

A QUARRELSOME ROMANCE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

DAVID EARLE LEWIS

IN the history of English literature, one of the most dramatic, one of the most passionately human, and one of the most grotesque, relationships between a man and a woman was that of Alexander Pope and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Even now, their emotions, their motives, their petty intrigues stand out as clearly as they did to the society in which they moved. Perhaps more clearly—for Time has given one an impersonal perspective, an absence of emotional affiliations, and a scientific scrutiny, which their contemporaries could not enjoy.

* * * * *

Fate has seldom arranged a situation more dynamically dramatic, more hatefully potent, and more pathetically grotesque than that of Alexander Pope declaring his love for Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. The genius of the age, brilliant, hideously deformed, savagely clever—and the beauty of the age, witty, charming, the nucleus of an admiring circle! Perhaps nothing has been passed on to us more indicative of Lady Mary's true nature than her reaction to Pope's declaration of love. She laughed. If she had shown pity even, the painfulness of the situation would have been acute enough, for Pope did not want pity in return for adoration. But Lady Mary felt nothing else, apparently, but amusement. Her laugh was the ringing declaration of war between them. From then on, there was no basis for any feeling between them but a hatred that mounted, kindled by the written words which both employed, incensed by spurious rumors and scandalous attacks both verbal and printed. Thus began one of the most sordid and degenerate feuds in the history of our literature. To blame one alone would be as immature and unkind as it would be untruthful. But both are, in a measure, to be censured for their display of revengeful hatred.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) was the eldest daughter of Evelyn Pierrepont, afterwards the Duke of Kingston. During the two years her husband was ambassador at Constantinople, she received letters from Pope¹ (who had met her

1. The sincerity of the letters sent to Lady Mary by Pope during her stay in Constantinople is questionable. One authority described it thus—"Pope, professing to be desolated, wrote her pretty letters of a most personal kind in the gallant style, he supposed, of Volture." (Cecil A. Moore—*English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century*). According to one letter, the concluding lines of his *Elotsa to Abelard* were intended as a hint to her that the whole poem was a vague expression of his love. But then he paid Martha Blount the same compliment!

in 1715) in which "gallantry was more obvious than sense". Before that, as Miss Edith Sitwell so imaginatively describes Pope's infatuation, "Lady Mary proceeded to dazzle London, and, in attaching Pope to her train, to present to the world the curious spectacle of a comet attached to the stick of a damp but noisy rocket. The stick, however, held for some time".

The stick was beginning to break in 1718. In that year Lady Mary wrote a parody on Pope's "Epitaph on the Lovers Struck by Lightning", which was widely circulated among the circle in which she moved: the circle which composed the audience and the censors of any man of literature in that Age . . . that fascinating Age of Anne, when statesmen "paid literary champions like Pope with social privileges and honorable public appointments". Never before or since have literary men entered such an inner circle of political and social intrigue. And thus Lady Mary's parody could do harm to Pope's aspirations at a time when, as W. Elwin has said, "he hardly drank tea without a stratagem".

The character, the mind, the personality, of Lady Mary remain an enigma. That she often acted with crass bad taste, that she was a brilliant, witty, beautiful woman with little compassion and less tolerance, is fairly well established. She has been violently, almost pathologically, attacked by Miss Edith Sitwell in her *Life of Alexander Pope*. The abuse lavished upon her by Miss Sitwell seems at times more prejudice than fact. She denies her everything—even her wit. But in the same chapter she enters into a robust defence of Pope in regard to Lady Mary's statement that "his general preaching against money was meant to induce people to throw it away, that he might pick it up". "At last", writes Miss Sitwell, "when it was felt that the Turks had suffered enough, Lady Mary's husband was recalled from the Porte, and the couple started for England in June, 1718. The journey was ponderous and slow as the lady's wit. Indeed, she and the sober Mr. Montagu (who seems, during all his life, to have neither received nor given so much as a single idea) did not arrive at Dover until November 1, 1718."

* * * * *

Lady Mary's life was a hectic one. In the *Epilogue to the Satires* there is an allusion to two separate dramatic episodes from her life:

Who starves a sister or fereswears a debt.

The first part of the line is now generally taken to refer to the insanity of her sister, Lady Mar. Lord Grange (Lady Mar's brother-in-law) accused Lady Mary of detaining her sister as a lunatic when she was in full possession of her senses so that she might profit by the annual £500 she received for Lady Mar's care. But another version of the incident makes her a sympathetic person, doing all she could to rescue her sister from the custody of her brother-in-law, who had a notorious reputation for cruelty to his own wife. Miss Sitwell sums it up: "Each of the combatants was, according to himself and herself, actuated by the highest principles; each of the combatants was accused by the other of mercenary motives."

The second part of the line refers to a rascally Frenchman named Remond, who kept alive a languishing, extravagant correspondence with Lady Mary before he had ever seen her. Eventually, at his own desire, she invested some money in a South Seas stock whose value soon fell to half the price. He "bullied, blustered and blackmailed" her into trying to repay him the original debt, on the threat of exposing her letters to her husband. Pope believed her to be the joint author of a pamphlet called *A Pop on Pope*, along with her friend, Lord Hervey.² The pamphlet was an odious, hateful thing, making sneering sport of Pope's deformity.

The hatred between these two former friends flared into open warfare with the famous couplet about a modern Sappho in *Imitation of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*:

From furious Sappho scare a milder fate,
Poxed by her love, or libelled by her hate.

Lady Mary believed these lines to refer to her, although there was no definite proof that they did. She was indelicate enough to solicit one Lord Peterborough to act as intermediary, but he refused. She still persisted in persecuting herself by telling widely amongst her friends that she was the victim of the couplet. It became an obsession with her, and at last she collaborated with Lord Hervey² in *Verses Addressed to the Imitator of Horace*:

². Lord Hervey was destined for a rather unfortunate immortality in the *Epistle to Dr. Arbutnot*:

Let Sporus tremble.—A. What? that thing of silk,
Sporus, that mere white of ass's milk?
Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
This painted child of dirt, that stinks and stings,
Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,
Yet wit ne'er tastes, and beauty ne'er enjoys;
Amphibious thing! that acting either part,
The trifling head, or the corrupted heart;
Pop at the toilet, flatterer at the board,
Now trips a lady, and now struts a lord.
Beauty that shocks you, parts that none will trust,
Wit that can creep, and pride that licks the dust.

Like the first bold assassin be thy lot;
 Ne'er be thy guilt forgiven or forgot;
 But as thou hat'st, be hated by mankind,
 And with the emblem of thy crooked mind
 Marked on thy back, like Cain, by God's own hand,
 Wander like him accursed through the land.

Pope published an advertisement demanding that the authors deny the authorship of the poem, or "a most proper reply to the same" would appear. His answer to Lord Hervey, who made no denial or apology, was never published. Pope himself wrote Jonathan Swift:

There is a woman's war declared against me by a certain Lord. His weapons are the same which women and children use; a pin to scratch, and a squirt to bespatter. I writ a sort of answer, but was ashamed to enter the lists with him, and after showing it to some people, suppressed it.

In 1739, Lady Mary Wortley went abroad, and in Florence she met Horace Walpole. He exaggerated and distorted her eccentricities into a "revolting slovenliness", and it seems that his attacks must be somewhat discounted, as those of Pope should be, for they were based on a personal antipathy towards her. Walpole's *Letters*³ (edited by Cunningham) are such that she merits little sympathy. But violent attacks on a person's reputation, moral and physical condition are usually prompted by some intimate personal cause which is seldom clarified and which is grossly distorted by prejudice.

Granted that her reaction to Pope's declaration of love was callously cruel, it is hardly a logical supposition to suppose her a degenerated trollop. Lady Mary cannot be as summarily disposed of as that. True, like Colly Cibber and John Dennis,⁴ those anemic men, she lives mainly through Pope's scurrilous attacks. But if it was true that she was spiteful, shallow, loose, mediocre, and little else, as we are often led to presume, it would have taken only a few lines at the most to dismiss her forever. In Miss Sitwell's engaging biography of Pope, she is given paragraph after paragraph, page after page,—vehement denuncia-

3. Horace Walpole's letter to George Montagu, dated February 2, 1762:

"Lady Mary Wortley is arrived: I have seen her: I think her avarice, her dirt, and her vivacity are all increased. Her dress, like her languages, is a galimatias of several countries; the groundwork, rags; and the embroidery, nastiness. She wears no cap, no handkerchief, no gown, no petticoat, no shoes. An old black-laced hood represents the first; the fur of a horseman's coat, which replaces the third, serves for the second; a dimity petticoat is deputy and officiates for the fourth; and slippers act as the last."

Such a caricature can be called little else than petty, and mildly humorous, but it cannot be considered factual material.

4. Pope included an attack on John Dennis, critic and dramatist, in *Essay on Criticism*, which, as his friend Joseph Addison suggested in the *Spectator* No. 253, was a costly indiscretion. Dennis replied with *Reflections Upon an Essay on Criticism*, in which Pope is referred to as "a hunch-back'd toad." This "vile and unspeakably disgraced Dennis," as Miss Sitwell labels him, was again attacked in *The Rape of the Lock*—that masterpiece of airiness, ingenuity and exquisite finish, as one critic called it. Colly Cibber, Poet Laureate at the time, became "the king of the dunces" in *The Dunciad*.

tion though it is—and she emerges as dynamic, as vivid, as forceful a personality as she must have actually been. Like the young girl who desperately wrote a ten-page letter to a boy explaining why she did not love him, she only provided him with the most final, conclusive proof that he might need of her love. If she actually did not love him, five words would have sufficed.

Lady Mary is irrevocably damned and blasphemed by Horace Walpole, that gossip of the 1700's, (who recalled that as a child she was "always a dirty little thing"), by Pope and others—but the fact remains that in the Age of Queen Anne it is a modest assumption that there were probably other wits as coarse, other morals as free, and other bodies as profaned. They rest in peaceful oblivion, in the deadening nonentity which is their lot. Yet Lady Mary emerges as an enigmatic person—a lady of wit, of beauty, of social prominence by birth, of intellectual prominence by her own right. (True, her wit might have been coarse—but was it coarser than Pope's? It is said that later in life she was disfigured by a painful skin disease and that her sufferings were so acute that she hints at the possibility of madness; yet in her prime she was painted by the greatest artists of her age, Liotard, Sir Godfrey Kneller, and others).

She might possibly have been the "dreary rattle" that Miss Sitwell fanatically insists she was, but the fact remains that she stood prominently out amongst the intelligentsia of her day, not as a patron, or a social "procureess", but as a wit in her own right.⁵ Even now, beneath the mud of expert declaimers, buried under the slime of scandal and scurrilous abuse, Lady Mary might still be laughing at Alexander Pope . . .

5. The letter from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to the Bishop of Salisbury, dated July 20, 1710—

"There is hardly a character in the world more despicable, or more liable to universal ridicule, than that of a learned woman; those words imply, according to the received sense, a talking, impertinent, vain and conceited creature. My sex is usually forbid studies of a serious nature, and folly reckoned so much our proper sphere, we are sooner pardoned any excesses of that than the least pretensions to reading or good sense."

- A letter to her husband, dated July 4, 1712—

"A harsh word damps my spirits to a degree of silencing all I have to say. I reflect with grief a man that is ashamed of passions that are natural and reasonable is generally proud of those that are shameful and silly." (Dated November 24, 1714).

- A letter to the Lady——, dated Adrianople, April 1, 1717:

(describing the interior of a hot bath)— . . . "if it was the fashion to go naked, the face would be hardly observed. I perceived that the ladies with the finest skins and most delicate shapes had the greatest share of my admiration, though their faces were sometimes less beautiful than those of their companions . . . I excused myself with some difficulty. They being all so earnest in persuading me, I was at least forced to open my shirt, and show them my stays; which satisfied them very well. For, I saw, they believed I was so locked up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband . . . "

- Letter from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to her daughter, the Countess of Bute, dated July 23, 1753—

"I am sorry for the untimely death of poor Lord Cornbury; he had certainly a very good heart; I have often thought it a great pity it was not under the direction of a better head . . ."

THE BURDEN OF JACOB

HILDA M RIDLEY

*"Ah me! this eager rivalry of life,
This cruel conflict for pre-eminence . . .
The chase, the competition, and the craft
Which seems to be the poison of our life,
And yet is the condition of our life!"*

ARTHUR CLOUGH, in *The Burden of Jacob*.

AMID all the perplexities caused by the conduct of man, that curious phenomenon, "who rushes here and there feverishly piling up money, enlarging his civilization, erecting noble buildings, extending his social services, and then periodically going mad, and with unbridled fury destroying by bomb and fire the cities he has built and the treasures he has accumulated," we seldom enquire whether the cause of his lunacy may not be due in part to the fact that he shoulders too heavy a burden. Certainly the one presented by our modern civilization, is stupendous.

Not only must the male of the species concern himself with the intricacies of government and enterprize in his own country, but he must keep an eye on the international scene. This implies an enormous extension of activities in the fields of science, invention, sociology, and administration. To meet these increased obligations, man should have a vastly improved physique and nervous system. But what do we find? On the contrary, an alarming increase in the modern malady, induced by overwork and anxiety, known as "nervous breakdown;"—one of the most prevalent causes not only of relatively early death, but of that death in life that incapacitates a human being.

Statistics compiled by large insurance companies, such as the Metropolitan Life of New York (1938), and by Government departments, such as the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (1941), show conclusively that men die earlier than women. Scientific investigation, generally, on this continent, arrives at the same conclusion. In findings having to do with elderly and old age groups, it has been shown that the majority of sixty-year olds are women, and that there are one hundred 90-year old women to every 20 men of the same age. It is possible that, after all, man is the weaker sex? Although 125 males are born for every 100 females, the mortality among infant boys is much greater than among girls,—and scientific investigation also reveals that in the case of twins (where one is a boy and the other a girl)

when only one of the two survives, it is usually the female!

Heart trouble, which statisticians place at the head of the list of causes of the greatest number of deaths, is clearly induced by nervous strain,—and when we ask which sex is the more exposed to nervous tension and overwork, the answer must be, unequivocally, the male. Women, in fact, do not shoulder a fair portion of the increased burdens of civilization. If any one doubts this, let him or her study the statistics contained in the national Handbooks, Almanacks, and Year Books to be found in any public library, and from them he will learn that in Government, Law, Religion, Medicine, the Army and Navy, and in every form of Free Enterprize, the responsible posts are held by men. The majority of women associated with administrative, professional, and free enterprize activities occupy clerical or subordinate positions, and that is why the names of so few women appear in such handbooks as *Whitaker's Almanac*, the *Canada Year Book*, and similar national records.

In the expanding fields of scientific discovery and technology (so stimulated by World Wars I and II), with the demands made upon the services of physicians, psychiatrists, chemists, engineers, astronomers, mathematicians, electricians, and highly skilled labour, we find women only thinly represented. Adequate compensation for this lack can no longer be found in the home, in which housework has been simplified by scientific invention and the care and training of children largely taken over by the state. My point here is not to question the justice of this state of affairs, but to emphasize the undue strain placed upon men in the complex civilization of a world in which women form 65% of the population.

Besides the duties which devolve upon him in the business, industrial and political spheres, the average married man is still supposed to be the main support of his family. The present agitation against the continuance of the services of married women in Government and industry is logically based on this assumption. The home has been called by a satirist the "extended ego" of a man,—and certainly we find even in this realm the extension of competitive conceptions regarding success. A man's success, in our Anglo-Saxon civilization, is adjudged largely by the size and costliness of the residence he lives in, by the clothes which his wife and children wear, by the number of material goods he possesses in the form of the latest designs in cars, radios, vacuum cleaners, and fur coats. We find this "standard" reflected throughout all the gradations of labour.

The first instinct of the acquirer of any degree of financial prosperity is to proclaim his achievement to the world in the ways that impress the materialistic mind. And so the home—far from being a haven of rest and refreshment—becomes too often a fresh scene of emulation.

This concentration on competitive, materialistic evidences of success in business and home has other evils which tend to accelerate man's early demise. Engrossed in a scheme of life that demands his full time energies, he often fails to cultivate those forms of recreation which might temper his pre-occupation with the ephemeral. Nature, great literature and art possess restorative qualities that serve to tranquilize, fortify, and sustain a sense of proportion; but to benefit by these human beings must have sufficient leisure in which to "invite their souls." In one of her latest books, *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf points out that most biographies of successful men are records of unremitting labour. She quotes Lord Baldwin in his speech reported in *The Times*, April 20th, 1936: "Since 1914 I have never seen the pageant of the blossom from the first damson to the last apple . . . and if that is not a sacrifice, I do not know what is," and she follows this up by quotations from the experiences of such men as Harley Street specialists, great divines, legal lights, and professional journalists, all of whom complain of their bondage to their special forms of work. Very succinctly she comments:—

These opinions cause us to question the value of professional life—not its cash value; that is great, but its spiritual, its moral, its intellectual value. They make us of the opinion that if people are highly successful . . . they lose their senses. Sight goes. They have no time to look at pictures. Sound goes. They have no time to listen to music. Speech goes. They have no time for conversation. They lose their sense of proportion . . . Humanity goes. Money-making becomes so important that they must work by night as well as by day. Health goes . . . What then remains of a human being who has lost sight, and sound, and sense of proportion? *Only a cripple in a cave.*

An American psychiatrist, writing in a recent number of the *Psychiatry Magazine* (New York), suggests that a main cause of the prevalence of nervous breakdown lies in the fact that the current definition of success is "too narrow." When a man of the world is "suddenly taken out of circulation" by serious illness, or financial reverses, he has no resources to fall

back upon. In losing the evidence of success measured by materialistic criteria, he loses all. Leisure—so dearly prized by the creative, artistic mind as an opportunity for the cultivation of those pursuits which open up large horizons—has played no effective part in his life. He knows nothing of the Greek sense of proportion which finds “wealth in poverty,” “solace in sickness,” “society in solitude.” His definition of wealth is the antithesis of that recorded for it by the Greek,—and this—in a world of fluctuating economic fortune—is very unfortunate for him.