lister's visit to Plâs newydd discloses her desire to identify with Butler and Ponsonby as a relational ideal. Her anxious enquiries after Butler's health procured her an after-dinner audience with Ponsonby, of which she observed, "This is more than I expected. I wonder how I will work my way & what she will think of me."²⁴⁸ Lister's consideration of how to "work [her] way" discloses her highly performative self-assertion, her desire to impress herself favorably upon Ponsonby indicated by the lengthy toilette in which she engaged before their meeting: "two hours upstairs washing & cutting my toenails, putting clean things on."²⁴⁹ Lister recalled less respectful Romantic commentators in noting Ponsonby's waddling gait and "remains of a very fine face."²⁵⁰ Ponsonby's age and infirmity were nonetheless soon eclipsed by what Lister described as "her manners & conversation. The former, perfectly easy, peculiarly attentive & well, & bespeaking a person accustomed to a great deal of good society." Ponsonby's combination of a serene femininity and compelling personality further appealed to

²⁴⁶ Writing to thank their neighbour, Mrs. Parker, for her "Sympathy & Compassion" following the loss of "Our Matchless Mary," Ponsonby describes the triangular vault, which remains standing in the St. Collen's Parish churchyard, Llangollen, as "the Vault – now Making for three." (Ponsonby, Ponsonby-Parker 23 Nov 1809.)

²⁴⁷ Lister, *Know* 210.

²⁴⁸ Lister, *Know* 201.

²⁴⁹ Lister, *Know* 201.

²⁵⁰ Lister, *Know* 202.

Lister's sexual aesthetic, distinguishing her in Lister's mind from both "learned ladies"²⁵¹ such as Miss Pickford and the *déclassé* girls of Halifax's middling ranks: "Mild & gentle, certainly not masculine, & yet there was a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* striking."²⁵² As we have seen, Lister habitually gauged women's erotic inclinations through the use of classical allusions.²⁵³ Ponsonby was not to be drawn on such references, with Lister reporting, "Contrived to ask if they were classical. 'No,' said she. 'Thank God from Latin and Greek I am free.'"²⁵⁴ Ponsonby also mentioned a volume of Lucretius, its author decried for his atheism and frank depictions of sexuality, but explained she was afraid to read such "a very bad book."²⁵⁵ Lister may have recognized the necessity of Ponsonby's demurrals, having herself assured Miss Pickford that her Sapphic sensibility was purely theoretical.²⁵⁶ While traveling in Paris, she was similarly dismissive of an English widow's allusions to "one of the things of which Marie Antoinette was accused"; her studiously artless response "I had never heard of it before and could not understand or believe it" nonetheless failed to prevent her from subsequently seducing the enquirer.²⁵⁷ Ponsonby's obfuscation did not deter Lister from enthusing over "their place & the happiness [that Butler and Ponsonby] had there,"²⁵⁸ explaining in Humean terms, "I should not like to live in Wales—but, if it must be so [. . .] it should be Plasnewydd at Llangollen, which is already endeared even to me by the association of ideas."²⁵⁹ Like her Byronic accessories, Lister's allusions to the Ladies thus operated as a form of sexually-

²⁵¹ Lister, *Know* 237.

²⁵² Lister, *Know* 202.

²⁵³ Lister, *Know* 268.

²⁵⁴ Lister, *Know* 202.

²⁵⁵ Lister, *Know* 203.

²⁵⁶ Lister, *Know* 273.

²⁵⁷ Lister, *No Priest* 31-32.

²⁵⁸ Lister, *Know* 204.

²⁵⁹ Lister, *Know* 209.

saturated code, figuring Plâs newydd as a metonym for the queer instantiation of a Romantic domestic ideal.

Ponsonby recognized Lister's need to identify with Plâs newydd and its inhabitants, presenting her with a rose from the cottage's garden as a token of their affinity. Lister protested against this gesture, recording Ponsonby's prescient response in her journal: "It may spoil its beauty for the present, but 'tis only to do good afterwards."²⁶⁰ Lister responded, "I said I should keep it for the sake of the place where it grew,"²⁶¹ later musing, "There was something in this simple circumstance that struck me exceedingly."²⁶² In giving Lister a tangible token sign of her journey, Ponsonby may be seen as materially acknowledging her younger acolyte, her assertion of futurity expressing the wish that Lister's hopes would indeed be fulfilled. Such dreams came to only partial fruition. Throughout 1823, Mariana became increasingly embarrassed by the social spectacle occasioned by Lister's masculine demeanour. A key event in their estrangement was Lister's decision to traverse the moors in order to surprise Mariana at a Lancaster coach stop, walking for several hours and leaping over three steps, "[u]nconscious of any sensation but pleasure at the sight of M-."²⁶³ While consumed with shame about "the 'three steps' business" Lister railed in her journal against Mariana's perceived betrayal:

Mary, you have passion like the rest but your caution cheats the world out of its scandal & your courage is weak rather than your

²⁶⁰ Lister, *Know* 210.

²⁶¹ Lister, *Know* 204.

²⁶² Lister, *Know* 210.

²⁶³ Lister, *Know* 278. Tuite offers an insightful reading of this incident as an example of "failed sociability, anti-sociability, and dysphoric sexual publicity, of sociability gone horribly wrong as it veers uncontrollably into spectacle." (Tuite, "Byronic," 202-05.)

principal [sic] strong [...] It was a coward love that dare not brave
the storm.²⁶⁴

Lister here figures public disapprobation as the personal cost of authenticity, the ‘world’s scandal’ as an inevitable result of courageous self-expression. Distinguishing Mariana’s desire for self-preservation against her own (albeit obligatory) fortitude, Lister condemns their relationship to the past tense, implicitly comparing Mariana’s inability to “brave the storm” with the domestic constancy witnessed in North Wales. While Byron offered Lister a model of masculine gallantry and sartorial style, Butler and Ponsonby offered her a model of enduring same-sex desire, thereby demonstrating their central place within the genealogy of Romantic subjectivities.

Lister travelled to Paris in September of the following year, seeking to cure herself of both her regard for Mariana and the venereal disease they had contracted by way of Mariana’s husband. In 1832, at the age of forty-one, she established a domestic partnership with Ann Walker, heir to a wool-manufacturing fortune and the property bordering Lister’s own.²⁶⁵ This second union was again solemnized through the exchange of rings, and Lister and Walker shared a pew in the Halifax church as family.²⁶⁶ Their relationship was nonetheless more pragmatic than passionate, with Walker fulfilling Lister’s downgraded desires for a “manageable” life-companion and a solid income with which to improve her estate.²⁶⁷ Their relationship never attained the fervor of Lister’s own ‘feverish youth,’ and Lister died in 1840, aged forty-nine, while travelling in

²⁶⁴ Whitbread, “Prologue,” 7.

²⁶⁵ Liddington, *Female* 31.

²⁶⁶ Liddington, *Female* 93.; Bray, *Friend* 43.

²⁶⁷ Liddington, *Female* 61-62.

Georgia.²⁶⁸ Walker was left the unenviable task of accompanying Lister's embalmed body on a six-month journey across Europe, only to be forcibly removed from Shibden Hall, in which Lister had bequeathed her a life-interest, and confined to a private asylum, where she died in poverty in 1854.²⁶⁹ Lister's documentation of her richly homoerotic life has rendered her a central figure within the history of sexuality, her demonstrated ability to "please girls" rendering her a more obviously appealing antecedent than Llangollen's sexually circumspect pair.²⁷⁰ Her pilgrimage to Plâs newydd nonetheless stands as a reminder of Butler and Ponsonby's status within their lifetimes as models of enduring same-sex domesticity, through which both Byron and his Yorkshire acolyte expressed their deepest affective desires.

The centrality of Byronism to Anne Lister's sexual subjectivity has led Castle to figure Byron's sartorial style as a master trope of twentieth-century lesbian self-fashioning.²⁷¹ According to this view, the Byronic poses of sapphic luminaries including Romaine Brooks, Radclyffe Hall, Janet Flanner and k.d. lang constitute latter-day instantiations of a fetishized social and sexual position with which Byron himself also sought to coincide. Although Lister may have wished to *look* like Byron, however, her journey to Plâs newydd suggests that she also sought to echo a different form of life practice, the Ladies' durable domesticity embodying the equally performative life for which she waited "so long & patiently."²⁷² Indeed, while Byron's works offered Lister both the literary and material means by which to conduct her sexual conquests, it is

²⁶⁸ Liddington, *Female* 237.

²⁶⁹ Liddington, *Female* 235-41.

²⁷⁰ Lister, *Know* 136.

²⁷¹ Castle, *Apparitional* 103.

²⁷² Lister, *Know* 145.

through Butler and Ponsonby that she articulated her domestic desires, her departure from the public script of Byronism bringing Lister and Byron himself into unwitting emotional proximity. While Lister's sexual subjectivity was enacted through the citation of Byronic style, both Lister and Byron articulated their desires for enduring same-sex relationships with reference to Butler and Ponsonby, this doubled citation underscoring the injustice of the Ladies' dismissal as the drearily repressed emblems of chaste romantic friendship.

One may be tempted to assert a temporal logic in tracing the evolution of paradigmatic models of same-sex Romantic domesticity. If Lister's sexual style is enabled through the fetishization of Byron, it may also be argued that Byron's desires are articulated through the effort of putting Butler and Ponsonby "to the blush." Lister may thus be seen to be doubly indebted to her Welsh ideals, and Butler and Ponsonby revealed as the unlikely *logos* of Romantic same-sex desire. More productively, however, Lister's encounter with Butler and Ponsonby also may be seen as adding an importantly new dimension to her stylistic repertoire. This complex citation web rebuts the received model of the deep Romantic self, the sexual instantiation of which is here shown to be constituted through both performative iteration and interpersonal exchange. It further highlights the plasticity of Butler and Ponsonby's presence within the Romantic era, the productive opacity of their sexual affect allowing them to be figured in poetry of Seward and Wordsworth as an ideal model of enduring domesticity, and in the life-writings of Lister and Byron as exemplars of embodied same-sex desire. Discussing the present project, David Collings and Michael O'Rourke describe Butler and Ponsonby's Romantic figurations as disclosing the emergence of sexual paradigms within lived, as well as

written, cultural practices, indicating that “an affectively saturated domesticity also belongs to the genealogy of same-sex desire.”²⁷³ One may further claim such domesticity as belonging to the genealogy of a less-familiar configuration of Romantic subjectivity, revealed to be constituted through a range of cultural practices antithetical to the received model of the solipsistic – and implicitly male – Romantic self. Reversing the tendency to brandish Butler and Ponsonby’s friendships as their proof of entry to the critical club of Romanticism, one may instead describe the use to which the Romantics themselves pressed the Ladies, variously figuring their relationship as a historical curiosity, goal and goad.

²⁷³ Collings and O'Rourke, "Introduction." 38.

Chapter Seven

'The Future Arrives Late': Butler and Ponsonby and their 'Spiritual Descendents,' 1928-37

In April 1931, Virginia Woolf responded by letter to composer Ethel Smyth, who had suggested that Woolf review Eva Mary Bell's 1930 edition of extracts from Butler's diary, The Hamwood Papers. Woolf's position was unequivocal: "No, I can't 'do' the Ladies. They've done themselves too perfectly for anything to be written."¹ In refusing Smyth's proposal, Woolf anticipates my central claim that Butler and Ponsonby's life constituted a form of performative cultural production. In asserting the redundancy of further artistic rendering of Butler and Ponsonby, she suggests that any attempt to 'do' them would be dangerously close to ventriloquism, creating an identity-effect through the same stylized self-assertions they themselves undertook. Such conjecture was not unfounded. In 1788, Butler noted that a written report from Lady Williams Wynn had informed her of the "odd circumstance of two Ladies in Sussex impersonating us"; and that the latter had received "Civilities [...] in consequence from General and Mrs. Tryon, [and] Col. and Mrs. Gwynn."² By 1820, the Ladies' celebrity was such that a Miss Andrews and Miss Lolly moved to from Manchester to Llangollen in order to more closely emulate their idols, their status as Regency groupies earning them Butler's facetious epithet, "the lollies and the trollies." This pair purchased Plâs newydd after Ponsonby's death. Described by John Hicklin as "disposed to perpetuate the coventual

¹ Virginia Woolf, A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1929-1931, eds. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1978) 313.

² Bell, ed., Hamwood 78.

celebrity”³ of Plâs newydd, they fulfilled their adopted roles with such success that Hicklin made them the dedicatees of his 1847 The Ladies of Llangollen, in which they are described as Butler and Ponsonby’s “close friends.”⁴

Reflecting upon the life practices of Plâs newydd’s second pair of “maiden ladies,”⁵ one perceives the way in which the Ladies’ cipher-like status has enabled their self-appointed descendents to fashion them in their own image, thereby retroactively enabling and authorizing their own subject positions. The following chapter traces figurations of Butler and Ponsonby throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, focussing particularly on the period 1928-1937. It situates these representations within the intensification of anxieties over female same-sex desire that characterised this period, incited by the campaign for women’s suffrage; the post-war emergence of ‘New Woman’; the dissemination of sexology; and the prominence of fictional representations of love between women, particularly Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness. It then turns to reconfigurations of Butler and Ponsonby’s narrative in Woolf’s 1928 Orlando and Mary Louisa Gordon’s 1936 Chase of the Wild Goose. Within these two texts, Butler and Ponsonby are figured as spectral presences, their trace-like persistence allowing women’s same-sex desire to be brought into the historical and representational field of the twentieth-century. Gordon’s Chase of the Wild Goose figures Butler and Ponsonby as having anticipated and enabled the lives of the twentieth-century women Gordon termed their “spiritual descendents.”⁶ It further depicts the literal convergence of the past and

³ Hicklin, Ladies 18.

⁴ Hicklin, Ladies iv.

⁵ Roscoe, qtd. in Hicklin, Ladies 18.

⁶ Gordon, Chase 17.

present, as Butler and Ponsonby reappear in the 1930s to join Gordon in celebrating political advances such as women's suffrage, contraception, the ability to choose a single life, and to share a home with a female 'friend.' Gordon figures Butler and Ponsonby as having both anticipated and enabled the sexual and gendered freedoms both earned and asserted in the first decades of the twentieth-century.

Gordon's text has been largely dismissed within biographical and other fictional representations of the Ladies. Although Mavor admits it to be "a strangely moving piece," she describes it as "abounding in wild embellishments," against which she implicitly contrasts the factual rigour she claims for her own account.⁷ Gordon's figuration of the Ladies as queer antecedents might also appear outdated in light of the work of critics such as Judith Roof, who claims that generational political models reinscribe heterosexual inheritance as the dominant metaphor of futurity.⁸ Her depiction of Butler and Ponsonby's uncanny return also violates both the realist conventions of life-writing, and post-Foucauldian injunctions against the anachronistic assertion of sexual identities across time. Chase of the Wild Goose nonetheless resonates with some of the most compelling trends in queer historicism.⁹ As we have seen, Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero have called upon critics to acknowledge the identificatory cathexes that link contemporary scholarship with its historical objects, thereby complicating any insistence on the absolute alterity of the past.¹⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw similarly posits a queer

⁷ Mavor, Ladies 210.

⁸ Judith Roof, "Generational Difficulties, or, the Fear of a Barren History," Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue, eds. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997): 71-72. 71-72.

⁹ For a lucid overview of these trends, see Valerie Rohy, "Ahistorical," GLO: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies. 12.1 (2006) 61-83.

¹⁰ Fradenburg and Freccero, "Introduction," xvii-xix.

historiography committed to tracing erotic and affective connections across time, characterizing the relationship between the historian and his or her object of analysis as one of “relatedness in...isolation.”¹¹ Such critical invocations supplement queer theory’s earliest investments in the transversal displacement of gender and sexuality, manifest in texts such as Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet, with the troubling of the categories of time and space,¹² thereby acknowledging the desires and identifications which render figures such as Butler and Ponsonby exemplary of our desires for both the queer past and a queer future.

Freccero’s 2006 Queer/Early/Modern offers a sustained articulation of these historiographic trends, rejecting the methodological imperatives of a linear temporal model, defined as “the notion that time is composed of contiguous and interrelated joined segments that are also sequential.”¹³ Freccero instead affirms a model of “queer time,” a critical mode attentive to the relationships of identification and desire that conjoin contemporary historians with their objects of scholarly enquiry. These affective investments, she argues, compel a positively anachronistic model of temporality in which the past is not fixed via the logic of “done-ness,” nor the present inoculated against the persistence of affect across time.¹⁴ Freccero also employs the Derridean concept of spectrality to attend to the ways in which the past and the present impinge upon the present, their uncanny persistence and/or prescience constituting an ethical call for

¹¹ Dinshaw, Getting 170.

¹² For further explorations of this shift in queer scholarship, see Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” New Literary History 31 (2000): 727-44, and Judith Halberstam In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives. New York: New York UP, 2005.

¹³ Freccero, Queer 4.

¹⁴ Freccero, Queer 5.

acknowledgement of both their temporal conjunction and narrative effects.¹⁵ Adapting the work of Michel de Certeau, Freccero describes a 'necrological' model of history, in which the historian figures his or her narrative as covering over or displacing that of the subjects represented. As de Certeau argues, these displaced voices "whose disappearance every historian posits, but which he replaces with his writing – 're-bite' [*re-mordent*] the space from which they are excluded; they continue to speak in the text/tomb that erudition erects in their place."¹⁶ As Freccero elaborates, the work of history is thus figured as the melancholic entombment of the lost other within writing, an entombment from which these buried figures may return to haunt the present.¹⁷ De Certeau's figuration of the writing of history as the erection of textual tombs recalls the opening image of this project: the triangular monument with which Butler and Ponsonby enacted their own memorialization, its sociable conception and material construction thematizing the means through which they ensured their immortality. In The Apparitional Lesbian, Castle identifies the 'ghosted' or culturally-occluded lesbian with homophobic forces of

¹⁵ Freccero, Queer 69-70.

¹⁶ de Certeau, qtd. in Freccero, Queer 71.

¹⁷ Freccero, Queer 71.

Freccero suggests that de Certeau's depiction of history as a response to the underlying trauma or loss of historicity is particularly germane to queer history, which is not only characterised by embodied examples of violence and loss, but frequently involves the retrospective ascription of identities to individuals who may not have conceived of themselves within such stable terms. Freccero explores the ethical implications of such identifications with reference to the case of Brandon Teena, murdered in Falls City, Nebraska in 1993, who has been variously identified as a cross-gendered lesbian and a transgender man. As Freccero explores, these posthumous categorizations seek to efface the indeterminacies of Teena's subjectivity as, in fact, did his/her killers. Political mobilizations of Teena's narrative thus threaten to commit further historical violence, erasing problematic aspects of his/her narrative in order to "identify, and thus stabilize, the meaning of an event or person." (Freccero, Queer 72-74.) Such ethical anxieties are evident throughout Butler and Ponsonby's representational corpus, as they are throughout previous analyses of figures described in this project including Anne Lister, Sarah Scott and Elizabeth Carter. As we have seen, however, such ethical concerns are highly varied in motivation: while Jagose argues that claiming Lister for lesbian history erases the erotic primacy of her cross-gendered identification, Sylvia Harcstark Myers claims that identifying the emotional primacy of the Bluestockings' same-sex attachments as lesbian would be to grossly misrepresent their suspicion of sexual desire in all its manifestations. (Myers, Bluestocking 16-17.)

dematerialization.¹⁸ Refusing to reify this logic of sexual invisibility, the queer spectre can instead be seen as that which discloses the enduring historical immanence of transgressive desire. In constructing their own ghostly monument, Butler and Ponsonby literalized the performative strategies through which they fashioned their narrative for posterity, and have continued to be shaped throughout their afterlives. De Certeau's claim that the present is perpetually haunted by the mnemonic traces of the past also resonates with the protean range of Butler and Ponsonby's posthumous 'appearances.' Just as the Ladies' association with romantic friendship is apparent within the first accounts of their elopement, their trans-temporality constitutes an enduring representational trope, revealing their movement across, rather than erasure of, historical difference. The following chapter explores the way in which Butler and Ponsonby's narrative may be discerned as a spectral trace throughout the first decades of the twentieth-century, and the Ladies themselves understood as recalled into more substantial existence by their self-identified descendents. Chase of the Wild Goose presents Butler and Ponsonby's cultural project as both constitutive of and coextensive with the sexual and political advances of British women in the first decades of the twentieth century. Gordon thus offers a striking alternative to the tragic narrative teleology of Radclyffe Hall's 1928 The Well of Loneliness, exemplifying the queer interventions through which the discourses of romantic friendship and sexual inversion have been transformed into those of imaginative possibility.

¹⁸ Castle, Apparitional.

'Deeds, not Words': The Fight for Women's Suffrage

While Butler and Ponsonby have exerted a continual fascination, their story aroused particular interest amidst the renegotiation of gender roles in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. The first women's suffrage committee was established in Manchester in 1865. Following the defeat of an 1884 amendment that would have given the vote to women and the majority of adult men, seventeen suffrage organisations joined to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The largely middle-class membership of the NUWSS was committed to constitutional forms of activism. Such efforts received scant public attention, however, leading Emmeline Pankhurst to found the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. Between 1908 and 1913, the WSPU's campaign of public disobedience incorporated the destruction of public and private property, with an orchestrated campaign of window-smashing commencing in 1911.¹⁹ By the summer of 1914, over a thousand suffragettes had been incarcerated in Holloway Prison as a result of militant activities. In July 1909, detainees refused food in protest against the government's failure to recognize them as political prisoners, in response to which authorities initiated a violent program of force-feeding. With the outbreak of war in 1914, the NUWSS announced the suspension of political activity. In return for the release of imprisoned suffragettes, the WSPU agreed to halt its activities, changing the name of its newspaper from The Suffragette to Britannia. By July 1918, over seven million British women were engaged in some form of paid work. This dramatic increase in the pre-war participation rate confounded the

¹⁹ Martha Vicinus, Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920 (London: Virago, 1985) 253.

public/private dichotomy that excluded women from the modern body politic.²⁰ In recognition of women's contribution to the war effort, and to prevent the resumption of militant activism, the Qualification of Women Act was passed in March 1917, granting the vote to British women over the age of thirty, to university graduates, and those paying five pounds per annum in rent; a franchise equal with that of men was granted in 1928.

Such seismic shifts in gender relations have been critically linked with the emergence of a recognizably modern lesbian identity. Writing in 1897, Havelock Ellis declared that the German sexologists Hans Kurella and Iwan Bloch "believe that the woman movement [sic] has helped to develop homosexuality", himself hazarding that while, "[t]hese unquestionable influences of modern movements cannot directly cause sexual inversion [...] they develop the germs of it."²¹ Jagose observes that Henry James's 1896 The Bostonians also aligns female same-sex desire with both femininity and feminism.²² As James's narrator observes of Olive Chancellor, the Boston suffragette and "signal old maid": "it was a curious incident of her zeal for the regeneration of her sex that manly things were, perhaps on the whole, what she understood best."²³ D.H. Lawrence's The Rainbow, which was charged with obscenity in 1915, similarly links same-sex desire with contemporary concerns about women's place in the public sphere. Lawrence depicts the teenage Ursula Brangwen in passionate thrall to her young teacher, Miss Inger, a Newnham graduate and "fearless-seeming clean type of modern girl":

²⁰ Laura Doan, Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of an English Lesbian Culture (New York and Chichester: Columbia UP, 2001) xviii.

²¹ Havelock Ellis, "Sexual Inversion," Studies in the Psychology of Sex Volume I (New York: Random House, 1942): 1-184. 262.

²² Jagose, Inconsequence 64.

²³ Henry James, The Bostonians (New York: The Modern Library, 2003) 118.

“Winifred Inger felt a hot delight in the lessons when Ursula was present, Ursula felt her whole life begin when Miss Inger came into the room.”²⁴ Kent thus argues that Lawrence “makes ‘modern’ a euphemism for lesbian.”²⁵ Compton Mackenzie’s 1928 satire, Extraordinary Women, similarly depicted wealthy women of the period as driven to the interrelated states of ‘mannish’ independence and lesbianism, the same-sex orientation of his protagonist, Rosalba, reflecting her inability to desire the emasculated men of the post-war period.²⁶

The 1920s witnessed a markedly increased in representations of female same-sex desire.²⁷ Lawrence’s novella “The Fox” was published in 1923, while 1928 witnessed the publication of Mackenzie’s Extraordinary Women (its title recalling the headline of Butler and Ponsonby’s 1790 denunciation in the General Evening Post), Woolf’s Orlando, and Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness.²⁸ As previously described, extracts from Butler’s journal were published in 1930 as The Hamwood Papers. Contemporary reviews of the volume read it in the topical contexts of both second-wave feminism and female same-sex desire. The London Sunday Times presented the Ladies as predecessors of the ‘New Women’ of the post-war generation:

²⁴ D.H. Lawrence, The Rainbow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 336.

²⁵ Kent, Making 132.

²⁶ Compton Mackenzie, Extraordinary Women (London: Martin Secker, 1928).

²⁷ The first volume of Marcel Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu was published in France in 1913, and was available, as were ensuing volumes of Proust’s novel, throughout Britain and the United States over the following decade. English translations of the text appeared between 1924-1930.

²⁸ Djuna Barnes’s Ladies Almanack was also published in 1928. (Djuna Barnes, Ladies Almanack (Elmwood Park, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1992).) Barnes’s text depicts a fantastical realm of female same-sex desire presided over by Dame Musset, “a woman with a difference,” whose inherently inverted desires distinguish her from the range of women liable to be ‘converted’ to such pleasures through a pedagogical form of queer reproduction. (Kent, Making 126-37.) While Ladies Almanack is a central text of lesbian modernism, it was banned in the United States and printed and distributed privately by Barnes in Paris, its resulting circulation amongst an already sexually-literate audience limiting its relevance to the present discussion.

The tendency, especially among some feminists, to regard the present generation as the only one in which women have shown great will power in making a place for themselves has never made any appeal to those who know even a little history [...] Lady Eleanor Butler, the elder Lady of Llangollen, seems to have been born in 1739.²⁹

Butler and Ponsonby are situated as proto-feminists, their history standing as both an origin story and historical corrective to the progress narrative of twentieth-century activism. Although The Well of Loneliness was canonized in the later decades of the twentieth-century as ‘the bible of lesbianism,’³⁰ its 1928 prosecution for obscenity has led the modernist period to be recalled as hostile to love between women. Hall was an advocate of the sexology of Kraft-Ebbing, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Havelock Ellis, the latter of whom defined sexual inversion as a biological condition in which the “sexual instinct [is] turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex.”³¹ Describing this condition is one in which sexual object choice remains “heterosexual, that is to say, normal”, Ellis declared, “Inversion of this kind leads a person to feel like a person of the opposite sex, and to adopt, so far as possible, the tastes, habits, and dress of the opposite sex.”³² As seen in chapter two, this model of gender liminality thus preserves a fundamentally heterosexual model of desire, in which essentially male or female persons desire their gendered opposite, regardless of their sexual morphology.

²⁹ Bulloch, “Hamwood.”

³⁰ This epithet is prominently asserted on the cover of the 1997 Virago edition of Hall’s novel, which has been continuously in print since its first publication. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon’s 1972 Lesbian/Woman, described it a “Lesbian Bible.” (Martin and Lyon, Lesbian 17.), while Jane Rule’s 1975 Lesbian Images declared it to be “the lesbian novel.” (Jane Rule, Lesbian Images (London: Peter Davies, 1975) 50.)

³¹ Ellis, “Sexual,” 1.

³² Ellis, “Sexual,” 2.

Lesbian historians of the 1970s and 1980s noted the ambivalent relationship between sexology and the emergence of twentieth-century lesbian identity. Faderman claimed that sexology allowed women who loved women to justify their desires as biologically innate and thus immune from moral censure or medical ‘correction.’³³ She nonetheless stressed the juridical power of sexological models, emphasizing the role of pathologizing taxonomies in undermining the presumptive innocence of the romantic friendship paradigm.³⁴ Figuring sexology as the cause of the stigmatizing interregnum separating analogous golden ages, Faderman reified eighteenth-century romantic friends as lesbian pioneers, and claimed that women did not again articulate “the truth and complexity of their own experiences” until the lesbian-feminism of the 1970s.³⁵ Nancy Sahli similarly stressed the pathologizing effects of sexological discourse, suggesting that the language of sexual deviance effected a “fall” from grace for the female friendships that flourished in American schools and women’s colleges of the late nineteenth-century.³⁶

Laura Doan has argued against this view, denying that the dissemination of sexology in the first decades of the twentieth-century led in itself to the systematic identification and stigmatisation of female intimacies.³⁷ Cautioning against the retrospective projection of a presumptive linkage between female masculinity and same-

³³ Faderman, *Surpassing* 317-18.

³⁴ Lillian Faderman, "The Morbidification of Love between Women by Nineteenth-Century Sexologists," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4.1 (1978): 73-90.

³⁵ Faderman, *Surpassing* 356.

³⁶ Nancy Sahli, "Smashing: Women's Relationships before the Fall," *Chrysalis* 8 (1979): 18-27.

³⁷ In an influential article of 1982/3, George Chauncey also warns against drawing a straightforwardly causal relationship between the late nineteenth-century dissemination of sexology and the emergence and stigmatization of homosexual identities. (George Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi* 58-59.Fall (1982-3): 114-46.)

sex desire, Doan describes wartime commentators as characterizing the period's "boyettes" and "young Amazons" in terms ranging from mildly satirical to congratulatory.³⁸ Citing 1917-18 Punch cartoons depicting gentry women repairing plumbing and car engines, Doan suggests that the New Woman's assumption of masculine prerogatives was interpreted in certain contexts as merely the latest manifestation of upper-class women's ability to flout bourgeois conventions.³⁹ Other commentators were straightforwardly celebratory, describing the experience of conflict as a "crucible," from which "the pure gold of new Womanhood emerged."⁴⁰ Doan's carefully marshalled evidence suggests that female masculinity was imbued with a wide range of potential significations throughout the first decades of the twentieth-century, which included, but were not limited to, sapphism.⁴¹ Describing a 1918 libel case in which dancer Maud Allen sued the MP Noel Pemberton Billing for publishing an article characterizing her audience as members of "The Cult of the Clitoris," Doan claims that Pemberton Billing's action sought as much to gain publicity for his xenophobic politics as it did to prosecute immorality. While the case intensified interest in "that nameless vice between women,"⁴² its imprecise distillation of sexological discourse confounded any account of lesbianism as a particular sexual object choice. Similarly, while Magistrate Cecil Chapman attempted in 1921 to extend the 1885 Labouchère Amendment under which Wilde was convicted to criminalize "Acts of indecency by females," his central concern was to protect minors from abuse, rather than to criminalize

³⁸ Laura Doan, "Topsy-Turveydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War," GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 12.4 (2006): 517-43. 518-19.

³⁹ Doan, "Topsy." 519-20.

⁴⁰ Doan, "Topsy." 519.

⁴¹ Doan, "Topsy." 522.

⁴² Doan, Fashioning 31.

female same-sex activity *per se*.⁴³ While supporters of Chapman's bill insisted that knowledge and practice of lesbianism was endemic, opponents viewed such knowledge as a class marker, separating a sophisticated two percent from the ninety-eight who enjoyed "traditional hard work, Saturday nights and the boozier."⁴⁴

Doan's historical evidence offers an important corrective to the presumed primacy of sexological understandings of female same-sex desire in the first decades of the twentieth-century. She nonetheless affirms the importance of the 1928 publication and subsequent prosecution of The Well of Loneliness in the dissemination of sexological models in the 1920s and after.⁴⁵ Hall's lover, Lady Una Troubridge, described The Well as seeking to render the plight of the invert "accessible to the general public who did not have access to technical treatises," its polemical status underscored by Ellis's contribution of a preface to the first edition.⁴⁶ Hall's aristocratic protagonist, Stephen Gordon, exemplifies the figure of the "actively inverted woman" whose male soul is trapped in a woman's body. Hall literalized Ellis's etiology of sexual inversion by depicting Stephen as a male child mistakenly born as female-bodied; her father, Sir Philip, "never knew how much he longed for a son until, some ten years after marriage, his wife conceived a child; then he knew that this thing meant complete fulfilment, the

⁴³ Doan, Fashioning 51.

The Labouchère Amendment created the first non-religious category criminalizing particular sexual practices, specifically forbidding male subjects from committing "acts of gross indecency with another male person." (Ed Cohen, "Legislating the Norm: From Sodomy to Gross Indecency," Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture, eds. Ronald R. Butters, John M. Clum and Michael Moon. (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1989): 169-206.)

⁴⁴ Qtd. in Doan, Fashioning 25.

⁴⁵ Laura Doan, "Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s," Feminist Studies 24.3 (1998): 663-700. 686.

⁴⁶ Lady Una Troubridge, The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall (London: Hammond and Co, 1961) 81.

fulfilment for which they had both been waiting.”⁴⁷ Having christened the unborn child ‘Stephen,’ after the first martyr of the Christian church, Sir Philip insists that the disappointingly female infant be given the name already selected for ‘him.’⁴⁸ (The resonance of this creation myth is indicated by its intertextual employment in Doris Grumbach’s 1984 novelization of Butler and Ponsonby, The Ladies, in which Butler’s expectant mother orders “a crooked-neck silver spoon, the letters *SON* to be embossed upon the handle.”⁴⁹) The young Stephen views herself as inherently male. Her assurance, “Yes, of course I’m a boy. I’m young Nelson,”⁵⁰ nonetheless marks her gender as a “maimed” version of British masculinity, her female anatomy compromising her bodily integrity as did the Admiral’s blinded eye and amputated arm.⁵¹ Stephen’s irregularity is thus written upon her malformed body, which bears, Christlike, “all the outward stigmata of the abnormal – verily the wounds of one nailed to a cross.”⁵²

With the outbreak of World War One, Hall’s Stephen joins the London Ambulance Column, joining the ranks of those who find their ‘abnormality’ a virtue in wartime: “she

⁴⁷ Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness (London: Virago, 1997) 8.

⁴⁸ As critics including Doan observe, Hall here diverges from Ellis’s strictly biological account of inversion, with Sir Philip’s decision to raise Stephen “as all the son that I’ve got” supplementing Hall’s argument from nature with that from nurture. (Laura Doan, “the Outcast of One Age Is the Hero of Another:’ Radclyffe Hall, Edward Carpenter, and the Intermediate Sex,” Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on the Well of Loneliness, eds. Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia UP, 2001): 164.)

⁴⁹ Grumbach, Ladies 11.

⁵⁰ Hall, Well 16. Jay Prosser thus claims that Stephen’s experience of ‘her’ own body as *unheimlich* must be read as an assertion of transsexual or transgender subjectivity. See Jay Prosser, “Some Primitive Thing Conceived in a Turbulent Age of Transition;’ the Transsexual Emerging from the Well.,” Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on the Well of Loneliness, eds. Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia UP, 2001): 129-44. 129-44.

⁵¹ Victoria Rossner, “Once More into the Breach: The Well of Loneliness and the Spaces of Inversion,” Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on the Well of Loneliness, eds. Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia UP, 2001): 316-35. 325.

⁵² Hall, Well 247.

was strong, she was efficient, she could fill a man's place."⁵³ She serves on the French front and is awarded the *Croix de Guerre*, finding acceptance within a wartime community of "maimed" invert who minister to similarly wounded men.⁵⁴ Ellis's sexology contrasts the figure of the masculine invert with that of the feminine invert: "the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by."⁵⁵ Accordingly, Hall depicts Stephen finding love during wartime with the young Mary Llewellyn, whose active role in initiating their relationship has been obscured by the sexological figuration of the feminine invert as unmarked by the congenital transitivity of her masculine counterpart.⁵⁶ Ellis figures the feminine invert as merely mistaken in her sexual object choice, the situational nature of her desires rendering her open to heterosexual 'correction.'⁵⁷ Such women nonetheless differ, he argues, "from the normal, or average, woman in that they are not disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex."⁵⁸ Hall's depiction of Mary is markedly ambivalent, alternately emphasizing the wartime genesis of her love for Stephen and the certitude of her desire. As she assures Stephen: "What do I care for the world's opinion? What do I care for anything but you—as you are, I love

⁵³ Hall, *Well* 274.

⁵⁴ Rossner, "Once," 327. This theme is also developed in Hall's 1926 short story, "Miss Olgivy finds herself." (Radclyffe Hall, "Miss Olgivy Finds Herself," *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992): 24-38. 28.)

⁵⁵ Ellis, "Sexual," 222.

⁵⁶ Ellis emphasizes the passivity of the feminine invert, figuring her susceptibility to the masculine invert as reflecting her "coldness" and inability to stir male desire: "[Feminine inverts] are not usually attractive to the average man, though to this rule there are many exceptions. Their faces may be plain or ill-made, but not seldom they possess good figures: a point which is apt to carry more weight with the inverted woman than beauty of face. Their sexual impulses are seldom well marked, but they are of a strongly affectionate nature. On the whole, they are women who are not very robust, and who are not well adapted for child-bearing, but who still possess many excellent qualities, and they are always womanly." (Ellis, "Sexual," 222.)

⁵⁷ Clare Hemmings, "'All My Life I've Been Waiting for Something...': Theorizing Femme Narrative in *the Well of Loneliness*," *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on the Well of Loneliness*, eds. Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia UP, 2001): 179-98. 182.

⁵⁸ Ellis, "Sexual," 222.

you!”⁵⁹ In his 1928 judgement against the book, magistrate Sir Chartres Biron nevertheless described Mary as “a perfectly innocent girl” who is “debauch[ed,]”⁶⁰ attributing to Stephen Gordon the same deep seated powers of moral and physical corrupted that Mrs. Goddard levelled against Butler in 1778. The novel’s Martin Hallam similarly observes of Mary, “She was setting her weakness against the whole world, and slowly but surely the world would close in until in the end it had utterly crushed her. In her very normality lay her danger.”⁶¹ Recalling her martyred namesake, Stephen thus falsifies an affair in order to save Mary from a life of “spiritual murder,”⁶² her eventual departure with Hallam lending support to the figuration of the feminine invert as either a coerced straight woman or an inevitably “traitorous femme.”⁶³

In her 1981 article, “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” Catharine Stimpson identified as The Well of Loneliness as exemplifying the literary tradition of “the dying fall” – “a narrative of damnation, of the lesbian’s suffering as a lonely outcast.”⁶⁴ While the novel’s tragic ending was necessitated by its didactic purpose, it led the text to fall from favour in the early years of lesbian and gay liberation, insofar as it challenged the reification of historical texts and paradigms modeling the

⁵⁹ Hall, Well 316.

⁶⁰ Sir Chartres Biron, “Judgement,” Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on the Well of Loneliness, eds. Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia UP, 2001): 39-49, 45-46.

⁶¹ Hall, Well 431.

⁶² Hall, Well 433.

⁶³ Hemmings, “All My Life,” 180.

⁶⁴ Catharine Stimpson, “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” Critical Inquiry 8.2 (1981): 363-79, 364.

Exemplifying the harsh criticism of The Well of Loneliness within second-wave feminism, Stimpson declares Hall to be a “premature” writer who reinforces the social prejudices of her period: “Hall represents the lesbian as scandal and the lesbian as woman-who-is-man.” (367)

culture of tolerance that activists sought to establish in the present.⁶⁵ As we have seen, Smith-Rosenberg celebrated the maternally-inflected bonds of the “female world of love and ritual.” Hall’s novel closes, by contrast, with a hallucinatory scene in which Stephen undergoes a frightful spiritual ‘labour’ that brings forth a crew of fellow inverts: “They possessed her. Her barren womb became fruitful—it ached with its fearful and sterile burden. It ached with the fierce yet helpless children who would clamour in vain for their right to salvation.”⁶⁶ The Biblical St. Stephen is stoned to death for his faith, his final speech condemning the persecution of truth-tellers.⁶⁷ Hall’s Stephen is similarly rendered a Messianic figure whose ‘dies’ to Mary in order to engender the voices of “the fierce yet helpless children who would clamour in vain for their right to salvation.”⁶⁸

In an important reading of Hall’s novel, Heather Love surveys critical discomfort with Stephen’s “lonely suffering.” Surveying 1980s analyses of The Well, she observes that the Foucauldian concept of reverse discourse, in which stigmatizing categories are conceptually occupied and revalidated, allowed scholars including Esther Newton and Sonia Ruehl to interpret Hall’s use of sexological taxonomies as a form of critical resistance. Love nonetheless remarks of the novel’s pervading melancholy: “[Hall’s] use of the [category of inversion] cannot absorb the stigma associated with this medical discourse. In this sense, The Well might be said to give reverse discourse a bad name.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ For a perceptive account of such historical and political commitments, see Love, “Spoiled.” 491-92.

⁶⁶ Hall, Well 446.

⁶⁷ Acts 7:52.

⁶⁸ Hall, Well 444-46. Hall’s narrator intones, “Stephen Gordon was dead; she had died last night: ‘A l’heure de notre mort...’” (Hall, Well 444.) Hall here invokes the “Hail Mary,” in which Mary is petitioned to pray for sinners at the moment of their death. Through this dense array of religious references, Stephen is figured in death as a Christ-like martyr, an absolved penitent, and the Immaculate progenitor of a family of fellow inverts.

⁶⁹ Love, “Spoiled.” 488.

Love theorizes critical discomfort with Stephen's "lonely suffering" as a sign, not of the novel's incommensurability with anti-homophobic projects, but the centrality of shame and stigma to recent queer analyses. She thus urges attentiveness to the "difficulties of the queer past," rather than the effort to recuperate Edenic spaces *avant* homophobia.⁷⁰ As "the great success story of romantic friendship," Butler and Ponsonby have been closely aligned with the affirmative historiographic mode against which Love contrasts Stephen's affliction; as Noel Malcolm observes, they are located within "a roll call of heroes and heroines" who are juxtaposed against the "history of martyrdom" personified by Hall and Wilde.⁷¹ As the following discussion demonstrates, however, the Ladies have also been central to literary recuperations of sexology such as Gordon's Chase of the Wild Goose, in which "the difficulties of the queer past" are held, through the improper logic of queer temporality, both to bring about, and participate in, a more expansive queer future.

Butler and Ponsonby and the future that is 'to be'

Virginia Woolf scorned The Well of Loneliness as polemic aspiring to art, describing it as "pale tepid vapid"⁷² and "meritously dull."⁷³ Woolf was nonetheless committed to the more expansive articulation of female same-sex desire, remarking of her 1928 Orlando, "Sapphism is *to be* suggested [my emphasis]."⁷⁴ The following discussion suggests that Orlando and Chase of the Wild Goose may be viewed as

⁷⁰ Love, "Spoiled." 492.

⁷¹ Malcolm, "Gay."

⁷² Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 3: 1925-1930, eds. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980) 207.

⁷³ Woolf, Diary Vol. 3 193. Writing to Vita Sackville-West, her former lover Violet Trefusis (after whom the Russian Princess of Woolf's Orlando is modelled) described Hall's novel as a "loathsome example of homosexual literature." (Helen Southworth, "Correspondence in Two Cultures: The Social Ties Linking Colette and Virginia Woolf," Journal of Modern Literature 26.2 (2003): 81-99. 9.)

⁷⁴ Woolf, Diary Vol. 3 131.

undertaking a common project of textually realizing the possibility of trans-temporal queer desire. Both novels diverge from the formal experimentation of high modernist texts such as Woolf's 1931 The Waves, drawing instead upon the genre of the historical novel. While this genre was associated in this period with middlebrow escapism, it also offered an imaginative framework within which to conceptualize female lives as exceeding the bounds of contemporary propriety.⁷⁵ Woolf's "spoof pageant of English history" differs markedly in tone from the unwittingly camp earnestness of Gordon's Chase of the Wild Goose, which Gordon takes care to present as a work of historical reconstruction.⁷⁶ The fictionalized narratives of both texts nonetheless offers a spirited rebuke to the cheerless trajectory of The Well of Loneliness, invoking Butler and Ponsonby's shared life as an enabling myth of contemporary queer relationality. The Ladies may thus be seen as spectral inhabitants of sapphic modernity, their historical narrative instantiating a sapphic future that is 'to be.'

In A Room of One's Own (1929), Woolf's narrator describes the prose of fictional novelist, Mary Carmichael, as disrupting the expected progression of both sentences and narrative sequence: "The smooth gliding of sentence after sentence was interrupted. Something tore, something scratched; a single word here and there flashed its torch in my eyes."⁷⁷ Underscoring the figuration of same-sex desire between women as a form of expendable foreplay "that constitutes part of the narrative's detour"⁷⁸ Woolf's narrator shares her surprise upon encountering "those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-

⁷⁵ Chris Baldick, The Modern Movement 1910-1940 (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2004) 220-21.

⁷⁶ Baldick, Modern 224.

⁷⁷ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (St. Albans, Hertfordshire: Triad/Panther Books, 1977) 77.

⁷⁸ Judith Roof, qtd. in Rohy, "Ahistorical." 64.

said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone, unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex.”⁷⁹ She figures the events of women’s history as flickering traces effaced by the harsh light of masculine discourse, identifying the Polonius-like lurker policing women’s same-sex desire with Sir Chartres Biron, the “pathologically boorish” magistrate who prosecuted The Well of Loneliness:⁸⁰

Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Charles [sic] Biron is not concealed? We are all women you assure me? Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these— ‘Chloe liked Olivia . . .’ Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.⁸¹

Describing this passage, Jane Marcus observes of Woolf’s ellipses: “Dot dot dot is a female code for lesbian love.”⁸² Butler and Ponsonby also operate as such a code in this period, functioning less as an opaque substitution than a performative invocation, through which same-sex desire is textually instantiated. Woolf may have first encountered Butler and Ponsonby between the pages of the Dictionary of National Biography, of which her father was founding editor, or in Lockhart’s 1837-8 Life of Sir Walter Scott, which she received for her fifteenth birthday.⁸³ It is certain that she read about them when she reviewed E.V. Lucas’s biography of Anna Seward, A Swan and her Friends, for the Times Literary Supplement,⁸⁴ Lucas’s narrative devotes a chapter to the friendship that

⁷⁹ Woolf, Room 81.

⁸⁰ Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, Vera Brittain: A Life (Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 2002) 228.

⁸¹ Woolf, Room 78.

⁸² Jane Marcus, “Sapphistory: The Woolf and the Well,” Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions, eds. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York UP, 1990): 164-80. 168.

⁸³ Danell Jones, “The Chase of the Wild Goose: The Ladies of Llangollen and Orlando,” Virginia Woolf: Themes and Variations: Selected Papers from the Second Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, eds. Vara Neverow-Turk and Mark Hussey (New York: Pace UP, 1993): 183.

⁸⁴ Virginia Stephen [later Woolf], “A Swan and Her Friends,” Times Literary Supplement 14 Nov. 1907: 348.

played such a prominent role in Butler and Ponsonby's Romantic figuration.⁸⁵ Butler and Ponsonby's relationship may have further played on Woolf's mind when, in 1925, her friendship with Sackville-West transmuted in what they were later to describe as "bad behaviour on the sofa."⁸⁶

Woolf's relationship with Sackville-West is closely associated with her 1928 novel Orlando, which was famously described by Sackville-West's son as "the longest and most charming love letter in literature."⁸⁷ Although Woolf conceived of Orlando as an exuberant digression from the formal experimentation of works such as To the Lighthouse, it nonetheless constitutes a serious intervention into the genre of life-writing.⁸⁸ While her father's Dictionary of National Biography catalogued the facts pertaining to those who 'shaped the history of the British Isles and beyond,' Woolf joined peers such as Lytton Strachey and A.J.A. Symonds in rejecting the dry and hagiographic nature of Victorian life-writing. As her narrator comments archly in Orlando: "the first duty of a biographer [...] is to plod lightly, without looking to the right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads."⁸⁹ The emphatic finality of this inscription recalls de Certeau's necrological model of historiography. The biographer's 'fall' into the grave additionally collapses the positions of author and subject, suggesting, as Gordon later echoes, that the biographer also writes his or her own life story. In the 1927 essay, "The Art of Biography," Woolf

⁸⁵ Lucas, A Swan and Her Friends 260-305.

⁸⁶ Qtd. in Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf (London: Vintage, 1996) 499.

⁸⁷ Nigel Nicolson, Portrait of a Marriage (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973) 201.

⁸⁸ Woolf, Diary Vol. 3 131.

⁸⁹ Virginia Woolf, Orlando: A Biography, ed. Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 63.

contrasts the factual methods of the biographer with the imaginative freedom of the literary artist: "The world created by that [latter] vision is rarer, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made of authentic information supplied by other people."⁹⁰ Orlando, however, does not so much reject life-writing for literary fiction as expose the highly permeable boundary between these ostensibly distinct representational modes. Woolf's commitment to the "New Biography," jettisoning both arid facts and an exclusive commitment to "the lives of great men"⁹¹ would extend to her 1933 Flush: A Biography, which details the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet spaniel.⁹² Featuring the same assertive subtitle, Orlando purports to be the life-story of a sixteenth century Elizabethan nobleman. Embodying the transitivity associated with his Shakespearean name, the eponymous Orlando wakes from a week-long trance as a woman, falls in love with members of both sexes, travels to the culturally hybrid city of Constantinople, and lives for four hundred years. Woolf wrote to Sackville-West, to whom the work is dedicated, in October 1927: "But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its all about you & the lusts of your flesh & the lure of your mind?"⁹³ Woolf's protagonist shares Sackville-West's lineage, ancestral home, and status as an aristocrat "afflicted with a love of literature," (Orlando's poem The Oak Tree recalls Sackville-West's 1927 The Land).⁹⁴ The first edition went so far as to depict Orlando "throughout the ages" with photographs of Sackville-West staging her own life and those

⁹⁰ Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography," The Death of the Moth, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1947): 119-26. 124.

As Woolf declares, "Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses in odd corners. [...] Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what is smallness? (Woolf, "Art," 125.)

⁹¹ Woolf, "Art," 125.

⁹² Virginia Woolf, Flush: A Biography (London: Persephone Books, 2004).

⁹³ Woolf, Reflection 313.

⁹⁴ Woolf, Orlando 71.

of her ancestors. Rather than tethering Woolf's fantastical narrative to the solid ground of fact, these literal resonances suggest that "real life is [...] made up of imaginary identifications," with Orlando's shifting designations echoing those of Sackville-West – variously recalled as a writer, traveller, gardener and lover of women.⁹⁵

Woolf's relationship with Sackville-West is thus frequently acknowledged as central to the germination and shape of Orlando. This account of the novel's genesis nonetheless obscures the extent to which Butler and Ponsonby's narrative also served a central role. Woolf first conceived of Orlando in March 1927, writing in her diary:

Suddenly, between twelve & one I conceived a whole fantasy to be called "The Jessamy Brides"...Two women, poor, solitary, at the top of a house...It is to be written as I write letters, at the top of my speed: on the ladies of Llangollen; on Mrs Fladgate; on people passing. No attempt is to be made to realise the character. Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note — satire & wildness. The Ladies are to have Constantinople in view. Dreams of golden domes. My own lyric vein is to be satirized. Everything mocked. And it is to be ended on three dots ... so.⁹⁶

Butler and Ponsonby are here gathered with a suggestive range of references. Woolf's projected title recalls that of Frankfort Moore's 1897 novel, The Jessamy Bride, which describes the last years of Irish dramatist, Oliver Goldsmith, and his love for the widow Mary Horneck, with whom he travelled to France in 1770. Horneck was described as Goldsmith's 'jessamy bride'⁹⁷; the epithet thus suggests a form of sexually unconsummated relationship, as it does the intense female-female bonds that Horneck

⁹⁵ Rachel Bowlby, "Introduction," Orlando, ed. Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992): xii-xxvii. xix.

⁹⁶ Woolf, Diary Vol. 3 131.

⁹⁷ The Irish associations of the term 'jessamy' are also suggested by the character Mr. Jessamy from the comic opera Lionel and Clarissa, which debuted at Covent Garden in 1768. (C. Chattock, Notes and Queries 4th Series IX (1872): 149. 149.) Its text was composed by Irish librettist, Isaac Bickerstaff, who was also known for his sexual activity with men.

shared with her two daughters. The term was also used to describe a foppish or effeminized man, with the 1790 print “A Jessamy” depicting a young man of fashion parading in a cocked hat, closely-fitted breeches and elaborately ruffled shirt, with ribbon rosettes adorning his stockings and shoes.⁹⁸ Woolf’s contemplation of the Ladies, with its echoes of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” recalls Sackville-West’s time in Turkey during her husband’s posting as Secretary of the British Embassy,⁹⁹ as it does the Turkish location of Orlando’s changes of sex.¹⁰⁰ It also recalls the figuration of the near East as a place of cultural and gender liminality, its gendered crossings symbolized by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Turkish trousers and the “effeminate garb” impressed upon Byron’s Don Juan.¹⁰¹ In invoking the concept of “passing,” Woolf again gestures towards the instability of racial and sexual taxonomies, the ability of particular individuals to ‘pass’ as white or heterosexual suggesting the superficial nature of ostensibly essential identity categories.¹⁰² The disjuncture between surface appearance and ontological depth is further reiterated by Woolf’s rejection of realistic characterisation, suggesting that her protagonist is to be characterized by Wildean façade, rather than the psychological complexity conveyed by stream of consciousness narration. The ‘suggestion’ of sapphism with which Woolf flirts is thus constituted by conceptual indeterminacy, rendering Butler and Ponsonby fitting ciphers upon which an array of identities become manifest.

⁹⁸ Mary Dorothy George, Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires, Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum Vol. Vi (London: British Museum, 1938) 750 [BL7783].

In 1796, Francis Grose’s A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue defined a jessamy as “A smart jimmy fellow, a fopling.” (George, Catalogue 750.)

⁹⁹ Woolf, Orlando 325n113.

¹⁰⁰ Woolf, Orlando 132.

¹⁰¹ George Gordon Byron, Don Juan, eds. T.G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W.W. Pratt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 5:73-80.

¹⁰² In contemporary queer culture, ‘passing’ describes the act of being perceived voluntarily or involuntarily as straight or gender normative. In Woolf’s 1920s context, the term primarily described the act of a light-skinned Black person passing as white, thus subverting the purported self-evidence of systems of racial classification. This issue is explored in Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel Passing. (ed. Thadious M. Davis, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997)

In a 1993 essay, “The Chase of the Wild Goose: The Ladies of Llangollen and Orlando,” Danell Jones argues that Butler and Ponsonby emblemized for Woolf the rejection of heterosexual norms: “Like Orlando and her real-life model Vita, the Ladies’ lives were at odds with social conventions, particularly those conventions that dictate sex and sexuality. This is exactly the issue at the heart of Orlando: the social dimension of sex.”¹⁰³ Having been raised as a man, Orlando’s transition to womanhood renders her acutely conscious of the conventionality of gendered norms. Jones thus likens Orlando’s rejection of society to Butler and Ponsonby’s elopement: if being a proper eighteenth-century lady “meant conventionality, meant slavery, meant deceit, meant denying her love, fettering her limbs, pursing her lips, and restraining her tongue, she would turn about the ship and set sail once more for the gypsies.”¹⁰⁴ In refusing to alter her sexual object choice in order to correlate ‘properly’ with her altered sex, Jones suggests that Orlando further echoes Butler and Ponsonby’s avowed commitment to one another, the novel not only suggesting sapphism, but locating women’s same-sex desire as central to an expansive definition of love.¹⁰⁵ Woolf feared that Orlando’s publication would lead to her being “hinted at for a Sapphist,” the book’s dedication to Sackville-West nonetheless reflecting its apparent nonchalance towards potentially damning sexual slurs. In the wake of her change of sex, Orlando’s persistent desire for women is figured as an evolutionary quirk: “And as all Orlando’s loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was

¹⁰³ Jones, “Chase,” 185.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, “Chase,” 186.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, “Chase,” 186-87.

Jones thus claims that Woolf viewed Butler and Ponsonby as a romantic ideal based upon “kindness, fidelity, generosity and poetry.” (187)

still a woman she loved.”¹⁰⁶ Orlando is later figured in terms recalling the eighteenth-century French diplomat, Chevalier d’Eon, who lived the first half of his life as a man and the second as a woman: “[Orlando’s] sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive [...] For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally.”¹⁰⁷ Woolf’s manuscript nonetheless reveals that she censored references to Sappho and to Orlando’s peculiar ‘lusts.’ Her published text further echoes the figuration of sapphism as a foreign practice, wryly observing of her excisions, “[T]here was much in those pages of an impure nature [...] and there can be no real conflict in an English heart when Truth and modesty conflict.”¹⁰⁸

The generic playfulness and hybridity of Woolf’s Orlando allowed it to evade the censure meted out upon Hall’s Well, its capricious narrative style echoing the life of its eponymous protagonist. Woolf’s text is subtitled “A Biography,” its editorial notes and elevated tone recalling her father’s voluminous Dictionary of National Biography. Her diary nonetheless attests to her desire to write her ‘biography,’ “half in a mock style very clear and plain”,¹⁰⁹ the tension between its ‘realistic’ genre and Shandean stylization disclosing its guiding camp aesthetic. Its hyperbolic narrative trajectory similarly displays a scepticism towards ostensibly settled categories of gender and sexual identity more reminiscent of late-1990s gender parody than Hall’s tale of congenital doom. Freud observes, “When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male or

¹⁰⁶ Woolf, Orlando 154.

¹⁰⁷ Woolf, Orlando 211.

¹⁰⁸ Lee, Virginia Woolf 524.

¹⁰⁹ Woolf, Diary Vol. 3 162.

female?’ and you are accustomed to making that distinction with unhesitating certainty.”¹¹⁰ Woolf’s ironic opening – “He—for there could be no doubt about his sex”¹¹¹ – immediately undermines such certitude, as it does the “myth of coherent personality”¹¹² upon which the practice of biography traditionally rests. The Well of Loneliness reifies a gendered binary of essentially male and female subjects, who are characterized, in spite of their sexual morphology, by cross-gendered object choice. As Stephen assures her mother of her first love for Angela Crossby, “If I loved her the way a man loves a woman, it’s because I can’t feel that I am a woman. All my life I’ve never felt like a woman, and you’ve known it—.”¹¹³ Orlando instead confounds the logic of the heterosexual matrix, as it does the stability of its constitutive terms. Woolf’s narrator observes, “In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what is above.”¹¹⁴ Arguing that Butler and Ponsonby’s masculine dress marked their intention to “determine their own fate in defiance of the order of things,” Jones suggests that their apparent ability to change their sex at will may have influenced Woolf’s conception of her chimerical protagonist.¹¹⁵ Woolf figures the nineteenth-century’s gendered roles and adjectival lushness as inimical to Orlando’s capricious spirit. When she finally “yield[s] completely and submissively to the spirit of

¹¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Femininity,” New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1964): 22: 113.

¹¹¹ Woolf, Orlando 13.

¹¹² Geraldine Friedman, “Pseudonymity, Passing, and Queer Biography: The Case of Mary Diana Dods,” Romanticism on the Net 23 (2001). 1.

¹¹³ Hall, Well 204.

¹¹⁴ Woolf, Orlando 181.

¹¹⁵ Jones, “Chase,” 185.

the age”¹¹⁶ and takes a husband, her man of choice is the extravagantly-titled Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire, one “as strange and subtle as a woman.”¹¹⁷

‘Oh! Shel, don’t leave me!’ she cried. ‘I’m passionately in love with you,’ she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously. ‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried. ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried. Never was there such a scene of protestation and demonstration as then took place since the world began.¹¹⁸

This scene of gender revelation does not serve to efface queer possibilities, but to multiply them through its refusal of closure, as the pair’s mutual “protestation and demonstration” is brought to a disquietingly swift conclusion: “When it was all over and they were seated again she asked him, what was this talk of a South-west gale? Where was he bound for?”¹¹⁹ The implications of this truncated resolution are further underscored by Woolf’s hyperbolic narrative trajectory, within which stable gender identity is numbered amongst the “unimportant details” her protagonist drolly disregards.¹²⁰ The 1928 publication of Orlando and The Well of Loneliness locates them both within the contested gendered and sexual terrain of the post-war period. Their tonal divergence nonetheless discloses their antithetical attitudes towards the heterosexual logic of Ellis’s sexology, within which enduring queer desire is necessarily gender-transitive in nature.

¹¹⁶ Woolf, Orlando 232.

¹¹⁷ Woolf, Orlando 246.

The character of Shelmerdine carries echoes of Sackville-West’s husband, Harold Nicolson. Nicolson was actively bisexual, was of Scottish descent (a fact echoed by the fictional Shelmerdine’s “castle in the Hebrides”), and was known, like his fictional counterpart, by the nickname ‘Mar.’ (Woolf, Orlando 240.)

¹¹⁸ Woolf, Orlando 240.

¹¹⁹ Woolf, Orlando 240.

¹²⁰ Woolf, Orlando 240.

Pursuing Butler and Ponsonby: Gordon's Chase of the Wild Goose

For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately.¹²¹
(Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own)

Gordon's 1936 Chase of the Wild Goose, echoes Orlando in offering an alternative to the tragic teleology of Hall's Well of Loneliness. Each text rejects the formal experimentation characteristic of high modernism, drawing instead upon the tradition of the historical novel exemplified in the nineteenth-century by Scott and William Makepeace Thackeray. Gordon nonetheless posits her text as generically antithetical to Woolf's extravagant playfulness, declaring its depiction of Butler and Ponsonby to be grounded in "the things nearest to reality."¹²² Gordon was born in Lancashire in 1861 into a family long-settled on the Scottish borderlands. While details of her early life and education are scarce, her proximity to Scotland may have influenced her later decision to become one of the first female physicians to qualify in Britain. In 1869, the pioneering female physician Sophia Jex-Blake was granted permission to attend medical lectures at Edinburgh University, where she was joined by six other female students.¹²³ Upon being refusing a degree, Jex-Blake established the London School of Medicine for Women in 1874, which was the first English institution to offer medical training to women. Gordon studied at Jex-Blake's school in the early 1880s and registered as a medical practitioner in 1890, having been certified, after six years of

¹²¹ Woolf, Room 77.

¹²² Gordon, Chase 11.

¹²³ Both male doctors and members of the public were virulent in their opposition to women studying medicine. A confrontation dubbed the 'Surgeon's Hall Riot' broke out in 1870 when Jex-Blake and other members of the group that became known as "the Edinburgh Seven" attempted to sit an anatomy exam.

training, by the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, and the Faculty of Physical Surgery, Glasgow.¹²⁴

Gordon practiced medicine in Harley Street between 1890 and 1908; in 1907, she also published a novel, A Jury of the Virtuous.¹²⁵ In 1908, she was appointed Britain's first female Inspector of Prisons and Assistant Inspector of State and Certified Inebriate Reformatories, and placed on the board of the English and Welsh Prison Commission.¹²⁶ Gordon was responsible in these positions for overseeing the female inmates of forty penal and psychiatric institutions, including those housing imprisoned suffragettes. Her beliefs that female prisoners should be allowed sun bonnets and writing instruments were viewed with grudging suspicion, as was her progressive model of penitentiary rehabilitation, outlined in her 1922 monograph, Penal Discipline.¹²⁷ Her politics were viewed less sympathetically when Scotland Yard raided the WSPU offices in 1914, discovering Gordon's correspondence with Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, in

¹²⁴ W.J. Forsythe, Penal Discipline, Reformatory Projects and the English Prison Commission 1895-1939 (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1990) 34.

¹²⁵ Bill Forsythe, Gordon, Mary Louisa (1861-1941), 2004, Oxford University Press, Available: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/56108?docPos=2>>, 11 Jun. 2005.

¹²⁶ Mary Louisa Gordon, Penal Discipline (London and New York: George Routledge and Sons & E.P. Dutton, 1922) vii. Gordon notes that many members of the medical and bureaucratic establishment were opposed to her appointment, which was described in 1921 as "a sop to feminism" (Forsythe, Gordon). She was not allocated an office, and was frequently informed of her status as a "New Departure." (Gordon, Penal 4.)

¹²⁷ In the preface to her 1922 work, Gordon stresses that she is not commenting upon the British prison system in any official capacity. The significance of this demurral is made clear in the following pages, when she asserts that the women's prison system is comprised of a particular "manner of woman," rather than "*type of criminal*" (Gordon, Penal xi.), later observing that familial socialization lies at the root cause of common crimes such as prostitution: "There is no such certainty [of a "decent and honourable living"] for the child of the stupid, careless, or ignorant parent in any class, (no children are less protected than some in the upper classes) while the child of the vagabond parent has practically no chance at all." (Gordon, Penal 82.) Anticipating Foucault's Discipline and Punish by more than fifty years. Gordon claims that the true aim of the penal system is to assert "disciplinary power," rather than offer punishment and rehabilitation. She declares, "During my service I found nothing in the prison system to interest me, except as a gigantic irrelevance—a social curiosity. It appears to me not to belong to this time or this civilisation at all. My main argument here is that not only do we not deter, but that we actually make-over our criminal to crime [...] We merely ill-treat a man or woman who still ignores and escapes us." (Gordon, Penal.)

which she gave details of prison conditions and the wellbeing of detained suffrage leaders including Emmeline Pankhurst.¹²⁸ The Home Office demanded that Gordon publicly distance herself from the WSPU; she refused to do so on the basis that support of women's suffrage was not itself a crime, a stance that earned the enduring animus of her superiors.¹²⁹ In 1916, Gordon served on a Serbian transport column as a member of the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service; her proximity to the European battlefields anticipated Hall's depiction of both Stephen Gordon's work as an ambulance driver, and the wartime camaraderie shared by the women of Hall's 1934 short story, "Miss Olgivy finds herself."¹³⁰ Gordon retired to Sussex in 1921. In Chase of the Wild Goose, she describes herself as lacking a companion, "To call me Beloved...and go with me."¹³¹ In the years following the book's publication, however, she is known to have been romantically involved with the sculptor Violet Violet Labouchère, known to her friends as 'Frank.' She died in 1941 at the age of eighty.

The Origins of Gordon's 'Wild Goose Chase'

In Chase of the Wild Goose, Gordon tells of visiting Valle Crucis as a child, and of dreaming of the ruined abbey when visiting the psychoanalysts Carl and Emma Jung in Switzerland in the early 1930s. Mavor suggests that it was Carl Jung who advised Gordon to return to Llangollen Vale in 1935 in order to determine the significance of her dream. As Sarah Waters notes, however, Gordon's dedicated Chase of the Wild Goose to

¹²⁸ Forsythe, Penal 36-7.

¹²⁹ Forsythe, Gordon.

¹³⁰ Hall, "Olgivy," 28.

Hall's story was completed twelve days prior to the commencement of work on the initial draft of The Well of Loneliness in 1926, but was not published until 1934. (Terry Castle, ed., The Literature of Lesbianism: A Historical Anthology from Ariosto to Stonewall (New York: Columbia UP, 2003) 634.)

¹³¹ Gordon, Chase 271.

Emma Jung, herself a noted analyst, "to you, with affectionate regards,"¹³² suggesting that the latter's counsel was of more import than that of her more celebrated husband.¹³³ In early 1935, Gordon submitted the manuscript of Chase of the Wild Goose to Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. Gordon's choice of publisher was no coincidence; Virginia Woolf's correspondence suggests that Gordon had discussed the manuscript with the composer and suffragette Ethel Smyth, who was detained in Holloway under Gordon's supervision for suffrage activism, and, throughout her seventies, harboured an intense crush on the younger Woolf. Gordon's manuscript did not make a good first impression on the proprietors of the Hogarth Press. Virginia Woolf wrote to Smyth, "I had to send the Ladies of Ll. back to the hermaphrodite. I cant repeat my reasons on this slip; but perhaps she'll tell you. I thought it quite well done in its way."¹³⁴ Gordon was nonetheless tenacious, her second draft being accepted for publication by Leonard Woolf in January 1936.¹³⁵ Its cover was designed by Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, and 1200 copies were released in July of the same year.

With the publication of Orlando, Woolf stated her desire to "revolutionize biography in a night," with Orlando's mercurial sex, peripatetic existence and four-

¹³² Gordon, Chase 6.

¹³³ Sarah Waters, "Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present," PhD, Queen Mary and William College, 1995, 181.

¹³⁴ Virginia Woolf, ed., The Sickle Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1932-1935 (London: Hogarth Press, 1979) 431.

Woolf's nomenclature is jarring, its implied condemnation of Gordon's departure from normative heterosexuality apparently at odds with the sexual mores of the Bloomsbury circle. Its use may be traced, however, to the sexology of Krafft-Ebing, who employed the term 'psychical hermaphroditism' to describe cases of inversion in which an individual's gender identity corresponded to his or her sex. (Merl Storr, "Transformations: Subjects, Categories and Cures in Krafft-Ebing's Sexology," Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires, eds. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (New York: Columbia UP, 1998): 11-26. 18.). Woolf's terminology thus suggests an acknowledgement of both Gordon's feminine identification and her relationship with sculptor Violet 'Frank' Labouchère.

¹³⁵ Virginia Woolf, Leave the Letters Till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1936-1941, eds. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1980) 6.

hundred year long lifespan dismantling generic conventions of sexual, geographical and temporal continuity. In Chase of the Wild Goose, Gordon instead identifies herself with the nineteenth-century tradition of empirically verifiable biography, prefacing her text with the confident assertion, “The subjects of this tale, known as the Ladies of Llangollen, were real people.”¹³⁶ Despite such differences of generic orientation, Gordon’s title not only recalls the proverbial impossibility of “a wild goose chase,” but the curious bird that figures in the conclusion of Woolf’s novel. Orlando employs the figure of the wild goose to describe the elusive object of literary genius:

There flies the wild goose. It flies past the window out to sea [...] But the goose flies too fast. I’ve seen it, here—there—there—England, Persia. Italy. Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets (here she flung her hand out) which shrivel as I’ve seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them.¹³⁷

Orlando here laments the irreducibility of lived experience to language, the “wild goose” of representational transcendence evading the wide nets of her literary craft. The tension between life and its textual evocation is further asserted in the novel’s closing scene, in which “a single wild bird” springs over Shelmerdine’s head. As Orlando cries, “It is the goose...The wild goose.”¹³⁸

As is suggested by her titular employment of Woolf’s motif, Gordon located her writing in an intertextual relationship with Woolf’s ‘biography’; in a 1937 letter to Leonard Woolf she described herself as working on both a second volume on Butler and Ponsonby and a half-finished novel whose protagonist she characterized as “a son of

¹³⁶ Gordon, Chase 11.

¹³⁷ Woolf, Orlando 299.

¹³⁸ Woolf, Orlando 314.

Virginia Woolf's Orlando and a spiritual son of Hermaphroditis."¹³⁹ In Chase of the Wild Goose, Gordon echoes Woolf's figure of the wild bird in order to emphasize the perilous nature of the Ladies' elopement. As she depicts Butler warning Ponsonby, reluctant to expose her to danger:

"[T]hink of the cost of liberty, Sarah. Loss of the friends of our order, perhaps loss of one another, perhaps we should have to endure illness in poverty—and poverty for life. I should destroy my parents' hopes, and they would never forgive me. We should go on what the world calls a wild-geese chase. Could I take you to such a life?"¹⁴⁰

The fictional Butler here emphasizes the 'romantic' nature of the Ladies' eventual elopement, characterizing their departure as a capricious journey into self-imposed exile. Gordon's use of this figure also references Butler and Ponsonby's Irish ancestry; the phrase "flight of the wild geese" also alluding to the departure of Irish Jacobite soldiers to continental armies following defeat in the Williamite wars in 1691, and more generally describing members of the Irish diaspora. Noting the reappearance of Woolf's enigmatic image in Gordon's text, Jones demurs, "It may be just a fascinating coincidence that Gordon chooses the wild goose as the defining motif for [her] biography."¹⁴¹ I instead suggest that it marks the intertextual dialogue that links the two works, as it does the differing methods with which they resist the narrative trajectory of Hall's Well of Loneliness. While Orlando subverts the logic of sexology through generic playfulness, Gordon's Chase of the Wild Goose transforms its terms through a different form of generic play, conjoining the gendered typologies of inversion with an incongruously exultant plot.

¹³⁹ Gordon to Leonard Woolf 18 Feb 1937. Hogarth Press Ms 2750 File # 129 University of Reading.

¹⁴⁰ Gordon, Chase 53.

¹⁴¹ Jones, "Chase," 188.

In her introduction to Chase of the Wild Goose, Gordon identifies her text as a work of historical reconstruction, deeming her fictional narrative to be the only accurate account of Butler and Ponsonby's elopement and shared life. As she declares, "During the last 157 years all kinds of exaggerated or untrue stories have been in circulation regarding the reasons for, and the manner of their flight from Ireland. There still exists no biographical account of them which is not in one particular or another based on hearsay, phantasy, or empty conjecture."¹⁴² Anxious to distinguish her work from this factually flawed tradition, Gordon includes engravings of Butler and Ponsonby, photographs of locations including Kilkenny Castle and Plâs newydd, and dialogue from The Hamwood Papers, such 'documentary' evidence identifying her text as the work of an historian: "I have taken every pains to ground my tale upon the things nearest to reality, preserving historical setting where it may be had, as well as genuine incidents when these are available."¹⁴³ Gordon was scathing of the inclusion of Caroline Hamilton's diary in The Hamwood Papers; she expressed particular scorn over Hamilton's denial of her father's lascivious attentions towards his young ward (of which Hamilton suggests that "more was imagined [by Ponsonby] than was intended.")¹⁴⁴ Responding to Leonard Woolf's queries as to the provenance of her source material, Gordon describes Hamilton's diary as "worthless, abusive [and] repetitious," useful only in demonstrating "how not to make history."¹⁴⁵ Her opinion of Bell's editorial skills is no less harsh: "Mrs Bell's book is wretchedly put together [...] She no more distinguishes fact from conjecture or assumption than does Caroline Hamilton and neither of them say a good word for the

¹⁴² Gordon, Chase 11.

¹⁴³ Gordon, Chase 11.

¹⁴⁴ Hamilton, Memoirs.

¹⁴⁵ Mary Louisa Gordon, Gordon to Leonard Woolf 30 Dec 1935 Letter B, Ms, Hogarth Press Ms 2750 File # 129, University of Reading, Reading.

Ladies.”¹⁴⁶ Her perception of The Hamwood Papers as a betrayal of the Ladies’ legacy is underscored by her text’s inclusion of a fictionalized exchange in which they discuss whether to bequeath their papers to Hamilton. Having determined that Hamilton might destroy their accounts of her father’s misconduct, Ponsonby offers the damning remark, “If she were to do that, would she not tear some of the skin of her own soul?”¹⁴⁷ Apparently oblivious to the irony of her position in attacking Hamilton and Bell, Gordon acknowledges that she herself has taken generous liberties with the Ladies’ archive. She nonetheless reassures Woolf that her conjectural elements of her text are authorized by her peculiar status as Butler and Ponsonby’s heir. In particular, she affirms the reality of their spectral return, to which I turn below, asserting, “my own impressions were fresher – and I believe in them – it is not only made stuff.”¹⁴⁸

Central to Gordon’s biographical intervention is her transformation of the sexological narrative of The Well of Loneliness, in which the masculine invert is condemned to martyrdom and her feminine partner freed, however unwillingly, to seek salvation in marriage. Gordon appears initially to anticipate Faderman’s account of an historical paradise prior to sexology. As she declares of Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship: “[S]ince no terrible scientific names were in existence to describe phenomena of the kind, the escapade remained romantic, to the entire peace of the subjects themselves.”¹⁴⁹ The Ladies are thus described as dwelling in a paradise of

¹⁴⁶ Gordon, Gordon-L. Woolf 30 Dec 1935 B.

¹⁴⁷ Gordon, Chase 228.

¹⁴⁸ Gordon, Gordon-L. Woolf 30 Dec 1935 B.

¹⁴⁹ Gordon Chase 137.

Sedgwickian unknowing, in which the absence of sexological discourse confers an innocence unquestioned by the subjects of its epistemic protection.

Gordon's depiction of Butler's female masculinity nonetheless echoes the sexological linkage of gender transitivity and same-sex desire put in circulation by The Well of Loneliness. Within Gordon's text, Butler diverges markedly from feminine norms, leading Mavor to describe her, with some acuity, as "the epitome of a Gallant Great War officer."¹⁵⁰ Ponsonby reflects, in anticipation of their first meeting, that "people seemed to dislike or disapprove of Miss Butler."¹⁵¹ She nonetheless perceives Butler as "charming, gracious, kind",¹⁵² echoing Ellis's account of the feminine invert's peculiar sympathy for her masculine counterpart.¹⁵³ Butler's family, by contrast, view her as willful and perversely masculine, her refusal of "sound suitors" leading "hard epithets...to ring in her hearing. 'Eccentric,' 'unwomanly,' or 'old maidish'"¹⁵⁴ As we have seen, boyish female fashions and masculine accessories were not necessarily viewed as designating female same-sex desire until the late 1920s. The publication and prosecution of The Well nonetheless led to the convergence of "The Modern look and the Lesbian look,"¹⁵⁵ leading the magazine, Eve, to remark in August 1928, "It looks as if everyone will [now] dress...with just an added touch of femininity."¹⁵⁶ Ponsonby observes upon meeting Butler:

She was hatless, she had a rosy face, blue eyes, and fair thick hair that curled like her own. She was strong and active. She wore

¹⁵⁰ Mavor, Ladies 28.

¹⁵¹ Gordon, Chase 27.

¹⁵² Gordon, Chase 30.

¹⁵³ Ellis, "Sexual," 222.

¹⁵⁴ Gordon Chase 22.

¹⁵⁵ Doan, "Passing." 686.

¹⁵⁶ Doan, "Passing." 693.

unusual shoes, thick and square such as boys wore. She was smiling and talking to an enthusiastic puppy which had rushed to greet her.¹⁵⁷

The sartorial significations of Butler's hatless head and "unusual shoes" are consolidated by the gestural implications of her "strong and active" body, each of which act as metonyms for inversion. Butler is characterized by an inherent masculinity, asserted not merely at the level of dress, but of bodily carriage and demeanor. Her affinity with the puppy further recalls newspaper profiles of the late 1930s that emphasized Hall's aristocratic interest in dog breeding, as it does her and Lady Troubridge's omnipresent canine companions.¹⁵⁸ Butler's masculinity does not diminish her patrician eye for female grooming. Preparing for the Dublin "Rotunda Ball"¹⁵⁹ with which she and Ponsonby farewell Irish society, she selects for her chaperone "a gown of pale grey satin: "With your white hair, old lace, and diamonds—or old French jewels, don't you think?"¹⁶⁰ She in turn accepts the dressmaker's selection for her, an ivory gown "with a bold touch of black on breast and shoulder," its subdued palette anticipating nineteenth-century male dress. While her chaperone is troubled by Butler's unusual choice, the dressmaker stresses its suitability for a similarly unconventional wearer: "'the black [...] would cut out the wearer from her surroundings without violence. It was a dress for a

¹⁵⁷ Gordon, *Chase* 28.

¹⁵⁸ Doan, *Fashioning* 13.

Romaine Brooks' famous 1924 portrait of Una, Lady Troubridge, depicts her in a masculine-styled jacket, tuxedo shirt and monocle, the elongated lines of her body echoed horizontally by those of two dachshunds. While in 1924 such accessories marked her chic modernity, they were retrospectively interpreted as signs of lesbian subjectivity in the wake of *The Well of Loneliness*'s publication and trial.

¹⁵⁹ The site of Gordon's fictional ball appears to refer to Dublin's New Gardens, also known as the Rotunda. Alongside Dublin's Ranelagh Gardens, the Rotunda eclipsed the popularity of Fishamble Street Music Hall between the years 1762-7, despite Fishamble Street's status as the site of the first performance of Handel's *Messiah* in 1742. (W.H. Grattan Flood, "Fishamble St. Music Hall, Dublin, from 1741 and 1777," *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* 14.1 (1912): 51-57. 55.)

¹⁶⁰ Gordon, *Chase* 80.

personality...of distinction...unique.”¹⁶¹ Gordon’s depiction of Butler thus asserts the newly-consolidated conviction that female inverts could be identified by their predilection for masculine dress, outdoor activities and sensible shoes. Written in the wake of The Well of Loneliness trial, Butler’s masculinity thus connotes her status as a lover of women, rather than merely a fashionable “boyette,” her sartorial transitivity reflecting her similarly transposed desires.

In contrast to Butler’s ‘eccentricities,’ the Ponsonby of Gordon’s novel is genteel and feminine: “a charming self-possessed girl with a pretty face and fine manners—a girl who would have done any great family the utmost credit.”¹⁶² While her living situation is precarious and her fortune nonexistent, she is described as a “pretty little witch” whose grace and charm reduces male suitors to stammering hyperbole. As one unfortunate suitor stammers, “A thousand pardons, Miss S-S—Ponsonby, er...the fact is...” (precipitately) “You have me knocked to your adorable feet.”¹⁶³ Ponsonby is further rendered the centre of male attention when she and Butler attend the Rotunda Ball together, her pale pink dress contrasting with Butler’s masculine styling. Butler’s reluctance to expose Ponsonby “to all the difficulties”¹⁶⁴ of a shared life of female intimacy echoes Stephen Gordon’s unwillingness to subject Mary to the stigma of inversion: “Mary must not give until she had counted the cost of that gift, until she was restored in body and mind, and was able to form a considered judgement.”¹⁶⁵ Butler’s gentlemanly demeanour similarly leads her to suggest that Ponsonby and even she herself may prefer marriage to a life of female

¹⁶¹ Gordon, Chase 80.

¹⁶² Gordon, Chase 26.

¹⁶³ Gordon, Chase 65.

¹⁶⁴ Gordon, Chase 53.

¹⁶⁵ Hall, Well 303.

coupledom, remarking, “There are loveable men in the world and marriage is natural and right. We think – you and I – that we want something strange and exceptional, but something different *may* be ordained for us.”¹⁶⁶

Gordon’s narrative nonetheless reconfigures the gendered and narrative determinism of sexology, figuring Butler and Ponsonby’s tale of “perfect love” in striking contrast to Hall’s doom-laden Well.¹⁶⁷ Central to Gordon’s intervention is her rejection of the heteronormative logic of sexology. In The Well of Loneliness, Lady Anna describes Stephen as “a blemished, unworthy, maimed reproduction” of her father, her masculine frame and “crude lack of grace” undermining the charm of her fine-looking features.¹⁶⁸ Her father, poring over the sexological treatises of Karl Ulrichs, similarly notes with more tenderness, if no less concern, “the indefinable quality in Stephen that made her look wrong in the [female] things she was wearing, as though she and they had no right to one another.”¹⁶⁹ In Gordon’s narrative, by contrast, Butler’s great-uncle, the Archbishop of Cashel, is described as “looking very handsome and curiously like his great-niece.”¹⁷⁰ The genealogical inversion of Gordon’s comparison renders Butler’s female masculinity the originating source, rather than a failed copy, of their familial likeness. She thus implies that not only may masculinity be uncoupled conceptually from men, but that female masculinity may constitute “the real thing,” rather than merely the “rejected scraps” of a reified ideal.¹⁷¹ Although the dress that

¹⁶⁶ Gordon, Chase 54.

¹⁶⁷ Gordon Chase 269.

¹⁶⁸ Hall, Well 11.

¹⁶⁹ Hall, Well 20.

¹⁷⁰ Gordon, Chase 41.

¹⁷¹ Halberstam, Female 1-2.

Butler wears to the Rotunda Ball is described as “an *adventurous* style,”¹⁷² her refusal of four suitors is nonetheless defended by an old friend of the Butler family, Sir James Mackellow, who counsels a disappointed suitor: ““The girl has been made sick by the pressure put on her. It’s a persecution. Withdraw from that, and go look for a nice girl, whom you have some chance of understanding.”¹⁷³ Gordon’s prescient separation of the interrelated, yet importantly distinct zones of gender, sex and sexuality is apparent in her professional publications. In the preface to her 1922 Penal Discipline, she rejects the use of the “very old fashioned” biological terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ to distinguish between men and women,¹⁷⁴ averring “*Homo sapiens* is something much more than male and female, and I have called the persons to whom we apply penal discipline men and women.”¹⁷⁵ She further details the case of a young woman who is repeatedly incarcerated for stealing men’s clothes, and who expresses a desire to live and work as a man. Gordon reports:

I told her that there was no law against her wearing men’s clothing decently, if she did not steal it. After she had had two more convictions, I fitted her out with the clothes she wanted, and paid her fare to South Wales. She got work in a night shift and lay on her back in a coal-pit hewing coal [...] To make useful citizens out of lost vagabonds cannot be done on prejudice of any kind.¹⁷⁶

Hall’s tragic narrative presents Stephen Gordon as blighted by the conjunction of her masculine gender and female genitalia. Gordon instead figures the link between between

¹⁷² Gordon, Chase 84.

¹⁷³ Gordon, Chase 86.

¹⁷⁴ “My language is unofficial in one respect. I do not use the biological terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ to distinguish between men and women. This use is very old-fashioned, and liable to be misunderstood in other countries. *Homo sapiens* is something much more than male and female, and I have called the persons to whom we apply penal discipline men and women. (Gordon, Penal xi.)

¹⁷⁵ Gordon, Penal xi.

¹⁷⁶ Gordon, Penal 71-2.

femininity and femaleness as of societal origin, and Butler's masculinity as the source of her desirability, rather than a mark of shame.

Gordon's novel further differs from Hall's depiction of the same-sex courtship plot, its shape and constitutive features recalling the novels of Jane Austen. As Deidre Lynch has described, Austen's novels were canonized during the interwar period as exemplifying a new model of Englishness. In contrast to the outwardly-oriented rhetoric of empire, Austen's novels were held to affirm an organic model of middle-class domesticity, their enduring value and class specificity posited against the ephemeral pleasures of the modern cultural marketplace.¹⁷⁷ In figuring their relationship as paralleling the putative self-evidence of the Austen courtship plot, Gordon echoes Seward's "Llangollen Vale" in representing the Ladies as naturalized elements of the British landscape. By contrast, Hall presents Stephen Gordon's desires as perverting the tropes of heteronormative courtship. When coupled with the young men of local gentry families, she inspires only pity, their "manful" attempts at admiration rendering her acutely self-conscious.¹⁷⁸ Her first love is for the "florid, full-lipped and full-bosomed" housemaid Collins, the transgressive nature of their cross-class desire marked by the text's failure to accord Collins a given name.¹⁷⁹ Her second attachment to her neighbour's wife, Angela Crossby, is equally unsuitable; Crossby's brassy bloneness, American origins and sexual appetite mark her as an interloper within the world of the British landed gentry, just as Stephen's urgent telegrams, extravagant gifts and incautious letters

¹⁷⁷ Deidre Lynch, "At Home with Jane Austen," *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, eds. Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996): 159-92. 160-61.

¹⁷⁸ Hall, *Well* 76.

¹⁷⁹ Hall, *Well* 13.

mark her unfamiliarity with the rituals of heteronormative romance. With a boldness often unnoted by critics, it is Mary Llewellyn – “neither so frail nor so timid as Mrs. Breakspeare had thought her”¹⁸⁰ – who initiates a sexual relationship with Stephen.¹⁸¹ Her desire is nonetheless traced to the homosocial intensity of wartime service, underscoring Mary’s figuration as one of Ellis’s merely ‘situational’ inverts.

Gordon’s novel is instead styled in the manner of an Austen courtship plot, its narrative trajectory comprised of the circumstances bringing about the fulfillment of a both unlikely and self-evident match. Echoing Austen’s use of free indirect discourse, Gordon’s narrator shares Butler and Ponsonby’s shrewd appraisal of the machinations of the matrimonial marketplace: “The desirability of [Butler’s] marriage presented itself to her whole family circle.”¹⁸² The Ladies’ possession of social acumen exceeding that of their family members further likens them to Austen heroines including Elizabeth Bennet and Eleanor Dashwood, their mutual commitment to the ethical principle of “*noblesse oblige*” contrasted with their families’ vulgar commitment to the pecuniary rewards of advantageous marriage. In particular, Mrs. Butler’s charging of her daughter to “introduce the question”¹⁸³ of the family’s attained title to men and women of influence echoes Austen’s contrast in Persuasion between the quiet dignity of Anne Elliot and her father’s obsessive perusal of his own entry in the Baronetage.

¹⁸⁰ Hall, Well 287.

¹⁸¹ Hall, Well 316.

¹⁸² Gordon, Chase 21.

¹⁸³ Gordon, Chase 49.

In its imitation of the heterosexual and upwardly-mobile imperatives of the Austen courtship plot, however, Gordon's text also echoes the self-conscious artificiality of this generic form.¹⁸⁴ Gordon presents marriage as a naturalized mode of social organization, depicting Butler worrying as to whether she and Ponsonby are justified in their desire for "something strange and exceptional."¹⁸⁵ Like the female retirees of Scott's Millenium Hall, Butler endorses marriage as a "reasonable and proper contract."¹⁸⁶ She nonetheless declares, "'My mother tells me I am to have a big dowry on my marriage. No doubt she will secure that Lady Hartskill makes it known. I shall be placed at auction, Sally!'"¹⁸⁷ Marriage is thus figured as an objectifying commercial transaction, its destruction of affective investments evoked by the name of Butler's procuress. Romantic conventions are similarly denuded of meaning, as Gordon observes: "Protests of esteem, were [...] in all letters brought to a fine art, and were mainly decorative features of correspondence, like capital letters."¹⁸⁸ Butler endorses the institution of marriage only to reject it for herself, demurring, "One is entitled to have a high personal ideal, and if it cannot be realized, to decline to make the contract."¹⁸⁹ The queer possibilities put in play by this refusal are evinced by the candid operation of the Ladies' cover story. As Gordon declares of Mrs. Goddard, "Whatever, in the eighteenth century, a romantic friendship was supposed to imply, that she helped [Butler and Ponsonby's] relations to uphold."¹⁹⁰ Gordon is moreover unabashed in her praise of this 'indeterminate' intimacy: "Very few people who love one another tell one another about it often enough—some forget to

¹⁸⁴ Tuite, Romantic 17.

¹⁸⁵ Gordon, Chase 54.

¹⁸⁶ Scott, Millenium 115.

¹⁸⁷ Gordon, Chase 54.

¹⁸⁸ Gordon, Chase 51.

¹⁸⁹ Gordon, Chase 261.

¹⁹⁰ Gordon, Chase 137.

perform this simple duty for years. These two never forgot, and yet the task never lost its freshness.”¹⁹¹ In conjoining narrative realism with formal irony, Gordon’s narrative intrusion exposes, as does Austen, the formulaic nature of the heterosexual courtships their narratives ostensibly endorse. Her depiction of Butler and Ponsonby’s companionate existence further suggests that the ideals of marital union are best elaborated within a same-sex relationship, exposing the text’s explicit endorsement of traditional marriage as a superlatively queer adherence to heteronormative form.

The significance of Gordon’s digression from the sexological narratives of the period is demonstrated by a comparison with Butler and Ponsonby’s figuration in Gabrielle Sidonie Colette’s 1930 Le Pur et l’impure. In a gesture indicative of the Ladies’ status as mobile ciphers of queer desire, Colette devotes a chapter to them within her exploration of the erotic variety of “those pleasures that are lightly called physical”, her narrative filling the suggestive blanks apparent her historical source, The Hamwood Papers. Echoing Woolf’s invitation to imagine “these things [that] sometimes happen”,¹⁹² Colette figures the Ladies as a hermeneutic test case, the suppleness of their legacy demonstrating the conceptual limits of the future that is ‘to be’:

Can we possibly, without apprehension, imagine two Ladies of Llangollen in this year of 1930? They would own a car, wear dungarees, smoke cigarettes, have short hair, and there would be a liquor bar in their apartment. Would Sarah Ponsonby still know how to remain silent? Perhaps, with the aid of crossword puzzles. Eleanor Butler would curse as she jacked up the car, and would have her breasts amputated.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Gordon, Chase 165.

¹⁹² Woolf, Room 78.

¹⁹³ Colette, The Pure and the Impure, trans. Herma Briffault (New York: New York Review Books, 2000) 138.

Colette's narrator (also named Colette) attributes to Butler and Ponsonby the cropped hair, cigarettes and masculine attire rendered lesbian signifiers by The Well, a concatenation of gender transitivity and queer desire also apparent in her reference to the inhabitants of the Parisian *demi-monde* as "my blunt gentlemen in skirts."¹⁹⁴ Underscoring the Ladies' figuration as a sexually intimate pair, she conjoins their temporal transposition with a migration to the metropolis, their provincial habitation replaced by such 'fast' accoutrements as a motor car and a left bank apartment in which cocktails are served nightly. In spite of their shared location, however, Butler and Ponsonby are sharply gender differentiated; Ponsonby's imputed quietude is achieved through feminized word games, and Butler's masculinity expressed through mechanical prowess and the surgical correction of bodily dysphoria.

Colette presents Ponsonby as subordinate to Butler, the latter's contentment enabling the evacuation of her agency:

As usual with perfectly happily people, the younger woman neglected all means of expression and, mute, became a sweet shadow. She was no longer Sarah Ponsonby, but part of that double person called "we." She even lost her name, which lady Eleanor almost never mentioned in her diary. From then on she was called "Beloved" and "Better Half" and "Delight of my Heart."¹⁹⁵

Evidencing the historiographic erasure of Ponsonby's textual output, Colette's narrator figures her as silenced by Butler's diarizing, with Butler's tender epithets operating, like a marital patronym, to mark both affection and ownership. Ponsonby is thus figured as ceding the power of discourse in the same way as Mary Llewellyn in The Well, an intertextual resonance compounded by Colette's belief that Hall and Troubridge's

¹⁹⁴ Colette, Pure 73.

¹⁹⁵ Colette, Pure 125.

relationship recalled that of Butler and Ponsonby.¹⁹⁶ Ponsonby is thus reduced to an “amorous shadow”¹⁹⁷ recalling Castle’s figure of the lesbian apparition, even as the gendered particularities of her ‘ghosting’ suggest that the feminine invert bears the brunt of the cultural erasure of same-sex desire.

This equation of the erasure of femininity and sexuality is echoed in Colette’s musings upon the precise nature of Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship:

What I would like to have is the diary that would reveal the victim, the diary that the younger of the couple, Sarah Ponsonby, might have kept. Eleanor, who speaks for both and wields the pen, has nothing to hide from us. The secret here is Sarah, who says nothing, and embroiders.¹⁹⁸

The truth – here identified with genital practices – of Butler and Ponsonby’s relationship is located in the epistemically unavailable object of Ponsonby’s non-existent diary; that of the masculinized Butler is instead assumed to uphold the heterosexual order. Ladenson suggests that Colette here invests Ponsonby with “pen envy,” identifying her diary with the suppressed narratives of female experience valorized by texts such as A Room of One’s Own.¹⁹⁹ Colette, however, does not figure Ponsonby’s imagined text as constituting a progressive intervention into heteronormative discourse, but a form of involuntary admission recalling tropes of feminine corporeality and volubility: “What light would be shed by a diary she kept; surely she would have confessed everything; now and then there would have been a hint of a subtle and perhaps traitorous attraction, a

¹⁹⁶ “Colette rapproche le couple Una-John de celui que formaient les dames de Llangollen, qu’on rencontre dans *Le Pur et l’impur*.” (Claude Pichois and Alain Brunet, qtd. in Southworth, “Correspondence.” 10.)

¹⁹⁷ Colette, Pure 132.

¹⁹⁸ Colette, Pure 133.

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth Ladenson, “Colette for Export Only,” Yale French Studies: Same Sex/Different Text? Gay and Lesbian Writing in French.90 (1996): 25-46. 37.

wealth of sensual effusions.”²⁰⁰ The narrator’s striking description of Ponsonby as a “victim” might appear to be bracketed by her preceding observation: “‘In cases of public morals,’ an old judge once said, ‘it is almost always the victim who is guilty.’”²⁰¹ The guilt here described, however, is not that of sexual agency, but of tellingly sensual response. Colette rejects the equation of desire and impurity: “I pick a quarrel with those who consider that patting a young cheek, fresh and warm and velvety as a peach, does not violate the proprieties, but that caressing and lightly weighing with the cupped hand a rosy breast shaped like a peach is a cause for blushes.”²⁰² The breast’s responsiveness is nonetheless figured as a form of corporeal confession, its loquaciousness identified with that of Ponsonby’s imagined text. “Oh indiscreet little breast [...] Why are you not like warm marble, impersonal, law-abiding, and respectful of the caressing hand?”²⁰³ Described as “the weaker one,”²⁰⁴ Ponsonby is thus denied the role of sexual agent, her role within the Ladies’ relationship reduced to that of mute helpmeet and responsive flesh.

In contrast to Colette’s fiction of Ponsonby’s erasure from the textual record, however, Gordon’s Chase of the Wild Goose fictionalizes her voice in order to suggest her sexual agency.²⁰⁵ As she assures Butler on their first meeting, “I shall do as I like. I shall not marry to please other people; only to please myself.”²⁰⁶ Gordon emphasizes the emphatic nature of Ponsonby’s queer object choice, anticipating Madeline Davis’s

²⁰⁰ Colette, Pure 133.

²⁰¹ Colette, Pure 133.

²⁰² Colette, Pure 132.

²⁰³ Colette, Pure 132-33.

²⁰⁴ Colette, Pure 134.

²⁰⁵ Mavor describes this representation of Ponsonby as “a fairly representative emancipated woman” as rendering her “unrecognizably more self-opinionated than in real life.” (Mavor, Ladies 210.)

²⁰⁶ Gordon, Chase 35.

description of “women who look and act like girls and who desire girls” as “the queerest of the queers.”²⁰⁷ In a reworking of Stephen Gordon’s estrangement from Mary Llewellyn, Butler is presented cautioning Ponsonby against her desires, claiming gallantly, “There are lovable men in the world and marriage is natural and right.” Whereas Hall’s Mary flees into the arms of Martin Hallam, however, Ponsonby is certain of her desire for Butler, dismissing a bevy of male suitors with the disarming assurance, “I like you so much better than any of them.”²⁰⁸ Ponsonby appears momentarily open to heteronormative sway, remarking to Butler, “I rather like the Englishmen I have met.” Inverting the figuration of female same-sex desire as a narrative detour, rather than destination, Ponsonby nonetheless rejects an ardent male suitor with the news she is otherwise “pledged” to Butler.²⁰⁹ In a reference to the bold warnings of the historical Mrs. Goddard, Gordon depicts Ponsonby’s blunt friend as warning her of the danger of departing with Butler: “She has a debauched mind. Why...when she gets you away...why...she might make love to you!” Ponsonby’s response is simple: “I hope she will love me, Mrs. Goddard. She does it so beautifully.”²¹⁰

‘The Future Arrives Late’: Ghosting the Ladies of Llangollen

Describing the suffrage leader, Lady Constance Lytton, Gordon wrote in 1931:

The Women’s Social and Political Union leapt into being like a flame. It released vast stores of unconscious energy, just as the war did. It cohered fiercely, ignoring thinking, feeling and good order. It was not premeditated nor controllable—it *happened* at the bidding of the unconscious. [...] It always left behind a rebirth and a new situation.

²⁰⁷ Madeline Davis, “Epilogue, Nine Years Later,” *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Books, 1992): 270-71. 270.

²⁰⁸ Gordon, *Chase* 54.

²⁰⁹ Gordon *Chase* 67.

²¹⁰ Gordon *Chase* 122.

Such spiritual upheavals are always irrational, and irrational human types are swept up into them as high priests.²¹¹

In Chase of the Wild Goose, Gordon presents Butler and Ponsonby as constituting a similar kind of “spiritual upheaval”, the determination with which they pursued their unconventional life-plan animating the unconscious female psyche that Gordon identifies as the genesis of the suffrage cause.²¹² Their relationship is thus figured as an event of trans-historical significance, constituting, like the WSPU, “a rebirth and new situation” for the women of the twentieth-century. As Gordon declares in the text’s opening invocation,

They made a noise in the world which has never since died out, and which we, their spiritual descendents, continue to echo. It is true that they never foresaw that the hum they occasioned would join itself to the rumblings of the later volcano which cast up ourselves. Suffice it that they made in their own day an exclusive and distinguished noise.²¹³

Gordon’s description of Butler and Ponsonby as twentieth-century feminists might appear to exemplify the scholarly narcissism in which historical figures are fashioned in the writer’s own image. Her genealogical model might be further seen to echo the cultural logic that Michael Warner terms “repronarrativity”: “a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission.”²¹⁴

In figuring Butler and Ponsonby as queer progenitors, Gordon nonetheless refutes the claim that the non-procreative nature of same-sex practices demonstrates their

²¹¹ Gordon, qtd. in Vicinus, Independent 251.

²¹² Vicinus, Independent 251.

²¹³ Gordon Chase 17.

²¹⁴ Warner, qtd. in Tuite, Romantic 18.

unnatural nature.²¹⁵ She instead affirms a model of queer reproduction in which Butler and Ponsonby give birth to the future Gordon embodies, this metaphorical kinship rendered literal as the Ladies re-appear in the modern era. In his important No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Lee Edelman describes the way in which the trope of the Child, figured as the future beneficiary of any political program, requires politics to be conceived of within a conservative logic of the transmission of the social order.²¹⁶ As Berlant and Warner observe, “People feel that the price they must pay for social membership and a relation to the future is identification with the heterosexual life narrative.”²¹⁷ Rather than being implicated within the logic of historical continuity in which heterosexuality is figured as “chronology’s triumph,”²¹⁸ however, Gordon affirms a model of queer reproduction in which non-normative lives give birth to a similarly unbounded future. Gordon’s depiction of Butler and Ponsonby as the antecedents of feminist modernity moreover resonates with recent work in queer historiography, their appropriability recalling their status as ciphers able to signify a range of identifications and desires. Gordon employs genealogical language to describe the relationship between the Ladies and their latter-day descendents, figuring them as the “spiritual progenitors” of the emancipated women of the twentieth-century. Fittingly anticipating the recent work of scholars including Freccero, Fradenburg, Dinshaw and Jonathan Goldberg,²¹⁹ Chase of the Wild Goose nonetheless depicts Butler and Ponsonby as initiating a genealogy that is

²¹⁵ As Kathryn R. Kent observes, Foucault claims in The History of Sexuality Vol. 1 that sexuality in the nineteenth-century was primarily organized around a binary of reproductive and non-reproductive sexual acts (Kent, Making 33.)

²¹⁶ Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004) 2-3.

²¹⁷ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” Critical Inquiry 24.2 (1998): 547-66. 557.

²¹⁸ Jagose, Inconsequence 118. Also see Freccero, Queer 80-81.

²¹⁹ Jonathan Goldberg, “The History That Will Be,” Premodern Sexualities, eds. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (London and New York: Routledge, 1996): 3-21.

not only non-heterosexual, but importantly, non-linear, representing the constant interplay between the ostensibly distinct realms of the past and the present. Echoing the persistent trafficking of Butler and Ponsonby's narrative across period designations, this following discussion brings theories developed in relation to the early-modern period to bear upon the eighteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, reading Gordon's text, and its Llangollen subjects, as appropriately anticipating this "impure history of ghosts."²²⁰

In the heyday of social constructionism, the identificatory impulses of lesbian and gay history were tempered by a strict adherence to the Foucauldian dating of the advent of the homosexual 'species.' This strictly nominalist account of the history of sexuality was strengthened by the New Historicist insistence upon the absolute alterity of the past, rendering anachronism a peculiarly shameful form of scholarly inattention.²²¹ Noting the proliferation of methodological apologies, Valerie Rohy describes "the perfunctory nod to historical cautions" as constituting a near-automatic scholarly move, these "apotropaic gestures [...] honed and condensed to a stylized, almost *purely* gestural form."²²² As she observes of the totalizing effects of this method, "In this logic, historicism, now broadly cognate with social constructionism, becomes the hallmark of progressive politics."²²³ In the introduction to their 1996 collection, Premodern Sexualities, Louise Fradenberg and Carla Freccero instead attend to the way in which the excavation of the queer past is propelled by identification and desire; by the pleasures of both resisting

²²⁰ Derrida, Specters 118.

²²¹ As Valerie Rohy observes of the scholarly leveling of charges of ahistoricism, "When *ahistoricism* becomes another word for *anachronism*, the lack of engagement with the past becomes indistinguishable from the guilty overcautiousness that clings too closely to it; an overinvestment in history mirrors an indifference to it; and, by implication, the improper treatment of history is tantamount to the outright rejection of it." (Rohy, "Ahistorical." 67.)

²²² Rohy, "Ahistorical." 66.

²²³ Rohy, "Ahistorical." 65.

heteronormativity and of affirming one's present with reference to the past. Viewed from such a perspective, Faderman's identification of romantic friends as historical analogues of lesbian-feminists can therefore be seen not as 'naïve' ahistoricism, but evidence of her affective investment in the historical rehabilitation of what Leila J. Rupp terms "a desired past."²²⁴ Rather than purging such animating emotions, Fradenberg and Freccero call for an historiography that reevaluates its own "repudiations of pleasure and fantasy."²²⁵ The scholar who anachronistically identifies gays and lesbians *avant la lettre* is thereby defended from charges of positing their own self in history; his or her impulse is instead identified as underlying, even in the form of renunciation, the most scrupulously ascetic of historicist moves. As we have seen, Freccero rejects the methodological imperatives of linear temporality, endorsing an historical practice attentive to the force of scholars' affective investments in the continuities and discontinuities between the past and the present. She and Fradenburg further emphasize the way in which the practice of queer history is impelled by the desire to understand, not only the past, but the present conditions of living well:

The past may not be the present, but it is sometimes in the present, haunting, even if only through our uncertain knowledges of it, our hopes of living and surviving well..The questions we are raising about the practice of history may help us understand better the living and dying of twentieth-century bodies and pleasures.²²⁶

In Specters of Marx, Derrida describes a life practice he terms "spectrality," defined as a mode of attentiveness towards the "non-present present, this being there of an absent or

²²⁴ Leila J. Rupp, A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1999).

²²⁵ Fradenburg and Freccero, "Introduction," xvii.

²²⁶ Fradenburg and Freccero, "Introduction," xxi.

departed one.”²²⁷ The spectre or ghost, recalling the Derridean trace in its simultaneously presence and absence, thematizes the uncanny existence of that which is no longer verifiably present, or has yet to come into being. As Freccero elaborates, “Spectrality is, in part, a mode of historiography: it defines the way in which “the time is out of joint”; that is, the way the past or the future presses upon us with a kind of insistence or demand.”²²⁸ The ethical attendance to the spectral that Derrida terms “hauntology”²²⁹ requires an attendance to the ways in which “past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present,”²³⁰ the registers of memory, inheritance and generationality confounding the conceptualization of time as a series of successive and self-contained temporal units. Dinshaw therefore affirms the practice of queer history as an essentially tactile encounter: “[My queer history] is a history of things touching: contingent: L. con + tangere, to touch.”²³¹

Such figurations resonate strikingly with Gordon’s depiction of Butler and Ponsonby. Prior to their elopement, Gordon depicts the Ladies as “out of joint” with their time and place, their slippage from the proper bounds of historical sequentiality bringing them into literal contact with a future they both anticipate and instantiate. They are thus rendered the proleptic embodiments of twentieth-century feminism, their modernity, like that of Olive Chancellor, authorizing Gordon’s twentieth-century audience to interpret them through anachronistic modes of sexual knowingness. Gordon depicts the Ladies’ inherent nobility as differing from that characteristic of their place and time. Praising

²²⁷ Derrida, *Specters* 5.

²²⁸ Freccero, *Queer* 70.

²²⁹ Derrida, *Specters* 10.

²³⁰ Freccero, *Queer* 77.

²³¹ Dinshaw, *Getting* 39.

Butler's sartorial refinement, Gordon presents it as differing sharply from that of her compatriots: "Orgiastic Ireland liked its colours hot and crude and had little appreciation of line and form. Its handsomest men and most beautiful women had often but poor personal taste."²³² The Ladies' refined sensibility similarly differs from the utilitarian emotions avowed in their era: "Love was a thing which a man spent on a woman and a woman spent on her children, and was a luxury, not a necessity."²³³ Butler's diagnosis of the social limitations of gentrywomen is similarly shown to anticipate Wollstonecraft's 1792 Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

She found that she was free to lead a frivolous life, to dress, to spend, to flirt, to run after any man to whom she was attracted, but she was not free to read, nor to educate herself, nor to amuse herself out of doors.²³⁴

In articulating opinions identified with the period's "feminist heroine sans pareil,"²³⁵ Butler is retroactively installed as a political visionary, committed to improving the lives of all women, rather than merely those of herself and her Beloved. The Ladies' proto-feminism, emerging from the catalyst of their shared conversation, further estranges them from their temporal and political place:

In their tranquil talks their ideas seemed to coincide and fit together, and it was curious to see how they dropped the artificial style of their day and education. In the spiritual company of many other unknown women, they were slipping forward into another social epoch of which they were entirely unconscious pioneers.²³⁶

Described as "slipping forward", the Ladies do not so much presage the future as bring it proleptically to life, embodying the temporal folds and slippages that rupture any purely

²³² Gordon, Chase 81.

²³³ Gordon, Chase 51.

²³⁴ Gordon, Chase 22.

²³⁵ Barbara Taylor, "Mother-Haters and Other Rebels," London Review of Books 24.1 (2002).

²³⁶ Gordon, Chase 38.

linear account of history. In instantiating the “social epoch” from which Gordon writes, they further persist beyond their literal lifespans, their continual resonance marking, as does the spectre itself, the uncanny coexistence of past and present.

Reading Butler and Ponsonby as queer time-travellers sheds light upon their figurative plasticity, their literal assertion of a zone of opacity or privacy enabling the retrospective projection of a desired range of effects. As Derrida observes, “The specter is, among other things, what one thinks one sees, and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see.”²³⁷ The figure of the queer spectre, whose status as ghostly trace marks the historian’s affective investments across time, is literalized in Gordon’s novel, in which Butler and Ponsonby appear to Gordon, with whom they celebrate the historical changes they are identified as initiating. Upon first reading Chase of the Wild Goose, Leonard Woolf tempered his interest in the manuscript with pragmatic concerns as to the historical veracity and legal provenance of Gordon’s source materials.²³⁸ Gordon responded, “Of course I have let my imagination rip, and have also to remember the tremendous absolution of the ghosts and place which was mine after spending a week in it.”²³⁹ Gordon’s belief in spectres at first appears at odds with her scientific training. Her interest in the supernatural nonetheless reflects the preoccupations of the post-war period, during which the vast losses of conflict led to an upsurge of interest in ‘talking with the dead.’ The practice of spiritualism was also linked to the feminist activism in which Gordon participated. Describing women’s prominence

²³⁷ Derrida, Specters 125.

²³⁸ Leonard Woolf, Leonard Woolf to Mary Louisa Gordon 29 Dec., Hogarth Press Ms 2750, University of Reading.

²³⁹ Mary Louisa Gordon, Gordon to Leonard Woolf 30 Dec 1935 Letter A, Ms, Hogarth Press Ms 2750 File # 129, University of Reading.

within the spiritualist practices that flourished from the late nineteenth-century, Alex Owen observes that presumptions of female passivity led women to be hailed as uniquely suited to the role of spiritual medium, viewed as a merely reactive vessel through which spirits spoke forth. While sittings took place within feminized domestic settings, they also authorized women's participation within a public forum, within which they frequently gave voice to "flagrantly transgressive outbreaks of language and sentiments."²⁴⁰

Owen suggests that spiritualism was an ultimately ambivalent resource for female mediums, insofar as they were by definition viewed as passive mouthpieces for the transgressive discourses to which they gave voice.²⁴¹ In giving "voice to the unutterable," however, spiritualism also held special resonance for gay and lesbian adherents. As Sarah Waters describes, spiritualism had from its outset been associated with forms of physical and emotional congress that diverged from the sexual norm: "the spiritualist meeting or séance was frequently the scene of assignation, physical contact, and sexual voyeurism and display."²⁴² Writers of the period including Hall, Amy Lowell and Renée Vivien sought actively to commune with their lesbian forebears, their vision of transhistorical communion constituting "the natural form of an historiography which, unlike that of homosexual men, had no documented traditions around which to structure itself."²⁴³ Accordingly, Gordon viewed her spiritual beliefs as in no way incompatible with her scientific mindset. Indeed, the only trace of her profession is the briskness with which she lectures her readers on the importance of remaining open to ghostly revenants, observing,

²⁴⁰ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004) 220.

²⁴¹ Owen, *Darkened* 241.

²⁴² Waters, "Wolfskins," 184.

²⁴³ Waters, "Wolfskins," 182.

“These people do not come to us for nothing, and if we ignore them, they will never come again.”²⁴⁴

The final section of Gordon’s narrative moves from historical narration to autobiography, the ageing Gordon supplementing her narrative voice by inserting herself corporeally within Butler and Ponsonby’s life story. Literalizing her depiction of the Ladies’ estrangement from their temporal milieu, she depicts them as revenants akin to the ethereal guides of spiritualism, her pilgrimage to Plâs newydd allowing her to commune literally with her spiritual antecedents. Their historical narrative is thus rendered coextensive with Gordon’s own life-story: “I was not far from the end of a long and full life. I was the same age as Sarah Ponsonby had been when she had—gone away.”²⁴⁵ Gordon’s active shaping of their encounter reverses the usual relationship between a passive medium and active guide, an inversion apparent in the title of the final volume of her text: not “I Meet the Ladies,” but “The Ladies Meet Me.”²⁴⁶

Gordon describes travelling to the Ladies’ cottage, “which now belongs to the town, that is, the town thinks it owns Plas Newydd because it has paid good money for it.”²⁴⁷ Implicitly asserting her own more genuine title, Gordon enters the front door, whereupon she is surprised by “an overweening impression of [Butler and Ponsonby’s] invisible but actual presence there.”²⁴⁸ Although feeling like “vulgar intruder,” she describes “stay[ing] there because I felt they desired it,” sitting with their spirits for two hours,

²⁴⁴ Gordon, *Chase* 239.

²⁴⁵ Gordon, *Chase* 254.

²⁴⁶ Gordon, *Chase* 237.

²⁴⁷ Gordon, *Chase* 240.

²⁴⁸ Gordon *Chase* 240.

during which time neither party communicated in words.²⁴⁹ Leaving Llangollen, she reports spending the following winter reading all she could about the Ladies, returning to the town eight months later to be initially disappointed by their absence. She nonetheless reports “an intuition that they could not be very far away.”²⁵⁰ Walking in the mountains, to which she is instinctually drawn, Gordon is soon assured of the Ladies’ presence, this time in corporeal form:

[A]t the moment I saw them they turned their heads and appeared to see me. They were sitting so still that I thought they were in some kind of sleep, but in a couple of seconds they seemed to wake, and touched one another as if to call attention to my advent... Time for us was not abolished, but it had become plastic in a curious inexpressible way, and in order to reach one another we seemed to slip for a season into the fourth dimension.²⁵¹

Gordon viewed her ‘haunting’ entirely seriously, figuring herself and the Ladies as existing in a mimetic relationship in which she, rather than Mary Caryll, constitutes the third member of their queer ménage. Overcoming locked gates and iron railings in order to keep an appointment with the Ladies’ ghosts in Plâs newydd, Gordon figures herself as echoing their elopement of nearly a hundred and sixty years previously, her attention to the materiality of their former home underscoring its important place in their self-fashioning: “the house was both serene and intensely aware.”²⁵² The lesson of Butler and Ponsonby’s first capture renders Gordon circumspect, as does, perhaps, the desire to retain privileged access to their company: “I am cut out by nature as a burglar, but as long as I remain in the flesh I must not incriminate myself; therefore I propose to conceal the

²⁴⁹ Gordon, *Chase* 241.

²⁵⁰ Gordon, *Chase* 242.

²⁵¹ Gordon *Chase* 243-44.

²⁵² Gordon, *Chase* 259.

details of the way in which I broke in in order to keep my assignation with the Ladies.”²⁵³

In thematizing her desire to commune with the dead, Gordon anticipates the affective investments properly revealed by recent queer historiography, her depiction of her physical encounter with the Ladies offering a fitting literalization of Dinshaw’s figure of historical personages ‘touching’ across time. Addressing Butler and Ponsonby, Gordon describes the latter “control[ling] the surprise she evidently felt at my likeness to her friend.”²⁵⁴ She thus corporealizes her claimed genealogical relationship to the Ladies, presenting spiritual heirs as marked, as are their biological counterparts, by physical resemblance. Gordon’s identification with Ponsonby moreover explains her earlier-noted emphasis upon Ponsonby’s sexual agency, through which the certitude of Ponsonby’s desire serves as proleptic evidence of her own.

Gordon figures Butler and Ponsonby as the initiators of a specifically feminist historical trajectory, their interest in the years that have elapsed since their passage lying in the events of women’s history, rather than those of empire. As she reflects, “How was I to tell these two about the last two hundred years? It could not advantage them to hear of Queen Victoria, of the Chartist riots, the Indian Mutiny, the Ashanti, or South African or Great Wars. Nor of Mr. Gladstone nor Mr. Disraeli.” Rather, they seize eagerly upon Gordon’s intimations of a changed landscape of gendered relations: “Changes do you say—really changes?”²⁵⁵ Gordon recounts to them the passage of divorce laws, women’s rights over their own property, and the gradual removal of obstacles to women’s

²⁵³ Gordon, *Chase* 257.

²⁵⁴ Gordon, *Chase* 244.

²⁵⁵ Gordon, *Chase* 263.

employment, to which they respond, “How wonderful this all is!”²⁵⁶ They respond with similar delight to her news of the 1870 passage of the Married Women’s Property Act, and the optimistic assertion that, “The obstacles placed in the way of [a woman’s] earnings are almost all removed.”²⁵⁷ As Ponsonby explains, “[W]e thought that the world of women was not on the whole a happy world ... We dreamed of a better world.”²⁵⁸

Gordon’s identification with the Ladies leads her to suggest they would have been amongst “the uniting of all classes of women in a demand to have a parliamentary vote,”²⁵⁹ an opinion attributed without regard for their horror of ‘democratical’ principles, or shock upon learning that Seward preferred Wollstonecraft’s Vindication to Dr. Gregory’s conduct manuals.²⁶⁰ The mutual satisfaction expressed at this outcome sits uneasily alongside the text’s celebration of inborn aristocracy: “In the veins of both ladies ran blood of the bluest, and behind them were long pedigrees.”²⁶¹ This tension was further reiterated by Gordon’s supplanting of Caryll, the latter’s class-marked Irish presence displaced by Gordon’s refined character. As Gordon remarks to Butler and Ponsonby, “Your ideals have always been my own—personal worth, honour, dignity.”²⁶²

Gordon emphasises the Ladies’ feminist convictions, describing for them the suffragettes’ “gallant platform propaganda, [...] their demonstrations, and their imprisonment with its ill-treatment,” the latter of which she speaks with authority.

²⁵⁶ Gordon, Chase 263.

²⁵⁷ Gordon, Chase 263.

²⁵⁸ Gordon Chase 249.

²⁵⁹ Gordon Chase 264.

²⁶⁰ Mavor 165.

²⁶¹ Gordon, Chase 17.

²⁶² Gordon, Chase 262.

Underscoring the scope of their victory she asserts, “Now, women can be Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers,” to which Ponsonby responds, “Oh! Eleanor! That’s where you should have been.” Gordon’s response is swift and telling: “Should be, Lady Eleanor,” I corrected.”²⁶³ In grammatically marking their temporal mobility, Gordon figures the Ladies as both historical antecedents and contemporaneous activists, this spectral simultaneity working to queer the linear trajectory of traditional historiography. Declaring that “friends such as yourselves live all over the country,” Gordon renders Butler and Ponsonby exemplars of a domesticized model of British spinsterhood. She further apprises them of the advent of birth control, her account of voluntarily childlessness implicitly rebutting Hall’s depiction of the invert’s blighted barrenness:

A great many married people do not want to have any children at all, and do not have them. They have of course no reason for finding fault with the friendships of women which are from the point of view of population no less sterile alliances than their own—²⁶⁴

Gordon here refutes the presumptive link between queerness and non-procreation, instead suggesting that this apparent attribute characterizes the entirety of the binary field. She further confounds the presumed disjunction between queerness and reproduction, endorsing an alternative model of spiritual procreation, within which the Ladies’ life narrative “cast[s] up ourselves.”²⁶⁵ In his 1913 Love’s Coming of Age, sexologist Edward Carpenter declared “the rise of Women into freedom and larger social life [...] is likely to have a profound influence on the future of our race.”²⁶⁶ Advocating optimism, rather than fear, he continues, “[W]ho knows what evolution is preparing? Sometimes it seems

²⁶³ Gordon, Chase 265.

²⁶⁴ Gordon, Chase 266-67.

²⁶⁵ Gordon, Chase 17.

²⁶⁶ Edward Carpenter, Love’s Coming of Age: A Series of Papers on the Relations of the Sexes (London and Manchester: George Allen & Co; and S. Clarke Ltd, 1913) 64-65.

possible that a new sex is on the make [...] not adapted for child-bearing, but with a marvellous and perfect instinct of social service, indispensable for the maintenance of the common life.”²⁶⁷ Gordon presents Butler and Ponsonby as possessing this “perfect instinct,” their shared life begetting a queer future. As she continues, recalling Carpenter, “A writer on such subjects has reminded his readers that children of the spirit can be of more value to the world than children of the flesh.”²⁶⁸

Gordon presents her relationship with the Ladies as symbiotic, affirming a reciprocal dependency in which they are enlivened by her futurity and she is enabled by their past. As she asks herself, “How was it that I had been ‘called’—as I had phrased it—to come back and look for them after a space of 150 years in which we had needed one another, had been possibly dependent on one another[?]”²⁶⁹ Gordon’s reproductive figure thus exceeds the heteronormative frame and future-orientation of traditional models of temporal inheritance, positing the past and present as constitutively open to one another. As she tells them of suffragism, Gordon observes, “The eyes of the Ladies were burning like stars in the dim room as they drank in what I related...I saw the tears run down Lady Eleanor’s face. The tale was bringing her back to life: she was not dead, but sleeping.”²⁷⁰ Gordon’s presents the future as reanimating its necessary cause, likening Butler and Ponsonby to sleeping knights of Arthurian legend, and transforming the heterosexual trajectory of linear descent into a temporally complex web of queer kinship.

²⁶⁷ Carpenter, *Love’s* 67.

²⁶⁸ Gordon, *Chase* 267.

²⁶⁹ Gordon, *Chase* 255.

²⁷⁰ Gordon *Chase* 265.

She further underscores their status as the spiritual forebears of female emancipation, asking rhetorically:

Have you any idea how many women have been on a pilgrimage to this little old house of yours?...You made the way straight for the time that we inherited. You meditated among your books and dreamed us into existence.²⁷¹

As if excavating the ghostly traces of Lister's 1822 pilgrimage (unpublished at the time of Gordon's writing), Gordon depicts Plâs newydd as a sacred site, a point of temporal, political, and affective origin from which a feminist future is brought forth. Rendering possible the future within which they now recur, Butler and Ponsonby move constantly across the distinction between past and present, absence and presence. Just as they "dreamed [Gordon] into existence," she dreams into being their particular reincarnation, their meeting on the Llangollen hillside thematizing the material resonances of erotic and affective connections across time.

Gordon literalized this assertion of temporal and spiritual causation by commissioning a marble memorial to the Ladies to be erected in St. Collen's parish church, its substantiality thematizing, as did their tombstone, the material means through which they instantiated their perpetuity. Costing the substantial sum of 600£., the wall-mounted statue was paid in part by Gordon's royalties from the Hogarth Press, and may still be observed on the right hand of the interior wall. The memorial was executed by Gordon's partner Violet 'Frank' Labouchère, whose chosen profession echoed the trope of the masculinized female sculptor I have explored in relation to Damer. Further underscoring her identification with her historical subjects, Labouchère literalized

²⁷¹ Gordon Chase 269.

Gordon's claimed resemblance to her spiritual progenitor by allowing Gordon to pose in Ponsonby's place (see image below).²⁷² Butler and Ponsonby are depicted as strong-jawed and dignified, their collared habits and neck scarves failing to mask the contemporary cut of their jackets and skirts. The tall hats they are accorded in several eighteenth-century accounts have been similarly softened, their angled crowns recalling the sloped hats worn by traditional Welshwomen. Most strikingly, they are depicted as tall and slender (in striking contrast to the rotund likenesses that illustrate their most recent entry in the Dictionary of National Biography), their upright carriage and defined waists more evocative, one suspects, of Labouchère and Gordon's once youthful selves, than of their historical precursors. In a production recalling the Ladies' unveiling of their own tombstone, Gordon rendered the gift's 1937 inauguration a public event, inviting Lord Howard de Walden and the local archdeacon to dedicate the icon. The statue was showered with holy water and its sculptor presented with "a large bunch of pink roses",²⁷³ such rites suggesting that the Ladies' penchant for the performative persisted in spite of their unfamiliarly modern incarnations.

²⁷² Gordon to Leonard Woolf 3 Mar 1937.

²⁷³ Sherratt, Illustrated 37.



Violet Labouchère, 'The Ladies of Llangollen,' 1937

As seen in the first chapters of this study, Butler and Ponsonby sought to monumentalize themselves in life, constructing the substantial tomb in which they are interred with Mary Caryll. One may thus speculate as to the purpose of Gordon's monument, the nameless faces of its two figures turned away from the Ladies' own memorial. Portraying herself waiting for Butler and Ponsonby within Plâs newydd, Gordon quotes Butler's diary in describing "our peaceful delicious cottage," the ambiguity of Butler's pronoun allowing Gordon to replace Caryll as the third member of their relationship.²⁷⁴ Gordon's monument similarly erases Caryll, rendering the Ladies, as does recent criticism, an indivisible dyad. In tracing the contours of Gordon's own

²⁷⁴ Butler, qtd. in Gordon, Chase 258.

visage, however, wrought in stone by her lover, it also thematizes Butler and Ponsonby's enduring function as ciphers of queer desire. As the Midwestern reader, Sharon Deavy, wrote to Grumbach in 1985, having finished her fictionalization of Butler and Ponsonby's shared life, "Who we are and how we survive on the edge of society still is a frequent question – especially here in Ohio – among the ordinary folks. Anything, like The Ladies that gives some sense of a history gives me more hope for the future."²⁷⁵ In foregrounding Butler and Ponsonby's bodies, Gordon's monument displaces the pious platitudes and familial connections that are inscribed prominently upon their triangular tomb. It further restores their relationship to its central narrative position, asserting, in its displacement of the written word, that their lives constituted their most significant of cultural productions. Echoing Vanessa Bell's dustjacket in depicting their bodies in close proximity, their overlapping figures and close-fitting garments reinscribe the sexuality apparently erased by their consecrated location. Gordon's monument thus depicts the Ladies as the literal analogues of their "spiritual descendents," their ghostly persistence traced enduringly in stone.

Gordon figures the future as indeed arriving late, the gendered advances of modernity merely formalizing the freedoms the Ladies asserted unapologetically. Asserting her status as Butler and Ponsonby's spiritual heir, she nonetheless affirms a reciprocal dependency, in which knowledge of the past is sustained by the same future it enables. As she declares of the Ladies, "I, myself, was somehow the actual cause of their return. They had slept away their hundred odd years until the interest I had taken in them

²⁷⁵ Sharon Deavy, Sharon Deavy to Doris Grumbach 28 Jan. 1985, Doris Grumbach Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

had roused them to come back, seek me out, desire to question me.”²⁷⁶ The promiscuous proliferation of Butler and Ponsonby’s cultural afterlives belies the solipsism of Gordon’s suggestion. Her literalization of their status as sapphic revenants nonetheless corroborates their enduring significance, their confounding of the logic of cause and effect marking their inhabitation of what Freccero terms “queer time.”²⁷⁷ Gordon’s celebration of temporal impropriety thus stands as a powerful alternative to Hall’s tragic teleology, exemplifying the queer interventions through which inevitable wretchedness is rendered the stuff of imaginative possibility.

²⁷⁶ Gordon, *Chase* 256.

²⁷⁷ Freccero, *Queer* 5.

Afterword

In March 1931, the novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote to the poet Valentine Ackland, with whom she had fallen passionately in love, describing the passage of their physical separation: "The owls are crying round the house, and presently I shall go to bed, with Thomas, and the snuff box and the box with Sarah's hair, and your rings in my wedded hand. You are quite right to say my hand looks wedded. It does."¹ Retiring to bed alone, Townsend Warner surrounds herself with physical talismans of Ackland's presence, from their cat, Thomas, to her jewelry and the "little silver snuff box" that took the place of her lover's palm ("It is so smooth and finely curved that I might almost believe it to be your hand I hold.").² The most intriguing of these objects is "the box with Sarah's hair," an ivory toothpick case that Ackland presented to Townsend Warner "with a plait of ash-blond hair framed in the lid." As the latter explains its provenance, "We decided *on no evidence* that Sarah Ponsonby gave it to Eleanor Butler (my emphasis)"³

This object, described over one hundred and fifty years after Butler and Ponsonby's elopement, demonstrates the trans-temporal fascination that the Ladies have exerted from the eighteenth-century until the present day. As a material relic pressed into cultural service, the lock of "Sarah's hair" reflects the centrality of sociable and material practices to Butler and Ponsonby's performative self-fashioning. Insofar as it acts as a publicly displayed token of intimacy, it echoes the employment of the Ladies as a coded sign of

¹ Sylvia Townsend Warner, "Sylvia Townsend Warner to Valentine Ackland 27 Mar. 1931," I'll Stand by You: The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico, 1998): 60-63. 62.

² Sylvia Townsend Warner, "Sylvia Townsend Warner to Valentine Ackland 25 Mar. 1931," I'll Stand by You: The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico, 1998): 56-58. 57.

³ Townsend Warner, "Townsend Warner-Ackland 27 Mar. 1931," 62n1.

same-sex desire, their display and discernment marking its one's membership within "a hidden intimate network."⁴ As a retrospectively conceived 'historical' object, it also emblemizes the peculiar operation of Butler and Ponsonby's cultural afterlife, or the way in which their appropriated narrative has been rendered a vehicle through which queer desire is both instantiated and articulated. In giving Townsend Warner the ash-blond plait, Ackland draws upon the "[e]rotic semantics of hair remembrance" satirized by Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock.⁵ Upon being cut from the human form, hair is transformed from a natural to a cultural object,⁶ its status as a literal part of the lover's body conveying a peculiarly dense erotic charge. The particular operation of Ackland's gesture is nonetheless revealed by the fact that she here presents her lover with someone else's hair – not merely the ambiguously signifying strands displayed by Sense and Sensibility's Edward Ferrars,⁷ but the plait of an unknown donor wilfully misidentified as Sarah Ponsonby. As a detachable body part, human hair stands as an appropriate signifier of the ontologically uncertain status of Butler and Ponsonby's bodies, and the contested history of what their bodies did and did not do together. That this contestation has become estranged from the historical record is indicated by Townsend Warner's untroubled acknowledgment that "no evidence" links the plait to Ponsonby. This seemingly ahistorical assertion serves as a reminder of the vexed status of evidence within the history of sexuality, the demonstrable presence of this falsified relic standing in place of both absent and philosophically unverifiable proof of the Ladies' (projected?) bodily proximity. It also underscores the extent to which Butler and Ponsonby's

⁴ Christiane Holm, "Sentimental Cuts: Eighteenth-Century Mourning Jewelry with Hair," Eighteenth-Century Studies 39.1 (2004): 139-43. 140.

⁵ Holm, "Sentimental." 141.

⁶ Holm, "Sentimental." 140.

⁷ Austen, Sense 116-17.

appropriability is enabled by the ontologically tenuous nature of their public personas, their enduring celebrity instantiated by their retrospective construction of an historical genealogy.

As an evidentiary fabrication, “the box with Sarah’s hair” stands as an emblem of historiographic investment, fulfilling the queer demand, explored in the previous chapter, that criticism “[make] explicit its *own* erotic investments in bringing power and authority into representation.”⁸ Insofar as its utility is constituted by a leap of faith, rather than rational deduction, it further emblemizes Butler and Ponsonby’s status as canonized patrons of queer desire. As we saw in chapter four, Plâs newydd’s library windows featured fragments of stained glass appropriated from the ruins of Valle Crucis Abbey,⁹ while its gardens sported a similarly resituated stone font. In yet another temporal recurrence, the Ladies’ ‘liberation’ of such objects anticipated that of novelist Bertha Harris, who in 1984 gathered fragments of Plâs newydd as sanctified relics of queer history. Writing to Doris Grumbach after the publication of The Ladies, Harris describes how in the early 1970s she found herself “by sheer accident [...] in Llangollen after having read the Mavor book.”¹⁰ She continues:

Nobody in the village knew who I was talking about when I asked direction to the house (and I was thinking at the time they’d have commemorative postage stamps for sale, a pub named “The Ladies,” an inn named “The Ladies,” etc.) It was being restored – or more accurately rescued at the time. It had been falling apart and somebody (or a group) was gently putting it back together. They let me wander around the shell

⁸ Lauren Berlant, “Evidences of Masturbation,” Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice and Persuasion across the Disciplines, eds. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson and Harry Harootunian (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1994): 125-31. 128.

⁹ Hicklin, Ladies 6.

¹⁰ Bertha Harris, Bertha Harris to Doris Grumbach 29 Mar. 1984, Doris Grumbach Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

of the interior and the grounds (no one there but workmen). I stayed a long time, hoping for a blessing.¹¹

Having anticipated the trappings of cultural tourism that festoon Haworth or Stratford-upon-Avon, Harris echoes Gordon in figuring herself as a solitary pilgrim to Plâs newydd, her communion with her “spiritual progenitors”¹² enabled by physically crossing the threshold of their domestic space. Like Gordon, however, she nonetheless conceives of her individual rites as representing those of a queer collective. As she writes to Grumbach, “I left with a tiny piece of stained glass I picked up off the floor: the workmen said it was from one of the original windows and that I was welcome to it. I thought I should turn it in to someone – but to whom?” Identifying Grumbach as a suitable guardian such a treasure, Harris acknowledges that the fragment may derive from Plas newydd’s nineteenth-century owners: “(I hope—always have—that this piece of glass is from their oriel bedroom window, not part of the General’s and Yorke’s additions.)” She nonetheless implies that the fragment’s symbolic value is outweighed by its uncertain provenance, remarking, “I’ve always liked reliquaries.”¹³

Like the “plait of ash blonde hair”, Harris’s fragment is thus rendered, through affective assertion, a sanctified relic of female same-sex desire, its transubstantiation recalling the faith of Roman Catholic converts of this period including Radclyffe Hall and Ackland herself.¹⁴ Such falsified relics push to its disciplinary bounds the practice of queer historiography, not only avowing the affective proximity of the historical subject and object, but the way this inflects the very nature of historical evidence. In

¹¹ Harris, Harris-Grumbach 29 Mar. 1984.

¹² Gordon, *Chase* 269.

¹³ Harris, Harris-Grumbach 29 Mar. 1984.

¹⁴ Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Minerva, 1989) 259-63.

necessitating, in more conventional disciplinary terms, a nomadic methodology incorporating the analysis of both 'facts' and representations, the traces of Butler and Ponsonby's shared life further demonstrate the way in which queer analysis confounds not only the presumptions of heteronormativity, but those of the "normal business" of the academy.¹⁵ To describe Butler and Ponsonby's narrative as quintessentially queer is not to suggest it is without limits. Indeed, in recuperating the curious trajectories of their cultural afterlives, I have also been confronted with what cannot be fully incorporated within this polysemous array. The presence of Mary Caryll and what she might or might not represent has proved difficult to recover, her place within the Ladies' story constantly threatening to be effaced by the presumptive primacy of the couple form. Fittingly, however, Butler and Ponsonby remain at once central to the history of female same-sex desire and unable to fully assimilated within it, their legacy defined by the same constitutive irreducibility that characterized their lives.

¹⁵ Warner, "Introduction," xxvi.

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