

# Secretaries of the Interior: Narratorial Collaboration in Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*

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AT THE end of Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762), the anonymous narrator offers an apology to his unnamed friend in the publishing business, a correspondent to whom he has directed "a very circumstantial account" of the illuminating experiences that attended the breakdown of his chaise in Cornwall.<sup>1</sup> Moved to prolixity by the enlightened society he encountered during his excursion, he expresses half-hearted regret that he "could not restrain [his] pen within moderate bounds" (249); inspired by the myriad merits of his subject, the force of his impressions overwhelmed his sense of epistolary propriety. This willingness to take liberties with the patience of his friend, however, stands opposed to the nice circumspection that the narrator observes in his decorous dealings with the women of the Hall: only an awareness voiced in the penultimate paragraph, that he and his travelling companion Lamont could not "with decency" extend their stay, prompted them finally to depart (249). This juxtaposition of countervailing tendencies—a volubility licensed by intimacy and a reserve inspired by seemliness—crystallizes the essential narrative challenge posed by the premise of the text.

*Millenium Hall* comprises an illuminating array of progressive cultural ideas, yet the revelatory access called for by the narrative

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Scott, *Millenium Hall*, ed. Gary Kelly (1762; Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995), 53. References are to this edition.

obliges Scott to circumvent the protective policies and practices vital to her Utopian enclosure in order for the novel to achieve its expansive effects. Although the text offers lessons applicable to both sexes, Jane Spencer notes that Scott's staging seems more pointed, that "*Millenium Hall* really aims to educate men," that the content is "primarily concerned with disabusing men of their errors about women."<sup>2</sup> To realize her pedagogical objectives, Scott coordinates an elaborate pageant of virtues centred on the exemplary conduct of five female principals. Those very virtues, however, stand in the way of unguarded, unmediated narration. The unexceptionable character of these five women disqualifies them from telling their own tale or publicizing the measures that make their earthly paradise possible. As paragons of modesty, propriety, and prudence, they cannot decently perform the pageant of virtues for the men who most need to see it. Liberation from the necessity of such performance is among the crucial enabling conditions of the society that has grown up around them. To reach her intended audience and communicate the needful message, then, Scott tasks herself with the reconciliation of conflicting representational imperatives, subjecting her gentlewomen to a form of scrutiny that neither calls for the sort of ostentation that would impeach their respectability nor reproduces the kind of involuntary exhibitionism that spurred them to retire to the country in the first place.

Characterized by isolation and autonomy, the communal disposition of *Millenium Hall* interferes with both the transmission and reception of the desired broadcast. As Ana Acosta notes, Scott predicates her Utopian scheme on an idealized vision of self-sufficiency and self-regulation, yet the rural seclusion of the Hall reduces the heuristic value of its advantageous arrangements.<sup>3</sup> "Twice separated from the fashionable world of contemporary England,"<sup>4</sup> surrounded by natural and artificial

<sup>2</sup> Jane Spencer, introduction to *Millenium Hall*, by Sarah Scott (London: Virago Press, 1986), xi, xv. See also James Cruise, "A House Divided: Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 35, no. 3 (1995): 555–56.

<sup>3</sup> Ana Acosta, "Transparency and the Enlightenment Body: Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* and Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*," in *Gender and Utopia in the Eighteenth Century: Essays in English and French Utopian Writing*, ed. Nicole Pohl and Brenda Tooley (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 107.

<sup>4</sup> Nicole Pohl, "Sweet place, where virtue then did rest": The Appropriation of

barriers, and exempted from most local obligations and dependencies, the community literally minds its own business by choice and by design. As a result, the five principals—Miss Mancel, Mrs Morgan, Lady Mary Jones, Miss Selvyn, and Miss Trentham—may determine for themselves how they engage with visitors who come their way, and because they feel the ordinary idea of “society” may be likened to Hobbes’s “state of war,” a competitive chaos of vanities, ambitions, and “irrational pursuits” (111), wider social intercourse holds little charm for them. Nevertheless, Scott’s promotional premise calls for the introduction of a worldly admirer with protracted, privileged access into their midst, even if the unassuming, insular lives that her women lead would seem to render such an interloper unfit to tell their story. Scott’s shrewdest and most underappreciated narrative negotiations find her at once exposing and exploiting the equivocal effects of this outsider: by complementing and conditioning his imperfect understanding of Hall society with an insider’s discerning and artful partiality, she improves her message at the expense of the messenger, revealing beauties unperceived by the admiring yet blinkered eyes of the beholder.

Viewed in this light, Scott’s decision to employ a “Gentleman on his Travels” to convey the promised description is at once surprising and sensible. The very existence of Millennium Hall appears to depend on the exclusion of men and the masculine,<sup>5</sup> yet what the gentleman-narrator lacks as a documentarian he compensates for as a pitchman. Given the humility of her principals, Scott charges her narrator with the dissemination and reproduction of the economy and ethics of the Hall, and at the end of his visit he accordingly joins a diffident call to action

the Country-House Ethos in Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall*,” *Utopian Studies* 7, no. 1 (1996): 51.

<sup>5</sup> The claim is virtually ubiquitous in the criticism of *Millenium Hall*. For variations on this theme, see Acosta, 111; Betty A. Schellenberg, *The Conversational Circle: Rereading the English Novel, 1740–1775* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 88–89; Suzanne Stewart, “Beyond that Small Circle All Is Foreign to Us: Spatial and Social Cohesion in Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall*,” *Lumen* 22 (2003): 2; Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 226; Caroline Gonda, *Reading Daughters’ Fictions 1709–1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 110; and Julie McGonegal, “The Politics of Generosity in Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall* and *Sir George Ellison*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 19, no.3 (2007): 295.

with a promise to emulate the good example he has witnessed: "If what I have described, may tempt anyone to go and do likewise, I shall think myself fortunate in communicating it. For my part, my thoughts are all engaged in a scheme to imitate them on a smaller scale" (249). The installation of a male narrator makes available an array of promotional advantages that Scott thoroughly exploits, yet his salesmanship also distorts and depreciates what he is committed to selling. As J. David Macey maintains, the narrator garbles his descriptive materials, applying Edenic, Arcadian, and pastoral references indiscriminately to mask his failure to grasp the true nature of the Hall, and, as James Cruise notes, his linguistic representation of the Hall "subtly undermines its intrinsic value."<sup>6</sup> Scott's use of a male narrator surmounts some of the presentational obstacles that her premise entails, but his interference also threatens to obscure, cheapen, and misrepresent the distinctively feminine Utopia that the narrative envisions. Ardent, effusive, and sincere, the narrator is nevertheless only half the teller Scott requires.

To compensate for the narrator's functional deficiencies—his lack of the intimate knowledge needed to shed light on the dynamics of the Hall or on the sentiments of its denizens and his inability to command or convey such knowledge without distorting what he is meant to preserve—Scott assigns him a collaborator, Mrs Maynard, whose impact on the complexion of the novel has been remarkably undervalued. Although she acts as a sixth principal, completing the group of gentlewomen credited with establishing and managing the Hall, she may be better understood as a liminal figure, a member who does not belong fully to the community's inner circle or abide by its ethos but whose marginality allows her to serve as a transitional teller, a critical go-between, an ambassador of the interior. Scott empowers Mrs Maynard to speak of private matters with greater liberty than her peers, and she also capitalizes on Mrs Maynard's intermediary position to distil, homogenize, and embellish the historical share of the public presentation. Her account of the events that preceded the foundation of the Hall, articulated in a series of inset narratives, resists assimilation

<sup>6</sup> J. David Macey, "Eden Revisited: Re-Visions of the Garden in Astell's *Serious Proposal*, Scott's *Millenium Hall*, and Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9, no. 2 (1997): 169–70. Cruise, 556–57.

into the text of the open letter. Her account consolidates the values and attitudes emblematic of the community and, when contrasted with the epistolary content, simultaneously lays bare the narrator's perceptual and interpretive limitations. Mrs Maynard's contribution to the narrative effects an indispensable form of doubled exposure: she divulges the stories that the women cannot tell themselves and reveals the shortcomings built into the gentleman's telling.

That telling, staged as a laudatory letter composed after the narrator's visit, almost immediately betrays his deficiencies as a chronicler of the Millenium Hall experience. As Vincent Carretta points out, the epistolary structure encapsulates and rehearses the histories that Mrs Maynard supplies: "Within the large box of the letter, we find smaller boxes reinscribed by the narrator," and Mrs Maynard serves as a "transitional inscriber" implicated in Scott's strategy of overarching containment.<sup>7</sup> Such containment may realize "another level of masculine oversight and circumscription," as Carretta suggests, but that procedure tends to be differential, not palimpsestic.<sup>8</sup> Aside from sporadic interruptions that simulate the contextual realities of the visit, the narrator and Lamont routinely yield the stage during the relation of the inset narratives. Mrs Maynard speaks often and at length, and the sketches of feminine experience that she offers do not merge seamlessly into the surrounding discourse. When her listeners do respond to her stories, their commentary underscores their inability to appreciate properly the rarefied reasoning or magnanimous behaviour of the women. Lamont, a coxcomb whose understanding has been eroded by "fashionable amusement," "desultory reading," and "all the dissipation which the gay world affords" (55), serves as a weak foil, a moral naïf awakened to virtue by his contact with the ladies of the Hall. The narrator, despite his enthusiasm for the principles espoused and practiced by the community, furnishes evidence of a stronger, more settled contrariety in the body of the letter.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Carretta, "Utopia Limited: Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* and *The History of Sir George Ellison*," *Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual* 5 (1992): 310.

<sup>8</sup> Carretta, 310. Acosta describes an analogous relationship, a "frame ... and the area enclosed by that frame," and suggests that the embedding "bridges the gap between reader and utopia, creating a self-contained world from which everything undesirable may be excluded" (114).

The opening passages feature a submissive, self-deprecating writer, a man who has ostensibly measured himself against a new standard and found his conduct wanting. He commends his observations to the publisher with respect and deference, asking him to decide if, “by being made public, they may be conducive to [his] great end of benefiting the world” (54). Although his mannered interaction with the women of the Hall will confirm his uprightness, the overture finds him repenting frailties thrown into stark relief by contradistinction: “my vanity must rather be mortified than flattered in the description of such virtues as will continually accuse me of my own deficiencies, and lead me to make an humiliating comparison between these excellent ladies and myself” (54). He casts himself as a true believer at the beginning and the end of the novel, a convert impressed and improved by examples of moral excellence that beg emulation. Given his sophistication and probity, the alteration of his character may not seem especially momentous, but Scott uses Lamont’s more fundamental conversion to hint at the magnitude of the narrator’s edification. By the novel’s end, the miseducated coxcomb has opened up the New Testament, “convinced by the conduct of the ladies” of Millenium Hall “that their religion must be the true one” (248). The parallel bracket structure of the introduction and conclusion allows the reader to suppose that the narrator, exposed to the same enlightening acquaintance, must have undergone an equally radical inward transformation.

Despite these auspicious indices of the Hall’s salutary influence, the overall tenor of the letter punctures the intimation that the narrator has grown in any material way. Cruise notes that the narrator, unlike Lamont, “is marmoreal in his character”; he entertains the possibility of making positive changes, but “he is never so impressionable that we actually see them in the narrative, as we do with Lamont.”<sup>9</sup> In a circular, self-fulfilling gesture, the narrator actually prefigures his own resistance to amendment: the lessons to be learned from his description of Millenium Hall, he suggests, are intended for the cultivation of “youthful minds,” ones that are still unformed and “susceptible of impression” (53). While he is warmly responsive to the

<sup>9</sup> Cruise, 556.

industry, charity, and virtue he witnesses at the Hall, the narrator arrives with a fully formed spiritual identity and established habits of thought. As a result, he intermittently voices sentiments incompatible with the opinions expressed by the women he admires, even though he seems unconscious of the discrepancy. When he introduces the ladies, for example, he appraises them like chattel: Mrs Maynard is “well made,” possessed of a “complexion agreeable, though brown”; Miss Selvyn “can scarcely be called tall,” and her “features are far too irregular to be handsome”; Lady Mary Jones, in his estimation, “seems to have been rather pleasing than beautiful” (59–60). Later, conducted to a refuge for dwarfs, giants, and other “monsters,” the narrator is a silent party to a lecture on the cruelty of judging people according to Procrustean standards (72–73). In his subsequent reflections, he finds no cause for self-recrimination; instead, he notes how “admiration of the human mind” can displace “the pain one might naturally receive from seeing the human form so disgraced” (74). Scott mines the correlation between deformity, beauty, and womanhood on several occasions, but the conceit does not square with the narrator’s customary outlook.<sup>10</sup> The connection between the two incidents never occurs to him, nor does he reflect on the matter very long.

For much of the novel, the narrator’s observations are similarly blinkered. He seldom challenges the virtues that the ladies advocate, and he rarely disputes the wisdom of their benevolent practices. His commentary generally furnishes the women with opportunities to offer elaborations and clarifications, in much the same way that Lamont’s remarks afford them with occasions for gentle correction. The epistolary form allows

<sup>10</sup> The analogy occurs in a number of forms and is turned to a number of uses. See Carretta, 315; Ashley Stockstill, “Better Homes and Gardens: The Fairy World(s) of Sarah Fielding and Sarah Scott,” *Feminist Studies in English Literature* 6, no. 2 (1998): 144–56; Felicity A. Nussbaum, “Feminotopias: The Pleasures of ‘Deformity’ in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England,” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Linda Dunne, “Mothers and Monsters in Sarah Robinson Scott’s *Millenium Hall*,” in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, ed. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 65–72; Dorice Williams Elliott, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 49–51.

Scott to disclose the narrator's evaluative inclinations without pitting them directly against Hall ethics. When he attends an evening concert, he praises the "exquisite taste, and the most exact time" of the performance, and his dinner that night is "more elegant than expensive" (63); upon a visit to the park adjacent to the Hall, he regards the trees and considers in passing "the profit that might arise from their sale" (109); as a guest at a rural wedding sponsored by the ladies, he smiles down upon the rustic "coquetry and gallantry," which affords him great amusement because it is so different from "what one is accustomed to behold in higher life" (162). As "a disengaged picturesque tourist," as Suzanne Stewart aptly labels him, the narrator stands apart from the community, aloof from it, less interested in the social solidarity and felicity that the women have realized than in their merit relative to his own tastes and experiences as a connoisseur, gourmand, capitalist, and gentleman.<sup>11</sup> While he approves of all that he observes, his approbation arises from spectatorial sensibilities uncongenial to the objects and scenes that Scott sets out before him.

Given his tenuous connection to the enlightened society of the Hall, the narrator approaches the milieu as if from an "alien culture ... defined by gender."<sup>12</sup> He sorts, sifts, and evaluates the language and conduct that come into his compass, but he does not always grasp or accept the underlying convictions that inform what he hears and sees. When he announces that he has neglected to mention several conversations and discourses, "which did not serve to illustrate any particular actions, however worthy they may be of recollection" (122), the narrator calls attention to his privileged position, his authority over the content of the letter. His principles of selection may be out of tune with the community's ideals, and his ability to discover the didactic value of the omitted materials may be uncertain, but he holds uncontested sway in the epistolary frame. While preventing him from being a perfect cipher or a transparent lens through which Millenium Hall and its residents may be seen undistorted, those settled principles and that unselfconscious authority are central to his pedagogical function in Scott's design. The narrator is not pliable

<sup>11</sup> Stewart, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Christine Rees, *Utopian Imagination and Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Longman Group, 1996), 216.

or educable like Lamont, but he possesses a worldly acumen that allows him to recognize what is essential and irreducible—the illustrative histories that Mrs Maynard recounts—and to translate the feminized, Utopian culture of the Hall into terms accessible to outsiders like himself. He alone can make the crucial connection between spiritual and secular economies, discerning the way in which the enlightened charity administered by the women “is within the reach of every person’s imitation” (170); he alone can trumpet “the superior sense, as well as transcendent virtues of these ladies” (222), using his rank, experience, maturity, and integrity to underwrite his lavish praise. As the letter writer, the narrator often discloses chauvinistic habits of thought; those habits, however, occur as both liabilities and advantages. His attitudes bar him from appreciating Millenium Hall in a manner wholly consistent with its distinctive culture, yet they also allow him to acknowledge and applaud sources of esteem congenial to the text’s gender-inclusive prospects.

The primary terms of commendation for the community appear in the inset narratives furnished by Mrs Maynard. She supplies the critical points of origin, detailing the formative experiences that shaped the founders and mapping the lines of flight that ultimately brought them together. She also amplifies the moral precepts that characterize those events and careers, imperatives integral to the singular ethos of the Hall. The narrator’s letter, understood as an appendage, simply makes the histories that she offers more expansive and generically applicable. He “stresses the women’s Christian virtues, social vision, and good deeds,” while Mrs Maynard chronicles “the women’s ill fortunes with men, their intellectual interests, and their enduring female friendships”<sup>13</sup>—the precipitants that made Millenium Hall necessary, possible, and sustainable. While the framing epistle allows the narrator to exert control over the final form of the relation, Mrs Maynard’s stories resist interruption, superscription, or further embellishment. As George E. Haggerty suggests, they are part of “an elaborate strategy to resist the authority of the patriarchal narrative voice.”<sup>14</sup> Her contribution sometimes

<sup>13</sup> Lanser, 228.

<sup>14</sup> George E. Haggerty, *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 89.

even overflows the vessel that contains it, disrupting the epistolary illusion. The representation of the death of Edward Lambton, a prospective suitor of Miss Mancel, obliges the narrator to introduce a series of nested embeddings that yield a metadiegetic mess, and the history of Miss Selvyn involves the interpolation of a letter from her mother, Lady Emilia Reynolds, a dubious reproduction that strains his credibility.<sup>15</sup> The balance of the telling rapidly swings in Mrs Maynard's favour, reducing the narrator to a rapt and passive auditor for much of the novel. As a member of the community privy to its inner workings, she invests the narrative with an insider's insight that corroborates, contests, and exceeds the outsider perspective.

In the same way that the narrator's presence works to the benefit and detriment of Millenium Hall, Mrs Maynard's role in the relation has both a benevolent and an outwardly sinister aspect. As Gary Kelly suggests, her interpretive, synthetic work is vital: "Mrs Maynard reflects and explains," a needful complement to the narrator's description and reportage; she adds depth and dimension to his account, explaining the social milieu in a manner adapted to his contextual nescience; she serves as "the master of the discourses in utopia," a maternal educator enriching his observations with added layers of significance.<sup>16</sup> While her contribution to the narrative reveals the preconceptions that limit his outlook, she also offers an alternative means of apprehending the Hall, its history, and its nature—she possesses the faculties needed to decipher what he does not fully understand.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, she insistently and consistently brings the object lessons to be gained from the ladies' narratives into sharper focus. She yokes her intimate knowledge of the Hall and its founders to a pedagogical purpose, turning the stories she relates into parables endorsing duty, humility, modesty, piety, and reason while condemning vanity, frivolity,

<sup>15</sup> In representing the death of Edward Lambton, the narrative asks the reader to accept that a transcript of Lambton's last words managed to pass from his lips to an anonymous steward, to Lady Lambton, to Mrs Thornby, to Miss Mancel, to Mrs Maynard, and finally to the narrator, who records them in his letter.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Kelly, introduction to *Millenium Hall*, by Sarah Scott (1995), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Nanette Morton, "A Most Sensible Oeconomy': From Spectacle to Surveillance in Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11, no. 2 (1999): 192.

pride, perversity, and unregulated passions. She boils the experiences of the ladies down to their most essential didactic form: when confronted by a predatory, vicious world, a woman's best provision is mindfulness of her virtue, the society of likeminded women, and the benevolent dispensations of providence. She speaks out as an advocate for the beliefs that Millenium Hall was built to embody.

That advocacy, however, may represent a problematic breach of the protocols observed by the enlightened society. By addressing the narrator on familiar terms, by laying the history of the Hall and its residents bare to him, Mrs Maynard effectively subjects the ladies to a kind of public scrutiny, the likes of which drove them to seek refuge in seclusion. Given the intimate, circumstantial details that she supplies, the narrator's attempt to obscure the identity and location of the Hall by concealing "the real name, fearing to offend that modesty which has induced them to conceal their virtues in retirement" (53), becomes precarious. Mrs Maynard's particularity, despite the sympathetic tenor of her narration, makes his gesture of corrective discretion seem equivocal at best. As Linda Dunne notes, "the stories of the women, told voluntarily by Mrs Maynard, expose the lives of the residents of Millenium Hall to the visiting eyes of the gentlemen as well as to the reader, in much the same way as the visit into the asylum, made with the permission of the monsters, exposes them to the same eyes."<sup>18</sup> In addition to this sideshow effect, this unsettling treatment of the Utopian community as a menagerie of feminine oddities, some critics also find no satisfactory indications that the ladies of the Hall "endorse her narrative acts," nor any signs that "the community has authorized—or even knows about—the narrator's written account, which he sends to his narratee with the express hope that the recipient will see fit to publish it."<sup>19</sup> Although I will undertake to acquit Mrs Maynard of these charges, as an accessory to his public presentation her disclosures arguably constitute a grave betrayal.

Her complicity in the revelation and promotion of Millenium Hall echoes the affronts that the women endured in the wider

<sup>18</sup> Dunne, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Lanser, 228, 229–30.

world—for the purposes of the novel, the dangers of unwelcome public exposure cannot be overemphasized. The history of Miss Mancel, for example, finds the heroine wrestling with problems posed by her renown for great beauty; branded “*the handsome lady*,” she becomes a “general subject of discourse,” much to her chagrin (135). Mrs Morgan (née Melvyn) is victimized in a similar fashion, coerced into marrying a boorish suitor by a stepmother who threatens to expose her to the shame of “being publicly disclaimed by her parents,” even though she is entirely innocent of the charges levelled against her (123). The moral education of the young and vain Lady Mary Jones begins when she discovers how close she was to “becoming the object of general ridicule and disgrace” after an accident prevented her from eloping with a married man (178), and the remainder of her history centres on her efforts to repair, with the help of Miss Selvyn, the reputation for “vicious levity” her peers inferred from her “innocent vivacity” (183). Miss Trentham’s story finds her temporarily caressed and admired for her beauty and fortune in London, where she “forced herself in public” and discovered that “the idleness of men, and her own vanity, could afford her entertainment” (240). When smallpox ruins her complexion and prompts her to withdraw from polite society, she views her disfigurement as “a reward for the good she had done” (241). The personal histories of all five women include strong inducements to shun notoriety, both to defend against mistreatment and to check indecent pride. Mrs Maynard’s willingness to unfold their stories to a visitor, especially a male one, would seem to represent a significant transgression.

Moreover, if Mrs Maynard’s loquacity infringes on the privacy of her peers, it would also seem to run counter to the calculated detachment that characterizes the community. The ladies could conceivably extend their authority beyond the environs of the Hall, but they have purposely chosen to limit their involvement. To be “worldly,” as they understand the term, is to endure a succession of distresses and disturbances antithetical to the lives that they wish to lead. Their notions, to borrow words from the gentleman forced to explain how Miss Mancel’s guardian could boast of his plans to defile her yet still find acceptance among his friends, “are too refined for persons who

live in the world" (101). As Dorice Williams Elliott points out, their rural retirement thus "represents an escape ... but it also represents a withdrawal from the world, which they can never again enter without again taking on the position of victimized object."<sup>20</sup> The decision to withdraw cuts in both directions, and the women accept that the enjoyment of freedom entails the renunciation of wider influence. When Lamont suggests that the ladies, given their virtuous doctrine and corresponding conduct, have the "right to turn reformers," Miss Mancel clarifies the moderate scope of their ambitions: "We do not set up for reformers ... we wish to regulate ourselves by the laws laid down to us, and as far as our influence can extend, endeavour to enforce them; beyond that small circle all is foreign to us; we have sufficient employment in improving ourselves; to mend the world requires much abler hands" (166). This determined emphasis on localized exertions makes it more difficult to absolve Mrs Maynard of wrongdoing. If she is ignorant of the narrator's plans to publish a description of the Hall, her telling at least occurs as a betrayal of confidence; if she is aware of those publication plans and seeks to promote the community as a model for civic reform, her relation then becomes a wilful contravention of the articulated self-limiting principle.

Scott never addresses these matters directly, and were it not for her circumspect provision it might be tempting to write off the relational mechanism as a narrative expedient, as a clumsy handoff from an impolitic gossip to an indulgent, lordly chauvinist. Her canny management of the exchange between Mrs Maynard and the narrator, however, precludes that possibility. By scrupulously rendering the contexts of the conversation, the affinities that connect the two principal participants, the conditions of inquiry and curiosity that make candid responses permissible, and the special qualifications of the gentleman as a listener and Mrs Maynard as a teller, Scott establishes the terms of an extraordinary collaboration, a partnership that allows her to circumvent the protective precepts of *Millenium Hall*. What transpires between them occurs as a betrayal in form, but not in substance: an insider surrenders classified intelligence to an outsider, to be sure, yet Scott extenuates and

<sup>20</sup> Elliott, 51.

exculpates every aspect of the act. In her hands, Mrs Maynard's relations of intimate histories become perfidious proofs of her devotion, and the narrator drags those secrets from the shadows only to cast them in a more flattering light. They work in tandem to realize Scott's pedagogical ambitions, halving both the work of relating the tale and the pardonable fault of exalting the Hall.

Although the end result of Scott's engineering is a functionally balanced collaboration, the more challenging share of the promotional performance falls to Mrs Maynard. The gentleman, an outsider, requires only modest alteration to fit him for his narratorial role; as an insider, a fixture of the community empowered and determined to speak of it, Mrs Maynard obliges Scott to anticipate more complex objections and lay more elaborate groundwork. *The History of Sir George Ellison* would furnish Scott with an opportunity to explore further the narrator's eligibility as an ambassador and practitioner of Hall virtues, but in *Millenium Hall* itself she largely dispenses with characterization of him. It is enough to know that he journeyed to Cornwall as part of a regimen to restore his health, "to cure the ill effects of [his] long abode in the hot and unwholesome climate of Jamaica" where he made his fortune (54), knowledge which preconditions his response to the Hall milieu.<sup>21</sup> In the absence of a substantial backstory, his viability as a spokesman for the Hall can only be deduced from his epistolary comments. The modesty convention likewise limits the reader's access to the history of Mrs Maynard, who appears briefly in a supporting role in the story of Miss Trentham. The novel sheds little light on her reasons for seeking seclusion, her affinity for the Hall ethos, or her motives for furnishing the narrator with a detailed account of the lives of the five principals. That opacity distinguishes Mrs Maynard from her peers, increasing the distance between her and the subjects of her story, and helping to establish her connection to the narrator, a similarly marginal, dislocated figure, a man exhausted by his worldly experience. By cultivating this remove and tightening this connection, Scott nudges Mrs Maynard out from the interior and into a liminal space where she can reach him. From that threshold she can

<sup>21</sup> See Nussbaum, 162; and Carretta, 317–18.

make the necessary transmission to the outside world with the support and implicit sanction of the women of the Hall.

Scott begins widening the gap between Mrs Maynard and the founders of the community in the earliest moments of *Millenium Hall*. The narrator and Lamont are conducted to the Hall to await news of their damaged chaise, and Mrs Maynard's name is mentioned in passing, which kindles recognition in the narrator: "From the moment I saw her, I thought her face not unknown to me, but her name brought to my recollection, that she was not only an old acquaintance, but a near relation" (61). A fuller introduction refreshes their "affinity and former intimacy" and improves the renewed connection, and the ladies use the repair of the carriage and Mrs Maynard's "satisfaction ... from having recovered so long lost a relation" as pretexts for extending the gentlemen a warmer invitation (61, 62). The subsequent pages shift attention away from the surprising reunion and towards the quotidian life of the Hall, offering the narrator a glimpse of the orderly, sensible benevolence practised by the extended "family" with which Mrs Maynard has aligned herself. This new family, however, must contend with the older ties of consanguinity, and the narrator takes for granted that the latter will win out.<sup>22</sup> His survey of the Hall's prosperous operations piques his curiosity about the women and their unaccountable seclusion, and he longs for an opportunity "to be alone with my cousin, in hopes I might from her receive some account of this wonder" (76). His wish is doubly indicative, as it incorporates a natural claim to familiarity as well as an awareness that the solicitation ought to be made in private. Mrs Maynard responds to his request favourably and volubly, unfolding the stories of her friends with a frankness that is tacitly licensed by the ladies themselves.

In the middle of the history of Miss Mancel and Mrs Morgan, Mrs Maynard notes one of the few inhibitions that will curb her candour: "were I myself the subject," she informs her listeners, who have asked her to continue the relation, "the motive for my

<sup>22</sup> For a description of the contest between bonds of blood and bonds of choice, compare Alessa Johns, *Women's Utopias of the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 93–94, and Ann Van Sant, "Historicizing Domestic Relations: Sarah Scott's Use of the 'Household Family'," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 17, no. 3 (2005): 373–76.

obedience might be equivocal" (122). By implication, of course, her motive for recounting the histories of her peers cannot be. Self-effacing reserve prevents her from relating her own story at length—to do so would smack of the vanity she so often faults—but her liminal status surfaces in the few details that Scott supplies late in the novel. At the end of Miss Trentham's history, Mrs Maynard devotes a scant half paragraph to her own: "When Mr Maynard died, leaving me but a small jointure," Mrs Trentham was indulged in "her inclination, of asking me to spend the first part of my widowhood with her and her friends; and I have been fortunate enough to recommend myself so effectually, that they have left me no room to doubt they choose I should continue with them, and indeed I think I could scarcely support life were I banished from this heavenly society" (242). Unlike the five principals, Mrs Maynard does not bring a fortune of several thousand pounds to endow the Hall or contribute to the ladies' many charitable enterprises. She considers herself a lucky dependent, who enjoys a privileged position that she holds at their discretion. As was the case with her earlier appearance, in which she nursed Miss Trentham back to health and expressed modest pleasure that her "care was not useless" (241), she feels she must recommend herself to them, prove herself deserving of their favour. Most importantly, in her unqualified enthusiasm for the community she strongly resembles the narrator. Her peers, humble Christians all, are keenly "sensible of great deficiencies in the performance of [their] duty" (244). Mrs Maynard, however, perceives no such shortcomings; she both glorifies the "heavenly society" and melodramatically claims she might die without it.

Midway through *Millenium Hall*, Scott depicts the singularity that marks Mrs Maynard's character and the effusiveness that sets her apart from her peers and aligns her with the narrator even more vividly. Following a visit to one of the charities sponsored by the ladies, a home for indigent gentlewomen, the narrator heaps praise on the heaven in which his cousin lives. Rather than moderating his sense of her beatitude, she expands and refines it:

"I will not ... give up my share of the felicity you so justly imagine these ladies must enjoy, though I have no part in what occasions it. When I reflect on all the blessings they impart,

and see how happiness flows, as it were, in an uninterrupted current from their hands and lips, I am overwhelmed with gratitude to the Almighty disposer of my fate, for having so mercifully thrown me into such a scene of felicity, where every hour yields true heart-felt joy, and fills me with thanksgivings to Him, who enables them thus to dispense innumerable blessings, and so greatly rewards them already by the joyful consciousness of having obeyed him.” (120)

This exchange with the narrator deepens and complicates Mrs Maynard’s relationship to the ladies and the Hall community. She does not contribute to the benefactions of the principals—she maintains a respectful distance, even in her choice of pronouns—yet she considers herself the beneficiary of something like a surplus of blessedness. She is neither a donor nor directly a recipient; her role in the topmost rank of the Hall’s hierarchy defies categorization. Additionally, she views her attachment to the Hall as a gift of providence, the same divine solicitude that figures so prominently in the histories she relates, yet even that gifting betokens her difference. Divine favour, in effect, has endowed the five virtuous principals with the power to “dispense innumerable blessings,” and it has rewarded Mrs Maynard with the joy of tagging along. She can magnify their goodness precisely because, by doing so, she does not exaggerate her own.

The unrestrained communication that occurs between the narrator and Mrs Maynard on this occasion also illuminates a pattern of permissiveness, the implicit sanction and tacit license that I refer to above. Lanser, citing Miss Mancel’s differentiation of a “crowd” and “society” in *Millenium Hall* (111–12), notes that the ladies converse freely and openly among themselves, an expression of a communal philosophy that may imply a “pointed refusal to give over their stories to outsiders” like the “intruding men.”<sup>23</sup> That pointed refusal, however, does not materialize in the ladies’ laissez-faire approach towards monitoring the exchanges between the reunited pair. The operation of the Hall depends on diligent surveillance by the founders, yet they seem loath to exercise the same vigilance when Mrs Maynard and the narrator—as well as their own activities and histories—are concerned. In fact, the ladies slip away when Mrs Maynard lauds their liberality: “not choosing to be present

<sup>23</sup> Lanser, 229.

while their actions were the subjects of discourse" (120), they discreetly distance themselves from the two to avoid inhibiting their candour. Lanser suggests that the "free communication of sentiments" that the women espouse should be understood as a policy limited to intra-gender communication, yet Mrs Maynard's preface to her relation, addressed to the narrator, indicates that she adheres to a more general understanding of this discursive freedom: "my friends are above wishing to conceal any part of their lives, though themselves are never the subject of their own conversation. If they have had any follies they do not desire to hide them; they have not pride enough to be hurt with candid criticisms, and have too much innocence to fear any very severe censures" (76). Averse to exposure yet above concealment, the ladies seem amenable to having their stories told so long as they are not implicated in the telling.

The handling of disclosure in *Millenium Hall* thus requires a finicky negotiation, one Scott handles expertly. To authorize a chronicle of their lives would be presumptuous, but that does not prevent the ladies from inspiring the narrator to seek it out himself. The entire novel hinges on the evocation and satisfaction of the narrator's curiosity, and he proves to be obligingly inquisitive. Significantly, the arousal of his interest occurs as a peculiar form of play; the ladies can become almost coquettish as they tantalize him with the promise of revelation.<sup>24</sup> When they approach the enclosure of the "monsters," for example, neither the narrator nor Lamont can fathom what purpose it serves. The baffled narrator finally inquires, and "the ladies smiled on each other, but evaded answering [his] question, which only increased [his] curiosity" (70). Miss Mancel does not unriddle the mystery until the complexion of the conversation changes: Lamont guesses that the enclosure must conceal a zoo, and she responds in the negative, offering a disquisition on freedom and natural emplacement before deeming it cruel to leave the two men "tyrannized by curiosity" (72). In an interesting turn, however, she immediately condemns the "contemptuous curiosity of the unthinking multitude" (72), the nosiness

<sup>24</sup> See Schellenberg, 89; and Nussbaum, 163. Schellenberg characterizes the enticement of the narrator as a form of "sexual attraction," while Nussbaum suggests that the "men's voyeurism is motivated more from a curious, colonizing desire than from a sexual one."

that formerly caused idle onlookers to gape at the dwarfs and giants. The distinction that she draws establishes two forms of curiosity and sets them at odds: one derives from a will to edification and conduces to virtue, while the other is a product of the impudent spectatorship that the Hall was built to thwart. The description of Mr d'Avora, the former tutor of Miss Mancel and Mrs Morgan, clarifies the divide: "curiosity of wisdom, not of impertinence" led to the improvement of his understanding and made him the lone honourable man that the women encountered before adjourning to the Hall (95). The interactions prior to Mrs Maynard's relation of the five histories may accordingly be understood as a trial of the narrator's inquisitive temperament. Once the ladies determine that his curiosity is of the proper sort, that he is intent on learning, not gawking, they do not stand in the way of its seemly gratification.

The principals' circumspect withdrawal from Mrs Maynard and the narrator sets the stage for a liberal, uninhibited telling. Despite Lanser's contention, the narrator does not appear to be an importunate petitioner; his request for the histories is more humble than imperious, and his solicitations become quite cursory after the telling has begun. Moreover, his cousin's ready compliance would seem to challenge Lanser's corollary assertion, that "Mrs Maynard ... is repeatedly 'pumped' by the narrator for information that is not quite yielded willingly."<sup>25</sup> On most occasions, Mrs Maynard proves to be more than accommodating; her garrulity becomes so conspicuous that the narrator remarks on it and she acknowledges it. At the conclusion of the history of Miss Mancel and Mrs Morgan, Scott uses a call to company to break off the relation. Although Mrs Maynard has reached the tale's conclusion—the Hall has been founded, and the heroines have settled in—the narrator notes that she seems disposed to "mention some other of the actions of these ladies, which seemed a favourite topic with her" (161). When the telling recommences, she asks her listeners' pardon and promises greater brevity in the remaining histories: "I shall not the less readily comply ... for being able to bring what I have to say of them into less compass, than I did my history of Mrs Morgan and Miss Mancel, of whom,

<sup>25</sup> Lanser, 227.

when I begin to speak, I always find it difficult to leave off, and am led by my fondness for the subject into a detail, perhaps too circumstantial" (171). Belying the sense that information must be wrung from a reticent teller is the consistent failure of the narrator to comment "in any direct way on the narratives he hears or [to request] any supplemental details about the individuals involved," as Cruise points out.<sup>26</sup> Wheedling and hectoring hardly seem necessary: Mrs Maynard's account requires no elaboration, and her liminal status allows her to impart a far more comprehensive view of formative events than the principals themselves could properly supply.

When compared to the moralistic, mannerly worldview of the ladies of the Hall, that view can seem bracing, even brazen. Mrs Maynard always treats her five peers with due decorum in her relation, but the foibles and faults of the people who plague them are generally writ large. The case of Miss Melvyn's marriage furnishes her with an especially fine opportunity to contrast the principled behaviour of her benefactors with the machinations of those who would prey upon their virtue. Faced with the threat of compulsion, Miss Melvyn finds herself hemmed in on all sides: her spiteful stepmother succeeds in discrediting her; her father, duped by his wife's deceptions, demands obedience of his daughter; the loutish Mr Morgan proves eager to leverage her into the unwanted union. With all avenues of escape closed to her, Miss Melvyn determines that she must wed the boor, for doing so is "the least culpable part she could act" given her "duty to society" (127). Mrs Maynard recounts her heroine's scrupulous reasoning and Miss Mancel's sympathetic support with great warmth; in her description of the three oppressors, however, she makes no effort to veil her contempt. She introduces the father as "an easy tempered weak man" (83), a simpleton so tractable that his second wife cannot even take pleasure in deceiving him. She devotes several paragraphs to the deficiencies of the second Lady Melvyn, a woman "void of delicacy" and "destitute of grace," who "excited the admiration of some, but pleased none" (89). She reserves a special barb for Mr Morgan, whose age and poor health

<sup>26</sup> Cruise, 563.

make him a ludicrous suitor: “should any capricious artist take the sickle out of the hand of old Time, and in its place put Hymen’s torch,” she suggests, “the picture ... would represent a proper hymeneal to attend Mr Morgan to the altar” (106). Mrs Maynard’s colourful, playful, and sometimes venomous telling clearly departs from the assiduous propriety practised by her friends. She enjoys a narrative liberty that encompasses not only what she can tell, but also how she can tell it.

Of course, what Mrs Maynard can tell also circumvents the dignified reserve of the ladies of the Hall. Although she ostensibly belongs to the inner circle, she is not bound by the strictures that her fellows observe, at least not to the same degree. As Elizabeth Bergen Brophy notes, “Scott reinforces the century’s code of conduct for women,” and her five principals are especially punctilious in their efforts to safeguard their reputations and demonstrate exemplary obedience to authority.<sup>27</sup> Mrs Maynard, however, evinces a willingness to dispense with niceties if doing so will exalt the community and the ladies who govern it. Entrusted with extensive, intimate knowledge of the Hall and its history, she sometimes forsakes the scruples of her peers to emphasize their goodness and rectitude. During the visit to the home for indigent gentlewomen, for example, she blatantly breaks ranks to gratify the narrator: “if she did not satisfy [his] inquiries, [he] was in great danger of remaining ignorant of the nature of that society, as her friends would not be easily prevailed with to break silence on that subject” (114). Since the ladies will not boast of their beneficence, Mrs Maynard boasts for them. The same imperative prompts her to disregard Mrs Morgan’s chariness concerning the reputation of her deceased husband. Mrs Maynard confesses that she came across the damning description of his churlish nature and abusive behaviour second-hand: “the account I give of him, I have received from others; Mrs Morgan never mentions his name, if it can possibly be avoided; and when she does, it is always with respect” (135). Mrs Maynard does not hesitate to blacken his character or to denounce him roundly—whatever injury his memory suffers as a result of her scathing relation is

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Bergen Brophy, *Women’s Lives and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991), 253.

offset by the ennobling portrayal of his long-suffering wife and reverent widow. She invariably turns her telling to the service of the Hall and its patrons, but she does not allow the inhibitions that constrain them to constrain her.

Mrs Maynard also refuses to be cramped by the limits of second-hand intelligence when it stands in the way of her representational goals. To show the ladies off to best advantage, she sometimes expands and improves the narrative, supplying novelistic penetration into the backgrounds and motives of secondary characters. In the history of Lady Mary Jones, for example, she enters into the perspectives of Mr Lenman and Lord Robert St George, two predatory men who mistook the heroine's girlish levity for moral laxity. The insights that Mrs Maynard offers are transparently fabricated—both men learn to respect their intended victim, yet that respect involves private admission rather than outward signs that Lady Mary might have observed and passed along—but they substantiate her case for the edifying effects of contact with a virtuous woman. A comparable ethical imperative prompts Mrs Maynard to flesh out peripheral figures such as Susanna Morgan (a fifty-five-year-old spinster who elopes with an impoverished ensign) and the procuress whom Lord Robert enlists to seduce Lady Mary. The description of their moral careers does little to advance the narrative, but their failings shed light on the ignominious fates of women beyond the pale of the Hall. This determination to contrive and refine the ethical complexion of the narrative also encompasses the depiction of the ladies themselves. Mrs Maynard's comprehensive command of her narrative materials transcends their self-possession, and she will even dredge up a secret between them, such as Miss Selvyn's decision to omit news of Lord Robert's marriage proposals in her letters to Lady Mary Jones (210), if the disclosure showcases a new dimension of her subject's prudence and humility. Her uncontested privilege and nearly uninterrupted relation allow her to massage and manipulate the narrative for the benefit of both the Hall and the narrator.

As Scott's crucial intermediary, Mrs Maynard proves to be a consummate double agent, a devotee of Millenium Hall, who serves her community by betraying it, and a storyteller,

who enlightens the narrator while revealing his benightedness. Handcuffed by a pedagogical premise seeking to encourage masculine emulation of a Utopian society that restricts masculine access, Scott uses Mrs Maynard to compensate for the limitations of tight-lipped insiders and worldly outsiders. The expanded title of the novel reveals the extent of her influence over the content and complexion of the narrative: the narrator can provide *A Description of Millenium Hall and the Country Adjacent*, but only she can furnish the *Characters of the Inhabitants, and such Historical Anecdotes and Reflections as May Excite in the Reader Proper Sentiments of Humanity, and Lead the Mind to the Love of Virtue*. The narrator superintends the surrounding letter, detailing his impressions and suggesting how the progressive principles of the Hall will conduce to virtue in the wider world, but the faithful transcript of Mrs Maynard's histories illuminates the origin and occasion of those principles, the enabling circumstances that make their practice needful and possible. Contemporary critics have wrestled with the problem of the messenger's relationship to the message, the ways in which his oversight causes *Millenium Hall* to be "a novel *about* a ... female community" but "not yet a novel *of* the community,"<sup>28</sup> yet the complementary performances of the narrator and Mrs Maynard yield a concerted arrangement in which both extrinsic and intrinsic renderings of the community successfully coexist. Scott's incorporation of the histories into the letter makes it possible both to preserve and promote her paradise, to present it as a viable alternative while honouring the source of its alterity.

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<sup>28</sup> Lanser, 230. See also Macey, 168–69.