For most British women in the eighteenth century, Europe was a fantasy, an ‘imaginative geography’ represented in landscape paintings, narrated in books or described in letters, the backdrop to exotic episodes from history, as depicted by artists in allegorical scenes of Europe’s past.¹ What was not represented visually was described in history books or oral lessons. Women as well as men knew the stories. ‘Oh there is no Comparison between one’s Sensations at home and those one feels at Naples,’ declared Hester Piozzi, travelling in Italy with her new husband in 1785, before launching into an effusive, Gibbonesque blast of Italian history, trampling through its tumultuous past:

Royalty demolished, and Empire destroyed; Power unlimited once, now changed to a childish display of empty splendour; and Riches heaped up as the Scripture says, without knowing who was to gather them are the Images with which Rome impresses one’s Imagination.²

But these could not convey the sense of distance that travellers traversed, or the splendour of the landscape.

‘I love the notion of seeing all the places one has read of in Roman history, where great men have been and great things done,’ wrote Caroline Lennox to her sister in 1766, when preparing for her third continental trip which would take her to Italy for the first time. And thirty years later, Lady Elizabeth Webster struggled to remember the history she had learned in order to enjoy the places she felt privileged
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to visit: ‘those classical sentiments that one strives both from vanity and taste to bring back to memory’. Sometimes the surrounding scenes were overwhelming, ‘when the turbulence of the imagination subsides, and a long residence in the country familiarises one with objects so attractive, modern Italy, her poets, historians, and artists, arrest the attention very justly by the admiration to which they are entitled’.3

Imagination was needed to fill in the empty spaces of knowledge, sometimes leading to fanciful projections of reality. Once, the much-travelled Hester Piozzi took her friend, a twenty-seven-year-old woman who had never been 10 miles beyond London, to the Sussex coast.

‘And well, Child!’ Hester exclaimed, ‘are you not much surprised?’

‘It’s a fine sight, to be sure,’ answered her friend, with a cool calm, ‘but . . .’

At which point Piozzi interrupted: ‘But what? You are not disappointed are you?’

‘No,’ replied her friend, ‘not disappointed, but it is not quite what I expected when I saw the ocean.’

‘Tell me then, pray good girl, and tell me quickly,’ urged a puzzled Hester, ‘what did you expect to see?’

‘Why I expected,’ her friend replied in hesitation, ‘I expected to see a great deal of water.’4

Maybe she dreamt of a wall of water, or more visible depths. For those who had never travelled, anything could be expected.

Despite the limitations of formal schooling, many women of status were fluent in European languages, had studied history, acquired artistic skills, and were keen to engage in intellectual debate.5 Travel offered a rapid education in taste and manners which bypassed the traditional (all-male) route to refinement. Men had long taken for granted the many associations between travelling and self-improvement. But such quests for personal enlightenment were seen as unseemly and unsuitable subjects for women’s attentions, and few women openly spoke about it. One exception was Mary Berry.

‘Considering the education given to women,’ she complained, ‘and

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(according to the present system) the subsequent and almost necessary idleness both of mind and body, I am only astonished that they are not more ignorant, weaker, and more perverse than they are.’6 Her protest against the ‘present system’ of women’s education was stirred by the concern that she, regardless of her later wealth and commitment to the improvement of her mind, might have ended up in much more disagreeable circumstances than she did. ‘Every expense of education in the acquirement of talents was denied us,’ she wrote in her autobiographical recollections.7 Central to this neglect was one ‘blood-boiling’ point to which she repeatedly returned – that due to family politics and social customs, financial constraints prevented as full an education as she and her younger sister, Agnes, desired.

Mary Berry was born in March, 1763, fourteen months earlier than Agnes, who was born in May 1764. Neither she nor her sister married during their long lives, and they remained inseparable until they died – within eleven months of each other – in 1852.8 Mary was strong-willed, and held in high regard women’s intellectual powers. The stages of her life – as a traveller, writer and bluestocking – demonstrate her determination to tackle head-on her concerns about her lack of ‘systematised’ education.

It is well known that in the eighteenth century British genteel society placed influence and affluence in the pocket of its eldest sons. By the right of primogeniture the fortunate son would inherit all the wealth and land in the immediate family (or extended family, if there was no direct male progeny), distributing to his siblings at his discretion parts of the estate not already entailed. Mary Berry’s father, Robert, was that fortunate son. His wealthy uncle, who had no children of his own, had built a fortune of about £300,000 as a merchant in London. In 1762, Robert – after being educated for the Bar and embarking on his own Grand Tour – married Elizabeth Seton, the poor daughter of a Scottish widow. Tragedy struck five years later when Elizabeth and their third child, another daughter, died in childbirth. Mary was four.

During these years Robert Berry’s younger brother, William, had been endearing himself to his wealthy uncle. William was adept at
business, had married a woman of respectable wealth whose dowry brought him about £5,000, and, to his greater benefit, his first two children were boys. It soon became obvious that fortune favoured William. With only two daughters and therefore no heir apparent, and unwilling to contemplate remarriage straight away, Robert fell out of favour with his uncle.

Mary later reflected with disbelief on her great-uncle's conduct: her father had been left to 'starve' on an allowance of £300 per annum, while his younger brother 'was living in ease, indulgence, and luxury'. When the great-uncle eventually died in 1781, aged ninety-three, William was left virtually everything. 'To my father,' wrote Mary, 'a bare legacy of £10,000, with no mention at all of his two children.' No property, no linen or china. 'For many years afterwards,' Mary wrote, she could not think of the reading of the will 'without my blood boiling in my veins, and lamenting that I had not been present to support and reply for my father.' Mary was eighteen years old and away visiting a family friend when this episode occurred. Her rage and determination to 'reply' for her father, tell us much about her character — described by the same family friend as 'Sober, Honest, Virtuous & Industrious'. Thereafter she made clear her presence and voice in the masculine world that she believed had already overlooked her.

From the moment that her father 'silently acquiesced' to such terms, Mary Berry gained an acute sense of responsibility. She had no mother. She was growing up in a world where, because she was female, her father and her sister had been 'choused or cheated out of their inheritance, and, to add insult to injustice, William added only £1,000 per annum annuity to his brother's inheritance, again ignoring Mary and Agnes, since 'he concluded', thought Mary, they 'would marry, and be thus got rid of'.

William was wrong, and Mary determined to take charge of her own destiny and her family's future. When Mary's mother was eighteen, she once told someone who commented that baby Mary would grow into a handsome woman that she would prefer her to develop 'a vigorous understanding'. When her father first told her the story, Mary was greatly struck by it: 'it has impressed on my mind ever since all that I must have lost in such a parent'. Mary intended to make good her mother's hopes and expectations, and travelling was her resolve. 'I was now eighteen,' she wrote, 'and began to long to see that world of which I had been picking up all sorts of accounts from much desultory and often improper reading'.

Her 'improper' reading was a consequence of her father's inability to afford her a governess until the age of twelve, thus leaving Mary and her sister 'to our own devices — to be as idle, and to read what books, and choose what other employments we pleased'. They veered from the conventional commitment to religious instruction. 'It was in the middle of the age of Voltaire,' Mary later explained, 'and his doctrines and his wit had been adopted by all the soi-disant Scotch wits,' referring to Scottish philosophers such as David Hume. The reference to Voltaire by Mary (whose family was of Scottish origin) reveals an early sense of affinity with the intellectual esprit of the French philosophes who bestrode the 'age of Enlightenment'.

Voltaire, who lived most of his life in exile from Paris for his radical views on religion and philosophy, resided briefly in London, after which he published what is considered the first direct assault on the theological dogma of the ancien régime, his Lettres philosophiques (1734). Voltaire saw England as a land of civil liberties, where free trade and commerce promoted social intercourse between people of different nationalities, leading to religious toleration, peace and prosperity. Philosophes such as Voltaire, Montesquieu (another traveller to England), Diderot and others, created the 'moment of Anglophobia', as Mary called it, where England was revered with a 'respect for those who had so long preceded her in the enjoyment of civil liberty'.

British relations with France (the usual country of entry for travelers to the Continent), were strained during the eighteenth century — the two countries spent nearly four decades at war with each other. Yet it was no secret that French philosophes held British philosophers (especially the 'trinity': Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and John Locke) in high regard. Radicals abroad hailed Britain as a model for developing a rationally governed and egalitarian society.
In certain ways, then, it is ironic that travel to the Continent would become such a fashion when European sophisticates were looking to England with such admiration. But clearly England was not a model for everyone. The *philosophes*’ esteem of English civil liberties, for instance, said nothing of the exclusion of women from Enlightenment goals of asserting their ‘natural rights’ to equality. The view of the place of women in eighteenth-century Western culture, held by theorists such as the *Encyclopédie* editor Denis Diderot, the Scottish historian John Miller or the Scottish physician William Alexander, was that women were, at least, happier than their primitive, savage ancestors, and in modern society they could afford the time to support the family. Women were, in Montesquieu’s poignant phrase, ‘domestic slaves’ – a better position, he added, than ‘real slavery’.16

According to Locke (who had travelled through France in the 1670s), young men should travel the Grand Tour to finish their education and ‘compleat the Gentleman’ – and then return to flaunt their freshly polished sense of self-worth. British women were never publicly instructed on what benefits foreign travel might hold for them, but the most frequent criticism of women’s status in Enlightenment society was the lack of education given to them. One solution arrived at by many women was to go abroad to begin their education.

No matter how many philosophers celebrated England as a pathfinder to Enlightenment principles (‘As I have passed a good deal of my time with the Litterati at Paris,’ wrote Elizabeth Montagu in 1776, ‘you may imagine I heard much of the manner of Mr Hume’s taking leave of the world’), for British ladies, *foreign women* were models of the benefits to be had from pursuing enlightenment in modern society.17 Women in countries such as France and Italy engaged much more actively in philosophical debates and were able to elevate themselves in civil society. Despite the contemporary insistence of associating woman with the ‘natural occupations’ of childbirth and familial care (or ‘domesticky’) and men with culture (mostly political debate and economic management), even the continental *philosophes* began to acknowledge that they themselves were increas-

...ing an intellectual atmosphere conditioned by the women of the house. ‘Women accustom us to discuss with charm and clearness the dryest and thorniest subjects,’ admitted Diderot. ‘We talk to them unceasingly: we listen to them: we are afraid of tiring or boring them.’ The ladies of the Grand Tour went abroad to meet and learn from them.

Male observers too were struck by the ‘women of quality’ abroad, but not always favourably. Writing to Lady Hervey during his stay in Paris in 1765, Horace Walpole explained some of his prejudices about France and French women, owning that ‘Paris can produce women of quality that I should not call women of fashion: I will not use so ungentle a term as vulgar, but for their indelicacy, I could call it still worse.’18

Being ‘indelicacy’ rather than ‘fashionable’ meant talking freely about unseemly topics (at least ‘in my English eyes’, he thought) such as Walpole had experienced during evenings of entertainment at the home of the famous wit and salon hostess Madame de Deffand. This *grande dame* engaged with the best of the revolutionaries, and held views that were noted as being radical, irreligious, republican, and pro the American War of Independence. On visiting Paris a couple of decades later, Thomas Jefferson was captivated by the candid conversation he encountered between men and women in the salons, and learned from the wealthy Philadelphian Anne Willing Bingham what some American women thought of the growing spirit of equality amongst the women of Paris.

The state of Society in different countries requires corresponding Manners and Qualifications. Those of the French Women are by no means calculated for the Meridian of America, neither are they adapted to render the Sex so amiable or agreeable in the English acceptance of those words. But you must confess that they are more accomplished, and understand the Intercourse of society better than in any other country. We are irresistibly pleased with them, because they possess the happy Art of making us pleased with ourselves; their education is of a higher
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Cast, and by great cultivation they procure a happy variety of genius, which forms their Conversation to please either the Fop or philosopher.

Another American abroad, the commercial agent Gouverneur Morris, agreed: France was ‘the Woman’s country’. Even Fanny Burney’s six-year-old son shared such views (no doubt influenced by his French father’s insight), declaring that ‘Ladies govern there entirely.’

Mary Berry, who was a close friend of Horace Walpole, was quite familiar with the character of French women such as Madame du Deffand as well as with Voltaire’s views. Rather extraordinarily she edited for publication du Deffand’s personal correspondence, which, in 1780, had been bequeathed to Walpole (who passed them on to Mary), enabling her to read through hundreds of letters written to the grande dame by Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, de Staël, and others. These were radical writers whom Mary Berry, for the sake of her reputation in England, needed to distance herself from, declaring in her Preface to the published letters that she should not be ‘associated either in the principles, the opinions, the taste, the merits or the demerits’ of du Deffand. But those who knew Mary Berry and her fondness for foreign philosophy would see through such disclaimers. The evangelical writer Hannah More for one (while trying to proselytise Walpole) worried about Mary Berry’s intellectual inclinations. ‘Spoke boldly to Miss Berry,’ she scribbled in her Memoirs. ‘Made her promise to read some of the evidences of Christianity, and the New Testament. Oh Lord! Do thou follow with my blessing her resolves, and show her the truth “as it is in Jesus.” Open the blind eyes!’

But Mary Berry’s eyes were wide open, and focused on the Continent. There, life was full of wonder and intellectual vigour. When she was as young as eight years old she had been seduced by stories of life abroad by relatives returning from their travels. ‘The accounts my young ears heard from them of the beauties and charms of Italy, first impressed on my mind the strong desire of seeing what they described.’ A decade later, equipped with the modest inheritance from her wealthy uncle and burning with a fever to escape England, her moment had arrived. She ‘persuaded’ her father to give up the house in London and ‘to go abroad’. ‘This had long been the first object of my wishes.’

In May 1783 Mary, Agnes and their father, Robert, set off on their first trip to the Continent. They stopped in Rotterdam, where some of their extended family – some of her Uncle William’s in-laws – lived. Mary was overjoyed to be abroad, and recognised immediately the rewards she was reaping. ‘I have always looked back to those three weeks as the most enjoyable and most enjoyed of my existence, in which I received the greatest number of new ideas, and felt my mind, my understanding, and my judgement increasing every day, while at the same time my imagination was delighted with the charm of novelty in everything I saw or heard.’

After only a few months, she felt she had matured, and gained a new understanding of herself and her role as the eldest female in the family. ‘I began to feel my own situation, and how entirely dependent I was on my own resources for my conduct, respectability, and success,’ she wrote. Her father, devastated by the loss of his wife, neglected to see that it was his duty to nurture the motherless daughters into accomplishment and happiness. It was a role that Mary, now of age and maturing, felt she must take over. Her mission was to guide her family on life’s journey.

I soon found that I had to lead those who ought to have led me; that I must be a protecting mother, instead of a gay companion, to my sister; and to my father a guide and monitor, instead of finding in him a tutor and protector. Strongly impressed as I was that honour, truth, and virtue were the only roads to happiness, and that the love and consideration of my fellow-creatures, and the society in which I was about to live, depended entirely on my own conduct and exertions, the whole powers of my mind were devoted to doing always what I thought right and knew would be safe, without a consideration of what I knew would be agreeable, while I had at the same time the most
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For Mary, neither the countryside nor her own country was capable of opening the mind sufficiently to cultivate love, culture and rationality. She was not alone in this sentiment. Sir William Hamilton, the British Ambassador to Naples, struck a similar chord when he tried to persuade his niece, Mary Hamilton, to visit him. He 'wished us to come to Naples', Mary wrote in her diary, 'and said many things on the advantages of travelling & nothing opened the mind more, it was beyond concepcion how it furnished ideas to those who had natural taste & observation'. She, however, remained and ventured no further in her life than Belgium.

In 1752 Sarah Scott turned twenty-nine, and for reasons that others speculated involved domestic violence or illicit affairs on the part of her husband, George Lewis Scott, the couple separated. Sarah assumed residence at the home of a friend, Lady Barbara 'Bab' Montagu, in Batheaston, near Bath. Here she led a charitable and methodical life, as described by her sister, Elizabeth Montagu (no relation to 'Bab'): 'My sister rises early, and as soon as she has read prayers to their small family, she sits down to cut out and prepare work for 12 poor girls, whose schooling they pay for.' Sarah gave particular attention to promising pupils, volunteering to teach them writing and arithmetic. On Sundays, the twelve girls, joined by twelve young boys, would visit Sarah's house before attending church to read the catechism, some chapters, and to 'have the principal articles of their religion explained to them'.

This was an increasingly common lifestyle for women of the employing class through whose efforts the charity school burgeoned in the eighteenth century. Women such as Sarah Scott devoted themselves to moulding their pupils into sober, industrious and competent workers: the girls were being prepared for a life of a maidservant or maybe a position in cottage industry, and eventually to be well-mannered wives.

While living on a small income and denying themselves 'unnecessary expenses', Sarah and Lady Barbara Montagu managed to enjoy the 'reasonable pleasures of Society', attending plays and occasionally even a ball in Bath. Hoping to heal the 'wounds of disappointment' that she acquired from her ill-conceived marriage, she was now living a life that her sister thought would at least 'lead her to truth'. Even though Elizabeth – three years the elder – acknowledged that Sarah 'seems very happy', there are moments in their correspondence when she affectionately reaches out to her sister, almost in the hope of removing her from her routine life.

One August day in 1776 Sarah opened a letter from Elizabeth, writing from Paris, which treated her to a glimpse of how her days might be otherwise consumed.

I desire you to follow me on Sunday to Madame Neckers, dine there with Monsr de Bouffons and many learned Academicians, and take a gentle walk with them in ye evenings along ye banks of ye Seine, which is the most discreet of all rivers ... On Tuesday you shall dine with us at Col Drumgolds, and hear him read some composition of his, made for ye Royal family in France when they were young. The delicacy with which he conveyed virtue and truth into things so tender as young minds, and royal minds, wd please you. That night you shall sup at la Marquise de Defants [du Defand] with Russian Princes, French Princesses, beau esprits etc.

It was a thoughtful, and playful, invitation to her sister who, after reading her letter, would not only have a mental picture of daily life for a lady traveller abroad, but would be encouraged to think of herself as a fellow traveller. Like many Grand Tourists, Elizabeth walked her correspondents through foreign streets and took them into the homes of local society figures. Her philosophy was that 'When friends are at a great distance, the proper subject is, where they have been, where they are, how they are, and what they are doing.' Striving for intimacy in writing helped close the distance between correspondents while also educating others about the routes and rituals of life abroad. Such epistolary exchanges between travellers and friends and family generated the most widely received views of foreign travel in the
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eighteenth century (postcards were a late nineteenth-century solution to keeping in touch). Particularly for women, for whom the art of letter writing was an essential part of a well-born education, creating a literary legacy was a central element to the Grand Tour. Without this the history of the ladies of the Grand Tour would have been lost.

Such letters made seductive reading for the fireside voyagers who, from the familiar surrounds of their own home, followed the path of their own foreign correspondent. Travel was about time rather than space – time apart from a friend or lover, time spent anticipating the next letter. Maps, even those laid out to plot the path of the voyager, could never tell the whole story. The image must have been familiar. It was depicted by Jan Vermeer in his painting Woman in Blue Reading a Letter (1663/4). A pregnant woman stands tranquil, self-absorbed and engrossed in a long letter. Behind her, above an empty chair, hangs the parchment of a large map of Holland, a pronouncement that her thoughts often dwelt on distant places and on absent voices. For most women in England this is how the Grand Tour was experienced.

Letters from travelling friends and loved-ones were cherished. William Spencer Cavendish, future sixth Duke of Devonshire (son of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire), received letters from Mary Berry while she was touring France during the Peace of Amiens. ‘You cannot think, my dear Miss Berry,’ wrote the precocious thirteen-year-old to Mary (who had just turned forty), ‘how much pleasure your letter gave me; everything you say about Nice will be news to me, as I have never had any correspondent there.’ Young William was to receive news from abroad and already dreamt about conducting his own Grand Tour. ‘I envy you very much upon your tall personable beast upon the mountains, whilst we (poor souls!) are shivering in great coats by the fireside. We are certainly to go to Paris this summer. Perhaps we shall meet you there on your way back.’

In a distant branch of William Spencer Cavendish’s family was Miss Sarah Ponsonby, who lived with her lover, Lady Eleanor Butler – the two being known in society circles as ‘the Ladies of Llangollen’.

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They lived in Wales in self-imposed exile from fashionable society, and their favourite evening’s entertainment was discussing travel, books and continental curiosities. ‘After dinner talked of Rome’ with Mr and Mrs Whalley, Sarah recorded in her diary. The list of Sunday afternoon subjects continued: ‘Talked of Rousseau, Switzerland, North Wales. The exquisite pleasures of retirement, and the Luxury of Purchasing Books.’ Their guests would head for home at nine, leaving Sarah and Eleanor to romanticise about a richer life. ‘My Heart’s darling and I sat by the Kitchen Fire, talking of our Poverty.’ Two days later, a Mr Bligh, who had just returned from the Continent, and his brother visited them. Again, conversation centred on life abroad. The traveller showed them his trophies of travel:

Six views of Switzerland, washed drawings by Hacklet which I confess I want taste to admire. Two Rings, fine antique, bought at Rome for Mr. and Mrs. E. Tighe. An Eye, done at Paris and set in a Ring. A true French Idea, and a delightful Idea, which I admire more than I confess for its singular Beauty and Originality.

And where did their conversation lead them? ‘Geneva, its Government. Poor Rousseau. That detested Voltaire. Rome, the walls of an apartment which the Bishop Derry purchased there and sent to Ireland. Vienna...’ Other visitors informed them of the practical details of continental travel. Lord Milton, fresh back from a two-year tour of the courts of Berlin and Brunswick, relayed stories of the ‘Mode of Travelling in Germany...’ The Inns horrid... Mutton, half a hare, pieces of goose that had been heated over several times. Performances at the Theatre,’ and so on, throughout their days as recorded in Sarah’s diary.34

Before she toured Belgium on her single trip abroad, Mary Hamilton – when not attending the soirees of her London bluestocking friends such as Elizabeth Vesey or Mary Delany – found regular interest in conversation with Lord Stormont, who had recently returned from his continental travels. The traveller ‘inform’d me of
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ye stile of living at Vienna, wch was when he resided there ye most polish’d court in Europe. We talk’d a good deal abt the great difference of expense in every article between living abroad & in England.' Several weeks later she saw him again, and once more he ‘entertained me very much by describing the different stiles of manners in foreign Countries & particularly the “bon ton” etiquette in France’.35

Travel was a recurrent subject of conversation for the chattering classes. Everyone could be entertained by a returning traveller, intrigued by a book of published travels, and impressed by letters received from abroad. The instalments were informative as well as intimate. It was through reading such accounts that many women began to think of travel as a virtue – as a stimulant to the mind and an avenue to intellectual ‘improvement’, and in the words of one of a closely supportive and intellectually ambitious circle of friends surrounding Elizabeth Montagu, the best way to develop ‘our natural abilities’.

In the 1750s, it was Elizabeth Montagu’s ambition to make her marital home on Hill Street, near Berkeley Square, ‘the central point of union’ for all the intellectual and fashionable people in London. She began hosting evening assemblies for the discussion of literary topics, from novels and poems to paintings and plays. She drew a crowd: members of Samuel Johnson’s Literary Club were regulars, such as the Royal Academy painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, the actor David Garrick, the president of the Royal Society Sir Joseph Banks, the political economist Adam Smith, the historian Edward Gibbon and the writer Oliver Goldsmith. It was an eclectic mix providing an intellectual forum for women as much as men. Many of the women, besides Elizabeth Montagu, were highly accomplished, and such was their fame that many were depicted by Richard Samuel in his painting The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain (1779), including the artist Angelika Kauffmann; the writers Hannah More, Elizabeth Carter and Charlotte Lennox; the historian Catharine Macaulay; the educational writer and poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld; the actress and

playwright Elizabeth Griffith; and the singer Elizabeth Linley.36 In the 1750s Elizabeth Montagu formed a social circle that included Elizabeth Carter, Catherine Talbot, Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen; they began to be referred to as salonnières; their petticoteries being seen as the British equivalent to the Parisian salon culture – arenas of sociability that began to appear amid England’s tightly packed male club culture.37

These women became known as the ‘bluestocking’ ladies. While today this generally refers to any woman with intellectual ambition, in the eighteenth century the term ‘bluestocking’ was used with nuance. Coined in 1756 by Elizabeth Montagu, it was first used in reference to a particular gentleman acquaintance who frequented her soirées bedecked in blue, rather than black, stockings. Through the 1760s, however, the term evolved to apply to any man whose friendship with a woman was valued for his encouragement of her intellectual interests, as well as coming to represent a certain intellectual outlook, a ‘blue stocking Philosophy’ (as used by Elizabeth Montagu). What is little known is that the term was also used in a pejorative way as a reference specifically to women who violated the taboo against ladies being learned.38 (Thus, the modern, common tendency to think of a bluestocking as an esteemed eighteenth-century learned lady is often historically inaccurate, and leads to grouping women together who did not see themselves as one of the ‘Blues’, such as Hester Thrale, later Piozzi.)

What is notable is the existence of the term at all. It identified certain women who possessed intellectual characteristics: they became in particular ways identifiable, indicating that the trait of ‘intellect’ was not as transparent or ubiquitous among women as it was considered to be in men. However, it is clear that the term was never entirely stable and the leading figures within the bluestocking circle were always changing.

The character of the bluestocking – built on literary accomplishment and sociability – generally conflicted with conventional views about the appropriate conduct of a lady in public; this generated criticism from some quarters, but also considerable admiration. The
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Evangelical writer and educational theorist Hannah More, for example, wrote her poem, 'Bas Bleu; Or, Conversation' (1786), as a tribute to the bluestockings, and dedicated it to Elizabeth Vesey. Vesey's salon in Clarges Street 'rescued the ravaged realms of Taste' from 'Whist . . . that vandal of colloquial Wit' - in other words it aimed to rescue polite conversation from the drinking and card-playing culture of gaming society. Hannah More praised Vesey for her 'sensibility', referring to the dignity and virtue she had for possessing emotional feeling as well as intellect (a particular late-eighteenth-century way of linking the emotional and moral faculties). The bluestockings' intellectual companionship and conversation allowed them to explore their feelings and their natural sensibilities, to develop their own voices. This was not a private collusion, and to be accepted as intellectuals in public meant they had to run the gauntlet, face criticism and risk ridicule. Their unity led Horace Walpole to dub the bluestocking circle 'the first female club ever known'.

Yet this 'club' maintained no consensus about the means of achieving women's intellectual advancement. While to speak of the improvement of men's minds often involved an explicit reference to the benefits of travelling, for women improvement was usually connected with a regimen of religious contemplation. Hester Chapone's (anonymously published) Letters on the Improvement of the Mind (1773), for example, stressed the study of the scriptures, and later linked proper learning with decorum, economic housewifery and a general knowledge of history. Yet Hester Chapone was not antagonistic towards more enlightened avenues for women. After all, she had put the time in to her studies, writing (at twenty-two) 'I have (and yet I am still alive) drugged through Le Grand Cyrus, in twelve huge volumes, Cleopatra in eight or ten, Polyxander, Ibrabim, Celia, and some others, whose names as well as all the rest of them I have forgotten.' Sometimes referred to as the 'bluest of the Blues', she collaborated on translation projects with Elizabeth Carter, and dedicated her educational tract to Elizabeth Montagu (who urged her to publish it).

Thirty years later, Mary Wollstonecraft was unable to accept such a conventional blueprint for women's education. The French Revo-

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lution breathed new life into radical defences of equal rights across the ranks of society. The very event that had kept Mary Berry at home, but longing to travel, was that which provided Mary Wollstonecraft with her own battle cry. The face of 'Reason' promised to cut off the 'dark hand of despotism' of the ancien régime, she wrote, raising her glass to the promotion of the principles of liberté, fraternité and égalité. But frustratingly, these principles did not yet apply to women. When Wollstonecraft read Talleyrand's plan for national education in France, she was disappointed to find that it failed to mention women. How was it, she wondered, that the new-found rights of humanity applied only to men? Her response, dedicated to Talleyrand, was The Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792).

Mary Wollstonecraft discarded an inventory of writers who 'have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt'. Out was Rousseau ('What nonsense!' she cried at one point in reference to Émile); dismissed was the old-familiar Dr James Fordyce (who recommended, in his Sermons to Young Women, that women should be meek, timid, complacent, and retain 'a propensity to melt into affectionate sorrow'); Dr Gregory was tender but wrong-footed; Hester Chapone escaped lightly: 'I cannot, it is true, always coincide in opinion with her, but I always respect her,' and Catharine Macaulay's writing, where 'no sex appears', was mature and profound.

Wollstonecraft's book pressed against the bruise on the British aristocracy's faith in social stability. Already shaken by the loss of the American colonies, the British governing classes now feared their own revolution, a forewarning of which was offered in the eagerly consumed Reflections on the Revolution in France, by Edmund Burke. Whereas Mary Berry celebrated growing up in the 'age of Voltaire', Wollstonecraft was writing in the middle of the 'age of anxiety': parliamentary reform was being debated, and the year the Rights of Woman was published was the year that the first democratic organisations with representatives from the artisan and working classes entered British politics. The fear of the spread of 'infectious spirits' that were being agitated by English radicals such as Thomas Paine, author of the Rights of Man (1791), and now Wollstonecraft, made
any proclamations on women’s equality or rights to education and intellectual improvement particularly pungent.

Hannah More is remembered for her apparent attack on the ‘radical’ Wollstonecraft despite the fact that, as their contemporaries noted, their philosophies were similar, something that even More—who certainly voiced her disagreements with Wollstonecraft’s approach—recognized. More is often seen as a conservative figure, a critic of women’s abilities and their intellectual potential. (Statements such as, ‘Far be it from me to desire to make scholastic ladies or female dialecticians ... for by shewing [women] the possible powers of the human mind, you will bring them to see the littleness of their own’, lend themselves to such an interpretation.) Yet, the subtleties of her campaign for educational reform remain overlooked. Despite being ‘much pestered to read the Rights of women [sic]’, she refused to on the grounds that ‘I have as much liberty as I can make good use of, now I am an old maid.’

More’s own writings may not have been infused with such strong sentiments of liberation and rule-breaking radicalism, but she too was able to evade the trappings of the feminine world of domesticity and live by her pen. Despite relying on male patronage, her writings carried subtle messages about how women could improve themselves. She believed in the righteousness of evangelical philanthropy as a means of improving individuals who were godly, regardless of gender. The danger with fashionable society was its potential for corrupting morals through overindulgence in luxury, fatuous discourse, and aristocratic snobbery. If pious and disciplined, however, any man or woman could create a more civil society. Within Hannah More’s vision of civil society, women had the potential to develop morally and intellectually. Her philosophy for improving women’s education was underpinned by evangelical values and her belief that it would reinforce the moral probity of the nation. Education was ‘a school to fit us for life, and life be a school to fit us for eternity’.

Her life was a chapter in such capacities for accomplishment. Hannah was born in 1745 to a family with humble origins and raised with her four sisters near Bristol, where her father became a school headmaster. Hannah and her sisters were educated by their father (the mother being absent from this role, and subsequently absent in most biographical or analytical accounts of Hannah More’s life). When Hannah was twelve, she and her sisters (the eldest being nineteen), set up a boarding school for girls that concentrated on moral improvement through Bible reading. Her career as an author began when she wrote stories for her pupils, and by the age of seventeen she completed her first play, The Search after Happiness, published in 1773. In her early twenties Hannah met and became engaged to a local high-born country gentleman. This proved an unlucky courtship—he failed to appear at their wedding on three different occasions. Disgraced but recompensed with an annuity of £200 from him, Hannah packed up and, with a spirit for independence, ambition, and the manuscript of her play in hand, headed for London.

Hannah More lived until her eighty-eighth year and enjoyed an immensely successful literary career. Amidst her poems and plays was her educational tract, Strictures on a Modern System of Female Education (1799), which reached five editions and sold 10,000 copies. It held out the promise of improved education for women without challenging men’s ‘superiority’. Not challenging masculine culture was different from remaining deferential towards it. There was reason to support intellectual growth in women despite their overall genius being subordinate to men’s; that women have equal parts, but are inferior in wholesomeness of mind, in the integral understanding, she suggested. Men, she continued, should be less inimical to women’s improvement, not least since men ‘themselves will be sure to be gainers by it’. They would gain better companions who were thoughtful, considerate, and sympathetic—not antagonistic.

Their knowledge is not often like the learning of men, to be reproduced in some literary composition, nor ever in any learned profession; but it is to come out in conduct. A lady studies, not that she may qualify herself to become an orator or a pleader; not that she may learn to debate, but to act ... The great uses of study are to enable her to regulate her own mind, and to be useful to others.
Ladies of the Grand Tour

Like Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth was from a middle-class background and became a novelist as well as an educationalist. She took up the issue of women's intellectual growth in her first publication, *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795). Unlike Wollstonecraft's earlier *Rights of Woman*, however, Edgeworth's *Letters* was not written as a polemic. It is an epistolary fiction, a hypothetical exchange of letters between two gentlemen discussing the future education of one correspondent's new-born daughter. One of the points she pursued through the voice of the gentleman who opposes women's education, was that they could not attain an equivalent intellectual status as men due to society's 'customary' (and therefore somehow legitimate) exclusionary practices. 'We mix with the world without restraint,' wrote the antagonistic correspondent, referring to men like himself.

We converse freely with all classes of people, with men of wit, of science, of learning, with the artist, the mechanic, the labourer; every scene of life is open to our view; every assistance that foreign or domestic ingenuity can invent, to encourage literary studies, is ours almost exclusively. From academies, colleges, public libraries, private associations of literary men, women are excluded, if not by law, at least by custom, which cannot easily be conquered.⁵⁰

Maria Edgeworth used this fictional character to underline how ingrained such customary mechanisms were in men's minds, and how impotent they were to change the situation. Her point echoed that made over thirty years earlier by a reviewer who admired the bluestocking Elizabeth Carter's translation of the Greek *Works of Epictetus* (published in 1758), who noted that if 'women had the benefit of liberal instructions, if they were inured to study, and accustomed to learned conversation ... if they had the same opportunity of improvement as the men, there can be no doubt but that they would be equally capable of reaching any intellectual attainments'.⁵¹

This point again suggested that women were not by birth 'irrational' creatures or incapable of learning, but that the exclusionary practices of society wrongly deprived them of their chance to prove themselves.⁵² *If only*, however, still seemed to be followed by *but*. The gentleman who advocated women's education in Maria Edgeworth's tale pointed out that it was illogical to exclude women from literary studies and then ridicule them for their lack of accomplishments. 'After pointing out all the causes for the inferiority of women in knowledge,' he wrote in his reply, 'you ask for a list of the inventions and discoveries of those who, by your own statement of the question, have not been allowed opportunities for observation.' He polished off his retort by adding: 'With the insulting injustice of an Egyptian task-master, you demand the work, and deny the necessary materials.'⁵³

Despite the limitations of formal education, some women privately pursued an intensive self-education. Bluestockings were bookworms. Elizabeth Montagu's busy bookishness led her friends to nickname her Fidget, especially since one night after a ball and still in formal dress she chose to relax by reading the 'Ajax' and the 'Philoctetes' of Sophocles, wrote commentaries on both, then went to bed.

Similarly, after returning from dinner on a spring evening in 1768, Lady Mary Coke wrote in her journal, 'I am now going to read. I laid out yesterday eleven guineas in Books.' Books on prints, history, religion, travel — all lined her shelves; they were passed between friends, or borrowed from the newly established town libraries (the first lending library opened in Liverpool in 1758, with many others opening in the following decades). On a frosty and foggy evening the next January Lady Coke 'read Sherlock upon Providence, & then the fourth volume of Mrs Macaulay's History'. Visiting her friend Lady Charlotte Finch a few months later they 'had some conversation upon Books. She recommended two to me upon religious subjects, I shall send for them to Morrow.' Her appetite for reading was liberally catered for: 'I have laid out in books since I came to Town above fifty Pounds,' she once wrote, but this was by no means unique to her.⁴⁴ Some women built up a personal library that became their pride and joy. The writer Charlotte Smith, separated from her philandering husband and economically abandoned by him, regrettfully sold her collection of 500 books to help ends meet after single-handedly raising her seven dependent children. And if there was ever any
question that they bought without discriminating taste, a London bookseller could settle that. 'There are some thousands of women, who frequent my shop,' reported James Lackington in 1791, 'that know as well what books to choose, and are all well acquainted with works of taste and genius, as any gentlemen in the kingdom, notwithstanding they sneer against novel readers.'

By the century's end, women's learnedness and measure of accomplishment could be related to various educational systems. 'I have had so strange an education,' wrote Lady Holland (formerly Lady Webster), 'that if I speak freely upon sacred subjects it is not from an affectation of being an esprit fort [freethinker], but positively because I have no prejudices to combat with.' Holland's education was self-directed.

My principles were of my own finding, both religious and moral, for I never was instructed in abstract or practical religion, and as soon as I could think at all chance directed my studies; for though both my parents were as good and as virtuous people as ever breathed, and I was always an only child, yet I was entirely left, not from system, but from fondness and inactivity, to follow my own bent.

She could have lived a life of idleness but, she declared, a quest for knowledge and intellectual improvement guided her course. 'Happily for me I devoured books, and a desire for information became my ruling passion.' But with contemporary prescriptions for educational conduct, such a Rousseauvian route as hers was not recommended. 'The experiment of leaving a child without guidance or advice is a dangerous one, and ought never to be done; for if parents will not educate it themselves they should seek for those that will.' As a twenty-seven-year-old, she continued to voraciously devour books. In late June 1798 she recorded in her diary:

I have read since Xmas the Duke of Marlbro's Apology, Burnet's History, ye XIII. Satire of Juvenal, Hearne's Travels into N. America, Smith on ye figure and complexion of ye human species, Bancroft on dying, some desultory chemistry, Roderick Random, Lazarillo de Tormes, Leti's

Education & Improvement

Life of Sixtus V., various German and French plays, novels, and trash, Cook's Third Voyage, Wolf's Ceylon, part of Ulloa's Voyage, and some papers in ye memoirs of ye Exeter Society. Frequent dippings into Bayle, Montaigne, La Fontaine, Ariosto. Read ye three first books of Tasso; Ld. Orford's works.

A good start for 1798, but by the early nineteenth century other budding intellects were already lost in the growing libraries. The national library at the British Museum (which, under the privilege of copyright deposit, acquired a copy of every work printed in the United Kingdom — a privilege vested to this day) was the most overwhelming. By 1811, Princess Charlotte's companion, Lady Charlotte Bury, accompanied a royal entourage to the Museum, and was taken aback by the staggering display of bound knowledge. 'I was interested in walking through the magnificent library, and in looking at the statues; yet whenever I view these collections my mind is depressed,' she confessed in her journal.

I devoured with greedy eyes the outside of the volumes, and wished — oh! how vainly — that their contents were stored in my brain. A whole life of learned labour would not suffice for that; what chance have I then, in the middle of my days [she was thirty-six], of accomplishing such a wish?

In a further self-effacing tone, she lamented that 'I shall leave nothing to excite one emulative sigh when I am gone! I shall die, and nothing will tell of my existence! In fact, the next year she began writing, and left numerous novels and her Diary published for posterity.

It was not uncommon for women to express feelings of frustration in their intellectual stagnation and the desire to inquire into new forms of knowledge. Elizabeth Wynne, who on her seventeenth birthday reflected on her accomplishments thus far in life, determined she wanted to be 'more philosophical.' Attaining this goal might involve learning a science. Lady Holland recorded in her diary her perusal of chemistry books, but pursuing natural history more generally was a prevailing fashion for women as much as for men. In the 1780s
Mary Hamilton – the niece of the British Ambassador and dilettante collector of antiquities, Sir William Hamilton – spent time with the bluestocking Mary Delany. Together they ‘arranged a Glass Cabinet of fossils, Spas & Minerals for her, she gave me a few specimens’.59 While most societies and institutes were open to men-only membership, by the early nineteenth century lectures in various subjects of natural philosophy were offered to women in private homes or, in some examples, public forums. The Royal Institution, founded in 1799, quickly attracted curious people ‘of the first rank and talent – the literary and the scientific, the practical and the theoretical, bluestockings and women of fashion; the old and the young, all crowded – eagerly crowded – the lecture room’.60 Lady Holland, however, was unimpressed – dismissing the Royal Institution as ‘a very bad imitation of the Institut at Paris; hitherto there is only one Professor, who is a jack-of-all-trades, as he lectures alike upon chemistry and shipbuilding’.61

Here again the Continent provided more inspiring examples of learning for women. Italy was famous for having at least one noted scientifically learned woman in its cultured cities, such as Laura Bassi, professor of Newtonian physics and mathematics in Bologna; Maria Gaetana Agnesi, mathematician in Milan; and Cristina Roccati, tutor in physics to the patricians in the Veneto. Women were featured as interlocutors in popular scientific pedagogical tracts from Fontenelle’s Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds (1686) to Francesco Algarotti’s Dialogo sopra l’ottica newtoniana [Newtonianism for Ladies, 1737], to Giuseppe Compagnoni’s La chimica per le dame [Chemistry for Ladies, 1796]. They were also respected translators of scientific treatises, including Guiseppe Eleonora Barbapiccola’s 1722 translation of Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy or Emilie du Châtelet, whose acclaimed translation of Newton’s Principia was published in France in 1759.62

Despite Lady Holland’s criticisms, public science lectures in Britain, such as those offered at century’s end at the Royal Institution, introduced women to new realms of exploration, inspiring some – such as Maria Jacson, Jane Marcet, or Rebecca Delvalle – to write what became immensely popular catechisms on subjects including botany, chemistry and mineralogy. The late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century marketplace for such books provided unprecedented opportunities for women to pursue enlightened subjects. It was not unknown for these educational books to make it on to the recommended list in reformed systems of education for women. Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles, suggested Maria Jacson’s Botanical Dialogues as part of his Plan for the Conduct of Female Education (1797), an author also recommended by the Edgeworths in their Practical Education (1798).63 Some of these were approached with caution, and sometimes confusion. Upon reading that ‘every well educated person is expected to know the Botanical names of plants’, Maria Edgeworth’s American friend Rachel Lazarus wrote to her asking whether the great educational theorist thought ‘that Latin ought to form a part of female education’, since, of course, botanical nomenclature was in the scientific language of Latin.64 Intriguingly, Maria Edgeworth remained silent on this question.

Central to the issue of women’s educational development was the question: how could women learn, but remain feminine? How were they to engage with men, but not be too ‘public’ or too aggressive about it? The message of James Fordyce’s Sermons to Young Women (1766) lingered in inquiring minds: women should not let ‘education’ lead them to ‘display’ themselves publicly or lead them to aspire ‘to shine anywhere but in [their] proper sphere’.65 The learned woman was expected to maintain her ‘femininity’ but learn in the ‘masculine’ style. Hannah More’s father dealt with the ‘problem’ of her aptitude for mathematics by halting her lessons in that unwaveringly masculine field. Ironically, Fordyce’s words were echoed in Hannah More’s first play The Search after Happiness, where one character advises a female friend to rein in her intellectual ambitions, ‘for a woman shines but in her proper sphere’.66 Such censures led to a culture in which women chose to conceal their personal achievements.

Sarah Dickenson, writing to Mary Hamilton (also a friend of Hannah More’s), understood the problem. She admired Hamilton