

Elizabeth Vesey and the Art of Educating Oneself, Between London and Lucan

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Abstract:

A 1926 publication describes the Library of Mrs. Elizabeth Vesey (1715-1791), a Bluestocking and the wife, by second marriage, of Agmondisham Vesey, a member of the Irish Parliament. The essay examines the books that refer to the cultural background and critical abilities of an Irish literary lady who transmitted but a small record of her literary competence to posterity. The excursus points to her historical, philosophical, and theological formation as the daughter of the Bishop of Ossory, besides her acquaintance with foreign literatures (most prominently the Italian one) and her ideological involvement with the question of the American colonies that she only briefly hints at in a letter to her friend Mrs. Montagu in order not to trespass the borders of the public sphere. Vesey's portrait would be mostly imperfect if this collection was ignored.

Keywords: bluestocking, education, Ireland, library, Mrs. Elizabeth Vesey

In “The Politics of Paradise, Insurrection, the Sunday Schools and Elizabeth Vesey's Dragon”, a chapter of *Madam Britannia*, Emma Major argues for the importance of “the political, the public and the private” in defining eighteenth-century women of letters (Major 2012, 166-99). A mixture of those categories also emerged from Elizabeth Vesey's polite circles of conversations causing Elizabeth Montagu's comment, in a letter to Elizabeth Carter, about some Dragon amusing, and simultaneously preoccupying, their beloved Sylph, who had to face “Mr Vesey's fits, Mrs Hancock's palpitations, the loss of America, the gutter that overflows in ye kitchen, & the Fleet superior to our Navy, a Foreign army ready to land &c.” (184). The foundations of Vesey's intellectual development, untraceable because of lack of published work on her part, emerge distinctly from her extensive reading as evidence of her self-motivated lifelong commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and learning including her political engagement. An analysis of her library, entwined with biographical data and her correspondence with Montagu, is being carried out in what fol-

lows in order to uncover her cultural roots and account for her way of keeping up with contemporary public events.

“It is indeed one of the most pleasant compilations that ever occupied the attention of a collector”, so writes, in the course of a three-page review, Seumas O’Sullivan, editor of *The Dublin Magazine* (O’Sullivan 1926, 75) of William H. Robinson’s catalogue *The Library of Mrs. Elizabeth Vesey, 1715-1791: The first of the blue-stockings, the friend of Laurence Sterne, Horace Walpole, Goldsmith, Gray, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mrs. Montagu, etc., etc., and the hostess of Dr. Johnson and the ‘club’* (Robinson 1926, wpn)². The Library, purchased by Robinson and removed from Lucan House, the family mansion near Dublin, is advertised as a collection “of unusual interest”, containing rare items, “treasures, the mere describing of which is a joy to read” (O’Sullivan 1926, 75). Of several of those volumes there is no trace left; as a matter of fact, the demands of business led to the dispersion of such historical assemblage of valuable writings.

Browsing the list of books interspersed with the correspondence of friends and acquaintances that discuss Elizabeth Vesey, the comments on her character and her literary engagement by contemporary writers, and her correspondence (a considerable part of which is still unpublished) – ninety-six letters on the whole, ninety addressed to Mrs. Montagu and six to Lord Lyttelton, kept at Huntington (Brimley Johnson 1926; The Montagu Collection)³ – adds a remarkable interest to one’s reading: on one hand, the whole has a cultural and affective value; on the other, the known historical and social scenario is enriched with personal and intimate notations. In a way, the technical bibliographic citation is being charged with signifiers, so much so that the list of titles becomes almost a charming narrative of the relationship between the book and its user – a different story for each different owner, for each different reader, for all those who come into contact or interact with a book, or even just keep it on their bookshelves. In this case, the collection throws light on the ability of upper-class women’s self-education in Georgian times; an ability often transmitted within the family or, sometimes, at school; an ability that improves with time, whether it is exploited in the private or the public sphere⁴.

A biographical note by Ross Balfour opens the catalogue supplying details, for those who did not know her, on Elizabeth Vesey’s life (Robinson 1926, i-iv)⁵. It is based on Reginald Blunt’s 1925 “admirable essay” – he writes – on “The Sylph” published in the *Edinburgh Review* from which he quotes (*ibidem; passim*). As is known, the Magazine was hardly benevolent towards colonial affairs. Let us just think of such a prestigious critic, philosopher, and literary writer as the Reverend Sydney Smith’s literary attack in 1820 against the former British colonies: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” (Smith 1820, 79) that attracted reactions by a crown of Americanists taking the field to defend the emerging American literature. Far from being an objective narrator, Balfour follows Blunt in reporting information obtained from people who had met her when already declining (Burney 1832, 264-66;

Barrett 1854, *passim*), or underestimated her intelligence, or even her cultural relevance for not transmitting a permanent memorial of herself to posterity through her writings (Robinson 1926, iii). The portrait transmitted to posterity by modern scholarship is certainly less distorted than contemporary representations: in particular, Deborah Keller's essay on "Elizabeth Vesey as The Sylph" analyses her in her playful jolly identity as a free spirit or Sylph, as she was known among the Bluestockings. Keller, however, is not too pre-occupied with her native roots, nor does she detect in her a champion of a modern life-long learning project (2003, 215-34)⁶.

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Vesey wrote herself into the history of education at a time in which the pedagogical discipline was not yet official, nor were themes such as women's education, self-teaching methods, cultural dissemination, life-long learning, and the role of the learning instrument *par excellence*, the book.

About the library, it consists of one thousand and eighty-one volumes, some of which exhibit the elegant book-plate engraved by Gretton, bearing her signature, "Mrs. Vesey" or "Eliza Vesey"; others have her own or her husband's, Agmondisham Vesey, M.P., or just her husband's; others that of Colonel Vesey (Agmondisham's nephew and heir to Lucan House with its *demesne*, the Irish residence of the Vesseys), who took care of her after her husband's death (1785), during the last six years of her life (Keenan 2003)⁷.

Not all of the books were owned by Mrs. Vesey; the collection, however, is of considerable amplitude at a time when Ireland had only two public libraries and a few private ones, these last hosting between as few as fifty to six-thousand volumes. A part of the collection was removed from the London home after her death in order to join the volumes that had stayed at Lucan House, whence they were moved by boat toward a British or perhaps even an American buyer. A note in the catalogue informs that the book "enter the United States free of duty" (Cole 1974, 231-47)⁸. Col. Vesey, some of whose books carry his book-plate, could have added his own signature to that of Mrs. or Mr. Vesey's in some of the books.

Vesey is the Queen of the Bluestockings (the informal coterie she regularly attends and she contributed to get going) for Hannah More, who met her in London where she organized receptions at Clarges Street first, then at Bolton Row, for the brilliant wits of the Georgian epoch⁹. The beginning of *The Bas Bleu; or Conversation* is quite significant:

Vesey! Of verse the judge and friend!
Awhile my idle strain attend:¹⁰

The poem More dedicates to her is significant as it throws light on her critical abilities, her interest for the geometrical-mathematical paradox, her charismatic character, and her use of common sense, a quality for which she was much admired by her female friends.

Elizabeth Carter, whose knowledge of Greek Doctor Johnson greatly praises, is present in her library with three copies of her translation of Epicurus besides another two of *Poems on Several Occasions* (dating to 1762 and 1766, respectively). Through her thick correspondence with the Irish lady, Carter (who has a somewhat paternalistic attitude towards her) shows no little consideration for her literary taste, but when the matter is political she does not approve of her somewhat transgressive attitudes¹¹.

Carter dedicates to her friend a poem, "To Mrs. Vesey" (1766), whose initial lines announce the time of contemplation that leads one to reflect upon the immortality of art and of the soul:

Silent and cool the Dews of Evening fall,
Hush'd is the vernal Music of the Groves.(Carter 1766, 94)

It is a work that would stir her liberal and evasive friend towards a more solid ethical point of view. Carter complains, in a letter of 1779, of Vesey's neglect to inform her of her own attempt at writing a Pindaric ode, especially because Carter understands "Pindar as well at least as one half of the fine ladies and gentlemen do who were admitted to hear it, and certainly love you much better, not only than half, but than all of such an assembly, is such an unparalleled breach of friendship, that it would not be credited was it to be put into a note at the bottom of the said Ode, when it descends to future ages"¹² (Pennington 1809, 235-236).

Vesey also entertained a correspondence with Elizabeth Montagu, the other important London salonnière, a great guide to inquire into the tastes, fashions, and the female ethics of the eighteenth century. About the work, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*, published by Montagu anonymously, Vesey is not fooled, and recognizes her friend's hand immediately. Actually, at the moment of publication she takes possession, in a friendly manner, of the volume: "I invited Mr. Hume, Ramsay and Ld. Lyttelton in hopes to hear our book talked about" (The Montagu Collection). The library also contains a copy of the first edition of Shakespeare's *Works* (Oxford 1743-1746), edited by Sir Thomas Hanmer given to her by the editor.

Among the works with a pedagogical background we find, inevitably, John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (1748) and *The Works of John Locke* (1759); besides, *Les Pensées de J. J. Rousseau* (1766, that carries Col. Vesey's bookplate) and at least three volumes (out of eight) of the French controversial author, Voltaire (*Essay sur l'Histoire Général et sur les Moeurs des Nations* [1758], *Lettres Secrètes de M. de Voltaire* [1765] e *Histoire de la Guerre de 1741* [1756]) which Vesey does not include among the volumes to remove from her London home. A found item and a symbol of the eighteenth-century London intelligentsia grouped under the same "Club" presided over by the Doctor is a copy of the famous Dictionary (*Dictionary of the English Language*), an undisputed protagonist of the "Vesey's", the bluestocking meetings that were

identified with the lovable hostess in a way that they were finally called with her own surname (Craig 1895, 136)¹³.

Mrs. Vesey was not only well-read in literature, but also brilliant in the everyday social interaction. She is reported in Bluestocking studies to have told Benjamin Stillingfleet, a brilliant conversationalist at parties who had declined the invitation to participate in an evening assembly on the score of not having suitable clothes: “Don’t mind dress. Come in your blue stockings” (Ward, Trent 2000). Though still disputed, the anecdote reveals a spontaneity and enthusiasm that contributed to have her regarded by some society members as cultivated and graceful (Doctor Johnson, Horace Walpole and Jonathan Swift were among her admirers) as well as, on some occasions, inconsequent. Her Irishness, probably, made her the victim, in the London society, of condescension and a snobbish attitude.

Balfour quotes, in the biographical note introducing *The Library of Mrs. Vesey*, a letter by Mrs. Montagu (“The Queen of the Blues”, as she was called), who, having met Vesey in Bath (1755), detects in her personality “an easy politeness that gains one in a moment, while in reserve she has good sense and an improved mind” (Robinson 1926, ii). The adjective refers to the fencing of property by the landed gentry and aristocracy who, by engaging landscape architects to take care of, and indeed *improve*, their land, showed their authority, wealth and taste, in one word their social power. Strictly linked with the idealised concepts of power relations was the concept of culture in which many affluent ladies exercised their influence. In Ireland Louisa Lennox, of Castletown, county Kildare, promoted feminine culture, and so did the writings of Maria Edgeworth, who, in *Practical Education*, advised parents to sacrifice, for the benefit of their children, the amusements of the city in favour of the country life (Edgeworth, Edgeworth 1798)¹⁴. A rural archetypal dwelling in Ireland was the cottage, that was suffused with ideal and ethical overtones; Mrs. Vesey had her own “*cottage ornée*” built on the shores of the river Liffey which crosses the Lucan demesne, with a “large and roomy” parlour “fitted up with every possible accommodation for retired literary luxury” (O’Kane 2004, 66)¹⁵. The rural life conceived in Georgian times was called “idle” by William Cowper and is semantically tied with the Roman *otium* (Musser 1979, 515-31)¹⁶. The etymology of *culture*, it is to be remarked, goes back to *colère*, meaning cultivate, which is also the origin of *colony*, the master’s land cultivated by local people. In Montagu’s sophisticated language, the use of *improved* may not be innocent, but the consequence of a paternalistic attitude towards her Irish rival.

Elizabeth Vesey’s origins were definitely in keeping with a historical, philosophical, and theological culture. A descendant, on her mother’s side (Mary Muschamp, daughter and sole heir to Denny Muschamp of Horsley, Surrey, married to Thomas Vesey in 1698) of Michael Boyle, Archbishop of Dublin and Armagh, Primate of Ireland and Lord Chancellor. Her father Thomas (1716-1731) was the erudite Bishop of Ossory, who was educated,

after leaving Cork, at Eton College and Christ Church, Oxford, and a nephew of Agmondisham Vesey senior (grandfather of Elizabeth's second husband), who had married Charlotte Sarsfield¹⁷. Mrs. Vesey's letters to Lord Lyttelton prove her acquaintance with *Orlando Furioso* and *Pastor Fido*, both of them quoted by heart in the original language to attract the addressee to her romantic Lucan demesne peopled, in the Celtic tradition, of elphs and creatures of the woods¹⁸. Ariosto's and Guarini's volumes are mentioned, of course, in the Catalogue: their melancholic notes resound in Vesey's letters and define her existence as that of the prisoner of an incompassionate Hibernia.

Vesey's library is crowded with volumes that speak of the refined culture breathed through her Abbey Leix paternal home (located near medieval Kilkenny). The year of publication of some of the volumes – going back one or two centuries, and in any case earlier than the time when Elizabeth became fully mature – strikes the reader. Among others, there are: a *Fiammetta* (Firenze 1533) with a calf cover, the *Histoire de la Reunion du Royaume de Portugal à la couronne de Castille* (1680), by J. Contestagio, translated from Italian; a first edition of *The Works of Sr. William Davenant* (1673), Herringman; *Memoirs of Denzil, Lord Holles*, the historical enemy, as a moderate Presbyterian, of Charles I and Cromwell, published in 1699; Nicolò Machiavelli's *Opere* (1550), "given by Maurice, Bishop of Ossory" and with her book-plate; *Il Petrarca con l'Espositione d'Alessandro Vellutello*, Vinegia (Venezia), 1528. A French version of Tucydides, *L'Hisotire de Thucydide de la Guerre du Peloponese*, Amsterdam, 1713, and the *Dizionario di Giovanni Torriano*, Italian-English and English-Italian, written by John Florio (1688) also appear in the catalogue. The eighteenth-century edition of John Donne's poems (1699, some of which were unpublished until then) is probably a residue of her youth studies, whereas her father's gift of a copy of the precious third *in folio* edition of Spenser is inscribed with the words: "Eliz. Vesey. Given by her father Sr. Thomas Vesey," and is accompanied by a page of verse handwritten by herself¹⁹. Other foreign works appear in the catalogue with her book-plate: a seventeenth-century translation from Italian of historical interest, *The Odes, Epodes, and Carmen Seculare of Horace*, with a dual text version English-Latin 1713-1725, an edition of *La Gerusalemme Liberata di Torquato Tasso* (1716): all books, one ventures to suggest, handed to a young Elizabeth to be instructed in classic languages and literatures; books usually reserved for intellectuals. This shows how much education was heavily regarded in the Vesey home. Some fifty-odd-year-old Vesey's quotations from Tasso's and Ariosto's epic verse and the pastoral motives in her correspondence to Lord Lyttelton in the original language, with a few variants and *omisses*, cannot go unnoticed; it is as if their author was digging into her youth memories. The hippogryph, the romantic heroines, the heroes of the chivalrous world emerge from the exotic section of the collection to inscribe a gendered mark, as it were, on her epistolary, dissolving out into the magic of Irish folklore. Several years

before leaving her paternal home, Mrs. Vesey continues her interaction with Italian literature: she receives as a homage – as already mentioned – a copy of 1550 Machiavelli's *Works* by one whose chair as a Bishop of Ossory had been occupied by her own father forty years beforehand.

Vesey's educational context cannot but be exquisite, durable and steadfast; her pedigree is a *carte visite* opening doors, in Ireland and Britain, to places attended by eminent personalities such as Jonathan Swift, the Dean of Saint Patrick's Cathedral, where her great-grandfather Boyle's (who died in 1702) human remains are kept.

The Vesey family used to leave Abbey Leix for Bath or London when the offspring were young; there Elizabeth could breathe the healthy thermal air as well as the effervescent air of urbanized society, less rigid than at home and inclined towards salon life. She begins her married life in Ireland, however, as a very young and privileged wife of William Handcock, M.P., an excessively jealous husband (Day 1991). She got married in 1731, when the Kingdom had resumed its strength after the disastrous consequences of the civil war (1680). In the course of the eighteenth-century the Irish capital goes through a splendid phase: dinners, balls, concerts, masquerades, two theatres and salon culture. Among the ladies who attended society, Miss Vesey (then Mrs. Handcock) had struck, at her first Irish visit, the refined Mary Granville, i.e. Mrs. Delaney (who belonged to the highest circles of British society). She had taken, as a second husband, the Irish Reverend Patrick Delaney, on account of his "wit and cleverness" (*ibidem*). In *Some Celebrated Irish Beauties of the Last Century* the salon cultural activity that Vesey engaged in, and was among the first women to devote themselves to it, is defined "Bluestocking mania" (Gerard 1895, xxi-xxii). The author considered the following ladies *avant garde* epitomes of feminine philosophical culture: Mrs. Pilkington, Mrs. Sycon (Swift's Psyche), Mrs. Grierson, Mrs. Vesey, and Mrs. Brooke who sat at the foot of the great Dean, while some among those *chaste wits*, Vesey and Lady Lucan, were affiliated to the London group. This last lady, affirms Walpole, possesses "an astonishing genius for copying whatever she sees. The pictures I lent her from my collection, and some advice I gave her, certainly brought her talents to wonderful perfection in five months; for before, she painted in crayons as ill as any lady in England" (Craig 1895, 135-36).

Mrs. Delaney has some reservations on high society Irish ladies: "their education is careful and their reading, especially in classical history, extensive [...] the conversation (even of the young girls) is marked by much intelligence, this however is somewhat marred by extraordinary coarseness; they use expressions, which coming from such fresh and lovely lips, have a startling and unpleasing effect" (Gerard 1895, 166). Vulgarity was diffused; the girls do not hesitate – and this is quite rude – to call a spade a spade.

Elizabeth was obviously free from such excesses; she became Mrs. Delaney's closest friend, and, together, they devoted themselves to a material culture activ-

ity that led Delaney to develop such a good artistic and practical craftsmanship that her works were eventually acquired by the British Museum²⁰. To whoever missed becoming acquainted with Mrs. Vesey to some depth, and yet offered her portrait to posterity, she did not appear ambitious or intellectual, but rather the equivalent of a modern head-hunter (Forbes 1807, 144)²¹. She, on the contrary, held the bluestocking experience in great regard: she often refers to it, in her letters, with the French term *badinage*. On this point she writes very honestly to Mrs. Montagu: “I don’t believe you my Dear Madam that you would quit the dangerous paths of Ambition if they lay in your walk. Your Character is too animated to retire to blue Stocking or any other exclusive Philosophy!”²². Her attempt at verse writing (mentioned above) must have convinced her that poetizing wasn’t her cup of tea, and as a consequence she did not pursue publication nor is any attempt in that sense known. She obviously kept in her library her 1749 copy of Pindar, calf-bound, with her book-plate and autograph. Far from her mentality was the description, in a 1711 issue of the *Spectator*, of the perfect lady as “out of the Tract of any amorous or ambitious Pursuits of her own” (Steele 1711, 48): women’s ambition, on the contrary, was perfectly alright when they are endowed with significant intellectual qualities.

Besides literature Vesey had a penchant for contemporary politics, as is proved by various hints, in her letters, at many topics, the interest in which is corroborated by the presence of writings catalogued in her library. One of the most pressing problems is the one concerning the question of the American colonies that she discusses in a letter of 26 January, 1776 to Mrs. Montagu (The Montagu Collection). As the incursions of women in the public sphere were rare, Vesey’s approach to politics can be read in terms of civic engagement and participation besides the personal interest in public affairs connected with her husband’s role as an M.P. and Accountant General of Ireland (Warner 1990, 3)²³. She sometimes hints at the ideas of Lord Lyttelton and Edmund Burke, whose role in the debate on the constitutional limits of the King’s executive power are present throughout the correspondence, although she does not resist dropping the topic when the reader has reached the moment when something more problematic is at stake (Burke 1770)²⁴. Her library records the presence at home of *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution... wherein the Right of Parliament to Tax our distant Provinces is explained and justified upon such Principles as will afford an equal security to the Colonists as to their Brethern at Home*, undoubtedly a purchase of her husband, who put his signature on it, which would be more or less contemporary to its publication in 1771, when the debate was becoming more and more pressing. Vesey’s autograph, instead, is on at least four volumes that concern America besides the writings by Burke: *The Annual Register, or, View of History, Politicks, and Literature*, 1758-1767 and 1770-1779, in twenty volumes (some of which autographed by both husband and wife), *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1760), *Speech of Edmund Burke on American Taxation, April 19, 1774* (1775), *Observations on a*

Late State of the Nation (1769), *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontent* (1770), and *Recherches philosophiques sur l'Origine del Idées que nous avons du Beau et du Sublime* (1765). An aside concerns the mention of the first edition of *The Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq., on moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies, Mar. 22, 1775* (1775), where a quotation from Burke appears in the Catalogue: "Whatever England has been growing to by a progressive increase of government, brought in by varieties of people, by succession of civilizing conquests and civilizing settlements, in a series of seventeen hundred years, you shall see as much added to her by America in a single life" (Robinson 1926, 13), an opinion that Vesey might also entertain. Among other kinds of books on America, one can list the original version of *Histoire Philosophique et Politique des Etablissements et du Commerce des Europeens dans les deux Indes* in six volumes (1772) by the infamous Abbé Raynal with Agmondisham Vesey's autograph on each title and Elizabeth's on the first; also present is the English version of the important work published in Dublin in 1779²⁵.

More at ease in the literary closed circles than in public spaces Vesey comes into contact – for the important project of the construction of a pseudo-Palladian villa on the river of the Liffey in the place of the historic gothic mansion – with artists of the local and Italian school. The history that accompanies the project is a matter for another essay; it must be recalled, however, that the collection of books of Architecture – from the Greeks to Palladium, and Vitruvius to Sir William Chambers, including the copy of Edward Baynard, *The History of the Cold Bathing both Ancient and Modern* (1706) – are all directed at knowing better all the cultural apparatus around the neoclassical villa and its possible acclimatization in Hibernia.

When her husband dies (a somewhat unfaithful husband, though the second marriage was more successful than her first one) Elizabeth loses her enthusiasm, and her health declines. As a not rich, elderly Irish widow, her popularity starts declining. Burney meets her when the star has set to let the morning appear. Mrs. Montagu, who is still very much on the stage, writes to Mme d'Arblay on Mrs. Vesey in words that should be considered as those written on her tomb: "A frippery character like a gaudy flower, may please while it is in bloom; but it is the virtuous only that, like the aromatics, preserve their sweet and reviving odour when withered"²⁶ (1842, 344).

Notes

¹ Major quotes from a letter by Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter dated 28 July 1779, The Montague Collection, The Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The Montagu Collection also contains manuscript letters from Elizabeth Vesey to Elizabeth Montagu.

² An advertisement of the catalogue is in W.H. Robinson (1926), *Notes and Queries* 150, 1, 197.

³ Among others, descriptions of works are supplied such as "Three Unknown Books Printed at Aberdeen," "Four Unknown Editions of Cicero," "The First Circumnavigation of the Globe," and "The Only Copy Known" (O'Sullivan 1926, *passim*).

⁴ Among the eighteenth-century schools for men *and* women is Samuel Whyte's English Grammar School, who had opened one at No. 75, Grafton Street (among its students was Richard Brinsley Sheridan), and offered private lessons to well-off young ladies at three guineas for eight lectures (Gerard 1895, 165). The author of the book, centred upon beautiful and famous young ladies, also wrote *Angelica Kaufmann: A Biography* (London, Ward and Downey, 1893).

⁵ R. Balfour, "Elizabeth Vesey, 1715-1791. Biographical Note" (Robinson 1926, i-iv).

⁶ See also, among other works of women's study interest, for Vesey and her entourage: Myers 1990; Rizzo 1994; Eger, Peltz 2008, 20-55.

⁷ The Vesseys spent time in London because Agmondisham was an M.P. in the British Parliament; they also lived in Dublin, in Molesworth Street, during the biennial sessions of the Irish Parliament, and in other periods of the year, at Lucan House, Lucan, Co. Dublin (the present residence of the Ambassador of Italy in Ireland), a few miles from Dublin. On the tradition of book-plates (*ex-libris*), see Keenan 2003.

⁸ Public libraries funded by the Irish Parliament in the course of the eighteenth-century were: Armagh Public Library (in today's Northern Ireland) and the Marsh Library in Dublin; the private ones were: TCD (Trinity College Dublin), RDS (Royal Dublin Society), RIA (Royal Irish Academy) and Edward Worth of Dr Stevens' Hospital, all of them in Dublin, besides two hundred more libraries of religious congregations, aristocrats, judges, lawyers, military officers, writers, artists and scholars (Cole 1974, 231-47).

⁹ The poem circulated first in manuscript, it was published three years later, in 1786.

¹⁰ The poem has been exhaustively commented upon by Moyra Haslett in the course of the ECLRNI (Eighteenth-Century Literature and Research Network of Ireland, the Network coordinated by Ian Campbell Ross) Symposium "Literature and Audience: Writing, Circulation, and Publication in the Long Eighteenth Century", that took place on November 17, 2007 and hosted by the Ambassador of Italy and the author of this paper in the Vesseys' historical mansion at Lucan. Haslett has thrown light, within the poem *The Bas Bleu*, on the role of disenchanting enchantress reserved by More to Mrs. Vesey, a charismatic creature who controls the group and challenge geometry; a woman of the same stuff as *not* dreams, but the Bluestocking ideals, aspirations and desires are made.

¹¹ On this point see my contribution entitled "Elizabeth Vesey's American Politics" to a Symposium in honour of Professor Ian Campbell Ross that took place in June 2012 in the Long Room Hub of Trinity College Dublin), not in print.

¹² Letter CXXII, dated Deal, Oct 22, 1779.

¹³ Horace Walpole, instead, calls them *Babels* for the abundance of brilliant spirits who were always present at each meeting (Craig 1895, 136).

¹⁴ For the development of the concept of improvement in Ireland, see Busteded 2000.

¹⁵ The quotation comes from Rev. J. Burrows, *Diary of a Journey through England and Wales to Ireland* (1773) (O'Kane 2004, 66).

¹⁶ William Cowper, "How various his employments whom the world/Calls idle, and who justly in return/Esteems that busy world an idler too!" *The Task* (Book III, ll. 352-54).

¹⁷ She was the descendant of Patrick Sarsfield, a favourite of the Irish people as a protagonist hero in the fight between the last Catholic forces of James II, who had just been defeated in the famous "battle of the Boyne" (1690) and had taken refuge in France, and the army of William III of Orange, something that earned him the reputation of Limerick's hero. He is remembered as the Earl of Lucan in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

¹⁸ See the author's essay, "Elizabeth Vesey's Letters from Lucan", to be published.

¹⁹ The last four lines are from "The Cock and the Fox: or, the Tale of the Nun's Priest" by John Dryden, one of the editors of the text; the four initial ones centred on the myth of Philemon and Baucis are probably a translation by Vesey from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 8.

²⁰ An account of her activity is recorded in Hayden 1980; Mrs. Delaney's flowers are today exhibited as specimens and changed over every so often.

²¹“Without attempting to shine herself, she had the happy secret of bringing forward talents of all kind, and of diffusing over society the gentleness of her own character”. The same piece appears also as “Mr Stillingfleet, and the Blue Stocking Club”, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* 109 (1811), 309-310.

²²The letter is dated February 1775 (The Montagu Collection).

²³Warner speaks of “technology of privacy” and “technology of publicity”.

²⁴This crucial knot is discussed in Reid 1995; Edmund Burke made known his own point of view in *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, of 23 April, 1770.

²⁵For Vesey’s involvement with the politics of the colonies, see note 12.

²⁶Letter of Mrs. Montagu to Frances Burney, dated 1785.

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