“Knight Errant of the Distressed”

Horace Walpole and Philanthropy in Eighteenth-Century London
REVIEWSWING HORACE WALPOLE’S LETTERS TO GEORGE MONTAGU, published posthumously in 1818, William Hazlitt pulled no punches over Walpole’s reputation for parsimony. Hazlitt felt that Walpole had treated scurvily his protégés, the designer Richard Bentley and the painter Johann Heinrich Müntz, as well as the prodigy Thomas Chatterton (fig. 1), who had applied to Walpole for patronage and been refused. Walpole’s haggling with an art dealer over his copy of a Peter Lely portrait, Hazlitt felt, “would disgrace a petty merchant in Duke’s Place, in a bargain for the reversion of an old pair of trowsers.” Summing up, Hazlitt condemned Walpole’s “utter poverty of feeling” and concluded, “There is a sad want of feeling and dignity in all this; but the key to it is, that Walpole was a miser.” Walpole himself hardly helped matters. His reply to one of Hannah More’s periodic slaps on the wrist about his failure to spend money on good works gloated that “I employ mine better at auctions and in buying pictures and baubles, and hoarding curiosities, that in truth I cannot keep long, but that will last forever in my catalogue and make me immortal!”

Did Walpole only spend money on himself? This exhibition seeks to situate Walpole in an age that prided itself on the extent of its philanthropy and its generosity toward the needy. Walpole acknowledged this when he wrote to Sir Horace Mann in the bitter winter of 1759–60, when Britons raised huge sums to clothe and feed French prisoners of war:

Don’t you like much more our noble national charity? Above £2,000 has been raised in London alone, besides what is collected in the country, for the French prisoners, abandoned by their monarch. Must not it make the Romans blush in their Appian Way, who dragged their prisoners in triumph?

1. Francesco Bartolozzi, after R.L. West, Death of Chatterton, ca. 1801. Etching. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Portraits Box 17
During the reigns of George II (1727–60) and III (1760–1820), Britain came to abound in philanthropic organizations of all kinds. In London, specialist hospitals, asylums, and charity schools were prominent landmarks on the city streets (fig. 2). Major towns possessed their own hospitals and workhouses. Local parishes contained almshouses, poorhouses paid for through a tax on property, and myriad arcane parochial charities. The period also gave rise to the subscription philanthropic organization, paid for through variable donations in the manner of a joint-stock company. Donors’ names were published in order of social rank and size of gift, with royalty and aristocracy heading the list.

Walpole liked to give the impression that he was a curmudgeonly bachelor constantly trying to fend off meddling do-gooders. Cynic that he was, he frequently adopted a flippant or mocking tone in his remarks on philanthropy that makes his true views on the subject hard to fathom.

In 1760 Walpole was part of Prince Edward’s entourage on a visit to the newly opened Magdalen Charity for penitent sex workers, of which his cousin Lord Hertford was the founding president (fig. 3). In his eyewitness report to Montagu, Walpole tartly compared the Magdalen’s chapel to a Catholic church, the repentant women to nuns in a convent, and Lady Hertford weeping over William Dodd’s sermon to Edward IV’s mistress Jane Shore.4 To the indefatigable campaigner More, Walpole could be crueler still, accusing her of using philanthropy as a cloak for personal inadequacies: “I wish at least that you would have some children yourself, that you might not be plaguing one for all the pretty brats that are starving and friendless.”5

Walpole hardly appears to advantage in such exchanges. Yet given his wealth and social status, he could hardly escape the social whirligig that was Georgian philanthropy. His exact wealth is difficult to pin down, but
in 1745 Walpole’s income from public sinecures totaled around £3,000 a year (equivalent to about $1 million today), and this increased steadily over his lifetime. When his father, Robert Walpole, died in 1745, Horace inherited the lease of the family townhouse in Arlington Street, a stone’s throw from the royal court at St. James’s Palace, and £5,000 (the equivalent of $1.7m) in cash. By 1788 Walpole’s net worth has been estimated at around £91,000 (the equivalent of $19.5m). Hazlitt’s censure and More’s reproofs stem chiefly from the belief that Walpole did not discharge the eleemosynary obligations incumbent upon him as a person of wealth and influence. In the eighteenth century, the rich were expected to pay out.

Yet Walpole’s friend and next-door neighbor Mary Berry felt able to write in 1840 (in response to another character assassination, this time from Thomas Babington Macaulay) that while Walpole may have been “no ostentatious contributor to public charities and schemes of improvement,” nonetheless “the friends in whose opinions he knew he could confide, had always more difficulty to repress than to excite his liberality.” Berry’s words point us to two potentially redeeming traits in Walpole the philanthropist. First is the suggestion that he simply found the public spectacle that typified Georgian philanthropy distasteful. For instance, the Foundling Hospital for abandoned children became a place of fashionable resort, with gala concerts conducted by George Frideric Handel and exhibitions of paintings by William Hogarth (fig. 4), Francis Hayman, and Joseph Highmore. It was commonplace for the gentry and well-to-do to visit philanthropic organizations to watch their donations in action, or simply observe the beneficiaries at their labors (fig. 5).

Second, Berry hints that Walpole preferred, to borrow Alexander Pope’s famous words on the proverbially saintly reformer Ralph Allen, to “do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame.” Walpole’s two best-known literary works both feature philanthropic scenes of the sort Berry suggests: discreet, habitual, yet quietly known about. In The Castle of Otranto (published 1764), the long-suffering Hippolita is benefactress to the local poor and funds the convent of St. Nicholas, Otranto’s patron saint (and patron saint of gift-giving in his guise as Santa Claus).
The Mysterious Mother (composed 1766–68), the Countess of Narbonne dispenses alms at her castle gate and takes in an orphan ward (really her daughter) to assuage the guilt over her double incest (fig. 6). The tragedy also features a procession of orphans “neatly clothed in a white and blue uniform,” a clear allusion to the parade of charity schoolchildren that took place through the streets of London annually until 1872. Walpole’s children sing a hymn of gratitude before they are herded offstage by a wicked confessor and soon after traumatized by a thunderstorm.

From documentary evidence, it is possible to piece together a snapshot of Walpole’s ad hoc giving in the early 1760s. Via his man of business, Grosvenor Bedford, Walpole subscribed to the fund for French prisoners of war to the tune of five guineas (equivalent to $1,500), but asked to remain anonymous. Walpole instructed Bedford on September 24, 1762, to send a guinea (equivalent to $310) apiece to victims of misfortune described in newspaper appeals, but asked Bedford first “to inquire if the persons mentioned in these advertisements are really objects of charity.” (It was common practice to check the bona fides of recipients before donating.) On February 29, 1764, Walpole asked Bedford to hire a porter from the Exchequer to deliver two guineas for sick prisoners in the Southwark County Gaol and another for poor debtors in the Marshalsea, with the instruction to use a tokenistic pseudonym: “He must not say from whom he comes, but in the name of A.B., and don’t let him go into the prison, for the jail distemper is there.” On July 30, 1764, Walpole sent Bedford three newspaper appeals and asked him to give half a guinea to each victim “if their cases are really compassionate,” together with one guinea for sick debtors in the Fleet, “but don’t mention me.”
cannot know if the Bedford notes (the manuscripts of which are lost) are samples of a larger pattern of anonymous giving, but one hopes these are not isolated examples. Much later, in 1790, we find More reporting to her sister Martha that “Mr Walpole has given me two guineas for our poor man who was cut down after he nearly hanged himself” after being found guilty of committing a crime.  

As a gay man with a tangential relationship to the Georgian establishment, Walpole showed scant interest in the era’s many charities dedicated to human reproduction: the Foundling Hospital, the Lying-In Hospital for women in childbirth, the Lambeth Asylum for women at risk of seduction and the like, designed to cut mortality rates and boost the productive population at a time of war when the population was wrongly believed to be shrinking. Walpole’s distinctive sensibility gravitated more toward the outlandish and the romantic, causes such as that of Theodore von Neuhoff, German adventurer and self-styled King of Corsica (fig. 7). Theodore had been ousted by his Genoese foes, pursued across Europe, and finally arrested for debt in London. Walpole published a subscription for him in *The World* in 1753, but the appeal raised only £50, when Theodore’s debts stood at £1,500. Walpole fell out with Theodore and composed a moralizing epitaph for him, which survives on a plaque in the churchyard of St. Anne’s Church, Soho.

Another case drawn to Walpole’s attention by Mary Hamilton in 1783 was that of Louisa, a mentally ill German woman found living in a haystack outside Bristol. “The Maid of the Haystack,” as Louisa became known, maintained that she was the illegitimate daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Francis I; whenever a carriage passed, she was heard to remark in heavily accented English that it was nothing compared to her father’s coach and eight. Walpole, sympathetic because his nephew suffered from insanity, offered to give Louisa medical treatment and help trace her family through his diplomatic connections. Still, he could not resist making sport of his own beneficence, replying to Hamilton that “if it ever is justifiable to good sense to act romantically, it is by being the knights errant of the distressed. Louisa shall be my Dulcinea, Madam; and you shall be the Duchess who countenances me.”


Cervantes’s hero
Don Quixote tilting at windmills became an emblem for Walpole of the element of caprice inherent in philanthropy (fig. 8).

Walpole’s personal philanthropy is best understood as part of his life’s work to shape a private world that suited his sensibility and taste, a form of queer world-making. He plainly eschewed philanthropy in the service of reproductive futurity (to use a modern critical term) in favor of self-expression, seeming impulsiveness, and singularity. Behind the scenes, Walpole seems to have been an active helper of the poor. Undeniably, his controlling tendencies made him an exacting benefactor and patron, but for all Hazlitt’s and Macaulay’s denunciations of his character, Walpole did take concrete steps to support causes he believed in. While quixotic philanthropy may seem ridiculous to the average onlooker, for the knight errant of the distressed the passionate commitment to improve the world is real. What is philanthropy, ultimately, but the pursuit of one’s own vision of what is for the best?

Notes

1 William Hazlitt [unsigned], review of Letters from the Hon. Horace Walpole to George Montagu, Esq. From the Year 1736 to 1770, Edinburgh Review 31 (December 1818): 80–93; 81, 86.


3 Walpole to Horace Mann, February 3, 1760, HWC 21:367.


5 Walpole to More, HWC 31:338.


9 Horace Walpole, The Mysterious Mother, Act II, Scene 2.


11 Walpole to Bedford, September 24, 1762, HWC 40:270. Lewis notes that “perhaps one may have been an appeal published in the Daily Advertiser on 21 September, dated ‘St Paul’s Coffee-House Sept. 20 1762’: ‘A charitable contribution is humbly requested for a poor creature now lying in St George’s hospital, having lost all she was possessed of in the world by the late fire in Pulteney Street; and who to avoid perishing in the flames, threw herself together with a little boy out of a two pair of stairs window…. She has not a rag of clothes to put on, nor either money or relations to assist her, but is a woman of an unexceptionable character, as the people of this house can testify.’”

12 Walpole to Bedford, February 29, 1764, HWC 40:308.

13 Walpole to Bedford, July 30, 1764, HWC 40:345. Lewis notes that “Two such newspaper appeals, one from ‘a poor distressed widow, with three small children…all perishing for want of necessaries’ and another from ‘a poor tradesman, eighty-seven years of age, that is…plunged into prison for a small debt, and in great distress,’” appeared in the Daily Advertiser on July 25, 1764.


15 Walpole to Mary Hamilton, October 7, 1783, HWC 31:209.

Guide to Further Reading


Checklist

Unless otherwise noted, all works are in the collections of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

George Vertue
Tabula exhibens puellos in scholis eleemosynariis educatos. The View of the Charity Children in the Strand, upon the VI of July, MDCCXII
Etching and engraving on two separate sheets
London [?]: Publisher not identified, 1715
Drawer 745.000.00.03 Impression 1
Printmaker unidentified [fig. 5]
The Sunday School Children of Colchester
Aquatint and etching
Colchester: Published by I. Marsden, October 1, 1797
797.10.01.01+

Parish Removal Order for Jane Symons
England, 1726
File 64 Sh725 T627
Indenture for the Parish Apprenticeship of Mary Adderley, Aged 9
England, 1769
File 64 St15 769
Jonas Hanway
Proposal for County Naval Free-schools
London: Publisher not identified, 1783
Quarto 659 783H
Account of the Society of Friends of Foreigners in Distress
London: Printed for the Society by W. Marchant, 1814
63 814 S0678
Robert Robinson

*Christianity a System of Humanity. A Sermon in Behalf of the Protestant Dissenting Charity-school, at Horsly-Down, Southwark*

Cambridge: Printed by T. Fletcher, 1779

68 779 R56

Nathaniel Parr after L.P. Boitard [fig. 2]

*A View of the Foundling Hospital*

Etching and engraving

London: Printed for R. Sayer, January 1753

Topos L847 no.27+

Simon François Ravenet after William Hogarth

*The Good Samaritan*

Etching and engraving

London: Published by John Boydell, February 24, 1772

Kinnaird 68K(a) Box 320

William Hogarth and Luke Sullivan

*Moses Brought before Pharaoh’s Daughter*

State 4

Etching and engraving

London: Published by William Hogarth, February 5, 1752

Hogarth 752.02.04.03.4 ++ Impression 1

Francesco Bartolozzi after Robert Smirke

[fig. 8]

*Concert Room, King’s Theatre, Haymarket*

Etching and engraving

London: Publisher not identified, ca. 1798

Folio 75 B28 804

Invitation to a Dinner with the Officers of the Lying-In Charity, 1778

File 66 778 L984
Invitation to a Dinner with the Officers of the Lying-In Charity, 1786
File 66 786 L984
Horace Walpole
Letter to Horace Mann, February 3, 1760
lwl Mss Vol.133, vol.3
Jonas Hanway
Thoughts on the Plan for a Magdalen-House for Repentant Prostitutes
63 759 H19
Printmaker unidentified [fig. 3]
Frontispiece
William Dodd
An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Magdalen Charity
London: Printed by W. Faden, 1763
646 763 D66
Sir John Lees
Account book for George, 1st Marquis Townshend, 1765 Sept. 20, 1765–April 17, 1772
lwl Mss Vol. 2
Sir Thomas Durrant
Ledgers for Durrant estate of Scottow, Norfolk, 1759–1815
lwl Mss Vol. 252, vol. 1
Sutton Nicholls
Guys Hospital for Incurables
Etching and engraving
London: Printed by W. Innys and J. Richardson, etc., 1754
Topos L847 no. 36+
In Chattertoniana
London, 17---?
49 3690
Horace Walpole
A Letter to the Editor of Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton
Strawberry Hill: Printed by T. Kirgate, 1779
49 1609 v.39
Horace Walpole
Epitaph in the Church-Yard of St. Anne, Soho
Strawberry Hill, 1757
49 2506
After William Hogarth [fig. 4]
Ticket for a performance to benefit the Foundling Hospital, May 24, 1759
State 2
Etching and engraving
London: Publisher not identified
Kinnaird 72K(d) Box 115
Lady Diana Beauclerk [fig. 6]
The Mysterious Mother (Act 2d, Scene 2d), 1776
Ink and soot water
SH Contents B73 no. 1 ++ Box 300
Printmaker unidentified
Amock Charity Sermon to a Dissenting Congregation
Etching, hand-colored
London: Published by J. Aitken, May 25, 1795
795.03.25.02+
James Gillray
Temperance Enjoying a Frugal Meal
Stipple engraving and etching, hand-colored
London: Published by H. Humphrey,
July 28, 1792
792.07.28.01+ Impression 1
"Excellente Balade of Charitie"
In Chattertoniana
London, 17---?
49 3690
Horace Walpole
A Letter to the Editor of Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton
Strawberry Hill: Printed by T. Kirgate, 1779
49 1609 v.39
Horace Walpole
Epitaph in the Church-Yard of St. Anne, Soho
Strawberry Hill, 1757
49 2506
Horace Walpole
Letter to Horace Mann, April 27, 1753
LWL Mss Vol.133, vol. 2
Portrait of Theodore [fig. 7]
Reproduced from Filipin’s Histoire des Révolutions de Corse, in Percy Fitzgerald, King Theodore of Corsica
London: Vizetelly & Co., 1890
53 N39 F57
Horace Walpole under the pseudonym Adam Fitz-Adam
The World, No. 8, February 22 1753
Folio 49 2616 II MS
Thomas Bowles after John Mauer
The Hospital of Bethlehem
Etching and engraving
London: Printed for Bowles & Carver and Robert Wilkinson, ca. 1800
Topos L847 no. 6+ Box 8
Thomas Bowles
A View of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea & the Rotunda in Ranelagh Gardens
Etching, hand-colored
London: Printed and sold by Robert Sayer,
ca. 1751
Topos L847 no. 15+
Horace Walpole
Letter to Mary Hamilton, October 7, 1783
LWL Mss 1 box 12, folder 39
Francesco Bartolozzi after R.L. West [fig. 1]
Death of Chatterton, ca. 1801
Etching
Portraits Box 17
It is very provoking that people must always be languishing or tormenting themselves or going mad that you set forth. It’s help, may have diversion of exercising your sight, your name, your charity. In the region, all that is well of virtues that make you so troublesome. If you might be ten times more agreeable by writing things that would not cost one of you a cent at a time, you are an absolutely walking hospital. Talk about into some very places with your doors open to save some casualties. In short that you would have some children yourself. That you might not be pleasing one for all the pretty traits that are growing so well. Suppose it were some such good day or three thousand years ago that suggested the idea of an alma mater. With much of the three hundred thirty-five members of the country of St. Vincents—well, as your newly adopted persons have two books. I insist on your accepting two guineas for them at present (that is, when you shall be present). If you can’t come to buy your own shares, you shall not want mine. Knowing who can afford it much better, who must be saved for.