Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature

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The Use of Paratext in Popular Eighteenth-Century Biography

The Case of Edmund Curll

Pat Rogers

Why Curll, of all people? A natural reaction to the title of this essay might be to wonder what the rascally publisher Edmund Curll has to do with narratology, the theme of this volume. It might be thought that Curll (1683-1747) was an interesting fellow, no doubt, but scarcely a pioneer of writerly innovation. The case I shall try to make here is that Curll’s most characteristic productions, above all the instant biographies he brought out in the late 1720s and early 1730s, do tell us something about paratext – specifically on the way it constitutes a type of narrative statement – and may even exemplify changes in the shape of biography. In the limited space available, I can only point to a few salient features of his method, such as it was, and provide some empirical instances.

Western life-writing in classical and Renaissance times had been dominated by the Plutarchian model. This usually meant something brief, even elliptical, emphasizing character, and incorporating only a selection of significant incidents. Comparatively little use is made of letters until the time of James Boswell – though William Mason had anticipated the Life of Johnson under this aspect in his work The Poems of Mr. Gray. To Which are Prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings (1775). In English examples scant use is made of commonplace diurnal details; the biographer stands outside the narrative (again a fashion not followed by Boswell); we regularly detect a certain pudeur about using gossip in serious contexts; and the exemplary quality of the story outweighs picturesque ‘human’ touches. Few of these conventions, or shibboleths, held much appeal for Curll.

Output

Between 1706 and 1747 Curll was involved in the publication of some 1100 titles, of which more than 40 can be regarded as self-standing or full
biographies. A number went into several editions, real or factitiously described as such. Some of these are short; some are very long, padded out by various devices to occupy hundreds of pages. In the majority of cases, the volume in question constituted the first such treatment of a particular individual, though it has seldom remained the best. Curll himself was probably responsible for writing as many of twenty of these, though he almost always makes no claim on the title-page or in advertisements. In other instances he assuredly edited the work of others.

These books ranged across several categories. Authors were the subject of the largest number of items: they included John Gay, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Matthew Prior, Delarivier Manley, William Congreve, William Wycherley, and John Philips. The printer John Barber, who performed the presswork for many works by Jonathan Swift, stands in a group of his own. Among churchmen and theologians we find Gilbert Burnet, Thomas Sprat, Francis Atterbury, and John Tillotson. Add to these scholars and antiquarians such as Thomas Hearne, Jean Le Clerc, and William Dugdale; thinkers such as John Locke; free thinkers such as Walter Moyle and Matthew Tindal (perhaps also John Toland, though this may be wrongly ascribed to Curll’s list). A further category of politicians includes Robert Walpole, the Duke of Shrewsbury, the Earl of Halifax (also a writer of sorts), Arthur Maynwaring, and the Earl of Wharton. Physicians on the list are Dr. John Radcliffe, immortalized by the Camera, Observatory, and Infirmary in Oxford, and Dr. John Freind. From the acting profession come Thomas Betterton, Robert Wilks, and Anne Oldfield, a performer admired by Voltaire, and commemorated in her biography among other accomplishments for her liaison with Maynwaring. Soldiers, misers, Jacobite conspirators, and historians help to make up the tally. A miscellaneous group includes the astrologer John Partridge (victim of Swift’s Bickerstaff hoax); the deaf soothsayer Duncan Campbell (a life formerly – but no longer – believed to have been written by Daniel Defoe); and historic figures such as Jane Shore, Lady Jane Gray, and the legendary first king of Britain, Lucius – this was put out to trade off a play by Manley currently on the London stage. Perhaps the most distinguished individual within all these categories is Cicero. A few were presented as autobiographies, including those on Manley again and on the adventurer John Ker, whose indiscreet revelations landed himself in gaol and Curll in the pillory. We should also note that the bookseller reprinted a number of the shorter productions, as well as fresh items, in collections of composite lives.

1 The count of 1100 includes new editions of previously published items.
Not included in this reckoning are more than thirty ‘memoirs’ appended to the works of writers published by Curll. On the surface the count is impressive, since among those involved are some considerable figures. We might name at random Vincent Voiture, Nicholas Rowe, Thomas Burnet (author of *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, and an inexhaustible source of material for Curll), Jean de La Bruyère, George Farquhar, St. Évremond, Boileau, John Aubrey, John Pomfret, Sir Philip Sidney, Andrew Marvell (in the first collected edition of his works), the Earl of Rochester, the Duke of Buckingham, Sir Thomas Browne, Lord Roscommon, the mercurial Duke of Wharton, the neo-Latin author Bonefonius (Jean Bonnefons), and others – this is not to mention Julius Caesar and Theocritus. An outrider is the translation of three portions of *De viris illustribus* by Cornelius Nepos. Finally there are the copies of last wills commonly included with the published life, but also sold separately. At least twenty-five of these survive, and they too were spliced together into collections – bundling is not an invention of modern financiers.

Components

A characteristic Curll biography, as defined here, will contain a number of features, some of which serve to define by negatives the main goals of biography up to this point in time, especially those in the Plutarchian tradition. These include:

– A narrative of incident, without any subjugation of detail to the overall view of the subject.
– A willingness to include material of any kind Curll had been able to obtain, either by writing to friends and relatives, raking the dustbins, or merely by sending someone down to Doctors’ Commons (the ecclesiastical court where probate registers were kept), to get a will for a small fee.
– The habit of throwing in these things into the ongoing narrative as they come to hand. By what seems pure literary incompetence, he managed to create an often arresting cento which was before its time – before Sterne, Blake, Jean-Paul, and Carlyle he brought some of the effects associated with Robert Burton or Rabelais into non-satiric discourse. He even constructed a written collage long before the term was applied to literature.
– Regular interventions at arbitrary moments to boast about his discoveries and to deplore the failure of his rivals to lay hands on such privileged
material. At times the result approaches the effects of metanarrative. In some respects his productions can even resemble A.J.A. Symons’s *The Quest for Corvo* (1934) or Ian Hamilton’s *In Search of J.D. Salinger* (1998), where we may learn less about the putative subject than the process of attempting to come to terms with him or her.

Elaborate documentation for the sake of it. No one snapped up more unconsidered trifles than Curll, and few trifles were more justly unconsidered than the scraps of correspondence he was able on occasions to ferret out. The interest of this material lies in its associative quality, not its content. It is no paradox that the great master of publicity made his name by exposing what had up till now been considered intensely private. As it happens, this is much the way that some celebrity biography has gone in our own day.

Embedding official-looking documents that appear to confer a serious quality to the narrative. The most astounding example occurs in the third volume of *The Memoirs and Secret Negotiations of John Ker, of Kersland, Esq*; (1727). Curll had got into very serious trouble over the first two volumes of the memoirs, in which the former spy released some embarrassing details about diplomatic activities during the reign of Queen Anne. Indeed it was this work – not as often supposed his obscene publications – that landed him in the pillory very soon after the third volume came out. So keen was Curll to boost the appeal of his production that he bookended this text with two curious items. The first is an affidavit at the outset, signed S. Gray, and purporting to guarantee the authenticity of the memoirs. Its author was Susanna Gray, a mysterious woman who may have lived with Curll around this period. The second was an appendix which actually gives the full indictment by the King’s Bench court of the publisher in both Latin and English, setting out in complete form the accusations against Curll, named as ‘a Malitious and Seditious Man’ (with much more along those lines). Admittedly the imprint carries no name, and technically there was no obvious proof that the bookseller had been responsible for the new volume: but then Curll had kept his identity out of the two earlier volumes which had prompted the case against him.

In general Plutarch’s approach has been effaced by that of John Aubrey, whose *Brief Lives* remained undisturbed in the Ashmolean Museum, but whose antiquarian volumes on local history such as *The Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey* (published by Curll in 1723) had begun to appear in print. Most of these were published under the auspices of Richard
Rawlinson, the nonjuring bishop and Jacobite who furnished Curll with much of his most saleable material. It was probably Rawlinson who supplied many of the purloined manuscripts that the bookseller brought before the public gaze (see Tashjian, Tashjian, and Enright, 1990; Baines and Rogers, 2007, pp. 132-38). But the snippets of information from which Curll typically assembled his text do not provide a succinct and relatively coherent picture of the subject, as with Aubrey’s method of terse summary. They contribute rather to a loose-knit fabric in which anecdote, vital data and embedded citations mesh with one another.

Modes of Paratext

The foundational document here is of course Gérard Genette (1987). *Seuils* was translated into several languages, including an English version in 1997. We should begin with some semantic issues. The word *seuil* in French, which is cognate with *la soglia* in Italian, looks forwards and backwards. Where in the English language we use words such as threshold or doorstep, we typically think of progress into a space: the good thing about *seuil* is that we exit as well as enter that way. Genette and his followers have shown how *le péritexte* regularly invades the text proper. In his book Genette explores *l’entour du texte*, its surroundings. The Greek preposition *peri*, as is well known, means ‘about’, but also ‘beside, on the edge of’, shown in terms we have derived such as periphrasis or perimeter. The work deals with a threshold that obviously has to be crossed. Even simply to name and conceptualize this peritext is to open up an expectation of border crossings and transgression. While the school of Genette seldom allude to biography or historiography, prime forms of narrative discourse, I am suggesting that the notion is as applicable here as in fiction, where these matters are usually detected.

Famously Jacques Derrida told us, ‘Il n’y a pas de hors texte’ (see Derrida, 1997, 158). Certainly in Curll’s volumes what should be external, or preliminary, or supplementary, regularly infiltrates the main body of the book, and becomes constitutive rather than ancillary. We might think here of parallel French idioms: *hors d’œuvre* of course, but also *hors série*, out of sequence, unclassifiable, and extending to the sense of incomparable or unrivalled. Then there is *hors sujet*, irrelevant, an idea highly relevant to what ends up in Curll’s books. It may be recalled that Derrida made much of *supplementarité*. As far as I understand it, he claims that the supplementary insinuates itself into the centre, in other words not just accreting but substituting or replacing as well as augmenting: as it inscribes, it erases.
Curll loved supplements, which took many forms, such as new editions with slightly expanded contents. Since his productions are regularly constructed on the principle of the assembly toy Lego, as discrete gatherings which can be, and are, bound together in almost any order, they readily accommodate themselves to such a process. More obviously than any other publisher in early modern times, he takes advantage of the fact that buyers commonly acquired their books in sheets, and selected the binding style for themselves. This can lead to an aleatory quality in his works since we may encounter surviving copies on a variety of different assemblages, recalling the volumes of William Burroughs and B.S. Johnson in the 1960s. Of course he did not consciously attempt to create such an effect; but the productions of chance would seem to produce much the same results as a more purposeful use of the technique. Burroughs and Johnson may just mimic the processes which followed naturally from the way Curll did things.

Some of the elements of paratext have generally been defined as follows: Title-page (with half-title); Contents; Dedication; Preface; Affidavit/testimonial; Commendatory letters; Verse; Elegies; Footnotes; Postscript; Appendices; Supplement; Key; Index; Advertisements; Appendages, e.g. wills. One addition might be lists, for which Curll had a great fondness: as in Faithful Memoirs of the Life, Amours and Performances, of that Justly Celebrated, and most Eminent Actress of her Time, Mrs. Anne Oldfield (1731), where eight pages near the end set out well over 100 roles in which the subject performed. The array of features just supplied excludes graphic and visual items, such as frontispieces and plates, which Curll did employ, as well as typographic devices like borders and ornaments – one reason for omitting the latter here is that Curll employed a very wide range of printers over his career and never developed a unique house-style in matters such as layout.

However, he was master of almost all the elements just set out. Some examples will be given shortly, but a rapid summary will be help at this point. His title-pages are famous for their deceptions – for example, by announcing a new edition on a cancel title-page (that is, a new page that would be bound or pasted in to replace the original) while using old unsold sheets. Another common trick was to attribute a given book to a pseudonymous writer who bore a name suspiciously close to a real one. This happened in the case of several productions by ‘Mr. Joseph Gay’, not far from the successful John Gay, famous for The Beggar’s Opera and other works. These items were mainly written by his hack author John Durant Breval.²

² Typography can also help here: thus Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Right Honorable Joseph Addison, Esq; with his Character, by Sir Richard Steele (1719: 1724), by Giles Jacob, makes
His half-titles at the start of the volume often supply a name for the book quite different from that on the full title-page, which follows immediately afterwards in the printed sequence. On repeated occasions his imprint is unreliable, very frequently concealing his own responsibility, while the date of publication is put forward or back without compunction. He likes to supply affidavits guaranteeing the legitimacy of what follows, and more rarely a warrant from the Lord Chamberlain or other high authority (see for example its point by printing Steele’s name in the same large font size as that of Addison, even though Steele’s contribution is simply a few paragraphs lifted, doubtless without permission, from the dedication to The Drummer.)
the late biography by ‘William Ayre’ of Pope (1745) – Curll may not have written this, as is often claimed, but he was almost certainly responsible for ‘a patent under his Majesty’s royal signet’ claiming privilege at the start).

Contents lists do not invariably match up with all the material included. Footnotes are another speciality, utilized most often to advertise items from the publisher’s catalogue. Supplements, already mentioned, include last-minute updates as new material reaches the bookseller. Keys, which
were used to decode the identity of persons mentioned within the text in a disguised form, find a place appended to scandalous works such as the so-called autobiography of Manley, published as *The Adventures of Rivella*, 2nd edition (1715); but they move from paratext to text in works such as Curll’s *Complete Key to the Tale of a Tub* (1710) and *Compleat Key to the Dunciad* (1728), along with a few other such items. Indexes are generally found in the longer biographies among those considered here, but they seldom are very detailed or well compiled.

This leaves advertisements, a branch of the trade in which Curll had few superiors. They may appear at any point in the book, but most commonly on the verso of the half-title, before or after the prelims, or at the end. If placed at the end, they may be integral parts of the make-up of the volume, printed on the concluding leaves of the last gathering. Alternatively they may form a separate gathering, which bears a signature which aligns them with the entire collation of the volume. Just as often they are bibliographically separate entities, which might or might not form part of the whole in any given copy. The simplest to classify here are cases where Curll included his full catalogue, running to 16 or 24 pages, at the end of the text. Their presence in surviving copies is a little hit and miss, but the evidence would mainly indicate that they were routinely included in some publications – thus any titles with relevance to Pope are likely to have the catalogue present at the end, since items of Popiana figure so heavily in these lists. It should be stated again that much incidental advertising goes on within the main text.

**Uses of Paratext**

The paratextual modes employed by Curll do not exactly correspond with those found in the typology set out by Genette, who stresses the need to define categories in advance of any examination of their historical evolution: ‘Their establishment is a precondition of any attempt to provide historical perspective’ (Genette, 1997, pp. 13-14). This arises from his declared ambition to offer ‘a synchronic and not a diachronic study’. If we look at Curll’s procedures in a historical context, we shall require some adjustment of the categories.

In practice, we find an array of devices whose principal goals might be summarized as follows:

– Authority and authenticity. Curll generally aims more openly for the latter, but elements such as affidavits and warrants, already mentioned, clearly seek to achieve the former.
Novelty or at least recency. This most often shows up in dates appended to letters he received shortly before publication, provided sometimes in the body of the text but usually in prefatory material or in some kind of postscript. By way of example, in the five volumes of *Mr. Pope’s Literary Correspondence* (1735-1737) these dates may be as recent as a few days before publication.3

Competitive advantage. Supplementary materials such as a preface denounce rival versions as spurious or incomplete (a claim often implicit in title-pages or advertisements).

Supplementation. Curll engaged in this across almost every kind of book he published, but a good instance from his output of biographies occurs in [William Pittis], *Some Memoirs of the Life of John Radcliffe, M.D. Interspersed with Several Original Letters: His Two Speeches in Parliament, and a True Copy of his Last Will and Testament*. The item appeared in April 1715; during May a *Supplement to the First Edition* was issued both as an independent work and as a component of a second edition.4

Reuse and rebranding of old materials. The Radcliffe life supplies some illustration of this, as the title was altered for the third edition and the title-page heavily reworked so that a buyer might even assume there were substantial new materials (not so). On scores of occasions – perhaps little short of a hundred times – Curll brought out a work with a cancel title-page, trumpeting a new edition, where the reality was that the rest of the volume consisted of unsold sheets from an earlier. The interval between these ‘editions’ might be as much as twenty years or more, or as little as a few days – a striking example occurs in the case of [‘William Musgrave’], *The Life of the Right Honourable Sir Robert Walpole*, where the first edition was advertised on 27 September 1731, the second on 1 October, and the third on 11 October. A substantially new version with a fresh section on the family history of the Walpoles (and a new title) appeared in 1732. The family history portion came out again in 1738, with another fresh title, and once more this consists of the old sheets.

Vindication. Curll actually uses this word from time to time. He may have been involved in the first edition of [John Oldmixon], *Memoirs of

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3 This effect was facilitated by Curll’s publishing strategies. He produced a second and sometimes a third edition of volumes in this series shortly after their original appearance, typically in a different format (e.g. duodecimo following an octavo version).

4 The new material was also grafted into the text of the third edition (1716) and the fourth edition (1736).
the Life of John Lord Somers... With a Large Introduction, in Vindication of the Modern Biography (1716), although he did not advertise his claim prior to a supposed new edition said to be in the press in 1734. But more regularly he uses extra-textual means to justify the need for a given book and the means he has used to access the materials.

Promotion of his stock, through advertisements, catalogues, booklists, footnotes, addenda and other methods. The brand is enhanced by extensive self-advertisement, with the insertion of his own doings, correspondence and publications. Thus the main flow of the volumes of Pope's letters (insofar as they have one) is interrupted by items such as a snering dedication to Pope, doggerel verses celebrating the bookseller's triumph over his adversary in a case that came before the House of Lords, or notices of a print of Pope's house and garden entitled The Honour of Parnassus – a deliberately invasive gesture that carries the quarrel of the two men away from the pages of the current volume to a larger extra-textual space.

We could add to these objectives a greater opportunity for cheating, since much of the fraudulent side of Curll's output relates to claims he makes in a paratextual rather than a textual location. It is here that we find misdating, confusing or duplicated titles, misleading descriptions of previous bibliographical history, and other devices meant to throw buyers of the scent, or to circumvent the restrictions of the Copyright Act of 1709. Much of the appeal of his books lies in claims surrounding the text, rather than in the narrative itself.

**Representative Cases**

It would require a space equivalent to the length of this book to document in full the characteristics of a Curll biography, as outlined above. All that can be done here is to provide a brief sampling of particular cases as they illustrate features already noted, and the use made of the components listed. They make up a fairly arbitrary set, but not in any respect a misleading one.

Thus, The Life of the Late Honourable Robert Price, Esq; One of the Justices of his Majesty's Court of Common-Pleas (1734) is alleged on its title-page to have been 'printed by the authority of the family'. Such authority seems to derive from the countenance given to it by the judge's estranged wife, Lucy Price, a remarkable woman who acted – illegally of course, since she could not enter the inns of court – as an attorney for individuals in civil and criminal cases.
She supplied an affidavit testifying to the authenticity of Curll’s *Memoirs of Matthew Tindal* (1733), which was itself a text centrally concerned with a question of authenticity – that is, the legitimacy of claims made by the writer Eustace Budgell to the estate of the freethinker Tindal. Lucy had probably drafted the will that was in dispute, and could not be regarded by any stretch of the imagination as an impeachable witness. There followed a long struggle between Budgell and the deceased man’s expected heir, Nicholas Tindal, a clergyman and translator of Rapin de Thoyras’s *History of England*. Curll became heavily involved in the episode, reprinting a copy of the will, contacting the Prime Minister Robert Walpole about it, and publishing pamphlets on the topic. The dedication to Lucy Price in the *Memoirs* is signed by Curll, and her testimonial is dated five days later. Budgell’s fragile mind was unhinged by the affair and he ultimately threw himself into the Thames.

Curll’s self-justifying prefaces are a thing of wonder in themselves. Take for example *Mrs. Manley’s History of her Own Life and Times. Published from her original manuscript. The Fourth Edition. With a Preface Concerning the Present Publication* (1724). In reality, this is no more than a reissue of *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714), with a substitute title-page together with the addition of three leaves ‘To the reader’ before the preface, and a key at the end. The reissue came about because Delarivier Manley had recently died. The note at the start begins, ‘It must be confessed, That these *Memoirs* have been written above Ten Years; and, likewise, That they have been published as long, though under a different Title. The Reason of which, as well as to prove them Genuine, I shall lay before the Reader with as much Brevity, as the Fact will admit of’ (sig, A2’). Curll, who signs the note at its conclusion, describes his original dealings with the author in 1714, and cites three of her letters, expressing friendship and gratitude to him as well as her readiness to carry out more work for him. The document openly admits that Charles Gildon (a frequent presence among Curll’s stable of hacks) had originally planned to write a hostile account of Manley, and explains that she felt the need to provide her own more authentic narrative. It further seeks to justify the subterfuge of presenting the narrative on its first appearance as a translation of a foreign work. We cannot know how much of this is true, although the letters may well have been genuine. The professions of ‘honesty’ serve an obvious rhetorical purpose and they had enough plausibility to mislead some of those engaged in the study of Manley for a long time to come.\(^5\)

\(^5\) For a full recent discussion, see Carnell, 2008, pp. 15-16, 130-32. See also the edition of *Rivella* by Zelinsky, Manley (1999).
Whenever possible, Curll enlisted his main antagonist as an unwitting collaborator, appropriating whatever he could. Thus, while he was in gaol in 1727, he had his son Henry issue *Some Memoirs of the Life of Lewis Maximilian Mahomet, Gent. Late Servant to his Majesty*. Curll also made oblique use of the other Scriblerian satirists, notably Swift and Gay. *The Life of Mr. John Gay, Author of The Beggar’s Opera, &c.* (1733) contains a tasteless set of ‘Verses on the Death of Mr. Gay’. The title of this item suggests that the compiler had somehow got wind of Swift’s verses on his own death, which had been first drafted around 1731 but remained unpublished for some years. This volume carries a dedication to Gay’s sisters and legatees, Catherine Baller and Joanna Fortescue, otherwise little known to history. It opens, ‘Ladies, The Authority of the Gentleman from whom I have borrowed the Motto, prefixed to these Papers, is a sufficient Vindication of their Design’ (sig. π3r). The convenient quotation on the title-page, printed just above a vignette of Gay, comes from William Congreve. Midway through the text, the author suspends his discussion of *The What D’ye Call It*, a farce co-written by Gay with Scriblerian colleagues, as he has received a letter dated 28 December 1732, less than a month after the writer died, and five weeks before the biography appeared. This praises the parodies of tragedy found in the play. The interruption ends with a puff for a racy poem called *The Hornbook*, which came out about this time and in which Curll apparently had some interest. After this the narration resumes with no sense of embarrassment on the part of the compiler, recognisably Curll himself. Self-evidently, chronology must suffer in cases like this.

The typical form of these biographies was of course fully apparent to critics of Curll, and they were many. His main scourge was the *Grub-street Journal*, the weekly organ that served as a kind of streaming *Dunciad*. Another work devoted to the acting profession, *The Life of that Eminent Comedian Robert Wilks, Esq*; had come out in 1732 (dated ‘1733’). This is what the paper made of it on 8 March 1733: ‘We could not refuse to publish gratis the following Content […] written by a much greater comedian’.

False title-page and dedication.  
Preface, with a catalogue of Lives printed for, and (most of them) supposed to be written by Mr. E. Curl.  
Introduction taken from Two Tatlers, and one of Mr. Farquhar’s Prefaces.  
A digression about Mr. Farquhar, with a Prologue and Epilogue.  
A second digression about Mr. Farquhar, with a Prologue and Epilogue.
A third digression concerning Mr. Hen. Norris, called Jubilee Dickey, and his wife Mrs. Eliz. Knapton.

A fourth digression, containing an honest confession of Mr. Cibber in a Dedication.

A fifth digression, giving an account of the preference of Mrs. Oldfield to Mrs. Rogers.

An Essay on the action of the Stage, containing characters of four Plays, in which Mr. Wilks had the most eminent parts; taken word for word from the History of the Stage, published in Mrs. Oldfield’s Life by Mr. Curl, and taken originally from the Tatlers.

Characters of some other Plays, taken from the Tatlers.

Post-script, taken from the lord Lansdowne’s Works, containing his Defence of Mr. Dryden, against bishop Burnet.

Advertisement, containing an inventory of goods to be sold, taken from the Tatler of July 16, 1709.

A catalogue of books printed for E. Curl.

Some circumstances relating to Mr. Wilks’s Life.

Some account of his two wives.

A copy of his last will and testament.

A catalogue of the principal parts he performed.

Stanzas on his death taken from a Daily Journal.

The Journal could not resist adding, ‘The reader, by casting his eye upon this table, will be surprised to see the Life of so great an actor, drawn within the narrow compass of 8 pages; for which he cannot surely grudge to pay 1s. 6d. having 4 pages of his last will and testament, and 66 of useful digressions into the bargain’. While this volume offers a slightly more muddled collection of disparate elements than some, it could not be claimed that the ‘table’ is inaccurate or that the overall description is misleading. Significantly the order of these items differs from one copy to another – the last two in the Journal’s table sometimes appear among the prelims, before the preface. One of those providing a ‘testimonial’ is the actor’s widow, Mary Wilks, also the dedicatee.

The need here was to guard against a rival life put out by a bookseller who was bidding fair to inherit Curll’s mantle as the least scrupulous member of the trade, William Rayner, who had got his version into print more speedily. The preface begins, ‘That the Public may be farther convinced of the Genuineness of these Memoirs, I shall lay before them, the several Steps I have taken in compiling them’ (sig. a1r). Among documents cited are letters to the publisher/compiler from the daughter-in-law of Wilks. As usual, their recency is crucial to the effect: the idea is to lend these biographies
the appearance of what used to be called bang up-to-date. We should also note that the list of Curll lives is integral to the text, occupying the last page of the gathering. Likewise the catalogue seems to be present in all copies: it takes the form of 'new books' printed for Curll, and features as 'just published' a collection of the lives and families of more than thirty people. Actually these had been compiled by John Le Neve and strung together by Curll among other booksellers in 1713 and 1714.
Almost exactly the same thing happened in the case of the life of Matthew Tindal, already mentioned. This time the *Grub-street Journal* of 18 October 1733 analysed the contents of the volume, beginning with the dedication to Lucy Price, and then identifying seven sections that serve to pad out the book to 59 pages. These include four letters by William Whiston, ‘in which there is not word relating to Dr. Tindall; which Mr. C. calls *curious Anecdotes relating to our author, &c*. A further five pages are described as follows: ‘A short account of the Doctor; one page of which is taken from Mr. *Wood’s Athenæ Oxonienses*: one page a half from *Minutes* communicated by Mrs. *Price* or Mr. *Small*; the remaining page and a half fill’d with necessary connections of the curious materials above-mentioned, by Mr. E.C.’ We are told that fresh information on Tindal occupies less than four pages. Once again, it could scarcely be claimed that the *Journal* has misrepresented what the book contains.

In many respects the most egregious example of Curll’s methods is to be found in a work dated 1730, but actually published in August 1729. This is *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Amours of William Congreve Esq; Interspersed with Miscellaneous Essays, Letters, and Characters, Written by him. Also some very Curious Memoirs of Mr. Dryden and his Family, with a Character of him and his Writings, by Mr. Congreve. Compiled from their Respective Originals, by Charles Wilson Esq.*

The complex bibliographical history of this item has been set out elsewhere and its heterogeneous contents described, so it is enough here to isolate a very few features (see Rogers and Baines, 2008). One concerns the preface, in which ‘Charles Wilson’ (possibly Giles Jacob, but perhaps the bookseller himself) remarks, ‘I employ’d Mr. Curll to print these *Memoirs*, and think my own Authority sufficient for whatever I am inclin’d to publish’ (p. xii), despite threats of reprisal from the physician and Scriblerian satirist Dr John Arbuthnot. The italics here hark back to expressions used in a paper war over the forthcoming book that had been going on in the pages of the daily press. Wilson goes on to attempt to convince his opponents that ‘there was a very friendly Correspondence between Mr. Congreve and Mr. Curll’, by citing a letter from the dramatist to the bookseller, conveying strong approval of one of Curll’s earlier projects, *The Historical Account of the English Poets* (1719-1720). Thus the writer kills at least three birds with one stone, as he is able to announce his publication, establish his title to authorship of the work, and make good his claim to authority by emphasizing the good relations between Curll and the subject of the biography. Actually there are no signs of anything remotely approaching intimacy between the two men.
Among all the eccentricities of this broken-backed compilation the strangest comes perhaps in a passage referring to Congreve's ill health. This led to advice that he should drink snail-water as a remedy:

"but since he had 'a strong Aversion to this Insect', he rather chose Ass's Milk; till last Summer he became a Convert to the Snail, by reading at
Bath, in the Posthumous Works of that ingenious Poet and Physician Dr. Sewell of Hampstead, a small but very curious Dissertation of the Usefulness of S N A I L S in MEDICINE, written by him, but the Year before his own Death, which for its Excellence and publick Benefit I shall here insert...’ (pp. 128-29).

The next three pages reprint Sewell’s deathless words which survey the advantages of snail-water. It hardly needs pointing out that Sewell had been one of the bookseller’s most prolific authors; that a footnote directs readers to the Posthumous Works; or that the entire passage has no possible bearing on the main narrative.

Conclusion

Plainly, Curll in his eccentric fashion was one of those who contributed to the evolution of paratext. So much so, that he may be said to have taken its use almost to the point where our habitual category comes close to dissolution. When the ‘core’ of a life amounts to only eight pages, while the additional elements take up 58, these scarcely serve any longer as a mere ‘threshold’. They serve a different function from the purely ancillary or supplementary role described by Genette. Seuils assumes that the make-up of books is overwhelmingly the responsibility of the author, who uses paratexts as a means of guiding the audience towards the meaning of the whole. By contrast Curll’s publications are put together by the bookseller, and ‘paratexts’ become a constitutive element that serve his commercial interests. This distinction applies even in the many cases mentioned where we must regard Curll as the ‘author’ of the volume in question.

As the foregoing examples may suggest, the opportunistic and slapdash methods employed by Curll ensured that his biographies were as much process as product. The ostensible centre is under constant threat as subsidiary parts swell; yet these add-in elements flaunt their externality by their title or by the insertion of dates meant to stress the topicality of their contents. Postscripts, in particular, advertise their separation from the main narrative. With these biographies, Curll blundered and cheated himself into literary and publishing innovation. Some of the devices he employed to capture attention still have a place in our own day. It might

6 I owe some of the points here to Liisa Steinby, who offered incisive comments on the whole of this essay.
seem that his methods belong more to the history of publicity than to the
development of the literary text *per se*. But they certainly helped to mould
the way that readers understood the narratives of human life. If it is accepted
that title-pages, prefaces, supplements and indexes can be involved in the
creation of meaning for a story, then the old reprobate can legitimately
claim a place in this volume.

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