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Elizabeth (Robinson) Montagu

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Abstract

Called the ‘Queen of the Bluestockings’ in her own time, Elizabeth Montagu was perhaps the best-known salon hostess during the second half of the eighteenth century. She was a towering figure in circles promoting literary sociability, and a respected literary critic after her publication of an essay on Shakespeare refuting Voltaire’s criticism of the dramatist. Affluent and generous, she set her own stamp on fashionable London society.

The fourth child of nine surviving siblings, Elizabeth Robinson grew up in a debate-loving, literary household. Her parents, Matthew Robinson and Elizabeth Drake Robinson, were well connected among the Yorkshire gentry, her father having gained a reputation as a wit in London coffee houses, besides excelling as an amateur painter of landscapes. The family later

moved to Kent where Elizabeth's mother had inherited a small estate. Elizabeth made friends with the future Duchess of Portland, Lady Margaret Cavendish Harley, at an early age, and would frequently spend some weeks as her guest at Bulstrode after the Duchess's marriage. Elizabeth Montagu would later remember Bulstrode as the happy seat of what turned out to be a companionate marriage spreading the new light of rational domesticity. The Duke and Duchess valued interesting company, and the Bulstrode circle may well have influenced Elizabeth Montagu's own decision to start a literary salon afterwards.

Witty, lively, and good-looking, Elizabeth Robinson had many suitors, and in 1742, aged 22, she settled for a man some 29 years her senior, wealthy and well-connected Edward Montagu. The couple had one son who died in infancy. Montagu suffered from ill health (mostly called 'nervous' and occasionally 'bilious') and spent part of almost every year at Tunbridge Wells taking the waters. There, where friendships could be begun – and dropped – more easily than in London, she met many of the literary men and women who would later be part of the bluestocking circles. After her husband's death in 1775, Elizabeth Montagu took over the direction of their coal mines in Newcastle, and from then on used her wealth largely for philanthropic measures as well as rebuilding and decorating her various houses: first her marital home at Hill Street in London and her country estate, Sandford in Berkshire, then, in 1781, she had a new house built for her in fashionable Portman Square which would serve as a representative basis for her already famous literary salons.

Along with (at least) [Frances Boscawen](#) and Elizabeth Vesey, Elizabeth Montagu was a principal hostess of the informal gatherings now known as the 'Bluestocking circle', beginning with literary breakfasts in the mid-1740s in the Montagus' house in Hill Street, London, which turned into evening assemblies by the 1760s, and were later staged at fashionable Portland Square in 1781, moving into a house Montagu had herself commissioned after her husband's death in 1775.¹ Montagu invited members of the upper as well as middle classes, men as well as women, professionals and amateur lovers of literature, to their various homes, mostly in London but also in the country, for gatherings which did not involve the usual card games but were based on literary (not political) conversation. Bluestocking sociability was based on the advance of politeness as extolled for instance by David Hume in 'Of Refinement in the Arts': civilization here is based on a social exchange between men and women who meet and correspond on an equal footing. (Eger 41-43) Virtue, wit, good humour, literary interests, religion and benevolence were the most important character traits cherished by the various members of the bluestocking salons.² Each *salonnière* had her own method to initiate debates: Montagu seated her guests in a circle and took the lead herself. Up until her husband's death in 1775, Montagu's own bluestocking gatherings were small, consisting mostly of good friends. Her circle was gradually enlarged, including 'a heavy complement of the aristocracy' until 'there were interlocking circles of the observed and their observers'.³ Bluestocking sociability eschewed formal visits and clothes (the blue stockings being considered to stand for an informal dress code), and members were involved in a 'wide range of philanthropic, social, and cultural activities'. These ranged from 'rescuing fallen women [...] to organising subscriptions for publishing works by deserving authors'⁴, especially female authors in the case of Montagu. In 1781, at the height of her salon years, Montagu told her friend Elizabeth Vesey: 'We have lived much with the wisest, the best, & most celebrated Men of our Times, & with some of the best, most accomplish'd &

most learned Women of any times. These things I consider, not merely as pleasures transient, but as permanent blessings [...]’ (Myers 11).

Montagu is now no longer regarded as the centre of the bluestocking networks, but she still provides an important link in their connections.⁵ She knew many of the now more or less famous mid eighteenth-century writers, sometimes in the form of a patron (as in the now widely known case of Ann Yearsley), but mostly as an acquaintance, supporter, or even friend. Montagu had contributed three dialogues to George Lyttelton’s *Dialogues of the Dead* (1760), and was, for quite a while, on friendly terms with [Samuel Johnson](#), who seems to have admired her knowledge on literature. For his pejorative remarks on her *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769), there is only Boswell’s word, but they did fall out when Johnson maltreated Lyttelton in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-1781).

Today, Elizabeth Montagu’s fame rests mostly on her literary letters to other bluestockings and their associates. Writing to her sister, the novelist Sarah Scott, Montagu confessed, ‘I don’t see how a sociable Being can live without writing’, and the Huntington Library now holds some 6,923 letters and manuscripts left by Montagu and her correspondents, which are currently being edited by the Project Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online (EMCO).⁶ Most of these letters have not been published before, though a first selection appeared in 1810-1813, compiled by her adopted nephew and heir, Matthew (Robinson) Montagu. In 1906, a biography of her early years and edition of her early letters was compiled by Emily Climenson, and in 1923, Reginald Blunt published a selection of her later correspondence. A few more letters have found their way into print, along with an unpublished *Dialogue of the Dead*, in the volume on Montagu, edited by Elizabeth Eger as part of the *Bluestocking Feminism* series.

1. See Eger, Elizabeth, *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 68.

2. See Emma Major, ‘The Politics of Sociability: The Public Dimensions of the Bluestocking Millennium’, in Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg (eds), *Reconsidering the Bluestockings* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2003), p. 175-192, p.178.

3. Sylvia Harcstack Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 250.

4. Gary Kelly (ed.), *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, 6 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), ix.

5. For sociograms of the bluestocking networks, see Deborah Heller and Steven Heller, ‘A Copernican Shift; or, Remapping the Bluestocking Heavens’, in Deborah Heller (ed.), *Bluestockings Now! The Evolution of a Social Role* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p. 17-54, p. 51-54.

6. Eger, Elizabeth Montagu, lvii and p. 141.

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Further Reading

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The Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online (EMCO):
<http://emco.swansea.ac.uk/edition/introduction/>

[Of The Love of Fame \(1734\)](#)

[Letter to The Chronicle \(1762\)](#)

[Of Refinement in the Arts \(1777\)](#)

[The Bas Bleu \(1786\)](#)