Publishing and prostitution

Hazel K. Bell


Harriette Wilson, with her box at the Opera and the Peerage at her feet, found herself before she was fifty reduced to solitude, to poverty, to life in foreign parts, to marriage with a Colonel, to scribbling for cash whatever she could remember or invent of her past.

Wilson’s memoirs were first published (by John Joseph Stockdale) in instalments in 1825 – the publication financed by the ingenious method of writing to ‘various people whose names figured in the book, telling them that they would find themselves unmercifully quizzed in a forthcoming work by Miss Wilson, and suggesting that a cash payment would prevent unpleasantness’. At the end of each published part appeared ‘an advertisement of the names of the people to be mentioned in the next number, thus giving them another chance of buying themselves off’. Wellington – so Harriette said – wrote to threaten a prosecution (a different story from ‘Publish and be d—d’). ‘Wellington – so Harriette mentioned in the next number, thus giving them another chance of buying themselves off’. Wellington – so Harriette said – wrote to threaten a prosecution (a different story from ‘Publish and be d—d’).

The Memoirs enjoyed a succès de scandale. Thirty-five ‘editions’ appeared in a year; they were translated into French and German, appearing in Paris, Brussels and Stuttgart, and were serialized in Bell’s Life in London. There were libel suits. The printer sued the publisher . . . for work done and paper supplied, stating that at the beginning he contracted to print 1,000 sheets a week, but ‘such was the prurient taste of the town that 17,000 a week were shortly called for’. The unfortunate plaintiff was non-suited on account of the objectionable character of the work, the responsibility for which was shared by him and Stockdale.

The Memoirs sometimes figure now in lists of the most intriguing first sentences of volumes. They open with: ‘I shall not say why and how I became, at the age of fifteen, the mistress of the Earl of Craven’.

In 1831 Stockdale brought out a new edition of the Memoirs, incorporating previously unpublished parts. Thirkell observes: ‘This edition is also remarkable for an objectionable character of the work, the responsibility for which was shared by him and Stockdale.

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The index of The fortunes of Harriette itself, for which Mr Frederick Page (who he?) is thanked, shows its own curious features. The preliminary note reads, in its entirety (and in parenthesis):

(The dates, where given, are for identification, or to indicate that there is matter of interest in the D.N.B.)

Some specimen entries are:

Beaumont, Mrs., a nouveau riche
Dickens, parallels from
Dubauchet, Amelia (Amy); and black puddings; the Fury; a liar; her pronunciations
Dubauchet, Frances (Fanny); her beauty; one of the Graces
Dubauchet, Sophia, afterwards Lady Berwick (1794–1875); and the black puddings; Scott and
Dubauchet, another sister, unnamed, married Lord Lascelles, son Frenchman, a, in the coach
Irishman, an, in the coach
Julia Johnstone; on Amy; and Lord Berwick; on Brougham; her Confessions; as a Grace, Harriette on; on Harriette
Lamb, Hon. Frederick James, afterwards third Viscount Melbourne (1782–1853); and Lady Abdy; Greville on; is tiresome
‘Montgomery, the dancing’
Quinten, Quintin, or Quinton, Colonel
Rochfort, W. H.; Harriette’s first meeting with; her devotion to; his treatment of her; in the Fleet prison; their Fleet marriage; as ‘the Colonel’, at Marlborough Street Police Court
Rochfort, Harriette as Mrs. or Madame Shakespeare, Harriette and Shakespeare, Stockdale and W., Lady Walpole, General ?George (1758–1835)

The entry for the main character is distinguished by having the name in capital letters, and being divided into five paragraphs. We give only parts:

WILSON, HARRIETTE (c. 1789–c.1846) . . .; her ‘protectors’: Lord Craven; Frederick Lamb; Marquis of Lorne; Duke of Wellington; Lord Ponsonby; Lord Worcester; Richard Meyler; Lord Ebrington; Sir Charles Bampfylde; William Henry Rochfort in Mayfair; at Rouen; . . . personal encounters with the Duke of Beaufort; Lord F. Bentinck; Brougham; Brumnell; Byron; Lord Francis Conyngham; Berkeley Craven; the Duke of Devonshire; Lord Dudley; Lord G. Leveson-Gower; first Lord Melbourne; John Murray; the Prince Regent; Scott; Tom Sheridan; General Walpole described by Julia; by Lord Rivers; by Scott, 216–18; her literary style; described by Scott, 209, 217; by Stockdale; her reading first writings . . .

Angela Thirkell writes in her preface to The fortunes of Harriette:

Her Memoirs of her own life contain about a quarter of a million words, are inaccurate, and totally regardless of chronology. But the style is so dashing, the characterisation is so true, the conversations are so vividly reported, that retelling gives but a poor idea of her brilliant, slipshod impertinence.
Thirkell adds, ‘[Harriette] never mentions dates, and it is hardly worth searching too closely into her chronology’. This being the case, perhaps we should hardly expect a precise, objective index either to the Memoirs or to the book based on them, and simply enjoy what we have.

Acknowledgement
Extracts from Angela Thirkell, The fortunes of Harriette (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1936) are reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

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‘How to divorce your son’, by Deborah Moggach

This short story appeared exclusively in Good Housekeeping (UK edition) in August 2000. It is told in two voices, by Muriel, a widow in her late sixties, and by Martin, her fortyish divorced son, whose wife has left him for a work colleague with a full head of hair. Martin is an indexer. His mother says: ‘He compiles indexes for technical books – work about which I find it hard to summon up any interest.’

Martin is an enthusiast:

Compiling indexes is the only thing that keeps me sane. Out of chaos, it creates order. There is a certain beauty in it – sorting out priorities, making connections.

He sees much of life as a series of cross references.

Marriage: see under Humiliation. See also under Sex. Sex: see under Infrequency of. See also under Performance, inadequacy of.

We see both viewpoints. Muriel feels obliged to cook for Martin, though she had been relishing the freedoms of habituated widowhood. Martin feels obliged to eat the meals, despite his concern for the cholesterol content – rather Adrian Moleishly he says, ‘I let her care for her little boy because that’s what I will always be in her eyes’.

Martin’s attempt to update his mother’s wardrobe makes her desperate enough to concoct a Plan. She gets him to a library function in Chesterfield also attended by a number of women with whom he had been acquainted as a boy. Being a short story, it doesn’t work out quite as she expects. Martin concludes:

As I said, an index makes sense of things. Mine does, now. Jowell, Martin: schooldays, see under Bullying; Mother, see under Complicated relationship with; Marriage, see under Misery and Misunderstanding; Happiness in middle years . . . See under Love.

It may seem to some readers that Martin is rather a caricature of an indexer – middle-aged, overweight, hemmed in by books. On the other hand, nobody else is likely to come up with the whorls of cross-references with which he defines his life. This is a three-dimensional miniature of an indexer with whom we surely have something – but hopefully not too much – in common.

Christine Headley, Stroud