Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: the Epistolary Woman, Because Women Could Not Be Called Philosophers, Scientists, or Inventors

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Abstract

In the past, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu has been associated with two roles: her experience in the Embassy of Turkey, highlighting cultural diversity, and her transnational travels. The aim of this article is to argue that she was more than a literary aristocrat who described habits and customs from abroad. Drawing on her collected letters, with special emphasis on letters that move beyond descriptions of Istanbul, this article notes that she was also a vaccine entrepreneur, and a journalist of political and urban issues, as well as philosophical issues. In the passages discussed here, she describes and comments on trade, products, pavement, fashion, and social class. It is high time for epistolary studies to shed its biases and to consider aspects that have been overlooked in the depiction of a secular woman of feelings and emotions. Many letter writers from the sixteenth and seventeenth century were already politically and artistically engaged feminists who used letters with precision and expertise. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, as she signed her letters, was one of them. Her letters contribute significantly to building a transcultural view of the world in which diversity and knowledge contribute to a wider perspective on reality, and they provide new opportunities to learn more about what the world was like in her day.

Keywords

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu – travels – vaccine – letters – epistolary studies
1 Epistolary Studies

Letter writing in the Early Modern period included literary and non-literary ventures as well as public and private ones and represented culture with a richness and enthusiasm unrivalled in any other period (Brownlees, Del Lungo, and Denton, 2010). Although the so-called Republic of Letters (Respublica literaria) is named after the intellectual groups of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, letters fostered communication among individuals who had the privilege of literacy in a selective world of intellectuals.

Directly linked to the rise of the Enlightenment, the cultural and intellectual elite of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced an extensive letter exchange unrivalled by any other scriptural practice. As documents, letters record not only historical and linguistic data, but formats, relationships, connections, facts, emotions, and spatial mobility unlike any other source.

To use a phrase of the present era, letters were the social media of the past, bridging from journalistic media to literary genres and tabloids. They conveyed a wide variety of genres (essays, diaries, and novels), and were multilingual; Lady Mary Montagu herself corresponded in English, Italian, French, and Latin (Halsband, 1965, 1966, 1967; Curran, 2018).

Letters are also documents that were read aloud in salons and events and thus have a deep connection with discourse, rhetoric, and oratory. They were not private texts, as in the contemporary conception of private documentation and individual self. Letters of the Early Modern and Modern periods were a conversational form of knowledge exchange (Daybell, 2012). Majorly focused on well-educated layers of society, it is mister to say that the corpus Letters of Artisans and the Labouring Poor (LALP) were also as active, with more than 2,000 letters from the period c.1750–1835 (see Laitinen and Auer, 2014).

Letter writing was fuelled by the rise of mobility, new discoveries, and the expansion of commerce. Letters travelled by horse and by ship, in carriages and on expeditions. Discoveries of new continents and other travels were extensively documented through journals and letter exchange. Besides the rise of commercial practices, the growth of the press made possible the circulation of the printed world at a level that was previously only possible for people deeply connected with religious writings and the Canone. These developments were aided by the movement of the humanists and their dedication to cultural innovation on the basis of Greek and Roman antiquity as it was preserved by paper and ink—a signed and sealed genre (Päivi et al., 2010).

Thus, there was a continuous flux in letter-writing communities from merchants to humanists, ambassadors, and travellers. Letters were also compiled and printed, reaching a much larger audience. The mechanized printing industry helped to democratize letter writing in those days, and today the
digital humanities facilitate access to those texts (Dunster, Kipnis, and Michael Angelo, 2014).

The dissemination of calligraphic manuals and model letters made letter exchange an event where literature took the form of real life. With the use of pulp-based paper and the proliferation of water-powered paper mills in the thirteenth century, letter production became economical and expanded widely. As the habit of taking notes spread, handwriting evolved toward cursive scripts, making its execution faster while preserving readability. In addition, courier networks enabled safer and more frequent deliveries. In other words, there used to be an informal postal system (O’Loughlin, 2018). Letters were disseminated for personal, intellectual, administrative, diplomatic, commercial, and artistic use. From the Early Modern period onward, it is possible to access the lives of women in different periods through this documentation.

Due to the immense success of the system, epistolary novels and poetry became a new trend across Europe (Curran, 2018; Backscheider, 2005). The epistolary mode represented these new voices and possibilities, but their use and analysis sometimes reflected patriarchal models and relationships (Beynon, 2003). Nevertheless, it was an era when women compounded and expanded their ideas and power freely, testing new ideas and possibilities beyond social hegemony.

With the rise of digital humanities and the ability to access large collections of letters, the amplitude of epistolary studies can be much enlarged. This may require new strategies and methodologies that can recognize the full potential of letters as the true voices of women and their worldview. These women seized every opportunity to create and venture anew, not just to reproduce the status quo (Meriwether, 2013).

The limits of the public and the private are transcended in the epistolary mode as the external reader enters this space. Consequently, new possibilities and readings can flourish, and new communication becomes possible. The paradox is that both the authors and the recipients are absent, and new relations need to be constructed from the surviving documentation. This article focuses on the urban, the political, and the philosophical perspectives (Secor, 1999) that are part of Lady Mary Montagu’s extensive epistolary production and range far beyond sentimental affairs (VanHaitsma, 2014).

2 Women’s Letters as Philosophical Texts

One recurrent issue in epistolary studies is the tendency to classify its elements according to an ideal of womanhood (Louw, 2016). Certain characteristics
attributed to determined historical periods offer a sort of optical lens towards past relationships, but the procedure in this article is to do the opposite of that and offer new strategies for comprehending women's authorship. If women's letters carry intense gender issues in their narratives, reflecting power relations at a given time, it is all the more important to highlight with the same emphasis the occasions when these voices question their social scripts and roles and venture into new positions (Richter, 2010).

Women's letters in epistolary studies can provide an in-depth comprehension of gender relations, as their letters contain both resignation to as well as resistance to what society offered them. Much of the epistolary convention (Jensen, 1995) is taken for granted in an idealistic frame of who the "Epistolary Woman" is. Seduced, betrayed, and suffering, this invented woman writes letters of anguished lament to her partner (Jensen, 1995; Russell, 2009).

Thereafter, there seem to be other items that need to be addressed in the overall female production of letters beyond feelings. How do these letters compound the overall trajectory of a given female author? What do other letters from this author address? Why were some letters foregrounded by scholars while others were not even commented on? This neglect is especially true of those letters that contain disruptive questionings of a society that was not only patriarchal, but whose knowledge and literacy was for just a few.

During the eighteenth century, women's letter-writing manuals began to spread, offering models and rules for adorning their written material (Daybell, 2006). Letters should be divided into those that merely reproduce a standard model (Gori, 2011) and those that possess their own style and authenticity. These original letters portray theses, legacies, philosophy, and gender issues, as do those of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (Montagu, 1971; Deutsch, 2012; Lewis, 1925; Grundy, 1999). Editors and society sought to limit women's writing to the epistolary genre, which was later marginalized as non-literary (Backscheider, 2005; Ingrassia, 2009).

Epistolary studies need to detox from previous conceptualizations, for example that of the "Epistolary Woman," which could reflect a male perspective shaping women as emotional beings. It is understood that it is necessary to re-empower these letters in order to read what is behind them. Indeed, they were a product of the same seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when women began to gain influence in salon cultures. Their letters and authorship were first cultivated in circles of power and influence. These are the letters and voices that need to be used to retell the history of epistolary studies (Harrington, 2009), and it is surely not only emotional.

Instead of being celebrated as the output of leaders, explorers, inventors, philosophers, entrepreneurs, or poets, women's epistolary content was undermined and cast as expressions of trauma, unrequited love, and sacrifice.
Although their letters were regarded as private and despised as a marginalized genre, the fact is that women were the leading correspondents before their activities were circumscribed.

When writing for publication was out of the question due to genre biases, letter writing appeared as an unthreatening form of private communication that observed social gender rules while allowing women a limited social education. With the rise in female literacy, and women’s access to literary publication, women emerged as authors. Nevertheless, early modern women’s letters seem to have been the only genre accessible to these women that allowed them to express themselves fully. Therefore, it is possible that they wrote much more in their letters than what has been so far highlighted. There already seems to be enough evidence that they postulated their philosophies, hypotheses, science, experiments, and rhetoric in letters. These letter-writing protagonists interrogated places, gender, and politics, as Harrington (2009) notes when discussing the rejection of the epistolary woman.

The proportion of women able to write their own names rose from about 1 percent in 1500 to 8 percent by 1600 (Daybell, 2006). Although most elite women were literate by the later sixteenth century, Daybell’s data shows more than 3,000 surviving letters, written by over 650 different individuals, that can yield valuable information about women’s lives. Daybell (2012) found that from the fourteenth century onward, 90 percent of the surviving letters written by women were penned by women belonging to the aristocracy, while 10 percent were produced by members of professional and mercantile groups. Letters written by plebeian women were also relatively common. The great majority of these letters were functional and dealt with practical everyday matters. Even letters sent by wives to absent husbands were generally concerned primarily with the smooth running of the household rather than with the expression of personal emotions.

Other letters were written by women to keep in touch and to share news with family and friends, but they also included political, court, and military news. All of these corroborate the thesis that there is no such a thing as an “Epistolary Woman” crying over sentimental difficulties, and that there are as many epistolary women as there are reasons for writing letters.

Writing letters at that time was not an individual craft. Many women wrote letter drafts and had someone else rewrite them; others dictated them to a secretary who could sometimes even work up a polished final version concerning business, law, and petitions. The important fact is that many of these letters were neither private nor sentimental but were communicative means that enabled women to take part in endeavours that included matters of politics, geography, and property (Barton and Hall, 2000).
The reason I have chosen to focus on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters is that her voice and writing does not follow any manual or style but is suffused with marks of personal authorship to such a degree that a signature is not necessary to identify her compositions. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu excelled in making letter-writing into an art and a way to express the uniqueness of her sharp intelligence and worldview (Paston, 1907). In other words, her most famous letter, which closes with the words “your most humble servant,” has nothing humble or servile about it.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Certainly Not an “Epistolary Woman”

Almost everyone has read or heard of the Turkish Embassy letters of Lady Montagu. In her large collection of letter writing, named as one of the most extensive and representative works of the Early Modern period, Lady Montagu expresses the best of her genre. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1971) not only wrote about her experience of cultural diversity at the Embassy of Turkey, but she produced an anthropological-sociological study of that experience. Her travel notes yielded much more knowledge than any other source about life in the embassy from a woman’s perspective. Her comparisons and notes indicate that not only was she attentive to cultural differences between England and Turkey, but she was also able to offer explanations for the phenomena she experienced at the embassy.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (b. 1689, London; d. 1762, London) can be considered the most brilliant and versatile woman of her time. Remembered as a prolific letter writer in almost every epistolary style, she was also an essayist, feminist, traveller, vaccine entrepreneur, and philosopher. She pioneered the practice of inoculation against smallpox after contracting the disease herself and demanding that doctors in England inoculate her children, for she had noticed the effectiveness of this precaution during her time in Turkey (Ferguson, 2021).

Smallpox in Lady Montagu’s day was wildly infectious and killed one in four of infected people, but she recorded the Turkish practice of inoculation against smallpox according to her personal observations.

I am going to tell you a thing that will make you wish yourself here. The smallpox, so fatal, and so general amongst us, is here entirely harmless .... There is a set of old women, who make it their business to perform the operation, every autumn, in the month of September, when the great heat is abated. People send to one another to know if any of their family
has a mind to have the small-pox; they make parties for this purpose, and when they are met (commonly fifteen or sixteen together) the old woman comes with a nut-shell full of the matter of the best sort of small-pox, and asks what vein you please to have opened. She immediately rips open that you offer her, with a large needle (which gives you no more pain than a common scratch) and puts into the vein as much matter as can lie upon the head of her needle, and after that, binds up the little wound with a hollow bit of shell.

MONTAGU, 1971, 340

Before Lady Mary Wortley Montagu returned to England, where her son would be threatened by smallpox, she arranged a visit from an old woman with a needle and a nutshell. Her son, the first Englishman to undergo smallpox inoculation, would never contract the disease. She was determined to bring the technique home with her (Rosenhek, 2005).

Nevertheless, once back in London, her enthusiasm was met with disdain by the English medical community. When the disease threatened London again in 1721, she had a daughter inoculated and observed by a group of physicians (Lindermann, 2013). Convinced by this public proof of the method, her friends began asking to have their own children inoculated. Later, other male partners were acclaimed as the inventors of the vaccine, and it is only nowadays that she has received a measure of recognition for her advocacy. From overcoming critics and unrecognition, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu broke rules and reimagined the world, rewriting herself into it. She was never described as a breaker of paradigms, however, because that was not achievable by women of her era.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu escaped from an arranged marriage and chose as her partner Edward Wortley Montagu, with whom she lived during her time in Turkey. After her husband returned to England, some texts mention that for reasons not wholly clear, Lady Mary’s relationship with her husband was too formal, and thus she left him in England while dedicating herself to a more intensive literary production. What is not commonly mentioned is that she left him to pursue a life of her own in the hope that she might incite other women to do the same.

In her letters she observed that women in Turkey could take lovers in addition to a husband, and that many such women were notorious and famous for the trysts they could arrange. Given that she lived at a time when sexual freedom was non-existent, such alternative marital arrangements were not addressed in her writings or discussed in her letters. But in Europe she became involved with Francesco Algarotti and voluminously corresponded with him all through her European years. Their messages were neither idealistic nor
romantic love letters, but quite the opposite. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu displayed all her bravery and agility of thought in writing to him, being at turns sarcastic, witty, or ambiguous in her responses to his letters. On one occasion, for instance, when he writes to enquire about weather conditions in her location, she answers him with a quick note, saying that she does not intend to be his weather forecast channel.

Some of her other letters concern rumours that her literary output depended on the assistance of Alexander Pope, who spread rumours that her production was based upon plagiarism when in fact it was he who imitated her. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was not the first female who, after showing originality of thought, was accused of plagiarizing the work of other authors (the same happened to Laura Cereta and many others; see Mastrantonio, 2022). In fact, Pope turned against her because she declined to engage herself intimately with him. Therefore, he was determined to destroy her reputation in English society (Grundy, 1999).

Whoever goes against the grain of society is destined to attract many critics. Lady Montagu's writings are full of her own voice, of politics, of resistance to the cynicism of her time. Being a liberal and a feminist had no place in that world. Having lived in Italy and France, Lady Montagu corresponded largely with her daughter and son, other important people, and constant friends, besides Sir Montagu. Some correspondents call her Lady Mary, but that was not her full name, nor was it the name with which she signed her letters. It is believed that the way someone signs his or her name indicates how that person wants to be referred to (Franklin, 2020).

Her strong reputation is based upon her fifty-two Turkish Embassy letters, but for a full account of her journey one must consult her collected correspondence (Halsband, 1965, 1966, 1967). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was not merely a literary aristocrat; she was an explorer, a poet, a blogger, a thinker, a vaccine entrepreneur, an academic, a feminist, a philosopher, and a lover – a woman ahead of her time in every way. She made important contributions to science, literature, the arts, and academia.

Women's letters need to be treated as important documents and literary contributions, but gender issues have hindered their evaluation and use in research. There certainly were women who relied on correspondence manuals and stylistic models when writing to each other (Dossena and Fitzmaurice, 2006), but others defined their own style (Beynon, 2003). The boundaries between private and public seem to be much more delicate than usually noted in authorial letters. Indeed, some women wrote in a variety of modes, including political, scientific, lyrical, and satirical ones. They were not simply crying over
“lost love,” as has often been assumed; certainly Lady Mary Wortley Montagu never did so (Meriwether, 2013).

Gender bias is heavily implicated in what is brought into perspective and what is purposely forgotten. This was certain true of women’s education in eighteenth-century England. For example, elite girls were usually taught the italic hand, judged to be easy enough for women to master, given their inferior capacity. Men, on the other hand, were taught the secretary hand, which was the standard script used in business, law, and government. Few women could read and write in Latin. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was one of them, as she had taught herself the language by disobeying her father and studying books from his library. At that time, Latin was only taught to boys. It is important to mention that most men avoided religious matters in their letters, while many of the female writers were rich in spiritual concerns. Again, this is not true of Lady Montagu!

Reading and discussing Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters demands studying them considering her age when writing them. A letter from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in her earlier years is very much different from her late letters. Dedication and a wide analysis is necessary when learning to understand a woman who followed no rules, nor was limited by categories. It is notable that her letters, although much commented on, constitute a rich documentation that has not yet been fully discussed in academia. Her style and strong voice would be sufficient to verify her authorship in the absence of a signature.

Perhaps the very act of writing prompted a writer to think of oneself as an individual, with a distinct voice and identity. Being satirical and rhetorical seemed like a wise option for someone who was widely criticized for her ingenuity and had been born into a world in which women were not recognized as the equals of men, capable of great achievements.

4 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Travel Letters

The following letters illustrate that women did write about a wide range of subjects in their letters, and that a whole new knowledge of their time and place can be gleaned from their documentation if the reader adopts a fresh and unbiased perspective. The importance of ranging through a wider scope of content, producing new dialogues between the letters and the reader, is that it can potentially show that there is no one “Epistolary Woman,” but there are many women in epistolary studies, and many of them have not yet been granted recognition.
4.1  

*Letter i: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Mar, August 3, 1716*

To Lady Mar, Aug. [1716]
Rotterdam, Friday Aug’t 3. O.S.5

I flatter my selfe (dear Sister) that I shall give you some pleasure in letting you know that I am safely past the Sea, thô we had the ill fortune of a storm. We were perswaded by the Captain of our Yacht to set out in a calm, and he pretended that there was nothing so easy as to tide it over, but after 2 days slowly moving, the Wind blew so hard that none of the Sailors could keep their feet, and we were all Sunday night toss’d very handsomely. I never saw a Man more frighted than the Captain. For my part I have been so lucky neither to suffer from Fear or sea sickness, thô I confess I was so impatient to see my selfe once more upon dry land, that I would not stay till the Yacht could get to Rotterdam, but went in the long boat to Helver Sluyse where we hir’d Voitures to carry us to the Brill. I was charm’d with the neatness of this little Town, but my arival at Rotterdam presented me a new scene of Pleasure. All the streets are pav’d with broad stones, and before the meanest artificers’ doors, seats of various colour’d marbles, and so neatly kept that I’ll assure you I walk’d allmost all over the Town Yesterday, incognito, in my slippers without receiving one spot of Dirt, and you may see the Dutch maids washing the Pavement of the street with more aplication than ours do our bed chambers. The Town seems so full of people with such busie faces, all in motion, that I can hardly fancy that it is not some celebrated fair, but I see ’tis every day the same. ’Tis certain no Town can be more advantagiously situated for Commerce. Here are 7 large Canals on which the merchant ships come up to the very doors of their Houses. The shops and warehouses are of a surprizing neatness and Magnificence, fill’d with an incredible Quantity of fine Merchandize, and so much cheaper than what we see in England, I have much ado to perswade my selfe I am still so near it. Here is neither Dirt nor Beggary to be seen. One is not shock’d with those loathsome Cripples so common in London, nor teiz’d with the Importunitys of idle Fellows and Wenches that chuse to be nasty and lazy. The common Servants and little shop Women here are more nicely clean than most of our Ladys, and the great variety of neat dresses (every Woman dressing her Head after her own Fashion) is an additional pleasure in seeing the Town.

You see hitherto, Dear Sister, I make no complaints, and if I continue to like travelling as well as I do at present, I shall not repent my project. It will go a great way in makeing me satisfy’d with it if it affords me opportunitys
of entertaining you, but it is not from Holland that you must expect a
disinterested offer. I can write enough in the stile of Rotterdam to tell you
plainly, in one word, I expect Returns of all the London News. You see I
have already learnt to make a good Bargain, and that it is not for nothing
I will so much as tell you that I am Your Affectionate Sister.

Halsband, 1965, 249–250

As this letter shows, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was aware of differences
in social class as she mentions beggars and comments on their absence in
Rotterdam as opposed to London. She also notes different fashion styles, with
women enjoying special freedom to adorn their heads as they please. Despite
facing some difficulties here and there, for instance the sea tempest, she is
determined enough to carry on with her project, searching for opportunities
and learning all the time, including how to bargain, as she demands news from
Lady Mar in exchange for what she has shared with her correspondent.

4.2 Letter 2: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Rich, 20 September
1716

Vienna, Sept. 20.
I am extremely pleas’d, but not at all surpriz’d, at the long delightfull Let-
ter you have had the goodnesse to send me. I know that you can think of
an absent Freind even in the midst of a Court, and that you love to oblige
where you can have no view of a Return, and I expect from you that you
should love me and think of me when you don’t see me.
I have compassion for the Mortifications that you tell me befall our little
Freind, and I pity her much more since I know that they are only ow-
ing to the barbarous Customs of our Country. Upon my word, if she was
here she would have no other fault but being something too young for
the Fashion, and she has nothing to do but to transplant hither about 7
years hence to be again a young and blooming Beauty. I can assure you
that wrinkles or a small stoop in the shoulders, nay, Gray Hair it selfe, is
no objection to the makeing new conquests. I know you can’t easily figure
to your selfe a young Fellow of five and twenty ogling my Lady Suff[olk]
with passion, or pressing to lead the Countesse of O[xfor]d from an Op-
era, but such are the sights I see every day and I dont perceive any body
surprizd at ’em but my selfe. A Woman till 5 and thirty is only look’d upon
as a raw Girl and can possibly make no noise in the World till about forty.
I don’t know what your Ladyship may think of this matter, but tis a con-
siderable comfort to me to know there is upon Earth such a paradise for
old Women, and I am content to be insignificant at present in the design of returning when I am fit to appear no where else.

I cannot help lamenting upon this Occassion the pittifull case of so many good English Ladys long since retir’d to pruderie and rattafia, whom, if their stars had luckily conducted them hither, would still shine in the first rank of Beautys; and then that perplexing word Reputation has quite another meaning here than what you give it at London, and getting a Lover is so far from loseing, that ’tis properly geting reputation, Ladys being much more respected in regard to the rank of their Lovers than that of their Husbands. But what you’ll think very odd, the 2 sects that divide our whole nation of Petticoats are utterly unknown. Here are neither Coquets nor Prudes. No woman dares appear coquet enough to encourage 2 lovers at a time, and I have not seen any such Prudes as to pretend fidelity to their Husbands, who are certainly the best-natur’d set of people in the World, and they look upon their Wives’ Galants as favourably as Men do upon their Deputies that take the troublesome part of their busynesse off of their hands, thô they have not the less to do, for they are generally deputys in another place themselves. In one word, ’tis the establish’d custom for every Lady to have 2 Husbands, one that bears the Name, and another that performs the Dutys; and these engagements are so well known, that it would be a down right affront and publickly resented if you invited a Woman of Quality to dinner without at the same time inviting her 2 attendants of Lover and Husband, between whom she allways sits in state with great Gravity. These sub-marriages gennerally last 20 year together, and the Lady often commands the poor Lover’s estate even to the utter ruin of his family, thô they are as seldom begun by any passion as other matches. But a Man makes but an ill figure that is not in some commerce of this Nature, and a Woman looks out for a Lover as soon as she’s marry’d as part of her Equipage, without which she could not be gentile; and the first article of the Treaty is establishing the pension, which remains to the Lady thô the Galant should prove inconstant, and this chargable point of honnour I look upon as the real foundation of so many wonderfull instances of Constancy. I realy know several Women of the first Quality whose pensions are as well known as their Anual Rents, and yet no body esteems them the lesse. On the contrary, their Discretion would be call’d in Question if they should be suspected to be mistresses for nothing, and a great part of their Emulation consists in trying who shall get most; and having no intrigue at all is so far a disgrace that I’ll assure you a Lady who is very much my freind here told me but yesterday how much I was oblig’d to her for justifying my conduct in a conversation on my Subject, where it
was publicly asserted that I could not possibly have common sense that had been about Town above a Fortnight and had made no steps towards commencing an Amour. My friend pleaded for me that my stay was uncertain and she believed that was the cause of my seeming stupidity, and this was all she could find to say in my justification.

But one of the pleasantest adventures I ever met in my life was last night and which will give you a just idea after what delicate manner the Belle-Passions are managed in this Country. I was at the Assembly of the Countess of ———, and the Young Count of ——— led me down stairs, and he asked me how long I intended to stay here. I made answer that my stay depended on the Emperor and it was not in my power to determine it. Well Madam (said he), whither your time here is to be long or short, I think you ought to pass it agreeably, and to that end you must engage in a little affair of the Heart.—My Heart, answer’d I gravely enough, does not engage very easily, and I have no design of parting with it.—I see, Madam (said he sighing), by the ill nature of that answer, that I am not to hope for it, which is a great mortification to me that am charm’d with you; but however, I am still devoted to your service, and since I am not worthy of entertaining you myself, do me the Honour of letting me know who you like best amongst us and I’ll engage to manage the affair entirely to your satisfaction.—You may judge in what manner I should have receiv’d this complement in my own Country, but I was well enough acquainted with the way of this to know that he really intended me an obligation, and thank’d him with a grave Curtsy for his Zeal to serve me and only assur’d him that I had no Occasion to make use of it. Thus you see, my Dear, Galantry and good breeding are as different in different Climates as Morality and Religion. Who have the rightest notions of both we shall never know till the Day of Judgment, for which great Day of Éclaircissement I own there is very little impatience in your etc.

Lady Mary Montagu describes two topics taboo in her time. The first is how women’s infidelity was common in the Viennese society of her day. Men would indulge older women with displays of gallantry and flirtation. The second is that it is not until her thirties and forties that a woman of Vienna reaches full maturity, and thus she calls the city a “paradise for old Women,” as many of the English practices current in her time linked reverence to youth. Another much-neglected topic is growing old and living with a mistress as natural and healthy for one’s marriage and relationship. Aspects such as these have not yet received appropriate debate, as society still seems to annul content that brings
full liberation to women—liberation from age prejudice and from monoga-
mous morals.

It was not uncommon for married women to be attached to men who were not their husbands and to live with them in great intimacy without hurting their reputation. Much to the contrary, a woman who had a nice friend was powerful! This is indeed a belief that even today attracts critics.

4.3  Letter 3: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Bristol, 25 November 1716

Hannover, Nov. 25.
I receiv’d your Ladyship’s but the day before I left Vienna, thô by the date I ought to have had it much sooner, but nothing was ever worse regulated than the post in most parts of Germany. I can assure you the pacquet at Prague was ty’d behind my Chaise and in that manner convey’d to Dresden. The secrets of halfe the country were at my Mercy if I had had any curiosity for ‘em. I would not longer delay my thanks for yours, thô the number of my Acquaintance here and my Duty of attending at Court leaves me hardly any time to dispose of. I am extremely pleas’d that I can tell you without either flattery or partiality that our young Prince has all the Accomplishments that tis possible to have at his Age, with an Air of Sprightlynesse and understanding, and something so very engaging and easy in his behaviour, that he needs not the advantage of his rank to appear charming. I had the honnour of a long conversation with him last night before the King came in. His Governour retir’d on purpose (as he told me afterwards) that I might make some judgment of his Genius by hearing him speak without constraint, and I was surpriz’d at the quick-
nesse and politenesse that appear’d in every thing he said, joyn’d to a per-
son perfectly agreeable and the fine fair Hair of the Princesse.

This Town is neither large nor handsome, but the Palace capable of hold-
ing a greater Court than that of St. James’s, and the King has had the goodnesse to appoint us a Lodging in one part of it, without which we should be very ill Accomodated; for the vast number of English crouds the Town so much, tis very good Luck to be able to get one sorry room in a miserable Tavern. I din’d to day with the Portugueze Ambassador, who thinks himselfe very happy to have 2 wretched Parlors in an Inn. I have now made the Tour of Germany and cannot help observing a con-
siderable difference between travelling here and in England. One sees none of those fine Seats of Noblemen that are so common amongst us,
nor any thing like a Country Gentleman's house, thô they have many Sciu-
tuations perfectly fine; but the whole people are divided into Absolute
Sovereigntys, where all the riches and magnificence are at Court, or Com-
munitys of Merchants, such as Neiurenbourg and Francfort, where they
live allways in Town for the Convenience of Trade. The King's company
of French Comedians play here every night. They are very well dress'd
and some of them not ill actors. His Majesty dines and sups constantly
in Public. The Court is very numerous and his affability and goodnesse
makes it one of the most agreable places in the World to, Dear Madam,
Your Lady-ship’s etc.

HALSBAND, 1965, 286–287

In this letter, Lady Mary W Montagu describes Hannover and the political and
governmental differences between there and England. She is also aware of the
division of classes and that England has much more connection with nobleness
than does the German style, which is based upon commerce and trade. Again, there is no talk of sentiments, but rather new connections and network-
ing, like the exciting talk with the prince who was agreeable and welcoming.

4.4 Letter 4: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to the Countess, November 1716

Nov. 23, Brunswic
I am just come to Brunswick, a very old Town, but which has the advan-
tage of being the capital of the Duke of Woffumbute1's Dominions, a fam-
ily (not to speak of its ancient Honours) illustrious by having its younger
Branch on the Throne of England, and having given 2 Empresses to Ger-
many. I have not forgot to drink your health here in Mum, which I think
very well deserves its reputation of being the best in the world.
This Letter is the 3rd I have writ to you during my Journey, and I declare to
you that if you do not send me immediately a full and true Account of all
the changes and chances amongst our London Acquaintence, I will not
write you any description of Hannover (where I hope to be to night), thô
I know you have more Curiosity to hear of that place than of any other.)

HALSBAND, 1965, 285

In this letter, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu demands news from England. She
is in Brunswick, where she drinks and tastes probably what was recognized
as the best beer in the world. Besides that, she points out the strong political
connections between Europe and England.
5 Conclusion

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is the shining example that there is no such thing as an “Epistolary Woman.” On the contrary, her style and content traverse various fields of knowledge and expertise, proving that the study of women’s letters needs to develop other topics apart from feelings, emotions, and lamentations.

These women’s letters and textual production should not be minimized as literature and should be valued for the impressions, theses, and concepts that they elaborate on. If letter writing was the only possible venue for women to express themselves, there were some authors who created their own style of communication and explanation and projected in their letters their full range of abilities. It is important to recognize that these women made the best possible use of their access to letter writing, in particular Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. She is among those women who did everything possible to express the geo-political, urban, mercantile, cultural, and personal aspects of herself and of the places she visited. Being a literary writer, Lady Montagu uses rhetorical, argumentative, and comparative strategies to create effective contrasts while developing a unique style that deploys irony, jokes, sarcasm, and citations to elucidate her arguments. “Invincible” may be the word to describe her persuasive powers and determination in her convictions. Her letters are full of her thought and spirit.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu breaks with conventional wisdom, and being multi-lingual and transatlantic certainly helped her to create herself in this way. For her, poetry was the most important part of a girl’s education, and much of her poetry is found in her letters. To read her is to discover not only a seventeenth-century epistolary woman, but to experience the world through signed correspondence.

References


