

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08172-6 - The Letters of Mrs Elizabeth Montagu: With Some of the Letters of Her Correspondents: Volume 4: Containing Her Letters from the Age of Twenty-Three to Forty

Edited by Matthew Montagu

Excerpt

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## LETTERS OF MRS. MONTAGU.

&c.

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*The Editor is uncertain to whom the following Letter was written, the cover being lost.*

SIR,

I THINK myself much obliged to the zeal which suggested the contents of your letter; and though as an *idol*, I may accept the incense of flattery, you may be assured that friendly admonitions will be still better received. Addresses of sincerity and truth are worthy to be offered to a real divinity, and shew an unfeigned zeal and true devotion in the person who presents them. I should ill deserve your guardian care, if I made such use of it as could any way commit you. I shall not intimate, even to Mr. West, any thing you have said concerning Mr. Bower,\* for

\* Mr. Bower had been a Jesuit, and professor of philosophy in Italy, and a member of the Inquisition.

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reasons I will communicate to you. As for me, in my degree of correspondence with Mr. Bower, I could not suffer if things should be as you suppose them. I will own to you, that a slight report, even the most idle rumour might prevent my entering into acquaintance, but to break off one made, I must have of every accusation, “ confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ.” I will go still farther, and say past offences would hardly bring me to it: if I had unwarily lent my ear to a person who had forfeited theirs, I believe I should continue to do so, till by some new transgression, they had incurred the penalty of having their nose slit. Obstinate idol! perverse baby! say you. But I shall urge in my defence, that to break a connection without giving a reason for it, would bring upon one an imputation of caprice and levity; to found the separation on facts not proved, how precarious!

He fled to England in 1726, abjured the Romish faith, and published the first volume of his History of the Popes, in 1748. For an entertaining account of his life and of the controversy concerning him, see the Biographical Dictionary.

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now odious! how unpleasant the means of one's justification! Mr. Bower is esteemed by many, very many of my friends, and as I have nothing to bring into society but good humour and good will, very little would it become me to raise disturbances there. And how many charities are dissolved by the division of one friendship? allies, partisans, acquaintance, kindred, and at last, all the gossips in the town mix in the uproar. I hope, and I believe you have been misinformed, but should all you apprehend be proved to the world, I should not blush at having been deceived. I had much rather, even in that very world, where charity may be less in fashion than prudence, be accounted a person of inviolable charity, than of infallible wisdom. Enamoured of the person of virtue, I may be too fond of her picture, and adore her semblance in a hypocrite. I agree with you, that hypocrisy stands first in the black catalogue of crimes, and therefore it should be last in the order of suspicion, for surely we should be most cautious of belief in cases of greatest enormity. In the hazards of a weak and

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fallible judgment, I had rather fall into error than cruel injustice. I will make that use of your friendly caution, I think you will be best pleased with, it shall guard me, and hurt no one. As for Mr. West, I do not imagine that he thinks a writer against Popery can have no sin, but I believe he would be apt to suppose such a person might be accused of sins they have not, by some of the church they write against, and a priest at Doway would hardly be admitted as an evidence, by the truly Protestant Gilbert West. Mr. Bower was introduced to me by Mr. West, as an old friend of his, as such I received him without examination or suspicion. The reasons for his coming over to our church and our country, I never attentively examined into; as a Protestant and an Englishwoman I was not surprised that he did so. I know Mr. West has a personal regard for the man, and suspicion sleeps so soundly at the gate of his wisdom, it would not easily be awakened. Such an attempt would make him consider as a martyr, one whom he now only esteems as a friend. The nature

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of the times would make people still more alarmed at such an attack, a kind of holy war would commence, recriminations would be made on the characters of his accusers: and in the way of report, hearsay evidence, and vague accusations, what character would be secure? from motives of prudence too, Mr. West would not quarrel with him, for he has many friends among the Scotch nobility, and some among the English of considerable credit. What you have heard of his living immorally with his wife, I dare say is without foundation, for I have heard a very good character of her from ladies of great strictness, who have had many years acquaintance with her. You may be assured I shall not intimate any thing on the subject of Mr. Bower, to my friend and neighbour in Hill-street, it would be an unbecoming presumption in me, to take on me the character of an adviser to a person so much more capable of directing himself. I am, &c. &c.

E. MONTAGU.

\* Sir George Lyttelton.

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*To Mrs. Scott, her Sister.*

*Hill-Street, November 18th, 1755.*

HAVING sinned beyond the reach of apology, in not having thanked you for your letter, I must throw myself on your mercy. On Monday we arrived to dinner at Mrs. Anstey's, I had great pleasure in seeing my old friend in a neat house of her own, presiding at the head of her table as queen regent, which when the days of youth are over, and *les jeux et les ris* could not be of the party, is a comfortable system. The rose of love blooms only in the spring, and when Damon and Delia grow into Darby and Joan, it is but a homely happiness at best. I find the town is very full: the men are full of politics, and the ladies of birth-day clothes. New ministers and new fashions, are interesting subjects: but I hear that Messrs. Legge, Pitt, and Grenville, though against the subsidy, are not to be turned out. There is a great bustle at

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Mr. Garrick's play-house about some dancers, though they are chiefly Germans and Swiss, the mob considers them as French, and I imagine they will be driven off the stage, though the dancers and scenery have cost Mr. Garrick an immense sum; this evening is to decide their fate, and I imagine that at this time there may be a very bloody engagement. As the world is fond of every thing Chinese, Mr. Voltaire has given us a Chinese tragedy, which I would send you if I thought it could entertain you, but I think your good taste would not be pleased with a Chinese tale dressed in a French habit. I read it without any concern. When I compare this indifference with the interest, the admiration, the surprise with which I read what the saucy Frenchman calls *les farces monstreuses* of Shakespear, I could burn him and his tragedy. Foolish coxcomb! rules can no more make a poet, than receipts a cook. There must be taste, there must be skill. Oh! that we were as sure our fleets and armies could drive the French out of America,

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as that our poets and tragedians can drive them out of Parnassus. I hate to see these tame creatures taught to pace by art, attack fancy's sweetest child. Voltaire has made Genghiscan appear in the character of a lover, with a fierce Tartar for the confidant of his amorous cares. The Tartar has indeed the modesty to own he does not understand a lover's language, that he can kill and eat venison, but for wooing, it is out of his province. In fable a lion may be a lover, and a bear the confidant, but I don't like it in tragedy. I imagine if one could call up the ghost of this great hero, he would tell you, he was cruel and fierce in war, but as gentle in love as any French marquis. I hate a bullying lover, one should see people in that in which they excel. Who, but a Frenchman, would have set Genghiscan to make love, he is so angry and so fond, and so brutal and so sentimental, that there is no enduring him. Adieu! the letter-bell rings.

I am, &c. &c.

E. MONTAGU.



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*To the Same.*

*Wednesday, the 3d of May.*

MY DEAREST SISTER,

IF I were to tell you how often the follies of a London life, and how often the infirmities of a sickly being have hindered my writing, I should send you a tragi-comedy, the mixture of absurdity would spoil the dignity of your sorrow, and sufferings allay your mirth in the farcical part of my drama. I shall be glad of Voltaire as soon as you and Lady Bab have done with it, and not one moment sooner. I would rather have it here than at Sandleford, for in a more sober way of life I have more serious studies; but *Le Roman Historique* of M. de Voltaire, does admirably well to make the reveries of a London lady. I suppose you can have Miss Carter's *Epictetus* at Mr. Leake's. The introduction appears to me a piece of perfect good writing, the doctrine, the style, the order, is admirable. The pre-

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ference given to the Gospel morality above the philosopher's, is done with the greatest justice and an animated zeal; parts and learning are never better employed than in setting forth their inability to discover the means of salvation, which it has pleased almighty wisdom to hide from the wise, and reveal to babes and sucklings. Epictetus's Discourses and the Enchiridion, are allowed by all the learned, to be admirably translated; there is so much absurdity in the stoical doctrines, one cannot read their works with intire pleasure, but Epictetus is reckoned one of the best of them, and I believe Miss Carter has done him ample justice. I hope Mr. G. Montagu has sent Lady Bab Mr. Walpole's account of the noble and royal authors of England, it is a work of great wit, written with much spirit and elegance, and highly entertaining. Ld. Hyde's play has made its appearance; it is a moral piece, and that is all one can say in its praise. Lord Thoughtless appears on the stage to deserve rather the name of Lord Senseless, though we