

NO ONE'S OBEDIENT SERVANT
LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU (1689-
1762)



To pass from Alexander Pope to his friend, later his enemy, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, is to pass from a major poet and minor letter-writer to a major letter-writer and minor poet. For a lover of epistolary literature, to arrive from earlier examples at the letters of Lady Mary is like emerging from the confines of a river—even a broad one—to the open sea. Here is a correspondent who mingles pictures of people and places with passages of introspection, scathing wit with reflections on destiny, political comment with literary criticism, and talk of children with outbursts against superstition.

The eldest child of Evelyn Pierrepont, who inherits the earldom of Kingston the year after her birth, is only three when her mother dies and leaves her, her two sisters, and her brother to the care of their pleasure-loving aristocratic father. As a young girl, Lady Mary Pierrepont loves to study and by assiduous application to grammar and dictionary learns enough Latin to read the Roman poets—no mean achievement—but she also takes pleasure in the company of her more conventional contemporaries.

In February 1710, when her friend Anne Wortley dies suddenly, Lady Mary enters on a correspondence with Anne's handsome brother, eleven years older than herself; he is a Member of Parliament and a close friend of the prominent writers Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Edward Wortley, with whom she has already had some acquaintance, is dazzled, as well he might be, by her wit, intellect and learning, as well as her beauty. (At this time, few women learn Latin.) She is ready to marry him if her father consents, but Wortley rejects the latter's demand that he entail his estate—that is, settle it inalienably—on their eldest son: however his grandson turns out, he is not going to have him a beggar. The courtship

continues in a clandestine but stormy fashion. Wortley, probably misinterpreting Lady Mary's liveliness, seems to fear she may be a flirt who is trifling with him, and his accusations arouse her anger. On her part, failing to recognize that his passion is what makes him fearful, she charges him with deceiving her into wrongly imagining that he loves her. Admitting that she feels great esteem and liking for him rather than romantic ardour, she confesses that there are some aspects of his temperament she could wish were different. The unhappy pair are like swimmers trapped under water but occasionally reaching the surface for a welcome gasp of air. Eventually stalemate degenerates into crisis when the Earl decides he can browbeat his twenty-three-year-old daughter into marrying the Honourable Clotworthy Skeffington, an heir to wealth and title, but a man she detests. In a memorable letter, which seems to belong to the world of Restoration comedy, she tells Wortley how, at her father's suggestion, she has consulted all her closest relatives and is dismayed to find they view her as "a little romantic" who would be altogether "unreasonable" to reject her father's choice. She finds herself tottering, poised between the anguish of being yoked to Skeffington and the fear of losing her father's affection as well as the fortune she should inherit. In terror, she warns Wortley that his love and their happiness will not survive unless they settle on a congenial lifestyle, and that he must not expect her father to "come to terms" after an elopement. Prudently, this "little romantic" confesses:

Tis something odd for a woman that brings nothing to expect any thing; but after the way of my education, I dare not pretend to live but in some degree suitable to it. I had rather die than return to a dependancy upon relations I have disoblighd.

To read the subsequent letters is to be caught up in the suspense that engulfs both Wortley and Lady Mary as her father begins to suspect she has a secret suitor and she finds she is not strong enough to stand firm but confesses her attachment and makes a promise she has no intention of keeping. Closely watched, she is dispatched to the family house at West Dean in Wiltshire; Wortley shadows the coach and is suspected at one point of being a highwayman. Although he fails to snatch her away in mid-journey, she succeeds in eloping with him from West Dean, and they are married at Salisbury in August 1712, just under a month after she has reported that her relatives side with her father.

The young women in Lady Mary's immediate circle speak of marriage to one's true love as Paradise, marriage to a man one hates as Hell, and a marriage that falls between these extremes as Limbo. If her sister Lady Francis Pierrepont is to be relied on, Lady Mary, having expected her

elopement to lead to Limbo, finds herself in Paradise. Her letters indeed confirm that she now feels an intense love for her husband. A few weeks after the elopement, when he is away tending to his father's business (happily, *his* family accepts the match) and neglects to write, she tells him, "'Tis the most cruel thing in the world, to think one has reason to complain of what one loves" and a year later she laments, "I had rather be quite alone and hear sometimes from you, than in any company and not have that satisfaction. Your silence makes me more melancholy than any solitude, and I can think on nothing so dismal as that you forget me." When their son, born in May 1713, is still a baby, she is sad that his father never asks about him when he writes to her. Does paternal neglect bear some responsibility for the boy's turning out badly?

Though twenty-seven years are to elapse between the marriage and the couple's separation, there are early signs in the correspondence that once Wortley wins the elusive prize, his passion begins to wane and his suspicions of Lady Mary start to revive. Less than four months into their wedded life, she writes of how a friendly robin has kept her company for nearly a whole afternoon, only to be told that she must have been enjoying a different kind of company than the bird's to prevent her from writing sooner.

Lord Pierrepont becomes reconciled to his disobedient daughter and new son-in-law, but not to the extent of helping them financially, and though Wortley's father is wealthy, Wortley himself is not. However, Lady Mary helps him to live economically and in 1713 dutifully house-hunts in the provinces while he attends to his parliamentary career. By 1714 she is firmly advising him how to obtain advancement in the political world. Only one of her letters survives from 1715, when husband and wife are together in London and Lady Mary enjoys a friendship with Pope and writes her *Town Eclogues* (among her contemporaries, her poetry is much admired). At the year's end, she succumbs to the dreaded smallpox and just escapes death but loses her eyelashes and is left with a pock-marked face. It must be some consolation when, in the following spring, she is able to start preparing for the greatest adventure of her life. In April she is looking for a new nursemaid for her infant son, Edward Wortley Montagu Junior, for the boy will need to get used to her before the family's journey begins. Wortley has been appointed Britain's Ambassador to Turkey, and his wife courageously decides to accompany him.

Lady Mary is about to write her most famous letters, but at this point we find ourselves back in the territory of James Howell and Alexander Pope. These letters survive imperfectly in a manuscript she herself prepared, probably with posthumous publication in mind. As Robert Halsband shows, she freely combines passages from letters of different dates and to

different recipients and cuts out most of the personal messages and domestic details. Exceptionally, she once has an amanuensis copy three letters into the manuscript with little or no alteration and, at the opposite extreme, takes the accounts of her travel across Hungary and her Mediterranean voyage from a journal. Three letters to Wortley and two written in French survive independently of the manuscript.

The collection of Turkish letters, which was rapturously received in 1763, on its first publication, falls neatly into two parts. The first narrates the family's six-month progression—they left London in August 1716—across Christian Europe; the second records the discovery of an alien world in Turkish territory and covers the journey home.

Though shorn of much that seemed ephemeral, the letters are by no means impersonal. Lady Mary executes Lady Bristol's commission to seek out desirable fabrics, wonders whether she should take "the fine things" Pope writes to her for "wit and raillery," and disagrees with her husband as to whether Constantinople or London is the larger. She takes great pleasure in contrasts, sometimes comparing what she finds abroad with what her correspondents know at home. Prosperous Rotterdam is cleaner and neater than London, and Nijmegen is a Nottingham with fortifications added. Observing the contrast within Germany between the flourishing free towns and the run-down princely states, she writes,

I cannot help fancying one under the figure of a handsome clean Dutch citizen's wife, and the other like a poor town lady of pleasure, painted and ribboned out in her head-dress, with tarnished silver-laced shoes and a ragged under-petticoat, a miserable mixture of vice and poverty.

Equally striking if less serious is the contrast she finds at Vienna between a delightful opera with "a great variety of machines" and changes of scene "performed with a suprising swiftness" and an absurd comedy larded with "such gross words as I don't think our mob would suffer from a moun-tebank." Something of the sprightliness that makes her so welcome at Hanover and Vienna comes out in the zest with which she retails what she observes. In Ratisbon she deplores the preoccupation of the envoys and their wives with small-minded disputes over precedence, an unfortunate obsession "in a town where there are so few diversions." Equally notable is the behaviour of married ladies in Vienna:

Here are neither coquettes nor prudes. No woman dares appear coquette enough to encourage two lovers at a time. And I have not seen any such prudes as to pretend fidelity to their husbands,

who are certainly the best natured set of people in the world, and they look upon their wives' gallants as favourably as men do upon their deputies, that take the troublesome part of their business off of their hands; though they have not the less to do; for they are generally deputies in another place themselves.

Like Swift, whom, sadly, she despises, Lady Mary can be scathing in her accounts of Calvinist and Roman Catholic practices. A Huguenot minister in Nijmegen with his "extraordinary antic gestures" seems to her exactly like Lanthorn Leatherhead, a Puritan preacher in Ben Jonson's comedy *Bartholomew Fair*, and the magnificence of a Jesuit church at Cologne sits strangely in her eyes with the "rotten teeth, dirty rags, &c." that are adorned with a "profusion of pearls, diamonds, and rubies" to be venerated as sacred relics. Worse still is her finding "the only beautiful young woman" she has seen in Vienna "buried alive in a convent." The sight provokes her to declare:

I never in my life had so little charity for the Roman-catholic religion, as since I see the misery it occasions; so many poor unhappy women! and the gross superstition of the common people, who are, some or other of them, day and night offering bits of candle to the wooden figures that are set up almost in every street.

Mischievously, Lady Mary confesses to Pope, "I have so far wandered from the discipline of the Church of England, to have been last Sunday at the opera," but she is enough of a Christian — if a rationalistic, eighteenth-century one — to be

very much scandalised at a large silver image of the Trinity, where the Father is represented under the figure of a decrepit old man, with a beard down to his knees, and a triple crown on his head, holding in his arms the Son, fixed on the cross, and the Holy Ghost, in the shape of a dove, hovering over him.

Doubtless the papal triple crown contributes to Lady Mary's disgust.

Having come from Hanover, Wortley has to present a letter from George I (who reigns over that German state as well as over Britain) to the Austrian Emperor at Vienna; after trying to persuade the Emperor to make peace with Turkey, he must then take his party back on its tracks to Hanover to receive another commission from King George. This leaves the party, which includes Wortley's three-year-old son, to face a formidable winter journey through eastern Europe to Constantinople, a journey

requiring armed escorts both in Christian lands and, after the crossing at Belgrade, in Turkish territory.

In letters written after the crossing, we begin to be taken into the homes, bathhouses, mosques and gardens of a new culture; to meet Muslim soldiers, scholars and ladies; and to share the excitement of a young English wife and mother whose girlhood dream of travel is being superbly fulfilled. Unlike most Western women in Constantinople, Lady Mary is ready to don the Turkish robe and veil and to learn the language well enough to converse in it. More open-minded than many travellers of her own and other ages, she finds a mingling of barbarism and high civilization. As a daughter of the Enlightenment, she has a high regard for the Greco-Roman world, and she writes to Pope about her recognition of customs, dress and musical instruments described in the epics of Homer and the pastorals of Theocritus. She delightedly exclaims to an unnamed lady, "I am now got into a new world, where every thing I see appears to me a change of scene." She describes the view of the Turkish capital from the sea:

for twenty miles together, down the Bosphorus, the most beautiful variety of prospects present themselves. The Asian side is covered with fruit-trees, villages, and the most delightful landscapes in nature; on the European side, stands Constantinople situate on seven hills. The unequal heights make it seem as large again as it is (though one of the largest cities in the world), shewing an agreeable mixture of gardens, pine and cypress-trees, palaces, mosques, and public buildings, raised one above another.

The architecture, too, gives Lady Mary exquisite pleasure, and she enthuses over the Mosque of Selim II at Adrianople (now Edirne):

It is situated very advantageously in the midst of the city, and in the highest part, making a very noble show. The first court has four gates, and the innermost three. They are both of them surrounded with cloisters, with marble pillars of the Ionic order, finely polished and of very lively colours; the whole pavement being white marble, the roof of the cloisters being divided into several cupolas or domes, leaded, with gilt balls on the top.

The Turkish way of life fascinates Lady Mary as long as Wortley's commission keeps the family in the country. She watches a procession of tradesmen's organisations on their way to give the "present" exacted from them to support a military campaign: "It was preceded by an *effendi* mounted on a camel, richly furnished, reading aloud the Alcoran, finely bound, laid

upon a cushion." After visiting the baths at Sofia, she confesses, "I know no European court where the ladies would have behaved themselves in so polite a manner to a stranger." She is glad to disabuse a correspondent of a false notion: the Greek Christians, she explains, "are subjects, and not slaves." Famously, she discovers the Turkish practice of inoculation against smallpox and adopts it to protect her son. "The boy was engrafted last Tuesday," she writes to her husband, "and is at this time singing and playing, and very impatient for his supper." (Seventeen days later, we find that Wortley is still giving her cause to complain that he does not ask about his son.)

In the Turkish legal system, too, Lady Mary finds elements to admire, for "many points of the Turkish law," are, she admits, "better designed and better executed than ours; particularly, the punishment of convicted liars (triumphant criminals in our country, God knows): They are burnt in the forehead with a hot iron, being proved the authors of any notorious falsehood." With her Enlightenment contempt for superstition, and even a leaning towards Deism or completely rational religion, she is glad when her conversations with a Muslim scholar convince her that the essence of Islam "is plain deism," but that this core is tricked out with "mysteries and novelties," for which humans have a "natural inclination," and it is these that cause the formation of antagonistic sects.

Combating the idea that Turkish ladies, though oppressed, are chast-er than their European counterparts, Lady Mary reports that their concealing robes and veils hide their identities and protect them from prying eyes. So disguised, those minded to do so carry on illicit amours; while an adulteress who is caught is sometimes killed, more often her relations "compound the matter for money." The great function of Turkish wives is childbearing, and in January 1718, eleven months after entering the Turkish Empire, Lady Mary earns additional respect as she is about to give birth to a daughter. The ordeal, she finds,

is not half so mortifying here as in England.... Nobody keeps their house a month for lying in; and I am not so fond of any of our customs to retain them when they are not necessary. I returned my visits at three weeks' end.

The daughter is christened Mary Stuart.

Lady Mary is equally outspoken about the defects of Turkish society and government. As her party passes through Serbia, the sufferings of the peasants from the depredations of the janissaries leave her daily "almost in tears," and when the Cadi, or chief official of a town, proves unable to obtain the pigeons she has ordered for her supper, her military atten-

dant offers to bring the man's head (how seriously is in doubt). Inheriting the Whig tradition of guarding liberty by strictly limiting the power of the crown, Lady Mary contemplates with some horror the phenomenon of a Sultan who is "the most absolute monarch upon earth, who owns no *law* but his *will*," yet is powerless to save the life of a minister who antagonizes his soldiers: "it is hard to judge," she concludes, "whether the prince, people, or ministers, are most miserable."

Although Lady Mary finds evil here as well as good, the seventeen months she spends in this land of wonders have a strong claim to be the happiest period of her life. The gracious hospitality, the beauty of land and sea, the architecture and gardens, the congenial climate, and the gratification of her curiosity about an exotic yet advanced civilization make her reluctant to leave when Wortley is unexpectedly recalled to London and the couple have to depart by sea in July 1718. Contemplating what she is leaving behind, Lady Mary even asks whether, "Considering what short-lived weak animals men are, is there any study so beneficial as the study of present pleasure?" She carefully distinguishes pleasure from vice but also from intellectual pursuits like Newton's quest for knowledge. Her protest to Pope that in England she will have to suffer "a thousand disagreeable impertinents ... receive and pay visits, make courtesies, and assist at tea-tables" carries a faint suggestion that she may not spend the rest of her life in her native land. With the advantage of hindsight, one can see a further foreshadowing of the future in her effusions over the art and palaces she discovers in Italy on her way home. "The street called Strada Nova," she writes in Genoa, "is perhaps the most beautiful line of building in the world." Contrasting Raphael, Veronese and other Renaissance artists who depict reality with the portrayals of gruesome, tormented Christs, she exclaims, "These, my beloved painters, shew nature, and shew it in the most charming light." Back at last in London, she writes to the Italian scholar the Abbé Conti, "I pray God ... since I must be contented with our scanty allowance of daylight, that I may forget the enlivening sun of Constantinople."

After the brilliance of the Turkish letters, what is to be expected from those composed at home? Robert Halsband gives the preference to the series Lady Mary writes from 1721 through 1727 to cheer her depressed sister Lady Mar, who is living at Paris—missives "spiced ... with wit to amuse and cynicism to console." While he exaggerates their merits, Isobel Grundy goes to the opposite extreme, claiming that Lady Mary is here "at her most flippant and brittle." In the best of these letters, barbed sentences puncture social vanity looking back to the gentle mockery of Dorothy Osborne and forward to the sharp-edged wit of Jane Carlyle. We hear that "B[ridget] Noel is come out Lady Milsington to the encouragement and consolation

of all the coquettes about town," while "Lady Hervey makes the top figure in town, and is so good to show twice a week at the drawing-room, and twice more at the opera, for the entertainment of the public." When Lady Mary declares, "I own I enjoy vast delight in the folly of mankind," she speaks in the spirit of Jane Austen's heroine Elizabeth Bennet, who confesses, "Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies *do* divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can."

The letters also convey family news and reports of notable happenings. In 1721, Wortley's jealous temperament and society's prurient nose for scandal cause Lady Mary nearly a year of terror. Nicolas-François Rémond, a French intellectual, threatens to publish her letters to him if she does not remit the whole of a large sum she invested at his request, although the investment has failed. After ten months of begging Lady Mar to use her good offices with him in Paris, she apparently confesses her imprudence to her husband without her fears of being made "for ever miserable" being realized. Rémond's surviving letters bear Wortley's endorsement and show, as Halsband observes, that the two were not lovers.

At times Lady Mary is able to take some pleasure in high society. Writing of the Prince of Wales's birthday celebration in 1723, she is happy to inform Lady Mar, "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." More often, however, she grumbles about her unsatisfying life, and, at the age of thirty-six, already wishes herself ten years younger. "The coldness of this vile climate" features in her complaints as does "this sinful seacoal town" – namely London. She is glad to retreat intermittently to the comparative solitude of the house Wortley has bought at Twickenham, where she takes much pleasure in riding. Unlike the inoculation she has brought back from Turkey, her writings in prose and verse, all published anonymously or circulated in manuscript, receive only oblique mention in these letters. "Virtue in Danger," a ballad which is probably hers, turns her good friend Griselda Murray into a dangerous enemy: the poem describes a much discussed attempted rape of the lady in mocking terms, and in revenge Murray rails on the supposed author in public, once assailing her "in very Billingsgate at a masquerade." Another friend with whom Lady Mary quarrels furiously is Alexander Pope. As they print libels against each other, their venom reflects credit on neither: Lady Mary must know the falsehood of her assertion "that nobody will buy his verses except their curiosity is piqued to it, to see what is said of their acquaintance." At least, when he dies, nine years later, she writes of his will, "on the whole, it appears to me more reasonable and less vain than I expected from him."

By the later 1720s, when this verbal war is in full bloom, Lady Mary has realized that her son is the sort of boy no parent would desire. His second flight from Westminster School – he is fourteen at the time – provokes his mother into writing to Lady Mar, “My girl gives me great prospect of satisfaction, but my young rogue of a son is the most ungovernable little rake that ever played truant.”

Few of Lady Mary’s surviving letters belong to the period from 1728 through 1735, but suddenly, in 1736, a new emotion fills her with unappeasable longing. In middle age, she is overcome by a passion for a young, charming, bisexual Italian intellectual who is visiting England. Francesco Algarotti, a friend of Voltaire and a popularizer of Newton, is more than twenty years younger than her. Writing to him in French, she confesses that her philosophical equanimity has vanished, and about the time of Algarotti’s departure from England in September, she declares that her reason condemns her heart in vain. Her anguish recalls that of Racine’s Phèdre and Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina; her own comparison is with Virgil’s Dido. By December she is assuring Algarotti that if he cannot return to her country, she will devise a way to join him in Italy. Her correspondence, however, does not reveal that a year later, while still pouring out her pain to him, she retains enough interest in politics and social questions, especially the position of women, to publish anonymously a weekly cultural and political paper, *The Nonsense of Common-Sense*, which runs, with some interruptions, from December 1737 to March 1738. (*Common Sense* is the title of an anti-Walpole periodical.) Moreover, her letters at this time to her friend Lady Pomfret, have much the same wit and vivacity as her earlier letters to Lady Mar, and they show that she still relishes the tinkle of mocking laughter. While she assures Algarotti that he is the only thing in the world that pleases her, she tells Lady Pomfret, now in Paris, how she longs for her conversation.

A telltale remark in a letter of May 1739 to this lady speaks of a hankering to leave behind an England of rain, sickness and deaths for the pleasure of her ladyship’s company and the delights of Italy. Lady Mary is beginning to plan her flight. Driven by her unsated passion, she acquires the cunning she needs to disguise her scheme from all but her confidant, Lord Hervey, as a leisurely journey through France and Italy in search of a place of residence where her health will mend. For a long time, only Hervey, a man of doubtful sexuality, who shares her obsession with Algarotti, knows that she is from the first aiming at Venice. It is fascinating to watch in her letters exactly how she deceives all others, including her husband. Arriving in Venice in September 1739, two months after her departure from London, she writes to Wortley that she wishes it had been her original destination.

Algarotti, unsurprisingly, does not return his middle-aged adorer's passion, but month after month, as he, absorbed in his pursuit of a profitable career, avoids the city, Lady Mary becomes more and more impatient with him while she finds increasing satisfaction in a new life. Treated as a celebrity, she is visited by ambassadors and honoured by the Doge, and her residence becomes a centre for the literati. By May 1741, she at last succeeds in meeting Algarotti – at Turin – and her passion finally evaporates. In an angry letter, she denounces his indifference to her and reveals that what ensnared her was his connoisseurship in manuscripts, statues, pictures, poetry, and wine and his refined conversation. Meanwhile the charm of her letters to Wortley describing her travels shows that a warm friendship still survives between the spouses, though warmer on her side than on his. In later letters to their daughter, she praises his healthy lifestyle, generous disposition, and patriotism, and says that she will especially value the china jars he is sending because they are his gift.

By now Lady Mary is well into the creation of her second great series of letters, which describes her life and adventures in France, Switzerland and Italy from 1739 through 1761. For many years, she writes diligently to Wortley, not only telling him of her movements, but feeding him historical and political information and news of antiquities. The most confidential letters have to be carried by private travellers; one bears intelligence of the coming invasion of James II's grandson, the Young Pretender, in 1745. Less happily, the couple correspond about the misdeeds of their improvident, lying son, who, though a talented linguist, is a weak man easily misled by bad companions and addicted to promising reform of which he is incapable. One letter to Wortley begins, "I am sorry to trouble you on so disagreeable a subject as our son." For a time, Lady Mary displays some anger with her daughter, who insists on marrying, against her parents' wishes, the poor Scottish peer Lord Bute. Eventually she and Wortley grant their very reluctant consent, but the latter bestows no dowry and gives no wedding dinner.

When Lady Mary writes from Italy, her letters, she discovers, are suspected of being written in code, and whomever they are written to, they are frequently stopped by the authorities, delayed due to wartime conditions, or lost in the mail. Likewise, some written to her she does not receive. Wortley, still distrustful, protests that none of his other letters from abroad fail to arrive, though he does not say whether any of them originate in Italy.

By the time she meets and breaks with Algarotti, Lady Mary has resided in Rome and Naples; after the break, she proceeds to Genoa. But in October 1741, driven by fear of invading Spanish troops, she crosses the Swiss border to live first in Geneva and then in the healthier Chambéry. Six months later, under the threat of a French invasion, she withdraws to

Avignon, a papal enclave within France. After a few pleasant months here, she finds the conversation empty and the obsession with card games an irritant. Nostalgic for Venice, she finds solace for her loneliness in correspondence. She eagerly awaits the uncertain mails to bring letters from her husband, her old friend the Countess of Oxford, and her adored Venetian Chiara Michiel, who must have been a lady of singular perfection. Unfortunately, Avignon is a refuge for expatriate Jacobites, some of whom decide that Lady Mary is a Hanoverian spy. Eventually a flood of refugees from the failed Stuart invasion of 1745 overruns the city, so that she can go nowhere “without hearing a conversation that is improper to be listened to, and dangerous to contradict.” Under such pressure, she dares in August 1746 to escape under the protection of Count Ugolino Palazzi, who is in the service of the Prince of Saxony. Travelling in the guise of a Venetian lady, she passes unmolested by fleeing Spanish or victorious German troops and arrives at the Venetian city of Brescia.

For the next ten years, Lady Mary resides mainly in the village of Gottolengo, near Brescia, with excursions – some of them months long – to drink the waters and mend her health at Lovere. At Gottolengo, she lives in a rundown house but also buys a large riverbank garden and farmhouse in the neighbourhood. Here we find Lady Mary in a new role – the role of businesswoman. With weakening eyesight restricting her hours of reading and needlework, she enthusiastically takes up landscaping, market gardening, and even the raising of silkworms. She has hopes of doubling her capital and several times asks her daughter for the price of silk in London as well as for books on architecture and gardening. Finding companionship, however, proves a problem. “I do not desire much company,” she once writes to Wortley, “but would not confine myself to a place where I could get none.” One letter describes her daily routine:

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, which is a very large inquiry.... At eleven o'clock I retire to my books: I dare not indulge myself in that pleasure above an hour. 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 'tis cool enough to go out. One evening I walk in my wood, where I often sup, take the air on horseback the next, and go on the water the third.

Another letter tells of the pleasure she gives her neighbours by baking bread and churning butter and “by the introduction of custards, cheese-

cakes, and minced pies, which were entirely unknown to these parts and are received with universal applause."

One thing missing from the letters is the sad story of how Count Palazzi turns from hero to villain, preying on her credulity and her sympathy to cheat her out of a large segment of her fortune. As his depredations increase, he manages for a time to prevent her from leaving the province of Brescia, but in August 1756, fearing even for her life, she makes a second escape, this time to Venice. Eventually she writes out the whole story in Italian with a view to prosecuting the man, but never does. The Count, who is also guilty of other crimes, is later imprisoned.

From 1756 through 1761, Lady Mary divides her time between Venice and Padua. As age eats away at her vitality, she finds large social assemblies too tiring to attend more than rarely, and though she occasionally goes to an opera or musical party at Venice or watches the Carnival, she is glad to retreat to the quiet of Padua, where she rides, walks, reads, continues to bake and churn, and writes to her correspondents. From September 1758, these include her new friends the Jacobite exile and political philosopher Sir James Steuart and his wife, Lady Frances. At Venice, the British Resident John Murray,—"a scandalous fellow ... despised by this government for his smuggling, which was his original profession"—stops most English travellers from calling on her. He seems to resent her support for the leading English politician William Pitt (later Lord Chatham) and to suspect her of Jacobite sympathies. His persecution embitters her last years in Italy.

Memorable passages of description, narrative, and reflection enrich the letters that chronicle Lady Mary's life on the Continent. They show how the carnivals, palladian palaces and ostentatious carriages of Catholic Italy contrast with the simplicity of Calvinist Geneva, where food and drink are plentiful but the architecture is plain and equipages are non-existent. Lady Mary treats her correspondents to pictures of the waterborne parade at the Venice Regatta, and the old tower with a view over four provinces that is given to her by the Town Council at Avignon. She describes her riverside gardens at Gottolengo and the paradise of hills, waters and villages at the hardly accessible Lovere—"a place," she says, "the most beautifully romantic I ever saw in my life"; here she can enjoy operas and lakeside music. There is also a vast palace on the shore of Lake Garda with an estate that "you must turn to the fairy tales to give you any idea of." At Lovere, she is treated by Dr. Baglioni, an amazingly skilful physician who "will climb three or four miles in the mountains, in the hottest sun, or heaviest rain," to treat even the poorest patient. During her last sojourn here, she buys a decayed mansion for "but one hundred pounds," and her purchase

includes “a very pretty garden in terraces down to the water, and a court behind the house.” Of the dwelling itself she writes:

It is founded on a rock, and the walls so thick, they will probably remain as long as the earth. It is true the apartments are in most tattered circumstances, without doors or windows. The beauty of the great saloon gained my affection: it is forty-two feet in length by twenty-five, proportionably high, opening into a balcony of the same length, with marble balusters: the ceiling and flooring are in good repair, but I have been forced to the expense of covering the wall with new stucco.

Lady Mary’s skill as a storyteller does not falter whether she is narrating sensational events like her escape from Avignon through warring armies or her rescue of an adulteress from death at her husband’s hands or quieter happenings like a Cardinal’s refusing to believe that she has not published any books and therefore cannot give them to him and the rise of a pauper’s daughter who, like the novelist Richardson’s Pamela, resists seducers until an upper class man, in this case Count Jeronimo Sosi, marries her.

In many of the letters of her Continental years, Lady Mary is alleviating her loneliness by talking to her loved ones with her pen. She tells her daughter, now Lady Bute, “I shall for the future indulge myself in thinking upon paper when I write to you.” The reflections she pours out constitute a self-portrait in which we see emotion engaging with rationality, resentment outweighed by affection, and vivacity at war with aging.

Lady Mary is ready to disclose intimate feelings to a very few close friends as well as to her daughter. She admits to Chiara Michiel that she is in the habit of thinking too much and that she squelches dark thoughts at birth before they can gain a hold over her mind. To Sir James and Lady Frances Steuart, she confides her conviction that the inhabitants of “this vile planet” are not free and have little chance of happiness.

Lady Mary has a strong affection for both Steuarts, but most of her letters are written to Sir James, a fellow intellectual, whose *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* she eagerly reads in manuscript. She spurns any notion that the female mind is inferior, and she responds to Lady Bute’s request for advice on the education of her daughters by recommending that they get all the learning they want, but that, on account of society’s prejudice, they are careful to conceal their knowledge. Wisely, she observes that reading is a pleasure that outlasts most others—it could even provide an occupation for her reprobate son. “I wish your daughters,” she tells Lady

Bute, “to resemble me in nothing but the love of reading, knowing, by experience, how far it is capable of softening the cruellest accidents of life.”

For a long time, Lady Mary doubts whether her granddaughters, who are reputed to be plain, will find husbands. Her view of marriage as “a lottery, where there are (at the lowest computation) ten thousand blanks to a prize” is clearly influenced by her own experience. She almost envies Lady Steuart’s happiness with her husband and is astonished, as well as delighted, to find that her son-in-law, Lord Bute, in no way tires of his bargain. “What I think extraordinary,” she writes to her husband in 1748, “is my daughter’s continuing so many years agreeable to Lord Bute.” She blames novels such as Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and *Amelia* for encouraging “extravagant passions” and regards Richardson’s reputedly moral *Pamela* and *Clarissa* as “two books that will do more general mischief than the works of [the libertine poet] Lord Rochester.”

In several letters, Lady Mary treats her daughter to critiques of these and other contemporary books. She has some appreciation of the literary merit of Fielding and reads Richardson with a mixture of fascination and disapproval. She herself has been in *Clarissa*’s position as a young woman ordered to marry a man she cannot endure, but she finds the author’s representation of high society completely unconvincing.

Swift she despises, being insensible to the genius of either *Gulliver’s Travels* or *A Tale of a Tub*, and she is glad that Wortley shares her low opinion of his *History of the Four Last Years of the Queen*.

It is disappointing to find Lady Mary misreading *A Tale of a Tub* in the same manner as Queen Anne. She deems it an anti-religious book, whereas it is an attack on Roman Catholicism and Calvinism and a defence of Anglican Christianity. Her view of religion is in reality close to Swift’s, and he would have endorsed her vigorous defence of Protestantism that silences her Catholic challengers in Italy, a defence she recounts to Lady Bute:

I always, if possible, avoid controversial disputes: whenever I cannot do it, they are very short. I ask my adversary if he believes the Scripture? when that is answered affirmatively.... My second question is, if they think St. Peter and St. Paul knew the true Christian religion? The constant reply is, O yes. Then say I, purgatory, transubstantiation, invocation of saints, adoration of the Virgin, relics (of which they might have had a cartload), and observation of Lent, is no part of it, since they neither taught nor practised any of these things.

Lady Mary is able to assure her daughter, “I have never been attacked a second time in any of the towns where I have resided.” When her adversaries, she reports, cite Church Fathers and ecclesiastical Councils, “they

are surprised to find me as well (often better) acquainted with them than themselves." She is similarly set against Methodism, with its emphasis on seeking personal spiritual experience, classifying it with belief in witches and hobgoblins, and on encountering the Moravians, she protests, "I imagined after three thousand years' working at creeds and theological whimsies, there remained nothing new to be invented." Again resembling Swift, she scorns free thought, holding that "Nobody can deny but religion is a comfort to the distressed, a cordial to the sick, and sometimes a restraint on the wicked." Religion, she believes, is "necessary in all civilized governments," but it should be confined within boundaries: she is sorry to learn that the Prince of Wales, the future George III, "has an episcopal education."

Her circumspect approach to religion is one of the traits that mark Lady Mary as a woman of the Enlightenment. Similarly, with her opposition to absolute rule, she prefers republican Venice to royalist Naples, and she tells Lady Oxford, "I wish every Englishman was as sensible as I am of the terrible effects of arbitrary government." Easy credulity earns her scorn; she is convinced that the "the universal inclination of humankind is to be led by the ears." Empiricism, not cleaving to ancient authority, is for her the way to the "very small proportion of knowledge" that "is allowed us in this world," and she acclaims Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as "the best dissection of the human mind of any author I have ever read." In medicine, likewise, she recommends the work of the seventeenth century physician Thomas Sydenham, who relied on observation and experience as the basis for diagnosis and treatment, as opposed to the application of a theory like the supposed government of the body by the four humours.

The last letters of Lady Mary, following the death of Wortley early in 1761, record her escape from Murray's persecution and her return to her daughter in London a few months later. After dragging herself and her entourage painfully across Western Europe, she is held up in Rotterdam, a place where she finds "neither amusement nor conversation." Nevertheless, she strikes up an acquaintance with Benjamin Sowden, the scholarly minister of the English Church, and entrusts him with the manuscript she has compiled from her records of her expedition to Turkey: her written permission entitling him to treat it as he pleases indicates that she intends to keep it out of her family's hands and allow its publication.

Once in London, lodged in a rented house, Lady Mary finds herself oppressed by the necessity of receiving and making visits as well as troubled by the bad air. Writing to her dear friend Chiara Michiel, she raises the possibility of mustering enough strength to return to Venice, but that lady advises her to remain with her family. Her last letter reassures Lady

Frances Steuart that she still labours to obtain a pardon for the Jacobite Sir James.

Among the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, two series stand out: those from the period of the Turkish embassy and those from her expatriate years on the Continent. These literary achievements are a happy consequence of her defiant marriage. Although the couple eventually separates, she is surely right to escape the prison of wedlock to a man whom her father chooses and whom she loathes. She enjoys a few months of bliss before the neglect of Wortley, who is perhaps sated with the prize he has won, begins to blemish her happiness, and through her marriage she fulfils her longstanding ambition to travel. Boldly crossing Europe with her infant son to reside in exotic Turkey, she brings inoculation back to Britain. Here she bears the daughter whom she dearly loves and who looms so large in her later years.

Lady Mary lives a life of mingled joy and pain, but underlying her more transient thoughts and feelings is a sad belief that she and the rest of the world are the victims of a destiny that excludes the possibility of a happy existence. From the days before her marriage, when she can make such a claim as "I am not born to have anything I have a mind to," a conviction of the essential misery of the human lot and the absence of any real freedom intermittently intrudes into her letters. In this world, she once suggests, we must be in a "state of punishment" for sins committed "in some pre-existent state." "I am afraid," she tells Sir James Steuart, that "we are little better than straws upon the water: we may flatter ourselves that we swim, when the current carries us along." "I am not born to be happy," she asserts in another letter, adding "perhaps nobody can be so without great allays, — all philosophers, ancient and modern, agree in that sentiment."