

CHAPTER 4

Memorializing a coterie life in print *The case of William Shenstone*

I have read an octavo volume of Shenstone's letters. poor Man! he was always wishing for money, for fame, & other distinctions; & his whole philosophy consisted in living against his will in retirement, & in a place, which his taste had adorn'd; but which he only enjoy'd, when People of note came to see & commend it. his correspondence is about nothing else but this place & his own writings with two or three neighbouring Clergymen, who wrote verses too.

(Thomas Gray, 1769)¹

Eagerly, according to custom, looking over the contents of your Magazine for December last, p. 505, I dropped upon the birthplace of my favourite Shenstone, and glad I am that there is a semblance of it preserved . . . Modest and worthy Shenstone! I knew him well. Amiable in his manners, willing to communicate, he was the friend of merit and the fosterer of genius. I well remember when a youth, that I showed him some Verses I had written on the Leasowes, which, although they have little to recommend them, I will introduce, to show the willingness he had to assist a rhyming adventurer, and likewise the facility with which he wrote. With a pencil he immediately annexed the eight last lines, and returned me the verses.

(A.F., *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1812)²

The poet Thomas Gray's dismissal of William Shenstone's correspondence, published posthumously in 1769 as the third and final volume of Dodsley's edition of Shenstone's *Works*, calls for two caveats. First, Gray is responding to a limited selection only. This early volume did not contain the correspondences with Lady Luxborough, Thomas Percy, and Robert Dodsley, for example, and thus its focus was by default on the struggles of Shenstone, Graves, and Jago to establish themselves through preferment or public recognition; the extensive discussions of landscape gardening with Lady Luxborough, of poetics and the ballad genre with Percy, and of various publishing projects with Dodsley are all absent. Secondly, Gray's own negotiation of his authorial persona in relation to publicity and

audience was a vexed one, and his discomfort over the revelation of Shenstone's attitudes toward his financial limitations, his pride in connections to "People of note," and his restricted literary and social circle might well have involved an element of self-recognition. Gray's tone aside, there was clearly some basis for the conclusion that Shenstone was to be pitied as a victim of ambition unfulfilled and potential unrealized. Elizabeth Montagu responded to these themes through a patron's lens, recognizing the difference a more organized patronage network might have made to this career; she writes of the letters:

they have made me regret I did not know him, not from the witt or genius they display but that I fancy I should have urged him to have had his Works printed by subscription. A few hundred pounds would have given him ease. His taste was above his fortune & to purchase some elegance for his retirement he was obliged to deny himself many little comforts. Eye upon the rich & great who professd to admire his works! He was not happy . . . This poor Man seems to have had a friendly good heart, narrow circumstances & ye churlish World sufferd it not to expand itself. He appears to have had no strict friendships but with authors.³

Montagu's knowledge of how literary fame and accompanying financial ease were to be achieved by an individual of the middling sort or lower gentry in the 1750s and 1760s is not to be dismissed, as the past chapters have shown. The paradox in the case of Shenstone's career is the fact that this "patronage" enabled by print was realized posthumously through Robert Dodsley and, more broadly, the Dodsley firm.

This chapter will trace the record of Shenstone's reception as it is found in book publications and in the periodical press in the decades following his death of a putrid fever on February 11, 1763, at the age of just forty-eight. Just as Robert Dodsley's *Collection of Poems by Several Hands*, especially its fourth and fifth volumes, was shown in Chapter 3 to disseminate Shenstone's coterie, the bookseller's production and diligent marketing of a posthumous edition of Shenstone's works created a representation of the Poet of the Leasowes whose essential features remained unchanged through the century following his death. This fact is illustrated by Gray's and Montagu's comments cited above – Dodsley's celebration of his friend, extended to the volume of letters preserving exchanges of the coterie (published after Dodsley's own death by his brother James), provided the material basis for their image of "poor Shenstone." It was the meaning of this representation, rather than its content *per se*, that was subject to contestation and mutability as literary values and fashions, as well as the institutional and market structures supporting literary reading and

readerships, diverged and developed. A closer examination of this record therefore reveals much about shifts in notions of literary production and their relation to concepts of literary value. This chapter will show how these shifts were grounded in the interdependent yet competing practices of media systems. The differing orientations of these systems resulted in radically different hierarchies of authorship and reading – between the print-oriented professional and the manuscript-circulating amateur, between the “universal” audience sought by print and the local readership of the coterie, and between the critic and the reader of magazines. Shenstone’s afterlife thus becomes for us a means of tracing the intermedi-ality of the literary coterie and the print trade (the latter itself bifurcating into popular and institutionalized modes) in the final decades of the eighteenth century.

This is because of a second line of influence stemming from Gray’s response to the Dodsley edition of the correspondence. Gray’s jab, initially in a private letter but made public when his own letters were published posthumously by William Mason in 1775, received a highly visible endorsement by its inclusion in Samuel Johnson’s “Life of Shenstone,” published in 1781 as part of his “Lives of the English Poets.” Johnson summarizes Dodsley’s account of Shenstone’s character and physical appearance from the preface to the edition, before quoting from Gray’s letter. Johnson’s portrait is most often described as condescending; while he couches his skepticism of Shenstone’s landscape gardening with qualifiers and assigns them to “a sullen and surly speculator,” he insinuates that, in expending his energies thus, Shenstone devoted himself “rather [to] the sport than the business of human reason” – however “innocent” the “amusement” and however he might be commended for “doing best what such multitudes are contending to do well.” He represents as fact an exaggerated version of the financial constraints Shenstone experienced, writing of a house falling to ruin and of woods filled with duns who drowned out the birdsong. Led by his own dislike of the pastoral and blank verse forms to depreciate a number of Shenstone’s most well-known works, Johnson nevertheless expresses admiration for his very popular and much-imitated “Pastoral Ballad” and acknowledges “Rural Elegance” and “The School-mistress” to be poems of some importance. The overall impressions nevertheless are of a literary production that is superficial, narrow, lightweight, and does not quite attain the standard of being “agreeable,” let alone “great” – and of a life harmless but also useless.⁴

Thus, in its dismissal of Shenstone as essentially irrelevant, Johnson's biographical preface refuses to acknowledge the carefully constructed esthetic Shenstone himself had articulated and Dodsley had foregrounded in his edition, whereby rural retirement and landscape gardening could constitute a contribution to the moral and esthetic good of society. The implicit value system is that of the urban print professional, which Linda Zionkowski has similarly traced in Johnson's biographies of Lyttelton and Gray, and which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Johnson's qualified judgments, stripped of their caveats, quickly became common critical currency and until very recently have strongly influenced discussions of Shenstone. Yet very little critical attention has been paid to the enormous popularity and influence of the Poet of the Leasowes in the decades following his death. The steady stream of visitors who circulated through his *ferme ornée*, the dozens of editions of his works in every form, and the hundreds of invocations of Shenstone or the Leasowes in magazine tributes, anecdotes, poetry excerpts, and illustrations demonstrate that Shenstone and his coterie values were embraced by an international audience as an object of admiration and affection, and as an ideal to which they could aspire.⁵ Beginning with the powerful influence of Dodsley's edition of the *Works* and the line of publications of the Warwickshire coterie issuing from the Dodsley firm, then, this chapter will go on to consider their legacy in the magazines, but also the ultimate tendency of those venues to represent a "Shenstone" freed of factual and coterie constraints. I will conclude with a discussion of the counter-influence of Johnson's "Life of Shenstone" on the tradition of critical representations of Shenstone, together with the last vestiges of coterie resistance to this tradition.

Dodsley's Shenstone: the 1764 *Works*

As already noted, Shenstone's reputation built gradually through the 1740s and 1750s, expanding outwards from the Leasowes through the visits of persons of taste to his *ferme ornée* and encompassing his poetry and that of his coterie as collected by Dodsley for his 1755 and 1758 *Collection* volumes. Acknowledgments of Shenstone's leadership in poetic and gardening taste were on the increase in the late 1750s and early 1760s, including letters seeking permission to dedicate works to him, unsolicited manuscripts from aspiring poets, and poetic tributes. Typical was the anonymous verse offering of "Cotswouldia" "To William Shenstone, Esq.," which he was delighted to receive by post in September of 1761, and which was published

in the *London* and *Scots* magazines for January and February 1762, respectively. With Shenstone's death in 1763, such works swelled inevitably into poetic eulogies such as "Lucinda's Testimony of Regard for Mr. Shenstone," "The Sequestered Bard: An Elegy," "To the memory of William Shenstone, Esq., by "Dr. S.," and "Corydon: A Pastoral" by J[ohn] Cunningham, all of which appeared in print within about a month of the poet's death. As their titles suggest, these poems lament the loss of an elegant shepherd who mentored his flock of "poetic youths" with kindness and respect:

'Twas Shenstone's choice to raise with gentlest care
The tender shoot of blooming Fancy's tree,
To stamp a genuine mark on what was rare,
And bid each muse-fir'd poet "dare be free."⁶

Riding the wave of popularity that he had helped to swell, Dodsley, in equal parts a sincere admirer and shrewd businessman, had sought for years after the publication of his *Collection* to persuade Shenstone to agree to publish an edition of his works, especially his elegies, while Shenstone just as obstinately held back, endlessly planning to improve them.⁷ But by making Dodsley one of his literary executors, Shenstone determined his posthumous fate as above all a print-based one. With the active assistance of Richard Graves and other members of the coterie, Dodsley produced, in little more than a year after the poet's death, *The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone, Esq; most of which were never before printed, In two volumes, with decorations*. However he might have quibbled over the precise wording of a line or the inclusion of a song or two, Shenstone's trust was not misplaced, for Dodsley designed his edition to reflect Shenstone's esthetic values. This print memorialization began with a biographical preface of Dodsley's own composition, explicitly focusing on the embodied nature of the poetry. The preface opens:

A great part of the poetical works of Mr. Shenstone, particularly his Elegies and Pastorals, are (as he himself expresses it) "The exact transcripts of the situation of his own mind;" and abound in frequent allusions to his own place, the beautiful scene of his retirement from the world. Exclusively therefore of our natural curiosity to be acquainted with the history of an author, whose works we peruse with pleasure, some short account of Mr. Shenstone's personal character, and situation in life, may not only be agreeable, but absolutely necessary, to the reader; as it is impossible he should enter into the true spirit of his writings, if he is entirely ignorant of those circumstances of his life, which sometimes so greatly influenced his reflections.

In other words, this case is unique, going beyond that of the typical author whose life is the object of a print reader's curiosity: with Shenstone, the poetry cannot be comprehended, and certainly not properly appreciated, without an understanding of its relation to his life and its setting of the Leasowes. Touching in turn on the poet's modest gentry origins, benevolence, friendship, financial limitations, unhappiness in love, writing "distinguished by simplicity with elegance, and genius with correctness," indolence, perfectionism, and "profound knowledge of the human heart," Dodsley rings the changes which will feature for generations in commentary on Shenstone, concluding that "if he be not injured by the inability of his editor, there is no doubt but he will ever maintain an eminent station among the best of our English writers."⁸ The "decorations" accompanying the edition, beginning with a title-page rendering of the poet's self-designed coat of arms, prominently featuring a kingfisher or halcyon (Figure 4.1), reinforce the editor's belief in the "eminent station" which this poet deserves, along with its foundation in nature – the "flumina amem, silvasque inglorious," or "rivers and forests inglorious" that Shenstone chose from Virgil as his motto.⁹ As one of Shenstone's coterie members, John Pixell, writes to Dodsley shortly after the appearance of the two 1764 volumes, "You have certainly done your utmost to hand [the Writings of Mr Shenstone] down to Posterity in the most elegant manner, which must be esteem'd as the highest Instance of your friendly Zeal for his Fame & Reputation."¹⁰

While the first volume of the edition consists entirely of Shenstone's poetry, beginning with the hitherto unpublished elegies, the second volume, primarily comprising prose pieces, culminates in a representation of the Leasowes-centered coterie. Dodsley himself contributes "A Description of the Leasowes," a 32-page prose account, keyed to a drawing of the farm's plan and embedding Shenstone's poetic inscriptions as they were scattered through the farm's circuit walk.¹¹ This volume then concludes with nine sets of "Verses to Shenstone" celebrating the Leasowes. Some of these poems are written by members of the coterie themselves – Luxborough, Graves, and Dodsley himself are identified – while others are tributes by writers attracted to the Poet of the Leasowes, such as the shoemaker poet James Woodhouse whom Shenstone had mentored. But all draw attention to the physical site as the dwelling place of undisguised Nature (not to mention the fairies, dryads, Muses, and Graces), flourishing because of its Bard/Hermit's adherence to "SIMPLICITY" and "the WAVING LINE." "Verses by Mr. Dodsley on His First Arrival at the Leasowes, 1754" neatly inverts this rhetorical device

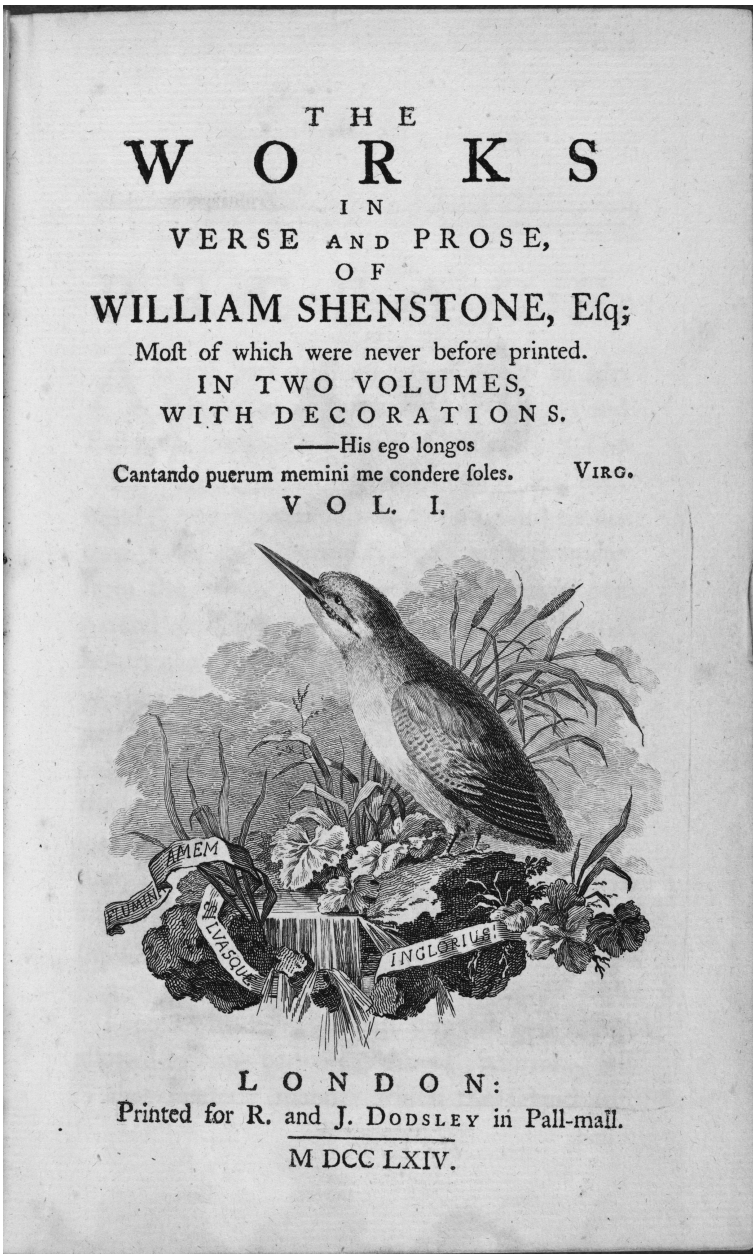


Figure 4.1 William Shenstone, *The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone, Esq.* (1764), title page. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California (RB 106624).

for effect. It is structured by the visitor's search for the "Naïd" [*sic*], "Dryad," or "rural Deity" who has created this paradise, as he penetrates ever deeper into its beauties. The poem culminates in the discovery that the "enchantment," represented by "The powerful incantations, magic verse,/ Inscrib'd on every tree, alcove, or urn," is in fact the work of the speaker's friend:

Yes, great magician! Now I read thee right,
And lightly weigh all sorcery, but Thine.
No Naïad's leading step conducts the rill;
Nor sylvan god presiding skirts the lawn
In beauteous wildness, with fair spreading trees;
Nor magic want has circumscribed the scene.
'Tis thine own taste, thy genius that presides,
Nor needs there other deity, nor needs
More potent spells than they.¹²

In all these ways, the two volumes not only preserve the poet's works but also mediate them through the coterie's image of itself and of its character as established by Shenstone. As already noted, the *Works* were completed in 1769 by a third volume consisting of Shenstone's letters; these letters were given editorial titles such as "To Mr. Graves, on Benevolence and Friendship" or "To a Friend, disappointing him of a Visit" that rendered them works of literary interest as occasional coterie writings as well.

The success of the *Works* was not left to chance or the vagaries of consumer interest. A search of periodical databases reveals that at least twenty-three items from the *Works* appeared in magazines of April to September 1764, fourteen of those in the first month alone, coinciding with the edition's publication on April 6. Nine different excerpts of previously unpublished items from the *Works* – two elegies and several essays, in addition to the preface – appeared in the *London Magazine*, in which Dodsley held a quarter share. Dodsley's preface, with its account of the author and assessment of his writings, appeared that April in no less than five magazines: the *London*, the *Gentleman's*, the *Scots*, the *Royal*, and the *Universal*. The first three of these, in particular, had existed since the 1730s and were influential and authoritative venues for the publication of original poetry. As Michael Suarez's account of the publication history of Gray's *Elegy* shows, manuscript circulation, periodical distribution, and appearance in print could mutually enhance, rather than undercut, one another.

It is clear that Dodsley worked hard to whet curiosity and create demand.¹³

Shenstone's *Works* was very successful in its own right – the 1791 edition announced itself as the sixth, with a final eighteenth-century “new edition” issued by Cadell in 1798, a year after the demise of the house of Dodsley; George Faulkner issued editions in Dublin in 1764, 1769, and 1777, as did Alexander Donaldson in Edinburgh in 1765, 1768, 1770, and 1775; there were also imprints originating in Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Manchester. Alongside these full editions, more or less identical to the Dodsley, smaller editions of “select works” or of the poetry alone began to appear in 1770, and in 1780 the series began, as the three volumes became part of “The Poetical Magazine: or, Parnassian Library,” the “Wenman's Cheap Editions,” “Parson's Edition of Select British Classics,” and “Cooke's Pocket Edition of the original and complete works of select British poets, or Entertaining Poetical Library.” Finally, in the 1790s, the prose works came into fuller prominence, with a volume of *Essays on Men and Manners by William Shenstone, Esq.*¹⁴

Another measure of the influence of Dodsley's representation of Shenstone is the stability of the contents of these volumes: despite the very occasional magazine appearance of a purported Shenstone poem “never before published,” none succeeded in being added to either the Dodsley or the numerous other editions.¹⁵ Omissions are even more rare, with the exception of the obvious genre sorting that took place with the appearance of poetry- or prose-specific volumes.¹⁶ Within this continuity, however, there are indications not only of a hardening of the definition of the “literary” but also of an elevation of the single author and a waning of interest in the more collaborative spirit of the coterie, in keeping with the more individualistic print-based model of literary production that, as the remainder of this study will show, began to reshape scribal practices and the representation of them in print in the later decades of the century. Thus, the items most likely to be dropped in the late 1780s and 1790s in non-Dodsley editions are Dodsley's prose “Description of the Leasowes” – sometimes with the Shenstone verse inscriptions that were originally embedded within the “Description” retained as separate poems – and the commendatory verses addressed to Shenstone by members of his circle or admiring protégés. Nevertheless, the Dodsley editions issued simultaneously with these continued to foreground the Leasowes and the Warwickshire coterie.

The house of Dodsley and the Warwickshire coterie

After Robert Dodsley's death in 1764, the firm's continuing investment in Shenstone's posthumous reputation was reinforced, under the leadership of Robert's brother James, by a close business relationship with the poet's circle. This is illustrated by Table 4.1, which lists Dodsley publications from 1764 onward that were authored by members of the coterie. Appearing in the same year as the *Works* (and reviewed together in the *Monthly Review* by the poet John Langhorne) was *Original Poems on Several Occasions*, the work of Mary Whateley Darwall, whom Shenstone had recommended to Dodsley, and whom Mary Scott was to call "Daughter of Shenstone" in her 1774 poem *The Female Advocate*.¹⁷ Thomas Percy's groundbreaking 1765 *Reliques of English Poetry*, while obscuring the extent of Shenstone's editorial role in the project, acknowledges the encouragement of "such judges as the author of the Rambler, and the late Mr. Shenstone," and includes Shenstone's ballad "Jemmy Dawson," as "printed among his posthumous Works, 2 vols. 8," but "here given from a Ms. copy."¹⁸ Richard Jago's wide-ranging topographical poem in four books, *Edge Hill, or, The Rural Prospect Delineated and Moralized*, was published by subscription with James Dodsley in 1767; this poem pays tribute to Shenstone as the one-time school friend who "smooth'd my incondite Verse" and who presided over the "social Circle" that "round his *Leasowe's* happy Circuit rov'd." A year later, Jago's *Labour and Genius: or, the Mill-Stream, and the Cascade* announces itself on the title-page to be "A Fable. Written in the Year, 1762; and inscribed to The late William Shenstone, Esq." As an allegory of the utilitarian and profitable versus the pleasing and admired, the poem cleverly deploys the contrast between the jealous local millstream and one of Shenstone's artfully designed cascades. Suggesting that Nature has distributed talents and their rewards in such unequal proportions that "Hundreds eat, who spin, or knit,/For one that lives by Dint of Wit," the speaker concludes that a Wit such as "Damon" the landscape artist may have gained praise, but "never got a Shilling"; the poem ends by reiterating, in a concise equation spoken by the cascade, the economic-esthetic exchange posited by Shenstone in his "Rural Elegance": "We gain our Ends by different Ways, /And you get Bread, and I get – Praise."¹⁹ This 1768 portrayal of Shenstone's circumstances as a self-conscious life choice provides a frame that the reader might use to read the 1769 edition of Shenstone's letters to Graves and Jago, with their wishes for money and fame and visitors. The letters, in turn, were supplemented by the 1775 *Letters written by the late Right Honourable Lady Luxborough to*

Table 4.1 *Shenstone coterie publications issued by the Dodsley firm, 1764f.*
 Entries are based primarily on information from the **English Short Titles Catalogue**. First editions only are shown, except in the case of *Shenstone's Works*.

Date	Author	Title	Edition
1764	Shenstone, William	<i>The works in verse and prose, of William Shenstone, Esq. Most of which were never before printed. In two volumes, with decorations. Vol. I–II</i>	1st ed.
1764	Darwall, Mary Whateley	<i>Original Poems on Several Occasions. By Miss Whateley</i>	
1765	Shenstone, William	<i>The works . . . of William Shenstone, Esq. Vol. I–II</i>	2nd ed.
1765	Percy, Thomas	<i>Reliques of English Poetry. Vol. I–III</i>	
1767	Jago, Richard	<i>Edge Hill, or, The Rural Prospect Delineated and Moralized. Vol. I–IV</i>	
1768	Jago, Richard	<i>Labour and Genius: or, the Mill-Stream, and the Cascade</i>	
1768	Shenstone, William	<i>The works . . . of William Shenstone, Esq. Vol. I–II</i>	3rd ed.
1769	Shenstone, William	<i>The works . . . of William Shenstone, Esq; Vol. III. Containing letters to particular friends, from the Year 1739 to 1763.</i>	1st ed.
1773	Graves, Richard	<i>The Love of Order: A Poetical Essay</i>	
1773	Graves, Richard	<i>The Spiritual Quixote. Vol I–III</i>	
1773	Shenstone, William	<i>The works . . . of William Shenstone, Esq. Vol. I–III</i>	4th ed.
1775	Knight, Henrietta (Lady Luxborough)	<i>Letters written by the late Right Honourable Lady Luxborough to William Shenstone, Esq.</i>	
1776	Graves, Richard	<i>Euphrosyne, or, Amusements on the Road of Life</i>	
1777	Shenstone, William	<i>The works . . . of William Shenstone, Esq. Vol. I–III</i>	5th ed.
1778	Hull, Thomas	<i>Select Letters between the late Duchess of Somerset, Lady Luxborough, Miss Dolman, Mr. Whistler, Mr. R. Dodsley, William Shenstone, Esq. and others. Vol. I–II</i>	
1779	Graves, Richard	<i>Columella, or, The Distressed Anchorite: A Colloquial Tale. Vol. I–III</i>	
1784	Jago, Richard	<i>Poems, Moral and Descriptive</i>	
1785	Graves, Richard	<i>Eugenius: or, Anecdotes of the Golden Vale</i>	

Table 4.1 (cont.)

Date	Author	Title	Edition
1786	Graves, Richard	<i>Lucubrations: Consisting of Essays, Reveries, &c., in Prose and Verse</i>	
1788	Graves, Richard	<i>Recollections of Some Particulars in the Life of the Late William Shenstone</i>	
1789	Graves, Richard	<i>The Rout, or, A Sketch of Modern Life</i>	
1790	Graves, Richard	<i>Plexippus, or, The Aspiring Plebian</i>	
1791	Shenstone, William	<i>The works . . . of William Shenstone, Esq. Vol. I–III</i>	6th ed.

William Shenstone, Esq., edited by John Hodgetts, and the 1778 *Select Letters between the late Duchess of Somerset, Lady Luxborough, Miss Dolman, Mr. Whistler, Mr. R. Dodsley, William Shenstone Esq. and others*, edited by Thomas Hull, which together supplied correspondence to and from members of the coterie who had not been represented in the 1769 volume.

An even more long-term, and presumably profitable, relationship between the Dodsley print enterprise and Shenstone's coterie was with Richard Graves, who followed up his poems in the *Collection* and his editorial assistance on the Shenstone *Works* with *The Love of Order: A Poetical Essay* in the manner of Pope's *Essay on Man* (1773) and at least eight other works of substantial length, beginning with his popular novel *The Spiritual Quixote* (1773). Graves's publishing success continued unabated to the time of his death in 1804 (though no longer with the now-defunct Dodsley imprint), implying that he surpassed his friend Shenstone in navigating the world of print. Yet the reality is more complex. Like so many instances in this study, Graves's publications depended on his representations of the coterie, as part of his general tendency to process his life in his writings. In this case, he turned Shenstone and the Leasowes into, first, the object of his protagonist Geoffrey Wildgoose's crazed iconoclastic attack in an episode of *The Spiritual Quixote*, and then, in *Columella, or, The Distressed Anchoret: A Colloquial Tale* (1779), the primary focus of his critical attention. The latter work has been described by David Oakleaf as "disparage[ing] idle solitude – his view of Shenstone's retirement," but Clarence Tracy nuances this by clarifying that "the novel was not a biography of Shenstone, much less a satire on him, but rather an apologue in which some parts of Shenstone's experience were used to

illustrate a theme: the dangers implicit in a retired way of life.”²⁰ The questions Graves raises in these works about the social and moral risks of any eccentricity or enthusiasm are already traceable in the frank correspondence between him and Shenstone. There he teases the latter about building a “cabbage-garden *ornée*” in much the same manner that the second canto of *The Love of Order* warns against “an Affectation of Irregularity, in laying out small Plots of Ground, [that] has of late been carried to a ridiculous Extreme,” exemplified by the landlord of the local inn who, in a vain attempt to ape the harmonious irregularity of the great William Pitt’s estate, jumbles his small plot of land instead of planting his cabbages in proper rows.²¹ Yet Graves seems ambivalent: does Shenstone most resemble the innkeeper who is the laughing stock of his social superiors, or is he one of those superiors? After all, the Leasowes was much admired by William Pitt, who reportedly offered a monetary contribution to its improvements and consulted Shenstone about his own landscaping projects. The correspondence also makes clear that it was Shenstone who steadily urged Graves to complete and seek print publication for his works, out of a belief in his potential for gaining fame and preferment in this manner and from the knowledge that he needed to support a growing family.

Thus, it is not necessarily a contradiction that the same Graves who could poke fun at Shenstonian eccentricities should also be his most vigorous print defender in response to Gray and Johnson. In 1775, the *Monthly Review* published (and endorsed) an anonymous letter from Graves complaining about “an offence against propriety at least, if not against humanity” in William Mason’s edition of Gray’s letters,²² and his response to Johnson’s “Life of Shenstone” was even more substantial. Graves’s 1788 *Recollections of Some Particulars in the Life of the Late William Shenstone, Esq.* is one of his Dodsley publications and benefitted from the use of materials likely in the publisher’s stock – an engraving of Shenstone possibly prepared for the Hull edition of letters and an image of a garden labeled “Shenston”²³ – and no doubt also from the firm’s interest in upholding the value of an author so closely identified with it. Graves’s memoir of his friend appeals through the author’s characteristic stance of fair-minded, lightly satirical, yet affectionate assessment. Thus, he takes courage from “a rage for anecdotes of every kind” in this age, when “the colour of Dr. Johnson’s coat, his oaken staff, his inordinate love of tea, and his flatulencies, are listened to with patience and complacency”; although Shenstone “was by no means to be compared to so great a man,” the public may by turns be amused by “the little Polish Count, and the Irish Giant.”

Graves adroitly justifies the rehearsal of temporally distant events tangentially concerning himself, not by a claim about their enduring significance, but by virtue of the interest Johnson's own account of Shenstone (along with Gray's) has aroused in the subject. His second justification is the one of friendship, which at once calls upon him to defend the character and writings of a man to whom he is "bound by gratitude and affection" and lends him authority, by virtue of "intimacy," on a subject that Johnson can only know at second hand.²⁴

Graves asserts Shenstone's originality and influence in two areas: "that natural and simple taste in rural ornaments, which now so generally prevails in the nation" and his much-imitated "writings in the elegiac and pastoral style." Throughout his *Recollections*, Graves pits prudence against taste, implying that the former is the mark of a money-oriented professional, while Shenstone chose the latter with at least as great a chance of happiness:

In short, Indolence persuaded him, that to contract our desires, or to enlarge the means of gratifying them, is much the same thing; and that it was better to enjoy ease and independence with a competent fortune, than to toil, and be subject to the caprice of others, to augment it. In this decision the happiness of Mr. Shenstone was materially concerned. Whether he determined wisely or not, people of taste, and people of worldly prudence, will probably be of very different opinions.

Though Graves is careful not to say so outright, it is clear that Johnson cannot appreciate Shenstone in part because he falls into the category of "people of worldly prudence." Similarly, Graves dismisses Johnson's insinuation that planting a walk could demand "no great powers of mind" as revealing the ignorance of an urbanite: "he seems to have been contemplating some zig-zag shrubberies and wheel-barrow mounts in the tea-gardens near the metropolis, or at some inn on the road." The pleasure gardens of the nobility and gentry, by contrast, display as great a genius as do the poems of Thomson or the paintings of Rosa. Graves suggests further that Johnson's cold appraisal of Shenstone's poetry reflects his urbanized inability to appreciate the pastoral and blank verse forms. In response to Gray's reflections, the author takes a somewhat different tack, noting that Gray, while perhaps a superior poet with greater social and material advantages, was in fact more like than unlike Shenstone in a "great and even *excessive* delicacy" that vied with his love of praise; the hint is that, unlike Johnson, Gray was not uncomprehending but rather petty and even hypocritical. In these ways, the Warwickshire coterie publications

issuing from the house of Dodsley through the decades following the 1764 *Works* both implicitly and explicitly endorse and uphold the esthetic values and reputation of Shenstone.²⁵

Shenstone in the magazines

While Graves's *Recollections*, by virtue of its book format and its riposte to Johnson and Gray, is the most high profile of the Shenstone defenses, it is only the tip of the iceberg when periodical publication is brought into the picture. In his 1985 dissertation on Shenstone's esthetic theory, a review of comments about the poet from "authors of note" in the first half of the nineteenth century leads Randall Calhoun to conclude "not only that Shenstone was known widely but also that something about him had a wide appeal."²⁶ That appealing "something" is now made even more open to examination by the aid of searchable databases bringing together hundreds of periodical titles. For if the printed book increasingly represents works that can be categorized as "poetry" or "essays" and as the *oeuvre* of a solitary literary author, magazines and their readers are more capacious, more sociable, in their ethos, and thus seemingly more open to what Shenstone represents.²⁷ I will now turn to a summary of the results of searches carried out in 2013 for the terms "Shenstone" and "Leasowes" in three electronic resources: the British Periodicals database, that of the American Antiquarian Society, and that of the Burney Newspaper Collection.²⁸ Excluding advertisements, I was able to examine seventeen lifetime and 230 posthumous appearances of material by Shenstone, in imitation of Shenstone, about the Leasowes, or about Shenstone's life and works spanning 110 years after the publication of Dodsley's edition, up to 1874 (Table 4.2). These results are of course subject to the limits of optical character recognition software and the periodical coverage of the databases in question, and also exclude any reprintings of Shenstone's works or extracts from them that might have appeared without attribution; thus, the actual number of posthumous references, even within the periodicals included in these databases, would be higher and this can only be considered a sampling.²⁹ Nevertheless, the size of this sample has allowed some patterns to emerge and suggests some conclusions about the afterlife of William Shenstone as an ongoing stimulus to a form of literary sociability, as well as some of the tensions between such use and the developing institutions of print, especially professional criticism.

One of the patterns suggesting Shenstone's popular appeal is the breadth – social, geographic, and generic – of his penetration of the

Table 4.2 *A survey of periodical references to Shenstone or the Leasowes, 1749–1874.*

Year	Total by time period	Shenstone poem	Shenstone essay	Shenstone poem set to music	Tribute poems	Shenstone imitation	Shenstone anecdote	Shenstone biography or criticism	Antiquarian note on Shenstone
1749–62	17	7			10				
1763 (death)	4				4				
1764 (<i>Works</i>)	25	11	7		1	1		5 (RD's Preface)	
1765–69	8	3	3 (3x)			2			
1770–74	9	1			5	2	1		
1775–79	8	3			4	1			
1780–84	33	2	3 (2x)	22	3	2		1 (RD's Preface)	
1785–89	13	2 (1x)	2		7 (1 prose piece)	1	1		
1790–94	12	4			4	3		1	
1795–99	12	6	1		2	2	1		
1800–1804	15		3 (3x)		2	1	2	2	5
1805–1809	11	4			2 (1 also antiq.)	1	1		4 (1 also tribute)
1810–14	6		1 (1x)		1 (1 also antiq.)	2			3 (1 also tribute)
1815–19	3	2			1 (1 also antiq.)				1 (1 also tribute)
1820–24	7	1			1		4		1
1825–29	8		1 (1x)			1	4	1	1
1830–34	4		2 (1x)		1			1 (1x)	
1835–39	7		4 (3x)		1 (1 also biog.)			2 (1 also tribute)	1
1840–44	5	2	2 (2x)				1 (1x)		
1845–49	3	2						1	
1850–54	11	1	5 (5x)				4	1	
1855–59	5	2 (1x)	3 (3x)						
1860–64	3	1 (1x)						2	
1865–69	11	1 (1x)	1 (x)		1 (founding of Shenstone Tree Society)			2	6 (all in <i>Notes & Queries</i>)
1870–74	7	2 (2x)	5 (5x)						
Total by type		57	43	22	50	19	19	19	22

All individual appearances are noted, including items that may be duplicates of articles published in other periodicals. The “x” denotes an item that is an excerpt only. Items that fall into two categories are recorded in each and cross-referenced. Thus the total number of individual items for each time period may not equal the sum of category totals for that period.

English-reading world. The periodicals in which his work and discussions of it appear range from the highly respectable *Gentleman's Magazine* to the broadly pitched *Weekly Entertainer, or: Agreeable and Instructive Repository*, full of stories, poems, and riddles, to the more specialized *Western Sunday School Visitant & Christian Miscellany*, the *Prisoner's Friend*, and the newly founded *Notes and Queries*. The immediate appearance of excerpts from Dodsley's 1764 edition in the *Scots* magazine, published in Edinburgh but relying heavily on materials from London-based periodicals,³⁰ no doubt responded to and enhanced Shenstone's popularity in Scotland, where an edition of the *Works* was put out a year after Dodsley's appeared. Other Edinburgh-based magazines featured the poet's works as well as a previously unpublished letter from him to the writer John MacGowan, whom Shenstone had described as his "very good Friend in Scotland."³¹ Geographical range is further signaled by appearances in a number of North American publications, such as the *Philadelphia Repertory*, the *Nova-Scotia Magazine*, and *Moore's Rural New-Yorker*. Modes of representation of Shenstone's productions are equally broad, including drawings of the Leasowes or its features, several complete reproductions of the lengthy Shenstone essay "Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening," the excerpting of short extracts or handfuls of aphorisms, and in the middle years of the nineteenth century, extended critical treatments. This wide reach across demographic levels, geographical distances, and generic forms suggests at once the attraction of Shenstone for almost any reading audience, the usefulness of his work for extraction and insertion as filler, and the ubiquity of editions from which such work could be lifted (recognizing, of course, that much of this material could also simply be taken from other magazines).³²

A closer look at poems identified in their titles as tributes to, or imitations of, Shenstone reinforces what this "distant reading" suggests. There are thirty-eight poetic tributes to Shenstone in the magazines, ten of these preceding his death, but the remainder appearing at a steady pace to the 1830s. The tributes are hagiographical in character; fourteen in fact are epitaphs of some sort, partaking of the intense eighteenth-century interest in the form. All draw on the ideas of artless nature, simplicity, and gentleness associated with the persona. Many more specifically invoke a place – the Leasowes, its neighborhood, or other gardens associated in some way with Shenstone – whether in the form of the inscription on an erected monument on an estate or a vision of the poet in his own rural retreat, nurturing the shoot of plebian genius, planting trees for the birds, or singing of his lost love. Reflecting the economic conflicts and the

rejection of worldly values so central to Shenstone's own poetry and letters, more than one speaker is inspired by a resident spirit to abjure ambition and the madding crowd in favor of nature, poverty, and content.³³ In those poems purported to be stimulated by visits to the Leasowes specifically, pilgrims hear laments in the falling waters, see visions of mourning pastoral muses, "and crown what he lov'd with a tear."³⁴

Of the nineteen poetic imitations my search revealed, all fall roughly into the first half of the period covered by my overview and all but two are of the very popular *Pastoral Ballad* or some other pastoral poem or elegy, usually lamenting lost love, youth, or opportunity in the voice of a shepherd or shepherdess. Despite the temptations of burlesque to which the pastoral lends itself, with the precedent of prominent eighteenth-century examples like John Gay's *The Shepherd's Week*, Shenstone's pastoral imitators are overwhelmingly sincere – I have found only one poem which turns on the form, and by implication on Shenstone and all his imitators, by having the shepherd announce that he's abandoning the sheep, since after all the tears he's shed, they've never wept for him in return. Clearly, most of these poets identified with Shenstone and sought to enact his esthetic principles of simplicity and sincerity of tone, even where they failed to attain the more elusive goals of musicality and originality which had helped to build his reputation. In this sense, the imitators participated in transforming the embodied coterie of the Leasowes into a "school of Shenstone," founded not on reciprocity or collaboration, but on unidirectional inspiration and a perception of knowing in what the essence of his poetry consisted.

Nor did readers stop here – they also felt an affinity for the man as they understood him, taking the Dodsley preface to heart in its encouragement of biographical reading. Ironically, two of the most prominent themes in tributes to Shenstone distort or even fabricate elements of his character and experience. The first of these is his supposed unhappiness in love, the theme of his "Pastoral Ballad," composed when he was in his late twenties. Probably due to the speaker's stance and Dodsley's assertion that the poem recorded a "[tender impression], which he received in his youth, [that] was with difficulty surmounted," Shenstone came to be described as having died of a broken heart. This belief appeared risible to those who knew him; Montagu, for example, reports to Lyttelton after her meeting with a Marquis de Pesay from France, whose visit to England had included a stay at Hagley, that she has seen "a very pretty copy of verses he made upon Lady Nunehams laughing at his supposing Shenstone dyed for love, her Ladyship thought Mr Shenstone had not the air of a Pastor Fido." But

this did not prevent sympathetic readers such as “Anna,” in “On Reading Shenstone’s Pastorals,” from expressing her pity for “Gentle Shenstone,” at last “gone where all sorrow shall cease,” in the *Monthly Visitor* of June 1800. Nor were lovers deterred from insinuating, as they presented copies of Shenstone’s works to young ladies, the fatal consequences of rejecting the gift and the poet-lover who gave it.³⁵

An “Original Anecdote of Shenstone”: the comforts of economic distress

The second fictional extrapolation from Shenstone’s life seems to have begun with his reputation for benevolence, as asserted again by Dodsley: “Tenderness, indeed, in every sense of the word, was his peculiar characteristic; his friends, his domestics, his poor neighbours, all daily experienced his benevolent turn of mind.” There is evidence of this quality in some of Shenstone’s letters, most notably when he writes to Thomas Hull in 1761 about refusing to prosecute a poor laborer who has stolen fish from his pond to feed his starving wife and five children: the writer describes himself as torn between distress over the cruel way in which the fish were killed, pity for the plight of the thief, defensiveness at being arraigned by “conscientiously-upright Neighbours” for undermining the law, and frustration at the inconvenience and expense of pursuing a conviction, but his overarching conclusion is that the severity of the penal laws would lead to an unjust outcome. Although this letter was not published in Dodsley, first appearing in Hull’s 1778 edition of additional letters, the story or the manuscript letter itself may have circulated widely enough to invite the attachment of an apocryphal anecdote to Shenstone, one that combined his love life and his financial restrictions with his benevolence.³⁶

This anonymous “Original Anecdote of Shenstone,” as it is titled upon its first appearance in the *Westminster Magazine* of 1774, is introduced by a letter to the editor which in itself embeds a letter dated “Cambridge, Aug. 27, 1768,” purportedly found “among the papers of a deceased Friend.” At three removes of anonymity from its subject, then, the Cambridge letter begins with a paragraph-long encomium to benevolence: “I am always pleased when I hear of a generous action . . . And certainly, were men to reflect, that benevolence and affection towards their fellow-creatures is the first duty of moral life, the world would be once more restored to the Golden Age. – Do you not guess I am going to say something about your beloved Shenstone? – I know you wish it. Your wishes shall not be disappointed.” Having framed the ensuing anecdote with this

conjunction of benevolence, the pastoral ideal ("Golden Age"), and Shenstone, the letter-writer begins:

Shenstone was one day walking thro' his romantic retreats, in company with his Delia (her real name was Wilmot); they were going towards the bower which he made sacred to the ashes of Thomson, our harmonious country-man. "Would to Heaven (said Shenstone, pointing to the trees) that Delia could be happy in the midst of these rustic avenues!" He would have gone on, but was interrupted. A person rushed out of a thicket, and presenting a pistol to his breast, demanded his money. Shenstone was surprised, and Delia fainted. "Money, says he, is not worth struggling for. You cannot be poorer than I am, unhappy man, (says he, throwing him his purse) take it, and fly as quick as possible." That man did so. He threw his pistol into the water, and in a moment disappeared. Shenstone ordered the footboy, who followed behind them, to pursue the robber at a distance, and observe whither he went. In two hours time the boy returned, and informed his master, that he followed him to Hales Owen, where he lived; that he went to the very door of his house, and peeped thro' the key-hole; that as soon as the man entered, he threw the purse on the ground, and addressing himself to his wife, "Take (says he) the dear bought price of my honesty" – then taking two of his children, one on each knee, he said to them, "I have ruined my soul, to keep you from starving;" and immediately burst into a flood of tears. You know how this tale of distress would affect Shenstone. He enquired after the man's character, and found that he was a labourer, honest and industrious, but oppressed by want and a numerous family. He went to his house, where the man kneeled down at his feet, and implored mercy. Shenstone carried him home, to assist at the buildings and other improvements which made himself so poor; and I am told, when Shenstone died, that this Labourer wet his grave with the true tears of Gratitude.³⁷

The recognizable Shenstone clichés are called upon in the anecdote itself, in the form of the immovable love-object (there is no Miss Wilmot hinted at in the correspondence, only the local parson Dr Pynson Wilmot, whom Shenstone heartily despised), the poet's impulsive action arising out of his despairing love, his own pecuniary distresses, his mentoring of social inferiors, and the pathos of his death. Thus, its very extravagance of conventions raises red flags about its authenticity, and yet it represents eighteen of the 230 posthumous Shenstone magazine appearances I have analyzed.

E.W. Pitcher, in a 1998 *Notes and Queries* article, was the first to identify this act of forgiveness as attributed to a Parisian counselor of parliament in the 1660s, a M. de Salo, in an account translated into English for a 1721 miscellany and reappearing in *The Entertaining Medley* in 1767. Pitcher also notes that the Parisian anecdote had a parallel magazine life of its own,

concluding, “That no contemporary editor recognized or cared to remark upon its expropriation in the prose and verse tributes to Shenstone seems to underscore the separation which existed in the eighteenth century between popular literature and ‘high art.’”³⁸ The problem with this reading – of the anecdote as popular literature and Shenstone as belonging to the realm of “high art” – is that there is in fact little difference between the venues in which “Shenstone the Benevolent” and the story as simply a reflection on “the Miseries of Human Life” appear – there is not much to choose, for example, between the *Westminster Magazine* and the *Universal* and *London Magazines* where the anecdote appeared in its original guise. We are seeing, I would suggest rather, a kind of folkloric or popular “Shenstone” who originates in the persona and the esthetic originally crafted by the poet himself and popularized by Dodsley’s posthumous edition but who has taken on a life of his own, simplified and endlessly replicated in print just as an urban legend might be propagated through social media in our own day. It can be argued that this anecdote’s popularity reflects not only attachment to a particular image of Shenstone but also the desire of middle-class British and American readers for comforting images of sentimental connection across the gulf that divided the propertied from the disenfranchised poor in an age of deepening inequality and revolution. But what made this “Shenstone” such a convenient receptacle for such material? Why, when the anonymous Cambridge letter-writer generalizes about benevolence in the Golden Age, should he continue, “Do you not guess I am going to say something about your beloved Shenstone? – I know you wish it”?

In my previous chapter, I noted modesty of scale as one of the most innovative features of Shenstone’s gardening esthetic and a key to his democratization of landscape gardening. I would now add that in this strand of the afterlife of Shenstone as set in motion by Dodsley, his financial distresses become not a shameful consequence of gardening fever, as Gray would have it, but an enhancement of his appeal. Whereas the impoverished gentleman or gentlewoman would traditionally maintain appearances and avoid explicit discussion of financial affairs, and the prosperous professional would despise the amateur who could not make his way in the world, Shenstone’s letters and even his poetry, as we have seen, openly bring economic pressures, and related issues of social hierarchy, into play with the esthetic. There is something refreshing about an eighteenth-century poet who writes, as cited in Chapter 3, “A person may amuse himself almost as cheaply as he pleases.” David Hall Radcliffe has argued that Shenstone’s “Rural

Elegance” ode makes of the Duchess of Somerset’s Percy Lodge “a site for aesthetic commerce” where not only do private improvements contribute to public good by the employment of laborers but also the reader of taste is enabled to participate in the Duchess’s estate through “disinterested contemplation.”³⁹ In the hands of a laboring class poet such as James Woodhouse, as Sandro Jung has pointed out, such arguments could serve as authorization as well as inspiration for a pastoral that was explicitly not proprietary.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, this anecdote recuperates Shenstone’s financial impecuniousness, not simply by his throwing a purse full of money at the man in a gesture of romantic despair but also more politically by his employment of the man “to assist at the buildings and other improvements which made himself so poor.” Conspicuous display at the Leasowes may not have attained the scale of that at Hagley or Percy Lodge, but it redistributed resources and made a significant difference in the local economy.

The complexity of this influence can be illustrated by a citation from Walter Scott’s late-life autobiographical memoir, in which he justifies his decision to become a landowner:

I purchased a small farm of about 100 acres, with the purpose of planting and improving it, . . . and thus an era took place in my life, almost equal to the important one mentioned by the Vicar of Wakefield, when he removed from the Blue-room to the Brown . . . Abbotsford . . . had a stretch of meadow-land along the river, and possessed, in the phrase of the landscape-gardener, considerable capabilities. Above all, the land was my own, like Uncle Toby’s Bowling-green, to do what I would with. It had been, though the gratification was long postponed, an early wish of mine to connect myself with my mother-earth, and prosecute those experiments by which a species of creative power is exercised over the face of nature. I can trace, even to childhood, a pleasure derived from Dodsley’s account of Shenstone’s Leasowes, and I envied the poet much more, for the pleasure of accomplishing the objects detailed in his friend’s sketch of his grounds, than for the possession of pipe, crook, flock, and Phillis to the boot of all.⁴¹

In recounting his transition to being a man of property – an accomplishment he assures the reader is only enabled by the hard work of novel-writing – Scott carefully aligns himself with beloved literary examples from the eighteenth century of unambitious men completely absorbed in making the most of the restricted landscapes in which their modest spheres of influence have set them. By placing himself in this tradition, Scott disclaims any pretensions to social grandeur; it is possible to “exercise” one’s “creative power . . . over the face of nature” with limited means, and

without losing the endearing modesty of the middle class or lower gentry. And, once again, it is “Dodsley’s account of Shenstone’s Leasowes,” not any personal acquaintance with the poet’s garden or appreciation for his poetry, which arouses this powerful desire in the young boy.

Interestingly, Shenstone still retains a place in gardening history as the creator of, in John Riely’s words, “a modern Arcadia, the model of the ideal landscape for all those whose means did not enable them to garden on the grand scale.”⁴² Most recently, Shenstone’s ingenuity in creating a blend of poetic and landscape effects with limited means, as well as his aphoristic “Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening,” served as an important influence for the Scottish concrete poet and landscape gardener Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006) in creating his own garden, Little Sparta, with accompanying works such as his allusively titled *Unconnected Sentences on Gardening*. Shenstone’s modest coterie life in this sense perhaps begins to represent for our culture, drawn to “unplugged” musical performances, “slow food” movements, and “-isms” such as “craftivism” and “locavorism,” a life given meaning and pleasure through attention to its most mundane aspects. In this reception history, however, the mentorship, the collaborative writing and criticism, the use of scribal forms, and the strong sense of place and occasion in the poetry – in short, the specifically eighteenth-century apparatus of the coterie – are obscured as an acknowledged feature of Shenstone’s writerly practice. Although a transmediated form of literary sociability lives on in Shenstone appreciations and imitations, in the representations of him as a beloved poet, as “one of us,” and in the emphasis on themes of friendship, mentoring, and hospitality, the coterie is not “named” as such. Rather, the emphasis is on an increasingly limited set of individually authored works and personal anecdotes, and the community of “Shenstonians” appears to exist entirely in the virtual world of periodical print. In the final section of this chapter, I will consider evidence of the trajectory of the actual Shenstone coterie as it appears in the magazines and as it fights to preserve its center in the face of the Johnsonian tradition.

Two traditions: criticism and the coterie

Richard Terry has noted the prominence of issues of biography and personality in criticism of Shenstone – the ways in which Shenstone’s life “was rendered, made shapely, so that it could be morally serviceable.” The reception narrative he presents, however, is very different from the one I have been tracing in the magazines. For Terry, Shenstone’s life and

character were “curiously prone to being factitiously shaped, to being dressed up by others, mostly so as to be exemplary of general human frailty or futility.”⁴³ We have already noted the origins of this narrative, which views the poet’s retirement to the Leasowes as a mistake, as a tragic exemplar of a life spent in futile and insignificant pursuits, finally subject to the depredations of time in both his own early death and in the mutable fate of his garden, in Dodsley’s biographical preface, Gray’s 1769 letter, and Johnson’s 1781 “Life” – to which Terry adds a 1773 Goldsmith essay on the disrepair of the Leasowes and Graves’s 1779 *Columella* and 1788 *Recollections*.⁴⁴ While I interpret Graves’s *Recollections* differently, the very existence of the morality tale Terry identifies is important to my argument because it reveals the emergence and growing influence of “critical reading” – the work of professional readers, or critics, whose task it was to identify what was of value in a writer’s work and to place that work in the context of a print-based canon. In other words, there are two traditions of responses to Shenstone, both biographically based, but unlike the appreciative magazine-based tradition which was built upon the efforts of the Dodsleys assisted by members of Shenstone’s coterie, the second might be seen as a meta-tradition fostered by the institution of literary criticism and the canon-building exercise it supported. This meta-tradition can be seen as receiving its most influential statement in Johnson’s “Life of Shenstone,” as we saw at the start of this chapter. While Graves’s witty rebuttal of Johnson in his 1788 *Recollections* was effectively calculated to qualify and question Johnson’s claims, it could not over the long term attain the stature of the “Lives,” with their collective and much-anticipated pronouncements on the relative merits of English poets, issued by the most authoritative print author of the day and underwritten by a consortium of leading London booksellers.

In its immediate context, however, Graves’s spirited defense of his friend was well received, not only by the Montagu coterie and Philip Yorke, second Earl of Hardwicke, who had their own reasons for disputing Johnson (see Chapter 5), but also by readers unwilling to accept Johnson’s version of their favorite Shenstone. Thus, the decade of late 1781 to 1792 saw seven of the thirteen printed epitaphs I have found, while the stream of tributes to the Leasowes and praise of its recent owners continued unabated. More broadly, the years 1780–1809 show the greatest range and number of Shenstone-related offerings in the magazines since the year of Dodsley’s original publicity blitz for the *Works*. While many of these make no reference to Johnson or Graves, effects of the two representations can be found – for example, in the fact that Dodsley’s biographical preface is

reprinted in December 1781 for the first time (that I have been able to discover) since 1764.⁴⁵ The most sustained challenge to Johnson's narrative, however, occurs with the beginning of an antiquarian or scholarly approach to Shenstone, represented by a flurry of items appearing in such periodicals as the *European Magazine*, the *Monthly Visitor*, the *Edinburgh Review*, and especially the *Gentleman's Magazine* at the start of the new century, nearing the fortieth anniversary of the poet's death.

In the first months of 1801, the *European* printed an account, submitted by "A.X.," of "The Origins of Shenstone's Ballad of Jemmy Dawson." In the spring of 1802, the *Monthly Visitor* offered a detailed "Sketch of the Memoirs of William Shenstone, Esq., Embellished with a fine Portrait." Although ostensibly produced by "E." of Islington, the heart of the sketch quotes, with acknowledgment, seven key paragraphs from Johnson, and the remainder is in fact a close paraphrase of the same. With more apparent scholarly legitimacy, an anonymous essay in the December 1804 *Literary Magazine* assesses positively Shenstone's achievement as a landscape designer; in this case, however, while Johnson's "Life" and a few writers on gardening are cited by name, a number of passages from the essay are taken directly from Graves's *Recollections* without any mention of that author or work. The *Monthly Visitor* and the *Edinburgh Annual Register*, in 1803 and 1809 respectively, print hitherto-unpublished letters by Shenstone. Other magazine pieces offer an account of the epitaphs in the Hales-Owen church, including Shenstone's; a detailed report of the current state of the *ferme ornée's* walks, water features, and decorations; and a series of observations and questions about details of the relationship between Shenstone, Johnson, and Gray as indicated by the correspondence record. This interest in Shenstone "remains" on the part of antiquarian contributors to the magazines makes it clear that, at least among educated gentlemen in the rural parishes of England and Scotland, there were many who considered the poet's contribution to the English literary tradition worth preserving.

Of special interest is a burst of exchanges submitted to Mr Urban of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1806, incited by an anonymous travel writer who claims of the Leasowes (and Hagley) that "*too much* has been already said," adding that "the natural timidity of its Fauns and Dryads seems never to have recovered from the shock inflicted by the bitter persecutions of the merciless bailiff"; that the "lowly thatch" of Shenstone's house is long gone; and that the garden inscriptions are little more than a "profuse sprinkling of poetical scraps." This intrepid critic is called to account for his "illiberal observations" by "A Shenstonian," who notes the first writer's dependence

on “Dr. Johnson’s sarcasms” and refers him to pages 72 and 73 of Graves’s *Recollections*, “printed by Dodsley in 1788,” for correction. The Shenstonian promises a further account of the Leasowes in its present state but is followed rather in the next month by “Arcadio,” asking “why should the memory of such a man be in any way traduced?” Arcadio, apparently the same whose tribute to Shenstone had been published more than forty years earlier in Volume Two of the 1764 *Works*, presents his own credentials – “I assure you, Mr. Urban, I have seldom met with any of his acquaintance (and many I have conversed with in the shades of his favourite Leasowes,) but have dropt the tear of sympathy, at the bare mention of his wonted benevolence and friendship” – and concludes with lines he wrote at the Leasowes.⁴⁶

Again in December 1811, David Parkes, an antiquarian schoolmaster born near Shenstone’s home village who had contributed an addendum to the above-mentioned 1803 article on Halesowen epitaphs, submits to Mr Urban drawings of the birthplaces of Shenstone and William Wycherley, prompting “A.F.” to write early in the new year with gratitude “that there is a semblance of [the birthplace of my favourite Shenstone] preserved” and a request that Mr Parkes or someone else would provide a view of the Leasowes at about the time of the poet’s death. This correspondent continues:

Modest and worthy Shenstone! I knew him well. Amiable in his manners, willing to communicate, he was the friend of merit and the fosterer of genius. I well remember when a youth, that I showed him some Verses I had written on the Leasowes, which, although they have little to recommend them, I will introduce, to show the willingness he had to assist a rhyming adventurer, and likewise the facility with which he wrote. With a pencil he immediately annexed the eight last lines, and returned me the verses.

There follows a short poem, “Verses written at The Leasowes, May 19, 1759,” incidentally containing what, if authentic, would likely be the last previously unprinted Shenstone piece to surface for the next century.⁴⁷ Parkes at last complied with A.F.’s request in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* of August 1823, accompanying it with yet another citation of Graves to refute Johnson, and with an anecdote about the decoration of one of the rooms. The diligent Mr Parkes also contributed, in April 1815, an epitaph to the memory of Shenstone composed by Thomas Hull and enclosed in a letter to John Scott Hylton, another member of the coterie.

The 1806–23 exchanges in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* are of interest for their blend of antiquarian motivation and coterie spirit. In this latter

respect, they differ from the more vaguely biographical and imitative magazine *Shenstoniana* I have reviewed above – these writers are clearly motivated by the belief that they are the vestiges of a once physically embodied, if now scattered and dissolving, network centered around Shenstone at the Leasowes. As such, they understand it as their social responsibility to defend the poet's reputation and preserve the memory of the *ferme ornée*, even if it now exists only in prints and drawings (Graves, the longest lived of the initial members, had died in 1804, but Thomas Hull submitted a poem lamenting the garden's neglect in 1823).

The perceived need for such efforts implies that Shenstone was beginning to recede into the author-centered narrative of literary history – and concomitantly, that he was increasingly judged on his authorial merits in isolation, still connected to the Leasowes, to be sure, but not first among equals as originator and mentor of a productive literary coterie. As contemporary memory faded and the taste for “nature,” “simplicity,” and retired melancholy that Shenstone himself had helped initiate became paramount, the shift to an institutionalized literary criticism aligned with “Romantic” values in poetry became complete. The hegemony of the literary critic is nicely illustrated by an 1836 report in *The Analyst* on Shenstone's marginalia in his 1733 edition of Prior's poems, contributed as a sample of the kind of “data” needed in order to “judge of the talents, the taste, the intellectual cultivation and acquirements of men eminent in their generation” and to move beyond “fulsome eulogies” or “bitter and harsh declamations” calculated “to gratify and tickle the whimsical and capricious palate of a false public taste.” Criticism's adherence to Romantic values is equally well represented by a lengthy critical assessment by H.T. Tuckerman, published in *Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art*, a Philadelphia publication, in 1849. For Tuckerman, it is “a singular evidence of the mutations of taste to compare [Shenstone's] effusions with the order of poetry now in vogue.” The reader need only “note how tamely the changes are rung on Damons, Melissas, Philomels and Cynthias” in Shenstone's pastorals, in comparison to the work of Wordsworth, Byron, and Tennyson, to “feel, by the force of contrast, what a glorious revolution has taken place in English poetry.” Despite contemporaries' admiration of him as the “great magician” whose “powerful incantations, magic verse” are “inscrib'd on every tree, alcove, or urn,” Shenstone now represents, in both his writing and his landscape gardening, “the artificiality of his day”; indeed, as a votary of taste rather than “creative power,” Shenstone not only betrays his inner poverty but thereby represents the state of “decline” of his literary epoch. The professional

framework through which Tuckerman makes these evaluations is again revealed by his concluding concession that, because “the mass of people need to be refined, to acquire more delicate standards of judgment and to educate the perceptions,” “the amateur [like Shenstone] has his place in the social economy.”⁴⁸

In short, what had once been the height of elegance and of life as art was now the epitome of convention and cliché, and Shenstone came to represent, within the specialized landscape of literary criticism, not an innovative democratization of elite literary values and coterie practices, but rather “men of the virtuoso class” who, “by surrounding themselves with quaint, beautiful and curious memorials . . . seek to reflect instead of embodying their finest instincts.” While an 1854 review of a new edition of Shenstone’s poems could still recommend the reading of this “minor minstrel” for his “homely simplicity and gentle grace,” and the occasional critic could still acknowledge Shenstone’s “exquisite ear for melody, and . . . wondrous acquaintance with the pastoral poetry of the ancients,” Johnson’s increasing elevation as a towering critical authority diminished those voices that contended with his, obscuring the very real divergence of views of Shenstone in the preceding decades. Indeed, the last-cited critic, Edward Jesse, expresses his dismay at the “severe wound [inflicted] on the reputation of Shenstone by Dr. Johnson, capturing at once the necessity and the hopelessness of reparation by concluding his 1862 piece with the assertion that “whoever shall attempt to roll back the stone of prejudice which Dr. Johnson contrived to place at the entrance to the Leasowes, will be a real benefactor to the present age.”⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the material reality of Dodsley’s edition continued to command attention even in the mid-nineteenth century. The Tuckerman essay from which I quote above opens with the recent purchase of an old book, “illustrated with a portrait and frontispiece representing some kind of aquatic bird peering up from among the reeds, by the side of a little waterfall. There is an eulogistic preface by Dodsley, several pages of tributary verse, and a map of the bard’s rural paradise. The care bestowed upon the work, indicates the estimation in which Shenstone was held by his contemporaries.” For all his lack of appreciation for the poet and his certainty of a subsequent glorious revolution in poetry, and despite his inability to identify the bird on the coat of arms, thereby missing the symbolism of Shenstone’s kingfisher, the critic is at least driven to reflect on a “mutation of taste” that just momentarily hints at the transience of his own. One might invoke here Acland’s observation, cited in my introduction, about “the tenacity of existing

technologies . . . [and] their related materials and practices.” Ironically, the Dodsley firm’s printed celebration of Shenstone and his coterie continues to generate response, mediating the gap in comprehension opened up by print’s own tendency to reinforce normative esthetic values and authoritative critical voices.

Recently, a revival of interest in manuscript records and scribal modes of literary circulation has begun to bring Shenstone into view once again. Interest in the ballad revival fuelled by Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* has incidentally highlighted how centrally Shenstone and his esthetic judgments were involved in the preparation of that watershed publication. Work on the manuscript poetry collections of Shenstone is reacquainting literary historians with an artist whose accomplishments encompass not only poetry and gardening but also watercolor painting and bookmaking. At the same time, fuller histories of the eighteenth-century book trade, such as James Tierney’s edition of Robert Dodsley’s correspondence, together with unprecedented digital access to facsimiles of original, ephemeral print materials such as magazines, make it possible to trace how a poet’s persona might have been disseminated far beyond the confines of his immediate circle through a collaboration with print. The sum of these reconsiderations can make more comprehensible to us William Shenstone’s contemporaries’ and immediate successors’ perception of him as an innovative and original arbiter of taste, popularizing or pointing the way toward the period’s democratic, naturalistic, and Romantic turns in poetry, landscaping gardening, and collecting. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this study, we can now appreciate more fully how interdependent the workings of a scribal coterie and the printing press might have been in managing a poet’s reception in late eighteenth-century Britain despite the growing power of culturally authoritative print institutions like literary criticism and canon construction. My next chapter will re-consider the question of a coterie member’s afterlife from a more personal and passionate perspective, examining the skirmish that pitted Elizabeth Montagu and her allies against Samuel Johnson over the question of whether a man’s character belonged to his coterie or to the public.