

# Writing in the Duchess of Devonshire's 'Works'

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Linda Colley focused on the public and patriotic role she played after describing her as a person 'we still know so little about'.<sup>1</sup> Amanda Foreman produced a full 463-page biography, and the succeeding film has made Georgiana a popular talked-about figure.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to their insight and perceptive argument with the succeeding attention and studies over these two decades, we have learned much about Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806). And also with the help of studies concerning her life we explore the intricacies of private and public spheres in the eighteenth century, especially of women's roles. Yet even after Colley, Foreman and others, she still has much to offer; so rich materials she and people around her have left.

Foreman's biography draws attention to one of the distinctive factors that lead to Georgiana's vulnerability and susceptibility; that is the formidable presence of her mother. Foreman represents the mother, Margaret Georgiana, Countess Spencer as psychologically repressive. Spencer is confident in her moral uprightness and steadfast self-reliance. With this adamant self-assurance, she is always willing not only to give advice but also to intrude upon others' lives, especially her beloved daughter's. The daughter is good-natured and kind-hearted, and, as a result, too susceptible to exploitation and influence exerted by people around. Foreman implies the mother's imposing character as one of the considerable reasons of Georgiana's weakness.

In fact, Spencer admitted her own fortitude and the daughter's frailty. In a letter to her frequent correspondent, Caroline Howe, Spencer proudly refers to 'a pretty Fable' Georgiana composed. 'Georgiana sends me a pretty Fable in which

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons : Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 1992), p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana : Duchess of Devonshire* (London: HarperCollins, 1998).

she compares me to the spreading Oak, herself to the weak Woodbine hanging upon it & her little Girl to the blue Violet beneath'.<sup>3</sup> It was nearly ten years after the daughter left her parental home for her marriage. We quite understand that a mother feels happy when she finds herself useful to a daughter, but this case seems to be going too far. The problem lies in the daughter's lack of self-reliance, but more serious is the mother's satisfaction. The mother joyfully and even boastingly endorses the description of the large, hardy and vigorous tree for herself and the helpless creeper for the daughter. The parent and the daughter would be urged to consult an agony aunt or counsellor today.

An earlier biography by Gower characterizes Lady Spencer more clearly. With the 'unbending integrity' and 'iron discipline' she was 'insistent on order, habit and application'. She had 'so decided a character that nothing can warp it'. 'Decorum, method, piety and energy were the foundations of her own life and on them she built those of her daughters'. When these were directed toward herself alone, it is just self-discipline, but she tried to keep her daughters' lives under control, being 'extremely critical, even censorious'.<sup>4</sup> Although a closer look at her papers reveals her own uncertainty and fragility, the mother she played towards the duchess was confident enough.

The mother and the duchess were, basically, on good terms with each other, and their correspondence was an important means to keep the bond of affection. The duchess is accustomed to express herself affectionately in letters: 'Indeed you are my best, my dearest friend. You have my heart and may do what you will with it'. The countess, in turn, once confides her predilection in a letter to her friend: 'I will own I feel so partial to my Dear little Gee, that I think I never shall love another so well'.<sup>5</sup> Although in the letters to the duchess herself the mother's affection frequently takes the form of admonition and advice rather than sweet declaration of tenderness, the mother appreciates the intimacy the correspondence creates between them: '... our letters are, I flatter myself, more like a comfortable conversation with the friend of one's heart, than well written epistles'. In the

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<sup>3</sup> Bath Oct 1 1783, Spencer to Mrs Howe, BL Add.MSS 75619.

<sup>4</sup> Iris Leveson Gower, *The Face without a Frown : Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire* (London: Frederick Muller 1944) pp. 9, 17, 18, 19.

<sup>5</sup> BL Add. 75691, to Thea Cowper, 30 Sept 1758, quoted in Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana : Duchess of Devonshire* (London: HarperCollins, 1998) p. 4.

daughter's recognition the letter means a little bit of stirring up rather than comfort, but she also cherishes its workings on her: 'Indeed, Dst M., nothing encourages me like your letters'.<sup>6</sup>

Lady Spencer wrote letters and journals incessantly. Even when her beloved husband was suffering his last illness, she wrote to Howe every day. Surprisingly shortly after his death she resumed keeping her journal. Keeping journal and writing letters were very important part of her life. Indeed, it was self-imposed to discipline herself. Yet this born writer fell silent when the Duchess died.<sup>7</sup> How terrible a blow it was is only to be surmised, and it must have been still graver disappointment to know that Georgiana left all her papers to Lady Elizabeth Foster, not to 'little G', Georgiana's daughter or Spencer; especially because Spencer did not like Foster at all. Foreman attributes Georgiana's decision to her commitment to Foster's standings in the family procedure and in society. In the context of mother-daughter relationship, it marks difference between them.

The mother devoted herself to writing letters, keeping records and sorting them out. She took care to preserve the papers in good order and secured the possibility of showing the token of her life eventually. However, she did not write anything for publication in her lifetime, or even posthumously; she did not expose her writings to the public. She liked to write in order to make response to her daughters, friends and petitioners. Not turning herself to an author, she stayed a writer, who was committed to leaving records.

The duchess had a variety of means to express herself. Writing letters and journals, which the mother thought most important, was just a part of her repertoire. She was, for the most part, as Foreman points out, a performer who sought for viewers. This performer could show herself in the latest fashion, in the election campaigns as well as political gatherings as a hostess, accepting exposure and other inconveniences of the celebrity. Indeed, she liked to get response and talked about. She wrote letters, composed poetry and epitaphs, published part of them and, perhaps, published two works of autobiographical fiction.

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<sup>6</sup> Georgiana Cavendish and Vere Brabazon Ponsonby, *Georgiana. Extracts from the Correspondence of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, ed. the Earl of Bessborough (London: John Murray, 1955) pp. 13, 14, 113. (Sept 23 [1774], Oct 5 1774 and [15 Nov 1786])

<sup>7</sup> Foreman, *Georgiana : Duchess of Devonshire* p. 390; *ibid*; Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana's World : The Illustrated Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (London: HarperCollins, 2001) p. 227.

She had a keen awareness of the style and the correct use of language as well as of others' eloquence and clever conception. One of the people who are thought to have influenced her awareness was a language genius. Georgiana as a child knew Sir William Jones (1746-1794), tutor (from 1765) to her brother, Viscount Althorp, later 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Spencer. Jones possibly taught her.<sup>8</sup> He was a genius in language skills and photographic memory, being a master of eight languages including Arabic and Sanskrit, a tolerable user of other eight languages and a student of Tibetan, Russian and Chinese. He was also an orientalist as well as an Arabic and Persian poetry scholar. Georgiana's educational environment at home nurtured love of refinement in language ability and literary ingenuity. She appreciated a person for their command of language: 'I was overpower'd with Mrs. Haviland's eloquence. What do you think of a woman who talks of the sun's *glancing* on the sea - You may put her on what subject you please her words never fail her, ...'<sup>9</sup> She found another's unusual style of conversation interesting: 'I had the pleasure of finding Parker a dirty, as comical and talking as bad English as ever. There is certainly a degree of humour about him that makes one laugh, he is so short and always talking in a strain of irony'.<sup>10</sup> For her own writing, she was searching for a way to perfect it: '...pray likewise give me your advise what steps I can take to mend my writing. I mean to learn to write perfect English and always spell well. Is there no door open but the Latin for English grammar?'<sup>11</sup> All these suggest she had a discerning eye for language, aspiring to have a good command.

The duchess's literary work was not Foreman's prime concern in her biography. In its index, the entry of 'WORKS' includes musical and poetical composition and the novel called *The Sylph* along with harp performance, gardening works and house refurbishment arrangements. In short her creative writing does not find privileged attention. Even her published poetical work does not have an independ-

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<sup>8</sup> Foreman, *Georgiana : Duchess of Devonshire*, p. 9; Jeremy Bernstein, *Physicists on Wall Street and Other Essays on Science and Society* (New York: Springer, 2008), pp. 73-86; Janet Gleeson, *Privilege and Scandal: The Remarkable Life of Harriet Spencer, Sister of Georgiana* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Cavendish and Ponsonby, *Georgiana. Extracts from the Correspondence of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* p. 51. ([Aug 18 1781])

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55. ([July 30 1782])

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83. (Tuesday the 16 [June 1784])

ent entry. The epitaphs she composed, including the one she wrote in mourning her father's death, do not appear in the index. Considering that literary composition was only part of her various kinds of works as an aristocratic celebrity, it is natural, but it might be an underestimation. Even if the outcome is treated as it deserves, her writing life deserves more attention.

Poetry composition was everyday practice to her while Lady Spencer wrote poems but occasionally. Rich in vocabulary and invention, she derived pleasure from paying attention to people and moulding thoughts into poetry. She mourned Sir William Jones's death in 1800:

Regret and praise the general voice bestows,  
And public sorrows with domestic blend;  
But deeper yet must be the grief of those,  
Who, while the sage they honour'd, lov'd the friend.

Among the many epitaphs she wrote, above all, an epitaph she wrote for herself, which Gower quotes in her biography, though not found in Foreman, is of greater interest. According to Gower Georgiana gave it to Charles Grey, her lover, and it was found in Halifax papers. She regards herself as one who is lavishly gifted in vain:

She was once exalted in Situation ...  
Her heart was warm though weak  
Her disposition friendly though incautious  
And her understanding good though misguided & obscured  
By her hastiness of decision & want of judgment.  
It was to her a source of shame when she considered  
That she had misused talents that might have been useful, ...  
Happy in her Parents, her Husband, her Children, her Sister  
And her Friend,  
She above all received  
From her affectionate respectable & beloved Mother  
Religious Principles

Which tho' she sometimes neglected she never renounced<sup>12</sup>

This self-recognition offers basic understanding of her character. Noteworthy in the latter half is the mention of 'her Friend' in singular, which admittedly refers to Lady Elizabeth Foster. More than that, she particularly emphasises the mother's importance in her life.

Her published work, 'The Passage of the Mountain of St Gothard, a poem', presents a broader view. It was composed when she was heading for home after the exile for her pregnancy of Grey's child. She had a difficult time, being separated from her children, though she thought she got what she deserved. Her letter to her son written in blood was written at this time; she was emotionally almost to the limit. However, the poem presents more than the sorrow of a mother torn away from her children. Together with the mother's private emotions, it refers to patriotic sentiment and human aspiration in general. Long before the 1802 edition, a pirated edition was published in 1799, which enjoyed popularity. It was so popular that Coleridge half-mockingly admired in an ode its poetess whose 'heroic measure' is remarkable when one thinks of the merry superficial and pompous world she lives in.<sup>13</sup> Switzerland in this poem represents liberty, order and peace: its people's liberty based on law, its social order kept in gentle rule and its peace maintained by noble-minded intellectuals. These values appealed to the British threatened by the turmoil after the French Revolution.

A novel assumed to have been written by the duchess is of a very different hue. An epistolary novel *The Sylph* was once attributed to Fanny Burney, but generally thought to be by the duchess. Her biographers agree in attribution, though without any definite evidence, considering it autobiographical.

However, if autobiographical, the setting and plot of the novel is puzzling and it is not straightforwardly autobiographical but twisted by her complicated psychology to suppress what is given to her life. Or her literary creativity overshadows autobiographical clinging to her life story. First of all, the absence of the mother

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<sup>12</sup> From her own epitaph, quoted in Gower, *The Face without a Frown : Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire* pp. 231-32.

<sup>13</sup> Coleridge, 'Ode to Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire' on the Twenty-fourth Stanza in her "Passage over Mount Gothard", *Morning Post* on December 24, 1799.

is bewilderingly noteworthy: the heroine, Julia, is without her mother. For Georgiana, Lady Spencer was a very important figure, exerting great influence even after her marriage. Some might think that to ignore and suppress the mother tells a lot about her. Secondly, Julia's attribution is bothering: she is an ignorant country girl. Although the Spencers favoured Althorp and Wimbledon Park rather than bustle of London, Georgiana was far from an unrefined and uncouth daughter of a country bumpkin. It is true, though, Lady Teazle in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, whose model is said to have been the duchess, is likewise a crude country girl who got sophisticated through marriage. If we take this as a girl whose simple ethos does not fare well in the society she knew after marriage, Julia, Georgiana and Lady Teazle have things in common. Thirdly, Julia's family status arouses a question: her father has aristocratic connections and his first wife is a daughter of a rich merchant. His second wife inherited the fortune of the heiress of the merchant. The duchess actually did not have such strong merchant connections, her father being an heir to Duchess of Marlborough and her mother's father being a diplomat. And finally, Julia's husband in serious debt: he commits suicide, desperate for his debt. The one who was suffering from debt for gambling was the duchess herself rather than her husband. So, these not so trifle features do not agree with her biographical facts. Yet, this novel, *The Sylph*, is thought with considerable certainty to be autobiographical. When one reads this 'autobiographical' novel especially, with interests in her relationship with her mother, psychological surmises proliferates. One of the assumptions is that this work with all its autobiographical reflections, variances and contradictions is an amalgamation of facts and delusional solutions to difficulties in life. Above all, this work lies between her married life in high society and liberal ideas imbibed earlier in her education and in reading.

There is a famous episode about the duke and the duchess: she was eager to show how happily married she was in front of her mother and sister, asking for the duke's loving attention by trying to climb on his lap. To her dismay and the general embarrassment, he disdainfully pushed her back and without a word he walked off.<sup>14</sup> This episode is to illustrate an affectionate and candid bride and a

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<sup>14</sup> Gower adds that this incident, some say, was on the wedding day. Gower, *The Face without a Frown: Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire*, p. 28; Foreman, *Georgiana : Duchess of Devonshire* p. 42. Fore-

forbidding unsympathetic bridegroom. What is emphasized in this illustration is that the rejected young bride, after asking for her husband's affections in vain, is prone to look out for her emotional compensation and fulfilment, turning her disappointed and disquieted eye to gambles and tormenting herself in the end. This is not a simple story of incompatible personalities, but a conflict of values.

She had learned hard-working, industrious principle with deep respect for refinement in culture and learning as well as affective individualism on which her ideal family depended. Lady Spencer's educational concept was, as it were, in middle class ways, or at least progressive. She was on good terms with her husband, appreciating affective exchanges between the spouses. Her mother, Mrs Poyntz was socially ambitious, and it might have been somewhat manipulated, but in her own understanding she fell in love and got married for love rather than for family interests. Georgiana was brought up by such parents. In daily life, although they were immensely rich and pursued luxury in various ways, Lady Spencer adhered ethically to 'a harsh regimen', diligence and self-discipline. She was known to have simple gowns and plain, or meagre, diet.<sup>15</sup> Besides, the Spencers valued company with intellectuals. Brought up in this family, Georgiana was well read. For her, home was a centre for one's tender feelings and for regulated, intellectual and cultural life.

On the other hand, the duke had different educational background and had different values. He regarded marriage a system to perpetuate the title and estates by producing an heir. For him landownership represented what counted. Summing up, his values were undoubtedly of aristocratic landowners. He was not particularly unfeeling, insensitive or indifferent, or still less malicious; his values concerning home were quite different from hers.

She sought for domestic happiness fostered through the warm interactions between the spouses. She would have played a role of a wife who was a guardian of morality within the protected enclosure of a household. However, he was not eager to build up walls of protection of a family. Then, her moral energy sought for outlets, the site of action. Linda Colley argues that in late eighteenth-century on, the more confined women's roles were within households and the more ea-

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man quotes Gower, though it refers to Iris Palmer.

<sup>15</sup> Foreman, *Georgiana : Duchess of Devonshire*, p. 13.

gerly the importance of moral influence at home was emphasized, the more strongly they found themselves involved in society and the public sphere by way of the moral influence.<sup>16</sup> If the duchess shared this idea of participation at home as a citizen, she was puzzled to know that she did not have a walled household where she was expected to exert civic virtues as a mistress, although as an aristocrat, it was not difficult to find some other forms of activities.

Her heroine and the hero make much of emotions and morality of individuals as well as personal industry and efforts. However, their moral values and sensitivity cannot help in their lives. Julia cannot exert any influence on her husband however good and thoughtful she is. Indeed, she does not try to bring about justice, nor work on him in order to pull their lives together and set up a union of a family. Her good qualities only go astray. In the end, Julia is rescued from the predicament not by her own exertion but by Sir William's suicide, which leaves her in the quiet life among the trusted good people. She is quite ignorant of the husband's situations and the horrifying result is brought to her just like an accident. The eponymous 'Sylph' tries to protect her from the upper-class moral corruption, taking counsel by way of letters and watching her without being detected. Toward the end, a childhood friend Henry Woodley turns out to be the guardian, who has given his heart to her. He left her neighbourhood after his father lost the family fortune. After five years, he has made a fortune on his own and comes back to court her, only to find that Julia has just got married with Sir William. Totally in despair, he decides to go abroad, but his friends persuade him to stay there. Thus, he has been a self-appointed sylph to her. The Sylph finally helps the heroine and they live happily ever after, but the question about the characterization and the plot remain.

The starting assumption of this argument is that the two novels were written by Duchess of Devonshire. The mystery is that neither she nor her friends did not refer to the work in letters and journals, though Georgiana and people around were usually ready to write down whatever they saw, heard and read. My tentative answer to this question is that it involves a chasm between her liberal education and the aristocratic approaches. Georgiana tried to solve the problem by letting

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<sup>16</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons : Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 262-81.

her ideas flow in the created world of the novel. But the method itself was born in the context of the rise of the middle class. Either the bourgeois-like cause or the method of the novel—or possibly both—was not acceptable, which forced that silence.

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