Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Letters: (a) on Constantinople; b) on Smallpox; (c) on Vaccination in Turkey

Born to a noble family, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762 CE) became well known in gentry and intellectual circles for her writing and advocacy of women’s rights. She became a prominent figure in London court life as the wife of Edward Wortley Montagu, a Member of Parliament who served as ambassador at Constantinople in 1716–1717. The experience of travel and living abroad gave Lady Mary an international outlook, which she vividly expressed in her writing and her promotion of smallpox vaccination, a practice she discovered in Turkey (early in life the disease had marred her physical beauty). In later years, she traveled and lived in France and Italy.


Focus Questions:
1. Why would Lady Mary have returned from Constantinople to England with a very different outlook on life? Lady Mary lived in Constantinople for a rather brief time. Why was her experience so intense?
2. Describe Lady Mary’s attitude toward prevailing notions in society, whether in Constantinople or England. Given the level of detail in her descriptions, how much contact would one infer Lady Mary had with society in Constantinople?
3. What does Lady Mary have to say about the elites in Ottoman society, particularly in religion, government, and the law?
4. According to Lady Mary, what are the attitudes toward religion of both the common people and of the elites she met?

To the Lady—.

**Pera, Constantinople, March 16, O.S. [1718]**

I am extremely pleased, my dear lady, that you have at length found a commission for me that I can answer without disappointing your expectations; though I must tell you, that it is not so easy as perhaps you think it; and that, if my curiosity had not been more diligent than any other stranger’s has ever yet been, I must have answered you with an excuse, as I was forced to do when you desired me to buy you a Greek slave. I have got for you, as you desire, a Turkish love-letter, which I have put in a little box, and ordered the captain of the Smyrniote to deliver it to you with this letter. The translation of it is literally as follows: The first piece you should pull out of the purse is a little pearl, which is in Turkish called Ingi, and should be understood in this manner:

Ingi, Sensin Guzelerin gingi
Pearl, Fairest of the young.
Caremfil, Caremfilsen cararen yók
Clove, Conge gulsum timarin yók
Benseny chok than severim
Senin benden, haberin yók.

You are as slender as this clove!
You are an unblown rose!
I have long loved you, and you have not known it!
You see this letter is all verses, and I can assure you there is as much fancy shewn in the choice of them, as in
the most studied expressions of our letters; there being, I believe, a million of verses designed for this use.
There is no colour, no flower, no weed, no fruit, herb, pebble, or feather, that has not a verse belonging to it;
and you may quarrel, reproach, or send letters of passion, friendship, or civility, or even of news without ever
inking your fingers.

I fancy you are now wondering at my profound learning; but, alas I dear madam, I am almost fallen into the
misfortune so common to the ambitious; while they are employed on distant insignificant conquests abroad, a
rebellion starts up at home;—I am in great danger of losing my English. I find it is not half so easy to me to
write in it as it was a twelvemonth ago. I am forced to study for expressions, and must leave off all other
languages, and try to learn my mother tongue. Human understanding is as much limited as human power, or
human strength. The memory can retain but a certain number of images; and ‘tis as impossible for one human
creature to be perfect master of ten different languages, as to have in perfect subjection ten different kingdoms,
or to fight against ten men at a time: I am afraid I shall at last know none as I should do. I live in a place that
very well represents the tower of Babel: in Pera they speak Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, Armenian, Arabic, Persian,
Russian, Scelovonian, Wallachian, German, Dutch, French, English, Italian, Hungarian; and, what is worse, there
are ten of these languages spoken in my own family. My grooms are Arabs; my footmen, French, English and
Germans; my nurse, an Armenian; my housemaid Russians; half a dozen other servants, Greeks; my steward, an Italian; my janissaries, Turks; [so] that I live in the perpetual hearing of this medley of sounds, which produces a very extraordinary effect upon the people that are born here; they learn all these languages at the same time, and without knowing any of them well enough to write or read in it. There are very few men, women, or even children, here, that have not the same compass of words in five or six of them. I know myself several infants of three or four years old, that speak Italian, French, Greek, Turkish, and Russian, which last they learn of their nurses, who are generally of that country. This seems almost incredible to you, and is, in my mind, one of the most curious things in this country, and takes off very much from the merit of our ladies who set up for such extraordinary geniuses, upon the credit of some superficial knowledge of French and Italian.

As I prefer English to all the rest, I am extremely mortified at the daily decay of it in my head, where I’ll assure you (with grief of heart) it is reduced to such a small number of words, I cannot recollect any tolerable phrase to conclude my letter, and am forced to tell your ladyship very bluntly that I am, your faithful humble servant.

SMALLPOX VACCINATION IN TURKEY

A propos of distempers, I am going to tell you a thing, that will make you wish yourself here. The small-pox, so fatal, and so general amongst us, is here entirely harmless, by the invention of engrafting, which is the term they give it. 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 small-pox; they make parties for this purpose, and when they are met (commonly fifteen or sixteen together) the old woman comes with a nut-shell full of the matter of the best sort of small-pox, 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 matter as can lie upon the head of her needle, and after that, 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, one in each arm, and one 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 chuse 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 to 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 small-pox 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 well satisfied of the safety of this experiment, since I intend to try it on my dear little son. I am patriot enough to take the 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. etc.

LETTER XXVIII (ADRIANOPLE, I APRIL 1717)

To the Abbé Conti, 125

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 have to oblige you to the utmost of my power has made me very diligent in my enquiries and observations. ‘Tis certain
we have but very imperfect relations of the manners and religion of these people, this part of the world being seldom visited but by merchants, who mind little but their own affairs, or travellers who make too short a stay to be able to report anything exactly of their own knowledge. The Turks are too proud to converse familiarly with merchants etc., who can only pick up some confused informations, which are generally false, and can give no better account of the ways here, than a French refugee lodging in a garret in Greek Street, could write of the court of England. The journey we have made from Belgrade hither by land cannot possibly passed by any out of a public character. The desert woods of Serbia are the common refuge of thieves who rob fifty company, that we had need of all our guards to secure us, and had no mercy on their poverty, killing all the poultry and sheep they could find without asking who they belonged to, while the wretched owners durst not put in their claim for fear of being beaten. Lambs just the villages so poor that only force could exort from them necessary provisions. Indeed the Janissaries fallen, geese and turkeys big with egg all massacred without distinction! I fancied I heard the complaints of Moelibeus for the hope of his flock. When the pashas travel ‘tis yet worse. Those oppressors are not content with eating all that is to be eaten belonging to the peasants; after they have crammed themselves and their numerous retinue they have the impudence to exact what they call teeth money, a contribution for the use of their teeth, worn with doing them the honour of devouring their meat. This is a literal, known truth, however extravagant it seems; and such is the natural corruption of a military government, their religion not allowing of this barbarity any more than our does.

I had the advantage of lodging three weeks at Belgrade, with a principal effendi, that is to say a scholar. This set of men are equally capable of preferments in the law or the church, those two sciences being cast into one, and a lawyer and a priest being the same word. They are the only men really considerable in the empire; all the profitable employments and church revenues are in their hands. The Grand Signor, though general heir to his people, never presumes to touch their lands or money, which go in an uninterrupted succession to their children. ‘Tis true they lose this privilege by accepting a place at court, or the title of pasha, but there are few examples of such fools among them. You may easily judge of the power of these men who have engrossed all the learning and almost all the wealth of the empire. ‘Tis they that are the real authors, though the soldiers are the actors of revolutions. They deposed the late Sultan Mustafa; and their power is so well known ‘tis the emperor’s, interest to flatter them.

This is a long digression. I was going to tell you that an intimate daily conversation with the effendi Achmed Bey gave me opportunity of knowing their religion and morals in a more particular manner than perhaps any Christian ever did. I explained to him the difference between the religion of England and Rome, and he was pleased to hear there were Christians that did not worship images or adore the Virgin Mary. The ridicule of transubstantiation appeared very strong to him. Upon comparing our creeds together I am convinced that if our friend Dr Clarke had free liberty of preaching here it would be very easy to persuade the generality to Christianity, whose notions are already little different from his. Mr Whiston would make a very good apostle here. I don’t doubt but his zeal will be much fired if you communicate this account to him, but tell him, he must first have the gift of tongues before he can possibly be of any use.

Mohamedism is divided into as many sects as Christianity, and the first institution as much neglected and obscured by interpretations. I cannot here forbear reflecting on the natural inclination of mankind, to make mysteries and novelties. The Zeidi, Kudi, Jabari etc. put me in mind of the Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, etc., and are equally zealous against one another. But the most prevailing opinion if you search into the secret of the effendis is plain deism but this is kept from the people who are amused with a thousand different notions, according to the different interest of their preachers. There are very few amongst them (Achmed Bey denied there were any) so absurd as to set up for wit by declaring they believe no God at all. And Sir Paul Rycaut is mistaken, as he commonly is, in calling the sect muserin (i.e. the secret with us) atheists, they being deists, whose impiety consists in making a jest of their prophet. Achmed Bey did not own to me that he was of this opinion but made no scruple of deviating from some part of Mohammed’s law by drinking wine with the same freedom we did. When I asked him how he came to allow himself that liberty he made answer that all the creatures of God were good and designed for the use of man; however, that the prohibition of wine was a very wise maxim and meant for the common people, being the source of all disorders amongst them, but that the
prophet never designed to confine those that knew how to use it with moderation. However, scandal ought to be avoided he never drank it in public. This is the general way of thinking amongst them, and very few forbear drinking wine that are able to afford it.

He assured me that if I understood Arabic I should be very well pleased with reading the Alcoran, which is so far from the nonsense we charge it with that ’tis the purest morality delivery in the very best language. I have since heard impartial Christians speak of it in the same manner, and I don’t doubt but all our translations are from copies got from the Greek priests who would not fail to falsify it with the extremity of malice. No body of men ever were more ignorant or more corrupt, yet they differ so little from the Romish Church that I confess there is nothing gives me a greater abhorrence of the cruelty of your clergy than the barbarous persecutions of them, whenever they have been their masters for no other reason than not acknowledging the Pope. The dissenting in that one article has got them the titles of heretics, schismatics, and, what is worse, the same treatment.

I found at Philippopolis a sect of Christians that call themselves Paulines.133 They show an old church where, they say, St Paul preached, and he is their favourite saint, after the same manner as St Peter is at Rome; neither do they forget to give him the same preference over the rest of the apostles.

But of all the religions I have seen the Amounts seem to me the most particular. They are natives of Amawutuk,134 the ancient Macedonia, and still retain the courage and hardiness, though they have lost the name of Macedonians, being the best Militia in the Turkish empire, and the only check upon the Janissaries. They are foot soldiers; we had a guard of them relieved in every considerable town we passed. They are all clothed and armed at their own expense, generally lusty young fellows dressed in clean white coarse cloth, carrying guns of a prodigious length, which they run with upon their shoulders, as if they did not feel the weight of them, the leader singing a sort of rude tune, not unpleasant, and the rest making up the chorus. These people living between Christians and Mohaniedans, and not being skilled in controversy, 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 follow both and go to the mosque on Fridays and to the church on Sundays, saying for their excuse that at the day of judgement they are sure of protection from the true prophet; but which that is, they are not able to determine in this world. I believe there is no other race of mankind who have so modest an opinion of their own capacity. These are the remarks I have made on the diversity of religions I have seen. I don’t ask your pardon for the liberty I have taken in speaking of the Roman. I know you equally condemn the quackery of all churches as much as you revere the sacred truths, in which we both agree.

You will expect I should say something to you of the antiquities of this country, but there are few remains of ancient Greece. We passed near the piece of an arch which is commonly called Trajan’s Gate, 135 as supposing he made it to shut up the passage over the mountains between Sofia and Philippopolis, but I rather believe it the remains of some triumphal arch (though I could not see any inscription), for if that passage had been shut up there are many others that would serve for the march of an army. And notwithstanding the story of Baldwin, Earl of Flanders, being overthrown in these straits 136 after he had won Constantinople, I don’t fancy the Germans would find themselves stopped by them. ‘Tis true the road is now made, with great industry, as commodious as possible for the march of the Turkish army. There is not one ditch or puddle between this place and Belgrade that has not a large strong bridge of planks built over it; but the precipices are not so terrible as I had heard them represented. At the foot of these mountains we lay at the little village of Kiskoi, wholly inhabited by Christians, as all the peasants of Bulgaria are. Their houses are nothing but little huts, raised of dirt baked in the sun and they leave them and fly into the mountains some months before the march of the Turkish army, who would else entirely ruin them by driving away their whole flocks. This precaution secures them in a sort of plenty, for vast tracts of land lying in common they have liberty of sowing what they please, and are generally very industrious husbandmen. I drank here several sorts of delicious wine. The women dress themselves in a great variety of coloured glass beads and are not ugly, but of tawny complexions. I have now told you all that is worth telling you, and perhaps more, relating to my journey. When I am at Constantinople I’ll try to pick up some curiosities and then you shall hear again from, etc.