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Significant Others: The Fashioning of Orientalism in the
Travelogues of 18th-Century British Women

Rachel Barton

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British fascination with the Ottoman Empire was not a new phenomenon in the 18th Century. To the Occident, the Orient had always been a source of mystery, intrigue, and romance. Regardless of whether the desire for knowledge of the unknown Other came from colonial interest or a sense of scientific and anthropologic duty, travelers to the empire filled their journals and letters with observations of all aspects of Ottoman life. These crossers of cultural boundaries were self-proclaimed experts on the economic, political, and social institutions of the East, and wrote with confidence for themselves and readers back home. Due to their frequent opportunities for travel, most pre-18th-century travel writers were male. Their gender, however, kept them from the one area of Ottoman society that they craved to know the most: the harem. Restricted to male outsiders, the harem was desired for its sexual connotation and forbidden nature. Women travel writers had this particular advantage over their male contemporaries; the wives of European officials had access at least at the elite level, where their husbands did not. The travelogues of these women were not considered independent accounts, rather they were thought to be supplements to the works of men. Despite this, they were voraciously consumed by a wide variety of European readers. Aristocratic British female writers were some of the most prolific producers of such travel writing. Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu and Lady Elizabeth Craven are two examples of the increasingly popular 18th-century trend. Despite their portrayal of a liberated and free existence for upper class Ottoman women, Lady Montagu and Lady Craven essentialize and Orientalize them, ‘Othering’ them and reducing them from active agents to subjects. The reasons and methods for doing so differed per author.¹

¹ This paper requires knowledge of a very diverse group of subjects. For a general reference on life for women writers in the eighteenth century, see: Frederick M. Keener, *Eighteenth-Century Women and the Arts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988); Beth Fowkes Tobin, *History, Gender & Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Elizabeth A Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For information on English women in the 16th through 18th centuries, see: Teresa Barnard, *British Women Writers and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Dorchester: Dorset Press, 2015); Carolyn A. Barros and Johanna M. Smith, *Life-Writings by British*

To understand Montagu's and Craven's writings, their work must first be placed in the context of 1) Orientalism, 2) gender norms in the English and Ottoman worlds, and 3) the conception of travel in the 18th Century. Each will be considered in turn, and explained in the context of Montagu and Craven.

The subject of Orientalism continues to be a debated topic. Edward Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, is critical in understanding the phenomenon and the subsequent scholarship on it.² Said argues that Orientalism divides the world into two unequal halves, the superior Occident and the inferior Orient. He maintains that the creation of the schism is European based: "The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered common-place by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* – that is, submitted to being – made Oriental."³ Said continues with the idea of "submitted to being" by further emphasizing that the Orient does not exist as a region with agency, but as a foil, something to "help define Europe as its contrasting image."⁴ This usage of the Orient as a binary that reflects European power is pervasive throughout Montagu's and Craven's writings; Craven in particular notoriously uses Ottoman women to portray herself in a superior way.

Said also linked knowledge and power. The East became a place for Occidental scholars to increase their knowledge of the unknown and mysterious: "the Orientalist, poet or scholar,

Women 1660-1850 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670-1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Susie Steinbach, *Women in England: A Social History*. (Frome, England: Butler & Tanner Ltd, 2004). For more on Ottoman women themselves, see: Bernadette Diane Andrea, *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Fanny Davis, *The Ottoman Lady* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986); Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005); Natalia Krolikowska, "Muslim Women in the Local Social Life of the Ottoman Empire in the 16-18th Centuries," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 96 (2007): 1-26; Madeline C. Zilfi, *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Two prominent Orientalism scholars are: Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³ Said, 5-6.

⁴ Said, 1-2.

makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West.”⁵

He goes on to say: “to have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it.”⁶ Said emphasizes Europe’s self-presumed superiority, calling it cultural hegemony:

Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion of identifying ‘us’ Europeans against all ‘those’ non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have different views on the matter (Said 7).

As will be shown, here again Said’s argument is neatly supported by Montagu and Craven; both women, though Montagu is much more approving of the Ottomans, agree that European society is superior to Ottoman society.

Meyda Yegenoglu’s study, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, departs from Said’s general discussion of orientalism by offering feminist analysis of the subject. She argues that while Montagu’s letters are benevolent towards Ottoman women, this attitude implies power over those receiving benevolence. Perhaps Yegenoglu’s most insightful conclusion comes from her enquiry into the reduction of Ottoman women and the practice of veiling into a symbol of the empire as a whole – thus, the uncovering of the veil and revealing the face behind it represented uncovering the mysteries of the empire.⁷ The veil earned a negative connotation like the negative connotation earned by a woman who spurned a man – by denying the West to ‘know’ the Ottoman Empire or its women, it gained a bad reputation. The empire’s portrayal as a woman lends itself to the idea of the sexual discovery and penetration of

⁵ Said, 20-21.

⁶ Said, 32.

⁷ Yegenoglu, 90.

the Ottomans by a masculine Western Europe.⁸ This imagery is pervasive in both Craven's and especially Montagu's writings – as they attempt to “know” Ottoman society, they take masculine ‘outsider’ perspectives.

Lisa Lowe also discusses British and French orientalism in the context of an emerging feminist discourse. Here she disagrees with Said's interpretation of a monolithic orientalism, arguing that the theme of orientalism is characterized by multiple shifting discourses. Most significantly, though, she attributes the formation of orientalism to a rhetoric of similarity and difference visible in Montagu's letters.⁹ Lowe observes: “Montagu relies on and reiterates an established cultural attitude that differentiates Orient and Occident, that constitutes them as opposites.”¹⁰ She argues that Montagu uses existing perceptions of the East-West divide to give credibility to her observations. Interestingly, however, Montagu often refutes these pre-conceived notions of the Ottoman world. She seems almost gleeful when she has the opportunity to correct the recipient of her letter's thoughts on a particular topic. In one letter to a female friend back in England, Montagu takes great joy in telling her that the common perception of Ottoman slavery is wrong.¹¹ She admits that her friend will probably doubt her account, which she “owns is very different from our common notions in England” but argues, “it is not less truth for all that.”¹² It appears that in addition to using a rhetoric of similarity and difference to establish boundaries between Ottoman women and European women, Montagu uses this method in order to add to the shock value of her accounts and to boost others' perceptions of her own

⁸ Yegenoglu refers to this multiple times throughout her study. The comparison between the veil of the Ottoman woman and the veil of the empire is a frequently discussed metaphor.

⁹ Lowe, 42.

¹⁰ Lowe, 32.

¹¹ Montagu, 104.

¹² Montagu, 104.

intelligence and insightfulness.¹³ Orientalism, then, does not function as a single, isolated topos, but the basic binary remains clear enough. As Lowe states, “Eighteenth-century portraits of the oriental world as an exotic, un-civilized counterpart of Europe were crucial enunciations of the discourses that produced representations of the European world as knowing, stable, and powerful.”¹⁴

What makes Montagu and Craven such unique subjects is their success in writing, despite the restrictions upon them because of their gender. To understand them, they must be placed in the context of 18th-century England’s gender norms. Women of all classes were denied formal educations.¹⁵ Some rich middle- and upper-class families attempted to educate their daughters to the best of their abilities. Many times, upper-class women would educate themselves via family tutors or libraries. In Montagu’s particular situation, she used resources that were available to her in order to educate herself. Still, at this time, “women’s capacity to reason remained a contentious issue.”¹⁶ English ladies could hold property,¹⁷ but divorce laws were restrictive. A divorced woman would likely lose custody of her children, and inevitably become the subject of much scandal.¹⁸ These norms led Montagu, and Craven to a lesser degree, to admire aspects of the lives of Ottoman ladies.

Despite Orientalist reductions, the gender picture in the Ottoman Empire was similarly complex, with norms varying by class, locale, and other factors. In Ottoman society, ‘harem’ refers to both a physical space and the people who dwelled within. The most recognizable model

¹³ This is actually very in character for Lady Montagu. Further in my paper, I recount an anecdote in which she actively seeks praise for her intelligence.

¹⁴ Lowe, 30.

¹⁵ Teresa Barnard and Ruth Watts, “Introduction: Nature’s School,” in *British Women and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Teresa Barnard (Dorchester, UK: Henry Ling Limited, 2015), 2.

¹⁶ Barnard and Watts, 2.

¹⁷ A right that they shared with their Ottoman female contemporaries

¹⁸ Steinbach, 81. This situation is likely what happened to Lady Craven – she lost custody of her children after her divorce from her husband, despite both of them being guilty of adultery.

was the imperial harem in Constantinople, which was composed of the wives, concubines, children, female relatives, and servants of the sultan.¹⁹ The harem was a significant institution, especially for the elites, but it varied greatly across classes and geography, as did the use of concubines and the practice of polygamy. This reality is a far cry from the portrait of the empire that male travel writers painted. It is true, however, that marriage was perhaps the most important part in an Ottoman woman's life. Fanny Davis in *The Ottoman Lady* emphasizes security and social status: “[polygamy] saved unmarried women and widows from a state of manlessness and lack of protection.”²⁰ Beyond marriage, women had some legal rights and various kinds of mobility. Both Montagu and Craven fashioned an archetypal “Ottoman woman” for their readers based on their privileged access to the Ottoman elite, mainly in Constantinople.

Long distance travel was also taking on new meanings in the 18th Century. In his book, *The Mind of the Traveler*, Eric J. Leed discusses the development of travel and its cultural significance.²¹ Leed highlights the transition from travel as a heroic and individualizing journey to the rise of the tourist. Additionally, he analyzes the literal and metaphorical meanings of certain aspects of travel. In his section on the significance of departure, he argues: “the separations of departure are a moral experiment determining which aspects of the self may be left behind in the context of their germination, and which are ineradicable features of it.”²² Both Craven and Montagu use their travels to the Ottoman Empire and their experiences in it as a way of defining themselves and their home country. This will be seen in the kinds of observations that they make throughout their journals and letters.

¹⁹ The classic study is Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Davis, 88

²¹ Eric J. Leed, *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

²² Leed, 46.

Leed also suggests, “the most privileged official motive of travel became to see and know the world, to record it, to assemble a complete and detailed picture of it.”²³ This is in reference to the post-Renaissance, when scientific and learning-based travel rose in popularity and the documentation of journeys became increasingly important. These ‘travelogues’ were in high demand as more and more Europeans had access to ‘exotic’ lands.

Accordingly, women’s travelogues increased in quantity and popularity in the 18th Century. As opportunities to travel with their husbands increased, more women began to write and publish what they wrote. Women most frequently wrote their journals on the Ottoman harem, as that was a subject heavily in demand by their European audience, and their gender afforded them special access. Many women used this as a way to publish their writings. Lady Montagu set the standard for this movement.

Montagu was born in 1689, to Evelyn Pierrepont, the first Duke of Kingston-Upon-Hill, and to Mary Pierrepont, neé Fielding.²⁴ She was the first of four children – followed by two sisters and a brother. To her sisters she would address several of her Turkish letters. Montagu’s mother died shortly after the birth of her brother, leading her father to send his children to live with their grandmother until her death. Biographers of Lady Mary attribute her characteristic cheekiness and lack of attachment to any one particular place to the absence of her mother.

Perhaps the most significant part of her childhood was her rich education. Though she had no formal teaching, Mary poured over the books in her father’s extensive library. She even learned Latin on her own, by copying text after text into English. Gibbs, in his biography of Montagu, relates an anecdote in which she sent a copy of a difficult Latin text that she translated

²³ Leed, 188.

²⁴ The information on Montagu’s biography comes from Lewis Gibbs, *The Admirable Lady Mary: The Life and Times of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1949), and Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

to a bishop in order to have him make ‘corrections’ – in actuality, Montagu knew that her translations were mostly correct, she just wanted praise.²⁵ This type of attitude was common for Mary, and she shows this confidence and desire for attention throughout her letters and her memoir.

In her early twenties, Mary met her future husband, Edward Wortley Montagu. They corresponded through letters written by Edward’s sister Anne for two years. Rather than agree to the sizable requests of Mary’s father when Montagu asked for Mary’s hand in marriage, the couple eloped in 1712. The first years of Mary’s married life were uneventful in the country and she spent most of her time corresponding with Edward. Later, she joined him in London, where her poetry became popular. In 1716, Montagu received a position as British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and Mary made the decision to go with him to Constantinople.

As a woman, Mary had access to certain areas of Ottoman society where her husband and his peers did not. While Montagu met with diplomats and other ambassadors, Lady Mary met with and was entertained by their wives. The entirety of her experiences in the Ottoman Empire was with fellow aristocrats, so her letters unfortunately lack insight into the lower class. However, as an aristocratic woman meeting with other aristocratic women, she had plenty of material for comparisons between the elite worlds. With this narrow focus, Montagu chose to depict *all* Ottoman women as like her aristocratic subjects. Carolyn A. Barros and Johanna Smith go so far as to describe Mary as “thoughtlessly [ignoring] women of other classes or lower stations.”²⁶ In this overlooking of the lower classes, Mary generalizes all Ottoman women into the one class that she interacts with.

²⁵ Gibbs, 20-22.

²⁶ Barros and Smith, 151.

Montagu's most important selling point for her travelogue was that, as a woman, her observations of Ottoman women and the Ottoman Empire were more accurate than those of her male predecessors. Her sex was "a powerful tool to claim,"²⁷ and claim it she did. She argued that men like Robert Withers and Jean Dumont had completely incorrect perceptions of Ottoman women, and she proved this by supplying her own observations.²⁸ Male travelers in the empire had previously portrayed women in the harem only as domestic slaves for their husbands. Montagu contradicted this by saying that she looks upon "Turkish women as the only free people in the empire."²⁹ She argued this through her interpretation of veiling and her observations of the dynamics between women and men in the harem.

Montagu, like many of her time, was fascinated with veiling. However, she did not view it as oppression, as others did; rather, she considered it one of the more liberating parts of Ottoman life. "The perpetual masquerade,"³⁰ as she called it, allowed women to pursue what they want without fear of discovery. Montagu herself purchased a Turkish 'costume,' which she occasionally donned and wandered around the city – she embraced the feeling of freedom in anonymity that it gave her. Where Montagu did not separate herself from men is that she took her interpretation of the freedom gained by veiling and gave it sexual significance. She commented that it "may easily [be] imagine[d] the number of faithful wives very small"³¹ in relation to the allowed anonymity. Montagu turned her observation that a woman could keep her identity from a lover into an assertion that many women did have affairs under the cover of the

²⁷ Yegenoglu, 86.

²⁸ Men like Dumont and Withers can easily be put in the same category when it comes to their description of Ottoman women. Both men associate the harem and veiling with female slavery. They argue that the harem, in particular, is barbaric, while exoticizing and sexualizing the women in it.

²⁹ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. *Turkish Embassy Letters* (London, 1763), 74.

³⁰ Montagu, 71.

³¹ Montagu, 71-72.

veil. She romanticized infidelity to mean a type of freedom, but ended up reproducing pervasive Orientalist stereotypes of the sexual promiscuity of Ottoman women.

This sexual subtext of Montagu's writings continues in her objectifying descriptions of Ottoman women. Perhaps to make her subjects more palatable to her high-class European audience, she consistently used European references when comparing. Her positive descriptions usually involved a characterization of the individual being white-skinned or belonging in a European court. Lady Mary meant the highest of compliments when she described Ottoman women "as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian,"³² but using beauty standards for Western culture as a means to verify the quality of women of a different culture is Orientalist objectification in its nature. When meeting Fatima,³³ Montagu was speechless and spent nearly an entire page going through her every feature, much like one would with a horse³⁴ (creatures that Lady Mary was also very fond of and described similarly).³⁵ Mary's valuation of worth was clearly in terms of physical attributes – the only other qualities praised by her were Fatima's, Sultana Hafise's, and others' hostessing abilities. She briefly mentioned Fatima's wit, however she almost immediately brought the description back to her beauty.

In perhaps her most famous letter, Montagu described the Turkish bathhouse, or the 'bagnio,' as she called it. There she entreated the male artist to turn the bathers into art subjects to improve his quality of art: "To tell you the truth, I had wickedness enough to secretly wish that Mr. Gervase could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improved his

³² Montagu, 59.

³³ Fatima is an upper class Ottoman lady that Mary meets on a visit with her husband. Fatima entertains Mary while her husband does business. Mary is quite smitten with her, leading to an entire letter being written solely on her.

³⁴ Mary has a section in her letters discussing the animals native to the Ottoman Empire. She concludes that they are all ugly and unrefined, and compares them to a majestic white horse. She goes on to describe how refined and beautiful her horse is.

³⁵ Montagu, 83, 89.

art to see so many fine women naked, in different postures.”³⁶ The reduction of a woman to an object, or the subject of an artist, diminishes her agency. It has the effect of creating an unreal two-dimensional character. In Mary’s well-intentioned attempt to correct misconceptions about Ottoman women, her observations flattened her subjects to sexualized figures with no free thought.

She refuted the sexual deviancy and sinfulness claims of male travel writers, but in doing so, Montagu fell prey to her own type of orientalism and erotization of her Turkish companions. She made arguments that support the idea of Ottoman women being free multiple times throughout her letters: through the practice of veiling, their sexual liberty, but also through certain advantages that she claimed they have. She said that, even though they may not be seen in public anywhere but the baths, and only by women, they can “go abroad when and where they please.”³⁷ Mary particularly fixated on the women of the harem’s ability to deny sexual encounters with their husbands – perhaps because in her own society, women lacked this right.³⁸ She insisted that this capacity, in addition to a few others, made Turkish women “freer than any ladies in the universe.”³⁹

To Lady Montagu, what symbolized freedom seemed to be the ability to “lead a life of uninterrupted pleasure, exempt from cares, their whole time being spent in visiting, bathing, or the agreeable amusement of spending money and inventing new fashions.”⁴⁰ She mocked male travelers who “lament on the miserable confinement of the Turkish ladies”⁴¹ and proclaimed

³⁶ Montagu, 59.

³⁷ Montagu, 134.

³⁸ Tobin, 119.

³⁹ Montagu, 134.

⁴⁰ Montagu, 134.

⁴¹ Montagu, 134.

their “extreme stupidity.”⁴² In this, Mary replaced the iron cage that male travelers had Ottoman women locked away in with a gilded one.

Throughout Mary’s letters, she advocated for the situation of Ottoman women, representing them as free. Her qualifiers left a lot to be desired, however, because in addition to the perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes, she effectively ‘Others’ Ottoman women. In Mary’s writings, the only method of qualifying the worth of the Orient was to compare it to the Occident.

Lady Montagu’s letters from her journey to and from Constantinople paved the way for future female travelers to have their journals and letters received in the literary community. Lady Elizabeth Craven was one of those travelers, though she had a complicated relationship with Montagu’s legacy. Craven’s accounts are fascinating because in key ways, she contradicted her predecessors, particularly Montagu. Those studying her life speculate that these differences are specifically constructed in order to portray Craven in a certain light.

Lady Elizabeth Craven was born in 1750 as the third child of the 4th Earl of Berkeley and Elizabeth Drax. Craven (née Berkeley) was an active poet and playwright throughout her life. She married her husband, William Craven, in 1767 at the age of seventeen. Craven was busy in the aristocratic social scene until the time of her departure from England. She began to travel throughout Europe, spending a lot of time in France especially. In Prussia, she met the Margrave Christian Frederick Charles Alexander, and the two allegedly began a relationship, despite both still being married. After her divorce in 1783, Craven began traveling again and wrote letters to the Margrave discussing her journeys.⁴³

⁴² Montagu, 7.

⁴³ In order to keep up good appearances, these letters to the Margrave were usually signed “Your sister” or something along those lines.

Like Montagu, Lady Craven was an aristocrat, and thus traveled as such. She had very little contact with the lower classes, so her letters are also not useful in providing a holistic observation of Ottoman women. She, like Montagu, fell easily to the generalization of Ottoman women based on her experience with the upper class. Nonetheless, her observations provide interesting contrasts with other travel writers. Craven, unlike Montagu, was very critical of what she saw. This criticism potentially stems from a desire to justify herself, using Ottoman women as foils. Regardless of intent, her portrayal provides a distinctive image when compared with her predecessors.

From an early point in her letters, it is clear that Craven's disparaging remarks come from somewhere other than the quality of the women she discussed. Even before her arrival in the Ottoman sphere, she was very vocal in expressing her opinions of other women. Frankly, her descriptions of German and French women can only be characterized as nasty.⁴⁴ Her mean remarks grew harsher as she moved out of Western Europe. For example, she described the cosmetic process of Ottoman women as "making them appear rather disgusting than handsome,"⁴⁵ and this criticism is far more restrained than some of her others. Compared to Montagu's depiction of Ottoman women as beautiful, Craven's harsh descriptions stand in stark contrast. Even the sexist descriptions from Dumont and Withers contribute to an image of Ottoman women as at least erotic, and far from disgusting. One wonders whether Craven's criticisms of Ottoman women come from Orientalist perceptions or from a personal desire to appear the chaste, good English wife.⁴⁶ Lady Craven's travels originated with her messy divorce

⁴⁴ Lady Elizabeth Craven, *A Journey Through the Crimea to Constantinople* (London, 1789), 116. This is just a minor example of one of Craven's quips at French women.

⁴⁵ Craven, 295.

⁴⁶ Alison Winch's article discusses this subject thoroughly: Alison Winch. "If Female Envy Did Not Spoil Every Thing in the World of Women': Lies, Rivalry, and Reputation in Lady Elizabeth Craven's Travelogues" in *Women, Travel Writing and Truth*, ed. Clare Broome Saunders (New York: Routledge, 2014), 91-105.

from her husband, in an attempt to flee scandal. Her harsh critiques of Ottoman women and emphasis on morality imply a wish to be seen from a higher moral ground, perhaps to save face in the wake of her divorce. Craven is then not only fashioning Oriental subjects, but also self-fashioning a positive image through them.

Despite her disparaging remarks, Lady Elizabeth claimed to view Turkey as “a country where women may enjoy so much liberty, and free from all reproach.”⁴⁷ She even went so far as to say they are “the happiest creatures breathing”⁴⁸ and that “[Ottoman men’s] conduct towards our sex [is] an example to all other nations.”⁴⁹ Her views on freedom were very similar to Lady Mary’s – she greatly admired much about Ottoman women’s situation in the harem. She focused particularly on wifely management of the husband’s wealth and the control the first wife has over subsequent wives.⁵⁰ Again, this admiration likely stems from what she desires of her own relationships.

Despite her seeming appreciation of certain aspects of Turkish women, Craven had many unflattering things to say about them. She was particularly disdainful about the baths, saying that “such a disgusting sight as this would have put me in an ill humor with my sex in a bath for ages”⁵¹ when explaining why she declined her invitation to join the bathers. She described the women in the bath as fat with boiled flesh.⁵²

Craven hyper-focused on the physical forms of Ottoman women – rarely did she discuss their intelligence.⁵³ Like Montagu, Craven turned her companions into the subjects of an

⁴⁷ Craven, 270.

⁴⁸ Craven, 305.

⁴⁹ Craven, 304.

⁵⁰ This fascination likely derives from Craven’s own husband’s infidelity and the scandal his mistress caused Lady Elizabeth when she discovered that the woman had been traveling around Britain while using her name.

⁵¹ Craven, 342.

⁵² Craven, 341-342.

⁵³ The one instance she did, she disdainfully mentions their “simple” questions, revealing her perception of their intellectual inequality – Craven, 295-296.

exhibition. Their worth was measured through their appearance; this may be one of the reasons she compares women that were veiled on the street to “walking mummies.”⁵⁴ This took the agency out of the women she was observing by comparing them to nothing more than corpses that were reanimated, unable to think.

Craven had a much different method of ‘Othering’ Ottoman women than Montagu, but she did it just as effectively. By making severe distinctions between herself and her subjects, she assists in the development of the East/West divide. She was adamant about not being anything like the ladies of the harem. The fact that she retained her ‘good English morals’ by refusing to undress at the baths underlines this distinction, because nudity was unseemly. Craven’s letters characterize her as the chaste, English mother she wished to resemble.

It is the distinctions, both large and small, that Montagu and Craven make between themselves and their subjects that ‘others’ them. The act of comparing European and Ottoman women, as both ladies do, furthers this distancing. The comparisons in themselves are typically ethnocentric.⁵⁵ As Montagu and Craven attempted to explain their observations of Ottoman women, they reported to their audience how ‘We’ are different from ‘Them.’ In order to maintain this separation, potentially for the benefit of their audience, they emphasize why Ottoman women are inferior, regardless of their freedom.

As aristocrats, Montagu and Craven were exposed to upper-class Ottoman women; they had little direct experience with the middle and lower classes. In their letters, however, they speak of Ottoman women as a whole. Lady Craven said: “the Turkish women pass most of their time in the bath or upon their dress.”⁵⁶ It is highly improbable that all women of every class lived

⁵⁴ Craven, 270.

⁵⁵ This is interesting on Montagu’s part, because she insists that only small minds are ethnocentric. Perhaps in her mind she believes this, but her writings imply something different.

⁵⁶ Craven, 296.

a life of such leisure. Lady Montagu said similar things, like her statement that “a husband would be thought mad that exacted any degree of economy from his wife, whose expenses are no way limited but by her own fancy.”⁵⁷ In a majority agrarian society, most people could not spend excessively on clothes. The common people lived quite differently than the political elites, but Montagu and Craven do not see this. They essentialize Ottoman women in such a way that they took an extremely large, heterogeneous population and condensed it into a privileged upper class. Based on their letters, the casual reader would assume that all women in the Ottoman Empire bathed all day and hosted parties.

There is no dispute that Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu and Lady Elizabeth Craven were successful and intelligent women. However, their writings have caused much controversy since their publication. While both portrayed upper-class Ottoman women as free and liberated, each did so with a different spin. Montagu saw beautiful, erotic, and liberated women. Craven was very critical of her subjects and maintained that her European values were superior to Ottoman values. Both authors succeeded in essentializing and Orientalizing Ottoman women. Despite alleged intentions to be different than their male contemporaries, Craven and Montagu fell into the same traps.

⁵⁷ Montagu, 134.

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