

Why Should Hester Lynch Piozzi Be “Dr Johnson’s Mrs Thrale?”

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Our subject lived for 20 years as Hester Lynch Salusbury, and more than 40 years as the wife, then widow, of Gabriel Piozzi. Her bestselling literary works appeared under the name Hester Lynch Piozzi and yet she is recognized for her 20 years as Mrs Thrale: friend, confidante, amanuensis, and muse of Samuel Johnson. Upon her second marriage, “Piozzi” became a hostile signifier for a woman who defied her family and social opinion to choose a new husband and a new name; later biographers would recast her as “Dr Johnson’s Mrs Thrale,” the wife of one man, the possession of another. Meanwhile, modern critics have employed more than 20 different names, variously signaling emotional loyalty, theoretical affiliation, political correctness, or sensitivity to the academic marketplace. The naming of Hester Lynch Piozzi continues to complicate our understanding of one of the eighteenth century’s most distinguished and inscrutable figures.

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One of the most successful and celebrated women writers of the late-eighteenth century had the pleasure of hearing that her first book sold so briskly on the day it was published that, when a messenger arrived to purchase one for King George III, the bookseller had to borrow a copy from a friend. Later editions of the book also sold out, and she went on to publish four more books, three of which went into extra editions. For 35 years she remained squarely in the public eye: her writings were reviewed in prominent journals, her family life was chronicled (and lampooned) in the society pages, and her correspondence and marginal notes in books were treasured by friends and carefully preserved for future publication. So why have so few students of English literature ever heard of Hester Lynch Piozzi?

Hester Lynch Salusbury was born in Wales in 1741 and, at the age of 22, married Henry Thrale, a wealthy brewer, with whom she had 12 children (four of whom survived to adulthood). In 1765, the Thrales made the acquaintance of the lexicographer, critic, and moralist Samuel Johnson, who became a frequent guest in their elegant home of Streatham Park. Johnson was the principal luminary of a brilliant salon hosted by

Mrs Thrale, which was frequented by such notables as the actors David Garrick and Sarah Siddons, painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, linguist Giuseppe Baretti, and novelist Frances Burney. For 20 years, Hester Thrale supported Johnson as friend, confidante, correspondent, amanuensis, and muse. Upon the death of Henry Thrale in 1781, the newspapers speculated that the rich widow would wed the aging lexicographer; instead, in 1784, she married Gabriel Piozzi, who had once been her daughter's music teacher. This much-derrided union proved to be a happy one, in no small part because Gabriel supported his wife in her pursuit of the literary career that her first husband had largely forbidden. During her second marriage, Piozzi published five substantial works — a biography of Johnson, an edition of Johnson's letters, a travel journal, a synonymy, and a world history — under the name Hester Lynch Piozzi. Yet it was as Mrs Thrale that her celebrity was first achieved, and to Mrs Thrale that Mrs Piozzi would always reluctantly owe her fame and, to some degree, her literary success.

In presenting the following chronicle of the uneasy relationship between Mrs Thrale the celebrated hostess and Hester Lynch Piozzi the writer, I will examine the implications of giving a name to our writer, both during her own lifetime and throughout the two following centuries.¹ As I will show, even before her marriage, the name of Piozzi became a term of reproach, while using the name of Mrs Thrale to evoke the friend and comforter of Johnson soon served as a backhanded means of attacking the woman who had chosen — defying her family and social opinion — a new husband, new loyalties, and a new name.

Part 1: Mrs Thrale becomes Signora Piozzi

Had the Welsh-born widow of Henry Thrale married a man of the surname Jones, I would not have had to write this article. But the rich and well-connected Mrs Thrale married an Italian Catholic tenor. This unconventional act fractured her relationship with her adult daughters, prompted several friends — among them Frances Burney — to renounce her, and inspired dozens of amusing, occasionally obscene, cartoons and paragraphs in the popular press. Among those publishing vulgar and even libelous pieces were two former members of the Streatam circle, Giuseppe Baretti and the future biographer of Samuel Johnson, James Boswell.

That a 40-something widow might fall in love with an enterprising and attractive foreigner was simply too funny. In her essay “Lustful Widows and Old Maids,” Cindy McCreery speaks of the “cynicism with which [eighteenth-century] contemporaries viewed the remarriages of talented widows to relatively unestablished foreigners;” the inevitable lampoons “charge independent widows [with] rejecting the mores of English society. In turn,” McCreery continues, “society abhors such behavior: no self-respecting Englishman, the caricatures imply, would put up with such lewd and selfish wives” (McCreery, 2009: 121). Attacks on widow Hester Thrale's union deliberately use her married name as code to equate her choice of a foreigner with her supposed display of intransigent sexuality. One semi-pornographic cartoon in *Rambler's Magazine*, for example, depicts a drawing room gathering in which a female figure recognizable as Hester Thrale says to a caricature labeled “Piozzi,” who is lounging on a sofa: “Your music has ravished me and your instrument is large and delightful.” Standing in a corner, another man is saying: “She had better to have stuck to Home-brewed.” This character



FIGURE 1 H. L. Thrale (afterwards) Hester Lynch Piozzi. (Napier, 1884)

clearly represents the late Henry Thrale (McCreery, 2009: 120–121). The admonition to “stick to Home-brewed” equates the English husband with his beer, the iconic English beverage, as celebrated for example by William Hogarth in the engraving “Beer Street,” and it contrasts Mr Thrale with the presumptively effete European. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) confirms that “home-brewed” at this time by extension commonly meant “native, indigenous, homemade;” moreover, to judge by the illustrative quotations that the OED provides: “home-brewed” connotes English superiority over European affectation in sensual contexts (OED Online, 2015). The OED’s examples include a passage from an 1802 letter of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in which he avers: “But I am a homebrewed Englishman, and tolerate downright grossness more patiently than this coy and distant Dallying with the Appetites” (OED Online, 2015). An earlier illustration also

echoes the moralistic parallel: in her 1771 novel *The History of Lady Barton*, Elizabeth Griffith writes: “A man had better be contented with the wholesome home-brewed beer of old England, than pay too dear for Tokay” (*OED Online*, 2015). Given the collocation of “home-brewed” with “wholesome” and “appetite,” it is likely that, for eighteenth-century readers, “home-brewed” also implied what in today’s slang we call “home-cooking” — that is, sex with your spouse. Moreover, I would posit that the name “Piozzi” (English speakers rhymed it with “gauzy”) may have suggested “pizzle,” or “bull’s penis,” eighteenth-century slang for a man’s penis or sexual intercourse. The parallel certainly is implied in the cartoon’s reference to Gabriel Piozzi’s “large and delightful instrument” (Green, 2010: III: 198; *OED Online*, 2015).

Identifying Mrs Thrale with beer particularly amused James Boswell. Even before her second marriage, he had anonymously published a mock love poem in the voice of Samuel Johnson in which the amorous lexicographer supposedly petitions for her hand by declaring: “Tis I MYSELF am *Thrale’s Entire*” (Boswell, 1784). *Thrale’s Entire* was one of the products of the Thrale brewery; “entire” is an eighteenth-century term for a beer we now call “porter.” In his *Life of Johnson*, Boswell later published this sally together with another poem satirizing “Johnson’s wishing to unite himself with this rich widow” (Fletcher, 1963: III: 438-39.); without identifying himself as the author, he complacently remarks in a footnote on the “characteristical merit” of the verses. Note that the name of Thrale derives from “thrall” (slave), so arguably the last line of Boswell’s parody also puns on that signification, that is: “I am your slave/thrall entirely.” I have not, however, come across other contemporary satires that develop a punning theme of the widow Thrale’s status as either enslaver or enslaved, so this implication of Boswell’s final line may be chance.

Returning to Thrale versus Piozzi, contemporary parodies exploit other contrasts in the two surnames: for example, by juxtaposing the monosyllabic (and thus masculine) Thrale with the polysyllabic (and therefore effeminate) Piozzi, or by taking advantage of the fact that “Thrale” rhymes with “ale,” while “Piozzi” rhymes with [...] *Bozzy*, the famous nickname bestowed on Boswell by Dr Johnson. In two poems published in 1785 and 1787, John Wolcot, under the pen name of Peter Pindar, satirized the authors for their shockingly candid lives of Johnson by exploiting their rhyming names, most successfully in *Bozzy and Piozzi, or The British Biographers, A Town Eclogue*. In the title of the poem, through its rhymed pairing with *Bozzy*, the name Piozzi becomes both diminutive and an echo. Furthermore, Wolcot’s subtitle “The British Biographers” reminds us that Johnson’s friends were not strictly “home-brewed” — they were British, but not English. Boswell was a Scot and, given her new married name, the Welsh-born Mrs Piozzi could hardly lay claim to being even a “British biographer.”

Wolcot’s poem is very funny, presenting the two biographers as performing an increasingly contentious singing contest composed of quotations from Boswell’s *A Tour of the Hebrides with Dr Samuel Johnson* (1785) and Piozzi’s *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LLD* (1786). However, *Bozzy and Piozzi* also is significant as an early representation of the idea that Mrs Piozzi chose to reject a previous self called Mrs Thrale. The waspish Wolcot, unlike most of those attacking her second marriage, seems to have recognized that she wed Gabriel Piozzi and took his name not because she was an over-sexed middle-aged widow, but at least in part deliberately to leave behind the name and

role of hostess of Streatham, with all its vexed duties and alliances. In Wolcot’s poetic dialogue, Mrs Piozzi says:

Lord! let the world to *damn* my match agree;
 Good God! James Boswell, what’s *that world* to me?
 The folks who paid respects to Mistress Thrale,
 Fed on her pork, poor souls! and swill’d her ale,
 May *sicken* at Piozzi, nine in ten —
 Turn up the nose of scorn — good God! what then?
 For *me*, the Dev’l may fetch their souls so *great*;
 They keep their homes, and I, thank God, my meat. (Wolcot, 1835: 137)

Wolcot’s verse is both intriguing and surprisingly accurate in anticipating how Hester Lynch Piozzi in fact came to regard Mrs Thrale — as a separate person, a past acquaintance, of whom she spoke with ruthless detachment.

One of the most entertaining versions of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* was published by the Heritage Press in 1963. This edition collates and prints Piozzi’s marginalia from copies of the fifth and the eighth editions of the *Life* (some of the annotations are dated, the earliest to 1807 and the latest to 1819). Her marginal notes range from underlining to identifying obscure references to challenging or correcting Boswell’s narrative and especially his characterization of herself. Reading these volumes, one has the remarkable impression that a fictional character is writing back from the margins. In composing the biography, Boswell reduced Mrs Thrale’s role in Johnson’s life as much as he could, but he could not exclude her; his resentment of her importance to Johnson was as transparent to Piozzi in 1807 as it is to the modern reader. For example, after describing Johnson’s role in publishing Anna Williams’ *Miscellanies*, a volume that included contributions from Johnson’s friends, Boswell adds: “I cannot withhold from Mrs Thrale the praise of being the author of that admirable poem, ‘The Three Warnings.’” Piozzi’s marginal note remarks dryly: “How sorry he is!” (Fletcher, 1963: 1: 376).

In her marginalia, Piozzi sometimes uses first-person pronouns to refer to herself, but initials were throughout her life a common mode of self-identification in informal writing; she used H. L. T. during her marriage to Henry Thrale, and her official signatures were H. L. Thrale and H. L. Piozzi. One illustration of her use of initials to record her contemporary responses to Boswell’s text occurs in her comment beside a paragraph about an unnamed author: “Who is this excellent Writer? known as it appears — to every body except H. L. P.” (Fletcher, 1963: 3: 161). Similarly, when responding to descriptions of her former self, she might be writing of a third person. In a footnote, for example, Boswell writes: “Mrs Piozzi has given a strange fantastical account of the original of Dr Johnson’s belief in our most holy religion,” and, after a long quotation from Piozzi’s *Anecdotes*, he continues: “This is one of the numerous misrepresentations of this lively lady, which it is worth while to correct; for if credit should be given to such a childish, irrational, and ridiculous statement of the foundation of Dr Johnson’s faith in Christianity, how little credit would be due to it.” She responds plainly in the margin: “Mrs Piozzi thought & knew that she was telling Truth” (Fletcher, 1963: 1: 34). Challenging Boswell’s version of the “supper of larks” story, she writes: “Mrs Thrale never *saw* a Supper in those Days, never eat a Lark for Supper in England; & dar’d as well have swallow’d the Lark *alive*

as to have said O my dear Johnson! She never address'd him with any such familiarity" (Fletcher, 1963: 3: 401). Likewise, when Boswell quotes a letter from Johnson that concludes: "You continue to stand very high in the favour of Mrs Thrale," the annotator remarks: "Poor Mrs Thrale was forced to say so in order to keep well with Johnson" (Fletcher, 1963: 2: 48).

In the years after she and her second husband returned to England and settled at their Brynbella estate in Wales, Piozzi published several more books under the name Hester Lynch Piozzi (the title page of the first edition of *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* misspells her name as "Hesther;" she was in Italy when the volume was published and unable to correct proofs) (Piozzi, 1786: title page). However, from book to book her readership diminished — not coincidentally, as the subject of Samuel Johnson moved from the center to the periphery of her writing. As I have argued elsewhere, she ruefully came to acknowledge that, if Johnson had needed her for friendship and succor during his last 20 years of life, so her literary career, to say nothing of her fame — and her notoriety — depended upon the public's memory of that same friendship (Berglund, 2009). After the death of Mr Piozzi, his widow moved to Bath and soon became one of its most famous residents, largely on the strength of her past association with Johnson and the other luminaries of the Streatham circle. No doubt she enjoyed having the last word, as she outlived so many of her contemporaries, including Boswell. In her final decade, Mrs Piozzi was cheerfully willing to anecdotalize for visitors and correspondents about the witty sayings of Mrs Thrale — a woman whom she characterized not as her own self but as a remote, almost legendary, figure from the last century.

Piozzi's deliberate detachment from the role of Mrs Thrale was remarked by more than one commentator. I have already cited Wolcot's poem; similarly, her friend Edward Mangin observes in his preface to *Piozziana* that "she used to look at her little self, as she called it, and speak drolly of what she once was, as if talking of some one else" (Mangin, 1833: 10). A similar response is that of the nineteenth-century anthologist Robina Napier. In her preface to a collection of short lives of Johnson, including Piozzi's *Anecdotes*, Napier differentiates the independent female author from the friend of Johnson, and damns the former with very faint praise:

Indeed, if we had had no Boswell, we should still have obtained from Mrs Piozzi's lively pages, a good notion of Johnson — a notion, however, that would have been more tender and true if it had been given by Mrs Thrale instead of Mrs Piozzi, who writes with something of the bitterness arising from consciousness of wrongdoing. (Napier, 1884: vi)

In *Johnsoniana*, Napier prints an intriguing portrait that illustrates this dual identity. The volume's frontispiece is an engraving of Mrs Thrale based on the double portrait with her eldest daughter, by Sir Joshua Reynolds (Figure 1). Pensively resting her head on her left hand, she appears to be reflecting on two boldly legible signatures: "H:L:Thrale" and "Hester Lynch Piozzi," which have been appended below her image (Napier, 1884). Although "(afterwards.)" appears in delicate copperplate between the two signatures, it is too small and faint to interrupt the impression produced by the frontispiece, which is that of a woman choosing a new name, and thereby (to follow the tendentious implications of Napier's juxtaposition) about to involve herself in the "bitterness [of] wrongdoing."

Part 2: Hester Lynch Piozzi becomes “Dr Johnson’s Mrs Thrale”

Upon learning of the death of Hester Lynch Piozzi, the novelist and diarist Frances d’Arblay (*née* Burney) wrote that: “I have lost, Now, — just lost, my once most dear, most intimate, & most admired friend, Mrs Thrale-Piozzi —” (Newton, 1921: 5). She then elaborates a comparison between Mrs Piozzi and Mme de Stäel that is both flattering and highly critical of her late friend. However, what interests me here is her reference to “Mrs Thrale-Piozzi.” This compound name comprises a number of onomastic choices, some pragmatic, some hostile. Their acquaintance had begun in 1778 at Streatham, when her new friend was the brilliant hostess Mrs Thrale, and Frances Burney was the yet-unrevealed author of the wildly successful novel *Evelina*. Reminiscing in 1821, d’Arblay would naturally remember both the Mrs Thrale she first knew and the Mrs Piozzi who had just died. Moreover, d’Arblay wrote her diaries with other readers in mind; she may have used the compound name Thrale-Piozzi as a shorthand allusion to her friend’s marital history. And yet, in 1784 Burney strongly opposed the union with Gabriel Piozzi and, despite having been the widow’s treasured confidante, she completely severed relations after the marriage, aligning herself with the estranged older daughters of Hester: Hester Maria (known as Queeney), Susanna, and Sophia. Only a few letters were exchanged, decades later, by the former friends. Conjoining the two surnames in her diary is thus a reproach: d’Arblay refuses, even at such a solemn moment, to call her old friend by the name she had chosen — Mrs Piozzi.

This complete diary entry was first published in 1921, as a seven-page pamphlet entitled *Reflections on the Character of Madame Thrale Piozzi*, transcribed by the book collector A. Edward Newton. Newton notes that most of the paragraph on “Mme Piozzi” had been omitted from both the 1841 and 1904 editions of d’Arblay’s journals. He prefaces his transcription by claiming to present “[t]he unvarnished version as originally written, capitals, italics and all[.]”² In the preceding half-century, “Thrale-Piozzi” had become a common cognomen, especially in popular biographical treatments, such as the essay “Mrs Thrale-Piozzi” published in *Temple Bar. A London Magazine for Town and Country Readers* in 1878; or the chapter “Mrs Thrale-Piozzi” in Philip and Grace Wharton’s 1890 *The Queens of Society*. Yet, in the title of his pamphlet, Newton — who admiringly called Piozzi the literary woman “you would like most to meet in the flesh” — chooses to omit the hyphen (Newton, 1918: 221). After all, the punctuation mark in “Thrale-Piozzi” is not benign; it yokes and equates Henry Thrale and Gabriel Piozzi as even the accretive series of surnames “Thrale Piozzi” does not. Hester Lynch would *never* have called herself “Thrale-hyphen-Piozzi.” The compound implies a posthumous loyalty to her first husband, whom she did not love (theirs was an arranged marriage, and he was a serial adulterer), and to apply it to herself would have made her unjust to her second husband, whom she did love, and whom she chose to marry despite family opposition and social ostracism.

Both historical accuracy and conventional civility require one to speak of Mrs Thrale, when describing the hostess of Streatham, or of Piozzi, when referring to the author of *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* or *British Synonymy*. However, beginning with d’Arblay, the naming practice of biographers, editors, and scholars of the occasionally erstwhile Hester Lynch Piozzi has been marked by ambivalence, pragmatism, and reproach. As the memory of Piozzi’s literary career faded after her death — only

her *Anecdotes* remained in print — her friendship with Johnson became the factor that signified. And it was Mrs Thrale, not Hester Lynch Piozzi, who had been the friend of Johnson.

I mentioned above that, in 1782, when speculation was rife that Samuel Johnson would marry the rich widow of Henry Thrale, Boswell comically had imagined the lexicographer as “Thrale’s entire;” posthumously, their relationship continued to be characterized as possessive, but with the roles reversed. When her library was sold in 1821, for example, the preface to the sale catalog observed: “Nearly the whole of the following collection is enriched with the MS notes of Dr Johnson’s Friend and Biographer, the late Proprietor of this Library, whose name will ever be attached and carried down to posterity with this truly great man” (Eddy, 1993: 32). It is ironic that a woman who willingly brought the entire British scandalous press upon her head by “attaching her name” to one man, Gabriel Piozzi, should be “carried down to posterity” by involuntary attachment to another, Samuel Johnson. As one early twentieth-century biographer has commented: “She must have known that her name would be remembered, for incalculable ages, as the friend of Dr Johnson: in what way it would be remembered was immaterial; Mrs Thrale would be known as long as Dr Johnson was known” (Vulliamy, 1936: 300).

The first collection of Piozzi’s writings dramatically illustrates this attachment. In 1861, editor Abraham Hayward published a volume entitled *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs Piozzi (Thrale)*. Hayward sensibly supplies the parenthetical prompting of *Thrale*, but he assumes that his readers will want to read about *Mrs Piozzi* (and indeed the book went into several impressions). In 1910, however, when Hayward’s book was re-issued in a revised edition, the title was changed to *Dr Johnson’s Mrs Thrale: Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs Piozzi*. Popular biographical works from the last century in particular preferred the name of Mrs Thrale, which was repeatedly linked to Samuel Johnson through use of the possessive, as in such works as Winifred Carter’s lightweight historical novel *Dr Johnson’s “Dear Mistress”* from 1950 or a monologue by Kathleen Danziger, *Dr Johnson’s Mrs Thrale*, published in 1984. In the latter work, the speaker is Mrs Piozzi, reflecting on 60 years of social and marital experience, yet the monologue’s title relegates her to her earlier role as Johnson’s friend. Indeed, for an egregious extension of this apostrophe usage, consider the title of Norma Clarke’s 2000 book: *Dr Johnson’s Women*.

Meanwhile, looking at the titles of the three most significant modern biographies of our subject, we find that James Clifford in 1941 called his book *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs Thrale)* while William McCarthy in 1985 authored *Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman*. The most recent full-scale biography, a 2008 life written by Ian McIntyre, is titled *Hester: The Remarkable Life of Dr Johnson’s “Dear Mistress.”* I find it striking, not to say alarming, that the title of McIntyre’s volume not only banishes both of its subject’s surnames, replacing them with the possessive “Dr Johnson’s” of a century ago, but also resurrects a version of the patronizing and sexualized name-calling of the 1780s. For readers today, the name “Hester” likely evokes neither Mrs Piozzi, nor her namesake the Biblical Queen Esther, but rather the adulterous Hester Prynne of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. The erotic implications of that allusion are strengthened by replacing the twentieth-century commonplace “Doctor Johnson’s Mrs Thrale” with the phrase “Dr Johnson’s ‘dear Mistress.’” Johnson’s affectionate phrase meant “beloved

authority” with a hint of “courtly love object,” but today a man’s “dear Mistress” is his extra-marital, financially compensated, lover.

While Hester Lynch Piozzi has remained an object of both literary scholarship and popular history, narratives about Johnson and the Streatham circle have signaled their emotional loyalty, their theoretical affiliation, their political correctness, or their sensitivity to the marketplace in the name they have chosen to assign to her. No one agrees on what to call her — there is no single name, or even a “naming convention.” I have identified more than 20 different names used in criticism and biographies published in the last 100 years, including Hester Lynch Thrale, Hester Lynch Piozzi, Hester Thrale Piozzi, Hester (Thrale) Piozzi, Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs Thrale), Mrs Hester Thrale (Piozzi), Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, Hester Lynch (Thrale) Piozzi, Hester Lynch Thrale (Piozzi), Hester Lynch Thrale (Mrs Piozzi), Hester Salusbury Thrale Piozzi, Hester Lynch Salusbury Thrale Piozzi, Hester, Mme Thrale Piozzi, Hester Thrale, Mrs Thrale-Piozzi, Mrs Thrale, Mrs Piozzi, Piozzi, Mme Piozzi, Mrs Gabriel Piozzi, HLP, and Mrs Thrale/Piozzi.³ Even within single texts, different names are applied without the reasonable context of different biographical circumstances. A particularly egregious case of such shifting nomenclature occurs in Thomas Seccombe’s biographical introduction to *Doctor Johnson and Mrs Thrale* (Hayward, 1910). Seccombe often allows more than half a dozen pages to slip by without using any proper name at all — the implication is that pronouns are safer. When he does give her a name, his protagonist can be Mme Piozzi (p. 65), Mrs Thrale-Piozzi (p. 75), or either Mrs Piozzi or Mrs Thrale (p. 77).

This onomastic inconsistency is not confined to early twentieth-century scholarship. Janice Thaddeus, for example, in her 1990 essay “Hoards of Sorrow: Hester Lynch Piozzi, Frances Burney d’Arblay, and Intimate Death,” sympathetically echoes Piozzi’s practice of self-referential initials by using the initials H. L. P. to refer to her subject. Thaddeus explains her strategy in a footnote:

Hester Lynch Salusbury Thrale Piozzi often referred to herself by her initials, sometimes written with colons (H:L:T: or H:L:P:). I have adopted this method of referring to her, and for convenience have called her H. L. P. throughout; for convenience, I have also called Madame d’Arblay “Burney,” which is now the usual method of referring to her. (Thaddeus, 1990: 125, n. 1)

This attempt by Thaddeus to respect Piozzi’s chosen identity, however, is not successful. In the first place, to refer to her subject as “H. L. P.” is confusing because Thaddeus focuses on the marriage to Henry Thrale and the deaths of eight of their children; the initials therefore lead to awkward anachronisms, as in sentences like: “When in 1763 H. L. P. married Henry Thrale, the brewer, she did so out of duty and financial need, to please her mother” (Thaddeus, 1990: 111). The initials H. L. T. (or, in this case, H. L. S.) would have been more accurate and less distracting. Meanwhile, when her essay turns to the effect of the decline and death of Alexander d’Arblay, Thaddeus calls his wife “Burney” rather than “d’Arblay,” a strategy no less distracting, not to say problematic. One consequence of calling Frances Burney d’Arblay “Burney,” while calling Hester Lynch Piozzi “H. L. P.,” is to reinforce the name by which the former has been recognized by contemporary scholars as a novelist, one whose works are now published under that “usual” name (as Thaddeus notes), while effacing the name under which the latter published her various non-fiction works. Referencing Piozzi by her initials obscures and even dismisses her

identity as a published writer, particularly in contrast to Burney, a problem highlighted by the even-handed treatment the authors receive in the title of the article, which calls them “Hester Lynch Piozzi” and “Frances Burney d’Arblay,” respectively.

In a valuable article published in 1988, William McCarthy argued: “When the name that is recognized is Thrale, then what is being recognized is not a writer — a woman writer — but a woman, *tout court*. And she is being recognized as a traditional female object — wife, mother, perhaps mistress — not as an agent” (McCarthy, 1988: 100). McCarthy goes on to locate the naming controversy in the context of a double standard that applies in general to women writers in the eighteenth century. While I agree with McCarthy’s critique, I think the onomastic problem has peculiar resonance in Piozzi’s case. The name requires you to take sides, and set ethical and professional priorities. If you call her Mrs Piozzi, or simply Piozzi without the honorific, you acknowledge the scandalous second marriage and her alleged abandonment of Johnson — but in so doing you also respect her identity as an adult woman able to choose her own marriage partner, as well as the fact that her career as a writer was only possible because Gabriel Piozzi, unlike Henry Thrale, supported his wife’s desire to enter the public sphere as an author. If you call her Mrs Thrale, you restrict her to her role as the domestic friend and patroness of Johnson, but you also acknowledge the personal, historical, and literary importance of that friendship — and you ensure a wider potential audience for your book. If no one has *heard* of Hester Lynch Piozzi [...] can your book sell? Will people type the proper search words into Google? If you compromise and call her Thrale Piozzi (as McCarthy did in the title of his book, although not in the title of his article), you create a useful hybrid, but in doing so you perpetuate an inaccuracy and arguably an injustice.

Conclusion: Lapidary inscriptions

In *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy observes that: “[Famous people] are vehicles of cultural memory and cohesion. They allow us to identify what’s present with what’s past. By preserving their names, we create a self-conscious grammar of feeling and action that allows us to connect where we have been as a society and where we are going” (Braudy, 1997: 15). Given Piozzi’s own lifelong interest in grammar and usage, Braudy’s phrase “self-conscious grammar” is an especially apt commentary on the still-veiled issue of her name. As scholars, biographers, and readers, as users of catalogs, search engines, and indexes, when we employ the names of Thrale and Piozzi we necessarily reflect upon “where we have been as a society and where we are going,” whether it be the long-standing practice of subsuming married women’s identities within those of their husbands, the judgments that society has passed on independent widows, or even the privileged place allotted to novelists rather than linguists and biographers in recent accounts of women’s literary history.

Dr Johnson famously observed to Charles Burney that: “In lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath” (Fletcher, 1963: 2: 205). Not far from Brynbella, the home that the Piozzis shared until Gabriel Piozzi’s death, is the Church of Corpus Christi. Here, in 1821, Mrs Piozzi was laid to rest beside her late husband. Marking the location is a plaque, erected in 1909, inscribed:

NEAR THIS PLACE ARE INTERRED THE REMAINS OF HESTER LYNCH PIOZZI
“DR JOHNSON’S MRS THRALE.”

BORN 1741 DIED 1821

WITTY, VIVACIOUS AND CHARMING, IN AN AGE OF GENIUS

SHE EVER HELD A FOREMOST PLACE

Meanwhile, at the house where she died in Clifton, a more recent historical marker reads:

HESTER THRALE

(MRS PIOZZI)

DR JOHNSON’S FRIEND

b. 1741

DIED HERE

2nd May 1821

A third marker, affixed to her home at 8 Gay Street in Bath, reads more simply: “HERE LIVED / MRS PIOZZI / B. 1741 D. 1821” (Openplaques.org; Thrale.com; Vulliamy, 1936: 327). In the first two lapidary inscriptions, Dr Johnson retains possession of Mrs Thrale or of Mrs Piozzi. Moreover, in the Clifton marker, Mrs Piozzi is visually confined by a parenthesis, apologetically sandwiched between the historically powerful names of “Hester Thrale” and “Dr Johnson’s friend.” Yet I imagine that the “witty, vivacious, and charming” Mrs Piozzi would not hesitate to remind those of us struggling to secure her onomastic justice that to live in cultural memory thanks to being circumscribed by another’s name is a fate not peculiar to Hester Lynch Piozzi, or even to married women. To make the point, she could direct our attention to the 1809 obituary in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* that announced Gabriel Piozzi’s death, which remembered him as “the husband of Mrs Piozzi, the once justly celebrated Mrs Thrale” (Scott, 1947: 120).

Notes

¹ This article refers to its subject as “Mrs Thrale” when narrating her experiences during the period of her first marriage and widowhood; as “Mrs Piozzi” in the context of her second marriage; and as “Piozzi” when discussing her career as an author. Maintaining both these distinctions and argumentative clarity is harder than it appears.

² Subsequent references in the paragraph are to “Mrs Piozzi.” The authoritative Oxford edition of Burney’s journals and letters does not include the “Thrale-Piozzi” reference. In a footnote, the editors observe that: Mrs Piozzi was to die on 2 May 1821 and in a Memorandum Book, now missing, FBA ruminated on her character[.] This study was transcribed by FBA’s editor and niece Charlotte Barrett, who printed it with deletions and emendations [...] Anxious to suppress records of a rift much deplored by the Francis family, to make the most of returning kindness, and to present both ladies in the best light, CFBt deleted the adverse criticisms, with which FBA had balanced her account. (Burney, 1984: 208–209, n. 13) The note then quotes excerpts from this memorandum, but not the entire passage as transcribed by Newton.

Arguably, use of the name “Thrale-Piozzi” is one of the “adverse criticisms” that Burney’s earliest editors sought to suppress.

³ For examples of variations on the name, other than those given in works cited elsewhere in this essay, see the titles of the following: Randy C. Bax. 2002. “Linguistic Accommodation: The Correspondence between Samuel Johnson and Hester Lynch Thrale.” *Sounds, Words, Texts and Change*, ed. Theresa Fanego, Belén Méndez-Naya and Elena Seoane. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Benjamins: 9–23; Edward A. Bloom, Lillian D. Bloom and Joan E. Klingel. 1978. “Portrait of a Georgian Lady: The Letters of Hester Lynch (Thrale) Piozzi, 1784–1821.” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 60(2): 303–338; Morris R. Brownell. 1977. “Hester Lynch Piozzi’s Marginalia.” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 3(3): 97–100; Mariana D’Ezio. 2010. *Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi: A Taste for Eccentricity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars; John A. Dussinger. 1992. “Hester Piozzi, Italy, and the Johnsonian Aether.” *South Central Review* 9(4): 46–58; Gay W. Hughes. 2003. “The Estrangement of Hester Thrale and Samuel Johnson: A Revisionist

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Lives (Genres in Context). London: Routledge, and in W.K. Wimsatt. 1974. "Images of Samuel Johnson," *ELH* 41(3): 359-74, although interestingly the MLA Bibliography gives the subject of the Wimsatt article as "Piozzi, Hester Lynch." "Mrs. Thrale/Piozzi" is used in Robert H. Bell. 2003. "Boswell's Anatomy of Folly." *The Sewanee Review* 111(4): 578-594.

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