English Women Staging Islam, 1696–1707

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Woman from Rumelia, Ottoman period, third quarter of 18th century (w/c on paper), French School, (18th century) / School of Oriental & African Studies Library, Uni. of London / The Bridgeman Art Library UOL 120687.

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General Introduction

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH WOMEN STAGING ISLAM, 1696–1707

I. Early Modern England and Islam

The history of England’s engagement with the Islamic world in the early modern period arguably begins and ends with a woman. Elizabeth I, whose via media established Protestant England on a firm footing after over a decade of political crises and religious oscillations following her father’s death, actively pursued ties with Muslim sov-

1. Elizabeth Tudor, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, was born in 1553; she assumed the throne in 1558 after the death of her sister, Mary; she ruled as queen regnant (i.e., sovereign in her own right) until her death in 1603. I use the term “England” throughout as my focus is on English-language literature; however, Elizabeth I was generally designated as queen “of England, France and Ireland,” as in “The answere of her Majestie to the aforesaid Letters of the Great Turke, sent the 25 of October 1579, in the Prudence of London by Master Richard Stanley,” in Richard Hakluyt, The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation, 12 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 5: 175. The English hold on Ireland during the Elizabethan era was tentative and their claims to France anachronistic; see Donald Stump and Susan M. Felch, eds., Elizabeth I and Her Age (New York: Norton, 2009), on the Calais debacle in France (125) and the Tyrone Rebellion in Ireland (487–89). The Laws in Wales Acts incorporated Wales into England from 1535 to 1542. Scotland was an independent kingdom until 1707, when the Acts of Union were passed; however, the Scottish king James VI, who was Elizabeth’s successor as James I of England, ruled over both realms, as did his son Charles I until his trial and execution in 1649, when monarchy in England was abolished for over two decades. For more, see Christopher Hill, The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980).

2. Henry VIII (r. 1509–47) established the Church of England independent of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. His immediate successor was his nine-year-old son, Edward VI (r. 1547–53), during whose reign Protestant reforms were intensified and English Catholics persecuted. When he died, his eldest sister, the Catholic Mary Tudor (r. 1553–58), assumed the throne. Her mother, Catherine of Aragon, was the daughter of the Catholic Sovereigns (Reyes Católicos), Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. Her husband was Philip II of Spain, whose dominions stretched across the globe. Mary Tudor’s persecution of Protestants led to her designation as “Bloody Mary.” Elizabeth adopted a middle course, or via media, between these doctrinal extremes while retaining the independence of the Church of England from the authority of Rome.
ereigns, especially those of the Ottoman empire and Morocco, as a counterweight to the claims of the Catholic Habsburg empire. Hence, while a series of uncertain trade missions were launched into Muslim lands prior to Elizabeth’s reign, the beginnings of the early modern English (and more generally British) engagement with Islamdom in the political sense, Islamicate culture in a broader sense, and Islam as a religion in a narrower sense occurred under her auspices. By the 1580s, when the Turkey Company (subsequently absorbed into the Levant Company) was established “to finde out and set open a trade of Marchandize and trafique into the Lands, Islands, dominions, and territories of the great Turke, commonly called the Grand Signior [i.e., the Ottoman sultan],” this trade became more propitious for several reasons, including England’s isolation from Catholic Europe after Elizabeth’s formal excommunication. This edict from Pope Pius

3. The Ottoman empire dates from 1299 to 1923; Constantinople (Istanbul) was conquered from the Byzantines in 1453. The expansion of the empire came to a halt with the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, which followed the first significant military defeat of the Ottomans and the loss of a large portion of their European territories. Morocco remained an independent kingdom throughout this period, though it frequently allied with the Ottomans.

4. For instance, Goran V. Stanivokovic, introduction to Remapping the Mediterranean World in Early Modern English Writings (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), discusses possible Ottoman efforts in England’s favor that contributed to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 (5, 17 n. 16). For a comparable case, see Andrew P. Vella, An Elizabethan-Ottoman Conspiracy (Valletta: Royal University of Malta, 1972).


7. “The letters patents, or privileges graunted by her Majestie to Sir Edward Osborne, Master Richard Staper, and certaine other Marchants of London for their trade into the dominions of the great Turke, in the yeere 1581,” in Hakluyt, Principal Navigations, 5: 192.

8. Pope Pius V issued the first papal bull excommunicating Elizabeth in 1570. Pope Sixtus V reiterated the papal stance in A Declaration of the Sentence and Deposition of Elizabeth, the Usurper and Pretensed Quene of Englannde (1588), listing among the reasons for her excommunicating Elizabeth in 1570. Pope Sixtus V reiterated the papal stance in A Declaration of the Sentence and Deposition of Elizabeth, the Usurper and Pretensed Quene of Englannde (1588), listing among the reasons for her excommunicating Elizabeth in 1570. Pope Sixtus V reiterated the papal stance in A Declaration of the Sentence and Deposition of Elizabeth, the Usurper and Pretensed Quene of Englannde (1588), listing among the reasons for her excommunicating Elizabeth in 1570.
V denied Elizabeth’s “legitimacy as Queen,” thereby “releasing her [Catholic] subjects from their oath of allegiance.” This led to a series of potential rebellions and assassination plots over the next decade.

The struggles between the competing empires of the “Greater Western World”—the Habsburg and the Ottoman, the former covering much of the western half of Europe and the latter covering the eastern half and constantly threatening the western half—led Elizabeth to seek strategic alliances with Muslim sovereigns as like-minded iconoclasts and monotheists. While most of the evidence for these negotiations remained secret, some was preserved as the widely read letters in Richard Hakluyt’s *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598–1600). Because the balance of power favored the Ottomans, and to a lesser degree their client states in the Maghreb and the rival Safavid empire in Persia, Elizabeth did not—and, indeed, could not—assume a dominating stance. Instead, she had to finesse Muslim sovereigns’ perceptions of her as a supplicant and of her kingdom as a potential tributary. Nevertheless, the more open engagement during Elizabeth’s reign introduced “other voices” from this region into English culture, including that of the valide sultan (mother of the sultan) Safiye in “A letter written by the most high and mighty Empresse the wife of the Grand Signior Sultan Murad Can to the Queenes Majesty of England, in the yeere of our Lord, 1594.” It also highlighted the “otherness” of the English as bit players in these great power politics.

Mary Wortley Montagu, who from 1716 to 1718 traveled through the western half of the Ottoman empire as far as Istanbul, may be seen as marking the end point of the rapprochement with Islam in its multiple aspects initiated by Elizabeth. As wife of the “Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Turkey,” and as a promising participant in the sparkling and satirical literary scene of the age of Pope, Montagu recorded her conversations with Muslim men and women in a series of letters circulated in manuscript during her lifetime and published posthumously in 1763. In these *Turkish Embassy*

13. Born Mary Pierrepont, daughter of the duke of Kingston, in 1689, she eloped with Edward Wortley Montagu in 1712. After almost a quarter century in Italy, she returned to England to die in 1762. Her letters documenting her travels through the Ottoman empire were published posthumously despite the efforts of her daughter to suppress them; for bibliographical details, see note 17 below. For more on Montagu's life and works, see Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

14. This embassy threaded its way through the major cities of Germany and the Habsburg empire, which encompassed modern-day Austria and Hungary (the latter acquired from the Ottomans between 1699 and 1737). Lady Mary and her husband officially entered the Ottoman empire in the regions of modern-day Serbia, staying in Belgrade for three weeks; here, she discussed Arabic language and literature and debated the status of women with the urbane Achmet (Ahmed) Bey. Their next stop at Sofia, now the capital of Bulgaria, was the *mise-en-scène* of the passage in Lady Mary’s account that has received most commentary: the Turkish bath scene. They then traveled to Adrianople (Edirne), and finally to Constantinople (Istanbul), where they lived in the European quarter of Pera (Beyoğlu).


17. One letter was published anonymously during Montagu’s lifetime: *The Genuine Copy of a Letter Written from Constantinople by an English Lady, who was lately in Turkey, and who is no less Distinguish’d by her Wit than by her Quality; to a Venetian Nobleman, one of the Prime Virtuosi of the Age. Translated from the French Original, which is likewise added* (London: Printed by J. Roberts and A. Dodd, 1719). The full title of the posthumous collection runs: *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M———y W———y M———e: Written, during her Travels in Europe, Africa, and Asia, To Persons of Distinction, Men of Letters, &c., in different Parts of Europe. Which Contain, Among other Curious Relations, Accounts of the Policy and Manners of the Turks; Drawn from Sources that have been inaccessible to other Travellers, 3 vols.* (London: Printed for T. Becket and P. A. de Hont, 1763). The second edition was published in
Letters, the common shorthand for her magnum opus, Montagu constructs an authorial persona as a pioneer correcting the gender and religious biases in accounts of prior male travelers.\(^\text{18}\) Over the course of this collection, she challenges patriarchal and orientalist stereotypes of the harem, which she correctly defines as the “women’s apartment,” and of Muslim practices of polygamy, about which she states “there is no instance of a man of quality that makes use of this liberty, or of a woman of rank that would suffer it.” She also critiques the western European view that Muslim wives are slaves, that Muslims “do not own [acknowledge] women to have any souls,” and “that Mohammed excludes women from any share in a future happy state [i.e., paradise].”\(^\text{19}\) Her effort to understand Islam in its theological, legalistic, and cultural aspects through her conversations with Ottoman women and men thereby compares with Elizabeth’s attempted rapprochement in that it stressed commonalities with Muslims rather than differences. Even so, as a reputed deist, Montagu positioned her largely positive and fairly accurate representation of the Islam practiced in the Ottoman empire among the urban elite as a foil for what she deemed Catholic superstition.\(^\text{20}\) Moreover, her sympathetic stance, voiced at the cusp of the Ottoman empire’s “decline” after its defeat in what is now Serbia at the battle of Peterwardein (1716), whose scorched-earth, corpse-ridden battleground Montagu traveled across, became increasingly anomalous as English imperialist discourses assumed a patriarchal and feminist orientalist tone.\(^\text{21}\)

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18. Montagu, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, indirectly (57) and directly (83) compares herself to Columbus.
19. Ibid., 72, 100, 109.