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 careful 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. 1

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 curlée 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 tapock, 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,

1 During her stay, Lady Mary had her portrait painted twice by Jean-Baptiste Vanmour, who had been based in Istanbul since 1699. In the one she had done for her sister, she is alone, and in the other she is with her son. See Appendix II.

112 LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU
what they please; but the most general fashion is, a large bouquet of jewels, made like natural 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 hard to imagine anything 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 their 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 accustom myself to this fashion 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 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 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 ferige, which no woman of any sort appears without. This has strait 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 impossible 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 pennisworths|^3 and tumber over rich goods, which are chiefly to be found amongst that sort of people. The great ladies seldom 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 corresponded 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

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^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).^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 Thevenot (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 grieve” as in contrast British men “possess a just and mild pre-eminence by nature's laws and those of matrimony” (42). He further informs the reader that Turks “boast a sort of unconfined authority, which makes their wives submissively obedient” (97). See Appendix E5. Around the question of women's confinement, Hill (97) and Dumont (268) erroneously declare that women are strictly sequestered. Dumont remarks that “There is no Slavery equal to that of the Turkish Women... The Door of the Women's Apartment is a Ne plus ultra for every thing that looks like a Man, and the utmost limit of the Women's Liberty” (268). In contrast, Joseph de Tournefort in his Relation d'un voyage du Levant (1717) states that most women could pursue their affairs without detection.

^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 house—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, pennisworths means bargains.

^4 Refers to married Muslim women's rights to own property; the Qur'an established 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 Tefterdar2 (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.

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on her marriage. In contrast, the English dowry was given to the husband and British women were subject to the doctrine of "couverte," where wives and all their assets were the property of and under the control of their husbands.

1 Harem means sanctuary or sacred place.
2 A tefterdar or book-keeper was a high ranking official in charge of the finances of the Ottoman Empire.
3 Wortley makes similar observations in a private letter to Joseph Addison: “The men of Consideration among the Turks appear in their conversation as much civilized as any I have met with in Italy and are not unlike the Italians in their Carriage. Those that are in good credit have but one wife. She has commonly several slaves, which the Husband does not see; if he does it makes an entire breach with the wife. But they frequently keep women at private places. The wives who go abroad with their faces hid are thought to take as much liberty as they do in Italy. The Privilege of having more wives than one is very rarely made use of unless by those that travel into distant Countries” (22 August 1717, Tickell MS; quoted in Halsband 1.329 n3).

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Letter 31
To Mr. P--1

Adrianople, April 1, O. S. 1717

I dare say you expect at least something very new in this letter, after I have gone a journey not undertaken by any Christian of some one hundred years. The most remarkable accident that happened to me was my being very near overturned into the Hebrus, and if I had much regard for the glories that one’s name enjoys after death, I should certainly be sorry for having missed the romantic conclusion of swimming down the same river in which the musical head of Orpheus repeated verses, so many ages since

Caput a cervice revulsum,
Gurgite cum medio, portans Oeagrías Hebrus
Volveret, Eurídicen vox ipsa, et frígida lingua
Ah! Miseram Eurídicen anima fugiête vocabat,
Eurídicen totu referebant flumine rapæ.2

Who knows but some of your bright wits might have found it a subject affording many poetical turns and have told the world in an heroic Elegy that

as equal were our souls, so equal were our fates.3

I despair of ever hearing so many fine things said of me as so extraordinary a death would have given occasion for.4

1 To Alexander Pope.
2 "Oeagrías Hebrus, down mid-current rolled,
Rent from the marble neck, his drifting head,
The death-chilled tongue found yet a voice to cry
‘Eurydice! ah! poor Eurydice!’
With parting breath he called her, and the banks
From the broad stream caught up ‘Eurydice!’” (Virgil, Georgics, 4.522-27)
3 “As equal were their souls, so equal was their fate,” from John Dryden’s “To the Pious Memory of the Accomplished Young Lady Mrs. Anne Killigrew” (1686).
I am at this present moment writing in a house situated on the banks of the Hebrus, 1 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 vome come into my head at this minute! And must not you confess to my praise that 'tis more than an ordinary discretion that can resist the wicked suggestions of poetry in a place where truth for once furnishes all the ideas of pastoral? The summer is already far advanced in this part of the world, and for some miles round Adrianople the whole ground is laid out in gardens, and the banks of the river set with rows of fruit trees, under which all the most considerable Turks divert themselves every evening, not with walking, that is not one of their pleasures, but a set party of them choose out a green spot, where the shade is very thick, and there they spread a carpet on which they sit drinking their coffee and generally attended by some slave with a fine voice or that plays on some instrument. Every twenty paces you may see one of these little companies listening to the dashing of the river, and this taste is so universal that the very gardeners are not without it. I have often seen them and their children sitting on the banks and playing on a rural instrument perfectly answering the description of the ancient fistula, being composed of unequal reeds, with a simple but agreeable softness in the sound. 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. 2 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. 3 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; 4 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 5 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 4 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. 5 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. 6 The description of the belt of Menelaus exactly resembles those that are

1 It was common for women to go unveiled in rural areas.
2 Theocritus (c. 300 BCE) was an ancient Greek writer of bucolic poetry.
3 The Idylls 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 timeless nature 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).
now worn by the great men, fastened before with broad golden clasps and embroidered round with rich work. The snowy veil that Helen throws over her face is still fashionable; and I never see (as I do very often) half a dozen old Bashaws with their reverend beards, sitting 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 Erotes. 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 extreme gay and lively, yet with something in them wonderful soft. The steps are varied according to the pleasure of her that leads the dance, but always in exact time and infinitely more agreeable than any of our dances, at least in my opinion. I sometimes make one in the train but am not skilful enough to lead. 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 Achmet 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 Achmet 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 pierc'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 The most celebrated poet of the Tulip era, Ahmet Nedim Efendi (1681?-1730), was patronized by Ibrahim Pasha. As a court poet he frequently wrote occasional verse for weddings and other holidays.
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 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 its 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?

Stanza I
Now Philomel renews 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 transfixed 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 Goddess and my Life renew.

¹ The French poet and critic Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s (1636-1711) L’Art poétique (1674) was a crucial text of neo-classical 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.

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 lastis 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.
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.

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1 As Halsband notes (1.337n1), Lady Mary owned Thomas Vaughn’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.
Letter 34

To the Countess of __ 3

Adrianople, April 18, O. S.

I write to you (dear Sister) and to all my other English correspondents by the last ship, and only Heaven can tell when I shall have another opportunity of sending to you, but I cannot forbear writing, though

perhaps my letter may lie upon my hands this two months. To confess the truth, my head is so full of my entertainment yesterday that 'tis absolutely necessary for my own repose to give it some vent. Without farther preface I will then begin my story.

I was invited to dine with the Grand Vizier's lady,1 and 'twas with a great deal of pleasure I prepared myself for an entertainment which was never given before to any Christian. I thought I should very little satisfy her curiosity, (which I did not doubt was a considerable motive to the invitation) by going in a dress she was used to see, and therefore dressed myself in the court habit of Vienna, which is much more magnificent than ours. However, I chose to go incognito to avoid any disputes about ceremony, and went in a Turkish coach only attended by my woman that held up my train, and the Greek lady who was my intercessor. I was met at the court door by her black eunuch who helped me out of the coach with great respect and conducted me through several rooms, where her she-slaves, finely dressed, were ranged on each side. In the innermost, I found the lady sitting on her sofa in a sable vest. She advanced to meet me and presented me half a dozen of her friends with great civility. She seemed a very good woman, near fifty year old. I was surprised to observe so little magnificence in her house, the furniture being all very moderate, and, except the habits and number of her slaves, nothing about her that appeared expensive. She guessed at my thoughts, and told me she was no longer of an age to spend either her time or money in superfluities, that her whole expense was in charity, and her employment praying to God.2 There was no affectation in this speech; both she and her husband are entirely given up to devotion. He never looks upon any other woman, and what is much more extraordinary, touches no bribes, notwithstanding the example of all his predecessors. He is so scrupulous in this point, he would not accept Mr. W __'s present, till he had been assured over and over 'twas a settled perquisite of his place at the entrance of every ambassador.

She entertained me with all kind of civility till dinner came in, which was served one dish at a time to a vast number, all finely dressed after their manner, which I don't think so bad as you have perhaps heard it represented. I am a very good judge of their eating, having lived three weeks in the house of an effendi at Belgrade,3 who gave us very magnificent dinners dressed by his own cooks, which the first

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1 Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Jean Dumont, and Ottaviano Bon are among the many male travel writers who reported on the lascivious goings on in harems, despite the fact they had no access to them. See Appendix E.
2 A formal garden, usually with a symmetrical pattern.
3 To Lady Mar.

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1 Haci Halil Pasha (1655-1733), an Albanian, was the Grand Vizier from 5 August 1716 to 26 August 1717.
2 Lady Mary does not distinguish between Allah and God here.
3 Aehmet-Beg. See Letter 25.
week pleased me extremely, but I own I then begun to grow weary of it and desired my own cook might add a dish or two after our manner, but I attribute this to custom. I am very much inclined to believe that an Indian who had never tasted of either would prefer their cookery to ours. There sauces are very high, all the roast very much done. They use a great deal of very rich spice. The soup is served for the last dish, and they have at least as great a variety of ragouts as we have. I was very sorry I could not eat of as many as the good lady would have had me, who was very earnest in serving me of everything. The treat concluded with coffee and perfumes, which is a high mark of respect. Two slaves kneeling censed my hair, clothes, and handkerchief. After this ceremony she commanded her slaves to play and dance, which they did with their guitars in their hands, and she excused to me their want of skill, saying she took no care to accomplish them in that art. I returned her thanks and soon after took my leave.

I was conducted back in the same manner I entered, and would have gone straight to my own house, but the Greek lady with me earnestly solicited me to visit the Kahya’s lady, saying she was the second officer in the Empire and ought indeed to be looked upon as the first, the Grand Vizier having only the name while he exercised the authority. I had found so little diversion in this haram that I had no mind to go into another, but her importunity prevailed with me, and I am extreme glad that I was so compliant. All things here were with quite another air than at the Grand Vizier’s, and the very house confessed the difference between an old devotee and a young beauty. It was nicely clean and magnificent. I was met at the door by two black eunuchs, who led me through a long gallery between two rows of beautiful young girls with their hair finely plaited almost hanging to their feet, all dressed in fine light damasks brocaded with silver. I was sorry that decency did not permit me to stop to consider them nearer, but that thought was lost upon my entrance into a large room or rather pavilion, built round with gilded sashes, which were most of them thrown up, and the trees planted near them gave an agreeable shade, which hindered the Sun from being troublesome. The jessamin and honey-suckles that twisted round their trunks shedding a soft perfume increased by a white marble fountain playing sweet water in the lower part of the room, which fell into three or four basins, with a pleasing sound. The roof was painted with all sort of flowers, falling out of gilded baskets that seemed tumbling down.

On a sofa raised three steps and covered with fine Persian ce sat the Kahya’s lady, leaning on cushions of white satin embroïd and at her feet sat two young girls, the eldest about twelve year lovely as angels, dressed perfectly rich, and almost covered jewels. But they were hardly seen near the fair Fatima (for that is her name) so much her beauty effaced every thing. I have seen all that has been called lovely either in England or Germany, and must own that I never saw anything so gloriously beautiful, nor can I recollect a face that would have been taken notice of near her. She stood up to receive me, saluting me after their fashion, putting her hand upon her heart with a sweetness full of majesty that no court breeding could ever give. She ordered cushions to be given me and took care to place me in the corner, which is the place of honour. I confess, though the Greek lady had before given me a great opinion of her beauty, I was so struck with admiration that I could not for some time speak to her, being wholly taken up in gazing. That surprising harmony of features! that charming result of the whole! that exact proportion of body! that lovely bloom of complexion unsullied by art! the unutterable enchantment of her smile! But her eyes! Large and black, with all the soft languishment of the blue! every turn of her face discovering some new charm. After my first surprise was over, I endeavoured by nicely examining her face to find out some imperfection, without any fruit of my search but being clearly convinced of the error of that vulgar notion that a face perfectly regular would not be agreeable. Nature having done for her, with more success, what Apelles\footnote{According to the historian Pliny the Elder, Apelles of Kos (4th century BCE) was the greatest painter of ancient Greece.} is said to have essayed by a collection of the most exact features to form a perfect face, and to that a behaviour so full of grace and sweetness, such easy motions with an air so majestic yet free from stiffness or affectation, that I am persuaded could she be suddenly transported upon the most polite throne of Europe, nobody would think her other than born and bred to be a queen, though educated in a country we call barbarous. To say all in a word, our most celebrated English beauties would vanish near her.

She was dressed in a caftan of gold brocade flowered with silver, very well fitted to her shape and showing to advantage the beauty of her bosom, only shaded by the thin gauze of her shift. Her drawers were pale pink, green and silver, her slippers white, finely embroïdered; her lovely arms adorned with bracelets of diamonds, and her broad girdle set round with diamonds. Upon her head a rich Turkish handkerchief of pink and silver, her own fine black hair hanging a great length in various tresses, and on one side of her head some bodkins of jewels. I am afraid you will accuse me of extravagance in this description. I think I have read somewhere that women always speak in rapture when they speak of beauty, but I can’t imagine why they should not be allowed to do so. I rather think it virtue to be able
to admire without any mixture of desire or envy. The gravest writers have spoke with great warmth of some celebrated pictures and statues. The workmanship of Heaven certainly excels all our weak imitations, and I think has a much better claim to our praise. For me, I am not ashamed to own, I took more pleasure in looking on the beauteous Fatima than the finest piece of sculpture could have given me. She told me the two girls at her feet were her daughters, though she appeared too young to be their mother.

Her fair maids were ranged below the sofa to the number of twenty, and put me in mind of the pictures of the ancient nymphs. I did not think all nature could have furnished such a scene of beauty. She made them a sign to play and dance. Four of them immediately begun to play some soft airs on instruments between a lute and a guitar, which they accompanied with their voices, while the others danced by turns. This dance was very different from what I had seen before. Nothing could be more artful or more proper to raise certain ideas, the tunes so soft, the motions so languishing, accompanied with pauses and dying eyes, half-falling back and then recovering themselves in so artful a manner that I am very positive the coldest and most rigid prude upon Earth could not have looked upon them without thinking of something not to be spoke of. I suppose you may have read that the Turks have no music but what is shocking to the ears, but this account is from those who never heard any but what is played in the streets, and is just as reasonable as if a foreigner should take his ideas of the English music from the bladder and string, and marrow bones and cleavers. I can assure you that the music is extremely pathetic. 'Tis true I am inclined to prefer the Italian, but perhaps I am partial. I am acquainted with a Greek lady who sings better than Mrs. Robinson, and is very well skilled in both, who gives the preference to the Turkish. 'Tis certain they have very fine natural voices, these were very agreeable. When the dance was over, four fair slaves came into the room with silver censors in their hands and perfumed the air with amber, aloes wood, and other rich scents. After this, they served me coffee upon their knees in the finest Japan china, with soucoupes of silver gilt. The lovely Fatima entertained me all this time in the most polite agreeable manner, calling me often Uzelle Sultanam, or the beautiful sultana, and desiring my friendship with the best grace in the world, lamenting that she could not entertain me in my own language. When I took my leave, two maids brought in a fine silver basket of embroidered handkerchiefs. She begged I would wear the richest for her sake, and gave the others to my woman and interptress. I retired through the same ceremonies as before, and could not help fancying I had been some time in Mahomet's paradise, so much I was charmed with what I had seen. I know not how the relation of it appears to you. I wish it may give you part of my pleasure, for I would have my dear sister share in all the diversions of etc.

1 See Hill, 72-73.
2 From 1714 to 1724, Anastasia Robinson (c. 1692-1755) was one of the leading singers in London. She was a regular attendant of Lady Mary's suppers, and a lodger at Twickenham. Before her journey, Lady Mary would have seen her perform at the Queen's Theatre in a variety of roles including early Italian operas by Handel.
3 Saucer (French).