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Life after Emmet's death: Sarah Curran's literary and friendship circle

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Curran (1782–1808) has been remembered chiefly as a tragic figure – the heartbroken beloved of martyred United Irishman Robert Emmet. In over two centuries of Irish republicanism, in academic histories, and drama and literature, Curran has variously symbolised Irish resistance to the Union, a prostrate Ireland under British rule, and the Victorian ideal of self-sacrificing womanhood. What unifies these representations is that they all define her chiefly in relation to a male historical figure. Building on existing scholarship theorising women's networks, and focusing specifically on Curran's closest friendships, this article reappraises Curran's legacy by repositioning her within the literary circle of which she was part and reconstructing her friendship network. This article enriches existing understandings of Irish female literary networks in the period and rehabilitates Curran as a historical figure in her own right, who had meaningful personal relationships that extended beyond her love affair with Emmet.

KEYWORDS

Sarah Curran; women's history; friendships; nineteenth-century poetry; literary networks

"[T]here may be occasion when you may dwell with pleasure on the thought that there is a disinterested heart devoted to you as you shall find mine." – Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 1 July 1807.¹

In September 1803, twenty-one year-old Sarah Curran found herself cast out of her father's house in disgrace, following revelations that she and the Irish republican, Robert Emmet had been lovers. Their secret engagement became public knowledge when one of his letters to her was intercepted during his imprisonment while on trial for treason, and her father's Dublin home was subsequently searched. True to form for a man whose own serial infidelity came to light after throwing his pregnant wife out onto the streets in 1795 for an extramarital affair, barring her from further contact with her children, John Philpot Curran rejected his youngest daughter after Emmet's execution, likely out of concern for the affair's potential to harm his own legal career. Sarah took refuge in the home of Quaker merchant, philanthropist and art collector Cooper Penrose of Woodhill, Cork. Penrose was a republican and sympathetic to the United Irishmen, and had travelled to Paris during the French Revolution.² He and John Philpot Curran became acquainted in 1801, when Penrose engaged the lawyer to prosecute the case against Henry Hayes, who abducted and raped Penrose's niece Mary Pike.³ Sarah Curran formed particularly strong bonds with Penrose's daughters Anne and Bess and, in turn, with their neighbours Anna

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Maria Chetwood, Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood) and Katherine Wilmot. These women were at the heart of a Cork-based literary network with significant international connections.⁴ The father of two of them – Anna Maria and Elizabeth – Reverend John Chetwood, officiated at Curran's marriage to Captain Robert Henry Sturgeon of the Royal Staff Corps on 25 November 1805. The war with France called Sturgeon to a regimental headquarters in Sicily in October 1806. Curran accompanied him, and the pair would remain there until Sturgeon was recalled to England in late 1807, where Sarah died five months later. Marianne Elliott, in her masterful biography of Robert Emmet, identifies Washington Irving's publication of an essay on Curran and Emmet's affair as the genesis of the image of Curran as someone who died "the victim of a broken heart." This article argues that Curran did indeed die in a state of heartbreak, not only at the loss of Emmet, but in anguish at her separation from the female friends who had supported and loved her for the previous five years.⁵ The only record of Curran's state of mind in her final months is a series of letters she wrote to Anne Penrose, but the personal crisis she suffered due to the deterioration of her relationship with the latter is suggested by the mediation attempts of mutual contacts (particularly Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood)). The emphasis Curran placed on friendships, right until her final breath, is further indicated in a letter her brother Richard wrote to Melesina-Henrietta Woodward shortly after Sarah's death, stating that she was in Sarah's thoughts until the last moment.⁶

In the two centuries since her untimely death, Sarah Curran (1782–1808) has been best – indeed, almost exclusively – remembered as the lover of martyred United Irishman Robert Emmet (1778–1803). Dying at the age of just 26 shortly after burying her newborn son, the tragic details of Curran's personal life were quickly and easily co-opted by nineteenth-century Irish nationalism. Her emotional and physical torment conveniently embodied a weakened Ireland suffering under British rule in the tradition of Cathleen Ní Houlihan. Her marriage to Captain Henry Sturgeon – portrayed as an unwilling march to the altar made in response to the economic and social necessity of obtaining male protection – was easily recast as the apotheosis of self-sacrificing Victorian womanhood. The propagandistic manufacturing of these idealised images began soon after Curran's death, the details and circumstances of her life as an individual wilfully overlooked. Biographers privileged her relationship with Emmet, narrowly defining her as the grieving fiancée of an Irish martyr. Her central role in an important, but since completely overlooked, network of literary Munster women – mainly genteel and protestant, and most of whom had left Ireland for England by about 1810 – was brushed aside as an inconvenient complication of the Irish nationalist credentials manufactured in her name. This article enriches existing understandings of Irish female literary networks in the period and rehabilitates Curran as a historical figure in her own right, who enjoyed meaningful personal relationships that extended beyond her love affair with Emmet.

Building on existing scholarship that theorises women's networks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, this article reappraises Curran's legacy as a historical figure. First, I reconstruct the circle of Munster families that gave Curran her closest friends – a heretofore largely unstudied circle of literary women – before turning to her life and social circle in Sicily, where she lived with her husband in 1806–7. In the second part of the article, I outline the ways in which Curran was memorialised within her literary circle and friendship network, revealing new dimensions to her personal life and interests that have been previously ignored. The only surviving first-

person testimony by Curran herself is a collection of nine letters she wrote to Anne and Bess Penrose.⁷ This reappraisal of Sarah Curran's life and memory is made possible through the excavation of surviving archival records relating to three Cork families with whom she was intimately acquainted – the Chetwoods, Penroses, and Wilmots. These rich collections evidence Curran's elevated standing within the group as a musical and poetic creative force, as a person who established strong friendship bonds during her residence in Cork from late 1803 to late 1806, and whose memory endured within the circle long after her premature death. The Wilmot and Chetwood albums stand as literary memorials to devoted friendship, containing several heretofore unrecognised poems and elegies dedicated to Curran.

The study of women's networks and sociability in the eighteenth and (to a lesser extent) nineteenth centuries has flourished in the past two decades.⁸ Curran's particular devotion to Anne Penrose has received passing attention as part of wider studies of the personal and familial relationships of naval officers, and as part of the life story of Robert Emmet.⁹ Patrick M. Geoghegan's research very usefully delves into the mythmaking that served various political functions for decades after Curran's death, particularly in terms of its uses in the creation of Emmet's tragi-heroic memory, and provides careful insights into her character. However, Irish historiography has for 200 years fashioned an image of Curran as a love object, emphasising only those details of the last five years of her life that contribute to the figure of Robert Emmet as a nationalist hero. Her life has never been studied from her point of view, with her at the centre; she has only ever been considered adjacent to her executed lover and through the lens of male hero narratives. Curran's personal relationships merit detailed study in their own right, and her rich personal life has yet to be taken seriously for the opportunities it offers to enrich understandings of the ways in which female friendship and women's networks operated in the period. Specifically, the catastrophic effects of the failure of Curran's treasured friendship with Anne Penrose demonstrates the fundamental importance of these relationships in Curran's life, while conversely, the Wilmot and Chetwood families clearly treasured her memory, as evidenced in the preservation of her original compositions in their albums.

There are obvious risks to extrapolating wider historical patterns based on the life of a single individual, or the relationship dynamics within one group. However, the neglect of Curran's female friendships in Irish historiography – which has for two centuries privileged her affair with Robert Emmet to the near-complete exclusion of all else, save her troubled relationship with her father – enriches our knowledge and understanding of a woman whose short life has been co-opted for political purposes as the tragic victim of parental abuse, personal tragedy, and imperial oppression. Susan Civalé has demonstrated how nineteenth-century readers responded to female autobiographies – those women's literary afterlives.¹⁰ But Sarah Curran never got the chance to publicly manage her image. This was done for her by political groups and literary writers after her premature death, ignoring how her closest friends remembered her. Closer study of Curran's female friendships and repositioning her at her rightful place at the heart of a previously unidentified women's literary circle contributes to historical understandings of bonds between women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in a broader sense, and the means by which those ties were fostered and maintained.

Curran's social circle

From the time of her departure from her father's house in Rathfarnham, Co. Dublin in September 1803 until her death in England in May 1808, Sarah Curran's social circle revolved around three families in the Glanmire area, near Cork city: the Wilmots, Chetwoods and Penroses. The Wilmot and Chetwood families were Anglican and of the middling sort – genteel, respectable, and well-connected, but not of independent means, with male family members employed in the clergy, military, or legal profession. The Penroses were Quakers and may have been a little better-off than the Wilmots or Chetwoods, with Cooper Penrose still remembered today as a philanthropist and art collector. Curran formed strong attachments with Anne and Bess Penrose. Of the seven Chetwoods and nine Wilmots, she was closest to Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood, b. 1771); her younger sister Anna Maria Chetwood (1774–1870); and Elizabeth's sister-in-law, the traveller and diarist Katherine Wilmot (1773–1824). Curran did not, as has been erroneously asserted elsewhere, become acquainted with Katherine Wilmot while living in Sicily.¹¹ The pair in fact became friends during the time that they both resided in Cork. Katherine Wilmot returned to Glanmire from a tour of the Continent in October 1803, shortly after Curran moved to Woodhill, and their fond friendship developed in the succeeding 18 months, before Katherine left for Russia in June 1805.

The daughters of the Curran, Chetwood, Penrose and Wilmot families were home-educated, but were nevertheless well-read and of a literary turn. The circle – which I refer to as the Chetwood-Wilmot circle – can be considered a literary one because, while few of its members' names are familiar even among specialists today, its collective literary output was formidable. The circle represents a lively women's literary scene in 1790s Munster that fits with the wider pattern identified by Máire Kennedy.¹² These women composed hundreds of original poems, elegies and ballads. One group member anonymously published at least two novels.¹³ Martha and Katherine Wilmot made some of the earliest English translations of Russian folk songs, and Martha Wilmot translated the first edition of Princess Dashkova's *Memoirs* (1840) – arguably the most important eighteenth-century Russian woman's autobiography. Together, group members produced thousands of pages of correspondence detailing their travels, their reading, and their private and family lives in Ireland, England, the Continent and Russia; Martha and Katherine Wilmot's letters from the Continent and Russia during the Napoleonic Wars were posthumously published and remain an important historical source.¹⁴ Writing activities of all descriptions were central to the group's identity and were among their chief occupations.

In addition to the Chetwoods, Wilmots, and Penroses, the erudite female social circle of which Curran was part included women from regional landed and titled families. As members of the relatively small Anglican gentry class in Ireland, all of these families were linked by just a few degrees of separation. Curran knew the writer and political radical Margaret King, Lady Mount Cashell (1772–1835), probably through Katherine Wilmot, who accompanied the Mount Cashells on a tour of France and Italy in 1801–3.¹⁵ Learning from a distance of the breakdown of the Mount Cashells' marriage, Curran expressed her "astonishment" and asserted, "I cannot endure to class her with Lady Cloncurry until I hear more."¹⁶ Margaret King's husband left her, denying her access to their children, as a result of her affair with George William Tighe, with whom she lived from 1807.¹⁷ Elizabeth, Lady Cloncurry (c. 1782–1857) also caused a stir when the details

of her extramarital affair with Sir John Piers became public in 1807, resulting in divorce in 1811.¹⁸ Her husband, Valentine Lawless, 2nd Baron Cloncurry, was a member of the United Irishmen and was friendly with Margaret King, so it is therefore possible that Curran was also acquainted with them, given her father's proximity to the radical organisation as a lawyer, and her own acquaintance with Margaret King. Finally, prior to, and completely separately from their friendship with Curran, the Wilmots were known to Robert Emmet. Like Emmet, Robert Rogers Wilmot was an alumnus of Trinity College, Dublin, and Katherine Wilmot met Emmet in Paris in 1802. She furnished her older brother with this sympathetic description:

We have lately become acquainted with Robert Emmett [*sic*], who, I dare say you have heard of [. . .] His face is uncommonly expressive of everything youthful and everything enthusiastic, and his colour comes and goes rapidly, accompanied by such a nervousness of agitated sensibility, that in his society I feel in a perpetual apprehension lest any passing idle word shoud [*sic*] wound the delicacy of his feelings.¹⁹

Despite meeting mutual acquaintances of Margaret King (Lady Mount Cashell), Katherine Wilmot and Lady Cloncurry in Sicily, Curran found her social circle there wanting.²⁰ She assured her old friends, "however my acquaintances may be kind or not as they please for as usual 'my treasure lies in home & there my heart lies also.'"²¹ An introvert by nature, she wrote of how the effort of socialising with strangers exhausted her, and how "the friendship of a female is a very chief want."²² Evidently, it was not the friendship of just any woman that Curran wished for, but that of her former companions in Cork, and specifically, the Penroses. She fondly cast her memory back to Woodhill, "& the dear little circle whose taste accorded so well with mine."²³ Her disdain for her new acquaintances in Sicily was compounded by their lack of musical taste (as she saw it), and she mockingly remarked that they had "never heard Mozart's name."²⁴ Music was Curran's passion, and those who knew her considered her a talented harpist and vocalist. A friend recalled after her death, "Her musical talents were of the first order: she sang with exquisite taste; I think I never heard so harmonious a voice."²⁵

Correspondence, obligation, and friendship

Initially formed around the hinterland of Cork city in the comfortable drawing rooms of the grand houses of Lota and Woodhill, the Chetwood–Wilmot circle found a new geographical focus by the early 1810s, as members of both the Chetwood and Wilmot families gradually relocated from Cork to the English spa towns of Clifton, Bath and Cheltenham. Correspondence indicates the enduring fondness with which these women remembered the Cork houses in which they had formerly gathered. Taking comfort in such memories during the sea voyage to Sicily, Sarah Curran wrote to Anne Penrose in 1806, "I devote myself to thinking of Woodhill and its inhabitants," and later recalled "blessed days" in the parlour at Woodhill with the Penroses, Anne Latham and Katherine Wilmot.²⁶ The lack of a fixed centre or physical salon did not inhibit the circle's longevity or cohesion, which was maintained through correspondence. In the absence of family archives of comparable completeness for the Penroses, Chetwoods or Currans, the Wilmot papers provide crucial evidence of patterns of correspondence within the circle. While many of the letters have been lost – Martha

Wilmot later recorded “tearing up old papers” (likely including letters)²⁷ – a picture of the ways in which textual exchanges functioned to nourish the circle’s long life emerges from the scattered family archives, providing broader context for Sarah Curran’s relationships. For example, Lord and Lady Mount Cashell’s Continental tour of 1801–3 is recorded only thanks to Katherine Wilmot’s diligent habit of writing to her eldest brother, Robert. During their residences in Russia in 1803–8 and 1805–7 respectively, Martha and Katherine Wilmot maintained regular correspondence with their own family and with the Chetwoods. These patterns reflect recent historiographical understandings of letter-writing as the foundation of eighteenth-century male and female sociability, networks and friendships,²⁸ as well as a form of self-expression, self-fashioning and life-writing through which gender, relationships, and public life were constructed and negotiated.²⁹

Curran’s letters to the Penrose sisters demonstrate her reliance on epistolary sociability as a point of contact with her adopted family, and as the lifeblood of the highly mobile and frequently dispersed wider circle of which she was part. The circle thrived on written communication and, as an extended kinship group, is an example of what Peter Clark terms “private sociability,” sustained by close friendship and relative (but never absolute) privacy.³⁰ In the period, letters were commonly shared between mutual acquaintances and family. Curran, aware of the risk that her intensely personal letters may be shared more widely, twice entreated of Anne and Bess Penrose to keep her letters to themselves. She made the first request in a friendly tone with a modest admission that she was “ashamed to send such a scribble,” but the second was made in illness and a passion of disappointment, anger and jealousy against another friend of Anne’s: “I beg Miss Elliston may not see my letters if she has seen any previous ones I have only to express my extreme dislike to the idea.”³¹

Curran’s letters clearly demonstrate how necessary regular contact with cherished friends was for her mental health. She was distressed at parting from her friends, particularly Anne and Bess Penrose, and her letters to them are filled with declarations of her love and devotion. In her own words, “while I have life I shall never be thoroughly reconciled to every situation which separates me totally fm you both.”³² Her first letter from the Mediterranean opened with the line: “I once again thank god sit down to enjoy one of the greatest pleasures I know, that of communicating with my ever beloved Anne & Bess.” She reinforced the point on the following page: “If you will not freely tell me as to an affectionate sister every thing respecting yourself how shall I ever know half I want to hear respecting those I love beyond most in this world.”³³ She later wrote of taking comfort in looking upon a portrait of Bess, and related how her husband found her weeping violently in her sleep due to “melancholy dream[s]” of their parting.³⁴ However, ten days after her arrival at her destination (Messina, Sicily) she was disappointed to find no replies to her letters. She wrote to tell Anne that this made her feel “disheartened.”³⁵ And so the pattern continued through to the following summer, a virtually unreciprocated correspondence. By July 1807, Curran’s mental state deteriorated by the effects of isolation. She wrote to thank Anne for a letter enclosed in a box of shoes, and spent almost two full pages reminding her of how often she had written with no reply, how she remained a devoted friend, and of the sorrows that she had endured in her life.³⁶ She felt that the “long succession of violent griefs & strong emotions” she had experienced had left an indelible mark on her character and rendered her embittered.³⁷ Indeed, she may have relished her

melancholy isolation in ways. Stating that she did not desire pity, despite the many tragedies in her personal life, she quoted lines from a popular song: "Me and my cares in silence leave/Come not near me while I grieve."³⁸

It is not known what caused the imbalance in the correspondence between the women. Simply the vagaries of wartime post, perhaps, or some untold hurt on the part of the Penroses. It is also not known whether she received responses to letters she sent to Anna Maria Chetwood, Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood) and Katherine Wilmot.³⁹ It seems unlikely that all of her cherished friends would have failed to respond, given the patterns of devoted correspondence they demonstrated elsewhere. Whatever the cause of their rarity, Curran's joy at receiving letters from Anne and Bess Penrose is made clear by the speed of her replies. Of the four letters she received, she responded to three within a day or two of receipt, as if to keep hold of the line of contact while it was still fresh. Responding to the first letter from Bess, Curran exclaimed, "Now my darling & ever dear Bessey I shall express to you the pleasure I yesterday experienced on receiving your thrice precious letter. (The first I have had fm you.) & how shall I hope to make this sheet large as it is any King's worth in return except by returning to the long cherished belief that you do after all love me as I love you." The flame of friendship rekindled, in her joy, she temporarily abandoned her previously wounded tone. Desperate for an explanation, she grasped at excuses for the lack of communication, speculating about the unreliability of wartime post. She attempted to excuse her previous complaints: "I meant every syllable spoken in the bitterness of heart which you may well suppose me to feel and besides I claim your forgiveness in as much as it proceeded from my love to you." Bess's long delay in writing again is understandable, given the inadequacy of Curran's condolences on the death of the latter's mother, coming only far into the letter, and offering little comfort.⁴⁰ Two months later, Curran thanked Anne for a letter: "how yr letter cheered my very soul to know you loved me still & to think that if given up by every one else you will still continue to do so is My balm of Gilead & 'medicine of life.'"⁴¹

The devastating effects of Curran's isolation from the rest of the group quickly become evident, with the letters assuming an accusatory tone that clearly demonstrate her deteriorating mental health and increasing desperation and loneliness. Penrose family tradition holds that Curran was melancholic and had suffered a breakdown as a child.⁴² Indeed, she confided to Anne Penrose in a shaky hand the lasting effects on her character of growing up in "a melancholy home & confined circumstances" with the result that "the better part of my disposition were stifled & lost."⁴³ Curran's final letters, written on her return to England and documenting the agonising loss of her infant son, lay bare the central importance of friendship in her life. Her relationship with Anne was not recovered in time for the latter to be in a position to respond in Curran's darkest hour of need following the death of her son, delivered prematurely and unassisted aboard ship en route from Messina to England on 26 December 1807.⁴⁴ On 7 January 1808, Curran let Anne know that she had discovered "by accident" that the latter was living with one Miss Ellistone of Lincoln, and requested "with all becoming diffidence that you will leave even Miss Elliston and come to me for some time. A refusal I do not expect from you."⁴⁵ In her next (and penultimate) letter, a week later, Curran's plaintive words were replete with accusation – "In vain have I waited for one line from you. One line to ease my poor broken heart [...] for Heavens sake and mine my darling I conjure you on my knees to come." In desperation, and unable to conceal her jealousy of Anne's friendship with Ellistone, she

threatened to cut all contact. This, to Curran's mind, was the worst threat imaginable.⁴⁶ She was too weakened by grief and illness to respond to Anne's letter when it did eventually arrive, and on 20 March, six weeks before her death, she wrote her last to her cherished friend, embittered and in "a most pitiable depression of spirits."⁴⁷ A few brief words illuminate the substance of the breakdown in the relationship: "As to the share you My dear Anne have had in it adding to my griefs I am very willing to believe that an authority was erected over you by one who could not affect the slightest regard to my feelings. Mrs Robert Wilmot assures me this was the case."⁴⁸ She refers to Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood) who, it seems, attempted to repair the rift by assuring Curran that Anne had come under Miss Ellistone's influence, and that this person had laid a claim to Anne's friendship, company and attention. In failing health, grief and pain, Curran gave a parting shot to Anne:

You may indeed truly think me changed in some respects But those who live at ease surrounded [by] kind friends and every comfort know not what it is those wretched tossed about the world as I have been suffer in mind and body. No wonder one is altered.⁴⁹

Within weeks, Sarah Curran was dead. Henry Sturgeon was said to have never recovered from the double shock of losing his wife and infant son within a short few months of each other; he was killed in the Peninsular War in 1814.⁵⁰

Curran's connections to the Chetwoods and the Wilmots have been completely overlooked by the few historians who have studied her life, despite the fact that Curran counted members of these families among her closest friends. Indications of her intimacy with members of both families are found in her surviving letters. Small acts of service and brief written comments indicate the care and trust that existed between Curran and members of the Chetwood-Wilmot circle. Martha and Katherine Wilmot's second brother, Edward, then in the service of the British navy, delivered a parcel of shoes and letters to Curran at Messina.⁵¹ Curran's surviving letters include repeated mentions of Katherine Wilmot, Anna Maria Chetwood and Lucy Chetwood – who Curran described as "creature[s] with all the natural virtues & dispositions for happiness"⁵² – as well as Anne Latham and Margaret King, Lady Mount Cashell. Curran asked Anne Penrose to check Katherine Wilmot's Italian journal for evidence of a mutual acquaintance (this was in Katherine's absence, as she was in Russia at the time).⁵³ Curran mentioned Katherine Wilmot four times in two of her ten extant letters to the Penroses, always in fondness, and stated that she had written to her.⁵⁴ Katherine Wilmot reportedly wrote to Anne Penrose some months after Curran's death, "I look upon the name of Elliston as my natural enemy," and had previously referred to Curran as her "favourite."⁵⁵ Despite the hints at animosity towards Ellistone, Anne Penrose seems to have maintained a position of respect and warmth within the wider circle, with Martha Wilmot (then Mrs Bradford) writing on the latter's death in 1827, "Dear Ann Penrose, that friendly heart, so true, so simple and so affectionate!"⁵⁶ Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood) – who married Robert, the eldest of the Wilmot sons – also played a significant role. She attempted to mediate between Anne Penrose and Curran (albeit unsuccessfully), and preserved Curran's unpublished poems in an album. Curran referred to Elizabeth as "a kind friend" and stated that she had written her a very personal, vulnerable letter that was "a downright effusion of spleen [...] I always regret having infested a kind friend with dulness [*sic*] & perhaps even sadness."⁵⁷

The Wilmots and Chetwoods memorialised their love and personal sympathies for Curran and Emmet by preserving elegies composed by Anna Maria Chetwood and her father, Reverend John Chetwood. Just over a year after Emmet's execution, Martha Wilmot received a copy of Anna Maria Chetwood's poem, "To the Memory of the Late Unfortunate Robert Emmet" in Russia, where she was living with Princess Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova. She found the composition "delicate, so feeling to the memory of the unhappy Robert Emmet" and "peculiarly to my taste."⁵⁸ The elegy, composed during Curran's residence in Cork and preserved in three separate albums, reflects her elevated position within the Chetwood-Wilmot circle. Having officiated at Curran and Captain Sturgeon's marriage ceremony in Glanmire in November 1805, Reverend John Chetwood took on the sad task of composing an epitaph on Curran's death in 1808.⁵⁹ It was intended for her tombstone, but this plan was never realised; the poem was later published in a local history of Cork in 1864.⁶⁰ The circulation and preservation of these literary monuments within the group demonstrates communal appreciation for the compositions, a shared grief at Curran's premature death, and the cherishing of her memory.⁶¹

Thomas Moore's "She is Far from the Land" is acknowledged as the literary spark that ignited popular memorialisation of Curran as a tragic figure, and as having deliberately misrepresented key facts of her life, including her place of death.⁶² This composition, and his equally enduring elegy to Emmet – "O! Breathe not His Name" – have important and heretofore unappreciated links to the Chetwood-Wilmot circle. Moore was not only inspired by the romance of Emmet's martyrdom and the tragic details of Sarah Curran's life, both of which provided ample fodder, but was personally invested in both figures. He was an old friend of Emmet, and was known to Curran as a regular visitor to the Penrose family home at Woodhill.⁶³ Further, it is possible that Moore's elegy to Emmet may in fact have been inspired by the women of the Chetwood-Wilmot circle that he met at Woodhill. Anna Maria Chetwood's intriguing unpublished elegy, "To the Memory of the Late Unfortunate Robert Emmet," composed in around 1804, shares similarities with Moore's "O! Breathe not His Name," composed four years later, in 1808. There is a shared pattern of imagery between the pieces that may arguably be more than coincidental: for example, references to sleep in the first line of both poems; and references to cold or chill in the second line of both poems. Both poems also reference the absence of a funerary monument ("unhonoured" in Moore, l. 2; "No Epitaph" in Chetwood, l. 3), but this is less surprising given Emmet's famous speech from the dock, with the immortal exhortation: "let no man write my epitaph." Whether or not Moore borrowed from Anna Maria Chetwood in commemorating his martyred friend, it is unfortunate that he does not seem to have had regard for the feelings of Curran's bereaved friends – among them Anna Maria Chetwood – when fictionalising the facts of the deceased woman's life in "She Is Far From The Land." For instance, the poem incorrectly indicates that Curran died and was buried in Sicily, when she in fact died in England and was buried in Cork. Despite his misappropriation of those facts, the poem was clearly still held in regard by those closest to Curran, as is indicated by its preservation in Alicia Wilmot's commonplace book.

Curran's literary memorialisation

In 1831, an anonymous female friend wrote in the *Literary Souvenir* that "Sarah Curran has already been the theme of story and song [. . .] so long must the real history of the inspirer of these pathetic records continue to interest the sympathies of the gentle and the

good.⁶⁴ By 1847, historian of the United Irishmen Richard Madden referred to Curran as “the poor, woe-begone wanderer from home – the fond and faithful girl of the broken heart.” His biography of Emmet proceeds from this premise, emphasising images of female suffering and self-sacrifice. While acknowledging the kindness of the Penroses, Madden all but erased Curran’s steadfast circle of devoted friends from her story, stressing her “friendlessness.” He also further propagated the fiction invented by Thomas Moore, that Curran died in Sicily.⁶⁵ And so the mythical image of Sarah Curran was popularised throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, persisting in histories, fiction, and on the stage; their proliferation has been studied elsewhere.⁶⁶ An opportunity for reappraisal arose with the Emmet bicentenary in 2003. The flurry of academic and popular publications of that time included well-researched and respected studies by Marianne Elliott and Patrick Geoghegan.⁶⁷ Both of these excellent studies contain careful reflections on Curran’s life, but the focus rests on the period prior to autumn 1803 and her relationship with Emmet, with little consideration of her friendships.

In 1831, an article appeared in the popular *Literary Souvenir* titled “Some Passages in the History of Sarah Curran.” The author was identified only as “M.,” who claimed to have known Curran since she was twelve years old. The piece reproduced in full a letter from Richard Curran to the author, written shortly after Sarah’s death, in which a letter addressed to “M.” – the last Sarah ever wrote – was enclosed. Richard had written to “M.” in 1808:

I wish also to convey to you a testimony that her [Sarah’s] thoughts never strayed from you [“M.”], and that, to the hour of her death, you were the object of her affection. The enclosed unfinished letter is *the last* she ever wrote. [. . .] I, at the same time, congratulate and thank you, for having cultivated in her the seeds of that consoling confidence, which cheered her departing moments, and stripped death, if not of its anguish, yet of its greatest horrors. [. . .] I enclose you a lock of her hair – it was cut off after her death. [. . .] I beg to assure you, that one, in whose acquirements and disposition she found so much that was kindred to her own, can never cease to be an object of most respectful esteem and attachment to a brother that loved her as I did.⁶⁸

The historian Richard Madden reproduced this letter in full in his 1860 history of the United Irishmen, with the preface that it was intended for a “Mrs Henry W-.”⁶⁹ I have identified this “Mrs M. Henry W-” as Melesina-Henrietta Woodward (*née* Lovett), wife of Reverend Henry Woodward (c. 1775–1863), rector of Fethard, Co. Tipperary.⁷⁰ Sarah Curran named Henry Woodward in a letter to Bess Penrose in reference to his recommendation that she read *Bishop Butler’s Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed*.⁷¹ He was a respected preacher who regularly delivered fundraising sermons for charitable institutions and published a number of theological pamphlets.⁷² Unfortunately, Melesina-Henrietta left few traces in the historical records, save a few passing mentions in the Wilmot correspondence. She was the daughter of Verney Lovett of Lismore,⁷³ and her claim to having known Curran since the latter was twelve years old fits with the received family biography that Curran lived in Lismore for a time when she was that age. Richard’s letter to Melesina-Henrietta, together with the enclosed lock of Sarah’s hair, further confirms the overwhelming importance of friendship in Sarah’s life and how her dedication to those relationships defined her in the eyes of those who knew her best. This part of Sarah’s character and personal life was purposefully elided in successive histories and creative works.

The depth and devotion of the relationships within Curran's friendship network found expression in a distinct manuscript culture. Wilmot and Chetwood family papers in the Royal Irish Academy, Farmleigh House, Dublin and Senate House library, London together comprise of several thousand manuscript pages, mostly composed between around 1800 and 1822.⁷⁴ The bulk of the material relates to Martha and Katherine Wilmot's travels in France, Italy, and Russia, but the collections also include friendship albums containing unpublished compositions by Sarah Curran, Princess Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova, and members of the Chetwood, Curran, Penrose and Wilmot families.⁷⁵ The albums evidence a shared written culture within a close-knit extended kinship and friendship circle – despite high levels of geographical mobility and long periods of separation – and a shared memorialisation of Curran. In the Chetwood–Wilmot circle, these lovingly shared albums were intended to provide comfort in separation; to commemorate birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and bereavements; to provide good counsel through melancholy periods; to entertain, in the form of riddles and humorous poems; and to express affection. They demonstrate close relationships, mutual trust and caring, and represent a continuation of the seventeenth-century tradition described by Marie-Louise Coolahan, whereby unpublished verse “abounds with the social and historical occasions” of a “self-proclaimed ‘Society of Friendship.’”⁷⁶ Betty Schellenberg has described albums as “literary memorial[s] of sociability,” and Amanda Herbert has demonstrated the ways in which, in early modern Britain, women were “bound together” in a rich variety of social networks by “letters, social activities, labors, [...] gifts and services.”⁷⁷ In this sense, the albums form a compelling counterpoint to Curran's devastation when her friendship with Anne Penrose was no longer reciprocated – as Katherine Wilmot put it in a poem dedicated to Bess Penrose, “my Friendship is Jealous nor Yields to the Croud/That a Livre de Souvenir brings.”⁷⁸ This section considers the mostly unpublished compositions dedicated to Sarah Curran within Wilmot and Chetwood manuscript collections, as evidence of Curran's heretofore unstudied female friendships and their significance in her life.

In Cork, in 1804, Dorothea Wilmot carefully inked a dedication to her sister inside the front cover of a red leather notebook with red ribbon tie. The words, “Martha Wilmot from her Sister DW: Cork, 1804” are surrounded by a hand-drawn bouquet of red, blue and yellow flowers. The document wallet inside the back cover features a small, unsigned line-and-ink scene of two male and female figures reading under a tree, by a waterfall.⁷⁹ The album contains handwritten transcriptions of poems by Alexander Pope, Thomas Moore and Robert Burns, as well as unpublished pieces by Katherine Wilmot, Anna Maria Chetwood, Princess Dashkova, and family friends. Martha Wilmot lived in Russia in 1803–08, so the album was either sent to her by post, or carried by Katherine when she travelled there in 1805–07. Martha continued to add pieces in Russian, English, Italian and French; the latest item is dated 1809. The album's contents, and the care with which it was created and assembled, speaks to its status as a treasured memento of faraway friends and loved ones. Significantly, two compositions by Sarah Curran sit among the pieces by close friends and admired poets: a 7-stanza piece titled, “On Hearing the Death Watch” and an untitled love song (first line, “Turn on me, Love, thine eye of blue”). The former appears in the middle of a series of items relating to Martha's residence in Russia, including two of Dashkova's favourite poems (a traditional French song with the opening line, “*Si le Roi m'avait donné Paris sa grande ville,*” and a poem from the Pythagorean Golden Verses). The transcriptions of Curran's compositions are undated, but it is possible that Martha added them to the album in 1808, after Curran's death. The pieces are

attributed by initials or partial names (“S.C.” and “S. Curran” respectively). While there is little consistency across the volume in terms of the recording of authors’ names, the use of initials and partial initials indicates familiarity and an expectation that any reader would easily recognise the name. The same is true across all three albums discussed here.

In Cork in June 1805, Alicia Wilmot (c. 1776–1860) followed Dorothea’s lead and dedicated a gold-tooled red Morocco book to her sister Martha (“Matilda”) with the words:

This little collection will be, I know, acceptable to you, my dearest Matilda, as it is chiefly compos’d of those poetical sweets, call’d by the hands, of your own family, & friends. I am not permitted to enter the flowery parterre with them, therefore am content with the humbler office assign’d me by nature, of collecting from them those never fading flowers, which she permits them to pluck on Parnassus Hill, & I look for no higher reward than the certainty of by so doing giving pleasure to you.⁸⁰

Alicia selected the pieces that she thought would best please her elder sister, who had by then been in Russia for two years. It is possible, given the dedication’s June 1805 date, that this album was prepared for carriage to Russia by Katherine, who left Cork for Russia on 5 June 1805. Doubtless, when making her selection, Alicia took into consideration the standing of particular poems among the wider group – special favourites, evocative pieces connected to memorable events, and testaments of friendship to comfort Martha while far from home. The 64-leaf book contains original poems by women from the most intimate centre of this social circle: poems by Katherine Wilmot, one of which was dedicated to Bess Penrose; poems by Anna Maria Chetwood, including one dedicated to Sarah (“Miss Curran’s Singing,” ff. 29 v–30 r); two poems dedicated to Sarah by Chetwood’s cousin, Fanny Hamilton (one in response to Chetwood’s piece, and another titled “On hearing Miss Curran sing & play on the Harp,” f. 30 v); and many poems by Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood). Dated 1821, a loose-leaf transcription of “She is Far from the Land,” Thomas Moore’s 1810 requiem to Curran remains tucked between the pages (ff. 32 v and 33 r), demonstrating her enduring place at the heart of the circle and her ongoing memorialisation thirteen years after her death. The book also includes original compositions by Curran herself: “The Dream” (ff. 25 r–v), “The Tear” (f. 25 v), “The Young Man’s Dream” (ff. 26 r–v), and three poems attributed to her father, John Philpot Curran, who was considered a talented poet within his own social circle (ff. 56 r–57 v). The three poems inspired by Curran’s musical talents date from the period of her residence at Woodhill, a lively centre for the arts. Cooper Penrose himself was a respected art collector and patron of Irish artists like James Barry, and Thomas Moore was a regular visitor to the house. The importance of shared experiences of the arts is evident in these compositions, and feeds into the memorialisation of Curran within her friendship group. Curran’s musical talents enriched the lives of her friends in Glanmire, a creative gift reciprocated in verses dedicated to her. The poems do not shy away from Curran’s personal history, with both Hamilton and Chetwood employing the Irish harp as a symbol of Ireland’s oppression – directly referencing Curran’s past connection to the United Irishmen – and in turn co-opting Curran, a talented harpist, as the embodiment of Cathleen Ní Houlihan. Anna Maria Chetwood compared Curran’s singing voice to “tones as soft as Erins harp e’er rung.”⁸¹ Fanny Hamilton employed familiar tropes, visualising Erin “dejected on the ground/With head declin’d, & tresses all unbound [...] Her Harp she sought – in Currans hand she found/Rest ever there she cried, & vanish’d at the sound.”⁸²

Finally, a 135-leaf album compiled in the early nineteenth century by Elizabeth Wilmot (*née* Chetwood) embodies intergenerational and extra-familial conversation, with original, unpublished contributions from Elizabeth herself, her sister Anna Maria Chetwood, and their father Reverend John Chetwood, as well as pieces by her son Edward Wilmot and friends of the extended family, including at least half-a-dozen original pieces by Frances Sally Irwin (1795–1841), daughter of Irish poet Eyles Irwin (1748–1813).⁸³ These personal compositions sit alongside works by celebrated poets of the day, including Thomas Moore. It also contains a transcription of Reverend John Chetwood’s epitaph to Sarah Curran, and “Farewell to Mrs Sturgeon” by Anna Maria Chetwood (ff. 99 r–99 v). The date of composition of the latter piece is uncertain, but it is likely a response to Sarah’s departure for Sicily, with its note of hope that the friends who “lov’d thee so well” will mourn her absence “but for a season.” Reverend Chetwood’s octave pays posthumous homage to Curran’s musical talents and social graces, again harnessing the image of the “harp unstrung” and a “tuneless tongue.” The Chetwood compositions may not be sophisticated, but the warmth and grief they express is unmistakable.

Conclusion

Sarah Curran merits recognition as a historical figure in a wider sense than has heretofore been the case. The romantic appeal of her life’s tragedies was co-opted shortly after her death into a nationalist telling of Irish history, erasing her individuality and overlooking the characteristics that made her dear to those who knew her best. This erasure was facilitated by her gender, and by the dominance of female friendships in her life – in the eyes of those who fashioned the narrative, the importance of a woman’s life was defined by the men she was related to by blood or marriage. By attempting to reconstruct her life through the eyes of those closest to her a different picture emerges, of a woman scarred by early experiences but with a rich interior life; a person with a deep appreciation for music and the arts; someone who formed extremely deep attachments; one who quickly won the hearts of a group of intelligent, travelled, literary women and left an imprint that would long outlast her short life amongst them. Despite the relative brevity of her residence in Cork – just two years – and her premature death shortly afterwards, Curran retained a place at the heart of the Chetwood-Wilmot circle. The forms that her literary commemoration took within the circle – unpublished poetry, published elegy, published biographical reflection – demonstrates the multiple function of friendship albums as repositories of biographical information, as means of commemoration, and as tools of communication and sociability.

Notes

1. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 1 July 1807, MS 8327/5, National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI).
2. This synopsis of Curran’s life is indebted to Clarke and Kleinman, “Curran, Sarah” in *Dictionary of Irish Biography online* (hereafter *DIB online*) and to Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet: a Life*, except where otherwise stated.
3. O’Riordan, “Pike, Mary” in *DIB online*.
4. See Byrne, “Anonymity, Irish Women’s Writing, and a Tale of Contested Authorship.”
5. Elliott, *Robert Emmet*, 117.

6. Richard Curran to "M." [Melesina-Henrietta Woodward] quoted in "M.", "Some Passages in the History of Sarah Curran," 342–3.
7. The NLI catalogue states that the collection contains ten letters, but one is missing.
8. See, for example, Prendergast, *Literary Salons across Britain and Ireland*; Rizzo, *Companions Without Vows*.
9. Gill, *Naval Families, War and Duty in Britain*, 155–60; and Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet*, 30–37.
10. Civalo, *Romantic Women's Life Writing*.
11. This error appears in Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet*, 32; and in Clarke and Kleinman, "Curran, Sarah" in *DIB online*.
12. Kennedy, "Women and Reading in Eighteenth-Century Ireland", 93.
13. Byrne, "Anonymity, Irish Women's Writing, and a Tale of Contested Authorship".
14. Wilmot, *An Irish Peer on the Continent 1801–3*; Wilmot, *The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot*; and Wilmot, *More Letters from Martha Wilmot*.
15. See Todd's absorbing account of Margaret King's early life in *Rebel Daughters, Ireland in Conflict 1798*.
16. Sarah Curran to Bess Penrose, 25 July 1807, MS 8327/6, NLI.
17. Clarke, "Moore, Margaret Jane ('Mrs Mason').".
18. Geoghegan, "Lawless, Valentine Browne."
19. Katherine Wilmot to Robert Wilmot, 13 March 1802, in Wilmot, *An Irish Peer on the Continent*, 54.
20. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 25 December 1806, MS 8327/4, NLI; Sarah Curran to Bess Penrose, 25 July 1807, MS 8327/6, NLI.
21. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 25 December 1806, MS 8327/4, NLI.
22. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 29 September 1807, MS 8327/7, NLI.
23. See note 21 above.
24. *Ibid.*
25. "M.", "Some Passages in the History of Sarah Curran," 346.
26. Sarah Curran to Anne and Bess Penrose, 24 October 1806, MS 8327/2, NLI; and Sarah Curran to Bess Penrose, 25 July 1807, MS 8327/6, NLI.
27. Martha Bradford (*née* Wilmot) to Alicia Wilmot, 22 June 1827, in Wilmot, *More Letters from Martha Wilmot*, 261.
28. Earle, ed. *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers*; Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*; How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letters*; Dowd and Eckerle, *Genre and Women's Life-Writing*; Coleman, Lewis and Kowalik, eds, *Representations of the Self*.
29. See Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*; Civalo, *Romantic Women's Life Writing*; Cook and Culley eds, *Women's Life Writing, 1700–1850*; Culley, *British Women's Life Writing, 1760–1840*; Whyman, *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England*; and Whyman, *The Pen and the People*.
30. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800*, 141.
31. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 25 December 1806, MS 8327/4, NLI; Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 20 March 1808, MS 8327/11, NLI.
32. Sarah Curran to Anne and Bess Penrose, 24 October 1806, MS 8327/2, NLI.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Sarah Curran to Anne and Bess Penrose, 31 October 1806, MS 8327/2, NLI.
35. See note 21 above.
36. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 1 July 1807, MS 8327/5, NLI.
37. See note 22 above.
38. Sarah Curran to Anne and Bess Penrose, 24 October 1806, MS 8327/2, NLI. The song was published in a number of contemporary songbooks, including *A Selection of Favourite Catches, Glees, &c. as sung at the Bath Harmonic Society* (2nd edn, [Bath]: R. Crutwell, 1799), 3.
39. See note 32 above.
40. See note 16 above.
41. See note 22 above.
42. Mr Penrose to Dr Bourke, 16 September 1955, MS 8327/1, NLI.
43. See note 22 above.

44. Curran related these details to Penrose in a letter of 7 January 1808, published in Macmullen, *The Voice of Sarah Curran*, 70.
45. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 7 January 1808, MS 8327/9, NLI; this letter was missing from NLI collections at the time of publication, so the version referred to is that published in Macmullen, *The Voice of Sarah Curran*, 70.
46. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 13 January 1808, MS 8327/10, NLI.
47. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 20 March 1808, MS 8327/11, NLI.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet*, 36–7.
51. See note 36 above.
52. See note 22 above.
53. See note 36 above.
54. Sarah Curran to Anne Penrose, 1 July 1807, MS 8327/5, NLI; Sarah Curran to Bess Penrose, 25 July 1807, MS 8327/6, NLI.
55. Quoted in Macmullen, *The Voice of Sarah Curran*, 71 n, 45 n; and Katherine Wilmot to Alicia Wilmot, 18 February 1806, MS 12L30, p. 84, Wilmot Papers, Royal Irish Academy (hereafter RIA).
56. Martha Bradford (*née* Wilmot) to Alicia Wilmot, 1 July 1827. Typescript copies of letters of Martha Wilmot later Bradford, written from Vienna c.1820–1830, PRONI D3084/C/E/1/20.
57. See note 32 above.
58. Martha Wilmot to Anna Chetwood, 7 August 1804, MS 12L24, Wilmot Papers, RIA, unpaginated folios. An analysis of these poems is the subject of a separate article in preparation.
59. The poem is also recorded in Commonplace book [...] containing copies of poems by various authors, including Mrs R. Wilmot, Revd John Chetwood, and Edward Wilmot, [early 19th cent.], MS 704, Senate House Library, University of London.
60. Brady, *Clerical and Parochial Records of Cork, Cloyne, and Ross*, I: 53.
61. Commonplace book, MS 704, ff. 12 r, 114 r, Senate House Library; [A collection of poetry], compiled by Alicia Wilmot, 1805, MS 871, Benjamin Iveagh Library, Farmleigh; and E.R. Dashkova, Martha Wilmot [and others], "Poems and Miscellaneous Notes," 1803–7, MS 12L25 (1), Wilmot Papers, RIA, unpaginated folios.
62. Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet*, 22–3; and Elliott, *Robert Emmet*, 117.
63. Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet*, 22.
64. "M.," "Some Passages in the History of Sarah Curran," 331–2.
65. Madden, *The Life and Times of Robert Emmet*, iii, 268–71.
66. Hawkins, "The Dramatic Treatment of Robert Emmet and Sarah Curran."
67. Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet*; and Elliott, *Robert Emmet*.
68. "M.," "Some Passages in the History of Sarah Curran," 342–4.
69. Letter from Sarah Sturgeon to Mrs Henry W., reproduced in Madden, *The United Irishmen*, vol. 3, 532.
70. The marriage of Melesina-Henrietta Lovett and Henry Woodward took place in June 1797 (Farrar, *Irish Marriages*, vol. 2, 476). Death notice of Reverend Henry Woodward in *Kerry Evening Post*, 18 April 1863.
71. See note 16 above.
72. Woodward's sermons were regularly reported in the Irish press from about 1809 into the 1820s.
73. Brady, *Clerical and parochial records of Cork, Cloyne, and Ross*, vol. 2, 527.
74. For a brief account of the Wilmot papers, see Byrne, "Princess Dashkova and the Wilmot Sisters."
75. [A collection of poetry], 1805, MS 871, Benjamin Iveagh Library; [A collection of poetry], compiled by Eliza Wilmot (*née* Chetwood), 1814–22, MS 8741, Benjamin Iveagh Library, Farmleigh; Dashkova, Wilmot [and others], "Poems and Miscellaneous Notes", MS 12L25 (1–3), RIA; Dashkova, Wilmot [and others], "Poems, Letters, Extracts and Notes", MS 12L29 (1–5), RIA; and Commonplace book, MS 704, Senate House Library.

76. Coolahan, "We Live by Chance, and Slip into Events," 9.
77. Schellenberg, *Literary Coteries*, 23; and Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 5.
78. Katherine Wilmot, "Written in Bess P – [Penrose's] Allebaume on little Scrolls which were thrown over a Wreath of Roses encircling the initials of my Name which was enchain'd in the centre," MS 12L29 (3), 44–6, Wilmot Papers, RIA.
79. E.R. Dashkova, Martha Wilmot [and others], "Poems and Miscellaneous Notes," 1803–7, MS 12L25 (1), Wilmot Papers, RIA.
80. [A collection of poetry], 1805, MS 871, ff. 1 v–2 r, Benjamin Iveagh Library.
81. Anna Maria Chetwood, "Miss Curran's Singing" in [A collection of poetry], 1805, MS 871, ff. 29 v–30 r, Benjamin Iveagh Library.
82. Fanny Hamilton, "On hearing Miss Curran sing & play on the Harp" in [A collection of poetry], 1805, MS 871, f. 30 r, Benjamin Iveagh Library.
83. Commonplace book, MS 704, Senate House Library.

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