

THE LETTERS OF LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU

GENDER AS PERFORMANCE IN THE LETTERS
OF LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU

By

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ABSTRACT

This study treats the letters of Lady Mary (Pierrepont) Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), an English aristocrat who produced a extensive body of writing, primarily during the first half of the eighteenth century. My approach to the letters is informed by poststructuralist feminist theory, in particular by Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance. It is my contention that when we consider how this specific eighteenth-century woman's subjectivity is generated by intersecting, heterogeneous discourses, we equip ourselves to examine the ample contradictions of her self-positioning in relation to eighteenth-century discourses of gender and to notions of identity, authority, and community. Throughout this discussion, then, I take into account the historical specificities of Montagu's position, especially the ways in which upper-class status, literary conventions, and certain other discourses, namely Orientalism and gossip, intersect with gender norms to produce and shape her subjectivity.

The introductory chapter begins by considering Montagu's place in the poetry of her contemporary Alexander Pope as well as by examining her resistance to the place he assigns her; this discussion highlights the limitations on women's participation in public discourse, demonstrating also how gender norms might be transformed when a woman seizes the right to speak and write. Next, I examine current critical commentary on the letters, showing how readers of Montagu have moved in recent years towards a model

of gender as performance. I argue that the references critics of Montagu make to Judith Butler's theory of gender and identity as performative constructs fall short of the investigative potential these concepts offer. I then return to Butler's work in order to theorize the concepts of subversion and abjection. Subsequently, Montagu's "Autobiographical Romance," a fragmentary story, provides an cogent example of how Montagu's subversive strategies of self-definition are contingent on the violent denigration of other women.

Chapter 2 focuses on The Embassy Letters (1716-1718), which Montagu wrote during her term as English ambassadress in Turkey to correspondents in England and France. Here, the relationship Montagu's texts construct between the author and Turkish noblewomen emerges an ambivalent one, as her strategies for criticizing gender norms are shown to be marked by a reluctance to cast in her lot with a group defined within both Orientalism and gender ideology as inferior, passive, and, hence, appropriable. Chapter 3 examines the letters Montagu wrote while in England during the 1720s to her sister Lady Mar who was living in Paris. In this chapter, I look at Montagu's relationship to the discourse of gossip. Though Montagu attempts in some ways to claim gossip (and vanity or self-pride) as a positive resource for women's self-representational practices, she is also prompted to violently reject the very women whose transgressions she celebrates. In both cases, I argue that Montagu's strategy of relegating other women to an abject status, outside the norms of social and cultural intelligibility, works to make

Montagu's own transgressions of gender norms seem more poised, and thus more acceptable, than they might otherwise appear. Nonetheless, we see in both sets of letters how Montagu's fierce impositions of distance between herself and other women are qualified by her longing for connectedness with their experiences, especially their moments of liberation.

Having worked through these issues in the two sets of letters, I arrive at the conclusion that Montagu's approach to the "trope of the other woman," to use the term employed by Reina Lewis in her recent book on Western women's Orientalism (Gendering Orientalism [1996] 26), involves a disturbing violence directed against other women. One of the most valuable aspects of Montagu's letters, however, is that they allow us to see how this violence is generated by the discourses which shape Montagu's own abject, disenfranchized position in her society and culture, and not by an essentially closed attitude towards other women or other cultures on her part. In the end, I maintain that Montagu's representational strategies remain troubling in certain local instances to the dominant eighteenth-century English notion that women are inert, appropriable bodies, incapable of representing themselves or of participating in public discourse. But I also emphasize that feminist readers of Montagu need to challenge the exclusions that underwrite the subversive aspects of her epistolary discourse.

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CHAPTER ONE

Gender as Performance: Theorizing Subversion and Abjection

Lady Mary (Pierrepont) Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), whose letters are the subject of this study, figures prominently in the gallery of female characters depicted in the poetry of her famous friend, and later enemy, Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Indeed, Pope's portraits of Montagu have come to be the chief source for our understanding of her as an historical personage, and so they provide a provocative starting point for a discussion of the relationship between Montagu's own literary production and the historical and material situation of her writing. Pope represents Montagu as a woman who, through her writing, but also more generally through her multifarious acts of self-representation, transgresses against the norms of eighteenth-century womanhood in the most repulsive of ways. As the "Sappho," or woman poet, of his later poems, Montagu is depicted as unkempt, avaricious, and lustful. In "To A Lady, Of the Characters of Women" (1735), Pope emphasizes the degenerative potential of Sappho's combination of wealth and slovenliness. Sappho's "diamonds" are incongruous with her "dirty smock," the overall result of such corruption being that her body begins to breed noisome insects (III-ii:24-28).¹ In Pope's *Dunciad* (1728), a critique of the forces of dullness at work

¹The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope, Gen. Ed. John Butt, 11 Vols. All citations of Pope's poetry refer to this standard edition and will include volume and line numbers.

in English culture, Montagu's speculation with male friends' money on the stock market comes under attack. In particular, by describing Montagu/Sappho as a "batter'd jade," Pope likens female participation in the sphere of public commerce to promiscuous, disease-spreading sexual activity, thus characterizing it as an activity which threatens to corrupt male pleasure and profit (V:Bk.II,126). The overall impression is of a woman whose personal resources--physical beauty, upper-class status, money, and intellect--have been mismanaged to the extent that she comes to pose a serious sexual and financial threat to her culture.

These derogatory portraits were circulated after the pair's estrangement, which is thought to have occurred late in 1722 (Robert Halsband, The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu [1956] 113).² But Pope's earlier representations of Montagu, and the epistolary exchanges between the two writers, reveal a dynamic no less fraught with anxiety on his part about the management of her person. Indeed, if we think back to the desire and admiration Pope expresses for Montagu's "beauty, titles, wealth, and fame" in an earlier poem, "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" (1717), the ideological charge of the Sappho caricatures comes into clearer view (II:70). This poem ostensibly expresses Pope's sense of loss at Montagu's departure in 1716 with her husband, Edward Wortley

²From this point, references to Halsband's Life will be included parenthetically in the text.

Montagu, to Turkey, on an ambassadorial mission.³ Interestingly, the loss of the unfortunate lady's soul--she is presented as an unredeemed suicide, haunted and haunting--is expressed in terms of money and property: "Is there no bright reversion in the sky,/ For those who greatly think or bravely die?" (II:9-10). As in the case of Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," though the speaker's concern is allegedly all for the lady's fate, it is evident that he himself is the subject of the elegy, its emotional centre.⁴ The wasted thought and courage being lamented are primarily his own, as, he hopes, will be the "reversion" accruing from the poetic enterprise. The speaker's appropriation of the task of memorializing the lady is justified, within the logic of the poem, by the lady's manifest inability to represent herself, as well as by the ineptitude of the strangers who surround her. The association of an unmemorialized, unsanctified death with femininity and with

³Geoffrey Tillotson details the elegy's biographical connections to Montagu in the Twickenham Edition, Vol. II. In this regard, Tillotson cites the poem's chronological placement in Pope's corpus, the courtly tenor of the poem's compliments to the "unfortunate lady," and the presence in the correspondence between the two writers of strikingly similar references to Montagu's journey as a death (II:pp.353-355).

⁴"Eloisa to Abelard," another poem with biographical connections to Montagu (see Tillotson, Twickenham Edition; II:pp.311-313), concludes by accenting the "similitude," even the superiority, of the poet's grief to that of the female speaker:

And sure if fate some future Bard shall join
 In sad similitude of griefs to mine,
 Condemn'd whole years in absence to deplore,
 And image charms he must behold no more,
 Such if there be, who loves so long, so well;
 Let him our sad, our tender story tell;
 The well-sung woes will sooth my pensive ghost;
 He best can paint'em, who shall feel'em most.

(II:359-366)

the indolence of "eastern kings" is based on an assumption that souls would be doubly condemned to be "useless, unseen" when trapped in the bodies of those who are by definition only bodies, not speaking or writing subjects (II:20-21). A further rationalization of the male speaker's right to speak for the lady derives from what is seen as the cruel negligence of her guardian (in the case of Montagu, her husband, Wortley), who is charged with having failed in his task of making the lady's "breast...glow/ For others' good, or melt at others' woe" (II:45-46). Ultimately, only the great male poet can "atone" adequately for the "fate unpityed" and the "rites unpaid" of the unfortunate lady (II:47-48). Without the advantages conferred by his poetic powers, Montagu's journey to Turkey, presented as a suicide in the context of English culture, will apparently lack any meaning or dignity.

Despite the narrow scope left to her by Pope's version of their relationship, in the actual role of writing woman, of a Sappho, Montagu implicitly undermines the assumption on which Pope's self-satisfying portrait of her rests in the "Elegy."⁵ In her own letters, Montagu is emphatically not the passively malleable woman of Pope's poem,

⁵Patricia Meyer Spacks, in "Imaginations Warm and Tender: Pope and Lady Mary" (1984), comments perceptively that "Pope's powerfully articulated version of their respective positions leaves her [Montagu] little space" (211). However, I disagree with Spacks's contention that Montagu's only strategy of resistance was to refuse Pope's controlling fictions (214). In what follows, we will observe how Montagu creates contestatory fictions of her own out of the conventions and assumptions Pope invokes. Unlike Spacks, I argue that they are all the more (rather than less) effective for their self-reflexiveness. See also Cynthia Wall's "Editing Desire: Pope's Correspondence with (and without) Lady Mary" (1992), which focuses on Pope's frustration with Montagu's strategies of resistance as well as on his technique of replacing the real woman with more satisfying fictions.

nor is she the nightmarish reversal of this ideal feminine form (which is really a receptive formlessness) as manifest in his later writings. The discussion of elegiac verse in the correspondence between Montagu and Pope reveals the distance between their views of women's place in literary culture. In a letter written while Montagu was on her journey back to England, Pope reiterates his desire that she favour him with the gift of her self, her "Oriental self," which he hopes has become more innocent, truthful, infantile, and open by virtue of her experiences in the East (1 Sept. 1718; I:493-496).⁶ As a test of her openness, Pope supplies Montagu with the story of two English lovers, members of the labouring class, who were killed together by lightning. He sees this episode in unequivocally idealistic terms, recounting the steps he has taken to memorialize the victims. Responding in her own right, Montagu refuses to believe that the lovers Pope described "would have liv'd in everlasting joy and Harmony" or that "their sudden Death was a reward of their mutual Virtue" (Sept. 1718; I:445). She responds to Pope's epitaphs written in honour of the tragic pair with a parodic poem of her own; it concludes with an ironic nod in the direction of Pope's poetic authority:

Who knows if 'twas not kindly done?
 For had they seen the next year's sun,
 A beaten wife and cuckold swain
 Had jointly curs'd the marriage chain;

⁶My references to Pope's letters come from The Correspondence of Alexander Pope, Ed. George Sherburn, 5 Vols., and to Montagu's letters from The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Ed. Robert Halsband, 3 Vols.. Henceforth, citations to Montagu's and Pope's letters will be provided, parenthetically, in the text by volume and page numbers; the date of a given letter and the name of its addressee will also be indicated where relevant and available.

Now they are happy in their doom,
 FOR POPE HAS WROTE UPON THEIR TOMB. (I:446)

Through this reference to the happiness Pope confers on the lovers, Montagu shrewdly insinuates that Pope has a monopoly neither on the sympathetic understanding of others' experiences, nor on the literary and moral authority to represent them. In addition, by introducing the possibility that the marriage of "John Hughs" to "Sarah Drew" would likely have resulted in each partner's disregarding the idealized affective bonds that Pope celebrates, Montagu's poem questions the naturalness and the sanctity of married love. In an overall sense, then, Montagu contests Pope's conjecture that her emotions are to be easily solicited in support of his sentiments, defying also his corollary suggestion that her contact with the East has made her a more easily appropriable object. In her epistolary text, then, we encounter, to borrow Judith Butler's terms, "the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position" (Gender Trouble vii). Conversely, the virulence of Pope's portraits of Montagu as Sappho in his later poetry suggests the emergence of a distinctly "troubled" male subject, one who can no longer assume the easy naturalness of representing this particular woman as his complimentary "other" (vii).

In this study, I propose to argue that it is the performative dimensions of her letters that allow Montagu to resist the constraints placed by gender ideology on her ambition to participate as a literary producer and to win recognition for her efforts. More

specifically, I will examine two sets of Montagu's letters, in Chapter 2 the letters she wrote during the Turkish Embassy to friends in England and France, and in Chapter 3 the letters she wrote while residing in England during the 1720s to her sister, Lady Mar, who was living in Paris. Of particular interest is the way in which Montagu constructs moments of identity and authority through her representations of other women, in the case of The Embassy Letters, the women she encounters in the Ottoman Empire and in various European courts, in the letters to Lady Mar, the women of the court aristocracy in England. By drawing on Judith Butler's analysis of gender and identity as performatively produced, I aim to clarify two major points: 1) that the limitations on eighteenth-century women's participation as subjects in public discourse could be reworked to generate oppositional possibilities through subversive reiterations of those very norms; and 2) that the temporary and mediated quality of the oppositional moments is most accurately interpreted in terms of the limits governing Montagu's own intelligibility as a woman and writer in English society and culture. In the present introductory chapter, I will develop a theoretical framework for this discussion by reviewing pertinent critical commentary on the topic and by showing how Butler's theories of subversion and abjection can add to our understanding of the abundant ironies of Montagu's strategies of self-representation.

Before I can provide a useful response to the literature on Montagu's letters, I need to summarize the groundwork of Butler's understanding of gender and identity as performative. In Gender Trouble (1990), Butler argues against any notion that gender

is a natural given or essence, arguing instead that "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (24). This attempt to pinpoint how the naturalness of gender might be unsettled is based on a poststructuralist understanding of identity, including gender identity, as being produced through intersecting discourses of power and knowledge. For Butler, as for Foucault, "to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life" (145). Her proposition is that we consider gender as being comprised by "the stylized repetition of acts through time," or, in other words, as a "dramatic and contingent" construction of meaning (139-40).

A review of recent critical commentary on Montagu's letters reveals the potential a poststructuralist feminist analysis holds for their analysis, as well as the need for a return to Judith Butler's theories in order to clarify and extend the significance of the performative dimensions of Montagu's writings. The most extensive investigation of the letters as performative is Cynthia Lowenthal's book-length study Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Familiar Letter (1994). Lowenthal defines performance, in relation to Montagu's letters, as "the visible, gestural, mannered behaviour presented to others," arguing that it

shapes and fashions a fluid identity. The letters collectively reveal her lifelong performance of a series of identities, a constantly evolving presentation of a dramatic and emerging "self," a theatrical recreation of

experience, and a specifically fashioned form of conscious artistry. (10)

Lowenthal's understanding of performance in the letters is based on three key components. First, she points out that the material conditions of letter writing, particularly its dependence on the actual absence of the addressee, furnish opportunities for the careful calibration of the "presence" projected in a given letter; furthermore, the fact that eighteenth-century epistolary discourse (especially in aristocratic circles) straddled the distinction between public and private communication allows Montagu to speak simultaneously in both spheres--to use one mode to challenge the other (23). Second, Lowenthal correctly points out that, as an aristocrat writing in the early eighteenth century, Montagu does not adopt the view that writing reveals "transparent and unmediated consciousness," but rather "relies on an older model of experience drawn from the theater" (10). Finally, Lowenthal argues that the letters reveal the persistence of a "rationalist feminist" writing "inherited from the seventeenth century," which promotes personal experience and observation as reliable modes of knowledge (10). These are crucial observations, but they require a reframing of their significance. Partly because she orders her discussion chronologically, Lowenthal tends to see in the letters a building up of a coherent identity: for her, fluidity seems to indicate not just flexibility, but a linear evolution of selfhood. This unwritten assumption becomes problematic, for example, when we consider the exchange of letters with Pope on the subject of elegiac verse. While Lowenthal emphasizes the substitution of a coherent, fully-realized alternative "self" for the controlling fiction of Pope's writings, specifically, the "private

discourse of Royal Society empiricism, a language" that depends on "individual experience and observation" (53), I argue that what we see on Montagu's side of the correspondence is, rather, a set of highly provisional engagements with conventions for representing women.

Lowenthal's adherence to a notion of resistance as the substitution of one identity for another leads her into particular difficulties in her discussion of The Embassy Letters. She claims that the "literary elements" which inform Montagu's judgements are at once the most powerful and the most hypocritical of her strategies of self-definition (81):

The romance, which has a generative role in this correspondence, allows Lady Mary to see power in Turkish women's lives, but it also seduces her into believing that the fictional constructs are real. As a result, she fails to perceive the violence and pain endured by some women in Turkey because she views female sorrow through the veil of romance. (81-82)

Because Lowenthal sees Montagu's invocation of images from the romance genre as implying her complete allegiance to the romance heroine as an alternative identity, she tends to admonish Montagu for choosing to employ this imagery in the first place. As I shall show in Chapter 2, the ambivalence of Montagu's constantly shifting identifications with Turkish women attests to the existence of at least some recognition of the power relations governing their lives as women. As a corollary, I submit that although these discourses do help to foster a performative dynamic that challenges the naturalness of, say, Pope's positioning of Montagu, they do not serve, as Lowenthal implies, as the grounds for resistance in and of themselves. In my view, then, the factors enumerated by Lowenthal--namely, epistolarity, social status, empiricism, literary conventions--

number among the fields of power and meaning that intersect in Montagu's letters to generate and condition what we might call *effects* of identity and authority.

Three recent articles on The Embassy Letters refer specifically to Judith Butler's theories in their discussion of the performative dimensions of Montagu's letters. Yet, these references to Butler remain limited, and sometimes misunderstood, in their application. In "Scolding Lady Mary Wortley Montagu? The Problematics of Sisterhood in Feminist Criticism" (1994), Devoney Looser questions a "celebratory" feminist tradition of reading Montagu. Her essay stresses the need to move away from "feminist/not a feminist" or "progressive/not progressive" binary models of analysis: "Rather than working to castigate or exonerate Montagu more thoroughly, a turn to generic, historical, and disciplinary questions--to difficult matters of historicizing--may prove a way to deal with these either/or feminist options" (54). In disputing the usefulness and accuracy of analyzing Montagu's text in relation to a women's tradition of writing, Looser refers to Butler, who points out that

To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear. (Butler, "Contingent Foundations" [1992] 16; qtd. in Looser 57-58)

I agree with Looser's challenge to the proclivity of feminist critics to measure Montagu's literary production against a tradition that tends to assume nurturance and compassion as the values structuring all women's writing. Looser's argument is especially persuasive

in light of Isobel Grundy's work on Montagu as reader and book collector, which highlights just how different Montagu's frames of references as an Augustan are from those of twentieth-century feminist critics and the predominantly middle-class nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers they tend to study (Grundy, "Books and the Woman" [1994] 17). But because Looser is primarily concerned with challenging a past tradition of reading Montagu, her analysis of Montagu's strategies of self-representation in the letters is necessarily limited in scope: "In claiming herself as the first to "make visible" the Turkish women in all of their naked and noble splendour, Montagu puts herself in 'history' and dehistoricizes her subjects" (54). The suggestion that Montagu's self-representational strategies are contingent on her representations of other women is accurate as far as it goes, but I want to ask more precise questions: 1) in what ways and into what specific spaces does Montagu place herself?; and 2) what sorts of pressure does this strategy place on existing ideologies of gender, and how does it reinforce them and/or produce new ideologies?

In another recent article, "Aesthetics and Orientalism in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Letters" (1994), Elizabeth Bohls explores connections between The Embassy Letters and the aesthetic subject, especially as constructed by Joseph Addison in The Spectator. (For Bohls, "[e]ighteenth-century aesthetic discourse exemplifies [a] process of empowering one privileged group of subjects by excluding and disempowering others" (182). In theorizing her position, Bohls links eighteenth-century aesthetics to Butler's argument that subjects are discursively constituted "through the creation of a domain of

deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view"; that is to say, subjects are produced "through acts of differentiation that distinguish the subject from its constitutive outside, a domain of abjected alterity conventionally associated with the feminine, though clearly not exclusively" ("Contingent Foundations" 12-13). [Bohls astutely analyzes Montagu's attempt to position herself within the domain of cultural intelligibility, which was designated within her culture as the preserve of the "well-educated, propertied, white European man, whose good taste enhances his prestige" (183). Nonetheless, Bohls never really confronts how a similar phenomenon of "abjection" shapes Montagu's own representations of other women: for, as I shall demonstrate, Montagu measures her own "good taste" and "prestige" against the bodies of other women. In fact, Bohls goes so far as to argue that Montagu's letters "de-eroticize" and "de-exoticize" the Turkish women she encounters:

Aesthetic distance helps defuse the degrading potential of the bathers' corporeality within Orientalist discourse (which feeds in turn on other deeply entrenched Western discourses about women's bodies) to let Montagu present them as human individuals deserving of interest and respect, rather than essentially non-human Others. (189-190)

Though Bohls subsequently acknowledges that "it is as if she [Montagu] hesitates to put herself on the same level with these doubly objectified, doubly vulnerable beings," she concludes by emphasizing that "these letters are perhaps most valuable for their apparent aspiration, however partial and intermittent, to actual cultural exchange--a condition of intersubjectivity whose necessary precondition is an acceptance of the 'other' as an intelligent, sensitive acting self" (196, 200). In contrast to Bohls, I propose that we need

As Butler points out in relation to masquerade practices, we need to ask how and why a certain "repudiation of the feminine" (that is, of the bodies and spaces coded in dominant culture as inferior and passive) seems necessary preparation for the female subject to claim "the right to occupy the position of a language user" (Gender Trouble 54).

Regarding Montagu's letters, I suggest that the violence implicit in her use of other women to authorize her own status as a subject demands that we consider how dominant ideologies condition and inhibit even the most subversive moments of a given narrative text. In her study of primarily middle-class women autobiographers of the eighteenth century, Felicity Nussbaum reminds us that the "self-fashionings" of eighteenth-century women "were inevitably bound up in cultural definitions of gender, those assumed, prescribed, and embedded in their consciousnesses--as well as in their subversive thoughts and acts of resistance to those definitions" (The Autobiographical Subject [1990] 133). Indeed, the effectiveness of regulatory grids of gender and identity resides in their constitutive role in producing intelligible subjects, as well as in the fact that their contradictions are so difficult to disentangle.

In order to arrive at a way of describing and explaining the vacillation between resistance and complicity in Montagu's letters, I propose to reconsider Butler's notion of "abjection," which she initiates in Gender Trouble and "Contingent Foundations," but elaborates most fully in her second book Bodies That Matter (1993). For Butler,

like tone of their letters to one another during frequent periods of separation attest (see Halsband's Life, Chapters 2 and 3).

to suspend references to what we might label (following Butler) the nostalgic ontology of "actual cultural exchange," to open up space for an investigation of the "unanticipated meanings," both oppressive and liberating, that might come to bear in Montagu's representations of other women.

Finally, Srinivas Aravamudan, in "Montagu in the *Hammam*: Masquerade, Womanliness, and Levantinization" (1995), focuses on what is promisingly termed Montagu's "ambivalence about the masquerade of feminine identity" (71). Referring to Butler's definition of fantasy in *Bodies That Matter*, Aravamudan proposes to argue that *The Embassy Letters*

inaugurates a phantasmatic partial identification with Turkish womanhood. The specific fantasy, in this case, is not so much the activity of an already-existing subject, as the performative dispersion of the subject into several identificatory positions. The subject inhabits the position of both desiring subject and object, thereby reconfiguring itself. (69)

But a subsequent formulation of this dynamic significantly trivializes the role of Montagu's "fantasies" of the freedom of other women. Ignoring Butler's qualifications on the issue of masquerade, Aravamudan suggests that Montagu's ambivalence "is strikingly reminiscent of Joan Riviere's assertion that 'womanliness...could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she [the analysand] was found to possess it'" and further points to the "double action" of masquerade which "involves the fantasy of aggression and deference to two kinds of threats: academic father-figures in the real world and phantasmatic negro attackers in the imagined one" (71-72). My contention with Aravamudan's use of

Riviere's theory is that it locates this "double action" as originating in a sort of atavistic jealousy of and aggression against men on Montagu's part, such that she becomes characterized as "a thief who will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods" (Riviere qtd. in Aravamudan 72).⁷ Aravamudan further claims that Montagu "places and then hedges her cultural bets in a manner that could be reminiscent of eighteenth-century gamblers who 'ran a levant,' or 'threw a levant'. To run or throw a levant was to make a bet with the intention of absconding if lost" (70). Aravamudan derives this metaphor of "gaming" or "throwing the levant" from a rather torturous play of words on a nineteenth-century title for Montagu's travel letters, Letters from the Levant (69). But the most serious problem with this analogy is that it negates the ideological implications, both positive and negative, of Montagu's representational strategies by reducing them to the status of a mere game; in the process, this analogy unwittingly reproduces the stereotype that women's strategies for gaining power are motivated by nothing more than a will to deviance. Taking my lead from Butler, who argues in relation to Riviere that "the typology of gender and sexuality needs to give way to a discursive account of the cultural production of gender" (53), I aim to locate Montagu's competing desires--her desire to embrace the freedom she sees in other women's lives and her desire for cultural intelligibility--within the realm of signification,

⁷The key problem here is that Aravamudan does not take into account Butler's revision of Riviere's position. Indeed, his condescending rhetoric can be seen uncritically to repeat the "fear" of a woman's "phallicism" that Butler identifies as one of the main limitations of Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" (Gender Trouble 53).

the realm of social and cultural power.

What is particularly useful about Butler's work is that it prompts us to consider what possibilities become apparent when the problem of agency is "reformulated in terms of how signification and resignification work" (Gender Trouble 144). In Butler's view, "signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*" (145). As a corollary, then, agency inheres "within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (145). The surface of the gendered body is itself constituted and stylized by such acts, and so it becomes the site of "performative inversions" that reveal "the imitative structure of gender--as well as its contingency" (136-137). In other words, parodic repetitions of what appears to be "the original" feminine body, as, say, in drag, can reveal the notion of an original or natural essence of gender to be itself a ruse (31). In the category of such "troubling" bodily performances we might include repetitions that produce "hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation," along with other forms of exaggeration and inversion (31).

It is especially important to emphasize at this point that the displacement of normative grids of gender is not abstract, but can challenge dominant discourses of femininity and the social practices they institute and justify. Butler points specifically to the institution of "compulsory heterosexuality," which constitutes women as "objects of exchange," lynchpins to a social, cultural, and economic order that privileges and is dominated by men (Gender Trouble 38-39). The practices of resignification she identifies have material and ideological consequences in that they can throw into question the

founding notion of the institution of compulsory heterosexuality; that "sex" is the essential cause of "sexual experience, behaviour, and desire" (23). In this regard, we should also remember that the possibilities for opposition are generated by the shifting boundaries of bodies and identities, which are constituted by intersecting and heterogeneous discourses. For Butler, as for other feminist poststructuralists, "[T]he coexistence or convergence of such [multiple] discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment; it is not a transcendental subject who enables action in the midst of such a convergence" (Gender Trouble 145). Notably, Butler's observations have recently been theorized in specific relation to women's self-representation by Leigh Gilmore, who argues in Autobiographics (1994) that "an emphasis on the rhetorical dimension of autobiography indicates its performative agency" (25). Gilmore stresses the potentially disruptive ideological and material effects of women writers' rhetorical "interruptions" of the discourses which shape their subjectivities (43). In a particularly evocative formulation of the issue, Gilmore claims that the women writers she discusses "removed themselves in material and psychic ways from a social economy in which they would function as objects of exchange through self-representational practices and social and political acts and choices" (43). Gilmore's point is that women writers often accomplish this subversive effect by representing "their identities through an emphasis on the I that contrasts with the I in the traditional forms or epistemologies they restructure" (43).

In order to comprehend the significance of the disruptions (and reinscriptions) of

these norms mobilized in Montagu's letters, we need to grasp in greater detail their specific historical formation. Indeed, part of my purpose in opening this discussion with references to Pope's representations of Montagu was to highlight the specific gender norms that generated and governed the representation of women in early eighteenth-century writing. Two feminist studies of Pope place his strategies of appropriation in the larger setting of eighteenth-century gender ideology. In Women's Place in Pope's World (1989), Valerie Rumbold argues that "the familiar notion of women's softness" is one of the key assumptions of Pope's writing about women (21). This quality of "softness" or impressionability, as it were, is "the characteristic that enables them to be tender mistresses, mothers, and general comforters, but it also confirms their deficiency in the mental powers on which humanity prides itself" (21). Similarly, in The Poetics of Sexual Myth (1985), an examination of gender ideology in Pope and Swift, Ellen Pollak analyzes the concept of women's softness in Pope's poetry as it relates to imagery of gold. According to Pollak, "uncharactered" women are identified with gold in its unrefined state, "a filthy lucre unmediated by industriousness or rational enterprise" (125). As we have seen in relation to the "Elegy" and the correspondence, for Pope, "only circulation in a masculine economy can confer value on a woman... [thus bringing] her into the realm of the proper/property" (Pollak 125); when women claim the role of participants in public discourse, rather than accepting their role as objects, they threaten to upset the dominance of this economy, to challenge its status as normative. That women did function as objects of exchange in eighteenth-century England is borne out by historical

analyses of marriage. As Lawrence Stone points out, although there was a growing recognition in the period of the importance of companionship in marriage, among the court aristocracy considerations of money and status were still predominant, and affective bonds between parents and children were often used by aristocrats to influence their daughters' decisions regarding marriage (271, 303, 313).⁸

In this context, I want to suggest that Montagu's strategies for self-representation in her various autobiographical writings tend to foster subversive confusions of this norm of feminine passivity and inferiority. While in the two chapters that follow I shall focus on Montagu's epistolary production with some references to relevant poems and essays, at this stage an examination of "Autobiographical Romance," a fragment recounting

⁸In "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Historical Machinery of Female Identity" (1994) Jill Campbell points to another aspect of the connection between women and commerce in eighteenth-century gender ideology: its connections to imperialist trade. Campbell suggests that the female body becomes "an ideologically charged figure for the equivocal morality of imperial trade," arguing that in the portrait of Montagu as Sappho in "To a Lady" we see "the grinding of the machinery of material relations now rendered unflatteringly visible in the evident labors of the woman's material body" (64-65). To clarify my view of Montagu's own relationship to imperialism in her letters, particularly The Embassy Letters, I take the position that Montagu in her letters is primarily concerned with gender norms as they operate within the extremely privileged environment of the court aristocracy. Though in the early years of their marriage the Wortley Montagus had some reason to be concerned that their elopement had offended their families, by the time they travelled to Turkey in 1716, their position among the monied, aristocratic elite was fairly secure (see Halsband's Life, Chapters 3 and 4). Thus, imperial trade plays at most a liminal role in Montagu's letters: her challenges to its dynamics are minor and inadvertent where they do occur, but neither does an imperialistic concern for economic gain figure prominently in her relationship to the various women she describes, who are themselves primarily upper-class. In pursuing the "trope of the other woman" in Montagu's letters, to use Reina Lewis's term (Gendering Orientalism [1996] 26), I am concerned with the cultural rather than the economic capital Montagu stands to gain by sidelining other women.

Montagu's girlhood and her courtship with Edward Wortley Montagu, will yield a productive introduction to the issues at stake (Essays and Poems and "Simplicity, A Comedy" 77-81).⁹ Here, we encounter a significant reworking of her position as an object of exchange in an aristocratic marriage contract. The heroine's desire for and commitment to scholarly pursuits is so powerful that she succeeds in spite of her aristocratic father's indolence and neglect:

Laetitia had naturally the strongest Inclination for Reading, and finding in her father's house a well furnish'd Library, instead of the usual diversions of children, made that the seat of her Pleasures, and had very soon run through the English part of it. Her Appetite for knowledge increasing with her years, without considering the toilsome task she undertook she begun to learn her selfe the Latin Grammar, and with the help of an uncommon memory and indefatigable Labour made her self so far mistrisse of that Language as to be able to understand allmost any author. (77-78)

The repeated association of desire and pleasure with learning displaces the notion that girls and women are predisposed to receive the imprint of men's wishes: Montagu's heroine is able and confident enough to seek out on her own the cultural knowledge she desires but which is denied to her. This same desire for knowledge subsequently prompts Laetitia to resist to the conventional process of courtship, and her self-education furnishes her with the tools to do so. Indeed, when Laetitia is introduced by a female friend to

⁹The exact date and title of this piece is unknown, but Halsband suggests that Montagu composed it sometime after 1715, when her father, Evelyn Pierrepont, became Duke of Kingston: the heroine's father's name is given as "Regiavilla" in the fragment (Halsband, Introduction to "Autobiographical Fragment," Poems and Essays 77). Note that all references to Montagu's miscellaneous work will be to the collection entitled Poems and Essays and "Simplicity, a Comedy", Eds. Robert Halsband and Isobel Grundy.

Sebastian (Wortley), she draws on her intellectual acumen to provide an analysis of a new play. Her manner was "so just and so knowing" that Sebastian "was as much amaz'd as if he had heard a piece of Waxwork talk on that subject" (78). But even as it becomes evident that she had made a "conquest" of Sebastian's heart, Laetitia "never thought of marriage but as a bond that was to subject her to a Master": "if she found any Pleasure in Sebastian's Company it was only when he directed her in the Choice of her Books or explain'd some passages to her in Virgil and Horace" (79). By privileging Laetitia's goal of intellectual accomplishment over an ideal of female emotionality in courtship, Montagu effectively challenges the cause and effect structure of compulsory heterosexuality, a patriarchally shaped set of assumptions which suggest that one's biological sex as female automatically produces a suitably feminine set of sexual experiences, behaviours, and desires (Gender Trouble 23). She both "critiques" how she is coded as a woman and "reads gender as a construction" (Gilmore 20).

However, this autobiographical fragment introduces us not only to the subversive effects of her rhetorical strategies, but also to the more problematic ironies of Montagu's self-positioning, for here Montagu seeks to validate her position as an educated, intelligent woman by denigrating other women. What ultimately makes it possible for Laetitia to interpret Sebastian's "astonishment" as a positive response to her learning is the fact that it makes her more desirable as a companion and potential love interest than the young woman who had introduced them:

The conversation grew so eager on both sides, neither Cards nor Mlle [the

other young woman] were thought upon; and she was force'd to call to him several times before she could prevail on him to go towards the Table. When he did, it was only to continue his Discourse with Laetitia, and she had the full pleasure of triumphing over Mlle, who was forc'd to be silent while they talked about what she could not understand. (79)

In this passage, the female acquaintance, "Mlle," is assigned the unflattering role of a "censorious woman" or perhaps a "scold," female character types that Ellen Pollak refers to as the "stock deviants" of a mythology of passive womanhood (68). Importantly, we are encouraged to interpret the exposure of Mlle's judgemental and petty nature as the inevitable comeuppance of a social climber: "She had a large fortune, which was enough to draw after her a croud of those that otherwaies would never have thought of her" (78). By contrast with the contradictions of Mlle's demeanour, Laetitia's combination of intellectual ability, grace, and lack of self-consciousness appears both natural and attractive. The problematic implication of Montagu's positioning of Laetitia is that it seems that the language a woman "steals"¹⁰ from within a patriarchal system of knowledge and power can only be made acceptable and meaningful through the denigration of other women's intellectual abilities, sexual desirability, and social status.¹¹

¹⁰Isobel Grundy reports that Montagu referred to her reading in her father's library as an act of "stealing" the Latin language "whilst everybody else thought that I was reading nothing but novels and romances" (Spence I:303; qtd. in Grundy, "Books and the Woman" 3).

¹¹The story ends with Laetitia's father discovering the covert correspondence she carries on with Sebastian, which prompts Sebastian to propose and initiates the negotiation of a marriage contract (80-81). The ironies of the actual courtship of Lady Mary Pierrepont and Edward Wortley Montagu are numerous. After a lengthy and difficult period of negotiations and correspondence, the pair took the dramatic step of eloping. However, their union was for the most part an unhappy one, as the business-

As Butler points out in relation to masquerade practices, we need to ask how and why a certain "repudiation of the feminine" (that is, of the bodies and spaces coded in dominant culture as inferior and passive) seems necessary preparation for the female subject to claim "the right to occupy the position of a language user" (Gender Trouble 54).

Regarding Montagu's letters, I suggest that the violence implicit in her use of other women to authorize her own status as a subject demands that we consider how dominant ideologies condition and inhibit even the most subversive moments of a given narrative text. In her study of primarily middle-class women autobiographers of the eighteenth century, Felicity Nussbaum reminds us that the "self-fashionings" of eighteenth-century women "were inevitably bound up in cultural definitions of gender, those assumed, prescribed, and embedded in their consciousnesses--as well as in their subversive thoughts and acts of resistance to those definitions" (The Autobiographical Subject [1990] 133). Indeed, the effectiveness of regulatory grids of gender and identity resides in their constitutive role in producing intelligible subjects, as well as in the fact that their contradictions are so difficult to disentangle.

In order to arrive at a way of describing and explaining the vacillation between resistance and complicity in Montagu's letters, I propose to reconsider Butler's notion of "abjection," which she initiates in Gender Trouble and "Contingent Foundations," but elaborates most fully in her second book Bodies That Matter (1993). For Butler,

like tone of their letters to one another during frequent periods of separation attest (see Halsband's Life, Chapters 2 and 3).

"abjection literally means to cast off, away, or out and, hence, presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated" (Bodies That Matter 243 n2). In other words, the "intelligibility" of the subject depends on the production of a domain of "excluded" or "abjected" bodies; such bodies inhabit a "zone of uninhabitability" which defines the limits of the subject's social and cultural terrain.¹² Though Montagu appears in some ways unusually confident, for an eighteenth-century woman writer, about her right to engage in cultural commentary, she continues to encounter deeply entrenched ideological limitations to her participation in public discourse. One way for her to move towards a resolution of these contradictions--and towards ensuring that she will remain intelligible to her English readers--is to define her identity in distinct opposition to other women whom she represents as transgressing gender norms in markedly less stylish or controlled ways. By developing flattering contrasts between herself and the women she describes, Montagu can imagine her self to be managing *her own* transgressions with unusual and admirable poise.

But how fully do Montagu's letters, both The Embassy Letters and the letters to Lady Mar, succeed in neutralizing the more unsettling consequences of her bold entry into public discourse? Surely, the point highlighted in Butler's discussion of abjection

¹²It is important to note the nuances of Butler's use of the term abjection. In her view, "the notion of *abjection* designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (243 n2). The distinction I wish to emphasize is that Butler situates this notion of "casting away" the other within the realm of signification or discourse. Thus, "abjection" does not correspond to a fixed, essentialized psychic order, but is discursively constituted and hence open to resignification.

is that the boundaries defining the relationship between the subject and its abjected other(s) are neither universal nor fixed, but must be incessantly reiterated if they are to maintain the status of authoritative law. Since the laws governing identity must be constantly reiterated, "the law [itself] provides *the discursive occasion* for a resistance, a resignification, and potential self-subversion of that law" (109). To put this another way, the subject is unable always or thoroughly to maintain its disavowal or rejection of the bodies it excludes. In fact, "a radical refusal of a subject to identify with a given position suggests that on some level an identification has already taken place, an identification that is made and disavowed" (99). What results from the "hyperbolic incorporation of that female Other who is refused" is "an odd form of preserving and protecting that love within the circle of the melancholic and negative narcissism that results from the psychic inculcation of compulsory heterosexuality" (Gender Trouble 53). Though the overall impact of Montagu's self-representational strategies is to authorize herself to speak at the expense of other women's status as subjects, this outcome does not negate entirely the identification with them that has already taken place. Montagu's attraction to the positions of other women, and the sense of isolation and frustration that tempers her refusal to identify herself with them, exert a certain negative pressure on the boundaries between self and other that her texts incessantly (re)construct.

It is in this framework that I propose to explore, in the following two chapters, how Montagu's combination of attraction to and rejection of the positions occupied by other women comprises a set of "multiple and contestatory" identifications (Bodies That

Matter 99). Specifically, this argument will entail an analysis of Montagu's relationship to a dominant discourse of cultural exchange, Orientalism, in The Embassy Letters, and her approach to a women's discourse of gossip in the letters to Lady Mar. Let me clarify before proceeding that by accenting the contradictions of Montagu's position, and the ambivalence they generate, I do not mean to deny that Montagu's representations of other women gesture towards a reconsolidation of the norms governing both femininity, class, and ethnicity in her milieu. To emphasize the divided nature of her position is, rather, to insist that this reconsolidation of gender norms is performed with a modicum of critical difference. Acutely aware of the ideological conditions with which she has to comply in order to make her own voice heard and her own body appropriately visible, Montagu nonetheless yearns for the existence of spaces and relationships in which these conditions might be suspended. Simultaneously, the letters unintentionally demonstrate that the objects of Montagu's discourse--other women--are themselves discursively, rather than essentially, constituted as other within the logic of eighteenth-century discourses of gender, identity, and authority. What we shall see in this study is that Montagu is unable to identify fully with other women largely because the pejorative attributes and positions assigned to them by the discourses in circulation in her milieu work so effectively to counter their own unravelling. Just as Montagu's letters testify to an eighteenth-century aristocratic woman's astonishing ability to wrest--from within the very discourse of gender that assigns her an inferior position--the power to participate as a subject in discourse, they also alert us to the ideological limitations that restrict their potential to unsettle entrenched discursive structures that perpetuate inequalities and exclusions.

CHAPTER TWO

"More than an ordinary Discretion": Managing the "Extrodinary" in The Embassy Letters

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's journey to Turkey in 1716 provided her with new occasions for exercising the unconventionality, curiosity, and wit we see beginning to emerge in her early writings. In August of that year she set out with her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu, who had been appointed the English ambassador to Turkey, on a two-year trip that would take her through Holland, Germany, and Austria, and, eventually, to Constantinople, the seat of political power in the Ottoman Empire at the time.¹³ This journey was an unprecedented opportunity for an Englishwoman, and the fifty-two letters Montagu wrote about her experiences register throughout an intense awareness of the novelty of her position. In a letter addressed to Alexander Pope she acknowledges that he has a right to expect "at least something very new in this Letter after I have gone a Journey not undertaken by any Christian of some 100 years" (1 April

¹³The political context of the Wortley Montagus' embassy in Turkey deserves some elaboration at this point. Wortley's role as English ambassador was to mediate between Austria and Turkey, so as to prevent them from going to battle; he was unsuccessful in this role, prompting the government to recall him to England two years into what was supposed to be a five year assignment (Halsband's Life, Chapter 4-6). As Lisa Lowe points out in Critical Terrains (1991), the peaceful resolution of this dispute was important to England in that it would ensure that England's commercial relationship it had established with the Ottoman Empire from the late sixteenth century would remain uninterrupted (36-37).

1717; I:330). But the privilege of representing a perspective hitherto underrepresented in English writing is not taken up by Montagu as an excuse for indulging in generalizations. Rather, she sees herself as writing in opposition to the stereotypes of Turkish culture, especially Turkish women, circulated by male travel writers. In an attempt to explain why she focuses on the comforts and beauties of the women's quarters or *harems*, Montagu writes in a letter addressed to a female friend, Anne Thistlethwayte, that

You will perhaps be surpriz'd at an Account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common Voyage-writers who are very fond of speaking of what they don't know. It must be under a very particular character or on some Extrodinary Occassion when a Christian is admitted into the House of a Man of Quality, and their Harams are always forbidden ground. (1 April 1717; I:343)

As a woman and an aristocrat, Montagu was able to enter spaces usually off limits to male travel writers, and she often deliberately employs this position to challenge the dominant meanings assigned to women and to the Orient in Western European cultures.¹⁴ Thus, Montagu's journey to Turkey and her year-long stay there allowed Montagu to claim a significant role as a subject in public discourse. However, what we shall see in

¹⁴This point has been discussed extensively in recent criticism of Montagu. See in particular the work of Lisa Lowe, Joseph Lew, and Elizabeth Bohls, where Montagu's representations of Turkish women are shown to contrast with the stereotypes perpetuated by male travel writers such as Jean Dumont and Paul Rycaut. For example, Dumont, in *A New Voyage to the Levant* (1696), admits that he was unable to obtain entrance to the most interior courts of the imperial harem, but assumes the right to represent to represent Turkish women regardless (Lowe 38-40). As Lowe explains, Dumont's unsubstantiated emphasis on the enslaved and enfeebled status of Turkish women furthers an agenda that combines both misogyny and imperialism (39).

The Embassy Letters is not an overcoming of the limits on female speech and desires marked out, say, in "Autobiographical Romance," but a renegotiation of these restrictions. Despite the multiple ways in which The Embassy Letters cultivate postures of confident authority (together with strong feminist and cross-cultural sympathies), they also disclose a sense of uneasiness about how to position herself in relation to these experiences. The question I wish to explore is the following: just how fully can Montagu identify herself with Turkish culture before she becomes unintelligible to the English readers whose attention and respect she wishes to engage--and even illegible to herself?

The first letter that Montagu writes to Pope from Turkey strives for a rhetoric of elegant control (1 April 1717; I:330-337). Montagu endeavours to present herself as the absolute manager of her encounters with Turkish people and customs, as well of her personal and literary relationship with Pope. Consider, for instance, her humorous evaluation of the Turkish landscape as a source of poetic inspiration:

I am at this present writeing in a House situate on the banks of the Hebrus, which runs under my Chamber Window. My Garden is full of Tall Cypress Trees, upon the branches of which several Couple of true Turtles are saying soft things to one another from Morning till night. How naturally do boughs and vows come into my head at this minute! And must not you confess to my praise that tis more than an ordinary Discretion that can resist the wicked suggestions of Poetry in a place where Truth for once furnishes all the Ideas of Pastorall? (I:331)

The references to the river Hebrus and to "the Ideas of Pastorall" makes explicit Montagu's unusual classical learning, so claiming her equality with her male literary models (I:331). However, her declaration that she is witnessing in reality the idealized

landscape of classical poetry transposes her claim of equality to one of superiority; indeed, she implicitly upstages Pope's vaunted proximity to this ideal space in his role as translator of Horace. In these ways, the letter inverts two dominant assumptions about women: that they are incapable of mastering classical languages and that (as writers) they can produce little more than vapid imitations of their male forbears and contemporaries. The mention of "Discretion"--particularly the assertion that hers is "more than ordinary" and thus deserving of praise--bolsters the impression of rhetorical control (I:331). Ultimately, for all the emphasis on the plenitude and ease of her surroundings, Montagu wittily shows that she remains clearheaded enough to distinguish between good and bad poetry; she, for one, knows to abstain from the trite and predictable rhyme of "boughs" with "vows" (I:331).

Yet the stress laid on "Discretion" in this passage discloses a contradictory dynamic. We might read "the wicked suggestions of Poetry" as referring to the unpredictable, and potentially dangerous, results of Montagu assimilating herself to the luxurious landscape created in the letter (I:331). As Reina Lewis points out in Gendering Orientalism (1996), a study of mainly nineteenth-century English and French women artists and writers, "For women the loss of identity involved in a passionate experience of the sublime threatened the boundaries of the proper femininity essential for their reputation" (179). The notion of discretion is important for Montagu, then, not only because it is a way of demonstrating wit, but also because it represents a measure of compliance with the importance placed on female chastity in eighteenth-century gender

ideology.

Interestingly, the letter to Pope proceeds from this point by interweaving a discussion of love poetry with the classical references and assertions of rhetorical mastery. Montagu includes two translations of a Turkish love poem into English--one a "literal" translation and the other a version which attempts to render the poem's sentiments in "the stile of English poetry" (I:336). The differences between the two help in pinpointing the difficulty Montagu has in disentangling herself from the English cultural codes governing gender, identity, and authority. The "Turkish" version of Stanza One is as follows:

The Nightingale now wanders in the Vines,
Her Passion is to seek Roses.
I went down to admire the beauty of the Vines,
The sweetness of your charms has ravish'd my Soul.
Your Eyes are black and Lovely
But wild and disdainfull as those of a Stag. (I:334)

While in this literal translation the nightingale's "passion is to seek roses," the conventions of English poetry decree that the nightingale becomes "Philomela," whose pleasure is intermingled with pain (I:334-336). It would be hasty to read the difference between the two versions as an uncomplicated instance of nostalgia for an idealized pastoral and/or "Oriental" existence; indeed, the contrast between them effectively captures a sense of the ways in which English literary conventions for thinking and representing love and gender structure the desires of women. Montagu's expression of relief at escaping the fate of Orpheus, and her apparent uninterest in "the Glorys that

one's Name enjoys after death," can be interpreted in this context as a way of signalling to her readers that she maintains an appropriate, decorous distance from the Eastern landscape (I:330). But however much this letter to Pope strives to minimize the risks of identifying with her new environment, it continues to produce some moments where relations of exploitation and exclusion based on sex/gender are suspended. Certainly, Montagu manages to insinuate her equivalence with Orpheus ("As equal were our souls, so equal were our fates?" [I:330]), and to posit a realm where female desire might not have to be expressed indirectly and might not entail violence and pain. She pursues these possibilities even though they are both highly risky identifications for her to take up.¹⁵

The relationship constructed in The Embassy Letters between Montagu and her experiences of other cultures, Turkish and European, is thus an intricately ambivalent one, and it needs to be theorized not only with attention to self-representational practices that engage dominant discourses of gender, identity, and authority, but also in connection with the tradition of Orientalism. In his landmark study, Edward Said defines Orientalism "in short...as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). More specifically, Said posits that Orientalism operates

¹⁵Jill Campbell and Cynthia Lowenthal both comment on Montagu's response to Turkish love poetry. While Lowenthal sees the translation as a largely successful endeavour to "regularize" and mute the passion of the Turkish poem (62), Campbell sees the translation more as I do--as a locus of contradiction. According to Campbell, the phrase "Stag-Eyed" creates "an image of the poet's mistress in terms of her likeness to an unequivocally male (and famously virile animal) the stag"; Campbell argues that Montagu is simultaneously attracted to the gender-bending effect of this image and repulsed by the "burlesque" effect it has in an English context (76).

by defining the Orient as "Other" to the Occident, thus arrogating to Western individuals, communities, and nations the right to represent and thus to exploit the people and resources of the East. Significantly, recent accounts of Orientalism, especially those by Reina Lewis and Lisa Lowe, which consider women's participation, have criticized the model Said outlines in Orientalism (1978) for its characterization of Western representations of the "East" as overwhelmingly "constant and monolithic" (Lowe 4). Lewis points to the following passage from Said in order to suggest how our understanding of Orientalism shifts when we consider its intersections with discourses of gender and class:

In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. And why should it have been otherwise...? (Said's emphasis, 7; qtd. in Lewis 17)

The potential for things to be "otherwise"--the possibility, that is, that the Occidental subject might not be flexible enough to evade "losing...the upper hand"--is in this passage foreclosed by the assumption that the Occidental subject is "unified," "intentional," and unambiguously "male" (Lewis 17). This point is underlined by Said's use of the pronoun "him" to refer to the Occidental subject (Lewis 17).

In Critical Terrains, Lisa Lowe provides a succinct and suggestive account of how gender and class ideologies can introduce gaps and inconsistencies into Orientalist discourse. Following Foucault's understanding that "neither the conditions of discursive formation nor the objects of knowledge are identical, static, or continuous over time,"

Lowe argues that Orientalism is a mode of discursive production characterized, like other social and cultural discourses, by its "multiplicity" and "heterogeneity" (6-7). Regarding the involvement of women writers in Orientalist production, Lowe posits that

the convergences of multiple, uneven discursive productions--such as those of gender, race, and class--not only circumscribe sites of instability in the discourse [of Orientalism], but also permit the rise of new positions, practices, and alignments which are instrumental in the transformation of the prior discursive arrangements and the generation of new conditions.
(20)

But the framework Lowe develops does not prevent her from reinscribing the incongruities of Montagu's letters within a binary model of innocence versus collusion. When Lowe, in her half-chapter length discussion of The Embassy Letters, refers to a sort of alternation between a rhetoric of "identification" (and resistance to Orientalism) and one of "difference" (acceptance of conventional Orientalist habits of thought), she unintentionally forecloses on the contingent relationship between the two modes (45). This schematic approach to Montagu's letters leads Lowe, for example, to misconstrue Montagu's comment to Anne Thistlethwayte that "a Letter out of Turkey that has nothing extrodinary in it would be as great a Disappointment as my visiters will receive at London if I return thither without any raritys to shew them" (I:340; qtd. in Lowe 49). My point is that Montagu's presentation of her Turkish experiences as a sort of "theatrical entertainment" is not in and of itself an index of her collusion with colonialism, as Lowe implies (49-50), but shows her awareness that she holds an immensely powerful position as an interpreter of a foreign culture to her English readers. On the one hand, Montagu's

comment to Thistlethwayte astutely summarizes the pressures on an English traveller to perform for his or her readership in order to engage their attention; it also pinpoints the performance imperatives of the aristocratic milieu, where, as Cynthia Lowenthal suggests, social status is dependent on making oneself visible in the public sphere (115-116).

As I discussed in Chapter 1, a performative textual dynamic may mobilize subversive confusions *as well as* symbolic recuperations of dominant power relations, with the former often being contingent on the latter. While Lowe purports to disclose a certain hypocrisy in The Embassy Letters, I propose that the evident limitations of Montagu's ability to cast her lot in with the women she encounters on her travels, especially those she meets in Turkey, emerge from the dependence of her performative defamiliarization of gender norms on the very discourses of gender, class, ethnicity, and nation that create and shape her position as a speaking subject. Indeed, Butler's exploration of abjection highlights that the impetus for the female subject to introduce difference and distance into her relationship with other women derives not from a deep-set, immutable aggression or hatred of them. Rather, her desire for distance comes from the way the subject finds herself aligned in relation to her female objects by the discourses that enable her to signify (socially and culturally) in the first place. For Montagu to associate herself unequivocally with people, customs, and geography encoded within her culture as inferior, passive, indolent, and easily appropriated would be in a sense to relinquish her determination to reject the exploitable feminine role assigned to

her in her own society and culture.¹⁶ In this chapter, we shall see how the letter that Montagu writes about the women's bathhouse in Adrianople and her account of Turkish women's apparel as a form of "masquerade" accent the transformative pressure of Turkish customs on English gender ideology. However, even these enthusiastic descriptions of Turkish culture are suffused with ambivalence, for Montagu cannot quite decide to merge with her new milieu. Next, I will examine how the ambivalences evident in the bathhouse and masquerade letters manifest themselves in even more deeply contradictory and violent ways in Montagu's additional portraits of women in The Embassy Letters. I will focus on how Montagu rejects certain women, both groups and individuals, for their lack of sophistication, while creating one particular woman, Fatima, as an altogether complementary other, as a quintessentially public woman. Through the parallel development of female caricatures and female characters, Montagu's texts work to preserve and fortify her own sense of agency, while denying other women this privilege. As a way of summing up Montagu's relationship to other women in The Embassy Letters, I shall return to her theme of translation between cultures. This theme emphasizes that her approach to representing other women is governed by a concern to secure her own intelligibility within the terms of English society and culture. Lastly,

¹⁶In her exploration of male travel writers' accounts of Turkey, Bohls demonstrates how "portrayals of both male and female Turks...bear out with a remarkable consistency Said's description of a discursively feminized and sexualized Orient" (186). I contend that the fact that the "Orient" was discursively coded as feminine--wanton, immodest, and lascivious--is a crucial factor contributing to Montagu's hesitation to associate herself fully with Turkish culture and Turkish women.

Montagu's poetry written during the Turkish embassy reveals her yearning for a position immune to these conditions, but also underlines the unsustainability of such an idea.

Initially, however, a consideration of the readership Montagu anticipated for The Embassy Letters is necessary to help us to distinguish the general lines along which the boundaries governing intelligibility seem to have existed for her. Indeed, Butler reminds us that "parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered" (Gender Trouble 139). In particular, we need to consider the circumstances of the letters' production and reception, for these factors helped both to enable and to constrain Montagu's strategies of subversion and her tactics for gaining authority.¹⁷ Though we know from lists Montagu kept of the heads and contents of her letters that she did, in fact, send letters to specific correspondents during the Turkish embassy, the text that has come to be known as The Embassy Letters is derived not from actual letters (which, indeed, are no longer extant) but from a manuscript. It is evident that they were extensively revised before being edited, rearranged, and copied into two small albums. While the revisions were likely

¹⁷Robert Halsband details the production, circulation, and publication of The Embassy Letters in The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (see pages v-xx). It is worthwhile to note at this point that I have relied on Halsband's edition because it reprints The Embassy Letters as they appear in the manuscript copy. Other editions, including the 1763 edition, contain verbal variants and edit some passages, and so are unreliable.

complete by 1724 when Montagu showed the text to Mary Astell,¹⁸ the letters remained in Montagu's possession in a single manuscript copy until 1761, when she gave them into the keeping of an English cleric residing in Rotterdam, with the understanding that he was to have them published after her death. The letters were finally published posthumously in 1763. In my view, the complicated status of The Embassy Letters as a literary text has significant consequences for an analysis of their performative dimensions. As Lowenthal points out, the letters blur the distinction between public and private discourse, posing on one level as private epistles, but on another level designed deliberately with the aim of winning public recognition for their author (23). Thus, in addition to the requirement that she maintain a social decorum befitting her sex (and to an extent her rank), Montagu must also confront the rules of intelligibility governing literary fame. The overlapping of these domains of intelligibility helps to explain why Montagu is compelled to send out so many signals of equivocation. However, the intersection of the ostensibly private with the actually public can also help to mobilize strategies of resistance. In contrast to the distance, density, and difficulty cultivated in Montagu's letters to Pope (and other important correspondents such as the Abbé Conti and Lady Bristol), her posture of intimacy with female correspondents in England,

¹⁸Mary Astell (1666-1731) is best known for her two feminist treatises, A Serious Proposal (1694; part II, 1697) and Some Reflections Upon Marriage (1700) (Rogers 250). In 1724 Montagu let Astell borrow her albums containing The Embassy Letters, and before returning them Astell inscribed an enthusiastic preface, wherein she praises the letters for their "Beautys and Excellencys" and encourages Montagu to have them published (I:xvii, 466-467).

primarily with her sister, Lady Mar, and with other anonymous female friends, provides a temporarily favourable reception for the parodic displacement of gender norms. Yet, even in these contexts which are relatively conducive to subversive reinterpretations of the norms of English femininity, the inscription of "a zone of uninhabitability" continues to unfold, a zone of risible bodies against which Montagu can measure her own urbanity (Butler, Bodies That Matter 232 n2).

The complexities of the position Montagu takes up in relation to Turkish women are perhaps most provocatively detailed in the letter she writes to an anonymous female correspondent about her visit to a women's bathhouse in Adrianople (1 April 1717; I:312-315). The letter claims to inaugurate Montagu's movement into an entirely new geographical, as well as rhetorical and interpersonal, position: "I am now got into a new World where every thing I see appears to me a change of Scene, and I write to your Ladyship with some content of mind, hoping at least that you will find the charm of novelty in my Letters and no longer reproach me that I tell you nothing extraordinary" (I:312). However, though we are prepared by this statement for Montagu to embrace all variety of cultural differences, the letter soon begins to give evidence that she does have some reservations. For example, the description of the coach which carries Montagu to the women's baths at St. Sophia betrays her ambivalence about entering this erotically charged venue.¹⁹ Stating that she desires to go "incognito," Montagu describes her

¹⁹There is an important distinction that needs to be made between the bathhouse, or *hammam*, and the *harem* proper. Aravamudan points out that the *hammam* was a liminal "sexualized" space in Ottoman culture (79). In contrast, the term *harem* refers to the

Turkish coach in the following terms:

These voitures are not at all like ours, but much more convenient for the Country, the heat being so great that Glasses would be very troublesome. They are made a good deal in the manner of the Dutch Coaches, haveing wooden Lattices painted and gilded, the inside being painted with baskets and nosegays of Flowers, entermix'd commonly with little poetical mottos. They are often richly embroidier'd and fring'd. This covering entirely hides the persons in them, but may be thrown back at pleasure and the Ladys peep through the Lattices... (I:312)

Here, Montagu is at pains to justify the difference she observes, so as to show herself capable of appreciating the details and materials of the coach's construction. It is crucial for her to demonstrate that she has *inside* information--this is the source of her superiority and authenticity in relation to male travel writers and to her readers who were unable to see Turkey for themselves--and she proffers this information to her readers with almost exaggerated flair. Observe, too, how she displaces herself from the scene, making herself doubly incognito, as it were. Rather than picturing herself in the carriage, Montagu the character or figure is absorbed into the function of author, into the hand that pulls back the curtain to reveal the ladies sitting inside.

Yet, for all of Montagu's concern with maintaining authorial control in this scene, there is a performance of the subversion of gender norms embedded within it, for the women themselves are portrayed as having the power of drawing back the curtain in the coach and are presented as electing to gaze (covertly?) through the lattices. The theme of the freedom and agency experienced by Turkish women in comparison with English

women's quarters in an upper-or middle-class residence, and carries the connotations of a sacred and forbidden/restricted space (100 n25).

women is ostensibly Montagu's dominant concern in this letter. Certainly, the possibility of nakedness is celebrated as an index of their greater liberty:

The first sofas were cover'd with Cushions and rich Carpets, on which sat the Ladys, and on the 2nd their slaves behind 'em, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English stark naked, without any Beauty or deffect conceal'd, yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest Gesture amongst 'em. They Walk'd and mov'd with the same majestic Grace which Milton describes of our General Mother. There were many amongst them as exactly proportion'd as ever any Goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shineingly white, only adorn'd by their Beautiful Hair divided into many tresses hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or riband, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces. I was here convinc'd of the Truth of a Refflection that I had often made, that if twas the fashion to go naked, the face would be hardly observ'd. (I: 313-314)

The suspension of distinctions of rank, together with the possibility of nakedness, suggests the cancellation of sexual oppression, whereby the differences marked through clothing on women's bodies designate them as the property of men. In addition, the assertion of the women's modesty interrupts the predominant assumption that women are defined by their sexuality and refutes the stereotype that "Oriental" women are particularly lascivious. Montagu subsequently characterizes the baths as "the Women's coffee-house, where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented etc.," and this claim frames her portrait of the women's bathhouse as a critique and a challenge of the distribution of power and property in English culture (I:314). Just emerging in eighteenth-century England as a centre for the exchange of political information and power, the coffee-house was by definition the purview of men in opposition to women,

who were beginning to be associated with the domestic sphere.²⁰ Montagu's references to the women's bathhouse as a coffee-house can thus be interpreted as an appropriation of this paradigmatically male space. Like most recent commentators on this letter, I would suggest that this appropriation has the effect of impelling Montagu's readers to imagine alternative social arrangements, where women would be enabled to participate in rational and democratizing interaction.²¹

But the introduction of Milton's authorial presence, along with the references to the painters Guido and Titian, qualifies the impression that this is a sphere in which women do what they please among themselves, unobserved and unhindered by men. In fact, Montagu informs us subsequently that "[t]o tell you the truth I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr. Gervase [Charles Jervas] could have been there invisible" (I:314). The admission of a contemporary male painter of portraits appears to

²⁰This point has been elaborated by Kathryn Shevelov in Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical (130) and by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (80-84).

²¹This particular letter and its coffee-house motif have been central to the analyses of The Embassy Letters published within the last five years. For example, Elizabeth Bohls argues that "The idea of a woman's coffee-house must have been profoundly empowering for an Englishwoman, hinting at a society where women might occupy space and possess power in the public realm" (193). And Ruth Bernard Yeazell, in "Public Baths and Private Harems: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Origins of Ingres's Bain Turc," contends that the "humble analogy" of the bathhouse as a women's coffee-house "projects a form of utopia" (123). I refer to the bathhouse letter's dominant motifs as a starting point for a discussion that seeks to complicate the notion of Montagu's utopianism.

put the finishing touch on the spectacle of a sell-out to a male point of view.²² If, however, we consider what Angelika Bammer describes as the "dialectic" between ideology and utopian discourse and the "inevitability" of "convergence between the two" (Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s 45), there emerges an alternate way of reading the gap between Montagu's feminist ideals and her insinuation of deference to male literary and artistic models. On the one hand, by comparing her perspective and skills favourably with Milton and other male artists, and in arguing for the superiority of her account, Montagu implicitly questions their monopoly on cultural representation and authority. Think in particular about how she elaborates on the reference to Jervas by highlighting that her interior view of the harem might "improve" on the images of women he produces:

I fancy it would have very much improv'd his art to see so many fine Women naked in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking Coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their Cushions while their slaves (generally pritty girls of 17 or 18) were employ'd in braiding their hair in several pritty manners. (I:314)

By emphasizing that the women's activities of talking, working, drinking, and braiding are positive and productive ones, Montagu counters the derogatory aspects of the stereotype of Eastern women's indolence. Montagu implies that their lifestyle has its

²²Recent criticism has tended to read this move as indicative of a certain hypocrisy or conceptual failure on Montagu's part. Campbell argues that "Finding herself in the position of the observer and interpreter of female bodies rather than that of the observed and represented, Lady Mary can only imagine that position as a male one, and she fantasizes herself as replaced in the baths by an invisible male artist" (80), and Bohls even implies that it is Montagu's adoption of a male voyeur's point of view that is responsible for "the titillating charge the images still retain" (192).

own, equally worthwhile modes of labour and desire. She does not erase indolence from the scene altogether, but rather attempts to show that relaxation, enjoyment, and variety are not necessarily antithetical to socially and culturally meaningful activity.

Simultaneously, though, the references to male artistic models defuse the threat this analysis poses to male dominance in cultural production, so reinscribing Montagu herself as the abjected other of the male-privileging and male-dominated culture which constitutes her frame of reference. Indeed, Montagu's reference to her own "wickedness" in the line alluding to Jervas echoes the "wickednesse of Poetry" she mentions in the letter to Pope (I:331), reminding us that utopian moments of resistance are subject to the norms governing intelligibility in her culture. Precisely because they blur distinctions between indolence and meaningful work, the alternatives imagined in this letter threaten in some ways to make her authority even more precarious than it already is. Therefore, it seems that the safest way out of this conceptual bind for Montagu is to define these alternatives as an excess which she herself cannot represent, but which can perhaps be represented by a man. Thus, the "extraordinariness" of the women's coffee-house comes to be at least in part contained by the exercise in Montagu's text of a "more than ordinary discretion" (I:331).²³

²³My point about the contingent relationship between Montagu's utopian imaginings and the norms governing intelligibility in her milieu modifies others' usages of the term "utopian" to describe Montagu's writings. Yeazell notes Montagu's inability to maintain her dream of "cosmopolitanism" upon her return to England (123); likewise, Aravamudan describes *The Embassy Letters* as "a utopian projection of Montagu's that anticipates a positive cultural outcome," looking to geography (as opposed to what are disparagingly termed "ideological litmus tests") to account for Montagu's disillusionment (69,93). I

As the bathhouse letter works out compensation for transgression through the invocation of male writers and artists, it also looks to the privileges of rank to shore up Montagu's position as a modest and discreet observer. Despite the delight she ostensibly takes in the equalizing potential of the baths, Montagu cannot help but remark on the fact that her rank draws the attention of the most "considerable" ladies there (I:314); the implication is that if she does consort with cultural and ethnic difference, social rank stabilizes and sanctions this interaction. However, the "discretion" and control facilitated by this identification through rank threatens to disintegrate when it intersects with her contradictory determination to explore the arbitrariness of her position:

The lady that seem'd the most considerable among them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undress'd me for the bath. I excus'd my selfe with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in perswading me. I was at last forc'd to open my skirt and shew them my stays, which satisfy'd 'em very well, for I saw they beleiv'd I was so lock'd up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my Husband. I was charm'd with their Civillity and Beauty and should have been very glad to pass more time with them, but Mr. W[ortley] resolving to persue his Journey the next morning early, I was in haste to see the ruins of Justinian's church, which did not afford me so agreeable a prospect as I had left, being little more than a heap of stones. (I:314)

One effect of this passage is to foreground the constructedness of Montagu's position as an aristocratic Englishwoman. In shifting perspectives so that Montagu becomes the

submit that ideological questions play at least as important a role as Montagu's actual geographic positioning in limiting the "enabling fantasy" (Yeazell 123) of the women's coffee-house. Even in the Turkish setting, Montagu never consistently writes as one who "wander[s] at liberty through the world, free to pick and choose [her] 'customs' at will" (Yeazell 123).

object of the Turkish women's gazes, the letter argues against the naturalness of the corset, and, by implication, against the naturalness of the silhouette imposed by this garment, forms which mark her as an object of value in the English heterosexual economy. Ironically, though, the emphasis placed on the clothed surface of Montagu's body functions also to distinguish her from the nakedness of the Turkish women. Montagu maintains a level of modesty and thus intelligibility, but does so at the cost of reinvoking the restrictiveness of her clothing and the authority of her husband. There remain nonetheless suggestions of a contestatory set of identifications. The Turkish women's "Civillity and Beauty" continue to impress Montagu and so to facilitate her rethinking of English gender ideology. And Montagu's recollections of them overshadow the much-vaunted splendour of the ruins of Justinian's church, which would have been a conventional, requisite landmark for a traveller to visit.²⁴

The theme of Turkish women's freedom and agency is also illustrated in a letter addressed to Lady Mar from Adrianople, where Montagu treats the Turkish women's dress, particularly their veiling practices, as a form of masquerade. Adopting an initial posture of cultural relativism, Montagu asserts "their Morality or good Conduct" is no

²⁴Joseph Lew, in "Lady Mary's Portable Seraglio," and Elizabeth Bohls both interpret the conclusion of the bathhouse letter in a similar light, pointing in particular to the way Montagu's corset is denaturalized through the other women's reactions to it. But where Lew praises Montagu for giving "subtle credence to a woman's viewpoint" (444), Bohls reminds us that "The image of Montagu seating in her riding habit amid the Turkish bathers poignantly epitomizes Western women's conflicted multiply determined relation to the women of non-Western cultures" (194-195). We might ask to which particular woman's viewpoint Lew refers, for it seems clear that Montagu is primarily concerned with winning credence for her own point of view.

less relaxed than that of English women: "I can say like Arlequin, 'tis just as 'tis with you, and the Turkish Ladys don't commit one Sin the less for not being Christians" (1 April 1717; I:325). In this way, Montagu insinuates that her direct knowledge of Turkish women's lives gives her the advantage over other travel writers; she mockingly suggests that male travel writers must be motivated either by "stupidity" or "discretion" in placing emphasis on Turkish women's sinfulness (I:325). The effect is to direct her readers's and her own attention away from the possibility of Turkish women's immodesty and towards the liberating and democratizing effects of their dress and manners. The description of clothing that follows takes this celebration of Turkish women one step further by suggesting that they are not only just as moral as English women, but, in fact, more free:

Tis very easy to see they have more Liberty than we have, no Woman of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets without 2 muslins, one that covers her face all but her Eyes and another that hides the whole dress of her head and hangs halfe way down her back; and their Shapes are wholly conceal'd by a thing they call a Ferigée, which no Woman of any sort appears without... You may guess how effectually this disguises them, that there is no distinguishing the great Lady from her Slave, and 'tis impossible for the most jealous Husband to know his Wife when he meets her, and no Man dare either touch or follow a Woman in the Street.

This perpetual Masquerade gives them entire Liberty of following their Inclinations without danger of Discovery. (I:325-330)

If we read the notion of "masquerade" in terms of gender performativity--specifically, in terms of the way eighteenth-century "masquerade" practices tended to denaturalize gender--the relationship between the subversive dimensions of this comparison and the

containment of its most radical consequences comes into clearer view.²⁵ In Masquerade and Civilization, Terry Castle analyzes the historically specific functions and consequences of masquerade practices in early eighteenth-century England. The possibility of being able to exchange one set of clothes for another implies that identity can be transformed and public spaces infiltrated by those who have traditionally been excluded from them; and the idea that such interruptions of the dominant heterosexual economy might be performed "perpetually" promised to extend the "semiotic defamiliarization" and "female emancipation" beyond the contingent bounds of a carnival season or site and into daily life (Castle 33). The application of the English term "masquerade" to Turkish women's clothing, like the association of the bathhouse with the English coffee house, comprises an attempt to employ Turkish institutions and customs as metaphors for women's participation in the public, democratic sphere. Notably, in the same letter, Montagu expresses much delight in her own Turkish costume, highlighting the sense that it affords agency to women. The impression that Turkish clothing allows Montagu increased control over her own self-presentation is particularly strong when she

²⁵Although I agree with Lowe's argument that Montagu's interpretation of Turkish women's garments as liberating counters the Orientalist assumption that women are "enslaved" (and thus "a sign for Oriental barbarism"), I take exception to her conclusion that Montagu's use of the term "masquerade" is a rhetorical strategy basically in collusion with an exploitative, colonialist dynamic (44-45). Devoney Looser points to Terry Castle's work as "a helpful historicizing corrective" to interpretations of Montagu's references to masquerade (55). There are two points opened up by this connection which I think deserve more discussion than Looser provides: 1) the subversive effects of masquerade; and 2) the factors that might have motivated Montagu to "rescue" herself into intelligibility at the expense of other women (56-58).

exclaims to Lady Mar that none of the "Noveltys of this Place....would surprize you more than a sight of my person as I am now in my Turkish Habit, th^o I believe you would be of my Opinion that 'tis admirably becoming. I intend to send you my Picture; in the mean time accept of it here" (I:326).²⁶ Montagu's active role in choosing (and then describing) the richly elaborate details of her Turkish costume is complemented by the fact that the Turkish women are "at Liberty to show their fancys" in how they ornament themselves. The obviousness of the statement that it is "very easy to see that they have more Liberty than we have" thus underplays the insidious disruptiveness of Montagu's references to masquerade (I:328).

There are, however, evident limitations on the subversive potential of the comparison of Turkish dress with English masquerade. Despite her claim that Turkish

²⁶Marcia Pointon, in "Going Turkish in Eighteenth-Century London: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Her Portraits," argues that the potential for attention to be displaced from the "marked" female face to the naked female body and/or to the disguise afforded by Turkish women's dress would have had a particularly poignant significance for Montagu, whose face had been badly scarred by smallpox in 1715 (142). Though I think that Pointon's work is valuable for its documentation of Montagu's portraits, I agree with Jill Campbell's suggestion that Pointon's forays into psychobiography are too straightforwardly optimistic (85 n19). Pointon suggests that the "destruction" of Montagu's face was perceived in her milieu as a liability to her husband's career at court (144), further declaring that "the painted portraits of Montagu in Turkish dress...re-empower" the "ego-damaged" subject, thereby allowing her to "re-enter the public domain, and in triumph" (144). As Campbell points out, the history of Montagu's portraits qualifies the sense of a triumphant return: "Back in England...her Turkish outfit became merely another costume in which she might be represented by male artists within the frame of conventional portraiture" (81); this is the case, for example, with Sir Godfrey Kneller's 1719-20 portrait of Montagu in Turkish dress, which "nearly identically reproduces" the pastoral guise assigned to Montagu by Charles Jervas in his 1710 portrait (81).

women's morality is not at issue, Montagu's references to Turkish women's sexual behaviours and to their attitudes towards marriage strive to define them as virtuous. Of course, her sense that women "have nothing to fear from their Lovers' Indiscretion" nor "much to apprehend from the resentment of their Husbands" initially prompts the conclusion that "Upon the whole, I look upon turkish Women as the only free people in the Empire" (I:328-329). More specifically, on the topic of polygamy, Montagu informs us that "'Tis true their Law permits them 4 Wives, but there is no Instance of a Man of Quality that makes use of this Liberty, or of a Woman of Rank that would suffer it" (I:329). But Montagu cannot bracket off the dissonances she witnesses between the theory and the practice of heterosexual relationships in Turkish society. Indeed, she follows her observations on women's liberty by citing an instance of male sexual indiscretion: "Amongst all the great men here I only know the Tefterdar (ie. Treasurer) that keeps a number of she slaves for his own use... and he is spoke of as a Libertine, or what we should call a Rake, and his Wife won't see him, th^o she continues to live in his house" (I:329). Given the persistence of male libertinism, Montagu reasserts the necessity for women to exercise extra caution in their marriage relationships. But the emphasis she places on the woman's refusal to see her husband is more than an argument in favour of female self-protection, for it also reinforces the injunction to female modesty so important to English gender ideology. After all, the reason we know about the association of masquerade with gender subversion is that moralists deplored its liberating effects and discouraged respectable women from participating in it (Castle 33). We might

say, then, that Montagu's use of Turkish women's habits of dress as metaphor for women's liberty threatens to backfire: if Montagu defines herself as immodest, she may lose her cultural intelligibility, opening herself up to be defined by others as a degenerate "Sappho." Notably, Montagu's willingness to adopt Turkish women's clothing stands in sharp contrast with her hesitation to merge with them by disrobing in the bathhouse letter. For Montagu to remove her clothes would be in a sense to relinquish the power to represent herself. By contrast, Montagu's adoption of Turkish clothing maintains a semiotic system within which she can operate so as to safeguard both her modesty and her legibility.

Other letters in the embassy series are somewhat less celebratory of the women Montagu encounters in other cultures than are the letters I have been discussing, as they seek more explicitly to shore up Montagu's sense of cultural authority. For example, Montagu's letter to Lady Mar describing women of the imperial court of Vienna parallels in terms of structure and content her later letter from the bathhouse. This letter works to reinscribe the transformative potential of cultural and ethnic difference celebrated in the bathhouse and masquerade letters in more thoroughly abject, and hence manageable, terms (Sept. 14, 1716; I:265-269). Written, like the description of the women's baths, about an ostensibly gynocentric space (no men are allowed into the women's drawing room), Montagu's account of Viennese women delineates the women's elaborate court dress and then focuses on the comportment of one specific woman of rank, the Empress. Though we continue to see in this letter some evidence of Montagu's resistance to gender

ideology through her destabilization of gender norms, in contrast to the letter from the bathhouse, the accent is here placed on Montagu's superiority over the other women, rather than on her identification with their positions. In particular, Montagu mocks the elaborate costume required for a woman to appear at the Viennese court, emphasizing its gigantic proportions; she observes, for example, that "their whalebone petticoats out-do ours by several years Circumference and cover some acre of ground" (I:265). This description enacts a hyperbolic extension of the more "inconvenient," "monstrous," and "contrary" elements English dress shares with other European dress, implicitly criticizing the irritations caused by elaborate, heavy headdresses and unwieldy skirts (I:265). In the end, though, Montagu concludes that "You may easily suppose how much this extraordinary Dresse sets off and improves the natural Uglyness with which God Almighty has been pleas'd to endow them all generally" (I:265). By contrast, Montagu insinuates that she herself appears well in this costume, "which certainly shews the neck and shape to great advantage" (I:265). Later on, when Montagu tells how she elects to wear her Viennese garment when she visits the Grand Vizier's lady at Adrianople in order to satisfy the curiosity of the Turkish women, she repeats this dynamic, playing her own legibility against the illegibility of the Viennese women. By dressing the part of what she has earlier defined a ridiculous Viennese lady, Montagu deflects in advance laughter or criticism of her own otherness; she also seems confident that her beauty, wit, and rank will counter the costume's negative effects (18 April 1717; I:347). It seems, then, that one way of counterbalancing the near loss of control in the Turkish scenario is for

Montagu to reiterate the destabilizing differences she encounters in European terms, so as to create what Reina Lewis describes as "the textual domain of an Orientalized Europe"(45).²⁷

The ideological recuperation of parodic moments is accomplished most succinctly in this letter within the specific context of the women's shooting party. With the Empress serving as adjudicator of their marks(wo)manship, the ladies of the court compete for prizes (I:268). Initially, this competition seems to represent an instance of an autonomous female community that successfully appropriates to women's own purposes sporting activities usually associated with men, but we learn subsequently that this event is actually organized around men's rather than women's desires: although only women are allowed to participate in the contest, "all of the men of Quality at Vienna were Spectators," and the primary reason for such events taking place at the imperial court is that they are "the favourite pleasure of the Emperour" himself (I:268-269). For Montagu's part, she declares that "I was very well pleas'd with having seen this Entertainment, and I don't know but it might make as good a figure as the prize shooting in the Aeneid if I could write as well as Virgil" (i:268). As with the invocation of male artistic models in the bathhouse letter, the reference to Virgil's poetic powers here splits

²⁷The Embassy Letters seem to have been conceptualized as a cohesive text, a travelogue of sorts, and are known to have been extensively edited. These factors buttress my claim that the Viennese letters gesture towards a symbolic resolution of the problems Turkish women present for Montagu (as expressed in her "subsequent" letters). Here, I am in disagreement with Aravamudan who tends to read The Embassy Letters as working in a linear, chronological manner away from a position of cultural relativism and towards a denial of the positive, disruptive potential of cultural differences.

on a paradox: it registers her claim to poetic excellence, but betrays a concern that her voice's public register is precarious. The conclusion of the letter addresses this concern by distancing her from the potentially negative consequences for her gendered character of involving herself in the project of representing cultural differences. That Montagu herself is "afraid to handle a gun" becomes an index of her disengagement from a potentially demeaning spectacle; by remaining removed from the Viennese women's sport Montagu strives to assert her superiority and sophistication (I:269). In this sense, the interruption of gender ideology mobilized by Montagu's insistence that femininity is enacted through a system of signs (clothing) becomes contained, in the larger scope of the text of The Embassy Letters, in a narrative that reinforces dominant ideologies of gender and ethnicity, namely feminine triviality and Germanic unrefinement. However, Montagu's mention of the Viennese women's laughter at her uneasiness with guns (I:269), and the accent she places on the suspicion inspired by her refusal to contract one of the "sub-marriages" (basically formalized extra-marital affairs) by which she says the Viennese women acquire their "reputations" (I:270-271), suggest that she desires connection with the Viennese women and positive recognition from them. Indeed, these elements of her letter suggest that Montagu perhaps harbours an affinity with the Viennese women (and their particular freedoms) which she cannot overtly recognize.

The sense that Montagu excludes these other European women from the status of subjects in discourse in order to further her own store of knowledge and power is augmented in a subsequent letter addressed to Lady Mar from Prague. In the following

passage, Montagu celebrates the arbitrariness of Viennese dress as well as the instabilities potentially introduced by the ways in which it is performed in daily life:

I have allready been visited by some of the most considerable Ladys whose Relations I knew at Vienna. They are dress'd after the fashions there, as people at Exeter imitate those of London. That is, their Imitation is more excessive than the Original, and 'tis not easy to describe what extrodinary figures they make. The person is so much lost between Head dress and Petticoat, they have as much occasion to write upon their backs, This is a Woman, for the information of Travellers, as ever sign post painter had to write, This is a bear. (17 Nov. 1716; I:280-281)

The notion that an imitation could be "more excessive" than its original imputes the very excessiveness of the original itself, thus suggesting that clothing is at best a rather flimsy foundation for gender and class identity. What is most noteworthy here, however, is that the exposure of the instability of the category of aristocratic womanhood is taken up by Montagu as an occasion for demonstrating her intellectual and aesthetic preeminence. According to this letter, the women of the quasi-aristocracy in Prague are decidedly outside and beyond the norms of cultural intelligibility, and thus might well not be able to distinguish themselves from creatures so markedly different from themselves as bears. Montagu assumes the power to name these "lost" women as women, attempting by this to ensure her own relationship of authority with her readers. In foregoing what Aravamudan refers to as her "realist mode" for the rhetorical resource of "caricature" (76), Montagu ironically succeeds in furthering a major assumption of eighteenth-century gender ideology--that women are by nature imitators or frauds, incapable of representing themselves. That the references to the "sign post painter" and to the symbol of the bear

allude to an anecdote that appeared in the influential English periodical, the Tatler, reminds us that Montagu's definition of these women as abject figures is structured by her determination to participate in cultural debates in England which were normally the territory of men (I:281 n1).

Returning to consider some of the later letters Montagu writes about the Turkish setting, we can see how the difficulties for Montagu of identifying herself with Turkish women are similar to, and yet more acute than, her anxieties about European women. In particular, when she moves to consider individual women's lived realities, Montagu must grapple with the fact that Turkish women's masquerade practices are not as uniformly emancipatory as she would like to see them; her reaction is to distance herself from Turkish women's lived experiences. That Turkish women's "perpetual masquerade" does not, in fact, give them "liberty...without danger of discovery" is suggested, and then neutralized, in two stories which Montagu recounts in one of the last letters written explicitly about Turkey (May 1718; I:405-412). The first story pertains to a young woman who was raped, stabbed, and then abandoned to die in the Christian suburb of Pera where Montagu herself resided during her stay:

About 2 months ago there was found at day break not very far from my House the bleeding body of a young woman, naked, only wrapp'd in a coarse sheet, with 2 wounds with a knife, one in her side and another in her Breast. She was not yet quite cold, and so surprizingly Beautifull that there were very few men in Pera that did not go to look upon her, but it was not possible for any body to know her, no woman's face being known. She was suppos'd to be brought in dead of night from the Constantinople side and laid there. Very little enquiry was made about the Murderer, and the corps privately bury'd without noise. (I: 407-408)

The evidence of this woman's mutilated body is preceded by Montagu's admission that "Tis true the same customs that give them so many oppertunitys of gratifying their evil Inclinations (if they have any) also puts it very fully in the power of their Husbands to revenge them if they are discover'd, and I don't doubt but they suffer sometimes for their Indiscretions in a very severe manner" (I:407). However, Montagu does not elaborate on the causes of this woman's suffering, preferring to exclude it from her attempt to reconstruct an idealized space for intellectual and social exchange. This performance of gender foregrounds what Butler identifies as the "punitive consequences" of straying from gender norms (Gender Trouble 139). In dismissing this woman's experience of sexual oppression, Montagu's story enhances the punitive consequences of transgression rather than criticizing them.

The second anecdote moves to complete this exclusion by idealizing one woman's acceptance at once of the norms of both Western and Turkish gender ideologies. The story involves a Spanish woman who was raped by a Turkish Admiral who had attacked her ship: fearing that her Roman Catholic family would resolve the situation by confining her in a convent, the woman eventually elected to marry her attacker in order to save her honour (I:408). As Lowenthal points out, Montagu's emphasis on the tenderness, generosity, and fidelity of the woman's "Infidel lover" encloses the pain and terror of this story in a myth of romantic love (110). Even as the text works to minimize the two painful stories' potentially subversive emotional impact, their structural placement (towards the end of Montagu's account of her Turkish sojourn) reminds us that

Montagu's idealizations of Turkish women's lives are highly unstable compounds. In other words, the stories inadvertently indicate how the "noncorrespondence between metaphor and referent," between concept (freedom) and object (Turkish women), to use Asha Varadharajan's terms, continues to disrupt the compromise that Montagu is attempting to work out (Exotic Parodies 28). In fact, there emerges the possibility that if Montagu were to extend her celebration of the fictional freedom offered by "perpetual masquerade" any longer it would become irretrievable. That is to say, Montagu would no longer be able to authorize her own identity through statements such as her confident declaration that: "Upon the Whole, I look upon the Turkish Women as the only free people in the Empire" (I:329). Accordingly, the feminized status of the objects of Montagu's discourse is managed by deferring discussion of unsettling incidents, and by framing them as aberrant or assigning them happy endings. Remarkably, in the same letter, we are returned to the bathhouse setting, where Montagu now has "the opportunity of seeing a Turkish Bride receiv'd there" (I:406). Here, Montagu's ability to interpret this event in a celebratory mode (it makes her recall "the Epithalamium of Helen by Theocritus") seems dependent on her strategy of bracketing off the more discomfiting aspects of marriage in the Turkish milieu.

One point I should like to stress is that the strategy of invoking class privilege plays a key role in instituting boundaries between Montagu and the objects of her emancipatory discourse. Montagu's use of masquerade is regulated by another notion of performance, an aristocratic one, where rank serves to mitigate the consequences ensuing

from the transgression of dominant cultural categories of gender or nation and so to guarantee Montagu a position in the realm of cultural intelligibility.²⁸ It is Montagu's rank and learning which most effectively allow her to broach the sphere of "public commerce" in which she clearly desires to participate, but from which Turkish women are themselves barred (I:363). For example, when Montagu visits "the Exchange" in Adrianople she elects to wear her "Turkish dress," commenting that it "is disguise sufficient, yet I own I was not very easy when I saw it crowded with Janizarys, but they dare not be rude to a Woman, and made way for me with as much respect as if I had been in my own figure" (To the Abbé Conti, May 17, 1717; I:354). This indication is repeated in Montagu's account in the same letter of her visit to the Mosque of Sultan Selim: "I was dress'd in my Turkish habit and admitted without Scrupule, tho I believe they guess'd who I was, by the Extreme Officiousness of the door keeper to shew me every part of it" (358). Later, we learn that Montagu is only able to visit the Byzantine church of Saint Sophia, usually off limits to Christians, because of her status as an ambassador. She reports that she "was forc'd to send three times to the Caimaicam (the Governour of the Town), and he assembl'd the Chief Effendis or heads of the Law and inquir'd of the Mufti whether it was Lawfull to permit it. They pass'd some days in this

²⁸Indeed, Terry Castle points out that while the more public sorts of masquerades result in the formation of a "promiscuous Multitude" (Addison's term), "the situation was somewhat more restricted at private masked parties held in the townhouses of the aristocracy" (29). We might consider Montagu's treatment of masquerade as being contained by mechanisms similar to those at work in the context of such elite parties. Montagu's performances take place in a doubly protected space, one sanctioned by the temporary permissiveness of the masquerade context *and* fortified by class barriers.

Important Debate, but I insisting on my request, permission was granted" (I:398).²⁹ The spectacle of Montagu's own attempts to gain entrance to the church take centre stage, while the description of the interior of the church itself is by her own admission brief, "dull," and "imperfect" (i:399). The invocation of class privilege functions to make Montagu's body impermeable, a stable signifier, thus distinguishing it from the instability both of the masquerade and of the "objects" (Turkish women) with whom she attempts elsewhere to link the notions of freedom and agency.³⁰

While the letters I have been discussing treat of Turkish women as a collectivity, Montagu also depicts visits to individual noblewomen, the most significant of these visits being those she pays to Fatima, the wife of an important Turkish official. Class

²⁹The story of Montagu's visit to the church recorded by Joseph Spence in his *Anecdotes* highlights the tension in *The Embassy Letters* between her desire to project an image of herself as achieving mobility and power through her Turkish impersonations and her actual dependence on the privileges of rank (see Halsband's *Life* 82-83). In the version Montagu apparently told to Spence, we learn that Montagu was unable to obtain permission from the authorities to visit the church; accordingly, she and the Princess of Transylvania "resolve to dress themselves up in men's clothes, and to run the risk of [secretly entering the church] together" (82). The adoption of male dress not only compensates for lack of permission, but also has the advantage of making Montagu look more daring than she does if she seems to require official approval to occupy the role of a subject in public discourse. What is particularly interesting about this account is that it emphasizes that female Turkish dress was not an empowering alternative for Montagu in this context: she gains the power to exercise her curiosity in the public sphere only by invoking aristocratic privilege or by pretending to a male identity.

³⁰Note that these references to aristocratic privilege are produced in relation to correspondents who would have conceivably required a more stable, conventional positioning on Montagu's part than Lady Mar or the anonymous "Lady" to whom the bathhouse letter is addressed: the letters to Lady Bristol, an important figure at court, tend to cultivate deference and respectability (I:254), while the letters to the Abbé Conti are characterized by Montagu's declared desire to oblige him (I:315).

distinctions become even more important in this context. By identifying herself with the fantastically beautiful Fatima, Montagu actually distances herself from Turkish women as well as from her arguments that the spaces they occupy and the clothing they wear grant them greater freedom; in turn, Montagu accedes to a more stable position of agency and authority based on aristocratic privilege. Fatima possesses all of the attributes of a successful European court lady, actually outdoing the most admired and respected of them. Montagu is "perswaded" that "could she [Fatima] be suddenly transported upon the most polite Throne of Europe, nobody would think her other than born and bred to be a Queen, thô educated in a Country we call barbarous. To say all in a Word, our most celebrated English Beautys would vanish near her" (18 April 1717; I:350). In a subsequent portrait of Fatima, Montagu goes even farther in contradicting her claim that the agency of Turkish women derives from their segregation from the world. This second visit to Fatima is preceded by a call on the "Sultana Hafise" who, according to Montagu, "is what one would naturally expect to find a Turkish Lady, willing to oblige, but not knowing how to go about it, and tis easy to see in her Manner that she has liv'd excluded from the World" (10 March 1718; I:379-387). The exclusion of the Sultana Hafise and the corresponding inclusion of Fatima can be seen as a reaction on Montagu's part against the more limiting connotations of female seclusion within a private, domestic sphere in her own culture.³¹ The portrait of Fatima, on the other hand, is modelled on

³¹I do not mean to suggest that the *harem* is equivalent to the sphere of domesticity in eighteenth-century English culture. On the contrary, as Leslie Peirce argues in The Imperial Harem, the assumption that the seclusion of women in the *harem* "precluded

a notion of the public, aristocratic woman. Fatima mirrors several of the most favourable attributes Montagu associates with her own person, implicitly arguing that true agency derives for women from aristocratic status, beauty, and wit:

But Fatima has all the politeness and good breeding of a court, with an air that inspires at once Respect and tenderness; and now I understand her Language, I find her Wit as engaging as her Beauty. She is very curious after the manners of other countrys and has not that partiality for her own, so common to little minds. (I:386)

A certain worldliness, epitomized by the purportedly disinterested curiosity about other cultural customs, is attributed to Fatima. Thus, the portrait of Fatima is rather like the image Montagu constructs for herself as an observer of other cultures in opposition to male travel writers.

But, in constructing Fatima as a mirror image of herself and in elevating Fatima above other Turkish women, Montagu effectively reserves agency unto herself, for she implies that the social and cultural institutions which shape Turkish women's lives resign them to a passive, private role. Significantly, the reinscription of agency within the

their exercise of any influence beyond the physical boundaries of the *harem* itself" is an erroneous one (6). I propose that Montagu misreads the spatial division of gender and power in Turkish society as corresponding to an ideology of domesticity which would delimit a woman's ability to participate in the public sphere; she prefers to present herself as embracing the image of a thoroughly public and hence (she thinks) empowered woman, Fatima. In fact, Peirce suggests that the imperial family of the Ottoman empire was intrinsically political and hierarchal, so that "although they rarely crossed the *harem* boundary to the outside world, ...high-ranking women enjoyed considerable prestige and exercised considerable influence in that world" (12). What Montagu perceives as a lack of sophistication and influence deriving from seclusion would thus likely have been related to the Sultana's mourning for her husband, the late Emperor Mustapha, and to her loss of status in Ottoman court culture following his death (i:380 n1-5).

bounds of European aristocratic femininity is further developed through a discussion of Fatima's ethnicity. Montagu's Greek servant expresses surprise that Fatima's appearance is so like a Christian woman, prompting Fatima to admit that her mother was, in fact, a Polish woman captured in wartime (I:386). Rather than responding to this information with the latitudinarianism she purports to favour, Montagu sees as an opportunity to reconsolidate the claim she wants to make for Fatima's probable success in the world of the European courts: "I assur'd her that if all the Turkish Ladys were like her, it was absolutely necessary to confine them from public view for the repose of Mankind, and proceeded to tell her what a noise such a face as hers would make in London or Paris" (I:387). Ironically, segregation by sex is invoked here as a measure to protect men from women, not as an organization of social space promising to further women's agency. The response that Montagu attributes to Fatima is allegedly quite a flattering one: "I can't believe you...if Beauty was so much valu'd in your Country as you say, they would never have suffer'd you to leave it" (I:387). This courtly compliment accomplishes its own gesture of limitation by proposing that the best index of Montagu's value as a woman of beauty would have been for her own country to refuse her freedom of movement.³² Paradoxically, Montagu's strategy of excluding other women threatens to

³²Lowe criticizes Montagu's use of the rhetoric of courtly love poetry to describe Fatima (48). My analysis elaborates on Lowe's rather vague comment that Montagu's lapses into this mode of "female objectification and subordination" is "inevitable" in an eighteenth-century context (48). Montagu's upper-class status is one of the most powerful resources of identity she has available to her, and courtly compliments are one way of reinforcing class bonds; the contradictory element is that these discourses in some ways promote the reinscription of gender norms.

unravel the very position that she builds upon it; she cannot quite secure for herself a position safely outside the reach of the objectifying discourse which she attempts to employ for her own benefit.

Towards the end of the correspondence, the conflict played out between resistance and legibility in Montagu's representations of separate female space and women's clothing and manners are re-articulated in a debate she carries on with her correspondents, and with herself, about her facility in learning new languages and the consequences of doing so.³³ At the end of the letter to Pope cited earlier, Montagu flaunts her quickness in learning Turkish: "You see I am pritty far gone in Oriental Learning, and to say truth I study very hard" (I:337). Here, losing herself--being "far gone"--in another culture seems an unambiguously positive asset, and Montagu seems certain of her ability to manage the process and its outcomes: it is not merely a state acquired, but a body of knowledge deliberately and judiciously studied. In a similar, but even more confident vein, Montagu's letter to Pope from Belgrade Village elaborates on the conceit of her journey as a death. As we have seen in the context of "Elegy to the Memory of an

³³Campbell sees the theme of translation as revealing Montagu's dependency on male artistic models, suggesting that "Lady Mary formulates her erotic and aesthetic response as a kind of translation from male texts" (78). Shifting from away from gender issues to focus on cross-cultural concerns, Aravamudan argues that "linguistic alienation...is one of the first signs of the culture shock from which Montagu wishes to cushion herself" (92). While Campbell chastizes Montagu for being derivative and Aravamudan circumvents the connections between "linguistic alienation" and gender ideology, I suggest that Montagu's discussion of translation emphasizes that there is no neutral space available to Montagu in which to reformulate her identity, that she has no language but "stolen" language out of which she can attempt to forge an authoritative voice.

Unfortunate Lady," Pope sees the distance between them as an occasion for the relaxation of decorum, and a slew of demands (all rhetorical, of course, but with undeniably erotic overtones) that she acquiesce in defining her body as a sexual and aesthetic property. He writes to her in Vienna in anticipation of the next stage of the journey: "Lastly I shall hear how the very first night you lay at Pera, you had a Vision of Mahomet's Paradise, and happily awaked without a Soul. From which blessed instant the beautiful Body was left at full liberty to perform all the agreeable functions it was made for" (The Correspondence of Alexander Pope; 10 Nov. 1716; I:369). On the other hand, the variations Montagu performs on this theme of her own death enable her to adopt a posture of detachment from the world and control over her self-presentation. She asserts that her Turkish experiences have made it possible for her to translate herself into a serene happiness: "But what perswades me more fully of my Decease is the Situation of my own Mind, the profound ignorance in which I am in of what passes amongst the Living, which only comes to me by chance, and the great Calmness with which I receive it" (17 June 1717; I:366).

The contrast between the attractive calm of Turkey and the exigencies of English society (particularly English intellectualism) is further developed through several taunting comments directed to her male correspondents. To Pope, Montagu contends ironically that "To Say Truth, I am Sometimes very weary of this Singing and dancing and Sunshine, and wish for the Smoak and Impertinencies in which you toil, th^o I endeavour to perswade myself that I live in a more agreeable Variety than you do" (I:366). This

derisive reference to the unpleasantness of London is followed by an outline of two opposing weekly itineraries, one describing how she spends her time in Turkey, the other detailing what she would be doing were she in London:

...and that Monday Seting of partridges, Tuesday reading English, Wednesday Studying the Turkish Language, in which, by the way, I am already very learned), Thursday Classical Authors, Friday spent in Writing, Saturday at my Needle, and Sunday admitting of Visits and hearing Musick, is a better way of disposing the Week than Monday at the Drawing Room, Tuesday Lady Mohun's, Wednesday the Opera, Thursday the Play, Friday Mrs. Chetwynd's, etc: a perpetual round of hearing the same Scandal and seeing the same follies acted over and over, which here affect me no more than they do other dead people. (I:366-367)

The emphasis placed on the intellectual texture of her existence in Turkey negates point for point the itinerary of desires, labour, and social interaction marked out for Montagu as an upper-class woman in her own culture. Rather than being a consumer of a narrow range of cultural products such as theatre and scandal, in Turkey Montagu is a producer and a participant in a much greater variety of cultural activities. In addition, this description of the variety of occupations in which she is allowed to participate while in Turkey refutes the erroneous theology that underlies Pope's claim that in associating herself with Turkish women she has reduced herself to a mere body--namely, his belief that according to Islam women have no souls.³⁴ Montagu makes this point about the superiority of her life in Turkey in a more straightforward manner to the Abbé Conti,

³⁴In "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," Leila Ahmed suggests that Montagu had her theology right in this instance. Ahmed argues that "there is no record...in the body of orthodox Muslim literature of the notion that women are animals or have no souls although it's an idea that has surfaced with tiresome regularity...since Westerners have been writing about Islam" (526).

declaring that "I had rather be a rich Effendi [scholar] with all his ignorance, than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge" (I:415). In claiming the desire and the power to translate herself from one cultural idiom to another Montagu seeks to restructure her identity, one that would allow her an effortless and integrated enjoyment of scholarly pursuits and social and cultural interactions.

But, in another letter, this one addressed to an anonymous female correspondent, we come to see that the ability to translate herself into the terms of Turkish culture is not unambiguously empowering for Montagu (16 March 1718; I:387-391). The possibility that her experiences in Turkey might actually eradicate her social and cultural position in England begins to threaten her sense of agency rather than promoting it. This is evident in her reflections on the learning of new languages:

I fancy you are now wondering at my profound Learning, but alas, dear Madam, I am allmost falln into the misfortune so common to the Ambitious: while they are employ'd on distant, insignificant Conquests abroad, a Rebellion starts up at home. I am in great danger of loseing my English. I find it is not halfe so easy to me to write in it as it was a twelve-month ago. I am forc'd to study for expressions, and must leave off all other Languages and try to learn my Mother tongue. (I:390)

The notion that she might lose her ability to use English threatens the dissolution of her claim to occupy a position as a participant in discourse, capable of meaningful speech: "I am afraid I shall at last know none as I should do. I live in a place that very well represents the tower of Babel" (I:390). The reference to "Ambition" is especially important because it suggests a questioning of the merits of losing herself in the cultures she has encountered on her travels, a questioning mobilized by the injunctions against

women seeking after fame that complement the English ideology of female passivity and inferiority. Finally, Montagu seeks to resolve this conundrum by shifting the basis of her argument away from the positive, utopian potential of translation. Towards the end of the letter, she continues to claim that her facility in learning languages represents a source of freedom and agency, but implies that it ceases to stand on its own merits. In fact, its meaningfulness can only be marked out in terms of how it makes her superior to other English women's lack of accomplishment: "This [multilingualism] seems incredible to you, and is (in my Mind) one of the most curious things in this country, and takes off very much from the Merit of our Ladys who set up for such extrodinary Geniuses upon the credit of some superficial knowledge of French and Italian" (I:390).

The difficulty for Montagu of integrating her utopian impulses with the exigencies of her social and cultural position in England, and the strength of her impulse to create an invulnerable position by distancing herself from others, are problems voiced with particular cogency in the poetry she writes while in the vicinity of Constantinople. Her verses written in the British Palace at Pera provide us with a spatial metaphor--the chiosk--that encapsulates a sense of the contradictory position into which she writes herself in The Embassy Letters ("Constantinople, To -----," 26 December 1717; Essays and Poems pp.206-210). In this poem, Montagu attempts to invoke a pastoral realm, a space free from compromise, as she opens with the words, "Give me Great God (said I) a Little Farm/ In Summer shady and in Winter warm..." (1-2). In the end, however, none of the "prospects" available from her vantage point in the chiosk, neither the navy on the

sea nor the city of Constantinople itself, with its endless succession of beautiful woods, palaces, gardens, and domes, offer her a position in social space free from intrusion or interruption (92-98). Much differently, Pope seems able to assume the privilege of a commanding and secure position from which to view the world in his "Ode to Solitude": "Happy the man, whose wish and care/ A few paternal acres bound,/ Content to breathe his native air,/ In his own ground" (VI:1-4).³⁵ The concluding lines of Montagu's poem reiterate her determination to retreat from the world in order to achieve a comprehensive perspective. She insists that nothing

So soothes my wishes or so charms my Mind
 As this retreat, secure from Human kind,
 No Knave's successful craft does Spleen excite,
 No Coxcomb's Tawdry Splendour shocks my Sight,
 No Mob Alarm awakes my Female Fears,
 No unrewarded Merit asks my Tears,
 Nor Praise my Mind, nor Envy hurts my Ear,
 Even Fame it selfe can hardly reach me here,
 Impertinence with all her tattling train,
 Fair sounding Flattery's delicious bane,
 Censorious Folly, noisy Party rage,
 The thousand Tongues with which she must engage
 Who dare have Virtue in a vicious Age.
 (99-111)

Though Montagu is ostensibly referring to the city of Constantinople in this passage, the

³⁵As Valerie Rumbold argues, the irony underlying Pope's confidence is that "as a Roman Catholic Pope was excluded from the universities, from public office, and from the inheritance or purchase of land, all three factors which traditionally distinguished upper-class males" (2). Yet the power of patriarchal myth is such that Pope can construct his self-image as a secure property owner with evident ease. Montagu, though a member of the aristocratic elite and influential in court circles, cannot make the same assumption; her pastoral perspective is markedly more hard-won.

references to the "knave," "coxcomb," and "mob alarm" resonate more specifically with the English social and political context, as do the references to "merit," "praise," and "envy," problems about which she does not generally complain in relation to Turkey. In any case, the telling point here is that neither Turkey, Constantinople, nor even the spaces in this culture specific to women, be they *harems* or *hammams*, become for Montagu in this poem her metaphor for retreat from the social world, for freedom from the compromises it demands of an aristocratic woman. It is when alone in the chiosk, confidently surveying the geography of Constantinople, that her position seems most secure.

CHAPTER THREE

"The thousand Tongues with which she must Engage": Negotiating Gossip in an English Context

The position of isolation evoked in the verses written in the chiosk is less tenable, however, than it initially seems. The reference to "Fame" in the concluding lines of the poem is especially resonant. On the one hand, it is desirable for Montagu to put herself beyond the risk of developing a negative reputation. On the other hand, if participation in social discourse is in itself perilous for an eighteenth-century woman, Montagu also understands that "virtue" and respect are not automatically hers. For Montagu to ignore the clamour of "the Thousand Tongues," of the discourses that circulate in her milieu, would be, in effect, to resign herself to the position of abject other to the male voices that dominate and are privileged in her society and culture. This she refuses to do. The Embassy Letters show us that Montagu's efforts to negotiate a position of visibility and audibility for herself operate within the sphere of social discourse and that no position of immunity is available to her. As a way of compensating for the lack of a pristinely objective position from which to view her world, Montagu misinterprets and misplaces the women of the Turkish and Viennese court aristocracies; their bodies, voices, clothing, and behaviours are structured so as to make Montagu's status as enlightened aristocrat and intellectual appear more significant and secure than it really is.

The letters Montagu wrote to her sister, Lady Mar, during the 1720s suggest that

Montagu has at least as much difficulty in disengaging herself from the multifarious and contradictory demands and possibilities of social discourse in a private context as she does in the more public form of The Embassy Letters.³⁶ In the process of cataloguing, evaluating, and ridiculing the behaviour of English aristocrats, the letters to Lady Mar speak both within and against dominant cultural scripts of femininity, persistently working to challenge the normative exclusion of women from public discourse. Yet, even in these ostensibly more personal letters, Montagu continues to define her identity through portraits of other women, sometimes provoking a subversive "expansion" of the norms of aristocratic femininity, but just as often excluding other women--defining them as "excessive"--in order to create a renewed social and cultural position for herself (Butler, Gender Trouble 29). Although Montagu continues to yearn in these letters for the less complicated position of a detached and confidently critical observer, her attempts to disentangle herself from her milieu only succeed in indicating the extreme difficulty of transcending or evading the imperatives of intelligibility.

Before analyzing Montagu's letters to Lady Mar and comparing them to The Embassy Letters, I will explore some of the material and ideological factors that have

³⁶Lady Mar (1690-1761) was born Lady Frances Pierrepont. She married the 6th Earl of Mar in 1714, acceding to the title Countess of Mar. Her husband was exiled from England in 1720 as a result of his involvement with the Jacobites, and she joined him in Paris in 1721. Montagu's letters to Lady Mar are addressed to Paris over the seven year period of her exile there. Lady Mar suffered from depression throughout her time in France, and upon her return to England she was given into Montagu's care; a custody battle ensued between Montagu and Lord Mar's brother, the Hon. James Erskine of Grange (II:1,86; Halsband 133-5).

shaped the direction of critical commentary on Montagu's work. This discussion is necessary for two reasons: 1) the fact that recent critical commentary on Montagu's literary production has tended on the whole to privilege The Embassy Letters and so to overlook the majority of her writings, including poetry, essays, a play, and the rest of her extensive body of letters, which spans a 54 year period (1708-1762); and 2) the tendency of critics to seek in Montagu's post-Embassy letters a resolution, rather than a continuing elaboration, of the ideological conflicts which dominate the earlier epistles. Among the factors that have militated against and influenced discussions of Montagu's letters to Lady Mar by twentieth-century critics are the circumstances of the letters' production and publication, as well as the predilection of critics to privilege unity and coherence as markers of literary merit. As Felicity Nussbaum points out in relation to the study of eighteenth-century diaries and journals, there have been "practical reasons for the neglect of serial narrative forms as well as critical assumptions" contributing to their being overlooked (The Autobiographical Subject 23). In the case of Montagu's correspondence, the letters to Lady Mar (along with the letters to Wortley, Lady Bute, Lady Pomfret and Algarotti) remained in unpublished manuscript form until the nineteenth century.³⁷ The earliest editions, produced by Montagu's descendants, had edited portions of her correspondence with Lady Mar and had eliminated other letters. These individuals were evidently motivated to censor her writings by their desire to

³⁷Halsband details the history of editions of Montagu's letters in The Collected Letters.

construct and to bolster Montagu's reputation as a distinguished and refined literary gentlewoman.³⁸ In any case, a complete edition containing all of the known letters by Montagu remained unavailable until the publication of Halsband's 1965 edition. It is true, of course, that Montagu had recognized The Embassy Letters as her masterpiece and intended them to be received as such; they were extensively reworked throughout Montagu's lifetime and she secretly arranged to have them published after her death. However, although the letters to Lady Mar and others were not identified by the author as individuated texts, there is evidence to suggest that she did see potential for winning fame in her letters to her other correspondents. In a letter to Lady Mar, Montagu compares her own letters favourably to those of the acclaimed Madame de Sevigny, which had just been made available in England: "very pretty they are, but I assert without the least vanity that mine will be full as entertaining 40 years hence. I advise you therefore to put none of them to the use of Wast paper" (June 1726; II:66). Clearly, Montagu seems to have desired that her letters be circulated and preserved; however, her wryly voiced expectation that her work will be treated as "Wast paper" registers her simultaneous awareness of the very real possibility that her works will be destroyed, either through negligence or through censorship.

While the practical problems facing the study of Montagu's correspondence have

³⁸Halsband notes that previous editions eliminated passages from Montagu's account of the Schemers (specifically the reference to "Whoring" [March 1724; II:40]) and omitted the lewd verse she includes in a letter commenting on the "Noise" Madam de Broglio makes at court (Dec. 1724; II:43).

been in many ways resolved for twentieth-century readers by Halsband's comprehensive edition of the letters, there remain in circulation among twentieth-century critics several assumptions that function to privilege study of The Embassy Letters over Montagu's other correspondence. Some critics, in an effort to win for Montagu a place in the eighteenth-century canon, have sought to find coherence of personality and purpose in particular groups of letters, such as those to Lady Mar. In his preface to Volume II of the letters, Halsband praises the letters to Lady Mar for their "concentrated and sustained brilliance," remarking that "she spiced her letters with wit to amuse and cynicism to console" (II:ix). Bruce Redford's treatment of Montagu in The Converse of the Pen (1986) is similarly congratulatory in tone. It is his contention that the achievement of the best eighteenth-century familiar letters, including Montagu's, is that they "fashion a distinctive world at once internally consistent, vital, and self-supporting" (9). Thus, the predilection of these two critics is to locate in Montagu's letters a stable, controlled voice, such as we might find in eighteenth-century fiction or autobiography; in so doing, they avoid engaging with and so obfuscate the letters' articulation of the contradictions of gender and class ideologies.³⁹

³⁹The responses of twentieth-century readers to a third important set of Montagu's letters, those written to her daughter, Lady Bute, during the period 1746-1761, have been influenced by similar factors. The theme of women's education is prominent in the letters to Lady Mar, a fact which makes them inviting to social historians (see Pollak, Rogers, Stone); on the other hand, Bruce Redford, in his chapter on Montagu, concentrates on the stoicism and world-weariness Montagu expresses in the letters to her daughter. Significantly, however, Isobel Grundy's recent work detailing Montagu's reading habits treats the letters to Lady Bute more fully on their own terms (rather than mining them for anecdotes or seeking to find in them a cohesive and inspirational

Neither has contemporary feminist criticism of the letters to Lady Mar been entirely exempt from simplifying Montagu's position. As Rita Felski argues, Anglo-American feminist criticism has tended to operate "with a conception of patriarchal ideology as a homogeneous and uniformly repressive phenomenon masking an authentic female subjectivity" (Beyond Feminist Aesthetics [1989] 27); consequently, the literary production of women has often been "read as containing an implicit critique or subversion of patriarchal values" (27). The problematic results of attempting to fit Montagu's gossip letters into this model of power relations are evident, in varying degrees, in the two most comprehensive feminist treatments of Montagu. Patricia Meyer Spacks's evaluation of Montagu's letters over the course of several articles and books consistently returns to the proposition that the "purpose" of autobiographies is the "projection and justification of personality," of a consistent subjectivity (Imagining a Self [1976] 314). Her conclusion regarding Montagu's letters dealing with her position in English society is that

The emotional power of her letters derives from their firm sense of self. Despite Lady Mary's full awareness of her limited opportunities for action or public status, she constructs a self-image by recognizing the positive possibilities of a richly acknowledged vulnerability. (86)

Cynthia Lowenthal's Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Familiar Letter (1994) takes a significant step towards remedying Spacks's tendency to locate in Montagu's work an

personality). Please note that Montagu's letters to Lady Bute fall outside of the scope of my study mostly because the "trope of the other woman" is more subdued in them, but also due to considerations of length.

essentially female authorial voice by arguing that Montagu's "letters chart the social, political, and ideological changes she observes and shed light on the tensions inherent in the competing demands of public and private life..." (4). Nonetheless, Lowenthal's study accentuates Montagu's control over her subject matter and assumes her mental and emotional mastery of her world--at the expense of attending to what is termed the "self-in-conflict" (4). This drift is evident in Lowenthal's evaluation of the letters to Lady Mar, which installs a coherent, consistent self as the creative force standing behind and authorizing Montagu's cultural production. For example, in concluding her fourth chapter, "The Spectatress': Satire and the Aristocrats," Lowenthal asserts that:

Only from the Italian countryside and only when she sends letters focussed on three generations of aristocratic women...does she [Montagu] come to believe that female retirement is the only place that allows a gentlewoman to maintain her visible status as an aristocrat while avoiding the conflict, the violations and transgressions, inescapable in the social world. (152)

Here, Lowenthal overinterprets Montagu's decision to leave England for Italy as a deliberate attempt on Montagu's part to resolve the complexities of her life in England when, in fact, it was entirely typical for members of the English aristocracy to take lengthy tours of the continent in this period. On the contrary, this detail would seem to suggest that Montagu's European sojourn fits in with conventional social practice rather subverting it.⁴⁰

⁴⁰Montagu met Horace Walpole and his sister-in-law, Lady Margaret Walpole, in Italy, among numerous other British citizens who were touring southern Europe (see Halsband's *Life*, especially Chapter 12). As well, there is evidence to suggest that Montagu did not entirely relinquish with her move her efforts to empower herself by commenting on violations and transgressions of social codes, for the letters she writes to

In a more general sense, readings that impose a model of narrative consistency on Montagu's letters to Lady Mar and/or attempt to locate in them an essential female identity disclose a certain uneasiness or difficulty with the style and subject matter of these letters. Indeed, faced with the heterogeneous, serial form of the letters to Lady Mar and their ostensibly trivial, even nasty, subject matter, gossip, critics have for the most part tended to ignore them or to relegate them to the role of a sourcebook for historical anecdote. It is in some ways relatively comfortable for twentieth-century feminists to read of Montagu's tolerance and cultural relativism in The Embassy Letters, although I hope that I have sufficiently problematized this practice and the assumptions that underlie it in Chapter 2. On the other hand, gossip, which, as Spacks points out in her study of the topic, often involves the repetition of scandalous stories, relating to themes of sex, violence, and money (Gossip 68), unsettles the notion that women construct their identities on principles of empathy and sharing, opening up the discomfiting possibility that the definition of an identity and a sense of authority may proceed through identificatory violence. Unfortunately, as Spacks further explains, gossip's reputation as an entirely trivial phenomenon tends to preclude serious engagement with its cultural and social functions and consequences, though its reputation as pure malice has inspired numerous diatribes against it (Gossip 6, 16).

Given gossip's rather vexed history, I need to explore Montagu's relationship to

another female friend, Lady Pomfret, from Italy and France during the 1740's continue to relay and delight in scandal (see The Complete Letters, Vol. II for Montagu's letters to Lady Pomfret).

it in a wider sense before proceeding to analyze its specific rhetorical and ideological functions in the letters to Lady Mar. Indeed, we might well ask in the first place why Montagu would elect to turn to gossip, with all of its negative connotations, as her chief rhetorical mode in the letters to Lady Mar. That gossip dominates the letters to Lady Mar is especially surprising in light of the distaste she expresses for gossip in The Embassy Letters. As we saw towards the end of Chapter 2, Montagu seems prepared to forgo the "perpetual round of hearing the same Scandal and seeing the same follies acted over and over," having supposedly become convinced during her stay in Turkey that there are more gratifying and dignified ways for an upper-class woman to spend her time (I:367). Thus, Montagu seems to be in accordance with the dominant contemporary penchant for denigrating gossip as a destructive form of female folly (Shevelow 96). As Kathryn Shevelow observes,

The definition of female tattle as a vice stood in sharp contrast to the status accorded to what men said to each other, for instance, in the coffee-house: male "idle conversation" was respectable, even important; its feminine equivalent was trivial, perhaps vicious. Men met in public, women in private. Men "conversed," women tattled. (97)

A later essay of Montagu's "The Nonsense of Common-Sense, Number VI" confirms that Montagu saw gossip in terms similar to those Shevelow outlines (Poems and Essays 130-134).⁴¹ The essay suggests that her repudiation of gossip has two contingent motivating

⁴¹The title of the essay refers to a weekly newspaper which Montagu published (anonymously) from 1737-1738. According to Halsband, the nine essays Montagu published in this series had two purposes: to offer "impartial" comment on "manners, morals, and politics" and "to defend Walpole and his ministry from the Opposition press" (105).

forces: 1) her concern to distance herself from a feminized and feminizing rhetorical mode; and 2) her determination to claim a place for herself as a woman in a rational and respectable mode of public interchange. Here, Montagu takes on the guise of a "Moralist" in order to refute the claim of the author of the periodical "Common Sense" that women ought to resign the "pursuit" of the "present pleasures" of public entertainments (130). Unlike her adversary, Montagu denies that trivial occupations like gossip will protect women from losing their innocence; she repudiates the notion that "Gosiping, Scandal, Lying, and a whole troop of Follies" are the only "preservatives" for female "Virtue" (131). Rather, Montagu would encourage women to temper their "propensity to Gallantry by Reason or Reflection," and she emphasizes the importance for moralists of treating women with a dignity befitting their capacity to reason: "I have some thoughts of exhibiting a set of Pictures of such meritorious Ladys, where I shall say nothing of the fire of their Eyes or the pureness of their Complexions, but give them such praises as befits a rational sensible Being" (134).

Significantly, Montagu makes this argument in "The Nonsense of Common-Sense" having adopted a male persona; in particular, she professes to observe the representation of women in her culture from the dispassionate vantage point of a "Freind" of the "Fair sex" (130). By contrast, in the letters to Lady Mar, Montagu adopts neither a masculine persona, nor a consistent posture of disinterested rationality. If the attractive isolation of the chiosk is unavailable to Montagu in her role as a woman in English aristocratic society, then so too is the idealized intellectual and political space of "The Nonsense of

Common-Sense," a space similar in its democratizing potential to the women's coffee-house with which Montagu identified herself while in Turkey. Rather, the tea-table, and the seemingly trivial and sometimes vicious exchange of information among women associated with it, would have been the mode of social interaction and commentary most readily available to Montagu as a woman in an English context (Shevelow 96). That Montagu recognizes gossip as the one public rhetorical mode in which she has an automatic right, as a woman, to participate is evident when she later writes to Lady Pomfret from Italy: "I desire no other intelligence from my friends but tea table chat, which has been allowed to our sex by so long a prescription, I believe no lady will dispute it at present" (Nov. 4, 1742; II:294).

In admitting that gossip is a mode of conversation which lends itself to women and in employing gossip in the letters to Lady Mar, however, Montagu does not by any means resign herself to a lesser, restricted role in English society and culture.⁴² In Gossip, Spacks reminds us that gossip can function as a rhetoric of intimacy and

⁴²In "Tea, Gender, and Domesticity" (1994), Beth Kowaleski-Wallace explores the relationship between the tea-table/gossip and the cultural construction of womanhood in eighteenth-century England, attending in particular to the class distinctions that permeate moralists' attitudes towards these associated phenomena. Kowaleski-Wallace argues that men such as Addison and Steele advocated tea-drinking and gossip because they recognized that "power, when located in the body of the middle or upper-class woman, can be managed" (141); on the other hand, working women were discouraged from tea drinking because it threatened to undermine their productivity as mothers, wives, and workers (141-142). Notably, with its fluctuation between subversion of male control and collusion with the exigencies of social intelligibility, Montagu's deployment of gossip challenges Kowaleski-Wallace's understanding of middle and upper-class women's gossip as being thoroughly structured by an ideology of male dominance and female liminality.

inclusion, one that allows conversationalists, letter-writers, and novelists to valorize information, events, and relationships that are considered unworthy of serious public discussion within dominant culture (Gossip 5). More specifically, Spacks refers to Mary Astell, an older contemporary and friend of Montagu's, who speculated about the positive value of talking about others:

The only way we can make of that Time which the world borrows of us and necessary Civility exacts, is to lay in Matter of Observation. I do not mean that we should make Ill-Natur'd Remarks, or Uncharitable Reflections on Particular Persons, but only that we take notice of the several workings of Human Nature, the little turns and distinctions of Various Tempers; there being somewhat peculiar almost in every one, which cannot be learned but by conversation and the Reflections it Occasions. (Astell, A Serious Proposal to the Ladies 142; qtd. in Spacks 36)

This passage comes from Astell's Serious Proposal (1697), a treatise in which Astell outlines a plan for the creation of a "Monastery" or "Religious Retirement" that would allow women to devote themselves to intellectual and spiritual concerns (as opposed to worldly or domestic ones) (Astell 36-37). In Astell's view, the activities of observing others and conversing about them can enable women to engage critically with their social world--but only if these activities are sufficiently dissociated from their potential to deride. Montagu had apparently been inspired during her youth to dream up a similar plan for an "English Monastery" for women: "It had been a favorite Scheme of mine when I was fiveteen, and had I then been mistriss of an Independent fortune, would certainly have executed it and elected myself Lady Abbess" (Halsband's Life 7; To Lady Bute, 20 Oct. 1755; III:97). This plan resonates strongly with the scholarly ambitions

of Laetitia, the heroine of Montagu's "Autobiographical Fragment"; but whereas Laetitia seems content to pursue her learning in relative isolation, Montagu, the historical personage, seems to have desired the existence of a community that could foster her intellectual needs and goals. Unable to bring this scheme of founding an all-female scholarly community into effect, and, admittedly, never seriously committed to such a plan, Montagu seeks rather to achieve a measure of social and intellectual autonomy and power by renovating the female relationships in which she found herself involved: specifically, her friendship with Lady Mar, and, more generally, her social connections with other English noblewomen. However, as we shall see, despite Montagu's insistence on her devotion to entertaining her sister, the letters to Lady Mar make it tremendously difficult to extricate the affirmative and derogatory modes of gossip from one another.

An early letter describing the celebration of the Prince of Wales's birthday exemplifies how Montagu refurbishes gossip as an enabling, public discursive mode for women (Oct. 1723: II:31-32). Here, Montagu explicitly suggests that she crafts her representation of social intrigue in order to nurture her bond with her sister:

I write to you at this time piping hot from the Birth night, my Brain warm'd with all the Agreeable Ideas that fine Cloths, fine Gentlemen, brisk Tunes and Lively dances can raise there. 'Tis to be hoped that my Letter will entertain you; at least you will certainly have the freshest Account of all passages on that Glorious Day. (II:31)

The accent in this letter is clearly on Montagu's ability to relay up-to-the-minute information--and to relay it with flair. The tone conveys an uncomplicated enthusiasm and a sense of certainty about the validity of her first-hand observations. The implication

is that Montagu gains from her correspondence with Lady Mar the satisfaction of presenting herself as possessed of a privileged vantage point from which to disseminate and control information. As well, she is confident that Lady Mar, too, will benefit from the "entertainment" her letters produce. In this sense, we can begin to see how gossip might figure as a way of reinvigorating and reinforcing bonds between women, especially when they are sisters and thus members of the same gender and class.

Importantly, Montagu's subversive deployment of gossip has strongly evident public, cultural reverberations in addition to its private, familial significance. Montagu communicates the specific details of the birth night celebration, telling, for example, of Mrs. West, "who is a great Prude, having but 2 lovers at a Time; I think those are Lord Haddingtoun and Mr. Lindsay, the one for use, the one for show" (II:31). Her comment on Mrs. West's behaviour draws attention to the existence of female sexual indiscretion in aristocratic circles, simultaneously exposing the gap between the conventional definition of "prude" and its (mis)use in her milieu. Montagu thus asserts her ability to redefine what it means to be an overly modest woman. Complementing her analysis of prudery, Montagu offers a parodic judgement on the indiscretions of her peers in the second paragraph of the same letter:

The World improves in one virtue to a violent degree--I mean plain dealing. Hipocrisy being (as the Scripture declares) a damnable Sin, I hope our publicans and Sinners will be sav'd by the open profession of the contrary virtue. I was told by a very good Author, who is deep in the secret, that at this very minute there is a bill cooking up at a Hunting Seat in Norfolk to have Not taken out the Commandments and clap'd into the Creed the Ensuing session of Parliament. (II:31-32)

Montagu's use of gossip empowers her to appropriate and so to parody the voice of the law, of conventional wisdom. In particular, the ironic references to "Scripture" and to "parliament," supposed bastions of social order, insinuate that the law itself may be rewritten and manipulated to suit the inclinations of its subjects. Thus, Montagu implies that authoritative discourse is an arbitrary medium which can be used to valorize any position one likes, so rendering questions of morality obscure. We might say, following Butler, that Montagu "re/cites" the term *prude* and the notion of plain dealing versus hypocrisy effectively to revise the norms regulating sexual behaviour in her social circle (Bodies That Matter 13).

But it would be misleading to focus solely on the benefits that accrue to Montagu from her deployment of scandal. Mary Astell, a devout Christian, is optimistic about the possibility of maintaining a distinction between appropriate, constructive talk about others and "Ill-Natur'd Remarks and Uncharitable Reflections" (142). In distinct contrast to Astell's Proposal, Montagu's letters disclose a vested interest on the author's part in ridiculing other women. The existence of such an interest on Montagu's part is evident in the way she prefaces her account of the birth night celebrations:

First you must know that I led up the ball, which you'll stare at; but what's more, I think in my conscience I made one of the best figures there. To say truth, people are grown so extravagantly ugly that we old Beautys are force'd to come out on show days to keep the Court in Countenance. (31)

Invoking the deeper authority of "conscience," Montagu avows her own beauty and social status at the expense of the other women present. She rhetorically disfigures their bodies

and reputations: the fact of their extravagant ugliness makes it possible for Montagu to install herself in a position of cultural visibility, power, and judgement. We should, furthermore, note that Montagu's relegation of the women of the court to an abject status in this passage is predicated on a process of collusion with dominant assumptions about women's weakness and lust; the other women's inability to manage their own persons--that is, to make themselves attractive enough to appear at court--puts Montagu's body, but more importantly her epistolary wit, into flattering relief. Therefore, while it is evident that Montagu's letters to Lady Mar offer critical resignifications of the regulatory norms of her social milieu, it is less clear that interpretation of women's prudery, vanity, and indiscretion effectively challenges the hegemony of the normative definitions against which she purportedly writes.

In what follows, I shall examine how Montagu's violently satirical rejections of her social peers, particularly women, simultaneously oppose and reinforce dominant gender and class ideologies. First, I will examine two more of Montagu's polished, extended accounts of aristocratic women's self-presentations at public events, considering how Montagu interweaves the celebration of gender transgression with attempts to stabilize the intelligibility of her own position. The first example, Montagu's critique of the Schemers, derides a group of male revellers in a scathingly parodic tone, thus demonstrating a sympathy for the fate of other women. However, in the second instance, an account of the women who attend the coronation of George II, Montagu's position is more thoroughly contradicted by her desire to celebrate the challenges other women pose

to dominant gender norms and her proclivity to disfigure and exclude these same challenges. Subsequently, through an examination of a series of more ephemeral passages concerning marriage and extra-marital affairs, I will explore how Montagu's commitment to an ideal of companionate marriage gives rise to feelings of isolation and of frustration with the normative practices of marriage in her milieu. In some ways, Montagu's investment in an ideal of companionate marriage prompts her to distance herself perhaps even more thoroughly from women whom she sees as unsuccessful in love. Finally, when I come to consider some of Montagu's more introspective moments in the letters, we shall see that the rhetorical violence perpetrated by Montagu's repetition of gossip articulates her (otherwise unrepresentable) desires and fears, as well as working to secure her sense of social superiority, pleasure, and control.

The ambivalence at the heart of Montagu's satirical enterprise in the letters to Lady Mar is evident in her commentary on a group of revellers known as "The Schemers" (March 1724; II:36-40). Worried about Lady Mar's failure to respond to her letters, Montagu attempts to renew her sister's interest in the correspondence and in English affairs--to break through her "indifference" and "coldness"--by relating the "metamorphoses of some of your Acquaintance, which appear as wondrous to me as any in Ovid" (II:37). By recasting the love affairs of Lady Holderness and Mrs. Robinson, for example, in a mock-heroic mode, Montagu challenges the significance accorded to them in her circles, exposing the frivolity of their "Triumphs," but at the same time celebrating their transgressions of "Nature and Fortune" and even asserting their

superiority to classical models (II:37). However, the escapades of the Schemers' all-male club offer even more potential for her to pursue her related projects of cultural commentary and self-definition:

In General, never was Galantry in so elevated a Figure as it is at present. 20 very pritty fellows (the Duke of Wharton being President and cheif [sic] director) have form'd themselves into a committee of Galantry. They call themselves Schemers, and meet regularly 3 times a week to consult on Galant Schemes for the advancement of that branch of Happyness which the vulgar call Whoring. (II:38).

The Schemers' parties are best described as private masquerades; members of the club disguised themselves as animals or demons and took the license of entertaining together their masked upper-class mistresses before retiring to private bedchambers for the evening (Robert J. Allen, The Clubs of Augustan London 120-122).⁴³

On one level, Montagu embraces the liberty from the decorum of upper-class society that the Schemers' masquerades seem to offer. She points out that the wearing of masks allows women to remain anonymous and, by implication, to engage in illicit sexual activity (II:38-39). But this same letter also demonstrates that the possibility of exposure and the threat of a ruined reputation persist: a woman's identity may at any point be revealed by "Accident or the Lady's indiscretion," so that the women's only real source of protection rests with the exclusively male Schemers' sense of honour to their

⁴³Like the coffee-house phenomenon, eighteenth-century clubs, whether specialized, academic societies or informal groups assembled for fellowship, conversation, or debauchery, were the preserve of men and were dominated by men of the upper-class; the Schemers may be categorized among the less reputable of these clubs (see Robert J. Allen, The Clubs of Augustan London 101-122).

club (II:38-39). I suggest that Montagu questions the sincerity of the men's dedication to maintaining the women's anonymity and freedom. She accomplishes this by attributing to the Schemers the lofty goal of promoting the "public good and the conservation of peace in private Familys" and by recasting their commitment to secrecy as a sacred one (she notes the Schemers' determination that the names of their mistresses "should remain sacred and as unspeakable as the name of the Deity amongst the Jews") (II:38-39). These hyperbolic comparisons, with their imputation of mock-heroic bathos, imply that the Schemers are concerned with little more than their own sexual immediate interests.

That Montagu places her allegiances with other women, and against the Schemers, in her telling of this anecdote becomes most evident in her mockingly serious evaluation of the significance of the Schemers' activities towards the end of the letter. The passage that concludes the letter, while it registers a certain delight in the Schemers' audaciousness, has the overall effect of denying any pretensions this club might have to more noble purposes:

These Galantrys are continu'd every Wednesday during Lent, and I won't ask you pardon for this long Account of 'em since I consider the duty of a true English Woman is to do what Honour she can to her native Country, and that it would be a Sin against the pious Love I bear the Land of my Nativity to confine the renown due to the Schemers within the small extent of this little Isleland, which ought to be spread where ever Men can sigh or Women wish. Tis true they have the Envy and Curses of the old and ugly of both Sexes and a general persecution from all old Women, but this is no more than all Reformations must expect in their beginning, and what the Christian Church suffer'd in a remarkable manner at its first blaze. (II:40)

Montagu's repetition of the Schemers's intrigues, together with her censure of those old,

unfashionable, and narrow-minded people who envy, curse, and persecute them, seems to suggest that she sides with the revellers. But by presenting her account as being motivated by high-minded nationalism and piety, Montagu implicitly distances herself from the Schemers. In effect, she employs a sort of formalized hypocrisy as a way of weaving her way through the attractive and the dangerous aspects for women of the Schemers' society. Though Montagu welcomes the opportunities that their entertainments offer for the gratification of female desires, she is clear that they should not be considered radical or revolutionary, that they should not be interpreted as being in any way utopian or without negative consequences. Thus, Montagu renegotiates social and cultural codes and spaces already extant in her milieu, specifically the preserve of the all-male club, to claim for herself the position of an impartial cultural commentator.

If Montagu reworks the destabilizing effects of social activities which are already transgressive, then the letters show that she is also capable of targeting and rewriting the more staid, formal varieties of upper-class social interaction. Of particular interest in this regard is the final letter in the series addressed to Lady Mar, which recounts an emphatically public, spectacular entertainment--the coronation of George II (Oct. 1727; II:85-86). In contrast to the portrait of the Schemers, which refers to other aristocratic women indirectly, here the physical appearance, dress, and reputation of aristocratic women constitute Montagu's central concern. Montagu finds both the men and the women in the crowd amusing in a general sense, exclaiming to Lady Mar that "it was very entertaining to Observe the variety of airs that all meant the same thing, the Business

of every walker there being to conceal Vanity and gain Admiration. For these purposes some languish'd and others strutted..." (II:85). However, it is a female figure to which Montagu finds her gaze drawn:

But she that drew the greatest Number of Eyes was indisputably the Countess of Orkney. She exposed behind a mixture of Fat and Wrinkles, and before a considerable pair of Bubbys a good deal withered, a great Belly that preceed her; add to this the inimitable roll of her Eyes, and her Grey Hair which by good Fortune stood directly upright, and 'tis impossible to imagine a more Delightfull Spectacle. She had embellish'd all this with a great deal of Magnificence which made her as big again as usual, and I shou'd have thought her one of the largest things of God's making if my Lady St. John had not display'd all her Charms that day. (II:85-86)

In one sense, by assigning the Countess of Orkney the role of a laughable "spectacle," Montagu asserts her power to judge and to ridicule this woman. But it is also evident that Montagu invests in, even identifies with, the Countess of Orkney: she shapes the portrait of this woman so as to undermine the dominant assumption that only beauty and decorum offer social power and import. Notably, Montagu passes quickly over the moment of the coronation itself--"the Coronet [being] clapp'd on the head"--installing the Countess of Orkney instead as an inverted symbol of authority and prestige (II:85). Thus, Montagu employs the portrait of the Countess of Orkney as a subversive substitute for the formal and respectful report that might be expected from a woman who adhered to the official rules governing her social station.

Significantly, the Countess's enhanced visibility has considerably less to do with biology than it does with her deliberate embellishment of her person. Furthermore, the

Countess's magnificent presence, epitomized by her potent size, constitutes in Montagu's view the rule, rather than the exception, for female self-presentation at the Coronation. Indeed, Montagu subsequently registers the presence at the coronation of two other aristocratic women whose costumes transform their bodies and identities in the process of distorting them: "The poor Duchess of Montross Crep'd along with a Dozen of black Snakes playing round her Face; and my Lady Portland (who is fall'n away since her dismissal from Court) represented very finely an Egyptian Mummy embroider'd over with Hieroglyphics" (II:86). Not only, then, do the qualities of age, decrepitude, and size challenge the equation of female visibility with youth and beauty: the implication is that any woman can deliberately and intentionally recast her body and identity (and so vault into a position of social prominence) by adopting a spectacular and unusual costume.

Montagu's final comment on her catalogue of female portraits in this letter extends their subversive, celebratory dimensions, as she asserts the power of a woman's vanity to create a place for her in culture and society in spite of her age: "In General I could not perceive but the Old were as well pleas'd as the Young, and I (who dread growing Wise more than any thing in the World) was overjoy'd to observe one can never outlive one's Vanity" (II:86). Recognizing that she lives in a social world where status is dependent on public display, Montagu creates a set of female portraits that allow her to find comfort in the persistence of vanity, in the persistence of self-representation and self-celebration. Though this project is certainly distinct from the task of creating rational

pictures of "meritorious ladys" (a task which Montagu espouses in "The Nonsense of Common-Sense") these portraits do enable her to imagine how women might use the resources of self-representation they have at hand in order to make themselves seen and in public discourse. Indeed, Montagu's portraits of the women at the coronation function in some significant ways to disentangle the positive potential of vanity from the contradictory pressures of the eighteenth-century ideal of female modesty, which would have women define themselves as passive and inferior beings, incapable of representing themselves.

But Montagu's relationship to the women about whom she gossips is fraught with tension. The noblewomen Montagu represents in her account of the coronation are seen and heard in public discourse, not on their own terms, but in relation to an ideology of gender and age which constitutes them as monstrosities.⁴⁴ In this sense, Montagu reinforces gender norms even as she subverts them. Reflecting on her own relationship to English court society in the 1720s, Montagu professes her preference for remaining in the relative isolation of her house at Twickenham and remarks pessimistically that "I should not fail to amuse my selfe tolerably enough but for the Damn'd, damn'd Quality of growing older and older every day, and my present Joys are made imperfect by fears of the Future" [Dec. 1725; II:44]). Interestingly, the description of the superannuated

⁴⁴Lawrence Stone, in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (1977), points to the decline of respect for the old in the eighteenth-century; rather than being associated with the "accumulation of wisdom and dignity," old age "came to be seen as a period of decay in all faculties, as the biological organism approached death" (403).

Countess of Orkney in such hideous terms has the function of making the younger Montagu's own strategies of self-representation seem controlled, objective, and respectable. Thus, we see how vanity's assertive, self-defining functions can be so swiftly inverted and redefined as a vice within the discourse of gossip. Unlike Montagu's account of the Schemers, which is so poised in its impartiality, her coronation-day letter attempts to forestall her own becoming the abject target of gossip partially through the abjection of other women.⁴⁵ Overall, however, the most significant point that emerges from Montagu's multivalent relationship to the Countess of Orkney and company is the sense that she is willing to gamble on the highly unstable cultural resource of vanity, regardless of its potentially oppressive consequences for herself or for other women, rather than to risk shrinking from participation in public discourse altogether.

Thus, in three of her most highly crafted, stylized letters--those describing the birth-night, the Schemers, and the coronation--Montagu seems for the most part quite confident in her ability to negotiate gossip so that it produces results favourable to her.

⁴⁵As I suggested in Chapter 1, Pope's fiercely derogatory portraits of Montagu remind us that even a woman of Montagu's confidence and sophistication is prone to be misread and ridiculed for her attempts at self-celebration. Most ironic, perhaps, is the fact that Montagu was to be the subject in her old age of anecdotes similar to her account of the Countess of Orkney. Horace Walpole was particularly savage: "Her dress, her avarice, and her impudence must amaze any one that never heard her name. She wears a foul mob [cap], that does not cover her greasy black locks, that hang loose, never combed or curled; an old mazarine blue wrapper, that gapes open and discovers a canvas petticoat..." (Walpole to Conway, 25 Sept. 1740, qtd. in Halsband). Although Elizabeth Montagu adopts a more generous tone, her comments also suggest a certain discomfort with Montagu's appearance; she comments that Montagu "neither thinks, speaks, acts nor dresses like anybody else" (4 Sept. 1762, qtd. in Halsband).

She employs gossip in order to put into circulation portraits of other women, portraits which serve the purpose of solidifying her position of intellectual and social prominence in an aristocratic world of public display. On other occasions, however, particularly when she relates anecdotes concerning bad marriages and extramarital affairs, Montagu's delight in making the foibles of her peers into spectacular entertainments is shaped by another factor: her own competing desire for a companionate love relationship. When she contemplates the institution of marriage, Montagu is often distinctly unable to "insensibly dwindle into a Spectatress," for she has a tremendous investment--emotional, sexual, and political--in the matters she describes (20 March 1725; II:48). The outcome is a more acute difficulty in disavowing her complicity with the female targets of her gossip than we see in the publicly oriented letters, together with an increased desire to accomplish just such a disavowal. An early poem entitled "The Lover: A Ballad" demonstrates that Montagu had made a significant commitment in her thinking and writing to the possibility of a companionate marriage (Poems and Essays 234-236).⁴⁶ Apologizing to her female addressee for giving an impression of "stupid Indifference" to romantic love (3), Montagu's female speaker in "The Lover" fantasizes about an ideal male companion: "And that my Delight may be solidly fix'd/ Let the Freind, and the Lover be handsomly mix'd/ In whose tender Bosom my Soul might confide,/ Whose

⁴⁶ Isobel Grundy notes that this poem was written probably 1721-1725 (publ. 1747), which makes it roughly contemporary with Montagu's letters to Lady Mar. Furthermore, "The Lover" has as its biographical context a strong female friendship: "Lady Mary's MS. addresses the description to her friend Molly Skerrett, and it seems likely that she wrote it while she and Molly were on confidential terms" (234).

kindness can sooth me, whose Council could guide" (33-36). The realities of the social world militate against this fantasy being realized, however, and the speaker, "hat[ing] to be cheated" (9), seemingly refuses to gamble on anything but a sure bet:

I never will share with the wanton Coquette
 Or be caught by a vain affectation of Wit.
 The Toasters, and Songsters may try all their Art
 But never shall enter the pass of my Heart;
 I loath the Lewd Rake, the dress'd Fopling despise,
 Before such persuers the nice Virgin flies,
 And as Ovid has sweetly in Parables told
 We harden like Trees, and like Rivers are cold.
 (41-48)

While the allusion to Ovid's Metamorphoses in the birth-night letter serves to emphasize the subversive potential of female self-transformation, here Montagu defines women's self representation primarily as a defensive strategy, whereby a demeanour of "hardness" and "coldness" may be substituted for the dominant ideal of womanly softness and vulnerability. However, the firmly worded refusal of unworthy male "persuers" with which the poem concludes does not totally undo the traces of sexual and emotional longing articulated in this poem. Montagu's vision of an equal and intimate relationship implicitly unsettles the posture of guarded disinterestedness invoked in the poem's final lines. As in the case of Montagu's image of the chiosk in the British palace at Pera, the degree of isolation implied at the end of "The Lover" is intolerable, yet there remains a sense that the social milieu is fraught with potential dangers and with frustrations.

Similarly, Montagu's revision of La Rochefoucault's maxim on marriage clarifies her commitment to a companionate ideal (Essays and Poems 157-164). She rejects La

Rochefoucault's notion "qu'il y a des mariages commodes, mais point des *Delicieux*," arguing instead for a vision of romantic love within the institution of marriage: "J'ose avancer tout le contraire, et je soutiens hardiment qu'il n'y a qu'un Amour marié qui peut estre delicieux pour une Ame bien faite" (157-158). In developing her position on the institution of marriage in this essay, Montagu posits that it is necessary for a woman to give up the world of public display and galantry to achieve a happiness based on ties of friendship, esteem, inclination, and tenderness (158); her conjecture is that a successful union between husband and wife should compensate a woman more than sufficiently for her sacrifice of an independent and active role in public discourse. Importantly, Montagu's own rather difficult relationships with men confirm her admission in the essay that convenient marriages and exploitative or compromising love affairs constitute the normative boundaries of heterosexual relationships in her milieu; her relationships with Wortley, Francisco Algarotti, and Nicolas-François Rémond were certainly far from attractive or promising substitutes for participation in more public forms of social and cultural debate.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Certainly, the difficulties of mediating the contradictions between the declining norm of female passivity in aristocratic courtship and marriage and the emerging principles of companionship are borne out in the context of Montagu's most intimate relationships with men. As noted in Chapter 1, her marriage to Wortley did not develop into the companionate experience she had apparently anticipated. On the other hand, Montagu's infatuation later in life with the Italian Count Algarotti, to whom she wrote a series of passionate letters, remained unrequited; evidently, Algarotti preferred the company of men, including Montagu's friend Lord Hervey (see Halsband's *Life*, Chapters 10-12). Another sometime suitor, Nicolas-François Rémond, a Paris intellectual reputed to be of questionable integrity, blackmailed her after she lost the capital he had requested her to invest in South Sea stocks, thus providing the incident of Montagu's female profligacy

Notably, whereas the letters addressed to Wortley and Algarotti are devoid of gossip and tend to focus, often rather plaintively, on Montagu's own private failures, the letters to Lady Mar assert Montagu's own ability to critique and judge the (mis)management of love relationships; the dynamic of gossip thus allows her in some ways to surmount her own frustrations in marriage and in love. One favourite topic--the arrangement of unions between young aristocrats--is especially telling of Montagu's determination to unravel the contradictions between her ideal of a companionate relationship and the actual practice of marriage among her social peers. For example, the evident rapture of the Duchess of Montagu's daughter on the occasion of the girl's recent engagement prompts the following response from Montagu:

Her Daughter Belle is at this instant in the Paradisal state of receiving visits every day from a passionate Lover who is her first Love, who she thinks the finest Gentleman in Europe, and is besides that Duke of Manchester. Her Mama and I often laugh and sigh reflecting on her Felicity, the Consummation of which will be in a fortnight. In the mean time they are permitted to be alone together every day and all the Day. (c. 2 April 1723; I:22)

Montagu shrewdly notes the fortunate confluence in the young woman's lover of three elements which seem to bode well for their potential marital relationship, namely, passion, social status, and parental approval--but the implication of Montagu's celebratory tone is that the situation is too good to last for long. In addition, the fact that this scene is viewed through the eyes of two experienced women, along with Montagu's pun on the word "consummation," highlights that the couple's union in marriage will likely

which Pope attacks in *The Dunciad* (see Halsband's *Life*, Chapters 6-8).

extinguish both sexual desire and happiness.⁴⁸ In this sense, Montagu registers a high level of cynicism about the institution of marriage as it functions in upper-class circles. Her parodic repetition of these details criticizes dominant norms in marriage relationships; she implicitly censures the privileging of money over desire, calling attention to the compromising position in which this custom places aristocratic women. Moreover, throughout the letters, there is a sense that the failure of marriages is so much the norm among the aristocracy that most need only a brief sentence or two to explain their preposterousness: "There is a ridiculous marriage on the point of conclusion that diverts me much. You know Lady Mary Sanderson; she is makeing over her discreet person and 1,500 a year jointure to the tempting Embrace of the noble Earl of Pembroke, ag'd 73" (II:26). Here, another method of inversion, understatement, allows Montagu powerfully to critique courtship and marriage practices to which she objects.

Despite these expressions of world-weariness, Montagu's letters to her sister suggest the persistence of some hope that successful and happy marriages might be possible, were the whole system of arranging marriages to be altered. Commenting on the particularly unfortunate marriage of Lady J. Wharton to Mr. Holt (she expresses her sorrow in seeing "one of the agreablest Girls upon Earth so vilely misplac'd"), Montagu takes on an uncharacteristically wistful tone: "I suppose we shall all come right in Heaven, as in a Country Dance, tho hands are strangely given and taken while they are

⁴⁸Halsband notes that the marriage of Isabella Montagu to the Duke of Manchester was in the end rather less than felicitous (II:22).

in motion, at last all meet their partners when the Jig is done" (11 Aug. 1721; II:11). Here, Montagu anticipates the possibility of escaping from the confusing and ultimately unsatisfactory "dance" of public social interaction to a realm where one's partner is judiciously chosen by a higher and wiser power. My point is that the optimistic note sounded in this statement is imbued with irony and is probably best interpreted as a gesture of incomprehension and resignation: the reference to the resolution in an idealized afterlife of the contradictions that plague love relationships in aristocratic circles emphasizes, rather than meliorates, her sense that marital happiness is antithetical to "the Jig" of public, social life. For the most part in the letters to Lady Mar, Montagu delights in this "Jig"; surely, it forms the very subject matter of her letters and hence the generating source for her subversion of gender norms and for her constructions of identity and authority. The exigencies of her social milieu may exact their own price from Montagu, yet to submit to a preordained, fixed social order would be to surrender the pleasure and sense of agency she derives from actively negotiating the complications of her environment.

If the ridiculousness of marriage arrangements among her peers and their children affords Montagu plentiful opportunities for renegotiating gender and class norms, then the documentation and interpretation of illicit affairs provide Montagu with equally rich material for her interrogation of courtship and marriage; but here Montagu's policing of other people's behaviours takes on more violent tones. Take, for example, her extended account of the discovery of Mrs. Betty Tichburne's affair with Richard Edgecumbe by

one Miss Leigh, a spinster of questionable rank, beauty, and accomplishment (23 June 1727; II:77-80). When the "tall, musical, silly ugly thing," Miss Leigh, threatens to interrupt the lovers' rendez-vous by arriving unexpectedly for a visit, Mrs. Tichburne requests that Miss Leigh play some music to entertain them (II:78-79). The easily flattered Miss Leigh "very willingly sat to the Harpsichord, upon which her Audience decamp'd to the Bed Chamber, and left her to play over 3 or 4 lessons to her selfe" (II:79). The couple request a second and then a third concert, whereupon Miss Leigh becomes outraged and leaves the house to publish the news of their indiscretions.

What is noteworthy about Montagu's version of the story is that it is Miss Leigh herself who is made ridiculous, whereas Montagu takes a particular pleasure in summing up the fate of "poor Edgcombe" who "met with nothing where ever he went but compliments about his third Tune, which is reckon'd very handsome in a Lover past forty" (II:79); in the end, both Edgcombe and Titchburne go entirely unrebuked by Montagu and are, in fact, praised for their "admirable Conduct" (II:80). Like the relationship constructed between Laetitia and her female friend in Montagu's "Autobiographical Fragment," the abjectly silly, even shrewish, character of Miss Leigh helps to prepare the way for Montagu to occupy the "position of language user" (Butler, Gender Trouble 54). The possibility of extramarital sexual activity is attractive to Montagu when it is managed well: the opposition created between the lovers and Miss Leigh shows how it might be possible to carry this off. Montagu identifies herself as the narrator of this anecdote with a pair of lovers who exemplify the stylish, controlled, and potent execution

of transgression (note the emphasis on Edgecombe's virility). The lovers' finesse in executing their ruse and Montagu's acumen as an observer of their affair are made all the more attractive by the savage humour with which Montagu describes Miss Leigh's naivete and awkwardness. If Miss Leigh is an unsophisticated gossip, who may, in fact, need the male supervision at the tea-table that Steele and Addison advocate (Kowaleski-Wallace 141-142), the corollary imputation is that Montagu knows how properly, attractively, and safely, to relay scandal. And the ironic connection is that Montagu repeats in her account of Miss Leigh the ideological pattern of exclusion, mockery, and appropriation quite similar to the one she tries so hard to challenge and to elude, for example, in her epistolary and poetic relationship with Pope.

Some of the more explicitly self-reflective moments in the letters to Lady Mar further illuminate the issues exemplified in the Miss Leigh episode; they emphasize that Montagu's fiction of herself as objective and inviolable is a necessary, but troublingly exclusionary and violent, construction. As with the spatial metaphor of the chiosk, Montagu's claim to have "insensibly dwindle[d] into a spectatress" belies the contradictoriness of her position (17 March 1725; II:48). Indeed, we need to return to the question of how and why Montagu continually constructs and reconstructs the seemingly impregnable position of "spectatress." An early letter in the series highlights the power of Montagu's self-representational capacities by underplaying them:

My life passes in a kind of Indolence, which is now and then awaken'd by agreeable moments, but pleasures are transitory and the Ground work of every thing in England stupidity, which is certainly owing to the coldness

of this Vile Climate. I envy you the Serene Air of Paris, as well as many other conveniencys. Here, what between the Things one can't do and the Things one must not do, the Time but dully lingers on, tho I make as good a shift as any of my Neighbours. (Oct. 1723; II:30)

The move toward emotional and intellectual detachment identified in this passage forms a distinct contrast with the enthusiasm for social reportage one senses in many of the letters to Lady Mar. However, if "pleasures" are indeed to be had only in spite of the general conditions governing social interaction in England, then this explains the disparity between her gestures of helpless unconcern and her passionate claims to agency; the never-ending process of calibrating how she presents herself seems at times an impossible task. Montagu remains concerned, though, about maintaining a stake--opportunities for power, knowledge, and agency--in a world where the terms of social power are constantly shifting, where her gender disenfranchizes her and cultivates indolence, and so she undertakes to fortify her self-representational strategies and resources. Yet, the "passable" or makeshift quality of her self-definitions and her engagement in the social world point to a certain dissatisfaction with the transitoriness of her renegotiation of the rules of her social milieu.

The following passage from a later letter revises Montagu's presentation of herself as a disinterested "spectatress." It suggests more explicitly the prevalence of her concern to manage her identifications with others so as to enhance the self-image of sophistication and control she wishes to project:

Beauty and money are equally ill bestow'd when a fool has the keeping of them; they are incapable of Happyness and every blessing turns useless in

their hands....In the mean time I divert my selfe passably enough and take care to improve as much as possible that stock of Vanity and Credulity that Heaven in its mercy has furnish'd me with, being sensible that to those two Qualitys (simple as they appear) all the Pleasures of Life are owing. (January 1725; II:44-45)

What this passage discloses so clearly is Montagu's determination to present herself as an incontrovertible social and cultural authority possessed of a distinct, unalterable identity. She does not purport to abandon entirely the "Vanity" and "Credulity" associated with her gender and class position, but rather endeavours to shore up their value by redefining her self-pride as an eminently reasonable and respectable quality (II:45). Aware that privileges of class and education do not carry automatic cultural currency for a woman, Montagu employs her intellect and literary skill to further her own happiness and pleasure. She never indulges wholeheartedly or for very long the dream of a utopian space, where she might be free from compromise. A more reliable, and more complicated, strategy for Montagu to circumvent her fears and frustrations is the practice of measuring her own "shift" against those of "fools"; it is crucial to her that she understand herself and be understood by others to be making a "shift" which is better than those of her neighbours rather than merely just as good.

But, as powerful a rhetorical tool as gossip comes to be for Montagu, it cannot, in the end, furnish her with a completely confident position from which to survey her milieu. Despite her intermittent professions of disinterested rationality, Montagu's subjectivity, entangled as it is in the very social scripts against which she writes, remains in conflict throughout the letters to Lady Mar. Even as she is drawn to celebrate the

possibility that a companionate marriage might address all of her desires, for instance, she continues to value the public display of beauty and wit; and she asserts her superiority as an interpreter of courtship and marriage through her judgements of other women's relationships, behaviour, and appearances. We have seen a similar dynamic at work in The Embassy Letters, where Montagu's multivalent practices of cross-cultural comparison and identification, though they provisionally identify some powerful possibilities for female agency, never completely resolve her search for an assured sense of identity and authority. So too, the letters to Lady Mar qualify, even as they structure, Montagu's attempts to fortify her position as a pre-eminent aristocrat and untouchable wit through the denigration of other women. This is the case because Montagu, like the women she gossips about, is always herself subject to the compromising ideological processes of gossip, whereby female pride and resourcefulness are equated with the vice of female vanity. What ultimately makes Montagu's gossip, both the spectacular and the more subdued varieties, interesting and revealing (as opposed to merely malicious), is that Montagu cannot cover over her own stake in both the transgressions and exclusions she describes. She implies the inability of certain other women to represent themselves appropriately, but she herself is never quite assured of her right to represent herself or of her ability to disavow her connections with the women on whose portraits her own constructions of identity and authority depend.

CONCLUSION

In a survey of recent theoretical work on gender as performance, with particular emphasis on Butler's seminal work, Gender Trouble, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that "Discussions of linguistic performativity have become a place to reflect on ways in which language really can be said to produce effects: effects of identity, enforcement, seduction, challenge" ("Queer and Now" 11). Sedgwick's second, complementary observation is that such discussions "also deal with how powerfully language *positions*" (11). By discussing Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters in light of Butler's theoretical work on gender performativity, I have addressed the two points highlighted in Sedgwick's summary: namely, I have sought to apprehend the effects, especially the subversive effects, of Montagu's rhetoric and to grapple with the contradictory ways in which her performances position her, especially in relation to other women.

The subversive effects of Montagu's rhetoric have multiple grounds, modalities, and consequences. In The Embassy Letters, Montagu's openness to new models of identity and community prompts her not only to question Orientalist stereotypes of Turkish women, but also to reconsider (and to prompt her readers to reexamine) the norms governing gender in English society and culture. And, in the letters to Lady Mar, gossip is reconfigured as a constructive discursive mode for women, while the vice of vanity is reclaimed as a valuable resource for women in the project of creating and controlling one's own identity.

Yet Montagu's tendency to disrupt in her letters the existing order of things is curbed in diverse ways by her concern to remain visible and audible to her English readers and to herself. We see processes of abjection and ideological recuperation at work in both sets of letters, whereby Montagu constructs her own intelligibility against a domain of unintelligible, abject, feminized bodies. An array of female unsophisticates--those whose stories are too painful, whose social positions are too insignificant, or whose bodies are too old--become the feminine "excess" which constructs and magnifies Montagu's authority and the potency of those characters with whom she identifies most wholeheartedly, namely Fatima and the lovers in the Miss Leigh episode. The tenor of these repudiations is often savage. As Montagu explains in a letter on the subject of female sexual indiscretion to an acquaintance, Barbara Calthorpe, "To say Truth, I have never had any great Esteem for the fair Sex, and my only Consolation for being of that Gender has been the assurance it gave me of never being marry'd to any one amongst them" (7 December 1723; II:33).

Thus, when we consider how Montagu's performances position her, the subject who emerges is "not so much divided" as she is "contradicted" among multiple identifications and allegiances (Teresa de Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender" 2). The spatial metaphors that permeate Montagu's letters provide a telling map of the possibilities and limitations that emerge in Montagu's letters regarding female identity, authority, and community. Her celebration of the notion of a women's coffee-house in The Embassy Letters and her renovation of a women's discourse of gossip (associated with the tea-

table) as a constructive mode of discursive exchange in the letters to Lady Mar are implicitly refuted as liberating possibilities in a series of constructions--the chiosk, the spectatress--in which she seeks to guarantee for herself an impermeable, inviolable position.

In an overall sense, then, my interpretation of Montagu suggests that the contradictions, persistently marked out by violence, of her strategies for representing self and other, should assume a central role in analyses of her cultural production. A sort of critical double vision is necessary because of the contingency of the most positive, constructive and daring aspects of Montagu's work on its most fiercely self-interested dimensions. While we need to attend carefully to the ways in which Montagu's letters evade and transform the constraints of eighteenth-century gender ideology, we need also to question the exclusions that her texts perpetrate in order to sustain and fortify the bold new discursive positions that her subversive strategies initiate. However, the evident contradictions of Montagu's self-positioning do not inevitably lead us to indict her for failing to unravel the forces that compromise her incipient feminism. As Butler points out in Bodies That Matter: "That identifications shift does not necessarily mean that one identification is repudiated for another; that shifting may well be one sign of hope for the possibility of avowing a more expansive set of connections" (118). Montagu's own difficult relationship to the democratizing spaces her texts construct does not entirely undo their attractiveness, but rather shows how the author's need to remain intelligible in her milieu makes the ideal communities she imagines vulnerable to compromise.

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