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‘THE APPROBATION OF MY OWN HEART’
Virtue and Duty in Harriet Ventum’s
Selina and *Justina*

Barbara Vesey



I

I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience.¹

WITH HER SIGNATURE KNOWINGNESS AND WIT, Jane Austen ends *Northanger Abbey* (written in 1798 but not published until December 1817, five months after her death) with this provocative sentence. The epigraph speaks directly to the tension between filial duty and duty to oneself which Harriet Ventum explores in her first two novels. In both *Selina, a Novel, Founded on Facts* (1800) and *Justina; or, the History of a Young Lady* (1801), Ventum’s female characters are more than mere paragons of virtue but actual flesh-and-blood women coping with sophisticated moral dilemmas. Adopting a deeply moral, Christian tone which simultaneously takes into account pre-Christian, Aristotelian ideas surrounding morality, these novels implicitly endorse a woman’s right to choose her future, while exploring the characters’ complex motivations and emotions. Ventum’s first two novels, therefore, offer an insight into traditional and contemporary ideas about the nature of virtue in the very first years of the nineteenth century.

Through an examination of her two eponymous heroines, this essay will consider Ventum’s exploration of both established and more progressive notions: the necessity for filial obedience versus the pursuit of personal happiness, of duty to others versus duty to self.

As these conflicting notions underscore, at the time Ventum was writing the ground had been shifting underfoot for some years. Following the French Revolution there were, as Linda Colley has pointed out, mass fears of any kind of similar dissent in Britain, calling forth a conservative backlash—felt not least by women:

Just like the French Jacobins would do after 1789, British moralists condemned *ancien régime* France for allowing women an unnatural

prominence [...] Describing ‘inappropriate’ female behaviour as French in this way was partly a polemical tactic: a means by which British moralists could stress how alien and unwelcome they found such behaviour to be.²

One of the most popular and pervasive viewpoints regarding women and the changing times was that of Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) was highly influential on popular political and social thought:

the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever [...] On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly.³

It was perhaps in response to polemic such as this that Harriet Ventum made her female protagonists so three-dimensional; as Karen Morton has argued, ‘the restrictions of behaviour coupled with the need to be seen to conform meant that boundaries were rigid [...] [women writers were in a] particularly good position to blur those boundaries.’⁴

The moralists had good reason to be concerned: new roles for women were being created—and taken up, not just by women of the privileged ranks, but by those such as Ventum who were among the burgeoning middling classes. As well as an author, Ventum was a teacher, charged with instructing her pupils in precisely the kind of ‘inappropriate’ ideas abroad at this point regarding politics, social issues and other matters considered outside woman’s natural sphere. Her desire to entertain as well as educate is voiced in the Preface to *Selina*, where she also calls forth the subject of having a moral to her story:

if to a moral, which she trusts will be her advocate with the thinking part of her readers, the writer may perhaps have added a few sketches of character, not unworthy the subject, and by the conduct of the story succeed in arresting the attention of the thoughtless;—if, while she seems desirous only to amuse, she may sometimes have the good fortune to instruct;—the hours, that have glided not unpleasantly away in writing these volumes, will not be regretted as wholly lost.⁵

This desire to instruct as well as amuse stemmed from her teaching work, where she would have been faced daily with the challenge of making lessons instructive as well as diverting. During her career Ventum wrote several didactic tales for children and young people; in the Preface to one of these she states is her wish for all her writing: ‘The following work is written purposely for [...] instruction, as well as amusement’.⁶

This strain of didacticism reveals itself in Ventum’s writing, which seeks to employ popular elements of suspense, exotic locations, humour, and pathos in the cause of delivering her moral message. Ventum was canny enough to

know what would sell, setting her stories among members of the *ton* (a segment of society she was most likely not part of), yet also commanding sufficient depth of understanding of the emotions, trials, and vicissitudes of life to focus on themes which most of her readers—whatever their background—could recognise and sympathise with. If the purpose of the novel at this time ‘was explicitly educational and [...] its main business was to inculcate morality by example’, Ventum certainly strove to fulfil this function.⁷

The notion of practical virtue—‘it was practical virtue, not metaphysical truth, that was the goal of effort in the eighteenth century’⁸—can also be thought of as what Karen Stohr translates as ‘practical wisdom’, as propounded by Aristotle. As Stohr points out, ‘practical wisdom is necessary for the exercise of the moral virtues and [...] conversely, the moral virtues are necessary for the exercise of practical wisdom’.⁹ This Aristotelian concept of virtue allows for the fallibility of human nature. Even those with established moral principles cannot always be said to possess practical wisdom, as it also encompasses reason and judgement. Defining this ‘intellectual virtue’ as ‘a form of knowledge aimed fundamentally at acting well’, Stohr points out that it requires both a general understanding of what’s worthwhile in human life, and the ability to act in ways that reflect that understanding.¹⁰ In Ventum’s novels *Selina* and *Justina*, her heroines enact this kind of virtue. Sarah Emsley, in her discussion of Jane Austen’s characters, points out that they ‘experience morality as a positive, if difficult, choice, not as a sacrifice, for even when they do choose to defer or renounce gratification [...] it is in the service of a greater good [...] that sustains them.’¹¹ If, as she posits, ‘The question that is always at the beginning of ethical thought is, “How should I live my life?”’, then we can say that, like Austen, Ventum ‘addresses this question directly in the characterization of her heroines’.¹²

An examination of Edward Copeland’s graph of plots, which outlines the most common themes in novels from 1793 to 1815 (as noted by the *Lady’s Magazine*), shows us that Ventum was both traditional and forward-looking in the themes she adopted in order to explore her female characters’ sense of virtue. In 1800, the five most common plot-types, in order of frequency, were:

1. impoverished heroine saved by marriage
2. parental pressure to marry
3. woman responsible for welfare of family
4. woman suffers bad husband
5. housekeeping significant to heroine.¹³

Ventum makes use of the second, third, and fourth plots listed here, though in ways that subvert what might have been expected for the time. Her novels thus more realistically reflect the changing—and conflicting—ideas of conservatism and revolution in society at the time she was writing. Ventum’s descriptions of her two main protagonists—their histories, fates and the other characters they interact with—and the stylistic elements of the Gothic and didactic, reveal

how she was able to answer both the public demand for sensation and her own private artistic desires to educate and entertain.

The theme of ‘woman suffers bad husband’ makes itself felt in both *Selina* and *Justina*. *Selina* opens with the heroine in hospital, nearing the end of her short life. It’s made clear that being in a public hospital is frankly beneath someone of her former social status.¹⁴ The first few pages are seen from the point of view of the respectable and perforce noble Dr X, who is immediately impressed with Selina’s courage and beauty. Ventum thus fools the reader into thinking that this narrative is going to be of the ‘impoverished heroine saved by marriage’ variety. However, Selina promptly dies, leaving nothing in the way of worldly goods but a pocketbook containing a long letter to her young daughters. We are left wondering what she has done to have fallen so far and ended her life among strangers?

Ventum has a feel for suspense, however: we must wait another hundred-odd pages before we get to read Selina’s letter. Meanwhile, the narrative shifts focus and time, fast-forwarding eight years to when her girls are sixteen and eleven. Freed from the constraints of family and fortune (or so she believes), the elder daughter, Emma, is nevertheless caught up in a struggle over filial duty with its roots in money and status: the parents of the man of her choice are opposed to their union. Ventum makes a case here for one of the chief generational disputes in the novel: the older generation clinging to the notion of marriages arranged based on fortune and name, the younger depicted as more far-sighted and wise, by recognising that a similarity of interests and desires is a greater guarantor not just of happiness but also of material success.

Howard Mordaunt is Emma’s would-be lover, whose father wants him to marry the vain and profligate Emily Ferguson—a match that Howard recognises would be detrimental because Emily’s habits, tastes and predilections are so dissimilar to his own as to ensure domestic disaster:

He looked for something more than mere beauty in a wife; he hoped to find in one all the comforts of domestic happiness, and all the delights, that mutual confidence, arising from an union of minds, could bestow. (*Selina*, III, 3)

Sexual politics of quite a modern variety can also be seen here, as Ventum’s male characters are distinctly weaker in terms of their ‘practical wisdom’ than her women. Howard, for example, is seen as emotionally labile and easily swayed from standards of virtue. Influenced by the back-biting Emily Ferguson, he all too easily believes that Emma is flirting with a rival and therefore unworthy of him. This is deeply uncomfortable reading, and disturbing to Emma who, noting this, responds in this way:

Emma sat thunderstruck at the alteration she observed in him [...] she felt offended, and hurt at this proof of the uncertainty of his disposition [...] ‘and this,’ said she, mentally, ‘is among the first

proofs of his unabated love, that he takes the earliest opportunity
of being offended.’
(*Selina*, II, 218–20)

This episode also mirrors the mistrustfulness of Selina’s husband Captain Manley, as described in Selina’s long epistle to her daughters. Manley, we learn, was all too readily convinced that Selina was an incorrigible flirt—and therefore a threat to his own and her honour. He therefore banished her to Wales. This banishment, and the rundown castle she describes being sent to—as well as the minor skirmish with smugglers she encounters there—are among the more Gothic elements that mark this earlier period covered in the novel.

Selina, in her letter to her daughters, preaches obedience even though her own history could be seen to belie this. However, Ventum makes Selina sympathetic from the outset of the book and she is allowed to defend herself in her own voice for more than half of the novel. We are also made to see her through her daughters’ eyes, which reinforces both her goodness and the weight of the injustices done to her by her father and her husband. Ventum makes Selina the moral centre of the book, and ensures that we know that Selina’s goodness is of a deeper, more complex nature than that allowed expression in her society. Not for her the show and empty gaiety of the *ton*:

[T]he remembrance of the past, when I was the object of admiration, when the young, the vain, and the giddy, all flocked around me, taking laws from my looks, and fashions from my manners, each eagerly striving to be noticed by me; what a change! Reflection told me, though I obtained by bitter experience the sentiments which now glowed in my heart, that I was at this time a far more useful member of society, than when, courted by the multitude, and the fashionable leader of amusements, I was the first in every gay assembly.
(*Selina*, II, 152–53)

Selina’s daughter Emma becomes the moral focus of the second generation of the novel. Presumed to have little fortune and less name, she succeeds because she has the same broader moral compass and steadfastness as her mother. This is demonstrated by the fact that, in spite of her lack of status, she maintains her dignity and sense of honour when Howard Mordaunt’s father, Sir James, appeals directly to her not to stand in the way of his wish that Howard marry Emily Ferguson:

‘[H]ere receive my promise [...] I will not enter your family; and since the happiness of it depends upon Mr Howard’s marriage with a woman of fortune, I will be no obstacle to it [...] I should think I derogated not only from delicacy, but what is due to myself, if I should again be tempted to listen to your son [...] Believe me, sir [...] I feel my own littleness; I acknowledge, that there are many circumstances, which make an union with me far from desirable.’
(*Selina*, III, 24–25, 27)

This passage also shows us that Emma is no shrinking violet: although she is obeying Sir James's wish, she cannot resist expressing her indignation at his bad manners for having broached the subject with her, and for having implicitly accused her of being mercenary and insincere. For, even while she agrees with the undesirability of her connections and lack of fortune, she (and we) are aware that her self-possession and dignity are gifts worth far more.

In the letter that takes up over half of the novel, Selina treads a very careful line—exhorting her daughters by her example not to do as she did, yet never expressing regret about her loss of status in a society that prizes this over all. Selina is, in fact, superior to her society in every way that (Ventum persuades us) matters: she is, bravely, true to her own moral code in a climate that actually values money over moral fibre. But she is no paragon: she is fallible, and both she—and her daughter Emma—wrestle with the conflicting demands and expectations of their culture. Considered weak, they are often called upon to be strong; dismissed as flighty, they prove themselves steadfast. When Selina's father and the other elders concerned with her try to claim the moral high ground in order to disguise their acquisitiveness and snobbery, she has the moral courage to defy this hypocrisy and to stand by the choice she has made, even in the face of real hardship. When Captain Manley disappears at sea and she is left alone in London with two small children, taking in needlework to support them, she has the moral strength to resist temptation:

‘Am I to give myself up to infamy and vice, because I am in trouble? Am I to derogate from a conduct, which has hitherto insured me the approbation of my own heart [...]? No, no, though steeped to the very lips in misery, never will I despair.’ (Selina, II, 163)

‘The approbation of my own heart’ is a telling phrase: it shows us that Selina has the strength of character to trust her own inner moral compass. This takes us back to the notion of ‘practical wisdom’ and of the experience of morality spoken of by Emsley.

This larger conception of virtue and morality in *Selina* was not appreciated by the contemporary critic of the *Monthly Review*, who—disapprovingly—wrote:

This novel is written with a view of pointing out the evils attendant on disobedience to parents in the article of matrimonial connections [...] Though we applaud the intention, we are of opinion that, to give the moral its full effect, the ill consequences of the breach of duty ought to be such as naturally and directly flow from it [...]¹⁵

Such criticism reveals for us a great deal about the expectations of the *Monthly Review*'s critic and, by extension, those of the paternalistic society he is part of and acting spokesperson for. In his failure to understand, or at least to appreciate, the complexity of motives, emotions, and relationships that Ventum explores, he reveals his own narrow strictures regarding acceptable depictions of women's

virtue—and also of the duties incumbent upon women novelists. The reviewer wants a black-and-white morality tale; Ventum has provided something much more subtle and true to life. As with the *British Critic's* review of *Northanger Abbey*, which feels it must mention that while 'a good novel [...] is, perhaps, among the most fascinating productions of modern literature [...] we cannot say, that it is quite so improving as others',¹⁶ the *Monthly Critic's* reviewer fails to allow for the possibility that women writers might deliberately use shades of grey in their dissection of social norms and restrictions.

Perhaps in reaction to her critics—or poor sales—Ventum's *Justina*, the novel that followed *Selina* a year later, is more obviously concerned with the popular themes and motifs of the moment—namely, the Gothic. As Jerrold Hogle points out, 1800 was '[t]he largest single year yet for [the] number of Gothic novels published in England.'¹⁷ *Justina* is made up entirely of letters, for the most part between Justina Trecothick, a native of Wales, and her close friend Matilda Nesbitt, living in Scotland. There are also occasional letters from Lord Osmond, Justina's would-be suitor, to his friend Frederick. This epistolary form allows for a less formal tone, and more insight into the characters' innermost feelings.

Once again the primary preoccupation of the main characters is a suitable marriage—the 'parental pressure to marry' plot illuminated by Copeland. Again, however, there are differing definitions of this depending on age, rank, and—to a certain extent—gender. It is another generational tale, where the views and morals of the older generation are set against those of the younger. The other plot addressed here, as in *Selina*, is that of 'woman responsible for welfare of family'. However, it is worth noting that here it is Justina, and not her mother, who is the woman responsible for the family's welfare. This brings to the fore one of the many Gothic-derived themes that makes itself felt: that of the absent mother. If 'the eighteenth century witnessed the idealisation of maternity that gave rise to modern motherhood [...] women's novels help[ing to] [...] construct modern maternity, generating a literary tradition with politically complex and psychologically enduring effects', then both of these novels by Ventum could be said to have been influenced accordingly.¹⁸ Mothers (both absent and present) in both novels act as moral signposts for their children—particularly their daughters, by way of their actions (or, in the case of Justina's mother, inaction). Selina is of course a mother herself and, in spite of the filial disobedience that has brought her to a low ebb at the start of the novel, she is portrayed throughout as a virtuous woman who merits our sympathy and identification. Significantly, through her failure to obey her father, marrying instead someone of whom he thoroughly disapproves, she comes to be stronger morally throughout the novel.

To take us back to the epigraph at the start of this essay, perhaps Selina has her father's recalcitrance to thank for the life lessons she learns. Ventum's

readers could not have failed to be moved by descriptions such as this within the novel:

Thus passed, or rather lingered, another four months, during which I experienced the most pinching necessity, frequently wanting the common necessities of life. For many weeks, our chief subsistence was bread and potatoes [...]

(*Selina*, II, 159)

Selina casts a long shadow over the events and outcomes in the novel, and her absence is felt by her daughters. Justina's mother, on the other hand, is absent in quite a different way: she is weak, ineffectual, and incapable of looking after her daughter. As Lord Osmond writes to his friend: '[Justina's] mother has given such a glaring proof of her own credulity, and imbecility of character'.¹⁹ It is Justina who must take on the role of head of the family. Just one instance of this is when she and her mother are being held captive by Justina's wicked stepfather—who plans to marry her off to the odious Sir Evan—in an isolated house in Sicily: 'At present they have it all their own way; but [...] I may yet turn the tables [...] my resolve [...] is invariably fixed' (*Justina*, III, 95, 119). Shortly after she writes this, Justina does indeed take action to secure her own and her mother's escape.

Justina's correspondent, Matilda, is an orphan; as such she must also take on the role of head of her family. It is a task she is more than equal to. Faced with adversity, she writes to Justina:

[M]y fortunes are sunk—my prospects altered—and even my hopes blighted: nothing remains but the *native freedom of my mind*, and the power of thinking, and, I trust, *acting right* [...]

(*Justina*, II, 143)

Alongside female characters who are decisive and in command, *Justina* also includes many more traditionally Gothic elements such as women in peril. In trying to appeal to a readership hungry for adventure, Ventum's second novel boasts descriptions of foreign climes, abductions, convents, monks, nuns, and orphans. Yet, Ventum uses these elements to her own purpose: the Gothic device of confinement, for example, is used by Ventum to explore the characters' opportunity for self-reflection, and when Justina and her mother are held captive in the Sicilian countryside, imprisonment is used as a metaphor for one's inner life, and seen as an opportunity for contemplation and gaining greater self-awareness.

In writing about issues such as these, Ventum reveals expectations of her readers that are decidedly sophisticated. At this point in time, 1800, it is notable that these 'minor' novels of Ventum's give voice and place to a world, a climate, where a woman's virtue does not preclude flouting accepted 'moral' behaviour such as filial duty. Women of this time would have welcomed this kind of writing, as food for debate. As Harriet Guest has written, women were participating 'through their literacy' in an enlarged kind of public oratory, and

enjoying greater freedom to espouse—and publish, and read about—themselves and their lives.²⁰ Guest gently points out that

eighteenth-century novels themselves participate in debate that cuts across genres; they assume readers who are also immersed in periodical literature, in poetry, in histories [...] Novels echo debates and discourses the implications of which may only be spelled out in, say, polemical essays, or conduct books, or private letters.²¹

These were Ventum's readers, too, and she was up to the task of entertaining them *and* giving them food for thought. The epistolary form she uses for all of *Justina* and more than half of *Selina* allows her heroines their own voice. Later in her career, Ventum would go on to write several works of fiction for children, on themes ranging from scientific enquiry and the vicissitudes of a soldier's life to the importance of virtuous and obedient behaviour in children and the adults responsible for them. This change of genre speaks of her desire to influence the rising generation in a way mirrored in her teaching work—though it is worth pointing out, with Mitzi Myers, that readers of this period 'did not yet bracket off the juvenile from the adult, popular fiction from the high-art novel, or moral concerns from aesthetic forms'.²²

Harriet Ventum was, of course—as we all are—a product of her times. Yet she was also possessed of an intelligence capable of embracing ideas about women, motherhood, and virtue at variance with and challenging of the prevailing notions that existed in the very first years of the nineteenth century. While she conforms in terms of the things these novels take for granted—a woman's place, a woman's finer feelings—at the same time, she breaks out of these strictures by making both *Selina* and *Justina*, as characters, strong and with the presence of mind and moral intelligence to navigate their way through life. Once she has made them our focus, by creating them as sympathetic characters we identify with, she is free to break out of conformity and to construct their motives and actions as complex and multi-dimensional, granting them a depth that makes them full and well-rounded characters and women.

Mitzi Myers' excellent examination of the vagaries of creating a canon is particularly apt with writers such as Ventum, I believe, for while the 'erasure' of Ventum's work can all too easily be put down to its relative lack of originality, it could, as well, have fallen by the wayside because it did not 'fit the paradigm of periodization that eventually became our way of making sense of the Revolutionary decades'.²³ For readers of her own time, and particularly women, Ventum offered stories that, while dramatic and entertaining, also presented them with characters whose motives and moral dilemmas they could recognise. It could be argued that those works of art considered in the main to be second- or even third-rate can actually tell us a good deal more about contemporary preoccupations and concerns, fashions and mores than the 'classics'. More 'serious' works often have a groundbreaking element (which by

definition breaks with the times), which both contributes to their longevity and marks them out as superior.

By contrast, *Selina* and *Justina* are not saying anything radical, but are rehearsing well-trodden ground which by its very ordinariness demonstrates how far the ideas propounded have come to be commonplace and accepted in the society of the time. Nothing happens in isolation. Any historicist evaluation of Ventum's works—and her works demand to be analysed in an historicist light—reveals that without novels like Ventum's there would not have been the innovators who came after her. By definition, those taking a new path need an old one to stray from. So what could be seen as derivative or second-rate can just as easily be read, and understood, as better than that by virtue of its fluid use of prevailing themes and tropes. If you regard

the study of literary history as including within its province the study of the ideas and feelings which other men in past times have been moved by, and of the processes by which what may be called literary and philosophical public opinion is formed [...] your minor writer may be as important as—he may often, from this point of view, be more important than—the authors of what are now regarded as masterpieces.²⁴

There is not—or shouldn't be—anything timeless or unassailable about the canon,²⁵ yet in the headlong pursuit of the next recovered masterpiece we are in danger of losing sight of the smaller gems. Focusing on only a tiny percentage of the literary output of a period is as wrongheaded as extrapolating an elephant from just its trunk. As Myers points out, we cannot say 'here is how women wrote; here are all the women who matter' until we have accorded writers such as Ventum a place in the 'serried ranks' of novelists of the time.²⁶ Our understanding of the long eighteenth century will forever be incomplete until we have examined works such as those by Harriet Ventum. The writer 'has to trust only to the unbiassed judgment of her readers [...] unknowing what may be its [*sic*] fate,—herself unknown as a writer,—her book steals silently to its [*sic*] trial,—timid—not hopeless;—doubting—yet resigned' (*Selina*, I, viii).

II

HARRIET VENTUM (*fl.* 1800–1814): AN AUTHOR STUDY

Born Harriet Crossley sometime in the 1760s, Harriet Ventum would seem to have spent most of her life within a two-mile radius in London. Nothing is known of her early years, but we can glean some information from the work she later produced: she was educated—she worked for part of her life as a teacher in a school—she may perhaps have travelled to Italy, Wales, and Portugal among other places, and she may have been a part of or known about members of the gentry.

On 12 October 1786, Harriet married a Thomas Ventum at St Benet Gracechurch, London.²⁷ According to *The Times* for 10 December 1790, the couple took up residence in a house at 20 Greville Street, Holborn. There is a record of a Thomas Ventum given as a ‘court officer’ and ‘gentleman pensioner’, a post he held between 1788 and 1789.²⁸ (The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘gentleman-pensioners’ as ‘royal bodyguards, one of 40 gentlemen who act as guards or attendants to the sovereign on state occasions’.)

On 11 November 1790, Harriet and Thomas christened their daughter, Elizabeth Frances, at St Andrew’s Church Holborn. However, Thomas’s duties to the King seem to have ended abruptly—the record simply states, ‘vac by 1790.’²⁹ Then, in December 1790 and January 1791, Thomas’s name appears twice in the archives of *The Times*—under ‘Sales by Auction’—first on Friday, 10 December 1790:

Lot I. A Spacious FREEHOLD HOUSE, situate No. 20, on the South-side of Greville-street, recently repaired, and let, to Mr. Ventum, one year of whose term was unexpired at Lady-day last [25th March 1790], at a very low Annual Rent, clear of Land Tax and all Outgoings, of FIFTY POUNDS per Annum.³⁰

—and then for Tuesday 18th January 1791:

By HENRY WATKINS,

On the Premises, No. 20 Greville street, Hatton Garden, THIS DAY and TO-MORROW, at Twelve o’Clock

THE Neat and Genuine HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, Plate, Linen, China, Prints, and Books, of

Mr. THOMAS VENTUM,

amongst which are neat four-post and sield [*sic*] bedsteads, with printed cotton and morine furnitures, a number of good beds and bedding, a general assortment of cabinet work, a fine toned harpsichord by Griffin, an eight day clock in mahogany case, good kitchen requisites and other effects.

To be viewed to the Sale, and Catalogues had on the Premises, and of Henry Watkins, no. 63 Holborn Hill.³¹

Perhaps these were felicitous rather than ominous events; perhaps the Ventums simply needed a bigger residence for themselves and their new daughter; but it is just as likely that their financial circumstances may have been taking a distinct turn for the worse. Almost two years later, on 13 December 1792, a second daughter, Mary Harrison, was christened when she was two days old in the Lying-in Hospital at Endell Street. The hasty christening tells us that, in all likelihood, the child did not survive; the place of Harriet’s confinement almost certainly indicates that at this point her circumstances were very much straitened indeed.

For the next eight years the trail goes cold; however, turning to Ventum's work we find a description of extremely straitened circumstances in her first novel, *Selina* (tantalisingly subtitled 'A Novel, Founded on Facts'), published in 1800. Certain passages in this novel speak of first-hand experience of real penury. *Selina* was printed for C. Law, Avemaria-Lane, by Bye and Law, St John's-Square, Clerkenwell. A second novel, *Justina; or, The History of a Young Lady* followed in 1801. For the next thirteen years, however, Ventum turned her attentions and talents almost exclusively from novels for adults to didactic prose intended to improve and inspire children and young people, writing seven books for children, four of which were published by J. Harris, successor to Elizabeth and Francis Newbery, the famous children's publishers who had a press-cum-bookshop in St Paul's Churchyard. (The renowned Newbery Medal, awarded annually to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children, was named in tribute to the Newbery family of publishers.)

In the Preface written for her fifth book (and her third for children), published in 1802 and entitled *Surveys of Nature: A Sequel to Mrs Trimmer's Introduction*, Ventum writes,

Engaged in the business of a school, and constantly in the habit of teaching, I found that although Mrs Trimmer's Introduction was a very serviceable work for the perusal, something on the same plan, but on a rather more enlarged scale, with more particular descriptions, would be highly necessary to assist my purpose of instruction with the elder ones.³²

Thus we know that she worked as a teacher alongside her work as a writer. Perhaps Ventum was influenced in part by a desire to contribute to the growing canon of work by women, such as Maria Edgeworth and Sarah Trimmer, which sought to meet the social mood of concern for the 'rising generation' during turbulent times at home and abroad.

I could find no extant record of Thomas Ventum's death, nor of a divorce, but on 9 July 1803, Harriet married a William Brown at St Mary's Whitechapel. At this point Harriet would have been somewhere between 35 and 43 years old. There is no easily recoverable record of any children from this marriage, and Harriet continued writing under the name Ventum.

Most of her works seem to have had only one edition, though the Newberys seem to have had enough faith in her abilities to accept—perhaps even commission—roughly one a year. Her work was often favourably reviewed, for the most part, though sometimes she was accused of being derivative.³³

The publication of *The Holiday Reward, or, Tales to Instruct and Amuse Good Children during the Christmas and Midsummer Vacations* in 1814 is the last public record I have been able to unearth concerning Harriet Crossley Ventum Brown. Her story was not that of a player in the social carnival of bluestockings, theatre parties, and nobility, such as that enjoyed by more lustrous contemporaries, but

of a keen observer and self-appointed guardian of morality, who grew from her early Gothic-influenced work to the more serious business of guiding the young. Her life was spent in the workaday world of London as a woman whose relative lack of status would seem, ironically enough, to have granted her more, not fewer, opportunities and freedoms, though perhaps at a price which, at times, may have included real hardship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY HARRIET VENTUM

All of the works listed in this bibliography have been located from either the Corvey Microfiche Edition (CME), the online catalogues of depositories, or internet sites and facsimile editions. The entries below begin with a transcription of the title page, omitting any epigraphs and volume-specific details. The publisher's imprint is also omitted, as this appears on the subsequent line. The following segment of each entry records pagination, including details of illustrations, and format. The next line of the entry gives the library details of the copy examined, followed by catalogue entries given in DBF and OCLC.

ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library
CME	Corvey Microfiche Edition
DBF	<i>British Fiction, 1800–1829: A Database of Production, Circulation & Reception</i> (Cardiff University, 2004). Online: Internet < http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk >
EN	Peter Garside, James Raven, Rainer Schöwerling, <i>The English Novel, 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles</i> , 2 vols (Oxford: OUP, 2000)
ill.	illustrations
LSJ	Sydney Jones Special Collections & Archives, University of Liverpool
MH	Harvard University Library
O	Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
OCLC	OCLC Worldcat Database
PM	Pierpont Morgan Library
V&A	National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum
xOCLC	not located in OCLC

1. **SELINA, A NOVEL, FOUNDED ON FACTS. BY A LADY. IN THREE VOLUMES.**

London: Printed for C. Law, Avemaria-Lane, by Bye and Law, St. John's-Square, Clerkenwell, 1800.

3 vols (I 239p; II 268p; III 254p). 12°.

BL 12612.bbb.15; CME 3-628-48643-2; DBF 1800A074; OCLC 49468158.

Notes. Electronic facsimile available on *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*

- (ECCO). BL, CME, ECCO list as an anonymous work. For more information about the author attribution, see Peter Garside, with Jacqueline Belanger and Anthony Mandal, 'The English Novel, 1800–1829: Update 1 (Apr 2000–May 2001)', in the Updates section of DBF <<http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/guide/updates.html>>.
2. **JUSTINA; OR, THE HISTORY OF A YOUNG LADY. IN FOUR VOLUMES. BY HARRIET VENTUM, AUTHOR OF SELINA, &C. &C.**
London: Printed for J. Badcock, Paternoster-Row, by J. D. Dewick, Aldersgate-Street, 1801.
4 vols (I iv, 264p; II 256p; III 215p; IV 215p). 12°.
BL C.171.a.14; DBF 1801A068; OCLC 15062855.
Notes. CME (3-628-48909-1) holds the 1802 edn.
 3. **THE AMIABLE TUTORESS; OR, THE HISTORY OF MARY AND JANE HORNSBY. A TALE FOR YOUNG PERSONS.**
London: Printed for T. Hurst and Sold by E. Newbery, Corner of St. Paul's Churchyard, 1801.
169p, ill. 12°.
BL Ch.800/95; LSJ JUV.1:1; PM E1 14 B 082613; OCLC 177743492.
 4. **JUVENILE INSTRUCTION.**
London: Printed by T. Plummer for R. Dutton, 1802.
144p, ill. 12°.
O Vet. A6f.1040; OCLC 32063170.
 5. **SURVEYS OF NATURE: A SEQUEL TO MRS TRIMMER'S INTRODUCTION; BEING FAMILIAR DESCRIPTIONS OF SOME POPULAR SUBJECTS IN NATURAL PHILOSOPHY, ADAPTED TO THE CAPACITIES OF CHILDREN. BY HARRIET VENTUM, AUTHOUR [sic] OF SELINA, THE AMIABLE TUTORESS, &C.**
London: Printed for John Badcock, Paternoster-Row, and B. Tabart, Bond-Street; by W. Bristow, Canterbury, 1802.
138p. 12° (in 6's).
BL 8707.a.5; O 2521 f.215; OCLC 6803922.
Notes. Electronic facsimile available on Google Books.
 6. **INTERESTING TRAITS OF CHARACTER, IN YOUTH, OF BOTH SEXES, BY MRS. VENTUM, AUTHOR OF THE AIMIABLE TUTORESS, &C. &C.**
London: J. Harris, Successor to E. Newbery, the Corner of St. Paul's Churchyard, 1804.
168p, ill. 12°.
BL 8306.bb.24; O Nuneham 256 f.3278; V&A Children's Books 60.J.13; OCLC 32063178.
Notes. Electronic facsimile available on the Internet Archive <<http://www.archive.org/details/interestingtraitoventiala>>.

7. **TALES FOR DOMESTIC INSTRUCTION: CONTAINING THE HISTORIES OF BEN HALLYARD; HANNAH JENKINS; JOHN APLIN; EDWARD FLETCHER, OR THE NECESSITY OF CURBING OUR PASSIONS; LUCY AND JEMIMA MEADOWS; AND MR WILMOT. BY H. VENTUM, AUTHOR OF THE AMIABLE TUTORESS, INTERESTING TRAITS OF CHARACTER IN YOUTH, &C.**
 London: Published by J. Harris (Successor to E. Newbery), Corner of St. Paul's Church-yard, 1806.
 131p, ill. 12° (in 6's).
 BL Ch.800/126; MH Houghton 19462.37*; LSJ JUV.1:2; O Johnson f.355; PM E1 14 A o82681; OCLC 12681263.
Notes. Electronic facsimile available on the Internet Archive <<http://www.archive.org/details/talesfordomesticooventiala>>.
8. **CHARLES LEESON; OR, THE SOLDIER. A TALE.**
 London: Printed for J. Harris, Corner of St. Paul's Churchyard, 1810.
 164p, ill. 12°.
 BL Ch.810/30; MH Houghton 19462.37.3; O Nuneham 256 e.16895; OCLC 32063188.
9. **THE DANGERS OF INFIDELITY: A NOVEL.**
 London: Chapple, 1812.
 3 vols. 12°.
 No copy located; DBF 1812A063; xOCLC.
10. **THE GOOD AUNT: INCLUDING THE STORY OF SIGNOR ALDERSONINI AND HIS SON.**
 London: Printed for C. Chapple, 1813.
 133p. 12°.
 OCLC 63072493.
Notes. Listed in the *Edinburgh Annual Register*, 6 (Jan 1813) under 'New Publications for 1813'. This is most likely a reworking (or straight reprint) of *The Amiable Tutoress* (Item 3).
11. **THE HOLIDAY REWARD; OR, TALES TO INSTRUCT AND AMUSE GOOD CHILDREN, DURING THE CHRISTMAS AND MIDSUMMER VACATIONS. BY MRS. VENTUM.**
 London: Printed for J. Harris, Corner of St. Paul's Church-yard, 1814.
 168p, ill. 12° (in 6's).
 BL 1568/9161; O Johnson f.364; PM E1 14 B o82679; OCLC 32063161.
Notes. Electronic facsimile available on the Internet Archive <<http://www.archive.org/details/holidayrewardortoventiala>>. Two stories from this collection were later republished as *The Industrious and Pious Sailor Boy; and The Sick Soldier* (New Haven, CT: John Babcock & Son; Charleston: S. & W. R. Babcock; Philadelphia: M'Carty & Davies, 1820).

It is important to note that the novel *Selima; or, a Village Tale* (EN, vol. 1, 1794: 40) is often still attributed to Harriet Ventum in spite of work done by Peter Garside and Virginia Blain, among others (see below), to rectify this mistake. *Selima* was in fact written by Margaret Holford (senior), a Minerva Press poet and novelist. 

NOTES

1. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, edited by Claire Grogan (1818; Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 240.
2. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London: Pimlico, 1992), pp. 251–52.
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6. Harriet Ventum, *Surveys of Nature: A Sequel to Mrs Trimmer's Introduction; being Familiar Descriptions of Some Popular Subjects in Natural Philosophy Adapted to the Capacities of Children* (London: Badcock & Tabart, 1802), p. 3.
7. J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800* (1932; rev. edn, London: Methuen & Co, 1969), p. 70.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
9. Karen Stohr, 'Practical Wisdom and Moral Imagination in *Sense and Sensibility*', *Philosophy and Literature*, 30.2 (Oct 2006), 379.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
11. Sarah Emsley, *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 21.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
13. Edward Copeland, *Women Writing About Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790–1820* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 63.
14. When Selina's father is informed of the manner and place of her death, he is stunned: "In an hospital! [...] Do I hear right? Did you say in an hospital? God of Heaven! my daughter, lady Selina St. Aubin, die in an hospital!" (*Selina*, 1, 22)
15. *Monthly Review*, 2nd ser. 32 (May 1800), 93.
16. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 253.
17. Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. xix. This is substantiated by figures provided by Peter Garside, in his 'Historical Introduction' to vol. 2 of *The English Novel, 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, edited by Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schöwerling, 2 vols (Oxford: OUP, 2000), II, 56: Table 3. According to Garside's data, the imprint year 1800 saw the appearance of 27 new Gothic novels (33.3 per cent of the total number of titles for the year), a figure that exceeded both preceding and subsequent years.

18. Susan C. Greenfield, *Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of Family Romance, Frances Burney to Jane Austen* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), p. 13.
19. Harriet Ventum, *Juština; or, the History of a Young Lady*, 4 vols (London: J. Badcock, 1801), III, 66. Subsequent references are from this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
20. Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism 1750–1810* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 9.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
22. Mitzi Myers, 'Shot from Canons; or, Maria Edgeworth and the Cultural Production and Consumption of the Late-Eighteenth-Century Woman Writer', in *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text*, edited by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 196.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
24. Arthur O. Lovejoy, in *The Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present: A Reader*, edited by Raman Selden (London: Longman, 1988), p. 428.
25. Myers, 'Shot from Canons', p. 205.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
27. I am indebted to the excellent genealogical index at <http://www.familysearch.org> for the first sighting of the records of Harriet Ventum's two marriages and two children. The original of the record of her marriage to Thomas Ventum is held by the Guildhall Library, Manuscripts Section, Aldermanbury, London EC2P 2EJ, microfilm record Guildhall Library MS 17611/1.
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29. 'Index of Officers', *British History Online*. Online: Internet (11 June 2008): <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=43969>>.
30. *The Times*, 10 Dec 1790.
31. *The Times*, 18 Jan 1791.
32. Harriet Ventum, *Surveys of Nature: A Sequel to Mrs Trimmer's Introduction; being Familiar Descriptions of Some Popular Subjects in Natural Philosophy Adapted to the Capacities of Children* (London: Badcock & Tabart, 1802), p. vi.
33. 'In all the publications of this Author, good intention is apparent; but they certainly do not afford much novelty, being chiefly compositions from the writings of others.'—Sarah Trimmer, *The Guardian of Education* (1802), 512. Trimmer's review is of Ventum's 1802 work *Juvenile Instruction*, but she is most probably (and rather pointedly) alluding here to Ventum's *Surveys of Nature* (the subtitle of which acknowledges its debt to Trimmer's *An Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature, and Reading the Holy Scriptures* [London: J. Dodsley, 1780]). Trimmer did not deign to review Ventum's *Surveys of Nature*, even though it was published during the lifetime of her journal *The Guardian of Education*.

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