

Author Biography

Elizabeth Sarah Villa-Real Gooch was born in Nottinghamshire on 27th June 1757 to William Villa-Real and Elizabeth Halifax. Her father, a Sephardic Jew, died when she was only three, leaving a large fortune as he owned estates in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. He was not faithful to his wife, this being confirmed by his daughter's discovery of an illegitimate child. Elizabeth's mother re-married to a man who was apparently a good step-father and the first seventeen years of Gooch's life was reportedly spent in happiness. Gooch's inherited wealth made her attractive to suitors from an early age.¹

In 1774 she fell in love with a young doctor, Thomas Crawford. He wanted to elope with her but she refused him twice as she did not want to deceive her mother. After discovering some letters of correspondence between Gooch and her lover, her mother sent Gooch to her grandmothers. Gooch later revealed that she wished she had married him and still proclaimed her devotion to him twenty years later.² In 1775 she passively agreed³ to marry William Gooch, the younger son of a baronet whom she had known for 5 weeks and who had attempted to marry other heiresses before this. She gave birth to William Thomas in 1776 and later bore another son, Henry Robert.⁴

After William Gooch had secured her fortune he decreed her banishment to a convent in France⁵ after suspecting her of infidelity, which she denied.⁶ Elizabeth went to Lille where she reportedly suffered greatly from illness and isolation and received cruel letters from her family.⁷ She became a courtesan and worked up the social scale of lovers, shuttling between France and England seeking family and money. She pawned goods, met Grace Elliott⁸, and as mistress of a military prince, rode at the head of his regiment dressed in its uniform.⁹

William Gooch retained her wealth but she negotiated with him to receive £200 per annum. He divorced Elizabeth in 1781 by Act of Parliament which caused her to plunge into debt. By 1782 she was discarded by William and he forbade her to see her children, however she visited them twice incognito.¹⁰

Due to her debts she was sentenced to prison in Lille where she remained for 2 months. After serving her sentence she returned to England where she hoped to begin

¹ Orlando Project; <http://orlando.cambridge.org>; March 2007

² *ibid*

³ Blain, Clements, Grundy, *The feminist Companion to Literature in English, Women writers from the middle ages to the present* (B.T Batsford:London, 1990) p 439

⁴ Orlando Project; <http://orlando.cambridge.org>; March 2007

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Blain, Clements, Grundy, *The feminist Companion to Literature in English, Women writers from the middle ages to the present* (B.T Batsford:London, 1990) p 439

⁷ Orlando Project; <http://orlando.cambridge.org>; March 2007

⁸ Grace Elliot was a courtesan and memoirist whose lovers included the Prince of Wales. Her *Journals of my Life* were allegedly written at the request of George III. Blain, Clements, Grundy, *The feminist Companion to Literature in English, Women writers from the middle ages to the present* (B.T Batsford:London, 1990)P 337

⁹ *ibid.*, p 439

¹⁰ Orlando Project; <http://orlando.cambridge.org>; March 2007

a career in acting;¹¹ a career that was severely frowned upon in the eighteenth century. Fear of dishonour deterred many women from taking up this profession, but for those who were successful, there were many rewards. If one was not a successful actress and remained in the provinces performing as an itinerant player, one was likely to be subjected to indignity and inconvenience. Actresses also had recourse to prostitution, this being relevant in Gooch's life.¹² While in London, she was re-arrested for debt and sent to Fleet Prison in London and while there, she wrote her first work titled, *Appeal to the public, on the conduct of Mrs. Gooch, wife of William Gooch*, (1788); a pamphlet of self-justification.

The fact that Gooch became involved in acting is interesting when considering the fact that women were increasingly embracing new forms of public self-representation. Women became more likely to put their name on the front of the title page, as evident with Gooch, and in the second half of the eighteenth century the authorial figure became recognizable; someone to be visibly admired as a distinct entity as well as through their works. The public became eager to know about the author's private life which was facilitated by a rapidly expanding print culture.¹³

In 1789, probably due to her acting career, Gooch began a journey northwards up to Scotland. She returned to London after this 'retirement,' as she called it, fifteen months later, and published her life story which was 'dedicated to the public,' and called, *The life of Mrs Gooch (1792)*, followed by *Poems on Various subjects (1793)*, also dedicated to the public.¹⁴ The fact that she published an autobiography is interesting when considering the backdrop of this craze for publicity as it signifies a craving for public interest. Her first novel, *The Contrast*, was published in December, 1794 followed by *The Wanderings of the Imagination*, a year later in December 1795.¹⁵ In 1797 she wrote a poem on her mother's death which was published in the *Monthly Mirror*.¹⁶ She was still acting at the Haymarket Theatre, London, in 1796 whilst writing novels, suggesting the fact that she must have been fairly successful. The next novels published were '*Fancied Events: or, The Sorrows of Ellen*' in August, 1799, *Truth and Fiction* in 1801 and *Sherwood Forest; or, Northern Adventures* in 1804. Other works include writing a memoir of Thomas Bellamy and completing his novel, *The beggar boy*, which was published after his death in 1801¹⁷ and shows that she had a 'close knowledge of the world of journalism.'¹⁸ She also translated from the French, Charlotte Bournon-Malarme's, *Can we doubt it? Or the genuine history of two families of Norwich*, in 1804. The date of her death is unknown. Her husband, William Gooch, survived until 1833.¹⁹

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¹¹ <http://orlando.cambridge.org>; March, 2007

¹² Turner, Cheryl, Chapter 4, 'Professional Authorship- The alternatives for women' in *Living by the pen* (Routledge, 1992) pp 75-77

¹³ Brock, Claire, Introduction in *The feminization of fame* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2006) pp 1-14

¹⁴ Orlando Project; <http://orlando.cambridge.org>; March 2007

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Blain, Clements, Grundy, *The feminist Companion to Literature in English, Women writers from the middle ages to the present* (B.T Batsford:London, 1990) p 439

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Blain, Clements, Grundy, *The feminist Companion to Literature in English, Women writers from the middle ages to the present* (B.T Batsford:London, 1990) p 439

¹⁹ Orlando Project; <http://orlando.cambridge.org>; March 2007