THE TURKISH EMBASSY LETTERS

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

edited by Teresa Heffernan and Daniel O’Quinn

broadview editions 2013
passed the ridges between the mountains of Haernus and Rhodopha, which are always covered with snow. This town is situate on a rising ground near the river Hebrus, and is almost wholly inhabited by Greeks. Here are still some ancient Christian churches. They have a bishop; and several of the richest Greeks live here, but they are forced to conceal their wealth with great care, the appearance of poverty (which includes part of its inconveniencies) being all their security against feeling it in earnest. The country from hence to Adrianople is the finest in the world. Vines grow wild on all the hills, and the perpetual spring they enjoy makes everything gay and flourishing, but this climate, as happy as it seems, can never be preferred to England with its very large one, paved with marble, and all round it raised two sofas of marble, one above another. There were four fountains of cold water in this room, falling first into marble basins, and then running on the floor in little channels made for that purpose, which carried the streams into this room, falling first into marble basins, and then running on the floor in little channels made for that purpose, which carried the streams into the next room, something less than this, with the same sort of marble sofas, but so hot with steams of sulphur proceeding from the baths joining to it, that it was impossible to stay there with one's clothes on. The two other domes were the hot baths, one of which had cocks of cold water turning into it, to temper it to what degree of warmth the bathers have a mind to.

I was in my travelling habit, which is a riding dress, and certainly appeared very extraordinary to them, yet there was not one of them that showed the least surprise or impertinent curiosity, but received me with all the obliging civility possible. I know no European court where the ladies would have behaved themselves in so polite a manner to such a stranger. I believe in the whole there were two hundred women, and yet none of those disdainful smiles, or satirical whispers that never fail in other assemblies, when anybody appears that is not dressed exactly in the manner. They repeated over and over to me, Uzelle, pek uzelle, which is nothing but Charming, very charming. The first sofas were covered with cushions and rich carpets, on which sat the ladies, and on the second their slaves behind them, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed, yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. They walked, and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes of our

---

1 Plovdiv, Bulgaria. The Greek name was Philippopolis and the Turkish name Filibe.
2 To Lady ___. The addressee of this crucial letter is not specified. Although the letter is addressed from Adrianople, Lady Mary is relating events that happened in Sofia. This letter inspired the famous orientalist painting, Le Bain turc (1862) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), who copied several passages from it in his notebook. See p. 173, note 1 and Appendix I.3.
General Mother. There were many amongst them as exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shinningly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or ribbon, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces.

I was here convinced of the truth of a reflection that I had often made, that if it was the fashion to go naked, the face would be hardly observed. I perceived that the ladies with the finest skins and most delicate shapes that if it was the fashion to go naked, the face would be hardly observed. I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband. I was charmed with their civility and beauty, and should have been very glad to pass more time with them, but I resolved to pursue his journey next morning early, I was in haste to see the ruins of Justinian's church, which did not afford me so agreable a prospect as I had left, being little more than a heap of stones.

Adieu, Madam. I am sure I have now entertained you with an account of such a sight as you never saw in your life, and what no book of travels could inform you of. "Tis no less than death for a man to be found in one of these places.

Letter 28

Adrianople, April 1, O. S. 1717

You see that I am very exact in keeping the promise you engaged me to make, but I know not whether your curiosity will be satisfied with the accounts I shall give you, though I can assure you that the desire I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr. Gervase could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improved his art to see so many fine women naked, in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions, while their slaves (generally pretty girls of seventeen or eighteen) were employed in braiding their hair in several pretty manners. In short, 'tis the woman's coffee-house, where all the news of the Town is told, scandal invented, etc.

They generally take this diversion once a week, and stay there at least four or five hours without getting cold by immediate coming out of the hot-bath into the cool room, which was very surprising to me. The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her, and would fain have undressed me for the bath. I excused myself with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in persuading me. I was at last forced to open my skirt and show them my stays, which satisfied them very well, for I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband. I was charmed with their civility and beauty, and should have been very glad to pass more time with them, but Mr. W resolved to pursue his journey next morning early, I was in haste to see the ruins of Justinian's church, which did not afford me so agreeable a prospect as I had left, being little more than a heap of stones.

Adieu, Madam. I am sure I have now entertained you with an account of such a sight as you never saw in your life, and what no book of travels could inform you of. "Tis no less than death for a man to be found in one of these places.

Letter 28

Adrianople, April 1, O. S. 1717

You see that I am very exact in keeping the promise you engaged me to make, but I know not whether your curiosity will be satisfied with the accounts I shall give you, though I can assure you that the desire I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr. Gervase could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improved his art to see so many fine women naked, in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions, while their slaves (generally pretty girls of seventeen or eighteen) were employed in braiding their hair in several pretty manners. In short, 'tis the woman's coffee-house, where all the news of the Town is told, scandal invented, etc.

They generally take this diversion once a week, and stay there at least four or five hours without getting cold by immediate coming out of the hot-bath into the cool room, which was very surprising to me. The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by

1 John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667) 4.304-18:

She, as a veil down to the slender waist,
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
As the vine curls her tendrils—which implied
Subjection, but requir'd with gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best receiv'd,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet, reluctant, amorous delay.

No those mysterious parts were then conceall'd:
Then was not guilty shame. Dishonour Shame
Of Nature's works, Honour dishonourable,
Sin-bred, how have ye troubl'd mankind
With shows instead, mere shows of seeming pure,
And banish'd from man's life his happiest life,
Sin-bred, how have ye troubl'd mankind
With shows instead, mere shows of seeming pure,
And banish'd from man's life his happiest life,

2 Charles Jervas (c. 1675 - 1739), an Irish portrait painter who painted many of London's intellectuals including Pope and Swift, became the Principal Portrait Painter to King George I in 1723. He painted Lady Mary in 1716.

3 The coffee houses in England (the first opened in 1637, almost a hundred years after the first coffee house in Istanbul) were mostly closed to women clients during this period, although women could own them and did serve in them.

4 To the Abbé Conti. Antonio Schinella Conti (1677-1749) was a Venetian cleric and literary figure from Padua who visited England in 1715 and in 1717-18. While in England he became a member of the Royal Society and adjudicated in the controversy between Leibniz and Newton over the invention of differential calculus. Princeess Caroline received him, and throughout 1715 he attended Lady Mary's weekly suppers of authors and intellectuals. They were reacquainted when Lady Mary moved to Venice in 1739, and he translated nine of her poems and one essay into Italian. See Grundy 89 and 405 and Appendix B3 for a letter she wrote to him in French.

5 Halband (1.314n3) notes: "In 1741, when LM met Joseph Spence in Rome, she related this episode, and quoted the lady's remark that 'the Husbands in England were much worse than in the East; for that they ty'd up their Wives in little Boxes, of the shape of their bodies.'" Working against the tradition of male travel literature that emphasized the enslavement of Turkish women, Lady Mary instead offers herself up as a figure in need of saving.

6 Lady Mary is referring to the few remains of antiquity left in the ancient city of Sardica, the church founded by the Emperor Justinian I (ruled from 527 to 565).

7 Male travelers had no access to women's quarters, yet fantastical accounts of the abuse of Turkish women in the harems are standard tropes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel narratives to the Levant. See Appendix E.
will again. Your Ladyship may easily imagine that we drew a vast crowd of spectators, but all silent as death. If any of them had taken the liberties of our mob upon any strange sight, our janissaries had made no scruple of falling on them with their scimitars without danger for so doing, being above the law. Yet these people have some good qualities. They are very zealous and faithful where they serve, and look upon it as their business to fight for you on all occasions, of which I had a very pleasant instance in a village on this side Philioppolis, where we were met by our domestic guard. I happened to bespeak pigeons for my supper, upon which one of my janissaries went immediately to the cadi (the chief civil officer of the town) and ordered him to send in some dozens. The poor man answered that he had already sent about, but could get none. My janissary, in the height of his zeal for my service, immediately locked him up prisoner in his room, telling him he deserved death for his impudence in offering to excuse his not obeying my command, but out of respect to me, he would not punish him but by my order, and accordingly he came very gravely to me to ask what should be done to him, adding by way of compliment that if I pleased, he would bring me his head. This may give you some idea of the unlimited power of these fellows, who are all sworn of falling on them with their scimitars without danger for so doing, being of our mob upon any strange sight.

I wish to God (dear Sister) that you was as regular in letting me have the pleasure of knowing what passes on your side of the globe, as I am

---

Letter 30

To the Countess of ___

Adrianople, April 1, O. S. 1717

I wish to God (dear Sister) that you was as regular in letting me have the pleasure of knowing what passes on your side of the globe, as I am carefull in endeavouring to amuse you by the account of all I see that I think you care to hear of. You content yourself in telling me over and over that the town is very dull; it may possibly be dull to you, when every day does not present you with something new, but for me, that am in arrear at least two months news, all that seems very stale with you would be fresh and sweet here. Pray let me into more particulars. I will try to awaken your gratitude by giving you a full and true relation of the novelties of this place, none of which would surprise you more than a sight of my person as I am now in my Turkish habit, though I believe you would be of my opinion that 'tis admirably becoming. I intend to send you my picture; in the mean time accept of it here.  

The first piece of my dress is a pair of drawers, very full, that reach to my shoes, and conceal the legs more modestly than your petticoats. They are of a thin rose coloured damask, brocaded with silver flowers. My shoes are of white kid leather, embroidered with gold. Over this hangs my smock of a fine white silk gauze, edged with embroidery. This smock has wide sleeves hanging half-way down my arm and is closed at the neck with a diamond button, but the shape and colour of the bosom very well to be distinguished through it.—The _antery_ is a waistcoat made close to the shape, of white and gold damask, with very long sleeves falling back and fringed with deep gold fringe, and should have diamond or pearl buttons. My _caftan_, of the same stuff with my drawers, is a robe exactly fitted to my shape and reaching to my feet, with very long straight falling sleeves. Over this is the girdle, of about four fingers broad, which all that can afford have entirely of diamonds or other precious stones. Those that will not be at that expense, have it of exquisite embroidery on satin, but it must be fastened before with a clasp of diamonds. The _curdée_ is a loose robe they throw off or put on according to the weather, being of a rich brocade (mine is green and gold) either lined with ermine or sables; the sleeves reach very little below the shoulders. The headdress is composed of a cap, called _takkip_, which is in winter of fine velvet embroidered with pearls or diamonds, and in summer of a light shining silver stuff. This is fixed on one side of the head, hanging a little way down with a gold tassel, and bound on either with a circle of diamonds (as I have seen several) or a rich embroidered handkerchief. On the other side of the head, the hair is laid flat, and here the ladies are at liberty to show their fancies, some putting flowers, others a plume of heron's feathers, and, in short,
what they please; but the most general fashion is, a large bouquet of
ejewels, made like nature's flowers, that is, the buds of pearls, the roses
of different coloured rubies, the jessamines of diamonds, the jonquils
of topazes, etc. so well set and enamelled, 'tis impossible to imagine any-
thing of that kind so beautiful. The hair hangs at its full length behind,
divided into tresses braided with pearl or ribbon, which is always in
great quantity.

I never saw in my life, so many fine heads of hair. I have counted
110 of these tresses of one lady's, all natural, but it must be owned that
every beauty is more common here than with us. 'Tis surprising to see
a young woman that is not very handsome. They have naturally the
most beautiful complexions in the world and generally large black
eyes. I can assure you with great truth, that the Court of England
(though I believe it the fairest in Christendom) cannot show so many
beauties as are under our protection here. They generally shape their
eye-brows, and the Greeks and Turks have the custom of putting round
eyes on the inside a black tincture that, at a distance, or by candle-
light, adds very much to the blackness of them. I fancy many of our
ladies would be overjoyed to know this secret, but 'tis too visible by
day. They dye their nails a rose-colour; I own I cannot enough accus-
to myself to find any beauty in it.

As to their morality or good conduct, I can say, like Harlequin,
that 'tis just as 'tis with you,1 and the Turkish ladies don't commit one sin
the less for not being Christians. Now I am a little acquainted with
their ways, I cannot forbear admiring either the exemplary discretion
or extreme stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of
them.2 'Tis very easy to see, they have more liberty than we have, no

1 In Aphra Behn's The Emperor of the Moon (1687), Harlequin declares the
same moral codes exist on the moon as those on earth (III.1).

2 A common theme in the travel and histories of the Ottoman Empire and
Turkey was the oppression of Muslim women and the comparative freedom of
European women. Jean de Thévenot (1687) writes: "the Turks do not believe
that women go to Heaven, and hardly account them Rational Creatures; the
truth is, they take them only for their service as they would a Horse" (56-57).
Aaron Hill in his 1709 account wrongly reports that Turkish women are
denied entry into Paradise and promises to give "British ladies, an enlivening
taste of Turkish arrogance" in order that they will see "how little cause [they]
have to grudge" as in contrast British men "posses a just and mild pre-emi-
tntment of their husbands, those ladies that arc rich having all their
money in their own hands, which they take with them upon a divorce,
with an addition which he is obliged to give them.4 Upon the whole, I

woman of what rank soever being permitted to go in the streets without
two muslins, one that covers her face all but her eyes, and another that
hides the whole dress of her head, and hangs half way down her back;
and their shapes are also wholly concealed by a thing they call a
jeriqa, which no woman of any sort appears without. This has straight
sleeves that reaches to their fingers' ends, and it laps all round them,
not unlike a riding-hood. In winter 'tis of cloth, and in summer plain
stuff or silk. You may guess how effectually this disguises them, that
there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave, and 'tis impos-
sible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her,
and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street.

This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following
their inclinations without danger of discovery.1 The most usual
method of intrigue is to send an appointment to the lover to meet the
lady at a Jew's shop, which are as notoriously convenient as our Indian
houses,2 and yet even those that don't make that use of them do not
scruple to go to buy penneths3 and tumble over rich goods, which are
chiefly to be found amongst that sort of people. The great ladies
didn't let their gallants know who they are, and 'tis so difficult to find
it out that they can very seldom guess at her name, they have corre-
responded with above half a year together. You may easily imagine the
number of faithful wives very small in a country where they have
nothing to fear from their lovers' indiscretion, since we see so many
that have the courage to expose themselves to that in this world,
and all the threatened punishment of the next, which is never preached to
the Turkish damsels. Neither have they much to apprehend from the
resentment of their husbands, those ladies that are rich having all their
money in their own hands, which they take with them upon a divorce,
with an addition which he is obliged to give them.4 Upon the whole, I

1 Masquerades were a very popular aristocratic entertainment throughout
Europe and England at this time. In the literature and art of the period, they
were often depicted as places of sexual intrigue.

2 Lady Mary had suggested she and Edward secretly meet at an Indian houso-
rooms that were let out to distressed lovers—when they were engaged in their
clandestine courtship that led to their elopement.

3 In this context, penneths means bargains.

4 Refers to married Muslim women's rights to own property; the Qur'an estab-
lished women's right to the mahr, which is granted to the bride (continued)
look upon the Turkish women as the only free people in the Empire. The very Divan pays a respect to them, and the Grand Signor himself, when a bassa is executed, never violates the privileges of the harem,1 (or women’s apartment) which remains unsearched entire to the widow. They are queens of their slaves, whom the husband has no permission so much as to look upon, except it be an old woman or two that his lady chooses. 'Tis true their law permits them four wives, but 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. When a husband happens to be inconstant (as those things will happen) he keeps his mistress in a house apart, and visits her as privately as he can, just as 'tis with you. Amongst all the great men here, I only know the Teferdar2 (i.e., treasurer) that keeps a number of she-slaves for his own use (that is, on his own side of the house, for a slave, once given to serve a lady, is entirely at her disposal) and he is spoke of as a libertine, or what we should call a rake, and his wife won’t see him, though she continues to live in his house.3 Thus you see, dear Sister, the manners of mankind do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe. Perhaps it would be more entertaining to add a few surprising customs of my own invention, but nothing seems to me so agreeable as truth, and I believe nothing so acceptable to you. I conclude with repeating the great truth of my being, dear Sister, etc.

116  LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU
I am at this present moment writing in a house situated on the banks of the Hebrus, which runs under my chamber window. My garden is full of tall cypress trees, upon the branches of which several couple of true turtles are saying soft things to one another from morning till night. How naturally do boughs and vows come into my head at this time of the Hebrus, which runs under my chamber window. My garden is minute! And must not you confess to my praise that 'tis more than an herb, and seem to live very easily. They are most of them Greeks and seem inspiring a laziness and aversion to labour, which the great plenty indulges. These gardeners are the only happy race of Romans that is not to be found in the hands of the people of this country.

Mr. Addison might here make the experiment he speaks of in his travels, there not being one instrument of music among the Greek or Roman statues that is not to be found in the hands of the people of this country. The young lads generally divert themselves with making garlands for their favourite lambs, which I have often seen painted and adorned with flowers lying at their feet while they sung or played. It is not that they ever read romances, but these are the ancient amusements here, and as natural to them as cudgel playing and football to our British swains. The softness and warmth of the climate forbidding all rough exercises, which were never so much as heard of amongst them, and naturally inspiring a laziness and aversion to labour, which the great plenty indulges. These gardeners are the only happy race of country people in Turkey. They furnish all the city with fruits and herbs and seem to live very easily. They are most of them 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 unveiled. These wenches are very neat and handsome, and pass their time at their looms under the shade of their trees. 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, which before oppression had reduced them to want, were I suppose all employed as the better sort of them are now. I don't doubt had he been born a Briton, his Idylliums had been filled with descriptions of threshing and churning, both which are unknown here, the corn being all trod out by oxen, and butter (I speak it with sorrow) unheard of.

I read over your Homer here with an infinite pleasure and find several little passages explained that I did not before entirely comprehend the beauty of, many of the customs and much of the dress then in fashion being yet retained, and I don't wonder to find more remains here of an age so distant than is to be found in any other country, the Turks not taking that pains to introduce their own manners as has been generally practiced by other nations that imagine themselves more polite. It would be too tedious to you to point out all the passages that relate to present customs, but I can assure you that the princesses and great ladies pass their time at their looms, embroidering veils and robes, surrounded by their maids, which are always very numerous, in the same manner as we find Andromache and Helen described. The description of the belt of Menelaus exactly resembles those that are

---

1 The ancient name for the Maritsa River, which runs through Edirne.
2 Joseph Addison, Remarks on Several Parts of Italy in the Years 1701, 1702, 1703 (London, 1705). Addison (1672-1719) wrote what was considered the definitive account of Italy in the eighteenth century, comparing its contemporary landscape to renditions of it by the classical poets. Lady Mary's library contained a copy of his travels.
3 The Idylls of Theocritus are short poems that depict the everyday life of peasants, at times idealized.
4 Lady Mary was reading Pope's translation of the Iliad, which was published between 1715 and 1720. The second volume was published in 1716, and in his letter of June 1717, Pope indicates that he was sending her the recently published third volume and his Works (1717). See Appendix B5.
5 While the depiction of the timelessness of Greek culture (from ancient to modern) is a common convention of neo-classical English travelers, Lady Mary implies that the acceptance of Greek culture by the Ottomans is evidence of an accommodating model of empire.
6 Both characters are from Greek mythology. In the Iliad, 22.437-76, Homer depicts Andromache, Hector's wife, embroidering flowers on a purple cloak just prior to receiving news of Hector's death. The allusion to Helen is to the first moment she appears in the Iliad, where she is embroidering a scene depicting the siege of Troy (3.121).
basking in the sun, but I recollect good King Priam and his counsellors. Their manner of dancing is certainly the same that Diana is sung to have danced by Europa. The great lady still leads the dance and is followed by a troop of young girls who imitate her steps, and if she sings, make up the chorus. The tunes are extremely gay and lively, yet followed by a troop of young girls who imitate her steps, and if she sings, make up the chorus. The tunes are extremely gay and lively, yet

The great lady still leads the dance and is followed by a troop of young girls who imitate her steps, and if she sings, make up the chorus. The tunes are extremely gay and lively, yet

These are the Grecian dances, the Turkish being very different. I should have told you in the first place that the eastern manners give a great light into many scripture passages that appear odd to us, their phrases being commonly what we should call scripture language. The vulgar Turk is very different from what is spoke at Court or amongst the people of figure, who always mix so much Arabic and Persian in their discourse that it may very well be called another language; and 'tis as ridiculous to make use of the expressions commonly used in speaking to a great man or a lady as it would be to talk broad Yorkshire or Somersetshire in the drawing room. Besides this distinction, they have what they call the sublime, that is, a style proper for poetry, and which is the exact scripture style. I believe you would be pleased to see a genuine example of this, and I am very glad I have it in my power to satisfy your curiosity by sending you a faithful copy of the verses that Ibrahim Bassa, the reigning favourite, has made for the young Princess, his contracted wife, whom he is not yet permitted to visit without witnesses, though she is gone home to his house. He is a man of wit and learning, and whether or no he is capable of writing good verse himself, you may be sure that on such an occasion he would not want the assistance of the best poets in the Empire. Thus the verses may be looked upon as a sample of their finest poetry, and I don't doubt you'll be of my mind that it is most wonderfully resembling the Song of Solomon, which also was addressed to a royal bride.

Turkish verses addressed to the Sultana, eldest daughter of Sultan Ahmet 3rd.

Stanza 1st
1. The Nightingale now wanders in the Vines
   Her Passion is to seek Roses.
2. I went down to admire the beauty of the Vines
   The sweetness of your charms has ravish'd my Soul.
3. Your Eyes are black and Lovely
   But wild and disdainful as those of a Stag.

Stanza 2nd
1. The wished possession is delayed from day to day
   The cruel Sultan Ahmet will not permit me to see those cheeks, more vermilion than roses.
2. I dare not snatch one of your kisses
   The sweetness of your charms has ravish'd my Soul.
3. Your Eyes are black and lovely
   But wild and disdainful as those of a Stag.

Stanza 3rd
1. The wretched Bassa Ibrahim sighs in these verses,
   One Dart from your Eyes has pier'd through my Heart.
2. Ah when will the Hour of possession arrive?
   Must I yet wait a long time
   The sweetness of your charms has ravish'd my soul,
3. Ah Sultana stag-ey'd, an Angel amongst angels,
   I desire and my desire remains unsatisfied,
   Can you take delight to prey upon my heart?

Stanza 4th
1. My cries pierce the Heavens,
   My Eyes are without sleep

---

1. Lady Mary comments on another use of the veil, as fashion.
2. In the Iliad, Priam is the King of Troy.
3. Europa is one of the main rivers in the Peloponnese and named after a figure from Greek mythology. See Virgil, Aeneid 1.498, where Diana leads a dance on the banks of the river.
4. Ottoman divan poetry, influenced by Sufi thought, reached its peak between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.
5. Ibrahim Pasha (1666-1730), who would shortly become the Grand Vizier, was a great patron of Ottoman poets and actively promoted the intellectual and artistic environment that characterized the Tulip era. See Shaw on both his political and intellectual contributions (233-38).
Turn to me, Sultana, let me gaze on thy beauty.

2. Adieu I go down to the Grave
   If you call me I return
   My Heart is hot as Sulphur, sigh and it will flame.

3. Crown of my Life, fair light of my Eyes, my Sultana,
   my Princess,
   I rub my face against the Earth, I am drown'd in scalding
   Tears—I rave!
   Have you no Compassion? Will you not turn to look
   upon me?

I have taken abundance of pain to get these verses in a literal translation, and if you were acquainted with my interpreters, I might spare myself the trouble of assuring you that they have received no poetical touches from their hands. In my opinion (allowing for the inevitable faults of a prose translation into a language so very different) there is a good deal of beauty in them. The epithet of stag-eyed (though the sound is not very agreeable in English) pleases me extremely, and is I think, a very lively image of the fire and indifference in his mistress’ eyes. Monsieur Boileau has very justly observed, 1 we are never to judge of the elevation of an expression in an ancient author by the sound it carries with us, which may be extremely fine with them at the same time it looks low or uncouth to us.2 You are so well acquainted with Homer, you cannot but have observed the same thing, and you must have the same indulgence for all oriental poetry. The repetitions at the end of the two first stanzas are meant for a sort of chorus and agreeable to the ancient manner of writing. The music of the verses apparently changes in the third stanza, where the burden is altered, and I think he very artfully seems more passionate at the conclusion as ’tis natural for people to warm themselves by their own discourse, especially on a subject where the heart is concerned, and is far more touching than our modern custom of concluding a song of passion with a turn which is inconsistent with it. The first verse is a description of the season of the year, all the country now being full of nightingales, whose amours with roses is an Arabian fable as well known here as

any part of Ovid amongst us, and is much the same as if an English poem should begin by saying: Now Philomela sings—Or what if I turned the whole into the style of English poetry to see how it would look?1

Stanza I
Now Philomela renew her tender strain,
Indulging all the night her pleasing pain.
I sought the groves to hear the wanton sing,
There saw a face more beauteous than the spring.
Your large stag’s eyes where 1,000 glories play,
As bright, as lively, but as wild as they.

2
In vain I’m promised such a heavenly prize,
Ah, cruel Sultan who delays my joys!
While piercing charms transfuse my amorous heart,
I dare not snatch one kiss to ease the smart.
Those eyes like etc.

3
Your wretched lover in these lines complains
From those dear beauties rise his killing pains.
When will the hour of wished-for bliss arrive?
Must I wait longer? Can I wait and live?
Ah bright Sultana! maid divinely fair!
Can you unpitying see the pain I bear?

Stanza 4th
The Heavens relenting hear my piercing cries
I loath the light, and sleep forsakes my eyes.
Turn thee Sultana ere thy lover dies.
Sinking to earth, I sigh the last adieu.
Call me, my goddes and my life renew.

1 Common symbols in Ottoman, Persian, and Arabic poetry, epics, and legends. The nightingale represents the constant lover or the rose, which is both beautiful and thorny. Lady Mary is referring to the myth of Philomela from Ovid’s Metamorphoses VI. King Tereus lusts after her, rapes her, and cuts out her tongue. She weaves a tapestry depicting the act and sends it to his wife, who murders their son and serves him to the King for dinner. The King then tries to murder the two women, but all three are turned into birds. Philomela is sometimes used to refer to a nightingale.

1 The French poet and critic Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s (1636-1711) L’Art poétique (1674) was a crucial text of neoclassical criticism. He heavily influenced both the verse and criticism of Dryden and Pope.

2 Lady Mary is referring to a passage in Boileau’s Réflexions critiques sur quelques passages du Rhéteur Longin [Critical Reflections on Several Passages by Longinus the Rhetorician] (1694-1710), in which he argues this point with regard to translating the diction of Homer and Virgil.
My Queen! my Angel! my fond Heart’s desire
I rave—my bosom burns with Heavenly fire.
Pity that Passion which thy charms inspire.

I have taken the liberty in the second verse of following what I suppose the true sense of the author, though not literally expressed. By saying he went down to admire the beauty of the vines and her charms ravished his soul, I understand by this a poetical fiction of having first seen her in a garden where he was admiring the beauty of the spring. But I could not forbear retaining the comparison of her eyes to those of a stag, though perhaps the novelty of it may give it a burlesque sound in our language. I cannot determine upon the whole how well I have succeeded in the translation. Neither do I think our English proper to express such violence of passion, which is very seldom felt amongst us, and we want those compound words which are very frequent and strong in the Turkish language.1 You see I am pretty far gone in oriental learning, and to say truth I study very hard. I wish my studies may give me an occasion of entertaining your curiosity, which will be the utmost advantage hoped from it by etc.

Letter 32
To Mrs. S. C. 2

Adrianople, April 1, O. S. 1717

In my opinion, dear S., I ought rather to quarrel with you for not answering my Nineguen3 letter of August till December than to excuse my not writing again until now. I am sure there is on my side a very good excuse for silence, having gone such tiresome land journeys, though I don’t find the conclusion of them so bad as you seem to imagine. I am very easy here, and not in the solitude you fancy me; the great quantity of Greek, French, English and Italians that are under our protection make their court to me from morning till night, and I'll assure you are many of them very fine ladies, for there is no possibility of a Christian to live easily under this government but by

---

1 As Halsband notes (1.337n1), Lady Mary owned Thomas Vaughan’s A Grammar of the Turkish Language, and she wrote translation exercises in a Commonplace Book now held in the Fisher Library, University of Sydney.
2 To Sarah Chiswell. In Malcolm Jack’s edition, Letters 32-35 have the wrong date: they are listed as 1718 and should be 1717.
3 Lady Mary is referring to Letter 3, dated 13 August 1716.

---

1 Those dreadful stories you have heard of the plague have very little foundation in truth.1 I own I have much ado to reconcile myself to the sound of a word, which has always given me such terrible ideas, though I am convinced there is little more in it than a fever, as a proof of which we passed through two or three towns most violently infected. In the very next house where we lay in one of them, two persons died of it. Luckily for me, I was so well deceived that I knew nothing of the matter, and I was made believe, that our second cook who fell ill there had only a great cold. However, we left our doctor to take care of him and yesterday they both arrived here in good health, and I am now let into the secret that he has had the plague. There are many that escape of it, neither is the air ever infected. I am persuaded it would be as easy to root it out here as out of Italy and France, but it does so little mischief, they are not very solicitous about it and are content to suffer this distemper instead of our variety, which they are utterly unacquainted with.

Apropos of distempers, I am going to tell you a thing that I am sure will make you wish yourself here. The smallpox so fatal and so general amongst us is here entirely harmless by the invention of engrafting (which is the term they give it).2 There is a set of old women who make it their business to perform the operation. Every autumn in the month of September when the great heat is abated, people send to one another to know if any of their family has a mind to have the smallpox. They make parties for this purpose, and when they are met (commonly fifteen or sixteen together) the old woman comes with a nutshell full of the matter of the best sort of smallpox and asks what vein you please to have opened. She immediately rips open that you offer to her with a large needle (which gives you no more pain than a common scratch) and puts into the vein as much

---

See in contrast Alexander William Kinglake, in chapter 18 of his Lothen (1844), for a very exaggerated and orientalist account of the plague in Cairo. Reports on the plague were commonplace both in travel literature and in diplomatic dispatches. Lady Mary underestimates the virulence of the plague, which killed large numbers in both Europe (last major outbreak in 1720 in Marseilles) and in the Ottoman Empire; port towns were particularly vulnerable.

2 Lady Mary was disfigured by smallpox in 1715 and her brother had died of it two years earlier. She had her son Edward (1713-76) inoculated in Turkey and later her daughter Mary (1718-94) in 1721, when an outbreak was sweeping England.
venom as can lie upon the head of her needle and after binds up the little wound with a hollow bit of shell and in this manner opens four or five veins. The Grecians have commonly the superstition of opening one in the middle of the forehead, in each arm and on the breast to mark the sign of the cross, but this has a very ill effect, all these wounds leaving little scars, and is not done by those that are not superstitious, who choose to have them in the legs or that part of the arm that is concealed. The children or young patients play together all the rest of the day and are in perfect health till the eighth. Then the fever begins to seize them, and they keep their beds two days, very seldom three. They have very rarely above twenty or thirty in their faces, which never mark, and in eight days time they are as well as before their illness. Where they are wounded there remains running sores during the distemper, which I don’t doubt is a great relief to it. Every year thousands undergo this operation, and the French Ambassador says pleasantly that they take the smallpox here by way of diversion as they take the waters in other countries. There is no example of any one that has died in it, and you may believe I am very well satisfied of the safety of the experiment since I intend to try it on my dear little son. I am patriot enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England, and I should not fail to write to some of our doctors very particularly about it if I knew any one of them that I thought had virtue enough to destroy such a considerable branch of their revenue for the good of mankind, but that distemper is too beneficial to them, not to expose to all their resentment the hardy wight that should undertake to put an end to it. Perhaps if I live to return I may, however, have courage to war with them. Upon this occasion, admire the heroism in the heart of your friend, etc.

1 Her attempts to introduce inoculation into England were met with resistance and Lady Mary correctly predicted that she would have to “wage war” with the English doctors (see Appendix D2). Reports of the success of smallpox inoculation in the East were already circulating in England from about 1700, but were largely ignored despite the presentation of the practice to the Royal Society.