

**Currency of the Body and Mind: A Quest for Agency in the *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington***

by Erica L. Spiller

The quest for agency is a constant theme throughout the biographies of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Victorian female poets. Paula R. Backsheider, in her book on 18th-century female poets, defines agency as “somehow resisting or escaping being socialized into being primarily imitative, writers with agency are believed to have, and be committed to, agendas and serious experimentations” (22). While it could be argued female poets in general are pushing the envelope by publishing in a form many believed should be reserved for males, Pilkington goes above and beyond to the truly experimental by publishing her personal *Memoirs*. Before her *Memoirs* were published, the readers of her time and place had only been akin to one other set of memoirs—those published by Pilkington’s friend Colley Cibber, the same man who encouraged her to publish her own. Not only did she publish in this mostly new and experimental vein, but she did so with serious commitment and agenda, two other requirements for achieving agency, according to Backsheider. Made clear in her *Memoirs* was Pilkington’s intent to gain agency through publication as she writes in Volume I:

*That I, like the Classics, shall be read*

*When Time, and all the World are dead. (87)*

Pilkington implies here that she plans on making a name for herself and that her life’s works will be preserved and read for eternity. Unfortunately, for Mrs.

Pilkington, the works of many 18<sup>th</sup>-century female poets have been buried for years, although they are beginning to re-emerge and will possibly take on the status of “classics.”

The *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington* did not remain a bestseller throughout the years following publication, but she did enjoy a great deal of attention initially following the publication. However, to understand where she ended up it is important to examine how she got there and what helped to motivate her journey.

Made clear in the early pages of her *Memoirs* is the importance that Mrs. Pilkington places on money and economic prosperity. Even in the Preface she opens with the lines:

It is usual with all Authors to write Prefaces, either to beg the  
Applause of the Public, or else,  
*By Way of filling,*  
*To raise their Volume's Price, a Shilling. (7)*

These lines communicate that she is seeking not only more money, by way of the length of her *Memoirs*, but also that she may achieve greater notoriety by having written a Preface. Success for her is twofold—public praise and financial gain.

The fact that she is even composing *Memoirs* versus the typically Miscellany of Poems gives the sense that she is after something not only new and experimental for art's sake, but because the fresh and exciting is likely to cause a stir and thus bring in more revenue. Art for art's sake, while perhaps a theme she may have embraced in her earlier days, is likely not applicable to the production and publication of her *Memoirs*. As mentioned, what she is questing

after is a sense of agency and one that she must believe can be obtained by such a novel form for poetry and story-telling.

Her preoccupation with economic success is further established in the second page of her *Memoirs*. She begins by describing the success of her mother's ancestors and their honor, although in this case, honor is likely synonymous with money:

I was born in the Year 1712; by my Mother's Side descended of an ancient, and honourable Family, who were frequently inter-married with the Nobility. My Great Grandfather was Earl of *Killmallock*, whose Daughter married Colonel *Meade*... This Gentleman, to his Honour be it spoken, tho' he was a Man of Fortune. (10)

She goes on for several more pages describing the story of this "honourable" family, however, so as not to appear vain, interjects midway through that "As this little Piece of History redounds to the mutual Honour of both these great, and eminent Gentlemen; I hope it will not be accounted Vanity in me to recite it" (12).

Pilkington explains away her "falling from grace" as it may be seen by blaming her choice in marriage on her mother. Laetitia Van Lewen, soon to be Pilkington, boasts of her past love life:

I had almost as many Lovers... I should have been happily disposed of in Marriage, but that my Mother's capricious Temper made her reject every advantageous Proposal offered, and at last condemn me to the Arms of one of the greatest Villains, with Reverence to the Priest-hood be it spoken, that ever was wrapt up in Crape. (14)

Even in this passage she makes sure to mention that she had plenty of “advantageous” proposals, thus further illustrating her zest for money and economic success. Possibly to her detriment she did settle down with Matthew Pilkington, and despite his economic status being lower than she would have liked, the couple worked to raise their position in society.

Having been befriended by Jonathan Swift, whose celebrity status she later used by including personal anecdotes about him as a means to sell her *Memoirs*, Mr. Matthew Pilkington and his wife Laetitia entered into a community rich in poesy which allowed them both to further their attempts at poetic endeavors (Baldwin 636). They had both hoped that with Swift’s influential praise of their poetry they would find substantial income and notoriety. Unfortunately for Mr. Pilkington, Laetitia showed far greater poetic promise than her husband and she was quickly taken under the instruction of Swift who was not afraid to boast of her prowess over her husband’s (Lee 71). Laetitia describes one such occasion where Matthew had decided to mimic *Horace* and write his own ode that was stylistically similar. Laetitia decided to try her hand at this as well and reports in her *Memoirs*:

As I had finished my Task first, I shew’d it to Mr. *Pilkington*, who, contrary to my Expectation (for I imagin’d he would be pleas’d), was very angry, and told me the Dean [Swift] had made me mad, that the Lines were Nonsense, and that a Needle became a Woman’s Hand better than a Pen and Ink. So to bring him into Temper I prais’d his Ode highly, and threw my own into the Fire. And here let

me seriously advise every Lady who has the Misfortune to be  
poetically turn'd, never to marry a Poet. (50)

Mr. Pilkington's envy of his wife did not stop there, and as he was more concerned about his own success, he left for London alone, despite his wife's insistence on joining him. He told her explicitly "he did not want such an Incumbrance as a Wife, that he did not intend to pass there for a married Man, and that in short he could not taste any Pleasure where I [Laetitia] was" (50).

So Mrs. Pilkington stayed in Dublin, frequently in the company of Swift, from whom she soon heard of Pope's disgust of Mr. Pilkington (Lee 71). It was during the ensuing discussion between Swift and Mrs. Pilkington that she envisioned a sort of separation between herself and husband, before any true parting took place. If she were to continue as a poetess and in the company of poets such as Swift, it was necessary she not share with Matthew the negative opinions toward him. Soon after, Matthew returned from London where he had met a woman who seemed to benefit him much more than Laetitia, and he filed for divorce on the grounds of adultery claiming he had found his wife in her bedchamber with Mr. Adair.

Whether Mrs. Pilkington ever actually committed adultery is still up for debate according to Goulding (qtd. in Kittredge 49), but his allegations were enough to obtain a divorce and the two were now officially separated. Although Matthew himself had been truly guilty of adultery he, being a male and the one who pressed charges, was believed and remained in control of all their estate, including their children, leaving Laetitia alone and practically penniless. By this

time, Matthew had made such a wretched name for himself that Swift had abandoned both of the Pilkingtons in fear of tarnishing his own reputation, and he no longer remained as an influence or savior for Laetitia. Finding herself alone and poor, Laetitia began her quest toward making her own living. Despite the prevalence of the all-too-common route of prostitution for monetary gain, Pilkington refused to go down that path (Thompson 112).

Although she swears to only using her pen as a means to gain capital, others encouraged her to use the gift of her sex. A. C. Elias Jr. mentions in his introduction to the *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington* “her husband, who tries to exploit her to other men while chasing widows or actresses on his own” (L). Michael Caines, in his book review of *The Complaints of Laetitia Pilkington*, similarly writes of her “husband who said one morning over breakfast that he felt nauseous at the sight of his wife’s breast (but was still prepared to sell her body to the highest bidder).” (3)

Matthew was not the only one trying to sell or use her body for sex capital either. Elias mentions further characters such as “married men who proposition her after her separation...his [Matthew’s] fellow clergy in Dublin, who hound her relentlessly while turning a blind eye to worse sins in their own families; and the haughty ladies, formerly her friends” (L). While staying in a lodging house shortly after the charges of adultery became known, the woman of the house actually sent a man to Laetitia’s bedchamber. Mrs. Pilkington relates the episode in her *Memoirs* upon the man entering her room after she had already told the woman she would see no one:

I started up and threw my Gown about me, but I was not quite so quick in putting on my Cloaths as the Gentleman was, in taking his off, resolving, without the least Ceremony to come to Bed with me. I pull'd my Companion who ask'd him what he meant? 'Why, who the Devil are you, you old Bitch?' said he: 'This Lady' (meaning me) 'is publickly known thro' all the Coffee Houses in *Dublin*.' (90)

Apparently, seeing her shock and upset at his admonishment he soon retracts his harsh advances and the conversation becomes a dialogue of understanding:

'Do I occasion your Tears, Madam?' 'You do Sir, and therefore I desire you will depart.' 'Well, Madam,' said he, 'I beg pardon, I had a full History of you from the Maid of the House, who said, she believ'd a Companion would not be disagreeable to you, especially as she was apprehensive you had no Money.' (90)

Following this incident, another of a similar nature, and similar stories from other married ladies in regards to the behavior of their husbands, Laetitia vows:

If every married Man, who has ever attack'd me, does not subscribe to my *Memoirs*, I will, without the least Ceremony, insert their Names, be their Rank ever so high, or their Profession ever so holy.

*I'll dash the proud Gamester from his gilded Car;  
Bare the mean Heart, that lurks beneath a Star.*

And the more formal Villains, who in the Robes of Sanctity, commit worse Frauds than Highwaymen, surely ought not to remain unexpos'd.

*For me, while Heav'n afford me vital Breath,  
Let them behold me, as their Scourge, till Death;  
Them, thro' their Serpent Mazes, I'll pursue,  
And bring each latent Vice to public View (93-4)*

As if Mrs. Pilkington's revenge threats, designed for monetary gain, are not made clear enough through this passage in her *Memoirs*, she goes on to list the price of each sin that was once told to her by a prelate. They are as follows:

	<i>l.</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>
For Adultery	1	7	0
For Simple Fornication	0	10	6
For Venial Transgressions	0	5	0 each. (94)

While she used threats and charts to ensure the downfall of men, eminent or not, should they cross her, she also received money by those enlisting the services of her and her pen. However, even these men should have been more cautious as the slightest indiscretion was likely to guarantee the wrath of Pilkington. Such is the case of Mr. Worsdale who left London to seek her out and ask for her help. She writes "he assured me, if I would devote my Genius to his Service, he would liberally reward me; to which I gladly consented, as an easy and honourable

Method of getting a Subsistence” (95). It would seem from Worsdale’s offer that she would be glad to have such an opportunity at making money without encountering the slanderous reputation of whoring herself for money, an occurrence which was so becoming increasingly prevalent. However, Worsdale, like many other people in her life, took one wrong turn and incurred her angry pen.

After writing a song for him, which he had asked of her, he showed it to Mr. Pilkington for review. Upon this meeting Worsdale allowed Matthew to change the last few lines, for what he thought was the better. However, when Laetitia received word of this, she labeled Mr. Pilkington’s lines as “profane and nonsensical” (96). Worsdale, seemingly as much of a questionable character as Matthew himself, soon began showing each Pilkington the other’s lines while claiming them as his own, and found them both to be equally successful in the public eye. However, Matthew demanded an increase in payment for his lines causing Worsdale to drop him for the less expensive Mrs. Pilkington who now seemed to be above the poverty line.

Although she was bringing in an income substantial enough to support herself, Laetitia soon gave birth to a female child – the child of which man no one can be sure, although she claims it as Matthew’s – and could no longer afford the lifestyle she desired on the salary from Worsdale. This caused her to return to threats and slanderous writings in an attempt to obtain more subscriptions to her *Memoirs*.

The threat money coupled with her reputation allowed her to be as prosperous as she was, although admittedly that was not very prosperous at all (Braeshear 617). As Caine mentions in his review “The comedian Henry Woodward sent her up on stage, at Dublin’s Smock Alley theatre in 1748, as the ‘Mrs Pill-Kill-Tongue’ who hissed ‘Subscribe, or else I’ll paint you like the Devil” (3). Caine further discusses how grateful she was for the attention, and in that assertion he is right on point. At this time in her life her reputation was already tarnished and she would not have seen portrayals of her as wicked, as long as they were only slanderous toward her writing and not her virtue.

In the title page of her *Memoirs* she defends her virtue while hamming up her publicity. The title page reads:

THE MEMOIRS OF Mrs. Laetitia Pilkington, WIFE TO THE Rev.  
Mr. Matth. Pilkington. Written by HERSELF. Wherein are  
occasionally interspersed, All her POEMS, WITH Anecdotes of  
several eminent Persons, Living and Dead. In TWO VOLUMES.  
VOL. 1. But one Stroke more, and that shall be my last. (3)

Her virtue is protected by the fact that she lists herself as still being the wife of Matthew Pilkington. By paying some sort of homage to him it makes her seem the better person who may not have any vendetta against him, although most audiences would know that is not the case. Also, by addressing her husband on the cover page she is adding fuel to the fire considering the scandal of their divorce was well known. It could be confidently inferred by readers subscribing to

this first volume that they would be welcomed with a healthy dose of inside glances at the gossip which surrounded the Pilkingtons.

Although the *Memoirs* are filled with libel and Laetitia often found subjects for such slander in people who would not subscribe to her volume, there was also profit to be made off those who she could portray in a positive light (Thompson 111). In one such circumstance she includes two poems written to a man from whom she “receiv’d an unexpected Bounty” (Elias 113). The poems she writes to him praise his virtue and name, although she never identifies him, at his request. She likely published these poems that cast him in such a positive light in an attempt to be handed more money from him in the future, but unfortunately for her he passed away soon after.

Following the death of her unidentified lender, she soon lost her support from the other financial backer in her life: Worsdale. Upon promising him a hundred Ballads, which she could not produce fast enough for his liking, she was scolded for her lack to deliver and their correspondence and professional career was considerably dissolved. It is here, in the loss of two men of funding that she decides

[To] leave *Ireland*; for though I led the Life of a Recluse, I had every Day some new Story invented of me. If I went out to take a little Air, they said, I had great Impudence to shew my Face; and if I stay’d at Home, I was then in Keeping with some Man who confin’d me, and, in short, I could please no body. (115)

Soon after these lines she ends her first volume only to return with Volume II, housing increased slander and further attempts at gaining economic agency.

While she had used her relationship with Swift as the primary means to sell issues of Volume I, also mixing in some slander and praise for other “eminent persons,” she resorts almost exclusively to libel as a means to gain subscriptions to the second volume. For those who would not be scared into subscribing to this volume, she makes an addition to her front page not seen in Volume I. She includes verses from Pope, Virgil, and Ovid not only to showcase herself as well read, but in a way comparing her skill to theirs. Furthermore, as opposed to the line “Anecdotes of several eminent Persons, Living and Dead” on the front matter of Volume I, she now uses the line “With Variety of SECRET TRANSACTIONS of some EMIMENT PERSONS” (119). The difference in the Volume II line can immediately be seen in the way in which the page is printed as phrases such as “SECRET TRANSACTIONS” and “EMIMENT PERSONS” are printed in all capital letters calling attention to the scandal with which the volume will clearly be filled. Furthermore, the words themselves are nowhere near as innocent as the word “anecdote” used in the first volume. Anyone picking up Volume II would be quick to notice the defamation they would be reading.

Knowing that Volume II was rife with accusations about well known people, Pilkington is smart in framing this preface with a motif of how she had been wronged and is therefore not responsible for her portrayal of the acts against her. She also begins the narrative portion of her *Memoirs* in Volume II by

describing how she maintained her virtue during her entire trip from Dublin to London, even though she had many licentious offers from fellow male travelers.

Upon arriving in London she was first visited by Colley Cibber who encouraged her poetry. She wrote sarcastic verses about Cibber himself, which greatly amused him, and he began to spread support for Pilkington (Thompson 111). She became particularly popular at *White's* where gentlemen such as Lord Fitz Roy took a liking to discussing Pilkington's poetry with her. These men encouraged her writing and many of the men Lord Fitz Roy and Pilkington solicited gave her money for a subscription to Volume II; however, when one Colonel refused, she wrote a poem about him included in the second volume. She comments in the poem on his mistress, who he gives a fair amount of money to, but that he will not give any to her for her poetry:

Now, pray, Sir, consider the Case of your Mistress,  
Who neither can kiss, nor write Verses, in Distress:  
For *Bacchus*, and *Ceres*, we frequently prove,  
Are Friends to the Muses as well as to Love. (138)

The lines had their intended affect as the other men at *White's* chided the Colonel about his portrayal. The Colonel, soon tiring of the sport, sent Mrs. Pilkington a bottle of brandy as an apology although he joined her in consuming it. While this may have been a poor excuse for an apology, he actually did her a favor by introducing her to the Duke of Marlborough who approached as the two were sitting together. The Duke had heard that she was in want of money "and, opening his Pocket-Book, presented me with a Bank Note on Sir *Francis Child*

for Fifty Pounds” (139). After giving her the money he insisted she write something nice about the Colonel so as not to tarnish his reputation to which she agreed and composed some lines extempore.

She continues Volume II by either praising or insulting the character of many people that she encounters. However, this deviates from Volume I in that she does it with increased frequency and almost exclusively. While she does mention things that happen to her, she is less inclined to write about how certain events made her feel or show any remorse for mistakes she may have made in the past. In Volume I, while still focusing on the fortune she seeks, she often apologizes for upsetting Matthew, or mentions how lost or hopeless she was without her children. In her poem “Sorrow,” which can be found in Volume I, both her greed and sorrow appear coupled together:

...Encompass'd round with Ruin, Want and Shame,  
Undone in Fortune, blasted in my Fame,  
Lost to the soft endearing Ties of Life,  
And tender Names of Daughter, Mother, Wife;  
Can no Recess from Calumny be found?  
And yet can Fate inflict a deeper Wound!

Thus the poor Bird when frightened from her Nest  
With agonizing Love, and Grief distrest,  
Still fondly hovers o'er the much lov'd Place,  
Tho' strengthless, to protect her tender Race;

In piercing Notes she movingly complains,  
And tells the unattending Woods her Pains. (91-2)

This poem runs for six stanzas and although mixed with her preoccupation with fortune, still seems to represent a pouring out of her heart's woes. However, a poem which describes her "distress" in Volume II is only one stanza and is more generalized by speaking to the race of women as opposed to her personal pain:

CAN, alas! the plaintive Pray'r  
Dictated by Grief sincere,  
Hope to reach a friendly Ear;  
Will the kind and bounteous Heart  
Sympathize while I impart  
Such Affliction, as before  
Never hapless Woman bore. (203)

While this poem clearly has similar themes to the one in Volume I, they each take on a different tone. Each poem seeks attention from others who are in a better situation than the author; however, the appeal to the audience is significantly more subtle in the first compared to the blatant call for sympathy and money. She asks point blank that a "bounteous" person help her out of her affliction. As a result of the obvious solicitation of money she receives the reply "I have so many Applications for Charity, that it is impossible for me to relieve all" (203). It appears as though now she is getting desperate and selling her wit in exchange for any sort of currency.

Where once Pilkington's wit resembled something worth a fair penny, as seen by Swift and other contemporaries, she had degraded herself to such a point where very few seemed to give merit to her poetic skill, although it surely remained somewhere within her. She even goes so far in the conclusion of Volume II to carry on a conversation with herself in which she attacks and defends her own work, and she leaves off with a promise that her third volume will be filled with even more "surprising Events, and infinitely more entertaining than either of the foregoing" (253).

The third volume, published posthumously by her son, can be best summed up in the first two paragraphs:

A Third Volume of Memoirs is a really bold Undertaking, as they are generally light, frothy, and vain; yet I have met with such unhop'd Success, that I am quite encouraged to proceed; more especially as my Word is pass'd to the Publick; and my Word I have ever held sacred. I cannot, like a certain Female Writer, say, I hope if I have done nothing to please, I have done nothing to offend; for truly I mean to give both Pleasure and Offence: Lemon and Sugar is very pretty. I should be sorry to write a Satire which did not sting, nor will I ever write a Panegyrick on an Undeserver: If a Rogue should happen to be mine honest Friend, I owe him Silence; but that is the most he can expect.

Many indeed are glad to become Purchasers. Persons whom I know nothing of, come and beg I may not put them into the Third Volume; and they will subscribe: Surely then they should knock at their own Hearts; and if it confess a natural Guiltiness,

*Let it not breathe a Thought upon their Tongue*

*To my Dishonour – Shakespear.*

I threaten not any, nor did I ever do it; but Characters are my Game, who

*Eye Nature's Walks, shoot Folly as it flies,*

*And catch the Manners living as they rise. (263)*

Contained within the paragraphs are her motivation and justification for her *Memoirs*. She is well aware of the criticism she has received, and thankful for it as the public interest boosted her readership. She is also in tune to the fear aligned with potential slanderous publication of notable public figures and how that fear manifested into further subscriptions. In preceding passage she rationalizes her art, story-telling, and intentions, but they matter not for what an artist produces is up to that artist and their intent remains their property as well. In the case of Laetitia Pilkington she used her wit, whether poetic or manipulative threats, to gain notoriety because she knew that it would bring in the subscriptions and allow her to be an independent woman and an owner of agency.

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