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Women and the British Empire in the 18th century

> Empire entered public political consciousness as a British right...
> British imperial ascendancy was a benefit to the world.[1]

A heterogeneous discourse about imperial matters threads through 18th-century women's writing in poetry and prose. During this increasingly complex era of overseas involvement and acquisition, the concerns of women writers in English ranged from commentary on avaricious merchants and cultural difference to questions about English militarism, Scottish nationalism, racial bigotry, and the shifting status of both colonizers and colonized people.[2]

In the earliest decades, two English aristocrats, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, and Frances Thynne, Countess of Hertford, wrote poems about mercantilism and human exploitation, while Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote letters, describing her voyages abroad in 1717, that were not published until 1763. In the 1770s came Englishwoman Anne Penny, three Scotswomen, Janet Schaw, the travel writer and two poets, Jane Elliott and Alison Cockburn, who lamented Scottish national defeats in battle. They were followed by Bristol-born Anna Maria Falconbridge and Susana Smith, of African descent, who both wrote in 1791.

The first poem, 'A song on the South Sea' by the Countess of Winchilsea, written in 1720 and published in 1724, decries the high number of credulous women who invested in the South Sea Company in the summer and autumn of 1720.[3] I open with this poem because it stresses the immersion of women in the first era of stock-jobbing when a national fervour for speculation engrossed Britain. G.M. Trevelyan hints at deliberate plans to exploit the widow and the orphan.[4] The poem suggests Finch's close knowledge of both national politics and the culture of wealthy unmarried females.

The narrator describes these women abandoning gaming tables, 'the court, the park, the foreign song / And harlequin's grimace' and pawning every jewel they own.[5] Unprecedentedly, 'tender virgins' are mixing fearlessly with elderly men, both Gentile and Jewish. Avarice, the narrator contends, has supplanted love and ruined

[1] Wilson 1995, p.201.
[2] Anderson 1966; Colley 1992; Newman 1987; Bhabha 1980; Said 1993; Boehmer 1995.
[3] Lonsdale 1990, p.17, note 18.
[4] Trevelyan 1926, p.47.
[5] Lonsdale 1990, p.26.
[6] Colley 1992, p.60.

the lives of affluent young women by magnetizing them into a male world of financial speculation and risk. Such disenabling, the very issue of gender and power, troubles the speaker. So do issues of class. This was the time of George I's accession and coronation when trade, commerce, and the British Empire were becoming inextricably linked. Nonetheless, in Linda Colley's words, 'in terms of wealth, status and power, men of trade in this society came a long way behind men of land'.[6] The speaker, sounding much like the Countess herself, deplored the necessity and near-vulgarity of trade and its effect on women.

In the next decade, in 1726, the Countess of Hertford, great-niece of Anne Finch, wrote a poem entitled 'The story of Inkle and Yarico'. In two parts, it concerns a shipwrecked merchant, Inkle, who betrays his intimate relationship with a free black woman named Yarico. They have fallen in love. But after Yarico espies a 'European' vessel, the formerly enamoured Inkle reassesses the situation in his economic self-interest: 'By sordid int'rest sway'd/He Resolv'd to sell his faithful Maid...'.[7] Not even the pregnant Yarico's desperate last-ditch appeal that he stab her to death moves the now-intractable Inkle.

In the second part, Yarico appears as an exemplary female Christ-figure, selflessly solicitous about Inkle's soul, despite his responsibility for their 'wretched infant's death.' Ultimately, Inkle seems as irredeemable as the South Sea Company directors in 'Song on the South Sea' who expropriate young women's savings while remaining invisible. Again, the poem's concerns are related to gender and mercantilist risk, with slavery an added issue. As aristocrats, both authors deplore the upstart recklessness of Whiggish mercantilism. Legitimate trade and fair dealing they both agree with, but not fraud and self-indulgent greed. The South Sea Directors and Inkle participate in a negative mercantilist mentality that verges on the unpatriotic. Inkle lets Britain down, so to speak, because he calculatingly sells a hospitable pregnant woman for profit.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu recontextualizes British overseas involvement in her *Turkish Letters*.[8] As wife of the ambassador to Turkey from 1717 to 1718, she directly assisted in the imperial operation, attending public functions and conversing with indigenous people about issues that concerned both Britain and the host country. While doing so, she ostensibly challenges previous male travel writers on the subject of Turkey and extends the boundaries of acceptable discourse for women. Moreover, regarding Turkish women during her visit to the baths, she remains, perhaps prefers to be an object of curiosity rather than a stark naked woman like the rest of the company. Maybe she feels constrained, or so it seems, from joining their leisure pursuits.

Most particularly, Lady Mary admires the ability of Turkish women, regardless of class, to go out veiled anywhere, to visit anyone, male or female, and all the time to remain unknown. She concludes that this cultural custom aids 'illicit' amorous

[7] Hertford 1738; both parts of this poem are reproduced in Prince 1937. Versions of *Inkle and Yarico* continued up to the 19th century. Anna Maria Porter presents a poem on that subject (see Porter 1811). Prince discusses many versions of *Inkle and Yarico,* French and German as well as English.
[8] Schaw 1921, p.127.

practice. Put another way, her western imaginings induce her to reconfigure Turkish cultural practices. While appearing to place Turkish women on an equal footing with herself, through adulation and her own status, perhaps consciously, perhaps not, she represents herself as the all-seeing eye that weighs and evaluates, the all-knowing consumer of 'knowledge'.

In Meyda Yegenoglu's words, Lady Mary's narrative derives its power from constructing 'the very object it speaks about, [producing] a regime of truth about the other and thereby establish[ing] the identity and the power of the subject that speaks about it'.[9] It is a peripheral concern, Yegenoglu goes on, 'whether the images deployed to this end are positive or negative'. Lady Mary seems tolerant, curious, and affirming of Turkish cultural practices, that is, while remaining a staunch member and agent of colonialism's retinue.

Curiously enough, she lives in Turkey not long after the accession of George I (1714) who was roundly scorned for his religion and illegitimate claim to the throne. A nationalist critique that had wide currency linked him to 'Turks and infidels, barbarity and tyranny, subterfuge and subversion'.[10] In one sense, Lady Mary is confronting these aspersions and configuring Turkish people as gracious and sophisticated. Is George I a diamond in the rough, her discourse circuitously asks.

By the 1770s, when Lady Mary's *Turkish Letters* were finally published, women writers were beginning to address military matters. In 1771, for example, Anne Penny commemorates, in two odes, the founding of the patriotic Marine Society in 1756. The first ode applauds Britain's social virtue – the nation's avowed respect and love for humanity. This quality aids orphaned boys and unemployed men who become 'bulwarks of our wealth and trade' and 'quell each foe' when they join the navy.[11] British imperial ventures, both commercial and military, are thus bound to succeed. Social love, that is, bonds patriot-Britons together and engenders imperial victory. In some sense, social love is a concept related to Lady Mary's sense of bonding with Turkish women, the Countess of Hertford's sympathy for Yarico, and Anne Finch's compassion for naive rich women.

The Maritime Society, moreover, marks a new phase in British expansionism.[12] It centre-stages the firm mercantilist imperial perspective that dominated the nation after the English victory over the Scottish during the 1745 rising and the imperial triumph in 1763 of the Seven Years War. The increase in discussions of rights, the English phobia about France, the recruiting of young, impoverished, and potential 'troublemakers' as seamen, were interconnected and included Scottophobia, or hatred of Scotland, to boot. By 1771, when Penny wrote her odes, Parliament had already passed legislation to erase the cultural difference of the Highlands, summed up in the banning of tartan-wearing. Simultaneously, Parliament tried to attract Highlanders into imperial projects and succeeded surpassingly in India and colonial America. Scottish economy expanded; so did emigration from Scotland, especially to the less

[9] Yegenoglu 1998, p.89-90.
[10] Wilson 1995, p.111.
[11] Lonsdale 1990, p.295.
[12] Wilson 1995, p.78, 191, 196.

fashionable regiments of Britain's army. In Colley's words again: 'Imperialism served as Scotland's opportunity'.[13] Scotland's national identity consolidated.

Anne Penny's eulogy to the Marine Society applauding British naval power parallels, inversely, poems published at roughly the same time, in 1765 and 1769, by two Scottish female poets. They lament England's military victory at the Battle of Flodden in 1513 in poems similarly entitled 'The Flowers of the Forest.'

Jane Elliott, who wrote the later poem 'The Flowers of the Forest', was the daughter of the Lord Justice Clerk of Scotland.[14] At 19, during the 1745 rebellion, led by Bonnie Prince Charley, she facilitated the escape of her Hanoverian father from a group of Jacobites. According to the poem, Flodden has changed the mood of Scotland: women singing at milking time, men working in the fields, people at church or out and about – the nation as a whole, that is, is no longer blithe but moaning. The poet regrets that so many young men of all classes – 'the prime of our land' – were vanquished by the English Army. In the famous words of Elliott's song:

> Dool and wae for the order, sent our lads to the border!...
> Women and bairns are heartless and wae:
> Sighing and moaning, on ilka green loaning
> The flowers of the forest are a' wede away.[15]

A committed Whig, prominent in Edinburgh literary circles, Alison Cockburn espouses sentiments that anticipated Elliott's: Scotland is no longer fortunate.[16] Were the 1760s' lamentations by women about Flodden part of the construction of a burgeoning national identity? As Scotland was shaking off the defeat of Culloden – and even in its offrhyme, Flodden evokes Culloden – these poets revivified an older defeat to English imperialism, as part of the national mourning. Scottish nationalist sentiment and the forging by Scots of a British imperial identity were not conceptually as self-contradictory as they seemed. Internal British discord becomes subsumed by the colonial process.

A travel narrative written in 1774 by the middle-class Scotswoman at leisure, Janet Schaw, contextualizes the poems very well. Schaw deplores the plight of Scottish emigrants as she accompanies one of her brothers to Antigua in the Eastern Caribbean, and then to the American colonies where they visit a second brother. Both brothers – even the tourist sister – are an integral part of the expatriate colonial retinue.[17]

Although Janet Schaw calls the Scottish emigrants on board 'a Company of most respectable sufferers', she accepts the emigrants' meagre diet and appalling conditions, cramped all together in steerage. Her bigoted attitudes toward African slaves are also unabashed. To her own amusement in Antigua, she confuses black children with monkeys and praises a friend who keeps a five-year-old black child as a pet.

She excuses the evidence of inhumane punishment on the bodies of slaves by saying that the Creoles or owners have come to realize that these practices cannot be

[13] Colley 1992, p.130.
[14] Lonsdale 1990, p.264. For the Battle of Flodden, see also Maclean 1993, p.74-75.
[15] Lonsdale 1990, p.265.
[16] Id., p.262-263.
[17] For Scottish emigration and Highland clearances, see Grant 1997, p.223-233, 271; and Ferguson 1990, vol.IV, p.276-277, 322.

avoided because of the nature of slaves: 'It is the suffering of the human mind', Schaw goes on, 'that constitutes the greatest misery of punishment, but with them [Africans] it is merely corporeal'.[18]

A Tory to the core and presumably a defender of the Scottish rebellion of 1745, she also supports the British Loyalists in North Carolina. American Revolutionaries, in her view, are uncouth, ill-advised barbarians. As a wealthy middle-class Scotswoman, Janet Schaw combines a concern for settling Caribbean colonies and opposing revolutionaries with praise for mercantilism. The Schaw family enterprise encapsulates the new national slogan: 'Trade, Liberty – and Empire – would constitute the heart of the new patriotic imperative'.[19] The brother she accompanies to Antigua is a customs inspector, who will protect British interests in matters of immigration and trade, and further his own career. Or so he perhaps imagined. In fact, in the 1730s, merchants had become gradually irate about the increase in excise men who they thought would disrupt trade. Once again, Empire benefits Scottish entrepreneurs. Schaw's Scottish nationalist, British loyalist, racist, and pro-mercantile perspective derives inevitably from her class and ethnicity and substantially differs from the perspectives of the Countess of Winchilsea and the Countess of Hertford. Anne Finch mocks commercial speculation, and the Countess of Hertford opposes mercantilism as a grasping bourgeois venture while attacking the slave trade and its entrepreneurs. Resembling Lady Mary, Janet Schaw supports the government, deplores its traits, and mixes agreeably with her host communities. She seems to understand that colonies like Antigua and colonial America were essential to the imperial project.

The last two women writers I have chosen to discuss are Anna Maria Falconbridge and Susana Smith, the former English, the latter African and respectively a colonialist and colonized person.

Like the travel-based texts of her predecessors, Falconbridge's letters describing her voyages to Sierra Leone, London, and Jamaica offer another dimension on European expansionist ideology.[20] This time, the text is written by someone intending to take up residence in the newly founded colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa where she travelled with her abolitionist husband, Alexander Falconbridge, who was taking up an administrative post there in the name of trade and commerce as well as territorial acquisition. But unlike Lady Mary and Janet Schaw, Falconbridge condemns the metropolitan colonial administration and makes her contentious letters public. Her role as a widowed colonial wife demands just recompense. On the other hand, the colony that she and others set out to build that will substitute trade in goods for trade in human beings, is one that she turns her back on.

For example, the charity that Falconbridge extends to black Sierra Leone settler representatives who are petitioning in London for their civil rights somewhat obscures her own transformation: from an abolitionist who risked social ostracism by marrying a well-known, antislavery activist to someone who upholds the necessity of slavery and dedicates her text to the inhabitants of Bristol, a major pro-slavery port

[18] Schaw 1921, p.127.
[19] Wilson 1995, p.136.
[20] Falconbridge 1794.

and her hometown. In the end, that is, she surrenders an oppositional stance for a niche in the *status quo*. Total abolition being slow in coming, she reconstitutes her façade.

Susana Smith's text, on the other hand, throws a very different kind of light on English and Scottish women's writings on colonialism.[21] To start with, very little is known about this strong-spirited black woman. She probably travelled to Nova Scotia as recompense for aiding the British in the War of Independence; then with other members of the Nova Scotian community, known as the Black Loyalists, she travelled to West Africa. Literate and insistent on her rights, she is the only woman known to have written within the stalwart Nova Scotian community who adventured to Sierra Leone.

Smith's brief petition suggests to what deep degree the needs of colonized women differ from those of colonial wives and sisters. Written in Sierra Leone the same year as Anna Maria Falconbridge was composing her travel chronicle, Susana Smith's petition to the Governor of Sierra Leone, dated May 12, 1791, reads as follows:

> Sir I your hum bel Servent begs the faver of your Excelence to See if you will
> Pleas to Let me hav Som Sope for I am in great want of Some I have not had aney
> Since I hav bin to this plais I hav bin Sick and I want to git Som Sope verry much
> to wash my family Clos for we ar not fit to be Sean for dirt
> your humbel Servet Susana Smith

Susana Smith's prose is that of an individual who has laboured valiantly, in adverse circumstances, to be literate. It seems to display humility while chiding her correspondent silently and subtly for colonial neglect. Smith speaks for harmonious family values, thinking of others and their comfort, trying to adjust in a sociable manner to a new place. Washing her family's clothes as soon as she has recovered from an illness like malaria is her first order of business. Where earlier writers stressed Britain's social love as a matter of concern for the downtrodden – how the nation will help such people and be proud to do so – Susana Smith speaks as one of the very downtrodden themselves who loves her community and insists on basic social services on its behalf. Constructed as a pawn in the imperial project, she declines that role on her own terms.

Collectively, the nine writers patch together a quilt of diverse national identities. In this era of British colonial advance, these voices sound themselves into the void, offering a variety of hegemonic stances on colonialism, nationalism, and gender. They expose the corruption and hollowness of the so-called civilizing mission. The earliest writers attack commercial speculation and corrupt trading practices. Four of them – Lady Mary, Anne Penny, Janet Schaw, and Anna Maria Falconbridge – support the colonial project overseas and endorse colonial implantation and force. At the same time, the Scottish poets deplore English military advance, with Janet Schaw adding a particular edge to Scottish nationalist sentiment by critiquing coerced emigration, the origin of which dates back to England's imperial victory at Flodden and earlier. British identity is becoming much more fluid.

[21] Fyfe 1991, p.24.

Lastly, the settlers themselves. Echoing Janet Schaw, Anna Maria Falconbridge betrays a traditional perspective on indigenous people living as a part-time tourist, part-time social commentator, and full-time wife of a British imperial agent and facilitator of trade with West Africa. The fact that she turns against abolition is a matter of a colonizer's class interest and gender empowerment. She is a woman who speaks her mind, but so does Susana Smith, who quietly destabilizes the status quo from a colonized person's standpoint.

These preliminary findings about women and the British Empire in the 18th century suggest an interlocking and ongoing commentary among occasional poems and prose in English that diversely tackles trade, gender, and empire. Englishwomen comment extensively on imperial practices at home and abroad: Scottish women do the same while inflecting their texts with a conspicuously variant nationalist sentiment. The displaced woman of colour worries, by contrast, about hygiene and basic necessities, unrelated to any contemporary possibility of hegemonic power, but still subtly stressing her sense of human dignity and connectiveness.

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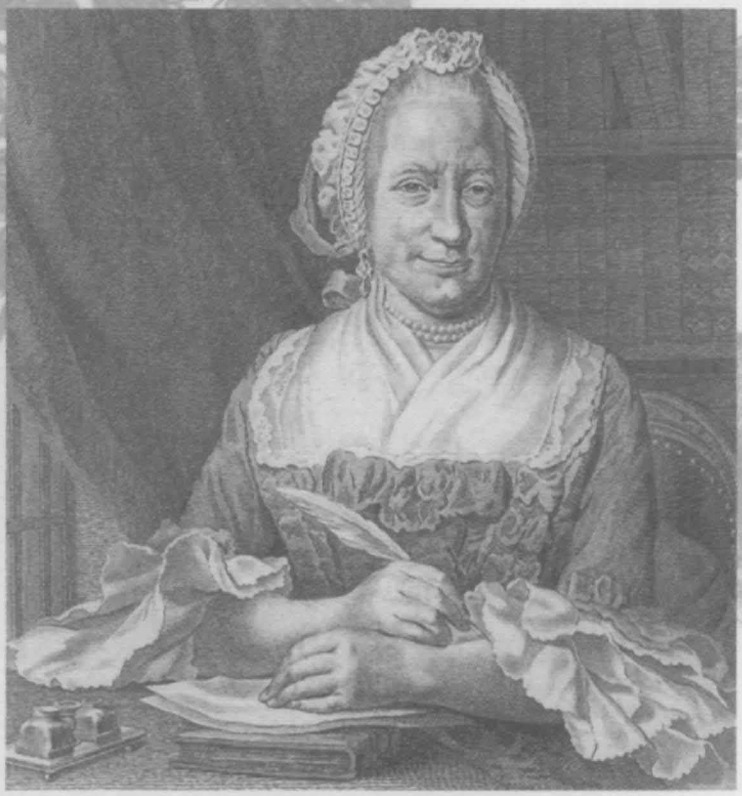
Lucretia Wilhelmina van Merken (1721-1789)



Germanicus

Het afscheid van Germanicus en Agrippina:

De Prins heeft naauw de komst van Silius vernomen,
Met Flavius terug van 's Meinstrooms boord gekomen,
Of spoedt zich tot den togt; hoewel zijn moedig hart
Een teedre deernis voedt met Agrippinaas smart,
Die, overwonnen door de zorgen, die haar prangen,
Hem in hare armen klemt, en aan den hals blijft hangen.
Ach! zegt ze, in Rome dreigt u Cezars dwinglandij;
In Duitschland waagt ge u aan des vijands razernij.
Hier kan de woede, daar de haat u doodlijk wezen.
Moet uw bedrukte gâ dan onophoudlijk vreezen!
'k Weet wat uw glorie eischt en wat noodzaaklijk is;
Doch zorg, om mijn behoud, voor uw behoudenis.
Denk aan uw gade en kroost, nog in zijn kindsche jaren.
't Is uit met ons, ten zij de Goôn u 't leven sparen.
Herstel u, zegt de prins, 't is ligt vergeefsch getreurd,
'k Heb nimmer zwakheid in uw groot gemoed bespeurd.
Het gunstig Godendom zal mij om u doen leven;
't Zal op Arminius ons de overwinning geven,
Hij droogt, meêdoogend, haar de tranen van 't gezigt;
Kust kleenen Cajus, en het jongstgeboren wicht,
Die naauw hun vader in zijn wapenrusting kennen,
Doch aan den glans daarvan welhaast hun oog gewennen.
Daar zich het teeder jongske aan kindsche vreugd gehecht,
In 's vaders schild, als waar 't een rustbed, nederlegt;
En 't zoogend wicht, bekoord door 't prachtig hoofdsieraadje,
Den helmtop aanlacht op 't bewegen der pluimaadje.
De veldheer toont zijn gâ de blijdschap van hun kroost.
Dan ach! de kindermin, hoe sterk, geeft weinig troost
Als zich de huwelijkstrouw door angsten voelt verscheuren.
De brave vrouw, die zich vergeefs tracht op te beuren,
Beveelt al weenend hem aan zijnen eedlen stoet,
En ziet hem zuchtend na met een beklemd gemoed.

Lucretia Wilhelmina van Merken, *Germanicus. In zestien boeken.* Amsterdam: Pieter Meijer, 1779, book 10, p.259-261.

Germanicus

Germanicus quitte Agrippine:

Dès que Germanicus eut appris le retour de Silius
et de Flavius, arrivant des bords du Mein,
il ordonne les apprêts du départ. Son âme magnanime
éprouve la plus tendre pitié des chagrins de la sensible Agrippine,
qui, vaincue par les soucis qui l'accablent,
le serre entre ses bras et le presse sur son coeur.
'Ah! lui dit-elle avec une douleur touchante, la tyrannie de Tibère te menace à Rome;
et dans la Germanie tes jours sont en bute à la rage des ennemis;
ici, la fureur, là, la haine peuvent t'être fatales.
Hélas! ta triste Epouse est-elle donc condamnée à nourrir d'éternelles craintes?
Je sais ce que ta gloire exige, ce que la nécessité commande;
mais au moins, si tu veux que je vive, daigne songer à ta conservation;
que l'image de ton épouse et de tes enfants, encore si jeunes, te soit toujours présente:
c'en est fait de ta famille, Germanicus, si les Dieux ne veillent sur toi'.

'Calme tes agitations, réplique le Prince attendri, peut-être tu t'attristes en vain;
ne laisse point abattre ton âme par une faiblesse peu digne d'elle;
les Dieux favorables me feront vivre pour toi,
et triompher d'Arminius'.
En achevant ces mots le Héros essuie d'une main bienfaisante les larmes de son Epouse;
il embrasse tendrement le jeune Cajus, et prend dans ses bras le dernier fruit de son hymen, encore au berceau:
ces enfants reconnaissent à peine leur père sous son armure brillante;
bientôt ils se familiarisent avec cet éclat:
l'un se couche, en jouant, dans le bouclier de son Père;
l'autre sourit d'un air enfantin à chaque mouvement du panache,
qui surmonte le casque brillant du Héros.
Germanicus montre à son Epouse la joie de leurs enfants;
mais dans ces tristes instants, où la tendresse conjugale est dévorée par mille inquiétudes,
l'amour maternel, quelque fort qu'il puisse être, ne donne que de faibles consolations.
La tendre Agrippine, qui tâche en vain de cacher son émotion,
recommande mille fois son Epoux à la Noblesse qui l'accompagne,
et le suit longtemps des yeux, accablée de craintes et de sollicitude.

Anonymous translation: *Germanicus. Poème en seize chants.* Amsterdam: P.J. Uylenbroek, 1787, book 10, p.247-248.