



### *Table talk*

She: There was a young woman called Hester. She was born in Wales in 1741 to a noble and well-connected family. When her father lost his fortune, her mother (predictably) married her off to a rich, low-born man. Her husband bought her connections; his wealth bought her access to London society. She became a close friend of Samuel Johnson and Frances Burney.

Hester: It is many Years since Doctor Samuel Johnson advised me to get a little Book, and write in it all the little Anecdotes which might come to my Knowledge, all the Observations I might make or hear; all the Verses never likely to be published, and in fine ev'ry thing which struck me at the Time.<sup>1</sup>

She: Hester Thrale's *Thraliana* cannot be contained by the description 'diary'. It began as a collection of anecdotes or 'table-talk'; scraps of information and gossip; in the mode of French 'anas.' Hester's ana is thought to be the first English ana. *Thraliana* is a performance but as Hester collated these scraps for posterity she confided in the book. The personal merges with the public until it reads like the curated intimacy of a social media account.

Cixous: It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded— which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.<sup>2</sup>

She: When my first baby arrived, the cat started pissing on the carpets. We scrubbed with a potion I discovered online. I eyed it – Edgar (after Poe). I became the Poe-villain – drunk on sleeplessness – trying to bury mercaptans in perfume, but the piss decomposed and the scent deepened instead, becoming as overwhelming as the beat

of the tell-tale heart. The cat had to go. We renovated a brick outhouse, painted the walls, installed a heater – Edgar moved out.

Boyer: It is easy to imagine not writing, both accidentally and intentionally. It is easy because there have been years and months and days I have thought the way to live was not writing have known what writing consisted of and have thought ‘I do not want to do that’ and ‘writing steals from my loved ones.’<sup>3</sup>

She: As the children grew, they pissed all over the house. I tried to pry off my obligations to these sons, to relentlessly scrubbing carpets, by separating myself from the house, and the cat-house doubled its debt as my study.

De Quincey: Paint me, then, a room seventeen feet by twelve, and not more than seven and a half feet high. This, reader, is somewhat ambitiously styled, in my family, the drawing room: but, being contrived ‘a double debt to pay,’ it is also, and more justly, termed the library.<sup>4</sup>

Beecher Stowe: ‘Mina, you may do what I told you, while I write a few minutes till it is time to mould up the bread. Where is the inkstand?’

‘Here it is, on top of the tea-kettle.’<sup>5</sup>

[interruptions]

Painting one: White breeze blocks. A bookcase stacked with gardening trowels, forks and rakes. Gobs of spider webs strung on plastic plant pots. Grey floor tiles – buzzy – like a scouring pad. A row of wellington boots. A black cat, a black fur machine, writhing with worms. The fluorescent smell of ammonia. A strip light. A desk. A garden chair. The woman bobbing up and down, in and out of the frame, to make food and drink. To wipe floors and arses.

She: A United States Association of International Development report on the uptake of clean stoves in Bangladesh notes one reason for low usage is that clean stoves (unlike traditional three stone stoves) don’t allow women to multitask.<sup>6</sup> Traditional stoves

pollute the air and choke the household, but the clean stoves need to be constantly watched. If this is symbolic, then women's work is a choice of paralysis or choking.

Painting two: A room like De Quincey's. A nest of books at the end of the sofa and a laptop on the knees. A three stone stove with dinner on the go and smoke weaving between the soft brown pages of the room. De Quincey's decanter half empty on the table. Also, somewhere in the frame, children – each holding a tablet, eyes as glazed as the screens.

Johnson: It is as though male writing were by nature procreative while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal.<sup>7</sup>

She: There was a wealthy wit called Hester who was pregnant twenty times in fourteen years. Only one handful of babies survived to be adults. Even by Georgian standards, these odds are bad.

Hester: 'Tis less a Miscarriage after all than a dead Child: a Boy quite formed & perfect; once I wished for such a Blessing—now if my Life is left me no matter for the rest.<sup>8 1</sup>

She: There is a woman I know with a number plate that reads: A11 MUM. For a long time, I read it as A1 1 MUM: meaning 'I'm one A1 MUM,' which could be smug or ironic or both. One day, I heard someone say 'ALL MUM.' Suddenly embarrassed—

Irigaray: it is a matter of urgency not to submit to a desubjectivised social role, that of the mother, governed by an order subordinated to a division of labour – man produces/woman reproduces –

She: I once happened to be in a local news story and throughout the reporter referred to me as 'mum of two.' This story was entirely unrelated to a child – I wasn't even aware that I'd mentioned any. Later, I joked with my childless friends, 'Imagine if it had been you. What would he have called you? "Mum of none?"'—

Irigaray: – which confines us to a mere function. Have fathers ever been asked to renounce being men?<sup>9</sup>

She: I know a woman who rarely sees her partner without the children being present. He's become so used to calling her 'Mummy' that she believes he has forgotten her name. 'Pass the salt, Mummy,' he says over dinner and she asks him what kind of pervert he is.

Irigaray: The mother has become the devouring monster as an inverted effect of the consumption of the mother.<sup>10</sup>

Hester: I married the first time to please my Mother, I must marry the second Time to please my Daughter—I have always sacrificed my own Choice to that of others.<sup>11</sup>

She: There was a wealthy widow called Hester, her rich brewer-husband died, leaving her with five daughters. She began to love an impoverished music teacher but her eldest daughter couldn't bear the shame of this poor marriage. Hester pined and she pined until—

Hester: I actually groaned with Anguish, threw myself on the bed with an Agony which My fair Daughter beheld with frigid Indifference.<sup>12</sup>

Clytemnestra: *[to Orestes] Pity the breast [pulling open her shirt]*

She: [Audience remember, Clytemnestra had already sent for an axe.]

Hester: Praying for Children is wrong however, and I will do it no more; I used to weary Heaven with Request for Pregnancy, & now!! all I begged for are in the Grave almost, & those that are left, love not me.<sup>13</sup>

She: There was a wealthy widow who became Hester Lynch Piozzi. Her second husband's birth bought her estrangement from her daughters and from London society. They moved to Wales and lived on her wealth and she wrote—

Francus: the greatest embarrassment for Hester's daughters at this time was their mother's status as professional writer [...] Hester was unpredictable, uncontrollable and consequently dangerous.<sup>14</sup>

Kraus: Monstrosity is the self as machine. The Blob, mindlessly swallowing and engorging, rolling down the supermarket aisle absorbing pancake mix and jello and everyone in town. Unwise and unstoppable. The horror of The Blob is the horror of the fearless.<sup>15</sup>

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### **Notes**

1/

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15/

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