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# Mary Jackson, a petitioner and her 'esteem'd & Ever belov'd Benefactress'<sup>1</sup>

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As John Potter remarked in 1762 that 'It is an age of charity', the eighteenth century saw remarkable instances of voluntarism.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Coram and Jonas Hanway were among the famous individuals for their philanthropic initiation and involvement. The Foundling Hospital and the Magdalen House were most well-known examples among those which were supported by donations from wide range of people.<sup>3</sup> The successful charitable institutions drew on people's shared concern and interests. The trend in fiction contributed to the surge of interests as well as bore resonance of the concern: compassion and benevolence for the unfortunate were ubiquitous topics in novels of sensibility.

Care for the weak has been given renewed attention. With reconsideration of the assumption of the linear progress from personal benevolence and endowment to organized charitable societies and then to welfare state, recent

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This is based on my paper read at the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies 31st annual conference (January 2002).

<sup>1</sup> Mrs Jackson's last letter to Dowager Countess Spencer, Althorp F141, the British Library Manuscript Collection, Althorp Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman 1689-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 492. Potter seems to use the word 'charity' here to mean both 'kindness' of the heart and 'liberality to the poor' in action (two of the definitions of 'charity' in *Dr Johnson's Dictionary*).

<sup>3</sup> Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 74-134; Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 170-77; Stanley Nash, 'Prostitution and Charity: The Magdalen Hospital, A Case Study', *Journal of Social History* 17 (1984): 617-28; Mika Suzuki, 'Charity and Literature in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: The Magdalen House and Its Literary Works', 『地域文化研究』4 (1992): 69-93.

works on philanthropic activities throw light from various perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Martin Gorsky reminds us of the current research emphasis on 'the diversity of systems of relief, the complex interplay between legislation and private effort and the importance of long-term continuities'.<sup>5</sup> The new type of institutional charity in the eighteenth century was remarkable and deserves much attention. At the same time, private effort, not as what to be superseded by organized forces, should be studied more closely. Another aspect of charity that is difficult to explore is on the receiving side.<sup>6</sup> Although information I focus on in this paper is quite limited to a specific person, it is a rich mine of details of the one who received charity. This paper attempts to analyse a relationship between the benefactress and the benefited in the scene of personal charity. There, it brings to attention the motivation of the wealthy countess, the demand and adjustment of the needy and the contextual forces which fostered the dialogue between the privileged and the unfortunate.

It is also an attempt to seek for a link between life and literature in the scene of charity offered in the wake of the cult of sensibility. It examines the use of the language of sensibility in the record of charity kept by Georgiana, Countess Spencer. My focus is on the case of Mary Jackson, one claimant of benevolence from her. The volume of the letters from Jackson to Lady Spencer is enormous. Between 1782 and 1800 she sent more than one hundred epistles, each considerably substantial. In these letters, Jackson developed the language of begging and asking attention into detailed and elaborate narrative of a life story, appealing how she should be thought to deserve compassion.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, Jonathan Barry and Colin Jones, ed., *Medicine and Charity Before the Welfare State* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Kathleen D. McCarthy, ed., *Women, Philanthropy, and Civil Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Gorsky, *Patterns of Philanthropy: Charity and Society in Nineteenth-Century Bristol* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Royal Historical Society the Boydell Press, 1999), p. 7; see also Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes, ed., *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform from 1690s to 1850* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 2; Joanna Innes, 'State, Church and Voluntarism in European Welfare, 1690-1850', in Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes, ed., *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform from 1690s to 1850* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 15-65; Sandra Cavallo, 'The Motivations of Benefactors: an Overview of Approaches to the Study of Charity' in Jonathan Barry and Colin Jones, ed., *Medicine and Charity Before the Welfare State* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 46-62.

<sup>6</sup> The papers in *The Use of Charity: the Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth-Century Metropolis*, ed. Peter Mandler (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) point to the omission of the relieved and attempt 'a social history of charity from below' (p.1).

Quite noteworthy is the construction of this self-representation and her idolisation of Lady Spencer in her harangue. Lady Spencer's encouragement as well as Jackson's ingenuity and talent in writing was crucial in forming this peculiar relationship between the benefactor and the petitioner. Narrative devices in fiction permeated the context of actual benevolence seeking.

Mary Jackson was one of the numerous petitioners who asked for a favour of Georgiana, Countess Spencer (1736-1814). Spencer was renowned for her generous charitable activities, attracting a number of petitioners from various parts of England and even in France. Jackson was not among the tenants or local residents who usually get benevolence from the benefactors. However, she was fortunate enough to be given Lady Spencer's lavish attention. Spencer let her be a resident of her charitable apartments, gave her in the end as much as £50 a year, saw her personally when possible, and wrote to her. And above all, she was not reluctant to receive Jackson's letters, or rather she encouraged Jackson to write to her. What helped her to appeal to Lady Spencer to such an extent? She was a widow; widows were among the first to attract benevolence. Her husband had been involved in the naval service; Lady Spencer was favourable to navy. She had a good education, she lost a lot and she was disabled; yes, she deserved pity from the privileged. But beyond everything, she was a very good writer. Her letters were engaging, long and frequently written. This paper focuses on her writing ability that contributed much to provide Jackson with Spencer's care.

Some eighteenth-century men and women puzzle us with the sheer quantity of their writings. We wonder why they wrote so much. It seems that they were engined by the insatiable desire to record what course one's life led. Some were letter devotees, just like the modern e-mail addicts. They could not do without writing and reading letters. Spencer was one of them. Her extraordinary commitment to letter-writing and reading is part of her efforts to prove for herself and assure herself that she is a worthy mistress of herself. Letters were not only the direct record of her emotional life, but also the active agent to work on her: a soothing tool to invite her to get control of herself as well as a channel of indulgence in otherwise secret sensations. Consequently, reading and writing letters served her to discipline herself and

justify her privileged comfortable situation to herself.

Not only to herself but also to the posterity who read her documents do her records prove her devotion and interests. In her portraits she preferred being depicted as a cultured young lady (by Pompeo Batoni), as a protective mother (by Sir Joshua Reynolds) and as a sober dowager (by Thomas Gainsborough). She did more than privileged women did who could afford to leave their image in the artists' brush; she chose to leave her mark in the letters and in the records of charity. Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, whose vast property the father of John Spencer inherited, stepped forward in politics; a daughter of Lady Spencer, Duchess of Devonshire, later played active role as a political hostess. Although chatty in political gossip, Lady Spencer avoided the political limelight - so did Lord Spencer --: 'I do naturally abominate Politicks so much that I cannot write upon them with any pleasure - my inclinations in publick affairs as well as in private tend all to peace and quietness'.<sup>7</sup> She opted, instead, to engage herself in charitable activities and kept them recorded.

The importance of philanthropy's quasi-public space in more or less limited women's lives, later, especially in the nineteenth century has been called to attention.<sup>8</sup> These studies make much of women's voluntary work in philanthropic societies and institutions, which is thought to have paved their way to gain access to other public activities. Lady Spencer was an influential member of Ladies' Charitable Society, but her charity centred on personal and occasionally face-to-face undertaking rather than involvement in institution.

Mary Jackson was one of the hundreds of petitioners who wrote to Lady Spencer. The existing documents include 114 letters from Mary Jackson to Lady Spencer. In addition to this enormous bulk, there are four from Lady Spencer to Jackson, one introductory letter by an unknown writer, one about

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<sup>7</sup> To Mrs Howe, Jan 4 1780, Althorp F45. Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough left her fortune to Hon. John Spencer with the condition that he and his son should not embark on a political career (Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* [London: HarperCollins, 1998], p. 6).

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650-1850: the Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 209-33, 238-48; Gorsky, *Patterns of Philanthropy*, pp. 162-77; Kathleen D. McCarthy, ed., *Women, Philanthropy, and Civil Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), esp. 1-7, 9-28.

Jackson written by Mrs Dodd, who worked as an investigating agent for Spencer (she was also an investigator for the Ladies' Charitable Society), and another letter about Jackson by Mrs Wyburn, Jackson's sister.

The facts about Mary Jackson are not easy to collect and ascertain, except for what the bulk of letters tell. Jackson was introduced to Lady Spencer by an anonymous writer in 1782. Jackson herself began to write on 2 September 1782. Between this September 1782 and June 1791, for nearly ten years, Jackson wrote quite frequently; the last one of this succession was dated 29 June 1791, her 110<sup>th</sup> letter. Then, she wrote sporadically, in January and July 1795, in December 1798, and her 114<sup>th</sup>, her will, delivered in March 1800. During the dense nine years she wrote quite regularly. It seems like a monthly report. But it is not her punctuality that is most impressive. It is her enthusiastic profusion of writing that distinguishes her from other petitioners.

From the information given by the first anonymous petitioner and confirmed by Mrs Dodd's investigation, Mary Jackson was the widow of Lieutenant or Captain Jackson, who worked for the East India Company. Her husband's name is not reported but he might have been a John Jackson, who was Lieutenant in 1756, became Captain in 1770, and died in 1778. After the husband's death, she had four children to support with a pension of 19 £ a year. Both the first petitioner's description and Mrs Dodd's report support her claim of being an unfortunate gentlewoman 'much respected', having 'much Delicasey[sic] in her'.<sup>9</sup>

The first petitioner for Mary Jackson claims that he / she is writing the petitioning letter without letting her and her sister's family know about the very letter. Moreover, the person even claims that 'the Author of this address to the Countess of Spencer a Volunteer in their Service whom they do not absolutely know by name or Character'. It is not unusual that the letter writer claims that they are writing without the person's knowledge in order to impress the needy's modesty, but it is a little unnatural that the person is not known 'by name or Character' to the people concerned. Here the writer places himself / herself as a person who knows the family's situation very well, but

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<sup>9</sup> A letter on behalf of Mrs Jackson sent in 1782; Mrs Dodd to Countess Spencer dated 12 March 1784 (Althorp F40); *The Commissioned Sea Officers of the Royal Navy 1660-1815* 3vols.

hidden from the family; thus the writer establishes himself / herself as a narrator. If this were fictional, it is a perfect beginning of a touching story which is narrated by a detached narrator who is not involved in the affliction and supposed to be able to report the distresses of the unfortunate objectively enough and affectingly enough to invite the reader's pity and benevolence. The mysterious anonymous writer is able to use a narrative device of sensibility. Although the hand is different, it is possible that Mary Jackson herself was involved in composing this eloquent letter which is claimed to be written 'in aid of Virtue & merit struggling under the sad fatality of a series of accumulated misery & Woe, more than adequate to sink the greatest Fortitude into the depth of Despair'.

Usually in the sentimental novels, the stories of the helpless unfortunate move the hearts of the delicate, who are soon drowned in tears. However, real petitioners have to make their distresses understood convincingly, first. For this purpose, their suitable model is the life-story tellers frequently found in the interpolated narrative in the novel. Applicants tell their stories as if they were story-telling agents a little detached from the reality so as to present the narrative seemingly in a neutral way. They have to prove that they are the deserving poor, so they take this stance. Thus their style resembles remarkably that of life stories interpolated into longer narratives. They insist on their telling the bare facts, which should appeal to the sensitive mind and be naturally pitied.

In Mary Jackson's letters, the transition of emphasis, from emphasis on the rational analysis then to the prominence of the language of the heart, is distinctly present. She at first describes her situation in detail. What is repeated is her 'distresses of mind', and what she fears most is 'the loss of Reason' resulting from the extreme affliction. Her immediate concern is her head and mind, for example:

... as My Head will not bear the least encrease of Affliction, and the most distant hint of it to them wou'd occasion such an Addition to my present distress of Mind...<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sept 2 1782, Althorp F140.

My Mind is in the most Exquisite distress, I am not well, & the certainty that None to interest themselves in the preservation of My life, or Senses, will infallible deprive Me of the latter.<sup>11</sup>

It is after sending the report of her situation and getting response from the countess that Jackson indulges in tears and the language of the heart. When she writes a letter of gratitude, the 'heart' is repeatedly emphasized: in her first thank-you letter, though her mind is also present, it is superseded by the heart both of her own and Lady Spencer's: Lady Spencer's is 'a Heart replete with goodness, & alive to all the finer feelings of Humanity'; Jackson begs pardon for 'the effusion of a Heart'. Jackson repeats descriptions of her heart: 'My Heart is now at ease', 'out of the Abandances of the Heart &c. ... with every sentiment a gratefull Heart is capable of feeling'. All these phrases are in one single letter.<sup>12</sup> In another letter, after apologizing for her 'seeming familiarity', she adds that it is not on account of the lack of respect but 'my Heart overflows with the tenderest gratitude. Will your Ladyship allow me the Expression, I must speak the language of my Heart, or be silent'.<sup>13</sup> About twenty letters were written while Jackson is an object of Lady Spencer's occasional charity, that is before Mrs Dodd's report to witness the situation and support Jackson's claims was sent to the countess. Through these letters, she gradually establishes the steady relationship of a favoured and the benefactress, by resorting alternately to rational discourse of appeal and to heart-felt gratitude.

After Jackson gets established as a favoured, the relationship between these two women is curious. Jackson idolizes Spencer; 'You alone Madam fill every Avenue of my Heart'; she goes as far as to consecrate her:

I salute the Church in your House, & take the liberty to kiss the fair Hands of all the saints at Holy well Mrs & Miss Points in particular, & beg a Bitt of the Border of your ladyship garments for a Relick, which I shall

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<sup>11</sup>. Sept 27 1782, Althorp F140.

<sup>12</sup>. October 4<sup>th</sup> 1782, Althorp F140.

<sup>13</sup>. Sept 9<sup>th</sup> 1783, Althorp F140.



have more faith in, than in St Winifreds Ear, which was once offerd me.<sup>14</sup>

Of course Jackson pays due respect, and Spencer's attitude to her is not too friendly, but Lady Spencer allows Jackson to indulge in rather presumptuous approaches in letters. Now, the countess is Jackson's guardian Angel, and every thing, the world to her. Not only Jackson asks to let her live near the countess, but also does she mention that she is thinking of her all day and dreaming of her at night: the countess's goodness is on her mind 'at least eighteen hours out of the four & twenty, to say Nothing of the happiness of seeing you almost every night'.<sup>15</sup> With a letter from Lady Spencer kept under her pillow, Jackson cherishes Lady Spencer. Her attachment to the countess is so fervent that her spirit repeatedly travels from her. Jackson haunts the countess and her daughter the Duchess of Devonshire:

... My spirit is sometimes Hovering over your Bed when I take Care that not a Zephine Breathes too badly on you, from thence I take my flight, & in a Moment am perch'd on her Graces pillow when after Creating a thousand pleasing Images to play before her fancy & prolong her Slumber, I Return to my first dearest Charge, & Wateh till the Envious Morning ster, Reminds me that all spirits must vanish as its approach ...<sup>16</sup>

Jackson's obsession seems to be excessive, and she would be called a stalker if she did the same now. But as far as is known in the letters by Spencer as well as Jackson herself, Spencer did not reject her but instead, even encouraged her. Indeed, to style herself as a hovering spirit is a means to prove that she can participate in playing with literary allusions, sharing literary culture with the countess. One immediate reference is easily found: Jackson mentions 'Sylph', which is the title role of Duchess of Devonshire's fiction: 'some times I take my flight to Devonshire House in the Charracter of a Guardian

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<sup>14</sup>. Sept 9<sup>th</sup> 1783; June 20 1785, Althorp F140.

<sup>15</sup>. January 7<sup>th</sup> 1784, Althorp F140.

<sup>16</sup>. March 9 1785, Althorp F140.

Sylph,....'<sup>17</sup> As the enigmatic Sylph protects the heroine in the novel, so Jackson appoints herself the role of a mysterious guardian spirit.

Reference to literature thus provided her with a means to getting closer to Lady Spencer. So did her literary ability. Her letter writing ability was for her the only resource to depend on, if we put aside her dexterity in needlework. The potentials of her writing were acknowledged by her sister and Lady Spencer. Though they lived together and helped each other for a certain period, Jackson and her sister got on difficult terms. Mrs Wyburn is vigilant over 'her talent at writing by which I have been a sufferer', pointing to the charm of her engaging pen. She bitterly points to Jackson's creativity: 'the warmth of her temper,... does not always permit her to confine herself to the strictest truth'.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to Mrs Wyburn's apprehension, the countess seems to have encouraged her to become an author. Lady Spencer's suggestion letter is still to be looked for, but Jackson's reply to her advice is telling that Spencer appreciated Jackson's adeptness:

Your Hint Madamn, of setting about some Work, has employd My thoughts ever since, as to Works of genius or Judgment, I have not courage to attempt or Vanity to think I shou'd succeed, as to those of fancy I shall endeavor, before I have quite lost the Use of my Hands,<sup>19</sup>

Although her pen seems to be running smoothly even when she begs money, she claims to prefer writing without any practical purpose: 'if your ladyship will order me to write a treatise on Nothing, ... I shall shine without a foil'.<sup>20</sup> She confides that she began to write fiction at the age of fourteen. She tells that she might do it a la Sterne. But in the end she takes pride in her modesty of abstaining from publication. In receding from the publication, she does not do it silently, but offers her negative opinion of the literary market of the day.

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<sup>17</sup>. July 16 1784, Althorp F140. Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire's novel *The Sylph* was published anonymously in 1779.

<sup>18</sup>. Mrs Wyburn to Lady Spencer, Dec 3 1782, Althorp 164.

<sup>19</sup>. November 25 1787, Althorp F141.

<sup>20</sup>. June 20 1785, Althorp F141.

She is critical of the literary market: 'everyone writes, & to have wrote a Book, No matter what Noncense it Contains, it sufficient to establish a Reputation'. If she should publish, she will 'dedicate them to the Men in the Moon, to avoid the Errors of some late Scribbles who have dedicated their Absurditys to the Most respectable Characters'.<sup>21</sup>

In this way she takes only a side glance at the publication world, though she was one of the potential authors. It was her choice not to become a professional writer. Instead, she earned Lady Spencer's benevolence by her pen. She was in her way 'living by the Pen': instead of exchanging her text and money in the book market, she chose to offer her writing in exchange for the allowance and attention in the site of personal charity. My assumption is that this is why Mary Jackson kept writing substantial letters regularly, like monthly instalments. Stopping writing was not just negligence or ingratitude but it meant abandoning her psuedo-writing-profession.

However, she knew that her writing was, as a letter, too long: in her words, 'one of the Excellences of writing is to comprise much in a few Words, which to your ladyship regret perhaps is not often the case with me, I usually multiply words'.<sup>22</sup> Her writerly desire to write was in conflict with her self-control of a charity-seeker, and she often begs pardon for her prolixity. What she thinks of as a solution to this problem is, ingeniously, to be a scribe. First she thinks of a scribe to her son: 'As an old soul like me, you know Madam, is of no Gender, I may with propriety offer my service if his lordship wants a faithful confidential scribe....'<sup>23</sup> A scribe would be confidentially involved in the family matters and would have to write, write, and write, (to his mother) without feeling guilty of writing too much. When she considers how to be near the countess, she first offers to be a cook but immediately rejects the idea herself, and then a fool, and she denies it as well, and then a scribe. She is fascinated with this idea: 'I think I shall be found to have Witt Enough to Write, if you will have the Goodness to dictate to me, that pleasure to transcribe your thoughts, will your ladyship think of that or something else

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<sup>21</sup>. May 8 1789, Althorp F141.

<sup>22</sup>. April 6 1789, Althorp F141.

<sup>23</sup>. February 13 1789, Althorp F141.

for me, let me be Useful in some shape'.<sup>24</sup> Any reply to these offers is not known. After all, the aged letter writer remained as a letter writer. Jackson lived for nearly twenty years after she got to know Spencer. During these years she asked Spencer to take care of her in various ways. In the last years, maybe because of Jackson's weakness, especially on account of her failing sight or maybe because of cooling down of their relationship, her letters were sent less frequent.

Spencer's charity papers include those letters from the barely literate with numerous misspellings and grammatical mistakes, but there are substantial amount of letters which emulate the style of literature. Applicants included those who had moderate or good education and probably had chance to read much, then reduced to distress and poverty. This kind of people who are at present devoid of proper clothes, bread, or coal appeal in the language of various types of literature, among which the voice and style of the virtuous and grateful weak were ubiquitous. They tell their life stories in detail to impress their being worthy petitioners and appeal to humane sensibility. They adopted such literary style understandably because they could easily identify themselves with the unfortunate in the novels who appeal to the sensibility of the reader as well as to the listener's compassion within the work. Moreover, they write on the assumption that the unfortunate and the privileged can communicate and share experience through the common language, the language of the heart. Although the attacks on sensibility were more in power in the world of literature at the end of the eighteenth-century, when these application letters were written, actual petitioners at this time were ready to resort to the sentimental techniques borrowed from novels when effective. It has been pointed out that the didactic nature of sentimental works and the writers' emphasis on instruction were based on the assumption of a close relationship between literature and real life. In discussing this, the instruction is mainly focused on the side of the recipients of the narrative; the sentimental work shows how to respond to the touching story and how to behave, how to be a compassionate person. However, the instruction must have reached the other

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<sup>24</sup> July 6 1789, Althorp F141.

side. The needy must have learned how to address to the respectable who were said to have most delicate sensibility and how to move them. Mary Jackson was one example of those who had acquired the exceptionally proficient narrative techniques and used it to earn her livelihood. Her resourceful literary stock included religious, satiric, sentimental, Gothic, and whatever was available to her.