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# Dialogues of the dead: Social identity in eighteenth-century anonymous satire

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores constructions of social identity in eighteenth-century dialogues written by the bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800). These three satirical dialogues are set in the Underworld between mythological figures and contemporary type characters, and they were included in Lord Lyttelton's anonymously published *The Dialogues of the Dead* (1760). Social identity constructions in these texts are analysed through stance-taking, specifically in terms of evaluation and the identification of social values. Montagu's satires are instructional and judgmental, and the social values advocated through the voices of her characters are assumed to represent the author's own social identity and the values of the bluestocking circle. Through her judgment of the empty lives of fashionable women, entertainment-driven readers and the capitalist greed of the publishing industry, Montagu promotes the virtues of learning, morality, duty and self-discipline. Social values function as identity markers of her moral and rational mind.

Keywords: social identity, social values, stance, satire, eighteenth-century English, anonymity, historical linguistics.

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines social identity constructions in eighteenth-century anonymous writing when the author's identity is known<sup>1</sup>. Of key interest is how satire is used to guide the readers' perception of the values which

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the texts promote. In May 1760, Whig statesman and author George, Lord Lyttelton published a collection of twenty-eight satirical conversations that take place in the Underworld, the last three of which were written “by a different Hand” (Lyttelton 1760: vii, Ellis 2012: 417). This co-author, identified in the preface as Lyttelton’s ‘Friend’ and described as ‘a Genius [...] capable of uniting Delight with Instruction’, was Elizabeth Montagu, a founding figure of the learning-oriented Bluestocking circle (see Eger 2010, Pohl – Schellenberg 2003). According to Ellis (2012: 425),

In the dialogue of the dead the voice of the dead was presented without a framing narrative: the dead speak to each other, the reader overhears. Lyttelton’s preface lays out the rules obeyed by his dialogues, in which ‘remarkable Persons’ from ‘the History of all Times, and all Nations’ debate together in the afterworld.

The book was such a success that the printer could not keep up with demand, and the second edition was advertised already on the day the book was published (Ellis 2012: 424). The focus of this paper is on the three dialogues contributed by Montagu, which were her first venture into the publishing world.

It was a risk for a woman to engage in publishing in the eighteenth century and particularly in writing satire, and very few women seem to have tried their hand at this genre (Marshall 2013: 28). Anonymity, flimsy though it must have been in the fairly small literary circles of London, was a necessary protection and a common authorial practice, but given that a select group of friends knew of Montagu’s project, we can talk of semi-anonymity rather than full anonymity. Montagu wrote to her friend Elizabeth Carter on 1 May, 1760 that she had written a dialogue “between Mercury and a fine modern Lady, for which ye fine Ladies wd hate me still more than they do, but I shall decline ye honour of their aversion by being unknown” (quoted in Ellis 2012: 423, note 32). Montagu’s author identity presented a satisfying puzzle to the readers, and she was very happy with their guesswork; they mostly assumed her to be male (Ellis 2012: 430). When Montagu’s author identity was revealed, she was accused of hypocrisy in her criticism of fashionable women.

As satire, these texts represent a genre of literature that involves critique of a particular topic and subsequently has a target, but which may also be instructive (Marshall 2013: 3). Marshall (2013: 31) distinguishes between three types of satire: attack, where the satire is essentially negative, distributive

justice, which allows exemplary critique through positive examples, and provocation, which aims to “provoke thought, issue a warning, or unsettle the reader”. In the preface, Lyttelton speaks of “uniting Delight with Instruction, and giving to Knowledge and Virtue these Graces, which the Wit of the Age has too often employed all its skill to bestow upon Folly and Vice” (1760: vii). The aim of the dialogues was thus to instruct the reader in a pleasing manner and to promote knowledge and virtue. As they provide both positive and negative examples, the dialogues can be classified as distributive justice (Marshall 2013: 31).

A key concept in this paper is social identity, a person’s sense of self derived from group membership(s) which “satisf[ies] a great many needs” (Deaux 2000: 26). Social identity refers to the relationship between personal and group identity, the two of them perceived to be intersecting (orthogonal) rather than involving two opposite ends (bipolar), and social identity theory investigates intergroup behaviour that is simultaneously individualistic and social (Brown – Capozza 2000: 8-9). The connection between language and social identity is “sociolinguistically distant” (Ochs 1993: 288), and linguistic constructions of social identity are often explored using the concept of stance-taking (see for example Bucholtz – Hall 2005, Johnstone 2007, Jaffe 2009, and Biber – Finegan 1989). Stance, or the linguistic expression of beliefs, emotions, attitudes and opinions, provides an indirect access to identity, and it is a useful concept in investigating social values and norms (Thompson – Hunston 2000). Normative orientations are universal in human societies, and norms (specific obligatory demands, claims, expectations, rules) and values (the criteria of desirability) form their most important realizations (Williams 1979: 15). Explicit and conceptualised values function as criteria for judgment, preference, and choice, and even when values are implicit, they have an effect in behaviour (1979: 16). Values are interlinked with one’s sense of self and sense of what is appropriate: they are “used socially to present claims, to evaluate other people, to evaluate oneself, to attack others, to gain instrumental advantage. [...] [They] are continually used as weapons in social struggles” (Williams 1979: 26). This potential of value as a weapon finds ample realizations in satire.

With regard to published historical texts that were edited and regulated from orthographical decisions to content and style and thus involve input from a number of people, the linguistic analysis of social identity is challenging. But the fact that the dialogues were published anonymously and were meant to be read as instructional texts provides helpful starting points. First of all, in Christopherson’s (2007: 3041) words, “[i]ndividuals can use their anonymity

to almost become a different person without fear of being identified and negatively evaluated by those they know". Anonymity offers the writer a degree of freedom, a chance to be assessed without the assumptions attached to their 'true' identity (if they have a chance to be heard). Second, an instructional text intends to provide a relatively clear set of values and targets of criticism. The audience is meant to inspect and evaluate their own behaviour, if the shoe fits, and the behaviour of others, and to be persuaded to the author's viewpoint. I argue that in Montagu's dialogue project, there is a connection to the norms and values of the Bluestocking circle.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I present my theoretical background of social identity theory and stance, the genre of satire, and the concept of anonymity. Then I introduce Montagu's three dialogues, focusing on the topics she has chosen, the characters she has picked to explore these issues, what they stand for, oppose, defend or criticize, and how the conversation flows in terms of turn-taking and power: who gets the last word, and who the reader is supposed to listen to and learn from. I then discuss the vices that Montagu raises up for criticism and the virtues that she promotes, leading the discussion to the social values behind the stances that are advocated through the voices of the characters.

## 2. Social identity and stance

Social identity refers to aspects of self-knowledge that are influenced by membership in specific social groups. It positions the self as an integral or interchangeable part of a social group which influences the individual's value sets, beliefs and perhaps even psychological traits (Brewer – Hewstone 2004: xi). Identity is formed through and by social relations, and identities that divide people into (for example) 'us' and 'them' are part of the normative structures of our lives (Wearing 2011: vii). Through the expression of evaluation, affect and other stances, identities are constructed in linguistic means. Stance can function as an index of individual or community value systems (Thompson – Hunston 2000: 5). Stancetaking reflects broader cultural norms and views of the period perhaps in line with cultural scripts, or "cultural norms, values, and practices which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike" (Goddard – Wierzbicka 2004: 153). Stance can be viewed as a prerequisite for language use, and the informational function of communication may come second to stancetaking: "people adopt stances when they adopt ways of speaking", and these stances derive from our

understanding of who we are (or want to be) in relation to other people (Kiesling 2009: 178-179). Particular linguistic forms cannot be automatically connected to specific stances. Their meaning arises in the interaction. The context-dependency of stance thus makes it a complex framework to apply. In this paper the concept of stance is involved in identifying the topics of the dialogues, what norms or values they appear to represent, how the characters criticize or defend these topics, and what type of authoritative epistemic stances are employed, or who dominates the conversation and to what end. A largely qualitative analysis of the frequencies of the first- and second-person pronouns *I* and *you* is carried out to investigate the degree of character involvement.

With regard to social relationships as a dimension of social identity, the salient social groups include, first, the two authors and their immediate Bluestocking circle. Lyttelton and Montagu engaged in an informal practice of literary exchange; Lyttelton sent Montagu his dialogues and Montagu sent him her own texts, and this practice eventually included a small number of their friends, especially Elizabeth Carter as Montagu's critique partner (Ellis 2012: 422). Secondly, there are the dead, the characters chosen to convey views of the authors. And then there is the reading public, who make up the audience and perhaps also the targets of satire. The readers correctly recognized certain aspects of Montagu's identity simply by the fact that the essays existed: they would have correctly assumed that the writer was a native English speaker with classical learning and a certain understanding of life in the higher strata of society. They did not correctly peg her gender.

Following Deaux (2000: 21), group membership is likely to result in greater exposure to shared group representations and norms and group pressures for uniformity. Gender was a complex aspect of Montagu's social identity. In her youth, she spent time with literary figures in the circles of her friend Lady Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, the Duchess of Portland. At the age of twenty-two, Montagu wrote to her sister about her impressions of poet Edward Young:

- (1) the poetical D=r= Young is with us, I am much entertai\_d with him, he is a very sensible Man has a lively imagination & strikes out very pretty things in his conversation, tho he has satirized the worst of our Sex he honours the best of them extreamly & seems delighted with those who act & think reasonably I think he had wrote a Satire against that composition of oddity affectation & folly which is call'd a pretty Sort of Woman, if any one has a mind to put on that character they

need but pervert their Sense, distort their faces, disjoint their Limbs, mince their phrases & lisp their words & the thing is done, grimaces, rite Sentences, affected civility, forced gayety & an imitation of good nature compleats their Character[.] (Elizabeth Robinson to Sarah Robinson. October 8? 1740. MO 5556)

She seems glad that Young, the satirist of “the worst of our Sex”, gives credit to sensible and rational women, among whom she has reason to include herself. Montagu had a keen and critical eye for women who did not “act & think reasonably” and were pretentious and foolish in speech, manner and gestures. Roughly twenty years later, she wrote to Lord Bath about the attitudes that learned women had to endure:

- (2) Distinguish’d talents expose Women to a great deal of envy, & seldom assist them in making their fortunes. It is hard to say whether Women remarkable for their understanding suffer most from the envy of their own sex or the malice of the other, but their life is constant warfare. (1762, quoted in Eger 2010: 97)

As women were under constant scrutiny (she herself being a blunt critic of female behavior), she was not sympathetic towards women who made themselves, and so easily the entire female sex, a justified target for criticism. In her early correspondence with Lyttelton in the 1750s, Montagu made sure to maintain a thoughtful, analytical style even in the face of Lyttelton’s witty, teasing and flirtatious responses (Ellis 2012: 421). She was careful to invest in sophisticated self-presentation. Anonymity allowed her to minimize the weight of gender identity in her work, “shifting [this] category to a low position in [her] identity hierarchy and stressing other, less conflicting identities instead” (Deaux 2000: 22). With gender identity to some extent out of the way, Montagu could claim other identities through her texts, and next I discuss the literary genre of her choice which enabled particularly negative stancetaking.

### 3. Satire

Satire was the dominant literary genre in the first half of the eighteenth century (Nokes 1987). It is “a two-toned genre, being both sweet and sour, a weapon and a toy”, and in order to expose vice and corruption it relies

on “the invocation of social values and public responsibilities” (Nokes 1987: 17, 42). Satire is effective in producing and enforcing the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality which structures perception of social group memberships and their boundaries. It engages in “acts of exclusion, efforts of boundary policing, introductions of difference and distinction that create – rather than grow out of – an opposition” between the satirist and the target of satire (Bogel 2001: 12).

Successful satire has a social function in that it consolidates inter-group bonds; an intellectual function through linguistic creativity and the freedom from rules and rationality; and an aggressive function which emerges through the aim to ridicule the target, allowing the non-victim a feeling of superiority (Simpson 2003: 3). But if satire fails, it tends to destabilise and reshape the relationships between the satirist, the addressee and the target. Failure may distance the satirist from the satiree, and instead draw the satiree and the target of satire together (Simpson 2003: 8). Satire thus carries an element of risk.

In literary history, women have generally been excluded from the canon of satire. Marshall (2013: 28) does not attempt to include women in any great detail in her investigation of English satirical writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as women by and large do not seem to have taken part in this practice (although Marshall acknowledges that anonymous texts are a case apart). Reasons for women’s absence include the lack of access to classical education and the conventions and traditions of satire, the domesticity of female spaces, discouragement of female aggression, and the “hostile images of gossip, nag, complainer, termagant, and virago” which “may have discouraged women from cultivating in public a form that deals in grumbling and railing” (Griffin 1994: 190). According to Ellis (2012: 423), Montagu’s letters suggest “some uncertainty about the moral virtue” of publishing the dialogues. Elizabeth Carter did not believe satire to be a good method of instruction especially with regard to female manners, and she did not believe that exposing flaws to ridicule could be constructive. She hoped that Montagu would write a conduct book or in another improving genre instead (Ellis 2012: 431). Montagu’s sister Sarah Scott, another professional author, did not consider it prudent for Montagu to publish the dialogues either, as it meant exposing oneself to censure (2012: 431). Women in Montagu’s circle were thus cautious of her plans to publish her satires, but Montagu was no stranger to policing behaviour through biting irony, and she had the chance to publish under Lyttelton’s protection and approval, so to speak.



In his dialogue between Mercury, Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift, Lyttelton suggests that vehement and cruel satire does more harm than good:

- (3) Swift: Pray, good Mercury (if I may have liberty to say a word for myself) do you think that my talent was not highly beneficial to correct human nature? Is whipping of no use to mend naughty boys?  
 Mercury: Men are generally not so patient of whipping as boys, and a rough satirist is seldom known to mend them. Satire, like antimony, if it be used as a medicine, must be rendered less corrosive. (Lyttelton 1760: 29)

Maiming satire à la Swift was not the aim of these dialogues. Marshall (2013) distinguishes between different realms of motive, nature of judgment, and intensity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English satire. Some satirists were interested in educating like-minded readers; they could issue warnings, lament the state of things, or explore philosophical, political or social principles (Marshall 2013: 31-32). In terms of judgment, satire may be straightforwardly critical, mildly corrective, or essentially positive; actual exemplary judgment which emphasises virtue and downplays vice is less common, and Marshall (2013: 32) points out the importance of establishing the satirist's relationship to and attitudes towards the targets: "[d]oes he or she judge from a comfortably superior viewpoint, as Pope tends to do, or are subjects treated sympathetically, as by Fielding and Sterne?" The intensity of attack may be ferocious and angry, "sharp or tart", or cheerful and light (2013: 32). Satire may also establish difference instead of merely registering it (Bogel 2001). These combinations produce several varieties of satire. For this paper, I won't attempt to discern the minute characteristics of satire in Lyttelton's and Montagu's collaboration: my understanding is that their dialogues (and Montagu's in particular) are instructional and corrective, occasionally biting and not very sympathetic, but not particularly angry or violent, either.

The dominance of satire as a literary genre was over by 1760, "probably killed off by the novel"; this change indicates a shift away from a literature of type characters and towards the individual experience of fiction (Nokes 1987: 22, 90). However, dialogues of the dead were very popular between 1760 and 1780, starting with the publication of Lyttelton's *Dialogues*. More dialogues were written during this twenty-year period than in the previous one hundred years (Prince 1996: 224, Keener 1973, quoted in Prince 1996: 224, n. 22). Keener (1973) suggests that their popularity may derive from an interest in travelogues and in the instructive role of history, and from the popularity of biography, among other factors (in Prince 1996: 225).

#### 4. The meaning of anonymity

In anonymous settings, aspects of social identity disappear from view. Montagu took pains to protect her author identity, and apparently Edmund Burke copied the dialogues in order to protect her handwriting from being recognized in the publishing process (Ellis 2012: 423). An early definition of anonymity classifies this state of existence and expression as “being among others, but without personal surveillance by them” (Westin 1967, in Pedersen 1997: 148). As a type of privacy, anonymity involves the presence of others, usually strangers, in the midst of whom one can lose oneself (Pedersen 1997: 153). Privacy, then, is a boundary control process in which the individual controls the amount and type of contact they have with others (Pedersen 1997: 147). Anonymous interaction with strangers provides a chance to “experiment with new social behaviors” (Pedersen 1997: 154): this is prevalent in present-day online communication, where anonymity potentially allows the expression of sensitive thoughts and emotions without fear of being identified and socially evaluated (Christopherson 2007: 3041). A similar phenomenon can be recognized in the 18th-century publishing world.

Between 1750 and 1790, over 80 percent of all new novels were published anonymously (Raven 2003: 143). Reviews were anonymous as well, and their tendency to malicious and critical scorn further encouraged authors to disguise their identities (Raven 2003: 155-156). Eighteenth-century readers accepted anonymous and pseudonymous publications as common authorial practices (Batchelor 2016: 80). According to Ellis (2012: 418), eighteenth-century women writers’ venture into publishing was a “complicated paradox”. Ellis argues that among women writers there remained “a significant resistance to the professional status of an author”, manifested in the unwillingness to be publicly known as an author and in the “almost habitual recourse” to anonymous publishing (2012: 418). Only 14 percent of new novels published between 1750 and 1769 have been identified as the work of women authors (Raven 2003: 150). Montagu believed that anonymity would allow her a chance to become a published author, and that anonymity would protect her reputation from the “stigma of public recognition” and critical judgment (Ellis 2012: 423). She did not use a pseudonym for either of her published works, and Lyttelton went without a pseudonym as well.

Anonymity causes the self to be “perceived and presented less as a unique individual and more in terms of its similarity to the perceived prototypical attributes of the salient social group” (Lea et al. 2001: 528), which would explain why many people in Montagu’s acquaintanceship were so sure that the author of the last three dialogues was a man. The salient

cues they'd picked up from the texts – demonstration of classical learning, perhaps also the judgment of fashionable women – undoubtedly made them think in terms of prototypes and default expectations. Elizabeth Carter doubted that Montagu's anonymity would be preserved (letter in Ellis 2012: 424, note 34), which turned out to be a correct assessment. Once Montagu's author identity became known, it triggered accusations of hypocrisy: her behaviour was scrutinized for ways in which she diverted from the values she promoted in her dialogues, and she was accused of piling blame on a group of people she belonged to. However, the dialogues were generally well received, and accusations of hypocrisy did not seem to bother her (Ellis 2012: 436-437). She was fairly well insulated from criticism.

## 5. Elizabeth Montagu's dialogues

I investigate Montagu's texts through the concept of social identity because of their interesting position regarding anonymous space, group values and the functions of the genre. As anonymous and instructional satires that are in a sense opinion pieces, the dialogues provide theoretical freedom for the author to express views without fear of embarrassment or retribution. The *Dialogues of the Dead* (1760) are set in the Underworld, between characters of fictional or historical background. Overall, the dialogues are didactic by nature, in that the author attempts to educate the reader and persuades them to adopt a particular viewpoint. Satires are essentially cast with type characters that can be imitated from classical models or based on contemporary figures (Nokes 1987: 23). The overall cast consists of classical figures and more contemporary personages such as Plato, Peter the Great, Ulysses and Circe, Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift, John Locke, Queen Christina of Sweden and Chancellor Oxenstierna, Fernando Cortez and William Penn, and Mercury, 'an English duellist', and 'a North-American savage' (Lyttelton 1760: ix-xii, Ellis 2012: 425). The dialogues are an "elite space", as "all but two of the conversations [...] are between named and celebrated men and women" (Ellis 2012: 425). Lyttelton's focus is on the Roman Civil War and the peace of Augustus, the Elizabethan period, and the English Civil War and Restoration, periods which provide Whig historical writing the opportunity to debate on liberty (Ellis 2012: 425, 526). Montagu's dialogues are more focused on the eighteenth-century society.

The characters in Elizabeth Montagu's dialogues come from Greek mythology and antiquity (Cadmus, Hercules, Mercury, Plutarch, Charon) and her own world, in the form of a fashionable lady and a rich bookseller.

The choice of characters indicates her classical learning, and the contemporary characters are used to critique Montagu's own eighteenth-century world.

### 5.1 XXVI: Cadmus and Hercules: Learned minds vs. active men

In the first dialogue, the mythical Greek king Cadmus, mostly known for his prominence in the arts (Ellis 2012: 427), and the hero Hercules (Heracles in Greek mythology) debate the merits of learning. The conversation begins when Hercules challenges Cadmus's merits to occupy a place on Mount Olympus: "Do you pretend to sit as high on Olympus as Hercules? Did you kill the Nemean Lion, the Erymanthian Boar, the Lernean Serpent, and Stymphalian Birds? [...] You value yourself greatly on subduing one Serpent: I did as much as that while I lay in my Cradle" (1760: 291). Cadmus responds that his merits derive from introducing the art of writing in Greece. "You subdued monsters; I civilized men", he counters (1760: 292). If not for historians and libraries, the memory of Hercules's heroism would be long lost. At first Hercules is belligerent, but then he begins to listen, and his questions change from hostile challenges to genuine questions.

Cadmus defends science and innovation and the seemingly less active habits of scholars ("idle men", as Hercules scornfully describes them) by pointing out that "[t]he most important and extensive advantages mankind enjoy, are greatly owing to men who have never quitted their closets" (1760: 295). These advantages include the invention of the compass, advances in engineering, improvements in agriculture, and poetry, which enables people to remember "precepts of virtue and virtuous actions" (1760: 296). Cadmus is beginning to persuade his opponent: Hercules admits that science does have its uses when it comes to navigation and the advances in explorations. He is not so convinced of the value of arts, however, fearing they may render men "effeminate, luxurious, and inactive" (1760: 298)<sup>2</sup>. Cadmus responds that the purpose of sciences is not merely to assist, but to direct action and "moderate [the] too great ardor" of the active mind. The study of history instructs the warrior and the legislator on the path to virtue and self-discipline; "Heroes may kill Tyrants; but it is Wisdom and Laws that prevent Tyranny and Oppression" (1760: 292).

Cadmus is put on the defensive, but he soon dominates the conversation and eventually concludes the dialogue. Hercules is portrayed as

<sup>2</sup> Effeminacy and luxury are interconnected keywords in the eighteenth century with overlapping effects and connotations of wilting strength, indolence and degeneration (Cohen 1996: 5, see also Berg – Eger 2003 and Clery 2004).

a hot-headed hero who represents values that need to be moderated and enriched by learning and self-discipline. Neither character is a target of criticism: instead, the active heroic mind comes to understand the value of learning and art.

## 5.2 XXVII: Mercury and Mrs Modish, 'a modern fine lady'

In this dialogue, the Roman god Mercury arrives to escort a fashionable lady to the underworld, but she protests that she cannot possibly die just yet. Mercury misunderstands her meaning, believing that Mrs Modish wishes to live because of her husband and children. However, she corrects him: "I never thought myself engaged to *them*". The real reason is that her social calendar is full for the next two months. But perhaps he could come back in the summer when the social season is over: "Pray have you a fine *Vauxhall* and *Ranelagh*? I think I should not dislike drinking *the Lethe Waters* when you have a full season" (1760: 301). Mercury assumes (somewhat cunningly) that surely with a life like this she would not want to drink the waters of oblivion. Modish responds that "[d]iversion was indeed the business of my life, but as to pleasure I have enjoyed none [...] Can one be pleased with seeing the same thing over and over again?" (1760: 302). Mrs Modish admits that the life she has led, and which she is loth to leave, "gave me the Vapours, spoiled the natural chearfulness of my Temper, and even in youth wore away my youthful vivacity" (1760: 302). As a (type) character whose purpose is to expose vice and failure, she readily admits her own. Mercury asks why she has continued this way of life: surely not for any assumption of merit? No, she responds: she has always been too busy to think at all. She has followed the bad advice and example of her friends and doctor, who assured her that "dissipation was good for [her] spirits" (1760: 302). Her husband has disagreed with this advice, but she has been more than happy to contradict him, ignoring her domestic duties and orienting herself to the fashionable world.

The lady's choices have been motivated by her desire to belong to the *bon ton*, the elusive and undefinable high society which is referred to in French. There is a footnote that explains the meaning of "*Du Bon ton*" for the reader: it is "a cant Phrase in the Modern French Language for the fashionable Air of Conversation and Manners" (1760: 303). With this annotation, the author makes a clear distinction between themselves and Mrs Modish, who is unable to explain what the *bon ton* means, even though she has admired and aimed at it all her life. One of the privileges of the *bon ton* is "never to define, or be defined"; "[i]n conversation it is not wit; in manners it is not politeness; in behaviour it is not address; but it is a little

like them all" (1760: 303). Perhaps Montagu is making fun of the phrase *Je ne sais quoi* by making Mrs Modish unable to explain what the bon ton actually is. Behaviour, social status, living in a certain part of London, suitable lack of virtue, and the corresponding possession of vice regulate admittance to the bon ton. Mercury is not impressed, and he disapproves Modish for having wasted her time and her health, faded her beauty and contradicted her husband for nothing. Mrs Modish asks what she should have done instead, and gets this indirect but clear answer:

- (4) I will follow your mode of instructing. I will tell you what I would not have had you do. I would not have had you sacrifice your time, your reason and your Duties, to fashion and folly. I would not have had you neglect your husband's happiness, and your childrens [sic] Education. (1760: 304)

Mrs Modish protests that she spared no expense on her daughters' education, having provided them with dancing lessons, music lessons, drawing lessons, and French lessons. But to Mercury this means that they have learned "religion, sentiments and manners [...] from a dancing-master, music-master, and a chambermaid!" (1760: 305). Mrs Modish has not only ruined her own life, but prepared her daughters for the empty life of the fashionable world. She is judged to be a bad mother and wife, and Mercury advises her to "keep happiness her view, but never take the road that leads to it", just as she has done in life (1760: 305). Ellis points out that this dialogue, although the most popular of Montagu's dialogues, is also the most problematic (2012: 427): she attacks women above her own station and places herself at risk for accusations of hypocrisy. While Lyttelton's dialogues aim to "establish or defend established moral or critical certainties", Montagu's dialogues "attack the tenets of their own possibility: that there might be stable and enduring cultural value in print and amongst society women" (Ellis 2012: 428).

### 5.3 XXVIII: Plutarch, Charon and the Bookseller

In the third dialogue, Charon ferries a "troublesome and obstreperous" Bookseller across the Hades in order to be "awe[d] into order and decency" by Greek historian Plutarch (Montagu 1760: 306). Most of the conversation takes place between Plutarch and the Bookseller, with Charon, the ferryman of Hades, initiating and concluding their encounter. This is another critique of the morals of contemporary society which does not value education and self-improvement.

The wealthy and cynical Bookseller is unpleasantly surprised to find himself in a place where authors have power over booksellers, and he has no love for Plutarch, whose works have cost him money. Plutarch misunderstands why his books fail to sell in the contemporary world, and assumes that modern times and improved morals must have produced greater men and better writers: "I should be glad you would give me some account of those Persons, who in Wisdom, Justice, Valour, Patriotism, have eclipsed my Solon, Numa, Camillus, Scipio, &c" (1760: 309). But the Bookseller explains that Plutarch's instructional histories are no longer relevant. The modern readers, "negligently lolling" in their easy chairs (1760: 316), want to be entertained. In the present day, it is possible to read all one's life and have no learning or knowledge at all, "which begins to be an advantage of the greatest importance" (1760: 309). The educational function of history has been given up for "Adventures which never occurred, Exploits that never were atchieved, and Events that not only never did, but never can happen" (1760: 310): in other words, fiction. The Bookseller also mentions secret histories "in which there is *no secret* and *no History*", a genre of literature with an interest in sex and scandal that reveals noble characters "in a state of undress" (Bullard 2017: 5).

The message of this dialogue is that novels and romances, 'false histories', are potentially threatening entertainment that easily corrupts the mind. This is particularly harmful for women whose lives are constrained and who lack access to what the world could teach them. Without novels, the Bookseller muses, women "would remain long in *an insipid purity of mind*, with a *discouraging reserve of Behaviour*" (1760: 311). Plutarch now becomes concerned for the women and wishes he had written more about exemplary heroines, but the Bookseller assures him that women do not bother to read about good examples, as they are more interested in scandal and vilification of honourable reputations (1760: 310-311).

Plutarch finds this love of fiction problematic because characters in novels are not guided by dispassionate and prudent principles and cannot provide a good example. He allows, however, that fiction could be useful if it follows the rules of religion and morality, given that fiction authors are able to attract an audience and a writer's first responsibility is to always try to correct the vices and follies of the age. Women in particular could benefit from the example of domestic (rather than public and heroic) virtues. The Bookseller admits that certain authors of the period have aimed at this, specifically Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. In Richardson's *Clarissa*, "one finds the dignity of Heroism tempered by the meekness and humility

of Religion, and perfect purity of mind and sanctity of manners" (1760: 318). And Fielding, the Bookseller says, has "exposed vice and meanness with all the powers of ridicule", even if he does not really provide virtuous examples (1760: 319). The Bookseller does not give these opinions as his own, but refers to what he has been told by more convincing authorities (a clergyman and "the best judges") (1760: 318). At this point Charon steps in to take the Bookseller away, indulging in fantasies of punishment: "shall we constitute him Friseur to Tisiphone, and make him curl up her locks with his Satires and Libels?" (1760: 320). Plutarch takes a graver stance and reiterates his view of the responsibility of the writer. Authors are guilty of crimes they encourage, faults they tolerate, and the damage they have caused for the virtuous. They will be punished accordingly.

## 6. Stance and social values: Exposing vice, promoting virtue

Values are adopted and internalized through social group membership, as elements of social identity, and they serve as standards that guide behaviour towards certain morality- and competence-related goals (Williams 1979: 20, Rokeach 1979: 48). Montagu promotes values mainly through judgment. She satirizes the moral bankruptcy of commercially driven publishing (Ellis 2012: 428), thrill-seeking readers who turn to "absurd fancy" and "monstrous fiction" instead of instructive and virtuous history (Montagu 1760: 312), and the empty lives of high society women. Through this criticism she emphasises virtue and learning, rationality, morality, self-discipline and self-improvement.

The word *Ton* "highlights the foreignness and Frenchness" of the fashionable public space to which Mrs Modish belongs (Cohen 1996: 75). Montagu's stances reflect David Fordyce's *Dialogues Concerning Education* (1745-48), in which Fordyce asserts that politeness "must be cleared of French contamination" and promotes the instructive reading of history for the proper education of young men, in opposition to fashionable conversation with the ladies (Cohen 1996: 48). By the second half of the century, attitudes to learning French were ambiguous and associated with the problematics of 'displaying' female accomplishments (Cohen 1996: 65). In order to avoid this association of display, "serious young ladies" like Frances Burney, who could read French literature, might make a point of not speaking French (1996: 72). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, female politeness began to be domesticated and separated from the false politeness and meaningless



ceremony of the fashionable world (1996: 74-75). By condemning the behaviour of fashionable women, Montagu indeed calls upon them to acknowledge their family duties. Later in the eighteenth century, Hannah More contrasted the bluestocking assemblies “with the ‘tainted affectation and false taste’ of the Hotel de Rambouillet, the seventeenth-century Parisian salon, and also with her contemporary society, where ‘Cosmetic powers’ and ‘polish, ton and graces’ rule the day” (Eger 2003: 200). According to Eger, “[w]hile the bluestocking ideals of conversation and education for women were embedded in the rhetoric of commerce and luxury, they were solidly implanted on a bedrock of morality and concerned to promote learning above luxury” (2003: 200). The domestication of politeness, implied in the Bluestocking values of morality and learning, transformed politeness into a virtue and made it unproblematically available for women (Cohen 1996: 76, see Backscheider 2013 on the Bluestocking ideal of self-mastery).

An investigation of the pronouns *I* and *you* shows patterns of high involvement and subjectivity as well as more detached objective stances in the characters’ speech. Hercules refers to himself and his heroic accomplishments more than Cadmus does, whereas Cadmus speaks more about learning, progress, inventions and other abstract concepts, focusing less on himself. Hercules engages Cadmus with questions (*What think you of their thin-spun systems of philosophy*), whereas Cadmus makes statements about Hercules’s actions (past and proposed) and compares himself to Hercules. Mrs Modish talks about herself more than Mercury, and Mercury’s role is to direct the conversation. While Modish ruminates about her life choices, talks about her routines and has difficulties with clear, precise expression (*I have told you as much as I know*), Mercury listens and responds with judgment and affect (*I am in a fright for you*). There is ambivalence in Mrs Modish’s style, reflected in how she has drifted forward with the elusive bon ton as a directing force.

Plutarch is focused on self-reflection and observation and less on himself, whereas the Bookseller is persuasive and interactive (*I tell you, I assure you*). The second-person pronouns add to the Bookseller’s more involved style: he engages Plutarch with direct address terms (*As to you, Plutarch*) and makes blunt statements about the financial trouble Plutarch has caused him and what Plutarch could do to please modern readers. The Bookseller’s style of conversation is more direct and confrontational, but Plutarch is the moral winner, and in the end Charon somewhat abruptly declares that the Bookseller has now been sufficiently humbled.

Cadmus and Plutarch get the most space on the page, and they appear to be Montagu’s mouthpieces. They both have a thoughtful style,

less belligerent than their companions'. Plutarch is learning- and value-oriented, and though Cadmus is somewhat assertive, he is more focused on abstractions than Hercules. The dialogue between Cadmus and Hercules stands out as a conversation where the character being educated is not morally deficient. Their discussion is rich with references to self-mastery and learning. When Cadmus states that the most important inventions of mankind "are greatly owing to men who have never quitted their closets", this state of privacy and confinement brings to mind women's lives: wouldn't a well-read woman, devoting what time she is able to spare for learning, also be able to make observations and inventions that benefit mankind?

Montagu emphasises commitment to group norms, but only when those norms are governed by the right morals; women in particular need to understand the perils involved when they aspire to belong to the wrong social group. The normative division into 'us' and 'them' which tends to structure social identities (Wearing 2011: vii) is prominently illustrated in the dialogues. 'Us' would be the people who value moral self-improvement, and 'them' are the vacuous and morally corrupt consumers who face eternal punishment in the afterlife. Montagu's style is at times comically ironic, but she shows her targets little sympathy. It is too late for Mrs Modish to redeem herself, and the Bookseller is ferried off to Minos and future punishment; all the exemplary characters are the classical figures who dwell in the Underworld.

The topics of the dialogues are not very subversive or original. Women and novel readers are an easy target, and Montagu criticizes those who are essentially the victims of their own errors. The possibility of fiction to provide good examples is perhaps the only case where Montagu offers constructive advice; and two of the dialogues do allude to women's possibilities to lead useful, fulfilling lives. Montagu was grateful that her love of reading kept her amused and occupied, particularly in solitude which could be mentally straining. "As Men are designed for active & publick life, I think a love of reading is hardly so necessary for them as for Women, to whom retirement is always safe, & sometimes necessary", she wrote to her father (in Eger 2010: 80). Mrs Modish has no redeeming qualities, but Richardson's Clarissa is presented as a virtuous example for female readers. Clarissa, of course, died a drawn-out death that deeply upset the readers, but Bowers (2013: 10) suggests that Richardson "wanted readers [...] to believe that the novel's pervasive darkness is dispelled at last by the individual radiance and steadfast faith of its heroine". The main character's "contentment and self-control" at the face of her exemplary death "may have served as a kind

of wish fulfillment" (Bowers 2013: 18). Clarissa's Christian patience and self-mastery represent important themes in eighteenth-century women's fiction, and are in line with Bluestocking women's ideals of a good life (Backscheider 2013: 183-186).

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper I have explored social identity through the linguistic construction and expression of social values. Through investigating values and norms that a critical instructive text promotes we are able to distinguish elements of the author's social identity: what they stand for, their targets of identification, what they strongly distance themselves from. Satire can be a slippery slope in terms of irony, provocation and jest, but even with less ambiguous texts like Montagu's, what the author truly believes is not relevant: the key point is how they wish to be perceived and what values they want to be seen to embody. In this sense social identity and image are deeply interlinked.

In 1760, Lord Ferrars was sentenced to death for murdering his steward. Montagu considered it scandalous how women flocked to his trial decked with jewels, as if it was a social event. In the beginning of this letter she essentially states what Dialogue XXVII between Mrs Modish and Mercury is about, and she places the frivolous, unthinking Modish in this scene of human tragedy.

- (5) I have long been sorry to see the best of our Sex running continually after publick spectacles & diversions, to ye ruin of their health & understandings, & neglect of <P3> All domestick duties; but I own the late instance of their going to hear Lord Ferrers sentence particularly provoked me. [...] in spite of all pretenses to tenderness & delicacy they went adorn'd with jewels, & laughing & gay, to see their fellow creature in the most horrid situation, making a sad end of this life, & in fearfull expectation of ye commencement of another. [...] You will believe Mrs Modish was there, tho she does not mention it. (Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, 1760 May 1, MO 3034)

Montagu addresses here the problematic issue of female display and diversions in public spaces and expresses concern for the lack of empathy and understanding she has witnessed. In this letter, as in her dialogues, she

positions herself among the morally conscious reading ranks who seek to improve themselves, practice self-discipline and acknowledge their domestic duties. Anonymity gave her access to a public forum and diminished the risks involved, but compared to how distinct the novelist Maria Edgeworth's 'author-self' seems to be from her individual identity (Gallagher 1995: xix), Montagu author-self seems less disembodied from the person we see in her private letters. The dialogues should be read as an index of belonging, as embodying the social identity of a respectable learned woman who could contribute to the cultural progress of the age.

Montagu went on to publish an essay on Shakespeare in 1769, at first anonymously but in time under her own name. In 1777 she added her three dialogues to the fourth edition of the Shakespeare essay, with her name now displayed on the title page ("To which are now first added, THREE DIALOGUES OF THE DEAD By Mrs. MONTAGU", Montagu 1777). At this point, Montagu was a fêted patron of arts, a financially independent businesswoman and a public figure who specifically encouraged women writers (Eger 2010: 81). It was common knowledge that she was the author of all these texts, but to include her name on the title page in this age of anonymous publishing, even in that roundabout way which did not directly identify her as the author of the essay, must have been empowering.

A talented woman's life may have been constant warfare, but anonymity could offer space for intellectual creativity and values could be her weapon; a learned and virtuous eighteenth-century woman could depend on her values to distinguish herself from the false politeness of the bon ton. The right set of values, legitimized by the right kind of social group, could function as identity markers of a moral and rational mind. Frances Burney, who wrote a private journal to Nobody, encountered difficulties when her 1779 comedy *The Witlings* "seemed to be about Somebody, Elizabeth Montagu, the queen of the bluestockings" (Gallagher 1995: 229); next to the Nobodies, Montagu was a Friend and a Somebody.

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