Self-Fashioning through Travel Writing: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Letters from Italy*

Donatella Abbate Badin

Abstract
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was, according to Manfred Pfister, the first woman to have expressed written opinions about Italy in her 1718 letters. Her subsequent copious writings on Italy, however, were published late and were not to influence the vision of Italy in the eighteenth century. Montagu's responses to Italy, where she sojourned three times, reflected the events which had led her to what she considered a hospitable and congenial country and were not, therefore, tied to fixed models dictated by an Addisonian classicism nor by a nationalistic and paternalistic consciousness. Memories of her Oriental experience during her first visit, the anxious expectation of an encounter with her beloved Francesco Algarotti during the second, and the status of an expatriate who had been a victim of various swindles during the third contributed to fashioning the writer's textual self and the ever changing readings of the country she offered. Those multiple self-fashionings act both as a protective screen and as a lens through which to view Italy.

1. Introduction

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote that "all women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds" (1985: 63). If we extend Woolf's advice to women travel-writers of the past, they should all have laid a wreath upon the grave of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) who, through her better known account of life in Constantinople as well as her letters from Italy, written at different times in her lifetime, feminised the eminently masculine discourse of travel and helped dismantle many male stereotypes. Lady Montagu

* Parts of this essay were published in Italian in Abbate Badin (2008), pp. 351-82.

played, indeed, a pivotal role in a literary genre dominated by male figures by establishing new modalities regarding both the form and content of travel accounts written by women.

Unfortunately, women travellers would have to wait a long time to fully benefit from her example. Lady Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* were published posthumously for the first time in 1763. The collection included a report of her travels to and from Constantinople in fifty-two letters (or pseudo-letters) to various correspondents[1] and was an immediate success, followed by several reprints and new enriched editions which even contained forgeries. In that first seminal publication there were also the three letters relating to her 1718 passage from Genoa to Mont Cenis which made her, according to Manfred Pfister (1996: 500), the first woman to have expressed written opinions about Italy.

We are so used to thinking of Montagu as a commentator on the East that even the literary production of a sojourn totalling almost twenty years does not establish her as an authority on Italy. First of all, the Italian letters do not form a corpus like the Turkish ones. Since they were not edited for publication or circulation, the representations of Italy get lost among other concerns. Moreover, they were made public progressively over a period of a century and a half so that their impact was diluted[2]. No wonder, then, that the Italian letters have so far been read for their biographical interest or to study her style or her thoughts on literature or women's education, while little attention has been paid to the construction of the Other (and implicitly of the Self) they reveal[3].

---

[1] As Robert Halsband, the editor of her *Collected Letters*, affirms, "They are not the actual letters she sent to her friends and relations; they are instead a compilation of pseudo-letters […] perhaps a travel-memoir in the form of letters" (1965a: xiv-xv). The *Turkish Letters*, however, were most certainly based on actual letters, much manipulated in view of publication.

[2] The 1803 edition of her *Works*, edited by James Dallaway, took in for the first time the long period of her residence in Italy, revealing her views about the country. Successively, the picture was clarified and expanded by several intervening editions before the 1861 one, the first "worthy of her literary rank", according to Robert Halsband (1965a: xix), her biographer and the editor of the *Collected Letters*, whose publication finally lays bare her long experience in Italy.

[3] Among the most notable analysts of her Italian letters, besides her biographers Robert Halsband and Isobel Grundy's books and essays, are Marianna D'Ezio 2004, Arden Hegele 2011, Cynthia Lowenthal 1994, Silvia Mantini 1999, Jurgen

For these same reasons, her authoritative status and expertise deriving from a long stay in the country did not overly influence the vision of Italy in the eighteenth century, nor did her construction of Italy counterbalance prevailing patriarchal opinions and stereotypes. Romantic writers, however, did start benefitting from her views and unprejudiced exploration of Alterity. Byron, who was inspired by her to travel East, also contributed to the recovery of some of her Venetian letters (Hegele: 2011)[4]. Lady Morgan compared her own passage of the Alps with Montagu's adventurous crossing (2010, 6: 29) and relied on the earlier traveller's pioneering explorations of the Italian lakes (1863, 2: 96)[5]. Maria Graham, following, whether consciously or not, Montagu's example, saw the interest in writing about "the manners of a class of inhabitants not often brought into contact with foreigners, and therefore little known in England – namely the farmers and peasants" (2010: 14). This unprecedented approach to creating an image of Italy through scenes of common life was first displayed in Montagu's frescoes of Gottolengo and Lovere, the provincial towns where she resided between 1746 and 1756. Montagu was as proud as Graham of the originality of her enterprise and boasted of her difference from other travellers:

Schlaeger 1999, and Giovanna Silvani 1996 to whom we owe an Italian edition of the letters translated by Maria Cristina Vino. An early commentary on the images of Lovere projected by the Letters of Lady Montagu is contained in Marinoni 1904.

[4] Lord Byron, who had chanced upon Montagu's letters to her Italian lover, Algarotti, had given them to his publisher, Murray, who in turn offered them to Lord Wharncliffe, Montagu's great-grandson, to use in his 1837 edition of her work. The episode is fully explored in Hegele 2011, an essay that discusses Byron's involvement in an investigation of the curious story regarding Montagu and the censorship that ensued. "Given the family's concerted effort to suppress details of Montagu's Italian escapades in order to protect her reputation", the heir refused to publish the letters, as Hegele recounts, because "any outstanding Venetian letters were a serious liability" (2011: 41). Byron's discoveries were not included in biographies of Montagu until the twentieth century.

[5] In a letter to her sister, Morgan writes: "I know not where to refer you for an account of the lake of Como except to *Lady M. W. Montague's Letters":* See *Lady Morgan's Memoirs*, 2, 96. Montagu's lake was Iseo, not Como, but Morgan was recognising her role as a groundbreaker in describing places that were outside the established itineraries of the Grand Tour.

> You will wonder, perhaps, never to have heard any mention of this Paradice [Salò on Lake Garda] either from our English Travellers or in any of the printed Accounts of Italy. It is as much unknown to them as if it was guarded by a flameing Cherubim. I attribute that Ignorance in part to its being 25 miles distant from any post Town, and also to the Custom of the English of herding together, avoiding the conversation of the Italians, who on their side are naturally reserv'd and do not seek Strangers. (1965, 2: 469)

Her boast was quite justified, for not only did she take unbeaten paths but also inaugurated an approach to travel writing that came to be established as suitable for women. While, as Loredana Polezzi aptly writes (2001: 30), in the literature of men the myth of the past "never lost its ambivalent force, its power to sustain both admiring and dismissive judgements", Montagu redirected the traveller's gaze and, especially, the gaze of women, to the realities of the present and, by concentrating on the domestic scene, she opposed the male "rhetoric of mastery, conquest, and quest" (Lawrence, 1994: 20). For her there was no "dry, over-embellished, summary historical and geographical information", which Annie Richardson and Catherine Dille (2009: xi) indicate as characteristic of her male contemporaries, but rather idiosyncratically presented material which naturalised information so as to make it appear spontaneous.

None of Montagu's three journeys through Italy could be technically defined a Grand Tour, if one accepts the narrow definition of the term as educational travel for young gentlemen to allow them to experience classical antiquity and Renaissance art. Yet the bulk of her epistolary account of Italy amounts to one of the most accurate and diversified tours of Italy, containing both what is considered typical of a masculine account and a new feminine approach. This new approach does not simply consist in establishing the epistolary form as the norm for female travel accounts, nor in indicating as suitable for women writers the topics in which she excelled, namely descriptions of social life and the habits of polite society and, generally, the customs of the people, which, as Garms-Cornides indicates (1999: 178-81)[6],

[6] "Travel literature written by women in prerevolutionary Europe does not seem to reveal specific typologies either formally or contentwise" (Garms-Cornides 1999: 183).

were equally exploited by male writers. What makes Montagu a pioneer of a feminised way of travelling quite distinct from the Grand Tour is her experiential approach: her decision after her first visit to travel on her own in search not so much of a lost lover, as on her second visit, but of herself, and on her third visit to turn from a tourist to a permanent resident as a sign of rupture with everything she had been raised to become and society expected her to be. Most feminine travel writing was, indeed, a rupture in the natural course of a woman's existence, but not as radical as Montagu's. The writing of the letters that cover these years becomes both a veil to hide the reasons for her stay abroad and the vicissitudes that tormented her, and also a way to present to her correspondents (her husband, her sister, her daughter, some friends) but, more especially to herself, an ideal image constructed to reassure and console and to lessen the transgressive nature of her decisions. It is an act of self-fashioning and of deflected autobiography.

The letters fall into three groups, corresponding to different visits to Italy, different moments in the history of the country, and a different psychological disposition that contributed to fashioning the writer's textual self and the ever-changing and ever-new reading of a country she considered hospitable and congenial (or which she constructed as such). For it must be borne in mind that she was putting up a façade rather than an edifice, creating a *trompe l'oeil* effect. How far the fashioning of the territory is directly linked to an act of self-fashioning will be seen by linking the imagological[7] analysis of her description of Italy to the circumstances and the purposes behind the letters.

2. Biography

An aristocrat of highly prestigious descent, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) was a proud woman, conscious of her

[7] The imagological approach is a developing field in comparative literature and in semiotic theory of culture, and is closely linked to the debate on Alterity in literary geopolitics or cultural geography. It focuses on how images of the Other are formed and on how certain characteristics, functions, and qualities are assigned to certain people. See, for instance, Beller and Leerssen (2007).

position but also, from the beginning, an eccentric, impatient of conventions and of roles assigned to women by society and free of petty inhibitions. Her life was marked by many eccentricities and transgressions, to wit her travels. Her first transgression was her marriage to an entrepreneur, Edward Wortley, undesirable by her family's standards but which she had pursued through a passionate correspondence ending in an elopement (1715). The glowing colours in which, after Wortley was named Ambassador to the Ottoman empire, she depicts the life of women in the *harem* and her adoption of many Turkish customs, including smallpox inoculation, indicate her innovative and fearless attitude and subvert, as Mantini notes, the burden of stereotypes and received images dictated by a budding Orientalism (1999: 297). The years that followed her triumphant return from Turkey saw her as an intellectual who could hold her own among the most intelligent, cultivated and witty men of the literary salons of the day. Lady Montagu was not afraid to play the role of the bluestocking to the hilt, in spite of being often ridiculed (even by Alexander Pope, of whose circle she had been the star), but she began to grow impatient in an atmosphere she found petty and stifling. On the family front, moreover, she was profoundly disappointed by her husband and both her children. Her falling passionately in love in 1736 at the age of forty-seven with the young Italian poet and scientist Francesco Algarotti (1712-1764), then half her age, must have appeared as a last chance to break all bounds imposed by nature, society and class. So, when in 1739 she left England in pursuit of her love, she was embarking on what Silvani has aptly defined a voluntary exile but also a stubborn affirmation of autonomy and of an intolerance to submitting to any role imposed on women by the society of her times. Having waited in vain for him in Venice, she finally met Algarotti in Turin in 1741, but the encounter was a disaster. Yet, in spite of being thwarted in love, she never questioned her decision to make Italy her residence with or without Algarotti, as D'Ezio points out (2006: 133). Around this time she must have confessed to herself that she would not go back to England, that she would choose a life of solitude, but live on her own terms. This decision, together with her love affair, is the lens through which the letters of her second visit to Italy should be viewed.

As for Montagu's third period of residence in Italy, the account of life in Gottolengo and Lovere on the banks of Lake Iseo, with its idyllic descriptions, must be read through the lens of her *Italian Memoir* (originally *Memoria Italiano* [sic]), a manuscript hidden for a long time in the Sheffield City Archives and made public by Isobel Grundy in 1996 in both the original idiosyncratic Italian and her translation[8]. Driven out of Italy in 1741 by the political situation that followed the end of the War of Austrian Succession, Montagu had spent the next four years in France but in 1746, driven by restlessness and nostalgia, she returned to war-ravaged Italy and travelled amid many dangers to Brescia, escorted by yet another young man, Count Ugolino Palazzi, whose ambiguous role has only recently been partially disclosed by the *Memoir,* a "retrospective account" compiled with the intention of suing him "for fraud and theft of money" (Grundy 1996: xix). The young aristocrat, who had been recommended to her in Avignon, was instrumental in making her take up residence in the province of Brescia where, initially, she had been his mother's and his family's guest. This is, at least, what one deduces from the letters, which make him appear a trusted adviser and agent who helped her settle down to a peaceful and fruitful retirement. The *Memoir* gives another version of her decade in the province of Brescia, a story of underhanded dealings including money borrowing and extortion, theft, swindling and Palazzi's illegitimate use of her house, horses and carriages. In addition, there are passages describing persecution, threats of violence, forced detention and an adventurous escape, with all the ingredients of a Gothic novel including an Italian villain as the stock character. Embarrassed by her friendship with such a scoundrel as Palazzi (who, in age and behaviour, reminded her of her son Edward) and even more by her own gullibility and indifference to material things, which, says Grundy, comes close to "idiocy" (1996: xx), she never mentioned her problems to the family. For different reasons, then, each group of letters produces a highly manipulated picture of Italy and of her sojourn there.

[8] The *Memoir* had been previously included in Philip Henry Stanhope, 5th Earl. *Miscellanies*. 2nd ser., 1872. The Sheffield manuscript on which Grundy based her publication was not in Montagu's hand, but probably in that of her secretary.

3. First visit, 1718

The three letters of 1718 are the work of a confident woman producing carefully crafted accounts of what her readership would have expected of her: some news about society and court life, some conventional descriptions of artistic beauties and some piquant details. They relate to her brief visit to the North-West of Italy on the way home from Constantinople. Unlike the majority of travel-writers who measured Italy by the yardstick of England, Montagu, imbued with memories and impressions of Turkey, used the East as a term of comparison. After "barbarous" Tunis, she declared herself "surrounded with Objects of pleasure, and […] charm'd with the Beautys of Italy" (1965, 1: 428), but in her eyes, which were used to the splendours of Constantinople, Genoa seemed "diminished" and even the most sumptuous churches "appeared so mean to [her] after that of Sancta Sophia" (1965, 1: 432). She did, however, recognise that "the street call'd Strada Nova here is perhaps the most beautiful line of Buildings in the World" (1965, 1: 430). In Turin, her Protestant self would surface in ironical sallies against Catholicism, too close to her experience to be viewed with the tolerance she had displayed towards Islam, a religion that had intrigued and charmed her. "I have not respect enough for the holy handkerchief to speak long of it" (1965, 1: 432), she writes about the Holy Shroud, and she mocks the pious Savoy Court where "Processions and masses are all the magnificence in fashion" (1965, 1: 434). On the whole, her views about Italy, though sympathetic, appear imbued with condescension and would be rather conventional were it not for the triangulation between Italy, England and the East that confers an aura of cosmopolitanism to her vision. This is especially the case of the famous passage on cicisbeismo[9], the prototype of a *topos* of British discourse on Italy. Montagu had observed the same custom at the Ottoman court ("the Custom of Tetis beys") and in Vienna, where she called it "sub-marriage" (1965, 1: 271), and she pointed

[9] The *cicisbeo* or *cavalier servente* was a (young) man attached to the service of a married woman, whom he accompanied in lieu of her husband and with whom he might also entertain sexual relations that would be viewed indulgently by society. Most eighteenth-century English writers about Italy mention the practice as a shameful one.

out ironically that the appearance of Italian ladies had been much improved by it. The comparison between East and West confers a sophisticated and multiethnic dimension on *cicisbeismo* and frees it from the reprobation which seeps from the writings of such male writers as Sharp or Smollett. Montagu, instead, in this first account of *cavalier serventi,* casts an amused gaze on them: "These are Gentlemen that devote themselves to the service of a particular Lady (I mean a marry'd one, for the virgins are all invisible, confin'd to convents)" and concludes her description of the duties of *cicisbei* with these ironical words: "In short they are to spend all their time and Money in her service who rewards them according to her Inclination (for Opportunity they want none) but the husband is not to have the Impudence to suppose 'tis any other than pure platonic Friendship" (1965, 1: 430).

The sojourn in Turkey and the exposure to a different conception of married life, together with her own incipient dissatisfaction with her husband, prompted the open-minded cosmopolitanism of her response to a practice that had inflamed male observers with priggish moralising. In refusing the male gaze and relativising the transgression, Montagu was already building the foundations of her justification for her own lapses in life, travels and writings.

4. Second visit: 1739-1742

The second group of letters follows Montagu's *de facto* separation from her husband when, in 1739, she moved to Italy on the double spur of fulfilling her youthful dream of escaping to Naples[10] and her present dream of joining the man she had fallen in love with in 1736, Francesco Algarotti[11]. In both cases she was following an impulse

[10] A young Montagu planning her elopement with Wortley in 1712 had fantasised of living in solitude with him in Italy: "At Naples we may live after our own fashion" (1965, 1: 141).

[11] Francesco Algarotti (1712-1764) was a handsome and brilliant Venetian savant and poet whom Montagu met in 1736 in London, where he was working on the Italian popularisation of Sir Isaac Newton's *Optics*, later published with the title *Il Newtonianismo per le dame* (1737). Montagu's five-year-long passion for Count Algarotti led her to supply him with money, pursue him with witty and passionate letters and, as he was reluctant to return to London, follow him (fruitlessly) to Italy, where they had arranged to meet in Venice. The affair was fully revealed by

that was going against the ideal of moderation and self-control she had displayed so far. "What has become of that philosophical indifference that made the glory and tranquillity of my former years?" she wrote to Algarotti, almost surprised at such a change in her personality. To her family and acquaintances she justified her journey in various ways, alleging health complaints or the desire to meet her friend, Lady Pomfret, and pretending to hesitate between various destinations (the South of France, Rome or Venice) when her mind had already been made up.

A sample of her inflamed rhetoric (originally in idiosyncratic French, the language of passion) is sufficient to explain what had been the true reasons for her journey:

> I am leaving to seek you. One need not accompany such a proof of an eternal attachment with an embroidery of words. I shall meet you in Venice. I had intended to meet you on the road, but I believe it is more discreet, and even more certain, to wait to see you at the end of my pilgrimage. It is for you to grant my prayers and to make me forget all my fatigues and chagrins. (1965, 2: 139)[12]

Even though the scandalous relationship was not known, simply travelling on her own contradicted what Lawrence calls the "Western cultural truism that Penelope waits while Odysseus voyages" (1994: ix). Montagu was well aware of the obvious transgression of her journey, undertaken without any plausible excuse, and of the secret transgression of reversing all feminine models and acting like a Casanova or, rather, as she suggests, a Don Quixote in pursuit of Dulcinea (1965, 2: 154). The letters to her family and friends, then, would necessarily be crafted so as to become a screen for this double transgression. The many lies she tells her correspondents leads us to presume that her portrait of Italy, too, is to be taken with a pinch of salt.

The codified images of Venice, a city famous in England for the "lasciviousness of its lifestyle" (Schlaeger 1999: 63), and of Italy, "a land of excess and of infinite possibilities" (Silvani 1996: 31), fitted

---

Halsband's publication of the thirty-seven extant letters but had been gossiped about in Venice and London.

[12] Trans. Isobel Grundy, ed., Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Selected Letters,* Penguin, London 1997, p. 245.

those evoked by Montagu's recent passion, which made her declare that if she found Algarotti "such as [he] had sworn", she would find the "Elysian fields" (1965, 2: 140). Mixing original observations and time-honored clichés, Montagu presented her "Elysian fields" as a permissive, easy-going country of relaxed mores, much in contrast with the stiff conformism that characterised England: "I am surprized at the different way of acting I find in Italy, where, though the sun gives more warmth to passions, they are all managed with a sort of discretion that there is never any public *éclat*, though there are ten thousand publick engagements" (1965, 2: 173). The freedom Venice allowed is, indeed, one of its most fascinating aspects and is one to which the clandestine lover repeatedly returns when praising the secrecy of masks and dominoes (1965, 2: 159)[13] or the "universal liberty that is certainly one of the greatest *agréments* in life" (1965, 2: 173).

Venice combined discretion, bound to please a woman in search of a hideaway, with elaborate social rituals and intellectual stimulation that appealed to the snobbish and ambitious aristocrat. Being aware of how her journey transgressed feminine canons, Montagu must have felt the need to appear at her most feminine, describing the intense "course of conversations, concerts, balls" (1965, 2: 173) she went through in Venice and elsewhere. To convince her correspondents that she was having a good time she boasted: "We have foreign ambassadors from all parts of the world, who have all visited me. I have received visits from many of the noble Venetian ladies, and upon the whole I am very much at ease here" (1965, 2: 152). The favours received from Venetian high society (dinners in her honour, keys to opera-boxes, the Regatta watched from the Doge's balcony) were listed in order to flatter her husband, who expected his wife to be the object of attentions consonant with his status.

Writing to Lady Pomfret, on the other hand, she concentrated on intellectual pleasures: "It is impossible to give any rules for the agreeableness of conversation; but here is so great variety, I think 'tis impossible not to find some to suit every taste" (1965, 2: 173). Her *palazzo*, as Isobel Grundy notes (1999: 405), became "a centre for literati, antiquarians and virtuosi" and her literary aspirations were taken much more seriously here than at home, so that later

[13] Montagu had also appreciated the freedom that wearing the veil gave her in Constantinople.

she was to write: "The character of a learned woman is far from being ridiculous in this country, the greatest families being proud of having produced female writers. […] To say truth, there is no part of the world where our sex is treated with so much contempt as in England" (1965, 3: 39-40).

In the report of her second visit, Montagu is a generous advocate for Italy and is proud to differ from her predecessors, whom she implicitly criticises: "[This] is so different from what I had always heard and read, that I am convinced either the manners of the country are wonderfully changed, or travellers have always related what they have imagined and not what they saw" (1965, 2: 173). Considering, however, that to Algarotti she confessed she was so blinded by love, so "absorbed in myself […] not even the pleasures I was offered in the cities could divert me from the sweet contemplation in which I am immersed" (1965, 2: 148), it is possible that her rosy construction of Italy, rather than a reflection of her elatedness at being in love at her ripe age, was a mask she wore to hide the turmoil of her passion and reassure her relatives about the agreeableness of her Grand Tour.

After waiting for Algarotti for two years, the encounter, which had been several times postponed, took place in Turin in 1741. At that point, Montagu finally convinced herself of the hopelessness of her relationship with the young Italian and broke it off, only to re-establish a witty epistolary exchange with him some fifteen years later. This, however, did not deter her from continuing in her voluntary exile. In 1742 she left Italy and moved to Avignon where she spent four agreeable years before returning to Italy in 1746, when she had to cross a war-torn Northern Italy to settle in the province of Brescia and on the shores of the nearby Lake Iseo. In 1756 she moved to Padua and her beloved Venice, where she had initially planned to go. Only on her husband's death did she return to England, where she died of breast cancer in 1762. Examination of the letters of this period shows that Montagu's construction of selfhood continued even while she was imagining a rural and idyllic Italy, quite different from the brilliant theatre of her passionate interlude.

5. Third visit: 1742 -1761

The third visit to Italy saw Montagu, increasingly estranged from her native country, turn from a tourist to a resident, one of the

first examples of English expatriates, like the Brownings, Lord Acton or Norman Douglas, whose Italophilia made them unfit to live anywhere else, although they never totally integrated where they were. "The people I see here make no more impression on my Mind than the Figures in the Tapestry" (1965, 2: 485) she wrote, suggesting hers too was an Italy without Italians, as for many other English travellers. In spite of this statement, the letters of this period, addressed almost exclusively to her close family, weave a memorable tapestry of images of Italy, a mosaic made of many shiny pieces.

To her daughter and granddaughters she communicates the small events of her daily life in a rural setting: "I [am] in a retreat where I enjoy every amusement that Solitude can afford" (1965, 2: 405). Gardening, reading, sewing, cooking, butter-making are some of the amusements listed in her representation of herself as a woman who has set intellectual pretensions aside and is pursuing a simple life and outdoor activities: "One evening I walk in my wood, where I often sup, take the air on horseback the next, and go on the water the third" (1965, 2: 404).

Evocative landscape descriptions, which were rare in the letters of the earlier periods, are now frequent and marked by a double rhetorical feature. Montagu underlines how exceptional the landscapes are and, conversely, draws comparisons with other known places, not, says Halsband (1965b: 160) "through invidious insularity but to bring the scene to her correspondent's eye". She waxes lyrical over Lovere, on Lake Iseo, where she had bought a house: it is an "extraordinary spot of land [that] does not seem to be destined by nature to be inhabited by human creatures" and where "[t]he lake itself is different from any other I ever saw or read of, being the colour of the sea, rather deep tinged with green" (1965, 2: 454). Yet it also reminds her of Tunbridge Wells. In describing the garden of a palace near Salò, on Lake Garda, she heralds Goethe's enchanted question: "Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn? / Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühn" ["Do you know the land where the lemon trees blossom? /Among dark leaves the golden oranges glow"]. Montagu, too, pioneering picturesque travel, underlines the contrasts of colours, and of darkness and light, and the fairy-tale atmosphere:

> [Y]ou are secure from the Sun in the hottest part of the Day by the shade of the Orange Trees, which are so loaded with fruit you can hardly have any notion of their beauty without seeing them. They are as large as Lime trees in England. You will think I say a great deal; I will assure you I say far short of what I see, and you must turn to the Fairy Tales to give you any Idea of the real charms of this Enchanting Palace. (1965, 2: 468)

Accounts of simple social events and encounters add other strands to her tapestry: there are descriptions of operas, theatre productions in her own residence, the masquerade at Carnival time, taking the waters, life on the lake, popular medicine and, above all, dealings with a variety of neighbours – feuding local gentry, peasants and artisans, local doctors and clergy as well as prominent personalities in the world of culture. Montagu inaugurates a new style of describing a country through domestic scenes and encounters that are only accessible to an insider. This approach, popular with many women travellers, such as Mariana Starke, Hester Thrale Piozzi, Lady Blessington or Anna Jameson, who all offered more detailed, domesticated portraits of Italy and Italians, has become a successful genre in our age of post-tourism. Montagu writes as a social historian or an ethnographer and prides herself on having a truer vision of reality than travellers directed in their vision by previous constructions of Italy:

> You can take your ideas [of Italy] only from books or travellers; the first are generally antiquated or confined to trite observations, and the others yet more superficial, they return no more instructed than they might have been at home by the help of a map. […] After a tour […] people think themselves qualified to give exact accounts of the customs, policies, and interests of the dominions they have gone through post, when a very long stay, a diligent inquiry, and a nice observation, are requisite even to a moderate degree of knowing a foreign country. (1995, 2: 495)

As James Buzard and other travel writing critics have highlighted, the ambition of travellers is to leave the "beaten track" and see the "real" country. Montagu knows that the "real" lies in the day-to-day and tries to convey it even while choosing colourful and unusual aspects (which appear almost exotic) to amuse her audience.

A summer gathering offers an occasion to comment on fashion and outline an ideal of informality, "the gentlemen being all in light

night-caps and night-gowns (under which I am informed they wear no breeches) and slippers, and the ladies in their stays and smock-sleeves" (1995, 3: 12-3). Instead of going to the opera in Brescia, she allows the people of the village, for the cost of "a barrel of wine" which she gave the actors, "to erect a theatre in [her] saloon". The result surprises her for "the beauty of their scenes" and the quality of the acting which prompts her to utter an essentialist cliché: "the Italians have so natural a genius for comedy" (1995, 2: 401). Meanwhile she enjoys the role of village patron of the arts.

Italy is also the setting of some life-stories sent to her daughter and granddaughters ostensibly to counter the pernicious effects of Richardsonian sentimental romances. What Cynthia Lowenthal calls "cameo narratives" are small, dramatic and especially well-constructed "novelistic histories of events in the lives of her Italian acquaintances" (1994: 173). The Marchioness Licinia Bentivoglio, a member of high-society in Brescia, having left her husband and quarrelled with everybody, retired to her father's house where she lived as a recluse "hateing and being hated" and refusing to return to her husband even after the Pope himself intervened. While some aspects of this story may appear to be a form of self-dramatisation, it also contains elements that prefigure the gothic mode and look back to Jacobean models of Italianness, as when the Marchioness, having been offered poisoned soup, has someone taste her food before she eats it (1965, 3: 103-5).

Clichés about Italy mix with licentious elements stemming from Boccaccio or Chaucer in the dramatisation of a story of common cuckoldry. When Montagu's neighbour, Laura, is caught in bed with "a Handsome Lad of eighteen", her husband reacts as a stereotypical husband would in any tale with an Italian setting. Called by the chambermaid of the victim, Montagu finds "Signora Laura prostrate on the Ground, melting in Tears, and her Husband standing with a drawn stiletto in his Hand, swearing she should never see to morrow's Sun" (1965, 3: 44-6). Montagu's final comments on this little drama, in which she plays the role of peacemaker and heroine, betray an ethnic bias when she affirms that in Italy "the slightest provocation is sufficient to shoot, and they see one of their own Species lye dead before them with as little remorse as a Hare or Partridge, and when Revenge spurs them on, with much more pleasure".

While Montagu is not free of essentialism in these lively dramatisations of what Italy was in her eyes, one cannot help thinking that the display of failure in women's character reflects Montagu's own indiscretions and experience of marriage, so unsuccessful, as Halsband notes, "when measured by her ideals" (1965b: 159). The interest of this series of *tableaux vivants,* narrated with open-mindedness and a certain degree of cynicism, lies as much in the construction of Italy as in the self-fashioning that takes place through them, since Montagu writes mostly about herself in many guises.

We also recognise traits of how she would have wished to be represented in the panegyrics of some important male acquaintances. The death of the Doge, Pietro Grimani, her old friend in Venice from earlier years, prompts her to evoke him as "Bolingbroke's imaginary patriotic prince", a man who "passed through the greatest employments [...] without ever making an enemy", "cheerful of temper", "a blessing to all his dependants", humble, free from ambition and desire for authority and, to her, "a tender father or a kind brother" (1965, 3: 11-12). Scipione Maffei, the scholar and tragedian, is represented as a "benefactor to his country" (1995, 3: 86) for the cultural activities he fostered, the epitome of "polite pleasure" such as she might have promoted herself, as one of "a sect of rational philosophers" (1995, 3: 86), had she not chosen the role of the village sage or, as Lowenthal suggests (1994: 188), that "of the female squire" whose presence contributes to the general health and happiness of those around her. Cardinal Angelo Querini, "with all his magnificent foundations, and voluminous writings to support superstition" is yet another man of power and culture who pursued an ideal of civilisation and public service. The secular virtues of Grimani and Maffei , however, are extolled over Querini's dogmatic zeal.

Religious matters, indeed, bring to the fore a fracture between Self and Other which Montagu usually plays down. Catholic religion is a sore point for most Protestant visitors and Montagu is no exception, but her comments are mostly ironical rather than militant and she says that she wants to avoid "controversial disputes" (1965, 3: 92). She smiles at "the most astonishing legends embraced as the most sacred truths" (1965, 3: 10) and at the vagaries of popular faith but, in one of the letters to her daughter, she waxes more impassioned:

"[I]f the fopperies of their religion were only fopperies, they ought to be complied with [...] like any ridiculous dress in fashion; but I think them impieties: their devotions are a scandal to humanity from their nonsense; the mercenary deceits and barbarous tyranny of their ecclesiastics, inconsistent with moral honesty" (1965, 3: 93). It is on the rock of fiery religious debates that her friendship with an old priest foundered, underlining the difficulties of integration. He was "a learned man particularly esteemed as a Mathematician", who extolled her "with such violent praise, that, had we been young people, God knows what would have been said" (1965, 3: 93). Yet, when she invited him to see her point of view, the friendship ended.

Although Montagu poses as a recluse, the letters show her surrounded by people and the whimsical or serious portraits she draws of them produce a convincing and lively fresco of life in Italy. As well as the old priest, the monks with whom she plays whist and the nuns in the progressive nunnery of St Ursula (1965, 2: 419-20), a notable figure is the doctor who was "the instrument of saving [her] life". He is a man full of "uncommon secrets", giving "advice and medicines gratis", overworked and selfless: "I often see him as dirty and poor as a foot post, having eat nothing all day but a roll or two that he carries in his pocket, yet blest with such a perpetual flow of spirits, he is always gay to a degree above cheerfulness" (1965, 3: 53).

Montagu's Italy is a mosaic of natural scenery and topographical details, of dramatised domestic scenes and, predominantly, of people of both high and low station, drawn quite sympathetically. The few hints given of a less than rosy picture betray the fact that these images, too, are an artificial construction, a polished façade hiding a less comforting reality from the eyes of her family. The positive impression must be read against the background of her *Italian Memoir.* As Grundy comments (1996, xix-xx), the images of serene retirement suggested by Montagu's letters and her "customary self-presentation as capable and decisive" are contradicted by "the prevailing mood" of the *Memoir*.

What conclusion, then, should be drawn from such manipulated images? What is the function of the Derridian *hors-texte*?[14] The

[14] Jacques Derrida's famous statement that "there is no 'outside-the-text'" ("il n'y a pas de hors-texte") is contained in one of his essays on Rousseau, "L'exorbitant:

images of Italy Montagu reveals in each of her three groups of letters do not correspond to what her experience had dictated: they are constructed images, much fairer than those an Algarotti or a Palazzi would have suggested about the national character of Italians, much rosier than Italy would have appeared to her in the numerous moments of despondency and solitude. Knowledge of what lay behind, however, should not impinge on the evaluation of her textual construction of Italy, a groundbreaking one since it is based on new myths and alternative models of intercultural confrontation. Authorial decisions about what to leave out and what to put in, apart from the obvious need to protect her privacy and self-image, were designed to suggest a feminine way of travelling and writing about it, which consisted in refusing hegemonic or received ideas and trying, instead, to find points of contact. By departing "literarily as well as literally from the beaten path", to borrow Lawrence's words about women travellers in general (1994: x), and by using a comparative method to contextualise the images of Otherness and imbuing them with her own idiosyncrasies, she ends up domesticating them and turning hetero-images into auto-images. The country where, as in her youthful dream, she lived "after [her] own fashion" is also fashioned after herself. In this lies the innovative nature of her letters and their specific femininity.

References

BADIN ABBATE, DONATELLA, 2008, "Tre primedonne del Grand Tour: Lady Montagu, Hester Thrale e Lady Morgan", in C. Sensi and P. Pellizzari (eds), *Viaggi e pellegrinaggi fra Tre e Ottocento*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria, pp. 351-82.

BELLER, MANFRED and LEERSSEN, JOEP, 2007, *Imagology: A Handbook on the Literary Representation of National Characters*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta.

BUZARD, JAMES, 1993, *The Beaten Track,* Clarendon Press, Oxford.

DERRIDA, JACQUES, 1967, *De la grammatologie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris ; English trans. *Of Grammatology*, by G. Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins U.P., Baltimore (MD), 1976.

question de méthode" in *De la grammatologie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1967, 226-234; English trans. *Of Grammatology*, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore (MD), 1976, 157-64.

D'Ezio, Marianna, 2004, "Un viaggio sentimentale sulle tracce di Francesco Algarotti: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu e l'ideale italiano", in *Miscellanea di storia delle esplorazioni* 29, pp. 125-42.

Garms-Cornides, Elisabeth, 1999, "Esiste un *Grand Tour* al femminile?", in D. Corsi (ed.), *Altrove: Viaggi di donne dall'antichità al Novecento,* Viella, Roma, pp. 175-200.

Graham, Maria, [1820] 2010, *Three Months Passed in the Mountains East of Rome,* ed. B. Hagglund, Pickering & Chatto, London.

Grundy, Isobel (ed.), 1996, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Romance Writings,* Clarendon, Oxford.

Grundy, Isobel, 1999, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment,* O.U.P., Oxford-New York.

Halsband, Robert (ed.), 1965a, *The Collected Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu,* Clarendon, Oxford.

Halsband, Robert, 1965b, "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as Letter- Writer", PMLA 80, pp.155-63.

Halsband, Robert, 1956, *The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu,* Clarendon, Oxford.

Hegele, Arden, 2011**,** "Lord Byron, Literary Detective: The Recovery of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Long-Lost Venetian Letters", *The Byron Journal* 39 (1), pp. 35-44.

Lawrence, Karen R., 1994, *Penelope Voyages*, Cornell U.P., Ithaca.

Lowenthal, Cynthia J., 1994, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter*, University of Georgia Press, Athens-London.

Mantini, Silvia, 1999, "Dalla corte inglese alla tenda dell'harem: il viaggio di Lady Montagu", in D. Corsi (ed.), *Altrove: Viaggi di donne dall'antichità al Novecento,* Viella, Roma, pp. 297-316.

Marinoni, Luigi, 1904, *Lady Montagu Wortley e la sua decennale dimora alle rive del Lago d'Iseo,* Filippi, Lovere.

Montagu, Mary W., [1763] 1798, *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M---y W---y M---e Written during Her Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa*, 3 vols., T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, London.

Montagu, Mary W., 1803, *The works of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Including her correspondence, poems and essays*, 5 vols, ed. J. Dallaway, R. Phillips, London.

Montagu, Mary W., 1861, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu,* 2 vols*,* ed. J. Lord Wharncliffe, R. Bentley, London.

Montagu, Mary W., 1965, *The Complete Letters,* 3 vols, ed. R. Halsband, Clarendon, Oxford.

Montagu, Mary W., 1996, "Memoria Italiano", English trans. "Italian

Memoir", in I. Grundy (ed.), *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Romance Writings,* Clarendon, Oxford.

MONTAGU, MARY W., 1997, *Selected Letters,* ed. I. Grundy, Penguin, London.

MORGAN, SYDNEY, 2010 [1821], Lady Sydney, *Italy,* 2 vols, ed. Donatella Abbate Badin, in *Women's Travel Writing in Italy*, 9 vols, Pickering & Chatto, London.

MORGAN, SYDNEY, 1863, *Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries and Correspondence.* 2 vols, ed. T. William Hepworth Dixon and G. Jewsbury, W. H. Allen, London.

PFISTER, MANFRED, 1996, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Italies of British Travellers,* Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta.

POLEZZI, LOREDANA, 2001, *Translating Travel,* Ashgate, Aldershot.

RICHARDSON, ANNIE and DILLE, CATHERINE (eds), 2009, *Women's Travel Writing in Italy: Anna Riggs Miller and Hester Thrale Piozzi*, Pickering & Chatto, London.

SCHLAEGER, JURGEN, 1999, "Elective Affinities: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in Venice", in M. Pfister and B. Schaff (eds), *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds. English Fantasies of Venice*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta (GA), pp. 63-71.

SILVANI, GIOVANNA and VINO, MARIA CRISTINA (eds), 1996, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Lettere scelte,* Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento.

STANHOPE, PHILIP HENRY, 1872, "Italian Memoir by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu", in *Miscellanies*, 2nd ser., J. Murray, London.

WOOLF, VIRGINIA, [1929] 1985, *A Room of One's Own,* Granada, London.