

38. Horacio Sierra, “Convents as Feminist Utopias: Margaret Cavendish’s The Convent of Pleasure and the Potential of Closeted Dramas and Communities,” Women’s Studies 38 (2009), 666-668; Bonin, 347-351.


42. Cf. Bowerbank, 84-100.

Humbled as “the first English feminist,” 1 Mary Astell is rarely studied as an ideal reader of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s The Turkish Embassy Letters, a series of feminist letters written between 1717 and 1718 while she was travelling to the Ottoman Empire with her husband, the English Ambassador Edward Wortley. Yet Astell was herself admired by Montagu, and notes that the author had lent her a manuscript of her letters “to satisfy my Curiosity in some enquirys I made concerning her Travels” (234).2 In this preface to the 1763 posthumous publication of Montagu’s letters, Astell praises her “skill to strike out a New Path” by avoiding the bland anti-Islamic stereotypes typically deployed in “Male Travels,” which are written “in the same Tone, and stuffed with the same Trifles” (234). This preface raises perplexing questions about the history of ideas: what would Astell, a Tory and Church of England supporter, find so appealing in a heretical travel account that exalts “Turkish women as the only free people in the empire?”3 And why would Montagu, a Whig and radical dissenter, glorify Astell’s “English Monastery,” a proto-Catholic defense of female self-segregation in England?4

In order to answer these questions, this essay argues that the intellectual exchange between Montagu and Astell is enabled by Tory feminism, a malleable political theology that employs the language of royal prerogative, passive obedience, and hierarchal privilege to articulate biblical precepts about gender equality in relation to a diffuse tradition of radical Protestant thought. By adopting this language, Montagu is capable of criticizing contract theory’s “false universals”: Whig-democratic terms such as “freeborn Englishmen” that falsely imply the inclusion of both genders when in practice women were excluded.5
To strike out a New Path

In her account of the eventual displacement of Tory feminism by British Whig feminism, Karen O'Brien briefly discusses the Tory-Whig “cross-party salience” evident in Montagu’s Tory-like admiration of the prerogatives and privileges enjoyed by the elite Austrian and Ottoman women she encountered, but within a different paradigm from the one I have outlined above. O’Brien argues that Latitudinarian (mainly Whig) Anglicanism is what enabled this cross-party salience, making it possible, say, for Montagu to have friendly conversations about the marital freedom of the widow “Sultana Hafise” in her correspondence with the Countess of Marlborough. In O’Brien’s rich intellectual genealogy, Latitudinarian Whig Anglicanism champions religious toleration (for some), free religious inquiry, the rational examination of scripture, the efficacy of good works and not grace alone, and salvation for all (rather than only the elect of Calvinist theology). Whig Anglicanism also served as the primary paradigm in which arguments about gender equality were most effectively articulated throughout the eighteenth century. O’Brien maintains that the educational and religious toleration (for some), free religious inquiry, the rational examination of scripture, the efficacy of good works and not grace alone, and salvation for all (rather than only the elect of Calvinist theology). Whig Anglicanism also served as the primary paradigm in which arguments about gender equality were most effectively articulated throughout the eighteenth century. O’Brien maintains that the educational virtues of John Locke, the sentimental moral philosophy of Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury, and the libertine sociology of Bernard Mandeville provided the only critical vocabularies through which British feminists were able to fashion their own account of female benevolent sociability. They rejected both the individualist competitive egotism implicit in the social contract and Astell’s asocial subordination of the love of neighbors to love and knowledge of God. Instead, for them, the “instincts of nurturing and kindness . . . became the basis of a familial and communitarian, rather than contractual account, of social origins.” In other words, many British feminists criticized the patriarchal interpretation of contractual rights but did so without falling back on anti-Whig accounts of the gender-indiscriminate rule of the absolute patriarchal monarch. In O’Brien’s account, Astell’s Tory feminism falls by the wayside as British women, including Montagu, helped formulate many of the progressive Whig concepts that would later prove indispensable to the Bluestocking feminists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

My essay revises O’Brien’s genealogy in two significant respects: first, it underscores the political-theological currency of female monarchal self-rule in Montagu’s letters; and, second, it shows how Montagu’s and Astell’s feminist critiques of contract theory share a Tory and libertine mode of freethinking. O’Brien exclusively associates the latter with the libertinism of Mandeville and unduly disassociates it from the literary libertinage championed by oppositional Tories, English deists, and freethinkers. For Montagu and Astell, elite Muslim women’s sexual and socioeconomic autonomy in the imperial harem is not emblematic of domestic-state despotism, as it was for Bluestocking feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft. Rather, the harem represents a mode of gender equality in which the political theology of the absolute monarch and a deist philosophy of libertine sexuality are coarticulated within the evolving paradigm of Latitudinarian Anglicanism. Feminist admiration for the “royal prerogative” of freeborn harem women poses a challenge to O’Brien’s Whig-centered account.

This essay also corrects a tendency in existing scholarship to treat The Turkish Embassy Letters as if it were written privately in a theological and political vacuum. In the absence of sufficient attention to the radical Protestantism informing her feminist stance on Muslim female sexuality, Montagu’s letters have generally been read as an anticipation of secular Whig feminism. Alternatively, I treat Montagu as a Tory-inspired “female deist” who invokes the deist epistolary letter genre to redefine Anglican citizenship in the gender-inclusive language of “Mahometan” virtue, rather than in the gender-exclusive language of contractual rights.
In order to expand O’Brien’s informed but partial genealogy, the following sections situate Montagu’s contribution to British feminism in two overlapping currents of English Post-Reformation thought: the radical deism of the Early Enlightenment as promoted by the “Mahometan Christian” John Toland and the early modern tradition of a female-friendly biblical hermeneutics as reformulated by “first feminist” Mary Astell.

I

The Turkish Embassy Letters were not literally written to friends and family between 1717 and 1718. Rather, these letters were written after Montagu’s return to England based on notes she kept in her travel diaries, which were later destroyed by her daughter. As Cynthia Lowenthal has shown, these “familiar” letters were carefully crafted and rewritten in a dramatic epistolary form. Throughout the eighteenth century, deist publications on Islam relied on this form. For example, a published version of Gottfried Leibniz’s private letter includes casual references to Islam as “a kind of Deism” that restored the natural Christianity practiced by the Nestorians and the Eutychians. However, this potentially heretical account of Islam is not included in his published scholarship. In this section, I argue that Montagu’s radical claims about the deistic wisdom of the “effendi” Ahmed Bey had to be written in the genre of the private epistolary letter if, like Leibniz, she ever expected to gain public access into the republic of letters. Inspired by deist travel accounts such as Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy and John Toland’s A letter from an Arabian physician, her letters recast the Ottoman elites she encountered during her travels as fictional Muslim characters in order to launch a disguised satiric assault on the Anglican church and state.

Imaginary letters by Muslim characters are part of an eighteenth-century semi-journalistic literary genre. Before Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu’s The Persian Letters (1730) achieved acclaim in England and Europe, Giovanni P. Marana’s Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy living in Paris was the first popular, multi-volume work to fictionalize a deist account of Mahometanism. Published in Paris and translated into Dutch, German, Italian, and Russian, the eight volumes of the Turkish Spy appeared in English translation from 1692 to 1801, a total of 31 editions. This satiric work centers on a fictional Turkish spy living in Paris who criticizes, among other things, Christian rituals and doctrines. But unlike The Persian Letters, Marana’s work satirizes not only Roman Catholicism but also Christianity in general, which the Turkish spy describes as a “reformed” Judaism based on the primitive Nazarene model, corrupted by

the “politheism of the Gentiles” (6:212-19). He further adds that the Trinity is a blasphemous doctrine invented by the gentiles to further their own ecclesiastical power (6:341). Given this antitrinitarian account of monotheistic history, the Turkish spy concludes that Christians should not disparage the religion of Mahomet, the “Holy Lawgiver,” because “some ancient writers among the Nazarenes . . . make Honourable mention of Him and his family” (7:232; 5:145). An English translator notes that the Turkish spy is a “Deist rather than an Atheist . . . and it is well enough known, to those who travel in Turkey, and Convers with Men of sense there, That there are abundance of Deists among the Mahometans, as well as among us Christians: and our Arabian demonstrates, that he is one of these” (8: “To the reader”). Ultimately, the satiric and indirect writing style of the Turkish spy letters renders Mahometanism more rational than its Trinitarian counterpart.

This Enlightenment view of rational Islam was becoming part of a growing radical trend during Montagu’s lifetime. Beginning with Henry Stubbé’s deist defense of Islam in The Rise and Progress of Mahometanism (in manuscript circa 1671; published in 1911), some writers reread Islam’s successful propagation as inaugurating the unfolding of Protestant providential history rather than as marking a perverted hybrid of Christianity and Judaism. For Stubbé, primitive Nazarene Christianity sank into oblivion as a result of severe Trinitarian (Roman) persecution until it was resuscitated by Mahomet centuries later. Stubbé writes that Mahomet “was a convert to the Judaizing Christians and formed his Religion as far as possible in resemblance of theirs” (145). Positive accounts of Islam by Henri Comte de Boullainvilliers, John Toland, and Gottfried Leibniz retell the history of Protestantism from the perspective of the “Arabian legislator,” suggesting that the Reformation took place nine centuries before Martin Luther nailed his famous Ninety-five Theses to a church door. With the widespread publication of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy living in Paris and other such subversive fictional letters, deist-inflected accounts about Mahomet, “the Holy Lawgiver,” become a mainstay of radical English culture and the eighteenth-century republic of letters.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters adopt the “Turkish Spy” motif in the guise of a wise Islamic scholar, an “effendi” from Belgrade by the name of Ahmed Bey who practices “plain deism” (53, 62). Her letters are strongly fixated on the virtuous character of this “extraordinary scribe.” Ahmed Bey is described as a well-educated aristocrat who avoids “mysteries and novelties” and all religious disputes, schisms, and rituals. He instead preaches a “natural” religion (or atheism), “whose impiety
consists in making a jest of their prophet” (62). According to Montagu, the effendi have no more faith in the inspiration of Mohammed than in the infallibility of the pope. They make a frank profession of deism amongst themselves... and never speak of their law but as of a politic institution, fit now to be observed by wise men, however at first introduced by politicians and enthusiasts. (110-1)

Islamic-Ottoman law is “deist” in the sense that it is a flexible natural law that avoids the superstition practiced by vulgar politicians and fanatical religious leaders. Even though Montagu’s view of the prophet’s “enthusiasm” and “inspiration” is more closely aligned with Anglican anti-Islamic (anti-Catholic) polemic than with radical Protestant views, his positive characterization of Achmed Bey follows the fictional conventions of the deist familiar letter. As in the Turkish spy letters, the ostensibly private form of Montagu’s epistolary letters allows the English reader to enter a moment of transculturation that, in effect, implies a one-to-one identification between Mahometanism and Protestantism but without explicitly upholding the deist tenets of the Islamic faith or elevating Mahomet to the status of a republican legislator.

Notwithstanding her negative approach to early Islamic history (in which Mahomet is compared to an infallible “pope”), Montagu uses Achmed Bey as a mouthpiece for voicing deist ideas. According to Montagu, he is “a lawyer and a priest” who controls all religious and civil matters (61). Writing to Abbé Antonio Conti, a Catholic and closet antitrinitarian, Montagu explains that the effendi’s deism reveals a theological affinity between Muslims and Protestants (63). If only superstitious Catholic doctrines (including the Trinity) were eliminated, then the Protestants, Montagu suggests, could easily facilitate the conversion of the Muslims:

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. (62)

Achmed Bey’s deism is comparable to the freethinking antitrinitarianism espoused by Samuel Clarke and William Whiston, two Arian Whig Churchmen whom Montagu knew personally from her attendance in the Hanoverian court. She thoroughly approved of their Latitudinarian position on natural religion.

By drawing a comparison between Arianism and Mahometanism, Montagu’s letter subtly alludes to radical writings that realign the tradition of Protestant freethinking with the history of Islamic heresy. More specifically, she references the heretical writings of William Whiston, whose outspoken anticleerical views and challenge to Athanasius’ Trinitarian creed ignited a fierce controversy that led to his ejection from the Cambridge professorship in 1710. Like his teacher Sir Isaac Newton, he used an Arabic manuscript to reinterpret the history of the Apostolic church and to question the canonical authority of the scriptures. Whiston’s findings were culled from the research of Simon Ockley, an Anglican divine and respectable orientalist who in his The History of the Saracens (1718) praised the Arabs as “great men” whose “considerable actions” are as virtuous as “any other nation under heaven.” Whiston used Ockley’s scholarship not for its original purpose of converting the Muslims to Anglican Protestantism but instead to write subversively “against [the] canon of scripture.” His heretical crime is that he ascribed more authoritative clout to a new work found in an Arabic manuscript than to the scriptures. In this regard, Whiston—like Newton, an Arian—is a covert deist who admires near eastern monotheisms and shares the methodological agenda espoused in Toland’s Nazarenus: or, Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity. This controversial polemic claims to have discovered “the Original Plan of Christianity” in the lost Gospel of Barnabas (a Christian forgery), a “Mahometan Gospel” that synchronizes an Islamic account of the continuity of the prophets from Adam to Mahomet. Montagu alludes to this synchronized account when noting that Achmed Bey acknowledges Toland: “he seemed to have some knowledge of our religious disputes and even of our writers, and I was surprised to hear him ask, amongst other things, how Mr. Toland did” (111). Her witty allusions to notorious English theologians turn the Anglican proselytizing rhetoric deployed in her letters into a thinly veiled disguise for conveying firsthand confirmation of the Islamic freethinking legacy.

Indeed, Montagu’s letter on Achmed Bey is dated February 1718, the year in which Toland published Nazarenus. Her letter was not included in the original 1763 publication of the Embassy Letters but was published anonymously as a separate letter in 1718 and 1719 under the title The Genuine Copy of a Letter Written from Constantinople by an English Lady... no less distinguished by her Wit than her Quality; To a Venetian
Nobleman, one of the Prime Virtuosi of the Age. Mostly an attack on the Christian clerical establishment (including the Anglican Church), the letter was written as a response to a series of questions on Islam posed by a "Venetian Nobleman" in a previous conversation with an "English Lady of wit and quality." The Venetian nobleman refers to Abbé Conti. Without Montagu's permission, he published her letter in the French original accompanied by an English translation, concealing both the name of the author and the recipient in order to avoid prosecution under the seditious libel act. However, a small circle of family and friends were aware of the author's identity. Indeed, this particular letter conferred upon Montagu her notorious reputation as a "female wit." The Venetian nobleman says that the Venetian nobleman features an "Arabian physician" who responds to a series of objections against Islam that were raised in a previous conversation with the recipient, an English scholar whom he met at a university in Paris. Recalling the deism of the Turkish spy and Achmed Bey, this fictional author first seeks to prove that Islam is more tolerant of religious dissent than any sect in Christianity and that Protestants have more with Mahomet's antitrinitarian faith than with Catholicism. Secondly, he uses this radical deist theology to support a libertine argument: mainly, that the Muslim notions of a sexual paradise and polygyny are not inherently sinful because there is no primordial evil inherent in sexual pleasure. He maintains that sexual procreation was divinely sanctioned by the Old Testament injunction to breed and multiply and ridicules the doctrine of original sin:

If you say there is [sin in the sexual act], then the Propagation of Mankind even in the most perfect State would have been vile and sinful; then a Man's enjoying his own Wife (which all Men take to be not only lawful, but a Duty) must needs be sinful; then Mankind (which is contrary to God's own Appointment) ought not to be propagated, and the World should be left desolate of Inhabitants of the Human Kind; the Absurdity of all Which is, I think, evident to all rational men. (14)

By employing the pseudonym of the "Arabian physician," Toland safely conveys his libertine views on sexuality while disavowing authorial responsibility. Disguised as a Muslim critic, he assaults the legal sanctity of men's marital duty as understood by orthodox Christianity. As such, the genre of the familiar deist letter provides a cautious technique whereby Toland ironically distances himself from his own heterodox arguments in print. The casual form of the "private" letter absolves the deist writer from assuming authorial liability, should a lawsuit be filed for sedition, which could result in hefty fines and prison sentences.

Montagu's letter on Achmed Bey deploys the same cautious technique of ironic self-distancing when addressing controversial topics such as human pleasure, original sin, and marriage. She describes him as "a man of wit and learning" who indulged in wine-drinking despite the Islamic prohibitions against consuming alcohol. Achmed Bey does not adhere to Qur'anic law in this case and even discounts the Prophet's authority. In response to Montagu's questions about wine-drinking, he replies that all humans are meant to take pleasure in the world since God would not have created a world of sensual pleasure if it were truly sinful. As in Toland's letter, this libertine argument dispenses with the biblical narrative of the fall and the doctrine of original sin: the prohibition against wine-drinking is nothing more than a secular law only meant to control the vulgar people, who drink in excess, and not people "of quality," who drink in moderation. Achmed Bey adopts deism's two-tiered system for categorizing "religion": a secular, rational ideal practiced solely by elites and a superstitious faith associated mainly with uneducated, lower-class commoners. For Montagu, this distinction between the rational monotheism of "people of quality" and the gross enthusiasm of "the vulgar people" allows her, an aristocratic Englishwoman, to sympathize with a Muslim nobleman despite the gender restrictions she would have normally encountered in English courtly society. She makes this last point clear in an earlier letter addressed to Alexander Pope (her main satiric target in this case): Achmed Bey is a polite Mahometan who, unlike his English counterparts, treats women as his intellectual equals—"I pass for a great scholar with him." In response to Montagu's inquiries, he maintains that the confinement of Muslim women is completely false, with the exception that "we [Ottoman Muslims] have the advantage that when our wives cheat us nobody knows it" (54). She uses the deist letter form not only to dispel western myths about Muslim women's "oppression" but also to satirize the hypocritical, back-biting Anglicanism characteristic of paternalistic elite society in early-eighteenth-century England.

In this respect, the English feminist, too, assumes the rational voice of the "Arabian physician." Through this technique of ironic self-distancing, Montagu's letters adopt the character of the female deist who finds greater freedoms in the laws of elite Ottoman Muslims than in those of aristocratic Anglicans. The satiric genre of the deist familiar letter allows an aristocratic
Englishwoman to claim agency. And yet Montagu was reluctant to publish these letters during her lifetime. She shied away from doing so when urged by Mary Astell, who admired Montagu’s views on Islamic culture. Perhaps Montagu was wary of being issued a seditious libel, given that eighteenth-century English readers were not fooled by the use of fictional Muslim characters. For example, Bishop William Warburton notes in his *The Divine Legation of Moses* (London, 1742-58) that “modern freethinkers” are notorious for donning the mask of “personated character[s],” so that the author is “now a dissenter, then a Papist, now again a Jew, and then a Mahometan; and when closely pressed and hunted through all these shapes, at length starts up in his genuine Form, an Infidel confess’d” (1: xxxv). Muslim, Jewish, and Pagan characters serve as means of ventriloquizing ideas that are too dangerous to convey otherwise. The popularity of this satiric form of writing might partly explain why the Turkish spy letters achieved international notoriety and why Montagu chose not to publish her letters during her lifetime.

II

I have shown thus far that Montagu appropriated the genre of the deist letter for the purpose of developing a feminist critique of male-dominated upper-class English society. In this section, I argue that her opposition to English patriarchy also applies to contract theory’s false universals, in which the unequal conjugal relationship between husband and wife stands in for the equitable union between sovereign and subject. The Whiggish language of contractual “rights” neglects to address the ways in which the marriage analogy underwrites gender-exclusive conceptions of Anglican citizenship. Montagu’s critique of contract theory reevaluates elite Muslim women’s private domestic spaces—like the imperial harem—as sites from which women can claim socio-economic agency. In contrast to the gender inequalities of marriage property rights in England, Turkish women acquire autonomy by virtue of owning their bodies—the means of sexual, economic, and political reproduction in a gender-segregated society where men run state affairs while women give birth to civic virtue.

Montagu claims to be the first Christian to visit the Ottoman Empire in centuries and the first European woman to have access to the Ottoman women’s household (55, 60, 72, 86). Although recent scholarship on the early modern period has shown that these claims to exclusivity are an exaggeration, Montagu, as a wife of an English ambassador, would have possessed the firsthand knowledge about Ottoman court life and the harem that previous male travelers lacked. In fact, she frequently chides them for their ignorance of the socioeconomic conditions of Muslim women. For example, she sharply criticizes Aaron Hill and his “brethren voyage-writers” for their

lament on the miserable confinement of the Turkish ladies, who are, perhaps, freer than any ladies in the universe, and are the only women in the world that lead a life of uninterrupted pleasure, exempt from cares, their whole time being spent in visiting, bathing, or the agreeable amusement of spending money and inventing new fashions. (134)

As Astell notes in her preface, Montagu counters the orientalist discourse of male travel writers by insisting that Turkish ladies possess agency in pursuing pleasure, experiencing physical mobility, managing wealth, and “inventing new fashions.” For her, Ottoman women are “freer than any ladies in the universe” (134).

Montagu also corrects the mistaken English patriarchal assumption that women have no souls under Islamic doctrine:

Our vulgar notion that they do not own women to have souls is a mistake. 'Tis true they say they are not so elevated a kind and therefore must not hope to be admitted into the paradise appointed for the men, who are to be entertained by celestial beauties, but there is a place of happiness destined for souls of the inferior order where all good women are to be in eternal bliss. (100)

Montagu’s notion of a separate and inferior paradise for women is also mistaken, because the Qur’an states that spiritual salvation is equally available to both men and women. In this case, her view of Muslim women rests on a Qur’anic understanding of the biological and social inequality between the sexes despite their spiritual equality. The Qur’an sanctions the unequal distribution of economic and sociopolitical power, especially in gender relations. Her description of an inferior female-only paradise also sanctions this type of inequality: the freedom of “Turkish ladies” is based solely on their capacity for pleasure, mobility, wealth, consumption, and (as I will argue below) procreation; they never assume men’s role in the Ottoman state, and Montagu never claims anywhere in her letters that men and women are socially equal. On the contrary, her notion of liberty depends on the sharp dissimilarities between the sexes. Based on a spiritual egalitarianism without class and gender equality (a legal-civil notion suitable to her hierarchical class biases), the communal Islamic virtue practiced by secluded Muslim women provides Montagu with an alternative to the (male) egalitarian ideals promoted in rights-based contract theory.
Montagu argues that Muslim women fulfill the Old Testament injunction to be fruitful and multiply. Accordingly, Mahommed "was too much a gentleman and loved the fair sex too well" to deny them their share in a sensual paradise (109). She then proceeds to ridicule Catholic (and implicitly Protestant) notions of virginity and chastity:

What will become of your saint Catherines, your saint Therases, your saint Claras and the whole bead roll of your holy virgins and widows, who, if they are to be judged by this system of virtue will be found to have been infamous creatures that passed their whole lives in a most abominable libertinism. (110)

Montagu ascribes promiscuous sexuality exclusively to women, refusing to acknowledge men's libertine sexuality or condemn sensual women as "rakes." By describing orthodox Christian women as libertines, Montagu's transvaluation of Christian sexual mores marks a twofold assault against the Catholic sacrament of marriage and, more covertly, the questionable double standards embedded in radical Protestant views on gender and sexuality. The former conveys a standard critique of Catholic corruption, whereas the latter extends this critique in order to challenge a male deist view that bars women from libertine pleasures. In other words, her letters cleverly reveal that patriarchal modes of political rationality deceptively deploy the generic category "freeborn Englishmen" to ensure men's libertine pleasure while implicitly holding women accountable to an Augustinian-Pauline doctrine of the monogamous family.

For Montagu, the procreation of "little musulmans" is a virtuous public "office." Her views recall Gale Rubin's insights on how the subordination of women in a marriage contract requires that they repress their own sexuality so that men can freely own the female kin of their choice: the "exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves." Montagu's deist views on women's sexual agency counteracts patriarchal modes of rationality—the "trafficking of women"—because male property "rights" to female bodies necessitate that women's sexual needs remain repressed.

In The Sexual Contract, Carole Pateman elaborates on Rubin's insight. She argues that democratic contract theory entails a male sex-right agreement that excludes women from citizenship by symbolically assuming their childbearing reproductive capacities. Supposedly, men are naturally endowed with political reproduction, whereas "physical birth symbolizes everything that makes women incapable of entering the original contract and transforming themselves into civil individuals" (95-6). According to Pateman, seventeenth and eighteenth-century English contract theory refuses any acknowledgment of the capacity and creativity that is unique to women. Men appropriate to themselves women's natural creativity, their capacity physically to give birth—but they also do more than that. Men's generative power extends into another realm; they transmute what they have appropriated into another form of generation, the ability to create new political life, or to give birth to political right.35

Sexual reproduction is metaphorically displaced onto men's political "right," effectively depriving women of their socioeconomic agency in the public sphere. Montagu resists this patriarchal logic in two ways: first, by ascribing female ownership to sexual reproduction (Ottoman women are
Montagu dramatizes her liability as an English wife while visiting a Turkish bathhouse in Andrianople (Sophia). Rather than reading this episode as a “private” expression of feminine and homoerotic desire, I argue that her experience in the hammam (bathhouses off-limits to men) contains a buried critique of English contract theory. She portrays the women there as living in a prelapsarian “state of nature” that is preferable to the “disdainful smiles or satirical whispers” of any “European court” (58):

[They] are without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed. Yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. They walked and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes of our general mother. (59)

By comparing these women to Milton’s Eve—“our general mother”—Montagu ties deist-Islamic sexual mores to a Miltonic understanding of innocent female pleasures and, conversely, disassociates carnal pleasure from original sin. As a female deist she eroticizes Muslim women’s bodies in order to foreground the socioeconomic agency that defines their “feminotopia”—an idealized space of female empowerment that contests masculine modes of social and sexual economy. Resisting the male voyeuristic gaze, she refuses to present herself as a pornographic object for male consumption. Instead, she presents herself as incapable of undressing because English patriarchal norms prevent her from joining the naked Turkish ladies:

The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undressed me for the bath. I excused myself with some difficulty, they being 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. (59-60)

Montagu’s letter demystifies Christian patriarchal beliefs about modesty and chastity: her “stays” metaphorically represent a “machine,” signifying a husband’s right to own the female body. She casts herself as male property under the English law of coverture in marriage, despite her status as a wealthy aristocrat. Patriarchal slavery is identified as an English, rather than Turkish, institution. In this satiric critique through the eyes of a Muslim woman, the hammam scene exposes cherished conceptions of “freeborn Englishwomen” as founded on a false universal
in which English “freedom” pertains only to property-holding, orthodox Anglican husbands.

Read together, her views on Muslim women’s reproductive powers and her critique of the marriage contract in the hammam scene point to the importance of deist heterodoxy for eighteenth-century British feminism. According to O’Brien, British feminists championed a theory of benevolent female sociability in which “instinct, including the instinct to propagate and rear children and the urge to seek safety in numbers, rather than contract . . . propels men and women into complex societies and defines their mutual obligations” (49). In the case of Montagu, her deist interpretation of female libertine sexuality—rather than Shaftesbury’s moral philosophy and Mandeville’s libertine sociology—subtends the feminist theory of women’s sexual-civic reproduction in the Ottoman Empire. Marginalized in O’Brien’s Whiggish account, forms of unbelief need to be factored into the wider paradigm of Latitudinarian Anglicanism once Montagu’s letters are treated as an important contribution to British feminism.

Indeed, Montagu’s feminist appropriation of freethinking heterodoxy represents a notable effort to carve out an autonomous site for subversive forms of female publicity, defined as both a Habermasian sphere of public debate and consumption and a Bakhtinian form of the carnivalesque. She compares the Turkish bathhouse to a “women’s coffee house”: a private female-dominated space that parodies a male-dominated public sphere in England (59). In Habermasian terms, eighteenth-century London coffeehouses symbolize a public sphere off-limits to genteel women, the primary locus for deist debates and subversive clandestine activities as well as an urban center for modern forms of (male) sociability—a place for news, gossip, discussion, and debate. Montagu may have experienced something akin to this sociability in her visits to the imperial women’s harem, a domestic sphere of female communion that involved discussion, consumption, and scandal. The female community created by gender segregation is conducive toward a productive engagement with politics, as exemplified in the secluded life of the valide sultan: powerful mothers of the Ottoman sultan. As I will argue next, she encodes Turkish domestic spaces as the “perpetual masquerade” of veiled Muslim women: a permanent, carnival-like atmosphere that, in Bakhtinian terms, enables a dialogical public reasoning that can transgress social, political and religious norms/laws (71). Couched in a freethinking discourse, this subversive display of female publicity would not go unnoticed by Astell.

As evident in Astell’s laudatory preface, The Turkish Embassy Letters represents a groundbreaking feminist intervention in the male-dominated world of the eighteenth-century republic of letters. In her vindication of Montagu’s writing style, Astell betrays a keen interest in Montagu’s deist critique of English marriage laws as contrasted to equitable Ottoman-Islamic laws. For Astell, Ottoman woman are not essentially “slaves” to their husbands or fathers and their veiled lives do not serve to remind Englishwomen of their Christian freedom. On the contrary, Astell interprets the practice of veiling, Muslim and non-Muslim, as a form of gender equality that is rooted in St. Paul’s prescriptive views on female modesty.

In her preface, she implores English women to abstain from imposing ethnocentric prejudices when reading about Montagu’s travels in the Ottoman world:

Lay aside diabolical Envy, and its Brother Malice with all their accused Company, Sly Whisperings, cruel backbiting, spiteful detraction, and the rest of that hideous crew, which I hope are very falsely said to attend the Tea Table, being more apt to think they frequent those Public Places where Virtuous Women never come. (235)

Traditionally associated with women’s domestic spaces, the vices of envy, malice, gossip, and spite are personified as brothers—masculine prejudices. Astell not only inverts English patriarchal values but also relocates civic virtue in women’s “Tea Table[s]” rather than men’s coffee houses, “Public Places where Virtuous Women never come.” Her cautionary note to female readers reinscribes Montagu’s literary conventions: virtue belongs only to the secluded female communion of the “Tea Table,” which finds its analogue in Montagu’s hammam as a women’s coffeehouse. Because the domestication of tea in eighteenth-century Britain was congruent with the domestication of the fluid female body, the “Tea Table” served as a metonymy for an empowered upper-class “white” femininity based on uninhibited consumption, civic virtue, and bodily self-discipline; a mode of sociability that parallels the masculine subjectivity formed in the coffee house. Astell deploys the positive metonymic significance of the tea table—freed from misogynist stereotypes about female domestic vices—to redefine female civic virtue in contrast to men’s “Public Places” rather than Muslim woman’s private spaces.

The theme of female empowerment through domestic self-seclusion runs throughout Astell’s feminist oeuvre. She writes against women’s
Letters transposes the Tory language onto the Turkish bathhouse and the biblical precedent for male superiority and argues that the marriage who enter a political contract with the sovereign. She dismisses the on the biblical justifications for the social contract, in which wives who had elevated male contractual “rights” at women’s expense since the mid-modern feminists because it critiques the Whig republican citizenship that given prerogatives and privileges. This language is crucial for early feminist appropriation of Hobbes and Whiston reflects a seventeenth-century tradition of English women’s multiple attempts to reinterpret the scriptures in women-friendly and antipatriarchal terms. As a radical extension of this earlier tradition, Astell is invested in distinguishing Pauline notions of female modesty from those of the early modern marriage contract. In the preface to Reflections, she marshals an impressive lineage of biblical women to argue against those who justify the “natural” inferiority of women based on a patriarchal reading of St. Paul’s letters. She writes that Paul’s letters prove that

The Relation between the two Sexes is mutual, and the Dependance Reciprocal, both of them Depending entirely upon God, and upon Him only, which one would think is no great Argument of the natural Inferiority of either Sex. (13)

According to Astell, women’s “natural” inferiority cannot be inferred from St. Paul’s demand that women be modest, remain socially subordinate to men, and observe proper dress codes while in church. She supports this argument through a feminist interpretation of the Pauline account of veiling practices. According to her reading of St. Paul’s 1 Corinthians 11:3-10, “Praying and Prophesying in the Church are allow’d the Women, provided they do it with their Head Cover’d, as well as the Men; and no inequality can be infer’d from hence” (11) (emphasis original). For Astell, Christian modesty applies equally to both genders. Moreover, St. Paul does not forbid women from speaking in church “but only takes care that the Women should signify their Subjection by wearing a Veil” (20). As understood by Astell, the veil is a sign only of equal subjection to God. It does not prove women’s inherent inferiority or their lack of intellect and spirituality. From her Tory perspective, “Subjection” to God and king does not necessarily entail gender inequality and veiling is not exclusively a Muslim practice. On the contrary, modest dress enables women’s religious autonomy according to a primitive Pauline code of piety that, for Astell, differs from a historically imposed, Augustinian understanding of patriarchal marriage.
In this case, Astell’s feminist reading of Pauline veiling is closely aligned with Qur’anic injunctions on women’s modest dress, which are not tainted with gender inferiority, original sin, or demonic influence as traditionally propounded in orthodox interpretations of Paul’s references to veiling women. While Astell’s feminist investment in the Bible is aligned with Qur’anic injunctions on women’s modest dress, which are not historically rooted in the early seventeenth-century querelle des femmes in England, from Rachel Speght to Margaret Fell Fox, her reliance on contemporary radical sources departs from this earlier tradition of trying to historicize alternatives to the misogynist interpretation of the Pauline letters. Unlike preceding English feminists, she exploits the writings of controversial male heretics Whiston and Hobbes to reconcile women-friendly representations in the scriptures with the spiritual egalitarianism of a prelapsarian state that predates divisions among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Her appropriation of radical sources is not unusual. As is well documented, Astell’s theological and philosophical writings entail ant Clerical attitudes that brought her into direct conflict with High Church clergymen, mainly because her unwavering support of church and state did not prevent her from strategically incorporating radical pantheistic ideas when they proved expedient for scoring polemical points against her opponents. In this respect, the idea that Astell’s reading of the scriptures shares certain ant Clerical tendencies with Montagu’s deist interpretation of elite Muslim women, or that Montagu’s description of Muslim veiling practices could be read as an ethnographic application of her Pauline exegesis, is not particularly paradoxical or problematic.

As in Astell’s vindication of Christian veiling practices, Montagu does not equate the veil with women’s inferiority. For her, veiling is a “perpetual masquerade” that offers Turkish women “entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery” (71). It allows for a feminine mode of physical mobility that is denied in English patriarchal society, in which women must always be escorted by a male chaperon. She notes that “Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have, no woman, of what rank so ever 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” (71). In this case, veiling symbolizes Muslim women’s sexual, economic, and physical mobility in the public sphere, allowing them to engage in illicit and extramarital love affairs without being detected by their husbands or any other men: “You may guess then how effectually this disguises them . . . ’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” (71). Anonymity marks Turkish women’s sexual agency. Yet during Montagu’s visit to the mosque, the anonymity of this “disguise,” in which she is clothed as an upper-class Muslim woman, paradoxically renders her public identity visible to others. In Bakhtinian terms, the veil’s “perpetual masquerade” offers a transgressive fantasy of private anonymity that constitutes a dialogical public sphere for women.

Even though Astell and Montagu share positive views about the veil’s feminist potential, they do not share a theological position on female modesty. Unlike Astell, Montagu ascribes libertine freedoms to veiled, “faithful wives”:

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 punishments 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. Upon the whole, I look upon the Turkish women as the only free people in the empire. (71-72)

Whereas Astell locates the freedom of Christian veiling practices within a Pauline tradition of modesty, Montagu locates the freedom of Islamic veiling practices in a libertine tradition of immodesty. For Astell, the Pauline practice of veiling precludes female promiscuity and sexual misconduct. For Montagu, the veil allows women to own their bodies, because they receive a secular Islamic education that teaches them to believe in the pleasures of “this world” rather than in the salvation of the afterlife. This anti-Pauline theology renders Ottoman women “the only free people in the empire.” Nevertheless, Montagu and Astell want to recover the veil’s feminist significance beyond the gender inequality of the marriage contract. Despite their opposing theologies, Astell probably would have been amused with Montagu’s sympathetic assessment of the free lifestyles of veiled Muslim women: “As to their morality or good conduct . . . the Turkish ladies don’t commit one sin the less for not being Christians” (71). Understood from Astell’s theological perspective, Montagu’s writings cast these ladies as more accurately following Pauline prescriptions than do their Anglican counterparts, who have exchanged the biblical veiling practices that would have guaranteed their spiritual gender equality for the false universals of English (Whig) liberty.

Montagu locates the veil’s freedom exclusively within an Islamic (male) political economy. In contrast to Astell’s theology, she refuses to ascribe agency to Christian veiling practices. Her May 1718 letter to the
For Astell, veiling practices within the Christian (and Islamic) tradition render women subordinate subjects who nonetheless acquire spiritual equality by virtue of their modesty; for Montagu, only veiling practices in a deist-Islamic (anti-Pauline) tradition can guarantee women’s socioeconomic and sexual (libertine) agency, even though it cannot offer women protection from patriarchal violence. At any rate, they equally rely on the political theology of the absolute monarch—Astell locates it in the Pauline church and Montagu in the imperial harem—and refuse to treat the veil as a negative foil for “freeborn” Englishwomen. Their Tory-inflected and heterodox interpretations of the veil represent an early feminist attempt to redefine Anglican citizenship in the prophetic language of Mahometanism (primitive monotheism) rather than in the post-Lockean language of (Whig) supposed equality.

This essay has argued that the story of eighteenth-century British feminism remains incomplete if Montagu’s erotic letter on the 

hammam 

continues to be fetishized, rather than being read in the radical Protestant context that informs her other letters on female sexual reproduction and Ottoman veiling practices. Indeed, her letters are a direct product of the complex intersection between a deist epistolary letter genre that championed Islamic virtue and a Tory skepticism that contested the false universals of contractual rights. These two intellectual traditions cross paths in The Turkish Embassy Letters, producing a sustained critique of British marital laws. I am not, however, offering a political apology for the untainted virtues of Tory feminism. For Montagu, the Islamic freedom of the women’s coffeehouse is racially and class coded: Ottoman women’s natural beauty is determined by royal lineage and “shiningly white” skin color (59), whereas in her later travels to North Africa the ugly nakedness of dark-skinned, Tunisian Muslim women symbolizes a human subspecies of “baboons” (151). The 

hammam 

exemplifies a Qur’anic egalitarianism that dispenses with false universals but not with classism and racism. Although this topic lies beyond the scope of the present essay, the language of Tory feminism helped facilitate Englishwomen’s national, racial, and imperial self-definition: gender-inclusive conceptions of Anglican freedom implicitly grounded on notions of property/slave ownership, social subordination, racial hierarchy, and royal distinction—a high Tory and aristocratic language that Montagu unabashedly employs in her defense of elite Ottoman women.

Overall, the goal of this essay is to explain why Astell praised The Turkish Embassy Letters as a significant literary contribution to the republic of letters. It substantively revises the genealogy of British
feminism by examining the cross-party intellectual exchange between the Tory Astell and the Whig Montagu without marginalizing the Enlightenment freethinking skepticism adopted by both Whig and Tory feminists.\(^5\) Indeed, Tory opposition between 1717 and 1760 is a crucial part of the untold story of English radical expression, in which freethinking Tory authors formulated many of the methods of protest that would be used by Whig republicans decades later.\(^6\) Feminist admiration for the privileges and prerogatives of freeborn harem women is rooted in intertwined republican and royalist discourses about Islam. For example, the "radical royalist" and Tory libertine John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester enthusiastically read excerpts of Stubbe's account of the virtuous Islamic monarchy from Charles Blount's deist letter.\(^7\) Likewise, the intellectual exchange between Astell and Montagu suggests that eighteenth-century British feminism needs to be understood holistically as a mix of discourses in which the political theology of the absolute monarch, a deist philosophy of libertine sexuality, and the anti-authoritarian ideals of contractual rights played equally prominent, if ultimately divergent, roles in fashioning the skeptical critique of a male-dominated church and state order. Ultimately, Astell established the theological terms for a Post-Reformation critique that came into fruition in Montagu's polemical ethnography. Only in this limited sense can critics consider Astell and Montagu pioneer feminists who employed freethinking views on Muslim female sexuality and veiling practices to contest gender-exclusive conceptions of Anglican citizenship at the moment of their discursive inception.

Notes

I want to acknowledge Bernadette Andrea, Felicity Nussbaum, and the Southern California Eighteenth Century Group for their thoughtful and engaging comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I also want to thank Katherine Quinsey for helping me edit and revise this essay.


5. Hilda L. Smith calls attention to the uneasy application of democratic terms to women in the eighteenth century. All Men and Both Sexes: Gender, Politics, and the False Universal in England, 1640-1832 (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2002).


7. See Gallagher, 38.


12. I am borrowing the label "female deist" from Jane Shaw, "Gender and the 'Nature' of religion."
16. All citations are based on the original English translations of Giovanni Paolo Marana's Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, 8 vols, (London, 1702-03).
18. These authors were interested in revising theories of "imposture" by recasting Mahomet in a positive Greek-Roman republican mold—as an "Arabic legislator," See John Toland, Nazarenus: or, Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity (London, 1718), Henri Comte de Boulainvilliers, The Life of Mahomet (London, 1731), and Leibniz, 245-54. The anonymous author of Reflections on Mahonmedanism, and the Conduct of Mohammed. Occasioned by a late learned translation and exposition of the Koran (London, 1735), a work inspired by George Sale's 1734 translation of the Qur'an, suggests that Islam prefigured the Protestant Reformation: Mahomet "laid the foundations of a general and thorough Reformation, Conversion, and Re-union in ages to come" (30). See Justin Champion, "Legislators, impostors, and the politic origins of religion: English Theories of 'imposture' from Stubbe to Toland," in Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe, eds. Silvia Berri, François Charles-Daubert, and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 333-56.
26. The English Short Title Catalogue notes that "an Arabian physician is possibly a pseudonym of Anthony Collins." Given its antireligious sentiments and its use of materialist arguments, the letter could have been written by Collins. However, the authorship and publication of this work have been traced to John Toland. See Margaret C. Jacob, The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 162, 197, and Richard E. Sullivan, John Toland and the Deist Controversy (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP, 1982), 337. My argument relies on the rhetorical techniques shared by this text and Montagu's letters and not on the author function.
30. Barbara Freyner Stowasser argues that the Qur'anic concept of equality should not be equated with eighteenth-century democratic notions of "human rights,"
which ideally seek to eliminate economic and social inequality. Instead, Qur’anic equality reflects a morality that serves the collective well-being of the citizens of a given community (without eliminating class and gender hierarchies), a task that falls with equal measure on both men and women. “Women and Citizenship in the Qur’an,” in Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History, ed. Amira El Azhary Sonbul (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996), 33-34.

31. On the deist fascination with polygynist cultures, see Roy Porter, “Mixed Feelings: the Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain, ed. Paul-Gabriel Bousé (Totowa: Manchester UP, 1982), 1-27, particularly 4, 7, 11. In the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism, Stubbe argues that the Christian doctrine of monogamous marriage is “a Paganian tenant derived from Roman Constitutions, and complied with by the degenerate Christians” (173-174). He may have derived his arguments from some earlier Christians who argued that the church patriarchy were polygynists and that monogamy is a corrupt Catholic doctrine. See John Cairncross, After Polygamy was Made Sin, the Social History of Christian Polygamy (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1974).


40. See John Milton’s Paradise Lost 4.1.492 for a description of Eve and her unsinful, sensual pleasures.

42. The term “feminotopia” was first formulated by Mary Louise Pratt, only to be refined by many critics thereafter. See Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 155-171. Nicole Pohl defines the harem’s feminotopia as a symbolic space for “the imaginative resistance to the existing social economy.” Women, Space and Utopia: 1660-1800 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 146. Taking my cue from Felicity A. Nussbaum’s work, I will use the term feminotopia to include broader socioeconomic issues involving sexuality and citizenship in eighteenth-century England. See Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 160-62.

43. Throughout her life, Montagu was extremely conscious of herself as a woman without socioeconomic independence. Under the common law of coverture, she was forced to surrender her wealth and inheritances to her husband, Edward Wortley. Isobel Grundy discusses Montagu’s unhappy marriage life in her fourth chapter, “February-August 1712: Elope: ‘ran away with, without fortunes’” (45-56).


45. For a more focused study on how political decisions and actions centered on the elite Muslim women of the Ottoman household, see Dina Rizki Khoury, “Slippers at the Entrance or Behind Closed Doors: Domestic and Public Spaces for Mosuli Women,” in Women in the Ottoman Empire, ed. Madeline C. Zilfi (Leiden, New York, and Koln: Brill, 1997), 107-8, 123, 126-7.


52. On the early seventeenth-century response to the querelle des femmes, prompted by the publication of John Svetnam's misogynist pamphlet The Arraignment of Women (1615), see Rachel Speight's A Mouzell for Melastomus (1617), the earliest response to Svetnam that reinterprets the Genesis creation story and the Pauline injunctions for women's submission to men from a feminist perspective. Margaret Askew Fell Fox's Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures (1667) could be seen as the culmination of the querelle des femmes. In this feminist polemic, Fox protests against women's exclusion from Church involvement by reinterpreting the Pauline injunctions against women's public preaching.


54. A compelling postcolonial critique that qualifies Montagu's progressive feminism in the context of her idealization of the Ottoman slave institution is provided in Adam R. Beach, "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Slavery in the Ottoman (and the British) Empire," Philological Quarterly 85, no. 3, 1 (2006): 293-314. He argues that Montagu's casual references to servant girls remain eerily silent about the violent exploitation involved in the Ottoman and British Empires' slave trafficking, and that her conception of Muslim women's freedom is defined in terms of economic inequality, social and class subordination, and royal deference.

