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The Ottoman Obsession

In 1603 an immense volume of more than six hundred leaves, *The Generalle Historie of the Turkes*, was published in London. By no means the first book printed in England on the subject of the Turks and the European efforts to halt their advance, it was, nevertheless, the first to attempt a general history

from the first beginning of that nation to the rising of the Ottoman Famelie, with all the notable expeditions of the Christian Princes against them, together with the lives and conquests of the Ottoman Kings and Emperours, faithfully collected out of the best histories, both ancient and moderne, and digested into one continual historic until this present year 1603.

Its author was the English clergyman Richard Knolles, a former scholar of Lincoln College, Oxford, and headmaster of a school at Sandwich. Knolles did not know a word of Turkish—indeed very few Europeans of his day did—nor had he ever left his native island. He was, however, an educated Renaissance Englishman who could read Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and even German. Thanks to these attainments, he was able to make use of the writings of earlier authors whose linguistic skills and personal travels outstripped his own. “I collected so much of the History as possibly I could,” he wrote, “out of the Writings of such as were themselves present, and as it were Eye-witnesses of the greatest part of that they write.”

Knolles’s history, drawing extensively as it does on the literature of travel, mission, diplomacy, and scholarship, faithfully reflects the perceptions and concerns of Christian Europe as regards the Turks and their faith—the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic religion—during the preceding centuries.

The threat posed by the Turks had long been perceived as twofold: a challenge to Christendom from the rival Muslim faith, and a menace to Europe of conquest and incorporation into, in Knolles’s words, “the glorious Empire of the Turks, the present terror of the world.”

European Christendom seems to have had some initial difficulty in recognizing Islam as a rival world religion, preferring instead to designate the Muslim enemy by ethnic, rather than religious, terms. Some churchmen, however, were well aware that they were confronting not just an ethnic tide but a rival faith, similar in some ways to their own and with equal universal aspirations. They set to work to refute the Islamic faith and therefore, of necessity, to study it. But their efforts did not stop there: not only must Christians be safeguarded from the blandishments of Muslim emissaries, but the infidel must be converted to the true faith. In the sixteenth century, and even more so in the seventeenth, however, there occurred a decisive change of attitude. True, the theological arguments of the Reformation brought about a revival of interest in Islamic scripture and doctrines as certain warring Christian sects saw in Islam a possible ally for themselves or for their enemies. But in general, with the growing intellectual sophistication of Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe, the Islamic religion was no longer feared as a serious rival threatening to convert large numbers of Christians.

Convents there still were, but mainly of two kinds. In the European lands conquered by Turks there were some—surprisingly few—who, for one reason or another, decided to adopt the religion of their new masters. There were others who came from Europe to seek their fortune in the lands of the Turks and at some stage embraced Islam, perhaps as a step in their careers, perhaps out of genuine religious conviction. But these converts in no way constituted a significant movement away from Christianity to Islam, and even Luther, though much concerned with the “Turkish peril,” perceived it primarily in military and political, rather than in religious, terms. “Antichrist,” he declared in his *Table Talk*, “is the Pope and the Turk together. A beast full of life must have a body and soul. The spirit or soul of Antichrist is the Pope, his flesh and body the Turk.” And again, “The Turks are the people of the wrath of God.”

Such indeed was now perceived as the main threat: Turkish military power menaced the very heart of Christendom. From the time the Turks first crossed the Straits of Galipoli and set foot on the European mainland, they had achieved one brilliant victory after another, and advanced rapidly into southeastern Europe. In 1389 the Serbs and their Albanian allies were crushed at Kosovo; in 1396 a great crusade mounted by the chivalry of the West was defeated by Sultan Beyazid in a pitched battle at Nikopolis on the Danube. Many of the Frankish knights were taken prisoner, and the sultan paraded his resplendent captives as far east as Afghanistan to flaunt his triumph before the Muslim world. The fifteenth century brought further advances: the capture of Thessaloniki in 1430, the defeat of Christian forces at Varna in 1444 and at Kosovo in 1448, culminating in the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, henceforth the capital of the new empire of Europe and Asia, which the sultan and his forefathers had created.
they were threatening Italy at both ends. At the northern end of the Adriatic, the Turkish cavalry was skirmishing almost within sight of Venice; at the southern end, a Turkish expeditionary force seized and held the port of Otranto and prepared to embark on further campaigns in Italy. Only the death of Sultan Mehmed II in 1481 and an ensuing struggle for the succession between his sons led to the withdrawal of the garrison and the abandonment of plans for Italian conquest.

Under Mehmed’s successors the Turks consolidated their eastern Mediterranean base by absorbing Syria, Palestine, and Egypt and then advanced into Europe, laying siege to Vienna in 1529. The siege ended in a stalemate, with the Turks in possession of half of Hungary, including Buda, which became the seat of a Turkish pasha. For the next 150 years the Ottoman and Hapsburg armies faced each other in central Europe in a struggle that would determine the fate of the entire continent. This stalemate was not resolved until 1683, when a second Turkish siege of Vienna failed, this time bringing unequivocal defeat and withdrawal.

For centuries, however, most of southeastern Europe remained under Turkish rule, while Turkish fleets dominated the eastern and menacing the western Mediterranean. All Europe was keenly aware of the threat that hung over it. As far away as Iceland the Lutheran prayer book included a prayer beseeching God to “save us from the evil designs of the Pope and the terror of the Turk.” The latter, at least, was no idle fear. Iceland’s historians and poets had much to say about a raid of Barbyrun corvains, who descended upon their coasts in 1627 and carried off hundreds of captives to the slave markets of Algiers. One captive, a Lutheran pastor by the name of Oluf Egilsson, who was subsequently ransomed and returned to his native land, wrote a book describing his adventures as a slave in North Africa; the discovery that his maid servant had fetched a much higher price than he had upset him as much as anything else.

But the vast and thriving empire of the Turk was not only a military threat to Europe; it was also an extensive and ramified market where European merchants could come in increasing numbers to profit from the open commercial policies of the Turks and the favorable treatment they accorded to foreign merchants. In earlier days, before the great technological and industrial advances gave Europe a decisive economic advantage over the rest of the world, there was little that the relatively backward and impoverished states of the West could offer. They came to the Turkish lands mostly as purchasers and were constrained to pay for their purchases in hard cash. The inflow of bullion from the newly discovered lands of the New World for a while provided them with the means to do this.

The one European product—apart from slaves—for which the Turks had a substantial and continuing demand was weaponry. Though such weaponry was needed principally to pursue the war against Christendom, there was never any dearth of Christian merchants willing to provide it and even, on occasion, to finance its purchase. By the sixteenth century, European writings were full of accusations and recriminations by various Christian governments and communities, each accusing the other of supplying both weapons and military skill to the Turks. A papal bull issued by Clement VII in 1527 pronounced excommunication and anathema on all those who [took] to the Saracens. Turks and other enemies of the Christian name, horses, weapons, iron, iron wire, tin, copper, bandarapsapta, brass, sulfur, saltpeter, and all else suitable for the making of artillery and instruments, arms and machines for offense, with which they fight against the Christians, as also ropes and timber and other nautical supplies and other prohibited wares.

A century later Pope Urban VIII issued a similar bull, this one with a slightly longer list of prohibited war materials, excommunicating and anathematizing those who, directly or indirectly, gave aid, comfort, or information to the Turks and other enemies of Christianity. Neither excommunication nor more immediate penalties in this world, however, were able to deter or even seriously limit the highly profitable traffic in weapons. Nor surprisingly, the image of the Turk as trading partner, together with that of the Turk as invader and conqueror, figured prominently in European literature, easily overshadowing the image of the Turk as the standard-bearer of a rival religion.

By the time Richard Knolles set pen to paper to write his general history of the Turks, the educated European reader already had at his disposal, in print, a vast literature of books and pamphlets—a modern bibliographer has listed forty-nine in English alone—on the Turks and the countries over which they ruled, their history, manners, and customs, their armies, revenues, and system of government.

The stories and impressions recorded in this literature derived from a wide variety of sources, extending over several centuries. Some of the earliest information was provided by escaped or liberated slaves. The advance of the Turkish armies on the European mainland and of the Turkish and North African fleets in the Mediterranean and beyond brought about the capture and enslavement of many Christians. While the great majority of Christians who served as Turkish slaves, like the Turks who were enslaved in Europe, left no record of their experiences, some were men of letters who wrote accounts of their strange and wonderful adventures after their return. One of the first was the Bavarian Johann Schlüterberger, who was captured by the Turks at the Battle of Nikopolis in 1396 and remained an enslaved slave, a native of Transylvania known as Georgius de Hungaria, who was captured in 1438 at the age of sixteen by a Turkish raiding party. After eight attempts to escape, in 1488 he was finally rewarded with success. Some time thereafter he entered the Dominican order and wrote his memoirs, which, though composed when he was an old man, retained their freshness. His “Tractate on the customs, conditions and iniquities
of the Turks," published in many editions and translations, became a major source of knowledge about Turkey for European readers.

Among the other returned slaves, two Italians are of particular importance. One of them, Giovan Maria Angiolello, was born in Vicenza about 1451 or 1452. As a young man he enrolled in the service of the Venetian republic and in 1470, at the fall of Negroponte, was taken prisoner by the Turks. More fortunate than most, he became the personal slave of Prince Mustafa, the son of Sultan Mehmed II. After the prince's death in 1474, Angiolello was sent to Istanbul, where he attracted the attention of the sultan himself and was appointed to a post in the palace treasury. After the death of Sultan Mehmed in 1481, Angiolello's position appears to have deteriorated, and he took steps to arrange his escape; in 1488 he returned to Italy, where he lived until his death, about 1524. Though his description of the Ottoman capital and imperial household long remained in manuscript, it was read and quoted extensively by contemporary and later European writers interested in the Ottoman establishment.

Another Italian slave who contributed greatly to Western knowledge of the Turk was Giovannantonio Menavino, a Genoese who was captured at the age of twelve when a cargo ship belonging to his father was seized by pirates. Sent to Turkey, Menavino was educated in the sultan's household and remained in the country for ten years, spending much of that time as a palace official. In 1513 he managed to escape to Italy via Trebizond and the Black Sea; back home, he published works on the life, law, and religion of the Turks, on the court of the sultan, and on some of the wars conducted by the Turkish armies.

After the first Turkish siege of Vienna in 1529, the situation in Europe more or less stabilized, and fewer captives remained in Turkey for any length of time. Of course Europeans were still captured at sea by the Barbary corsairs, but they were taken mostly to North Africa rather than to the Near East.

Returning slaves were not the only Christian travelers from the East. There were also Christian refugees from the lands conquered by the Turks: first Greeks from the former Byzantine territories and capital, and later Balkan Christians fleeing from the Turks and appealing to the West for shelter and help.

By the sixteenth century there was also a considerable movement of Western Europeans to Turkey, where they had no great difficulty in entering, traveling around, and even establishing residence. This freedom was in marked contrast with the usually insuperable obstacles placed before such few Turks and other Muslims as tried to visit Europe.

European travelers to Turkey were of various sorts. Some were pilgrims, bound for the Christian holy places in Palestine. These became fewer—or at least less articulate—as the age of skepticism approached. Far more important were the merchants and traders who came in increasing numbers to profit from the rich commercial opportunities of the Turkish Empire. At first they were mainly from Italy, from commercial cities such as Venice and Genoa; later merchants from France, Holland, England, and other European countries followed. Although most of these merchants confined themselves to their business dealings, a few recorded their impressions in books or in letters, thus adding their contributions to the Western image of the Turk.

Commerce was also a main concern of the diplomatic visitors, who from the sixteenth century onward wrote lengthy reports and sometimes books about Turkey. These envoys often had the advantage of casual visitors of long residence in the Turkish capital and time to form a circle of acquaintance—if not among Turks, at least among local non-Muslims—upon which to draw for deeper, and perhaps more accurate, knowledge of the country. Of particular importance were the Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, a native of Flanders who was the ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire in Istanbul from 1554 to 1562. His letters, first published in Antwerp in 1581, were reprinted many times, both in the original Latin and, in translation, in most western European languages.

Busbecq was a man of keen observation and penetrating judgment, and his letters exercised a profound influence on the European perception of the Turk. From the sixteenth century a series of envoys from Venice spent some time in Istanbul, and their reports are to this day a rich source of information on events and circumstances in the Turkish capital. Although these reports were not published at the time, their unclassified contents seem to have been well known.

Slaves, refugees, pilgrims, merchants, and diplomats all contributed substantially to the growth of the Western image of the Turk. There were other travelers—soldiers, spies, and miscellaneous adventurers—whose writings were intended to throw light on the current situation and future prospects of relations between the Turks and Europe and thus to gratify a rapidly growing European curiosity. A good deal of the published literature consists of diplomatic, commercial, and intelligence reports, as well as writings to which it would not be inappropriate to apply the term "journalistic."

One category of visitor particularly well placed to satisfy the avid European curiosity concerning the domestic arrangements of the Turks were the physicians. By the sixteenth century Turks were becoming aware that European medicine was more advanced than their own, and the services of European doctors were in growing demand. The needs of their profession gave these men greater access to Turkish homes than was enjoyed by other visitors. Although even for doctors access was still severely limited, their accounts of the harems, of the sultans, and of lesser persons were eagerly studied.

Another group of European visitors who contributed substantially to the growth of the image of the Turk were artists. Some appear to have gone with personal commissions to paint portraits, as did the painter Gentile Bellini, sent by the Venetian republic to paint the portrait of
Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. Others traveled on their own initiative. Most commonly they went in the suite of some great man. One of the first of these was the German artist Erhard Reuwich, who accompanied his noble and priestly patron Bernhard von Breydenbach on a pilgrimage in 1483–84 and joined with him in producing the first illustrated guidebook to the Holy Land, a work that depicted many Turkish figures and costumes. Two artists are particularly interesting: the Fleming Peter Coeck of Aelst, who was in Istanbul in 1553 and whose remarkable set of engravings was published in Antwerp in 1553; and Melchior Lorich, or Lorich, who stayed in Istanbul between 1556 and 1558, part of that time in Busbecq’s entourage. These and many other European artists contributed the pictures that appeared time and time again as illustrations to the travel literature. Although some of these pictures are fantastic, many are drawn from life.

The artistic reflection of the image of the Turk in the West is not limited to those intrepid writers and artists who ventured into the Ottoman realms. Painters and illustrators, with or without the benefit of personal acquaintance, depicted Turkish figures and scenes in a tradition that often combined the exotic with the erotic. Western dramatists, for their part, peopled the stages of the blossoming European theater with fanciful and violent Turkish heroes and villains.

Mention should also be made of the role of the scholars in propagating the image of the Turk. The intellectual curiosity of the Renaissance extended even to what Europeans perceived as an alien and infidel empire. A number of historians, mainly in Italy, wrote books on the history of the Turks and their neighbors. Although most of these histories, like Knolles’s, were based on Western sources and conceived in ignorance of the Turkish language and literature, an outstanding exception was the work of the German Johannes Löwenklau, known as Leunclavius. Leunclavius’s Latin versions of Ottoman historical texts, published toward the end of the sixteenth century, were eagerly read and turned to account by European historians, who thereby contributed greatly to Europe’s better understanding of its mighty and enigmatic Eastern neighbor.

European sources of information concerning the Turk were thus diverse. Even more diverse were the Europeans themselves. Italians and Frenchmen, Catholics and Protestants, merchants and missionaries, soldiers and diplomats, each had a different perception of the Turk, the result of widely differing experiences and concerns. There are, however, a few basic themes that recur and predominate, lending a certain consistency to the European perception of the Turk and response to the Turkish presence in Europe.

One of these themes concerns customs surrounding food and drink. In one of the earliest European references to coffee, the Venetian envoy Gianfrancesco Morosini, writing in 1585, noted that for entertainment it is their practice to drink publicly, both in shops and in the streets, not only men of low status but also among the greatest, a black liquid as boiling hot as they can stand, which is extracted from a seed which they call cavae, and which they say has the quality of keeping a man awake.

The Englishman George Sandys, who visited Turkey in 1610, noted the same habit:

Although they be destitute of Taverns, yet have they their Coffa-Houses, which something resemble them. There they sit chatting most of the day, and sippe of a drinke called Coffa (of the berry that it is made of) in little China dishes, as hot as they can suffer it: black as soote, and tasting not much unlike it... which helpt them as they say, digestion, and procureth alacrity.

Even more remarkable than their habit of drinking this strange, hot, black drink was their rejection of alcohol, forbidden to them by their religion. Oluf Egilsson, the captured Icelandic pastor, noted with astonishment that on the corsair ship that carried him and his fellows off to Algiers, the corsairs had casks of brandy, which they gave to their captives, while they themselves drank only water. Other travelers and prisoners made similar observations. Though it was well known that the Turks did not always strictly observe this ban, its very existence was strange to the European observer and formed a common theme in the European stereotype of the Turk. Thus, for example, in a play written in 1700 by the English playwright William Congreve we find this drinking song:

To drink is a Christian diversion
Unknown to the Turk and the Persian
Let Mahometan foole
Live by heathenish rules,
And be drowned over tea-cups and coffee.
But let British lads sing,
Crown a health to the king.
And a fig for your sultan and sophy!

(The Way of the World, act 4, scene 1)

Amid all the variety of literature about Turkey in the West, certain basic themes recur and indeed predominate. One of them is fear: the deep and ever present fear of the Turk as an intruder in Europe and a menace to Christendom. When Shakespeare’s Othello spoke of “a malignant and a turbanned Turk,” he was expressing the common idea of an evil and alien invader. Some Europeans saw themselves primarily as Christians threatened by a new assault from the old Islamic enemy. Others, more classically minded, saw themselves as the heirs of ancient Hellas defending civilization against the barbarous Asiatic heirs of the great kings of Persia. Others, again in a classical conceit, depicted the Turks as the descendants
of the Trojans—Teucri—come to seek vengeance on their ancient Greek enemies.

For men of strong religious convictions, the Turk could be the embodiment of evil. "If an Englishman," says John Milton in his Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, "forgetting all laws, human, civil and religious, offend against life and liberty, he is no better than a Turk, a Saracen, a heathen." But such characterization was by no means unanimous, especially among those whose travels brought them into direct contact with the mysterious neighbors.

Indeed, there were some who openly protested against this hostile image. Thus the French traveler Jean Thevenot, who went to Turkey in 1652, observed:

There are many in Christendom who believe that the Turks are great devils, barbarians, and people without faith, but those who have known them and who have talked with them have a quite different opinion; since it is certain that the Turks are good people who follow very well the commandment given to us by nature, only to do to others what we would have done to us.

Thevenot continued with the observation that these good qualities were to be found only among the native Turks and not among the converts "who are present in great numbers in Turkey, and who are surely capable of every kind of wickedness and vice." This observation was corroborated by other travelers. In contrast to what was commonly believed, "the native Turks are honorable people, and respect honorable people, whether Turks, Christians or Jews. They do not believe at all that it is permitted to deceive or to rob, no more a Christian than a Turk... they are very devout and very charitable."

The Scottish philosopher David Hume, speaking in his Essays of "the integrity, gravity and bravery of the Turk," echoed an old established tradition among European writers on Turkey, many of whom contrasted these qualities with the alleged defects of other peoples in the region. A feature of Turkish life that won the approval of many visitors was the administration of justice. In the traditional Islamic state there were no lawyers, that is to say, no advocates who, for a fee, would argue one side or another in a case. Litigants argued their own causes, and the justice dispensed by the Qadi was swift, expeditious, and inexpensive. European travelers, particularly those who had some experience of the costly and lengthy litigation procedures of most European countries, were not unimpressed, and the Turkish Qadi was often held up as a model. Another observation, made by a French traveler in the seventeenth century, was that the Turks "are not quarrelsome, do not fight duels, and do not carry swords in the city. Even the soldiers wear only daggers."

A virtue sometimes accorded the Turk—though by no means unanimously—was tolerance. Until the eighteenth century tolerance was a quality neither expected nor admired by many Europeans. They reproached the Turk, not because he imposed his doctrines by force—how else would one impose them?—but because his doctrines were false, that is, not Christian. In fact, however, the Turk did not impose his doctrines by force but instead allowed his subjects to follow their own religions, provided that they respected Muslim supremacy and paid their taxes. The result was that in the seventeenth century the Turkish capital was probably the only city in Europe where Christians of all creeds and persuasions could live in reasonable security and argue their various schisms and heresies. Nowhere in Christendom was this possible.

Some European writers had the grace to concede this point. Thus, the Englishman Thomas Fuller, in his History of the Crusades published in 1639, observed: "To give the Mahometans their due, they are generally good fellows in this point, and Christians among them may keep their consciences if their torques be fettered not to oppose the doctrine of Mahomet."

Along with honesty, sobriety, and tolerance, hospitality was another quality singled out as a characteristic virtue of the Turks.

Among the faults and vices ascribed to the Turk, two themes dominated: arbitrary power and unbridled lust. So universal were these themes and so striking the terms in which they were presented, in both letters and arts, that one is impelled to seek their explanation in the European, rather than the Turkish, psyche. After all, on more than one occasion we of the West have projected our deepest hopes and fears onto strange peoples and distant realms.

Western writers have been virtually unanimous in depicting the Ottoman sultan—the Great Signor—as a despotic and capricious autocrat, restrained by neither laws nor established interests, exercising the powers of life and death over all his subjects. Comparing absolute and limited monarchy, no less a connoisseur of political power than Niccolo Machiavelli took the sultan as the model of the former:

The examples of these two different Governments now in our days, are the Turk and the King of France. The Turks whole Monarchy is governed by one Lord, and the rest are all his Vassals; and dividing his whole kingdom into divers Sanguiacques or Governments, he sends several thither: and those hee chopp and changes, as hee pleases. But the King of France is seate in the midst of a multitude of Lords, who of old have been acknowledg'd for such by their subjects, and being below'd by them, enjoy their preeminencies: nor can the King take their States from them without danger.

(The Prince, translated by E. Dacres in 1640)

In the same spirit Shakespeare's Henry V, on succeeding to the throne, offered this reassurance to some courtiers who feared that they might suffer under the new monarch:

This is the English not the Turkish court.
Not Amurath an Amurath succeeds.
But Harry, Harry.

(Henry IV, part 2, act 5, scene 2)

Although the sultan was certainly an autocrat with powers greater than most European monarchs were able to muster, he was not despotic. Indeed, he was subject to the laws of Islam no less than the humblest of his slaves. In the course of time a whole series of groups and interests evolved within the empire, imposing effective limits on the sultan’s power. Some Europeans who had the opportunity to observe more closely the Turkish system in its later phases were well aware of this development. Thus, in 1786, when the French ambassador Choiseul-Gouffier was trying to persuade the Ottoman government to adopt certain military reforms, he explained the reasons for his limited success in the following way: “Things here are not as in France, where the King is sole master; here it is necessary to persuade the Ulama, the men of the law, the holders of high offices, and those who no longer hold them.”

But despite these developments and a growing European awareness of them, the older image of total and capricious power persisted. As late as the nineteenth century Sam Weller, in The Pickwick Papers, remarked, “It’s over, and cannot be helped, and that’s one consolation, as they always say in Turkey, ven they cut the wrong man’s head off.”

Even more pervasive and persistent than the image of the capricious despot is that of the lustful and licentious Turk, whose alleged sexual prowess and practices have been described in what has sometimes amounted to pornographic literature and art. Rampant sexuality is an old accusation leveled by Europeans against their Eastern neighbors. Already in antiquity some Greek and Latin authors had made this point against the Saracens. The theme cropped up occasionally in Byzantine and Crusading times about the Muslims and deepened when Ottoman tolerance of foreigners brought greater numbers of Europeans to the lands of Islam. There was a curious convergence in this matter between Christian travelers to the East and the few Muslim travelers who ventured into Christian Europe. Almost all the Muslims were struck by the extraordinary license allowed to Western women: in the same spirit Western travelers displayed a prurient curiosity about the women’s quarters of the Muslim household, especially the sultan’s palace. Muslim travelers in Christendom were at once repelled and attracted by its forward and immoral women, while Westerners in the East spoke with barely veiled envy of its sensuous and lascivious men and the opportunities that Muslim usage afforded them. If the encounter between East and West was really a meeting between loose women and lustful men, it is remarkable that they did not get along better. In truth, of course, both images, like so many of the mutual perceptions of both sides, were stereotypes.

What chiefly aroused, in varying degree, the astonishment, reprobation, and envy of Western visitors were the institutions of polygamy and concubination, and the processes by which the personnel of the harem were recruited and replenished. Western travelers dwelled in loving detail—much of it imaginary—on the staff of the seraglio, the odalisques, eunuchs, dwarfs, deaf mutes, and other exotic figures. It is revealing that in most European languages the word saray—which in Turkish and Persian simply means palace—came to connote only that part of the palace reserved for the women, presumably because that was the only part in which European travelers were interested. The more correct term is “harem,” from the Arabic harem, meaning forbidden in the sense of off limits or out of bounds. Although the law allowed a man four wives and as many slave concubines as he could afford, in fact such indulgence was limited to a small upper class. The possession of a large harem, from the days of King Solomon in all his glory to more recent times, was an important status symbol for a Middle Eastern monarch. It offered some other advantages, too.

Not surprisingly, the image of the Turk as an insatiable sensualist is the best known and most widespread of all the stereotypes. When Edgar in Shakespeare’s King Lear, reciting his sins, wished to speak of his sexual excesses, he claimed that he had “in women, out-paramoured the Turk” (act 3, scene 4). By the nineteenth century, European travelers, fiction writers, and artists luxuriated in the sexuality of a largely mythical Orient and regaled Victorian drawing rooms with stories and pictures of the harems and their mysterious denizens.

One of the few European women to visit Turkey and to write about it was an Englishwoman, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, born Pembridge, who in 1717 visited Istanbul, where her husband was ambassador. As a woman, she had access to the harem and could observe and describe the mysteries that had tantalized so many males; as the wife of an ambassador, she shared his social opportunities without his political constraints. In addition, she had the further advantage—by no means common among travelers—of being cultivated, intelligent, and perceptive.

What makes Lady Montagu’s visit even more interesting is that it came at a time when the old myth of the Turk as a barbarous, despotic, and lustful infidel was just beginning to give way to the new myth, still in its embryonic form, of the non-European as the embodiment of mystery and romance and ultimately of wronged innocence. By the eighteenth century, Europe was looking at Turkey with somewhat different eyes. The religious certitude that for so long had made Christian Europeans look down on Islam was beginning to give way to a mood of self-questioning and, in time, self-doubt. Such a hint of the self-deprecation of a consumer society confronting another, more restful way of life is evident in one of Lady Montagu’s letters:

Thus you see, Sir, these people are not so unpolish’d as we represent them. Tis true their magnificence is of a different taste from ours, and perhaps of a better. I am almost of opinion they have a right notion of Life, while they consume it in Music, Gardens, Wine, and delicate eating, while we are tormenting our brains with some Scheme of Politics or
Studying some science to which we can never attain, or if we do, cannot persuade people to set that value upon it we do our selves... I allow you to laugh at me for the sensual declaration that I had rather be a rich Effendi with all his ignorance, than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge.

In the sixteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire was still at the pinnacle of power, it was, among statesmen at least, the Turkish menace that overshadowed all other aspects; two empires, two faiths, two different ways of life stood face to face, contending for the mastery of the known world. To some at the time it seemed that the centralized, disciplined power of the Ottoman must surely prevail over a weak, divided, and irresolute Christian Europe.

Yet how wrong they were. Though Ottoman power remained a factor on the European scene for years to come, it had already passed its peak. The Muslim faith no longer attracted Europeans; the Turkish menace was ceasing to frighten them. There was, in fact, no settlement: between the Turks and the Persians, but continuous struggle and occasional wars until the eighteenth century, by which time neither Turkey nor Persia offered any threat to Europe. On the contrary, now they themselves were threatened. A new image of the Turk—weak and decadent, an invitation to foreign domination—was replacing the once prevalent images of power and menace, while a new image of the European—threatening, alien, and yet seductive—was looming on the Turkish horizon.