

## ROBERT BAGE BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

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Robert Bage was a leading radical novelist of the late eighteenth century who championed the cause of women's rights and the rights of the underprivileged through his works. He also opposed forced marriages, slavery, duelling and war. Bage is regarded as a Jacobin novelist and his literary contemporaries included William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Holcroft, and Erasmus Darwin. Bage became acquainted with Godwin towards the end of his life, Wollstonecraft and Holcroft both reviewed Bage's novels, and Darwin was a long-time friend, business partner, and member of the Lunar Society. Another member of the Lunar Society whom Bage knew well was the Derby clockmaker and author, John Whitehurst (Wadle 398). This article sets out to establish Bage's date of birth and consider who his parents, or guardians, were, along with providing a short history of what is known, and not known, about his birth. This is important because the article speculates that Bage may have been born outside of marriage, which would satisfactorily account for the social concerns he shows in his novels for orphans, bastards and unmarried mothers.

In addition to being a novelist, Robert Bage was a paper manufacturer who owned a mill at Elford in Staffordshire. For more than two centuries the year of his birth-date has been given as 1728, and despite Bage twice informing the Birmingham stationer and historian, William Hutton, it occurred two years later than this, the incorrect birth-date has largely remained unchallenged. Kelly provides an example of those few critics who recognise that the birth-date may be incorrect.<sup>1</sup> Hutton bought most of the paper produced by Bage and the two men were long-standing friends. All authorities agree that Robert Bage died on 1 September 1801. The mystery about to unfold began when the first printed record of his birthday appeared in a memoir by Hutton written late in 1801 and published the next spring in the *Monthly Magazine*. Here it was given as 29 February 1728 — the last day in February of a leap year — and Hutton concluded Bage could celebrate no more than eighteen birthdays (Memoir 478)<sup>2</sup>. Derby parish records of St Alkmund's and St Werburgh's, contain a number of entries for the Bage family but there is none for this date and none for a boy called Robert. It was a mistake and one of many, not all relating to his birth. Llewellyn Jewitt gives Bage's birth-date as 1 February 1728, as does Henry Kirke (Jewitt 170, Kirke 33). Simple

examples like these demonstrate how historical inaccuracies are replicated, and for the purpose of this article, the most glaring of these is Hutton's.

Nevertheless, there is an entry in St Alkmund's register for 26 February 1728-9 which simply reads: "baptiz'd            son of George Bage."<sup>3</sup> The gap indicates that either a name has been scratched out or that a name had not then been decided upon. There is no mention of this son being Robert, though those who have written biographies of Bage, including Peter Faulkner, assume it to have been him (157, note 1). Neither is there any entry for Robert's assumed brother (or half-brother), George, who was born either some time in the second half of 1721 or the first half of 1722. From an obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* it may at first glance appear that Robert had at least one other brother (or half-brother), Edward, but this was actually his second son (191).<sup>4</sup> There are several other misleading items of information which hamper biographical research, but they lie beyond the scope of this article.

Two extracts from Bage's business letters to Hutton shed light on, or cloud, the mystery of his birth further, depending on viewpoint. The first, written on 11 March 1800, begins: "This day I am 70 . . . But I should not have thought necessary to announce this sublime intelligence to thee by letter, if a necessity of a different kind had not compelled me to write."<sup>5</sup> The "necessity of a different kind" concerned raw materials, rising prices and arguments as to how Bage might get a fair price for his paper, a perpetual contention he had with Hutton. It was "not thought necessary" for him to announce details of his birthday to his friend, because the former Sarah Cock, Hutton's wife, was also born on 11 March, although she was dead by the time Bage wrote this letter. Just over a year later, on 20 March 1801, the year the novelist died, he signed another letter:

Yr hble most obedt  
Mo devoted — Ask Miss Hutton for more epithets — and  
tell her I love her quite as much as a man — 71 — & married ought to love —

RB<sup>6</sup>

When the Miss Hutton referred to, Catherine, supplied Sir Walter Scott with biographical details for a *Prefatory Memoir of Robert Bage* to accompany reprints of three of his novels by Ballantyne Press, she edited, altered and embellished the above extract thus:

Tell Miss Hutton that I have thought of her some hundred times since I saw her; insomuch that I feared I was falling in love. I do love her as much as a man seventy- three years of age, and married, ought to love. I like the idea of paying her a visit, and will try to make it reality some time — but not yet.<sup>7</sup>

Catherine Hutton, the daughter of William, changed Bage's age to concur with her father's accounts. Discounting the dissimilarity in dates this edited extract has in other ways a degree of justification since her concatenation is derived from three separate

letters written by Bage, the other two within weeks of one another, and dated 8 January and 26 March 1800. From the evidence it seems the Hutton family were just as convinced that Bage was born 29 February 1728 as he was of 11 March 1730.

Or were they? And who was right? As Peter Faulkner points out, while the change from the old style to new style calendar in 1752 would account for the disparity of days it could not account for a disparity of years (33-34). Faulkner however comes to the conclusion that Hutton, as a businessman, was more likely to have been correct than Bage. In reality Hutton was sloppy both as historian and bookkeeper and Bage reprimanded him more than once for not keeping proper accounts.<sup>8</sup>

Vanity would seem the most apparent reason for a desire to appear two years younger, but Bage was anything but vain and scorned vanity. All six of his novels were published anonymously and even when they enjoyed the resounding success of his last novel, *Hermesprong* [1796], Bage still retained his anonymity, prompting Mary Wollstonecraft to ponder why more was not known of someone who “steals” so much upon readers’ “affections” (Todd & Butler ed. Works 472-3). It was, perhaps, this curiosity of hers coupled with that of her husband, William Godwin, which determined Godwin to seek out Bage at his mill in Elford, and to whom we are indebted for another brief biographical sketch (Wardle ed. Letters 398-9).

Hutton wrote a short entry about St Alkmund’s in his *History of Derby* (1791) as well as a tribute to Bage. One possibility is that while researching this he came across the parish record regarding the unknown son of George Bage, misread or failed to recall the exact date, and drew the conclusion that this related to his old friend. Alternatively he may have obtained some local intelligence that Bage was older than he thought himself to be. It is improbable that Bage’s guardians changed his birthday to give him a better chance in life because he was small and delicate. What Hutton wrote of his physical prowess after Bage left school shows the young man was no such weakling: “...he was completely master of the manual exercise, and I saw him instruct some young men” (Memoir 478).

Despite the differences in their ages few could have known Bage better than Hutton, and none for a longer period of time, not even Erasmus Darwin. Hutton informs us that two years after his friend’s birth the two boys, he and Robert, were living in the same street and Hutton is recorded as having been born and bred in Full Street, Derby. From the description he gives of his house’s location it would have stood on the site where the Police Station and Law Courts now stand. In later life Hutton was to reflect: “At the bottom of this street, upon the banks of the Derwent, twenty yards from the river, now Mr. Upton’s garden, I first drew the vital air, September 30, 1723” (Derby 27). Mr. Upton was Erasmus Darwin’s nosy next-door neighbour after Darwin

moved to Derby in 1784 (King-Hele 209; Uglow 462). Somewhere along this street, if Hutton's account is to be believed, the novelist, Robert Bage, spent his early years.

Hutton's obituary in the *Monthly Magazine* paints Bage as a bit of a child prodigy, the "wonder of the neighbourhood" (Memoir 478) and it may have been quite irksome for the older boy to have a scrawny youngster set up as exemplar by his own father, William Hutton senior. To discover then that Robert was two years older than his claims might have helped Hutton raise his own self esteem. However, there is nothing in his obituary memoir suggesting the slightest envy on the part of Hutton, either of Bage, or of his talents: quite the contrary. He was, and remained, in great awe of a close friend whom he "dearly loved," one who he recognised as being an "uncommon but excellent man" and a person who "moved in a sphere more elevated" than himself. This glowing tribute was later criticised by Bage's son Charles who, fifteen years after Hutton's account was published, corresponded the following to Catherine Hutton:

I believe I ought to have written to your father to thank him for his insertion in the monthly magazine for Dec<sup>r</sup> 1801; but shall confess the truth? I thought the praise too much exaggerated & likely not to raise or perhaps to do justice to my father's character. People do not like to hear others exalted too much, so they set to work to pull down and when they begin they never fail to pull down too much.<sup>9</sup>

When Hutton wrote his short tribute to Bage for his *History of Derby* the novelist made a similar criticism of its content (Hutton 478). This lack of vanity may in some ways have led to the decline of his literary reputation. As a novelist he suffered that fate of being popular in his day and almost totally obscure some 50 years later. By the time Charles Bage was responding to Catherine Hutton it seems, by the tone of his letter, that the rot had already set in. Eight years later Scott's publication of three of Bage's novels ought to have re-established the Staffordshire novelist's reputation. Instead, thanks to an unjust and thoroughly biased criticism in the *Quarterly Review* by Scott's son-in-law, John Gibson Lockhart, Scott's publication dragged Bage's reputation down even further (QR 367-8).

In fairness to Hutton it is doubtful whether his published tributes to his friend had anything to do with the decline in Bage's popularity. Much more likely it was the radical content of Bage's writings which instilled fear in the staid minds of late-Georgian and then Victorian upper-class conservative England. Despite a few progressive writers and thinkers the English-speaking world was not ready even to consider liberation for women, or a society free from the hierarchy of master and servant relationships. Nor was it ready for peace and equality — other virtues Bage embraced in his works.

Of Bage's parentage not much is known. In the prefatory memoir by Walter Scott, his father is dismissed with a single sentence: "The father of Robert Bage was a paper-maker at Darley, a hamlet on the river Derwent, adjoining the town of Derby, and was remarkable only for having had four wives." Thankfully there are a few more details

available about this “remarkable” man than this terse apology suggests. Hutton himself, in his memoir of Bage, tells us that Robert’s mother:

died soon after his birth, when his father removed to Derby, but kept the mill. He quickly married a second wife, and, as I resided in the same street, and near him, I well remember he buried her in 1732. He soon procured another, buried her, and ventured upon a fourth, who survived him. (Memoir 478).

The story, due to a succession of marriages and deaths, now starts to get even more complex. George Bage, a papermaker at Darley Abbey, is assumed to have been Robert’s father from as late as 1979 when Don Peters made the claim without giving a source (87). Probably using Peters’ book as his source Maxwell Craven mentions this too (45). Neither of them give any hint regarding where this information comes from, which is somewhat frustrating. Nevertheless, it turns out they are, in all probability, right. But there is still some contention as to who his mother was. If she was the first of George’s wives, she would have been the former Mary Bakewell who married the Darley papermaker on 5 July 1719. Their marriage came to an end a decade later, brought about by her death. She was buried on 27 February 1729-30 at St Alkmund’s, the day before Bage gives as his birthday. Known offspring of the couple include a son George and a daughter Mary together with the unnamed son mentioned earlier, the one who most commentators assume to have been Robert. There was also another daughter, Dorothy, who died as a teenager.<sup>10</sup>

Eighteen months after Mary (née Bakewell’s) death George Bage married Elizabeth Locko at St Werburgh’s in August 1731.<sup>11</sup> Hutton must have had George in mind as Bage’s father because he wrote “I well remember he buried her (his second wife) in 1732” and Elizabeth Bage was buried on 5 December that year at St Peter’s, Derby. His third recorded marriage was to another Mary, Mary Seal of Derby on 20 April 1733 at Duffield. Mary’s burial took place on 28 March 1750 at St Werburgh’s. Though he moved quickly in the marriage stakes it leaves the tally of wives at only three and George Bage appears not to have been much of a mourner.

If Robert Bage was born on the date he gives this would have been between marriages, but only just. He could only have known his birthday from what his parents, surrogate parents, or relatives told him. His natural mother was not there to see him grow up, and if his acting mother was the second Mary Bage, for the bulk of his childhood she would have had some responsibility for his home education and upbringing. A comment made in one of his trading letters to Hutton blames a scarcity of paper on a scarcity of rags. In this he refers to his third mother and quotes one of her sayings. “I shall also make a lot of boards (paper). As to blue (paper) I have no rags – or nearly none. None are to be bought, and my third mother used to tell me once a day for ten years together You can have no more of a cat than her skin.”<sup>12</sup>

Mary was this third mother and she had on her hands a bright and inquisitive stepchild, a future beacon in English literature and a literary philosopher. Information given to Scott claims Bage's father had four wives but it does not say if any of these was Robert's real mother. When Hutton wrote his obituary Bage was not around to refute it. The stationer-historian continued: "Robert was put to school, so that I did not perfectly know him till 1735, when he was seven years old. He had made at that age such a progress in letters, that he was the wonder of the neighbourhood; he was then in the Latin tongue" (Memoir 478).

Childhood memories are not always the most reliable, especially regarding progeny belonging to another peer group than one's own, and Hutton may be a year or two out with this and other recollections despite his self-acclaimed phenomenal memory. On the other hand he may have known more than he was prepared to tell in an attempt to protect his friend from biographical revelations which, if generally known, could have hurt Bage's family. Or Bage, a secretive man in some respects, may have told his friend no more than he thought prudent until the time his death approached. Hutton and Bage were of different age groups, Hutton being born in 1723. The most likely explanation for Hutton's editing of Bage's letters is to protect his friend's family, and if Robert Bage was the illegitimate son of George, it would be a good reason why this protection was afforded.

While this is most probable it is also possible that Robert was brought up by his grandfather, Charles Bage. It is known that Charles Bage was living at Darley Abbey in 1735,<sup>13</sup> but very little else is known of him. According to IGI (International Genealogical Index) records, he appears to have come from a dissenting background,<sup>14</sup> and his wife, Margery, was buried at St Alkmund's in the autumn of 1734.<sup>15</sup> Charles Woolley Bage, Robert and Elizabeth's eldest son, was almost certainly named after him, since there is no-one called Charles on the Woolley side. It was not uncommon in the eighteenth century for craftsmen, like papermakers, to raise orphaned apprentices as their own children, so this possibility cannot be eliminated either. His father, be it real or surrogate, is in all probability George, who according to Hutton, was living on Full Street in the early eighteen thirties. This same George Bage was an innkeeper with a public house in the centre of Derby: the Ostrich, on Sadler Gate. By 1737 he was selling paper from this inn and seeking rags and other raw materials from the public. Hutton says he moved to Derby and kept the mill at Darley and from this advertisement he was clearly still connected with the paper-trade. The tenancy for the Ostrich was on the property market in George Bage's name, although it is not known whether the inn changed hands.<sup>16</sup> The cat adage repeated by Robert's third mother once a day for ten years together, and the birth-date Bage gives himself, would have put him at thirteen when he was no longer hearing its repetition. It is not implausible that at this age, or

thereabouts, Robert became apprentice to a papermaker at Darley Abbey Paper Mill, where he learnt the trade which would eventually provide for him and his family.

Another intrigue tends to suggest that John Bage of Stanton, brother of George, may have been a parent or guardian of Robert. This suggestion comes from a statement that Jane Bage, later Mrs Boulton, was a “near relative of the novelist” (Bishop 210). Poet and essayist William Hayley, whose whole family were fond devotees of the works of Bage, passed on this information to his brother when he met John Boulton, son of the former Jane Bage, at Lord Egremont’s estate, Petworth. Egremont and Hayley were both patrons of the arts and John Boulton, like his twin brother, Thomas, was a trained artist (Bishop 210). It is the will of John Bage which reveals Robert to be John’s nephew, and thus Jane Bage his cousin.<sup>17</sup> This last will and testament almost certainly confirms that Robert was the son of George Bage, and the younger brother to George Bage junior. It also reveals that he had an aunt Margery.<sup>18</sup> She married Philip Pattenden on 2 July 1742 at Mortlake, Surrey.<sup>19</sup>

It is surprising to find that in March and April 1753 Robert Bage was advertising the tenancy for Darley Abbey Paper Mill and the nearby house in which he, his wife and their new baby, Charles, had lived for the first two years of their marriage.<sup>20</sup> It brings into question why young Robert had suddenly been left in charge of the mill. The answer relates to a spate of deaths. John Bage, then servant to Sir Henry Harper of Calke, and uncle to Robert died in 1746, the same year that Robert’s grandfather, Charles, passed away. Robert’s elder brother, George, died in 1747.<sup>21</sup> The last of this unfortunate run of deaths was Robert’s third mother herself, Mary Bage, who was buried at the end of March 1750. True to character Robert’s father, George, would again remarry less than twelve months after Mary’s death, taking Hannah Marsh as his bride. They were married at the little village church of Dalbury, not in George Bage’s parish church of St Werburgh’s. Hannah became the fourth of George’s wives, and thus the one who Hutton quite rightly states outlived him. There was not the same obligation for mourning imposed on men as there was on women but it seems George was no sooner free from one relationship, than he became involved in another. Remembering that Hutton said that after the death of Robert’s real mother, George moved to Derby and quickly married a second wife, the possibility that Robert’s mother was unmarried at the time of her death is strong, although much hinges on the interpretation of the word “quickly”.

If the Huttons deliberately concealed the truth of Bage’s birth, what was the purpose? Had Bage concealed it from his family? The stigma of being born illegitimate or orphaned crops up time and again in his novels, and young women giving birth outside of marriage are just as frequent. *James Wallace* (1788) is “nobody’s whelp” (I, 26), Gregory Glen, in *Hermesprong* (1796), is the “son of nobody” (I, 3), Thomas and Ann

Sutton are orphans in *Mount Henneth* (1782), and Honoria Warren is presumed orphaned in *The Fair Syrian* (1787). It is true that other novelists of the century had bastard protagonists like Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and, to all intents and purposes, Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), and since orphans engender sympathy in their readers' minds this is a literary device unlikely to go out of fashion for long. What makes Bage different is his support for the "fallen woman" in a way that no novelist up to then had then shown, and few would show support in the century to come. Sixteen year-old Kitty Ross in *Barham Downs* (1784) is seduced and made pregnant outside of marriage then abandoned by her seducer, Corrane. She is forced out by her family and in attempting to reunite with Corrane in Ireland she is raped en-route which brings on a miscarriage. Caralia, in *Mount Henneth*, is raped in the Far East by soldiers, yet Foston, who rescues her, does not despise her, as might be expected, but goes on to marry her instead. Kitty Ross too marries well, the lawyer William Wyman. In his support for the "fallen woman" Faulkner observes that "Bage is expressing the emerging feminist attitude which is to find fullest embodiment in Mary Wollstonecraft" (Faulkner 41).

George Bage's marriage to Hannah Marsh took place eighteen months before Robert Bage himself married Elizabeth Woolley at Mackworth All Saints, Derby. Hannah Bage bore a son, John, who was christened at St Werburgh's in 1752, and who thus became Robert's only surviving half-brother. Robert's father, George Bage, died in 1766 and John Bage is found in occupation of Darley Abbey paper mill at the beginning of 1781 when his name appears on an insurance policy of the Evans family who owned the mills (Shorter 152). His mother, Hannah, would die in 1780, confirming Hutton's account that George's fourth wife outlived him. In April 1781 John married Henrietta Turner of Duffield Inn. The will of Hannah Bage, a widow, was administered by John in which administration he is described as being a yeoman of Derby. We know that this is the half-brother of Robert Bage from one letter in which the novelist, once more criticising Hutton for his meanness, writes in 1782 that because Hutton had only paid his "brother," as Bage called him, 5/9d per bundle instead of 6/- the Darley papermaker had promised his next lot to Brown and Bentley, a rival Birmingham stationers, for 6/3d, and Bage told Hutton his "brother" must keep his promise.<sup>22</sup>

Many eighteenth and nineteenth century authors began by writing anonymously. It was the fashion. But success nearly always brought them out into the open. This is not the case with Bage. Why did none of his Lunar associates ever mention him by name and scarcely even his novels? It is as though there was a deliberate brief, to which Bage himself was party, to avoid all references to his existence. After all as an author he was just as popular as Thomas Day and Maria Edgeworth and was probably read more widely than Anna Seward. Was the possibility of bastardy enough alone to prevent him from acknowledging his successes or was there a possibility of scandal? Was he a son of

nobility, or even royalty? Inherited titles and those who laid claim to them are singled out for special condemnation by Bage in all his novels. But while he might occasionally dip his nib into a well of nitrous acid he always manages to mix in a little zinc for levity, as Priestley, or rather, Humphrey Davy might have done before administering anaesthesia. End results from this admixture produce light-hearted, sometimes muddle-headed, caricatures of peers of the realm and other worthies.

While his ancestry remains in doubt his birth-date does not. Hutton, and later his daughter Catherine, claimed Bage, at the time of his death, was seventy-three. This was not true. A monumental stone laid four years after his death, possibly influenced by Hutton's claim or a misunderstanding of the obituaries, puts him at seventy-two. Accounts at the time of his death agree to his age. *The European Magazine*, *Gentleman's Magazine*, *Derby Mercury* and the *Staffordshire Advertiser* all say he died in the seventy-second year of his age, that is, aged seventy-one.<sup>23</sup> Tamworth parish register of St Editha's gives his age as seventy-one. Bage told William and Catherine Hutton he was seventy in 1800 and seventy-one in 1801. He told William Godwin he was sixty-seven in 1797.<sup>24</sup> The evidence is overwhelming. Bage was a man of great personal integrity and honesty who believed "fraud is beneath a man" (Memoir 478). Whatever other speculation exists about parentage it cannot reasonably be doubted that his birthday was 11 March 1730 (new style), 28 February 1729 (old style).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his article for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Kelly places a question mark against 1728 to show his doubt that is the correct year.

<sup>2</sup> A shorter version of this, also by Hutton, appears in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (LXXI pt.2, London 1802), 1206.

<sup>3</sup> Parish Register of Saint Alkmund's, 1729 and W. Beresford, "St. Alkmund's, Derby, and its oldest parish register." *Reliquary* XII (1871-1872): 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine* II(1812): 191. The entry reads: "Salop—Edw. Bage, esq. of Shrewsbury, formerly an eminent surgeon of Tamworth, and brother to the celebrated author of Hermsprung [sic]."

<sup>5</sup> B.L.S., 486802 11 R 29.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> P.M.

<sup>8</sup> B.L.S., 486802 11 R 29. (See letters of 19 Oct. 1796, 2 Apr. 1797, 11 Oct. 1798 and in particular one dated 16 June 1801 in which Bage castigates Hutton for not keeping separate accounts for the mills at Elford and Shugborough.)

<sup>9</sup> B.L.S., M.S. letter, IIR 12 L52.41, at the back of W.Hutton, *A Trip to Coatham*, M.S.

<sup>10</sup> Bage, Dorothy, daughter of George Apr 20 1721 buried May 29 1736 (St Alkmund's P.R.)

<sup>11</sup> Parish records, 15 August 1731.

<sup>12</sup> B.L.S., 486802 11 R 29. (See letter 3 Dec. 1782).

<sup>13</sup> Woolley Manuscripts, 6689ff 358-60, Derbyshire Public Record Office, Matlock.

<sup>14</sup> Two records of his marriage exist. Charles Bache married Margery Harrison at Middle or Dove Green United Methodist or Free Church, Selaston, Nottingham (IGI). Charles Bache married Margery Harryson at Ashbourne, Derbyshire. The dates are identical; 30 April 1691. Bache is an alternative spelling of Bage which I have also come across in a document relating to Robert's wife.

<sup>15</sup> Buried. Margery wife of Charles Bage (St Alkmund's P. R.).

<sup>16</sup> *Derby Mercury*, 25 May 1737. (I am grateful to Maxwell Craven for this lead).

<sup>17</sup> Will of John Bage, PRO: Probate 11/756.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Pattenden married Margery Bage at Mortlake, Surrey on 20 July 1742 (IGI index).

<sup>19</sup> IGI records: <http://www.familysearch.org/> batch number M013353.

<sup>20</sup> *Derby Mercury*, 30/3/1753 to 6/4/1753.

<sup>21</sup> John Bage buried 02 March 1746/47, Charles Bage buried 10 June 1746, St Alkmund's, George Bage, buried 13 June 1747 at St Alkmund's (Parish records).

<sup>22</sup> 486802 IIR 29, Birmingham Local Studies, Bage's letters to William Hutton, 3 December 1782.

<sup>23</sup> *The European Magazine*, XL: 238. *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXI (pt.2, London 1801), 862. *Derby Mercury*, Thursday, 10 Sep. 1801, 4, col. 3. *Staffordshire Advertiser*, Sep 12 1801.

<sup>24</sup> *M.W Letters*, 398-9.