

Amelia Precup
Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
amelia.nan@gmail.com

**MAPPING FEMININITY AS SELF-REFLECTION
STRATEGY IN LADY MARY WORTLEY
MONTAGU’S TRAVEL LETTERS**

Recommended Citation

Precup, Amelia. “Mapping Femininity as Self-reflection Strategy in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Travel Letters”. *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 3.1 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2017.3.06>

Abstract. The present paper participates in the discussion about the differences between masculine and feminine modes of travel in terms of interests, perception, and representation, by exploring the *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M--y W--y M--e Written during Her Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa*, by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. As a traveller, Lady Mary engaged in the contemplation of cultural landscapes: she attempted to understand the social logic of the communities she met and to assess the cultural distance between the English society and the local customs of the countries she visited. Within this large social and cultural framework, the focus of her keen spirit of observation is represented, in many of her letters, by gender dynamics and the status of women, thus allowing a feminine configuration of the map of continental Europe and the Ottoman Empire and a comparative understanding of femininity and expected feminine behaviour. Therefore, the contention of this paper is that, in Lady Mary’s letters, the female-traveller’s gaze ends in meditation and self-contemplation, and functions as a means of comparing and reassessing female identity.

Keywords: feminine mode of travel, cultural (self)-positioning, otherness, strategies of othering, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, travel letters, feminine map.

The parlance of cultural encounters in the Western world relies on the vocabulary of difference and identity, and the modes of perception and representation of sameness and otherness are generally shaped by discourses mediated by relations of power. Cultural (self)positioning is usually defined by the East-West dichotomy. As Susan Sontag explains,

modern thought is pledged to a kind of applied Hegelianism: seeking its Self in its Other. Europe seeks itself in the exotic — in Asia, in the Middle East, among pre-literate peoples, in a mythic America; (...) The ‘other’ is experienced as a harsh purification of ‘self.’ But at the same time the ‘self’ is busily colonizing all strange domains of experience. (69)

The Western reliance on strategies of othering as a means of defining its own identity has become the basic thesis of a variety of fields that touch upon cultural politics. The strategies of othering, ranging from the representation of the threatening other to the domestication of the exotic (60), present the ‘other’ as a construct emerging from the dynamics of power relations that seem to always guide cultural interaction. As Johannes Fabian points out, “the Other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but made” (qtd. in Hallam and Street 1). Thus, otherness becomes the result of reworking difference in accordance with specific configurational codes and structures designed by one’s own ideological framework and cultural presuppositions.

Travel writing is one of the literary genres in which the modes of perception and representation of the ‘cultural other’ are most easily discerned and addressed. The cultural contact zones probed by the traveller-writer inform the construction of the ‘other’, while the assessment of convergence and differentiation assists in the configuration of one’s own cultural identity. This strategy is apparent in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M--y W--y M--e Written during Her Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa*. The letters included in the collection were written while she was accompanying her husband, a British ambassador, in his trip to continental Europe and Turkey, between 1716 and 1718. The *Letters* count among Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s most memorable and most anthologised work and reveal the writer’s interest in engaging, exploring, and translating different cultures. During her journey (especially the return trip), she probes “Europe’s cultural memory” (Borbély 236); she assumes “the role of a

cultural mediatrix (...) casting her recuperative gaze upon the polychromic, interstitial sties of the cities, fortresses, or castles she tours by” (239). This cultural mediation between past and present is enriched by Lady Mary’s insightful analyses of coeval cultural encounters drawing on reflections on her unmediated experiences. She interacted mainly with women, and most of these interactions occurred in feminine spaces. Her perceptive descriptions of the societies she encountered and the savvy observations on the people she met are always translated into her own culture. This strategy does more than educate her correspondents on foreign customs; it allows a feminine configuration of the map of continental Europe and the Ottoman Empire and a comparative understanding of femininity and expected feminine behaviour.

The implications of Lady Mary’s letters extend beyond the space of confessional self-revelation and echo across the public sphere. For instance, the letters tackling her Turkish experiences participate in the formation of the Orientalist discourse. As Mihaela Mudure explains, Lady Mary’s letters “were published during the formative period of the Orientalist discourse, a discourse of the Western power according to Edward Said, which was meant to chart the symbolic borders of Europe in contrast to the Oriental otherness.”¹ (151). Indeed, Lady Mary’s letters reveal the same type of fascination with the exoticism of difference that seems to define the dynamics of the European encounters with Eastern cultures. On the other hand, the letters resist the reinforcement of received and commonly-held assumptions about Oriental cultures through Lady Mary’s effort to learn about and from the people she met. Her mode of engaging new cultures is guided by curiosity and fascination, and her strategies of interaction and exchange are mindful of cultural variations and ideological differences. In this manner, Lady Mary’s letters differ from the rhetoric of cultural confrontation that has shaped the discourse of exploration and colonization.

Although the letters sent from the countries under the Ottoman Empire have attracted the most attention (precisely because of the European fascination with the exoticism of the Oriental world), the construction of otherness in Lady Mary’s travel correspondence is not restricted to the East-West dichotomy. The

¹ In the original: „scrisorile orientale ale lui Lady Montagu se publică în perioada de formare a discursului orientalist, discurs al puterii euro-occidentale, în accepția lui Edward Said, discurs menit a trasa limitele simbolice ale Europei în opoziție cu alteritatea orientală.” (my translation).

strategies of othering at work in this collection of letters rely rather on the ‘English – non-English’ opposition. Although there is a direct relation between cultural distance and Lady Mary’s fascination and appreciation, she examines and reports on continental European societies with just as much interest and insight as she does on those of the countries under Ottoman domination. Thus, the logic of European sameness is replaced with strategies of defining otherness with a view to revisiting and reflecting on the notion of Englishness; or, more accurately, of feminine Englishness, since the perspective from which ‘non-English otherness’ is configured in Lady Mary’s letters is also that of an ‘other’ – not a ‘cultural other,’ but the ‘female other,’ a construct emerging from the structure of Western gender politics and power relations. As a woman, the writer’s own status is shaped under strategies of othering designed by a patriarchal hierarchy.

Due to her minute reporting, to the realistic vein of her first-hand observations, and to her vital and energetic style, Lady Mary’s letters read like an entertaining travel journal, written from and clearly imprinted with a feminine perspective. Her letters participate in the debate about the difference between male and female modes of travel writing. As the lady (identified as Mary Astell) who prefaced Lady Mary’s *Letters* argues, there is a clear difference between male and female travel observations and, moreover, women’s accounts are considered superior:

I CONFESS, I am malicious enough to desire, that the world should see to how much better purpose the LADIES travel than their LORDS; and that, whilst it is surfeited with Male travels, all in the same tone, and stuffed with the same trifles; a lady has the skill to strike out a new path, and to embellish a worn-out subject with variety of fresh and elegant entertainment. (Preface, By a Lady, written in 1724)

The superiority of the feminine style drawing on the newness and the freshness of the tone on which the prefacer builds her argument is the effect of the lack of an established tradition of female writing. Therefore, the feminine insights are meant to enlarge and complete the set of possible approaches to seeing the world and addressing cultural differences. As Sara Mills noted, unlike the traditional discourse of male travel writers, concerned with the exploration of the public space and universal manifestations of human nature, women focus chiefly on the particular experience of individual and personal interaction (3). The

personal note of female travel accounts reveals the dynamic of the negotiation between the writer's background and the new personal experiences, which often functions as an impulse to reconsider and revise the writer's role and identity. Most of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters are built around such personal accounts, told from the viewpoint of the high-class English woman. Her new experiences are examined in the letters and filtered through the lens of her personal understanding. Her observations draw on comparative descriptions that implicate her background in the presentation of these new experiences. Thus, the generalizations that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's attempts based on her personal encounters with individuals from different cultures function as identity defining alternatives.

As expected, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu spends most of her time in the company of women. She assumes the authoritative spectatorial gaze in her examination and representation of the women with whom she comes into contact. Her gaze, however, is radically different from the type of male gaze defined by her contemporary, Eliza Haywood. In Book V of the *Female Spectator*, Haywood writes:

Men are so censorious, that they look on all those of our sex, who appear too much at public places, as setting themselves up for sale, and, therefore, taking the privilege of buyers, measure us with their eyes from head to foot; and as the most perfect beauty may not have charms for all who gaze upon her in this scrutinous manner, few there are, if any, who have not found some who will pass by her with a contemptuous toss, no less significant than the most rude words could be. (qtd. in Pollock 147)

The masculine sexualised and sexualising gaze as the source of the typical masculine rhetoric of objectifying women is replaced by a type of gaze which functions both as a narrative source and as the starting point for (self)evaluation, (self)representation, and (self)positioning. Lady Mary's gaze is identifying and interpretive, and thus differs from the dynamics of perception stemming from conventional masculine fantasy.

The letters under consideration here were sent to various recipients, both male and female, during Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's trip to the Continent and Turkey. The first letter, written from Rotterdam, initiates the string of

observations about the lifestyle of women belonging to other cultures, as compared to English women. Lady Mary writes: “The common servants, and little shop-women, here, are more nicely clean than most of our ladies; and the great variety of neat dresses (every woman dressing her head after her own fashion) is an additional pleasure in seeing the town” (Letter I). Lady Mary is not satisfied with simply making a statement about the fashion independence and cleanliness of the Dutch women, but she immediately compares them to “our ladies”. The comparison involves both cultural and class issues: simple middle-class Dutch women differ from English ladies in terms of cleanliness and attitude towards fashion. Therefore, these two elements, tidiness and fashion independence, function as defining elements for English women by way of denial. The comparison also acts as facilitator in transmitting the message to the recipient of the letter by referring to a familiar reality. Descriptions of women are also used as metaphors for illustrating the difference between the “free towns” and “those under the government of absolute princes” (Letter V). Lady Mary writes:

I cannot help fancying one under the figure of a clean Dutch citizen’s wife, and the other like a poor town lady of pleasure, painted and ribboned out in her head-dress, with tarnished silver-laced shoes, a ragged under-petticoat, a miserable mixture of vice and poverty. (Letter V)

The presentation of the town in the image of a woman is not new *per se*; it follows a tradition that goes back to the biblical association of the city of Babylon with the whore, or the city of Jerusalem with a widow. However, Mary Wortley Montagu’s metaphorical use of the image of women bears nothing of the negative connotation implied by the association with what is generally perceived as the decayed state of womanhood. On the contrary, the definition of the organisation of the public space by resorting to the feminine stereotypes shaped under that particular socio-political organisation is meant to emphasise the effects of the public sphere on the less visible individuals, thus providing a context for social critique.

The women of the high society in Vienna receive special attention in Lady Mary’s letters, as she spent a few months in their company. In a letter addressed to her sister, she does nothing to hide her judgemental attitude and her satirical fangs when describing the appearance and judging the taste in fashion of Viennese women. Lady Mary sees their dresses and adornments as “monstrous,” “absurd,”

and “contrary to all common sense” and then proceeds to a minute description which, again, involves a comparison with English women (Letter IX). The maliciousness of her account transpires through the writer’s self-assumed superiority position, visible in the premeditated association of the fashion accessories of Viennese ladies with the tools of British working-class women:

They build certain fabrics of gauze on their heads, about a yard high, consisting of three or four stories, fortified with numberless yards of heavy ribbon. The foundation of this structure is a thing they call a Bourle, which is exactly of the same shape and kind, but about four times as big as those rolls our prudent milk-maids make use of to fix their pails upon. (Letter IX)

Lady Mary’s tone becomes more sarcastic as she continues with the description of their dresses, which only underline their “natural ugliness.” The ladies of Prague are ridiculed and dismissed as petty copies of the women of Vienna. The comparison with English realities infiltrates this description as well:

They are dressed after the fashions there, after the manner that the people at Exeter imitate those of London; that is, their imitation is more excessive than the original. (...) The person is so much lost between head-dress and petticoat, that they have as much occasion to write upon their backs, ‘This is a Woman,’ for the information of travellers. (Letter XIV)

Although Mary Wortley Montagu often resorts to satirical stings when examining the social, political, or religious aspects of the societies she comes into contact with, these are milder than the vitriolic attacks she launches against what she sees as the absurd fashion and the bad taste of continental women. She exhibits the same taunting attitude towards French women, in a letter from Paris, written in October 1718. She resorts to disdainful judgments and extreme ridicule to show her contempt for the French ladies and to emphasise the superior taste of English women. Montagu describes them in unflattering terms:

nauseous creatures! so fantastically absurd in their dress! so monstrously unnatural in their paints! their hair cut short, and curled round their faces, and so loaded with powder, that it makes it look like white wool! and on their cheeks to their chins, unmercifully laid on a shining red japan, that glistens in a most flaming manner, so that they seem to have no resemblance to human faces. I am apt to believe, that they

took the first hint of their dress from a fair sheep newly ruddled. 'Tis with pleasure I recollect my dear pretty country-women: and if I was writing to any body else, I should say, that these grotesque daubers give me still a higher esteem of the natural charms of dear Lady R—'s auburne hair, and the lively colours of her unsullied complexion. (Letter XLIX)

Taste and fashion function as essential criteria of differentiation and contribute to the affirmation of English superiority. Class boundaries, on the other hand, become fluid in Lady Montagu's strategy of othering. English women, be they country-women or aristocrats, are introduced in the comparison and implicitly defined by comparison with the 'continental other'. The continuous references to English women show how Montagu's examination of other feminine fashions is guided by her cultural background, and how her opinions are modelled by her culturally shaped preconceptions. Lady Mary's ridicule sharpens when she evaluates the most prominent and influential European societies of the day.

Oddly enough, Mary Wortley Montagu's tone is neither moralistic, nor contemptuous when she details the private behaviour of women from other cultures. A good example in this respect is, again, that of the Viennese women. Lady Mary begins her account with a taxonomy meant to describe what she sees as the two feminine stereotypical extremes of the English society and continues with the assessment of the behavioural fashion of Viennese women as 'in-between.' Montagu writes:

the two sects that divide our whole nation of petticoats, are utterly unknown in this place. Here are neither coquettes nor prudes. No woman dares appear coquette enough to encourage two lovers at a time. And I have not seen any such prudes as to pretend fidelity to their husbands, who are certainly the best natured set of people in the world, and look upon their wives' gallants as favourably as men do upon their deputies, that take the troublesome part of their business off their hands. (Letter X)

Lady Mary shows less haste in showing her satirical fangs and appears more intrigued than judgmental when it comes to exploring aspects of the private life. Differences in behaviour seem much easier to accept than offences to good taste in fashion. Therefore, aesthetics seems to win over morality when it comes to providing a framework for assessing cultural differences. Mary Wortley Montagu's irony only shows when she tackles the difference in attitude between Viennese and

English husbands. Given the aforementioned description of their wives, it is no wonder that they show some gratitude to the gallants courting their wives. This behaviour of Viennese women is not only condoned, but encouraged by society. It had become a tradition with well established rituals. As Lady Mary tells her correspondent, in Vienna, a woman looks for a lover immediately after marriage and such para-marital relationships usually last twenty years. Moreover, “it would be a downright affront, and publicly resented, if you invited a woman of quality to dinner, without, at the same time, inviting her two attendants of lover and husband, between whom she sits in state with great gravity” (Letter X). Within this context, Lady Mary’s behaviour, i.e. her reticence with regard to finding a lover, was deemed inappropriate and judged as a breach of the laws of common sense, as she confessed to her correspondent, Lady R --:

a lady, who is very much my friend here, told me but yesterday, how much I was obliged to her for justifying my conduct in a conversation relating to me, where it was publicly asserted, that I could not possibly have common sense, since I had been in town above a fortnight, and had made no steps towards commencing an amour. (Letter X)

A similar marital arrangement is described in a letter sent during Lady Mary’s return trip and addressed to her sister, in which she analyses the relationship between the women of Genoa and the *Cizisbeis*, “gentlemen who devote themselves to the service of a particular lady” (Letter XLV). While the Genovese ladies escape the kind of vitriolic treatment Lady Mary applies to Parisian or Viennese women, the biting tone of her consternation targets the *Cizisbeis*, to whom she refers as “those animals.” She emphasizes her scornful amazement by writing: “Upon my word, nothing but my own eyes could have convinced me there were any such upon earth” (Letter XLV). This social phenomenon is ironically explained as the result of male futility. The acid rhetoric of the explanation also targets the presumed political wisdom of the unaware cuckold:

The fashion began here, and is now received all over Italy, where the husbands are not such terrible creatures as we represent them. There are none among them such brutes, as to pretend to find fault with a custom so well established, and so politically

founded, since I am assured, that it was an expedient, first found out by the senate, to put an end to those family hatreds, which tore their state to pieces, and to find employment for those young men who were forced to cut one another's throats, pour passer le temps: and it has succeeded so well, that since the institution of Cizisbei, there has been nothing but peace and good humour amongst them. (Letter XLV)

The institutionalised freedom to enjoy flattery, courtship, and presents from other men besides the husband intrigues Lady Mary. However, she does not appear willing to sanction such social behaviour, even if it enables female sexual freedom. Although the Cizisbei willingly becomes the adulating servant of the lady, thus changing gender power relations on the surface, such social customs do not represent actual strategies of female acknowledgement; the institution of the Cizisbei is a sign of male weakness rather than an expression of real female empowerment.

The letters Lady Mary Wortley Montagu sent from Turkey are even more interesting and entertaining, mainly because she introduces her experiences as those of 'a new world.' Since she was the first Westerner to have gained access to the *harem* and to the women's bath, her letters represent the first accounts "in Western travel writing about the Orient [in which] exclusively female spaces became subject to the gaze of a European traveller." (Konuk 393). The letter containing Lady Mary's account of the bath at Sophia, written from Adrianople on 1 April 1717, is probably the best known, the most anthologised, and the most discussed of her letters. In this letter, she provides a description of the *bagnio*, one of the most intriguing Turkish spaces for the Westerner, and depicts Turkish women in their most enticing hypostases. Lady Mary focuses on detailing the appearance of those women within the frame of an enthusiastic aesthetic assessment, and completes this portrayal with the examination of their ways of acting and interacting, as compared to European and English women. Unlike her above-mentioned assessments of the women in Vienna or Prague, Lady Mary's rhetoric is guided by a strain of admiration. She perceives and admires female bodies as works of art – a visual approach that impregnates her rhetoric with *ekphrastic* nuances. Montagu writes:

The first sofas were covered with cushions and rich carpets, on which sat the ladies; and on the second, their slaves behind them, but without any distinction of rank by

their dress, all being in the state of nature. (...) I perceived, that the ladies of the most delicate skins and finest shapes had the greatest share of my admiration (...) so many fine women naked, in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions with their slaves. (Letter XXVI)

What is remarkable about her stance and tone is that she “writes against the grain of western fantasies about the secret recesses of the harem and *hamam*” (Bohls and Duncan 4). Even in this picturesque description, she is more focused on aesthetic pleasure than on imprinting some mythical dimension on the customarily sexualized oriental female spaces.

Montagu’s gaze gains a denser self-contemplating dimension as she becomes aware of the difference between the naked bodies of the Turkish women and her own inappropriately covered body. The reaction of the Turkish ladies to the clothed Englishwoman becomes yet another opportunity to revisit and reassess the identity of Englishwomen as compared to other cultures and, implicitly, of the author herself:

I know no European court, where the ladies would have behaved themselves in so polite a manner to such a stranger. I believe, upon the whole, there were two hundred women, and yet none of those disdainful smiles, and satirical whispers, that never fail in our assemblies, when any body appears that is not dressed exactly in the fashion. (Letter XXVI)

As the experience becomes more personal, it encourages even more self-awareness and self-reflection. The women in the *hamam* wanted Lady Mary to go through the bath ritual in the traditional way, so they insisted on her losing her clothes. However, the view of the corset convinced them that it is beyond Lady Mary’s prerogatives as a woman and a wife to control her body and decide on the moments when she can take off her clothes: “they believed I was locked up in that machine, and that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband” (Letter XXVI). A conventional marker of female propriety, Lady Mary’s corset becomes symbolic of the ‘tight-laced’ condition of English women and a marker of cultural difference. The corset incident emphasises the definitive power of garments when it comes to cultural belonging and class differentiation. It also encourages, as Susanne Scholz points out, a

plurality of cultural readings, ranging from the “paradoxes of the discourse of fashion – the fact that clothes both cover and display the body at the same time” (88), to the superiority of “hard bodies” in Western cultures (89), all of them enriching the set of self-fashioning strategies typical of Western societies. The *bagnio* scene, through the exaggeration of the dynamics of gender domination and control, exposes the traditional patriarchal strain of the English society, which Montagu was continuously trying to subvert through her work. As Carole Fabricant noted, “the Turkish women’s equation of Montagu’s clothes with a kind of chastity belt symbolically underscores what Montagu saw as British society’s misogynistic treatment of women” (717). This newfound understanding of her culture’s lopsided view on gender dynamics and her culturally determined condition potentiates Lady Mary’s “critical outlook” which, in Rae Ann Meriwether’s opinion, would subsequently nourish her political activism (624).

In another letter written on the same day, Mary Wortley Montagu ponders on the meaning inherent in the naturalness of the behaviour of Turkish women and examines the notion of freedom in their idioculture:

’Tis very easy to see, they have in reality more liberty than we have. No woman, of what rank soever, is permitted to go into the streets without two murlins, one that covers her face all but her eyes, and another, that hides the whole dress of her head, and hangs half way down her back. Their shapes are also wholly concealed, by a thing they call a serigee, which no woman of any sort appears without; this has strait sleeves, that reach to their fingers-ends, and it laps all round them, not unlike a riding-hood. In winter, ’tis of cloth; and in summer, of plain stuff or silk. You may guess then, how effectually this disguises them, so that there is no distinguishing the great lady. (Letter XXIX)

Freedom is here described as the result of transforming imposed fashion into an empowering strategy of disguise. Turkish women are seen as moving from complete exposure and extreme visibility in the *bagnio*, the exclusive domain of women, to complete concealment and hiding as a means of achieving freedom. Unlike being rendered invisible by society, concealing oneself willingly and becoming invisible on purpose become the fundamental gestures of the strategy of female empowerment. Concealment, in the case of Turkish women, also erases class boundaries in a way unknown to Western individuals. Although Lady Mary’s

frame of mind is that of the elitist group of a hierarchically divided class system, she is not interested in elaborating on the implications of stripping fashion of its role in delineating hierarchies and social categories. She continues to view veiling as the instrument of freedom since it offers women “entire liberty of following their inclinations, without danger of discovery” (Letter XXIX). The type of freedom she examines and praises in her letters from Turkey is often construed as sexual freedom. However, Lady Mary’s careful observation and her elaborate examination of the lifestyle of Turkish women, as reflected in her accounts of the economic and juridical prerogatives these women enjoy, enlarge the notion of female freedom and make her inquire into the failure of the Enlightenment societies to allow such liberties to women. (Melman 111 – 112).

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s insight into the Oriental world also contributes to deconstructing the negative assumptions the Western world tends to make about lesser-known societies and customs in order to reaffirm its sense of superiority over the culturally different. According to Esra Almas, “from the late Renaissance to nineteenth century, in mainland Europe and across the channel, the Orient as a locus of despotism and especially female captivity was a favourite theme” (19). However, Lady Mary’s exploration and admiration of the freedom of Turkish women indirectly challenges the figure of the captive woman, so popular in oriental narratives, yet so unsubstantiated as a definitive trait in the representation of the Orient. Moreover, the religious damnation of women as a derivative of Muslim beliefs is dismantled by Lady Mary in a letter addressed “To the Count —”, in which she writes that Mahomet “was too much of a gentleman, and loved the fair sex too well” to deny them a “future happy state” (Letter LVIII). The discussion of the virtues required of Muslim women, namely to make themselves useful to the world by “making little *musselmans*,” elicits yet another comparison with English (Christian) women. Lady Mary writes:

What will become of your St Catharines, your St Therasas, your St Claras, and the whole bead-roll of your holy virgins and widows; who, if they are to be judged by this system of virtue, will be found to have been infamous creatures, that passed their whole lives in most abominable libertinism. (Letter LVIII)

Amused and amusing in her approach to the arbitrariness of notions of female libertinism, Lady Mary questions the Western world’s ingrained reluctance

to acknowledge female sexuality. The emphasis Lady Mary places on discussing the differences between Oriental views of female sexuality and Western discourses of eroticism relies on notions of independence, acknowledgement, and freedom, which would subsequently “[translate] into her own political freedom upon her return to England” (Meriwether 625).

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Letters* “became a blueprint for the travel writing which integrated movement across open spaces with detailed accounts of domestic and largely feminine spaces” (Melman 111). Lady Mary’s Levantine experiences function as identity defining catalysts with transformative potential. Understanding and constructing one’s idiocultural identity through reflections on the ‘other’ intensifies one’s awareness to cultural differences and increases the sensitivity to one’s own condition. Therefore, as Rae Ann Meriwether argues, “her written reflections about Turkish women led her to eventually embody a new subject position in England – one that enacts political agency in ways traditionally deemed ‘male’” (624). Remembered for her poetry, essays, letters, and for the advancement of women’s emancipation, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu promoted a series of ideas revolutionary for the social attitudes of her time. She advocated intellectual equality between men and women and, as if to prove her claims, she picked intellectual and literary quarrels with several contemporary writers, including Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. She was very determined in expressing her political views, thus emphasising women’s ability to assume an active role in the debates of the public space. Lady Mary also influenced medical advancement in Britain by promoting and insisting on the importance of inoculation against smallpox, a prophylactic therapy she had seen in Turkey.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters thrive on insightful examinations of cultural differences and show an understanding of the culturally different unknown to other (male) travellers. Indeed, political, religious, artistic, or historical aspects attract Lady Mary’s critical commentaries², but her letters represent a detailed documentation of social life centred chiefly on descriptions of women and their lifestyle. She examines cultural codes and gender-related conventions and practices, both on an individual level and within the framework of social and political relations that sustain and promote them. It is based on this

² See, for instance, Carmen-Veronica Borbély’s “Chorographies of the Mediterranean in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *The Turkish Embassy Letters*”.

observant analysis of the complex interplay of cultural forces and ideologies that she maps female identity in the travel letters. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's strategies of othering rely on approaching alternative manifestations of femininity from a comparative perspective, followed by an immediate translation of her assessments into her own culture. This translation is, arguably, biased and shaped under the force of a sense of English superiority, most visible in the exploration of Continental cultures. The self-assumed English superiority, more than obvious in the politics and the poetics of the representation of European cultures, is replaced by the fascination with the exoticism of difference when writing about the Oriental world. Nevertheless, beyond the cultural bias, the vivid visual descriptions in Lady Mary's letters invite her correspondents to participate in a form of voyeuristic examination of female behaviour and female bodies, be they naked or adorned with the most luxurious outfits and ornaments, as an exercise in finding and defining the role of women in society. Her evaluations are the reflective product of her feminine gaze, reprocessed through a regime of representation that relies on her own cultural background, and her insightful cultural translation offers the pretext for revisiting the structures of both collective and individual self-positioning. Identity is thus understood in terms of both individual and communal identity; she defines English women and, implicitly, she defines and identifies herself on her newly drawn map of femininity.

References:

- Almas, Esra. "Captivity Alla Turca: W. A. Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*." *Trading Women, Traded Women. A Historical Scrutiny of Gendered Trading*, edited by Gönül Bakay and Mihaela Mudure. Peter Lang, 2017. 19-34.
- Bassnett, Susan. "Travel writing and gender." *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, edited by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs. Cambridge University Press, 2002. 225-241.
- Bohls, Elizabeth A. and Ian Duncan. *Travel Writing 1700–1830. An Anthology*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Borbély, Carmen-Veronica. "Chorographies of the Mediterranean in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters*", *Babel* [Online], vol. 29, 2014. 233-250 DOI: 10.4000/babel.3706

Fabricant, Carole. "Eighteenth-century travel literature." *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780*, edited by John Richetti. Cambridge University Press, 2008. 707-744.

Hallam, Elizabeth and Brian V. Steet. "Introduction." *Cultural Encounters - representing 'otherness'*, edited by Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Steet. Routledge, 2005. 1-10.

Konuk, Kader. "Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters: Reenacting Lady Mary Wortley Montagu." *Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 3. Summer, 2004. 393-414.

Meriwether, Rae Ann. "Transculturation and Politics in the Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu." *Studies in English Literature, 1500 - 1900* vol. 53, no. 3, 2013. 623-41. DOI: 1441291762?accountid=15533.

Melman, Billie. "The Middle East / Arabia: 'the cradle of Islam'." *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, edited by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs. Cambridge University Press, 2002. 105-121.

Meyer Spacks, Patricia. "Personal Letters." *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780*, edited by John Richetti. Cambridge University Press, 2008. 623-648.

Mills, Sara. *Discourses of Difference. An analysis of women's travel writing and colonialism*. Routledge, 1991.

Mudure, Mihaela. *Ispitiri, trecute vremi*. Paralela 45, 2002.

Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley. *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M--y W--y M--e Written during Her Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa (1725)*. Kindle ed. Adelaide: eBooks@Adelaide, 2012.

Pollock, Anthony. *Gender and the Fictions of the Public Sphere, 1690-1755*. Routledge, 2009.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.

Scholz, Susanne. "English Women in Oriental Dress: Playing the Turk in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters and Daniel Defoe's Roxana." *Transculturalisms, 1400-1700: Early Modern Encounters with the Islamic East: Performing Cultures*, edited by Sabine Schulting and Hertel Ralf. Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2012. 85-99.

Sontag, Susan. "The Anthropologist as Hero". *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Picador, 2001, 69-81