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Assertion of Identity Through Marriage and Aging in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Writings

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Abstract

This essay reviews many poems and letters written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and relates certain events to her perspectives on a woman's identity. Two important events for Montagu were her marriage and the aging process. Changing appearances and the aging process really worried Montagu and this anxiety presented itself in her works.

"They live, they speak, they breathe what love inspires" (Pope 53) is eloquently expressed to describe how women characteristically believe in love. In Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's writing, a common theme found throughout her various poems and letters is her concept of female identity, which she develops through portraying her ideas and personal experiences of aging and marriage. Aging is a persistent topic in Montagu's writings because she held views on how a woman should conduct herself at different ages. As Montagu encountered smallpox and menopause, her works began portraying a consistent mention of one's appearance and how it shaped one's life. Love and marriage were extremely important in Montagu's writings because her views

changed due to her own failing alliance. During this time, Montagu realized that a woman needed to assert her own strength. This strength also applies to Montagu's views on fidelity, which suggest that a woman's faithfulness was her own choice based on her own self-awareness and that society should consider men and women equals.

The socially and privately performed behaviors of women change as they age and mature. In John Locke's *Treatise* of 1690, he wrote about a "'state of nature' within which people were free to order their actions and to dispose of themselves"(Turner 42) however they wished as long as it was in accordance to certain universal laws. This statement may have influenced Lady Mary Wortley Montagu because she believed that women should be seen as equals to men. Montagu's idea of feminine identity stemmed from her own education and her belief that every woman deserved proper instruction in other fields of knowledge as well as etiquette classes at a young age, just as a male would receive. The author's own superior educational experience arose from her self-instruction because she viewed her formal education as "the worst in the World... [filling her] Head with superstitious Tales and false notions (sic)" (Turner 72). Without a proper education, young women were unable to speak their opinions in an appropriate manner, which to Montagu consisted of letters to friends and witty poems. This is evident in the poem that she wrote in response to Jonathon Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room," which describes a man's disgust with a woman's private changing room. Montagu's reciprocal poem "The Reasons That Induced Dr. Swift to Write a Poem Called the Lady's Dressing Room" describes Swift as a "Doctor"(1) with certain sexual dysfunctions; however, instead of going into excruciating detail, Montagu in a polite ladylike fashion stops the action in the poem and states:

But now this is the proper place
Where morals stare me in the face
And for the sake of fine expression
I'm forced to make a small digression. (31-
34)

By using wit and withholding detailed events, Montagu is able to leave the reader with a humorous and embarrassing vision of Swift. Montagu also strongly believed in appropriating to others her true feelings, which is evident in her July 1710 letter to Wortley, where she states, "I am honest; I would do right. I am naturally generous... and I could never forgive myself... an injury to you" (1:47). A decent gender-similar education would enable a female to stand up for herself and her sex without disregarding her manners.

As a young woman ages, Montagu believes that proper life deportment is to get married and to have children. Her own life followed this pattern because she considered family life "an agreeable picture of [her and Wortley's] future life" (Halsband 30). This is also apparent in her own letters to her sister Lady Mar where she writes "I wish you joy of your Niece, for I was brought to bed of

a daughter [five] weeks ago" (Montagu 1:380). To give birth was seen as a time for celebration and merriment. However, Montagu began to reach menopause and she could "testify to a considerable degree of ambivalence and anxiety about the way her own aging might come to exclude her from the field of sexual desire and desirability" (Brophy 1). In a letter to her daughter, Montagu claimed that "the weakness of Humanity, [is that] we commonly lose what is, wither by regretting the past, or disturbing our minds with [f]ear of what may be" (3:15). Her fear was that she might seem more unpredictable because she was "prone to transforming physiological processes" (Brophy 2). Montagu later realized that the "truest [w]isdom is that which diminishes to us what is displeasing, and turns our [t]houghts to the advantages we possess" (3:15). One advantage is that she no longer had to worry about getting pregnant and she discovered that she was still desirable because she found another lover after she left Wortley (Brophy 2). Menopause frightened Montagu dearly as it was a new experience and a life-changing event. However, she discovered that her personality did not change but she became wiser in the way of the world and thus realized that aging was part of everyone's life and helped form one's identity. This is especially true for women who go through more aging processes than men and have to reassert themselves in their surrounding worlds.

Appearance is also a predominant theme in Montagu's work because she worried about her own changing looks throughout her life. When Montagu was of the marrying age, "Mr. Wortley found himself attracted to the pretty girl" (Halsband 8). A few years later Lady Mary Wortley Montagu fell ill from smallpox, which she recovered from but it "robbed her of her famous beauty, leaving her skin deeply pitted" (Napp 60). The loss of her beauty was a traumatic experience, which she described in the verse: "Beauty is fled, and spirit is no more!" (Halsband 28) and this feeling was not relieved by the jokes and gossip created by others. Wortley, on the other hand, proclaimed that he was relieved and pleased that her beauty was impaired because "it would lessen the number of [a]dmirers" (Halsband 11). This is not something most women like to hear, especially the romantic Montagu who wrote that men should "[t]ell her how young she looks, [and] how heavenly fair" ("Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" 75). As her looks changed again with age, Montagu overcame the challenge and reasserted her identity as an older woman in society, which was not an uncommon process as the concept of feminine identity was changing in society due to economic and political changes (Turner 41). The affirmation appeared to be an easier task for Montagu as she had seen other women deal with the same issues. This is demonstrated in her positive demeanor and her letter to Lady Rich, which stated, "I can assure you that wrinkles or a small stoop in the shoulders... is no objection to the making [of] new conquests. I know you can't easily figure to Lady Suff[olk] with passion... but such are the sights I see every day" (Montagu 1:270). However, Sarah Brophy notes that in Montagu's later poems, "'loss of self respect' connected to the experience of growing older... can occasionally be glimpsed through her characteristic bravado" (2). Even though Montagu still

worried about how she appeared, she was able to remain herself because she knew who she wanted to be as an outspoken poetic woman and that one's looks do not determine identity.

Montagu's concepts on marriage also appear throughout her writings (Halsband 116). The most important thing to note is that Montagu believed strongly in love. She did not only write about love but she practiced it by eloping with Wortley when her family and especially her father disapproved. Montagu's romantic views can be seen in her verse, "The Lover: A Ballad" where she writes "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" (29-31). Montagu writes about a true passionate love but she also mentions in the same poem, characteristics of a male that she feels are important for a relationship to last. This is evident in the lines "Let the friend and the lover be handsomely mixed, / In whose tender bosom my soul might confide / Whose kindness can soothe me, whose counsel could guide" ("The Lover: A Ballad" 34-36). Her ideal mate was not only a lover but also a friend. This poem differs from other poems written by Montagu because she discovered that wives and husbands change over time and therefore presents an "age sensitive marketplace of love" (Brophy 4).

Her later poems contradict the earlier ones because they describe the risks of marriage for women based on societal views of fidelity. The poem "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" presents a woman on trial for committing adultery. The irony is that her husband, who took her to court for her actions, is also cheating. Another twist to the narrative is that the male witness to Mrs. Yonge's actions is also an adulterer. This poem "examines the inconsistency of public morality, which condones male infidelity while condemning female infidelity (Brophy 4) and therefore presents a socially and politically held view of inequality between men and women. Montagu questions this unfairness in the lines, "From whence is this unjust distinction grown? / Are we not formed with passions like your own?" ("Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" 25-26). Montagu believed that women had the same desires and needs as men but the existence of these proclivities were denied by society. Women's faults were to be nonexistent while men's were widely observed but never spoken of. Montagu demonstrates this point in her letter to Wortley describing what it would be like if they lived together. She wrote "you would be disappointed... you would find an easy equality of temper you do not expect and a thousand faults you do not imagine" (Montagu 1:30), and by admitting that she had faults, I believe Montagu was allowing herself to be seen as an equal to Wortley. This equalitarian comment was extremely uncommon and prohibited by society.

Montagu also conveys her unsatisfied knowledge of inequality by providing an interesting statement about infidelity, which is that a "Woman looks out for a Lover as soon as she's marry'd (sic)" (1:270-1). This statement should not be taken literally as she was providing a satirical comment on men's behavior after they married. It is also interesting to note that when Lady Mary Wortley

Montagu visited Vienna, she observed a “custom that allowed ‘every Lady to have two husbands, one that bears the name, and another that performs the duties’” (Napp 62). I believe this was an empowering concept to Montagu, as it was the first time she had witnessed an accepted custom of women having the power over men. The ideology behind this convention was exactly the example or event Montagu was looking for. It allowed her to fully acknowledge and accept her own ideas without feeling as though all societies were against her.

In Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's writing, female identity is a strong theme that can be deduced from the majority of her works. Her own self-identity is derived from her thoughts on marriage and aging. Aging is a process that everyone experiences but women usually have a difficult time asserting who they are, while their bodies are changing. Montagu was able to affirm her individuality by accepting the notion that appearances do not construe what or whom a person is but the actions of that person will. She also realized that the inequality between men and women were causing difficulties for females because they were not allowed to be themselves, which in turn hindered ideal relationships based on love.

About the Author

Lindsay Yates and was born on June 23, 1985. She transferred to the University of Lethbridge from Red Deer College. She is now in her fourth year in the Bachelor of Arts program with a major in English. Her thanks go to Professor Richard Arnold for his help with this paper.

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