The Turkish Embassy Letters : Self-narration in Letter-writing

Nicla Riverso[1]

Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) adopted the epistolary form to narrate her life and travels during her journey to Constantinople, expressing her challenging view of the East and her critique of the West. Positioning herself as being more authentic and credible through her first-hand experience and the plurivocal dialogue she adopted in her letter-writing, Montagu defies previous male travel writers, noting that because her gender granted her access to private spheres closed to men, her letters present a different and more accurate description of the culture of the Ottoman Empire. The epistolary form allows Montagu to move from a private to a public sphere and to reach a wide range of readers by embodying different identities that enable her to narrate her experience through both 'male' and 'female' voices.

1. Introduction

When Lady Mary's husband Edward Wortley Montagu was appointed ambassador to Turkey in 1716, she decided to travel with him, and recorded her experience of living abroad in letters to acquaintances, friends and family members. The letters, written in an unstructured and conversational style, give the impression of a spontaneous and casual compilation of personal correspondence; but Montagu in fact kept copies, and carefully edited and polished her collection with an eye to posthumous publication[2]. The epistolary form, as the most appropriate form of

[1] University of Washington, USA.

[2] Additional evidence for her desire to publish is found in a letter to her sister : « I am resolved to keep the copies as testimonies of my inclination to give you, to the utmost of my power, all the diverting part of my travels while you are exempt from all the fatigues and inconveniencies », in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, London, Virago Press, 2009, p. 113. Montagu wished for a posthumous publication due to her uncertainty about public reaction to her positive interpretation of the cultural customs of the East and her feminist tone, overtly challenging for the period. Public reaction aside, publication while she lived would have embarrassed her family and blemished her own standing in society. On the difficulties faced by women writers, see Catherine GALLAGHER, *Nobody's Story : The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994 ; Jody GREENE, *The Trouble with Ownership: Literary Property and Authorial Liability in England, 1660-1730*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005 ; Robert J. GRIFFIN, « Anonymity and Author-

self-expression for a woman of her era, gives Montagu her own narrative voice, and allows her to express a positive view of the East and a consequent criticism of western culture from the authoritative position of a traveller[3]. Beyond these advantages, the epistolary form provides Montagu with the opportunity to adopt a different role with each recipient, allowing her to enter into types of discourse ranging from discussions of Turkish poetry or thoughts on Islam to observations on the customs and dress of Turkish women. Her letters demonstrate her ability to communicate fluently in both 'male' and 'female' voices.

2. A new view of the East through self-narration in letter-writing

Montagu self-narrates her sojourn in the East while immersing herself in a different society. She participated actively in Turkish culture in order to better understand these new customs and traditions, which she viewed overtly through the lens of her womanhood : « An emergent feminist discourse provides Montagu with the language, arguments, and rhetoric with which to interrogate traditional travel writing about the Orient while furnishing her with a critical position from which to write »[4]. Her observations and interpretations offer a unique perspective, one which subverts the received stereotypes of Turkish society. By presenting herself as a participant instead of an observer, Montagu gives solid credibility to her observations. In her letters, she describes encounters with other women in the bathhouse, in the harem, and at wedding ceremonies[5]; but rather than merely observing, a position which distanced many writers from their subjects, she includes herself actively in the goings-on. Rather than merely repeating facts which

ship », *New Literary History* n° 30/4/1999, pp. 877-895 ; Harold LOVE, *Attributing Authorship: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[3] « The letter became an everyday privileged site for the expression of the self… For the woman, be she mother, wife, lover, or friend, the letter was the only means of expression at her disposal... In her confidences, the woman spoke of the difficulty of being a woman in the eighteenth century », in Marie-Claire GRASSI, « Naissance de l'intimité épistolaire (1780–1830) », *Littérales* n° 17/1995, p. 74. On the popularity of letters written by women because their style underlined spontaneity, naturalness and grace, see Clare BRANT, *Eighteenth-century letters and British culture,* Basingstoke England, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 40-47.

[4] Lisa LOWE, *Critical terrains : French and British Orientalisms*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 51.

[5] On the hospitality that Montagu experienced as a guest of the Turkish women in their *bagnio* and *harem* see Judith STILL, « Hospitable Harems ? A European Woman and Oriental Spaces in the Enlightenment », *Paragraph* n° 32/1/2009, pp. 87-104.

might be gleaned from anywhere, she relates her feelings and impressions of the new places she visits and the people she meets[6]. To demonstrate how completely she has been absorbed into the East, Montagu dresses in Turkish costume and even learns Arabic, which allows her to communicate effectively and to better appreciate Turkish poetry[7]. Montagu is keenly aware of the uniqueness of her experience, due entirely to her gender, which allowed her access to restricted areas in private homes and female-only spaces. She gives emphasis to the advantage that this unique perspective has afforded her, particularly over male writers[8]. Montagu's letters explicitly claim that she is better able than previous (male) observers to grasp the true nature of Turkish culture and to understand how Turkish women live in their society, and that she does so more completely and accurately ; in her words, she « Cannot forbear admiring either the exemplary discretion or extreme stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of them »[9]. Writing to her friend Lady Rich, she underscores the authenticity of her account : « Upon my word, madam, 'tis my regard to truth, and not laziness, that I do not entertain you with as many prodigies as other travellers use to divert their readers with »[10]. When discussing her visit to the harem, emphasizing the access that her gender has gained her, she remarks upon the difference between her own reports and those of the « Common voyage writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don't know »[11]. Montagu views her writing as a source of truth, which she hopes may

---

[6] Linda MCDOWELL points out that geography plays a relevant role in the analysis in which men and women « Experience spaces and places differently and to show how these differences themselves are part of the social constitution of gender as well as that of place » in *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 12.

[7] «As she travels deeper into the empire her identity becomes increasingly fluid: from her first tentative steps into Ottoman women's space to her adoption of Ottoman costume, the veil, and the inoculation of her son, her narrative demonstrates how geographic progress and continued exposure to the foreign is transformative » in Ambereen DADSBHOY « 'Going Native': Geography, Gender, and Identity in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters », in Mona NARAIN and Karen GEVIRTZ eds., *Gender and Space in British Literature 1660-1820*, Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2014, p. 55.

[8] On Montagu's openness to the values and ideas of the Turkish culture and on her carful choice of anecdotes to both entertain and instruct the reader, see Elizabeth WARNOCK FERNEA, « An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu », *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* n° 40/ 4 /Oct.1981, pp. 329-338.

[9] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 71.

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 41.

[11] *Ibid.,* p. 85. In *A New Voyage to the Levant* (1696), Jean Dumont admits that he was unable to obtain access to the most interior courts of the imperial harem, but still claims the right to describe Turkish women, as did Robert

sway the English to modify their negative view of Turkish culture[12]. Proving her assertion that « Nothing seems to me so agreeable as truth »[13] Montagu refuses to embellish the facts with imagination, striving instead of giving an accurate portrait of the places and people she visited, with the resulting « enquires and observations » used to generate a precise picture for her audience[14]. Though she is aware that, as a travel writer, she will be criticized no matter what she presents[15], and that not everybody will believe her[16], she trusts that at least some readers - like her sister Lady Mar, with whom she has a close relationship - will support her statements. In a letter to Lady Mar, she writes « I depend upon your knowing me enough to believe whatever I seriously assert for truth»[17]. Through her letters, Montagu seeks to educate westerners about true Eastern culture, attempting to amend the misconceptions brought about by books like *Les Mille et une nuits* (*Arabian Nights*), which depicted the East as erotic and sensual[18]. Though she herself engages in Orientalist discourse and even declares that she found the tales of the *Arabian Nights* similar to reality[19], Montagu uses her own descriptions of rich interiors and fabulous women to offer a new perspective on Turkish culture. According to Anna Sector, « The letters challenge the value judgements implicit in Orientalist discourses of difference while simultaneously reproducing European myth of the Orient. The trope of the sensual, hedonistic Orient, for example, is employed not to condemn the Turks but rather to praise them »[20]. When Montagu describes the

---

Withers in his *Description of the Grand Signor's Seraglio* (1653). See L. LOWE, *Critical Terrains : French and British Orientalisms, op. cit.,* p. 38-40.

[12] On Montagu's claim that the English misrepresented the East and on her efforts to present the true nature of the people and places she visited, see Ahmed AL-RAWI, « The portrayal of the East vs. the West in Lady Mary Montagu's 'Letters' and Emily Ruete's 'Memoirs' », *Arab Studies Quarterly,* n° 30/1/Winter 2008, pp.15-30.

[13] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 72.

[14] *Ibid.,* p. 60.

[15] « We travellers are in very hard circumstances. If we say nothing but what has been said before us, we are dull and have observed nothing. If we tell anything new, we are laughed at as fabulous and romantic », *Ibid.,* p. 118.

[16] « I am afraid you'll doubt the truth of this account, which I own is very different from our common notions in England, but it is not less truth for all that », *Ibid.,* p. 104.

[17] *Ibid.,* p. 118.

[18] On the claim that the *Arabian Nights* created the western vision of the Orient, see Rana KABBANI, *Europe's myths of Orient : Devise and Rule*, London, Macmillan, 1986, pp. 23-36. On the Orient as a place of romance, exotic beings, and haunting landscapes, see Edward W. SAID, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978, pp. 49-73.

[19] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 118.

[20] Anna SECOR, « Orientalism, Gender and Class in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's 'Turkish Embassy Letters : to persons of distinction, men of letters & c.' », *Ecumene* n° 6/4/ October 1999, p. 385.

women she encounters, she specifically avoids depicting them in the terms used by male travelers: as hypersexual, immodest, lustful, and libidinous. Montagu's goal is to avoid perpetuating the stereotypes of 'Oriental' women, and she uses aesthetic comparisons to « De-eroticize her readers' imaginary gaze and block the crassly sexualized representations of Withers and Dumont's lascivious crew »[21].

In direct opposition to those « Voyage-writers [who] lament on the miserable confinement of the Turkish ladies »[22], Montagu informs her sister, « I look upon the Turkish women as the only free people in the empire »[23]. To the Countess of Bristol, she describes them as « freer than any ladies in the universe »[24].

She insists that Turkish people are not barbaric and uncultured, and declares that they « are not so unpolished as we represent them. 'Tis true their magnificence is of a different taste from ours, and perhaps of a better. I am almost of opinion, they have a right notion of life »[25]. Describing the refined manners of Fatima (wife of the Kahya, or Second Officer after the Grand Vizier of the Sultan), she writes, « I am persuaded, could she be suddenly transported upon the most polite

---

[21] Elizabeth A. BOHLS, « Aesthetics and Orientalism in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Letters », *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* n° 23/1994, p.188. On aestheticizing female bodies, Jill CAMPBELL argues that « Finding herself in the position of the observer and interpreter of female bodies rather than that of the observed and represented, Lady Mary can only imagine that position as a male one, and she fantasizes herself as replaced in the baths by an invisible male artist » in « Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Historical Machinery of Female Identity », Beth FOWKES TOBIN ed., *History, Gender & Eighteenth-Century Literature*, in., Athens, Georgia UP, 1994, p. 80.

[22] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 134.

[23] *Ibid.,* p. 72. « The phrase 'women as the only free people' speaks volumes in the cultural face-off between the English, who prided themselves on their liberty, and the Turks, who notoriously lived in a tyranny. Lady Mary consciously developed an aesthetic strategy of subversion of mental attitudes that exacerbated differences between the two nations. », in Arthur J. WEITZMAN, « Voyeurism and Aesthetics in the Turkish Bath : Lady Mary's School of Female Beauty », *Comparative Literature Studies* n° 39/4/2002, p. 355. On Montagu's praise of the freedom enjoyed by the Turkish women, see Reina LEWIS, *Gendering Orientalism : Race, Femininity, and Representation*, New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 152-153. On Montagu's observations covered with a veil of romance and fictive structures in order to convince her audience of her claims, see Cynthia LOWENTHAL, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-century Familiar Letter*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1994, pp. 110-112. On the contemporary feminist critique on Montagu's claim about the freedom of Turkish women, see Devoney LOOSER, « Scolding Lady Mary Wortley Montagu ? The Problematics of Sisterhood in Feminist Criticism » in Susan WEISSER ed., *Feminist Nightmares, Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood*, New York, New York University Press, 1994, pp. 44-61.

[24] M. W. MONTAGU*, The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 134.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 142.

throne of Europe nobody would think her other than born and bred to be a queen, though educated in a country we call barbarous »[26].

Montagu's experiences enable her elaborate critical thoughts and commentary on Turkish society, and she uses her writing as a political device. Her celebration of Eastern culture serves to strengthen her feminist authority in the fight for women's equality in England[27]. The epistolary form allows Montagu to write herself into existence as a literary heroine. She is the protagonist of her stories, observing and commenting on the reality that she experiences. While giving the impression of recounting her travels in spontaneous and relaxed conversations, Montagu in fact ventures into topics which were the centre of political and social debate and displaying her strong will, her determination, and the wide-ranging scope of her knowledge.

Montagu's collection of letters, initially conceived for private readers, was later intentionally extended to the public[28]. Montagu's design to enter into a more public domain is evident in her strong expression of an alternative voice, which aimed to effect change in eighteenth-century English society.

Montagu wishes to astound and shake not just the single recipient of each letter, but a large number of public readers - or even better, an entire society. Her creation of an intimacy with each of her addressees, telling candid stories about herself and alternating her keen wit with warm-hearted prose, becomes a literary device by which Montagu hopes to gain the trust of a

[26] *Ibid.,* p. 89. On Montagu's praise of Fatima, see Lisa LOWE, *Critical Terrains : French and British Orientalisms, op cit.,* pp. 47-48.

[27] In « A Woman Triumphs : From Travels of an English Lady in Europe, Asia, and Africa (1763) by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu », in Ivo KAMPS and Jyotsna G. SINGH eds., *Travel Knowledge : European 'Discoveries' in the Early Modern Period*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, Rebecca CHUNG argues « that the uses Montagu made of her gender and sexual agency while in Turkey determine her authority as contact participant and cross-cultural authority on the condition of women », p.117. « She used the materiality of her experience in Turkey to displace linguistic and political manipulation of gender power at home », p.119. On the debate about whether to label Montagu's text as orientalist or feminist, see Teresa HEFFERNAN, *Veiled Figures : Women, Modernity, and the Spectres of Orientalism*, Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press 2016, pp. 20-23.

[28] In the eighteenth-century even personal letters were read in the presence of family members or close friends, but with the publication of the letters in her mind, Montagu intended to have a bigger audience. On the exposure of private letters to the public, see Minna NEVALA, « Inside and out : Forms of address in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters », *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* n° 5/2/2004, pp. 271-296. In eighteenth century society 'public' and 'private' were not considered opposite concepts, see Thomas MUNK, *The Enlightenment : a Comparative Social History, 1721-1794*, London, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.198-199.

large audience[29]. Such trust naturally inspires confidence in an author's views and statements of fact. Montagu shares details about her life, bringing the reader closer and involving him/her in her world, with the end goal being a public ready to embrace her perspective on the East.

3. Letter-writing as a plurivocal dialogue

Montagu resorts to an interesting stratagem in her quest to convince the reader of her reliability and the truth of her accounts. Depending on the recipient of the letter, Montagu plays different roles, each of which showcases her understanding of a different culture and displays her extensive knowledge in multiple areas. These shifting roles allow Montagu to reach a wide range of readers, fostering an intimate relationship between her and a larger audience. Montagu engages in various styles of communication, each with a different purpose, and takes pleasure in demonstrating the range of her identities : she is a refined poet and architect, sharing her observations on Turkish poems and buildings in a masculine discursive style; she is a serious thinker about religion, elaborating her thoughts on Islam; she is an enthusiastic supporter of science and new medical procedures, describing and celebrating the technique for smallpox inoculation; she is playful, frivolous and gossipy when she addresses female recipients on subjects like women's fashion and customs. Blurring the lines between sexuality and gender, Montagu plays many roles, each intended to lend validity to her claim on the reader's attention and trust[30].

In a letter to her friend Alexander Pope, she engages in clever discourse on Turkish poetry. Her intellectual brilliance is on display as she translates a Turkish love lyric, written by a male poet, for her friend, himself one of the most prominent male poets in England. In doing this, she transfigures herself into a masculine role. Montagu provides both a literal and a non-literal translation of the verses by Ibrahim Pasha, subverting gender expectations as she plays the role of a poet expressing his love for a young princess. Joseph Lew notes that « The usurpation of the role of the translator by the traveller/narrator » brings radical changes in the representation of the

[29] « In the same way that Lady Mary imitates spontaneity through her artifice, the reader in turn imitates intimacy by fictionalizing himself or herself as one privy to her world » in Kevin J. GARDNER, « The Aesthetics of Intimacy: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Her Readers », *Papers on Language & Literature* n° 34/2/March 1998, p. 116.

[30] On gender difference as an experientially articulated and socially mediated expression of sexual difference, see Michael MCKEON, « Historicizing Patriarchy : The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760 », *Eighteenth-Century Studies* n° 28/3/Spring, 1995, pp. 295-322.

journey. Referring to Montagu, Lew writes that «As the traveller dismisses a now-useless servant from his entourage, the newly bi-lingual narrator dismisses the act of translation from the text, which ceases to draw attention to unintelligibility and represents Orientals as if they were speaking English »[31]. I would add that by playing the role of translator, Montagu empowers herself by taking control of another language (and another culture), inflecting the translated subject with new layers of meaning added by her own interpretation. The Orientals, who now 'speak English' thanks to Montagu, express themselves in actions and feelings shaped by the translator.

In her comparison of English and Turkish culture, Montagu notes that the difficulty of translating poems from Turkish into English is more than merely linguistic: « I cannot determine upon the whole, how well I have succeeded in the translation, neither do I think our English proper to express such violence of passion, which is very seldom felt amongst us. We want also those compound words which are very frequent and strong in the Turkish language »[32].

This is another challenge to the Western view of the world. Re-valuating Eastern culture on its own merit, Montagu demonstrates to her readers that there are certain modes of expression for which languages other than English are superior.

In another letter to Pope, describing a visit made to the battlefield of Peterwardein on her way to Adrianople, Montagu adopts a different aspect of the male persona. As Montagu shows it, the site of the battle fought between the Hapsburgs and the Ottomans only six months before still shows signs of merciless and violent conflict :

> The marks of that glorious bloody day are yet recent, the field being strewed with the skulls and carcasses of unburied men, horses and camels. I could not look without horror on such numbers of mangled humane bodies, and reflect on the injustice of war that makes murder not only necessary but meritorious. […] I am a good deal inclined to believe Mr. Hobbes that the state of nature is a state of war, but thence I conclude humane nature not rational, if the word reason means common sense, as I suppose it does[33].

In this letter, Montagu tackles a topic generally reserved for male discourse, giving details of the atrocities of the slaughter with masculine confidence and displaying familiarity with political philosophy in her judicious contemplation of Hobbes' statement. By repeating the words of a

[31] Joseph LEW, « Lady Mary's Portable Seraglio », *Eighteenth Century Studies* n° 24/1991, p. 436.
[32] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 79.
[33] *Ibid.,* p. 51.

male philosopher, she once again overcomes gender boundaries ; and her 'inclination' to believe Hobbes shows that, confident in her own intellectual capacity, she feels perfectly entitled to question a received male authority.

Montagu is proud to display her knowledge of architecture on a visit to the mosque of Sultan Selim I in Adrianople. In a letter to her Italian friend, the writer and philosopher Abbot Antonio Schinella Conti (Abbé Conti), she employs discipline-specific language in her descriptions : 'marble pillars of the Ionic order', 'cupolas', 'domes', 'portico', 'pillars with marble balustrades,' all of these words indicating that she knows enough about architecture to be able to provide a depiction of the mosque using the diction of the field[34]. Depending on the correspondent, Montagu can also adopt a tone of modesty in her discussion of architecture. Writing to Lady Bristol about Saint Sophia in Constantinople, a Byzantine church converted into a mosque by the Ottomans (which she visited dressed as a man)[35], she describes the mosque with the precision and skill of an expert, recalling that « The Dome of St. Sophia is said to be 113 foot diameter, built upon arches, sustained by vast pillars of marble […] There are two rows of galleries supported with pillars »[36] but then remarks, « I understand architecture so little that I am afraid of talking nonsense in endeavouring to speak of it particularly »[37]. At first glance, it seems peculiar for Montagu to adopt this tone, in contrast with the audacity expressed in other letters, particularly when she is describing having entered a masculine space dressed as a man, and handles the masculine topic of architecture with dignity. However, she engages in this self-deprecation for a reason. Montagu understands that statements made by women face more scrutiny than those made by men, and she recognizes that a certain display of modesty and submission will better gain the favour of the men who she hopes will eventually form part of her audience.

In another letter to Abbé Conti, she elaborates an erudite analysis of Islam. Here too, ignoring gender restrictions, she adopts a masculine voice in order for her statements and her commentary to be heard seriously and with respect. Montagu shares with Abbé Conti the knowledge of Islam that she has received through daily conversation with a scholar named Ahmed Bey. Firmly in the male sphere, Montagu becomes a mediator between two men, conferring with a male Muslim

---

[34] *Ibid.,* pp. 95-96.
[35] Montagu told Joseph Spence in 1741 that she and the Princess of Transylvania dressed as men and risked their lives to visit the mosque. Isobel GRUNDY, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, Oxford, New York, Clarendon Press 1999, p. 166.
[36] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 128.
[37] *Ibidem.*

scholar to learn about his religion and transferring to her male Catholic scholar friend what she has learned. With this action, Montagu helps both parties understand and focus on the important issue of religious differences[38].

Comparing Islam with Christianity, she writes, « Mohammedism is divided into as many sects as Christianity, and the first institution as much neglected and obscured by interpretations I cannot here forbear reflecting on the natural inclination of mankind, to make mysteries and novelties. The Zeidi, Kudi, Jabari etc. put me in mind of the Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, etc., and are equally zealous against one another »[39].

As the letter proceeds, Montagu moves on to her description of the Quran. This, in keeping with her positive attitude towards the Orient/East, she describes in glowing terms. She mentions that Ahmed Bey recommended the Quran to her, assuring her that she would be very pleased, because it « Is so far from the nonsense we charge it with that 'tis the purest morality, delivered in the very best language »[40]. She explains that the negative opinion of the Quran in the West is based on translations done by Greek priests « who would not fail to falsify it with the extremity of malice. No body of men ever were more ignorant or more corrupt. Yet they differ so little from the Romish Church that I confess there is nothing gives me a greater abhorrence of the cruelty of your clergy than the barbarous persecutions of them, whenever they have been their masters for no other reason than not acknowledging the Pope »[41].

Not only does Montagu defend Islam, but she deliberately writes an anti-Catholic polemic to her friend the Catholic abbot. Toward the end of the letter, she writes, « I don't ask your pardon for the liberty I have taken in speaking of the Roman [Catholic Church] »[42]. Here, Montagu is provocative and defiant, her tone the opposite of what we expect from an eighteenth-century English lady. She expresses herself in obstinate and rebellious language, ill-suited to the feminine gentility expected of a woman in her position, discussing with 'masculine' vigour the complex and serious topic of religion. Though it seems anomalous, it is understandable that an eighteenth-century woman would feel the need to 'act' masculine while delivering herself of these strong opinions and harsh comments, simply in order to be taken seriously. Thanks to her coura-

[38] « I explained to him [Ahmed Bey] the difference between the religion of England and Rome, and he was pleased to hear there were Christians that did not worship images or adore the Virgin Mary ». *Ibid.,* p. 62.
[39] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 62.
[40] *Ibid.,* p. 63.
[41] *Ibidem.*
[42] *Ibid.,* p. 64.

geous and opinionated nature, her confidence in her literary skills, and her ability to defy norms and rely on her intelligence to discern what is right and what is not, Montagu stands out, opposing dogmas and institutions and opening the possibility of different perspectives on religious belief.

4. Discourse on medical procedure : inoculation against smallpox

While Montagu was traveling in the Ottoman Empire, she discovered the local practice of inoculation against smallpox, known as variolation. She observed that the local people deliberately infected their children with a mild form of smallpox by smearing the matter from a smallpox pustule into an open scratch; even if the children thus treated came down with the symptoms of smallpox on the eighth day after application, their illness was shorter and they were very seldom scarred, and naturally they were then immune to smallpox for the rest of their lives. In a letter to Sarah Chiswell from Adrianople, Montagu expresses her excitement at this unconventional approach to combating smallpox. Having had smallpox herself and having lost a brother to the disease, Montagu adopts the role of interested scientific observer, resolved to champion this life-saving new preventative treatment in England. Though scientific observers were traditionally imagined to be male, Montagu is unapologetically female, and explicitly attributes this form of medical expertise to women : «There is a set of old woman who make it their business to perform the operation. […] the old woman comes with a nutshell full of the matter of the best sort of smallpox, and asks what veins you please to have opened. She immediately rips open that you offer to her with a large needle… »[43].

From scientific observation, Montagu moves into an active role : «I am patriot enough to take the pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England, and I should not fail to write some of our doctors very particularly about it, if I knew any one of them that I thought had virtue enough to destroy such a considerable branch of their revenue, for the good of mankind»[44].

Montagu had the procedure performed on both her children and enthusiastically promoted the smallpox inoculation in England, but encountered a great resistance from the medical establishment, who were suspicious of the unconventional 'Oriental' method, which was moreover being

[43] *Ibid.,* p. 81.
[44] *Ibid.,* pp. 81-82.

championed by a woman[45]. Montagu, who was denied a formal education because she was a woman but who, thanks to her curiosity and intellect, mastered the arts, literature, poetry, history, and even science, was not considered qualified to be granted recognition in a scientific and medical field strictly led by men[46]. If Montagu had not been treated with such skepticism, many lives would have been saved - among them, Sarah Chiswell, who died in London of smallpox in 1726.

5. Feminine Discourse

Though in many letters Montagu engages in masculine discourse, speaking seriously and competently and defying gender norms, when she writes to her sister Lady Mar and other long time female friends, her conversations highlight her femininity. She uses a personal tone, creating intimacy by relating frivolous stories and gossip. To please her feminine correspondents, she carefully chooses her topics to interest her friends, discussing fashion rather than political and literary matters. Being fascinated herself by Turkish Muslim female dress, she offers detailed descriptions of the clothing of women she meets[47]. Describing Fatima, a Muslim woman whose house Montagu visited, she reports to Lady Mar that « She was dressed in a caftan of golden brocade flowered with silver, very well fitted to her shape and showing to advantage the beauty of her bosom, only shaded by the thin gauze of her shift »[48]. In another letter to her sister she describes herself dressed in a Turkish costume very similar to Fatima's : « My caftan of the same

[45] On Montagu's efforts to spread smallpox inoculation in England, see Isobel GRUNDY, « Montagu's Variolation », *Endeavour* n° 24/1/2000, pp. 4-7 ; « Literary Experiment and Female Infamy: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu fictionalizes her life », *Lumen* n° 31/2012, pp. 1-20 ; « Medical Advance and Female Fame: Inoculation and its After-Effects », *Lumen* n° 13/1994, pp. 13-42.

[46] « Many people around Lady Mary sneered not only at her lack of training, but at her willingness to pay serious attention to rumours coming from even more absurdly 'ignorant' sources : Ottoman women and African slaves », in Jennifer LEE CARRELL, *Speckled Monster : A Historical Tale of Battling Smallpox*, New York, Plume, a member of the Penguin Group, USA, Inc, 2004, Introduction, p. xiv. On Montagu's problem with credibility due to a lack formal education, see Harvey J. GRAFF, *The Legacies of Literacy : Continuities and Contradictions in Western culture and Society*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 239.

[47] On the consideration of Oriental dress and responses to female body and female sexuality by women travellers, see Shirley FOSTER, « Colonialism and Gender in the East: Representations of the Harem in the Writings of Women Travellers », in Nicola BRADBURY ed., *The Yearbook of English Studies: Nineteenth Century Travel Writing,* vol. 34, Leeds, MHRA, 2004, pp. 6-17.

[48] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 90.

stuff with my drawers, is a robe exactly fitted to my shape and reaching to my feet, with the very long straight-falling sleeves »[49]. She even dresses her hair like Fatima. Montagu explains that her hair « Hangs at its full length behind, divided into tresses braided with pearl or ribbon, which is always in great quantity »[50]. Compare this to her description of Fatima : « Her own fine black hair hanging a great length in various tresses, and on one side of her head some bodkins of jewels »[51]. In these descriptions Montagu not only shows a vivid interest in Turkish women's clothing and hair dressing, but identifies herself in Fatima.[52] By immersing herself in a different society and embracing a different identity, Montagu seeks an authentic experience of the daily life of Turkish women. At the same time, proud of her Turkish costume, she emulates the women she admires the most, demonstrating her enthusiasm and respect for Ottoman culture[53].

In a letter to her friend Lady Rich, Montagu discusses the extremely expensive 'Balm of Mecca', a cosmetic ointment thought to be extremely effective in preserving the beauty of the skin. It contained, among its many ingredients, sweet almond, turpentine and aromatic oil. It was very popular among women in the East and in great demand in the West. Montagu readily shares her experience with this beauty treatment, admitting that she was attracted by the prospect of rendering her skin whiter, softer, and smoother. But after the 'Balm' made her face swell and her skin turn red, Montagu debunks the myth of such ointments, remarking,

> As to the Balm of Mecca, I will certainly send you some ; but it is not so easily got as you suppose it, and I cannot in conscience advise you to make use of it. I know not how it comes to

[49] *Ibid.,* p. 69.
[50] *Ibid.,* p. 70.
[51] *Ibid.,* p. 90.
[52] « She avoided insularity by effective use of travel-book aesthetics and emphasis and pierced the myths of orient by refusing to demonize the Turks, using her admittedly amateur ethnographic understanding. When she looked at the 'other' she saw herself », in Arthur J. WEITZMAN, « Voyeurism and Aesthetics m the Turkish Bath : Lady Mary's School of Female Beauty », *Comparative Literature Studies* n° 39/4/2002, p. 357.
[53] « Wearing these clothes herself, she is full of praise for the Turkish aristocratic women she encounters », in Srinivas ARAVAMUDAN, « Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the Hammam : Masquerade, Womanliness, and Levantinization », *ELH* n° 62/1/Spring, 1995, p. 80. On the performance of an ethnic identity (through imitating clothes, gestures, and appearance) as a demonstration of control over the threat of transgressing ethnic, religious, and sexual boundaries in Montagu, see also Kader KONUK, « Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters: Reenacting Lady Mary Wortley Montagu », *Criticism* n° 46/3/2004, Special Issue: « Extreme and Sentimental History », pp. 393-414.

> have such universal applause. All the ladies of my acquaintance at London and Vienna, have begged me to send pots of it to them.
> […]
> I have very little esteem for medicines of this nature
> […]
> For me, that am not very apt to believe in wonders, I cannot find faith for this[54].

Montagu's statements confirm her fundamental nature : though she is feminine in her manners and customs, her attitude is always scientific, resolved to separate fact from fiction, dispelling myths with empirical evidence. In the case of the 'Balm of Mecca', Montagu engages in direct scientific experiment, using herself as the test subject, and she ascertains the negative results from the data she has collected. Here again, Montagu pushes the gender boundaries into blurring the lines between female and male roles : she is not a submissive woman who accepts common misconceptions ; adopting a male attitude, she asserts herself, and proves empirically that they are wrong.

6. Between-letters and in-letter dialogues

Letters communicate in writing what could be otherwise be communicated orally, creating a conversation with a physically absent person[55]. In order to preserve the conversional quality, letters must not be too pompous in style and should maintain a balance between plainness and spontaneity. Montagu's epistolary discourses create an ongoing dialogue between herself and the recipient, engaging in lively conversations with friends and family members extending over time. To give the impression of spoken language, Montagu adopts a colloquial style, using shorter and more informal sentence structures[56]. She uses punctuation to create dynamicity in the discourse : commas, periods, colons, and question and exclamation marks are employed to introduce pauses and variations in pace, as well as prosodic effects. Montagu inserts rhetorical questions for emphasis and to grab attention. In a letter to her friend Anne Thistlethwayte dis-

[54] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 105.
[55] « Letters bring writers and readers together, bridging physical distance with the written word », in Claudine VAN HENSBERGEN, « Towards an Epistolary Discourse : Receiving the Eighteenth-Century Letter », *Literature Compass* n° 7/7/2010, p. 515.
[56] C. LOWENTHAL, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-century Familiar Letter, op. cit*., p. 29.

cussing Turkish law and the punishment of convicted liars, she writes, « How many white foreheads should we see disfigured ? How many fine gentlemen would be forced to wear their wigs as low as their eye-brows were this law in practice with us ? »[57] Explaining to Lady Rich the popularity of the 'Balm of Mecca' among the women of the East, she says « What would not some ladies of our acquaintance give for such merchandise ? »[58] In the middle of a story about a Christian woman who found herself in critical circumstances and finally chose to marry a Turkish man, Montagu, to create a pause and a certain suspense, writes « And now how shall I modestly tell you the rest of her adventure ? »[59] In all three letters, Montagu's purpose for the rhetorical questions is to give the reader the impression of being addressed directly by the writer. Sometimes, as in the discussion of convicted liars, the rhetorical question may serve as a subtle way of presenting an idea that might anger or offend if asserted directly.

To give the impression of a spontaneous conversation and to avoid the monotony of an unbroken string of assertions, Montagu incorporates exclamations to simulate extreme emotions such as surprise, excitement, and even grief. Of a private audience in Vienna with the Hapsburg Empress, Elisabeth of Brunswick, she writes enthusiastically of Elisabeth's beauty to Lady Mar : « When she smiles, 'tis with a beauty and sweetness that forces adoration. She has a vast quantity of fine fair hair ; but then her person ! »[60] And again in another letter to her sister, after meeting Fatima, she exclaims « That surprising harmony of features ! That charming result of the whole ! That exact proportion of body ! That lovely bloom of complexion unsullied by art ! The unutterable enchantment of her smile !... »[61] On her way home, writing to Abbé Conti from Greece, Montagu expresses her nostalgia for classical antiquity and grieves the loss : « Alas ! Art is extinct here. The wonders of nature alone remain »[62].

To produce an intimate tone in her writing, Montagu often introduces parenthetical comments. She frequently interrupts one phrase by starting another phrase in parentheses, generating a particular voice that seems to whisper into the addressee's ear, communicating a personal note or a private insight. In a letter to Lady Bristol, she narrates her impression of seeing the sultan on his way to the mosque. Describing in detail the encounter, she writes,

---

[57] M. W. MONTAGU, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, op. cit.,* p. 108.
[58] *Ibid.,* p. 106.
[59] *Ibid.,* p. 136.
[60] *Ibid.,* p. 18.
[61] *Ibid.,* p. 89.
[62] *Ibid.,* p. 148.

« Next him the Kilar Aga (your ladyship knows this is the chief guardian of the seraglio ladies) in a deep yellow cloth (which suited very well to his black face) lined with sables and last his sublimity himself… »[63]. The sentences in parentheses speak directly to the addressee, delivering a more specific explanation and a personal comment.

Another way for Montagu to create a friendly and informal conversational tone is the use of contractions. These forms (won't, 'tis, don't, 'twas, don't, you'll, I'll, 'twas) improve the fluidity of speech. Moreover, always with the aim of giving an impression of speech rather than writing, Montagu sometimes begins her sentences with 'but', 'nay', 'thus', 'then', 'yet' and 'however,' transforming her written words into an oral performance.

In evidence of the ongoing dialogue between the addresser and addressee, Montagu's letters include the explicit expectation of a response. She is informing her correspondents, but she is also eager to receive news. To her sister she pleads, « I will write often, since you desire it, but I must beg you to be a little more particular in yours »[64]. And again in another letter : « I wish to God, dear sister, that you were as regular in letting me have the pleasure of knowing what passes on your side of the globe »[65]. To the Countess of Mar she writes « I declare to you that if you do not send me immediately a full and true account of all the changes and chances amongst our London acquaintance, I will not write you any description of Hanover »[66].

Montagu often is thankful for the letters she receives or expresses her delight in the continuing conversation. To her friend Mrs. Thistlethwayte, she writes, « I never was more agreeably surprised than by your obliging letter »[67]. In another letter she declares, « I am infinitely obliged to you, dear Mrs. Thistlethwayte, for your entertaining letter »[68]. She begins her correspondence to the Countess of Bristol with the words, « Your ladyship may be assured I received yours with very great pleasure »[69]. And to Abbé Conti she exclaims, « I am extremely pleased with hearing from you »[70]. Montagu enjoys the re-establishment of a neglected correspondence ; she writes to Madame de Bonnac, « I am so glad to find you again, my dear madam, that I cannot complain any more of having lost you, and the pleasure given me by that letter which I have just received

[63] *Ibid.,* p. 67.
[64] *Ibid.,* p. 39.
[65] *Ibid.,* p. 69.
[66] *Ibid.,* pp. 34-35.
[67] *Ibid.,* p. 24.
[68] *Ibid.,* p. 106.
[69] *Ibid.,* p. 133.
[70] *Ibid.,* p. 139.

today makes me forget completely the uneasiness of the past ten months »[71]. It is as if Montagu depends on her correspondents to continue her self-narration and to provide her with a sounding board for her observations and comments on the East. She creates lively dialogues, conveying thoughts and descriptions clearly, cogently and naturally, answering questions asked in letters previously received. She tells Abbe Conti, « I am charmed, sir, with your obliging letter ; […] I intend to give punctual answers to all your questions »[72]. In another, she concludes, « I have answered your letter by giving you the account you desired »[73]. But she also modestly admits that sometimes an answer is not possible : « My vanity [is] not a little flattered by the uncommon questions you ask me, though I am utterly incapable of answering them »[74].

To keep up the ongoing conversations, it is necessary to entertain the reader, augmenting the other pleasures of reading the letters. Aware that prosaic monotony can bore her reader, Montagu livens her style by adding new voices : she recounts conversations with people she has met and sometimes even incorporates their words. In a letter to Abbé Conti she describes her return to England across the Channel in a vessel at the mercy of the waves during a storm. She tells a story of a fellow traveller, an English lady who had bought a fine lace cap which she was hiding from the customs officers. When the wind blew stronger and the vessel began to crack, she exclaimed « Dear madam, will you take care of this point ? If it should be lost… Ah, Lord ! We shall all be lost ! Lord have mercy on my soul. Pray, madam, take care of this headdress »[75]. This episode, particularly lively because of the introduction of the voice of a fellow passenger, has a purpose beyond merely amusing her reader, in that it employs humour while bringing up a paradox. Montagu adds this conclusion : « This easy transition from her soul to headdress, and the alternate agonies that both gave her, made it hard to determine which she thought of greatest value »[76].

Adding new voices also serves as a rhetorical device for catching sight of herself reflected in the vision of others. In a letter to Lady Mar, recalling her second meeting with Fatima, Montagu writes,

---

[71] *Ibid.,* p. 132.
[72] *Ibid.,* p. 109.
[73] *Ibid.,* p. 151.
[74] *Ibid.,* p. 139.
[75] *Ibid.,* p. 164.
[76] *Ibidem.*

> She met me at the door of her chamber and, giving me her hand with the best grace in the world : « You Christian ladies », said she with a smile that made her as handsome as an angel, « have the reputation of inconstancy, and I did not expect, whatever goodness you expressed for me at Adrianople, that I should ever see you again ; […] if you knew how I speak of you amongst our ladies you would be assured that you do me justice if you think me your friend ». She placed me in the corner of the sofa and I spent the afternoon in her conversation with the greatest pleasure in the world[77].

Here Montagu herself becomes an object of scrutiny; she passes the test, and Fatima offers her friendship. The general observation of 'you Christian ladies' holds not only Montagu but English society up to the light, implying that they may not be the very peak of breeding and manners.

In a letter to Lady Rich, Montagu describes an interaction with some women at the bath-house[78]. Here again, she lets the women speak for themselves as they comment on her dress, and presents herself for observation : « They repeated over and over to me ; 'Güzelle, pek güzelle', which is nothing but 'charming, very charming' »[79]. When the women invite her to undress and join them for the bath, Montagu flips the Western narrative : the Turkish women view her as oppressed and constrained. « I was at least forced to open my shirt and show them my stays, which satisfied them very well, for I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband »[80].

By showing herself objectified and introducing a Turkish female gaze to her writing, Montagu critiques the gender rules and restrictions of British society[81]. She juxtaposes the liberty of the

---

[77] *Ibid.,* p. 119.

[78] « Montagu's experience of cultural dislocation enabled her to perceive the relationship between herself and others as reciprocal or dialogic ; as a result, she saw how subjectivity could be reinvented perpetually through social interaction », in Mary Jo KIETZMAN, « Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters and Cultural Dislocation », *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* n° 38/1998, pp. 547-548.

[79] *Ibid.,* p. 58.

[80] *Ibid.,* pp. 59-60.

[81] « Montagu has chosen to interpret herself in imaginary chains, having willingly chosen subjection over agency. She is allowing the Turkish women to come up with an interpretation of her own limitations, about which she may not want to complain so directly », in S. ARAVAMUDAN, « Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the Hammam: Masquerade, Womanliness, and Levantinization », *op. cit.,* p. 85.
On Montagu's view of the idealization of female nudity and the view of clothing as an 'instrument of oppression', see Riccardo CAPOFERRO, « Genre Contamination and Gender Critique in Lady Mary Montagu's Turk-

nude Turkish women to herself imprisoned in a 'tortuous machinery,' pointing up the embrace of 'nature' in Eastern life and the 'mechanical' focus of the West[82].

7. Conclusion

Montagu, with this account of her sojourn in the Ottoman Empire, positions herself differently than other (male) travel writers. Claiming authenticity and accuracy for her narrative, she also narrates herself. She depicts herself interacting with the Oriental ladies, herself visiting historical sites, herself surrounded by Ottoman monuments and Turkish countryside. Emphasizing the first-hand nature of her information, she defends her personal perspectives, challenging the views of other travel writers. Through her correspondence, Montagu re-draws the Orient for her western friends and acquaintances, attempting to minimize differences between West and East and to amend the misconceptions produced by the Oriental topoi of her time. At the same time, she adopts a feminist rhetoric, engaging in discourses of gender, identity, and authority. Thanks to her ability to accommodate her writing to a changing audience, by shaping her language to suit each recipient, she transforms a private communication into a public expression calculated to appeal to a wide number of readers[83]. As she abandons the conventional English descriptions and interpretations of the Orient, Montagu aims for a larger goal : she offers the West a path to social and cultural improvement gleaned from the knowledge and culture of the East. A crucial factor in her success is her use of the epistolary form, as it offers her the opportunity to play distinct roles, appealing to readers of varying gender, education and interests. Montagu's letter-writing is a performative autobiographical act, meant to support the authenticity of her descriptions and statements. As Montagu creates and spreads her subversive image of the Orient, she also unfolds herself, exploring her inner and outer voices and accomplishing the self-formation of her identity.

---

ish Embassy Letters », in *Literary and Cultural Intersections During the Long Eighteenth-Century*, ed. Marianna D'EZIO, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2008, p. 47.

[82] Billie MELMAN, *Women's Orients : English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Macmillan, 1992, p. 92.

[83] On the speaker's linguistic choice and desire for approval, see Allan BELL, « Language Style as Audience Design », *Language in Society* n° 13/2/1984, pp.158-161.