‘An Editor’s duty is indeed that of most danger’

The rationale for a digital edition of Elizabeth Montagu’s letters[1]

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> Owing to the enormous quantity of letters undated, the sorting has been terribly difficult, and I spent one entire winter in making up bundles and labelling each year. My grandfather made a variety of mistakes as to the dates of the letters. I hope I have atoned for some of his deficiencies, though a few mistakes are probably inevitable. He nearly blinded himself by working at night, and my grandmother had constantly to copy the letters in a large round hand to enable him to make them out.[2]

Emily Climenson’s description of her laborious task of compiling an edition of her great-great-aunt Elizabeth Montagu’s correspondence surely resonates with everyone who has ever worked in archives to transcribe and order manuscript letters. Climenson was realistic about her task; she knew that many dates would remain provisional, that several letters to and by Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800) would have vanished, and thus any edition would be incomplete and contain errors. But she was buoyed by the realization that the vast number that had remained made ‘the collection unique’ (Figure 12.1).[3] That remains the case. The Montagu papers have been described by Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg as ‘among the most important surviving collections from the eighteenth century’.[4] Climenson, like her grandfather, merely culled selected passages for publication and framed them with a biographical narrative. She died before the task was completed and her friend, the historian Reginald Blunt, felt duty-bound to bring it to a conclusion after her death. Extracts from only about a third of the letters had been published.[5] The sheer volume of the correspondence, the fact that two-thirds is in the Huntington Library, California, and the lack of a chronological inventory, prevented a scholarly print edition of the entire collection ever being contemplated by modern scholars. Today, digital technology makes it not only feasible but also even perfectible – for it could be added to and corrected as new letters and information become available. The digital edition of Elizabeth Montagu’s letters will be fully searchable and provide a complete chronological listing of the letters. Its interface and customizable tools will provide a useful research and reading experience by displaying critical notes and variants alongside the facsimile and transcription.[6] This major new resource will generate more research in literature, history, art and architecture, theatre, philosophy, economics, politics and women’s history. However, a huge investment of time, money and expertise will be needed to bring it about. This essay will reflect upon our reverence for such archival sources, and face up to the practical realities that digital editing of them imposes. The first question to ask is whether the source material is important enough to warrant the scholarly effort required.

> In spite of the love of gadding, I shall be brought to confess that at home, with an inexhaustible ink bottle, an indefatigable pen, and an unlimited sheet of paper, I have the means of the greatest happiness your absence will allow,

the young Elizabeth wrote to her friend the Duchess of Portland.[7] It was once assumed that the missives of the ‘queen of the Blue-stockings’ merely illustrated the frivolous social life of the upper classes. Actually, from her teens until her eighties, Montagu devoted part of every day to composing business letters to the managers of her coal mines and estates and the architects, landscape and interior designers of her mansions; witty epistles to fellow female intellectuals and authors she patronized; or nuanced missives pursuing her political and religious interests within powerful dynastic circles. Montagu corresponded extensively with leaders of British Enlightenment coteries, such as Edmund Burke, Gilbert West, David Garrick and Horace Walpole, as well as the Bluestocking inner circle – Elizabeth Carter, Sarah Scott, Hannah More, Hester Thrale Piozzi, Frances Burney, Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen. Like many female intellectuals, she revelled in the democratization of pen and ink:

> Of all fowl I love the goose best, who supplies us with her quill, surely a goose is a godly bird; if its hiss be insignificant, remember that from its side the engine is taken with which the laws are registered, and history recorded.[8]

Montagu's history and indeed, the cultural history of her age, is recorded and narrated in the archives of her letters. Digitization will further democratize Montagu's correspondence by making it freely available and, make it the 'predominant centre of creative processes that are deployed to make sense of human experience, cultural memory and the world in general.'[9] To be more specific, these letters shed light on the crucial part women played in the Enlightenment. They will also enable explorations of epistolary forms and practices, including the relationship between manuscript and print cultures.[10] Moreover, the geographical, temporal and social diversity of the archive will facilitate new research into women's social networks too.

However, even as we revel in the possibilities of today's information age, should we editors subject our own idealization of archival research to question? A return to the archives such as the Montagu Collection at the Huntington Library and the other libraries promises authenticity, originality and 'wie es eigentlich gewesensei' [how it actually was], according to Leopold von Ranke's wishful dictum about historical investigation.[11] It is not that we fondly imagine they will put us in direct touch with the author. We realize that exploring the original manuscript letters in their incomplete and fragile material existence, confusing order, manifold endorsements and most importantly, in terms of their predication upon absence, will never fully succeed in establishing Elizabeth Montagu's epistolary self and her history.

The ephemerality of epistolary communication is manifold. It is a generic one, as critics have already struggled with the definition of the term 'letter' in the eighteenth-century context where the genre ranged from the familiar letter to the commercial letter, the petition requesting patronage or political support, the 'public' letter in the fashion of d'Alembert and Rousseau, and finally, to the 'journal' letter.[12] But structurally, too, the epistle remains evocative yet elusive. In his study, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987), Jacques Derrida proposes an interminable process of movement and reception of the epistle between writer and addressee:

> que veut te dire une carte postale? A quelles conditions est-elle possible? Sa destination te traverse; tu ne sais plus qui tu es. A l'instant même où de son adresse elle interpelle, toi, uniquement toi, au lieu de te joindre, elle te divise où elle t'écarte, parfois elle t'ignore.
>
> What does a post card want to say to you? On what conditions is it possible? Its destination traverses you, you no longer know who you are. At the very instant when from its address it interpolates, you, uniquely you, instead of reaching you it divides you or sets you aside, occasionally overlooks you. And you love and you do not love, it makes of you what you wish; it takes you, it leaves you, it gives you.[13]

Derrida usefully highlights the 'circuitous routes and detours of human communication and identity' in this most ephemeral mode of writing.[14] The quotation above unveils the relationship between the letter-writer and her reader as entirely imaginary and fundamentally impossible.[15] She can only assume the addressee's absence ('le trou') and the trajectory of the letter – and even then, there is no certainty. The letter might be destroyed ('dead letter'), delayed or reach the wrong reader. By the time the (intended) reader reads the epistle, time has passed but 'the language of absence makes [the] present by make-belief'.[16] Thus, for Derrida, epistolary communication is not a closed circuit of exchange and communication but one of ephemeral indeterminacy. Nevertheless, we are eager to make sense of the epistles by creating a narrative through emplotment: narrating lived experience.

Thus, we catch the excitement that comes across in Climenson's Foreword – that the Montagu letters are a material trace of the famous Bluestocking queen. As Arlette Farge poetically describes the taste of the archive, here we feel privileged to 'touch reality'.[17] But as follows, the archive is at the same time physical and imaginative, public and yet closed hermetically. Paul J. Voss and Marta L. Werner stress that its very nature is paradoxical: 'The archive preserves and reserves, protects and patrols, regulates and represses.' Ultimately the history of the archive is, 'on the one hand a history of conversation […], on the other, a history of loss.'[18] It gives us material traces and spectres of lives and memories but, at the same time, denies us the certainty of a narrative of meaning. The narrative of lived experience created thus can be constructed, censored and possibly displaced.[19] Derrida confirms that:

> There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.[20]

For Michel Foucault the archive metaphor was: 'the first law of what can be said'.[21] In publishing an archive extremely relevant to women's history, we draw upon the authority of the past for today's feminism: we seek out and highlight the absences and possibly the enforced silences. We do not regard the archive as merely a sepulchre of outmoded ideologies. We agree with Foucault that it is also a centre of circulation – with the potential to generate new insights and strategies despite its inherent *instability*: the archive

> deploys its possibilities […] on the basis of the very discourses that have just *ceased to be ours*: its threshold of existence is established by the *discontinuity* that separates us from what we can no longer say, and from that which falls outside our discursive practice.[22]

This belatedness awakens our consciousness of past ideologies preserved in forms of discourse. Our exploitation of the virtual reality of digitization paradoxically reminds us that *physical* means of inscription and methods of preserving discourse in writing have just 'ceased to be ours' too. Derrida stresses: 'Archival meaning is in advance co-determined by the structure that archives' – now digitization shapes knowledge formation for the future.[23] So handwritten letters, postcards, notebooks, diaries, account books, ledgers, pen and ink, the postal system, cursive handwriting, the printed book and even the library itself have now been rendered archaic – they are a collection of items. The old tools are no longer used to conserve but are themselves the object of conservation. As antiquarians of old scrutinized scrolls, tablets and stelae, today we are suddenly fascinated by the aura that surrounds the physicality and materiality of writing on paper – its spaces, places, cultural practices, representation, tools and the symbolization these carry with them as they disappear into history. To archive is to uphold the past, present and future, 'to die is to be disconnected from access to the archives, not jacked-in or not in real time.'[24]

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Derrida argued that electronic mail was transforming the public and private binary.[25] Digitizing eighteenth-century correspondence certainly inverts the conventional distinction between public and private paper correspondence. This leads us to ask whether we can rightly describe the collection as an archive at all, owing to the gendering of the concept.

Derrida devotes much attention to the etymology of the word 'archive' from the Latin *Archium, archivum* – or ἀρχεῖον (arkheion) in Greek – a house or domicile – whose resident has the power to make law. Indeed, as Voss and Werner remind us, 'the concept of an archive also has links to the essentially private, hermetic spaces of the cloister, carrel, *almarie*.'[26] This private, hermetically sealed trace is revealed by and in relationship to the archivist.[27] 'The archive may be, in effect, a political space, a gendered space, a memorial space.'[28] The concept of a magisterial residence indicates a public office or a government place where official historical records are kept. Derrida observes the word implies firstly *physis* (Nature personified or the inherent quality of a being or object), thus channelling material power, and secondly the principle of the commandment.[29] In other words, like holy relics, the archived objects have been selected or collected because they are the things themselves and bear traces of human transactions. Derrida acknowledges, 'this *archic* – in truth *patriarchic* – function, without which no archive would ever come into play'.[30]

In the nineteenth century, it was axiomatic that legal and administrative records were superior to personal papers or eyewitness accounts, being empirical evidence.[31] This model of history was based on the bureaucratic nation-state and its imperial role. Sir Hilary Jenkinson (1892–1961) – autocratic mandarin of the British public record office – defined an archive solely as state 'documents which formed part of an official transaction and were preserved for official reference', though he recognized that personal papers had secondary value as a complement.[32] This is to reiterate the Roman concept of *res publica* as opposed to the private life of the social and sexual individual. But as Habermas has argued, the Enlightenment public sphere and its critique of government paved the way for democracy.[33] It was a republic of letters in which correspondence – whether published or not – acted as the counterpart to conversation and civic sociability. Elite women took a leading part in the public sphere salons, in maintaining epistolary networks, and in circulating, copying, preserving and storing

valued letters. Kinship networks, civic associations and philanthropy served society and they needed active maintenance through correspondence. Susan Dalton argues that 'literary commerce, to send news, books, literature – even compliments and criticism – was to show one's commitment to the community as a whole'.[34]

As scholars of women's writing, we would agree that official archives have traditionally been used to support patriarchal authority and priorities. In that sense, Marlene Manoff comments, women's studies may be defined as 'a project to write women back into the historical record – to fill the gaps and correct the omissions in the archive'.[35] But, as we have been arguing, the nature of the archive and what it can do will itself change through the inclusion of female correspondence. We also realize that digitization will require a revaluation of traditional scholarly practices and priorities.

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The myriad of personal papers surviving outside the archives of official power, in homes, in the forms of diaries and letters, have not often been professionally curated, as was the case with official papers deposited in archives. If not deliberately destroyed by descendants to preserve the family's good name, they provided primary material for biographers to recycle in print when illustrating a famous individual's selfhood. For example, William Godwin published his wife Mary Wollstonecraft's letters to her former lover Gilbert Imlay purely for their literary quality:

> The following letters may possibly be found to contain the finest examples of the language of sentiment and passion ever presented to the world […]. The Editor apprehends that, in the judgement of those best qualified to decide upon the comparison, these letters will be admitted to have the superiority over the fiction of Goethe. They are the offspring of a glowing imagination, and a heart penetrated with the passion it essays to describe.[36]

However, he destroyed the originals– having achieved print publication – so we have no way of knowing what was altered, censored or omitted. The difference between a public and private letter is not acknowledged in the *Posthumous Works* – Wollstonecraft's most private letters to her lover, and business letters to her publisher, are juxtaposed with her drafts for epistolary book projects such as *Letters on the Management of Infants* or a political polemic such as *Letter on the Present Character of the French Nation.* All the manuscripts are considered preliminary to, and of less value than, the print publication he felt Wollstonecraft deserved.

The Bluestockings were themselves pioneering editors of private correspondence, as manuscript letters began to be valued as documents validating the new discipline of English Literature and its idealization of geniuses. Hester Thrale Piozzi stated her editorial policy was accurate transcription of *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson*: 'The letters […] remain just as he wrote them, and I did not like to mutilate such as either contained sallies of humour or precepts of morality, because they might be mingled with family affairs'.[37] For modern critics the edition is 'textually unreliable', but, for her era, Thrale was relatively respectful of the original documents. Her title makes a point of the authenticity of the letters, published 'from the original mss. in her possession'. She feels that correspondence has been undervalued:

> It has been frequently lamented that we have few letters in our language printed from genuine copies – scarce any from authors of eminence; such as were prepared for the press by their writers, have forfeited all title to the name of letters, nor are I believe ever considered as familiar chat spread upon paper for the advantage or entertainment of a distant friend.[38]

But she felt readers might 'prefer the native thoughts and unstudied phrases […] to the more laboured elegance of his other works'.[39]

Anna Barbauld undertook the Herculean task of editing Samuel Richardson's letters. She was frank on the need to balance the commercial constraints of satisfying the prurient curiosity of readers about what famous authors were really like and the ethics of exposing the private lives of living individuals:

> Mr Phillips purchased them [the letters] at a very liberal price; he trusts for remuneration to the curiosity of the public, which has always shown an eagerness, more natural perhaps than strictly justifiable, to penetrate into the domestic retirements, and to be introduced to the companionable hours of eminent

> characters. That this inclination may be gratified without impropriety, care has been taken that no letters should be published of any living character, except the correspondence of Mrs Duncombe, (formerly Miss Highmore) which that lady had had the goodness to communicate herself.[40]

What is considered significant enough to conserve, and why, is subject to debate and to change. In the eighteenth century, Bluestocking editors were in the vanguard of identifying a canon of English Literature. While they preserved the correspondence of male geniuses, Godwin attempted to treat Wollstonecraft in the same way. In the twenty-first century, feminists are cultural historians – interested in creating digital archives of women's writing not only to rescue great authors from oblivion and to edit their texts, but to study how women connected in social groups. Noelle A. Baker and Sandy H. Petrulionis challenge the editors of today to look beyond the canon:

> How should we evaluate the fragmented writings of less celebrated figures? How do their damaged, coded or recently accessible texts shed light on the varied traditions of women's writing? How might emerging theories of digital archival environments enable us to interpret and represent the physical features of […] manuscripts, their layered scribal witnesses, mixed genres and non-linear structure?[41]

A searchable digital edition of varied correspondence like Montagu's is ideal for research into epistolary networks: it will enable us to plot friendship circles geographically, temporally, by class and gender and through language and style. For, as Marie-Laure Ryan suggests:

> A truly digital text, or narrative, is one that cannot be transferred into the print medium without significant loss. It depends on the computer as a sustaining environment, and it uses the screen (or any other display device) as a stage for performance.[42]

The edition will not merely reproduce the features of a print edition but will enable such dynamic interaction through digitization. The research possibilities of the correspondence will depend on the encoding methods used to produce machine-readable texts, conformable to the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), an international and interdisciplinary standard that since 1994 has 'been widely used by libraries, museums, publishers and individual scholars to present texts for online research, teaching, and preservation.'[43] TEI opens up scholarly claims about Montagu's letters in a complex but meticulous manner. We would argue that feminist construction of digital archives is therefore conservative yet also revolutionary work which preserves traces of women's history yet lays the foundation for new disciplines and new areas of knowledge.[44] As Derrida comments, archivization 'produces as much as it records the event'.[45]

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So, how far will our edition contribute to the democratization of the archive? Digitization has provided research tools, which have brought rare texts out of the control of professional archivists. Anyone who has visited their local record office will know that the archive is no longer an inner sanctum of civil service regulation, but buzzing with life – the focus of twenty-first-century ancestor worship. As Paul Ricoeur says, 'The archive is not just a physical or spatial place, it is also a social one'.[46]

Feminists have been in the forefront of this immense change to scholarship since the 1980s – unearthing women's writing from the special collections and making it directly available through reprints and digitization: often entirely bypassing the canon mediated to the reader via publishers, literary institutions and academic scholarly editors. It is arguable that there is no need to transfer editorial practices that evolved for print to texts made available through new media.[47] Digital images of the Montagu manuscript letters could be published without the painstaking work of diplomatic transcription. Readers could engage directly with images of the letters. In other words, we now need to distinguish between a digital edition and a virtual archive. Any form of classification or mapping of the archive is an act of authority that 'open[s] up new avenues in it to the material, yet it also closes off others.'[48] But an unordered archive would be the archivist's nightmare, 'one in which scholars and archivists journey through the library in the search of some ultimate order or meaning, some mystical revelation.'[49] The Montagu Project's aim is to exploit new possibilities for the genre of the scholarly edition through the collaboration of a group of experts in editing and digital humanities. Our edition can

minimize elitism by offering the viewer the availability but not the necessity of consulting explanatory notes and scholarly apparatus. We are involving a spectrum of potential users, whether academics, students or members of the public, from the very beginning – through crowdsourcing the transcription of letters (to be checked by the general editors).

Thus the editing process as well as digital access to images of the Montagu manuscripts will create a dynamic teaching tool (see Appendix). Ideally, though, this should go hand in hand with paying attention to the physical objects themselves. Close examination of watermarks, ink, fold-marks and seals of manuscript letters yields information often missed by the camera. In the same way, particular books have annotations; the paratext and advertisements may convey valuable information. Objects have their own integrity, which is not easily reproduced: for example, women often kept commonplace books of extracts and drawings in manuscript. Nevertheless, digitization can achieve not just the democratization of accessing rare texts and secret diaries without travelling to the archive, but facilitate the most arcane scholarly work of collating manuscripts that are physically remote from one another.[50]

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There are hundreds of Montagu letters cared for in Britain in the British Library, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, university libraries at Aberdeen, Manchester, Nottingham, the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, at Cornell University and the Houghton Library, Harvard. Other collections of Montagu letters are still in private archives, for example the Longleat archive. The Princeton Collection of the correspondence between Elizabeth Montagu and Frances Reynolds (with one letter from Edmund Burke) was purchased by the Library in 1967 at the Sotheby sale of 27 November (lot 196) and originally had been in the possession of Doreen Ashworth, a descendant of Mary Reynolds Palmer, Frances
Reynolds's sister.[51]

However, the vast majority of the manuscripts are held at the Huntington Library, California. Here the letters are in use constantly, according to curator Sue Hodson. They are in good condition – for paper quality was better in the eighteenth century than the nineteenth and Montagu insisted on good paper. She patronized a female stationer and bookseller and wrote to Messenger Monsey on 28 August 1757:

> Pray send in my name to Mrs. Denoyer's at the Golden Bible in Lisle Street for an 100 of the best pens, and half a ream of the finest and thinnest quarto paper ungilt, and let them come down in your portmanteau.[52]

But of course digitization would help preserve these finest and thinnest papers. There are 6,923 pieces (chiefly letters) in the Huntington Library – arranged in 117 boxes plus one album containing 5–7 images, making a total of c. 6,930 items to be scanned. Many of the letters consist of multiple pages as Montagu's letters are longer than average, so the estimate of total images needed is 37,094. Descriptions of each letter appear on the front of each folder for each piece (name of correspondent, date, place of writing and so on). The front of each folder must also be scanned to capture the descriptive metadata. This makes a total of 44,024 scans. It is a huge amount of work – estimated at a total of 1,950 hours to digitize everything and will disrupt the running of the library for many months – but this is nothing to the amount of work which would have been involved if the letters had *not* been concentrated into one main archive. This, and the good will of the Huntington Library, make the project feasible.

Digitizing Montagu's manuscript letters will benefit many scholars in eighteenth-century studies who are currently forced to travel to the USA and who are duplicating transcriptions. *The Correspondence of Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800): Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition* has brought them together to pool their work and to organize transcriptions of manuscript letters by amateur historians and students eager to be involved. Metadata management will append the provenance and repository of the manuscripts to the image. Transcription metadata will identify and clarify transcription methodologies. This project raises the question of the editors' aims in their presentation of the letters, which were informed by Thomas G. Tanselle's reflections:

> In the first place, an editor's primary responsibility is to establish a text; whether his goal is to reconstruct that form of the text which represents the author's final intention or some other form of the text, his essential task is to produce a reliable text according to some set of principles. Relegating all editorial matter to an appendix and allowing the text to stand by itself serves to emphasize the primacy of the text and

> permits the reader to confront the literary work without the distraction of editorial comment and to read the work with ease. A second advantage of a clear text is that it is easier to quote from or to reprint. Although no device can insure accuracy of quotation, the insertion of symbols (or even footnote numbers) into a text places additional difficulties in the way of the quoter. Furthermore, most quotations appear in contexts where symbols are inappropriate; thus when it is necessary to quote from a text which has not been kept clear of apparatus, the burden of producing a clear text of the passage is placed on the quoter.[53]

The transcription methodology required extensive discussions and decisions. Peter Robinson notes: 'To transcribe a manuscript is to select, to amalgamate, to divide, to ignore, to highlight, to edit.'[54] For it would be impossible to produce truly non-critical transcriptions, ones that 'transcribe', 'reproduce' and 'present' the original.[55] We decided on a diplomatic transcription. However, our digital edition will allow the reader to view the image of the manuscript letter with a zoom tool, juxtaposed with a clear reading text, with access to full critical apparatus if required.[56]

Perhaps the most vexed question we pose ourselves is how far digitization of the manuscripts can hope to preserve the originals. It is salutary to consider whether the new medium makes an inherently flawed form of archive, inferior to paper. Letters were valued in the eighteenth century and carefully stored. Conservation could be achieved by threading them together on thread or wire: Latin for which is *filum* – therefore a file. Alternatively, they were folded into neat rectangles and endorsed by a note on the back as to recipient and contents. Then bundles of letters were stored methodically in desks and chests. Elizabeth Vesey was particularly anxious about Elizabeth Carter's correspondence and wrote:

> I have not been able to find much less to select Mrs Carter's letters […] Those fine ones I mention'd are lock'd up in a saving Box in Ireland particularly that wrote upon her return from Miss Talbot's funeral which one day will touch the Heart & improve the religious feelings of Posterity.[57]

Sometimes they were protected by being bound into a codex or letter-book and this is the case with some of the Montagu family letters in the British Library. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the custom arose to store letters flat between boards. It was usual for letters to be returned to the originator on the recipient's death, and so, because Montagu was so long-lived and because she had also carefully kept and sometimes copied the letters she had received from her friends, the collection was extensive when she died. Montagu asked Elizabeth Vesey once to return her letters: 'I wish you w^{d} send me some of my letters back I mean such as you have read, I want the letters for a friend, I w^{d} have only such as are copied, the originals are hardly legible.'[58]

The great majority of the letters were inherited and curated by Matthew Montagu, 4th Baron of Rokeby, nephew of Elizabeth Montagu and executor of her estate. From 1809–13 he published four volumes of extracts from the correspondence of the first forty years of her life. Like Montagu Pennington, the nephew of Elizabeth Carter, and publisher of her and Catherine Talbot's correspondence, Matthew Montagu was deliberately affirming the value of Bluestocking learning by creating his aunt's afterlife in extracts from her letters, in a decade when the backlash against female intellectuals was at its height. The *Quarterly Review*, notorious for savaging Anna Barbauld and Lady Morgan, sneered that despite 'considerable comic powers' Elizabeth Montagu dealt in 'stale, pedantic morality' with 'that very learned, very excellent and very tiresome person, Mrs Elizabeth Carter'.[59]

In 1899, the letters passed into the hands of Matthew Montagu's granddaughter Emily J. Climenson, who was just then publishing extracts from another eighteenth-century manuscript source: *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House AD 1756–1808* (1899). She brought out another two volumes of Montagu extracts, taking the memoir up to 1761. Her death in 1921 saw Climenson's friend Mr Reginald Blunt, a historian of Chelsea, completing the task in 1923. He would go on to publish a biography of Thomas, Lord Lyttelton in 1936. Other family papers from 1761 to the end of Mrs Montagu's life were used by Dr John Doran, an experienced biographer and editor, to provide a further selection of correspondence, which he printed with remarks of his own in biographical form, in 1873, under the title *A Lady of the Last Century (Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu) illustrated in her unpublished Letters*. He also published an extra-illustrated twelve-volume edition of it the same year.[60] The aim of these editors was to construct a chronological biographical account piecing

together extracts of anecdotes of upper-class life. They were cavalier in using manuscript sources. Occasionally they would splice together extracts from different letters or censor them. Even Doran acknowledged in his dedication of *A Lady of the Last Century* that he had compiled a 'bit of mosaic'.[61] Crucially, though, they refrained from destroying the letters as each selection saw print.

The main collection of correspondence was then sold to the American rare book dealer A. S. W. Rosenbach, who in 1925 sold it in turn to the railroad magnate Henry E. Huntington. Huntington was at the end of his life, and decided to turn his personal book and manuscript collection into a research institution on his estate in Pasadena, California, which would survive into the future. He therefore began buying up entire collections wholesale rather than individual items – the larger the better. So he must have been delighted with the Montagu letters. Endowing the library with the enormous annual budget of $400,000 p.a. he declared of his archive: 'Its value to the world will depend chiefly upon what it *produces*'.[62] The card catalogue his librarian used to record recipients of more than ten of Montagu's letters alphabetically is still in use today, though an online electronic finding aid is now available at the Online Archive of California www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf767nb23s/entire_text/. The Montagu archive at the Huntington Library is an example of the institutionalization of a private archive not by the state but by an entrepreneur/connoisseur: with the charitable purpose of encouraging research inextricably bound to the aim of preserving his estate and keeping his collection together.

The Montagu correspondence has informed recent pioneering research on female intellectuals of the Enlightenment by Elizabeth Eger, Nicole Pohl, Betty Schellenberg, Harriet Guest, Emma Major, Deborah Heller, Norma Clarke and others, and offering electronic access to the archive will inspire even more. Emma Major has eloquently described studying the Montagu letters in the Huntington Library:

> The privilege of using manuscript letter collections means that layers of editing are made visible. Passages and names that descendants or editors thought should be permanently erased had been struck out in thick ink, while the different forms of handwriting that Montagu had used for her fair copies of earlier letters highlighted the careful self-preservation involved in her epistolary practice.

She adds encouragingly:

> Scholarly modern editions of the correspondence, such as those now underway for Montagu and her sister Sarah Scott will enable scholars to engage more directly and fully with those writers' epistolary lives.[63]

Democratizing the archive and facilitating research on it is what a digitized scholarly edition can brilliantly achieve. But let us consider the distinct possibility that our virtual edition may prove as, if not more, fragile and degradable than the original papers. It could be said that today's digitization frenzy is not too far different to eighteenth-century bibliomania. However, our belated realization of the instability and fragility of the digital archive we are creating conjures up an even more unsettling historical analogy. Perhaps today's digital humanities scholars are re-enacting the role of medieval scribes in the monastery library with our endless copying of past papers, while the arch-vandal Time is at the door and may well destroy our work. We cannot guarantee the immortality of the copies we make, and maybe we will leave less trace of our electronic correspondence than Montagu did. As Michael J. Paulus points out:

> But now, with the proliferation of digital materials, dispersed and uncurated, the traditional positions of libraries within the archival cycle are problematic. Physical storage media need to be preserved, to maintain the integrity of the bits that reside on them, and the logical ordering of the bits needs to be preserved, to make them 'renderable' or readable in the future. There is also the bigger and more basic question of responsibility: who will save what, when, how, and where? Common computer applications and uses do not do much to support long-term access, therefore digital materials are at risk if they are not proactively curated.[64]

Libraries and archives have to reposition themselves within the archival cycle – to adopt responsibility for creating and distributing as well as merely conserving.[65] But many digital scholarly resources have proved all too ephemeral as they need constant updating to remain accessible. In our own case, the Huntington Library actively supports our digitization to help preserve its fragile papers by making images of them all, so we can virtually

reassemble and re-order the collection, bringing it back to the Uk through mediated images of the letters. Swansea University has offered to host the edition, and its Department of Information Services and Systems will design, build and – crucially – maintain a platform specifically for freely accessible scholarly digital editions, beginning with *The Correspondence of Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800): Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition.* The Elizabeth Montagu Project has benefitted from generous grants by AHRC and other funders to bring together a network of experts in literary editing and digital humanities, librarians and archivists who have helped us thrash out some of the theoretical and practical problems discussed in this essay. Long-term sustainability is planned for; it is our main priority, so that the letters benefit from further metadata developments and advances in digital analysis.

For arguably, although today we can communicate instantly across the world wide web, we have found no way to better preserve writing than the physical paper archive, which – by no means redundant – magically combines the material and the immortal. This realization at least prevents us from the hubris of presentism. We are spurred on by the awareness that a digital edition of Elizabeth Montagu's letters will need to be invested with the highest quality of scholarship, in order to justify the amount of work it will take to build, and especially by its perpetual maintenance and improvement, if it is to survive far into the future.

Appendix: Selected Editorial Principles

THE MASTER INVENTORY (metadata for every letter/ person):

- It creates and maintains a unique identifier and metadata structure for every document and person – this is the Control File/Master Index for the Montagu project – all decisions regarding the metadata of the project must be registered here.
- It will become an online database for *everyone* to consult.
- Editing will be limited by password to assigned editor or editors.
- Letters must have an entry before transcribing.

Transcribing

The letters are presented in a *diplomatic* transcription of the originals:

- They retain historical punctuation, abbreviations (ye, wd), spellings, misspellings and deletions.
- The use of lower and upper case is reproduced faithfully.
- Superscripts and subscripts are retained.
- If a final period has been inadvertently omitted, we will introduce one in square brackets [.], as web browsers collapse multiple white spaces into one.
- Valedictory remarks, regardless of how they appear, will be placed at the end of each letter on the right side, with line breaks as appropriate.
- Postscripts are reproduced as they appear in the original document.
- The en dash (or en rule), rather than a hyphen, must be used to indicate a closed range of values – a range with clearly defined and finite upper and lower boundaries – roughly signifying what might otherwise be communicated by the word 'through'.
- Use full numbers for page references in annotation, dates, etc. e.g. 110–115 not 110–5.
- Include a space before and a space after an em rule (i.e. a full dash).
- When notecalls occur next to punctuation, they always appear after punctuation. For example 'Word.'[5]
- Font size and style does not matter (with the exception of superscript and subscript) as it will all be standardized in the process of digitization.
- One document = one letter, do not have more than one transcript per word document.

Prefatory materials (header)

- Document IDno.
- APE (Address, Postmarks, Endorsements).

Palaeography and aids to reading

- All unusual characters (e.g. alchemical, astrological etc.) are presented as full Unicode characters.

Postal markings

- Postal markings identify franking and directions. These are recorded as Montagu and her correspondents used them.

Notes

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43 www.tei-c.org/index.xml. For advantages/disadvantages of TEI, see E. Vanhoutte, 'Electronic Textual Editing: Prose Fiction and Modern Manuscripts: Limitations and Possibilities of Text-Encoding for Electronic Editions', www.tei-c.org/About/Archive_new/ETE/Preview/vanhoutte.xml. There is a *TEI* Special Interest Group on Correspondence and the Digital Archive of Letters in Flanders project (*DALF*) that has extended *TEI* to make it particularly useful for letters. http://ctb.kantl.be/project/dalf/ dalfdoc/ introduction.html.
44 See Women Writers Project's publications on encoding women's historical documents: www.wwp.northeastern.edu/research/publications/; the Project Orlando: http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svDocumentation?formname=t&d_id=MARkUP; and H. M. Schilperoot, 'Feminist Markup and Meaningful Text Analysis in Digital Literary Archives', *Library Philosophy and Practice* (e-journal) (2015), Paper 1228. http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ libphilprac/1228.
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> By Archival Function I mean the preservation of the literary artefact in its historical form and the historical-critical research of a literary work. Museum Function I define as the presentation by an editor of the physical appearance and/or the contents of the literary artefact in a documentary, aesthetic, sociological, authorial or bibliographical contextualization, intended for a specific public and published in a specific form and lay-out. The digital archive should be the place for the first function, showing a relative objectivity, or a documented subjectivity in its internal organization and encoding. The Museum Function should work in an edition – disregarding its external form – displaying the explicit and expressed subjectivity and the formal orientation of the editor. The relationship between these two functions is hierarchical: there is no Museum Function without an Archival Function and an edition should always be based on a digital archive.

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