


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dr Johnson's Women

Norma Clarke

Contents

Cover

About the Author

Illustrations

Title Page

Preface

1 At Mrs Garrick's

2 Elizabeth Carter

3 Charlotte Lennox

4 Hester Thrale and Elizabeth Montagu

5 Hannah More

6 Fanny Burney

7 Women and Writing

Picture Section

Notes

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Index

Copyright

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696

DR JOHNSON'S WOMEN

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Illustrations

- [1](#) Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), Sir Joshua Reynolds, *c.* 1756. (*National Portrait Gallery*)
- [2](#) Eva Garrick (1724–1822), by Nathaniel Dance, 1771. (*National Portrait Gallery*)
- [3](#) Elizabeth Carter (1771–1806), by Sir Thomas Lawrence. (*National Portrait Gallery*)
- [4](#) Charlotte Lennox (*c.* 1727–1804), engraving by H. P. Cook after Sir Joshua Reynolds.
- [5](#) Elizabeth Montagu (1720–1800), after Sir Joshua Reynolds. (*Courtauld Institute*)
- [6](#) Hester Thrale, neé Lynch, later Piozzi (1741–1821), by George Dance, 1793. (*National Portrait Gallery*)
- [7](#) Fanny Burney, later d’Darblay (1752–1840), by Edward Francis Burney, *c.* 1784–85. (*National Portrait Gallery*)
- [8](#) Hannah More (1745–1833), by Frances Reynolds. (*City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery*)

DR JOHNSON'S WOMEN



NORMA CLARKE



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Preface

'I dined yesterday at Mrs Garrick's, with Mrs Carter, Miss Hannah More, and Miss Fanny Burney. Three such women are not to be found; I know not where I could find a fourth, except Mrs Lennox, who is superior to them all.'

Samuel Johnson to James Boswell, 15 May, 1784

This book is an attempt at collective biography which is also, in part, collective criticism. It is exploratory, speculative, selective in its choice of materials. It begins with a moment in Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* where a tantalising conversation about women writers fails to happen. Johnson's friendships with literary women barely feature in Boswell's account of his life; and on the one occasion when Boswell did record a remark by Johnson revealing his pleasure in the company of 'three such women' the conversation went nowhere. In *Dr Johnson's Women* I have taken up the thread, convinced not only that a rich and detailed conversation could have been had in 1784, but that Johnson, at the end of a long life spent in the heart of literary London, had things to say about female authorship which would have been of great interest to us today. Even in a short exchange he managed to be provocative.

What follows is a study of relationships between individuals who succeeded in becoming successful writers. It is at the same time an enquiry into the conditions of female authorship at a particular time, the mid eighteenth

century, and in a particular place, England, meaning mostly London. I have taken up the names Johnson listed to Boswell, and added some more: no book called *Dr Johnson's Women* would be complete without Hester Thrale, and there are others, such as Hester Mulso Chapone, Catherine Talbot and Laetitia Hawkins who demanded walk-on parts. As readers will discover, the chapter divisions look more orderly than they are: the person named in the chapter title is rarely allowed undisputed possession of the territory. There is much popping in and out. I have made no attempt to be fair or balanced in the amount of attention given to the different subjects. Some, like Fanny Burney and Hannah More, are relatively well known and there is a substantial literature available about their lives and works. Others, like Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu and Charlotte Lennox, are not. My choices have been governed to some extent by the raw materials but my underlying question has been the same throughout: what did it mean to this individual living this specific life to be a woman and a writer?

At Mrs Garrick's

On Saturday 15 May 1784 Samuel Johnson spent the evening with James Boswell and other members of the Essex Head club. This club, instituted the previous winter, was the latest in a series of dining and discussion clubs which Johnson relied on for conversation and company. In membership, it was a pale echo of the Literary Club (or The Club) which had flourished from the mid 1760s and which had included Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith, Charles James Fox, Edward Gibbon and Richard Brinsley Sheridan among others. But like The Club it was dedicated to the extension of knowledge. Johnson's ideal since boyhood had been to possess, as he put it, the 'general principles of every science', to 'grasp the Trunk' of knowledge and 'shake all the Branches'. This meant not only literature in many languages, philosophy, psychology, theology, medicine and history; but also the law, science, and such practical arts as brewing, coining, tanning, the making of gunpowder or butter, and even, in spite of his 'horror of butchering', the slaughter of cattle for the table - a subject Boswell discovered him to be proficient in explaining. Such knowledge he had got, he said, by 'running about the world with my wits ready to observe, and my tongue ready to talk'.

There was pleasure in this but it was also work. Knowledge of every kind was capital to be intelligently deployed; it was the means by which an 'author by profession' gained credit. As Johnson admitted: 'a fellow

shall have strange credit given him, if he can but recollect striking passages from different books, keep the authors separate in his head, and bring his stock of knowledge artfully into play'.¹

The newly established club met three times a week at a tavern called the Essex Head in Essex Street off the Strand, run by an old servant of the brewer Henry Thrale. (The club was a way of providing him with business.) Members, who had to be proposed, were bound by club rules which Johnson had drawn up: membership was limited to twenty-four, though members could bring one guest per week; attendance was insisted upon and absence punished by fines. This 'assembly of good fellows' was, like the more famous club before it, a men only affair.

On the evening of Saturday 15 May, Johnson was in 'fine spirits'. Boswell describes him at that time as being particularly 'able and animated in conversation, and appearing to relish society as much as the youngest man'. Certainly, Johnson's social energy was undimmed by age and illness. However, his 'fine spirits' at the Essex Head on 15 May were connected with his enjoyment of another and very different gathering which he had been at the evening before, an account of which he was eager to share with the club. Boswell reported it thus in *The Life of Samuel Johnson*:

He told us, 'I dined yesterday at Mrs Garrick's with Mrs Carter, Miss Hannah More, and Miss Fanny Burney. Three such women are not to be found; I know not where I could find a fourth, except Mrs Lennox, who is superior to them all.' BOSWELL. 'What! Had you them all to yourself, Sir?' JOHNSON. 'I had them all, as much as they were had; but it might have been better had there been more company there.' BOSWELL. 'Might not Mrs Montagu have been a fourth?' JOHNSON. 'Sir, Mrs Montagu does not make a trade of her wit; but Mrs

Montagu is a very extraordinary woman: she has a constant stream of conversation, and it is always impregnated; it has always meaning.'²

If Johnson meant to surprise, he certainly succeeded. Momentarily at a loss, Boswell could think of no intelligent response. His roguish, 'What! Had you them all to yourself, Sir?' seems to be a reflex, and rather meaningless; and the suggestion, 'Might not Mrs Montagu have been a fourth?' earned him nothing but a reproof. Johnson's stern encomium on Mrs Montagu's virtues carried more than a hint that Boswell would do well to try to follow her example: she was 'a very extraordinary woman' with a remarkable ability to talk. Johnson had once said to Mrs Thrale of Mrs Montagu: 'She diffuses more knowledge than any woman I know, or indeed almost any man.' And on another occasion he commented: 'That lady exerts more *mind* in conversation than any person I ever met with.' Unlike Boswell's, her conversation was 'always impregnated; it has always meaning'.

For the reader who has followed Boswell through his thousand-plus pages to 1784, the final year of Johnson's life, this exchange is an arresting one, made all the more so by its setting. At the formally constituted club of men, Johnson testified to the merits of certain distinguished women writers of his time. All were praised, blanket-fashion, though one - Mrs Lennox - was praised above the rest. The men of the club probably shared Boswell's sense of surprise but neither they nor Boswell asked Johnson to elaborate on his remarks. Establishing the cause of surprise - Boswell's 'What!' - is not straightforward. Was it the fact that Johnson had dined with these women? Was it his evident relish of their company, such as a younger man might have been expected to enjoy, the being amongst 'three such women'? Was it the critical opinion laid down like a gauntlet: that Mrs Lennox was 'superior to them all'?

We don't know. The conversation, beginning so intriguingly with praise of women, goes on to discuss praiseworthy men. Five extraordinary women (six if we include Eva Garrick) flash suddenly into view in *The Life of Samuel Johnson* and just as suddenly out of it.

The vanishing acts of women writers make a familiar theme in the annals of literature. Women celebrated in their own times become hidden from history and must be rediscovered by later generations. The work of rediscovery has gathered pace in recent decades, but it is still the case that eighteenth-century women writers are relatively unknown to the general reader. Furthermore, the conditions of the activity – what it was like to *be* a woman writer, what the credit of female authorship consisted in and how it might be maintained – are little understood, in spite of the fact that the eighteenth century witnessed the establishment of the professional woman writer as a recognised and respected figure in the culture. Indeed, Britain prided itself as a nation on its ability to produce such women. In 1752 George Ballard published a biographical collection, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain: Who Have Been Celebrated for their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages, Arts and Sciences*, in which he declared: 'it is pretty certain that England hath produced more women famous for literary accomplishments than any other nation in Europe'.

Such a declaration was characteristic of the mid eighteenth century. Johnson, in an essay of 1753, coined the phrase 'The Age of Authors' for his own time: 'there never was a time', he wrote, 'in which men of all degrees of ability, of every kind of education, of every profession and employment, were posting with ardour so general to the press'. Previous ages had devoted themselves to warfare, and just as in warlike times there had been illustrious women warriors, so the mid eighteenth century, committed to prosperity and letters, had produced 'a generation of

Amazons of the pen, who with the spirit of their predecessors have set masculine tyranny at defiance, asserted their claim to the regions of science, and seem resolved to contest the usurpations of virility'. Similarly, Mary Scott, in her introduction to *The Female Advocate* in 1774, somewhat tartly reminded readers: 'facts have a powerful tendency to convince the understanding, and of late, *Female Authors*, have appeared with honour, in almost every walk of literature'.³

Samuel Johnson's dinner companions at Mrs Garrick's in May 1784 were among those female authors who had appeared with honour in several walks of literature. All had been successful, all could be said to have reached the top of the profession; and as a group they represented the literary establishment of the day. What then was Boswell surprised about? Not that Johnson had been dining with these women. They were friends - each individually a friend of Samuel Johnson - and fellow professionals. Boswell knew them, though he had offended Hannah More by getting drunk at Bishop Shipley's. Her first impression of him, that he was 'a very agreeable and good-natured man' had been spoiled by his behaviour on their second meeting: 'I was heartily disgusted,' she wrote, 'with Mr Boswell, who came upstairs after dinner, disordered with wine, and addressed me in a manner which drew from me a sharp rebuke, for which I fancy he will not easily forgive me.' Whether Boswell forgave her or not is one question; another is how posterity has responded, posterity being generally more indulgent to the drunken male writer than to the offended woman delivering a rebuke. The anecdote has come down to us as an encounter between prude and profligate; a comic juxtaposition, especially if we add our knowledge of Boswell's use of street prostitutes and Hannah More's piety. But there is another consideration. Hannah More's asperity, her sense of entitlement to deliver rebukes to men who addressed her disrespectfully, signalled a social

confidence that was more than merely personal. At Bishop Shipley's the young, unmarried, female writer rested comfortably on her rights. Those rights - to bring herself into largely male literary company and be addressed appropriately - had been earned by an earlier generation. They were not spoken of as rights but they were in use, and they had been achieved by some resolute women.⁴

Like Boswell, the men of the Essex Head club would have been familiar with the names and reputations of the women with whom Johnson had dined, and they too might have been intimidated at the thought of 'three such women'. Dr Johnson, however, the man who, in Fanny Burney's words, was 'the acknowledged Head of Literature in this kingdom', was at ease in their company. His friendship with Elizabeth Carter went back almost fifty years. He had known Eva Garrick, the widow of actor-manager David Garrick, since at least the mid 1740s. David Garrick had been Johnson's pupil at the ill-starred school at Edial which Johnson had set up in 1735 with his wife Tetty's money, most of which was lost in the venture.

The younger women, Fanny Burney and Hannah More, were more recent friends and favourites, brilliant women who looked up to Johnson, and had a profound respect for what he had achieved and what he represented, and whose affection for him was sincere. Fanny Burney had become Johnson's special pet after the publication of her first novel, *Evelina*, in 1778. Nothing like *Evelina* had been seen before and Samuel Johnson - perhaps surprisingly - was as enthusiastic a reader of the adventures of this particular 'Young Lady's Entrance into the World' as the next person. Introduced to the author by Hester Thrale, he adored the mixture of shyness and slyness, diffidence and self-determination he discovered in her. The elderly man and the young woman spent hours together tête-à-tête at Streatham, after which Fanny would return to her room

and write up their conversations at great length in her diary.

All Johnson biographers have drawn on Fanny Burney's diary as raw material for their accounts of Samuel Johnson. It is, like Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, a primary source, vivid, immediate and intensely personal. Boswell made no secret of his determination to capture the talk of the greatest talker of his age and preserve it for posterity. He would take his notebook out in public and openly take notes, a practice Mrs Thrale, for one, took offence at. It was ill-mannered, in her view, to sit 'steadily down at the other end of the room to write at the moment what should be said in company, either *by* Dr Johnson or *to* him'. This was not Fanny Burney's style and she avowed no such agenda. Ostensibly, her diary was a 'private journal', begun at the age of fifteen and serving as the repository of her secret thoughts, private wishes, fears and dislikes. It was where she could freely tell her 'wonderful, surprising and interesting adventures'.

These included the interesting adventures of literary success, first with *Evelina* and subsequently, in 1782, with *Cecilia*. In its playful irony, the diary entry announcing *Evelina* reveals an unusual preoccupation with public fame:

This year was ushered in by a grand and most important event! At the latter end of January, the literary world was favoured with the first publication of the ingenious, learned and most profound Fanny Burney! I doubt not but this memorable affair will, in future times, mark the period whence chronologers will date the zenith of the polite arts in this island!

Becoming an intimate of Samuel Johnson was itself a significant yardstick of literary success. Writing down her conversations with him was another way for Fanny Burney - the 'morbidly timid', 'the very cowardly Writer' - to

convey to posterity the achievements of her own 'wonderful, surprising and interesting' self.⁵

In this respect, Fanny Burney's motives were much like Boswell's. Both were tireless diarists. The young Scot, James Boswell, had come to London determined to make his way; or, to use his own formulation, longing for 'the company of men of Genius' whose wisdom he could absorb and whose example he could emulate. Considering himself 'a man of singular merit', he had written to the French writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, requesting an interview; he had pressed himself on Voltaire, Wilkes and Horace Walpole. Those he admired he sought to become: when the streets of London evoked for Boswell the literary world of the early eighteenth century, the world of Swift and Pope and Addison and Steele's *Spectator*, he confessed to his diary that he felt 'strong dispositions to *be a Mr Addison*'. On another occasion he 'was in such a frame to *think myself an Edmund Burke*'. But mostly it was Johnson he wanted to become: '*Resemble Johnson ... your mind will strengthen*'; or, as he wrote in one entry when commending his own conversational performance, 'Was *powerful* like Johnson, and very much satisfied with myself'. Samuel Johnson had been Boswell's target when he came to London and in 1763, at the age of twenty-two, he achieved his ambition and was introduced to him in the back parlour of Tom Davies's Covent Garden bookshop:

At last, on Monday the 16th of May, when I was sitting in Mr Davies's back-parlour, after having drunk tea with him and Mrs Davies, Johnson unexpectedly came into the shop; and Mr Davies having perceived him through the glass-door in the room in which we were sitting, advancing towards us, - he announced his awful approach to me, somewhat in the manner of an actor in the part of Horatio, when he addresses Hamlet on the

appearance of his father's ghost, 'Look, my Lord, it comes.'

Such theatricality was to be expected from an ex-actor like Davies, who may also have been sending up his intense young guest. Boswell proceeded to blunder his way through the meeting, being twice snubbed and feeling 'much mortified' at what he considered a rough reception. His first mistake was to disparage Scotland in an attempt at pleasantry: 'I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.' Johnson's reply was crushing: 'That, Sir, I find, is what a great many of your countrymen cannot help.' The second was puppyish presumption: cutting in on Johnson's conversation with Davies and brushing aside the very object of Johnson's visit. Boswell recalls the moment in painful and honest detail:

He then addressed himself to Davies: 'What do you think of Garrick? He has refused me an order for the play for Miss Williams, because he knows the house will be full, and that an order would be worth three shillings.' Eager to take any opening to get into conversation with him, I ventured to say, 'O, Sir, I cannot think Mr Garrick would grudge such a trifle to you.' Sir (said he, with a stern look), I have known David Garrick longer than you have done: and I know no right you have to talk to me on the subject.⁶

Johnson had come to Davies's shop expressly to vent irritation at Garrick for his disrespect to a female author. Miss Williams, who lived in Johnson's house and under his protection, had neither wealth nor power. The question, 'What is Miss Williams worth?' lay behind Johnson's anger at Garrick, a component of the larger question: what was Johnson worth, what credit did he have with Garrick? If Boswell knew little about Garrick and Johnson and had no

right to offer his opinion, he knew less and cared nothing for Miss Williams.

Boswell's interest in Johnson was unapologetically self-promoting. Sincerely ambitious after literary fame, he attached himself to the man whose words could carry his own name down to posterity. This element in Boswell is well recognised in the vast literature that has since grown up about Boswell and Johnson. The same cannot be said about Fanny Burney, whose presentation of herself as a timid, modest, awe-struck female child, properly obedient and deferential, who would *naturally* want her diary to be a secret because it was merely an outlet for her feelings, has been endorsed by critics infatuated with the image of 'little Burney'. Fanny Burney's characteristics, we learn, are 'self-effacement' and 'sensitivity'; her writing is 'unpremeditated', without 'any trace of self-consciousness'. But even a scholar committed to this point of view is forced to acknowledge some contradictions. Chauncey Brewster Tinker, the editor of an early compilation of all the passages about Samuel Johnson which appeared in Fanny Burney's diary, *Dr Johnson and Fanny Burney*, reflecting on Burney's 'modesty', observed:

These meek young women who are for ever retiring to their 'chambers,' to escape the voice of the flatterer or to record his words in interminable letters, seem at times possessed of a remarkable sanity which detects the market value of this favorite virtue. They exhibit a surprising facility in contracting successful engagements, in publishing novels ... or an almost Boswellian faculty for scraping acquaintance with the most distinguished folk of their time. It is all very innocent ...⁷

Or perhaps it is not so very innocent, or no more innocent than Boswell's 'faculty for scraping acquaintance with the

most distinguished folk'. Young Boswell could pass himself about in his forthright way, displaying his self-regard and declaiming his admiration of men of genius and his desire to be of their company. What could young women do? How were they to get knowledge and get on? Ready as they might be with wit and tongue, they were not for the most part encouraged to go 'running about the world' in the way Johnson had done. Fanny Burney recognised the market value of meekness. It served her purposes. To read it as innocent is a form of chivalry rather like the old-fashioned habit of holding open doors for ladies.

Certainly, she was afraid: 'I am frightened out of my wits, from the terror of being attacked *as an author*, and therefore *shirk*, instead of *seeking*, all occasions of being drawn into notice.' She feared ridicule. She was obsessed with the need for privacy, an obsession that was at least matched by the compulsion towards self-display. This ambivalence is clear in her response to the success of *Evelina*, which quickly became the craze of provincial circulating libraries: 'I have an exceeding odd sensation,' she wrote,

when I consider that it is now in the power of *any* and *every* body to read what I so carefully hoarded even from my best friends, till this last month or two, - and that a work which was so lately lodged, in all privacy in my bureau, may now be seen by every butcher and baker, cobbler and tinker, throughout the three Kingdoms, for the small tribute of three pence.⁸

All these responses were part of the adventure of going into print. Women writers were by no means new in the 1770s and 1780s, but the market value of meekness was.

In *The Life of Samuel Johnson* Boswell's intense excitement in the presence of the older man communicates itself as an excitement about the *idea* of Johnson, which is

also about the idea of the famous writer Boswell himself wanted to become. Inevitably, the picture Boswell gives us is a partial one, idealising and romanticising and oddly weighted: a full half of this huge biography is devoted to the last eight years of Johnson's life. It favours the Johnson of the masculine clubs and taverns over the domestic Johnson, placing him amongst groups of men rather than groups of women. Women tend to appear in *The Life of Samuel Johnson* in the footnotes, relating an anecdote or confirming one. The fact that many of them were active participants in the literary world, celebrated and made much of by their contemporaries, is easy to overlook.

Emulation was considered a virtue in the eighteenth century. Young people were encouraged to model themselves on worthy older figures; anybody with a public identity understood that they had a responsibility to behave in ways that contributed to the common good when emulated. But young men like Boswell were not exhorted to emulate women. Boswell would not write in his diary: 'Think myself a Hannah More. Resemble Elizabeth Carter ... your mind will strengthen. Be meek like Fanny Burney.'

It is not surprising that Boswell's identifying impulses were directed towards male models. But reading *The Life of Samuel Johnson* as history is misleading in many particulars, not least in its representation of women in the literary world of the eighteenth century. Boswell's response to Johnson's conversational gambit on the evening of 15 May 1784, his inability to do anything with the pleasurable recollections of dinner at Mrs Garrick's the night before, his failure to take up a provocative critical judgement and his haste to move the conversation on to the familiar ground of men's affairs, is symptomatic. It is a moment which reminds us that life stories are not told but made. Boswell's consciousness of his own 'singular merit', his urge to identify with those he admired, his fantasy of being 'a man of letters' and his possessive appetite for the

territory, inclined him not just to disregard women but in rivalry to elbow them out. In doing so, this most 'clubbable' of men did more than most to reinforce the idea of literature as a club of men.

Nevertheless, the literary world in the eighteenth century was very far from being a club of men. All the women amongst whom Johnson had dined so contentedly had found places for themselves in this world with remarkable ease. Admittedly, they were extraordinary women. They had talent and energy and self-belief. But without any special advantages of birth, wealth or marriage, without formal schooling such as a similarly situated boy would have received (for better or worse), each of them had directed their ambitions towards literary success. And each of them had succeeded: writing words people wanted to read and talk about, and gaining entry into social circles that would otherwise have been closed to them. Even the younger ones, Hannah More and Fanny Burney, were already part of the literary establishment in 1784. It had opened its arms and welcomed them in.

In this world the sexes mixed on relatively equal terms. To say this is not the same as saying that women had equal opportunities with men, nor that social structures did not discriminate against them. Women's lives were different from men's, and how they imagined their lives - the mix of personal desire with social expectation - was also different. But many imagined themselves as writers and received confirmation of the acceptability of that sense of self from family, friends, teachers, booksellers and readers. Women of every degree, single, married, widowed, wealthy and poor, educated and semi-literate, leisured and labouring, sought the realm of print. Some became celebrated; most did not. Books were status symbols. To be a successful writer was to reach the top of a hierarchy of status open to talent. Elizabeth Carter, Hannah More and Fanny Burney occupied such positions. So did Elizabeth Montagu, and so

too, at an earlier period - during the 1750s - did Charlotte Lennox.

Johnson's manners were notoriously rough. His social behaviour was much commented on and variously described. He was considered uncouth, irritable, violent-tempered, ill-mannered, and brusquely indifferent to the feelings of those around him. His attempts at gentility were laughable. Arthur Murphy, in his *Essay on the Life and Genius of Dr Johnson* (1792), admitted that 'self-government, or the command of his passions in conversation, does not seem to have been among his attainments ... he has been known to break out with violence, and even ferocity'. Boswell's first encounter with him illustrated the point. 'Dr Johnson', he was later to write, 'did not practise the art of accommodating himself to different sorts of people.' Slovenly, ugly, huge, scrofulous and squinting, he was grotesque to look upon. His body was never still. He suffered from obsessive compulsive disorders, twitching and performing ritual motions whilst walking or before going through a door. The painter Hogarth, calling on Samuel Richardson, 'perceived a person standing at a window in the room, shaking his head and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner. He concluded that he was an idiot, whom his relations had put under the care of Mr Richardson as a very good man.' That was Johnson soon after he came to London in 1737. Many years later, Fanny Burney said he had 'a face the most ugly, a person the most awkward, and manners the most singular that ever were or ever can be seen'.

Boswell raised the subject of Johnson's 'forcible spirit, and impetuosity of manner' with him a number of times, suggesting that his habit of harsh contradiction was a trial to people with weak nerves. 'I know no such weak-nerved people', he reports Johnson replying. And on another occasion, when it was suggested to Johnson that he might

have done more good if he had been gentle, he defended his own harsh manners on the grounds that they produced better manners in others: 'I have done more good as I am. Obscenity and impiety have always been repressed in my company.'

It is unlikely that the female company at Eva Garrick's on the evening of 14 May 1784 experienced difficulty in repressing their impulses towards obscenity and impiety in his presence. In contrast to Johnson they were models of mannerly behaviour, women whose lives were rooted in the centrality of perfect self-command and self-government. Johnson's physical and temperamental difficulties caused him great problems. They were balanced by qualities that also made him loved: he was a 'virtuous bully' as one writer puts it, who became 'the idol of the club, the tavern and the drawing-room - the perfect companion at once of the profligate, the toper, the scholar, and the fashionable lady'.⁹

Perfect he may have been but easy he was not. Yet women of all kinds, but especially those with intellectual interests or literary aspirations, sought him out. His situation at dinner at Mrs Garrick's - a single man in the company of women - was not particularly unusual for him. Indeed the image of Johnson holding forth among 'the ladies' was so common and for different reasons had such currency that it has circulated as one of the many definitive images of Samuel Johnson. In its most sentimentalised version, Johnson is a grizzly bear and the ladies are tinkling visions of elegance. Eva Garrick, Elizabeth Carter, Hannah More and Fanny Burney did not tinkle and, with the exception of Eva Garrick who had been on the stage and understood the importance of self-presentation, they were not inclined to elegance. But neither were they inky-fingered slatterns. And whatever difficulties an evening with Samuel Johnson might entail, their nerves were evidently equal to it.

By 1784 Johnson was in his mid seventies; it was to be the last year of his life. He was in poor health. A paralytic stroke the summer before had affected his speech. In the autumn of 1783 he had suffered so badly with the dropsy that his whole body had swollen from head to foot. He was sleeping even less well than usual, and in terror of death and judgement. Arthur Murphy, who had first introduced Johnson to Henry Thrale and who knew him well, tells us:

The contemplation of his own approaching end was constantly before his eyes; and the prospect of death, he declared, was terrible. For many years, when he was not disposed to enter into the conversation going forward, whoever sat near his chair, might hear him repeating, from Shakespeare,

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod, and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods -

The powerful and moving words of Claudio in *Measure for Measure* at once frightened and comforted.¹⁰ Johnson's love of literature was a passion. But being 'an author by profession' had been far from easy. For almost fifty years he had been at the centre of London literary life. His periodical, the *Rambler*, which ran twice weekly from the summer of 1750 to the summer of 1752, following on the favourable reception of the *Life of Savage* of 1744, established him as an authoritative voice, and the *Dictionary* of 1755 confirmed his high standing. But if his reputation was secure, his material existence was not. He had never recovered the loss of his wife's money, sunk in his attempt at schoolmastering. In London, she had lived uncomfortably with him in a series of lodgings until the

space was gradually taken over by the papers, books and assistants required for work on the dictionary. Increasingly ill and discontented, secretly drinking heavily, Tetty had moved out to Hampstead. She was almost sixty and did not live to see her much younger husband become celebrated. She died in 1752. Johnson was grief-stricken to a degree that surprised his closest friends, most of whom thought the marriage a disaster or a joke. (Garrick occasionally mimicked the 'tumultuous and awkward fondness' of Johnson and Tetty making love, having spied on them through the keyhole of their bedroom when he was a boy at the Edial school.) Some of Johnson's grief had its origins in guilt, but although the life he shared with Tetty had deteriorated through the difficult years of the 1740s it had been based on a real affection.¹¹

Money continued to be a problem throughout the 1750s. In 1759 he struggled to raise sufficient to travel to Lichfield to visit his dying mother - this was the prompt which led to the writing of *Rasselas* during the evenings of one week; and he gave up his house in Gough Square because he could no longer afford to maintain it. Murphy's comment, that he 'removed to chambers in the Inner Temple-lane, where he lived in poverty, total idleness, and the pride of literature', hint at the bitterness Johnson felt.

The year 1759 marked the beginnings of a severe depression during which Johnson feared the complete loss of his reason and which was to maintain its hold until the late 1760s. Instrumental in the relief of this depression was the patronage of the wealthy brewer and MP Henry Thrale and his young wife, Hester. Concerned about 'the horrible condition of his mind', the Thrales more or less adopted Johnson, making their homes at Southwark and Streatham available to him as his home. He ceased to be a middle-aged waif and became the centre of an admiring circle. Hester Thrale undertook 'the care of his health'. This was no small matter. It included listening to an endless litany of

complaint about his condition in general and his mental condition in particular and sitting up with him until the small hours. Mrs Thrale reported that Johnson's doctor had declared he would rather Johnson came and beat him once a week, since 'to hear his complaints was more than *man* could support'. She added caustically: "Twas therefore that he tried, I suppose, and in eighteen years contrived to weary the patience of a *woman*.' Her patience was certainly tested in those eighteen years:

Mr Johnson loved late hours extremely, or more properly hated early ones. Nothing was more terrifying to him than the idea of retiring to bed, which he never would call going to rest, or suffer another to call so. 'I lie down (said he) that my acquaintance may sleep; but I lie down to endure oppressive misery, and soon rise again to pass the night in anxiety and pain.' By this pathetic manner, which no one ever possessed in so eminent a degree, he used to shock me from quitting his company, till I hurt my own health not a little by sitting up with him when I was myself far from well: nor was it an easy matter to oblige him even by compliance, for he always maintained that no one forbore their own gratifications for the sake of pleasing another, and if one did sit up it was probably to amuse one's self. Some right however he certainly had to say so, as he made his company exceedingly entertaining when he had once forced one, by his vehement lamentations and piercing reproofs, not to quit the room, but to sit quietly and make tea for him, as I often did in London till four o'clock in the morning.¹²

Boswell underplays the importance of the Thrales in Johnson's life, not least because Mrs Thrale was a major rival to him as a biographer. Her *Anecdotes of Dr Johnson* came out early in 1786 and was a tremendous hit: the first edition of one thousand copies sold out in a day. Three

more editions followed over the next two months. In capturing this ready market, she beat not only Boswell into the field but also Sir John Hawkins whose official *Life* did not appear until the following year. Arthur Murphy, whose *Essay on the Life and Genius of Dr Johnson* came out in 1792, after Thrale, Hawkins and Boswell, commented on how newsworthy Johnson was: 'the death of Dr Johnson kept the public mind in agitation beyond all former example. No literary character ever excited so much attention.' The press, 'teemed with anecdotes, apophthegms, essays, and publications of every kind'.¹³

So closely was Hester Thrale associated with Johnson that she became part of the Johnson legend; she is Dr Johnson's Mrs Thrale - not her own person nor anyone else's. But by 1784 and the dinner at Mrs Garrick's, Johnson was estranged from her. The death of Henry Thrale in 1781 had made his continued domestication in her home awkward; he took a formal final leave-taking of Streatham Park in October 1782, after reading the Bible in the much-loved library there. There were other tensions. Mrs Thrale's feelings were mixed: she lost the most important friendship of her life but she was also relieved of a burden. She was still only forty. Later she recalled the 'venerating solicitude which hung heavily over my whole soul whilst connected with Doctor Johnson', a solicitude that made her feel 'swallowed up and lost' in Johnson's mind. She was ready to break free, intellectually and emotionally. Her love for Gabriel Piozzi, the Italian music master who was shortly to become her second husband, was unacceptable to Johnson. In this he reflected public opinion which was savage about the connection. The press and most of her friends accused her of degrading herself by marrying a man socially beneath her, and a foreigner too. She admitted she was being 'selfish' and defended herself with sarcasm: 'I have always sacrificed my own choice to that of others, so I must sacrifice it again: - but why? Oh because I am a

woman of superior understanding, and must not for the world degrade my self from my situation in life.'¹⁴

Johnson felt abandoned and he reacted violently. When Hester Thrale wrote asking for his approval - 'I feel as if I was acting without a parent's consent' - she received a letter back in which the words still have power to shock. Johnson lashed out at her: 'you are ignominiously married ... If you have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your fame, and your country, may your folly do no further mischief.' Her dignified response demonstrated that she was, indeed, not one of the 'weak-nerved' people:

Sir - I have this morning received from you so rough a letter, in reply to one which was both tenderly and respectfully written, that I am forced to desire the conclusion of a correspondence which I can bear to continue no longer. The birth of my second husband is not meaner than that of my first, his sentiments are not meaner, his profession is not meaner, - and his superiority in what he professes - acknowledged by all mankind. - It is want of fortune then that is ignominious, the character of the man I have chosen has no other claim to such an epithet. The religion to which he has always been a zealous adherent, will I hope teach him to forgive insults he has not deserved - mine will I hope enable me to bear them at once with dignity and patience. To hear that I have forfeited my fame is indeed the greatest insult I ever yet received, my fame is as unsullied as snow, or I should think it unworthy of him who must henceforward protect it.¹⁵

She had not 'forfeited her fame' (honour), but if she had married for reasons other than social status or wealth, the conclusion was inescapable: she had married for passion. It was this which threw not only Johnson but also most of her

women friends into a lather of rage. Fanny Burney exclaimed, 'How *can* she suffer herself, noble-minded as she is, to be thus duped by ungovernable passions'. Mrs Montagu, meanwhile, repudiated her on behalf of the larger community of intellectual women:

I respected Mrs Thrale, and was proud of the honour she did to the human and female character in fulfilling all the domestic duties and cultivating her mind with whatever might adorn it. I would give much to make every one think of her as mad ... If she is not considered in that light she must throw a disgrace at her sex.¹⁶

She was thus not bad as a woman of the old stereotype – weak-willed and lustful – but mad as an individual, an eccentric deviation from the new norm. Mrs Montagu was a politician and her response was political. As she saw it, there was something larger to defend: the gains women had made in her lifetime. Governing passion, or being seen to believe in the importance of governing passion, was an essential weapon in the armoury.

Mrs Montagu's own passions were characteristic of a wealthy woman: she had a passion to rule and a passion for power, as well as a passion for literature. Busy in the management of her husband's lucrative collieries, she was 'a critic, a coal owner, a land steward, a sociable creature'. Her interest in architecture, landscape design and interior decoration led to the fitting up of sumptuous houses and the patronage of artists and craft workers as well as writers. She looked back to her namesake, Queen Elizabeth I, a woman whose abilities she admired, whose state papers she had studied and about whom she wanted to write. She had in her possession six china plates which the queen had once owned; Johnson paid her a well-judged compliment in saying that the plates 'had no reason to be ashamed of their present possessor, who was so little inferior to the

first'. Boswell's suggestion that Mrs Montagu might have made a fourth at Eva Garrick's dinner was misjudged: not only was there, by then, outright hostility between Johnson and Elizabeth Montagu, but the idea of Mrs Montagu being anything but a commanding first in any assembly was provocative in itself. She was the 'Queen of the Blues' and acknowledged as the supreme hostess in literary London.

With Boswell as his courtier, Johnson clearly became a king in the realm of literature. Unlike Mrs Montagu, he was not dubbed king of anything and was therefore spared the specific mockery that attaches itself to what subsequent generations read as overweening self-love. Elizabeth Montagu was 'Queen of the Blues' because she was the richest, the most powerful and possibly the cleverest of the intellectuals who came to be known as the bluestockings in the mid eighteenth century - a term which at first applied to men and women alike but later came to be applied only to women and still later took on its pejorative meaning. She was also 'Queen' because she sought pre-eminence. She sought to rule. Her kingdom, as she and her supporters conceived of it, was the kingdom of arts and letters.

Johnson's respect for Elizabeth Montagu - a precondition, it might be argued, for his sense of rivalry - is evident in his response to Boswell. Mrs Montagu was 'extraordinary'. Though fully aware of the flattery and homage she was accustomed to receive, he did not question her assumption of queenship nor read it as the overinflation of a wealthy woman by servile courtiers. As a thinker and a talker, she was, in his opinion, a genuine force. So, too, was Charlotte Lennox. Johnson believed in kings and queens; he was not a democrat, nor a radical and certainly not a revolutionary. He believed in hierarchies of rank. His ideas about how the literary world should be ordered were modelled on the monarchical system, a system that balanced deference, homage and praise on the one side with privilege and responsibility on the other.

Some years before Mrs Montagu became 'Queen of the Blues', Johnson made a determined bid to have Charlotte Lennox crowned queen in the realm of literature. The occasion was the 1751 publication of her first novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart*. Boswell does not tell us about it, but Sir John Hawkins, Johnson's official biographer, does. Sir John Hawkins, older than Boswell, was a member of the discussion club of that time, the (all male, of course) Ivy Lane club and it was at the club that Johnson made his proposal for what was, effectively, to be a coronation. Under the circumstances, the slight tone of protest one can hear in Sir John Hawkins's account is not to be wondered at. After explaining that Mrs Lennox's first novel was 'ready for publication', Sir John Hawkins tells us:

One evening at the club, Johnson proposed to us the celebrating the birth of Mrs Lenox's first literary child, as he called her book, by a whole night spent in festivity. Upon his mentioning it to me, I told him I had never sat up a whole night in my life; but he continuing to press me, and saying I should find great delight in it, I, as did all the rest of our company, consented. The place appointed was the Devil tavern, and there, about the hour of eight, Mrs Lenox and her husband, and a lady of her acquaintance, now living, as also the club, and friends to the number of twenty, assembled. Our supper was elegant, and Johnson had directed that a magnificent hot apple-pye should make a part of it, and this he would have stuck with bay-leaves, because, forsooth, Mrs Lenox was an authoress, and had written verses; and further, he had prepared for her a crown of laurel, with which, but not till he had invoked the muses by some ceremonies of his own invention, he encircled her brows.