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'A land of slavery and superstition'? Hester Thrale and Elizabeth Montagu in France

British intellectual women were often compared with their French counterparts during intense rivalry between the two colonialist powers in the 1770s. It had to be conceded that, in comparison with Parisian aristocratic salonnières, British bluestockings were gentry-class and often provincial, but therefore they were portrayed as more chaste, pious and natural in laudatory poems such as John Duncombe's *The Femiinad* (1774) and Mary Scott's *The Female Advocate* (1775). The French female intellectuals that British bluestockings emulated had made themselves the hub of a French republic of letters. As cultural historian Dena Goodman puts it: 'The French Enlightenment was grounded in a female-centred mixed-gender sociability that gendered French culture, the Enlightenment, and civilisation itself as feminine'.¹ However, by the 1770s, the philosophes were bent on reclaiming that republic for the male professionals, by finding exclusively masculine alternatives to the salon. Their literary criticism also enforced neo-classicist dogma, specifically to exclude amateur and popular writing: categories where women were beginning to make inroads. As Elena Russo points out: 'Unlike their British and Scottish counterparts, [French thinkers] seemed less interested in laying out the philosophical foundation for a comprehensive theory of taste and aesthetic experience than in policing the world of the arts. They often limited themselves to a critique of bad taste'.²

¹ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p.6.

² Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics and Authorship in Eighteenth Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2007), p.3, see also p.10.

Women on both sides of the channel, discussing and exchanging reading-matter in their published and unpublished travel journals, letters and in regulating polite conversation in their salons, were consciously engaging in the civilising process - supposedly woman's role. This was theorised by the Scot William Alexander and Frenchman Antoine-Léonard Thomas in their comparative histories of the female sex.³ These historians were bemused by contemporary women's passion for reading: 'Brought up for the most part in convents, books are often the only means they [French women] have of beguiling the tedious hours of lonely inactivity' suggested Alexander. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau before him, Alexander resented the growing importance of female readers and literary judges: 'Such is female influence over literature, as well as over every other thing in France, that by much the greatest part of the production of the press are calculated for their capacity; and happy is the author who meets their approbation, it is the ladder by which he must climb to fame, and the fountain which will assuredly yield him profit.'⁴ The elevated status of British bluestockings and French salonnières certainly testified to the newly-acquired refinement of the two nations' ruling classes in the modern commercial world, but these histories of women debated whether the effeminization of culture had gone too far.

A productive tension between cosmopolitanism, born of Enlightenment universalism, and patriotism, bolstered by women's role in symbolising their nation's cultural capital, spurred British bluestockings to interrogate national stereotypes when they travelled to their sister country. This essay will examine the separate journeys to

³ See: Antoine-Léonard Thomas, *An Essay on the Character, Manners, and Genius of Women in different ages*, enlarged from the French of M. Thomas by William Russell, 2 vols. (London: Robinson, 1773), William Alexander, *The History of Women*, 2 vols. (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1779, 3rd ed. 1782).

⁴ Alexander, *The History of Women*, 1, pp.445-6.

France in the mid-1770s of Hester Thrale (1741-1821) and Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800), in order to compare and contrast their responses to the twin evils that French culture represented to many patriotic Britons: Roman Catholicism and the hyper-rationalism and scepticism of neoclassicism.

Bluestockings Thrale and Montagu staunchly supported the Church of England, for Britain's claims to unique religious and political liberty lay in the constitutional foundation of firstly its national church and secondly its limited monarchy.⁵ They saw Protestantism as endorsing women's rationalism in contrast to French Catholic 'superstition' and ritual. They also believed the Church of England ensured social stability and both deplored freethinkers and Dissenters for undermining its unifying role. Thrale's Streatham salon showcased Dr. Johnson's scholarship on the English language while her powerful rival and friend Elizabeth Montagu promoted the formation of a canon of vernacular literature. However, the patriotism which powered their salons did not preclude intense interest in French culture, for bluestockings made common cause with their French equivalents who had led the way in elevating the status of women in the public sphere. For example, Charlotte Lennox had published *Memoirs for the History of Madame de Maintenon and of the Last Age*, 4 vols (1757), a translation of the Huguenot writer Laurent Angliviel La Beaumelle's 1752 work, which refuted the misogynist besmirching of Maintenon's reputation.⁶ Women writers, such as

⁵ On Anglicanism and the bluestockings, see Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church and Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and for Elizabeth Montagu's ambivalence to France, see pp.200-211.

⁶ Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon (27 November 1635 – 15 April 1719) was the second wife of King Louis XIV of France though the marriage was not officially recognized. She was devout, and set up a school for girls, but had been criticized for wielding political influence at court and wrongly blamed for instigating the King's persecution of the Huguenots. On the bluestockings' views on Maintenon's memoirs and correspondence, see Gillian Dow, 'A model for the British fair? French women's Life Writing in Britain, 1680-1830', in *Women's Life Writing, 1700-1850: Gender, Genre and Authorship*, ed. Daniel Cook and Amy Culley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.86-102, pp.89-90.

Montagu's sister, the novelist Sarah Scott, routinely translated books from the French as well as publishing their own work, which might itself be translated, and this two-way traffic promoted cosmopolitanism. As well as fiction, these might be travels or histories written from a cosmopolitan point of view. Frances Brooke [*née* Moore] prefaced her 1771 translation of the Abbé Claude François Xavier Millot's *Eléméns de L'Histoire d'Angleterre* (1769) with a declaration that despite the difficulty of breaking ties of education, 'to change an habitual mode of thinking, and to become absolutely a citizen of the world' she aims for 'the same spirit of universal charity and philosophic candor, in which the author wrote.'⁷ Nicole Pohl makes a distinction between this purely literary cultural transfer and that effected when bluestockings such as Thrale and Montagu visited France in person:

On the one hand, literary exchanges, translations, reviews, published literary correspondence and more implicit forms of literary receptions (such as paratexts) initiate cultural transfer in the literary field. On the other hand, and more importantly to the Bluestockings, cultural agents such as Elizabeth Montagu effect cultural transfer in literary salons and networks, court circles, and in academies.⁸

Later, bilingual bluestockings were able to adopt an authorial stance of objectivity and edit correspondence between French and English intellectuals. For example, the well-travelled Mary Berry (1763-1852) edited a 4 vol. selection from the correspondence of

⁷ Quoted by Susan Staves, *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.293. On the importance of translation from the French for women writers such as Brooke in the 1760s and 1770s and the two-way traffic in novels, see: Marijn S. Kaplan (ed.), *Translations and Continuations: Riccoboni and Brooke, Graffigny and Roberts* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015); Mary Helen McMurrin, *The Spread of Novels: Translation and Prose Fiction in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁸ Nicole Pohl, 'Cosmopolitan Bluestockings' in *Bluestockings Now!*, ed. D. Heller (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), pp.71-90, p.85.

Madame Du Deffand to Horace Walpole in 1810. She went on to publish a comparative account of the sister cultures: *Social Life in England and France*, 2 vols (1828).⁹

Even in the 1770s, the salon was clearly a transnational space, where regional and national particularities could be cherished, at the same time that cultural exchanges between Britain and France encouraged female intellectuals to participate in the debates of the European Enlightenment over religion and rationalism. Hester Thrale and Elizabeth Montagu were already fluent in French before embarking on their travels to France in 1775 and 1776 respectively. Hester Thrale, a Welsh woman who spoke several European languages, revelled in international 'Literary Chat, sometimes in English, sometimes in French, sometimes in Latin, sometimes in Italian; we all made Mistakes & those mistakes made us laugh'.¹⁰ The two women had become friends at about this time despite a twenty-three year difference in their ages, but their relationship would cool in 1784 when the widowed Hester married the Catholic Gabriel Piozzi, who, as a professional musician, was her social inferior. For Mrs Montagu this was taking bluestocking cosmopolitanism and social fluidity too far!¹¹ Yet Montagu was fascinated with French culture. Nicole Pohl notes that when, corresponding with her sister, Sarah Scott, Elizabeth discussed French authors as diverse as Françoise

⁹ See: Susanne Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

¹⁰ *The French Journals of Mrs. Thrale and Doctor Johnson, edited from the original manuscripts*, ed. Moses Tyson and Henry Guppy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1932), p.109. From henceforth cited as *Journals* in parenthesis in the text.

¹¹ She wrote to Elizabeth Vesey: 'When one laments and weeps over the disgrace of a Friend, bitter are the sensations, and as the cause of one's grief is an object of contempt and scorn one cannot disburthen the heart by communicating its sufferings'. See *Mrs Montagu 'Queen of the Blues': Her Letters and her friendships from 1762 to 1800*, 2 vols, ed. Reginald Blunt (London, Bombay and Sydney: Constable, 1923), 2:274. Henceforth abbreviated to *Blunt*. Later, Hester Thrale was pressurized to make a statement, published as a postscript to her *Anecdotes of the late Dr Johnson* (1786), to affirm her admiration for Montagu's *Essay on Shakespear*, after Boswell in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785) had quoted Dr Johnson as saying she had not been able to get through it. See James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs Thrale)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 259-60.

d'Aubigné, Madame de Maintenon;¹² the mystic Jeanne Guyon;¹³ the medieval chronicler Jean de Joinville;¹⁴ essayist and critic Dominique Bouhours¹⁵ and the famous letter-writer Madame de Sévigné.¹⁶ Montagu had already entertained the poet Anne-Marie Figuet du Bocage¹⁷ in England as well as the leading salonnière Suzanne Necker,¹⁸ and during her 1776 trip to Paris, she sought out the acquaintance of Madame Geoffrin,¹⁹ Mdme de Deffand,²⁰ and the Countess of Rochefort,²¹ and met the philosopher Denis Diderot, the naturalists Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon and Jacques-Christophe Valmont de Bomare, and the historian of women, Antoine-Léonard Thomas.²² The year before, the younger and aspiring Hester Thrale had also met Madame du Bocage, author of *Lettres sur l'Angleterre, la Hollande et l'Italie* (1762) as well as the translator of Johnson's *Rasselas*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Harboursing ambitions to write a travel-book herself, Thrale confessed her jealousy to her journal: 'This morning I have been reading Bocages' [sic] Letters on the English Nation, which

¹² Nicole Pohl, 'Cosmopolitan Bluestockings', p.78.

¹³ Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte-Guyon (1648 –1717) was a French mystic and one of the key advocates of Quietism. Imprisoned for over seven years for her beliefs, her autobiography was posthumously published in 1720. In 1992 an additional text was discovered.

¹⁴ Jean de Joinville (1224-1317) was a medieval chronicler and the author of a biography of Louis IX of France, which gave an account of the seventh crusade in which Joinville had participated as a young man.

¹⁵ Dominique Bouhours (1628 –1702) was a French Jesuit priest, essayist, grammarian, and neo-classical critic.

¹⁶ Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné (1626-96).

¹⁷ Anne-Marie Figuet du Bocage née La Page (1710-1802). In 1746 she won 1st prize for poetry at the Academy of Rouen. As well as her travel book, she published *Le Paradis Terrestre* (1748), *Temple de la Renommée* (1749), *Les Amazones* (1749) and *La Columbiade* (1756).

¹⁸ Suzanne Necker (née Curchod) 1737-94, founder of a children's hospital and mother of Madame de Staël.

¹⁹ Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin (1699-77) held a salon in the Hôtel de Rambouillet where politics and religion were not permitted as subjects of conversation.

²⁰ Marie Anne de Vichy-Chamrond (1697) – 1780), Marquise du Deffand, was a French patron of the arts and became the mistress of Philippe II, Duke of Orleans.

²¹ Correspondent of Horace Walpole and Mirabeau.

²² In Paris, Montagu also met and later corresponded with Jean Dromgold (1720-81) who had been commandant of the École Militaire; the mathematician, D'Alembert and Francois Marquis de Chastellux. See: Blunt, 1, 322-3. She wrote to Elizabeth Vesey on 22 Sept 1776 that 'I was allowed to read ... (Madame Adelaide, the Princess Royal's translation of Henry IV part 1) by her English master and it seemed to be a very good literal translation' (see also *Blunt* I, p.334).

have somewhat tended to restrain my Spirit of Criticism: She had more Opportunities of Observation & I fear more force of Mind besides than I may have, yet her Information has been miserably confined, I see, & many of her Facts are false – how should mine be better! I will relate only what I see – which can hardly fail of being true'.²³

Whilst emulating French salonnières, British bluestockings habitually compensated for their less prominent social status by identifying with the rational elements of Christianity and criticizing the effeminacy of both Catholicism and absolutist monarchy. Though she had delighted in her visit to France in 1776, Elizabeth Montagu stated categorically to the poet James Beattie: 'The principles which most elevate the human character are piety and patriotism, these can never exist in their genuine state in a land of slavery and superstition'.²⁴ Yet a more detailed examination of their journeys will demonstrate that both women, through comparing French with British culture, came to interrogate the very notion of superstition, especially in relation to national identity.

The noun 'superstition', of French as well as Latin provenance, was coined to castigate the unorthodox or foreigners, either for irrationally enthusiastic or superfluous worship or for using practices now superseded. Voltaire had drily noted in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) that religious chauvinists always accused other nations, or even other sects of superstition:

²³ *The French Journals of Mrs. Thrale and Doctor Johnson, edited from the original manuscripts*, ed. Moses Tyson and Henry Guppy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1932), p.201. From henceforth cited as *Journals* in parenthesis in the text.

²⁴ Nov. 1776. Huntington Library MSS. MO 172. However, in discussing Xenophon, with Elizabeth Carter on 20 October 1758, she stated: 'I have great indulgence to superstition, in those who wanted the light of revelation; the best and wisest men must have been liable to it.' Matthew Montagu (ed.), *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu: Part the second, Containing her letters from an early age to the age of twenty-three*, 4 vols. (London: Cadell, 1813), 3, p. 106.

It is difficult to mark the limits of superstition. A Frenchman travelling in Italy thinks almost everything superstitious; nor is he much mistaken. The archbishop of Canterbury asserts that the archbishop of Paris is superstitious; the Presbyterians cast the same reproach upon his grace of Canterbury, and are in turn called superstitious by the Quakers, who, in the eyes of the rest of Christians are the most superstitious of all.²⁵

In both Britain and France, a consensus had arisen amongst the *philosophes* that superstition and religious mania were responsible for the witch hunts and warfare of the preceding century. In his 1741 essay 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', David Hume produced a psychological hypothesis that it was originally mankind's feelings of fear and powerlessness which produced religions in human society. Moreover: 'As superstition is a considerable ingredient in almost all religions, even the most fanatical; there being nothing but philosophy able entirely to conquer these unaccountable terrors; hence it proceeds that in almost every sect of religion there are priests to be found; but the stronger mixture there is of superstition, the higher is the authority of the priesthood'.²⁶

Hume also castigated the opposite of fearful superstition - puritan 'enthusiasm', which sprang from an individual's over-confidence in his/her spiritual vision - because this could inspire revolutionary upheavals in society. Overall, however, he felt that, from a utilitarian perspective, superstition was more dangerous because it was longer-lasting

²⁵ 'Superstition', *A Philosophical Dictionary, from the French of M. de Voltaire*, 2 vols (Boston: J.Q. Adams, 1836), 1:344.

²⁶ *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: A. Black and W. Tait, 1826), 3, pp. 85-6.

and empowered a priestly caste. Although they detested Hume's preference for philosophy over revealed religion, Anglicans Elizabeth Montagu and Hester Thrale carefully positioned themselves as the English *via media* between the enthusiasm of the religious revival and the superstition of Gallic Catholicism. Let us examine more closely this Humean notion of 'superstition' in accounts of the friends' visits to France and compare their attitudes.

Hester Thrale had made her first trip to France just a year earlier than that of Montagu's. She took a 58 day tour from 15th September to 11th November 1775 accompanied by her husband and daughter Queeney, Queeney's Italian tutor Guiseppe Baretti, and Dr Johnson. It is evident from her journal that the 'superstition' of Catholicism was their prime fascination with France. Hester Thrale rhapsodized at the grandeur of the cathedrals and was duly shocked by the exotic ritual of the high mass, which provoked an argument with Dr Johnson as to whether one should join in with genuflecting at the Elevation of the Host (*Journals*, p.156). But they were both particularly intrigued by monastic life: not just Gothicizing it as many travellers did, but empathizing by comparing it with that of a modern scholar in his library.²⁷ Their first evening in Calais, they dined with a Capuchin friar, Father Felix, who showed them his convent. Mrs Thrale noted approvingly: 'The book open in his cell was the History of England ... [this] shewed he had not neglected modern or colloquial knowledge: there was a translation of Addison's Spectators, and Rapin's Dissertation on the contending Parties of England called Whig and Tory' (*Journals*, pp.71, 192).

²⁷ The Benedictines' library at Arras 'resembles All Souls exceedingly in Size and Disposition' she noted. (*Journals*, p.73).

But how could English Catholics, expatriates living in France, keep up with current affairs in England? At a Convent of Dominican Nuns, Hester 'chatted at the Grate with a most agreeable English Lady [Miss Grey, see *Journals*, p.192] who said she had been immured there 26 years'. Mrs Thrale's horror at the nun's separation from the world abated, however, when Miss Grey 'chatted about Mr Foote & his Controversy with the Duchess of Kingston" (*Journals*, p.72). This concerned Foote's most recent but as yet unperformed play, *A Trip to Calais*, satirising English tourists in France, set in the very same Hôtel d'Angleterre that Mrs Thrale had just left. The fashionably-dressed nun could not have been more up-to-date, and – incongruously enough – knew all about the most salacious of scandals, for it was only a few weeks previously that Foote had been refused a licence for this risqué comedy, which lampooned the upcoming trial for bigamy of Elizabeth Chudleigh, Duchess of Kingston.²⁸

At Rouen, the Thrales met up with Hester's old friend Mrs Cecilia Strickland, who was herself a Roman Catholic and who procured their entrée to visit more convents. Like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu before her, Mrs Thrale therefore had access to immured females, the sight of whom was denied to male travellers. This made her journals piquant and therefore potentially publishable. As Ana Acosta observes, the convent 'served as shorthand for the antithesis of reasonable, Protestant, enlightened, middle-class values'.²⁹ Therefore the convent could be denounced, while also

²⁸ In August 1775 the duchess had declared in the public press that she would 'prostitute the term of manhood by applying it to Mr. Foote' (*Public Advertiser*, 16, 18 Aug 1775). On 8 July, John Sangster, a servant of Foote, had come forward to charge the actor with an attempted homosexual attack, a capital offence. His case would come to trial on 9 December 1776. When Arthur Murphy, who acted as Foote's attorney, visited the actor to tell him he had been acquitted of the trumped-up charge, Foote collapsed on the floor 'in strong hysterics' [*ODNB*].

²⁹ Ana M. Acosta, 'Hotbeds of Popery: Convents in the English Literary Imagination, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 15:3-4 (April-July 2003), pp.615-42, p.617. See also: Anna Battigelli and Laura M. Stevens (eds), 'Eighteenth-century Women and English Catholicism', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 31:1-2 (Spring-Fall 2012), 1-26.

functioning as a way to explore anxieties closer to home, about women's autonomy in spiritual and material terms, their economic productivity and fertility as national assets.

Hester Thrale noticed very contrasting regimes in different convents. While some British Catholics chose a nun's life in France in order to inflict lacerating self-punishment, others merely adopted the comfortable life of a genteel intellectual. On 23rd Sept in Rouen, Thrale visited the English convent at Gravelines, the 'poor Claires', conversing with the very thin, cold and ill-dressed women through the grate: 'they were all my Countrywomen, & some still retained a strong Provincial Northern Dialect' (the superior was Sister Margaret Teresa alias Vavasour). Then, in great contrast, they visited the splendid French Benedictine Priory of Saint-Louis (Rouen) with a thoroughly modern outlook and its own billiard room, where 'we talked of Literature' (*Journals*, p.81).³⁰ That afternoon, in the library of the Benedictines, the Abbé Roffette 'conversed in Latin with Mr Johnson' (*Journals*, p.82). In another meeting, they 'read, chatted, & criticized and Mr Johnson's Eulogium upon Milton *in Latin* was truly sublime' (*Journals*, p.86). Hester later returned to the English Poor Claires, who, in contrast, were 'miserably involved in Ignorance and Superstition: telling wild Stories' of supposed miracles of St Francis and St Winifred (*Journals*, p.83). She reflected that the superstitious outlook predominated in those lacking a liberal education:

I have now acquired pretty good Notions of the Monastick Life; and have found that these Austerities are never chosen by any Women who have the least Experience of any other Mode of Life ... However some of them must

³⁰ Mrs Thrale promised the Abbess a French translation of Johnson's *Rasselas*. Johnson had been influenced by French moralists such as Pascal and adopted their genres of the essay and moral fable. *Rasselas* was extremely popular on the continent with 13 Italian translations, 18 German, 56 French, as well as translations into Arabic, Bengali and Armenian. See: J. D. Fleeman, *Bibliography of the Writings of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

absolutely be taken ... & forced to warm themselves in Winter, or they would kill themselves by using Severities on their wretched Persons to distinguish themselves by Sanctity from the rest. Can such blind Superstition be pleasing to God? Surely not...' (*Journals*, p.83).

This observation seemed to endorse Hume's view that such religious practices encouraged a slavish mentality.

We could compare Hester's friend Helen Maria Williams, who would visit the Carmelite Convent at Rouen fifteen years later, and wrote: 'Religion which was meant to be a source of Happiness in this world, as well as in the next, wears an aspect of the most gloomy horror'. Williams pretended to be interested in becoming a nun herself merely to obtain titillating details of the austerities. She relayed that the nuns 'slept in their coffins, upon straw, and every morning dug a shovel-full of earth for their graves; that they walked to their devotional exercises on their knees; that when any of their friends visited them, if they spoke they were not suffered to be seen, or if they were seen, they were not suffered to speak; that it was toujours maigre [always a fast], and that they only tasted food twice a day'.³¹ Revolutionary enthusiasm led her to particularly deplore the fostering of lack of self-worth, yet, as a Unitarian, Helen Maria Williams was also careful to discriminate between her own rational dissent and French Enlightenment freethinking by expressing her feelings of religious devotion inspired by sublime scenery, when she visited the Alps for example.³²

³¹ Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790*, ed. Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser (Toronto CA: Broadview, 2001), p.113.

³² See Deborah Kennedy, *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002), p.135.

Thrale's views on monasticism became much more positive the longer she stayed in France, in contrast with the anti-Catholicism of Williams. On 7th Oct 1775, in Paris, Thrale visited a 'Convent of English Nuns', the 'Blue Nuns' or Order of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady in Paris, whose Abbess was Lady Annastatia (sic) Stafford and aristocratic inmates included Lady Lucy Talbot, the Hon. Anne Howard and Lady Anne Stafford (*Journals* p.105). She observed approvingly that Sister Simpson (formerly a maidservant) was treated as an equal by the sisterhood.³³ She visited again on 23rd October and recorded detailed notes on their way of life, questioning in her journal: 'what Happiness can there be in Store for Women, young, friendless, ugly & poor? ... Surely a Convent is their safest Refuge from the Shafts of Poverty & the corrosions of Care' (*Journals* p. 136).

On 16 October Hester had passed a 'delightful day' at the Augustinian Convent of English Nuns [Notre Dame de Sion, Rue des Fossés St Victor], where her friend Mrs Strickland had herself been educated, and where Dr Johnson noted that the Abbess, Mrs Fermor, 'has many books' (*Journals* p.204), and Hester that she was 'Niece to Pope's Belinda' in *Rape of the Lock* (*Journals*, pp.120-1), after whom Frances Brooke's coquette was named in *The History of Emily Montague* (1769).³⁴ Another nun, Miss Canning, a well-travelled, beautiful woman, had 'many Books in her Room on various Subjects & talks of studying Latin in good earnest'. Mrs Thrale reflected: 'I shall surely lose my heart among these Friars & Nuns: there is something so caressive in their manner, so Singular in their Profession, which at once inspires Compassion and Respect' (*Journals*, p.122).

³³ On 23rd October she repeated her visit and noted details on their way of life (*Journals*, pp.134-5).

³⁴ Dr Johnson noted in his journal: 'She knew Pope, and thought him disagreeable' (See *Journals*, pp.173, 204.)

A recent monograph by Tonya J. Moutray, *Refugee Nuns, the French Revolution and British Literature and Culture* (2016), elucidates how a female traveller such as Thrale could aid the cause of these British religious refugees.³⁵ For since the Dissolution of the monasteries, it had been English Catholic women who were responsible for re-establishing abroad the religious orders that had been dissolved by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. In France, they were the particular means of cultural transfer for female tourists like Thrale, and later when, during the revolution, many returned to their homeland. Whereas French Huguenots in Britain had had to integrate, convents abroad provided an institutional structure for the education of priests and British Catholic families until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 and the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850. One of the Thrales' first visits on 18th September had been to the 'College and Schools' (*Journals*, p.72) in St Omer [at the invitation of the government, the clergy of the English college at Douai managed a school there after the Jesuits had been banished]. Pierre-Antoine De La Place was a former pupil who had benefited from tuition in the English language sufficiently to publish *Theatre Anglois* (1746-9), which included a free rendition into French of ten of Shakespeare's plays adapted to French neoclassical taste. His partiality to Shakespeare in the preface provoked Voltaire's wrath.³⁶

'How all these English Convents are supported is to me astonishing', said Mrs Thrale in her journal. 'I can now reckon ten of my own Knowledge for Women only' (*Journals*, p.163). Like Mary Astell, and, later, Elizabeth Montagu's sister, Sarah Scott, in

³⁵ Tonya J. Moutray, *Refugee Nuns, the French Revolution and British Literature and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). Chapter One discusses Hester Thrale's visits to French convents.

³⁶ According to Montagu: 'he prevailed with the Minister not to let him have an imprimatur, so the poor man's trouble was thrown away' (*Blunt*, 1, 329).

her Utopian novel, *Millenium Hall* (1762), Mrs Thrale pondered whether British Protestant woman, too, needed a communal way of life as a viable alternative to marriage. She mused in her journal:

a Well endowed Convent is of all others the most perfect Refuge from Poverty. With regard to Celibacy – it is for the [most part] uncomfortable in the World [only] because it is a Disgrace, which Objection is lost in a Convent; with Regard to Solitude – few Women live in so much Society as four and twenty or thirty [female] acquaintance. ... Obedience is the most objectible (sic) of all the Vows, & that too seems to be made very easy: their Abbess is of their own chusing ... (*Journals*, p.122).

When she departed, Hester sent the 'Miss Canning the Rambler and Mrs Fermor the Rasselas' (*Journals*, p.144). Providing that she might be allowed secular literature, Hester Thrale could see the attraction of the contemplative life.

It might be wondered whether there was perhaps a frisson of sentimental Jacobitism, too.³⁷ Cecilia Strickland (née Townley), herself hailed from a prominent Jacobite family, and showed them the corpse of James II preserved at the convent of English Benedictine monks at Paris (*Journals*, p.97). On 28th Sept the party had visited the Chateau of Saint-Germain-en-Laye which had been the home of the Stuart court. Johnson studied in the library of St Edmund's, the priory of the English Benedictines, noting in his own journal: 'we saw the Library of St Germain. A very noble collection'. (*Journals*, p.185). But, as Jonathan Clark has pointed out, far from Johnson and Mrs

³⁷ Mrs Thrale had noted that nuns in the English Convent of Blue Nuns had conversed about a Mr Hooker who had not been pardoned for his treachery in the year '45 and therefore established his cotton factory at Paris (*Journals*, p.106); when she visited the Gobelines tapestry manufactory she noted that the principal person was a Scot, James Neilson, who ran away like Hooker on Account of the Rebellion' (*Journals*, p.111).

Thrale showing any desire to convert to Catholicism, one of the Benedictine monks whom Samuel Johnson met at Paris, actually converted to Anglicanism.³⁸ James Compton, according to John Nichols, 'renounced the Catholic religion on reading a number of *The Rambler*, and was maintained by Johnson until he could live by teaching the languages'. Clark points out that another Roman Catholic priest, Luke Joseph Hooke, whom Johnson met in Paris, edited the Duke of Berwick's memoirs (the latter had been a Jacobite military commander), but Johnson declined to provide the preface, as he had accepted a pension from George III. Instead, when his Benedictine friends visited London in 1776, Johnson presented them with his *Political Tracts* (1777) which implicitly accepted the Hanoverian dynasty.³⁹ In 1776, Johnson wrote to Mrs Thrale that he had furnished Father Wilkes the Benedictine with letters of introduction to Oxford; he had requested that Rev. Dr. Adams, the Master of Pembroke College, show him the same facilities for study that he had enjoyed in France (*Journals*, p.224). The following year, the Prior of the convent, Father Cowley, visited London, and sent a message via Mrs Thrale from Father Wilkes to Johnson: that 'a cell is always kept ready for your use ... when your cruel Mistress turns you out', and she added: 'when Mr Thrale dismisses me, I am to take refuge among the Austin nuns, & study Virgil with dear Miss Canning' (*Journals*, p.224).

British bluestockings habitually condemned the 'superstition' in French religion, but Hester Thrale increasingly recognized that educated Catholics were immersed in Enlightenment rationalism if only in order to be able to counteract its deleterious

³⁸ J.C. D. Clark, 'Samuel Johnson: The Last Choices, 1775-1784', in *The Politics of Samuel Johnson*, ed. J.C.D. Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.168-226; p.176. For a contrary view on Johnson and Jacobitism, see Donald Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* (Athens Georgia and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

³⁹ J.C. D. Clark, 'Samuel Johnson: The Last Choices, 1775-1784', p.197.

influence on belief in God. She herself resisted the removal of the supernatural from religion, and managed to combine a sceptical intelligence with literal belief in the scriptures. Her growing open-mindedness towards Catholicism, apparent in the French journal, predated her relationship with Gabriel Piozzi and the understandably positive representation of Italian Catholic culture she would project in her pioneering travel book, *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy and Germany*, 2 vols. (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1789).⁴⁰

Ironically, when the French rationalists turned their attention to policing literature, Britons found that it was the turn of their own Bard, along with his ghosts and his fairies, to be attacked by the hugely popular playwright and philosophe, Voltaire, for superstition and lack of stylistic orthodoxy. (Such was his standing, that on 1770, Suzanne Necker's salon had hosted a project to erect a statue of him, the first time in modern history that any living person, other than a reigning monarch, was so honoured.⁴¹) On 9th October 1785, Hester Thrale recounted a literary discussion in Paris: 'Our two Foreigners [a Florentine, Count Manucci, and Hungaraian Bathyan] had a Mind to retail Voltaire's criticisms on Shakespeare. Voltaire has indeed a most prodigious Power over the Minds upon the Continent. Scripture seems to have but few Champions who dare oppose him; Shakespeare ought to have fewer, and Homer is, I fancy, almost given over except by a few solitary scholars' (*Journals*, p.108). The Bible,

⁴⁰ She would write in her diary whilst on her honeymoon tour in Milan on 30th June 1786: 'The Emperor is going (as People say) to build a Protestant Church here, and the Prince of Wales (as People say) is already married to a Roman Catholick Lady: surely the Wall which has parted our Churches so long, is breaking down on every side at last: a Jewish Rabbi of great Eminence is turned Xtian too in our country, the English Newspapers say - Hasten the Time Oh Lord! I beseech thee, when we shall all become one Fold under one Shepherd. Amen.' *Thraliana, The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs Piozzi) 1776-1809*, ed. Katharine C. Balderston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p.649.

⁴¹ Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, p.226.

Shakespeare and Homer all encouraged superstition in the credulous by their portrayal of the supernatural, according to Voltaire, who believed ancient metaphysical writers: 'contain not a word of *truth* till the time of Galileo' [my italics].⁴² The Bard, according to Voltaire, wrote 'monstrous farces ... which they have christened tragedies'; Shakespeare was merely an 'intoxicated savage'.⁴³

In fact, there had been a consensus among secular *philosophes* and advocates of rational religion on both sides of the channel, that didactic and realist fiction should be preferred to folk-tale magic and romance, which might encourage backward-looking superstition in the lower classes, women and children. British literary critics, however, had recently begun to argue that modern literature was impoverished by its lack of some sort of supernatural machinery. John Dennis, in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), posited that the reason classical Greek tragedy was superior to contemporary drama was because it had originated in religious ritual. Joseph Addison, writing on 'The Fairy Way of Writing', suggested that poets should use the supernatural for purely aesthetic purposes, to arouse 'a pleasing kind of horror'.⁴⁴ This suggestion was most fully developed in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of Our Ideas and the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), which explored the psychological effects of awe and fear in responses to art and landscape.⁴⁵ Then in 1762 Richard Hurd, in *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, radically questioned the basis of neo-classicism and revalued the use of the magical by Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser. The realm of the

⁴² 'On printed lies', *The Works of M. de Voltaire: Miscellanies and Others*, tr. T. Smollet, T. Francklin and others (London: J. Newbery et al, 1762), vol.13, pp.238-68, p.239.

⁴³ On the English Tragedy', *The Works of M. de Voltaire*, vol.13, p.134; Preface to *Sémiramis* (1748).

⁴⁴ *The Spectator*, no.419, 1712.

⁴⁵ Later Anna Letitia Aikin would publish 'On the Pleasure derived from Objects of Terror' 1773; and Nathan Drake, 'On Gothic Superstition' (1789).

supernatural, he argued, should not merely be tolerated in the service of Gothic sensationalism or comedy, but positively embraced in the revival of romance forms of poetry and tragic drama. Horace Walpole, took the former approach in *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story* (1769): a *jeu d'esprit* remorselessly mocking Catholic peasants' belief in the supernatural yet utilizing its shock-value to entertain sophisticated readers. But Hurd's suggestion was taken up the very same year in the most sustained and serious attempt to theorize the rehabilitation of the supernatural in literature. This was the startling thesis of pioneering critic, Elizabeth Montagu, that a 'national superstition' or body of folklore, preserved in popular poetry and drama, such as Shakespeare's, should be perceived as a vital moral resource, rather than an artistic blemish or historical curiosity.

The widowed Elizabeth Montagu, sailed to France on 23rd June 1776 and returned on 15th October, accompanied by her young nephew Matthew and godson Montagu Pennington, Mr Blondel their Swiss tutor, and her adopted daughter Miss Gregory (Blunt 1: 311-335). The fourth edition of *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare, compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets, with some remarks upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire* (1769) had been published under her name for the first time that spring: previously it was assumed to be the work of a man. Of it, R.W. Babcock remarked that 'Voltaire's attack on Shakespeare for violating the unities received its most vigorous answer ... from Mrs Montagu'.⁴⁶ Others, such as Johnson, had already countered neoclassical objections to Shakespeare's lack of decorum by Thomas Rymer and Voltaire, but it was Montagu who made the most wide-

⁴⁶ R.W. Babcock, 'The English Reaction against Voltaire's Criticism of Shakespeare', *Studies in Philology* 27:4 (Oct. 1930), pp.609-250, p.615; see also his 'A Preliminary Bibliography of Eighteenth-century Criticism of Shakespeare', *Studies in Philology* 26 extra series 1 (May 1929), pp.58-98.

ranging attack on the French critic: pointing out Voltaire's mistranslations; lack of historical knowledge of Tudor drama; and lack of appreciation for English blank verse; and even suggesting his envy and jealousy of his English forbear. René Huchon writes: 'Never had Voltaire been so frankly, so fully confuted, never had his literary authority been set at naught in a tone so peremptory that it must be heard even in France'.⁴⁷ The *Essay* would not be translated into French until the following year, but already fragments of it were appearing in the *Année Littéraire* and even Elizabeth's hairdresser had heard about it. She wrote to her sister: 'A young man has made a very middling translation of my *Essay*; happily it was not gone to the press, so I bought it of him rather than let him print it. While Voltaire lives, the writers of reputation dare not translate it, and I don't like to have it ill done' (*Blunt*, 1, p.324).

Montagu acknowledged in her *Essay* that the demi-god Shakespeare was suffering the predictable backlash of a sceptical age: against that idolatrous hero-worship of secular authors 'on whom the vanity of their country, and the *superstition* of the times, bestowed an apotheosis founded on pretensions to achievements beyond human capacity' (my italics).⁴⁸ Then, adopting a tactic Wollstonecraft would replicate when writing against Burke in 1790, Montagu implicitly charged her male opponent with effeminacy: so that the revelation that the pseudonymous author was a woman would intensify the sting. For she suggested the French should 'man up': by positing a

⁴⁷ René Huchon, *Mrs Montagu and Her Friends, 1720-1800: A Sketch* (London: John Murray, 1907), p.161.

⁴⁸ *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear, compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets, with some remarks upon the representations of Mons. de Voltaire* (Dublin: H. Sanders, T. Potts, W. Sleater, D. Chamberlain and J. Williams, 1769), pp.1-2. Henceforth abbreviated to *EWGS* and cited in parenthesis in the text. In fact, since the 1760s, the burgeoning interest and controversy over Shakespeare had produced a plethora of print publications, such as dictionaries of quotations, essays, biographies, editions as well as a Shakespeare festival. See: *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Sabor and Paul Yachnin (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

mean between the 'effeminately delicate' French neo-classicists, whose audience 'would not endure so unpleasing an object as a wounded man' *EWGS*, p.35, and the 'audaciously bold' Greek and Roman drama, which reflected the brutal manners of a warrior age. It is on the depiction of warriors – Henry Vth, Macbeth and Julius Caesar – that her book particularly focuses. Voltaire disapproved of historians entertaining their readers with fabulous anecdotes, but Montagu credits the poet Shakespeare with inventing a new genre - historical drama- capable of weighing up martial ideology: 'here [in *Macbeth*]we are admonished to observe the consequences of pride and ambition, the tyrant's dangers and the traitor's fate' (*EWGS*, p.48).⁴⁹ Her insistence on Shakespeare's moral purpose directly contradicted Dr Johnson, who had described Shakespeare as 'much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose'.⁵⁰

As Elizabeth Eger has observed, Montagu was particularly original in her approach to the supernatural.⁵¹ There are 23 instances of the word 'superstition' in the *Essay*. The section 'On the Praeternatural Beings' goes much further than Hurd in welcoming not merely the romance elements of Tudor court masques, but also the representation of popular fables and superstitions believed by the groundlings. In

⁴⁹ Her originality in treating the histories as a distinct genre was praised by Hugh Blair. Montagu had pointed out the plays were divided into tragedies, comedies and histories in the first folio. She also showed that Shakespeare's mingling of comedy and tragedy– criticized harshly by neo-classicists – had achieved an effective balance in the histories. See Fiona Ritchie, 'Elizabeth Montagu: "Shakespeare's poor little critic"?' *Shakespeare Survey* 58, *Writing about Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.72-82.

⁵⁰ *The Plays of Shakespeare, from the text of Samuel Johnson*, 6 vols (Dublin: Thomas Ewing, 1771), 1, Preface, p. xiii.

⁵¹ See Elizabeth Eger, "'Out rushed a Female to protect the Bard": The Bluestocking Defense of Shakespeare', in Pohl and Schellenberg (eds.), *Reconsidering the Bluestockings*, *HLQ* 65:1/2 (2002), 127-51, p. 130. See Also, Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1770-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.227-237. For an example of the misogyny of early twentieth-century views of Montagu's essay, see: Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Shakespeare and Voltaire* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), pp.288-308.

France, Jean-François Ducis's translation of *Hamlet* (1769) had dispensed with the ghost and the gravediggers, and a production of his *Macbeth* in 1784 would have no witches.⁵² However, Montagu pointed out 'how poorly epic poetry subsists on the pure elements of history and philosophy' (*EWGS*, p.114): arguing, on aesthetic grounds, that poets, from the ancients onwards, have found magic, coincidences and spirits aesthetically 'useful': especially deploying what she several times refers to as 'national superstition', or folklore. Allegory, used in moral fables like Johnson's *Rasselas*, was not sufficiently compelling; the particular rather than the general is what catches the imagination. She declares that: 'Shakespear in the dark shades of Gothic barbarism had no resources but in the very phantoms that walked the night of ignorance and superstition' (*EWGS*, p.127). As sophisticated spectators, she noted we moderns may choose whether 'we willingly yield ourselves up to the pleasing delusion, or as critics, examine the merit of the composition' (*EWGS*, p.138). Masterly in his sophisticated deployment of the supernatural: his 'ghosts, fairies, goblins, elves, were as propitious, were as assistant to Shakespeare and gave as much of the sublime, and of the marvellous to his fictions, as nymphs, satyrs, fawns and even the triple Geryon to the works of ancient bards' (*EWGS*, p.117).

Montagu claims that Shakespeare has a particular advantage derived from 'the more direful character of his national superstitions' (*EWGS*, p.127). For, a treasure-house of melancholy and terrible Celtic fables (which of course were a heritage of pre-Norman, and even pre-Saxon Britain) enabled Shakespeare's dramas to keep 'in our minds a sense of our connection with awful and invisible spirits, to whom our most

⁵² See John Pemble, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2005), p.96.

secret actions are apparent, and from whose chastisement innocence alone can defend us' (*EWGS*, p.147). It is likely that Montagu was responding to Voltaire's frequent use of the terms 'Allobroge' or 'Velches' (Gauls or Welsh) to castigate the barbarity of Shakespeare.⁵³ Ironically, the word 'Velches' etymologically may mean either 'French' or 'foreigner', depending on whether the speaker adopts a Roman point of view! But Elizabeth Montagu responded by drawing upon the Whiggish myth of origins: that the British spirit of liberty can be traced back all the way to the barbarian Celts' resistance to Roman invasion and followed by the Welsh Tudors' rejection of Roman Catholicism. In contrast to the elitism of French neoclassical theatre, Montagu endorses Shakespeare's employment of the resources of folklore in popular culture which kept Britons in touch with their mixed Anglo-Saxon and Celtic heritage.

Lastly, unlike Dr Johnson, who thought Shakespeare's natural disposition was for comedy,⁵⁴ Montagu felt his tragedies – with their problematizing of the nature of evil and suffering – to be powerful allies to religion, when traditional belief was beset by modern scepticism. To Montagu, Shakespeare was 'one of the greatest moral philosophers that ever lived' (*EWGS*, p.51) and she especially defended the communal nature of the drama. Representing popular superstitions, popular tumult and 'the manners of the whole people' (*EWGS*, p.56) was essential if stories drawing on legendary material were to resonate with everyone: the vulgar as well as the educated. The idea of his being primitive and extravagant comes from library connoisseurs, 'not in the street, the camp or village' (*EWGS*, p.15).

⁵³ His use of these words rather than 'Gothic' is noted by Dale Townshend, in the excellent article 'Gothic and the Ghost of Hamlet' in *Gothic Shakespeare*, ed. John Drakakis and Dale Townshend (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp.60-97, p.65.

⁵⁴ *The Plays of Shakespeare, from the text of Samuel Johnson*, 6 vols (Dublin: Thomas Ewing, 1771), 1, Preface, p. xi.

By coincidence, it was while Elizabeth Montagu was in Paris that Voltaire's resentment at the growing respect of the French for Shakespeare came to a crisis. The first two volumes of Pierre Letourneur's translation of Shakespeare's plays into French had appeared under royal patronage, prefaced with an epistle to the king which boasted that 'till now the father of the English stage had never been shown to the eyes of the nation, except in a ridiculous travesty'.⁵⁵ Voltaire was incensed at Letourneur's preface which took the English playwright as the only model of true tragedy. In a letter to d'Argental of 19th July, he declared:

Il s'appelle le Dieu du Théâtre, il sacrifie tous les Français à son Idole comme on sacrifiait autrefois des cochons à Cérès ... ce qu'il y a d'affreux c'est que le monstre a un parti en France, et, pour comble de calamité et d'horreur, c'est moi qui autrefois parlai le premier de ce *Shakespeare*; c'est moi qui le premier montrai aux Français quelques perles que j'avais trouvées dans son énorme fumier.⁵⁶

Voltaire's letter was read to the Academy on the festival of St Louis on Sunday 25 August in Mrs Montagu's presence. His obvious pride at having introduced Shakespeare to France jostles uneasily with his imagery of superstitious savages sacrificing civilised French drama on the primitive altar of a monstrous Gothic idol. Montagu realised he

⁵⁵ Huchon, *Mrs Montagu and Her Friends, 1720-1800*, p.179.

⁵⁶ Letter to D'Argental, July 19th, 1776. Voltaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 96 (Lyon: J. B. Delamollière, 1792), p.179. A contemporary English translation was: 'He calls him the God of the Theatre, he sacrifices all the French dramatists without exception to his idol as they formerly used to sacrifice hogs to Ceres. ... the worst of it is that the monster has a party in France, and what is peculiarly unfortunate, 'twas I that formerly first talked of this *Shakespeare*; 'twas I that first showed the French some pearls which I found in his enormous dunghill'. *Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics and Literature for the Year 1776*, Fourth edition (London: Dodsley, 1788), pp.190-1.

was probably especially irked that Letourneur's translation would allow readers to observe similarities between his own *Zaire* and Shakespeare's *Othello*, the influence of *Julius Caesar* on *La Mort de César* and Shakespearean aspects of *Mahomet*. She wittily responded that 'ce malheureux fumier avait engraisée une terre ingrate' [this unfortunate manure had fattened a thankless earth].⁵⁷ Her bon mot was much repeated, so much so that it found its way into the *General Evening Post*, *London Chronicle*, *New Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser* for 28-30 November 1776, following the relevant excerpts from Voltaire's letter, which itself was published in its entirety in English the following year, so great was the furore.⁵⁸

Mrs Montagu wrote to Mrs Vesey:

I must do that justice to the Academy and Audience, they seem'd in general displeas'd at the paper read. I was ask'd by an Academician if I would answer this piece of Voltaires, and [he] did not doubt that I would do it very well. I said Mr. L'abbe Arnaud had done much better than I could, in the praises he had given to original genius, and the benefits arising from the study of them; that I remembered 60 years ago in the same academy Old Homer had met with the same treatment with Shakespear; that they now did justice to Homer, I did not doubt but that they would do so to Shakespear; for that great Geniuses's Survived those who set up to be their Criticks or more absurdly their Rivals.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Huchon, *Mrs Montagu and Her Friends, 1720-1800*, p. 194.

⁵⁸ *General Evening Post* 28-30 November 1776, also *London Chronicle*, *New Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser* same date. The following year was published an English translation of Voltaire's letter: *A Letter from M. Voltaire to the French Academy: Containing an Appeal to that Society on the merits of the English Dramatic Poet Shakespear: Read before the Academy on the Day of St Louis 1776* (London: J. Bew, 1778).

⁵⁹ *Blunt*, I, p.331.

The translator Jean-Baptists-Antoine Suard said to Mrs Montagu: 'Je crois, Madame, que vous êtes un peu fâchée de ce que vous venez d'entendre'; she replied suavely: 'Moi, Monsieur! Point du tout. Je ne suis pas amie de monsieur Voltaire'.⁶⁰

The following year Johnson's friend, Giuseppe Baretti, who had translated the tragedies of Pierre Corneille into Italian blank verse, now joined in the censure of Voltaire, publishing *Discours sur Shakespeare et sur M. de Voltaire* (1777) which was written in French and aimed at the French-influenced nations where neo-classicism had a stronger hold than in Britain. The same year, a French translation of Montagu's *Essay* appeared. It was well received in the French periodical press, though her treatment of Corneille and Racine was thought harsh: to which Voltaire added the charge of unfemininity, in his preface to *Irène*, because Montagu had reproved 'the constant use made by Racine of the passion of love'!⁶¹

Orthodoxy and rationalism were the rule-book of French male critics, the neo-classical clerisy, who believed that the idolization of Shakespeare was backward-looking, and that Shakespeare's mixture of modes and bizarre plots were beyond the pale. Yet Elizabeth Montagu's defence of 'Gothic' drama, like Hester Thrale's tolerance of Roman Catholicism, was not in fact retrograde or nostalgic. Rather, both responses evidence the bluestockings' secure faith in modernity: only when the Jacobite threat was well and truly past, the union of England and Scotland cemented and the Hanoverian dynasty securely established could fear of a barbaric, schismatic and

⁶⁰ I believe, Madam, you are a little angry about what you just heard. Me, sir! Not at all. I am not a friend of Mr. Voltaire'. Ibid.

⁶¹ Huchon, *Mrs Montagu and Her Friends, 1720-1800*, p.202. The *Essay* was translated into German (1771) and Italian (1828). Letourneur wrote to Montagu on her return, and in 1779 Lorenzo Pignotti addressed some verses to her on her *Essay*. See: Blunt, 1, p.338.

superstitious past be assuaged and its 'Gothic' religious and literary culture coolly reassessed.

Hester Thrale would continue to be a Protestant fascinated with Catholic culture: marrying her second husband, the Italian musician Gabriele Piozzi, in both an Anglican and a Catholic service. She would reside for a time in Italy, where she edited *The Florence Miscellany* (1785), a multilingual multi-authored collection of poetry which celebrated the particularity of the culture of Tuscany, in defiance of the Austrian Emperor's attempts to modernize and centralize religious and regional practices. Thrale and Montagu both became writers who were especially willing to challenge the rationalist orthodoxy which had replaced compulsory Christianity. Perhaps they believed with Francis Bacon: 'There is superstition in avoiding superstition, when men think they do best when they go furthest from the superstition formerly received'.⁶²

⁶² *The Works of Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam, Viscount St. Alban and Lord High Chancellor of England*, 10 vols (London: F.C. and J. Rivington et al, 1819), 2, p.293.