The End of a Friendship

By Merrowyn Deacon

 When Hester Thrale was married to Henry Thrale, a wealthy brewer, whose brewery was in the Borough of Southwark, they delighted in the company of Samuel Johnson. The Thrales owned a spacious house at Streatham, where Johnson was welcome to stay when they were in residence. He often made use of their hospitality in the summer months, after he had returned from his travels to Lichfield (staying with Lucy Porter, his stepdaughter), and from Ashbourne, where his friend Dr. Taylor was living.

 Henry Thrale suffered a stroke and thereafter it was obviously difficult for Johnson to spend time with the family, but he wrote often to Hester Thrale offering advice and support. Hester still found time to send him and the residents at Bolt Court various presents, and she wrote to him when she had time. After Thrale’s death, following more seizures, Johnson helped Hester with the sale of the brewery, and with sorting out the affairs of her daughters. With the brewery finally sold to “David Barclay, the rich Quaker”, (Thraliana vol. 1 p. 494), Hester felt that the “golden Millstone”, the brewery, had been lifted from her neck and she could look forward to better days.

 That this was not to be, was because of a number of factors, among them being various lawsuits against Hester and the fact that the executors of Thrale’s will kept her in ignorance of the exact amount of money she was entitled to receive, so that she was looking to economise in any way she could. She decided to go to Bath and let the big house at Streatham. About this time also, with Johnson’s health declining and his letters to her becoming more querulous, and the added complication of the attraction between her and her daughter’s music teacher, Gabriel Piozzi, she probably had too many problems in London, so to move away from it all would have appealed greatly.

 It is hard to understand why the fact that Hester Thrale and Gabriel Piozzi fell in love and wanted to get married, caused such a furore in society at the time. The attitude towards music and musicians in England had undergone a huge shift from earlier times to the eighteenth century. Music was considered unmanly, so no males engaged in music making although it was fine to dance. Young ladies were expected to be able to play the harp or the spinet and to sing in order to get a husband, but no one took it up professionally and remained in society, with a few exceptions such as Dr. Burney. Also the English attitude toward foreigners was usually disapproving. One wonders why they bothered to do the Grand Tour, as they usually came back secure in the belief that everything was much superior in England. Since Piozzi was both Italian and a musician, he wasn’t suitable husband material. After being the butt of various cartoons and scurrilous stories in the newspapers, along with the continued opposition of her daughters to the relationship, Hester reluctantly broke up with Piozzi. He went back to Italy and Hester went to Bath.

 Fast forward from September 1781 to July 1784. Hester Thrale’s health had so seriously declined during this time, because of the continued separation from Piozzi, that her daughters became alarmed, finally relented, and consented to her sending for him. He arrived in England and they were able to dine together privately in London. When Johnson heard of this, first from Queeney Thrale on July 1, 1784, and then from Hester herself in a letter which he received the next day (also included was a circular letter from Hester to the trustees), he wrote the famous “rough letter” supposedly in a fit of rage and pique. The phrases “ignominiously married” and “If you have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness”, would seem a bit exaggerated. Hester’s reply is measured, stating that Piozzi is a gentleman whose birth and status is certainly no lower than Thrale’s. If Johnson cannot esteem her second husband, she cannot continue their friendship.

 Of course Johnson immediately regretted his harsh words, but to no avail. Thraliana does not even mention his letter and it would seem that Hester Thrale was so excited to finally be with the man she loved, that she was content to let her friendship with Johnson go. Having looked after one sick husband and been sympathetic for a long time to Johnson’s ailments, it was time for Hester Thrale as Hester Piozzi to travel to Italy and have some fun.