

MIRACULOUS RECOVERY? HANDEL'S ILLNESSES, THE NARRATIVE TRADITION OF HEROIC STRENGTH AND THE ORATORIO TURN

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ABSTRACT

The image of the heroic Handel, typified by claims of immense physical and mental toughness, and rapid – even miraculous – recovery, may satisfy the credulous, but it needs considerable modification once we realize that Handel continued to suffer following the first acute paralytic attack in 1737. It is no coincidence that the onset of acute symptoms occurred during Handel's last lengthy season of opera production and that oratorios came to dominate his composing and his shortened performance seasons thereafter.

Whatever the immediate causes for Handel's decisions to write and publicly to perform the first few English-language works, the intensification of that practice after 1737 was due in large measure to the challenges posed by lead poisoning and its ensuing saturnine gout, and an increasing debility exacerbated by obesity. In other words, the illnesses should be considered as an integral element in the switch by Handel to writing his late works, the major oratorios.

The biographical treatment of illness offers nine story-lines. Each of the ends – overcoming, coping with or succumbing to illness – intersects with the means of resistance, endurance or acceptance. Of these nine, Handel's paralytic attacks have been written about as if he conquered them by heroic resistance, and his blindness as if he coped with it through acceptance (see Table 1).¹ The stories rely less on an accurate understanding of symptoms and medical treatments and more on how closely the tropes fit the image of Handel that the authors seek to project and that readers – in the absence of any familiarity with medical history or the details of Handel's symptoms – invariably accept. Whatever the overt and covert rationales may be for the disease-conquering portrayal, they entirely overlook the personal changes entailed by the onset of serious acute illness, chronic pain and the potential for recurrence of the attacks.

The image of the heroic Handel, typified by claims of immense physical and mental toughness, and rapid – even miraculous – recovery, may satisfy the credulous but it needs considerable modification once we realize that Handel continued to suffer following the first acute paralytic attack in 1737. It is no coincidence that the onset of acute symptoms occurred during Handel's last lengthy season of opera production and that subsequently oratorios came to dominate his composing and his shortened

I am grateful to Robert Hume, Judith Milhous, Thomas McGeary and the anonymous readers for comments.

¹ This generalization obscures some strikingly different, even contradictory, opinions. For example, Victor Schoelcher says of the period during which Handel wrote *Jephtha* and had begun to go blind, 'Thus, we may see him fighting hand to hand with the malady, seizing, and once more seizing the pen, as suffering tore it from his grasp', while on the next page he has Handel 'compelled to recognize that the evil was without a remedy, [and once] his manly soul got the upper hand, he resigned himself to his fate.' *The Life of Handel* (London: Trübner, 1857), 321, 322.

**Table 1** Biographical treatment of illness

	MEANS	Resistance	Endurance	Acceptance
ENDS				
Overcoming		CONQUER (paralytic attacks)	BE COURAGEOUS	TRANSCEND
Coping		CONFRONT	PERSEVERE	ACQUIESCE (blindness)
Succumbing		DEFY	DREAD	EMBRACE

performance seasons.² I begin consideration of the so-called oratorio turn by examining how biographers have attempted to explain it heretofore. Then I summarize recent work on Handel's health and show how we should revise our understanding of his body and mind. I conclude by suggesting that lead poisoning and the symptoms and treatments it induced, coupled with Handel's obesity, should be regarded as chief among the causes of the turn from opera to oratorio.³

From 1720 to 1741, with a break only for the 1728–1729 season, Handel was an integral and public part of the provision of London's most exclusive and expensive entertainment, Italian opera seria: twenty seasons of hiring and firing singers, orchestral musicians and innumerable stage personnel, composing two or more operas a year, rehearsing and directing fifty or more performances annually until 1737, working with, around or against other impresarios (see Table 2 for a summary of season lengths).⁴ Not only did Handel have competition from English opera and musical theatre, but also, during the four seasons from 1733 to 1737, from a rival Italian opera company established by members of the nobility and gentry who were dissatisfied with him. Beginning in 1732, Handel offered English-language oratorios as part of his seasons. His last wholly operatic season was 1737–1738, when he cooperated with what had been the Nobility opera company. From 1738 Handel's seasons consisted primarily of oratorios, though it was not until after the Dublin visit of 1741–1742 that Handel finally forsook the Italian language and opera.

Three rationalizations – economic, musico-psychological and political – have been used to account for Handel's 'abandonment' of opera. The first points to the lower expenses of oratorio and its usual profitability, but it ignores several contradictions and thus its explanatory power is reduced.⁵ Handel knew the extent of the financial drain of the joint opera and oratorio seasons he promoted; he sold off his stock investment

2 Handel's previous season (1735–1736) comprised only twenty-three performances, but its late start was occasioned by the unavailability of sufficient opera singers.

3 I use 'oratorio' in the sense of 'English-language musical works intended for entertainment' and therefore include works on both sacred and secular themes, and works more strictly classified as odes, pastorals or dramas.

4 This assumes that it was Handel who directed (conducted) from the keyboard the performances of works by other composers even when those composers were present in London. Atilio Ariosti and Giovanni Bononcini wrote seven and five operas respectively while in London between 1717 and 1727, but they were noted for their cello playing; see Lowell Lindgren, 'Italian Violoncellists and Some Violoncello Solos Published in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in *Music in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. David Wyn Jones (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 121–157.

5 For examples of the use of this explanation see John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 5 volumes (London, 1776), reissued in 2 volumes (London: Novello, 1853; reprinted New York: Da Capo, 1963), 889 ('above all, this served to recommend it, that it could be conducted at a small expence'); Jonathan Keates, *Handel: The Man and his Music* (London: Gollancz, 1985), 208 ('The most likely cause of his defection to oratorio lies in the economic realities of the situation'); Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, 'Handel's London – The Theatres', in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62 and 63 ('Unlike opera, oratorio could easily make its expenses'; 'Oratorios were . . . cost-effective, and highly suitable to the personnel and performance calendars of the English theatres: a concatenation of fortunate circumstances from which Handel was to profit handsomely the rest of his life [after he had abandoned opera]').



Table 2 Handel's London season dates, Lent, number of performances and operatic competitors, 1720–1752

Season	Date of first and last performances by Handel	Lent (Ash Wednesday, Easter Sunday)	Number of performances directed by Handel		Opera seria competitors and performances		Notes
			Opera	Oratorio	Name	No.	
1719–1720	2 April 25 June	2 March 17 April	22	–	–	–	Royal Academy of Music's preliminary season
1720–1721	19 November 1 July	22 February 9 April	57	–	–	–	
1721–1722	1 November 1 June	7 February 25 March	63	–	–	–	
1722–1723	7 November 15 June	27 February 14 April	62	–	–	–	
1723–1724	27 November 13 June	19 February 5 April	51	–	–	–	
1724–1725	31 October 19 June	10 February 28 March	62	–	–	–	
1725–1726	30 November 7 June	23 February 10 April	54	–	–	–	
1726–1727	7 January 6 June	15 February 2 April	39	–	–	–	Season delayed by Senesino's late return to London
1727–1728	30 September 1 June	6 March 21 April	57	–	–	–	
1728–1729	–	–	–	–	–	–	No opera season
1729–1730	2 December 13 June	11 February 29 March	46	–	–	–	
1730–1731	3 November 29 May	3 March 18 April	53	–	–	–	
1731–1732	13 November 20 June	23 February 9 April	58	10	–	–	
1732–1733	4 November 9 June	7 February 25 March	52	14	–	–	Handel at Oxford, 5–12 July



Table 2 continued

Season	Date of first and last performances by Handel	Lent (Ash Wednesday, Easter Sunday)	Number of performances directed by Handel			Opera seria competitors and performances		Notes
			Total	Opera	Oratorio	Name	No.	
1733–1734	30 October 6 July	27 February 14 April	61	41	20	Nobility	42	
1734–1735	9 November 2 July	19 February 6 April	52	37	15	Nobility	63	
1735–1736	19 February 9 June	10 March 25 April	23	10	13	Nobility	50	
1736–1737	6 November 25 June	23 February 10 April	51?	38?	13?	Nobility	49	Handel unable to direct during May and June
1737–1738	29 October 6 June	15 February 2 April	19? of 38	19 of 38	–	–	–	Shared season with Heidegger; death of Queen Caroline causes cancellation of performances in November and December
1738–1739	16 January 5 May	7 March 22 April	15	2	13	Middlesex	4	
1739–1740	22 November 23 April	20 February 6 April	14	–	14	Middlesex	43	
1740–1741	8 November 8 April	11 February 29 March	15	5	10	–	–	
1741–1742			–	–	–			Handel in Dublin
1742–1743	18 February 31 March	16 February 3 April	13	–	13	Middlesex	49	
1743–1744	10 February 21 March	8 February 25 March	12	–	12	Middlesex	56	
1744–1745	3 November 23 April	27 February 14 April	16	–	16	–	–	Handel announces 24-performance season



Table 2 continued

Season	Date of first and last performances by Handel	Lent (Ash Wednesday, Easter Sunday)	Number of performances directed by Handel		Opera seria competitors and performances		Notes
			Total	Opera	Oratorio	Name	
1745–1746	14 February 26 February	12 February 30 March	3	–	3	Middlesex	Jacobite uprising; opera season lasts 7 January–14 June
1746–1747	6 March 15 April	4 March 19 April	12	–	12	Middlesex	Handel's first season not supported by subscription
1747–1748	26 February 7 April	24 February 10 April	14	–	14	Middlesex	
1748–1749	10 February 23 March	8 February 26 March	14	–	14	Croza and Ciampi	
1749–1750	2 March 12 April	28 February 15 April	12	–	12	Croza	Mostly comic opera
1750–1751	22 February 20 March	20 February 7 April	8	–	8	–	Public performances forbidden following death of Frederick, Prince of Wales
1751–1752	14 February 26 March	12 February 29 March	13	–	13	–	

Note: 'Oratorio' column includes odes, serenatas and dramas.

Sources: C. R. Cheney, *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978); *The London Stage, 1660–1800*, 11 volumes (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960–1968); Carole Taylor, 'Italian Operagoing in London, 1700–1745' (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1991); Donald Burrows, *Handel, The Master Musicians* (New York: Schirmer, 1994); Otto E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: A & C Black, 1955).



in 1732 and spent all the resulting £2,300 by March 1739.⁶ If profit was paramount, why did he not give up opera and/or oratorio sooner? Are we to disregard the unprofitable oratorio seasons of 1745, 1746, 1753 and 1757?⁷ In short, during the transitional period of 1732–1741, and for several seasons following his return to London, it was not obvious that the lower expenses of oratorio production would ensure its survival.

For Handel, the mixed or (as some have characterized them) incoherent seasons of 1738–1741 were an attempt to develop an audience for oratorios while trying to hold on to opera-lovers, who would have missed the staging – costumes, sets, action and Italian language – as well as the Italian vocal superstars.⁸ Until several consecutive profitable seasons had occurred, which did not happen until the late 1740s, Handel could have no assurance of financial success, and even after that time, as his supporters pointed out, he did not always fill the theatre.

Successful oratorio seasons depended upon the development of an audience of critical mass, which could not happen overnight. Relevant factors in building the audience include linkage with charitable performances (such as the first performance of *Messiah* in Dublin and the Foundling Hospital fundraisers in London from 1749), the performance of oratorios in sacred spaces, the timing of the seasons (from 1747 settling into a pattern coinciding with Lent) and their relative shortness (compared with the opera seasons), the use of native singers and the English language, and the fact that religious oratorios became, if not orthodox, at least acceptable as entertainment. In tracing the rise of such acceptability, John Mainwaring claims that though oratorios were ‘more suited to the native gravity and solidity of the English’, their ‘style [was] little suited as yet to the apprehensions of the generality . . . [which, together with other reasons] may have concurred to render his attempt inauspicious in its commencement.’⁹ From the viewpoint of the audience, its members needed to know what kind of an entertainment oratorio was, whether it was approved of and whether society leaders would attend, thereby lending it their cachet. Ruth Smith has rightly pointed out that oratorios met the calls ‘for morally ennobling, spiritually uplifting religious art, for scriptural drama, for native, national, Protestant words-and-music . . . all of which must be emotionally affecting and which could be allegorical.’¹⁰ By 1740 ‘A Widower’ was writing to *The Daily Advertiser* proclaiming the superiority of oratorios, particularly the recent *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, to other forms of entertainment and preferring ‘the imperfectly harmonious Voice of an *English Boy*, who may live to defend and *people* his native country . . . to the most perfect Expressions of his *Art* in a *foreign Eunuch*, who enervates the Place he appears in’.¹¹ Even with these advantages, it took a decade for seasons of oratorios to become commercially successful, so I doubt that money was the main factor in Handel’s continued composition and performance of works in the new genre.

6 John Rich, proprietor of the Covent Garden Theatre (opened 1732) and partner with Handel in opera from 1734 to 1737, wrote to John Russell, fourth Duke of Bedford, in March 1737 requesting a delay in payment of ground rent. His excuse was the losses incurred in opera production over ‘these three Years last past.’ See Judith Milhous, ‘Opera Finances in London, 1674–1738’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 37/3 (1984), 590. For the latest information on Handel’s finances see Ellen T. Harris, ‘Handel the Investor’, *Music and Letters* 85/4 (2004), 521–575.

7 In the absence of accounts for the oratorio seasons we can gauge profitability only from the contrast between years in which Handel did and did not purchase government stocks (bonds). Using this admittedly crude indicator, the 1745, 1753 and 1757 seasons seem not to have been profitable inasmuch as Handel did not make stock purchases. In 1746 he gave only three performances by way of making up a deficiency in the previous season.

8 Schoelcher (*Life of Handel*, 236) claims that Handel renounced opera because the British nation ‘had not yet the taste for that species of music’; so much for the successful productions of previous decades. If by ‘British nation’ he intends to signify an appreciation of opera beyond the moneyed elite, then yes, such diffusion of taste had yet to take place, but such diffusion was irrelevant to Handel and would not obtain for another century or more.

9 John Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel* (London: 1760), 126, 130.

10 Ruth Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 170.

11 Letter dated 29 February 1740, printed in *The Daily Advertiser*, 5 March 1740. Not in Otto E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: A & C Black, 1955), or any other modern source. My thanks to Thomas McGeary for providing a photocopy.



The second explanation (musico-psychological) comes in two forms. Handel was reluctant to drop – or, paradoxically, longed to escape from – Italian opera as a genre or form.¹² Alternatively, he underwent a religious conversion. That Handel persevered so long with Italian opera, and continued to experiment musically during the 1730s, hardly suggests that he desired an escape from the genre's restrictions.¹³ Nor should that perseverance be attributed to an attachment to a musical category, as if that were possible or likely.¹⁴ Instrumental and sacred vocal works also came from Handel's pen during the years he wrote operas, as did oratorios. To reverse Winton Dean's claim: the most striking feature of Handel's career is his obstinate reluctance to abandon English oratorio after it had repeatedly failed with the public. If, as some writers have maintained, Handel should be characterized as an opportunist, what place can there be in such a view for attachment to or disenchantment with a genre?¹⁵

The religious conversion argument depends on accepting the propositions that oratorio is necessarily sacred and that, prior to writing oratorios, Handel was not religious.¹⁶ The former is questionable inasmuch as oratorio's purpose in London was identical with that of opera: theatrical entertainment for the elite. In addition, several of the oratorios are not on religious subjects. Handel had sufficient religious knowledge and conviction to permit his appointment to musical posts in churches at Halle and Hanover and to compose liturgically relevant works. While in Italy he supposedly resisted the enticements of Roman Catholics to conversion. How sensible is it to infer that by concentrating on operas, he became a non-believer and that, on turning to oratorios, he 'converted'?

The third, political, explanation claims that Handel wished to assert his independence from the aristocratic patronage of the 'opera party'. Thus we are to imagine that Handel was 'rescued' from oblivion by an audience drawn from the newly ascendant 'middle class'.¹⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, there was no such thing as a middle class at this time, and those families that historians consider as occupying the social space between the rich and poor, families earning between £50 and £200 a year, could not afford tickets to oratorios, as they cost the same as opera tickets.¹⁸ Handel had to draw on the same wealthy, elite social

12 Both are to be found Paul Henry Lang's *George Frideric Handel* (New York: Norton, 1966): 'In the final operas one senses a conscious attempt to break through the routine of the opera seria. . . . the great vessel of his imagination was too large for the restricted waters of the opera seria. . . . [Handel] continued to risk his fortune and health in fanatic defense of Italian opera' (329). See also Winton Dean, *The New Grove Handel* (London: Macmillan, 1983): 'Perhaps the most striking feature of his career. . . . is his obstinate reluctance to abandon Italian opera after it had repeatedly failed with the public' (47).

13 That Handel's perseverance owed something to the twenty-one-year agreement of 1719 establishing the Royal Academy of Music to produce operas seems unlikely in view of Handel's role as a servant of the Academy (he was not an investing stockholder), the Academy's de facto dissolution in 1728 (or 1733) and the existence (1733–1737) of the rival Opera of the Nobility.

14 Keates suggests that the most frequent explanation has been that Handel 'managed to grow out of writing operas', as if, indeed, they were an adolescent infatuation overcome only at the age of fifty-five; *Handel*, 207. Another explanation, that Handel experienced 'creative exhaustion' with opera as a genre, while superficially persuasive, is hard to sustain given the absence of evidence other than cessation.

15 See, for example, Lang, *George Frideric Handel*, 556.

16 Burney, in a variation on this argument, states that from 1740 'Handel may be said to have devoted his labours solely to the service of the church', an elision of belief, institution and venue that is incredible. 'Sketch of the Life of Handel', in *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon in Commemoration of Handel* (London: sold by T. Payne, 1784), 24.

17 Dean, *New Grove Handel*, 55: 'He now [1743?] had the increasingly prosperous middle class on his side, whereas most of the aristocracy supported opera.'

18 David Hunter, 'Patronizing Handel, Inventing Audiences: The Intersections of Class, Money, Music and History', *Early Music* 28/1 (2000), 32–49. Writers who have used the 'middle-class' argument include Charles Burney, William Coxe, Victor Schœlcher, Richard Streatfeild, Newman Flower and Winton Dean. The argument is made negatively (Handel lacked the support of the nobility) in some cases, for example by Herbert Weinstock, *Handel* (New York: Knopf, 1946).



group – restricted to the 12,600 families with incomes of more than £400 a year who comprised less than one per cent of the population of England and Wales – for his oratorio audience, as he had for his operas.¹⁹ Surviving account books and correspondence show that such notables as Richard Temple, Lord Cobham (eventually Earl Temple); Jemima, Marchioness Grey (wife of Philip Yorke, second Earl Hardwicke); Francis North, Baron North (eventually Earl Guilford) and Gertrude Savile (sister of Sir George, seventh Bt) attended both genres.²⁰ Handel's supporters, such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, fourth Earl of Shaftesbury, and the Percival families (including the first and second Earls of Egmont), went to both. Other than persons unable to attend because of press of business or the incapacitations of pregnancy, sickness or age, only that portion of the elite for whom opera was the sine qua non of their theatre-going, or who disliked Handel, declined to attend Handel's mixed or oratorio seasons; these included Sir Michael Newton, Lord Delawarr and other directors of the Opera of the Nobility, the Middlesex opera directors, including John Frederick (eventually fourth Bt) and the infamous Lady Margaret Brown.²¹

The three explanations cannot adequately account for what is rightly regarded as a fundamental change in Handel's compositional activity, as they fail straightforward tests. Do the explanations: 1) fit the known facts? 2) include external and internal pressures? and 3) ring true to the profound seriousness of the change for Handel as composer, for public entertainment, for the development of a musical genre and for the audiences? Thus, as an example of the first test, any claim for financial success must be tempered by the realization that Handel was able to persevere with oratorio composition and performance despite 'losing' seasons thanks to his substantial gross income from the Crown of £600 a year.²² None of the three explanations meets the test of combining both internal and external aspects. Each of the explanations separately, or even all of them collectively, hardly does justice to the seriousness of the turn.

Biographers have not considered Handel's body to be of much account.²³ The placement by early and some later biographers of their physical descriptions of Handel towards or at the end of their works enacts a curious marginalization of his physical presence. For Mainwaring and Richard Streatfeild, Handel's body becomes mentionable only after death.²⁴ In part this is a result of the lack of information about Handel's physical condition when he was young. The early biographers knew the mature, overweight Handel and therefore characterized him in that way. The inclusion of reproductions of paintings, sculptures and engravings removes some of the obligation from subsequent biographers, but as these images are of the older Handel, and as what is shown is usually only the face and shoulders, even when the original is larger, readers

19 Even £400 may be setting the bar too low. At £600 we are left with 4,670 households or 0.3 per cent of the population of England and Wales. For a cogent analysis of the (mis)use of the 'rising middle class' in literature see Nicholas Hudson, 'Social Rank, The Rise of the Novel, and Whig Histories of Eighteenth-Century Fiction', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 17/4 (2005), 563–598.

20 Frederick, Prince of Wales, financially supported the Nobility Opera and Handel except for the seasons 1734–1735 and 1735–1736. Only during the 1734–1735 season did Frederick not attend any of Handel's performances. For a summary of attendance and financial support see Thomas McGeary, 'Handel, Prince Frederick, and the Opera of the Nobility Reconsidered', *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 7 (1998), 156–178. Donald Burrows offers a more traditional interpretation in 'Handel and the London Opera Companies in the 1730s: Venues, Programmes, Patronage and Performers', *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 10 (2004), 149–165.

21 See David Hunter, 'Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown: "Persevering Enemy to Handel" but "Otherwise Unknown to History"', *Women & Music* 3 (1999), 43–58. John Frederick did attend Handel performances (of both opera and oratorio) prior to the establishment of the Nobility Opera; see his account book at the Surrey History Centre (183/33/10).

22 For details of the British pensions and office held by Handel see David Hunter, 'Royal Patronage of Handel in Britain: The Rewards of Pensions and Office', in *Festschrift for Howard Serwer* (forthcoming).

23 For the role of narrative in reminding us 'that we do have considerable influence over the way our bodies, healthy or not, are viewed' see G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life-writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 289.

24 Mainwaring, *Memoirs*, 139–143; Richard Streatfeild, *Handel*, second edition (London: Methuen, 1910; reprinted New York: Da Capo, 1964), 217–218.



rarely gain a clear idea of Handel's body and how it changed. In some cases, biographers admit an aversion to the topic, and thus his gluttony and obesity are denied, excused or ignored.

In order to indicate the severity of Handel's health problems, I will summarize points made in greater detail elsewhere.²⁵ From early 1737 (if not before) Handel suffered repeated periods of incapacitation as a result of headaches, irritability, rheumatic pains, colic (acute abdominal pain), cognitive dysfunction (notably loss of speech and/or language comprehension) and localized paralysis. Eventually he became blind. Whether one considers the symptoms as constituting peripheral neuropathy, transient ischemic attacks (small strokes) or plumbism, all were the consequence of lead poisoning.²⁶ In addition, he probably suffered from what is now called binge-eating disorder, which contributed to or perhaps even caused his obesity. Handel's friends urged him to moderate his diet in the belief that excessive consumption of wine and rich food would kill him, though they had no idea of the direct link between wine, food and lead poisoning.

It has taken until the 1990s for the full extent of the havoc that lead can cause humans to be understood and documented in the scientific literature. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries some of the dangers were known and warned against, though this knowledge was often restricted according to geography and language. With the elimination of lead from petrol, paint, food, drink and other common substances, plumbism is no longer as widespread in industrialized countries as it once was, but the disease continues to be found in children who ingest old paint and in persons who work with lead or who make or drink moonshine. There was no cure for lead poisoning, but full-immersion hot spa treatments (such as those available near Aix or at Bath) could and did reduce the lead burden temporarily, thereby delaying the next painful attack of rheumatism, colic or palsy. Had Handel been able or willing to follow the advice of his friends and leading doctors, the consequence would have been the reduction of his body's lead burden, possibly to a level sufficiently low to avoid the attacks.

While the circumstances of Handel's ill-health – the late onset of debility, its known symptoms, the regular return of acute attacks and the effectiveness of a particular treatment – are all attributable to long-term lead ingestion, the diagnosis of saturnine gout can be confirmed only with additional evidence of Handel's behaviour while he was sick, as well as a definitive statement concerning the extent of the lead poisoning.²⁷ Exhumation of his remains would permit the relevant tests for lead poisoning and joint deterioration to be made. Whether such disturbance is justifiable requires debate.²⁸

In arguing that the primary explanation for the oratorio turn is to be found in Handel's body, the illnesses that afflicted it and his responses to pain and suffering, I necessarily upset the biographical tradition of the

25 See David Hunter, 'Handel's Ill-Health: Documentation and Diagnoses' (forthcoming), where citations of the extensive medical and scientific literature on plumbism (saturnine gout) and spa treatment will be found.

26 Change of skin colour, especially of the face, the development of a black lead-line on the gums, change of eye colour and constipation are also evident in lead poisoning. The most serious cases entail encephalopathy and death.

27 Burney gives a psychological explanation, attributing Handel's 'very severe illness [of 1737 to] . . . the joint effects of anxiety, mortification, distress, and disappointment' (*Musical Performances*, 25).

28 For the value of the scientific examination of remains see Russell Martin, *Beethoven's Hair* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000). Among others, the following composers' remains have been exhumed: Mozart (retrieved from communal grave after two years); Beethoven (in 1863 and again in 1888, when the burial site was moved); Schubert (in 1863, in conjunction with Beethoven); Delius (buried temporarily at Grez, France; reburied at Limpsfield, Surrey); Bartók (died in New York 1945, body returned to Hungary 1988). For the Beethoven and Schubert exhumations see William Meredith, 'The History of Beethoven's Skull Fragments', *Beethoven Journal* 20/1 (2005), 3–46, and 'Argonne Researchers Confirm Lead as Cause of Beethoven's Illness', news release, Argonne National Laboratory, 6 December 2005. David Yearsley tells the story of the disinterment of what may have been J. S. Bach's skeleton in *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 210–224. From 1750 to 1894 the remains were buried in the graveyard of the Johanniskirche in Leipzig. At the church's rebuilding, bones from an oak coffin (not necessarily Bach's) were examined (the skull was dissected) and they were reinterred in a tomb fit for a national hero inside the church. The church was damaged during World War II. In 1949 the remains were removed to the Thomaskirche and a bronze plaque now signals what may be Bach's final resting place.



heroic Handel overcoming his paralytic attacks.²⁹ This is not simply the substitution of a new narrative – one of suffering and creative response to it – in place of the old, but is part of an attempt to explain Handel's undoubted strength, which enabled him to continue the crushing demands of opera production into his early fifties, an age at which the men in his elite cohort typically were enjoying their worldly success and/or nursing their painful afflictions. Until 1737 Handel seems to have avoided serious illness or injury and thus had little or no personal experience with pain. His last twenty-two years were a complete contrast.

Responses to pain in the eighteenth century cannot have been much different from our own; only our ability to moderate pain has improved.³⁰ Though the symptoms of an illness may be severe, patients desire first to be relieved of pain. Daniel de Moulin summarizes the results of his survey of seventeenth-century reports: 'Breast amputation and colic, migraine, piles and plague sores, all these were apparently experienced as being extremely painful . . . and [the vast majority of] patients did not suffer in silence'.³¹ When recounting her mastectomy of 1811, Fanny Burney told of how she screamed 'the whole time of the incision', which part of the operation 'lasted 20 minutes! a time, for sufferings so acute, that was hardly supportable'.³² She fainted twice. Primary gout and urinary calculi, from which Horace Walpole and his father Sir Robert respectively suffered, were both exceedingly painful.³³ During 1744 and until his death on 18 March 1745 Sir Robert was treated for the stone and suffered intense pain. Horace recorded some of his final words: 'Give me more opium; knock me down . . . Dear Horace, . . . 'tis hard to die in pain'.³⁴ Horace, who was relatively abstemious, wrote to his friend Henry Seymour Conway after the onset of his second attack of gout that 'Nobody would believe me . . . when I said I had the gout. They would do leanness and temperance honours to which they have not the least claim'.³⁵ Joseph Farington says that Horace's post-mortem found no evidence of diseased organs but notes that his Lordship 'had been much afflicted with gout . . . [and] died with apparent pain'.³⁶ If Handel took opium to relieve pain caused by his ailments, the various purging treatments and eye operations, he joined many others, both then and since, for whom the drug and its derivatives have made it possible to endure the agonies of life.³⁷

29 According to Lang, 'Whatever the nature of his ailment [in 1745], a brief rest sufficed to restore him to action, and his combative spirit drove him back to London' (*George Frideric Handel*, 439). For Streatfeild, by 1752, 'The battle was won at last. The struggle had been long and severe, but Handel had come out a conqueror in the end. With everything against him he won by sheer force of personality' (*Handel*, 209). The onset of blindness and the end of unassisted composition is a strange moment to announce Handel's triumph.

30 Daniel de Moulin, 'A Historical-Phenomenological Study of Bodily Pain in Western Man', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 48/4 (1974), 540–570. 'Judging by the reaction of the patient and the attitude of the physician, there is no evidence that pain was once less acutely felt tha[n] in our own days' (569). David Morris makes an apparently contradictory assertion: 'the pain we feel today differs from the pain our ancestors felt'; *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 57. While this may be true in terms of the treatments available to us (such as anaesthetics and analgesics), it is not relevant to the pre-diagnostic period, as any sufferer from kidney or other kinds of stone, migraine, or an injury or burn can attest.

31 De Moulin, 'A Historical-Phenomenological Study', 552.

32 *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay)*, ed. Joyce Hemlow and others, twelve volumes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972–1984), volume 6, 596–616 (especially 612, 613). The surgeon's pupil wrote that the operation was 'très douloureuse & supportée avec un grand Courage' (616).

33 See Arthur J. Viseltear, 'The Last Illnesses of Robert and Horace Walpole', *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 56/2 (1983), 131–152.

34 'Sir Robert Walpole's Last Words', in *Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis and others (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937–1983), volume 26, 12.

35 *Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, volume 38, 65 (7 August 1760).

36 *The Farington Diary*, ed. James Grieg, eight volumes (London: Hutchinson, 1922), volume 1, 196.

37 Apparently Beethoven did not take opium-based medicine because of its dulling effect and its interference with creative abilities; see Martin, *Beethoven's Hair*, 202–204.



'The human experience of pain . . . inescapably involves our encounter with meaning', as David Morris remarks.³⁸ Whether the oratorios can be said to be part of Handel's encounter is an intriguing question. That Handel's compositions from 1737 to 1752 have been considered to lack explicit marks of the composer's distress does not mean that he was pain-free, though some biographers have come close to making this specious argument.³⁹ As a matter of biographical narrative, denial of the expression of pain in the musical works may be a necessary part of the claim of heroic manliness, but given the systemic nature of Handel's illnesses, the effects of his chronic and acute symptoms on composition and performance are likely to have been of greater personal import than biographers have indicated heretofore.⁴⁰

The romantic aesthetic had yet to sanction the personalization of the production and meaning of art; nevertheless, Handel's opportunities were significantly bounded by his health in terms of continued survival and mental stability (John Clegg, the violin prodigy from Dublin who joined Handel's band in the 1730s, apparently went insane⁴¹). If we suppose that Handel suffered less than other composers because his compositions appear not to exhibit marks of his distress, does that imply approval of his avoidance of putting his pain into music, or is it a 'fault' of the musical style of his time that it would not allow him to exhibit such marks?⁴² Or are we, his posthumous audience, in desiring both 'absolute' and personalized musical works, caught in a paradox? For example, Winton Dean claims 'specifically Christian feeling' for *Theodora* (not a biblical story) and *Jephtha*, but denies it to the earlier oratorios; and Romain Rolland says of the works composed during the autumn and bitter winter of 1739–1740 that Handel 'perhaps put more [into them] than into any other his own personal feelings'.⁴³ To assert that a composer's personality pervades his compositions is both trite and exceedingly complex: think of John Dowland's melancholy, William Byrd's attachment to Catholicism or Benjamin Britten's homosexuality.⁴⁴ To exempt Handel and his compositions from this general rule of distinctive personal style by claiming for him heroic strength sufficient to conquer the 'enemy' of disease and decay seems short-sighted.⁴⁵

38 Morris, *Culture of Pain*, 26. Later he rephrases it: 'pain is not just a biological fact but an experience in search of an interpretation' (38). See also Raymond A. Anselment, "'The Want of Health': An Early Eighteenth-Century Self-Portrait of Sickness', *Literature and Medicine* 15/2 (1996), 230.

39 According to Morris, the 'denial of pain is in the largest sense a denial of the claims pain implicitly makes upon us' (287). The restricted opportunities Handel biographers give readers to see the 'inter-human' responses of Handel's friends or to participate themselves in the 'inter-human' may be attributable to the mechanistic, modernist conception of pain within whose terms they wrote, as well as to the narrative demands of the heroic portrayal.

40 Schelcher asserts, in the context of the 1749 season, that 'it seems as if the fatigues of old age were unknown to him' (312). Except for the obvious incapacitations of paralysis and blindness, biographers have written about Handel as if he were capable of doing what he did regardless of his body.

41 Ian Bartlett, 'A Burning Talent', *The Strad* 111 (2000), 1076–1079.

42 In the absence of any objective standard for measuring pain today, let alone that of eighteenth-century persons, and given that the same symptoms can produce apparently different levels of pain in different persons, we can say with certainty only that Handel suffered. The intensity of the pain remains unknown, though contemporary descriptions are touching: 'Poor Handel has been excessively ill'; Earl of Shaftesbury to James Harris, 19 August 1745, in Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris, 1732–1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 216.

43 Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 40, and Romain Rolland, *Handel*, trans. A. Eaglefield Hull (London, 1916), 95, the works being the *St Cecilia's Day Ode*, the Concerti Grossi Op. 6 and *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*. For Lang, Handel 'reached the highest peak in his artistic career when in a dozen weeks or so [in 1744] he composed *Hercules* and *Belshazzar*' (*George Frideric Handel*, 439).

44 That compositional style can be individually distinctive is obvious but the ways in which style causes listeners to feel certain emotions or to assign attributes of personality to composers is not well understood. For a pioneering if still controversial attempt to explain how standard musical phrases are 'made to "convey" composers' own personal experience of . . . emotions' see Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 168.

45 Whether because of the rationalism of Enlightenment thought, British pragmatism or personal acquaintance with Handel, the early biographers do not consider Handel's suffering to be divine punishment or test, nor do they interpret his compositions as a visionary response to it.



Triumphant Handel biography has it that the composer returned to the opera business reinvigorated after the paralytic attack of 1737. In fact, Handel's involvement with the 1737–1738 opera company led by John Jacob Heidegger included only the writing of two operas and a pasticcio, and possibly the direction of their nineteen performances.⁴⁶ Doubtless there were some among Handel's audience who considered that he was finished, particularly as he received a highly profitable benefit performance on 28 March 1738, and Roubiliac's marble statue of him was installed at Vauxhall Gardens in April, but their viewpoint does not need to be countered by biographical exaggeration, by emphasizing heroic strength of both constitution and character.⁴⁷ The narrative action of returning Handel to full health as fast as possible after illness is paradoxical. Biographers seek to normalize Handel, thereby removing the obligation to empathize with his suffering or to consider how it may have affected his compositional or performing life. On the other hand, they emphasize that he was abnormal in overcoming so speedily these serious afflictions, thereby enhancing the image of his uniqueness. A two-thirds reduction in performances by Handel is hardly a return to normal. The first consequence of ill-health was an inability to direct long performance seasons.

Until 1737 Handel's primary arena of music-making – opera – had necessitated his working in collaboration with other investors (boards of directors, impresarios, managers) who inevitably brought different perspectives to bear, not only in terms of how money should be spent, but also by their being consumers of that entertainment. The changes that Handel made to his own seasons during the 1730s indicate decreasing willingness to meet demands for spectacle. In broad terms, by removing the visual element of costume, set and action, Handel put the focus on aural discernment. By reducing the need for superstar singers he de-emphasized virtuosic display. By changing language from Italian to English he ensured that the literary text would be of greater interest. By switching from classical to biblical figures he changed the tone and layers of inference of the works. By leaving opera he gave up what he may have regarded as the rigidities of contrived plots, exit arias and happy endings. Handel's unwillingness to write operas for the Middlesex company in 1743 even when pressured by the Prince of Wales was correctly seen by Christopher Smith as selfish, but we can now understand that it was made in the context of a preference for his own brand of entertainment, a preference solidified by acute and chronic illness.⁴⁸

The spiritualization of entertainment is what distinguishes the oratorio turn, and is Handel's distinctive contribution to music and social history.⁴⁹ He had no ambition to prefigure the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner. On the contrary, the limitation of his means of influence to sound required the audience to heighten its attention to the notes and words.⁵⁰ Handel's talent for musical scene painting was vital to this transformation. The claim for Handel's religious focus, which Paul Henry Lang scornfully dismisses (Handel 'finds lasting serenity by turning away from the theatre to Holy Scripture'⁵¹), is partially justifiable, not on the grounds of the exclusion of the secular, but in terms of the portrayal of religious characters whose circumstances elicit the audience's sympathy, such as the Israelites, Christ, Samson, Susanna, Theodora. Obviously, Handel could not obtain 'lasting serenity' by turning to oratorio in terms of either correcting his

46 A London newspaper noted that at the premiere of *Faramondo* on 3 January 1738, 'It being the first Time of Mr Handel's Appearance this Season he was honour'd with extraordinary and repeated Signs of Approbation'. First cited in Newman Flower, *George Frideric Handel: His Personality and His Times* (London: Cassell, 1923), 263. Who it was that directed the nineteen performances of operas by other composers is unknown.

47 The contrast between the relaxed, lyre-strumming image in stone and the actual palsied and pain-wracked person of the previous year is a classic instance of artistic imposture.

48 Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, 167.

49 Handel was not the progenitor of such events. For prior efforts and propaganda, such as the concerts of Cavendish Weedon in 1702, see Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 160–167.

50 As Burrows points out, oratorio made 'its primary appeal to the more musical of listeners, for it require[d] from them an imaginative effort'; Donald Burrows, *Handel, The Master Musicians* (New York: Schirmer, 1994), 307. The focus on sound and listening made audience-building an especially arduous task given that people then (as now) were more attracted to visual spectacle, preferring shows to sermons.

51 Lang, *George Frideric Handel*, 327.



physical ill-health or assuring a comfortable life in the hereafter, but there is no need to assume that this was Handel's aim. As a conventional believer Handel presumably looked to God for his salvation and not to his work. Rather, the continuing predominantly religious focus – maintained despite lucrative requests to write secular operas, financial loss and the failure of oratorios to find audiences – was a personal choice and suggests that Handel was exploring the possibilities offered by the portrayal of suffering.⁵²

One musical indicator of Handel's changing values can be seen in the choice of mode (major or minor) with which he opens his operas and oratorios.⁵³ I offer these statistics in full recognition of the interpretive perils induced by, for example, modulation during the opening movement, textual alteration during revivals, audience arrival times, attention spans and disruptiveness, and therefore consider them indicative rather than conclusive (see Table 3).⁵⁴ Although in terms of theme the Italian operas are serious and tragic, those that begin in the major outnumber those in the minor three to two;⁵⁵ on the other hand, oratorios that begin in the minor have a slight majority over those that do not. Unless someone is prepared to argue otherwise, Handel's choice of mode was deliberate, in which case it must have a cause.⁵⁶ For the audience, the impression of increased seriousness is even more marked as the performances during Handel's lifetime of oratorios that begin in the minor outnumber those of major-mode works by fifty per cent. Handel continued to write in major keys when called for by a libretto or a monarch (for the Royal Fireworks of 1749), but he seems to have employed the minor ones more frequently after 1737.

Table 3 Opening mode of overtures

Genre	Date	Total	Major	Minor
Italian operas	1710–1740	35	21	14
English oratorios and dramas	1718–1751	21	12	9
Italian operas	November 1737–1740	4	3	1
English oratorios and dramas	November 1731–1751	17	8	9

To what extent does explanation of the oratorio turn as resulting from bodily infirmity meet the three tests? It fits the known facts, notably the chronology that extends over at least twenty years and provides key moments in 1732, 1737, 1739, 1741–1742, 1745 and 1752. The increasing debility is acknowledged, as is the change in focus of the librettos. The second test is met, for illness is experienced both internally and externally and induces both internal and external effects. The eyewitness reports of continuing illness (occasionally manifested as bizarre behaviour) need no longer be brushed aside. Unaware that Handel's cognitive dysfunction was the result of lead poisoning, biographers have seized on compositional fertility as an indication of his strength of will. Thus Percy Young describes the intensity of composition required to write *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt* (he omits *Imeneo*) between the end of July and the beginning of November 1738 in

52 This is not to discount operatic portrayals of suffering, such as in *Tamerlano*, or the triumphal themes of some oratorios, but it does indicate a change of emphasis.

53 The funeral anthem for Queen Caroline of December 1737 perhaps offers another example. Its excessive length was the result in part of the number of biblical verses selected, but also of Handel's long-standing personal attachment to the Queen and conceivably also to his own recent illness, which had provided a painful token of mortality. The King refused to allow the work to be performed at Handel's benefit performance on 28 March 1738. With considerable modification, Handel used the piece as the first part of *Israel in Egypt*, which was given its premiere in April 1739.

54 The complex interrelations between the overtures to *Athalia*, *Il pastor fido* and *Parnasso in Festa* are outlined in Donald Burrows, 'Handel's 1735 (London) Version of *Athalia*', in *Music in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 193–212.

55 According to Robert Hume, the dramatic situations most often used by Handel in his operas include disaster, abduction, crimes of love, ambition, enmity of kinsmen and self-sacrifice. Hume's stimulating though as yet unpublished paper is entitled 'The Morphology of Handel's Operas'.

56 Overall tonal planning may be one reason for the choice of opening mode, but comparative study of Handel's works to elucidate their tonal plans and the context of the openings has yet to be undertaken.



terms of Handel having ‘fought the nightmare of mental disturbance with deep concentration’.⁵⁷ In addition to supposedly explaining how richly productive was Handel’s conquering of mental demons, this comment wraps Handel in the cloak of heroic manliness as he faces down the worst possible affliction – disintegration of the self – without the aid of drugs or other treatments. This might have been an acceptable characterization when first published in 1947, but if offered today the comment would rightly be regarded as patronizing (if not worse), ignorant and insensitive. Beginning in 1739, Handel reduced his annual output of major works from three or more to two or one, and in the years 1742 and 1745 wrote none. Lastly, for Handel, illness is more significant than finances, audience or genre preference in affecting what he can and what he wishes to do. Handel was forced to come to terms with the solitude of sickness, the pain and suffering of illness and treatments, the humiliation and dependency of incapacity, and his mortality.⁵⁸

As is usual in biography, the significance of ‘last things’ in a creator’s life – for himself, for the audience and for posterity – has induced some sentimental or unthinking claims. Handel may have regarded *Jephtha* as his last oratorio and therefore as special, but any one of the oratorios could have been the last, if only because Handel’s illnesses made him conscious of his failing body and inevitable death.⁵⁹ Nor is an incomplete or interrupted composition necessarily the most evident or significant mark of the cessation of Handel’s creative powers. He spent the greater part of his life doing things other than composing. His contemporaries lamented most the loss of his keyboard prowess.⁶⁰

That the oratorio turn was contingent upon Handel’s body and its suffering becomes even clearer when we consider the counterfactual scenario of earlier onset of acute symptoms. Had that occurred in 1732 or 1727 or 1725, the consequences for audiences, for musicians (especially composers) in London and Europe and for operatic history would have been wide-ranging (note that the stability of his royal income would have made the turn just as possible then as it was in the late 1730s, though other factors might have prevented it). Handel’s illnesses were serious enough to influence the change of genre and the shortening of seasons but were insufficiently serious, until the onset of blindness, to induce the cessation of composition and orchestral direction. Even blindness did not put a complete stop to public performance at the keyboard. Had the onset of blindness occurred sooner than it did and the paralytic attacks lasted longer than they did, Handel’s engagement with oratorios would have been severely curtailed. Had Handel become blind in 1737, he could not have written the major oratorios.

Doubtless some readers will regard my argument for considering the significance of Handel’s body to the oratorio turn as merely the substitution of one fallacy – the heroic – with another – the pathetic. But I wish to preserve some of the heroic interpretation while trying to find a way of accommodating the illnesses, the turn and the always tricky relationship between works and their creators. Whatever the immediate causes for Handel’s decisions to write and publicly to perform the first few English-language works, the intensification of that practice after 1737 was due in large part to lead poisoning and its ensuing saturnine gout, and an increasing debility exacerbated by obesity.⁶¹ Thus the illnesses should be considered as an integral element in the switch by Handel to writing his late works, the major oratorios – a bold, perhaps even controversial claim. This is not to eliminate the economic, musico-psychological and political arguments that have been used to explain the oratorio turn, but it places them in a subordinate position. Without the need for Handel

57 Percy Young, *Handel* (London: Dent, 1975), 67. (First published in 1947.)

58 Samuel Gorovitz outlines the five ways that illness and being ill are undesirable in *Doctors’ Dilemmas: Moral Conflict and Medical Care* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 60–61.

59 Winton Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 595, 599.

60 The pathos of the story about a performance of *Samson* in April 1753, at which the audience – knowing of Handel’s blindness and hearing an aria about Samson’s – was brought to tears, or that Handel cried, stemmed from a temporary linkage between Samson’s plight and Handel’s, and not from anything inherent in the aria, which had been finished and first performed in 1743. See Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, 291.

61 Handel’s overeating and excessive drinking were not a maladaptive response to sickness but preceded its acute onset. That he continued the practice after he became seriously ill suggests that he could not control his appetite even when this was recommended by doctors and friends.



to reduce the length of his season, to please himself and to focus largely on the theme of suffering, those arguments lack purpose. Opera continued to be regarded as the acme of elite audience entertainment; Handel was invited to write new ones but declined to do so. Oratorio offered no certainty of financial success. Indeed, to focus a public career on an untried and unappreciated musical genre seems a foolhardy proposition even at the best of times.⁶² By misdiagnosing Handel's illnesses and claiming that he resisted and even conquered them, biographers have told the wrong story of a miraculous recovery and heroic strength, thereby denying Handel the connection between personal circumstances and actions, and also denying readers the opportunity for empathy.⁶³ If claims of a miracle are warranted, they derive from the regular production from 1739 to 1752 by a chronically ill man of musical works that continue to play a defining role in the English-speaking world.

62 If Handel articulated an explanation for his dogged continuation with oratorio despite commercially unsuccessful seasons in London from 1738 to 1741, it has not survived. His letter published in *The Daily Advertiser* of 17 January 1745, announcing a hiatus to his season, emphasizes 'that joining good Sense and significant Words to Musick was the best Method of recommending *this* [music] to an English Audience; . . . the English Language . . . so expressive of the sublimest Sentiments is best adapted of any to the full and solemn kind of Musick.' Deutsch, *Handel*, 602.

63 For Mainwaring, Handel's 'faculties remained in their full vigour almost to the hour of his dissolution, as appeared from' continued composition. But he then writes that 'This must appear the more surprising, when it is remembered to how great a degree his mind was disordered, at times, towards the latter part of his life.' *Memoirs*, 139.