

"Knight Errant of the Distressed"

Horace Walpole and Philanthropy in Eighteenth-Century London

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Horace Walpole and Philanthropy in Eighteenth-Century London

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Produced in conjunction with the exhibition at the Lewis Walpole Library on view from May 11 to December 22, 2022



1. Francesco Bartolozzi, after R.L. West, *Death of Chatterton*, ca. 1801. Etching. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Portraits Box 17

REVIEWING 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!"2 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? 3



2. Nathaniel Parr after L.P. Boitard, *A View of the Foundling Hospital*, 1753. Etching and engraving. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Topos L847 no.27+

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.

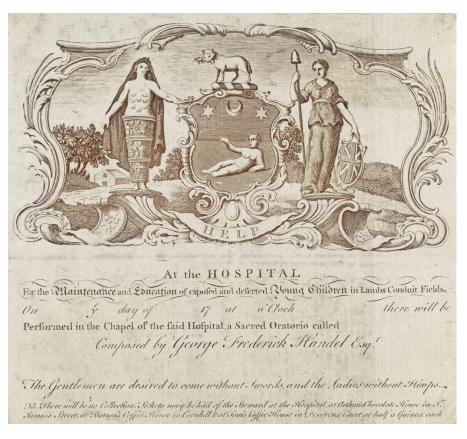
Walpole liked to give the impression that he was a curmudgeonly bachelor constantly trying to fend off meddling do-gooders. Cynic that he was, he frequently adopted a flippant or mocking tone in his remarks on philanthropy that makes his true views on the subject hard to fathom.



3. Printmaker unidentified, Frontispiece, William Dodd, *An Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Magdalen Charity.* London, 1763. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 646 763 D66

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. 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

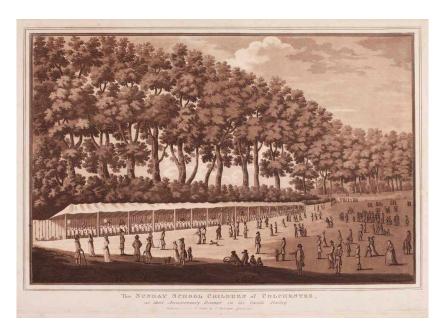


4. After William Hogarth, Ticket for a performance to benefit the Foundling Hospital, May 24, 1759. State 2. Etching and engraving. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Kinnaird 72K(d) Box 115

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). In



5. Printmaker unidentified, *The Sunday School Children of Colchester, at their Anniversary Dinner in the Castle Bailey,* 1797. Aquatint and etching. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 797.10.01.01+

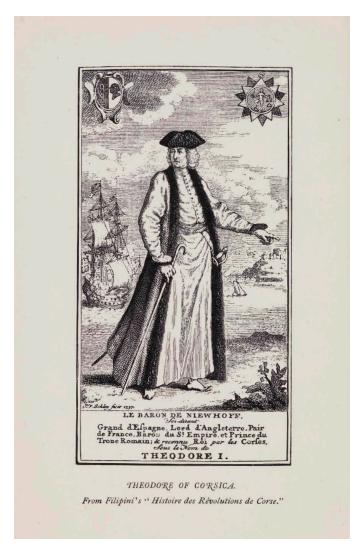
The Mysterious Mother (composed 1766–68), the Countess of Narbonne dispenses alms at her castle gate and takes in an orphan ward (really her daughter) to assuage the guilt over her double incest (fig. 6). The tragedy also features a procession of orphans "neatly cloathed in a white and blue uniform," a clear allusion to the parade of charity schoolchildren that took place through the streets of London annually until 1872. 9 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 snap-shot 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,



6. Lady Diana Beauclerk, *The Mysterious Mother (Act 2d, Scene 2d)*, 1776. Ink and soot water. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, SH Contents B373 no.1++ Box 300

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." We

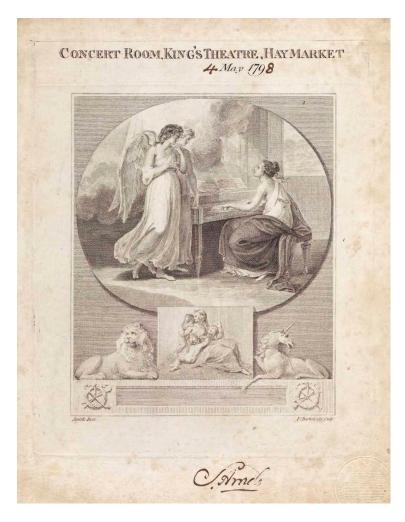


7. Portrait of Theodore, reproduced from Filipin's *Histoire des Révolutions de Corse*, in Percy Fitzgerald, *King Theodore of Corsica*, 1890. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 53 N39 F57

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. ¹⁴

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." ¹⁵ Cervantes's hero



8. Francesco Bartolozzi after Robert Smirke, *Concert Room, King's Theatre, Haymarket*, 1798. Etching and engraving. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Folio 75 B28 804

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?

Rotes

- 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.
- 2 Walpole to Hannah More, February 20, 1790, in Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, ed., The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence, 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-83), 31:339. Henceforth HWC.
- 3 Walpole to Horace Mann, February 3, 1760, HWC 21:367.
- 4 Walpole to Montagu, January 28, 1760, HWC 9:273-74.
- 5 Walpole to More, HWC 31:338.
- 6 See Paul Langford, "Horace Walpole," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and Timothy Mowl, Horace Walpole: The Great Outsider (London: John Murray, 1996), 239. The value of English pre-decimalized currency (£, s. d.) has been converted into presentday values using the Bank of England's inflation calculator and converted into US\$. Nevertheless, values remain approximate. 7 "Advertisement to the Letters Addressed to the Miss Berrys," in Peter Sabor, ed., Horace Walpole: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge, 1987), 331-39; 338. Macaulay's unsigned review of the Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford, to Sir Horace Mann (1833) appeared in the Edinburgh Review (October 1833); see Sabor, 311-26.

8 Alexander Pope, Epilogue to the Satires

(1738), Dialogue I, l. 135; Pope, Poems, ed.

John Butt (London: Routledge, 1996), 693.

9 Horace Walpole, The Mysterious Mother,

Act II, Scene 2.

- 10 Walpole to Grosvenor Bedford,
- ca. January 17, 1760, HWC 42:453.
- 11 Walpole to Bedford, September 24, 1762, HWC 40:270. Lewis suggests 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 "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.
- 14 Hannah More to Martha More, dated 1790, in William Robertson, Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (London: R.B. Seeley & W. Burnside for L.B. Seeley, 1834), 2:217.
- 15 Walpole to Mary Hamilton, October 7, 1783, HWC 31:209.

Guide to Further Reading

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Helen Berry, Orphans of Empire: The Fate of London's Foundlings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

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Rudd, Andrew, "'Knights Errant of the Distressed': Horace Walpole, Thomas Chatterton, and Eighteenth-Century Charitable Culture," Eighteenth-Century Life 44.1 (January 2020), 74-97.

Beth Fowkes Tobin, Superintending the Poor: Charitable Ladies and Paternal Landlords in British Fiction, 1770-1860 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993).

Paul Vallely, Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020).

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 715.000.00.03 Impression 1

Printmaker unidentified [fig. 5]

The Sunday School Children of Colchester

Aquatint and etching

Colchester: Published by I. Marsden,

October 1, 1797

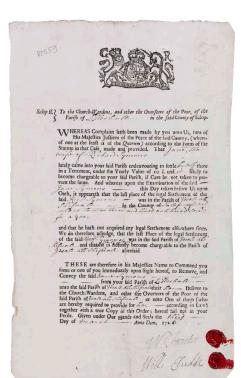
797.10.01.01+

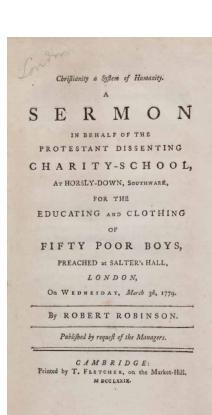
> Parish Removal Order for Jane Symons England, 1726 File 64 Sh725 T627

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 Charityschool, 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 752.02.05.03.4++ 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

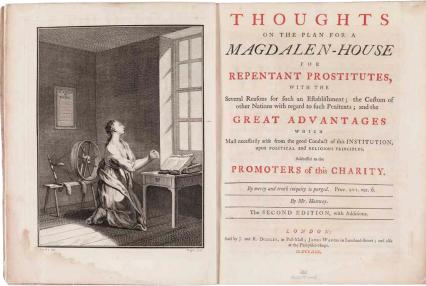
Invitation to a Dinner with the Officers of the Lying-In Charity, 1778 File 66 778 L984





19





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
London: J. and R. Dodsley and James
Waugh, 1759 (2nd edition)
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

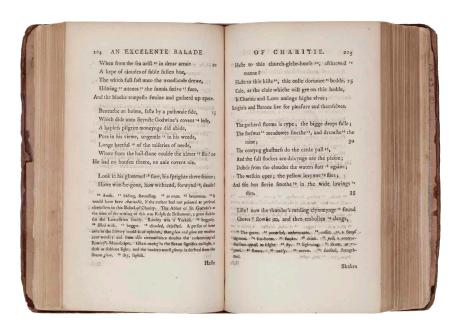
Topos L847 no. 36+

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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

After William Hogarth [fig. 4]

Lady Diana Beauclerk [fig. 6]

The Mysterious Mother (Act 2d, Scene 2d), 1776

Ink and soot water

SH Contents B373 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

↑ "Excelente 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. Kirgote, 1770

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 Ranelaigh 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

➤ Horace Walpole [verso]

Letter to Hannah More, February 20, 1790

LWL MSS 1 box 33, folder 56

Francesco Bartolozzi after R.L. West [fig. 1]

Death of Chatterton, ca. 1801

Etching

Portraits Box 17

Mistrely, may have Twenson of exercising your Armes more agreable by winting things that would not cost that are starring & friendless.

FRONT COVER

After William Hogarth, Ticket for a performance to benefit the Foundling Hospital, May 24, 1759. State 2. Etching and engraving. The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Kinnaird 72K(d) Box 115

Organizing curator: Cynthia Roman

Designed and set in Old English and Yale typefaces by Rebecca Martz and edited by Steve Aitken Office of the Yale University Printer

Printed by GHP in West Haven, Connecticut

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