JOHNSON'S LAST YEARS WITH MRS. THRALE:
FACTS AND PROBLEMS

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JOHNSON'S relationship with Mrs. Thrale, particularly during the last years of his life, has always posed fascinating but difficult problems for the biographer.\(^1\) Over twenty years ago, in her provocative essay "Johnson's Vile Melancholy", Katharine Balderston presented evidence which to her explained, "as nothing advanced by Johnson's biographers has been able to explain, the violence of his repudiation of Mrs. Thrale when she married Piozzi".\(^2\) This was one of few modern studies to call attention to the gaps in our understanding of the Johnson-Thrale connection. Although little new evidence has come to light in recent years, it is instructive to consider what is known about this crucial period in Johnson's life. In doing so we obtain a clearer picture of the relationship in its final stage.

Johnson's "break" with Mrs. Thrale during the summer of 1784 was the last important event of his life. But their final exchange of letters, so often quoted or summarized, does not in itself explain the "break" or the attitudes which led to it. For a full explanation we should probably start with the beginning of their acquaintance in 1765. But for the present purpose we may begin with the death of Henry Thrale in April 1781, an event which drastically altered the course of their acquaintance.

Johnson's respect and affection for Henry Thrale were such that his death was, as Boswell describes it in the Life, "a very essential loss".\(^3\) The man he had chosen to call "my Master" was admired for his success in business and loved for his un­failing friendship and generosity. For years Johnson had fondly referred to Streatham and Southwark, where he had rooms ap-

\(^1\) I am grateful to Professor Marshall Waingrow for helpful advice during the preparation of this article.
pointed for his own use, as "home". In view of these and many other expressions of high regard, it is quite possible to suppose that Thrale and the hospitality he provided were the main attraction for Johnson. Boswell, in fact, urges this interpretation so persistently that it becomes the theme of his account of Johnson and the Thrales. According to him, Johnson soon became "sufficiently convinced that the comforts which Mr. Thrale's family afforded him, would now in a great measure cease. He, however, continued to shew a kind attention to his widow and children as long as it was acceptable."¹

Fulsome praise of Henry Thrale, contrasting with belittling references to his wife, occurs early on in the *Life*, where the Thrales are first mentioned. "Johnson," Boswell writes, "had a very sincere esteem for Mr. Thrale...." He continues: "Nothing could be more fortunate for Johnson than this connection. He had at Mr. Thrale's all the comforts and even luxuries of life;... He was treated with the utmost respect, and even affection. The vivacity of Mrs. Thrale's literary talk roused him to cheerfulness and exertion, even when they were alone. But this was not often the case...."² Here, as elsewhere, Boswell implies that Johnson frequented the Thrale household chiefly because of the creature comforts and conveniences he enjoyed there.

To be sure, Boswell seems unwilling to indicate the full extent of Johnson's attachment to Mrs. Thrale. In describing Mrs. Thrale's romance with Gabriel Piozzi and her gradual estrangement from Johnson, he resorts to the not-so-subtle hint, the calculated innuendo, the oblique allusion, to serve his purpose. This strategy in part reflects the paucity of detailed factual material at his disposal. After Henry Thrale's death, Boswell did not see Mrs. Thrale again until nearly two years later. Away from London,³ he was out of touch with Johnson-Thrale relations during this important time, and as a result he cannot in general be considered a knowledgeable source of information. It must be remembered that Boswell's account in the *Life* was for the most part based on information he received at second or third

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid. i. 494-6 (italics mine). ³ From 2 June 1781 until 20 March 1783 (*Life*, iv. 118, 164).
hand. It consists largely of hindsight judgements or mere guessing. And it was written many years later, at the height of his literary rivalry with Mrs. Piozzi, when he felt strong antagonism towards her.

Henry Thrale died on 4 April 1781. Following her impulse, Mrs. Thrale immediately fled to Brighton with her oldest daughter, Queeney, to recover from the shock. While she was away from Streatham, Johnson wrote consoling letters to her almost daily. These tender notes show the depth of his sympathy and devotion. He told her: "Of my friendship, be it worth more or less, I hope You think yourself certain.... I hope to be always ready at your call."¹

While Mrs. Thrale was away at Brighton, gossip about the wealthy widow's future intentions sprang up. Rumours began to circulate in London that she might marry Johnson. The numerous squibs appearing in the newspapers must have exerted a kind of subtle public pressure on Johnson and Mrs. Thrale, although it is impossible to know just how much they were aware of being in the social limelight. Boswell contributed in his own way to the speculation by composing a series of scurrilous verses the very day after Thrale's funeral. His satirical epithalamium, published seven years later as Ode by Dr. Samuel Johnson to Mrs. Thrale, upon Their Supposed Approaching Nuptials, was evidently composed at Sir Joshua Reynolds' house and passed around in manuscript among several of their friends during the next few days.²

It appears that neither Johnson nor Mrs. Thrale ever found out the author of the Ode, if indeed they ever saw a copy or heard of it. Boswell's friend John Wilkes once mischievously threatened to show his handiwork to Johnson—an exposure that would surely have produced a strong rebuke to Boswell.³ Fanny

² For an account of the Ode's composition and subsequent publication, see Mary Hyde, The Impossible Friendship: Boswell and Mrs. Thrale (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 66, 130-6, 155-6.
Burney informed Mrs. Thrale that she had "heard some verses, though, about you & Dr. Johnson! such as you so well foretold".\footnote{1}  

Boswell, we discover from his Journal, saw Dr. (later Sir William) Scott at Johnson's house on 15 April and the two men privately agreed that "it was possible Mrs. Thrale might marry Dr. Johnson, and we both wished it much. He saw clearly the Dr's propensity to love the vain world in various ways."\footnote{2} A fragmentary entry in Boswell's Journal for 17 May 1783 suggests that two years later he still believed that the marriage of Johnson and Mrs. Thrale was a possibility. When Johnson showed him a carefully preserved letter from Mrs. Thrale, Boswell "imagined upon [his] honour it was some tender epistle; something of love, perhaps of marriage".\footnote{3} It is important to bear in mind that Boswell charged Mrs. Thrale with disloyalty to Johnson only long after her marriage to Piozzi, at the time when their literary rivalry had become intense.

Mrs. Thrale returned from Brighton to Streatham in late April of 1781. A month later, after the sale of the brewery was transacted, she began to get some perspective on her situation. Apparently freed from financial worry by a regular income, she was now, in her own words, in the "restored Character of a Gentlewoman".\footnote{4} No longer the wife of a brewer, she was now a well-to-do, admired lady of fashion, just forty years old. Unconfined by the demands of a husband who had grown irritable and lethargic in his last years, she was nevertheless beset by new

\footnote{1}{John Rylands University Library, English MS. 545, item 23 (undated letter, but written around this time).}  

\footnote{2}{Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle, ed. Geoffrey Scott and Frederick A. Pottle (Mt. Vernon, N.Y., privately printed, 1928-34), xiv. 198.}  

\footnote{3}{Ibid. xv. 226. The subject of the letter is in doubt, since a portion of the manuscript is torn away at this point. Mrs. Hyde states (The Impossible Friendship, p. 90) that when the news of Mrs. Thrale's marriage to Piozzi reached Boswell in Scotland "his reaction was final and complete disgust". She also says (p. 85) that Mrs. Thrale's "neglect" of Johnson during the summer and fall of 1783 caused Boswell to think of her as "an unfaithful and heartless friend". But no evidence has been found concerning Boswell's attitude towards Mrs. Thrale at the time of these events, and thus Mrs. Hyde's assertions must be regarded as purely speculative.}  

worries and frustrations. On the one hand her life seemed swallowed up by numerous practical details, while on the other she felt the uncertainties of independence. There were five daughters to look after, the youngest girl but three years old. And as Johnson's health grew worse, he expected her to nurse his infirmities and listen dutifully as he recited his various troubles.

This degree of possessiveness on Johnson's part indicates the special place which she occupied in his life. Those who have probed the nature of Johnson's psychological involvement and dependence vis-à-vis Mrs. Thrale have observed that the emotional fulfilment which she brought him over the years far outweighed the physical comforts which he received in her house. The numerous expressions of "love" in his letters to her reveal his extraordinary concern and affection for her up to the time of her second marriage. It is true that Mrs. Thrale's diary contains the following marginal note, written sometime after August 1782:

I begin to see... that Johnson's Connection with me is merely an interested one—he loved Mr. Thrale I believe, but only wish'd to find in me a careful Nurse & humble Friend for his sick and his lounging hours: yet I really thought he could not have existed without my Conversation forsooth. He cares more for my roast Beef & plumb Pudden which he now devours too dirtily for endurance: and since he is glad to get rid of me, I'm sure I have good Cause to desire the getting Rid of him.

But this particular outburst was presumably the result of her frustration and resentment at Johnson's (so she believed) indifference to her proposal of going to live in Italy.

Miss Balderston has described his love for her as "half-paternal, half-romantic"—a phrase which hints at the tantalizing question of whether Johnson (or Mrs. Thrale) contemplated a romantic connection leading to marriage. It is certain that Johnson wished their past intimacy to continue and dreaded the

1 I have in mind particularly Miss Balderston's essay and George Irwin's highly suggestive study Samuel Johnson: A Personality in Conflict (Auckland and Oxford, 1971).
2 Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776-1809, ed. Katharine C. Balderston, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1951), p. 541, n. 1 (undated). Dr. Powell notes (Life, iv. 503) that this was probably "uttered in a fit of pique". For evidence that Mrs. Thrale believed Johnson to be indifferent, see the passage from Thraliana quoted below, p. 203.
thought of any disruption of it during his last years. Boswell, when writing about this topic for the *Life*, cancelled a passage in manuscript where he reported that Johnson "wished to espouse the rich widow. This I believe to be totally without any serious foundation, though I have seen him pleased to be rallied upon it." Mrs. Thrale, for her part, had never viewed her first marriage as in any respect a love-match. The fact remains that there is no concrete evidence on either side that marriage between them was seriously entertained or proposed, even though the idea must have occurred to them.

By the fall of 1781 Mrs. Thrale felt emotionally drawn towards Gabriel Piozzi. She had met Piozzi in February of 1778 at Dr. Burney's, and during the summer of 1780 at Brighton she had engaged him to give singing lessons to Queeny. He had quickly become a favourite. Now, when Johnson went off for his autumn visits in the Midlands, Mrs. Thrale grew more and more preoccupied with the Italian musician. He was soon to return from the Continent, and when Johnson heard the news he wrote to her: "Piozzi, I find, is coming... and when he comes and I come, you will have two about you that love you; and I question if either of us heartily care how few more you have. But how many soever they may be, I hope you keep your kindness for me..." Yet soon after this he felt the need to remind her "not [to] neglect me, nor relinquish me. Nobody will ever love you better or honour you more..." With Piozzi back at Streatham before him, Johnson seems already to have feared that Piozzi might come between them.

The tempo of gossip did not subside, and Mrs. Thrale was continually plagued by scandalous newspaper reports of her marital plans. In December, after Johnson had returned from the Midlands, she complained to Fanny Burney: "I have got Dr. Johnson home at last, so the Town may tire of saying how we have quarreled about a Sugar Dish, or a Tea Cup, or a Pinch of Snuff—it seems a great deal has been said on the
Occasion [of his returning]; Mr. Seward told it me, but it would be news to him perhaps that he & I are going to be married, & Mrs. Nesbitt told me that. Well! They will sing Songs upon me now to be sure, & all to filthy Tunes..."  

The first day of 1782 found Mrs. Thrale pondering the future in her diary. She feared the loss of Johnson, whose health was failing, yet hoped someday to take her older daughters to Italy, with Piozzi along as a companion: "I would make it worth his while, & we should live happily together." After moving into a house in Harley Street for the winter, she tried to divert herself with the activities of London social life. At the same time she was wary of being too much in the public eye. Johnson continued to spend a good deal of his time in her company and, as before, had a room appointed for his use whenever he came to stay.

During 1782 Johnson's health deteriorated to such an extent that, as Boswell remarks, "the history of his life this year, is little more than a mournful recital of the variations of his illness." It was chiefly Mrs. Thrale who bore the responsibility of nursing Johnson and the burden of hearing his complaints. He could not help becoming irascible or fretful in his demands on her time and patience. And so, as she viewed the essentials of her situation, she must have begun to realize that she could not go on accommodating Johnson in this way without destroying possibilities in her own life—for example, romantic love, which she had not known in her first marriage. In short, she was faced with the most important decision of her life.

Johnson's physical condition continued to be precarious, and the early months of this year became a period of tension, as he struggled to regain his health and she mentally debated the alternatives of her future. In mid-April, soon after returning to Streatham, they may have had a quarrel—the details are not known—and she sent him away. He pleaded with her pathetically in a letter: "Do not let Mr. Piozzi nor any body else put
me quite out of your head, and do not think that any body will love you like [me]." Here Johnson showed definite concern that a gap was opening up between them, yet he appeared helpless to prevent it.

By early May they were reconciled and Johnson was back at Streatham. He was then suffering from various respiratory ailments, but a brief trip to Oxford for the fresh air proved beneficial. During the summer of 1782 they renewed something of the old intimacy at Streatham, but many things had changed since the days when "the Master" was alive and in control of his family. According to Boswell, "The manly authority of the husband no longer curbed the lively exuberance of the lady; and . . . she gradually became less assiduous to please [Johnson]." Here again Boswell was exercising hindsight judgement concerning a complicated series of events about which he knew very little. But no doubt she did grow weary of Johnson's troubles and became frustrated by the tensions of their life together at Streatham.

Just at this time the outcome of a costly property suit, initiated by the widow of Mrs. Thrale's uncle, threatened to reduce substantially her regular income. The necessity of financial retrenchment soon became apparent. After deciding that she could live abroad more economically, and at the same time rid herself of unwanted suitors and scandalmongers, she proposed the trip to Italy. Johnson astonished her by approving the plan, even though he was not to be one of the party: "I fancied Mr Johnson could not have existed without me forsooth, as we have now lived together above 18 Years, & I have so fondled and waited on him in Sickness & in Health—Not a bit on't! he . . . thinks it a prudent Scheme, & goes to his Book as usual." Streatham was to be rented to a tenant, Lord Shelburne: "the expenses of this House . . . which are quite past my Power to check: is the true & rational Cause of our Departure."

On 6 October they dined together at Streatham for the last

1 *Letters*, ii. 477 (25 April 1782).
3 *Thraliana*, pp. 540–41 (22 August 1782).
4 Ibid. p. 541 (22 August 1782).
time. Johnson composed a special prayer for the Thrale household and made his "parting use of the library".\textsuperscript{1} In the Life Boswell takes this opportunity to criticize Mrs. Thrale, declaring that "Johnson's penetration was alive to her neglect or forced attention". He hints that her attachment to Johnson may have been "already divided by another object".\textsuperscript{2} There can be no doubt that Piozzi was much on her mind. But it is probably erroneous to conclude that her decision to leave Streatham and go abroad was taken as a step towards the second marriage. She faced a severe financial reverse and economy was certainly her main concern.\textsuperscript{3}

The next six weeks were spent together on a sojourn in Brighton, marked by Johnson's extreme ill humour and Mrs. Thrale's privately wondering whether or not to marry Piozzi. Fanny Burney, whose diary is the chief source of information about the trip, served as her confidante now and in the days ahead. Mrs. Thrale had fallen in love with Piozzi, and she now confessed her passion to "sweet Burney" and Queeney. But fear of ruining her daughter's prospects, to say nothing of leaving Johnson, led her into a serious dilemma. Queeney strongly disapproved of her marrying Piozzi, and Fanny Burney urged her not to do "what Reason itself would condemn".\textsuperscript{4}

In the anguish of her predicament, Mrs. Thrale rented new lodgings in Argyll Street for the winter in London. Johnson was in residence part of the time, though less frequently than in the past. Tortured by indecision, she was unable to commit herself to any course of action. But as 1783 began, the situation rapidly became desperate. The newspapers had caught on to Piozzi's place in her life and printed insinuating notices linking the two names together. Urgent appeals from her immediate family

\textsuperscript{1} See Johnson's diary entries in Diaries, Prayers, and Annals, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde (New Haven, 1958), pp. 337-9, and the editors' commentary there.\textsuperscript{2} Life, iv. 158.

\textsuperscript{3} See Dr. Powell's commentary in Appendix J, Life, iv. 502-4.

and close friends (Johnson, of course, excluded) succeeded in persuading her to give up the Italian journey and to send Piozzi away. How much knowledge of these proceedings Johnson had is uncertain, but he could hardly have been completely unaware as he passed many days at the house in Argyll Street.

When Boswell arrived in London on 20 March, Mrs. Thrale was still agonizing over Piozzi’s dismissal, which had taken place nearly two months before. She was soon to leave the city for Bath, where (as she wrote in her *Anecdotes of Johnson*) she “found it convenient, for every reason of health, peace, and pecuniary circumstances, to retire” and where she “knew that Mr. Johnson would not follow” her. The decision was guided, at least in part, by the idea of removing herself from “perpetual confinement” with him.¹ She had already informed Johnson and Jeremiah Crutchley, one of Henry Thrale’s executors and a guardian of the daughters, that she intended to “live in a little way at Bath till [she] had paid all [her] Debts, and cleared [her] Income.”²

In the *Life* Boswell suggests that this explanation of her conduct is disingenuous.³ And indeed Mrs. Piozzi, writing later in her own defence, carefully avoids making any mention of Piozzi. Yet it is unwarranted to conclude that she went off to Bath simply to wait for Piozzi to follow her there. At that time she had no such prospect, only the hope that someday they might be reunited. Boswell records in his Journal (though not in the *Life*) Johnson’s disclosure to him that “they had driven her out of London by attacks upon her which She had provoked by attacking every body.”⁴

² *Thraliana*, p. 560 (undated).
³ See *Life*, iv. 340 (Boswell’s “animadversions”).
⁴ *Boswell Papers*, xv. 174 (21 March 1783). The following memorandum in Boswell’s hand, written on a single quarto sheet, is in the Hyde Collection, Somerville, New Jersey: “Dr. Johnson said of Mrs Thrale I am / he was / glad She is gone to Bath to some place where her head may cool. Sir they have fairly driven her from London. Sir she has made innumerable enemies by her tongue. L [?Langton] said to me who has helped her to it.—Dr. J———n said I.—He knocks them on the head and she cuts their throats.[. . .] They butcher it fairly between them.” This is doubtless Boswell’s original memorandum for his Journal entry (quoted by kind permission of Mrs. Donald F. Hyde).
Dreading the thought of being left alone, Johnson told Boswell: "You must be as much with me as you can."1 On 5 April, with Mrs. Thrale about to depart for Bath, Johnson wished her well and "took leave" of her after "some expostulations." Johnson's diary entry for this day conveys a grim sense of finality.2 The meeting may have been their last. The next day Mrs. Thrale saw Piozzi, bade him again farewell, and two days later went off to Bath with three of her daughters.3

Greatly affected by her absence, Johnson spent much time in Boswell's company during the next two months. On 17 June, after Boswell had returned to Scotland, he suffered a stroke which left him temporarily unable to speak. His long, intimate letter to Mrs. Thrale describing his condition (considerably abridged in the Life) did not persuade her to nurse him through yet another ailment. This letter, accusing her and pleading with her by turns, displays the depths of his need and devotion.4

She remained at Bath, the victim of her own hypochondria and self-pity. Johnson continued to write to her regularly, his letters more or less assuming the character of a medical report. She replied with somewhat less frequency, and in this way they gradually became more distant from each other. This period, while Mrs. Thrale grew increasingly aloof and distraught over her separation from Piozzi, might be called the period of estrangement. Her despondency led to a form of nervous breakdown in November. In the face of her mother's dangerous collapse, Queeney's obstinacy at last gave way, and it was agreed that Piozzi should be recalled from Italy.

How much Johnson knew about the Piozzi affair at this time, or in the months following, is by no means clear. On 15 November Fanny Burney reported to Queeney: "Dr [Johnson] knows of this horrible affair!—I have seen Mr Seward,—it is he who has

1 Life, iv. 166.
2 Diaries, Prayers, and Annals, p. 359. The diary is lost; the brief entry was first printed by Sir John Hawkins in his Life of Johnson (London, 1787), p. 552 n.
3 In mid-April, while Mrs. Thrale was at Bath, her youngest daughter died at Streatham. She went up to London for the funeral, tried unsuccessfully to see Piozzi (who was preparing to leave England), and then returned to Bath for the rest of the year.
4 See Letters, iii. 34-36 (19 June 1783).
told me this, though he has not told me by what means he gained the intelligence. He [Johnson] does not, however, know its present state, but concludes it is all over. O would it were!" From this it is evident that both Fanny and Queeney had supposed Johnson to be wholly ignorant of what had happened so far. Interviews with Johnson during the winter and early spring persuaded Fanny that he continued to think the affair "blown over" as long as Piozzi was gone. She admitted, however, that "What he knows of the matter I have not any means of discovering." 2

Suffering from asthma and dropsy, Johnson was confined to his quarters during the early months of 1784. Boswell arrived from Scotland on 5 May and found him surprisingly recovered. On Tuesday, 11 May, Mrs. Thrale came to London from Bath "for a Week to visit Fanny Burney, and to talk over my intended —(& I hope—approaching Nuptials,) with Mr Borghi", a friend of Piozzi. 3 Fanny records in her diary that "The rest of that week I devoted almost wholly to sweet Mrs. Thrale", who stayed quietly in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, and "saw nobody else". 4 But there is a good deal of evidence which suggests that Mrs. Thrale probably did see Johnson, however briefly.

As recently as 23 March she had written to Fanny that "My going to London would be a dreadful expense, and bring on a thousand inquiries and inconveniences—visits to Johnson and from Cator . . . ". 5 This passage indicates that she considered an interview with Johnson almost inevitable if she were to come to London. A month later Johnson urged her in a letter to "Settle your thoughts and controul your imagination, and think no more of Hesperian felicity," presumably hinting at Piozzi. 6 Since she did see Fanny Burney and Signor Borghi, and perhaps

1 Queeney Letters, p. 75 (15 November 1783).
2 Ibid. pp. 83, 94. See also p. 80.
3 Thraliana, p. 593 (23 May 1784).
4 Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay, ed. Charlotte Barrett (London, 1842-6), ii. 315 (17 May 1784).
5 Ibid. ii. 307. John Cator was also one of Henry Thrale’s executors and a guardian of the Thrale daughters.
6 Letters, iii. 160 (26 April 1784).
also Dr. Burney, while in London, she may have thought it dangerous to try to keep Johnson unaware of her being in town.

Significantly, when Boswell visited Johnson at his house on Sunday, 16 May, he found him alone and much concerned about Mrs. Thrale. "I could not imagine what disturbed him," Boswell wrote in the manuscript of the Life, "for I had heard nothing to her disadvantage."

He said, "Sir she has done everything wrong since Thrall's bridle was off her neck. You must know there was an Italian Singer"—Here Dr. Douglas now Bishop of Carlisle was announced, and Johnson was interrupted in explaining himself to me upon an affair which has since made much noise, but which being then totally unsuspected by me, I never afterwards asked him about it, which if I had done, I have no doubt that by my peculiar ease in questioning him I should have heard what would have been well worth being recorded.

Johnson's outburst on this date seems more than coincidental: it appears quite likely that it was brought on by a recent interview with Mrs. Thrale.

Moreover, Johnson's first letter to her after her return to Bath begins: "Why you expected me to be better than I am I cannot imagine; I am better than any that saw me in my illness [sic] ever expected to have seen me again." This sentence almost certainly implies a face-to-face meeting. And there is also the letter Fanny Burney wrote to Queeney on 24 May: "Since I began & writ thus far, I have seen Dr Johnson—& find he knows the whole affair!" This last can only be interpreted as meaning that Johnson now knew of Mrs. Thrale's unabated passion for Piozzi and probably also of his returning to England. It must have been the occasion when Johnson turned to Fanny "with an air of mingled wrath and woe, [and] hoarsely ejaculated: 'Piozzi!'" and added: "She cares for no one! You, only—You, she loves still."

1 Mrs. Thrale wrote soon afterwards in Thraliana, p. 594, that "We have told all to her father, and he behaved with the utmost Propriety" (23 May 1784).

2 MS. of the Life, p. 929. This passage was later deleted in the MS. and revised for publication. In the printed text (Life, iv. 277) there is only a veiled reference to Piozzi. Boswell's Journal entry for this day is the barest of notes and contains no mention of Mrs. Thrale.

3 Letters, iii. 165 (31 May 1784).

4 Queeney Letters, p. 97 (24 May 1784).

5 Madame d'Arblay, Memoirs of Doctor Burney (London, 1832), ii. 361-2. Both Chapman and Miss Balderston were inclined to believe that the meeting.
It is reasonably clear that, if a meeting between Johnson and Mrs. Thrale did occur, she told him nothing of her intention to marry Piozzi as soon as possible. When, on 30 June, she did write to tell him, she begged his pardon “for concealing from you a Connection which you must have heard of by many People, but I suppose never believed ”. In July, when the marriage was a fait accompli, Fanny Burney confided to Queeney that “Poor Dr. Johnson was prepared, I know, for in my last visit but one [on 13 June] he spoke to me openly upon the subject, & with a softness that much surprised me.” Yet it appears equally certain that Johnson, right up to the time of Mrs. Thrale’s announcement, had been deluding himself with the hope that the marriage might not take place. “I had fondly flattered myself that time had produced better thoughts ”, he admitted to Queeney immediately after receiving word.

In any event, the news came to him as a profound shock. According to William Cooke, a fellow member of the Essex Head Club who published a short biography of Johnson in 1785, the report of Mrs. Thrale’s marriage had such an effect on him, that for three nights he could not close his eyes. He then wrote her a long letter of five quarto pages, dissuading her from so rash and disgraceful an union. To this he had no answer but a confirmation of the report, on which he exclaimed, in great bitterness of heart, “Varium et mutabile semper foemina ”. In view of the fact that this anecdote is doubtful in one of its details (as far as is known, Johnson did not write—or at least did not occurred, and Professor Clifford has recently informed me that he now tends to think the evidence that it occurred convincing. See their discussions in Letters, iii. 165 n; Thraliana, p. 593, n. 3; and Clifford, p. 225.

1 Letters, iii. 172 (30 June 1784). The “many People” included Seward and Crutchley, both of whom were knowledgeable sources of information. They strongly opposed her marrying Piozzi. Chapman maintains, however, that since Seward “ was consulted [by Mrs. Thrale] in confidence there is no reason to suppose that he enlightened [Johnson] ” (Letters, iii. 100, n. 5).

2 Queeney Letters, p. 101 ([July 1784]).

3 Letters, iii. 173 (1 July 1784).

4 The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., 2nd ed. (London: George Kearsley, 1785), p. 84. This anecdote was not included in the first edition (an abbreviated version of it appears in the “Johnsoniana” section of the second edition, p. 145). The allusion to Dido in the Aeneid (iv. 569) is an ironic comment on Mrs. Thrale’s passion for Piozzi.
send—a reply five pages long), it is difficult to credit its authenticity. On the other hand, Cooke could have heard the story directly from one of the Essex Head Club members, and it may well contain some elements of truth. The “rough” one-page reply that Johnson did send to Mrs. Thrale certainly reveals “great bitterness”.

In announcing to Johnson her momentous decision, Mrs. Thrale took particular care to avoid any possible interference with her plans for marriage. Her last three letters to him, though actually written well in advance of her wedding, were all designed to make him think the matter was “irrevocably settled, & out of [his] power to prevent”. In her announcement she tried to explain that her connection with Piozzi had been concealed “only to spare us both needless pain; I could not have borne to reject that Counsel it would have killed me to take. . . . I feel as if I was acting without a parent’s Consent.”

Johnson first learned of her intention “with anguish and astonishment” from Queeney on 1 July. He received Mrs. Thrale’s letter the next day and immediately composed his notorious answer. In it he charged her with marrying “ignominiously”: “If you have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your Fame, and your country, may your folly do no further mischief.” As Miss Balderston has stated, this famous letter displays “irrational and unjust behaviour” on Johnson’s part, and she has suggested a neurotic, quasi-sexual attachment to Mrs. Thrale as a partial explanation of his conduct. Even if her argument fails to convince everyone, it presents evidence that should not be overlooked.

On 8 July Johnson resignedly offered Mrs. Thrale his benediction in the last letter he ever addressed to her. “I am going into Derbyshire,” he concluded, “and hope to be followed by your good wishes. . . .” The aftermath of this episode, from the time of their “break” until Johnson’s death on 13 December of the same year, is not entirely without puzzles. Mrs. Piozzi, having separated from her daughters, was married

1 *Letters*, iii. 172–3 (30 June 1784).
2 Ibid. iii. 178 (2 July 1784).
3 *Letters*, iii. 178 (8 July 1784).
in London on 23 July and left England on her honeymoon in early September, while Johnson was still at Ashbourne. Mrs. Montagu, the bluestocking, wrote to Mrs. Carter on 25 July: "Miss Burney & Dr Johnson have been much afflicted on account of Mrs. Thrales indiscretion, and indeed I pity them both, but what misery may in time await ye poor Woman herself one cannot guess." Curiously, Johnson appears not to have written a word to Boswell concerning Mrs. Thrale's marriage to Piozzi. In the *Life* Boswell merely quotes a "characteristick specimen" extracted from a scornful letter Johnson sent to Sir John Hawkins on the subject. The mysterious disappearance of all but three (out of more than a hundred) of Johnson's letters to Boswell prevents our knowing all of what the manuscripts contained. We do know that Johnson exchanged several letters with Boswell after her marriage, but the texts printed in the *Life* are, after all, edited versions of the originals.

After returning to London in November, Johnson received a visit from Fanny Burney on the 25th. She could not resist asking if he had heard from Mrs. Piozzi. "'No,' cried he, 'nor write to her. I drive her quite from my mind. If I meet with one of her letters, I burn it instantly. I have burnt all I can find. I never speak of her, and I desire never to hear of her more. I drive her, as I said, wholly from my mind.'" This passage from Fanny's diary is the only positive evidence of Johnson's burning Mrs. Thrale's letters to him. Fortunately, well over one hundred letters managed to escape the flames and are now in the John Rylands University Library. It seems likely, therefore, that his anger did not impel him to make a thorough search.

No doubt Johnson felt that Mrs. Thrale had deserted him at

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3 *Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay*, ii. 328 (entry dated 28 November, but the meeting occurred on the 25th).
4 R. W. Chapman, in "Did Johnson Destroy Mrs. Thrale's Letters?" *N. & Q.*, 185 (28 August 1943), 133–4, comments: "My guess is that he was angry enough to destroy what was nearest to his hand, but not vindictive or patient enough to plunge into the presumably tempestuous, certainly uncharted, ocean of his accumulated papers."
the time of his greatest need. He had, somewhat grudgingly, wished her well and urged her to settle in England with Piozzi. But she had gone off to Italy on her honeymoon and perhaps he believed she would never return. As his health grew steadily worse, he was given to sullenness and resentment. Life quickly closed in on him and he succumbed on 13 December, only a few days after Mrs. Piozzi had settled in Milan for the winter. Many contemporaries shared the opinion that by marrying Piozzi Mrs. Thrale had shortened Johnson's life, and his bitter remarks recorded by Fanny Burney have become an unhappy epilogue to the story of their last years together.