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## **Postmodernism and Its Precursors**

This chapter examines parallels between eighteenth-century literary practice and late twentieth-century aesthetic theory. Focusing on two particular case studies, Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier's *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable* (1754), and Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), it argues that at two crucial moments of its early history the novel is preoccupied with formal and generic issues which were to recur two centuries later, in different forms, in the predominant mode of late twentieth-century art and culture. In doing so it is not attempting to suggest that postmodernism can be traced to these two texts, or to the eighteenth century more broadly, nor that there is any kind of continuous line of stylistic influence between the two periods. The aim instead is to draw attention to potential points of connection and intersection, in the belief that, in the words of Thomas Docherty, 'it is increasingly apparent that many of the debates around the issue of the postmodern not only have their sources in eighteenth-century controversies, but also recapitulate those earlier debates and reconsider them: the late twentieth century is contaminated by the late eighteenth'.<sup>i</sup> To investigate these earlier debates as they are represented in two eighteenth-century texts is not to award either the dubious honour of being 'postmodern', but rather to attempt to shed light on each work's rich complexity and contested place within its own literary culture.<sup>ii</sup>

One reason why the eighteenth-century novel in particular is often singled out by those seeking precursors of postmodernism is its self-conscious experimentation with the material form and layout of the page. This is one of the cornerstones of postmodern practice; in Brian McHale's words, 'postmodernist novels foreground the

materiality of the book in a multitude of ingenious ways, from Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and Brooke-Rose's *Thru to Milorad Pavic's Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984), Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and hypertext fictions'.<sup>iii</sup> As many critics have observed, early novels are no less ingenious in this respect. Pointing to the 'extraordinary visual diversity' of the eighteenth-century novel, Janine Barchas, for example, claims that in the early decades of its formation the genre 'plays its own games of havoc with the form and meaning of the printed word'.<sup>iv</sup> She claims that as a result of the opportunity afforded to this 'new species of writing' to 'redefine both audience expectation and print convention', and aided by 'the fluidity of publishing practices' at the time, 'writers of prose fiction during roughly the first half of the eighteenth century experimented broadly (and, broadly speaking, every publication was an experiment) with the material presentation of the novel as well as its narrative content'. Highlighting a number of early eighteenth-century writers, publishers and printers who 'emerge as particularly prone to graphic experimentality', including Edmund Curll, Delarivier Manley and Eliza Haywood, Barchas urges renewed 'consideration of the astounding graphic self-consciousness and experimentality that was common across much of the new species of writing, from "high" to "low" and peripheral to mainstream'.<sup>v</sup>

For Barchas, as for many others, 'the apotheosis of this generic experimentation with form is, of course, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67)'. Describing how Sterne 'uses both graphic design and paratexts to test the boundaries of the emerging genre itself, rearranging the conventional ingredients of an eighteenth-century book to challenge readerly expectation', Barchas, like others before her, sees *Tristram Shandy* as publicizing the early novel's formal experimentation rather than inventing it: 'In a

sense, Sterne's work records how far the novel has progressed by the late 1750s and early 1760s; the success of *Tristram Shandy* may, in part, be attributed to the preexistence of a novel readership that had been schooled to "read" the visual components of the genre as part of its text'.<sup>vi</sup> It is not just in its graphic design and visual experimentation that *Tristram Shandy* is often seen as a precursor of the postmodern. The essays in the 1996 volume *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, edited by David Pierce and Peter de Voogd, for example, propose a series of provocative connections between Sterne's works and those of canonical postmodern writers, such as Rushdie (87-98) and Kundera (147-156), covering areas as varied as autobiography (123-132), psychoanalysis (179-196) and physics (109-121). An overriding theme is Sterne's use of language; as Pierce puts it in the Introduction, 'the postmodern interest in the free play of language, in the gaps and fissures in a text, in a concern with fragments, in what is involved in Derridean deferral or Sternean delay, in the impossibility of full presence, in the open work – all these have their place in the essays which follow'.<sup>vii</sup> Many of the contributors implicitly endorse Larry McCaffery's claim that *Tristram Shandy* is 'a thoroughly postmodern work in every respect but the period in which it is written'.<sup>viii</sup>

Yet elsewhere other critics are more careful about making such an identification. A valuable note of caution is struck by Thomas Keymer, who complains that the 'widespread contemporary sense of *Tristram Shandy* as the defining work of its immediate day, tied intimately into the writing of a culture it both reflects and influences, is rarely registered in modern criticism'.<sup>ix</sup> Keymer outlines two competing critical traditions, both of which 'present the work as essentially an anachronism'. While one emphasises Sterne's debt to a long and learned tradition of Renaissance

satire, the other, emphasising the ‘deconstructive sophistication’ of his writing, regards him as ‘an honorary modern’. Keymer observes of this second approach that ‘by defining him instead as a writer of proto-modernist or proto-postmodern fiction (the identikit yoking of ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodern’ endemic in this approach says much about its broad-brush manner), criticism can restore him to his proper place as our own contemporary’. Keymer is critical of both camps, arguing that ‘whether one finds in the text a disruptive sophistication that looks forward to postmodern fiction or a tissue of learned-wit recoveries that harks back to Renaissance satire, *Tristram Shandy* can all too easily seem to escape its time’. Paying attention to the work’s ‘contemporaneous literary hinterland’, which includes ‘a close engagement with the novel genre in the crucial period of its formation’, his aim is to ‘to reinsert Sterne’s writing into its rich and heterogenous cultural moment’. To do so is not, however, to dismiss the insights of either approach, as Keymer is at pains to stress: ‘Although I dispute identifications of *Tristram Shandy* as a solitary postmodern anticipation or a Renaissance Scriblerian throwback, I do indeed see it as heavily conditioned by satirical traditions that culminate with Swift, and I also see it as a self-conscious exercise in metafiction’.<sup>x</sup>

Keymer’s measured treatment of Sterne’s connection to the postmodern, and that of *Tristram Shandy* in particular, provides a useful model for the discussion of other potential precursors. While dismissing the commonly-held view of the text as a ‘solitary postmodern anticipation’, he is nevertheless sensitive to the ways in which it includes, even embodies, techniques which are characteristic of postmodern writing, such as self-conscious experimentation with language. To investigate such techniques is not however to draw up a cursory list of postmodern features and tick them off as

one reads the eighteenth-century counterpart. Rather, Keymer is concerned to stress the importance of considering *Tristram Shandy* on its own terms, and in its own ‘rich and heterogenous cultural moment’. The rest of this essay will attempt to proceed along similar lines; situating the texts discussed in their literary-historical moments while also being aware that the debates they raise are germane to other periods too.

One crucial concern of the postmodern is with the ways in which the world we live in relates to the world(s) of the fictional text. McHale has observed that while ‘modernist fiction’s dominant was epistemological, knowledge-oriented; postmodernist fiction’s is ontological, being-oriented’.<sup>xii</sup> While modernist fiction was preoccupied with consciousness, this is relegated to the background, McHale claims, in postmodernist fiction, which ‘rather foregrounds the world itself as an object of reflection and contestation through the use of a range of devices and strategies. Postmodernism multiplies and juxtaposes worlds; it troubles and volatizes them’. Furthermore, according to McHale, while most fictional experiments generally vary individuals, while ‘leaving world-models intact’, postmodern fiction not only experiments with individuals and with world models, ‘but beyond that it experiments as well with the very process of world-modeling’; in other words, ‘postmodernist fiction also foregrounds the category of world by laying bare the operations by which narrative worlds are constructed’. This exposure can take a variety of forms, McHale claims, arguing that at its extreme ‘the ultimate gesture of exposing the nature and limits of a world involves drawing the veil of fiction aside to reveal the material basis of all world-building – or rather its material bases, in the plural, for there is more than one way to think about the ultimate ontological grounding of a fictional world’.<sup>xiii</sup>

In Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier's *The Cry: A Dramatic Fable* (1754) it is the curtain of theatrical performance rather than the veil of fiction which is often drawn aside.<sup>xiii</sup> The work is presented in the form of a play script, with characters including Portia, the heroine, Una, her wise mentor and spiritual guide, and The Cry, a group of sceptical, often rowdy observers, speaking to each other as if they were on stage. Discussing 'the amateur theatrics' of the mid-eighteenth-century novel's 'graphic self-presentation', Barchas notes that Fielding and Collier's 'experimental novel' 'most remarkably expresses the way that the eighteenth-century novel usurps the printed conventions of drama'.<sup>xiv</sup> It is not just the work's dramatic layout which leads to it frequently being described as 'experimental'. In a critique of Northrop Frye's universalizing critical methodology, and his reliance on myths and archetypes, John Paul Hunter, for example, describes how this 'rich and complex but highly unorthodox novel' 'moves easily among different modes of discourse and organizational strategies, sometimes affecting to be more of a closet drama than narrative and sometimes appearing to be an essay or argument – now being hortatory, now meditative, now telling a broad cultural story of majority tastes and modes, now following a highly unconventional contemporary woman through her engaging but sad tribulations as a quietly rebellious liberated individual free of societal prejudice and restraint'.<sup>xv</sup> Discussing how the text 'resists allegorization, interpretation in terms of honored precedents, application, or ready moralizing', Hunter decides that 'like most novels of the early 1750s, *The Cry* is consciously experimental in the powerful definitional wake of *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones*'.<sup>xvi</sup>

Hunter's mention of *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones* illustrates the common critical tendency to view *The Cry* through the lens of the rivalry between the two leading novelists of

the mid-eighteenth century. In his discussion of Sarah Fielding's role in the relationship between her brother Henry and her 'principal literary advisor' Samuel Richardson from the late 1740s, Peter Sabor, for example, briefly mentions the latter's assistance with *The Cry*, as part of his overall argument that 'far from acting as a bridge between the rival novelists, as has often been suggested, Sarah Fielding served, unwittingly, to drive them ever further apart'.<sup>xvii</sup> When Fielding's own work is given attention, these two male novelists have continued to loom large, with critics frequently associating her style with one or the other, as Emily Friedman observes: 'because her opus does not quite fall into either the more satiric tradition of her brother Henry or the written-to-the-moment epistolary style of her friend Samuel Richardson, her work has suffered from misunderstanding and neglect. When it has not, her work is often discussed as moving between these two poles, combining qualities of both or leaning towards one man's influence or the other's'.<sup>xviii</sup> As Friedman rightly points out, 'this placement is inaccurate given her experimental techniques – the criticism, translation, didacticism, and genre-bending that cannot simply be understood as a conflation of Richardsonian and Henry Fieldingesque novelistic practices'.<sup>xix</sup> Another experimental technique found throughout *The Cry*, the 'laying bare the operations by which narrative worlds are constructed' which McHale identifies as key to postmodern experimentation, further establishes it as a significant mid-eighteenth-century text, deserving of critical attention on its own terms.

The Introduction to the work sets out to justify its use of the dramatic form. The first-person plural pronoun is used throughout, as for example when it is observed that 'instead of the common divisions of books and chapters, we beg to be indulged in



borrowing from the stage the name of scenes'.<sup>xx</sup> This authorial 'we' defends 'the method of making the principal character the speaker', arguing that 'it must be allow'd that characters should be animated to gain our attention', and claiming that 'the nearer things are brought to dramatic representation, the more you are acquainted with the personages, and interested in the event of the story' (*The Cry*, I, 17). While leaving it up to 'future critics' to decide 'whether this method be really the best or the worst', the authorial voice declares that 'we found it our easiest manner of conveying our thoughts and executing our purpose' (*The Cry*, I, 17). Yet at the same time this 'we' indicates that it will remain as 'an audience to hear the stories of those who shall be brought before them' (*The Cry*, I, 15), and so will be able to intervene in the on-stage action at strategic moments: 'Altho' we have borrow'd from the stage the name of scenes, and generally its dialogue, yet have we kept the privilege of being our own chorus, in order not only to point out the behaviour of our actors, which for want of a real stage representation could sometimes not otherwise be understood; but to express or relate some things which are not proper to be spoken by our principal characters' (*The Cry*, I, 16).

While the use of 'we' may partly reflect the probable joint authorship of *The Cry*, more important than is the collective persona that it constructs, able to comment on and assist the dramatic action at any stage. This choral voice is especially prominent in the 'Prologues' to each of the work's five 'Parts'. The Prologue to the first Part announces, for example, that 'our assembly being now form'd, not by ourselves, but by the good-will and spritely imagination of our readers, we have nothing to do but to draw up the curtain (our prologue being ended) and to discover our chief personage on the stage' (*The Cry*, I, 24-5), while the Prologue to the fourth Part introduces

another important character: ‘Our assembly being again met, we implore as at first your assistance, gentle reader, that by your imagination you would add another personage to those with whom you are already brought acquainted. Her name Cylinda. Her character – such as will appear by her discourse, and the relation of her past life’ (The Cry, II, 249-50). The Prologue to the second Part illustrates the chorus’s role in revealing information which is ‘not proper to be spoken by our principal characters’, introducing the history of the family of Nicanor, with various members of which the heroine becomes intimately connected: ‘the matters of fact contained in the following history, our Portia could not with any propriety relate, had they been all within her knowledge: but concerning most of the circumstances she was perfectly ignorant’ (The Cry, I, 201-2). At other points the chorus can present details which are known, but not spoken by any of the characters, such as Portia’s ‘real thoughts’ when a member of the Cry condemns female learning: ‘but these were only the thoughts which pass’d within Portia’s mind, for she deem’d their rude mirth not worthy an answer’ (The Cry, III, 111). The result of such interventions is a sense of a guiding group presence hovering in the wings, ready to step in at any moment.

The drama is further complicated by the need for the viewpoints of characters who cannot realistically be on stage at a particular point to be represented. This results in characters having on occasion to impersonate the voices of others. When Portia feels she has to present the feelings of Melantha, the young lady who first introduces her to Nicanor’s family, she turns to her spiritual advisor for guidance: ‘Shall I, O Una, relate only my own observations, or may I be permitted to suppose Melantha present, and speaking; by which means, in a more lively manner, I could paint all her sensations, and throw into action every motion of her heart?’ (The Cry, II, 143-4).

Una gives her blessing, declaring that ‘it is the subject matter itself I seek; and to cavil about the manner of conveying it, is trifling and unnecessary. Take therefore that method, Portia, by which, in the most lively and intelligible manner, you can paint the real history of Melantha’s mind’ (The Cry, II, 144). Portia then proceeds ‘in the assumed character of Melantha’, revealing ‘the secret springs’ which led her friend to believe herself in love with various members of the family, including finally Ferdinand, who Portia is in love with herself (The Cry, II, 144). Her portrayal (which is resumed several scenes later) is so convincing that the Cry become confused about who is actually speaking: ‘The minds of the Cry now all sympathized so strongly with the raptures of Melantha for this compleat triumph over Portia, that they could admit no other image. They fairly forgot in whose person Portia had been speaking; they imagined Melantha present before their eyes. They declared that it was ever their opinion, that Portia would at last come to the highest disgrace. They pityed poor Melantha for entertaining such a treacherous guest, and abused Portia as if she was absent in the most virulent terms they could invent’ (The Cry, II, 209-210). Portia is taken aback by this, and has to have it explained by Una: ‘Don’t you perceive, Portia, that the Cry have all drank of the Circean cup; they are intoxicated by the pleasure of supposing it possible for Melantha to have the power of treating you in such a manner. They are so drunk with their own inclinations, that they have literally lost their senses, and are metaphorically all standing upon their heads’ (The Cry, II, 210). Perhaps intoxicated herself by the success of her acting skills, Portia later impersonates the Cry themselves (The Cry, III, 160-1), and gives Ferdinand’s account of his complicated deception of her in order to prove her love in his own words, having again sought permission from her mentor: ‘Una told Portia that she would on

no occasion refuse her the liberty of taking her own method, provided she was but clear and intelligible in her narration' (The Cry, III, 250).

The Cry thus evinces a pervasive concern with how its narrative is to be presented. Its characters debate the advantages and disadvantages of the dramatic form in which they find themselves, with Portia often turning to her spiritual mentor Una for guidance on whether her chosen method of telling her story is acceptable. Any attempt to delineate the various voices in the work is complicated by the individual voices that emerge within the Cry itself, as well as by the ability of characters on occasion to ventriloquize others. When read free from the Richardson/ Fielding rivalry which continues to dominate much modern criticism, The Cry demonstrates the diversity and innovativeness of the novel in the early 1750s; its ability to incorporate a wide range of genres while reflecting skilfully and wittily on the process. Fielding and Collier's 'new dramatic fable' is self-consciously experimental throughout, especially in the sense proposed by McHale; constantly lifting the curtain on its own mechanics, and the 'operations by which [its] narrative worlds are constructed'.

The pervasive presence of the collective authorial voice in The Cry relates to another preoccupation of late twentieth-century postmodernism which is also the subject of much debate in the eighteenth century, particularly in the novel. Quoting Ronald Sukenick's observation that "there's a writer sitting there writing the page", McHale comments that 'the author, already a foregrounded presence in modernist *Künstlerromane*, intrudes even more aggressively in works of postmodernist metafiction (Beckett, Barth, Fowles, Brooke-Rose) and surfiction (Sukenick,

Federman, Major), thrusting herself or himself onstage, visibly seizing control of the story and its world'.<sup>xxi</sup> In the earliest stages of its formation, the novel is similarly dominated by the intrusive figure of the author, whether it be in the form of supposedly 'editorial' prefaces, obsessive revisions, or first-person meta-narrative reflections. The remaining part of this essay will demonstrate how one particular late eighteenth-century text foregrounds the role of the author by presenting a number of author figures, each of whom, in different ways, is challenged and undermined.

Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) purports to lay before the public the letters of the Rajah Zããrmilla, Chief of the Province of Kuttaher in Hindoostan. These were supposedly written in the 1770s and early 1780s, when much of Hindoostan was under British rule. Zããrmilla corresponds with a fellow Chief Mããndããra, who has been banished to a neighbouring Province. Zããrmilla comes into contact with an English officer named Captain Percy, and is impressed by his depiction of Christianity, and English customs. His curiosity piqued by their discussions, he undertakes to travel to England. In the second volume his letters report on his voyage and the characters he meets when he arrives. Zããrmilla's naïve impressions of English society allow for much satire against the fashionable manners of the day, though it is not always clear where exactly the target of the satire lies.

Critics have agreed that due to its mixture of genres *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* is a very difficult text to classify. Pamela Perkins and Shannon Russell note that 'part anti-jacobin satire, like *Modern Philosophers*, part oriental fable, it is an ambitious piece of writing, one in which Hamilton engages directly with a range of

the major issues of her day, from colonialism to the “new” philosophy to the present state of literature to female education’.<sup>xxii</sup> Discussing the text’s ‘multi-generic layers’ Claire Grogan observes that it has been deemed ‘variously a eulogy, a religious satire, a political satire, an Oriental tale and most recently as a miscellany’.<sup>xxiii</sup> Grogan’s own view is that the work, with its ‘heightened, factual, scholarly cultural analysis of an Eastern culture or community’s behaviour, history, manners and customs’, should be regarded, at least in part, as an ‘Orientalist study’, the result of the author’s close relationship with and admiration for her brother Charles, a member of the East India Company and Oriental scholar and enthusiast, who had died in 1792 while on leave in England. For Grogan, his sister’s work ‘is a rethinking, a rewriting and reimagining of her brother Charles’s experience and learning’. As Grogan observes, the work’s factual credentials are enhanced by ‘various scholarly trappings’, including extensive footnotes, fifty-two page ‘Preliminary Dissertation’, and five page ‘Glossary’.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The categorization of *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* as an Oriental study thus raises questions about Elizabeth Hamilton’s authorship of the work, as well as broader issues concerning the outlook for the female writer in the 1790s. Her extensive demonstration of her scholarship, drawing not only on her brother’s work, but that of other members of the Royal Asiatic Society, and her deliberate blurring of the line between fact and fiction, carried political connotations in the contentious gender debates of the 1790s. While most of the contemporary reviews broadly praised the book, the conservative *Monthly Review* took Hamilton to task on several factual matters, asserting for example that ‘in assigning the Barampooter as the eastern limit of Hindostan, she cuts off some of its richest provinces; in bestowing on its antient government a federative form, she has embraced too readily a most questionable

hypothesis; and in exempting the Hindoos from all hatred or contempt of other nations, she has totally mistaken the genius and character of the sons of Bramha' (Hindoo, 314). The reviewer concludes that 'Miss H. is less happy in her descriptions of Hindoo manners, than in her delineations of scenes at home, where she is better acquainted' (Hindoo, 315). As Grogan notes, the insistence by Elizabeth Benger, Hamilton's earliest biographer, that her subject wrote "'without affecting to become a Persian scholar'", similarly 'plays down Elizabeth's competence or right to discuss Oriental matters'.<sup>xxv</sup> Some contemporary critics have implicitly endorsed this view, emphasising Charles's role in the creation of the work at the expense of Elizabeth's. Gary Kelly, for example, comments that 'its material, viewpoint, and political purpose show the influence of her brother, as reflected in his published Orientalist work', and refers to 'Hamilton's novelization of her brother's Orientalist project'.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Hamilton's own ambivalence and anxiety at what Grogan describes as 'entering this masculine sphere of writing'<sup>xxvii</sup> is strongly apparent in the 'Preliminary Dissertation', in which the author somewhat nervously defends her 'short sketch, imperfect as it is' of the state of Hindoostan: 'Adequate, however, to the purpose of elucidation, as it may be thought by some readers, it may be censured by others, as a presumptuous effort to wander out of that narrow and contracted path, which they have allotted to the female mind' (Hindoo, 72). Anticipating this objection on the grounds of her gender, she feels obliged to give 'a succinct account of the motives which led her to the examination of a subject, at one time very universally talked of, but not often very thoroughly understood' (Hindoo, 72), and describes how she became familiar with 'the names of the most celebrated of Orientalists' and 'the productions of their writers' (Hindoo, 73). Without mentioning her brother and his death specifically, she

laments that ‘had it not been for a fatal event, which transformed the cheerful haunt of domestic happiness into the gloomy abode of sorrow, and changed the energy of Hope into the listlessness of despondency, a competent knowledge of the language of the originals would likewise have been acquired’ (Hindoo, 73). Renewed study eventually relieved her of her grief, as ‘the mind, by degrees, took pleasure in reverting to subjects which were interwoven with the ideas of past felicity’ (Hindoo, 73). The result is the work to follow, the letters of the Rajah, which ‘are now presented to the world, whose decision upon their merit, is looked forward to with timid hope, and determined resignation’ (Hindoo, 73).

A counterpart of this suffering, timid, yet determined author figure appears within *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* itself. Near the end of the second volume Zããrmilla finally has his long-awaited meeting with the sister of his late English friend Captain Percy. Hearing that she is staying on a farm near to the home of his current hosts, the Denbeigh family, he discovers her poetry before he meets her, written on ‘some leaves of ivory, fastened by a silver clasp’ (Hindoo, 300). Shortly after reading one of Charlotte’s melancholy poems, made partially illegible by tears, Zããrmilla encounters the poet herself, sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree: ‘her countenance wore the traces of melancholy, but the manner in which she received the salutations of my friends, shewed that her heart was still capable of the most animated affection’ (Hindoo, 301). She returns with him to the Denbeigh family home, where the grandfather of the family, Mr Denbeigh, proceeds to give her advice on how to rouse herself from her grief and depression. His suggestion is that she seek to instruct and amuse others by seeking to publish the products of her cultivated mind, to which Charlotte replies, “‘Ah! Sir, [...] you know how female writers are looked down



upon. The women fear, and hate; the men ridicule, and dislike them” (Hindoo, 303). Mr Denbeigh’s response offers a somewhat qualified justification of the place of the female writer, admitting ““this may be the case with the mere mob””, but insisting that ““if the simplicity of your character remains unchanged – if the virtues of your heart receive no alloy from the vanity of authorship; trust me, my dear Charlotte, you will not be less dear to any friend that is deserving of your love, for having employed your leisure hours in a way that is both innocent and rational”” (Hindoo, 303). This is close to Hamilton’s cautious defence of her authorship in the ‘Preliminary Dissertation’, which similarly emphasizes how the exertion of her rational powers has helped her to overcome her grief, while maintaining her femininity. The connections between Charlotte and Elizabeth are indeed so strong that Benger describes the character as the author’s ‘prototype’.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Yet Charlotte Percy is not the only female author figure within the text. Zããrmilla is nervous about being introduced in London to the well-known philosopher Miss Ardent, who his friend Doctor Severan has attacked, criticising her attempts to demonstrate her ““masculine understanding””, and claiming that she ““enforces her opinions in so dictatorial a manner, as renders her equally the object of dread and dislike to the generality of her acquaintance”” (Hindoo, 220-1). When he does finally meet her Zããrmilla is pleasantly surprised, finding this ‘learned Lady’ ‘not quite so formidable as I had at first apprehended’ (Hindoo, 226). He reports to Mããndããra that ‘you may believe it impressed me with a very high idea of the superior powers of Miss Ardent’s mind, when I found she had paid particular attention to every thing connected with the history or literature of India’ (Hindoo, 227). This suggests that she could be another proxy for the author herself. However, Miss Ardent’s claims to

learning are somewhat undermined by her association with the vacuous philosophers who gather at Ardent-Hall, and her particular fondness for the theories of Doctor Sceptic. She asks Zããrmilla ““What will your friends in India think, when you tell them, that sparrows may be changed into honey-bees?””, declaring that ““according to the arguments of the young philosopher, I see no reason, why, by a proper course of education, a monkey may not be a Minister of State, or a goose, Lord Chancellor, of England”” (Hindoo, 266).

The main author figure within the text is of course male; its chief letter-writer. After reporting Mr Denbeigh’s encouragement of Charlotte, Zããrmilla reveals that this ‘venerable old man’ has facilitated his efforts as an author too: ‘he has been particularly solicitous to know my opinions concerning all that I have seen in England; and expecting to reap advantage from his observations, I have put into his hands a copy of all my letters to you’ (Hindoo, 303). According to Zããrmilla, ‘Mr Denbeigh was much entertained with my account of the philosophers, but said, “if it was known in England, people would think that I intended to turn philosophy itself into ridicule”’, which provokes him to exclaim that ‘thus it is that the designs of authors are mistaken! Perhaps this is not the only passage in my letters that might, to an English reader, appear to be absurd’ (Hindoo, 303). Zããrmilla decides that ‘happily they will never be exposed to any eye, save that of my friend’, declaring his ‘astonishment at the number of new books that are every year produced in England’, and his fear of the ‘formidable phalanx of Reviewers’ (Hindoo, 304). Yet despite this apparent unwillingness to publish, later in the same letter he sums up the entirety of his account of his travels to Mããndããra, anticipating his response in a way that suggests he is also imagining the lessons that a wider, public readership should draw:

‘Thou wilt observe, that to extend our knowledge of the world, is but to become acquainted with new modes of pride, vanity, and folly. Thou wilt perceive that in Europe, as in Asia, an affected singularity often passes for superior wisdom; bold assertion for truth; and sickly fastidiousness for true delicacy of sentiment’ (Hindoo, 306).

Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah is thus supposedly the result of Zããrmilla’s letters somehow finding their way into public notice after being placed in the hands of Mr Denbeigh, and then being edited and appended with scholarly apparatus by a figure whose biography closely resembles that of Elizabeth Hamilton. Within the work, one author figure appears to express Hamilton’s own anxieties about female authorship, while another is used to suggest the potential dangers of female learning. This somewhat confusing picture expresses well the uncertain position of the woman writer in the fevered print culture debates of the 1790s. For a moderate like Hamilton, keen to promote female education and learning, but skeptical of the excesses of the radical New Philosophy, as embodied by such controversial women as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, negotiating a path through this minefield is a delicate matter. The multiple figures of the author in her fiction are thus subtly hedged via layers of qualification and questioning.

1754 and 1796 represent two key moments of experimentation and tension in the novel’s early history. The Cry and Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah demonstrate the genre’s flexibility, as well as its ability to engage with crucial debates concerning form and politics. Viewing such complex eighteenth-century engagements through the lens of postmodernism, employing its insights and terminology as

appropriate, is not to relegate any text to the status of ‘solitary postmodern anticipation’ which Keymer identifies in much criticism of *Tristram Shandy*. Instead it can serve to highlight with particular acuity those aspects of texts which were both original and controversial at the time. If deployed judiciously, and not (pre-)cursorily, postmodernist theory can bring out more fully the literary practice of earlier periods, especially that with which it is most deeply imbricated: the eighteenth century.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 15.

<sup>ii</sup> As it is not attempting to identify any text as ‘postmodern’, the essay thus remains neutral on the vexed question of whether postmodernism is an aesthetic style which could be found in any historical period, or whether, in Jameson’s words, it is ‘essential to grasp “postmodernism” not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant’ (Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 55).

<sup>iii</sup> Brian McHale, ‘Postmodernism and experiment’, in Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 141-153. 148.

<sup>iv</sup> Janine Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>v</sup> Barchas (2003), 13, 15. See also Christopher Flint, *The Appearance of Print in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8-9.

<sup>vi</sup> Barchas (2003), 15-16.

<sup>vii</sup> David Pierce and Peter de Voogd (eds.) *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 14.

<sup>viii</sup> Larry McCaffery, *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press), xv.

<sup>ix</sup> Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

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<sup>x</sup> Keymer (2002), 6, 12, 6-7.

<sup>xi</sup> McHale (2012), 146. See also Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987) and *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>xii</sup> McHale (2012), 146, 145-6, 147.

<sup>xiii</sup> There is considerable debate over the authorship of *The Cry*, specifically the extent of Jane Collier's involvement (see Carolyn Woodward, 'Who Wrote *The Cry*?: A Fable for Our Times', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9, 1 (1996), 91-7). Here I follow most modern critics in attributing it equally to Fielding and Collier.

<sup>xiv</sup> Barchas (2003), 190-1.

<sup>xv</sup> John Paul Hunter, 'Novels and History and Northrop Frye', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 24, 2 (1990-1), 225-241. 234.

<sup>xvi</sup> Hunter (1990-1), 234.

<sup>xvii</sup> Peter Sabor, 'Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Sarah Fielding', in Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 139-156. 150, 153.

<sup>xviii</sup> Emily C. Friedman, 'Remarks on Richardson: Sarah Fielding and the Rational Reader', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22, 2 (2009-10), 309-326. 310.

<sup>xix</sup> Friedman (2009-10), 310.

<sup>xx</sup> Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier, *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable*, 3 vols. (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1754), I, 15. Hereafter referred to in the text as *The Cry*.

<sup>xxi</sup> McHale (2012), 147-8.

<sup>xxii</sup> Elizabeth Hamilton, *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, edited by Pamela Perkins and Shannon Russell (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1999 [1796]), 12. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Hindoo*.

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Claire Grogan, *Politics and Genre in the Works of Elizabeth Hamilton, 1756-1816* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 30.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Grogan (2012), 36, 29, 37. See also Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790-1827* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 113.

<sup>xxv</sup> Grogan (2012), 40.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Kelly (1993), 129, 132.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Grogan (2012), 44.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Elizabeth Benger, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton, with a Selection from her Correspondence, and other Unpublished Writings*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), I, 61.