

**Alison Winch, Middlesex University**

**Author Final Version**

**'Drinking a dish of tea with Sappho': The Sexual Fantasies of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lord Byron**

When George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) occupied the Palazzo Mocenigo in Venice, it was widely believed to have been the residence of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) over sixty years earlier.<sup>1</sup> It was when he was residing here that Byron began work on *Don Juan*, and it was also from here that he discovered the extraordinary letters that Montagu sent a young Venetian scholar, Francesco Algarotti. These letters explain Montagu's exile, and provide a passionate complement to the dry letters detailing her health and expenses which she was simultaneously sending her husband, and which were published in 1803. Her family had been rigorous in their censorship and consequently her published works, as well as her 1803 biography, made no mention of this affair. Fascinated, Byron thought her correspondence "very pretty and passionate"<sup>2</sup> and their "sentiments beautiful".<sup>3</sup> He sent six letters, together with other correspondence, to his publisher, John Murray. The correspondence included some letters by Montagu's friend, Lord Hervey, a rival for Algarotti's attentions. Montagu and Hervey shared an erotic infatuation for the Venetian philosopher whose "tastes were predominantly if not entirely homosexual".<sup>4</sup> Despite some unkindness over this rivalry, Hervey and Montagu were close friends throughout their lives. They even collaborated over verse; their voices circling the feminine scholar's absence. Byron suggested that "a small and pretty popular volume" might be made of their letters, and he promised to "hunt" for more.<sup>5</sup> However, there is no more mention of the letters, and the volume was never published.

Byron's admiration of Montagu is an exception in a period when her reputation was still suffering from Alexander Pope's and Horace Walpole's virulent misogyny. The increasingly puritanical climate emerging in England, combined with his own scandalous exile, and his anger against the hypocrisy of English culture, must

have warmed Byron to the fluid and creative possibilities that sex and desire inspired in these early eighteenth-century aristocrats. Moreover, the letters that he discovered reveal how Montagu also self-exiled on account of reputation and sexual transgression. Examining Montagu's Orientalist voyeurism and romantic philhellenism, Donna Landry has identified her "phallic seizures", and Felicity Nussbaum notes her "Orientalist Sapphism".<sup>6</sup> In addition, Nussbaum argues that Montagu was unwilling "to be restricted, privately or publicly, to traditional heterosexual activities", but she did not possess a lesbian identity because "sexuality was not the locus of subjectivity in the early eighteenth century".<sup>7</sup> This shift in theoretical paradigms since the academic mainstreaming of queer theory, means that Byron can be productively read through his alliances with earlier, sexually transgressive, literary figures. This article suggests that Montagu's queer ethnomasquerades were influential in Byron's writing of *Don Juan*, and also in his creation of a Byronic celebrity persona.

## Sexualities

Byron was fascinated by Montagu. He claims to have read her *Turkish Embassy Letters* by the age of 10, and his letters reveal an erotic admiration for her as a scholarly woman. In his 'Letter to John Murray Esq' during the Bowles/Pope Controversy in 1821, he exclaims: "I admire her so much, – her beauty, – her talents [...] She was an extraordinary woman – she could translate *Epictetus*, and yet write a song worthy of Aristippus." He enthusiastically cites lines from her poem 'The Lover':

And when the long hours of the Public are past  
And we meet with Champaigne and a Chicken at last,  
May every fond pleasure that moment endear!  
Be banished afar both discretion and fear!  
Forgetting or scorning the airs of the Crowd  
He may cease to be formal, and I to be proud  
Till lost in the Joy, we confess that we live,  
And he may be rude, and yet I may forgive.<sup>8</sup>

The depiction of a private intimacy threatened by honour, reputation and scandal, as well as coquettes and “the long hours of Public”, must have appealed to him.

Moreover, the sensual pleasures of food are linked to a hedonistic friendship where “the Freind, and the Lover be handsomely mix’d” (line 34). Byron exclaims:

what say you to such a Supper with such a woman? And her own description too? – Is not her ‘*Champaigne and Chicken*’ worth a forest or two? – Is it not poetry? It appears to me that this Stanza contains the ‘*purée*’ of the whole Philosophy of Epicurus.<sup>9</sup>

This poem was written for Montagu’s friend, Molly Skerrett, and Grundy reads it as a warning against her taking Robert Walpole as a lover. There were rumours that Montagu and Skerrett were lovers, and Twickenham came up in scurrilous verse as a venue for a lesbian seraglio. Members of Montagu’s circle, including her close friend Lady Stafford, were known for their Sapphic relationships. Lord Hervey and Pope, among others, called Montagu ‘Sappho’. Montagu herself reworked Sappho’s fragment 31, and celebrated the Greek poet in an age when she was synonymous with transgressive sexuality. When Montagu settled into her retreat at Twickenham, she told her sister in September 1721: “I do not presume to judge, but I’ll assure you I am a very hearty as well as humble Admirer. I have taken my little thread satin Beauty in the house with me. She is allow’d by Bononcini to have the finest voice he ever heard in England [...] this easy indolent Life would make me the happiest thing in the world if I had not this execrable affair still hanging over my head.”<sup>10</sup> The affair that she refers to is a debt, but the ‘little thread satin Beauty’ is Skerrett, who will later marry Walpole and, on the eve of her wedding night, will burn all her letters from Montagu.

Montagu’s daughter, Lady Bute, burned her diary from 1718 onwards, and her sister burned all the diaries and papers she could find. Montagu set fire to her *History of Our Times* as fast as she wrote it, as well as destroying many of her other letters and writings. These letters hint at the scandals and sentiments that could have been so damaging to Montagu’s reputation. They hint at the silence that, in Foucault’s words, “is less the absolute limit of discourse”, but rather “an element that functions

alongside the things said".<sup>11</sup> They hint at sex. Montagu's letters to Algarotti are extraordinary because they escaped this rigorous censorship and consequently reveal a passionate voice. Indeed, when Byron first encounters these letters he is not sure they are from her, and needs to emphasise to Murray that "they *are* hers". Algarotti unleashes passions that have been lying dormant:

You know only too well that you are the only object in the world which pleases me. I have done everything until this moment to prove it to you, and I shall always be the same towards you, and I have so little Notion of finding anything else agreeable, I would wish with all my heart, if I lose the hope of seeing you, to lose my life at the same Moment.<sup>12</sup>

Byron also admired Hervey. When he sent Algarotti's correspondence back to Murray, he suggested writing a preface defending Hervey against Pope. Pope's attacks on Hervey were primarily leveled at Hervey's transgendered sexuality:

His wit all see-saw between *that and this*,  
Now high, now low, now master, up now miss,  
And he himself one vile Antithesis.  
Amphibious thing! that acting either part,  
The trifling head, or the corrupted heart,  
Fop at the toilet, flatt'rer at the board,  
Now trips a Lady, and now struts a Lord.<sup>13</sup>

Byron decides against it as he feels Pope is maligned, and "your whole generation are not worth a Canto of the Rape of the Lock, or the Essay on Man, or the Dunciad, or 'any thing that is his'.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in his 'Letter to John Murray Esq' Byron takes exception to the word "vile" which he finds harsh. He seeks to protect Hervey's queer identities.

Although both Hervey and Montagu were married with children, their sexualities were not defined by these gendered roles. Hervey's passion for his wife was not inconsistent with his enduring relationship with the much younger Stephen Fox, nor his intimacies with other men and women. Montagu's sexual identity was

also ambiguous. The epistolary exchange between the young Montagu and Anne Wortley, for example, reveals a passionate friendship. In a letter dated 5 September 1709 Montagu declares: “Mrs. Wortley, as she has the entire power of raising, can also, with a word, calm my passions”.<sup>15</sup> She insists “I don’t allow it possible for a man to be so sincere as I am”.<sup>16</sup> In her reading of these letters and the Algarotti correspondence, Marilyn Morris persuasively suggests that we should broaden our understanding of eighteenth-century subjectivity to include emotional, sexual and intellectual flexibility, instead of hard and fast definitions.<sup>17</sup> Rather than attempt to categorise Montagu or Hervey, Morris suggests we should situate “the subtleties of their sexuality in the larger context of all their affective relationships”.<sup>18</sup> We could ask: What kind of relationships are sought? Where does the speaker position herself? What or who does the beloved provoke? Through giving attention to how emotional and erotic bonds are inscribed, multiple subjectivities are constructed in relation to the Other. Hervey and Montagu’s attraction to the Italian scholar allowed them, in Morris’s words, “flights of erotic fantasy and freedom to construct idealized versions of themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Focusing on the performative identities that come into being in relation to a lover, is also pertinent when reading Byron. He, too, forces us to think “more broadly in terms of a queer sensibility based on emotional and intellectual flexibility”.<sup>20</sup>

## Fantasies

Algarotti’s replies to Montagu are not extant which render her exclamations of reproach and disappointment all the more poignant. When she arrived in Venice with the intention of being with him, she found that he had journeyed to London in her absence. Moreover, instead of spending the rest of his life with her in Venice or France (as she wanted and insisted that he had promised), he became the lover of Frederick of Prussia. Nevertheless, rather than being an obstacle, Algarotti’s difference “from the rest of mankind (who yet have the insolence to think themselves of the same species)” inspires “sentiments” in Montagu “which until now have not been inspired in anybody”.<sup>21</sup> This is the rhetoric of passion, but it also reveals how this “foreigner” unleashes Montagu’s own textual subversions.<sup>22</sup> Her idealization of his difference opens a textual space for masquerade, and she performs herself in a

variety of mythological and tribadic roles. In her letters to her slippery obsession, he becomes the muse to her “fluid and multiple sexualities”.<sup>23</sup>

Montagu writes her love letters in French as if this is the appropriate tongue to express the loss of her reason and “philosophical Indifference” in the face of her “ardent” and “conflicting” feelings.<sup>24</sup> In her letters she becomes an “absurdity” that he has brought into being: “All that is certain is that I shall love you all my life in spite of your whims and my reason.”<sup>25</sup> But it is not just her love which is absurd, she too undergoes metamorphosis. She is the “Penelope of his absence” who lives only to “dwell every moment on the charms of a fugitive whose abode I did not even know, and whose existence I sometimes doubted.”<sup>26</sup> Or she weaves desire and death through her letters, exclaiming that, “I am a thousand times more to be pitied than the sad Dido, and I have a thousand more reasons to kill myself.”<sup>27</sup> In 1739 she announces: “I am leaving to seek you”.<sup>28</sup> Following the recent deaths of Skerrett and Stafford, Algarotti seems to have re-ignited the adventurer of her *Turkish Embassy Letters*. The night before she leaves for her “pilgrimage” Montagu writes:

At last I depart tomorrow with the Resolution of a man well persuaded of his Religion and happy in his conscience, filled with faith and hope.<sup>29</sup>

She promises that her dramatic professions of love are worthy of a man, heightening her adoration to a religion:

I have a devotion for you more zealous than any of the adorers of the Virgin has ever had for her. I believe that all these men have had a little vanity in their devotion, or they hoped for great rewards for their prayers. Here am I praying to you without hope that you will give me any credit at all for it, and I spend whole hours in my Study absorbed in the contemplation of your perfections.<sup>30</sup>

Algarotti is the feminine muse provoking her travel, her “enthusiasm” and her devotion.<sup>31</sup>

Idealising herself as Penelope and Dido, as well as masculinizing her passion, Montagu makes heroics out of her womanhood. She has feelings “of Generosity which Virgil did not think women capable of”<sup>32</sup> and exposes to Algarotti “(what has never been seen till now) the faithful picture of a woman’s Heart”. She presents herself to him as a lover, but strips down to “the accurate dissection of a female Soul.”<sup>33</sup> Her commitment to love is also heroic – “Nothing frightens me”:

Here I am at the feet of the Alps, and tomorrow I take the step which is to lead me into Italy. I comment myself to you in all perils like Don Quixote to his Dulcinea, and I have imagination no less inflamed than his.<sup>34</sup>

Montagu’s self representation is dispersed through a multiplicity of sexed identifications. As well as Don Quixote, she is Apollo: “You, Lovely Youth, shall my Apollo prove,/ Adorn my Verse, and tune my soul to Love”.<sup>35</sup>

At times she despairs her female body. She laments that “this outward Form submits to Nature’s power”<sup>36</sup> and in another letter declares:

you must believe that you possess in me the most perfect friend and the most passionate lover. I should have been delighted if nature permitted me to limit myself to the first title; I am enraged at having been formed to wear skirts.<sup>37</sup>

Although she ostensibly wishes to be his friend, the fact that he predominantly desires men suggests that she wants to be his male lover. It is reminiscent of the lines, “Let the Freind and the Lover be handsomely mix’d” which so enchanted Byron. Moreover, it is significant that she defines her sex through her clothing, as if her dress is some kind of disguise; it prefigures *Don Juan*. Montagu’s despair at her skirts provokes Morris to propose that she is “a gay man trapped in a woman’s body.”<sup>38</sup>

In a letter dated 10 September 1736, Montagu depicts her soul and mind as transcending her female physicality:

Why was my haughty Soul to Woman joyn’d?  
Why this soft sex impos’d upon my Mind?<sup>39</sup>

She ends the verse exclaiming that, “I dream to pleasure, but I wake to pain” (9). It is only in her creative world that she experiences the pleasure outside the boundaries of female flesh. In her imagination, she is able to disperse the sexed self. Moreover, not only does her textual invocation of Algarotti disrupt her femaleness, but his fluid sexuality offers her the space to represent her longing for an eroticised feminine object; his own vacillating sexuality ‘disorders’ her desire. In a poem composed on 10 May 1739 Montagu fantasises her beloved:

Between your sheets you soundly sleep  
Nor dream of Vigils that we Lovers keep  
While all the night, I waking sigh your name,  
The tender sound does every nerve inflame,  
Imagination shews me all your charms,  
The plenteous silken hair, and waxen Arms,  
The well turn’d neck, and snowy rising breast  
And all the Beauties that supinely rest

between your sheets (1-9)<sup>40</sup>

It is “Imagination” that arouses the speaker’s desire for the conventional female tropes of beauty: “waxen Arms”, “plenteous silken hair”, “snowy rising breast”. Significantly, Algarotti is projected as a silent, supine, statue-like figure to the speaker’s active creativity, voice and lust; he is objectified. In the second stanza the Pygmalion-like speaker cannot explicitly inscribe desire as:

... every Metaphor must render less  
And yet (methinks) which I could well express  
between your sheets (16-18)

The speaker is provocative and almost predatory. Her silence erotically charges her poetry with an abject and subversive longing.

In December 1736 Montagu apparently sent Algarotti a portrait of herself. Accompanying this portrait was a poem entitled ‘This Once Was Me’ in which the

speaker laments the decay of her youthful body as encapsulated in the portrait. She declares to her lover:

This once was me, thus my complexion fair,  
My cheek thus blooming, and thus curl'd my Hair,  
This picture which with pride I us'd to show  
The lost resemblance but upbraids me now,  
Yet all these charms I only would renew  
To make a mistress less unworthy you. (1-6)<sup>41</sup>

Following her lament, the speaker exclaims:

'Tis said, the Gods by ardent Vows are gain'd,  
Iphis her wish (however wild) obtain'd,  
Pygmalion warm'd to Life his Ivory maid,  
Will no kind power restore my charms decaid? (7-10)

Ostensibly she wants a return to youth, but it is significant that the figures who are invoked are Iphis and Pygmalion; male Ovidian characters marked by passion. Born a girl and brought up a boy, Iphis falls in love with Ianthe and they are to be married. On her wedding night she metamorphoses into a man. S/he is a potent figure reflecting Montagu's own "phallic seizures", as well as the anguish over a fixed sexed body. The speaker seems to desire a metamorphosis into a younger woman so that Algarotti will find her attractive. However, if we take into account his homosexuality and Montagu's despair over her sex, the metamorphosing and tribadic figure of Iphis offers more exciting possibilities.

The allusion to Pygmalion is an ironic comment upon Montagu's relationship with Algarotti as she idealises him. She also gives him money and patronage. The story of Pygmalion, however, also offers a metaphor for the creative process of her sexuality – "the only pleasure which is left to me". Through invoking Pygmalion Montagu reveals her authorship in portraying others (and herself); they no longer exist objectively but must be distorted and dispersed through her eyes, her pen and her

text. Indeed, she often employs statue-like imagery when writing others, such as in ‘Between Your Sheets’, as well as her famous description of the St Sophian women. As in ‘between your sheets’, Montagu does not refer to her beloved’s sex. Instead, she describes him as a “Lov’d Form” that “does at once unite/ All that can raise Esteem, or give delight” (21-22). It is a form that incorporates the respect commanded by men, as well as the delight or pleasure conventionally expected from women. Significantly, it echoes Dryden’s hermaphroditic description of Iphis whose “Habit shew’d a Boy, the beauteous Face/ With manly fierceness mingl’d Female grace” (66-67).<sup>42</sup> Because we do not have his replies and Montagu continually despairs over his faithlessness, Algarotti is an enigma. His femininity and the queer passions that he provokes in Montagu render him an unusual and seemingly passive figure in relation to her emotional torrent. Indeed, he seems as much a victim of circumstance and female desire as Don Juan.

### **Celebrity Ethnomasquerade**

Montagu probably compiled her *Turkish Embassy Letters* in the 1720s (Mary Astell was shown them in 1724). She arranged them into two albums and they travelled with her through France and Italy. They were published posthumously under her wishes (and against her family’s) in 1763. They are letters written for the wider public with the respondents functioning as a fictive device. Montagu is the heroine of her own narrative: a passionate and learned woman who discovers the Ottoman and Greek landscape armed only with her scholarly imagination, a sense of adventure, and her own heroic beauty.<sup>43</sup> In a letter to the Abbé Conte she fantasises “drinking a dish of tea with Sapho” and the same evening visiting “the temple of Homer in Chios”. She imagines how she would have “pass’d this voyage in takeing plans of magnificent Temples, delineateing the miracles of Statuarys and converseing with the most polite and most gay of humankind.”<sup>44</sup>

Montagu’s self-representation is given potency through the opulence of an Othered topography. She is fascinated by travelling incognito. In a letter to her sister,

she highlights the sexual freedoms offered by the veil, perhaps implying that this freedom extends to her:

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 [...]’tis impossible for the most jealous Husband to know his Wife when he meets her.<sup>45</sup>

She depicts herself “in my Turkish Habit” which is “admirably becoming”, and describes her dress in intricate and luxurious detail.<sup>46</sup> Significantly, as Garber points out, Montagu uses the lexicon of male dress and so, although her dress is entirely feminine, it “is also virtually identical to the items worn by men, as Lady Mary’s ‘translations’ into an English sartorial lexicon – drawers, smock, waistcoat – make clear”.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, when Montagu is in the baths she presents herself in her “rideing dress” which, according to Joseph Addison, signifies a “mannish woman”.<sup>48</sup> Montagu demonstrates, in Landry’s words, a “peculiarly English queerness, cross-dressed and smelling of horse”.<sup>49</sup>

In this ethnomasquerade, Montagu embodies the textual fantasy of becoming the Other, while at the same time controlling how she is being seen. Imagining taking tea with Sappho, and sensuously portraying the women in the Levant, the epistolary form creates a space where she can play with what was rendered scurrilous and scandalous in Twickenham.<sup>50</sup> After all, her teasing self-portrait surrounded by beautiful naked women attempting to force her stays, is written to an anonymous woman:

I have now entertaind you with an Account of such a sight as you never saw in your Life and what no book of travells could inform you of.<sup>51</sup>

Straddling the boundaries of the English language and an Eastern landscape, she offers her readers a beguilingly exotic, and yet ethnically safe, heroic woman. Just as Algarotti queers Montagu’s sexuality, so do her imaginings of the Orient.

When Byron and John Cam Hobhouse travelled to Albania, Greece and Turkey in 1809 they traced Montagu's footsteps. Hobhouse's annotations (made in 1813) reveal his disgust at Montagu's masquerade as Sapphic heroine. When Montagu is at her most romantic, her most Byronic, Hobhouse is at his most irate. He writes, "perfect nonsense" in the margins of her 31<sup>st</sup> July letter to the Abbé Conte:

While I view'd these celebrated Fields and Rivers, I admir'd the exact Geography of Homer, whom I had in my hand. Allmost every Epithet he gives to a Mountain or plain is still just for it, and I spent several hours in as agreeable Cogitations as ever Don Quixote had on Mount Montesinos.<sup>52</sup>

He continually corrects her, particularly when it comes to filth and cleanliness; when she writes 'clean', he writes 'dirty'. He takes issue with her propensity to exaggerate and blames her lies on her desperate desire to appear beautiful:

From what I have seen of the country, and from what I have read of her book, I am sure that her ladyship would not stick at a little fibbing; and as I know part of her accounts to be altogether false I have a right to suppose she has exaggerated other particulars.

Significantly, he employs Juvenalian misogynist discourse to attack her body and, by implication, her truth of her letters:

Once cannot fail to discover Lady M W M's ruling frailty in these letters. She wished to be considered a striking beauty [...] Yet she was not very beautiful, and soon began the repair of her charms by paint, which she laid on so thick that it was scraped off her face and bosom with a knife.<sup>53</sup>

Both he and Byron would have been aware of two versions of the *Turkish Embassy Letters*, one of which contained five spurious letters.<sup>54</sup> All editions include the exuberant preface by Astell who asserts "how much better purpose the LADYS Travel than their LORDS" and "a Lady has the skill to strike out a New Path".<sup>55</sup> The 1767 version is prefaced with an engraving of Montagu in her Turkish dress and

holding a book. It is entitled “The Female Traveller in the Turkish Dress”.

Underneath the portrait are the lines: “Let Men who glory in their better sense, / Read, hear, and learn Humility from hence;/ No more let them Superior Wisdom boast, / They can but equal M-nt-g-e at most.”<sup>56</sup> These additional materials may have annoyed Hobhouse, but they seem to have seduced Byron.

Byron also insists on Montagu’s fibbing. In a letter to his mother he writes:

The other day I was at Belgrave (a village in these environs), to see the house built on the same site as Lady Mary Wortley's. By-the-by, her ladyship, as far as I can judge, has lied, but not half so much as any other woman would have done in the same situation.<sup>57</sup>

It is not clear what Byron means here. He refers specifically to her gender and, therefore, could be alluding to her visit to the Turkish baths where she claims to have kept her clothes on. Or, like Hobhouse, he could be assuming that, as a woman, she wants to appear beautiful. He is extraordinary in that he does not ever (as far as I have found) discourse with relish on her filthy body. On the contrary, he professes an erotic attraction towards her:

I, besides, am so attached to the very name of “*Mary*”, that – as Johnson once said – ‘if you called a dog *Hervey* – I should love him’ – so – if you were to call a female of the same species – ‘*Mary*’ I should love it better than others (biped or quadruped) of the same sex with a different appellation. [...] But after all – would not some of us have been as great fools as Pope? For my part – I wonder that, with his quick feelings – her coquetry – and his disappointment – he did no more – instead of writing some lines – which are to be condemned – if false – and regretted if true.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, *Don Juan* reveals a playful attitude to women and lies: “What I love in women is, they won’t/ Or can’t do otherwise than lie, but do it/ So well, the very truth seems falsehood to it”. And “after all, what is a lie? ’Tis but/ The truth in masquerade” (11, 36-37).<sup>59</sup>

Byron had read her letters from Italy and France which were published in 1803. Consequently, he would have been aware of what Srinivas Aruvamudan terms Montagu's "performative dispersion" of 'self' "into several identificatory positions".<sup>60</sup> The carefully choreographed voices performed throughout her essays, poems, and correspondence (as well as numerous spurious letters) reveal Montagu as consciously dramatizing herself, as prefiguring Byronic gestures. Her textual identity is fluid and, in Cynthia Lowenthal's words, "constantly evolving".<sup>61</sup> Byron mimics her: she is painted in Turkish dress, and he in Albanian. Moreover, they both employ the Levant as a foil for sexualities in England. Both had read Paul Rycaut's sexualized visions of the Ottoman empire, and so were familiar with how the Orient had been associated with perversion in the European imagination. Although they both distance themselves from Rycaut, they exploit this particular sexualized form of Orientalism and, consequently, the landscape becomes a site for the inscription of sexual fantasies. This is evident in *Don Juan*, but also in Byron's letters and journals. For example, in 1819 Byron writes to John Murray of the Turkish baths: "that marble palace of sherbet and sodomy".<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, like Montagu, Byron suppressed, burned and excised textual evidence of his sexuality. In Albania he met the homosexual Ali Pasha but he reveals little of his experiences there. In his letters to his mother from Albania, he enthusiastically compliments the beauty of the men and Ali Pasha's sons who are "the prettiest little animals I ever saw".<sup>63</sup> He also fictionalizes Ali Pasha in an early unpublished version of Canto 2 of *Childe Harold*:

For boyish minions of unhallowed love  
The shameless torch of wild desire is lit,  
Caressed, preferred even to women's self above,  
Whose forms for Nature's gentler errors fit  
All frailties mote excuse save that which they commit.<sup>64</sup>

He later edits these lines, presumably for fear of the British public.

Byron's attraction to Montagu finds its way into the "transvestite drama and verbal cross-dressing" of *Don Juan*; the text that, in Susan J. Wolfson's words, "foregrounds the artifice that sustains much of what we determine to be 'masculine'

and ‘feminine’”.<sup>65</sup> The penetrating phallus that Yegenoglu identifies is taken to excess: Don Juan relishes being a man in the female spaces of the Ottoman empire. When Don Juan is captured and sold, he sails past the very islands where Montagu metonymically aligns herself with Homer and Don Quixote. When he arrives in Turkey he enjoys “the very view/ Which charmed the charming Mary Montagu” (5, 3); the same view that presumably charmed Byron when he followed in her footsteps. Moreover, the narrator, like Byron, has “a passion for the name of Mary,/ For once it was a magic sound to me” (5, 4). Montagu stalks the text. Sometimes this is verbatim as in: “A monkey, a Dutch mastiff, a mackaw,/ Two parrots, with a Persian cat and kittens [...] caged in one huge hamper altogether” (3, 18) which originates from a spurious letter from the 1803 edition of her works.<sup>66</sup> But it is also in her queer ethnomasquerades.

Wolfson notes that in the context of *Don Juan* “masculinized women are almost always figures of erotic desire”<sup>67</sup>. Indeed, the text gains its momentum from polymorphous sexual transgression. Its celebration of masquerade, multiple sexes, exotic erotica, and sexual fantasies, play with Montagu’s romanticized and sensualized disguises. Although Byron turns Montagu’s idealization of Turkish women’s freedoms on its head – “Thus in the East they are extremely strict, /And wedlock and a padlock mean the same” (5, 158) – he mimics her contact zone where women peruse women. Only, this time, the woman flirting with masculinity is now a man playing with femininity. Moreover, as Landry points out, a cross-dressed Don Juan hidden in a Turkish harem is counterposed with a cross-dressed Duchess of Fitz-Fulke. Just as both men and women find Don Juan irresistible in the seraglio (echoing the attractions of Algarotti?), so Don Juan finds this phallic woman dressed as a friar seductive.<sup>68</sup> It is as if Montagu’s Ovidian fantasies of her feminine scholar have come true.

In his *A Short History of Celebrity* Fred Inglis argues that celebrity culture began in the mid-eighteenth century, replacing the court as primary spectacle and centre of social dynamics. It was a product of London’s new consumerism. Inglis argues that the capital began to breed “its version of a new social figure, famous for his and her urban accomplishments”. He includes:

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the lead she took as a solitary woman tourist (getting into the Sofia mosque disguised as a man), as philanthropic proselytizer for the new science of immunization (herself disfigured by smallpox), as friend of poets (Alexander Pope) and audaciously free-loving free-liver.<sup>69</sup>

Byron's celebrity status is assured. His cultivation of a heroic image, along with the mass circulation of newspapers and the printing industry, meant that his public persona reached a wide and diverse audience.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, as an aristocrat and defender of transgendered identities, his celebrification can also be read as having its roots in Montagu's masquerades. For both writers, philhellene and Orientalist discourses enable possibilities of self-imagining, ethnomasquerade and celebrity spectacle. Montagu's passionate travelling and heroic sexuality reveals continuities across the borders of canonized literary periods.

---

<sup>1</sup> Montagu never lived here. See Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 563 n.24. This is the source of all Montagu's information unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> *Byron's Letters and Journals* ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1973), vol. 6, p. 60. Hereafter cited as *BLJ*.

<sup>3</sup> *BLJ*, 6, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Halsband, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> *BLJ*, 6, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> See Donna Landry, 'Horsy and Persistently Queer: Imperialism, Feminism, and Bestiality,' *Textual Practice* 15: 3 (November 2001), pp. 467-85, p. 479, and Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*, p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> From 'Letter to John Murray Esq' in *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose* ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 120-160, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> *Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, p.126.

<sup>10</sup> *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Robert Halsband, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. 2, p. 13. All letters are cited from this edition, unless otherwise stated. Hereafter cited as *CL*.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (London: Allen Lane, 1979), vol. 1, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 129 (p. 505). Most of Montagu's letters are written in French. The page numbers for the English translations will also be given. Montagu's 32 letters to Algarotti were not published until Robert Halsband's 1965 *Collected Letters*. They contain six letters from the Murray Archive which are presumably the letters that Byron sent from Venice as they match his descriptions. They are dated 20-29 August 1738, November 1738, February 1739, July 1740, 30 December 1756 and May 1758 (see Halsband 119,129,134,198 in vol 2 and 117 and 149 in vol 3). The remaining letters were authenticated in Venice in 1850. The period between Byron's last letter to Murray and 1850 remain a mystery. It is not known who found or kept the letters. However the cover page of the remaining 24 letters in the Halsband Collection at Columbia University is, according to Halsband, "in the handwriting of Lady Morgan (1783-1859)". Lady Morgan was a friend of Byron's and it is possible that Byron had found and also read them. See Arden Hegele, 'Lord Byron, Literary Detective: The Recovery of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Long-Lost Venetian Letters', *The Byron Journal* 39: 1 (2011), pp. 35-44 for the

---

full story of these letters, including the period after 1850. Apart from the letter just cited, the other correspondence discussed in this article is from the remaining 24 letters.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735), *Imitations of Horace. With an Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot and the Epilogue to the Satires*, *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1936), vol. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *BLJ*, vol. 6, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> *CL*, 1, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *CL*, 1, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Morris, ‘Transgendered Perspectives on Premodern Sexualities’, *SEL* 46: 3 (Summer 2006), pp. 585-600.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, ‘Transgendered Perspectives’, p. 597.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, ‘Transgendered Perspectives’, p. 593.

<sup>20</sup> Morris, ‘Transgendered Perspectives’, p. 597.

<sup>21</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 104 (p. 502).

<sup>22</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 104 (p. 501).

<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*, p. 141.

<sup>24</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 103 (p. 501-2).

<sup>25</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 103 (p. 501).

<sup>26</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 116 (p. 504).

<sup>27</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 104 (p. 501).

<sup>28</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 139 (p. 507).

<sup>29</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 140 (p. 508).

<sup>30</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 104 (p. 502).

<sup>31</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 103 (p. 501).

<sup>32</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 104 (p. 501).

<sup>33</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 106 (p. 503).

<sup>34</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 147 (p. 508).

<sup>35</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 115.

<sup>36</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 104 (p. 502).

<sup>38</sup> Morris, ‘Transgendered Perspectives’, p. 595.

<sup>39</sup> *CL*, 2, p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Essays and Poems and Simplicity, a Comedy*, ed. Isobel Grundy and Robert Halsband (2nd edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) , p. 296. All citations are taken from this edition unless otherwise stated. Hereafter cited as *E&P*.

<sup>41</sup> *E&P*, ‘This Once Was Me’, Appendix 1, p. 381.

<sup>42</sup> John Dryden, ‘Iphis’ from *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958). In 1739 Montagu owned at least six French and English translations of Ovid's work, including those by Dryden. She later told Joseph Spence that, “When I was young I was a vast admirer of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and that was one of the chief reasons that set me upon the thoughts of stealing the Latin language.” See Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*, ed. Samuel Weller Singer (London: Centaur Press Ltd., 1964), p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Montagu enjoyed the masquerades she attended in London where women, according to Terry Castle, could “violate all the cherished imperatives of ordinary feminine sexual decorum” and enjoy the “simulcrum of sexual autonomy”. See Terry Castle, ‘The Culture of Travesty: Sexuality and Masquerade in Eighteenth-Century England’, in *British Literature 1640-1789: A Critical Reader*, ed. Robert DeMaria Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), pp. 251-270, p. 261.

<sup>44</sup> *CL*, 1, p. 423.

<sup>45</sup> *CL*, 1, p. 328.

<sup>46</sup> *CL*, 1, p. 326.

<sup>47</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 312.

<sup>48</sup> See Susan C. Shapiro ‘The Mannish New Woman, Punch and Its Precursors’ *The Review of English Studies* 42:168 (1991), pp. 510-520.

<sup>49</sup> Donna Landry, ‘Horsy and Persistently Queer: Imperialism, Feminism and Bestiality’, *Textual Practice* 15:3 (2001), pp. 467-85, p. 480.

<sup>50</sup> Meyda Yegenoglu maintains that Lady Mary's scrutiny of the naked bathers for a British audience is one of power, and argues that Lady Mary “attaches a phallus to herself” to penetrate a “feminized” East. See *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 93. Landry also acknowledges that Montagu sustains her English

---

subjectivity through enacting a masculinist and imperialist desire for the Other. See Donna Landry, ‘Feminism and colonialism: Three English women travellers on horseback,’ *Science and Society* 75 (Winter 1997), pub. in Ankara, Turkey as ‘*Feminizm ve sömürgecilik: At üzerinde üç Ingiliz kadın gezgin*,’ trans. Asena Gnal. Toplum ve Bilim (1997), 75. pp. 68-84.

<sup>51</sup> CL, 1, p. 315.

<sup>52</sup> CL, 1, p. 420.

<sup>53</sup> *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M—y W---y M---e Written During her Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa, To Persons of Distinction, Men of Letters, &c. in different Parts of Europe*, new Edition, complete in One Volume (London: John Taylor, 1790). Annotations made in 1813. British Library – 1813 shelfmark: 1477.b.29. This does not include the spurious letters. See also Donna Landry, ‘Love Me, Love My Turkey Book: Letters and Turkish Travelogues in Early Modern England’ in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> The 1767 edition of her works includes an additional volume with spurious letters, apparently written as a bet (See CL, p. xviii). The description of the “barbarous spectacle of Turks” is more akin to Hobhouse than Montagu. The letter to Pope which alludes to the “luscious passion of the Seraglio” may have inflamed Byron’s imagination. See *An Additional Volume To The Letters Of the Right Honourable Lady M—y W---y M---e* (Dublin: P. Wilson, D. Chamberlaine, J. Potts, S. Watson, J. Mitchell, J. Williams, 1767), p. 20-21.

<sup>55</sup> CL, 1, p. 467.

<sup>56</sup> *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M—y W—y M—e; Written, during her TRA VELS in Europe, Asia and Africa To Persons of Distinction, Men of Letters, &c. in different PARTS of Europe*. (London: Printed for S. Payne, A. Cook, and H. Hill, 1767).

<sup>57</sup> BLJ, 1, p. 250.

<sup>58</sup> *Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, p. 126.

<sup>59</sup> Quotations of *Don Juan* follow *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, 5 vols., ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-86).

<sup>60</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan, ‘Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the Hammam: Masquerade, Womanliness, and Levantinization’, *ELH* 62 (1995), pp. 69-104, p. 69.

<sup>61</sup> Cynthia Lowenthal, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> BLJ, 6, p. 207. For Byron’s philhellenist fantasies of classical Greek sexualities see Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in Nineteenth-Century England* (Swaffham: The Gay Man’s Press, 1998), pp. 140-141 and 146.

<sup>63</sup> BLJ, 1, pp. 227-8.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in *Byron and Greek Love*, p. 78.

<sup>65</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, ‘Their She Condition: Cross-dressing and the Politics of Gender in Don Juan’ *ELH* 54 (1987), pp. 609-610, p. 611.

<sup>66</sup> See letter dated January 20 1758 from Venice, *The Works of the Right Honorable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu including her Correspondence, Poems and Essays* (London: Richard Philips, 1803) vol. 5, pp. 33-37. It was reprinted in Lord Wharncliffe’s 1837 edition of her letters but it is not in Halsband’s *Complete Letters*.

<sup>67</sup> Wolfson, ‘Their She Condition’, p. 610.

<sup>68</sup> See Landry, ‘Feminism and Colonialism’.

<sup>69</sup> Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010) p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Tom Mole, *Byron’s Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke and New York, 2007).