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Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Women's Coffee House

Vicki A. Spencer

I was in my travelling habit, which is a riding dress ... there were two hundred women, and yet none of those disdainful smiles or satirical whispers that never fail in our assemblies when anybody appears that is not dressed exactly in fashion. ... [They] 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 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 shiningly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses, ... perfectly representing the figures of the Graces. ... To tell you the truth, 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 ... In short, 'tis the women's coffee house, where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented etc. ... The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have unaddressed me for the bath. I excused myself with some difficulty, they being however all so earnest in persuading me, I was at last forced to open my shirt, 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.¹

On 2 August 1716, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) set off from London to the Ottoman Empire with her husband, Edward Montagu, who had been appointed British ambassador to the Turkish court. Already well known

among the London literati for her poetry, during her travels she wrote a series of letters based on her daily journal that she later edited into a linear account of her experiences. The preface to the text, written by Mary Astell (see Chapter 3 in this volume), suggests Montagu intended publication following her death,² and in 1763, it first appeared in the *London Chronicle*. This extract comes from the letter she wrote in Adrianople to an unidentified Lady about her visit to the Turkish baths in the Bulgarian city of Sofia. Although a European country, Bulgaria was colonized by the Ottoman Empire, and it is evident from Montagu's description of the bath house preceding this extract that she had entered an entirely different cultural landscape.

Here I explore the implications contained in Montagu's depiction for the gendered binary between the public and private. In my reading, the letter's most insightful feminist moment lies in her challenge to the dominant assumption that gender exclusivity renders the bath house a privatized site exemplifying female oppression in the Ottoman Empire; instead, she depicts it as an important public site of sociability. Her comparison with the male-dominated English coffee house cleverly disrupts the logic entailed in seeing the distinction between segregated male and female spheres as an opposition between the public and private, social and non-social, and freedom and confinement. Montagu creates an alternative image of the bath house as a place of civility and conversation where public opinion is formed, and of the women within it as agents in possession of freedoms strikingly unavailable to her as an early eighteenth-century, British, aristocratic woman.

To re-conceptualize the Ottoman bath house as a site of sociability, Montagu must first desexualize this exclusive female space that male travel writers had depicted as a hot house of rampant sexual promiscuity. The extract shows her employing a number of literary and artistic allusions to reinforce her claim that the women's naked state is absent any sexually suggestive actions. She equates their graceful movements with the innocence and majesty of the divine beauty attributed to Eve's nakedness in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.³ Next, she visually transports the scene with her reference to the Italian painters Guido Reni and Titian. The references to goddesses and the women's 'shiningly white' skin suggest a familiarity with Titian's mythological series on Diana, goddess of the hunt and moon, or his portraits of Venus, goddess of love and beauty. Titian's idealized goddesses have skin that takes on the appearance of porcelain. They therefore possess an ethereal quality, and yet their voluptuous figures, generous buttocks and rounded stomachs ground them in the physicality of this world. The profane and divine coexist in

Titian's work. His mythological paintings are typically seen to possess an erotic dimension, but Montagu subverts any eroticism with the further invocation of a divine aesthetic in her final reference to 'the figures of the Graces'. These minor Greek and Roman divinities were personifications of beauty, joy and flowering. In sculptural and pictorial forms, they were represented as three naked figures, but their lack of clothing did not diminish the purity of the love and harmony they represented. In Montagu's bath scene, nudity, decorum and civility act in concert.

A potentially more salacious dimension enters the scene when Montagu confesses her secret desire for the artist, Charles Jervas,⁴ to have been there in invisible form. The 'wickedness' (59) of this thought, as she candidly describes it, exists at several levels. The impropriety of the idea of a man viewing so many naked women based on eighteenth-century British standards of modesty is to be expected. It was even more wicked from the perspective of Turkish morality since the artist, if not invisible, would have been put to death (60). The presence of an invisible man would also have violated the women's space, a point emphasized by critics who argue that the scene is resexualized by Montagu's insertion of the male gaze that reduces the women to an erotic object.⁵

This voyeuristic male gaze was later realized in artistic form in Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's neoclassical painting, *Le Bain Turc* (1862). The keyhole he used to frame his depiction of naked women in various sensual poses with one woman in the foreground holding another's breast was based on notes he took fifty years previously from Montagu's letter. His painting style recalls Titian's, but Ingres replaces the powerful mythological goddesses of Titian's paintings with an exotic eroticism characteristic of nineteenth-century Orientalism. A connection with Montagu's allusion to the invisible artist is undeniable in Ingres's keyhole effect. However, the sexually overt gestures and poses in Ingres's bath house provide a vivid contrast to Montagu's letter. Ingres does not re-present Montagu's images as if he were there, invisible, to capture her bath scene through a camera lens; rather, he reinterprets them so that his painting is the product of his own erotic imagination and invention.

The satirical intention of her wicked thought is, moreover, revealed in the next sentence when Montagu surmizes that the sight of the naked female form in such a variety of poses with the women conversing, taking refreshments, working and braiding hair would have significantly enhanced Jervas's artistic ability. As Jervas had painted her as a shepherdess in 1710, the slight on his ability is mockingly playful. Given that the artist is invisible and the women in the bath house entirely unaware of her secret thought, he possesses no power

to turn the women into passive objects. Instead, Montagu takes authorial control of Jervas's representation. To be sure, in recounting her experience, she constructs a depiction of the women over which they have no control. However, most significant for Montagu's representation of the women is that immediately after her criticism of Jervas's skill, she compares the bath house with the English coffee house.

Since women's coffee houses did not exist, the reference deliberately undercuts any erotic association with the women's nudity and elevates the bath house's status to that of a well-known male institution. Coffee houses originated in the Ottoman Empire and first appeared in London in 1652. By the time Montagu departed for her journey, as many as 500 to 600 existed in London and Westminster. Women were not formally barred, nor entirely absent from them, with the coffee-woman typically the manager of daily operations and sometimes the owner. On occasion, a woman might enter as a customer to engage in specific business; some evidence exists that certain aristocratic women did attend, but only rarely. As Astell confirms in her preface, they were not a 'public place' that 'virtuous women', who wanted to be regarded well, would visit. Where they were included, it was not as equals. The sociability of the coffee houses, based on drinking coffee, reading newspapers and conversing about politics was confined by convention to men.⁶

Jürgen Habermas and other sociologists associate the English coffee house with the rise of a new public sphere that created the foundations for democratic participation. Hierarchies, at least between male customers, were set aside as men came together from different social positions to debate as equals. Though recent scholars argue that this image of a 'civil' society is at best a polite fiction, the relevant point to take from Habermas's analysis is the intermingling of the public and private in this new realm. Despite its private, intimate nature, the coffee house was well recognized as an arena for public discourse about politics. Some eighteenth-century coffee houses had direct links to parliament through the formation of lobby groups, as they were meeting places for people with common work interests. Montagu's 'coffee house' did not possess this direct connection to formal political institutions. However, this link was not necessary for the coffee houses to act as a significant site of sociability. In the late seventeenth century, when the English parliament had not sat for years, coffee houses in London acted as the main arenas in which the city's public opinion was aired and formed.⁷

Likewise, in the bath house, reputations could be made or broken and 'scandal invented'. By employing the comparison with the male-dominated

coffee house rather than the English ladies' tea-table, Montagu suggests the bath house is a place for public discourse rather than the private, petty gossip typically associated with the latter. Yet this public discourse/private gossip divide is largely an artificial contrivance. The Ottoman women possess the power to form public opinion by inventing scandal and making reputations, as was also known to occur in the men's coffee houses. In the eighteenth century, the image of men inventing scandal and gossiping maliciously contended with the image of the polite, urbane coffee house constructed by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in the periodical, *The Spectator*.⁸ Montagu emphasizes the power of the Ottoman women, like that of the men in English coffee houses, to affect the wider public sphere with her reference to scandal. However, her depiction of women sharing news in an environment of civility, conversation and sociability strongly parallels *The Spectator's* coffee house.

In both cases, the images are idealized constructions, but their function as a significant meeting place for each gender was real. Though a private intimate space only women could attend, Montagu suggests the bath house, like the English coffee house, was an important institution in the public realm. Gender segregation did not diminish its significance as a public place or the value of the activities of the women within it any more than was the case for the men in an English coffee house. For Montagu, they are equally significant sites of sociability.

The behaviour of the bath house women emulating the civility of *The Spectator's* coffee house is also strengthened with the contrasting negative image of gossip in Montagu's reference to European women's 'disdainful smiles' and 'satirical whispers' towards anyone not fashionably dressed. Their concerns appear trivial, and their behaviour is vain and belittling towards others compared to the civil, obliging reception Montagu receives from the Ottoman women. She thereby undercuts any moral superiority European readers might smugly assume from the Ottoman women's nudity. But Montagu further revels in the advantages for female sociability in this segregated space. The competition between women vying for male attention in European courts is replaced by the self-assuredness of women without qualms about revealing to one another 'any beauty or defect' they might have. The gender segregation and confinement of the baths enabled one to show one's body in an atmosphere of polite sociability without fear of judgement.

The difference between the liberties of the Ottoman women and Montagu in her riding habit is striking. She notes during her description of the steam emanating from the baths that it was 'impossible to stay there with one's

clothes on' (58), and yet she does not undress. Her refusal to bathe has been seen to reinforce her position as an unassimilated viewer who objectifies the women.⁹ However, she is no less a participant in the scene; indeed, her strangeness makes her an object of attention and subject to the gaze of the Ottoman women. In the bath house, Montagu is not in a position of privileged power; rather, she is the obvious outsider whose acceptance is entirely dependent upon the women she encounters. The 'extraordinary' (58) sight of Montagu dressed in her riding habit underlines her oddity and alien status. She is the one who is deprived of the freedom to engage in the naturalness of the women's nudity.

Montagu's life is, in contrast to theirs, one of convention and artifice. As Isobel Grundy indicates, as a British Ambassador's wife it would have been scandalous for Montagu to undress.¹⁰ Even attending the baths was risqué; to disguise her station, she went 'incognito' by taking a Turkish coach entirely covered in cloth that hid anyone inside it (57–58). Her lack of freedom is reinforced when she feels the formidable presence of the lady who entreats her to join them. Montagu is not powerless, but she is 'forced', however politely, to unbutton her shirt thereby revealing her stays.¹¹ Thus, her confinement by social conventions with her inability to engage in the naturalness and freedom of undress that the Ottoman women experience is dramatically verified with her stays appearing so abhorrent to her viewers that they assume her husband had imprisoned her. Her use of the term 'machine' to describe her underwear emphasizes its mechanical artifice compared to the divine 'grace' she attributes to the Ottoman women's nudity. While Turkish convention enabled the Ottoman women fully to experience the advantages of the bath house, British convention literally locked Montagu up; it was she, and not the Ottoman women, who suffered as a consequence of gender confinement. She thereby reverses the western view that Ottoman women were subordinated and oppressed.

Some commentators emphasize erotic overtones in the unveiling of Montagu's stays; and indeed, for one author, it invokes an image of medieval chastity belts even if her description is not quite one of 'whips, chains, and handcuffs'.¹² Yet, contrary to the assumption of her viewers in the bath house, we know her husband played no part in her bondage, and presumably, it was not for his benefit. It is also important to recall that her original reader was an English woman subject to the same restraints. It is thus far more likely a satirical comment on the very real bondage that women wearing stays – and later corsets – experienced due to the social convention to conform to women's fashion no matter how unpleasant it might have been. Above all, what is

evident from the vividness of her description is how uncomfortable Montagu must have been. It is no coincidence that, on the day she wrote this scene, she composed a letter to her sister in which she describes in detail the Turkish habit that she wore for subsequent excursions. In this letter, too, she first disparages the foolishness of male travel writers for their abject failure to recognize the greater liberty afforded to Ottoman woman over that enjoyed by their British counterparts (69–72).

Meaning is always the co-production of reader and text, and when it comes to a description of either 200 naked women or Montagu's underwear, some readers evidently find it impossible not to sexualize the content of her letter. Yet Montagu employs literary and artistic allusions to evoke images of graceful and powerful women. She describes women who are naked but modest and civil, women who drink coffee and converse in a private, intimate and yet public space, and women who are segregated from men and confined but free of small-minded judgement, petty competition and the social constraints that inhibit her from undressing. Her letter is an account of her experience where she is alternately viewer and viewed, and in which she delights in drawing out the paradoxes of these juxtapositions. She might present an idealized image of a 'women's coffee house', but it is no more idealized than the model of civility in the English coffee houses that Addison and Steele created in *The Spectator*. In Sofia, Montagu discovered an alternative model of gender segregation that stands in stark contrast to the oppressive effects she earlier described of the Catholic convent on the beautiful nun she visited in Vienna (27–28). She is by no means an unequivocal advocate for gender equality, but with her coffee house analogy, Montagu constructs a life-affirming vision of female sociability that skilfully subverts European perceptions of female subordination, confinement and freedom, and the gendered binary of the public and private.