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Citation for final published version:

Mandal, Anthony 2018. Mrs. Meeke and Minerva: The mystery of the marketplace. *Eighteenth-Century Life* 42 (2) , pp. 131-151. 10.1215/00982601-4384591 file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00982601-4384591> <<https://doi.org/10.1215/00982601-4384591>>

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# **Mrs. Meeke and Minerva: The Mystery of the Marketplace**

**Anthony Mandal, Cardiff University**

The most prolific novelist of the Romantic era was “Mrs. Meeke,” whose twenty-six original novels and four translations, published over a period of almost thirty years, eclipsed even Sir Walter Scott’s famously productive output.<sup>1</sup> Yet, until recently her identity has been a mystery to scholars of the period, who knew barely anything about her—not even her forename. Most of Meeke’s novels appeared with her marital ascription on their title pages, meaning that her married surname was the only trace by which she might be identified. The longest-standing attribution was provided in the *Dictionary of National Biography* at the close of the nineteenth century, suggesting that the prolific author was “Mary Meeke,” the wife of a Staffordshire vicar.<sup>2</sup> This attribution formed the basis for subsequent associations between Mary Meeke and the Mrs. Meeke of the novels for well over a century—despite the fact that the former died in 1816, while the latter continued to publish until 1823. Misidentified for decades, it was not until 2013 that an article by Simon Macdonald conclusively revealed the author’s actual identity as *Elizabeth Meeke* - not a respectable vicar’s wife, but the scandalous stepsister of Frances Burney.<sup>3</sup>

Macdonald provides a brief biographical account of Meeke’s somewhat fraught role within the extended Burney family (376–82). Born in 1761, “Bessy” was the youngest of three children of Elizabeth Allen, who, following her husband’s death a few years earlier, married Dr. Charles Burney, father of Frances, in 1767. Sent to Paris for an extended stay in 1777, the fifteen-year-old Bessy eloped with Samuel Meeke, a man twenty-four years her senior and of dubious reputation. Following an initial estrangement, an uneasy rapprochement took place

between the Meekes and the Burneys. Living first in Geneva and then France, the Meekes endured a tempestuous marriage, and around autumn 1787, Bessy separated from her husband, perhaps (according to rumours in circulation) absconding with another man. She returned to Britain shortly before the first appearance of “Mrs. Meeke” in the literary marketplace in 1795, although around this time she had been living under the surname of “Mrs. Bruce,” and by 1802 she was a widow. Comments within her family network indicate that Bessy was a pitied, if unwelcome, presence in the Burney *ménage*. Some of the final mentions of Bessy come from just before and after her death in 1826, when it appears she had married a man named “Benjamin Rawlings” – who proved to be yet another source of misery – in November 1824.

If Meeke’s domestic life was a turbulent one, her literary life was equally convoluted. Throughout her writing career, and under a variety of guises, she published the entirety of her fiction with the Minerva Press, whose production of new novels – written primarily by women – achieved unprecedented levels of output. Despite a productive career that spanned multiple decades, little scholarship has been published on this enigmatic writer. The current critical field comprises only a few articles, passing mentions in a handful of monographs on Romantic-era fiction, and a facsimile edition from the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> As such, my article extends recent work on the significant, if overlooked, contributions made to the Romantic novel by women writers who published with the Minerva Press.<sup>5</sup> In order to redress the paucity of scholarship on Meeke, I wish to propose a starting point for a more sustained consideration of her role in the Romantic literary marketplace in a number of ways. To accomplish this, I apply a book historical approach to consider the various ecologies that framed Meeke’s career, through the role of the Minerva Press and of Meeke’s employment of anonymous, pseudonymous and named personae. Finally, I examine Meeke’s outputs and reception, offering an account of the tropes, motifs, and

preoccupations of a body of work that refracted the complex rhythms of her private and literary lives. In these ways, I argue for a recognition of the hitherto neglected—yet paradigmatic—role played by the protean Elizabeth Meeke, whose literary career acts as a metonym for the ways in which women novelists found themselves continually inscribed, re-inscribed, and erased in a volatile literary marketplace that left little trace of them for posterity.

*Enterprising trash? Women's fiction and the Minerva Press*

Meeke's literary career can be understood as the result of a wider confluence of legal, demographic, and commercial transformations that took place during her lifetime, and which provided opportunities for women writers to publish fiction for regular remuneration in unprecedented quantities. Over the last quarter of the eighteenth century, changes in copyright law combined with the emergence of circulating libraries and the expansion of a provincial publishing network in Britain, to stimulate a rapidly growing market for new fiction. A leap in the publication of new fiction titles that began in the 1790s (701 works, compared to 405 in the 1780s) continued through the 1800s (778), stalling slightly during the 1810s (667), before being revived in the 1820s (827), by which time fiction exceeded poetry as the dominant literary form.<sup>6</sup> Driven by an emergent female readership drawn primarily from the middling ranks, the appetite for new fiction was itself met by women writers, who often acted as both originators of new titles and translators of foreign works. Between 1790 and 1829, identifiable female novelists published 1,291 of 2,973 new titles (compared to 1,145 by identifiable male novelists). Cheryl Turner points to the “flexible, at times desperate, at times highly successful accommodation of pressing need and inadequate resources. In this context, the value of authorship as a new

occupation was immense, and the persistence with which these women pursued it is not at all surprising.”<sup>7</sup>

Meeke’s career began in 1795 with *Count St. Blancard* and concluded in 1823 with *What Shall Be, Shall Be*, spanning the heyday of Radcliffe’s popularity to the zenith of Scott’s novel-writing career. Her oeuvre catered for and inflected the changing interests of Romantic readers successfully enough to sustain a career spanning three decades. As Michael Page notes: “Meeke, then, can be seen as a case study on how the institution of the literary marketplace first developed at the end of the eighteenth century” (§5). In particular, Meeke’s publication of her fiction with the Minerva Press illustrates the symbiotic relationship that existed between the firm and female writers of popular novels, among them Ann Hatton (“Ann of Swansea”), Isabella Kelly, and Regina Maria Roche. Dominating the novel market, the Minerva Press became synonymous with fictional potboilers, issuing 819 new novels between 1780 and 1829. Founded in 1773 by “one of the most astute and enterprising publishers of the eighteenth century” William Lane (1738–1814) and based in Leadenhall Street, the Minerva Press operated as the foundry for a great many authors and a wide range of genres: sentimental fiction, *romans-à-clef*, gothic horrors, scurrilous melodramas, and domestic fables.<sup>8</sup> After Lane’s retirement in 1808, Minerva continued to publish well into the nineteenth century, under the proprietorship of his partner A. K. Newman. Nonetheless, its golden years spanned 1790–1820, and its prosperity was deeply calibrated to the fortunes of female novelists. A Victorian retrospect of the Romantic trade observed that Lane’s imprint

was noted for the number and variety of books, called novels, and distributed to all the circulating libraries in the country. From ten to twenty pounds were the sums usually paid

to authors for those novels of three volumes. The Colburns and Bentleys drove this trash out of the market.<sup>9</sup>

Despite such sniffy dismissals, however,

the “Minerva Press novel” became almost as much of a descriptor as “Mills and Boon” was to be of popular romantic novels in the second half of the twentieth century. Lane was an entrepreneur, with an understanding of his market and the ability to turn a fashion into a profit.<sup>10</sup>

Not only was Lane able to print and publish his potboilers: his “Minerva Library,” situated alongside his publishing premises, made his wares readily available to an entranced reading public.

Several of Lane’s authors provided sketches of the man as both humane and supportive, which might go some way to explaining his popularity with less-established, typically female, novelists.<sup>11</sup> In this metafictional spirit, the beginning of Meeke’s *Midnight Weddings* (1802) advises any would-be novelist to “consult the taste of her publisher. Indeed to secure their approbation is the general aim; for should you fail to meet with a purchaser, that labour you hope will immortalize you is absolutely lost; a most mortifying circumstance in every sense of the word.”<sup>12</sup> The assurance Meeke implies here perhaps explains her reasons for publishing with the Minerva Press, rather than higher-class booksellers like Cadell & Davies or Robinsons, who had issued the works of her novelist sisters, Frances and Sarah Harriet Burney.

This image of equanimity, however, is complicated by the multiple identities Meeke employed in her professional career. In another contribution to this collection, Lorna Clark draws

attention to the value (figurative and literal) accorded to the Burney name by Sarah Harriet Burney's publisher, Henry Colburn. It is striking that no similar attempt was made – by either author or publisher – to capitalize on the family's reputation in the case of Elizabeth Meeke. Instead, Meeke's novels were published under three different personae, which were largely successful in masking her true identity for two centuries. It is to these onomastic identities that I now wish to turn, in order to consider how, despite her seemingly satisfactory relationship with Minerva, Meeke's authorship refuses to yield an identifiable presence beyond the concatenation of generic tropes located within the pages of her works.

#### *Authorship and/as identity*

Meeke functions as synecdoche for the majority of women writers in the Georgian literary marketplace: she wrote prolifically but, where it did appear, her name was in practice little more than a subordinated “tag” on her title pages. If the cult of celebrity attached to her stepsister Frances resulted in an often-problematic sense of self-exposure, a “Mrs. Meeke novel” said nothing about the author, while speaking much about the novel's contents. This issue is further complicated by Meeke's chameleonic use of a tripartite system of authorial attribution in her novels, which appeared nominally, pseudonymously, and anonymously. Nineteen out of Meeke's thirty works (including her translations) were published as “by Mrs. Meeke”; six were issued under the pseudonym “Gabrielli”; five appeared anonymously.<sup>13</sup> Macdonald (377) suggests a Burney family link for the “Gabrielli” identity: in 1775, Frances and Bessy joined a family outing to see the renowned opera-singer Caterina Gabrielli perform in London. Among the Minerva stable, Meeke is not alone in using multiple authorial identities when publishing her

work: Ann Hatton published fourteen works between 1810 and 1831 either anonymously (twelve) or as “Ann[e] of Swansea” (two), while the pseudonymous “Medora Gordon” Byron (five titles, 1808–15) also published as “A Modern Antique” (three, 1809–16).

Various arguments have been made as to why Meeke, or indeed her publisher, elected to divide her works up among the three personas, as there is no differentiation in terms of content to explain this. Roberta Magnani suggests that

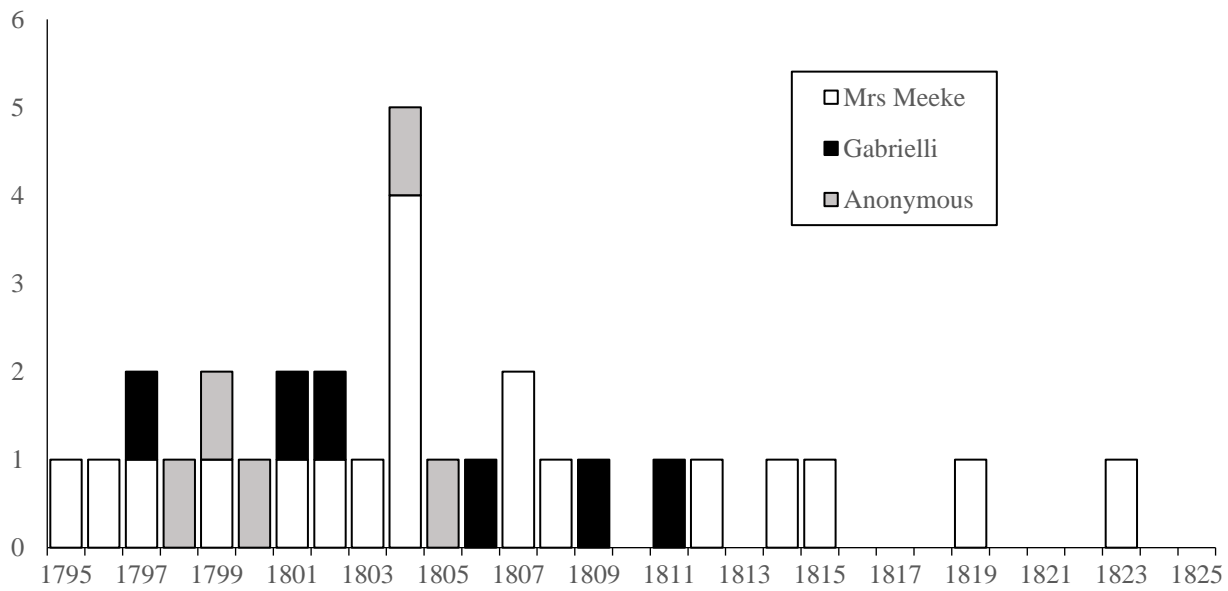
Meeke’s consciousness of the rules of the print industry sustains the speculation that the threefold authorship may be an editorial strategy or “game” to avoid the increasing hostility of the reviewers towards “over-productive” women novelists, and to renegotiate and appropriate the coercive rules of the market. (§9)

Similarly, Macdonald (372) notes: “Given the volume of novels Meeke produced, there may have been some concern about overexposure of the ‘Mrs. Meeke’ brand to readers who prioritised variety and novelty in their choice of authors.” While it is true that the reviewers often bemoaned the fecundity of novelists, I would argue that this argument with regard to Meeke simply does not hold once we consult the bibliographical record. Figure 1 charts Meeke’s output on an annual basis, split among these three personas. Given the preponderance of the white bars indicating publication as “Mrs. Meeke,” the argument of “overexposure” becomes less convincing: most notably in 1804, when Meeke published five works, four of which appeared nominally and only one anonymously. Like Meeke, Hatton and Byron used varying attributions despite the generic homogeneity of their novels, suggesting that this kind of splitting of personas is less a deliberate tactic than a convention of the Romantic literary marketplace. We might even go so far as to read such practices as onomastic games that informed the practice of reading



popular fiction, in which readers were ludically encouraged to pursue authorial associations through title pages, paratexts, and the other paraphernalia of print culture. In the case of Meeke, close perusal of title pages would have enabled canny readers to spot the interconnections between her novels through the formula “by the author of . . .,” regardless of the actual attribution to Mrs. Meeke, Gabrielli or Nobody.

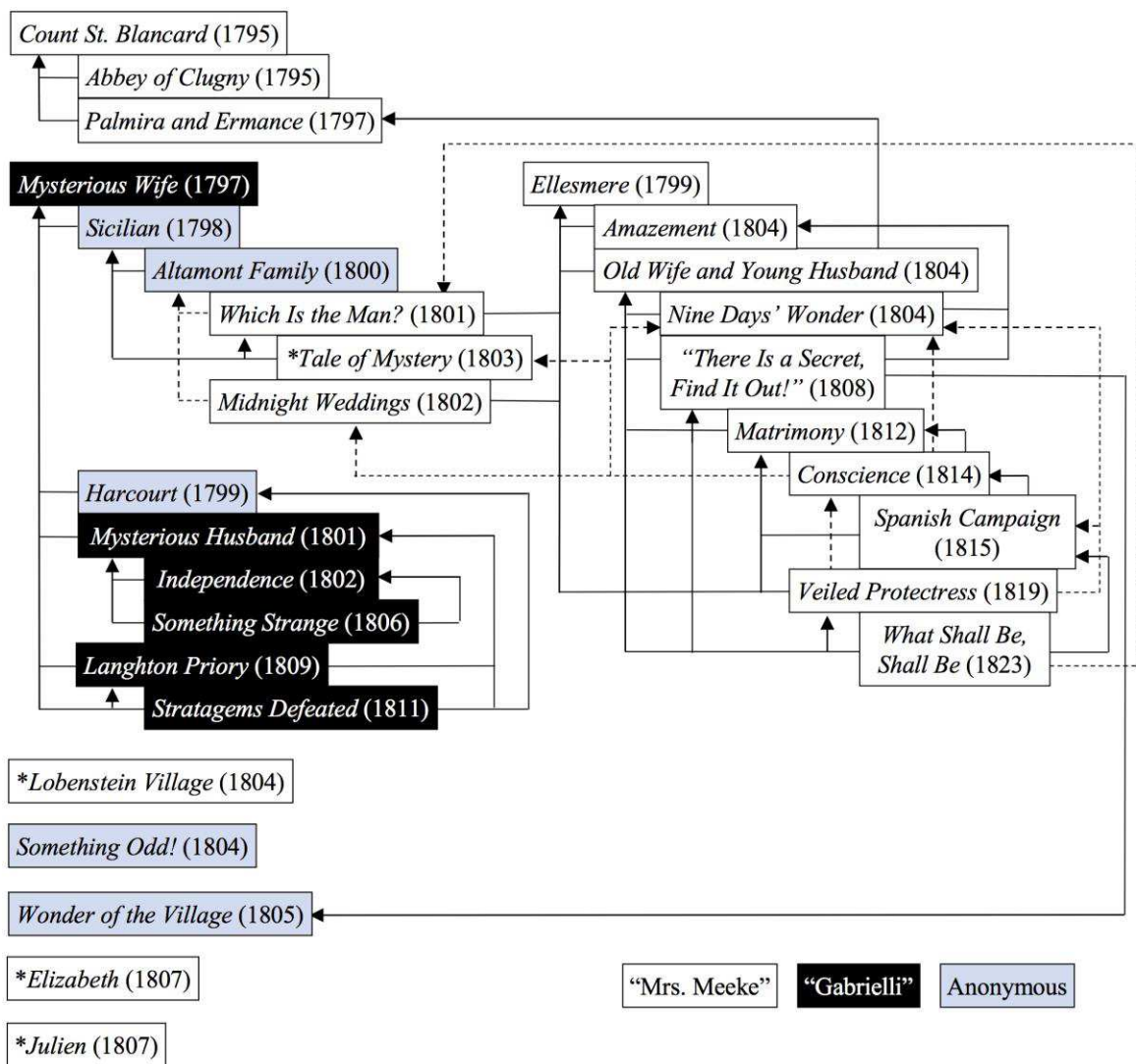
**Figure 1: Meeke’s output by authorial persona**



If we set aside the chimerical suggestiveness of Meeke’s tripartite system, title-page chains of authorship present an almost rhizomatous puzzle. The subordinate attributions provided through the “[by the] author of . . .” formula cross and recross each other. Hence, the nominal, pseudonymous, and anonymous personas no longer function as exclusive categories: instead, they imbricate with one another, even traversing links that span decades. Figure 2 illustrates attributive chains forged through the “[by the] author of . . .” formula. Each of Meeke’s thirty fictions, original and translated, is presented as a “node,” shaded according to whether it appeared as by “Mrs. Meeke” (white), “Gabrielli” (black), or anonymously (grey); asterisks

indicate translations. Lines connecting each node trace the chains of attribution on title pages (“[by the] author of . . .”), with arrows pointing back to antecedent works that are listed after the formula. Lines that converge indicate where multiple works point back to an earlier work, while dashed lines have been used to avoid confusing the chains of association where overlaps occur on the chart.

**Figure 2: Chains of attribution in Meeke’s novels**



The chart can be read as a map that enables the viewer to traverse the chains of attribution while maintaining a birds-eye view of the entire network. Taking a straightforward example, Meeke's second work *The Abbey of Clugny* points back to her first, the title page reading: "THE ABBEY OF CLUGNY. A NOVEL. BY MRS. MEEKE, AUTHOR OF COUNT ST. BLANCARD. IN THREE VOLUMES." A more complex instance is offered by Meeke's final novel, *What Shall Be, Shall Be*, which points back to works that are, in some cases, decades old: "WHAT SHALL BE, SHALL BE. A NOVEL. IN FOUR VOLUMES. BY MRS. MEEKE, AUTHOR OF THE VEILED PROTECTRESS; OLD WIFE AND YOUNG HUSBAND; THERE IS A SECRET! FIND IT OUT; WHICH IS THE MAN? THE SPANISH CAMPAIGN, &C." While the chart demonstrates that the invocation of previous titles was, in general, heterogeneous, some interesting patterns do emerge. Meeke's first work, *Count St. Blancard*, is only ever linked to by her second and fourth novels before becoming a "dead end." By contrast, *Ellesmere*, although attributed to "Mrs. Meeke," links to no antecedent titles, yet, despite having apparently received no reviews, is linked back to by five subsequent novels: *Which Is the Man?*, *Midnight Weddings*, *Amazement*, *The Old Wife and Young Husband*, and twenty years later *The Veiled Protectress; or, the Mysterious Mother*. Excepting Meeke's 1803 translation of Ducray-Dumenil's *Cœlina, ou l'enfant du mystère* (1798), her other three translations do not connect to any of her other works—although her 1807 translation of Mme. de Cottin's *Élisabeth, ou les exilés de Sibérie* was republished alongside her translation of Ducray-Dumenil's *Julien, ou le toit paternel* in the same year.

The chains of attribution remain relatively discrete, as the "Mrs. Meeke" and "Gabrielli" nodes never connect directly to each other. Instead, Meeke's anonymous titles function as the links between "Mrs. Meeke" and "Gabrielli." The most straightforward case is the anonymous

*Harcourt*, which connects back to Gabrielli's first novel, *The Mysterious Wife*, while being linked to by Gabrielli's last, *Stratagems Defeated*. The anonymous *Sicilian* also points back to Gabrielli's *Mysterious Wife*, and is in turn connected to by Meeke's translation *A Tale of Mystery*. The anonymous *Anecdotes of the Altamont Family* points back to *The Sicilian*, and is pointed to by *Which Is the Man?* and *Midnight Weddings*, both of which carry Meeke's name, thus connecting back indirectly to Gabrielli's *Mysterious Wife*. Sitting suitably apart from the rest of the Meeke canon, with no chains linking to or from it, is the anonymous *Something Odd!*. Instead, an alternative route to attribution was furnished by another paratextual source: at the end of the third volume of *Something Odd!*, Mrs. Meeke's *The Old Wife and the Young Husband* was advertised as "By the Same Author."

It has not escaped me that Figure 2 is almost dizzying in its twisting, interweaving links—and suitably so. As much as it allows us to trace pathways between title pages that would themselves have enabled canny readers to link authors who were ostensibly discrete figures, it also maps Romantic authorship as a complex, convoluted, and contestable site of activity. As I have already hinted, this overdetermined network of title-page attributions might be further complicated by additional study of other artefacts of print culture, which would have certainly disclosed connections and revealed "secret" identities to contemporary readers: publishers' lists, newspaper advertisements, circulating-library catalogues, periodical reviews. Moving between the public and the private spheres, we might also begin to draw comparisons between the convoluted nature of Meeke's literary life—as "Mrs. Meeke," "Gabrielli," Nobody—and the equally palimpsestic nature of her domestic existence—as "Bessy Allen," "Mrs. Meeke," "Mrs. Bruce," and perhaps "Mrs. Rawlings." In both worlds, Meeke's fortunes illustrate the liminal, often shifting identities that Georgian women found themselves obliged to occupy, whether by

choice, misfortune, or circumstance. I wish to explore this protean sense of self further in the next part of this article, by examining how it manifests in the generic tropes and patterns of Meeke's novels themselves. Much like her melodramatic life and her chameleonic authorship, which both concealed and revealed multiple identities, Meeke's voluminous fictions trace a similarly asymmetrical world characterized by mistaken or disguised identities, labyrinthine plots, domestic disharmony, and class conflict.

*Diverting, not didactic: Locating Meeke's fiction*

According to Dorothy Blakey (61), "There is nothing subtle in Mrs. Meeke's character-drawing, and nothing particularly polished in her style; but her lively manner is free of over-wrought sensibility, and she affects no heavy discussion of the moral code. Her skill in narrative is considerable." Frederick S. Frank contends, less generously: "She was a formulaic novelist who knew how to appeal to the sentiments of the reader without demanding the slightest intellectual exertion. Her success in the various modes of Gothic fiction was based on the diverting, not the didactic" (235). Indeed, if we survey her titles pages alone, the paraphernalia of gothic excess abound: counts, abbeyes, mysteries, wonders, secrets, and veils. However, closer inspection of Meeke's novels reveals them to be less centered on the gothic genre than their titles suggest; instead, they tend more towards sentimental melodramas.

Meeke employs fairly consistent conventions and tropes throughout her career. Most of the novels focus on male protagonists whose identities are disguised, as the result of childhood abductions (*Abbey of Clugny*, *Palmira and Ermance*, *Midnight Weddings*), enigmatic injunctions (*Mysterious Wife*), or romantic attachments (*Ellesmere*). The action tends to revolve around the

providential restoration of these displaced identities. Employing one of eighteenth-century romance's dominant motifs, Meeke's heroes are often revealed to be nobility in disguise, their innate virtues establishing *a priori* their aristocratic bloodlines (*Abbey of Clugny*, *Ellesmere*, *Harcourt*, *Independence*, *Mysterious Husband*). There is some mixing of identikit protagonists' names across Meeke's oeuvre as well, suggesting the interchangeability of her narratives: *The Abbey of Clugny* and *Palmira and Ermance*, for example, feature young aristocratic heroes respectively called "Alphonso" and "Alphonsus." Unlike those of Frances and Sarah Harriet Burney, almost all of Meeke's protagonists are men. The novels are sentimental bildungsromane that follow the heroes from infancy to young adulthood, as they transition from the familial space into a social world of romance, ambition, and intrigue.

If Meeke's fiction is not strictly gothic and there are no actual hauntings, nonetheless abbeys, castles, and priories function paradigmatically as stages for the continuation and revelation of secrets (*Abbey of Clugny*, *Langhton Priory*, *Sicilian*). While mysteries are foregrounded, they usually occur in recent high society rather than a distanced gothic past. Despite the hints of their title pages, the gothic-sounding *Abbey of Clugny* and the historical-seeming *Palmira and Ermance* are set in the later eighteenth century; *Harcourt* begins in 1790 and *Langhton Priory* takes place in 1801, making indirect reference to the Napoleonic occupation. The action moves between England and the continent, with intricate coincidences linking disconnected families who are eventually revealed to be intimately related. Often set in France, partly or entirely, the novels draw on Meeke's intimate knowledge of the culture, manners, and politics across the Channel. Even when they feature British protagonists, the novels typically continue the peripatetic eighteenth-century preoccupation with foreign shores (*Harcourt*, *Mysterious Husband*). Even *Something Strange*, which begins at a school in

Wakefield and remains within British confines, leads its hero Theodore to discover he is the grandson of an English duke and a Portuguese marchioness. Meeke's later fiction shifts more squarely towards British settings, in works such "*There Is a Secret, Find It Out!*" and *The Veiled Protectress*. Although Frank (239) suggests that as Meeke's career wore on, she "moved in the direction of that new breed of popular fiction that was threatening to replace the Gothic novel, the so-called romance of the tea-table," I would argue that even in her earliest works there are what we might call characteristically "Burneyesque" and "Edgeworthian" motifs: for instance, *Harcourt* satirically depicts the egocentric Mackenzie family and ridicules social climbers, and also presents an improving landlord in the guise of Lord Valmont.

Focusing on the social dynamics of Meeke's plots, Edward Copeland notes: "Although Meeke's novel *There is a Secret, Find It Out!* (1808) abounds with lost heiresses and melodramatic villainy, it also contains the wry and knowing tale of two wily tradespeople, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, who have 'wheeled' their way into a great deal of money, first by petty avarice, then by major treacheries" (85). Copeland's analysis is rather reductive, however, as Meeke's novels offer a rather more nuanced analysis of social systems and class conflicts than he suggests. It is true that Meeke's novels ultimately re-enshrine the privileges of the *ancien régime* by correlating inherent morality with aristocratic lineage, marrying the heroes off to accomplished young noblewomen, and by putting social climbers firmly in their place. *The Abbey of Clugny*'s hero Alexis is quickly revealed to be the son of a duke, while halfway through *Ellesmere*, the protagonist Clement is revealed to be the eponymous son of a marquis. That said, Meeke clearly espouses bourgeois values in her novels, typified through the comparison of the orphaned protagonist brought up within a humbler station and the dissipated nobility. For instance, in *The Abbey of Clugny* the hero's adoptive father, Baron Wielbourg, is shown to be a

far more deserving figure than his biological one, the narcissistic Duke de Longueville. Early in the novel, Meeke's levelling view of class reframes the romance convention of inherent nobility, through the Baron's reflections on his adoptive son: "The Baron was not weak enough to attribute the novel sentiments Alexis had always displayed, to his exalted birth; a peasant's son, who had been equally well educated, might have acted, thought, and expressed himself as he did."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, at the start of *Ellesmere*, Clement is adopted by Mrs. Davenport, the deserving middle-class widow of an Indian general; while his romantic attraction to Maria, Baroness de Grand-Pré leads him to disguise himself as a servant in order to remain in her company during her travels. As such, Clement occupies multiple class positions—servant, bourgeois, aristocrat—through the course of the novel.<sup>15</sup> Despite inheriting Mrs. Davenport's large fortune early in the novel, Clement persistently reflects on his orphaned, possibly illegitimate, origins and how they shape his social identity. Moreover, when read across gendered lines, Meeke's social dynamics become more complicated than either Copeland or Frank recognize. For example, Meeke's own experience of matrimonial troubles may have informed her novels' recognition that romantic flights of fancy are not always the basis for a dependable marriage. In *Ellesmere*, Clement's first marriage, to Maria, fails because of her Quixotic nature and his belief in love at first sight, while *The Veiled Protectress* begins with a young mother opening a mysterious letter that reveals her marriage is a sham.

Meeke demonstrates a clear sense of genre and market through self-referential or metafictional statements. There are some tongue-in-cheek references to the conventions of fiction, with the narrator of *Langhton Priory* observing:

As we are writing a novel, and not the tour of England, we shall not tire our readers with describing what every guide to the different water-drinking places, and every tourist, has



already done to our hands, as we are not fond of quoting the words of others, or of displaying our own lack of talents in the descriptive line . . .<sup>16</sup>

*The Veiled Protectress* opens by connecting its plot self-referentially to its own paratextual structures: “As the mother of our hero (whose name, situation in life, parentage, &c. &c. our title forbids us to disclose) . . .”<sup>17</sup> An unpaginated preface to *The Wonder of the Village* purports that the novel is the product of a posthumous plan “found among the papers of a Lady deceased, whose Executors presented them gratuitously to the Proprietors of the Minerva Office.”<sup>18</sup> These examples suggest Meeke’s ludic recognition of the conventions and contexts of novel writing—a trope that would recur extensively in the work of other writers, such as Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, and Walter Scott—illustrating how comfortably Meeke occupied her authorly space. I wish now to extend these readings of Meeke’s sense of authorship by considering how her contemporary reception might help us locate her role more comprehensively within the Romantic literary marketplace.

*“Superior to the common class of novels”*

Despite the large amount of and appetite for new fiction, novels were frequently vilified as purveying dubious morals that would corrupt their young (female) readers. A reviewer of Meeke’s 1804 translation of La Fontaine’s *Lobenstein Village* (1802) observed:

The modern novel [. . .] occupies a very considerable station in the field of literature; and some of our first writers have exerted their talents, laudably, in its composition. [. . .] But the mob of writers yearly employed on this mode of composition, and the facility with

which so many volumes of the most wretched trash are annually given to the public, have occasioned a strong prejudice against novels in general, which that species of composition, when undertaken by competent writers, is very far from deserving.<sup>19</sup>

As Sophie Coulombeau notes in her contribution to this collection, even a respected novelist like Frances Burney recoiled from some of the taxonomic implications of authorship, confessing: “I own I do not like calling [*Camilla*] a Novel: it gives so simply the notion of a mere love story, that I recoil a little from it. I mean it to be *sketches of Characters & morals, put in action*, not a Romance.”<sup>20</sup> As far as Meeke was concerned, however, neither she nor her publisher was reticent about displaying the term “Novel” on all-but-two of her title pages.<sup>21</sup> Instead, there seems a much clearer determination to be inserted amid this growing, if troubled, market for fiction. In fact, Meeke herself prefaces *Something Odd!* with “A Dialogue between the Author and his Pen,” noting: “I have one little hope, which, in the fulness of modesty, I shall venture to express:—to wit—that your readers will agree with Godfrey Williams, Baron of Leibniz, that there is no book, however, ridiculous, bad, or badly written, from which something *useful* may not be gleaned.”<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding the controversial status of the novel, some of Meeke’s earlier works were popular enough to be translated into French and German (*Palmira and Ermance, Mysterious Husband, Midnight Weddings, Which Is the Man?*), while her translation of Mme. de Cottin’s *Elisabeth* proved to be a bestseller, reaching numerous editions during the nineteenth century. Meeke’s works also traversed the Atlantic: *Count St. Blancard*, for example, is not only listed in an undated catalogue for Meyler’s Circulating Library in Bath, but also in one for 1798 for the Boston library run by W. P. and L. Blake. Meeke also pops up in several literary contexts, and is mentioned by writers ranging from Mary Russell Mitford, to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton,

and Hugh Walpole.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the best-known recollection is that of Thomas Macaulay's passion for Meeke's fictions, supplied second-hand by his sister:

“There was a certain prolix author,” says Lady Trevelyan, “named Mrs. Meeke, whose romances he all but knew by heart; though he quite agreed in my criticism that they were one just like another, turning on the fortunes of some young man in a very low rank of life who eventually proves to be the son of a Duke.”<sup>24</sup>

In a letter written to his sister in the summer of 1819, Macaulay had himself wistfully reflected: “I wish I knew where my old friend Mrs. Meeke lives. I would certainly send her intelligence of the blessed effects of her writings. [. . .] I shall read over Mrs. Meeke's hundred and one novels in a theological point of view; I hope with equal benefit.”<sup>25</sup>

Macaulay's recognition of the pleasurable predictability and fecundity of Meeke's narratives echoes the response of her first reviewers. Appearing in a range of literary and mainstream periodicals, reviews of Meeke's works appeared up until the late 1800s (the last is of her translation of *Julien*), perhaps signaling the shifting reading interests of the public towards newer fare. Most were favorable, complimenting Meeke as the writer of effective “second-rate novels,”<sup>26</sup> which would “not suffer by a comparison with most of the novels of the day”<sup>27</sup>—some were even perceived to be “superior to the common class.”<sup>28</sup> Her aptitude in labyrinthine plotting led the *Critical Review* to call *Count St. Blancard* “an entertaining and well-connected story, [which] may agreeably beguile a leisure hour,”<sup>29</sup> while the *Monthly Mirror* commented that *The Mysterious Wife*'s “suspense is artfully managed, and, of course, the attention is kept alive to the end.”<sup>30</sup> Meeke's characters were recurrently praised as “well drawn,”<sup>31</sup> “well drawn and supported,”<sup>32</sup> and “drawn with spirit.”<sup>33</sup> Similar compliments were given to her dialogue, which was described as “lively”<sup>34</sup> and “lively and entertaining.”<sup>35</sup>

Criticisms often focused on the length of the narratives, a complaint typically made about triple-decker (and longer) novels of the period. The *Critical* observed that *The Mysterious Wife* displayed “symptoms of a desire of prolonging the anxieties of the husband; merely to eke out four volumes.”<sup>36</sup> More disparagingly, a reviewer moaned that *The Sicilian* “wearies the reader by prolonging the work after the denouement has taken place, when no expectation remains to be gratified. The fourth volume is altogether useless.”<sup>37</sup> For other reviewers, the unrealistic nature of Meeke’s rags-to-riches narratives were a cause of dissatisfaction: a sardonic notice of *Independence* offered a thumbnail of the novel, “the hero of which is by turns mountebank, a rope-dancer, and an English peer, without any pretensions to the latter rank of society, or any pre-eminent dexterity for either of the former.”<sup>38</sup> A typical gambit of reviewers was to extend their criticism of untempered novelists to undiscerning readers, establishing the two (typically feminine) categories as equivalent, owing to their lack of self-regulation. Readers of *Mysterious Husband* were admonished by the *Critical* not to indulge in the behavior of its heroines, “for it is a thousand to one, that, instead of making them princesses, it would lead them towards the direct and almost certain road to infamy and ruin.”<sup>39</sup> The reviewer of *Something Odd!* waspishly commented: “This piece of dulness might [. . .] be recommended [. . .], were it not too well ascertained that the readers of novels are in general no less silly than the writers.”<sup>40</sup> Similar dismissals were made of readers’ tastes in *Something Strange*: “the person who chose this title seems to have understood the taste of the multitude. Let them have something strange, and they will never enquire whether it be in the smallest degree consonant to nature or common sense.”<sup>41</sup>

These anonymous reviews of a little-known author who employed a range of personae offer an insight into Meeke’s symbolic capital within the literary marketplace. However, an equally significant conjuncture between the private and public spheres takes place during her

earliest novel-publishing days, which returns us to Meeke's Burney family connection. Reviews of her first two novels, *Count St. Blancard* and *The Abbey of Clugny*, appeared in the *Monthly Review* respectively in October 1795 and April 1796. Penned by the same critic, both are exceedingly complimentary about the newly minted Minerva novelist. Speculating on the authorship of *Count St. Blancard*, the reviewer contends that "[i]t is probably the labour of some industrious emigrée; as the French idiom predominates, and some errors of the press are discoverable."<sup>42</sup> Despite these continental links, we are told that the story is nevertheless "divested of the immorality, party, and levity, which are too frequently found in the lighter productions of French writers." (228) Summing up, he observes that the novel "may divert a solitary hour, without endangering youth or disgusting age." (229) The reviewer pours even more praise upon *The Abbey of Clugny*, noting: "This work is certainly far superior to its predecessor mentioned in the title. [. . .] The story of this novel is told with ease and vivacity."<sup>43</sup> Picking up on the novel's gothic modishness, the review continues: "Ghosts are in the fashion; and, as we were entertained by the spectre which haunts this sacred retirement, we cannot blame the fair writer for following the mode." Surviving copies of the *Monthly*, marked up by the editor, disclose the reviewer as none other than Meeke's stepbrother, Charles Burney, Jr.<sup>44</sup> Macdonald notes that "Burney had by this point become a frequent reviewer for the *Monthly Review*. But he hardly ever reviewed novels: besides these two Meeke titles, he is known to have reviewed only three other works of prose fiction" (375). Despite her unwelcome position in the Burney family, Charles assisted his stepsister's tentative first steps into the literary marketplace by leveraging his own role within print culture.

In this respect, as a female author Meeke is no different from sister Frances herself, or other even more famous writers like Jane Austen (whose brother Henry acted as her literary

agent and whose first publisher, Thomas Egerton, had longstanding links to the Austen family). While women writers like Austen, Burney, and Meeke entered the public sphere through their own labors, their story becomes richer and more accurate if we can recognize how they negotiated multiple social networks—interweaving professional contacts and familial relationships, enigmatic authorly identities and very private drama, evanescent consumption and nostalgic readerships.

### *Conclusion*

Although she published only four titles, Frances Burney was one of the most successful novelists of the day, while her foundational role in the history of fiction is unequivocally recognized today by scholars. By contrast, as a member of one of the period's most well-known literary families, Elizabeth Meeke's production of thirty novels entailed a different form of popularity. Reflecting on his discovery, Macdonald notes: "if the identification of Elizabeth Meeke as the novelist 'Mrs Meeke' can be seen as consolidating the prominent position of the Burney family in recent scholarship on female novelists of the period, it also highlights her equivocal place in relation to the Burney nexus" (385). Furthermore, I would argue that the Meeke–Burney association also highlights the complex rhythms that shaped not only the lives of women writers like Meeke, but also their motivations for entering and their relationships with the literary marketplace. Meeke's story is part of a collage of women writers' histories, perhaps most notably emblemized in the troubled domestic life of Charlotte Smith, which forms a persistent narrative of familial marginalization, spousal neglect, and economic deprivation. As a prolific novelist forced to adopt a multifaceted persona within the marketplace, Meeke both functions as metonym for and was herself shaped by the literary habitus created by the Minerva Press for its voracious patrons.

Over three decades, she fashioned works that met the protean tastes of her reading public, incorporating sentimental melodrama, gothic suspense, and fashionable high life in equal proportions. While the Minerva Press never achieved the respectability of her sister Frances' publishers, it nevertheless offered Meeke a living, and both parties were evidently happy enough with their relationship for it to continue across several decades.

Meeke's productivity and responsiveness notwithstanding, her erasure from literary posterity tells a far from straightforward story about women's writing. Isobel Grundy identifies the tension faced by scholars when evaluating women's contribution to the work of writing:

The question of what difference they made to the book trade might be answered cynically (they kept prices and authors' earnings low; they supplied foot-soldiers for literary combat and boosted the figures of the literary marketplace), but the question as to what difference they made to literature is only just being addressed by literary historians.<sup>45</sup>

It is through this prism that we ought to understand the crucial role played by Elizabeth Meeke, located at the nexus of several different imperatives of the Romantic book trade: the proliferation of new fiction, the emergence of publishers like Minerva, and, of course, the equivocal status of the novel itself. In assessing various aspects of Meeke's literary identity, I have sought to argue that her chameleonic yet interconnected identities offer us new ways of understanding authorship, in a scholarly field that remains so preoccupied with "big-name" writers like Austen, Byron, Scott, and Wordsworth – and even Frances Burney. Overshadowed by such looming figures, the hitherto little-known – at one time seemingly *unknowable* – "Mrs. Meeke" discloses her own complex history. We might even begin to see Meeke, the most prolific novelist of the age, as offering an alternative history of authorship, in which a single name carries less totemic

power in isolation, while nevertheless reifying the complex networks of Romantic print culture in revealing ways.<sup>46</sup>

Although it has been beyond the scope of this essay to explore the plots, tropes, and conventions deployed by Meeke in depth, broad analysis indicates that far from being the merely “formulaic novelist” dismissed by Frank, she was a self-aware writer whose works were particularly attuned to the expectations and conventions of the market for fiction. It is hoped that this article will prompt fuller investigation into her large body of work. As well as meriting further close study, Meeke’s oeuvre would benefit from scholarship that draws on the “distant reading” approaches advocated by Franco Moretti, in order to analyze the language, typologies, and motifs employed by a single writer across decades, and the complex chains of authorship through which other Georgian novelists made themselves known to their readers.<sup>47</sup> As we have seen in Meeke’s case, such patterns of attribution can be as labyrinthine as her many plots. What I have hoped to have made clear in presenting Meeke as a case study is that more remains to be done in terms of excavating, identifying, and *studying* the literary productions of this prolific cadre of “foot-soldiers” who contributed so significantly to the development of fiction during its fitful early years, yet whose role continues to be under-represented in academic curricula of the twenty-first century.

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1. Meeke’s original titles comprise: *Count St. Blancard, or, the Prejudiced Judge* (1795), *The Abbey of Clugny* (1796), *The Mysterious Wife* (1797), *Palmira and Ermance* (1797), *The Sicilian* (1798), *Ellesmere* (1799), *Harcourt* (1799), *Anecdotes of the Altamont Family* (1800), *Mysterious Husband* (1801), *Which Is the Man?* (1801), *Independence* (1802), *Midnight Weddings* (1802), *Amazement* (1804), *The Nine Days Wonder* (1804), *Something Odd!* (1804), *The Wonder of the Village* (1805), *Something Strange* (1806), *“There Is a Secret, Find It Out!”* (1808), *Langhton Priory* (1809), *Stratagems Defeated* (1811), *Matrimony, the Height of Bliss, or the Extreme of Misery* (1812), *Conscience* (1814), *The Spanish Campaign; or, the Jew* (1815), *The Veiled Protectress; or, the Mysterious Mother* (1819), *What Shall Be, Shall Be* (1823). Her translations are: François Ducray-Duminil, *A Tale of Mystery, or Celina* (1803);



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August Lafontaine, *Lobenstein Village* (1804); Sophie Cottin, *Elizabeth; or, the Exiles of Siberia* (1807); François Ducray-Duminil, *Julien; or, my Father's House* (1807).

2. Elizabeth Lee, "MEEKE, Mrs. Mary (d. 1816?)," in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sidney Lee, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan and London: Smith, Elder, 1909), 13:210.

3. Simon Macdonald, "Identifying Mrs. Meeke: Another Burney Family Novelist," *Review of English Studies* 64.265 (2013): 367–85.

4. Apart from Macdonald's essay, only two other articles treat Meeke at any length: Roberta Magnani, "The Mysterious Mrs. Meeke: A Biographical and Bibliographical Study," *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840* 9 (December 2002), available online at <[http://www.romtext.org.uk/reports/cc09\\_n04/](http://www.romtext.org.uk/reports/cc09_n04/)>; Michael Page, "Mary Meeke's *Something Strange*: The Development of the Novel and the Possibilities of the Imagination," *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840* 11 (December 2003), available online at <[http://www.romtext.org.uk/articles/cc11\\_n01/](http://www.romtext.org.uk/articles/cc11_n01/)>. Meeke has received fleeting consideration in Edward Copeland, *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1995); M. O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Frederick S. Frank, *The First Gothics: A Critical Guide to the English Gothic Novel* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987); and Ann Tracy, *The Gothic Novel 1790–1830: Plot Summaries and Index to Motifs* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1981). A facsimile edition of *Count St. Blancard*, with a (dismissive) preface by Devendra Varma and an introduction by John Garrett, was published by the Arno Press in 1977.

5. See Elizabeth Neiman, "A New Perspective of the Minerva Press's 'Derivative' Novels: Authorizing Borrowed Material," *European Romantic Review* 26:5 (2015): 633–658 and "The Female Authors of the Minerva Press and 'Copper Currency': Revaluing the Reproduction of 'Immaculate-Born Minervas'" in *Global Economies, Cultural Currencies of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Michael Rotenberg-Schwartz with Tara Czechowski (New York: AMS Press, 2012), 275–294; and Yael Shapira, "Beyond the Radcliffe Formula: Isabella Kelly and the Gothic Troubles of the Married Heroine," *Women's Writing* (2015): 1–19, available online at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2015.1110289>>.

6. For fuller details, see Anthony Mandal, "Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing of the Romantic Period*, ed. Devoney Looser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 16–31. Statistics supplied in the present essay draw upon Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling, *The English Novel, 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Peter Garside, et al., *British Fiction, 1800–1829: A Database of Production, Circulation & Reception* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2004), available online at <<http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk>>.

7. Cheryl L. Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 82.

8. Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press, 1790–1820* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1939), 5.

9. Thomas Rees, *Reminiscences of Literary London from 1779 to 1853*, with additions by J. Britton (New York: Harper Brothers, 1896), 87.

10. John Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 78.

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11. For considerations of this kind of prefatory discourse in other Minerva fictions, see Deborah Anne McLeod, "The Minerva Press," unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Alberta, 1997), 7–9, and Neiman, "Minerva Press's 'Derivative' Novels," 637–643.
  12. Elizabeth Meeke, *Midnight Weddings*, 3 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1802), 1:2.
  13. See Figure 2 for a breakdown of Meeke's output across the three personae.
  14. Elizabeth Meeke, *The Abbey of Clugny*, 3 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1796), 1:64.
  15. Elizabeth Meeke, *Ellesmere*, 4 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1799).
  16. Elizabeth Meeke, *Langhton Priory*, 4 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1809), 1:3.
  17. Elizabeth Meeke, *The Veiled Protectress; or, the Mysterious Mother*, 5 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1819), 1:1.
  18. Elizabeth Meeke, *The Wonder of the Village*, 3 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1805), 1:n.p.
  19. *Literary Journal* 3 (1 May 1804): 487–89.
  20. Joyce Hemlow, et al. (eds.), *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d'Arblay)*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972–84), 3:117.
  21. These were *The Wonder of the Village* and Meeke's translation of Cottin's *Elizabeth*, which was described instead as "A Tale".
  22. Elizabeth Meeke, *Something Odd!*, 3 vols. (London: Minerva Press, 1804), 1:v.
  23. A. G. L'Estrange (ed.), *The Life of Mary Russell Mitford: Related in a Selection from her Letters to Her Friends*, 3 vols. (London: Bentley, 1870), 1:80; Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "My Novel" by *Pisistratus Caxton. Or Varieties in English Life*, 2 vols. (1852; London and New York: Routledge, 1878), 1:158; Hugh Walpole, *The Fortress* (1932; London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), 125.
  24. G. O. Trevelyan (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1876), 1:132.
  25. Thomas Pinney (ed.), *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 1:219.
  26. Review of *Palmira and Ermance*, *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 24 (October 1798): 237.
  27. Review of *Something Strange*, *Literary Journal* 2nd ser. 2 (August 1806): 218.
  28. *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 16 (April 1796): 473.
  29. *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 15 (November 1795): 342.
  30. *Monthly Mirror* 6 (July 1798): 34.
  31. Review of *Harcourt*, *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 29 (May 1800): 116; review of *The Old Wife and Young Husband*, *Literary Journal* 3 (16 May 1804): 550.
  32. Review of *The Nine Days' Wonder*, *Literary Journal* 4 (October 1804): 435.
  33. Review of *Palmira and Ermance*, *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 24 (October 1798): 236.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. Review of *Harcourt*, *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 29 (May 1800): 116.
  36. *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 23 (June 1798): 233.
  37. *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 25 (February 1799): 234.
  38. *New Annual Register* 23 (1802): 322.
  39. *Critical Review* 2nd ser. 33 (November 1801): 353.
  40. *Literary Journal* 3 (1 May 1804): 491.
  41. *Literary Journal* 2nd ser. 2 (August 1806): 218.
  42. *Monthly Review* 2nd ser. 18 (October 1795): 228.

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43. *Monthly Review* 2nd ser. 19 (April 1796): 453.

44. See B. C. Nangle, *The Monthly Review, Second Series, 1790–1850: Index of Contributors and Articles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 246–247.

45. Isobel Grundy, “Women and Print: Readers, Writers and the Market,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume V: 1695–1830*, ed. Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159.

46. It is encouraging to see recent research is being undertaken to pursue such “alternative” histories of authorship: see, for instance, Peter Garside and Karen O’Brien (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: English and British Fiction 1750–1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Devoney Looser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Women’s Writing in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

47. See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).