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WRITING TO SIR WALTER
The Letters of Mary Bryan Bedingfield

Sharon Ragaz

I

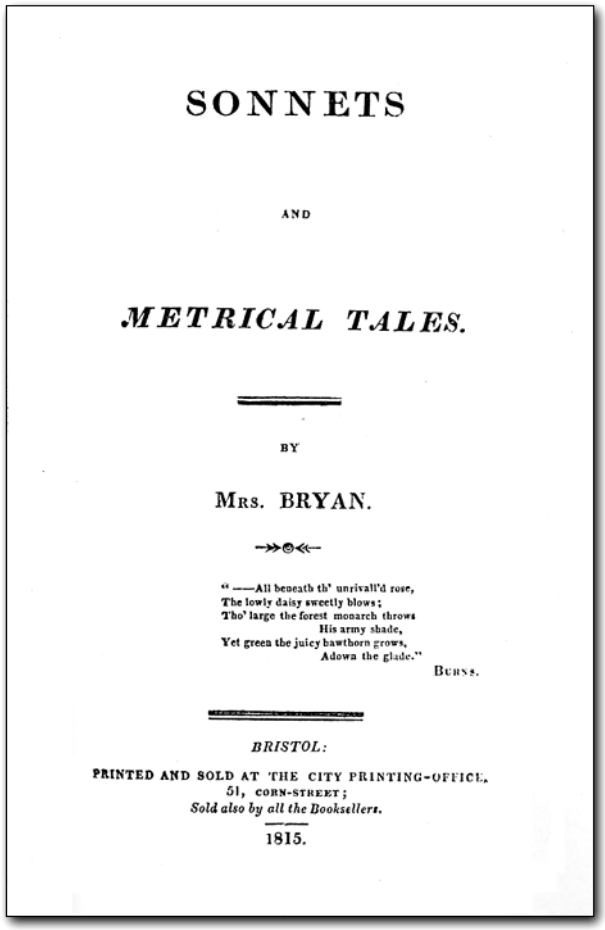
THE two volumes of *The English Novel 1770–1829* document the large number of men and women involved in the production of fiction in the Romantic period.[1] Of this number, biographical data are presently available for only very few individuals. Most are known to us by little more than the titles of their published work and, despite the richness of the biographical material that is being recovered for all genres in the period, details of the lives and aspirations of the actual writers often remain more difficult to trace. We know that they wrote and successfully published their work, but we have little information about the psychological or social value they attached to their labour or to being a published author, and we are unlikely to know what stratagems they used in pursuit of their goals. The problem is compounded with women writers whose life stories and careers may be especially resistant to excavation and reconstruction because of changes of surname with marriage.[2] One such writer is Mrs Bryan Bedingfield, whose novel, *Longhollow: A Country Tale*, was published in 1829 by the London firm of Whittaker, Treacher, and Arnot. Through the entry in the second volume of *The English Novel*, we catch no more than a fleeting glimpse of a woman writer who seems to have left few traces of her existence apart from her one novel, which now survives in only a few scattered copies.[3] However, because this particular woman was remarkable for her determination to enlist all possible aid in securing publication of her work, a significant body of her letters also survives. The letters are addressed to Walter Scott and span a period from 1818 to 1827.[4] Famous first as a poet and then increasingly as the 'anonymous' author of the series of best-selling historical novels, inaugurated with the publication of *Waverley* in 1814, Scott was to become well known for his willingness to assist or encourage the numerous aspiring writers whose letters to him solicited aid for literary projects. That he also, with a keen eye to their future interest and potential historical value, chose to preserve much of his extensive incoming correspondence ensured the survival of even the most unlikely or apparently insignificant letters. In the case of Mrs Bryan Bedingfield, the letters prove invaluable in tracing her career and they conclusively identify the author of *Longhollow* with the Mary Bryan whose collection of *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* was issued by the Bristol City Printing Office in 1815. A rich mine of information about her life, ambitions, and the particular circumstances under which she sought publication of her work, the letters allow us to build up a more detailed picture of the otherwise very shadowy figure behind the bibliographical record.

If Mrs Bryan Bedingfield has hitherto received little scholarly interest as one of a legion of now unknown early-nineteenth-century novelists, Mary Bryan has recently attracted the attention of ongoing projects to document the literary achievements of women poets in the Romantic period. An essay by Stuart Curran, published in *Wordsworth Circle*, identifies the strong Wordsworthian influences evident in her poetry. Both *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* and J. R. de J. Jackson's *Romantic Poetry by Women* have entries for Mary Bryan. A facsimile of her book of poetry is available in the Revolution and Romanticism series edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, and a

1. Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schöwerling (eds.), *The English Novel 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
2. For a succinct account of difficulties in researching the lives of women writers, see J. R. de J. Jackson, *Romantic Poetry by Women: A Bibliography, 1770–1835* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. xvi–xvii.
3. See entry 1829: 17 in *The English Novel*. This records copies in the Corvey collection and the Bodleian library. As noted in this essay, there is also a copy in Walter Scott's library at Abbotsford. *The English Novel* does not record any copies of the novel in North American libraries; however, Judith Pascoe's online catalogue of books in the Van Pelt library at the University of Pennsylvania includes *Longhollow*. Online: Internet (24 July 2001): <*http://www.english.upenn.edu/ dwhite/pascoe1.htm*>.
4. The largest group of letters date from 1818. A list of the entire series, showing manuscript details, date, and the sender's address, is given in Section II.

transcription of the British Library copy is available from the Brown Women Writers Project.[5] This interest and the relative availability of her poetry mean that Mary Bryan is far better served than many other early writers. Nevertheless, she has hitherto remained an example of someone whose story must be pieced together almost wholly by inference, from her slim volume of verse with its obliquely phrased and enigmatic preface and often apparently autobiographical poems. This version of her story is necessarily truncated; essentially, it ends with the publication of the single edition of *Sonnets and Metrical Tales.*

The careful recent readings of *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* have established that, in 1815—the year of the book's publication—Mary Bryan was an impoverished and widowed mother of six very young children. It is evident that, under these difficult circumstances, Mary suffered great anxiety and emotional distress. However, the Preface to her book also hints at problems that antedate Mary's widowhood; her late husband seems to have prohibited her writing, and she returned to it only after his protracted illness and eventual death. Issues of self-expression and the nature of her role in her society and particular community seem persistently vexed, and the Preface somewhat defensively cites the example of Charlotte Smith as justification on the grounds of financial necessity for Mary's own decision to risk public exposure and scrutiny through the publication of her previously private verses. In addition, *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* establishes that Mary had grown up in the rural environs of Bristol, and had admired Wordsworth as a writer whose poetry so fully expresses the worth of rural experience to the sensitive and thinking individual. Wordsworth's crucial formative influence on her own work is acknowledged in the dedication to the first poem of her collection.



SONNETS

AND

METRICAL TALES.

BY

MRS. BRYAN.

" ——All beneath th' unrivall'd rose,
The lowly daisy sweetly blows;
Tho' large the forest monarch throws
His army shade,
Yet green the juicy hawthorn grows,
Adown the glade."
BURNS.

BRISTOL:
PRINTED AND SOLD AT THE CITY PRINTING-OFFICE,
51, CORN-STREET;
Sold also by all the Booksellers.
1815.

Although, until now, knowledge of the biographical facts of Mary Bryan's life has been limited to these few details, Stuart Curran's insightful reading of her poetry enriches the slight sketch with his conjectures about her psychology. In particular, he convincingly argues 'that for Mary Bryan writing poetry is a stabilising force in a world that has lost its customary forms of order.'[6] The discovery of Mary's correspondence with Scott is valuable for the new information it makes available about her life, subsequent writing career, and eventual publication of a novel.[7] It is also significant that the letters convey Mary's experiences in her own voice, and show her reacting to the challenges and distresses of her penurious state while documenting the steps by which she strove to establish herself as a writer. In

5. See Stuart Curran, 'Isabella Lickbarrow and Mary Bryan: Wordsworthian Poets', *Wordsworth Circle* 27 (1996), 113–18; Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy (eds.), *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (London: Batsford, 1990), p. 153; and Jackson, *Romantic Poetry by Women*, p. 43. Jonathan Wordsworth's introduction is reprinted in his *The Bright Work Grows* (Poole and Washington, DC: Woodstock, 1997), pp. 195–201.
6. Curran, p. 115.
7. Because Mary's surname changed during the period of her correspondence with Scott, I have found it simplest to refer to her throughout by her forename.

so doing, they strongly support Curran's conclusions. The letters confirm that if Mary was motivated to try publishing her writings because of very considerable financial pressures, literature and the cultivation of an authorial persona also held crucial psychological and emotional significance for her. The correspondence with Scott seems to have served Mary as another stabilising and sustaining force in her life—one that offered slight but encouraging contact with the literary success so fully embodied by Scott. As an antidote to despondency and despair, the exchange gave cause for hope and a constantly renewed sense of purpose as she took up Scott's suggestions and advice. The letters complicate the view of Mary that emerges from *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* to show a woman who, in the face of despair and successive disappointments, clung desperately to her literary hopes.

Beginning with the letter that Mary wrote to Scott on 10 June 1818, the surviving correspondence amounts to a total of ten often quite lengthy letters, and there are only a few obvious lacunae in the series. Unfortunately, all the letters are from Mary's side of the exchange; those addressed to her by Scott have not been traced and may have perished. As a result, Scott's half of this epistolary conversation remains frustratingly silent. While the substance of his replies can often be deduced from Mary's own letters, it is difficult or impossible to be certain what tone or manner he adopted towards his correspondent. In general, the evidence of the collections of Scott's letters affirms that he usually replied courteously to letters from aspiring writers—even when he was urging them to lay aside their literary ambitions—and he tended to confine complaints about those he denominated his 'voluntary correspondents' to the pages of his journal.[8] Although there is no evidence that Mary ever directly occasioned such a complaint, her correspondence with him was unusually protracted and it is entirely possible that, on some level, Scott did come to view her persistence as both tiresome and unreasonable—especially given Mary's frankly incautious remarks about matters such as Scott's politics or the negative impact of the best-selling Waverley novels on the chances for success of other writers. However, that he did reply to her sometimes importunate letters makes it likely that her difficult situation, combined with her apparently unquenchable determination to succeed in publishing another work, led Scott to feel a degree of sympathetic interest in a woman whom he never met. Although this interest did not translate into precisely the kind of vigorous literary patronage that Mary hoped for—in this case, the evidence suggests that Scott's assistance was largely confined to little more than supportive counsel and advice—he did continue corresponding with her throughout a period in which he was concerned with a great many literary and other projects of his own.

Mary's long letters are filled with references to calamities both threatened and actual, and they strongly reflect an oppressive sense of despondency and near-hopelessness. The highly wrought language with which the first letter of 10 June 1818 begins is typical: 'Will you pity—I have said—or will you not alas regard with indifference if not contempt the last feeble efforts of expiring hope?'[9] Mary's epistolary style is aptly described in Jerome McGann's phrase as 'clogged', particularly where the letters document symptoms of physical, emotional, and psychological suffering.[10] In part, this suffering is invoked to justify the appeal to Scott and awaken his sympathy for one who describes herself as 'the daughter of Parents whose misfortunes have cast them wholly upon her resources, and the widowed mother of six helpless orphans.' However, the initial letter also aims at

8. *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), p. 462.
9. National Library of Scotland [hereafter NLS] MS 3889, fols. 115–16. Thanks are due to the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for citations from manuscripts in their care.
10. Writing of Ann Yearsley, McGann seizes on her use of 'clogg'd' for a description of the tortuous phrasing by which her verse conveys the 'struggle of her suffering thought.' In this usage, it applies equally well to Mary's letters and poetry. See Jerome J. McGann, *The Politics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 55–57.

another purpose: to establish Mary's literary credentials. To this end, it includes a brief printed extract from the favourable notice accorded *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* by the *Critical Review*.[11] In other respects, the letter is tantalisingly short on actual details and it concludes cryptically but urgently: '[i]n a few days you will receive a parcel, to which I entreat your attention—your prompt attention.'

A second letter, dated from the City Printing Office in Bristol on 27 June 1818, was sent to accompany the promised parcel and supplies more precise information about Mary's circumstances and the specific nature of her appeal to Scott. Its opening reveals that the parcel contained literary material: '[i]f you will do me the honor to peruse the enclosed book and MSS you will gather from them the general circumstances of my situation and present embarrassment and threatened total destitution.'[12] Somewhat unusual for a letter of the kind is the mention of a previous, apparently unsuccessful bid for help that Mary made to another well-known writer, Samuel Rogers. This is an early instance of the kind of interpretive difficulties raised by Mary's correspondence: is the mention of Rogers a function of Mary's social naïveté or, alternatively, of her astute knowledge of psychology? The inclusion of information about the earlier appeal and Rogers's failure to offer any meaningful assistance might seem unwise, since it could arouse suspicion that Scott had been chosen to receive Mary's present letter not because of his unique qualifications to help her but because she is systematically sending letters to any number of likely authors—including, as the letter also notes, William Wordsworth. Alternatively, the comments might be evidence for Mary's desire to disclose all the facts about her situation and, incidentally, to offer Scott an opportunity to show himself more generous and forthcoming than his colleagues.

Other sections of the letter, which itself merits quoting at length, supply a detailed account of Mary's difficult—and deteriorating—circumstances, and a commentary on contemporary literary culture:

> Mr Bryan, my late Husband, was Proprietor of a respectable printing office in Bristol and died about four years ago insolvent; all the property that he possessed was yielded to the demands of the Creditors who upon the interference of some friends allowed me to hold the materials in the Office upon my agreeing to pay them in instalments. After many obstacles and much distress the affair was settled and my Father, tho not practically acquainted with the Business, undertook to superintend it and it is after various misfortunes become his and my mother's only recourse—Although the business lost some concession the income derived from it has been adequate to the very moderate expences of my little household. To assist in defraying the instalments and providing for the necessary expences of the business a friend borrowed for me about three years ago the sum of £300—this sum was a short time since unexpectedly reclaimed and is indeed become necessary to the pecuniary losses of the lender: after great difficulty I have obtained an indulgence of two months expiring on the fifth of August—To repay this sum and render the Business free has occasioned my increasing anxiety to save it and at the same time to preserve my little family (I have six children) in health has been utterly impossible—But one path of exertion was open to a woman of my habits and all the difficulties I have encountered have not yet quite vanquished [?] me: these have only in view the security of the Business, which, in the event of a fatal termination of long weakness and frequent ailment would still afford a support to my Parents declining years and bring up my orphan and friendless children.
>
> You are a Parent—I would ask but vainly must expect you to judge of my feelings: in the strength of your happy and prosperous circumstances you cannot know what it is

11. See *Critical Review* 2 (1815), 519–23.
12. NLS MS 3889, fols. 131–32. The letter is endorsed 'Mrs Bryan, City Printing Office, Bristol' in Scott's hand. The mention of 'book and MSS' implies that Mary included a copy of her 1815 book of poetry along with her new manuscript. The book is not listed in the catalogue of the library at Abbotsford.

to shudder over the anticipated want, ignorance, dependency all the most degrading evils that await my childrens helpless and unprotected years. Over such anticipations I continually sorrow: for me day has no joy—night no peace […] I start from insensible sleep and imagination is almost as fatal as reality—I throw myself from bed—clasp my trembling hands—[several words illegible].

I have received from Mr Wordsworth and others very soothing testimonies of the quality of some of my compositions: but it is well known that Mr W is not popular enough to give public weight to his opinion. The Public favor is engrossed by a few and, without infringing their right, I confess I think it ought to extend to a few more: but this is a subject inclement to my purpose: I have never supposed that any of the trifles I had performed had pretensions of this decisive nature, but some of a lower order have floated a little on their ever changing tide, and a short success of this kind were sufficient to my wishes.—But I have no influence to obtain this trial: still have I turned to it in my hopelessness of all other resources, hoping that I might be assisted, for although I am not ignorant that literary patronage has rather fallen into disrepute there are still names that might silence all objections and circumstances of too affecting a nature to allow either of ridicule or [several words illegible].

Difference in political opinion—which to an ardent and sensible—and indeed I must confess on this subject, ignorant mind—involve more perhaps than truth and reason can justify—has together with other feelings, for I would not call them reasons, prevented me from turning my hopes or wishes to you—I have greatly admired your writings but you have not I think as some others have done identified yourself in your pages. I have thought and felt and wept with your descriptions but not with you—I hope I shall not offend you by this truth—I would not wilfully presume—

I do not know that I can say anything more if indeed I ought to do so […]

And now everything is vanishing from my mind & I can but repeat to you: if benevolence be other than a mockery—if there be a duty and if there be a reward, then I pledge myself to you to answer it to my God and your God to my judge and your judge—on the behalf of my excellent Parents and for my helpless ones the plea of her who never fails her watch—the objects for which I plead are most worthy

Mary Bryan[13]

The letter is evidence of the status that authorship held in the early nineteenth century as a means for an educated but impoverished woman to augment a meagre income—and the extent to which a woman's writing for profit tended to be justified with explicit reference to a vigorous sense of domestic duty and affections. Although Mary might be seen as more fortunate than many other women in distressed circumstances because she had inherited her deceased husband's business, the debt-encumbered printing office could not be counted on to secure the future of her extended family.[14] In consequence, she resorted to that other 'path of exertion' open to a woman with literary

13. In transcribing the letter, I have retained Mary's spelling and punctuation. Square brackets indicate uncertain readings. Because Mary used poor quality paper and her ink has faded significantly, her letters are a challenge to decipher. Compounding the difficulties in the early letters is her hand, which is cramped and makes optimal use of all the available space on the paper.

14. My principal concern in this essay is with Mary's writing career, which is inseparable from the account given in the letters of the setbacks posed by financial troubles and attacks of illness. It would, however, be interesting to know more about her involvement with the Bristol printing business. C. R. Johnson, *Provincial Poetry 1789–1839. British Verse Printed in the Provinces: The Romantic Background* (London: Jed Press, 1992) lists Harris and Bryan of 51 Corn Street, Bristol as printers for Joseph Cottle's *The Fall of Cambria: A Poem* (London: Longmans, 1808). Although it is a long shot, Cottle is a link to Wordsworth, to whom Mary also appealed for help. According to Johnson's catalogue, the firm printed Thomas Curnick's *Jehoshaphat with Other Poems* during the time of Mary's

tastes—that is, to writing with the aim of publication. From her experience with the printing office and with *Sonnets and Metrical Tales*, Mary would have known that preparation of a manuscript was only the first step and that there remained considerable impediments to getting it published or achieving financial and popular success. She also knew that enlisting a prominent name in support of her enterprise could do much to ease her way with booksellers and, subsequently, with the public. But the attempt to secure an influential patron could be no casual affair, and the petitions addressed to Rogers and Wordsworth surely taught Mary that even praise for her writing need not mean that useful assistance would also be forthcoming.[15]

In describing her circumstances in detail, Mary was undoubtedly concerned that Scott should believe a story which he would have few means of corroborating. To ensure that he should also be inclined to help, Mary's letter had to secure his interest, to stand out from the many other appeals he received. By its nature, such a letter is a mode of self-presentation that initially must proceed without any direct means of gauging the recipient's response—or failure to respond. It must put to best use the writer's sole chance to capture the attention of her intended audience and open the way for a potentially fruitful exchange to ensue. Mary's narrative strives to convey a vivid impression of her specific circumstances and despairing attempts to overcome or mitigate the difficulties besetting her. This gave the letter an excellent chance of making a favourable impression on Scott, who tended to adopt a chivalrous response to women in need and was favourably disposed to help those who showed initiative in helping themselves. No doubt it was also to Mary's advantage that, unlike some of Scott's other correspondents, she wisely did not express a conviction that publishing a book was an easy route to fame and fortune.[16]

Aspects of Mary's letter strongly indicate that, over time, she had developed an astute understanding of and familiarity with the requirements of the particular genre that is the begging letter. To this degree, the letter seems deliberately calculated to evoke not only Scott's interest but also his guilt as a man whose own 'happy and prosperous' circumstances might dull apprehension of the plight of a woman assailed by fears for her children's future. And yet, other aspects of the letter make it appear curiously naïve, even incautious. Indeed, certain comments seem likely to antagonise the recipient. In 1818, Scott's reputation as a poet remained intact while his authorship of the phenomenally popular Waverley novels was an open secret. Scott himself must surely have been one of the principal targets of Mary's remark about the 'few' whose works engross the public's attention; the subtext is a reminder that those who are privileged to enjoy extraordinary success in the literary marketplace have a clear obligation to assist those whose works are overshadowed. There was an obvious hazard in formulating the matter in quite this way, and this is perhaps still more true of the comment about the sensitive issue of political views. If it seems unlikely that Mary would intentionally have risked antagonising the man whose help she urgently solicited, a possible explanation for the remarks might be found in her ignorance of the specific forms of address that would best promote her cause, in her honesty rather than in her cunning—this, at least, is what Mary was to argue in a subsequent letter. While the remarks seem strangely at odds with the letter's

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proprietorship. For this book, the printer is identified on the title page as M. Bryan, 51 Corn Street. 1815 was the year in which *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* was issued, but its title page has 'City Printing Office, 51, Corn Street' rather than Mary's name. It is tempting to speculate that the change was intended to avoid the appearance of self-publication which would have resulted if the title page had identified Mary as both author and printer.

15. I have not been able to find that letters between Mary and other authors survive. However, corroboration of her claim to have been in contact with Wordsworth is indicated by the presence of copies of her books in the Rydal Mount library; it is likely that Wordsworth had received these directly from their author. See Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver, *Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue* (New York: Garland, 1979).

16. For one example, see the 1817 letter from Jemima Layton, printed in *The Private Letter-Books of Walter Scott*, ed. Wilfrid Partington (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), pp. 227–28. This letter was one that Scott (mis)recalled in a journal entry written nine years later; see *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, p. 100. Although Layton's brashness and Scott's dislike of her novel, which he read in manuscript, defeated her attempts to secure his aid, her novel was eventually published as *Hulne Abbey: A Novel*, 3 vols. (London: Fearman, 1820).

evident purpose, it is well possible that they did in fact serve to provoke Scott's curiosity about his correspondent; from his point of view, the alternating expressions of despair and assertive assessment that characterise Mary's epistolary style may have compared favourably with the flattery typical of many letters he received.

In the event, although Scott was not deterred from replying, he evidently chose to probe further at his correspondent's motives in order to determine if the case was worthy of his attention. In so doing, he must have decided that plain-speaking was required; when Mary wrote again on 22 July 1818, she acknowledged the 'frank stile' of Scott's response. She also attributed her mention of political differences to the 'bewildered' state of her mind at the time of writing, and she took a defensive tone in attempting to clarify her wishes for Scott's intervention on behalf of her manuscript: 'I had thought that your recommendation of [the work] to the Public would have secured it success—of literary intrigue I have no knowledge or conception.'[17]

The phrase 'literary intrigue' is likely a direct borrowing from Scott's own letter; if so, it may be indicative of Scott's understandably guarded response to his new correspondent. However, that he replied at all indicates some interest, and his letter encouraged Mary to continue the epistolary conversation she had initiated. Her letter of 22 July 1818 effectively signals the beginning of a true exchange characterised by question and answer, suggestion and response. The letter supplies the potential benefactor with an update on the financial affairs of the printing business. On the advice of a solicitor, Mary had taken on as partner a Miss King whose father was to serve as business agent. While Miss King's capital investment enabled Mary to pay off the most pressing of her business debts, the terms of the new profit- and risk-sharing arrangements also halved her share of any income from the company. By her calculations, as she informed Scott, this sum would barely be sufficient to meet the requirements of her large family. Therefore, although the partnership relieved immediate need, long-term prospects had not been substantially improved. Under such circumstances, the letter adds, Mary remained committed to her goal of publishing her work and maintained a belief that only thereby could the family's income be increased to a sustainable level.

Scott's letter evidently included suggestions for securing publication of the manuscript. To these, however, Mary responded sceptically, expressing a conviction that Scott had failed precisely to gauge either her situation or the particular culture milieu in Bristol. The letter considers and rejects his recommendation for subscription publication—although Scott must surely have sweetened the proposal by offering to have his name appear on the list of subscribers. In framing her negative response, Mary singled out for special mention the attitudes of Bristol's citizenry:

> The subscription you so kindly propose […] has one only objection: the improbability of its being successful to any considerable extent in this City which you justly stile wealthy—but most erroneously, I believe, intellectual. Indeed I do not think they have more *genuine* benevolence than when even that [word illegible] Judge Jeffries—shocked by their odious hypocrisy—ordered the whole magistracy to appear before him and openly disgraced them for selling their poor fellow citizens to [word illegible] in plantations—nor do I believe them more intellectual than when Catterton [*sic*] became a wandering outcast & they would now suffer twenty Chattertons to perish in their streets.

Mary's passionately expressed criticisms position her as the neglected artist who is surrounded by uncomprehending philistines. With regard to the financial rewards that could be expected from a work published by subscription—even one with the advertising advantages conferred by the use of Scott's name—Mary's familiarity with the printing business no doubt informed her bleak view of a method with relatively low prestige among authors because, as Peter Garside notes, 'publishers had little incentive to promote a novel once subscribed copies had been distributed.'[18] Mary's opposition

17. NLS MS 3889, fols. 155–57.
18. Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era: Consolidation and Dispersal', *The English Novel*, II, 80.

may also have been the result of her experience with *Sonnets and Metrical Tales*. That work, although technically not a subscription edition, was essentially a self-publication issued through Mary's printing company and the burden of securing publishers would have fallen to her. For his part, Scott no doubt shrewdly recognised that his proposal would offer the best hope of success for a commodity presenting the marketing challenge that could be expected from a volume of occasional verse by an all-but-unknown author—and that Mary's pathetic story could be turned to advantage when it came to canvassing potential subscribers.

If Mary was disappointed by Scott's advice, she would have been gratified by the qualified praise for her writing, probably expressed in the terms echoed in her own letter: 'you say there are passages in the attempts which I have made not discreditable to my fancy and feeling.' Any admiration for the fancy and feeling was, however, evidently mixed with concern about the execution, and Scott not only suggested specific revisions but also promised to review the manuscript after Mary had incorporated corrections. Although the 22 July 1818 letter indicates an eager willingness to adopt this plan, Scott's criticisms also prompted Mary's despairing acknowledgement that the quality of her writing necessarily suffered from her being constantly 'in such a feeble or disturbed state of mind.' That is, the very financial pressures which led her to consider writing for profit also made excellence so elusive. To a degree, this is special pleading since it implies that if the financial situation were alleviated, the writing would improve. But, as so often with Mary's letters, another interpretation is possible. Mary's evident distress that the standard she achieved was lower than the level at which she aimed may be seen as evidence that the impetus for her writing actually emerged not only from dire economic straits but also, more complexly, from psychological factors that included notions of herself as an author with something to say and aspirations to writerly excellence.

While Scott had responded cautiously and even critically to Mary's earlier letter, he was evidently moved by this one to offer sympathetic encouragement to his beset and ailing correspondent. His reply must have been dispatched without loss of time: Mary's next letter is dated 16 August 1818 and it opens by acknowledging receipt of Scott's 'kind and cheering' message.[19] By mid-August Mary was in urgent need of cheer. The intervening weeks had seen a deterioration in both her health and financial situation. Nevertheless, her literary goals had not been set aside, and the letter outlines for Scott's consideration a number of proposals for new works. In so doing, it addresses the question of subject-matter. Mary's published verse, like that of many women poets of her day, is highly personal in engaging the intimate experiences of her life within the family and rural community, relationships with friends, and the risks or value of sensibility. The letter to Scott registers Mary's fear that her inability to write on other topics must hamper the achievement of a wider success. 'Hitherto', she wrote, 'I have attempted desultory and occasional effusions; I fear my limited information on every subject that engages the present attention must prevent my succeeding in any other.' Aiming to remedy this perceived deficiency, the letter canvasses Scott's opinion as to the merits of attempting 'Village tales somewhat after Crabbe', since these had been recommended by a Bristol literary acquaintance who is identified only as 'Mr Elton' but was probably Charles Abraham Elton, the poet and translator.

Unexpectedly, the August letter also delivers some vigorous criticism of the Waverley novels. This, like the earlier comment about politics, seems at best imprudent since Mary was surely aware that rumour persistently linked Scott's name with the novels. Once again, the criticism serves notice that as a 'formidable opponent' to the popular and commercial successes of other writers, Scott had a virtual obligation to dispense practical aid to those struggling in his wake in a highly competitive field. As a contemporary assessment of the negative impact the Waverley novels were perceived to have on the career of an aspiring woman writer, Mary's remarks acquire special interest—not least because they prefigure modern assessments of the radical nature of Scott's intervention in the

19. NLS MS 3889, fols. 187–88.

history of the novel and the resulting shift as the genre came increasingly to be dominated by male writers.[20] Describing the novels as 'the strongest food', Mary emphasised their extraordinary and lasting impact on contemporary fiction and recorded her own feelings of ambivalence about works that she both admired and feared for their popularity:

> [my] sympathy with the productions of this writer have been alternately lively, profound, and absorbing, yet I have regretted that he has found a devastating stream that has levelled in confusion, together, superficial worthless productions, and some that had large claims to a longer day. Meg Merrilies and Helen McG[regor] have strode, sublime and terrific, from their 'cloud-capt mountains' and laid their iron wands on the damsels of high renown and they will sleep in their beauty even longer than the old fashioned nap of a century.[21]

From such pointed commentary, the letter returns to the theme of Mary's aspirations and to questions of the practical measures by which she might be assisted. Evidently responding to proposals advanced by Scott, Mary wrote:

> I cannot make the smallest objection to your sending any extracts to the Journals that you think proper. You say if Mr Jeffrey approves my productions—if they meet his taste [several words illegible]—yet if he would read, and if he perceive genius, however bowed down by calamity and trammelled by the hard bondage of circumstances, would aid—where would he find an object more affecting?

If, as the remarks indicate, Scott had offered to show extracts from Mary's manuscript to the editors of various journals and to Francis Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review*, he was prepared to do so only after the text had been thoroughly revised—a process delayed by Mary's illness. The letter concludes with another assurance that the task of correction would promptly be tackled and the manuscript returned to Scott for his final approval. Following her signature, Mary annexed verses which are similar in style and content to the 'metrical tales' of her published work. Entitled 'The Village Maid', the verses describe Ellen, a country girl who is entranced and almost seduced away from homely duties by romantic reveries associated with a lonely glade; the end of the poem marks a return from dreaming solitude to community and the security of the family circle.

In the correspondence as it survives, a gap of nearly two years separates the letter of 16 August 1818 from the next in chronological sequence. The gap means that we lack the indirect evidence of Mary's letters for both Scott's response to her criticisms of the Waverley phenomenon and his opinion of 'The Village Maid'. However, comments in Mary's next surviving letter, from 8 May 1820, firmly establish that the correspondence had not languished during the two-year gap, and its sequence can be reconstructed as follows. Mary sent Scott the corrected manuscript, and he wrote in December 1818 to announce its arrival at Abbotsford, and to convey the encouraging news of Jeffrey's willingness to read the work. Subsequently, when Jeffrey failed to communicate his opinion of the manuscript directly to Mary, she again appealed to Scott as intermediary. Her letter was probably written during the summer of 1819, when Scott was occupied with the publication of *Tales of My Landlord, Third Series*. In August 1819 Scott replied and, as Mary reminded him in her letter of May 1820, informed his correspondent that he 'could not intervene on behalf of the MS and Vol put into Mr Jeffrey's hand, by writing to him on the subject.'[22] Scott did, however, promise to raise the matter informally with Jeffrey in November in Edinburgh. Frustrated by the slowness of the process and the lack of any response at all from the influential reviewer and editor who perhaps

20. For a summary and analysis of the actual numbers by gender, see Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era', pp. 72–76. In the 1820s novels by men began to outnumber those by women.
21. The description is echoed in the Preface to *Longhollow*: 'strange beings […] have arisen from the wand of the Wizard of the North, and the damsels and heroes of romance will sleep the sleep of a century or two; nay, they will never wake again.' Mrs Bryan Bedingfield, *Longhollow: A Country Tale*, 3 vols. (London: Whittaker, Treacher, & Arnot, 1829), I, x. The Preface makes the remark in order to clear a space for domestic fiction.
22. NLS MS 867, fols. 12–13.

did not grasp the matter's urgency, Mary eventually sent an appeal directly to Jeffrey. His failure to respond then occasioned the beseeching letter to Scott on 8 May 1820.

By this time the matter had been so long protracted that Mary's most pressing worry was the return of the manuscript since, as she told Scott, she retained no other copy of the corrected version. However, the letter also vividly documents the degree to which, despite discouraging setbacks, Mary continued to prosecute her case with vigour and determination. She must have known that Jeffrey's failure to reply did not augur well for his willingness to promote her work, yet she was reluctant to leave unremarked and uncriticised behaviour that she condemned as both slighting and rude. As her letters show, Mary was not one to let such treatment pass without affirming her own sense of grievance and the merits of her case. Mary's determination to have her say was fuelled equally by a conviction that her work possessed literary merit—that it fully deserved to be published—and by a well-honed perception of her right, as an impoverished woman and widowed mother, to expect assistance from successful and influential men. In his letter of August 1819, Scott evidently counselled Mary to be patient, in language which implied that he had begun to find his correspondent's persistence perhaps unreasonable and certainly tiresome. Mary responded assertively:

> I beg to remind you that I never sought this favor of Mr Jeffrey by any presumptuous application of my own; it was the voluntary promise of Prosperity & power to distress, and helplessness rendered more affecting, as your own words told me, by talents and by sensibility; it was a promise pledged to the cost of perhaps two hours attention to the subject of this affecting woman's, this widowed mother's most anxious hopes—Patience! my dear Sir for many afflicted years I have had much cause for patience. I have tried for patience—prayed for patience, and have scarcely found its practice more difficult than since I have today held & withheld my pen on the subject of Mr Jeffrey.

With such language, Mary once again risked alienating the one individual who had proven willing to exert himself, within limits, on her behalf. That she knew she was taking a risk is perhaps evident in in the letter's ending which, in more conciliatory and temperate phrases, merely begs Scott to retrieve the manuscript.

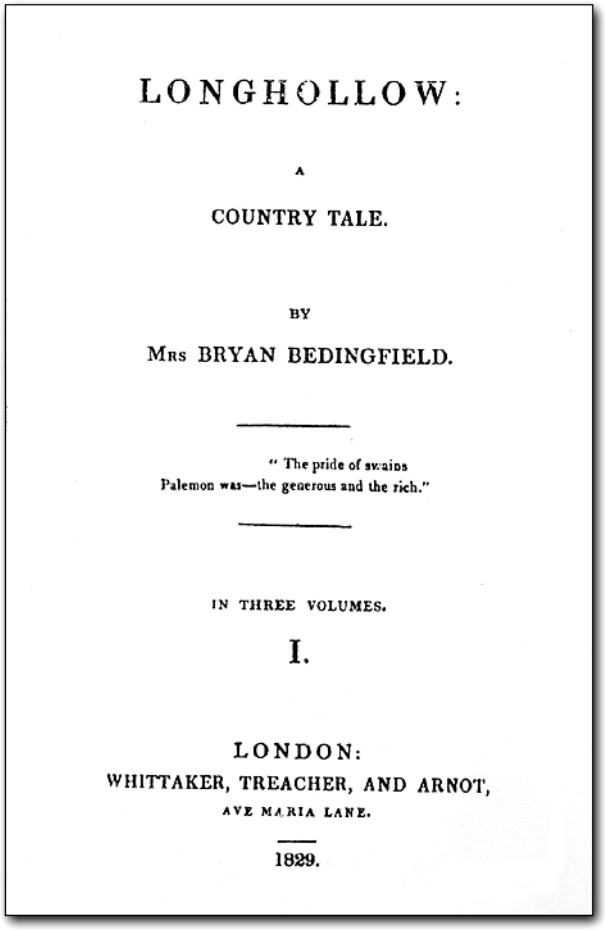
The second part of the letter reveals a significant change in Mary's circumstances—one which has prevented modern bibliographers and scholars from identifying the author of *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* with the novelist who wrote *Longhollow*. The 1815 book of poetry is dedicated to one James Bedingfield, a medical practitioner and the individual to whose care Mary's dying husband had committed the care of his wife and children.[23] The letter of May 1820 announces Mary's marriage to Dr Bedingfield, who is identified as formerly a physician at the Bristol Infirmary and newly a partner in a medical practice in his native Stowmarket, Suffolk. Mary's account of the affair stresses her feelings of utter desolation when Bedingfield departed from Bristol. In time, she followed him to Stowmarket—leaving her children in Bristol—and they were married secretly in London. There is a decidedly novelistic quality to Mary's narrative, which describes the decision to keep the marriage a secret because of the disapproval of Bedingfield's relatives, his long visits to her under the watchful eye of the landlady with whom Mary had taken lodgings 'in [her] true character of a sick Lady come for change of air', and the wrath of the wealthy aunt who promptly disinherited Bedingfield when she learned of his union with a penniless widow already encumbered with six children.

The letter clearly indicates that Mary's change of state did not mean the abandonment of her literary ambitions. Indeed, the letter concludes by recording Mary's intention, formed after rereading Scott's replies and finding there 'so encouraging advice to try a tale', to write a

23. James Bedingfield was the author of a popular book of medical case histories, *A Compendium of Medical Practice* (London: Highley, 1816). Comments within the book confirm that its author worked at the Bristol Infirmary in the 1810s.

collection of tales interspersed with verses and designed a juvenile audience. A year later, in November 1821, she wrote to say that she remained anxious for the return of her manuscript because parts of it were to be incorporated into the new work. The letter adds that, without his express permission, Mary would not send her manuscript Scott who had already taken so much trouble on her behalf. And, registering a newly deferential tone that contrasts with earlier complaints of the Waverley novels' monopoly in the literary marketplace, it concludes with praise for the 'time-defying pages' of books now fully acknowledged to be Scott's own.

The November 1821 letter is uncharacteristic for its optimism. In general it conveys an impression of Mary's improved spirits and brighter outlook since her remarriage. Nevertheless, it is puzzling on several counts. Below the signature and date is a short postscript which says: 'dimness of sight, from a severe cold, obliges me to employ another hand—though still my own.' This is the first mention of a disorder which would eventually develop into blindness, and it is notable that the letter is written in a distinctly larger and more sprawling hand than the earlier, closely written ones. The evidence of the manuscript and comparisons with both later and earlier letters leave it unclear whether Mary or an amanuensis—possibly her husband—actually penned the letter. Moreover, although the letter was apparently written in November 1821, the postmark and another date written below the postscript establish that it was not sent until February 1822. An explanation for the delay is supplied by a subsequent short note, dated 9 October 1822 from Bristol where Mary was visiting her children.[24] This states that, for unspecified reasons, Mary had been unhappy with the earlier letter and postponed sending it until, in her words, 'Mr Bedingfield impatient of delay, and wishing to have the Vol. & manuscript returned, and moreover differing from my opinion of the aforesaid letter, took it from my portfolio where it still lay, directed, and sent it.'[25]



LONGHOLLOW:

A

COUNTRY TALE.

BY

MRS BRYAN BEDINGFIELD.

"The pride of swains
Palemon was—the generous and the rich."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

I.

LONDON:
WHITTAKER, TREACHER, AND ARNOT,
AVE MARIA LANE.

1829.

In the absence of other documentation, the mysteries associated with the November 1821 letter cannot be solved. We cannot, for instance, know anything about Bedingfield's apparently proprietary interest in his wife's correspondence with the famous author. What seems certain, however, is that Mary did suffer from a degenerative eye disease and the sprawling hand of her later letters can be explained by her deteriorating vision. Writing on 24 January 1824, Mary informed Scott that her sight had worsened to the point where she could no longer clearly discern the faces of friends and family. Her blindness is also stressed in a poem which Mary appended to the final letter in the series, dated 5 September 1827. The verses, entitled 'Return my Muse', describe the poet as one of the 'living dead' for whom the progress of a disease she

24. Subsequent letters confirm that the children moved to Stowmarket. According to *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, Mary continued overseeing the printing business until 1824, and the 9 October 1822 letter also notes that her presence was required in Bristol for business reasons.
25. NLS MS 3895, fols. 156–57.

has long feared eventually entombs her in darkness: 'The doom that I have dreaded many a year / Is sealed at last.'[26]

'Return my Muse' charts Mary's struggle with her disability and her continuing determination to fulfil her literary hopes. Although the opening bespeaks bleak hopelessness, the conclusion invokes a 'humble muse' who will lead the poet in solacing memory to the landscape of her childhood—the 'Western Vale'—and inspire her to write about those scenes. However, in January 1824, the hopeful turn documented by the poem was still three years in the future. In the meantime, Mary continued struggling to find a voice and style of writing that would render her work acceptable for publication. And, despite the confidence expressed in November 1821, by 1824 circumstances once again impelled Mary to sue for Scott's intervention:

> in my last letter to you, I mentioned an intention of publishing a small work for the reading of children and youth. Unknown to any of the booksellers, and quite disheartened by the general opinion of their pride and insolence, I am afraid that if I offered my work without any celebrity to give me consequence with them, I should have but little chance for anything but contempt or injustice at their hands. So helplessly situated, the favour I would ask of you is that you would have the goodness to open a way for me with some bookseller, if you should find my MS sufficiently worthy to justify your recommendation by a fair prospect of success—Passing through your hands would ensure it that due consideration which I should vainly seek to obtain for it.[27]

The letter also includes brief mention of attempts to solicit aid from another writer. Describing a London meeting with William Hazlitt, it states that he had looked over the manuscript and agreed to recommend it to his bookseller. Subsequent events made Mary feel uneasy at the association: 'circumstances afterwards arose which made me averse to recieve [*sic*] any favour at Mr H's hands.' If Mary's contact with Hazlitt occurred in 1823, it is probable that the scandal ensuing from the publication in May of that year of *Liber Amoris* occasioned her second thoughts.[28] Yet, as the letter adds, options for securing other aid remained limited. Mr Elton's advice was to apply to Scott or Wordsworth and, as Mary confessed, she had alienated the latter by 'not having written to him since about five years ago when he sent me a poem he had just published.'

The letter's identification of several men writers who might assist Mary foregrounds her apparent reluctance to approach women writers. In the letter of 20 January 1824, Mary said of Joanna Baillie 'there is no female writer of the present day with whom my heart is so much in unison.' Yet there is no evidence that she ever directly solicited aid from Baillie or any other woman writer. Her failure to do so might be interpreted as a function of an entirely realistic assessment of the relative lack of influence that even popular women authors could hope for in a male-dominated publishing world. In addition, given the nature of Mary's appeals to Scott, another reason may have been involved. From the first, her letters were intended to call forth his most chivalrous response to suffering womanhood. Although this type of appeal clearly could—and did—inspire women to offer assistance, Mary may have felt that, in a culture where to be manly was to acknowledge women's legitimate right to sue for aid, it was likely to be most effective with men. Moreover, that several of Mary's letters derogate other women as superficial or haughty implies that she felt her difference from them to an acute degree and failed to find in women's company any supportive sense of sisterhood. The conclusion is inescapable that, despite evidence from the Preface to *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* that her first marriage was unhappy and even oppressive, Mary's life experience otherwise taught her to look for productive help from men whose gender and social position meant that they not only might be more inclined to assist an unknown and distressed woman but also had consequence with booksellers and the public.

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26. NLS MS 3905, fols. 7–10.
27. NLS MS 3898, fols. 30–33. The letter is dated 24 January 1824.
28. For an account of the scandal, see Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 337–42.

Certainly, it was as a distressed woman that Mary sent Scott a brief note dated 3 August 1824. This is the most pitiful of all her letters, and its scrawled handwriting and unstructured syntax are telling signs of desperation. The letter begins, 'I beseech you dear Sir I beseech you to pardon, pity, and succour me, help me, help me, save me from suffering under which all my fortitude sinks and which brings me a miserable suppliant to your bounty.'[29] Faced with severe aggravation of her health problems, Mary was in urgent need of funds to travel to London to consult a specialist. Specifically she begged Scott to lend the then sizable sum of £15. With reference to a situation which, despite her husband, remained one of limited financial resources, the letter's conclusion acknowledges and strives to justify the temerity of the request: '[a] stranger to you and without any claim I fear this will be deemed presumptuous but in this wide world I am equally a stranger to all who with the will have the ability to serve me.'

There is no clear evidence for Scott's response to this pathetic appeal. All that can be known for certain is that the August 1824 letter is not the last in the series, and that a slight but suggestive clue to Scott's reply may be found in the opening words of the letter, dated 5 September 1827, which is next in sequence:

> It is now so long since you expressed a most kind and generous interest in my welfare, that I fear you must almost have forgotten one who had no other claim upon your attention than that which her misfortunes and your own feelings obtained for her: yet such a claim Sir Walter Scott did then acknowledge.[30]

While the formulaic opening words to this last of the surviving letters could refer generally to Scott's attempts over time to assist his needy correspondent, it is possible that the specific occasion of Mary's request for money and Scott's response is being invoked. If so, the letter does not dwell on the matter beyond noting that Mary had been able to seek treatment in London. The letter's main focus is on the setbacks that continued to plague Mary's literary endeavours. The manuscript of the collection of moral tales and verses for a juvenile audience had initially been accepted for publication by Taylor and Hessey of London. Mary's choice of this firm possibly resulted from her acquaintance with Hazlitt since Taylor and Hessey were his booksellers; citing Hazlitt's approval of the manuscript would have served a useful introductory function. In any event, the offer to publish was later withdrawn on the grounds that the firm was no longer interested in works of the kind. And, subsequently, when she approached another bookseller, Mary found that she lacked the influence necessary even to have her manuscript read over.

Beset again by illness, Mary put aside the children's book and, during this period, composed the poem, 'Return my Muse', which is appended to the 1827 letter. The verses are the lament of one who feels herself to be in exile both from her native landscape and the activity of writing which formerly gave her pleasure. They do, however, end hopefully and herald the beginning of yet another literary project—the third documented in her letters to Scott. This time Mary decided to try writing a novel for which, as with the collection of tales and verses, she drew on Scott's former advice: 'I had never forgotten that you once advised me to [write a tale], and I resolved to keep in mind a few general instructions you were then so good as to suggest for that purpose.' While we cannot know exactly in what the 'few general instructions' consisted, it is possible to guess. It is likely that he cautioned Mary to keep her tale simple and to focus on the region and people she knew best; the strength of *Sonnets and Metrical Tales*, as Scott would have recognised, lies in its almost elegiac evocation of place, mood, and individuals, and in its representation of domestic affections and the rural environment. Mary's early writings also tend to stress the darker, more morbid sides of human experience and psychology. Perhaps Scott urged her to adopt a lighter tone. Significantly, the 1827 letter accounts for the turn to prose fiction as process in which Mary abandoned the evocation of

29. NLS MS 3889, fols. 47–48.
30. NLS MS 3905, fols. 7–10. The letter concludes by recording 'a very grateful sense of your former kindness and liberality'. The last word in particular strongly indicates that Scott had sent money.

'overwrought feelings', as it describes 'an exhausted spirit that has wasted itself in effusions which […] have [been] successively relinquished.' Painfully disciplined by repeated disappointments, Mary had evidently turned to writing her novel with a new spirit of meekness, a weariness in which she yet clung to hopes for a limited success. The letter is additionally remarkable for its carefully flattering tone and, in general, it marks a decided change from the sometimes provocative mode of the earlier letters. Here, a plea for help in promoting the new manuscript is urged on a man who is said to exemplify the 'regard for woman always prominent in the generous and manly breast' and is carefully justified with reference to literary standards: '[a]midst the present crowd that engage the public attention—the frivolity the nonsense that obtain both popularity and profit, surely it were not unworthy of Sir Walter Scott to assist the just and moderate claims of feeling and truth?' The letter closes with a postscript, likely by James Bedingfield, that seconds Mary's request and affirms that, despite the melancholy circumstances under which it was written, the unnamed tale unites both humour and pathos.

The 5 September 1827 letter is the last in the series and we cannot know if Scott agreed to Mary's request, nor if he was instrumental in securing a publisher for the work. Yet it is well possible that he had a hand in the matter: Whittaker, Treacher, and Arnot, who published *Longhollow: A Country Tale* in 1829, were the London agents for Robert Cadell, Scott's own publisher at the time. It is also notable that Whittaker's went to some lengths to promote the novel which was advertised on three separate occasions in the daily newspaper, *The Star*, and earned favourable reviews from *The Sun* and the *London Weekly Review*; such attention bestowed on a novel by an unknown author possibly indicates some background influence.[31] And finally, although copies of the novel are very rare, one is still in Scott's library at Abbotsford and was almost certainly sent to Scott by Mary in acknowledgement of his long-standing involvement and as tangible proof that her goal had finally been achieved.[32] The Abbotsford copy was originally stored with other contemporary novels on the shelves of Scott's breakfast room and, like many of these books, is still in boards. However, the bent spine and cut pages of the three volumes are evidence that they were indeed read. And, in the end, such evidence, in combination with the letters that Scott preserved and that allow the story of one woman writer's dreams of authorship to be reconstructed, is a moving tribute to both Mary's perseverance and Scott's interest in his correspondent.

In conclusion, I wish briefly to consider Mary's published writings since these are the point at which our interest in her begins. *Sonnets and Metrical Tales*, as Curran notes, is fascinated by acute psychological states and, although conventionally stressing the dangers of female sensibility, many of the poems are remarkable for their concern with the psychic costs to women of suppressing an inner life. If, at times, the poetry is bold and original, its apparently autobiographical elements also prompt concern for the woman whose often hyper-acute observations and sensitivities seem to have been effects of a highly labile emotional life. The letters to Scott tell us that this woman did indeed feel herself to be an outsider alienated from the various communities to which she might belong, and that her struggles were not the result of solely economic causes. When Scott advised writing a novel rather than poetry, he no doubt had in mind the growing preference of both publishers and readers for fiction. That Mary took up his advice was to acknowledge the wisdom of a suggestion based on Scott's extensive knowledge of the book trade and market forces. However, it is evident from her last surviving letter that other, more personal factors were also involved in her decision. The letter documents Mary's recognition that her own psychic health required a retreat from the intimate and impressionistic mode of her early work. More cautious and controlled than the poetry, *Longhollow* is a didactic tale in which the heroine, Ellen Montague, contracts an unfortunate

31. Advertisements in *The Star* appeared on 19 February 1829 (with the novel said to be 'now ready'); 6 April 1829 (with an extract from the review in *The Sun*), and 7 April 1829 (with an extract from the *London Weekly Review*).

32. I am grateful to Professor Jane Millgate and to the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh for making it possible for me to examine the Abbotsford copy.

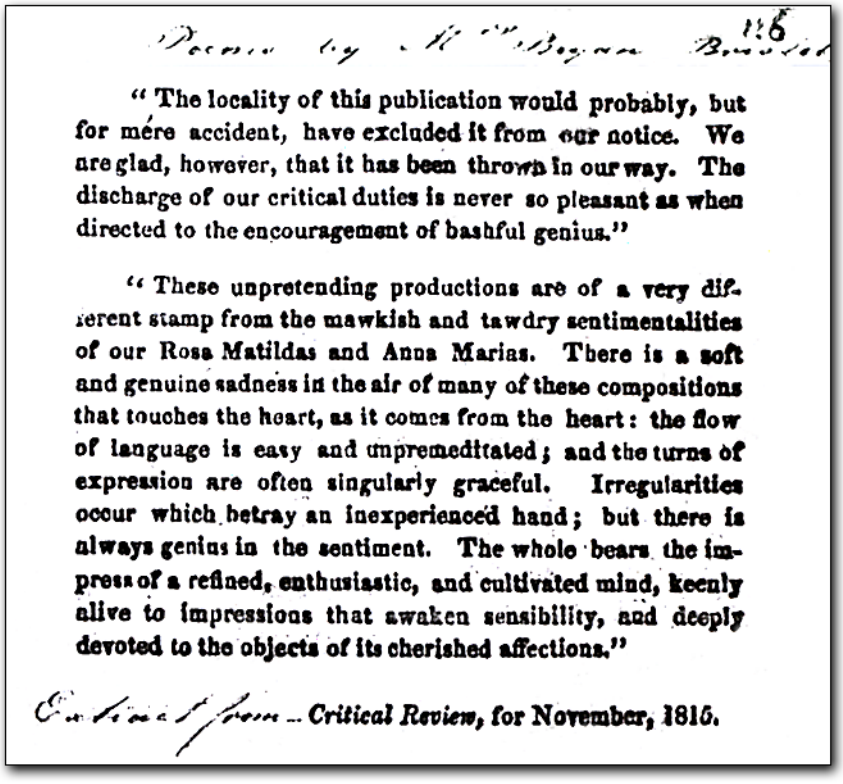
marriage to the dissolute Rochford who was ruined by an indulgent mother. Later, Ellen learns the truth about her husband's character when she rescues a young woman who had fallen into vice after being ruined by Rochford. Eventually, Rochford dies, and Ellen is freed to marry her own choice, Mr Herbert. Because the novel is heavily interspersed with verses, and evidently draws on and develops a vision of a rural environment and community which Mary had enjoyed in her youth, it is tempting to think of it as inscribing a consolatory response to the dilemma of a woman who finds herself in exile from her muse and from the places of her memory. On present evidence, it also marks the end of Mary's literary career.

The bibliographic entry for *Longhollow* records the facts about the novel's publication. Knowledge of Mary's long correspondence with Scott allows the novel to resonate as the work of a particular historic individual. While Mary's story, as it emerges through her letters, remains uniquely hers, it is possible to read in its details evidence for the status that authorship held in the period for other aspiring writers—both women and men—who saw in it possibilities both for augmenting a meagre income and for a psychologically powerful outlet for self-expression and affirmation as they interacted as consumers and producers in a burgeoning literary culture. And, despite the one-sided nature of the surviving correspondence, it also serves as a reminder that Scott himself evidently shared the view that his success carried with it the responsibility to be generous with his advice and encouragement to other literary hopefuls.

II

MARY BRYAN BEDINGFIELD'S LETTERS IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

1.	MS 3889, fols. 115–16	Bristol	10 June 1818
2.	MS 3889, fols. 131–32	Bristol	27 June 1818
3.	MS 3889, fols. 155–57	Bristol	22 July 1818
4.	MS 3889, fols. 187–88	Bristol	16 August 1818
5.	MS 867, fols. 12–13	Stowmarket	8 May 1820
6.	MS 3894, fols. 57–58	Stowmarket	November 1821 [sent in February 1822]
7.	MS 3895, fols. 156–57	Bristol	9 October 1822
8.	MS 3898, fols. 30–33	Stowmarket	20 January 1824
9.	MS 3899, fols. 47–48	Stowmarket	3 August 1824
10.	MS 3905, fols. 7–10	Stowmarket	5 September 1827



"The locality of this publication would probably, but for mere accident, have excluded it from our notice. We are glad, however, that it has been thrown in our way. The discharge of our critical duties is never so pleasant as when directed to the encouragement of bashful genius."

"These unpretending productions are of a very different stamp from the mawkish and tawdry sentimentalities of our Rosa Matildas and Anna Marias. There is a soft and genuine sadness in the air of many of these compositions that touches the heart, as it comes from the heart: the flow of language is easy and unpremeditated; and the turns of expression are often singularly graceful. Irregularities occur which betray an inexperienced hand; but there is always genius in the sentiment. The whole bears the impress of a refined, enthusiastic, and cultivated mind, keenly alive to impressions that awaken sensibility, and deeply devoted to the objects of its cherished affections."

Critical Review, for November, 1815.

Extract of review of Mary Bryan's *Sonnets and Metrical Tales* (1815), sent with her first letter to Scott: NLS MS 3889, fol. 116r.

III

REVIEW OF 'LONGHOLLOW; A COUNTRY TALE', BY MRS BRYAN BEDINGFIELD.

The Sun, Wednesday 28 January 1829, p. 3, cols. 1–2.

We have been more than usually gratified by the perusal of this affecting, instructive, and very unobtrusive tale. It is evidently the production of a female (the name, notwithstanding, on the title-page we take to be a fictitious one) and for a calm, quiet sensibility, a gentle strain of tender affection, and an easy familiar flow of humour, does credit to the head and heart of its fair author. The scene, as the name implies, is laid chiefly in the country, in the middle walks of rustic life, and in the neighbourhood of Sidmouth, Devonshire, near which the valley of Longhollow is supposed to be situated. The personages of the tale consist, for the most part, of two respectable country families, the Montagues and the Blandfords, out of whose lives, calm and unsullied as they are, a series of incidents is wrought up, meditative, impassioned, romantic, adventurous, to an eminent degree; yet in no one respect outstepping the limits of the strictest probability. In her mode of managing her characters, and restricting the localities of her tale, the authoress before us bears no indistinct resemblance to Miss Mitford. She too has taken up a favourite village, peopled it with beings of her own refined creation, described its individualities, its minutest points of interests, thrown a dim religious halo over its little humble Gothic church, shed a sunshine over its green sward, and a picturesqueness over its humblest inhabitants—and, in fact, given it a local habitation and a name, which no one can possibly mistake, But here all further parallel ceases. Miss Mitford caricatures her descriptions and her characters, exaggerates the beautiful, and loses simplicity in straining after effect,—the natural fault of a poetic frame of mind. The authoress of 'Longhollow,' on the contrary, with an equal relish for nature, and the superior refinement in the detail of character, never once loses sight of probability: she keeps strictly within the pale of the tritest truth, and every where purposely subdues her descriptions, from a sort of overweening anxiety to be simple, natural, unsophisticated. Hence the tale of 'Longhollow' to those accustomed to the stimulants of fictitious history—to the meretricious allurements of sentiment—the wildness of romance, or the senseless heroism of 'such faultless monsters as the world ne'er saw,' will be but an insipid composition; but to those who whish to peruse a tale of artless and natural feeling—who wish to recognise the emotions of their own hearts expressed just in the way they would themselves have expressed them—to those whose tastes are thus sound and unpolluted, we strongly recommend the perusal of this delightful novel. If they desire, in particular, to see the female character adequately rendered, they will here be delighted at every page, and once fairly introduced into the society of the simple enthusiastic and high-minded Ellen Montague—the flower of the tale—the lively Gertrude Blandford, the affectionate Mary Bingley, and the unassuming and deeply-sensitive Susan Paulett, whose catastrophe, just subsequent to her marriage with young Frankland, the blighted child of a parricide, is really one of the most affecting episodes we ever read—the reader once introduced into such society, will not easily forget it. As a specimen of the touching manner in which our author draws that hacknied incident—a death-bed, we will extract the details of Mary Bingley's death […]

[lengthy extract omitted]

We have given a longer extract than usual from this delightful tale, so must conclude by recommending it strongly to our readers' notice, as a work of modest but durable pretensions. The incidents we would particularly point out, are those descriptive of the midnight marriage between Susan Paulett and Frankland, in a ruined chapel, where the latter's parents had shed his grandfather's blood; and the adventures that befell Mrs. Betty Broom, a fat, humble, country woman in one of her trips to the great Metropolis. As far as mere style goes, the authoress may defy the most hypercritical exactness. Her language is the 'pure well of English undefliled'—easy—unambitious—idiomatic—and, at times approaching to an impassioned eloquence that makes its way at once to the heart. Thus characterized her tale cannot fail to succeed, and most delighted shall we be, from a mere principle of justice, to hear of its extended and permanent popularity.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sharon Ragaz received her doctorate from the University of Toronto for her thesis, ' "A Living Death": The Madwoman in the novels of Walter Scott'. She has worked as a research assistant in preparing a database union catalogue of Scott's correspondence under the direction of Professor Jane Millgate, shortly to be made available on the National Library of Scotland website. In October 2001, she joined the Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research at Cardiff University to work on its 'British Fiction, 1800–29: A Database of Production, Circulation, and Reception' project.