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Eliza Hillier, The Opening of Siam, and Editorial Colonization in *Household Words*

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<1>This essay concerns the personal and public writings of the previously unknown Eliza Medhurst Hillier (1828-93), wife of the first British consul appointed to Siam (now Thailand), then the last independent kingdom in Southeast Asia. Eliza Hillier's published works depict the culture and people of the newly-opened Siam from the perspective of an average British woman. Her essays, "At Home in Siam" (November 1857), "A Pair of Siamese Kings" (April 1858), and "Siamese Women and Children" (December 1858), were published anonymously in the popular periodical *Household Words* (1850-1859), famously edited by Charles Dickens. Because *Household Words* was one of "the most prominent periodicals in the Anglophone world" (Drew 301), Eliza had unprecedented opportunity to help shape the average British citizen's limited understanding of Siam and the court of King Mongkut. For the British reading public of the time, "the name Siam would probably have vaguely conjured the distant and exotic kingdom bordering the far reaches of India" (Stape 3), giving her an outsized voice in representing and promoting this early expansion of the British Empire to Siam.

<2>It is only with the recent publication of Eliza's letters by historian and descendent Andrew Hillier in *My Dearest Martha: The Life and Letters of Eliza Hillier* (City University of Hong Kong Press 2021) that we now know the full name of the anonymous author of the *Household Words* Siamese articles. Eliza's authorship would have been unknown in her lifetime; from the limited information recovered from the original 1850s *Household Words* office book, recent periodical scholarship identified the author of the articles solely as Mrs. Charles B. Hillier. Even her own descendant Andrew Hillier was initially ignorant of her publications in *Household Words* until they were pointed out to him by a literary scholar (Hillier and Landy 183), as the publications postdate the extent letters, found in Eliza's

papers after her death. These seventy-five letters from her time in Southeast Asia were transcribed by her grandson Harold Hillier (*My Dearest* 6), and kept in the family well over a century before being published by Andrew Hillier, along with a monograph on the extended Hillier family history entitled *Mediating Empire: An English Family in China, 1817-1927* (Renaissance Books 2020). The letters cover the period from 1846-56, following the newly-married Eliza from Shanghai to Hong Kong and then later to Siam. Most are written by Eliza to her younger sister Martha Medhurst Saul (Martha's responses were not found in the papers), but a few are penned by her husband Charles and her brother Walter, as the family corresponded extensively while spread across the British Asian world, writing from Shanghai, Hong Kong, Foochow [Fuzhou], Macao, Batavia, Singapore, and Bangkok. The letters end shortly after Charles's early death of dysentery in 1856, just five months after the Hillier family's arrival in Siam. The widowed Eliza, with three-year old Maudie to care for and another baby on the way, quickly journeyed to England, where she reunited with her older children and extended family. It is there that she appears to have drafted and published three articles on the subject of Siam for Dickens's weekly literary magazine *Household Words* from 1857-58.

<3>This essay will explore Eliza Hillier as a historical hybrid, focusing on her role as colonizer, convinced of her own racial, cultural, and religious superiority and deeply invested in her husband's promotion to Consul at Siam. However, it will also investigate the ways in which Eliza was restricted by gendered and class expectations, particularly in her "intensely patriarchal" marriage (Hillier and Landy 163), and in her interaction with her publishers at *Household Words*. With the recent publication of her letters, her private voice is now available to scholars and I argue there is a significant difference in the tone between Eliza's personal letters and her *Household Words* articles, and that this difference, at least in part, is representative of Dickensian editorial policies. Her personal letters to her sister are full of wit and self-reflection, as well as the religious reverence that reflects her upbringing as a missionary's daughter. In contrast, her published writings are notably secular and illustrate a tension between the travel genre's expected description of foreign cultures and the editorial requirements of *Household Words*, which prided itself on a lighthearted Dickensian comical style, no matter the subject. The essays can also be seen as historical hybrids in both form and tone as Eliza's otherwise ethnographic and respectful work is frequently interspersed with anecdotal humor that often relies on Western assumptions of cultural superiority in its attempts to amuse the British reader at home. As historians Andrew Hillier and Simon Landy remark, "whilst the tone of Western superiority that creeps into some of her writing may grate, she plainly developed a considerable respect for Siamese culture" (177). The variable nature and topics of these works also suggests that Eliza

was herself caught in a hybrid historical position: when occupying the space of advocate for her husband's career in the China Consular Service, she takes up an imperial mantle and critiques what she sees as illiberal or tyrannical Siamese court practices. However, when speaking in a personal tone or about everyday Siamese people, particularly women, she shows empathy and mutual respect and advocates for these private citizens as intelligent, capable people. Despite her precarious origins as a lower middle-class English woman born on the fringes of empire, she uses her voice to promote the cause of Siamese women and children, all while advancing the career of her late husband and providing for her five surviving children.

<4>Elsewhere, I have discussed Mrs. Charles B. Hillier's writings as falling into line with common imperialist narratives of Western domestic superiority common to both the travel writing genre and to *Household Words*.⁽¹⁾ The publication of Eliza's private letters has led me to contemplate further how the role of *Household Words*' editorial policies may have contributed to this perception. In this essay, I investigate how much of Eliza's public writing might itself be seen as colonized by Dickens and his editorial team. Using her personal letters to compare tone, I aim to recover Eliza's voice and to retrieve the personal history of a woman writer lost to the conventions of anonymous publication. Patrick Leary describes this standard Victorian periodical practice as a "regime of secrecy" whose "purpose was to foreground the journal or newspaper itself as the 'author' of its contents . . . giving agency to a title rather than to any specific individuals" (par. 1). This is particularly true of *Household Words*, which sought not only to differentiate itself in a crowded field of publications, but also to recreate the tone and popularity of "Conductor" Charles Dickens's well-known fiction and essays.⁽²⁾ Leary argues that "piercing this veil of anonymity" to recover the identities of "the great unsigned" is a vital task for Victorian scholars (par. 6, 8), particularly for those contributors who were "marginalized by their gender or class position" (par. 2), as the widowed young Eliza Hillier likely was.

<5>As an amateur writer, Eliza's primary appeal to *Household Words* was most likely her historically unprecedented access to the Siamese culture and government at a crucial juncture in Siam's history. Caught between British Burma to the west and French Indochina to the East, Siam maintained its independence only through diplomatic cooperation, as first Britain, then America and France, pushed for Western free trade policies. In 1854, Sir John Bowring, then governor of Hong Kong, traveled to Siam on behalf of the British government to negotiate a treaty to open Thailand to international trade. As a result of Bowring's *Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Great Britain and Siam* of 1855, Charles B. Hillier, Bowring's Chief Magistrate in Hong Kong, was named the first HBM Consul to

Siam and traveled to Bangkok with his family in June 1856. Well before, however, Bangkok had been visited by both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, who contributed Western languages and science to the extensive knowledge of reigning King Mongkut (or Rama IV), who came to the throne late in life in 1851. Having previously spent over 25 years in the monkhood, Mongkut was famous for his intellectual pursuits in religion and astronomy, and later became known as “The Father of Science and Technology” in Siam. While Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn’s modernization efforts were later popularized in the West through Anna Leonowens’ memoir *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870), Eliza Hillier’s anonymous “A Pair of Siamese Kings” (1858) introduced King Mongkut’s efforts to the British public over a decade earlier. Of his Western accomplishments, she writes “By the assistance of the American missionaries, he has acquired a smattering of most subjects, and even a slight knowledge of Latin and Greek . . . He writes English with difficulty, and looks out all the dictionary words” (448). King Mongkut played up this interest in Western languages and science in order to stave off the growing interest of Western colonial powers and undermine imperialist accusations that the Siamese were uncivilized.

<6>Historian Hong Lysa argues that the Bowring Treaty “compelled the Siamese to submit to free trade practices,” a sacrifice made in order to “remain independent amidst the tide of colonialism that swept Southeast Asia” (328). Similarly, Lisa Lowe reminds us that the Western value of free trade so assiduously promoted as vital to “economic liberty in England” was also “intrinsic . . . to the improvisation of new forms of sovereignty in the empire.” (17). In more recent years, Siam has been understood by postcolonial scholars as a British “semi-colony” (Lysa 327), or even as an example of “crypto-colonialism,” which Michael Herzfeld defines as a “condition in which the very claim of independence marks a symbolic as well as material dependence on intrusive colonial power” (Herzfeld 173). Lysa agrees that historically, “the myth of Siam’s independence was the work of the British residents both official and unofficial in Bangkok, as much as of the Siamese rulers, who shared the interest of projecting the image that the latter were fully in charge.” (330). However, Mongkut and Chulalongkorn remain “generally revered in modern Thailand for their success in preventing Siam falling into the hands of the rapacious empires of either Britain or France” (Landy 21).

<7>In expanding the scholarly discussion to include early British relations with “semi-colony” Siam, this article participates in recent calls for “undisciplining” Victorian studies beyond a primary focus on the nation-state and complicating the commonplace “home/away binary” (Freedgood 300). The writings of Eliza Hillier can help expand the discussion beyond the more documented Indian Raj and the

settler colonies, as Andrew Hillier argues that they “provide a lens through which to view these outposts of the British World, including the ‘in-between places’” (*My Dearest* 3). Similarly, in the introduction of “The Wide Nineteenth Century” special issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2021), Banerjee, Fong, and Michie urge literary scholars “to think, instead, about the transimperial flows, networks, and formations that constituted the nineteenth-century world” (9). The flow of letters from Eliza, her brother Walter, and sister Martha between the expanding Chinese Treaty Ports, the Dutch East Indies, British Singapore, and the Kingdom of Siam have much to teach us about daily life on the fringes of “informal empire” in the early Victorian period (*Mediating* xxvi).

<8>The combination of Eliza’s letters and published works illuminate her unique position as imperial daughter and wife in the “British World far to the east of the Raj” (*Mediating* 105). Her father, Rev. Walter Medhurst, was an evangelical missionary with the London Missionary Society who married Anglo-Indian widow Betty Braune in transit to his first posting in Southeast Asia. Eliza was born at the missionary station in Batavia in the Dutch East Indies (now Jakarta, Indonesia); the Medhurst family later transferred to Shanghai when it opened as a new treaty port following the first Opium war. At age seventeen, Eliza married an assistant magistrate in the newly established Crown Colony of Hong Kong (1842), and four of Eliza’s surviving sons also went on to have imperial careers in Southeast Asia and Africa. In many ways, the Hillier/Medhurst families follow patterns established in more well-known imperial arenas such as India; Elizabeth Buettner’s significant study *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford 2004) illustrates “the integral role of family practices in the reproduction of imperial rule and its personnel,” claiming these “families both made, and were made by, the raj” (2). However, as Andrew Hillier points out in *Mediating Empire*, “Although there have been many studies of empire families, there have been remarkably few of British families in China” (xxii). Furthermore, much of what is known is focused on the role of imperial men as “contemporary memoirs and biographies that were written by and about Britons in China . . . made little or no mention of wives and children” (*Mediating* xxiii). Eliza’s writings from China and Siam therefore make a valuable contribution to the colonial archive from a feminine perspective. In contrast to the memoirs and the official correspondence that write out British women and children,⁽³⁾ Eliza’s published work does not erase the domestic experience of empire; while anonymous, the articles are clearly penned by a woman. For example, her first essay, “At Home in Siam,” begins with references to the Hilliers’ three-year-old daughter Maudie sitting on a Malaysian Sultan’s knee and continues the discussion of domestic family life interspersed with Siamese culture throughout.

<9>The domestic nature of her writing helps elucidate Eliza's complicated hybrid position as both colonizer and marginalized wife and daughter. While her father and husband chose to journey to Asia in search of opportunity, Eliza was born into an imperial role in Batavia, with little political, social, or financial agency. While clearly empowered in the imperial world by her racial status, she is also constricted as the daughter of a lower-class and "extremely patriarchal" missionary (*Mediating* 82). Her adult life was also full of financial and physical hardships, the latter chiefly related to the health risks of being constantly pregnant in a newly-established treaty port "where there were so few facilities and so much disease" (*My Dearest* 61). Eliza had seven children (five surviving) between 1847 and 1857, giving her little time to personally contribute to the daily work of maintaining an empire.

<10>If Eliza might be viewed a hybrid historical figure, both colonizer and colonized by her gender and class status, it is clear that her male family members were all well poised to take advantage of the opening of new arenas of empire to further their own careers. Her father, the Rev. Walter Medhurst, achieved his lifelong dream when assigned to Shanghai to help translate the Bible into Chinese at the conclusion of the First Opium War in 1843. The Reverend was regarded as a "maverick" (*My Dearest* 48), whose intense devotion to bringing the gospel to the Chinese led him to violate treaty rules when he traveled in disguise into the Chinese interior to conduct research (21). Eliza's brother Walter Medhurst, Jr., was onboard the first Consul's ship up the river after the Treaty of Nanjing as a young interpreter, beating his father to Shanghai. The only Medhurst child to be educated in England as a male, Walter, Jr. returned to Asia in 1843 to climb the ranks of the China Consular Service, eventually named Consul to Fuzhou and then Shanghai. Walter, Jr. earned his "reputation as a 'warrior consul'" and proponent of Gunboat Diplomacy during the Yangzhou Incident of 1868, when Chinese residents rebelled against the city's Christian missionaries and he responded by "sailing up river in a hastily summoned British warship" without waiting for orders (*Mediating* 120-21). Despite this misstep, he was knighted Sir Walter Medhurst for his service in 1877, before returning to Asia in retirement to work for the North Borneo Company where he was involved in the coolie trade.

<11>Eliza's husband, Charles Hillier, was also heavily implicated in the criminal abuses of the Hong Kong magistracy against the Chinese. A teenaged Charles arrived in Hong Kong as "second mate on the *Minerva*" during the First Opium War, and "must have been one of the first British civilians to set foot on the island" (*My Dearest* 23). From there, he too climbed the ranks, being named Assistant Magistrate in 1842, promoted to Chief Magistrate in 1847, before achieving the appointment of

HBM Consul to Siam in 1857. Hillier and Landy observe that “Despite lacking any legal qualifications, Hillier had nonetheless ensured that law and order was maintained in Hong Kong, not the least through the comprehensive use of corporal punishment for even the pettiest offenses.” (162-63). While he earned a reputation as a “notable flogger” (*Mediating* 63), “for all his faults, [he] was one of the few officials whose integrity had not been called into question during the colony’s first troubled years” (163). These Medhurst and Hillier men all have their place in the colonial archive, unlike Eliza, who “represents the sort of woman who played a key role in Britain’s empire project, but one whose life is seldom described or even acknowledged in the literature” (*My Dearest* 357).

<12>It is tempting, then, in reclaiming Eliza Hillier’s role in imperial history, to want to read her as critical of her male family’s empire building. However, Eliza’s letters offer little reflection on the violence and imperial actions of her father, brother, and husband. Andrew Hillier claims, “Accepting the values instilled into her, and taking the lead from her father, she would never question Britain’s imperial presence, whether in Hong Kong or Shanghai” (*My Dearest* 22). Her letters portray Walter, Jr. only as a very loving brother, always willing to go to the aid of Eliza and Martha when needed (as when he separately offered both his sisters and their children the protection of his household upon their widowhood). Likewise, her letters are unwavering in her support of her husband’s career and do not mention any judiciary abuses in the early treaty port. “From Eliza’s letters it is clear that, she had been shielded from the more unseemly aspects of Hong Kong’s life and that, although proud of his position and status, she had played little part in her husband’s public life” (Hillier and Landy 163). Whether she was “shielded” from imperial politics or actively discouraged from getting involved is not clear. What is obvious is that she enjoyed the new status that came with her husband’s and her brother’s promotions, writing to Martha “having two brothers Consuls, you ought to be a very proud little woman!” (*My Dearest* 286).

<13>The extant letters do not discuss much of her early childhood, but Andrew Hillier believes her to have “led a sheltered life” (*My Dearest* 22). It also seems to have been a grueling life for her, her younger sisters, and her mother Betty, who were all encouraged by the polyglot Rev. Walter to learn Malay and Chinese and work long hours in the missionary station and its school. Many missionary families abroad existed on the fringes of the lower middle class (Buettner 7), and it seems unlikely that the Medhursts could afford to send the girls to England for an education as they did for Walter, Jr.; instead, the girls were educated at home by their father. For the Medhurst girls, therefore, there seems little evidence of any viable option beyond early marriage for their protection and livelihood. Early marriage may have

been encouraged by the parents or thought of by the girls as a way to escape from the control of Rev. Walter, who was “renowned for his irascibility” (*My Dearest* 48). Eliza was married at seventeen, and Martha at only a year or two older to Powell Saul, an Irish merchant in Shanghai, separating the sisters for the duration of their marriages and setting the stage for their correspondence. Eliza may have been resentful of her early marriage, especially as she lost her first child Ann in Hong Kong when she was only eighteen years old; certainly, her later letters to her sister suggest their marriages were rushed or mishandled by their parents and express worry that they will do the same for their young sister Augusta. In 1855, Eliza writes to Martha of fourteen-year-old Augusta, “I dread their making some early marriage for her—Mama is not wise in these things and I am sure it was more by luck than good management that we got such good husbands” (258). She continues, “I confess I rather tremble for her” (258-9). Two letters later, regarding her father’s potential leave to England the following year, she comments, “I am chiefly glad on Augusta’s account because if she leaves next year when she will be 16, and remains till she is past 18, there will be some chance of her escaping a preposterously early marriage, perhaps an equally undesirable one, for Papa and Mama are not wise in such matters.” (*My Dearest* 263). Eliza’s repetition of the phrase “not wise” in both letters seems to represent a cemented view in Eliza’s mind that the older Medhurst girls’ marriages had been mismanaged.(4)

<14>While Eliza might have intimated to Martha that it was only by “luck” they both got “good husbands,” the domestic worries of finances, babies, and illness that dominate in her letters indicate that married life was still very difficult for her and Martha. It seems only in the privacy of a letter to her sister that she can share some of her true thoughts on the grind of pregnancies, birth, and childcare. The month after Maudie’s birth (Eliza’s fourth surviving child), Eliza wrote to Martha to apologize for not having shared her pregnancy news earlier: “Really I was ashamed to tell you how it was with me—for it seemed as if I have done nothing else since I was married but have babies—I am thoroughly sick of it.” (*My Dearest* 99). She continues, referencing Martha’s own pregnancy with her third child, “You are every bit as bad so you can’t laugh at me, which is a great comfort. Seriously though, I am sorry to hear that you have again such an interesting amusement in prospect and shall be anxious until I hear you are well over it.” (209). Dark humor aside, Eliza’s worry was well justified, as she herself had already lost Ann and, like Martha, been very ill after several of her surviving children’s births. Moreover, Eliza was at the time helping to care for her brother Walter’s son Wattie, whose mother Ellen had died in childbirth in Shanghai (*My Dearest* 62).

<15>Her letters also show the reality of the empire family as at the mercy of unsympathetic imperial employers. They are full of references to applications for extended leave for anticipated births, ill health, and family deaths being denied by the China Consular Service, for both Charles and Walter, Jr. Eliza writes Martha in 1855 that they are waiting to hear “if the powers that be will give Charles a leave of absence” (*My Dearest* 265); she reports that he has had another “sharp attack of fever” and “I think he is much too hard worked” (266). Similarly, her brother was on assigned duty elsewhere when his first wife died in childbirth in Shanghai in 1848 and when his second wife and infant died in Singapore in 1855 (63, 253); he was also denied permission by Sir John Bowring to go “to Martha’s protection” when her husband Powell died the same year, even after he offered to accept “a written reprimand if he [Bowring] would but let me go” (271). Even when the men were granted a leave, as Charles was to escort his family to England on medical advice in anticipation of Maudie’s birth in 1852, the families endured long separations. Charles had to return to Hong Kong well before Maudie was born, and Eliza stayed in England another two years with their boys and the infant. Upon returning with Maudie to Hong Kong in 1856, Eliza was immediately pregnant again before losing her baby Hugh a few short days after his birth; Hugh is buried with Ann in the Christian cemetery in Hong Kong. What is clearest then in her letters is the personal costs of empire for the women and children: family separations, ill health, and early deaths. Between 1855-57, Eliza, her sister Martha, and her mother Betty would all find themselves early widows, relocating to England without the possibility of employment and dependent on the help of extended family to raise their surviving children.

<16>After her reunion with Martha and her mother in England, there was little need for further correspondence. Therefore, little is known about the publication history of Eliza’s articles on Siamese culture the following year. These articles were likely meant to reinforce her husband’s career and influence posthumously, but the money brought in from the sale also seems to have been very necessary for the family finances. For her three published articles about Siam, she received almost 14 pounds, “a not insignificant sum” for a widowed mother of five (*My Dearest* 338). It is believed that “it was [Sir John] Bowring who had suggested she write her articles in *Household Words* and who had probably introduced her to [his friend] Charles Dickens.” (*My Dearest* 339-40).⁽⁵⁾ Sir John Bowring remained a life-long friend of Eliza’s, and on Charles’s death, had been helping Eliza to claim at least a partial widow’s pension, writing to the Foreign Secretary on her behalf (336-37). Yet there was also a wider web of Chinese imperial officials and missionaries writing for Dickens’s magazines that also might have inspired Eliza. William Charles Milne, her father’s co-translator of the Chinese Bible, wrote six articles on China

for *Household Words*. Later, Bowring anonymously published “To China in a Gunboat” (1865) in Dickens’s second magazine *All the Year Round*, and Eliza’s brother Walter “would anonymously write at least one article for the journal, titled ‘Chinese Kites’” in 1864 (*My Dearest* 386).

<17>However, as Eliza Hillier was neither a member of the China Consular Service like these men, nor a professional writer, it was an impressive achievement for her essays to be published in a such a popular magazine. Her work would have competed with “‘whole sacks’ of manuscripts that were to be submitted to *Household Words* during the nine years of its existence” (Lohrli 4). Dickens himself emphasized the magazine’s exclusivity in 1853, stating, “In the last year, we read nine hundred manuscripts,” eventually choosing “eleven” as a good fit (“H.W.” 146). Yet Eliza did more than just compete with all these possible contributors; she won the lead position for her very first article. “At Home in Siam” opened the November 21, 1857 issue, a position that was frequently occupied by installments of Dickens’s own travel narrative (co-authored with Wilkie Collins) *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*, as well as by the installments of Dickens’s novel *Hard Times* in 1854.

<18>The opening paragraph of “At Home in Siam” therefore allows Eliza, although writing anonymously, the pleasure of presenting herself as an authority on Southeast Asia in a first-person narrative. It begins with the Hillier family traveling from Singapore to their new posting in Bangkok onboard the British naval warship the *Auckland*. When the ship stops to provision at the small Malay sultanate of Terengganu, the Hilliers and several officers are invited to an audience with the sultan, who is naturally curious to know why “a war-steamer had anchored off the town” (481). However, while Charles was fluent in Chinese, only Eliza spoke Malay from her time at the missionary station at Batavia. Her unnamed female narrator announces, “I alone of the party knew anything of the language. But, I rose to my position, and informed his Majesty, that a treaty of commerce had been concluded between England and Siam, [and] that a consul had been nominated” (481). This knowledge gives the narrator an advantage, as this “fact was new . . . to the Sultan.” She answers his “endless stream of questions” and the encounter ends triumphantly with Eliza’s small daughter Maudie being “much noticed and honoured by a place on the great man’s knee” (481). The historical success of this visit is corroborated by the Sultan gifting the real Maudie his sword knot, which still remains in the family today (*My Dearest* 300).

<19>Beyond establishing the anonymous narrator’s authority and knowledge, these opening paragraphs are meant to draw in the reader with the excitement of new

places and the expansion of the British empire. The descriptions of the Sultan are unrelated to the following discussion of Siamese culture and there is no correlating mention of the visit to the Sultanate in Eliza's letters, suggesting it was not important to the official work of the Consul. Instead, it seems likely that the visit to the Sultanate was included for interest to fit *Household Words* guidelines. Anne Lorhli establishes that one of the "distinctive characteristics of *Household Words*' treatment of non-fiction prose" included "the provocative introductory paragraphs and the 'tricky,' 'smart' titles (often puns), intended to lure a reader into what might be article of serious import." She continues, "*Household Words* readers were to be 'instructively amused,' or—indirectly, unwittingly—instructed." (9). This may explain the more eccentric aspects of the Malaysian opening of "At Home in Siam," particularly the suggestive reference to the Auckland as "in search of pirates, real or imaginary" (481). It also seems likely that the naming of the article, "At Home in Siam," was suggested by the periodical, as Dickens was known to have "re-titled contributions" (Lohrli 15), and the "At Home" naming convention permeates *Household Words*. See, for instance, "The Turk at Home" (HW 1854), "At Home with the Russians" (HW 1855), "The Collier at Home" (HW 1857), and even "The Albatross at Home" (HW 1854).⁶

<20>The interference of the *Household Words*' editorial staff often extended to tone and style, as writing was regularly "bettered" in "pursuance of Dickens's instructions" (Lohrli 15). Lohrli points out that the preferred "personal attitude and the 'frequent, ingenious' handlings of subjects combined to give a distinctive tone to *Household Words*, a tone best described by Mrs. Gaskell's coinage 'Dickensy.'" She notes that "Mrs. Gaskell used the term in other than a complimentary sense" (Lohrli 10). Furthermore, Lohrli reports, "Editorial revision was extensive—and drastic. Dickens sometimes rewrote articles and stories almost entirely" (15). In the essay "H.W." (April 1853), Dickens and staff writer Henry Morley also describe submissions from amateur writers as sometimes "being entirely re-written" (146). According to Dickens and Morley, the average male unsolicited writer expects to be published on the first attempt and "has a general idea that literature is the easiest amusement in the world" ("H. W." 145-6). Female submitters are more severely dismissed as dilettantes with bad taste, writing "on scented paper" and "sprinkl[ing] with French words." (147). When, "Occasionally, she presents herself in the serious aspect of having some relative to support," then it is "our misery to endeavor to explain to her . . . that it would be as hopeful a resource to play a church organ without any knowledge of, or aptitude for, the instrument, as to play the muse's lyre." (146). How much Dickens or subeditor William Henry Wills might have rewritten Eliza's essays may never be known, but the condescension of these "H.W."

descriptions suggests that the gendered aspect of writing as the widowed Mrs. Charles B. Hillier, with five children to support, meant fighting to be taken seriously.

<21>I propose, therefore, that Eliza's gender, amateur status, and need for money to support her young family make her particularly vulnerable to editorial interference and rewriting. Such interference may explain why all three works are so strikingly uneven in tone and haphazardly structured, lacking transitions and jumping from topic to topic. This appears particularly true of the sardonic personal anecdotes sprinkled throughout. As these anecdotes do not match Eliza's letters or the tone of the culturally descriptive passages, it seems likely that they were encouraged or even, in Dickens and Morley's words, "entirely re-written" to match the magazine's established desire for a "personal attitude" (Lohrli 10). These passages are also the most objectionable from a twenty-first century perspective due to the racial and imperial implications of many of these anecdotes, which often include humor that presumes Western cultural superiority. As Sabine Clemm argues, the magazine's "constant demand to be imaginative and entertaining led to some rather crude generalisations, especially with regard to the representations of other countries" (13).

<22>One such potential editorial change occurs early in "At Home in Siam" when the Hillier family leaves the Auckland in the Gulf of Thailand and is rowed up the Chao Phraya river to Bangkok; in comparing the personal letters and the published account, this seems likely to be an instance in Eliza's writing that was potentially made more "Dickensy," in Gaskell's words (Lohrli 10), while relying on "crude generalisations" regarding the Siamese rowers (Clemm 13). Eliza's original letter to Martha only briefly discusses the journey up river, stating, "The 40 men paddled and shouted and yelled, I believe according to the custom in the King's boats, but it was 9 o'clock before we reached the factory.⁽⁷⁾ Such a journey it was, I hope I may never have such another." (*My Dearest* 302). The version of the incident in "At Home in Siam" expands this discussion to two full-length paragraphs. She explains to the reader that the boats were manned by "royal paddlers, selected by his Majesty the King of Siam to transport us to Bangkok, all clad in a kind of livery . . . much the worse for wear, and terribly in need of soap and water" (481). This acknowledgement of the royal gesture of welcome by the King is quickly subverted by a slight on the paddlers' livery, playing into common Orientalist tropes regarding poor hygiene. Eliza's narrator describes how the men "rowed standing, and at each stroke of the paddle, the sixty gave a stamp on the deck with one foot" (482). Occasionally, the steersman gave "a prolonged yell, to which the other fifty-nine responded by a short sharp bark." This commotion resulted in the Hilliers' "wearied nerves and aching heads," but the "howling boatmen" could not maintain their pacing without the yelling, so that "for ten mortal hours . . . we submitted to be yelled

and barked over.” (482). The language in this excerpt is much more exaggerated (60 boatmen instead of 40) and is more dehumanizing to the Siamese paddlers than in her letter: in the article, she uses “bark” twice and variants of “howl” three times, in the common manner of Dickensian repetition, while her correspondence uses the terms “shouted and yelled” and only once (*My Dearest* 302). Eliza’s private letter also focuses much more on the Western contributors to the family’s discomfort on the journey, particularly the captain of the *Auckland*. She writes to Martha, “The captain was a most unpleasant sort of person” who had “scarcely” given them “enough to eat” in the several days that they were anchored while waiting for transport to Bangkok (301). When the rowboats arrive, “though the captain knew that we had at least a 12 hours’ journey before us he allowed us to leave the ship without even so much a biscuit. Charles thought of course he had sent a basket of provisions.” (*My Dearest* 302). Overall, this example follows a general trend in which incidents are vastly exaggerated in the *Household Words* essays compared with her letters. Whether by design or editorial interference, however, the impression given to the average British reader is that life abroad is full of hardships, and that these hardships are chiefly caused by the Easterners themselves.

<23>Another instance of an unmistakable change in tone between published work and personal letter comes in Eliza’s description of a hosting a dinner for local European officials and missionaries. This section plays for laughs the domestic difficulties of entertaining guests “without the resources usually at command in civilized countries” (485). The narrator complains of the “intensely idle” Siamese who “have a real fear of labour,” impeding her in her diplomatic duties when, on the day of the dinner, the king’s head cook “had forgotten her promise” to kill a “bullock” and her interpreter’s friend “had been too idle to take the trouble” to provide the promised pigeons (485-6).⁸ Compare this with the tone of Eliza’s private writing, as she describes the same incident the year before, telling Martha: “You have no idea what a business it is to provide a dinner here—all the material one has to work upon being chickens *ad libitum*. I was obliged to send far and near yesterday to secure a joint of beef, and in order to get one piece, I must take a whole leg! It is amusing after all, and everyone knows that you can get nothing but fowls, so it does not much matter.” (307). The letter informs Martha that the dinner party was for “some French people,” who are presumably familiar with the local diet limitations so that it is “amusing” and “does not much matter.” She concentrates instead on Monsieur Montigny, the French ambassador and the Hilliers’ acquaintance from Shanghai, who had been invited but “declined on the plea that his constant occupations would prevent his going anywhere, but really I fancy it is because he thinks it would be infra dig for an Ambassador to dine with a Consul.” (*My Dearest* 306). Here the emphasis is on European class snobbery, not on the

interference of lazy Siamese in ruining state dinners. In fact, the letter does not mention any servant or specific person, only that it is difficult to procure beef in Bangkok. In the private writings, the humor is much gentler and the tone far more cheerful about any difficulties encountered. There is also generally a more respectful treatment of the Siamese people; for instance, Eliza writes in the same letter that “The Siamese here are remarkably civil and courteous in their manners to ladies as well as gentlemen . . . amongst the lower orders one always finds them quiet and unobtrusive in their manners” (307). She concludes that “We both like the place really very much” (307).

<24>This respect, however infused with Euro-centric bias, seems to have been a family trait. Andrew Hillier argues in *Mediating Empire* that the career success of the Medhurst men was largely dependent on their knowledge of Chinese and the “Confucian principals” that underpinned the society, which led to “the development of a cultural sensitivity towards China” (xxx). While still “Self-serving and predicated upon a belief that Britain’s presence in China was both legitimate and in China’s best interests” (xxx), their approach contrasted significantly with that of the British imperial brass, such as governor George Bonham who began his term in Hong Kong by “expressing a deep distrust of the Chinese and of any British officials who spoke the language,” a technique that was reportedly well received by British Hong Kong residents (70). The Medhurst men’s “sympathetic accounts of the country and its customs” likely influenced Eliza’s own approach to writing (*Mediating* 53).

<25> Eliza follows this same pattern, not questioning the predatory Bowring treaty—based, according to historian Landy, on the “unequal,” forced treaty between the Chinese and British after the First Opium War (21)—that brought them to Siam while simultaneously extending respect to Siamese culture. For instance, she provides her own “sympathetic accounts” of Siamese people and places in the middle of “At Home in Siam.” Once the family arrives in Bangkok, Eliza’s article takes pains to thoroughly and accurately describe the building of the houses on stilts, the transportation on waterways, marketing in boats and the Siamese’s “great” skill in handling watercraft, swimming “as a general accomplishment” from a young age (483), bathing, acquiring and storing rain water, and other everyday Siamese practices. In another passage, she thanks her acquaintance with “Chow- Kra-Tge,” a “young and intelligent noble who became intimate with us,” for information about the priesthood, filling another two columns with details about how one enters and exits the priesthood, the practice of begging for food and fasting, and the rights of the wives to remarry if desired. At the end of the eight-page article, Hillier spends over three columns discussing funeral rites and the burning of the bodies, which she

claims “contributes to the healthiness of Bangkok” (487). The Hilliers are “fortunate in being witnesses” to a ceremony for the ritual burning of a Prince’s elderly mother and Eliza minutely describes the décor, the ceremony, feasts, and “beautifully plaintive” dirges (487). This passage is overwhelmingly positive, written in the style of an amateur ethnographer of empire like her father and brother; overall, more space is devoted to carefully reporting the culture and traditions of the Siamese than to the personal anecdotes meant provide the magazine’s signature “stylistic flair” (“*Household Words*” 292).

<26>The second article to be published, “A Pair of Siamese Kings” (April 1858), demonstrates a similar mishmash of styles and form. This essay describes the hierarchy of the court of Kings Mongkut and his brother Pinklao to a British public practically ignorant of Siamese politics. Like “At Home in Siam,” it begins with an unrelated narrative in what is likely another attempt to grab the reader’s attention with a “provocative introduction paragraph” (Lohrli 9), this time a depiction of the royal elephant sheds in Bangkok. Eliza’s narrator jokes that the sheds are “a sight well worth wading for through the black sea of mud, known as a royal road,” before tutting over how the sheds are “kept in a most disgraceful state,” “in spite of their proximity to royalty” (“Pair” 447). This is a reference to the nearby Grand Palace complex, where elaborate palaces, golden-tipped wats, and pleasure gardens were laid out in a vast walled complex on a man-made island beside the Chao Phraya river. This engineering legacy of the Rama dynasty is an impressive sight for any visitor, even in the twenty-first century; surprisingly, however, there is no scene setting here for *Household Words*’ armchair travelers—only a joke about the elephant path of “mud, known as a royal road.” As Eliza well knows, there are no roads in Bangkok (not even a “a single carriage in the city”), as the river and canals are the main arteries of transportation (Landy 119). Therefore, this opening comical depiction seems to be included merely to quickly grab attention and establish a hierarchy between Western and Siamese royal culture at the beginning of an article in which many Victorians would likely have gotten their first understanding of the political situation of Siam.

<27>The rest of “A Pair of Siamese Kings” contrasts the First and Second Kings of Siam, two royal brothers. It relies heavily on Charles’s experience in public life and critiques what she views as the illiberal practices of Mongkut’s court. In 1851, King Mongkut appointed his younger brother Prince Chutamani as Second King, crowned as King Pinklao. Eliza explains to the reader, “The same prostrations and ceremonials are observed in the presence of both; the only difference between the two being that the elder brother actually governs the kingdom, though the younger has a voice in all public matters, and no important state affair can be settled without

his approval” (448). Eliza’s article shows a preference for the more Westernized Second King, and depicts the elder First King as arrogant and petty. She writes, “The King Number One loves pomp and display, and appears to possess little of the innate refinement and consistency which so eminently characterize his younger brother.” Furthermore, “The Second King excels the First in intellectual attainments. King Number One may be considered decidedly clever, but is extremely superficial in his knowledge, and his self-conceit is great barrier to his advancement.” (448). It is not known if Eliza ever met the First King in the brief period she was in Siam. The only direct description of Mongkut in her writings depicts a formal diplomatic meeting that is excerpted posthumously from Charles’s journal. In the excerpt, Charles writes of his first formal audience with the First King from the perspective of a newly promoted consul who has been frequently frustrated by the archaic cultural protocols of a foreign despot. It begins with a disapproving commentary on the practice of prostration, in which “every person in the hall—without exception, save the King and ourselves, [was] on their hands, knees, and faces, a position between crawling, sprawling, and lying on the floor” (448). Prostration is also described negatively in Eliza’s other articles and in Sir John Bowring’s 1857 book *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, which referred to Mongkut as a “despotic monarch” (vol. 2, 312), suggesting the practice was viewed as tyrannical and therefore antithetical to the European values of the modern liberal individual. (Mongkut’s son King Chulalongkorn abolished prostration in 1873) (Landy 20).

<28>Whether she met him or not, Eliza had personal reasons to dislike Mongkut, as it was his flogging of a “Siamese writer attached to the consulate, Kru (Teacher) Seng,” which impeded Charles’s recovery from dysentery and may have led to his death (Landy 159). The scribe Seng was accused of helping write a crooked lease for a British resident which violated the Bowring Treaty’s provision regarding foreign land ownership, for which he “received 99 blows of the rattan” in the presence of the First King (159); Seng later died of his injuries. As Seng was employed by the consulate, his seizure was seen by the British as a violation of the same treaty and “an insult both to the consul and Queen Victoria” (Landy 162); the *Singapore Free Press* reported that the incident greatly “threaten[ed] the peaceful relations existing between the Kingdom of Siam and Her Majesty’s government” (qtd. in Landy 161). This threat required the seriously ill Charles Hillier to abandon his recuperation on the Gulf of Thailand to return to Bangkok against medical advice, a decision which his doctors agreed hastened his death in the weeks that followed (Landy 166). Despite the First King’s personal involvement in this affair (and Eliza’s knowledge of it as she took the ill Charles’s dictation to his assistant Charles Bell regarding Britain’s formal diplomatic response), Eliza’s public discussion in “A Pair of Siamese Kings” betrays little reference to this

diplomatic incident and none to Charles's death. It sticks to carefully excerpting descriptions of the First King from Charles's journal in order to promote an untarnished account of her husband's successful establishment of the British consulship.

<29>This incident does not prevent Eliza from speaking highly of other members of the court in the article; she has glowing things to say about the Second King when the Hilliers are invited to luncheon at his palace. Eliza writes, "I was pleased by his manners, which were particularly courteous and gentlemanly, and at the same time unassuming." (450). He "bowed and shook hands, with the ease of an English gentleman, and with much grace and dignity." She was "surprise[d] at finding a pretty commodious and well-built house, neatly and elegantly furnished in the English style," as "all his ideas of English architecture had been gathered from pictures in the Illustrated London News" (450). These gushing passages feature Dickens's signature repetitive style, insisting again and again on King Pinklao's admiration for everything English, from his wooden paneling down to his tea set, and the article admires his admiration, perhaps viewing it as tacit acknowledgement of English superiority. By becoming English in manners and lifestyle, the Second King is depicted as becoming the ideal modern liberal individual to rule Siam.⁽⁹⁾ Eliza writes, "In the event of his succeeding to the throne, the interests of foreigners will doubtless be much advanced." (450). The pointed preference for the Second King seems to reflect Charles's private worries for Britain's continuing good relations with Siam under the "willful and capricious" Mongkut (451). She ends with a warning regarding the First King, "there is a constant danger of his infringing upon the rights of foreigners . . . should his anger at any time inadvertently be roused" (451). This seems to be a controlled, veiled allusion to the Seng affair, her only published reference to this diplomatic incident. The most political of all her writings, "A Pair of Siamese Kings" betrays Eliza's awareness of her husband's unfinished work in Siam and her own attempt to fulfil the role of dutiful wife in publicly cementing Charles's career and legacy posthumously.

<30>The most positive treatment of Siamese culture in her public writing can be found in her last article "Siamese Women and Children," published in December 1858. While "A Pair of Siamese Kings" seems self-aware of its goal of bolstering Charles's professional achievements, Eliza's voice seems to be freer in this more personal final piece. This 2½ column article was published as a "Chip," categorized by *Household Words* as a short, satirical piece. Ironically, this work may be the least satirical of Eliza's essays and, perhaps because of the brief length, has limited personal anecdotes with most of the piece dedicated to anthropological descriptions of Siamese dress, hairstyles, jewelry, betel chewing, etc. Whereas "A Pair of

Siamese Kings” spoke highly of the Second King’s favorite wife and children, in this work, she champions Siamese women of all classes, resisting any attempt on the part of the reader to see them merely as savages by saying “The women, as a race, are very intelligent” with “pleasing and modest manners” (41). She further emphasizes their education, noting “it is not uncommon in Siam to find women able both to read and write,” even among “the lower ranks,” and argues that they also “occupy a moral position many degrees superior to that of their sisters in neighboring countries” (41). Eliza describes having the Prime Minister’s head wife, a “very interesting woman,” to lunch and commends her “perfect propriety and good breeding” on the occasion (41). In this piece, she uses her unique position as a female writer to champion Siamese women as intelligent, capable, and civilized people while embodying a hybrid position on Siam’s emerging status as a “semi-colony.” The essay does not take a direct political position on the British right to trade in Siam or the treaty agreement, but neither is it a call for the type of paternal interventionism on the part of women and children that typically justified so much of Western imperial expansion.

<31>The publication of “Siamese Women and Children” is the last dated example that we have of Eliza Hillier’s writing, either public or personal.⁽¹⁰⁾ The three empire widows, mother Betty Medhurst, sister Martha Saul, and Eliza Hillier, would briefly live near each other in Bedford, England, a town “where ‘empire families’ would often . . . retire to in later life,” in part because it provided free education to male children (*My Dearest* 339). The women would certainly have been busy, caring for a combined nine children, including newborn Guy Hillier—a hardship common to many empire families that is not alluded to in the *Household Words* articles. It may have been her financial struggles that led Eliza to remarry in order to provide a home for her two youngest, Maudie and Guy, while the eldest boys were at school. She married Devon solicitor Charles Marshall Hole in 1864 before having two more children (Hugh Marshall Hole, born 1865 and named after Eliza’s deceased son Hugh Hillier, and Gina Marshall Hole, born 1868). While her feelings about her second husband are unknown, her marriage and the raising of the four youngest children may have contributed to the end of Eliza’s brief writing career.

<32>In recovering the extent personal and public writing of Eliza Hillier, I expose some striking differences between the treatment of Siam in her letters and in Dickens’s *Household Words*. We must be aware that Eliza Hillier’s public depiction of her short time in Siam is mediated by her grief, the several months that she spends in England while drafting, and perhaps by her need for the income provided by her writing. While this certainly may account for some of the hardening of her tone in the published works, we must also take into consideration questions of genre and

form, as Eliza was shifting from a personal to public forum, and from the epistolary to the essay format. In her letters, Eliza is a child of empire writing to another child of empire, well aware of both the benefits and difficulties of life in Southeast Asia. The audience for *Household Words* readers was primarily Britons reading at home, and the magazine's editorial staff likely wanted to amplify foreign differences for these readers while maintaining the ever-present desire for Dickensian humor, explaining the essays' hybrid form and curtailed ethnographic tone. In the twenty-first century, we can only make educated guesses as to how many of these changes between the personal letters and public articles were made by Eliza in the drafting process and how many were made later through editorial suggestion or even re-writing without her approval.

<33>No matter the exact extent to which Eliza's voice was colonized by editorial interference, we must acknowledge that her publication of early information about the newly-opened Siam in such a well-known magazine as *Household Words* meant that her words had a great impact on the common Victorian reader's understanding of Siam; the sense of cultural superiority that infuses the humorous sections of the essays therefore must also have contributed to establishing and promoting a power dynamic that allowed everyday British readers to feel entitled to the expansion of their empire. Despite her significant accomplishments in promoting the cause of Siamese women and children for posterity, her publications exploit her unique knowledge of Siamese culture, a knowledge that was only achieved through governmental mechanisms of empire. In recovering the voice and history of Eliza Hillier, we also recover and acknowledge her contributions to the colonial archive. We now know the story of Eliza Medhurst Hillier to be that of a historical hybrid figure, caught between familial duty and imperial history.

Notes

(1)I have previously discussed Eliza Hillier as one of several anonymous authors who published imperial travel writing in *Household Words* in "Mapping Domesticity 'At Home' and Abroad in the Travel Writing of Dickens's *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*" (2021). At the time of the article's submission, "At Home in Siam" had been attributed to Mrs. Charles B. Hillier, but Eliza's first and maiden name and personal history remained unknown until Andrew Hillier's publication of her letters and family history.(^)

(2)The *Household Words* Office Book suggests "some three hundred ninety writers—and non-writers—who were eager or willing to have their contributions

appear anonymously under the aegis of Dickens” during the magazine’s nine-year run (Lohrli 24).(^)

(3)Andrew Hillier cites several cases, including W. Meyrick Hewlitt’s *Forty Years in China* (1943), in which “the only reference to his private life in his memoirs is a passing remark that he was married and that, on occasion, he had to travel across China with ‘wife, governess, two children, cockatoo and forty tons of luggage.’” (xxiii).(^)

(4)Eliza must have been relieved when Augusta did go with her parents to England the next year; however, due to their father’s sudden death in Jan. 1857, Augusta remained permanently with their mother in England and much “later married a vicar, Revd Jonathan Bates” (*My Dearest* xix).(^)

(5)Dickens and Bowring, who was a man of letters, polyglot, and prolific translator before being posted abroad, were long-term friends and correspondents, with Dickens “consulting him [Bowring] for information about opium among the Chinese, an interest that found expression in *Edwin Drood*.” (<https://www.vialibri.net/years/books/33153765/1864-dickens-charles-autograph-letter-signed-to-sir-john>). In the same letter, Dickens solicited Bowring for material on China for his magazine, writing “to agree to consider anything Sir John wants to submit for publication in *All the Year Round*: ‘I leave your Chinese knowledge to select the subjects most likely to strike an audience composed of all sorts and conditions of men. Ghost stories of the Levant, by all means!’” This suggests that Dickens was particular eager for travel narratives from the region for both of his magazines.(^)

(6)For more information regarding this naming convention, see Durgan, “Mapping Domesticity ‘At Home’ and Abroad in the Travel Writing of Dickens’s *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*,” pg. 259-263.(^)

(7)The factory is the name of their residence. The house had been “Constructed in the 1820s for a Scottish merchant, Robert Hunter, although still known to the foreign community as the British—or sometimes English—Factory” (Hillier and Landy 166). Hunter is best known for his contribution to the exhibition of imperial subjects as curiosities, as he was responsible for “discovering, and sending to American, the famous Siamese [conjoined] twins, Chang and Eng” (166).(^)

(8)For more on the domestic elements of “At Home in Siam” regarding household duties and managing staff, see Durgan, “Mapping Domesticity ‘At Home’ and

Abroad in the Travel Writing of Dickens's *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*," pg. 268-270.(^)

(9)While there is no corresponding mention of the Second King in her letters to Martha, there is a similar comment regarding the Kalahom, or Siamese Prime Minister, whom Eliza also admires and has to dine at the newly-established consulate. She writes to Martha, "Such a nice gentlemanly little man, he really behaved as if he had been accustomed to dine in English fashion all his life" (307).(^)

(10)As mentioned before, we have nothing to indicate her process of the drafting and publication of her articles, or their reception in the family. Andrew Hillier does suggest that Eliza may have had some desire to continue her writing career, stating "At some point, she also began writing some fiction, the few examples remaining in the family papers being fairly typical of 'sentimental novels' of the time, depicting orphans and wards of the court making their way in the world, and no doubt reflecting her own reading. However, so far as we know, this did not progress and nothing more was published." (*My Dearest* 338).(^)

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