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# An Honorable Alliance: The Friendship between James Beattie and Elizabeth Montagu, as Revealed by Her Letters

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Caroline Franklin

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**ABSTRACT** The friendship between Elizabeth Montagu and James Beattie arose out of their shared desire to combat religious skepticism through promoting English literature. Beattie as a poet and philosopher and Montagu as a critic of Shakespeare wanted to reinvigorate the moral health of the nation. Beattie was an impecunious academic and the wealthy Montagu his most important patron. This essay draws on Montagu's unpublished correspondence to illustrate the businesslike nature of their epistolary commerce, culminating in 1773, when Beattie visited London to canvass support for a royal pension, having failed in his attempt to garner support for taking orders in the Anglican Church. In "The Commerce of Life: Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800)," ed. Nicole Pohl, special issue, <http://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2018.0030> **KEYWORDS:** Montagu's correspondence; eighteenth-century patronage; opposition to Hume; Reynolds's portrait of James Beattie; literature and moral education

Priceless, honour would be what saves friendship from calculation and raises it above the bargaining of rendered services. Above a certain recognition (the thanks of commerce, the market of patronage), hence the recognition of gratitude, but in the name of another recognition: the recognition of entitlement to honour.<sup>1</sup>

—Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*

❧ **FRIENDSHIP FOR ELIZABETH MONTAGU** existed at the intersection of practical Christianity, commerce, and public service. Her unpublished letters reveal her intellectual alliances with those of a different sex, nation, and/or class origin as

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, *Radical Thinkers* 5 (London, 2005), 203.

the weft she deftly drew through the warp of her upper-class family connections, in a dense political network. Her friendship with the Scottish poet and thinker James Beattie lasted almost thirty years; it was sustained chiefly by letters, due to the 530-mile distance between Aberdeen and London. When he was (mistakenly) informed that she was dying in 1799, Beattie wrote to his friend the Peterhead clergyman and physician, Dr. Laing:

Ever since 1771, when I first became acquainted with her, she has been a faithful and affectionate friend, especially in seasons of distress and difficulty. . . . For not less than twenty years she was my punctual correspondent. . . . I have known several ladies eminent in literature, but she excelled them all; and in conversation she had more *wit* than any other person, male or female, whom I have ever known. These however were her slighter accomplishments: what was infinitely more to her honour, she was a sincere Christian, both in faith and in practice, and took every opportunity to show it.<sup>2</sup>

The alliance between the leading English Bluestocking and the popularizer of Scottish Enlightenment Common Sense philosophy came about because both saw combating religious skepticism as a patriotic and chivalric duty to be staged in the arena of the republic of letters. Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1769) dexterously released Shakespeare's dramas from the strictures of neoclassicism—harnessing their imaginative power for moral instruction. She adopted his histories as the national mythology at the heart of an emerging canon of English literature.<sup>3</sup> Beattie combated skepticism through his philosophical essays, while his phenomenally successful poem *The Minstrel, or the Progress of Genius* (1771) would inspire Wordsworth and Coleridge in their mission to renew religious sensibility through “Romantic” vernacular poetry.<sup>4</sup> Montagu and Beattie helped set in motion an idea that the role of English literature was to reinvigorate the moral health of the nation, a notion that would become an accepted axiom in the nineteenth century.

James Beattie was born in northeastern Scotland in 1735 and baptized in Laurencekirk, Kincardineshire, the son of a humble tenant farmer. His brilliant

2. Sir William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie: Including Many of His Original Letters*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1807), 1:496, henceforth *Life*.

3. See Kathryn Prince, “Shakespeare and English Nationalism,” in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor (Cambridge, 2012), 227–96 at 277.

4. Everard H. King, *James Beattie* (Boston, 1977); King, *James Beattie's “The Minstrel” and the Origins of Romantic Autobiography* (Lampeter, U.K., 1992); Scott Hess, *Authoring the Self: Self-Representation, Authorship, and the Print Market in British Poetry from Pope through Wordsworth* (New York, 2005), chap. 4; Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, Pa., 1991), 71–77.

intellect drew patrons, and he gained a university education. Beattie may well have originally intended to enter the church; when he graduated, he attended divinity classes at King's College, Aberdeen.<sup>5</sup> His Episcopalianism, however, made him technically a dissenter from the Scottish national church, and perhaps he saw this as a bar to social mobility. Although England and Scotland had been supposedly ruled as one since the 1707 Act of Union, their church governance was completely at odds. The Church of England was the established church of the English nation, its bishops sitting in the House of Lords. Presbyterianism was the denomination of the Scottish church, however, which had been founded specifically on resistance to Erastianism, or the intrusion of the secular into the spiritual realm.<sup>6</sup> Aberdeenshire was a stronghold of "High Church" Episcopalianism, which found itself beleaguered after the failed rising of 1745–46. Penal acts of 1719, 1746, and 1748 were imposed upon Scottish Episcopalians, unless they "qualified" by abandoning their Jacobitism and adopting the Anglican prayer book. It would not be until 1788 that they publicly prayed for King George III, which paved the way for the repeal of penalties against them in 1792. This essay will suggest that as James Beattie could not rely on a powerful institutional church to help him make his way in the United Kingdom as a writer-priest, he had particular need of influential individuals who especially valued secular literature with a moral purpose.

That Montagu was Beattie's most important English patron is plain even from the earliest accounts—excerpts from their correspondence published by Beattie's friend Sir William Forbes in *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie* (1806) and in the nineteenth-century compilations of extracts from Montagu's letters made by her descendants.<sup>7</sup> Reginald Blunt provided a summary:

5. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Beattie, James," by Roger J. Robinson, last updated 2004, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/1831.

6. See Alistair Mutch, *Religion and National Identity: Governing Scottish Presbyterianism in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 2015); and Nigel Yates, *Eighteenth-Century Britain: Religion and Politics, 1714–1815* (London, 2014).

7. Following Forbes's *Life*, others of Beattie's letters were published in Margaret Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends* (Westminster, U.K., 1904); and *James Beattie "The Minstrel": Some Unpublished Letters*, ed. Alexander Mackie (Aberdeen, U.K., 1908). See esp. *The Correspondence of James Beattie*, ed. Roger Robinson, 4 vols. (Bristol, U.K., 2004), henceforth *CJB*. Robinson lists 893 letters, of which 348 are fully transcribed. See also *James Beattie's London Diary, 1773*, ed. Ralph S. Walker, *Aberdeen University Studies* 122 (Aberdeen, U.K., 1946), henceforth *Diary*. Extracts from Montagu's letters were published in *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, with Some of the Letters of Her Correspondents, Published by Matthew Montagu*, 4 vols. (London, 1809–13); *Elizabeth Montagu, the Queen of the Blue-Stockings, Her Correspondence from 1720 to 1761 by . . . Emily J. Climenson*, 2 vols. (New York, 1906); *Mrs Montagu, "Queen of the Blues": Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800*, ed. Reginald Blunt, 2 vols. (London, 1923); and John Doran, *A Lady of the Last Century (Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu)* (London, 1873). Twenty-seven of Montagu's letters are published in full in *Elizabeth Montagu*, ed. Elizabeth Eger, vol. 1 of *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738–1785*, gen. ed. Gary Kelly (London, 1999).

She introduced him to Dr. Percy, to David Garrick, to General Paoli, Lord Lyttelton, Mrs. Carter, the Duchess of Portland, and to all the bluestocking coterie. She took him to Bulstrode, where he also met Mrs Delany; she sent Lord Chatham his *Minstrel* and the *Essay on Truth*; she urged upon him the publication of the quarto subscription volume, the success of which was largely attributable to the work of herself and her friends; and she even ventured to inform him, “in very explicit though delicate terms,” that if the Government did nothing for him, it was her intention to settle on him an annuity for life.<sup>8</sup>

This essay will examine Elizabeth Montagu’s unpublished correspondence held in Aberdeen University Library in order to illustrate the businesslike nature of their epistolary commerce from the beginning and her determination to obtain remuneration for him from the government. Her letters from 1771 to 1773 indicate that their mutual interest was the cause rather than the effect of personal intimacy. Her patronage was philanthropic and meritocratic in that Beattie was lowly born; it was also a calculated gesture of support for the Common Sense school in its attack on the skepticism of David Hume, which, it was feared, might weaken the state churches of England and Scotland and loosen social control.

Beattie and Montagu had been drawn together through their mutual friend John Gregory (1724–1773), a member with Beattie of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, along with Thomas Reid (1710–1796) and Alexander Gerard (1728–1795). The Montagus and Lord Lyttelton had met Dr. Gregory when he resided in London for a period in the mid-1750s, and in 1766 Gregory introduced Elizabeth Montagu to the Edinburgh literati, including Lord Kames, William Robertson, and Hugh Blair, when she toured Scotland. After the death of Gregory’s wife in 1761, Elizabeth had taken a personal interest in the upbringing of his daughters, especially the elder, Dorothea. Her own views on female education may well have influenced Gregory’s popular, posthumously published conduct book *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1774). It was Dr. Gregory who had drawn her attention to Beattie’s *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770), which would go through five editions in three years and establish Beattie’s reputation as an extremely vigorous disseminator of the main tenets of the Common Sense school. Gregory had commented: “I detest Mr. Hume’s philosophy as destructive of every principle interesting to mankind, tho’ in other respects one of the most authentic, entertaining and instructive Histories I have ever read: but I love Mr. Hume personally as a worthy agreeable man in private life.”<sup>9</sup>

A year later, it was again Gregory who recommended to Montagu the first part of Beattie’s autobiographical poem, *The Minstrel*, which had been dedicated to him, though his name was not given, as the poet’s greatest mentor. Gregory would

8. “*Queen of the Blues*,” ed. Blunt, 1:271–72.

9. “*Queen of the Blues*,” ed. Blunt, 1:233–34.

subsequently be described in the second book as “He, whom each virtue fired, each grace refined, / Friend, teacher, pattern, darling of mankind!”<sup>10</sup> *The Minstrel* went through three editions in its first year of publication and became one of the best-selling and most influential poems of its age; it was still being reprinted well into the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> On March 13, 1771, Montagu conveyed to Gregory her own and Lord Lyttelton’s delight at reading the poem (*Life*, 1:251–53).

That autumn, Beattie visited London for the second time, in order to capitalize on the favorable reception of both works—especially his polemic against Hume, the *Essay on Truth*—by appearing among the literati as “the successful champion of truth, and the decided enemy of sophistry and scepticism” (*Life*, 1:143). The *Essay* had prompted a bitter dispute in the periodicals, in which supporters of Hume accused Beattie of exaggeration and mean-spiritedness in demonizing the philosopher’s atheism as antisocial.<sup>12</sup> Beattie’s poem portrayed his younger self in quite another light, as the unworldly romantic enthusiast, Edwin, “long by penury control’d / And solitude.”<sup>13</sup> This idealization of poverty and obscurity might seem ironic, given his mission in the capital, but the subtitle “The Progress of Genius” straightforwardly invoked the concept of natural genius theorized by Gerard and alluded to in Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. (Beattie had been a fervent admirer of the poet, who died that same year.) Indeed, the conclusion of Edwin’s career was left tantalizingly open, perhaps inviting readers to encourage and reward its progression. Beattie sent one of his presentation copies of the poem to David Garrick, who hoped to bring Beattie and Montagu together.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, the poet met his future patron when Mr. and Mrs. Beattie were invited to visit her at Sandford after their visit to the Garricks’ country seat (Letter 263, *CJB*, 1:76).

As Beattie came from a humble background, he had made the most of networks of patronage from his earliest days as a poor schoolmaster. Right at the beginning of their relationship, he was perfectly direct in asking Montagu’s advice as to how to capitalize on his literary success: whether to apply for a more prestigious university post, to seek a living in the Anglican Church, or to canvass for a royal pension. In a letter of October 9, 1771, for example, he queried whether the chair of modern history at Cambridge, which had been held by his late friend Gray, could be given to a Scotsman. He was equally unembarrassed about immersing himself in the print trade to supplement his meager stipend as professor of moral philosophy at

10. *The Minstrel, or The Progress of Genius, In Two Books* (London, 1797), 2:67.

11. See Hess, *Authoring the Self*, 105.

12. Articles by “Orthodoxus” (Henry Grieve) and “Democritus” (Mrs. Carnegie of Pitarrow) and others are reprinted in *Early Responses to Hume’s Life and Reputation*, ed. James Fieser, 2 vols. (Bristol, U.K., 2005), 1:200–230.

13. *The Minstrel, or The Progress of Genius. A Poem. Book the First* (London, 1771), stanza 60, p. 39.

14. Aberdeen University Library MS 30 1 31. Manuscripts from this library are cited henceforth in the text.

the University of Aberdeen. He gave her detailed information on the £16 Dilly gave him for the second edition of *The Minstrel*.<sup>15</sup> Montagu replied in an equally business-like manner five days later.

Between his arrival back in Aberdeen on November 1, 1771, and his next visit to London on May 7, 1773, they generally exchanged monthly letters to compare their progress in attempting to procure a living for him in the Anglican Church. Friendship was a bond produced by each serving the other in working together for the greater social good, as they saw it. She reported that in her “effort to serve you, & prove the sincerity of my friendship,” she had elicited the bishop of Bristol’s acknowledgment that Beattie “had a just claim on the publick as [he] had done so great publick service” by publishing the *Essay on Truth*. Then she wittily replied that his reward would be “to be put in the way to do *daily* service”—as an Anglican preacher (MS 30 2 68). The small remnant of Episcopalian sympathizers in northeast Scotland, of whom Beattie was one, were still regarded with suspicion by the networks of power and influence in Scotland. They were required to take an oath of allegiance to the king, in order to differentiate themselves from Jacobites, and their clergy (few in number) were ordained in England.<sup>16</sup> However, Beattie welcomed the idea of moving to England and even schemed to obtain extra salary by keeping his plan to resign his university post secret until another incumbent was ready to apply (Letter 278, *CJB*, 1:79).

When Beattie praised her profusely for her efforts on his behalf, on December 21 Montagu reiterated that, in serving him, “I mean to serve religion, morals, whatsoever things are virtuous” (MS 30 2 70). While her friend Lord Lyttelton consulted the bishop of Durham, she herself approached the powerful chief justice, Lord Mansfield. She warned Beattie: “Ld M-d seem’d very desirous of doing something for you, but seem’d to hesitate about the Church.” This does not seem to have stemmed from lack of respect for Beattie as a writer on Mansfield’s part.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, he recommended him to the king. Montagu warned him: “You must not say to any one but Mrs Beattie any thing of Ld M- & the Archbishop having recommended you to his M-y, who will read yr Essay on truth, & spoke with great approbation of your having defended the cause of religion, but all this is for your private satisfaction; & not to be utter’d to any one. Perhaps some of Mr Hume’s friends would endeavour to counteract your friends” (MS 30 2 70).

By February 23, 1772, Montagu made it plain that Beattie was unlikely to gain preferment in the Church of England: “I am much out of humour that I have not yet got any good encouragement in my hopes & wishes to see you in our church tho

15. MS 30 1 32; Letter 266, *CJB*, 1:77; see also Hess, *Authoring the Self*, 108.

16. See Jeffery Mark Suderman, *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: George Campbell in the Eighteenth Century* (Montreal, 2001), 50.

17. Lord Mansfield’s biographer suggests that Beattie’s argument against belief in the racial inferiority of black people in his *Essay* and Beattie’s meeting with Mansfield in 1771 may have influenced Mansfield on the question of slavery. See Norman S. Poser, *Lord Mansfield: Justice in the Age of Reason* (Montreal, 2013), 290.



all the prelates speak highly of yr merit” (MS 30 2 73). She now asked him whether he would instead like her to canvass for him to succeed Adam Ferguson in a more lucrative chair at Edinburgh University (MS 30 2 74). She had meanwhile contrived to send the royal governess a copy of *The Minstrel* for the king and queen. Beattie replied immediately and at length on March 1, 1772, emphasizing that he could not possibly take a university post in Edinburgh—or indeed any another Scottish university—because he had made so many enemies through his attack on Hume.<sup>18</sup> It seems he would have to remain in Aberdeen. On the other hand, he feared that a pension or a lay sinecure were avenues unlikely to succeed, so he suggested that a specially created academic remunerated role would meet the bill, giving as precedent the office of historiographer for Scotland at £160 per annum, which had been created for Dr. Robertson (Letter 292, *CJB*, 1:84). He feared leaving Aberdeen, for two days later he was writing again—pointing out that even if Ferguson did remove from Edinburgh, which was uncertain, Robertson, being a friend of Hume’s, would not be likely to support Beattie. He explained that the post would only pay more than his present post if he attracted good audiences as a public lecturer, which was unlikely, given the hostile atmosphere in Edinburgh, which would also destroy his delicate health (Letter 295, *CJB*, 1:85). Montagu replied promptly and briefly that she understood the points he was making (MS 30 2 75). As it turned out, there was no prospect of a vacancy (Letter 301, *CJB*, 1:87).

Later that spring, writing on March 28, 1772, Montagu again emphasized that the powerful Lord Mansfield “appears backward as to yr being introduced into the Church” and gently pointed out the potential in his academic career for influencing the coming generation: “you wd certainly be very useful in any employment that wd give you an opportunity of forming the minds of young persons at the University” (MS 30 2 77). Beattie was racking his brains to know what he had done to give Lord Mansfield reservations. It was an uncomfortable task for Montagu to explain to the naive poet that the answer mainly lay in snobbery about his lowly origins and anti-Scottish feeling in England.<sup>19</sup> She reported on June 5 that she and Lord Lyttelton had raised the matter again with Lord Mansfield, who “seem’d to wish to establish you in Scotland, & said a Northern Benifice might indeed do for you, but he fear’d in the south of England the scotch accent wd be objected to.” She went on bitterly: “I dare say a professorship will be created but Lord Mansfield is a timid man, & wd wish to avoid the yelping of the Curs in Grubstreet who would open perhaps on a place being created for a scotch man, but this delicacy is below a character of so great merit as Lord

18. Roger L. Emerson states that Beattie had definitely sought Ferguson’s post, however. See *Academic Patronage in the Scottish Enlightenment: Glasgow, Edinburgh, and St Andrews Universities* (Edinburgh, 2008), 345.

19. In addition, Mansfield had recently been criticized by the anonymous satirist Junius for his partiality to the Scots and may not have wanted to be seen promoting another.



Mansfield, but even virtue has its weakness, & too nice a sense of blame is such, and undeserved caution is to be despised” (MS 30 2 80).

At this discouraging news, Beattie consulted with his Scottish patron, Thomas Hay, ninth Earl of Kinnoull, and his fatherly friend, Dr. Gregory, who urged him to inform Lord Mansfield that a sinecure or chair would be acceptable if he were not to gain preferment in the Church.<sup>20</sup> Beattie suggested that Montagu let Lord Mansfield know just how isolated he now was in academic circles in Scotland, after his attack on Hume, but Montagu replied that Lord Kinnoull was the right person to write “to Lord Mansfield, to tell his Lordship your bad state of health & the persecutions you lie under from the free thinkers of your Country & that you would be glad of some professorship in Scotland. . . . The more Lord Mansfield is urged to provide for you the sooner it will be done” (MS 30 2 83). Beattie proceeded to send Lord Kinnoull her letter, which prompted him to consult his brother, Robert Hay Drummond, archbishop of York, who had recommended Beattie’s essay to the king (Letter 320, *CJB*, 1:94). Beattie then sent Montagu an extract from Kinnoull’s encouraging letter together with the sad news of the death of the Beatties’ newborn baby, whose godmother Montagu was to have been (Letter 324, *CJB*, 1:95). Lord Kinnoull encouraged him to make another attempt at procuring a living in the Anglican Church. Montagu conceded on August 27, “I wish that you were established in our Church preferably to any other mode of life” but also wondered if moving to England would really suit him—reminding him how important the land of his infancy must be to him with all its associations (MS 30 2 86). On December 13, Montagu wrote that the archbishop of York wanted Beattie to set out his qualifications in a letter to show to the other bishops (MS 30 2 97). On January 12, 1773, he informed her that the king had approved his essay (Letter 353, *CJB*, 1:103).

On February 10, Beattie was knocked back by the death of his great friend, Dr. Gregory, on whom he had greatly depended for advice. This galvanized him: less than three months later, the author was in London to ensure that Montagu would take over from Gregory as his mainstay. On April 3 Beattie had written to ensure that both his patrons, Lord Kinnoull and Montagu, approved this decision to visit London and to make one last concerted attempt at obtaining financial remuneration from the government for his writings (Letter 368, *CJB*, 1:107). Montagu welcomed his visit, though she warned him that most people would be out of town by early summer, except to attend parliamentary sessions, and she herself would have to go north to attend to their Newcastle coal mines (MS 30 2 107).

Beattie kept a meticulous diary of this, his third sojourn in the English capital. He seems to have decided that Montagu was his last hope. He recorded that on Friday,

20. He was also perplexed and suspicious at receiving information that an anonymous well-wisher had inquired from the sheriff of Aberdeen about what he wanted in the way of preferment. The inquirer might have been sent by the king but might also have been a mischief-maker (Letter 316, *CJB*, 1:91). This inquirer turned out to be Sir James Montgomery, Lord Advocate of Scotland; see Letter 316, *CJB*, 1:92.

May 7, 1773, he arrived at London and only “half an hour after I set out for Mrs Montagu’s. I found her at home and sate with her an hour or more” (*Diary*, 30). Montagu duly swung into action. By the 10th, at a rout at her house, she proposed that Beattie “should publish a quarto vol. of Essays by subscription by which she thinks (so great is the inclination of the people of fashion here to promote my interest) that 800 or 1000 £ might be raised as a provision for my child independently of what I may receive from the government” (*Diary*, 31–32).<sup>21</sup> Beattie and Montagu would meet or dine together almost every day in London for over a month, until she felt they had achieved their aim, when she departed the capital for her country house, Sandleford Priory.

On May 21 Beattie reported that he had procured an audience with the prime minister, Lord North, through the help of Lord Dartmouth, who—significantly—was a close friend of the leaders of the religious revival sweeping Britain and America: the Countess of Huntingdon and George Whitefield. According to the Countess of Huntingdon’s biographer, it was the former’s friend Lady Chesterfield who presented a copy of the *Essay on Truth* to the king.<sup>22</sup> Beattie asked Montagu whether he should take the advice of the archbishop of York to prepare a memorial “expressing my (supposed) services, my wants, and my wishes; and suggested the expediency of all my friends using all their interest in laying (it) before the King and Lord North,” and Montagu supported the idea (*Diary*, 38). Although she had once hinted she might be able to procure a living for Beattie at some point in the future (meaning after the death of Edward Montagu), on Tuesday, May 25, Beattie recorded that Elizabeth Montagu now seemed “averse to my entering into the Church. She thinks I may do more service to religion as a layman; for that if I were to receive ecclesiastical preferment, it might look as if I had written in defence of the Truth merely for the sake of profit” (*Diary*, 41). This was a crucial point. Despite—or perhaps because of—this decision, they assiduously garnered ecclesiastical support for the pension behind the scenes. For example, on May 28, they both visited the archbishop of York, and spoke two hours with him on Beattie’s affairs. Two days later, Montagu looked over his prepared memorial and the letter he would send with it to Lord Dartmouth the following day (*Diary*, 43–44). It informed Dartmouth that the archbishop of York wished the king to appoint Beattie to a temporary pension of £200 per annum, until an office

21. The *Essay on Truth* was to be accompanied by three other essays: *On Poetry and Music, as They Affect the Mind*; *On Laughter, and Ludicrous Compositions*; and *On the Utility of Classical Learning*. On June 7, Beattie visited Dilly, who agreed to print the quarto edition by subscription: “He allows me to print a Quarto Edition of the Essay on Truth in one volume along wt. other essays; on condition of my giving him a few copies (the number not specified)—and I allow him afterwards the property of those other Essays; and he is to make me a present in money greater or less, according as the sale will admit”; *Diary*, 50–51.

22. In his audience with the monarch, Beattie was asked what he thought of Lord Dartmouth and replied that he found him “not only agreeable but enchanting.” The king commented that, although Dartmouth was known as an enthusiast, “surely he says nothing on the subject of religion but what any Christian may and ought to say”; *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, by a Member of the Houses of Shirley and Hastings*, 2 vols. (London, 1841), 2:35.

of an equal value could be obtained (MS 30 1 42 [Letter 381, *CJB*, 1:111]). On June 1 Montagu procured the support of the bishop of Bristol, who “promises to speak to all the Bishops in my favour” (*Diary*, 45). By June 12 they had succeeded: Beattie was informed by Lord Dartmouth that the king wanted to see him (*Diary*, 52). Presumably feeling her job was done, Montagu retired to Sandlesford.

However, without her constant support, Beattie became prostrate with nervous illness at the prospect of going to court. He fretted that he wished to speed up the pecuniary arrangements, but little business was being done now that it was summer, and all the time he and his wife were staying in London they were spending money as well as growing anxious about their little son back in Scotland. He bewailed Montagu’s absence, feeling everything went cross with him since she left (MS 30 1 43 [Letter 391, *CJB*, 1:113]). Then to cap it all off, when he at last attended the royal levée in his newly bought grand clothes on June 18, he found it had broken up early and was asked to return on Wednesday the 30th. Although it had been mooted that he would be conferred the degree of Doctor of Laws from Oxford (MS 30 1 44), he feared that some dissention arose because he was thought to be Presbyterian, which delayed this (*Diary*, 59).<sup>23</sup> He noticed some abuse of him in the newspapers (MS 30 12 12 [*CJB*, 1:113]). His confidence was at a low ebb without Montagu.

Montagu wrote hurriedly in a letter that is undated but was probably sent at this point; she was much engaged with business but was glad that his friend Sir William Mayne was taking care of him at Arnos Grove, Middlesex, and she referred encouragingly to the subscription project that he could be working on (MS 30 1 43 [Letter 391, *CJB*, 1:113]).<sup>24</sup> On Saturday, July 3, the harassed Beattie wrote to tell her that he had now been presented to the king but was then informed that the arrangements for the pension would not be concluded until Lord North returned from Oxford. He had been advised to remain at or near the capital and thus could not yet visit Sandlesford (MS 30 1 47 [Letter 398, *CJB*, 1:114]). Probably the same evening, Montagu was herself writing to say she was “anxious to hear of your health, & of what passed between you & ye Queen” (MS 30 2 139). He had on Thursday, July 1, been told by Dr. John Majendie, who had been preceptor to Queen Charlotte, that the queen had informed him that an annual £200 pension would be settled on Beattie (*Diary*, 64).

On Monday, July 5, “wishing to see Mrs Montagu,” Beattie returned to London “but missed her” and again called on July 8 before she again left town. The following week he was writing with the exciting news that just as he had given up hope of the Oxford degree he had been summoned to the university, and the degree had been conferred on him on Friday, July 9 (MS 30 1 48 [Letter 402, *CJB*, 1:115]). On July 14,

23. Yet, as J. C. D. Clark remarks, honorary degrees were the only degrees that non-jurors could obtain; Clark, *Samuel Johnson: Literature, Religion, and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1994), 97.

24. He stayed at Arnos Grove from July 12 to August 10; see Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends*, 89.

Montagu wrote with her congratulations, but—ever businesslike—required him to come down to earth “to prepare the form of the proposals” for the subscription edition of his *Works* (MS 30 2 124). On July 23 Elizabeth was writing again from Sandlford Priory, wondering at his silence. She was looking forward to welcoming him there. She described at length a bucolic feast she gave to the estate’s haymakers “in a grove in ye garden” (MS 30 2 127). Beattie replied on July 26 that he was still waiting for the pension arrangements to be finalized. He at last enclosed the drafts for a paper announcing a proposal for the subscription volume that she had requested (MS 30 1 51 [Letter 411, *CJB*, 1:117]). On July 31 he wrote again, concerned about her health and letting her know he was correcting the fifth edition of the *Essay on Truth*. Elizabeth replied on August 2, admitting she was still unwell and so planned to go to Tunbridge Wells but was hoping to meet him in London, where she would break her journey (MS 30 2 128). Beattie replied eagerly on August 7 “to let her know I should go to London on Tuesday in hopes of seeing her there in her way to Tunbridge” (*Diary*, 78). He was in great frustration at the long silence from those on high, which made him fear failure of the whole pension project; at the enforced delay in his preparing his essays for the subscription publication; and at the instruction to remain in London, which prevented him from accepting an invitation from the Duchess of Portland to visit Bulstrode (MS 30 1 53 [Letter 422a, *CJB*, 1:118]). He had also reluctantly canceled plans to accompany Dr. Johnson on his journey to Scotland (*Diary*, 77). Dr. Johnson had commiserated with him, writing: “It is very little for the honour of the age that you should meet with any delay or obstruction in the improvement of your fortune.”<sup>25</sup> On the 9th Beattie received Montagu’s letter of August 6 in which their meeting was postponed, for Montagu told him she had changed her plans, having been bled by the doctor and now feeling somewhat better. She eagerly awaited his long-deferred visit to Sandlford, “if ye can see to ye end of ye Court mystery in this long delay” (MS 30 2 131).

Montagu wrote to the poet again on August 11, the day after receiving his miserable epistle of the 7th, providing the reassurance and advice he sought: “I cannot have the least doubt of your pension but the behaviour of ye Great North on such occasions is often amazing in regard to delay. In short the ministers are out of the chapter of sympathies. . . . By all means call on Lord North & ask him what you have left to hope. . . . Why do you not go to Mr [i.e., Dr.] Majendie & ask him how he wd advise you to proceed? If your mind was at ease you might write yr essays as well at Sandlford as in Scotland” (MS 30 2 132). On the 14th he wrote to tell her he had been at last informed that his pension arrangements would be concluded by next Thursday (MS 30 1 54 [Letter 424, *CJB*, 1:119]).

On Saturday, August 21, Beattie finally heard from a Mr. John Robinson that the pension was being prepared at the treasury. He immediately wrote to Montagu from Charing Cross (MS 30 1 55 [Letter 430, *CJB*, 1:120]), telling her that he had been

25. *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1992–94), 2:44.

prostrated with pain in his bowels while waiting in agony for the affair to be concluded.<sup>26</sup> However, on the positive side, Joshua Reynolds had painted an allegorical picture of him as truth's triumph over infidelity (fig. 1). (The painter had been awarded his honorary degree at the same time as Beattie.) Montagu obviously enjoyed this juxtaposition of the gut-wrenching and the sublime, replying: "While my imagination was delighting itself in painting you in all the florid colours and utmost glow of prosperity & joy, you were in fact languishing on a sick bed!" But she deemed Reynolds as capable of producing art for the public good (letter of August 23 excerpted in *Life*, 1:343). Reynolds portrays Beattie in his academic dress as Doctor of Laws with his *Essay on Truth* under his arm, looking on while the Angel of Truth defeats the Vices, the leader of whom is a caricature of Voltaire. The flamboyant painting exposed Beattie to much ridicule. Goldsmith (who was jealous of Beattie's being awarded a pension) remonstrated with Reynolds:

It ill becomes a man of your eminence and character . . . to condescend to be a mean flatterer, or to wish to degrade so high a genius as Voltaire before so mean a writer as Dr Beattie; for Doctor Beattie and his book together, will in the space of ten years, not be known ever to have been in existence, but your allegorical picture, and the fame of Voltaire, will live for ever to your disgrace as a flatterer.<sup>27</sup>

On Tuesday, August 24, Beattie visited Dr. Majendie at Kew Green and was granted a private audience with the king and queen in the king's house. He spoke with them for an hour, and the king told him he possessed two copies of the *Essay on Truth*, keeping one in Kew and the other in town. "He had heard that the sale of Hume's Essays had failed, since my book was published. . . . He had even heard of my being in Edinburgh last summer and how Mr Hume was offended on the score of my book." Beattie noted that the king and queen were "warm friends to Christianity, and so little inclined to infidelity, that they could hardly believe that any thinking man could really be an atheist, unless he could bring himself to believe that he made himself."<sup>28</sup> The king asked about Beattie's duties as a university lecturer. He might have been aware of the original suggestion that Beattie become a priest in the Episco-

26. The same day, he received three letters from Montagu (MS 30 2 134, MS 30 2 135, MS 30 2 136), two of which had been sent to Arnos Grove. The first of these congratulated him on his well-deserved success and said Montagu was glad the stipend would be paid in Scotland, where it would not be subject to "those deductions [i.e., taxes] which not only diminish, but tarnish & obscure the lustre of Royal Bounty." The latter two, of August 18 and 19, asked him to defer his arrival, as she had an unexpected visitor, and then let him know she was at liberty to receive him and his wife.

27. James Northcote, *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1817), 154. See also *Diary*, 55.

28. *Life*, 1:261–65.





FIGURE 1. Joshua Reynolds, *The Triumph of Truth*, 1773, oil on canvas, 133 × 160 cm.  
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palian church, for he mentioned that he had heard of the small stipends Scottish clergymen received and asked if that meant they were therefore poorly educated. Beattie explained that this was not the case, as a good education could be had much more cheaply in Scotland than England.

On August 27 Beattie recorded in his diary that “Mr Gray brought the royal warrant appointing me a pension of two hundred pounds yearly to be paid out of the Exchequer in Scotland,” computed at £183 net after tax and costs. He reckoned that since he had left home on April 23, he had only spent £175, which he calculated he would have spent anyway had he remained in Aberdeen (*Diary*, 95–96).

On August 28, Mr. and Mrs. Beattie at last set out for Sandleford Priory. But before they began their journey north to Scotland, the poet had to conclude the important business of the subscription to which Montagu would canvass all her friends to contribute. On Wednesday, September 1, he went to Dilly, the publisher, with “a Subscription-paper [proposal] which Mrs. M approves of, and desiring him to get 250 printed.” He noted in his diary that “Mrs M desires me to send her some of the Subscription papers as soon as they are ready. She is quite positive the scheme will answer, and that perhaps a thousand pounds may be raised by it;—but I should be satisfied

with the half” (*Diary*, 90–91). A week later he ordered 600 subscription papers to be sent to Montagu and another 600 to Sir William Mayne, as he would be too far away to sign the receipts. By October 4 the poet was writing from Aberdeen promising that the subscription volume would be “in great forwardness” by the end of the winter.

The concluding stanza of part one of Beattie’s poem *The Minstrel* had invoked the poet’s greatest male friend, Dr. Gregory, but Elizabeth Montagu would now be the dedicatee when both parts were published together. His second son was named Montagu. These years were the crux of Beattie’s life, and he was tacitly admitting that it was largely due to Montagu that his achievements were given official recognition, with the award of an annuity in 1773 and the publication in 1776 of a quarto edition of the *Essay on Truth* together with new essays, to which nearly 500 had subscribed.

Looking in detail at the early years of their correspondence casts new light on Beattie’s attempt to combine the role of champion of truth with the acquisition of a secure income. The friends’ initial attempts to reposition Beattie within the Anglican Church had failed, partly because of his inferior social origins and his Scottishness. Lord Mansfield, a Scot himself, may have judged that the embattled status of the small number of Episcopalians in northeast Scotland was another factor militating against that route. It was not until 1788 and the death of Bonnie Prince Charlie that John Skinner, the primus of the Scottish Episcopalian Church, began a campaign for their disabilities to be lifted.<sup>29</sup> George Campbell, Beattie’s friend and fellow member of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, and a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, was persuaded to garner the support of moderate Presbyterians. The bill was eventually passed in 1792.

In any case, Montagu herself judged that Beattie’s opposition to Hume would seem more independent coming from a poet and a philosopher than a priest. He himself had come to agree to this, for in 1774 he turned down two offers of livings in the Church of England: one from Mr. John Pitt of a living of £150 per annum in Dorset, and one from Dr. Thomas, bishop of Winchester, of a living of £500 per annum in Hampshire.<sup>30</sup> The latter must have been extremely tempting. But he wrote to Dr. Porteus: “If I were now to accept preferment in the Church, I should be apprehensive that I might . . . give the world some ground to believe that my love of Truth was not quite so ardent or so pure as I have pretended.”<sup>31</sup> His poem *The Minstrel* had idealized a writer as an unworldly seer, drawing inspiration from the natural beauty of northern Britain. But to take orders at this stage would expose him to the charge of having merely pecuniary motives in his new vocation. As it was, Beattie’s and Montagu’s success in obtaining his pension gave royal sanction and attendant publicity to a revival of the archaic role of loyal minstrel, consigning Gray’s vision of a solitary genius wasting his “sweetness on the desert air” to a more Romantic posterity.

29. Suderman, *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment*, 50.

30. *Life*, 1:336, 364, 384; Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends*, 82–83, 112–15.

31. Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends*, 114.



Adam Smith and Hugh Blair lectured on rhetoric and belles lettres in the eighteenth century, but it would not be until 1828 that Henry Brougham would pioneer English literature in University College London as a university discipline in its own right. His mission was further democratization of the written word. This would enable more poor men like Beattie and eventually even women like Montagu to access and make available to others the cultural capital of higher education. But anxiety about the decline of religion, such as Beattie and Montagu shared, shadowed the liberal progressive movement for canonizing English literature and continued to do so for 150 years. As Professor George Gordon would put it in 1922, the study of English had been constructed “to save our souls and heal the state.”<sup>32</sup> As the Anglican Church lost its near monopoly over education in England, so secular literature, it was felt, should take over religion’s role of promoting spiritual and communal values. The epistolary commerce between Beattie and Montagu that we have explored illustrates that the poet’s personal dilemma over which path to prioritize—that of philosopher or poet—became overlaid by the professional question of whether his voice should retain its origins in the secular debates of the Scottish Enlightenment or be sponsored and remunerated by the Anglican Church itself.



An online supplement to this special issue, “Selected Letters between James Beattie and Elizabeth Montagu (1758–ca. 1799), University of Aberdeen,” may be found at <http://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2018.0029>. These letters from Elizabeth Montagu to James Beattie, which have never been published in full before, were transcribed and annotated by the General Editors of the Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online project: Caroline Franklin, Michael J. Franklin, and Nicole Pohl.

I should like to thank Aberdeen University Library for its generosity to the Elizabeth Montagu Letters Project in making the archive freely available for our research and to dedicate this essay to the staff at the manuscript collection.

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32. Quoted by Franklin E. Court, “The Social and Historical Significance of the First English Literature Professorship in England,” *PMLA* 103, no. 5 (1988): 796–807 at 797.

