

# Melancholy and the Idle Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century

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## Abstract

This interdisciplinary thesis explores the connection between mental health and lifestyle in the eighteenth century. The thesis draws upon scholarly and medical writings on melancholy, from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1622) onwards, and consider these works alongside eighteenth-century literary representations and biographical testimonies from those suffering from melancholy. The thesis provides a new perspective and understanding of the terms in which depression and other associated nervous illnesses were medicalised in the eighteenth century. I argue against recent scholarly work which regards melancholy as a label interchangeable with nervous illnesses such as vapours, spleen and hysteria. I argue that in the eighteenth century melancholy was a clearly identified medical condition in its own right and that it was a depressive illness which can be closely related to today's depression.

The thesis argues that there is a direct link between idleness and the melancholy state of mind and that a depressed state of mind was often the result of an idle lifestyle. Melancholy is also considered in relation to gender and the idle lifestyle that many females were forced to adopt. It then focuses upon three prominent literary figures: Samuel Johnson, William Shenstone and William Cowper, all of whom suffered from depression. The thesis considers Johnson's preoccupation with idleness as a symptom of his melancholy, a notion that has received little critical attention. Shenstone's experience is used to illustrate the depressing effect that a retired lifestyle could have on the individual. I argue that his melancholy was largely caused by the conflict created between his decision to live the idle lifestyle of a country gentleman and his desire to remain amongst society. Finally I re-evaluate the account of the mental turmoil expressed by Cowper in his spiritual autobiography *Adelphi* and provide evidence that suggests Cowper may have feigned the symptoms of religious melancholy in an attempt to resist the pressures placed upon him to follow a profession. Ultimately the thesis reveals that, in the eighteenth century, idleness was regarded as a major cause of, and symptom of, melancholy. Idleness was also seen as an obstruction to one of the most widely prescribed methods of cure for melancholy: occupation.

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## Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. This thesis contributes towards the larger 'Before Depression' project: a three year research project by the English departments of the universities of Northumbria and Sunderland and funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

Name:

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## Introduction

One of the main aims of this thesis is to explore the way in which the illness we now refer to as depression manifested itself in the eighteenth century. For instance, what were the set of feelings or symptoms attributed to the illness then? How did people refer to their depression in the eighteenth century? What label or labels were attached to or associated with the illness and how did sufferers describe their experience of the illness? However, it is dangerous territory that we enter into when we look back on the past and attempt to extract from medical literature, personal letters and journals, evidence of what we believe represented a depressed state of mind. For example, what is the difference between the symptoms described by an eighteenth-century person feeling slightly dejected and the same person in a severely depressed state? Was there a definitive point when a dejected state of mind became classed as a medical condition? The physician Timothy Rogers suggests that '[i]t is a very slight Melancholy and which is not deeply rooted, that can be drowned in wine, or chased away with sociable divertissements'.<sup>1</sup> Rather alarmingly, the polar extreme of this mild melancholy is referred to by John Arbuthnot as 'a Disease more terrible than Death'.<sup>2</sup>

Over recent years much research has been undertaken in the area of eighteenth-century depressive illness and these very points have been raised, analysed and debated. The overriding impression we get from this body of work is that there is a basic disagreement as to whether today's depression can, or even should, be equated with the

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Rogers, 'Advices to the Relations and Friends of these under Religious Melancholy', in, *Counsels and comforts to troubled Christians. In eight sermons by James Robe* (Glasgow, 1749), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/umn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 16 January 2008], pp. 257-278 (p. 276).

<sup>2</sup> John Arbuthnot, *An essay concerning the nature of ailments...* The second edition (London, 1732), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/umn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 17 December 2009], p. 374.

eighteenth-century illness. The first problem we encounter when we begin to read around the subject is that there is confusion amongst critics as to which term denoted the eighteenth-century depressed state of mind: was it melancholy or melancholia? Many of the major writers on the subject appear to use the terms interchangeably. In *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*, published in 1986, Stanley W. Jackson suggested that there is ‘a remarkable coherence in the basic cluster of symptoms’<sup>3</sup> between melancholia and today’s depression. The year 2000 saw the publication of Jennifer Radden’s *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*, which gives a history of the depressive illness but still does not settle on which term was used in the eighteenth century to denote the illness.<sup>4</sup> In 2003, Radden posed the question: ‘Is This Dame Melancholy? Equating Today’s Depression and Past Melancholia’, and she refuted Jackson’s argument, suggesting that only a ‘SUPERFICIAL CONTINUITY LINKS today’s *clinical depression* with *melancholy* and *melancholia* [...]’.<sup>5</sup> But should we be attempting to compare depression with both of these terms? To further complicate the matter, very often critics use the terms spleen, vapours, hysteria and hypochondria when referring to eighteenth-century depression and consequently it is implied, and the reader assumes, that the symptoms relating to these various labels are generic to all, melancholy included.

In George Rousseau’s ‘Depression’s forgotten genealogy: notes towards a history of depression’, published in 2000, Rousseau questioned whether in fact we should be attempting to compare today’s depression with eighteenth-century depression, because

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1986), p. ix.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Radden, ed., *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Radden, ‘Is This Dame Melancholy? Equating Today’s Depression and Past Melancholia’, *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*, 10.1 (2003), 37-52 (p. 37).

until the semantic dimensions and territorial border zones are further clarified it is difficult to agree on any pre-1800 model of depression. The conundrum for classification is apparent. One can compile examples and label *all* depressive rather than hysterical, mad, manic, melancholic, nervous, splenetic, vapourish, or consumptive. [...] But until definitions are agreed to and applied, there can be no stable theory among these unstable pre-1800 categories.<sup>6</sup>

The first aim of this thesis, therefore, is to define melancholy. In chapter one I argue that melancholy in particular *was* a relatively stable category and that it was the depressive illness most closely related to today's depression. I also argue that it is modern critics who confuse the illness melancholy with melancholia and these various other related nervous illnesses such as spleen and vapours, and that this was not the case with the majority of eighteenth-century physicians or eighteenth-century sufferers.

The second objective of this thesis is to explore the relationship between melancholy and idleness as a major cause of the illness. In *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture*, published in 2003, Sarah Jordan examined the social and economic factors which lay behind the eighteenth-century's problematical relationship with the issue of idleness. Although chapter two of this thesis also addresses these matters, the chapter considers all aspects of eighteenth-century idleness and how it was regarded in religious, moral, social and economic terms. It also explores how perceptions of idleness changed with regard to class and gender over the course of the century and the economic reasons behind those changes. However, the main objective of this chapter is to explain the reasoning behind society's concerns with idleness in order to throw light on the subsequent chapters which deal with idleness at a much more personal level: as a possible cause of melancholy.

In chapter two I discuss the direct relationship between melancholy and idleness and how, in the eighteenth century, idleness was regarded by physicians, ministers and

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<sup>6</sup> George Rousseau, 'Depression's forgotten genealogy: notes towards a history of depression' *History of Psychiatry*, 11.71 (2000), 71-106 (p. 84).

moralists as a major cause of melancholy and a major obstruction to recovery. Dr. James Beattie, an eighteenth-century professor of moral philosophy at Aberdeen University, suggested that '[t]o a person of a sound constitution idleness is a misery: if long continued, it impairs, and at last destroys, the vigour of both the soul and the body'.<sup>7</sup> However, this was the perceived effect of idleness on a person of 'sound constitution', whereas this thesis is interested more in the effects of idleness on those suffering from depression. For the melancholic, the effects of idleness appear to have been particularly acute. Sufferers such as Samuel Johnson actually feared idleness because they anticipated that it would either trigger a depressive episode, or that it would exacerbate and intensify an existing attack. The poet William Cowper stated that 'A vacant hour is my abhorrence; because, when I am not occupied, I suffer under the whole influence of my unhappy temperament'.<sup>8</sup>

Eighteenth-century women had their own particular issues with idleness. In chapter three I explore the social and economic factors that promoted industriousness in the poorer classes, whilst encouraging females belonging to, or aspiring to, the wealthier classes to adopt a basically idle lifestyle. I will examine the effect that such an idle existence had on the mental state of these women. For example, why was it that the general consensus amongst eighteenth-century physicians was that the poor did not suffer from melancholy? And how did the mental frustration caused by enforced idleness manifest itself in their wealthier counterparts?

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what constituted idleness in the eighteenth century, for, particularly in a century which prided itself on its industriousness, one man's work may have been perceived by another as idle leisure. This becomes

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<sup>7</sup> James Beattie, *Elements of moral science*. vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1790-93), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 26 October 2009], I, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. by John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), III, p. 143 (11 April 1788).

particularly apparent when, in chapters four and six, we examine the retired lifestyles adopted by the poet and landscape gardener William Shenstone and the poet William Cowper, both of whom suffered from depression. In chapter four of this thesis I consider the lifestyle choice Shenstone made when he turned his back on attaining a profession in order to adopt the retired, and what many considered to be the idle, lifestyle of a country gentleman. This chapter explores the economic reasons behind the changing attitudes towards such an idle lifestyle and considers whether in fact it was the idleness of his retired lifestyle that was responsible for causing him to become depressed.

In his article ‘Luxury and Idleness Moralized’, published in 2006, David Mazella states of Jordan’s chapters on Samuel Johnson and Cowper, that they are ‘individually the strongest chapters of the book, though these authors’ precise role in advancing, contributing to, or resisting the largescale discourses of idleness posited in the earlier chapters remains unclear’.<sup>9</sup> Jordan addresses the idleness of these men in a very literal sense, as in their physical idleness. Chapters five and six of this thesis reconsider the issues both men had with idleness, their attitudes towards work and the symptoms of depression they experienced. Johnson was a prolific writer and yet obsessed with, what he perceived to be, his own idleness. In chapter five of this thesis I argue that there is a far more complex relationship between Johnson’s idleness and his melancholy than has been previously suggested: that there are, in fact, many different facets of Johnson’s idleness. The chapter examines the spiritual as well as the physical idleness Johnson struggled with and also considers Johnson’s idleness as a symptom of his melancholy, a factor that is often overlooked and which has received little critical attention.

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<sup>9</sup> David Mazella, ‘Luxury and Idleness Moralized’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 39.2 (2006) <<http://wf2dnvr13.webfeat.org/>> [accessed 25 January 2010], 273-278 (para. 9 of 12).

Chapter six of this thesis will examine the illness ‘religious melancholy’ as opposed to basic melancholy. The general consensus amongst ministers and physicians of the period was that religious melancholy was basic melancholy with the added complication that the sufferer often believed that they had been abandoned by God, or that their melancholy was a just punishment inflicted upon them by Him. This final chapter argues that religious melancholy was in fact a very well recognised illness in the eighteenth century, and that its symptoms, because they were largely psychological, could be easily replicated yet hard to disprove. In this chapter I argue that the illness was exploited by those who used it as an excuse to live a basically idle lifestyle, because of the tolerance shown towards sufferers. As an example of this misuse I will analyse the melancholy of William Cowper and, more importantly, how he related the symptoms of his melancholy. I argue against the general consensus: that Cowper’s melancholy was either caused or exacerbated by his religious concerns. I provide evidence that suggests Cowper borrowed from religious works when writing his spiritual autobiography in order to intentionally portray himself as a religious melancholic, the reason for his doing so being a desire to avoid earning a living and to attain a more leisurely lifestyle.

# Chapter One

## Melancholy

### I

#### Defining Eighteenth-Century Depression

In *Madness and Civilisation*, Michel Foucault refers constantly to melancholia and therefore, because of his title, one presumes that he is referring to madness. In a chapter entitled 'Aspects of Madness' he suggests that 'this clear and coherent syndrome was designated by a word that implied an entire causal system, that of melancholia'.<sup>10</sup> Foucault states that the Dutch physician Herman Boerhaave 'defined melancholia as merely "a long, persistent delirium without fever, during which the sufferer is obsessed by only one thought"'.<sup>11</sup> However, when we examine Boerhaave's *Aphorisms*, we discover that the physician was in fact referring to melancholy, not melancholia. The quotation comes from a section entitled, 'Of Melancholy' and its symptoms, according to Boerhaave, include:

A violent Exercise of the Mind; the dwelling Night and Day mostly upon one and the same Object; a constant wakefulness; great Motions of the Mind, whether of Joy or Sorrow [...] a lessen'd Appetite; a Leanness; Sorrowfulness; love of Solitude [...].<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001; reprinted, 2006), p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Herman Boerhaave, *Boerhaave's aphorisms: concerning the knowledge and cure of diseases. Translated from the last edition printed in Latin at Leyden, 1715. With useful observations and explanations, by J. Delacoste, M.D* (London, 1715), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 11 November 2009], pp. 291-292.

The symptoms Boerhaave describes may suggest a mind focused, a severe dejection of spirits and a propensity to withdraw into oneself, but they do not necessarily equate to madness.

It becomes evident that Foucault discusses both the symptoms of melancholy and madness, but categorises them both under the term melancholia. Madness, according to most eighteenth-century physicians, including Boerhaave, was often only the very final manifestation of a deeply rooted melancholy that had either been left untreated, or where the sufferer had not responded to treatment. For instance, Thomas Sydenham, whom Foucault also cites, states of madness: '[b]ut this Description of so deplorable a Condition of mind, agrees only to those who after a long Combat with the Disease, are at last vanquish'd by it [...]'.<sup>13</sup> Boerhaave observes that the differences between the melancholy person and the mad is in the strength of the patient, the mad having 'a great strength of the Muscles, an incredible Wakefulness, a bearing to a wonder of Cold and Hunger, frightful Fancies, Endeavours to bite Men like Wolves, or Dogs, & c'.<sup>14</sup> These symptoms suggest a complete loss of reason. They are not the symptoms of the depressed state of mind this thesis is concerned with and they should not be confused. The more we read on the subject of melancholy the more evident it becomes that for many modern day critics the definition of melancholy is not as 'clear and coherent' a matter as Foucault suggests.

In 'Melancholia and Mechanical Explanation in Eighteenth-Century Medicine', published in 1983, Stanley Jackson suggested that

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Sydenham, *Dr. Sydenham's compleat method of curing almost all diseases, and description of their symptoms to which are now added five discourses of the same author concerning the pleurisy, gout, hysterical passion, dropsy, and rheumatism / abridg'd and faithfully translated out of the original Latin; with short and useful notes on the former part, written by a learned physician, and never before printed* (London: 1695), Early English Books Online <[http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full\\_rec?SOURCE=var\\_spell.cfg&ACTION=SINGLE&ID=36282387&ECCO=N&FILE=../session/1264372116\\_24417&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&DISPLAY=DATE\\_ASC&SUBSET=17&ENTRIES=21&HIGHLIGHT\\_KEYWORD=default](http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=var_spell.cfg&ACTION=SINGLE&ID=36282387&ECCO=N&FILE=../session/1264372116_24417&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&DISPLAY=DATE_ASC&SUBSET=17&ENTRIES=21&HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD=default)> [accessed 24 January 2010], p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> Boerhaave, p. 302.

[b]y the eighteenth century *melancholia* had been the term for one of the chief forms of madness since at least Hippocratic times. [...] Gradually *melancholy* had become common in English as an equivalent term for this disease [...] Melancholy had also become a popular term used with a breadth and diffuseness not unlike our use of the term *depression* today. In various instances it referred to low spirits, anxious dejection, discouragement, disappointment, grief, sadness, a gloomy cast of mind [...]. Unfortunately, some twentieth-century authors on the subject of the eighteenth century have blurred these boundaries far beyond what might be due to natural difficulties in discrimination, and have presented their readers with one grand disease.<sup>15</sup>

Here Jackson suggests that melancholy was the name used for a group of feelings associated with today's depression. Jackson intimates that then, as now, there was a distinct difference between madness and depression and that this should be taken into account. However, in *Melancholia and Depression*, Jackson refers to 'a remarkable coherence in the basic cluster of symptoms'<sup>16</sup> between Melancholia and Depression. Already there appears to be a certain amount of confusion as to which syndrome was closest to today's depressive illness. In the first instance it is suggested that it is melancholy, in the second Jackson refers to melancholia. In setting out the focus of his argument, Jackson also states that it 'will be on melancholia the medically recognized disease'.<sup>17</sup>

However, when we examine the medical and religious literature published during the eighteenth century, it becomes apparent that the majority of physicians and ministers who wrote on the subject did not use the terms melancholy and melancholia interchangeably and that the 'recognized disease' was in fact labeled as melancholy. Publications carried titles such as *The signs and causes of melancholy*, by the Reverend Richard Baxter. There was *Observations on the nature, causes and cure of melancholy; especially of that which is commonly called religious melancholy*, by Benjamin Fawcett.

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<sup>15</sup> Stanley W Jackson, 'Melancholia and Mechanical Explanation in Eighteenth-Century Medicine', *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 38 (1983), 298-319 (p. 298).

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, 1986, p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> Jackson, 1983, p. 298.

Ministers and physicians such as Sir Richard Blackmore and Robert Whytt were writing on the subject of melancholy, not melancholia.

In 'Depression's forgotten genealogy: notes towards a history of depression' published in 2000, George Rousseau questions whether melancholy and depression should in fact be regarded as one and the same illness. Rousseau suggests that it would be extremely difficult for current day scholars to attempt to compile a 'history of depression' because of the vast number of labels associated with the illness in the eighteenth century and the difficulty in ascertaining what the various labels denoted.<sup>18</sup> Rousseau himself uses the terms melancholy and melancholia interchangeably. Likewise, in 'Is This Dame Melancholy? Equating Today's Depression and Past Melancholia', Jennifer Radden challenges Jackson's argument: '[t]he conclusion that there is but one unchanging condition identified as melancholia in the past and renamed depression in our own era represents a troubling oversimplification [...].'<sup>19</sup> Radden suggests that both terms were used interchangeably 'until the nineteenth century',<sup>20</sup> and, rather confusingly, she uses the terms interchangeably herself throughout her argument. Although she may have begun by asking the question, 'Is This Dame Melancholy?' Radden eventually bases her conclusion that melancholia and depression 'are not to be understood as one and the same'<sup>21</sup> illness on the fact that she believes there are more differences than similarities between them: 'the melancholia of past eras' she suggests, 'encompassed much more than the modern conceptions of depression.'<sup>22</sup> It is hard to pin down exactly what Radden is comparing with today's depression: melancholy or melancholia? As evidence of the differences between melancholy/melancholia and

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> Radden, 2003, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

depression, she lists symptoms such as ‘delusions and hallucinations’.<sup>23</sup> However, when we examine the basic symptoms of melancholy in eighteenth-century medical works, we find that it is generally described as a sustained dejection of spirits and that the symptoms Radden refers to can more readily be attributed to eighteenth-century nervous disorders than basic melancholy. One suspects that, as with Rousseau, Radden has compared the symptoms of today’s depression with a far wider range of symptoms than those belonging to melancholy.

The term melancholia is in fact rarely used or discussed in eighteenth-century medical works. In Johnson’s *Dictionary*, ‘melancholia’ is neither listed as a term nor defined. It is the term ‘Melancholy’ that is defined as ‘A kind of madness, in which the mind is always fixed on one object’.<sup>24</sup> Other symptoms include a ‘gloomy, pensive, discontented temper [...] dismal, fanciful [...] habitually dejected’.<sup>25</sup> However, when Johnson refers to this ‘kind of madness’, he is not suggesting raving madness or a complete loss of one’s reason, although the melancholic may certainly have feared this during their most distressing periods. As will become clear when we examine Johnson’s own struggle with melancholy in chapter five of this thesis, when he refers to madness, he implies more a loss of control over governing one’s own thoughts, and therefore one’s moods, than complete raving madness. On the basis of this evidence, I suggest that if we are attempting to align any eighteenth-century ailment with today’s depression, then it should be melancholy, and not melancholia. Although Radden suggests that the terms melancholy and melancholia were used interchangeably, she does not specify exactly who it was that does so. For instance, is Radden suggesting that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations ...* Volume 2 of 2 (London, 1755), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 18 December 2009].

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,

it was eighteenth-century sufferers of depression or eighteenth-century physicians? Or is it, as Jackson suggests, twentieth and twenty-first century literary scholars and medical historians, herself included, ‘blurring the boundaries’ of these labels and the states of mind they denoted?

John F Sena suggests that

[i]t is somewhat ironic that although Englishmen demonstrated an almost obsessive concern over the malady, they were not able to define precisely the nature of the disorder. The difficulty in defining it arose from the fact that there was not one single ailment which was designated by the term “melancholy”.<sup>26</sup>

Barbara McGovern also states that ‘[m]elancholy is difficult to define, for the term was applied to a vast range of clinical symptoms’.<sup>27</sup> Although it is true that melancholy then, just as depression now, had more than one symptom, it is not true that physicians were not defining the nature of the disorder. In 1725 Sir Richard Blackmore stated that ‘continual Thoughtfulness upon the same set of Objects always returning to the Mind, accompanied with the Passions of Sadness, Dejection, and Fear, seems to be the genuine and discriminating Idea of proper Melancholy’.<sup>28</sup> In 1780, in a chapter entitled ‘The Symptoms of Melancholy’, Benjamin Fawcett quotes from a Dr. Moore, who observed of French sufferers: ‘In this dreadful state, every pleasing idea is banished, and all the sources of comfort in life are poisoned. Neither fortune, honours, friends, nor family, can afford the smallest satisfaction.’<sup>29</sup> This is a severely dejected state of mind and the sufferer becomes so introverted that their thoughts and emotions become impervious to any external influence. Indeed, as Michael Macdonald states:

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<sup>26</sup> John F Sena, ‘Melancholic Madness and the Puritans’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 66. 3 (July 1973), 293-309 (p. 294).

<sup>27</sup> Barbara McGovern, *Anne Finch and her Poetry: A Critical Biography* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> Sir Richard Blackmore, *A treatise of the spleen and vapours: or, hypocondriacal and hysterical affections* ... (London, 1725), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 18 December 2009], p. 164.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Fawcett, *Observations on the nature, causes and cure of melancholy; especially of that which is commonly called religious melancholy* (Shrewsbury, 1780), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 11 January 2008], p. 1.

‘Melancholy made men and women inner exiles.’<sup>30</sup> The melancholy mind, when it has reached this level of severity, appears to have been a very lonely state in which to be trapped.

Andrew Solomon, a current day sufferer of depression himself and author of the book *The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression*, suggests of today’s depression that

[w]hen it comes, it degrades one’s self and ultimately eclipses the capacity to give or receive affection. It is the aloneness within us manifest, and it destroys not only connection to others but also the ability to be peacefully alone with oneself.<sup>31</sup>

Solomon perceives and refers to depression as a literal concept, with the capacity to invade and ultimately destroy one’s mental health. The sufferer of depression experiences a dejection of spirits which is notably and worryingly different from their usual mental state and which it is often beyond their ability to control. How then does this illness relate to the state of melancholy as an eighteenth-century depressive illness?

Fawcett gives the following description of a sufferer of melancholy:

Though his case be the same with many others, yet he is prone to look upon it as singular [...] and to say, that no one was ever afflicted as he is. He loves to be alone, and is afraid and weary of company; yet is apt to be as much displeased and discontented with himself. [...] His thoughts are most of all about himself, in unprofitable, or rather mischievous anxiety. His mind is in continual perplexity, as if he was groping in the dark, encompassed with difficulties, from which he cannot be extricated. He cannot turn his thoughts to other subjects, any more than a man in the tooth-ache can avoid thinking of his pain. Such fixedness in his musing seems to be his chief employment, and a considerable part of his disease. He is very averse to a course of action, suitable to his station in life, and would rather lie long in bed, or sit long by himself. He is untractable, hardly to be persuaded out of the most unreasonable conceits, and is seldom better for any advice: For if it seems to compose him for the present, in a little while he is as bad as ever.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 160.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Fawcett, p. 5.

Eighteenth-century melancholy, as an illness, appears to have been as equally lonely and frightening an experience as today's depression, with sufferers locked into their own private mental torment. Fawcett draws attention to the inability of sufferers to motivate themselves whilst under the influence of melancholy. Even when the melancholy was brought about by physical illness, physicians noted its ability to obstruct recovery.<sup>33</sup>

This lethargy was a symptom well recognised by physicians and one which obstructed the effectiveness of the most commonly prescribed method of treatment: occupation. Fawcett observed: 'When *dejection* grows up to *distress*, then a person feels himself as unable, and it seems to him as fruitless, to strive against his disease, as against a fever, or the gout, or stone.'<sup>34</sup> We can see how a person struggling with such melancholy-induced indolence would have become overwhelmed when the physical symptoms of a strained nervous system were added to their burden. Idleness as a symptom of melancholy will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. The implications of this symptom also resonate throughout chapter five, which examines Samuel Johnson's struggle with the illness.

Lest we should deduce from Fawcett's description that the sufferer of melancholy had a tendency to indulge his illness, that he was 'averse' to help, Solomon gives an indication as to the depth of such mental distress: 'Grief', he states, 'is depression in proportion to circumstances; depression is grief out of proportion to circumstances.'<sup>35</sup> As grief is an emotion that most can relate to, it would be well to keep in mind this analogy when melancholy is referred to throughout this thesis: that

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<sup>33</sup> William Dufour, *A treatise on diseases in urinary passages. Particularly describing the various symptoms attending strictures, obstructions* (London, 1795), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 11 November 2009], p. 19. Dufour refers to 'a permanent melancholy indolence.'

<sup>34</sup> Fawcett, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Solomon, p. 16

melancholy could be as devastating as grief, but grief accompanied by a frightening sense of bewilderment, because the source of the distress was often unfathomable.

## II

### Melancholy and Associated Nervous Disorders

As well as the term melancholy there were many other labels closely associated with the illness, such as spleen, hysteria, the vapours, hypochondria and hysterical disorders. These labels were closely related with melancholy because the symptoms of the illnesses they denoted often included an element of dejection. Such labels are referred to frequently in the medical writing of the period and used with a certain amount of authority in current critical sources. Yet one gets the impression that we, as twenty-first century critics, academics and readers of such literature, are never quite sure of their meaning. Often critics, looking back on the eighteenth century, tend to regard such illnesses as merely being different names for the same depressive illness with the same set of symptoms. For instance, Rousseau attempts to compare the symptoms of all these illnesses with the symptoms of today's depression. He concludes that of the many eighteenth-century terms used to describe 'the dumps', such as melancholy, spleen and vapours, that they 'all differ, however subtly, from modern notions of mental depression'.<sup>36</sup> There are two issues here. The first, is that this is too broad a list of conditions to suggest that all of these terms signify eighteenth-century depression. Secondly, Rousseau concludes that they 'all differ, however subtly,' whereas I suggest that their symptoms differ quite significantly, because they are different illnesses. Although all of these ailments may have contained an element of melancholy, as in a general lowness of spirit, in the eighteenth century they were not regarded as the same sustained dejection of spirits that melancholy denoted.

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<sup>36</sup> Rousseau, p. 73.

Rousseau suggests of the dejected state of mind we refer to now as depression, that '[t]wo main categories have existed in Western history: a pre-medicalized category (*melancholia*) and post-medicalized (*depression*)'.<sup>37</sup> However, to suggest that eighteenth-century depression was neither regarded nor diagnosed by physicians as a medical condition is rather a sweeping and dismissive suggestion, particularly when we consider the volume of literature written on the subject by the medical profession. It is evident from the body of medical work that physicians were indeed listening to and observing their depressed and nervously ill patients in great detail.

Rousseau suggested that one of the main difficulties current-day scholars would encounter in attempting to compile a pre-1700 history of depression, is with the 'word(s)' used, 'and the unstable category(ies)' they denoted.<sup>38</sup> And when we look at the range of eighteenth-century illnesses associated with melancholy, such as spleen and vapours, there does appear to have been much confusion. However, the confusion pertained to these nervous illnesses, not specifically melancholy. Rousseau states that 'the borders of these words and the things they designate are perilous'.<sup>39</sup> Blackmore was well aware of and struggled with this very problem:

indeed the Limits and Partitions that bound and discriminate the highest Hypochondriack and Hysterick Disorders, and Melancholy, Lunacy, and Phrenzy, are so nice, that it is not easy to distinguish them, and set the Boundaries where one ends, and the other begins.<sup>40</sup>

As we have already seen, Blackmore had already defined 'proper melancholy'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, melancholy is regarded by him as a separate entity. He is not suggesting that all of these labels denote the depressive illness, only that the symptoms and the nature of the various illnesses were closely related. Likewise, Nicholas Robinson states:

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> Blackmore, pp. 163-164.

<sup>41</sup> See p. 14.

I shall first consider how far these Affections differ among themselves; after that, I shall proceed to discover the Material Differences between them, and those Diseases, that, by a Parity of Symptoms, they seem most nearly related to, as the properest Way to discover as much of their abstruse Nature as is within the Reach of our Capacity to comprehend.<sup>42</sup>

When we examine the medical literature written by eighteenth-century physicians, at first there does appear to be a certain amount of confusion as to the terms used and what those terms denoted. Despite the sharing of medical knowledge, or perhaps because of it, confusion existed as to which label denoted which group of symptoms. What is more, because the symptoms of melancholy and other related illnesses were often psychological, yet they also produced physiological symptoms, it was difficult for sufferers to understand, let alone explain their condition, and for physicians to diagnose and treat them. Robinson draws attention to the dilemma faced by sufferers whom, he claims, have been accused of inventing imaginary symptoms: ‘I have endeavoured to prove, that the Spleen, Vapours, &c. are real Diseases, and no Ways depending on the imaginary Whims of Fancy.’<sup>43</sup> It is significant to note that at this point, as early as 1729, melancholy and nervous illness appear to have been associated with weakness of character. When apportioning blame for such misdiagnosis Robinson claims that

[t]he World, indeed, has been a long Time at a Loss to know what to make of those Disorders we call the Spleen, Vapours, and Hypochondriack Melancholy; nor have they been less puzzled to discover, under what Class of Diseases they might most properly range them. This is the Reason, why some Gentlemen, when they cannot reasonably account for those surprising Phaenomena that often arise in the Spleen, are so ready to resolve all into Whim, or a wrong Turn of the Fancy.<sup>44</sup>

However, Robinson’s observation does raise the question of how exactly physicians categorised these different diseases.

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<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Robinson, *A new system of the spleen, vapours, and hypochondriack melancholy: wherein all the decays of the nerves, and lownesses of the spirits, are mechanically accounted for. ... By Nicholas Robinson, M.D.* ... (London, 1729), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 01 March 2007], p. 192.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Radden raises a similar point with regard to melancholy/melancholia and today's depression: 'whether we see them as the same condition under different guises [...] rests not only or perhaps not at all on how much descriptions of these two conditions resemble one another, but on what kind of thing conditions like depression and melancholia are judged to be.'<sup>45</sup> Today's depression is regarded as a mental disorder which is often accompanied by upsetting physiological symptoms. It may be a discrete illness which may or may not be accompanied by nervous symptoms, or it can manifest itself as one symptom of a larger nervous disorder.<sup>46</sup> The Australian scientist and physician Dr. Claire Weekes **states of current day sufferers of nervous illness:**

A person emotionally exhausted by months of fear and conflict may become apathetic, with little interest in his surroundings, or he may feel a more overwhelming desperate and powerful physical feeling of depression, a sickening heaviness in the pit of the stomach. It is said that the stomach is the most sympathetic organ in the body. [...] It is certainly the focal point of depression.<sup>47</sup>

In this instance Weekes is referring to the inner fear and conflict that accompanies nervous illness. Depression in this instance is a symptom of the nervous disorder.

Robinson's purpose in writing *A new system of the spleen, vapours, and hypochondriack melancholy*, was, he tells us,

to discover the Difference of Constitutions, that, so greatly, diversify the same Disease in different Bodies; So, in this and the following Chapters, I shall endeavour to remove those vulgar Prejudices and Mistakes concerning the Nature of those Affections, by demonstrating the regular Progress of the Symptoms, and their fatal Tendency, when not prevented by timely Applications.<sup>48</sup>

Here Robinson suggests, for the first time perhaps, that all of these apparently diverse ailments, are in fact all nervous in origin. Of the difference between the Spleen, Vapours and Hypochondriack Melancholy, he states that 'it clearly appears, that these

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<sup>45</sup> Radden, 2003, p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> Claire Weekes, *Self Help For Your Nerves* (London: Thorsons, 1995), pp. 110-115.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> Robinson, p. 175.

several species of Melancholy Disorders, are only the same Disease improv'd in different Constitutions, or in the different Habits of different Sexes [...].<sup>49</sup> Although he catagorises them all as being 'melancholy disorders', the term melancholy, in this instance, is used to imply that all of these nervous disorders had a tendency to deject the spirits.

Hypochondriac melancholy differed from basic melancholy because the dejection was accompanied by distressing physical symptoms. Melancholy was still an illness in its own right, its major symptom being a sustained dejection of spirits. As with melancholy, nervous illnesses also ranged in intensity: 'The Hypochondriack Melancholy is only the last or highest Degree of the Spleen or Vapours, wherein all the Symptoms are heighten'd to a surprizing Degree. [...] Horror reigns; the Ideas are dark, unsteady, and confus'd.'<sup>50</sup> The depression has been added to the physical nervous symptoms in this case.

Although lowness of spirits was very often part of nervous illness, Blackmore noted that the difference between the melancholy state of mind and 'Hypocondriack Affections' is that for the sufferer of melancholy there was no respite, the person was, we would say today, in a constantly depressed state of mind. Whereas persons suffering from 'Hypocondriack Affections', according to Blackmore,

have frequent lucid Intervals; and are not only in a chearful, facetious, and pleasant Humour, but are often carried on to so profuse a Pitch of Mirth and Gaity, that by their too great Waste and Expence of Spirits, they soon after sink to a low, dull, and uncomfortable Temper.<sup>51</sup>

So, although a dejection of spirits could be part of a nervous disorder, such dejection is not to be confused with the medical illness referred to as melancholy.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>51</sup> Blackmore, p. 157.

With such a close connection between mind and body, we can see how and why the literature written on the subject of melancholy often contained observations on physiological symptoms which we would normally not associate with depression: symptoms such as ‘Pain in his spleen’ and ‘sour belchings’ for instance, observed by Archibald Pitcairn in 1745.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, John Leake, in 1781, was well aware of the sensitivity of the stomach in relation to our moods and emotions: ‘The stomach is more amply supplied with nerves [...] and therefore, more susceptible.’<sup>53</sup> Such observations reinforce the fact that eighteenth-century physicians were noting the close relationship between psychological and physiological symptoms of illnesses such as melancholy, spleen, hysteria and so on, and the mind’s influence on the body.

We can surmise from this close connection that, as with today’s depression, melancholy could be one symptom of nervous disorder, or alternatively, melancholy could be accompanied by nervous symptoms. Medical works included chapters such as ‘Of Melancholy’, as in Blackmore’s *A treatise of the spleen and vapors: or, hypocondriacal and hysterical affections....* Leake includes a chapter in his work entitled ‘Of Nervous Disorders, Hysterical Affections, Low Spirits, and Melancholy; their treatment and cure’.<sup>54</sup> It is notable that Blackmore and Leake link melancholy to labels such as spleen and hysterical affections, yet specifically separate the illness from them. Leake’s chapter in particular categorises melancholy alongside other ‘Nervous Disorders’. Although we, as twenty-first century critics, may become confused as to the range of labels associated with melancholy, it appears that the majority of eighteenth-

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<sup>52</sup> Archibald Pitcairn, *The philosophical and mathematical elements of physick. In two books. The first containing the theory: the second the practice. ... By Archibald Pitcairn, ... Translated from ... the Latin, ...* (London, 1718), Eighteenth Century Collections Online

< <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 15 March 2007], p. 299.

<sup>53</sup> John Leake, *Medical instructions towards the prevention, and cure of chronic or slow diseases peculiar to women: especially, those proceeding from over-delicacy of habit called nervous or hysterical* (London, M.DCC.LXXVII, 1777), Eighteenth Century Collections Online

< <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 26 June 2007], p. 246.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, Section X, p. 218.

century physicians recognised the condition of melancholy as being both linked to yet distinct from nervous disorders. Although their symptoms often included a dejection of spirits, it was not the sustained dejection of melancholy, the ‘medically recognised disease.’

However, Stanley Jackson suggests that ‘[o]ne cannot be guided merely by the name, though that provides some guidance. [...] It is the clinical description that is essential—the symptoms and the signs, the observations that could be attested to by the sufferer or noted by another person’.<sup>55</sup> To illustrate the point that melancholy is not to be confused with other nervous disorders, we can examine two poems written by Anne Kingsmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, which highlight the differences between melancholy, as a sustained dejection of spirits, and the spleen, as a nervous disorder. The first poem is entitled ‘Ardelia to Melancholy’. In this poem Finch concentrates on the various distractions she employs specifically to lift her dejected spirits:

At last, my old inveterate foe,  
No opposition shalt thou know... (ll. 1-2)

Tho’ I confesse, I have apply’d  
Sweet mirth, and musick, and have try’d  
A thousand other arts beside,  
To drive thee from my darken’d breast,  
Thou, who hast banish’d all my rest.  
But, though sometimes, a short reprieve they gave,  
Unable they, and far too weak, to save... (ll. 6-12)

Friendship, I to my heart have laid,  
Friendship, th’ applauded sov’rain aid... (ll. 15-16)

But leaning on this reed, ev’n whilst I spoke  
It pierc’d my hand, and into peices broke.  
Still, some new object, or new int’reast came  
And loos’d the bonds, and quite disolv’d the claim.

These failing, I invok’d a Muse,  
And Poetry wou’d often use,  
To Guard me from thy Tyrant pow’r;

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<sup>55</sup> Jackson, 1986, p. ix.

And to oppose thee ev'ry hour...<sup>56</sup> (ll. 25-32)

The tone of the poem is despairing, as though she has given up the fight against her depression. Finch employs every distraction to occupy her time, and consequently her mind, in a desperate attempt to escape from melancholy's influence. However, as with Moore's observations on melancholy referred to earlier, nothing relieves her spirits for long.<sup>57</sup> When her melancholy does eventually return, which it always does, she is held prisoner by it 'until some new object, or new int'rest came/ And loos'd the bonds'. Finch realises that, ultimately, there is no permanent relief for her and certainly no escape. It is an exhausting, hourly, battle she fights and the more she struggles against her melancholy the stronger her dejection is when it returns: 'All arts to quell, did but augment thy force/ As rivers check'd, break with a wilder course.'<sup>58</sup>

If we now examine and compare Finch's poem 'The Spleen', although it is also a poem of despair, the subject matter is quite different. In 'Ardelia to Melancholy' Finch was concerned with finding distractions that would both occupy her time and lift her spirits: 'sweet mirth, and musick.' The poem focuses on her mood and her frame of mind. She is entirely familiar with her subject matter, her melancholy, 'my old inveterate foe.' It is a constant, negative force that affects her daily life. However, in 'The Spleen', Finch is concerned with both the psychological as well as the physical symptoms of distress. The symptoms of spleen are unfamiliar to her and they puzzle her because of their changing nature:

What art thou, *SPLEEN*, which ev'ry thing dost ape?  
Thou *Proteus* to abus'd Mankind,  
Who never yet thy real Cause cou'd find,  
Or fix thee to remain in one continued Shape. (ll. 1-4)

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<sup>56</sup> *Selected Poems of Anne Finch: Countess of Winchelsea*, ed. by Katharine M. Rogers (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979), p. 19.

<sup>57</sup> See p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> 'Ardelia to Melancholy', *Selected Poems of Anne Finch*, ll. 13-14.

This is not the sustained dejection of melancholy she is familiar with, but an array of alarming and upsetting symptoms which cause her distress:

Still varying thy perplexing Form,  
Now a Dead Sea thou'lt represent,  
A Calm of stupid Discontent,  
Then, dashing on the Rocks wilt rage into a Storm. (ll. 5-8)

Here Finch refers to polarised mood swings as well as physical symptoms:

Trembling sometimes thou dost appear,  
Dissolved into a Panick Fear;  
On Sleep intruding dost thy Shadows spread,  
Thy gloomy Terrours round the silent Bed... (ll. 9-12)

Thy fond Delusions cheat the Eyes,  
Before them antick Spectres dance,  
Unusual Fires their pointed Heads advance,  
And airy Phantoms rise.<sup>59</sup> (ll. 16-19)

Such trembling fits, panic spasms and hallucinations were regarded as the symptoms of eighteenth-century nervous disorder. They are not the symptoms of melancholy, although dejection of spirits is added to her burden: 'our deprest, and pond'rous Frame.' Finch is aware that the symptoms of Spleen, unlike the dejection of melancholy, vary according to the individual: 'In ev'ry One thou dost possess/ New are thy Motions, and thy Dress [...].' However, John Sena, in analyzing Finch's poem 'The Spleen' states that

[b]y speaking of melancholy in these terms, Lady Winchilsea is echoing the sentiments of contemporary physicians who frequently compared the disease to Proteus, the shape-changing god of the sea, because its manifestations were always changing, continuously shifting from one part of the body to another [...].<sup>60</sup>

In Sena's notes he writes: 'see, Sir Richard Blackmores, *A Treatise of the Spleen and Vapours*.' Yet, as the title suggests, Blackmore was not referring to melancholy. Sena

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>60</sup> John F. Sena, 'Melancholy in Anne Finch and Elizabeth Carter: The Ambivalence of an Idea', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 11 (1971), 108-119 (p. 110).

is correct in noting that physicians were aware of the changing nature of Spleen, but it is Sena, and not they, who regards melancholy and the spleen as the same illness.

Similarly, in *Anne Finch and Her Poetry: A Critical Biography*, McGovern suggests that '[f]or most of her life Finch was afflicted with melancholy, a term then interchangeable with the spleen, and her poetry contains numerous references to this malady'.<sup>61</sup> Although McGovern does state that Spleen is a 'nervous disorder with physiological as well as psychological effects',<sup>62</sup> she also regards melancholy and spleen as the same illness. In her critical analysis of the poem she states that "'The Spleen'" opens with some basic general information about melancholy' and that '[i]ts symptoms ape those of other illnesses [...]'.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, when referring to Finch's poem, 'Ardelia to Melancholy', McGovern suggests that '[o]ne poem [...] that does pertain specifically to her affliction with spleen is "Ardelia to Melancholy"'.<sup>64</sup> McGovern, like Radden and Rousseau, is attempting to compare two different types of illness with different symptoms. Although the symptoms pertaining to the whole range of nervous illnesses proved elusive and would continue to intrigue the eighteenth-century medical profession, physicians were striving to reach a general agreement as to what symptoms belonged to which disorder. However, they were generally in agreement as to what constituted melancholy. It is we, as twentieth and twenty-first century critics, who generally confuse the terms. Finch specifically differentiated between the two illnesses, hence the difference in her titles.

The poet William Shenstone, whose depression will be discussed later in this thesis, also differentiated between symptoms of depression and symptoms of nervous disorder:

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<sup>61</sup> McGovern, p. 160.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

I will mention one circumstance regarding the weakness of my nerves;— and not my spirits, for I told you those were tolerable:—the least noise that is, even the falling of a fire shovel upon the floor, if it happen unexpectedly, shocks my whole frame; and I actually believe that a gun fired behind my back, unawares, amidst the stillness of the night, would go near to kill me with its noise.<sup>65</sup>

It is apparent that, although his nerves appear to have been highly sensitised, he was not, at this particular time, unduly depressed. Shenstone clearly defines sensitised nerves as distinct from his depression. However, it is only when sensitised nerves become significantly out of proportion to the event that triggered them that it appears to have been regarded as an illness.

The eighteenth-century physician and philosopher Robert Whytt noted the different way in which people respond to different external pressures, and especially those whose nervous system had become sensitised: ‘Sudden terror, excessive grief, or other violent passions of the mind, in people whose nervous system is very delicate, may affect the brain so as to produce a continued *mania* or melancholy.’<sup>66</sup> Whereas one individual may become melancholy, another may experience distressing physical symptoms. Whytt refers to nervous symptoms such as ‘[p]alpitations or trembling of the heart; the pulse very variable, frequently natural, sometimes uncommonly slow, and other times quick [...] on certain occasions, irregular or intermitting; a dry cough with difficulty of breathing [...] a sense of suffocation’.<sup>67</sup> Robinson had also noted nervous symptoms such as ‘violent Palpitations and Flutterings of the Heart, of those Indigestions and Loss of Appetite, that most generally ensue upon any great and sudden commotion’.<sup>68</sup> Whytt refers to patients complaining that they can feel a ‘lump in the

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<sup>65</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, ed. by Marjorie Williams (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939), p. 68 (9 July 1743).

<sup>66</sup> Robert Whytt, *Observations on the nature, causes, and cure of those disorders which have been commonly called nervous, hypochondriac, or hysteric...* (Edinburgh, 1765), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 1 March 2007], p. 315.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>68</sup> Robinson, p. 89.

throat'.<sup>69</sup> Weekes refers to this syndrome as 'globus hystericus [...] the hysterical lump'.<sup>70</sup> Whytt continues:

fits of crying, and convulsive laughing. [...] A giddiness, especially after rising up hastily [...] a violent pain in a small part of the head, not larger than a shilling, as if a nail was driven into it; a singing in the ears; a dimness of sight, and appearance of a thick mist. [...] Objects are sometimes seen double [...].<sup>71</sup>

These are not the symptoms of melancholy but of nervous disorder according to Whytt. Those people whom we would now say were of a nervous disposition, or had a heightened sensitivity, perhaps because of some former trauma, according to Whytt, had 'a greater degree of sensibility, and consequently a greater aptitude for motion in the heart'.<sup>72</sup> Although he does not refer to adrenalin, he appears to have been aware that the heart beat more quickly in response to certain triggers: '[t]he blood is made to return in greater quantity to the heart by all kinds of exercise, sudden fear, and other strong passions'.<sup>73</sup> Robinson also equates less familiar physiological symptoms with nervous disorder: 'those singing Noises in the Ear, that most People complain of, that for any considerable Time have labour'd under the Spleen, Vapours, or Hypochondriack Melancholy.'<sup>74</sup>

Although there were many questionable instances of extreme remedies for and treatments of nervous disorders, such as bleeding, purging, vomits, ducking into cold water, it must have come as somewhat of a relief to sufferers when, in the *English Malady*, George Cheyne recommended a far gentler approach towards patient care. Although it is generally assumed that Cheyne's *English Malady* refers specifically to the English melancholy temperament, 'lowness of spirits' is regarded in the book as being only one symptom of nervous disorder. When we examine his title it reads, *The*

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<sup>69</sup> Whytt, p. 100.

<sup>70</sup> Weekes, p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> Whytt, pp. 100-101.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>74</sup> Robinson, p.138.

*English Malady: or a Treatise of Nervous Diseases of all Kinds, as Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of Spirits, Hypochondriacal and Hysterical Distempers, &c.* Cheyne was not talking of melancholy in particular. The eighteenth-century sufferer would find few references to the term melancholy within the book. He was aware that dejection was often a symptom of nervous disorder and, as with Robinson, that this dejection ranged in severity, from ‘Lowness of Spirits, lethargick Dullness, Melancholly and Moping, up to a complete *Apoplexy* [...]’.<sup>75</sup> He regards melancholy as being a more severe dejection of spirits than a general lowness of spirits or apathy. Although Cheyne regarded melancholy as being an integral part of nervous disorder it was also distinct from it.

Physicians had to tread very carefully when diagnosing the ailments their affluent customers complained of, particularly, it seems, if those ailments were in any way regarded as nervous in origin. For some patients, to be diagnosed as suffering from melancholy or a nervous disorder was proof of a heightened sensibility. Roy Porter points out that ‘[n]ervous’ maladies’ with ‘popular labels’ such as spleen, vapours and hysteria did in fact become ‘privileged in polite society, as tokens of their victims’ cultivation, and “nervousness” turned into a badge of honour, a mark of superior sensibility’.<sup>76</sup> Note that Porter also categorises such labels under the larger classification of ‘nervous illness’. He does not regard them as specifically appertaining to depression or a sustained dejection of spirits.

But for others, such nervous ailments and melancholy were regarded as a weakness of character. To Samuel Johnson, whose depressive episodes severely affected his life, the notion that melancholy or any nervous ailments could have any positive connotation was quickly dismissed. In a letter to Boswell he writes: ‘[i]f you

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<sup>75</sup> George Cheyne, *The English Malady* (1733), ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Roy Porter, ‘Nervousness, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Style: From Luxury to Labour’, in *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*, ed. by Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter (New York: Editions Rodopi, 2001), pp. 31-49 (p. 32).

are really oppressed with overpowering and involuntary melancholy, you are to be pitied rather than reproached.’<sup>77</sup> The reference to ‘involuntary melancholy’ would suggest that Johnson differentiated between a person suffering from the debilitating effects of melancholy, and the kind of feigned dejection allegedly suffered by individuals who regarded it as a sign of refined sensibility. He advises Boswell: ‘read Cheyne’s “English Malady”’; but do not let him teach you a foolish notion that melancholy is a proof of acuteness.’<sup>78</sup> In this age of sensibility therefore, sensitivity of temperament became entangled with sensitivity of the nerves as a medical condition, and the whole area of nervous illness and depression became confused: some regarded their nervous symptoms and dejected spirits as positive assets and others regarded them as medical disorders which blighted their lives.

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<sup>77</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Bruce Redford, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), II, p. 349 (6 July 1776).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348 (2 July 1776).

### III

## Melancholy as a Psychological Illness

Melancholy was a disease of the mind. Whether it started as a disorder of the mind which then affected the body, or whether some illness or defect in the body then affected the mind, the state of melancholy was regarded, by physicians and sufferers, as a mood disorder: a psychological illness. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Burton had been well aware of the devastating effect the state of melancholy could have upon the human body, both physiologically and psychologically. He perceived it as ‘an Epidemicall disease, that so often, so much crucifies the body and minde’,<sup>79</sup> implying that the sufferer of severe melancholy often lived a tortured existence. In the Preface to *A discourse concerning trouble of mind, and the disease of melancholy*, Timothy Rogers alludes to a similar image of crucifixion when discussing the mental anguish experienced by those suffering from religious melancholy. Religious melancholy was basically melancholy with the added misery that the sufferer believed themselves to have been abandoned by God. Of this mental anguish Rogers suggests that ‘it is every moment tearing them to pieces; every moment it preys upon their Vitals, and they are continually dying, and yet cannot die’.<sup>80</sup> If we can conceive of the loneliness and isolation experienced by those suffering from basic melancholy, one can only imagine the desolation when the sufferer was no longer able to draw any comfort from their

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), I, p. 110.

<sup>80</sup> Timothy Rogers, *A discourse concerning trouble of mind, and the disease of melancholy. In three parts. Written for the Use of such as are, or have been Exercised by the same. By Timothy Rogers, M. A. Who was long afflicted with both. To which are annexed, letters from several divines, relating to the same subject* (London, 1691), Early English Books Online <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 21 December 2009], p. vi.

religion. The subject of religious melancholy will be discussed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis, when we will examine the case of the poet William Cowper.

Burton had suggested that whilst labouring under a severe dejection of spirits, both the body and mind became vulnerable. The mind in particular appears to have become vulnerable to negative thoughts and impressions. Eighteenth-century physicians observed that the mind of the melancholic often became fixed on some negative aspect of their life. Blackmore explained this fixed obsession as

a continued and uninterrupted Flux or Train of Thoughts fixed upon one sad Object, from which the Patient is unable to call them off [...] this is not what is called Contemplation, Study, or Deliberation, but unguided and restless Musings; and the Difference between them is this, that when a Man studies or meditates, he commands his Faculty of Thinking.<sup>81</sup>

Blackmore suggests that sufferers were at the mercy of their own thoughts and fears. It is this inability to govern one's thoughts which Samuel Johnson feared and found so distressing.

It is interesting at this point to introduce a twentieth century viewpoint on this symptom. Weekes discusses this symptom amongst today's sufferers of depression. She likens this obsessive focusing to 'playing the same gramophone record ceaselessly. In the beginning the sufferer can work with the record playing in the background'.<sup>82</sup> The sufferer still has the ability to divert his thoughts. But, eventually,

however hard he tries to get this thing off his mind, he cannot. The harder he fights the more it clings [...] *his tired mind has lost its resilience and thoughts race on automatically*. [...] This ceaseless thinking is exhausting, terrifying and bewildering [...]. He can no longer think "around" his problem, only "of" it.<sup>83</sup>

With this in mind, we can see how melancholy persons would withdraw into themselves. Unfortunately, the more introverted they became, the less chance there would have been for others to distract their thoughts. Although most times the

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<sup>81</sup> Blackmore, pp. 155-156.

<sup>82</sup> Weekes, p. 53.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

melancholy would pass, there must have been times, when sufferers were in the depth of despair, when they doubted they would ever gain back control over their thoughts and feelings. Johnson was aware of this and in a letter to Mrs Thrale, discussing Henry Thrale's disturbed mental state, he advised of just such a situation:

The chief wish that I form is, that Mr. Thrale could be made to understand his real state, to know that he is tottering upon a point, to consider every change of his mental character as the symptom of a disease; to distrust any opinions or purposes that shoot up in his thoughts; to think that violent Mirth is the foam, and deep sadness the subsidence of a morbid fermentation [...].<sup>84</sup>

Johnson fears that Thrale may be, as Blackmore had noted, at the mercy of his own misguided thoughts. More importantly, he was aware that, in such a vulnerable mental state, Thrale may react badly to such powerful thoughts. Thrale's melancholy does appear to have been somewhat manic in this instance. Although the highs may have been enjoyable, Johnson suggests that even this reaction, 'violent Mirth', may have been out of proportion to the thought that triggered it. Just as Johnson warned Thrale, Weekes advises today's sufferers of depression to try and view their thoughts and their emotions objectively, to regard them as a symptom of their illness and therefore to try not to be too impressed by them: 'YOU ARE BEING COWED BY A THOUGHT', she warns, 'Do not be bluffed by a thought.'<sup>85</sup>

Boerhaave was aware that there was a psychological root to melancholy: 'this Disease doth begin in what is called the mind'<sup>86</sup> he states. The cure, he believed, was therefore in treating the mind of the sufferer and not the body:

the best Method to cure this Disease, is to apply different Remedies and opposite to the different Sorts known from the exact observation of the proximate Cause [...] a) By withdrawing the Mind from the usual object to others contrary to the same b) By causing and raising very artfully another passion of the Mind contrary to the constant Melancholic one. Sometimes by Siding with them in

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<sup>84</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, III, p. 306 (24 August 1780).

<sup>85</sup> Weekes, p. 113.

<sup>86</sup> Boerhaave, p. 291.

their false and depraved Fancies. Or often opposing the same with a great Force.<sup>87</sup>

Boerhaave's approach to treatment was radical in comparison to the general remedies prescribed by physicians, which were generally external remedies such as purges, vomits and bleeding. He attempted to cure his patients by manipulating their minds. It is interesting that when the York Retreat was opened at the end of the century, occupational therapy was introduced to keep patients distracted. Therapy could be anything from needlework to gardening, anything that was regarded as normal and domestic or a usual occupation. However, Anne Digby points out that William Tuke, the founder, recorded that it was particularly difficult to engage his melancholic patients in such pursuits.<sup>88</sup>

Throughout the century, idleness was regarded as a major obstacle in the recovery of melancholic patients because it allowed them to dwell on their problem or fears. As Blackmore had stated, because of their melancholy, sufferers often lost the capacity to resolve their problems and thus a vicious circle developed. Occupation was therefore paramount to distract the mind. However, as Tuke eventually discovered, the form of occupation was also important. Menial tasks would not suffice. This factor becomes significant when we turn to the subject of female idleness in chapter three. Basic domestic duties such as sewing, or even worse, an endless round of visiting or shopping was thought to be the cause of much melancholy experienced by women. The mind of the melancholic had to be distracted and occupied, but it also had to be stimulated.

In conclusion, we can now see that during the eighteenth century melancholy was generally regarded as a psychological illness which had a detrimental effect on

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>88</sup> Anne Digby, 'Moral Treatment at the Retreat, 1796-1846', *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, ed. by W. F. Bynum, Roy Porter and Michael Shepherd (London: Tavistock, 1985), pp. 52-72 (p. 64).

moods and emotions. In some cases it was also accompanied by upsetting physical symptoms. However, the predominant symptom of melancholy was a severely dejected state of mind. This dejection of spirits was in some cases constant and in others the depression would be intermittent. The severely melancholy patient would often withdraw from society. Melancholy ranged in severity, anywhere from a mild dejection to a state of great mental distress.

Melancholy was an illness in its own right, and although much confusion appears to exist now as to its symptoms and nature, the majority of eighteenth-century physicians regarded it as separate from nervous illnesses such as spleen, hysteria, vapours and so forth. When we examine eighteenth-century medical works, it is in the area of these associated nervous illnesses that confusion existed amongst physicians, with many agreeing that all these other labels pertained to the same nervous disorder. But melancholy was regarded as distinct. The symptoms of melancholy were mainly psychological: sadness, dejection, despair, the mind becoming fixed on one sad or worrying aspect of their lives, whereas the symptoms of these nervous illnesses were mainly physical. However, melancholy and nervous illness had overlapping symptoms and often developed out of or into each other: a nervously ill patient could become melancholy and a sufferer of melancholy could eventually develop the physical symptoms of a nervous disorder.

Throughout the century many remedies were employed to cure patients of their depression, such as purges and vomits, but one cure that was thought to be highly beneficial and productive of good mental health was occupation. In some instances the cause of melancholy was obvious to both the sufferer and the physician, such as bereavement, an illness or some other trauma, but in many cases the cause remained

undetected. As we shall discover in the next chapter, idleness became regarded as a major cause of the illness as well as a major obstacle to recovery.

# Chapter Two

## Idleness

### I

#### The Issue of Idleness

The overall aim of this thesis is to explore the link between the depressed state of mind in the eighteenth century and the issue of idleness. Idleness was considered by physicians to be a major cause of melancholy, and lethargy a frustrating symptom of the illness which hindered recovery. However, we cannot begin to discuss, or even attempt to understand, the connection without first taking into consideration society's concern with idleness in the eighteenth century. To begin with, idleness was regarded as a direct sin against God; ministers emphasised the moral and spiritual implications of idleness from the pulpits and in their literature. William Broughton stated that 'Spiritual Idleness, or the Neglect of those Duties that concern God's Glory, and our Salvation, is a most shameful and inexcusable Sin'.<sup>89</sup> Chapter five of this thesis will explore this aspect of idleness by examining Samuel Johnson's experience of melancholy and his struggles with, what he perceived to be, his own spiritual idleness.

Idleness was also deemed to have far-reaching social and economic implications. Moralists and political writers expounded on the subject. With some, such

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<sup>89</sup> William Broughton, *Idleness in spiritual affairs, an inexcusable sin. A sermon preach'd in the parish-church of Hartlebury, in the county of Worcester. On Septuagesima-Sunday, February 6. 1725. By W. Broughton, ...* (London, 1726), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 21 December 2009], p.9.

as Johnson, a religious dogma underpinned the social content of their work. When Johnson addresses the matter of employment he views the benefits as three-fold: man's labour fulfils his duty to God; it contributes to a flourishing economy which in turn created work for others; and, very importantly with regards to this thesis, Johnson regarded employment as crucial for the individual's mental health. Idleness always carried with it the threat of depression according to Johnson. Bernard Mandeville, however, viewed idleness in largely social and economic terms and the psychological issues of idleness are rarely, if ever, considered in his works. Those who were perceived as inherently idle, particularly the poor, were regarded as a threat to England's economic success. Keeping the poor constantly employed was regarded as paramount to economic growth.

The idle rich found that their lifestyles came under just as much scrutiny. They often found their privileged lifestyles the target of attack and they were judged for what was regarded as their inherent idleness and their misplaced pride at being able to sustain such a lifestyle. Robert Burton had suggested of the gentry and nobility at the beginning of the seventeenth century, that no matter how much money they had, as long as they were idle, 'they shall never be pleased, never well in body and minde. [...] And this is the true cause', he claims, 'that so many great men, Ladies, and Gentlewomen, labour of this disease in country and citty; for idlenesse is an appendix to nobility' who 'count it a disgrace to worke'.<sup>90</sup>

Burton, like Johnson, realised that there was a significant link between idleness and melancholy. It was an observation that continued to develop throughout the eighteenth century. This chapter will explore the body of eighteenth-century religious, medical and moral literature which portrays idleness as a major cause, not only of

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<sup>90</sup> Burton's *Anatomy*, I (Part I. Sect. 2, Memb. 2, Subs. 6), p. 240.

melancholy, but of the many related nervous disorders, and which states that occupation was the best cure for these illnesses. George Cheyne would pick up on this issue in 1733 with his *English Malady*, suggesting that the more affluent classes were particularly prone to nervous disorders such as vapours, hysteria and spleen, of which melancholy was often a symptom. Cheyne and many other eighteenth-century physicians would make the connection between the depressed state of mind and nervous symptoms experienced by their patients and their over-indulgent lifestyles: the fashionable penchant for acquiring luxury items for instant gratification; an excess of rich food combined with too little exercise; too little application to business in favour of an idle lifestyle.

The issue of idleness in the eighteenth century is therefore not straightforward. However, it is crucial that we attempt to understand it in its eighteenth-century context if we are to consider it as a cause of melancholy. Some of the definitions Johnson gives of the term 'idle' are 'Lazy; averse from labour; useless; vain; ineffectual; worthless; barren; not productive of good'.<sup>91</sup> Idleness is presented as the unattractive character trait of the lazy and the selfish, something to be ashamed of: '[t]o be idle and to be poor have always been reproaches, and therefore every man endeavours with the utmost care, to hide his poverty from others, and his Idleness from himself,'<sup>92</sup> states Johnson in *Idler* 17.

But then there is also the idleness associated with the dejected state of mind. This is a type of idleness that is often referred to as indolence: a lethargic state of mind that can be a symptom of melancholy. It is an apathetic state which could quite easily be mistaken for laziness both by sufferers and those who cared for them. Indolence does

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<sup>91</sup> *Dictionary*, 1755, Vol. 1.

<sup>92</sup> *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. by W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt and L. F. Powell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), II, p. 54 (No. 17, 5 August 1758)

not appear until the 1756 edition of the *Dictionary*, where it is defined as ‘Laziness; inattention; listlessness’.<sup>93</sup> It is the ‘listlessness’ in particular which implies there is an involuntary aspect to indolence, and because of this we should perhaps consider it as a symptom of an illness rather than a reasoned decision to do nothing. Solomon suggests that ‘[t]he opposite of depression is not happiness but vitality [...]’.<sup>94</sup> He implies that lack of energy and motivation are indeed major debilitating symptoms of today’s depression. This is not the conscious decision to do nothing, but an overpowering sense of apathy.

However, when we look at the issue of idleness in a religious context we find that generally no allowance was made for it being a symptom of basic melancholy. The opposite was found to be the case when the melancholy was aggravated or complicated by religious doubts, but this will be addressed in the final chapter which looks at the issue of religious melancholy.

In *Preservatives against melancholy and overmuch sorrow* published in 1713, Richard Baxter preached to all that ‘Idleness is a constant Sin, and Labour is a Duty’.<sup>95</sup> It was thought that the devil would encourage idleness because it was the exact opposite of what God would have wished us to be. Baxter also regarded idleness as being a direct cause of melancholy. The benefits of labour, according to Baxter, were therefore two-fold: it safeguarded the soul and, industriousness being the opposite of idleness, it acted as a deterrent against melancholy.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English language*, Vol. 1, The second edition (London, 1756), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> > [accessed 21 December 2009].

<sup>94</sup> Solomon, p. 443.

<sup>95</sup> Richard Baxter, *Preservatives against melancholy and overmuch sorrow. Or the cure of both by faith and physick. Written about thirty years ago, by ... Richard Baxter ...* (London, 1713), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> > [accessed 11 January 2008], p. 75.

<sup>96</sup> *Dictionary*, 1755, Vol. 1. Johnson defines ‘industrious’ as, ‘Diligent; laborious; assiduous. Opposed to slothful.’

In 1726, William Broughton stated that ‘God has appointed us to work out our Salvation in a way of Diligence and Duty: All such then as fail in this Point, can have no good Hope that it shall go well with ’em hereafter’.<sup>97</sup> So not only was it a sin against God, but idleness carried with it the threat of eternal damnation. This tract, like so many others, also suggests that the opportunity to work was granted by God. Broughton states: ‘He not only furnishes us with proper Business; but gives us likewise Abilities to Work. [...] He has placed in us Wills and Affections to direct us in our Actions.’<sup>98</sup> God may have provided the opportunities for man to work, but it was up to the individual to make the most of those opportunities. Religious tracts viewed idleness as the conscious and wilful act of the individual to avoid work, and by refusing to work they were wilfully rejecting one of God’s gifts to man.

In 1708, John Conant suggested that ‘[t]he idle person is a *disorderly Person*. He is one that breaks that Order which God hath set Men. ’Tis his Appointment and Ordinance, that every Man should have a Calling, some honest and lawful Employment wherein to exercise himself’.<sup>99</sup> In this case, those who were idle were perceived as disrupting the status quo. Not only did they flout God’s law but they were the miscreants of society: ‘[t]he idle Person is a useless Person; he is a Burthen to the Common-Wealth, and to the place where he lives. His Idleness is maintained by the Labour of other Men’s Hands; others must work, that he may sit still.’<sup>100</sup> Such forceful tracts not only acted as moral guidance for those who were idle, but they brought to the attention of the industrious the audacity of those who were not prepared to work. This religious dogmatism continued throughout the century.

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<sup>97</sup> Broughton, p. 9.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>99</sup> John Conant, *Sermons on several subjects. Viz. Of pride, luxury, idleness, unmercifulness ...* 6 vols (London, 1708), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> > [accessed 28 September 2007], V, p. 15.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

In 1772, John Macgowan stated likewise: ‘[t]he voice of the law is, “He that will not work let him not eat;” yet, in defiance of divine authority, some are so sottishly stupid, and void of understanding, that they expect the end, without the means, and to eat whether they work or not.’<sup>101</sup> Again, attention is drawn to the audacity of the idle. From a religious perspective, whether poor or rich, idleness (when not a symptom of melancholy) was regarded as the wilful disregard of God’s wishes. Conant warned that ‘[w]hatever the richer sort may think, they can no more justify themselves before God in an idle Course of Life, than the Poor can’.<sup>102</sup> Such religious tracts helped raise social awareness of the issue of idleness and fuelled condemnation of it. This vehement religious condemnation of the idle fed into and strengthened the arguments of moralists and political writers who viewed idleness in largely economic terms.

Society was becoming particularly concerned with not just how one spent one’s own time but how others were spending theirs. There was, as Sarah Jordan has suggested, a general ‘anxiety’ about idleness.<sup>103</sup> At the beginning of the century, the boundaries between being idle and enjoying one’s leisure time appear to have blurred somewhat. Guilt appears to have been introduced over how one spent one’s leisure time. Was it deserved? Had you earned it? Were you merely being idle? The difference between the positive frame of mind that accompanies relaxation and the negative frame of mind that often accompanies idleness is, I will argue, one of boundaries. Periods of relaxation almost always have boundaries, time scales, either self imposed or imposed by others. Even when we are relaxing and do absolutely nothing, it could be argued that we are actively changing, or at least attempting to

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<sup>101</sup> John Macgowan, *A rod for the sluggard; or the great evil of idleness represented* (London, 1772), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> > [accessed 28 September 2007], p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> Conant, p. 19.

<sup>103</sup> Sarah Jordan, *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (London: Associated University Press, 2003).

change, our frame of mind as well as our body, by practising inaction. There is a positive, anticipated outcome. In contrast, idleness has no boundaries, and it is this factor that appears to have caused, not just those who suffered from melancholy, but individuals in general, so much mental torment. Physicians, ministers and moralists regarded idleness, not just as a threat to the economy, but as a very real danger to a person's mental health.

The author of *Spectator* 316 writes:

if I had less Leisure, I should have more; for I shou'd then find my Time distinguish'd into Portions, some for business, and others for the indulging of Pleasures: But now one Face of Indolence over-spreads the whole, and I have no Land-mark to direct myself by. Were one's Time a little straitned by Business, like Water inclos'd in its Banks, it would have some determin'd Course; but unless it be put into some Channel it has no Current, but becomes a Deluge without either Use or Motion.<sup>104</sup>

In this instance, the vast amount of unfulfilled time has negative repercussions on the author's mental health. The result of his excess of time is 'indolence', and his anxiety as to how he spends his time is caused by the boundless amount he feels obliged to fill. It has a depressing effect on his mental state. He can foresee no positive outcome from his idleness. This idle person wishes for something to constrain the 'deluge' of time as a river is constrained by its banks. He is aware that he needs a 'marker', a purpose in life to make his existence worthwhile. It is interesting that right at the beginning of the century, the strictures of 'business' are thought to provide the contrast needed to appreciate one's 'leisure'. Without this contrast, it was thought that the idle person could become depressed. Eighteenth-century moralists such as Samuel Johnson knew this, as did the physicians and ministers who wrote on the subject of melancholy.

Idleness is unlike relaxation, which comes with the peace of mind that, although we may be doing nothing in particular, such free time is deserved. Relaxation is the

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<sup>104</sup> *The Spectator*, edited with an introduction by Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), III, p. 148 (No. 316, 3 March 1712). The author of this *Spectator* is unidentified.

well-earned rest that is the reward for a job well done. In fact, whether that work is rewarding or not is immaterial; relaxation is simply the break that follows a period of work or occupation. By mid century Johnson defines ‘relaxation’ as, amongst other things, ‘Remission; abatements of rigour; Remission of attention or application.’<sup>105</sup> Relaxation does not carry the negative connotations associated with idleness. We have chosen a specific period in which to relax both body and mind. Relaxation of the mind is not something that, unless practised, most of us can summon at will. However, when we do manage to relax completely, both mind and body feel the benefits. Under ‘relax’ Johnson suggests, ‘To be mild’ and ‘to be not rigorous’.<sup>106</sup> It is a frame of mind that generally generates a sense of well-being.

J. H Plumb informs us that ‘by 1750 [...] leisure was becoming an industry with great potentiality for growth’.<sup>107</sup> According to Plumb, this increase in leisure was in itself one of the ‘social signs of affluence—increased consumption of food, [...] increased pre-occupation with fashion, a boom in books, music, entertainment and holidays: and the rapid growth of leisure towns’.<sup>108</sup> It does appear that, as the century progressed, many people’s lives were indeed becoming ‘straitened by business’. To illustrate this point, we can compare the depressed state of mind evident in Spectator 316 and written in 1712, with an extract from *Columella*, a novel published in 1779. In the novel, two friends, Atticus and Hortensus, set out to spend some time with their friend Columella, who lives a retired lifestyle in the country. The author, Richard Graves, writes:

As an innocent relaxation from the fatigues of business was one subordinate end of their journey, they had determined to banish every anxious thought, and to

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<sup>105</sup> *Dictionary*, 1755, Vol. 2.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> J. H. Plumb, ‘The Commercialization of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England’, in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England*, ed. by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (London: Europa Publications, 1982), pp. 265-285 (p. 265).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

leave every severer care behind them. Atticus was no longer the solemn Head of a college, nor Hortensius the sage Counsel learned in the law. The consciousness however of having punctually discharged every duty of their respective stations, diffused an ease and cheerfulness over their minds, and left them open to enjoyment, and at leisure to receive amusement from every object that presented itself in their way.<sup>109</sup>

This small extract relates much information about the attitude towards work and leisure in the second half of the century. To begin with, relaxation is only one minor outcome the friends hope to achieve from their holiday. Secondly, relaxation is defined by its contrast to the ‘fatigues of business’. However, the major achievement for Atticus and Hortensius, the thing that creates their ‘ease’ and peace of mind, is that they have earned the right to relax. Their relaxation is described as ‘innocent’. Their leisure time is the reward for having ‘punctually discharged every duty of their respective station’. Only having done so can they expect to enjoy their leisure time. Had they lived a basically idle lifestyle, then their leisure time would not have been defined and it is implied that they would not have benefited from its contrast.

By the middle of the century Johnson had defined leisure as ‘freedom from business or hurry; vacancy of mind; power to spend time according to choice [...]’.<sup>110</sup> Leisure time for the industrious had boundaries and positive connotations. It was a period of time that could be radically different from one’s working lifestyle, and it was thought to be beneficial to one’s mental and physical health because of this. The novel *Columella* will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four of this thesis, which considers the connection between the eighteenth-century notion of the retired lifestyle and the depressed mental state.

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<sup>109</sup> Richard Graves, *Columella; or, the distressed anchoret. A colloquial tale. By the editor of the Spiritual Quixote*, 2 vols (London, 1779), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> > [accessed 25 July 2008], I, pp. 20-21.

<sup>110</sup> *Dictionary*, Vol. 2, 1755.

It seems strange that idleness became such a prominent issue in the eighteenth century, considering that the nation as a whole appears to have been working harder and more productively than ever before. John Rule states that

[a]ccording to most economic historians, somewhere in the eighteenth century there began a transformation of production so that output per head was to rise to new heights and the economy revealed a new ability to sustain this growth through successive generations. England not only got richer, it stayed richer.<sup>111</sup>

There is an ongoing debate amongst historians as to when this rapid economic growth began. Ann Kussmaul suggests that it was near the beginning of the century: ‘Imagine yourself to be standing in the early eighteenth century, viewing the economy of Britain’, she suggests,

[y]ou would not be on a stable plain, but rocked by change, seeing the landscape of the eighteenth century being created all around you. Evidence of the changes in work and output that must have been happening is to be found in goods that were unlikely to have been produced for one’s own consumption. [...] There is evidence of increased internal trade or of increased wear on the roads carrying some of this trade. [...] Rare census-like listings of occupations [...].<sup>112</sup>

Roderick Floud and D. N. McCloskey address some of the problems historians face when attempting to quantify and qualify such change:

most events in economic history cannot be neatly dated. [...] [I]t is concerned [...] with how people live most of their lives, how many people are born and how they die, how they earn and how they spend, how they work and how they play. [...] The historian has to reconstruct the details of such behaviour from scattered and ambiguous evidence, and his reconstruction can often only be imprecise.<sup>113</sup>

However, given that this thesis argues that idleness and over indulgence were regarded as a major cause of melancholy, these statistics are exactly the social and economic information needed to ascertain exactly what was regarded as an over-indulgent idle

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<sup>111</sup> John Rule, *The Vital Century: England’s Developing Economy, 1714-1815* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 28.

<sup>112</sup> Ann Kussmaul, ‘The Pattern of work as the eighteenth century began’, in *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700: second edition, volume 1: 1700-1860*, ed. by Roderick Floud and D. N. McCloskey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1-11 (p. 4).

<sup>113</sup> Floud, Roderick and D. N. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700: second edition, volume 1: 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), vi, p. xvii.

lifestyle. For idleness and indeed luxury are not static concepts. They are constantly shifting phenomena to which attitudes change over the centuries and even within the course of a century itself. With this in mind, the social and economic evidence provided by historians in this chapter has been supplemented by the moral, religious, political and medical literature published during the period. The result should give as a relatively full and rounded picture of the issues relating to idleness that affected people's lives and, in particular, their mental health.

## II

### The Pressure to Succeed

As will be discussed later in this chapter, new and increased opportunities were being created for people to make a living for themselves and their families. However, with increased opportunities came higher expectations and greater condemnation of those who chose not to take advantage of them. For instance, more opportunities existed for the younger sons of the more affluent families, those who Joseph Addison refers to as being ‘bred to no Business and born to no Estate [...]’.<sup>114</sup> It became possible for educated young men to forge professions in finance, trade (as in export and import), manufacture or commerce. In *The Complete English Tradesman*, published in 1726, Daniel Defoe states that ‘many of our noble and wealthy families are rais’d by, and derive from trade’ and that ‘many of the younger branches of our gentry, and even of the nobility itself, have descended again into the spring from whence they flow’d, and have become tradesmen’.<sup>115</sup>

But at the same time, these same industrious people, particularly members of the rapidly rising middle class, expected to reap the rewards of their hard work and industry. They wanted to enjoy all the comforts and benefits that their labour had produced, not least of which was the leisure time to enjoy those benefits. Yet the persistent condemnation of idleness created a tension. Certainly a tension existed between the need or desire for a slower pace of life and the increased pressure to work and contribute to society. Chapters four and six in this thesis will examine the lifestyle

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<sup>114</sup> Bond, *Spectator*, I, p. 447 (No. 108, 4 July 1711).

<sup>115</sup> This and other quotations found in *Literature and the Social Order in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Stephen Copley (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 37.

choices of William Shenstone and William Cowper, two young men who turned their backs on a profession in favour of a retired lifestyle. I argue that in Cowper's case in particular, much of his mental torment and depression was brought about by the pressures placed upon him to acquire a profession and support himself.

In 1711, Sir Richard Steele attacked the 'sect' of university educated young men he refers to as 'Loungers', those whose favourite saying, apparently, was 'That Business was design'd only for Knaves, and Study for Blockheads'.<sup>116</sup> It is apparent that, even at the beginning of the century, it was becoming less accepted that young men from privileged backgrounds should go through life with little or no ambition to make any contribution to society. Such young men were said to be 'satisfied with being merely Part of the Number of Mankind, without distinguishing themselves from amongst them'.<sup>117</sup> However, by mid-century the need to, at least be seen to, belong to some kind of profession becomes apparent. In *Idler* 48, entitled 'The Bustles of Idleness', Johnson states that

[t]here is no kind of idleness, by which we are so easily seduced, as that which dignifies itself by the appearance of business, and by making the loiterer imagine that he has something to do which must not be neglected, keeps him in perpetual agitation, and hurries him rapidly from place to place.<sup>118</sup>

Here Johnson attacks those who merely aspire to be industrious, but who have neither the stamina nor the inclination to make the effort:

These imitators of action are of all denominations. Some are seen at every auction without intention to purchase; others appear punctually at the Exchange, though they are known there only by their faces. [...] [S]ome neglect every pleasure and every duty to hear questions in which they have no interest debated in parliament. [...] As political affairs are the highest and most extensive of

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<sup>116</sup> Bond, *Spectator*, I. p. 230 (No. 54, 2 May 1711).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>118</sup> *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. by W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt and L. F. Powell (London: Yale University Press, 1963), II, p. 150 (No. 48, 17 March 1759).

temporal concerns; the mimick of a politician is more busy and important than any other trifler.<sup>119</sup>

We can see examples of these ‘imitators’ within the literature of the period. In Defoe’s *Roxana* for instance, Roxana’s first husband, we are told, was left ‘a considerable Addition to his Estate, the whole Trade of the Brewhouse, which was a very good one [...]’. However, having ‘no Genius for Business’, and ‘no Knowledge of his Accounts’ we are told that

he bustled a little about it indeed, at first, and put on a Face of Business, but he soon grew slack; it was below him to inspect his Books, he committed all that to his Clerks and Bookkeepers; and while he found Money in Cash to pay the Maltman, and the Excise, and put some in his Pocket, he was perfectly easie and indolent, let the main Chance go how it would.<sup>120</sup>

The similarity between Defoe’s and Johnson’s ‘bustlers’ is striking.<sup>121</sup> John Mullan states that, although first published in 1724, *Roxana* was ‘critically invisible for the first fifty years or so of its life’.<sup>122</sup> This would place the novel’s popularity and influence firmly in the second half of the century which, according to many of the historians noted in this chapter, was the period of most rapid economic growth and expansion.

In Fanny Burney’s *Cecilia*, first published in 1782, we meet yet another example of an ‘imitator of action’ in the character of Mr. Belfield. Belfield, we are told, ‘had been intended by his father for trade.’<sup>123</sup> However, having been given a university education, he subsequently travels around the country, sampling, and then rejecting, the many opportunities and professions that open up to him as a consequence. At one point he enters the Temple, but finds himself ‘too volatile for serious study, and too gay for

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., II, pp. 150-151.

<sup>120</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724) (Oxford World’s Classics) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 9-10.

<sup>121</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, Everyman’s Library (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1992), II, p. 186. Boswell informs us that Johnson held Defoe’s works in high regard and that he allowed, ‘a considerable share of merit to a man, who, bred a tradesman, had written so variously and so well.’

<sup>122</sup> *Roxana*, p. viii.

<sup>123</sup> Fanny Burney, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), ed. by Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody (Oxford World’s Classics) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 12.

laborious application [...]’.<sup>124</sup> Next he becomes a writer, only to find that he cannot write to order: ‘to write by rule, to compose by necessity [...] when weary, listless, spiritless [...] Heavens! [...] how cruel, how unnatural a war between the intellects and the feelings!’<sup>125</sup> Belfield is basically an idle young man who desires the title of a profession without actually having to do any of the work. The fact that Belfield had been given a university education is significant, in that it encourages him to aspire to the lifestyle of his more affluent peers and, as a consequence, he feels it beneath his dignity to settle in any profession. In a similar vein, Johnson’s *Rasselas* could be viewed as an idler: deliberating endlessly about his ‘choice in life’ without ever actually settling on any. Both characters suffer from severely depressed mental states as a consequence of their idle lifestyles, yet neither can settle on a ‘choice of life’. By creating such characters in their fiction, both Johnson and Burney demonstrate two things: that there was an awareness and moral disapproval of wasted talent and privilege, at least in the second half of the century; but more importantly, that the depressed mental state was often regarded as the consequence of an idle lifestyle.

Chapter four of this thesis examines the notion of the retired lifestyle in the eighteenth century. In this chapter I examine the lifestyle choice of the poet William Shenstone, who left university with no degree and adopted the lifestyle of a country gentleman. He spent the remainder of his days creating one of the eighteenth century’s most famous landscaped gardens. However, he also suffered for much of his adult life with ‘lowness of spirits’. Whether it was the solitariness or the idleness of his lifestyle which caused his depression became a matter of much debate. Shenstone’s lifestyle choice appears to have raised an undue amount of critical interest and the poet was often criticized by his contemporaries for having chosen the leisured lifestyle of a country

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 883.

gentleman, rather than apply himself to a profession. Shenstone had left university in 1735, yet in *Columella*, a book based on his life and published in 1779, the issue of young men leaving university unprepared to make their own way in the world was still topical. The author, Richard Graves, writes:

when a young person, after having been prepared for a liberal education, and a long and regular course of studies, for some learned or ingenious profession, and qualified to be useful to the world in some eminent station; when such a one retires, in the vigour of life, through mere indolence and love of ease, [...] such a one, I say, not only robs the community of an useful member [...] but probably lays the foundation of his own infelicity: for he will not only find himself unqualified to enjoy that retirement of which he had formed such romantic ideas; but the consciousness of having deserted his proper station in society [...] and the reflection on his misapplied talents, will probably be a continual source of dissatisfaction and remorse.<sup>126</sup>

Graves' *Columella* explores the relationship between the idle and secluded nature of a life lived in retirement and the depressed mental state. However, it also acts as a social critique: debating issues such as education and public duty, mirroring the point Steele made at the beginning of the century about university 'loungers'. In this extract it is also suggested that the 'young person' would become depressed, or at the very least, feel guilty and dissatisfied with his new lifestyle, because he was aware that he was not fulfilling his full potential. The novel highlights the changing attitudes towards work and leisure and the antagonism that existed, particularly between the landed gentry and members of the rising bourgeoisie.

In contrast, the bourgeoisie tended to view a country retreat as a means of reinforcing their rising social status, but significantly, they also regarded it as an appendage to their working life, a temporary retreat from the stresses of the city. Rule suggests that

[s]uccessful merchants and bankers hardly ever sought large estates. They lacked a full commitment to land and were content with the advantages in terms of power, position and prestige which more modest country seats could bring.

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<sup>126</sup> *Columella*, I, pp. 3-4.

Most historians seem to agree that it was the social rather than the economic value of land which motivated purchase. [...] Men of business for the most part made a controlled investment in land as a basis for gentility, while keeping most of their resources in better-paying places.<sup>127</sup>

However, those who nursed a more romantic notion of the lifestyle of a country gentleman aspired to a more permanent mode of retirement. In, 'Solitude and the Neoclassicists', Raymond D. Havens suggests of such men that 'their craving for solitude [...] arose principally from timidity, idleness, and sloth. In their fear of life they glorified moderation until it meant the castration of all dynamics of action'.<sup>128</sup> Fear of a changing society and uncertainty as to one's role and abilities within that society is a concept Johnson also alludes to in *Idler* 48:

He that sits still, or reposes himself upon a couch, no more deceives himself than he deceives others; he knows that he is doing nothing, and has no other solace of his insignificance than the resolution which the lazy hourly make, of changing his mode of life. To do nothing every man is ashamed, and to do much almost every man is unwilling or afraid. [...] The greater part of those whom the kindness of fortune has left to their own direction, and whom want does not keep chained to the counter or the plow, play throughout life with the shadows of business, and know not at last what they have been doing.<sup>129</sup>

Like Havens, Johnson implies that fear of even attempting to succeed, or, more likely, fear of failing in one's attempts, may in fact have been behind the decision made by many young men to adopt a 'retired' lifestyle.

The reality of such a lifestyle, was that it was often a very lonely existence. Although the romantic notion may have consisted of some quiet abode, surrounded by one's beloved books and closest friends, the reality was, that for much of the time, the individual lived alone, or at least they found that their social circle was severely restricted. In Burton's estimation, idleness and solitariness were the fatal mix for

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<sup>127</sup> Rule, *The Vital Century*, p. 45.

<sup>128</sup> Raymond D. Havens, 'Solitude and the Neoclassicists', *ELH*, 21. 4 (1954) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2871883>> [accessed 9 March 2009], 251-273 (p. 263).

<sup>129</sup> *Idler*, II, p. 150 (No. 48, 17 March 1759).

melancholy: ‘*Be not solitary, be not idle*’<sup>130</sup> he urged. The idle, solitary lifestyle was considered detrimental in two ways: it had a depressing effect on one’s mental health and it was thought not to be the life God had intended for us. ‘It is [...] by no Means allowable to sequester ourselves from society,’ Peter DuMoilin states, ‘because God has formed us for one another. They who do so, unless it is for the public Good, are but an useless Burden upon Earth.’<sup>131</sup> Johnson stated in *The Adventurer* that

[t]o receive and to communicate assistance, constitutes the happiness of human life: man may indeed preserve his existence in solitude, but can enjoy it only in society: the greatest understanding of an individual, doomed to procure food and cloathing for himself, will barely supply him with the expedients to keep off death from day to day; but as one of a large community performing only his share of the common business, he gains leisure for intellectual pleasures, and enjoys the happiness of reason and reflection.<sup>132</sup>

Johnson’s moral dictate was that peace of mind is achieved only when our energy and talents are used for the benefit of others, which of course would be difficult to do if we chose to live apart from our fellow man. We help others and contribute towards society in general and we gain a sense of belonging and therefore well-being when others help us. However, ‘[t]he slothful person,’ Macgowan warns, ‘makes all men his enemies; and he that looks to others for assistance, whilst he has a capacity to provide for himself, but neglects the means of so doing, shall find that he is utterly deserted [...].’<sup>133</sup>

It is worth considering that the poor would have been less likely to live alone and their time and energy would most likely have been employed for the benefit of their family and community. This is yet another possible reason why, although their lifestyles were much harsher than those of the rich and they may have suffered more distress, it was observed that they did not suffer as much from melancholy.

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<sup>130</sup> Burton’s *Anatomy*, III (3. 4. 2. 6), p. 445.

<sup>131</sup> Peter Du Moulin, *An abridgment of Mr. Dumoulin's treatise on peace of soul and content of mind. By the translator of the larger work* (Salisbury, 1769), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/umn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 20 December 2009], p. 90.

<sup>132</sup> *Adventurer*, II, p. 389 (No. 67, 26 June 1753).

<sup>133</sup> Macgowan, p. 15.

Eighteenth-century men in particular were beginning to define themselves by their professions and their status in society was defined by how successful they were in those professions. To be seen to be a key part of the new industrious age was of the utmost importance. Everyone, it appears, was held accountable for how they spent their time and how much they contributed towards society. Johnson states that

the most unskilful hand and unenlightened mind have sufficient incitements to industry; for he that is relatively busy, can scarcely be in want... no man, unless his body or mind be totally disabled, has need to suffer the mortification of seeing himself useless or burdensome to the community.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> *Adventurer*, II, pp. 385-386 (No. 67, 26 June 1753).

### III

## An Industrious Nation

With such emphasis placed on the moral, economic and social obligations to work, it is necessary to consider what opportunities were opening up for people, how extensively the economic landscape was changing, and just how exactly these changes came about. Bridget Hill informs us that ‘[a]ccording to N. F. Crafts, in the period 1710-1800 total agricultural output must have risen by 80 per cent. The period of greatest growth was from 1710 to 1740, during which period England became a substantial exporter of food’.<sup>135</sup> Robert Allen suggests that ‘[t]he major reason that agricultural productivity rose was because output increased: the production of both corn and livestock products more than tripled from 1700 to 1850’.<sup>136</sup> So the fact that England had opened up and expanded her markets created the increased demand for productivity. Such an increase in agricultural output would have fed into the many derivative industries such as the textile industry, and in the eighteenth century, according to Ann Kussmaul, ‘[t]extile production was the dominant manufacturing sector, whether measured by employment at spindles and wheels and at looms, or by value output.’<sup>137</sup> The end result of this increased productivity was to have massive economic impact on the nation’s capital.

John Sekora states that

[b]y the middle of the eighteenth century, London was the largest city in Europe and contained the greatest proportion of national population. [...] She was also the greatest port, the largest center for international trade, and the largest center

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<sup>135</sup> Bridget Hill, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 10-11.

<sup>136</sup> Robert Allen, ‘Agriculture during the Industrial Revolution’, in *The Economic History of Britain*, ed. by Floud and McCloskey, I, pp. 96-122 (p. 111).

<sup>137</sup> Ann Kussmaul, ‘The Pattern of work as the eighteenth century began,’ in *The Economic History of Britain*, ed. by Floud and McCloskey, pp. 1-11 (p. 3).

of ship-owning and shipbuilding in the world. Through these enterprises she eventually became the world center of banking, finance and insurance. [...] Defoe called her the great octopus that sucked to itself the vitals of the nation's trade.<sup>138</sup>

London would therefore have had the greatest concentration of men making money from the employment of others and consequently, the biggest concentration of those earning money by selling their own time and skills to others.<sup>139</sup>

However, increased export was not the sole driving force behind increased production. As Neil McKendrick explains, there was a 'consumer revolution in eighteenth-century England' and that '[m]ore men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions'.<sup>140</sup> A massive increase in consumer demand from home appears to have been the largest driving force. McKendrick defines the very beginning of this 'consumer revolution' as the 1690s, when the 'taste for the cheap, colourful fabrics imported by the East India Company reached "epidemic proportions"'.<sup>141</sup> According to Joyce Appleby, '[u]nder the sway of new consuming tastes, people had spent more, and in spending more the elasticity of demand had become apparent.'<sup>142</sup>

Numerous opportunities for wealth and social advancement opened up as a consequence. McKendrick suggests that for those with skills to manufacture and the

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<sup>138</sup> John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollet* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 71.

<sup>139</sup> Josiah Tucker, *Instructions for Travellers* ([London?], [1757?]), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 2 February 2010]. Tucker gives an indication of what the average adult wage was compared to a child's wage in the Birmingham factories: A man's 'Gettings may be from 14*d.* to 18*d.* and the Child's from a Penny to 2*d.* per Day for doing the same Quantity of Work [...]' p. 23.

<sup>140</sup> Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa Publications, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. Joyce Appleby, 'Ideology and Theory: The Tension between Political and Economic Liberalism in Seventeenth Century England'. *The American Historical Review* 81:3 (June 1976), 500-501.

foresight to market their products ‘the opportunities were legion’.<sup>143</sup> In *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* published in 1767, the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson suggested that

Men are tempted to labour, and to practise lucrative arts, by motives of interest. Secure to the workman the fruit of his labour, give him the prospects of independence or freedom, the public has found a faithful minister in the acquisition of wealth, and a faithful steward in hoarding what he has gained. [...] In the progress and advanced state of his art, his views are enlarged, his maxims are established: he becomes punctual, liberal, faithful, and enterprising [...].<sup>144</sup>

Although self-interest was, according to Ferguson, the motive behind their labour, flourishing business acumen was thought to develop every commendable human attribute. It promoted self-respect as well as encouraging the respect of others, a vital component for good mental health. It is interesting that the first attribute of the successful businessman is listed as punctuality. A regard for and respect for one’s own time and the time of others was a major component of any successful business venture. Time was being calculated in both money and productivity. In economic terms, idle time would therefore equate to a disregard for and waste of these resources.

Yet another result of flourishing trade and manufacture was that it created opportunity for movement up the social ladder. Historians appear to be split as to just how much movement there was between the classes. Rule suggests that the image of the ‘self made man’ was a ‘myth’, and that very rarely did any person from the working classes manage to rise into the middle classes: ‘[t]here seems little doubt that considered as a group, industrialists were middle-class in origins as well as in standing’.<sup>145</sup> However, McKendrick draws attention to what he describes as

Those hordes of little men who helped boost the demand side and who succeeded in exciting new wants, in making available new goods, and in

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<sup>143</sup> Neil McKendrick, ‘The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-century England’, in *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, pp. 9-33 (p. 31).

<sup>144</sup> Copley, p. 117.

<sup>145</sup> John Rule, *Albion’s People: English Society, 1714-1815* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 83.

satisfying a new consumer market of unprecedented size and buying power. [...] [T]hose busy, inventive, profit-seeking men of business whose eager advertising, active marketing and inspired salesmanship did so much in eighteenth-century England to usher in a new economy and a new demand structure in English society.<sup>146</sup>

It does appear that it was quite possible for men from humble backgrounds to improve their own social standing, and consequently the lifestyle of their families, as a result of sheer hard work and enterprise. McKendrick suggests that ‘[f]rom Gregory King to Patrick Colquhoun, the social analysts had depicted a multi-layered society in which vertical mobility was both possible and greatly coveted’.<sup>147</sup> He quotes from *An Essay Upon Money and Coins*, published in 1757, in which Joseph Harris refers to ‘that gradual and easy transition from rank to rank’.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, when we consider the many trades that flourished and prospered within the eighteenth century, it is not hard to imagine how this could happen. Josiah Wedgwood, for instance, born in 1730, ‘the twelfth son of a mediocre potter with only the promise—and a promise never fulfilled—of a £20 inheritance [...] died in 1795 worth £500,000 and the owner of one of the finest industrial concerns in England.’<sup>149</sup> As well as crockery, there was an increased demand for furniture, textiles, carpets and artwork, as well as an increase in the leisure industry and its associated outlets: increased demand for literature meant that printers and booksellers prospered, theatres expanded, spas became popular.<sup>150</sup>

However, along with the increase in demand for leisure pursuits, came a warning that too much indulgence in idle leisure and too little work could have disastrous effects on one’s mental and physical well-being. In the *English Malady*,

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<sup>146</sup> McKendrick, pp. 5-6.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>148</sup> Joseph Harris, ‘An Essay upon Money and Coins’ (1757), pt. I, p. 70, quoted in *Birth of a Consumer Society*, p. 20.

<sup>149</sup> McKendrick, ‘Josiah Wedgwood and the Commercialization of the Potteries’, in *Birth of a Consumer Society*, pp. 100-145 (p. 103).

<sup>150</sup> For details of this increase in trade and leisure see McKendrick, ‘Commercialization and the Economy’ pp.7-194, and J. H. Plumb, ‘Commercialization and Society’, pp.263-334, in *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.

tailored very much toward the more affluent classes, Cheyne claims of those who indulged their every whim that ‘*Assemblies, Musick, Meetings, Plays, Cards, and Dice,* are the only Amusements, or perhaps Business follow’d by such Persons as live in the Manner mention’d, and are most subject to such Complaints, on which all their Thoughts and Attention, nay, their Zeal and Spirits, are spent’.<sup>151</sup> The ‘manner mention’d’ is basically an idle lifestyle and the ‘complaints’ he regards as nervous disorders.

Bernard Mandeville, however, suggested that both luxury and idleness were absolutely necessary for the flourishing of a consumer driven society. Mandeville believed that ‘[t]here ought to be a vast disproportion between the Active and Unactive part of the society to make it Happy [...]’.<sup>152</sup> But Mandeville alluded to economic happiness, in the sense of a healthy economy and trade, whereas on a personal level, the happiness of the individual was less apparent. The idle rich were demanding more luxury goods which in turn created more labour for the poor. Economically, the theory was that everyone benefited from the rich being idle; the demands of the rich created work for the poor, whose labour supplied the rich with an almost limitless array of goods to delight them and make their lives essentially easier. The poor would be kept busy and therefore would have no time for ‘melancholy deliberation’ and, in theory, the rich would be free from melancholy because they could employ their idle time by indulging their every whim. ‘[I]dleness can scarcely form a wish which she may not gratify by the toil of others, or curiosity dream of a toy which the shops are not ready to afford her’,<sup>153</sup> declared Johnson.

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<sup>151</sup> Cheyne, *The English Malady*, p. 52.

<sup>152</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *The fable of the bees: or, private vices, publick benefits. The second edition, enlarged with many additions. As also An essay on charity and charity-schools. And A search into the nature of society* (London, 1723), Eighteenth Century Collections Online

<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 22 December 2009], pp. 301-302.

<sup>153</sup> *Adventurer*, II, p. 386 (No. 67, 26 June 1753).

However, opportunities for entrepreneurship and flourishing trade created a widening gap between the idle person and the industrious worker or entrepreneur. The greater the gap, the greater would have been the awareness of idleness, and idleness would become more apparent and noticeable set in the context of a more aspirational society. In 1755, the economist and political writer, Josiah Tucker, suggested that ‘the poorer the Inhabitants of a Country, the greater by *Comparison* is the Baron, the Laird of a Clan, or the Landed Squire’.<sup>154</sup> Peter H. Lindert suggests that ‘[m]ovements in average income or wealth by *socio-economic class* suggest a dramatic widening of the gaps between rich and poor from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth’.<sup>155</sup> In contrast, the idleness of many of the aristocracy and old landed gentry caused the social gap to shrink between themselves and the rising bourgeoisie. Having said this, although the gap may have narrowed, Rule points out that the ‘eighteenth-century titled aristocracy was one of the most closed in Europe [...]’.<sup>156</sup> Although it may have been very rare to raise one’s social position to this extent, he does suggest of the merchant class of gentlemen that a select few ‘mostly of London [...] were sufficiently powerful and important to be considered part of the ruling classes’.<sup>157</sup> He suggests that ‘evidence still seems strong that the ranks of the landed gentlemen were *not* closed to men of new money’.<sup>158</sup> He also points out that by the eighteenth century ‘the upper ranks of the professions enabled a man to hold on to the status of gentleman while undergoing the necessary chore of earning a living’, and gives examples of such professions as law, medicine, teaching and estate management.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Josiah Tucker, *A preliminary discourse, setting forth the natural disposition, or instinctive inclination of mankind towards commerce* ([Bristol?], 1755), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 30 December 2009], p. 42.

<sup>155</sup> Peter H. Lindert, ‘Unequal Living Standards’, in *The Economic History of Britain*, ed. by Floud and McCloskey, pp. 357-386 (p.379).

<sup>156</sup> Rule, *Albion’s People*, p. 50.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

In 1738, John Burton warned of the direct link between melancholy and idleness. He suggested that melancholy was a self-inflicted disease and drew attention to the fact that, in particular, it was brought about by man's desire to better himself 'by Luxury, Intemperance, and an idle sedentary Life'.<sup>160</sup> Of this new social mobility, Sarah Jordan suggests that 'a profound contradiction becomes apparent' in that 'the middle classes, in aspiring to join the gentry, were using their industriousness to leave a class known for its industry and join a class which by definition was idle. Idleness, therefore, was somehow the desired reward for hard work'.<sup>161</sup> However, whilst the newly rising middle class of tradesman may have aspired to the social standing of the landed gentry, we should also consider that many appear to have resisted adopting a completely idle lifestyle, even though, financially, it would have been well within their capabilities to do so.

Contrary to Jordan's assertion, it is apparent that many of those who made their fortunes in trade or manufacture appear to have had a very different approach to work and leisure than their privileged counterparts. In particular, they appear to have had an aversion to a completely idle lifestyle and regarded their leisure time as a well-deserved appendage to their businesses, which they continued to run, and their professions, which they continued to work at. Samuel Johnson's close friend Henry Thrale for instance, is described as the 'handsome, worldly, and rich, owner of the Thrale Brewery [...] a farm in Oxfordshire; and owner of Streatham Park, a country house and property of nearly a hundred acres in Surrey [...]'.<sup>162</sup> He was also a member of Parliament from 1765-1781.<sup>163</sup>

In *The Complete English Tradesman*, Defoe observed:

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<sup>160</sup> John Burton, *A treatise on the non-naturals* (York, 1738), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 30 December 2009], p. 247.

<sup>161</sup> Jordan, p. 18.

<sup>162</sup> Mary Hyde, *The Thrales of Streatham Park* (London: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 1.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

An ordinary Tradesman now, not in the city only, but in the country, shall spend more money by the year, than a gentleman of four or five hundred pounds a year can do; and shall encrease and lay up every year too; whereas the gentleman shall at the best stand stock still, just where he began, nay, perhaps decline. [...] It is evident where the difference lies, *an Estate's a pond*, but *a Trade's a Spring*...which not only fills the pond, and keeps it full, but is constantly running over, and fills all the lower ponds and places about it.<sup>164</sup>

So there were many very positive social and economic aspects that resulted from the success of the middle classes. Their money came largely from trade and they were able to spend more of what we today would call surplus income on luxury items. Rising consumerism meant that people were beginning to define their social status by their possessions.

However, there was also a negative side to their success. As Defoe had stated, they were also the class that spent the most. For those who desired but could not afford such luxuries, or indeed the idle lifestyles they adopted or merely aspired to, the dangers to their mental health were ominous. Of such idle beings Macgowan states that they are

their own destroyers [...] the sluggard leads an uncomfortable and disagreeable life. [...] His desires are strong, perhaps stronger than those of others; but alas! his industry being so far inferior to his wants, he may well be said to desire, and not have wherewithal to gratify the ardent passion; and therefore [...] through the intenseness of the desire, and the chagrine of disappointment, melancholy is bred [...].<sup>165</sup>

A new kind of lifestyle was becoming attainable in the eighteenth century, a lifestyle where, for men at least, one's leisure time was counterbalanced by one's business. The rise in social status of the lower classes, the merchants, tradesmen, manufacturers and many farmers, would have generated a positive sense of achievement, owing to the fact that they had raised their fortunes themselves. What is more, they appear to have enjoyed all the more the benefits that their labour and entrepreneurial skills had earned

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<sup>164</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The complete English tradesman, in familiar letters; directing him in all the several parts and progressions of trade. ... Calculated for the instruction of our inland tradesmen; and especially of young beginners* (Dublin, 1726), Eighteenth Century Collections Online

<<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 30 December 2009], pp. 243-244.

<sup>165</sup> Macgowan, pp. 14-15.

them. By contrast, the idle lifestyle of those born to money was ridiculed. The ‘Loungers’, as Steele refers to them, when they have completed their education, ‘retire to the Seats of their Ancestors’ where they ‘usually join a Pack of Dogs, and employ their Days in defending their Poultry from Foxes’.<sup>166</sup>

How the poor spent their time appears to have been of even greater interest to society. Throughout the century, the poorer classes were often considered and referred to as being inherently idle. *Spectator* 232 argues that

Of all Men living, we Merchants, who live by Buying and Selling, ought never to encourage Beggars. The Goods which we export are indeed the Product of the Lands, but much the greatest Part of their Value is the Labour of the People: But how much of these People’s Labour shall we export, whilst we hire them to sit still? The very Alms they receive from us, are the Wages of Idleness.<sup>167</sup>

There was a new attitude developing towards labour, and in particular, payment for labour, which in turn encouraged harsher attitudes towards the giving of aid and charity to the poor. Even at the beginning of the century, the poor were often regarded purely in economic terms as in how they could be used most efficiently to benefit manufacture and productivity.

By 1757, Josiah Tucker stated that ‘great Judgment appears in the Methods and Contrivances for bringing the several Parts of the Manufacture so within the Reach of each other, that no Time should be wasted in passing the Goods to be manufactured from Hand to Hand [...]’.<sup>168</sup> Here we can see the beginning of what would become the production line system which would be adopted in the factories and mills later in the century. There is evidence of its presence in the workshops of businessmen such as Wedgwood. McKendrick suggests that once Wedgwood opened his showrooms and introduced pattern books for his customers his ‘success was immediate. [...] His men

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<sup>166</sup> Bond, *Spectator*, I, p. 232 (No. 54, 2 May 1711).

<sup>167</sup> *Spectator*, II, pp. 402-403 (No. 232, 26 November 1711). The author of this particular *Spectator* is unidentified.

<sup>168</sup> Josiah Tucker, 1757, pp. 22-23.

had to work night and day to satisfy demand and the crowds of visitors showed no signs of abating'.<sup>169</sup> Hugh Cunningham suggests that '[i]t was in the eighteenth century and not before that it became customary to think of a normal working day, a fair day's work, as ten hours'.<sup>170</sup> However, he also states that

The new breed of employers of the Industrial Revolution deplored [...]the irregular work patterns, the traditional holidays, the norm of only ten hours work, together with in many trades habits of drinking and 'larking' on the job. The rational pursuit of profit called for the elimination of such atavistic habits [...].<sup>171</sup>

This would suggest that, even before the so called industrial revolution began, which Rule suggests was not until the last quarter of the century,<sup>172</sup> people were working long hours. Yet Cunningham suggests that the new factory owners would not have regarded them as such: 'only ten hours work.' This raises questions as to how many hours a person would have to work for them to be perceived as not being idle.

To give us some idea of the rate and speed at which business and trade was growing, McKendrick points out that

after Wedgwood's commercial assault on the national and European markets the evidence of his success is overwhelming. The suggestion that 84 per cent of the total annual production of the Staffordshire potters (worth some £300,000 in eighteenth-century values, and approximately £30,000,000 at today's prices) was being exported by the late 1780s is difficult to avoid.<sup>173</sup>

All of these businessmen would have benefited from such an increase in productivity and trade, and to a lesser extent, so would the people they employed. To have ambition was commendable and to live an idle lifestyle was becoming increasingly unacceptable.

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<sup>169</sup> McKendrick, p. 119.

<sup>170</sup> Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c.1780- c.1880* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 58.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>172</sup> Rule, *The Vital Century*, p. 135. Rule suggests of the extent of manufacturing and mining in the eighteenth-century, that '[p]ossibly the only safe generalisation is that before the last quarter of the century only a small minority of the labour force worked in large units of production or extraction. For most of the eighteenth century there were so few 'factories' that the scattering of precocious examples, such as Thomas Lombe's silk mill at Derby, when chanced upon by travellers, were considered as exceptional as cathedrals, and when occasionally portrayed by artists were depicted hardly less splendidly.

<sup>173</sup> McKendrick, p. 144.

## IV

### Idleness a Cause and Work a Cure

Apart from having social and economic repercussions, idleness was thought to have a serious detrimental effect on the mental health of the individual. To be idle or, in particular, to adopt an idle lifestyle, was regarded as a major cause of melancholy. Although published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* should not be overlooked when discussing melancholy in the eighteenth century, as so much of its subject matter was still so relevant to an eighteenth-century readership. In Burton's estimation, idleness was one of the major causes of melancholy: 'Nothing begets it sooner, encreaseth and continueth it oftener then idlenesse. A disease familiar to all idle persons, an inseparable companion to such as live at ease.'<sup>174</sup> At the beginning of the eighteenth century, in a chapter entitled 'The Ill Consequences of Idleness and Laziness in Poor People educated to Labour', Dubé points out that 'it is evident that, as Sobriety, and moderate Work or Exercise, are the two Foundation-stones of our Health; so excessive Eating and Drinking, and Idleness, are the Bane of our Health and Sensible Faculties'.<sup>175</sup> Baxter suggested likewise:

[I]abour profiteth others and ourselves, both Souls and Body need it. [...] I have known grievous despairing Melancholy cured and turned into a Life of Godly Cheerfulness, principally by setting upon Constancy and Diligence in the Business of Families and Callings [...].<sup>176</sup>

Baxter's medical and moral guidance reiterates Burton's warning, that idleness could cause a person to become severely dejected and that occupation would, in many cases, cure them of it. He advises those who care for the melancholy: 'suffer them not to be

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<sup>174</sup> Burton's *Anatomy*, I (1. 2. 2. 6), p. 239.

<sup>175</sup> Dubé, p. 296.

<sup>176</sup> Baxter, p. 75.

idle, but drive or draw them to some pleasing work, which may stir the Body and employ the Thoughts.’<sup>177</sup> As well as a cause of the illness, idleness was also regarded as a major obstruction to recovery.

Although eighteenth-century physicians may have begun by discussing the theories surrounding the possible causes of melancholy, as the century progressed, many regarded an imbalance in a person’s lifestyle as being the ultimate cause of the illness: too little application to occupation and too much indulgence in acquiring immediate gratification. Occupation was thought to distract the sufferer, encouraging them to focus on others rather than themselves. Peter Du Moulin argued in 1769 that ‘Men are ruined and made unhappy, when they cannot employ themselves honestly’.<sup>178</sup> Likewise, in 1780, Benjamin Fawcett quotes from Richard Baxter:

It is just with God, to make your sin itself your punishment, and your own idle thoughts to chastise you, when you will not get up and go about your lawful business. I have known melancholy persons cured by setting themselves resolutely and diligently about their callings. [...] If you will sit musing in a corner, and increase your own misery by idleness, rather than rouse up yourself, and apply to your business, your calamity is just.<sup>179</sup>

Idleness is perceived as the cause of the melancholy, melancholy is the deserved punishment for the sin of idleness, and employment is the prescribed cure. The link between idleness and melancholy prevailed. James Beattie, near the end of the century, recommends to those who believed that they were somehow exempt from occupation that ‘honesty and attention to business are in every station respectable, and that contempt and misery never fail to attend a life of idleness [...]’.<sup>180</sup> As we can see, whatever eighteenth-century literature we read on the subject of melancholy, we usually

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>178</sup> Du Moulin, p. 91.

<sup>179</sup> Fawcett, p. 17.

<sup>180</sup> James Beattie, *Elements of moral science*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1790-93), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 26 October 2009], p. 117.

find that the subjects of idleness and industriousness are linked in some way as cause and cure of the illness.

It is inevitable however that, in such a rapidly changing society, there would be those who fell victim to the pressures placed upon them to conform and to adopt and succeed in a worthwhile occupation, those for whom idleness was of particular concern. For the eighteenth-century male in particular, an idle lifestyle was often regarded by themselves and others as a pointless, self-gratifying existence. Of the highly educated but idle young men in society Steele suggests that ‘[t]hey may be said rather to suffer their Time to pass, than to spend it, without Regard to the past, or Prospect to the future. All they know of Life is only the present Instant, and do not taste even that’.<sup>181</sup> It is implied that their lives held no relish because they served no obvious purpose. It is likened to a vegetative state of both mind and body: existing without actually living and experiencing life.

The author of *Spectator* 316 refers to indolence as a

Rust of the Mind, which gives a Tincture of its Nature to every Action of one’s Life. [...] And it is to no Purpose to have within one the Seeds of a thousand good Qualities, if we want the Vigour and Resolution necessary for the exerting them.<sup>182</sup>

However, indolence and idleness are not necessarily self-indulgent vices, although they were often portrayed as such: the individual wilfully choosing to do nothing. In this particular *Spectator* indolence is depicted as an apathetic state of mind caused by idleness. It is an invisible, destructive force that has a negative effect on all parts of our life. Burton had also suggested that idleness, as well as being a cause of melancholy, could also be a symptom of the illness: ‘[t]his idlennesse is either of body or minde. That of body is nothing but a kinde of benumbing lazinesse,’<sup>183</sup> whereas ‘[i]dlennesse of the

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<sup>181</sup> Bond, *Spectator*, I, p. 231 (No. 54, 2 May 1711).

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, III, p. 149 (No. 316, 3 March 1712). Author unidentified.

<sup>183</sup> Burton’s *Anatomy*, I (1. 2. 2. 6), p. 239.

minde is much worse than this of the body: witte without employment is a disease [...] the rust of the Soule, a plague, a hell it selfe'.<sup>184</sup> It is interesting to see how often the idleness or indolence caused by the depressed state of mind is referred to as 'rust'. Solomon states of current day 'mild' depression that it also is 'a gradual and sometimes permanent thing that undermines people the way rust weakens iron'.<sup>185</sup> As in the description of indolence in the *Spectator*, Solomon regards 'mild' depression as having the same effect as rust: a slow, corrosive destruction of the mind and therefore of the self, by an invisible, internal force.

Burton had stated at the beginning of the seventeenth century that the poor, just like any other class of person, could certainly fall victim to melancholy. He refers to them as being 'poore in purse, poore in spirit'.<sup>186</sup> Their poverty could have no other outcome than to depress their spirits: 'the very care they take to live, to be drudges, to maintaine their poore families, their trouble and anxiety *takes away their sleep*, [...] it makes them weary of their lives.'<sup>187</sup> It is the harshness and relentless 'drudgery' of their lifestyles that depresses their spirits. However, one of the most surprising observations we come across in the eighteenth-century medical literature is that very often physicians suggest that the poor are rarely afflicted with melancholy. Their necessity to work in order to live was thought to keep them free from the illness. Baxter observed:

Tho' Thousands of Poor People that live in Want, and have *Wives* and *Children* that must also feel it, one would think should be distracted with Grieffs and Cares, yet few of them fall into the Disease of Melancholy, because Labour keepeth the Body sound, and leaveth them no leisure for Melancholy Musings.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., I (1. 2. 2. 6), p. 240.

<sup>185</sup> Solomon, p. 17. 'Large' depression, Solomon suggests, 'is the stuff of breakdowns. If one imagines a soul of iron that weathers with grief and rusts with mild depression, then major depression is the startling collapse of a whole structure'.

<sup>186</sup> Burton's *Anatomy*, I (1. 2. 6. 6), p. 348.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., I (1. 2. 4. 6), p. 350.

<sup>188</sup> Baxter, p. 75.

Likewise, in 1704, Dubé suggested of the associated ‘hysterick’ disorders that people suffered from such as vapours and spleen, which he also regarded as ‘the Effects of an Idle Life’, that in all his years of practice he never ‘met’ with them ‘among the Poor Women’.<sup>189</sup> However, in the next chapter I will argue that eighteenth-century women appear to have suffered as much, if not more so, from nervous disorders than melancholy. Nevertheless, as with melancholy, these illnesses were often perceived as afflicting the more affluent, idle sort of women, more than the laboring poor. Richard Mead suggests likewise, that the poor are less likely to be troubled by lowness of spirits because their labour keeps them too occupied to become dejected and the rewards of their labour keep them happy and content.<sup>190</sup> Constant occupation was thought to be the secret of their good mental health: as long as they had no time to be idle, it was thought that they would have no opportunity to dwell on their misfortunes and would therefore remain free from melancholy.

We can again turn to Burney’s *Cecilia* in order to illustrate this point. At one point Mr. Belfield adopts the lifestyle of a lowly farm labourer in an attempt to cure his dejected spirits caused by an overindulgent lifestyle. Cecilia asks him ‘is labour indeed so sweet? And can you seriously derive happiness from what all others consider as misery?’. To which he answers:

[w]hen I work, I forget all the world; my projects for the future, my disappointments from the past. Mental fatigue is overpowered by personal; I toil till I require rest, and that rest which nature, not luxury demands, leads not to idle meditation, but to sound, heavy, necessary sleep. I wake the next morning to the same thought-exiling business, work again till my powers are exhausted, and am relieved again at night by the same health-recruiting insensibility.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Dubé, p. 175.

<sup>190</sup> Richard Mead, *The medical works of Richard Mead, M.D. Physician to his Majesty K. George II. Fellow of the Royal Colleges of Physicians at London and Edinburgh, and of the Royal Society*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1763), Eighteenth Century Collections Online

< <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 15 March 2007], III, p. 145.

<sup>191</sup> *Cecilia*, p. 665.

This is the equivalent of Baxter's 'constant occupation', where a body works to the point of sheer exhaustion. It may be a depressing lifestyle, but their dejection is outweighed by physical exhaustion. In this instance it is suggested that melancholy is kept at bay because the poor have the time to think about neither themselves nor their lifestyles. Their labour is described as 'thought-exiling'.

However, there is a very obvious discrepancy here, for, as has already been discussed, along with the very rich, the poor were thought to be an inherently idle class of people. And, as idleness was thought to cause people to become miserable and dejected, we would therefore expect to find that they, above all other classes, would be said to suffer most from melancholy. Of course another reason that the poor were thought not to suffer from melancholy is that, as the poorest sector of society, they would have been largely illiterate and would therefore have had little, if any voice. They did not have the means to express their feelings in the way that their more educated counterparts were able. In general, we find that the mental health of the poor is commented upon by others: ministers, physicians, moralists and economists. It is others who, more often than not, declare that the poor did not suffer from melancholy.

Similarly, Cheyne writes: '[i]t is a common Observation, (and, I think, has great Probability on its Side) that *Fools, weak or stupid Persons, heavy and dull souls*, are seldom much troubled with Vapours or Lowness of spirits.'<sup>192</sup> It is implied that only those with a heightened intelligence would be most susceptible; their 'bodily organs' being 'finer, quicker, more agile, and sensible, and perhaps more numerous than others'.<sup>193</sup> Here it is suggested that it is 'stupid' or uneducated people that did not suffer from melancholy rather than the poor. As the laboring class would have had little education, we can see how this correlation would have been drawn. Burney addresses

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<sup>192</sup> Cheyne, *The English Malady*, p. 52.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

this issue when Cecilia is reacquainted a little while later with Belfield, who had since quit his life of physical labour. Reflecting on his experience he tells her that

the life I led at the cottage was the life of a savage; no intercourse with society, no consolation from books; my mind locked up, every source dried of intellectual delight, and no enjoyment in my power but from sleep and from food. [...] I thought in labour and retirement I should find freedom and happiness; but I forgot that my body was not seasoned for such work, and considered not that a mind which had once been opened by knowledge, could ill endure the contraction of dark and perpetual ignorance.<sup>194</sup>

Devoid of intellectual stimulation, all that was left was the harsh reality of his existence:

‘[t]o rise at break of day, chill, freezing, and comfortless! no sun abroad, no fire at home! to go out in all weather to work, that work rough, coarse and laborious!’<sup>195</sup>

Belfield is an idler, in Johnson’s sense of the word, who envisaged a romantic notion of a country life.

Richard Mead in 1763 suggested that ‘[p]eople of low condition, for the most part, enjoy the common advantages of life more commodiously than those of the highest rank’.<sup>196</sup> When Mead talks of the lower classes he paints, what can only be assumed is, an overly romantic picture:

Wholesome food is acquired by moderate labour; which likewise mends the appetite and digestion: hence sound sleep, uninterrupted by gnawing cares, refreshes the wearied limbs; a flock of healthy children fill the cottage; the sons grow up robust, and execute the father’s task. [...] How vastly inferior to these blessings are the vain delicacies of most persons of affluent fortunes [...].<sup>197</sup>

Although this is surely an unrealistic picture, note that the previous relentless labour has been replaced by a call for ‘moderate labour’, which suggests that by this time, some kind of work/rest balance was thought to be conducive to good mental health, regardless of one’s class. The physician John Leake M. D. was the founder of the Westminster Lying-in Hospital, ‘designed to relieve the Wives of poor industrious Tradesmen, and

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<sup>194</sup> *Cecilia*, p. 738.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p.739.

<sup>196</sup> Mead, III, p. 145.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

also for those of Soldiers and *Sailors*.<sup>198</sup> Of all the physicians, he would surely have been able to observe the poorer classes in what can only be imagined must have been a particularly stressful time for them. Yet he notes that

low spirits and acquired melancholy [...] always operate most powerfully on people of nice sensations, whose *pleasures* and *pains* from over-delicacy of the nervous system, are too exquisite for sense. [...] Those on the contrary, of more clumsy organs, who are possessed of little more than vegetable feeling, never experience the misery of nervous disorders; but if they have less pleasure, the account is balanced by enduring less pain.<sup>199</sup>

Leake's observations would suggest that the energy of the poor was far more concentrated on the necessities of life. Their psyche, little distracted by ambition, would consequently be less likely to become dejected by disappointments. Their time would have been less occupied with the pursuit of pleasure which, if attained, would only have highlighted the depressing nature of their existence. Burney's Mr. Belfield is an idle young man who believes he possesses just such an 'over-delicate nervous system'. Cecilia asks of his laborious life in the cottage: 'if this [...] is the life of happiness, why have we so many complaints of the suffering of the poor, and why so eternally do we hear of their hardship and distress?'<sup>200</sup> To which Belfield replies:

[t]hey have known no other life. [...] Had they mingled in the world, fed high their fancy with hope, and looked forward with expectation to enjoyment [...] had they seen an attentive circle wait all its entertainment from their powers, yet found themselves forgotten as soon as out of sight. [...] Oh had they known and felt provocations such as these, how gladly would their resentful spirits turn from the whole unfeeling race [...].<sup>201</sup>

Burney refers to the hardships and distress of the poor, but she does not suggest that they became melancholy as a result of them. Although Belfield's attitude towards the poor is employed as a satiric attack on the ignorance of this social climbing yet idle

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<sup>198</sup> John Leake, *Medical instructions towards the prevention and cure of chronic diseases peculiar to women*; ... fifth edition, 2 vols (London, 1781), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>> [accessed 26 June 2007], I, p. 14.

<sup>199</sup> Leake, 1777, p. 258.

<sup>200</sup> *Cecilia*, p. 665.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 665.

young man, to a certain extent it does reiterate the general theory of the medical profession, that the poor did not suffer from melancholy because they were basically ignorant and therefore their expectations of life were low.

A factor which differentiated the idleness of the more affluent members of society from that of the poor, was its connection with luxury. At the very beginning of the century Baxter had suggested that the melancholy many people experienced was brought about by an overindulgent lifestyle: ‘the secret Root or Cause of all this’, he states, ‘is the worst part of the Sin, which is, too much Love to the Body, and *this World* [...] if Ease and Health were not *over-loved*, *Pain* and *Sickness* would be the more tolerable.’<sup>202</sup> In 1733 Cheyne also claimed that the real and very dangerous threat to health, especially amongst the more affluent members of society, was not from any internal cause, but in their quest for instant gratification from external sources: ‘Since our Wealth has increas’d, and our Navigation has been extended, we have ransack’d all the Parts of the *Globe* to bring together its whole Stock of Materials for *Riot*, *Luxury*, and to provoke *Excess*.’<sup>203</sup> Instead of giving pleasure and making life easier, the pursuit and attainment of luxury and excess was often regarded as a cause of melancholy.

Ministers and moralists suggested that the more affluent members of society placed a misguided onus on the immediate gratification they acquired from these luxury items in order to give them a sense of fulfillment and self-worth. In *Idler* 73 Johnson writes:

We fill our houses with useless ornaments, only to shew that we can buy them; we cover our coaches with gold, and employ artists in the discovery of new fashions of expense; and yet it cannot be found that riches produce happiness. Of riches, as of everything else, the hope is more than the enjoyment [...] no sooner do we sit down to enjoy our acquisitions, than we find them insufficient to fill up the vacuities of life.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Baxter, pp. 30-31.

<sup>203</sup> Cheyne, p. 49.

<sup>204</sup> *Idler*, II, pp. 227-228 (No. 73, 8 September 1759).

The rising middle class, more than any other, was driving the economy forward by their spending, apparently heedless of the warnings from people such as Johnson that ‘a pampered body will darken the mind’.<sup>205</sup> Although the males belonging to this rising middle class of tradesman may not have been idle, they do appear to have been the class that most indulged their taste in luxury items. As we shall see in the next chapter, the wives and daughters belonging to this class also indulged their every whim for luxury items in an attempt to relieve the boredom of their idle existence. Particularly for those who lived an idle lifestyle, there would have been little else to fill up such ‘vacuities’ other than acquisitions. The danger was that, when the novelty of their acquisitions wore off, the idle in particular would have nothing else they could draw on or indeed ‘hope’ for. For those who could afford such instant gratification, their happiness appears to have been short lived:

every man, in surveying the shops of London, sees numberless instruments and conveniences, of which, while he did not know them, he never felt the need; and yet, when use has made them familiar, wonders how life can be supported without them. Thus it comes to pass, that our desires always increase with our possessions.<sup>206</sup>

Johnson suggests that what may be regarded as a luxury is often soon regarded as an item of necessity and therefore loses its novelty appeal. By relying on material objects to make ourselves happy and raise our spirits, we are sure to be constantly disappointed. This is one of the themes that runs throughout ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’.

Oliver Goldsmith writes in 1762 on a similar theme:

It often happens [...] that when men are possessed of all they want, they then begin to find torment with imaginary afflictions, and lessen their present enjoyments, by foreboding that those enjoyments are to have an end.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., II, p. 161 (No. 52, 14 April 1759).

<sup>206</sup> *Adventurer*, II, p. 387 (No. 67, 26 June 1753).

<sup>207</sup> Copley, p. 50.

In this instance Goldsmith introduces the notion that acquisitions, rather than lifting the spirits, have a propensity to create a rather morbid, gloomy disposition. As we have seen in the previous chapter, one of the symptoms of the dejected state of mind is that the sufferer is rarely able to concentrate on the present moment, but looks back over their life, focusing on regrets, or to the future with ‘dread’. In 1765, William Cullen observed of melancholy that ‘[i]t is commonly said to be a distemper of the idle, voluptuous, and luxurious’.<sup>208</sup> As the nation’s industry and wealth increased, so luxury, or rather the pursuit of luxury became inextricably linked with idleness as a major cause of melancholy.

One would imagine that the idle rich, those born to wealth and land, would have suffered little from melancholy. However, Addison suggests that ‘as for those who are not obliged to Labour, by the Condition to which they are born, they are more miserable than the rest of Mankind [...]’.<sup>209</sup> To be classed as the most miserable members of society, suggests that there must have been either something significantly different about the idleness of the upper classes, as opposed to the poor and ‘middling sort’, which caused them to be so ‘miserable’. One possible explanation would be the rapid change in social and economic factors which occurred during the century, changes which brought increased pressure to adapt and succeed and with this change would have been added a certain amount of resentment.

As Kussmaul stated earlier, the eighteenth-century landscape was anything but predictable. The landed gentry in particular found their privileged world being encroached upon by a rising bourgeoisie. Tucker writes in 1755:

Granting therefore that the Estates of such *Old English Gentry*, who value themselves on the Antiquity of their Houses, would be bettered by the

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<sup>208</sup> William Cullen, *Clinical lectures, delivered in the years 1765 and 1766, by William Cullen, M.D. ... Taken in short-hand by a gentleman who attended* (London, 1797), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 21 December 2009], p. 255.

<sup>209</sup> Bond, *Spectator*, I, p. 472 (No. 115, 12 July 1711).

Introduction of Trade and Manufactures, and that they themselves would enjoy more of the Conveniences, Elegancies, and Ornaments of Life, than they otherwise do; – yet as their *Inferiors* by Birth might sometimes equal, and perhaps surpass them in these Injoyments, the *Country Gentlemen* are strongly tempted to regret this Diminution of their former Importance, and the Eclipsing of their ancient Grandeur by the Wealth of these *Upstarts*.<sup>210</sup>

Such a change to the status quo, even if they had resisted that change, would surely have had a depressing effect on their class. ‘The gloomy and the resentful are always found amongst those who have nothing to do, or who do nothing’<sup>211</sup> states Johnson. Tucker’s use of the term ‘regret’ and Johnson’s ‘resent’ are key words. Such movement between the social classes would have constituted anything but a settled and predictable world. The new moneyed, industrious class of gentlemen was not only emulating the lifestyle of the privileged classes, but in many cases was surpassing them in wealth. McKendrick suggests that ‘[p]art of the increased consumption of the eighteenth century was the result not only of new levels of spending in the lower ranks, but also new levels of spending by those in the higher ranks who felt for the first time threatened by the loss of their distinctive badge of identity’.<sup>212</sup>

Our ability to grasp the economic magnitude of this developing ‘consumer society’ is crucial if we are to understand the link between melancholy and the idle lifestyle. For the rise in consumerism not only underpins the eighteenth century’s apparent obsession with idleness, it also explains the many social changes that occurred as a result of it: the opportunities for work, the attitude towards work, the intolerance shown towards those who were perceived as idle and would not work or indeed, could not work. It is as a result of economic factors, that a complete change in the working conditions and lifestyles of many eighteenth-century women in particular came about. Increased consumerism can be regarded as a major contributing factor of the

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<sup>210</sup> Tucker, 1755, p. 42.

<sup>211</sup> *Idler*, II, pp. 226-227 (No. 72, 1 September 1759).

<sup>212</sup> McKendrick, ‘The Commercialization of Fashion’, in *Birth of a Consumer Society*, p. 55.

melancholy and nervous disorders experienced by many eighteenth-century men and women. In the eighteenth century the idleness of all classes came under public scrutiny and attack from moralists and pamphleteers. Novelists highlighted the issue; their characters' idle lifestyles were laid open for public scrutiny and moral guidance. Such literature demonstrates the changing attitude towards idleness that developed over the course of the century, for time became a commodity, and all were held accountable for how they spent it.

# Chapter Three

## The Female Condition

### I

#### The Changing Role of Women

The relationship between women's idleness and the depressed mental state is particularly interesting because, for many of the more affluent women, the idleness of their lifestyles was a social requirement for the attainment of their position within the class system. This chapter will explore the changing relationship between women and work and, by setting this relationship in a broad social and economic context, explain how a large proportion of women moved from a life of hard work and responsibility to a basically idle lifestyle. How the idleness of such women's lifestyles affected them psychologically is reflected in the medical tracts and case studies of eighteenth-century physicians and surgeons. Directly related to this issue is the issue of women's education, or rather the poor standard of the little education they did receive. Feminist writers of the period blamed poor education for contributing towards the mental suffering of women who led particularly idle lifestyles.

As was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, recent criticism has tended to view the term melancholy as one large umbrella term for a whole range of eighteenth-century disorders such as hysteria, spleen and vapours. However, I have argued that the majority of eighteenth-century physicians regarded melancholy as being distinct from

these nervous illnesses. Hysterical disorders appear to have been identified by physical symptoms which followed a familiar pattern that remained largely unchanged throughout the century, whereas melancholy was usually identified by its psychological symptoms such as dejection and sadness. This distinction becomes particularly pertinent when we address the subject of gender.

Women's roles in relation to work changed quite remarkably over the course of the long eighteenth century. In her book, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, Hill reveals how women belonging to the poorer classes, which, she states, was by far the vast majority of women, would have worked in agriculture or the domestic industries such as weaving and spinning. They were responsible for the domestic duties within the home: cooking, cleaning and rearing their children. However, they also carried a substantial share of the workload and responsibilities on their farms and smallholdings.<sup>213</sup> The woman was a valuable contributor to the upkeep of her family and the wider community in which she lived.

Hill suggests that

wives must have been conscious of their role as contributors to the family budget, whether it was in the form of food — vegetables from the garden, milk, butter and cheese from her cows, eggs from her poultry, all of which were the result of her labours — or of clothes of her making from raw material of her gathering — either from growing a little flax or hemp, or from keeping a few sheep. [...] Her wages from the work she did at hay time and harvest on neighbouring farms was a *money* contribution to the family budget, as was what she gained by selling her yarn at the local market, or what she was paid by the agent of the local clothier. Her earnings, like the products of her other labour, went into the pool of family or household resources.<sup>214</sup>

Although no doubt a hard life, the results of such industriousness must have had a positive psychological impact on these women: a sense of accomplishment, achievement, satisfaction and the peace of mind that their families were well provided

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<sup>213</sup> Hill, 1989.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

for. It must also have given them a sense of worth and belonging that resulted from having contributed to the provision of food, goods and money for the family. Such social and economic factors become particularly pertinent when we consider the relationship between idleness and melancholy because, as will be discussed, we should consider what happened to a woman's sense of self-worth and psychological wellbeing when such productivity was replaced by idleness.

As well as the contribution women made to the upkeep of their families and the immediate community, they also played a major role in driving the economy forward, for as Hill points out, it was in the domestic industry 'that a great deal of industrial expansion occurred. [...] Factory organization up to the middle of the nineteenth century only really applied to textiles, and cotton in particular'.<sup>215</sup> Similarly, in *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850*, Ivy Pinchbeck strongly refutes any suggestion that it was only with the industrial revolution that women entered the workforce on mass and became productive and valuable members of society:

It is often assumed that the woman worker was produced by the Industrial Revolution, and that since that time women have taken an increasing share in the world's work. This theory is, however, quite unsupported by facts. [...] It was only when new developments brought about the separation of home and workshop that a far greater number of women than ever before were compelled to follow their work and became wage earners in the outside world; hence the mistaken notion that women only became industrial workers with the Industrial Revolution.<sup>216</sup>

Pinchbeck's work reveals that for many eighteenth-century women belonging to the poorer classes, their working lives changed, rather than developed. This was due to economic growth and the subsequent increase in demands made from agriculture and domestic industries such as spinning and weaving, by increased trade and manufacture.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 11-12. Hill states that, '[s]ocial and economic historians of the eighteenth century have been under a considerable disadvantage as compared with their colleagues working on the nineteenth century for they lack the official statistics of the first censuses of population, occupational censuses, and the official evidence in the many government reports.' p.16

<sup>216</sup> Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and The Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1930; repr.1969), p. 1.

This point is illustrated in a letter written by William Cowper concerning the female lace makers in his home town of Olney: ‘I am an Eye Witness of their Poverty and do know, that Hundreds in this little Town [Olney], are upon the Point of Starving, & that the most unremitting Industry is but barely sufficient to keep them from it.’<sup>217</sup> It would appear that it was not the lack of work in this case that was the problem, but the poor wages these women received for their labour. Rule suggests that at the beginning of the century

[w]riters like Defoe were apt to stress the value of manufacturing in bringing extra employment, for women and children as well as for men. [...] But there is another side. As Lord Townsend recognized in 1730, the availability of poor relief was in fact a subsidy to rural manufacturing which allowed cheap wages.<sup>218</sup>

Rule states that by ‘later standards and by those of their middle and upper-class contemporaries, most labouring people were poor’<sup>219</sup> and that ‘[w]omen were more likely than men to be dependent on poor relief’.<sup>220</sup>

However, although increased demand may have created new opportunities for employment for some women, it also restricted and closed down many opportunities for others. With economic growth and increased trade came the inevitable increase in demand for produce and raw materials. Farms needed to increase in size if they were to supply large-scale trade and not just the immediate family, with any excess being sold to neighbouring shops and markets. Many tenant farmers lost their land as smaller farms were amalgamated and both the men and women had to then look elsewhere for work. Hill suggests that for a woman in particular, this resulted in her

doing tasks no longer of her choosing and outside her control. [...] If they still owned spinning wheels or jennies, they no longer owned the raw material and were no longer responsible for marketing the finished product. All control over

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<sup>217</sup> *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. by James King and Charles Ryskamp, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), I, p. 363 (8 July 1780).

<sup>218</sup> Rule, *Albion’s People*, p. 119.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

the amount of work available and when it was available was dictated by the agents of capitalist clothiers.<sup>221</sup>

Thus, many poorer women found that their role as co-worker with their husband in providing for their family became less accepted and more striven for. Hill suggests, with regard to marital relationships within the labouring class, that '[t]he assumption that women both before and after marriage invariably worked was by the end of the eighteenth century no longer valid. Changes in agriculture and industry were making it less possible for women to contribute significantly to the family budget'.<sup>222</sup> For such women, they may have had unemployment thrust upon them but they did not have the luxury of remaining idle.

Hill examines the diminishing role of women's employment from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century, suggesting that

[p]overty in the eighteenth century was not confined to women. Yet, for a number of reasons, conditions bore more heavily on women than on men. [...] There was great reluctance among poor women to become dependent on poor relief. Many chose to starve rather than become so dependent.<sup>223</sup>

Although the livelihoods of women may have been taken away from them, their responsibilities still remained. Women from rural locations often travelled with their young children to the cities and towns in the hopes of finding employment there. If indeed they made it, their struggle was often in vain, for it appears that the towns held an abundance of unemployed, poor women. In *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology*, Bridget Hill gives us an insight into the terrible conditions of women beggars and the very poor and, as one would expect, states that '[w]ith no opportunity for productive labour despondency and despair set in'.<sup>224</sup> Hill refers to the devastation caused by the enforced unemployment and therefore idleness of working class women

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<sup>221</sup> Hill, 1989, p. 48.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>223</sup> Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1984, 1987; repr. 1993), p. 156.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

as a result of economic factors. Unlike their more affluent counterparts, idle hands for the poor usually meant no food on the table. Hill's anthology reveals the dreadful plight of desperate mothers, single, widowed and abandoned women. On the 28th June 1750 *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal* carried a report of 'a poor woman (who had been harassed the evening before, and refused relief by the parish-officers, at a town east of London, and not many miles from the sea) was found dead in a gravel-pit in the neighbourhood, together with an infant, of which 'tis supposed she was there delivered'.<sup>225</sup> There are numerous parish records of 'big bellied' women being paid to move out of parishes so that the parish would not be held responsible for supporting and raising the baby.

In his book, *Albion's People: English Society, 1714-1815*, John Rule draws attention to a remarkable survey done in 1724 by the vicar of Piddletown in Dorset, who listed the inhabitants and the occupations of each of the inhabitants of the houses in the town. Of the poorest, old women, widows and younger women with children who had been left by their husbands figure predominantly. What is particularly interesting in this case is that seventy years later, in 1794, another survey was carried out in the same village, but in even greater detail, and Rule suggests that '[i]t confirms the pattern of poverty, although its level would seem to have risen significantly'.<sup>226</sup>

Yet surprisingly, and as mentioned previously, when we examine the medical literature of the period with regard to depressive illnesses such as melancholy, the poorer class of women are rarely commented upon, and when they are, it is usually to suggest that, unlike their richer sisters, they rarely suffered from melancholy. The fact is that, when it came to the mental health of the poor, their poverty would have meant that there would have been little, if any, money for doctors' fees, and what little there

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>226</sup> Rule, *Albions People*, p. 118.

was would very likely have been utilised for physical rather than psychological ailments. Having said this, even taking into consideration their poverty, we would expect to see some evidence that their harsh living conditions would have had some kind of negative psychological effect on these women other than despair. Alice Browne informs us that eighteenth-century writers

do not say much about female unemployment in the poorest classes until the end of the century. [...] [I]t is only then that writers begin to show much concern about the effect on poor women of hard physical work. Most eighteenth-century statements about feminine weakness have to be read as applying to upper-and middle-class women only.<sup>227</sup>

Even in the medical literature relating directly to their class, the melancholy and nervous illnesses of the poor are significant by their apparent absence. In *The Poor Man's Physician*, Paul Dubé devotes a chapter to 'the Distempers of Women in general', in which he addresses those ailments 'most frequently attended by the Poorer sort'. He writes:

without troubling my self about the *Furor Uterinus*, or the Madness of the Womb,<sup>228</sup> nor the *Hysterick Passion*, or Fits of the Mother; which, as they ... are commonly the Effects of an Idle Life, Excess in Eating and Drinking, and Luxurious Entertainment; so I never remember in all my Practice to have met with these two Distempers among the Poor Women, who by reason of their constant Exercise and Labour, and the Want of Sufficient Aliment, which in a great measure takes away all the Appetite to Luxury, seem to be exempted from the Misery of these Diseases.<sup>229</sup>

Whilst the daily lives of the poor must have been anything but comfortable, the use of their time and, most importantly, the end result of their labour, money to buy food and

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<sup>227</sup> Alice Browne, *The Eighteenth-Century Feminist Mind* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), p. 128.

<sup>228</sup> Whytt, p. 104. Whytt states that 'The hypochondriac and hysteric diseases are generally considered by physicians as the same; only in women such disorders have got the name of *hysteric*, from the ancient opinion of their seat being solely in the womb; while in men, they were called *hypochondriac*, upon the supposition, that in *them* they proceed from some fault in those *viscera* which lie under the cartilages of the ribs.'

<sup>229</sup> Dubé, p. 175.

provide clothing and shelter for their families, was thought to be key to them not falling victim to such 'hysterick passions'.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Whytt, p. 215. In 1765 Whytt does refer to both male and females in a poor house suffering from hysteric fits.

## II

### Rich Idle Women

Whereas the poor were often berated for their idleness, when their idleness is commented upon, it is usually linked to their poverty and living conditions and not to their mental health. However, the opposite can be said of the more affluent female members of society, whose idle lifestyles were frequently regarded as a major cause of their melancholy and nervous illnesses. As was discussed in chapter one of this thesis, Robert Burton had noted of the gentry and nobility at the beginning of the seventeenth century, that no matter how much money they had, as long as they remained idle, they would never be 'well in body and minde'.<sup>231</sup> It is interesting that two hundred years later, the idleness of the upper classes was still being commented upon. Mary Wollstonecraft comments on the eighteenth-century elite and warns of the detrimental effect on society and the individual that such an elitist, idle lifestyle has:

what but habitual idleness can hereditary wealth and titles produce? [...] Yet whilst wealth enervates men; and women live, as it were, by their personal charms, how can we expect them to discharge those ennobling duties which equally require exertion and self-denial. Hereditary property sophisticates the mind, and the unfortunate victims to it [...] swathed from their birth, seldom exert the locomotive faculty of body or mind.<sup>232</sup>

Wollstonecraft, who suffered from depression herself, believed that the physical act of working, of employing both the mind and the body, was crucial for one's mental health. Besides which, from a religious perspective, to work was regarded as the natural order

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<sup>231</sup> See p. 39.

<sup>232</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications : The Rights of Men, The Rights of Women*, ed. by D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (London: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997), pp. 277-278.

of things. God had placed man on earth to work: 'six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work.'<sup>233</sup>

As stated in chapter two, economic progress and advanced systems of manufacture and production encouraged and allowed for a certain amount of movement between the classes, and particularly within the middle class itself. 'With', as Hill states, 'the growth of a more capitalistic system of farming,'<sup>234</sup> the face of England's agriculture began to change and with that change came the inevitable disproportion in land, property and wealth: 'If at one end of the social scale there was a significant increase in poverty, at the other was a growth in the ranks of those who, prospering from changed economic conditions, began to identify with middle-class aspirations to gentility.'<sup>235</sup>

The wives of wealthy farmers often aspired to raise not only their standard of living, but also their social position. Vivien Jones suggests that

In a developing consumer economy to have, or to become, a 'leisured' wife was a measure of social success, underwriting the dependence of that economy on the isolated unit of the nuclear family, serviced by an invisible working class.<sup>236</sup>

In raising their own social position, the wives of these farmers would no longer be required to work and contribute towards the upkeep of the household. Such women did in fact aspire to live idle lifestyles: '[t]hey became aware of work as a class barrier cutting off those who laboured from those who did not.'<sup>237</sup> However, they appear to have embraced their new-found idle lifestyles, paying little regard to how they would occupy their time or to the mental adjustment that would be required. Such change was not only restricted to agriculture. Within the larger towns and cities especially, many

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<sup>233</sup> Exodus 20. 9.

<sup>234</sup> Hill, 1989, p. 49.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>236</sup> Vivien Jones, ed., *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 10.

<sup>237</sup> Hill, 1989, p. 49.

women who had worked in trade alongside their husbands, building up their family businesses, appear to have eventually relinquished many of their responsibilities for a more elegant, leisurely lifestyle. Rule points out with regards to the middle classes that they became

providers of the increasing range of goods and services marketed in eighteenth-century England. [...] They were an employing class – not only of those who worked on their farms or in their shops, offices and workshops, but also of the increasing number of domestic servants.<sup>238</sup>

But the men belonging to this class were not employing others so that they could necessarily be idle, only to carry out the more menial tasks so that their attention could be focused on the actual running and expansion of their businesses. Although men are often blamed for having kept women subordinate to them, we should take into consideration that women appear to have been eager enough, initially anyway, to adopt a more genteel lifestyle with all the trappings of luxury and leisure that accompanied it.

In her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft draws attention to this fact:

In the superiour ranks of life, every duty is done by deputies [...] and the vain pleasures which consequent idleness forces the rich to pursue, appear so enticing to the next rank, that the numerous scramblers for wealth sacrifice every thing to tread on their heels. [...] Women, in particular, all want to be ladies. Which is simply to have nothing to do, but listlessly to go they scarcely care where, for they cannot tell what.<sup>239</sup>

But what were they sacrificing? Hill suggests that for those women who had initially worked alongside their husbands in providing for their families, particularly in agriculture, ‘the relationship between husbands and wives must have come nearer to achieving real equality than in the situation where making such a contribution to the maintenance of their household was no longer possible for women.’<sup>240</sup> The new, upwardly mobile leisured class of women appear to have been all too eager to relinquish their responsibilities, but in doing so they also placed themselves subordinate to men;

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<sup>238</sup> Rule, *Albion's People*, p. 85.

<sup>239</sup> *Vindications*, pp. 285-286.

<sup>240</sup> Hill, 1989, p. 46.

they moved from a positive position of co-provider to a negative position of dependent.

Rule suggests that, particularly with the wives of tradesman,

Several historians have discerned a trend over the eighteenth century for middle-class wives to retreat to the home front. [...] Keeping a wife in a home separate from the shop became a mark of status, and emulation of 'gentility' affordable by the rising incomes of increasing numbers. Early in the century, Defoe had seen things differently. For him one of the main purposes of employing domestic servants had been to free the wife for business [...].<sup>241</sup>

Defoe obviously believed there was no reason why a woman should not take her fair share of the responsibility for running the family business. Rule points out that Defoe was concerned that those women who chose to live an idle, dependent lifestyle, would not be able to carry on their family business, should they become widowed, because they would have no experience of their trade. It was not that women felt themselves incapable of working in business, rather, the majority appear to have chosen not to unless forced by necessity. Rule states that in fact 'the directories of most towns reveal that widows carried on a wide range of businesses, not only in retail'.<sup>242</sup>

As for when this trend in women moving from working class to middle class and consequently working lifestyle to idle lifestyle began, he suggests that

[i]f growing wealth and spreading ideas of refinement did bring the increasing confinement of middle-class women to the home, it was a trend which became pronounced only in the last decades of the eighteenth century and characteristic only in the early decades of the nineteenth.<sup>243</sup>

What this suggests, is that we have this newly developing social group of idle women in the latter part of the century. Such women, if they had not previously worked themselves, would at least have remembered that their mothers and grandmothers would most likely have worked for their living. This is in contrast to women belonging to the upper classes and aristocracy who would have been trapped at birth into a class system which had existed for hundreds of years and which dictated that its women should live

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<sup>241</sup> Rule, *Albion's People*, p. 97.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

in comparative idleness. Speaking of upper class women in particular, Wollstonecraft suggests that '[d]estructive, however, as riches and inherited honours are to the human character, women are more debased and cramped, if possible, by them, than men, because men may still, in some degree, unfold their faculties by becoming soldiers and statesmen'.<sup>244</sup>

Having said this, although idleness appears to have had a particularly detrimental effect upon women in all walks of life, those belonging to the middle classes appear to have come under particular attack for their idle lifestyles, surprisingly enough, from the more radical members of their own sex. Sarah Fyge Egerton was born in 1670 and died in 1723. When her first poem *The Female Advocate* was published in 1686 she was only sixteen years old. However, as a result of this success she was banished from the family home to live in the country with relatives. Sarah's father was a physician in London but he was from a landed family.<sup>245</sup> Obviously a daughter who aspired to be an author did not fit with his notion of a genteel young lady. In her poem *The Liberty*, she writes:

Shall I be one, of those obsequious Fools,  
That square their lives, by Customs scanty Rules;  
Condemn'd for ever, to the puny Curse,  
Of Precepts taught, at Boarding-school, or Nurse,  
That all the business of my Life must be,  
Foolish, dull Trifling, Formality.  
Confin'd to a strict Magick complaisance [...].<sup>246</sup>

There is a palpable need to break free from the idle lifestyle imposed upon her and the negative mental state it creates. Egerton juxtaposes 'the business of my Life', connoting energy, purpose and action, with the reality of her situation, which is foolish, dull and trifling, thus drawing attention to the emptiness of her existence. Unlike other

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<sup>244</sup> *Vindications*, p. 280.

<sup>245</sup> Uphaus and Foster, p. 139.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139 (ll. 1-7).

young women, she can find no comfort in the fact that society dictates this lifestyle. Her mental energy and intellectual ability will not allow her mind to be satisfied with an empty, complacent existence. Egerton appears to have been angered by, rather than to have pitied, women who accepted and followed the ‘puny’ rules laid down at female boarding schools by, very likely, other women, although condoned by society in general. ‘Obsequious fools’, who did not question the status quo, or worse, women who subsequently flaunted their diminished sense of self:

Some boast their Fetters, of Formality,  
Fancy they ornamental Bracelets be,  
I’m sure their Gyves, and Manacles to me. (‘The Liberty’, ll. 26-28)

The stanzas are loaded with imagery which suggests physical and mental restraint and confinement. Egerton was not alone in her condemnation of what she saw as weak, foolish women, who lived for the pleasures of the moment without considering the implications for their mental health in the future.

Mid-century saw the publication of *The Female Spectator*, a series of monthly essays, most of which were, according to Patricia Meyer Spacks, written by Eliza Haywood. As Spacks states, it was ‘the first periodical for women actually written by a woman’.<sup>247</sup> She suggests that Haywood’s target audience was middle-class women, most of whom ‘would lead relatively confined domestic lives, cut off from the possibility of remunerative work and even from wide social opportunity’.<sup>248</sup> In these monthly periodicals Haywood warns such women of the dangers to one’s mental health and the diminished sense of self-worth of leading such an idle, dependant lifestyle:

how great a Stab must it be to the Vanity of a Woman, who, at Five and Twenty, finds herself either not married at all, or to a Husband who regards her no otherwise than a withered Rose. [...] The sun of Hope, of Admiration, of

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<sup>247</sup> Eliza Haywood, *Selections From The Female Spectator*, ed. by Patricia Meyer Spacks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xii.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

Flattery and Pleasure, is set forever, and the dark Gloom of cold Neglect and loath'd Obscurity, envelopes all her future Life.<sup>249</sup>

It is striking that the age of doom is set as early as twenty five, leaving many idle years to be lived without the bolstering of 'flattery and pleasure'. If Rule's theory is correct in that only in the latter part of the century was there an increase in middle class women becoming confined to the home, then it must have been the lifestyle of Haywood's target audience to which they aspired.

Haywood states that '[m]any women have not been inspired with the least Notion of even those Requisites in a Wife, and when they become so, continue the same loitering, lolloping, idle Creatures they were before'.<sup>250</sup> Early feminist writers distanced themselves both intellectually and morally from these idle women by painting them in the most unflattering terms. Haywood warns of the dangers of indulging too much in pleasurable activities. Even the anticipation of such activities 'render us indolent of our Affairs, even the little Time we are at Home;— where the Heart is the Thoughts will continually be when the Body is absent' and as a consequence such women are said to 'neglect their Husbands, Children, and Families, to run galloping after every new entertainment that is Exhibited'.<sup>251</sup> It is notable that Haywood portrays these idle women as either mentally and physically depressed by their idle lifestyle or otherwise frantic in their attempts to distract themselves, suggesting that they rely solely on the hope that some external stimulus will bring them pleasure.

It is also evident that, although we may consider the likes of Haywood to be something of a radical writer, the overruling theme of the *Female Spectator* is that a woman's rightful place was in the home, and that she should aspire to perfect the skills of domesticity for the benefit of her husband and children. Of the numerous conduct

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid. (Book V), pp. 71-72.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid. (Book X), p. 125.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. (Book V), p. 71.

books published throughout the period, Vivien Jones states, ‘it has been argued that this dominant ideal of femininity, with its emphasis on morality and feeling [...], was one of the most powerful factors [...] in establishing a sense of middle class identity.’<sup>252</sup> Even, arguably the most radical feminist writer of the period, Wollstonecraft, berates such idle women:

[t]he wife, in the present state of things, who [...] neither suckles nor educates her children, scarcely deserves the name of a wife, and has no right to that of a citizen. But take away natural rights, and duties become null. Women then must be considered as only the wanton solace of men, when they become so weak in mind and body, that they cannot exert themselves, unless to pursue some frothy pleasure, or to invent some frivolous fashion. What can be a more melancholy sight to a thinking mind, than to look into the numerous carriages that drive helter-skelter about this metropolis in a morning full of pale-faced creatures who are flying from themselves. I have often wished, with Dr. Johnson, to place some of them in a little shop with half a dozen children looking up to their languid countenances for support. I am much mistaken, if some latent vigour would not soon give health and spirit to the eyes [...] might restore lost dignity to the character, or rather enable it to attain the true dignity of its nature.<sup>253</sup>

As with the women Haywood comments on mid-century, Wollstonecraft also draws attention to the psychological polar extremes which are symptomatic of their idle lifestyles. Wollstonecraft also portrays these women as either ‘weak in mind and body’, unable to exert themselves, or else ‘driving helter-skelter’ in carriages. They are restless and eager to escape, ‘flying from themselves’, either from the dullness of their existence or the psychological distress such dullness caused. However, once such a woman had attained her newly found social status, and whether she enjoyed the idleness of her new lifestyle or not, like the poorer members of her sex, idleness often appears to have been her lot. She had doomed herself, any daughters she may have and subsequent generations of females in her family to the same idle lifestyle. Such women in fact became trapped in the very lifestyle they had helped to create.

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<sup>252</sup> Jones, p. 11.

<sup>253</sup> *Vindications*, p. 284.

In *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady*, first published in 1740, in a chapter entitled, 'The Duties of a Married Female', Wettenall Wilkes suggests to women: '[t]he utmost happiness we can hope for in this world, is contentment; and, if we aim at any thing higher, we shall meet with nothing but grief and disappointments. Hence, it reasonably follows, that a wife must direct all her studies, and endeavours, to the attainment of this virtue.'<sup>254</sup> Conduct books tended to encourage women to occupy their time and develop their skills in household management and making sure that their husbands returned home from business to a well ordered, and comfortable environment. If they had been content with such a lifestyle then all would have been well, but for those women intelligent enough to be aware of the emptiness and idleness of their lives, the monotony of their lives appears to have been torturous. Andrew Solomon quotes from a letter written by the Marquise du Deffand, a French society hostess, who writes: 'You cannot possibly have any conception of what it is like to think and yet to have no occupation.'<sup>255</sup> As with Egerton, the Marquise' intelligence and intellect would never be satisfied with trivial pursuits. Louis Tenenbaum suggests that, unlike the Marquise, her French contemporaries could 'fill their lives with all the diversions of their dissolute century and disguise, even to themselves, the basic meaninglessness of their existence'. However, he suggests that

[t]here was something in the character of the Marquis that would not let her enjoy the solace of such amusements, and she found herself always seeing through, with too penetrating an eye, to the emptiness of her life.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Wettenall Wilkes, 'A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady', in, *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Jones, p. 35.

<sup>255</sup> Solomon, p. 311. The Marquis du Deffand was born in France in 1697 and died 1780. The quotation is taken from Jerome Zerbe and Cyril Connolly, *Les Pavillions of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962).

<sup>256</sup> Louis Tenenbaum, 'Madame du Deffand's Correspondence with Voltaire', *The French Review*, 27.3 (Jan., 1954) < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/383075> > [accessed 19 January 2010], 193-200 (p. 196).

It is the emptiness of an idle lifestyle that appears to have been so psychologically damaging for women: the lack of any sense of purpose or accomplishment. For with a sense of purpose there would have at least been movement towards something, which, once attained, would have produced a positive sense of accomplishment. Wollstonecraft recounts the experience of a Madame La Fayette, whose husband was imprisoned during the early years of the French Revolution:

During her prosperity, and consequent idleness, she did not, I am told, enjoy a good state of health, having a train of nervous complaints which, though they have not a name [...] had an existence in the higher French circles; but adversity and virtuous exertions put these ills to flight, and dispossessed her of a devil, who deserves the appellation of legion.<sup>257</sup>

Wollstonecraft directly links Madame La Fayette's 'nervous complaints' with her idle lifestyle. When Madame La Fayette's lifestyle was drastically curtailed and her mind was focused on the specific purpose of freeing her husband, her 'nervous complaints' left her. She fought for and eventually won the freedom of her husband. Just as occupation was regarded as a cure for melancholy, so it would seem having a sense of purpose in life had equally beneficial effects on nervous illnesses. But Madame La Fayette's lifestyle change was forced upon her, she had no choice in the matter, just as her previous idle lifestyle would have been a mark of her social status dictated by the society in which she lived.

In *Idler* 80, Johnson comments on such idle women whom he suggests, 'the tyranny of Fashion had condemned to pass the summer among shades and brooks.' To begin with Johnson appears to ridicule these women, painting a picture of them as mindless, dull creatures, who willingly accept their custodial sentence:

Many a mind which has languished some months without emotion or desire, now feels a sudden renovation of its faculties. [...] She that wandered in the garden without sense of its fragrance, and lay day after day stretch'd upon a

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<sup>257</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark and William Godwin: Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'*, ed. by Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 192.

couch [...] unwilling to wake and unable to sleep, now summons her thoughts to consider which of her last year's cloaths shall be seen again [...].<sup>258</sup>

However, the essay can be interpreted another way, with Johnson accusing society in general for imposing these 'tyrannical' rules upon women. For the movement of such women's lives was dictated, not only by fashion, but by the social class they belonged to and the social circle within which they moved:

But however we may labour for our own deception, truth, though unwelcome, will sometimes intrude upon the mind. They who have already enjoyed the crouds and noise of the great city, know that their desire to return is little more than the restlessness of a vacant mind, that they are not so much led by hope as driven by disgust, and wish rather to leave the country than to see the town.<sup>259</sup>

As with the Marquise du Deffand and Egerton, Johnson suggests that many such women were aware of the emptiness of their idle lifestyles and suffered as a consequence. This is not an attack on women's idle lifestyles per se. There is a real sense of empathy in this *Idler*, with the deterioration of the mental faculties and senses caused by the idleness of their situation. The state of mind experienced by these women is more than mere boredom. A closer reading of the text reveals many of the symptoms of melancholy: their enforced idleness depresses their spirits; they no longer extract joy from their surroundings. Idle time for the melancholic loses all definition. Day merges into night unmarked and although the mind may become tired, the body has known no exertion, and although lethargic, cannot sleep. As Wollstonecraft points out, women's idleness was of a crueller nature than men's because it was almost impossible for them to break free from such a lifestyle, and equally hard to implement any outlet for their emotions or frustration. Johnson wrote to Hester Maria Thrale on 24 July 1783:

Never lose the habit of reading, nor ever suffer yourself to acquiesce in total vacuity. Encourage in yourself an implacable impatience of doing nothing. [...] If you cannot at any particular time reconcile yourself to any thing important, be busy upon trifles. Of trifles the mind grows tired, and turns for its own

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<sup>258</sup> *Idler*, II, p. 250 (No. 80, 27 October 1759).

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

satisfaction to something better, but if it learns to sooth itself with the opiate of musing idleness, if it can once be content with inactivity, all the time to come is in danger of being lost. And, I believe, that life has been so dozed away by many whom Nature had originally qualified not only to be esteemed but admired. If ever therefore you catch yourself contentedly and placidly doing nothing, *sors de l'enchantement*, break away from the snare, find your book or your needle, or snatch the broom from the Maid.<sup>260</sup>

Johnson implies that idleness is a trap that lures the unwary. The link between women's idleness and the mental distress it caused becomes immediately apparent when we begin to read the letters, journals, poetry and prose written by eighteenth-century women. Yet it is not simply occupation of their time by any trivial pursuit that fills their need. Like Johnson, they are aware that the mind requires, and will search for, something other than mere entertainment to satisfy itself. Johnson merely suggests any trivial pursuit rather than a passive acceptance. Hill suggests that for those women who had known what it was like to have worked for their living that 'in the majority of cases, the drudgery of housework or work on a farm was exchanged for leisure occupied by time-filling rather than productive pursuits' and that many 'found their newly won leisure intolerably boring'.<sup>261</sup> In many cases, this boredom led to more chronic mental illnesses such as melancholy. Hill suggests that had such 'increased leisure led to more and better education for women, if it had prompted the opening up of more employments or the use of their new leisure in interesting and fulfilling ways, it might have been different'.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, IV, p. 180 (24 July 1783).

<sup>261</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

### III

## Education and Employment

For many of the lower order of middle class women, the reality of their day to day lives would have changed considerably: from one of hard labour to one of idleness; empty hours expected to be filled by empty minds. For the daughters born into the middle and upper classes, little was expected from them but a good marriage. These young women would have known no other way of life. Bernard de Mandeville writes of such females who received a boarding school education that

they may be taught to sing and dance, to work and dress, and if you will, receive good instructions for a genteel carriage, and how to be mannerly; but these things chiefly concern the body, the mind remains uninstructed. They lead easy and lazy lives, and have abundance of time upon their hands [...].<sup>263</sup>

Society not only dictated the role that women played, but also dictated and restricted the level of education a young girl received. Mandeville's description of a boarding school education in 1709 is the exact education that the lower classes wished for their own daughters by mid century. Vivien Jones informs us that

[a]t the beginning of the period, very few girls received much of a formal education. By the mid-century, the pressures of an expanding bourgeoisie and competitive marriage market had established some degree of education as the norm for daughters of the middle class, but the issue remained contentious.<sup>264</sup>

The author of an article in the *London Chronicle* in 1759 despaired at the absurdity of 'the improper education given to a great number of the daughters of low tradesmen and mechanics' at boarding schools:

the daughter of the lowest shopkeeper at one of these schools, is as much Miss, and a young lady, as the daughter of the first Viscount in England [...] and Miss, whose mamma sells oysters, tells Miss, whose papa deals in small coal, that her

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<sup>263</sup> Hill, *Anthology*, p. 62. This and other quotations found in *Eighteenth-Century Women; An Anthology*.

<sup>264</sup> Jones, p. 99.

governess shall know it, if she spits in her face, or does anything else unbecoming a lady [...].<sup>265</sup>

It is due to the aspirations of their parents that such young women were not brought up to work. In 1776, Adam Smith comments on the education of young women: '[t]hey are taught what their parents or guardians judge it necessary or useful for them to learn, and they are taught nothing else.'<sup>266</sup> Whether such girls ever achieved such an idle lifestyle or not, two ideas were imposed on them: one, that they would have little use of even the most basic education, and two, that their sights should be set no higher than a lifestyle of trivial pursuits.

However, for a young woman born and raised in an established middle class family, it would have been very difficult to break free from her social position and virtually impossible for her to make a living should she manage to do so. Nearing the end of the century more women were indeed calling for change. Wollstonecraft writes:

How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling any duty, than the most accomplished beauty! [...] yet I sigh to think how few women aim at attaining this respectability by withdrawing from the giddy whirl of pleasure, or the indolent calm that stupefies the good sort of women it sucks in. Proud of their weakness, however, they must always be protected, guarded from care, and all the rough toils that dignify the mind. – If this be the fiat of fate, if they will make themselves insignificant and contemptible, sweetly to waste 'life away,' let them not expect to be valued when their beauty fades, for it is the fate of the fairest flowers to be admired and pulled to pieces by the careless hand that plucked them.<sup>267</sup>

Again, there is this allusion to the lack of self-worth thought to accompany a cosseted, idle lifestyle and the mental and emotional response that such a lifestyle creates: they either filled their days with a 'giddy whirl of pleasure', or else their idleness physically and mentally drained their zest for life. However, it was literature that encouraged change and berated docile acceptance without giving any realistic guidance as to how a woman could realistically and practically change her lifestyle.

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<sup>265</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 62.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>267</sup> *Vindications*, p. 288.

The diaries of Gertrude Savile give us a realistic insight into the lifestyle of a young woman whose melancholy can be directly attributed to the idle lifestyle she was forced to live. Savile was born in 1697 to elderly parents. Her father, the Rev. John Savile, died when she was only three years old and we are told that in the same year her brother ‘inherited an unexpected title’ of 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet Savile. Fatherless, Savile went to live under her brother’s protection: ‘Thus the infant was brought, with neither sibling nor playmate’ to live in Rufford Abbey.<sup>268</sup> The entries Gertude makes in her diaries during the period she lived at Rufford give us particular insight into her melancholy state of mind, a state of mind brought about, she suggests, by the idleness and solitariness of her lifestyle there.<sup>269</sup>

In January 1722, Savile considers how much happier her life would be if she could earn her own living: ‘’Tis far better to work honestly for my bread than thus to have every mouthful reproach me; than thus to be oblig’d to a Brother. [...] He has a vast estate and I have nothing.’<sup>270</sup> Although living what some may have considered a privileged lifestyle, the idleness and monotony of her life at Rufford appears to have been torturous for Savile. Note that in this diary entry Savile does not wish for money enough to be independent and yet remain idle, but would prefer some paid occupation. By the end of the century, Wollstonecraft was questioning, ‘How many women [...] waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry.’<sup>271</sup> However, Savile was born in 1697 and died in 1758. So the reality for Savile was that

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<sup>268</sup> Alan Saville, ed., assisted by Marjorie Penn, *Secret Comment: The Diaries of Gertrude Savile 1721-1757* (Devon: Kingsbridge History Society in collaboration with The Thornton Society of Nottinghamshire, 1997), p. xii. All spelling mistakes in the quotations from Savile’s diaries are Gertrude’s.

<sup>269</sup> The extant diaries begin in 1721 when Savile was twenty four years old and end in 1757, the year before her death.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>271</sup> *Vindications*, p. 287.

there was no alternative course or means of escape, had she been given the education to pursue any other course in life. Even nearer the end of the century the opportunities for educated, unmarried young women were scarce. As Wollstonecraft suggests in ‘Thoughts on the Education of Daughters’, published in 1787: ‘[f]ew are the modes of earning a subsistence, and those very humiliating.’<sup>272</sup>

By 1727, Savile was still unmarried and had little opportunity or hope of ever becoming so; ‘Twas not possible to be made acquainted with the World in my Brother’s house [...]’<sup>273</sup> she states. Two things become immediately obvious when we read her diaries. One is that she spends much of her time, particularly at the end of the day, alone; the other is that she seems particularly aware of her mental state at all times. The final comment of the day is usually upon her state of mind: ‘Not happy’, ‘Happy’, ‘Not Miserable’, ‘Very peevish’, ‘Fretted at everything.’<sup>274</sup> She has a remarkable insight in to her mental state and is often aware that she is melancholy and that her idle lifestyle exacerbates her condition. Wollstonecraft laments the fate of girls like Savile:

Girls who have been thus weakly educated [...] cruelly left by their parents without any provision; and, of course, are dependent on, not only the reason, but the bounty of their brothers. [...] Who can recount the misery, which many unfortunate beings, whose minds and bodies are equally weak, suffer in such situations — unable to work, and ashamed to beg?<sup>275</sup>

At one particularly low point for Savile, she is taken on a visit to Bath. The vacation appears to have come at just the right time, for she writes afterwards:

I was grown almost desperate: much longer I could not have born the uneasines[s]es I had, and should have done what woud have been a remediless ruin to myself. [...] What that would have been, I did not then know, but I own, had any sort of opportunity (for which I was waiting) offer’d, that woud but be a change to my misery, I shoud have embrac’d it [...].<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 130.

<sup>273</sup> *Secret Comment*, p. 2.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> *Vindications*, p. 182.

<sup>276</sup> *Secret Comment*, p. 1.

We can see from her journals the benefit to her mental state that the lively company in Bath and change of scenery occasion in her. Although painfully shy, she writes that whilst in Bath

[m]ortifications were [not] deeply resented by me, having still something elce to please me. [...] Nor had I time to pore upon them nor let them ferment and work up in my breast, but I could go into Company or to some diversion and be put into good humour again immediately.<sup>277</sup>

Savile appears to have been remarkably aware of her own psychological makeup: that she was somewhat intense and tended to dwell on negative thoughts. In this instance she is not only aware of the triggers, but also of the things that lift her spirits: the company of others distracted such gloomy reflections. However, such self-awareness brings its own problems and when she has to leave Bath and return home she is acutely aware that her melancholy may in fact be made worse by the contrast: 'I have been very happy, but now that 'tis at an end, is it better that it has been or not? Shall I be better able to endure the life I return to then if I had never known a better?'<sup>278</sup> On her journey home she writes from London:

I have now had a *tast of what the young thinks pleasure, and I like it. Walking alone or sitting under a tree in my Brother's park (my only felicities at Rufford)* does not come up to it. But if those were the *pleasures, what were the plagues of Rufford? O! they are not to be born, and if what was my only satisfaction there be now gon, how agreable must it be?*<sup>279</sup>

The contrast, not only between the pleasures of Bath and London and the solitariness of Rufford, but the ways in which she occupies her mind in the various places is interesting. For in Bath and London, other people occupy her time and thoughts, whereas in Rufford she lists walking and sitting as her greatest pleasures.

Savile's lack of education was yet another issue she bitterly resented:

[t]he wretched *edducation I have had [is] plainly seen [erasures] in my unfitness for the most common occurance of life; in my trembling faultering silences; in*

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

*my choosing to sit alone rather than endure the agony of going into Company; in the insolency that my insignificant despicable figure exposes me to from my Brother's servants [...].*<sup>280</sup>

Savile regards her poor education as yet another cause of her melancholy. She realises that had she been given a better education, her confidence, particularly in social settings, would have opened up opportunities for her to alleviate her boredom and isolation. The lack of self-worth and her apparent self-loathing is striking. However, we should consider whether her brother's servants were indeed insolent to her, or whether this was paranoia brought about by her melancholy frame of mind. Under the influence of melancholy the mind was drawn to gloomy introspection. Wollstonecraft, who suffered severe periods of depression herself, once wrote in a letter: 'I may be a little partial, and view every thing with the jaundiced eye of melancholy – for I am sad.'<sup>281</sup> Suspicion and paranoia would have fed into and justified Savile's melancholy.

It is interesting to consider the difference a good education could make to the mental health of young women at this period. For instance, we can compare the effect of Savile's retired lifestyle and relative idleness with the thoughts of Lady Mary Chudleigh. Chudleigh was a late seventeenth-century poet, who, at the age of seventeen found herself in an unhappy marriage. Yet far from becoming despondent, Chudleigh relishes her solitary hours:

When all alone in some belov'd Retreat,  
Remote from Noise, from Bus'ness, and from Strife,  
Those constant curst Attendants of the Great;  
I freely can with my own Thoughts converse,  
And clothe them in ignoble Verse,  
'Tis then I tast the most delicious Feast of Life:  
There, uncontroul'd I can myself survey,  
And from Observers free,  
My intellectual Pow'rs display,  
And all th' opening Scenes of beauteous Nature see:  
Form bright Ideas, and enrich my Mind,

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>281</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Short Residence in Sweden*, p. 178.

Enlarge my Knowledge, and each Error find;  
Inspect each Action, ev'ry Word dissect,  
And on the Failures of my Life reflect,  
Then from my Self, to Books, I turn my Sight,  
And there, with silent Wonder and Delight,  
Gaze on th' instructive venerable Dead [...] <sup>282</sup>

Chudleigh is obviously a far superior scholar than poor Savile and it appears to be because of this fact that she is able to occupy her time both creatively and studiously. Her capabilities allow her to free herself mentally from her physical restrictions. Her idle hours are spent productively acquiring knowledge:

Their great Examples elevate my Mind,  
And I the force of all their Precepts find;  
By them inspir'd, above dull Earth I soar,  
And scorn those Trifles which I priz'd before. ('Clorissa', ll. 41-44)

It is through books that she is able to escape the tediousness of her life.

In 1704, the French physician Paul Dubé stated of the 'hysterick passions':

I am fully evinced, that if Ladies of Quality would not indulge themselves so far as they do in an Idle Life [...] but instead thereof would improve themselves by good Conversation and the reading of good books, they would be as free from these Distempers as the Ancient Poets have represented to us their Goddesses, *Vesta*, *Diana*, and *Minerva*, to have been. <sup>283</sup>

Dubé was aware that occupying idle hours by expanding the mind would be beneficial in the treatment of nervous disorders. Similarly, Haywood links nervous illness with the idle lifestyle of women and their lack of education:

[i]f the married Ladies of Distinction begin the Change, and bring Learning into Fashion, the younger will never cease soliciting their Parents and Guardians for the Means of following it, and every Toilet in the Kingdom be loaded with Materials for beautifying the Mind more than the Face of its Owner. <sup>284</sup>

Haywood is aware that in order for society to change, then the most privileged should lead by example and change would subsequently filter through the various social

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<sup>282</sup> Lady Mary Chudleigh, 'To Clorissa' (ll. 20-36), in *The "Other" Eighteenth Century: English Women of Letters 1660-1800*, ed. by Robert W. Uphaus and Gretchen M. Foster, p. 147.

<sup>283</sup> Dubé, p. 176.

<sup>284</sup> Haywood, (Book X), p. 134.

classes. She is aware that idleness has a negative effect on the mind and suggests that one of the ways in which women could occupy their minds and increase their learning would be by the reading of philosophy:

All the Restlessness of Temper we are accused of, that perpetual Inclination for gadding from Place to Place; — those Vapours, those Disquiets we often feel merely for want of some material Cause of Disquiet, would be no more, when once the Mind was employ'd in the pleasing Enquiries of Philosophy; — a Search that well rewards the Pains we take in it.<sup>285</sup>

Haywood does not refer to melancholy specifically in this instance, but vapours and disquiets. She hints at an anxious state of mind, a mind not at rest, but without being able to pinpoint the root cause of the unrest. She suggests that illnesses such as vapours may in fact have been psychosomatic, that they are the physical manifestation of mental distress or 'Disquiets'. In this instance she is not suggesting that such illnesses are feigned in order to receive attention. This passage hints more at a person focusing intensely on some negative aspect of their life merely to justify their distressed state of mind, much in the same way that Savile focused on what she refers to as her 'mortifications'.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid. (Book X), p. 129.

<sup>286</sup> See p. 104.

## IV

### Medical History

In *The signs and causes of melancholy*, in which Samuel Clifford transcribed the ‘thoughts’ of Richard Baxter, it is suggested that a major cause of women’s melancholy was an overindulgent and idle lifestyle and that men were partly responsible because they had encouraged women to be idle:

[y]ou took her in Marriage for better and for worse; for Sickness and Health. If you have chosen one who, as a Child must have everything she cryeth for, and must be spoken fair, and as it were rock’d in a Cradle, or else it will be worse, you must condescend to do it, and so bear the Burden which you have chosen [...].<sup>287</sup>

For many female sufferers, the root cause of their dejection was regarded as little more than dashed expectations and disappointment at not being given what they wanted. There is no suggestion that they should earn these things. However, in *Preservatives Against Melancholy*, Baxter observes

in *London* and great Towns, abundance of Women that never sweat with bodily Work, but live in idleness (especially when from fullness they fall into Want) are miserable Objects, continually vexed and near Distraction with Discontent and a restless mind.<sup>288</sup>

In this instance it is implied that idleness is very much a negative trait and Baxter regards it as a major cause of melancholy, specifically in women. Although Baxter is largely sympathetic to the misery of such women, he does appear to regard women’s melancholy as the disease of the privileged. Similarly, Dubé, like many other

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<sup>287</sup> Samuel Clifford, *The signs and causes of melancholy. With directions suited to the case of those who are afflicted with it. Collected out of the works of Mr. Richard Baxter, For the Sake of Those, who are Wounded in Spirit. By Samuel Clifford, Minister of the Gospel. With a recommendatory preface, Mr. Tong, Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Brown, Mr. Evans, Mr. Bradbury, Mr. Harris, Mr. Grosvenor, Mr. Wright* (London, 1716), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> > [accessed 21 December 2009], p. 120.

<sup>288</sup> Baxter, pp. 75-76.

eighteenth-century physicians, believed that many of the nervous illnesses attributed to women belonging to the middle and upper classes were brought on by over-indulgence and the idleness of their lifestyles. Women's under-stimulated minds and their idle lifestyles were thought to lead to mental angst, which subsequently manifested itself in illnesses such as melancholy and nervous disorders such as the vapours. 'If they would resolve to take the usual Times of Rest', suggests Dubé,

wean their Appetites from the extravagant use of Sweet-meats, they might enjoy their Health with much more pleasure [...] and at last would save themselves the Trouble of procuring themselves a wholesome Colour with Paint, which commonly rewards them at last with a Stinking Breath and Rotten Teeth.<sup>289</sup>

Dubé is quite cutting and unsympathetic in his remarks towards women suffering from these illnesses. However, for the true sufferer of these disorders, their lives were often made miserable by the symptoms they experienced.

When we read the diaries of Savile for instance, we find that her mental condition is both acute and distressing. On 21<sup>st</sup> November 1727 she writes:

I by myself. I work'd Tent, [made] wrappers...House reckoning. Mrs. Dyott call'd to ask me to go to the Gentleman's Musickall Club tomorrow – a pleasure to any but such an untuned Soul as I...but 'twas a terror to me. I woud have wish'd a Mother's tender advice in the difficulty my mellancholly made of it, but was answer'd sternly. [...] There is not an hour now that is not big with evill, resentment and missiry. This writing which was design'd for an amusement, is grown a weary task, nor can I even to myself write sence. Very Cold. Foggy. Miserable.<sup>290</sup>

We note that Savile is again alone. If we look at her activities, they are tedious, household chores. Even her writing, 'design'd' it would seem, specifically to counteract her depression, is a solitary pastime. There is also an apparent sense of despair as well as mental confusion. However, when an opportunity does arise for Savile to escape for a while from her routine, she declines the invitation.

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<sup>289</sup> Dubé, p. 292.

<sup>290</sup> *Secret Comment*, p. 79.

Savile would most likely have benefited from the trip to the gentleman's musical club. However, it is not that she did not want to go, or that she could not summon up the enthusiasm to go, but that she was afraid to go. As stated earlier, Savile appears to have had a remarkable insight into her own mental condition. She realises that her fear of going to the Club is irrational and suspects that it is merely a symptom of her melancholy. Although Savile may have had insight into her condition, her mother apparently did not. Savile received little, if any, comfort or understanding from others as to her mental condition, and when she did try to confide in her mother she is answered 'sternly'.

Whether it was because the symptoms of melancholy were largely psychological and therefore could not be seen, or because the causes of hysteria and vapours were unfathomable to the average person and therefore difficult to relate to, there does appear to have been a general irritation with female sufferers of these illnesses. Haywood comments:

I have seen a fine Lady, who has been sunk [...] half dying with the Vapours, and in such a Lethargy, both of Mind and Body [...] yet [...] has no sooner heard of some Intrigue [...] than all the Lustre has return'd into her Eyes, Smiles have dimpled her Cheeks [...] and almost killed a Pair of Horses in galloping round the Town with this Intelligence.<sup>291</sup>

As Ann Finch had suggested in *The Spleen*, it was not beyond the realms of possibility that many women may have affected symptoms in order to gain attention. Wollstonecraft warns that 'sedentary employments render the majority of women sickly – and false notions of female excellence make them proud of this delicacy, though it be another fetter, that by calling the attention continually to the body, cramps the activity of the mind'.<sup>292</sup> The implication is that some women were happy to feign illness in

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<sup>291</sup> Haywood, (Book XIII), p. 139.

<sup>292</sup> Hill, 1993, p.250.

order to gain attention, even though by doing so they reinforced society's subordination of women in general. Haywood writes:

A desponding Temper is, of all others, the least pleasing both to God and man. [...] Can any thing [...] be more rude than to disturb the Chearfulness of whatever Conversation we come into, with the melancholy Detail of our private Misfortunes?<sup>293</sup>

Such literature does not attempt to distinguish true melancholy as an illness from a mere propensity to complain. It suggests that any attempt made by the truly melancholy to relate their distress may have been met with a hostile reception. It is understandable how, as MacDonald stated, 'Melancholy made men and women inner exiles.'<sup>294</sup> There is evidence that at times Savile did turn in on herself. At one point she states: 'I sometimes [...] *indulg'd an agreable dispare and sat and cry'd comfortably*. That must be all my *pleasure* now.'<sup>295</sup> This suggests that the episode was agreeable in that it was not the uncontrolled despair she sometimes experienced, but the physical relief of releasing her emotions.

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, most physicians made a distinction between melancholy and nervous complaints such as spleen and hysteria. In a chapter entitled 'Of Hysterick Affections', Sir Richard Blackmore suggests that

[t]his disease, called vapours in women, and the Spleen in Men, is what neither sex are pleased to own. [...] One great Reason why these Patients are unwilling their Disease should go by its right Name, is I imagine, this, that the Spleen and Vapours are, by those that never felt its Symptoms, looked upon as an imaginary and fantastick Sickness of the Brain, filled with odd and irregular Ideas; and accordingly they make the Complaints of such Patients the Subject of Mirth and Raillery. This Distemper, by a great Mistake, becoming thus an Object of Derision and Contempt, the Persons who feel it are unwilling to own a Disease, that will expose them to Dishonour and Reproach; though some I believe are not themselves conscious of the Nature of their Distemper, especially when complicated by the Seeds of Melancholy or Lunacy.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Haywood, (Book III), p. 49.

<sup>294</sup> MacDonald, 1981, p. 160.

<sup>295</sup> *Secret Comment*, p. 6.

<sup>296</sup> Blackmore, pp. 97-98.

Note that Blackmore refers to spleen and vapours as something other than melancholy. He regards these illnesses as ‘Hysterick Affections’, otherwise referred to as nervous disorders. He does, however, suggest that the spleen and vapours may be further complicated if the patient is also suffering from or becomes melancholy. There are two illnesses here, each adding to the distressing symptoms of the other. The tract is of further interest because Blackmore also suggests that when nervous illness is complicated by melancholy, the patient may not be aware that they are in fact suffering from two illnesses and may attribute all of their symptoms to one.

For instance, if we look again at the wording Savile uses in her diary entries to describe her various symptoms, although she attributes them to melancholy, many of them would suggest that she also suffered from a nervous disorder. When invited to the Gentleman’s Musical Club for instance, she states ‘’twas a terror to me’, as though she was experiencing acute anxiety at the thought of going: a nervous symptom. However, she then writes: ‘I woud have wish’d a Mother’s tender advice in the difficulty my melancholly made of it.’ The symptom is attributed to melancholy. Similarly Savile had written of her mental state prior to her leaving for Bath that ‘I was grown almost desperate: much longer I could not have born the uneasines[s]es I had [...]’.<sup>297</sup> Again, this suggests anxiety rather than a depressed state of mind.

After having been at Bath for a while she writes:

I have been free from the Aggony I endured always upon seing any face but the dismall ones I was dayly used to [...] the trembling of Nerves, the confution of Spirits and the Agony of mind that my Brother’s self and Family occation’d in me. I generally went to bed pleas’d and waked chearfull.<sup>298</sup>

This would suggest that, when at home, her physical trembling and anxiety state were often accompanied by a depressed state of mind: she went to bed often unhappy and

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<sup>297</sup> *Secret Comment*, p. 1.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

woke up miserable. After returning from Bath, she writes in her diary: ‘I was not frightened as I used to be but was very easy and chearfull. Had no palpitations, tremblings nor the least confusion upon any occasion, thanks to Bath.’<sup>299</sup> It is apparent that Savile suffered as much from physical nervous symptoms as she did from depressed spirits, except that her melancholy appears to have been a part of her daily life when at home. Her melancholy is linked to her idleness, whereas her nervous symptoms were more acute and occasioned when she had to meet new people or deal with new situations. Savile often appears not to have been able to distinguish between her melancholy and her nervous symptoms.

As stated previously, it is often the case that critics who look back on such illnesses as melancholy, spleen, vapours, hysteria and so forth, categorise them as belonging to the same disorder and they generally label that disorder, ‘melancholy’. In ‘The Problem of early Modern Melancholy’ for instance, Angus Gowland suggests that the

English preoccupation with melancholy as the mental affliction par excellence gradually waned in the course of the eighteenth century not because there was a decrease in the incidence of psychic disorders, [...] but in the first place because the investigations of those such as Willis convinced the medical-scientific community that the symptoms of the disease should not be traced to the non-existent black bile, or indeed any other humour, but rather to the dysfunction of the nerves in mediating between body and brain.<sup>300</sup>

Gowland suggests that during the eighteenth century, the term melancholy was somehow merged with or replaced by labels such as vapours and spleen. But as I have argued, with the majority of eminent physicians, this was not the case: they categorised melancholy as being separate from these nervous disorders, not replaced by them.

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>300</sup> Angus Gowland, ‘The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy’, *Past and Present*, 191 (May 2006), 77-120 (p. 112).

This confusion over semantics raises a particularly interesting point when we examine melancholy in women and particularly the issue of whether melancholy was a predominantly male or female affliction in the eighteenth century. For unless there is agreement as to what constituted the symptoms of melancholy then it is impossible to say. For instance, in an article entitled ‘Melancholy in Anne Finch and Elizabeth Carter: The Ambivalence of an Idea’, John F. Sena states that ‘[i]t was believed in the eighteenth century that melancholy most frequently attacked members of the “soft sex”’,<sup>301</sup> and here he quotes from William Stukeley. However, when we look at Stukeley’s treatise, the actual title reads, *Of the Spleen*.

In this thesis I have argued that the spleen, as with the vapours, was a nervous disorder known more for its distressing physical symptoms than a dejected state of mind, although such nervous disorders were often accompanied by psychological symptoms such as acute anxiety and varying degrees of lowness of spirits. However, the sufferer of spleen or vapours was not necessarily depressed or dejected, just as those who were diagnosed with melancholy did not always experience the physical symptoms of nervous disorder. What Stukeley actually states is that ‘[w]e know ’tis a common observation in our practice, that the modish disease call’d the vapors, and from its supposed seat, the SPLEEN, does most frequently attack scholars and persons of the soft sex [...]’.<sup>302</sup> It is not Stukeley who refers to melancholy, but Sena. In *The signs and causes of melancholy*, it is suggested that melancholy ‘is more the Disease of Women, than of Men’.<sup>303</sup> However, when we begin to examine the actual medical tracts pertaining to melancholy in the eighteenth century, there is no basis for the view that

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<sup>301</sup> Sena, 1971, p. 108.

<sup>302</sup> William Stukeley, *Of the Spleen, its description and history, uses and diseases, particularly the vapors, with their remedy*. ...London, 1723[1724], p. 25.

<sup>303</sup> Clifford, 1716, p. 120. If we go back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton suggests that melancholy was more prevalent in the male, but that when women were afflicted they became more violent: See *Anatomy*, I (1. 1. 3. 2), p. 165.

women suffered any more from the disease than men. Sena lists other eighteenth-century physicians, all of whom he claims stated that women suffered more from melancholy than their male counterparts: Sydenham, Dr John Purcell, Robert Whytt, Sir Richard Blackmore and William Cullen. However, again, it is Sena and not they who use the term melancholy. Purcell writes on *...those disorders which are commonly called Nervous, Hypochondriac, or Hysterical*, and Blackmore writes *An Essay Upon the Spleen*. These conditions are not the same as melancholy. With this in mind, we should reconsider just exactly which illness, if any, eighteenth-century physicians thought women were more prone to.

One may have expected that because of their idle lifestyles there would be many women who did suffer from melancholy. However, when we examine the medical literature of the eighteenth century we find that although they did often suffer from ‘lowness of spirits’, women appear to have been just as troubled, if not more so, by the upsetting physical symptoms of nervous disorders such as the vapours. Robert Whytt suggested that ‘Women, in whom the nervous system is generally more moveable than in men, are more subject to nervous complaints, and have them in a higher degree’.<sup>304</sup> In *A Dissertation Upon the Nerves*, William Smith M. D., also suggests that ‘Women, whose nerves are generally more delicate and sensible than those of men, are more subject to nervous complaints’.<sup>305</sup> Richard Mead states that

[t]here is no disease so vexatious to women as that called *hysterical*. It is common to maids, and widows; and although it may not be attended with great danger, yet it is frequently very terrifying: and moreover, it sometimes deprives them of their senses as effectually, as if they had been seized with an epileptic fit.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Whytt, 1765, p. 118.

<sup>305</sup> William Smith, M.D., *A dissertation upon the nerves; containing an account, I. Of the nature of man. 2. Of The Nature Of Brutes. 3. Of The Nature And Connection Of Soul And Body. 4. Of The Threefold Life Of Man. 5. Of the symptoms, causes and cure of all nervous diseases.* By W. Smith, M.D (London, 1768), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 30 December 2009], p. 147.

<sup>306</sup> Mead, III, pp. 135-136.

The spleen, vapours and hysteria all fell into the general category of hysterical diseases, sometimes referred to as nervous complaints or nervous disorder and sometimes as hysterick passions. Both men and women could suffer from hysterick passions, the psychological symptoms of which, according to Blackmore, were as follows:

The Symptoms that disturb the Operations of the Mind and Imagination in Hysterick women, are the same with those in Hypochondriacal Men, with some inconsiderable Variety; that is, Fluctuation of Judgment, and swift Turns in forming and reversing of Opinions and Resolutions, Inconstancy, Timidity, Absence of Mind, want of self-determining Power, Inattention [...].<sup>307</sup>

One may argue that these symptoms could also be attributed to melancholy. However, such symptoms suggest an overactive mind, anxious, unsettled and indecisive. Savile had referred to the absence of her palpitations and tremblings along with her ‘confusion’ of mind. Added to these psychological symptoms Blackmore lists the distressing physical symptoms that accompany the hysterick passions:

sometimes the Patient feels in his Throat a suffocating Grasp, or Constriction, of which the Female sex more frequently complain. But the Symptoms that accompany this Distemper in the Head, are more various and surprising ( *i. e.*) Pain, Aches [...] Giddiness, excessive Lightness, or on the contrary, great Dulness and Melancholy [...].<sup>308</sup>

Blackmore states that melancholy can ‘accompany’ the illness but he does not regard them as the same illness under different names. The symptoms of hysterick fits or vapours appear to have changed little, if at all, over the course of the century. **Physicians’** accounts of them remain quite consistent. In *A Treatise of the Vapours, or, Hysterick Fits*, published in 1702, Dr John Purcell, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, regarded the vapours and hysterick fits as being one and the same illness: ‘Vapours’, he states, ‘otherwise called *Hysterick Fits*, or Fits of the Mother, is a Disease

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<sup>307</sup> Blackmore, p. 107.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

which more generally afflicts Humane Kind, than any other whatsoever.’<sup>309</sup> He lists numerous symptoms of the disease, beginning with the onset of the attack:

[t]hose who are troubled with the *Vapours*, generally perceive them approach in the following manner; first, they feel a Heaviness upon their Breast; a grumbling in their Belly; they belch up, and sometimes vomit, Sower, sharp, Insipid, or Bitter Humours: They have a Difficulty in Breathing; and think they feel something that comes up in their Throat, which is ready to choke them; they Struggle; Cry out; make odd and inarticulate sounds, or mutterings; they perceive a Swimming in their heads; a Dimness comes over their Eyes; they turn pale; are scarce able to stand; their Pulse is weak; they shut their Eyes; Fall down; and remain senseless for some time; afterwards by little and little, their Pulse returns; their Face regains its natural colour; their Body grows hot as before; they Open their Eyes; Sigh; and by degrees come to themselves.<sup>310</sup>

These are not the symptoms of melancholy and would not have been confused with them in the eighteenth century by most physicians. In the clinical lectures given by William Cullen between 1765 and 1766 he gives an almost identical description of a hysteric episode.<sup>311</sup> Cullen’s lectures were published in 1797, so we can assume that his clinical observations were still pertinent then. In 1777 John Leake gives yet another almost identical description. Using the term, ‘Hysteric Fit’, he suggests that it

generally commences with universal languor and pain in the loins, attended with a sense of coldness and nervous trembling; the heart begins to palpitate, the pulse becomes unequal and obscure; The extremities grow cold, a choking is perceived in the throat; the face is pale, breathing difficult, and the voice is lost. [...] As the fit goes off, the pulse gradually becomes stronger, and the countenance resumes its native colour.<sup>312</sup>

These symptoms are quite specific and appear to follow a particular pattern. The patient appears to be overwhelmed by a relatively sequential pattern of unpleasant and alarming physical symptoms which gradually pass and the patient recovers their equilibrium.

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<sup>309</sup> John Purcell, *A treatise of vapours, or, hysteric fits. Containing an analytical proof of its causes, Mechanical Explanations of all its Symptoms and Accidents, according to the newest and most Rational Principles: together with its cure at large* (London, 1702), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 30 December 2009], p. 1.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>311</sup> Cullen, p. 253.

<sup>312</sup> Leake, 1777, pp. 249-250.

However, as previously stated, it was observed that a lowness of spirits often accompanied nervous illness. Purcell suggests that

Melancholy in Hysterical People is easily cur'd in the beginning, but when it has taken deep root, and the Patients avoid and shuns Company, then it is hard to be cur'd: Nay it is to be fear'd they will endeavour to make themselves away: and if this Melancholy has so alter'd them, that they will not speak to, or answer others, it is much to be feared they will fall into a *Melancholy Madness*.<sup>313</sup>

In the whole treatise he only refers to melancholy about half a dozen times and always as a symptom that may arise from the vapours when the patient has suffered from the illness for a long time and was most likely suffering by that time from nervous exhaustion. Nicholas Robinson also argues that the

sinkings of the spirits, or sadnesses, that oblige some vapourish Women to burst into sudden Fits of Crying, without any evident Cause, arise from great Depressions of the Mind, that damp the Passions, retard the Motions of the Nerves, and make us low spirited.<sup>314</sup>

We can see that 'lowness of spirits' was very often part of nervous illnesses but I argue that physicians believed women were more susceptible to these nervous disorders and not particularly to melancholy. Having said this, in 1765 William Cullen suggests of the 'Hysterick Disease', that, 'these symptoms are peculiar to certain subjects, viz. chiefly females, and particularly those between the age of puberty and fifty. [...] Our sex is not, however, exempted: they attack sometimes men, at the prime of life.'<sup>315</sup> Nevertheless, Cullen suggests that it is nervous disorder that women are more prone to rather than lowness of spirits. William Perfect also states of the 'hysteric passion', that it is a 'Disorder peculiar to the Fair Sex'.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Purcell, p. 127.

<sup>314</sup> Robinson, pp. 277-288.

<sup>315</sup> Cullen, p. 254.

<sup>316</sup> William Perfect, *Cases of Insanity, the epilepsy, hypochondriacal affection, hysteric passion, and nervous disorders*....The second edition. With many additional cases (Rochester, 1785?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unm?db=ECCO> > [accessed 30 December 2009], p. 73.

In conclusion, economic progress and social change meant that for many women, the vital role they played in providing for their families changed considerably. Their position changed from one of co-worker and provider, an essential cog in the smooth running of the family unit, to one of dependent spouse, daughter or sister. Change in the working lives of these women was to a large degree forced upon them by economic factors: an increased demand for raw produce initially. However, to a certain degree it was also striven for. For those women whose livelihoods prospered because of this same economic growth, many aspired to raise their social standing, as well as their standard of living, by adopting a more genteel and leisured way of life. Such a rise in social status inevitably meant that the female members of the household would no longer be required to work. In fact society dictated that such women should not work. The leisured lifestyle of middle class women appears to have been brought about as much by the women themselves as by men and society in general. The subsequent idleness of their lifestyle was often regarded by physicians as being a major cause of the psychological and nervous disorders from which they suffered. What little education women did receive was compatible with the lowered expectations society had of them. Thus, ill equipped educationally and restricted socially, these idle women appear to have experienced significant mental and physical distress.

Based on the medical literature from the period, the melancholy and nervous illnesses suffered by women do appear to have been illnesses which affected the more affluent female members of society: women for whom employment was not a necessity. One could argue that the physicians' observations were inaccurate or misleading because their case studies were not a fair representation of all classes of women. The poorer class of women had less money and therefore less access to physicians, particularly the more eminent physicians who were more likely to write on the subject.

Contemporary criticism has suggested that melancholy was in fact the resultant illness from which many eighteenth-century women suffered and that women were more susceptible to the illness than men. However, when we examine eighteenth-century medical literature, there is no basis for this supposition. What evidence does suggest is that, although their idle lifestyles were regarded as a major contributing factor of their melancholy, their idleness also brought on nervous illnesses such as the vapours and hysteria. It is these nervous illnesses that women appear to have been more prone to than men, not melancholy. The destructive psychological effect of idleness appears to have been worse for women than men because women were restricted by social constraints, both educationally and physically. Whereas this chapter has looked at the melancholy and nervous illnesses caused by the enforced idle lifestyle of many women, the next chapter will consider the negative psychological effect that retirement had on men who freely adopted an idle lifestyle, despite the educational and professional opportunities available to them.

# Chapter Four

## The Changing Face of Retirement

### I

#### William Shenstone

In 1779 *Columella* appeared, a novel which was written by William Shenstone's friend Richard Graves. At one point in the novel the character Columella, who is largely based on Shenstone and who chooses to live a life of rural retirement and relative idleness, considers employing a man to be a hermit in his woods, a fashionable appendage to his country estate. The hermit's only duties would be 'to keep his hermitage clean, and to sit at the door with a book in his hand when any company came [...]'.<sup>317</sup> This man would therefore be employed to be idle. They negotiate over salary, the man condescending to take a drop in salary from his last position as a resident hermit 'rather than be out of *business* and live *idle* [...]'.<sup>318</sup>

Although the irony provides comic effect, the scenario illustrates the contradictory nature of the prevailing views of idleness during the eighteenth century. Columella, in choosing a retired lifestyle, wants to portray a refined way of living. The hermit is equally aware of how his idleness will be perceived by others, but in his eyes, it was perfectly acceptable to sit idly all day affecting to read, because he, and others,

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<sup>317</sup> *Columella*, II, p. 121.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122.

would perceive this as paid occupation. The question this raises is, just how accurate a depiction of the attitudes of the time towards idleness does this extract represent?

In 'Lamb, Shenstone and the Icon of Personality', Richard Terry discusses the unusual amount of interest that critics and contemporaries of William Shenstone took in his lifestyle, as to whether or not it had been a success or failure. Terry suggests that '[w]hat accounts for it [...] is the fact that his life came to be prized not so much for its own sake as for its convergence with an ideal of Augustan lifestyle: that of retirement'.<sup>319</sup> However, to decide whether a person's life was successful or not depends largely on whether we believe they have spent their time productively and whether they were happy. In Shenstone's case we know that for much of his life he suffered from depression and therefore we assume that he was largely unhappy. But when we attempt to discover whether it was the idleness of his retired lifestyle that made him depressed, we find that the answer really depends on how one defines idleness. For idleness is not a static concept: it constantly shifts and changes in response to social changes.

In this chapter I will examine what exactly constituted an eighteenth-century retired lifestyle, where the notion came from and why someone like Shenstone may have been drawn to it. Graves's *Columella* will be used as a social critique to illustrate the changing face of that ideal throughout the century. For example, what constituted retirement at the beginning of the century was different to what constituted retirement at the end of the century. I will also examine how Shenstone's life fitted with the romantic notion of the retired lifestyle which existed during the period and will argue that it was the contrast between the romanticised notion and the actual reality of such an idle, secluded existence that was a major contributing factor of Shenstone's depression.

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<sup>319</sup> Richard Terry, 'Lamb, Shenstone and the Icon of Personality', *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, New Series, 76 (Oct, 1991), 124-132 (p. 125).

Shenstone was born in 1714 to Thomas Shenstone and Ann Penn. Thomas was a yeoman farmer but Ann had been born to gentry. Shenstone lost his father at the age of ten and his mother at the age of eighteen. In 1732 he entered Pembroke College, Oxford, with his friend Richard Jago, and there he met and remained lifelong friends with Richard Graves and Anthony Whistler. Initially it was hoped that he would be ordained into the Anglican Church. However, having inherited an income of £300 per annum, in 1735 Shenstone left Oxford with no degree. He moved into the family farmstead he would later officially inherit, known as The Leasowes, in the summer of 1736. But rather than run the farm as a going concern, Shenstone decided to spend most of his time and all of his money turning what had been a working farm into a landscaped garden. One would think he would have been quite happy in this privileged position, but in fact he suffered for much of his life with ‘dejected spirits’ and bad ‘nerves’. It becomes apparent when we read his letters that, for at least the first ten years after he moved into The Leasowes, Shenstone had difficulty in adjusting to his new lifestyle. It is at this point in his life, that we can begin to see how his mental health was affected by the lifestyle he led.

Terry notes that whether Shenstone ‘ever elected to retire, and whether it was retirement which brought about his periodic bouts of melancholy, cannot be exactly determined’.<sup>320</sup> Initially he does appear to have been quite happy with the novelty of his new lifestyle. In 1736 he writes to a Mr. Dean:

I am, at present, in a very refined State of Indolence and Inactivity. Indeed I make little more Use of a Country Life, than to live over again the Pleasures of *Oxford* and your Company. [...] I am vastly self-interested, for I write only to beg a Letter from you [...].<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>321</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 1 (19 October 1736).

Although he attempts to justify to himself and others that he has achieved the ‘refined’ lifestyle, there is a palpable boredom here. In the same letter he states, ‘I aim at rendering my Letters as odd and fantastical as possible,’<sup>322</sup> suggesting that he was aware that his life, like his letters, needed to be embellished to make it at all interesting, both to himself and others. In a letter to Jago in 1741 we find him planning a trip to London:

Saddle your mule, and let us be jogging to the great city. [...] Let me have the pleasure of seeing you in the pit [...] let us go forth to the opera-house; let us hear how the eunuch-folk sing. Turn your eye upon the lillies and roses, diamonds and rubies; the Belindas and the Sylvias of gay life!<sup>323</sup>

There is an urgency to escape from the boredom and constraints of a rural location to the liveliness of London. He anticipates the thrill of seeing and being entertained by others, of filling his days and nights with activities which will delight his senses. In London he will depend on external stimulus to occupy his mind as opposed to The Leasowes where he is obliged to find or make his own distractions or occupation. As was the case with Gertrude Savile, it is this factor in particular that Shenstone constantly struggles with when alone, particularly when he is depressed.

In *Columella* Graves presents an eighteenth-century society that, like Shenstone, is restless for change:

Some indeed, being quite disgusted, or not being able to breathe in the smoke of town, yet not finding that happiness which they expected in the country, shift the scene from one place to another, till death overtakes them in their career, and lodges them quietly in their grave; entitled to the well-known epitaph [...] “Here rests the man, who never was at rest.”<sup>324</sup>

It could be that leaving Oxford with no degree was Shenstone’s first attempt to ‘escape life’. The decision would have effectively removed the possibility of him ever entering a profession suitable to his class which would have enabled him to support himself. Although initially he preferred London, Shenstone eventually found it difficult to settle

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., p. 35 (25 November 1741).

<sup>324</sup> *Columella*, II, pp. 174-175.

in either environment. However, what his personal letters do reveal is that, once he did leave Oxford, it was not the idleness of his existence that he attempted to escape from, but the depression that his idle existence exacerbated.

Because he had made no provision to enter a profession, it was assumed by others that he had chosen to withdraw from society permanently to adopt a retired lifestyle. The fact that he remained on his college books for a further seven years, until 1742, suggests that he was unsure of his decision. T R Nash wrote of Shenstone in 1781:

Of his college he continued a member over ten years having at the end of the first four years put on a Civilian's gown, but with what design does not appear, for he never took a degree, and apparently never intended to follow any profession as he had long before succeeded to his patronal estate.<sup>325</sup>

Significantly, Nash gives the final date of Shenstone's leaving college, in that he removed his name from the college books, as 25 March 1742. However, in a letter written to Jago that same month, it is evident that Shenstone, although unsure of his future, had ruled out a life of retirement. He states of a retired life:

[T]o tell you the truth, I am not pleased with being advised to retire. I was saying the other day to Mr. Outing, that I *had* been ambitious more than I was at present, and that I grew less every day. Upon this he chimed in with me, and approved my despondency; saying, "that *he* also had been ambitious, but found it would not do." Do you think I liked him much for this?—no—I wheeled about, and said, "I did not think with him; for I should always find myself whetted by disappointments [...]."<sup>326</sup>

Retirement and despondency are linked not only by Shenstone but by Outing who feels that he understands the predicament Shenstone is in. Although the letter does not give the actual date of the month on which it was written, it would be interesting to know whether it pre-dated or post-dated Shenstone's decision to remove his name from the college books. It is significant that Shenstone becomes offended when it is implied that

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<sup>325</sup> T. R. Nash, 'Collections for a History of Worcestershire' (17810, 529-30) quoted in F. D. A. Burns, 'William Shenstone's years at Oxford', *Notes and Queries*, 45: 4 (1998), 462-465 (p. 463).

<sup>326</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 44 (1741 [March, 1742]).

he should adopt the same attitude towards an idle lifestyle in the country as Outing. Shenstone claims that he is in fact motivated by disappointment. He rejects the idea that one should forget all ambition and be content, despite being forgotten by the rest of society.

In the very first *Idler*, Johnson warns that this is a likely outcome of a retired lifestyle. He suggests that, although many believe they would like to live an idle lifestyle, the reality of such a situation is far from fulfilling: ‘The Idler has no rivals or enemies. The man of business forgets him; the man of enterprize despises him [...]’.<sup>327</sup> To have no purpose in society is portrayed as a lonely business. Outing implied that any ambitions, literary or otherwise, should be forgotten for one’s own sanity and mental health. Shenstone was in London when he wrote this letter and in it we can sense his shock at this exchange. Within the same letter he immediately attempts to distance himself from his life of rural retreat as though The Leasowes were merely a place he occasionally visited rather than his permanent abode.

Outing had implied that ambition and the retired lifestyle do not mix. Ambition is an issue that Shenstone raises time and again in his letters, as though he is aware that he should be ambitious, but he is not quite sure what should be the object of his ambition. In a letter to Jago written in 1747, twelve years after leaving Oxford, it is evident that he had still been hoping that some alternative lifestyle would open up for him:

I should think myself fortunate at present, if, like you, I could only find that I have been mentioned for a vacant post; but I have withdrawn all my views from court-preferment, and fixed them on finding a pot of money, which I determine to be the far more probable scheme.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> *Idler*, II, p. 4 (No. 1, 15 April 1758).

<sup>328</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 93 (1747, [1744?]).

Although Shenstone may have regarded a retired lifestyle as an easy option, as opposed to obtaining a degree and entering a profession, the psychological transition to such a lifestyle was not as easy as he may at first have expected.

## II

### A Retired Lifestyle

So what exactly was the definition of a ‘retired’ lifestyle in the eighteenth century? Where did the concept originate, and why might someone like Shenstone have been drawn to it? Clarence Tracy, author of Graves’s biography, draws from Johnson’s *Dictionary* when defining the term ‘retirement’ in its eighteenth-century context. Tracy suggests that retirement meant ‘a private way of life, as opposed to an active participation in a trade, a business, a profession, or politics’.<sup>329</sup> Significantly though, Johnson’s definitions of ‘retirement’ and ‘retired’ mention neither trade nor business. I say significantly, because the rapidly changing social structure in England meant that nearing the end of the century a retired lifestyle was no longer the exclusive privilege of the landed gentry.

Under ‘retirement’ Johnson lists ‘private abode; secret habitation’ a ‘Private way of life’.<sup>330</sup> Under the heading of ‘a private way of life’, he quotes from Thomson, ‘an elegant sufficiency, content, *Retirement*, rural quiet, friendship, books, Progressive virtue, and approving heaven’,<sup>331</sup> suggesting images of a relaxed, elegant manner of living, a tranquil retreat in which to escape from society. Shenstone would aspire to this ‘elegant manner of living’, but found that in reality he was unable to maintain such a lifestyle comfortably because his patrimony was insufficient. In the preface to the *Dictionary* Johnson writes:

[T]he *English Dictionary* was written with little assistance of the learned, and without any patronage of the great; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or

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<sup>329</sup> Clarence Tracy, *A Portrait of Richard Graves* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1987) p. 140.

<sup>330</sup> *Dictionary*, Vol. 2, 1755.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

under the shelter of academick bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow.<sup>332</sup>

Again, the retired lifestyle is deemed a privileged existence, sheltered from the harsh realities of life, such as the need to earn a living. Johnson, with his strong moral views as to man's obligation to make the best use of his talents and be of service to society, was opposed to those who retired from society having made no prior contribution.

A. D. Harvey traces the notion of the eighteenth-century ideal of retirement back to the Roman poet Horace:

These were my pray'rs, and these my constant Vows,  
A pretty Seat, a Fountain near my House,  
A Garden, and a little Grove of Trees;  
'Tis well, the Gods have given me more than these...

...And who, retiring from the importunate crowd,  
Live in his own house, satisfied with his lot.<sup>333</sup>

It is suggested in the poem that being content in and with one's situation is important to one's peace of mind: not looking back with regret or forward with ambition because we are content to live in the present. Harvey then draws attention to the replication of this Horatian ideal of retirement in poems written during the eighteenth century. In 'Ode on Solitude' Alexander Pope writes:

Happy the man, whose wish and care  
A few paternal acres bound,  
Content to breathe his native air,  
In his own ground.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Preface to Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. 1, 1755.

<sup>333</sup> A. D. Harvey, 'The Roman Ideal of Rural Retirement in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century England', *Contemporary Review* (Autumn 2006) <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 03 April 2009], 357- 366 (pp. 357-358).

<sup>334</sup> Alexander Pope, 'Ode on Solitude', *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A one-volume edition of the Twickenham text with selected annotations*, ed. by John Butt (London: Methuen & Co, first published 1963, repr. 1965), p. 265 (ll. 1-4).

Such poems depict a romanticised notion of a life lived in retirement, a more relaxed state of mind, a slower pace of life. Likewise, in perhaps one of the best known eighteenth-century poems on retirement, ‘The Choice’, John Pomfret writes:

If Heav’n the grateful liberty would give,  
That I might chuse my method how to live,  
And all those hours propitious fate should lend,  
In blissful ease and satisfaction spend:  
Near some fair town I’d have a private seat.  
Built uniform; not little, nor too great; [...] (ll. 1-6)

A little garden, grateful to the eye,  
And a cool rivulet run murm’ring by,  
On whose delicious banks a stately row  
Of shady limes or sycamores should grow;  
At th’ end of which a silent study plac’d  
Should be with all the noblest authors grac’d [...] <sup>335</sup> (ll. 13-18)

It is evident that there was a strong theme developing within eighteenth-century literature, in that the idyllic withdrawal from society was always to some place rural. However, note that Pomfret suggests that such a retreat should not be completely removed from society but ‘Near some fair town’. Harvey suggests that ‘[t]he poems of Horatian retirement are not denunciations of metropolitan culture – this came later perhaps, with the Romantic movement – they are simply explorations of possible alternatives to it’.<sup>336</sup> However, in certain letters Shenstone does portray himself as having turned his back on society and suggests that he is perfectly content with his retired lifestyle:

A polite & friendly Neighbourhood *in ye Country*, or, (in Lieu of that) agreeable visitants from *any Distance*, give a Person all ye Society he can extract from a Crowd; & then he has the *rural Scenery*, which is all *clear gains*. For I fancy no one will prefer ye Beauty of a *street* to ye Beauty of a Lawn or Grove; & indeed the Poets wou’d have form’d no very tempting an *Elysium*, had they made a *Town* of it.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> John Pomfret, ‘The Choice’, *The Poetical Works of John Pomfret: With the life of the author* (Edinburgh: Appolo Press, 1779), pp. 13-19.

<sup>336</sup> Harvey, p. 6.

<sup>337</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, pp. 125-126 (Fast Day, [Feb.?]1747).

Shenstone portrays the romantic literary notion of the rural retreat. However, at such times, there is the feeling that he is trying to convince himself as much as the beneficiary of the letter, of the validity of such an ideal. Although Shenstone's poetry is not necessarily about retirement he does portray a romantic notion of country life. In his 'Pastoral Ballad' for instance, he writes:

My banks they are furnish'd with bees,  
Whose murmur invites one to sleep;  
My grottoes are shaded with trees,  
And my hills are white-over with sheep,  
I seldom have met with a loss,  
Such health do my fountains bestow;  
My fountains, all border'd with moss,  
Where the harebell and violets grow... <sup>338</sup>

Surprisingly, taking into consideration how unhappy he claims to have been for much of the time in his rural solitude, this romantic notion of rural life dominates his poetry.

Johnson comments on the 'Pastoral Ballad':

I cannot but regret that it is pastoral; an intelligent reader, acquainted with the scenes of real life, sickens at the mention of the *crook*, the *pipe*, the *sheep*, and the *kids*, which it is not necessary to bring forward to notice [...].<sup>339</sup>

He makes it quite clear that neither he nor any other 'intelligent' person would be fooled by such a romantic notion of rural living. However, it is not the fact that Johnson dislikes the poem because its subject matter is rural life, it is Shenstone's romantic depiction of the rural life that Johnson takes issue with.

George Dyer argued along similar lines but was a little more tactful:

Shenstone has long been acknowledged as the lady's poet. [...] But his pictures, if I may so speak, are too minute and local, the productions of a man, always

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<sup>338</sup> William Shenstone, *The works in verse and prose of William Shenstone, Esq. in two volumes, with decorations*, Volume 1 (Dublin, 1764), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 30 December 2009], p. 125.

<sup>339</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives Of The Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations On Their Works*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), I, p.129 .

serenading the birds in his own garden, and whose views, as Gray expresses it, were bounded by the Leasowes.<sup>340</sup>

This perceived localisation and sheltered existence is taken to extremes in *Columella*, when a list of possible titles for Columella's future poetic works is found by his friend Hortensius, a list we are told 'which shews what trifling objects frequently employ men of genius in their solitude'. The list reads as follows:

The young man and his dog; a soliloquy.  
Meditation on a farthing candle.  
Epigram on a tobacco-stopper.  
Ode to Chlorinda, on mending  
an hole in her stocking.  
To Sophronia, on her pickling  
cucumbers: an epistle.  
Bottled Ale: a dithyrambic.  
Fornication triumphant; or, the  
world ruled by harlots: a satire.<sup>341</sup>

The list provides humor, the apparent randomness of its contents being contradicted by the final item which possibly hints at the true nature of Columella's idle preoccupations and solitary lifestyle: that he is sexually frustrated. It is a satiric attack on the futility of an idle lifestyle, a lifestyle which is unfulfilling and which leads to his becoming depressed and obsessive. Johnson observed that had Shenstone's 'mind been better stored with knowledge, whether he could have been great, I know not; he could certainly have been agreeable'.<sup>342</sup> Although Johnson initially glosses over the fact that Shenstone left Oxford without having made the effort to obtain his degree, this final comment could be regarded as a gentle dig at Shenstone's choice in life. Although Johnson had also left university with no degree, unlike Shenstone, he used his literary talents to support himself and others.

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<sup>340</sup> George Dyer, *Poems* (1802) I, xxv-xxvi.  
<<http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/CommentRecord.php?action=GET&cmmtid=2499>> [accessed 21 January 2010].

<sup>341</sup> *Columella*, II, p. 164.

<sup>342</sup> Johnson, *Lives*, p. 131.

Graves may have based *Columella* on Johnson's moral essays in the *Rambler* series, of which Shenstone was a great admirer,<sup>343</sup> in that it is an amusing tale of moral guidance: the reader learning by the mistakes others make. Johnson devotes much time in both the *Rambler* and *Idler* series to warning of the dangers to one's mental health that a retired life could hold. However, the novel is more closely modelled on *Rasselas*, which Shenstone also read and admired, in that it consists of three friends wandering through the countryside observing and commenting on the many varied forms of retired life they see. They then debate whether or not the owner of that lifestyle is happy with the choice of life they have either made or been forced into. The tale works by showing different perspectives of the retired lifestyle: the imagined versus the actual.

Columella had nurtured the image of the perfect retired lifestyle. His letters to his friends perpetuate the myth, being 'filled with romantic accounts of the happiness and tranquillity he enjoyed in his rural retreat'.<sup>344</sup> His two friends who come to visit him therefore imagine that they will find him basking in the idleness of his retirement:

either sauntering in his fields [...] or else perhaps reclined at the foot of some tree, or sitting in an alcove in his garden, reading Thompson's Seasons, or Shenstone's Works, or perhaps *Rasselas*, Prince of Abyssinia [...].<sup>345</sup>

When they actually meet Columella, his demeanour is far from their preconceived image of a refined country gentleman: 'they discovered their philosophical friend running across the lawn', chasing some pigs which had trampled his flower beds. Again, the scenario is drawn for comic effect, but Graves draws attention to the ludicrousness of the situation: Columella is distressed because pigs, which you would expect to find on a farm, are trampling flowers, which are totally impractical and which

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<sup>343</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 553. In a letter to Thomas Percy dated February 15th 1760, Shenstone writes, 'As to reading, I have, for the first time, perus'd a vol.: or two of ye Rambler, & I think for *Judgment & perspicuity* he equals any writer I ever read—& for ye musick of well-turn'd Periods, I do not *know* his equal. For I am hardly *satisfy'd* with any one in ye eng: Language, *beside* Him.'

<sup>344</sup> *Columella*, 1, p. 16.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

you would not expect to find. The scene highlights the fact that Columella is more concerned as to the aesthetic quality of his farm than the practicality. Johnson honed in on this naïve approach to life, stating that ‘[t]he pleasure of Shenstone was all in his eye; he valued what he valued merely for its looks; nothing raised his indignation more than to ask if there were any fishes in his water’.<sup>346</sup> After pacifying Columella the friends are led to the fashionable literary grotto, evident in Pomfret’s poem, where, we are told, Columella had been ‘amusing himself with Seneca on Tranquillity of Soul’.

Despite his definitions of retirement in the *Dictionary*, Johnson had no such romantic ideas of a retired rural retreat. However, he seems to have been aware of the lure such a romanticised lifestyle could have for those more sensitive people, who appear to have been particularly opposed to earning a living, his friend Richard Savage included. Shenstone aspired to the retired way of life whilst naively ignoring the practicalities of funding it. Although he did have a patrimony on which to live, he also believed that it was perfectly reasonable to make such a lifestyle choice and live off the subsistence of others. There is evidence however, in a letter written in 1753 to his friend Graves, that he was beginning to consider the benefit of having an income that matched one’s lifestyle: ‘I am glad enough to hear of yr Encrease of Salary; & begin to think a sort of affluence a little more *essential to Happiness* than I have formerly done.’<sup>347</sup> His friend and publisher, Robert Dodsley stated in the preface to his works:

He was no oeconomist; the generosity of his temper prevented him from paying a proper regard to the use of money: he exceeded therefore the bounds of his paternal fortune, which before he died was considerably encumbered.<sup>348</sup>

There was a naiveté to Shenstone’s character when it came to the issue of money and the necessity of supporting one’s lifestyle. Indeed, the prevailing notion that the need to

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<sup>346</sup> Johnson, *Lives*, IV, p. 127.

<sup>347</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 378 (24 October 1753).

<sup>348</sup> Shenstone, *Works*, p. iii.

earn money to support oneself was not important, or indeed even an issue, is also evident in the attitude of William Cowper, whom we will look at in the final chapter of this thesis.

In a letter to his friend Jago, Shenstone writes: '[y]ou speak of my dwelling in a Castle of Indolence, and I verily believe I *do*. There is something like enchantment in my present inactivity.'<sup>349</sup> This childlike disregard for the necessity of money being linked with the romantic notion of a retired life is apparent in a chapter within *Columella* entitled 'Love in a Cottage'. In this chapter, a young woman tells the tale of how she and her husband had at one time set up a business in the town but that the business had failed:

After having lived for two or three years in a dirty part of a miserable country town, I was much pleased with the thoughts of retiring again to shades and solitude; and formed to myself romantic ideas of a neat cottage and a little garden in the country [...]. But here, alas! I soon found my hopes of happiness again disappointed. My husband soon grew tired of home and continual labour [...] My brothers now and then contrive to send me a guinea, but that answers no other end than to make my husband idle for a week or fortnight, 'till it is all spent.<sup>350</sup>

This example illustrates Graves' 'restless' society. The couple were motivated to escape, not just from the city, but from the necessity to earn a living and support themselves, as though this would not be required in the country. The husband in particular appears to have had a romanticised notion of the practicalities of living in the country and works only under duress and only when it is essential.

It is implied throughout the tale that a healthy state of mind (one that is satisfied with one's lot) is comparative to how intelligent one is. Surprisingly, those who are less well educated than Columella and his friends and who are motivated on a daily basis to provide the bare necessities for their families, are usually portrayed as far more

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<sup>349</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 165 (11 September 1748).

<sup>350</sup> *Columella*, II, pp. 26-27.

contented than their highly educated counterparts, whose path is complicated by ambition. But this assumption is always made by others. When the reality of a retired life dawns upon the couple in the cottage, the realisation that life in the country is just as hard work, if not harder, than life in the town, both are completely miserable. Shenstone perpetuates this romantic notion in *Men and Manners*: ‘A cottage is a pleasing object partly [...] on account of the tranquility that seems to reign there.’<sup>351</sup> The tale of *Columella* then moves into a philosophical discussion as to the importance of achieving a balance in life between work and leisure, concluding that ‘the busiest and most laborious man, in the most busy and most noisy part of the metropolis, will, (generally speaking) be found to live happier than the idle man can possibly do, in the most romantic rural retreat [...]’.<sup>352</sup>

The novel suggests that by 1779, the idle lifestyle of the country gentleman, that ‘ideal of Augustan lifestyle’, was fast becoming a thing of the past. However, it also suggests that, even nearing the end of the century, most classes had a preconceived, romanticised notion of what a retired life was and felt that it was something they could aspire to: ‘this absurd passion for *retirement* [...] is become a prevailing evil in the world. We are all quitting the stage before we have performed our parts. Every little clerk in office must have his villa, and every tradesman his country-house.’<sup>353</sup>

When we look again at Johnson’s definition of retirement, ‘an elegant sufficiency, content, Retirement, rural quiet, friendship, books [...]’, it would seem that Shenstone enjoyed virtually none of these benefits. However, he writes to a Mr. Hull in November 1761, two years before his death:

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<sup>351</sup> William Shenstone, *Essays on Men and Manners In one volume*, Volume 1 (London, 1794), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/umn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 30 December 2009], p. 67.

<sup>352</sup> *Columella*, II, p. 212.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

what a Pity that your Uncle does not make a more frequent Use of his Pen! the World does not abound too much in such Writers. How much likewise is it to be lamented, that a Man of such Abilities should lie concealed in an obscure Part of *Essex*! He should have remained in the World—that is, I mean, for the Sake of the World; to his own Happiness, probably, Retirement was most conducive. It is most certain, that no Men are fit for Solitude, but those who find the Source of Amusement and Employment in themselves. Fancy, Reflection, and a Love of Reading, are indispensably necessary for such a Situation. It is downright Lunacy for a Man who has passed his Life in a Computing-House, or a shop; who possesses, possibly, but a moderate Share of natural Understanding, that Understanding too not cultivated by Education, and who has never known what it is was [sic] to look into a Book—It is, I repeat, downright Lunacy, for such a Man to think of *retiring*. He knows not, the Fatigue he is going to encounter: he will want Employment for his Hours; most probably, may shorten his Existence, and while he retains it, it will be one continued state of Apathy, if not Disorder.

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This letter was written when Shenstone was forty-seven years old and twenty-five years after he had first taken up residence at The Leasowes. Perhaps in this instance Shenstone reflects on his own life. It is possible that he regretted having left ‘The World’ in a literary sense. Shenstone can see both the positive and negative effects that the retired lifestyle can have on one’s mental health. He is aware that for some, the retired lifestyle can indeed make them happy. However, he is also aware that idleness is a major cause of depression, particularly for those who have been used to actively earning their living. The negative mental effects of retirement, ‘fatigue’, ‘Apathy’ ‘Disorder’, are juxtaposed against the need for ‘Employment’.

It is understandable how such an idealised lifestyle would have appealed to Shenstone, particularly when it came within the realms of possibility for him to achieve it: having inherited the farmstead and with a patrimony of £300 per year, a significant amount of money in more ways than one. Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers suggest that, particularly in the eighteenth century, the amount of income one had was indicative as to whether or not one could regard oneself as a true gentleman. More to the point, it also determined whether those who knew you would also regard you as such: ‘£500 yes,

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<sup>354</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 608 (26 November 1761).

£300 probably, £150 doubtful.<sup>355</sup> So Shenstone would just have managed to fit into the acceptable gentleman status bracket.

To be perceived as a gentleman was important for Shenstone. It is interesting to speculate whether his obsession with status came from the fact that his mother was originally from gentry, as opposed to his father, who Dodsley informs us was ‘a plain uneducated country gentleman [...] who farmed his own estate’.<sup>356</sup> Homai J. Shroff draws attention to the classification of the gentleman in Johnson’s *Dictionary*, one meaning being: ‘A man raised above the vulgar by his character or post.’<sup>357</sup> Shenstone would have perceived the vulgar as those such as the character of Mr. Nonsuch in *Columella*. Although still a gentleman, Nonsuch represents the successful merchant class of country gentleman: people whom Shenstone believed did not have good taste, would not recognise it if they saw it, and did not appreciate it when it was pointed out to them. It was very important for Shenstone that he was perceived as the right sort of gentleman. For Shenstone it was the importance of belonging to, as Shroff suggests, ‘a *gentleman* class, about the status and privileges of which there is no ambiguity’ and which ‘enjoys a prestige which makes membership of it a coveted distinction’.<sup>358</sup>

However, in reality it appears that, particularly in the latter half of the century, there was indeed much ambiguity about what constituted a gentleman. Hay and Rogers suggest that, in this period, ‘social distinctions at the top of society were a matter of constant concern to the literate public’,<sup>359</sup> and that ‘[w]hat mattered to real gentlemen [...] was an accurate estimate of real worth. That meant annual income, notably income

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<sup>355</sup> Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society: Shuttles and Swords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>356</sup> *Men and Manners*, p. i.

<sup>357</sup> Homai, J. Shroff, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel: The Idea of the Gentleman* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 19.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>359</sup> Hay and Rogers, p. 22.

from land'.<sup>360</sup> This raises the question as to why, having inherited a working farm, Shenstone should choose to begin landscaping it and turning it into a place of leisure.

In 'Prospects and Trifles: The Views of William Shenstone and Richard Jago', Stephen Bending discusses the possible motivation behind the creation of The Leasowes as a garden to be admired by the public:

What we can see in Shenstone's garden is an attempt to make an apparently private and enclosed landscape carry him into the public world, to give him a public status which can vie with the social representations of the aristocratic elite.<sup>361</sup>

Here Bending argues along the line that Shenstone created his garden out of vanity and regarded it as merely a means of social climbing. William Hazlitt had no sympathy for the depression suffered by Shenstone who lived such a privileged lifestyle:

who only wanted to be looked at: who withdrew from the world to be followed by the crowd, and courted popularity by affecting privacy! His Letters show him to have lived in a continual fever of petty vanity, and to have been a finished literary coquet. He seems always to say, "You will find nothing in the world so amiable as Nature and me: come, and admire us."<sup>362</sup>

There is a sense that Hazlitt was irritated by Shenstone because he 'withdrew' from society having contributed nothing. He ridicules Shenstone's retired lifestyle, implying it is the pathetic symbol of a bygone era that had no place in post-revolutionary England. The cultivation of his garden is regarded as a trivial pursuit carried out either because he was unable or unwilling to contribute anything else. There is no sympathy for the depression he suffered because it is regarded as a direct consequence of his idle lifestyle.

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>361</sup> Stephen Bending, 'Prospects and Trifles: The Views of William Shenstone and Richard Jago', *QWERTY*, 10 (2000), 125-131 (p. 127).

<sup>362</sup> William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets: From the Third London Edition, Edited by his Sons* (London: John Wiley, 1849) <<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=mn11RW3RoUkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=William+Hazlitt,+Lectures+on+the+English+Poets&cd=1#v=onepage&q=courted%20popularity&f=false>> [accessed 21 January 2009], p. 141.

In 'Mrs. Montagu's Contemplative Bench: Bluestocking Gardens and Female Retirement', Bending suggests of the landed gentry's preoccupation with landscaping their own land that

they drew on the landscapes they had constructed to justify the naturalness of their own wealth and to distinguish their use of that wealth from the false aspirations of the vulgar rich and the world of fashionable show.<sup>363</sup>

To be seen to be indulging in ostentatious shows of vanity would have been deemed vulgar. Gentry such as Elisabeth Montagu, who landscaped her estate at Sandleford, and Shenstone's neighbour, Lord Lyttleton, who owned and landscaped Hagley Park, were careful to market their newly styled gardens as pastoral retreats. Bending suggests that the 'true designer of the landscape garden is both a gentleman and a proprietor; not only must he be educated in the liberal arts, but, ideally, he must own the property he improves'.<sup>364</sup> Here we can see the influence of the Horatian poetry on retirement filtering into the eighteenth-century class system. Although it alludes to peace of mind and contentment, the actual onus is on land, money and property. But where did this leave Shenstone on his meagre £300 a year? Shenstone's decision to landscape his farm is of particular interest when we consider his lifestyle in its social context and what was happening at this period with other landed gentry. G. E. Mingay informs us that

[t]he new industrialist squires of the eighteenth century [...] made their mark as agricultural improvers. [...] Few of the old country gentry, and probably few of the industrialist newcomers, could afford to pour large sums into spectacular but highly uncertain projects of reclamation. [...] The majority of new arrivals among the squirearchy preferred an established estate with farms which were already a going concern.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Stephen Bending, 'Mrs Montagu's contemplative bench: Bluestocking gardens and female retirement', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 69.4 (2006) <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 3 April 2009], 555-580 (p. 578).

<sup>364</sup> Stephen Bending, 'Horace Walpole and Eighteenth-Century Garden History', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 57 (1994) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/751470>> [accessed 03 April 2009], 209-226 (p. 225).

<sup>365</sup> G. E. Mingay, *The Gentry: The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* (London : Longman, 1976), p. 95.

Shenstone, however, chose to pour his inheritance into land that would soon lose its potential to even pay for its own upkeep, let alone add to his wealth. Significantly, Bending states of ‘Capability’ Brown, a professional landscape gardener, that he was a man ‘whose professional task was to recast working agricultural land as an aesthetic object of luxury and leisure [...]’.<sup>366</sup> There appears to have been a real effort by some to resist the faster, more industrialised pace of life by encouraging a more relaxed environment. To manage a working farm would also not have fitted with Shenstone’s idealised notion of the country gentleman. Nor would a working farm have appealed to his artistic temperament, or attracted the attention and regard of others that he craved.

Graves uses Shenstone’s lifestyle to represent the idealised view of a life lived in retirement and he uses the character of Columella to expose the resistance to the changing social structure. The novel *Columella* highlights the shifting perception of what constituted a ‘retired’ lifestyle. The similarity between Columella’s ‘retired’ lifestyle and the ‘retired’ lifestyle of Mr. Nonsuch for example, is only in that they both live in the country. Their attitudes towards their country seats are totally different. Whereas Columella’s life is one of solitude and idleness, Nonsuch regards his country retreat as an appendage to his working life in business in the city.

Bending broaches a similar issue when he discusses the female perspective on retirement and class. Whilst staying at the Duchess of Portland’s country estate in Bulstrode, Elisabeth Montagu writes: ‘Next Sunday I quit the peaceful groves [...] of Bulstrode, for the noisy, turbulent city; my books and serious reflections are to be laid aside for the looking-glass and curling-irons [...]’ In returning to town she proposes ‘to be as idle, as vain, and as impertinent as any one’.<sup>367</sup> Montagu, whose family money came from an industrial background, was expected by her husband to live part of the

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<sup>366</sup> Bending, 2006, p. 576.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 570.

year in the country. Surprisingly, in this letter, she regards her time spent in retirement as pertaining to the 'serious' business of life, whereas her life in the city or town is regarded as one of mere idle amusement. This female perspective on retirement is the opposite of Nonsuch's, who retires to the country periodically to relax.

It is interesting to compare Montagu with her fictional counterparts in *Columella*: Nonsuch's daughters. Although their father is rich enough to own a country estate, their family background is merchant rather than industrial, and their wealth is on a much lower level than that of Montagu. Nonsuch is proud of the fact that his daughters have 'not been bred up in idleness'.<sup>368</sup> He declares that

he would rather marry his daughter to a man that got four or five hundred pounds a year by his business, than to an idle man of as many thousand, who had nothing to do but to spend what his ancestors had left him.<sup>369</sup>

The dynamic between Columella and Nonsuch is stark: Columella regards Nonsuch as inferior to him in every way; Nonsuch rejects Columella's idle lifestyle on moral grounds. Money, although the driving force behind Nonsuch's business, does not enter the equation when his principles are challenged.

Nonsuch is portrayed as a far happier and well-adjusted man than Columella, who veers between eccentricity and depression. Unlike Columella, Nonsuch is content with his lot and proud of his achievements. Although Columella looks down on him, Nonsuch remains secure in his position as a gentleman. Bending, however, suggests that although Shenstone regarded his garden as a means of positioning himself within an elite group, he was in fact 'unsure of his own status'.<sup>370</sup> It is well known that Shenstone was often envious of the money Lyttleton could spend on his garden, and the fact that Hagley attracted a higher calibre of visitor than The Leasowes often depressed him.

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<sup>368</sup> *Columella*, II, p. 53.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>370</sup> Bending, 2000, p. 127.

### III

## Depression and the Idle Lifestyle

In *Columella*, Graves links the depression his friend Shenstone experienced with the idleness of the lifestyle he lived at the Leasowes. The tale begins with two friends embarking on a journey to visit their friend who, like Shenstone, has retired from society to live the life of a country gentleman. However, before they reach his estate they are made aware that all is not as *Columella* has led them to believe in his correspondence with them. The landlord of a nearby Inn suggests that *Columella*'s state of mind is somewhat precarious: "I believe the gentleman is a little *malancholly*", and pointing to his own forehead, with an arch leer, "I am afraid all is not right in the attic story."<sup>371</sup> No distinction is drawn between dejected spirits and madness: the two are classed as one and the same thing by *Columella*'s neighbour. At the very least, it is implied that *Columella* has become a little odd in his reclusive state.

However, we cannot blame Shenstone's depressive moods solely on his idle lifestyle or his retired lifestyle. Shenstone's struggles with depression were entangled within a larger net of emotions and circumstances which triggered his depressive moods. In his own words these were made up of a '[s]olitary life, limited circumstances, a phlegmatic habit, and disagreeable events [...]'.<sup>372</sup> It is interesting that idleness is not mentioned in his list of grievances, considering that he mentions the issue in much of his correspondence in which he talks of his depression. He informed Graves

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<sup>371</sup> *Columella*, I. p. 37.

<sup>372</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 295 (16 February 1750-1).

in a letter written in 1741 that ‘I have filled my paper, not without difficulty, through the barrenness of my brain and situation’.<sup>373</sup> In 1742 he writes:

I am so unhappy in my wintry, unvisited state. [...] I am miserable, to think that I have not thought enough to amuse me. I walk a day together; and have no idea, but what comes in at my eyes. [...] If you chance to think of a subject which you do not chuse to *adorn* yourself, send it to me to *write upon*.<sup>374</sup>

Here we can see the reality of his seclusion and the idleness of his existence dawning upon him. The first thing to notice is the similarity between the letter to Mr Hull, discussed in the previous section, which was written in 1761 at the end of his life at The Leasowes, and this letter written in 1742 at the beginning of his retired lifestyle. To Hull, Shenstone categorically stated: ‘It is most certain, that no Men are fit for Solitude, but those who find the Source of Amusement and Employment in themselves.’<sup>375</sup> In the letter to Graves he fears that he does not have ‘thought enough’ to amuse himself. But Shenstone is not saying that he has nothing within, merely that he feared it would not be enough to sustain him and stave off his depression. As with the author of *Spectator* 316, it was the endless amount of time Shenstone felt obliged to fill and which he can envisage stretching ahead of him that is both shocking and problematical for him.<sup>376</sup>

In *Rambler* 6, Johnson writes:

those whom fortune has let loose to their own conduct; who not being chained down by their condition to a regular and stated allotment of their hours, are obliged to find themselves business or diversion, and having nothing within that can entertain or employ them, are compelled to try all the arts of destroying time.<sup>377</sup>

Johnson’s comment suggests that such a person as Shenstone, with all his potential, would eventually feel compelled to ‘destroy’ time in order to save his sanity. This is

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., p. 33 (23 September 1741).

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., p. 61 (November 1742).

<sup>375</sup> See p. 137.

<sup>376</sup> See p. 44.

<sup>377</sup> *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, 3 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), III, p. 31 (No. 6, 7 April 1750).

not the Horatian notion of retirement or the retirement of Johnson's *Dictionary*. Unlike Horace, Shenstone was 'not satisfied with his lot'; he did not have Pope's contentment; nor did he find Pomfret's 'ease and satisfaction' in his idle lifestyle, and for much of the time there were no friends with whom he could discuss literature.

Shenstone suspected at the very beginning of his new life at the Leasowes that the retired lifestyle may not agree with him psychologically: 'though I very highly approve it, and envy it, my particular turn of mind would be as little satisfied with it, as it is like to be in a *different* one.'<sup>378</sup> But even with these misgivings, for a young man with little experience in anything other than university life, the reality must have come as something of a shock. There were certainly many things he should have considered before making his decision. But Johnson's moral essays in the *Rambler* and *Idler*, highlighting the potential dangers to one's mental health that a retired life could induce, had not yet been written.<sup>379</sup> Neither had Cowper's poem, 'Retirement', published in 1782, with its warning, 'A life of ease a difficult pursuit'.<sup>380</sup> Nor had Graves's *Columella*, the main theme being '[t]he disappointment and unhappiness [...] which too frequently attend this prevailing love of ease and retirement'.<sup>381</sup> All of this literature was published after Shenstone had made his decision to retire.

In 1741, he wrote a letter to Jago entitled 'To a Friend [...] expressing his Dissatisfaction at the Manner of Life in which he is engaged'. In this letter we can certainly see how depressed his retired lifestyle could make him:

Now I come home from a visit—every little uneasiness is sufficient to introduce my whole train of melancholy considerations, and to make me utterly dissatisfied with the life I now lead, and the life which I foresee I shall lead. I am angry, and envious, and dejected, and frantic, and disregard all present things, just as becomes a madman to do. I am infinitely pleased (though it is a gloomy joy) with the application of Dr. Swift's complaint, "that he is forced to

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<sup>378</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, pp. 43-44 (1741 [March, 1742]).

<sup>379</sup> The *Rambler* series was published 1750- 1752 and the *Idler*, 1758-1760.

<sup>380</sup> 'Retirement', in *The Poems of William Cowper*, I, p. 394 (l. 634).

<sup>381</sup> *Columella*, I, p. 4.

die in a rage, like a poisoned rat in a hole.” My soul is no more suited to the figure I make, than a cable rope to a cambric needle:—I cannot bear to see the advantages alienated, which I think I could deserve and relish so much more than those that have them.—Nothing can give me patience but the soothing sympathy of a friend, and *that* will only turn my rage into simple melancholy.—I believe soon I shall bear to see nobody [...] for I can never bear to appear in the same stupid mediocrity for years together, and gain no ground.<sup>382</sup>

Shenstone’s ‘uneasiness’ is caused by the inner knowledge that in living a retired lifestyle he was not making full use of his potential. His mood of dejection is almost eclipsed by one of anger, envy and frustration, which, although projected outwards on others, we suspect is really directed at himself for maintaining such a lifestyle. Hence his ‘soul’ is not ‘suited to the figure’ he makes. In letters written during the early years of his retirement, ambition habitually raises its head and prevents him from relaxing into the lifestyle of a gentleman of leisure. Shenstone certainly feels trapped. But it should be remembered that this letter was written the year before he gave up his place at Oxford and it raises the question as to why, when he felt so strongly against such a lifestyle, did he cut himself off from the opportunity to escape from it?

A strong Anglican work ethic runs throughout *Columella* as to the sinfulness of living, not so much a retired lifestyle but an idle one. The moral of the tale is that those who have made full use of their youth, health and talents for the benefit of their country and lived a useful life, have every right to ‘look forward with ardent wishes towards a calm retreat’.<sup>383</sup> But it is one thing retiring after a busy life and another thing before it has even begun. It is implied that many of Shenstone’s depressive episodes were based on discontent and regret for not having followed a profession.

In the novel, the friends look back over what might have become of *Columella* had he pursued some worthwhile career, which, they claim ‘would have prevented you from growing sick of the world [...] and have relieved you from the greatest burthen of

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<sup>382</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 34 (23 September 1741).

<sup>383</sup> *Columella*, I, p. 1.

life, Time, which you now know not how to employ'.<sup>384</sup> It is ironic that it is in many of the letters Shenstone writes to Graves and Jago, the two friends who worked for their living, that he complains about the burden of excess time he finds difficulty in filling. Graves, although born to gentry, was a younger son and therefore had to earn his living and he certainly was not work-shy.<sup>385</sup> In 1755 Shenstone writes to Graves:

There is nothing I can less forgive the World than your Want of Leisure. [...] I know you to be infinitely more happy than myself, who am cloyed with it; but it would add something to my Happiness, if not to your own, that you had more vacant Spaces or Intervals of Time to employ in those refined Amusements, for which you are so exquisitely qualified.<sup>386</sup>

In Johnson's *Dictionary* the term 'Cloy' carries such negative connotations as 'to fill beyond desire' and 'to fill to loathing'.<sup>387</sup> Shenstone's use of the term suggests such negative connotations and implies that by this time he was well aware that his idle lifestyle had a negative effect on his mental state. It is significant that it is Shenstone who wishes that Graves had more time to write and not Graves himself. Graves obviously regarded his employment in the service of the church as being more beneficial to his fellow man than his writing. He managed to continue his writing career successfully alongside his ministerial work and appears to have thought it was beneficial to one's mental health to do so.

In *Columella* Graves makes a direct link between idleness, choosing to live a secluded life and the depressed state of mind that such a lifestyle can cause. He points out that *Columella*

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<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 72.

<sup>385</sup> Audrey Duggan, *The World of William Shenstone* (Warwickshire: Brewin Books, 2004). See also Duggan's remark on p. 8 '[a]fter graduating in 1736 and by means of a series of rapid promotions: from Dean of the Faculty of Arts at his college, to the Rectorship of Theology and Natural Philosophy, and in 1745, to the bursarship of his college, his future in academe seemed assured.' What is more, he augmented his income by taking the position of curate for the village of Aldsworth.

<sup>386</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 432 (21 March, 1755).

<sup>387</sup> *Dictionary*, Vol. 2 of 2 (London, 1755), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO>> [accessed 18 December 2009].

had a small family estate; which would have been a good foundation for a genteel profession: but, instead of making that use of it, he [...] retired immediately from college to the solitude and inactivity of a country life; and is now become prey to low spirits, spleen, and, I am afraid, an incurable melancholy.<sup>388</sup>

Note that Graves separates out spleen and melancholy, because they are different illnesses, and suggests that Shenstone suffered from both of these ailments. Nonsuch, who has had to work hard for his country retreat and is proud of it, cannot understand why Columella, who had been literally given the opportunity to have both a country retreat and a profession, had not taken full advantage of his privileged position.

What is surprising in the case of Shenstone is that, initially, when he feared that the retired lifestyle would not suit him, he felt unable to change his situation. He displayed an almost passive, submissive acceptance: ‘a poisoned rat in a hole.’ Indeed, this also appears to have been the opinion of many others: that Shenstone had no other choice than to live in retirement. Thomas Gray wrote in 1769: ‘poor man! he was always wishing for money, for fame, and other distinctions: and his whole philosophy consisted in living against his will in retirement [...]’.<sup>389</sup> Audrey Duggan suggests in her biography of Shenstone that his patrimony ‘was to prove a mixed blessing, removing as it did, the urgency of courting success’.<sup>390</sup> James King makes a similar remark on Cowper’s evangelicalism and subsequent retired lifestyle: ‘at a stroke it removed him from a world in which one had to strive for success.’<sup>391</sup> For both Shenstone and Cowper, the lure of the retired lifestyle was that it presented an escape from the pressure and expectations of others that they should earn a living for themselves. But, as we shall see, whereas Cowper appears to have been content to live

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<sup>388</sup> *Columella*, I, p. 8.

<sup>389</sup> *The Works of Thomas Gray*, ed. by Edmund Gosse (1895) 3: 344-45  
< <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/CommentRecord.php?action=GET&cmmid=2489> > [accessed 1 February 2010], [Thomas Gray to Norton Nicholls, 24 June 1769].

<sup>390</sup> Duggan, p. 11.

<sup>391</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1986), p. 56.

in rural retreat, for it was not his retired lifestyle that caused his mental distress, with Shenstone, the solitariness and idle nature of his existence appear to have been detrimental to his mental health.

A common assumption amongst critics is that Shenstone's depression was, to a large extent, seasonal:

[w]hat seems most to have affected his spirits was the transition of the seasons; so much so, indeed, that the editor of his correspondence, Marjorie Williams, offers conjectural datings for some letters mainly on the premise that Shenstone was invariably at his gloomiest during the winter.<sup>392</sup>

This conclusion is understandable, given that Shenstone adamantly self-diagnosed the major cause of his depressed spirits as seasonal and was insistent upon this point in his correspondence with friends. To Jago he writes:

To say I have been ill, would perhaps imply too much; when I would only allude to that state of heaviness and dejection which is so frequently my lot at this time of year; and which renders me both *averse* to writing, and utterly dissatisfied with every thing that I *do* write.<sup>393</sup>

However, although he may believe and continually refer to his depressive state as seasonal, when we examine his letters as a whole, it would appear that this was not the case, and that his depressed spirits often continued throughout the Spring and Summer. Considering that he states that he often became depressed merely anticipating the onset of Autumn, and there is evidence that he was still suffering from depressed spirits at the end of May, there was actually only a very limited period, at the most four months, when he was likely to be free from the complaint.

His closest friends, who were in a position to view his moods objectively, realised that his depression was not seasonal:

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<sup>392</sup> Terry, p. 126.

<sup>393</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 423 (22 January 1755).

The malady you complain of at present is not, I conjecture, so much owing to the Winter, as to Solitude. [...] Could you have in Winter the same Round of Company and enchanting Scenes that you enjoy in Summer, your Nerves would, I am convinced, be stronger, and your Spirits more alert.<sup>394</sup>

The practicalities of travelling by horse and carriage during winter, on isolated country roads, would have meant that Shenstone was naturally less likely to visit and be visited by others. Thus idle hours, which may have passed quickly and pleasantly in the company of others, would have dragged on interminably when spent alone. Solitude and lack of activity are also recognised as having a negative effect on both the body and the mind. Lady Luxborough writes:

I observe your aversion to Autumn continues, and that, when you find your spirits depressed, you are ready to lay the fault on the season; but I take it that solitude is the chief cause, and the nurse of painful ideas.<sup>395</sup>

In this letter she attempts to reason with Shenstone to do the very opposite of what seems to have come naturally to him when he was dejected: to withdraw into himself and stay close to home. A. R. Humphreys states of Johnson, that although '[t]he vicissitudes of his mental distress were more violent than those which Shenstone had to support [...] he could not understand a man who retreated under the attack of depression [...]'.<sup>396</sup> However, Johnson was only opposed to man retreating from society permanently. Johnson would retreat temporarily himself during particularly intense periods of depression.

Shenstone was aware at the very beginning of his retirement that he was averse to a solitary life. Michel Baridon points out that the eighteenth-century landscaped garden, considered as an art form, 'does not seem to have reflected a high degree of

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<sup>394</sup> Thomas Hull, *Select letters between the late Duchess of Somerset, Lady Luxborough, ... and others; including a sketch of the manners, laws, &c. of the republic of Venice, ... The whole now first published from original copies, by Mr. Hull*, 2 vols (London, 1778), Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unl?db=ECCO>> [accessed 24 July 2008], 1, p. 148 (Letter XL, 20 March 1753).

<sup>395</sup> Lady Luxborough, *Letters*, p. 295 (Letter LXXIX, 29 February 1752).

<sup>396</sup> A. R. Humphreys, *William Shenstone: An Eighteenth-Century Portrait* (Cambridge: University Press, 1937), p. 11.

social consciousness. Pope was alone in his grotto, and both Shenstone and Mason sang the pleasures of solitude.<sup>397</sup> However, for Shenstone there is a stark contrast between the reality of his situation and that which he chooses to portray in his poems. He writes to Graves from The Leasowes in September 1741:

though a very limited number of *friends* may be sufficient, an idle person should have a large *acquaintance*; and I believe I have the least of any one that ever rambled about so much as I have done. I do not know how it is, but I absolutely despair of ever being introduced into the world.<sup>398</sup>

At this point Shenstone naively regards companionship primarily as a social tool as opposed to a support system that would enable him to cope with his secluded lifestyle and offset the bouts of depression he would suffer from throughout the remainder of his life.

It is noticeable that Shenstone and his close friends, Lady Luxborough, Graves and Jago, rarely use the term melancholy in their correspondence to describe their own states of mind. Instead, they use the term ‘depressed spirits’ or depression itself. And this is also the case with Johnson. When Johnson uses the term melancholy, it is because he is aware that others would be able to understand the state of mind the term denoted when applied to the mind. However it was rarely a term that any of the people discussed in this thesis used when attempting to describe their own symptoms to personal acquaintances. When Shenstone describes his depressed state of mind he often refers to it as a ‘dejection of spirit’ or a ‘stupid identity’.<sup>399</sup> When he refers to this ‘stupid’ mental state, he implies more a dullness or a state of confusion: ‘with a Heart utterly depress’d & a Head equally confus’d.’<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Michel Baridon, ‘The Gentleman as Gardener: Pope, Shenstone, Mason’, *The Crisis of Courtesy: Studies in the Conduct-Book in Britain, 1600-1900*, ed. by Jacques Carré (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 129-141 (p. 129). George Mason’s *Essay on Design in Gardening* was published in 1795.

<sup>398</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 32 (23 September 1741).

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52 (1741 [June, 1742]).

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356 (April 1753).

Likewise, Lady Luxborough writes that ‘Your promise of letting me see you soon at Barrells [...] will support me in a season when high winds, bad roads, and solitude, depress me so, as to make me sometimes ready to sink under their weight’.<sup>401</sup> Here, the verb ‘depress’ describes her feelings, whereas the fact that her solitude has the power to make her ‘sink under their weight’, suggests that, at times, she suffers from a dejection far more severe than a basic lowness of spirits. However, although sufferers may have referred to their spirits as being depressed, the term depression was not recognised or used by physicians as a label for their illness.

Unlike Johnson, when Shenstone does refer to melancholy, it is usually objectively and is connected with some pleasing aspect of his garden:

[T]o mention what a Change there is in my Scheme since I first began to lay out my little Farm in Paths, etc. At First I meant them merely as Melancholy Amusements for a Person whose circumstances required a solitary Life.<sup>402</sup>

This begs the question, what type of person ‘requires a solitary life’? Is Shenstone referring to himself here, or does he mean that he created these walks as a refuge for those in need of peace and tranquility? However, a pleasing melancholy could easily tip over into an unpleasant ambience with subsequent negative psychological effects: ‘They were so,’ he states, with regard to these trails, ‘but I ever found ye solitude too deep to be agreeable.’<sup>403</sup> For Shenstone then, melancholy is usually an external factor which can have either a positive or negative influence on the mind, but he does not use it to describe the state of mind itself. This is quite unusual, given that most of the eighteenth-century physicians and ministers were labelling symptoms such as dejection of spirits under the term melancholy.

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<sup>401</sup> Baroness Henrietta Knight Luxborough, *Letters written by the late Right Honourable Lady Luxborough, to William Shenstone, Esq* (London, 1775), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 24 July 2008], p. 400 (Letter CXV, 8 December 1754).

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282 (27 June 1750).

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*

As discussed earlier, it is surprising how clear a perspective Shenstone has of the various components which constituted his general ‘disorder’. He clearly defines sensitised nerves as distinct from his depression.<sup>404</sup> Even though Shenstone rarely uses the term melancholy to describe his depression, others who write to him do. The term had a recognisable social meaning. In this respect it can be regarded as a social construct, applied by others to an eighteenth-century sufferer of depression. A Mr. H— writes to Shenstone shortly after the death of a young female friend: ‘Let me have the Pleasure, my dear Friend, to find your spirits unbroken by this shock, and endeavour to shake off the Melancholy you are too subject to indulge [...].’<sup>405</sup> This person knows Shenstone well and how he usually responds to bad news. Although the word ‘indulge’ may sound harsh, Shenstone was aware that his depressed state of mind was very often out of proportion to the event that triggered it.

When Columella’s two friends finally take their leave, their verdict on the retired life is as follows:

[T]hough we had conceived an high idea of your happiness in this retired plan of life, and in the midst of our fatigue and hurry of business quite envied your choice; yet I am now persuaded that a life of mere indolence and inactivity, must in the end prove irksome and disgusting: too great an abundance of leisure, like too great a plenty of riches, and the good things of this life, must cloy the imagination, and blunt the relish of every amusement.<sup>406</sup>

The tale of *Columella* is a perfect example of the consequences of having achieved what so many desired: an idle lifestyle and the opportunity to enjoy a greater amount of leisure time. Graves uses Shenstone’s own terminology, ‘cloy’,<sup>407</sup> to describe the negative effect on one’s mental health of having too much leisure and not enough to do.

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<sup>404</sup> See p. 28.

<sup>405</sup> Hull, *Select Letters*, I, p. 210 (Letter LIV, 2 April 1754). The female friend was Miss Dolman.

<sup>406</sup> *Columella*, II, p. 171.

<sup>407</sup> See p. 147.

It is suggested by Columella's friends that leisure time has to be earned and feel deserved in order to be satisfying and beneficial to one's mental health.

## IV

### Gardening: Cause or Cure?

The Horatian poems referred to earlier in this chapter paint a picture of a simple lifestyle with no need for the trappings of society to fulfil one's needs. Such rural retreats could be construed as man's attempt to create his own personal Eden. However, when we examine them more closely, it is not a hermit-like retreat to nature that these poets aspire to, but to a carefully constructed piece of land belonging to the person. As soon as we take this into consideration the notion of retirement changes: from a passive acceptance of, and return to, nature, into an active attempt to change and create. Depending on the scale of the task, and Shenstone's task in creating the Leasowes was immense, the place of relaxation can become a place of work. With this labour, in most cases a labour of love, comes the inevitable range of emotions: delight, a sense of achievement, elation and pride. However, it can also cause disappointment, anger, frustration and despair.

Johnson wrote of Shenstone's Leasowes that '[h]e spent his estate in adorning it, and his death was probably hastened by his anxieties. He was a lamp that spent its oil in blazing'.<sup>408</sup> Isaac Disraeli stated in 1791:

The life of Shenstone was passed in an amusement which was to him an eternal source of disappointment and anguish. [...] His feeling mind was often pained by those invidious comparisons which the vulgar were perpetually making with the stately scenes of Hagley's neighbouring magnificence.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Johnson, *Lives*, IV, p. 128.

<sup>409</sup> Isaac Disraeli, *Curiosities of literature. Consisting of anecdotes, characters, sketches, and observations, literary, critical, and historical*, Vol. II (London, 1791)  
<<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=rVkUAAAQAAJ&pg=PR3&dq=Isaac+Disraeli,+Curiosities+of+literature.+Consisting+of+anecdotes,+characters,+sketches,+and+observations,+literary,+critical,+and+historical.+London,+1791.&cd=1#v=onepage&q=hagley's&f=false>> [accessed 21 January 2010], p. 82.

Here, it is not the fact that Shenstone's time and energy were regarded as idle 'amusement' that is the focus of attention, but rather that his efforts brought him little joy.

Critics have suggested that Shenstone may have turned to landscape gardening as some kind of therapy for an existing depression. Humphreys proposes: 'alternating between a listless dissatisfaction and a lively sense of enjoyment, he attempted to banish the one and foster the other by cultivating the art of landscape.'<sup>410</sup> Terry also suggests that 'Shenstone landscaped for peace of mind even as his obsessive desire for improvement ravaged his equanimity'.<sup>411</sup> Bending also suggests that the gardens of Shenstone and his friend and neighbour, Lady Luxborough, provided an aid to offset their depression, that a garden 'at least diverts the mind from melancholy and the troubles of life'.<sup>412</sup> Shenstone would not have been alone in regarding the actual act of creating a garden as a remedy for depression. In a letter to Christopher Wren he writes:

You Sir, I presume, proceed in the innocent recreations of your garden, and those may at least prove a balance for any small disquiets that attend you. If greater ills befall you, you have persons near you to alleviate them.—A wife, family, visitants, male and female friends in abundance, and a table sufficiently hospitable to attract even your enemies. With me the case is otherwise.<sup>413</sup>

So here gardening is regarded as a therapy for a dejected state of mind, but significantly, only when the cause is 'small'. This implies that he did not regard it as enough of an occupation to offset a major bout of depression.

Although we have already considered the notion of retiring from society as a form of escapism, this only amounts to removing oneself one level. However, creating a private environment for oneself within that retired lifestyle removes the sufferer of depression still further and places him or her at least two levels removed from society.

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<sup>410</sup> Humphreys, p. 72.

<sup>411</sup> Terry, p. 128.

<sup>412</sup> Bending, 2000, p. 126.

<sup>413</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 335 (no date).

The benefit of a garden is that it offers an easily accessible and, importantly, temporary retreat, which one can move in and out of at will. It is this ease of transition and lack of restriction that appears to have been beneficial to the depressed mental state.

Montagu, for instance, writes

When I am sitting in my garden, I can add myself to the whole map of created beings. I consider some insects feeding on a flower which like them was call'd forth by the rising sun. [...] My imagination can travel on, till it gets to those planets whose revolution round the sun is many years in accomplishing....My hopes, fears, desires, interests, are all lost in the vast ocean of infinity & Eternity. Dare I find fault with the form or fashion of any thing that relates to me in the presence of him before whom all modes & forms pass away. [...] From these thoughts I draw a philosophick peace & tranquillity [...].<sup>414</sup>

In this kind of secure, relaxed, environment Montagu appears to have developed, not only a sense of proportion but also, a sense of perspective for any concerns which may have preyed on her mind and dejected her spirits. It is also worth considering that, for Montagu, there is a very strong sense of spiritual connection with her garden, a factor that appears to be missing for Shenstone. Baridon suggests that Shenstone 'saw the gardener as a poet, but a poet whose inspiration sprang from the natural world'.<sup>415</sup>

Harvey suggests of the 'Horatian Cult of Retirement' that it developed because city and court life was just 'not quite right for one's peace of mind'.<sup>416</sup> However, Johnson and Graves would have disagreed. Tracy argues that the main point of *Columella* 'is one that meant much to Graves himself and that Johnson would have agreed with, that happiness is not to be found in solitude and self-gratification but in integrating oneself into a community and contributing actively to its welfare'.<sup>417</sup> But for the person suffering from a depressed state of mind, the need to retreat from society, either physically or psychologically, was as apparent then as it is now.

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<sup>414</sup> Bending, 2006, p. 555.

<sup>415</sup> Baridon, p. 136.

<sup>416</sup> Harvey, p. 3.

<sup>417</sup> Tracy, p. 140.

It is tempting to consider that Shenstone may have turned to gardening as a therapy. With his usual dip in spirits after visiting friends, or in this case after Lady Luxborough has visited him, he states

Now, indeed, Summer has forsaken me likewise; the Trees and Groves are stripped of their Covering, and I am left without any Fence against Spleen, Vapours, Megrim, Discontent, and a numerous Train of such Sort of Beings, which plague me to Death, whenever I offer to recollect your Absence.<sup>418</sup>

Here, it is implied that his garden acted as a practical barrier against his nervous complaints and melancholy disposition, the foliage delighting his senses and lifting his spirits. In the spring and summer his garden would also have needed much tending and, as a consequence, his thoughts would have been preoccupied and drawn outwards in a creative way. There would also have been the added benefit that the natural sunlight of the summer months would have done much to lift his spirits.

However, when Shenstone is depressed, his garden often appears to add to his dejected state rather than alleviate it. Autumn appears to have been a particularly oppressive time for him:

It is not *Youth*, God knows, but a kind of premature Old-Age yt makes me bid Autumn less welcome yn I should otherwise do. [...] [I]t reminds one of past Pleasure [...] & also of approaching Pain, It seems to centre in itself rather too *much* of ye douce Melancholie [...] Autumn obtrudes its pensive Look in every nook & Corner. If it paints my Grove with ever so many colours, Those Colours are the symptoms of *Decay*.<sup>419</sup>

Autumn appears to remind Shenstone of his own mortality, even though at the time of writing this letter he was only thirty four years old, an age when you would not expect him to be too overly concerned with death. His depressive moods appear to have focused his attention on the subject of death, although he is aware that this is unreasonable for a man of his age, hence the 'premature kind of old age'. The Countess

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<sup>418</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, pp. 49-50 (Early 1742?).

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174 (9 November 1748).

of Hertford, who writes frequently to Lady Luxborough and, who also held Shenstone in high regard, does not agree with him on this point:

I am sorry I cannot agree with him, in his Dislike to *Autumn*. On the contrary, I draw one Motive of my Partiality to it, from a similar Cause to what he partly ascribes his Aversion: he hates it as a Seson which deprived him of a friend; I love it, because the latest Days my Heart could boast of Happiness, in the best and most beloved of sons, were in that Time of the year [...]. Every Thing around me seemed to sympathize in my Distress, and still at every melancholy Anniversary of my ever-to-be-lamented Loss, put on the same friendly Appearance of social sorrow [...].<sup>420</sup>

The Countess is comforted by what she regards as nature's empathy, whereas for Shenstone, the contrast of life and death appears too stark and cruel. This depression stays with him throughout the winter months, when bad weather would have made travelling treacherous, if not impossible, and as a consequence he would have been deprived of his much-needed company. At certain times, when he is particularly depressed, such as in 1752 after the death of his brother, his dislike of his home and his garden is tangible:

I should thank you for your remarks upon my poetry; but I despise poetry: and I might tell of all my little rural improvements; but I hate them.—What can I now expect from my solitary rambles through them, but a series of melancholy reflections and irksome anticipations?<sup>421</sup>

But we can understand this. His home now would arouse memories of suffering and abject sorrow and his thoughts would have been concentrated on his loss rather than on his writing. After the death of his closest remaining relative, Shenstone would surely have been more aware of the solitariness of his existence than ever.

It is interesting to see from just the few examples discussed in this chapter just how many gardens were created as a result of mental pain and desolation. Harvey says that Horace, having had his land confiscated from him, was eventually given a farm near Tivoli and it was here that he may have written his hymn to rural retirement. Pope,

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<sup>420</sup> Hull, *Select Letters*, I, p. 83 (Letter XXIII, 20 November 1748).

<sup>421</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 333 (14 February 1752).

who was ostracised for being a Catholic, developed his garden at Twickenam. The gardens which were developed at Stourhead in Wiltshire in the 1740's by Henry Hoare, the banker, were created after the deaths of his wife and two of his children.<sup>422</sup> Even Montagu's garden appears to have been developed, initially from a sense of dejection in her 'loveless marriage' and having lost her only child at the age of two. Bending states that her 'life in the country was at times something of a forced retirement, with her husband often elsewhere but insisting she go there rather than stay in London'.<sup>423</sup>

Although it is likely that there were many landscaped gardens developed throughout the eighteenth century which have no connection whatsoever with their owners' state of depression, the connection between psychological pain and the cultivation of a garden is often apparent. As we have seen in this chapter, gardening was regarded as a means of reclaiming a sense of identity, of belonging, as with Pope and Horace. In the case of Henry Hoare, it was a means of occupying one's time so completely that it distracted the mind from issues too painful to dwell on or deal with. Cultivation of the garden appears to have provided both a place of contemplation and given a sense of power back to Montagu in her enforced retirement, albeit a temporary, fashionable retreat from society.

One female whose retirement was both enforced and permanent was Shenstone's friend and fellow keen gardener, Lady Luxborough. Having been accused by her husband of having had an affair, Lady Luxborough had her children taken from her and was, in a sense, exiled to the country for the remainder of her days. There she lived in a somewhat dilapidated house, on a comparatively small income. As with Shenstone, from that small income she managed to transform her home and landscape her gardens.

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<sup>422</sup> James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700 – 1789*, 2nd edn (London: Longman Group Uk, 1993), p. 188. For a description of Pope's garden see p. 163.

<sup>423</sup> Bending, 2006, p. 561.

Shenstone's letters to Lady Luxborough are filled with plans for creating paths and streams for his garden and questions as to which wallpapers and coverings he should choose for his rooms. The urge to change their environment is apparent in all of these depressive characters.

At a superficial level, the cultivation of the eighteenth-century landscape garden was, for some, nothing more than a status symbol. For others, it provided a temporary retreat from the pleasures of the city as in the case of Montagu, or as a temporary escape from the world of business as with the character Nonsuch. For others, it was significant at a far deeper, psychological level, as a way of escaping from emotional pain. However, it is difficult to say definitely that gardening for Shenstone was a therapy for or prevention against his depressive moods because his attitude towards his garden fluctuates. From what we now know of the eighteenth-century melancholic, the mind of the sufferer often became fixed on one particular thing and perhaps for Shenstone this was his garden. Maybe Bending is too harsh in regarding Shenstone's obsession with landscape gardening as merely a means of social climbing. It is indeed likely that his anxieties over and obsession with his garden stemmed from his disorder rather than being the cause of it.

## The Perception of Idleness

In a letter to Mr. Hull, Shenstone states that ‘no Men are fit for Solitude, but those who find the Source of Amusement and Employment in themselves’.<sup>424</sup> In this letter he refers both to amusement and employment, employment being an ‘object of industry’ or an ‘object of labour’.<sup>425</sup> The major achievement of Shenstone’s life was the creation of his garden. At the beginning of this chapter I referred to the fact that Shenstone’s critics paid an unusual amount of interest as to whether his retired lifestyle had been successful or not. Their verdict would partly have rested on the individual’s interpretation of idleness and whether they believed he had used his time productively or whether he had wasted it in idle pursuits. However, it is never made clear whether he regarded the use of his own talents as mere ‘amusement’, or whether he regarded it as employment. Both Johnson and Disraeli referred to Shenstone’s efforts and gardening skills as an ‘amusement’. But the interpretation of the term is subjective and shifts in accordance with social changes.

We can track the changing attitudes towards Shenstone’s life and achievements over the centuries. Anna Seward notes that Shenstone had

lived in happy times, when England was wise and great, the arbitress of Europe, at leisure to investigate the claims of classical talents; and the claims of Shenstone, genuine as they were modest, passed not away without their fame. National danger [...] drowned not the tones of his silver lyre.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 608 (26 November 1761).

<sup>425</sup> *Dictionary*, Vol. 1, 1755.

<sup>426</sup> *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807*, 6 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, William Miller, and John Murray, 1811), p. 50 (13 February 1798) <<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=uXo4AAAIAAJ&pg=PA50&dq=tones+of+his+silver+lyre&cd=8#v=onepage&q=tones%20of%20his%20silver&f=false>> [accessed 21 January 2010].

Seward looks back on a social order which existed in England pre-French and Industrial Revolutions. She has a romantic notion of the privileged, literary gentleman living in retirement. Seward regards Shenstone's idle lifestyle as a perfectly acceptable attribute for a man of his social standing and literary talents.

Shenstone was very aware that he had many idle hours to fill and that for much of that time he chose to be idle. Even though his time was 'occupied' it was very often occupied with idle pastimes. In a letter to Christopher Wren he writes: 'The principle part of a correspondence betwixt two idle men consists in two important enquiries—what we do, and how we do. [...] [T]ouching my occupation, alas! [...] I neither read nor write aught besides a few letters.'<sup>427</sup> His relaxed approach to his publisher Dodsley's pleas, that he should send him finished work so that he could get on with his business of publishing it, often fell on deaf ears:

You and I shall hardly agree about the *Means of estimating* Letters; you [...] are desirous to value them by their *Weight*; while I, conscious of my late *Industry*, would fix their Value by the Number of *Words*. [...] Is not *Industry* a *Moral Virtue*? And are not many written Words a *Proof* of Industry? [...] If then, Industry be a Virtue, I am possessed of it very remarkably: Not a Moment of my Time passes, but I am employed, either in overseeing Labourers; reading ROBINSON'S *History of Scotland*; writing in my Paper Books [...] perplexing the *Birmingham Artists* with Sketches for Improvements in their Manufactures [...] feeding my Poultry, my Ducks, my Pigeons, and my Swans.<sup>428</sup>

Dodsley was a businessman with an eye set on production, deadlines and turning a profit, whereas what Shenstone regarded as a busy schedule, although surely written in jest, would be regarded as recreational for most businessmen. Dodsley could be forgiven for perceiving Shenstone as idle, for wasting his time on the trivial pursuit of creating a garden at the expense of his writing career. However, in Dodsley's

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<sup>427</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 340 (22 July 1752).

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 507-508 (31 March 1759).

estimation this was not the case and he refers to The Leasowes as ‘the perfect paradise he had raised around him’.<sup>429</sup>

Others were less sure. Johnson considers Shenstone’s achievements in *The Lives*:

Whether to plant a walk in undulating curves, and to place a bench at every turn [...] demands any great powers of mind, I will not enquire; perhaps a sullen or surly speculator may think such performances rather the sport rather than the business of human reason. But it must be at least confessed, that to embellish the form of Nature is an innocent amusement.<sup>430</sup>

Although Johnson praised the end result of Shenstone’s efforts he does not regard the effort as a serious, and therefore useful, employment of his time. However, in George Mason’s *Essay on Design in Gardening* published in 1795, Shenstone is deemed, amongst others, as a major figure in English garden history, whereas ‘Capability’ Brown, a professional landscape gardener who was paid for his services, is regarded by Mason as a man who practises an ‘mechanical art’.<sup>431</sup> The term ‘mechanical’ is used in a derogatory fashion here and is directly related to Brown’s paid employment as opposed to the creative talents of Shenstone. Shenstone’s use of his talents is held in highest regard and his efforts are no longer regarded as idle amusements. In a letter to Graves, Shenstone writes:

I question whether I should be more unhappy in any mere *mechanical* employment; for instance, making nails (which seems to deal as much in *repetition* as any trade), than I am in great part of my time when my head is unfit for study.<sup>432</sup>

Shenstone, like Mason, uses the term ‘mechanical’ in a derogatory fashion. In this instance it is used to imply menial skills carried out by those of lower intelligence than himself. They are trained to do a job and it is implied that such employees would not

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<sup>429</sup> Shenstone, *Men and Manners*, p. iv.

<sup>430</sup> Johnson, *Lives*, p. 127.

<sup>431</sup> Bending, 1994, p. 224.

<sup>432</sup> *Letters of William Shenstone*, p. 63 (February 1743).

have the capacity to think for themselves, hence their dependence on the repetitive nature of their work. The significance is that Shenstone regards his time spent in ‘study’ as far superior and more difficult than those who earn their living in a repetitive job. Shenstone does not regard himself as idle in this respect.

However, David Parkes, writing under the pseudonym, “Mr Urban” in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1823 states:

Dr. Johnson insinuates that the Poet’s House was *mean*, and much *neglected*, which was not by any means correct; for, as his friend Graves observes, "There was the same genius discovered in improving his house as in whatever else he undertook; for he often made his operators perform what they represented as impracticable." He gave his hall a considerable magnificence, by sinking the floor, and giving it an altitude of 12 feet, instead of nine. By his own good taste and mechanical skill, he acquired several very respectable, if not elegant rooms, from a mere farm house, of diminutive dimensions.<sup>433</sup>

Here Shenstone’s skills are regarded as ‘mechanical’ but in a positive sense. The term places Shenstone’s labour on a more industrious, professional footing. Interestingly, given his portrayal of Shenstone in *Columella*, the language Graves uses is also of an industrial age. For instance Shenstone is said to have ‘made his operators perform’. Shenstone’s skills are perceived as having been utilized in a project management capacity. In this respect both Graves and ‘Mr. Urban’ appreciate Shenstone’s talents and there is no suggestion that Shenstone’s use of them was in ‘idle’ or ‘innocent’ amusement. Norman Callan, writing in the twentieth century, suggests that the retired lifestyle entailed ‘turning from ambition to usefulness’ and he gives as an example ‘the arts of the landscape gardener, as in Shenstone’s *Rural Elegance*’.<sup>434</sup> By this time

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<sup>433</sup> David Parkes, ‘The Leasowes. – History of Staffordshire.’ *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol 93, part 2, August 1823  
<<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6qkJNy3q6q8C&pg=PA105&dq=He+gave+his+hall+a+considerable+magnificence,&cd=1#v=onepage&q=&f=false>> [accessed 21 January 2010], p. 105.

<sup>434</sup> Norman Callan, ‘Augustan Reflective Poetry’, *From Dryden to Johnson, The Pelican Guide to English Literature* ed. by Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, First published 1957, reprinted with revisions to Part IV 1980), pp. 346-371 (p. 351).

Shenstone's 'innocent amusement' is regarded as a justified profession and it carries the credible title of 'landscape gardener'.

Shenstone appears to have been, and remained, largely unaffected by the moral and religious debates which raged on the subject of idleness throughout his lifetime. Although others passed censure on his decision to retire and perceived his lifestyle as being a waste of his talent and education, Shenstone appears not to have regarded it as such. As to how his lifestyle affected his mental health, although he was adamant that his depression was largely seasonal, close friends, who were able to view his illness more objectively, did not agree. Those acquaintances who lived similar retired lifestyles believed that his melancholy was often caused by the solitariness of his lifestyle. In the correspondence between these friends, the topic of idleness was rarely, if ever, discussed and they did not regard it as a possible cause of his dejection. Interestingly, it is in the correspondence with friends who worked for a living that Shenstone mentions his concerns as to his own idleness. It is these friends who regarded idleness as being a major cause of the poet's melancholy. Graves in particular was very aware of just how depressing an idle lifestyle could be.

# Chapter Five

## The 'Black Dog' Revisited

### I

#### Samuel Johnson

Although idleness may not have been an issue for Shenstone on moral grounds, for Samuel Johnson it was a very different matter. For Johnson, although it was a necessity that he earn a living, he also regarded it his duty as a Christian to employ his time productively for the benefit of others. Dennis Hall suggests that 'Johnson proved the very model of the self-made man, a person for whom work is a special virtue [...] and for whom idleness was an ever present personal and social danger'.<sup>435</sup> It may seem strange that Hall should refer to idleness as a 'personal danger'. It raises the question as to why such a prolific writer as Johnson could be so concerned with and perceive himself as idle. To understand what Hall means by 'personal danger', I want to examine in this chapter the connection between Johnson's concerns with idleness and his struggle with his 'vile melancholy'.<sup>436</sup> I will argue that to understand Johnson's struggle with depression we have also to understand his issue with idleness, and in order to do this we have to consider his religious beliefs. The three are inextricably linked.

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<sup>435</sup> Dennis Hall, 'On Idleness: Dr. Johnson on Millennial Malaise', *Kentucky Philological Review*, 15 (2001), 28-32 (p. 29).

<sup>436</sup> Boswell, *Life*, p. 16.

For instance, his religious convictions invariably encroach upon discussions of his physical idleness, which in turn often lead to discussion of his depressed mental state.

I will suggest that when Johnson refers to his own idleness, he means first and foremost a spiritual idleness: that he believed he made too little mental and physical effort to live a devout life. At other times he does literally mean a physical idleness, in that he believed he consistently did not do enough with his God-given talents to help others as part of that devout life. However, idleness for Johnson was also the kind of mental and physical sluggishness which we today would recognise as a symptom of depression. The surprising and sad thing is that, although Johnson often recognised and allowed for this fact in others, he was totally unforgiving of his own idleness and rarely, if ever, regarded it as a symptom of his illness. This chapter will examine all of these different facets of Johnson's idleness.

Closely linked with the image we have of Johnson as one of the eighteenth century's most well known melancholics are his general pessimistic views on the subject of happiness. Consequently he is often perceived by critics as a somewhat morose character. In much of his literature, he frequently writes on the futility of man's search for happiness and from this it is assumed that he means that happiness can never be attained in this life. Our interpretation of his views on happiness fits with the preconceived mental image we have of him: that of the morbid melancholic labouring under the influence of the 'black dog'. Critics expect to see this theory reflected in his literature. However, I will argue that there is a general misinterpretation of the term 'happiness'. I will argue that what the majority of us regard as happiness and what Johnson regarded as happiness are two entirely different things. At the end of this chapter I will give an independent reading of *Rasselas*, arguing against the general interpretation of the narrative: that it portrays man's futile search for happiness. I will

argue that the character's symptoms amount to something far more acute than mere boredom or indolence and that his idleness can be interpreted as both a major cause of and symptom of his depressed mental state.

## II

### Robert Burton and William Law

Although Johnson states that he suffered from melancholy all of his life, he appears to have suffered two particularly severe bouts of depression, what we today would perhaps regard as nervous breakdowns. The first was at the age of twenty, shortly after he left Oxford in the winter vacation of 1729, having been there for only thirteen months. The second occurred in 1766, although W. Jackson Bate does state that there is evidence to suggest that Johnson's depression had become progressively more acute from 1760.<sup>437</sup> His workload during this period was immense; he finished the Shakespeare edition and wrote the *Preface* 1764-65. Whether this in itself caused mental exhaustion which triggered his melancholy, or whether he used work to keep his mind occupied we shall never know. Although he despised the influence of his melancholy, Johnson accepted it as part of his life; but idleness was the one aspect of melancholy which, in his own character, he could never accept. The negative influence of idleness appears always paramount to his thinking, his attitude towards life and the advice he offers to others. Johnson openly warns of the dangers to one's mental health that idleness could cause.

Two authors in particular appear to have had a huge impact on the way Johnson viewed and coped with his own depression and idleness. The first was William Law and his work *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, a book whose impact on Johnson, according to the biographer W. Jackson Bate, was 'in a way nothing less than profound'.<sup>438</sup> The second author was Robert Burton and his *Anatomy of Melancholy*,

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<sup>437</sup> W. Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, 1977), p. 371.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

which, Johnson stated, was ‘the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise’.<sup>439</sup> Considering the amount of literature Johnson read in his lifetime, this is no small compliment. For Johnson to single out this book suggests that he was able to acquire a great deal of instruction, and comfort, from it. Whether Law’s influence helped Johnson or exacerbated his anxiety and depression is a matter for debate.

Johnson first became acquainted with Law’s work whilst at Oxford. Although he read *A Serious Call* with, he admits, the intention ‘perhaps to laugh at it’,<sup>440</sup> he admitted to Boswell that ‘I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational inquiry’.<sup>441</sup> *A Serious Call* is a book of moral and spiritual instruction and in it Law is unrelenting in his opinion of what constitutes a devout life, which, significantly, he believes is the only way man can ever hope to achieve happiness in this life and in the life hereafter. He is particularly dogmatic when he writes on the subject of idleness. According to Law, man was given many talents by God. In Johnson’s case these would have included, amongst others, his vast intellect, his reason and his ability to write. Regardless of what station in life a man was born to, according to Law, he or she must use these talents productively and, most importantly, for the benefit of others. On this point, like so many others in Law’s philosophy, there was not the slightest amount of room for manoeuvre.

The spiritual form of idleness which Johnson struggled with consisted of him believing that he did not do everything in his power to live a devout life and that he did not do everything physically possible to help others as part of that devout life. In a prayer written on Easter Sunday 1759, Johnson writes: ‘Give me thy Grace to break the

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<sup>439</sup> Boswell, *Life*, 1, p. 390.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 36.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, p. 36.

chain of evil custom. Enable me to shake off idleness and sloth [...] that I may support myself and relieve others.’<sup>442</sup> In this instance idleness and sloth are referred to as unwelcome and overpowering forces which it was his duty to resist and ‘shake off’. He also suggests that it was an influence which he all too often allowed to overpower him. It is his inability to resist idleness and sloth that he perceives as ‘evil’ and which makes him so unforgiving of himself. It is crucial to understand the religious philosophy behind Johnson’s anxieties over idleness if we are to understand what he means by the term and to prevent us from viewing his ‘idleness’ as mere boredom or laziness.

According to Law, all sins, whether gross or small were to be regarded as equal in their magnitude, for they were to be regarded as sins against God. Law preaches:

let us judge our selves sincerely, let us not vainly content our selves with the common disorders of our lives, the *vanity* of our expences, the *folly* of our diversions, [...] the *idleness* of our lives, and the *wasting* of our time [...] we must not look upon our selves in a state of common and pardonable imperfection.<sup>443</sup>

With strong Calvinistic undertones, Law states that the individual alone would know whether he or she had in fact succeeded in this task. Only at the hour of their death, assured by the inner knowledge that they had lived a devout life, would they know if they would receive eternal happiness in heaven: ‘The best way for anyone to know how much he ought to aspire after holiness, is to consider, not how much will make his present life easy, but to ask himself, how much he thinks will make him easy at the hour of death.’<sup>444</sup>

Just how great a burden Law’s religious philosophy would become to Johnson, although he would never regard it as a burden himself, can be judged by examining

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<sup>442</sup> *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. by E. L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958- ), I, p. 69.

<sup>443</sup> William Law, *A serious call to a devout and holy life. Adapted to the state and condition of all orders of Christians* (London, 1729), Eighteenth Century Collections Online

< <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> > [accessed 28 September 2007], p. 25.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

some of his personal prayers. A prayer he wrote on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1736, the day of his twenty-eighth birthday and nine years after he first read Law, clearly shows just how closely he tried to follow Law's guidelines:

Mayst thou, O God, enable me, for Jesus Christ's sake, to spend this in such a manner, that I may receive comfort from it at the hour of death, and in the day of judgment. Amen.<sup>445</sup>

The use of his time is of paramount importance to Johnson and, for such a young man, it is conspicuous that his mind should be so clearly focused on his future demise. It reveals the extent to which he tried to follow Law's severe stricture of self-analysis. Law stated that we must know ourselves intimately and be aware of our weaknesses.

Peter Martin comments on *A Serious Call*:

The book called the reader to private rather than public prayer, making religion a personal and individual affair between him and God. There was hope in that but it was also a double-edged sword. 'Every man knows something worse of himself than he is sure of in others'— in Johnson's words this was one of Law's recurring themes that deeply penetrated his psyche. The battle would be fought in his mind, not in church.<sup>446</sup>

To understand what Martin means by this it is necessary to explain more about Law's religious philosophy.

Law called for daily scrutiny of the individual's actions and, far more psychologically damaging, the reasoning behind those actions. According to Law, the individual must live a devout life because he truly wishes to and not purely in the hope of being saved. Every action carried out and every hour spent was therefore open to self-scrutiny. The amount of psychological soul-searching called for must have led to anything but a settled mind. It begs the question, if one was consciously analysing how one spent one's time, how would one feel about relaxation, which, as discussed

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<sup>445</sup> *Prayers and Annals*, p. 36.

<sup>446</sup> Peter Martin, *Samuel Johnson: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), p. 80.

previously, was considered important for good mental health.<sup>447</sup> Although we can regard Law as a severe task-master, he does ask the question: '[w]hat is more innocent than *rest* and *retirement*? And yet what more dangerous, than sloth and idleness?'<sup>448</sup> I suggest that Johnson became so anxious about being idle that eventually he was unable to differentiate between sloth, idleness and deserved relaxation.

It is hard to imagine why such a philosophy as Law's would have made such an instant and powerful impression on the young Johnson, who until that point had found works of religious philosophy 'dull'.<sup>449</sup> Having said this, Law claims that 'So true is it, that the *more* we live by the rules of religion, the more peaceful and happy do we render our lives'.<sup>450</sup> In the mind of the depressed Johnson, the power of these words and the simplicity of the instruction must have been compelling: live a truly devout and pious life, use your talents willingly for the benefit of others and you will live with peace of mind and be happy. Although it has often been acknowledged by critics that Law had an immense effect on Johnson, few have written upon the subject in any great depth. One of the first was Katherine C. Balderston who regarded *A Serious Call* as a definite

contributing cause of the serious attack of depression which began in December 1729. [...] It appears to me that it was not Johnson's failure to live up to general Christian standards, but his failure to live up to *Law's* conception of the Christian life, which dragged Johnson down to despair and precipitated his depression.<sup>451</sup>

Balderston notes the negative impact that Law may have had on Johnson.

However, in a conversation with Boswell, Johnson admitted that although religion had at one point 'dropped' out of his mind he states that '[i]t was at an early

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<sup>447</sup> See p. 153.

<sup>448</sup> *A Serious Call*, p. 94.

<sup>449</sup> Boswell, *Life*, 1, p. 36.

<sup>450</sup> *A Serious Call*, p. 165.

<sup>451</sup> Katherine C. Balderston, 'Doctor Johnson and William Law', *PMLA*, 75.4 (September 1960), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/460600>> [accessed 18 December 2009], 382-394 (p. 384).

part of my life. Sickness brought it back, and I hope I have never lost it since.<sup>452</sup> From such evidence it appears that Johnson had been suffering from depression when he first turned to Law. Martin states that in November 1729, the month before Johnson left Oxford,

in an effort to get down to study, he made a self-disciplining table of how much reading he could get done in a week, month and year if he read ten pages per day [...] Such computations would become almost chronic with him as he struggled to impose a sense of order on a sense of disorder.<sup>453</sup>

This compulsive list-making stayed with him throughout the rest of his life. It may have been a symptom of depression or it could have been a coping mechanism which saved him from falling into complete depression-induced indolence. The positive side to Law's strict guidelines on how one should account for and spend one's time, is that they could have provided the only motivation for Johnson to pull himself out of a depressive mood.

Although Johnson read many other books on religion throughout his life,<sup>454</sup> as Law's was the first to have impressed and indeed 'overmatched' him, then it is quite likely Law's philosophy on religion would have had the strongest influence. However, it appears to have been much easier in theory than it was to put into practice. Indeed, Balderston suggests that '[w]hat Law actually demands of all Christians is saintliness'.<sup>455</sup> The Methodist leader John Wesley, who had also become an enthusiastic follower of Law's doctrine whilst at Oxford, would eventually reject Law's philosophy, claiming that he and his followers found it 'too high for man. [...] Both they and I were more and more convinced, that this is a law by which a man cannot live [...]'.<sup>456</sup> We

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<sup>452</sup> Boswell, *Life* p. 457.

<sup>453</sup> Martin, p. 77.

<sup>454</sup> J. C. D. Clark, *Samuel Johnson: Literature, religion and English cultural politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; repr. 1995), p. 135.

<sup>455</sup> Balderston, p. 393.

<sup>456</sup> Gerda J. Joling-van der Sar, 'The Controversy Between William Law and John Wesley', *English Studies*, 87.4 (August 2006), 442-465 (p. 443).

should take into account that Law eventually lived an almost monastic life in retirement, whereas Johnson obviously lived amongst society with all of its pressures. Gerda J. Joling-van der Sar makes the same point about Wesley: ‘Law lived a tranquil life. In contrast to John Wesley, who showed such widespread activity and was known to thousands of people [...].’<sup>457</sup> Balderston notes of the incredibly strict prayer regimes Law advised which involved rising at five and praying six times a day: ‘How anyone but a man of leisure could meet this schedule is hard to conceive, but that is beside the point.’<sup>458</sup> However, in the context of this chapter it is a very apt point. Having said this, we should remember that although Law berated the idle, he was not referring to those labouring under the influence of depression. To be fair, Law did say his philosophy was

not intended to possess people’s minds with a scrupulous anxiety and discontent in the service of God, but to fill them with a just fear of living in sloth and idleness, and in the neglect of such virtues as they will want at the day of judgment.<sup>459</sup>

But the fact is that Johnson *was* naturally prone to depression and as we have seen from the first chapter of this thesis, the mind of the melancholic *was* naturally prone to becoming ‘possessed’ by just such ‘scrupulous anxiety’.

Thomas Woodman refers to the negative influence of Law on Johnson: ‘He suffered greatly from what he called by the traditional name of ‘scruples’: exaggerated ideas of imperfection and of his own sinfulness, an over-elaborate sense of spiritual responsibility, and fears of being condemned.’<sup>460</sup> It could be argued that Johnson was more a religious melancholic than a melancholic and yet we do not perceive him as such. Adam Potkay suggests that

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid. p. 443.

<sup>458</sup> Balderston, p. 388.

<sup>459</sup> *A Serious Call*, p. 34.

<sup>460</sup> Thomas Woodman, *A Preface to Samuel Johnson* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 13.

The only “superstition” generally recognized as an internal threat to eighteenth-century Britons was, in Johnson’s phrase, the irrational, “unnecessary fear” that can prey on the melancholy temper. [...] [S]uperstition abides in England in the gloomy temper that harbors unreasonable religious fears [...].<sup>461</sup>

Religious melancholy will be discussed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis, but the most upsetting symptom for sufferers is that they very often felt that they had been abandoned by God. Johnson did not believe that he had been abandoned, but he did fear that his soul would not be saved after his death because he had not lived a devout life. When it came to the matter of his own religious failings, Johnson never used his illness as an excuse. Johnson regarded his idleness in purely rational terms: a weakness in his character. Charles E. Pierce, Jr. states of Law’s influence on Johnson that he ‘did not reject or regret this influence. On the contrary, he welcomed it in the belief that it had laid the foundation for his own character and conduct’.<sup>462</sup>

Calling for a similar need for self-awareness, but more for medical reasons than for religious, Burton had suggested in *Anatomy* that people became melancholy because they did not know their own character.<sup>463</sup> James L. Clifford suggests that, although Boswell found references to Burton’s *Anatomy* in Johnson’s notebook and estimates the date of entry as 1753, which would be the year after Tetty had died, he is of the opinion that Johnson’s first reading of it was much earlier. Clifford suggests that it may have been as early as 1737, when the school at Edial was about to close. According to Martin, Johnson had opened the school at Edial in 1736 with the help of Tetty’s money, placing an advert in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* advertising it as a school ‘where young gentlemen are boarded and taught the Latin and Greek language’. However, Martin also informs us that with Lichfield Grammar School nearby there was little interest in

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<sup>461</sup> Adam Potkay, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 161.

<sup>462</sup> Charles E. Pierce, *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Athlone Press, 1983), p.84.

<sup>463</sup> Burton’s *Anatomy*, 1, p. 36.

Johnson's school which closed within a year.<sup>464</sup> Clifford suggests that '[i]t may have been during these last months that Johnson solaced himself with Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, seeking in that fascinating volume new ways to divert his own returning depression'.<sup>465</sup> If Clifford is right, this would place the first reading of Burton the year after Johnson wrote his birthday prayer. It creates a link between these two authors, above all others, who influenced Johnson when it came to the issue of his melancholy and idleness: Law with his strict views on idleness and Burton's famous advice on how to combat or stave off melancholy: '*Be not solitary, be not idle.*'

Many years later, looking back on his first episode of severe melancholy in 1729, Johnson was to state that 'I did not then know how to manage it'.<sup>466</sup> This suggests that, although he may have suffered for the rest of his life from its symptoms, he did eventually find a way to live with and manage his illness. Burton's influence played a crucial part in Johnson's understanding and handling of his depression. However, Sarah Jordan suggests that

[w]hile many critics have discussed how influenced Johnson was by Burton and his ideas about idleness, melancholy, and madness, relatively few of the book's 971 pages of text are devoted to this advice. [...] But these pages form a rather small portion of the work as a whole, which leads me to think that Johnson's having so taken to heart the "Be not idle" advice comes more from a preoccupation of his own than from an impartial reading of the book itself.<sup>467</sup>

Jordan underestimates the influence Burton had on Johnson. Johnson was an avid reader of medical literature, but in many of his letters in which he gives advice to others on the subject of melancholy, it is Burton's practical advice which he quotes. Although Burton does go into physiological descriptions of the sources of the disease, much of his work focuses on the negative character traits in individuals that he believes can cause or trigger the individual to become melancholy. Solitariness and idleness are regarded as

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<sup>464</sup> Martin, p. 108.

<sup>465</sup> James L. Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson* (London: William Heinemann, 1955), p. 161.

<sup>466</sup> Boswell, *Life*, 1, p. 34.

<sup>467</sup> Jordan, p. 161.

only two, albeit they are the major two, causes of the illness. Burton's *Anatomy* could be regarded as the first self-help book for sufferers of depression. As with modern self-help books today, readers referred to it for some explanation that would help them to understand and then relieve the symptoms of whatever it was that drove them to read the book in the first place. In Burton, Johnson appears to have found all of these things.

Melancholy, according to Burton, was to be accepted as part of one's life: it was a disease to be endured rather than eradicated. We can see this attitude reflected in Johnson's literature. In the *Rambler*, Johnson takes the opportunity to denounce the Stoics' philosophy on life, those who 'proclaimed themselves exalted [...] above the reach of those miseries, which embitter life to the rest of the world'.<sup>468</sup> Johnson claims that the Stoics tried to remove

pain, poverty, loss of friends, exile, and violent death, from the catalogue of evils; and passed, in their haughty stile, a kind of irreversible decree, by which they forbid them to be counted any longer among the objects of terror and anxiety [...].<sup>469</sup>

This, according to Johnson, was a false expectation of life. Johnson's philosophy on life was that melancholy had to be accepted as a part of it because one could never rid one's life of unpleasantness. We can also see Johnson advocating acceptance in the advice he gave to Boswell, who frequently bewailed the fact that he suffered terribly from melancholy:

make it an invariable and obligatory law to yourself, never to mention your own mental diseases. [...] When you talk of them, it is plain that you want either praise or pity; for praise there is no room, and pity will do you no good [...].<sup>470</sup>

Pierce suggests of Johnson's notes in his private journals which relate to his melancholy: 'All he can do is to describe what he feels; there is no attempt to account

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<sup>468</sup> *Rambler*, III, p. 174 (No. 32, 7 July 1750).

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>470</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, III, p. 232 (8 April 1780).

for its existence, either here or in any of the later meditations.’<sup>471</sup> Johnson does not ask where his melancholy comes from because, as Burton advised, he accepts it as part of his life. However, Burton also states that by examining and adjusting one’s lifestyle, one can learn to stave off, or at the very least diminish, melancholy’s influence. Johnson applied the direction that most fitted his profile: ‘Be not solitary’ and in particular, ‘be not idle.’ With a much less dogmatic approach than Law, Burton also claims that time spent unproductively is a major factor contributing to mental unrest and he calls for men to take responsibility for their own lives and manage their time accordingly. Burton’s direction to ‘be not idle’ would have been completely compatible with Law’s religious instruction, that all of one’s time should be accounted for and used in the service of God.

For a melancholic like Johnson, who struggled with idleness in its various forms, Burton’s prescribed antidote to melancholy, to stay active as much as possible, would have re-affirmed Law’s instruction as to what was needed to lead a devout life. As with Law, Burton also warns of the misuse of one’s time. In fact there is a marked similarity between the subject matter discussed in *Anatomy* and *A Serious Call*. Whereas Law refers to God’s ‘talents’, Burton refers to God’s ‘gifts’ and, like Law, Burton also warns of the perils of their misuse: ‘abusing those good gifts which God hath bestowed upon us, Health, Wealth, Strength, Wit, Learning, Art, Memory, to our owne destruction [...]’<sup>472</sup> However, unlike Law, although Burton prescribed employment as a defence against melancholy, he does not advocate such rigorous self-scrutiny.

The promise in *Anatomy* is that, by reading the book, man would learn to know himself, live happily with himself, be content with his lot and live with ‘tranquillity of

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<sup>471</sup> Pierce, p. 132.

<sup>472</sup> Burton’s *Anatomy*, I (1. 2. 1. 1), p. 127.

the minde'.<sup>473</sup> Although Law's philosophy promised inner peace and happiness and Burton's 'tranquillity of the minde', Burton's philosophy was far less dogmatic and much easier to follow than Law's. Whereas Law refers to a 'disturbed mind' being the result of anything less than a completely devout lifestyle, Burton takes a far more tolerant approach: 'as long as we are ruled by reason, correct our inordinate appetite, and conform ourselves to God's word' we will live happily, but

if wee give reines to Lust, Anger, Ambition, Pride, and follow our owne ways, wee degenerate into beasts, transforme our selves, overthrowe our constitutions, provoke God to Anger, and heap upon us this of *Melancholy*, and all kindes of incurable diseases, as a just and deserved punishment of our sinnes.<sup>474</sup>

However, it is important to note that although Johnson regarded his idleness as a sin against God, he did not regard his melancholy as a direct punishment from God. As with Law's *Serious Call*, Johnson takes on board much of Burton's theory, but not all of it. For Johnson, his melancholy was always a constitutional disease and his religion was not to be blamed for it. That religion should not be blamed for causing people to become melancholy was a matter of great importance to ministers of all denominations during the eighteenth century, and this matter will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter which looks specifically at the issue of religious melancholy. One of the major differences between Burton and Law is that Burton's *Anatomy* concentrates far more on the damaging psychological effect that one's lifestyle can have on the individual, rather than introducing the enormously unsettling notion of doubt and guilt which Law's *Serious Call* generates.

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid., I, P. 35.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid., I (1. 1. 1. 1), p. 128.

### III

## Johnson and the Issue of Idleness

It is well documented in biographies that Johnson, in his youth and particularly whilst he was at Oxford, had a tendency to laziness. It is not that he never succumbed to idleness in this respect. However, there is a general misinterpretation of the word ‘idleness’ in the sense that Johnson uses it. For instance, when Johnson refers to sloth he generally means what we would call laziness. ‘Slothful’ in Johnson’s *Dictionary*, although the definition does include the term idle, suggests a more conscious decision to do nothing.<sup>475</sup> The definition of ‘Idle’, as already stated, includes the terms ‘ineffectual and not productive of good’.<sup>476</sup> I suggest that when Johnson refers to his own idleness he focuses more on the ‘ineffectual and not productive of good’ in a spiritual sense. He does suggest there is a specific difference between the two terms. For example, in the first birthday prayer Johnson wrote after arriving in London, he writes:

Create in me a contrite Heart, that I may worthily lament my Sins, acknowledge my wickedness. [...] O Lord, enable me by thy Grace to use all diligence in redeeming the time I have spent in Sloth, Vanity, and wickedness; to make use of thy Gifts to the honour of thy Name; to lead a new life.<sup>477</sup>

The prayer is quite upbeat. It is the beginning of a new life as a writer for Johnson. He does not use the term idleness, but sloth, and this is because in this instance he is referring to laziness or idleness as we would recognise it today and not to the spiritual idleness he refers to in so many of his prayers. Critics today however do not generally take into consideration the various forms of idleness Johnson struggled with and tend to

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<sup>475</sup> *Dictionary*, 1755, Vol. 2, ‘Slothful’ is defined as ‘Idle; lazy; sluggish; Inactive; Indolent; dull of motion.’

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1.

<sup>477</sup> *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, p. 37.

impose a more contemporary interpretation on the word. As a result, Johnson's idleness is often viewed in a purely literal sense. It is perceived as the action, or rather inaction, of someone who is inherently lazy or averse to work. In 1955 James L. Clifford stated that Johnson 'well knew his own weaknesses, that he was lazy, indolent, irritable, subject to fits of deep melancholy'.<sup>478</sup> In 1975, W. Jackson Bate gave a more psychologically probing interpretation of Johnson's idleness, stating that it was an 'almost pathological "indolence" (to use his own word) into which he could increasingly fall [...] a powerful inner resistance, even protest, against the unceasing pressure of strong self-demand'.<sup>479</sup> However this implies that his idleness was still under his control to some extent and that Johnson chose to be idle. More recently, in her book *The Anxieties of Idleness*, Sarah Jordan analysed Johnson's idleness and determined that boredom was the major cause: 'Preoccupation with and guilt about idleness trapped him in a serpentine maze of vicious circles [...]'. Moreover,

[...] one reason idleness is so hard to escape is that it leads to boredom (for which Johnson had a great capacity), which causes an indolence that prevents occupation, which leads to even greater boredom and indolence.<sup>480</sup>

Although Johnson carried much guilt as to his own idleness, I would argue that Jordan views his idleness in too literal a sense and not in the sense that Johnson employed it. She changes the notion of idleness to one of boredom, with all of its twenty-first century connotations: dull, monotonous, tedious. She misreads his symptoms and his attempts to express those symptoms. To introduce the notion of boredom as a major cause of Johnson's idleness is a classic case of retrospective mis-diagnosis and a gross oversimplification of the issue. For someone to be continually bemoaning the fact that they were bored in the way that Johnson bemoaned his idleness would suggest that the person was lacking in sufficient intellectual capacity to find anything to entertain

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<sup>478</sup> Clifford, 1955, p. 308.

<sup>479</sup> Bate, 1975, p. 34.

<sup>480</sup> Jordan, p. 153.

themselves. Boredom does not fit with our image of the highly intelligent Johnson, the prolific writer, the avid reader. In a letter to Mrs. Thrale he advised, ‘When you are alone read diligently, they who do not read can have nothing to think, and little to say.’<sup>481</sup>

In comparative terms, although he perceived himself to be idle, he was anything but. With regards to the issue of doing everything he could to help others, Johnson was very aware that for some, the need to express their concerns was important. Throughout his letters there is a constant reminder to friends to keep lines of communication open. When the subject of melancholy is raised it is often in response to their distress not his, and he gives specific advice as to how to cope with their symptoms. In a letter to John Taylor he admits: ‘When I am musing alone, I feel a pang for every moment that any human being has by my peevishness or obstinacy spent in uneasiness.’<sup>482</sup> In a letter to Boswell, having admonished him for speaking once again of his depressed state of mind, Johnson relents: ‘I make haste to write again, lest my last letter should give you too much pain. If you are really oppressed with overpowering and involuntary melancholy, you are to be pitied rather than reproached.’<sup>483</sup> Here we can see how Johnson berated himself for not doing enough to help others, a crucial part of living a devout life. He views his lack of written communication in this instance as a lack of compassion and hence would have regarded it as idleness in spiritual matters.

It is only when we examine Johnson’s personal journals and prayers that we discover just how difficult it was for him to follow Law’s advice and deal with the psychological unrest Law’s strict guidelines caused. A brief look at his journal entries clearly shows a dejected mind struggling to live up to exacting standards. Reading his

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<sup>481</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, III, p. 289 (27 July 1780).

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 149 (November 1756).

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 349 (6 July 1776).

meditations in the context of Law's philosophy, it becomes apparent that spiritual idleness was a major problem for Johnson:

. Forgive me, that I have this day neglected the duty which thou hast assigned to it, and suffered the hours, of which I must give account, to pass away without any endeavour to accomplish thy will, or to promote my own salvation.<sup>484</sup>

This is a typical example of Johnson's preoccupation with spiritual idleness. Here, his religious beliefs called him to make best use of his time and talents, but there is a palpable dejection of spirits as he senses, as he does so many times, that he has failed once again. It is at low points such as these that Johnson's thoughts often become fixed, either looking back on the amount of time that he believes he has already wasted, or in frantically trying to organise his future conduct, compulsively making lists of resolutions. It is significant that there is never any attempt to blame his spiritual idleness on the indolence he must surely have experienced as a symptom of his depression.

Johnson perpetually rose late, often in the afternoon. However, Law pontificates: 'how odious we must appear in the sight of heaven, if we are in *bed*, shut up in *sleep* and *darkness*, when we should be praising God.'<sup>485</sup> Yet two forms of idleness would have played their role here, neither of which would have been laziness in the sense that we refer to it. Johnson would have had to contend with a natural tendency towards depression and the accompanying lethargy that was a symptom of his melancholy. He would also have experienced guilt as to his spiritual idleness, in that he regarded his symptomatic lethargy as a weakness in his character that he must overcome. Under the term 'Depress' in the *Dictionary*, Johnson quotes from Locke: 'Others *depress* their own minds, despond at the first difficulty, and conclude that the making any progress in

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<sup>484</sup> *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, I, p. 49 (19 November 1752).

<sup>485</sup> *A Serious Call*, p. 229.

knowledge is above their capacities.’<sup>486</sup> This choice of quotation is significant, not only because it equates depression with a psychological state, but because it also attaches a lack of motivation and a loss of confidence in one’s own abilities to conquer that depressed psychological state; symptoms which are attributed to today’s depression. It is also of interest because Locke implies that the depressed state of mind is self-inflicted. The fact that Johnson chose this particular quotation implies that he believed that, at the very least, it should be within man’s capabilities to control his state of mind. Yet, with both today’s depression and eighteenth-century melancholy, it is this very lack of control of the mind that caused sufferers so much fear and distress.

In his advice to others on how to cope with their symptoms of melancholy Johnson never fails to warn of the dangers of solitariness and idleness. As with his advice to Hester Maria Thrale, discussed in chapter two,<sup>487</sup> he writes to his friend John Taylor, who also suffered from depression:

make use of all diversions, sports of the field abroad, improvement of your estate or little schemes of building, and pleasing books at home or if you cannot compose yourself to read, a continual succession of easy company. Be sure never to be unemployed, go not to bed till you sleep, and rise as soon as you wake, and give up no hours to musing and retrospect. Be always busy.<sup>488</sup>

Here we can see Johnson implementing Burton’s ‘Be not solitary, be not idle’ instruction. It is important to note that when Johnson writes to friends suffering from melancholy, advising them on the use of their time, it is with one purpose in mind: to help them stave off depression or distract their attention away from their depression. At such times Law’s strict moral guidance as to how one should use one’s time in the service of God does not enter the equation. Any form of occupation and distraction is advocated. In *Rambler* 85, Johnson states that

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<sup>486</sup> *Dictionary*, Vol. 1, 1755.

<sup>487</sup> See p. 99.

<sup>488</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, I, p. 242 (22 May 1764).

It is certain that any wild wish or vain imagination never takes such firm possession of the mind, as when it is found empty and unoccupied. The old peripatetick principle, that “Nature abhors a Vacuum,” may be properly applied to the intellect, which will embrace any thing, however absurd or criminal, rather than be wholly without an object.<sup>489</sup>

For those who feared being alone, Johnson suggests that

when a man cannot bear his own company there is something wrong. He must fly from himself, either because he feels a tediousness in life from the equipoise of an empty mind [...] or he must be afraid of the intrusion of some unpleasing ideas, and, perhaps, is struggling to escape from the remembrance of a loss, the fear of a calamity, or some other thought of greater horror.<sup>490</sup>

Here, Johnson addresses two distinct types of mental torment connected with the issue of idleness. Of the first group, some are motivated to change their employment or condition of living for no other reason than that they are discontented and crave distraction, usually from the tediousness of their lifestyle: ‘the mind of man is never satisfied with the objects immediately before it, but is always breaking away from the present moment, and losing itself in schemes of future felicity.’<sup>491</sup> In this sense, an idle lifestyle is very much a class issue, an empty existence for those who have the money and time to enjoy it and yet feel unsatisfied with all it produces. Of the second group, Johnson refers to those who ‘struggle’ to escape from the tortures of their own mind, a mind so melancholy that it is no longer able to divert its attention away from the particularly upsetting subject matter it focuses on.

It is idleness as a symptom of depression that Johnson often portrays in the *Rambler* and *Idler* essays and in particular his prose work *Rasselas*. It is in these works that he explores the difficulty sufferers of melancholy find in expressing or explaining their indolence, a symptom often misinterpreted by others as mere physical idleness.

Pierce argues that

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<sup>489</sup> *Rambler*, IV, p. 86 (No. 85, 8 January 1751).

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, III, pp. 27-28 (No. 5, 3 April 1750).

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, (No. 2, 24 March 1750).

Contrary to popular belief, Johnson was a psychologist first and a moralist second. His deepest desire was to understand how the mind worked and to analyze the various forces that determined human conduct. This effort of understanding always began at home; it always began with himself and his own experience. And yet it always aimed, even at the outset, beyond himself, at other people whom he did not know but who he was sure suffered from the same affliction that he did.<sup>492</sup>

When we examine the *Idler* and *Rambler* essays we notice that there are in fact very few direct references to the term melancholy. As has been discussed, the symptoms of melancholy when portrayed in these essays, that dejection of spirit which encroaches on life and stifles vitality, are often referred to or perceived as idleness. More often than not, idleness is either presented as a debilitating symptom of the disease, or as a root cause of it. In *A Serious Call*, Law used moral tales to illustrate and clarify his religious doctrine. Johnson used the template of the moral tale in a similar way. It is through the moral essays in particular that Johnson used his talent as a writer to reach out to those who suffered from depression, to alleviate the symptoms of loneliness and the isolation they may have felt. Time and again, sufferers may well have recognised themselves, or their symptoms, in the characters Johnson draws. The subject of melancholy is implicit in many of the *Rambler* and *Idler* essays: its causes, its many symptoms and how they manifest themselves. However, this is an area of Johnson study that has received little critical attention.

For those who had never experienced melancholy, the essays provided entertainment, distraction and advice as to the pitfalls and dangers of what Johnson regarded as an unhealthy, idle lifestyle. But for those who did recognise the symptoms of melancholy, the moral essays may have offered a sense of inclusion in a world, albeit a world of suffering, which they may have thought they experienced alone. Davis suggests that ‘although primarily he feared he had wasted his life, at a secondary verbal

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<sup>492</sup> Pierce, pp. 102-103.

level he wasted nothing, not even those primary fears'.<sup>493</sup> Pierce states that 'he believed that his writing was the principal professional means by which he could work toward his salvation'.<sup>494</sup> Johnson drew from Burton, amongst other things, to warn people of the dangers of living in idleness and of the resultant depression that frequently accompanied this choice. The danger of idleness, in particular of choosing to adopt an idle lifestyle, is a predominant theme running throughout all of these works. Having said this, it is the resultant depression that such a lifestyle can lead to which is the main focus of Johnson's moral guidance.

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<sup>493</sup> Philip Davis, *In Mind of Johnson: A Study of Johnson the Rambler* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), p. 27.

<sup>494</sup> Pierce, p. 108.

## IV

### Happiness

Johnson is one of the eighteenth-century's most famous melancholics, the iconic literary figure labouring under the affliction of the 'black dog'. Closely linked with this image is, I would argue, the mistaken notion that he had a somewhat gloomy outlook on life. David Nokes suggests of 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' that 'The poem [...] expressed Johnson's view of life [...] the tone is gloomy, only saved from despair by a final effort of will which calls upon celestial wisdom to calm the mind'.<sup>495</sup> Nicholas Hudson suggests that today 'in our post-Romantic and Freudian age' Johnson is more often than not portrayed as 'a figure tormented by family-induced guilt, religious doubts and congenital melancholia'.<sup>496</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch describes him as 'a pessimist' but 'with an enormous zest for living.'<sup>497</sup> Of course this is not the only side of Johnson's character that these critics comment upon, but such characterisations do help to create an image of Johnson as being constantly depressed and intent that others should also expect to be less happy.

The source of this assumption stems from the perceived general theme that is thought to run through many of his works such as 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', *Rasselas* and *The Fountains*:<sup>498</sup> that man's constant striving to achieve happiness in this life is futile. Bate suggests that Johnson was

repeatedly using 'happiness' as a yardstick with which to measure and

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<sup>495</sup> David Nokes, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 113.

<sup>496</sup> Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>497</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, *Samuel Johnson* (New York and Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 1.

<sup>498</sup> Bate, p. 411. Bate refers to *The Fountains* as 'a child's version of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*'.

evaluate life. That he should be so passionate in maintaining the futility of 'happiness' as a goal or end in itself showed only how persistent an obsession it was.<sup>499</sup>

Had Johnson believed that man would never find happiness in this life he would by no means have been alone in having such a pessimistic outlook on life. The futile pursuit of happiness was a theme running throughout much of the religious literature of the century. Du Moulin states that one should 'meditate often on the Vanity of the Advantages and Pleasures of this World, on the Frailty of life, the Certainty of Death, and the Uncertainty of its Time'.<sup>500</sup> However, Johnson does not state that man's attempt to find happiness in this world is futile, only that happiness can never be attained from the acquisition of wealth, honour and material goods. Johnson believed that happiness could be achieved, but only at a much higher, spiritual level.

I argue that what Johnson perceived as happiness and what we today perceive as happiness are two very different things. As with the term idleness, discussed in chapter two of this thesis, the problem we immediately encounter when we begin to examine Johnson's attitude towards 'happiness' is in defining the term in its eighteenth-century context. Harvie Ferguson sheds some light on the problem of defining comparative states of happiness. Looking as far back as Augustine, Ferguson states that the term 'Happiness'

has refused to be translated into some innocuous modern equivalent; pleasure, satisfaction, fulfilment, are labels we attach to particular segments of experience and lack the radical inclusiveness of Happiness (and its related spiritual terms, Bliss, Joy, Ecstasy), which designates a completely autonomous mode of being.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, p. 380.

<sup>500</sup> Du Moulin, p. 49.

<sup>501</sup> Harvie Ferguson, *Religious Transformation in Western Society: The end of happiness* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. ix.

It is happiness at a spiritual level that Johnson strove for throughout most of his life and which acted as the moral basis for all his major works, particularly *Rasselas*. When we attempt to define happiness today it is usually at a far more superficial level.

For Johnson, happiness and pleasure are widely different terms, the first being very difficult to attain and the second regarded almost as man's duty to pursue. In a letter to John Taylor giving advice on his melancholy, Johnson suggests that 'there is no distemper, not in the highest degree acute, on which the mind has not some influence, and which is not better resisted by a cheerful than a gloomy temper'.<sup>502</sup> He advises Mrs Thrale following the death of her husband: 'Do not represent life as darker than it is. [...] You have children from whom much pleasure can be expected.'<sup>503</sup> For Johnson, the terms joy and pleasure replace what we refer to as happiness, and when he refers to happiness it is at a spiritual level with which many of us cannot identify today. If we read his works with this in mind we are presented with a far more spiritual meaning of the texts and a far less pessimistic view of Johnson.

Leaving the eighteenth century momentarily, we can look to Charlotte Brontë's Mr. Rochester, who perfectly illustrates the difference between spiritual happiness and personal pleasure. Rochester states of his privileged lifestyle: 'I am a trite commonplace sinner, hackneyed in all the poor petty dissipations with which the rich and worthless try to put on life.'<sup>504</sup> Rochester has the means to acquire anything he wishes, but he is aware that he is not happy and that such acquisitions will never make him happy. However, Rochester, like Johnson, also regards pleasure as distinct from happiness: 'since happiness is irrevocably denied me, I have a right to get pleasure out of life: and I

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<sup>502</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, I, p. 395 (31 Aug 1772).

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, III, p. 332 (9 Apr 1781).

<sup>504</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1848) Third Edition, ed. by Richard J. Dunn (Norton Critical Edition) (London: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 116.

will get it, cost what it may.<sup>505</sup> As with Johnson, Rochester equates happiness with living a Christian lifestyle and is encouraged to change his rather dejected view as to the hopelessness of his ever acquiring happiness: ‘I will break obstacles to happiness, to goodness—yes, goodness; I wish to be a better man than I have been; than I am [...].’<sup>506</sup> Rochester is aware that happiness can only be achieved by the positive impact he can have on the lives of others rather than from the selfish gratification of personal desires.

Johnson drew from Law when warning of the futility of man’s search for happiness by any other means than by living a pious and devout life, secure in the knowledge that he had done everything in his power to follow God’s will. Defining happiness or knowing how to achieve happiness was not the problem for Johnson. The problem he encountered was in physically and mentally implementing Law’s rules into his own lifestyle in order to achieve this state of mind. Mrs Thrale refers to Johnson’s ‘high Notions of the hard Task of Christianity—He never thinks that he has done or can do enough’.<sup>507</sup> Here we can see how difficult it was for Johnson to obtain a sense of perspective as to the concept of his own idleness. Johnson’s religious beliefs, his notion of and struggle with idleness and his dejected state of mind are always locked in a vicious circle of causation.

Yet Law suggests of his rules for attaining such a pious life that

instead of making our lives dull and melancholy, they will render them full of content and strong satisfactions. [...] By these rules we only change the childish satisfactions of our *vain* and *sickly* passions, for the solid enjoyments, and the real happiness of a *sound mind*.<sup>508</sup>

The sound mind in this case refers to both the knowledge that one was living in true accordance with God’s word and that one would be at peace with one’s conscience and

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>507</sup> *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776-1784*, vol. 1, ed. by Katherine C. Balderston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), p. 203.

<sup>508</sup> *A Serious Call*, p. 163.

live happily as a consequence. But this does not mean that Johnson believed that all those who failed to meet such exacting standards, himself included, should live a miserable existence. Happiness in this life and enjoyment of this life are separate entities as far as Johnson was concerned and this is where confusion lies when we examine his works. It is not surprising therefore, that our perception of happiness and Johnson's are vastly different.

For Johnson, the source of happiness would always be within oneself and would only transpire when one's actions had a positive effect on another person's life. In *Idler* 41 he says that happiness is 'perceived only when it is reflected from another'.<sup>509</sup>

Tillotson writes on a similar theme to Johnson:

There is no sensual pleasure in the world comparable to the delight and satisfaction that a good man takes in doing good. [...] Sensual pleasures are not lasting, but presently vanish and expire: but that is not the worst of them, they leave a sting behind as the pleasure goes off [...] sadness and melancholy come in the place of it, guilt and trouble and repentance follow it. But the pleasure of doing good remains after a thing is done, the thoughts of it lie easy in our minds, and the reflection upon it afterwards does for ever minister joy and delight to us. In a word that frame of mind which inclines us to do good is the very temper and disposition of happiness.<sup>510</sup>

It is important to note however, that neither Johnson, Tillotson nor Law advocated doing good purely to make oneself feel better. This would not have brought happiness because the motivation behind the good deed would have been self-serving. It becomes apparent that there was an existing body of literature which critiqued the issue of happiness long before Johnson wrote on the subject. Yet, possibly because their authors were not known for having suffered from depression, their philosophies on happiness were regarded as Christian by nature and not merely pessimistic.

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<sup>509</sup> *Idler*, II, p. 130 (No. 41, 27 January 1759).

<sup>510</sup> John Tillotson, *Sermons on several subjects and occasions, by the most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury*, 12 vols (London, 1742), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 21 December 2009], I, Sermon XVIII, p. 428.

Carey McIntosh demonstrates the confusion surrounding much of the criticism of Johnson's work and the issue of happiness, claiming that '[t]he principal motif of Johnson's fiction is "the choice of life": selection of the activity, profession, or surroundings that will determine one's way of life and produce whatever happiness one is entitled to this side of heaven'.<sup>511</sup> The point McIntosh makes, that we are in some way entitled to a certain amount of happiness, is the very point Johnson disputes. Johnson believed that we are not automatically entitled to any happiness; that whatever happiness we do obtain has to be earned and is found only in the peace of mind we acquire from knowing that we are living a devout life according to God's laws. This is the message inherent in 'The Vanity of Human Wishes':

Yet when the Sense of sacred Presence fires,  
And strong Devotion to the Skies aspires,  
Pour forth thy Fervours for a healthful Mind,  
Obedient Passions, and a Will resign'd;  
For Love, which scarce collective Man can fill;  
For Patience sov'reign o're transmuted Ill;  
For Faith, that panting for a happier seat,  
Counts Death kind Nature's Signal of Retreat:  
These goods for Man the Laws of Heav'n ordain,  
These Goods he grants, who grants the Pow'r to gain;  
With these celestial Wisdom calms the Mind,  
And makes the Happiness she does not find.<sup>512</sup>

Only by living a truly pious and devout life would man find true happiness on earth. This is also the message in many of the moral essays, *Rasselas* and many of his sermons. In Sermon 14 he states that

The young and the gay imagine happiness to consist in shew, in merriment and noise, or in a constant succession of amusements, or in the gratification of their appetites. [...] That this state is not a state of happiness, that it affords no real

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<sup>511</sup> Carey McIntosh, *The Choice of Life: Samuel Johnson and the World of Fiction* (London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 54.

<sup>512</sup> 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', in *The Poems of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by David Nichol Smith and Edward L. McAdam, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 110-133 (ll. 357-368).

satisfaction to a reasonable mind, those who appear most engaged in it will, in their calmest moments, readily confess.<sup>513</sup>

Ferguson suggests that '[e]veryday enjoyments and leasures are, in fact, obstacles to the attainment of authentic happiness'.<sup>514</sup> But Johnson would not have agreed wholly with this, only when such pleasures were taken to extremes. In *Rambler* 58 for instance, he warns of the dangers of seeking happiness by depending on too luxurious a lifestyle:

When therefore the desire of wealth takes hold of the heart, let us look round and see how it operates upon those whose industry, or fortune, has obtained it. When we find them oppressed with their own abundance, luxurious without pleasure, idle without ease, impatient and querulous in themselves, and despised or hated, by the rest of mankind [...].<sup>515</sup>

As was discussed in chapters two and three, it is the excesses of society that Johnson denounced, not progress in general. He warns against the popular misconception that the more we attain the happier we will be, and uses this theme throughout his moral essays, and many of his major works. When we judge our happiness by that of others, Johnson warns,

We see only the superficies of men, without knowing what passes within. Splendour, equipage, and luxury, are not always accompanied by happiness; but are more frequently the wretched solaces of a mind distracted with perplexities, and harrassed with terrors. [...] Prosperity and happiness are very different.<sup>516</sup>

The motivation behind this apparently futile search for happiness is man's desire for change; '[f]or a desire to change is a sufficient proof, that we are dissatisfied with our present state; and evidently shews, that we feel some pain which we desire to avoid, or miss some enjoyment which we wish to possess'.<sup>517</sup> Happiness based purely on anything external is doomed to failure. Man is almost compelled to make himself unhappy by his eagerness to acquire pleasure. It is the pleasure he can extract from his

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<sup>513</sup> Yale, *Samuel Johnson: Sermons*, ed. by Jean Hagstrum, and James Gray (London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 150-151.

<sup>514</sup> Ferguson, p. x.

<sup>515</sup> *Rambler*, III, p. 313 (No. 58, 6 October 1750)

<sup>516</sup> *Sermons*, No. 16, p. 178.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 14, pp. 149-150.

possessions that mankind in general interprets as happiness, and when they no longer give pleasure he assumes that he is unhappy. However, whereas pleasure is usually transient at the best of times, happiness for Johnson, when attained in this life, would be constant, regardless of whether we faced hardships or not. In Sermon No. 5, he writes: ‘God is not the Author of our present state, that when he created man, he created him for happiness; happiness indeed dependant upon his own choice, and to be preserved by his own conduct.’<sup>518</sup> The choice Johnson refers to here is the choice whether or not we should follow God’s word.<sup>519</sup>

A prose work of Johnson’s which has attracted comparatively little critical attention is the fairytale *The Fountains*. In this moral tale Johnson warns of the dangers of excess and indulgence and the depressing effect they can have on man’s state of mind. The tale tells the story of one fairy’s quest to prove that not all men are inherently greedy and selfish. A little girl, Florentina, is invited to drink from two fountains, supplied from the Spring of Joy and the Spring of Sorrow. When drinking from the Spring of Joy, anything Florentina wishes for will come true, but because she is a genuinely good person, she is given the even greater gift of being able to reverse her wish by drinking from the fountain of Sorrow. The fairies explain why this is such an honour: ‘We have granted mortals to wish according to their own discretion, and their discretion being small, and their wishes irreversible, they have rashly petitioned for their own destruction.’<sup>520</sup> As one would imagine in a moral tale, Florentina begins by wishing for reasonable requests but soon her wishes become excessive and selfish. She wishes for things which she believes will make her happy: good looks, long life and a faithful lover. Time and again she returns to drink from the Spring of Sorrow to

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>519</sup> *A Serious Call*, p. 95. In Law’s *Serious Call*, the character Miranda manages to achieve true happiness, despite confronting sorrow and sickness on a daily basis and having few comforts in her own life, because she leads a purely devout life, p. 95.

<sup>520</sup> *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. by Gwin J. Kolb (London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 236.

counterbalance the negative effects of her overindulgence because her wishes did not bring her the happiness she anticipated. It is significant that the fairy tells her that

You may become lovely by the efficacy of the fountain, but that you shall be loved is by no means a certain consequence; for you cannot confer upon another either discernment or fidelity: That happiness which you must derive from others, it is not in my power to regulate or bestow.<sup>521</sup>

Florentina is unable to wish for something that relates to another. The tale depicts Johnson's thoughts as to the difference between pleasures derived from external sources and happiness, which can only be sourced from within. In *The Fountains*, it is significant that the springs of sorrow and joy eventually merge: a metaphor for life in general perhaps? The theme is also apparent in 'The Vanity of Human Wishes': 'Yet hope not life from Grief or Danger free / Nor think the Doom of Man revers'd for Thee [...]' (ll. 155-156) The balance of life is ordained by God and the joys of life are made all the more joyous by their contrast with one's sorrows: 'Implore his Aid, in his Decisions rest / Secure whate'er he gives, he gives the best.' (ll. 355-356)

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid., pp. 239-240.

## Johnson's 'Unhappy Valley': Melancholy in *Rasselas*

In *Rasselas* Johnson places his character in a mythical land where no such balance between the pleasures and sorrows of life exists. In Johnson's Happy Valley, the occupants are never exposed to calamity or sickness. Everything is provided for them and yet *Rasselas* is not 'happy'. As with Johnson, criticism of *Rasselas* has tended to interpret the cause of *Rasselas*'s unhappiness as boredom. James L. Clifford suggests that *Rasselas*, 'in spite of having everything he could desire [...] was bored.'<sup>522</sup> Lawrence Lipking suggests that 'the truth of the story hangs on its pictures of mental states [...]',<sup>523</sup> but, like Clifford, he also suggests that mere boredom is the main obstacle that *Rasselas* and the other characters in the story have to overcome. Sarah Jordan claims that *Rasselas* wants 'something to do; he is bored'.<sup>524</sup> Other critics have interpreted *Rasselas* as one man's futile quest for happiness. Robert DeMaria Jr. suggests that 'the prince's temporary complacency followed by disappointment sets the pattern for all of *Rasselas*'s endeavours to find happiness'<sup>525</sup> and suggests that '*Rasselas* is sometimes merely restless [...]'.<sup>526</sup> Carey McIntosh offers an even more pessimistic reading, suggesting that 'though Johnson's stories,' *Rasselas* included, 'explore states of

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<sup>522</sup> James L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson: Samuel Johnson's Middle Years* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 212.

<sup>523</sup> Lawrence Lipking, *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 188.

<sup>524</sup> Jordan, p. 155.

<sup>525</sup> Robert DeMaria, Jr., *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 207.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

mind, they virtually ignore all psychological processes except one, the intense and complicated experience that convinces us of the vanity of human wishes.<sup>527</sup>

In the following reading of *Rasselas*, I will argue against these interpretations of the text. I will argue that to understand the full moral and psychological implications of *Rasselas*, the tale must be read in the context of both Johnson's religious beliefs, as influenced by Law, and Burton's medical advice, particularly concerning the dangers of leading an idle, solitary lifestyle. In this reading I argue that the mental anguish many of the characters in *Rasselas* suffer and the bewilderment they experience are much more acute than mere boredom or restlessness. To regard them as such is too simplistic. In this reading I argue that, far from ignoring psychological processes, *Rasselas* is in fact a deep psychological exploration into the state of melancholy caused by idleness and that the philosophies of Law and Burton underpin the tale.

The writing of *Rasselas* has strong psychological ties with Johnson's own experience of melancholy. The idea for *Rasselas* was inspired by Father Jerome Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia*, which Johnson first read whilst at Oxford, shortly before his first bout of severe depression.<sup>528</sup> A year after leaving Oxford he went to stay with his friend, Edmund Hector. It was at this point in time, whether from the lack of any stimulating employment, or whether he was anxious over not having any set direction in his life, Johnson became particularly dejected. Hector, in an attempt to find something to occupy Johnson's mind and time, encouraged him to undertake the English translation of Lobo's *Voyage*. By this time, however, Johnson's melancholy had created such a despondency and incapacitating lethargy, that the work was finished off with Johnson dictating to Hector from his bed. There is also a link with *Rasselas* and

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<sup>527</sup> McIntosh, p. 32.

<sup>528</sup> Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, p. 137. Bate informs us that Johnson read Abbé Joachim La Grand's French translation of the Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Father Jerome Lobo's travels in Abyssinia whilst at Oxford.

the melancholy circumstances under which it was penned, almost thirty years later, with Johnson aware that his mother was dying.

The tale of *Rasselas* begins in the Happy Valley, an idyllic setting, where he is ‘confined’ amongst others ‘till the order of succession should call him to the throne’.<sup>529</sup> The inhabitants have been removed from society and are shielded from the tribulations that affect mankind. In the Valley the inhabitants live an overly indulgent, cosseted lifestyle and they source their happiness from luxury and leisure. It is thus impossible for Rasselas to live, what Johnson would have regarded as, a devout life. He cannot source his happiness from within. There is no need for any of the inhabitants of the Valley to help each other because ‘[e]very desire was immediately granted’.<sup>530</sup> The Valley epitomises the idle lifestyle. It provides a life of complete but enforced idleness and the warning signs are ominous. Johnson states that ‘[s]uch was the appearance of security and delight’<sup>531</sup> that for those outside the Valley, many wished to enter so that they too could adopt this lifestyle. However, Rasselas bewails the fact that so much of his life has already been wasted in idle thought and melancholy deliberation. He states that ‘I have lost that which can never be restored’.<sup>532</sup> The character’s despondency increases as he focuses on the fact that life is passing him by but cannot motivate himself to change his condition. He thus ‘past four months in resolving to lose no more time in idle resolves’.<sup>533</sup> Eighteenth-century physicians noted amongst their melancholy patients this focusing of their attention on one particular problem. This is the state of mind that Weekes refers to as ‘playing the same gramophone record ceaselessly’.<sup>534</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> *Rasselas*, ch.1. p. 8.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.1. p. 10.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.1. p. 10.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. IV. p. 19.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. IV, p. 20.

<sup>534</sup> See p. 33.

This is psychological idleness which incapacitates the body. A vicious circle develops which must be broken in order for the mind to move on.

The influence of Burton's *Anatomy* is strong within *Rasselas*. There are immediate and obvious thematic similarities between *Rasselas* and 'Democritus to the Reader', the tale at the beginning of *Anatomy*. The negative effect that man's lifestyle choices have on the human psyche and the topic of idleness are prominent in both. In both tales Johnson and Burton reveal what they believe are the major causes of melancholy in man. In both tales the protagonists compare the lives of humans with those of the animal kingdom and state that, in animals, melancholy does not exist. *Rasselas*, referring to the animals, observes, 'I have many distresses from which ye are free; I fear pain when I do not feel it; I sometimes shrink at evils recollected, and sometimes start at evils anticipated.'<sup>535</sup> Although it could be argued that such fears are not always misplaced, what Johnson refers to here is fear as a symptom of melancholy. 'Fear without cause' was another well-documented symptom of melancholy in the eighteenth century. Benjamin Fawcett describes this in a chapter entitled 'The Symptoms of Melancholy':

This principle symptom, viz. fearfulness, may be traced, in some degree, through every different stage and appearance of the disease; whether it puts on the milder form of *dejection and lowness of spirits*; or when it increases to *distress and anguish*; or in its dreadful extreme of *horrible despair*.— Hence it comes to pass, that a person has much *sadness*, without any apparent cause. [...] If a danger is but possible, he speaks of it as *probable*, and even certain; or of any common calamity, as if it were utter ruin.<sup>536</sup>

When actual danger threatens, then the mind at least has a reason for its fear, but when the threat of danger leaves and fear remains, or worse, there is no apparent reason for the fear, then this is another symptom of melancholy. In a letter regarding his friend Henry Thrale, who was suffering from a severe bout of depression, Johnson writes that

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<sup>535</sup> *Rasselas*, ch. II, p. 14.

<sup>536</sup> Fawcett, p. 4.

‘[a]ll sorrow that lasts longer than its cause is morbid, and should be shaken off as an attack of melancholy’.<sup>537</sup> Whether fear or sadness, Johnson suggests that the mind laboring under the influence of melancholy is unable to dismiss distressing thoughts which continue to have a negative psychological effect on the sufferer long after the initial cause has passed. Johnson and Burton imply that animals are content to live entirely in the present, whereas man is inherently compelled to manufacture his own disquiet.

In both tales, Johnson and Burton imply that it is the middle years of life in which man is most likely to bring melancholy upon himself. Burton suggests that man ‘when he is growne great, practiseth unhappinesse’.<sup>538</sup> Rasselas discounts the two extremes of age: ‘[i]n life, said he, is not to be counted the ignorance of infancy, or imbecility of age.’<sup>539</sup> Rasselas, we are told, was twenty six years old when he began to withdraw into himself. When asked why he withdraws from the others, he admits: ‘I fly from pleasure [...] because pleasure has ceased to please; I am lonely because I am miserable, and am unwilling to cloud with my presence the happiness of others.’<sup>540</sup> Rasselas mistakenly believes that the other inhabitants of the Valley are happy, without fully understanding the meaning of the term. Under no circumstances could Rasselas here be described as merely bored. He realises that there is something terribly wrong with his state of mind and that he is different from his peers. Initially he was told that he alone suffered from ‘misery’ and the character Imlac states, ‘I hope to convince you that your complaints have no real cause.’<sup>541</sup> However, Imlac later says that not one of

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<sup>537</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, III, p.128 (15 October 1778).

<sup>538</sup> Burton’s *Anatomy*, I, p. 36.

<sup>539</sup> *Rasselas*, ch. IV, p. 19.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. III, p. 15.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. III, p. 15.

those who he thought were content in the Happy Valley ‘does not lament the hour when he entered this retreat’.<sup>542</sup>

Significantly, in the case of *Rasselas*, Johnson draws from Burton’s warnings of lifestyle choices, which he believed were particularly conducive to melancholy and applies them to his characters. The Valley, we are told, was ‘surrounded on every side by mountains, of which the summits overhang the middle part’,<sup>543</sup> a virtual prison in other words. The mountains are symbolic of melancholy and represent a psychological barrier:

Then raising his eyes to the mountain, “This,” said he, “is the fatal obstacle that hinders at once the enjoyment of pleasure, and the exercise of virtue. How long is it that my hopes and wishes have flown beyond this boundary of my life, which yet I never have attempted to surmount!”<sup>544</sup>

Although *Rasselas* is convinced that there is a way out of the Valley, he is often too despondent or too afraid to attempt an escape. However, *Rasselas*’s reasons for wanting to escape from the Valley are purely self-serving. He wishes to escape both from the physical restraints of the Valley and his melancholy state of mind.

When *Rasselas* does eventually escape, Johnson uses the character as a tool to view others who suffer from varying degrees of melancholy. There are those characters where Johnson makes it quite clear that their particular choice of life has led to their dejected state of mind. Whereas *Rasselas*’s idleness was enforced, *Imlac* chose to enter the Happy Valley of his own accord, having led an adventurous life. However, as Burton stated, those that have been used to a busy lifestyle, ‘[e]specially if they have been formerly brought up to business, or to keep much company, and upon a sudden come to lead a sedentary life, it crucifies their souls [...]’.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid., ch. XII, p. 54.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., ch.1, p. 8. This description of the Happy Valley is reminiscent of Milton’s description of Eden in *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid., ch. IV, p. 18.

<sup>545</sup> Burton’s *Anatomy*, I (1. 2. 2. 6), p. 239.

The hermit they meet has also chosen to retire from a position of ‘the highest military rank’<sup>546</sup> and admits, ‘I have been for some time unsettled and distracted: my mind is disturbed with a thousand perplexities of doubt, and vanities of imagination [...] I have no opportunities of relaxation or diversion.’<sup>547</sup> This character has nothing and no one to make demands on his time and yet his mind is not at ease. The message within *Rasselas* is that the mind, as long as it is occupied with gainful, productive employment, remains healthy, but when starved of interest or company, it will cast around for something on which to focus. If there is no immediate stimulation, then it will look back over past experiences. Imlac, although unhappy in the Valley admits that

I am less unhappy than the rest, because I have a mind replete with images [...]. The rest, whose minds have no impression but of the present moment, are either corroded by malignant passions, or sit stupid in the gloom of perpetual vacancy.<sup>548</sup>

Given that both Burton and Johnson stated that animals do not suffer from melancholy because they live wholly in the present, this last remark appears something of a contradiction. What we have here are two different things. Yes, it is good to have past experiences and memories to draw on and fortify us during periods of melancholy, but for those whose past memories disturb them or who view the future with anxiety, then it would be better to live as much as possible in the present moment.

Rasselas, growing up in the Happy Valley never had the opportunity to acquire any life experiences. However, even when he escapes from the Valley he remains unhappy. In Cairo he attempts to escape from his depressed frame of mind by forcing himself to mingle in society, but this only results in him feeling even more isolated: ‘I live in the crowds of jollity’, he admits to Imlac, ‘not so much to enjoy company as to

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<sup>546</sup> *Rasselas*, ch. XXI, p. 81.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. XXI, p. 82.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. XII, pp. 54-55.

shun myself, and am only loud and merry to conceal my sadness.’<sup>549</sup> It would seem that to keep a healthy equilibrium of the mind is to tread a fine line between too much and too little stimulation. What authors like Johnson and Burton suggest is that the mind is more easily drawn to the more negative aspects of one’s life. Imlac states of those who appeared to be happy and content with their lives: ‘believe me, prince, there was not one who did not dread the moment when solitude should deliver him to the tyranny of reflection.’<sup>550</sup>

The importance of remaining a social being is implicit in the tale. Not only is it the only way, according to Johnson, that an individual can lead a devout life by helping others, but it also enables others to give a reasoned perspective as to whatever troubles the mind of the melancholic. In *Rasselas*, the astronomer, who had led a life of scholarly seclusion, describes his dependence on his new friends for his own mental health:

If I am accidentally left alone for a few hours [...] my inveterate persuasion rushes upon my soul, and my thoughts are chained down by some irresistible violence, but they are soon disentangled by the prince’s conversation, and instantaneously released at the entrance of Pekuah.<sup>551</sup>

Eighteenth-century physicians noted of melancholy patients that their minds often became fixed upon one subject. Burton states of the melancholy person: ‘one daies solitarinesse, one houres sometimes, doth them more harme, then a weekes physicke, labour and company can doe good.’<sup>552</sup> We are told that the astronomer had ‘spent forty years in unwearied attention to the motions and appearances of the celestial bodies [...]’.<sup>553</sup> Although initially he appeared completely in control of his reason, the signs of madness are ominously present. Having become melancholy in his reclusive lifestyle,

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid., ch. XVI, pp. 65-66 .

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., ch. XVI, p. 66.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid., ch. XLVI, p. 162.

<sup>552</sup> Burton’s *Anatomy*, I (1. 2. 2. 6), p. 239.

<sup>553</sup> *Rasselas*, ch. XL, p. 142.

he admits that he made the wrong choice in life: 'I now see how fatally I betrayed my quiet, by suffering chimeras to prey upon me in secret; but melancholy shrinks from communication, and I never found a man before, to whom I could impart my troubles [...].'<sup>554</sup> Here Johnson implies that when we do not live our lives in the company of others, we lose a sense of perspective over our concerns. As the astronomer is gradually drawn into a social setting where his attention is distracted, he is able to achieve a more reasoned perspective on life.

It could be argued that the astronomer lived in his own reclusive version of the Happy Valley: he was separated not only from the negative aspects of society but also from the positive and, like Rasselas, he was aware that he was not content. But whereas Rasselas was able to use his reason and compare his own dissatisfaction with the peace of mind of others, the astronomer, in seclusion, appears to have crossed that line from melancholy into madness. Burton suggested of those who applied their minds too rigorously to learning: 'how many poore schollers have lost their wits, or become dizards, neglecting all worldly affaires, and their owne health [...] to gaine knowledge? for which, after all their paines in the worlds esteeme they are accompted ridiculous and silly fooles [...].'<sup>555</sup>

Imlac explains the psychological devastation caused when melancholy strikes suddenly and is outside of our control:

The state of a mind oppressed with a sudden calamity [...] is like that of the fabulous inhabitants of the new created earth, who, when the first night came upon them, supposed that day never would return. When the clouds of sorrow gather over us, we see nothing beyond them, nor can imagine how they will be dispelled.<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid., ch. XLVII, p. 163.

<sup>555</sup> Burton's *Anatomy*, I (1. 2. 3. 15), p. 304.

<sup>556</sup> *Rasselas*, ch. XXXV, pp. 126-127.

This raises the point that Johnson frequently refers to in his personal letters, that one should never be too impressed by the thoughts and feelings experienced whilst the mind labours under melancholy, for at this time it is not functioning rationally.

The tale of *Rasselas* explores the need to acquire a sense of purpose in life and ultimately, to obtain a sense of achievement in order to stave off melancholy. In Burton's *Anatomy*, Democritus envisages his own version of the Happy Valley: 'an *Utopia* of mine owne, a new *Atlantis*',<sup>557</sup> a utopia, we suspect, that will be free from melancholy. Johnson, in comparison, creates the Happy Valley, yet another idyllic setting but with a very great difference. Burton stipulates that in his new commonwealth he 'will suffer no Beggars, Rogues, Vagabonds, or idle persons at all, that cannot give an accompt of their lives how they maintaine themselves'.<sup>558</sup> In Johnson's Happy Valley every human need is catered for. The Happy Valley, that surreal lifestyle, removed from the outside world, could be described as a state of total inertia. It could be argued that it represents man's imagined idyll, free from the demands of society, stress, worry and grief. Imlac asks how *Rasselas* can be unhappy in the Valley when he wants for nothing: "[t]hat I want nothing," said the prince, "or that I know not what I want, is the cause of my complaint[...]"<sup>559</sup>

Significantly, throughout *Rasselas*, the Prince plans what useful purpose he will put his life to when he eventually makes his choice. He soon realises that all walks of life are susceptible to melancholy. He sees that man cannot protect himself from melancholy with money, solitude, power or intelligence. The moral guidance within *Rasselas* shows us that the right 'choice of life', the lifestyle that will bring us peace of mind and happiness, can never be achieved by shutting oneself away from others, or focusing too intently on one's own personal gratifications, but by using one's talents for

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<sup>557</sup> Burton's *Anatomy*, I, p. 85.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>559</sup> *Rasselas*, ch. III. p. 15.

the benefit of others. In ‘The Conclusion Where Nothing is Concluded’ Rasselas and his sister come frustratingly close to this realisation. Rasselas eventually decides to ‘administer justice in his own person’ over a ‘little kingdom’ of his own.<sup>560</sup> His sister decides to found a college of women and to ‘divide her time between the acquisition and communication of wisdom [...]’.<sup>561</sup> At the end of the tale however, Johnson suggests ‘[o]f these wishes that they had formed they well knew that none could be obtained’.<sup>562</sup> The fact that they merely return to Abyssinia, could be regarded as surprisingly realistic. They choose to continue in their idle lifestyles and therefore we can assume that they will remain depressed. Idleness, Johnson suggests, is an inherent part of man’s constitution. In a letter to John Taylor he states that

[t]here is one honest reason why those things are most subject to delays which we most desire to do. What we think of importance we wish to do well, and to do anything well, requires time, and what requires time commonly finds us too idle or too busy to undertake it.<sup>563</sup>

It is only when we take into consideration Johnson’s religious beliefs that we are able to make any sense of why such a prolific writer as Johnson could have regarded himself as idle. The confusion, I believe, stems from semantics: the term ‘idleness’ is itself problematical and open to misinterpretation. Critics have generally viewed Johnson’s idleness as one-dimensional, interpreting it as a conscious decision by him to do nothing, whereas Johnson’s idleness was in fact multi-faceted and complex. In his prayers he refers to his spiritual idleness in the sense that he believed he did not make enough effort to live a devout life. He believed that he was physically idle in not using the talents bestowed on him by God to help others as part of that devout life. He was aware that at times he was idle in the sense that we would recognise today, and in these instances I argue that Johnson refers to his idleness as sloth.

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid., ch. XLIX, p. 175.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., ch. XLIX, p. 175.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., ch. XLIX, p. 176.

<sup>563</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, I, p. 147 (18 November 1756).

I have also argued that Johnson suffered from the physical and mental indolence which was a symptom of his depression and it is this idleness which he often expresses in the *Rambler* and *Idler* essays and in *Rasselas*; it is an idleness which is often misdiagnosed by others as mere boredom or laziness. Johnson warns that having nothing to do, no purpose in life, to be in fact physically or worse, mentally idle, is both a critical cause of, as well as a major symptom of melancholy. It is in these works that Johnson links the philosophies of Law and Burton. It is Burton's warnings of the dangers of living a solitary or idle lifestyle, and how this invariably leads to a depressed state of mind that reverberates throughout the moral essays, *Rasselas* and in his private correspondence. It is Law's belief in the importance of living a devout life and the sinfulness of wasting one's time and talents that is prominent in his private prayers and journals as well as his poetry and fiction.

What Johnson found in Law was a prescribed course of life which, if followed exactly, promised not only to alleviate his mental anguish but also to bring him eternal happiness. What Johnson found in aspects of Burton was a prescribed way of life that complimented Law's philosophy and also promised to alleviate the symptoms of his depression. Law's *Serious Call* was the source of Johnson's anxieties over idleness if not necessarily the primary source of his depression. Although initially Law's religious guidelines could not be held responsible for triggering Johnson's first severe bout of melancholy, they eventually exacerbated his condition by feeding the doubt and insecurity to which he was susceptible. Law was a severe task master and Johnson was attempting to rise to an almost unattainable challenge. Burton, on the other hand, seems to have been a positive influence in helping Johnson to understand and cope with his melancholy. Johnson accepted melancholy as a part of his life and he kept its impact on his life, to a large extent, private. He owned his depression and took full responsibility

for all facets of his idleness, regarding it as a weakness in his character. Although he regarded his spiritual and physical idleness as a sin against God, he did not regard his depression as a punishment from God, nor did he regard his religion in any way responsible for melancholy's presence in his life.

# Chapter Six

## Religious Melancholy

### I

#### A Fashionable Illness

In this final chapter I will examine the concept of religious melancholy as opposed to melancholy. Religious melancholy was basically general melancholy with the added complication that, added to their depressed mental state, sufferers became tormented by religious doubts: they usually believed that they had committed some sin that they could never be forgiven for or that they had been abandoned by God. Religious melancholy is of particular pertinence to this thesis because of the way in which the idleness of those suffering from the illness was regarded by others.

As discussed earlier, one of the main symptoms of general melancholy was that sufferers became increasingly lethargic, a symptom often mistaken for idleness. This lethargy could range in severity, from a general lack of motivation, to a severely incapacitating dejection and disinterest in life. The symptom made it particularly hard for those who cared for the patient to motivate and help the sufferer and indeed, as we saw with Samuel Johnson, for the sufferer to motivate themselves. As previously discussed, idleness was regarded as a social evil and idle persons berated, regardless of whether they were suffering from melancholy or not. However, there was a greater degree of tolerance shown towards the idleness of those suffering from religious

melancholy. Fellow Christians sympathized and empathized with those afflicted because of the religious aspect attached to the condition. With this in mind, it is interesting to consider just how easy it would have been for a person to adopt the characteristics of religious melancholy in order to live a basically idle lifestyle. After all, it was the sufferer's account of their illness and mental state, either verbal or written, that allowed others to interpret their symptoms as recognisably those of a religious melancholic. As with melancholy, the symptoms of religious melancholy were mainly psychological and there would have been no external evidence, apart from the general distress of the sufferer.

The case of William Cowper is particularly intriguing when set in this context, for as Patricia Meyer Spacks suggests, an autobiographer 'presents for public contemplation a version of the self that he wants or needs or chooses to offer [...]'.<sup>564</sup> In this final chapter I argue that our perception of Cowper as a person suffering from religious melancholy was initially cultivated by Cowper himself in his spiritual autobiography *Adelphi*. Cowper's melancholy can be linked with the notion of idleness, especially his attempts to resist having to earn a living. The mental angst he suffered, because of his alleged belief that he had been abandoned by God, has been viewed with pity, shock and compassion, but the validity of his condition has not generally been questioned or doubted.

In this chapter I do not suggest that Cowper never suffered from periodic bouts of melancholy. I will suggest, however, that it was neither his religious doubts nor his idle lifestyle that initially caused his melancholy. I will argue that in *Adelphi*, Cowper reinterprets the root cause of his melancholy and intentionally portrays himself as a religious melancholic in order to avoid the pressures placed upon him to earn a living. I

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<sup>564</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining A Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 19.

will argue that religious melancholy was in fact a very prevalent illness. I will also provide evidence that Cowper borrowed from the religious works written on the subject when constructing his autobiography, and that the psychological symptoms he describes in his memoir were in fact easily recognisable generic traits.

In chapter five I discussed how Samuel Johnson regarded his melancholy as a physiological ailment inherent in his nature, something to be accepted and coped with whilst he got on with the business of his life. W. Jackson Bate suggests that

the special burden for Johnson was his refusal to slough off responsibility for his own frame of mind. [...] Nor would he blame or project on others, or on society, or even, beyond a point, on the universe generally lest it become a charge against God himself.<sup>565</sup>

However Cowper, referring to God, in a letter to his cousin Martin Madan writes:

I bless His holy name for every sigh, and every groan, and every tear I have shed in my illness. He woundeth and His hands make whole—they heal the wounds which He Himself hath made for our chastisement [...].<sup>566</sup>

Cowper leaves no doubt that God was responsible for inflicting mental torment upon him in a justified attempt to correct his wayward and idle lifestyle.

In laying the blame for his tormented mental state firmly at the hand of God, Cowper, perhaps unwittingly, entered into an eighteenth-century debate, whereby ministers were attempting to distance the Christian faith from being held responsible for causing people to become melancholy. For instance, ministers such as James Robe suggested that one of the biggest problems the Christian faith had to contend with was that religion was often blamed for causing people to become dejected, or, that if a person was not already dejected when they turned to Christianity, they very soon would

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<sup>565</sup> Bate, 1975, p. 376.

<sup>566</sup> *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. by King and Ryskamp, I, p. 96 (24 June 1765).

be: 'Be not then afraid that your becoming really and strictly religious will turn you vapourish or Melancholick,' he preached.<sup>567</sup>

Richard Baxter argued that

the commonest cause of passionate Melancholy, is at first some worldly Discontent and Care [...] and then when the Discontent hath muddied and diseased a Man's Mind, Temptations about his Soul do come in afterwards, and that which begun only with worldly Crosses, doth after seem to be all about Religion, Conscience, or merely for Sin or Want of Grace.<sup>568</sup>

Here, Baxter suggests that the initial melancholy may have been triggered by one particularly traumatic event and suggests that religious doubts or concerns were then added to the existing mental distress and confusion which were themselves symptoms of general melancholy. Ministers such as Robe also argued that religious melancholy was a physiological illness and therefore religion could not be held responsible for causing it.

With general melancholy, one of the most common symptoms described by physicians was that the mind of the patient very often became focused and indeed fixed on what they believed was one particularly overwhelming problem. With religious melancholy, the melancholic's attention was focused on their faith and their 'trouble of mind' became a trouble of conscience. Sufferers of religious melancholy did not necessarily stop believing in God, but they mistakenly believed that, because of some sin they had committed, they had been abandoned by Him. In many cases they were unsure themselves as to what that sin was: 'Ask such a man' suggests Edward Synge, Archbishop of Tuarn in Ireland, 'what is the Cause of this Trouble in his Mind, and, upon the strictest Examination of his whole Life, he is able to assign no Reason for

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<sup>567</sup> James Robe, *Counsels and comforts to troubled Christians. In eight sermons by James Robe, ... With an essay shewing, that true religion is neither the cause nor effect of vapours and melancholy. Vol.I. Also in Mr. Samuel Clifford's Collection upon religious melancholy. And Mr. Timothy Roger's Advices to the friends of the melancholy* (Glasgow, 1749), Eighteenth Century Collections Online

< <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 16 January 2008], p. xv.

<sup>568</sup> Baxter, p. 43.

it.<sup>569</sup> This feeling of being disconnected from their religion and in particular from God's mercy must have been particularly traumatic for devout Christians, whose natural instinct would have been to turn to God for comfort and guidance at such a time.

Benjamin Fawcett specifies three distinct types of person who suffered from religious melancholy.<sup>570</sup> He stated that there were those who turned to religion because of their already melancholy condition, but that when cured thought no more of it, a fact which he regarded as an actual sin. Any number of reasons could have drawn such people to religion. They could have been looking for answers as to why they should be afflicted with the disease, guidance as to how to deal with their condition, or comfort from their condition. A troubled conscience over a perceived lack of devotion in their lifestyle and the fear of eternal damnation was the most likely cause of their newly found piety. Once their melancholy had lifted, their fear abated and with it, apparently, their need for comfort. The second group of sufferers were those who turned to religion for help and remained religious even after they were cured and the third group were already religious when they became melancholy.

However, I argue that there was in fact another group of people who appear to have deliberately feigned the symptoms of religious melancholy in order to gain sympathy from others. Their reason for doing so can be linked with the Christian condemnation of idleness and the much more tolerant approach ministers and physicians took towards the apparent idleness of those suffering from religious melancholy. Robe suggests that illnesses such as vapours, melancholy, spleen and hypochondria were often used by the 'gay sort' as no more than some 'fashionable'

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<sup>569</sup> Edward Synge, *Sober thoughts for the cure of melancholy, especially that which is religious* (London, 1742), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 27 January 2010], p. 8.

<sup>570</sup> Fawcett, pp. 20-21.

crutch to ‘conceal the horrors of their conscience’.<sup>571</sup> The implication was that these illnesses were being feigned and that ‘serious Religion’<sup>572</sup> would often be regarded as the cause. It may appear shocking at first to even suggest that Cowper may have faked the symptoms of religious melancholy. However, it would appear that in doing so, he would not have been the first. Jeremy Schmidt states of the Puritan minister Richard Baxter, that although he

recognized that true spiritual affliction could result in melancholy [...] he thought that in most cases, the language of desertion and withdrawal and the complaints of spiritual lassitude were used by melancholic individuals to feed self-pity and arouse sympathy, even admiration, among members of the religious community who valued the expression of these religious experiences as markers of godliness and spiritual depth.<sup>573</sup>

This is not even hypochondria in today’s sense of the word, but a deliberate attempt to influence the way others would perceive them.

Ministers who berated idleness, both physical and spiritual, as being a sin against God, very rarely, if ever, referred to the subject of melancholy. The Baptist minister, John Macgowan stated that the idle and slothful are the ‘*pests of society*, and the *burden of churches* [...]’.<sup>574</sup> However, for those who were diagnosed or perceived as suffering from religious melancholy, ministers in general viewed their physical idleness and mental and spiritual lethargy as a symptom of their illness and therefore did not regard it as a sin at all. Even Timothy Rogers, whom one would expect to preach a very strong Puritan work ethic, advised those who cared for the religious melancholic to

look upon your Friends in this case with great tenderness, for they, alas, are wounded both in Soul and Body; and in all the world there are none for the time in so doleful estate as they.<sup>575</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> Robe, pp. ii-iii.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid., p. iii.

<sup>573</sup> Jeremy Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 104.

<sup>574</sup> Macgowan, p. 14.

<sup>575</sup> Rogers, *A discourse concerning trouble of mind*, p. vi.

Interestingly he also warns carers not to

urge your friends under the disease of Melancholy, to things which they cannot do. [...] It puts them into a more anxious ferment, when you are continually fretting them with doing this or that [...].<sup>576</sup>

This advice, to remove the pressure from those suffering from religious melancholy, is typical of both the attitude of those who wrote on the subject and of the advice given to those who cared for them. It is also opposite to the advice given to those caring for sufferers of basic melancholy by Baxter in *Preservation against melancholy and over much sorrow*: ‘suffer them not to be idle, but drive or draw them to some pleasing work, which may stir the Body and employ the Thoughts.’<sup>577</sup> There was a general heartfelt empathy and compassion for sufferers of religious melancholy and agreement that they should be administered to by sympathetic ministers and physicians. Acceptance, toleration and sympathy towards those who suffered was advocated.

If we consider the case of Cowper, my contention is that he chose the image of the suffering religious melancholic because he needed it to serve a specific purpose: to clearly indicate to others that he was ill and unable to exist within public life. To have presented himself as merely melancholy would possibly not have evoked the same response. In the poem ‘Retirement’, written in 1782, Cowper suggests that this would have been the case:

This is a sight for pity to peruse [...]  
This of all maladies that man infest,  
Claims most compassion, and receives the least [...]<sup>578</sup>

The biographer James King points out that there were five main occasions in Cowper’s life when he suffered from severe bouts of depression: 1753, 1763, 1773, 1787, and 1794. We can identify two very specific reasons for the melancholy he experienced in 1787 and 1794; in 1787, the episode was precipitated by the death of his friend William

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<sup>576</sup> Rogers in Robe, p. 265.

<sup>577</sup> Baxter, p. 78.

<sup>578</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, ‘Retirement’ (1782), ll. 297-302.

Unwin and in 1794, Cowper feared that his close personal friend Mary Unwin was about to die. But the reasons behind the first bouts of depression appear less straightforward.

D. Bruce Hindmarsh states that

Soon after Cowper's death, a long and often acrimonious debate commenced over the causes of his dementia. [...] On the one hand, it was argued that Cowper's madness derived from natural causes [...] on the other, it was insisted that the emotionalism and eschatology of evangelicalism were to blame.<sup>579</sup>

As with Shenstone, the debate over what caused Cowper's melancholy appears to have continued long after his death. A review of the *Works of Cowper* by John S. Memes in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1835 reads:

with regard to Cowper's melancholy aberration of mind, we agree with Mr. Memes, that it sprang from a constitutional malady, and was not produced or even increased by his views of religion.<sup>580</sup>

In this instance Cowper's problem was regarded as a depressed mental state and the depression is regarded as inherent to his nature. Hindmarsh, on the other hand, referred to Cowper's 'madness'. However, King informs us that James Boswell related an account he received of Cowper's condition from a Mr. Sharpe, that Cowper had been in a deplorable state, restrained and in danger of harming himself, 'being impressed with the most dismal doctrines of Calvinism.'<sup>581</sup> Sharpe adds that 'he was at bottom a deeply religious melancholy [...]'.<sup>582</sup> In this instance, although Cowper may have been restrained as though mad, he is perceived as suffering from a recognised illness with a recognised name. There was a very good reason for his distressed state of mind. He was regarded as a religious melancholic and, as a consequence of this label, he was to be pitied.

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<sup>579</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>580</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine* (June 1835) <<http://www.bl.uk/>> [accessed 12 October 2008], p. 563.

<sup>581</sup> King, *Biography*, p. 51. The reference for this quote reads 'Boswell Journal: MS Yale'.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

## II

### *Adelphi: Anxiety Reconstructed*

Our perception of Cowper as a religious melancholic is strongly influenced by the retrospective account we get of his early life recounted in his spiritual autobiography, *Adelphi*. In *Adelphi* Cowper relates how he was driven to the point of utter despair and mental ruin as punishment from God for having lived a sinful, self-indulgent, idle and Godless life. Critics have continued to argue along the line that it was Cowper's religious angst which caused much of his depression. James King suggests that Cowper 'perceived a hostile God as the force which plotted against him' and that '[h]is belief in such a power was so great that it destroyed his psychic well-being, forcing him to withdraw from the great Babylon of London and the life he led there'.<sup>583</sup> However, when we examine the period prior to 1763, when Cowper was eventually detained in Dr. Cotton's madhouse, we see that his bouts of depression were linked to lifestyle changes forced upon him by others and not to any sense of spiritual angst. In fact, by 1763, Cowper was keen to escape from London and the pressure placed upon him by others to acquire a profession.

In *Adelphi*, Cowper states that, in 1753, at the age of twenty-one, he moved to the Temple and it was expected of him that he study and make a career for himself in law. This was a career which held no relish for him and which led to a severe bout of depression. However, in *Adelphi*, he writes:

[t]his being a most critical season of my life and upon which much depended, it pleased my all-merciful Father in Christ Jesus to give a check to my rash and ruinous career in wickedness at the very outset. I was struck not long after my

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.

settlement in the Temple with such a dejection of spirits as none but they who have felt the same can have the least conception of.<sup>584</sup>

It should be remembered that Cowper claims this bout of depression was a just punishment from God fourteen years after the event.<sup>585</sup> Cowper was aware that general melancholy would not have generated the compassion and tolerance he craved after leaving Dr. Cotton's sanatorium, but that religious melancholy may have. If we strip away the religious content from *Adelphi*, what we are left with is a young man who could be regarded as basically work shy, or at least one who reacted badly when forced to relinquish his idle lifestyle. Cowper had all the character traits of Steele's 'Loungers'.<sup>586</sup> When he eventually left the temple, motivated by the fact that his patrimony would soon run out, Cowper was offered and accepted the position of Clerk of the Journals, a position which, in Cowper's own words, would have provided him with an 'easy maintenance'.<sup>587</sup> Again Cowper alludes to the fact that he does not and never did relish the idea of having to earn his own living, let alone put much effort into doing so. Unfortunately for Cowper, the position was contested and he was obliged to defend his right to the post in the House of Lords.

It is during this period in particular that there is a clear disjunction between the account of the period evident in letters he writes at the time to friends and family, and the account we get of the same period related retrospectively in *Adelphi*, where there is evidence of re-construction. For example, in order to defend his position, Cowper was expected to familiarise himself with the requirements of the post: 'The journal books were indeed thrown open to me—a thing which could not be refused'<sup>588</sup> he recounts with a growing sense of alarm in *Adelphi*. Cowper's anxiety at this point is connected

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<sup>584</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. 8.

<sup>585</sup> King suggests that Cowper's Memoir was written in 1767.

<sup>586</sup> See p. 50.

<sup>587</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 15.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

directly with the expectations of others and doubts as to his own capabilities. In *Adelphi* he implies that he was rather backed into a corner: ‘the interest of my friend, the honour of his choice, my own reputation and circumstances all urged me forward.’<sup>589</sup> The acute anxiety he suffered as a consequence could be regarded as a perfectly rational reaction to an extremely daunting situation. It certainly appears to have had nothing to do with any sense of spiritual anxiety. In fact, Cowper states that at this time he was ‘as ignorant in all points of religion as the satchel on my back [...]’.<sup>590</sup> However, in a letter to Lady Hesketh on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1763, he writes:

my days are spent in reading the Journals, and my nights in dreaming of them. An employment not very agreeable to a head that has long been habituated to the luxury of chusing its subject, and has been as little employed upon business, as if it had grown upon the shoulders of a much wealthier gentleman.<sup>591</sup>

The tone of this letter is playfully self-mocking. It should also be remembered that although Cowper claims he is a stranger to business, he had spent the previous ten years at the Temple supposedly studying the Law. In chapter two of this thesis it became apparent that for some sufferers of melancholy, when their idleness was a cause of their melancholy, they desired a more structured day and a lifestyle that was constrained by business.<sup>592</sup> In contrast, it is apparent from this letter that Cowper was perfectly happy and content to be idle; he preferred to have the freedom to choose how he spent his time, with no pressure, no deadlines, and, most importantly perhaps, no expectations from others.

Cowper was aware that he was not a particularly wealthy man and therefore unable to achieve the lifestyle he would have preferred: a gentleman of leisure. Lack of money and the pressure this placed upon him to obtain a profession was the major cause of stress in this particular instance. Sarah Jordan suggests of Cowper that he ‘liked to

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<sup>589</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>591</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. 93.

<sup>592</sup> See p. 44.

consider himself a “mere gentleman,” refusing to feel responsible for earning a living. He did not even support himself, much less anyone else, and he invoked the older aristocratic ideals to justify his idleness’.<sup>593</sup> In a letter to Clotworthy Rowley, Cowper writes:

I could be as splenetick as you & with more reason if I thought it proper to indulge that Humour, but my Resolution is, & I would advise you to adopt it, never to be melancholy while I have a hundred pounds in the world to keep up my Spirits.<sup>594</sup>

Wealth was a critical factor for Cowper, with money in this instance regarded as enough of a barrier to offset depression. As the day on which he was to defend himself in the House drew close, Cowper relates in *Adelphi* how he struggled in an attempt to escape from the mounting anxiety he was experiencing.

Rather surprisingly, Cowper had regarded madness as a possible way out of fulfilling his obligation to his benefactor:

I now began to look upon madness as the only chance remaining. [...] I wished for it earnestly and looked forward to it with impatient expectation. My chief fear was that my senses would not fail me time enough to excuse my appearance in the House, which was the only purpose I wanted it to answer.<sup>595</sup>

In the medical literature of the eighteenth century, written on the subject of melancholy, madness or loss of one’s reason was the worst outcome sufferers feared; it was not usually ‘wished for’. Cowper relates the fact that, when his senses did not fail him, he then regarded suicide as the only possible means left open for him to escape from the ordeal of defending his right to the position in the House of Lords, a position we should remember he did not really want.

It has been said of Cowper that he has ‘given us one of the most terrifying pictures of the suicidal mind. Here is unrelieved and desperate desolation, beyond

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<sup>593</sup> Jordan, p. 20.

<sup>594</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. 90 (2 September 1762).

<sup>595</sup> *Adelphi*, pp. 17-18.

pathos to the stark heart of total loss and abandonment'.<sup>596</sup> Although Cowper appears to have been many times desperate, there are problems with his account of events leading up to and during his first attempt at suicide that should make us question the reasons behind his 'desperate' mental state. For instance, initially Cowper did not consider taking his own life at this time because he was particularly depressed or because he had lost his reason. However, Michael Davies suggests that

the difficulty Cowper's *Adelphi* presents – the very thing that makes it unique, in fact – is the way it blends and bends the conventions of spiritual autobiography within a concurrent story of mental illness and recovery, the 'eighteenth-century dress' of Cowper's otherwise straightforward evangelical conversion account thus reflecting not just Cowper's own suicidal struggles with depression and despair, but something too of the period's fascination with madness.<sup>597</sup>

Although Davies points out the complexities of *Adelphi* it is still suggested that the suicide attempts were a result of his 'depression and despair'. But Cowper had made sure that others were aware of the fact that he thought he was going mad: 'the day of decision drew near and I was still in my senses, though in my heart I had formed many wishes and by word of mouth expressed many expectations to the contrary.'<sup>598</sup> His suicide attempts were carried out in a desperate attempt to get out of his obligations.

Barbara Packer writes: 'So begins the account of what is one of the most minutely detailed and comically protracted set of suicidal thoughts, impulses and gestures ever recorded by a single human being.'<sup>599</sup> Although Packer is not the only critic to point out the comical elements of Cowper's various failed suicide attempts, I believe that humour was far from Cowper's intention when he recounted them in his *Memoir*. It is apparent that Cowper was not incapacitated by his anxiety state: he was

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<sup>596</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. v.

<sup>597</sup> Michael Davies, 'Shaping Grace: The Spiritual Autobiographies of John Bunyan, John Newton and William Cowper', *Bunyan Studies: John Bunyan and his Times*, 12 (2006/2007), pp. 53-54.

<sup>598</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 18.

<sup>599</sup> Barbara Packer, 'Mania and Depression from the Writer's Point of View: The Case of William Cowper', *Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Psychology and Literature* (1990), 223-228 (p. 226).

still in command of his reason and had the motivation to plan out the various modes of suicide available to him, which, as Packer states, would be recounted in ‘minute detail’. Newey refers to Cowper’s failed attempt to hang himself and suggests of the fact that Cowper ‘accidentally’ opened the door to his room when he thought he was locking it, ‘[t]hat Cowper never entertains the possibility that his mistake was an unconscious cry for help [...]’.<sup>600</sup> Far from it being an ‘unconscious’ cry for help, I suggest that it was very much a conscious plan of action carried out with the sole purpose of resisting a course of life he did not relish. Although it would have been virtually impossible for Cowper to have extracted himself from his obligation to defend his position in the House of Lords by claiming to be merely melancholy, there is no arguing over a person’s state of mind when they have just attempted to take their own life. The whole purpose of what Davies refers to as ‘Cowper’s [...] savagely farcical suicide episodes’,<sup>601</sup> was that others should observe his distressed mental state and that he would consequently be relieved from his duty to defend his position. It was a drastic step to take but it worked. The witnessing of his mental state both before and after the event seems to have been of utmost importance to Cowper. When his relative arrived in his chambers and was told by Cowper of the failed attempt his words were, ‘My dear Mr. C—, you terrify me to death. To be sure you cannot hold the office at this rate.’<sup>602</sup>

As a consequence, Cowper was placed under the care of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton in a private madhouse and it was whilst under Cotton’s care that Cowper claims to have undergone a spiritual conversion. He stayed under Cotton’s care for the next two years until his release in 1765. Two years after his release he wrote his personal *Memoir*, his

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<sup>600</sup> Vincent Newey, ‘Bunyan’s Afterlives: Case Studies’, in *Reception, Appropriation, Recollection: Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. by W. R. Owens and Stuart Sim (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 25-48 (p. 33).

<sup>601</sup> Davies, p. 54.

<sup>602</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 25

spiritual autobiography, in which, true to the genre, he recounted the sinfulness of his past life and the sense of euphoria he experienced having found God.

It may seem extreme to suggest that Cowper's initial suicide attempts can be linked directly with idleness, but the fact is that they, and the subsequent bouts of depression he would suffer throughout the remainder of his life, can be linked to periods when pressure was placed upon him to live anything other than the basically idle lifestyle he preferred. We should also remember that it was Cowper who retrospectively linked his distressed mental state prior to his suicide attempts with religious angst. I suggest that Cowper never intended to commit suicide in this instance and that reflecting on this and other episodes at a later date, he would have been aware that the very attempt would have been looked upon sympathetically if the cause of the suicide attempt could be attributed to religious melancholy. Although suicides were reported in newspapers, the cause of the suicide was not usually given by the press.<sup>603</sup> However, when the cause could be attributed to religion, then the press had no such qualms. The following article appeared in the *St. James's Chronicle* and the *British Evening Post*:

Thursday morning last, between seven and eight o'clock, the porter of a gentleman in Hanover Square hanged himself; the jury brought in a verdict Religious Melancholy!<sup>604</sup>

Religious melancholy had become a well-documented and recognised cause of suicide. However, when a person suffering from religious melancholy committed or attempted to commit suicide, as with their idleness, their distress was regarded as pitiful rather than

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<sup>603</sup> In a recent lecture given by Professor R. A. B. Houston at Northumbria University entitled 'The Limits of Sympathy: Newspaper Reporting of Suicide in the North of England, c1750-1830', Professor Houston stated that verdicts were not usually given as to the cause of suicides. <<http://www.beforedepression.com/>> (11 November 2008).

<sup>604</sup> *St. James's Chronicle* and *British Evening Post* 16 April 1774; Issue 2055. Likewise, an article in the *General Evening Post*, 21 June 1766; issue 5099 reported the following instance, 'On Sunday morning a woman, who kept a Chandler's shop in Black Friars, being discontented in mind, hanged herself: it is supposed to have been occasioned by a religious melancholy', Burney Collection of Newspapers, <<http://www.bl.uk/eresources/dbstptitles/eresourcesa.html>> [accessed 12 October 2008]

sinful. The author of this article, which was found in the *General Evening Post* under the title 'Observations on Suicide' states that

Religious melancholy has in all ages, and modes of faith, been capable of such fatal resolutions [...] but religious melancholy is not a subject for human (nor I trust) divine rigour [...]. The prevailing maxim of the present age, and of the law, whose intention (may it ever be so) is humanity, maintain, that no man in his senses can commit suicide: the act itself is insanity.<sup>605</sup>

The fact that articles such as this appeared in the press reflects the prominence of religious melancholy and the debates it raised. The fact that religious melancholy was linked directly to God commanded a certain respect for the condition which, as the author of this article implies, was of too complex a nature for man to understand or indeed to pass judgement upon. Although Cowper could not overtly diagnose himself as a religious melancholic, this was the message he needed to convey in his spiritual autobiography. Although a failed suicide attempt may have been looked upon as a sin against God and with a certain amount of contempt, an attempt carried out whilst under the influence of religious melancholy would very likely have aroused pity and compassion for the sufferer.

There are many things about *Adelphi* which make it distinct from others in the genre. The most immediate and notable difference is the amount of narrative space Cowper gives to the description of his physiological and psychological state leading up to his incarceration in Cotton's madhouse. Hindmarsh draws attention to this unusual mix:

Cowper described this entire episode of his repeated attempts at suicide [...] in lurid detail, minutely relating his physical and psychological symptoms at each stage.[...] The theological commentary that follows then tied the vivid psychological narrative back into the conventions of the conversion genre.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> *General Evening Post*, 24 August 1790; Issue 8877, Burney Collection of Newspapers <<http://www.bl.uk/eresources/dbstptitles/eresourcesa.html>> [accessed 12 October 2008].

<sup>606</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 273.

What may appear to us as medical content within *Adelphi*, takes precedence over the spiritual content. The point I argue, is that the spiritual autobiography was used by Cowper primarily as a vehicle to relate this information and only secondly to relate the account of his conversion.

Vincent Newey argues that although *Adelphi* 'is conceived as a conversion narrative, its religion is a borrowed language, something incidental rather than integral to the inner life'.<sup>607</sup> Here Newey implies that the religious conviction behind the conversion narrative is what is borrowed. Although I would agree, I would also suggest that by the time Cowper wrote his *Memoir*<sup>608</sup> he was also familiar with the literature written on the subject of religious melancholy, and that the 'borrowed language' is literally that of ministers who wrote specifically on the subject of religious melancholy. Newey points out that Cowper was not averse to borrowing the language of others and adapting it to make a point. For instance, both Newey and Davies point out the similarities between Cowper's *Memoir* and Bunyan's spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding*, although Davies states that there is no evidence that Cowper had ever read this work.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> Newey, p. 32.

<sup>608</sup> James King, 'Adelphi Restored: The Excisions to Cowper's Narrative', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series (August 1979), pp. 291-305. King informs us that Cowper's own autobiography, entitled *Memoir of the Early Life of William Cowper*, was written in approximately 1767 and published by two separate publishers, Edwards and Cox, in 1816. Cowper's narrative of his Brother John's death, entitled *Adelphi. A sketch of the character, and an account of the Last Illness, of the Late Rev. John Cowper*, was published by John Newton in 1802. It was not until 1967 that the manuscript containing both of these narratives and entitled *Adelphi, An Account of the Conversion of W. C. Esquire Faithfully Transcribed From His Own Narrative and Likewise His Narrative of the Memorable Conversion of His Brother the Revd. John Cowper* appeared. This manuscript was Judith Madan's copy (Cowper's aunt), made from Newton's copy and transcribed in 1772. The copyist is thought to have been Maria Cowper, Judith Madan's daughter and the sister of Martin Madan. The manuscript is in 'Common Place Book Vol. 2', which was presented to the Bodleian Library in 1967. Mrs. Madan's manuscript, according to King, contains personal material relating to his mental state not found in the *Memoir* published in 1816. King suspects that the excisions made from the 1816 version were likely to have been made by Newton or 'by someone who was a personal friend anxious to present Cowper in a particular way.'

<sup>609</sup> Davies, p. 52. Davies suggests that '[w]hen Cowper describes feeling, in his despair, "like a man borne away by a rapid torrent into a stormy sea from which he sees no possibility of returning, and where he knows he cannot subsist", it is of Bunyan's "casting down and raisings up" that we might well be

Although Hindmarsh draws attention to the medical content within *Adelphi*, as far as I am aware, no one has researched into where exactly this information may have come from. It has always been assumed that the symptoms of depression and mania Cowper relates in *Adelphi* are drawn from his own experience. The narrative, perhaps because of its uniqueness, has proven both alluring and problematical for critics. Cowper's relating of his experience draws attention to itself by its very objectiveness. For instance Allan Ingram states:

There are suicide attempts, there are the promptings of the devil, there is the complete mental breakdown, the confinement, the appalling dreams, the conviction of sin and certainty of damnation, all feelingly narrated, more feelingly, in fact, for the almost detached manner in which Cowper deals with his own experience, as if it were not, somehow, even his own.<sup>610</sup>

The point I make is, what if we should consider that the experience were not his own? What if we should consider that Cowper was merely relating the symptoms of religious melancholy, which was by then a well-documented disorder? Spacks concentrates on the spiritual conversion being an unconscious attempt by Cowper to give meaning to his suffering, whilst still accepting that the experience itself was genuine: 'Cowper's self-depiction has the absolute authority of authentic emotional experience'<sup>611</sup> she states. Spacks suggests this even though she points out that Cowper 'defines the meaning of his tale in terms that the reader cannot fully accept'.<sup>612</sup> King suspects that the excisions made from the 1816 version of Cowper's *Memoir* were likely made to the passages in *Adelphi*, where 'Cowper appropriates spiritual meanings to mundane incidents (the gun, the brick, the dog and the sheep, the thunder and lighting)', because '[t]he censor surely felt that the limits of credibility had been stretched and that the narrative might seem to

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reminded most, and of how Bunyan too felt just like "a broken vessel, driven, as with the winds, and tossed sometimes head- long into despair."

<sup>610</sup> Allan Ingram with Michelle Faubert, *Cultural Constructions of Madness in Eighteenth Century Writing: Representing the Insane* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 204.

<sup>611</sup> Spacks, 1976, p. 42.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

be hovering on the precipice of fiction'.<sup>613</sup> Although in this instance King alludes to the emblematic focus, it suggests that, even in the early nineteenth century, certain aspect of *Adelphi* were thought to have been too contrived. Packer states of Cowper that '[w]hen describing his own symptoms he combines the passion of the autobiographer with the detachment of the clinician, and as a result produces one of the most consistently absorbing case histories of severe affective disorder ever written'.<sup>614</sup> However, as with Hindmarsh and Spacks, Packer also does not take into consideration that Cowper may have been borrowing the 'language' to describe the symptoms of a well-recognised mental disorder, and that this is the reason behind the apparent 'detachment'.

However, there is no actual evidence that Cowper ever read any medical or religious literature that dealt specifically with the subject of religious melancholy.

Stanley W. Jackson also draws attention to this fact:

Although Cowper clearly thought of himself as suffering from a disease, and a grave one indeed, and although at times he received medications and was otherwise administered to by physicians, neither his letters nor his *Memoir* reveals any inclination to introduce medical theories, old or new, into his efforts to describe or explain his condition.<sup>615</sup>

The lack of any reference specific to the illness within *Adelphi* is highly significant in itself. However, it is only when we read *Adelphi* in the context of the religious works written by ministers such as James Robe, Richard Baxter and Samuel Clifford, that we find evidence that Cowper borrowed heavily from such works in order to portray himself as a religious melancholic. I argue that by the time Cowper wrote his spiritual autobiography he was well versed in the language surrounding the illness.

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<sup>613</sup> King, 1979, pp. 304-305.

<sup>614</sup> Packer, p. 225.

<sup>615</sup> Jackson, 1986, p. 138.

### III

## Influence

In 1749, the minister James Robe published *Counsels and comforts to troubled Christians*. The title itself would have surely drawn those suffering from religious angst, as well as those who cared for them. In this publication Robe included the works of the Puritan minister Timothy Rogers, *Advices to the Relations and Friends of these under religious Melancholy*. Also included was 'Mr Samuel Clifford's collection on religious melancholy' which he had collected and transcribed from the works of Richard Baxter. Clifford's work had first been published in 1716. It is in these two works, Rogers' and Clifford's, but Clifford's in particular, that we can see the similarity of expressions used by Cowper to describe his state of mind leading up to his conversion.

If we look again at Cowper's phraseology in *Adelphi*, he claims that

I was struck not long after my settlement in the Temple with such a dejection of spirits as none but they who have felt the same can have the least conception of. Day and night I was upon the rack, lying down in horrors and rising in despair.<sup>616</sup>

Rogers states of the sufferer of religious melancholy that 'He is then like one upon a rack, whose anguish will not suffer him to rest' and that the melancholy person should be administered to by those who 'have themselves felt it; for it is impossible fully to understand the nature of it any other way than by experience'.<sup>617</sup> The important thing to note here, is that religious melancholy is usually portrayed by those in authority as being almost impossible to understand and, because of this, it should be accepted

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<sup>616</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 8.

<sup>617</sup> Rogers in Robe, p. 257.

without question that those who suffered from it were to be pitied. It would therefore be very hard, or indeed inappropriate, to question whether someone was truly suffering from the illness. Rogers had suffered from religious melancholy himself and therefore speaks from experience. He ends by saying ‘I do not speak only with borrowed expressions in this matter [...]’.<sup>618</sup> Although it could be argued that the expression ‘upon the rack’ was quite common, when we add to this the weight of Clifford’s methodical listing of the symptoms of religious melancholy, it becomes evident that, unlike Rogers, Cowper may indeed have used ‘borrowed expressions’ to portray himself as a religious melancholic.

It was not uncommon in the eighteenth century for physicians to refer to and quote from the works of fellow physicians when discussing the symptoms of illnesses. Benjamin Fawcett makes the almost identical observations to Clifford in his *Observations on the nature, causes and cures of melancholy* published in 1780.<sup>619</sup> Clifford’s work was possibly used by numerous other physicians. However, Jackson suggests of Cowper that ‘there is nothing to tell us what medical theories, if any, he may have entertained in thinking about his disorder, or even what relevant medical views might have been familiar in his immediate circle’.<sup>620</sup> The reason for this lack of medical evidence is that it was mainly ministers who were writing with authority on the subject of religious melancholy, not physicians. This very fact elevated religious melancholy to a level above what was thought to be the general understanding of ordinary man. Ministers’ endorsement of the mental suffering of those afflicted promoted and encouraged sympathy from others who empathised with the suffering of their fellow Christians.

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<sup>618</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>619</sup> Fawcett, p. 6.

<sup>620</sup> Jackson, 1986, p. 140.

The Epistle Recommendatory to Clifford's work congratulates Clifford's skill in faithfully transcribing Baxter's writing on the subject and making it 'more servicable to common Readers than before'.<sup>621</sup> It reads as follows:

There are few that become real Christians, but at one time or other, are exercis'd with something of that melancholy which is here described: And we believe there are none that have chosen to be companions of them that fear God, who do not meet with it in the cases of others, however free from it they are themselves. Where it prevails to a high degree, 'tis one of the most deplorable cases in the world; and even the least degree of it requires good help, and some pains to get rid of it.

Clifford lists 35 symptoms commonly displayed by sufferers of religious melancholy in what is essentially an easy reference guide to identifying the religious melancholic. I argue that in *Adelphi* Cowper relates most of these symptoms and applies them to his own experience. For instance, number 9 in Clifford's list states of sufferers that they 'never read or hear of any miserable instance but they are thinking [...] "This is all spoken of me, or this is just my case"'. Cowper relates in *Adelphi*, how the day before he was due to defend his case in the House he experienced such paranoia:

I read the newspaper and in it a letter [...] it appeared demonstrably true to me that it was a libel or satire upon me. The author seemed to be acquainted with my purpose of self-murder and to have written that letter to secure and hasten the execution of it.<sup>622</sup>

What is yet more interesting than the fact that Cowper may have borrowed the symptom from Clifford's list, is that at this point Cowper suggests his mind 'possibly began to be disordered'.<sup>623</sup> Clifford clearly states in number 23 that the major overriding symptom of melancholy is 'a distemper'd confused phantasie, with a weak reason which cannot govern it'. So here Cowper implies that he is aware that this

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<sup>621</sup> Samuel Clifford, 'The Signs and Causes of Melancholy', in *Counsels and comforts to troubled Christians*. In eight sermons by James Robe (Glasgow, 1749), Eighteenth Century Collections Online < <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/unn?db=ECCO> > [accessed 11 March 2009], pp. 147-254. All subsequent quotations from Samuel Clifford are taken from this edition in Robe.

<sup>622</sup> *Adelphi*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

symptom, the pressure to commit suicide, is the symptom of a disordered mind, but he does not admit to it being the symptom of religious melancholy.

Number 27 in Clifford's list says that sufferers 'are further tempted to think they have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost' and number 6 that '[t]hey are still apprehending themselves forsaken by God, and prone to despair. [...] [T]heir continual thought is, I am undone, undone [...]'. Cowper writes in *Adelphi*: 'having sinned against the Holy Ghost [...] I delivered myself over to absolute despair. [...] I laid myself down in bed, howling with horror [...] I am damned—damned.'<sup>624</sup> The generic traits of religious melancholy are apparent throughout *Adelphi*. Without ever explicitly stating that he is suffering from the condition, the sheer volume of specific symptoms described by Cowper would have left the reader in no doubt as to his mental condition and what he was suffering from. Number 15 in Clifford's list says that '[t]hey are much addicted to solitariness and weary of company [...]'. Cowper writes: 'I grew more sullen and reserved, fled from all society, even of the most intimate friends, and shut myself up in my chambers.'<sup>625</sup> In *Adelphi* Cowper states that '[t]here never was so abandoned a wretch, so great a sinner'.<sup>626</sup> It is at this point that we get the sense of just how prevalent the illness religious melancholy had become. In number 10, Clifford informs the reader that 'I have had abundance in a few weeks with me, almost just in the same case; and yet every one saith, "never anyone was as they"'. The growing popularity of the literature written specifically on the subject of religious melancholy may have had something to do with this apparent deluge of sufferers.

Number 20 in Clifford's list suggests that '[t]hey are endless, in their scruples: Afraid lest they sin in every word they speak, and in every thought, and every look, and every meal they eat, and all the clothes they wear'. Cowper writes: 'At length I thought

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

every motion of my body a sin, and could not find out the posture in which I could sit or stand without offending.’<sup>627</sup> This is such a very specific symptom of religious melancholy, that to find it suddenly dropped into a spiritual autobiography without the slightest hint from the author that he is aware that it is a symptom of a specific illness should make us suspicious.

As disturbing as it is to read an account of a person’s attempted suicide attempt, when we set Cowper’s first attempts in the context of Clifford’s ‘Signs of Melancholy’ we see, yet again, a marked similarity between the two narratives. Number 30 on Clifford’s list states of the religious melancholic that, when tempted by the Devil, ‘if they pass over a bridge, he urgeth them to leap into the water.’ Cowper relates how he was tempted to throw himself into the river from the Custom House quay. Number 30 continues: ‘[I]f they see a knife they are presently urged to kill themselves with it [...]’ Cowper states that whilst incarcerated in Cotton’s madhouse he found a stocking needle in the fire and made several attempts to stab himself in the heart before the point eventually snapped. Clifford states of sufferers of religious melancholy that they are often tempted to take their own life because of ‘something within them importunately provoking them, and saying “Do it, Do it now”’. Cowper relates that whilst in the madhouse he was in fact advised by some inner voice to kill himself: ‘[h]e even persuaded me that it would be an act of duty to rid the world of such a sinner [...]’<sup>628</sup> It is not clear in this instance whether Cowper meant that it was God or the devil who was tempting him, but if we go by Clifford’s, or rather Baxter’s, reasoning, it would most likely have been attributed to the devil. Number thirty continues: ‘For the disease they labour under,’ he states, ‘will [...] not only make them weary of their lives, (even while

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<sup>627</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

they are afraid to die) but the Devil hath some great advantage by it, to urge them to do it.’

Given the profuse number of symptoms discussed, it should make us wonder why Cowper is not directly acknowledging that he is narrating the symptoms of such a well recognised illness. These very specific symptoms also appear in his poetry. In ‘The Heart Healed and Changed by Mercy’, written between his breakdowns of 1763 and 1773 Cowper writes:

Much I fasted, watch’d and strove,  
Scarce would shew my face abroad,  
Fear’d, almost, to speak or move,  
A stranger still to God.<sup>629</sup>

Again, these are very specific symptoms which can be attributed to religious melancholy. The fact that he has incorporated them into a poem for others to read would suggest that he was aware that such unusual symptoms would be recognised by others.

Number 8 in Clifford’s list proposes that religious melancholics ‘are oft tempted to gather despairing thoughts from the doctrine of predestination, and to think that if God hath reprobated them, or hath not elected them, all that they can do [...] cannot save them’. In number 9 he states that ‘if they hear of any terrible example of God’s judgements on any, they think, it will be so with them’. In *Adelphi* Cowper writes:

I particularly remember the barren fig tree was to me a theme of  
inconceivable misery, and I applied it to myself [...] that when Our  
Saviour pronounced a curse upon it He had me in His eye and pointed  
that curse directly at me.<sup>630</sup>

The very nature of religious melancholy meant that sufferers were often prone to exaggerate and to misinterpret the significance of the scriptures. Close self-

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<sup>629</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, I, p. 195 (ll. 13-16)

<sup>630</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 26.

examination of one's soul or close reading of the scriptures was therefore discouraged. Even attendance at church was excused.

In *Adelphi* Cowper describes the mental angst of a religious melancholic who believed that he was being punished by God and feared that he had been abandoned by God. However, eighteenth-century ministers who wrote on the subject of religious melancholy, Clifford included, categorically stated that the religious melancholic was always mistaken on this point, that this belief was in fact a symptom of the illness. Number 30 in Clifford's list states that 'the disease they labour under will let them feel nothing but misery and despair, and say nothing, but I am forsaken, miserable, and undone [...]'. By presenting these symptoms in the form of a spiritual autobiography, Cowper was trying to convince the reader that these very symptoms, acute anxiety and bouts of depression, were punishments inflicted upon him by God in order to show him the error of his ways.

The similarities between Clifford's 'signs of melancholy' and the symptoms Cowper describes in *Adelphi* continue, and it is because the symptoms he describes are so precise and so unlike the symptoms of any other disease that we should question a) why Cowper should want to portray himself as a religious melancholic and b) why he would choose to do so within a spiritual autobiography? As stated earlier, one of the most puzzling aspects of the narrative, is that nowhere in *Adelphi* does Cowper ever state that he believes he is suffering from religious melancholy or that his judgment may have been mistaken because of the illness; this despite all of the literature written on the subject that suggests this would have been the case. However, last but not least in Clifford's list, he states:

Yet in all this distemper, few of them will believe that they are Melancholy [...] and say it is but the rational sense of their unhappiness, and of the forsakings and heavy wrath of God. [...] This is the miserable case of these poor people to be pitied; and not to be despised by any [...] for men of all sorts do fall into this

misery [...] some that have lived in the greatest jollity and sensuality, when God hath made them feel their folly.

This is a surprising note to end on, for here Clifford suggests that the melancholy is in fact inflicted upon people by God in an attempt to correct their ways. Yet for most of the tract he seems to have been stating that this was a mistaken belief of the sufferer of religious melancholy. The fact that not admitting that they were melancholy was perceived as yet another symptom of the illness also creates a problem, considering my argument is that Cowper knowingly used the language of others to build a picture of himself as a religious melancholic. However, this tract also presents evidence that explains why Cowper may have wanted to portray himself as a religious melancholic within a spiritual autobiography. According to Clifford, even those like Cowper, who had lived in relative ease and had brought shame to his family were to be forgiven by others because they were, in fact, suffering from this specific illness.

When referring to eighteenth-century autobiographies in general, Spacks points out that '[r]eal life [...] seldom manifests such orderly and revealing patterns as one finds in its literary renditions'.<sup>631</sup> It is perhaps the fact that Cowper relates so many symptoms of religious melancholy into his narrative that we should be suspicious of their authenticity and question his reasons for doing so. It is interesting at this point to compare the apparent detachment of the symptoms described in *Adelphi* with the disturbing portrait of the depressed character Cowper paints in his poem 'Retirement':

Look where he comes—in this embower'd alcove,  
Stand close conceal'd, and see a statue move:  
Lips busy, and eyes fixt, foot falling slow,  
Arms hanging idly down, hands clasp'd below,  
Interpret to the marking eye, distress,  
Such as its symptoms can alone express.

(ll. 283-288)

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<sup>631</sup> Spacks, 1976, p. 21.

This could be regarded as a self portrait, but more likely it is drawn from his observation of other depressed patients during his stay in Cotton's madhouse. For one would surely not have been able to observe one's own mannerisms, or indeed have been in the right frame of mind to have been aware of them, when in the depth of despair oneself. Despite the fact that there is still a sense of objective observation, there is also a sense of personal involvement here, an empathy. It is hard to pinpoint the difference between this portrait of a depressed character and the picture Cowper presents of himself in *Adelphi*. Perhaps it is the very definite sense that we view the patient in the poem through the actual eyes of Cowper, as opposed to the almost text-book specimen of the religious melancholic portrayed in *Adelphi*.

## IV

### Working for a Living

Cowper portrayed his melancholy as a punishment inflicted upon him by God.

Shortly after his release from Cotton's madhouse he wrote to his cousin, Lady Hesketh:

[t]errible as this chastisement is [...] I am exceedingly thankful for it, and, without hypocrisy, esteem it the greatest blessing, next to life itself [...] I write thus to you that you may not think me a forlorn and wretched creature [...] my affliction has taught me a road to happiness which without it I should never have found.<sup>632</sup>

If one were to be very cynical here, one could draw attention to the fact that Cowper regards his 'affliction' and not his religious faith as the means of acquiring the lifestyle that will eventually bring him 'happiness'.

Timothy Rogers suggests that the disease of religious melancholy 'is more formidable than any other, because it commonly lasts very long; it is a long time before it comes to its height, and usually as long ere it decline again'.<sup>633</sup> This would suggest that, by the time a person was diagnosed as suffering from religious melancholy, the initial trigger of the melancholy may have been forgotten and would no longer have been considered as the cause. Consequently, although initially not instigated by religion, it would have appeared to the patient and, most importantly in this case, all who knew them, that their 'trouble of mind', as Baxter states, was 'all about religion'.<sup>634</sup> It could be argued that Cowper's melancholy followed a similar pattern. Even though his depression of 1763 followed a period of acute anxiety unconnected with religion, in the letters, poetry and ultimately the *Memoir* he wrote after his release

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<sup>632</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, pp. 96-97 (1 July 1765).

<sup>633</sup> Rogers in Robe, p. 258.

<sup>634</sup> See p. 215.

from Cotton's care, Cowper suggests his mental turmoil was caused by God. Those who read his memoir would subsequently believe this was the case and forget the original cause.

Cowper's suicide attempts were an effort to resist the pressure placed upon him to follow a profession and earn a living. The subsequent melancholy he experienced appears to have been the result of finding himself in the vulnerable and desperate situation of having alienated himself from those family members who would have been in a position to help and support him. There is a sense that Cowper felt somewhat harshly judged and treated by those he hoped would have shown him compassion. He writes to Madan in February 1766:

Perhaps I have many friends who pity me, ruined in my profession—stript of my preferment—and banished from all my old acquaintance. They wonder I can sustain myself under these evils, and expect that I should die broken hearted.<sup>635</sup>

But we should remember that Cowper forfeited his right to his preferment, for the obvious and understandable reasons already discussed, and it was a lifestyle course and a career choice which he did not relish to begin with. It is significant that this letter was written the year before Cowper wrote his memoirs in which he portrayed himself as a religious melancholic. It is apparent that neither general melancholy, nor indeed madness, had gained him the compassion he desired. It was imperative therefore, that his actions and his mental state leading up to his failed suicide attempt should be recounted in such a way that would evoke the most sympathy and compassion for the vulnerable situation he subsequently found himself in. His *Memoir* can be regarded as much a cry for help as the attempts themselves. Spacks states of Cowper's *Memoir* that

the clash between the memory which reports mainly pain and the interpretation which affirms a positive meaning for pain produces a drama that belongs both to

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<sup>635</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. 129 (10 February 1766).

his life and to his life story. His experience of isolation, persecution, paranoia, and helplessness would be intolerable without the descent of grace that retrospectively justifies his misery.<sup>636</sup>

Vincent Newey draws attention to the ‘flatness of the religious content of the *Memoir*’ and attributes it ‘to Cowper’s desperate personal need to take up an available framework of ideas by which he could make sense of his unruly life [...]’.<sup>637</sup> Spacks and Newey argue along similar lines, that Cowper wrote his spiritual autobiography as a sort of therapy. But this does not explain why he should have included the abundance of symptoms peculiar to the religious melancholic. It is my contention that Cowper specifically chose the genre of spiritual autobiography in an attempt to explain and justify his actions whilst arousing sympathy and support for his condition.

As was the general case with spiritual autobiographies, Cowper’s *Memoir* would have been passed around amongst his immediate circle of friends and acquaintances. It was not written or intended for publication. If, as I argue, the symptoms of religious melancholy were well known, then those who read Cowper’s memoir would have immediately recognised that he was ill. They would have believed he was not in his right frame of mind, that he was in fact suffering from religious melancholy and therefore should be pitied, treated sensitively and, although difficult at times, with patience. Clifford states in number 34 that few of them

are the better for any reason, conviction or council that is given them. If you convince them of some work of spirit upon their souls, and a little at present abate their sadness, yet as soon as they are gone home and look upon their souls [...] all your convincing arguments are forgotten.

Cowper writes that ‘after some discourse with Mr. Madan and Mr. Haweis upon the subject of faith I went to bed full of resolutions that I would believe in Jesus [...] I slept my usual three hours well and then awakened with ten times a stronger sense of my

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<sup>636</sup> Spacks, 1976, pp. 53-54.

<sup>637</sup> Newey, p. 33.

alienation from God than ever'.<sup>638</sup> At every point in Cowper's spiritual autobiography we can see the generic traits of religious melancholy mimicked.

Packer takes a less cynical approach, suggesting that the 'Evangelical desire to bring all shameful secrets to light'<sup>639</sup> lay behind Cowper's narration of his various suicide attempts and mental trauma in spiritual autobiography. But in the light of all that has been discussed so far, we can attribute yet another reason as to why Cowper chose to portray himself as a tormented religious melancholic. Number 30 in Clifford's list encourages those suffering from religious melancholy 'to open their case to others, and to tell them all, that they may help to their preservation'. With this in mind, we should consider what other forms of narrative Cowper could have used to portray himself as a religious melancholic that would have been so warmly and respectfully received without laying himself open to criticism. Packer suggests that any author 'who is trying to explain what he or she has experienced in a state of acute mania or depression must either choose from the available genres offered by the culture or create new ones'.<sup>640</sup> Without the *Memoir* Cowper's actions might have been regarded as at best desperate and at worst cowardly and sinful.

In 'A Song of Mercy and Judgment', which he wrote after his release from Cotton's care, Cowper is euphoric, both in his return to health and with the retired lifestyle he now lived:

Lord! I love the Habitation  
Where the Saviour's Honour dwells,  
At the Sound of thy Salvation  
With Delight my Bosom swells...<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>638</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 31.

<sup>639</sup> Packer, p. 226.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>641</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, I, pp. 135-137 (ll. 1-4).

He then proceeds to revisit what must surely have been his traumatic experience within the madhouse:

From the cheerful Beams of Morning  
Sad I turn'd my Eyes away:  
And the shades of Night returning  
Fill'd my Soul with new Dismay...(ll. 13-16)

Food I loath'd nor ever tasted  
But by violence constrain'd,  
Strength decay'd and Body wasted,  
Spoke the Terrors I sustain'd....(ll. 19-22)

Bound and watch'd lest Life abhorring  
I should my own Death procure,  
For to me the Pit of Roaring  
Seem'd more easy to endure. (ll. 25-28)

And so the poem continues, and, as in *Adelphi*, Cowper packs the stanzas with the clinical symptoms experienced by the religious melancholic. Cowper would have had to be sure that the symptoms he described were recognisable in order for them to be attributed to religious melancholy and not merely the lunatic ravings of a madman, which, if the religious content is removed, they would suggest. By linking his symptoms with both the vengeance and mercy of God, Cowper consciously presents himself as a distressed religious melancholic who has been put through this ordeal by, at first, a vengeful God and secondly, a merciful God. However, it is in the final stanza that Cowper suggests his intention to narrate his story:

Since that Hour in Hope of Glory,  
With thy Foll'wers I am found,  
And relate the Wondrous Story  
To thy list'ning Saints around. (ll. 73-76)

Baird and Ryskamp suggest in their commentary of this poem that it was likely written in the autumn of 1767, after Cowper went to Olney and after Morley Unwin, Mary

Unwin's husband, had died. The basis for this assumption is that Cowper had written to his cousin Maria Cowper in April 1767, stating that he could not relate his story to the Unwins, 'no doubt because Morley Unwin was not one of the "saints".'<sup>642</sup> King suggests that Cowper's *Memoir* was also written around this time.<sup>643</sup> So we can deduce that Cowper made a conscious effort to relate his story to a certain group of people at a very specific time, when he would have been sure of a favourable reception and outcome.

Cowper would have been able, within reason, to not only limit the distribution of his memoir, but he would also have been able to control who read it. In most cases these would have been the very people he hoped would care for and support him. Perhaps he sensed that Morley Unwin would have been an unsympathetic ear. The fact that *Adelphi* can still evoke sympathy and compassion for Cowper today proves how convincingly the approach worked. Packer writes:

the poems and narratives that make up his intermittent autobiography constitute a moving account of the sufferings of a man attempting to understand a disorder his own culture was powerless to explain or to alleviate.<sup>644</sup>

It is apparent that, not only did he understand the nature of the 'disorder', he used the symptoms of the illness to his own advantage. In 'Retirement' Cowper alludes to the desperate situation of the sufferer:

No wounds like those a wounded spirit feels,  
No cure for such, till God who makes them, heals.  
And thou sad sufferer under nameless ill,  
That yields not to the touch of human skill,  
Improve the kind occasion, understand  
A father's frown, and kiss his chast'ning hand;  
(ll. 341-346)

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<sup>642</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, I, p.479.

<sup>643</sup> King, 1979, p. 293.

<sup>644</sup> Packer, p. 224.

The very nature and elusiveness of the disease would surely have evoked sympathy in fellow Christians, to whom Clifford ominously warned in number 35: ‘let none despise such; for men of all sorts do fall into this misery; learned and unlearned, high and low, good and bad [...].’

In the hymn, ‘Looking Upwards in a Storm’, Cowper attempts to evoke sympathy for his suffering:

Poor tho’ I am, despis’d, forgot,  
Yet GOD, my GOD, forgets me not;  
And he is safe and must succeed,  
For whom the LORD vouchsafes to plead.<sup>645</sup>

He must have been aware that he had not fulfilled the expectations his family had for him and that the lifestyle choice he made, a poet, a gentleman writer living in retirement, was not the lifestyle they had envisaged for him. Although Jordan points out that writing in the eighteenth century had changed from ‘being seen as an activity for leisured gentlemen (or at least those patronized by gentlemen) to being a professional activity at which many made their livings’,<sup>646</sup> this poem suggests that Cowper was well aware that he had failed in their eyes.

However, once having established such a lifestyle, as we saw in the case of Shenstone, there is evidence in Cowper’s correspondence and poetry of a general anxiety as to whether a retired lifestyle was in fact the right choice to make and whether it would suit his temperament. After leaving Cotton’s care, he immediately resigned from his one remaining source of income as Commissioner of Bankrupts, which he states ‘released’ him ‘from every obligation to return to London’.<sup>647</sup> However, it was not city-life in particular that repelled Cowper but the fact that, were he to stay, he would have been urged to find employment.

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<sup>645</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, I, p. 179 (ll. 21-24).

<sup>646</sup> Jordan, p. 21.

<sup>647</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 41.

King points out that

In 1764, Cowper's faith removed him from the society in which he had once existed. He no longer had to be concerned with establishing himself in a profession.<sup>648</sup>

Although King does not rule out that Cowper's religion may have initially provided him with a deep sense of spirituality and inner strength, he does suggest that one of the main reasons he was attracted to religion was because it served a specific purpose. In 1766 Cowper writes to Lady Hesketh that 'solitude has nothing gloomy in it if the soul points upwards'.<sup>649</sup> It is apparent that Cowper had considered that solitude may trigger his depression, but it is noteworthy that, although he had no fixed plan as to what he was going to do with his life, he had decided that he was not going to be pressurised into pursuing any kind of profession in London. In his poetry there is evidence that Cowper would always associate London with being trapped in an occupation: 'Like bottled wasps upon a southern wall.'<sup>650</sup> Men who were obligated and tied to their professions by the necessity to earn a living until they eventually expired.

Cowper desired and would eventually adopt what could be regarded as an idle lifestyle: a life lived in retirement. Whereas for some such a lifestyle would cause them to become melancholy, initially it appears to have suited Cowper's temperament. Yet he does not appear to have taken into consideration the privileged position he lived in: for much of his life he was supported by the generosity of others. King remarks that '[d]ependency was the least attractive of Cowper's traits. [...] Cowper always lived as a gentleman, and he expected others to assist him in maintaining the style to which he had become accustomed'.<sup>651</sup>

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<sup>648</sup> King, *Biography*, p. 56.

<sup>649</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. 131 (6 March 1766).

<sup>650</sup> 'Retirement', l. 494.

<sup>651</sup> *Letters*, p. 59.

A regular income appears to have been, for Cowper, something to avoid: ‘A business with an income at its heels / Furnishes always oil for its own wheels.’ (‘Retirement’, I, 615-616) Cowper suggests that it is the necessity of income that binds a person to a trade or profession. He alludes to the increase in consumerism, discussed in chapter two of this thesis, and man’s increasing desire for material goods for instant gratification: men earn money to acquire goods which, as Johnson pointed out, only increase their desire to buy even more goods.<sup>652</sup> The concept of earning a salary appears somewhat alien to Cowper. At the very least he appears to find it rather a sad predicament in which to find oneself. Of the author Charlotte Smith, Cowper writes in a letter to William Hayley:

poor Mrs. Smith. [...] I know not a more pitiable case. Chain’d to her desk like a slave to his oar, with no other means of subsistence for herself and her numerous children. [...]. I never want riches except when I hear such distress.<sup>653</sup>

Cowper is aware that, although a serious writer, Smith is obligated out of dire necessity to earn an income from her writing. Similarly, in a letter to a Thomas Park, he writes:

I had indeed supposed you a person of independent fortune, who had nothing to do but to gratify himself, and whose mind, being happily addicted to literature, was at full leisure to enjoy its innocent amusement. But it seems I was mistaken, and your time is principally due to an art which has a right pretty much to engross your attention. [...] No matter.—I am not prudish in this respect, but honour you the more for a passion virtuous and laudable in itself, and which you indulge not, I dare say, without benefit both to yourself and your acquaintance.<sup>654</sup>

As well as an element of condescension in Cowper’s tone there is shock that Park cannot devote his full attention to the business of writing. Cowper implies that although Park’s many professions as antiquary, bibliographer and engraver<sup>655</sup> may obstruct his literary career, he can now see the necessity of such a working lifestyle. It

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<sup>652</sup> See p. 76.

<sup>653</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, IV, p. 281 (29 January 1793).

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26 (10 March 1792).

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvii. King and Ryskamp inform us that in 1797 Park abandoned his profession and, encouraged by Cowper, dedicated his time to writing poetry.

is quite likely that Cowper was not averse to Park's various professions because they were linked with the concept of a lifestyle 'happily addicted to literature'. There is what could be described as a childish naivety about Cowper's logic: the perception that people have independent fortunes and, as a consequence, should be able to choose the career they desire rather than the one available to them. It should be pointed out however, that these two letters were written when Cowper had firmly established himself as a writer. But nevertheless, he had been supported for many years prior to this by friends and family during the periods when he was unable to write because of his depression, a situation sadly not possible for 'poor' Charlotte.

In *Adelphi*, Cowper attributed all that was good in his life to the mercy of God: 'the Lord has since raised me up such friends as have enabled me to enjoy all the comforts and conveniences of life [...].'<sup>656</sup> This idea is evident in his poetry and poems. In the Olney hymn, 'Grace and Providence', written during a period of respite, Cowper states

My streams of outward comfort came  
From him, who built this earthly frame;  
Whate'er I want his bounty gives,  
By whom my soul for ever lives.

(ll. 9-12)

He does not take into consideration the fact that by removing himself from the pressures of society, to adopt a basically idle lifestyle, he had also removed himself from the initial source of his anxiety: the pressure to earn a living. It would not be until 1782, in his poem 'Retirement', a poem in which he sets up opposing views of urban and rural life, that he acknowledges and reflects upon this fact. In the poem, a rural life is depicted as a life of 'leisure, silence, and a mind releas'd / From anxious thoughts how wealth may be increas'd [...]' (l. 139-140). However, in the same poem we can

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<sup>656</sup> *Adelphi*, p. 41.

detect that the secluded, retired lifestyle of the gentleman poet was not as idyllic or conducive to mental health as he had hoped:

For solitude, however some may rave,  
Seeming a sanctuary, proves a grave,  
A sepulchre in which the living lie,  
Where all good qualities grow sick and die. (ll. 735-738)

Although Cowper focuses on the solitariness of his existence, there is an implicit sense that eventually he did believe that the idleness of his existence contributed towards his despondency. These lines conjure up images of a man merely existing; there is a lack of any energy, creative or physical. It is portrayed as a living death.

In *Rambler* 135 Johnson addresses the issue of leaving the town for the solitude of the country:

Those who thus testified their weariness of tumult and hurry, and hasted with so much eagerness to the leisure of retreat, were either men overwhelmed with the pressure of difficult employments, harassed with importunities, and distracted with multiplicity.<sup>657</sup>

Cowper may have retreated to the safety of the country because he was ‘overwhelmed with the pressures of difficult employments’, but he did not find the peace of mind he had hoped for. When any kind of external pressure was applied that he should work, or indeed change his mode of life, he often feared his melancholy would return. In the hymn ‘Walking with God’, the tone alters considerably back to one of fear that his depression was returning, and he looks to religious faith to sustain him. This hymn was written at the end of December 1767, when, as Baird and Rykamp’s notes explain, Mrs. Unwin was taken seriously ill and Cowper feared that she would die:

Where is the Blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord?  
Where is the Soul-refreshing View

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<sup>657</sup> *Rambler*, IV, pp. 351-352 (No. 135, 2 July 1751).

Of Jesus in his Word?

What peacefull Hours I then enjoy'd,  
How sweet their Mem'ry still!  
But they have left an Aching Void  
The World can never fill.<sup>658</sup>

Here Cowper reacts badly to the possibility that Mary might die, but also to the threat that his lifestyle circumstances may change. The words of this hymn do not reflect the typical concern that one would naturally feel when a loved one was in mortal danger. Apart from the fact that the focus of attention is on his own distress, Cowper does not appear to have had the ability to cope with the natural calamities of life. Cowper's periods of depression always had a definite external trigger, and it is how he responds to those triggers that makes his depression appear manic.

For example, after the death of Morley Unwin in June 1767, Cowper continued to live with Mary Unwin. However, this friendly living arrangement shared between Cowper and Mrs. Unwin was frowned upon by other members of the community and pressure was applied that they should marry. It is at this point, that once again, Cowper's melancholy resurfaced. But, as King says, '[a] "terrible Malady" did not seize him in 1773 and prevent the marriage; he became acutely ill in 1773 because marriage was for him a frightful prospect'.<sup>659</sup> Rather than see it for what it was, an anxiety state similar to all intents to the one he experienced when called to defend himself in front of the House, Cowper again related his emotional state to religious angst. Throughout his life Cowper always reacted badly to any change in his living circumstances. Hugh Underhill says that for Cowper "Domestic happiness [...] hating change" meant withdrawal into a protective casing, a sought imperviousness to

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<sup>658</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, I, p. 139 (ll. 5-8).

<sup>659</sup> King, *Biography*, p. 87.

change'.<sup>660</sup> This could be regarded as a weakness of character: that he felt some childish necessity for things to remain constant. Cowper could not cope with the raised expectations of others and the pressure this placed upon him.

One of the most distressing symptoms of Cowper's melancholy appears to have been that he frequently experienced nightmares. Late in February 1773 Cowper had a dream in which he heard the words "Actum est de te, periisti" ("It is all over with thee, thou hast perished").<sup>661</sup> Much criticism has focused on this traumatic dream as being the turning point in Cowper's struggle with depression, after which he never really recovered. He certainly never attended church again after experiencing the dream. However, Gilbert Thomas questions the importance of the 'fatal dream' claiming that 'Thomas Wright, who discovered the record of this dream, [...] was tempted on that account to attach undue importance to it'.<sup>662</sup> Thomas states that although the dream was never forgotten, the memory of it only 'accentuated the gloom of Cowper's despondent periods' and that it is 'absurd [...] to represent his melancholy as having been other than intermittent'.<sup>663</sup> Indeed, the significance of the dream and the distressing effect it had upon Cowper is only apparent during periods when Cowper is already depressed. The vast majority of letters Cowper writes in the months, and indeed the years, that followed the dream are particularly light hearted. That is apart from one letter in July 1776, to Joseph Hill, where Cowper idly toys with the idea of giving tuition to boys in Greek and Latin. But again, we find that this idea of employment had originally come from outside pressure applied to him by Hill. Cowper confirms that Hill had 'often

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<sup>660</sup> Hugh Underhill, "Domestic Happiness, thou only bliss": Common and Divided Ground in William Cowper and Robert Bloomfield', in *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric Class and The Romantic Canon* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), pp. 269-287 (p. 272).

<sup>661</sup> King, *Biography*, p. 87.

<sup>662</sup> Gilbert Thomas, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century*, new and revised second edition (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948), p. 192.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

wish'd me an Employment, and I know none but this for which I am qualified'.<sup>664</sup> It is apparent that others were aware that Cowper was idle and either disagreed with such idleness on moral grounds, or possibly they were aware that idleness was not good for his mental health. However, in the majority of letters written by Cowper there is no hint of spiritual angst and indeed they appear to have been written by a man who relished his retired lifestyle. In Dec 1779, Cowper writes to William Unwin, 'My dear Friend—How quick is the Succession of Human Events! The Cares of today are seldom the Cares of tomorrow, and when we lie down at Night we may safely Say to most of our Troubles—Ye have done your worst & we shall Meet no more.'<sup>665</sup> Here Cowper seems very philosophical about the undue importance we attach to our problems. These do not appear to be the thoughts of a man traumatised by the threat of eternal damnation.

Further evidence from a letter sent between Mrs. Unwin and the Newtons, who were at the time caring for Cowper at their own house, also suggests that the importance of the dream was not as significant as critics assume, at least not at the time.

Mrs. Unwin writes to Mrs. Newton:

It is amazing how subtilly the cruel adversary has worked upon him. & wonderfull to see how the Lord has frustrated his wicked machinations. [...] A most Marvellous story will this Dear Child of God have to relate when by His Almighty power he is set at liberty.<sup>666</sup>

Here, surprisingly, the blame for Cowper's mental distress is firmly placed with the devil, and God is seen as the administering hand that will save him. It does not appear that Mrs. Unwin is particularly concerned about the dream or the effect it may have had on Cowper. Indeed, she seems elated that Cowper is doing so well and quickly moves on in the letter to a different topic: 'I must beg the favour of you to buy for me two

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<sup>664</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. 262 (6 July 1776).

<sup>665</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 310 (2 December, 1779).

<sup>666</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 260 (7 October 1773).

pounds of chocolate, half a pound or ten ounces of white sixpenny Worsted, half a dozen lemons, & two sets of knotting Needles.’<sup>667</sup> Having said this, King points out that after Cowper returned home in 1774, Mrs. Unwin sat in his bedroom every night, fully clothed, for the next twelve years. Mrs. Unwin cared for and watched over Cowper as one would a child. Her care and affection for him was unconditional. With Mary Unwin, Cowper was free from the pressure of expectation.

So although much importance is made of the significance of the dream, we can see that Cowper’s melancholy was very likely triggered by feeling pressurised into changing the comfortable lifestyle he had adopted with Mary Unwin after her husband’s death, and not the fact that he had been abandoned by God. Peter G. Jarvis suggests of Cowper that

[f]aced with situations he couldn’t cope with [...] he lapsed into insanity (perhaps better described as a mental or nervous breakdown). This view of Cowper as a lonely, shy, oversensitive person, quite unfit for the rough and tumble of everyday life, seems to be confirmed by his own description of himself as ‘a stricken deer that left the herd’. Yet a very different portrait could be drawn. The periods of insanity, the attempted suicides, the religious melancholia, can be treated as temporary lapses, and the real person be seen in the charming letter-writer who kept in touch with a wide circle of friends, the poet whose poems prepared the way for the romantic revival, and the Christian whose times of despair never entirely extinguished his faith.<sup>668</sup>

Here, Jarvis reaffirms the point, that it is the way in which Cowper chose to portray himself that has influenced the way others perceive him, and why would they perceive him otherwise? Cowper’s dream, along with all of the other disturbing symptoms he describes, can be regarded as a symptom of religious melancholy.

Conrad Brunström suggests of Cowper’s having been abandoned by God:

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<sup>667</sup> Ibid.

<sup>668</sup> Peter G. Jarvis, ‘God Moves in a Mysterious Way: William Cowper (1731-1800)’, *Expository Times*, 114 (2003), 300-302 (p. 300).

Unable to admit the possibility that this isolation might be merely self-imposed (a typical stroke of melancholic egotism), Cowper falls back into the familiar formulae of rejection.<sup>669</sup>

In number 11 on Clifford's list he suggests of those who believed that they had been abandoned by God that it was 'their disease' which 'will not suffer them to believe' they will be saved. In number 22 he clearly states that '[t]hey have lost the power of governing their thoughts by reason'. But as we have seen, Cowper's bouts of depression were intermittent and, during the time that he was not labouring under its influence, his reason was perfectly intact.

The deterioration of Cowper's mental health and his bouts of depression often coincides with the deterioration of Mrs. Unwin's physical health, and when she improves his spirits rise. Cowper would have been aware that Mary's death would inevitably lead to, the always to be feared, change in his lifestyle and the fact that the major source of his psychological support would no longer be there. In the poem 'To Mary' written between 1792 and 1795, Cowper writes:

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,  
I see thee daily weaker grow—  
Twas my distress that brought thee low  
My Mary! (ll. 5-8)

But ah by constant heed I know  
How oft the sadness that I show  
Transforms thy smiles to looks of woe  
My Mary!

And should my future lot be cast  
With much resemblance of the past,  
Thy worn-out heart will break at last  
My Mary! (ll. 49-56)<sup>670</sup>

This extract suggests a rather depressing transference of melancholy: a misery shared rather than alleviated. It becomes apparent from his poetry that the idle, retired lifestyle

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<sup>669</sup> Conrad Brunström, *William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 2004), p. 119.

<sup>670</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, III, p. 206.

Cowper adopted was not always as conducive to his mental health as he would have wished for, or indeed expected: ‘A life of ease a difficult pursuit’ (‘Retirement’, l. 634). He was aware that he lived a basically idle lifestyle. In a letter to Joseph Hill in 1780 he states: ‘If you were as idle a man as myself [...]’.<sup>671</sup> In his poetry and poems which followed his release from Cotton’s madhouse there is evidence of Cowper’s surprise perhaps that, having escaped from the pressures of London, he was still prone to attacks of melancholy. Having resisted any suggestion throughout his life that he should find employment, it becomes apparent that Cowper eventually realised that it was often the idleness of his lifestyle that caused his depression: ‘Absence of occupation is not rest / A mind quite vacant is a mind distress’d.’<sup>672</sup> Whereas in his youth, Cowper was quite comfortable being idle, later in life it is evident that idleness became a source of mental torment for him: ‘An idler is a watch that wants both hands / As useless if it goes as when it stands.’<sup>673</sup>

Ultimately, Cowper was a man who, like Shenstone, wished to adopt an idle lifestyle. His initial bouts of depression were related to his own resistance to earning a living, and the expectations of others that he should do so, rather than any sense of divine retribution. This goes against the general argument that his religion caused his melancholy or madness. Yet in *Adelphi* Cowper ultimately links his mental distress and melancholy with religion. Cowper’s account of his mental illness manifests itself in a way that reflects his prior knowledge of religious melancholy. In *Adelphi* there is a clear sense of events having been reconstructed. Cowper reinterprets the root cause of a general melancholy by looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, on this period of his life and subsequently layering the narrative with the conventions of, what was by then, a well-established genre. By presenting himself as a religious melancholic undergoing

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<sup>671</sup> *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, I, p. 337 (6 May 1780).

<sup>672</sup> *The Poems of William Cowper*, ‘Retirement’, ll. 623-624, p. 393.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 681-682.

spiritual conversion, Cowper could justify his own failings, whilst simultaneously achieving sympathy for his condition and thus excuse himself from any possible future offers or expectations of employment. The psychological symptoms Cowper describes in his memoir would have been easily recognisable generic traits.

Religious melancholy was a recognised condition that could easily be, and was, exploited by those who used it as an excuse to justify their idleness. The illness permitted the sufferer to adopt an idle lifestyle with less criticism than would have been the case with generic melancholy. With religious melancholy there was a degree of sympathy for and understanding of the sufferer's predicament. For example, there is a stark contrast between the negative approach shown towards Shenstone's choice of life discussed in chapter four, and the sympathy shown towards Cowper. Both men suffered from melancholy, but Shenstone's illness was virtually disregarded. He was very much criticised for retiring from society without having first contributed something to it. He received little sympathy for his condition because it was deemed the just result of his idle lifestyle. Cowper had also received the benefit of a university education. However, rather than being criticised for not making full use of his education, his retired lifestyle and subsequent idleness was regarded as a prescribed course of life for one who, because of his illness, was unsuited to a profession.

## Conclusion

This thesis has proven that during the eighteenth century melancholy and idleness were intrinsically linked. The main aim throughout has been to explore the ways in which they were linked. Idleness was a major contentious issue within eighteenth-century society in general and the dangers associated with idleness, both to one's mental and physical health, appeared in much of the century's religious, moral, medical and political literature. In economic terms, a flourishing economy and increased manufacture and trade promoted industriousness and led to the condemnation of idleness. However, increased labour, and in particular the wealth this labour created, also encouraged increased leisure and idleness, especially amongst the more affluent members of society. It was a dynamic which was not entirely conducive to good mental health.

Nowhere was this dynamic more prevalent and more destructive than on the mental health of women. I therefore investigated the negative effect that idleness had on the individual when an idle lifestyle was forced upon them, as was the case with many eighteenth-century women. Although industriousness was encouraged in the working classes, a life lived in domestic idleness was both promoted and encouraged amongst the women belonging to, or aspiring to, the wealthier classes. An idle lifestyle was crucial to the attainment of the status of 'lady', and the retention of that social status depended upon them remaining idle. Eighteenth-century physicians and early feminist writers were aware of the detrimental effect such idleness had on the mental health of these women. Current day critics have suggested that melancholy was the mental illness they suffered from as a consequence of their idle lifestyles and that it was a largely female affliction. However, I have argued that critics have confused the

symptoms of eighteenth-century melancholy with symptoms pertaining to other nervous illnesses, such as spleen and hysteria. As a result of researching this particular area of women's health I have discovered that idleness amongst women led as much to an increase in these nervous disorders as to the development of melancholy.

I then considered the opposite scenario, and I examined the psychological effects of idleness on the individual when an idle lifestyle was chosen rather than forced upon them. The notion of the retired lifestyle adopted by many 'would be' gentlemen was explored. I chose William Shenstone as a case study of just such a 'gentleman', who rejected a profession in favour of a retired lifestyle, and considered whether his lifestyle choice led to or exacerbated his depression. What my research revealed is that, over the course of the century, there was a change in attitude towards the retirement of many 'would be' gentlemen. Economic and social factors, such as the obligation to attain a profession, make good use of one's education and contribute something to society, influenced society's judgement and made it less tolerant of those who adopted a more relaxed mode of living. This changing ideology is reflected in the literature of the period. The novel *Columella* was introduced as a social critique because it not only questioned the morality of eighteenth-century retirement but it also considered the dangers to one's mental health of such a lifestyle. The novel explicitly identifies an idle lifestyle as a major cause of melancholy.

Idleness was then considered as a symptom of melancholy, a factor which frustrated both physicians and patients because it exacerbated the condition and hindered recovery. In exploring this area I took a fresh look at Samuel Johnson's struggles to overcome his idleness. This is an area of Johnson studies which has been much commented on. However, I considered his idleness as a symptom of his melancholy, and this is a factor which has received little critical attention. What I

discovered was that it was not idleness in the physical sense which caused him to become depressed, but rather the anxiety created by the importance he attached to never being idle. From a religious perspective, idleness was regarded as an intentional sin perpetrated in defiance of God's wishes. I found that the main factor which underpins Johnson's melancholy is his sense of spiritual idleness. Johnson believed that he did not lead a purely devout life because he perceived himself to be idle. However, he suffered from the physical and psychological apathy which was a symptom of his melancholy, a fact which he allowed for in others but never in himself. I introduced Johnson's *Rasselas* into the thesis because I argue that it is a literary source which explores the link between melancholy and idleness. The idle lifestyle of the main character was considered as both the cause of his melancholy and as a symptom of the illness.

Finally I looked again at idleness as a symptom, but this time in relation to religious melancholy as opposed to general melancholy. I questioned how easy it would be for a person to adopt the symptoms of religious melancholy in order to justify a basically idle lifestyle. My research has demonstrated that, during the eighteenth century, religious melancholy was in fact a very prevalent condition with easily recognisable generic traits. Religious melancholy was a condition that was open to abuse because of the more tolerant and sympathetic approach shown towards sufferers. With this in mind, I re-considered the depression suffered by William Cowper and questioned the validity of his being diagnosed as a religious melancholic. I have argued against the general consensus that Cowper's melancholy was caused and exacerbated by his spiritual turmoil. I suggest that Cowper borrowed the religious language, and replicated the symptoms of this very prevalent illness, when compiling his spiritual autobiography *Adelphi*, in order to portray himself as a religious melancholic. By portraying himself as a religious melancholic being punished by a vengeful God, he

was able to re-direct attention from his own personal failings. As a result, he was able to gain sympathy and understanding for his mental turmoil and adopt the lifestyle which most suited his temperament: the gentleman poet living in retirement.

Although much confusion appears to exist today as to what actually denoted eighteenth-century melancholy, with critics using various terms interchangeably, the majority of eighteenth-century physicians appear to have been in agreement as to the symptoms of melancholy. It was regarded as an illness which mainly affected the mind. The prominent symptom was a severe dejection of spirits, and, very importantly, it was distinct from nervous disorders such as spleen, vapours and hysteria, where the symptoms were largely physiological. Of all the eighteenth-century labels associated with dejection of spirits, melancholy was the name given to the depressive illness most closely related to today's 'depression' and idleness was regarded as a major cause of the illness.

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