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‘I, witness ...’: The Grand Tour and the Georgian Lady of Letters

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This talk explores four themes:

I. Pleasures of the Imagination

The epistolary exchange between travellers and friends and family generated the most widely depicted view of foreign travel in the eighteenth century. Particularly for women, for whom the art of letter writing was an essential part of a well-born education, offering a literary legacy was a central element to the Grand Tour. But for those who never travelled, there was little chance that a letter could convey the sense of distance that travellers traversed, or the splendour of the landscape. Imagination was needed to fill in the empty spaces of knowledge.

II The Burdens of Representation

The letter was more than a source of information; it was testimony of one’s experiences. In this way, travel writing becomes the end—the achievement—of travelling. The correspondent sometimes suffered under the burden of representation. So, in Paris in 1795 Helen Maria Williams wrote in her *Memoirs*, ‘My pen, wearied of tracing successive pictures of human crimes and human calamity, pursues its task with reluctance, while my heart springs forward to that fairer epoch which now beams upon the friends of liberty’.

III. Georgian self-fashioning

By the end of the eighteenth century, ‘ladies of letters’ were beginning to settle in their pursuit of a ‘life of the mind’, and continental travel helped enable them to carve out spaces for themselves in the intellectual geography of enlightenment England. Increasing numbers of

women were asking themselves similar questions to the ‘light bluestocking’ Hester Piozzi’s: ‘I will write my Travels & publish them—why not?’

IV. What European Women saw in Each Other

While we explored examples of what British women thought was attractive about traveling to the continent—how they thought it would benefit them, and how in particular other European women were regarded as models of social and intellectual achievement—I also want to consider what European women thought of English women, both those who were traveling the Continent and those whom they encountered on visits to England. I’m intrigued by something I see as somewhat of a paradox. While English women longed to go abroad in the hope of discovering a better way of life for themselves, the prevalent view from abroad (held by European men and women) was that *England* was the place that held most promise as a country to extend profound rights to its citizens and create conditions of liberty and (degrees of) equality. Before 1789, many European *philosophes* and *salonnières* were busy applauding the achievements of the Glorious Revolution and industrial progress in England and criticizing the polarity of European prince and peasant.

* * *

You are a wanderer, Lady Mary, like Cain, & seem not to care for your own Country. You would have liked it better, I believe, during the Heph-tarchy, when we had more Kings & Queens than there are in a Pack of Cards. If you should ever write your Travels, and like Baron Polnitz give a full account of all the gracious Sovereigns upon Earth, I flatter myself you will honour the Strawberry press with them. I promise you they shall be printed on the best *Imperial* paper.

Horace Walpole to Lady Mary Coke, 27 January 1771²

Lady Mary Coke was regularly received at Courts around Europe. Her copious reflections on her continental travels were left in a 26 volume journal (covering the years 1756-91), subsequently published in part in four volumes, but the bulk remain in manuscript, and nothing else penned by her was published in her lifetime. But what of Walpole's playful suggestion that she might 'write your Travels' and publish them with his Strawberry Press—a vanity press he started in 1757? After all it was a standard practice for male travellers. As the physician Henry Holland—who was planning to publish an account of his recent trip to Iceland—told Maria Edgeworth, 'Nobody, you know, travels now a days without writing a quarto to tell the world where he has been, & what he has beheld'. Everyone knew men liked to publish their travelling tales, but there were very few examples of women who 'told the world' where *she* has been, and what she has beheld.

One exception who is widely remembered today was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose famous 'Embassy Letters' were penned during her eastern travels when her husband was appointed Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Turkey in the late 1710s. She later neatly copied her letters, possibly with the hope of publishing them. These manuscripts were gathered into two volumes and passed around privately and read by different circles of friends as was customary for women of her social standing. In this way they gained widespread appreciation amongst the fashionable

circles. When in 1724 her friend, Mary Astell, had the Letters in her possession, she was moved to add a preface to them, praising the fact it offered a woman's perspective of foreign life. Astell declared her desire

that the World shou'd see to how much better purpose the Ladys Travel than their Lords, and that whilst it is surfeited with Male Travels, all in the same Tone, and stuff with the same Trifles, a *Lady* has the skill to strike out a New Path and to embellish a worn-out Subject with a variety of fresh and elegant Entertainment.

It was a fresh perspective on travel, Astell assured future readers, who 'will find a more true and accurate account of the customs and manners of the several nations with whom this Lady conversed, than he can in any other author'. Though during her lifetime her own authority as a travel writer spread only privately, her 'Embassy Letters' were eventually published posthumously, and against the wishes of her daughter, in 1763.³ Lady Mary Coke—to whom Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was a fond distant relative—also belonged to this older tradition of distributing one's views about foreign society privately, though she never gained as much recognition (public or private) as her famous relation. But by the end of the eighteenth century, the 'tradition' was changing—more women were breaking with convention and publicising their views about the non-domestic world.

Many Grand Tourists encouraged those they wrote to back home to think of themselves as fellow travellers. Consider the correspondence between the famous bluestocking and traveller Elizabeth Montagu and her sister, the novelist Sarah Scott. In her letters, Elizabeth walked her sister through foreign streets and took her into the homes of local Society. Montagu's philosophy was that (in her words) 'When friends are at a great distance, the proper subject is, where they have been, where they are, how they are, and what they are doing'.⁴ Striving for intimacy in writing helped close the distance between the correspondents while also educating others about the routes and rituals of life abroad. The epistolary exchange between travellers and friends and family generated the most widely depicted

view of foreign travel in the eighteenth century (postcards were a late nineteenth-century solution to keeping in touch). Particularly for women, for whom the art of letter writing was an essential part of a well-born education (and which gained such notoriety in the popular form of the epistolary novel), offering a literary legacy was a central element to the Grand Tour.

Such letters made seductive reading for the ‘fireside voyagers’ who, from the familiar surrounds of their own home, followed the path of their correspondent. Despite the frequent references in letters to ‘swarms’ or ‘flocks’ of British abroad at a given time in certain places (contemporary estimates usually figured numbers of visiting Britons to Europe in the high tens or low hundreds in the main cities, with a general increase in numbers as the century progressed), for those without the experience, there was little chance that a letter could convey the sense of distance that travellers traversed, or the splendour of the landscape. Imagination was needed to fill in the empty spaces of knowledge.

‘Imagination’ is, interestingly, a word that often appears in letters and diaries. Foreign travel impressed magnificent scenes on the imagination, said Hester Piozzi. Sometimes the surrounding scenes could be overwhelming especially when travellers trekked through Rousseauian landscapes in Switzerland or Elysian fields in classical Italy. ‘When the turbulence of the imagination subsides’, wrote Piozzi, ‘modern Italy, her poets, historians, and artists, arrest the attention very justly by the admiration to which they are entitled’. Reflecting on the first three weeks she ever spent abroad, another traveller, Mary Berry, considered them ‘the most enjoyable and most enjoyed of my existence, in which I received the greatest number of new ideas, and felt my mind, my understanding, and my judgement increasing every day, while at the same time my imagination was delighted with the charm of novelty in everything I saw or heard’. She returned to the sentiment a bit later, in Switzerland, when she claimed that ‘If anything could inspire an unpoetic imagination (of which she thought hers was one), it would surely be the scenes which surround this delightful valley’.

For those who never travelled, however, anything could be imagined. The perspective from home saw travel in terms of time rather than

space—time apart from a friend or lover, time spent anticipating the next letter. Maps, even those laid out to plot the path of the voyager, could never tell the whole story. The image must have been familiar. It was depicted by Vermeer in the seventeenth century in ‘Woman in Blue Reading a Letter’. A tranquil, self-absorbed, pregnant reader, engrossed in a long letter. Behind her, above an empty chair, hangs the parchment of a large map of Holland, a pronouncement that her thoughts often dwell on distant places and on absent voices. For most, that was how the Grand Tour was experienced.

Travel therefore sharpened the skills of epistolary writing, shaping Grand Tourists into travel writers. Travel was, of course, an adventure, and the letters promised to take the reader along on the journey. In some respects, receiving letters generated a curious culture of addiction, with people anxious to read more details about life abroad, while also being relieved that the arrival of a letter proved the correspondent was still alive (a study needs to be done on readers of the travel narrative).

Letters registered more than a vital sign or a daily itinerary, though. Most travellers also assessed what their trip *meant* to them, how travel affected their views, tastes, health, and happiness. The letter was more than a source of information; it was testimony of one’s experiences. In this way, travel writing becomes the end—the achievement—of travelling.

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As the century progressed, so the political climate was changing—potentially, it seemed to some, offering women a more equitable place in society. The underground publishing movements that we know fuelled Enlightenment debate abroad also helped guide women into the world of print. Radical publishers such as Joseph Johnson, who published Mary Wollstonecraft, and dissenting publishers in Dublin, were amongst those who solicited women’s writings, the more radical the better. Some women seized upon these opportunities to voice their views about the good and bad, the hopeful and the discouraging, in the revolutionary changes occur-

ring abroad. The writer sometimes suffered under the burden of representation. So, writing a first-hand account of the Reign of Terror while in Paris in 1795 Helen Maria Williams recorded in her *Memoirs*, 'My pen, wearied of tracing successive pictures of human crimes and human calamity, pursues its task with reluctance, while my heart springs forward to that fairer epoch which now beams upon the friends of liberty'.⁵

Helen Maria Williams gained notoriety in England after the publication in 1790 of letters written from France earlier that year, which reveal her deep-rooted sympathy and stirred emotions at the prospects that enlightenment would generate in Europe as a result of the French Revolution, which she declared 'she loved'. She grew despondent, however, when she witnessed the horrors of the Terror. Like another British traveller to France at the time, Mary Wollstonecraft (who admired Williams as a writer before meeting her in Paris in early 1793) she nevertheless felt privileged to be an eye witness to the events in Paris at such an extraordinary time.

Not at all content to sit in England and read second hand and prejudiced accounts of what was happening, she was keen to compare the social and political condition of European states for herself. If one nation, like France, could be so radically changed, it was entirely likely that repercussions would be experienced elsewhere. Of course, travellers' reports had for some time been a wide-spread source of information about what was going on throughout Europe, but they were predominately written by men. This is what made commentators such as Helen Maria Williams notable; while in the minority as a woman writing about foreign political affairs, however, she was not alone in realising that whatever exclusionary mechanisms prevented her from formally participating in government, she was able to seize on greater opportunities to establish her views and pronounce her presence in the world of print. When she proudly and pointedly declared that she was an eye-witness to the events unfolding abroad, she was asserting herself undeniably as an authority: an author providing her unique perspective. The union of travel and travel writing provided a powerful front for women who wanted their presence in the public domain to be recognised, if not necessarily respected.

Another example is Mary Berry—whose everlasting esteem for France was qualified with mixed views about the future of its political and humanitarian principles. She put down much that she had learned from numerous continental visits with her sister and father over a period of nearly fifty years in two published volumes comparing (as her title says) *Social Life in England and France*. Right from her earliest trips abroad, she knew what she intended to do. 'I am resolved for the future', she wrote in 1797, 'to make memoranda of the remarkable circumstances and characters that pass either immediately under my own eyes and knowledge ... as may satisfy even the steady search and unquenchable desire of truth which has ever existed in my mind'. The great changes occurring throughout Europe—the new systems of social order being forged and the 'heedless enthusiasm of novelty' prevailing—could not go unnoticed, or without historical reflection. How, she wondered, would her own country fare in this intemperate climate—only 'a hundred years after its complete embellishment' (the restoration of Charles II, 1660). Mary Berry found the questions, the history, the analysis, and the predictions spellbinding. However, 'my sex and situation condemning me to perfect insignificance, and precluding all possibility of my ever taking an active part', she had only the option of being an observer—but one with pen in hand. Perhaps, she thought—catching a whiff of the authority she could gain—enforced distance from debate but close proximity to the political action of the people would make her 'the more fit to record what I see'.⁶

* * *

'Distance' always helps the traveller clarify her perspective and prose. When the traveller returned home, the distance reintroduced between them and the Continent, as well as the time that passed when going through one's travel diary, helped create another perspective on the way one's experiences were recollected, and the way they were tailored to public taste in preparing them for publication, when ladies of the Grand Tour refashioned themselves into ladies of letters.

When Hester Piozzi announced in a letter from Paris in 1784, during her second continental journey, ‘Well! now am I a professed Traveller’, she was only *half* the traveller that she would eventually become. It was not until she gave the public an account of her journey that her identity as a traveller was complete. She was already about to become a published author, her *Anecdotes* of Samuel Johnson appeared in print in 1786, and a year later, the London press was eager to know what she planned to publish next. What would be very ‘curious’, thought the *World* (a paper edited by a friend of Piozzi’s, Charles Este) on 9 March 1787, ‘would be a publication of her travelling anecdotes and observations!’ The next year, she was convinced by the idea. ‘I will write my Travels & publish them—why not?’ she asked herself. ‘Twill be difficult to content the Italians & the English but I’ll try it’.

There is no time to go into the editorial sleight-of-hand used by Piozzi to synthesise her observations for publication or to look at what the critics had to say about her narrative style, but whatever the response, there was support to be found from the emerging women’s literary *community*, and travel writing potentially inspired not only literary form, but also the activity itself. Just as Piozzi had read Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, so the future travel writer Ann Radcliffe read Piozzi, and was said to have culled from her *Observations in Italy* the geographical detail that provided the scenery for ‘marvellous Italy’ in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).⁷

Women were still the minority amongst travel writers, to be sure, but they set examples for other women. It began as admiration for the French *salonnières*, the famous Parisian hostesses such as Julie de Lespinasse, Madame Geoffrin, or Madame du Deffand, who provided more stimulating intellectual alternatives to increasingly corrupt Court culture. The Evangelical writer Hannah More astutely compared the activities of the English ‘Bluestocking Circle’ in the latter half of the eighteenth century to the famous Parisian salons, revealing a parallel that helped mould the identity of British learned ladies. And by the end of the eighteenth century, there were enough women travellers and travel writers for a new image of the ‘literary traveller’ and learned lady to emerge. An ensemble cast helped to fashion the Georgian ‘lady of letters’, an identity that emerged in

the transformation from the manuscript culture of epistolary exchange to the new opportunities to publish, in which the experience of travel and the exploration of foreign ground were integral to the enterprise.

* * *

‘You must confess’, wrote the Philadelphia socialite Anne Bingham to Thomas Jefferson when he was in Paris, French women ‘are more accomplished, and understand the Intercourse of Society better than in any other country. We [by which she meant like-minded American women] are irresistibly pleased with them, because they possess the happy art of making us pleased with ourselves; their education is of a higher cast, and by great cultivation they procure a happy variety of genius, which forms their conversation to please either the Fob or the philosopher.’

Anne Bingham was wealthy and well traveled. She conducted American salons for American *philosophes*, and expressed strong views about the active role women should play in politics. Her praise of French women stemmed from her appreciation of the levels of social prominence that they reached, particularly the ability of salon hostesses to engage in literary, philosophical, and political discourse. She was not alone in her admiration.

In Britain, many women of different social backgrounds who shared educational ideals, who aspired to higher levels of intellectual ‘improvement’ (in the way that their fathers or brothers were encouraged to ‘improve’ themselves), French *salonnières* represented hope, they were in many ways models of achievement. The novelist Frances Brooke, for example, praised French women for moving beyond concern for their appearances to cultivate the arts and their sense of taste. ‘A French woman of distinction’, she wrote, ‘would be more ashamed of wanting a taste for the Belles Lettres, than of being ill dressed’. This was in contrast to prevalent trends amongst English women, she felt, saying that ‘it is owing to the neglect of adorning their minds, that our traveling English ladies are at Paris the objects of unspeakable contempt.’

English women who bucked such trends, such as the bluestockings Elizabeth Vesey or Elizabeth Montagu, were proud to fashion themselves after their French friends. 'I am now quite a Parisian dame', announced Montagu, admiring how French women had turned conversation into a superior art form. 'The Ladies', she commented, 'by being well informed and full of those graces we neglect when with each other [with men, she means] show that they have been used to conversing with men.' The educational writer Maria Edgeworth agreed, hoping that, as in France, English women would learn to mix 'feminine and masculine subjects of conversation, instead of separating the sexes ... into hostile parties, dooming one sex to politics, argument, and eternal sense, and the other to scandal, dress, and eternal nonsense.' What's more, while women such as Montagu declared that their 'great object of traveling' abroad was, in her words, 'to get well acquainted with the French character', it was a welcome revelation that women intellectuals were met beyond France. In Vienna, for instance, Hester Piozzi found the intellectual freedom given to women remarkable:

The ladies here seem very highly accomplished, they study to adorn conversation with every ornament that literature can bestow, and they do not appear terrified as in London, lest pedantry should be imputed to them, for venturing to use in company *knowledge* they have acquired in private.

Indeed, bursting the apparent 'separate spheres' of life that confined English women to ideals of domesticity was what was so refreshing about social life abroad. There, 'private study' could be made public without risk of condemnation for trespassing into masculine territory. It didn't seem hyperbolic to say, as Fanny Burney's six-year-old son did, that 'Ladies govern there entirely.' (No doubt influenced by his French father's insight.)

Such adulation, I believe, leads to something of a paradox in the ways that national identities were defined within Enlightenment discourse. European women had *their own* thoughts about English women, both those who were traveling to the Continent and those whom they encountered on

visits *to* England, when they traveled (or looked) the other way. While English women longed to go abroad in the hope of discovering a better way of life for themselves (in different ways, I'm just focusing on one here), the prevalent view from abroad (held by European men *and* women) was that *England* was the place that held most promise as a country to extend profound rights to its citizens and create conditions of liberty and (degrees of) equality. Before 1789, many European *philosophes* and *salonnières* were busy applauding the achievements of the Glorious Revolution and industrial progress in England and criticizing the polarization of European prince and peasant.

On her visit to London the early 1780s, the German novelist Sophie von la Roche was in awe of the place. '[I am now in the land and] the city I have wanted to see for so long; which have meant more to me than Paris and France ... London is the centre of a nation prominent throughout so many centuries, the theatre of such great debuts as have inspired the human heart and mind both with glory and repulsion. This was the home of Newton and Addison.' That it was Newton's, as well as Francis Bacon and John Locke's, home—the revered trinity of Enlightenment thought—made the pilgrimage to England all the more hallowed.

The British writer and moralist Hannah More's ears perked up when listening to foreign visitors and happily described 'the encomiums of modern travelers who generally concur in ascribing a decided superiority to the ladies [of England] over those of every other.' But she was dismayed as to why traveling abroad was so popular, at least before the French Revolution. She thought that *now* English ladies would be reconciled with the idea that they were born in England, rather than disgraced if it was thought she was *not born* in a neighboring country. England was, she said,

a country to which the whole world is looking up to with envy and admiration, as the seat of true glory and of comparative happiness: a country, in which the exile ... finds a home!

This is the same woman who, remember, held that the 'real' aim of the education of girls should be to make them 'good mothers, good wives,

good mistresses, and good Christians.’ In fact it was the idealization of the British form of the companionate marriage that led some foreign *men* to think that English women were happiest in the home, or on her beau’s arm. ‘Husband and wife are always together and share the same society’, gasped one Prussian visitor, ‘it is the rarest thing to meet the one without the other. They pay all their visits together. It would be more ridiculous to do otherwise in England than it would be to go to [anywhere] *with* your wife in Paris.’ Of course it was precisely the marital bond that many English women wanted to break—and escaping to the Continent where she could be independent was ideal.

Accounts of how travel provided an avenue out of ‘companionate’ or ‘mercenary’ marriages would take me too far off my present point, which is to illustrate ways that English women did not share such views of their own country as a the land of Enlightenment, particularly relating to the strictures on their own potential for intellectual enlightenment.

Bluestockings were vociferous in their criticisms of educational opportunities for women in England. ‘If women had the benefit of liberal instructions’, said Elizabeth Carter, ‘if they had the same opportunity of improvement as the men, there can be no doubt that they would be equally capable of reaching any intellectual attainment.’ Alas, despite her own and her friends’ prestigious accomplishments, such support was thin on the ground. ‘Most thoroughly’, wrote the intrepid traveler Mary Berry, ‘do I begin to feel the want to shake out of English ways, English whims, and English prejudices, which nothing but leaving England gives one.’

While the status and condition of the life of English women may not themselves have been the key feature of the perceived ‘enlightened’ English culture, it was considered something of an enigma as to why English women could not find happiness at home and so desired to leave their land. Sure European women believed that continental travel had *something* to offer everyone, but besides the superficial, such as evaluating and imitating fashions, those who were interested in pursuing a ‘life of the mind’ considered the status and visible achievements of the ‘matrons of enlightenment’ a more important attraction than visiting Versailles.

There were many motivations and perceived benefits (as well as dangers) to foreign travel, from enjoying a healthy climate to appreciating

artistic culture, but if we focus on the opinions of women who were seeking political and intellectual enlightenment, European and British women saw in each other something they did not see in themselves.

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² Lewis (ed.), *Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, xxxi, 154.

‘Baron Polnitz’ refers to Karl Ludwig, Freiherr von Pöllnitz, who published his letters and memoirs, with reflections on the principle courts of Europe.

³ Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 241, 612, 625-6.

⁴ Blunt, *Mrs Montagu*, ii, 53, in a letter to Benjamin Stillingfleet from Spa, 9 August 1763.

⁵ Williams, *Memoirs*, 152.

⁶ Lewis (ed.), *Journals and Correspondence of Miss Berry*, ii, 22; it appears that Berry later repeated her commitment to keeping a journal, being particularly inspired by the travel writings of her friend, Bertie Greatheed. See Bury and Berry (eds), *An Englishman in Paris*, xix.

⁷ Hamalian (ed.), *Ladies on the Loose*.