

# LETTERS

Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800)

to George Lyttelton (1709–1773), **Baron Lyttelton**

*Elizabeth Robinson, a native of Yorkshire, learned Latin, French, and Italian as a child, as well as studying art, literature, and history. In 1742, she married fifty-year-old Edward Montagu, an immensely wealthy landowner. Their only child, a son, died in 1744 the age of one. Montagu then devoted her life and considerable fortune to fostering art and literature. She spent winters in London, hosting endless parties for England's political and social elites, and then summered in Berkshire and Yorkshire, inviting Britain's leading lights to stay in her homes. These events, which society came to call Bluestocking Society, attracted everyone with literary, political, or social ambition. Her regular guests included Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, David Garrick, Horace Walpole, Frances Burney, and Sarah Fielding, and Montagu corresponded widely with those men and women unable to attend her salons.*

Saturday, 29 September 1759

Though I find your lordship and Mr. Lyttelton<sup>1</sup> have been naturalized in Scotland, yet as you were born in England and have a pretty good establishment here, I will venture to congratulate you on your return to us. Or, at least, I may congratulate myself and your other friends on the event. Whether I shall have the pleasure of seeing your lordship before you go to Hagley<sup>2</sup> I do not know, as our day for going to town is not fixed; but if business should keep you a very few days longer, I believe I may depend on having that pleasure at your return from Mr. Payne's.

I am impatient to hear your account of Scotland, and also your opinion of Mrs. Stanley's health. I hope the wild and sublime prospects of Scotland have not spoiled your taste for the gentler beauties of Hagley. Though the shade of a forest, breezes from a snow-topped mountain, and the dashing of a torrent may be refreshing in a sultry day or please a traveller by their novelty, yet softer scenes and milder air, cultivated lands, and the vestiges of men in rural or civil arts must be more gladsome to the heart than all savage nature can exhibit.

Mr. Lyttelton is a charming painter; his views of Scotland appear as the scenes of Salvator Rosa would do were they copied by Claude,<sup>3</sup> whose sweet and lovely imagination would throw fine colours over the darkest parts and give grace to the rudest objects. I design, at some time, to visit Scotland, but I do not expect more pleasure from nature's pencil than I have had from his pen. I can trust with equal confidence and delight to all you say of him. Pray God preserve you to guide him, and preserve him to make you happy!

I am not quite satisfied, nor quite displeased, with the account your lordship gives of your health. As to mine, which you are so good as to enquire after, I am very well content with it. I can never expect a long course of un-interrupted health, but I am sure my constitution mends very much, and good spirits more than compensate for its delicacy.

I am much flattered with your lordship's approbation of the Cathedral at York. I think we may set King Alfred's character and York Cathedral in opposition to Athenian legislators and Athenian edifices, and our ancestors will not suffer much by the comparison. And it would be decided as party should run—for firm and strong or beautiful and polished. As both are perfect in their kind, the contention must lie between the merit of the particular species

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Lyttelton (1744–1779), the recipient's son

<sup>2</sup> The Lyttelton family had their home at Hagley Hall, in Hagley (Worcestershire)

<sup>3</sup> Salvator Rosa (1615–1673), a Neapolitan Baroque painter whom many critics consider a forerunner of the Romantic movement, painted dark, brooding subjects. Claude Lorrain (c. 1600–1682), a French painter who helped make landscapes acceptable subjects for serious artists, generally depicted calm, brightly-lit pastoral scenes. Eighteenth-century aristocrats frequently linked the two men as examples of starkly contrasting styles. In 1758, for example, the poet James Thompson used them as opposites: "Whate'er Lorrain light touched with softening hue / Or savage Rosa dashed..."

of character, or architecture. I am afraid I should be a traitor, forget Church and King, and vote for Pericles and Athenian buildings.

I do not doubt but your lordship will contrive to see Lady Frances Williams<sup>1</sup> before you go to Mr. Payne's. By a letter I had from Mrs. Trevor<sup>2</sup> last post, I find her Ladyship is very ill in health as well as spirits; your conversation may give her great consolation. Her mind is so weakened by this shock that it cannot assist itself in finding those religious consolations which on any other occasion would offer themselves to her. To evils inflicted by human authority, resignation is sufficient obedience; but to the chastisements of the perfectly wise and good Being we must not only patiently but cheerfully submit.

I beg that you will order Dr. Monsey<sup>3</sup> to send me a direction to Mr. Lyttelton's boarding house at Eton, for I cannot suffer his letters to lie unanswered, especially as he assures me I am still his flame after all the northern ladies have done to get him from me. As your lordship says you shall not be in town till the meeting of the Parliament, I suppose you do not come to the birthday.<sup>4</sup>

3 October 1760

A letter I had the honour to write your Lordship on the road would tell you how well I endured my journey, and I can now add that a week's residence in the busy smoky town of Newcastle has not impaired the stock of health and spirits I acquired at Tunbridge. My mind, indeed, is no longer sporting in the fairy land of fancy, taking flights on Ruggiero's hippogryph<sup>5</sup> or making excursions to the moon with the gallant and the gay Astolpho.<sup>6</sup>

I lament the loss your Lordship has of Mr. Meadowcourt.<sup>7</sup> An ingenious mind that is weaned from the cares and business of the world, void of envy, void of avarice and ambition, makes a sweet companion and a faithful friend. I imagine Lindridge,<sup>8</sup> like its master, had a character of elegant simplicity, and that the whole brought to one's mind the golden age, so called because there was then no gold. The pleasure one receives from persons and places where art has done no more than remove what in uncultivated nature is too rude, is very great. But Hagley and Hagley's master, where with every improvement and addition, nothing has been vitiated and spoilt, must afford its guests much higher satisfaction.

I will confess that I wished very much to have snatched your Lordship for an hour from Hagley—where every rill has its course directed in the line of beauty—to the banks of a rude, rough, roaring, boisterous river at Weatherby. And if I had had *quel Ippogrifo grande, e strano augello*<sup>9</sup> of my friend Ruggiero's at command, you would have found yourself instantly wafted to the shore of the river Wharff, where I should have attended to conduct you up a sweet valley in which this river runs between rocky banks, whose rugged fronts are adorned with oaks, beeches, and ash. Trim art has never checked their luxuriance; some bend their branches quite over the river, others grow aslant; some seem entirely to prefer the spray of the river to the dew of the heavens, and from the top of the bank hang perpendicularly down. The stream is as clear as the finest crystal, and where it runs on the pebbles, dimples and whispers, but when it meets with rocks, it foams and roars, and dashes and

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Coningsby Williams (1708–1781), estranged wife of Charles Hanbury Williams (1708–1759). She left her husband in 1742 after she contracted syphilis from him. Charles Hanbury Williams wrote odes and poems attacking his political opponents, including Baron Lyttelton. Charles Williams eventually went insane from the effects of his venereal disease, dying in November 1759.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Trevor, Frances Williams' companion, in fact remained unmarried throughout her life.

<sup>3</sup> Messenger Monsey (1694–1788) held an appointment at the Royal Hospital (Chelsea) and served as physician to England's leading aristocrats. He courted Elizabeth Montagu for several years.

<sup>4</sup> Parliament went into recess on 2 June 1759 and scheduled itself to re-convene on 13 November 1759, four days after George II's birthday.

<sup>5</sup> A Christian knight and the object of competing prophecies, Ruggiero appeared as the central character in several popular operas, most recently in Handel's 1735 *Alcina*. Throughout the stories, Ruggiero repeatedly attempts to re-unite with his true love. At one moment, just after his true love rescued him from an enchanted castle, her hippogriff seized Ruggiero and carried him to India.

<sup>6</sup> Astolpho, one of Charlemagne's paladins, featured in dozens of operas and epics. In the course of recovering a comrade's lost wits, Astolpho rode Elijah's chariot of fire to the moon.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Meadowcourt (1695–1760), a writer and Anglican priest, died on 8 September 1760. In his lifetime, he gained fame for his poems, prose, and literary criticism.

<sup>8</sup> Meadowcroft served as vicar at Lindridge (Worcestershire), about twenty miles from Hagley

<sup>9</sup> *such a great hippogriff, and such a strange bird*

froths with wonderful impetuosity. Like the human mind, which in the smooth and even scene of life is gentle in its looks and its tones, but meeting great impediments in its course frets, storms, and threatens, and we ask ourselves whether it is of the same element which just before appeared so soft and inviting.

My landlord, I found, was a man of taste and much delighted with my admiration of the river, and he said with an air of disdain that none of the quality (except my Ladyship and the Bishop of Durham<sup>1</sup>) had even perceived its beauty. I observed in my walk a small neat house with Venetian windows, advantageously placed to command all the objects on the river, and asking my landlord to whom it belonged, he told me he was building it for his own use, to which I answered it would be very agreeable to his guests to dine there. He said, indeed, he had built it with an intention to inhabit it whenever he could quit public life. I was diverted to find the phrase and sentiment of a weary innkeeper answer so exactly to that of a harassed minister of state. But—alas!—they are both deceived in their schemes of repose. The murmuring of a river may amuse a man who has been used only to the softer purling of a rill, but to him who has been accustomed to the racket of business or the roaring of a torrent, it would soon appear very dull.

I grieved for my friends at Hagley when the weather changed. I met with reports of “your great living and high renown” in London, and I rejoice much that your elegant and polite hospitality has been so well understood by those it has entertained.

Dr. Gregory<sup>2</sup> came hither last night. He assures me your Lordship had won the hearts of all Scotland in your tour, and gained all their admiration by your *Dialogues*.<sup>3</sup>

I assure your Lordship, you do me but justice in supposing I prefer wisdom to wit, especially in old people. In young persons one fancies wit will ripen into wisdom, and one loves the blossoms of the spring as the hopes of the fruit of autumn. But in that season, unless the understanding, like the orange tree, bears fruit at the same time as blossoms, it falls in our esteem. I revere my old prelate as a higher being. There is a character I respect above all others where wit and wisdom are equally joined, where there is equal greatness, strength, solidity, and elegance of mind; spirit and activity in business, and yet a delicacy of honour that avoids that which can sully the person who is employed in it. Where these perfections meet, may they be crowned with Fortune’s fairest garlands!

The post has just brought me a letter from Mrs. Pitt.<sup>4</sup> She is now in my house in Hill Street, which I recommended as the best ready furnished lodgings she could find at present. The Bishop of Ossory<sup>5</sup> is just arrived at Newcastle, and I expect him every moment.

Matthew Montagu, ed. *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, Part the Second* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1813), IV:247–251, 303–308.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Trevor (1707–1771), Bishop of Saint David’s (1744–1752) and Bishop of Durham (1752–1771)

<sup>2</sup> John Gregory (1724–1773), FRS, Professor of Medicine at the University of Aberdeen, wrote many works both on medicine and on moral philosophy. In the years following this letter, he received appointment as Professor at the University of Edinburgh and as personal physician to George III.

<sup>3</sup> In 1760, Lyttelton published *Dialogues of the Dead*, a series of satirical conversations between famous dead leaders from throughout the Western tradition, including Hernán Cortés, William Penn, Cardinal Wolsey, Alexander the Great, and Alexander Pope. Montagu herself anonymously contributed three essays to the volume.

<sup>4</sup> Hester Pitt (1720–1803), wife of William Pitt the Elder and sister of George Grenville, both of whom later became Prime Ministers.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Pococke (1704–1765), Bishop of Ossory (1756–1765) and Bishop of Meath (1765), and author of many popular travel narratives.