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# The Turkish Embassy Letters and the Development of Discourse

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Meaghan Harrington

2/27/2018

Dr. Nunez

*The Turkish Embassy Letters* and the Development of Discourse

Scholars perpetually seek the answers to how and why things happen. In the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, an 18<sup>th</sup> century female traveler, scholars like to look for the origins of two important discourses: orientalism and feminism. Montagu wrote about the people, cultures, and environments of far-away lands before the West became the possessor of the East. This is appealing to origin-seeking scholars because Montagu makes it seem as if there may be a straightforward source for orientalism and feminism. The answers to how and why these discourses emerge are not so simple, though. Some scholars view Montagu as a feminist rogue for change, yet others view her as a misogynist abiding by the roles of a typical European woman. Some see a European, orientalist villain, and others see a critic of orientalism. There is evidence to support all of these views because Montagu was extremely multifaceted, but examiners of Montagu do not analyze her as a complete package. There seems to be a discomfort among these scholars like Diana Barnes and Kader Konuk with the tensions in Montagu's letters, and a tendency to negate the counter-argument as unimportant. When these tensions are analyzed, though, is where one can identify the origins of these powerful discourses. This paper argues that by being both an orientalist and an anti-orientalist, a feminist and an anti-feminist, Montagu illustrates that both of these discourses had proto-forms in which they were not fully developed. The few who have examined Montagu in her own right gloss over the contradictions in her work and miss the opportunity to analyze her as an example of proto-orientalism and proto-feminism. This deterministic view of Montagu either supporting orientalism, anti-

orientalism, feminism, or anti-feminism stifles the complexities of her letters and prevents an understanding of Montagu and these discourses within the context of time.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had a background that seems as if it came from a Gothic romance novel. Hailing from a wealthy government family, she taught herself Latin in her youth, eloped to the dismay of her Father who wanted her to marry a man of his choosing, and survived smallpox unscathed.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Montagu was a complex person. She married Wortley in 1712 and lived several years with just the company of her son as her husband was busy making governmental advances in the city. Their relationship seems to have been a passionate one, and as those relationships tend to be, a complicated one. In a particularly amusing excerpt from Anita Desai's introduction to *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, Wortley chased Montagu on horseback as she fled in tears from her carriage upon his being late to their elopement in Naples.<sup>2</sup> Then, her husband was sent on a diplomatic mission to become the Ambassador Extraordinary of the Turkish court. She and her two children accompanied him on his travels, traversing through Austria, Hungary, Turkey, and even into Algeria before heading back to France. While Wortley would end up failing in his mission, Montagu was able to observe the cultures, customs, and people of places very foreign to her own. During her travels, she wrote about her observances in letters to friends, family, and even foreign diplomats (though their existence is uncertain) in what would comprise *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. She intended these letters to be published due to her finesse and organization; however, they would not be published until her death in 1763. Much to her daughter and son-in-law's avail, two employees of the Reverend Snowden (who had

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Ropes, introduction to *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, (London: Seeley and Co, Limited, 1892), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Anita Desai, introduction to *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (London: Virago Press, 1994), xiii.

been entrusted with the letters) copied and sent them to *The London Chronicle* before they were bought by Montagu's relatives, and made the collection available for public consumption.<sup>3</sup>

### Montagu: The Orientalist?

Montagu was born in 1689 and died in 1762. Thus, she lived the majority of her life in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. England had imperialist ties to America, but by this point it had not become the empire upon which the sun never set. Imperialism shaped much of discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onward. After the Revolutionary War, English interest would spread beyond the colonies and towards places like Africa and 'the Orient.' Thus, modern orientalism – as in the discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – was largely shaped by imperialism. It certainly consisted of hierarchies and power structures; this paper does not try to argue that Europeans did not hold a self-imposed sense of superiority in their orientalist ideologies. If we take modern orientalism at its surface value, it absolutely could be perceived as having a distinctly imperial structure. Edward Said argues that “the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony... there is very little consent [on the part of those in the Orient] to be found [in this].”<sup>4</sup> Control over the Orient by the Europeans played an enormous role in modern oriental discourse.

The problem with a modern reading of orientalism is that it is shaped entirely on these 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century sources. Orientalism is more than just control over the Orient; if it was that simple, orientalist ideology would not seep into modern life as much as it does. Orientalism is the most complex system of power and hierarchy. At its basest level, orientalism is an attitude linked with living in a place that is different than one's own. At its most complex level,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 133.

orientalism is comprised of thousands of years of ideology, and is a culmination of all the angers, frustrations, wins, and losses that have ever happened in the world. Orientalism is the complete opposition of culture, people, and environment. It puts two entities at odds against each other so that each is forced to look at the other's strengths and weaknesses, and though to do so is much more difficult and done much less often, even their own. Orientalism is an example of how not to analyze the difference between 'me' and 'you.' This discourse takes many forms throughout history, but the one with which people are most familiar is the orientalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: an attitude shaped by imperialism and a hierarchy in which 'self' is superior and 'other' is inferior with little wiggle room.

In a letter written to a mysterious 'Abbe Conti' in May of 1718, one can see Montagu participating in an ideology similar to this later orientalism. While viewing a procession to honor the Grand Signor, she describes a specific section in which Turks participated in self-inflicted corporal mutilation as a way to display their willingness to fight for the Grand Signor. She characterizes the scene as being "so barbarous [she] removed [herself] from the window upon the first appearance of it."<sup>5</sup> Instead of viewing the scene as something intrinsic to Turkish culture or reluctantly embracing the practice, she shuts it down as barbarism in a way uncomfortably similar to the words of Europeans towards indigenous peoples in colonized countries. When she states that they were "naked... their arms pierced through with arrows... others had them sticking in their heads, the blood trickling down their faces, and some slashed their arms with sharp knives, making the blood spout out on those who stood near,"<sup>6</sup> Montagu sounds like a 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century orientalist. This appeal to a higher up was an act of supplication, signifying a power

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<sup>5</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (Virago Press, London, 1994), 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

imbalance with the supplicants at a lower stance. This signals that those who were supplicating were perhaps of a lower socio-economic class than both Montagu and the Grand Signor. She is unable to recognize them as equals due to their perceived inferiority and their spiritual acts. In this situation, she is the ‘self’ and these people are the ‘other,’ and she does not see them for anything other than their inferiority. Here, Montagu cannot see past orientalist boundaries.

But Montagu’s orientalism is not as simple as the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century versions. There are ideologies in some of Montagu’s letters that challenge orientalist stereotypes. Her account of her stay with Achmed Bey provides a look into this. In said letter, the mysterious ‘Achmed Bey’ reads Arabic poetry to Montagu after discussing the current state of affairs in Belgrade. The experience has a great effect on Montagu and she is deeply moved by the poetry. She states that “[the poetry he had read to her] are in numbers not unlike ours, generally alternate verse, and of a very musical sound.”<sup>7</sup> The simple fact that she recognizes Arabic poetry, and further, the Arabic language as being worthy of listening to, indicates a deviation from orientalist ideology. She goes on to say that she was “so much pleased with [the poetry, she] really [believed she] should learn to read Arabic.”<sup>8</sup> These few words signify so much about Montagu’s attitude towards Turkey, its language, and its people. European orientalists like Thomas Babington MacCaulay did not recognize the validity of the languages of those they conquered. Instead, they forced lingual assimilation upon natives.

MacCaulay’s “Minute on Education” reveals the views held by 19<sup>th</sup> century orientalists and the ideology from which Montagu was deviating. MacCaulay states that Western literature has an “intrinsic superiority.”<sup>9</sup> His remarks towards the literature and academic works of Arabic

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Babington MacCaulay. *On Empire and Education*. (Modern History Sourcebook, 1833).

and Sanskrit writers are notable. Considered by MacCaulay as “less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England;” the natives were incapable to him of assimilating into British culture by learning English themselves. He takes on the ‘white man’s burden;’ saying that they must be educated, and that their education must be provided by the ever-capable Europeans. He goes on to say that “the department of literature in which the Eastern writers stand highest is poetry, [but that he] certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanskrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations.”<sup>10</sup> Montagu in the 18<sup>th</sup> century believes that Arabic poetry is just as good, if not better, as European poetry; MacCaulay in the 19<sup>th</sup> century believes that Arabic poetry, though good, is not comparable to the caliber of European poetry.

The fact that MacCaulay was writing in the early nineteenth century and that Montagu was writing in the early eighteenth is notable. Orientalism by MacCaulay’s time was much more well-developed and ideas seem to be much more homogenous by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Montagu represents a proto-orientalist stance that transcends traditional thought and the application of imperialist ideology. To better understand her beliefs and the views of these other ‘proto-orientalists,’ one must delve into the less popular but still important works of other early 18<sup>th</sup> century travelers. While this is an extremely difficult task as orientalism had not been fully developed, Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu (hereon referred to as Montesquieu) provides a relevant source in his *Persian Letters*, or in French, *Lettres Persanes*. The *Persian Letters* are an epistolary novel, and are primarily fictional. In this fiction/nonfiction hybrid, Montesquieu writes the story of two Persian men - Usbek and Rica - traveling through Paris. It consists of their commentary about Parisian society, yet in doing so, Montesquieu participates in

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

proto-orientalism. The ‘letters’ are satirical. Montesquieu used them to try to make a point about the world into which they were headed.

To grasp this concept, one may analyze a passage of Montesquieu’s in a fashion similar to Montagu’s. In a letter penned by Usbek to an ‘Ibben in Smyrna,’ Usbek – or, rather, Montesquieu – writes about gambling in Europe. However, this discourse transcends the simplicity of libidinous desire. Its meaning is based in orientalism, anti-orientalism, feminism, and anti-feminism. His description of European women provides enough fodder for an argument itself. He describes them as being taken up with the ‘vogue’ of gambling, and that “they are intent on ruining their husband [through] gambling... [with] clothing and carriages [starting] the trouble; flirtation [compounding it]; [and gambling finishing] it off.”<sup>11</sup> This description can be viewed two ways. On the one hand, it could be considered as being distinctly anti-feminist, as it establishes women as licentious creatures only desiring the downfall of their oppressive husbands. On the other, that very analysis could be viewed as giving women the agency to plot the downfall of their husbands. Montesquieu’s intent is obscured by the format of this letter, and it continues to become more confusing. In the last paragraph of the letter, a comparison between Persian, Muslim men and Christian men becomes apparent. Usbek/Montesquieu goes on to list all of the things that Persian men are prohibited from doing by their ‘Holy Prophet:’ such as “the use of wine... [and] games of chance.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, he states that when men are driven by passion, their prophet ameliorates the circumstances. He continues, “the plurality of women saves [Persian, Muslim men] from their despotism. Their numbers temper the violence of [their] desires.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Montesquieu writes that from a ‘Persian’ perspective, men have a large pool of

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<sup>11</sup> Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu. *Persian Letters*. (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1961), 124.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



women to choose from as a result of their prophet's will to better their spiritual lives. The satire here is blatant upon investigation. Scholars argue that "here, the harem represents an extreme version – a caricature almost – of the traditional European institution of patriarchy. The idea of the French as completely without morals is just as much a caricature of contemporary Parisian society."<sup>14</sup> Montesquieu's critique of French culture, society, and attitude is blunt and relevant.

This argument truly has roots in all four ideologies analyzed in this paper. It supports orientalism on a very surface level in that it has an idea of Persian men being rather barbarous in their sexual practices. It supports anti-orientalism in that it could also be read as being a satire and establishing these values as the 'right' values. It supports feminism by giving women sexual agency and the power to be despots; and anti-feminism by making men the ones who give women this sexual agency. Montesquieu illustrates the idea of being rooted in multiple ideologies just as Montagu does. He provides an example of another early 18<sup>th</sup> century orientalist. In doing so, he adds gravity to orientalism not being a sudden, fully formed discourse; and instead, having a group of proto-orientalists that shaped later oriental ideologies.

On the topic of religion, Montagu describes the religious practices of Turks and how similar Islam (or in her case, what she calls 'Mohammedism') is to Christianity. She writes once again to 'Abbe Conti' about a specific discussion with Achmed Bey on religion. They bond over a shared dislike of Catholics and the "ridicule of transubstantiation."<sup>15</sup> She states that if her friend "had free liberty of preaching [in Turkey] it would be very easy to persuade the generality to Christianity, whose notions are already little different from his."<sup>16</sup> While this quote was likely

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<sup>14</sup> Dena Goodman, "Women and the Enlightenment," in *Becoming Visible: Women In European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Stuard, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 247.

<sup>15</sup> Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

not intended as negative commentary on Islam, it does imply a desire to convert Muslims to the 'right' religion. This a quote loaded with double meaning. On the one hand, Montagu is criticizing Islam. She views Muslims as being a group that should be converted to Christianity. She participates in orientalism. But on the other hand, she recognizes the validity of Islam by saying that it is similar to the basic tenets of Christianity. She tries to close the distance between the two religions as if she is trying to prevent other Europeans from viewing Islam as an oriental, exotic religion oceans away from their own. She participates in anti-orientalism. If one reads this quote with the lens of historic context, the haze of a perceived desire for homogeneity can be surpassed and a new meaning can be discovered. Instead of viewing Islam as a barbaric religion of natives, she views it as something similar to Christianity. Montagu does not view Christianity in a negative light (though it is unclear if she practiced it devoutly), thus she does not view Islam in a negative light.

The way she goes on to describe 'Mohammedism' reinforces the idea that she is trying to bridge the gap between Christianity and Islam, and thus, participate in anti-orientalism. She states that "Mohammedism is divided into as many sects as Christianity... the [different sects of Islam] put me in mind of the Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, etc., and are equally zealous against one another."<sup>17</sup> Once again, Montagu recognizes the validity of Islam by likening it to Christianity. Though she does put forth the quote about Dr. Clarke potentially converting Muslims to Christianity, she goes on to say in this passage that this is not necessary, but that it would be an easy thing to do. This passage points to other ways we might interpret Montagu. It is almost as if every single one of her quotes has a double meaning. This imposes a question: is Montagu employing a narrative tactic like Montesquieu in his *Persian Letters*? The theory (while

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

very hypothetical) could potentially have some rooting in truth. *The Turkish Embassy Letters* were published decades after the *Persian Letters*.<sup>18</sup> Both have similar titles, formats, and subject matter, though Montesquieu's work is about Persian men in Europe whereas Montagu's work is about a European woman in Turkey. Even their surnames rhyme and share a similar prefix. Scholars even refer to her today as Montagu despite having married a man with the surname of Wortley. Montesquieu was renowned for his work and had a reputation for being one of the first enlightened thinkers. One might even wonder if Montagu purposefully crafted her letters as a satire about the state of relations between the English and the Turks just as Montesquieu did between the French and the Persians.

Given this similarity and the storybook-like nature of Montagu's youth, how real were Montagu's letters? While this reasoning is theoretical, one main point can be drawn from viewing Montagu's letters in this way. If the modern knowledge that we all hold today is taken away from the equation and we can forget about 19<sup>th</sup> century Imperialism, we can see Montagu's letters in a new light. Instead of searching for examples of social hierarchies and of what Montagu was trying to say about said social hierarchies as either being 'bad' or 'good,' we can analyze Montagu as a complete package. When this strategy of viewing passages as neither reinforcing what we understand orientalism to be nor rejecting what we think are orientalist ideologies, new conclusions can be drawn in a way that is beneficial to our understanding of this complicated subject. It helps us understand how this phenomenon comes into existence instead of simply seeing it as one that emerged suddenly and fully formed. At the root of the problem, it helps us to understand why orientalism is such a contradictory subject: because it is something

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<sup>18</sup> Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* were published in 1763, and Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* were published in 1721.

that developed in multiple settings over centuries. Furthermore, it shows us that orientalism is an intersectional discourse. It incorporates politics, religion, gender, sexuality, economics, and almost every aspect of a society. Orientalism is not just a discussion of cultural otherness because cultures are multifaceted. A culture is, among other things, the overarching beliefs of a society. When two cultures are opposed to one another as they are in orientalism, contradictions are bound to arise not only because of the opposition but because a foil is provided to view the shortcomings of each culture itself. This criticism of culture on foreign and domestic fronts is a very enlightened ideal and shows us that Montagu was participating in the Enlightenment. This move illustrates her proto-feminism.

#### Montagu: The Feminist?

In order to understand Montagu as a proto-feminist, one must set forth on the daunting task of defining feminism. Feminism can be different for every feminist, but there is an overarching agreement: feminism is the equality of all sexes. It emerged alongside discourses like orientalism, and the two share many similarities. Like orientalism, feminism is a complex hegemony of power and hierarchies between genders. At its basest level, feminism is acquiring equal rights for men and women. At its most complex, feminism, like orientalism, is the culmination of every culture across every time period from every place. Feminism is comprised of the development of women's ideology over thousands of years. Feminism did not just emerge suddenly, fully-formed.

Society in the eighteenth-century was changing. Enlightenment ideology was beginning to set the scene for social debate, and in just over half a century, the French Revolution would occur. People were beginning to recognize the social and economic inequalities of European life. In the context of women, the Enlightenment inadvertently introduced revolutionary thought to

the discourse of proto-orientalism. “Writers [in this time] strove to discover the ‘original nature’ of man and to develop systems to enhance and develop this nature, rather than restrict it;” and thus, women’s rights became an issue for some. Though the Enlightenment was just gaining traction in these times, it still proves noteworthy in the discussion of Montagu’s aims of writing. Feminism was becoming relevant, although it was a distinctly ‘male’ feminism. People were beginning to realize that “gender roles were constructed and not necessarily natural.”<sup>19</sup> New discourses were emerging alongside proto-orientalism that were in opposition to what we view later orientalism to be. The idea of gender equality was not a new one. Renes Descartes in the late 16<sup>th</sup> to mid-17<sup>th</sup> century would argue that all humans (including women) were able to use reason as it is separated from the body.<sup>20</sup> Francois Poulain de la Barre in his *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* in the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century argued that men and women had an equal capacity to learn.<sup>21</sup> This enabled Montagu to have this dialogue and make these narrative decisions. It helps us to see the lens through which Montagu views her own life, the Orient, and furthermore, the rights of women.

Montagu’s feminist ideology was contradictory. As aforementioned, Montagu had a passion for Latin. She would lock herself in a closet for ten hours a day to teach herself against the wishes of her governess.<sup>22</sup> Latin at this time remained a male-dominated language, just as all of education was. Her decision to act against the wishes of her governess (and furthermore, her family) in such a blatant way illustrates an unwavering sense of agency from her youth that

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<sup>19</sup> Deborah Simonton. *Women in European Culture and Society: Gender, Skill, and Identity from 1700*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011) 15.

<sup>20</sup> Dena Goodman, “Women and the Enlightenment,” in *Becoming Visible: Women In European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Stuard, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 238. “I think, therefore I am.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Anita Desai, introduction to *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (Virago Press, London, 1994), ix.

would permeate her letters for years until her death. Her actions were in direct violation of the misogynistic agenda and illustrate a desire for female empowerment. Yet Montagu also believed women ought to be subservient to men. In one letter, she encourages the daughter of a friend to learn languages. While she believes that the daughter should be allowed to learn languages, her reasoning for why is not for female empowerment. She had “heard it lamented that boys lose so many years in the mere learning of Words. This is no objection to a girl, whose time is not so precious. She cannot advance her selfe in any profession, and has therefore more hours to spare; and as you say her memory is good, she will be very agreeably employ’d this way...”<sup>23</sup> Her letter makes no efforts to change the status quo. Furthermore, she says that the daughter must “conceal whatever learning she attains, with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness... [as it will induce] envy... [and] the most inveterate hatred.”<sup>24</sup> Instead of motivating the daughter to learn language for the sake of intellectual exploration, she does so for the sake of filling free time; and in lieu of encouraging the daughter to spread her knowledge for the advancement of womankind, she encourages her to hide it.

There is a dichotomy here. Montagu’s wish to so stubbornly learn languages ought to point towards her being a feminist, but she states that a woman’s skill in foreign language ought to be hidden so that she stays humble and liked by her peers. Montagu believes foreign languages ought to be a woman’s hobby like needlework or music. But is it right to brush this example off as anti-feminism even though there could be some rooting in proto-feminism here, and could one wholeheartedly say that this is an example of feminism? The fact that Montagu was living in the 18<sup>th</sup> century must be taken into account here, and one must resist the urge to

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<sup>23</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Robert Halsband. *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*: Volume 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

classify her. Once again, the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a distinctly male feminism. The more progressive were just starting to reach towards gender equality. Montagu's feminism here is obviously repressed by the context of her time period. She would not have had the knowledge of what was to come as we do. She may not have even known the word feminism, let alone what it meant. Here, Montagu is not a feminist because she believes a woman ought to hide skill in foreign language and use it simply to occupy her time. Here, Montagu is not an anti-feminist because she believes a woman ought to be able to learn the same languages as men. Instead, Montagu is a proto-feminist who is leaning towards a more liberal ideology within the context of her own time.

Another example of Montagu's proto-feminism would be the infamous bath scene from *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. This example at first seems to be an analysis of just orientalism. She begins the letter by a comparison of Turkish stagecoaches and European stagecoaches. Turkish coaches are actually "more convenient for the country, the heat being so great... they are made a good deal in the manner of Dutch coaches having wooden lattices painted and gilded, the inside also being painted with baskets and nosegays of flowers, intermixed commonly with little poetical mottos..."<sup>25</sup> While stagecoaches may be an odd thing to analyze and not particularly impactful upon Turkish culture, she is marveling at the beauty of a Turkish work, and that is notable. One observation that illustrates her proto-feminism in this excerpt is the use of clothing. Nudity was the norm in a Turkish *bagnio*. However, Montagu arrives in her "travelling habit, which is a riding dress, and certainly appeared very extraordinary to them."<sup>26</sup> The fact that she is wearing a riding dress and going 'incognito' shows masculine agency. The riding dress was a

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<sup>25</sup> Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, 57-58

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

newer style of fashion that looks relatively similar to some aspects of masculine fashion. While trying to stray from the assumptions made by other scholars of one simple sentence denoting whether Montagu was a feminist or a misogynist, her agency here is different from the rule for a married woman in a foreign country at the time.

This is an example of Montagu participating in aspects of Turkish culture that are not available to others. The *bagnio* is described as “the women’s coffee house, where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented, etc... they generally take this diversion once a week, and stay there at least four or five hours...”<sup>27</sup> This is an example of women having their own spaces separate from men. The *bagnio* is a communal ritual. It is not much different than a morning cup of coffee with one’s cats, a weekly Friday evening out with one’s closest friends, or a monthly lunch with one’s family. Montagu is participating in (and can participate in) a secret environment that is off limits for males, young children, and others. However, even though she does participate in this, she retains her traditional values. She remains in her riding dress even though the other women in the bath house are all nude. The fact that there is a gathering of women unsupervised by men – and that Montagu does not even recognize that – gives both these women and Montagu agency. Furthermore, the fact that the women are all gathering nude gives them agency. Montagu makes a comment that despite their nudity, “there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them,” yet goes on to make some ‘wanton’ remarks herself upon their beauty.<sup>28</sup> She states that “there were many amongst them as exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was... most of their skins shingly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses... braided either with pearl or ribbon, perfectly representing the figures

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 59

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



of the Graces... [they were] ladies with the finest skins and most delicate shapes.”<sup>29</sup> This could be viewed as an effort to eroticize these women; or, it could be viewed as one woman remarking on the beauty of other women because of her agency and ideology. Once again, Montagu here is not a feminist because she remains in her clothing and retains traditional values. Here, she is not an anti-feminist because she participates in a secret gathering of all women separate from men and remarks on the beauty of nude women. Instead, Montagu is illustrating her proto-feminism here that embodies both of these discourses as a result of her own time.

#### Montagu: The Orientalist, Anti-Orientalist, Feminist, and Anti-Feminist

Diana Barnes would see the earlier example as Montagu being progressive in both orientalism and feminism. In her article, Barnes argues that Montagu was more liberal, and to argue this, she sets it in the stage of Montagu’s advocacy for smallpox inoculation. She is portrayed by Barnes as a woman truly motivated only by her love of learning and education. In Barnes’ short discussion of how Montagu uses Turkish culture, Barnes argues that Montagu was not participating in but was witnessing Oriental culture – wearing Oriental dress, having a reputation as a “witness”, and so on.<sup>30</sup> While Barnes does seem to think that Montagu was more liberal than Kader Konuk does, she does not paint Montagu as specifically revolutionary; instead, Barnes argues that Montagu exerted her influence in a positive way that did not correspond with typical gender roles. Barnes would view this example as Montagu participating as the aforementioned ‘witness’ to Turkish culture. She would see her description of the women

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Barnes, Diana. "The Public Life of a Woman of Wit and Quality: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Vogue for Smallpox Inoculation." *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 346, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23269190>.

as being in reverence; and she would see Montagu refraining from nudity as not being distinctly traditional.

On the other hand, scholars like Kader Konuk would view this example as distinctly negative. Konuk would argue the bath scene was an effort on the part of Montagu to insert herself into the Turkish narrative for her own purposes. In his article "Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters," he argues that Montagu was a 'typical orientalist' that participated in the imperialist views that would surface in the coming century. Branching off the arguments aforementioned, Konuk states that she lived "a short-lived fantasy of embodying the Other [serving] as a narrative strategy in her letters."<sup>31</sup> While Montagu may have been using many narrative strategies in her letters, Konuk argues that the strategies she used were clearly for her own benefit and to the detriment of Turkish women. Instead of having goals of assimilation, of revering Turkish culture, or of general respect like other scholars believe her to have, he thinks that she held an unhealthy, sexual, fetish-like obsession with the Orient just as imperialists in later centuries. He argues that Montagu employs masculine tactics of control upon the Turks. In lieu of having actual imperial control over the Turks, he argues that her participation in a culture that was not her own was a method of control. He argues that central to this fascination was "the performance of heterosexuality;" an application that seems as if you could find it in a modern article on the political climate of today.<sup>32</sup> His argument is one of westernization, heterosexual norms, and adherence to his conceptualization of orientalism.

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<sup>31</sup> Konuk, Kader. "Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters: Reenacting Lady Mary Wortley Montagu." *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (2004): 394, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23127324>.

<sup>32</sup> Konuk, "Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters," 399.

Barnes and Konuk's articles are reliant on the assumptions we have today of more modern imperialism and feminism. They view her through the lens one would apply to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century imperialists or to women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century advocating for change. However, these situations are completely different than a British woman traveling in Turkey in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Women in this time were gaining a greater role in politics and even the Enlightenment in its initial stages. Simonton states that "women contributed to 'mainstream' culture through their interaction with the Enlightenment debate and their literary and artistic productions, and were integral to the rituals and customs of popular culture,"<sup>33</sup> In short, women in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century fit into neither the 'revolutionist' belief nor the '19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist' belief that scholars try to push upon them. It was a time of changing values, societies, governmental systems, and cultures. We cannot impose the gendered spheres that 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialists did upon Montagu, as both groups thrived in completely different environments. We also cannot impose imperial ideology upon Montagu's writings on the Turks because Europe did not hold the same imperial power there as they did in, say, the Americas.

One of the greatest disadvantages of history is that we are unable to know the nuances of life hundreds of years ago. There are no readily available primary sources that tell us attitudes towards aspects of daily life. In lieu of these helpful sources, we must be weary of imposing our own attitudes upon the time periods we study. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is an excellent example of this. She represents a proto-orientalist and proto-feminist group that modern ideology does not apply to. Scholars like Konuk and Barnes try to classify her as either a negative or a positive figure, but when we are able to surpass the simplicity of classification, new conclusions

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<sup>33</sup> Simonton, Deborah. *Women in European Culture and Society: Gender, Skill, and Identity from 1700*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011) 95.

can be drawn. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was an orientalist. She also was an anti-orientalist; a feminist; and an anti-feminist. Some of her sources show that she was against the 'system;' others, that she was for the superiority of her race, class, and ethnicity against the inferiority of the Turks. Montagu reveals the contradicting ideologies that contribute to the development of discourse.

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