

## Chasing Somerville, New College's Poet of the Hunt

Our alumnus, poet and country squire William Somerville (1675–1742), in the aftermath of the death on 5 September of his wife Mary (née Bethell), anticipates with most unbecoming eagerness the death of Elizabeth his mother, as is clear from a candid letter he wrote to his rich kinsman James, thirteenth Lord Somerville (1698–1765) on 27 September 1731—a letter we were fortunate enough to acquire for our archives in January of this year. Somerville therein writes:

Your servant Reynolds is gone to Adderbury to my Mother, to take Directions from her own Mouth, about her Funeral. This looks as if She was resolved to dye in good earnest. She is indeed so very old, and so very weak that She can not continue long.<sup>1</sup>

But continue the old, weak lady did. Somerville's finances were a problem for him, and the letter refers to a need for money—'my Parliamentary Friends are at Such a Distance that I can not apply to them for Franks'—and also to a deed he and his distant cousin were going to draw up in November, a legal arrangement whereby Somerville's properties in Edstone, Warwickshire and Aston Somerville, Gloucestershire would revert to Lord Somerville in Edinburgh, after the poet's death, in return for present financial support from his lordship. And Somerville's financial woes can most definitely be attributed in some degree to his widowed mother, as editor Walter Scott's conclusion to the *Memorie of The Somervilles* (1815) makes evident: 'his estate, nominally 1500*l.*, was reduced to less than two-thirds of that sum, by a jointure of 600*l.* to his mother'.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately for the dowager Mrs Somerville, though perhaps unfortunately for her son, Elizabeth would live to the age of ninety-eight; William would in fact outlive her by just a month. An expectation, then, of being rid of the burden of the £600 annuity (and of his mother), which Somerville alludes to in his letter, would prove quite premature, because Elizabeth would live on for another eleven years after William seemingly devoid of filial concern had already been anticipating her demise.

In his defence, we should certainly say that William Somerville is reputed to have been convivial, generous, even-handed as a justice of the peace, and good and caring with his servants—if not good with money. A tall, fair, and decidedly handsome man, his financial worries seem to have driven him to drink—his tipples of choice being rum and blackcurrant jelly with a dash of water—and drink possibly precipitated his death.<sup>3</sup> The two principal passions of his life appear to have been hunting and poetry, which together combined in his most celebrated work, the four-volume hunting georgic poem *The Chase* (1735), and its short verse supplement *Field-Sports* (1742). Following schooling in Stratford-upon-Avon, and later Winchester College as founder's kin from 8 August 1690, he had proceeded to New College, matriculating 24 August 1694, and later becoming a fellow. When his father Robert died in 1705, Somerville then returned to his family seat in Edstone, where he would remain until his death.

Poor Somerville—he is damned with such faint praise by the great, if unkindly, Dr Johnson, who presents him as but a dilettante poet, an interesting specimen of a man of his social standing who can also write a bit, albeit about a subject (Johnson grudgingly concedes) Somerville knew a very great deal—hunting:

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from William Somerville, from Edston[e], to James, thirteenth Lord Somerville (27 September 1731), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/Somerville.

<sup>2</sup> James, eleventh Lord Somerville, *Memorie of the Somervilles; Being A History of the Baronial House of Somerville*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Printed by James Ballantyne and Co. for Archibald Constable and Company, Edinburgh; and Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, London, 1815), II, 482.

<sup>3</sup> Helpful biographical detail can be found in Gilbert Forester, 'Brief Memoir of Somerville, Author of "The Chase," with a Sketch of his House and Kennel', *The Sporting Magazine, or Monthly Calendar* 2nd series, 4 (22) (February 1832), 264–9, H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'William Somerville: The Poet of the Chase', *Country Life* 85 (2,212) (10 June 1939), 614–5, and F. D. A. Burns 'Somerville [Somerville], William (1675–1742)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (3 October 2013) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/26026>> (Accessed: 12 December 2022).

[A] writer, who at least must be allowed to have set a good example to men of his own class, by devoting part of his time to elegant knowledge . . . Somervile has tried many modes of poetry; and though perhaps he has not in any reached such excellence as to raise much envy, it may commonly be said at least, that *he writes very well for a gentleman* . . . His great work is his *Chace*, which he undertook in his maturer age . . . To this poem praise cannot be totally denied.<sup>4</sup>

But *The Chace* would prove very popular well into the nineteenth century, and an 1832 assessment of Somervile by ‘Gilbert Forester’—pennname of Fanny White Braddon (1803/4–1868),<sup>5</sup> mother of *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835–1915)—is more sympathetic:

If the divine breathings of a Shakespeare, the magnificence of a Byron, or the melody of a Moore be wanting, we have that which will never cloy . . . He was a practical sportsman, and wrote from his own personal knowledge, which is not always the case with those who “make books.”<sup>6</sup>

Poets whose influence Somervile himself acknowledged, and to whom he might be better compared, include Milton, and the English georgic poets John Philips (1676–1709) who wrote *Cyder* (1708), and also *The Seasons* (1730) author James Thomson (1700–1748). Forester’s account is useful for the specifics of Somervile’s kennels, which speak to the considerable outlay Somervile must have had to expend to keep up his sport—and which would have certainly proved a financial drain—with his ‘about twelve couple of beagles’, ‘six couple of fox-hounds’, and ‘five couple of otter-hounds’.<sup>7</sup> *The Chace* seeks both to elevate the history and contemporary practice of British hunting as well as to provide illuminating detail on four different types of hunt—hare hunting which takes place in autumn (across 286 lines of verse), fox hunting for the winter (191 lines), and the pursuit of the stag (264 lines) and the otter (124 lines) during the summer.<sup>8</sup> Somervile’s verses circulated in manuscript prior to being printed: his earliest major poem seems to have been ‘The Wicker Chair’, written probably around 1708/9 but first published in revised form only in 1740 as *Hobbinol, or The Rural Games*—a mock-heroic poem on the Cotswold Games.<sup>9</sup> *The Two Springs, A Fable* (1725) was his first published poem, and copies survive in around half a dozen libraries only, including the Bodleian Library. New College Library lacks this book, but has otherwise a very strong holding of Somervile’s printed works (including rarities and one-offs), beginning with what appears to be a fine paper copy of his second book *Occasional Poems, Translations, Fables, Tales, &c.* (1727), which reproduces ‘The Two Springs’. The library holds copies of several editions of *The Chace*, including its first, a quarto edition (one of 750 copies produced)—with its superb engraving depicting the poet presenting his lyre to Diana, goddess of the hunt, by Gérard Jean-Baptiste Scotin (1698–1755) after Hubert-François Gravelot (1699–1773). Our copy bears the armorial bookplates of the dukes of Gloucester and of John West, first Earl De La Warr (1693–1766).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Johnson, ‘Somervile’, in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works*, 4 vols. (London: Printed for C. Bathurst, 1781), III, 191–4, at pp. 192, 193, 194.

<sup>5</sup> See Jennifer Phegley, ‘Cultivating Bohemianism Among the “Unknown Public”: John Maxwell, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Fanny Braddon, and the *Halfpenny Journal*’, *Women’s Writing* 29 (1) (2022), 9–27, at p. 10.

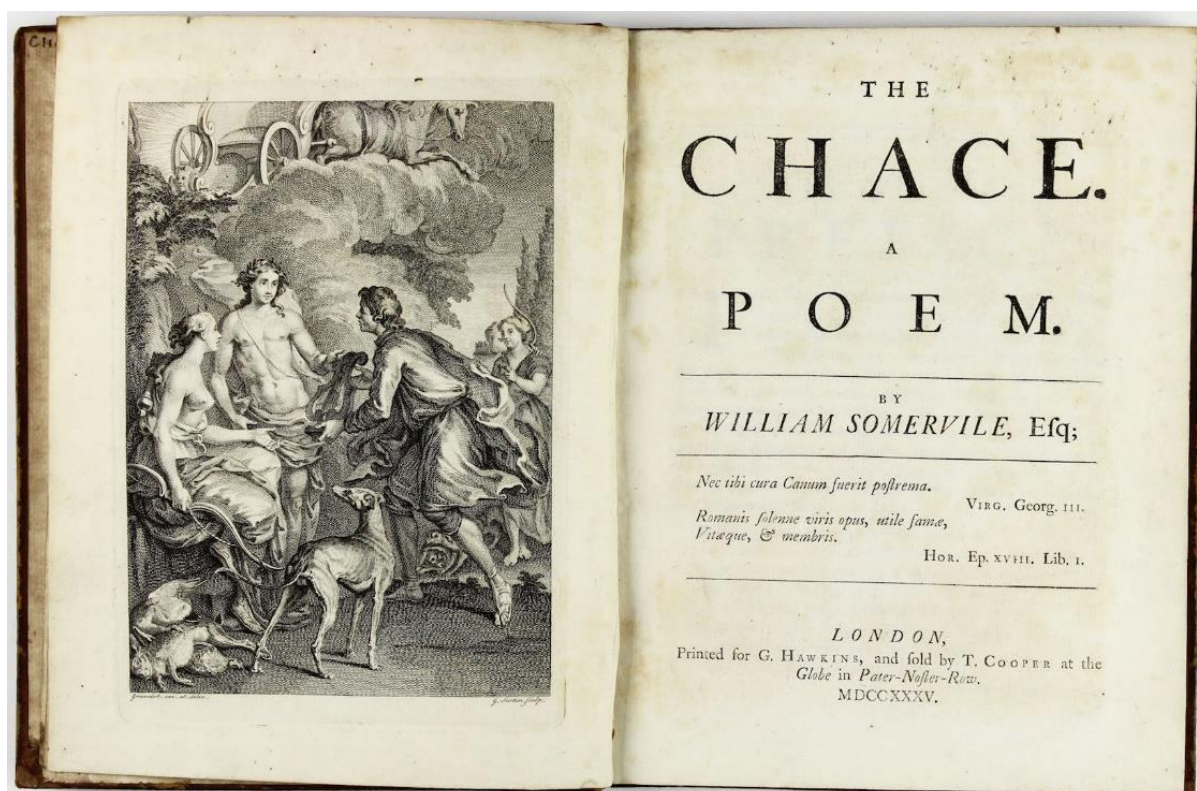
<sup>6</sup> Forester, ‘Brief Memoir’, p. 269.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>8</sup> Donna Landry, ‘The Pleasures of the Chase circa 1735 to circa 1831’, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671–1831* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 168–94.

<sup>9</sup> William Somervile’s ‘The Wicker Chair, A Burlesque Poem, in Blank Verse’ was subsequently published in *The Shakespearean Miscellany: Containing a Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts . . . Scarce and Original Poetry; and Curious Remains of Antiquity* . . . Printed chiefly from Manuscripts, in the Possession of, and with Occasional Notes by, F. G. Waldron (London: Lackington, Allen, and Co., 1802), pp. 25–84.

<sup>10</sup> William Somervile, *Occasional Poems, Translations, Fables, Tales, &c.* (London: Bernard Lintot, 1727), and his *The Chace. A Poem* (London: Printed for G. Hawkins, and sold by T. Cooper, 1735), New College Library, Oxford, held at respectively NB.66.36 and NB.66.33.



New College Library, Oxford, NB.66.33

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New College Library, Oxford,  
NB.73.18

An instantly popular book, the library also holds copies of the two octavo editions of *The Chace* which appeared later that same year—in a June print run of 1,000 copies (the second edition), and then, for the octavo that bears ‘third edition’ on its title-page, in an August run of 1,500 copies. Somerville’s next book (which he dedicated to Hogarth), *Hobbinol, or the Rural Games*, first appeared, as a quarto, in 1740: the library holds a copy, along with one of the ‘third edition’ (an octavo) from that same year. Soon it became common for editions of the two poems to be issued and bound together, and the library holds instances of these dual productions.<sup>11</sup>

Most notable is our copy of the 1786 edition of *The Chase . . . by William Somerville* [sic], one of ‘Wenman’s cheap editions of the most celebrated works in the English language, both poetry and prose’.<sup>12</sup> It is an extremely rare edition—ESTC records just one other copy within the British Isles (at the British Library)—it includes a lovely frontispiece, and our copy has a distinguished provenance, having belonged to the foremost collector and bibliographer of hunting, hawking, and shooting books, C. F. G. R. Schwerdt (1862–1939), and to HRH Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester (1900–1974), himself an exceptional horseman and shot.

<sup>11</sup> For example, William Somerville, *The Chace. A Poem*, 4th ed. (London: G. Hawkins, 1757) bound with his *Hobbinol, or the Rural Games*, 4th ed. (London: G. Hawkins, 1757), New College Library, Oxford, NB.73.10(1,2).

<sup>12</sup> See Thomas F. Bonnell, ‘The Best Judges of Vendible Poetry: William Strahan, Joseph Wenman, et al.’, *The Most Disreputable Trade: Publishing the Classics of English Poetry 1765–1810* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 169–98.



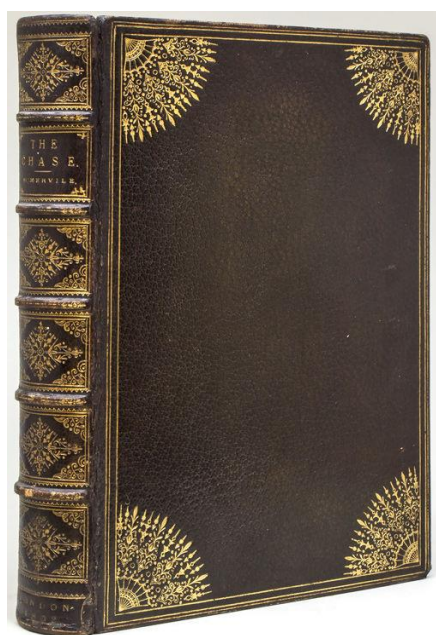
A 1931 appreciation in *The Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News* of Somerville and his celebrated *Chace* singles out as the ‘generally agreed . . . best edition’ the 1796 quarto printing by William Bulmer (1757–1830), containing illustrations and engravings by brothers John (1760–1795) and Thomas Bewick (1753–1828)—examples of their best work—which were instrumental to the book’s success. The library holds a copy, along with a Cadell and Davies London octavo printing of the same date, illustrated with plates by Thomas Stothard (1755–1834). Our copy of this 1796 Stothard edition is notable and unique on account of its fore-edge painting of a fox-hunting scene, depicting two horses and riders, and two dogs near a stream.<sup>13</sup> Georgics, indeed, lend themselves most readily to the work of fore-edge painters.



New College Library, Oxford, NB.66.31, fore-edge painting [detail]

We also hold a copy of the second Bulmer edition of 1802, a yet more extraordinary labour of love on account of—in addition to the original Bewick engravings—its having been profusely extra-illustrated. It contains around sixty engraved portraits (including of Somerville, Hogarth, and Dr Johnson), sporting and hunting scenes, and animal illustrations—notably dogs and hounds. Many engravings are from the 1830s, and the extra illustrations enable us to date this specially constructed book’s dark brown morocco, gold-tooled binding to no earlier than 1844.<sup>14</sup>

In January 1742, *Field-Sports* appeared, in a print run of 1,500 copies, six months before Somerville’s death. He was part of a Whig ‘Patriot’ opposition to Sir Robert Walpole and King George II that looked to Frederick, Prince of Wales for promise of future leadership, and Somerville had addressed the prince within the *Chace*. But with his verse sequel (of a kind—on hawking and angling), Somerville went one further, and the title-page of *Field-Sports* bears ‘Humbly Address’d to His Royal Highness The Prince’, indicative no doubt of princely approval of Somerville’s earlier poem.<sup>15</sup>



New College Library, Oxford, NB.17.19

<sup>13</sup> H. T. Kirby, ‘The Laureate of the Chace: An Appreciation . . . of William Somerville and his Poem “The Chace”’, *The Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News* 133 (3,030) (10 October 1931), 84 and 112, at p. 84; (M. L. Biscotti, *Six Centuries of Fox Hunting: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) similarly notes that the Bulmer edition of 1796 ‘is considered a very desirable edition by many collectors’, p. 347); William Somerville, *The Chace. A Poem* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Co. Shakespeare Printing Office, 1796), and his *The Chace, A Poem. A New Edition. To Which is Prefixed a Critical Essay by J. Aikin* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1796), New College Library, Oxford, held at respectively NB.43.14 and NB.66.31.

<sup>14</sup> William Somerville, *The Chace; A Poem* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Co. Shakespeare Printing Office, 1802), New College Library, Oxford, NB.73.19.

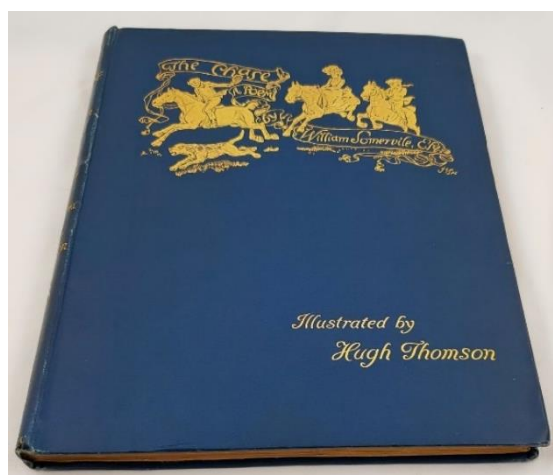
<sup>15</sup> See Christine Gerrard, ‘Mythologizing the Monarch: Idea of a Patriot King’, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725–1742* (1994), pp. 185–229.

Copies of *Field-Sports* are also rare, with ESTC listing, in addition to New College, just eight holding libraries within the British Isles. We know that *The Chace* and *Hobbinol* would frequently appear, bound together within one volume, but there is also an 1804 Albion Press edition, with fine illustrations by celebrated animal painter John Nost Sartorius (1759–1829), which annexes *Field-Sports* to Somerville's most famous poem, *The Chace*. A quite superb fore-edge painting depicting an English hunting scene distinguishes our copy.<sup>16</sup>



New College Library, Oxford, NB.73.5, fore-edge painting [detail]

Other notable nineteenth-century illustrated editions include an 1813 one by publisher Rudolph Ackermann (1764–1834) combining three of Somerville's poems into one book, *Hobbinol, Field Sports, and The Bowling Green*, and done in the manner of the Bulmer *Chace* edition; illustrations come from John Thurston (1774–1822) engraved by Charlton Nesbit (1775–1838), himself an apprentice of Thomas Bewick. The library also has a copy of the 1896 edition by publisher George Redway (1859–1934), with illustrations by Ulsterman Hugh Thomson (1860–1920).<sup>17</sup>



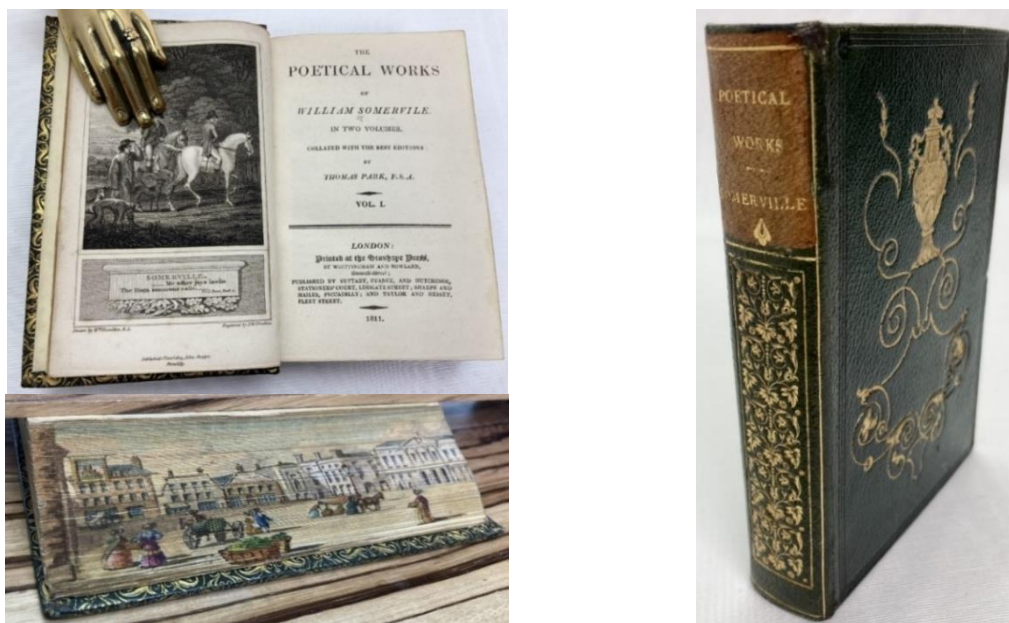
New College Library, Oxford, NC/SOM

Finally, last year we also acquired a lovely little gem of a duodecimo—a two-volume edition by Thomas Park (1758/9–1834) of *The Poetical Works of William Somerville* (1811–12), with both volumes

<sup>16</sup> William Somerville, *Field-Sports. A Poem. Humbly Address'd to His Royal Highness the Prince* (London: Printed for J. Stagg, 1742), and his *The Chace; to which is annexed Field Sports . . . With a Sketch of the Author's Life . . . By Edward Topham* (London: Albion Press; Printed by James Cundee . . . for T. Hurst, 1804), New College Library, Oxford, held at respectively NB.33.17 and NB.73.5. (The library also holds an eighteenth-century composite volume containing *The Chace*, arrestingly illustrated with a frontispiece of a tiger hunt: *Cynegetica; or, Essays on Sporting: Consisting of Observations on Hare Hunting . . . Together with An Account of the Vizier's Manner of Hunting in the Mogul Empire. By William Blane . . . To which is added, The Chace: A Poem* (London: Printed for John Stockdale, 1788), New College Library, Oxford, NB.73.4.)

<sup>17</sup> William Somerville, *Hobbinol, Field Sports, and The Bowling Green* (London: Printed by William Bulmer and Co. Shakespeare Printing-Office, for R. Ackermann, 1813), and his *The Chace* (London: George Redway, 1896), New College Library, Oxford, held at respectively NB.43.15 and NC/SOM.

bound into one green morocco binding, decorated with a gold-tooled urn device with patterning and floral motifs, and with a splendid fore-edge painting depicting a view of Stafford marketplace.<sup>18</sup>



New College Library, Oxford, NB.66.37

The library's holdings, then, of New College's poet of the hunt are extensive, varied, and remarkable—and this note highlights only some copies of books we hold that he wrote. William Somervile died, without issue, on 17 July 1742 in Edstone. Hunting was undeniably a passion, yet the gallows humour jars of Edward Topham (1751–1820), in his sketch of the author's life written for his 1804 edition of *The Chase and Field-Sports*: 'Mr. SOMERVILE had one cause of satisfaction in his death—he was not cut off in the middle of an *hunting season*'.<sup>19</sup> Somervile would remember his old college in his will, proved 3 September 1742, leaving to New College fifteen folio volumes of the *Antiquities* of Catholic Benedictine monk Bernard de Montfaucon (1655–1741).<sup>20</sup> These we have retained in the library to this day. They are a very fine set indeed. And on the front endpaper of the first volume there is this tribute, recording the bequest, written in an unknown hand:

D[ono]. D[edit].  
Gulielmus Somervile  
Armiger.  
Poeta Eximius.  
H[onoris]. C[ausa].  
Quondam Socius.<sup>21</sup>

Christopher Skelton-Foord  
Librarian  
New College, Oxford

<sup>18</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Somervile . . . Collated with the Best Editions: By Thomas Park* (London: Printed at the Stanhope Press, 1811–1812), New College Library, Oxford, NB.66.37.

<sup>19</sup> Somervile, *The Chase . . . With a Sketch of the Author's Life*, p. vii.

<sup>20</sup> Will of William Somervile of Edston, Warwickshire (3 September 1742), The National Archives, PROB 11/720/280.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard de Montfaucon, *L'antiquité expliquée, et représentée en figures. Tome premier. Les Dieux des Grecs & des Romains. Première partie* (A Paris: Chez Florentin Delaulne, 1719), New College Library, Oxford, NB.118.1.