

## Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) by Isobel Grundy

I've said in my biography of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (Oxford University Press, 1999) that she is the most interesting woman writer in English between Aphra Behn and Jane Austen. But what differences separate the noblewoman from the clergyman's daughter, the traveller from the domestic, the publicly notorious woman from the maiden aunt, or the dilettante who pitied those who wrote for pay, from the professional novelist justly concerned with her profits?

There is common ground. Both were teenage writers of genius, who measured themselves against recent fictions by others. They were both satirists and nonconformists as regards the literary norms of their day, yet each self-identified as an author. Each was an addicted reader of novels, even those they found silly, and each defended the novel genre against hostile comment. Both were splendid letter-writers. And Montagu, long known for her letters or her poems, has now been revealed as also a writer of prose fiction.

Lady Mary's intriguing life story tends to steal the limelight from the literary works. Her glamorous, tyrannical father became an earl, and later a duke. Her mother died young after giving birth to four babies within three years. Her father planned to wed Mary, his eldest daughter, as he did all of his children, to advance the family power and glory. Mary loathed his choice for her, and after agonies of indecision, she escaped by eloping with her difficult and neurotic admirer Edward Wortley Montagu. Eloping left her with no marriage contract, literally and absolutely dependent on her husband's goodwill – or his whim – for financial support.

Marriage gave her a brief period of delight, a baby and (when at last Queen Anne died) the prospect of London life as a member of the Whig circle now in power. She met courtiers and politicians, poets and painters and scientists. She set out to cultivate the court, while circulating satiric poems in manuscript which mocked it. All this success came crashing down when she nearly died of smallpox, and her risqué poems were exposed to people in power who were not amused. But just as life became difficult, a means of escape presented itself. Her husband was appointed British Ambassador to Turkey – a distant, barbarous, threatening power. She elected to go with him, taking her three-year-old son with her.

Her time in Turkey was glorious but brief. The British Government changed hands, reversing its policy, and her husband was recalled before his embassy had an opportunity to make an impact. Lady Mary loved the Muslim culture which her countrymen mostly sniffed at. She took coffee with harem ladies, studied oriental languages, collected cultural artifacts – and investigated inoculation against smallpox, a folk medicine practice unknown in Europe. She had her son inoculated, and (more crucially), her baby daughter, after her return home. She spent years upon her return publicising inoculation, fighting a media war of total ruthlessness. She was instrumental in saving many lives, but she was hated and reviled by those who disapproved. Meanwhile she gardened, taught her daughter, and kept writing.

The public controversy over smallpox was succeeded by another controversy; her quarrel with Alexander Pope, the leading poet of his generation. He had been her

fulsome adorer when she travelled to Turkey, but for reasons still unknown his adoration turned to hatred and contempt. She came to symbolise for him all that was bad in women. Drawing on the tradition of centuries of misogynist writing, he publicly depicted her as a monster of dirt, avarice and lust.

Lady Mary had other troubles. Edward Montagu, embittered after his recall from Turkey, was now a ruthless and immensely successful coal-mining entrepreneur. The couple remained ostensibly on excellent terms, but there were deep ideological rifts between them. Their son turned out badly. Their daughter refused to marry for money as her father wanted, choosing instead an impecunious young Scottish nobleman and disappearing to an island off Scotland. Lady Mary's brother and one of her sisters were dead, and the other sister declared legally insane.

At this point Lady Mary decided to leave England. She was wildly in love and had picked someone with beauty and brains, but in other respects a mistake. He was Italian, about the age of her own son, with bisexual leanings. He is known to literary history as Francesco Algarotti. Lady Mary, aged fifty, decided to remake her life on the strength of her feelings. She set out for Venice to rendezvous with Algarotti: an extraordinary rash, unreasonable, un-Augustan thing to do. Of course, he never turned up. She lived in Venice, did the Grand Tour round Italy, got stuck in Avignon by the War of the Austrian Succession, set out for Venice and got stuck again at Gottolengo in the province of Brescia. There she lived for ten years, in a philosophic retirement which she made famous by her letters to her daughter, but which was secretly far from idyllic. Her landlord was a professional gangster who milked her of huge sums over the years, and stole her jewels and papers in a series of melodramatic or gothic plots.

She finally made it back to Venice before the next war began. Her years in Europe encompassed the whole of her middle and old age, happily, on the whole. She was often lonely, but she found a freedom of action and an intellectual respect which she had not achieved at home. At her husband's death she struggled back across war-torn Europe, to prevent her son from disinheriting her daughter. She died of breast cancer, a celebrity,

What did Jane Austen know of her? Probably she read Montagu's Letters written during her Travels (now known as her Embassy Letters). They appeared, to great success, as soon as she died; new editions regularly followed throughout the years of Jane Austen's childhood. A volume of Montagu's poems also achieved wide circulation.

Then before Austen was thirty, a large collection of Lady Mary's Works appeared: five volumes, 1803. Montagu also led a marginal afterlife in the pages of other women writers. She was quoted by novelists like Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier (*The Cry*, 1752), and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire in *Emma*, or the *Unfortunate Attachment*, 1773.\*

When Jane Austen was thirteen, Anna Seward published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* a list of those writers who for her made up the 'Augustan Age'. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is the only woman included. And everyone read the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Lady Mary was celebrated again two years later in a far less authoritative

publication, *The Female Geniad* by the young Elizabeth Ogilvy Benger. This is the first poem about women writers which dared to praise the controversial as well as the safe and the moral. It is a precocious, earnest, learned, explicitly feminist poem, quite unlike Austen's juvenilia, yet certainly a remarkable production for a thirteen-year-old.

It is difficult for modern scholars to remember just how hard it was in Jane Austen's lifetime to come by accurate information about other writers. It was easier for Austen to read Pope's slanders on Montagu than to read Montagu herself. Or suppose that as well as *The Female Geniad* Austen read another feminist text, *A Letter of the Women of England*, pseudonymously published by Mary Robinson in 1799. That offered Montagu a paean of praise, but for a poem which was not really hers at all.

I'll tell you now how I should like Austen to have encountered her. Montagu was the only woman ever to publish an essay in Addison's famous periodical *The Spectator*. Austen maligns the publication in *Northanger Abbey*, advancing women novelists at the expense of famous male essayists. So far as Austen knew, *The Spectator* was an all male publication. Yet Montagu's essay is there, purporting to be from a woman who is the president of a club of widows. She is a widow from hell, a caricature designed to feed male paranoid fantasies. She sounds like Lady Susan in Queen-Anne-style clothing. I imagine Austen discovering this amoral, unrepentant presence in the midst of the heavily didactic *Spectator* and wondering, 'WHO WROTE THAT?'. That is my tale of the meeting of Jane Austen with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. And there's no reason why it shouldn't be true.

\* The attribution is not certain.

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