

**“Perhaps I have Already Said Too Much”: Lady  
Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters*  
and the Traveler’s Identity Crisis**

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**Abstract**

Given the dominant theoretical influence of Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*, travel writing has since often been regarded as an extension of colonial discourse. Recent scholarship on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* has also attempted to respond to this line of questioning by embracing or rejecting the Orientalist approach. However, upon closer inspection, in her voyage narrative Lady Mary reveals significant signs of profound uncertainty about her own cultural identity and faces fragmentation and destabilization of her Britishness in cross-cultural encounter.

Voyaging across borders, the traveler does not necessarily take possession of the alien but rather faces indeterminate places where one’s cultural preferences lose relevance and one’s cultural identity is contested as the values and ideologies entailed in that identity begin to crumble. In *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, Lady Mary feels disturbed about her Britishness when traveling across borders and encountering foreign cultures, which not only do not turn out to be inferior to her own as she was taught to believe but at times seem superior, more sensible, and make her own country appear insufficient by comparison.

This study, via examining significant disturbances to Lady Mary’s British identity in her travels, proposes a consideration of the unsettling effects of traveling and the consequential unraveling of cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Traveler, Identity Crisis, the Orient, Disturbance, Transgression

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Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) is a deliberately prepared collection of correspondences written during her travels with her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu, who was appointed on a diplomatic mission to the Ottoman Empire in 1716-8, and was not published until the year after her death. The first British woman to travel through Europe by land to Adrianople and Constantinople, Lady Mary<sup>1</sup> also had unusual access to the seraglios and Turkish women's private baths, which gave her travel narrative on the East and its people a certain authority denied to contemporary male travel writers such as Jean Dumont and Aaron Hill.<sup>2</sup> With respect to other European nation-states, her honest, unflattering reflection of British values and culture by comparison have also struck a dissonant cord from other British grand tourists because of her critical re-assessment of her origin.<sup>3</sup> Because of her female perspective and outspoken frankness about the East, other European nation-states, and her own culture, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* was instantly popular after its publication and has attracted considerable scholarly attention, especially since the advent of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).<sup>4</sup> Lady Mary's travel narrative is unique for not touting the

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, I will refer to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as Lady Mary, rather than as Montagu (her married name), which is the scholarly convention, in order to distinguish her from her husband and to highlight her aristocratic status.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Dumont (1677-1727), Baron de Carlsroon, wrote several travel books, including *Voyages en France, en Italie, en Allemagne, à Malthe et en Turquie* (1699, 4) and *Nouveau Voyage Du Levant* (1696). Aaron Hill (1685-1750), aside from his proliferate dramatic works, also wrote about Turkey in *A Full and Just Account of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire in all its Branches* (1709). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu accuses both of them of gross inaccuracies in their writings about the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>3</sup> British grand tourists to the Continent not infrequently deployed a rhetoric that highlighted British superiority over other European nation-states (Sweet, 2012: 143). Jeanne Moskal (2001: 170) also comments on female British grand tourists' British superiority embedded in their travel narratives.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Elizabeth A. Bohls' (1994) "Aesthetics and Orientalism in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Letters," Srinivas Aravamudan's (1995) "Lady Wortley Montagu in the Hamman: Masquerade, Womanliness, and Levantinization," Mary Jo Kietzman's (1998) "Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters and Cultural Dislocation," Arthur J. Weitzman's (2002) "Voyeurism and Aesthetics in the Turkish Bath: Lady Mary's School of Female Beauty," Denys Van Renen's (2011) "Montagu's Letters from the Levant," and Rae Ann Meriwether's (2013) "Transculturation and Politics in the Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu" all explore new interpretations of

Orientalist ideology underlying many other European descriptions of the foreign.<sup>5</sup>

In a letter to her beloved and revered Abbé Antonio Conti, written when she was traveling from Constantinople en route back to England in 1718, Lady Mary seemed ambivalent about returning home. She comments that while the Turks consume their time “in music, gardens, wine and delicate eating” “we [the English] are tormenting our brains” with some unattainable “scheme of politics (Montagu, 1994: 142)” or science.<sup>6</sup> She further confesses that “I am almost of opinion they [the Turks] have a right notion of life,” but then she checks herself abruptly, saying “perhaps I have already said too much (Montagu, 1994: 142).” To a trusted friend Lady Mary is being quite frank in her comparison between Turkey and Britain that perhaps there is nothing “so beneficial as” the Turks’ “study of present pleasure (Montagu, 1994: 142)” and that perhaps the British self-aggrandizement about their political or scientific pursuits is undeserved and overrated. Lady Mary’s critique of her own culture reveals ambivalence about her identity as a British subject.<sup>7</sup> Lady Mary’s travels trigger a self-interrogation of her native cultural values, which is serious enough to damage her approval of her British identity.<sup>8</sup>

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Lady Mary’s *Turkish Embassy Letters*, with varied assessments of Said’s theory in relation to the travel narrative. This continued scholarly interest in re-examining Lady Mary’s work has also coincided with increasing contemporary attention to issues of feminism, cultural studies, and multiculturalism.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, James Boswell, David Garrick, Thomas Broderick, and Robert Gray proudly verified British superiority while touring the Continent in their travel accounts. For a detailed discussion on the Grand Tourists and their imperial travel descriptions, see Chard. See also note 3 above.

<sup>6</sup> All the references to *The Turkish Embassy Letters* are to the 1994 Virago edition and will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>7</sup> What I mean by identity is the collective sum of Lady Mary’s social, cultural, political, and female recognitions, rather than her private, personal identity as a British aristocratic woman, as she mostly has the overall notion of Britishness in mind when making comparisons between the foreign and the familiar.

<sup>8</sup> In this study, I use Lady Mary’s cultural identity, British identity, and Britishness interchangeably when referring to her identity. Cultural identity can encompass national, social, and historical values, but not vice versa.

Her last remark “perhaps I have already said too much” about having divulged honest yet perhaps improper feelings betrays not only a sense of unease and apprehension but guilt as well about complimenting the East at the expense of her motherland. She had better check herself, for if she were to continue her commentary, she might anger her fellow countrymen by making more offensive observations about Britain. This self-imposed interruption illustrates her inner disturbance which most likely arises from having belittled Britain and transgressed as its subject. Aside from Turkey, there are also several other occasions in her narrative when she travels through different parts of the Continent where her confidence in her own culture and national identity, now that she can draw comparisons, seems shaken. On returning to Britain after having seen the outside world, Lady Mary’s disillusionment and critique of Britain prevents the homecoming from being a felicitous event.

However, Britain was a leading world power in much of the eighteenth century, with impressive growth and prowess in commerce, social development, sea dominance, empire building, and cultural values and sensibilities, all of which contributed to an overall optimism of the period (Langford, 2002: 10-15). European visitors, Voltaire included, saw Britain as “an open, tolerant, and forward-looking society that provided a model for the continental reformers right up to the eve of the French Revolution (Langford, 2002: 10).” With such a formidable national and cultural background, British travelers and Grand Tourists to the Continent and elsewhere often participated in the triumphalism and patriotic tendencies of the times and adopted “a binary opposition between the foreign and the familiar” with “the native region as a constant point of reference,” assuming British superiority when “translating foreignness into discourse (Chard, 1999: 40).”

By contrast, Lady Mary’s ambivalence about returning home indicates her suspicion of her fellow countrymen’s imperialist mentality. Her dwindling confidence in her cultural identity reveals inadequacy in the Orientalist argument that Western travelers cannot help being imperial observers or translators of the Orient or the foreign.<sup>9</sup> In this article, I will argue that Lady Mary, as a traveler from a formidable,

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars who endorse Orientalism such as Rana Kabbani, S. Aravamudan, Mary Louise Pratt, and Cynthia Lowenthal all argue that embedded in the Western discourse on and representations of the

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expanding British Empire, is nonetheless susceptible to a crisis of cultural identity. Rather than superimposing Western imperialist perceptions on the East and other nation-states in cross-cultural encounter, Lady Mary betrays significant signs of self-doubt and psychological wavering.

Based on Lady’s Mary’s critical reflection of her British identity in important areas of social governance, treatment of women, components of cultural identity, and her disturbance at the recognition of problems embedded in her identity, I set out to prove that *The Turkish Embassy Letters* shows significant signs of fragmentation of her British identity.

## **1. Border-Crossing and the Traveler’s Questioning of Domestic Governance**

Traveling involves border-crossing and going to strange and far-away places where home values and laws may not apply or are suspended. Both the places traveled to and the traveler become “sites of indeterminacy (Musgrove, 1999: 39)” as the notions of self and other may get inverted, shifted, or evacuated. The traveler, under the circumstances, wavers “between two worlds (Musgrove, 1999: 39).” Indeed, traveling entails “crossing symbolic as well as geographical boundaries (Chard, 1999: 11).” After crossing borders, the traveler could be said to be positioned in what Homi Bhabha (1994: 4) terms “the third space,” which allows people like Lady Mary an in-between position where negotiations and interrogations of old/new and native/foreign values and identities are possible.

Lady Mary’s travel via the Continent to Turkey, with constant cross-cultural

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Orient and their colonies are Eurocentric ideological manipulations, which are meant to buttress an orthodox, superior European consciousness. Steve Clark (1999: 3) also contends that colonial ideology pervades “the representational practices” of travel literature “at every level. I agree with these scholars’ convincing arguments, but their expostulations fail to account for Lady Mary’s critique of Britain. See Kabbani’s (2009) *Europe’s Myths of Orient*, Aravamudan’s (2011) *Enlightenment Orientalism*, Pratt’s (2007) *Imperial Eyes*, Lowenthal’s (2010) *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter*, and Clark’s (1999) *Travel Writing and Empire*.

encounter, works as a symbol of this third space in that her observations in other European states and the Orient depart from a transcendent vantage point which is not available to her back home. Her intense reassessment of her native identity is “a process that often gives rise to a profound identity crisis (Dallmayr, 1996: 135).”<sup>10</sup>

As soon as Lady Mary leaves Britain’s borders, she relishes the freedom which arises from belonging to neither the homeland nor the foreign land. This in-betweenness liberates her and grants her some anonymity in that she does not have to attend, at least temporarily, to the regulations, obligations, and inhibitions associated with her British identity. Nor does Lady Mary need to feel any cultural or moral obligation to a strange land or people.<sup>11</sup> For example, when Lady Mary reaches Rotterdam, she tells her sister, Lady Mar, in a letter that “I walked almost all over the town yesterday, incognito, in my slippers, without receiving one spot of dirt, and you may see the Dutch maids washing the pavement of the street with more application than ours do our bedchambers (Montagu, 1994: 3).” Being incognito releases Lady Mary from her native identity which is not at liberty to criticize the home country. Being in a foreign land gives the traveler a license of relativity which makes cultural self-interrogation possible. Receiving not even one spot of dirt in Rotterdam, Lady Mary implies that back home there is perhaps too much filth for one to be comfortable with.

The squalor Lady Mary complains about applies to the structural components of British society as well, for she relates: “Here is neither dirt nor beggary to be seen. One is not shocked with those loathsome cripples so common in London, nor teased with the importunities of idle fellows and wenches that choose to be nasty and lazy (Montagu, 1994: 4).” From dirt to beggary and cripples in London, Lady Mary solemnly indicates that there is something seriously wrong with the way British society is governed and that is why in the British capital there are shocking, distressing sights of poverty, beggary, and prostitution all around. Her disapproval of British society sets in motion

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<sup>10</sup> Although Dallmayr (1996: 135) is talking about how third world societies often have to tackle the problem of identity crisis in cross-cultural confrontation in the context of globalism, he also argues that Western culture, even with its “hegemonic position,” is “by no means immune from this crisis”. Lady Mary’s travel narrative is an example of a Western dominant culture facing identity crisis.

<sup>11</sup> That is except when Lady Mary performs her diplomatic functions.

the destabilization of her cultural identity.

Moreover, in Ratisbon, Germany she comments on how her decision not to participate in any local family feuds by treating everyone equally with civility helps to keep her in a “peaceable position (Montagu, 1994: 11)” while she gets to remain politically unburdened. As an outsider, her freedom and transcendence above the values of both her place of origin and destination contribute to both psychological relief and resistance to both the native and foreign identities.

## **2. Critical Reassessment of British Women’s Liberty**

Eighteenth-century Britain prided itself for being the most enlightened and civilized nation in its treatment of women. Indeed, European writers and visitors had been impressed and commented that “English women enjoyed more freedom than their continental sisters (Dreher, 1986: 31).” However, Lady Mary challenges this smug assumption by contemplating on how women in other nations are less prejudiced against and enjoy much more liberty than those back home. For instance, Lady Mary’s portrayal of Viennese women exposes misogyny at home and betrays profound unsettlement about the stringently-regulated and -monitored British women. Learning from Lady Rich how a mutual friend at home was shamed for her age, Lady Mary expresses her sympathy, for “the mortifications ...are only owing to the barbarous customs of our country” and here “I can assure you...wrinkles, or a small stoop in the shoulders, nay grey hair itself is no objection to the making new conquests (Montagu, 1994: 21).” Calling her own country barbarous, Lady Mary vehemently articulates how deeply rooted Britain’s ageism is and how it discriminates against women even when they are still fairly young. By contrast, here in Vienna “A woman till five and thirty is only looked upon as a raw girl” and “’tis a considerable comfort to me to know there is upon earth such a paradise for old women (Montagu, 1994: 21).” Lady Mary reveals that the prospects for British women past their bloom appear very grim whereas for men there is no such discrimination. Underlying this self-deprecating reflection about old women’s paradise is Lady Mary’s realization of depressing misogyny back home, which she, even as an aristocrat with far more privileges than ordinary women, admits painfully.

Lady Mary also takes issue with British women's stringent moral regulations. Feminine propriety dictates that women remain chaste and above all guard against even the slightest appearance of desire. Contemporary eighteenth-century conduct manuals and advice literature in fictional forms abound with precepts exactly to this purpose. Advice writers such as Daniel Defoe and John Essex advise women to beware of any expression of desire.<sup>12</sup> Later conduct manuals by James Fordyce and John Gregory continue in the same vein.<sup>13</sup> Novelists such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth all instruct women to guard their virtue like a hawk. However, in Vienna Lady Mary observes that "that perplexing word reputation has quite another meaning here than what you give it at London, and getting a lover is so far from losing, that 'tis properly getting reputation, ladies being much more respected in regard to the rank of their lovers than that of their husbands (Montagu, 1994: 22)." In this remark, the entire British notion of proper femininity and reputation is not only cast in a dubious light but rendered absurd. The British conception of female honor, when taken out of its context, loses its desirability, ceases to buttress national pride, and in turn contributes to Lady Mary's denial of the liberty and enlightened treatment British women supposedly enjoyed.

In addition, Lady Mary challenges how British society perceives women and how serious moral offences committed by women at home turn out to be quite innocuous outside the borders. Lady Mary explains to her friend, Lady Rich, that "what you'll think very odd, the two sects that divide our whole nation of petticoats are utterly unknown" in Vienna and that "Here are neither coquettes nor pruders (Montagu, 1994: 22)." Women's expression of desire is a natural, common occurrence rather than a moral offence in Viennese society: there need not be any condemnation of women for showing desire nor sanctification of them for their abstinence. By comparison, women's reputation as the rationale for restraining British women suddenly loses credibility. Targeting Britain's inhibition of female desire, Lady Mary solemnly withdraws her

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Defoe's (1687) *An Academy for Women* and Essex's (1722) *The Young Ladies Conduct* admonish women against any articulation of desire.

<sup>13</sup> Fordyce's (1787) *Sermons to Young Women* and Gregory's (1774) *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* both advocate feminine modesty and delicacy.



approval of the morality-bound, silenced British women, of whom she is a member. More significantly, she a-moralizes female desire by suggesting that it should be irrelevant in the assessment and treatment of women.

The scene that most highlights Lady Mary’s unsettlement about British womanhood is in the Turkish bagnio or bath in Adrianople where she witnesses two hundred women, both ladies of quality and their slaves, bathe, confer, and socialize with each other as if in “the women’s coffee house” “in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked (Montagu, 1994: 59).” The Turkish women’s prelapsarian innocence without “the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them” greatly impresses Lady Mary as she compares them to Eve: “They walked and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes of our general mother (Montagu, 1994: 59).” Lady Mary implies that back home women would have felt ashamed and improper, and would not have enjoyed a female counterpart of the camaraderie that in Britain only men enjoy in public places or coffee houses. There is a subtle trace of irony in Lady Mary’s likening of the Turkish women to the prelapsarian Eve at the expense of her own origin, as the Turks are not even Christians and yet they seem to embody that innocence that is forever lost to the British descendents of Eve.

In contrast to the Turkish women’s ease and comfort with their natural state, Lady Mary, when “at last forced to open my shirt, and show them my stays,” realizes that “they believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband (Montagu, 1994: 59-60).” The stays or bodice not only imposes physical confinement but wields spiritual subjugation as well, for it is instantly apparent to the Turkish women that Lady Mary’s husband’s will overrides her own and she does not really have control over her own body. As Susanne Scholz contends convincingly, Lady Mary “evokes a feeling of solidarity,” since “all women are slaves, but English women are even worse than Turkish ones (Montagu, 1994: 90).” Indeed, the husband to whom the Turkish women attribute the wearing of stays represents British patriarchy, which polices women rigorously at all times.

While looking at her own imprisoned body from the Turkish women’s perspective, Lady Mary experiences a significant disturbance of her cultural identity as she realizes how she, as a British subject, is perceived and how foreign and alienated her body is from her self-awareness. As Chard argues rightly, when Lady Mary is revealed to be in

her stays, she “slides temporarily from the position of spectator to that of spectacle (Montagu, 1994: 157).” Being a spectacle exposes her to an alarming realization of insufficiencies in her British identity and public humiliation as well when she looks at her own estranged body in symbolic bondage with the Turkish women and their slaves. The stays, while supposedly reinforcing Lady Mary’s “chastity, modesty, and purity,” “signify and critique this imprisonment (Winch, 2007: 58).” Because Turkish women enjoy complete liberty in the bath and when outside move about in “This perpetual masquerade [of heavy veils and concealing loose garments which] gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery,” Lady Mary cannot help observing “Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have (Montagu, 1994: 71).” Lady Mary frankly admits that she as well as her fellow countrymen had been deluded about British women’s condition. Turkish women’s disguise allows them “greater opportunity for infidelity (Halsband, 1965: 162)” as they are so effectively protected from recognition. By suggesting that the veil not only does not inhibit “feminine agency” but enhances it, Lady Mary “disturbs the very basics of a paternal social order (Heffernan, 2000: 213).” The illusion that British women have more liberty than those in other nations has now imploded, and this gravely diminishes the credibility of Britishness.

### **3. Dismantling the Cultural Foundations of British Identity**

Beyond the geographical borders, Lady Mary also reconsiders her approval of her own cultural identity as the social and cultural markers of home values cease to be convincing or meaningful when contrasted with other more sensible world visions. In *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, Lady Mary picks on three crucial cultural phenomena—namely religion, slavery, and formation of knowledge—to expose the shaky foundation of the British identity.

With religion, Lady Mary illustrates how easily one can be led astray in one’s religious beliefs into untruths and how limited and manipulated that knowledge can be. When in Adrianople, Lady Mary, after learning more about the Muslim holy script, meditates that “the Alcoran [the Quran], which is so far from the nonsense we charge it with that ’tis the purest morality delivered in the best language (Montagu, 1994: 63).”

The misconceptions she used to have about the Alcoran, she believes, come from translations “from copies got from the Greek priests who would not fail to falsify it with the extremity of malice” as “No body of men ever were more ignorant or more corrupt (Montagu, 1994: 63).” She implies that deep cultural prejudices against Mohammedism and the Alcoran have been in place since long ago and the fountain of knowledge distribution has been contaminated with misinformation and falsifications. Lady Mary seems to ask: if religions other than Christianity can be so easily vilified, cannot Christianity be beautified just as facilely? Demonstrating how little credibility there is in what one knows about Mohammedism, Lady Mary places the Christian understanding of itself, other religions, and heretics in a dubious light. The British sense of security and superiority in the Christian faith, Lady Mary suggests, is the result of political manipulation and it is this collective complacency that is alarming as it weakens the British identity with false representations of religion.

Lady Mary’s observation of the Arnounts’ relaxed attitude toward religion also suggests that Christians are not really secure in their belief of salvation after all and that no religion can seem to offer any iron-clad guarantee of final redemption. The Arnounts, “natives of Arnawutluk, the ancient Macedonia,” seem “the most peculiar” to her: “These people living between Christians and Mohammedans . . . declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best, but to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth they very prudently . . . go to the mosque on Fridays and to the church on Sundays,” because that way “at the day of judgement they are sure of protection from the true prophet (Montagu, 1994: 63-64).” The Arnount’s in-between positioning, attaching themselves to neither Christianity nor Mohammedism, mirrors Lady Mary’s lack of belonging in cross-cultural encounter. The deeper Lady Mary “travels . . . into the empire,” the more “her narrative demonstrates how . . . continued exposure to the foreign is transformative (Dadabhoy, 2014: 55).” Although Lady Mary pokes fun at the Arnounts’ practicality, their flexibility about faith reflects religious rigidity in Britain where there is little if any tolerance for different faiths. More significantly, the Arnounts’ view on judgment day protection serves as a mouthpiece for Lady Mary to question the promise of Christian salvation.

On the issue of slavery, Lady Mary reveals that Britain’s pride in the protection of the rights of men is just another self-congratulatory illusion of civil society, for there is

plenty of injustice within the British social structure. Lady Mary tells an unnamed lady friend who has commissioned her to buy a Greek slave from Turkey that “The Greeks are subjects and not slaves (Montagu, 1994: 104).” Moreover, “The fine slaves that wait upon the great ladies or serve the pleasures of the great men are all bought at the age of eight or nine year old and educated with great care,” which, Lady Mary admits, is “very different from our common notions in England (Montagu, 1994: 104).” Surprised to find that slaves are actually treated very well, Lady Mary implies that in Britain the scenario is not so pleasant.

Anticipating disbelief from home about the condition of slavery in Turkey that she relates, Lady Mary defends herself preemptively: “you will imagine me half a Turk when I don’t speak of it [slavery] with the same horror other Christians have done before me . . . . They [the Turkish slaves] are never ill used and their slavery is in my opinion no worse than servitude all over the world (Montagu, 1994: 130).” In this observation, Lady Mary indicates that what people at home believe about servitude and slavery is not reliable, since terms such as servitude and slavery are merely appellations that do not necessarily correspond to realities. A Greek slave may well be better taken care of than a British servant. She further hints that Europeans are smugly deceived in their fantasies about the superiority of the European self and inferiority of the foreign, as she comments: “I cannot forbear applauding the humanity of the Turks to those creatures [the slaves] (Montagu, 1994: 130).” It is ironic that Lady Mary should allude to herself as half a Turk, for to be half a Turk means to be a traitor in disparaging British perceptions and values. However, her British identity means she is not quite a Turk because the conditions of servitude in Britain are likely worse off than those in Turkey.

Most significantly of all, Lady Mary exposes the shaky foundation of her cultural identity by suggesting that Britain’s knowledge and perception of world events are based on erroneous representations, for the generators of knowledge frequently indulge in falsehood and fantasy. Over the course of two years’ travel, Lady Mary comments quite a few times how what she used to believe about Turkey turns out to be entirely baseless: “You will perhaps be surprised at [my] account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common travel writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don’t know (Montagu, 1994: 85).” On another occasion, Lady Mary tells Anne Thistlethwayte: “I see you have taken your ideas of Turkey from . . .

Dumont, who has writ with equal ignorance and confidence. ’Tis a particular pleasure to me here to read the voyages to the Levant, which are generally so far removed from truth and so full of absurdities I am very well diverted with them (Montagu, 1994: 104).”

Accusing male travel writers, and by extension writers in general, of intentional misinformation, Lady Mary indicates that people in Britain have cultivated false notions about the world since writers as the general public’s fountain of knowledge tamper with information so the knowledge that gets distributed is necessarily compromised and untrustworthy. If travel writers lie to the reading public constantly, how does this reflect on authors in general? Might not other types of writers also fabricate what they know and write? Might not what Britain knows about itself and others turn out to be fantasies or self-congratulatory illusions? These are the questions that Lady Mary hints at subtly, but they jeopardize Britain’s understanding of self and other seriously.

Aside from accusing travel writers of inventing false truths about the Levant, Lady Mary also explicitly reveals that in Britain there are simply too many liars. Amused by the Turkish law of punishing convicted liars if they are “proved authors of any notorious falsehood” by burning them in the forehead with a hot iron, Lady Mary wonders “How many white foreheads should we see disfigured? How many fine gentlemen would be forced to wear their wigs as low as their eyebrows were this law in practice with us (Montagu, 1994: 108)?” Lady Mary playfully pokes fun at the prevalence of lying and contemporary fashion in Britain by imagining an absurd scenario of men wearing their wigs too low. She suggests that there are alarmingly egregious flaws in Britain’s formation of knowledge since so many authors fabricate what they write. Lady Mary’s exposure of the shaky foundation of Britain’s knowledge in her published letters, like her endeavors in bringing “smallpox inoculation into fashion,” poses “a challenge to the prevailing ideology separating public and private life in the eighteenth century (Barnes, 2012: 334).”

One detrimental consequence of false knowledge is the confusion of truth and fiction. Lady Mary complains that in Britain people are so used to fabrications that when they hear a truth related they may believe that it is invented. Defending the verity of her own travel narrative, Lady Mary frankly admits to Lady Mar who probably imagines that “I [Lady Mary] have entertained you all this while with a relation that

has... received many embellishments from my hand and that this is but too like...the Arabian Tales (Montagu, 1994: 118).” Given the prevalence of falsehood in the formation of knowledge in Britain, the people lose all sense of where they really stand on the world stage. Lady Mary implies that the foundation of cognition and experience from which a British identity emerges is not only unreliable but crumbling.

#### **4. Transgression, Disturbance, and the Crisis of Identity**

Traveling across borders and experiencing cultural diversity renders Lady Mary’s value system relative and causes her to doubt the validity of her beliefs. How the relativization of native values and subsequent alterations of cultural recognition affect the traveler can be further examined through Sigmund Freud’s experiences on the Acropolis.

Freud’s essay “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” in which he analyzes the impact of the foreign land on the traveler’s psychic state, illustrates psychological destabilization experienced by the traveler.<sup>14</sup> Reaching the Acropolis, Freud finds himself experiencing a complex mixture of disturbance, doubt, and transgression. He realizes that his “pleasure of travel lies in the fulfillment” of that childish wish to escape from home, which is rooted “in dissatisfaction with home and family (Freud, 1973: 247).” The sense of accompanying unease comes from having transgressed and escaped the pressure from home and having “got further than one’s father . . . as though to excel one’s father was still something forbidden (Freud, 1973: 247).” Rather than engaging in evaluating or absorbing the strange environment, Freud the traveler finds himself in the grip of self-reflection and -doubt. As the traveler experiences “psychic conflicts” about the self and the Other, s/he is also faced with not just “a threatened dismemberment of the individual subject, but also of a whole ideological system (Musgrove, 1999: 39).”

Freud’s mixed feelings of transgression and disturbance on the Acropolis are comparable to Lady Mary’s in her travels through the Continent to Turkey, for she

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<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Brian Musgrove’s (1999: 31-44) “Travel and Unsettlement: Freud on Vacation” for the notion of the traveler’s self-doubt while away from home. Musgrove’s piece led me to Freud’s article.

likewise experiences dissatisfaction with her British identity. In exposing the negative aspects of her identity, Lady Mary transgresses social expectations, for as a British subject her interrogation of the soundness of her cultural background is analogous to a child’s subversion of parental authority since the state can often work as a symbol for a traveler’s parentage.

For her outspokenness, she pays dearly for confronting her cultural identity as she undergoes significant psychological wavering. In the letters, we see Lady Mary contradict herself quite a few times, ameliorating her critique of Britain and compliment of Turkey and other European nation-states with something a bit more neutral-sounding in an attempt to make up for the damages already done. This self-modification is a symptom of her inner conflict between loyalty to her feelings and patriotic obligation to the homeland. This combination of critique and revision illustrates Lady Mary’s transgression and disturbance, because there is no longer any dependable anchoring on which to rest her recognition.

In Adrianople, Lady Mary tells her sister of her donning the Turkish dress, which symbolizes her foregoing of the British identity. Lady Mary relates that none of the “novelties of this place” she gives would “surprise you [Lady Mar] more than a sight of my person, as I am now in my Turkish habit (Montagu, 1994: 69).” And then she goes on to give a meticulously detailed description of her exotic clothing.<sup>15</sup> This scene interestingly reveals Lady Mary to be seeing a divided self as she now ceases to be British partially and yet she is not quite Turkish either, for the dress is only superficial after all.<sup>16</sup> Her appearance as an “outsider” in a Turkish dress speaks of her being “at the same time inside and outside of the other culture (Scholz, 2012: 92-93)” as well as her own. This kind of “cultural transvestism” highlights Lady Mary’s estrangement

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<sup>15</sup> Konuk (2004: 395) contends convincingly that Lady Mary’s ethnomasquerade (by donning the Turkish dress) operates “as a literary strategy in travel writing” because it strengthens “her credibility as a travel writer. This paper is very interesting in that it addresses the effects of ethnomasquerade from a literary rather than from a cultural or political perspective.

<sup>16</sup> Porter’s (1994) inspiring reading of T. E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in “*Orientalism and Its Problems*” comments on Lawrence’s relation of his wearing the dress of Arabs for several years while living amongst them. Porter (1994: 157) aptly calls this phenomenon “cultural transvestism”.

from her own culture, reveals a disturbance of her confidence in that cultural identity, and enhances “the ambiguities of an identity already subject to self-doubt (Porter, 1994: 157).” Her cultural identity is no longer what it used to be.

As T. E. Lawrence says of his experiences in the Middle East, living among Arabs and wearing their dress has “quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on Arab skin: it was an affectation only (Lawrence qtd. in Porter, 1994: 161).” Lawrence seems to be caught in a limbo of self-doubt, between affirmation of native identity and assimilation. Even when living just like Arabs do, Lawrence frankly admits that to call his condition assimilation is still too far-fetched as his appearance of living like an Arab does not automatically mean his identifying with Arabs entirely. In a similar fashion, Lady Mary is no longer able to be content with her British identity after having learned about Turkish and other foreign cultures and discovered deficiencies and injustices in her own cultural identity. Nor can Lady Mary’s donning of the Turkish habit be properly considered as assimilation of the Orient, for while her Turkish dress does help to give her access to places in Turkey there are still numerous Turkish cultural practices, such as bathing naked, entertaining clandestine affairs, and leaving bequests to worthy adopted children, which she is not ready to embrace.

Moreover, even though Lady Mary has praised Turkish culture for women’s freedom, sensible laws, and a humane attitude toward slaves, this does not necessarily guarantee that she has identified with the Orient because of the guilt she feels that accompanies her transgressing the home identity.<sup>17</sup> For example, right after admitting that she thinks perhaps the Turks “have a right notion of life” while the English waste too much time on vainglorious pursuits, Lady Mary checks herself with the remark “Perhaps I have already said too much (Montagu, 1994: 142).” This remark is meant to

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<sup>17</sup> Kietzman (1998: 547) and Weitzman (2002: 357) argue that there is an assimilation of the Orient and cultural relativism in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Furthermore, the identities of the traveler and the Other are reconstructed in the discovery of hybridity. I agree with the two scholars that Lady Mary achieves cultural relativism in her travel narrative, but whether or not she assimilates foreign cultures is questionable, because it is difficult to ascertain whether she really engaged in and possessed alien cultural practices from the letters.



appease her European correspondent, whom she does not expect to appreciate her honest if upsetting re-examination of her defective British identity. Even as she puts on the Turkish dress and voices her admiration for Turkish ways, Lady Mary cannot help revealing her unease and ambivalence, which can serve as a meaningful stumbling block on the path to assimilation.

Paradoxically, when it is time for her to return to Britain with her husband as his appointment comes to an end, Lady Mary seems compelled to compliment Britain and the home identity, but not without reservations. Psychological disturbance about having transcended and transgressed the home value systems accounts for Lady Mary’s seeming change of mind about her British identity. She alters, quite abruptly and unconvincingly, from sharp criticism to an unnatural, self-imposed silencing of honest but potentially unpleasant remarks on Britain. However, Lady Mary’s change of mind is only superficial and her compliment merely left-handed on home turf.

After reaching Dover in October 1718, Lady Mary tells Abbé Conti that “I cannot help looking with partial eyes on my native land” and that “That partiality was certainly given us by nature to prevent rambling (Montagu, 1994: 164).” So far, it would seem that Lady Mary is embracing Britain and relishing her homecoming like an exhausted, weary traveler. But she quickly elaborates: “after having seen part of Asia and Africa and almost made the tour of Europe, I think the honest English squire more happy who verily believes the Greek wines less delicious than March beer, that the African fruits have not so fine a flavour as golden pippins, . . . , and that, in short, there is no perfect enjoyment of this life out of Old England (Montagu, 1994: 165).” Lady Mary suggests that after having made the travels she cannot reverse her mindset back to before she had seen the world and that perhaps only self-deluding ignorance such as the English squire enjoys can safeguard one’s happiness and gratification back in Britain. Kyung Eun Lo’s failure to detect a sense of irony and resignation in Lady Mary’s reflection unfortunately leads to her mistaken observation that Lady Mary “reasserts her self as an English ultimately” and that her “female traveler’s gaze” still privileges “the Western seeing ‘I’ in representing . . . the East (Montagu, 1994: 116-117).” However, the implication is that Lady Mary cannot be content with Britain like a happily ignorant country squire; nor can she believe that “there is no perfect enjoyment of this life out of Old England (Montagu, 1994: 165).”

Nonetheless, to comfort herself now that she is back in England, she prays to God that “I may think so for the rest of my life, and since I must be contented with our scanty allowance of daylight, that I may forget the enlivening sun of Constantinople (Montagu, 1994: 165).” There is futility in Lady Mary’s wishes, for in pleading with God for help she is also admitting that this mind-bending task is beyond her and that she should not be held responsible if she could not force herself to be content with Britain. This mental resignation in entrusting an external power for inner peace tellingly reveals her disturbance as well as her unappeased dissatisfaction with Britain.<sup>18</sup> Lady Mary “delights in exploding received ideas, and uses what she asserts to be the liberty of Turkish women as a stick of beat English society with (Grundy, 1999: 200).” Her critique of Britain covers political, social, and cultural areas; her criticisms work to block her continued approval of Britishness. Lady Mary’s presence back in Britain is far from a re-inscription of the home identity and values,<sup>19</sup> but rather her return further confirms the destabilization of Lady Mary’s cultural recognition as reverse culture shock takes its toll and intensifies her discontent with Britain.

Lady Mary’s supplication to God that she may think “there is no perfect enjoyment . . . out of Old England” for the rest of her life also demonstrates that there is an alterity within her cultural identity which she cannot reconcile or work over to make

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, Lady Mary’s disillusion and discontent with Britain can be further verified in her subsequent writings on British politics, society, and womanhood which she got published in the journal *The Nonsense of Common Sense*, printed 1737-8. For example, she voiced her critique of women’s treatment in Britain by asking male authors to stop recommending to women “gossiping, scandal, lying, and a whole troop of follies” and to stop condescending to women (1837: 328). In addition, Meriwether (2013: 623) also argues that Lady Mary, instead of remaining “embedded within her aristocratic English womanhood at the end of her travels,” undergoes “a profound subjective transformation” and continues publishing her criticisms of Britain in *The Nonsense of Common Sense* and elsewhere.

<sup>19</sup> Aravamudan (1995: 70-71) and Van Renen (2011: 6-7) both contend that Lady Mary undergoes three different phases of perception regarding the Orient: replacing eurocentrism with cultural relativism, assimilating the Orient, and eventually returning home and re-inscribing or regressing to white superiority. I agree partially with the two scholars’ argument that Lady Mary replaces eurocentrism with cultural relativism, but her re-inscription of white superiority is questionable as Lady Mary’s psychological disturbance shows.

her identity unified.<sup>20</sup> What she verily thinks about Britain and what her British identity signifies cannot be harmonized. Rather than re-embracing her Britishness on the return home, Lady Mary experiences unsettlement and disintegration of cultural identity.

In *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, Lady Mary feels challenged and disturbed about her cultural identity when traveling outside borders and encountering foreign cultures. These different value systems not only do not turn out to be inferior to her native ones as she had been taught to believe, but at times seem superior, more sensible, and make her own British identity look insufficient by comparison. Her travel narrative and honest meditations on British values show that she experiences loss of confidence and relevance in her cultural identity and becomes divided about the culture she represents. This paper, via examining significant signs of destabilization in Lady Mary’s British identity in her travels proposes a consideration of the unsettling effects of traveling and the consequential unraveling of cultural identity.

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<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Anais Spitzer’s inspiring discussion on the act and implications of praying. She posits that in praying one admits one’s uncertainty or inability to make the things prayed for happen. See Spitzer’s (2011) *Derrida, Myth, and the Impossibility of Philosophy*.

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“Perhaps I have Already Said Too Much”:

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## “也許我已說得太多”：瑪麗·華特麗·孟特鳩 夫人的《土耳其大使館書信集》與遊者的身份危機

林宜蓉\*

### 摘 要

在艾德華·薩依德(Edward Said) (1978)《東方主義》的影響下，旅遊書寫常被視為殖民論述的延伸。近來有關瑪麗·華德麗·孟特古夫人《土耳其大使館書信集》的研究亦多接受或抗拒此論。然而，在跨文化接觸時，瑪麗夫人在她的旅遊書寫中透露對自我文化身份深層的不確定感，其文化身份亦受分裂與擾動的威脅。

當跨越國界時，遊者未必將異國文化佔有，反而，遊者在外國所面對的不確定場域，可能會使自我文化認同失去關連性，同時此認同中的價值觀與意識型態亦面臨瓦解。在《土耳其大使館書信集》中，當瑪麗夫人與異文化接觸時，對自我文化身份感到不安，由於異文化並非如想像中較自我文化卑劣，有時似更優越、合理、並使自己的國家相形見絀。

此篇論文藉由檢視瑪麗夫人在旅途中所經歷之不安與騷動，提出遊者對文化身份認同感到困惑與不安的解讀。

**關鍵詞：**遊者、身份危機、東方、不安、違背

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