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Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Turkish Embassy Letters*: Gardens and Gardeners in Transcultural Mediation

Abstract
This article uses as its basis an article by Ludmilla Kostova, "Acts of Intercultural and Interlingual Mediation in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters*" (VTU, 2020), in which Kostova addresses the representation of translation and the role of the interpreter in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's 1763 publication, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Gardens and natural landscapes were prevalent in Wortley Montagu's writing throughout her life, and this article proposes that gardens may also be regarded as a mode of communication, one in which symbolism and cultural and religious reference feature frequently. Drawing on Kostova's presentation of Wortley Montagu as a "mediator" of Turkish culture, which uses Debrix and Weber's conceptualisation of the act of intercultural translation, I suggest that Wortley Montagu's depiction of various garden spaces in Adrianople (now Edirne), both illuminates and obscures aspects of the culture and society she attempts to depict.

Keywords: women's travel writing, eighteenth-century, gardens, Turkey, interpretation

Introduction

Ludmilla Kostova's 2020 article in the *VTU Review*, "Acts of Intercultural and Interlingual Mediation in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters*" foregrounds language as a key aspect in acts of cultural exchange described by Wortley Montagu in her epistolary travelogue published posthumously in 1763. In the article, Kosotova presents "an analysis of Montagu's own acts of mediation, her representations of language difference, and the agents who must have helped her to come to terms with it" and suggests that it "should shed new light on both her famous and well-discussed travelogue and other travellers' accounts of their encounters with travellees" (2020: 13). Drawing on this important intervention, both in the fields of travel and translation, and also in scholarship about Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, this essay concentrates on Wortley Montagu's representation of gardens in her travel writing, published in 1763 as *The Turkish Embassy Letters.* It argues that gardens may be understood as texts, ones which are rich in symbolism, and cultural, religious, and social reference. Garden spaces feature prominently in the *Letters* and in Wortley Montagu's later life, and as such convey much about her own concerns and in their representation, her attempts to convey the cultural practices

in Turkey. Referring to the work of Meir Sternberg, Kostova considers the extent to which Wortley Montagu is successful in the "formidable mimetic challenge" of representing "the reality of polylingual discourse through a communicative medium which is normally unilingual"; in this essay, the aesthetics of the garden are presented as an additional language, one which Montagu is only partially successful in interpreting to her English readers (Kostova, 2020, 13: cites Sternberg, 1981, 221).

Kostova refers to the scholarship of François Debrix and Cynthia Weber who differentiate between two types of cultural exchange rituals, mediation and transformation. In the former, 'the mediator' emerges as a neutral agent who transfers meaning by "relating two domains of experience, which, at the same time, must be kept separate" (Debrix and Weber 2003: ix). She proposes that Wortley Montagu "quite consciously adopts the stance of a *mediator* between languages and cultures" (Kostova 2020: 13). Using Kostova's essay as a basis, this article proposes that Wortley Montagu's account of such "rituals of mediation" extend beyond verbal and written language to artistic and cultural media, in particular gardens. In her letters Wortley Montagu details several visits to gardens in Adrianople, [now Edirne], and later Constantinople [Istanbul] and gives an account of their socio-cultural significance as well as aspects of their appearance. As in Debrix and Weber's model of the linguistic act of mediation which relates but keeps separate two domains of experience, in her account of garden spaces, Wortley Montagu relates them to English garden design, whilst simultaneously retaining their exoticism. She avoids detailing their symbolic or religious meaning, despite, as I will show, this being central to the composition of the Islamic garden and deeply embedded in Turkish literature. Gardens are an important signifier for such trans-cultural exchange in this case, not only because of the pervasiveness of their symbolism throughout Islamic culture and religion but also in their personal significance to Wortley Montagu.

Kostova also notes that Wortley Montagu relied on interpreters and guides, and referring to Michael Cronin's work notes their ambivalent position in the process: "the issue of control is central to their activities and for this reason they may inspire fear in those for whom they work – the fear of being inadvertently misled or deliberately betrayed by them" (Kostova 2020: 14). In my response, I also consider local actors, here it is those who have a central role on social and cultural interpretation of the gardens, the gardeners themselves. As I will show, whilst these people are largely silenced, they are at significant points made visible to the reader, their political status acknowledged and the actions of their wives and daughters described.

The Significance of Gardens to Mary Wortley Montagu

Throughout her life, gardens were a significant solace and mental diversion to Mary Wortley Montagu, from her appreciation of outdoor space as a child, shown in her later letters to her sister, Lady Bute, to her difficult older years under the controlling behaviour of Count Ugo Palazzi (Halsbrand 1956: 4). The presence of a garden was an important aspect in her later move to Twickenham in 1720. The house had 130

yards behind it for garden, but Mary Wortley Montagu, clearly used to more expansive gardens of the type attached to the country estates of her youth and belonging to her contemporaries, still thought it small. Twickenham was at the time, as Isobel Grundy notes, "*the* centre for the new garden mania" (Grundy 1999: 186). In his biography of Wortley Montagu, Robert Halsbrand noted the connection between this choice of residence in Twickenham and her earlier travels in Turkey: "there Lady Mary could have the setting, when she wished it; for the Horatian solitude she had extolled in her Verses from the Turkish Kiosk: 'Give me, great God, a little farm" (Halsbrand 1956: 97).

Turkey – the Symbolism and History of the Islamic Garden

Turkey has a long tradition of garden design and creation. In his article on the importation to Europe of plants from Turkey over the last four hundred years, John H. Harvey notes that even in the eighteenth century, most plants were "already improved by centuries of culture, grafting, or accidental hybridisation", indicating Turkey's long history of gardening (Harvey 1976: 22). He explains the source of this expertise.

> Most of this […] was the result of Muslim gardening over a long period. Besides translating the works of ancient Greek science into Arabic, the Islamic conquerors became adept in the skilled technique of horticulture and in a special type of garden design, with pools and canals of water, pavilions and plots of trees and flowers bordered with aromatic shrubs and herbs. (Harvey 1976: 22)

The garden design to which Harvey refers here has connections to religious and cultural tradition. Scholars of garden history have indicated the correlation between the format of the conventional walled garden and the representation of Paradise as depicted in the Qu'ran, in Turkey and other countries with an Islamic tradition. For example, James Dickie argues that the Islamic garden can be seen as "an anticipation of Paradise", asserting that "this being the case it is no cause for wonder that the Islamic garden should embody cosmological concepts" (Dickie 1968: 238). Likewise, Emma Clark notes that in Islamic gardens, "the phrase from the Quran, 'Gardens underneath which Rivers flow, is really brought alive. The experience is truly a foretaste of the Paradise gardens which all Muslims, and others too no doubt, hope to be their final resting place" (Clark 2004: 12).

Clark's delineation of what she sees as the main types of garden in the Islamic world is illuminating here. She notes that the "main distinction [in these garden types] being between the larger outward-looking gardens and the smaller inward looking courtyard ones. The larger ones are generally known as *bustan* (the Persian word for 'orchard')" (Clark 2004: 15). In the following exploration of Wortley Montagu's discussion of gardens in Turkey, both types of garden are depicted, in successive letters. In her description of the smaller, enclosed garden type, the *chahar-bagh*,

Clark notes that "the classic *chahar-bagh* is the four-fold garden constructed around a central pool or fountain with four streams flowing from it, symbolically towards the four directions of space" (2004: 6). The precise and repeated structure of the design signals the significance of its symbolic reference. However, Dede Fairchild Ruggles argues that although this type of garden is representative of Islamic paradise, the design existed before its description in the Qu'ran (2008: 89). Where scholars such as Fairchild Ruggles and Clark indicate the religious significance of the structure of the enclosed Islamic garden, and its long history, other scholars, such as Dickie, have suggested a wider cultural reference, that of poetry, for the source of meaning of garden design in the Islamic world. As I will discuss, this aspect is drawn on more heavily by Wortley Montagu in her letters than any reference to religion. Dickie draws interesting parallels between interpreting meaning both in literature and in garden design. He argues that, "just as the full understanding of Graeco-Roman poetry is impossible unless the reader knows what such plants as laurel, ivy, and myrtle signified to the ancients, the study of Arab gardening is important in superlative degree for the correct interpretation of Arabic poetry" and suggests that "the normal critical procedure used in analysing literature, namely to consider it under its dual aspect of form and content, is equally applicable to garden design" (1968: 237). In Wortley Montagu's letters from Adrianople, whilst there is an acknowledgement of the significance of the gardens to its inhabitants and a demonstration of their appreciation, Wortley Montagu diminishes the religious significance and places more emphasis on the poetic value both in terms of Classical and Persian traditions.

Gardens Featured in the Letters Written in Adrianople

The focus of this article is on two letters which describe gardens composed while she is resident in Adrianople. Given the general interest in gardens amongst the upper classes in English and also her particular affinity with garden design, which would develop throughout her life, Wortley Montagu's emphasis on garden spaces on her arrival in the country of her husband's new appointment is unsurprising, "I am now got into a new world", she writes on 1st April, 1717 (Halsbrand 1965: I 325). The first letter is addressed to Alexander Pope from 1 April 1717 and the second to Wortley Montagu's friend Anne Thistlethwaite from 1 April 1718. As noted earlier, gardens and gardening had long formed an important aspect in Islamic culture and were prominent feature in the palaces and civic spaces of the Ottoman Empire, and Adrianople had been a significant site for horticultural design and new gardens from the sixteenth century. For example, in *Istanbul Hayati* [*The Life of Istanbul*], a garden history by Ahmet Refik (Altinay), there is reference to an order for forty tons of red and white rose trees from the city of Adrianople in November 1587 (cited in Harvey 2006: 29).

At the beginning of her letter to Alexander Pope, Wortley Montagu is indoors looking out over her garden and in turn over the River Hebrus, and the sound of tur-

tle doves in the cypress trees inspires the conflation of the contemporary landscape with one of classical poetry; writing, "'tis more than an ordinary discretion that can resist the wicked suggestions of poetry in a place where truth for once furnished all the ideas of the pastoral?" (Halsbrand 1965: I 331). The interpretation of the landscape by Wortley Montagu is in terms taken from Classical literature, a common trope throughout the letters, particularly those addressed to Pope and Abbé Antonio Conti, Italian mathematician and philosopher. Later, for example, she writes to Conti about her journey to Tunis from Constantinople, noting "every scene presents me some poetical idea" (Halsbrand 1965: I 377). This is a familiar trope for Grand Tourists of the period more generally, setting new places in a familiar context for their readers at home and signalling the cultural capital of both writer and audience. Wortley Montagu references Joseph Addison, who, in his *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy in the Years 1701, 1702, 1703,* comments on the range of instruments evident on classical statues in Rome and cross-references this against classical poetry (Wortley Montagu 1965: I, 331 cites Addison, 1767: 188). The account of the gardens of Adrianople shifts briefly to the present, detailing how the gardens are used by local people:

> The Summer is allready advanc'd for this part of the World and for some miles round Adrianople the whole ground is laid out in Gardens, and the Banks of the River set with Rows of Fruit trees, under which all the most considerable Turks divert themselves every Evening; not with walking, that is not one of their Pleasures, but a set party of 'em chuse [sic] out a green spot where the Shade is very thick and there they spread a carpet on which they sit drinking their Coffée and generally attended by some slave with a fine voice, or that plays on some instrument. (Halsbrand 1965: 331)

Wortley Montagu does not describe the garden layout; she refers only to the fruit trees and shade. She is a detached observer, and the tableaux is rendered in visual form only. The lack of detail allows her to slip back into Classical reference, several lines later, to the musical instrument "perfectly answering the description of the Ancient Fistula" (Halsbrand 1965: I 331). Wortley Montagu's next point addresses the class of the Turkish people who enjoy this entertainment in the gardens, moving from identifying those with slaves referenced earlier to describing how "this taste is so universal that the very Gardiners (sic) are not without it" (Halsbrand 1965: I 331). Placing the gardeners, who Wortley Montagu asserts are "most of them Greeks", as apparently the lowest of the social order, allows her to once again link the scene to an ancient practice. This "denial of coevalness" as Johannes Fabian identifies, fixes both higher- and lower-class residents in an ancient Greek tableau, and is one which also denies a meaning-structure to the gardens drawn from other ancient philosophies and meaning systems (Fabian, 2006).

Wortley Montagu's focus remains on the gardeners for the remainder of the paragraph, shifting away from the scene of the picnics:

> These Gardiners are the only happy race of Country people in Turkey. They furnish all the City with Fruit and herbs, and seem to live very easily. They are most of 'em Greeks and have little Houses in the midst of their gardens, where their Wives and daughters take a liberty not permitted in the Town; I mean, to go unvailed [sic]. These Wenches are very neat and handsome, and pass their time at their Looms, under the shade of their Trees. (Halsbrand 1965: I 332)

Wortley Montagu does indicate the productivity of the gardens with their fruits and herbs. However, the trees are not merely horticultural specimens or symbols from ancient poetry here, instead they act as a protection for the women who are able to enjoy each other's company and their work without being subject to social and religious constraint. In her next paragraph Wortley Montagu returns to Classical literature, she writes, "I no longer look upon Theocritus as a romantic writer; he has only given a plain image of the way of life amongst the peasants of his country" (Halsbrand 1965: I 332). The reference to Theocritus assimilates the Greek gardeners and their families in eighteenth-century Turkey into a classical tradition of Magna Graecia, a slippage of both time and geography. There is passing reference to the contemporary subjugation of the Greek population by the Ottoman Empire, followed by a return to a discussion of their classical past. Thus, from her elevated view over the gardens of Adrianople, Wortley Montagu's account does not address the meaning, contents or the appearance of the gardens in detail, rather they are a backdrop to social conventions and a reflection of Wortley Montagu's vision of a classical Greek past. In her concluding remarks, Kostova notes that there are "erasures and manifest absences" in *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (Kostova 2020: 22). These largely relate, for Kostova, to the lack of discussion by Wortley Montagu about the interpreters and translators who facilitate her communication with her hosts and with other Turkish people. In terms of Wortley Montagu's representation of gardens, she makes visible the gardeners but they are silenced. Watched, as in this extract, from a distance, and are not brought into the interpretation of these orchard gardens, and any discussion of their maintenance or design.

The letter of 1 April 1718 to Alexander Pope, then moves from a description of real to fictional gardens, in which there is also a shift from an ocular-centric account of the gardens surrounding the city on the banks of the Hebrus, to an imaginative garden which is the site of a suitor falling in love with a Princess. Wortley Montagu dedicates the second part of her letter to Pope to an account of a love poem written by Ibrahim Pasha to his future-wife, eldest daughter of Sultan Achmed III, Ottoman Emperor between 1703 and 1720. Wortley Montagu suggests that this might be considered as "a sample of their finest poetry" (Halsbrand 1965: I 334).

Having given a description of their provenance, she writes out what she refers to as "a literal translation" of the verses provided by her interpreters. With some sarcasm, she notes that the stanzas "have received no poetical touches from their hands" and proceeds to re-write them back into verse using heroic couplets, after which with perhaps false modesty admits, "I cannot determine, upon the whole, how well I have succeeded in the translation" (Halsbrand 1965: I 334). While in Kostova's article, the emphasis is on the translation and Wortley Montagu's use of the interpreter, here I want to focus on the changes made by the writer in her own poetic translation. In the first version, translated by the interpreter, the first stanza features a garden; the narrator goes there "to admire the vines" and is accompanied by a nightingale who is drawn to the roses. Wortley Montagu acknowledges she erases the garden in her re-writing, and qualifies this; she writes, "[b]y saying he went down to admire the beauty of the vines and her charms ravished his soul, I understand a poetical fiction, of having first seen her in a garden" (Halsbrand 1965: I 335). Although she notes the symbolism of the nightingale in the rose garden as belonging to "Arabian fable", Wortley Montagu eradicates both elements and the vines from her version of the poem, retaining only the image of the beloved as having "large stag's eyes" from the original stanza. The erasure of the symbolism of the garden from this poem is repeated throughout her time in Adrianople and Constantinople. Whilst the gardens are a visual entity, notable for their difference to English gardens and for some of their more prominent structural features, their meaning for their inhabitants is obscured. In effect, the gardens are silenced.

Of the remaining letters written from Adrianople, the other main reference to a garden comes a year later, in 1718, when she writes to her friend Anne Thistlethwaite. This letter gives an account of a private garden, one which can be seen only from the inside of its high perimeter walls and which is situated inside the city rather than on its periphery, and may be referred to as of the *chahar-bagh* design. The house and garden belonged to the Grand Signor, where the Wortley Montagus were staying on first arrival at Adrianople. Wortley Montagu first gives a long description of the arrangement of the two houses within the walls and their decoration; noting that there is a gallery on both houses which is turned towards the garden. Despite her emphasis on the beauty of the architecture and furnishings, Wortley Montagu's account conveys a claustrophobic feeling; the low windows are barred, and the orientation of the gallery is towards the interior of the compound rather than giving a view of the city. This is repeated, after an account of the interior; she writes, "the Women's Apartments are all built backward, remov'd from sight, and have no other prospect than the Gardens, which are enclos'd with very high Walls" (Halsbrand 1965: I 344). Here the gardens become the women's focal point and the constrained living conditions are highlighted by the succession of six phrases which all refer to their restricted view. Noting the differences between the Islamic and European traditions of garden design, Dickie notes that "the high walls of the Islamic garden

prevented its owner being seen from the outside and insulated him [sic] from the clamour and dirt of the antipathetic life of the streets" (1968: 248). The pleasures of this enclosed space are noted by Dickie, although in relation to the male owner of the palace, rather than its female inhabitants: "there, inside his artificial paradise […] he [sic]could enjoy in solitude the voluptuous pleasures produced by different perfumes, colours, and shapes in endlessly varied combinations" (1968: 168, 248. See also Thacker 1979: 34). Wortley Montagu goes into some detail about the garden, drawing a contrast with fashionable early eighteenth-century European garden design:

> There is none of our Parterres in them, but they are planted with high trees which give an agreeable shade, and, to my fancy, a pleasing view. In the midst of the garden is the Chiosk, that is, a large Room, commonly beautify'd with a fine fountain in the midst of it. It is rais'd nine or ten steps and enclosed with Gilded Lattices round which Vines, jess'mines [sic] and Honey suckles twineing make a sort of Green wall. Large Trees are planted round this place, which is the Scene of their greatest Pleasures, and where the Lady's [sic] spend most of their hours, employed by their Music or Embroidery. (Halsbrand 1965: I 344)

Apart from the reference to the design, she gives the impression that there is little structure to the garden apart from its focal point, the kiosk. The garden and the kiosk in particular are described primarily in terms of their social function, although there is some emphasis on the aromatic planting. The raised position of the kiosk is significant; Wortley Montagu notes the nine or ten steps. Christopher Thacker notes that this "is deeply characteristic of older Turkish gardens. In Turkey it develops in a special way, encouraged by the proximity of the sea along the shores of the Bosphorus, and by the steeply rising terrain at the back of the sites" (Thacker 1979: 34). Wortley Montagu does not discuss the wider cultural prevalence of this design, rather she concentrates on the actions of the women. As in the orchard garden, it is their pleasure and activities which she seeks to highlight. The enclosed seclusion of the garden spaces, complemented by trees and perfumed plants is again the site of female companionship.

Conclusion

In the descriptions of gardens in her letters from Adrianople therefore, Wortley Montagu's emphasis is on brief descriptions of their layout, use and differences to English gardens, rather than considering the meaning or intention of particular structures or the placing of plants. Her accounts are largely ocular-centric, sounds and smells are indicated but not described. The lack of detail and interpretation belies some of the richness of the cultural meaning of the garden spaces. We can perhaps see Wortley Montagu's lack of engagement with the symbolism of the garden and her emphasis on the visual as an example of what Michael Cronin calls "inter-

semiotic travel". Ironically, given Wortley Montagu's self-proclaimed prowess with languages, this occurs according to Cronin when "the traveller has no knowledge of the foreign language". He argues that "the premium placed on the visual, which is a feature of different forms of travel writing, is bound up with the alternative communication strategies of intersemiotic travel" (Cronin, 2020, 296). However, while there are notable absences and erasures in Wortley Montagu's descriptions of the gardens of Adrianople, the elements she chooses to focus on are those which speak to the social and political situation of their actors. Thus, in the account of the orchard gardens, although Wortley Montagu feels she must draw on a Classical frame of reference to engage her reader, the gardeners and the actions of their wives and daughters are highlighted rather than the elements of the garden itself. Likewise, in the description of the Grand Signor's palace, the orientation of the women's apartments and the women's use of the garden space, which again is the focus, over and above any religious or symbolic meaning in the design. Anja Drautzburg highlights this feature, noting that Wortley Montagu makes a "singular and invaluable contribution to eighteenth-century travel writing while at the same time addressing gender-related and socio-cultural issues that are still highly relevant in the twenty-first century" (Drautzberg in Schaff 2020: 227) Thus, concurring with the summaries by Drautzberg and Kostova, this brief consideration of Mary Wortley Montagu's representation of the gardens in Adrianople to her English friends has highlighted the notable ideological and symbolic blind-spots of these descriptions, but ultimately, as a result of her emphasis on the social roles of these spaces, particularly for women, demonstrates "the magnitude of Montagu's achievement in *The Turkish Embassy Letters* and the fact that her epistolary travelogue overall 'celebrates 'transcultural understanding'" (Kostova 2020: 22, Aravamudan 1999: 189).

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