

# A Woman of Mixed Emotions

*The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Volume II: 1721-1751*, edited by Robert Halsband (Oxford University Press. 530 pp. \$13.45), continues the witty correspondence of an extraordinary eighteenth-century woman. Benjamin Boyce is the author of a forthcoming biography of Lady Mary's contemporary, Ralph Allen of Bath.

By BENJAMIN BOYCE

"YOUR Ladyship is the only true Friend I ever had in my Life," wrote Lady Mary Wortley Montagu at the age of sixty to the Countess of Oxford. This, from one of the most remarkable of eighteenth-century letter-writers, suggests a key to her character and also to the unequal but often striking quality of her letters. Intellectual, aggressive, capable in practical affairs, strongly responsive to a sequence of male acquaintances (and shunning, despising, her wastrel son), Lady Mary was a solitary by nature who liked to observe the fashionable world without being involved in it. Her courage, whether in defying the conventions of polite society or in hazarding her life on mountain roads and her health and welfare alone in foreign countries, set her apart from most women. Self-educated in the classics and early acquainted with both fashionable and literary society, she had a hankering for eminence as a writer. Frustrated in various ways, she could live best with people at a distance.

Her relationship with Wortley Montagu could be called one of her unsuccessful friendships. Their love affair, before they eloped in defiance of her father and at the cost of her dowry, was ominously quarrelsome. Fairly soon her husband grew weary of her company. After their two-year stay in Turkey, where Montagu served as Ambassador Extraordinary, Lady Mary's reputation grew, partly because of her fascinating reports to friends on her explorations of Turkish court life and her championing of inoculation against smallpox.

Notoriety came when her friendship with the great Mr. Pope ended in a series of scarcely veiled insults in his poems and some harsh rejoinders from her. With the gifted but unsavory courtier Lord Hervey she kept up a sort of friendship, which was not destroyed by

the odd circumstance of their both falling in love with Count Francesco Algarotti, a charming, intellectual Italian who visited England in 1736. Algarotti was twenty-four and Lady Mary forty-seven. But in spite of her disillusion and cynicism, her husband and two children, and her witty jeering at the shameless sexual adventures of aristocratic London, she addressed herself frankly to the young man in passionate letters and proposed that they retire to the Continent to live together. Algarotti kept his aging adorer in a state of hope while he went abroad seeking a career. It was with the dream of living with this clever, ambitious gentleman that Lady Mary set out at the age of fifty to find, as she explained to husband and friends, better health in the climate of southern Italy or France. Not for eighteen months did Algarotti come near her, and then in Turin the long-anticipated rendezvous, of whatever sort, occurred. It terminated within a month, and Algarotti departed for Germany. They neither met nor corresponded again for fifteen years.

Several other of Lady Mary's friendships during the span from 1721 to 1751 are revealed or suggested in the present volume: with her sister, Lady Mar; with her distant cousin, young Henry Fielding; with Lady Pomfret; with a "beautiful," "very dear," and "lovable" Venetian lady, Chiara Michiel; with Lord Bute's attractive young brother, James Stuart Mackenzie; with Count Palazzi, half her age, who in 1746 helped her escape from Avignon in a hair-raising flight past the Spanish armies and who seems later to have extorted a great deal of money from her; and, following a prolonged lapse due to hostility or indifference, with her daughter, Lady Bute. Living in Venice or Avignon, Gottleengo, or Lovere, she appears always to have gained the attention, even the solemn respect, of local people of importance.

The letters in this volume contain, among the inevitable longueurs, many



## Speak Up

THE NEW BOOK OF UNUSUAL QUOTATIONS. Selected and edited by Rudolf Flesch. Harper & Row. 448 pp. \$7.50.

IRREPRESSIBLE CHURCHILL: A Treasury of Winston Churchill's Wit. Selected and compiled with historical commentary by Kay Halle. World. 372 pp. \$10.



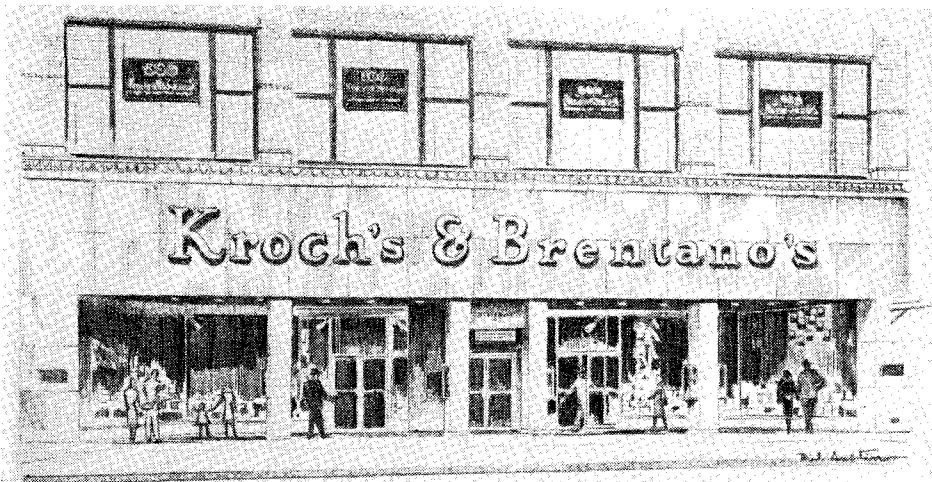
—From the book.

Lady Mary, from a miniature by C. F. Zinke, 1738—"withering periphrasis."

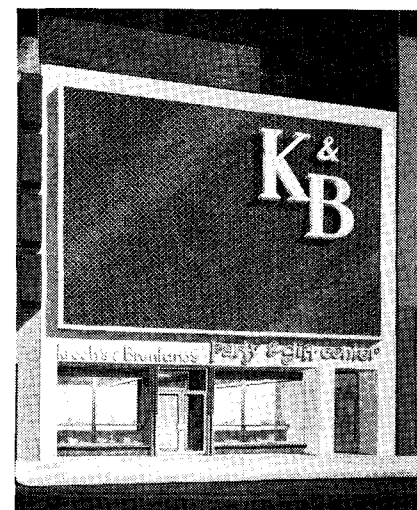
thoroughly delightful passages—descriptions of scenes and customs (Canaletto, said Hervey, never drew any views of Venice "half so amusing"), pictures of her idyllic gardening in a village near Brescia, brittle jokes about the "Folly of Mankind," very "modern" observations to her daughter on the usual wrong attitude of mothers to their children, comment on the behavior of English boys who come to Venice for a holiday but flock to her apartment to talk English to each other because they can speak nothing else. In 1725 she observed that adultery grew more fashionable every day: "The best Expedient for the public and to prevent the Expense of private families would be a genneral Act of Divorcing all the people of England . . . those that pleas'd might marry over again, and it would save the Reputations of several Ladys that are now in peril."

In the earlier of these letters Lady Mary reveals herself to be a mistress of withering periphrasis. Acid she uses better than milk or honey (except when writing to Algarotti). The letters can also be surprisingly inane, as in the newly discovered correspondence with Mme. Michiel. But elsewhere her sharp sketches, her vivacious gossip, her boldness of thought and directness of revelation, her interesting experiments in unconventional and self-sufficient living—all these bring plentiful reward to the reader.

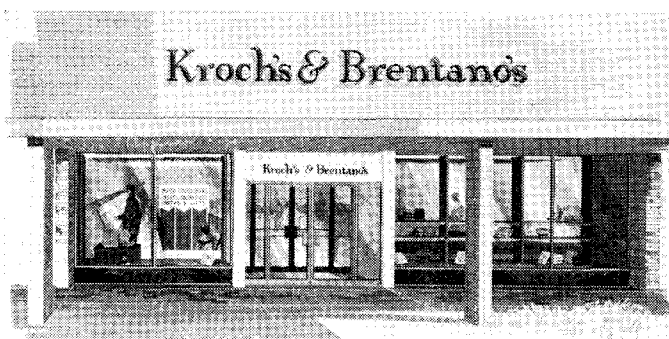
The editor, whose definitive biography of Lady Mary appeared ten years ago, issued the first volume of the *Complete Letters* in 1965. The third and final one will no doubt supply the necessary index. Professor Robert Halsband's handling of the editorial problems is expert in the best manner of modern scholarship, and his footnotes are discreet and valuable.



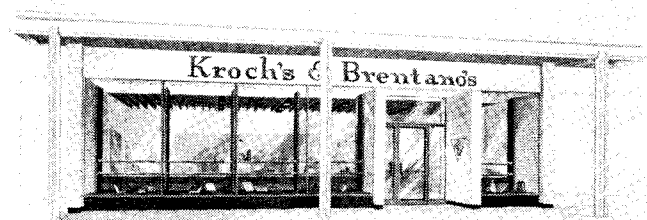
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# Probing with a Lyre

***Death of the Hind Legs and Other Stories*, by John Wain (Viking, 186 pp. \$4.50), ranges in motif from a gentle giant forced into professional wrestling to an aging thespian reduced to portraying the posterior of a horse. Patricia MacManus is a freelance writer and critic.**

By PATRICIA MACMANUS

**F**IRST, a modest proposal brought once more to mind by the jacket copy announcing the "unifying theme" of John Wain's new collection of stories as "alienation and the struggle to overcome it": that "alienation" as a descriptive literary term be exorcised by bell, book, and blue pencil from all publishing premises. After all, as a theme it's been very much around in song and story ever since "'Omer struck 'is bloomin' lyre," for the simple reason that it's so very much a part of the bloomin' human condition. But we today are dazzled by having found a word for it, though I doubt the quizzical Mr. Wain is; it doesn't appear once in *Death of the Hind Legs*.

While he is no Homer—and who is?—John Wain smites his lyre with accomplished versatility as an astute, lively critic, a fine poet (too little known over here), and a fiction writer whose highly lauded first novel, the picaresque *Hurry On Down*, is still a re-readable delight.

Following that notable debut, however, his indubitable gifts have been applied to curiously uneven material so that his irony and pointed social comedy are diminished, in some of his work, by his subject-matter, instead of the subject-matter remaining under the control of his dispassionate viewpoint.

This fluctuation is more evident in his short stories, it seems to me, because the form literally cramps his reach. However, as always, in the present collection he moves easily in diverse social directions, probing human pretensions and self-deceptions, though with less of the devastating comic put-down that so enlivens his novels. The situations, too, have the variousness characteristic of Wain.

In "King Caliban" a gentle hulk of a man is forced into professional wrestling against his will, with brutalizing

consequences; while in "Further Education" a cynically urbane tycoon renews acquaintance with a couple he knew during his Oxford undergraduate years, only to cuckold the idealistic husband, as he had done twenty years before. "Down Our Way" exposes another kind of ruthlessness, that propelled by the shibboleths of self-righteous "respectability." Most movingly, in "A Visit at Teatime," the reality of a child's imagination vanquishes the unreality of nostalgia in a man revisiting his boyhood home. But in the title story nostalgia drenches the scene: a tacky pantomime troupe, playing a last round in a condemned theater, includes a valiant old pro who, fallen on dark days, is now the hindquarters of a make-believe-horse routine, and it is while he is in this guise that death overtakes him. Even John Wain's skilled manner barely saves the matter of the tale from the abyss of bathos.

It's bemusing, the fuzzing-off that Wain is prone to from time to time, bemusing because, at its best, his talent for limning the more sardonic foibles of the human caper just doesn't fit with the disparities you'd accept in a lesser writer.

## Dragon Lady's Palace of Pleasure

***La Maison de Rendez-vous*, by Alain Robbe-Grillet, translated from the French by Richard Howard (Grove, 154 pp. \$4.50), presents a bizarre kaleidoscope of episodes repeated with variations and set in a Hong Kong bordello. Thomas Bishop is chairman of the French Department at New York University.**

By THOMAS BISHOP

**I**T WAS bound to happen sooner or later: pop art has invaded the novel. Fortunately for all of us, this new development has occurred in a challenging and sophisticated work by Alain Robbe-Grillet, a superb technician and theoretician of the novel who cannot be accused of facility nor of merely indulging in a popular trend. While *La Maison de Rendez-vous* contains definite "pop" elements, there is also solid substance in this brilliant new book by the author of *The Voyeur* and *Jealousy*.

With the focus strictly on the surface, the technique is flat, two-dimensional, highly stylized; this is where the "pop" element comes in. The narrative is related throughout in the present indicative, which moves rapidly and jaggedly

from one scene to the next, creating an effect curiously resembling a comic strip with its sequence of panels and its conventionalized dialogue rising in balloons out of stock characters. In fact, there is a "Terry and the Pirates" flavor in *La Maison de Rendez-vous*: the exotic Far East, replete with murder and intrigue; an aging Dragon Lady type, and beautiful girls in suggestively slit skirts.

It is a difficult and in many ways a disconcerting novel; as a result, it may irritate those who are unwilling to follow Robbe-Grillet in his sometimes labyrinthine but richly rewarding journey and who thereby fail to become immersed in its appealingly bizarre mood. It is impossible to speak of plot, for there is no plot in any conventional sense of the word. There are settings, attitudes, and various incidents which are described many times and yet never repeated, for each retelling blends into all the others but incorporates significant modifications.

The scene is Hong Kong, magnificently evoked, although always at the level of guidebook clichés—the sort of Hong Kong that the tourist would expect to find. The central locale is the Blue Villa (the *maison* of the title) where Lady Ava offers her wealthy clients dancing and wine as well as rather esoteric the-



—Jerry Bauer.

Alain Robbe-Grillet—"labyrinthine."