

NARRATIVES OF THE POOR IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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NARRATIVES OF THE POOR IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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Philanthropy and Fiction, 1698–1818

Edited by  
Lisa Zunshine



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## INTRODUCTION

Eighteenth-century readers and writers were deeply fascinated with the psychology of charitable giving. The period's fictional narratives frequently featured characters bestowing, soliciting and receiving alms; debating the meaning and sincerity of the philanthropic gestures of others; and striving to read the body of the beggar to see if it signified real penury or a shrewd performance of need that masked habitual idleness. Among the socio-historical and cultural developments that shaped this interest in fictions of charity, three deserve our particular attention: the destabilization of the traditional concept of the 'deserving poor', the diversification of philanthropic practices, and the emergence of what we today call the psychological novel. It is in the context of these phenomena that we ought to consider the typical sideline scenario that plays itself out in many an eighteenth-century literary narratives. A protagonist has to evaluate the truth-value of the apparently impoverished stranger's plea for assistance, while at the same time she herself is evaluated as she is being closely watched by an interested observer, such as a secret admirer, a parent, or a friend.<sup>1</sup> Such fictional inquiries into the 'true' state of mind behind the observable behaviour (and possibly, also, behind behaviour performed for the benefit of the observer) pushed at once several emotional hot buttons of the period's readers.

First, these stories resonated with what had become by the early eighteenth century the constant challenge of figuring out if the person asking for financial succour truly deserved to be assisted. As Paul Slack has demonstrated, already by the 1620s the lists of certified beggars drawn up by parish officials no longer reflected the actual proportion of those who qualified to

1. I would thus like to extend Matthew O. Grenby's argument that the 'assumption, increasingly prevalent in children's books, was that charity was a process to be understood entirely from the point of view of the donor, not the recipient' ('"Real Charity Makes Distinctions": Schooling the Charitable Impulse in Early British Children's Literature', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 25 (2002), pp. 185–202; p. 190). It seems that the assumption that the psychological processes of the donor are more interesting than those of the recipient applied to the period's literature for grown-ups as well.

receive support, in relation to 'a great mass of equally genuine poor who received no support because they did not fit in with the traditional doctrine of charity'. As 'pauperization on a huge scale' emerged as a fact of life, encompassing working families plagued by low wages and unemployment, the old rules for giving or refraining from giving became palpably inadequate.

Compounding the dilemmas of the eighteenth-century benefactor learning to live with this shift in the 'old image of poverty'<sup>1</sup> were the changes in the population distribution associated with the industrial revolution. Commenting on the 'cataclysmic' growth of the urban population in London and in 'newer industrial centers', David Owen points out that it

would be out of the question to translate to an urban environment the network of relationships, personal and professional, that made rural England an ordered society. Thus those who sought to improve the lot of their fellows faced a situation in which some of their traditional methods came to seem grossly inadequate, if not actually mischievous. Direct almsgiving and neighborhood charity, which in a village could be carried on without fear of being unduly imposed upon, now served to encourage the professional mendicant.<sup>2</sup>

For eighteenth-century readers, particularly middle-class city dwellers, a fictional story featuring a character encountering a claimant to her charity thus represented, among other things, a pleasant compensatory fantasy. Even if that character herself ended up duped by the presumably impoverished stranger, readers still had what felt like privileged access to that stranger's real intentions, an advantage rarely available to them in their everyday social interactions.

Secondly, the fictional representations of charity modelled the complicated relationship between traditional methods of giving and new institutionalized forms of relief for the needy. For, although Henry Fielding proudly proclaimed charity 'the very characteristic virtue of our time',<sup>3</sup> the Enlightenment was not unique in its charitable impulses. The two preceding centuries saw an 'extraordinary outpouring of wealth from the merchant aristocracy and gentry'<sup>4</sup> aimed at easing the lives of the poor in their communities. What made eighteenth-century practices of giving different from those common under the Tudors and the Stuarts, and thus must have justly struck Fielding and his contemporaries as particular to their age, was the emergence of new forms of

organized philanthropy. Along with the traditional figure of the individual giver, whose humanitarian actions were frequently couched in terms of Christian benevolence, now appeared the philanthropic association, such as the *Hospital* – a secular institution supported by numerous donors, who did not necessarily have to come into direct contact with the immediate objects of their charity, that is, the specific illegitimate children of the poor, disabled soldiers and sailors, indigent pregnant women and prostitutes, whose upkeep they paid for. The number of hospitals establishing this new kind of relationship between the giver and the recipient of charity rose from two before 1700 to thirty-one by 1800, a statistic that reflects deeper transformations in the social fabric of early modern England.<sup>1</sup>

The advent of the hospital as an alternative or additional outlet for charitable giving presented the public with a particular problem, which was really an old problem rearticulated with new force. It had been argued, at least since the days of the Elizabethan *Acte for the Reliefe of the Poore* (1601), that by contributing to the parochial poor relief, people fulfilled their obligations toward those less fortunate, and that any additional demands on their benevolence were unreasonable and pernicious. This is the stance espoused (at least in theory if not in practice) by Mr Drybone (a.k.a. the 'Man in Black') from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* (1760–1). The Man in Black seems 'amazed how any of his countrymen could be so foolishly weak as to relieve occasional objects of charity, when the laws had made such ample provision for their support'. Since in 'every parish-house ... the poor are supplied with food, clothes, fire, and a bed to lie on', they cannot possibly 'want more', and if they do accost their co-parishioners in the streets with their pleas for help, they 'rather merit a prison than relief'.<sup>2</sup> With the wide spread of hospitals, to the old question of why one should assist beggars in the street after having already paid the parish for taking care of them,<sup>3</sup>

1. See Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Donna T. Andrew, "'To the Charitable and Humane": Appeals for Assistance in the Eighteenth-Century London Press', in Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes (eds), *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform from the 1690s to 1850* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 87–107.

2. Oliver Goldsmith, *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. by Arthur Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), vol. II: *The Citizen of the World*, p. 110.

3. On the 'wilting' of the 'faith in the moral and financial effectives' (p. 69) of the Poor Laws since the 1750s, see Michael J. D. Roberts, 'Head versus Heart? Voluntary Associations and Charity Organization in England, c. 1700–1850', in Cunningham and Innes (eds), *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform*, pp. 66–86. On the practical implementation of the Poor Laws in the context of the eighteenth-century economy of makeshifts, see Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (eds), *The Poor in England, 1700–1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

1. Quoted in Bronislaw Geremek, *Poverty: A History*, trans. by Agnieszka Kolakowska (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 173.

2. David Owen, *English Philanthropy, 1660–1960* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 91–2.

3. Henry Fielding, *The Covent-Garden Journal and a Plan of the Universal Register-Office*, ed. by Bertrand A. Colgar (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), p. 247.

4. Owen, *English Philanthropy*, p. 64.

was added a closely related one: Why give to needy strangers when their distress can be alleviated at a variety of new hospitals sustained by the donations of citizens (who were also already supporting the poor of their own parish)?

This dilemma constitutes an implicit background for the scene in Tobias Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* in which a certain 'lady duchess' pronounces unworthiness of her assistance a young woman who, having married against the wishes of her family, is now left a penniless widow with two infants. The duchess is ready, however, 'to offer a recommendation, by which [the young widow] would be admitted into an infirmary, to which her grace [is] a subscriber; at the same time advising the solicitor to send the twins to the Foundling-Hospital'.<sup>1</sup> The 'infirmary' in question appears to be the Magdalen House, a hospital sheltering penitent prostitutes. It seems that the duchess feels that because she patronizes the Magdalen, she can reject any additional claims to her benevolence from a demographic group presumably serviced by that hospital (i.e., destitute young women, who may have reasons to be 'penitent' for their past behaviour, be it prostitution or disagreement with their families about their choice of a husband). A differently ironic – though similarly disapproving – look at philanthropists capable of this kind of discrimination is offered by Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Commenting on Lady Bellaston's romance with the penniless Tom, the narrator observes wryly that she would rather pay for the upkeep of a sexy 'young Fellow' than contribute to such 'Hackney Charities of the Age ... [as] Hospitals'.<sup>2</sup> The moral indefensibility of both women's behaviour – their triumphal selfishness cloaked in the rhetoric of benevolence – thus underscored the daily challenge faced by Smollett, Fielding and their contemporaries, who had to figure out on their own what constituted the category of 'deserving' poor and what combination of philanthropic activities would be most effective for assisting people in that category.

Note that, as in other fictions of the period, Smollett's lady duchess who deliberates over almsgiving is herself a subject of external observation. The novel's protagonist, Peregrine Pickle, witnesses the conversation, pronounces the duchess and her circle 'ungenerous', and rushes off to assist the poor widow. As he arrives at her house, he finds himself once more in the position of scrutinizing another person's charitable endeavour, since another, much kinder aristocratic lady, who had heard of the young woman's misfortune, has come over to relieve her. As Peregrine looks at that lady weeping over one of the infants, she appears to him as an 'angel ministering to the necessities of

mortals'. Moreover, the observation soon becomes mutual and mutually pleasing: as the lady sees Peregrine giving twenty pounds to the distressed family, she thanks him 'with such look of complacency ... that his whole soul [is] transported with love and veneration'.<sup>1</sup>

We can see now why the heightened interest in the representations of charitable encounters coincided with the development of the English psychological novel. The same social dilemmas that rendered such encounters so emotionally perplexing in everyday life made them attractive for the writers experimenting with new ways of portraying fictional consciousness. The conflicting emotions of the potential almsgiver (frequently anxious about being duped by the undeserving claimant to her charity), the ambivalent performance of her need by the petitioner (who may want to preserve some remnants of her dignity and yet has to impress the almsgiver as being truly in need of assistance), the peculiar interested position of the character who observes both the benefactor and the beneficiary and judges their personalities in respect to his future interactions with them, the body language of all the parties involved, which betrays or masks their true sentiments on the occasion – it is difficult to think of another social issue that opened so many possibilities for a writer striving toward increasingly nuanced representations of fictional mentality.

It is hardly a coincidence, then, that Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) – an eighteenth-century novel famous for its painstaking depiction of psychological subtleties – follows its protagonist, Mr Yorick, through a series of philanthropic dilemmas. The book opens with Yorick in Calais, first rejecting the plea of a Franciscan monk begging on behalf of his convent, then racked by guilt and afraid that the monk has reported his uncharitable behaviour to the attractive lady travelling next to Yorick, and finally making it up to the monk under the approving gaze of that increasingly attractive lady. We next see Yorick faced with the challenge of distributing eight *sous* among sixteen beggars in Montriul. This scene puts a new spin on the familiar problem of discriminating between the deserving and undeserving objects of charity, for this particular group seems to consist exclusively of deserving poor vying with each other in urbanity, politesse and modesty. Moreover, their feelings are gratifyingly transparent to the sensitive foreigner, who thus can fear no imposture on their part and ends up giving more than he initially intended. The role of the observer goes here to the reader, who is presented with the evidence of Yorick's behaviour and is explicitly invited to 'judge' his 'disposition' at that moment.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in Paris, Yorick comes across a street-beggar who, ignoring men who pass by, asks charity only of women, and seems strikingly successful in

1. Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle, in which are included Memoirs of a Lady of Quality*, ed. by James L. Clifford (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 429.

2. Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, ed. by John Bender and Simon Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 633.

1. Smollett, *Peregrine Pickle*, p. 431.

2. Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, ed. by Graham Petric, intro. by A. Alvarez (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 60.

his applications. This 'mystery' consumes the protagonist for several pages, until he listens closely to one such exchange and realizes that the beggar uses flattery geared particularly to female vanity and, being 'not straitened for time', doles out that 'delicious essence' in a 'larger dose'.<sup>1</sup>

In the specific conversation overheard by Yorick, the beggar compliments on their sweet bright eyes two women who stop next to him, and muses gently on whatever it was 'which made the Marquis de Santerre and his brother say so much of [them] both as they just passed by'. The women – 'two upright vestal sisters' of about thirty-six and forty, 'unsapped by caresses, unbroke in upon by tender salutations', with 'no mark of wife or widow in any one part of either of them' – immediately give him money. The emotional meaning of the scene reverses the conventional categories of the giver, the recipient, and the observer. Though ostensibly receiving charity, the beggar is actually bestowing 'happiness' on his benefactors.<sup>2</sup> Calculated as his flattery may be, it nevertheless gives the 'two vestal sisters' the warm sensation of erotic attention and appreciation that they crave but cannot ask for. Moreover, extraneous as he appears, the observer also participates in this economy of philanthropy. Figuring out the puzzle of the beggar's success with female almsgivers offers Yorick a delicious insight into these people's feelings, which is precisely what he is looking for on his travels, and is not easy to come by in a foreign land, for 'the balance of sentimental commerce is always against the expatriated adventurer'.<sup>3</sup> And so together with the observer, the reader, too, is drawn into an elaborate psychological dance where the costs and benefits of philanthropic exchange are constantly renegotiated along emotional and socio-economic lines.

This last passage also offers a suggestive, if ambiguous, illustration of the much-discussed phenomenon of the eighteenth-century secularization of philanthropy.<sup>4</sup> Yorick's observation that the beggar makes 'happy' the two women who give him money must have struck Sterne's contemporaries as somewhat ironic if they thought of it in the context of the traditional Christian view of charitable giving as a way to ensure the ultimate spiritual happiness of the giver. As Robert Nelson wrote in his influential *An Address to Persons of Quality and Estate* (1715; this volume), those blessed with 'great Advantages of ... Birth'<sup>5</sup> should consider,

in relation to the great Business of their Salvation, wherein their eternal Happiness lies at Stake; they may be disposed to secure it, as by other Methods of PIETY and Devotion, so particularly by a liberal Exercise of CHARITY; since their plentiful Circumstances make it easy for them to relieve and support the Miseries of Mankind, and that to do Good and to communicate are such Sacrifices as GOD is well pleased with. (this volume, p. 43)

The view that the recipients of charity served as 'a spiritual conduit or currency converters' for the 'persons of quality' – their 'means to lay up "Treasure in Heaven"' – was in a partial crisis by the first part of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In its traditional formulation, such a view did not emphasize strongly enough the need to investigate the background of the beggar, making sure that only the deserving poor are relieved. Nelson's *Address* thus could be read as an attempt to reconcile the traditional conviction that assisting the poor ensures one's eternal happiness with his countrymen's increasing anxiety about inadvertently sponsoring professional mendicants, whose 'noisy impudent ... bawl[ing]' (to quote *The Tatler* of 1709) attacked the 'Sight and Hearing'<sup>2</sup> of passers by at every turn of the street. Nelson still believes that relieving the poor is the 'sure and certain'<sup>3</sup> way to one's salvation, but the bulk of his argument – the long section entitled 'Ways and Methods of Doing Good' – is a discussion of the most discriminate and impostor-proof venues for charitable actions. The section's subheadings include 'The Erecting of Charity Schools, or Contributing to the Support of Them'; 'Relieving decay'd Tradesmen, and Putting them into a Capacity to maintain themselves for the Future'; and 'Setting up Colleges, or Seminaries for the Candidates of Holy Orders; and particularly for the Mission into America and other Remote Parts' (see this volume, pp. 61, 72, 50). The route to 'eternal Happiness' thus lies through selective, informed, and increasingly institutionalized giving.

One wonders, then, if Yorick's account of the Paris beggar consciously plays with the traditional maxim that almsgiving secures heavenly happiness and does so independently of the true deservedness of the receiver. Yorick's beggar certainly does not fit the profile of the deserving poor: saying that he is 'not straitened for time' is another way of stressing his idleness. Moreover,

1. Sarah Lloyd, "Agents in their own concerns"? Charity and the Economy of Makeshifts in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in King and Tomkins (eds), *The Poor in England*, p. 123. For a related analysis of this doctrine, see Richard Ashcraft, 'Lockean Ideas, Poverty, and the Development of Liberal Political Theory', in John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 43–61.

2. *Tatler*, no. 68 (Thursday 15 September 1709), in *The Tatler*, ed. by Donald F. Bond, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 472.

3. Nelson, *Address*, p. 12.

1. Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 119, 133.

2. Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 132.

3. Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, p. 33.

4. See Owen, *English Philanthropy*, chs I and II; Michael Chesterman, *Charities, Trusts and Social Welfare* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979); and Frank Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse: Philanthropy in Modern Britain* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

5. Robert Nelson, *An Address to Persons of Quality and Estate, to which is added an Appendix of some Original and Valuable Papers* (London: Bishop Beveridge's Head, 1715), p. B of the original.

the 'happiness' that this idle flatterer bestows upon the two 'vestal sisters' is of a pointedly secular (and erotic) kind. Still, Yorick is not harsh on the 'poor man', who takes time to 'correct, sweeten, concentrate, and qualify' his flattery to make it fit each individual case. Nor is he condescending toward the duped ladies. On the contrary, he feels that he himself 'could have wished to have made them happy', had their happiness not been 'destined, that night, to come from another quarter'.<sup>1</sup> The value of philanthropy as fostering the precious moments of 'sentimental commerce' is thus balanced precariously against the traditional religious value (with its promise of heavenly happiness) and the new value derived from the emphasis on social reciprocity (according to which the poor have to 'deserve' their relief). Yorick – a man of feeling, a clergyman, and a *homo economicus* – is forever negotiating among these three values.

### Interpreting fictional philanthropists

As we trace representations of philanthropy through eighteenth-century fiction, we see the emergence of a series of literary conventions that used the context of almsgiving to convey to the audience important information about the giver's moral outlook, social aspirations and marital compatibility with the protagonist of the opposite gender. Today we can reconstruct the meaning of many of these narrative shortcuts, though by no means all. For example, when we read Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747–8), we still recognize as unambiguously praiseworthy the philanthropic behaviour of Clarissa Harlowe, in spite of her sister's claim that Clarissa helps the poor merely to gain cheap popularity.<sup>2</sup> We also take note both of the complete philanthropic incompatibility between Clarissa and Roger Solmes and of the occasional affinity between the charitable impulses of Clarissa and Robert Lovelace, an affinity that renders their eventual alienation even more poignant. Similarly, when we learn that Cecilia Beverley and Mortimer Delvile, of Frances Burney's novel *Cecilia* (1782), have formed, unbeknownst to one another, the same plan for helping a poor but proud man of their acquaintance, we take it as a sign that Delvile suits Cecilia in the way that other men currently aspiring to her hand and coffer would never do. The protagonists themselves apparently read it the same way: 'A sympathy of sentiment so

striking impressed them at the same moment with surprise and esteem'.<sup>1</sup> These young people have long been regarding each other with particular attention, but this instance of their observing each other's charitable action carries a special significance. However 'imperfect'<sup>2</sup> the couple's future happiness might be, Burney's eighteenth-century audience must have felt assured that Cecilia and Delvile will always have *this* in common.

By contrast, it is more difficult for us to understand how contemporary readers judged the behaviour of Lord Dorchester from Sarah Fielding's *The History of Ophelia* (1760; this volume), whose practice of charitable giving involves sending his beneficiaries on emotional rollercoasters that he and Ophelia, his beautiful young protégée, can observe and, to some extent, share in. Thus having learned of the plight of a starving half-pay Captain, Lord Dorchester secretly procures him 'the Choice of two Commissions' (this volume, p. 145) and then proceeds to torture the man by telling him first only of the commission that he knows the Captain will not be able to take, because of family circumstances. The poor Captain, unwilling to appear ungrateful, receives 'this News with as much Gratitude as if it had been the very Thing he wished' (this volume, p. 145) and turns it down politely. Lord Dorchester then expresses his disappointment in such terms as to drive the Captain to break down in tears when he thinks nobody is watching. Ophelia, who witnesses this affecting spectacle, thinks that the old soldier's 'Violence of Grief' is such that it would destroy him 'on the Spot' (this volume, p. 146). Not yet content with the emotional charge of the scene, Lord Dorchester reveals the Captain's family waiting in the next room and urges him to take the first commission, in response to which the Captain 'faint[s] away instantly', terrifying his wife and once more making Ophelia fear for his life. When the Captain comes to, Lord Dorchester augments 'the general Joy' that his recovery occasions by telling him of the second commission, one that is completely acceptable and will save the whole family from starving. The joy now increases 'to a great Degree of Extacy' (this volume, p. 146), rising to a 'Height that must have been painful'. The Captain and his wife look 'upon my Lord with Adoration, and [give] way to Raptures that would have forced a Heart the most insensible to the Sensations of others, to partake of theirs'. Dorchester himself seems to be full of 'Bliss', experiencing perhaps 'a more solid Delight than they [do]' (this volume, pp. 146–7).

As we witness Lord Dorchester's driving to despair the poor man he is about to generously assist, in order to render more poignant the latter's sub-

1. Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, pp. 133, 132.

2. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 195.

1. Frances Burney, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, ed. by Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 250.

2. Burney, *Cecilia*, p. 941.

sequent joy, relief and gratitude, are we to appreciate his kindness and ability to feel keenly the emotions of others, or are we to wince at his voyeuristic sadism and take it as a sign of his present unsuitability for the guileless Ophelia? Dorchester's treatment of the retired officer seems as open to conflicting interpretations as is his other act of 'charity' – his relationship with Ophelia, a pretty rustic, whom he kidnaps from her aunt's house, sponsors in high society, grooms for the role of mistress and, unexpectedly for himself, ends up marrying. We have no way of knowing if Fielding's contemporaries would share this particular open-ended reading of her aristocratic protagonist's philanthropy, even if we can safely assume that they followed eagerly the show of emotions attendant upon Lord Dorchester's little power play.

Another literary convention, which built on the anxiety about the changing landscapes of charity to give the readers the pleasurable opportunity to trace characters' contradictory emotions, centred on philanthropists whose private actions contradicted their publicly expressed sentiments. Such narratives typically depicted older men who have been knocked around by life and have certainly learned the language of prudent giving, but not its practice. Thus, in *The Spectator*, no. 232 (1711), Sir Andrew Freeport inveigles against the beggars who solicit his 'Charity with the usual Rhetoric of sick Wife or Husband at Home, three or four helpless little Children all starving with Cold and Hunger'. Sir Andrew is certain that if he gives them any money, they will spend it all at the 'next Ale-House', and thinks that, 'of all Men living, we Merchants, who live by Buying and Selling, ought never to encourage Beggars'.<sup>1</sup> Yet at the end of his impassioned speech he admits that 'we prescribe better Rules than we are able to practise; we are ashamed not to give into the mistaken Customs of our Country',<sup>2</sup> a shamefaced reference to his having earlier relieved a group of beggars whose credentials as deserving poor he has certainly had no way of establishing.

Sir Andrew thus gets credit both for his realistic view of human nature and for his all-too-human failure to be rigidly guided by his hard-earned realism. The readers of *The Spectator* must have enjoyed disentangling the man's conflicting feelings on the occasion. For not only does this rich Londoner violate his own precepts (as we all do), he also attempts to deceive himself about his reasons for doing so. Sir Andrew blames his behaviour on the 'mistaken Customs of our Country', meaning, possibly, the traditional view of relatively indiscriminate almsgiving as a spiritual duty of the rich and their sure road to eternal salvation. His audience, however, can easily see that he evokes that

'Custom' to mask what he thinks will be perceived as his embarrassing inconsistency – a naivety not suitable for a man of his years and position – and this feeble attempt at emotional cover-up renders his behaviour rather endearing.

Compare Sir Andrew's position with that of the already-mentioned Mr Drybone – the 'Man in Black' from Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*. Mr Drybone is caught between his natural charitable impulse and his hard-earned realization that this impulse makes him an easy target for cheats. Brought up by his idealistic father to be a 'mere machine of pity', 'incapable of withstanding the slightest impulse made either by real or fictitious distress', the Man in Black used to be strikingly ill-fitted for this avaricious, calculating and treacherous world. It was not until he ended up in jail (after 'becoming ... bail' for a friend who then skipped town leaving Mr Drybone to take his place) that he learned, as he claims, to stifle his best impulses. As he proudly proclaims, *now* if 'a wretch solicits [his] pity, [he merely observes] that the world is filled with impostors, and [takes] a certain method of not being deceived by never relieving'.<sup>1</sup>

But, as in the case of Sir Andrew, the actions of the Man in Black belie his words. He still gives generously to every beggar who approaches him, but he is painfully 'ashamed of his natural benevolence'. He thus endeavours to help the needy while the observer (the Chinese philosopher narrating the story) is looking in the other direction (or so the Man in Black thinks) and so cannot call him out on his strange conduct. The three people to whom the Man in Black gives alms are an old man who still has about him 'the remnants of tattered finery' and who claims to support 'a dying wife and five hungry children', a sailor with a wooden leg who used to be 'an officer on board of a private ship of war', and a woman in rags with two children in her arms and 'attempting to sing ballads, but with such a mournful voice that it was difficult to determine whether she was singing or crying'.<sup>2</sup> Mr Drybone is thus moved by such signs of desperate need as rags, physical deformity, tears and sad stories, which is precisely the kind of evidence that eighteenth-century benefactors were advised to distrust. As Thomas Malthus wrote in his *Essay on Population* (1798), the giver has to do a thorough background check of the person she is to relieve, disappointing the 'hopes of clamorous and obtrusive poverty with no other recommendation but rags' and helping instead the 'silent and retiring sufferer laboring under unmerited difficulties'.<sup>3</sup>

1. *The Spectator*, no. 232 (Monday 26 November 1711), in *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. 2, p. 402.

2. *The Spectator*, vol. 2, p. 405.

1. Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, pp. 114, 118, 120.

2. Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, pp. 109, 110–12.

3. Quoted in Owen, *English Philanthropy*, p. 98.



It is in the context of Addison's and Goldsmith's narratives (as well as, of course, Sterne's portrayal of the sentimental traveller who initially refuses to give or sets strict limits to how much he will give, and then abandons these prudent initial decisions) that we should read the opening chapters of Anna Maria Bennett's novel *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* (1797; this volume). The story opens with one Colonel Buhanun berating harshly a 'little female mendicant' who begs him for 'one halfpenny' and cries out that she is 'very hungry' and that her 'mammy' will beat her if she comes home empty-handed. The Colonel tells the 'little Jezebel' that her mother is a 'drunken hussy' and that the girl, too, will be like her, and he promises that if he catches her near his house again, he will have her mother whipped, with her daughter 'tied to her back, from parish to parish, like vagabonds' as they both are (this volume, pp. 185–6). He rounds up his threat with a terrible curse, designed to scare away the little beggar, but neither his threats nor curses appear to move her, and, as we find out soon, for good reason. The girl has learned from previous experience that, as the narrator tells us, 'the least harshness from col. Buhanun [is] really fiction' and that he has 'a weak habit of making the distress of every human being his own' (this volume, p. 186). On this particular occasion, not only does the colonel give the beggar girl money, but, overwhelmed by pity, he also starts crying quietly: 'a swimming fluid, which often sprang involuntarily to his eyes ... prevented his looking directly at the little object, who, with her mammy, he devoutly damned his heart if he would not have whipped from the parish' (this volume, p. 186). We may add that this scene is observed by Buhanun's trusty servant – his occasional almoner, another crusty man with a heart of gold.

The representations of middle-aged men, whose speeches run a gamut from prudent to harsh, but whose actions gainsay their words, must have appealed to an eighteenth-century audience on several levels. Uncovering these characters' true sentiments allowed the readers to entertain an agreeable illusion of understanding such tough old birds better than they seemed to understand themselves. Moreover, the particular dilemma of these fictional benefactors – their susceptibility to the outward signs of distress that may or may not denote actual deservedness – resonated particularly strongly with the majority of Addison's, Goldsmith's and Bennett's middle-class readers, who had limited resources for checking the claims of impoverished strangers.

I have discussed earlier the problems faced by eighteenth-century urbanites who had to deal with the influx of strangers in their communities and who had to orient themselves amidst numerous new charities (many of which were still experimenting with the issues of fundraising, public accountabil-

ity, and the deservedness of their beneficiaries).<sup>1</sup> We should note that those problems were somewhat palliated for people who could afford to spend time and money on researching and planning out their charitable activities. Consider, for example, Thomas Firmin, the famous late-seventeenth-century philanthropist whose biography (1698; reprinted 1791) opens this volume. Firmin believed that his duty was 'not only to relieve, but to visit the Sick and Poor; because they are hereby encouraged and comforted, and we informed of what nature and degree their straits are [and whether] some are more worthy of assistance than others' (this volume, p. 7). Overextended as he was, managing his thriving businesses as well as his own and other people's charitable projects, Firmin still went into the houses of his petitioners so 'that he might judge farther, by their meagre looks, number of children, sorry furniture, and other circumstances, in what proportion it might be fit to assist them' (this volume, p. 20), 'for of vagrant, idle, and insolent beggars, he was no advocate nor encourager' (this volume, p. 36).

As Donna T. Andrew has demonstrated, eighteenth-century philanthropists with resources comparable to those of Firmin evolved a variety of investigative strategies that allowed them to discriminate between deserving and fraudulent objects of charity, such as sponsoring a network of local agents who could go and check the claims of people asking for assistance.<sup>2</sup> Those strategies, of course, were not available to the average man and woman accosted by an apparently impoverished stranger begging for immediate relief. What is fascinating about Addison's, Goldsmith's and Bennett's treatment of this subject is that in principle their protagonists have enough time and money to support some form of such an investigation and thus be informed and selective in their charities. That they frequently forgo these resources and engage in impulsive almsgiving based on sentiment rather than careful inquiry aligns them with their readers of modest means<sup>3</sup> and thus broadens the appeal of their stories.

1. For a discussion of the eighteenth-century concern with the accountability of the new charities, see David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993); and Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), ch. 5.

2. For a discussion, see Donna T. Andrew, 'Noblesse oblige: Female Charity in an Age of Sentiment', in John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 275–300.

3. For further discussion of class and philanthropy in the eighteenth-century novel, see Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Superintending the Poor: Charitable Ladies and Paternal Landlords in British Fiction, 1770–1860* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), esp. chs 1–4.

To put it starkly, the issue, which was simultaneously emotional, socio-economic and infrastructural was rewritten by such narratives as purely emotional. Colonel Buhannun, the Man in Black, and Sir Andrew Freeport are portrayed as *emotionally* incapable of systematically discriminative philanthropy, whereas the majority of their readers were also debarred from it by the lack of private financial resources as well as by a lack of established public networks that could ease the financial burden of individual investigation. The eighteenth century was a time of massive experimentation with different forms of philanthropy, when the traditional and much-derided establishments for parochial relief coexisted uneasily with the new (and also somewhat suspect) joint-stock charities such as hospitals, with 'numerous small-scale subscription charities',<sup>1</sup> and with the exclusive private networks centered around a particular benefactor (such as Richard Reynolds or Lady Spencer).<sup>2</sup> With imperfect old and new philanthropic systems thus in flux, a charitably disposed individual of middling income might have identified strongly with a fictional almsgiver led by his (however fallible) emotions rather than by information that could be derived from a careful investigation.

If Addison, Goldsmith and Bennett substituted the emotional and socio-economic issues complicating the project of the 'thorough background check' with the emotional issues, the anonymous author of *Eccentric Philanthropy* (1803; this volume) dreamt up a world where such difficulties simply do not exist. An infelicitous hodge-podge of styles, *Eccentric Philanthropy* interests us today primarily because of its unabashed fantasizing about the possibility of privileged access to people's real needs and to charitable rulers' coffers. Its protagonist, Rollo, also known as Tranterhahn and Albani (perhaps a nod to Cecilia's almoner, Albany<sup>3</sup>), is a fictional equivalent of Thomas Firmin, that 'Almoner General' of England. As part of his service to a benevolent king, he travels through his country incognito, in the guise of a 'show-man', to observe the lives of the poor and to redress their wrongs. What the novel's author dubs 'eccentric' we may well call 'ideal' philanthropy – disconnected from any real-life dilemmas of its readers. The emotionally sanitized adventures of the invariably high-minded Rollo bring into a sharper relief the way in which other eighteenth-century authors portrayed their philanthropists – doubting, duped, pompous, pious, naïve, self-deceiving, well-intentioned, self-interested – desperately trying to make sense of their imperfect world.

1. Grenby, "Real Charity Makes Distinctions", p. 186.

2. See Andrew, 'Noblesse oblige'; and Owen, *English Philanthropy*, p. 79.

3. For a discussion of the relationship between Albany and Cecilia, see Cynthia Klekar, "Her Gift Was Compelled": Gender and the Failure of the "Gift" in Cecilia', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 17:4 (July 2005), pp. 109–26.

## NOTE ON THE TEXTS

Unless noted otherwise, the sources for the short introductions are *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, ed. J. O. Thorne (New York: St Martin's Press, 1962); S. Austin Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors Living and Deceased from the Earliest Accounts to the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century. Containing over Forty-Six Thousand Articles (Authors) with Forty Indexes of Subjects* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1858); and *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: In Association with The British Academy: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, eds H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), hereafter referred to as ODNB.

Page numbers refer to pages in this volume. When I quote passages not reproduced here, I use page numbers from the original editions and make a note of it in the text (for example, Robert Nelson, *An Address to Persons of Quality and Estate*, p. B of the original).