

## **Performance and Performing in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Letters From the Embassy at Constantinople.**

**(Paper delivered Sunday April 19<sup>th</sup> 2009 – Britain and The Islamic World - Exeter)**

As teacher of Creative Writing, I sometimes ask my students to write an epistolary story. A narrative composed entirely of letters was commonplace fiction and non-fiction in the eighteenth-century and standard as recently as the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, written monologues from adults apparently aimed at a single reader, uninterrupted unless by visible deletions and arriving by the postman, are rare – even eccentric. So in the age of texts, threads and postings on Facebook what does a letter offer?

A single letter is already a performance. It's a scripted monologue that sifts experience to presents the self as protagonist of one's life, choosing and inflecting scenes to compose the required narrative with vocabulary and syntax to evoke the desired tone. There may be a deliberate invitation to read between the lines, creating intrigue for its reader and suggesting complicity of understanding. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters do this. So does a good business letter, for example a job application. So, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, does a good blog.

My students must find a reason to write a letter, which is usually something the fictional protagonists need – or need to pin down about a situation. A fictional sequence of letters usually rides on a lack in a character's life – a conscious desire or a subconscious or unconscious need, which, as for any other dramatic narrative stimulates the search to satisfy it. Letters seem harder to read when they have no agenda beyond keeping in touch.

Yet Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Letters from The Embassy at

Constantinople are very much about keeping in touch. She may miss her friends; she also misses her own centre stage presence amongst them. To Mrs Hewit, she writes: "I will not tire you with descriptions of places or manners...: but only desire you would be so good as to let me hear as oft as you can... what passes your side of the globe. Before you can receive this, you must consider all things as six months old, which now appear as new to me. There will be a great field for you to write... as it will be entirely disinterested and free from ostentation (it not being possible for me here to boast of your letters) and it will be very beneficial to your precious soul..."

Adding value to the discretion which Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's isolation guarantees for Mrs Hewit's gossip, is a chance for Mrs Hewit to boast to her many acquaintance of receiving letters from Turkey. Thus she may be kind enough to keep her absent friend prominent on the social map. The letters do not aim merely at the recipient (some of whom, like Lady ----- may have been fictional). She writes to and for anyone with the wit to take an interest in her. These days Lady Mary Wortley Montagu would be blogging... or making videos.

In a century whose main road to entertainment – if not entertainment itself – was reading, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was writing highly visual description, presenting characters and juxtaposing ideas and practice of East and West with herself as mediator – presenter and star. She further elevates her identity (as a performance of what one is to the world, as well as an expression of what one is not), by pitting her expert research against previous travel writers. Being a woman empowers her. She is "more inclined, out of a true spirit of female contradiction, to tell you the falsehood of a great part of what you find in authors."

But not all women are as clever as she. To Lady ----- she writes:

"Your whole letter is full of mistakes from one end to the other ... you have taken your ideas of Turkey from that worthy author Dumont who has written with equal ignorance and confidence".

Lady Mary Wortley Montague has her own confidence which is pluck. According to the first letter in the collection – she is less frightened of storm in the sea captain. This and the sight of the battlefield at Peterwaradin make her an honorary man. She is also honourable, by association with her husband's payment of poor Serbians for goods and services when he's been told he may requisition them. As honourable honorary man and yet woman who, by definition, understands what it is to be "Other" in a male world, she merits special attention from her hosts. "It must be under a very particular character when a Christian is permitted into the house of a man of quality." She lodged "three weeks at Belgrade with a principal Effendi... a scholar...who gave me an opportunity of knowing their religion and morals in a more particular manner than perhaps any Christian ever did...The Zeidi, Kudi,, Jabari &c ...put me in mind of the Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist &c and are equally zealous against one another."

That she can spot in the "secret of effendis"... "plain Deism" proves her facility of understanding and puts her in a cross cultural elite, as much ambassadress from the East as her husband was ambassador to it. However "plain" Deism subtracts from Islam. Loyalty to her religion maintains tension, sets her apart from what surrounds her and keeps focus on her. "Nothing gives *me* greater abhorrence of the cruelty of the clergy than your barbarous persecution...for no other reason than not acknowledging the Pope," she writes to the Catholic Abbe Conti.

This focus is her style, technique and strategy, exemplified in her visit

to the Baths and Sophia. First she establishes her unique access to female spaces where "It is no less than death for a man to be found." Here she evokes, for me, (from over a century later) Eduoard Manet's "Dejeuner sur L'Herbe", although instead of one naked woman amongst clothed men, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, in riding dress, is one clothed woman amongst many female nudes. The women give her outfit attention "with none of the disdainful smiles or satiric whispers that never fail in our assemblies when anybody appears who is not dressed in the fashion." Lady Mary Wortley Montagu describes for us the beauty of the women's white bodies, which trumps their beautiful faces. I think she is recovering for us – again – her own famous beauty which no longer depends on a face, when hers was very likely scarred by small pox.

Next she says that the leader of these naked women "would fain" undress her. The risk here is not so much that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu will be naked, but that she will be lose her status and identity amongst other naked women. Later she came to read and write Turkish, so that perhaps with false modesty, she was: "in great danger of losing my English" But for this visit, she has no Turkish, which contributes to the tension of *Innocent Abroad*. She can only defend her aristocratic modesty as well as maintain her position as extraordinary and exotic to her viewers (us as well as the women she had been watching) by a dramatic act: " I was at last forced to open my shirt and show them my stays... They believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband."

Here is projection here across cultures about the oppression of men. A Western woman in the eighteenth-century might find the idea of a chastity belt ridiculous, especially from Oriental women, confined to harems. Still, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu hints that males do impede

when she remarks that she would have liked to stay longer in the baths but cannot because of Mr Wortley's timetable.

Amongst the fascinating foreigners she watches and reports on, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu presents herself - to them and her readers - as more fascinating. Her side saddle is: "the first was ever seen in this part of the world and gazed at with as much wonder as the ship of Columbus was in America." She is a pioneer, always in the picture, with all eyes on her. Sometimes she can be subtler. Storks are "the happiest subjects under the Turkish Government... because they are supposed to make every Winter the Pilgrimage to Mecca.... so sensible of their privileges, they walk the streets without fear and generally build in the low parts of houses... The vulgar Turks are perfectly persuaded that they will not be in that year either attacked by fire or pestilence." She is talking about despotism and superstition, but she is also making a frame for herself. "I have the happiness of one of their sacred nests just under my chamber window."

Our heroine presents herself as object of desire of handsome young Jesuit priest as well as a Viennese count. Fatima, whose harem she visits, admires her with admiration that is gold starred since Fatima herself is so famously beautiful. Whereas Sultana Hafiten; is "what one would naturally expect to find in a Turkish lady, willing to oblige... but not knowing how to go about it," Fatima has "wit engaging as her beauty." And indeed she turns out to be half Polish, a hybrid like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, both personifying through birth or nurture the best of East and West. "Cushions..." writes our heroine. "I shall never endure chairs as long as I live."

In due course, as we all know, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu takes up

“the perpetual masquerade” of Turkish dress. Here first trip is to the Constantinople Exchange: “I own I was not very easy when I saw it crowded with janissaries... but they dare not be rude to a woman and made for me with as much respect as if I had been in my own figure.”

Masquerade was regular entertainment in eighteenth century England, practiced by all classes on Twelfth Night. It was allied with freedom because it was an opportunity to break out of appearing socially as what one was expected or allowed to be and do. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu opines that the ferigee, which covered her Turkish clothes to go out, gives Ottoman women, “entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery” and that other reporters on the East have been “too discrete or stupid to notice that, because they are covered, Ottoman women have more freedom than Western women...” If freedom is money “Neither have they much to apprehend from the resentment of their husbands, those ladies that are rich having all the money in their own hands, which they take upon divorce with an addition which he is obliged to give them... I look upon Turkish women as the only free people in Europe” or “the only women in the world who have a life of uninterrupted pleasure... a husband would be thought mad who extracted any degree of economy from his wife...”

The story of captive who realises she is better off marrying the Ottoman pirate who raped her than being ransomed and returned to Spain to live in a convent (an austere harem?) confirms this vision of “freedom”. Set deftly against this, is the naked female body found stabbed. The victim is beautiful - thus Lady Mary Wortley Montagu justifies men’s stares – but with her life she has lost her identity. No one can identify her, since she has never been seen uncovered outside the harem.

The discussion of fertility and marriage as a duty for Ottoman women is another adjustment to the concept of "freedom", especially as virgins and widows are declined the secondary heaven that woman souls are assigned. She writes it is: "more despicable for a woman to be married and not fruitful than it is for us to be fruitful before marriage."

Nevertheless Lady Mary Wortley Montagu became pregnant in Turkey. Carrying her daughter baby, giving birth and recovering from the birth, all more public experiences than in England, put her in touch with a Turkish health practices for which women were responsible – specifically engrafting against small pox. That she pioneered it to Western Europe with her own three year old son, is another controversial, highly dramatic act.

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