

Authorizing Access/Sustaining Desire: *Montagu's Visible Harem*

Narin Hassan

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters were composed during her travels with her husband Edward Wortley, who was appointed British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1716. Her correspondences with historical figures including Alexander Pope, the Abbe Conti, and Lady Mar were published in 1762 and were extremely popular during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of this large collection of letters, her descriptions of Turkey received much attention after their publication and continue to interest contemporary critics and scholars. Numerous editions of the *Letters from the Levant or Turkish Embassy Letters* exist in the form of illustrated "coffee table" books and more complete volumes with extensive critical introductions. As contemporary discussions of travel, Orientalism, and postcolonial theory flourish, Montagu's letters are often cited as examples of early women's travel writing. From their inception the letters were described as being especially insightful since they provided a vision of the "Oriental" through the eyes of a female traveler. Mary Astell in her preface to the 1763 publication writes:

I am malicious enough to desire that the World shou'd see to how much better purpose the LADIES Travel than their LORDS; and that, whilst it is surfeited with Male Travels, all in the same Tone and stuff with the same Trifles, a LADY has the skill to strike out a New Path, and to embellish a worn out Subject with a variety of fresh and elegant Entertainment.¹

Montagu was introduced as engaging in a novel project, one especially unique because she was a woman. Of her many accomplishments, including the popularization of smallpox inoculations in England, Montagu is most often recognized as the first European woman to enter harems and Turkish baths and to write about them. It is these highly aestheticized descriptions which seem to have developed a legacy for Montagu.² Her representations of intimate, private women's spaces in Turkey excited and intrigued readers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Fanny Parkes in 1850 wrote, "the perusal of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's work has rendered me very anxious

to visit a zenana and to become acquainted with the ladies of the East."³ Later, the French painter Ingres made use of her letters to produce his *Bain Turc*.⁴

Within contemporary criticism, Montagu is frequently described as an early feminist whose writings destabilize masculinist Orientalist discourse. She is especially recognized as the western woman who made the harem visible.⁵ In many discussions of Montagu, gender is highlighted as the unsettling feature which complicates her relation to established Orientalist conventions. In this article I explore the precarious and complicated space occupied by Montagu as both Orientalist and woman. I read her letters in order to examine the intersections between an emerging genre of travel writing by women and the already available and popular representations of the Orient. The letters reveal Montagu's ambivalent relations to these representations, and provide us with an opportunity to examine the emerging constructions of race, gender, and ethnicity in the eighteenth century.

Before approaching the texts themselves, I would like to explore current reception of the *Turkish Embassy Letters*. Just as older collections of the letters enticed readers with embellished illustrations and descriptions, recent editions of the letters continue to frame the letters with exotic visual and textual cues.⁶ For example, Christopher Pick's 1988 edition titled *Embassy to Constantinople* includes several reproductions of odalisque paintings, European representations of harem life and "portraits" of Turkish men and women painted by European artists. The popularized image of Lady Mary Montagu in her "Turkish habit," attributed to the painter Charles Philips and reproduced often as a frontispiece to older editions, is again displayed in Pick's edition as readers approach the section titled "Journey to Turkey." In older and newer editions, Montagu is celebrated as an early woman writer who was able to identify with women of other cultures. In her 1993 introduction to *Turkish Embassy Letters*, Anita Desai mentions Montagu's "ability to study an alien culture according to its own values" and suggests that "she was not inclined to exaggerate, and did not color her accounts with dramatic effects."⁷ In some recent criticism on Montagu emphasis is placed on her distance from "mainstream" Orientalist discourse with this distance predicated on and guaranteed by Montagu's gender. Being a woman becomes in this criticism both a metaphor for "the good," and "the culturally sympathetic," as Sara Suleri has noted with respect to British India. The frequently quoted Joseph Lew spends time articulating "Lady Mary's female vision" and its relationship to "the intertextual space of male Orientalism." Lew also describes Montagu as an important "first feminist" and argues that her ideas and writings constitute a subversion of Orientalist discourse and patriarchy. He writes, "Her description of how Oriental women subverted order anticipated by two hundred fifty years, the work of feminists such as Mernissi and Abu-Lughod"⁸ Lisa Lowe also discusses Montagu's identification with Turkish female society as invoking "an emergent feminist discourse."⁹

We must refrain from categorizing Montagu as an early feminist sympathetic to the concerns of "other" women without recognizing the fraught assumptions of early

British feminism. The growth of feminist discourses in Britain in the enlightenment does not take place in a vacuum but alongside other cultural, economic, and social forces.¹⁰ By comparing Montagu to feminists like Mernissi, Lew covers over the complicated ways her letters functioned historically. Lew's comments presume a model of Western feminism unaffected by British imperialism. In her discussion of British feminism's relationship to empire, Antoinette Burton claims:

Examining the ways in which feminism produced a colonized female Other across a variety of its public discourses demonstrates that British feminism's imperial concerns were not idiosyncratic, but permeated the whole fabric of feminist ideology and indeed that British feminist's identity *as feminists* depended upon convictions about the cultural, political and racial superiority of all Britons.¹¹

Here Burton reminds us that during this period, travel narratives functioned to sediment differences between western and non-western women.¹² As crucial fragments of eighteenth century discourse on the Orient, Montagu's letters are troubled as much by issues of race, ethnicity, class, and nationality as they are by gender.

I read the letters to question how implicitly Montagu contributes to and is implicated within the structures of Orientalist discourses and rising colonialist ideologies. As a woman writer marginalized from the "mainstream" of literary production, Montagu makes use of the Oriental space to "authorize" her own representations. The space of the bath is particularly useful for her purposes since it is the space that male travel writers cannot enter. The confining spaces within which she situates her subjects—the space of the harem or bath and the space beneath the veil—are not only metaphors for her own confined authorial space. They are also central to the notions of Eastern femininity which pervade her letters.

Montagu evokes the sense of a community of women by making Turkish women the primary subjects of her *Turkish Embassy Letters*. Her representations of this community are, however, heavily influenced by already functioning masculinist and Orientalist assumptions and literary conventions. She appeals to these assumptions and conventions to express her impressions and to assert her authority as a writer and observer. She assumes the role of ethnographer, one which she recognizes as a position of power. Her letters indicate that she was aware of her position as an observer and reporter of a different, already "curious" space; she repeatedly acknowledges that these lands and the people in them are somehow different. Throughout her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, she refers to previous travelers who have depicted this part of the world, both to complement their representations and to legitimate her own. When describing the "embellishments" of the East, she is reminded of the *Arabian Nights*, at the time one of the most pervasive and well known authoritative texts on the Orient, and comments, "You forget, dear sister, those very tales were written by an author of this country, and (excepting the enchantments) *are a real representation of manners here*"¹³ (emphasis





added).¹⁴ Montagu's authority relies on the fact that the differences described in texts like the *Arabian Nights* are real. Her aim is to offer her readers an image which, like the *Arabian Nights*, can capture their imaginations and sustain the "authenticity" of the differences she describes.¹⁵ To succeed in such a venture, Montagu presents the differences between the culture she is representing and her own as inherent and essential. The wider and more fantastic these differences are, the more they contribute to the value of her letters.

Of the many letters compiled in the Turkish Embassy collection, Montagu's letters to Lady Mar and Lady Rich recounting her visit to the Turkish baths in Adrianople has received the most critical attention. These letters are good examples of how the discourse of Orientalism is unevenly traversed by particular conceptions of race and gender. Dated April 1, 1717, the letters demonstrates Montagu's fascination with and aestheticization of the secluded space of the women's bath. Her choice of this locale is revealing. It satisfies her own and her readers' curiosity to see what has not yet been seen.

Her choice of describing this particular locale in order to represent the activities of women in the East is particularly interesting since the notion of harems already existed as the primary literary and visual signifiers of the Orient. Harems and baths were and continue to be some of the most sustained metaphors of Eastern sexuality and mentality. Conglomerating notions of pleasure and danger, desire and fantasy, the inner space of the bath or harem were the most impenetrable, but most fetishistically charged locale for men, particularly white men. In his "The Eroticized Orient: Images of the Harem in Montesquieu and his Precursors," Ali Behdad mentions how,

The harem as a prevalent literary topos came to signify boundless oriental passion within its secluded space, behind its closed doors and curtained windows. What makes this fictional institution attractive to the "European imagination" and significant to its vision of the Orient is the way in which the harem can incorporate within itself the two principle themes or stereotypes associated with the Oriental, namely, her lustful sensuality and his inherently violent nature.¹⁶

Similarly, Billie Melman describes how,

... in the Western imagination, the *hammam* came to apotheosize the sensual, effeminate Orient. Never actually penetrated by male travelers, the women's public baths were identified as the *loci sensuales* in the erotically charged landscape of the Orient. For the female bathers combined two of the oriental woman's traditional characteristics: over-sexuality and the easterner's propensity towards indolence.¹⁷

Behdad has argued that by entering the “secret realm” of the women’s harem Montagu dismantles the seclusionary nature of the space itself and disrupts its very existence as a space of fantasy. He writes, “The fact that Lady Mary was able to enter the harem seems to have cleared away all the repressive fantasies that one finds in the discourse of male Orientalists.”¹⁸ While Montagu’s entrance into this space may have cleared away some of the previous notions of it as a space of fantasy and desire, I would argue that breaking down this barrier of concealment is not enough. There are numerous elements in this letter which reveal Montagu’s uneasy relations to the spaces and to the women she encounters. In fact, Montagu’s constructions of these spaces continues to be influenced by the very representations she hopes to debunk.

“I am now got into a new world where everything I see appears to me a change of scene,” writes Montagu in the first line of her letter to Lady Rich. Her visit to Adrianople, “one of the most beautiful towns in the Turkish Empire and famous for it’s hot baths,” was indeed a novel experience. Montagu’s impressions of Turkey and its inhabitants will be filtered through this visit, especially through her experiences in the Turkish baths. David Spurr examined in his *The Rhetoric of Empire* travel writers’ and colonizers’ relations to the new lands and people they encountered. Spurr writes:

In the face of what may appear as a vast cultural and geographic blankness, colonization is a form of self inscription on the lives of people who are conceived of as an extension of the landscape. For the colonizer as for the writer, it becomes a question of establishing authority through the demarcation of identity and difference.¹⁹

Similarly, Montagu’s perceptions of Turkish women will be inextricably linked to the landscape of the baths. The nature of all Turkish women will be discerned from her impressions of what takes place in the baths. As a consequence, the baths become for Montagu and others to follow, the most available signifiers of Turkish women, and by extension, of all Turkish life and activity.²⁰ Montagu’s descriptions of the baths and of the women she encounters are clearly relational. She also leaves no doubt about the referential points of all her descriptions. She is sympathetic towards Turkish women’s moral stature and respectability to the extent that they conform to the good conduct and morality of her compatriots. She writes, “As to their Morality or good Conduct, I can say like Arlequin, ’tis just as ’tis with you, and the Turkish Ladys don’t commit one sin the less for not being Christians.”²¹ She is fascinated by their freedoms and their openness towards one another, and she describes the bath as the equivalent of a coffee house in England, a place from which women were excluded.

Montagu narrates her visit to the baths as “a sight as you never saw in your Life and what no book of travells could inform you of;” because “’Tis no less than Death for a Man to be found in one of these places.” As a woman, Montagu was destined to give us

a glimpse of what no other travel writer had previously described. The physical absence of men from this enclosed and guarded female space is countered, however, by the presence of masculinist themes and conventions of representation which taint Montagu's notions of Turkish femininity. Cynthia Lowenthal in her article "The Veiled Romance: Lady Mary's Embassy Letters" describes how the *Monthly Review* appreciated the "masculine" character of Lady Mary's prose, and quotes that "there are no pretty-nesses, no Ladyisms in these natural, easy familiar Epistles."²² While I would disagree that these are "natural," "easy," and "familiar" epistles, the focus in this review on the "masculine" nature of these letters raises the following question: What constitutes the masculine character of Lady Mary's letters?²³

I propose that Montagu's impressions and letters were already deeply inscribed by male Orientalist notions of what it meant to see and to write about "Oriental" subjects and spaces. As Billie Melman argues, "The explorer's gaze, however, had been generically and literally, man's gaze. For until the eighteenth century, travel outside Europe was a male experience."²⁴ Montagu's reference to the portrait painter Jervas during her description of the bath scene is a perfect example of how her spectatorship and authorship cannot escape the influences of English racial and patriarchal authority. She "secretly" wishes that "Mr. Jervas could have been there invisible" and comments:

it would have very much improved his art, to see so many fine women naked, in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions while their slaves (generally pretty girls of seventeen or eighteen) were employed in braiding their hair in several pretty fancies.²⁵

Montagu's reference to Jervas reveals the ways in which she is conscious of a male audience. Jervas effectively represents the physically absent yet symbolically present male figure. This "secret" and "invisible" presence also increases and makes manifest the erotic and exotic charge of the space of the baths as the objects of a voyeur's gaze.

Far from contesting stereotypical constructs of Eastern femininity and sexuality, Montagu's description of the women's baths ultimately confirms established and troubling notions. Her primary mode of representing Eastern femininity, a detailed and elaborate description of their beauty and adornment, contributes to these representations. She is amazed by their "skins shiningly white," their "beautiful hair divided into many tresses," and their "civility and beauty." This emphasis on the "feminine picturesque,"²⁶ on the visually appealing nature of Turkish femininity, figures as Montagu's attempt to alleviate more obvious notions of difference. Her aestheticization of the figures works, however, against this since it takes place within a romanticized and idealized space of illusion. Montagu's tone of amazement and her references to the impossibility of such beauty confirm that the spaces and women she describes are always also the products of her fantasies and wishes. I do not mean to assume that the "beauty"

and “civility” that she sees and writes about are necessarily imagined or consciously exaggerated. Rather, I read Montagu’s letters as determined by a masculinist and colonial Orientalist discourse that influences and guides her textual response to her visual experience.²⁷ As such, her descriptions are symptomatic of her ambivalent position within a discourse which requires her to depict the racial “other” against the gendered “same.”²⁸

Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* provide a historical angle to view the relationship between emergent European feminisms and colonial desire. Her letters display the ways in which gendered, racial, national, and class differences complicate and interrupt narratives of eighteenth century Orientalism. They also confirm that the authority of female travel writers at this historical moment was their uses of established Orientalist and masculinist representational strategies. While I argue that Montagu confronts a range of discursive pressures and constraints in her letters, largely imposed by a masculinist discourse, I refrain from confining her critically within a predominant Orientalist frame. It is the unstable and ambiguous qualities of her letters which provide a space to explore the complexities of emerging Orientalisms and feminisms. The most challenging feature of her letters is precisely the difficulty of situating and interpreting them through fixed categories of identification. This is why I find it important to challenge contemporary readings of Montagu which readily designate her writings as “feminist” or anti-imperialist. We must consider how constructions of gender by Montagu and other early travel writers have influenced the undercurrents and intersections of current global feminisms before we celebrate them as “protofeminists” and in turn as culturally sympathetic. As we assess and critique these texts, however “post-colonial” or “feminist” we assume they may be, we need to refrain from assigning metaphors and categories to history without considering the complicated textual, spatial, and cultural intersections within it.

Notes

- 1 Mary Astell, Preface. *Letters from the Levant, During the Embassy to Constantinople, 1716–1718*. By Mary Wortley Montagu (London: J. Rickerby, 1838), iv.
- 2 For a discussion of the aesthetic in Montagu's letters see Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetic, 1716–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).
- 3 Fanny Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* (2 vols. New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 59.
- 4 For a detailed discussion of Ingres' use of Montagu's letters see Bernard Yeazell, "Public Baths and Private Harems: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Origins of Ingres's *Bain Turc*." *Yale Journal of Criticism*. vol. 7 number 1 1994, 111. The author mentions Ingres' "decades long obsession with a piece of writing, the Turkish Embassy Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu" and also claims that sometime in the late 1830s he copied several lengthy extracts from the letters into his notebooks, although he seems to have freely adapted them and woven some of his own notes within them.
- 5 Several texts explore the intersections of gender within the imperial dynamic of the nineteenth century. See for example, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Antoinette Burton, *The Burdens of History. British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). While it is much easier to see the ways that British women contributed to colonialist ideologies in the nineteenth century (economically, as consumers of colonial products, ideologically, as "memsahibs" in India for example), in the early eighteenth century, the intersections between developing gender politics and Orientalisms are less obvious and seem to be examined much less in current debates.
- 6 For historical examples, see Lord Wharnccliffe, *The Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (London, 1837).
- 7 Malcolm Jack, ed., *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Turkish Embassy Letters* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), xxvi–xxvii.
- 8 Joseph Lew, "Lady Mary's Portable Seraglio." *Eighteenth Century Studies*. 24 (1991): 432–450.
- 9 Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains. French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 32.
- 10 Montagu was associated with the bluestocking feminists in England at this time; however this movement emerged among women in the privileged classes and was formulated within a system of gender capitalism.
- 11 Burton, 28.
- 12 Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones. Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 157.
- 13 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Ed. Robert Halsband. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–67), 299.
- 14 Billie Melman explains that "Most eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers would have recourse to three disparate but confluent kinds of texts. First and most influential is the *Thousand and One Nights*, or *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, commonly known to readers as the *Arabian Nights Entertainment*." Melman also confirms that by the time Montagu made her trip to Istanbul she "was thoroughly read" in Galland's transcription of these tales and would have used Galland as a "source of ethnographic data to be cited as authority, a repository of ready anecdotes, types, and plots." (Billie Melman, *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918*. [Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1992], 63–64).
- 15 Robert Mack introduces the collection of eighteenth century fictional *Oriental Tales* by commenting that Montagu's letters "read like an episode straight out of the *Arabian Nights*—like an Eastern

romance, an oriental tale" (Robert Mack, ed. *Oriental Tales*. [New York: Oxford UP., 1992], ix).

16 Ali Behdad, "The Eroticized Orient: Images of the Harem in Montesquieu and his Precursors." *Stanford French Review*. 13 (1989): 109–126, 110.

17 Melman, 89.

18 Behdad, 116.

19 David Spurr, *The Rhetoric Of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing & Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 7.

20 Although as a woman, Montagu is allowed access into the baths, she enters it as a racially and culturally displaced intruder. She enters the baths in her western garb and mentions in her letter that she was fully clothed in her "riding habit." As the only clothed English woman in this scene, she is the most obvious "other" figure; however, this description of her own clothing immediately relieves her readers from imagining that she may in fact have "disrobed" her European presence within this space. She automatically places herself in a position of difference from the women in the bath, who, as most readers would have assumed, were naked. Also see Melman.

21 Montagu, 149.

22 Cynthia Lowenthal, "The Veil of Romance: Lady Mary's Embassy Letters." *Eighteenth Century Life* 14.1 (1990): 66–82, 72.

23 Notions of "masculine" and "feminine" writings are themselves categories to be questioned, but, for the sake of discussing this review the terms are useful.

24 Melman, 10–11.

25 Montagu, 248.

26 Here I am borrowing Sara Suleri's title of Chapter 4. While Suleri's chapter discusses the production of nineteenth century sketches and reads the visual "picturesque" in relation to nineteenth century colonialism, I find this term useful here, since I would argue that Montagu's textual descriptions aim to construct visual images in the

minds of her readers; her detailed elaboration construct a textual "picturesque" which documents and devises notions of Turkish femininity very much the same way a sketch or painting would. (Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992].

———. "Woman Skin Deep. Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition." *Critical Inquiry* 18 [1992].)

27 I mention the "unreality" of the aestheticized image since Montagu's tone reflects the impossibility of such beauty through its excessiveness and through her references to figures such as goddesses — "there were many amongst them, as exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of a Guido or Titian." Montagu also writes that "They walked and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes our general mother with."

28 As a further response to the critical discussions of Montagu which focus on the central bath letters and encourage us to read her as a sympathetic traveler, I would like to turn to her letters from North Africa which provide a sharp contrast to her descriptions from Turkey. In these letters, class and race function as explicit representational features and gender is no longer a crucial mode of identification. Unlike the "well proportioned" and "white skinned" women of previous letters, the country people in North Africa are described as "not quite black, but all mulattos, and the most frightful Creatures that can appear in the Human figure" (Montagu, 425). Like the women of the bath, these figures are "almost naked," but here Montagu does not aestheticize nor romanticize. Instead, these "creatures" are compared to baboons. These descriptions provide a powerful response to both contemporary and historical criticisms which defend Montagu as a female traveler representing "other" women sympathetically. These letters reveal her complicity with an Orientalist tradition and testify to her inability to dismantle its authority. Also see Nussbaum.