

Genteel Appropriations of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762): Lady Louisa Stuart, William Moy Thomas, and the Rigors of Victorian Memoir

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An indomitable spirit, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu lived for pleasures and pastimes that her Victorian descendants and biographers considered unsavory, self-indulgent, and symptomatic of the worst excesses of the previous generation. In an episode seemingly lifted from an Eliza Haywood novella, Lady Mary and her future husband Edward Wortley Montagu began a lively courtship in letters, before eloping in 1712.¹ The marriage itself proved a long and bitterly realistic chapter in an otherwise romantic history. She composed satirical and feminist verse, attracting the admiration and eventually the ire of the most celebrated poet of her day, Alexander Pope.² A female adventurer in many ways ahead of her time, Lady Mary's brief sojourn in Turkey is documented in her lively and rightly celebrated *Embassy Letters*. What is more, she controversially introduced prominent members of the English medical establishment to the Turkish practice of inoculation against smallpox, the disease which had killed her brother and ravaged her own face prematurely.³ Her unrequited love for the much younger literary critic, Francesco Algarotti, reflects not the stoic or

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innovative Montagu championed by feminist scholars but a foolish, fond older woman. Finally, Lady Mary's decision to grow old on the Continent, to effect a prolonged estrangement from the friends, family, and literary society she had always known, remains another troubling piece of her biography.

With her history of (mis)adventures abroad in France and Italy, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had long furnished ample grist for the English rumor mills by the time she died in London in 1762.⁴ Though the events precipitating her quarrel with Pope remain unknown—a source of much scholarly conjecture and elaborate guesswork—he did mock her in the *Dunciad* and inspired others to take up his misogynist cause, notably Horace Walpole.⁵ Shortly following her death, Walpole set to work trivializing her literary achievement and further blackening her name, while her mostly well-intentioned descendants destroyed or concealed her scandal-tainted writings.⁶ For Isobel Grundy, Lady Mary's surviving epistolary oeuvre reflects a decidedly literary, if incomplete portrait of the woman writer.⁷ The publication history of the letters is complex and garbled, producing the literary version of Lady Mary most pleasing to her descendants who commissioned various editions of her letters throughout the nineteenth century. As the wife of the Prime Minister, her daughter Lady Bute wished to stifle any hint of scandal or impropriety surrounding Lady Mary's fortune or suspected liaisons. Motivated by a keen wish to prevent additional blemishes from marring her mother's already checkered reputation, Lady Bute kept a strict watch over her mother's diary. Though she consented periodically to share portions of it with her literary daughter, Louisa, she expressly forbade transcription.⁸ A ribald series of accidents and oversights, moreover, ensured that the early publication and editing of her work was completed in fits and starts, culminating in the disastrously unscholarly 1803 edition of *The Works* completed by the Reverend James Dallaway. Dallaway's unrepresentative and paltry selection of letters from the Harrowby manuscript, compound his numerous biographical inaccuracies, causing some of Montagu's descendants to protest.⁹ But for the subsequent efforts of Lady Louisa Stuart and William Moy Thomas in the nineteenth century, not only Lady Mary's biography but also the literary persona she wished to bequeath to posterity would have remained obscured by the persistence of slander, and the uneven biographical sketch of the author compiled hastily by Dallaway in 1803.

In 1861 the editor, journalist, novelist, and former contributor to Dickens' *Household Words*, William Moy Thomas, published the third edition of *The Letters and of Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Erben par.1). This two-volume edition retains and improves on the contents of the glossily packaged three-volume 1837 edition.¹⁰ The colorful "Introductory Anecdotes"¹¹ penned for Lord Wharnccliffe's 1837 edition by Lady Louisa are reprinted in 1861 and underscored by Thomas as an invaluable contribution to family biography, in a series of rhapsodic editorial pronouncements.¹² In addition to the reprinting and defense of the "Anecdotes," Thomas' edition offers a fuller and livelier range of Montagu's correspondence than previously available to nineteenth-century readers. It corrects, moreover, the misleading (and offensive) biographical portrait of Lady Mary supplied by Dallaway, in his shoddy 1803 edition of *The Letters and Works*.¹³ Reprinted in 1887 and 1893, Thomas' third edition and remarkable championing of Lady Louisa's proto-feminist portrait of her illustrious ancestor redeem Lady Mary as a historical subject worthy of characterological scrutiny, while highlighting the moral valences of her epistolary legacy. Though not scholarly by modern day standards of rigor, both Lady Louisa's "Anecdotes" and Thomas' own "Memoir of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu" reflect biased but meticulously revisionist attempts to counter the charges leveled against Lady Mary by her most formidable eighteenth-century detractors—Pope and Horace Walpole, chief among them. By pointing to the manuscript evidence retrieved and preserved by the family, Thomas' original "Memoir" complements and exonerates Lady Louisa's revisionist commentary, while silencing the eighteenth-century slanders (versified by Pope and perpetuated by others) with the weightier assertions of the Victorian moralist.

Modern scholars and biographers are, understandably, reluctant to praise Thomas and Stuart excessively, or to give their pioneering family-authorized biographical anecdotes more than a passing note of commendation.¹⁴ Jill Rubenstein, however sympathetically, determines that Stuart's "Anecdotes" and considerable bowdlerizing of the 1837 edition of *The Letter and Works* compromise her authority as a biographer, since she is strictly speaking "a memoir writer" and unabashed moralist.¹⁵ As they painstakingly highlight the quaintness of Victorian memoir, these accounts overlook just how carefully Stuart and Thomas adhered and faithfully corroborated the scholarly and accomplished self-construction of Montagu developed in the letters that remain. As definitive biographies, Stuart's and Thomas' effusive memoirs leave much to be desired, the former illustrative

of, in Rubenstein's apt assessment, the obfuscating "protective 'polishing and re-touching' [preferred] by Lady Mary's well-intentioned descendants" (10). Nevertheless, Thomas' and Stuart's anecdotes take pains to reproduce the proto-bluestocking history, as it were, in evidence in Montagu's letters, and in so doing constitute significant printed refutations of Pope's and Walpole's unfounded charges lambasting Montagu. The prevailing report of Montagu as little more than a hack romance writer, with a smattering of poetry to her credit, is contradicted by Stuart, and even more methodically disproven by Thomas (Grundy 625).

Modern critical assessments tend to disregard, moreover, the precise significance of Montagu's construction of herself as a scholar critical of the *beau monde* and fond of retirement. For instance, Grundy sees Montagu's writings as strictly quotidian products, not, as I maintain here, overwhelmingly reflective of an epistolary narrative of authorial self-justification.¹⁶ Yet the early feminist philosophy of Mary Astell, author of a 1724 preface to Montagu's *Embassy Letters* introduced with much fanfare by Lady Louisa Stuart, similarly upholds intellectual self-discipline as fundamental to the preservation and perfection of women's souls.¹⁷ Indeed, Astell advocates retirement in a semi-monastic community as the only fitting recourse for contemplative women desirous of meaningful self-improvement, and of permanently severing ties with the hollow customs that cut short their intellectual development. Eerily anticipating Mary Wollstonecraft's revolutionary call to arms in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, For the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest* (1694) faults women's blind submission to the conspicuous "Tyrant Custom" as the "grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our *present* interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future" (15). Astell continues in this mode of direct address to the ladies whose souls she wishes to save:

We think it an unpardonable mistake not to do as neighbours do, and part with our Peace and Pleasure as well as our Innocence and Vertue, merely in compliance with an unreasonable Fashion. And having inur'd ourselves to Folly, we know not how to quit it; we go on in Vice, not because we find satisfaction in it, but because we are unacquainted with the Joys of Vertue. (15)

In aligning reason with the quest for religious truth, Astell urges her female addressees to establish a monastery, and, with this bold stroke, dignifies “*Religious Retirement*” with a “double aspect, being not only a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage, but likewise, an institution and previous discipline, to fit us to do the greatest good in it” (18). This preference for retirement, stressed in Montagu’s epistolary narrative of her intellectual formation and reinforced by her Victorian memoirists, does not reflect mere literary froth, however. To read Montagu’s letters in conjunction with the Victorian biographical anecdotes supplied by Thomas and Stuart suggests the extent to which all three accounts strategically echo the early feminist principles disseminated by Astell and others. By resuscitating and modifying (for the benefit of their Victorian readership) the proto-bluestocking discourses developed by Astell and Montagu, the Victorian memoirists preserve Montagu’s epistolary construction of herself as a natural-born scholar detached from the superficial pleasures of the fashionable world, and, therefore, justified in her epistolary condemnation of it.

Indebted to the important twentieth-century recovery of Montagu and the feminist history of “lost women’s writing,” this chapter surveys two notable instances of the contouring of Montagu for Victorian consumption. By making the celebrated wit and travel writer into a demure gentlewoman potentially attractive to middle-class readers, Stuart and Thomas pander to her descendants’ concern for the family name. These memoirs purposefully blot out Montagu’s historical complexity, and, as a consequence, should be approached with an ample grain of salt.¹⁸ Ignoring the literary and sociological aspects of the Victorian editing of Montagu is not the only way to recover her legacy, though. Alternatively, the nineteenth-century vindication of the libertine Montagu underscores the complexity of the biographer’s task, and the fluctuating significance of her life and work for readers and critics over the years. As Thomas and Stuart filtered her story through a series of moral anecdotes, they also opted for a biographical practice formulated to settle scores, and one faithful to the shape of Montagu’s epistolary persona and theory of virtue. The biographical anecdotes of Montagu point to the complex negotiations involved in representing literary womanhood and what it means exactly to recover a lost lady, even for those most sensitive to her literary-historical significance.

To more fully appreciate the literary biographer’s dilemma and the concerns about gender raised in reworking the life of a controversial figure,

this essay briefly surveys Thomas' and Stuart's reappraisals of Montagu in terms of the Victorian rhetoric of self-cultivation. The memoirs and the recovery apparatus they employ are assessed here on their own terms, and according to their nineteenth-century logic, in an attempt to resist what Grundy calls "any sense of easy superiority to other editors" (72). Grundy cautions us that Montagu's published letters—and the narrative coherence they evoke—reflect the best efforts of editorial reconstruction. However faithful to the original handwriting, the edited letters "all differ widely from her manuscripts" (56). In comparing Montagu's printed letters to the literary project undertaken by her Victorian biographers, I wish only to show the complementarity of these reconstructive projects, not in any way to prove their authority. They remain, at best, artful reconstructions of a contested life, and, in the Victorian memoirs, approach only a cautious feminist stance burdened by the gendering of moral virtue. The comparison of the Victorian anecdotes with the modern printed letters chips away at the notion of a lost libertine, a woman shrouded in mystery, and, instead, retrieves from the customary Victorian biographies a woman who has been lost in the literary tradition.

WILLIAM MOY THOMAS' REAPPRAISAL OF "OLD MANNERS"

Positioned modestly as an appendage to (but not intended to supplant) Lady Louisa Stuart's "Anecdotes," William Moy Thomas' 1861 "Memoir of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu" scrutinizes "more closely than previous editors have done the charges preferred against Lady Mary by Pope and Horace Walpole, and those who have since adopted their statements or imbibed their spirit" (iv). Calling himself an "indulgent student of old manners," Thomas assumes the voice of the Victorian novelist to situate Lady Mary in the context of a distinguished lineage of feminine erudition made possible by aristocratic retirement (11). The proliferation of Victorian biographies of illustrious and accomplished subjects, Alison Booth maintains, reflects the widespread "consensus that biography had a beneficent effect." More: the biographer's project ignites "identification that is guided by the presenter and limited by the conventions of social reality," making the genre less dubious "than the novel" (50). Writing as a novelist under the protective cover of biographical authority, then, allows Thomas to experiment with various narrative strategies for reconstructing English women's literary history, while privileging Montagu's distinctive record of accomplishments. He offers guidelines, furthermore, on the

proper ways of reading historically remote subjects and customs. To condemn Montagu and her contemporaries for sexual impropriety or materialistic plotting is a tendency that must be resisted, Thomas cautions. Both directly and indirectly he models historically sensitive reading practices, to argue that “no reader can come to a just judgment upon the acts of our forefathers who does not remember many more important differences between the customs of their age and ours” (11). Readers inclined to weigh the past too heavily against the values of the present, the editor implies, risk losing sight of the fact that the past has its own coherence and must be assessed accordingly. Perhaps even more importantly, though, the intrusive novelist’s voice cleverly developed by Thomas licenses a nuanced sensitivity to manners above and beyond the biographical and historical imperative to maintain a safe critical distance from one’s chosen subject. The memoirist’s attentiveness to the record of “old manners” furnishes not only a diverting alternative to the standard biographical fare (designed as improving) but also implies that the private lives and marginalized voices of literary women should be considered worthy of careful study and imitation.

In his version of Lady Mary’s childhood, Thomas lavishes attention on the formative influences of extraordinary grandmothers, as he everywhere implies that Lady Mary’s own epistolary self-representation owes much to the “intelligent and worthy” women who preceded her on both the paternal and maternal lines (2). Lady Mary’s grandmothers are depicted in Thomas’ account as studies in resilience, longevity, and discernment—in short, the literary embodiment of Astell’s version of erudite aristocratic feminism:

That Mrs. Elizabeth Pierrepont communicated to her granddaughter something of the vivacity and shrewdness of her earlier days, and that in her remote solitude at West Dean, where within the present century the solemn house, its ancient avenue of trees, its dismantled terraces and bowling-green, were still objects of admiration, she taught her to read the old books in the library of the Evelyns is a fancy which can hardly be altogether wide of the truth. The grandmother, on her mother’s side, with whom Lady Mary tells us she maintained a “regular commerce” when a girl, appears to have been no less a remarkable person. She died at ninety-six, after Lady Mary’s return from the East. (2)

Here, Thomas’ strategic preservation of pleasing fictions that “can hardly be altogether wide of the truth” points to the delightfully colloquial

methods he employs consistently throughout the memoir. As a series of novelistically rendered impressions, Thomas' memoir is less of a necessary editorial apparatus than an artful reconstruction of Montagu's place in a long and distinguished line of scholarly women unhindered by circumstance or naysayers. With his concern for accessibility and nineteenth-century novelist's sensibility, Thomas deftly subordinates the concern for strict factual accountability (favored by more conventional biographical accounts) to his interest in distilling the essence of a singular girlhood. Thomas thus relies on the anecdotal evidence (corroborated by the family) to countenance women's learning and natural propensity for the life of the mind, under unusually propitious circumstances. Thomas' anecdotes, then, participate, however modestly, in broader Victorian discourses of self-cultivation, effectively presenting Montagu (and Montagu's grandmothers before her) as historical models of women's stoicism and scholarly persistence.

Thomas is less persuasive as an apologist for outrageous and negligent male behavior, as it happens. For instance, he somewhat unaccountably glosses over Lady Mary's father's (Evelyn Pierrepont's) well-documented catalogue of "vices" as amounting to little more than "thoughtlessness and love of pleasure" (3). It is Lady Louisa Stuart's memorable recounting of the child Lady Mary's toasting by her father's associates at the Kit-Cat Club that speaks more directly to Evelyn Pierrepont's tendency to regard his little daughter as ornamental, the symbolic prize set out to be fêted and "honored by [the] Whig center of power as if she were a grown-up woman" (Grundy 13). The scene is couched by the disapproving Lady Louisa as a cautionary tale, illustrative of the Victorian moralist's pointed rejection of eighteenth-century libertine conduct:

The company consisting of some of the most eminent men in England, she went from the lap of one poet, or patriot, or statesman, to the arms of another, was feasted with sweetmeats, overwhelmed with caresses, and, what perhaps already pleased her better than either, heard her wit and beauty loudly extolled on every side. Pleasure, she said, was too poor a word to express her sensations; they amounted to ecstasy: never again, throughout her whole future life, did she pass so happy a day. Nor indeed could she; for the love of admiration, which this scene was calculated to excite or increase, could never again be so fully gratified: there is always some allaying ingredient in the cup, some drawback upon the triumphs of grown people. Her

father carried on the frolic, and, we may conclude, confirmed the taste, by having her picture painted for the club-room, that she might be enrolled a regular toast.¹⁹

Lady Louisa's assessment of the romp, which appears early on in the "Anecdotes," underscores her characterological bent, her concern to present blueprints for happiness as well as the obstacles (familial, social or gender-based) to individual moral development and flourishing. Similarly, Thomas' focus on manners, if less elegant than Lady Louisa's narrative, authorizes the intellectual pursuits of certain exceptional women, while outlining a course of self-improvement available to both genders.

In his haste to offer up a pro-Whig history palatable to Victorian readers, Thomas relates the sins of the father as understandable lapses in judgment, forgivable errors on the part of a man otherwise principally engaged in "the politics of the stirring times in which he lived" (3). In his equally complimentary pro-Whig championing of Edward Wortley Montagu, Thomas temporarily (and in a disappointing capitulation to the Victorian gendering of separate spheres) sets aside his interest in capturing the contours of women's private lives in favor of equating male virtue with frantic political activity. Wortley shines forth, in Thomas' account, as a masculine exemplar combining "common sense, [with] knowledge of life, and firm and settled character" bound to secure his extraordinary wife's "respect" (6). Surprisingly, Thomas invests the (by all modern accounts) prosaic Wortley with a politically sound and morally sturdy character that makes Lady Mary's rakish father appear by contrast like a minor Whig luminary in the annals of anecdotal biography.²⁰ Thus, in his glowing portrait of Wortley, Thomas posits an attractive (and politically healthy) version of masculine subjectivity to compensate for Evelyn Pierrepont's deficiencies, and to complement the intellectual ambitions claimed elsewhere by Lady Mary.

Thomas explicitly links his anecdotes to Victorian ideals of self-culture and moral agency. Though he is fond of insisting that the past cannot be fairly measured against the prejudices of the present, his primary aim is to present relevant models of intellectual self-formation gleaned from legendary testimonies. He thus defends his historical subjects in terms of their capacity for self-improvement and conspicuous learning, emphasizing the reclusive tendencies (the impulse to retreat into the haven of books) that figure prominently in Lady Mary's own epistolary justification of her activities. For Thomas, the familiar tale of a neglected daughter is also instructive:

It does not appear that [Lady Mary's] father determined to give her an education beyond what was generally thought sufficient for the daughter of a nobleman in those days: but her love of reading, and the "well-furnished library" in her father's house, quickly supplied the defects of her instructor. (11)

A defective—or, in this case missing—tutor means that the fictional Lady Mary must persevere courageously, with only her reason to guide her. This characterization of Lady Mary, here as elsewhere in Thomas' memoir, as a quick study pointedly removes her narrative from the impenetrable sphere of aristocratic privilege. In effect, Thomas' anecdotes suggest that Lady Mary's exceptionality is not conditioned exclusively by class and gender-based determinants. Though hardly a Dickensian ordeal, the mini-narrative of development glimpsed here remakes Lady Mary into a resourceful heroine whose cleverness is most apparent under trying circumstances.

Montagu's epistolary persona relates a similar narrative of self-directed study, though her remarks are less transparently didactic than her Victorian editor's account would lead us to assume. With deliberate nods to both Astell and the stoic Epictetus, Montagu's letter of August 8, 1709 to Anne Wortley seeks philosophical justification for the rigorous course of study she undertakes. Furthermore, she develops a theory of virtue consistent with Astell's:

My study at present is nothing but Dictionarys and Grammars, I am trying whether it be possible to learn without a Master, I am not certain (and dare hardly hope) I shall make any great progresse, but I find the study so diverting I am not only easy, but pleas'd with the solitude that indulges it. I forget there is such a place as London, and wish for no Company but yours. You see my dear in makeing my pleasures consist of these unfashionable diversions I am not of that Number who cannot be easy out of the mode. I believe more follies are committed out of Complaisance to the World, than in following our own Inclinations. Nature is seldom in the wrong, Custom allwaies. (5–6)

True happiness is not to be found in materialistic, insubstantial, or showy pleasures; Montagu's theory recalls Astell's railing against the "Tyrant Custom," acknowledges a debt to solitude, and replaces formal educational structures with the more immediate and sustaining benefits of epistolary exchange (15). As the purported addressee of the letter, the implied confidante Anne Wortley importantly supplies the tacit approval for

Montagu's scheme that the absence of a Master necessitates. Anne's role as confidante and collaborator, moreover, adds a conspiratorial and discernibly feminist dimension to Montagu's exercise in stoicism.

In writing his own version of didactic feminist biography, Thomas portrays Montagu's early preference for romance writings as one of the misguided tendencies of feminine self-culture. In her letters, Montagu formulates a set of critical standards against which to measure the varieties of women's romances in the English and French traditions, arguing for the political merits of certain well-constructed scandal and secret histories. Favoring Anne Marguerite Petit du Noyer's epistolary contrivances over Delarivier Manley's *New Atalantis*, Montagu concludes that du Noyer strikes just right note, cleverly negotiating "that difficult path between the gay and severe, and is neither too loose, nor affectedly Prude" (11). Thomas fails to appreciate the significance of Montagu's fictional preferences and instead introduces this reading as a detour along the path to true self-culture. He thus emphasizes a series of false starts:

As with most persons whose learning is self-acquired, she appears to have begun with reading greedily works of fiction and entertainment, the old courtly romances then in fashion; and among the Wortley papers are some fragments of romantic stories in her own neat handwriting, which appear to have been early attempts to imitate her favourite writers. Graver studies succeeded. By the "account of an uncommon memory and indefatigable labor" she taught herself the Latin language, and soon became known among her friends for her acquirements and attachment to learning. (3)

The narrator pigeonholes the romance as the noxious remnant of an earlier literary tradition. Thomas interprets Montagu's romance training as a sign of immaturity, a girlish predilection she would learn to suppress in undertaking the study of Latin and other masculine subjects. The notion of feminine exceptionality he seeks to make Montagu fit privileges a kind of willful self-overcoming and conformity to conventional standards of excellence. She is not the equal or superior of any male intellectual but exemplary for her sex, her "critical observations on a new play" striking, only in their ability to capture the attention of her discerning suitor Wortley (4). She is also, by his account, an attractively flawed heroine, with a giddy enthusiasm for beguiling fictions that smacks of Austen's Catherine Morland.

An aversion to pleasure and a studious avoidance of the broad outlines of feminine socialization pervade Thomas' account of Montagu's childhood. Even though Montagu's letters trace her early embrace of ascetic philosophy in a manner approaching religious conviction, Thomas rewrites her narrative of scholastic retreat in pointedly moral terms with clear applications for his readership. Montagu in imitation of Astell, criticizes the secular trappings of "the Carelesse Education given to Women of Quality," for rendering them doubly vulnerable to "any Man of Sense, that finds it either his Interest or his Pleasure, to corrupt them" (30–31). Thomas seeks a more universal message in the memoir, for the benefit of a Victorian audience receptive to the notion of work as the highest expression of religious duty. As a study in mind over matter, Thomas' heroine (the child Montagu) is not so much a nonconformist (or radical feminist) as she is a reflective subject with a sharp sense of duty first. In rewriting Montagu as a self-consciously anti-libertine, Thomas' heroine resembles not Defoe's Moll Flanders but Richardson's Clarissa (the eponymous heroine who so distressed Montagu in her later life). In an eerie fictional rendering of Montagu's unhappy taste of the marriage market before her elopement with Wortley, Richardson's Clarissa rejects the suitor (the odious Solmes) put forward by her social climbing gentry family. The incident, of course, roughly parallels the young Lady Mary's refusal to comply with her father's plan for her marriage to Clotworthy Skeffington, an unremarkable Whig MP, though he was able to boast of an Irish peerage.²¹ The vicious marriage market of early-eighteenth-century England and the schemes of gentry families to enlarge and consolidate wealth and property through the brokering of strategic alliances provides the background for Clarissa's contempt of the "*upstart man*" Solmes (74). That Clarissa's objection to Solmes is registered in pointedly moral terms aligns the novel, furthermore, with Lady Mary's characterization of the proposed marriage to Skeffington in the courtship letters as antithetical to her happiness and flourishing, a "Common Hell [that prompted] my Dispair [*sic*] of Paradiice [*sic*]" (61). Sensing these obvious affinities between the fictional paragon and the afflicted young Lady Mary, Thomas, writing in the nineteenth century, was at pains to stress Richardsonian virtues in the young Montagu. In Thomas' revisionary memoir, the young Montagu possesses something akin to Clarissa Harlowe's attractive modesty, in perhaps the most anti-aristocratic turn in Thomas' text:

Her childhood was passed in a patient and industrious course of self-culture, which was rare, indeed, in that age of female frivolity and ignorance. Notwithstanding the temptations of remarkable beauty, her inclination appears at all times to have been towards a life of study and retirement rather than to one of gaiety or idleness. Although her father occupied a position of the highest influence in the political world, and her husband's importance among his party was very considerable, she does not appear ever to have sought one of those places about the Court which were the object of the hopes and ambition of young ladies of her age and station. (21–22)²²

The narrative voice belongs to the Victorian project of *Bildung*, education, or development.²³ Seconding the arguments against Custom advanced in Montagu's letters, Thomas makes the young heroine discerning beyond her tender years, exemplifying Montagu's claim that "Virtue, in this Wicked World, is seldom anything but its own reward" (Montagu 58). Characteristically, aristocratic privilege and Whig power prove unattractive to Thomas' Montagu as she assumes the role of the model Victorian "wife and mother," "homely, frugal, cheerful, and affectionate" (22). To label Montagu's Victorian biography a simple, banal, or suspiciously bourgeois flattening of a complex historical personage is to fail to appreciate the kind of recovery work it performs. While Thomas' sketch of Montagu deemphasizes her sexuality and, to a degree, her pedigree, he also reclaims her as a precursor model of the varieties of self-help and self-cultivation available even to women and the upper-classes, those seemingly least susceptible to the rigors of intellectual discipline. He thus reinvigorates Montagu's own epistolary lamentation on the precarious position of "Women of Quality, whose Birth and Leisure only serve to render them the most useless and most worthless part of the creation" (30). The nineteenth-century appropriation of Montagu depends, then, less on recovering the substance of her libertinism, or even in apologizing for it, than on reclaiming her record of literary accomplishments to suit discourses of feminism as a universalism—one inextricably linked to programs of self-culture and the shaping of moral character. Similarly, as Lady Louisa Stuart ties her grandmother's legacy to Astell's rhetoric of virtue—religious, aristocratic, and eloquently feminist—the biographical anecdotes serve less a nostalgic or proprietary function than a practical one. In laying claim to a privileged position for her grandmother in the annals of women's literary history as the complement and protégée of the celebrated Mary Astell, Stuart also

insists on the relevance of her grandmother's story for a readership beyond the family coterie.

LADY LOUISA STUART'S INDEX OF FEMINIST VIRTUE

Louisa Stuart's "Introductory Anecdotes" rewrite her grandmother less as an exemplar or study in moral heroineship than as a multi-faceted beacon of her era. The notion of the unfortunate woman stooping to folly is reworked in Lady Louisa's portrait of her grandmother not in sexual but in moral-characterological terms, with pointed implications for a potentially wide readership (86). With her vast learning and high standards for conduct, Montagu is sincere and severely sincere to a fault in her granddaughter's critical estimation. Lacking "Christian patience" with "affectation and folly," Lady Mary "attacked and exposed them when they were guiltless of hurting anybody but their owner" (100). As she duly notes the dangers of her grandmother's strictures, Lady Louisa also ties her grandmother's sincerity to the cultivation of the right kind of feminist virtue. Redeeming the legacy of an unfairly disparaged grandmother requires more than Lady Louisa's moralist's approbation, since the sign of Mary Astell (as contextualized by Lady Louisa) confers an even greater authority. In Lady Louisa's telling, Mary Astell's approval is not flippantly bestowed but selectively given:

[Mary Astell] was an enthusiast, not a flatterer, and felt for Lady Mary Wortley that fond partiality which old people of ardent tempers sometimes entertain for a rising genius in their own line. Literature had been hers; and she triumphed in Lady Mary's talents as proofs of what it was her first wish to demonstrate, namely, the mental equality of the sexes; if not the superiority of woman to man. (85)

Predictably, and in an effort to pinpoint even more precisely her grandmother's part in feminist literary history, Lady Louisa stresses the anti-Wollstonecraftian tenor of the earlier instances of English feminism vindicated by the "Anecdotes." Stuart cites Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* as a mirror of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, in part to rehearse the familiar arguments leveled against another notorious woman, in part to tie feminism back to religious teaching and practice. In Lady Louisa's account, "Mary Wolstonecroft" is dubious not for her words (or even the implications of her remarks) but problematically untethered to anything

resembling deference to all good authority. Opposites “in character, principles, and practice,” Astell (and by implication Montagu as well) and Wollstonecraft in the role of cautionary tale or dangerous bluestocking are rewritten and historically flattened to fit the aims of didactic biography. Most significantly for Lady Louisa and the version of history she wished to disseminate to a middle-class reading public, the right kind of feminist virtue is drawn from the pages of Astell that “championess of the sex” awakened to her vocation by a keen sense of herself as “a devout Christian, a flaming high-church-woman, deeply read in abstruse divinity, strictly virtuous, and eminently loyal” (86).

CONCLUSION: GENTEEL PERSUASION

The Victorian biographical anecdotes examined here intensify, qualify, and, in many instances, embellish the feminist philosophy articulated in Montagu’s epistolary self-representation. Like the printed letters they accompany, the memoirs address a readership outside the immediate family, and, in so doing, resituate Montagu’s story (with considerably fewer salacious Italian details) within Victorian programs of self-help, as a complement to the ongoing novelistic study of manners. Though Thomas wishes to construe the young Montagu in particular as a winning moral heroine, Lady Louisa Stuart sees fit to claim an even more exalted status for her grandmother as the worthy successor of the eminent Mary Astell. The version of Montagu that emerges from these accounts and the publishing history behind it tell us that the battle to edit and lay claim to Montagu is waged on many levels—feminist, discursive, literary, biographical—and it continues. Though modest exercises in the art of writing great lives, the genteel appropriations discussed above give us a lively sense of the value (and reading pleasure) that inheres in a “life-in-the-works” approach to writing feminist biography. And as exercises in rounded literary portraiture they reproduce Montagu’s own dialogue with Astell and stoic philosophy in a strategic bid to vindicate her literary legacy, while downplaying the record of slander: thus, and with varying degrees of success, the memoirists insist on the special status of a form of biography capable of retrieving the woman writer’s words, extending their scope beyond the family coterie, the circle of intimates, and even the most fastidious editor.

NOTES

1. See Grundy's edition of the so-called "Courtship Letters" in her edition of Montagu's *Selected Letters* in the section entitled "Marriage Market" (17–95).
2. Grundy provides the most satisfying explanation for the acrimonious feud between Pope and Montagu, taking into account the following: "that sexual issues inflamed a quarrel based in authorship issues; that she was desirable and unattainable, and made him feel humiliated; that he felt her poetic creativity trespassed on the prerogative of his"; see Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (274).
3. See Grundy's chapter on "inoculation" in *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (203–222).
4. Oddly enough, her notorious enemy Horace Walpole paid an unlikely tribute to her in his letters where he writes fittingly, with little fanfare and a marked absence of vitriol: "She had parts, and had seen much" (quoted in Grundy 624). See Grundy for the events leading up to Lady Mary's death in London in 1762 in the company of Lady Bute and Lady Louisa Stuart, the daughter and granddaughter who, for better or for worse, would exercise considerable sway in determining the scope of their ancestor's literary legacy and reputation (*Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* 622–625). Grundy's is the definitive feminist biography of Lady Mary, and her work along with that of her predecessor and mentor Robert Halsband represent the finest efforts of twentieth-century recovery of the woman writer.
5. Walpole's vituperative condemnation of Lady Mary's youthful manner of dressing, his disapproval of the company she kept and conventions she loved to flout all point to what Grundy aptly labels "the pathology of sexual hatred"; see Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (420).
6. I follow the seemingly anti-feminist or outdated practice established by Isobel Grundy in referring to Montagu also as "Lady Mary" consistently throughout her authoritative and only properly feminist biography of Montagu. The practice not only helps to distinguish Montagu from her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu, it preserves contemporary modes of address, however offensive to modern ears. Grundy rightly contends that modern scholarly distaste for the name "Lady Mary" serves only to "edit out the rank and status which to her own mind and the minds of her contemporaries was a fixed part of identity" (xviii). See Grundy's introduction to her biography (xvii–xxiii).
7. Grundy maintains that "a truly complete collection of all the letters [Lady Mary] wrote ... would be less literary and more haphazard than the one we have" (xix). See Grundy's introduction to the *Selected Letters* (xvii–xxiv).

8. These circumstances are recounted by Lady Louisa Stuart in the engaging "Introductory Anecdotes," composed originally in 1837 and included in both the 1837 and 1861 editions of the *Letters and Works*. Stuart, furthermore, contextualizes and defends what Victorians and Moderns would otherwise be inclined to construe as her mother's exaggerated concern for the family's reputation at the expense of preserving the historical record of her mother's lived experience. Lady Bute, her daughter explains:

declared it was her determined resolution to destroy [her mother's diary], as a sacred duty owing to the deceased, whose having forgotten or neglected to leave express orders for the purpose, made it only the more incumbent on her survivors.

See Stuart's apologetic account of her mother's proprietary behavior in the "Introductory Anecdotes," reprinted in Thomas' 1861 edition of Montagu's *Letters and Works* (64).

9. Dallaway's misleading representation of Lady Mary's life angered Lady Louisa Stuart (xxvii). Grundy further notes that Dallaway's "editing is equally sloppy" (xxviii). For the publication history of Montagu's letters, see Isobel Grundy's Note on the Text to her edition of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Selected Letters* (xxvi–xxviii).
10. As indicated by Thomas in his preface, the 1861 edition is the first to reproduce Lady Mary's extant manuscripts included in the Wortley papers, and to do so "faithfully from the originals" (iv). See Thomas' preface to his 1861 edition of Montagu's *Letters and Works*.
11. Also called "Biographical Anecdotes."
12. The 1837 edition was, in fact, prepared by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's granddaughter Lady Louisa Stuart and her nephew the Reverend Stuart Corbett. Designed as a corrective of the carelessly edited 1803 edition,

Wharnccliffe's scheme was both well-intentioned and self-serving; he would be the titular editor, since a nobleman's name was bound to stimulate sales, Corbett would do the actual editorial work, and Lady Louisa would serve as biographer and general research assistant. See Rubenstein (5).

13. Although specifically designated by Lady Louisa's elder brother the first Marquess Bute as his only choice for this special editorial commission, Dallaway "added haphazard selections from the present Harrowby MSS to the already published Embassy Letters: only eight ... of the courtship letters" (xxviii). For the editorial chronology, see Isobel Grundy's Note on the Text to her edition of Montagu's *Selected Letters* (xxvi–xxviii).

14. Though Grundy calls Thomas a “proper scholar,” his literary celebration of Lady Mary as a learned lady does not meet the standards of scholarly rigor established by Halsband’s and Grundy’s twentieth-century biographies. See Grundy, “Editing Lady Mary Wortley Montagu” (72).
15. Rubenstein sees Stuart and Thomas as “motivated by a sense of historicity, of the need to preserve the otherwise ephemeral past. And because the memoir offers a personal version of history, the genre is inescapably and unashamedly subjective” (10).
16. Grundy characterizes Montagu’s writing as “inextricably meshed with the actual, partly because that was the style of the time, partly because she wrote for herself or her friends, seldom for a market-wide public.” See Grundy, “Editing Lady Mary Wortley Montagu” (60). I accept (and the readings developed here complement) Cynthia Lowenthal’s nuanced understanding of Lady Mary’s letters as widening the textual possibilities “for a more literary treatment of experience, containing within their very form a space for the exploitation of the ‘high’ modes, the established and public genres, while allowing a writer to downplay their importance through an insistence on the insignificance of the ‘private’ epistle.” See Lowenthal (3–4).
17. In the “Introductory Anecdotes,” Lady Louisa Stuart identifies the author of a signed 1724 Preface to the Embassy Letters as “no less a person than Mistress Mary Astell, of learned memory, the Madonella of the Tatler, a very pious, exemplary woman, and a profound scholar” (84). The Embassy Letters set aside for posthumous publication were delivered personally by Montagu to the Reverend Benjamin Sowden in Rotterdam, as she made her way back to London from Italy. See Stuart, *Introductory Anecdotes* (84–85). For the publishing history of the Embassy Letters, see Halsband (278–79).
18. Rubenstein writes that even by eighteenth-century standards, “Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s sexual reputation was hardly pristine; by the time Horace Walpole supplemented contemporary gossip with his venomous accounts of her promiscuous conduct both at home and abroad, one might think there was little worth concealing of these matters” (7).
19. Halsband notes that “Lady Louisa Stuart is apparently the only source for this frequently quoted anecdote.” See his edited version of Stuart’s “Biographical Anecdotes,” in *Essays and Poems* (9).
20. Preoccupied with his political career in the early years of their marriage, Wortley frequently abandoned Lady Mary, failed to supply sufficient funds, and proved an irregular correspondent and negligent father. See Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (79).
21. Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (46).

22. In a March 1, 1752 letter to Lady Bute, Lady Mary acknowledges the degree to which Richardson's *Clarissa* "soften'd me by a near resemblance of my Maiden Days," even as she goes on, in a stubborn fit of misreading, to label the novel a libertine assault on impressionable young minds. See Montagu, *The Complete Letters* (9).
23. For the most engaging theoretical exploration of the Victorian engagement with various forms of *Bildung*, see Anderson.

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