

ENGL 3041: Adventures in the Literary Marketplace
Assignment 1.3: Author Biography

Albinia Gwynn was the daughter of Colonel Leonard Gwynnⁱ. She wrote two novels, *The Rencontre or Transition of a Moment* 1785 which was printed in epistolary form, and *History of the Honourable Edward Mortimer* 1785. Both works were published in London with a second edition of each appearing in Dublinⁱⁱ. Her death of apoplexy in 1791 was noted in *The Gentleman's Magazine*ⁱⁱⁱ which may hint at her social status, as *The Gentleman's Magazine* only reported the births marriages and deaths of high society, events in the lives of people with some military or social standing.

As *History of the Honourable Edward Mortimer* was dedicated from Bath to Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, a fairly frequent dedicatee,^{iv} it is reasonable to presume that Albinia Gwynn had some connection with the Bath area, especially when taken in conjunction with the fact that one of the Bath booksellers, Mr Cruttwell collected subscriptions for her^v. Among those who subscribed to her first book are the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, several Earls and other notables, which may also suggest her social status. It is likely, given the subscriptions and the absence of her name on the title pages of her books, that Albinia Gwynn was not a member of the labouring class. Also among those who subscribed to her first book are Hannah More and Susannah Gunning's husband^{vi}. Hannah More is perhaps the most significant, as she lived for a time in the small town of Wrington, Somerset which was the place where Albinia Gwynn died of an apoplexy in 1791^{vii}. A description of Wrington at the time includes the following passage,

About three-quarters of a mile to the E. of the village is Barley Wood, where is the thatched cottage-ornee built by the late Mrs. Hannah More and her sister, and in which she resided for twenty-five years.^{viii}

Hannah More was a famous writer, who, like the Duchess of Devonshire had a large literary circle. She was well-known for her work with the children of the poor in the schools she set up. When she retired from this charity work in 1785, it was to Wrington, which means that she was living in Wrington from 1785 for twenty-five years, and was living there when Albinia Gwynn died in Wrington in 1791. This leads me to surmise that Gwynn may have lived here, but it is certain that she stayed in Wrington in 1791. It may also point to a friendship between Hannah More and herself; Gwynn may have been visiting her when she died. This link however, is purely speculative, as I have been unable to find any evidence in the various critical biographies of Hannah More's life.

In Gwynn's preface to *The Rencontre or Transition of a Moment* she states,

I protest to thee that I have a large group of friends, only *one* of whom is intrusted with the secret of my being an authoress; so exceedingly afraid am I of being ridiculed for my ill success^{ix}

However, as Paula Feldman, remarks, it was unlikely that people would subscribe to a 'volume whose author was unknown to them'^x, although *History of the Honourable Edward Mortimer* and *The Rencontre or Transition of a Moment* were both printed anonymously, 'By a Lady'. This preference for anonymity may be linked to the social status of the novel as beneath poetry, or the mixed, and sometimes disparaging reviews she received for both works. Samuel Badcock, reviewing *The Rencontre or Transition of a Moment* for *The Monthly Review* wrote,

...*Transition of a Moment* will have an existence almost as short and will soon pass away and be heard of no more^{xi}

His review of *History of the Honourable Edward Mortimer* was almost as unfavourable,

We cannot say that this Novel is happy for the perspicuity of its plot, or the contrivance of its incidents...but...a vein of sprightliness and good sense runs through this Novel, that cannot fail of gratifying those who chiefly read for amusement...^{xii}

Badcock in essence positions these books as amusing works with little merit in the world of high culture. Other critics wrote slightly more favourably, for example in *The Critical Review* 16th-17th October one critic writes, ‘We have been greatly interested and entertained by this novel’^{xiii}. This mixed reception may have had an effect on her preference for obscurity; had the book been received well by all of the critics she might have revealed her identity. In her preface to *The Rencontre or Transition of a Moment* Gwynn writes ‘though I thus wrap myself up in obscurity, and hide me from my nearest friends, yet I sigh for fame’^{xiv} However, whether or not Gwynn’s anonymity was a ‘transparent pose’^{xv} is something difficult to discover as ‘time has disconnected us from the human context’^{xvi}.

Although Albinia Gwynn’s preference for obscurity makes it rather difficult to uncover many of the details of her life, several things are certain: that she was the daughter of a Colonel, that she wrote two novels and that she died, of an apoplexy in the small town of Wrington in 1791.

ⁱ Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Batsford 1990) p. 470

ⁱⁱ Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schowering, gen. Eds. *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey* (Oxford University Press: 2000) Vol. 1 pp.357-8

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Gentleman’s Magazine* vol. 61 part 1. in Gentleman’s magazine library. topographical history...a classified collection of the chief contents of ‘the Gentleman’s magazine’, from 1731-1868 (March: 1791) p.285

^{iv} James Raven ‘Introduction’ in *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey* gen. Eds Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schowering (Oxford University Press: 2000) Vol. 1 p.56

^v *St James Chronicle* 25-27th August 1785 cited in Garside, Raven, and Schowering, Vol. 1 p.357

^{vi} Blain, Clements and Grundy, ed. p. 470

- ^{vii} Blain, Clements and Grundy, ed. p. 470
- ^{viii} *The National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland (1868)* Transcribed by Colin Hinson (2003) <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/SOM/Wrington/index.html>
- ^{ix} Albinia Gwynn, *The rencontre: or, transition of a moment. A novel, in a series of letters. By a lady. In two volumes* Vol.1 Dublin, 1785. 2 vols. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale Group. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> p.4
- ^x Paula R. Feldman, 'Women Poets and Anonymity in the Romantic Era', in *Authorship Commerce and the Public: Scenes of Writing, 1750-1850*, ed. E.J. Clery, Caroline Franklin, Peter Garside (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p.45
- ^{xi} Samuel Badcock *The Monthly Review* 72: March 1785, p. 233 cited in Garside, Raven, and Schowerling, Vol. 1 p.358
- ^{xii} Samuel Badcock *The Monthly Review* 73: December 1785, p.465 cited in Garside, Raven and Schowerling, Vol. 1 p.357
- ^{xiii} *The Critical Review* 60: October 1785, pp.316-317 cited in Garside, Raven, and Schowerling, Vol. 1 p.357
- ^{xiv} Albinia Gwynn, *The rencontre: or, transition of a moment*, p.5
- ^{xv} Paula R. Feldman, p.46
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.* p.45

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