Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband"—a Feminist Poem

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Abstract

Although it is anachronistic to speak of feminism in the early eighteenth-century, the paper reads Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's 1724 heroic epistle "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" as a feminist poem. It stands as an expression of her progressive views on women and a testimony to the deep-rootedness of gender-based double standards, particularly when it comes to sexuality and sexual freedom. The paper will show how Montagu breaks the conventions of the form of heroic epistle, which is typically a passionate lament of an abandoned woman directed to her lover, to construct multi-layered meanings. It is both a poem about the failed marriage of the Yonges and a public appeal to reject social and cultural double standards that subjugate women. The poem is read in the context of Montagu's life and her letters from Turkey in order to affirm Montagu's position as one of the key progressive, feminist voices of her time.

Keywords: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, feminism, protofeminism, heroic epistle

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Introduction

It may seem a fruitless endeavour to write about an author about whom "the definitive study" (Foreman) had already been published by Isobel Grundy in 1999, yet the enlightening quality of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's literary work and social engagement invites continuous reading and scrutiny in order to transcend the boundaries of the dedicated field of eighteenth-century study, and communicate the significance of her work to a wider, both scholarly and general, audience. Known for writing various forms of verse, such as satires, verse epistles and mock epics, she also wrote letters and essays, and translated works from Latin and French into English. Significantly, "critics have long called Montagu's poetry 'masculine'" (Barash) due to its quality and thematic boldness. Prolific in her writing, she was equally active in her social, cultural, and political life, which makes it even more shocking that the knowledge of her contributions to literature and to cultural and social progress remains, for the most part, reserved for dedicated scholars:

> She was the introducer of the practise of inoculation, a staunch advocate of feminism, a friend of the wits (Addison, Steele, and Arbuthnot, among them), a patroness of young writers (Fielding and Edward Young), and, of course, one of the greatest of the English letter-writers of the century that could boast of Chesterfield, Walpole, Gray, and Cowper. (Halsband, Introduction ix)

Indeed, in the Introduction to the first collection of her periodical *The Nonsense of Common-Sense 1737- 1738*,[1] Robert Halsband identifies Montagu as "[o]ne of the most glittering figures of the Augustan Age in England" (ix), although her prominence nowadays hardly matches the significance of her contributions. In fact, her position in the literary canon reflects the typical treatment and evaluation of women writers and their contributions to life and literature. For instance, even W. Moy Thomas, Montagu's "most recent (1861) and most careful editor" (Halsband, Introduction x), prior to Halsband's own twentieth-century contribution, dismissed the possibility of the existence of Montagu's periodical, doubting that she wrote more essays than one or that, if she did, any of them survived (x). In reality, much of her writing was destroyed either by herself (Grundy, *Lady Mary Montagu* xix), her friend Maria Skerret, "who burned a trunkful of Montagu's writings" (Grundy, *Lady Mary Montagu* xx), or her daughter, Lady Bute, who "destroyed the voluminous life-long journal of Lady Mary" (Heffernan and O'Quinn 19), all of which to avoid possible tarnish to her or her family's reputation. As Heffernan and O'Quinn attest, "[r]eputation was a complicated challenge for a woman of her status: it posed problems for her career as a writer because publicity was often seen as a breach of feminine decorum" (18). To be bold and publicly visible meant to be "masculine;" femininity demanded humility and anonymity, even erasure from the historical and public records.

So, a new reading seems to be due, and particularly now in the twenty-first-century context of gender. The present, namely, seems disjointed in its claims of advancement, fairness, and equal opportunity, and its reality which, even in Western societies, is still marked by gender-based social expectations, unequal pay, inaccessibility of health care, and, most of all, violence.[2] Such a constellation of attitudes toward women makes it both relevant and necessary to persist in discussing feminist issues as well as to uncover the important work of (proto)feminists. To highlight her role as a vital

1 In the periodical, Montagu tackles topics that were not considered to be feminine, namely politics (for instance, she discusses the position of both the lower classes and women) and economy: "Each issue contains an unsigned essay on the recto side of the folio halfsheet, with the balance made up of domestic and foreign news items, vital statistics, and stock and bankruptcy reports" (Halsband, Introduction x).

2 The currently ongoing wars (Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Palestine) may be taken as proofs of the lack of human enlightenment and of moral and spiritual advancement and tolerance in a general sense. More pertinent to the particular context of the paper, an attestation of today's specifically gender-based lack of tolerance, acceptance, and egalitarianism can be found both in fiction and in nonfictional reporting as numerous texts testify to the inferior position of women both in the conceptualization of gender roles and in practice. For more details, see: Davis, Solnit, Valenti or Bates, to mention just a few. Being concerned with Montagu, the paper does not tackle the hotly debated issue of transgender identities and prejudice, although such debates also confirm the paper's claim of the prominence of gender-based concerns in current public and academic discourse.

character in both women's and feminist literary tradition,[3] this paper reads Montagu's 1724 heroic epistle "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband"[4] as a compressed expression of her progressive views on women and a testimony to the deep-rootedness of gender-based double standards, particularly when it comes to sexuality and sexual freedom. Significantly, "[t]his poem remained unpublished until the later twentieth century, omitted until then by all editors of Montagu" (Grundy, "Six Town Eclogues" 190). So, despite its thematic innovativeness and significance, the long-time exclusion of Montagu's "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" from the body of her published work sadly reflects both the tragic fate of the general erasure of her (and other women's) writings from the canon and the bleak future of the form of heroic epistle, extinguished by the appearance of the novel.

Relying on some of the tenets of biographical and feminist criticism, the paper will show how the poem refracts its meaning from being a poem about a failed marriage of the Yonges to being a public appeal to reject social and cultural double standards and change partial laws that apply to women. In this, the poem affirms Montagu's position as one of the key feminist voices of her time and stands as a testimony of a long-standing practice of discounting both female writing and female rights.

Heroic Epistles: Stories of Love in Verse

As Carolyn J. Kates has established in her 1991 doctoral thesis, the first survey-study of the English heroic epistle, the form has been overlooked both by literary critics and scholars, and "the term is not included in the majority of handbooks to literature" (1).[5] In a 2007 study, Bill Overton still mentions "its neglect by the academy" arguing that "it is a mistake to undervalue the form" (66). Gillian Beer identifies Ovid's *Heroides*, a collection of fifteen epistolary poems, as the genre's "generative text" (127) since the followers adopt both its form and theme. Written in elegiac couplets[6] and in the first-person point of view, the poems typically represent an expression of grief by heroic women "jilted by insensitive and uncaring lovers.

3 Scholarly convention would dictate that Montagu be referred to as a protofeminist, due to the fact that the term "feminist" is anachronistic in discussions of the eighteenth century, as feminism appears only later as an organized attitude, movement and/or scholarly approach. Still, the paper argues that her life and work should be regarded as feminist, since, by definition, feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of women and men, as this is what she advocates for.

4 As per Grundy, the original title of the poem includes the year and veils the family name: "Epistle from Mrs. Y–to her Husband. 1724" ("Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 418). In subsequent publications, however, the name is typically revealed and the year omitted, which is the form used in this article too.

5 Kates's dissertation serves as the main source, as later, more contemporary, publications available at the time of writing largely repeat Kates's findings, sometimes (as with Overton [2007]) even without referencing her research. The author makes no ill assumptions but notices the striking (though possibly coincidental) similarity to historical instances of ignoring the work of women writers.

6 The Roman (Latin) elegiac couplet consists of a verse written in dactylic hexameter followed by a verse in dactylic pentameter, whereas "most English poets compose their epistles in heroic couplets, the meter considered by scholars to be the English equivalent of Ovid's verse" (Kates 2).

The majority of heroines write their love-letters in order to persuade their lovers to return, although several are paired as dialogues and initiated by men for the purposes of seduction" (Kates 2). In this, the heroic epistle performs the traditional notion of men as active and dominant, and women as left to struggle and beg for the man's attention and love. It also promotes the idea of (great) love as suffering, and female suffering as both noble and expected.

In England, the genre is received thanks to multiple translations that occurred between 1567 and 1800 and that, according to Kates, served as "a source of inspiration for new and original heroic epistles" (87), starting with George Turbervile's translation *The Heroycall Epistles* (1567), the first full translation of *Heroides* into English, and leading to Dryden and company's *Ovid's Epistles* (1680), which remained "the most popular" (Kates 47), although it was not the most recent one.[7] Indeed, the translations inspired multiple English poets to write their own heroic epistles, particularly in the late seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century, as they beautifully corresponded to the literary fashion of the age marked by letter-writing and satire. On the one hand, certain poets satirize the genre, preserving its conventions, but corresponding to the contemporary literary trends of witty ridicule, as was the case with Matthew Stevenson's *The Wits Paraphras'd* (1680) and Alexander Radcliffe's *Ovid Travestie* (1889). On the other hand, as Trickett contends, the convention of poetic letter-writing specifically contributed to the popularity of the *Heroides* in the Augustan period in England (200), and to the proliferation of its imitators.

Moreover, the fashionable society of the time was in particular occupied by and interested in amorous intrigues,[8] and the topic of love, like the mode of satire, matched both the poets' and the readers' tastes well. In fact, the heroic epistle from Ovid onwards is specifically marked by love as its "most significant element . . . In whatever its form – betrayal, seduction, abandonment, homoeroticism, divorce – love is the factor which motivates a man or woman to write his or her epistle" (Kates 347). Although most heroic epistles rely on expressions of love between classical characters, English poets also introduce new types of characters in the heroic epistle: Drayton's 1597 *Englands Heroicall Epistles* imagine "love-letters written between famous British historical personages" (Kates 4); Pope turns to medieval sources with "Eloisa to Abelard" (1717).[9] John Donne's heroical epistle "Sapho to Philaenis" (1597) is noteworthy as "the first explicitly lesbian love elegy in English" (Holstun

7 Kates offers a comprehensive overview and discussion of all English translations of *Heroides* in the period (47-95).

8 This is famously evidenced by Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712, 1714), but other works attest to the fact too: for instance, Giles Jacob's parody *The Rape of the Smock* (1717), or Samuel Johnson's *A Compleat Introduction to the Art of Writing Letters* (1758), where in the comical Letter XIII Monsieur de Colletier jokingly describes the power of amorous impulses induced by "that son of a Whore Cupid" (163).

9 Interestingly, Montagu was convinced that Pope copied line 122 of "Eloisa to Abelard": "Still drink delicious poison from thy eye," from her poem "Tuesday," in which she writes: "Drinking Delicious Poison from her Face" (line 61), and, when he sent her the manuscript of the poem to read, she annotated the line with the word "mine" (Halsband, *The Life of Lady Mary* 76; Grundy, *The Verse of Lady Mary* 354; Barash).

838),[10] and likely inspired Lady Winchilsea's homoerotic "Epistle from Alexander to Hephaestion in His Sickness" (1713) (Kates 267). In discussing the form, Beer suggests that (sexual) love somehow irreparably breaks the woman's self because of which heroic epistle "could never . . . be called entirely a feminist form of literature" (129). Significantly, she makes this claim in a paper that does not discuss Montagu's heroic epistles but Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," which is a much more conventional example. Contrary to most authors, in her heroic epistles, Montagu is primarily concerned with contemporary characters. Moreover, she is a rare female voice to write letters that are, convention-wise, supposed to be written from the female perspective; most heroic epistles feature a female lyrical speaker written by a male author. This likely explains why her heroic epistles differ from most others, and why she offers a radically different idea of marriage and love than the one imagined, sanctioned, and promoted for centuries by male writers.

Indeed, Ovid's heroic epistles, according to Henry A. Kelly, commend legitimate marriage and love, and Ovid establishes himself as "the teacher of good morals in these epistles, and the extirpator of evil" (99). Consequently, the perspective on what is "legitimate marriage" and what is "love" is first determined by a man, and then repeated and affirmed over centuries by other men. For many, *Heroides* are, "the most glowing love stories ever told" (Cather 81), which implies that great love stories are based on suffering, waiting, desertion, and, generally, some form of self-immolation of, usually, the female partner. Even more so, being most typically written from a female perspective, heroic epistles ostensibly represent the female experience with relation to unhappy love affairs, which normalizes the idea that it is the female partner who should endure suffering and that the male is the one who causes it. Indeed, as McMillan explains, "Ovid's *Heroides* tells the stories of women suffering in love from the women's point of view. Some are traditionally good (Penelope), some bad (Helen); but Ovid's treatment of them is sympathetic" (11). So, regardless of the woman's character and virtue, she must suffer and Ovid feels for her. But the possibility to imagine and represent a man suffering for love in quite the same way—supplicating, crying—seems to be out of the question. Because of this, Montagu's "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" represents a welcome departure from the romanticization of suffering and a more realistic representation of the things that actually plague women in relation to men: double standards.[11]

Finally, the focus on character, the character's emotions, and psychological state explains both the genre's century-long allure and its ultimate demise. Namely, its popularity coincides with the proliferation of epistolary fiction "between the

10 Holstun does not even identify the poem as a heroic epistle, which confirms Kates's claims about the neglect of the genre (1), even though in his edition of Donne's poetry, Sir Herbert Grierson placed the poem after the elegies identifying it as an "Heroical Epistle" (see: Grierson lxiii, 91; Smith 452).

11 Indeed, as contemporary feminist thinkers suggest, this is still an issue. In her 2022 *Fix the System, Not the Women*, Bates argues that women are expected to do things "as a matter of course" (39), whereas men are praised if they do them. Women are also constantly *blamed* for being the *victims* of violence or injustice. For instance, whereas men can wear whatever they want, women should dress demurely so as not to provoke unwanted attention, whereby female bodies are constantly sexualized (23), and represented as so tempting that men, although ostensibly strong and rational, *cannot* resist them.

Restoration and 1740" (Kates 365), and "the years 1740-1800, when the English epistolary novel was in its heyday" (Day 2). As the poets "developed the genre further, complicating the standard Ovidian situation with politics, religion, and societal pressures" (Kates 366), they inadvertently enabled its own demise, that is, as Kates explains, the absorption of heroic epistles "by the larger and similar genre, the novel" (367; see also Beer 125). Paradoxically, the innovative poets, such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who treats the failed love story as backdrop upon which she elaborates on social and legal injustices, contribute to the disappearance rather than survival of the genre. As Trickett explains:

> The mingling of psychological realism and convention was a vital concern of poetry from the Renaissance to the Romantic period and only began to lose its urgency as a topic of criticism and a preoccupation of practising poets when a new genre for treating human situations and emotions emerged – the prose fiction, the novel which gradually in the eighteenth century superseded the traditional character interests of poetry and drama. (200)

Montagu and Heroic Epistles

At the age of twelve, the precocious Montagu writes an original heroic epistle in imitation of the *Heroides*, "Julia to Ovid" (1701-02),[12] which testifies to her familiarity with Ovid's works and the form itself (Grundy, "Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 420). Namely, written from Julia's point of view "in Ovidian rhetoric" (Kates 277), the epistle describes her suffering for being separated from the beloved Ovid. More importantly, it represents an early expression of both Montagu's intellectual brilliance and her vanguardism as the poem is "the first heroic epistle composed in the eighteenth century" (Kates 276), making Montagu's contribution to the genre momentous even before she publishes her innovative and "feminist heroic epistles" (276). As Kates surmises, Montagu's avant-garde writing seems unsurprising in light of the fact that, as her letters demonstrate, "she is unlike most women of her time" (314). Indeed, by the standards of her time, "scholarly aspirations and learning were often outside the scope of normative femininity" (Heffernan and O'Quinn 18), so she could not receive formal education and should not have been familiar with the classics. Yet, thanks to her keen mind, she was able to make the most of home-schooling at her father's library, where she taught herself Latin—a process she refers to as "stealing the Latin language" (Grundy, "Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 420), demonstrating that such knowledge was not meant for women and had to be acquired by stealth. In fact, the artificial schism between intellect and gender enforced by social conventions that a woman had to endure if she wanted to be a

12 Her heroic epistle tackles the alleged affair between the poet Ovid and Emperor Augustus's daughter Julia, which was frequently listed as a potential reason for his banishment from Rome in 8 A.D. The true reason for Ovid's exile is still unknown, even if Ovid himself claimed that it is "too well known to all" (*Tristia*, 4.10.99). For more details on his exile see: Thibault, or Goold.

writer is the focal point of Isobel Grundy's 1999 study of Montagu's life and writing; she represents Montagu's life and work as a continuous negotiation between the roles of a lady and a woman writer.

Providentially, Montagu was inspired and supported by her progressive "personal friend" (420), Mary Astell, who argued for women's education, advocating for it not only as a necessity in a woman's life but "as an alternative to marriage" (Blanchard 351), and making study a life-choice and purpose for women—a radical thought at the time. Of course, Montagu was not afraid of being different; she wanted both education, which she acquired herself, and marriage, but on her own terms. Her courtship with Edward Wortley Montagu was hindered by her father's financial demands, which caused Lady Mary to refer to herself (and other women) as "slaves" sold by their "masters" (Halsband, *The Life of Lady Mary* 16), which will remain a constant metaphor in the works of subsequent feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Hays's *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798), Mary Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), or John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Her father arranged for her to be married to the Honourable Clotworthy Skeffington, whose marriage contract was financially satisfactory (Halsband, *The Life of Lady Mary* 23), but, rejecting the possibility to "marry a man she could not love" (24) and thus defying her father, she eloped with Wortley Montagu and married him in secret (27).

Her blithe attitude to social customs translated in the 1720s to her poetry as she modified the conventions of the heroic epistle by giving voice to lovers of ordinary status,[13] rather than aristocratic or mythological characters, and by introducing new, contemporary topics. To be sure, "[w]hat makes her heroic epistles unique from any that had been written previously is that, unlike Turbervile, Wither, and Browne, who compose domestic heroic epistles between fictional lovers, and Drayton and Pope, who base their epistles on history, Lady Mary finds her material in contemporary events" (Kates 314). Motivated by gossip, news, and ongoing social debates, she writes exhilarating epistles that also contain her point of view to these current issues, which represents another breach of decorum: women were not supposed to publicly comment on civic or legal matters. In particular, Montagu is concerned with the society's treatment of women, having realized very early on that men and women are not judged by the same standards.[14] Her progressive views on marriage and criticism of patriarchy in England will be further shown on the example of "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband," a poem thought to be so outrageous at the time that it remained unpublished until Isobel Grundy shared it with the public for the first time in 1972.

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13 As Kates establishes, George Wither's heroic epistle "Elegiacall Epistle of Fidelia to her Inconstant Friend" (1615) is written from the point of view of an ordinary woman to her unidentified lover, and as she yearns for him, she also protests against arranged marriage and the position of women at the time, but this was not repeated for over a century, that is, until Montagu's epistles of the 1720s (7).

14 Joseph Spence notes an anecdote between Montagu and Alexander Pope that reveals both her strong sense of authorship and her realization of the way the society evaluates women's writing. Namely, she had refused to allow Pope to edit one of her poems, saying: "No, Pope, no touching, for then whatever is good for any thing will pass for yours, and the rest for mine" (233).

"Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband. 1724"

As Grundy elaborates, the Yonges were Montagu's contemporaries, and their marriage an unhappy one. A notorious adulterer, or a "gallant schemer," as he was then referred to both in the society and in the newspapers ("Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 423), Mr. Yonge left his wife to pursue other women, providing her with a Deed of Separation. Yet, when his de facto abandoned wife found a lover of her own, Mr. Yonge demanded financial compensation from him in a court procedure, paradoxically turning their marital issues into a public scandal, and his own adulterous self into the victim of his wife's adultery. In addition to claiming damages from the man, Mr. Yonge also demanded divorce and financial compensation from his wife, turning this private affair into a spectacular political and legal issue: "Both Houses of Parliament proceeded to deliberate 'An Act to dissolve the Marriage of *William Yonge* Esquire with *Mary Heathcote*'; and to enable him to marry again; and for other purposes therein mentioned'" ("Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 423). The severity of the public reactions judging the wife for her offenses, substantiated by the Court's and Parliament's actions that enabled the husband to both divorce his wife and make considerable financial gain in the process, provoked a response from Montagu, phrased in the form of a heroic epistle but effectively serving as a public complaint by the wronged wife:

> Think not this paper comes with vain pretense
> To move your pity, or to mourn th' offense.
> Too well I know that hard obdurate heart;
> No softening mercy there will take my part,
> Nor can a woman's arguments prevail,
> When even your patron's wise example fails.
> But this last privilege I still retain;
> Th' oppressed and injured always may complain. (lines 1-8)

Viewing herself as the injured party, the lyrical speaker frames their particular instance of marital infidelity as a general one: a case study of the marital customs and laws that tend to be unjust only toward the wife. In this, Montagu breaks the form's conventions. Although the abandoned woman passionately argues her case, she neither wants the lover's return nor expresses regret for her adultery or the end of the marriage. Rather, she advocates for women and their position in the society; complaining about the fact that women's pleas are never heard or accepted as serious, she exposes women as the society's oppressed.

The fact that the topic was a burning eighteenth-century issue is confirmed by numerous books that were published at the time and tackled issues such as the choice of the marriage partner, dowry, sexuality, and the wife's role in marriage. Grundy asserts that many of these titles were owned by Montagu and functioned as her

"polemical sources" ("Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 418-20).[15] In her 1721 heroic epistle titled "Epistle from Arthur G[ra]y to Mrs M[urra]y," Montagu also elaborates on a contemporary event—an unsuccessful attempt of rape that scandalized the society. According to Overton, the footman accused of the attempt was first sentenced to death and then pardoned by the alleged intercession of the family of the supposed victim (156; Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley* 227-28), which prompted Montagu to describe him as an Ovidian lover, "a man hopelessly and passionately in love with the woman he attempted to violate""(Kates 315). Her satirical approach to the incident, along with the man's acquittal, suggests that there was much more to it than was reported to the public. It also illustrates how Montagu "uses the heroic epistle to express her feelings about adultery, marriage, and the hypocrisy of society"" (Kates 253), which often used sex and sexual impulses to shame and vilify women: "Masculine desire was celebrated; so too was female or ladylike purity" (Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley* 227). The fictional Mrs Yonge deplores the double standards and says:

> Too, too severely laws of honour bind
> The weak submissive sex of womankind.
> If sighs have gained or force compelled our hand,
> Deceived by art, or urged by stern command,
> Whatever motive binds the fatal tie,
> The judging world expects our constancy. (lines 9-14)
> ...
> Our sex's weakness you expose and blame
> (Of every prattling fop the common theme),
> Yet from this weakness you suppose is due
> Sublimer virtue than your Cato knew.
> Had heaven designed us trials so severe,
> It would have formed our tempers then to bear. (lines 32-37)

The allegedly weak and submissive women were, inexplicably, expected to remain strong and constant in the face of temptation. The paradox baffled many protofeminist thinkers and writers, who then logically argued either that women should not be judged for their natural weakness or, if they are equally strong and moral as men, that their position in the society should reflect their capabilities. This line of argumentation gained more traction following the French Revolution, which put human rights in the foreground and rejected the unjust hereditary traditions. Mary Wollstonecraft spoke of "the tyranny of man" (84) that effectively keeps women "always in a state

15 The works referred to testify to the ubiquity of marriage as a literary theme: William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), John Sheffield's "Elegy to the Duchess of R—" (1723), Margaret Cavendish's *The Inventory of Judgments Commonwealth* (1655), and works by Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Lady Winchilsea, Lady Chudleigh and Mary Astell.

of childhood" (85) first by denying women education and equal rights and then by constantly chastising them for behaving foolishly.[16]

Speaking through the voice of Mrs. Yonge, Montagu wonders in her epistle about the origins of such injustice, scrutinizing from a biological or physiological point of view the idea that women's and men's bodies function according to different principles:

> From whence is this unjust distinction grown?
> Are we not formed with passions like your own?
> Nature with equal fire our souls endued,
> Our minds as haughty, and as warm our blood;
> O'er the wide world your pleasures you pursue,
> The change is justified by something new;
> But we must sigh in silence—and be true. (lines 25-31)

Whereas Mr. Yonge's adventurous (adulterous) behaviour is socially acceptable, and even expected, Mrs. Yonge is expected to ignore her passions and endure any and all of her husband's faults. Considering "this regard for the reputation of chastity [that] is prized by women, [and] is despised by men," Wollstonecraft asserts in her *A Vindication* that "the two extremes are equally destructive to morality" (219). In this respect, Montagu precedes most protofeminist and all feminist writers and thinkers, including Wollstonecraft, Robinson, Hays, and John Stuart Mill. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill exposes the very same troubling inconsistencies in the education and treatment of men and women by arguing unambiguously:

> [t]hat the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (3)

Relying on reason and common sense, Mill argues that the society as a whole suffers from female subordination because the preclusion of women's education also precludes the potential positive social and cultural contributions by a half of its citizens. According to Wollstonecraft, ignorant women are "foolish and vicious" (281), which results in unnecessary intrigues that waste time and energy. Montagu also satirizes women's vanity and foolishness, for example in "A Satyr," but she only does it as "a gambit . . . crediting them with a capacity to reform" (Sherman 1). Indeed, she writes essays and poems that explicitly advocate for women's education and unbiased marriage arrangements.

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16 Her work was quickly followed by Mary Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), where she equally criticizes the double standards (45, 78). As Gary Kelly explains, Mary Hays was also personally affected by Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* which contributed to her own feminist identity and politics, as well as her works (80-125).

This is not surprising since Montagu felt from an early age the consequences of gendered politics and policies acutely, first in being denied a proper formal education, which was not deemed suitable for ladies, and later in having difficulties publishing her works: "Frequently at court and well-known for her literary production among her friends and family (the novel writer Henry Fielding was a cousin) and among other writers of the time like Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison, only her gender and her position in society prevented her from becoming a published author" (Long par. 11). Writing under pseudonyms, publishing anonymously or under a man's patronage was, for the most part, a female writer's reality. For instance, in a scathing poem—as most of his are—John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester comments on the predicament of being a woman writer: "Cursed if you fail, and scorned though you succeed! / Thus, like an errant woman as I am, / No sooner well convinced writing's a shame, / That whore is scarce a more reproachful name / Than poetess–" ("A Letter from Artemisia in the Town to Chloe in the Country" lines 23-27). The struggle between reputation and professional success was quite intimate to Montagu, who, after years of friendship and professional cooperation with Alexander Pope, lived to see him cruelly and publicly attack her chastity (Thomas 21-22; Heffernan and O'Quinn 18; see also Grundy 1999; Rogers 2023).

According to Lewis Melville, this type of professional discrimination "seems to have been more marked in English society than elsewhere in Europe" (192). Melville refers to a letter by Montagu, written in Italy for a friend of hers and recounting one of the many social visits paid by Cardinal Guerini to Montagu. The Cardinal, who was enthusiastic about her writing, "requested her published works for the library in a college he was founding and even sent his chaplain to collect them. The chaplain was unable to believe that such a collection did not exist and seemed to think that Lady Montagu was snubbing the Cardinal by not donating the books" (Melville 192). So, her view, explicitly stated in her letters from Turkey, that the position of women in England is far inferior than in other countries, is based on actual experience. Thus, in the "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" the degree of injustice suffered by the wife is related through Mrs. Yonge's invocation of heaven in the hope that it provides more justice than the society guided by partial laws (lines 15-18), designed specifically to subjugate women.

Significantly, whereas Wollstonecraft and Mill use the rhetoric of slavery in their reference to the position of women—Wollstonecraft suggests that a woman is made into "a coquetish slave" (91) and Mill speaks of the enslavement of minds (18, 21)—for Montagu, women sometimes seem to be treated *worse* than slaves: "Defrauded servants are from service free; / A wounded slave regains his liberty. / For wives ill used no remedy remains, / To daily racks condemned, and to eternal chains" (lines 20-24). It is not surprising then that Montagu, who lived in Turkey for several years thanks to her husband's ambassadorship, expresses both her enthusiasm in relation to how women are treated there and her disdain for male writers who attempt to describe female experience although they have no real access to it.

Contradicting the typical Western views of the Orient based on ignorance and prejudice, Montagu "adopted an intelligent, measured, and critical stance as she negotiated sexual and national boundaries" in that she fostered "contact with the

'other' . . . studying Islam, Turkish, and Arabic, and engaging with the people she met on her sojourn" (Heffernan and O'Quinn 34). For instance, in her letter written from Turkey to her sister, the Countess of Mar, dated 1 April 1717, Montagu first expresses her admiration for the fashion and looks of Turkish women, and then criticizes "either the exemplary discretion or extreme stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of them. 'Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have" (*The Letters* 298-99). By ironically referring to the "discretion" of male travel writers, Montagu implies that they wished to conceal from the English public the degree of freedom awarded to Turkish women, spreading negative views and feeding prejudice against the Muslim. More significantly, she questions the legitimacy of men speaking on behalf of women as well as the authority of a male voice in speaking about the female experience.

Similarly, in a letter to Mrs Thistlethwayte dated the same day, 1 April 1717, she also criticizes male travel writers by suggesting that they are "very fond of speaking of what they don't know" (*The Letters* 312); namely, men (Turkish or foreign) are not allowed to enter the women's quarters and "[t]hey can only speak of the outside" (313), so their conclusions about female life are both uninformed and subjective. In fact, Montagu challenges the accuracy of their reports on life in a Muslim country in general by asserting that they even report falsely on obvious things such as architecture: "I suppose you have read, in most of our accounts of Turkey that their houses are the most miserable pieces of building in the world. I can speak very learnedly on that subject, having been in so many of them; and I assure you 'tis no such thing" (311). Montagu's astute observations precede Edward Said's *Orientalism* by two and a half centuries, but she is fully aware that the Western representation of Orient as inferior is imagined, conceived in such a way as to simultaneously construct the West (England) as superior. Although she inevitably participates in orientalist discourse because she cannot be exempt from the discursive power of the West, she also exposes it as artificial and harmful. In fact, if, as Said argues, the Orient and the Occident support and reflect each other (5) in creating a specific picture or idea of the world, Montagu certainly views the Orient as the more advanced half, representing the Western cultural hegemony as a misogynist invention. Her unambiguous statements about the Western male writers writing about things they know nothing about prove the claim that literary, cultural, and political representations of the Orient stand as a "highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient" (Said 21), that being an ostensibly uncivilized place inhabited by brutes.

Rejecting such prejudicial notions and, by extension, viewing the West's attitudes about the East similar in principle to the male attitude about and treatment of women, Montagu exposes Turkish legal and cultural practices as far more progressive. She praises the Turkish custom of covering women, as she views "the veils worn by women as liberating from the male gaze" (Marsden), and as a means of erasing class distinctions: "this disguises them, [so] that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave. 'Tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her; and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street" (Montagu, *The Letters* 299). She also dispels the myths of their sexual repression or subjugation by suggesting that Turkish women can freely choose lovers as they wish: "[t]his perpetual

masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery" (*The Letters* 299). The punishment for sexual transgression that supposedly awaits Christian ladies in the afterlife is "never preached to the Turkish damsels" (*The Letters* 299). In the "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband," Montagu speaks of the same things through the voice of the wronged wife, who exposes the injustice of the fact that adultery is seen as regular and acceptable for husbands, but as the highest moral and social mistake of a wife, for which she is publicly vilified:

> To custom (though unjust) so much is due;
> I hide my frailty from the public view.
> My conscience clear, yet sensible of shame,
> My life I hazard, to preserve my fame.
> And I prefer this low inglorious state
> To vile dependence on the thing I hate–
> But you pursue me to this last retreat.
> Dragged into light, my tender crime is shown
> And every circumstance of fondness known.
> Beneath the shelter of the law you stand,
> And urge my ruin with a cruel hand,
> While to my fault thus rigidly severe,
> Tamely submissive to the man you fear. (lines 46-58)

In addition to the social scorn, the wife faces financial consequences of her adultery as she loses not only her reputation and husband but also her livelihood and her home. Indeed, the financial aspect of the Yonge affair turned out to be particularly unfavourable for the wife. Contrary both to the English legal practice and the prevailing Western beliefs, the Turkish law provides for women in similar situations much more generously, preventing women from feeling resentment for their husbands: "those ladies that are rich having all their money in their own hands, which they take with them upon a divorce, with an addition which he is obliged to give them" (Montagu, *The Letters* 299). Furthermore, the gender-biased rules that determine English inheritance laws are quite different in Turkey, where women have the right to own and inherit property, and even to make certain decisions in that regard:

> the Grand Signior himself, when a pasha is executed, never violates the privileges of the harem (or women's apartment), which remains unsearched entire to the widow. They are queens of their slaves, whom the husband has no permission so much as to look upon, except it be an old woman or two that his lady chooses. (Montagu, *The Letters* 300)

These distinctions between her home country and Turkey unsurprisingly contributed to Montagu's perception of Turkey as "free of the sexual and patriarchal constraints imposed upon English women. Not only did spaces such as the female hammam exist but women had significantly more rights" (Marsden).

Evidently, the level of respect for women that Montagu witnessed in Turkey is diametrically opposed to what Mrs. Yonge experiences in England. She is first abandoned by the husband who pursued numerous affairs, and after she does the same, he demands compensation along with the divorce. The brunt of humiliation is borne by her alone, as she begs for him not to leave her destitute:

> And I have borne (oh what have I not borne!)
> The pang of jealousy, the insults of scorn.
> Wearied at length, I from your sight remove,
> And place my future hopes in secret love.
> In the gay bloom of glowing youth retired,
> I quit the woman's joy to be admired,
> With that small pension your hard heart allows,
> Renounce your fortune, and release your vows. (lines 38-45)

Yet, Montagu refuses to solely paint a humbling picture of the wife, and continues to expose the husband as the main culprit for the scandal. She highlights the hypocrisy of the society and the partiality of the law by making it clear that, as any reasonable person understands, the wife is the wronged party:

> This wretched outcast, this abandoned wife,
> Has yet this joy to sweeten shameful life:
> By your mean conduct, infamously loose,
> You are at once my accuser and excuse.
> Let me be damned by the censorious prude
> (Stupidly dull, or spiritually lewd),
> My hapless case will surely pity find
> From every just and reasonable mind.
> When to the final sentence I submit,
> The lips condemn me, but their souls acquit. (lines 59-68)

The irony of the situation is expressed in the lines where the wife liberates the husband from the shackles of marriage: "No more my husband, to your pleasures go, / The sweets of your recovered freedom know" (lines 69-70). Her release of her husband functions like a reversed echo of Montagu's conclusion about the position of women in Turkey: "Upon the whole, I look upon the Turkish women, as the only free people in the empire" (*The Letters* 299-300). The epistle ends, as Grundy notes, with a rapidly delivered series of verbs that insinuate the man's ambition, corruption as well as his close ties with politics and powers that be ("Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 426) that helped him win the claim in court. His lack of emotion and business-like approach to marriage illustrate the concept of marriage at the time: it is an arranged affair in which the woman is merely an instrument for the man's

self-actualization. Indeed, if the marriage fails to provide adequate heirs, a substitute "bride"[17] will be provided for:

> Go: court the brittle friendship of the great,
> Smile at his board, or at his levee wait;
> And when dismissed, to madam's toilet fly,
> More than her chambermaids, or glasses, lie,
> Tell her how young she looks, how heavenly fair,
> Admire the lilies and the roses there.
> Your high ambition may be gratified,
> Some cousin of her own be made your bride,
> And you the father of a glorious race
> Endowed with Ch——l's strength and Low——r's face. (lines 71-80)

The closing lines, although specific to Mrs Yonge's experiences, suggest that in a patriarchal society all marriages reduce women to a beautiful, nameless, breeding body, whereas they extoll men as the actual fathers of a nation, the supreme active agents in the Aristotelian sense,[18] regardless of their moral or other flaws.

Conclusion

With her assertive approach to her own education and the brave undertaking of a profession that was still for the most part considered to be reserved for men, Montagu destabilizes the existing gender boundaries. Both in her life and work she is consistent in demanding and speaking for the equality of women and men. Although she adopts the pathos of Ovidian epistles, and speaks from the position of the abandoned lover, she enriches the "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" with satirical overtones and harsh social criticism. Whereas heroic epistles typically treat materials from mythology and ancient literature, Montagu tackles a contemporary subject of marital infidelity and divorce in order to address problems that transcend the notion of "a lover's parting" by far.

Importantly, Montagu uses the story of the Yonges as a frame through which she laments the position of women in a society plagued by hypocrisy and misogyny. Although she has notable predecessors in Astell, Cavendish, and several other female writers, this does not undermine the significance of her feminist ideas. Quite the contrary, her life

17 Isobel Grundy detects the source for the bride reference in John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester's poem "A Letter from Artemisia in the Town to Chloe in the Country," in which the friends provide the groom with his own cousin as a bride to prevent the improvement of the family line through incestuous breeding ("Ovid and Eighteenth-Century Divorce" 426), which is an ironical comment on the detrimental effects of outdated social practices.

18 Aristotle found women to be passive and mere receptacles ("material") for developing foetuses, whereas men were seen as active and life-giving (111-13), and therefore fit to command, to instigate things: "the male is separate from the female, since it is something better and more divine in that it is the principle of movement for generated things, while the female serves as their matter" (133).

and work(s) provide a logical transition from the eighteenth-century satirical tradition to the humanist and individualist ideals of Mary Wollstonecraft, of one of the first feminist allies, John Stuart Mill, and, ultimately, of many contemporary feminist writers.

No less significantly, as "the first English woman to write about her travels in Ottoman lands" (Heffernan and O'Quinn 11), Montagu relies on her experience of living in a different culture to expose the harmful Eurocentric prejudices of the Christian West against the Muslim East. By representing Turkish customs and traditions as more advanced and more appreciative of the female gender, she rejects both the notions of the Oriental Other and of the Feminine Other, introducing more progressive discourse into the eighteenth-century upper-class society. In this, Montagu remains an important cultural and literary figure whose "idiosyncratic, open-minded, proto-feminist responses to Islamic civilization are more fascinating today than ever" (Grundy qtd. in "Comments").

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