LETTERS OF LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU*

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Many of Lady Mary's letters were written to her sister, the Countess of Mar who was living in Paris in poor health and low spirits, and were intended to cheer her up and amuse her. For this purpose gossip and scandal about their acquaintances was thought to be, and no doubt was, well adapted—a taste not exclusively confined to the Pierreponts or the eigh teenth century. The picture, highly coloured and not always accurate, that we get of high London society in the times of the first two Georges, resembles that of the giddy years of the Restoration, and is perhaps a shade more lurid than that of the same class at the end of the century as drawn by Cecil in *The Young Melbourne*. That in the main it is true, is confirmed by such contemporary accounts as the *Journals of Lord Hervey*. Yet lest we get a distorted view of English life as a whole in these decades, it is well to remember this caution of Mr. Turberville's:

> Nothing is as a rule easier than to exaggerate the delinquencies of the fashionable world. It lives in the limelight; it has the means and the leisure for dissipation, and the doings of its rakes and its ladies of doubtful reputation will invariably receive more than a fair share of attention, so that there is always a danger of confusing the normal with the exceptional. Whilst making this proviso, one must add that the nobility at the close of the seventeenth century and the opening of the eighteenth included a rather high percentage of rakes.

Some of the letters to her sister give a bright picture of the gay and active life she was leading. One written just after coming home from the great ball given on the birth-night of the Prince of Wales runs: "My brain warmed with all the agreeable ideas that fine clothes, fine gentlemen, brisk tunes, and lively dances can raise there . . . First, you must know that I led up the ball, which you'll stare at; but what is more, I believe in my conscience I made one of the best figures there; to say truth, people are grown so extravagantly ugly that we old beauties are forced out on show days to keep the court in countenance". She spent a good deal of time in the saddle. Mr. Wortley had bought a house at Twickenham, and she writes of riding between that village and London perpetually on a horse "superior to any two-legged animal, he being without a fault". She took up stag-hunting and wrote, "I have arrived to vast courage and skill that way, and am as well pleased with it as with the acquisition of a new sense; his Royal Highness hunts in Richmond Park,

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and I make one of the *beau monde* in his train". Another glimpse at social activity is afforded by the remark: "We have assemblies for every day in the week besides court, operas, and masquerades; with youth and money 'tis certainly possible to be well diverted in spite of malice and ill-nature". In fact, in some moods her content was so complete that she could write, "If life could be always what it is, I believe I have so much humility in my temper I could be contented without anything better than this two or three hundred years; but alas!

> Dullness, and wrinkles, and disease, must come,
> And age, and death's irrevocable doom."

But the sun did not always shine; there were dark days. Occasionally it was a stroke of ill-fortune that caused the gloom, as when she became involved in a nasty affair connected with speculation in South Sea stock, or when her son ran away from school and began his strange wayward career. Her cynicism and contempt for mankind in the mass led to the old cry, *vanitas vanitatum*, as when she began one letter, "This is a vile world, dear sister . . . one is stifled with a certain mixture of fool and knave that most people are composed of". At another time she wrote, "I own I enjoy vast delight in the folly of mankind; and, God be praised, that is an inexhaustible source of entertainment". An odd expression of her cynicism is this comparison:

> It is my established opinion that this globe of ours is no better than a Holland cheese, and the walkers about in it mites. I possess my mind in patience, let what will happen; and should feel tolerably easy though a great rat came and ate half of it up.

Her satirical description of the company in Westminster Hall at the coronation of George II is too long to quote.

Holding such views of the mass of her fellow mortals, endowed with a sharp tongue and a facility for writing satirical verses, and little regardful of the feelings of others, of course she made enemies. Though the verses were rarely published by the author, but were either passed in manuscript from hand to hand, or printed by someone's well designed indiscretion, Lady Mary was credited with the writing of a number of them, and indeed of more than she had anything to do with. She tells her sister of "a ballad that is said or sung in most houses . . . which has been laid firstly to Pope and secondly to me, when God knows we have neither of us wit enough to make it". She also tells of being in disgrace with a lady because "she fancied

me the author or abettor of two vile ballads which I am so innocent of that I never saw them".

But of all her quarrels the most famous was that with Pope. He and Lady Mary had been warm friends, and he had written many letters to her professing romantic attachment. But they became estranged, and he made satirical references to her in his poems, culminating in an outrageous attack in lines too gross to quote. She and Lord Hervey, who had also been the object of the poet's satire, retaliated in a vigorous personal lampoon. Usually when there is a contest in throwing mud some of it sticks, and there is little doubt that Lady Mary's reputation suffered, and still suffers, from the gross slanders of this clever, bitter, unscrupulous poet.

It is not surprising to find coupled with a certain hardness in her nature a brilliancy that, shining not too brightly, manifests itself in terse sayings, novel generalizations, pithy, fanciful or ironical remarks. When her sister wrote in a gloomy vein, Lady Mary replied, " 'Tis only the spleen that gives you those ideas; you may have many delightful days to come, and *there is nothing more silly than to be too wise to be happy*". On telling of a coming marriage that she thinks quite unsuitable she comments: "But where are people matched? I suppose we shall all come right in Heaven; as in a country dance the hands are strangely given and taken while they are in motion, at last all meet their partners when the jig is done",—certainly a queer bit of eschatology. She gives occasional glimpses of feuds between ladies of high social standing. Of the musical entertainments given by the young Duchess of Marlborough she writes, "But she and I are not in that degree of friendship to have *me* often invited: we continue to see one another like two people who are resolved to hate with civility". In another letter she tells that their acquaintances have been doing "monstrous and stupendous things", and she thinks they are "run mad". "Lady Hervey and Lady Bristol have quarrelled in such a polite manner that they have given one another all the titles so liberally bestowed amongst the ladies at Billingsgate". She confesses that she loves flattery though she does not swallow it undiluted: "I am in perfect health, and hear it said I look better than ever I did in my life, which is one of those lies one is always glad to hear". Reporting that she finds life fairly diverting, she philosophizes, "(I) take care to improve as much as possible that stock of vanity and credulity that Heaven in its mercy has furnished me with; being sensible that

to these two qualities, simple as they appear, all the pleasures of life are owing". Often when retailing some bit of gossip she does so with a salty wit that causes it to stick in the memory though the persons concerned are soon forgotten. For instance, here is her account of an odd love affair:

> The first of these ladies is tenderly attached to the polite Mr. Mildmay, and sunk in all the joys of happy love, notwithstanding she wants the use of her two hands by a rheumatism, and he has an arm that he cannot move. I wish I could send you the particulars of this amour, which is as curious as that between two oysters, and as well worth the serious enquiry of the naturalists.

And this is her cynical announcement of a recent wedding:

> As for news, the last wedding is that of Peg Pelham, and I think I have never seen so comfortable a prospect of happiness; according to all appearance she cannot fail of being a widow in six weeks at farthest, and accordingly she has been so good a housewife to line her wedding-clothes with black.

But she made a bad guess—the husband lived nearly fifty years longer.

IV. To Her Daughter From Italy—1739-1762. Age, 49-73

During the latter part of her life Lady Mary lived abroad, in the south of France and in Northern Italy, while Mr. Wortley remained in England attending to his parliamentary duties and amassing a fortune. Apparently there was no quarrel between them; they kept up a correspondence and each showed regard for the welfare and happiness of the other, but they were better friends at a distance. Lady Mary's health had not been good, she complained of the cold and damp of England; her spirits "faltered in the mist", and her thoughts turned with longing to the charms of the fine arts and the sunshine of Italy. Moreover, her sharp tongue and satirical pen had made enemies, while the malicious attacks of Pope as well as her own indiscretions had injured her reputation; so that instead of being admired and flattered she found herself the object of dislike and censure.

After going for some years from one place to another in Southern Europe, she settled down in a village by one of the Italian lakes in Venetian territory. Here in early old age, associating for the most part with elderly people, living a quiet life in the

country, remote from English society, she wrote to her daughter, the Countess of Bute, descriptions, anecdotes, and reflections comparatively free from such scandal as that with which she had entertained her sister. These letters from Italy are generally ranked with those from Turkey as the best specimens of Lady Mary's epistolary art. They are simple, spontaneous, and direct; the animated monologues of a woman with a vigorous, well-stored mind, wide experience of the world, interested in many things, especially in people and books.

Lively descriptions of her house, her garden, her village, her neighbours, prominent Italians she met, flowed from her pen. She bought an unfinished palace on Lake Iseo, and, as there was not enough ground with it to make a garden, she obtained possession of a near-by vineyard, the farm house on which she fitted up as a sort of summer cottage. A detailed account of her manner of life, "which is as regular as that of a monastery" fills one letter:

> I generally rise at six, and as soon as I have breakfasted, put myself at the head of my weeder women and work with them till nine. I then inspect my dairy and take a turn among my poultry . . . At eleven o'clock I retire to my books . . . At twelve I constantly dine, and sleep after dinner till about three. I then send for some of my old priests, and either play at piquet or whist till it is cool enough to go out. One evening I walk in my wood . . . take the air on horseback the next, and go on the river the third.

She adds, "I confess I sometimes wish for a little conversation".

She often wrote character sketches of outstanding Italians whom she had met. There was the good old Doge of Venice, who had befriended her, and of whom she said, "Authority appeared so *aimable* in him, no one wished it less except himself". Then there was Cardinal Querini with his literary ambition, that led him to publish several volumes a year for fifty years, who was at this time engaged on a voluminous autobiography: "He begins from the moment of his birth, and tells us that in that day he made such extraordinary faces (that) the midwife, chambermaids, and nurses all agreed that there was born a shining light in church and state". But the most attractive sketch is that of a country doctor who, she believed, saved her life:

> Both his character and practice are so singular I cannot forbear giving you some account of them. He will not permit his patients to have either surgeon or apothecary: he performs

> all the operations of the first with great dexterity; and whatever compounds he gives he makes in his own house: these are very few; the juice of herbs, and these waters (the medicinal waters of Louvere) being commonly his sole prescriptions . . . He professes drawing all his knowledge from experience, which he possesses perhaps in a greater degree than any other mortal, being the seventh doctor of his family in a direct line. His forefathers have all of them left journals solely for the use of their posterity, and he has recourse to these manuscripts on every difficult case. But what most distinguishes him is a disinterestedness I never saw in any other: he is as regular in his attendance on the poorest peasant from whom he never can receive one farthing as on the richest of the nobility; and whenever he is wanted will climb three or four miles in the mountains in the hottest sun or the heaviest rain, where a horse cannot go, to arrive at a cottage, where if their condition requires it, he does not only give them advice and medicines gratis, but bread, wine, and whatever is needful . . . I often see him as dirty and tired as a footpost, having eat nothing all day but a roll or two that he carries in his pocket, yet blest with such a perpetual flow of spirits he is always gay to a degree above cheerfulness.

Social customs, of nobility or peasants, interested her. In Gotolengo, where she lived, the villagers were accustomed to present a play at carnival time, and obtained permission to use a large unfurnished room in her house as a theatre. She was surprised by the beauty of the scenes painted by a country painter, and still more so by the excellence of the comedy-acting by the tailor of the village, though the play itself did not amount to much. But this was not the only way in which she took part in the life of the village. She writes, "I have learned them to make bread . . . I have introduced French rolls, custards, minced pies, and plum pudding . . . I expect immortality from the science of butter-making, in which they are become so skillful from my instructions". Moreover, she visited the sick and was thought a great physician. And the villagers were not ungrateful. Without letting her know, they decided to set up her statue in a prominent place, ordered the marble and engaged the sculptor. When he called to model her face, she firmly rejected the whole plan, fearing it would make her ridiculous in England. The villagers were determined, however, and did not give up their project till she told them that *her religion would not permit it*. An odd social custom among what in England would be called the county gentry is described in this lively report of a surprise visit:

> I had a visit in the beginning of these holidays of thirty horse of ladies and gentlemen with their servants . . . They came with the kind intention of staying with me at least a fortnight, though I had never seen any of them before; but they were all neighbours within ten miles round. I could not avoid entertaining them at supper, and by good luck had a large quantity of game in the house, which, with the help of my poultry, furnished out a plentiful table. I sent for the fiddles, and they were so obliging as to dance all night, and even dine with me next day, though none of them had been in bed; and were much disappointed I did not press them to stay, it being the fashion to go in troops to one another's houses, hunting and dancing together a month in each castle. I left the room about one o'clock, and they continued their ball in the saloon above stairs, without being at all offended at my departure. But the greatest diversion I had was to see a lady of my own age (59) comfortably dancing with her own husband, some years older; and I can assert that she jumps and gallops with the best of them.

Occasionally the best part of a letter is taken up with a story. Such is the gloomy account of the haughty marchioness, whose pride was "Luciferan"; the romantic tale of the beautiful but poor Octavia; and her own adventure in saving the life of a neighbouring signora, whose husband having surprised her in infidelity stood over her with a stiletto in his hand. These stories related in a simple straightforward style are memorable not only for the characters and events but for the effective way in which they are told. Perhaps with the Italian air she breathed in something of the art of Boccaccio.

Lady Bute with a large family of daughters, living when at home in Scotland out of the great world, asked her mother for advice on the girls' education. This Lady Mary gave in several letters; and while the ideas are less on education in general than on an adaptation of it to this particular case, they were advanced for the time. Having heard that her eldest granddaughter was clever, she wrote "Learning, if she has a real taste for it, will not only make her contented but happy". She is to be allowed to learn Latin, and even Greek, at least so far as to be able to read books in these languages in their originals. She must remember, however, that languages are rather the vehicles of learning than learning itself. "True knowledge consists in knowing things, not words." She should also read some history, geography, English poetry, and philosophy (which included then what we now call science). But this education from books is not to exclude needlework and drawing. "I think it as scandalous for a woman not to know

how to use a needle as for a man not to know how to use a sword."

Notwithstanding imperfections of her scheme, her vigorous advocacy of education for women entitles her to an honourable place among early feminists. She contrasts the pride shown by Italians in learned women with the attitude of Englishmen. "There is no part of the world where our sex is treated with so much contempt as in England," she declares; and she makes an amusing allusion to *Gulliver*, the popular book of the day: "I am persuaded (that) if there was a commonwealth of rational horses, as Dr. Swift has supposed, it would be an established maxim among them that a mare could not be taught to pace".

Lady Mary was an omnivorous reader, and her husband and daughter often sent her out from London boxes of newly published books. These she read avidly and freely discussed in her letters. She was fond of novels, from those that she called "trash and lumber serving only to pass away idle time" to the productions of Smollett, Richardson, and Fielding. She is sorry that her friend Smollett, who certainly had a talent for invention "loses his time in translations (he translated *Don Quixote*), and disgraces his talent by writing those stupid romances commonly called history". How strong was her interest in the novels of her cousin Fielding is shown by her confession that once when a box of new books arrived, she sat up all night reading *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*. When the news of Fielding's death reached her, she devoted part of a letter to an estimate of the novelist's temperament and character:

> No man enjoyed life more than he did, though few had less reason to do so . . . His happy constitution (even when he had with great pains half demolished it) made him forget everything when he was before a venison pasty or over a flask of champagne; and I am persuaded that he has known more happy moments than any prince upon earth . . . There was a great similitude between his character and that of Sir Richard Steele. He had the advantage both in learning and, in my opinion, genius: they both agreed in wanting money in spite of all their friends, and would have wanted it if their hereditary lands had been as extensive as their imagination; yet each of them was so formed for happiness it is a pity he was not immortal.

Richardson she criticized very severely, though she confessed that she was such an old fool as to weep over *Clarissa Harlowe* "like any milkmaid of sixteen". On reading a volume of *The Rambler*, she remarked, "(the essayist) always plods in the beaten

track of his predecessors, following the *Spectator* with the same pace a pack-horse would do a hunter . . . I should be glad to know the name of this laborious author". It may come as a surprise that she belittled the letters of Madame de Sévigné, but the two great ladies were of opposite temperaments. It is the familiar antithesis of heart and head. The letters of Madame de Sévigné are suffused with maternal tenderness; those of Lady Mary are ruled in the main by reason and common sense.

Lady Mary's views on human life and the unseen universe are partly the reflection of the ideas held at the time by most of her class. She seems to have held a vague deist belief in "The Author of Nature", though not in Providence, being convinced that destiny or fate or chance rules our lives. More than once she compares human beings to cards being played: "I am much inclined to think we are no more free agents than the queen of clubs when she victoriously takes prisoner the knave of hearts". At another time she expressed the opinion that liberty in human life is a chimerical idea and has no real existence. "The poor efforts of our utmost prudence . . . appear, I fancy, in the eyes of some superior beings like the pecking of a young linnet to break a wire cage, or the climbing of a squirrel in a hoop; the moral needs no explanation; let us sing as cheerfully as we can in our impenetrable confinement, and crack our nuts with pleasure from the little store that is allowed us". Though not a religious woman, she was an upholder of religion. She declares, "Nobody can deny but religion is a comfort to the distressed, a cordial to the sick, and sometimes a restraint on the wicked; therefore whoever would argue or laugh it out of the world without giving some equivalent for it ought to be treated as a common enemy". She was a staunch Protestant, and tells her daughter with some complacency how she vanquishes in argument Romanist disputants. She cannot accept the doctrine of faith as a supreme virtue: "Faith cannot determine reward or punishment, being involuntary, and only the consequence of conviction: we do not believe what we please, but what appears to us with the face of truth." Human civilization, she thinks, is nothing much to boast about. True, mankind is past its infancy, Time has brought great improvements, and there has been a "vast increase in useful as well as speculative knowledge". Yet we have not gone very far:

> I imagine we are now arrived at that period which answers to fifteen. I cannot think we are older when I recollect the many palpable follies which are still almost universally persisted in: I place that of war amongst the most glaring . . . Whenever we come to man's estate (perhaps a thousand years hence) I do not doubt it will appear as ridiculous as the pranks of unlucky lads.

Though not an amiable woman, Lady Mary was an interesting one. There was little about her of the tender emotions, of feminine softness; she had a lively, clear and rather hard intellect, that had been sharpened by association with clever men, and an outlook broadened by contact with foreign customs and ways of thinking. Her individual opinions and her freedom from convention combine with her cynical wit in giving an astringent quality to the letters like the flavour of a good dry wine. She early acquired an easy, natural, unforced style adequate to express with lucidity, and on occasion with vigor, whatever she wanted to say. A salient characteristic of her letters is abundance of material. Her lively curiosity and habit of close observation gave her plenty to say: things to describe, stories to tell, faults to find, advice to give, pointed comments to make. Thus she found no need for elegant drawing-out of *parvum in multo*—for what she scornfully described as "the tittle-tattle of a fine lady, sometimes that of an old nurse". Certainly her letters differ widely from those of Madame de Sévigné and of Horace Walpole; indeed one might fancy many passages in Lady Mary's letters written by a hard-headed man of the world, and many of Horace's by a fine lady. But nothing is further from our intention than an attempt to magnify the merits of Lady Mary's letters at the expense of those of her two great contemporaries. As Augustine Birrell said of poetry, "Let us be Catholics in this matter, and burn our candles at many shrines". Suffice it to say that among the letter writers of England, and indeed of Europe, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu holds an honoured place in the front rank.