



## Acts of Intercultural and Interlingual Mediation in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters*

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The article focuses on acts of intercultural and interlingual mediation and representations of language difference in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s posthumously published epistolary travelogue *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763). Montagu was probably the most important woman traveller to visit the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century. Having acquired first-hand knowledge of upper-class life in the empire, she strove to dispel prejudice and change her readers’ attitudes to Islam and Ottoman social mores. To achieve those ends, Montagu takes up the role of an intercultural and interlingual mediator in her epistolary travelogue. However, while stressing her own autonomous cultural and linguistic performance within the foreign context, she erases, or minimizes, the role of less privileged agents of mediation, such as hired guides and interpreters, who must have helped her communicate effectively with her Ottoman hosts. This simplifies her representations of otherwise complex intercultural encounters and seriously problematizes her claim to the *authenticity* of her account of the Ottoman Empire, which she regards as its distinguishing characteristic.

In my analysis of Montagu’s representations of mediation and language difference, I rely on theoretical texts reflecting the “cultural turn” in translation and interpreting studies as well as on other writing analysing intercultural dialogue and multilingualism.

**Keywords:** Mary Wortley Montagu, epistolary travel writing, intercultural mediation, interlingual mediation, representations of language difference.

Celebrated as a “Comet of the Enlightenment”<sup>1</sup> and “a progressive feminist in the context of Anglo-Ottoman cross-cultural relations” (Garcia 60), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689 – 1762) has long attracted the attention of scholars in gender studies and other areas of critical inquiry concerned with changing cultural practices and representations. Her posthumously published epistolary travelogue *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) has been recognized as “one of the most important accounts of *Continental* travel by an Englishwoman in the early eighteenth century [my emphasis]” (Kinsley 410). An English aristocrat, Montagu accompanied her husband on his mission as Ambassador to the Sublime Porte. As a result, between 1716 and 1718, she journeyed through parts of western and central Europe, some of the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire and along the western coast of Asia Minor, and the northern coast of Africa. As can be seen from this short overview, Montagu’s recorded travels were not confined to *Continental* Europe only but included other parts of the world as well.

Originally titled *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M – y W – y M – e*, Montagu’s account of her travels consists of letters, most of which “*were not literally written* to friends and relations between 1716 and 1718 [my emphasis]” (Garcia 62). In fact, the noble traveller wrote them in England, after her return, using notes from her travel diaries and copies of letters she had actually sent (Garcia 62; Winch 91). Cynthia Lowenthal, one of the undisputed authorities on Montagu’s work, has ably demonstrated

<sup>1</sup> My reference is Isobel Grundy’s 1999 book *Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment*.

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that the letters were crafted very carefully and “rewritten in a dramatic epistolary form” (Garcia 62), and in fact constitute Montagu’s “most polished and self-conscious epistolary performance” (Lowenthal 82).

Overall, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* represents a female letter-writer journeying through places some of which must have appeared (more or less) familiar to her correspondents at home whereas others were probably perceived as downright exotic. Her account of her experiences in the Ottoman Empire<sup>2</sup> is the most memorable part of her epistolary travelogue. In it Montagu portrays herself as immune to the prejudices of previous travellers and therefore open to what most Europeans still viewed as a form of unacceptable otherness.<sup>3</sup> This impression of openness is yet another reason for the high praise which the text has elicited from latter-day commentators. In particular, Montagu has been credited with the introduction of an alternative view of the Islamic Orient which challenges the patriarchal Orientalist stereotype of total female subjection.<sup>4</sup>

There can be no doubt that Montagu’s travelogue is a valuable contribution to the subgenre of epistolary travel writing, which enjoyed great popularity throughout the eighteenth century. *The Turkish Embassy Letters* is characterized by considerable thematic and structural diversity. According to Ros Ballaster, “[the] letters are dominated by the idea of storytelling” as the letter-writer produces “different personae and accounts for different correspondents” (182). In her letters to female correspondents, Montagu tells stories about women whom she claims to have met in the Ottoman Empire, such as the one about a Spanish “woman of quality who made it her choice to live with a Turkish husband” (136) rather than return to her homeland and be confined to a nunnery.<sup>5</sup> As will be seen, in a letter to Alexander Pope, she discourses about Ottoman-Turkish poetry and presents the renowned English poet with two different translations of a love poem. Certain letters appear to be close to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century epistolary fiction featuring invented Oriental characters, who pass judgement on European mores and political and religious institutions. In this connection Humberto Garcia mentions “the deist epistolary letter” (61) and cites as an example *A Letter from an Arabian Physician* (1706), which was in fact authored by the migrant Irish philosopher and notorious deist John Toland (62). Garcia also detects links with letters by other fictional Muslim characters, such as the Ottoman spy Mahmut in Giovanni P. Marana’s multivolume *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, repeatedly published in English translation between 1692 and 1801 (62). Such intertextual links place Montagu’s travelogue in the context of early eighteenth-century debates over the nature of Islam (Garcia 62). Her attitude to Islam will be considered further on in this text.

My focus in this article is on acts of intercultural and interlingual mediation and representations of language difference in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Even though foreign travel usually involves communication with linguistically and culturally different others, travel writers often produce simplistic representations of their encounters with foreigners. Alasdair Pettinger wryly remarks that otherwise complex exchanges and negotiations are simplified in a lot of travel writing “to the extent that both traveler and travelee appear to occupy the same *homogeneous, monolingual* space [my emphasis]” (150). The homogenizing effect in question may be due to the minimization, or complete erasure, of the acts performed by interlingual and intercultural mediators, such as guides, interpreters and/or translators. The minimization and/or erasure of their complex role in the process of communication can certainly be written off as one of the manifestations of the travel genre’s “imperialist leanings” (Fowler 63). However, it is also possible to adopt a somewhat different perspective on the matter and acknowledge

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<sup>2</sup> Montagu does not use the adjective “Ottoman” when referring to the empire to which her husband was accredited. Like other European writers of the eighteenth century and later times, she speaks of “the Turkish empire” (57) and designates its ruling elite and their families as “Turks,” thus obliterating the multi-ethnic origins of a lot of them. On upper-class Ottoman identity as “neither ... ethnic nor national” and on “Turkishness” as conflating religion with ethnic identity, see Landweber (214).

<sup>3</sup> On changing European attitudes to the Ottoman Empire from the late seventeenth century onwards, see MacLean and Matar (6–9).

<sup>4</sup> For a commentary on the critical reception of Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* from the 1990s to the early years of the present century, see Andrea (78–79) and Garcia (60–62).

<sup>5</sup> For a critical commentary on European-Ottoman intermarriages and their representations in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, see Kostova, “Homes Away from Home” (76–91).

that, alongside with other literary and non-literary genres, travel writing shares what Meir Sternberg has described as “a formidable mimetic challenge”: “how to represent the reality of polylingual discourse through a communicative medium which is normally unilingual” (222).

How does Montagu deal with this “mimetic challenge”? Her case appears to be of particular interest because of her avowed openness to what was generally perceived, in her lifetime, as an entirely alien culture and her claim to have studied and eventually mastered the language of her Ottoman hosts as she strove to gain direct access to it. Besides, as already remarked, she presented Pope with two translations of a Turkish love poem, thus assuming the role of a competent *interlingual and intercultural mediator* herself. Given all this, 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, should shed new light on both her famous and much-discussed travelogue and other travellers’ accounts of their encounters with travelleses.

Using examples from fictional texts, Sternberg has produced a useful classification of different cases of what he terms “heterolingual or translational mimesis” (223). Some of his terminology can be used for my present purposes. Prior to analysing Montagu’s *Letters*, it seems pertinent to offer brief commentaries on select theorizations of intercultural mediation, the human striving for linguistic and cultural autonomy, and aspects of Sternberg’s analysis of “heterolingual or translational mimesis” (223).

### **Theorizing Intercultural Mediation and Its Agents**

Montagu’s stance as an intercultural mediator poses certain questions which need to be considered within the broad cultural-theoretical context of comparative and international studies. Mediation has attracted the attention of specialists in both areas. Significantly, it has also been studied by scholars of translation (see Sturge 64–67) and World Literature (Littau 160).

The international studies specialists François Debrix and Cynthia Weber have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the concept of mediation. According to Debrix, “[t]o mediate is basically to provide a point of contact, an intersection, a place of communication or dialogue between two different positions” (xxi). He identifies three possible social uses of mediation which he terms “rituals of mediation” (xxi). The three “ritualistic modalities” in question are representation, transformation, and pluralization (xxi). While all three produce social meanings, each is based on a different ideological position. For instance, proponents of mediation as representation view it as a method of “peaceful, neutral interposition” (Debrix xxi). On the other hand, advocates of mediation as transformation maintain that “rituals of mediation do not simply connect and differentiate” but can also “initiate novel forms of thought,” “usher in new creative possibilities” and “make visible radical political choices” (Debrix xxiv). The third modality is primarily associated with postmodern times and favours openness and plurality of signification.

Each ritual of mediation operates through a particular image and/or stance of the mediator. Within the context of representation, 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 ix). In rituals of transformation, the mediator is an active figure intent upon change or, as Debrix and Weber have put it, on “mak[ing] the world in his or her own image” (ix). The pluralizing mediator rejects closure and favours multiple cultural practices (Debrix and Weber xi).

The above summary of the major social uses of mediation should serve as a critical prologue to my reading of Montagu’s epistolary travelogue in which she quite consciously adopts the stance of a *mediator* between languages and cultures. However, as already stated, the noble traveller is not the only intercultural and interlingual mediator in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*; as she admits in *some* of the letters, she employed people whom we would most likely describe as *professional* interpreters and guides today. It is therefore pertinent to combine Debrix and Weber’s theoretical perspective on mediation with writing that addresses some of the more practical aspects of this culturally significant activity.

Michael Cronin, one of the key theorists of the “cultural turn” in interpreting studies, has called for the creation of “a material history of interpreting” with a focus on colonial history and travel writing

(“The Empire” 391). For Cronin interpreters are “those that cross linguistic and cultural boundaries” and this makes them “objects of ambivalence,” “in-between figures, [both] loathed and admired, privileged and despised” (“The Empire” 391–392). 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. This fear often gives rise to distrust of mediators, which, as David Bellos argues, is difficult to overcome in intercultural encounters (121). Bellos speaks of “the huge intellectual and emotional obstacles to taking the word of another for the word of the source” (121). In his view, these obstacles can only be overcome through “a shared willingness to enter a realm in which meaning cannot be completely guaranteed” (121). Bellos suggests, somewhat tentatively, that the trust engendered through such “a shared willingness” constitutes “the foundation of all culture” (122).

The issue of dis/trust of mediators gains particular prominence in colonial contexts. Reflecting upon the role of interpreters in such contexts, Cronin distinguishes between “autonomous and heteronomous systems of interpreting” (“The Empire” 393). Within the former, “colonizers train their own subjects in the language or languages of the colonized” whereas within the latter, local interpreters are recruited (“The Empire” 393). To my mind, Cronin’s distinction between autonomy and heteronomy can be taken outside the colonial context and can be applied to intercultural encounters in general. In encounters shaped by heteronomous relations we depend upon the good will, good faith, and assistance of intercultural and interlingual mediators, and have to deal, in the words of Bellos, with “the huge intellectual and emotional obstacles to taking the word of another for the word of the source” (121). On the other hand, motivated by a strong desire for autonomy, we make efforts to learn the language, or languages, of the foreign others with whom we come into contact. This may be part of an attempt to dispense, totally or partially, with agents of interlingual and intercultural mediation, such as guides and interpreters, although motivation may differ from one case to another. Modifying somewhat Bellos’ pronouncement on trust, we may claim that the striving for autonomy is also fundamental to “all culture.”<sup>6</sup>

However, it should be noted that autonomous linguistic and cultural performance is rarely (if ever!) acquired without the help, or at least, the imitation, of others. Representing the process of acquisition and the various others, who were part of it, or refusing/failing to do so, should be part of the analysis of texts in which language difference is one of the topics of discussion. Besides, linguistic/ cultural autonomy does not, in all circumstances, bridge the gap between self and other completely. The individual striving to achieve such autonomy, or the one, who has to all intents and purposes achieved it, must still be prepared to enter “a realm in which meaning cannot be completely guaranteed” (Bellos 121), but, under the circumstances, has to rely on his/her own repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources rather than blame incomprehension or misunderstanding on the deceptive or faulty performance of mediating others.

### **Theorizing “Heterolingual or Translational Mimesis”**

Sternberg’s classification of representations of language difference comprises a scale of diverse mimetic practices flanked by the two “limiting cases” of “vehicular matching” and “the homogenizing convention” (232). “Vehicular matching” means “the allotment of different languages or different language varieties to characters or groups of characters in accordance with our knowledge of the historical reality represented” (Delabastita 107). The homogenizing convention operates when “a monolingual text describes what we know or believe to be a multilingual reality” (Delabastita 107). The intermediary practices flanked by vehicular matching and the homogenizing convention are selective reproduction, verbal transposition, conceptual reflection, and explicit attribution (Sternberg 232). Selective reproduction is exemplified by “*intermittent* quotation[s] of the original heterolingual discourse ... uttered by the speaker(s) [my emphasis]” (Sternberg 225). Cronin’s term for this is “lexical exoticism” (“Between Languages” 295). Verbal transposition may be defined as an instance of “*devised* translational interference [my emphasis]” as with “the literally rendered Spanish idioms in Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*” (Sternberg

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<sup>6</sup> Cronin has drawn attention to the emergence of the guidebook as a tool for achieving autonomy. According to him, it is part of an attempt “to create autonomous, monolingual space where the traveller is no longer dependent on the linguistic ministrations of doubtful others” (“Between Languages” 296).

227–8). Conceptual reflection and explicit attribution do not involve any attempts to render “the concrete texture of the original [multilingual] discourse” (Sternberg 230). The former retains “the underlying socio-cultural norms” of the foreign code and “thus lies at the crossroads of language and reality” (Sternberg 230). The latter is “a direct statement ... concerning the language (or some aspect of the language) in which the reported speech was originally made” (Sternberg 231).

Sternberg’s classification of these mimetic practices helps us to understand the representational work that travel writers perform. The predominant use of a particular type of mimesis in a travel text denotes a specific attitude to the language(s) and culture(s) of the foreign others with whom the traveller has come into contact. On the other hand, the absence of one or more types can also be meaningful.

### Montagu’s Perspective on the Ottoman Empire

Montagu visited the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the Christian victory at the battle of Vienna (1683) and the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), when it was no longer perceived as a serious threat to the major powers of Europe and could be approached in a spirit of “curiosity and ease” (MacLean and Matar 9). It is within this context that we should view her stance as an intercultural – and interlingual – mediator in her epistolary travelogue. Far from being terrified of the barbarity of “the Turk,” Montagu even goes so far as to represent the Ottoman Empire as a “utopia” of a kind: the noble traveller repeatedly stresses the freedom that Ottoman women enjoy, thus engaging with a strand in European Enlightenment thought according to which the condition of women was “an ‘index’ or even a ‘thermometer’ registering the state of development ... [and] the standard of politeness achieved in a particular society” (Randall 70). By reinterpreting in positive terms widely accepted emblems of female subjection in the east, such as the veil, Montagu succeeds in demonstrating Ottoman superiority over western Europe as far as the treatment of women is concerned (see Kostova, *Tales* 35–37). “Turkish ladies,” she declares in Letter XLVIII, “are, perhaps, freer than any other ladies in the universe, and are the only ones in the world that lead a life of uninterrupted pleasure, exempt from cares” (134).

In addition, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* is dominated by a “rhetoric of identification” asserting the near “likeness” of British and Ottoman *aristocratic* women (Lowe 51), as well as similarities between western and eastern enlightened elites, as is borne out by Montagu’s letters about Achmed Bey [sic], which will be discussed further on in this text. However, the traveller also maintains, in Letter XXVIII, that the Ottoman Empire exhibits “*the natural corruption of a military government* [my emphasis]” (61), and therefore the western European Enlightenment’s contractual and rights-based conception of liberty is alien to it. The “utopia” thus appears to have certain flaws.

Throughout her epistolary travelogue, Montagu frequently stresses the authenticity of her own observations as a function of her privileged position as an aristocrat and an enlightened individual rejecting “vulgar,” unfounded prejudices about the Ottoman Empire and Islam. She thus emerges as an *agent of transformation* in terms of the classification of “ritualistic modalities” of mediation presented above. Her mediatory interpositions are anything but “neutral,” and providing her correspondents with novel images of the aristocracy of an alien empire by dispelling prejudices about it seems her main objective in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Significantly, she also lets her readers know, in no uncertain terms, that her gender has provided her with access into well-guarded, interior, female-only spaces, such as *hammam* and *harem*, that less privileged male travellers could only fantasize about.

Taking her cue from Mary Jo Kietzman, Jeanne Dubino maintains that Montagu represents such cultural spaces and the activities that take place in them in a manner “befitting an *ethnographer* [my emphasis]” (150): “rather than emphasizing her own responses and reactions, [she] foregrounds the scenes that she witnesses” (150). As will be seen, that is not always the case: for one thing, Montagu’s frequent erasure of the services that she must have received from less privileged agents of interlingual and intercultural mediation, such as guides and interpreters, and her insistence on her own *autonomy* as she deals with the foreign culture seriously problematize such a view of her stance in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*.

Montagu repeatedly comments on the multiethnic character of the Ottoman Empire. As already remarked, she closely identifies with the Ottoman aristocracy and, for the most part, speaks highly of its

representatives. However, the traveller also notes the peculiarities of the empire's "lesser" populations, starting with the "Rascians," or Serbs, some of whom she initially encountered on Habsburg territory, before her entry into the Ottoman Empire (50 – 51), and subsequently dwelling on the Greeks, Bulgarians, "Arnounts," or Albanians, and Armenians. Significantly, it is in her own household in the Ottoman capital's ambassadorial and commercial district of Pera (present-day Beyoğlu) that the traveller experiences a remarkable mix of ethnicities that does not only testify to the vastness of the Ottoman Empire and the variety of its populations but also to the status of its capital city as a centre of commercial and political exchanges. In Letter XLII, dated 16 March 1718, she declares: "my grooms are Arabs, my footmen French, English and Germans, my nurse an Armenian, my housemaids Russians, half a dozen other servants Greeks, my steward an Italian, my janissaries Turks" (122).

Predictably, the traveller also remarks upon the multilingualism that results from the confluence of so many ethnically different individuals: "I live in a place that very well represents the Tower of Babel" (122). She further adds that the extraordinary diversity of languages in Pera has "a very strange effect upon the people that are born here: they learn all these languages at the same time and without knowing any of them well enough to write or read in it" (122). Cronin calls this kind of multilingualism "vernacular" or "quotidian" and opposes it to the elite multilingualism of upper-class individuals possessing proficiency in a variety of "'prestige' languages" ("Between Languages" 302). Montagu herself learned French, Italian, and Spanish, did her best to become proficient in Latin (Lowenthal 4 – 5), and, by her own admission, put a lot of effort into learning Ottoman Turkish, which she saw as a culturally prestigious language (79). Her disparaging remark about quotidian multilingualism in Pera is matched by a similarly denigrating description of the mating habits of lower-class people in the district: according to her, they produce "mongrel" offspring in whom "Greek perfidy" is combined with "Italian diffidence," "Spanish arrogance," "French loquacity," and "English thoughtfulness bordering ... upon dullness" (112).

As social status is of paramount importance for the traveller and she professes a lot of admiration for her aristocratic hosts, she is motivated by a strong desire to communicate with them directly. In Letter XXXI, addressed to the poet Alexander Pope, Montagu speaks of studying hard to master the intricacies of "oriental learning" (79). She eventually claims to understand even the *Salaams*, the arbitrarily coded language of Turkish lovers (120 – 22). According to the French diplomat Du Vignau, *Sieur des Joanots*, who was the first European author to produce a study of this very special system of communication, only people possessing "perfect knowledge of the Turkish language" could make use – or sense – of the *Salaams* (quoted in Grosrichard 175). Despite such declarations of linguistic and cultural autonomy, however, Montagu's epistolary travelogue preserves tangible traces of the presence of interpreters, who are definitely not treated as social peers.

Recent research into the history of translation and interpretation has repeatedly focused on the role and status of linguistic and cultural mediators in the multiethnic and multilingual Ottoman Empire. According to Saliha Paker, in the sixteenth century, professional translation and interpretation were institutionalized in that empire (547). By the time of Montagu's sojourn on Ottoman territory, the figure of the interpreter/translator, generally known as "*dragoman*," had become quite noticeable in interchanges between local dignitaries and their European counterparts. Dragomans could be employed as translators, face-to-face interpreters, hired guides, political advisers, and/or spies. Some of what was said about distrust above would seem to have been particularly applicable to relations between these intermediaries and their clients. That (some) dragomans were distrusted by their employers is borne out by a Levantine proverb quoted by another British traveller, George Keppel (1799 – 1891), in his *Narrative of a Journey Across the Balcan, by the Two Passes of Selimno and Pravadi; Also, of a Visit to Azani and Other Newly Discovered Ruins in Asia Minor, in the Years 1829 – 30* (1831): "*In Pera sono tre malanni,/ Peste, fuoco, dragomanni*" (2: 87). The proverb must have been around in Montagu's time, and it is noteworthy that dragomans are identified, along with the plague and fires (*peste, fuoco*), as one of the three evils (*malanni*) of Pera, the part of Istanbul in which Montagu spent some time during her husband's embassy. However, despite such allegations, the services of dragomans must have been found indispensable.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a commentary on Ottoman dragomans and their status, see Kostova, "Degeneration, Regeneration" (181–2).

There can be no doubt that, like most other European diplomats, Edward Wortley employed dragomans. Although Montagu never makes use of the word “dragoman,” she does speak of some interpreters employed by her husband and even mentions a Greek “interpretress,” who accompanied her on her visits to eminent Ottoman women (88). In her representations of intercultural encounters, the traveller mostly adheres to “the homogenizing convention” (Sternberg 232), with examples of “lexical exoticism” (Cronin 295) also playing a significant role. Through a combination of the two, she underscores her direct contact with Ottoman aristocrats and manages to maintain her stance as a “travelling heroine” (Winch 97) imparting knowledge about the Ottoman Empire. But the erasure of her interpreters’ mediating role seriously problematizes the claim to authenticity, which is central to her travelogue. This is borne out by the following two examples.

### Montagu in Belgrade and Sofia

Having crossed the military frontier between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, Montagu, her husband and their attendants made their way to Belgrade, a city that, as she informs Pope in Letter XXIV, had changed hands several times (52). She further speaks of her encounter with Achmed Bey, a learned and cultivated man, whose way of life and ideas, as represented by the noble traveller, decidedly challenge western preconceptions of secular and religious mores in the Ottoman Empire.

Achmed Bey is discussed by Montagu in Letters XXIV, XXVIII and XL, which are addressed to her most learned correspondents in western Europe: the poet Pope and the Abbé Antonio Conti, “a cosmopolitan intellectual and a [religious] sceptic by choice” (Grundy 89). Significantly, in the context of her epistolary travelogue, the Bey is the only Ottoman *man* with whom the traveller claims to have conversed personally. He is portrayed as an example of rational masculinity. Thus, the Bey is free from the common prejudices of the vulgar herd and cultivates an enlightened form of religious worship: the Quran, he informs Montagu, presents “the purest morality delivered in the very best language” (63). Montagu’s account of her conversations with Achmed should evidently vouch for her own rational ideas and their recognition by an exceptional foreigner.

In addition, the noble traveller assures her two learned correspondents in the west that Achmed Bey has a very high status in the Ottoman Empire: he is “a principal *effendi*, that is to say, scholar” (61), and the *effendis*, according to her, constitute a privileged class:

This set of men are equally capable of preferments in the law or the church, those two sciences being cast into one, and a lawyer and a priest being the same word. They are the only men really considerable in the empire; all the profitable employments and church revenues are in their hands. The Grand Signor ... never presumes to touch their lands or money. (61)

This description easily falls within an Enlightenment complex of ideas presenting a privileged minority, possessed of great knowledge and therefore capable of governing the ignorant majority. Monarchs are usually assumed to be at the mercy of such elites. Quite significantly, the guardians of knowledge, who constitute them, do not share any of the prejudices of “the vulgar,” but are nevertheless frequently instrumental in instilling and maintaining mistaken beliefs among them. For instance, Achmed Bey is said to “drink wine very freely” (53), despite Islamic restrictions on the consumption of alcohol. When questioned about it, he explains that “the prohibition of wine was a very wise maxim and meant for the common people ..., but that the prophet never designed to confine those that knew how to use it with moderation” (62–3).

Because of his enlightened ideas and privileged status, the Bey is portrayed by Montagu as the only *free* individual in Belgrade. Everyone else appears to exist in a state of manifest unfreedom. The indigenous population is oppressed by the Ottoman army. On the Ottoman side, the janissaries are said to have absolute authority over everyone, including their own commander, the *pasha seraskier*, but they themselves are swayed by rumours and can be easily manipulated (61). The charming and polished Achmed Bey is the only exception to the general rule in a society characterized by “the natural corruption of a military government” (61).

Predictably, Montagu and Achmed do not limit their discussions to religious and political subjects only but likewise discuss literature. The Bey, who is “perfectly skilled in the Arabic and Persian languages” (53), “explain[s] to [her] many pieces of Arabian poetry,” which seem to be “not unlike” English verse (53). Montagu believes that she should learn to read Arabic (53), but in the meantime impresses Achmed Bey by “relating to him some ...Persian tales” (54). The Persian tales in question must have come from the collection *Les mille et un jours* (1710 – 12) by the French interpreter and language scholar François Pétis de la Croix (1653 – 1713). A copy of *Les mille et un jour* was found in Montagu’s library (see Jack 173). Latter-day editors of the collection believe that “the stories are in fact Turkish in origin and retold and embellished by Pétis himself with other intervening hands” (Warner 129). Montagu, however, claims that they are genuine, and this, according to her, is borne out by the Bey’s reaction to her narration: “he believed I understood Persian” (54). Achmed reciprocates her interest in things eastern in kind by having a servant teach him the Latin alphabet, and, as Montagu informs Pope, learning to “write a good Roman hand” (54).

Montagu’s attempt to extol the Bey’s virtues and emphasize her own worth through her association with him is seriously marred by the erasure of the mediator(s), who must have made their communication possible. Curiously, the epistolary travelogue’s readers are never told *how* the two enlightened individuals came to conduct their “intimate daily conversation[s]” (61). Montagu had not learned Ottoman Turkish yet, and the Bey, according to the traveller, had been “educated in the most polite eastern learning” (53). His newly acquired ability to “write a good Roman hand” (54) could have hardly helped under the circumstances. How did they manage to discuss religion and culture, if neither of them possessed the linguistic competence to do so? The manifest absence of mediators makes one wonder if the Bey was not, after all, a fictional figure, produced by the traveller herself, in a bid for recognition by Pope and Conti, two real “stars” in the firmament of the western European Enlightenment.

That Achmed was Montagu’s literary invention is further borne out by the intertextual links of the letters dealing with him with late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century epistolary fiction (see Garcia 63 – 66). According to Garcia, in those letters, “Montagu adopts the Turkish spy motif in the guise of a wise Islamic scholar, an ‘effendi’ from Belgrade” (63). The Bey’s fictionality is further confirmed by the knowledge of western European debates over religion that Montagu attributes to him. Having explained to the Abbé Conti in Letter XL that Ottoman *effendis* “make a frank profession of deism amongst themselves or to those they can trust” (110 – 111), she claims that the Bey asked her “how Mr Toland did” (111). It is doubtful that Achmed, who is represented as a master of “oriental learning” (79) above all, could have made inquiries about the Irish deist. Montagu evidently got carried away in her attempt to represent the Bey as a true cosmopolitan seeking knowledge across political, ethnic, and religious boundaries.

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The most discussed part of *The Turkish Embassy Letters* is undoubtedly Montagu’s account of her visit to the public baths in Sofia. In Letter XXVII, addressed to “Lady –”,<sup>8</sup> the noble traveller conveys her admiration of the beauty and manners of (about) two hundred local women, who were all gathered together in the *hammam*. While male travellers usually portrayed the eastern bathhouse as the site of “much unnatural and filthy lust” (George Sandys, quoted in Kostova, *Tales* 34), Montagu makes a point of informing her correspondent that the naked women in the *hammam* behaved with the greatest propriety: “there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them” (59). In addition, she describes the bathhouse as a *public* space for women in which they gathered to partake of the kind of “communal pleasures” (Yeazell 40) that were deemed, at the time, to be typically feminine: “’tis the women’s coffee house, where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented etc.” (59). Montagu also tells her correspondent that she “was in her travelling habit, which is a riding dress” (58), and although her clothes “certainly appeared extraordinary” to the women in the *hammam*, “they received [her] with all *the obliging civility possible* [my emphasis]” (58). The women, she writes, “repeated over and over... ‘*Güzelle, pek Güzelle*’, which is nothing but ‘charming, very charming’ [my emphasis]” (58). This is the first example of “lexical exoticism” in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, and Montagu obviously wishes to impress her correspondent with her knowledge of her hosts’ language as well as to provide an example of the special treatment that she was accorded by them.

<sup>8</sup> Most probably to Lady Rich (see Jack 174).

Montagu further claims that “[t]he lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undressed me for the bath” (59). But the English traveller chose to remain fully clothed, despite her hosts’ earnest attempts to persuade her to join them in their nakedness (59). To make them give up, “I was at last forced to open my shirt and show them my stays,” which they took for a “machine” in which her (jealous?) husband had locked her (59–60).

In her account of her visit to the *hammam* in Sofia, Montagu stresses the important role that gesticulation played in her communication with the local women. However, it seems reasonable to assume that there were some verbal exchanges as well. As Montagu was unable to deal with such exchanges on her own, she probably availed herself of the services of a female interpreter, who also acted as a “native informant” explaining social relations among the women in the bathhouse and providing information about this “diversion” that, as Montagu remarks, they usually took once a week (59). However, the noble traveller evidently chose to erase *her* mediation.

### Montagu as a Translator

On other occasions, Montagu acknowledges her interpreters’ mediating role, albeit with a degree of condescension. Letter XXXI, addressed to Pope, provides an illustration of the traveller’s view of their services. It can also be read as an exercise in self-promotion insofar as Montagu poses as an expert on both eastern and western polite learning and *ars poetica*. In fact, this is the letter in which she regales Pope with her two translations of a Turkish love poem:

Montagu begins by informing the poet of the differences between three main varieties of the Turkish language: “the vulgar Turk,” “what is spoke at court, or amongst the people of figure,” and the “style proper for poetry” (75–76). To illustrate the distinctive features of the third variety, Montagu presents him with “a *faithful copy* of the verses that Ibrahim Pasha, the reigning favourite, has made for the young princess, his contracted wife [my emphasis]” (76). She describes the Pasha as “a man of wit and learning” but also suggests that he was not much of a poet and might therefore have been helped in producing his love poem by “the best poets of the empire” (76). This should vouch for the poem’s *exemplary* status, or, as she puts it, “the verses may be looked upon as *a sample of their finest poetry* [my emphasis]” (76). Montagu further stresses the poem’s exemplary quality by likening it to the Song of Solomon: “I don’t doubt you’ll be of my mind that it is most wonderfully resembling The Song of Solomon, which was also addressed to a royal bride” (76).

The traveller next presents the poem itself “in a literal translation” (77) and admits that she was helped in translating it by her interpreters (77). This should serve as a sufficient guarantee of the translation’s close correspondence to the original because the noble *ars poetica* was, in her opinion, a sealed book for the interpreters: “*if you were acquainted with my interpreters, I might spare myself the trouble of assuring you that [the verses] have received no poetical touches at their hands* [my emphasis]” (77). Significantly, the interpreters’ lack of poetic skill is, in this case, a proof of the translation’s *faithfulness*.

While Montagu claims that some of the beauty of the original has been preserved in the literal translation (77), she is nevertheless tempted to make up for her interpreters’ deficiency by producing a rendition of the Ottoman poem in “the style of English poetry” (78). The second translation is in heroic couplets and contains “poetic” words such as “Philomel” for “nightingale” (78). The traveller explains that its second verse, “Indulging all the night her [that is, Philomel’s] pleasing pain” may appear to be a deviation from the original but in fact expresses “what I suppose is the true sense of the author” (79). Unlike her “unpoetic” interpreters, who could only help with the production of a literal translation, Montagu was able to ascertain what the author *really* meant in that verse. Evidently, even across cultures, it takes one aristocrat to understand another. In an act of false modesty Montagu next decries the merits of her second translation by claiming that the English language lacks the means to express the “violence of passion” characteristic of the original (79).

Ironically, Pope is presented with two translations whose quality he has no means of judging insofar as, unlike Montagu, he is not proficient in “oriental learning” and is incapable of reading the

original love poem. Given his linguistic and cultural deficiency, the renowned English poet can only accept Montagu's pronouncements upon the distinctive features of Ottoman Turkish love poetry and the difficulty of translating it into English.

Further on in the travelogue, one of Montagu's interpreters is called upon to provide a *literal* translation of a couplet which the traveller found, together with numerous other "distiches," on the walls of the apartments of the ladies of the Ottoman court at Çorlu (98). Montagu considers several of the couplets "well turned" but accepts the interpreter's view that they "lost much of their beauty in the translation" (98). This can be interpreted as yet another reflection upon the deficiency of the English language (if indeed Montagu communicated with her interpreters in English rather than in some other west European language!) which, as stated above, could not express the "violence of passion" as effectively as Ottoman Turkish. On the other hand, this is one of the rare occasions on which Montagu accepts the service of an interpreter without any show of superiority.

### Montagu and Her Greek "Interpretress"

In Letter XXXIV, addressed to Lady Mar, Montagu speaks of the services of a Greek woman, who acted as her "interpretress" (86 – 91). She is said to have accompanied the traveller on a visit to "the Grand Vizier's lady" (86). The visit itself is described as an honour "which was never given before to any Christian" (86). Predictably, Montagu informs her sister that she was treated "with all kind of civility" (87). Predictably again, she completely erases the interventions of the Greek "interpretress" from her account of the visit. We are left with the impression that the two ladies conversed in the same language. At one point, Montagu even claims that "the Grand Vizier's lady" "*guessed at* [her] thoughts [my emphasis]" (87) as she (probably) noticed her disappointment at the lack of "magnificence" in her house (87). Montagu's host explains that "she was no longer of an age to spend either her time or money in superfluities; that her whole expense was in charity, and her employment praying to God" (87). Montagu applauds her rational attitude to the world's vanities and goes on to speak of the wonderful dinner that followed their conversation and extol the qualities of Turkish food. Despite the privileged treatment that she was accorded, the noble traveller declares that she "found ... little diversion in this harem" and goes on to describe her host as "an old devote" (88).

Once the visit to the Grand Vizier's wife is over, the Greek "interpretress" suggests that Montagu should visit Fatima, "the Kabya's [i. e. royal steward's] lady" (88). She explains that the Kabya is "the second officer in the empire and ought indeed to be looked as the first, the Grand Vizier having only the name, while he exerciz[es] the authority" (89). The "interpretress" thus emerges as a competent person, possessing first-hand knowledge of political life in the Ottoman Empire. Montagu follows her advice and pays the first of several visits to Fatima, "the Kabya's lady." The "interpretress's" suggestion provides an important twist in the epistolary travelogue's plot insofar as Fatima represents the best of Ottoman femininity: her fine qualities are lauded by Montagu to such an extent that Srinivas Aravamudan has seen her as "*a composite fiction ... created with the explicit purpose of seducing the reader with idealized accounts of Turkish womanhood [my emphasis]*" (173), that is, as yet another invented figure in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. And indeed, the English traveller is extravagant in the praises which she heaps on Fatima: her beauty, she says, "efface[s] everything I have seen, all that has been called lovely either in England or Germany," her behaviour is "full of grace and sweetness" and her "air" is "majestic [but] free from stiffness or affectation" (89). It is possible to see Fatima as Achmed Bey's female counterpart. Both of them are assigned major roles within the plot of Montagu's epistolary travelogue, and therefore the part played by the Greek "interpretress" in guiding the traveller to the second highly valued member of the Ottoman aristocracy should not be underestimated.

In the same letter Montagu also speaks, in glowing terms, of Fatima's fine clothes and jewellery, sumptuous apartments and numerous attendants, whose appearance "put me in mind of the pictures of the ancient nymphs" (90). Their conversation is represented only in general terms:

The lovely Fatima entertained me all this while, in the most polite agreeable manner, calling me often *güzel Sultanum*, or the beautiful Sultana, and desiring my friendship with the best grace in the world, lamenting that she could not entertain me in my own language. (91)

Despite her desire to entertain her guest in “her own language,” Fatima lacks the linguistic means of doing so. Montagu, on the other hand, demonstrates her own knowledge of the other woman’s language by quoting the complimentary phrase “*güzel Sultanum*, or the beautiful Sultana” (91). This is yet another instance of “lexical exoticism.” Apart from demonstrating Montagu’s (limited?) familiarity with her hosts’ language, the compliment, which has been paid to her by a paragon of beauty, such as Fatima, enables the traveller to project an aestheticized image of herself that symbolically obliterates all difference between her and the aestheticized others whom she claims to have encountered in the Ottoman Empire – a country where “every beauty is more common ... than with us” (70).

### Montagu and the Salaams

Montagu eventually provides positive proof of her mastery of her hosts’ language and culture by displaying her knowledge of the Salaams, the special language of Turkish lovers (120-22). In Letter XLII, probably addressed to Lady Rich (Jack 178), she speaks of having procured “a Turkish love letter” for her correspondent (120). Aravamudan describes the language of Turkish lovers as “an object-related system of identification that pivots around free association” (374). For this reason, the letter is contained in a box and the correspondent is instructed which of the objects that make it up to take out first. Montagu presents Lady Rich with a table explaining the meaning of each of the assembled objects. She goes on to extol the poetic quality of the letter and point out the numerous uses to which different objects can be put in the Salaam system of signification:

You see this letter is all verses, and I can assure you there is as much fancy shown in the choice of them as in the most studied expressions of our letters, there being, I believe, a million of verses designed for this use. There is no colour, no flower, no weed, no fruit, herb, pebble or feather that has not a verse belonging to it, and you may quarrel, reproach or send letters of passion, friendship or civility, or even of news, without ever inking your fingers. (122)

As already indicated, understanding the Salaams required high proficiency in the Turkish language. However, even if we assume that Montagu had learned a great amount of Turkish, she would have still needed someone to explain the Salaam system of communication to her. No mediating agent is mentioned in the travelogue. The impression that we are left with is that Montagu regards her familiarity with the Salaams as an outcome of her own efforts.

In the same letter the traveller complains that her remarkable progress in the Turkish tongue has put her in danger of “losing my English” (122). Having mastered (some of) the mysteries of her hosts’ language and culture, she feels that she must curb her desire for further “exotic” learning and try to re-master her native tongue which she “prefer[s] to all the rest” (123). This admission marks the outermost limit of the traveller’s striving for linguistic and cultural autonomy in a foreign land.

### Conclusion

Montagu was probably the most important woman traveller to visit the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century. Posing as a “travelling heroine” (Winch 97), who had acquired first-hand knowledge of upper-class life in a little-known land, she strove to dispel prejudice and change her readers’ attitudes to Islam and Ottoman social mores. To achieve those ends, Montagu takes up the role of an intercultural and interlingual mediator in her epistolary travelogue. However, while stressing her own autonomous cultural and linguistic performance within the foreign context, the noble traveller erases, or minimizes, the role of less privileged agents of mediation, such as hired guides and interpreters, who must have helped her communicate effectively with her Ottoman hosts. This simplifies her representation of intercultural encounters and seriously problematizes her claim to the *authenticity* of her account of the Ottoman

Empire. Montagu herself identifies “regard to truth” (41) as the distinctive mark of her text as opposed to the narratives of earlier *male* travellers to the east. In her travelogue, truth is very much a function of her social status and gender: as an aristocratic *woman* she was able to gain access to all-female spaces, such as *hammam* and *harem*, that male travellers could only fantasize about. However, in her visits to hammams and harems, she must have been accompanied by one or more guides and/or interpreters. They were probably local women, who were familiar with social hierarchies and other distinctions among Ottoman ladies of rank. There is no trace of their presence in the travelogue; the only exception is the Greek “interprestress,” whose mediation between Montagu and “the lovely Fatima” was considered above.

In addition, Montagu must have been helped by her husband’s interpreters in her attempts to learn Turkish and gain understanding of local customs. While she stresses her own persistence in studying hard (79), she never mentions any instructors or assistants. In Letter XLII, Montagu demonstrates her superior knowledge of her hosts’ culture and language by revealing to her correspondent the mysteries of the secret language of Turkish lovers. In the same letter she also speaks of her fear of “los[ing] [her] English” (122) on account of what we would describe today as her *immersion* in the foreign culture. Her fear, however, appears to be unfounded: there are relatively few representations of language difference in her text. As we saw, Montagu occasionally quotes phrases in Turkish, but for the most part adheres to “the homogenizing convention.” The original of the Turkish love poem that she translates for Pope is not included in her letter to him, but he would not have been able to understand it even if Montagu had included it. The only exception is Letter XLII, which, as already indicated, deals with the “cultural mystery” (Aravamudan 168) of the Salaams and contains several passages in Turkish.

The erasures and manifest absences discussed above should not blind us to the magnitude of Montagu’s achievement in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Albeit in an ideologically flawed way, her epistolary travelogue celebrates “transcultural understanding” (Aravamudan 189), and Montagu’s own acts of mediation stimulate critical reflection on the nature and multiple purposes of intercultural encounters.

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