

**MRS BIRKBECK'S ALBUM: THE HAND-WRITTEN AND THE PRINTED
IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMININE CULTURE**

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On the 25th December 1826, George Birkbeck, successful doctor, busy lecturer and founder of the London Mechanics' Institution (now Birkbeck College),¹ wrote a long letter to John Britton, antiquary and lecturer on the history of architecture at the Institution.

My dear Sir,

In consequence of your recommendation of Mr Behnes as an artist, I gave him at some inconvenience a great number of sittings. [...] In the course of his visits Mrs Birkbeck spoke of her Album, in which he undertook to induce some of his poetical friends to write and for which purpose he took the book with him [...]. Subsequently Mrs Birkbeck has wanted the book, which is of some value especially as containing some contributions from her friends, and has written to him for it without effect. I have also written and received no answer, and we have sent a messenger about half a dozen times in vain, and our only hope of recovering the book rests in your kind interference, as he probably will not run the risk of losing your friendship by such obstinate conduct.²

Mrs Birkbeck recovered her album and carried on working on it into her old age. It is now a rare example of an early-nineteenth-century album to survive intact and with a well-documented provenance.³ Recently rediscovered in the archives of Birkbeck College, and now valuable especially for an unpublished manuscript poem by Mary Shelley, the album has been described as 'a fascinating insight into the life and activities of the literary, artistic and diplomatic circles of Regency London and beyond'.⁴ According to George Birkbeck's biographer, the album, 'with its sentimental verses and its delicate paintings of birds and flowers, is a pleasant period piece'.⁵

Recent publications have explored the figure of the woman reader, and the emergence of women's magazines during the nineteenth century,⁶ but little or no consideration has been given to the practice of album making, beyond a study of the individual genres featured in them - poetry, water-colours, or, later, photographs. Yet album-making was an important aspect of the feminine culture of the time. As George Birkbeck's letter shows, this album was of some importance to the family, not only to Mrs Birkbeck personally. Its value might be described as

personal and sentimental, yet these ‘contributions from her friends’ warranted pulling strings obtained through professional and cultural associations. The same mixture of friendship and patronage also provided the networks and relationships through which the album’s material was gathered.

Anna Birkbeck, née Gardner, daughter of a Liverpool merchant, was the second wife of George Birkbeck, whom she married in 1817. The album is a leather-bound volume, 250 pages long, measuring approximately 28 by 21 centimetres. On the title page the word ‘Album’ is printed surrounded by a roundel with the name of its owner, ‘Mrs G. Birkbeck,’ and the date ‘September MDCCCXXV’. A small, brightly-painted watercolour of an oak tree with a rose and a rope has been painstakingly cut around each indented oak leaf and pasted onto the page (fig.1).

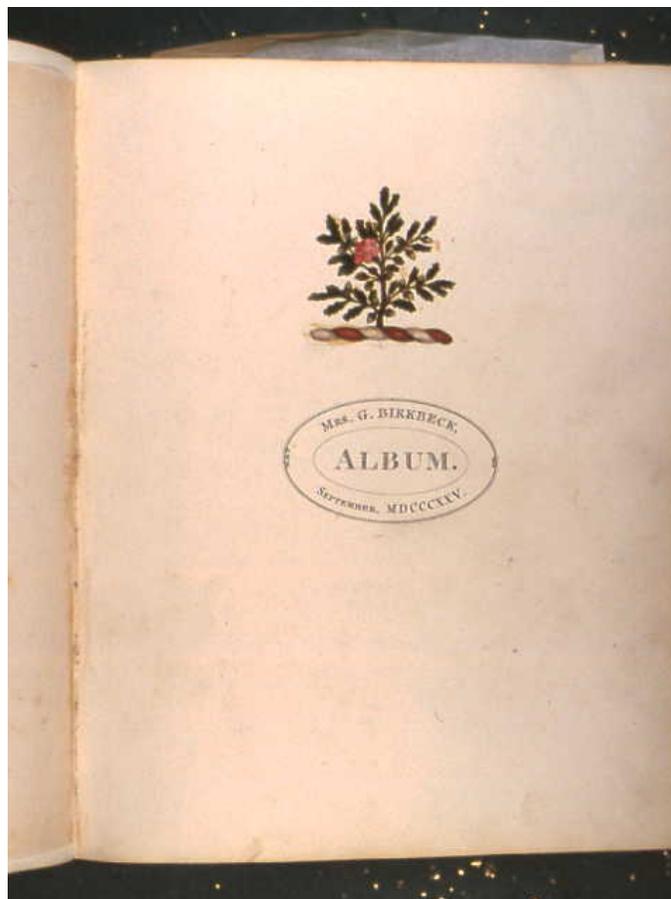


Figure 1.

On the reverse of the front endpaper, a watercolour of a waterfall further illustrates the beginning of the album, with references to flowing and rushing away (the waterfall), beauty and love (the rose) and ties that bind (the rope). The next item, on an unnumbered page, also dated September 1825, is a watercolour of a child working a flower chain, captioned by verses beginning ‘and its fragrance ne’er pass away’, another reference to both permanence and impermanence (fig.2).



Figure 2.

Described as a ‘Commonplace and autograph book’ by Janet Foster, an independent Archives Consultant,⁷ the album contains contributions by famous women and men of the time, collected from 1825 to circa 1847. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) the author of *Frankenstein* (1818), contributed a poem ‘The Death of Love’ on the 19 November 1830 (figs. 3 and 4);⁸ Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802 - 1838), celebrated writer of poetry, fiction, and literary reviews, two ‘Songs’ (23-27); Emma Roberts (1794-1840), poet and travel writer, and a friend of Landon’s, two long poems (30-31; 106-107); the social reformer Robert Owen (1771-1858) signed a short sentence: ‘The character of man is without a single exception formed for him’ (127).

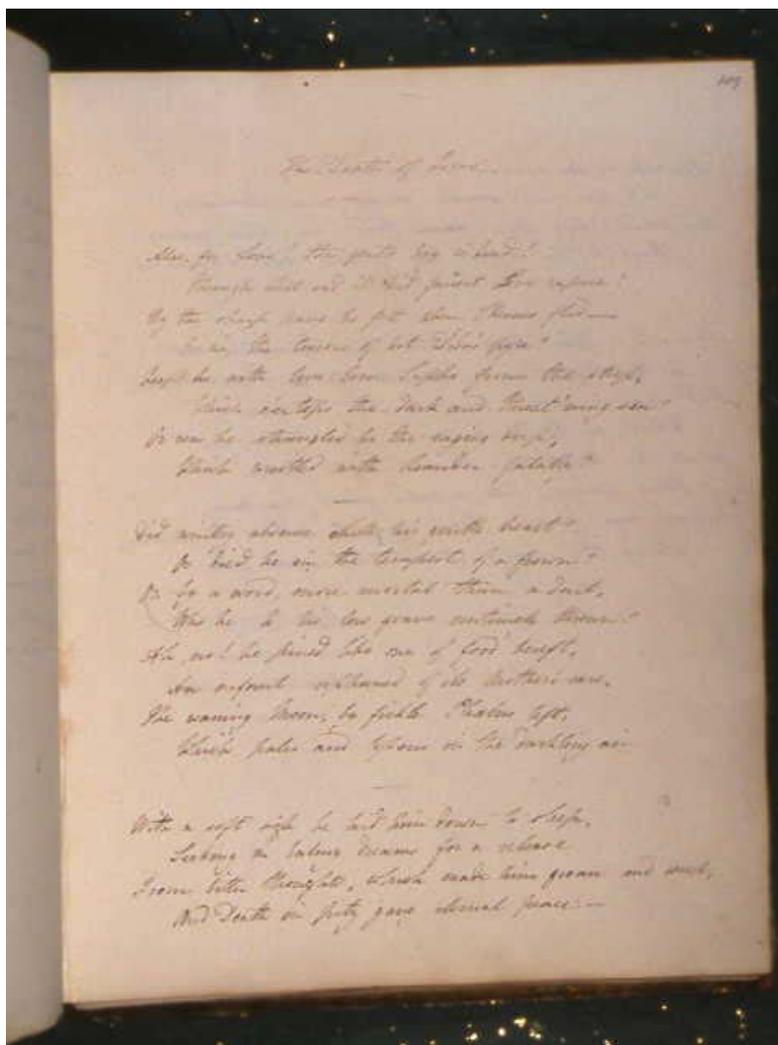


Figure 3.

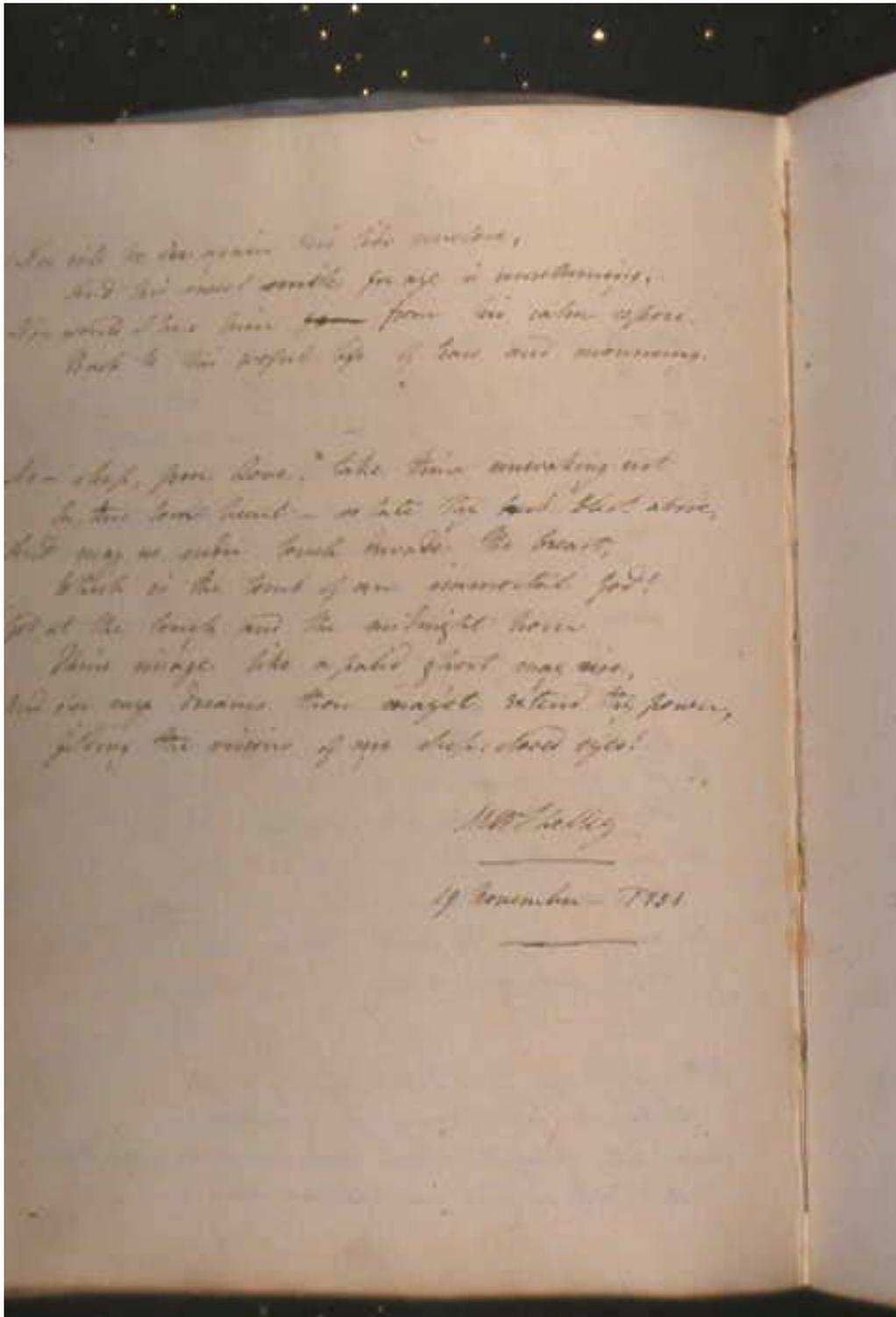


Figure 4.

The album has an international flavour. The Italian poet Guido Sorelli, translator of Milton, contributed some verses (57). His earlier poem, 'The Plague', had been translated into English by Julia Pardoe (1806-1862), a romantic writer on oriental themes, whose verses also appear in the album (121).⁹ There are also contributions in Arabic, French and Russian. Various artists, including a Royal Academician, 'JHR' (13), contributed drawings and watercolours.

Several entries are dated in the weeks just before George Birkbeck's letter to John Britton, presumably by Behnes's poetical friends: some 'Lines' and a 'Sonnet' by Eliza Louisa Emmerson dated 'Dec. 18 1826'; and a poem dedicated 'To the Lady of Dr George Birkbeck MD' by Thomas Gent, penned in November of the same year.

Lady unknown! A pilgrim from the shrine of Poetry's fair Temple brings a wreath
which fame, and gratitude alike entwine around a name that charms the monster
Death and bids him pause. (19)

Mr Behnes himself later contributed a drawing of a cherub statue surrounded by doves, signed and dated '1847' (49). The last pages of the album are dedicated solely to autographs, signed directly onto the pages. Henry Brougham (First Lord Brougham and Vaux, 1778-1868), a friend of Dr Birkbeck since their days at Edinburgh University, signed the album more than once.¹⁰ According to Kelly, the second occasion was on his last visit to the Birkbeck's house, when George was seriously ill, and his wife asked him 'to inscribe his name once more in her album'.¹¹

I became interested in Mrs Birkbeck's album while working on nineteenth-century photographic albums, as an example predating the diffusion of photographs. Like many other nineteenth-century women's albums, Mrs Birkbeck's at once suggests and constructs a rich network of social and cultural contacts, whose histories, meanings and connotations cannot be fully analysed without not only an interdisciplinary approach, but also expertise - on the literary and art scenes of the time, on diplomatic and women's history, on visual and print cultures - best provided by a team. It is to facilitate this kind of interdisciplinary team work on the album that I am working towards photographing and digitising the album, in the spirit of intellectual networks embodied by the album itself.¹²

Transcribing and researching individual items within the album, however, should not be at the expense of the meanings of the album as a whole. This poses the question of precisely how albums generate meanings. Are these created by the authors who have contributed individual entries to the album, or by Mrs Birkbeck as the collector or ‘curator’ of the album as a whole? Are we to see the album as the statement of an author, perhaps as a form of informal or private written speech, like diaries; or as evidence of a reading practice, of how one particular woman read, copied, contributed or sought contributions of texts and images? Literary studies and studies of the social production of art have de-centred the figure of the author, ‘now understood as constructed in language, ideology and social relations’,¹³ and emphasised instead the function of the reader as defined by Roland Barthes: ‘the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost’.¹⁴ In this respect, albums are particularly interesting, poised as they are between being a reading and a writing practice. They offer evidence of texts (visual and verbal) having been read or looked at in a particular context, that of the album pages, within specific sequences and juxtapositions; but also in the context of the domestic rituals in which albums were used. As a writing practice, albums are, like all texts, ‘not a line of words’ (or images), ‘but a multi - dimensional space in which a variety of writings none of them original blend and clash’ (146). Assembled from heterogeneous sources, albums seem to emphasise this multidimensionality, to make visible their nature - or indeed the nature of all texts - as ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’ (146).

Defined by their blankness (from the Latin *albus*, white), albums belong to a broad category of containers of miscellaneous items, such as repositories, cabinets, and magazines, defined by what is placed in them. Unlike museums, galleries, histories or encyclopaedias, which could also be defined as containers of miscellaneous items, albums impose little taxonomic order or value on their contents. In ancient Rome, an *albo*, a blank tablet, was used to enter notices to be exhibited for the benefit of the public; the head of the principal college of priests wrote his annals in an album, and in time the term was used to describe lists of official names. In the nineteenth century the term was still used for the official list of people matriculated from a University, and for the roll in which a Bishop listed his clergy.¹⁵ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word was used in the English language from the mid-

seventeenth century to describe a blank book in which visitors to a country houses, for example, or friends were invited to contribute signatures or short pieces of writing, often of a learned or poetic nature. It would seem that, in general terms, to be inscribed in an album was a sign of belonging to or participating in a community of fellows, defined by intellectual, religious, geographical or sentimental connections. The word was also used to describe published collections of verses, such as ‘The Album of Cashiobury House’.¹⁶ By the nineteenth century, albums were used to collect music, songs, poetry, sketches, watercolours, prints and autographs of celebrated people, as well as any other flat and lightweight souvenirs. The word could be used to describe an initially blank book, filled in by hand to become a one-off individual collection, or a commercially printed and published anthology of texts, images, and / or music, by one or more authors.

Anne Higonnet traces the origins of more personal albums, like Mrs Birkbeck’s, to the Romantic period.¹⁷ Their content, associated with an individual rather than an institution or a location, was up to the person making or collecting them, and the practice was seen as predominantly feminine and with aristocratic connotations. Men also compiled albums, but these were usually associated with specific professional endeavours. Artists, for example, made albums of drawings and coloured sketches, and musicians published albums of music. It is, however, difficult to generalise. Mary Ellen Best (1809-1891) filled her albums, now split into individual pages, only with watercolours. These recorded her life, her circle of friends and acquaintances, the places she visited, the rooms she inhabited, but were also part of her work as an artist, an activity she performed both as a wealthy amateur and as a professional painter, especially of portraits.¹⁸ Generally, the contents and authorship of women’s albums were heterogeneous. Images and texts could be originals by the album’s owner or her circle of friends, or copies, again made by herself or by other people. Also popular was cut paper work, in which intricate patterns designed by the author or copied, were cut from plain coloured paper and pasted onto album pages. By the mid-nineteenth century, mass-produced prints and images from printed ephemera were cut out and pasted on a variety of suitable surfaces, including albums. This practice was also known as *découpage*.¹⁹

My aim in this paper is not to provide a close reading of individual images and texts in the Birkbeck album, but to use it to explore the social meanings of an interest in visual and

textual culture, in the wife of a doctor in early nineteenth-century London. To do this, we need to consider the album as part of a feminine culture (and a culture of femininity) constructed by and through the image of the 'lady', as Mrs Birkbeck is addressed in many of the album entries, as a high-ranking woman with the means and the time to pursue cultural and social interests. This image was desirable because of its aristocratic and elite connotations, even as it was ambiguous in terms of class. *Lady* could be used to indicate a titled aristocrat, wife or daughter of a Peer or a Baronet, as well as a woman of sufficient wealth, education and taste to behave like one.²⁰

In his study of *Class in Britain*, David Cannadine shows that in the nineteenth century, group distinctions by class (upper, middle, and lower or working class) did not replace individual distinctions by rank, but rather one model overlaid the other.²¹ Even when the language of class was added to that of rank, it was often used in the plural - the middling classes. As these expanded and gained economic and political power, they also diversified in terms of wealth, culture, modes of living, and social aspirations - or, to use a nineteenth-century concept, in terms of rank. Wealthy, well educated merchants and professionals, who often were or became connected to the gentry, would have enough money, culture and time to socialise with the aristocracy, pursue political ambitions and even hopes for a title. At the other end of the scale, shopkeepers and bureaucrats, having just about enough education, manners and servants to consider themselves ladies and gentlemen, often had to struggle hard to keep up a lifestyle appropriate to such a definition. Trollope's novels, for example, often represent middle-class professionals as keen to differentiate themselves socially, in terms of rank, from people involved in trade, even though they were equally middle-class, and just as wealthy.²² Religious and political affiliations further fragmented class cohesion, fostering vertical allegiances up and down the social scale, as represented for example in the Birkbeck album, joining in its polite, radical community members of the aristocracy, professionals and intellectuals making a living from their work, and commercial gentlemen such as antique dealers. Album making and collecting was one of the attributes of a lady's femininity, or of a lady-like femininity potentially available to all women. As such, it was eagerly taken up and re-presented by a mass culture keen to service the general desire to know about genteel life styles, and so circulated to an audience that included middle-class women.

The entries in Mrs Birkbeck's collection which address the topic of the album itself reveal a certain familiarity with the activity and the expectations of the genre. They sometimes show a certain ambivalence. To be asked to contribute meant to be singled out as an individual worth remembering and celebrating, but also to be imposed on with an obligation to produce something on command. To be asked to write or draw in an album seems to have been part of a common culture of politeness and exchange. Mr Behnes, for example, was not the only one to prove tardy in his fulfilment of a promise to Mrs Birkbeck to provide items for her album. John Thelwall (1764-1834), noted romantic writer and radical reformer, and a teacher at the Mechanics' Institution on literary subjects,²³ apologised in the form of a poem for not having written something earlier:

A poet's wit is not his own [...]
 "Twas friendship's debt" in vain I said
 "And to a Lady due"
 But fancy slept; and wit was fled,
 and would not take the cue.
 So "blank the album page must be"
 [...]
 but here my offering late I send
 if it be worth accepting.(51-55)

This is followed by a poem titled 'The Offering', illustrated with a watercolour of a plinth inscribed 'To Mrs Birkbeck', supporting a lyre and a wreath of flowers, set amongst overgrown nature (fig. 5). At the end of 'The Offering' there is an Italian poem by F. Bozelli, about roses and stolen kisses (55). The Italian theme continues on the next page with verses by Guido Sorelli, (56) and a coloured print or watercolour of an ancient Roman cup, cut out and pasted onto a piece of embossed card (fig.6). In the album, poems, drawings, flowers and cups all become offerings due to a lady, gifts attesting to the rank and value of her femininity and individuality, rather than her precise social classification as the wife of a doctor. But this meaning is represented lightly, without great insistence or ponderousness, as befitting a lady's demeanour in polite society. Thus, some entries address the topic humorously, as in this 'Charm' by William Jerdan:²⁴

In an album tis pleasant to write
 as anything does very well
 but to me this does not respite(?) quite
 not yet having learned to spell. (99)

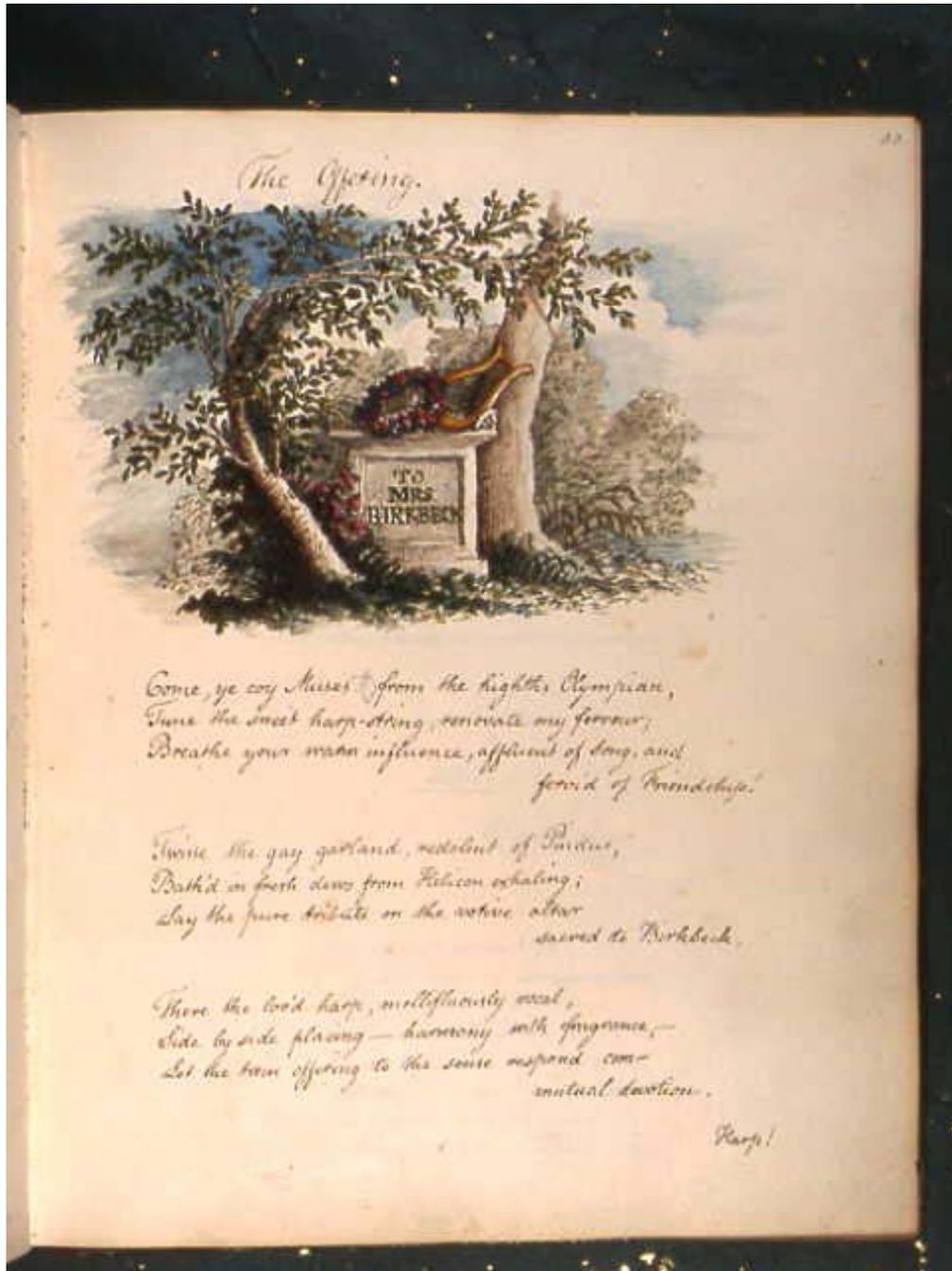


Figure 5.

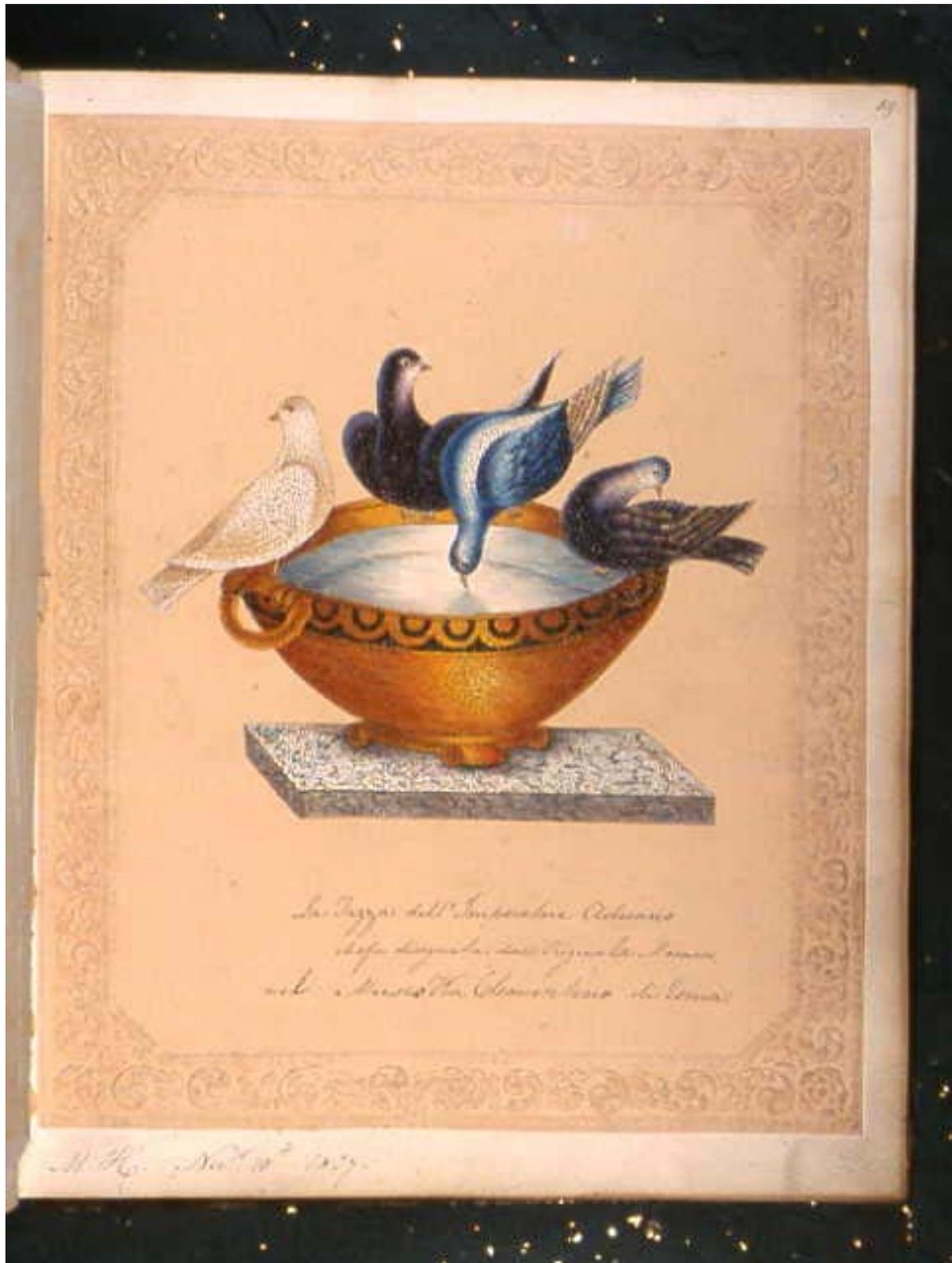


Figure 6.

Some are more earnest, such as ‘An Album’ by John Britton, who compares it to:

a quilt of patchwork [which] consists of various miscellaneous pieces of different hues and qualities, but jointly combining to make a pleasing and useful whole. Each is contributed to give exercise to the fancy in its composition and arrangement, and each will offer amusement to the eye when completed. [I]n the formation of the Album there is much wider scope for the mind - a more intellectual occupation; whilst it keeps up a constant and rational excitement during its progress, it becomes a repository for the most endearing sentiments of friendship, and affection. In its diversified features are found the fanciful effusions of poesy - the more steady, simple, unfettered language of prose; - the admirable and universal language of art, in delineating the scenery and flowing robes of nature, [and] ‘the human face divine’. (146-147)

Many entries in the album reflect a romantic taste for poetry about love, beauty and their passing: ‘Go, blossoming rose! Inform the lovely maid / For beauty like thy own, will soon decay!’;²⁵ and for the melancholic longings associated with the cult of sensibility that had been fashionable since the end of the eighteenth century. George Birkbeck himself seems to have had a taste for these, as we can see from some verses by him which have been pasted into the album, perhaps after his death:

Where’er thy lot - in hall or bower,
On Cambria’s hills, in Grecia’s tower,
in England’s loveliest vales,
Thy gentle Spirit! Bright and kind,
A moment midst its joys may find,
when memory’s power prevails.
Then, *should thy beaming eye these traces see,*
though absent long, and far away, thou’lt think on me. (my emphasis).

This poem, written by George Birkbeck when he was young, is pasted on page eight of the album, together with a printed card of the ‘Order of Procession for the Funeral of Dr Birkbeck,’ 13 December 1841. It is not known if the poem was dedicated to a real person, or if it was just an exercise.²⁶ Its position next to the funerary card makes it a poignant set of ‘traces’ for his wife to remember him by, when her ‘beaming eye’ sees them. The poem can in a sense be seen as a key to reading the whole album: hand-written texts, drawings, water-colours and signatures are there not only for their literary and visual merits, or because of the social significance of the

people who have so marked the album, but are above all inscribed into Mrs Birkbeck's album as belonging to her circle of friends and acquaintances. Looking through the album was meant to be at once amusing to the eye and rewarding to the intellect, but above all to give the 'bright and kind' spirits of Mrs Birkbeck and her visitors an occasion to let 'memory's power' prevail.

The themes in the album are varied. Romantic, sentimental and melancholy themes in the album are associated with and punctuated by recurring tributes to Dr Birkbeck for his endeavours in the cause of science and the diffusion of knowledge, and by the sobering contributions left by men and women associated with radical reforms and liberal political circles. Lord Brougham, for example, had been active in the passing of the bill to abolish slavery and was an important Whig politician associated with political reform. Tributes to Birkbeck include one by Sir John Bowring (1792-1872) linguist, diplomat, editor of the *Westminster Review* and of Jeremy Bentham's writings, a radical philosopher and one of the founders of the London Mechanics' Institution.²⁷

It is not known if Mrs Birkbeck herself sketched any of the images in the album, or which were copies and which original contributions from artists she knew. Images from a repertoire that was typical of feminine taste, such as portraits and genre vignettes of women, on their own, with men, animals or children,²⁸ are placed in a wider visual context, which includes classical nudes, picturesque locations and the occasional humorous vignette. Thus on page fifteen we find a black ink and sepia wash drawing of a woman sitting under a tree, whose reading has been interrupted by two children she is now cuddling and kissing, signed 'by Corbould' and dated June 1837. On page 165, there is a watercolour by R.J. Stotland, of a young man in ancient roman dress unveiling a statue of a seated woman (or, possibly, a skeleton) crowned with flowers, followed on page 167 by a watercolour titled 'The Sketch 1741', but dated 1841, which depicts two women on a neo-classical terrace by a park. One is sitting sketching; the other is standing next to her, looking down and gesturing towards the sketchpad; in the background two gentlemen step up from the park towards them (fig.7). An interest in sculpture is also shown by a pencil drawing by Bailly, of a female nude sculpture lying down on the rough marble she has been sculpted from (fig.8). A taste for the picturesque is represented, for example, in a watercolour by 'Emery' of Crummock Lake (179), and a view of

the interior of a Breton church by Mr Moon (193). Towards the end of the album, a humorous watercolour shows a man wearing a university gown, asleep by a table covered with many empty bottles, in a room strewn with a violin, globe, books and pens. Two cherubs are trying to pierce his heart. The background is rendered as clouds with black and white vignettes, representing his dreams: boxing, fishing, horse-riding, hunting. The caption reads: 'HEART STEALING - can't get at it!' (fig.9).



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

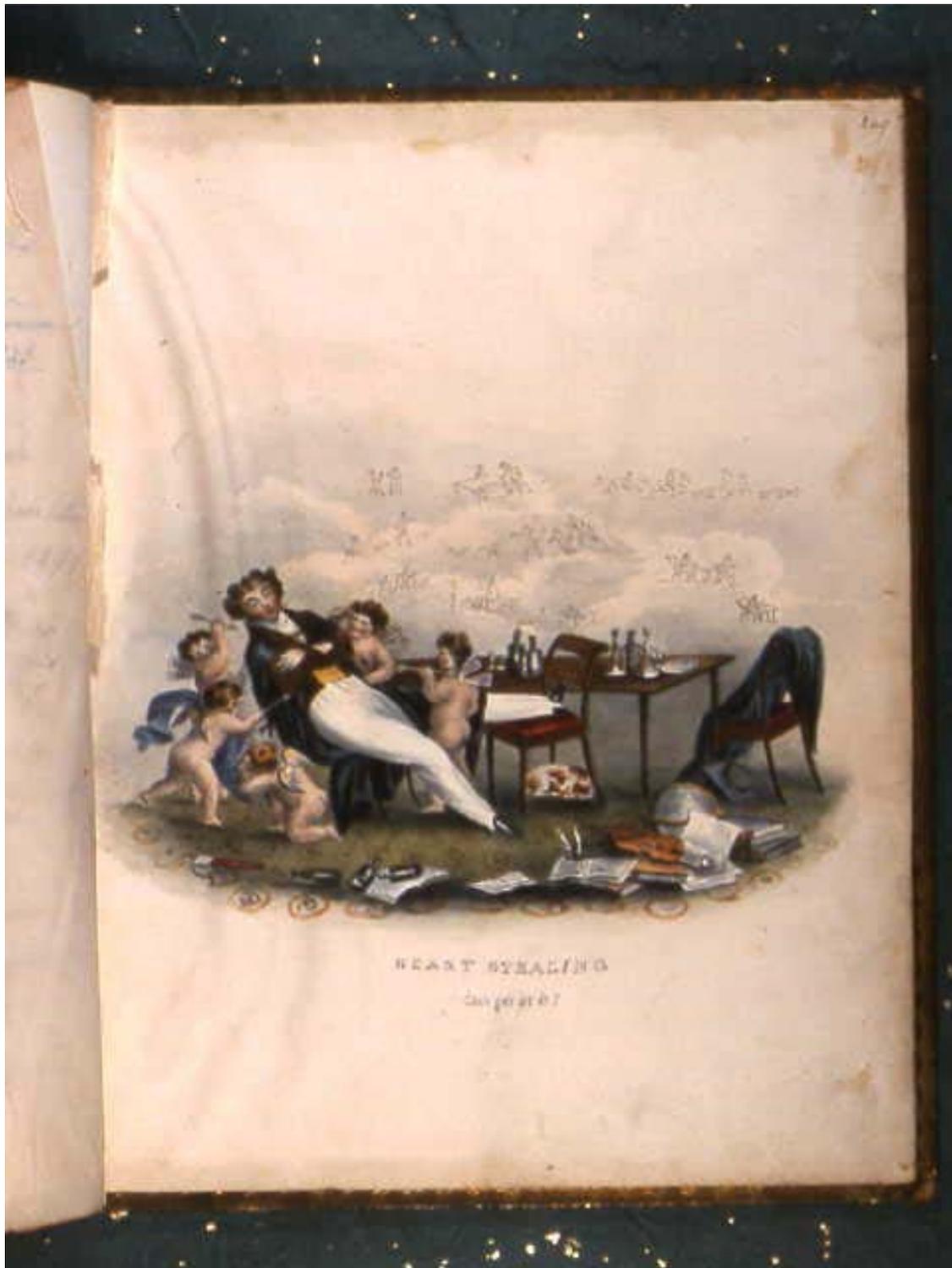


Figure 9.

I.

The female collector

In her study of women's albums, Higonet argues that a tradition of women making albums using their drawing and watercolour skills was replaced during the nineteenth century by the use of commercial images in the form of mass-produced prints and photographs. This however neglects the fact that women's collections had always mixed material that was bought or commissioned from professionals, with items that were made by the women themselves or by friends.²⁹

Stella Tillyard, in her biography of the Lennox sisters, self-defined women of fashion, belonging to the highest aristocratic and political circles in eighteenth-century England and Ireland, gives us a taste of the collecting activities of such women.³⁰ Avid readers of the latest books from England and France, assiduous writers and collectors of elegant letters, they read, wrote and collected poetry and verses, which they also exchanged with family and friends, some of whom were gifted poets.³¹ Caroline and her husband Henry Fox, Whig politician, later 1st Lord Holland, amassed a large library at Holland House, which included complete sets of works by Rousseau, Voltaire and Sterne and prints by Hogarth. As well as books and letters, Caroline Fox collected porcelain and paintings. She organised the existing family paintings, commissioned many more portraits, in particular from Reynolds, and arranged them in the picture gallery at Holland House, which she and her husband used extensively to entertain friends and as part of his political career. As well as celebrated artists, the collection also included works by her friends, such as Lady Bolingbroke, who was a talented painter. The collection thus visualised not only their marriage, ancestors, and his successful career, but also her network of friends.

Caroline's younger sister Louisa Conolly, married into a family of more modest means, collected instead prints in her Print Room and in the Long Gallery at her house at Castletown in Ireland.³² She asked her sisters, wealthier and closer to London, centre of the art trade, to buy prints for her, and asked her nephews on the grand tour to send her prints from Italy. She copied others herself from books and folios in her own or relations' libraries. On the walls of Louisa's print room were portraits of notable ancestors and relations (for example, a print from Reynolds's painting of her sister, *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces*, which hung in

Caroline's picture gallery), as well as images reflecting cultural and political interests (portraits of Garrick, the actor, and of Pitt the Younger) and upper-class pursuits (hunting, playing cards, flirting). These were interspersed with genre images illustrating familial and maternal bliss, or conveying moral messages and hints of mortality. For the long gallery at Castletown, which Luisa transformed into a fashionably informal living room, she used the same collecting and decorative scheme, but commissioned Mr Reily, a painter who specialised in such commissions, to copy prints, chosen by herself and her sister Sarah, onto oil panels, which were hung on the wall interspersed with portrait busts and decorative scrolls and swaggings copied directly onto the wall. Collecting demonstrated that the Lennox sisters had the economic means to purchase or commission such articles, and also access to a network of family, friends, and patronage that enabled them to do so. Mixing and arranging purchased and commissioned works with items made by friends, relations or by themselves demonstrated that they had taste and knowledge of the fine arts. It showed that they had the time and cultural means to cultivate their taste not only as consumers but also as practising amateurs - disinterested art lovers whose taste and choices were not hampered by the economic necessities associated with practising as a professional, and whose interest in collecting went beyond the need to showcase wealth.³³ Whether in libraries, print rooms, or in the smaller space of the album, women's collections often combined material from different sources and in a variety of media. Items could be hand-made or mechanically reproduced, original or copied. Social, visual and conceptual skills, necessary to obtain material, select it and arrange it, were as valued as the more manual accomplishments of drawing and painting.

As John Brewer and Ian Pears show, in the eighteenth-century cultural pursuits became important in English culture, as softening political and religious extremism, and promoting dialogue and forms of conviviality or exchange.³⁴ This domain could also overcome barriers of class and rank, but only insofar as the people concerned had a degree of common education, and enjoyed a level of ease from financial pursuits. In this culture of politeness, the concept of the collection evolved not just as the accumulation of individual pieces, but as a form of self expression, bound by rules of taste but nevertheless 'a form of creation through the process of selective acquisition'.³⁵ Collecting might be another form of upper-class conspicuous consumption, but unlike, for example, gambling or keeping horses, it carried specific meanings

associated with the formation of a cultured, cultivated taste, and its display for the benefit of one's own family, and any visitors. Collecting, in so far as it involved sharing one's good taste with other people, was considered a virtuous interest.

In this context, we can see Mrs Birkbeck's album as a miniaturised and compressed version of the kind of collections more wealthy and aristocratic women were able to spread over drawing rooms, picture galleries, libraries and specialised print rooms. The album formed and displayed her taste, and showcased her husband's reputation, not only for selfish satisfaction, but also for the benefit of her family and visitors.

Anna and George Birkbeck both came from merchant families from the North of England. George's ancestors were a typical example of a middle-class Quaker family, who rose in wealth and education, and used an active interest in cultural and philanthropic works, supported by well managed incomes, to mix with people higher up the social scale. George's professional life in London was divided between teaching at the London Mechanics' Institution, and working as a doctor, which was a more reliable source of income. Anna, who was not a Quaker, seems to have had some religious and cultural influence on the family, as all their children, including George's son from his previous marriage, were baptised into the Church of England. Anna started her album in what seems to have been a good year for the family. Dr Birkbeck's profile as a public man had been growing since the founding of the Mechanics' Institution, and in 1825 its commercial stability had allowed it to open a new lecture theatre, a ceremony attended not only by middle-class reformers, but also by the Duke of Sussex, the King's brother, giving the place an air of Royal sanction if not official support. Other titled supporters included the Marquis of Lansdowne and Lord Henry Brougham, who continued to give the Institution a gloss of aristocratic connection by attending the yearly prize giving ceremony. Dr Birkbeck, always a member of various scientific societies, became more interested in the arts, helping in the setting up of the National Repository, an initiative of the Society of Arts, to organise an annual exhibition of English art and manufacturing.³⁶ He moved in learned and aristocratic circles interested in the pursuit and diffusion of knowledge and the arts. Notwithstanding the arrival of a baby every two years to a total of six children, his home life was becoming more prosperous and genteel, with acquisitions of a country residence at Forty Hills, near Enfield, to complement his town house in the well-to-do Finsbury Square area,

near the wealthy merchant families who still lived in the city in the earlier part of the nineteenth century.³⁷

The album can be seen as representing, in the heart of the Birkbeck's home, the social, cultural and political circles in which the couple moved. With its combination of romantic verses by celebrated women writers, references to the fine arts and antiquities, and contributions from an international set of learned individuals and liberal or radical reformers, the album seems to harmonise feminine romanticism, sentimentality and beauty, with the more masculine and enlightened pursuits of knowledge and political endeavours. The album constructs the Birkbecks as members of an international, urbane, liberal, cultured elite of people of good taste, balancing knowledge and sense with a fashionable interest in sensibility.

II.

The lady as a woman of taste

Since the eighteenth century, the concept of taste was important as an index of rank, education and breeding, even as it could also transcend all of them, because supposed to be innate. Good taste became a common ground between aristocracy, gentry, and the rising ranks of the educated middle classes. It could also, however, be used to construct differences: between truly cultivated taste and recently acquired, superficial mannerism; between spiritually valuable displays and the merely ostentatious; between true gentility and the pretensions of upstarts, rakes or fops. A fine and delicate inner sensibility, the basic requirement for a person of taste, needed to be cultivated through constant exposure to the cultural forms that had been already selected by other people of taste. As a badge of distinction, taste was potentially available to everyone, but in practice it needed a degree of education, time and financial means, beyond the reach of many middle-class individuals. This concern with taste as a signifier of gentility was accompanied by a growing interest in arts. Poetry, painting and music became established as *the* fine arts of taste; they managed to maintain the connotation of a minority, elite interest even when they were circulated through books and engravings. The ability to understand and demonstrate taste became crucial, because it indicated an exposure to culture over a period of time in a variety of experiences and settings. Unlike fortunes and clothes, taste could not be acquired quickly.

The participation of women to the public sphere of culture and the discourse of taste - as readers, audiences at the theatre, collectors of prints, or purchasers of paintings and items of decorative arts - raised, however, anxieties about women's neglect of their domestic duties, to indulge in excessive consumption. This could fill women's heads with fancies and romantic desires that were above their station in life, making home life dull, and women vulnerable to moral corruption. This corruption seemed a particular threat to women if cultural consumption was too exclusively associated with its commercialised forms, in other words if it took place through buying. It was less of a threat if this consumption was accompanied by a direct, personal involvement with the objects of culture. Making, decorating and arranging beautiful objects, drawing in albums, cutting out frames for prints, or copying verses in beautiful calligraphy, sheltered women from the charge of an extravagant and potentially corrupting interest in purely commercialised forms of culture. Throughout the nineteenth-century, this personal, tactile involvement with decorative objects remained a powerful index of women's gentility, and an important impetus to the pursuit of feminine accomplishments.

The eighteenth-century concern with the vulnerability of polite society to moral and economic corruption was combined with romantic notions of sensibility, which became fashionable in the later part of the century. Sensibility was seen as a truer indicator of individual value than polite conduct, and as a quality best cultivated in more private and intimate circles away from the hustle and bustle of fashionable places. Romanticism and the related cult of sensibility were particularly crucial in establishing the private sphere as the setting for the true realisation of personal interiority, through activities and interactions based on authenticity of feelings rather than performances put on for fashionable considerations and in the interest of social ambition. Drawing rooms, rather than commercial assembly rooms, became increasingly important as the preferred meeting ground for men and women of polite society.³⁸ In this setting, women's accomplishments became an even more important part of polite culture. As Bermingham discusses in her analysis of the image of the accomplished woman on the marriage market, to meet people in public places of relaxation, entertainment and cultural pursuits became associated with the risk of mistaking fake fortunes and assumed manners for real material or spiritual worth. At the same time, domestic locations were constructed as the spaces of authentic subjectivity by eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century culture. In this

context, women's consumption of culture collapsed into the commodification of themselves as culture, to be exhibited in domestic spaces, used to entertain guests. Accomplishments allowed women 'to perform their subjectivity through certain allotted modes of artistic expression'.³⁹ After marriage, the income provided by a successful husband would allow women to use their accomplishments as a civilising, polite influence on men returning home from the competitive world of work, commerce and politics.⁴⁰

Anna Birkbeck's nineteenth-century album constructs her participation in a world of culture that still involves her in a public sphere of books, magazines, exhibitions, parliamentary debates and political activism. But her participation is constructed as being based on individual encounters and across personal exchanges. The album publicises the interiority of the woman of the house by making it visible. However personal, and unlike diaries, albums have no particular connotations of secrecy. They represent culture as performed in a private sphere, but for display to friends and visitors. The *private* here signals not only the domestic nature of the space in which the album is worked on and exhibited, but also the personal, non-commercial exchanges between the album collector and the people whose traces (as signatures, handwritten poems, or drawings) are collected. It is important, for example, that all the autographs are penned directly onto the album pages, not pasted in, as this shows that they were not bought from autograph dealers, but were the result of personal contacts and gift exchanges. This distinction between private and public, however, rather than being a clear demarcation between spaces (the domestic versus the commercial, the private house versus the public market place or place of work) and spheres (the feminine versus the masculine) is a shifting, fluid boundary. A house is private, in that only selected visitors and callers are allowed in; within the house, some rooms are public because they are used to receive visitors. Albums are public declarations, but in the case of women's albums, they are shown only to selected audiences chosen from visitors to the house. Just as class was not a matter of simple economic or social distinctions, but was instead conceptualised as a complex structure of ranks, stations, and small shifts in social and cultural behaviour, so private and public, rather than clearly divided and defined spheres, were also a matter of degrees and nuances.⁴¹

Compiling albums, like collecting paintings and prints, meant taking part in a culture of collecting (albeit in a modest form) associated with elite lifestyles.⁴² It aimed to demonstrate

knowledge of current definitions of what was tasteful, but also to show a degree of individuality and creativity in selecting, combining and displaying the material collected. Anna Birkbeck's album is inflected, for example, by her family connections with a political elite, which gave her individual access to people like Robert Owen and Mary Shelley, over and above the access that any member of the interested public could have had by buying their books or by reading about them. Like picture galleries and print rooms in houses, collections in albums were in an ambiguous space, both domestic and private (the home) and partially in the public domain - intended to be seen by visitors. As George Birkbeck's letter, at the beginning of this paper, shows, albums could circulate and be seen by contributors beyond the immediate circle of visitors to the house.

III.

Albums as printed media

As we have seen in the preceding sections, Anna Birkbeck's album can be understood as drawing on an upper-class tradition of feminine collecting, transforming it in size and format, and introducing meanings which were relevant to her specific status and cultural position in early nineteenth-century society. But to further understand the connotations of her album, we need to examine it in relation to the way in which the printed media represented and appropriated feminine collecting practices.

Throughout the nineteenth century, women's albums were represented in the press and illustrated women's magazines as possessions and gifts suitable for Queens and aristocratic women. In 1838, for example, *The Times* thought it worth reporting that the Duchess Alexandre of Wurtenber had been able to find 'an album and jewel case like those she lost by fire'.⁴³ Throughout the century, newspapers as well as women's magazines reported the gifts of albums to Queen Victoria and other Royal princesses or high-ranking women, as important moments in the course of official visits at home or abroad.⁴⁴

These representations confirmed the association of women's albums with aristocratic collecting practices. These associations were, from around the 1825 onwards, also exploited by commercial printers, who started producing ready-made heterogeneous compilations of images and texts, not unlike Mrs Birkbeck's album in their mix of visual and textual material. Often

collectively known as annuals, these were part portfolio of prints, part anthologies of poems and short prose and part periodical. Most of these illustrated publications came out annually, towards the end of the year, to coincide with the market for New Year gifts. An important sector of the rapidly expanding market for prints and illustrations, they mixed on the drawing room table with albums made by the woman of the house.

With titles such as *Forget-Me-Not*,⁴⁵ *Pictorial Album*,⁴⁶ and *Drawing Room Scrap Book*,⁴⁷ these were seen as a particularly feminine genre. Popular variants were the *Book of Beauty*,⁴⁸ and the *Court Album*,⁴⁹ which specialised in portraits of aristocratic women or Queens and other worthy women from history, accompanied by short biographical texts. Collectively referred to as 'Gift Books', 'Drawing Room Books' or 'Picture Books' in reviews and adverts, these were early versions of today's coffee table books. Portraits; genre vignettes featuring women or children; women in exotic or rural costumes and locations; and picturesque landscapes and ruins; were the staple imagery of the illustrations, which were considered more important than the text. Textual material included short stories often based around the lifestyles of the aristocracy; descriptive texts, typically of foreign locations and exotic lifestyles; biographical pieces on the women portrayed; and poems intended to 'illustrate' the visual material. The most popular title in the first part of the nineteenth century was probably the *Keepsake*, published by Charles Heath between 1828 and 1857, and imitated by many other publications which used the word in their own titles as a byword for an elegant feminine illustrated book, to the extent that the word also became used to describe the whole genre.⁵⁰ The defining characteristic of 'Annuals' seems to have been that the images were chosen first, and then accompanying texts were commissioned to match or poetically illustrate the images. This was partly for practical reasons, as obtaining and printing visual material was more costly and time consuming than commissioning poems or short texts to match the pictures. The texts, supposed to be 'inspired' by the images, were liable to be criticised as written to order with no real inspiration.

Reviewers in the late 1850s made much of the difference between annuals, whose texts illustrated or addressed the images, and later picture books, which made looser connections or juxtapositions, using pre-existing material. The crucial difference seems to have been the explicitly commissioned nature of the poems in Annuals, which intruded too much into a

fantasy of poetry as a pure art form, beyond commercial consideration and financial need. This might explain some of the scorn with which Annuals were described later in the century.

This is how Margaret Oliphant described annuals in her review of the latest 'Picture-Books':

The days of annuals are over and past. [...] Those wonderful stories - those scraps of murdered drama and sublime blank verse - those invocations of the serene beauty steel-graven on the frontispiece [...]. Whether it will ever be possible to make verses and pictures 'to match' without sacrificing one of the united arts [...] it is a question which we will not undertake to answer. [...] But we have not given up the laudable practice of making presents at Christmas, nor of making books, magnificent and sumptuous, for the same.⁵¹

In practice, they were all handsomely bound, lavishly illustrated volumes with short texts, intended to be looked at and leafed through casually, perhaps in company, rather than for sustained and solitary reading. The illustrations were normally steel engravings, imitating with a cheaper method the look of the copper plate used in finely crafted eighteenth-century prints.⁵² At times, their style imitated the sketches and pencil drawings found in women's albums. The text was set in decorative typefaces, sometimes in gold or colour. The covers were often embossed and decorated with gilt text, and in more expensive editions, elaborately bound in morocco leather and inlaid with gold and colour. The cover was important, as the book was supposed to look good from the outside, lying on the drawing room table.

Several of the contributors to Mrs Birkbeck's albums also published in or worked for annuals. These include Mary Shelley,⁵³ William Jerdan,⁵⁴ Letitia Landon, Amelia Opie,⁵⁵ and Barbara Hofland.⁵⁶ Corbould, identified as the author of one of the drawings in Mrs Birkbeck's album (on page 15), was a name closely associated with the illustration of annuals.⁵⁷ Landon (known as L.E.L.), who wrote two 'Songs' in Mrs Birkbeck's album, was one of the many women writers who became famous through their work on annuals. She edited and wrote for the *Literary Souvenir*,⁵⁸ the *Keepsake*, Fisher's *Drawing Room Scrap-Book*, the *Pictorial Album or Cabinet of Paintings*, and Heath's *Book of Beauty*. By publishing specially commissioned texts, rather than anthologising already published material, annuals gave writers, and women in particular, 'an elegant prestige outlet' for their work, and an important source of income.⁵⁹

Annuals marketed and presented themselves as collections fit for a Queen or a Lady of taste and refinement. Fisher's *Drawing Room Scrapbook* illustrated its frontispiece with a portrait of the future Queen, Princess Victoria, captioned with her engraved signature, as if she had personally owned, or given as a gift, each copy of the publication.⁶⁰ Heath's *Book of Beauty's* frontispiece was decorated by a portrait bust of the young Queen, in a neo-classical niche with urns and wreaths, turning each copy into a collection in her honour. In their contents, annuals sometimes addressed the genre itself by making references to women's album collecting, involving the reader in this as an elite activity. In Heath's *Book of Beauty* for 1838, for example, we have a portrait of Mrs Lane Fox, looking up at the viewer from the album she has on her table. The accompanying poem, by James Smith, describes 'the book that in your lap reclines'.⁶¹ In the last verses, the woman in the illustration, who as an observer of albums mirrors the woman looking at this particular issue of the *Book of Beauty*, is compared to the making of portraits and prints:

Let the glad artist learn of you,
 Lady, the art of true engraving.
 You who at every glance awake
 A portrait teeming with expression,
 And cleverly contrive to make,
 Where'er you go, a *proof impression!* (emphasis in the original)

Annuals here are represented as duplicating in print not only a feminine interest in small images in bound volumes, but the effect that women themselves have, as Ladies and/or Beauties, on the circle of people they meet. This capacity to 'at every glance awake - A portrait teeming with expression,' is thus common to the annual, as a 'Book of Beauty'; to Mrs Lane Fox, as a beauty herself; and by extension, to the woman who is looking at this annual, leafing through pages of portraits, and with every gesture creating a new visual sensation. As she stops to look at this portrait, the reader's pose mirrors that of Mrs Fox, and she too can feel engaged in 'awaking portraits teeming with expression', in a moment of fantasy in which looking and being looked at become blurred.

Another example of this connection between women's albums, annuals and desirable femininity can be seen in Fisher's *Drawing Room Scrap-Book* for 1851, where an illustration titled 'English Beauty', is teamed with a French poem described as found in a young woman's album: '*vers inscrits sur l'album d'une demoiselle anglaise*' (verses inscribed in the album of an English young lady). The verses themselves are a romantic address to this English Beauty, by '*le chevalier de chatelain*' (the knight of the lady of the castle), who wants to be everything that touches her, gives her pleasure or makes her happy.⁶² The verses are now not only in the one album of that one English Beauty, were they would have been inscribed by hand by the writer of the poem, but also in the album, or *Drawing Room Scrap-Book*, of every English woman who has bought or been given a copy, and who can fantasise about having been addressed by such a sensual and romantic *chevalier*, without having to take the trouble to write poems herself, seek poems from other people, or even just copy verses by hand.

To get a sense of how these publications were used, we can turn to fiction. Charlotte Brönte refers to albums and illustrated books in *Jane Eyre* (1847). The setting is the drawing room of Mr Rochester's country seat, after a dinner party for the local aristocracy and landed gentry. Jane Eyre, working as a governess for Mr Rochester, has been invited to join them after supper, and Brönte's detailed description of the room and the social interactions within it vividly renders the excitement and curiosity of someone who has never been a witness to such a gathering before. After supper, the ladies have spent some time by themselves in the beautifully furnished drawing room, amusing themselves by a little chat or by looking at the books displayed on the table, while the men were having port and cigars. But now they have come back into the room, and coffee is served. Illustrated books now provide an opportunity to pair up with men:

Mr Frederick Lynn has taken a seat besides Mary Ingram and is showing her the engravings of a splendid volume: she looks, smiles now and then, but apparently says little.⁶³

Blanche Ingram, young and beautiful, is 'standing alone at the table, bending gracefully over an album,' (205) waiting to be sought by Mr Rochester. Looking at albums here is a cool pose in a social and sexual game of momentary seductions and skirmishes in long-term strategies of

matrimonial conquest. By the time *Jane Eyre* was published, albums were well established as drawing room accessories; they provided entertainment and a focus for interactions between guests. As a wealthy and well-travelled individual, the prints in Mr Rochester's albums may well have been collected abroad, rather than bought at home. Their presence on the table is another detail demonstrating how well Mr Rochester's drawing room is appointed, with an awareness of what is required to entertain in style, surprising in someone who seems to socialise only rarely.

But albums and picture books could also be associated with a commercialised feminine culture, of an uncertain status between gentility and vulgarity, and the use of visual culture to climb up the social scale, rather than demonstrate rank. We find them for example in the drawing room that Becky Sharp, the heroine of *Vanity Fair*, manages to rent and furnish with borrowed funds while seducing Lord Steyne into giving her not only gifts and loans, but also a lucrative position for her husband. They figure in the list of valuable items her French maid escapes with, when scandal and ruin finally destroys Becky's marriage:

four richly gilt Louis Quatorze candlesticks, six gilt Albums, Keepsakes, and Books of Beauty, a gold enamelled snuff-box which had once belonged to Madame du Barri, [...] the sweetest little inkstand [...] and all the silver laid on the table.⁶⁴

Beautiful and accomplished, but bitter and cynical from her experience of poverty, Becky Sharp does not accept the place allotted to her by society, and refuses to become a governess. She becomes instead a social climber with few moral scruples, and makes her way into wealth and high society through seduction and marriage. We know she can paint, as one of her many accomplishments, but we are not encouraged by the text to imagine that she might have worked on those albums. The social whirlwind of her life with Rawdon, in fashionable, aristocratic and morally corrupt London, would not have given her the time to do so. Besides, personal albums would have been of no interest to Mademoiselle Fifine, who steals them in lieu of wages.

Thackeray reviewed annuals in disparaging terms, for *Fraser's Magazine*:

It is hardly necessary to examine these books and designs one by one - they all bear the same character, and are exactly like the *Books of Beauty*, *Flowers of Loveliness*, and so on, which appeared last year. A large weak plate, [...] a woman badly drawn,

with enormous eyes [...] and an exceedingly low-cut dress - pats a greyhound, or weeps into a flower-pot. [...] The picture is signed Sharpe, Parris, Corbould, Corbaux, [...] as the case may be, and is entitled 'the Pearl', 'la Dolorosa', 'la Biondina', 'le Gage d'Amour', or some such name. Miss Landon, Miss Mitford, or my Lady Blessington, writes a song upon the opposite page, about water-lily, chilly, stilly, shivering beside a streamlet, plighted, blighted, love-benighted, falsehood sharper than a gimlet, lost affection, recollection, cut connection, tears in torrents, true-love token, spoken, broken, sighing, dying, girl of Florence, and so on. The poetry is quite worthy of the picture, and a little sham sentiment is employed to illustrate a little sham art.⁶⁵

As Stephenson points out in her study of Letitia Landon, not every critic shared Thackeray's disdain for annuals. Christian Isobel Johnson, the editor of Tait's *Edinburgh Magazine*, saw annuals in more positive terms, as a contribution to women's visual culture, and a better fashion than that for jewellery, baubles and trinkets. By targeting 'the woman of taste and refinement' they cultivated a taste for art amongst the emerging members of the wealthy middle classes.⁶⁶ Some reviewers went as far as associating the fashion for annuals with the growth of interest in contemporary art by a new generation of wealthy collectors from industrial towns such as Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and Leeds. Many other critics thought the illustrations were the best element, as they were often engraved from the works of famous artists such as Turner and Maclise, and thus contributed to women's art appreciation.⁶⁷

With their romantic imagery, and often exotic and tumultuous texts, annuals gave women a temporary imaginative escape into a world of beauty and art, Byronic heroes, powerful yet genteel heroines, and sensuous adventures in exotic locations. These were not always consonant with middle-class values of respectable femininity, self-control and sensual moderation, and the consumption of annuals continued to be seen as a problematic aspect in the cultural life of middle class women, filling their heads with unsuitable fancies that would make them unfit to manage a middle class household.

How well the Birkbeck album manages to hint at fashion without straying into the vulgar, to include well known names without turning them into commercialised commodities, and to give the sense of a collection based on authentic, personal interests which included serious scientific and political pursuits, becomes clearer if we compare it with those collected by a fictional doctor's wife in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, (published in 1871 but set in the period

1829-1832). Rosamond Vincy, who marries Dr Lydgate with disastrous consequences for his pursuit of science and learning, also keeps an album.

Rosamond [...] was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verses, and perfect blonde loveliness, which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date.⁶⁸

She feels herself in love with Lydgate, not because of any understanding of him as a man, but excited by his 'aroma of rank' (196). The fantasy of being married to him, a professional from a family of landed gentry, allows her to imagine herself 'nearer to that celestial condition on earth' (195). While in the grip of this fantasy:

now more than ever she was active in sketching her landscapes and market-carts, and portraits of friends, [...] and in being from morning till night her own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness. (196)

Rosamond has never mixed socially with the local gentry and aristocracy. Her ideas about the behaviour of perfect ladies come mainly from her education as the best pupil in a provincial school:

where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female - even to extras, such as getting in and out of a carriage. (123)

Her accomplished education might seem to make her interested in the arts - poetry, drawing, music - but these are for her not a pleasure of the imagination, to paraphrase Brewer, but poses she can strike as if in a fashion plate, to perform the part of a lady for an actual or imaginary audience. To marry Lydgate, Rosamond had given up the attentions of what might have turned out to be a better, if less genteel provider:

Mr Ned Plymdale (one of the good matches in Middlemarch, though not one of its leading minds) was in tête-à-tête with Rosamond. He had brought the last Keepsake, the gorgeous watered silk publication which marked modern progress at that time: and he considered himself very fortunate that he could be the first to look over it with her, dwelling on the ladies and gentlemen with shiny copper-plate cheeks and copper-plate smiles, and pointing to comic verses as capital and sentimental stories

as interesting. [...] ‘I think the Honourable Mrs S. is something like you’, said Mr Ned. He kept the book open at the bewitching portrait, and looked at it rather languishingly. (302)

Lydgate of course pours scorn over the *Keepsake*, ‘I wonder which would turn out to be the silliest - the engravings or the writings here’ (303). In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond’s sketching, copying poems in her album and admiring the latest issue of the *Keepsake* signal the limited extent of her education. She has been educated to aspire to better herself through a good marriage - one with someone above her in rank. But she has no real understanding of the cultural subtleties involving in being a lady, rather than simply looking like one. While she recognises the gentility of albums, keepsakes or Edinburgh educated doctors,⁶⁹ she cannot use them properly, ending up coarsening the fine tools of Lydgate’s intellect and scientific aspirations by using them to acquire a costly and vulgar house in London. She has been educated enough to want to marry a doctor, rather than her richest suitor, but not enough to be the suitable wife of a doctor with a limited income. Isolated from both her peers and her betters, Rosamond can take part in album culture only as a consumer. Even her sketching is a the result of purchasing impersonal commodities on the market – blank books, paints, notions of gentility – rather than the production of hand-inscribed traces of individuals, to be exchanged as gifts between equals.

Anna Birkbeck’s small album might have shared writers and some of the visual taste with fashionable feminine publications, but its personal, one-off, and hand-made nature, with its pages marked by individuals rather than by printing presses, removes it from the world of mass-circulated and commodified culture, even as it partakes of its glamour and fame. Her collection of hand-made miscellanea is based not on the expediency of commercialised production, but on culture as a convivial and polite social exchange between herself and the people who wrote poems, painted watercolours, or simply signed their names for her album, out of respect rather than for a fee. It demonstrates that Anna Birkbeck’s interests were those of an amateur rather than a consumer. Her accomplishments as someone who arranged the contents and look of her album, as well as her marital connections, gave the right to be addressed as ‘Lady’ by contributors to her album. The album demonstrates her ability to socialise in a world at once fashionable and learned, using her networking skills rather than her purchasing power to

accumulate a small but perfectly formed collection - which she can treasure not because of its commercial value, but because of its significance in human ties of friendship, which are, of course, priceless.

¹ Dedicated to adult education and the education of skilled manual workers, this eventually became Birkbeck College, now part of the University of London.

² Thomas Kelly, *George Birkbeck, Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1957), p. 184. All the biographical information on George Birkbeck and his family is from this book. Mr Behnes was probably William Benhes (? -1864), sculptor and portrait painter/draughtsman, active since 1819, listed in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ Most albums, if they are of any value, are split into individual pages and sold or archived by the authors of individual contributions.

⁴ Birkbeck Library MSS, Janet Foster, 'Mrs Birkbeck's Album. Digitisation Report' (London, 2001). No page numbers. [Henceforth MSS Foster]. It is thanks to Philippa Dolphin, ex-librarian at Birkbeck College, that the album has been brought to light and to my attention. I must also thank the current librarian, Philip Payne, for enabling continued access to the album.

⁵ Kelly, *George Birkbeck*, p.185.

⁶ See, for example, Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800 -1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London and New York: Pandora, 1987).

⁷ MSS Foster.

⁸ Birkbeck Library MSS, *Mrs. G. Birkbeck. Album*, pp.189-190. I am using the page numbers hand-inscribed in the album. Further references to this album are given in brackets after quotations in the text. [Henceforth BA].

⁹ On Sorelli and Pardoe, see also *British Poetry of The Romantic Period Catalog*, (www.sul.stanford.edu.: Stanford University, 2002).

¹⁰ Lord Brougham was a celebrated advocate, statesman and liberal reformer, particularly associated with the abolition of slavery and the founding of the University of London. He was Lord Chancellor 1830 - 1834. See Henry Reeve, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th edn., T. S. Baynes ed., vol.4 (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1875), pp.373-381.

¹¹ Kelly, *George Birkbeck*, p.197.

¹² If you are interested in any aspect of this project, please contact the author of at p.dibello@bbk.ac.uk.

¹³ Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1993), p.136.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of The Author', *Image - Music - Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London.: Fontana 1977), pp.142-148 (p.148). Further references to this essay are given in brackets after quotations in the text.

¹⁵ Anon., *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1875, p.456.

¹⁶ Anon. reviews in *The Times*, 9 August 1793, p.9, and 23 August 1793, p.2.

¹⁷ Anne Higonnet, *Berthe Morisot's Images of Women* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.50-51 (and note 29, p.269).

¹⁸ On Best, see: Caroline Davidson, *The World of Mary Ellen Best* (London: Chatto & Windus, Hogarth Press 1985); Anne Higonnet, 'Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe', *Radical*

History Review, 38 (1987), 16-36; Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves. Women's Self-Portraits* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), pp.107-109

¹⁹ For a descriptive account of cut paper work, see Jane Toller, *The Regency and Victorian Crafts or The Genteel Female, Her Arts and Pursuits* (London and Sydney: Ward and Lock, 1969).

²⁰ For a discussion of the image of 'The Model Victorian Lady' in paintings, see for example Susan Casteras, *The Substance or the Shadow. Images of Victorian Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale Centre for British Art, 1982), pp.14-20. The term is also discussed by Elizabeth Langland in *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals and Class in England 1774-1858* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).

²¹ David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000).

²² See for example *Ralph The Heir* (1871), (New York: Dover, 1978). On the social taint of trade, see also Mrs Oliphant, *Phoebe Junior* (1876), (London: Virago Press and Penguin Viking, 1989).

²³ Kelly, *George Birkbeck*, p.129.

²⁴ William Jerdan (1782-1869), journalist, writer and editor of the *Literary Gazette*.

²⁵ BA pp.189-190, 'Sent with a Rose' by Thomas Green. On the same theme see also 'The Death of Love' by Mary Shelley (189-190).

²⁶ Kelly, *George Birkbeck*, p.186.

²⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (1875), Vol.4, p.181, Vol.3, p.575 and p.779.

²⁸ Higonnet discusses these in the context of women's albums and amateur practices in *Berthe Morisot*, pp.87-90.

²⁹ Anna Birkbeck did also collect prints from a variety of sources, from artist's proofs to cut-outs from illustrated periodicals. These are collated in a different, larger album, which I have only recently been able to see, and therefore awaits further study.

³⁰ Stella Tillyard, *Aristocrats. Caroline, Emily, Louisa and Sarah Lennox 1740 - 1832* (London: Vintage, 1995).

Further references to this publication are given in brackets after quotations in the text.

³¹ Mrs Frances Greville, for example, daughter of the Earl of Macartney, wrote 'Prayer for Indifference' (1756) 'the most celebrated poem written by a woman in the eighteenth century, frequently printed in miscellanies and anthologies' (Tillyard, p.159).

³² Tillyard, *Aristocrats*; See also Office of Public Works, *Castletown* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1995).

³³ On eighteenth-century women's art collecting, see also Ian Pears, *The Discovery of Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp.143-187.

³⁴ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London: Harper Collins, 1997).

³⁵ Pears, *Discovery of Painting*, p.160.

³⁶ Kelly, *George Birkbeck*, p.147.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.187.

³⁸ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*. See also Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London: Croom Helm, 1973; Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36:2 (1993), 383-414; Ann Bermingham, 'Elegant Females and Gentlemen Connoisseurs. The Commerce in Culture and Self-Image in Eighteenth-Century England', in *The Consumption of Culture*, ed. by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.489-513.

³⁹ Bermingham, 'Elegant Females', p.491.

⁴⁰ The literature on this construction of middle-class femininity is extensive. See for example, Catherine Hall's various essays, collected in her *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁴¹ For a critical discussion of the concepts of private/feminine and public/male spheres, and its relevance to understanding visual representations, see also Clarissa Campbell Orr (ed.), *Women in the Victorian Art World* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp.1-30. On the presence and representation of women in the streets of London, see Jane Rendell, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Gender, Space and Architecture in Regency London* (London: Athlone Press, 2002); Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000); and Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴² On this, see also Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink. The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995).

⁴³ Anon., 'An Agreeable Surprise', *The Times*, 5 June 1838, p.4.

⁴⁴ See for example Anon., *The Times*, 7 October 1844, p.4; and the *Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times*, 13 March 1858, p.161.

⁴⁵ Published by Rudolph Ackerman in 1823. According to Glennis Stephenson, this was the first annual. Similar to eighteenth-century almanacs, it still included blank pages to be used as a diary and sheets of practical information. See her *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L.E.L.* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.132.

⁴⁶ Subtitled: *Cabinet of paintings for the year 1837: Containing eleven designs, executed in oil colours, by G. Baxter, with illustrations in verse and prose* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1837). George Baxter was a wood engraver; his 'designs', mostly of picturesque landscapes, attempted to imitate the painterly texture of watercolour or oil painting. Oil prints, were, however, too expensive to be commercially viable. See Ruary McLean, *Victorian Book Design and Colour Printing* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963).

⁴⁷ Full title and subtitle: *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book: With poetical illustrations by L.E.L.* (London: Fisher, Son and Jackson, 1832 to 1854). The subtitle changed as other people took over from L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon). These were: Charles Mackay; Hon. Caroline Elizabeth Sarah Norton (afterwards Lady Stirling Maxwell); Sarah Stickney (afterwards Ellis).

⁴⁸ The first seems to have been *Heath's Book of Beauty*, founded in 1833 by the engraver Charles Heath, edited first by L.E.L. then by the Countess of Blessington (1834-1847), (London: Charles Heath, 1833-1847). The term became generic for the type of publication.

⁴⁹ *The Court Album: Fourteen portraits of the female aristocracy engraved by the best artists from drawings by John Hayter* (later: *by the best artists*), (London: David Bogue, 1850 - 1857).

⁵⁰ On the *Keepsake*, see L.E.L.'s 'Verses' and 'The Keepsake' for 1829, Electronic Editions, Romantic Circles, Terence Hoagwood, Kathryn Ledbetter and Martin M. Jacobsen eds. (www.rc.umd.edu: University of Maryland, 2001). This is an electronic facsimile edition of sections of the *Keepsake* for 1829, which was edited by Frederic Mansel Reynolds, with an introduction and added commentary by Hoagwood (Texas A&M University) and Ledbetter (Southwest Texas State University). There are no issues of the *Keepsake* in the British Library.

⁵¹ Margaret Oliphant, 'Picture-Books', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 81 (1857), 309-318 (p.309).

⁵² Patented in 1918, steel-plate was cheaper because able to survive many more impressions. See McLean, *Victorian Book Design*.

⁵³ To give one example, she published in the *Keepsake* for 1829 two contributions: 'The Sisters of Albano' (p.80) and 'Ferdinando Eboli' (p.195). See the facsimile edition of the *Keepsake* for 1828. For a discussion of the well known writers who contributed to annuals, including Thackeray and Wordsworth, and the fashionable upper-class circles in which writers moved in early nineteenth-century, see Adburgham, *Women in Print*, pp.218-272.

⁵⁴ Jerdan, mainly known as the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, also wrote for the *Keepsake*. He launched Letitia Landon's career by publishing her verses and reviews. See Stephenson, *Letitia Landon*, p.26.

⁵⁵ (1769-1853). See Adburgham, *Women in Print*, p.267. Opie is listed in *Representative Poetry On-line*, version 2.11, Ian Lancashire ed. (www.library.utoronto.ca: University of Toronto, 1996). This is an enlarged and on-line edition of *Representative Poetry*, a series of collaborative anthologies edited by members of the Department of English (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1912-67).

⁵⁶ (1770-1844) Active early-nineteenth century. See Adburgham, *Women in Print*, p.267. Hofland is listed in *Corvey Women's Writing on the Web: an Electronic Guide to Literature, 1796-1834*, Sheffield Hallam Corvey Project (www.shu.ac.uk/corvey, Sheffield Hallam University, 1996). This is based on the titles held in the Corvey library, near Höxter in Germany, 'one of the largest collections of Romantic-era literature in the world', and including 'the best collection of popular fiction in English between 1798 and 1834 to be found anywhere.' (All quotes in this footnote from the introduction to the website).

⁵⁷ See Thackeray's review of annuals quoted later in this paper. The 1837 sketch at the end of the Birkbeck album is probably by Edward Henry Corbould (1815-1905), a watercolour painter who had begun exhibiting at the Royal Academy in 1835. His painting 'The Artist's Dream' is stylistically and thematically similar to the dreaming academic in the Birkbeck album. He came from a large family of painters and illustrators: Richard Corbould (1757-1831), and his sons George (b. 1786) and Henry (1787-1844, Edward Henry's father), so Thackeray's comments could have applied to them collectively. Edward Henry Corbould was well known for his work as an illustrator of books and magazines, for his drawings from ancient statues and decorative fragments, and as drawing master to Queen Victoria's children. See Christopher Wood, *The Dictionary of Victorian Painters*, 2nd Edition (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1978), p.105 and p.576; and Christopher Wood, *Victorian Painting* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1999), pp.39, 258 and 362.

⁵⁸ First published in 1824.

⁵⁹ Adburgham, *Women in Print*, p.235.

⁶⁰ Many copies of the annuals I have looked at are inscribed by hand, on the frontispiece, with the name of the owner, or with a message from the person giving them as a gift.

⁶¹ James Smith, 'Mrs. Lane Fox', in Heath's *Book of Beauty*, ed. Countess of Blessington (London: Longman, 1838), pp.252-253.

⁶² Anon., 'English Beauty', in Fisher's *Drawing Room Scrapbook* (London and Paris: Peter Jackson, 1851), pp.24-25.

⁶³ Charlotte Brönte, *Jane Eyre* (1847), (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984), p.205. Further references to this edition are given in brackets after quotations in the text.

⁶⁴ William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1847), (London: Penguin, 1985), p.633.

⁶⁵ William Thackeray, 'A word on the Annuals', *Fraser's Magazine* (1838), quoted by Stephenson, *Letitia Landon*, p. 128. He also reviewed them in the same magazine in 1838, 'The Annuals', and 1839, 'Our Annual Execution', in similar terms. This dislike did not prevent him from contributing to them. See Stephenson, *Letitia Landon*, pp.128-131; and Adburgham, *Women in Print*, pp.218-272.

⁶⁶ Stephenson, *Letitia Landon*, p.130.

⁶⁷ Adburgham, *Women in Print*, p.237.

⁶⁸ George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), *Middlemarch* (1871), (Harmondsworth Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), p.301. Further references to this edition are given in brackets after quotations in the text.

⁶⁹ Lydgate, like George Birkbeck, was educated at Edinburgh University, which had a very good reputation for its medical training. See Kelly, *George Birkbeck*, pp.5-40.