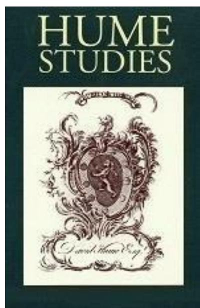

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Hume as Man of Letters: Comments on Harris's *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*

CATHERINE JONES

James A. Harris suggests, in the "Introduction" to his intellectual biography of David Hume, that we should take seriously Hume's description of himself in "My Own Life," composed in April 1776, as having intended from the beginning to live the life of a man of letters. Harris uses the category "man of letters" both to characterise Hume's intellectual career as a whole, and to address the question of how to approach the relation between Hume the philosopher, Hume the essayist, and Hume the historian. In this article, I will discuss Harris's claim that Hume "is best seen not as a philosopher who may or may not have abandoned philosophy in order to write essays and history, but as a man of letters, a *philosophical* man of letters, who wrote on human nature, on politics, on religion, and on the history of England from 55 BC to 1688."[1] I will begin by outlining who or what the man of letters was in early modern Europe. I will then consider one aspect of Harris's presentation of Hume as man of letters: Hume's style. I will conclude with some reflections on the genre of biography, and Harris's methodology in particular.

The earliest published work explicitly dedicated to the character and career of the man of letters was the Italian Jesuit writer and historiographer Daniello Bartoli's *Dell'huomo di lettere difeso et emendato* (1645), which was translated into English by Thomas Salisbury as *The Learned Man Defended and Reform'd* (1660). Peter Burke, however, convincingly suggests that in the twelfth century, for the first time since late antiquity, a "clerisy" became visible to the world outside the monastery; these specialists in knowledge were known as "men of learning (*docti, eruditi, savants, Gelehrten)"* or *"men of letters (literati, hommes de lettres).*" Such men were not confined to a clerical elite, but included "a group of learned laymen," usually either physicians or lawyers, who found their place within the medieval university, as well as status

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in the world outside it (enhanced in time by the foundation of corporate groups, such as the London College of Physicians [established in 1518], which were concerned to maintain a monopoly of knowledge and practice against unofficial competitors). Bartoli's treatise, Burke argues, represents a strengthening of group identity in the mid-seventeenth century rather than a new formation.[2]

Men of letters in early modern Europe defined themselves as citizens of the Republic of Letters, a term that goes back to the fifteenth century, but that was employed with increasing frequency from the mid-seventeenth century onwards.[3] The term embraced, as Françoise Waquet describes, first existing institutions of learning, then the scholarly community as a whole, and finally, that part of it which is interested in "letters" more or less broadly understood.[4]

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the "man of letters" as "a man of learning, a scholar; a professional writer, *esp.* one having a variety of literary or intellectual interests."[5] It gives as the first recorded use of the term a diary entry of the English *virtuoso* John Evelyn (1620–1706). Visiting the Library of the Vatican, in Rome, on his second tour of continental Europe (1643–1647), Evelyn wrote on 18 January 1645:

> The Library is doubtlesse the most nobly built, furnish'd, and beautified in the World, ample, stately, light and cheerfull, looking into a most pleasant Garden: The Walls and roofe are painted; not with Antiqu[e]s, and Grotesc's (like our Bodlean at Oxford) but Emblemes, Figurs, Diagramms, and the like learned inventions found out by the Wit, and Industry of famous men. . . . There were likewise the Effigies of the most Illustrious men of Letters and Fathers of the Church, with divers noble statues in white marble at the entrance, viz. Hippolitus and Aristedes.[6]

Evelyn was committed to erudition as well as to "practical" *virtuoso* activities.[7] The interest that he displays, while travelling on the Continent, in both the literary remains of scholars and memorials to them, suggests his affinity with the "men of Letters" of his own and earlier generations.

Hume uses the term "man of letters" in the sense of "a man of learning, a scholar," in his letter to the anonymous physician of March or April 1734. He is describing the character of the individual he hoped would help him recover from the crisis of emotional and physical distress that he had suffered in 1729:

> The Favour I beg of you is your Advice, and the reason why I address myself in particular to you need not be told. As one must be a skillful Physician, a man of Letters, of Wit of Good Sense, and of great Humanity to give me a satisfying Answer, I wish Fame had pointed out to me more Persons, in whom these Qualities are united, in order to have kept me some time in Suspense.[8]

Hume characterizes his correspondent as exceptional, anticipating the character of the ideal physician—who is "ornate" in his politeness, gentility, and liberal learning, and "skill-

ful" in his practice—elaborated later in the eighteenth century by John Gregory (1724–1773) and William Cullen (1710–1790) in their lectures to medical students at the University of Edinburgh.[9] Hume goes on to describe how his intense studies over the past five years have broken his health.

The term "man of letters" takes on a somewhat different meaning when Hume uses it to describe his own ambitions. In a letter to James Oswald of Dunnikier of 29 January 1748, for example, Hume writes of his decision to accept the offer of a further term of employment as Secretary to General St Clair, which will involve travel to Austria and Italy, specifically to the Courts of Vienna and Turin: "I shall have an opportunity of seeing Courts and Camps; and if I can afterwards, be so happy as to attain leizure and other opportunities, this knowledge may even turn to account to me, as a man of letters, which I confess has always been the sole object of my ambition."[10]

By the mid-eighteenth century, the Republic of Letters could be said to be epitomised by the French salon, which brought together in exquisite tension men and women, print and conversation, sense and wit, philosophy and amusement.[11] To be admitted to the Paris salon was the ambition of many men of letters; but, as Hume's correspondence makes clear, other locations on the Continent also offered British travellers the opportunity to develop their identities as men of letters. The courts and camps of Vienna and Turin held out for Hume the prospect of gaining greater experience of "the Operations of the Field and the Intrigues of the Cabinet," requisite for one of his ambitions, the writing of "History."[12]

Harris discusses Hume's breakdown and letter to the anonymous physician in chapter 1 of his biography ("Pursuits of Philosophy and General Learning"), and the letter to Oswald and his term of employment as St Clair's secretary in chapter 4 ("The Achievement of Independence"). Harris highlights in chapter 1 the important information found in the letter to the physician, that Hume, with his college education at Edinburgh University and an abortive period as a law student behind him, "found his choice inclining 'almost equally . . . to books of reasoning and philosophy, and to poetry and the polite authors.' What it suggests is that it would not be right to imagine the young Hume to have been fascinated by philosophy and by philosophy alone" (42). Chapter 4 brings out the urgency of Hume's pursuit of a moderate quantity of capital from employment that would allow him to devote himself entirely to a life of letters. On 9 February 1748, shortly before departing for the Continent, Hume wrote from London to Lord Kames of "an inward reluctance to leave [his] books, and leisure and retreat."[13] And yet, as Harris describes, he not only appears to have "wholeheartedly entered into the social life of Turin"; he also wrote a new essay, "Of National Character" (first published in *Essays, Moral and Political,* third edition [1748]), "[p]erhaps inspired by what he had seen on his journey to Italy" (242). Here the biographical context illuminates Harris's reading of the text; Harris also speculates on the possible influence of the ideas of Montesquieu on Hume's essay (243–44).

Harris emphasizes the centrality of breadth of learning to the identity of the eighteenth-century man of letters, an emphasis that fits Hume's career well, given the variety of his writing on a range of subjects—politics, economics, aesthetics, civil history, and the history and phi-

losophy of religion. "To call yourself a man of letters," Harris writes in the "Introduction" to his biography, "was to distance yourself both from the academic specialisms of the university and from the narrow and pedantic obsessions of the gentleman *érudit*" (15).

The generalist orientation of the man of letters was perceived as desirable in eighteenth-century Britain because, as Lawrence E. Klein observes, it "tend[ed] to the development of the whole person and ke[pt] the person and his social relations in view. It fixed knowledge in a firm ethical and social grid, flagged by such key words as 'judgment' and 'taste.'"[14] This was also the case in France, as Roger Chartier shows in his essay "L'Homme de Lettres," cited by Harris (477n66). Chartier takes as his starting point Voltaire's article "Gens de Lettres" of 1757, published in the *Encylopédie* (1751–72) of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert:

> On ne donne point ce nom [gens de lettres] à un homme qui avec peu de connaissance ne cultive qu'un seul genre· Celui qui n'ayant lû que des romans ne fera que des romans; celui qui sans aucune littérature aura composé au hasard quelques pieces de théatre, qui dépourvû de science aura fait quelques sermons, ne sera pas compté parmi les gens de lettres.[15]

What was inimical to politeness in learning was damned in Britain and France as pedantry. The word "pedant," observed William Smellie in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771), "is used for a rough unpolished man of letters, who makes an impertinent use of the sciences, and abounds in unseasonable criticisms and observations."[16]

In his study of the changing conditions and conceptions of authorship in the eighteenth century, Dustin Griffin divides the men of letters of the period into "authors by profession" and "gentleman authors."[17] Harris, however, rightly observes that Hume does not fit neatly into either category (477n75). Hume needed money; but, in Harris's words, "[Hume's] idea of himself was as a man of letters unconstrained by any practical demands, whether professional or political, or, for that matter, moral" (18).

Harris convincingly argues that Hume sought to model his identity as a man of letters on Alexander Pope (1688–1744), "the first writer in English to alter the balance of power between author and publisher and achieve financial success on his own terms" (16). In his account of the circumstances surrounding the genesis of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (chapter 2, "Anatomist of Human Nature"), Harris also makes the intriguing suggestion that Hume may have taken inspiration from Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1733–34). Harris goes on to contrast the approach of Hume and Pope to the study of human nature with fine discrimination (83). Less plausible is Harris's assertion (477–78n75) that money mattered more to Hume than it did to Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), author of *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), who famously observed on 5 April 1776, "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money."[18]

Hume's style has been the focus of a number of important studies over recent decades. These include Adam Potkay's *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume;* Susan Manning's *Fragments of Union: Making Connections in Scottish and American Writing;* and Anthony La Vopa's *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures.* Harris, however,

is the first to consider Hume's style across his career, and in the framework of an intellectual biography. Style mattered greatly to Hume, Harris argues, "because, as a man of letters, he did not write as a specialist only for fellow specialists. He sought, and found, a very large readership among the educated men and women of his day, in Britain, and in Europe more widely" (23). Harris's careful consideration of how Hume made his arguments in different genres is a particularly valuable aspect of his biography.

In his account of the rise of a culture of conversation in the eighteenth century, John Mee suggests that Hume sought to create in his essays an "elegant" world through a partnership between the "learned and conversable," on the model of Joseph Addison's and Richard Steele's *Spectator* (1711–12).[19] Like Mee, Harris draws attention to the links between Hume's essays and the Spectator (chapter 3, "Essayist"). But where Mee emphasizes the reorientation of learning in Hume's essays "away from scholasticism and towards the ordinary relations of the everyday world and vernacular language,"[20] Harris characterizes the kind of conversation that Hume wanted to engage in as "philosophical" because of its interest in underlying general explanatory principles, and because of the impersonality of its tone (23).

Of particular importance to Hume's sense of his task as writer of essays, Harris argues, was the woman reader: "Hume was interested in the extent to which women could help with the process of 'importing into company' the choicest discoveries made by the learned. . . . Any man of letters, therefore, who desired success with the public at large must first win over his female readers" (159). Harris describes how, in several of his essays, Hume explicitly addressed himself to women: "'Of Love and Marriage' explained to women 'what it is our sex complains of most in the married state.' 'Of the Study of History' recommended the study of history to women 'as an occupation, of all others, the best suited to their sex and education'" (159). Hume's condescension towards women in these essays is striking, but it is nonetheless important to bear in mind, as La Vopa argues, that, against the backdrop of one of the most pervasive conventional discourses in early eighteenth-century Britain, Hume conducts a positive reevaluation of women: "When he chides them for their preference for 'secret history,' the stories of behind-the-scenes intrigues and scandals, he aims to endow them with a knowledge of public history they can share with men."[21]

Harris offers a compelling account of Hume's conception of "proper historical style," and of his attempts in the *History of England* (1754–62) to balance a striving for impartiality with a desire "to emotionally engage the reader with the fate of history's victims, both great and small" (31). Harris suggests that Hume sought to reduce political debates to their most essential and abstract principles by balancing the best case that could be made on one side, against the best that could be made on the other, and then presenting a considered judgment as to the strengths and weaknesses of each argument. "Sometimes," Harris observes, "[Hume] presented arguments that were not made on one or other of these occasions, but that might have been made had the parties been more reflecting than they actually were" (339–40). Hume's method would be criticised by Thomas Babbington Macaulay, in an essay on "History" published in the Edinburgh Review in May 1828, for distorting facts to suit general principles.[22] Walter Scott, however, recognized the value of Hume's approach, and

incorporated reflections in the style of Hume in novels such as *Waverley:* or, *'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814) and *Old Mortality* (1816). "Ah that Distance!" Scott wrote privately in 1826, "what a magician for conjuring up scenes of joy or sorrow, smoothing all asperities, reconciling all incongruities, veiling all absurdness, softening every coar[se]ness, doubling every effect by the influence of imagination."[23]

By the time *Waverley* had burst upon the publishing scene in the early nineteenth century, the term "literary character" was in use as an alternative to "man of letters." Isaac Disraeli, for example, had published *An Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character* in 1795, on the habits and lifestyle of intellectuals. Thomas Carlyle, however, would revitalize the earlier term by depicting the "man of letters" as the modern manifestation of the heroic type in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840). In his chapter on "The Hero as Man of Letters"—on Johnson, Rousseau and Burns—Carlyle proclaims the quasi-religious sanctification of authorship:

> Fichte discriminates with sharp zeal the *true* Literary Man, what we here call the *Hero* as Man of Letters, from multitudes of false unheroic. Whoever lives not wholly in this Divine Idea, or living partially in it, struggles not, as for the one good, to live wholly in it,—he is, let him live where else he like, in what pomps and prosperities he like, no Literary Man; he is, says Fichte, a "Bungler, *Stümper*."[24]

Not until the late nineteenth century, with the instigation in 1878 of John Morley's series, *English Men of Letters,* did the phrase "become nearly synonymous with the concept of a professional author (what we now call a "public intellectual") and widely used as an honorific for a writer who had achieved literary distinction as well as financial success."[25]

In the "Introduction" to his biography, Harris gives particular attention to late nineteenth-century explanations of Hume's career as articulated by, amongst others, Leslie Stephen (in his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* [1876]). "Hume began as a philosopher, the story went," Harris writes,

> but in the *Treatise* reasoned himself into a position which made philosophy look as though it had destroyed itself under the pressure of systematic skeptical argumentation. Therefore, he turned from philosophy to subjects which could be treated purely empirically, such as politics, political economy, and history, but in each case the work that he produced was evidence that, as Stephen put it, his power as a destroyer was much greater than his abilities as a creator. (7)

This "story," Harris notes, would have a long reach into the twentieth century, informing, for example, Lytton Strachey's claim, in *Portraits in Miniature* (1931), that Hume had completed all his important works by the time he was twenty-six.

Stephen was the author of the "Old" (1859–1900) *Dictionary of National Biography's* entry on Hume, as well as the editor of the whole project. "The Old *DNB*," as H. C. G. Matthew

describes, "exemplified the 'man-of-letters' tradition and it rewarded its practitioners with fulsome coverage of their predecessors."[26] By the early twentieth century, however, biography was seen as "the literary emblem par excellence of Victorianism, a product faithful to the old era's habit of misapplied and exaggerated hero worship, with all its attendant hypocrisy and evasiveness."[27] The 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of new biographical theory and practice.[28] Virginia Woolf, for example, satirized the necessary conventionality of the approach to biography of her father, Leslie Stephen, as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography,* in her mock-biography *Orlando* (1928), her fictional life of Vita Sackville-West. She also mocked Stephen's idea of the eighteenth century as the age of Addison, Dryden, Pope and Swift, articulated in *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1904). Woolf responds in kind to what might be perceived as these writers' dismissive views of women by silencing them, such as when she excises Pope's words:

> Then the little gentleman said,
>
> He said next,
>
> He said finally, *
>
> *These sayings are too well known to require repetition, and besides, they are all to be found in his published works.[29]

Woolf thus sought to redress the balance of literary history by giving, in Jane de Gay's words, "short shrift to the writers whom Stephen had deemed central."[30]

In a letter to Vita Sackville West of 3 May 1938, Virginia Woolf wrote: "My God, how does one write a Biography? Tell me. I'm fairly distracted with Fry papers. How can one deal with facts — so many and so many and so many? Or ought one, as I incline, to be purely fictitious? And what is a life? And what was Roger? And if one cant say, whats the good of trying?"[31] Harris's answer to Woolf's question of how to write biography is to focus on the ideas rather than the man, the arguments made in defense of the ideas, and the language in which the arguments were couched. Such a focus, as Tim Stuart-Buttle observes, risks underplaying "the tension between Hume's carefully constructed literary persona (cool, detached and impartial to the point of ambivalence) and the character occasionally glimpsed in his correspondence (passionate, opinionated and contemptuous of the intellectual shortcomings of others)."[32] Yet by setting all of Hume's works in biographical and historical context and bringing to light the major influences on Hume's intellectual development, Harris enables us to reassess Hume's contribution to each of the fields that he entered, and to gain greater understanding of the nature of his engagement in the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters. *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* is a seminal work of scholarship, engagingly written and meticulously researched.

NOTES

1 Harris, *Hume,* 2.

2 Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge,* 19, 21, 28. In his use of the term "clerisy," Burke follows Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church* and *State,* and Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book.*

3 Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge,* 29.

4 Waquet, "Qu'est ce que la République des Lettres?"

5 *Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "man of letters."*

6 Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn,* 2: 300–01.

7 Hunter, "John Evelyn in the 1650s," 67–98.

8 David Hume to a Physician [Dr George Cheyne], March or April 1734, in *Letters* 1: 12. Harris argues that the most likely identity of the "skillful Physician" was George Cheyne (1671–1743), author of *The English Malady* (1733), "a pioneering study of depression" (77).

9 [Gregory], "Observations on the Duties and Offices of a Physician"; Thomson, *An Account of the Life, Lectures and Writings of William Cullen, M.D.,* 1: 504. See also Rendall, "The Reputation of William Cullen."

10 David Hume to James Oswald, 29 January 1748, in *Letters,* 1: 109.

11 Goodman, *The Republic of Letters.*

12 David Hume to James Oswald, 29 January 1748, in *Letters,* 1: 109.

13 David Hume to Henry Home, Lord Kames, 9 February 1748, in *Letters,* 1: 111.

14 Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness,* 5–6.

15 Voltaire, "Men of Letters," 7: 599.

16 *Encyclopædia Britannica: or, A Dictionary of Arts and Sciences,* s.v. "pedant," 3: 464.

17 Griffin, *Authorship in the Long Eighteenth Century,* 84–88, and chap. 11.

18 Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson,* 3: 19.

19 David Hume, "Of Essay Writing"; Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, 62.

20 Mee, *Conversable Worlds,* 62.

21 La Vopa, *The Labor of the Mind,* 189.

22 Macaulay, "History," 7: 217.

23 Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott,* 127–28.

24 Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History,* 135–36.

25 Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters,* 3.

26 Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography,* 20, 27–28.

27 Altick, *Lives and Letters,* 289.

28 Marcus, "The Newness of the 'New Biography,'" 193–218.

29 Woolf, *Orlando,* 193.

30 de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past,* 154.

31 Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville West, 3 May [1938], in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf,* 6: 225.

32 Tim Stuart-Buttle, review, *EHR,* 132, no. 556 (June 2017), 719–20 (720).

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