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## “QUIET & CLEVER TOGETHER”: REASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ELITE WOMEN AND THE LITERARY CULTURE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines elite women’s agency and participation in the literary life of the country house, focusing on the circle that centred on Jemima Marchioness Grey and her husband, Philip Yorke, at Wrest Park in Bedfordshire. The “Society at Wrest” was an exclusive group of close friends and family that included Grey’s childhood friends, Mary Gregory (née Grey) and Catherine Talbot, as well as her sisters-in-law, Elizabeth Anson and Margaret Heathcote (née Yorke). Most members of the Wrest Circle were careful about publishing their works, yet they found a cerebral escape in the shades of “Vacuna” – the name they affectionately gave to Wrest – as they created private literary compositions. Although Grey did not contribute to her friends’ literary compositions, she did, as hostess, play an invaluable role in providing a space at Wrest Park that facilitated and nurtured their intellectual and artistic endeavours. Disrupting the scholarly emphasis on public-facing female intellectuals, this article argues that for some elite women, the value of belonging to a coterie was not about attracting literary fame but rather having access to a permissive environment in which they could embark on private literary pursuits and belong to an exclusive and supportive intellectual network.

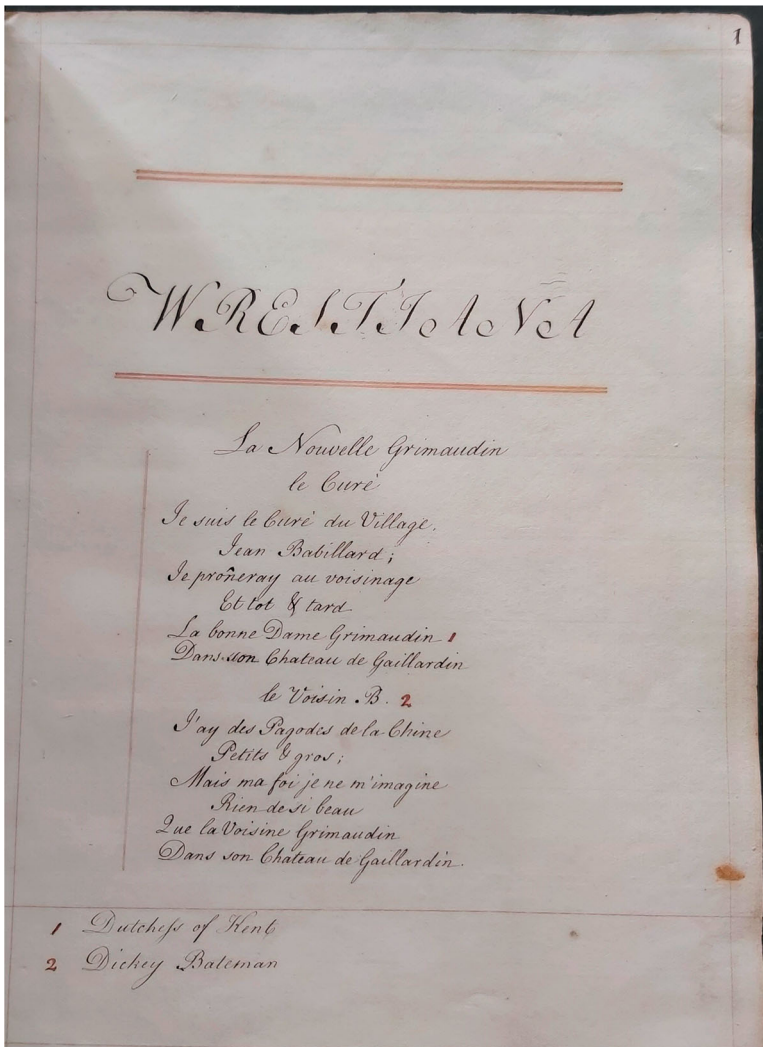
**KEYWORDS** Elite women; country house; literary coterie; Wrest Park; Bluestockings

From 1740 until the late eighteenth century, Wrest Park in Bedfordshire was the country home of Jemima Marchioness Grey (née Campbell) (1722–1797) and her husband, Philip Yorke (later 2nd Earl of Hardwicke) (1720–1790). There, they regularly hosted a select circle of friends to contribute to the literary and intellectual life at Wrest Park. The “Society at Wrest” was, in many respects, a family coterie – consisting of Yorke’s siblings, Charles, Elizabeth, and Margaret, his cousin John Lawry, and Grey’s young aunt, Mary Gregory (née Grey), though close friends were also welcomed into the fold.<sup>1</sup> The

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coterie also included Philip Yorke's friends from his days at the University of Cambridge, Daniel Wray and Thomas Birch, as well as Jemima Grey's childhood friend, the later Bluestocking Catherine Talbot. Though many members were reticent about publication, they left a rich legacy of correspondence and literary manuscripts that have still not been fully explored. This includes the *Athenian Letters* (1741–3), a fictional series of letters set during the Peloponnesian Wars that Yorke wrote with his brother and friends at Cambridge; and *Wrestiana* (1742–83), a vast private manuscript containing 30 years' worth of poems, fragments and plays that the circle



**Figure 1.** Private collection. First page of *Wrestiana*. Photograph by the author.

wrote at Wrest Park (Figure 1). While the Yorke brothers and Wray composed the bulk of the compositions found within both works, the female members of the group were by no means marginalised. As well as featuring as prominent characters in the coterie's compositions, the women, especially Catherine Talbot and Elizabeth Anson, made their own striking contributions that enriched the coterie's fictional worlds. Yet perhaps the most important figure in this group was Jemima Grey, for though she did not write literary compositions, since Wrest Park was her ancestral home, she played an invaluable role as hostess, cultivating a permissive and supportive environment that allowed her friends to partake in the literary activities.

In recent years, scholarship on women's writing has begun to look beyond the printed text to assess women's intellectual lives in the eighteenth century. A decade ago, Deborah Heller called for scholars to return to the wealth of original sources to understand the nuances within the Bluestocking Circle.<sup>2</sup> This call has since been answered, with recent studies reassessing the significance of women's manuscripts and letters and broadening our understanding of women's intellectual engagement.<sup>3</sup> However, despite significant progress on valuing the public role the Bluestocking Circle played in shaping Enlightenment values,<sup>4</sup> it remains unclear where we might place literary groups who did not seek public influence or fame. This certainly applies to the Wrest Circle, which did not publish its compositions or seek wider literary recognition.<sup>5</sup> The Wrest Circle has often been considered in relation to the Bluestockings for the role it played in nurturing Catherine Talbot's early literary career before she gravitated towards Elizabeth Carter and literary groups who could offer greater fulfilment and purpose.<sup>6</sup> Yet we should be careful about seeing the value of the Wrest Circle through one writer's trajectory. Despite Talbot's obvious and significant literary contributions, in privileging her involvement with the Bluestockings, little attention has been paid to the female sociability and literary culture at Wrest Park.<sup>7</sup> Though the Wrest Circle might not have fully answered Talbot's increasing need for literary purpose, I argue that it provided an important space for the other women in the circle to pursue their literary interests in a more private and intimate environment. Work remains to be done on the other women and the different roles they played, especially Jemima Grey, who was integral to the circle as its hostess, and her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Anson, who also contributed to the literary culture at Wrest Park. Thus, this article seeks to shed light on the different ways in which the Wrest women contributed to the intellectual culture of the country house – considering it as distinct from the public intellectual sociability epitomised by the Bluestockings. The first part of this article will consider how Jemima Grey, as the hostess at Wrest Park, nurtured a distinct aristocratic and academic environment that allowed other women within the circle unique opportunities to participate in the private literary

production. The second part will then consider the *Athenian Letters* and *Wrestiana* as significant examples of the way in which other women in the coterie contributed to the literary culture at Wrest Park. Overall, it uses the Wrest Circle as a case study to argue that we should be wary of only judging women's accomplishments in terms of their literary fame and instead consider how far elite women – ever mindful of how they presented themselves in fashionable society – created their own spaces and opportunities for intellectual camaraderie and private literary production within the more exclusive setting of the country house.

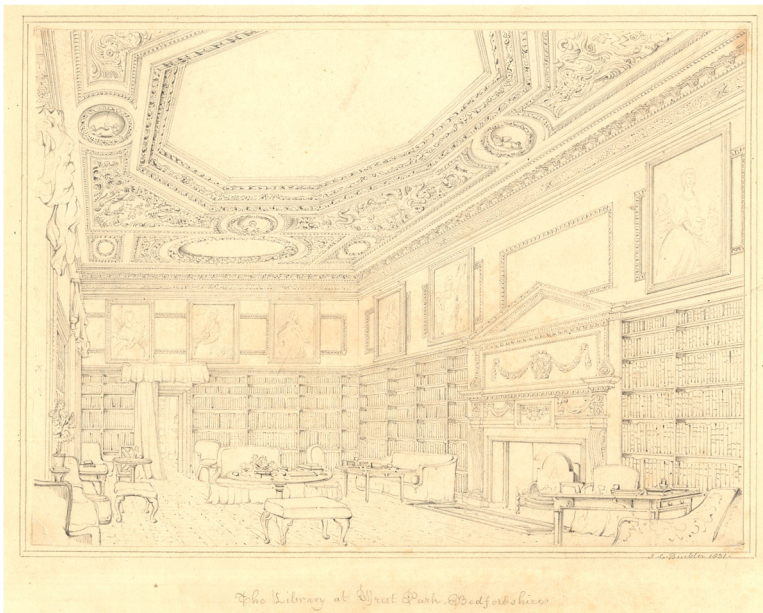
### A Marriage of Minds

Jemima Grey and Philip Yorke were an intellectual couple, and although their marriage had been arranged in 1740 as a political alliance between two wealthy Whig families, they found plenty of common ground in their mutual interests in literature, history, and gardens. In one letter, Grey describes how she and her husband often studied together in the library “with a Competent quantity of Candles Books & Papers [...] & looking most profoundly Wise.”<sup>8</sup> They had both been encouraged in their scholarly pursuits from an early age, forming intellectual friendships in their adolescent years which resulted in a close network of writers, scholars, and antiquaries – many of whom would become integral members of the Wrest Circle. Recognising and appreciating the impact of these friendships is essential to understanding the coterie's compositions, especially as most of the group's works were private jokes between friends.

For Jemima Grey, friendship and bibliophilia went hand in hand. She and her aunt, Mary Gregory (née Grey), had received an extensive education, and they were introduced to Catherine Talbot when they were teenagers living in London. There they formed a close friendship based on their mutual love of books and reading.<sup>9</sup> A letter from 1738 epitomises the playfulness and intellectual curiosity that characterised their friendship, as Grey wrote to Talbot “We shall be such meer Book-Worms that t'will be impossible to travel even from hence to London without contriving to get some Shelves put up in the Coach, & so turn it into a Library.”<sup>10</sup> As recent studies have shown, women's education was increasingly considered a marker of polite society,<sup>11</sup> yet there would remain a tension in how far elite women were allowed to display their cleverness in public in case they should be seen to transgress the “natural” order.<sup>12</sup> The girls' guardian in London, the Reverend Thomas Secker, while encouraging their learning, also felt the need to remind them to demonstrate “due submission to the superior sex” – and studies of Catherine Talbot have also considered Secker's role in dampening her creativity and fuelling her insecurities.<sup>13</sup> However, the death of Grey's grandfather, only a fortnight after her marriage, would change her life considerably, as

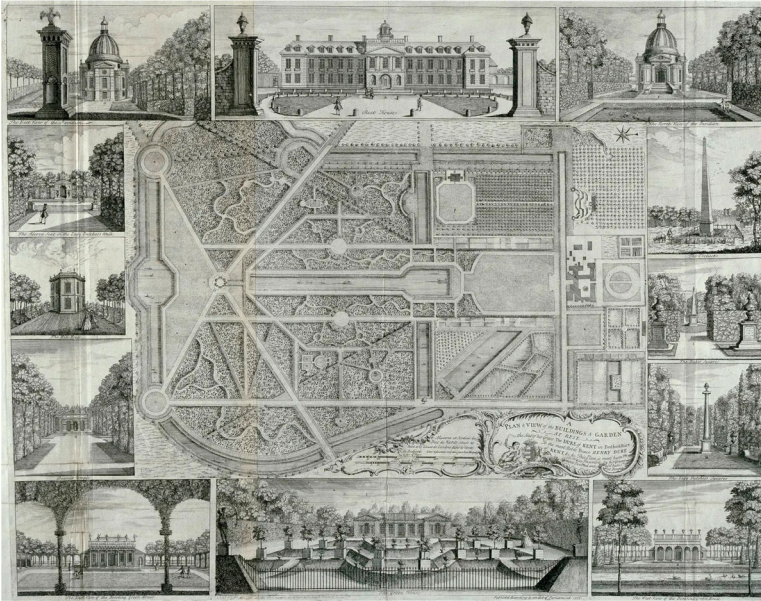
inheriting the ancestral family home of Wrest Park afforded Grey her own space to entertain her friends and pursue her intellectual interests without public censorship. With its well-stocked library and extensive gardens, Wrest Park provided permissive and creative spaces for the coterie's endeavours. [Figures 2](#) and [3](#) show what the library and gardens at Wrest would have looked like when owned by Jemima Grey and Philip Yorke.

The Yorkes were as ambitious as they were erudite; Philip's father, Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, had risen through the ranks in his political career and was keen to consolidate the family's position through prudent marriage alliances and political appointments. Philip and Charles Yorke are perhaps better known as politicians than writers,<sup>14</sup> but they had always shown considerable literary promise. Even as children they were encouraged to write essays for their own family journal, *The Triumvirate*, based on Joseph Addison's *Spectator*, composing essays on history, literature, and philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Nor were their sisters excluded from this project – years later, Elizabeth Anson described to Grey how she used to print her brothers' "sage Lucubrations" by "cutting Letters out of News-papers [...] to immortalise them, by pasting them to form the Words of those ingenious Authors."<sup>16</sup> Sadly, these "printed" copies do not appear to have survived, but this description provides some insight into Anson's creativity and her desire to have some hand in the literary manufacture at home by giving rough manuscript



**Figure 2.** J. C. Buckler, "The Library at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire." Bedfordshire Archives, L33/213.





**Figure 3.** John Rocque, *A Plan & View of the Buildings & Garden at Wrest*, 1737. Line-engraving. 592 mm x 739 mm. © Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: Prudence Cuming Associates Limited.

copies the appearance of a professional printed book. Outside the family home, Philip and Charles, as undergraduates at Cambridge, embarked on further projects with their tutors: in addition to the *Athenian Letters* – to which this article will return – they also produced the *Philosopher* (1738–42), another series of philosophical essays loosely modelled on the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. However, Philip’s marriage to Grey in 1740 brought about a significant shift in the university group as it ceased to centre on the homosocial collegiate environment of Cambridge but rather on Grey’s familial estate at Wrest Park.

Although Philip had initially feared the “loss of academic acquaintance” upon leaving Cambridge behind,<sup>17</sup> he need not have had such a concern, as the Wrest Circle was greatly enriched by the inclusion of Grey’s childhood friends, Talbot and Mary Grey (later Gregory), as well as by his sisters Elizabeth and (when she was old enough) Margaret. In the same way that Elizabeth had refashioned the *Triumvirate*, in the early years of the Wrest Circle, she wrote to her other brother Joseph of her similar desire to draw a frontispiece for *Wrestiana*, noting “I should indeed be so happy to make one of the [Wrest] Society that I cannot help indulging the thought & supposing myself really there drawing your Pictures in the proper attitudes for a Frontispiece to the *Wrestiana*.”<sup>18</sup> Though there is no surviving evidence of drawings for the manuscript, Anson’s suggestion shows that contributing

to the manuscript was important to consolidate her membership in her eldest brother's literary circle. Her wish to belong to the "Society" certainly seems to have been granted; in Talbot's "Stanzas In Answer to All the Preceding False-Wit" in *Wrestiana*, she describes the two sisters' literary enthusiasm: "Eliza arm'd with dangerous Quill / And Peggy fam'd for tuneful Skill."<sup>19</sup> In this context, Talbot teases Anson for her "dangerous" quill that might too readily spread the "false-wit" in vogue within the circle, but it is also a witty play on the idea of sister arts of music and poetry. Although music, like conversation, quickly evaporates and leaves few traces behind,<sup>20</sup> the letters between coterie members suggest that music was a key component to life at Wrest Park. Upon leaving Wrest, Anson wrote to Grey that "my Hearing grieves that [...] the Music of the Birds, or Lady Grey's Harpsichord" should be disturbed by the "unintelligible cries of London."<sup>21</sup> It is likely that Margaret, famed for "tuneful skill", also played for the group, and music was certainly a regular part of the Yorkes' family activities. On 25th May 1747, Elizabeth wrote to their brother Joseph that in their London home:

my Sister [Margaret] has begun to learn upon the Harpsicord, & Mama, thinking I suppose that your Dressing-room had more of the Spirit of Harmony in it [...] has placed the Instrument there, & for my part I expect to see your Flute walk out of the Trunk & join in concert with her, however at Winter we shall certainly have concerts upon this Floor as well as Assemblies, just before Supper.<sup>22</sup>

Anson grew particularly close to Grey, becoming an "additional sister" to her, as well as a friend to Catherine Talbot.<sup>23</sup> Yet she has been overlooked in studies of the Wrest Circle, though she contributed to several compositions in *Wrestiana* and became an integral member.<sup>24</sup> Anson seems not to have harboured private ambitions to publish, and instead enjoyed the intellectual camaraderie at Wrest Park. On 31st May 1748, she wrote to Grey that though she could not visit Wrest Park in person, she could imagine joining in with the literary activities as her friends read the latest works by Samuel Richardson and James Thomson: "I have also fretted at *Clarissa* [...] in your private readings; and in the public lectures, I have sauntered with you over the *Castle of Indolence* and toiled through its reverse, *The Voyage*."<sup>25</sup> In another letter to Grey, she notes how she particularly missed being "quiet & clever together" – showing the value that she placed on their quiet cerebral companionship at Wrest Park.<sup>26</sup>

Discussion and debate formed a key part of coterie life. Catherine Talbot's diary from 14th September 1751 provides a glimpse into how "Vacuna's Children"<sup>27</sup> spent their time at Wrest:

From 11 to 3 I was generally with my dear Ang [Angelina; Talbot's nickname for Grey]: Walking in those Fine Gardens whch [which] were in high beauty &



resting between whiles. Post days with Letters from our best Friends made an agreeable break in our Walks. We read together the Essay on Man at 3 ½ we dined, & Conversed till 5 ½. Then an hour Musick [...] then to Tea in the Library, where we sat over our Several Books till supper was brought in at Ten, & Cheerful Char [Charles Yorke] kept us till 11 ½. We laughed over the Follies of Courts many Centuries since buried, or debated the Politics of a hundred years ago. Sometimes on matters of Literature, the Style or Merit of Authors.<sup>28</sup>

This account shows how both the men and the women contributed to the intellectual life of the circle. The women certainly impressed their male peers: John Lawry wrote to Philip Yorke that although he always suspected the “Ladies of Rest were distinguished in an uncommon degree”, he believed it was confirmed when Philip was forced to end his previous letter as “it was impossible to attend to the Ladies Conversation [...] and write to me at the same time.”<sup>29</sup> As this comment reveals, the coterie operated in terms of polite sociability, in which the sexes were seen to complement and improve the other through conversation.<sup>30</sup> This is evident in “Epistle from Wrest to the Ingenious Philemon” in *Wrestiana*, a letter in which the “Inhabitants of Wrest” praise Henry Coventry’s *Philemon to Hydaspes* (1736). While the gentlemen praise the accuracy of the Greek translations and respond in Latin, the ladies, more “poetically inventive”, respond with a poem that praises the work, “weav’d in the fam’d Shaftsburian loom”.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that the women were completely removed from the classical education of their male peers: the ladies were certainly well-versed in the classics and studied some Greek and Latin, but it is unclear how advanced their knowledge was. When Jemima Grey visited the gardens at Hagley in 1763, she was critical that there were “too many” Latin inscriptions “which is not so considerate for the Ladies”, suggesting that the Latin made her feel marginalised as a viewer.<sup>32</sup> While the women do not claim interpretive authority over the Greek and Latin, it is possible that the weaving metaphor in the “Epistle from Wrest” is an allusion to famous female weavers in classical mythology, such as Penelope, Ariadne, and Arachne, positioning the Wrest women as creators in contrast to the men as translators. Thus, although men and women both contributed to the activities of the coterie – their voices and contributions are distinctly gendered. Even the female pseudonyms in *Wrestiana*, such as Sappho, Emilia, and Graia, are modelled on either classical literary figures or heroines from romances, placing the women within a well-established literary tradition with clearly gendered roles.<sup>33</sup>

Yet *Wrestiana* is also full of role play and parody. This is evident in Daniel Wray’s imaginary exchange between Anson and Grey about Lady Bedford’s ball,<sup>34</sup> as well as Anson’s imitation of the infamous publisher Edmund Curll in “Advertisement to Parnassus.”<sup>35</sup> In presenting the latter work as a “Translation of an Abstract of a very extraordinary Tract lately found”, it is likely

Anson was also imitating the mock-scholarly preface that her brother Charles had written for the *Athenian Letters*, another series of fictional translations that had been recently “discovered”.<sup>36</sup> The ability to successfully imitate a robust, learned style had a serious value outside the coterie too; Anson even used her literary abilities to aid her family’s political ventures, advising on a defence of the Admiralty after the loss of Minorca in 1756.<sup>37</sup> Thus, though the coterie adhered to the civil model of polite sociability and its activities were distinctly gendered, the role play in *Wrestiana* also shows that the authors experimented with other voices and styles.

### “Oft Our Best Muse, She Verse Inspires”: Jemima Grey as Hostess

Jemima Grey’s natural inclination to bring friends together must have had a considerable role in nurturing the Wrest Circle. In one letter to her aunt, she describes her joy at returning to Wrest, “the only Place that can heighten my Enjoyment of my Friends.”<sup>38</sup> In another letter, she envisages a scheme of inviting her friends to paint the gardens “in Vacuna’s Shades” and assemble “all the Beaux-Esprits of my Acquaintance to make Verses upon you in the Employment.”<sup>39</sup> Grey certainly played an integral role in facilitating the literary activities of her friends and acting as hostess at Wrest Park. Her role, and the significance of Wrest Park, is acknowledged in “Horace Book II, Ode XVI” in *Wrestiana*:

Oft Graia [Grey] Snowy Curd supplies,

Oft, our best Muse, she Verse inspires:

These Joys our lot, and to despise,

The W— [Wrestian] Wits and B— [Bedford] Squires.<sup>40</sup>

As these lines suggest, Jemima Grey was central as both hostess and muse.<sup>41</sup> The decision to obscure the names is interesting given that *Wrestiana* was never intended for publication, though the authors possibly sought to create a sense of mystery and exclusivity about themselves.

Grey seems to have chosen not to contribute to the circle’s literary compositions, though she would have certainly had the opportunity if she had so wished – and her extensive correspondence testifies to her skill as a writer. She clearly earned the respect of her male peers within the coterie for her intellect, and if anything, they wished she was more forthcoming in articulating her own opinions. Daniel Wray once reported how, in her husband’s absence at Wrest Park, Grey “took upon her the Office of our Entertainer” and “entered Freely into the Conversation”, and his only regret was that “she will not oftener exert her Good sense & excellent Taste, instead of

patiently attending to our Prattle!”<sup>42</sup> In this respect, Grey’s role is more akin to a *salonnière* than the Bluestocking model in which the hostess was often a literary critic and writer herself.<sup>43</sup> Yet Grey would always self-censor, constantly aware of the expectations of her class, and her anxiety was particularly heightened when socialising with “fine” society outside Wrest Park. On another occasion, she was mortified that while drinking tea with “fine gem’men” in her London home, she had been forced to admit she was reading Horace and fled the room in horror, remarking to Talbot that “an Old Latin Poet [...] by no means belongs to a Fine London Lady.”<sup>44</sup> Wray was oblivious to Grey’s embarrassment on this occasion, and while she was trying to make her excuses, he “found nothing better to talk of but Electrical Experiments, & appointing a Day for me to go [...] to see them.”<sup>45</sup> While the men in the circle actively encouraged female learning, as Grey’s comment suggests, they did not necessarily understand elite women’s anxiety about showing pretensions to learning. After confessing that she read Horace in Latin, Grey was convinced that she would be ridiculed as a “femme scavante [*sic*].”<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Anson did not go as far as Jemima Grey in hiding her learning in public, but was scorned for it and her status was weaponised against her: Horace Walpole criticised her for the “profusion of absurdities that she utters”, while Mary Delany judged her to be “coxcombical and affects to be learned.”<sup>47</sup> The waspish nature of these comments – though sent in private correspondence – do at least show the sorts of criticism that Grey feared and indicate why she often hid her endeavours before fashionable society, even in her own London home.

Though Jemima Grey’s social status meant that she was careful in how she displayed her learning before the fashionable society of London, there were significant advantages to her position, affording her the time to study in the extensive library at Wrest Park that could “carry one as far as one ever chuses” – as Catherine Talbot once wrote to Elizabeth Carter.<sup>48</sup> In addition, her aristocratic lineage and inheritance was arguably one of the most integral characteristics of the Wrest Circle. The coterie romanticised Wrest’s long aristocratic history, which perhaps stood in contrast to the Yorkes’ newly purchased family estate at Wimpole Hall. The coterie even seems to have modelled itself nostalgically on the earlier seventeenth-century coterie at Wrest Park that centred on Grey’s ancestor, Elizabeth Talbot, which included the poet, Thomas Carew, miniaturist Robert Cotton, and antiquary John Selden. Grey once remarked to Talbot that she had read the poems Carew had written from Wrest and was amused at descriptions of “the hospitable life of the Lord & Lady there, the ample Board groaning with the weight of Sirloins, the double Moat round the House & much more.”<sup>49</sup> Literary inheritance appealed to the group; when Elizabeth Anson visited Penshurst, she was disappointed that the “Ravages of Time & Accident” left little of the Sidney circle’s literary legacies.<sup>50</sup> Another composition in *Wrestiana*, “Letter

to the Honble Mr Y”, invents a fictional history about the “delightful mansion of the noble Family of Grey”, in which Grey’s ancestor copied a mistranslation onto the “great window at the North End of the high dining Room.”<sup>51</sup> The “mistranslation” playfully challenges the “honour” of Grey’s family by pretending that her ancestor was not as “well-skill’d in all Public Learning” as stated in history books, perhaps a joke on the fact that Grey and her family particularly valued education.<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere in *Wrestiana*, a fictional meeting is imagined between Daniel Wray and John Selden, as the latter remarks on Wray having “succeeded in my Apartment at Wrest or trod the ground; or Sat under the Oak which I used to frequent a Century agoe.”<sup>53</sup> Wrest Park itself is thus interwoven into the fabric of the manuscript, and its very name, *Wrestiana*, is a nod to the significance of the place and Grey’s family history. Even Grey’s coterie nickname, “Graia”, was both a pun on her family name and an allusion to the goddess of mother earth, acknowledging Grey as heiress and landowner of Wrest Park – and her role as hostess in bringing her friends together at her ancestral home.

Moreover, as the hostess of Wrest, Grey played a key role encouraging and facilitating the endeavours of her female peers, even when her friends were at a distance from Wrest. She particularly kept Catherine Talbot and Mary Gregory abreast of the latest compositions produced by her guests in the library and encouraged them to send their own compositions in return. Writing to Mary Gregory, Grey observes:

You will think us much sunk [...] when I tell you Anagrams & Acrostics have been [...] the great Employment of the Ladies after Dinner & such Idle Times, & putting them into Verse of the Gem'men. Several Names have been very luckily hit off; one upon Miss Talbot has produced some very excellent Verses in Return.<sup>54</sup>

The “Ladies” in this quotation likely refer to Grey’s sisters-in-law; in Talbot’s final retort, she refers to “Peggy” and “Eliza”.<sup>55</sup> Grey relished this role, and her letters are infused with teasing playfulness as she challenges her friends to respond to the other. At times, she even had to prod her male guests into responding to Talbot’s sharp wit, reporting back to her friend that “I have been quarrelling all Breakfast-Time with the Gem'men for not affording me some better return to send you [...] the Piece deserved a greater Effort of their Genius & I hoped [I] might be able to rouse it.”<sup>56</sup> Even from a distance, Grey played a significant role facilitating the literary activities.

### The Athenian Letters and Polite Sociability

Grey’s role as hostess and the environment she cultivated at Wrest Park is detectable too in the *Athenian Letters*, though the work started as a product of the university circle that the Yorke brothers cultivated at

Cambridge. Written in different places between 1739 and 1743, the *Athenian Letters* ultimately reflects the shift from the quads of Cambridge colleges to the heterosocial environment at Wrest Park. Wrest even inspired some of the letters; by June 1741, John Lawry wrote to Philip to inform him that he was “glad to hear of the [Athenian] Letters you indited in the Groves of Wrest.”<sup>57</sup> While the work initially represented the authors’ political interests and formal education at Cambridge, it soon came to reflect the ideals of polite sociability and complementarity as both Catherine Talbot and Jemima Grey were brought into this fictional world. Talbot contributed directly to the work, demonstrating her “sexless style” in writing two letters by Cleander and Smerdis, as well as two letters by Sappho.<sup>58</sup> Jemima Grey did not contribute directly but was written into the work as Aspasia, the learned hostess of the Athenian circle. Thus, although Bluestocking scholars have noted Talbot as the exception in this endeavour as a “learned among the young Cambridge men,”<sup>59</sup> I would argue that placing Talbot’s contributions in relation to the heterosocial environment that Grey cultivated at Wrest Park reveals how the Wrest women were not only written into this intimate fictional world but helped to shape it too.

Creating female characters for Talbot and Grey marked not simply their admission into a circle of university men, but also entry into an exclusive imaginative world. For many of the Cambridge authors, contributing to the *Athenian Letters* had offered a degree of cultural capital and proximity to the influential Yorke family – as well as a means of continuing their friendships at a distance. For the women of the circle, however, their inclusion in the *Athenian Letters* marked the beginning of a new era of literary ventures: one in which women were an integral part of the intellectual environment. This is evident in the character of Aspasia, who, featuring in the third volume of the *Athenian Letters*, is described as a woman who:

Abounds in so many elegant turns of wit, and in such a variety of good knowledge and good sense, that no one here is either equal or superior to her [...] As soon as the performers on the lute and harp were retired, with most of the persons who were invited, we drew together into a circle, and Aspasia led the conversation.<sup>60</sup>

As we saw earlier, conversation and music were important activities within the Wrest Circle, and this depiction almost certainly alludes to coterie life at Wrest Park. Although the earlier descriptions of the historical figure Aspasia were written by Dr John Green, the above quotation was written by Charles Yorke. This is significant, for in a letter to Philip, Charles sent, alongside his Athenian letter, his compliments to “Ly [Lady] grey, i.e. Aspasia.”<sup>61</sup> It is therefore almost certain that his description of Aspasia was intended to reflect and compliment Grey’s role as hostess at Wrest. The description of Aspasia certainly resonates with other descriptions of



Grey as hostess; a late comer to the group, Thomas Edwards, once remarked his surprise that Grey was “so superior not only to her own sex but to most of ours”.<sup>62</sup> But Charles Yorke’s description of Jemima Grey is surely more than a compliment to her hostess skills; by writing her into the *Athenian Letters* that he and his brother had first created at Cambridge, his letter has personal significance too, effectively welcoming his new sister-in-law into their private imaginary world.

Though Talbot also contributed two letters in the characters of Smerdis and Cleander, it is through the character of Sappho that Talbot could articulate her own voice – and Sappho became her name within the Wrest Circle. There are even parallels between Sappho and Talbot herself in the *Athenian Letters*, as Talbot emphasises the virtues of modesty – anticipating the religious themes to which her later work would return.<sup>63</sup> In “Letter CLXXVI, Sappho to Cleander” in the *Athenian Letters*, Sappho claims she would rather “be adorned [...] with these modest, soft, and female graces, which dwell retired among the domestic virtues, than with those light external charms, which have more lustre in poetry.”<sup>64</sup> Here, Talbot effectively challenges the way that poetry exaggerates a woman’s external beauty and instead emphasises Sappho’s modesty and virtuous character. Although Sylvia Harcstark Myers argues that Sappho’s letters in the *Athenian Letters* highlight the “need for improvements in the condition of women”,<sup>65</sup> such an overt feminist agenda is not evident in the *Athenian Letters*, which instead represent the same ideals of complementarity and polite sociability that defined the Wrest Circle. The translator’s note to Sappho’s letters further emphasises the progressive ideals of politeness in contrast to the culture of libertinism,<sup>66</sup> explicitly stating that there was “nothing dishonourable” in Sappho’s relationship with Cleander, for “Our Ephesian understood how to converse with the ladies for political purposes, without proceeding to gallantries.”<sup>67</sup> Rather than noting a need for improvement, the *Athenian Letters* celebrate the progress of a civilised society that values women for their intellectual contributions. It is also through the *Athenian Letters* that female authors are afforded respect for their intellect and the opportunity to write themselves.

The Wrest women’s engagement with the *Athenian Letters* does not end with Aspasia and Sappho. Elizabeth Anson certainly read the *Athenian Letters*, possibly when she stayed at Wrest Park in August 1744, a year after the final volume was printed. Soon after her visit, Anson playfully wrote to Catherine Talbot that she had recently found a “very scarce & curious” series of letters “between a Spy at Athens & the Ministers of the Persian Court”, particularly praising Sappho’s letters and regretting only that time has “spared so few of her Billet-doux.”<sup>68</sup> However, it is in the *Wrestiana* manuscript that we can see Anson engage with the *Athenian Letters* most clearly in “Advertisement from Parnassus”. In this scene, the

classical authors who had inspired the *Athenian Letters* recommend different members of the Wrest Circle to Apollo for their literary merits: Plutarch recommends Thomas Birch, historian and editor of the *Athenian Letters*; Cicero recommends Philip Yorke for his share in writing the *Athenian Letters*; and Sappho is at last moved to recommend Catherine Talbot – for nothing “could have persuaded her to it but the extraordinary merit of the Person for whom she demanded immortality.”<sup>69</sup> What is significant in Anson’s praise of Talbot is how she negotiates Talbot’s modesty and fear of fame to endorse her friend’s abilities without compromising Talbot’s model of domestic virtue. As scholars have often noted of Talbot, there is a tension as she resisted publication throughout her lifetime, though her writing (posthumously published by Elizabeth Carter) exemplified feminine virtues and made her the model of female piety.<sup>70</sup> In the “Advertisement”, Anson acknowledges the “domestic virtue” that Talbot had upheld in the *Athenian Letters*, as Sappho herself describes Talbot as “a young Lady who had already been called a Tenth Muse [...] only I must say, that I fear I offend her cautious love of retirement in procuring to her here a confirmation of that fame.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, unlike Birch and Philip Yorke, who both make speeches of thanks in the “Advertisement”, Anson imagines Talbot rejecting the honour of Fame, for

she had endeavoured to live in obscurity; That this fatal decree would at once destroy the effect of all her past care, and ruin her future quiet. That what might appear the highest honour to others, would be considered by her only as condemnation.<sup>72</sup>

Instead, honour is conferred to Talbot in a quiet, modest fashion, as Talbot “retired to her seat, an Anxiety in her face which shewed her own modesty, but did not alter the Sentiments of one Inhabitant of Parnassus.”<sup>73</sup> The “Advertisement” therefore shows Elizabeth Anson’s sensitivity towards her friend’s modesty and disinclination to publish while still finding a way to extol her literary talents. This is perhaps even more touching given Talbot’s severe criticisms of herself and her literary worth – exemplifying the female camaraderie and mutual support within the coterie.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to shed light on the significance of the Wrest women and the way in which they contributed to and shaped the literary culture at Wrest Park. Within the country house, one might argue that its primary value was in providing a space for intellectual endeavour and companionship. Although scholars have noted the tension that Talbot experienced between the values of the aristocratic Wrest Circle and those of the Blue-stockings, we might observe that the other women within the Wrest Circle

similarly experienced contradictions in how far they could display their learning. While the men at Wrest Park were certainly permissive and actively encouraged the women to take a prominent role in the conversations, this does not seem to have been the case within fashionable society and Grey in particular feared that “fine gem’men” would comment on her learning. It is for this reason that we should perhaps reconsider the significance of women’s contributions within the country house coterie and consider it as a space that allowed for intellectual engagement that was free from the sort of censorship women faced elsewhere.

Understanding the significance of female camaraderie and the networks women nurtured changes how we might read *Wrestiana* and the *Athenian Letters*. Indeed, focusing on the *Athenian Letters* as the product of male learning does not allow for the influence of the Wrest women in shaping the work. The introduction of women through the characters of Aspasia and Sappho introduces values of polite sociability, reflecting rather the heterosocial coterie at Wrest Park that is surely represented in the close parallels between Grey as Aspasia and Talbot as Sappho. Furthermore, although Anson did not contribute directly to the *Athenian Letters*, belonging to the Wrest Circle and contributing to *Wrestiana* allowed her to engage in that fictional world and even enrich it. It is even more significant that in her “Advertisement to Parnassus”, she chooses to have Talbot’s character praise her literary talents – while still respecting Talbot’s aversion to literary fame. This is perhaps an interesting contrast when compared with the regrets of Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Carter that Talbot did not publish her works. Possibly, within the more intimate environment of the Wrest Circle, there was a different understanding of acknowledging women’s literary talents, and that instead of seeking literary fame – their overarching desire was, in Elizabeth Anson’s words, to be “quiet & clever together.”

## Notes

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5. For the issues of class and publication, see Markman Ellis, “‘An Author in Form’: Women Writers, Print Publication, and Elizabeth Montagu’s ‘Dialogues of the Dead’”, *ELH*, 79.2 (2012): 417–45.
  6. Betty Schellenberg, “Coterie Fame, Media Choice and the Writing Lives of Hester Mulso Chapone and Catherine Talbot”, *Women’s Writing*, 21.3 (2014): 316–36 and idem., “Catherine Talbot Translates Samuel Richardson: Bridging Social Networks and Media Cultures in the Mid-Eighteenth Century”, *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 29.2 (2016/17): 201–20; Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), pp. 61–8.
  7. Zhoda Zuk, ed., *Writings of the Bluestocking Circle 1738–1785, Volume 3: Catherine Talbot & Hester Chapone*, in *Bluestocking Feminism*, eds. Gary Kelly and Elizabeth Eger (London: Pickering & Chatto), p. 120. Although Betty Schellenberg gives the Wrest Circle much needed attention and mentions other women within the circle, only Catherine Talbot’s literary contributions are analysed, in *Literary Coteries and the Making of Modern Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), pp. 25–43.
  8. Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 26 October 1744, Lucas Papers, L30/9a/4, fol. 14, Bedfordshire Archives Service, Bedford.
  9. Leonie Hanan, *Women of Letters: Gender, Writing and the Life in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 40–50.
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  11. Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2011).
  12. Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (John Hopkins University Press, 1995); Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660–1850* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001), p. 83.
  13. Thomas Secker to Jemima Grey, before 1737, Lucas Papers, L30/9/84, fol. 2; Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle* 64.
  14. Christopher Reid, “Reporting by Letter: The 2nd Earl of Hardwicke and his Parliamentary Correspondents”, *Parliamentary History*, 39.2 (2020): 239–54; D. P. Miller, “‘The Hardwicke Circle’: The Whig Supremacy and its Demise in the 18th Century Royal Society”, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 52.1 (1998): 73–91. For studies of Philip Yorke’s literary interests, see Markman Ellis “Thomas Birch’s ‘Weekly Letter’ (1741–66): Correspondence and History in the Mid-Eighteenth Century Royal Society”, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 68.3 (2014): 261–78, and idem., “The English Mercurie Hoax and the Early History of the Newspaper”, *Book History*, 22.1 (2019): 100–32.
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  17. Charles Yorke to Philip Yorke, 1 June 1740, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS 35360, fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, British Library, London.

18. Elizabeth Anson to Joseph Yorke, 9 November 1746, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS 35387, fol. 19<sup>f</sup>, British Library, London.
19. “Stanzas In Answer to All the Preceding False Wit”, *Wrestiana*, 114, private collection. [Signed “T”, for Catherine Talbot.]
20. For the difficulty of recapturing conversation, see Susanne Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth Century and Early Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 2.
21. Elizabeth Anson to Jemima Grey, July 1748, Lucas Papers, L30/9/3/2, fol. 157.
22. Elizabeth Anson to Joseph Yorke, 25 May 1747, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS 35387, fol. 32<sup>f</sup>, British Library, London.
23. Jemima Grey to Mary Gregory, 3 June 1760, Lucas Papers, L30/9a/3 fol. 37.
24. Only Elaine Chalus has considered her political influence: *Elite Women in English Political Life, c. 1754–1790* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 35–6; 139–40.
25. Elizabeth Anson to Jemima Grey, 31 May 1748, Lucas Papers, L30/9/3/3 fol. 153.
26. Elizabeth Anson to Jemima Grey, 3 November 1750, Lucas Papers, L30/9/3/25 fol. 225.
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28. Catherine Talbot’s diary, Berkeley Papers Series II Volume III, Add. MS 46690, fols 28<sup>v</sup>–29<sup>f</sup>, British Library, London.
29. John Lawry to Philip Yorke, 21 June 1743, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS. 35605, fol. 144<sup>f</sup>, British Library, London.
30. Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).
31. “Epistle from Wrest to the Ingenious Philemon”, *Wrestiana*, fol. 21, private collection. [Signed “P.W.L.”, Philip Yorke, Daniel Wray, and John Lawry.]
32. Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 17 August 1763, Lucas Papers, L30/9a/8, fol. 118.
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35. “J. Raggiugli di Parnasso or, Advertisement from Parnassus”, *Wrestiana*, fols 90–7, private collection. [Signed “E”, Elizabeth Anson.]
36. Philip Yorke, et al., *Athenian Letters: or, the Epistolary Correspondence of an Agent of the King of Persia, residing at Athens during the Peloponnesian Wars*, 4 vols (London: James Bettenham, 1741) I: iii–x [signed “C”, Charles Yorke.]
37. See Chalus 65–6. Elizabeth Anson to Philip Yorke, 30 June 1756, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS 35676, fols 132<sup>f</sup> – 137<sup>v</sup>, British Library London. Anson seems to have edited the full draft of the defence, mindful of “our great delicacy & fear of offending”, and passed it on to her eldest brother to “do with [...] as you see fit.”
38. Jemima Grey to Mary Gregory, 8 May 1741, Lucas Papers, L30/9a/1, fol. 4.
39. Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 2 June 1748, Lucas Papers, L30/9a/5, fol. 69.



40. "Horace Book II. Ode XVI", *Wrestiana*, fol. 57, private collection. [Signed "P. C. W.", Philip Yorke, Charles Yorke, Daniel Wray.]
41. Ibid.
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43. See Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg, eds., "Introduction: A Bluestocking Historiography", *Library Quarterly*, 65.1/2 (2002): 4; Elizabeth Eger, *Bluestockings: Women of Reason* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 60; Nicole Pohl, "'Perfect Reciprocity': Salon Culture and Epistolary Conversations", *Women's Writing*, 13.1 (2006): 145.
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50. Elizabeth Anson to Jemima Grey, 9 August 1749, Lucas Papers, L30/9/3/11, fol. 180, Bedfordshire Archives Service, Bedford.
51. "Letter to the Honble Mr Y", *Wrestiana*, fols 65-6, *Wrestiana*, [signed "P", Philip Yorke].
52. Ibid.
53. "Nouveaux Dialogues des Morts & des Vivans Dialogues Second A l'Enfer", *Wrestiana*, fol. 85, private collection. [Signed "L", John Lawry].
54. Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 30 August 1747, Lucas Papers, L30/9a/1, fol. 144.
55. "Stanzas in answer to all the preceding False-Wit", *Wrestiana*, fol. 113, private collection. [Signed "T", Catherine Talbot].
56. Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 20 August 1747, Lucas Papers, L30/9a/5, fol. 12.
57. John Lawry to Philip Yorke, 25 June 1741, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS 35605, fol. 94<sup>v</sup>, British Library, London.
58. Rhoda Zuk, "Introduction", *Bluestocking Feminism* III, p. 12.
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61. Charles Yorke to Philip Yorke, March 1741/2, Hardwicke Papers, Add. MS 35360, fol. 77<sup>r</sup>, British Library, London.
62. Thomas Edwards to Daniel Wray, 22 November 1746, Bodl. 1010, fol. 224, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
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64. Philip Yorke, et al., “Letter CLCCVI. Sappho to Cleander”, *Athenian Letters*, IV: 208. [Signed “T”, Catherine Talbot.]
65. Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle* 213.
66. Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).
67. Philip Yorke, et al., “Letter CLCCVI. Sappho to Cleander”, *Athenian Letters*, IV: 207. [Signed “T”, Catherine Talbot.]
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70. Major 71.
71. “Ragguagli. D. Parnasso, Or, Advertisement from Parnassus”, *Wrestiana*, fol. 94, private collection. [Signed “E”, Elizabeth Anson.]
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73. Ibid. fol. 95.

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