

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

“The borrowed veil”: reassessing gender studies of early modern England and Islam

The starting point for this study is the significance of women’s agency in the inaugural Anglo-Ottoman encounter, which began during the sixteenth century and extended through the early eighteenth century.¹ The English realm, excluded from Catholic Europe because of its turn to Protestantism, sought unorthodox diplomatic, economic, and military ties with the Ottoman empire, whose dominions stretched across Asia, Europe, the Arabian peninsula, and North Africa. Sustained engagement with the Islamic world during this period also encompassed the Persian and Mediterranean realms bordering the Ottomans, though involvement with the Islamic empire of the Mughals was minimal.² These ties affected English culture from the middle of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign (1558–1603), when her ambassadors brokered the first Anglo-Ottoman trade agreement, through the next century and a half, when the balance of power shifted in favor of the nascent British empire. Elizabeth propelled this encounter through her diplomatic correspondence with Muslim sovereigns, including the Ottoman queen mother or *valide sultan*. Over the course of the seventeenth century, this encounter would include English women from the highest to the lowest ranks as writers and travelers, such as the first English woman to publish original works in the prestige genres of Renaissance romance and sonnet sequences, the first generation of Quaker women missionaries and polemicists, the first female playwrights for the English stage, and the first English woman to compose a travelogue of her “embassy” to the Ottoman empire.

Despite the detailed historical documentation of England’s initial encounter with the Ottomans, literary and cultural studies of the era present two striking lacunae. The first derives from the false dichotomy between a constantly powerful West and a correspondingly subordinate East resulting from anachronistic applications of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978).³ As part of a cadre of scholars who recognize that early modern imperialism in the “Greater Western World” involved Ottoman, Spanish, and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

only belatedly English claims, I consider the decisive place Islamic powers occupied in this network.⁴ The second lacuna results from the effacement of women's agency in recent studies on Anglo-Ottoman relations, most of which focus on gendered representations in male-authored travel narratives and dramas to the exclusion of sustained attention to women's cultural productions. Such studies pay little attention to the archive of early modern women's writing accessed since the 1980s or to the methodologies of women's studies developed to recover alternative voices from male-dominated sources.⁵

In response to these gaps, I argue for the necessity of integrating gender *as articulated by women sovereigns, writers, and travelers* when analyzing the discourses informing the era's Anglo-Ottoman – and more broadly, Anglo-Islamic – relations.⁶ Where these discourses consist of writing by men, as in the public theater and popular travelogues of the era, this approach constitutes a “feminist critique.” In her landmark essay, “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), Elaine Showalter defines feminist critique as “concerned with *woman as reader*” and encompassing such subjects as “the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history.” Although incorporating the techniques of feminist critique, this study emphasizes the field of *la gynocritique* or “gynocritics,” which is primarily “concerned with *woman as writer*.”⁷ It further endorses Margaret Ezell's *Women's Literary History* (1993), which questions the application of the post-nineteenth-century model of imaginative literature and individual authorship to earlier women's writing.⁸ Accordingly, my analysis focuses on collaborative textual productions such as diplomatic letters, travelogues, and religious tracts, as well as more conventional forms of prose fiction, poetry, and drama. Finally, the relatively rare studies of early modern English women and the Islamic world, including Billie Melman's *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918* (1992), typically begin with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters*, based on her travels throughout the Ottoman empire during the early eighteenth century.⁹ While these *Letters* remain crucial for any analysis of Anglo-Ottoman relations, Montagu's “embassy” is falsely construed – most famously by Montagu herself – as *sui generis*. I address this truncated genealogy by turning to earlier publications that advance our understanding of how women negotiated conflicting discourses of empire when England remained a marginal player in the great power politics of Europe – which included the Ottomans – even as it aspired to global imperial status.¹⁰

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

As my investigation shows, cultural agency for early modern English women generally involved a negotiated subject position, though by the turn of the eighteenth century the oppositional position of “feminist” was emerging.¹¹ From the late sixteenth century, when the act of the objectified female speaking itself constituted a radical assertion of agency, to the early eighteenth century, when a discourse of women’s rights began to be articulated by the first feminists, these women approached the era’s conflicting discourses of empire from a distinctively gendered position. Oftentimes, they aligned themselves with patriarchal anglocentric discourses casting them as superior to “the ‘other’ woman of empire,” even if that empire was more imaginary than real in the early modern period.¹² However, because the Ottomans cast the English nation as subordinate, many women therein identified with their counterparts from the Islamic world to compensate for their domestic marginality. Examples include Safiye, the Ottoman queen mother, whose correspondence with Queen Elizabeth was preserved in Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (2nd edn, 1598–1600); the Persian Circassian Lady Teresa Sampsonia Sherley, whose travels with her husband, Robert Sherley, informed the first original prose romance by an English woman, Lady Mary Wroth’s *Urania* (1621); the mid-century sect of pseudo-Muslim women “from beyond the Sea” associated with the early Quaker movement, which produced most of the publications by English women in the seventeenth century; the accounts of Muslim women co-opted by late seventeenth-century English female playwrights from their male contemporaries’ travelogues; and the firsthand record of Muslim women’s lives as recounted by Montagu. Hence, women from the Islamic world, most of whom were Muslim, became part of *English* literary history.

Before turning to the gynocritical analyses that are my focus, I must address the continuing effacement of women’s agency in literary and cultural studies of early modern England and the Islamic world. The reiterated trope, “turning Turk,” which has assumed the status of a “false universal” in current criticism, signals this effacement.¹³ Featured in Philip Massinger’s play, *The Renegado* (1630), it has been used to link early modern imperialism, commerce, conversion, and masculinity.¹⁴ However, Massinger’s play contains a related but more ambiguously gendered term for conversion: “apostata.”¹⁵ A feminist critique of Massinger’s play highlighting the effaced gender differential of this alternative draws attention to the importance of seriously engaging early modern women when addressing the Anglo-Ottoman encounter. To reiterate, such critiques remain incomplete if we

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature*

do not attend to the cultural productions of these women, which is the goal of the balance of this study.

TURNING FROM “TURK” TO “APOSTATA”: GENDERING
CONVERSION IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

As suggested above, the masculinized tropes of the “renegade” and “turning Turk” have been deployed by various scholars seeking to challenge the transhistorical application of Said’s *Orientalism* to the early modern period. Nabil Matar, at the crest of the current wave of attention to Islam and England during the Renaissance, draws on early modern sources to identify a “renegado” as “one that first was a Christian, and afterwards becommeth a Turke.”¹⁶ In *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (1998), Matar demonstrates that, *contra* post-colonial anachronisms, during the early modern period “Britain did not enjoy military or industrial power over Islamic countries. Rather, the Muslims had a power of self-representation which English writers knew they had either to confront or to engage.”¹⁷ As he elaborates in *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (1999),

Historians and critics who have inaccurately applied a postcolonial theory to a precolonial period in British history forget that in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, England was not a colonial power – not in the imperial sense that followed in the eighteenth century. Although England had colonized Wales and Scotland and was waging a colonial war in Ireland, at the time Queen Elizabeth died, England did not yet possess a single colonial inch in the Americas.¹⁸

Working within the disciplinary framework of Ottoman studies, Daniel Goffman in *Britons in the Ottoman Empire, 1642–1660* (1998) confirms this ongoing reorientation with his conclusion, “[p]erhaps the nineteenth-century Briton could get under the skin of the colonial; in the seventeenth-century Mughal and Ottoman empires, it was more likely the Englishman whose shell would be pierced.”¹⁹ In sum, the balance of power constituting orientalism during the nineteenth-century peak of western European colonialism cannot accurately be applied to England’s proto-colonial era prior to the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, it cannot be dismissed as entirely irrelevant, since the anglocentric project of global imperialism imagined at the close of the sixteenth century frequently represented the Ottomans as positive foils.²⁰

Augmenting the historicist accounts of Matar and Goffman, literary critics such as Daniel Vitkus in “Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor” (1997), Barbara Fuchs in “Conquering

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

Islands: Contextualizing *The Tempest*" (1997), and Jonathan Burton in "Anglo-Ottoman Relations and the Image of the Turk in *Tamburlaine*" (2000) complicate approaches to early modern English drama by exploring how increasingly racialized representations of religious conversion placed profound cultural and political pressures on English *men's* sense of their national identity.²¹ However, as emphasized above, literary and cultural studies have yet to pursue a sustained analysis of women's writings as a constituent element of the discourses accruing from this encounter. My explication of *The Renegado* – the text most frequently cited in studies on early modern England and Islam for its dramatization of the complications involved in turning Turk – underscores the need for a differential gender analysis, as the conditions leading to male versus female conversion to Islam are distinct. Strictly speaking, while a man is required to convert to Islam upon marrying a Muslim woman, a woman, if she is from the monotheistic Abrahamic tradition, is not required to convert upon marrying a Muslim man. A common motif in early modern English travel accounts involves Christian men "coerced" into converting by being placed in compromising positions with Muslim women. Although personal conviction certainly played a part in actual conversions, English documents in the period focus on the rewards for renegades in the Ottoman empire, which allowed an upward mobility for men not possible in class-bound Europe.²² Christian women's upward mobility occurred largely through marriage or concubinage in the harems of powerful men, which, to reiterate, did not require their conversion.²³ Reliance on the false universal "turning Turk" effaces these gender differences. The following explication of *The Renegado*, as a prelude to incorporating women's writing into this discussion, seeks to expose the fissures in such assumptions.

On the surface, the play has a standard plot: boy sees and desires girl; boy encounters obstructing father figures when seeking girl; boy gets girl, finally legitimizing this relationship through marriage. However, its twists and turns dramatize the dynamic of conversion specific to the Anglo-Ottoman encounter in the early modern period: turning Turk includes not only abjuring one's religion, but also one's manhood. The details involve a pair of displaced Venetians in Tunis: a gentleman-cum-merchant, Vitelli, and his mercenary manservant, Gazet. The complication arises when Francisco, a Jesuit redeemer of Christian slaves in the Barbary States, rebukes Vitelli for neglecting the latter's abducted sister, Paulina. This innocent, we learn, has been sold into the harem of Asambeg, the viceroy of Tunis, where she has been pressured into converting to Islam. Her "turning" later intersects with Vitelli's forbidden desire for Donusa, niece to the Ottoman sultan, for

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature*

whom Vitelli also converts to Islam. With the eleventh-hour intervention of the priest Francisco, who has secured the backing of the renegade, Antonio Grimaldi (for whom the play is ostensibly titled), these conversions are quickly reversed. Moreover, Donusa turns Christian to marry Vitelli and returns with his entourage to Venice. Western manhood is thus restored and women, of Christian and Muslim provenance alike, are absorbed into its patriarchy.

Presenting a paradigmatic example of the “exchange of women,” which anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss postulates as “the origin of culture” but which Gayle Rubin reconceptualizes as “one of the greatest rip-offs of all time,”²⁴ the first scene of *The Renegado* stages an exchange between Vitelli and Gazet confirming the convertibility of commodities and women motivating the play’s parallel plots:

VITELLI. You have hired a shop then?
 GAZET. Yes, sir; and our wares,
 Though brittle as a maidenhead at sixteen,
 Are safe unladen. (249, I.I.1–3)

This shipment features “choice pictures” of western European women, which the merchants plan to palm off as images of royalty and aristocrats for the pleasure of Muslim men (249, I.I.4; cf. 261, I.3.33–35). However, as Gazet reveals, “my conscience tells me they are figures / Of bawds and common courtesans in Venice” (249, I.I.12–13). With this leveling gesture, which will be developed in the central plot featuring Donusa’s desire for the ostensibly lowborn Vitelli, women from the highest to the lowest rank are equally reduced to whores. As a result, when the formerly exemplary Christian heroine, Paulina, who has hitherto resisted assaults to her chastity and her religion, declares she “will turn Turk” (331, 5.3.152), her declaration is met not with disbelief by the Christians in attendance, but with a grim recognition that, to evoke Shakespeare’s *Othello*, women are bound to “turn and turn, and yet go on / And turn again.”²⁵ The huckster Gazet encapsulates this response in his aside, “Most of your tribe do so / When they begin in whore” (331, 5.3.152–53), which he reinforces with the invective, “That’s ever the subscription / To a damned whore’s false epistle” (332, 5.3.158–59). While dramatic irony allows the viewer to temper Gazet’s crude misogyny with the knowledge that Paulina merely poses as a renegade to redeem her captive brother, this gendered connotation of conversion resonates from the beginning of the play for all its female characters, Christian as well as Muslim.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

If Paulina's virtue, in the dual sense of her chastity and her Christianity, is ultimately affirmed, her brother's faithfulness in both senses remains extremely tenuous throughout much of the play. Paralleling male travelers' accounts from the period, his physical climax in Donusa's chamber requires his acquiescence to Islam. As such accounts elaborate, ritual circumcision sealed this "turn." For instance, Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk: or, The Tragical Lives and Deaths of the Two Famous Pirates, Ward and Dansiker* (c. 1609–12), the antithesis to Massinger's ensuing play about "Turks" turning Christian, features the spectacular circumcision of the English pirate, John Ward, who embraced Islam for what the play depicts as the lure of a Muslim woman. Because "turning Turk was associated with becoming a eunuch," western Christian males, who did not practice circumcision during the early modern period, projected their deepest fears onto the figure of the renegade.²⁶ The ample popular literature (primarily testimonial accounts and ecclesiastical tracts) regarding seventeenth-century English men who converted to Islam foregrounds the troubling rem(a)inder of circumcision at the heart of English Protestant conceptions of the self.²⁷ In *The Renegado*, this symbolic castration drives the subplot, which involves Gazet's close encounter with the razor as he misunderstands the "price" of a eunuch's upward mobility in an Ottoman court. The pun by the English eunuch, Carazie, whose privileged station in Donusa's harem necessitated "but parting with / A precious stone or two" (298, 3.4.52), thus bears a sharp edge in more than one sense. As another potential English eunuch, Gazet epitomizes the anxieties besetting Christian males faced with the gender-specific ritual for "turn[ing] Turk," which would mean "los[ing] / A collop of that part my Doll enjoined me / To bring home as she left it: 'tis her venture, / Nor dare I barter that commodity / Without her special warrant" (250, 1.1.38–42). Not simply circumcision, then, but the double bind of becoming a eunuch – gaining upward mobility at the "price" of "[a] precious stone or two" (298, 3.4.52) – defines the masculinist discourse of conversion.

Yet, by focusing on male circumcision, scholarship on the play has encouraged a gendering that precludes women. As we have seen, the play follows the era's travel accounts in specifying the ban against consorting with Muslim women as decisive for Christian men's conversions.²⁸ Even the masculinist equation of conversion with circumcision presumed unruly female sexuality as its *sine qua non*. Moreover, in Massinger's play Christian and Muslim heroines are specifically condemned for "turn[ing] apostata" (254, 1.1.138; 320, 4.3.159), a double standard the Turkish princess Donusa unsuccessfully challenges during her trial for "corporal looseness

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and incontinence” (313, 4.2.147; cf. 4.2.116–43). Her apostasy from Islam, traditionally punishable by death, collapses into a specifically gendered condemnation of women in general. “Apostata” was sometimes used generically in early modern England, as in Andrew Barker’s *A True and Certain Report of the Beginning, Proceedings, Overthrowes, and now present Estate of Captaine Ward and Danseker, the two late famous Pirates* (1609), wherein John Ward is condemned as “a villaine,” “an apostata,” and “a reprobate.”²⁹ My explication of the term in Massinger’s play serves to highlight the largely overlooked gender differential in current discussions of conversion across Anglo-Ottoman boundaries. Turning apostata does not necessarily equate with turning Turk. It is fitting, therefore, that “the renegado” featured in the title of Massinger’s play is displaced from its intended referent, the pirate Grimaldi, onto the female characters whose sexuality renders them suspect to Christian and Muslim men alike.

TURNING TO EARLY MODERN WOMEN’S CULTURAL AGENCY

In alternatively positioning gender – particularly as articulated by women – as a crucial category of analysis for the early modern Anglo-Ottoman encounter, the following chapters address a series of distinct but interlinked cultural moments from the late sixteenth century through the turn of the eighteenth century. This historical sweep, as many scholars have noted, involved the shift from England as a proto-colonial power – whose discourse of global empire as epitomized by Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* in no way matched its dominion – to England as an emerging imperial player with outposts in North America, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and South Asia.³⁰ This shift nevertheless remained uneven and uncertain throughout the period, rendering any teleological model untenable. Hence, I proceed via an “epochal” analysis, which “recognize[s] the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance.”³¹ This approach enables a discussion of “emergent” discourses, such as imperialism and orientalism, prior to their instantiation within the anglocentric global empire consolidated in the late eighteenth century. It also militates against reading the “rise” of the British empire back into earlier eras when England remained subordinate to Islamic and Catholic powers.

Accordingly, the first chapter of this study expands conventional methodologies for comparing early modern women’s cultural productions across Europe by viewing the Ottoman empire, which during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries included most of “eastern” and continually

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

encroached upon “western” Europe, as integral to this discussion. Focusing on the exchange of gifts and letters between Queen Elizabeth and Safiye, the Ottoman queen mother, this chapter examines the sixteenth-century emergence of “the sultanate of women” to assess Elizabeth’s paradoxical position as a “female prince.” Tracing the parallel patriarchal dismissal of women’s sovereignty in the Ottoman empire and the West, as well as the appropriation of Ottoman debates on the issue by western men, this chapter concludes with a sustained analysis of Elizabeth and Safiye’s exchange of gifts and letters. As I propose, this exchange functioned as the “field” within which the two women deployed shared signifiers of femininity to establish their sovereignty in their respective patriarchal cultures.

Chapter 2 shifts to the Jacobean era, characterized by King James I’s (1603–25) reversal of Elizabeth’s ameliorative policy towards the Ottomans and his concomitant effort to rein in English women’s literary, political, and social activities. Against this backdrop of retrenchment and backlash, Lady Mary Wroth published the first prose romance (along with the first sonnet sequence) by an English woman, which met with immediate resistance from the king and his male courtiers for its thinly veiled critique of Jacobean patriarchy. This chapter focuses on Wroth’s layering of a gendered critique with her tendentious representations of conflicting empires: the Holy Roman, the Ottoman, and the Safavid Persian. As I show, the overlapping of subaltern female subjectivity with the multivalent discourse of empire in the period remains “under erasure” in Wroth’s romance, which “deletes and leaves legible at the same time” the overdetermined status of its central emblem: Pamphilia’s cabinet.³² Accordingly, the first part of the romance, published in 1621, presents a purely but potently imaginative Holy Roman empire covering the Eurasian regions actually governed by the Ottomans. The second part, continued in manuscript, signals Wroth’s traumatic personal experience of gender subordination, despite her elite status, by means of her identification with the doubly othered Persian wife of Sir Robert Sherley, Lady Teresa Sampsonia Sherley.

Chapter 3 turns to the volatile period of the mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution, followed by the Restoration after 1660 of the monarchy, state censorship, and religious persecution. This era nevertheless opened the floodgates for English women’s printed writings, with Quaker women producing the bulk of such publications for the entire century. Moreover, Quaker women were at the forefront of the Anglo-Protestant missionary movement, venturing during the 1650s and 1660s as far as the Ottoman empire and contiguous Mediterranean regions. This chapter explores the contradictions structuring early Quaker women’s cultural

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12176-7 - Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature

Bernadette Andrea

Excerpt

[More information](#)

agency by proposing the paradigm of “the missionary position” to encompass their concurrent proto-feminism and proto-imperialism. As I stress, early Quaker women, particularly in their dual capacity as missionaries and publishing women, challenged the shared patriarchal mores of the competing empires constituting “the multi-cultural Mediterranean” of the seventeenth century even as they reinforced emerging Anglo-Protestant stereotypes.³³ Beginning with Mary Fisher’s audience with the Ottoman sultan and concluding with Katharine Evans and Sarah Chevers’s imprisonment on the isle of Malta, this chapter dwells on a liminal moment for radical sectarian engagement with the Islamic world by emphasizing Fisher’s ecumenism and Evans and Chevers’s narrow bigotry as alternate possibilities for emergent feminism in the English tradition.

The fourth chapter, focusing on the *fin de siècle* leading to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, marks the emergence of a discourse we can clearly label “feminist” and material conditions we can reliably call “imperialist.” This transitional period produced the first articulations of “feminist orientalism” by anglophone writers, culminating in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Nonetheless, though neglected in current criticism, this period simultaneously produced an anti-orientalist counterdiscourse as part of the era’s feminist debates. This chapter begins by tracing the extended genealogy underpinning feminist orientalism as it emerged in English culture at the turn of the eighteenth century. This genealogy involves the patriarchal orientalism elaborated by seventeenth-century male travel writers, the feminist orientalism critiquing the patriarchal component of the earlier tradition while retaining its imperialist biases, and the counterdiscourse by early feminists such as Delarivier Manley, preceding Montagu by a generation, who located supposed “oriental” abuses such as domestic immurement and polygamy within England itself. As I argue, Manley challenged emerging feminist orientalism by eschewing the definition of imperialist selfhood characteristic of seventeenth-century men’s travelogues and early eighteenth-century feminist polemics. Rather than displacing the source of patriarchal despotism onto an orientalized other, she locates it squarely in England.

The coda returns to Montagu as a crucial figure for studies of English women and the Islamic world by reading her oft-cited Turkish bath or *hammam* scene alongside the interrogation of patriarchal and feminist orientalism by Algeria’s premier woman writer, Assia Djebar. This dialogic method juxtaposes early modern English women’s engagement with the Islamic world and contemporary Muslim women’s engagement with the legacy of western European imperialism to discover not only the differences, but