

## **Turbans, Tea and Talk of Books: the Literary Parties of Elizabeth Spence and Elizabeth Bengier**

1. A truly grand party requires some A-list celebrities, and in the early nineteenth century this requirement was often most satisfactorily filled by a great writer or two, usually male and preferably with a number of interesting acquaintances about whom he could tell stories. Premier London hostesses tended to place Thomas Moore, the poet, novelist, and friend of Byron, near the top of their invitation lists. "He is the Venus throw in society," whispers a character in Letitia Landon's *Romance and Reality*. "His conversation carries you along with ease and grace of skating" (1831: 270). The Venus throw is the name for the highest throw in a Roman game of dice, and, as every reader of the society columns knew, each grand party marked another move in the game that the elite hostesses played to win.
2. In 1820s London, successful poets and novelists could therefore with relative ease become social celebrities welcome in the drawing-rooms of wealth, rank and fashion. If popular writers had reputations for wit or a fine singing voice, requests for their presence in the houses of the great arrived thick and fast. The hostesses Lady Holland, Lady Cork and Lady Charleville prided themselves on collecting substantial groups of intellectuals to provide their guests with the amusement of clever ripostes and perhaps, though less importantly, to raise the tone of conversation. Along with Moore, Samuel Rogers, Monk Lewis, Sydney Smith, Dr. Samuel Parr and Henry Luttrell were some of the stars of this circuit, though the occasional woman writer turned up as well, such as Lady Morgan, Lady Caroline Lamb and Amelia Opie in her pre-Quaker days.
3. For the writer of less renown who had published anything, be it just some articles or a book that not many had heard of, there remained available the few polite circles of a far more modest literary society. Here, if the host was not a writer, the hostess probably was. Women writers outnumbered the men at these gatherings, which provided the opportunity for women to come without escorts and meet other writers and editors they had never seen before and had little chance of meeting otherwise. "We do not hear of such female coteries in these more degenerate days," Cyrus Redding remarks in 1858:

The ladies with a sprinkling of titles ... met at each other's residences, about once a week to interchange ideas. Sometimes incipient literati or a sprinkling of gentlemen who were supposed to be able to communicate intelligence about

the merits of a novel in the press, regarding “new books and such works in the press.” (335-36)

on the strength of one publication or a manuscript, the few titled ladies that came were slumming it, condescending to visit their social inferiors in hopes of somehow benefiting their fledgling careers. But many of the women writers who regularly met were unmarried and could barely provide for themselves, much less host great parties (336). However, to call even the most impoverished form of this society bohemian, as has repeatedly been done, risks missing the point that its hostesses sought not to defy conventions but strictly to follow all rules essential to the maintenance of respectability.

4. No hostesses were more shabbily genteel in the mid 1820s than the historical biographer Elizabeth Ogilvy Benger and her good friend, the novelist and travel writer Elizabeth Isabella Spence. The books by these more than middle-aged spinsters were not reputed for radical or even provocative ideas. Benger’s biographies comfortably informed readers of a few women’s tactful use of their royal positions, while the novels of Spence appear to have done little more than entertain. That little more was supposed to be, as Spence’s obituary stated, the inculcation of “morality, religion, and graciousness of manners,” with emphasis on the latter (Anonymous, 1833: 369). In the society of women writers that they did much to create, Benger and Spence sought to practise what their books gently suggested. Through their polite conversation and letters, the two ladies tried to rise above the hustle of the literary marketplace and its rough treatment of writers. We may see them as essential supporters of a network connecting women authors with each other and with male editors, but they saw themselves in feminine terms, as benevolent hostesses intent on resisting the modern world’s unrefined habits that paid insufficient regard to writers’ personal lives and needs.
5. Such resistance to modernity, however well intentioned, could not but make them look silly at times, especially to younger writers for whom Benger and Spence took pains to demonstrate their “culture” and “the refinement and propriety of their age.” Alaric Alfred Watts relates that both women weighed down their letters with “modest euphuisms.” When speaking to Watts’s mother, they always referred to his father as “her *caro sposo*, thus avoiding ... the indelicacy of referring in direct terms to conjugal relations!” (Watts, 1884: 204). They certainly amused the then Edward Bulwer, later Lord Lytton: “Their affectation, their hunting after fine phrases, and their aversion to the common language of

ordinary mortals, are quite wonderful" (Robert Bulwer Lytton, 1883: 127). Bulwer is here referring generally to the women writers at Benger's and Spence's parties. The women's perceived absurdities, however, did not the least dissuade Bulwer from attending, though he could have been associating with much finer folk. In the same 1826 letter to a fashionable English lady in Paris, Bulwer's mockery of one "literary lady" quickly subsides into respect for another:

I have lately been much amongst the Blue Stockings. I go to town every fortnight for two or three days; and the evenings of those days, instead of being spent at balls, are generally consumed in the soirées of the savans, and the learned and literary ladies. You can have no idea what curious notes these people write me. ... "Write something in my album," said a celebrated Blue to me the other night. Teased into consent I wrote — Fools write here to show their wit, And men of sense to laugh at it. I need not tell you that the Blue looked exceedingly black. If the poems of L. E. L. (*alias* Miss Landon) are yet imported into Paris, I advise you to get them forthwith. They contain more power, pathos, and music than any I have lately seen. (127-28)

6. The sudden move in Bulwer's letter from the ridiculous Blue to the sublime of Letitia Landon's poetry is explained by the fact that Landon was also a frequenter of Benger's and Spence's conversaciones. Bulwer first met Landon at Benger's, at the same time he met Landon's friend and his future wife, Rosina Wheeler. Neither young woman could have been fairly described as conventional, restrained or genteel. An old flame of Bulwer, the scandal-ridden Caroline Lamb likewise visited Benger and Spence often and met Bulwer there. Like other women in search of some form of literary society, Rosina, Landon and Lamb gravitated to Benger and Spence for two or three years in the 1820s. Here we have the curious fact that a few bold, adventurous women who were destined to become famous, largely on account of their unorthodox passion and wit, made the effort to get to the unimpressive residences of two old-fashioned old maids whose literary reputations and discourse did not approach brilliance. Benger's and Spence's parties, however, were never dull and usually fun in quirky ways. Most of the female guests were first swayed into going when they heard the hostesses enthuse about their talent and express great desire for their presence at the next party. Besides, no one could fault their going. Wrapped in old world customs, Benger and Spence undoubtedly provided a protective veneer of respectability for the women who assembled under their roofs. Those customs

included an unVictorian admiration for all kinds of women, so-called respectable or not, so long as they had published or were likely to prove interesting to other writers.

7. Arising mainly from their literary interests, Benger's and Spence's eccentricities appear to have made their guests feel all the more welcome. Benger and Spence ignored – or remained ignorant of – those conventions that looked askance at their imperfect housekeeping and use of their clothes to express their identity as women writers. What society viewed as good taste was to a degree sacrificed to the great god Literature. Thus, no polite literary parties were yet more colourful than those which required guests to climb the stairs to Spence's second floor flat in Quebec Street, Portman Square, or to venture east of Tottenham Court Road, "beyond that *ultima Thule*, Brunswick Square" to Benger's house in Doughty Street (Thomson, 1846: 353; Thomson, 1845: 183; Thomson, 1860: 2: 183).
8. Benger and Spence wore turbans because that is what women writers were reputed to wear, regardless of the fact that in the 1820s women writers were likewise reputed to have terrible dress sense and be inclined to slovenliness (Hall, 1883: 2: 455; Devey, 1887: 41). No slaves to Fashion's increasingly important mandates, Benger and Spence wanted to stand out a little, to possess that air of the exotic and fanciful that accompanied the turban. Before her guests arrived, Miss Benger was known to require the services of a family friend's son, then studying sculpture in London, to arrange her turban for her, "and to make her, and things in general, rather more tidy" (Martin, 1883: 142-43). Rosina Bulwer Lytton remembers the very short and fat Miss Spence at one soirée wearing "a caricature" of a turban "in gauze and wire" above a face looking like it "had just 'struck oil'," while "in imitation of Madame de Staël" she "twirled a sprig of something" in her fingers (Devey, 1887: 43). Also present at the soirée on account of her husband having been "with Byron in Greece," Mrs. Edward Blaquièrre comes in for Rosina's loudest laugh, as she relates her shock at seeing on the woman's head what looked like "a conglomeration of Turkish bath towels." From behind Benger's fan Rosina learned that Mrs. Blaquièrre was instead wearing "a pair of Prince Mavrocordato's inexpressibles, which she brought away, as one of her Greek trophies ..." (45-46).
9. Access to Benger's and Spence's literary parties was gained by invitation only. Looking back nearly forty years, Anna Maria Hall cannot pretend that she did not mind when her journalist husband Samuel Carter Hall was asked to Spence's but she was told she was not allowed:

... my husband had been introduced to a certain little who, on the strength of having written something about the Highlands, was most decidedly BLUE, when blue was by no means so general a color as it is at present. She had a lodging of two rooms ... and “patronized” young *littérateurs*, inviting them to her “humble abode,” such- like small scandals about poor Miss Spence’s “humble abode”; still people liked to go; and my husband was invited, with a sort of apology for poor me, who, never having published anything at that time, was considered ineligible; it was “a rule,” and Miss Spence ... lived by rule. Of course I had an account of the party when Mr. Hall came home. I coveted to know who was there, and what everybody wore and said. I was told that Lady Caroline Lamb was there, enveloped in the folds of an ermine cloak, which she called a “cat-skin,” and that she talked a great deal about a periodical she wished to get up, to be called “Tabby’s Magazine”; and that with her was an exceedingly haughty, brilliant, and beautiful girl, Rosina Wheeler ... who sat rather impatiently at the feet of her eccentric “Gamaliel.” Miss Emma Roberts was one of the favored ladies, and Miss Spence (who, like all “Leo-hunters,” delighted in novelty) had just caught the author of “The Mummy,” Jane Webb, who was ... gentle and unpretending [Her novel *The Mummy* concerns a powerful queen’s rule of England in 2126] ... When I heard Miss Benger was there, in her historic turban, I thought how fortunate that I had remained at home! I had always a terror of tall, commanding women, who blink down upon you, and have the unmistakable air about them of “Behold me! have I not pronounced sentence upon Queen Elizabeth, and set my mark on the Queen of Scots?” (A. and S. C. Hall, 1865: 332)

The only aspect of her husband’s evening that disenchanted Anna Hall was her notion of Benger’s terrifying presence. Yet no other printed account of Benger allows her to be the least intimidating, regardless of all her unfeminine historical research. She could never have succeeded as a literary hostess if she intimidated other women in that day when, as Samuel Carter Hall says, “woman-authorship” was “in some cases considered a glory, in others an offense” (1883: 1: 263). That the image of the “historic turban” on Benger’s head was enough to cower Anna Hall indicates how easily women writers could make other women feel uncomfortable. In the absence of non-literary women, Benger’s and Spence’s parties provided women writers with a

rare space where they could pleasurably flaunt their literary identity without fears that they might incur disapproval or stir up feelings of inferiority.

10. Anna Hall was wanting to write in the mid 1820s, though she was not the least certain she could publish anything worthwhile. Benger aside, Hall's account reveals how much she then wished to make the acquaintance of popular women writers.

I quite appreciated the delight of meeting under the same roof so many celebrities, and was cross-questioning my husband, when he said, "But there was one lady there whom I promised you should call on to-morrow." (A. and S. C. Hall, 1865: 332)

So began Hall's long and mutually beneficial friendship with Letitia Landon, who would in turn encourage Hall to write for publication. In 1829, when her *Sketches of Irish Character* had just been published, Hall notes with amusement that on meeting Spence at Landon's boarding house to plan a fancy-dress ball, Spence "congratulated me on my *début* as an authoress ... and politely added, 'Now you are one of us, I shall be happy to receive you at my humble abode'" (334). In Spence's view, Hall had crossed the threshold that separated writers from the rest of mankind. Hall's book gave her real value as a conversationalist and a person worth meeting. Even the pleasing aspects of her person had probably been dignified. At the same fancy-dress ball, upon hearing Landon comment that Edward Bulwer was too handsome to be an author, Spence "agitated her sultana's dress, and assured [Hall] that 'nothing elevated the expression of beauty so much as literature'." Hall cannot forget that Spence's dress was topped by a "plum-pudding sort of turban, with a bird of paradise bobbing over the front," and when the turban began to suffer from the knocks of the dancers, Spence grabbed the young Jane Webb and made her way through the crowd, repeating the following appeal for recognition: "Please let me pass; I am Miss Spence, and this lady is Miss Webb, author of 'The Mummy,' – 'The Mummy,' Sir" (335). Spence relied on her bit of literary status to receive special treatment in society, or at least be treated with sufficient respect, but amid the dancers she felt her short self and turban required the respect accorded two female authors rather than one.

11. In the parlance of that day of lions and lionesses, Spence and Benger "hunted" down authors they had never met before, and those who agreed to come to one

of their evenings could then consider themselves captured. Applied to the likes of Lady Holland, the ruthlessness of the language of the hunt well conveys the socially competitive nature of the soirée and the commanding presence of the lions' patroness. However great was the lion, the triumphant huntress reigned supreme, the lustre of her guests only adding to her own in the society column of the next day's newspapers. But when directed toward Miss Benger and Miss Spence, the language of hunting sounds ironic. What S. C. Hall says of Spence should be applied to both women: "There were ambitious types of Mrs. Leo Hunter, but Miss Spence was the model of one who, aiming at patronage in small things, succeeded in doing what more elevated ladies desired to do, but failed to accomplish" (1883: 1: 263).

12. The question is, why were Benger and Spence so successful? Perhaps the answer begins with the fact that, for all the importance they placed on wearing their turbans, neither woman seriously claimed to have triumphed at writer-gathering or at writing: Spence because she would have been met with suppressed smiles and disbelief; Benger because she was not satisfied with her own achievements and thought the sneers that female literary pretensions were known to provoke could only hinder her efforts to help other writers. Without doubt, Benger believed she shared the sentiments she attributed to the historian and education writer Elizabeth Hamilton: "No one ... could discover that she founded any pretensions on authorship, or that she valued her literary reputation on any ground but as a means of usefulness" (1818: 177).
13. Despite critical regard for Benger's historical works, Benger never made enough money to come close to fulfilling the hopes she had entertained for herself when young. At the age of thirteen in 1791, Benger published a long poem in praise of women writers, *The Female Geniad*, but she would fail at writing dramas and wait nearly two decades before publishing another long poem, *Abolition*, and then a couple of novels, *Marian* (1812) and *The Heart and the Fancy* (1813). Her 1818 biography of Hamilton inspired her to follow Hamilton's example and take up a series of historical biographies of women. Benger published works on Anne Boleyn in 1821 and Mary, Queen of Scots in 1823. Recalling how she once encountered Benger in the British Museum when Benger was researching her 1825 *Memoirs of Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia*, Katherine Thomson describes her as an "elderly woman, dressed in the approved dowdy style adopted by lady authoresses in the reading-room." Without "an item on her back worth preservation," Benger emerged to face the rain with only a "dusky black" bonnet, "poking over a very dingy, withered, blear-eyed visage" and "a thin, shaggy fur tippet, the produce of some consumptive bear." Nevertheless, such

was Benger's "quiet good breeding" and "perseverance" that she managed to introduce herself and acquire a precious half-share in Thomson's umbrella (1846: 351).

14. The same perseverance made it possible for Benger to meet Elizabeth Inchbald when Benger was a young woman new to London. Mrs. Herbert Martin explains that Benger "bribed [Inchbald's] servant to let [Benger] take [the servant's] place at [Inchbald's] lodgings in the evening. Accordingly in cap and apron she brought up the tea kettle and tea tray" and began a long friendship with Inchbald (1883: 143). Benger had come to London in 1800 principally to surround herself with literary society. Her desire to associate with "the eminent and the excellent ... always distinguished her," Lucy Aikin claims (1827: v-vi). Benger's enthusiastic conversation -- rather than her meagre publication record -- also won her early friendships with Aikin and her father, Hamilton, Anna Barbauld, George Gregory, Charles Lamb, Joanna Baillie and Thomas Campbell, among others.
15. Benger wanted more from literary society than amusement. In her biography of Anne Boleyn, Benger writes, "It was impossible but that the society of such a man as Wiatt ... contributed to the development of [Boleyn's] talents and taste; and it is from him, probably ... that she imbibed her partiality for new opinions" (1827: 205). Benger expected associating with well-read writers to improve her tastes, to introduce her to the latest ideas and to help her get her work into print (Martin, 1883: 141). She may well have never discussed the role of the literary hostess with friends or acquaintances, but her book on Elizabeth Hamilton provides suggestions for how she viewed that role. The hostess was to be first and foremost an encourager of other women writers: Miss Hamilton "was ever disposed, not only to recognise merit, but to love it; and it was often her generous boast, that women of talents, by their reciprocations of kindness and friendship, verified the fable of the nine sister muses" (1818: 164). More was required than a cheerful disposition:

The secret of [Hamilton's] power was in the ardour and benevolence of her nature; it was by this she won the frigid to unbend, and the melancholy to smile, the diffident to dismiss his scruples, the worldly to suspend his calculations... . It was the heart that spoke, and the heart that listened; and each departed from the social feast with expanded faculties of benevolence and enjoyment. (175-76)

There is little shrewdness in these opinions of Benger. She would seem rather to possess an idealistic naiveté about what the literary hostess can achieve, as if the



hostess's "winning" ways can give all her guests a boost in spirits that will make them in turn kinder and happier, as if no unpleasantness could emerge from getting self-absorbed people together with such kind intentions. Thomson does say that Benger's "countenance [was] rather benignant than intelligent" (1860: 2: 183); moreover, that "her fame, in her own day, so far exceeded her merits as a writer. She held a high place among the literary women of her time, and she would in this [the 1840s] have obtained no place at all" (1846: 353). Nothing that I have read by Benger so far challenges Thomson's opinion that she was not a deep or original thinker.

16. However, Benger's progressive concern in her histories for "female manners" and "female influence" points us toward an explanation for her attractiveness (Thomson, 1860: 2: 183). I would argue that Benger's simplistic idealism about the role of the literary hostess – including her feminine humility and desire to hear others' ideas – worked as an attracting force on many women who wished for literary recognition, enabling her to gather around her more writers more frequently than so many lion-hunting patronesses whose capacity for self-advancement contrasted with her more worthy goals. Thomson attributes "a ready easy way" to Benger (1846: 351), and elsewhere remarks that Benger's "evenings were ... enlivened by inexpensive, easy, *willing* company," with the implication that the hostess deserves the credit (1860: 2: 184). Everyone seems to mention Benger's fundamental "goodness of heart" (Redding, 1858: 338), and no one praises that heart more than the ungood Rosina Bulwer Lytton: Benger "was that little coveted but inestimable and rare excellence which may emphatically be called *a good creature*, for she *was* good in every relationship of life" (Devey, 1887: 44).
17. In *Bulwer and his Wife*, Michael Sadleir refers to the pair simply as "the warm-hearted Miss Benger and the ludicrous Miss Spence" (1933: 83). Benger indeed appears to have been more tame than her companion in every conceivable form of social interaction. Miss Benger might wear a turban but in Thomson's opinion she "retained the proprieties of age"; whereas "Miss S----e sported yellow turbans [sic] with blue muslin dresses." On first being introduced Spence had no qualms about naming one or two of the books she had written, such was her recognition of how hard she had to work to have her services to literature remembered at all. "Her chief celebrity rested ... on some Romance, which no one 'had ever been able to meet with,' and ... she generally wrote down the title for the enquiring, twice or thrice in the course of an evening" (Thomson, 1846: 353). To increase circulation of her books, Spence supposedly used to call out to

booksellers from the window of aristocratic friends' carriages and ask if their shops stocked one of her titles. She would then affect shock if the book was not available, as it was "creating the greatest sensation in town" (Watts, 1884: 210).

18. Having lost both parents by the age of sixteen, Spence wrote at least six novels and two travel books between 1799 and 1826 to supplement a modest independent income. None of them sold very well, and sales of her works were said to have been helped by the attention they received from Spence's numerous literary and aristocratic acquaintance. Those fine ladies, "some of whom, in those days, like to sport 'a bit of blue'," ventured to rub shoulders with the much-published Miss Spence because they were aware of her background. They knew she was "born in the rank of a gentlewoman," with a doctor for a father and with an elegant mother who was the sister of Dr. James Fordyce, author of the popular and highly conservative *Sermons to Young Women* (209; Anonymous, 1824, "Biographical Sketch": 94; Anonymous, 1833: 367).
19. "Her writings were voluminous – lively and pleasing, if not characterized by depth," one of her relatives has commented (Fordyce, 1885: 228), and his views are matched by those of reviewers, even some of the ones writing for women's magazines. The best that the *Ladies Monthly Museum* could say of the novel *How to Be Rid of a Wife* (1823) is that it "is told in an agreeable manner, and is not deficient in interest, though it contains no very brilliant passages, nor any which would appear to advantage in detached form" (Anonymous, 1824: 156). Just as she so often did in literary society, Spence unintentionally provoked some giggles with her publications, as critics could not always resist making fun of her various errors. Reviews of Spence's work do make for more interesting reading than the bland approvals given to Benger.
20. "The blemishes which may be occasionally pointed out in the writings of Miss Spence, are chiefly such as belong to what may be called the *mechanism* of literary composition, and detract nothing from the amount of her native genius." *La Belle Assemblée* thus tries to defend Spence from past reviews and one in particular (Anonymous, 1824: 94). For very likely Spence's greatest fame, or notoriety, derived from her *Letters from the North Highlands* and its 1818 review in *Blackwood's* by John Wilson (Elwin, 1934: 49). After proposing that Spence should marry a "commercial traveller" who has also written a book on his travels in Scotland and whom he names "the Bagman" (Watts, 1884: 211), Wilson goes on to fault the "Travelling Spinster" for confusing locations and misspelling names, including printing Francis Jeffrey's name as "Mr. *Jaffery*." "She seems to have been perfectly intoxicated. The pure air of the Highlands was too much for her," Wilson chortles (1818: 428, 430).

21. Spence's intoxication is for Wilson epitomised by her spotting female talent in the likes of "Christian Milne, a fisherman's wife, who writes poetry and sells oysters" (429). Today we must more fairly admire Spence for recognising the worth of this interesting working-class poet, though we might demur at her calling one of Milne's manuscript poems "an effusion of genius" (Spence, 1817: 55). That was Spence's way. She found geniuses everywhere, often neglected and in need of her compassion and championing. As further evidence of Spence's absurdity, Wilson cites the following passage from her book which amounts to a declaration of her faith:

... when talents burst forth from the dark clouds of obscurity, and are lit up by a bright ray of genius, which discovers itself under every disadvantage of poverty, oppression, and discouragement, surely a generous and feeling mind will not merely sympathize with the object who has such evils to contend with, but will be inspired with an interest, for such a person, of no ordinary nature. (1818: 429)

22. Spence had complete confidence in her instincts, and unlike Wilson (and most modern critics) she did not fuss over whether a particular writer was supposed top-class or mediocre (Anonymous, 1833: 367). She trusted that where some acclaim had been won, much more could be deserved if the writer received the necessary encouragement and sympathy. "Bruce did not more anxiously explore for the source of the Nile than I do for *litry* talent in the young," Spence once boasted to the young, soon-to-be-major novelist, Edward Bulwer, "and I have heard so much of your prize poem, that I long to talk to you about it. I forget, at this moment, what the subject was?" Sculpture was the subject of Bulwer's poem that won the Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge, but Bulwer, who considered himself superior to Spence's attentions, told her the poem was "on patience." The thick-skinned Spence easily forgave Bulwer's reluctance to say more: "Ah! well, true *litry* talent is always modest" (Devey, 1887: 63-64).

23. Spence believed it her duty to discover promising writers, convinced as she was of the supreme importance of the literary hostess. She gives glimpses of her ideal of this intelligent and charming social being in *Letters from the North Highlands* and the seventeenth-century novel *Dame Rebecca Berry*. In the latter she states that "all frequented the mansion of the Lady Cordellia Trevillion, for she loved and appreciated genius of every description, and it was in truth the Temple of Science and the Graces" (1827: 110). For Spence the hostess was "in truth" a kind of priest, worshipful yet assured of the noble honour of that

worship. She who could discover literary geniuses did not find it difficult to find literary hostesses who had attained perfection. Wilson makes fun of Spence's "extreme delicacy" in stating in the *Letters* that the Edinburgh house of "Mrs. F---" was "the centre of all that is literary, amiable, distinguished, and is herself no less characterized by intellect than by virtue, by wit than by taste, softened by a captivation of manner rarely equalled" (1818: 429). Spence's delicacy is of course designed to display her own feminine virtue and taste. Yet how very different Spence's description of Mrs. F. sounds from reports of Spence in her outlandish turbans. The turbans and the description serve the same purpose, though, of calling attention to the literary hostess amid all her guests.

24. Spence and Benger had no illusions about what their own parties most lacked: fine food. Whatever attempts they made to secure newly published writers could only succeed if those invited were willing to put up with Benger's "innocent finger-biscuits, and gentle negus" and Spence's tea and muffins, or sandwiches and decanted wine (Martin, 1883: 142; Watts, 1884: 212-13). Everyone knew that "some of the ultramarines had small incomes," Redding admits, and "it was whispered that all were to satisfy their appetite before they came" (1858: 336). But the absence of culinary delicacies could be said to have had the merit of concentrating minds on somewhat higher matters. Thrilled at receiving an invitation from Lady Elizabeth Bulwer Lytton, Spence was not ashamed to state that at her own parties she regarded the talk as the only worthwhile offering: ". . . your parties, with all their hothouse luxuries [especially the pineapple], quite spoil me for my own, as in my own humble abode, at my *litry réunions*, I can only pretend to purvey food for the mind" (Devey, 1887: 57).
25. Spence did not in fact like Lady Bulwer Lytton. Only minutes before receiving this invitation at an 1826 party, Spence described her to Rosina Wheeler as "dreadful" (52). Benger was not much more impressed with "that odd, rich old woman," though she had invited Lady Bulwer Lytton to the party (48). But that year Lady Bulwer Lytton had, for the first and only time, privately printed a long poem of hers, *The Abbey de la Trappe*. She also was mother of the prize-winning Edward Bulwer. And, not incidentally, she had the sparkle of rank. For her part, Lady Bulwer Lytton probably dragged her son east of Brunswick Square to Benger's house because she was acting on some long-cherished literary aspirations for herself and for him, the same that had motivated her to have the poem she wrote at the age of fourteen put into print nearly forty years later. There was no way she was going to turn down what was one of the first invitations she had received partly for the sake of her literary accomplishment.

26. Lady Bulwer Lytton's oddness certainly would not have disinclined Benger to invite her, though she must have managed to stand out amid the turbans for Benger to remark on it. Rosina Bulwer Lytton relates that her future mother-in-law arrived at Benger's in a "morning-dress" of "dull-red slate" coloured "dingy silk" decked in various necklaces and bracelets and topped by a "rather crushed... blonde cap with

... artificial flowers trampled all over it," her frizzy brown hair almost hiding her eyes. Rosina's future husband on first appearance looked far more attractively striking, with his blonde curls, his cane and his shirt covered with lace and studs (48).

Mother and son thus joined what Landon and Rosina used to call the "curious specimens of the literary *menagerie*" of Benger's and Spence's acquaintance (41). "Shall I not meet you at Miss Spence's next Wednesday week?" Landon writes to Rosina in October 1825.

I have written to solicit the honour of the aforesaid lady's company on the Wednesday previous to her own show. I have taken it into my head I could form a very decent menagerie, but really I have not time to hunt up what would make a regular shilling-a-head exhibition, so I do not rate next Wednesday above a twopenny sight, but if you would come, I should forthwith raise the value to sixpence... (142)

27. These female intellectuals came together again and again partly to satisfy their curiosity, partly to enjoy the pleasure sanctioned by Benger and Spence of looking curious themselves. Never mind the hostess's boring finger-biscuits; the guests brought food for the eyes as well as the mind. As the principal records we have of Benger's and Spence's parties, the caricatures of the women there should not rankle our feminist instincts. Periodicals from the 1820s and 1830s testify that it was an age fascinated by its "literary characters," when British readers longed to see pictures of, hear anecdotes about and, best of all, meet real authors. And the more colourful their personalities, the better. Reputed eccentricities could only add to the interest created in the *literati*, and, anyway, authors in society were expected to provide some kind of entertainment.

28. An eccentric dresser in those days, Landon may well not have appreciated the polished manners and "perfect" clothes of Lady Caroline Lamb which made her, in

Thomson's words, "the pale and pensive star" of this otherwise too colourful crew (1860: 2, 184). "The neatness and finish of her attire was striking, where all others seemed to have dressed extempore; a streamer there, a feather here" (Thomson, 1846: 353). Between her visits to aristocratic circles, Lamb attended Benger's and Spence's parties seeking recognition and praise for her literary self, antidotes to the ignominy she met with for *Glenarvon* and the lack of appreciation for her 1820s novels *Graham Hamilton* and *Ada Reis*. Lamb often met Benger and Spence in private as well and probably then received some of the "soothing sympathy" and "comfort" with which they were known to be generous (Anonymous, 1833: 367-68; Thomson, 1860: 2: 184). So valuable were the pair to Lamb that she could not be disenchanted by the inevitable embarrassments. Once, when she and Benger were talking books on Benger's sofa, Lamb's "poodle cur" pulled out from under the sofa a slipper, a pair of stockings, two handkerchiefs and more, all of which had to be stepped over by Lamb with "polished regret" when she left (Redding, 1858: 337).

29. Spence considered little Lamb her principal lioness and the best advertisement she could have for making new acquisitions to her circle. Deprecating herself and home to flatter writers that they would confer an honour on her by visiting, Spence would then add that Lamb was coming as well, "whom I honour more for her *litry* abilities than her rank, -- though when *she* condescends to honour it with her presence, others -- of less litry and social pretensions, need not be afraid to honour my humble abode" (Devey, 1887: 43-44). How could other writers say no to Spence, when Lady Caroline said yes? Plus, they had to come just to see Lamb, who herself would not have objected to being thus used. Redding remarks that "in those days, Lady Caroline Lamb, Lady Charlotte Bury, and others ... liked to link the noble and the plebeian together" (1858: 337).

30. Most of the writers Spence and Benger drew in were either cubs at the beginning of their careers or ageing lions on their gentle decline, the sort who could well do with meeting editors, reviewers and other writers. Besides Bulwer and editor of the *Amulet* Samuel Carter Hall, some of the men who often turned up included William Jerdan, editor of the weekly *Literary Gazette* and ever in need of new writers to help fill its pages; Thomas Kibble Hervey, editor of the *Friendship's Offering* for 1826 and 1827 and author of the popular poem "The Convict Ship" (1825); and the journalist and friend of master poets, Henry Crabb Robinson. "A gastronomic celebrity" did frequent Benger's salon: Dr. William Kitchiner, described by Thomson as "a useful, conceited man ... with just and wholesome ideas founded on nature" who produced the once famous *Cook's Oracle* (1860: 2: 184). After an 1826 party, Robinson comments in his diary that Kitchiner was

"grave and formal ... with a long face and spectacles" and had "no conversation with him" (Sadler, 1872: 2: 21). The once-popular poet Campbell and the editor of the *Literary Souvenir* Alaric Watts also likely attended a few of the soirées. S. C. Hall cannot forget seeing Benger at one of Campbell's 1820s parties dressed "in a sort of flannel dressing-gown" (1883: 2: 456).

31. The women writers at Benger's were much more interesting for Robinson than the men. However, like most who wrote of their experience of these parties, he reported very little of what was actually said. Robinson records of an 1812 party that he spoke to Jane Porter, author of the popular historical romances *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) and *Scottish Chiefs* (1810). She impressed Robinson with her "stately figure and graceful manner," which means he was not unimpressed – as others were known to have been – by the nun-like hood she always wore at literary parties to remind everyone that she had been made a "lady-canoness of the Teutonic Order of St. Joachim" (Sadler, 1872: 1: 201; Bates, 1873: 156-57). Another woman Robinson met epitomises the notion of the bustling female writer all too pleased at having put a book into print. "I was introduced to a character – Miss [Sarah] Wesley, a niece of the celebrated John... . A very lively little body, with a short round person, in a constant fidget of good nature and harmless vanity. She has written novels which do not sell, and is reported to have said to Miss Edgeworth, 'We sisters of the quill ought to know one another'" (Sadler, 1872: 1: 201-2).
32. That these women benefited from meeting their brother editors of the annuals is evidenced by a quick look in Boyle's *Index to the Annuals*: Webb, Landon, Roberts, the Porter sisters, Benger, Spence, Bulwer, Jerdan and Campbell all had short works published in Hall's *Amulets*, Hervey's *Friendship's Offerings* or Watts's *Literary Souvenirs* for the years 1826 to 1829. So they gained a little money and prestige with the readers of annuals, but it is worth considering that such connections have only made it easier for these writers to be lumped together in our received literary histories, seen to deserve each other's company in society and on dusty library shelves. From their inception to the present day, the annuals have had to face accusations that their contents hold little but the second-rate or worse, and the same has been said of the literary salons of Benger and Spence.
33. Bulwer's son wrote that his father felt "contempt" for the "those little literary tea-gardens which are the resort of second-rate aspirants" (Robert Bulwer Lytton, 1883: 332). And a 2003 biography of Bulwer likewise sneers at the "literary demi-monde that clustered together in second-rate salons," with its "amateur poets like Elizabeth Spence" – Spence was neither poet nor amateur, as we have

seen (Mitchell: 15). Bulwer could be forgiven for not speaking fondly in later years of the society which introduced him to his future wife. But when writing before his marital difficulties began, he is funny rather than mean-spirited as he parodies the intellectual talk at these "soirées of the savans, and the learned and literary ladies." In his unfinished novel *Greville*, for instance, a discussion of poetry at a similar soirée concludes that since Pope is no longer deemed a poet, one should be as unlike Pope as possible in order to be a poet. It is also conjectured that when poetry has progressed further, verses would so float "on the waves of the soul" that they were "impossible to read" (1829: 447-48). *Greville* only leaves one wanting more.

34. Benger and Spence must have thought they were promoting a fruitful literary union when they allowed their soirées to be used as safe places for Rosina Wheeler and Edward Bulwer to continue to meet, once Bulwer's mother had declared Miss Wheeler an unsuitable match for her son. Despite the fact she had not published a thing, Rosina seems to have been let into the literary coterie on the strength of her beauty, clever talk and friendship with Landon. Benger opined that she saw in Rosina the wild brilliance of Lady Delacour from Edgeworth's *Belinda* (Devey, 1887: 141). Such was the importance placed on Rosina's conversation that she soon was sufficiently encouraged to form an "intention of magazine-writing" and to co-write Spence's novel, *Dame Rebecca Berry*, set in the court of Charles II. Rosina discloses to a friend in January 1826 that Spence, having "all of a sudden discovered herself ... not bad enough by fifty per cent to frame speeches and situations for the heartlessly depraved and insinuating [Charles] Sedley ... has requested me to do that part of the work for her" (Sadleir, 1933: 84). Rosina was flattered by the request and could not resist taking up her pen. She probably took little or no time to decide herself a better writer than Spence, whom she defended to Bulwer as "an exceedingly kind-hearted well-meaning person - and inoffensive, when she lays aside the 'litry,' that is, doffs the 'foolscap uniform turned up with ink,' and returns to the Mufti of muffins and marmalade" (Devey, 1887: 61). Rosina managed to succumb to Spence's flattery yet pretend to wish the flatterer devoid of her literary pretensions - but then Rosina would not have received the full weight of Benger's and Spence's admiration, as did her friends Lamb and Landon. Rosina had to endure years of maltreatment from her husband before she was motivated to become an author in earnest. The many novels she and Bulwer separately produced vilifying each other ironically vindicate Benger's and Spence's great literary expectations for the couple's relationship.



35. As Landon moved up the social scale and away from the turbaned pair, she used to entertain others with witty accounts of Spence's and Benger's literary parties, and so impressed was the (first-rate) Thomas Moore that he was willing to bet Landon could rival Jane Austen if she were to write novels (Thomson, 1860: 1: 202). Accordingly, Landon's first novel *Romance and Reality* includes a lengthy satire of a literary party hosted by a mature woman writer where only "dry biscuits and drier sandwiches were handed round" (1831: 155). She notes how writers were introduced to one another, using only "credentials in the shape of 'such a sweet poem' – 'such a delightful tale'." How many times Landon found herself being introduced by Spence or Benger as the "young lady whose extraordinary talents have delighted all the world" we can only imagine, but I think it fair to presume that she never again experienced quite such flattery from fellow writers (130-31). Landon could mock the flattery only because she could not forget it. Thomson speculates that "the *bas-bleu* buttering system" practised by Spence and Benger helped to feed Landon's ego to the extent that she was willing to break completely with her mother and live independently. "She began to feel her powers, and to reject control. Society spoiled her . . . by that pride in her talents that intoxicates" (1860: 1: 200-02). I would only add that some of Landon's finest writing is founded on her rejection of society's control.
36. Neither Spence nor Benger appears to have received the tributes of gratitude and kindness from writers that they deserved in their declining years. Growing increasingly ill and poor as she slipped toward her 1827 death, Benger in particular felt that reciprocation for her generous motives had been neglected (Aikin xii). No woman writer seems to have credited Benger with assisting her career, yet, besides the parties, she would have tried to help several directly, just as she tried to do for the unnamed woman about whom she writes to Alaric Watts on 31 July 1826: "I shall be happy to transmit you a contribution from an accomplished friend, who is at once Paintress, Poetess and Tourist, and will, I flatter myself, prove an acquisition" to Watts's *Literary Souvenir*. She herself would be happy to write for the *Souvenir* next year, Benger adds, "unless I should be banished from life, and consequently consigned to oblivion" (Watts, 1884: 206-7). Benger was realistic. She died within six months, and oblivion has all but buried her name and work ever since.
37. She seems to have understood that unglamorous literary hostesses who invited all kinds of authors would not receive the recognition they were due. With her *Memoirs of the late Elizabeth Hamilton*, Benger tried to make an exception to that rule. It begins by describing the nature of the loss that Hamilton's death occasioned for the group of writers who regularly visited her.

This happy circle exists no longer; that little society, composed of various elements, is dissolved; they who sympathised so cordially in admiration for one object, are for ever divided; the prosperous and the gay form new associations, whilst the melancholy and the unfortunate are replunged in the gloom of care, or left to the desolation of solitude and neglect. (1818: 4-5)

Those whom the literary hostess most helped went onto bigger books and lavish parties, while those who most needed her help might well have had to give up writing because, in her absence, no more chances for publication came their way.

38. Nevertheless, a new writer trying to make conversation with a magazine editor was not going to pause to think about the significance the party itself might have for her career nor how isolated she might feel without it. Benger's and Spence's soirées were the first to teach Landon that "society is a market-place, not a temple: there is a bargain to be made – the business to be followed; novelty, curiosity, amusement, lull all the strong passions to sleep, and, in their place, a thousand petty emotions hurry about, making up in noise what they want in importance" (1831: 156-57). All that was remembered of Benger's and Spence's evenings was the show and its stars, or so it would seem from contemporary accounts written by those whom Benger would call "the prosperous and the gay."
39. Contrast Landon's comments with Spence's idea of the hostess's house as a temple to Literature or Benger's idea of the guests experiencing heart-felt attentions, then departing "from the social feast with expanded faculties of benevolence and enjoyment." With her literary parties, Benger saw herself as working against the cruelties of the marketplace, providing a site for friendships to form and perhaps later flower into those bargains of business. In her 1820 *Memoirs of John Tobin*, Benger asserts that "the system ... in modern times, is, to the poet, worse than penury or scorn, or censure or contempt: it is the blank of silence, the darkness of despair. It is not often that a mind of poetical sensibility is endowed with the faculty of stoical endurance" (152-53).
40. At Benger's and Spence's salons, poetical sensibilities probably did compete well enough with writers' need to shine, and lifelong relationships did form that remained mutually beneficial to careers. But it did not sound very witty to admit as much, and consequently the literary salons of the two spinsters have been held up for little besides mockery in the last century by literary historians who did not take the trouble to weigh all of the words about Benger and Spence left behind by their guests. Nor do they seem to have paused to reflect on the

significance of belonging to a group of women writers who took pleasure in being a little outlandish for the sake of their art. I think it fair to surmise that no sooner did women like Anna Hall and Letitia Landon feel that they belonged, than they felt they could rise above these coteries and do great and mighty things. That is to say, Bengers' and Spence's flattery worked.

41. Bengers and Spence used the traditionally subordinate role of the feminine hostess to subordinate themselves as writers before other women writers, as well as men. If Bengers and Spence had been less eccentric and more assertive, and if they had been better writers with reputations that no amount of self-abasement could put into the shadows, then they probably would have been less successful at gathering writers together and sending them off full of confidence and merriment. The literary service Bengers and Spence performed as hostesses should not be deemed less important than their publications and perhaps, especially in the case of Spence, that service was of a more lasting importance. Women writers of the 1820s needed the respect, encouragement and contacts that Bengers and Spence doled out with their tea and muffins. Their uncommon ways helped to bring women writers into greater acceptance.