



Lady Montagu: Inoculation, Satire and Travelogues

Cracks in the Glass Ceiling III

David Green, June 25, 2009

Lady Mary Montagu was born in early May 1689 to Evelyn Pierrepont, the Earl of Kingston-upon-Hull. As a child she suffered from smallpox, bearing a few scars from the bout all her life, a fact which was to prove quite momentous to Western Medicine. Blessed with a family with vast estates, including the castellated mansion Thoresby Hall, in Nottinghamshire, which housed one of the best and most extensive libraries in England. Mary soon developed a passion for books, a passion which showed in her later writing; she was such a bibliophile that she was heart-broken when the library burned to the ground in 1744.

As was common in those times, Mary became an avid correspondent with several friends, most notably Mary Astell, an early proponent of women's rights, and her cousin Anne Wortley Montagu, the granddaughter of the Earl of Sandwich (Anne was also the aunt of the Earl for whom the sandwich is said to have been named). The letters that have survived show a lively but immature mind, although some presage the fascination of life around her that was to mark her later writing. It would appear that the correspondence with Anne masked a burgeoning romantic relationship with Anne's brother Edward. Later study has shown that Anne's letters were dictated by Edward and after Anne's death in 1709 the correspondence continued unabated to the point of marriage. Her father would not countenance the marriage as Edward refused to entail his estate (to entail means to predetermine the order of inheritance, presumably Mary's father wanted to ensure that the Montagu holdings would join up with the Pierrepont

estates, no mention of whether Edward would make his daughter happy or not!) Typically, the family insisted on another arranged union and Mary promptly eloped with Edward in 1712, love conquers all.

Initially they lived quietly in bucolic splendour until Edward became a Member of Parliament in 1715. It would be over a 150 years before the M.P.'s were actually paid, necessitating that the seats were held by landed gentry. He must have something of a rising star as he was appointed Lord Commissioner of the Treasury that same year and the following year made Ambassador to the Ottomans at the *Sublime Porte*. Mary had also experienced something of a meteoric rise, by the time of their departure she had become a well-known hostess, beauty and salon wit, admired by Alexander Pope, the poet, with whom she continued an animated and pithy correspondence as the couple travelled across Europe, stopping briefly at Vienna and then on to Istanbul. For reasons unknown, her husband was recalled the following year, but in an age of slow communication they stayed on until 1718.

Mary was fascinated by the culture and wrote voluminously to her varied friends in London; to Pope she wrote satire, some so caustic that when the correspondence was bandied about town he became upset and the pair feuded for years. To others she wrote, in an ingenuous and vivid fashion, of her observations of Ottoman society, later published as the *Turkish Embassy Letters* they are credited with inspiring many later female authors and travel writers, in fact the graphic descriptions of much she saw around her coloured the view of Oriental life for the next 2 centuries.

One of the things she saw was the method of variolation to combat smallpox. The Turks had probably learnt the method from the Chinese who had been using it for centuries. Later Edward Jenner would develop vaccination using cowpox to immunize, whereas variolation, so termed from the medical Latin *Variola* for smallpox. The doctors took a small culture of smallpox, sometimes from a cotton rag placed in an infected person's nostril, and then introduced it to another person in controlled circumstances, usually by means of a sore between the forefinger and thumb. Mary had lost a brother to the disease and had such faith in what she observed that she had her son, then 5 years old, inoculated by Charles Maitland, the surgeon in residence at the Embassy. When she returned to England she had her daughter inoculated and introduced the method, as well as displaying her daughter, to London society including the King's physician, Sir Hans Sloane.

Interest spread and Maitland gained permission to experiment on 6 condemned prisoners; they all survived. After the Prince of Wales had his own daughters inoculated the Royal seal of Approval was applied and it gained in popularity amongst the upper classes throughout Europe. A study done in Boston at the time showed that there was a 2% mortality rate for variolation versus a 14% rate in the population at large.

Mary's feud with Pope continued for many years, he lambasting her in *The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace* she responded with *Verses Addressed to an Imitator of Horace by a Lady* as well as *A Pop on Pope* and *One Epistle on Mr. A. Pope*. Her poetry, plays and writing were witty, satirical and learned.

In 1739 she left her husband, although they often wrote to each other in affectionate terms which implies there was no acrimony, and travelled to Florence. For many years she stayed in the South of France or different Italian towns, socializing with the likes of Horace Walpole who was also rather acerbic in his writing about her. In later life she became sick and finally was exhorted to return to England where she died in 1762. The bulk of her work was published posthumously, she seems to have indulged herself more for her amusement, writing, painting and playing music; she certainly lived her life to the fullest.

Sources : Lady Mary Wortley Montagu , *Selected Letters*, Penguin: 359
The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu
Harris DF. "Edward Jenner and Vaccination