

Writing like a Lady in *Humphry Clinker**

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I

Tobias George Smollett died with the publication of his last novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771).¹ The novel is an epistolary travel novel, in which Smollett's description of the resorts "is not synthesized in the dry terms of a historian or geographer but is dramatized in the lives of the imaginary travelers."² He explored the capacity of the epistolary novel for humour in this novel. Smollett's rare gift of humour exists not only in describing episodes but in handling styles of letters, so as to endow Winifred Jenkins, Tabitha Bramble, and Lydia Melford, as well as Jery Melford, with some degree of acceptable realism.³ Smollett's novels are famous for their realism; that is to say, he tries to show the reality of the eighteenth century through his senses.⁴

In *Humphry Clinker*, the party of Matthew Bramble's family goes on a adventurous tour from Wales to Bath, London, Edinburgh, and back to Wales. They all gossip about each other and describe their own travelling adventures throughout the sections in England and Scotland, in their letters. We can enjoy the Welsh squire's lively family letters, posted to various persons in England and Wales. The letters serve to give different versions of the same visit. "Bath to Matthew is unsanitary and unsavoury; to Lydia and Jery, quite pleasant."⁵ It is possible to sift out just enough distinctive traits in the language of each major letter-writer to make a case that each has his or her own style.

Among the correspondents in the novel, two young people, Jery and Lydia Melford, Matthew's sister's children, accompany him to Bath. Lydia is not one of the main characters who narrate the proceeding of the story, but she is essential in qualifying and dramatizing the story to a certain extent.

Through Lydia's letters, we will see Lydia's writing style and how Smollett

pretends to write a letter in young female manner in the eighteenth century. For the writer, the world is full of other people's words which he must get used to and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. We assume that Smollett picked up and investigated young ladies' letters in order to be able to represent the real world in his novel.

Smollett uses other characters' views of one character's personality so that he can add objectivity to the novel. Lydia's brother Jerry describes her personality: "I found her a fine, tall girl, of seventeen, with an agreeable person; but remarkably simple, and quite ignorant of the world" (8).⁶ He and his uncle take her on the tour to protect her from her boyfriend Wilson's advances. Matthew also describes his niece's disposition and accomplishment in more detail:

She is a poor good-natured simpleton, as soft as butter, and as easily melted--not that she's a fool--the girl's parts are not despicable, and her education has not been neglected; that is to say, she can write and spell, and speak French, and play upon the harpsichord; then she dances finely, has a good figure, and is very well inclined; but, she's deficient in spirit, and so susceptible--and so tender forsooth!--truly, she has got a languishing eye, and reads romances--Then petulance and self-conceit; proud as a German count, and as hot and hasty as a Welch mountaineer. (12)

Here we notice that she is educated and ready enough to enter the fashionable world. She socially belongs to the polite world. On the whole, her letters show her extreme delicacy and sensitivity. For example, she pleads to Letty Willis for some advice about Wilson:

O, my dear Letty! what shall I say about poor Mr. Wilson? I have promised to break off all correspondence, and, if possible, to forget him: but, alas! I begin to perceive that will not be in my power. (10)

Here she cries about her difficult situation that she is torn between her family and her boyfriend, like a girl of our own age. She cries to Letty that she "would rather suffer a thousand deaths than live the cause of dissension in the family" (309). The girl is too young and weak to be so arrogant and vulgar in everything as her aunt Tabitha Bramble and Tabitha's maid Win Jenkins. There is a clear line between the genteel (Lydia) and the ungentle (Tabitha and Win) in their traits and language.⁷

II

Lydia writes only to Miss Laetitia Willis and to Mrs. Jermyn, at Gloucester, about her sufferings and pleasures. Letty is her confidante, and Mrs. Jermyn is her governess. Lydia sometimes puts several salutations such as "MY DEAR LETTY," "MY DEAR, DEAR LETTY" and "MY DEAREST LETTY" which avoids monotony and adds decoration.

To compare her with Tabitha and Win socially, Lydia belongs to polite society, and writes letters in elegant form. This, in itself, shows some characteristics of her style. She likes the frequent use of such attributive adjectives as "poor," "worthy," and "kind." When Lydia writes her first letter to Mrs. Jermyn, she pleads with her governess to understand her present situation:

Having no mother of my own, I hope you will give me leave to disburthen my *poor* hear to you, who have always acted the part of a *kind* parent to me, ever since I was put under your care.--Indeed, and indeed, my *worthy* governess may believe me. . . . (9) (emphasis mine)

The italicized cadjectives shows her polite use of words in her petition. When Lydia writes her first letter to Letty, she tells about her sad parting with her:

My *dear* companion and bed-fellow, it is a grievous addition to my other misfortunes, that I am deprived of your *agreeable* company and *cover*sation, at a time when I need so much the comfort of your *good* humour and *good* sense. . . . (10) (emphasis mine)

Lydia and Letty are friends at boarding-school in Gloucester, where they have been educated before entering the fashionable world. Concerning her friend's absence, Lydia mentions "I doubt not but on my side it will daily increase and improve, as I gain experience, and learn to know the value of a true friend" (10).

In her petition, she uses such modest phrase as "your poor Lydia Melford" (336). The adjective "your" suggests submission and devotion. "My dear Mrs. Jermyn! my ever honoured governess! let me conjure you by that fondness which once distinguished your favourite Liddy!" (337). They correspond in letters of elegant or high friendship,⁸ which are very courtly and genteel.

Lydia makes frequent use of such prayer-like expressions as "if God will give me grace" when she tries to say something modestly. She appreciates her

governess's care in her education:

I never harboured a thought that was otherwise than virtuous; and, *if God will give me grace*, I shall never behave so as to cast a reflection on the care you have taken in my education. (9) (emphasis mine)

Here her religious expression seems to have no meaning and is to mere exaggeration. She uses other supernatural divine authorities such as "Providence" and "Fortune." The poor girl has no means nor permission to keep company with her boyfriend Wilson. She concludes crying:

I beseech him [Wilson] not to write to me, nor attempt to see me for some time; for, considering the resentment and passionate temper of my brother Jerry, such an attempt might be attended with consequences which would make us all miserable for life--let us trust to time and the chapter of accidents; or rather to *that Providence which will not fail, sooner or later, to reward those that walk in the path of honour and virtue.*⁹ (11) (emphasis mine)

We have other examples:

Dear Letty! you see how Fortune takes pleasure in persecuting your poor friend. (26)
but now, thank God, they are happily reconciled (91)
Nature intended me for the busy world (308)

As for topics in Lydia's letters, she often addresses womanlike or girlish ones. Smollett intentionally puts some gender difference in content.¹⁰ Lydia quotes her aunt's speech about the content of young girls' conversation: "young girls are not admitted, inasmuch as the conversation turns upon politics, scandal, philosophy, and other subjects above our capacity" (40). Such subjects as politics and philosophy were above girls' understanding, and it follows that those subjects are not to be seen in girls' passages.

Lydia and Letty sent their presents to each other. Lydia writes about it:

"Your kind present of *the garnet bracelets*, I shall keep as carefully as I preserve my own life; and I beg you will accept, in return, of *my heart-housewife, with the tortoise-shell memorandum-book*, as a trifling pledge of my unalterable affection" (38-39). (emphasis mine)

Here "garnet bracelet" and "heart-housewife"¹¹ are girls' accessories. When she enters Bath, surprised and pleased, she describes its tremendously prosperous fashion:

Bath is to me a new world--All is gayety, good-humour, and diversion. The eye is continually entertained with *the splendour of dress and equipage*; and the ear with *the sound of coaches, chaises, chairs, and*

other carriages. (39) (emphasis mine)

Her eyes and ears are attracted and enchanted; she is only given in to the prosperity of Bath. Further, she describes the ladies' manner in the King's Bath, a huge cistern, at the resort, in detail: "The ladies wear *jackets and petticoats of brown linen*, with *chip hats*, in which they fix their *handkerchiefs* to wipe the sweat from their faces." (39) (emphasis mine) The girl watches the people of high society, and is fluttering over the fashionable world.

Lydia's topics and expressions seem to be influenced by *sentimental movement*¹² popular in the eighteenth century. The young lady writes as if she were a heroine of a *sentimental comedy*, the features of which Smollett deliberately puts into Lydia's letters. The young girls and ladies gave themselves over to the then-current craze. Lydia mentions that young girls may go to "the bookseller shops, which are charming places of resort; where we read novels, plays, pamphlets, and newspapers" (40). In these circumstances, they grew up under the influence of sentimental literature.

In Lydia's letters we find some words suitable for young girls in the eighteenth century: "tenderness," "love," "weakness," "romantic," "sensitivity," "charming," and "melancholy." These words perhaps appear frequently in sentimental literature, emphasizing the importance of the individual's emotional state and benevolence to the weak. The dreaming girl praises the splendour of Bath: "This is a charming romantic place" (27).¹³

his mother loves me with all the *tenderness* of a parent (335)
the country being exceedingly *romantic*, suits my turn and inclinations
(258) Love and friendship are, without doubt, *charming* passions (38)
in a *charming* moonlight evening (92)
truly, her *weaknesses* are such as cannot be concealed (308)
We complain of advantages which the men take of our youth, inexperience,
sensitivity, and all that (259)
I beg in to be visited by strange fancies, and to have some *melancholy*
doubts. (58) (emphasis mine)

Lydia discloses her impossible love with Wilson and asks for Letty's advice and help for that pathetic situation. She frequently calls herself "a poor creature of weak nerves." Such an appellation shows that she behaves like a heroine of a sentimental comedy. She recollects a variety of experiences throughout the journey:

I am heartily tired of this itinerant way of life--I am quite dizzy with

a perpetual succession of objects--Besides it is impossible to travel such a length of way, without being exposed to inconveniences, dangers, and disagreeable accidents, which prove grievous to a *poor creature of weak nerves* like me. . . . (307-08) (emphasis mine)

We have other examples:

to travel of such a lengthy way . . . which prove very grievous to a *poor creature of weak nerves* like me (308)

You will easily conceive how embarrassing this situation must be a *young inexperienced creature* like me, of weak nerves and strong apprehensions (336)

I am such a *faint-hearted timorous creature*! (309) (emphasis mine)

The main purpose of sentimental writings is to appeal to human emotion. The sentimental girl sprinkles her passages with excessively emotive phrases. Toward the end of the tour, Lydia comes across her unforgettable boyfriend Wilson after a long separation. She lets Letty know her impressions and reflections excitedly:

O Letty, what shall I do?--where shall I turn for advice and consolation?--shall I implore the protection of my uncle, who has been always kind and compassionate.--This must be my last resource.--I dread the thoughts of making him uneasy; and would rather suffer a thousand deaths than live the cause of dissention in the family.--I cannot perceive the meaning of Wilson's coming hither:--perhaps, he was in quest of us, in order to disclose his real name and situation:--but wherefore pass without staying to make the least inquiry?--My dear Willis, I am lost in conjecture.--I have not closed an eye since I saw him.--All night long have I been tossed about from one imagination to another.--The reflection finds no resting place.--I have prayed, and sighed, and wept plentifully.--If this terrible suspense continues much longer, I shall have another fit of illness, and then the whole family will be in confusion.--If it was consistent with the wise purposes of Providence, would I were in my grave.--But it is my duty to be resigned.--My dearest Letty, excuse my weakness--excuse these blots--my tears fall so fast that I cannot keep the paper dry--yet I ought to consider that I have as yet no cause to despair--but I am such a faint-hearted timorous creature! (309) (emphasis mine)

This passage begins with the interjection and address "O, Letty" which forcefully appeals to her friend's feelings. The opening is soon followed by the repetition of such questions as "what shall I . . . where shall I . . . shall I . . . ?", which mimics the swell of her strong emotions.

The poor girl is tortured between her love for her Wilson and her love for her family. She utters "I . . . would rather suffer a thousand deaths than live." The number "thousand" as *adjective* usually makes up hyperbolic

phrases in sentimental writings. She often uses phrases of this kind:

after a thousand assiduities, perceiving I made but a cold return to his addresses (134)
It is a thousand pities he should ever be troubled with that ugly distemper. (40)

The emotional girl expertly puts some addresses into the passage at regular intervals according to the degree of her desire to call attention to them:

"O, Letty," "My dear Willis," and "My dearest Letty." These frequent addresses usually occur with exclamation points: "O my dear Willis!" (58), "My dear Mrs. Jermy!" (337), and "Dear Letty!" (258), further accentuating them.

She decorates the passage with such exaggerations as "I have not closed an eye since I saw him," and "my tears fall so fast that I cannot keep the paper dry," which Smollett borrows from sentimental writings. We have other examples:

nor did I once close my eyes for three nights running (9)
Such a prodigious forests of masts, for miles together, that you would think all the ships in the universe were here assembled. (92)
as if he would have penetrated into the utmost recess of my heart (309)

Moreover she uses emotive grammar: inversion, rhetorical question, and polysyndeton.¹⁴ The first instance is "All night long have I been tossed about from one imagination to another." The second is "wherefore pass without staying to make the least inquiry?", and the last is "I have prayed, and sighed, and wept plentifully.", in which each verb sounds impressive enough to show her distress. Those instances are skillfully studded in the passage.

We easily notice Lydia's favorite sentence construction such as "he always eyed me so earnestly, that I began to be very uneasy" (25). She often uses the *so-that* construction, which can be called her main sentence construction. The young girl confesses her love of Wilson to her governess:

he behaved so modest and respectful, and seemed to be so melancholy and timorous, that I could not find in my heart to do any thing that should make him miserable and desperate. (9) (emphasis mine)

Further, it is interesting and surprising to see her successive use of the adverb "so." She exaggerates her fondness for her uncle: "he is the best-tempered man upon earth; so gentle, so generous, so charitable, that every body loves him" (40).

The adverb "so" is called "feminine so,"¹⁵ often seen or heard in women's

speech. So repetitious is Lydia's use of "so" that we feel tired of seeing it. We have other examples:

a pretty little gentleman, so sweet, so fine, so civil, and polite, that in our country he might pass for the prince of Wales (39)
you see three stupendous bridges . . . so vast, so stately, so elegant, that they seem to be the work of the giants (91)

The adverb "so" is sometimes used to give more force than any other intensive. When Lydia's coach was overturned, the fate of Brumble's family went in the different direction. Her Wilson turned out to be an heir of people of fashion. She exclaims to Letty, "Since my last, the aspect of affairs is *totally* changed!--and so changed!" (334). (emphasis mine)

Other instances of the emotional use of Lydia's language, is the absolute superlative such as "the warmest returns of gratitude and affection on my part" (336). This superlative does not actually compare several things, but conveys the utmost degree. She tells Letty about Wilson's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dennison: "Mr. Dennison, one of the worthiest men living; and his lady is a perfect saint upon earth" (335). We have other examples:

there you see the *highest* quality, and *lowest* trades folks (39)
St. Paul's appears with the *most astonishing* pre-eminence. (91)
We must accordingly to Lough-Lomond, one of the *most enchanting* spots in the whole world. (258) (emphasis mine)

At times Lydia exhibits uncontrolled emotion and sometimes utters oaths. There are a variety of oaths in other characters' (especially male ones') passages, but only a few varieties of them in her passages. Regarding the sex difference in the use of swearing, Jennifer Coates says "The belief that women's language is more polite, more refined--in a word, more ladylike--is very widespread and has been current for many centuries."¹⁶ We assume that Smollett follows this belief because Lydia belongs to the fashionable world, and naturally has few instances of swearing. When Lydia found Wilson after a long period, and writes to Letty about it with some excitement: "a person passed a-horse back, whom (*gracious Heaven!*) I instantly discovered to be Wilson!" (308). (emphasis mine) We have other examples:

when the man, advancing to me, said, in a whisper--*O gracious!* what d'ye think he said? (25)
O heaven! is it possible that such happiness is reserved for. . . . (310)
O Letty!--O gracious heaven! how my heart palpitates (335)
Good God! did he really appear? (309) (emphasis mine)

Thus we have explored Lydia Melford's language and writing style. We find that Smollett is a perceptive surveyor of woman's language and skillfully imitates the writing style of eighteenth century ladies. His ability to adeptly portray the eighteenth century English world, enhances the richness of the novel. This is skill brought Smollett success for this novel.

Notes

- * My special thanks are due to Jenna M. Purses at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's College for reading the draft and making a number of helpful suggestions.
- 1. George M. Kahar1 says, in his *Tobias Smollett Traveler-Novelist* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1945), 121: "During the course of his last six unsettled years in London and Bath, and his travels in England, Scotland, and eventually Italy, Smollett wrote *Humphry Clinker*, which was published June 18, 1771."
- 2. Kahar1, 128.
- 3. Lewis M. Knapp, Introd., *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* by Tobias Smollett (1966; rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), xiv.
- 4. Knapp says "Surely the most comprehensive and enduring excellence of *Humphry Clinker* is its realism, its truth to life.", xv.
- 5. Roger P. McCutcheon, *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (1950; rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958), 62.
- 6. The edition used throughout is Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. Lewis M. Knapp (1966; rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984). Hereafter the page number is cited parenthetically.
- 7. The linguistic difference between Tabitha and Win, and the other characters, is that the old women use Malapropism, that is, they mangle the conventions of correct usage, grammar, and spelling. This extraordinary verbal distortion is one of Smollett's comic devices.
- 8. Carey McIntosh defines "high friendship" as, in his *Common and Courtly Language* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1986), 70: "The correspondence between noble or noble-minded friends."
- 9. The word "Providence" is "applied to the Deity as exercising prescient and beneficent power and direction." (*The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* Providence 4) *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989).
- 10. Jennifer Coates says, in her *Women, Men and Language*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1993), 115: "However, the fact that topics such as sport, politics and cars are seen as 'serious' while topics such as child-reading and personal relationships are labelled 'trivial' is simply a reflection of social values which define what men do as important, and conversely what women do as less important."

11. Housewife: A pocket-case for needles, pins, thread, scissors, etc. (*OED* *housewife* 3) The *OED* also notes the word in this sense dates from 1749.
12. The *OED* defines "sentimental" as "Of literary compositions (occas[ionally] of music or other art): Appealing to sentiment; expressive of the tender emotions, espec[ially] those of love" (*sentimental* 3). Brian Vickers explains "sentimental movement," in his *Introd., The Man of Feeling*, by Henry Mackenzie (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), ix: "The most important factor basic to this movement is the concept of the individual's emotional state. It postulated, and so encouraged, an ideal sensitivity to--and spontaneous display of--virtuous feelings, especially those of pity, sympathy, benevolence, of the open heart as opposed to the prudent mind." Ernest Bernbaum mentions, about "sentimental comedy," in his *The Drama of Sensibility*, Vol. III of *Harvard Studies in English* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958), 95: "[the writers of sentimental comedy] made these characters utter virtuous sentiments that uplifted the hearts of their audiences with admiration, and they placed them in emotional situations that evoked the tribute of tears." Lydia's choice of topics and expressions consistently is based on the concept.
13. Polysyndeton: "A figure consisting in the use of several conjunctions in close succession; usually, the repetition of the same conjunction (as *and*, or, *nor*) to connect a number of coordinate words or clauses." (*OED*)
14. C. Stoffel discusses "so," in his *Intensives and Down-toners* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1901), 101: "I suspect that it is especially to the fair sex that we owe the strongly intensive sense of *so*, which we are discussing. Ladies are notoriously fond of hyperbole. . . ."
15. Coates, 20-21.
16. Romantic: "Of places: Redolent or suggestive of romance; appealing to the imagination and feelings." (*OED* *romantic* 5 b). The *OED* notes the word in this sense dates from 1705.