Narrating Margaret Nicholson: A Character Study in Fact and Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis examines the historical and fictional character of Margaret Nicholson (1745-1828), a labouring woman who became notorious for her failed attempt to assassinate King George III in August 1786. After a quick trial, Nicholson was diagnosed as insane and spent the rest of her life in Bedlam. Her story continued to interest readers: she was the subject of multiple biographical chapbooks, the supposed author of a collection of radical poetry actually written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and a source of mingled terror and fascination for both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers. The thesis evaluates how Nicholson's story has undergone fictionalization from her time to the present, and examines how the boundaries between fact and fiction in the case have become so nebulous that history itself has become fictionalized.

Abrégé

Ce mémoire examine le personnage historique et fictif qu'est Margaret Nicholson (1745-1828), une ouvrière qui devint notoire pour sa tentative infructueuse d'assassiner le roi George III en août 1786. Lors d'un procès rapide, Nicholson fut déclarée folle et passa ensuite le reste de sa vie à l'Hôpital psychiatrique de Bedlam. Son histoire continua à intéresser les lecteurs: elle fut l'objet de nombreux opuscules biographiques; on la crut l'auteure d'un recueil de poésie radicale dont le véritable auteur était Percy Bysshe Shelley; elle resta une source de terreur et de fascination aux dix-huitième et dix-neuvième siècles. Le mémoire examine la façon dont la vie de Nicholson devint fiction au fil des siècles et la façon dont les limites entre faits et fiction devinrent tellement brouillées que l'Histoire elle-même devint romancée.

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Introduction: the Making of a Myth

Margaret Nicholson, a labouring woman, lived and worked in obscurity for the first half of her life. The fourth child of Thomas Nicholson, a barber, and his wife Anne,[1] she was baptized on 9 December 1745, in Stokesley, Yorkshire.[2] At the age of twelve, she left her family to find employment as a maid.[3] She lived modestly in London throughout her young adulthood and into middle age, first working as a housemaid and later as an independent needlewoman.[4] However, in August 1786, at the age of forty, Nicholson entered the public arena, achieving sudden infamy with her failed attempt to assassinate George III.

At midday on Wednesday, August 2, 1786, Nicholson waited amidst a crowd assembled at the garden gate of St. James's Palace for the arrival of George III, who was scheduled to attend a levee at the palace later that afternoon. As the king stepped out of his carriage, she pressed forward to present a petition. When he reached out to accept the proffered paper, Nicholson suddenly withdrew a knife that had been concealed in the scroll, and proceeded to make two unsuccessful stabs at the monarch before she was apprehended by a nearby yeoman of the guard. The crowd and royal attendants were stunned by this daring act, but before any retaliation could be taken against Nicholson, George III announced, "The poor creature is mad!—Do not hurt her! She has not hurt me!" and gave "positive orders that the woman should be taken care of."[5]

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[1] *The Parish Registers of Stokesley, Co. York 1571-1750*, ed. John Hawell (Leeds: Yorkshire Parish Register Society, 1901) 227.
[2] *The Parish Registers of Stokesley* 239.
[3] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456, Public Record Office, Kew.
[4] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.
[5] Frances Burney, *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*, ed. Charlotte Barrett, vol. 3 (London: Henry Colburn, 1854) 47.

Nicholson was quickly taken into custody and subjected to a hasty initial examination by the Board of Green Cloth. The examination yielded the information that she was from Yorkshire, had previously worked as a housemaid for a number of London families, and was currently self-employed as a needlewoman.[6] Her reasons for attempting to stab the king, however, were less clear. She claimed that she had "petitioned his Majesty twenty different Times upon a Property due to her from the Crown of England,"[7] but did not specify what sort of property she was owed, or, indeed, why she might merit it. She also declared that "her Grievance is a Mystery which she cannot relate."[8] During her trial, she continued to rant nonsensically about her vague claim on the throne. However, aside from her ramblings on this single subject, she acted and spoke quite calmly, causing one newspaper report to describe her as being "in a very placid humour."[9] According to the testimony of her friends and family, it appeared that Nicholson was an industrious worker who supported herself financially and functioned quite successfully in her everyday life. Thomas Monro, a notable mad-doctor who would treat George III three years later, ultimately diagnosed Nicholson as insane,[10] recommending that she be confined and treated as a lunatic, instead of having to stand criminal trial for attempted regicide, which would have been a treasonable offence.

The public was fascinated by the scandalous tale of a mad needlewoman's failed attempt to stab the king. London newspapers were quick to report the latest developments of the case, and rural newspapers picked up the original reports of the papers from the metropolis. Even continental and colonial newspapers featured coverage

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[6] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.
[7] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.
[8] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.
[9] *London Chronicle* 5 August 1786: 128.
[10] "Letter from T. Monro to Lord Sydney," 3 August 1786, HO 42/9/490, Public Record Office, Kew.

of the assassination attempt and trial. The Gazette d'Amsterdam reported that "Une Femme Lingère de profession, se disant Héritière légitime de la Couronne, & que tout jusqu'ici, annonce être absolument dérangée, se trouva le 2. à la descente du Carrosse du Roi, revenant de *Windsor* en cette Ville",[11] while the American newspapers offered articles such as "Authentic Particulars of the Extraordinary Attempt of Margaret Nicholson on the Life of King George the Third"[12] and "A Description of Margaret Nicholson's Person."[13] Personal letters and journals of late summer and autumn of 1786 abound with references to Nicholson. Maria Josepha Holroyd Stanley's comments in a letter of 1 September 1786 reflect how media coverage of the case eventually reached the point of over-saturation: she wrote to her sister, wearily asking, "Pray are you as tired of Margaret Nicholson as we are? our Papers have not done with her yet…"[14] Five chapbooks about Nicholson were published in August 1786, while newspapers and magazines ran multiple articles about the would-be assassin.

One might naturally assume that public interest in Nicholson would decline. In most notorious situations, it is the sheer novelty which propels public interest: as soon as a new scandal occurs, the current event is forgotten. However, this did not occur in the case of Margaret Nicholson. References to Nicholson continued to appear regularly through the remaining years of the eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth. She was mentioned in poetry (notably, in 1810, as the subject of the youthful Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*), novels, personal

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[11] "De LONDRES le 4 Août," *Gazette d'Amsterdam* 8 August 1786: 6.
[12] "Authentic Particulars of the Extraordinary Attempt of Margaret Nicholson on the Life of King George the Third," *Connecticut Journal* 27 September 1786: 2.
[13] "A Description of Margaret Nicholson's Person," *American Herald* 2 October 1786: 2.
[14] Maria Josepha Holroyd Stanley, "To Serena Holroyd," 1 September 1786, *The Girlhood of Maria Josepha Holroyd, Lady Stanley of Alderley: Recorded in Letters of a Hundred Years Ago, from 1776 to 1796*, ed. Jane Henrietta Adeane (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1896) 15-16.

memoirs, histories, and pseudo-medical treatises. Though her story was less known by the twentieth century, she still appeared in a number of scholarly works as well as making a dramatic appearance in the opening scene of Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III*.

As stories about Margaret Nicholson have been told and retold throughout the intervening centuries, the facts have shifted and altered, creating a pool of mythic tales that surround the would-be assassin. To a modern reader and researcher, the narratives surrounding Nicholson appear to be a number of jumbled tellings and retellings of the same basic facts. This apparent confusion, however, stems from the difficulty of reading the texts in a chronological order: the eighteenth-century audience of the media frenzy surrounding Nicholson would have been able to see that any given text drew upon and built on its predecessors. For example, many of the biographical minutiae of the chapbooks were gleaned and expanded upon from newspaper reports. Over the centuries, texts about Nicholson have combined to create an interwoven narrative tradition about the would-be assassin.

I am largely indebted to John Brewer's *Sentimental Murder* for my methodological approach. In the preface to his study of the narratives surrounding the murder of Martha Ray, mistress of the Earl of Sandwich, by James Hackman, a young clergyman, in 1779, Brewer writes, "I set out to write a history of the accounts, narratives, stories… that were built around James Hackman's killing of Martha Ray," noting that his aim was not to ask "is this story true" but instead to ask, "what does this story do?" and "what is the storyteller doing with this story?".[15] With similar questions in mind, my thesis will investigate how the literary character of Margaret Nicholson was first

[15] John Brewer, *Sentimental Murder: Love and Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) 5.

developed, and how it changed over time. It will survey the various fictional tropes or stereotypes that Nicholson was made to inhabit, including the virtuous country girl, the crafty servant, the mistreated or spurned lover, the sarcastic or wise lunatic, and the odd but ultimately unthreatening elderly lady. Ultimately, my thesis will evaluate how Nicholson's story has undergone repeated fictionalization and will examine how the boundaries between fact and fiction in the case have become so nebulous that history itself has become fictionalized.

Chapter 1. 1786: A Media Event

Newspapers were the first media outlets to write about Nicholson, though they did not offer any sort of consistent or sustained narrative. Brief articles on Nicholson were wedged in amongst other news stories, and these articles were often partially plagiarized from other newspapers, resulting in a crazy-quilt of facts and surmises. The newspapers were not interested in creating a consistent narrative of Nicholson's life and motives; instead, they tossed in salacious details that they thought would best appeal to their readers.

Though newspaper reports did not offer a coherent, well-shaped character view of Nicholson, these reports did serve as raw material that later writers were influenced by, drew upon, and sometimes simply copied. The multiplicity of newspaper reports about Nicholson may be part of the reason that later fictionalizations diverge so dramatically in their representations of her character.

The first publications which began to properly shape Nicholson into a clearly defined character were chapbooks. In August 1786, at least five chapbooks about Nicholson were published. These chapbooks, ranging in length from twelve to fifty-six pages, promised heretofore unknown details of Nicholson's life and the reasons behind her assassination attempt. The first to appear, *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson*, advertised as a biography, was published by August 9, only a week after Nicholson's assassination attempt. Three more biographical chapbooks followed in quick succession, the last appearing on August 18. The chapbooks were priced between one and two shillings, making them affordable and salacious reading material for the literate middle-classes. While the main facts of the Nicholson case had already been copiously

covered in newspapers, all of the biographical chapbooks promised to provide additional details on Nicholson's life, assassination attempt, and trial. The following table lists the title, publication date, and publisher of the five chapbooks on Nicholson which this thesis will address.

TITLE	DATE	PUBLISHER
Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson, Who Attempted to Stab His Most Gracious Majesty with a Knife, as he was Alighting from his Carriage at St. James's, on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 1786: Likewise the Whole of her Examination before the Privy Council, on the Motives which induced her to attempt a Crime of so horrid a Nature [50 pages]	August 9, 1786	James Ridgeway (Piccadilly)
The Plot Investigated; or, a circumstantial Account of the late Horrid Attempt of Margaret Nicholson to Assassinate the King, with Many interesting Particulars of her Character and Family, and of the Cause of her first petitioning His Majesty [56 pages]	August 11, 1786	E[dward][16] Macklew (Haymarket)
The Life and Transactions of Margaret Nicholson; Containing Not only a circumstantial Account of every Particular which transpired in the several Examinations respecting her Attempt To Assassinate his most Gracious Majesty; But Also Memoirs of her remarkable Life, From her Infancy to the 9th of August 1786, when she was conducted to Bedlam by Mr. Coates [48 pages]	August 15, 1786	Jonathan Fiske (Wigmore Street, Portland Square)
A True and Particular Account of Margaret Nicholson's Attempt to Stab His most gracious Majesty, George III. As he alighted from his Carriage. At St. James's, on the 2d of August, 1786. In Which Is Given An authentic Account of all the remarkable Transactions through Life, particularly her being apprehended and her Examination before the Privy Council, and by Dr. Monro, concerning the Motives which induced her to attempt so horrid a Crime [32 pages]	August 18, 1786	T[homas][17] Sabine (Shoe-Lane, Fleet-Street)
The Maniacs: a Tragi-Comical Tale [12 pages]	August 23, 1786	James Ridgeway (Piccadilly)

[16] See <http://www.devon.gov.uk/localstudies/121409/1.html>.
[17] See <http://bookhistory.blogspot.com/2007/01/london-1775-1800-s.html>.

Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson

The first chapbook on Nicholson, published by James Ridgeway at Piccadilly, was entitled *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson, Who Attempted to Stab His Most Gracious Majesty with a Knife, as he was Alighting from his Carriage at St. James's, on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 1786: Likewise the Whole of her Examination before the Privy Council, on the Motives which induced her to attempt a Crime of so horrid a Nature*. The earliest surviving newspaper advertisement for *Authentic Memoirs* appears in the Wednesday, August 9 edition of the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, indicating that this chapbook appeared no later than a week after the assassination attempt.

Within the narrative of *Authentic Memoirs*, Nicholson's life is shaped into a moral cautionary story against excessive pride. The author strives to transform all the details of Nicholson's biography into one cohesive and overtly didactic tale. Much of the content of later chapbooks builds upon items related in *Authentic Memoirs*, though they do not all share the didactic motivation of this first chapbook.

Authentic Memoirs opens with the dramatic assertion that "amid the many acts of delinquency which will blacken the annals of the present times, there are none of a deeper dye than the monstrous attempt on the life of our most gracious Sovereign,"[18] and continues with a philosophical debate over the similar atrocities of regicide and parricide. The author portrays these two crimes as intertwined, since "the veneration due to the parental character, whether in a natural or political relation"[19] is similar. After a discussion of the fatherly "care," "love," and "protection" offered by King George III, the author rhetorically asks his readers, "is it astonishing that every heart recoils at the

[18] *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson* (London: James Ridgeway, 1786) 1-2.
[19] *Authentic Memoirs* 2.

thought of assaulting lives held sacred by the wise and good of every nation?"[20] He is particularly distressed by the concept of "a woman, who, renouncing all the decent tendernesses of her sex, rushes on the life of her Sovereign," particularly "at the very moment when, with the most beneficent humanity, he extends his hand to receive from her a suppositious memorial, thereby manifesting a wish to serve her."[21]

The chapbook first outlines Nicholson's personal background and employment history, giving her birthplace, incorrectly, as Stockton-upon-Tees, Durham.[22] The author reports that "from the indulgence of her parents she received an education something superior to that usually given to the daughters of ordinary tradesmen in that part of the country,"[23] and notes that "she was taught to read, write, and work at her needle… in the latter she was a perfect adept, working with that delicacy and skill as to have been able to earn a comfortable subsistence."[24] This assessment of Nicholson's skill at needlework is echoed in almost all later sources, and has become part of the conventional narrative about her. The author conjectures that Nicholson went into service in London "about twenty years ago… being then not more than eighteen years of age."[25] This estimate of her age would make her thirty-eight years old, or possibly younger, at the time of her assassination attempt.

At this juncture, *Authentic Memoirs* begins its internal contradictions and inconsistencies of judgment. For example, the author alleges that, as a young woman, Nicholson "possess[ed] a share of boldness, cunning, and intrepid address, seldom to be

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[20] *Authentic Memoirs* 4-5.
[21] *Authentic Memoirs* 5.
[22] *Authentic Memoirs* 6.
[23] *Authentic Memoirs* 6.
[24] *Authentic Memoirs* 6-7.
[25] *Authentic Memoirs* 7.

found in women at a more advanced period of life,"[26] but reports in the following sentence that, in her first position in service, "she lived and behaved with great modesty and diligence, ever preserving that cautionary reserve which is a woman's best guard."[27] This is hardly the behaviour of a forward young maidservant. The author also reports that Nicholson "procured the esteem of her fellow-servants" who were "attached to her for her sobriety, honesty, and industry," yet simultaneously asserts that "an invincible obstinacy, and a kind of over-weening pride… seemed to be the indelible characteristic[s] of her mind."[28]

The author continues to run through a roster of her former employers, though he periodically pauses in his catalogue in order to offer commentary on pertinent events during the tenure of her employment. For instance, he suggests that Nicholson's pride was initially inflamed by her being offered a promotion in the Boothby household; he claims that "it was now that Margaret's natural temper broke forth, and she first evinced those principles which cannot fail to brand her name with infamy."[29] The author is quick to explain that he does not mean to infer that such an "act of outrage was then formed in her mind," since "it is but by slow advances that the human heart… hardens itself so far against the feelings of nature as to meditate, much less to perpetrate crimes of such monstrous magnitude."[30] Instead, he suggests that "this appearance of probable promotion" was the instigator of a false pride in herself, unsuited to her station, projecting that this promotion "kindled the latent sparks of pride which lay hid in the recesses of her

[26] *Authentic Memoirs* 8.
[27] *Authentic Memoirs* 8.
[28] *Authentic Memoirs* 8.
[29] *Authentic Memoirs* 10.
[30] *Authentic Memoirs* 10-11.

heart."[31] He reports that Nicholson began to put on "the most arrogant airs of insolent superiority,"[32] treated her fellow servants "with insolence and scorn, assuming airs of importance and authority,"[33] and generally "render[ed] herself obnoxious to [the Boothby] family."[34] After being discharged from this position, with "as favourable a character [reference] as her conduct would admit,"[35] the author alleges that Nicholson continued, in her new positions, to act in a manner unbefitting her station: "her deportment was authoritative, arbitrary, and decisive, on all occasions proclaiming and boasting of her own consequence."[36] He takes this opportunity to moralize, and extrapolates from the situation, asserting that "pride… is ever a dangerous companion, but more especially so to uninformed minds."[37] *Authentic Memoirs* seems undecided as to whether Nicholson is an admirable housemaid, who should be taken as a good conduct-manual model, or a proud fiend:

> It is but justice here to remark, that in every family where she lived her honesty, sobriety, and chastity were unquestionable and exemplary, she never having stood charged with any act of peculation, intemperance, or indecency; on the reverse, she fulfilled every trust reposed in her with a degree of diligence and fidelity, that would stamp a value on the most exalted character; her acquaintance were few, and those the most respectable that her situation allowed… In short, a prudence more than ordinarily circumspect was the most remarkable *trait* in her character,

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[31] *Authentic Memoirs* 11.
[32] *Authentic Memoirs* 11.
[33] *Authentic Memoirs* 12.
[34] *Authentic Memoirs* 12.
[35] *Authentic Memoirs* 12.
[36] *Authentic Memoirs* 13.
[37] *Authentic Memoirs* 13.

> after that ruinous pride which has not only been destructive to herself, but had well nigh involved these kingdoms in ruin.[38]

Aside from the detail of her "ruinous pride" which had such dramatic consequences, the author of *Authentic Memoirs* seems to feel that Nicholson was an exemplary servant and citizen.

After leaving service, and supporting herself by needlework, Nicholson, according to the *Authentic Memoirs*, continued to act in exemplary fashion: "her behaviour was sober and decent… her whole demeanor seemed perfectly regular, just and irreproachable."[39] The author is careful to emphasize that she did not exhibit any signs of what he classifies as mental illness: he writes, "she [did not] at this time, nor indeed at any later period that I can learn, [show] any marks of insanity in her conduct, but seemed at every time, and on all occasions, capable of supporting her part in conversation."[40] He then goes through a catalogue of symptoms which he assumes are indicative of mental instability: he notes that Nicholson had "no irregular starts of imagination, no actions of extravagance, nor no singularities, either in dress or address, ever appearing that could warrant a supposition of that nature,"[41] and concludes that she maintained "an equanimity of temper not at all characterizing a maniac, except a habit of talking to herself, which is well known to be the practice of many persons of sound intellects."[42]

The author of *Authentic Memoirs* is imprecise as to the chronology of when Nicholson began to speak of her supposed claim on the king, simply stating that:

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[38] *Authentic Memoirs* 14-15.
[39] *Authentic Memoirs* 16.
[40] *Authentic Memoirs* 17.
[41] *Authentic Memoirs* 17.
[42] *Authentic Memoirs* 18.

> At this place [her second independent lodgings, in Marylebone Lane], and at her former lodgings, she often mentioned a cause she said she had depending, and… frequently wearied her landlords with importunities to present a petition to his Majesty in her behalf, who, she said, she was sure would provide for her.[43]

The author glosses over the details of her residences, both during her employment as maidservant and when she lived independently, naming only a single landlord, Mr. Watson. Even Mr. Fiske, her most recent landlord, who testified at her trial, and who would later publish his own memoir of Nicholson, is not mentioned. The author of *Authentic Memoirs* is more specific about the time frame of Nicholson's first petition, asserting that she

> at length undertook to make a personal application to the King… she prepared a petition in April; but it not being attended to, she gave another the latter end of May or beginning of June, and another in July, in which she intimated her desperate intention in the following remarkable words; "If your Majesty wishes to prevent *regicide*, you must comply with the prayer of my petition."[44]

He admits that her actual claims on the monarch are unclear: "what this prayer was, does not fully appear, though it is most probable, that it was for some pecuniary relief."[45]

Authentic Memoirs ultimately conveys an ambiguous message to its readership. On one hand, Nicholson is repeatedly praised for her virtuous and modest behaviour, efficiency as a servant, and generally exemplary morality. She is condemned for one solitary vice—pride, which the author portrays as the reason for her attempted stabbing of George III. The treasonous action, a result of Nicholson's pride, cancels out all of her

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[43] *Authentic Memoirs* 18-19.
[44] *Authentic Memoirs* 22.
[45] *Authentic Memoirs* 22.

other virtues. However, no remedy against excessive pride is proffered. Despite the broadly religious connotations of virtues versus vices, her behaviour is not linked to any religious agenda, nor is any mention made of Nicholson's own religion or lack of religion.

The Plot Investigated

The second chapbook on Nicholson to appear was *The Plot Investigated*, published by Edward Macklew in the Haymarket on August 11.[46] In newspaper advertisements, it claimed to explain "the dreadful effects of insanity" on Nicholson.[47] The chapbook actually consisted of details gleaned from newspaper reports of the trial, strung together in a disjointed manner. Since many pieces are plagiarized word-for-word from a variety of sources, the chapbook has little consistent overall narrative and often contradicts itself. *The Plot Investigated* is perhaps the least interesting of all the chapbooks, since it offers the least original material, but is an extreme embodiment of how the facts of the Nicholson case were purloined, re-stitched, and re-circulated. Its primary role was in preserving and lending authority to claims made in transient newspaper articles. The most significant story to which *The Plot Investigated* lent credence was the story of Margaret Nicholson's supposed failed love affair with a fellow servant.

On August 10, the *London Chronicle* had reported an "incident in the life of Margaret Nicholson, [which] may serve to elucidate the cause from whence her insanity

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[46] *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* 8 August 1786: 2; *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* 11 August 1786: 3; *Public Advertiser* 15 August 1786: 1.
[47] *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* 8 August 1786: 2.

originated."[48] The article reported that, when Nicholson "lived some years ago with a Lady of Quality… her master's Valet paid her his addresses." Since "her conduct before the family was very reserved," neither the family members nor the fellow servants expected that the valet "had any prospect of success" with Nicholson. However, when one family member happened to be up later than usual, he or she "surprised the Valet de Chambre coming out of [Nicholson's] bedroom." When this gossip reached the mistress of the house the following morning, both Nicholson and her supposed paramour were "instantly discharged." Nicholson and the valet "sought for a new place, where they lived together in the same house," and after leaving that position, "their attachment still subsisted, and they got into a third service." However, the article claimed that during their tenure in this third establishment, "her sweetheart slighted her, and paid his addresses to a person who had some property." This mercenary affair apparently took precedence over his prior relationship with Nicholson, as the valet reportedly married the wealthier woman and "left his place to take an inn on the Western Road."[49] The *London Chronicle* did not simply report this scandalous tale about Nicholson's romantic life as salacious gossip; instead, it became part of the rationale for her insanity. The writer sympathetically acknowledges that "this disappointment could not but affect the woman who was deserted," and reports that, as a result of her suitor's defection, Nicholson "abandoned herself to solitude." The reporter confidently asserts that "intense thought on one subject debilitates the mind; and with a temper already prone to melancholy, an accumulation of thought and distress must encrease intense thinking," concluding that these introspective ruminations "cannot but produce paroxisms of madness." The article

[48] *London Chronicle* 10 August 1786: 144.
[49] *London Chronicle* 10 August 1786: 144.

prescribes "society and variety [as] necessary to remove the ill consequences of melancholy," noting that "neither of these it appears she sought for." The article claims that after Nicholson was abandoned by the Swiss valet, she chose to leave service and supported herself by her needlework. The writer, assuming that her level of income must have been quite low as a freelance needlewoman, argues that "the want of nourishment, with the anxiety attendant on it, must increase the mental debility which is the result of melancholy." For the *London Chronicle* reporter, Nicholson's abandonment by her lover, and consequent poverty, clearly forms the basis of her insanity. This story of Nicholson's failed romance was reprinted verbatim the following day in *The Plot Investigated*,[50] thus preserving and entrenching the story of Nicholson's supposed romantic loss and abandonment for later writers to draw upon.

The Life and Transactions of Margaret Nicholson

This chapbook was published by Jonathan Fiske, a bookseller on Wigmore Street, who was Nicholson's current landlord when she made her assassination attempt. Fiske capitalized on his unique position by writing his "own narrative of this extraordinary transaction" which he claimed "shall certainly have truth to recommend it."[51] (Fiske was experienced in turning his life experiences into fodder for his printing press: in 1781, after being falsely accused of forgery by a tenant,[52] he published *The Case of Jonathan Fiske, bookseller: tried and honourably acquitted at the sessions in the Old Bailey, held in June, 1781, upon the infamous prosecution of Patrick Roche Farrill, for Forgery: with*

[50] *The Plot Investigated* (London: E. Macklew, 1786) 50-51.
[51] Jonathan Fiske, *The Life and Transactions of Margaret Nicholson* (London: J. Fiske, 1786) 6-7.
[52] "Trial of Jonathan Fiske, deception: forgery, 30th May, 1781," *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, 2 April 2008 <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/oldbailey/html_units/1780s/t17810530-61.html>.

anecdotes of the prosecutor and his adultress confederate, Alice Harriot Herbert, who cohabits with him.) Fiske promoted *The Life and Transactions of Margaret Nicholson* as an improved, more authentic version of the chapbooks which had preceded it. In the opening paragraph of his chapbook, Fiske acknowledges the public thirst for information about Nicholson, then rails against "some mercenary persons" who compiled "paltry fabrications, miserably strung together from detached paragraphs in the news-papers, most of which are without the least authority or foundation,"[53] almost certainly a direct jibe at Edward Macklew's *The Plot Investigated*. Fiske sarcastically comments that "if any thing like a fact may have happened to creep into such publications, it must be attributed to accident."[54] He distinguishes himself by purporting that their personal acquaintance allows him to give a more reliable account of Nicholson's life. However, Fiske's posturing of authority is simply a rhetorical manipulation; his account is nowhere near as reliable as he claims it is. While he does offer details that are not found in other accounts, he also makes mistakes of his own. Some of his facts, despite his posing as a close friend of Margaret Nicholson, are taken from newspaper accounts, and simply rephrased to lend them a tenor of exclusivity. For example, he notes that "Stockton upon Tees has been said to have given birth to Margaret Nicholson" but smugly reports that "she certainly was born at Stokeswell, Yorkshire."[55] Nicholson's birthplace had indeed been repeatedly, and incorrectly, reported as Stockton-upon-Tees (an error which persists

[53] Fiske 5-6.
[54] Fiske 6.
[55] Fiske 7.

even in the most current version of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography[56]), but she was in fact born in Stokesley, not Stokeswell.

Fiske's account employs the most literary tone of all the chapbooks. He refers to Nicholson as "our heroine" at least six times in the slim, 48-page chapbook, indicating that he intends his book to be read as a pseudo-novel. The chapbook is narrated by Fiske in the first person: indeed, in the second half of the text, which is concerned with Nicholson's capture and trial, Fiske offers more details of his own personal experience of the trial than of Nicholson's behaviour. For example, he reports that:

> About half after one o'clock on that day, when I was busily employed in binding spelling books, and just going to dinner, one of the Under Secretaries of State alighted from a hackney coach, at my door, came into my shop, and asked me if I knew Mrs. Nicholson? I told him I did. He then said I must go along with him, and she had been to St. James's, and had behaved very ill to the gentlemen of the Board of Green Cloth. I apologized for my dishabille, and begged permission to clean myself, as I was not in a condition to appear before that assembly. No attention, however, was paid to my request, and I was obliged to go in the situation I then was.[57]

The reporting of these rather insignificant details certainly adds to the urgency, drama, and immediacy of the situation, while also putting forth Fiske as, if not the hero, at least a significant supporting character in the drama of Nicholson's capture and trial. Since Fiske was brought as a witness at Nicholson's initial examination before the privy council

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[56] Joel Peter Eigen, "Margaret Nicholson," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9 May 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20145>.

[57] Fiske 31-32.

on August 2, he is able to provide details of the questions and responses of himself and other witnesses. Fiske noted the detail that "three elderly matrons… examined into her sex, and declared her to be a woman," explaining to his readers that "this was thought a necessary step, as it was apprehended by some that she was a man, and had assumed the female habit to facilitate her design."[58] Fiske emphasizes his personal connection to the Nicholson family by reporting that "the next morning I called on Mrs. Nicholson's brother in Milford lane," a social liberty that no other chapbook authors would have been in a position to take. George Nicholson reputedly told Fiske that his sister "had been insane for several years, and that her insanity was occasioned by her pride."[59] This comment from Nicholson's own brother more firmly entrenched the theory put forth by the author of *Authentic Memoirs* (that Nicholson's insanity and actions were occasioned by a surfeit of pride) into the narrative tradition surrounding Nicholson.

After this point in his chapbook, Fiske no longer has any personal contact with Nicholson. However, he continues to write as if he is personally observing Nicholson being taken to Bedlam:

> …when they approached the wall of Bedlam, she exclaimed, with some little emotion, "I know where you are taking me to."—And, on her arrival at that repository of unfortunates, being asked if she knew where she was? she coolly and calmly answered, "Perfectly well." … The Steward of the hospital received her with great tenderness and politeness, and invited her and the company to dine with him.[60]

[58] Fiske 39.
[59] Fiske 40.
[60] Fiske 43.

Fiske devotes approximately four pages to Nicholson's delivery to and reception at Bedlam. None of this material is original to Fiske: though he superficially rephrases some sections, his account is lifted almost verbatim from a newspaper account of August 11.[61]

Like other chapbook authors before him, Fiske seems ultimately uncertain whether Nicholson was indeed insane: he reports that while "it was the opinion of the two doctors, and most of those who attended or examined her, that she was insane," he knows that "Mr. Paul [a mutual friend of Nicholson's and Fiske's], Mrs. Fiske, and some others, still think differently."[62] To complicate matters, in the final paragraph of his chapbook, Fiske briefly refers to "several particulars concerning Margaret, [which] have been lately communicated to me," giving no examples but stating only that it appears that she "exercised great cunning and dexterity" in the "science" of swindling.[63] In making this oblique reference, Fiske's ultimately portrays Nicholson as, potentially, a sane but scheming woman who has managed to finagle financial support and protection from a "generous…King" and "merciful… administration."[64] For Fiske, Nicholson's behaviour indicates that she is a crafty servant, but perhaps also a wise lunatic.

A True and Particular Account of Margaret Nicholson's Attempt to Stab His Majesty George III

Appearing on August 18, *A True and Particular Account of Margaret Nicholson's Attempt to Stab His Most Gracious Majesty, George III* was the final chapbook to be

[61] *Public Advertiser* [London] 11 August 1786: 4.
[62] Fiske 46.
[63] Fiske 47.
[64] Fiske 48.

published on the life of Nicholson. Later chapbooks would use the details of her assassination attempt for political commentary and entertainment, but *A True and Particular Account* was the last one to provide another biographical narrative. Thomas Sabine, or his anonymous author, apparently felt that including "a true and particular account" a chapbook title was a useful marketing tool; earlier in 1786, Sabine had published *A True and Particular account of the loss of the Halsewell East-Indiaman, Capt. Richard Pierce, Which was unfortunately cast away, at Seacombe, on the coast of Dorsetshire, on January 6, 1786.* By the time Sabine's chapbook on Nicholson appeared, scant weeks after the assassination attempt, the market had been largely satiated. Sabine's relatively slender chapbook (only 32 pages, compared to the 48-56 page range of the chapbooks which had preceded it) offers little in the way of new content. However, it does provide a considerably more sympathetic view of Nicholson. The introduction philosophically surmises:

> be a soul born with never so good dispositions, and have all the advantage of education, yet, upon certain emergencies, where the passions happen to tyrannize, he is capable of perpetrating the most horrid crimes, even those which are shocking to human nature.[65]

This chapbook makes no mention of Nicholson's supposed dalliance with a valet, but instead chooses to stress her generally virtuous conduct prior to her assassination attempt. This chapbook portrays Nicholson as unquestionably mad, referring to her as "a furious insane woman," "deranged in her faculties," and twice as "a mad woman."[66] For the author, Nicholson's madness was made manifest through her demanding petitions, since

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[65] *A True and Particular Account of Margaret Nicholson* (London: T. Sabine, 1786) 3.
[66] *A True and Particular Account* 13, 21, 23, 24.

"none but a mad woman would have used such language to a King."[67] *A True and Particular Account* plagiarizes copious amounts of material from other chapbooks, but does include one notable original passage. In this section, the author attempts to reconstruct how Nicholson might have reasoned with herself just before and during her attack on the king:

> What am I about to do? What monster of iniquity, or what devil has put these wicked thoughts into my head! Forbear it, just and righteous heaven, it must be, What? Kill the best of Kings, that ever sat on Britain's throne! Can it be? Is it possible his Majesty can have such an infernal subject? such a traitor to the Crown, to endeavour by this wicked hand, and outstretched arm to lay England in blood; What, if I should kill him, shall I not be miserable, eternally miserable here after? but see the [king] approaches, it must be, stand by your surrounded happy multitude, stand by, you that have a wish to see your Royal Soverign, and would, usher him in with loud huzza's into the Royal Palace. His most Gracious Majesty is arrived, and I have—What? a petition to present into his most gracious hand.—I know his Majesty will receive it—they make way; she drives in through the croud, and presents it into his royal hand, a petition, and to his breast, near his heart—what? a knife, good God! Just Heaven![68]

This soliloquy employs perspective slippage. Almost all of the chapbook is written by a distant third-person narrator, but this passage slips briefly into Nicholson's perspective before a switch back to a third-person narrator present at the moment of attack.

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[67] *A True and Particular Account* 13.
[68] *A True and Particular Account* 15-16.

The sympathy for and identification with Nicholson is reflective of the broadly optimistic narrative perspective espoused by the author. The author uses the occasion of Nicholson's attack to show the loyalty to the crown held by all British subjects, and particularly notes the loyalty displayed by minority groups. The author reports that "the loyal jews… had anthems composed and sung in their synagougue, on the happy occasion of his Majesty's happy deliverance" and "offered up their sincere prayers to Almighty God, for having by his divine mercy rescued his Majesty from the horrid and daring attempt on the life of his sacred person."[69] Similarly, the author notes that "the Dissenters, in beautiful extempore prayer, offered up their thanksgiving for his Majesty's happy deliverance."[70] The author even manages to see a positive fiscal consequence to Nicholson's attack: because so many people came to London to pay their loyal addresses to the king, "there was several hundreds of pounds collected at the different turnpikes… thus we see good is brought out of evil, as there is so much more collected towards paying off the national debt."[71] The author's resiliently positive outlook extends to the character of Nicholson herself. This chapbook offers Nicholson mercy and suggests extenuating circumstances for her madness, making the assertion that "it has been observed that there never was a person who had not in their heart the seeds of every vice."[72] The author appeals to the common humanity of his readers, suggesting that, despite appearances, Nicholson's behaviour is not so foreign and "other" as it may first seem.

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[69] *A True and Particular Account* 27.
[70] *A True and Particular Account* 28.
[71] *A True and Particular Account* 24.
[72] *A True and Particular Account* 3.

The Maniacs: a Tragi-Comical Tale

The Maniacs was the first work on Nicholson to diverge from the biographical, marking the beginning of more overt fictionalization of Nicholson's life. This slim chapbook, only a dozen pages in length, was published on August 23[73] by James Ridgeway, who had published *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson*, the first biographical chapbook on Nicholson, only a few weeks earlier. *The Maniacs* is by an anonymous author, masquerading under the name of "Nicholas Nobody". This pseudonym may have been deliberately chosen in order to allude to Nicholson herself: the name "Nicholas" resembles "Nicholson", and Margaret Nicholson was, before her assassination attempt, a "Nobody".

The advertisements for the chapbook misleadingly promise "an elegant frontispiece," apparently intended as a tongue-in-cheek joke. Other chapbooks provided either a traditional portrait of Nicholson or a serious engraving of her assassination attempt: the publishers lauded these illustrations as being "exact representation[s]."[74] The "elegant" frontispiece of *The Maniacs*, instead, offers a crude caricature of Nicholson before the Privy Council. She has just ripped off the wig of the main judge, and proclaims, "Give me the Crown ye traitors bold," with the wig held aloft, while the portly and undignified judge shouts, "You Bitch give me my Wig."[75] On the following page, line 139 from Horace's *Ars Poetica* is printed: "Patruriunt [sic] montes nascetur ridiculus mus" (The mountains will be in labor, and a ridiculous mouse will be brought forth). The mock-solemn Latin epigraph adds to the farcical nature of the work.

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[73] *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* 23 August 1786: 3.
[74] Title page of *The Plot Investigated*; Frontispiece of *A True and Particular Account*.
[75] See Figure 1 for a reproduction of this frontispiece.

The chapbook is entirely in verse, and includes a relatively high number of words from Northern England and Scotland, such as "Laird," "adown," "eke," "nae," "twae," and "wis."[76] The use of these terms may indicate the geographical background of the poet; may have been employed to imitate the style of a rural ballad; may have been intended to comment on Nicholson's being from Yorkshire; or may have been for some combination of these three possible motives.

The poem recreates the king's arrival at St. James's, embellishing it with the false detail that Queen Charlotte was also with him at the time of the assassination attempt. The poet humorously acknowledges the conflicting reports of the type of weapon used by Nicholson: "Some say that it a cake-knife was, / A pen-knife eke say some."[77] The king and queen are characterized as cowards who flee, and the king's famously magnanimous comments towards Nicholson, provided in virtually all other accounts, are not included in this narrative. The poet emphasizes the level of public interest in the case, claiming that when Nicholson was examined by the Privy Council, "all the world in wonder wait[s]" to know "how will this bus'ness end?"[78]

By the fourth page of this twelve-page chapbook, it becomes apparent that the poet's main aim is not to discuss Nicholson's life or motives, but rather to use her assassination attempt as an excuse for satire on the political administration of 1786. Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger had become prime minister two years earlier, at the age of 24, aided by the patronage and financial support of George III during the 1784 election. The king's support of Pitt seems to have been motivated by his distaste for Pitt's main rival, Charles James Fox; Boyd Hilton contends that George III had an

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[76] *The Maniacs* (London: James Ridgeway, 1786) 2, 3, 7, 10.
[77] *The Maniacs* 2.
[78] *The Maniacs* 4.

"unremitting, perhaps pathological" loathing for Fox and, by extension, his political supporters, the Foxites.[79] The king hated Fox for denouncing the American war, and for debauching his eldest son: Fox and the Prince of Wales gambled, drank, and womanized together, and swapped mistresses such as Perdita Robinson and Elizabeth Armistead. In the election of 1784, Pitt's "schoolboy image was an asset" since he and his supporters were being represented as progressive reformers, while the decade-older Fox was associated with corruption.[80]

The poet's choice to have Prime Minister Pitt preside over the trial, though he was never present for any of Nicholson's examinations, demonstrates the poet's interest in political commentary. When Pitt gives a pious, emotional response to the attack on the king, concluding that "'I love him well'—(then dropp'd a tear) / 'Cause why?—he well loves me,'"[81] the reading public would have been aware that Pitt had a personal interest in keeping the king alive and well in 1786, as he largely owed his political power and station to the patronage of the monarch. Lord Sydney, Pitt's Secretary of State, who actually was present at Nicholson's examination, is also given a a speaking role in the poem, but he is only a supporting character to the central figure of Pitt.

Sydney voices the fear that he has "a strong surmise, / No woman this you've seen: / No Lord in Council, save Woolsack, / Has got so *male* a mien;"[82] rumours that Nicholson was in fact a man in woman's clothing had circulated immediately following the attack. The majority of the gathered politicians are portrayed as eager to undertake a

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[79] Boyd Hilton, "Politics in the time of Pitt and Fox, 1783-1807," *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006) 56.
[80] Hilton 45.
[81] *The Maniacs* 5.
[82] *The Maniacs* 7.

strip-search of the assassin, proclaiming, "Let's search her! let's examine straight!"[83] The youthful Pitt, however, is embarrassed by this suggestion: "O'er the chaste cheek of the prime Lord, / A blush itself bespread."[84] The poet mocks Pitt for his youth and inexperience: he protests, "O spare, my Lords, / O spare my tender years! / I never—no, in all my life— / Most grievous are my fears!"[85] Pitt was notable in the world of eighteenth-century politics for not having a wife or a mistress; some modern historians suggest that he may have had repressed homosexual instincts, while other historians believe it is more likely that he simply had little sexual appetite.[86] In either case, the poet represents Pitt as prudishly ill at ease with potential female nudity. After some more fighting between politicians, Margaret Nicholson finally enters the courtroom, on the ninth page of this twelve page chapbook. When asked what she has to say for herself, she proclaims, "Give me the crown!—Queen Margaret thus / Seizes her lawful prey,"[87] then proceeds to pull off the wig of Woolsack (the generic name given to the Lord Chancellor in the House of the Lords). Instead of a decorous response, Woolsack yells back, "You b--h, give me my wig!"[88] The poet surmises that it is difficult to determine who is truly maniacal, the assassin or the bickering politicians, in the scene: "Or this or that the madder is / Or this or that foam more, / A task, I wis, too hard it be / In this place to explore."[89] In this poem, Nicholson becomes the wise lunatic who is no madder, and potentially less so, than the politicians of the day. After an undignified tussle, the judge

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[83] *The Maniacs* 7.
[84] *The Maniacs* 7.
[85] *The Maniacs* 8.
[86] Hilton 53-54.
[87] *The Maniacs* 9.
[88] *The Maniacs* 9.
[89] *The Maniacs* 10.

flees "as quick as wind" leaving both "the Court, and wig behind;"[90] this may have been intended as a pun on the concept that Pittites, who considered themselves independent Whigs, were largely reliant on the patronage of the royal court for political power. Pitt surmises that the trial has been a waste of time, asking "For what, my Lords, we've met?"[91] In order to maintain the "fair pretense" that the trial had been productive, the examiners decide that Nicholson shall be kept "as prisoner of state... / At moderate expences."[92] The poem concludes:

> The Council rose in all its pomp,
> The weighty bus'ness done, Sir;
> And here's an end of my fine Song,
> And Margaret Nicholson, Sir.[93]

The ending is succinct, but hints at a tragic ending for Nicholson herself, denied even the pretense of a serious trial.

Two reviews of *The Maniacs* survive. *The English Review,* published by John Murray, caustically commented:

> Though officially obliged to examine all the abortions of the teeming press, we have seldom met with one more distorted than the present. Mr. Nobody endeavors to give a ridiculous turn to the attempt of Margaret Nicholson, and to laugh at the king, queen, and ministry; but the production is remarkable only for its indecency, grossness, and stupidity.[94]

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[90] *The Maniacs* 10.
[91] *The Maniacs* 11.
[92] *The Maniacs* 12.
[93] *The Maniacs* 12.
[94] "Art. 23. *The Maniacs; a Tragi-Comical Tale*. By Nicholas Nobody," *The English Review* 9 (1787): 72.

The *Monthly Review* was slightly less disdainful:

> Mr. Nobody, viewing Margaret Nicholson's attempt on the life of his Majesty in a ludicrous light, has made it the subject of a ballad, to the tune of Catharine Hayes; but the story being rather barren of incident, the Author supplies that deficiency by his invention. He introduces the Lords in Council, at the examination of the Maniac; who, in a scuffle with the Chancellor, deprives him of his wig, and provokes him to a plentiful display of his skill in the vulgar tongue: and the humour of all this is assisted by a copper-plate frontispiece.[95]

The Maniacs was the first work to use Nicholson while not writing primarily about her; the text employs Nicholson as a convenient stock figure to make an excuse for political satire. This chapbook marks the beginning of the tradition of Nicholson being used as a trope or fixed literary character for the author's own ends; this tradition was later continued in Shelley's *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*, which is much more about the young poet himself than about Nicholson.

The artifact of the weapon itself also offered additional entertainment value. In 1786, the—or at least *a*—knife was exhibited to the curious public. A broadsheet accompanied the unassuming utensil, to make viewers aware of its significance. The headline of the broadsheet, preserved in the British Library, proclaims, "High Treason – Committed by Margaret Nicholson," and an explanatory paragraph is provided:

> Guilty of the horrid crime of endeavouring to murder his scared Majesty King George III on the 2d of August 1786, by thrusting a knife at his breast, which cut a hole in his vest, and had he not instantly shrunk back it would have plunged into

[95] "Art. 43. *The Maniacs; a Tragi-Comical Tale*. By Nicholas Nobody," *The Monthly Review* 76 (1787): 178.

> his heart, she was instantly seized by two of the guards, upon which His Majesty called out, Do not use her badly, take care of her, she is insane. This woman is the daughter of Thomas Nicholson, barber about Stockton, Yorkshire. With an account of her examination, life, and transactions, and her present situation. This knife, or poignard, will be kept as a remembrancer of this horrid act.[96]

This is followed by an account of Nicholson's life taken almost verbatim from the *London Chronicle*.[97]

Not to be outdone, the enterprising owner of a public house decided to profit from the popular interest in Nicholson. He reportedly

> hung out a board with this inscription:—"To be seen within, the fork that belonged to the identical knife wherewith Margaret Nicholson attempted to stab his Majesty, King George the Third—admittance one penny." Upon the landlord's being desired to produce the treasure, he brought out an old deal case, in which was an old-fashioned fork, with a green handle. To heighten the humour, and increase credulity, the lid had the following inscription: — "This fork, and the knife belonging to it, were the dessert knife and fork of Mr. Burn, the famous Irish giant, to whom Mrs. Nicholson is cousin, three times removed."[98]

This story includes an element of the mythic: in this adaptation, Nicholson is no longer only a notorious lunatic, she is also related to a natural wonder. Charles Byrne had been born in 1761 in Ireland, traveled throughout England as part of an exhibition, and had

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[96] "High Treason - Committed by Margaret Nicholson."
[97] "London: Further Particulars respecting the Attempt on his Majesty's Life," *London Chronicle* 4 August 1786: 121.
[98] John Watkins, *The Life and Times of "England's Patriot King", William the Fourth* (London: Fisher, Son, and Jackson, 1831) 118.

died in London 1783 at the age of twenty-two and the height of eight feet, four inches.[99] Nicholson's name was not linked to Byrne in any other sources, so this story was probably an attempt to link two notorious figures to increase public interest in a dubious cutlery exhibition.

Margaret Nicholson was a subject of curiosity to the general public, but her assassination attempt was of personal interest to those with close ties to her intended victim. The best-known account of the court responses to Nicholson's attempt is found in novelist Frances Burney's journals and letters during her time as Keeper of the Robes for Queen Charlotte at the court of George III from 1786-1791. Burney kept detailed journals to send to her sister and trusted confidante, Susan Phillips, and therefore provides a uniquely intimate view of life within the court during this period. Burney is aware that a number of conflicting stories were circulating about the assassination attempt, and states her desire to convey a correct version of events to her correspondents, writing, "You may have heard it wrong; I will concisely tell it right."[100] After providing a narrative of the assassination attempt, Burney muses on the charitable actions of the king:

> There is something in the whole of his behaviour upon this occasion, that strikes me as proof indisputable of a true & noble courage: for in a moment so extraordinary, an attack, in this Country, unheard of before, to settle so instantly that it was the effect of insanity, to feel no apprehension of private plot or latent conspiracy, to stay out, fearlessly, among his people, & so benevolently to see himself to the safety of one who had raised her arm against his life, – these little

[99] K. D. Reynolds, "Charles Byrne [O'Brien]," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9 July 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4270>.
[100] Burney 36.

> traits, all impulsive, & therefore to be trusted, have given me an impression of respect & reverence to the intrinsic worth of their operator that I can never forget, & never think of but with fresh admiration… The insanity of the woman has now fully been proved; but that noble confidence which gave that instant excuse for her, was then all his own.[101]

Burney is concerned with the domestic, rather than the political, consequences of the assassination attempt. She describes the queen as "seized with a consternation that at first almost stupefied her" and relates how, "after a most painful silence, the first words [the queen] could articulate were, in looking round at the Dutchess and Lady Charlotte, who had both burst into years, – 'I envy you! – I can't cry! –'".[102] (Ironically, in a *Times* article a few days later, which related the initial examination of Margaret Nicholson, the article reports that "at one time [Nicholson] appeared much oppressed, sighed heavily, and said, if she could cry it would give her relief."[103]) The queen's stupor did not endure, however. On the following morning, August 3, Burney notes that "the poor Queen looked so ill that it was easy to see how miserable had been her night."[104] Burney portrays the queen as a devoted, fond wife, emotionally overwrought at the thought of the potential loss of her husband. Burney relates how, at the concert held that evening at Windsor, the queen could only hold out her hand to her husband and sentimentally say, "I have you yet!".[105]

While Burney's court journals are full of solicitous care for the queen, and of praise for the king, they are not so kind towards Mrs. Schwellenberg, her fellow Keeper

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[101] Burney 38.
[102] Burney 36.
[103] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.
[104] Burney 39.
[105] Burney 38.

of the Robes, who made Burney's life at court "intolerable".[106] Burney presents Mrs. Schwellenberg's reaction to Nicholson's attack as negative and pessimistic. Burney disapprovingly notes that "it is unfortunately the unalterable opinion of Mrs. Schwellenberg that some latent conspiracy belongs to this attempt, & therefore that it will never rest here."[107] Since Burney believes that "this dreadful suggestion preys on the Mind of the Queen, though she struggles to conquer or conceal it," she longs "when alone with [the queen] to speak upon the matter, & combat the opinion" but is unable to do so, as the queen will not speak of it first.[108] Mrs. Schwellenberg is the only member of the household singled out by Burney as making unhelpful pronouncements of doom, rather than simply comforting the queen.

When the Earl of Guilford wrote to Mary Delany, an elderly courtier, on August 5, three days after the attack, he conveyed his hope that Nicholson was indeed mad:

> 'Tis to be hoped the woman will be found insane, for 'tis shocking to conceive any person in their senses could be capable of attempting to perpetrate so horrid a crime… I hear the King's behaviour was *great*, *composed*, and *generous*, in desiring in the moment of the horrid attempt that care should be taken of the woman, who appear'd to be insane. I hope effectual care will be taken that the woman is *closely confined* during her life. Our laws are, in my opinion, *very deficient* in not taking care of the confinement of persons insane.[109]

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[106] John Wiltshire, "Journals and Letters," *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney*, ed. Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 79.
[107] Burney 39.
[108] Burney 39.
[109] "The Earl of Guilford to Mrs. Delany: Wroxton, Aug. 5th, 1786," *The Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Delany, Second Series* 3 (London: Bentley, 1862) 376-377.

The Earl of Guilford uses Nicholson's attack as a chance to discuss his own views of the legal and medical treatment of the mentally ill in eighteenth-century England more generally. He expands the example to expound upon people of his own acquaintance:

> I meet two frequently in my garden whom the people who ought to confine them at home let them go about where they please.—They appear at present very inoffensive.—But when the senses are disorderd *nobody can tell* what a sudden phrensy may put into their heads?[110]

His comments demonstrate the fear that Nicholson's assassination attempt inspired in eighteenth-century readers, since her behaviour prior to the attack had appeared relatively normal.

Another of Delany's correspondents, Frances Boscawen, wrote to express her concern for her friend's health at hearing about the shocking attack made on the king's life. She praises the king for his charitable remarks to Nicholson, concluding:

> I trust therefore, my dear friend, this amazing event has not disturb'd your mind, for you see 'twas the species of frenzy that this wretch is visited with, that cou'd alone occasion an attempt that ends in proving that of all sovereigns, ours may most justly be hailed "*Le bien aime*."[111]

Boscawen assumes that that Nicholson must have been insane since her anger towards a gracious, benevolent monarch could not be explained by any other rationale than mental derangement.

The state politics of the Margaret Nicholson affair did not interest diarist Betsy Sheridan; instead, the case provided an excuse to gossip about the family politics of the

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[110] "The Earl of Guilford to Mrs. Delany: Wroxton, Aug. 5th, 1786," 377.
[111] "The Hon. Mrs. Boscawen to Mrs. Delany: Glan Villa, Aug. 4th, 1786," 378.

royals. Betsy Sheridan was the sister of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a close friend and political supporter of the Prince of Wales and, by extension, of Maria Fitzherbert. Mrs. Fitzherbert was doubly prohibited from marrying the heir to the throne by virtue of being both a widow and Catholic, but the pair had nonetheless been secretly married in an illegal ceremony in December 1785. By the summer of 1786, they were both living in Brighton, Mrs. Fitzherbert's ostensible residence being "a small villa… across the gardens from the Prince's rented farm house."[112] Betsy Sheridan reports that Mrs. Fitzherbert is in Bath with her father, then contrasts Mrs. Fitzherbert's relationship with her father and the relationship between the Prince of Wales and George III:

> Mrs. Fitzherbert is also here with her Father who has been dangerously ill. She received the news at Brighthelmstone while sitting at Breakfast with the Prince; She instantly set off and made what haste she could to Bath where her reception was very different from that given to her – (I don't know what to call him) – who when he flew with the utmost expedition to Windsor to rejoice at his Father's safety, was not permitted to see him, so after eating his dinner at the White Harte Inn he return'd from whence he came. Can you bear such sulky people?[113]

Sheridan provides a unique personal angle; other newspaper articles reported that the Prince had gone to Windsor after the attack, and simply assumed that the son had been permitted to see his father. Even Frances Burney, who may have known that the prince had been denied admittance, remained silent on the details, preferring to give the positive-sounding report that the Prince of Wales had ridden to Windsor "post haste, on the first

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[112] Valerie Irvine, *The King's Wife: George IV and Mrs. Fitzherbert* (London: Hambledon, 2004) 49.
[113] Betsy Sheridan, "28: Bath, 13th to 16th August 1786," *Betsy Sheridan's Journal: Letters from Sheridan's Sister, 1784-1786 and 1788-1790,* ed. William LeFanu (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1960) 94.

news of the alarm given to the Queen."[114] State politics and questions of monarchy aside, Nicholson's attack provided a possible chance for an estranged father and son to reconcile, but this did not occur.

On August 9, a week after the Prince of Wales' futile attempt to visit his father in Windsor, Margaret Nicholson was committed to Bedlam.[115] Once confined, she became a public object. Tourists visiting London often stopped at Bedlam, and Margaret Nicholson was a star attraction at this venue. William Knollys, the eighth earl of Banbury, arranged a visit through his personal acquaintance with one of the governors of Bedlam, and wrote a report of his visit to the notorious regicide:

> This morning… I went through… The Wards of Bedlam, & visited Margaret Nicholson. She was sulky & seemingly very proud, & said although she was chained by the Leg nobody could prevent her Dying – she has a Dictionary to read & plenty of Paper to write upon, & talked with great Glee of the Death of the K____ & her Marriage with the P. of W____ she is chained by a long chain & they will not suffer her to eat anything, by way of cutting, so she is obliged to tear her meat to Pieces with her Teeth. We were surrounded by mad People as we walked through, & were obliged to encourage their Rant, & saw some shocking objects chained to the *Floor* Some raving, & those wearing Blankets & straw Hatts of a Kind of matting, others stapled to the Wainscot, others chained down to the Bed. In the Women's Ward, it is wonderful they ask for nothing, but Snuff &

[114] Burney, 43.
[115] *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* [London] 10 August 1786: 2.

> Tea – I cannot forget the miserable objects I saw, many have been confined these twenty & eighteen years.[116]

Knollys' vivid report of life in Bedlam is the only text which reflects Nicholson's despair at being confined there, and suggests that she may have had suicidal tendencies, reflected in the dramatic comment that "nobody could prevent her Dying" and the precaution taken by Bethlem doctors and keepers not to provide her with any knives (though this may have been for their own protection as well as her own).

German novelist Sophie von la Roche made a visit to Bedlam a few weeks after William Knollys, and also emphasized her viewing of Nicholson as a notable part of her visit. Von la Roche related her visit as if she were writing a scene in a novel, with the notorious Nicholson as the heroine and a sympathetic keeper as a supporting character:

> "And now," said the supervisor, door key in hand, "I will show you Mistress Nicholson." I shuddered at seeing a person with murderous instincts. She sat there, tidily attired, her hat upon her head, with gloves and book in hand; stood up at sight of us, and fixed her horrible grey eyes wildly upon us. Meanwhile the inspector had noticed a number of pens lying on the ground. "Are these pens no use, Mistress Nicholson?" he asked kindly. She answered rapidly, "No, not one," taking a paper on which she had written with a really good hand. "See here, the first lines were good, but I cannot let the prince see the rest." Then the inspector assured her she should have good pens, and called a nurse immediately to take those away and bring fresh ones, for which the sad woman thanked him. Then he asked her whether she still had anything to read. "A few pages, as you see," while

[116] William Knollys, "To the Countess of Banbury," 30 August 1786, 1M44/90/15, Hampshire Record Office, Winchester.

> she passed her fingers through them. "I will send another part at once," he answered. She nodded thanks, sat down again, and continued her book. It was Shakespeare which she was reading so intently.[117]

In von la Roche's narrative, Nicholson becomes a parody of the upper-class lady sitting at home to welcome morning callers; she is "tidily attired" and appropriately accessorized with hat and gloves, and whiles away her time between visitors with reading and correspondence. The inspector stands in for the role of the loyal, patient butler, while the Bethlem nurse becomes a maid called in to provide better writing implements to her mistress. When von la Roche had coffee with the Bedlam keeper, he shared more information on Nicholson, explaining that he understood her insanity to have been caused by the twin motives of ambition and love.[118] He told von la Roche that Nicholson believed that she belonged to the house of Lancaster, and therefore possessed a more legitimate claim on the throne than George III. She also supposedly wished to marry the Prince of Wales, and believed that she would make him a legitimate king by transferring her own royal claim onto him via marriage. The Bedlam keeper reported that Nicholson often wrote to the Prince of Wales, and dressed up in anticipation of him coming to visit her in Bedlam.[119] Von la Roche's narrative employs the familiar trope of Nicholson being driven mad by love, first addressed in *The Plot Investigated* and later in Fiske's *Life and Transactions*, though von la Roche adds the unique twist that Nicholson was pining for the Prince of Wales, rather than a fellow servant. When Nicholson's behaviour was attributed to failed romance, she was transformed from a dangerous, unpredictable

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[117] Sophie von la Roche, *Sophie in London 1786, being the Diary of Sophie v. la Roche*, trans. Clare Williams (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933) 169.
[118] Clare Williams chose to omit this passage in her 1933 translation of von la Roche's diary.
[119] Sophie von la Roche, *Tagebuch einer Reise durch Holland und England: von der Verfasserin von Rosaliens Briefen* (Karben: Petra Wald, 1997) 354-355. Many thanks to Dr. Mascha Gemmeke of Ernst Moritz Arndt University Greifswald for translating from the original German.

enigma into a fictional stereotype of a woman suffering from the familiar experience of spurned love and abandonment. Through this narrative shaping, she became reassuringly familiar and therefore a less threatening figure.

Chapter 2. 1787-1819: Still in the Air

Topical stories are often dismissed, buried, and utterly forgotten as soon as the next leading scandal arises to displace its predecessor. The public, however, did not forget Margaret Nicholson. Perhaps it was the royal connection; perhaps it was the fact that she was a woman who attempted the masculine crime of assassination; perhaps it was the sheer oddity of her claims, or the mystery of what had turned her from a respectable maid and needlewoman into a threat to national security, who needed to be locked up in an asylum for the rest of her life. Whatever the reason, Margaret Nicholson, now safely confined in Bedlam far from the public eye, continued to fascinate readers, and merited a considerable number of allusions in the years following her assassination attempt.

References to Nicholson appeared in genres as diverse as personal letters, newspapers, poetry, and histories. During the period of from 1787 (the year after the assassination attempt) to 1819 (the year prior to the death of George III), the Nicholson case evolved from being a current event to part of the cultural history of England, and was, therefore, ripe for being retold, refigured, and reshaped by writers and poets.

Nicholson continued to merit passing references in personal letters. The Loyalist clergyman, Samuel Peters, received a letter in 1787 from his friend Rev. William Clark, who was living in Anapolis-Royal, Nova Scotia, which responded to Peters' "humorous account of Elizabeth Nicholson, confined to Bedlam".[120] Stories about Nicholson, albeit with a new first name, continued to circulate as far afield as a British colony on the opposite side of the Atlantic.

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[120] "Letter 288," *The Papers of Loyalist Samuel Peters*, ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1978) 48.

In 1788, Horace Walpole reported in a letter to the Countess of Upper Ossory that "two new stalls [have been] added in the church of St. George, at Windsor" to accommodate the expanded number of Knights of the Garter. While he admits that "one of the bas-reliefs I do not know," though he suggests that it is "probably the martyrdom of St. Edmund the King," he confidently reports that the second carving is undoubtedly "the ineffected martyrdom of George the King, by Margaret Nicholson."[121] Walpole's letter is the only surviving document that attests to the appearance of this carving so relatively soon after the assassination attempt: according to later guidebooks, such as Charles Andrews' *The Visitant's Guide to Windsor* (1828) and J. B. Brown's *The Royal Windsor Guide* (1831), the bas-relief of Nicholson's assassination attempt was supposedly not added until 1814, when "an addition was made to the number of knights, and six new stalls were in consequence added, in front of which are carved the attempt of Margaret Nicholson to assassinate his late Majesty."[122] Walpole seems to have been captivated by the carving, as he described it again, in more detail, in a letter to a different correspondent three years later, in 1791:

> …in the midst of all this solemnity, in a small angle over the lower stalls, is crammed a small bas-relief, in oak, with the story of Margaret Nicholson, the King, and the coachman, as ridiculously added, and as clumsily executed, as if it were a monkish miracle. Some loyal zealot has broken away the blade of the knife, as if the sacred royal personage would have been in danger still.[123]

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[121] "To Lady Ossory, Tuesday 22 July 1788," *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, vol. 34 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) 11.
[122] *The Visitant's Guide to Windsor*, 4th ed. (London: Charles Andrews, 1828) 27.
[123] "To Mary Berry, Sunday 9 October 1791," *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, vol. 11 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) 363.

Nicholson was still on Walpole's mind another three years later, in 1794, as he wrote of her once more, wryly asking his correspondent, "Don't you pity Margaret Nicholson? She came before her time or she might have been entitled to the honours of sepulture with Mirabeau, Marat, and other felons of this consecrating age. Poor woman! She is forgotten…"[124] As Walpole notes, Nicholson's memory had not been enshrined in a grand graveyard tomb: nonetheless, Nicholson was not truly forgotten, either by Walpole, or by other writers of the age.

Nicholson was not only a subject of correspondence: she also acted as a correspondent. Newspaper reports of her incarceration uniformly reported that, upon being secured in her cell, she "reminded [her keeper] of his promise, that she should have pen, ink, and paper, saying, that she had letters to write." When the requested writing implements were supplied—reported as a sign of the progressiveness of the English state asylum—Nicholson "did not attempt to write any thing," though a messenger "waited near an hour" to deliver any messages she wished.[125] However, Nicholson did successfully write a number of missives later in her time at Bedlam.[126] None of these missives were widely available during the eighteenth century; they would have circulated only amongst a select group of public officials who were involved in Nicholson's trial and incarceration. However, these letters form a significant part of Nicholson's legacy:

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[124] "To Mary Berry, Monday 29 September 1786," *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, vol. 12 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) 117.
[125] *The Gentleman's Magazine* 56.2 (1786): 710.
[126] Some of these letters are preserved at the National Archives at Kew and at the Pforzheimer Collection at the New York Public Library. It is notable that the Pforzheimer Collection, unlike the National Archives at Kew, is not composed of official records; its documents are gathered from estate sales and personal bequests. These letters by Nicholson were all intercepted by some unknown but apparently well-connected individual in the eighteenth-century who felt that they were worth preserving for his own collection, and these missives continued to be kept by later collectors. The fact that any of these missives, outside of the official records, survive at all, is a testament to the cultural currency that Nicholson and her story continued to hold in the years following 1786.

while the general public may not have been aware of their existence or subject matter, the letters provide a useful biographical counterpoint to the rumours and fictionalizations which abounded in other writings about Nicholson. These documents also provide a different angle to Nicholson's fictionalization—Nicholson is fashioning herself in these documents.

In a letter written to the king on August 7, 1787, a year and five days after the assassination attempt, Nicholson petitions him, in rather convoluted language, to "fully discharge[e] me from this Inveterate Confinement" and requests that "in case you think it proper to send any friends to take me out" he "appoint Sir James Erskine" (a Whig member of parliament who had acted as one of the managers of Warren Hastings' impeachment) for the task.[127] This letter is relatively brief in comparison with one to the Privy Council,[128] which "earnestly requests they will recommend… me to His Royal Highness the prince of wales In Case He Can accomplish parental Consent" to grant Nicholson's petition, though she does not clarify for what she is actually asking. Her missive rambles along in fragmented sentences, though some of her phrases individually betray a talent for poetic diction and dramatic allusions. She paraphrases one of Viola's lines from *Twelfth Night* in her assertion that "I am here fetter[d] from all Society pineing Between too Idols Like patience on a Monument Concealing grief."[129] She also alludes to John Home's *Douglas* (1756), indicating that she was well enough acquainted with the play, either in performance or in print, to paraphrase and quote from memory: Nicholson writes, "Brought me here a captive were know the Spectacle and tale of me/Enough to

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[127] "SC6: Margaret Nicholson to George III," *Shelley and His Circle: 1773-1822*, vol. 1, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) 88.
[128] The Pforzheimer Collection tentatively dates this document as August 9, c. 1786-1794.
[129] "SC3: Margaret Nicholson to the Privy Council," *Shelley and His Circle: 1773-1822*, vol. 1, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) 35; see *Twelfth Night* 2.4.114-115.

awe the vasal man…"[130], which is strikingly similar to Home's lines, "Making a spectacle, a tale of me, / To awe it's vassal, man."[131] She also employs vivid phrases in this letter such as: "my Ardent Zeal with it has thus Brought me here a captive," "ransom me from these Injorious Laws," "repeal me from my tedious and prejured Exile," and "fear not zemblian frowns or ever Smiling Cold." The last phrase is perhaps an allusion to the chilly temperatures of Bedlam, as this obscure adjective was usually employed in reference to a group of Arctic islands, Nova Zembla. This rare word appeared in James Cawthorn's poem "The Vanity of Human Enjoyments" (1749) and in the 1782 edition of *The Critical Review*, edited by Tobias Smollett. Her use of the uncommon term suggests that Nicholson was indeed widely read, as indicated in her brother's trial testimony that "she employed herself… in reading Milton's Paradise Lost and such high stiled Books."[132] Certainly, the register of her diction is hardly what one would expect of an undereducated housemaid and needlewoman. Her writing is almost impressionistic—it is topically linked, small phrases are carefully constructed, and produces a thematic impression overall. However, it makes no collective grammatical sense. Nicholson's writings in Bedlam may be compared to other similar narratives of insanity appearing in eighteenth-century literature. Writing about the mad papers in Richardson's *Clarissa*, Tom Keymer argues that the title heroine's disjointed manuscripts, written after her rape by the rake Lovelace, "mark a state in which coherent discourse has come to seem at once

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[130] "SC3: Margaret Nicholson to the Privy Council," *Shelley and His Circle: 1773-1822*, Vol. 1, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) 35.
[131] John Home, *Douglas, a Tragedy: As it is acted at the Theatres-Royal in Drury-Lane and Covent-Garden* (London: Harrison and Co, 1780) 15.
[132] "The Examination of George Nicholson," HO 42/9/457-458.

unattainable and invalid... In every sense, discourse is ruptured."[133] Nicholson's discourse from Bedlam is similarly confused and confusing.

Nicholson's case attracted the earnest censure of two female poets of the period. Hannah Wallis included a poem entitled "Thanks to God for the Preservation of the Life of our Sovereign King George III from the Hands of Margaret Nicholson, who attempted to assassinate his Majesty" in her 1787 collection of poetry, *The Female's Meditations, Or Common Occurrences Spiritualized in Verse*. Wallis, a Methodist poet, is known only through this single work: the scant extant biographical details about her life have been deduced through the contents of her poetry.[134] Her collection as a whole received unfavourable evaluations: the March 1789 edition of *The Monthly Review* declared that "this poor Methodist… [would] never write tolerable verse,"[135] and *The English Review* concluded that "Hannah Wallis would have employed her time better in making herself clean and tidy, darning stockings, or getting up small linen."[136] Wallis' verse on Nicholson is a loyal prayer of thanksgiving to God for protecting George III against Nicholson. She is particularly harsh on the specifically female assassin, writing that "Thou woulds't not give him up to Death, / By a base Woman's Hand."[137] After enumerating the virtues of life in England under the rule of George III, Wallis rhetorically asks, "Since we these Blessings still enjoy, / What could offend the Maid?"[138] By way of

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[133] Tom Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 223.
[134] "Hannah Wallis," *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 407-408
[135] Qtd. in Lonsdale, 407.
[136] "Art. 31. The Female's Meditations, or Common Occurrences Spiritualized in Verse," *The English Review, or, an Abstract of English and Foreign Literature* 12 (1789): 314.
[137] Hannah Wallis, "Thanks to God for the Preservation of the Life of our Sovereign King George III from the Hands of Margaret Nicholson, who attempted to assassinate his Majesty," *The Female's Meditations, Or Common Occurrences Spiritualized in Verse* (London: C. Watts, 1787) 3.
[138] Wallis 3.

explanation, she narrates a now-familiar story of Nicholson's excessive pride: "Sure Pride and Want had seiz'd her Brain, / And tortur'd so her Mind; / In Frenzy 'tempts her Sovereign's Life, / Who gracious is and kind."[139] The poet paraphrases the King's famous merciful remarks into metre: "His Lenity Excused her Fault, / He thought she was Insane: / 'Take Care of her, but hurt her not,' / No Anger did she gain," and notes that the line in quotation marks were "the King's own Words at the time she was taken."[140] Wallis praises the king and queen for a few more stanzas, and closes her poem with a pious observation on the royal couple: "And when their moral Lives shall end, / May God give them a Crown, / In Heav'n, to cast at Jesu's Feet, / Of Glory and Renown!"[141]

Jane Elizabeth Moore, writing in 1796, is even more condemnatory of Nicholson than Wallis had been in 1787. Moore, the daughter of an immigrant French leather manufacturer, had first published her three-volume *Genuine Memoirs* in prose in either 1785 or 1786, and had a number of her poems published in the *Sentimental and Masonic Magazine* in 1795. She published *Miscellaneous Poems, on Various Subjects* by subscription in 1796, with a second edition released the following year.[142] Moore's poem, entitled, "On Margaret Nicholson's Infamous Attempt upon the Life of his Majesty on the 2d of August, 1786," opens with a dramatic declaration and continues in an indignant tone:

> Scorn of thy sex! thou Regicide at heart!
>
> Who dar'd presumptuous at thy Sov'reign dart!
>
> Thy direful vengeance fail'd thy torrid zeal,

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[139] Wallis 4.
[140] Wallis 4.
[141] Wallis 5.
[142] Jane Moore, "Jane Elizabeth Moore," *Irish Women Poets of the Romantic Period* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2008). I am grateful to Dr. Jane Moore for providing me with a copy of her article.

And stem'd the rigour of thy fatal weal.

Monster of woe! keep thy terrific stroke

For those who treason own and leagues have broke;

Nor on the anointed bosom of thy King,

Dare thy insidious arm around to fling;

Did his inspired dignity thy wrath enrage,

His philanthropy should thy mind assuage;

Wert thou of hellish as of human frame,

E'en Dæmons would despise thy horrid name![143]

Both Hannah Wallis and Jane Elizabeth Moore are particularly harsh in their judgements of Nicholson, perhaps more so than their male counterparts. Not content to portray Nicholson as simply misguided, they use words such as "monster" and "hellish" to characterize the assassin as evil. It is possible that, as women, they felt the need to more strongly align themselves with their sovereign to avoid any sort of gender identification with a mad, disloyal woman like Nicholson.

In celebration of George III's successful escape from assassination at the hands of Margaret Nicholson, virtually all cities and towns in the realm sent in messages of loyal congratulation, all repeating similar pious messages of loyalty and praise for the monarch's mercy. In this spirit of festivity, the king decided to award a large number of knighthoods. Most of the men singled out for this honour tended to be low-ranking public officials such as mayors, sheriffs, and aldermen. The opinion was expressed that this wholesale knighting devalued the rank of knight, and thus the term "Peg Nicholson

[143] Jane Elizabeth Moore, "On Margaret Nicholson's Infamous Attempt on the Life of his Majesty on the 2d of August, 1786," *Miscellaneous Poems on Various Subjects* (Dublin: Printed for the Author, 1796) 51.

Knight" was coined to describe those who had been honoured in 1786 for relatively insignificant service. The phrase "Peg Nicholson's Knights" and, less commonly, "the Order of Peg Nicholson" or "Knight of the Order of St. Margaret" became a general slur against those who were knighted on little merit. In 1790, two satirical poems on Nicholson using this concept appeared. "An Epistle: From Margaret Nicholson to her Knights" appeared in *The Attic Miscellany*. The main conceit of the poem is that the men who were given titles in celebration of George III's successful escape from Nicholson's assassination attempt ought to be kinder and more attentive to Nicholson in Bedlam, since she was ultimately responsible for their elevation to the knighthood. Nicholson is presented as the neglected benefactor of these newly-minted knights.[144] A song called "Peg Nicholson's Knights" also appeared in 1790. Written by John Freeth, a tavern keeper from Birmingham, it has the tone of a bar-room ballad or drinking song. There are seven verses, interspersed with repetitions of the following chorus:

> But this I'll say— by night or day,
> No woman in her senses,
> Would e'er pretend— to lift her hand,
> Against the best of princes.[145]

The song is as concerned with the creation of Peg Nicholson knights as with the assassination attempt or the assassin herself. The first half of the song narrates the king's fortunate escape from Nicholson's "desert weapon" and surmises "what mischief might the jade have done, / Arm'd with a soldier's dagger!" Freeth then observes that "in France, I trust / For such a flagrant act, Sir, / Insane or not, the culprit must / Have on the

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[144] See Appendix 2 for the full text and commentary on this poem.
[145] John Freeth, "Peg Nicholson's Knights," *The Political Songster* (Birmingham: Thomas Pearson, 1790): 169.

wheel been rack'd, Sir" and comments that, instead of facing the death penalty in Britain, Nicholson instead "cause[d] a score / Of tinkers to be knighted."[146] He notes that "one poor Bedlamite has caus'd / A race of knights to spring up" and suggests that the "borough bailiffs" who were knighted due to her assassination attempt ought to "club pence and buy Peg Nicholson / A feather bed to sleep on."[147]

The final lines include a pointed slight to the disloyal former American colonies: "tell it in America, that George the Third is living" (170), which may also be read as a commentary on false rumours of the king's death that circulated after the assassination attempt. The short story entitled "A Canterbury Tale," appended to James Ridgeway's *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson*, comically narrates how the rumours surrounding Nicholson's attack of the king rapidly spread and became exponentially more doleful. A traveller at Canterbury hears that "twenty desperadoes, armed with daggers" rushed into St. James's and killed the King, two Secretaries of State, the President of the Council, and the Lord Chancellor. The Queen and Princesses were reportedly committed to the Tower of London, and Charles Fox, "in woman's cloaths," took control of the Bank, the Crown, and the Jewel Office.[148] As the "terrified" traveller makes his way to London to verify this news, he hears a different version at every town through which he passes. At Dover, Rochester, Chatham, Shuter's Hill, Blackheath, and the Kent-Bar Turnpike, he hears reports of the king's death, though the particulars of the assassination change dramatically. Once he reaches the "Surry side of Westminster bridge," however, he hears that the king is wounded, but not dead, and upon reaching St.

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[146] Freeth 169.
[147] Freeth 170.
[148] "A Canterbury Tale," *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of Margaret Nicholson* (London: J. Ridgeway, 1786) A1.

James's, he learns the true identity of the assassin and is told of the king's continuing good health.

In 1790, Nicholson temporarily escaped from Bedlam. The escape of such a notorious lunatic did not receive the media coverage that one might expect from an incarcerated would-be assassin who still had enough cultural currency to merit continued poetical and satirical references. Nicholson's supposed escape had been falsely reported with great fervour in 1786, when a different woman escaped from an asylum:

> ...a female lunatic having escaped from her keepers, finding the back door open of the Attorney General's house in New Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, went in… an alarm was consequently excited. The house was searched, and the woman found sitting with the utmost composure… a report was instantly spread through the neighbourhood, that Lord George Gordon had assisted Margaret Nicholson in her escape from Bedlam, and that she was now come to *open* her *case* to the Attorney General, and to have his opinion on the legality of her confinement. A great crowd gathered round the house to know the truth of the circumstance… [It was] found, on cooler enquiry, that there was no plot in the business, and the woman was accordingly returned to her keeper, with an injunction to keep her more strictly confined in future.[149]

The false report of Nicholson's escape in 1786 merited more newspaper inches than her actual escape four years later. The report of her 1790 escape survives only in one newspaper (though other reports may have been published, they have not been preserved). The *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* reported that:

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[149] *The Times* [London], 4 November 1786: 2.

> This unfortunate woman, of whose derangement of intellect the public has heard so much, contrived to escape from her confinement in Bedlam on Saturday morning. She went directly to the house of her brother, a publican in Milford-lane, where she was found by persons in quest of her, and carried back to her lodging so much against her inclination, that it was necessary to use force.[150]

Nicholson's escape route, from Bedlam in Moorfields to George Nicholson's pub, the Three Horseshoes in the Strand, would have been approximately two miles. The tale of Nicholson's escape was also retold in *The Story of London Parks*, published in about 1872, decades after Nicholson's death. At the conclusion of Jacob Larwood's retelling of Nicholson's assassination attempt, trial, and the tale of Peg Nicholson's Knights, he adds a postscript included in no other accounts, reporting that "Poor Peg was lodged in Bedlam, chained to the ground by her leg… Peg Nicholson escaped once, in 1790, but was recaptured the same day."[151]

It is uncertain how restrained Nicholson was in Bedlam. When she was incarcerated in Bedlam on Wednesday, August 9, exactly one week after her assassination attempt,

> …a chain was put round her leg, and fastened to the floor. Whilst this was doing, she was perfectly composed and did not seem to take any notice of it. On being asked by the Steward if the chain hurt her leg, as it should be altered if it did? She replied, "No, not at all." [152]

Visitors, such as Sophie von la Roche and William Knollys, who later viewed Nicholson in Bedlam make no mention of her being restrained in any way. No note of Nicholson's

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[150] "Margaret Nicholson," *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* 27 September 1790: 3.
[151] Jacob Larwood, *The Story of the London Parks*, vol. 2 (London: John Camden Hotten, c. 1872) 252.
[152] "Margaret Nicholson," *The Times* [London] 11 August 1786: 3.

escape is extant in official hospital records, but the consequences of her escape are alluded to in the minutes of a March 1791 meeting of the Bethlem Sub Committee: "a motion was made… that Marg[t]. Nicholson be no longer confined in her Cell by a chain."[153] Nicholson had apparently been chained upon her recapture in September 1790, but seemed to have proved docile, as her chain was removed six months later.

If anyone was tempted to dismiss Nicholson's case as passé in the early years of the nineteenth century, a slim quarto volume of poetry appeared in 1810, which would not allow them to forget the madwoman in Bedlam so easily. While an undergraduate at University College, Oxford, a youthful Percy Bysshe Shelley decided to publish a collection of verse entitled *The Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson: Being Poems Found amongst the Papers of that Noted Female Who Attempted the Life of the King in 1786*. Shelley presented himself as the editor of the collection, one John Fitzvictor, supposed nephew of Margaret Nicholson. He introduced the collection with a brief explanatory "Advertisement," in which he explained that:

> The energy and native genius of these Fragments, must be the only apology which the Editor can make for thus intruding them on the Public Notice… much as we may deplore the fatal and enthusiastic tendency which the ideas of this poor female had acquired, we cannot fail to pay the tribute of unequivocal regret to the memory of departed genius, which, had it been rightly organized, would have made that intellect, which had since become the victim of phrenzy and despair, a most brilliant ornament to society.[154]

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[153] "12 March 1791," *Bethlem Sub Committee Book, 12 Feb 1791-14 Feb 1795*, HCM/17, Royal Bethlem Hospital Archives and Museum, Beckenham, Kent.
[154] *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. 1, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 92.

Shelley's introduction fits into the pre-existing stereotype of Nicholson as a wise lunatic or natural genius, and also feeds into the idea that geniuses were of delicate mental states: there was a fine line between genius and madness.

Shelley was born in 1792, six years after Nicholson's assassination attempt, and published *Posthumous Fragments* in 1810, twenty-four years after the attack. One may wonder how Shelley was initially exposed to the story of the mad assassin of George III; the most likely source was Dr. James Lind, Shelley's tutor at Eton from 1809 to 1810.[155] Lind had been a regular visitor and trusted friend at the court of George III and would certainly have heard first-hand of the assassination attempt in 1786. The elderly Lind reportedly enjoyed regaling Shelley with stories of his long life,[156] and the story of George III's narrow escape from assassination at the hands of a madwoman would no doubt have presented itself as an interesting tale. Shelley greatly valued Lind's stories: according to his biographer and friend, T. J. Hogg, Shelley said that Dr. Lind was "exactly what an old man ought to be... I owe to that man far, ah! far more than I owe my father: he loved me, and I shall never forget our long talks..."[157] Though Shelley was generally dismissive of the wisdom of his elders, the young poet deeply valued Lind's mentorship, [158] and would have been no doubt intrigued by the long-past assassination attempt related by his tutor. However, while Lind may have been the source of Shelley's first exposure to the facts of the Nicholson case, it is doubtful that Lind shared the young poet's republican ideals and sympathy for the assassin, as Lind was a close and loyal friend of George III.

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[155] Christopher Goulding, "The Real Doctor Frankenstein?", *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 95 (May 2002): 257.
[156] D. G. King-Hele, "Shelley and Science," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 46.2 (July 1992): 253-254.
[157] Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *Life of Shelley*, Vol. 1 (London: Dent, 1933) 35.
[158] King-Hele 254.

Shelley's verses present a view of Nicholson so sympathetic that Lady Charlotte Bury described the young poet thus:

> We have lately had a literary Sun shine forth upon us here… a Mr. Shelley, of University College, who lives upon arsenic, aqua-fortis, half-an-hour's sleep in the night, and is desperately in love with the memory of Margaret Nicholson. He hath published, what he terms, the Posthumous Poems… which, I am grieved to say, though stuffed full of treason, are extremely dull; but the Author is a great genius, and, if he be not clapped up in Bedlam or hanged, will certainly prove one of the sweetest swans on the tuneful margin of the Charwell.[159]

In *Posthumous Fragments,* Shelley shapes Margaret Nicholson into an anti-monarchical, republican heroine, though this characterization runs counter to the pre-existing narrative tradition surrounding Nicholson. In previous newspaper reports, chapbooks, and other accounts, it is made clear that Nicholson does not object to the nature or existence of monarchy, but instead doubts the legitimacy of George III's claim to the English throne. Shelley, however, revises Nicholson into an exemplary mouth-piece for his own radical political views.

The anti-monarchical poem, "Ambition, power, and avarice, now have hurl'd," may be considered a precursor to Shelley's later sonnet, "England in 1819." Both poems use similar imagery of bulk and pointless death on fields better used for agriculture: compare "See! On yon heath what countless victims lie" ("Ambition" line 3) with "A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field" ("England" line 7). Both poems address the sensory imperfection and mortality of a monarch: the dying soldier in "Ambition" laments, "He hears me not—ah! no—kings cannot hear, / For passion's voice has dull'd

[159] Lady Charlotte Bury, *The Diary of a Lady in Waiting,* vol. 1 (London: Bodley Head, 1908) 35.

their listless ear" (lines 15-16) and the narrator ultimately concludes that "Kings are but dust—the last eventful day/ Will level all and make them lose their sway" (lines 59-60), while "England in 1819" includes the images of "An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king" (line 1) and "Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know" (line 4).

The longest of the *Posthumous Fragments*, "Supposed to be an Epithalamium of Francis Ravaillac and Charlotte Cordé," is a nuptial poem in praise of a bride and groom, who are, in this case, two French assassins from different periods. François Ravaillac, a Catholic extremist, had killed King Henri IV in 1610, and Charlotte Corday had assassinated the radical Jacobin Jean-Paul Marat in his bathtub in 1793. The narrator of the poem dismisses the minor temporal detail that the pair lived nearly two centuries apart, musing that "Congenial minds will seek their kindred soul,/ E'en though the tide of time has roll'd between;/ They mock weak matter's impotent control,/ And seek of endless life the eternal scene" (lines 42-45). Ravaillac, Corday, and Nicholson had all used knives to carry out their murderous attacks, though Ravaillac and Corday used weapons which were more deadly and effective than Nicholson's dessert knife. Shelley's choice to ally Nicholson with these two French assassins indicates his desire to rewrite Nicholson as a noble, revolutionary figure rather than an ambitious madwoman. The apparently well-matched couple of Ravaillac and Corday fondly praise their mutual acts of violence:

> Yes Francis! thine was the dear knife that tore
>
> A tyrant's heart-strings from his guilty breast…
>
> And thine, lov'd glory of thy sex! To tear
>
> From its base shrine a despot's haughty soul… (lines 51-52, 55-56)

The poem presents a morbid vision of the couple romantically bonding through their shared experience of gory murders. Shelley concludes the nuptial poem with a vision of the marital union eternally enjoyed by Corday and Ravaillac in death:

> And I will recline on thy marble neck
>
> Till I mingle into thee.
>
> And I will kiss the rose on thy cheek,
>
> And thou shalt give kisses to me.
>
> For here is no morn to flout our delight.
>
> Oh, dost thou not joy at this?
>
> And here we may lye an endless night,
>
> A long, long night of bliss. (lines 95-102)

It is interesting that Shelley chose to mate Corday with a male revolutionary from another period: immediately after her assassination of Marat, it was generally assumed that Corday had acted under the influence of a husband or lover, but it soon became apparent that she had neither.[160] It is possible that Shelley's romantic pairing of the two French assassins betrays a similar romantic interest on his part: he may have felt that the metaphysical concept that "Congenial minds will seek their kindred soul,/ E'en though the tide of time has roll'd between" (lines 42-43) would be equally applicable to himself and Margaret Nicholson, forty-seven years his senior. If Shelley felt an attachment to the romanticized, revolutionized version of Nicholson he created in *Posthumous Fragments*,

[160] Nina Corazzo and Catherine R. Montfort, "Charlotte Corday: *femme-homme*," *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine R. Montfort (Birmingham: Summa Publications, 1994) 45.

this emotion would help to explain Lady Charlotte Bury's off-handed comment that the young poet was "desperately in love with the memory of Margaret Nicholson."[161]

In "Despair," the narrator rails against the natural world for presenting images of beauty and peace "whilst throbs the tempest of my breast so high" (line 6). The narrator expresses a wish that the external world would "Pour the fierce tide around this lonely form,/ And roll the tempest's wildest swell along" (lines 21-22) in order to better match her own distressed inner state. In the final stanza, the narrator claims that all traditional virtues which stand against despair have left: "hope and peace, and joy, for aye are fled" (line 30). If Nicholson herself is assumed to be the unnamed narrator, the main conceit of this poem is an odd choice. Despair might be a natural enough emotion for one permanently confined to Bedlam, but, by virtue of her confinement, Nicholson would not have had any occasion to see the calm and beauty of the external natural world. Once more, the emotional viewpoints of the young poet and the assassin have been conflated and blurred.

The verse simply entitled "Fragment" is a funereal lament for the death of the hopeful soul before bodily death occurs. The opening lines set out the theme and central question of the poem:

> YES! all is past—swift time has fled away,
>
> Yet its swell pauses on my sickening mind:
>
> How long will horror nerve this frame of clay? (lines 1-3)

It is not hope, love, or any other virtue which continues to power the fleshly frame, but instead only horror. This poetic reflection on the extension of physical life past any emotional desire for life may have been intended as a commentary on Nicholson's

[161] Bury 35.

exceptionally long life in Bedlam; despite of the title of *Posthumous Verses,* Nicholson did not actually die until 1828, at the age of eighty-three. Shelley's poetic image of horror nerving a frame of clay anticipates Mary Shelley's later, more literal version of this concept in *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The novelist employs language and imagery strikingly similar to that of "Fragment":

> Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? … a resistless and almost frantic impulse urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit… I collected bones from charnel-houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame.[162]

In their commentary on *Posthumous Fragments*, Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat seem content to dismiss "Fragment" as probably "one of the poems that [Shelley] dashed off while Henry Slatter waited for additional copy for the press."[163] However, in the context of the narrative tradition of Nicholson, and of thoughts later expressed in Mary Shelley's seminal novel, this minor verse by Shelley takes on greater literary significance.

"The Spectral Horseman" is a poem filled with screaming, shrieking, and other Gothic noises. The narrator speaks chillingly of "the shriek that struck fancy's ear" (line 1), "the Benshie's moan on the storm" (line 5), a fiend's "low moan on the stillness of night" (line 11), "a yelling vampire reeking with gore" (line 13), "howls in the pause of the eddying storm" (line 21), "the death-demon's scream" (line 24), "the laughter of

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[162] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, 2nd ed (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999) 82.
[163] Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, "Commentary for Posthumous Fragments," *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 256.

fiends when they howl o'er the corpse" (line 25), "shrieking in agony" (line 54), and "unearthly sounds" (line 60). This cacophony of tortured voices is appropriate to a disturbed mind confined to Bedlam, but does not seem to bear any particular significance to the character or situation of Nicholson more than any other Bedlamite.

The final verse, "Melody to a Scene of Former Times," is a lament for lost love and emotional intimacy. The narrator, while questioning if love was given to mortals "to lift them to the height of heaven,/ Or dash them to the depths of hell?" (lines 6-7), does not blame the beloved for her pain:

> Yet I do not reproach thee dear!...
>
> Oh! heaven is witness I did love,
>
> And heaven does know I love thee still,
>
> Does know the fruitless sick'ning thrill,
>
> When reason's judgment vainly strove
>
> To blot thee from my memory;
>
> But which might never, never be. (lines 8, 12-17)

Commentary on Shelley suggests that this poem was autobiographical in nature, and may have been motivated by the loss of the affection of Harriet Grove.[164] However, the theme of unrequited love also fits within the pre-existing narrative tradition surrounding Nicholson, more so than in any other of the *Posthumous Fragments*. Nicholson had reputedly been romantically involved with a fellow servant, a Swiss valet, to the point where "a wedding was expected to have been the consequence," but eventually "the ardour of the Swiss abated… and Margaret was at first slighted, then neglected."[165] This

[164] Reiman and Fraistat, "Commentary for Posthumous Fragments," 259.
[165] Fiske 9.

failed love affair was put forth as a potential explanation for Nicholson's madness: a newspaper article in 1786 sympathetically acknowledged that "this disappointment could not but affect the woman who was deserted." The journalist extrapolated from the situation, confidently asserting that "intense thought on one subject debilitates the mind; and with a temper already prone to melancholy, an accumulation of thought and distress must encrease intense thinking," and concluded that these introspective ruminations must have "produce[d] paroxisms of madness" in Nicholson.[166] Shelley may have been deliberately choosing to allude to the story of Nicholson's Swiss valet or he may have inadvertently and unconsciously identified with the character of Nicholson through their shared experience of failed romance.

[166] *London Chronicle*, 10 August 1786: 144.

Chapter 3. 1820-1899: Nineteenth-Century Versions

When George III died in 1820, Margaret Nicholson figured in many of his numerous obituaries. This seemed to spur a revival of public interest in her; it had, after all, been more than three decades since her assassination attempt, and she had already begun to enter the realm of historical curiosity. In 1821, the *Liverpool Mercury* reported that:

> Margaret Nicholson, the unfortunate woman who attempted to assassinate his late most excellent Majesty, in the year 1789 [sic], is still living, and is kept as a state patient, under nominal restraint, in Bethlem Hospital. Considering her advanced age, she is in possession of most of her faculties usual at those years, except that of hearing, which is quite gone.[167]

The story of her assassination attempt was also retold the same year in *The Public and Private Life of His Late Majesty, George III*, a detailed and lengthy rewriting which drew upon and combined accounts of the assassination and trial presented in earlier chapbooks and newspapers.[168] Also in 1821, Nicholson was mentioned in "Jonathan Kentucky's Journal," a column in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*. The reporter had made a visit to Bedlam, and related his experience:

> There are certain wards set apart for the reception of criminal lunatics. In one of these were assembled nine persons, every one of whom had committed murder; and it required no little exercise of nerve to feel at ease in such company. Amongst this class old Peg Nicholson was pointed out to us, who sometime in the

[167] *Liverpool Mercury* 23 February 1821: 3.
[168] Robert Huish, *The Public and Private Life of His Late Majesty, George III* (London: Thomas Kelly, 1821) 468-476.

> last century attempted the life of King George the Third, and whose appearance, or rather apparition, after the lapse of so many years, seemed like a resurrection from the dead.[169]

By 1821, thirty-five years after her assassination attempt, Nicholson had already entered the realm of myth: she is the ghost of a long-forgotten quarrel from a past regime.

Nicholson's story, however, was resurrected in 1823, when she was made the subject of a chapter in the anonymous publication *Sketches in Bedlam*. Her name still commanded enough attention to be the first mentioned in the subtitle: "Characteristic traits of insanity: as displayed in the cases of one hundred and forty patients of both sexes, now, or recently, confined in New Bethlem, including Margaret Nicholson, James Hatfield, Patrick Walsh, Bannister Truelock, and many other extraordinary maniacs, who have been transferred from Old Bethlem." This work provides the most detailed surviving narrative of Nicholson in old age. After giving a brief account of her assassination attempt, the anonymous author provides Nicholson's own account of her motivations:

> Margaret herself, when much more communicative than of recent years, has given a very different account of the transaction which led to her confinement… She has declared, that she had not the remotest intention to injure his Majesty; on the contrary, "that she had a great notion of him." She had lived with a great family where his Majesty used to visit occasionally, and the King frequently looked at her in a manner which she thought bespoke kindness and regard. That being afterwards out of situation for some time, she imagined the King a likely person to recommend her to a good one… she had, therefore, determined to petition his

[169] *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 2 (London: Henry Colburn and Co, 1821) 529-530.

> Majesty as a last resource… she attended with her petition, and took her post at the garden-gate leading to the palace. That, unfortunately, having a knife in her pocket along with the petition, and being rather anxious and confused, and afraid of missing her presentation, as the King passed from his carriage, in the hurry of the moment she drew out the knife instead of the paper, and rushed forward to deliver it into his royal hand; when she was instantly seized, and accused of attempting to stab his Majesty, than which nothing could be farther from her intention.[170]

This is the first time that any alternative motivation for Nicholson's actions appeared in print. The author of *Sketches in Bedlam* comments that "it appears that her story, if she told it at the time, was not believed."[171] Nicholson did not in fact tell this version of events during her examination by the privy council on August 2: while she asserted that "she meant no Injury but wanted to have her case heard before a Judge, that her Grievance is a Mystery which she cannot relate," she also claimed that she was "inevitably obligated to commit" the act of "Regicide" unless "your Majesty's accomodating circumstances enable me to withstand it."[172] Her examination makes no mention of inadvertently having a dessert knife in her pocket. This retelling of her potential motivations further complicates the character of Nicholson: is it possible that her diagnosis of insanity, and decades-long confinement in Bedlam, could have all been because of a misunderstanding? Or is this defence further evidence of Fiske's claim that she was a conniving woman, well-versed in the art of "swindling"? This text further blurs the line between Nicholson as aggressor and Nicholson as victim: in this version, she

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[170] *Sketches in Bedlam*, 2nd ed (London: Sherwood, Jones, and Co, 1824) 256.
[171] *Sketches in Bedlam* 256.
[172] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.

inhabits the trope of both the virtuous and innocent country girl, if her story is true, and the crafty and conniving servant, if her story is false.

Sketches in Bedlam also provides a unique portrayal of Nicholson in old age. She was reputedly a well-behaved patient, having "long since made up her mind to her confinement," therefore appearing "perfectly tranquil and contented," and "never evinc[ing] any prominent symptoms of insanity beyond the occasional irritation."[173] She had completely lost her hearing, but otherwise "enjoys a good state of health, is regular, cleanly, and attentive to her little concerns, and is desirous to render herself useful, so far as her great age will permit."[174] She had developed a number of quirks in old age, namely "a singular aversion to bread," and a "peculiar satisfaction" and "enjoy[ment]" of taking snuff. She also reportedly was given "the exclusive privilege of living apart from all the other criminal patients, in a ward appropriated as a nursery for the aged and infirm, and such as are quiet and harmless."[175] These details of the life of the elderly Nicholson mark the emergence of yet another trope in the narrative tradition surrounding Nicholson: that of the odd but generally harmless grandmotherly figure. This narrative tradition is most strongly continued in Greg Hollingshead's 2004 novel, *Bedlam: A Novel of Love and Madness*, which will be addressed in detail below in chapter 4.

The year after *Sketches in Bedlam* was first published, Nicholson was portrayed by a "Mrs. Cobham" (probably the former Miss Drake, wife of actor Thomas Cobham[176]) in *George III: the Father of His People*, produced at the Royal Coburg Theatre in

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[173] *Sketches in Bedlam* 257.
[174] *Sketches in Bedlam* 257.
[175] *Sketches in Bedlam* 257.
[176] Joseph Knight and Katharine Cockin, "Cobham, Thomas (1779/1786–1842)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 14 August 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5746>.

September 1824.[177] The play includes two scenes featuring Margaret Nicholson: a re-enactment of the assassination attempt at the garden gate of St. James, and a scene set in the "Anti-Room in the Palace" which related an "anecdote of the 'Magnanimity of the Sovereign,' and 'forbearance towards the unhappy maniac who had attempted his life.'"[178] The piece was written by George Macfarren,[179] a prolific playwright who had a number of plays produced by the Royal Coburg Theatre during this period.[180] Regrettably, it does not appear that any text of the play survives today.[181]

Perhaps this resurgence of media interest in Nicholson prompted novelist John Galt to describe a character as "taper[ing] a fishing-rod with an old table-knife of the true Margaret Nicholson edge and pattern," in 1827, more than three decades after her assassination attempt.[182] The era of Margaret Nicholson in general was nostalgically conjured up by William Cobbett in his popular travelogue, *Rural Rides*, first published in 1830 and republished three more times in the nineteenth century. Cobbett described the Deptford Inn as:

> a famous place of meeting for the Yeomanry Cavalry, in glorious anti-jacobin times, when wheat was twenty-shillings a bushel, and when a man could be crammed into gaol for years, for only looking awry. This inn was a glorious place in the days of Peg Nicholson and her knights. Strangely altered now.[183]

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[177] *The John Bull Magazine and Literary Recorder* 6 September 1824: 1.
[178] *The John Bull Magazine and Literary Recorder* 6 September 1824: 1.
[179] Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930) 339.
[180] R. H. Legge and Rebecca Mills, "Macfarren, George (1788–1843)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 14 August 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17497>.
[181] While copies of the majority of Macfarren's other dramatic works are held at the Henry E. Huntington Library in California, the Huntington does not own a copy of *George III*.
[182] John Galt, *The Last of the Lairds* (London: Blackwood and Cadell, 1827) 41.
[183] William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, ed. Pitt Cobbett, vol. 2 (London: Reeves and Turner, 1885) 90-91.

In Cobbett's narrative, the idea of Peg Nicholson and her knights acts as a shorthand for the England of yore.

Nicholson's death in 1828 was reported in newspapers of the day. According to the records of Bethlem Hospital, she died on May 14 "of gradual decay."[184] The earliest surviving death notice appeared in the *Newcastle Courant* on Saturday, May 17:

> On Wednesday last, in Bethlehem Hospital, Margaret Nicholson, whose attack on the late King caused so many gentlemen to be knighted. She had been confined 42 years, and was insane all the time.[185]

This brief obituary touches on two recurring themes in narratives about Nicholson: her unintended role in creating knighthoods, and a reassurance that she was indeed insane. The obituary of the *Newcastle Courant* was reprinted in the London *Examiner* the following day, with a few more details appended:

> She always appeared much pleased whenever any of the Royal Family visited the Institution, and on the death of the late King, requested to be allowed to wear black ribbon. Her age is supposed to have been nearly 100 years.[186]

As an enduring celebrity, Nicholson still commanded enough cachet and public interest for her death to be briefly noted in *La Belle Assemblée*.[187] Later in 1828, the memory of Nicholson was conjured up in an editorial on public taste for morbidity. In September, the *Liverpool Mercury* ran a disapproving article on the "Reigning Taste for the Horrible and Terrific" which cited the exhibition of the knife (and matching fork) supposedly used

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[184] "Thursday 15th May 1828," *Bethlem Subcommittee Book 18 Aug 1825- 4 Dec 1828*, HCM/25, Royal Bethlem Hospital Archives and Museum, Beckenham, Kent.
[185] *Newcastle Courant* 17 May 1828: 3.
[186] *Examiner* [London] 18 May 1828: 2.
[187] *La Belle Assemblée, or Court and Fashionable Magazine* 7 (January-June 1828): 276.

by Nicholson in her attack as an example of the degradation of public taste, and ultimately dismissed contemporary English society as "a horde of barbarians."[188]

The phrase "Peg Nicholson Knight" became firmly entrenched in the cultural vocabulary of the nineteenth century. Walter Savage Landor alluded to "the knights and barons / Pitt and Peg Nicholson have made"[189] in his 1831 work *Gebir, Count Julian, and Other Poems*. In her 1843 novel, *The Banker's wife; or, Court and City*, Catherine Gore described "Lady Bondwell, as the lady-consort of a mere Peg-Nicholson-knight" being "overwhelmed at the idea of having to yield precedence to Lady Hamlyn."[190] In a critical essay on the works of Jane Austen first published in 1860, Victorian critic W. F. Pollock suggested that Sir William Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* was "probably one of Peg Nicholson's knights."[191] Pollock does not elaborate on this claim, assuming that his Victorian readers will be familiar with the phrase and the hollow gentility that it signifies. Austen may indeed have deliberately intended Sir William Lucas as an example of a Peg Nicholson knight, particularly since she notes that he had "risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the King, during his mayoralty."[192] The concept of a Peg Nicholson knight was indisputably known to the Austen family, since Jane Austen's brother James had used the term as part of a riddle written in verse.[193] Austen herself would have been ten years old when Nicholson's assassination attempt took place in August 1786. Austen's satirical nature would no doubt have, in the manner of her later

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[188] *Liverpool Mercury* 5 September 1828: 1.
[189] Walter Savage Landor, *Gebir, Count Julian, and Other Poems* (London: Edward Moxon, 1831) 366.
[190] Catherine Gore, *The Banker's wife; or, Court and City*, vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1843) 27.
[191] Qtd. in B. C. Southam, ed, *Jane Austen, 1811-1870: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1995) 171.
[192] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 19.
[193] David Selwyn, ed, *The Complete Poems of James Austen* (Chawton: Jane Austen Society, 2003) 124.

creation, Elizabeth Bennet, "delighted in any thing ridiculous,"[194] such as the situation of London aldermen and rural mayors being solemnly knighted on the occasion of the king's escape from Nicholson's attack, though they themselves provided no real service to the crown.

The story of Nicholson's assassination attempt was retold in Victorian histories of England. In *The Cabinet History of England*, published in 1846, Charles MacFarlane emphasized that Nicholson's attack "was scarcely a subject for jesting," since "though the woman was mad, if she had used a stronger knife there would have been blood and very possibly death."[195] MacFarlane disapprovingly notes that "the wits of the opposition party took up even this business as a matter of joke and burlesque" and suggests that though "George III could laugh at these jests at his own expense... many of them, hurtful to all kingly pride and state, must have rankled in his mind."[196] George Cunningham's 1853 volume, *A History of England in the Lives of Englishmen*, succinctly summarized Nicholson's assassination in a single paragraph, but added a lengthy footnote, which takes up nearly half the page, retelling the story of the failed romance with the valet copied from the *European Magazine* of August 1786.[197]

The Nicholson case was retold in considerable detail in *The New Wonderful Magazine* of 1849-1850, the title page of which promised "a carefully-selected collection of remarkable trials, biographies of wonderful or extraordinary characters, curious histories and adventures." The retelling opens *in medias res*, with Nicholson's attack on the king, then provides an account of her trial, examination, and eventual committal to

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[194] Austen 12.
[195] Charles MacFarlane, *The Cabinet History of England*, vol. 19 (London: Charles Knight and Co, 1846) 182.
[196] MacFarlane 182-183.
[197] George Godfrey Cunningham, ed, *A History of England in the Lives of Englishmen*, vol. 5 (London: A. Fullarton, 1853) 323.

Bedlam. It reinforces the apocryphal tale of her being born in Stockton-upon-Tees.[198] The details of the case are retold in a fairly reliable fashion: some names are altered (Evan Nepean becomes "Mr. Napeau," Ann Southey becomes "Ann Sontrey," and Pennister Topper becomes "Mr. Toplin") but the main events are recounted without any significant changes. An illustration of the assassination attempt accompanies the story. A hawk-nosed, hollow-cheeked George III, wearing the sash and star of the Order of the Garter, stands in the centre of the engraving, woodenly accepting a petition from Nicholson's left hand as she tries to stab him with her right. Nicholson is standing to the left of the king, necessitating an awkward, back-handed stabbing motion. An attendant guard, in generic finery (not the usual uniform of the Yeoman of the Guard which appears in earlier prints), is restraining the assassin by both hands in mid-stab. Nicholson herself is portrayed as fine-featured and slender, with a delicately shod foot peeking out from the hem of her dress as she steps forward to attack. In the text, there is no mention of the knife being a dull dessert knife, or in any way a less than impressive weapon. In the illustration, the knife itself is sharp and fearsome, and is forcefully aimed straight at the king's stomach.

The inclusion of this story, retold in a straightforward manner which emphasizes the potential danger that the monarch experienced, may have been a result of the assassination attempts on Queen Victoria. The first attempt took place in 1840;[199] two fresh attempts had occurred in 1850,[200] the year in which the *New Wonderful Magazine* was published. The author of *The New Wonderful Magazine* may have been attempting to capitalize on public interest in royal assassination attempts, both past and present.

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[198] "The Case of Margaret Nicholson," *The New Wonderful Magazine* 2 (1849-1850): 478.
[199] Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Queen Victoria: Her Life and Times*, vol. 1 (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972) 212-213.
[200] Woodham-Smith 310.

James Gregory, in his article on Victorian "eccentric biography," notes that the stories in *The New Wonderful Magazine* focused "on queens, regicides, murders, *lusus naturae*, [and] eccentrics."[201] The publisher, George Davidson, who usually published music, probably printed *The New Wonderful Magazine* in order to exploit the Victorian "fascination with eccentric behavior and strange physiologies."[202]

In 1867, the story of Margaret Nicholson's attack was recounted in *All the Year Round*, the periodical edited by Charles Dickens. The author of the article, entitled "Old Stories Re-Told," nostalgically conjures up the world of eighteenth-century London:

> Blue ribbons and diamond stars, satin train and ostrich plumes, were arriving every moment, either by Pall Mall or St. James's-street. Sedan-chairs and carriages were blocking every avenue to the palace. The old brick gateway gleamed with reflexions of scarlet uniforms and waving feathers… A cloud of dust, a flash of swords, a roll of wheels. The king. As the yeomen flung open the door, and the king alighted from his post-chariot, a little neatly dressed ruddy woman pressed forward to present a paper (a petition). As the king received it with kindly condescension, the woman drew forth an ivory-handled, half-worn-out dessert-knife, and struck at the king's breast: the thin point bending on his waistcoat. The poor crazed woman was making a second stab, when a yeoman caught her arm, and, at the same instant, one of the royal footmen wrenched the feeble weapon from her powerless hand.[203]

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[201] James Gregory, "Eccentric Biography and the Victorians," *Biography* 30.3 (2007): 345.
[202] Gregory 342.
[203] "Old Stories Re-Told," *All the Year Round* 26 January 1867: 113.

In this retelling, Nicholson is presented as undoubtedly insane, but also small and weak. The author is doubtful of the actual threat posed by Nicholson, and mocks the inappropriate outpourings of grief and loyalty to the king:

> The attempt at assassination was rather an impotent one. A little crazed old woman, armed with a limp, worn-out dessert knife, could hardly play the part of Brutus. Still the attempt was sufficient excuse for courtiers' flattery and for twopenny congratulatory odes and fulsome addresses running over with mouthy loyalty that meant nothing.[204]

Nicholson is domesticated into an unthreatening figure; the author notes that "the people always afterwards called her 'Peg,' in a half affectionate way."[205] The article's characterization of the assassin continues in the vein of Nicholson as a strange but ultimately unthreatening elderly lady. The author clearly consulted newspapers of the time, as he reports the same familiar details of Nicholson's trial and incarceration in Bedlam, including the scandal of her romance with the valet as the possible "cause of poor Peg's insanity." He also drew upon the account provided by *Sketches in Bedlam*, since he closes his article with a summary of the elderly Nicholson's life there. He dismisses the alternative explanation of Nicholson's actions given in *Sketches in Bedlam*, judging it as indicative of her "cunning of insanity, irritabil[ity] at confinement, and eager[ness] for escape."[206]

Margaret Nicholson merited inclusion in the staunchly Victorian institution of Madame Tussaud's: she was not immortalized in a waxwork, but her place in history did not go unchronicled. When the Duke of Sussex's possessions were auctioned off by

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[204] "Old Stories Re-Told," 113.
[205] "Old Stories Re-Told," 113.
[206] "Old Stories Re-Told," 115.

Christie's in 1843,[207] a number of items were purchased from the estate by the sons of Madame Tussaud.[208] These assorted paraphernalia were housed in a display unit which later became known as the Case of Sussex Relics.[209] Amidst the diverse items, which included a "snuff-box originally belonging to James II," a "shoe of Pope Pius VI," and some "hair of George III," was a knife, advertised as "the Knife with which Margaret Nicholson attempted to assassinate George III."[210] The so-called Sussex Relics were exhibited at Madame Tussaud's permanent collection, housed at the Baker Street Bazaar, at the junction of Baker Street and Portman Square.[211] Ironically, this building was less than a block away from the location of Nicholson's former lodgings with the Fiske family, at the corner of Wigmore Street and Portman Square.[212] The knife remained in the Tussaud collection, appearing by name in the detailed Tussaud Exhibition catalogues of 1866, 1880, and 1886. By 1901, while the Case of Sussex Relics was noted in the catalogue, only a selection of items within the case are listed, and the knife is not mentioned by name.[213] The knife certainly remained on display for the second half of the nineteenth century, and may have still been on display through the early decades of the

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[207] *Catalogue of the interesting collection of rings, seals, and trinkets; arms; and fowling pieces; of the Duke of Sussex: which will be sold by auction, by Messrs. Christie and Manson* (London: Christie and Manson, 1843).
[208] *Biographical and Descriptive Sketches of the Distinguished Characters which compose the Unrivalled Exhibition and Historical Gallery of Madame Tussaud and Sons* (London: G. Cole, 1866) 35.
[209] *Catalogue of Pictures and Historical Relics: Madame Tussaud and Sons' Exhibition,* ed. W. Wheeler (London: Cassell & Co, 1901) 36.
[210] *Biographical and Descriptive Sketches of the Distinguished Characters which compose the Unrivalled Exhibition and Historical Gallery of Madame Tussaud and Sons* (London: G. Cole, 1866) 35.
[211] Pamela Pilbeam, *Madame Tussaud and the History of Waxworks* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003) 103.
[212] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.
[213] *Catalogue of Pictures and Historical Relics: Madame Tussaud and Sons' Exhibition,* ed. W. Wheeler (London: Cassell & Co, 1901) 36-37.

twentieth century. In 1925, however, a devastating fire broke out, destroying virtually all of the historical relics along with the majority of the waxworks.[214]

[214] Pilbeam 194.

Chapter 4. From 1900 to the present: Explanations and Retellings

References to Nicholson were dwindling by the early years of the twentieth century, but she continued to merit occasional references in historical works. An entry on "Margaret's Knights" is included in Ebenezer Cobham Brewer's *The Historic Notebook*, first published in 1891 and reprinted in 1900 and 1903. The encyclopedia entry, cross-referenced with "Peg Nicholson," reads:

> Margaret's Knights (*The*), 2. Aug. 1786. An attempt was made by a mad woman, Margaret Nicholson, to assassinate George III as he was alighting from his carriage at St. James's Palace. Addresses of congratulation on his escape came from all parts of the kingdom, and a very large number of mayors and other functionaries, deputed to present the addresses, were knighted. These were called 'Margaret's knights,' or 'Peg Nicholson's knights.'[215]

Interest in Nicholson, however, seems to have dropped off by the First World War: virtually no allusions are made to her or her crime, even in passing, by the second decade of the twentieth century. It is reasonable to conjecture that the story of a failed assassin, who had lived over a century earlier, no longer captured the attention of a reading public far more concerned with the recent assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, a crime which had such immediate consequences of widespread carnage.

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[215] "Margaret's Knights," Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *The Historic Note-book* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1891) 659.

Whatever the reason, Nicholson's story lay dormant for most of the twentieth century, until it was resurrected by scholars in the final decades. Ann Jones opens *Women Who Kill*, her 1980 monograph on American female murderers, with a dramatic yet informal summary of Nicholson's assassination attempt:

> A seamstress named Margaret Nicholson waited by the garden entrance of St. James's for the returning carriage of King George III. In her gloved hands she carried a "memorial"—a written petition to the king—and, concealed beneath it, a long knife. The carriage arrived, the king descended, and Margaret Nicholson pressed forward to deliver her memorial and a stroke of the knife; but the king was saved by his exceedingly fine manners. As he took up the paper he bowed deeply to Miss Nicholson and so avoided the blow. Soon enough, the king's attendant yeomen caught "her drift" and disarmed her. Under questioning Nicholson claimed she had not meant to kill the king but only to terrify him so that he would grant her petition. The paper, however, was blank. When her landlords testified that Nicholson mumbled to herself a good deal, the king clucked over the poor woman, magnanimously refused to press charges, and committed her temporarily to the custody of one of his messengers who, for lack of anything else to do with her, took her to his home in Half Moon Street. What else was a fellow to do? It was 1786, just a few years too late to pack her off to America, where for years England had been dumping her riffraff.[216]

According to her notes, Jones based her facts on an account apparently given in the *Hampshire Gazette* of October 4, 1786; this article is now inaccessible. Her choice of a rural English, or perhaps American, newspaper, which was relating embellished details of

[216] Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980) 15-16.

the attack many months after the event took place, may account for the odd details which Jones includes, such as Nicholson's "gloved hands," the "long knife," and the salvation of the king via his "exceedingly fine manners." Jones' primary thesis is, however, female murderers in America, so she does not press her anecdote of Nicholson past her remark that it was "too late to pack her off to America," and does not include details of Nicholson's trial or incarceration.

Nicholson appeared as a character in the opening scene of Alan Bennett's 1991 play *The Madness of George III*, and was included in its subsequent cinematic adaptation, *The Madness of King George*, in 1994. She was portrayed by Richenda Carey in the original stage play,[217] and by Janine Duvitski in the film adaptation.[218] Though the events of the play are set in 1788, during George III's first bout of mental illness, Bennett made a deliberately anachronistic choice to include the Nicholson's 1786 assassination attempt. In his memoir *Writing Home*, he notes:

> The characters are largely historical. Margaret Nicholson's attempt on the King's life was in 1786, not just before his illness as in the play; but it is certainly true, as the King remarks, that in France she would not have got off so lightly. As it was, she lived on in Bedlam long after the witnesses to her deed were dead, surviving until the eve of the accession of George III's granddaughter, Queen Victoria.[219]

The convenient parallel of a madwoman attacking the king who would shortly himself go mad was too appropriate a similarity for the playwright to ignore. Bennett drew upon Frances Burney's account of the assassination attempt: the king's calm comment that

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[217] "*The Madness of George III*: Programme with production photographs," RNT/PP/1/2/151, 21 November 1991, *National Theatre Archive* <http://worthing.nationaltheatre.org.uk>. Accessed 14 May 2008.
[218] Alan Bennett, *The Madness of King George* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 3.
[219] Alan Bennett, *Writing Home*, rev. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) 363.

"The poor creature's mad… Do not hurt her, she's not hurt me"[220] and the queen's joyful exclamation of "Oh, thank God I have you yet"[221] are taken almost verbatim from the account of the attack given by Burney in her Court Journals. While the complete and unbowdlerized edition of Burney's Court Journals is still currently a work in progress, Bennett would have had access to Charlotte Barrett's 1842 edition of the journals, which does include these particular phrases.[222]

Mark Thompson, the costume designer of the film, certainly viewed either the frontispiece of Jonathan Fiske's *The Life and Transactions of Margaret Nicholson*, or one of its later reproductions.[223] This profile portrait of Nicholson bears a striking resemblance to a still of Janine Duvitski in costume as Margaret Nicholson: she is wearing a similarly styled dress, shawl, and bonnet, and has been given what appears to be a false nose, in order to match Fiske's physical profile of Nicholson.[224]

In his critical chapter on *The Madness of George III*, Peter Wolfe argues that Bennett uses Nicholson for a specific purpose:

> George gains audience sympathy early because of his gentleness with his would-be assassin. Mrs. Nicholson had sought an audience with him; in her opinion, the Crown had stolen some of her land, and she wants redress. In her anger, she stabs the king. Bennett need not judge the merits of her plea. The purpose of the

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[220] *The Madness of King George* 10.
[221] *The Madness of King George* 11.
[222] Burney 47-48.
[223] "M. Nicholson," PC HATS-17, *The Picture Collection of the New York Public Library* <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org>. Accessed 14 May 2008.
[224] "The King attacked by Margaret Nicholson," *The Madness of King George* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) 10.

> stabbing scene is to show George extending mercy to an attacker; he does not want Mrs. Nicholson hurt.[225]

As Wolfe notes, the inclusion of Nicholson in the opening scene of the play provides an opportunity for Bennet to shape King George into a sympathetic figure. Bennett is therefore, in some respects, a late twentieth-century heir to Frances Burney's earlier use of Nicholson's mad attack as a chance to shape George III into a selfless and noble hero in her court journals.

Nicholson first received sustained academic attention in Steve Poole's 2000 monograph, *The Politics of Regicide in England, 1760-1850: Troublesome Subjects.* Poole devoted an entire chapter, entitled "The Madness of Margaret Nicholson," to her case. In this chapter, Poole seeks to investigate why "the Margaret Nicholson affair… secured… such a prominent place in the nation's collective memory," noting that the attack of Rebecca O'Hara on George III eight years earlier had not merited such public fascination.[226] Poole is particularly interested in how the king is characterized as "tempered, 'humane' and judicious" in accounts of the assassination, and ultimately concludes that "the Margaret Nicholson affair was to be a significant marker in the development of George III's fatherly style, an interesting conflation of sensibility and bullishness which did much to recommend British approaches to monarchy."[227] Poole consults a range of sources, but his survey of texts is not as exhaustive as one might expect of a historian. He cites only one chapbook, *Authentic Memoirs*, and he seems unaware of the existence of the three other biographical chapbooks published in 1786.

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[225] Peter Wolfe, *Understanding Alan Bennett* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 73.
[226] Steve Poole, *The Politics of Regicide in England, 1760-1850: Troublesome Subjects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 69.
[227] Poole 70, 72.

Even though he repeatedly refers to the trial testimony and letters of Jonathan Fiske, now held at the National Archives at Kew, he does not cite or acknowledge the existence of Fiske's *Life and Transactions of Margaret Nicholson*. He relies largely upon *Authentic Memoirs* and on newspaper accounts for details of the assassination attempt and of Nicholson's background, neglecting to confirm their claims with other sources. For example, he confidently states that Nicholson's birthplace was Stockton on Tees, as reported in numerous newspaper accounts and in *Authentic Memoirs*. However, Poole repeatedly cites numerous documents held within the HO 42/9 archive of the National Archives at Kew, amongst which is found "the Examination of Margaret Nicholson," which clearly gives her birthplace as Stokesley.[228] He also uncritically repeats the story that Nicholson was "forced to leave the service of Lord Sebright after a love affair with one of his footmen" and unquestioningly reports that Nicholson petitioned the king "in a state of distress over the loss of her livelihood and lover."[229] He seems unaware of the time Nicholson spent living independently. He also claims that Nicholson "had not seen [her father] since she was 12" and that "he had recently received several letters from his daughter, most of which had convinced him she was unstable, but that, like George III, he had not replied."[230] Poole does not give any citation for these allegations.

Nicholson is also the subject of a chapter in Jonathan Andrews and Andrew Scull's 2001 monograph, *Undertaker of the Mind: John Monro and Mad-Doctoring in Eighteenth-Century England*. Andrews and Scull provide an impressively researched modern account of Nicholson's life, but still leave out some critical sources in their survey. They consult Ridgeway's, Fiske's, and Macklew's biographical chapbooks of

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[228] "The Examination of Margaret Nicholson," HO 42/9/455-456.
[229] Poole 69.
[230] Poole 70.

Nicholson, but not Sabine's, and rely heavily on a few select periodical accounts, such as the *Universal Magazine* and *Lady's Magazine* of 1786. Their most striking omission is their lack of consultation of the official trial records held at the Public Record Office at Kew. The primary motivation of Andrews, a historian, and Scull, a sociologist, is to provide a medical history of Nicholson to better understand John Monro, the main subject of their monograph. They are, ostensibly, only concerned with Nicholson's story insofar as it shows "the relevance of [Monro's] medical expertise" in "highly charged legal and political arenas."[231] Nonetheless, the authors seem rather fascinated by Nicholson's tale, and devote a good deal of time and text to relating her story without reference to its relevance to Monro.

Andrews and Scull attempt to create a coherent biography of Nicholson from the conflicting accounts presented in chapbooks and periodicals. They admit that even Fiske's chapbook, which they consider "substantially more sober and measured by comparison" with other chapbooks is still "partly reliant on the press and far from lacking in self-promotion and moral judgments about his former lodger."[232] Andrews and Scull strive to accommodate the conflicting character traits of Nicholson put forth in the various narratives, noting that "some of the more censorious and judgmental presented her case less sympathetically, as that of a crazed and 'audacious' assassin, an 'unhappy wretch' and a 'miserable woman,'" while other accounts "harped on how, despite being 'honest, sober, [and] industrious,' she was 'remarkable through life for a degree of pride unusual in persons of her station,'" a character flaw that was "depicted by contemporaries

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[231] Jonathan Andrews and Andrew Scull, *Undertaker of the Mind: John Monro and Mad-Doctoring in Eighteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 215.
[232] Andrews and Scull 216.

as at the root of her ensuing mental problems."[233] While admitting that Nicholson may indeed "may have had deep-seated psychic reasons for constructing a false but superior identity for herself,"[234] Andrews and Scull ultimately exercise caution in accepting any of the contemporary accounts of Nicholson's motives and mental state.

Though their primary mandate in this chapter is medical history, Andrews and Scull do make some critical analyses of how Nicholson was represented in the press. They suggest that her story acted as a precursor to the "Gothic romantic literary and artistic cult of the 'fair maid,' Crazy Jane, the melancholy madwoman whose ceaseless lamenting for her departed lover was made famous" by Matthew Gregory "Monk" Lewis' 1793 ballad.[235] They also propose that narratives surrounding Nicholson may have been mediated by "literary representations like Samuel Richardson's Pamela" which "reflect the positive potential… for the virtuous and talented to overcome persistently forbidding and formidable social barriers."[236] Nicholson did not, however, take the (debatably) acceptable method of social mobility by entrancing a man of higher stature through demonstrating her virtue, as in the case of Pamela, but instead made a more overt and violent attempt at social climbing.

Neither Poole's *The Politics of Regicide* nor Andrews and Scull's *Undertaker of the Mind* were cited in the 2004 entry on Margaret Nicholson in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Nicholson was the subject of an entry in both the original Dictionary of National Biography and the modern Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. The original entry, published in 1894, was written by the Reverend William

[233] Andrews and Scull 226-227.
[234] Andrews and Scull 235.
[235] Andrews and Scull 245.
[236] Andrews and Scull 247.

Hunt, a historian and prolific contributor to the DNB.[237] Hunt drew primarily upon the account of Nicholson's life and attack given in the Annual Register of 1786 and supplemented this source with details from personal memoirs of the period. Hunt tentatively gives Nicholson's year of birth as 1750, and definitively, but incorrectly, states her birthplace as Stockton-upon-Tees, Durham.[238] The contemporary entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography was written in 2004 by Joel Peter Eigen, a professor of sociology. Roughly half of Eigen's modern entry on Nicholson is either copied verbatim or superficially rephrased from Hunt's original DNB entry. Eigen assumed that much of Hunt's research was correct; for example, he kept Hunt's incorrect statement of Nicholson's birth year and place of birth. However, it is notable that, despite his general trust in Hunt's research, Eigen chose to remove Hunt's assertion that "about the time of her leaving her last place [Nicholson] was deserted by her lover, a valet, with whom she is said to have misconducted herself in a former situation."[239] Eigen's main area of research is criminal lunacy: as such, his extended commentary in the modern entry on Nicholson provides insight into "Nicholson's place in the history of criminal insanity" and how her case serves "as an exemplar of the extra-judicial manner in which one could enter Bethlem,"[240] but he is not particularly concerned with relating the facts of her life or of her fictional afterlife.

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[237] Robert W. Dunning, "Hunt, William (1842–1931)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 13 August 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34057>.
[238] W[illiam] H[unt], "Nicholson, Margaret (1750?-1828)," *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 14, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1909) 467-468.
[239] W[illiam] H[unt], "Nicholson, Margaret (1750?-1828)," 467.
[240] Joel Peter Eigen, "Nicholson, Margaret (1750?–1828)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 13 August 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20145>.

The most recent addition to the long line of fictionalizations of Margaret Nicholson appears in Greg Hollingshead's *Bedlam: A Novel of Love and Madness,* first published in 2004. The Canadian novelist is primarily concerned with narrating the tale of James Tilly Matthews, but Margaret Nicholson appears as a minor character in the novel. Hollingshead dubs her "Peg": this nickname was occasionally used to refer to Nicholson in primary texts, but Hollingshead probably adopts this name to differentiate her from another Margaret, the wife of the main protagonist. Though Nicholson makes only a handful of appearances within the novel, Hollingshead carefully crafts her brief scenes to convey a sense of character. Some of her appearances are comic, but her last appearance is a tragic scene.

Peg Nicholson is first mentioned when Margaret Matthews meets with the Bedlam governor's subcommittee, early in the novel. Two committee members first explain the function of the Board of the Green Cloth, then allude to the case of Margaret Nicholson, with a good deal of exposition for the reader:

> Mr. Lean then mentioned the case of Peg Nicholson, whose cell it happened was not a hundred feet from where we sat, she having been a resident of the women's wing nearly twelve years.
>
> Of course I had heard of Peg Nicholson. Whenever Bedlam comes up in conversation, she's the inmate everybody agrees they'd most like to shake the hand of. Peg was an upper servant in a good family who misconducted herself with a valet and was let go and reduced to needlework in a room over a stationer's in Wigmore Street. From there she first sent the King a petition intimating he was a tyrant and usurper. But real fame came only when, at age fifty-two, she made a public attempt on his Majesty's life, using some say a rusty, some say an ivory-

> handled, some say a worn-to-razor-sharpness, dessert knife—though by her own account she was only trying to deliver a second petition and in her nervousness happened to draw the knife from her pocket along with the paper. Accounts of the incident vary, but the one I know has the King, who was in the midst of receiving the petition with a noble condescension, avoiding the sudden knife at his breast by stepping back. Peg then making a second thrust (or perhaps only, as she said, once again encouraging him to take hold of the petition), the King's footman wrenched the weapon from her hand, at which his Majesty declared with the greatest equanimity and fortitude, "I am not hurt. Take care of the poor woman. She must certainly be mad."
>
> And things might have gone well for her had she not at her Privy Council hearing insisted she wanted nothing but her due, which was the Crown of England, and if she wasn't given it, the nation would be drowned in blood for a thousand generations. And so, by the King's express direction, for the past dozen years she's resided in Bedlam, where by all reports she does nicely, though daily expecting a visit from His Majesty that never comes.[241]

Hollingshead acknowledges the multiplicity of theories surrounding Nicholson's actual assassination attempt (for example, the condition of the weapon used), but accepts and reinforces the claim that Nicholson was fired for her dalliance with a valet.

Phillippe Pinel, a French doctor of mental illness who served as a physician at the Hôpital Bicêtre and the Hospice de la Salpêtrière, makes a visit to Bedlam in Hollingshead's novel. As an envoy of post-revolutionary France, Pinel predictably

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[241] Greg Hollingshead, *Bedlam* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2004) 47-48.

announces that "the first thing he must do was kiss the hand of Peg Nicholson, the would-be assassin of the King."[242]

> For fear the anticipation would excite her to extreme behaviour, I'd not forewarned Peg Nicholson a great man sought an introduction. A good thing, for the woman we came upon was a paragon of domestic contentment, sitting on her bed genteelly sipping tea, with a little plate of gingerbread by her. I wouldn't have arranged the tableau better myself—though I did have a hand in it. Not wanting her seen eating nothing, I'd given her a packet of gingerbread in light of her aversion, ever since she learned the King prefers brown bread, to the brown bread we serve. Her conviction seemed to be that she should not affirm his preference in bread as long as he persisted in refusing her the Crown.[243]

Hollingshead drew Nicholson's distaste for bread from *Sketches in Bedlam*, which reported that Nicholson had "contracted a singular aversion to bread, and never can be induced to eat any… but she is allowed gingerbread and biscuits, which she eats with good appetite, in moderate quantities."[244] However, he fictionalized Nicholson's motivation for not eating bread, in line with the recurrent trope of pride which had begun in the very first chapbook on Nicholson: in Hollingshead's narrative, she is too proud to eat the same sort of bread the king favours. When Pinel meets Nicholson, a slapstick scene ensues:

> As soon as he knew who it was, Pinel rushed in and fell to one knee. This being homage befitting the queen she is in her mind, Peg extended her hand. But the timing proved unfortunate, for with the fingers Pinel feverishly pressed devoted

[242] Hollingshead 102.
[243] Hollingshead 103.
[244] *Sketches in Bedlam* 257.

> lips against, she had just taken up a sizeable punch of snuff, which he in his impetuosity accidentally inhaling, sent him into violent gales of sneezing. Needing both hands to contain the flying snot, he let go hers. This afforded her an opportunity to finish taking her tobacco and to sit snuffling softly as he, still down on one knee, mopped at himself with a handkerchief slipped him by his secretary.[245]

In his combination of "the queen she is in her mind" and the vibrant depiction of snuff-taking, Hollingshead may be slyly alluding to the fact that Queen Charlotte bore the unflattering nicknames of "Old Snuffy" and "Snuffy Charlotte" from her fondness for taking snuff, even as a young woman. While Hollingshead is doubtless also referring to the comment in *Sketches in Bedlam* that "snuff seems to be her favourite luxury, of which she takes a great quantity, and seems to enjoy it with peculiar satisfaction,"[246] this comedic scene may be drawing a subtle parallel between the similarities of the mad would-be sovereign in Bedlam and the legitimate queen, herself married to a mad George III.

When they resume their interaction after Pinel has "dried off,"[247] he once more kisses her hand in a courtly gesture:

> Peeling away his lips and speaking through a translator, he informed her what a *formidable* heroine of the French people she is and will live forever in their hearts as a fearless fighter against tyrants. Her imprisonment, he added, is a call to action for those dedicated to the overthrow of oppression in all its disguises.

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[245] Hollingshead 103.
[246] *Sketches in Bedlam* 257.
[247] Hollingshead 103.

As the translator spoke, Peg smiled upon him with sanguine hauteur, liking what she heard. When he finished, she said simply, addressing him, "I am Queen of England, and you and your raving, grippish friend—" nodding toward Pinel—"are my faithful subjects."

This statement put Pinel at a loss what to say.

Still addressing the translator, Peg spoke into the silence. "You and your friend must now explain who I am to your fellow subjects, so they might understand, as so far they have failed to. And while you have their attention, prithee ask what's holding up my crown."

"Holding up… your crown, madam?" Pinel himself asked, in a daze. "You heard me well enough," she replied composedly. "Be sure to tell 'em that if her Majesty don't have it by sunset Friday, it's off with the heads of every member of the male sex inside ten leagues— What *is* the matter with you? Are you French?"

Pinel confessed he was.

"Then perhaps you can tell me. When Mrs. Carter, the English songbird, says she's determined if she ever keeps a lap-dog or monkey, it shall be a fish, what d'you think she means?"

Now Pinel turned to me with brimming tears and murmured, "*Prendue foue par son emprisonnement. Ah, quelle domage, monsieur. Quelle dommage tragique*."

"Indeed, *monsieur*," I confirmed. "Mad as a March hare."[248]

[248] Hollingshead 103.

From Pinel's point of view, Nicholson is a noble freedom fighter who has gone mad because of her confinement in Bedlam. Like Shelley, he wishes to idealize her as a supporter of disinterested republicanism, not as a woman who claims the throne for herself. Nicholson's language ranges from the archaically noble "prithee" to the low-class "tell 'em if [I] don't have it". Her language is full of double meanings, including a pun on the "member of the male sex," suggesting that she could be referring to decapitation or castration. While Hollingshead's Nicholson initially comports herself as a warmly condescending noblewoman, she is ultimately dismissed as "mad as a March hare." Though this proverbial phrase first appeared as early as 1529, in Sir Thomas More's *The Supplycacyon of Soulys*, the phrase is most strongly associated with the topsy-turvy world of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), which, appropriately, features a Queen of Hearts fond of ordering the decapitation of subjects who displease her for any reason. Though the allusion is anachronistic to the 1798 setting of this chapter of *Bedlam*, Hollingshead employs this allusion for the benefit of the modern reader.

The novel makes a number of passing references to Nicholson after this, usually in relation to her fame, and often mentioning her in the same sentence as James Hadfield, another would-be assassin of George III. The character of Nicholson herself does not appear again until James Tilly Matthews and John Haslam decide to bring her a birthday treat in 1816:

> "What say we break bread with Peg Nicholson?"
>
> "James," I teased him, "you know as well as I do bread's precisely what Peg won't eat, on principle, until the King hands over his crown.
>
> "*Cake* does she eat?"

> "When she can get it—"
>
> "Oh, she can get it—" And he held up a small, greasy, newspaper-wrapped oblong, tied with a string.[249]

The pair heads to visit Nicholson in her cell in New Bedlam, where they find her occupied with needlework. Haslam reports that he'd "heard she was as much a favourite here as at the old place (except now the general belief was that it was the Prince Regent she once attacked, and most wished she'd succeeded)".[250] Her sickly appearance alarms Haslam:

> …from the shocking appearance of her that day, she was wasting away. Gaunt and pale, except, her face being turned away, visible at the back of her jaw was a great yellow-black contusion, like a spider bite that had nipped a blood vessel.[251]

Haslam, "fearing the drastic loss of weight meant a cancer," asks, "Peg… [a]re you ailing?".[252] Nicholson regally replies, "Not a bit of it… I am only pining. Royalty does pine, you know. I understand that now."[253] By the scene's conclusion, it becomes apparent that the contusion is due to Nicholson's being force-fed with a brutal metal contraption.

Hollingshead's Nicholson is a pitiable, powerless woman with vestiges of pride and even slight nobility. Both Matthews and Haslam treat her indulgently and rather fondly. She is never portrayed as dangerous, raging, or ranting, and even seems sweet at times; she is portrayed more like a slightly dotty old lady than an incarcerated lunatic. Hollingshead, as a twenty-first century liberal Canadian academic far removed from any

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[249] Hollingshead 256.
[250] Hollingshead 256.
[251] Hollingshead 256.
[252] Hollingshead 256.
[253] Hollingshead 257.

potential political threat to Nicholson's actions, has the luxury of rewriting Nicholson as a comedic and somewhat tragic figure worthy of pity. Any threat that Nicholson once posed, or any power she held, has been long removed by the distance of time and place. As such, she is now a ripe subject for modern sympathy.

Conclusion

Margaret Nicholson's celebrity is a curious matter. Her meteoric rise, the ongoing public fascination, and the number of retellings and reshapings of her character might be compared to the celebrity and afterlife of her near-contemporary, Emma Hamilton. Both women emerged from anonymous, deprived rural beginnings and ended up as public figures of intrigue and mystery, much-dissected but ultimately enigmatic. However, unlike Hamilton, Nicholson did not reach her state of celebrity by a slow, systematic, carefully constructed method of social climbing. Nicholson did not become famous due to extraordinary beauty, social skills, sexual power, or any other stereotypically feminine wiles. Instead, she shot to infamy through one illogical and badly-executed act of would-be regicide. Though their manner of achieving celebrity status differed, both women are examples of how historical individuals may be superseded by fictional reshaping of their characters.

At this historical remove from Nicholson, it is virtually impossible to know whether she was a virtuous country girl, a crafty servant, a mistreated lover, a wise lunatic, an odd but unthreatening old lady, or some combination of these tropes. It seems that her own contemporaries were equally mystified about her actual character, even though they had the advantage of knowing or questioning her. When they found themselves unable to deduce any sort of satisfying explanation for her motives, they began the process of splintering and fictionalizing her character. As John Brewer notes in his study of the narratives surrounding the murder of Martha Ray, "the significance of each individual account" could only be understood by paying attention "to the form and

content of each individual story" as well as "to the teller, the medium of expression, [and] the audience (imagined or otherwise)."[254]

The basic story of Margaret Nicholson's attack itself is not of mythic proportions: a deprived madwoman makes a poorly-executed attack on the king and is incarcerated. Yet each author who retold Nicholson's story introduced another level of human experience to the tale, weaving in themes of mistaken identity, mysterious motives, hidden lineage, thwarted love, and political intrigue. These fictionalizations have now far surpassed fact. The historical Margaret Nicholson may only be an esoteric footnote in the reign of King George III, but, through repeated fictionalizations over the centuries, the character of Margaret Nicholson is now firmly ensconced as a familiar figure in English literature.

[254] Brewer 293.

Appendix 1: "An Epistle: From Margaret Nicholson to her Knights" (1790)

From *The Attic Miscellany, and Characteristic Mirror* 2.16 (1790): 121-123.

AN EPISTLE
FROM MARGARET NICHOLSON TO HER KNIGHTS

Ye mirrors of knighthood, to you from this cell,
Where pain and despair with Peg Nicholson dwell,
By way of remonstrance is justly addrest
What misery wrings from a Bedlamite's breast.—
Non compos[255] I must be, since you'll have it so:
'Twere madness downright to discredit M••ro,[256]
Who tells how the moon gives, by means of her phases,
Lucid intervals sometimes, at other times crazes;
What tricks and vagaries she plays with the brain—
Why you are so rational; I so insane.—
This moment I snatch, lest the planet's full orb,
By her pow'r of attraction, my senses absorb;
For soon she'll be at her old frolics again,
Her choppings and changings,[257] and legerdemain.[258]—
And better might I let my writing alone,
Than to the next quarter this letter postpone,
When soon as the goddess shall hang up on high,
Full-lighted, the lamp that illumines the sky;
Some imp on her errand, dispatch'd from her throne,
Popping into my head, shall bid reason begone.—
Then pity my durance in castle enchanted,
By goblins,[259] and giants,[260] and conjurors[261] haunted;
A damsel forlorn, in the deepest distress,
Exhibits her grievance, in hopes of redres—
Why come ye not hither, with lances and shields,[262]
To rescue your patroness out of Moorfields?[263]
Here sound your defiance—and blow, heralds, blow,
Till ye silence the din of that broker below.
As loud as yon Methodist preacher I bawl,

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[255] *Non compos*: From the legal term *non compos mentis*, meaning a person of unsound mind
[256] *M••ro*: The father and son mental health doctors, Drs. John and Thomas Monro, diagnosed Nicholson as insane, and treated her in Bedlam
[257] *Her choppings and chanings*: The waxing and waning stages of the moon
[258] *Legerdemain*: literally, sleight of hand; also, figuratively, trickery or deception
[259] *goblins*: the other patients
[260] *giants*: the keepers
[261] *conjurors*: the doctors
[262] *lances and shields*: The weaponry traditionally carried by knights
[263] *Moorfields*: an alternate term for Bedlam; from 1675 to 1815, Bethlem Hospital was housed in Moorfields, an area on the then-outskirts of London

Yet cannot ye hear me; p•x light[264] on you all!
Not hear me, ye varlets! ye might if ye chose;
What! you'll tell me you're stinted in ears,[265] I suppose—
In vain I solicit, in vain do I cry,
No succor is brought me, no champion is nigh.
I guess what prevents you,— you've got to your dinners,
You're gorging yourselves, ye carnivorous sinners—
While smoak on your tables fat turkies and chines;[266]
Ye care not—not ye—how poor Margaret dines.——
Is the spirit of chivalry banish'd the nation;
Or have ye no sense of a past obligation?
Fie! fie! on such gluttons! why am I thus slighted?
Had I never liv'd, pray, would ye have been knighted?
Ye knighted!—To humble your pride, I'll instal,
If I live, wooden Gog and Magog of Guildhall.
What were ye but yesterday, caitiffs![267] d'ye know?
Some taylors, some tinkers, some barbers I trow.[268]
And such would have been, to the end of your lives,
Untitl'd, unnotic'd, yourselves and your wives;
Had I not •••••• Who lifted you out of the dregs?
Whose doing was that, Sirs? pray, was it not Peg's?
'Twas Peg, who, prefixing the SIR to your names,
Made one a Sir Richard,[269] a second Sir James,[270]
A third a Sir Thingum, a fourth a Sir Ben[271];—
Deny it ye cannot, ye shadows of men.
You'll answer, I warrant, and say 'twas the K••g;
But I say he's an ass——who says any such thing.
What! have ye th'effontry! why, at this rate,
I'm grown a mere cipher[272] amongst you of late!
Is this the respect—the attention ye shew me!
O my conscience, ere long you'll pretend not to know me!
Ay, now you're exalted so high o'er the crowd,
So saucy you're grown, so excessively proud;
That under my window slap-dash, in your coaches,
You clatter—no doubt not to hear my reproaches——
Ne'er pulling your check-strings,[273] but galloping by,

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[264] *p•x light*: a curse wishing a venereal disease upon the hearer
[265] *stinted in ears*: deaf, hard of hearing
[266] *chines*: a joint of meat with the backbone attached
[267] *caitiffs*: an term expressing moral contempt; villain
[268] *I trow*: I believe (an obsolete phrase by 1790)
[269] *Sir Richard*: Richard Arkwright, cotton manufacturer and inventor of cotton-spinning machinery, was knighted on 22 December 1786 [See *Whitehall Evening Post*, 23 December 1786: 1.]
[270] *Sir James*: James Sanderson, Alderman of London, was knighted on 6 October 1786 [See Francis Townsend, *Calendar of Knights* (London: William Pickering, 1828) 52.]
[271] *Sir Ben*: Benjamin Hammett, Alderman of Portsoken Ward, London, was knighted on 11 August 1786 [See Francis Townsend, *Calendar of Knights* (London: William Pickering, 1828) 29.]
[272] *cipher*: an insignificant placeholder; zero

As if no such person were living as I.—
Yet while ye disturb me, yourselves and your cattle,[274]
And break my repose with your din and your rattle;
I never could learn, that ye order'd the street
To be litter'd, to lessen the noise of their feet.[275]
Nay, further, ye upstarts; since here I've been pent,
A word of condolence has never been sent;
Not even so much as a footman—not you,—
With a message, a card, or a how do you do?
Have you sent, to enquire, whether up or a bed,
Or whether poor Marg'ret were living or dead—
No, no, but you'll flatter that man at the steerage[276]—
So, nothing will serve you forsooth but a peerage!
You beg to be from the Mobility[277] draughted,
Like others, and on the Nobility grafted—
He'll grant you that favour; perhaps; but ye fools!
And soon as 'tis granted, he'll make you his tools.—
You've been naughty indeed; your delinquency own,
And for your ungrateful demeanor atone;
Forgiveness is yours, if ye do but repent—
For Margaret Nicholson yet may relent.
You've never yet enter'd my new habitation,
Nor the ladies your wives, since their *Ladification!*
Do let 'em come hither I pray; and, d'ye hear,
Be sure they be drest in their holyday gear[278]—
I intend 'em the favour of kissing my hand—
And, if they deserve if, perhaps I may stand
As sponsor to some of their progeny too——
I'm resolv'd to befriend 'em, — but that *entre nous*.
I'm eager to know if their dignities fit
Your spouses, or on 'em but awkwardly sit;
With other such matters; as whether they're clever,
Or but the same ill manner'd dowdies as ever;
Or whether they're meagre, or waxing in fat,
Or frizzled, or painted, or patch'd, and all that— —
Besides, I would know what new liv'ries you've got;
Your mottos, your crests, your supporters, what not—

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[273] *check-strings*: a cord which a passenger would pull to alert the carriage-driver to stop; the use of this term also indicates that the newly-minted knight was being driven, rather than driving himself
[274] *cattle*: horses
[275] *that ye order'd the street/To be litter'd, to lessen the noise of their feet*: it was a common practice to spread straw or sawdust on the street outside a home with an invalid or woman in labour, in order to make the street sounds less disturbing
[276] *that man at the steerage*: a man employed with the direction of the state; a reference to the political ambitions of the knights
[277] *the Mobility*: the mob; the common people
[278] *their holyday gear*: the fine clothing worn to church on Sundays

Adieu for the present:— yet much would I say;
But yonder's the conjuror coming this way.

Appendix 2: "Peg Nicholson's Knights" (1790)

From John Freeth, *The Political Songster, or, a Touch on the Times on Various Subjects, and Adapted to Common Tunes*, 6th ed (Birmingham: Thomas Pearson, 1790): 169-170.

PEG NICHOLSON'S KNIGHTS

Tune— The Grecian Bard.[279]

Ye citizens so fond and free,
Of loyal strains preparing,
Who are not in the least degree,
Of adulation sparing;
Come forward since the work, you see,
Admits no hesitation,
The Prince address, who luckily,
Escap'd assassination.

CHORUS.
But this I'll say—by night or day,
No woman in her senses,
Would e'er pretend—to lift her hand,
Against the best of princes,

The name of MARGARET NICHOLSON
Makes some with horror stagger!
What mischief might the jade have done,
Arm'd with a soldier's dagger!

For she for man who never car'd,
Her *desert weapon* pointed,
And rush'd before the BODY GUARD!
To strike the Lord's Anointed.

But this observe, in France, I trust,
For such a flagrant act, Sir,
Insane or not, the culprit must,
Have on the wheel been rack'd,[280] Sir;
Instead of death on Britain's shore,

[279] *The Grecian Bard:* Presumably a song about Homer; other references to the song do not survive
[280] *on the wheel been rack'd*: slowly stretched to death on a medieval torture device

For zeal so freely plighted,
More likely she to cause a score
Of tinkers to be knighted.

How each levee is throng'd on this
Miraculous salvation!
"Rise up Sir James, rise up Sir John,"
Is echo'd through the nation.
By ENGLAND when the VAN[281] is clos'd,
The REAR let SCOTLAND bring up,
Till one poor Bedlamite has caus'd
A race of knights to spring up.

The King to cross his favourite nag,[282]
Whose bosom oft is throbbing,
Instead of hunting down the stag,
Now daily knights is dubbing;
Ye BOROUGH BAILIFFS,[283] whom the crown
Seems honour fond to heap on,
Club pence and buy PEG NICHOLSON,
A feather bed to sleep on.

May they who madly aim to kill,
Be always disappointed,
And grant that Providence may still
Preserve the Lord's Anointed;
May PRIVY COUNCIL[284] fix a day
Of general thanksgiving!
And tell it in America,
That GEORGE the THIRD is living.

[281] *the VAN*: the front division of a military formation
[282] *to cross his favourite nag*: to perturb his favourite horse
[283] *BOROUGH BAILIFFS*: minor political figures; mayors of small municipalities
[284] *PRIVY COUNCIL*: the inner circle of the most powerful members of Parliament

Figure 1: Frontispiece of *The Maniacs* (1786)

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