

'To Amuse for an Hour'? Materiality, Femininity and Performance in the Scrapbook of Lady Maxwell

Louise Williams

This paper will focus on the smallest of five scrapbooks created by Lady Maxwell (1764–1841) held by the National Trust for Scotland at Pollok House, Glasgow. The scrapbook combines press clippings, engravings, fashion plates and off-the-shelf scraps to create intricately styled and interconnected snapshots of its era. This paper places the scrapbook inside a tradition of female polite sociability, revealing the life and preoccupations of its author and questioning the focus on linguistic signs that is all too often the centre of archival research. It will read messages sent by the physical characteristics of the book and the material choices made to create its pages in order to explore representations of femininity in an era that played out its social tensions through acts of performance.

Needed: Connection between past and present constructive imagination to make past live again.¹

In the undated note above, academic Lucy Maynard Salmon (1853–1927) called for a new way of approaching historical records, one that would transcend the institutionalised historiography of her times to bridge the conceptual gap between present and past. The solution that Salmon found is now known in museum studies, archaeology and anthropology as 'material culture' study. It caused considerable controversy inside the rigid academic conventions of her time as Salmon proposed an object-based history that identified evidence in the intimate and the everyday: on high-street pavements and in the utensils of her back kitchen. Rather than focusing upon what we can gain from a straightforward reading of written content, Salmon argues that material juxtapositions, physical forms and social and commercial contexts can yield as much evidence of behaviour and lives as words on a page. In recognition of Salmon's ground-breaking approach, this discussion offers a 'material culture' analysis of a mixed-media scrapbook of printed text, engravings, illustration and caricatures created by Lady Hannah Anne Maxwell (née Gardiner, 1764–1841), wife of Sir John Maxwell, 7th Baronet of Pollok (1768–1844), held in the care of the National Trust for Scotland at Pollok House, Glasgow.

Modern material culture scholarship is based on 'the study through artifacts

¹ Cited in N. Adams and B. G. Smith, *History and the Texture of Modern Life: Selected Essays, Lucy Maynard Salmon* (Philadelphia, 2001), 21.

[sic] of the beliefs ... of a particular community or society at a given time'.² Material culture scholars believe that past cultures and attitudes leave their traces beyond the written word and that physical objects can be 'read': that is, that 'objects are evidence, and material culture enables us to interpret the culture that produced them in ... ways that are unachievable through written records alone'.³ In this approach, a 1920s telephone, for example, is not just a household communication device, but can be 'read' as evidence both of early twentieth-century international networks of trade in the range of materials adopted in its manufacture, and of contemporary conceptions of the body and domesticity in the sweeping lines of its physical shape.⁴ Material culture scholars often use models of analysis that progress from the physical description of an object to deductions around the meanings of these material signs, to a final contextualisation using external source material – a methodology that will influence this discussion.

Lady Hannah Maxwell was born Hannah Anne Gardiner in Swatham, Lincolnshire, the daughter of Richard Gardiner (1723–81) and Anne Bromhead. Her father was a writer and an army officer: as a result of the final stint of his career in the military prompted by the outbreak of the Anglo-French War (1756–63), he published *An Account of the Expedition to the West Indies* in 1759, detailing his command of a company of marines.⁵ Hannah married Sir John Maxwell (1768–1844) in 1788 and had four children: Harriet (1789–1841), John (1791–1865), Mary (who died in infancy) and Elizabeth (1793–1822). Sir John and Lady Maxwell were a prominent Whig couple, conspicuous in the Tory city of Glasgow, and while Sir John canvassed in local elections (eventually serving as MP for Paisley from 1832 to 1834), Lady Maxwell was an active supporter in his campaigns. Hannah's son (and future 8th Baronet), John, was elected to represent Renfrewshire in 1818, going on to serve Lanarkshire after the Reform Bill of 1832, of which both father and son were fierce supporters.

Since its penultimate page contains obituaries to Lady Maxwell, her husband and her grandson (the future 9th Baronet, William Stirling Maxwell, 1818–78), the scrapbook investigated here was probably the latest in a series of five volumes created by Hannah Maxwell held by the National Trust for Scotland – the majority of its cuttings date its assembly from 1829 to 1841. The scrapbook is a bound volume, measuring when closed 31cm across by 49.3cm high, and is 6.1cm deep. Despite its smaller size in comparison with

² J. Prown, 'Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method', in (ed.) S. M. Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London, 1994), 133–8 (133).

³ J. D. Prown, 'The Truth of Material Culture', in (ed.) J. D. Prown and K. Haltman, *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (Michigan, 2000), 11–28 (20).

⁴ K. Haltman, 'Reaching Out to Touch Someone? Reflections on a 1923 Candlestick Telephone', in Prown and Haltman, *American Artifacts*, 71–92.

⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 92:1 (April 1822), 290. For a biography of Gardiner, see S. Handley, 'Gardiner, Richard (1723–1781)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

the four other books created by Lady Maxwell, the scrapbook is nevertheless a large album.

In common with many of its contemporaries, Hannah Maxwell's smallest scrapbook is part decorative art and part visual journal. The final lines of a poem written by Hannah's daughter Harriet (1789–1841) on the scrapbooks produced by her mother describe the dizzying array of characters, symbols and text found in this intricately crafted comment upon early nineteenth-century society:

High Church men, Dissenters, and poets, and kings,
Soldiers, sailors, and medals, with all sorts of things,
Then look at the volume, and may it have power,
To change a sad thought, or amuse for an hour.⁶

In its cumulative listing of subject matter, Harriet's poem gives an impression of the sensory overload experienced when looking through the album for the first time. The invitation to the reader to 'look at the volume' hints at the polite sociability that such albums were created to inspire. Rather than a private record (as may be expected of a personal album or diary today), such drawing-room scrapbooks acted as conversation pieces, visible accounts of their contemporary environment made to provide a stimulus for humour and debate. However, we might pick a polite quarrel with Harriet in an insistence that Hannah Maxwell's five scrapbooks do far more than 'amuse for an hour': they are a unique source of evidence concerning discourses, attitudes and contradictions running throughout the time of their production.

The pages of Hannah Maxwell's smallest scrapbook record multiple preoccupations, from reports of births, marriages and deaths among the peerage, to politically barbed lampoons and critiques of the latest fashions. Inside are pasted snippets of printed text from newspapers and periodicals, haute-couture figures cut from fashion plates,⁷ and monochrome engravings of noble, cultural and political personalities. Interspersed with these lie apparently unrelated symbols, often far different in scale from the human figures with which they share room on the page: representations of domestic pets, flowers, shells, still life, crests and the crowns of the peerage decorate blank spaces, most probably cut from sheets of ready-made scraps that were marketed to women album-makers in this period.

An analysis of the juxtapositions, selections and design on a single page

⁶ W. Fraser, *Memoirs of the Maxwells of Pollok* (Edinburgh, 1863), 426.

⁷ Fashion plates were illustrations (sometimes hand-coloured) depicting highly stylised men and women in the latest dress, used as advertising for fashion houses and inspiration for the dressmakers of polite society. From the eighteenth century to the twentieth, they featured in varying quality and colour in both fashion periodicals and more general publications (often imported from France, where higher quality plates were to be found) such as *Le Petit Courrier des Dames*, *Ackermann's Repository*, *La Belle Assemblée* and (in plates in Lady Maxwell's scrapbook), *The World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons*.

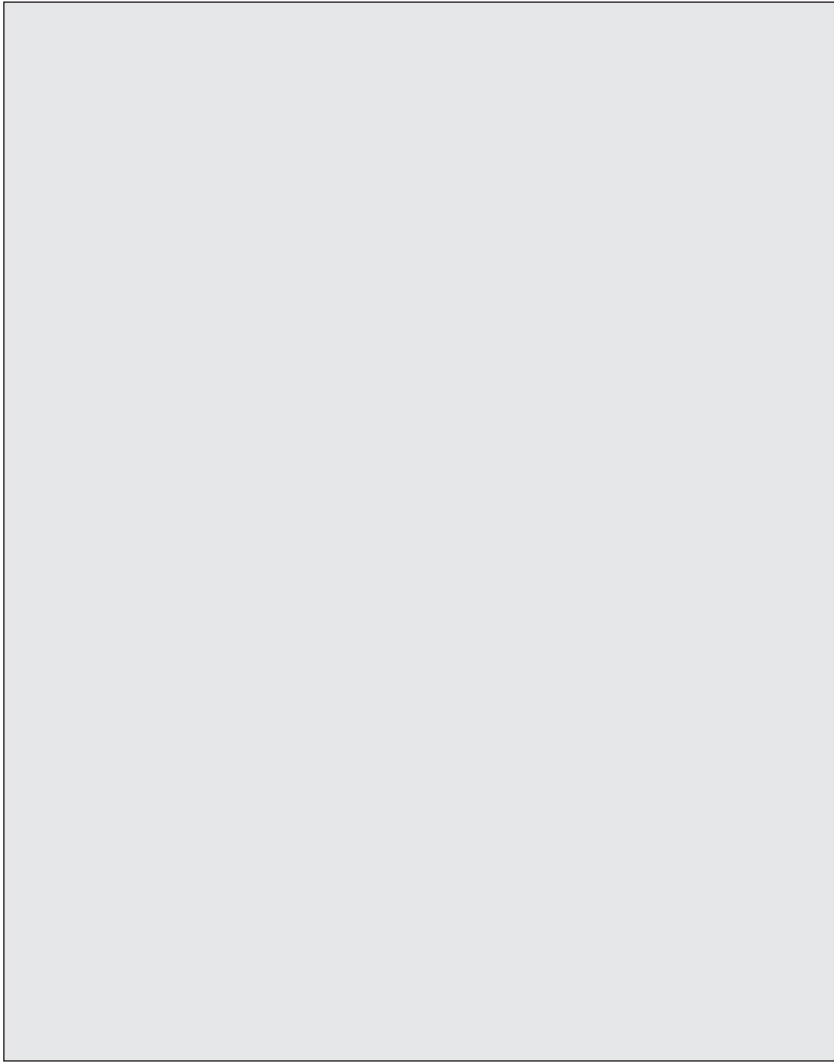


Plate 1 Selected page of the scrapbook of Lady Hannah Maxwell, *c.*1837, POL1/1/1/4
(© Maxwell Estate and National Trust for Scotland).

of Lady Maxwell's scrapbook takes up the remainder of this discussion, with a physical description of the page preceding discussion of the choices made in its assembly. Finally the page will be contextualised in the light of relevant contemporary debates – in this case, around competing ideas of femininity during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The selected page lies towards the centre of Hannah Maxwell's scrapbook (Plate 1). Although the subject matter of some pages relates directly to those adjacent to them, this side stands as a self-contained composition. It is edged by black and white bordering (also used as a 'frame' for individual cuttings) and is headed with a snippet reading 'Mrs Coutts' in ornate gothic type, onto which has been pasted (in newspaper type) the addendum of 'Lady Longpurse'. The top-left corner is taken up with a newspaper article assembled from five sections titled 'Biographical Sketch of Her Grace the Duchess of St Albans', adjacent to monochrome engravings of one female and three male figures. Pasted text names three of these four, whom Hannah Maxwell identifies as: the Duchess of St Albans, William Curtis (Baronet), and Lord Byron. A final male figure has no caption. An engraving of another female is pasted into the very centre of the page framed by representations of chickens and pigeons, with two lines of a poem attributed to 'Canning' positioned below. A print cutting is pasted to the right of this central figure, under which two women flank a well-dressed man with a dog, all cut from fashion plates. Two small sections of text are pasted below the feet of each female, while the bottom corners of the page are taken up with engravings of country scenes (one is identified as 'Leatherhead Village'). A humorous engraving lies in the centre of these two landscapes, depicting a dog and cat emerging from under a table, looking longingly at a plate of fish bones, competing for 'scraps', in what is perhaps a visual allusion to the nature of the entire volume.

Reading this description, a first-time viewer could be forgiven for perceiving the scrapbook as a nonsensical volume filled with unrelated ephemera and textual tittle-tattle. However, a closer examination of the page's juxtapositions inspires a very different reading. The page is held together through a series of symmetrical axes – figures and text are laid out upon vertical and horizontal planes, implying a preconceived design that guides the viewer towards a holistic reading. The two small engravings at the base of the page provide material and imaginative ballast to the composition in their evocation of an uncomplicated country life that sits in tension with themes of privilege and celebrity elsewhere. There is also an imaginative symmetry in the representation of four male and four female figures, the remaining likenesses being domestic or game animals – dogs and cats share uneasy company with game birds (in the shape of pigeons and chickens) in a dialectic of the hunting and the hunted.

The row of fashion plates in the lower half of the page draws the viewer along another horizontal axis, continued in the patterns of women's dresses, in their similarly styled bonnets and in their outlines (typical of the mid-1830s), in which a tiny waist sat between hooped skirts and wide gigot or leg-of-mutton sleeves, creating an exaggerated hourglass silhouette. The positioning

of a male figure between the two females suggests a certain sexual frisson, particularly since the gaze of only one of these women can be met. The viewer is invited to read the scene as one of courtship, in which Lady Maxwell chooses a representation of a confident yet approachable male (signified by open hand gestures and a chivalrous bow) pursued by two women. Margaret Beetham has theorised that the domination of fashion plates in women's periodicals of this period may mean that femininity was primarily interpreted in visible, material (rather than intellectual) ways.⁸ Hannah Maxwell continues this emphasis on physicality in the text that she has chosen to juxtapose with her two female figures. One cutting addresses the phenomenon of 'tight-lacing' through an anecdote on an Edinburgh milliner, mutilated by her corset, while the second is an equally depressing epigram:

RING – A ring is a circular link, put through the noses of swine to keep them in subjection, and often upon the finger of a lovely woman with the same view.

Such coy flirtation is implied to result in 'subjection', with the elaborately dressed young women having the societal status of 'swine' when their romantic ambitions are realised. Furthermore, by means of its appearance next to her fashion plate 'scene', Lady Maxwell links the cutting on the lethal consequences of wearing tight stays to that on feminine strategies to secure a husband (echoing medical debates of the time). Since women have game birds for company, the dog that jumps up to the man's outstretched hand further cements his superiority in this visual battle of the sexes. The trope of a pursued male and pursuing females suggested by the trio is turned upon its head in a closer (more material) reading.

Hannah Maxwell's representation of the two women who spatially and thematically dominate this page underlines the symbolic power of material juxtaposition and selection. The spatial focus of this page is Anne Louise Germaine de Staël, née Necker (1766–1817), daughter of Finance Minister to Louis XVI, Jacques Necker, and Paris salonnière Suzanne Curchod. A prominent female intellectual in her own right, de Staël wrote flowing historical narratives, vivid in detail and dependent upon the spiritual guidance of the female historian.⁹ Hannah Maxwell has identified de Staël by means of lines snipped from a poem, *New Morality*, by Tory statesman and Prime Minister George Canning (1770–1827), first published in his newspaper, *The Anti-Jacobin*, in 1798, hailing 'Preferment's golden Queen/Neckar's [*sic*] fair daughter, – Stael the epicene!'¹⁰ Hannah Maxwell's chosen label for de Staël (notably positioned at the dead centre of the page) is more than revealing.

⁸ M. Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800–1914* (London, 1996).

⁹ B. G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 19–36.

¹⁰ Canning published the antirevolutionary, anti-French and anti-Whig newspaper, *The*

Instead of adopting the ornamental printed title that conventionally appeared below such engravings (as she has christened ‘Lord Byron’, for example), Hannah Maxwell has deliberately placed Canning’s lines in order to express a less neutral judgement – one that provides an imaginative link to the page’s theme of banking (explored below) in its reference to Jacques Necker, and one that questions de Staël’s femininity in her description as an indeterminately gendered ‘epicene’.

The ‘Mrs Coutts’ to whom the heading of this page refers is Harriet Mellon (1777–1837), the second wife of the royal banker, Thomas Coutts (1735–1822), founder of the firm Coutts & Co. Before marrying Coutts in 1815, Harriet was a popular actress, the illegitimate daughter of a travelling player who rose to prominence as a result of roles on the regional theatre circuit and aristocratic patronage. From a popular London player of bit parts, her marriage to Coutts propelled Harriet to a very different sort of attention, which was intensified after her husband’s death in 1822. The banker left the entirety of his assets to Harriet (including a sizeable share in Coutts & Co.), a fact that did not escape newspaper gossip columnists and the satirical eye of caricaturists. Her 1827 marriage to William Aubrey de Vere Beauclerk, Ninth Duke of St Albans (1801–49) – a man 23 years her junior – made her the subject of further popular ridicule. This page has been assembled with obituaries and anecdotes published in the wake of Harriet Mellon’s death, dating it to 1837.

Harriet Mellon’s biography goes some way to explain the multiple aliases used on this page. However, Hannah Maxwell has rechristened Harriet Mellon once again: as ‘Lady Longpurse’, a character in the contemporary plays *A New Don Juan* (of which the pictured Lord Byron might well approve) and *My Wife! What Wife?*.¹¹ The juxtaposition of ‘Lady Longpurse’ with the more sedate title of ‘Mrs Coutts’ casts abrasive aspersions upon Harriet Mellon’s affluence and virtue. Similarly, in positioning the assertion that ‘the Duchess of St Albans is now nearly ready to start’ below Harriet Maxwell’s likeness, Hannah Maxwell makes a (somewhat cruel) parallel between the current (deceased) state of the Duchess and the activity implied in her portrait, which depicts her as the young and romantic Volante in *The Honeymoon*.¹² The modification of an image by a textual caption can radically alter the message of the purely visual sign, directing the viewer towards new associations.¹³ Patricia Anderson explores this approach in an early nineteenth-century context in her analysis of similar

Anti-Jacobin, from November 1797 to July 1798. *New Morality* is reproduced in C. Edmonds (ed.), *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* (London, 1890), 271–89.

¹¹ *My Wife! What Wife?* is a farce on *Othello* written by John Poole in 1829. *A New Don Juan* was written by an unknown author, but was performed at the Adelphi Theatre, London, in February 1828.

¹² The engraving reproduced in the scrapbook is by Charles Turner, taken from a c.1813 portrait of Harriet Mellon by Sir William Beechy. The play *The Honeymoon* was written by John Tobin in 1804.

¹³ R. Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London, 1977); J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972).

strategies used by *The Penny Magazine*, an improving publication produced by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.¹⁴ These rhetorical and visual methods are echoed in Hannah Maxwell's scrapbook, an example of the way in which the worlds of mass-produced print and drawing-room scrapbook collided.

The 'Biographical Sketch of the Duchess of St Albans', assembled on the page in five parts from newspaper accounts, further demonstrates the creative challenge to concepts of authorship that album-makers presented. With no context outside the volume itself to situate cuttings, the viewer is left at the mercy of the compiler in providing coherence. As Ellen Gruber Garvey insists, scrapbooks are defined by acts of choice and selection: removing material from its context in feminine acts of 'gleaning' of 'the small bits, the leftovers' in order to 'mark the path of one's own reading'.¹⁵ Hannah Maxwell's physical rearrangement of the life of the Duchess of St Albans is an assertion of consumer power over the conventions of nineteenth-century biography which demonstrates her ability to reappropriate media beyond its original context into a more personal composition.

Whereas Germaine de Staël and Harriet Mellon dominate the page, male personalities are also represented. The inclusion of Lord Byron is a thematic link between Harriet Mellon's world of the theatre (in his position on a Drury Lane subcommittee) and the literary salon culture of Germaine de Staël (whom Byron described as 'an extraordinary and able woman').¹⁶ The deceased Baronet William Curtis (popularly known as 'Billy Biscuit') is the second Tory (joining George Canning) to be referenced on the page of this Whig gentlewoman's scrapbook.¹⁷ Curtis joins Harriet Mellon's first husband Thomas Coutts as a financier, being a proprietor of the bankers Robarts, Curtis, Were, Hornyold, Berwick & Co.¹⁸ In contrast to dominant narratives of the day, male personalities on this page seem to be little more than visual commentary upon the status or trials of their female neighbours, appearing primarily as decoration in a reversal of traditional gender hierarchies in representation.

¹⁴ P. Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790–1860* (Oxford, 1991), 58. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was a London-based Whig group whose aim was to adapt scientific and literary scholarship for the consumption of a growing reading public.

¹⁵ E. Gruber Garvey, 'Scissoring and Scrapbooks: Nineteenth-Century Reading, Remaking, and Recirculating', in (ed.) L. Gitelman and G. B. Pingree, *New Media 1740–1915* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 207–27 (211).

¹⁶ S. Bordoni, 'Lord Byron and Germaine de Staël', <http://byron.nottingham.ac.uk/resources/digital/introductory/ByronandStael.htm>.

¹⁷ William Curtis inherited his father's sea-biscuit company in 1771, and profited greatly from demand during the war against the French (1793–1815).

¹⁸ In a historical irony, Robarts, Curtis, Were, Hornyold, Berwick & Co. was taken over by Coutts & Co. in 1914.

Lady Maxwell asserts the significance of the juxtapositions that she creates and contains the tensions that they generate through an equally material method. This page of her scrapbook is outlined with a narrow paper border that runs continuously around its edge, and ‘underscores’ and ‘frames’ certain elements. The border resembles a thick cord, with interchanging ‘strands’ of black and white, and may have been cut from a long section, since the only signs of a break in its run appear where Lady Maxwell has been forced to change its direction at the corner of an image or page. The border’s survival and relative completeness imply that it has been pasted with considerable care – it is perfectly flush to the outer edges of the page – inferring the border’s significance to Lady Maxwell’s overall composition.

This page is not alone in its use of a border as every page makes use of this decorative and symbolic device. Borders were manufactured specifically for the ‘scrap’ market and were available to purchase in more colourful and elaborate designs as the nineteenth century progressed. Imposing taxonomies upon their interior, they can be read as two-dimensional picture frames, or as museum display cases, implying that Hannah Maxwell theorised the contents of her scrapbook in terms of a collection. As Susan Stewart states, a collection is defined by boundaries, by physical or imaginative borders that separate the selected from the rejected.¹⁹ In a genre of craft that could be considered ephemeral (on account of its coding as feminine and in its use of ‘non-literary’ sources), borders insist upon the significance of Hannah Maxwell’s choices, in conceptual tension with the perceived triviality of ‘scraps’.

In its portrayals of women, this page of Hannah Maxwell’s scrapbook exposes very clear agendas surrounding the control of female bodies and minds. The final part of this analysis will focus upon one of several ways in which this anxiety is carried out on this particular page: in the selection of its two ‘celebrity’ female subjects. In a material culture framework, it will constitute the final stage of analysis in which the artefact is ultimately interpreted in the light of external, secondary research in order to determine its significance in wider cultural systems.

Scholarship on the culture and society of the early nineteenth century describes an era dominated by acts of performance. While theatre was booming, its methods and values spread to the manner in which people experienced state power, from the dapper uniforms of the military to dramatic political debates and royal fêtes and parades.²⁰ Hannah Maxwell’s scrapbook reveals performances surrounding ideas of womanhood to be equally crucial to notions of identity and that wresting control over expressions of femininity was a major cultural concern. Indeed, Hannah Maxwell’s scrapbook can be seen as one of these cultural performances: early nineteenth-century album-making has been interpreted as a debate over concepts of femininity, providing

¹⁹ S. Stewart, ‘Objects of Desire’, in Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 254–7 (256).

²⁰ G. Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society, 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1995).

a semipublic space in which ideas of gendered behaviour could be rehearsed and interrogated.²¹

Notorious for her rejection of codes of passive and submissive womanhood, author and intellectual Germaine de Staël is the spatial focus of the page. In her profession as an actress, an eventual major shareholder in Coutts & Co. and as Duchess of St Albans, Harriet Mellon is another prominent Regency female who lived life outside gendered norms and in the public gaze. Whereas the appearance of Harriet Mellon follows upon media portrayals in the months following her death in August 1837, and the portrait of de Staël can be traced to its presence in a biographical publication of 1836, the very deliberate inclusion (and juxtaposition) of these women in a relatively small physical space tells of more than the random opportunities presented by the print media. An illegitimate English actress and a high-born Swiss intellectual had a surprising amount in common, especially in terms of their power to disrupt contemporary tropes of female subservience.

As discussed above, the selection of George Canning's description of Germaine de Staël as an 'epicene' conveys a stark gendered and moral judgement. Hannah Maxwell has made further comment upon de Staël's gender identity in the decision to interfere directly with her printed likeness. On closer inspection of the engraving, it is clear that a section from the neck of another figure has been pasted onto de Staël, adding a choker and necklace that is not present in its source.²² In her decision to immortalise de Staël in this modified form, Hannah Maxwell provides a visual rebuff to Canning's verbal blows in a demonstration of de Staël's womanhood (a femininity which is expressed through a stylistic sign rather than any 'natural' characteristic).²³ Alternatively, Hannah Maxwell exaggerates the symbols of genteel femininity in order to draw an even sharper contrast between de Staël's 'un-feminine' behaviour and the more subservient role that contemporary commentators wished her to play. Whether it is meant in mockery or in defiance, this adornment can be read as an act of literal *and* metaphorical dressing up: a re-enactment of the processes that construct femininity by means of material symbols, revealing gendered

²¹ P. di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (London, 2007), 117.

²² The engraving chosen by Hannah Maxwell is by E. Scrivens, copied from a portrait by François Gérard. The scrapbook's engraving of de Staël may have been taken from Thomas Arthur Malkin's *Gallery of Portraits with Memoirs: Volume VI* (London, 1836), one in a series of collected biographies produced by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.

²³ In a more political reading, the pasting of the necklace separates de Staël's original 'head' from the body of the engraving, in a (probably unconscious) mirror of the executions that she acted against in her life, but was popularly believed to endorse. Despite her initial sympathy with the aims of the French Revolution, de Staël was horrified at the carnage during the Terror, acting to save many of her noble friends from execution, eventually fleeing to Switzerland from her adopted nation of France.

identities as neither fixed nor essential but as a series of calculated cultural performances.

While *New Morality* can be dismissed as an anti-French, anti-Whig rant, its unflattering view of de Staël as an ‘epicene’ was hardly confined to *The Anti-Jacobin*. As Silvia Bordoni observes, de Staël was not well received in London on her first visit in 1793, not only on account of her nationality during a time of war with France, but also following the abandonment of her husband in favour of a lover.²⁴ Along with her refusal to keep a demure feminine silence and her wonderment at what she saw as the unnecessarily submissive position of women in English public life, de Staël’s sexuality shocked an ‘increasingly domestic and conservative English society’. Even the libertine, Lord Byron, her admirer and friend, could not resist swipes at her appearance and private life.²⁵ Germaine de Staël’s failure to act out accepted performances of femininity rendered a considerable and confusing threat to contemporary gender hierarchies.

Harriet Mellon also enjoyed considerable celebrity in the early nineteenth century, and although she may have played the patriarchal system rather than rebelling against it, the challenges that she posed to mores of accepted genteel behaviour met remarkably similar responses to those levelled at de Staël. Unlike other women of comparable backgrounds, actresses in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries enjoyed considerable independence, often controlling their own incomes and using marriage in order to cement their careers in alliances with established theatrical families.²⁶ Harriet Mellon’s marriage to an ageing and ailing Thomas Coutts increased her wealth and influence considerably, and although this independent affluence was a source of popular gossip, later media portrayals of her courtship by and marriage to William Beauclerk took a decidedly nasty (and extremely gendered) turn. Contemporary caricatures of an ageing, corpulent Harriet with a simpering Beauclerk ridicule her age and portray her as an indulgent yet strict mother. While artist William Henry Heath frequently portrayed Harriet Mellon next to the money bags through which she was defined in the popular imagination, he also drew her with a very distinct moustache: a device echoed in another caricature by ‘A Sharpshooter’, *Hugeous Duchess*, picturing Harriet as a male in ‘drag’. It seems that Harriet, too, was perceived as an epicene: her financial independence and assertion are so unfeminine as to affect a material transformation.²⁷ The financial and social power of Harriet Mellon and the intellectual assertiveness of Germaine de Staël masculinise them in the public

²⁴ Germaine de Staël’s first marriage was to the Swedish ambassador to France, Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein (1749–1802). However, she later fled to London to join her lover, Louis de Narbonne (1755–1813), a French nobleman, soldier and diplomat, and the father of her two children.

²⁵ Bordoni, ‘Lord Byron and Germaine de Staël’.

²⁶ H. E. M. Brooks, ‘Negotiating Marriage and Professional Autonomy in the Careers of Eighteenth-Century Actresses’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 35:2 (2011), 39–75.

²⁷ Caricatures of Harriet Mellon before her marriage to William Beauclerk can be found

eye, making them creatures of indeterminate gender that were both freakish and threatening to accepted narratives of social stability.

As a member of the aristocracy, Hannah Maxwell also enjoyed a level of agency beyond her female contemporaries in the middle and working classes.²⁸ In common with many female peers, Hannah was able to retain control of her inherited wealth, leaving £3,500 in family legacies to her daughter Harriet in November 1839.²⁹ As the wife and mother of Whig members of parliament, Hannah was a recognised figure in her local community, appearing in public on behalf of her husband and son, and engaging in political canvassing.³⁰ Kimberly Crouch recognises an overlap in the public nature of the lives lived by actresses and titled women, who often acted as patrons to young actresses with whom they shared the social sphere of the theatre.³¹ While Hannah Maxwell may not have entirely approved of ‘Lady Longpurse’,³² her interest in the former actress is extremely telling as a link between theatrical and aristocratic worlds – in which lives were ‘played out’ before the public, whether that was on a stage, in the press, or in political performances in support of parliamentary ambitions.

In its discussion of an artefact created in a domestic environment, this analysis hopes to expand ways of thinking about the potential, nature and value of ‘non-conventional’ archives. That detailed investigations into historical contexts and time spent really *looking* at archival holdings lead to a greater understanding of objects’ significance may seem obvious – extensive background research may be the aim of the archivist, but is beyond the financial and temporal resources of most cataloguers. However, a material culture approach can offer an alternative method of *perception* in its openness to the presence of historical evidence beyond (but not excluding) the linguistic

in the H Beard Print Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, also available at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk>.

²⁸ S. Steinbach, *Women in England 1760–1914: A Social History* (London, 2004), 78–89.

²⁹ Glasgow City Archives, T-PM116/371, Correspondence of Hannah Maxwell, November 1839.

³⁰ According to her private diary, Hannah Maxwell went to Paisley on 11 August 1832 ‘to canvass for S[i]r John’ (Glasgow City Archives, T-PM116/471/5, Diary of Hannah Maxwell, 1832. Lady Maxwell also offered statements of thanks to Sir John Maxwell’s political supporters, including the Pollokshaws Royal Arch Lodge of Freemasons, whom she engaged as a result of election campaigns in May 1831 (Fraser, *Memoirs of the Maxwells*, 425).

³¹ K. Crouch, ‘The Public Life of Actresses: Prostitutes or Ladies?’, in (ed.) H. Barker and E. Chalus, *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (Harlow, 1997), 58–78.

³² This is especially apparent on a previous page of the scrapbook in which a figure designated as the ‘Duke of St Albans’ is captioned with ‘Some undone widow sits upon mine arm, And takes away the use on’t’. Tellingly, this text is taken from the 1625 Renaissance drama *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* by Phillip Massinger.

sign. It is a method of viewing traces of the past that can revisit the imaginative links that were involved in an artefact's creation, keeping evidence alive and relevant into the future through the viewer's own interpretation: whether the object is a letter, a digital file on a computer, or a nineteenth-century scrap album made, ostensibly, 'to amuse for an hour'.