OF the many cross-currents of romanticism in the late eighteenth century the one which has aroused the most ridicule is the so-called Della Cruscan movement. Its very name has become synonymous with all that is vapid and absurdly superficial. Yet some of the leaders of the movement will repay serious study, as evincing interests and traits usually associated with the more famous romantic poets in the next century.

It is not the purpose of the present article to discuss in detail the whole Della Cruscan episode, although in the light of recent discoveries some re-estimate is sorely needed; but rather to print excerpts from an interesting series of letters written to Mrs. Piozzi by the self-styled Della Crusca himself, Robert Merry. This correspondence, largely now in the John Rylands Library, actually reveals many facets of his character much better than do his published poems. It shows the erratic idiosyncrasies of a gifted man who somehow lacked the balance and discipline needed in a great writer. Merry had all of the surface traits of a Lord Byron—the spectacular love affairs, the masochistic sense of evil in his own nature, the feeling of tremendous inner power and pride in his own resources. And he had, too, many of Byron’s redeeming traits—his hatred of oppression, his intense feeling about human freedom, his passionate worship of beauty. But something was missing, and instead of the misunderstood genius he thought himself to be, Merry appears to us, after a century and a half, merely a foolish poseur, vainly striving to impress the world with his greatness.

1 There is no thorough, accurate analysis of the movement in print. J. M. Longaker’s *The Della Cruscans and William Gifford*, Philadelphia, 1924, was written without any consultation of manuscript material or even the files of the *World* newspaper. For partial accounts see R. B. Clark, *William Gifford*, New York, 1930; R. Marshall, *Italy in English Literature, 1755-1815*, New York, 1934; and my own *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)*, Oxford, 1941.
Robert Merry was born in London in April, 1755—his father a governor of Hudson Bay Company, and his mother the eldest daughter of Sir John Willes, Lord Chief Justice. At an early age he was sent to Harrow, where his tutor was the celebrated Dr. Parr, and later to Christ’s College, Cambridge. But from what meagre records we have of his early years it is apparent that he was too gay and independent to enjoy quiet academic life. He was admitted to Cambridge April 2, 1771, was irregular in his studies, and finally left without a degree. From the start he had been destined for the law, and for a time was actually entered at Lincoln’s Inn, but he found the pleasures of London fashionable life more to his liking. Wealthy, handsome, and high-strung, he threw himself with vigour into the dissipations of the Capital.

At his father’s death Merry inherited an independent fortune. His first act was to purchase a commission in the Horse Guards, and as a dashing officer he must have cut something of a figure. Gambling, it will be remembered, was the popular vice of the day: at White’s and Almack’s it was not uncommon for young bloods to lose ten, fifteen, or twenty thousand pounds in an evening’s play. Young Merry, consequently, soon had lost a large part of his fortune, and was forced to sell out his commission as adjutant and lieutenant to the first troop commanded by Lord Lothian. Ruined financially, and unable to continue his pleasant life in the London clubs, the pleasure gardens, the masquerades, and the salons, Merry saw only one recourse left open to him—to go abroad and spend the next three or four years wandering about France, the Low Countries, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. On the Continent he could live more cheaply, but still pose as a fashionable English gentleman and philanderer. At twenty-five, then, “a disappointment to everybody but himself,” he set out for new adventures.

We do not know much about his early wanderings about Europe, but by 1784 he had joined the English colony at Florence, where he idled away his time in a variety of pursuits. Like

1 The chief authority for Merry’s early life is his obituary notice, Gent. Mag., LXIX (March, 1799), 252-4. The account in the D.N.B. is largely derived from this.

2 J. A. Cramb, in the D.N.B. account of Merry.
Lord Byron, Merry always found three things necessary for his existence: love, literary ambition, and disillusionment with the social and political tenets of the day. In Florence he found ample opportunity for all three. He carried on an active and dangerous liaison with the notorious Lady Cowper—active because he was young and ardent, dangerous because his rival for the affections of the lady was the ruling Grand Duke Leopold himself.\(^1\) He found release for his artistic and social ideals in writing verses and discussing politics with a group of dissident Italian authors. These last were more than mere dilettante scribblers, for included in the group were Ippolito Pindemonte, Lorenzo Pignotti, and the Count of Elci, some of the finest poets of the day.\(^2\) They introduced the young Englishman to the subtle rhythms and verse forms of Italian poetry, and seem to have encouraged him to imitation and translation.

Shortly before Merry's arrival in Florence, the Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany had abolished the famous Accademia della Crusca, founded for the purpose of stimulating pure poetry in the manner of the great classics, Dante and Petrarch, and instead had instituted the Accademia Fiorentina, which he kept under his own control. Merry became a member of the latter institution, but his native liberal spirit chafed under the arbitrary curb now placed on literary and artistic composition. Together with two other young Englishmen, Bertie Greatheed and William Parsons, and encouraged by his Italian friends, he decided to attempt to revive the old ideals of the banished Accademia della Crusca. It might thus be possible to circumvent Leopold and still uphold the precious traditions of Tuscan poetry. Spurred on by these hopes, Merry, Parsons and Greatheed began to write numerous verses, often imitating Italian rhymes and meters and on Italian themes. Space does not permit more of a discussion of the work of this Florence coterie, which has been excellently described by Dr. Roderick Marshall in his *Italy in English Literature, 1755-1815*. It may be enough


\(^2\) R. Marshall, *Italy in English Literature, 1755-1815*, pp. 174-92. Merry translated one of Pignotti’s poems, published in 1785 in Florence as *Roberto Manners, poemetto in versi sciolti*. 
to say that in 1784 a few of this group of political and literary malcontents combined to issue a little volume called the *Arno Miscellany,* being a collection of fugitive pieces written by members of a society called the Oziosi. But of far more importance was another collection, printed the next year, entitled the *Florence Miscellany.*

Elsewhere I have told the story of Mrs. Piozzi's arrival in Florence in the early summer of 1785, of her introduction to this mixed group of Italo-English poets, and of the printing of the *Florence Miscellany.* Although she herself wrote the Preface to the work, she does not seem to have had any inkling of the serious implications of some of the verses. What interested her were the light stanzas of compliment and graceful romance which filled the volume. It might even be suspected that she was far more intrigued by the poets themselves than by their work. At least we know that she was immediately attracted to the good-looking, flamboyant Merry, so much so that when he was threatened with arrest by their landlord, Meghitt, she moved to another hotel. Moreover, Merry's dangerous liaison with Lady Cowper provoked a bit of well-meaning if too flowery advice:

```
Thou too, who oft hast strung the lyre
To liveliest notes of gay desire,
No longer seek these scorching flames,
Or trifle with Italian Dames,
But haste to Britain's chaster Isle
Receive some Fair-one's virgin smile,
Accept her vows, reward her truth
And guard from ills her artless youth:
Keep her from knowledge of the crimes
Which taint the sweets of warmer climes;
```

While this moral suggestion probably made little impression on the lover, it at least helped to cement what appeared on the

1 Printed in Florence at the Stamperia Bonducciana, 1784. It is not known exactly who the contributors to this volume were, but Merry was probably involved. See Walpole's letter to Sir Horace Mann, August 9, 1784. (Any standard edition.)

2 *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)*, pp. 248-54.

3 MS. called "Mainwaring Piozziana," now in the possession of Sir Randle Mainwaring, II, 53.

surface to be a fast friendship. Consequently when the Piozzis left Florence in September for Southern Italy they left the emotional Merry in tears, fearing that they might never meet again.

Travelling south through Rome, the Piozzis finally reached Naples, whence the lady sent news and verses to her new friend in Florence. Merry replied on January 10, 1786, in the first of his letters now known to have survived. In a fulsome strain of compliment he began:

Your elegant verses dear Madam which I received in your obliging letter of the 26th of Dec gave me great pleasure, they are masterly, or rather mistlessly, in short they are worthy of the pen of Mme Piozzi. They appear to me excellent throughout, but the 4th stanza pleases me particularly.

Where mid cold Staffa’s columns rude
Resides majestik solitude—

are two divine lines, and the epithet majestik is extremely beautiful. Continue Madam to charm your absent friends by your writings and delight those that are near with your company, for in good truth your talents and information would have made you respectable had you not been agreeable, and at the same time your personal accomplishments and amiable manners must have made you agreeable had you been without talents. don’t suspect me of flattery; for I never use it—

During the autumn the small stock of copies of the Florence Miscellany, which had been privately issued, had become exhausted, and Merry added that he had written to Parsons, the nominal editor, about a reprinting. So far he had had no reply. Then, after many ardent expressions of hope that he might soon see them back on the banks of the Arno, he closed with a postscript:

I dare say it was Mr Dickinson who did not like my verses. I here send you some bad verses in return for your good, they are melancholy, but that is the genius of my muse. . . .

Just what verses Merry inclosed in his letter we are not certain, but not long afterwards Mrs. Piozzi had in her possession a version of his long poem Paulina, for early in May when she

1 The original of this letter is now in the Adam collection in the library of the University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y. It was sold by Mrs. Piozzi’s heirs at Sotheby’s on January 22, 1907.
and her husband with the Greatheeds floated on a barge down the Brenta from Padua to Venice they occupied their time reading "that glorious poem." Her approbation was immediately written to Merry, still in Florence, along with another request for copies of the Florence Miscellany and with news of her own recent publication in London of the Anecdotes of Dr. Johnson. He replied on May 29, 1786:

I received Dear Mrs Piozzi's obliging letter by the last post, and am extremely sorry it is not in my power to send her any Florence Miscellanies, as my stock is totally exhausted, this I hope however her goodness will excuse. . . . Your approbation of Paulina flatters my vanity not a little, and as I have made several alterations and additions, I mean to give it to the world with my other Poems immediately by means of the renowned Mr Cadell, who has undertaken to print them at his own risque. I therefore implore your protection and encouragement for these my unfortunate children when you may happen to meet them in company, and am sure you will palliate their absurdities and faults, out of kindness to their father who has a most sincere and unalterable regard for you and Mrs Piozzi. I shall most certainly leave this place in a few weeks, or probably days. I shall first direct my course to Switzerland; and then homewards. and I hope it may be my lot to find something like happiness yet before I die. but I have been so long accustomed to the reverse that I almost despair. My worthy friends the Greatheeds will not be convinced that England has any defects or its societies any inconveniences, or Seccaturation till they have again been there, when I prophecy that they will soon undertake another Journey. . . .

Then with a florid and complimentary close he added, as usual, a postscript: "I heard from Parsons the other day, he was very well and sent me some good verses. He is an excellent young man."

The fact that Merry had been able to find a reputable London publisher like Cadell willing to consider bringing out his verses may be explained by the fact that some of his work had already been surreptitiously published in England with definite success. As Parsons wrote to Mrs. Piozzi on July 8, "The Editors of the European Magazine have somehow got hold of the Florence Miscellany, and are entertaining their readers every month with selections from it." Actually, excerpts had been printed not

---

2 J.R.L. Eng. MS. 558, I.
3 The original was formerly in the possession of the late Mr. A. Edward Newton. See also Parsons' letter to Mrs. Piozzi, October 1, 1786, from London, for his later reactions (Ibid., 17).
only in the *European Magazine* from February through June, but in the *London Chronicle* as well. Merry was in England for a short time during the summer of 1786, and there can be little doubt that he, like Parsons, was inwardly pleased to see his verses in the English public prints. At least we know that neither made any real move to stop the numerous quotations from the *Florence Miscellany*, which continued to appear during the autumn. Merry himself was probably more interested in speeding the publication of his narrative poem, *Paulina; or, the Russian Daughter*, a rather distressing tale founded on a real example of parental severity. “The renowned Mr Cadell” declined to publish the work (if indeed he ever considered it), so that when the slim quarto finally did appear in the spring of the next year it was brought out by Robson instead.¹

Still finding England not too hospitable, Merry spent the autumn of 1786 again in Italy, but when the Piozzis finally reached Brussels early in February, 1787, they found him in the English colony there, as usual dashing off verses on any and every opportunity. Moreover, from Mrs. Piozzi’s diary we know that he had now begun the practice of sending them at once to newspapers across the channel.² Perhaps the reason was that one of his old intimate friends, Edward Topham, a fellow commoner at Cambridge and a fellow officer in the Horse Guards, had started a paper which he called the *World*. Aided by the Rev. Charles Este, Topham was attempting to make his paper an upper-class social journal;³ consequently he welcomed light occasional verse from any of his wide acquaintance. He may even have actively solicited contributions. Certainly it was only after Topham, on May 21, had printed a half-column sketch of the life of Robert Merry, ending with the desire that he soon publish his writings, that the stream of verses from

¹ It is reviewed in the *Monthly Review*, LXXVII (Oct. 1787), 325.
² *Thraliana*, ed. K. C. Balderston, Oxford, 1942, II, 796. All following references are to this admirable edition, recently published. See also the *World*, February 20, 1787.
Merry began to flow. When they did, they were not signed directly, but instead by the famous nom de plume by which he was ever afterward known. On June 29, 1787, the World published a poem, "Adieu and Recall to Love," signed "Della Crusca."

It will be remembered that Merry had never been a member of the famous Accademia della Crusca. He merely assumed the name because it stood in his mind for resistance to oppression and for the priceless heritage of great poetry. As an active liberal and a romantic poet, he must have felt that the very name was symbolic of his ideals.

The romantic combination of disillusionment and hope in "Adieu and Recall to Love" struck an immediate response in at least one female reader. Who could resist the closing lines?

O rend my heart with ev'ry pain!
But let me, let me love again.

Certainly not the lady who signed herself "Anna Matilda"! She answered on July 10, "O! Seize again thy golden quill," and the famous poetical correspondence had begun. For the next two years in the World the sentimental verses between Della Crusca and Anna Matilda continued, while the reading public watched enthralled. Since Merry was on the Continent for much of this time there were often long intervals between their interchanges. But throughout the entire period Merry kept bombarding the World with verses on various other topics. During the next six months poems signed by Della Crusca appeared in issues of July 26, 31, August 10, 21, 23, 25, September 27, October 17, 23, 30, November 16, December 5, 25, 31, only three being directly addressed to Anna Matilda.

Della Crusca's verses made an immediate appeal to a certain class of readers. Mrs. Piozzi had from the first thought "exceedingly highly of Merry's poetical powers"; and Topham

1 Verses by Merry had appeared in earlier issues, for instance, see the World for February 20, 1787, but the number was not great until after June of this year.
2 Burney collection of newspapers in the British Museum.
3 Letter to Samuel Lysons, November 4, 1785, printed in Bentley's Misc., XXVIII (1850), 314. See also Thraliana, II, 682. Anna Seward's opinion, on the other hand, was not so favourable. See J.R.L. Eng. MS. 565, 6.
on November 18, 1787, wrote to his mistress, Mrs. Wells: "The verses of Della Crusca are the most beautiful things I ever saw or read in my life. I would give all that I am worth to be the author of them." To us to-day, familiar as we are with the work of the great romantic poets of the next century, such a critical estimate seems incredible, but it must be remembered that in 1787 Merry's extravagant use of epithets, his foreign themes, and his occasional obscurity were new and exciting. What Shelley and Byron did supremely well Merry tried to do and failed. Nevertheless, to many readers of his own day the excesses and lack of classical restraint were appealing. Moreover, the mystery surrounding his nom de plume increased the romantic appeal, and the editors were quick to use all the devices at their disposal to increase curiosity. Of course, Topham and Este knew the identity of the author, but they did not want the public to know. Thus on December 31, 1787, after printing Della Crusca's "Elegy," they added a note that the Della Cruscan verses were anonymous and sent from Europe. The last had been posted from Brussels. The editors further attempted to stir up interest by printing numerous conjectures as to the authorship. On January 2, 1788, the supposition was advanced that the verses were written by "Mr. Vaughan and his daughter," and on April 3 were listed numerous attributions, including Edward Jerningham, William Coxe, William Mason, and Mrs. Damer.

While curiosity was rife in London social and literary circles, Merry secretly arrived in England from Brussels. That he

1 Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sumbel, late Wells, I, 69.
2 In Thraliana, January 2, 1788, Mrs. Piozzi wrote: "Mr Merry is a prodigious capital Writer of Verses, his Elegy on the 31st of Dec is demy divine—what Pity that Fellow should put himself out of Friendship's reach to help or forward so—perhaps the Public will take up his Cause & I hope they will—no one Person could save Merry from Destruction, except Miss Pulteney would marry him. I am in hourly fear of hearing he has cut his own Throat" (II, 703-4).
3 Horace Walpole wrote to the Countess of Ossory on December 16, 1787, of a Captain Merry who was to act at Richmond House, and the next day added that "Mr. Merry is an excellent Lissardo." Probably this was Robert Merry's brother, who also had been in the army. It is doubtful that Robert Merry arrived in England from Brussels much before February, 1788.
hugely enjoyed making as much of a mystery about his move-
ments as possible is evident from his correspondence. He
had been built up into a mystery man and meant to play the
part. Merry had not seen Mrs. Piozzi for a year; he had
last written to her on May 29, the preceding spring. Wishing
now to renew old acquaintance, he wrote to her on February 20,
1788:

With shame and confusion I throw myself upon your mercy. I confess myself
guilty of negligence towards you, but never of forgetfulness—However culpable
I may appear in not having sooner acknowledged the happiness I received from
your last letter I can yet assure you the fault has been in my hand and not in my
heart. My tongue is often most silent when my feelings are the strongest, and
I am frequently prevented saying what I ought, from the despair of saying what
I wish. To be ranked amongst the number of your friends the world will readily
allow to be an honor, but I know also that it is the greatest consolation. I never
can forget the happy hours I have spent with you and Mr. Piozzi, or how much
I owe to your Countenance and kindness, still to enjoy both is my ardent wish,
and I trust will be my fortune, though I am conscious never can be my desert.
There is no need for me to own that I have many vices, though there is much
for me to prove that I have any virtues—yet in good truth I have one, and that
is gratitude—may your belief of the assertion save me from your displeasure.
Write me then Dear Madam a line of forgiveness (under cover to my Brother)
it will be a charity that if not well bestowed shall be most thankfully received.
I grow more and more attached to study and reflection though the latter teaches
me that the goodness of my friends towards me proceeds from pity and not
from approbation. I languish for Johnson's letters which I see are promised,
though not so much as for one from you which from my conduct I can scarce
promise myself—but which the knowledge of the benevolence of your temper
flatters me will be granted. Paulina has produced me a trifle, a mere trifle—
but if it has gained me your suffrages, my reward is sufficiently great. Perhaps
you know I sometimes write under the signature of Della Crusca, tell me your
real opinion of any of those compositions—but I fear you will rather think me
of the Straw than of the Bran. But I have encroached too long upon your time.

Then after more compliments, he significantly added: “At
present, and for some little time longer, I should be obliged to
my friends not to say that I am in England.”

1 Some of his desire for secrecy, to be sure, may have resulted from financial
difficulties, and a fear of creditors.
2 I have not seen this letter. It was sold at Sotheby’s on January 22, 1907.
3 J.R.L. Eng. MS. 892.
One week later, on the 27th, he wrote again:

Your very kind and flattering letter gave me both pleasure and consolation, and your approbation of Della Crusca was truly grateful to his vanity. I rather doubt Miss Seward being Anna Matilda, as she says in her last Ode

"Love on my couch has pour'd each sweet"

Now tho' the circumstance is very possible, yet the confession is hardly probable for a Miss.

... I should be most sincerely hurt if Greatheed should meet with any disappointment about his Tragedy. He is an excellent Man, and I hope will gain the fame he has a right to expect. As Pope says, "the Players and I are luckily no friends." My Tragedy was half approved, and then quite rejected. Perhaps it is well for me, as the condemnation of a play, is the destruction of all fame.

In the Course of a very few months I shall either be married or look at the Turks with the Russian Army. In both cases you see I may chance to get the plague tho I wish to remain quiet in England. I have seen enough of foreign pleasures, foreign follies and foreign miseries, and am so well convinced of the decided superiority of my own Country in every thing essential, that to remain in it, ducere leniter aevum, and enjoy the company & conversation of my worthy friends is the utmost of my ambition.

Should you chance to see in the papers an account of the late Pretender, you may guess the Author. Adieu Dear Madam. May every comfort and happiness ever attend yourself & Mr Piozzi thro a long life is the constant prayer of Yr most grateful & truly affectionate Friend

Robert Merry.¹

Of his activities during the next few weeks we have only hints from Mrs. Piozzi in her journal and engagement books.² From the latter it is evident that Merry, together with Parsons and Greatheed, came to a few of her entertainments, though the friendly link between the former collaborators was close to breaking. Merry was irked because Greatheed, under the pseudonym of Reuben, had ventured to address lines to the unknown Anna Matilda.³ Moreover, both Merry and Greatheed had written tragedies, but Greatheed was much more successful in getting his play, The Regent, produced, possibly because Mrs. Siddons had lived for some years with the Greatheeds at Guy's

¹ J.R.L. Eng. MS. 558, 2. The lady whom Merry was considering marrying was, so Mrs. Piozzi suspected, Mrs. Hervey of Aiton, a popular novelist (Thraliana, II, 762). See also note 2, p. 82, above.
² See Hester Lynch Piozzi, p. 334; also Thraliana, II, 713.
Merry's, on the other hand, entitled *Ambitious Vengeance*, never reached the stage. The resulting jealousy, further fanned by Parsons' and Greatheed's obvious distaste for Merry's theatrical attempts at mystification concerning the Della Cruscan poems, at last led to a complete rupture. Just what brought on the final explosion we may never know; but something certainly stirred the excitable Merry to frenzy. On March 24 he dashed off a hurried scrawl to Mrs. Piozzi:

As I have received numberless marks of kindness from you, I am emboldened to ask a favor of you—which is that you will endeavour to discountenance an opinion which is gone forth, & which I have foolishly encouraged of being the Author of those Poems signed Della Crusca. The truth of this odd affair I will one day clear up to you, in the meantime believe me Ever. . .

Scrawled at the side was, “I am going abroad immediately! Parsons & Greatheed have entirely cut me—but that’s natural!” and on the reverse, “The account of the Pretender is not what I wrote.” Then at the top, as an afterthought, he thanked her for the present of her edition of Johnson's letters.

Was there ever such a sudden about-face? Only a month before he had confided to Mrs. Piozzi the secret of his authorship of the Della Cruscan verses, a fact which she had long known, and now he wished her to tell everyone the reverse. The lady could certainly be forgiven if she was a bit puzzled and disgusted. Even when Merry called on the 28th and attempted to make some explanation, the air was not cleared.

Merry has not behaved quite right somehow, giving us all Suspicion that he envies Greatheed—very foolish if so, no Man breathing—no Man who has breathed since Thompson drew his last Sigh can write like Della Crusca.

---

1 T. Campbell, *Life of Mrs. Siddons*, London, 1834, I, 51-2. *The Regent* first appeared on March 29 and was favourably received. After the second night it was withdrawn because of the illness of Mrs. Siddons. Late in April it was revived. According to the *World* it then played to packed houses, and the receipts for the fourth night were £300. For references to the tragedy see the *World* for April 10, 18, 24, 26, 28, May 5, 10, 19, and June 4.


Greatheed is good, and flexible, and kind hearted, high in Principles of Religion, & sweet of Temper; too easy perhaps, and plastic in the hands of artful or violent Associates, who can without much difficulty mould him as their Passions not his own direct.

Were Jaffeir a better Character, he would resemble Greatheed.

Merry is a dissipated Man become truly wicked; by Accident, rather than by Principle however: of elegant and airy Manners, but of a Melancholy and apparently Conscience-smitten Spirit. his Distresses interest one's Tenderness, his Courage & Learning claim one's true Respect; Merry is a Scholar, a Soldier, a Wit and a Whig. beautiful in his Person, gay in his Conversation, scornful of a feeble Soul, but full of Reverence for a good one though it be not great. Were Merry daringly, instead of artfully wicked, he would resemble Pierre.¹

Merry, who could so easily go from the heights of optimism to the depths, was now in one of his periodic fits of despair. After some weeks, on April 21, he wrote to Mrs. Piozzi:

I called at your house yesterday with intention to have taken leave of yourself and Mr Piozzi but as you were out, permit me to assure you in writing of my sincerely good wishes and to thank you for all kindnesses in all places. I have I believe written the last Poem I shall ever write, you will think me grown wiser than I was, and I feel I am more prudent. Literary pretensions awake malice and excite envy. Ignorance and Silence are treated with complacency. A most Elegant writer has somewhere said that "One Friend's unkindness is harder to bear than the wisest, and justest, and harshest censures of all the wits and scholars put together." Experience has lately convinced me of the truth of the above remark—it is a cruel conviction. yet I doubt not, I have been treated as I deserved, tho' not as I expected. Well in future I will take nothing to heart, & I will love nobody, for as I never can love any persons more sincerely than those whose unkindness and neglect I have of late experienced, so henceforth I shall care but little for others. I trust and hope I have not entirely forfeited your good opinion. . . .²

But although he had now forewarned further poetical endeavour, he added in a postscript:

A Quarto Edition of certain Poems with a Tragedy at the end, is now in the press. by what I hear, it will be the finest & best printed book in the language. The Editor means to dedicate it to Sheridan, as that gentleman (ipse of men) has offered to patronize it, and has expressed himself in terms of the strongest approbation of the verses of D.C. he said, apropos of the dedication, that nothing out of a political line wouId gratify him more.³

¹ II, 714. Jaffeir and Pierre are characters in Otway's Venice Preserved.
³ In Topham's dedicatory epistle to Sheridan, dated June 7, 1788, and prefixed to the published poems, he stated: "Of their merit, if my opinion has not
The kindhearted Mrs. Piozzi did all she could to effect a reconciliation between the old friends. She recorded that “Merry begged Greavehead’s Pardon,” and “tried very sweetly to make matters up”; but Greavehead and Parsons refused to be moved. Suspicion and jealousy had gone too far. On April 29 the angry Merry wrote from his brother’s home in the country:

When I had the pleasure of seeing you at your own house—I thought the difference between Mr. Greavehead & me would have been over—but I was deceived—Mr. G had wrote me a very haughty & a very wise letter, wherein he charges me with never having called upon him—with having been mortified by the success of his Tragedy, and with having denied certain Poems to be mine. These offences which he calls atrocious I endeavoured to disprove—and concluded my letter (which I wrote him in answer) by saying that—if however I had offended him I would make any concessions rather than forfeit his friendship—that I most sincerely begged his pardon—to this unworthy condescension on my part he has returned no answer and not satisfied with treating me unlike a friend, he judges it apropos to treat me unlike a Gentleman. But milk-sop masters who have been tied to their mother’s apron till they are twenty never know how to behave themselves—but I should have myself recollected that the person who does the unkindness, never can forgive it. I suppose Greavehead is like Bayes—his play is his touchstone, if a man does not like his play, he knows what to think of him. As for the Chichester Mealman, Parsons, I am heartily glad to be off—I never much liked him—a certain priggish self-sufficiency, with a pert ill-breeding which he constantly displays, always highly disgusted me—I never wish to see him again, or be forced to read any of his Poetry. His Daughters of Paeon, his amaranthian flow’rs &c &c—He is a Poet of Shreds & patches & his head is a kind of Heralds Office of poetical pedigrees. Yet this man whose mortification at my repute as D.C. was so visible as to strike my Brother on the first interview, this man has poisoned Greavehead’s mind, & taught him to believe I felt envy. But as they declared war against me without cause, I shall enter the lists without fear—I will show them no more mercy than they have done kindness to me. yet will I always be a fair and open enemy.

His one hope was that the contagion of ill opinion had not “spread to her heart” also. Then he added:

On Monday I go abroad (if nothing happens to prevent me). I mean immediately to go to Russia, and if possible I shall return in November, to publish some works. One Poem in which there is neither spleen Satire nor ridicule I shall take the liberty to address to you.

been declared, I am free to say I know no modern Poems their superior. I am more happy that your opinion has confirmed mine.”

1 Thraliana, 11, 717. 2 J.R.L. Eng. MS. 558, 5.
D.C. will not be published this month—I have sold them outright—and not badly. when they are finish’d you will receive a copy. . . . I shall often trouble you with a letter while on my travels. I have brought my affairs into a decent train, & am not liable to any more distress.

Two days later Mrs. Piozzi made the entry in Thraliana: “Merry—our charming Della Crusca is gone to Paris in Company with Mr Este;—should Parsons meet ’em there, some sparring might ensue.”

The next letter from Merry was despatched from Rheims on June 2, 1788. After a somewhat mixed and sententious opening,

If the Circle of our friendships becomes every day smaller, it should grow warmer as it contracts, like the rays of a burning glass—when we have shaken away the chaff though we have less in quantity, what remains is solid grain, he insisted that when he had been abroad before he had not been too sure of her regard for him, but now he was convinced. Moreover, he recommended to her good graces his own sister and brother.

Since I left you I have passed ten days at Paris—Mr Este was with me part of the time he is a very worthy sensible pleasant man and I lament his loss extremly. I am now going Northward—instead of to Spain, which country I shall reserve for a winter. . . .

I have got the Regent, or rather the Poem which Mr Greatheed lays before his Country. I think the term Poem is ill applied to a work in which I hope to prove there is not a line of true Poetry. the language is mere literary lumber generally stolen, and always ill applied. The similies which have no exactness, put me in mind of plumbs which a dull housewife should thrust into her pudding after it was boil’d, & then call it a plumb pudding—an instant, which formerly used to seem an age, in this elegant production is a world. The plucking a Rebel from his nest is equally happy—Rebels used to have strong holds, and hiding places—now I find they have nests. Gomez walking across the scene, that Ansaldo may recollect him is called stage effect—but it puts me in mind of the old adage—Talk of the Devil and his imps will appear.—You may think me cross—but having discovered the falsity of that sentence in Sallust—“quos aeque armis cogere, neque auro parare queas, officio et fide parantur”—I shall now adopt for my motto—nemo me impune lacescit. if Mr Greatheed cannot feel, I will make him if possible repent, as I could not get justice, I will try to have revenge.

1 J.R.L. Eng. MS. 558, 6. The Regent had been published on May 10.
Scribbled at the end was a postscript: "Bell has altered his intention of printing the book so finely." Obviously, he thought, all his hopes of a sumptuous printing for the Della Cruscan poems were to be dashed to the ground. Nevertheless, Bell, the publisher, was doing what he could to advertise the work of the distant Merry. As early as May 17 the World had printed a letter from Della Crusca empowering Topham to publish his verses, together with others, and ten days later the volumes were announced as forthcoming by June 1. The editors continued, moreover, to stimulate curiosity and interest. On June 19, when discussing the reprinting of the poems, they made the statement: "Conjecture is very much at a loss with respect to the Authors, who have been as secret as Junius in concealing their names." Della Crusca and Anna Matilda, the writer added, had been attributed by some to the same author; by others to Mrs. Damer, Mrs. Piozzi, Miss Seward, Miss More, Jerningham, Pratt, Hayley, and General Conway. And when the two volumes of The Poetry of the World appeared, in Crown Octavo, the reviewer in the Monthly Review commented on the "great typographical elegance" of the work.1 Certainly the writers of the poems had no reason to complain.

Meanwhile, Merry continued his wanderings about the Continent. On August 21 he wrote again from Morillon near Geneva:

I have been almost constantly on the wing since I left my dear Mr. Piozzi in Hanover square, and so I have not received any letters from the persons I love and esteem. . . . How does Greatheed go on, has he yet recovered from the intoxication of his success, does he yet descend to think himself but the second Hero upon earth, or does he assert universal empire? I have often thought that one is not to judge of a man's sense so much by his excelling, as by the manner in which he bears his excellence. If I had a mind to be ill natured I think I could cut up a certain tragedy in a capital manner, but my resentments are past, and

1 Monthly Review, LXXIX (Nov. 1788), 449-52. The reviewer, after commenting on the mystery of authorship, adds that "Della Crusca is supposed to be Mr. Merry . . . several of his pieces claim a distinguished place in the class of modern poetry." Two more volumes (III and IV) of The Poetry of the World appeared in 1791, and are reviewed in the Monthly Review, VI, new series (Sept. 1791), 21-4. With the title The British Album, these poems, together with others, appeared in numerous editions, 1790-92.
when I think of the strange treatment I received, I feel no other emotion than what arises from contempt.

You know my intention was to go to Spain, and I got down to the frontiers, in my way to Madrid, but it was so hot, and the persons I saw coming thence, said it was a Journey thrown away; and as I had nothing to expect, but to meet fevers, and vermine, and Parsons so I cut across France and came to this delightful spot, which I think surpasses all others in beauty.

I understand the Della Cruscas &c are come out, pray inform me how they are liked, but particularly how you like them. If there is not a line amongst them addressed to you, do not take it ill—I have only deferred what I have not forgotten. Give me your opinion of the Tragedy.

I met Parsons at Paris, we were lodged in the same Hotel. I know not whether he is a Phisiognomist but if he is, my countenance might have given him some reflections.

Write to me at Paris, a la post restante, pray do, I shall be there in about a month...  

On the back of the sheet he added:

When I arrive in England, my earliest visit will be to yourself and I trust you will then tell me you are going to publish your delightful travels. I write a great deal, because I flatter myself that what I write you will read. Yet my strains are not so melancholy as they used to be for I have been living lately in gay society, particularly at Paris, and the agitation of my mind is subsaid, and the original tone of my character is restored, & I begin to be sans souci. I live here in a tourbillon of English, with whom I am rather popular.

Busy with her own writing, Mrs. Piozzi spent the late summer and autumn of 1788 at Exmouth and Bath. Nevertheless, Este in his letters kept her informed of the most recent news from Della Crusca. On August 29 Este commented: “His Letters, though quite unexciting, never fail to give me pensive sensations of the sweetest kind. Where is there any body more amiable?” 2 Then in late October or early November Merry returned to England, as usual sub rosa, and Este wrote to Mrs. Piozzi on November 12:

Della Crusca’s Poem, and your Tour, are the chief things I hear of. So, there is no fear of any thing, but Envy. His Poem is Admirable. Not in the least overdone in kind report.—We meet almost every Day, & if drinking your health without wasting our own, will do for you, what you wish must be Already done. He is well & more & more Amiable—Tell it not that he is here.3

2 Ibid., 555, 66.  
3 Ibid., 67.
The same day Merry himself wrote to the lady, complaining of the loss of two of her letters, and asking when she and her husband were coming to London. "My poetical Mania," he continued, "is not so violent as it was, yet I am going to publish—after which I mean to go thro' a course of Hellebore and be quiet. Expulit Ellebro morbum bilemque meraco Et redit ad sese." 

When the Piozzis returned to London in December they did not see Merry, and the only comments in Thraliana have to do with his latest publication, a slim quarto of thirty-seven pages entitled Diversity, an original Poem. This she found "very fine," but she suspected it would have few readers. "'tis about nothing so; and leaves such Nihility behind it. very fine all the Time, yet never will be quoted; and seldom read."

Merry was included in the invited guests for her large New Year's party, but was called instead into the country, and could not accept. Although his notes were just as full of compliment and excessive sentiment as ever, between the lines one might begin to read a subtle change. There had not been a word about Greatheed or Parsons in any of his letters during the last months of 1788. That episode in his life was evidently over. But with it also ended the intimacy with Mrs. Piozzi. She had been a sympathetic confidant, to whom he could explode about their common friends; now with new interests and new problems they gradually found less to discuss. Besides, Mrs. Piozzi, perhaps poisoned by her continued association with the Greatheeds, was beginning to be more suspicious of Merry's intentions. Even the friendly gestures of his sister and brother only seemed to generate distrust, and she later wrote in Thraliana: 

here is Merry—dissolute, wicked, and I fancy wholly worthless; who can command his Family's Purse to supply his Vices, while their own Virtues need it; only because they are proud of Della Crusca.

1 J.R.L. Eng. MS. 558, 8.
2 Reviewed in the Monthly Review, LXXX (June, 1789), 529-32, not too adversely.
3 Thraliana, II, 726.
4 J.R.L. Eng. MS. 558, 11, undated, accepts the invitation and 558, 9, of December 25, explains why he must decline.
There appeared an odd Combination of them all to coax me some Months ago—my Heart told me that Este and they were agreed to undermine it, in his Favour; & his own Behaviour in the only Visit he made us this Winter confirmed the Fancy. Whether they meant to get at my Money, or what they meant I knew not; but something they did mean.

In this same entry, dated April 1, she added: "I find the Man is still in London skulking about somewhere."

Another episode in Merry's life, too, was coming to an end. Throughout all these months he had never been able to find out the identity of the writer who signed herself Anna Matilda. Of course he pictured her as young and lovely, a glowing creature who had fallen in love with his verses. As a result, the exchange had become more and more passionate, while the public eagerly awaited a dénouement. Finally, in the spring of 1789, with the help of the editors, Della Crusca and Anna Matilda met. Then all his ardour congealed as if by magic, for the lady was forty-six, fat, and not particularly attractive. Obviously he could not arouse as much enthusiasm for the popular authoress Mrs. Cowley as for the mysterious incognita, and in a carefully worded poem, "The Interview," which appeared on June 16, he brought the long series to an end.

Just before this occurred he made one last effort to revive his dying friendship with Mrs. Piozzi. On April 23 he wrote:

I ought and do beg you a thousand pardons for my long neglect of that attention which is due to you from me, and which I am most happy to pay, but for some time past I have been so extremely occupied that I have been unable to give that observance I wished, to my private friends. The Ode recited at the Opera house by Mrs Siddons was in part my composition, though a considerable portion was from a much abler pen than mine. I was applied to on the occasion from a quarter I could not refuse—

If you would have the goodness to favour me with a line to convince me that I have not entirely lost your good opinion, which I once flattered myself I in some degree possessed, I should esteem it a particular kindness, as I can sincerely assure you there is no person whose regard I more highly value, than yours. . . .

1 II, 740-41.
2 J.R.L. Eng. MS. 558, 10. The Ode on the recovery of the King was spoken by Mrs. Siddons at Drury Lane on April 21. See also T. Campbell, Life of Mrs. Siddons, II, 160. The Ode was printed with The Album of Streatham by Ridgway, 4th edition, 1789.
Scribbled at the bottom is:

I am only in Town for a couple of days, but should you write to me in Red Lion Square, it will reach me immediately. When do your charming Travels come out—would you have the goodness to indulge me with a copy—If you should be at home (en famille) any evening this week, I should be happy to be permitted to wait upon you—

A day or so later Merry made good his promise, and on the 26th Mrs. Piozzi noted in *Thraliana*: “I have had another Visit from the renowned Della Crusca, but His hopes (whatever they were) seem blown away. The Ode Sheridan & he together wrote lately, is not liked.” But there was no indication of any return to the old intimacy, for she had lost all faith in the changeable wanderer. As she confessed in her journal, “Este and Merry seem to have quarrel’d, by Della Crusca preferring the *Star*, & neglecting the *World*; tho’ Miss Merry said how kind Este was; they are all as false one as another I fancy; I will never now be alone with any one of the Crew—I *know* them *now*.” She had had enough of such unstable friends. As far as we can tell their paths never crossed again.

The remainder of Merry’s life, after his break with Mrs. Piozzi, need not concern us at length in this present article, though it was just as hectic and variable as that which had gone before. With his hatred of oppression and love of liberty it was obvious that he would be deeply moved by the early struggles of the French Revolution. And in those exciting months following the fall of the Bastille Merry’s sympathies were so aroused that even the later terror did little to change his point of view. Faith in the “Rights of Man” became the touchstone of his existence; he judged everyone and everything by it. As a result, he became actively associated with the little radical group of English sympathisers whose efforts were so abhorrent to Burke and the other conservatives. At one time Merry even went so

---

1 II, 743.

2 On July 14, 1791, an Ode written by Merry in honour of the anniversary of the beginning of the French Revolution was recited before a crowd of almost fifteen hundred people in London. See *Gent. Mag.*, LXI (July, 1791), 673; *Monthly Review*, V, new series (July, 1791), 344; and Walpole’s letter to the Miss Berrys of July 26, 1791.
far as to present personally to the Convention in Paris a treatise on the "Nature of a Free Government."  

During the summer of 1789 he was in France, visiting the Assembly, and on his return to London in 1790 he published an ambitious poem, the *Laurel of Liberty*.  

Meanwhile he continued to send occasional verses to the English newspapers, but much of his zest for such writing was lost after the bitter and devastating attack by William Gifford in 1791, *The Baviad*.  

Although Gifford was unfair in some of his criticism of the Della Cruscan writers, he did fasten effectively on their chief weaknesses as poets—their excessive use of artificial ornament, their needless obscurity, their orgies of sentiment. And after such an annihilating dissection, few British readers would ever again find the same delight in Della Crusca’s outpourings. Nevertheless, he continued to strive for literary fame, and in the spring of 1791 finally brought out a tragedy called *Lorenzo* at Covent Garden.  

In *Lorenzo* the principal part of Zoriana was played by the beautiful and popular actress, Anne Brunton, whose charms proved too much even for such an experienced philanderer as Merry. Although he had narrowly escaped matrimony on numerous former occasions—once with a dancer at the Opera, so amusingly described many years later by Charles Lamb, he could not resist the "voice that was all music, and a face all emotion" of Miss Brunton. To everyone’s surprise, they were married in August, 1791. Mrs. Merry continued to act

1 *D.N.B.*  
2 By Robert Merry, A.M., Member of the Royal Academy of Florence. 4to, 38 pages, published by Bell. It is reviewed in the *Monthly Review*, IV, new series (Jan. 1791), 56-62. Walpole wrote to Miss Berry on November 11, 1790, that the poem had "confounded and overturned all ideas. There are gossamer tears and silky oceans—the first time, to be sure, that anybody ever cried cobwebs, or that the sea was made of paduasoy."


4 The published play is reviewed in the *Monthly Review*, V, new series (June, 1791), 201-5. In 1790 Merry had written the songs for a pantomime entitled *The Picture of Paris*, which was performed at Covent Garden. See the printed copy in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.


under her new name throughout the 1791-92 season, but the outcry of his family, who were outraged at the social stigma involved, finally forced her to withdraw from the stage. The complete failure of his comic opera, *The Magician No Conjurer*, in February, 1792, further added to his distresses, so that he and his wife left London for Paris, where, it seems, he narrowly escaped the guillotine.\(^1\) At the height of the terror they returned to England. Here for the next three years Merry lived somewhat irregularly, "haunting the clubs, declaiming on freedom and the French Revolution, writing epigrams—some of which are very neat—against Pitt and his supporters."\(^2\)

Despite his friend Topham's unfailing help, Merry sank deeper into debt and depression. The publication in 1795 of a play, *Fénelon*, an adaptation from the French, and in 1796 of a long poem, *The Pains of Memory*, stimulated by the more famous counterpart by Samuel Rogers, did little to better his position.\(^3\) Thus when his wife was offered an engagement in America, he willingly agreed to accompany her there.\(^4\) He never returned. Two years later, after enjoying some success as a poet and literary dictator in Philadelphia, while walking in his garden he fell in an apoplectic fit. Three hours later he was dead at the early age of forty-three.\(^5\)

What, then, must be our final estimate of Robert Merry? These letters to Mrs. Piozzi certainly show him as vain, frivolous, unstable, and inordinately jealous. Yet we must remember that

---

\(^1\) His escape is described by Walpole in a letter to the Countess of Ossory, September 10, 1792.

\(^2\) J. A. Cramb, *D.N.B.*

\(^3\) *Fénelon: or the Nuns of Cambray* is reviewed in the *Monthly Review*, XIX, new series (March, 1796), 274-7; and *The Pains of Memory* in XXI (Oct. 1796), 149-51. Of the latter the reviewer said: "experience has been well employed by Mr. M. in correcting that false glitter of language, and tinsel of imagery, which were justly blamed in a few of his earlier productions." See also P. W. Clayden, *The Early Life of Samuel Rogers.*

\(^4\) It has been amusingly pointed out that while going to America Mrs. Merry crossed in the same ship with three men successively to be her husbands—Robert Merry, Thomas Wignell, the manager, and William Warren, the comedian of the company. See Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, XI, 281-2.

\(^5\) He died on December 14, 1798. See *Gent. Mag.*, LXIX (March, 1799), 252-4. In the United States Merry had brought out a drama, *The Abbey of St. Augustine*, and a new version of *The Pains of Memory*. 
other evidence shows that he could appreciate good qualities in others and himself had high ideals; that although he was intemperate and dissolute he later made a considerate, affectionate husband.¹ Though a *poseur* in many things, he had as unalterable a revolutionary spirit as that of Shelley. His weaknesses were the childish products of an immature and unbridled romantic temperament. His tragedy was the lack of critical restraint which vitiated his genuine creative gifts. Of his poetry perhaps the best estimate was made by a writer in the *Monthly Review*, when discussing his *Laurel of Liberty*:

Simplicity is lost in refinement. Nature and ease are buried under a load of artificial ornament, and cumbrous difficulty. What Dr. Johnson, with less reason, said of Gray, may be said of Mr. Merry: “He strives to make himself tall by standing on tip-toe.”²

² See note 2, p. 94.