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Chapter 7

“Thrale’s Entire”: Hester Lynch Thrale and the Anchor Brewery

*Michael J. Franklin*

Who was Hester Lynch Thrale, aka the Rattlesnake of Deadman’s Place?[[1]](#footnote-1) Was she a high-kicking saloon-girl from Tombstone or Laramie perhaps? Not quite—she was from the wild north west of Wales, but hers is a story of liquor—and liquidity. A salonnière rather than a saloon girl, she was an innovative writer, an authoritative historian, and an important bluestocking. Her first book, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, a candid and generically ground-breaking biography, sold out on the first day of publication in 1786, five years before James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791). George III sat up all night reading his copy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hester was born on January 16th, 1741 at Bodfel Hall, near Pwllheli, Caernarvonshire, the only child of Hester Maria, *née* Cotton, and John Salusbury of Bachegraig, Flintshire. Her parents (who were cousins) were both descended from Catrin of Berain, “Mam Cymru,” and connected with the leading families of north Wales. It was a familiar Celtic story—noble blood but no money.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hester became the focus of her parents’ love and of their financial and intellectual aspirations: “*I* was their Joynt Play Thyng, & although Education was a Word then unknown, as applied to Females; They had taught me to read, & speak, & think, & translate from the French, till I was half a Prodigy.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

No early portraits exist, but Hester claimed to have been the teenage model for Hogarth’s painting *The Lady’s Last Stake*. She was slight in stature, only 4 feet 11 inches, with chestnut brown hair, sensitive grey eyes, and rather angular features; a later portrait by Reynolds and a miniature by Cosway reveal, as she herself was aware, a rather deceptive serenity. Her childless paternal uncle, Sir Thomas Salusbury, doted on Hester, nicknaming her “Fiddle” on account of her restless vivacity. She was expected to be his heir, but her aunt’s death and Sir Thomas’s subsequent remarriage blighted Hester’s prospects of independence. A London suitor, eulogized by both her uncle and her mother as “a Model of Perfection,” was introduced, but Hester’s father, John Salusbury, was determined that his daughter should not be “exchanged for a barrel of Porter” to this “Beau Brewer!” Her handsome father was a well-educated, well-traveled adventurer and gigolo. It takes one to know one: he predicted of Thrale: “I know he’ll be a Bankrupt.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This Bankside “whoring fop,” who had the effrontery to display a miniature of the celebrated courtesan Polly Hart on the *outside*of his snuffbox, would give his daughter the pox. Needless to say, Thrale did. The sudden death of Hester’s protective father in December 1762 removed the impediment. The visions of romance were over, and the heroine Hester gained no hero. Details of dowry and jointure were settled, and on October 11th, 1763, in St Anne’s Soho, at the age of twenty-two, she was “bartered” to the handsome but bourgeois Henry Thrale (1728–81), a wealthy London brewer.

Thrale, the “Southwark Macaroni,” always concerned to display his best side, swept her away to Streatham Park, the tarted-up brick villa that his father had built in 100 acres of Tooting Common which the Duke of Bedford allowed him to enclose in exchange for a ten years’ supply of ale and porter at Woburn Abbey. It was a marriage of convenience on both sides: hers wanted money, and Hester would have to endure the muck of money-making: the suffocating Southwark reek of malt. The patriarchal Henry forbade her superintendence of their cuisine: “*his* Wife was not to stink *of the Kitchen*,”[[6]](#footnote-6) yet his nostrils seemed oblivious to the sour and acrid South Bank smells of brewing, tanning, and vinegar-making which drifted through the windows of Thrale’s severe four-storied stone townhouse, adjoining the Anchor brewery in Deadman’s Place, off Dirty Lane.

The house was situated near the entrance to the wet and sloppy brew yard, in which were quarters for the counting-house and collecting clerks, storehouses, vaults, the brewhouse with its enormous coppers, forty massive porter vats and associated mash tuns, coopers’ sheds, stables for a hundred dray and mill horses, dung pits, coal-stores and so on. A nine-acre plot, part of a former burial ground, it included the site of Shakespeare’s Globe:

For a long time, then—or I thought it such—my fate was bound up with the old Globe Theatre;[[7]](#footnote-7) the alley it had occupied having been purchased & thrown down by Thrale to make an opening before the windows of our dwelling house. When it lay desolate in a black heap of rubbish, my mother, one day in a joke, called it the Ruins of Palmyra. (Hayward, 2.33)

The Thrales were an ill-matched couple: she, sprightly, witty, and highly intelligent, with intellectual and literary ambitions; he, despite his eager pre-marital attentions to both Hester and her mother, as stolid and heavy as the porter he brewed, with a tendency towards gluttony. His sensuality leavened his phlegmatic temperament occasionally—in the pursuit of foxes or available blondes. Revealing a certain social insecurity, the sportsman forbade as too masculine her favorite outdoor activity of riding, and restricted her participation in London social life. Shut away from the world, she lived, as Johnson later remarked, like Thrale’s “kept mistress” (Hayward 2.33). Her study was a solace and a retreat from the nursery, and her writing supplied both an intellectual and an emotional outlet.

It was a loveless match which deeply embittered Hester. Henry needed a male heir and in this she did her level best. Between 1764 and 1778 she saw little of her feet, giving birth to twelve children, only four of whom survived beyond childhood. She resented her endless pregnancies which encouraged Thrale’s absences and rakish inclinations. While Hester suckled, Henry whored.

Hester’s life was transformed by Samuel Johnson—introduced by Thrale’s friend, the dramatist and lawyer Arthur Murphy. On January 9, 1765 the Great Cham arrived to enliven dinner at Deadman’s Place and he became a regular guest. Thrale was no great talker, but Hester reveled in combative conversation, and her effervescent volubility encouraged, and provided a perfect foil for, Johnson’s erudite pronouncements. She was flattered by the attentions of this literary lion but perhaps would have recalled her ancestor Sir John Salusbury whose heraldic shield recorded his feat of killing with his bare hands a white lion in the Tower of London. His motto, taken from Ovid, “Sat est prostrasse leoni” (it is enough for a lion to have overthrown), reversed to “it is enough to have overthrown a lion,” might well prove her own. Johnson certainly took her sufficiently seriously as a poet not only to praise and criticize her efforts, but also to suggest collaboration. With Johnson she was soon translating Boethius’s *Consolations of Philosophy*, and for another of Johnson’s projects, the *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose* of his lodger, the blind Welsh poet Anna Williams, Hester contributed a translation from Boileau, and wrote her best-known poem, “The Three Warnings.” Subsequently she assisted him in the preparation of his *Journey to the Western Islands*, and Johnson acknowledged that several of the lives in his *Lives of the Poets*, completed at Southwark and Streatham, owed as much to her conversation as to her skills as amanuensis.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Hester’s friendship with Johnson further opened her eyes to what she terms “my odd kind of Life.” When she laments “Thrale’s cold Carriage to me,” Johnson—never averse to affording home truths—responds:

Why, how for Heaven’s Sake Dearest Madam should any Man delight in a Wife that is to him neither Use nor Ornament? He cannot talk to you about his Business, which you do not understand; nor about his Pleasures which you do not partake; if you have Wit or Beauty you shew them nowhere so he has none of the Reputation; if you have Economy or Understanding you employ neither in Attention to his Property. You divide your Time between your Mamma & your Babies & wonder you do not by that means become agreeable to your Husband. (*Thraliana* 1.309)

*Thraliana* records no angered, self-justifying, or even hurt response of Hester to this cruelly chauvinistic and depressingly patriarchal summation of her inadequacy as the wife of a man whose bourgeois insecurity and womanizing proclivities had so comprehensively circumscribed her existence.[[9]](#footnote-9) Her only stated reaction was a gentle hint to her mother “that I had Curiosity about the Trade, which I would one day get Mr Thrale to inform *me* about as well as the *Jacksons* who I observed had all his Confidence” (*Thraliana* 1.309–10). The maternal scorn at her daughter’s apparent willingness to debase herself as “*My Lady Mashtub*” is deeply predictable, but the fact that Hester’s jealousy was aroused by Thrale’s close relationship with his chemist friend Humphrey Jackson FRS rather than by any of his adulterous amours is in many respects quite remarkable. The woman who was to become a prime mover of fashionable sociability here reveals a fascination with trade and commercial sociability which entangles social and sexual chemistry with the chemistry of brewing and of male friendship. This is especially interesting when we consider that Thrale had met with earlier refusals from women who could neither bear the nature of his business nor the thought of living in the Borough (Hayward 2.24).

The Borough was also teaching Hester about the politics of sociability. In the autumn of 1765 Thrale stood for parliament to represent Southwark, and his wife, though heavily pregnant, helped canvass electors, organized “treats,” and collaborated with Johnson in the writing and proof-correction of election addresses. Thrale gained the seat, but Hester lost the child, under two weeks old, to infantile diarrhea. In the following year Johnson’s emotional breakdown led the Thrales to make over to his use rooms at both Southwark and Streatham, and for the next sixteen years his life was transformed by the affection, care, and Anchor-like stability offered by a couple to whom he referred as his “Master” and “Mistress.” Despite the glamour, the wit, and the repartee, however, Johnson was an exhausting house guest, demanding, beyond attention to his various physical ailments, a mother love to compensate for his own rather austere upbringing. Behind the public face of her performance as brilliant hostess, Hester’s nurturing powers were drained not only by her own children, but by the overgrown child Johnson, who required psychological fostering of his creative powers.

There was now little danger of emotional or intellectual stagnation for Hester. The Johnsonian magnet attracted Turk’s Head members—the leading and exclusively male literary club of the period—and other distinguished figures to her dining-table and tea-urn. Johnson presided with Hester Thrale over this new Streatham salon, which she saw as “a sort of Receptacle for Wits & Writers.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Membership of the Thrale coterie betokened social and cultural arrival. Having made his reputation as a historian of music, Charles Burney was delighted at his invitation, and so was his daughter Frances when critical acclaim of her Evelina, or, A Young Lady’s Entrance into the World (1778) secured her entrée into what had earlier been an almost exclusively male preserve. Hester made the acquaintance of the influential Elizabeth Montagu, “brilliant in diamonds, solid in judgment, critical in talk” (Hayward, 1.130), and her coterie rivaled that of the lively “queen of the blues” in celebrity.

All this celebrity was largely funded by porter, a dark-brown or black bitter beer, brewed from partly charred malt, beloved of London porters and manual laborers. According to the historian of eighteenth-century brewing, Peter Mathias: “Porter had been born in an attempt to undercut other beers (and other brewers).”[[11]](#footnote-11) London porter established market leadership in price and quality over all other beers. “Thrale’s ‘entire’ porter,” so called from its being drawn from an entire butt, retailed throughout London at three pence a quart pot.[[12]](#footnote-12) It was a popular beer, but Thrale lusted after the prospect of its becoming the market-leading brand. Brewing had raised Thrale’s father’s family from Hertfordshire yeomanry, but just as porter originated in cut-throat competition, Henry Thrale was prey to an obsessively fierce rivalry continually fermenting in the cask of his mind.

In many respects Thrale was in the van of modern brewing science. Encouraged by Johnson’s fascination with chemistry,[[13]](#footnote-13) Thrale introduced the use of both the hydrometer and the hydrostatic balance in the Anchor from 1770, communicating with James Baverstock about the relative specific gravity yield of malts from Burlington and Norfolk, and presenting Baverstock with a silver hydrometer in recognition of his pioneering work.[[14]](#footnote-14) This was advanced stuff, but in Thrale’s case it was all dedicated towards a single-minded ambition to triumph over his London competitors.

In June 1772 came a lightning-bolt—Thrale was facing bankruptcy. The brewery was in debt to the tune of £130,000. Though it was a complete shock, the perceptive Hester had intuited that something was wrong:

Mr Thrale had for some Time appeared pensive and gloomy—when I asked the Cause, he told me it was something relative to his Business: I grew more inquisitive & he told me that it was the bad Hops he had bought the year before which had spoyl’d all his Beer …—however bad Beer might be the Pretence to *Me*. well but said I methinks if the Beer is really bad, you should send for Jackson to cook it; he turned from me upon those Words in an Agony I could not then comprehend. (*Thraliana* 1.312–13)

Hester had touched upon the truth as his agonized look at her mention of Jackson and “cooking” the beer revealed. In his obsessive determination to outbrew London rivals such as Felix Calvert and Samuel Whitbread, Thrale had involved himself in a ruinous scheme of the chemist Humphrey Jackson to brew beer “without the *beggarly elements* of malt and hops.” All was now clear to Hester: her husband had been duped by that charlatan “pretender to chymistry,” Jackson;[[15]](#footnote-15) Jackson was the biblical “wicked *Haman*” whose plot, if not foiled, was now at least rumbled by Queen Esther. It is significant that the account of her discovery of this practice upon Thrale, written in old age, and in the immediate context of how her electioneering aid had at least led others to remark “how happy Mr. Thrale must be in such a *wonder* of a wife,” still represents Jackson not only as arch-deceiver but almost as sexual rival, in “complete possession” of Thrale’s heart:

I wondered all the while where his heart lay; but it was found at last, too soon for joy, too late almost for sorrow. A vulgar fellow, by name Humphrey Jackson, had, as the clerks informed me, all in a breath, complete possession of it. He had long practised on poor Thrale’s credulity, till, by mixing two cold liquors which produced heat perhaps, or two colourless liquors which produced brilliancy, he had at length prevailed on him to think he could produce beer too, without the *beggarly elements* of malt and hops. (Hayward 2.25)

Thrale’s attempt to produce “chemical” beer was undertaken against the advice of John Perkins, Thrale’s thrifty and responsible chief clerk, and the master brewer, and proved disastrous. Thrale produced a vast output of undrinkable beer, totally beyond “cooking.” Jackson had also encouraged Thrale to experiment in the production of a wood preservative to safeguard ships’ bottoms against marine worms. Hester could scarcely contain her contempt:

He had persuaded him to build a Copper somewhere in East Smithfield, the very metal of which cost 2000£, wherein this Jackson was to make Experiments and conjure some curious stuff, which should preserve Ships’ Bottoms from the Worm; gaining from Government Money to defray these mad Expenses. Twenty enormous Vats, holding 1000 hogsheads each —costly contents!—Ten more holding a *Thousand Barrels* each, were constructed to stew in this pernicious Mess; and afterwards erected, on I forget how much Ground bought for the ruinous Purpose. (Hayward 2.25–6)

Hester appreciated that their most urgent business problems were of supply: “We had in the commercial phrase, no beer to start for customers. We had no money to purchase with;” and of labor relations: “Our clerks, insulted long, rebelled and *ratted,* but I held them in” (Hayward 2.26). But she also realized that the recent failure in June 1772 of Fordyce’s bank had precipitated a financial panic, and she feared that her husband, in his present state of despair, might contemplate suicide. Her philosophical friend Johnson had comforted both Hester and her mother: “Fear not the menaces of suicide,” said he; “the man who has two such females to console him, never yet killed himself, and will not *now.* Of all the bankrupts made this dreadful year,” continued he, “none have destroyed themselves but married men; who would have risen from the weeds undrowned, had not the women clung about and sunk them, stifling the voice of reason with their cries” (Hayward 2.26). Johnson realized that the resourceful Hester was a very different sort of woman.

Thus Hester was drawn into taking an active managerial role in the family business by Thrale’s increasingly reckless speculation. Johnson rallied round in the counting-house, and Hester tirelessly set about averting the threatened bankruptcy by raising £3000 from her mother, and placating regular customers and suppliers. This took some doing; Thrale owed £6,400 to his Malt-factor Hankin, and £18,000 to his hop-factors. Though heavily pregnant, she drove to Brighton to beg £6,000 from a family friend, Charles Scrase. John Perkins was so full of admiration that he repeated to everyone Hester’s brief letter to her husband: “I have done my errand, and you soon shall see returned, whole, as I hope—your heavy but faithful messenger, H.L.T.” (Hayward 2.27). In this way, “Money was raised, the Beer was mended, our whole Conduct in the management of our Trade was changed” (*Thraliana* 1.312).

Hester’s mediating technique was not so much that of “beer and sandwiches” as of tea and cakes, and it certainly impressed Perkins to be invited into her house. She regained the loyalty of a demoralized workforce at the brewery who “declared they would not live *with* *Mr Thrale*, but they would do *anything* for *me*” (*Thraliana* 1.313). As she continues: “Women have a manifest Advantage over Men in the doing Business;”—this is important; she is not merely saying that women’s gender and sexuality provide them with a special advantage in labor relations, management and conciliation, but that women are *doers*, they do the business, they *are*the business, they get things *done***:** “Women have a manifest Advantage over Men in the doing Business; every thing smooths down before them, & to be a Female is commonly sufficient to be successful, if She has a little Spirit & a little common Sense.” Her spirit and common sense had saved the brewery, but her eighth child lived only ten hours.

While Thrale was suffering in a morose state of bewilderment, Hester and Johnson, schooled in literary collaboration, worked together to restore trade confidence. The burly figure of Johnson inspired confidence at the brewery but in his absence on a trip to Lichfield, the major burden fell upon Hester. His letters at this time are full of references to business matters, the harvest, and the price of malt and hops. He writes from Lichfield on October 24, 1772 to stiffen her resolve concerning the regaining of market ground by means of a vigorously economic brewing season:

The brewhouse must be the scene of action, … . The first consequence of our late trouble ought to be, an endeavour to brew at a cheaper rate; an endeavour not violent and transient, but steady and continual, prosecuted with total contempt of censure or wonder, and animated by resolution not to stop while more can be done. Unless this can be done, nothing can help us; and if this be done, we shall not want help.[[16]](#footnote-16)

He uses the first personal plural to stress his solidarity, adding that, although the price of malt has risen to “two pounds eight shillings the quarter,” and the price of ale in public houses has risen to an unprecedented “sixpence a quart,” that this constitutes “an evil which we only share with the whole nation, and which we did not bring upon ourselves.” On November 7th he writes from Ashbourne to assure her that her advice concerning the reimbursement of a business creditor is sound: “I think you were quite right in your advice about the thousand pounds for the payment could not have been delayed long; and a short delay would have lessened credit, without advancing interest. In great matters you are hardly ever mistaken.” Two days later Johnson, in expressing his confidence in the gradual financial recovery of the brewery, switches tactfully to the second person plural:

Mr. Thrale’s money, to pay for all, must come from the sale of good beer. I am far from despairing of solid and durable prosperity. Nor will your success exceed my hopes, or my opinion of your state, if, after this tremendous year, you should annually add to your fortune three thousand pounds. This will soon dismiss all incumbrances; and, when no interest is paid, you will begin annually to lay up almost five thousand. This is very splendid; but this, I think, is in your power.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Early March 1773 brought the news that Thrale was embroiled with another chemist, Thomas Alexander, who, together with a certain Mr Eyles, was threatening a lawsuit for fraudulent business practices. Hester was involved in negotiating an out-of-court settlement and, although she followed Johnson’s advice to be more imperious, it would seem that she had taken on the transactions alone:[[18]](#footnote-18)

Your Advice was precisely right, upon my talking in a higher & more fearless Tone my friend Alexander was much disconcerted—apparently so … [He] profess’d his Confidence in Mr Thrale’s honour & Perkins’s Honesty, both which he said I had clear’d to him. he then expatiated in praise of my powers of Negotiation.[[19]](#footnote-19)

And Johnson also, without reluctance and naturally without mention of his earlier savage pronouncement that Hester was of “neither Use nor Ornament” to Thrale, praised her business acumen and her expertise in conciliation and mediation, all achieved while nursing her mother in the cruel last months of a terminal breast cancer. A fleeting remission in Hester Maria Salusbury’s illness occasions Johnson’s strange attempt at humor hinting at classical anthropophagy; the implication would seem to be that if Thrale is to be boiled it ought to be in Hester’s rather than Jackson’s copper.

I shall be glad to see you, for you are much in my head, notwithstanding your negotiations for my master, he has mended his share for one year, you must think of cutting in pieces and boiling him. We will at least keep him out of J-ck-n’s copper. You will be at leisure now to think of brewing and negotiating, and a little of, Madam, Your, &c.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Hester was doubtless delighted to learn that she had now the leisure to superintend the brewery, conduct negotiations with and for the nervous Thrale—whose Borough adulteries were featuring in the *Westminster Magazine*—and attend a little more closely to the disciplined regime of “moral management” demanded by Sam Johnson.[[21]](#footnote-21)

When Thrale’s “horrible Stupor” hovered off, one might have expected to find him chastened. But although he had grown more taciturn, his self-confidence was restored and his old ways resumed. John Perkins informed Mrs Thrale in July 1773 that Thrale had “not done trying Experiments,” as he abandoned a cask of sick beer worth £600 when it might have been cured with “50 barrels of good stout porter.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The sudden death, on March 23, 1776, of the nine-year-old Harry, the Thrales’ only son and male heir, subjected the mother to a distracted grief which intensified her concerns for the health of her remaining children. Thrale was submerged in a black melancholy, recurrent bouts of which were exacerbated by venereal disease, and only alleviated by hunting parties, extravagance, a suicidal over-indulgence at the table, and flirtation with the beautiful scholar of Greek, Miss Sophia Streatfeild.

Over the years, despite Perkins’s urging him to a business-like caution at the Anchor, the greedy maggot of Thrale’s desire to be market-leader continued to ferment. And, although Samuel Johnson—with his considerable experience of personal economic problems—has generally been portrayed as seconding and supporting Perkins’s solid advice, it is clear that on occasions he was infected by Thrale’s yeasty ambitiousness to outbrew Whitbread. Johnson was close to Henry Thrale, habitually referring to him as “My Master,” arguably with less irony than Hester used this term. One can begin to appreciate exactly what Hester was up against in battling against these two huge male egos by considering a letter Johnson sent to Hester from Lichfield on August 23, 1777. With the brewing season approaching, the Great Cham is remarkably upbeat, anticipating a bumper harvest and overflowing vats. *100,000 barrels* has a satisfying ring to it:

I have no doubt of a most abundant harvest; and it is said that the produce of barley is particularly great. We are not far from the great year of a hundred thousand barrels, which, if three shillings be gained upon each barrel, will bring us fifteen thousand pounds a-year. Whitbread never pretended to more than thirty pounds a-day, which is not eleven thousand a-year. But suppose we shall get but two shillings a barrel, that is ten thousand a-year. I hope we still have the advantage. Would you for the other thousand have my master such a man as Whitbread?[[23]](#footnote-23)

When Hester read these words—“a hundred thousand barrels,” “such a man as Whitbread”—it must have seemed to her that Johnson was as mad as her monomaniacal husband. She knew that Thrale had valuable government contracts for the supply of ale and porter to the army and navy which he shared with Samuel Whitbread and Felix Calvert. She also knew the quality of their beers. She saw that this reckless “dog-eat-dog” desire to increase production threatened that quality. The ironic significance of Johnson’s letter is fully revealed when one considers the events of the following year. In early July 1778, Hester learned with alarm that her husband was thinking of dismissing the honest but straight-talking Perkins “who sets his faults before him somewhat too strongly.” If Thrale hated “Perkins for telling him Truth,” she wrote, “he will of Consequence hate Johnson & me most of all I suppose.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Hester immediately deduced that this quarrel between her husband and his chief clerk meant that her “Master” had been up to his old tricks.

On the evening of Friday, July 17, 1778, Johnson spent some hours looking over Thrale’s Reste-Book, the register of the Anchor brewery’s accounts. When Hester came in from her walk on ~~the~~ Saturday morning she found them deep in serious discussion. She soon discovered that “the great year of a hundred thousand barrels” that Johnson himself was relishing in prospect had had a disastrous effect upon their cash-flow. The liquor had flowed but their liquidity had all but ebbed away. Now in sober mood, Johnson conveniently forgot his obvious schoolboy-like egging-on of Thrale, solemnly advising a brewing limit of eighty thousand barrels:

Johnson observed that there was no need to be low spirited tho we had been Imprudent, that such was our Capital we might still be rich, might pay all our Debts, & lay up five Thousand a Year, while we lived at the Rate of five Thousand more, if Mr Thrale would but promise never to brew more than *fourscore Thousand Barrels of Beer* in a Winter.”

At this point, the long-suffering Hester herself intervenes, with never a word of reproach to 100,000 barrel-Johnson:

besides why should you wish said I to brew more than eighty Thousand Barrels? is not 10,000£ a Year enough for any Man—why then for Gods Sake such mad Rapacity? Rapacity so dangerous that it will certainly be punish’d as the Avarice of Gamesters always is—by the failure of their own Schemes. … To this I added that Mr Thrale was the most unfit Man in the World to get into Difficulties, as nobody was so much depressed by ’em, that he had so lost Flesh Spirits & Appearance by this last Perplexity, that I thought few Things worth the Anxiety he had suffered since April; that it was very ridiculous to hazard his Health and Fortune nay his Life for the sake of a paltry Superiority to Whitbred & Calvert. … I earnestly begged his promise to brew but 80,000 Barrels of Beer—Mr Johnson seconded me by earnest and pathetic Entreaties & we at length extorted from him a Promise that he would brew no more than 80,000 Barrels a Year—for five Years to come.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Johnson—with never a word of apology for the part he had played in creating this crisis—piously advised Hester to record that 80,000 Barrel promise in her diary *Thraliana*. She added: “and so the Wings of *Speculation* are clipped a little: very fain would I have pinioned her, but I had not the Strength to perform the Operation” (*Thraliana* 1.333). Showing herself possessed of more commercial *nous* than either Thrale or Johnson, Hester continues: “Oh what a Curse upon Commerce is this modern Spirit of *Speculation* as ’tis called!” She lambasts the banker Fordyce for his stock-market speculation creating the financial panic which had provided the sorry background for Thrale’s 1772 near-bankruptcy. She excoriates East India Company director, Sir George Colebrooke, for his rapacious monopolizing in the alum market. But Hester’s greatest contempt is reserved for a businessman closer to home: “Brewing more Beer than is necessary merely because Malt is cheap, or buying up Loads of Hops in full Years, thereby expending one’s ready Money in hopes of wonderful Returns the ensuing Season”(*Thraliana* 1.333). If things had been different and she were not engaged in the heavy industry of producing babies, how superior a captain of the brewing industry she would have proved to her womanizing husband!

In the following year—1779—the death and bankruptcy of Henry’s brother-in-law, Arnold Nesbitt, brought a further crisis. His will revealed that Thrale—as guarantor of one of Nesbitt’s speculative ventures—was potentially liable to Treasury debts of £220,000. Henry was seized by an apoplectic stroke at the dining table. That was in June and although Thrale seemed to make a partial recovery, his capacity for managing affairs at the brewery was seriously impaired. That summer demonstrated only too clearly how absolutely and tyrannically Thrale depended upon her as labor-relations troubleshooter at the Anchor, and that even when she was very close to labor herself. She writes that on August 10, 1779:

after long continued Threats of a Miscarriage had confined me to the House & even to my Chamber, some Mismanagement among the Borough Clerks obliged me to go thither, & set Things straight; Mr Thrale wished me to go, nay insisted on it, but seemed somewhat concern’d too, as he was well apprized of the Risque I should run. I went however, & after doing the BusinessI went to do, beg’d him to make haste home, as I was apprehensive bad Consequences might very quickly arise from the Joulting &c—he would not be hurried— … no Pain, no Entreaties of mine could make him set out one *Moment* before the appointed hour—so I lay along in the Coach all the way from London to Streatham in a State not to be described, nor endured;—*but by me*:—& being carried to my Chamber the Instant I got home, miscarried in the utmost Agony before they could get me into Bed, after fainting five Times. (*Thraliana* 1.401)

Hester knew that “Mr Thrale’s heart never much run over with Tenderness towards me God knows,—yet common Humanity might have had a place here; no *Feelings*, however, no *Shame* could induce him—to put himself in a hurry!” The stillborn child was a perfectly formed boy—the all-important male heir who might have continued the brewing line of Thrale into the nineteenth century. Hester provides the only note of extenuation: “some of our People had a notion he was under ye Influence of his Disorder; if so, that wd have been but a too fair Excuse. Perkins’s Expression was that our Master was *Planet-struck*” (*Thraliana* 1.401).

In June 1780 the Gordon rioters, convinced that Thrale was a Catholic supporter, attacked the brewery. The Thrales were in Brighton, but the resourceful John Perkins placated the mob with copious draughts of porter until the troops arrived. Perkins had now saved the brewery twice, but Hester began to resent her chief clerk’s burgeoning ambition. By November 22, 1780, the Britannia of the Brewhouse was confiding to *Thraliana*: “tho’ a Man saves my Nation, I see not I,— why he should share my crown” (1.462). The good and faithful servant of The Anchor was but a clerk who, though rewarded for his indispensability, is deemed incapable of gentlemanly sensibility. The crown and anchor might have an appropriate sound to Perkins’s “Compting House Honour” but Hester, convinced that it was her human resources skills which had steered the business from the rocks eight years earlier, could not tolerate the prospect of partnership. She had long dealt with the social tensions between *ton* and tun, but the mere idea of “Thrale & Perkins” was unsupportable: “he wants to have a part in the Trade forsooth, & seems to think nothing will pay his Services but that Mr. Thrale’s ill health making His Death too probable, my Name may be joined with Perkins’s commodiously enough under an Alehouse Checquer” (*Thraliana*, 1.462).

Perkins was following exactly the same path as Henry’s father, Ralph, the son of an Offley yeoman, who “worked at six shillings a week for twenty years” to become head clerk, and subsequently owner, of the Anchor Brewery, which he purchased from the executors of his uncle, Edmund Halsey, the previous owner, whose only child, Anne, had married Richard Temple, first Baron Cobham. Through enormous industry Ralph Thrale managed to pay off the purchase price of £30,000 within 11 years, making his fortune and becoming MP for Southwark in 1741. And Ralph Thrale himself had only imitated the career model of Halsey, the son of a St Albans miller, who rose from being an Anchor laborer to chief clerk and finally succeeded to the business on marrying the daughter, the only child of his master, a Mr Child.[[26]](#footnote-26) It was a repeated tale of humble origins, hard work, and social aspiration, not to mention the recurring lack of a male heir. This was all too depressing to Hester, ever conscious of her Salusbury and Cotton forebears. Here she would have concurred with Boswell, who, in describing Ralph Thrale, had opined: “perhaps, the too rapid advance of men of low extraction tends to lessen the value of that distinction by birth and gentility, which has ever been found beneficial to the grand scheme of subordination.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

The demise of Henry Thrale, at the age of fifty-two and after a series of strokes, came as little surprise. The simple statement: “Mr Thrale died on the 4th April 1781” was written on an otherwise blank page of Thraliana. Hester’s grief was augmented by the revival of gossip concerning the wealthy widow’s future plans; the day after the funeral was not too soon for Boswell to pen an “Ode by Samuel Johnson to Mrs Thrale upon their supposed approaching nuptials,” the third verse of which presents Sam’s bosom glowing with amorous ardor:

Porter no longer shall be prais’d;—

’Tis I MYSELF am *Thrale’s Entire!*[[28]](#footnote-28)

Partnership with “Dictionary Johnson” was, however, limited to the sharing of managerial duties at Southwark. Though anxious to remove all unfashionable traces of “Borough Dirt,” an entry from *Thraliana* of April 1781 explores the commercial and social dimensions of her dilemma. She sincerely wants to do her best for her daughters but she has been so close to potential Anchor disasters that she apprehends trouble brewing:

God forbid though that my Pride or Delicacy should so far influence me as to make me quit the Business *at any Rate*: My Children have a Claim to all that I can do & suffer—yet how will they be benefited by keeping their Money at hazard? Mr Scrase says ’tis Madness to try at carrying on such a Trade with only five Girls. (*Thraliana* 1.491)

Johnson, somewhat relishing his role as a captain of the brewing industry, attempted to convince Hester she should stay at the helm. His feeble attempt to convince her that daily humiliation brought exaltation is theatrically overmatched by her brilliantly pointed rejoinder. Situated as she was on the foundations of the Globe and surrounded by prisons reflecting her own enslavement, her commercial dealings with Southwark groundlings was fitting her only for social “elevation” to the Drury Lane gods:

Mr. Johnson did wish my Continuance in Business, but I have pretty well cured him of his Wishes; though when I was obliged Yesterday to go & court a dirty Gaoler to suffer our Brewhouse to serve his Tap, & when I complained even with Tears to Mr. Johnson of the Indignity; Dearest Lady says he your Character is *exalted* by it; I tell you it advances in *Heighth*, Yes replied I, it advances indeed, & rises from the *Side Box* to the *upper Gallery*. (*Thraliana* 1.491–2)[[29]](#footnote-29)

This exchange reminds us that Southwark’s prisons were valued customers of the brewery, especially as they had lost The Clink’s trade when it was burnt down by Gordon rioters. Which of Southwark’s five remaining prisons Hester visited on this occasion is unknown, but whether it was that of the King’s Bench, Horsemonger Lane Gaol with its rooftop gallows, the White Lyon, a converted inn, the Marshalsea, or the Borough Compter, the proximity of criminals—and especially of debtors—must have strengthened her desire for caution.

Her own feelings of imprisonment were exacerbated by the continuing proximity of suitors and press speculation concerning remarriage: “One day the paper rings with my marriage to Johnson, one day to Crutchley, one day to Seward.” It is little wonder that she felt like escaping to the continent, especially when the great rival Samuel Whitbread with his immense underground stores of porter began to contemplate business empire consolidation: “Whitbred, the rich brewer, is in love with me too; oh, I would rather, as Ann Page says, be set breast deep in the earth and bowled to death with turnips” (Hayward 1.175).

Failing to persuade Hester to continue in business, Johnson did his best to “talk-up” the value of the brewery. During the transactions he was reported as stating: “Sir, we are not here to sell a parcel of boilers and vats, but the potentiality of growing rich beyond the dreams of avarice.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Hester completed her liberation when David Barclay, the Quaker banker, philanthropist, and friend of Franklin, together with his nephews, Robert Barclay and Silvanus Bevan and his wife’s relative—John Perkins—purchased the Anchor Brewery for £135,000.[[31]](#footnote-31) Feeling her neck delightfully free of the “Golden Millstone,” she bade “adieu to brewhouse, and borough wintering; adieu to trade, and tradesmen’s frigid approbation” (Hayward 1.145). For the four years during which the purchase money was being paid the business was carried on under the title of “H. Thrale & Company.” Subsequently Barclay, Perkins & Co. took the lead in the London porter trade, becoming one of the three great London breweries of the nineteenth century. In 1955 Courage—founded by an Aberdonian named John Courage in 1787—merged with its great Southwark rival Barclay & Perkins. After the 1955 merger the brewery was known as Courage, Barclay & Company Limited.

A gentlewoman once more, established for the London season in Harley Street, Hester’s pre-eminence as a lady of fashion seemed assured. Scandal replaced celebrity, however, when in 1784, three years after the death of Thrale, she made a love match of her own. Against the advice of her forceful eldest daughter, and the violent opposition of Johnson, whose ill health increased his self-absorption, and to the dismay of almost all her fashionable and bluestocking friends, she married the Italian musician Gabriel Mario Piozzi (1740–1809). Having “married the first Time to please my Mother,” she came close to avoiding marriage to please her daughter, but ultimately she determined to brave society’s prejudice against an Italian, Roman Catholic singer husband. They were married in London by a Catholic priest on July 23rd, and two days later in an Anglican service at St James’s, Bath. Hester Lynch Piozzi not only secured her own happiness but, freed from the inhibiting presence of Johnson (“in Johnson’s intellect mine was swallowed up and lost”: Hayward 1.306), she also found her own feet as a writer. With Piozzi on their honeymoon tour of Europe her creativity grew together with her happiness. Determined to ‘keep the English from fancying she was *lost* to the world’, imprisoned in a convent by a gothic husband, she contributed the preface and some poems to the influential *Florence Miscellany* (1785) in collaboration with the ‘Della Cruscan’ poets, Robert Merry, William Parsons, and Bertie Greatheed.[[32]](#footnote-32) Italy proved a personal and cultural liberation: the crude and tasteless sarcasm of the prints and papers at the expense of “La Signora Piozzi, late Thrale’s Entire” was like porter off a duck’s back.[[33]](#footnote-33)

A decade later, in 1795, Hester returned home. At Brynbella, the macaronically named villa they built near her ancestral home of Bachegraig, she lived contentedly with her *caro sposo*. Piozzi was now “Thrale’s Entire” and her loving sheet-anchor to ride the storms of class and religious prejudice. She and Gabriel loved the wines of the Veneto, but we know from the Barclay Records—a regular order of eleven dozen bottles sent in crates[[34]](#footnote-34)—that they enjoyed an occasional glass of porter as Hester reflected upon the triumphs and tribulations of the Anchor brewery.

1. It was Johnson who compared her with a rattlesnake: ‘Many have felt your Venom, few   
   have escaped your Attractions, and all the World knows you have the Rattle’; *Thraliana:* *The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776–1809*, ed. Katharine C. Balderston (2 vols, Oxford, 1951), vol. 1, p. 169; see also p. 430; henceforth “*Thraliana*” within the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Now judge my Transport, and my Husband’s when at Rome we received letters saying The Book was bought with such Avidity, that Cadell had not one copy left, when the King sent for it at 10 o’Clock at Night, and he was forced to beg one from a Friend, to supply his Majesty’s Impatience, who sate up all Night reading it”: 24 October 1815 from Hester Lynch Piozzi to Sir James Fellowes, *The Piozzi Letters*: *Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784–1821*, eds Edward Bloom and Lillian Bloom (6 vols, Newark, 1989), vol. 5, p. 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Salusbury set out to repair the family fortunes as part of Lord Halifax’s expedition to Nova Scotia, but returned unsuccessful, a virtual dependant on his brother; see *Expeditions of Honour: The Journal of John Salusbury in Halifax, Nova Scotia*, ed. Ronald Rompkey (East Brunswick, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs. Piozzi*, ed. A. Hayward (2 vols, London, 1861), vol. 2, p. 10; henceforth “Hayward” within the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Thraliana*, vol. 2, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Firestone Library, Princeton: MS 3891.8.313, f. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Perhaps “bound up with” the Scottish play’s line: “[R]emember the Porter” (II.iii.21)? [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, Johnson’s letter to Hester Thrale of 11 April 1780: ‘You are at all places   
   of high resort […] while I am seeking for something to say about men who know nothing but their verses, and sometimes very little of them’, ***Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.***,ed. Hester Piozzi (2 vols, London, 1788), vol. 1, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “[F]rom the day of my Marriage did I never put my Head into a Theatre, or any Place of publick Resort, till my Eldest Daughter in her sixth Year was carried by Lady Lade to see the King at an Oratorio; & I went too, that I might take proper Care of her”: *Thraliana* 1.310. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Houghton Library, Harvard: Piozzi, “Poems”, Eng. MS. 1280, 5 vols (1810–14), 1, f. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter Mathias, *The Brewing Industry in England, 1700–1830* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Before the year 1730, the malt liquors in general use in London, were ale, beer, and twopenny; and it … became the practice to call for a pint or tankard of *three threads,* meaning, a third of ale, beer, and twopenny; and thus the publican had the trouble to go to three casks, and turn three cocks, for a pint of liquor. To avoid this inconvenience and waste, a brewer of the name of Harwood conceived the idea of making a liquor, which should partake of the same united flavours—of ale, beer, and twopenny; he did so, and succeeded, calling it *intire* or entire butt, meaning that it was drawn entirely from one cask or butt; and as it was a very hearty and nourishing liquor, it was very suitable for porters, and other working people; hence it obtained the name of porter”: *Monthly Magazine and British Register*, 13/1 (1802): 41-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A laboratory had been built at Streatham in 1771 for Johnson’s experiments into distillation which coincided with Henry Thrale’s brewing interests but, realizing that Johnson’s attempts to distil “Ætherial liquor” represented a danger to fascinated children, servants, and to the near-sighted chemist manqué himself, Thrale insisted that further studies should be exclusively theoretical. See Hester Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (London, 1786), pp. 237–8; *Thraliana* 2.982; Frederick Kurzer,“Chemistry in the Life of Dr Samuel Johnson,” *Bulletin of the History of Chemistry*, 29/2 (2004): 65–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Henry Thrale’s letters to Baverstock in J. A Baverstock, *Treatises on Brewing by the Late James Baverstock* (London, 1824). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. # *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson,* vol. 1, p. 79n. Though castigated by Thomas Thomson in his *History of the Royal Society* (London, 1812) as an apothecary who “destroyed the goodness of our national liquor for ever” (p. 499), a contrasting account is provided by John H. Appleby, “Humphrey Jackson, F.R.S., 1717–1801: A Pioneering Chemist,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 40/2 (May 1986): 147-68.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Johnson to Hester, 24 October 1772, *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson*, vol. 1, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. Johnson to Hester, 9 November 1772, vol. 1, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hester to Johnson, 10 March 1773, cited in Mary Hyde, “The Thrales of Streatham Park II: *The* *Family Book* (ii) 1773–1774,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 24/3 (July 1976), pp. 306–48, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “You will not let me burst in ignorance of your transaction with Alexander,” Johnson to Hester, 9 March 1773: *The Letters of Samuel Johnson,* ed.Bruce Redford (5 vols, Oxford, 1992), Vol. 2*,* p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Johnson to Hester, 20 March 1773, *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson*, vol. 1, pp. 78-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, for examples, John Wiltshire, *Samuel Johnson in the Medical World: The Doctor and the Patient* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 43-9; and M. W. Brownley, ‘“Under the dominion of some woman”: the Friendship of Samuel Johnson and Hester Thrale’, in *Mothering the Mind*, ed. R. Perry and M. W. Brownley (New York, 1984). pp. 65-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rylands MS 616. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Johnson to Hester, 23 August 1777, *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson,* vol. 1, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Mary Hyde, “The Thrales of Streatham Park II. *The Family Book* (iv) 1777–1778,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 25/1 (January 1977), pp. 63–100, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Mary Hyde, “The Thrales of Streatham Park II. *The Family Book* (iv) 1777–1778,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 25/1 (January 1977), 63–100, 89–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See J. Doran, “The Halseys,” *Notes and Queries*, s3-II: 33 (August 16, 1862): 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. James Boswell gives Johnson’s account of Ralph Thrale’s rise, *The Life of Doctor Johnson* (2 vols, London, 1791), vol. 1, p. 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ode by Dr. Samuel Johnson to Mrs. Thrale, Upon Their Supposed Approaching Nuptials* (London, 1784), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The seats in the upper gallery, termed ‘the gods’ on account of their proximity to the painted clouds of the sky- blue ceiling, were the cheapest, whereas the side box seats were the most expensive. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Boswell, *The Life of Doctor Johnson*, vol. 2, p. 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “On Mr. Thrale’s death I kept the counting-house from nine o’clock every morning till five o’clock every evening till June, when God Almighty sent us a knot of rich Quakers who bought the whole, and saved me and my coadjutors from brewing ourselves into another bankruptcy” (Hayward 2.47). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Thraliana*,2. 673; cf. 2: 674. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See, for example, “La Signora Piozzi, late Thrale’s Entire, winters it at Venice,” “Bon Ton Intelligence,” *Public Advertiser*, Tuesday, January 11, 1785. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Barclay Records, Thrale-Piozzi Letters, no. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)