

Learning Conversational Rhetoric in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Hester Thrale Piozzi and Her Mentors Collier and Johnson

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A young British woman in the eighteenth century who aspired to be an eloquent writer and conversationalist faced many challenges. It was rare for a woman to gain access to education in rhetoric because, since the classical era, rhetoric had been a largely masculine, upper-class discipline meant to prepare people to speak in official public roles. However, in the eighteenth century, some approaches to rhetoric accommodated the increasing number of women becoming educated and the increasingly important genre of sociable conversation. New opportunities within the culture made it possible for a woman to study rhetoric, practice and theorize it, and achieve widespread public acknowledgment for her eloquence and influence, although not without risks to her reputation. Studying the rhetorical development and practice of eighteenth-century British women brings to light how a category of people excluded from formal rhetorical education and practice could nevertheless participate due to shifts in cultural ideologies. Specifically, as I shall demonstrate below, these women experienced a greater opportunity to practice and learn a rhetoric of conversation in the public sphere. A brief rhetorical biography of Hester Thrale Piozzi (1741-1821), a famous eighteenth-century conversationalist and author, reveals how she and her two mentors, Dr. Arthur Collier and Samuel Johnson, approached the study and practice of conversation as a rhetorical art. It also helps us understand the importance of conversational rhetoric in forming eminent rhetors and rhetoricians.

Only a few modern and eighteenth-century scholars of rhetoric would acknowledge that such a woman's success in public or semi-public eloquence could be considered a rhetorical career. As one may gather from the majority of treatises on rhetoric, the traditional concept of a

successful rhetorical career is one in which the rhetor 1) develops his skills and identity as a rhetor through formal rhetorical education in schools and universities, 2) earns fame through public speaking or writing in church or government or other formal institutional settings, and 3) is described as an “orator” by the public at large. Each of these criteria generally exclude historical European women before the twentieth century, most of whom had no access to university education and no access to official church or government leadership positions. Calling a woman an orator (except in the case of a queen) was rarely intended as praise, as we see, for instance, in Addison’s frequently reprinted *Spectator* essay, which criticized four types of “female orators” in 1711 (435-40). However, because most rhetoricians have presumed that serious male rhetorical practice is formal and public, they have tended to overlook informal and less public ways of learning, practicing, and earning fame as a rhetor. It has been difficult for some scholars to imagine how rhetoric was learned and practiced outside of formal institutions by women before the nineteenth century, and how it could have been learned well. For instance, the rhetorical historian Robert Connors claims that “In western culture, women were excluded from formalized training in rhetoric and from forums within which oral civic discourse could be practiced almost absolutely before the seventeenth century and in most situations before the nineteenth.” Although the first part of his claim is true, Connors is not attempting to assess the value and potential depth of informal rhetorical training, and his second claim about women’s exclusion from “forums within which oral civic discourse could be practiced” is not entirely applicable to eighteenth-century Britain because Connors’s view is based on a narrower, later concept of “civic discourse” and where it is usually practiced.

Enlightenment Women and the Rhetoric of Conversation

Studies of pre-nineteenth-century women's participation in rhetorical education and civic discourse have emerged to demonstrate these women's participation in, rather than absolute exclusion from, rhetorical theory and practice. For example, Jane Donawerth's study of the seventeenth-century French author Madeleine de Scudéry discovers a "rhetoric of conversation" at work. She claims that Scudéry's letters, dialogues, and novels concerning the conversational salon advocate "rhetorical education for women" and that Scudéry "appropriate[s] rhetoric for women as a means to political power" ("As Becomes" 306). Scudéry's works in English translation may have persuaded her British readers to imagine women's potential to become "orators" in forums already open to them. Her book *Les Femmes illustres*, a collection of fictional orations delivered by queens in domestic settings, was published in English in 1756, 1681, and 1693, the latter two editions using the title *Heroick Harangues of the Illustrious Women*. Eighteenth-century editions in 1714, 1728, and 1768 were named *The Female Orators*, and the phrase *Worthy the Perusal and Imitation of the Female Sex* was in the title as well. As seen in Thomas Baker's discussion of rhetoric in 1708 (55), it became widely known among scholars that Madeleine de Scudéry herself had been given the first prize ever awarded by the French Academy for her eulogy of Louis XIV in 1761 (Donawerth, "Volume" 7).

Because women practiced and theorized rhetoric mainly in genres that many scholars have not considered rhetorical, and because women were rarely recognized as orators or rhetoricians, their contributions to rhetorical history through other genres and other terminology have been overlooked until recently. Yet rhetorical historians are well aware that the range of genres discussed in rhetorical theory has altered over the centuries according to changes in cultural and political contexts. In medieval times, letter writing became a rhetorical art; in the

Renaissance, poetry and courtly conversation became theorized as rhetorical genres. It all depended on which genres became highly valued and were theorized as “rhetorical” arts for gaining influence. In eighteenth-century Britain, among the new genres achieving social power and influence were the periodical essay, the novel, literary conversation, and correspondence.

In many ways, eighteenth-century Britain constructed what Cicero had regretted was lacking in his own time: a theory of conversational rhetoric. According to Dieter Berger, “The number of courtesy works on conversation [...] has been estimated to amount to over two hundred titles between the years 1650 and 1800” (82). Eighteenth-century authors rarely explicitly called conversation “rhetoric” because of the formalistic and scholastic connotations of the term “rhetoric” and the obviously informal nature of conversation; yet they occasionally considered conversation as rhetorical, as seen below, partly because of the strong influence of ideas expressed in contemporary translations of Cicero’s *De Officiis*. *De Officiis* was very popular in the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century: L’Estrange’s 1680 translation was in its sixth edition by 1720, and Thomas Cockman’s translation was in its tenth edition by 1792. In *De Officiis*, Cicero divides the power of rhetoric into two parts: *sermo* (conversation) and *contentio* (the speech of public argument), saying that while rhetoricians have formulated rules for *contentio*, they have neglected to theorize *sermo*. That a form of rhetoric lacked a formalized theory in Cicero’s time was not necessarily indicative of its low value in his estimation. Cicero states that conversation is equally worthy of rhetorical study; it simply takes place in a different setting: “in social circles, in philosophical debates, and in meetings of friends.

It should also follow after banquets.” The topics of conversation, he explains, are not merely household matters, but also politics, professions, and learning (*De Officiis* 1: 132).¹

Two further examples, besides the example of Madeleine de Scudéry given above, demonstrate that some eighteenth-century readers were aware of the idea of a rhetoric of conversation. In 1771, an English translation of a Prussian belletristic treatise *Elements of Erudition* appeared a year after the popular translation of the author’s letters. In his chapter on rhetoric, the author, the statesman Jacob Friedrich Bielfeld, preceptor to Prince Ferdinand and the chancellor of Prussian universities, classifies rhetorical genres in a way that prioritizes conversation:

Anciently rhetoricians divided discourses into three sorts, which they called, 1. Ordinary elocution, that is, such as is used in common conversation: 2. The ordinary elocution in writing, from whence comes the epistolary style, the form and disposition of letters on all sorts of subjects: and 3. The elocution of compliments for all occasions, as well verbal as written. All these matters are directed by particular rules in the old systems of rhetoric, where those, who are curious to see them, may easily find them. (Bielfeld 104)

In this conversational-epistolary view of rhetoric, we find echoes of *De Officiis*, but little trace of the epideictic, deliberative, and forensic genres, and yet the author asserts that the rules of rhetoric (he describes the figures and commonplaces) are applicable to these everyday uses. One must look in his later chapter on eloquence to find a discussion of political and sacred rhetoric. *The Lady’s Rhetoric* of 1707, as I explain elsewhere (Smith 349-73), also cites Cicero frequently. It is a rhetorical handbook for ladies that explicates Classical rhetoric and French belletristic rhetorical principles in everyday English and applies them to conversational situations relevant to a lady’s experience. The bookseller’s advertisement promotes the usefulness of *The Lady’s*

¹ See also a discussion of Cicero’s view of women in conversation in John F. Tinkler, “Renaissance Humanism and the Genera Eloquentiae” (284), and in Robert W. Cape, Jr., “Roman Women in the History of Rhetoric and Oratory” (117).

Rhetorick for people “of whatever Sex or profession they are,” as it is suitable to any “Place and Calling,” and “useful and pleasing to such of both Sexes, as desire to improve themselves in this excellent Art of Speaking and Writing Elegantly” (*Lady’s Rhetorick* A2, A2v). Therefore, in eighteenth-century Britain it was rare but not unprecedented to theorize conversation as “rhetoric” and to teach traditional rhetorical theory in a way that included women.

Traditionally, rhetorical genres were defined as those deemed to be “public”—forensic, epideictic, and deliberative rhetoric was conducted only by men in public settings. Yet narrow definitions of rhetoric as “public” still do not disqualify the genre of mixed-sex intellectual conversation as a rhetoric. To eighteenth-century Britons, this genre could be public. Historians of eighteenth-century culture have showed that despite discourses that distinguished separate spheres of public/male and private/female, conversation was often acknowledged to be a realm of women’s and men’s public life. Mixed-sex intellectual and literary conversational networks, the most famous of which were led by Elizabeth Montagu, Hester Thrale, and Elizabeth Vesey, have been recognized by Jürgen Habermas, Deborah Heller, and Lawrence Klein as an early form of the “public sphere” and as a very important institution of literary education and patronage for men and women. Habermas’s theory of the “public sphere” envisions the enlightenment conversational salons, coffee houses, and periodical press as a “literary public sphere” that gained in its time the power to become a “political public sphere” that critiqued, moderated, and filtered the influence of the state. Habermas acknowledges that the salon or coffee house was a training ground, a place where publications were tested by criticism before they went to print (34). But to eighteenth-century women, conversational gatherings were more than merely training grounds for written publication or for men’s formal oratory. They were already sites for public rhetorical performance.

Heller and Klein extend Habermas's theory of the public sphere, showing that what were nicknamed "Bluestocking" salons were not just for "literary" discourse and entertaining chit-chat; they were fully public. Heller finds "in the Bluestocking salons an institution of public dimensions, governed and in large part constituted by women, whose self-described purpose is the practice of what they call 'reason' or 'rational conversation'" (60). Heller's argument "supports a more positive assessment of women's intellectual, cultural, and, indeed, public agency" in the eighteenth-century conversational salon (60). Conversational salons were sites of what Klein calls "the associative public sphere, a sphere of social, discursive, and cultural production," which suggests that "people at home, both men and women, were not necessarily in private" ("Public/Private" 104, 105). It does not minimize their value to rhetorical history that these spaces and discourse practices were a more important public space for women than they were for men. Therefore, a rhetorical sphere's importance should not be judged by the gender or social status of the people who theorize and practice in it, nor by its resemblance to the rhetorical spheres we think of as "public" in our own culture.

If we were to include theories and practices of conversation in our study of rhetorical history, we would be able to arrive at a more comprehensive and accurate typology of the most influential and widespread realms of rhetorical practice. Rhetorical historians since Douglas Ehninger in 1952 have identified at least four major "trends" in eighteenth-century rhetorical treatises: neoclassical, belletristic, psychological-epistemological, and elocutionary. However, these classifications of rhetorical theory were based on Enlightenment treatises on rhetoric written by and for men. These classifications were not developed during the eighteenth century, did not include the much larger range of literature that theorized the art of conversation, and did not consider how women as well as men may have learned, practiced, and theorized rhetoric.

To understand the “trend” of conversational rhetoric in their culture, we need to look not only to the large volume of advice and theory about eloquent conversation (a few examples of which are mentioned above) but also to the ways in which conversation was actually learned as an art. A brief rhetorical biography of aspects of Hester Salusbury Thrale Piozzi’s rhetorical education and practice under two of her mentors provides modern scholars and students with a focused case study of how a woman learned the rhetoric of conversation in the eighteenth century.

Hester Thrale Piozzi’s Formation as Conversational Rhetor and Theorist

Hester Thrale Piozzi² (1741-1821) was one of the pre-eminent leaders of conversational salons in eighteenth-century Britain, and an author who published poetic, biographical, historical, linguistic, religious, moral, and political works. She is best known as the close friend, correspondent, and hostess of essayist and dictionary writer Samuel Johnson (who was so influential that scholars often speak of the “age of Johnson”). The frequent guests at her home included a variety of statesmen, actors, lawyers, scholars, artists, novelists, and historians. She was friend and mentor to the famous novelist Frances Burney, who wrote in her own voluminous diary about her experiences in Hester’s company. Hester was well connected with other conversational circles of men and women organized by Elizabeth Montagu and others. Sir Pepys claimed “that he had never met with another human being who possessed the talent of conversation in an equal degree” (McCarthy 265, 204). After the death of her first husband Mr. Thrale, Hester chose a controversial marriage to the Italian musician Gabriel Piozzi in 1784, and many of her former friends and even her daughters deserted her. Shortly afterwards, following

² Hester was known by many surnames: Lynch, Salusbury, Thrale, Piozzi. She was christened Hester Lynch Salusbury in her maternal grandmother’s and father’s names, and Thrale and Piozzi were her first and second husband’s surnames. She was known as Mrs. Thrale and Mrs. Piozzi during the period of her life upon which I focus. I shall most frequently refer to her as Hester to avoid confusion.

Samuel Johnson's death, she emerged as an author in several conversation-like genres and on conversational topics, such as her *Anecdotes of Johnson* (1786) and her experimental anecdotal history of the world, *Retrospection* (1801). In her conversational handbook of English usage for foreigners, *British Synonymy* (1794), she articulated her theoretical understanding of conversation as rhetoric.

After her controversial second marriage, Hester successfully restored her public reputation by using her conversational powers to forge new networks of intellectual friends with whom to converse and correspond. In early nineteenth-century Bath, her conversation became a legend and almost a tourist attraction to the younger generation, and her birthday ball in 1820 had six hundred guests. When Frances Burney D'Arblay heard news of Hester's death in 1821, she compared Hester to the feminist salonnière, novelist, philosophical writer, and critic Madame de Staël (1766-1817). She said that both women "had the same sort of highly superior intellect, the same depth of learning," and that "Their conversation was equally luminous, from the sources of their own fertile minds, and from their splendid acquisitions from the works and acquirements of others" (qtd. in McCarthy 265).

Hester Thrale Piozzi's lifetime rhetorical accomplishments are prodigious, especially when considered in light of the challenges facing women who aspired to rhetorical fame and influence. Due to a conjunction of cultural, political, and economic preconditions, and not least, the friendship and tutelage of her mentors, she learned to use language prudently to persuade, building for herself a surprisingly resilient career of social eminence as a conversation hostess, as an intellectual companion of eminent men and women, and as an author.

Tutelage under Arthur Collier

Hester Salusbury (later, Hester Thrale) was a young prodigy in language and literature who learned early to associate women's language skills with social influence. In a family that was often brought to its knees financially due to conflict over inheritances and her father's quick temper, Hester and her mother took every opportunity to soothe nerves, to divert attention from stressful situations and conflicts, and to inspire more sociable motives such as hospitality and charity. Hester was petted by her high-ranking family members and acquaintances in London. When Hester was seven, the Duchess of Leeds would send for her to read aloud Milton to her guests. Her love of learning and quick development also appeared at the age of ten, when over the course of several months Hester "read Rapin's Hist[ory] in French: Plutarch's Lives & Livy in the same Language—every Word;—besides long Translations that [she] laboured hard to make from French to English & from English to French" (*Thraliana* 1: 292). Hester was later taught Italian so she could correspond with her wealthy aunt, Lady Salusbury, who had also learned the language in her youth. When Lady Salusbury died in 1759, the year Hester turned 18, Hester became known as an heiress of a fortune and began to receive offers of marriage, and she gloried in the increased attention she received from family members, her tutor, her suitors, and noble and learned men and women. Later in her adulthood, when grieving the death of yet another child, or when seething over legal battles over the inheritances she had lost due to her uncle's remarriage, she would look back fondly on the years when "I used to be my Father's Favourite, my Mother's Comforter and Companion, & my Uncle's Darling.... my Influence was courted by every one" (*Thraliana* 1: 296). She wrote that in this period of happiness, "my friendship for Dr. Collier commenced; a Man of perfect Worth, profound Erudition, and polish'd

Manners: a Man who engrossed my whole heart, & deserved it [...] his *sweetest Angel* as he call'd me" (*Thraliana* 1: 297n).

Arthur Collier, LLD (1707-1777), was son of the published philosopher of the same name, a lawyer of Doctor's Commons, and friend of the novelist Henry Fielding and grammarian James Harris. Dr. Collier had an affection and respect for intelligent young women, many of whose literary talents he nurtured with care. Before tutoring Hester, Collier had educated his own sisters Jane and Margaret, and had tutored the novelist Sarah Fielding. He was Hester's educator for up to five years before her marriage in 1763 (McCarthy 7-8; *Thraliana* 1: 301 n1). Hester wrote, "Dr. Collier of the Commons called himself [my] preceptor" (*Piozzi Letters* 2: 500-501); and "From Dr. Collier I learn'd Latin & Criticism, and gained the little Knowledge of Logic which I have: he was to me a most attentive and disinterested friend" (*Thraliana* 1: 301 n1). Hester's journal contains several Latin poems Collier wrote to her, and she kept over 100 of his Latin letters to her (Clifford 26). Collier's influence was very strong in Hester's life: "his influence ... operate[d] on my Mind on almost every Occasion" (*Thraliana* 1: 305).

Collier was a lawyer, a wit, a scholar, and private instructor, but never published any works on rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is clear that he taught Hester and other women about rhetoric along with the other arts of the standard *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric). He used to tell her "women should learn rhetorick in order to persuade their husbands, while men studied to render themselves good logicians, for the sake of obtaining arms against female oratory" (*British Synonymy* 1: v-vi). Like a good preceptor, he provided a reason why the study of rhetoric was relevant to his female pupil. As the quotation above illustrates, he adapted rhetorical instruction to the uses of a woman in the domestic sphere, where rhetoric helped to guard a woman against false persuasion and enabled her to persuade more effectively in domestic situations.

Collier once told Hester that he wrote “the reply to Lord Shaftsbury’s Arguments in Cylinda’s Story” in *The Cry* (1754), a dramatic fable by Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier (*Piozzi* 2: 249). This passage is an example of conversational rhetorical criticism in which Cylinda’s father’s old friend (representing Collier) listens carefully to Cylinda’s praises of Shaftesbury, gains her respect and attention, and then persuades her to change her mind and believe that she has in fact allowed her “imagination to be warmed by the florid style and specious reasonings” of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics*. If this is a faithful representation of Collier’s mode of conversational rhetorical education, it demonstrates that he must have armed his tutees to defend themselves against persuasive appeals in writing and encouraged them to read philosophical works critically and converse about them with men.

However, eighteenth-century women’s rhetorical careers, whether as poets or as conversationalists, were necessarily different than men’s because of women’s dependency on marriage and the expectations of feminine ethos. Collier learned the hard way that teaching women to be scholars and wits could be dangerous to their future. Although he had encouraged his earlier female pupils in their scholarship and publication, the difficulties caused by his sisters’ and Sarah Fielding’s reputations for learning convinced him to recommend marriage to Hester instead of the life of a female writer. The problem with forming a woman to be a rhetorician in print publications and making her unashamed of knowing scholarly languages (Latin and Greek) was that it could delay or prevent her marriage. He probably feared that some men might have viewed her as an intellectual competitor who would pay little attention to household matters, and perhaps even become a nag or shrew. Arthur Collier often regretted that his sister Jane, who had “amiable manners, and such abilities,” was only known to the world by her satirical publication on household rhetoric gone awry, *The Art of Ingeniously Tormenting*

(1753). Problems also appeared in the Fielding household where Collier tutored Sarah. Collier told Hester that when Henry Fielding saw his sister Sarah “construe the sixth Book of Virgil with Ease [... he] began to tieze [sic] and taunt her with being a Literary Lady &c. till at last She resolved to make her whole pleasure out of Study, and becoming justly eminent for her Taste and Knowledge of the Greek Language, her Brother never more could perswade himself to endure her Company with Civility” (*Piozzi Letters* 2: 249). Accordingly, one of Collier’s last letters to Hester before her marriage implored her to give up learning Latin, since it “won’t make one a bit younger Richer, or Handsomer, and the only women that I ever knew made much of the matter all lived to be old maids” (Clifford 40). To ensure this would not happen to Hester, not long before she met her future husband Mr. Thrale, Dr. Collier was among the four men who pressured her uncle to endow Hester with ten thousand pounds on her marriage.

Preparing her for marriage, Collier armed Hester with the skills of inspiring affection as well as admiration for her rhetorical skill. To do so required an understanding of what society generally believed was appropriate and praiseworthy in women’s communication. The eighteenth century highly prized physical grace and decorum as the art of rhetorical delivery applied to conversation. The 1776 translation of Cicero’s *Orator* reads that an orator’s “decorum” and “our very looks, our gesture, and our walk” ought to be “suited to time and character” (*Cicero’s Brutus* 287). Likewise, Hester’s early tutor understood the arts of physical deportment and decorum as acquirements to be learned by a consummate rhetorician: “Doctor Collier had a notion that any Woman might be handsome if she would; meaning that Grace & Carriage were so near to every thing in the Affair of Beauty that any Woman of Condition might procure it if she would take Pains—Tis plain Lord Chesterfield thought the same of Grace in general” (*Thraliana* 1: 13). As we can gather from Hester’s diary and publications, Collier was

also an important figure in her education in conversation, especially in humor and raillery. These points appear in Cicero's *Orator* as essential for the orator using the Attic or simple style: "smart sayings and quick repartees, and ... humour" (*Cicero's Brutus* 297). Hester's diaries relate a few of Collier's smart and witty *bon mots*, which reveal a deep suspicion about the perversity of human nature. His sayings reveal that sincerity is not always the best policy, and that one both needed to cloak one's true feelings sometimes, and be wary of insincerity in others. For instance, he observed that "those who had the Word Gratitude oftenest in their Mouths, had the Love of Tyranny most deeply in their hearts" (*Thraliana* 1: 24).

Hester's keen rhetorical analysis of Collier's rhetorical performance and its effects pointed out which elements of a man's conversational rhetoric were not worthy of her imitation. In her diary *Thraliana*, she highlights his "assimilating Temper," his ability to "take his Share in any Conversation," his "Taste of general Knowledge" and enjoyment of all types of people. At the same time, she was well aware of his conversational faults. She notes that he loved talking more than listening, disputed on controversial points of religion and politics, and used logic to corner people and point out their fallacies for ridicule. Even if he did all this "with an Air of great Civility" to soften the offense, his manner could not eliminate the feeling of pain in his interlocutor. Another fault was his playful perversity in insisting on talking about "curing Hams, or making Minced Pyes" when a male conversationalist was willing to engage in a critical or metaphysical discussion with him. Hester concludes that he was admired far more than he was loved.

Although Collier's satirical insights into human character equipped Hester with some of the means of gaining and keeping relational power, he himself lost that power in Hester's family. Collier and Mrs. Salusbury occasionally competed for influence over Hester. When Hester

confided in Collier her distress about her mother matching her with Henry Thrale, Collier wrote back with advice not to marry Mr. Thrale, and her mother promptly persuaded Hester to break off correspondence with Collier, which Hester later regretted (*Thraliana* 1: 305).

Samuel Johnson's Influence

Hester became acquainted with Samuel Johnson in 1765, two years after her marriage. Just as Collier and her mother competed for influence, Hester perceived that her mother was also jealous of Samuel Johnson's influence over her (*Thaliana* 1: 182). Indeed, he was extremely influential in her development as a conversational rhetor. And yet, by the end of her relationship with Johnson, she had learned to moderate his influence with her increasing sense of confidence in her own abilities. She became his collaborator in conversational eloquence, and easily surpassed him in politeness and decorum.

Not long after Samuel Johnson joined the Thrale household, he began to perceive that Hester was not using her abilities and that Mr. Thrale would appreciate a woman who would shine in conversation. Thrale was a brewer rising in social class to be a Member of Parliament, and he seemed to have need of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century aristocratic model of a wife, a companion who, as Hawley says, "was supposed to embody and display the wealth and rank of her father or husband in her ornamental attire, witty and elegant speech, and lavish hospitality. While chaste, and obedient, she was not meant to be silent or retiring" (xix).

However, Hester's mother, Mrs. Salusbury, did not believe it was proper for a wife to be so much in public, so she kept Hester at home, and insisted that she educate her young children.

Happily for Hester, Samuel Johnson interposed in this impasse of influence between the domestic and the aristocratic model of femininity and helped Hester to perform in her drawing-room some aspects of this aristocratic kind of conversation for which, after all, she was already

trained by Collier. Early in her friendship with Johnson, Hester received important advice from him that enabled her to consider assisting her husband with her rhetorical skills. She once complained to Johnson that Mr. Thrale did not treat her with much kindness, perhaps expecting him to give some marital advice. However, Johnson's insight into her communication patterns was very helpful in expanding her conversational expertise beyond the traditionally feminine domestic sphere, where she could compensate for her husband's lack of verbal skill and thus serve him better and sustain her household. Johnson explained to her that she was spending all her time with her baby and mother, being neither useful nor ornamental to Henry with her wit and beauty, that she was not knowledgeable enough about his business nor active in protecting his property, and that she shared none of his pleasures (*Thraliana* 1: 309). Hester then told her mother she would like to learn more about Thrale's brewery.

However, Mrs. Salusbury continued to hold sway and discourage Hester from public entertainments and from involvement in Thrale's business, until a crisis erupted in his brewery in 1772. Mr. Thrale was tranquil and silent by temperament, and did not know how to deal with the fact that he had purchased bad hops the year before and it had spoiled all his beer. He began to lose sleep and appetite, and finally asked for advice from Hester, Johnson, and Mrs. Salusbury. While Hester was "big with child," Johnson drove her to town, "insisted on [Hester] talking to the Clerks authoritatively," and she conciliated them. Hester discovered that the source of the problem was Mr. Thrale's overconfidence in a manager, Mr. Jackson, who had persuaded Thrale to buy the hops. Learning this, her mother's "Delicacy was blunted about [Hester's involvement in] the Trade." Jackson was fired, money was borrowed, and the company was reorganized due to the joint efforts of Hester and Johnson. Although she lost her child, which she attributed to the stress, she learned that "Women have a manifest Advantage over Men in the doing Business;

every thing smooths down before them, & to be a Female is commonly sufficient to be successful, if She has a little Spirit & a little common Sense.” Hester’s own conclusion to this episode of life states that this crisis greatly increased Mr. Thrale’s respect for her, and Mrs. Salusbury’s respect for Johnson (*Thraliana* 1: 311-13). Hester came to understand that using her rhetorical abilities outside of the home could help her gain influence within it.

Hester assisted her husband with political canvassing, which increased her public reputation. In 1774, the Thrales and Johnson went on a tour of Wales, which concluded when they stopped at Edmund Burke’s home and received “the ever hateful News—that Parliament was dissolved, & we must all go home to canvassing” (*Thraliana* 1: 316). Hester and her husband now “hurried to Town to quiet the Minds of our Constituents who were run mad with Republican Frenzy, and had made choice of a half American Representative.” She conciliated enough of the voters and Mr. Thrale won the election. Her husband treated her very kindly afterwards for being “useful at the Election” (*Thraliana* 1: 317).

Hester’s activity as a canvasser for her husband’s position as Member of Parliament for Southwark became publicly known. In 1774, she became a character in a satiric essay in the *London Magazine*. In the “Harlequin’s Plan for a New Parliament,” she and other women writers and conversationalists such as Elizabeth Montagu, Charlotte Lennox, and Catharine Macaulay magically replace Members of Parliament. Although none of the above women were described at all, Hester was jestingly called a “very petticoated Demosthenes” as testament to her publicly known verbal ability. The article also hinted at Samuel Johnson’s role in empowering her, saying that she was elected by “Chesterfield’s hottentot” (it was believed that Chesterfield had been describing Johnson when he described in his letters, published in 1774, the character of a respectable hottentot). In 1777, Hester reported that “Mr. Johnson and I are abused in the

Newspapers most ridiculously for Rambling Sam and the witty Electionora; [but] one would wonder how such Stuff could seriously grieve any one” (*Thraliana* 1: 24). Such public jibes may have been lightened or counterbalanced in her mind by the fact that in 1777 Hester was presented at court. Thus the brewery crisis and Mr. Thrale’s election campaigns provided opportunities not only for the rise of Samuel Johnson’s influence with the Thrales, but also for Hester’s increasingly public conversational expertise and reputation. Johnson and Hester’s mutual support enabled them to weather the notoriety and flattery that could result from a woman’s public rhetorical activity.

Samuel Johnson’s role as Hester’s mentor and collaborator in the conversational public sphere is rarely noted in biographies of either of them, but can be seen in Hester’s writings. Although Johnson was a prolific writer, he often expressed a value for conversation that surpassed that of literature. Talking with each other about conversation confirmed their belief in the social value of their expertise as facilitators and conversationalists. Conversation in the Thrale household became a sphere in which conversational rhetoric was learned and theorized and a site where people could engage in criticism of literary, scholarly, and political rhetoric. Rhetorical criticism enabled friends to improve their own ideas and expression in a variety of genres. One of the common activities of their parties was to read aloud and discuss creative literature, occasionally pieces written by someone present in the room, in order to better understand their beauties and flaws. Hester’s circle also discussed social and political news that was shared in print newspapers or reported by conversationalists whose roles involved them in political processes. In this era, knowledge was still largely transmitted orally, and print publication, although on the rise, was not the only way to public fame as a rhetor, creative writer, or scholar. To Johnson, fame as a writer was not sufficient in itself to establish a person’s more

widespread social usefulness; an author needed to participate in everyday communication of his skill and knowledge where he could informally teach what he knew: “when [Johnson] saw a person eminent in literature, though wholly unconvertible, it fretted him” (*Anecdotes* 266).

Hester agreed that one’s knowledge gains importance and social usefulness primarily by being communicated personally in conversation, noting, for example, that “This fact the learned Doctor Parr taught me where to find [in a book]; but it is a greater distinction for me to have gained it from his conversation” (*British Synonymy* 1: 276).

Johnson and Hester continually reiterated their belief that conversation was an important means of their own education. Samuel Johnson’s education, according to Hester’s second-hand account, was carried out largely by having a book in his pocket to read when he had a moment, and, as he said, “by running about the World with my Wits ready to observe & my Tongue willing to talk” (*Thraliana* 1: 164). Johnson recommended to young Miss Thrall, Hester’s daughter, that soon after listening to something being said in serious conversation, she ought to go to someone else and explain what it meant to exercise her memory and understanding. On a similar principle, Johnson encouraged Hester to write down and reflect on conversation in her *Thraliana*.

Neither Hester nor Johnson minimized the aesthetic and entertaining purposes of conversation. She reports Johnson as saying “There is in the world no real delight (excepting those of sensuality) but exchange of ideas in conversation” (*Anecdotes* 267). In *Thraliana*, Hester records that “Common, every Day Sense and a Power of Conversation on many Subjects was the Character Mr. Johnson most delighted to meet with” (1: 171). Johnson was not merely a passive recipient of the pleasure of Hester’s entertaining conversation. A great part of the delight that Johnson had in travelling with her family and friends was in the conversation that took place

in a coach with his captive audience (*Anecdotes* 276), and Hester tells of how he repeatedly kept his friends awake until three or four o'clock in the morning to converse with him, recalling them despite their attempts to retire (*Anecdotes* 125).

Hester also learned by reflecting on the faults of Samuel Johnson's conversational skills, as she had from her early tutor Arthur Collier. She learned the skill to bear with the conversational roughness of both men, smoothing it over to prevent it from spoiling general conversation in a party. Johnson provided a negative example with his often rude and combative speech and his rough manner, of which examples abound in her *Thraliana* and *Anecdotes*. In contrast to his own practice, Johnson would continually extol the virtues of a sweet and soft temper, such as Dr. Burney's (*Anecdotes* 144). When Johnson and Dr. Burney were together, she made sure "to keep those parts of their characters out of sight wch [sic] would have offended the other. This was a mighty easy operation to me, & I grew skilful in it by long Practice; nor was it in itself difficult, as Mr Johnson's great Deficiency both in sight & hearing put him so far in one's power" (*Thraliana* 1: 182). On one occasion, Frances Burney observed how virtuously Hester quietly bore Johnson's sharp rebukes during conversation. Hester explained to Burney, in Johnson's hearing, that she did so because her own vanity was flattered by his attention, and because "I have received more instruction from you [Johnson] than from any man, or any book" (D'Arblay 1: 129). Yet in this very same conversation, Hester frankly and directly charged Johnson with severity and cruelty to her guests. Johnson defended his behaviour by saying that she often asked him to commend people or things against his own judgement. Hester had the last word, however, when she defended why she, on the contrary, was usually lavish in praise: "Why I'll tell you, sir, ... when I am with you, and Mr. Thrale, and Queeny [Miss Thrale], I am obliged to be civil for four!" (D'Arblay 1: 129).

Hester's Theories of Conversational Rhetoric

Arthur Collier's and Samuel Johnson's influence on Hester went far beyond her personal development as a publicly known and multi-talented conversationalist. Their influence was also a catalyst that, when combined with her continual practice, wide reading, writing, and reflection on the topic of conversation, enabled her to develop her own theories of conversational rhetoric, most clearly expressed in *British Synonymy* (1794).

In *British Synonymy*, Hester Thrale Piozzi's central claim is that the study of language is the basis of all knowledge and scholarship, and that principles of effective language use have their basis in conversational usage, not formal rules of grammar (or, by extension, rhetoric). Therefore, Hester reasons that one should go straight to the source and be a student of conversation: "These are the niceties of language that books never teach, and conversation alone can establish" (2: 29). Fine linguistic distinction is "learned only by conversation, or by trifling books like this [*British Synonymy*], wholly and solely colloquial" (2: 61).

Hester's *British Synonymy* provided important assistance for rhetors who needed to learn the "decorum" of conversational diction and usage. The eighteenth-century translation of Cicero's *Brutus* raises the issue of "decorum" and claims that "An unacquaintance with [decorum] has been the source of innumerable errors, not only in the business of life, but in Poetry and Eloquence. An Orator, therefore, should examine what is becoming, as well in the turn of his language, as in that of his sentiments" (284). Accordingly, the work is not merely about distinguishing between nearly synonymous words, but it subtly persuades readers to adopt the commonplaces and cultural beliefs that Hester wishes to be connected with the words. She also provides situational examples that demonstrate how terms are applied to different types of people, situations, and subject matter.

Hester's most articulate contribution to rhetorical theory is *Oratory, Eloquence, Rhetorick*, a brief essay within *British Synonymy* (2: 81-85). Selections from this essay illustrate how she connects women, rhetoric, and conversation. In this passage, Hester associates the goal of persuasion with the role of the male "orator" and the female "oratrix." A female actress proves her claim about women's higher probability for success in pleading one's defense (being an oratrix): "As proof of this, who would not rather choose Mrs. Siddons to plead a cause for immediate pardon from one's sovereign than Sheridan or Fox?" She notes that eloquent female conversationalists display their art even though they would openly deny that they have studied rhetorical theory: "I have a friend particularly eminent in such powers of charming her audience.... When she reads this, however, Mrs. P— will acknowledge that the very rules and terms of RHETORICK are unknown to *her*." To some degree, Hester approves of women's feigned or real ignorance of rhetorical rules. Rhetoric, Hester reasons, if it merely constitutes knowledge of theories and rules, is impotent without the powers of oratory and eloquence. As proof of this, she cites Samuel Johnson's opinion that persuasion in the House of Commons and in church (assumed to be consistent with formal rules of rhetoric) was rarely effective because it lacked genuine oratory and eloquence. And yet, Hester states very clearly that the science and practice of rhetoric are worthy of study: "ORATORY [is] a charming thing, ELOQUENCE a fine thing, and RHETORICK a great thing—for it comprises them both." While she associates "rhetorick" with the scientific or theoretical study of technique, and primarily with men in public office, she gives to women the palm of "eloquence" and acknowledges their skill in persuasive oratory. By the logic of her essay, rhetorical theory is the capstone of advice and principles that are built on the foundations of eloquent conversation and skillful oratory. Thus, she honours rhetorical traditions

and theories without relinquishing or minimizing the achievements of men and women in oratory and eloquence.

Hester's early formation under Arthur Collier helped her theorize the rhetoric of *sway*, the skillful influence deployed by those with limited authority, such as wives and private tutors. In her preface to *British Synonymy*, she cites Dr. Collier's quip that "women should learn rhetorick in order to persuade their husbands" (*British Synonymy* 1: v-vi). Taking Collier's cue about the applicability of rhetoric to the domestic sphere, Hester theorized the skill of "sway" as a type of government:

we must be GOVERNED *somehow*—either by RULE, as a husband in his house, where all acknowledge his authority; or like a wife in her family, who SWAYS by influence, and holds her limited power by perpetual attention not to disgust by its too rough exertions. Despotic sovereigns are obeyed as the *man* is in this case:—limited monarchs are contented to carry every point as a woman in her circle,

And win their way by yielding to the tide,

only adopting skill instead of strength. (*British Synonymy* 2: 231-32)

No doubt Hester was familiar with John Trusler's book of synonyms and his discussion of the synonyms *weight*, *influence*, and *sway*: Trusler writes, "Taking these words in the sense of having power over the minds of others; weight implies prevalence, though small; influence seems to have more force; sway is more absolute.[...] The art of finding out and taking advantage of the weakness of men forms the sway we bear over them" (149). As understood by both Trusler and Hester Thrale Piozzi, the skill or art of "sway" is more than a verbal strategy; it is a larger, strategic understanding of one's audience and the situational opportunities for influence. This perspective on the persuasive opportunities latent in a rhetorical situation is fundamental to the Aristotelian approach to rhetoric. As seen in this example, as well as in *The Lady's Rhetorick* and writings by Scudéry, women's rhetorical theory was adapted to

conversational situations and occasionally proceeded by way of analogy to public, masculine genres of rhetoric—by comparing and contrasting the techniques of persuasion in government to the techniques of persuasion used in the home or conversational salon.

Conclusion

In Hester Thrale Piozzi's life and writing, one can see an example of a woman whose education and experience convinced her to consider intellectual conversation an important rhetorical arena for women and men. She learned this art early in life from her early tutelage under Arthur Collier, and developed it more publicly with the mentorship and collaboration of Samuel Johnson. As a mature thinker and writer, she was able to define the constituent qualities of the art and examine its close relationship to the domain of masculine, formal argumentative rhetoric, at the same time as she argued for the superiority and ancient origin of conversational eloquence. Hester's own rhetorical life and writing serve to confirm Collier's recommendation of rhetorical education for women, and also to confirm Collier's and Johnson's belief that mixed-sex intellectual conversation was a primary cultural scene for effective persuasion, rhetorical education, and entertainment.

Rhetorical educators today can benefit from observing three features of her rhetorical training that were especially effective. First of all, we see the example of a woman learning rhetoric in a way that made it applicable to the influential relationships and genres that were accessible to her as a woman of her social class. Although the rhetoric of modern mass media and politics is important in any society, it is relatively inaccessible to all but a few whose careers lead them down that path. However, conversational rhetoric is accessible to all, and extremely influential in a variety of cultures even if they do not theorize them as thoroughly as the

eighteenth-century British did. Reading eighteenth-century conversational rhetorics and advice books would raise students' awareness of the potential civic purposes and subtle strategies of rhetoric in this genre.

Secondly, even in a culture where men and women had very different rhetorical careers, Hester learned a lot from her male mentors and from masculine rhetorical theory, not only from the imitation of female conversationalists in the Bluestocking world. This demonstrates that although gender is an important factor for rhetorical *ethos* and one's choice of strategies, most rhetorical principles can translate across genders, and therefore men can learn from women's rhetoric, and vice versa. By comparison with men's rhetoric, Hester became more aware of both the cultural limitations and opportunities for women's rhetoric.

Thirdly, and most importantly, in the records of Hester's life we can observe her and her mentors not only continually practising their art and reflecting on their practice, but also using private, informal writing to describe conversational anecdotes, critique them, and develop theories of good conversational rhetoric. Hester's practice of keeping a journal of conversational anecdotes and character portraits was one of her most important methods of rhetorical self-education, which strengthened her conversational skills and furnished materials for her later published works. Samuel Johnson first suggested in 1768 that she keep a diary of conversation; thereafter she collected her observations in the *Thraliana* diary, which was officially begun in 1776. The edited collection, ending in 1809, now comprises over 1,000 pages of text in two volumes in Katherine Balderston's edition. Some of the rhetorical theories of conversation that she constructed through informal writing in *Thraliana* were later expressed in her *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson* and *British Synonymy*.

Rhetorical historians should continue to conduct primary biographical research into men's and women's rhetorical lives in order to better understand how both men and women interacted with each other to learn, practise, and achieve fame as rhetoricians, as Hester Thrale Piozzi did. This will help to develop a more comprehensive view of rhetorical history that can encompass the contributions of both sexes through all genres, and the importance of informal ways of learning rhetoric and informal forums of rhetorical practice. Biographical analysis of the processes of informal rhetorical education and identity formation is very important to rhetorical history in general, but especially for women and for politically marginalized groups, such as religious dissenters in eighteenth-century England. If people suspect that women like Hester Thrale Piozzi were just naturally eloquent without the benefit of careful informal and self-education about rhetoric, then their rhetorical expertise and success may seem either a matter of luck or something that they could not help but express—hardly an art. But if there is biographical evidence that a number of eighteenth-century women were tutored in rhetoric and mentored in conversational arts, and that some theorized conversation as rhetoric, then our rhetorical tradition is not as limited to formal oratory as some have supposed.

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