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Jupiter, Medea and Triton, October 1778: new evidence

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ABSTRACT
In 1778 HMS Jupiter and HMS Medea engaged the French Warship Triton. This engagement was widely reported in British newspapers and an in-depth review demonstrates considerable variation in their content. New evidence is presented which casts doubt on accepted accounts of the engagement and indicates that the Medea's crew was inexperienced, that the crew refused to fight once the action turned lethal and that Medea's subsequent re-assignment to 'the worst Station that a Ship can be placed in, the North Sea,' was ordered by Lord Mulgrave, publicly rebuked at the trial of Admiral Keppel by the father of the Medea's captain only weeks before.

Introduction

This Research Note arose from a University of Winchester post-doctoral research project into the correspondence of Edward Montagu, (1717-1798), Master in Chancery. It focuses on Edward's nephew Captain James Montagu (1752-1794), James is unknown to history save for his death on 'the Glorious First of June'. However, information contained in his uncle's letters to the first Earl of Ailesbury, and contemporary news reports, reveal information about military events not otherwise easily visible to the historical gaze and not previously discussed.

Captain James Montagu (1752-1794) was the third son of Admiral John Montagu (1719-1795), and one of five Wiltshire Montagu's in the British military during the second half of the eighteenth century. In July 1778 Edward Montagu reported that 'My nephew Capt James Montagu is just appointed to the Command of the *Medea* now at Bristol & I believe lately built there by Contract'.[1] *Medea* was indeed Bristol built,

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[1]Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre (hereinafter W&SHC) 9/35/203/28, Letter dated 'London July 28 1778'.

'Bristol, May 2. Tuesday was launched from Mr Hillhouse's yard, near Hot-Wells, his Majesty's ship Medea a fine frigate of 32 guns, - the first King's ship ever built in this city'.[2] The deployment of the new ship was delayed, numerous papers reported that 'Though the Government are in such want of frigates, yet the Penelope and Medea, which were launched … upwards of three months ago, are not yet ready for sea'.[3] However Medea eventually joined Admiral Keppel's fleet and in September 1778 newspapers reported that,

> The Medea frigate, belonging to Admiral Keppel's fleet, has taken an American ship, of 20 guns mounted, from a French port to Boston, which had on board the following valuable cargo, viz, a great variety of India goods, fans, bunches of artificial pearls and garnets, paper hangings, watch chains, complete sets of paste shoe, knee and stock buckles, gold watches, with chain, seals &c. The Medea chased the American vessel upwards of 40 hours before she came up with her, during which she started part of her water, in order to lighten her, which made her sail the swifter.[4]

A month later *Medea,* in company with the brand-new HMS *Jupiter* (30 guns) under Captain Reynolds, was involved in a 'most gallant action' off Cape Finisterre. A number of newspapers carried an,

> Extract of a Letter from Falmouth, Nov 23. The Medea frigate is arrived at Lisbon, much shattered by an Engagement which she had in the Bay with a French 74 Gun Ship, with whom she left the Jupiter, of 50 guns, closely engaged, and 'tis feared, from the Great Disparity of Force, she must be taken. The Medea had an 18 Pounder shot through her Hull under Water, which rendered her so leaky, that she was under a necessity of quitting the Contest'.[5]

Other versions of the event were reported,

> the action between the French 74 gunship and the Jupiter of 50 guns, and the Medea of 28, happened off Saint Martins, on the coast of France. The Medea was dismasted almost at the beginning of the action, but the Jupiter continued to engage until a gale of wind arose, whereby the Frenchman was drove

[2]*The Bath Chronicle* 6 May 1778.
[3]*Jopson's Coventry Mercury*, 27 July 1778; also the *Newcastle Chronicle, Caledonian Mercury* and *Norfolk Chronicle* all 12 September 1778.
[4]*Ipswich Journal* 26 September 1778, *Northampton Mercury,* 28 September 1778 and *Saunders's Newsletter* 1 October, all 1778.
[5]*Drewry's Derby Mercury* 27 November, *The Kentish Gazette* and *Caledonian Mercury* 2 December and *The Dublin Evening Post* 5 December, all 1778.

> onshore, and the Jupiter narrowly escaped; It is supposed that the Frenchman would be lost. The Medea has since got into Lisbon, and we hear that the French ship is the Vigo, the Captain and several men killed, and the vessel much damaged, but no tidings have come to hand of the Jupiter.[6]

Yet another, fuller and more *celebratory*, version was carried by many other newspapers,

> The Lisbon papers are full of Commendations of a most gallant Action which happened on the 20th of October, between his Majesty's Ships the Jupiter, of 50 guns, Capt Reynolds, and the Medea, of 28, Capt James Montagu, with a French 80 Gun Ship, off Cape Finisterre. Capt Reynolds and Capt Montagu conceiving her to be and Indiaman, got so close to her without Apprehensions of Danger, that that it was too late to escape it, they therefore attacked her like Englishmen. Capt Reynolds at once laid alongside of her to Windward, at Five o'Clock P.M. the Medea placed herself on the Lee Quarter, and continued for some Time giving her Broadsides, but from the Inferiority of her Force could do very little Execution [Medea only mounted 28 guns with a throw-weight of 117 pounds, compared to *Jupiter's* of 414 pounds and Triton's 550 pounds], and was soon driven to leeward with an 18 Pounder between Wind and Water, and never able to recover her Station, so as to be of any Service to the Jupiter. Capt. Reynolds continued close engagement till 8 o'Clock, when the French ship gave Way, took the advantage of the very dark Night, and escaped to Ferrol, with the loss of her Captain and above 200 men. The Jupiter arrived in Lisbon in a shattered Condition to refit, and found the Medea there on the same Business.[7]

Captain Reynolds' report stated that the identity of the French warship was unknown but he later learnt she was Ship of the Line *Triton,* under her captain the Comte de Ligondés.

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[6]*The Kentish Gazette*, 2 December 1778. This version on page 4, the previous on page 3.Which ship the report meant is unclear, the only records for *Vigo* are either too early (a British Prize 1702-3) or too late (1810-1865, 1817-1887) for this action - source *Threedecks*, at https://threedecks.org/index.php?display_type=show_ship&id=521, and https://threedecks.org/index.php?display_type=show_ship&id=7331. All Accessed 5 October 2026.

[7]*The Norfolk Chronicle* & *The Kentish Gazette* 5 December, *The Hampshire Chronicle* & *The Reading Mercury* 7 December, *The Cumberland Pacquet and Ware's Whitehaven Advertiser, The Manchester Mercury and Harrop's General Advertiser* and *Adam's Weekly Courant* 8 December, *Saunders's News-Letter* 10 December and *Caledonian Mercury* 12 December, all 1778.

Historical research has thrown doubt on the casualty figures given in the newspapers, when as early as 1897 William Clowes and Clements Markham claimed that 'Triton had 13 killed & about 20 wounded … The Jupiter's loss was three killed & seven wounded; the Medea's loss was one killed & three wounded'.[8] Clowes and Clements noted that the Comte de Ligondés was apparently wounded, not killed as some newspapers reported, and this is supported by the *Hibernian Journal*,

> Brest, Nov. 16. The St. Michael, and the Triton, of 64 Guns each, are come into this Road, the last commanded by the Comte de Ligondes, who being separated from the St. Michael came across and engaged with an English Man of War of 70 Guns, and a Frigate of 30. 'The Engagement lasted several Hours, till the English Ships ceased her [sic] Fire and sheered off. The Comte was wounded in his right Heed, by a Musket Ball, and another in his Arm. He had 15 Men killed, and 14 wounded.[9]

Captain James Montagu's account in his log gives a slightly different version from that seen in the newspapers, including dating the event a day later than usually given, as 21 October,

> Wednesday 21 October Lat 43 53N long a C Finnistere 77 &c Bearing & Distance at Noon Cape Finisterre S52W 24 leagues Fresh gales & V Clear Weather. PM Saw a Sail Gave Chace with the Jupiter At 6 Bills shortn'd Sail came up with the Chace who hoisted French Colours & fired on the Jupiter, which she returned. We endeavoured to get upon her Quarter to rake her, but it blowing hard & the Ship so crank we could not, but ran alongside & receiv'd two heavy fires which were returned in the best manner our force would admit of & upon the Jupiter getting between us & the Enemy Wore with the intention of getting on his Quarter & on coming up found the firing had ceased & the Ship to Leeward which we took to be the Jupiter wear & Stand from the Enemy. The wind increasing & the weather thick lost sight of both. Our loss in the Action was one Man killed & three wounded. (AM Buried James Lockington, found one of the Chain Plates shot away, Carpenter fixing a new one & stopping the hole in the Water).[10]

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[8]Sir William Clowes & Clements Markham *The Royal Navy, a History from the Earliest times to the Present*, (London: Sampson Lowe Marston, 1897) *vol IV*, pp.21-22.
[9]*The Hibernian Journal: Or, Chronicle of Liberty*, 14 December 1778.
[10]UK National Archive (hereinafter TNA) ADM 51/573 Part II 'Journal of the Proceedings of His Majesty's ship the Medea between the 25th July 1778 & the 31st of July 1779 by James Montagu Comm'.

This confirms the *Medea*'s losses, and the damage below the waterline. The use of the word 'crank' to describe the ship is noteworthy. 'krank' is 'ill' or 'sick' in German, and there were very close ties between Britain and Germany at the time with George III being also Elector of Hanover and Hessian troops regularly deployed with British military forces. It was also used in English to imply 'bent out of shape' in 1793 and the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives '(c1745-1825) In figurative sense of 'twisted, angular'; crabbed, awkward or difficult to pronounce, understand, or execute'.[11] Tied to these definitions the Royal Navy used the term to describe a ship that was 'either because her construction or by the way her cargo was stowed, could not carry a great deal of sail without the danger of capsizing.'[12] This would explain why the Medea was unable to 'get upon [*Triton's*] quarter' in the heavy swell and wind. From Montagu's logs it is clear that *Jupiter* and *Medea* were not in Lisbon at the same time, *Medea* was there in the River Tagus for three days, 4 - 6 November 1778, but the first mention of seeing *Jupiter* was Saturday 14 November at 42 04 N 2 55W 'fresh Gales & Cloudy Spoke His Majesty's Ship Jupiter hoist out the cutter & went on board Am Blowing fresh with rain in company with Jupiter'.[13] A number of different and conflicting versions of the events can be found.

The received version, that *Medea* was unable to continue the action because of damage sustained, does not tell the whole story and is challenged by an account given by Edward Montagu. In a letter to the Earl of Ailesbury in March 1779, Edward said, 'I agree with him that the Medea has hitherto been much out of Luck, more particularly in the Affair of Lisbon'.[14] The 'him' was a 'young Seaman', one of James Montagu's midshipmen William Birchell. Birchell was a protege of Lady Ailesbury taken on by James Montagu through her patronage, directed through Edward Montagu in July 1778. Edward Montagu had informed the Earl that 'If Mr Wm Birchell is not disposed of & still continues an object of Lady Ailesburys favour, Capt Montagu will be happy in obeying her Ladyships Comands – & if [he] shod happen to be at Bath may go on board with great Facility, - & little Expence'.[15] Edward Montagu's letter of March 1779 suggests a reason why the *Medea* was unable to be more effective in the battle that is not given elsewhere; Edward stated that, 'Tho' Mr Birchell properly keeps the Secrets of his Ship yet I will whisper them to your Lordship', indicating that Birchell had not told the Earl of the 'affair' but was clearly the source of Edward's information. Edward Montagu told the Earl that the *Medea* was undermanned and mostly crewed by

[11] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "crank (adj.3), sense 2," September 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6911702879. Accessed 5 January 2025.
[12] 'Terminology', The Art of Age of Sail at http://www.ageofsail.net/aoshiptm.asp. Accessed 21 August 2026.
[13] TNA ADM 51/573 Part II
[14] W&SHC 9/35/203/32, Letter dated 'Frognal Grove March 31 – 79'.
[15] W&SHC 9/35/203/28, Letter dated 'London July 28 1778'.

inexperienced hands, 'To accommodate Mr Keppel [and] prevent a Ship in his Fleet giving Offence to a Seamans Eye the Medea was stript'd of every good Man & when she went to Sea might have been taken by a ten oar'd Boat'. The lack of experienced hands would have also contributed to the *Medea* being unable to manoeuvre as was required and 'get upon her quarter'. It was also contributory to what amounted to a mutiny, or at least loss of control of the crew, during the action; Edward Montagu continued that 'In the Engagement, he [Birchell] mentions as soon as it was promulged that "a man was kill'd" [all] except eight [of] the whole Crew ran from their Quarters & neither Persuasion, Threats or the Point of the Sword could get them back', which would have made it impossible for the ship to continue the action. This would have reflected very badly on the Captain but there is no mention of it anywhere.

There was no investigation of the incident, Edward Montagu claimed, because James did not insist on an enquiry to defend himself 'As this Circumstance must have been publish'd on an Enquiry into the Captain's Conduct & whose Reputation has greatly suffered by Newspaper criticisms he was persuaded to withdraw an Application so necessary for his own Honor, to prevent the Increase of Abuse elsewhere' [i.e. criticism of Keppel]. An investigation of the *Medea*'s logs, those of both Montagu and her Sailing Master John Wilson, was made to see if further information could be located about this incident.[16] Nothing at all was found, and William Birchell/Edward Montagu's claims cannot be substantiated. However it may not be a coincidence that, in the words of his uncle, 'In return [for not insisting on an enquiry], by the Interest of Ld Mulgrave he [James Montagu] is rewarded with the worst Station that a Ship can be placed in, the North Sea, & is to call every 14 days at Grimsby Road'.[17] Lord Mulgrave was Captain the Honourable Constantine John Phipps, (1744-92), 2nd Baron Mulgrave, and in 1779 he was a Lord of the Admiralty, and more than capable of arranging the re-assignment of a naval vessel. In command of HMS *Courageux* (74 guns) he was also part of Keppel's fleet. At the First Battle of Ushant in July 1778, before *Medea* joined the Fleet, he was in Palliser's division and 'played a distinguished part in action with the 'Ville de Paris' (110 guns). In the subsequent courts-martial sparked by the dispute between Admiral Keppel & his second-in-command, Hugh Palliser, he sided with Palliser'.[18] Subsequently, at Keppel's trial in January 1779, Mulgrave was 'unable to hide his support for his fellow Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Hugh Palliser, caused a rumpus and was ultimately censured by the court for refusing to give a direct answer when asked by Vice-Admiral John Montagu as to whether he had seen any instance of

[16]TNA ADM 51/573 Part II; TNA ADM 52/1864 'Medeas Log & Journal John Wilson Master 20 May 78 - 19 January 79'.
[17] W&SHC 9/35/203/32, Letter dated 'Frognal Grove March 31 – 79'.
[18]'Lord Mulgrave', *Royal Museums of Greenwich* at http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/14345.html#D8rK8gshVq1xzuDp.99. Accessed 4 January 2025.

neglect in Keppel's duty.[19] Following the popular commander-in-chief's acquittal, Mulgrave's London residence in Harley Street was one of those attacked by a mob, and his windows were broken'.[20] Given John Montagu was James' father this might be a cause for dislike of Captain Montagu. The trial took place in January 1779 with Edward Montagu's letter written only six weeks later. It is very possible therefore that Mulgrave's 'Interest' in having the *Medea,* and her Captain, re-assigned to the North Sea was a result of the opprobrium Mulgrave suffered because of Admiral Montagu. This does not prove this new version of events but, as it supports Edward Montagu's assertion of Mulgrave's involvement in *Medea's* reassignment, it lends credence to his other claims. As does the consideration that if James Montagu refused to cast a shadow on Keppel's reputation by not seeking an enquiry into the 'affair at Lisbon', even at the cost of his own 'honour', this would not have recommended him to Mulgrave.

It is suggested here that while not proving that the events described by William Birchell and Edward Montagu were what happened, it raises considerable doubt as to whether the accepted 'facts' surrounding the engagement of HMS Jupiter and HMS Medea with French Ship of the Line Triton in October 1778 are correct. It is maintained that the supporting evidence, while circumstantial, is convincing.

[19]Decision of the court read to Lord Mulgrave by the Judge Advocate 'My Lord, I am directed by the Court to observe to your Lordship, that in the course of the reasons you have thought fit to use in your declining an answer to the question put you by one of the members of the Court, with the approbation of the Court, you have made use of improper language, and that too with a warmth unbecoming the Court to receive, Your treatment of them is such, as they cannot pass over without observing to your Lordship their sense of the impropriety of it; and it is their pleasure, that I acquaint your Lordship of their disapprobation of your Lordship's behaviour to them,' [Anon, *The Trail of the Honourable Augustus Keppel, Admiral of the Blue Squadron, for a Charge of Misconduct and Neglect of Duty exhibited against him by Vice-Admiral Hugh Palliser*, (Bath: R Cruttwell, 1779), p.120.

[20]Richard Hiscocks, 'Hon. Constantine John Phipps, Lord Mulgrave', *More than Nelson,* (4 April 2016) at https://morethannelson.com/officer/hon-constantine-phipps-lord-mulgrave/. Accessed 4 January 2025.