Betül İpşirli Argıt

The Ottoman Imperial Harem in European Accounts (From the Fifteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century)

The Seraglio was the mysterious and glorious seat of the Muslim Ottoman rulers. The life behind its walls has always been a source of interest and wonder for the Western world, especially concerning the harem. Europeans were eager to depict the most secluded and mysterious part of the Ottoman palace, which was strictly forbidden to outsiders. Thomas Thornton's (1762–1814) statement "No part of the Turkish institutions or establishments has so strongly excited the curiosity of the foreigners as the harem of the Seraglio" is characteristic in terms of revealing the interest in the subject.[1]

Westerners' curiosity about the East has produced a rich literature, including ambassadorial reports, accounts of travelers, members of the ambassadorial entourages, diplomats, merchants, and captives who served in the imperial palace. This article aims to explore how the imperial harem was perceived and represented in European accounts produced between the fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries through examination of approximately one hundred European accounts.[2] It introduces the general characteristics of the harem narrative and its main themes. It provides insight into the nature, merit, and limitations of the narratives. In the concluding section, it discusses the possible functions and problematic aspects of these accounts as historical sources. At the final point, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the place and value of these accounts as historical sources in Ottoman studies.

It is critical to recognize that harem accounts produced during and after the fifteenth century were primarily written by men who had never been admitted

1 Thomas Thornton, The Present State of Turkey, or a Description of the Political, Civil, and Religious Constitution, Government, and Laws of the Ottoman Empire [...] (London 1807), p. 361.
2 For travel accounts produced in the early modern period see Shirley Howard Weber (ed.), Voyages and Travels in Greece, the Near East and adjacent regions made previous to the year 1801, being a part of a larger Catalogue of works on Geography, Cartography, Voyages and Travels, in the Gennadius Library in Athens (Princeton 1953); Stéphane Yerasimos, Les voyageurs dans l'Empire Ottoman (XIV^{e}–XVI^{e} siècles): Bibliographie, itinéraires et inventaire des lieux habités (Ankara 1991). Reports (*relazioni*) of Venetian diplomats, for instance, were published by Eugenio Albèri (1807–1878), Nicolò Barozzi (1826–1906), and Guglielmo Berchet (1833–1913). Note also Marino Sanuto's (1466–1536) *Diarii* (1496–1533), which include not only dispatches and eyewitness accounts of diplomats, merchants, and travelers, but also various anecdotes.

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into the harems. The writers frequently emphasized their difficulty entering, and thus learning about, the harem. Yet, there was an available construction of the stereotyped image of the Seraglio and authors tended to read and copy previously written works and reiterated the European fantasy about the Seraglio through several themes. As a whole, this literature generally described the harem with a mix of fact, hearsay, and fantasy. A common feature of these works is their portrayal of the imperial harem as a setting of overlapping fantasies: the despotic ruler, eunuchs, female slaves, virgin beauties for the pleasure of the sultan, sexuality, lust, intrigue, and extravagance.[3] Yet, a closer scrutiny of accounts about the Ottoman harem produced over a long period reveals that even though the narratives appear to be repetitive and resemble each other, it would be incorrect to assume that they produced a constant, homogeneous discourse with a uniform character.

Several factors, including the changing political and social conditions of the era, shaped the content and nature of the narratives. In earlier centuries, the Ottoman Empire was regarded as the epitome of strong tyranny, and the harem was seen as the essential feature of this structure. In the eighteenth century, the ideas of the Enlightenment dominated and colonization policies intensified. In the accounts developed in this context, the Ottoman Empire was set within a "despotic theory" discourse that presented the "harem" as one of the most important symbols of despotic rule.[4]

The close examination of the sources also shows that the authors' identity, their agendas, and sources played a determinative role in the narratives. Some European accounts are an exception, especially if they were written by authors who established contacts with sources close to the imperial court. Although these authors reiterated previous narratives to some extent, they also provided information that sometimes complements Ottoman sources such as court records, archival documents from the state archive, fatwas, waqf documents, and chronicles.

3 For a classic study that critically evaluates the Orientalist discourse and Orientalist imagery about the Seraglio see Alain Grosrichard, The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East, translated by Liz Heron with an introduction by Mladen Dolar (London, New York 1998).

4 For discussions of this issue see Aslı Çırakman, From the "Terror of the World" to the "Sick Man of Europe": European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth (New York et al. 2002); Thomas Kaiser, The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture, in The Journal of Modern History 72 (2000), pp. 6 – 34; Gülay Yılmaz, The Orientalist Construction of the Ottoman Governance, in Studies of the Ottoman Domain 4/7 (2014), pp. 50 – 81.

The following section outlines the general characteristics of the harem narrative and discusses representations of the imperial harem in European accounts produced between the fifteenth and early nineteenth century. It begins with the early accounts and presents the main themes that appeared in them and were reiterated in the following centuries. Following this, it comments on the peculiarities of seventeenth-century accounts, before moving on to trends in eighteenth-century accounts.

1 Narratives of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century

The first European narratives that provide information about the sultan's Seraglio appeared in the fifteenth century; they increased in numbers and diversified in the sixteenth century. In this period, some accounts do have exceptional value, especially those written by men who were attached to the Ottoman imperial court in various ways. These include the accounts of the Genoese merchant Jacopo de Promontorio de Campis (c. 1405 – 1487), the prisoner Giovanni Maria Angiolello (1451/52 – c. 1515), and the Genoese Giovanni Antonio Menavino (b. 1492). The latter was presented as a slave to Bayezid II (1447 – 1512) by a corsair and then educated as a royal page in the sultan's palace during the reign of Bayezid II and his son Selim I (c. 1470 – 1520).[5] From the same period, we have the accounts of Theodore Spandounes (early sixteenth century), who belonged to a Byzantine refugee family that had settled in Venice following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. In the first decade of the sixteenth century, he made several sojourns in Istanbul and compiled information about the Ottoman court based on what he learned from the members of his family who were in the service of the sultan.[6] The account of Luigi Bassano da Zara (c. 1510 – after 1552) is based on observations made during his long stay in Istanbul in the 1530s.[7] Other important sixteenth-century accounts include those of Benedetto

5 Franz Babinger (ed.), Die Aufzeichnungen des Genuesen Iacopo de Promontorio de Campis über den Osmanenstaat um 1475 (Munich 1957); Giovanni Antonio Menavino, I cinque libri della legge, religione, et vita de' Turchi et della Corte, d'alcune guerre del Gran Turco [...] (Venice 1548); Ion Ursu (ed.), Historia Turchesca, 1300 – 1514 (Bucharest 1909).

6 Theodore Spandounes, On the Origin of the Ottoman Emperors, translated and edited by Donald M. Nicol (Cambridge, New York 1997).

7 Luigi Bassano da Zara, I Costumi, et i modi particolari de la vita de Turchi (Rome 1545).

Ramberti (1503–1547), who came to Istanbul with the Venetian ambassador,[8] of Yunus Bey (an Ottoman dragoman) and Alvise Gritti (1480–1534), the son of the Venetian doge (1523–1538).[9] Alvise Gritti was born in Istanbul, eventually became jeweler to Sultan Süleyman I (1494–1566) and a close intimate in the household of the Ottoman grand vizier İbrahim Pasha (d. 1536). He had access to Ottoman networks of patronage and worked within the Ottoman intellectual and cultural context. The account of Nicolas de Nicolay (1517–1583), who came to Istanbul on a diplomatic mission in the retinue of the French ambassador to the Ottoman court in 1551, describes Ottoman court life and women's manners and costumes. Nicolay noted that he established a friendship with a eunuch named Zafer Agha who had grown up in the palace.[10] Domenico Hierosolimitano (c. 1552–1622), who served as third physician to Sultan Murad III (1546–1595) for some ten years, and also provided information about the Ottoman imperial court, including its harem.[11]

A description of the harem was provided in most of the accounts from the fifteenth century on, creating a repertoire of general characteristics and main themes which will be identified in the following. In every period, they generally defined the harem as a sacred and forbidden place, a place of privacy and security allotted to women and excluding all men except the master of the family. The word "harem" also referred to the women inhabiting this site.

A related theme was the impossibility of entrance into the harem, a fact emphasized by accounts in every period.[12] It was commonly stated that the harem resembled to monastery.[13] Therefore, a point frequently made was the impor-

8 Benedetto Ramberti, Libri tre delle cose de Turchi (Venice 1543), reprinted in Albert Howe Lybyer (ed.), The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman the Magnificent (Cambridge 1913), Appendix 1.

9 Junis Bey and Alvise Gritti, Opera noua la quale dechiara tutto il gouerno del gran turcho [...] (Venice 1537), reprinted in Lybyer, The Government.

10 Nicolas de Nicolay, Les navigations, peregrinations et voyages, faicts en la Turquie [...] (Antwerp 1577), p. 100.

11 For the account of Domenico Hierosolimitano see Geoffrey Lewis (ed.), Domenico's Istanbul, translated with an introduction and commentary by Michael Austin (Warminster 2001).

12 Some authors noted that even Jewish women who entered the palace for commercial purposes were not allowed in all areas of the harem. See Jean-Antoine Guer, Moeurs et Usages des Turcs, Leur Religion, Leur Gouvernement Civil, Militaire et Politique. Avec un abregé de l'Histoire Ottomane (2 vols., Paris 1747), vol. 2, p. 80; Jean Baptiste Tavernier, A New Relation of the Inner-Part of the Grand Seignor's Seraglio (London 1677), pp. 85–86; Joseph Pitton Tournefort, A Voyage into the Levant (2 vols., London 1741), vol. 2, p. 249.

13 Bassano, I Costumi, p. 17; Guillaume Postel, De la Republique des Turcs et, là ou l'occasion s'offrera, des meurs & loy de tous Muhamedistes (Poitiers 1560), p. 6. Hans Dernschwam (1494–1568) visited Istanbul in 1553: see Hans Dernschwam, İstanbul ve Anadolu'ya Seyahat Günlüğü

tance given to the privacy of the members of the harem. Sensitivity towards privacy was enforced even when a medical examination was required and doctors themselves had to comply with these regulations. They were only allowed to examine the sick person under the strongest restrictions.[14]

At this point, it is necessary to clarify who lived in the imperial harem. There were two groups of female slaves in the Ottoman imperial harem: the sultans' concubines and the women who worked in the service of the harem or of the sultan and his family. Only a small group of women in the harem were the sultan's consorts. The remaining female slaves were organized in a manner similar to the organization of pages in the *Enderun*.[15] There were several career paths available for female slaves within the Ottoman imperial harem. Some slaves rose within the harem service and were, eventually, promoted to one of its administrative offices. The majority, though, held lower-status positions; these women were manumitted after serving for a period of time and then left the imperial harem.[16]

In the accounts, apart from the sultan's mother, prominent consorts and the chief administrative officer, the remaining harem residents were typically de-

(Travel diary to Istanbul and Anatolia), translated by Yaşar Önen (Ankara 1987), p. 187. This narrative continued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See e. g. Laurent d'Arvieux, Memoires du Chevalier d'Arvieux [...], edited by Jean-Baptiste Labat (7 vols., Paris 1735), vol. 4, p. 483; Michel Baudier, The History of the Serrail and of the Court of the Grand Seigneur, Emperour of the Turkes [...], translated by Edward Grimeston (London 1635), p. 20; Ottaviano Bon and Robert Withers, A Description of the Grand Signour's Seraglio or Turkish Emperours Court, edited by John Greaves (London 1653), p. 37; Louis Deshayes de Courmenin, Voyage de Levant Fait par le Commandement du Roy en l'année 1621 (Paris 1632), p. 114; William Joseph Grelot, A Late Voyage to Constantinople [...] (London 1683), p. 80; Guer, Moeurs, vol. 2, pp. 57–58; Aubry de la Motraye, [...] Travels Through Europe, Asia and into Part of Africa [...] (2 vols., London 1723), vol. 1, p. 173; Paul Rycaut, The Present State of the Ottoman Empire [...] (London 1670), p. 9; Giovanni Sagredo, Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman (8 vols., Paris 1730–1732), vol. 7, pp. 12–15; Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 8; Jean de Thévenot, The Travels of Monsieur de Thevenot into the Levant (London 1687), part 1, pp. 1–291, here p. 25; Tournefort, Voyage, vol. 2, p. 198.

14 Bon and Withers, A Description, pp. 103–104; Giovanni Battiste de Burgo, Viaggio di cinque anni in Asia, Africa, & Europa [...] (Milan 1686), p. 374; James Dallaway, Constantinople, Ancient and Modern with Excursions to the Shores and Islands of the Archipelago and to the Troad (London 1797), pp. 114–115; Guer, Moeurs, vol. 2, p. 79; Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau Général de l'Empire Ottoman (7 vols., Paris 1788–1824), vol. 4, p. 319; Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, p. 36; Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 85; Tournefort, Voyage, vol. 2, p. 249.

15 The Ottoman imperial palace was composed of outer (*Birun*), inner (*Enderun*) and harem sections. The term *Enderun* was used to designate the inner departments and services (as opposed to *Birun*, the outer departments and services) of the Ottoman imperial household.

16 For detailed information about the imperial harem hierarchy based on European accounts and Ottoman sources see Betül İpşirli Argıt, Life after the Harem: Female Palace Slaves, Patronage and the Imperial Ottoman Court (Cambridge, New York 2020), chapter 1.

scribed as a whole under a single classification. After stating that the harem was composed of a great number of female slaves, these virgins were frequently described as the most beautiful women of the world.

In every period, the ways in which these slaves entered the imperial harem were also touched upon frequently. The accounts indicated that female slaves entered the service of the imperial harem either as gifts, through purchase, or as war captives. Some authors noted that captive girls were presented to the palace.[17] They also stated that girls in the imperial harem were presented as gifts from members of the imperial family, high dignitaries, provincial governors, and Tatars.[18] European accounts provide numerous examples of the practice

17 Baudier, Serrail, pp. 50, 57; Courmenin, Voyage, p. 157; John Francis Gemelli Carari, A Voyage Round the World, in Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill (eds.), A Collection of Voyages and Travels [...] (4 vols., London 1704), vol. 4; pp. 1–110, here p. 70; Michael Heberer, Osmanlıda Bir Köle: Brettenli Michael Heberer'in Anıları 1585–1588 (A Slave in the Ottoman Empire: Memories of Michael Heberer 1585–1588), edited by Kemal Beydilli, translated by Türkis Noyan (Istanbul 2010), pp. 238–239; Reinhold Lubenau, Reinhold Lubenau Seyahatnamesi. Osmanlı Ülkesinde 1587–1589 (Reinhold Lubenau's Travel Book: In the Ottoman Land 1587–1589), translated by Türkis Noyan (2 vols., Istanbul 2012), vol. 1, p. 207; Don Neriolava Formanti [= Valeriano Manfrotti], Raccolta delle historiae delle vite degli imperatori ottomani sino a Mehemet IV regnante [...] (Venice 1684), p. 15; Menavino, I cinque libri, pp. 134–136; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99; Guillaume Postel, La tierce partie des Orientales Histoires [...] (Poitiers, 1560), pp. 17–18; Postel, Republique, pp. 6, 34; Rycaut, The Present State, p. 38; Francesco Sansovino, Dell'Historia universale dell' origine et imperio de Turchi [...] (Venice, 1568), p. 32; Salomon Schweigger, Sultanlar Kentine Yolculuk, 1578–1581 (Journey to the City of Sultans, 1578–1581), edited by Heidi Stein, translated by Türkis Noyan (Istanbul 2004), p. 113.

18 Baudier, Serrail, pp. 50, 57; Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 36; Demetrius Cantemir, The History of the Growth and the Decay of the Othman Empire, translated by N. Tindal (London 1734–1735), p. 296; Carari, Voyage, vol. 4, p. 70; Dallaway, Constantinople, p. 26; Georges Guillet de Saint-Georges, An Account of a Late Voyage to Athens [...] (London 1676), p. 158; Joseph von Hammer, Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman depuis son origine jusqu'à nos jours, translated by J. J. Hellert (18 vols., Paris 1835–1843), vol. 17 (1841), pp. 70–71; Aaron Hill, A Full and Just Account of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire [...] (London 1709), p. 169; John Cam Hobhouse, A Journey through Albania and Other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia to Constantinople during the Years 1809 to 1810 (2 vols., London 1813), vol. 1, p. 852; Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, p. 35; Lubenau, Lubenau Seyahatnamesi, vol. 1, p. 207; Marchebus, Voyage de Paris a Constantinople par bateau à vapeur [...] (Paris 1839), pp. 152–155; Antoine Ignace Melling, Intérieur d'une partie du Harem du Grand Seigneur, in Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore [...] (Paris 1819), s. p.; Motraye, Travels, vol. 1, p. 247; Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau, vol. 7, pp. 63–64; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99; Guillaume Antoine Olivier, Travels in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and Persia [...] (2 vols., London 1801), vol. 1, pp. 27–28; Sagredo, Histoire, vol. 7, p. 30; Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 88.

of purchasing female slaves for the imperial harem.[19] Related to this issue, some accounts allow us to trace the geographic origins of female palace slaves. According to these accounts, there were women in the imperial harem who were brought from Europe, Asia, and Africa.[20]

Some accounts touch upon the education of harem members. They describe that the training of the girls in court manners was placed under the supervision of more experienced women.[21] The girls were taught Islamic religion, Turkish, and some of them even received education in sewing, embroidery, music, and dancing.[22] Less often, the accounts provide information on the size of the imperial harem, although their estimates of female members varied and were sometimes exaggerated.[23]

Even though most of the accounts depict female slaves of the imperial harem as a single group, they often provide details about the mother and consorts of the sultan. Not surprisingly, Roxelana (c. 1502–1558) the famous consort of Sultan Süleyman I, was a favorite topic. Details were provided regarding the role

19 Dallaway, Constantinople, p. 28; Motraye, Travels, vol. 1, p. 247; Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau, vol. 7, pp. 63–64; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99.

20 Bon and Withers, A Description, pp. 101–102; Dallaway, Constantinople, p. 28; Charles Deval, Deux années à Constantinople et en Morée (1825–1826) [...] (London, Paris 1828), p. 101; Lubenau, Lubenau Seyahatnamesi, vol. 1, p. 207; Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau, vol. 7, p. 69; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99; Postel, Republique, p. 34; Ursu, Historia Turchesca, p. 128.

21 Writing in 1534, the Italian Benedetto Ramberti related that the education of virgin girls was entrusted to matrons (Ramberti, Libri tre, p. 253); see also Sieur de la Croix, Mémoirs de Sieur de la Croix, cy-devant Secretaire de l'Ambassade de Constantinople: Contenans Diverses relations tres-curieuses de l'Empire Othoman (2 vols., Paris 1684), vol. 1, p. 354; Robert Fauvel et al., Le voyage d'ltalie et du Levant, de Messieurs Fermanel Fauvel, Baudouin de Launay, et de Stochove [...] (Rouen 1670), p. 77; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99; Rycaut, The Present State, p. 39.

22 Ursu, Historia Turchesca, p. 128. These details were mentioned by several other European authors. See Baudier, Serrail, pp. 50, 57–58; Bey, Gritti, Opera noua, pp. 268–269; Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 38; Croix, Mémoirs, vol. 1, p. 354; Dernschwam, Seyahat Günlüğü, p. 189. Girls were taught sewing and embroidery in the palace. See Menavino, I cinque libri, p. 135; Postel, Republique, pp. 6, 33; Ramberti, Libri tre, p. 253; Sansovino, Dell'Historia, p. 32; Schweigger, Yolculuk, p. 113. Mouradgea d'Ohsson observed that the newly acquired slaves for the harem were educated by older women at the end of their novitiate. See Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau, vol. 7, p. 64.

23 Bon and Withers, A Description, pp. 35–36; Carari, Voyage, vol. 4, p. 70; Fauvel, Voyage, pp. 76, 79; C. G. Fisher and A. W. Fisher, Topkapı Sarayı in the Mid-seventeenth Century: Bobovi's Description, in Archivum Ottomanicum 10 (1985 [1987]), pp. 5–81, p. 73; Formanti, Raccolta, p. 15; Costantino Garzoni, Relazione del impero ottomano [1573], in Eugenio Albèri (ed.), Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al senato (Florence 1840), series III, vol. 1, p. 395; Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, p. 23; Sagredo, Histoire, vol. 7, p. 30; George Sandys, A Relation of a Journey began An Dom. 1610 (London 1615), p. 74.

and status of sultan's consorts such as their income, material world, entourage, and activities. There was also a focus on the role and status of the chief administrative officer in the harem. Generally, she was referred to as *kahya kadın*, and reportedly she acted as the superintendent of the imperial harem and had an influential and prestigious position, being governess and lady matron to all the women.[24] She examined all the girls who were brought to the palace and ensured their adherence to the harem's rules and orders.[25] *Kahya kadın* was also frequently referred as the matron who took care of the women who were destined to become the sultan's consorts.[26]

Various accounts provide information about the position and roles of eunuchs. The main narrative is that women were guarded by the eunuchs and that, apart from the sultan and the eunuchs it was impossible for women to have any relations with other men

In the harem narratives, Jewish women were mentioned frequently.[27] It was noted that some Jewish women who were skilled in trade had the exceptional privilege of being allowed into the harem for commercial purposes.[28] Some authors noted that Jewish women taught needlework to female members of the

24 This information was repeated in several European sources. For examples see Bassano, I Costumi, p. 18; Baudier, Serrail, p. 55; Joseph-Eugène Beauvoisins, Notice sur la cour du Grand Seigneur, son Sérail, son Harem, La Famille du Sang imperial, sa Maison Militaire, et ses Ministres (Paris 1807), pp. 26 – 28; Lorenzo Bernardo, Relazione [1592], in Albèri, Relazioni, series 3, vol. 2, p. 360; Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 147; Antoine Laurent Castellan, Moeurs, Usages, Costume des Othomans et Abrégé de leur Histoire (6 vols., Paris 1812), vol. 3, pp. 62 – 63; Elias Habesci, The Present State of the Ottoman Empire. Containing A More Accurate and Interesting Account [...] of the Turks (London 1784), pp. 166, 169; Charles Pertusier, Promenades pittoresque dans Constantinople et sur les rives du Bosphore (3 vols., Paris 1815), vol. 2, p. 290; Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 88.

25 Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 37; Courmenin, Voyage, p. 158; Fauvel, Voyage, p. 77; Lubenau, Lubenau Seyahatnamesi, p. 208; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99; Postel, Republique, p. 33; Rycaut, The Present State, p. 39; Sagredo, Histoire, vol. 7, p. 30.

26 Baudier, Serrail, p. 51; Burgo, Viaggio, p. 376; Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau, vol. 7, p. 69. This information was also noted by Hammer. See Hammer, Histoire, vol. 17, pp. 70 – 71. See also Courmenin, Voyage, p. 158; Fauvel, Voyage, p. 77; Hobhouse, Journey, vol. 1, p. 853; Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, p. 32; Rycaut, The Present State, p. 40; Sagredo, Histoire, vol. 7, p. 30; Matteo Zane, Relazione [1594], in Albèri, Relazioni, series III, vol. 3, pp. 381– 444, p. 412.

27 For a detailed discussion of how Jewish women were portrayed in early modern English travel books on Turkey see Eva Holmberg, Esthers in the Seraglio: Jewish Women in Early Modern English Travel Narratives on Turkey, in Anu Korhonen and Kate Lowe (eds.), The Trouble with Ribs: Women, Men and Gender in Early Modern Europe (2 vols., Helsinki 2007), vol. 2, pp. 34 – 56.

28 Grelot, Voyage, pp. 79 – 80; Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 85.

harem, or the secret of some excellent medical recipes for the healing of their infirmities or the conservation of their health.[29]

These accounts, however, rarely include information concerning the imperial harem's organization, its functioning, and its internal dynamics,[30] or information concerning the life of manumitted female palace slaves following their transfer from the imperial harem. Only some European accounts provide information about the marriages of female slaves. They indicate that the majority of female slaves were manumitted after serving for a period of time, left the imperial harem, and later married men of various statuses.[31]

In every period, narratives mainly focused on the sultan and emphasized his sexual life. In most of the accounts, the main emphasis was on the pleasure of the sultan, and above all, his sexual pleasure. They noted that the main purpose of women and virgins in the harem was to please the sultan and to satisfy him. The sultan chose whomever he wanted and entertained himself.[32] The Venetian ambassador Marco Minio stated in 1522 that the sultan was lascivious and that he frequently went to the women's palace.[33] Domenico Hierosolimitano wrote that women would look for people who could teach them incantations to impress the sultan.[34] Various fanciful tales were popularized by Europeans and these tales were mainly associated with the sexual life of the monarch. The most com-

29 Baudier, Serrail, p. 62; Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 52–54; Guer, Moeurs, vol. 2, p. 34.
30 Rarely, accounts provide information about routine practices in the harem such as the habit of assigning food and clothing to the residents. See Ramberti, Libri tre, p. 253; Sansovino, Dell' Historia, p. 32. This issue was also mentioned in Bon and Withers, A description, 49; Heberer, Osmanlıda Bir Köle, p. 239; Histoire Generale des Turcs (2 vols., Paris 1662), vol. 2, p. 29; Schweigger, Yolculuk, p. 113.
31 For detailed information about the marriage of manumitted female palace slaves see İpşirli Argıt, Life after the Harem, ch. 3. See also Bassano, I Costumi, p. 18; Baudier, Serrail, pp. 50, 62; Bon and Withers, A Description, pp. 48–49; Cantemir, History, p. 443; Dallaway, Constantinople, p. 115; Dernschwam, Seyahat Günlüğü, p. 189; Stephan Gerlach, Türkiye Günlüğü 1577–1578 (Stephen Gerlach's Diary on Turkey 1577–1578), edited by Kemal Beydilli, translated by Türkis Noyan (2 vols., Istanbul 2006), vol. 2, p. 637; Heberer, Osmanlıda Bir Köle, p. 239; Lubenau, Lubenau Seyahatnamesi, p. 208; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99; Postel, Republique, pp. 6, 32; Ramberti, Libri tre, pp. 253–254; Sandys, Relation, p. 74; Spandounes, On the Origin, p. 113; Thévenot, Travels, p. 25; Thornton, Present State, pp. 372–373; Ursu, Historia Turchesca, pp. 128–129.
32 Bassano, I Costumi, p. 18; Courmenin, Voyage, pp. 158, 168; Dernschwam, Seyahat Günlüğü, p. 189; Garzoni, Relazione, p. 395; Heberer, Osmanlıda Bir Köle, pp. 238–240; Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, p. 32; Menavino, I cinque libri, p. 135; Nicolay, Navigations, p. 99; Ramberti, Libri tre, p. 253; Sansovino, Dell'Historia, p. 32.
33 Marco Minio, Relazione [1522], in Albèri, Relazioni, series III, vol. 3, pp. 69–91, p. 78.
34 Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, p. 36.

mon tale was that the sultan threw his handkerchief to the woman he liked most, as a sign of her election to his bed.[35]

Another related and intriguing matter was the presentation ceremony of virgins to the great seigneur during which he chose his companion for the night. Most of the accounts provide detailed descriptions of this ceremony[36] and of the consummation of the sultan's intercourse with the virgin.[37]

Obviously, there were several reasons behind such a focus on sexuality. Sexuality in the imperial harem was an important element that fed stereotypes. European readers were curious about the sexual life of the East and books touching upon this subject found buyers. Thus, commercial reasons were influential in this respect. It should also be remembered that obscenity served political purposes in Europe. In the period 1500 to 1800 pornography was a vehicle of critique against religious and political authorities. A link was deemed to exist between debauchery and tyranny or despotism and rulers' potential tyranny was often represented in sexual terms.[38]

2 Seventeenth century narratives

The sultans' Seraglio continued to attract the curiosity of European observers in the seventeenth century. In this century, accounts generally bolstered the stereotypes and enriched the fantasies of the harem. One of the frequently referenced accounts belongs to Ottaviano Bon (1552–1623), who served as Venetian *bailo* in Istanbul from 1604 to 1607. His information about the Topkapı Palace came from

35 Baudier, Serrail, p. 50; Ali Ufkî Bey and Albertus Bobovius, Saray-ı Enderun: Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam (Saray-ı Enderun: Life in the Topkapı Palace), translated by Türkis Noyan (Istanbul 2013), p. 61; Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 39; Burgo, Viaggio, p. 377; Courmenin, Voyage, p. 159; Fauvel, Voyage, p. 88; Fisher and Fisher, Topkapı Sarayı, p. 67; Gerlach, Türkiye Günlüğü, vol. 1, p. 107; Menavino, I cinque libri, p. 135; Rycaut, The Present State, p. 39; Sandys, Relation, p. 74; Sansovino, Dell'Historia, p. 32; Spandounes, On the Origin, p. 113. This narrative continued even in the eighteenth century: Motraye, Travels, vol. 1, p. 195; Sagredo, Histoire, vol. 7, pp. 32–33; Thornton, Present State, p. 370. Exceptionally, Dernschwam noted that if the sultan liked one of them, he threw her a pouch full of 1,000 asper. See Dernschwam, Seyahat Günlüğü, p. 189.

36 See Courmenin, Voyage, p. 159; Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, p. 32; Postel, Republique, pp. 31–32; Spandounes, On the Origin, p. 113.

37 Baudier, Serrail, p. 52; Hill, Account, p. 167; Lewis, Domenico's Istanbul, pp. 32–33; Menavino, I cinque libri, p. 136; Rycaut, The Present State, p. 40.

38 Lynn Hunt, Introduction, in Lynn Hunt (ed.), The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800 (New York 1993), pp. 9–48.

its head gardener (*bostancıbaşı*), and Bon presented it as a report. He recorded every aspect of life at the palace, including life in the harem. Robert Withers, who came to Istanbul in 1610, translated Bon's Italian report into English. However, Withers made some small additions. John Greaves, who was in Istanbul in 1638, found this translation and published it in London in 1650, stating that the author of the book was Robert Withers.[39]

Additionally, the account of the Frenchman Michel Baudier (1589–1645) greatly influenced the seventeenth-century concept of the Seraglio. Baudier used Domenico's *Relatione,* as well as *Relazioni* by Ottaviano Bon, as major sources for his popular book, *Histoire générale du Serrail, et de la Cour du Grand Seigneur, Empereur des Turcs,* which was published in 1624 and reprinted and translated throughout the seventeenth century. He contributed greatly to the stereotypical image of the lustful Turk by depicting an image of a sovereign who enjoys a lascivious and a delightful life. Baudier regarded ladies in the harem as the subjects of the Sultan's delight and virgins in particular as the focus of the sovereign's sexual fantasies. In his account he repeatedly emphasized the narrative which claimed that "the purpose of the virgins was to please and entertain the sovereign"[40] He also elaborated on the narrative of the presentation ceremony of virgins to the sultan.[41] Affections among women was a topic already mentioned by Bon[42] and Baudier dwelled on this issue in detail.[43] The fantasy that, like young men, women too could conceive a "detestable love" for one another was commonly referred to in seventeenth-century travel journals.[44] This theme was also mentioned in later accounts.[45] Some authors exaggerated this subject and noted that cucumbers were sliced at the gate to prevent

39 Bon and Withers, A Description. For information about Bon see Ottaviano Bon, The Sultan's Seraglio: An Intimate Portrait of the Life at the Ottoman Court, edited and annotated by Godfrey Goodwin (London 1996), pp. 11–19.

40 Baudier, Serrail. This theme was, for instance, mentioned by Fauvel (see Fauvel, Voyage, pp. 80–81, 84–85) and survived into the nineteenth century (see Marchebus, Voyage, pp. 152–155).

41 Baudier, Serrail, p. 51. The theme was also mentioned in the following accounts: Beauvoisins, Notice, pp. 25–26; Croix, Mémoirs, vol. 2, p. 365; Fauvel, Voyage, pp. 77–78; Habesci, Present State, pp. 168–169; Hill, Account, pp. 165–166; Rycaut, The Present State, p. 39.

42 Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 48.

43 Baudier, Serrail, pp. 164–167.

44 Rycaut, The Present State, pp. 33–34; Stephanos Yerasimos and Annie Berthier (eds.), Albertus Bobovius ya da Santuri Ali Ufki Bey'in anıları: Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam (The Memories of Albertus Bobovius or Santuri Ali Ufki Bey: Life in the Topkapı Palace), translated by Ali Berktay (Istanbul 2002), p. 72; Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 88.

45 Guer, Moeurs, vol. 2, p. 83; Melling, Intérieur, s. p.

lust.[46] There were also accounts of terrifying punishments meted out to these women. If they proved disobedient, incorrigible, and insolent, they were sent to the Old Palace on the sultan's order and stripped of most of their possessions. If they were accused of being engaged with witchcraft or any similar act, they were bound hand and foot, put into a sack, and thrown into the sea during the night. Bon added that if female slaves wanted to come to a good end, they had to contain themselves within the bounds of honesty, chastity, and good behavior.[47] Likewise, several other authors described that girls found to have engaged in improper behavior were squeezed in a sack – sometimes tied together with the guilty party – and thrown into the sea.[48]

Jealousy among the girls was another theme that appeared in the account of Baudier and in some of the later accounts. Rivalry among the harem residents supposedly caused fierce disputes and intrigues, which was even highlighted in the titles of some works, for example in the account by François de Chassepol.[49]

Baudier also mentioned the jealousy of black eunuchs[50] and embellished the story of the Jewish ladies who entered to the harem for commerce in detail: how they bargained with eunuchs at the gate, how they made trade secretly, how they gained great fortune and how they were sometimes charged of fraud.[51] These Jewish women were described as good sources of information, skilled and cunning traders, go-betweens, and rich powerbrokers.[52] In this context, he elaborated on the dramatic story of a famous Jewish woman named Kira and focused on

46 Baudier, Serrail, p. 65; Bon and Withers, A Description, pp. 55–56; Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 88.

47 Bon and Withers, A Description, p. 55. Baudier reiterated this, drawing on Bon's account. See Baudier, Serrail, p. 65.

48 Burgo, Viaggio, p. 377; Habesci, Present State, p. 171; Histoire Generale des Turcs, vol. 2, p. 31; Melling, Intérieur, s. p.; Albert Jouvin de Rochefort, Le voyageur d'Europe, où est le voyage de Turquie, qui comprend la Terre Sainte et l'Egypte [...] (Paris 1676), p. 213.

49 Baudier, Serrail; François de Chassepol, The History of the Grand Visiers, Mahomet and Achmet Coprogli, Of the three last Grand Signiors, their Sultana's and Chief Favourites; with the most secret Intrigues of the Seraglio. Besides several other particulars of the Wars of Dalmatia, Transylvania, Hungary, Candia, and Poland, translated by John Evelyn junior (London 1677); Courmenin, Voyage, p. 167; Fauvel, Voyage, pp. 80–81. See also Beauvoisins, Notice, p. 17; Guer, Moeurs; Melling, Intérieur, s. p.; Pierre Lambert de Saumery, Anecdotes Venitiennes et Turques ou Nouveaux Mémoires du Comte Bonneval [...] (2 vols., Frankfurt am Main 1740), vol. 1, p. 161.

50 Baudier, Serrail, p. 55; see also Arvieux, Memoires, vol. 4, pp. 481–482.

51 Baudier, Serrail, pp. 62–63.

52 For information on this issue see Holmberg, Esthers in the Seraglio, p. 49.

her covetousness.[53] Other accounts hinted at intimate relationships between women and eunuchs.[54]

Another seventeenth-century author whose account was frequently used in later texts was Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605 – 1689). He stated that he included a chapter about the women's quarters "only to entertain, with the impossibility there is, of having a perfect knowledge of it, or getting any exact account, either what accommodations of it are; or how the Persons, who are confined therein, behave themselves." He added that a white eunuch, who supplied him with specific descriptions of the inner part of the Seraglio, could not give him information on the women's quarter.[55] In spite of admitting the difficulty of reaching information about the harem, Tavernier also regarded the apartment of the women as subservient to the pleasures of the Ottoman monarchs.[56]

Another contemporary narrative account of the palace is by Albertus Bobovius (c. 1610 – c. 1675), who was a page in the *Enderun*.[57] He was taken captive and sold to the palace, where he lived for nineteen years as a royal page specializing in music. He noted that he aimed to give accurate and complete information about the palace based on what he experienced and witnessed with his own eyes. His account concentrates on the palace's functional organization and includes information about the women's apartments based on what he had learned from the wife of an imperial cavalry officer who had served herself in the imperial harem.[58]

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53 Baudier, Serrail, pp. 63 – 65. John Sanderson also mentioned Kira. See John Sanderson, in Samuel Purchas (ed.), His Pilgrimes, Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells, by Englishmen and Others (4 vols., London. 1625), vol. 2, pp. 1614 – 1640, p. 1622. Quoted in Holmberg, Esthers in the Seraglio, pp. 43 – 45.

54 Melling, Intérieur, s. p.

55 Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 85.

56 Tavernier, A New Relation, p. 88.

57 The text written by Bobovius around 1665 was published in 1669 in German and in 1679 in Italian. In 1685, Pierre de Girardin (d. 1689), the French ambassador in Istanbul, adapted the original Italian text into French, but incorporated his own personal interpretations, and sent it to France as if he had written the account himself. For the Turkish translation of this account see Yerasimos and Berthier, Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam. A partial English translation of the Paris manuscript also exists: Fisher and Fisher, Topkapı Sarayı, pp. 7 – 81. For the Turkish translation of the book published in German in 1669 see Bobovius, Saray-ı Enderun: Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam. The translation of the book published in German is extremely valuable for its footnotes highlighting what Girardin added to Bobovius's work.

58 Fisher and Fisher, Topkapı Sarayı, p. 72. Later on, Thomas Thornton assumed that no direct information could be obtained about the imperial harem except what could be learned from ladies who had themselves constituted part of the imperial harem. Thornton, Present State, p. 361.

Bobovius wrote statements which revealed the logic behind the functioning of the system. For instance, he noted that the primary aim of education in the harem was to teach Ottoman court culture and loyalty to the imperial household.[59] Yet, Bobovius's detailed accounts of the sexual practices and mores of the sultan illustrate the fact that even the most reliable of European descriptions of the harem adopted to some degree the body of hearsay and fantasy circulating among foreign observers. According to Bobovius, "the valide sultan instructs female slaves in all the manners and skills they can use to evoke the love of the sultan, so that in time they can become concubines or else be married to an eminent person outside the palace."[60] He also repeated the popular tale of throwing a handkerchief to the desired girl.[61]

Another author whose work was a reference for subsequent accounts was Paul Rycaut (1628–1700) who served as secretary to the English Embassy in the 1660s. He noted that he received information about the imperial court from a person who had spent nineteen years in it.[62] Most probably he referred to Bobovius. With the writing of *The Present State* (presented to England's secretary of state in 1665 though not published until 1668), Rycaut repeated the available body of anecdote, gossip, and fantasy about the harem and thus his account bolstered the stereotyped, clichéd image of the harem, with an emphasis on lasciviousness. He announced his intention with the following words: "[T]hough I ingenuously confess my acquaintance [...] with [these] women [...] is [...] unfamiliar I shall to the best of my information write a short account of these Captivated Ladies, how they are treated, immured, educated and prepared for the great achievements of the Sultans affection."[63] Rycaut, for instance, regarded girls' education as a way to attract the affection of the sultan and he highlighted that the main aim of "the army of virgins" was to obtain an invitation to the bed of their master. He embellished the event of a girl's entry into the man's bedchamber[64] and elaborated on the practice of *halvet* (privacy):

> When the Grand Signior is pleased to dally with a certain number of these Ladies in the Garden [...] Helvet is cryed [...]. [A]ll people withdraw themselves at a distance, and Eu-

59 Bobovius, Saray-ı Enderun: Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam, pp. 76–77.

60 Fisher and Fisher, Topkapı Sarayı, p. 73.

61 Bobovius, Saray-ı Enderun: Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam, p. 61; Fisher and Fisher, Topkapı Sarayı, p. 67. In the French translation, which includes additions of Girardin, there are references to intimate relationship between women. Yerasimos and Berthier, Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam, p. 72.

62 Rycaut, The Present State, "the Epistle to the Reader".

63 Rycaut, The Present State, p. 38.

64 Rycaut, The Present State, p. 39.

> nuchs are placed at every avenue, it being at that time death to approach near those walls. Here the Women strive with their Dances, Songs, and Discourse to make themselves Mistresses of the Grand Signior's affection, and then let themselves loose to all kind of lasciviousness and wanton carriage, acquitting themselves as much of all respect to Majesty as they do to modesty.[65]

Like many accounts of the previous century, Rycaut's and his predecessors' narrative about the harem was again a reflection of European readers' curiosity about the sexuality of the East. It has been noted that authors wrote about the harem in such a way as to meet Western readers' expectations.[66] However, one should read Rycaut's harem narrative by taking into consideration his apprehension of the Ottoman sultan and his government.[67] Rycaut's picture of the Ottoman sultan was uncompromisingly negative. He attributed impulsive irrationality and despotic cruelty to the Ottoman sultan and defined the Ottoman government as a tyranny controlled by a severe and absolute ruler who was above the law.[68] With this background in mind, one can form a more nuanced opinion of Rycaut's observations.

3 Eighteenth century narratives

Following Rycaut, Orientalizing fantasies did not diminish and some authors continued to emphasize the lascivious customs. For instance, Aaron Hill (1685–1750) who arrived in Constantinople in 1700 and stayed for three years, depicted the emperor as enjoying the pleasure of pure, undoubted virgins and regarded ladies who obtained a monarch's heart in exchange for their virginities as happy and successful ladies.[69]

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65 Rycaut, The Present State, p. 39.

66 Etat Général de l'Empire Othoman depuis sa Fondation jusques à Présent et l'abregé des Vies des Empereurs: Par un Solitaire Turc [...], translated by M. de la Croix (4 vols., Paris 1695) vol. 1, pp. 342–343.

67 For a critical evaluation of Rycaut's book that take into account the dynamics of the Ottoman Empire and England in the seventeenth century see Linda T. Darling, Ottoman Politics through British Eyes: Paul Rycaut's The Present State of the Ottoman Empire, in Journal of World History 5 (1994), pp. 71–97.

68 Rycaut, The Present State, pp. 2–3.

69 Hill, Account, p. 168. Christine Gerrard notes that "Hill's primary model was Rycaut's Present State of the Ottoman Empire. Both authors investigate 'perverse' Oriental sexual practices, but Rycaut's treatment of 'libidinous flames' of homoerotic love is mild compared to Hill's." Christine Gerrard and Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector 1685–1750 (Oxford 2003), p. 22.

In this period, however, some authors, including Aaron Hill, criticized earlier writers for inventing erroneous stories that did not reflect the reality. He claimed to narrate the truth, yet even he admitted that he reiterated what the reader wanted to read. He noted that:

> I will not only entertain the world with agreeable amusement, but proceed by regular degrees to give the reader an entire idea of the Seraglio of the Turkish sultan, not omitting any odd and pleasant observation [...]. I will trace the sultan to his amorous pastimes with the virgins of his pleasure [...] and if the British ladies are desirous of a further information, still advance a step or two beyond it.[70]

Another author who played an important role in strengthening already existing perceptions of the harem was Antoine Galland (1646 – 1715) who was in Istanbul in the 1670s as secretary of the French ambassador. Galland translated *One Thousand and One Nights* and adapted it to meet European taste or expectations.[71] The highly sexualized themes presented in this work reinforced fantastic-exotic harem images in the minds of the Westerners. Galland's translation attained great success and major European writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were to some extent influenced by the tales.[72] Some accounts of this period contained for instance detailed romantic stories related to the female slaves of the harem, such as the story of a female slave of queen mother (*valide sultan*) Gülnûş Sultan (d. 1715). This girl was the wife of Baltacı Mehmed Pasha and played a role in the career of her husband.[73]

In eighteenth-century accounts, we observe a growing diversity of attitudes toward the harem. The account of Aubry de la Motraye (1674 – 1743), who was in Istanbul at the beginning of the eighteenth century, is noteworthy. When the sultan was in Edirne with his entire court, Motraye was able to see the interior of several harems by accompanying the individual who had been assigned the task of mending some pendulums in the Seraglio. He was conducted by a

70 Hill, Account, pp. 147, 149.

71 Antoine Galland (trans.), Les Mille et une Nuits: Contes Arabes traduits en Français (12 vols., Paris 1704 – 1717).

72 For information on this work see Frédéric Bauden, Antoine Galland, in David Thomas and John Chesworth (eds.), Christian-Muslim Relations, A Bibliographical History, vol. 13: Western Europe (1700 – 1800) (Leiden, London 2019), pp. 543 – 547.

73 Cantemir, History, pp. 442 – 444; Friedrich Ernst von Fabricius, The Genuine Letters of Baron Fabricius, envoy from His Serene Highness the Duke Administrator of Holstein to Charles XII. of Sweden [...] (London 1761), p. xv. Another story was about a girl named Zulima. Guer, Moeurs, vol. 2, p. 120; Vincent Mignot, Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman: Depuis son origine jusqu'à la paix de Belgrade en 1740 (4 vols., Paris 1771), vol. 4, pp. 66 – 73, 103 – 104; Saumery, Anecdotes, vol. 1, pp. 160 – 165.

eunuch to the harem while the women were absent.[74] Motraye provided relatively reasonable information about events related the members of the harem, practices in the harem, and the female palace slaves' experiences in the harem. He, for instance, described the practice of *halvet* in a credible way.[75]

Likewise, the account of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689 – 1762), who as the wife of the British ambassador was on Ottoman territory in the years 1717–1718, stands in a category of its own.[76] Montagu herself regarded her account as more accurate and reliable than that of men since she had personally entered the spaces prohibited to men. Having had an opportunity to meet with the elite women of the period, Lady Mary Montagu despised the narratives of male writers such as Rycaut and Hill and criticized them for writing Orientalizing fantasies about the East that did not reflect reality and were thus to be treated with suspicion. Based on the narratives of the women she contacted, she rejected some of the stories of the harem (such as throwing a handkerchief to a chosen girl) as not reflecting the reality. Following Lady Mary Montagu, Julia Pardoe (1806 – 1862) and Lady Elizabeth Craven (1750 – 1828) were also opposed to the distorting sexual fantasies of mainly male European writers.[77] European women's harem representations, initiated by Montagu, stand as a feminine response to the prevailing Western fantasies about the exotic harem.[78] Still, it has been argued that, while Lady Mary Montagu tried to subvert the presuppositions of her male predecessors, she nevertheless could not completely break away from male fantasies of Eastern women.[79] Nevertheless, Montagu's thoughts on travelers' writings are noteworthy in terms of revealing a mentality:

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74 Motraye, Travels, vol. 1, pp. 171 – 173.

75 Motraye, Travels, vol. 1, pp. 248, 430.

76 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, edited by Robert Halsband (3 vols., Oxford 1965 – 1967).

77 Elizabeth Craven, A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople. In a Series of Letters from the Right Honourable Elizabeth Lady Craven, to his Serene Highness the Margrave of Brandebourg, Anspach, and Bareith (London 1789); Julie Pardoe, The City of the Sultans and the Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1836 (3 vols., London 1838).

78 On English female travelers' writings about Eastern women see Billie Melman, Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718 – 1918: Sexuality, Religion, and Work (Ann Arbor, London 1992).

79 Mary Roberts noted, for instance, that female travel writers often blended reality with the fantasy of *Arabian Nights* in an effort to make their tales more believable to European audiences. See Mary Roberts, Contested Terrains: Women Orientalists and the Colonial Harem, in Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (eds.), Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography (Durham, London 2002), pp. 179 – 202, here pp. 181 – 190. Roberts went beyond this interpretation by considering how British women authors constructed the harem according to their own fem-

> We travelers are in very hard circumstances. If we say nothing but what has been said before us we are dull and we have observed nothing. If we tell anything new, we are laughed at as fabulous and romantic, not allowing either for the difference of ranks, which afford difference of company, or more curiosity, or the changes of customs that happen every twenty year in every country.[80]

Yet, these developments did not change traditional perceptions of the harem. In accounts written in the atmosphere of the Enlightenment, the Ottoman Empire was described according to the tropes of the "despotic theory" discourse and the harem remained one of the most important symbols of despotic rule. In this period, the harem was evaluated from a theoretical framework. European accounts in periods prior to the eighteenth century did not reflect a particular theoretical approach to the Orient; however, they comprised common patterns and ideas which formed the basis for the theory of "Oriental Despotism."[81] This period's writers were influenced mainly by Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755). Montesquieu's accounts formed a stark contrast to the letters from Constantinople by Lady Mary Montagu. He claimed that the worst form of government was despotism and the best example of this was the Ottoman Empire. The harem became a key symbol on the ideological field. Montesquieu portrayed the sultan's harem as a despotic institution based on sexuality and claimed that most women were imprisoned in the harem. In Montesquieu's works, the harem, polygamy, and oppressed women were concepts related to despotism and oppression.[82] Thus, in Montesquieu's narrative, the despot's harem resembled a prison.[83]

Fed by religious prejudice and imperialist ambition, Montesquieu's misrepresentation became a widespread, established view over time. The body of Orientalist literature expanded over time and the West used Orientalist knowledge while building its dominance over the East. Several developments in the eighteenth century, such as a growing book trade, a rising interest in travel narra-

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inine fantasy. See Mary Roberts, Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature (Durham, London 2007), chapter 3.

80 Lord Wharncliffe (ed.), The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (2 vols., London 1837), vol. 2, pp. 51–52.

81 For discussion of this theme see Çırakman, From the "Terror of the World".

82 Montesquieu, Lettres Persanes (2 vols., Cologne [=Amsterdam] 1721); Montesquieu, De l'esprit des loix (Geneva 1748).

83 On this theme see Ruth P. Thomas, Montesquieu's Harem and Diderot's Convent: The Woman as Prisoner, in The French Review 52/1 (1978), pp. 36–45. This narrative continued after Montesquieu. See for example Marchebus, Voyage, pp. 152–155; Pardoe, The City of the Sultans, vol. 1, p. 311; Thornton, Present State, p. 371.

tives, and increasing trade with the East, led to further elaboration on the harem fantasies and their spread across broader areas of Europe. They projected an image that was inaccurate but accepted. Although some authors opposed these stereotyped approaches, the Western reader preferred reading about the exotic harem intrigues and affairs of the female slaves. Thus, the reiteration of common and inaccurate stories strengthened the prevailing perceptions of the harem as a "paradise of sexuality."[84]

In this context, Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson's (1740 – 1807) account stands as a rare find, and it has an exceptional value in providing detailed and relatively reasonable information concerning the functioning of the imperial harem as an institution, its residents, and practices. Mouradgea d'Ohsson, who was a functionary of the Swedish Embassy in Istanbul for much of his life, noted that officers of the palace furnished him with details about the imperial palace. He added that he owed the details concerning the female members of the imperial dynasty and the imperial harem to the slave girls of the Seraglio. Many of these girls received their freedom after a few years of service and then they left the imperial palace and were given in marriage to officers of the court. D'Ohsson stated that he corrected his misconception with information supplied by these officers and by Christian women who were able to arrange free access.[85] He noted that he also received information from Christian women who had the opportunity to visit other Ottoman harems.[86] Thus in some regards, information given in Mouradgea d'Ohsson's account complements what is expressed in the Ottoman chronicles and archival materials.

Some accounts of the period contained attempts at correcting some of the common false beliefs and tropes with some authors acknowledging that accepted claims had been fabricated. Thomas Thornton (d. 1814), for instance, noted that some narratives were discredited by absurd descriptions of the custom of women creeping at the bed's foot, of the intrigues and jealousies of the harem ladies, their mutual poisonings, and the stranglings and drownings.[87] Joseph-Eugène Beauvoisins stated that some of the common beliefs in Europe were not true, that there was in fact little information about the sultan's palace and that many authors wrote on the basis of the information they had read without eyewitnessing real events.[88] Hobhouse also mentioned that idle stories about the

84 William Eton, Survey of the Turkish Empire: In which are Considered [...] (London 1799), p. 63.

85 Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau, vol. 1, pp. ix–x.

86 Mouradgea d'Ohsson, Tableau, vol. 4, pp. 327, 338.

87 Thornton, Present State, pp. 374 – 375.

88 Beauvoisins, Notice, pp. 23 – 24.

harem circulated, but that these stories were rejected by well-informed people.[89] The handkerchief story, for instance, was rejected by Montagu and several other authors, claiming it did not reflect the reality.[90] Likewise, Elias Habesci (d. c. 1793) corrected views that the sultan had sexual intercourse with every woman in the harem, stating that: "it is commonly believed that sultan may take to his bed all the women of palace, yet this claim is a vulgar error."[91]

Conclusions

The harem, which represented "the otherness" of the East, was a source for speculation and fantasy in the West. This chapter is an overview of multiple European accounts providing information on the imperial harem. Many of them include speculations on the mysterious life in the Seraglio and the harem that contributed to the fund of Orientalist clichés. Therefore, it is obvious that taking these narratives at face value and using European accounts as the only source material obfuscates the reality.

At the end of this survey what can we say about the value of these accounts as historical sources for Ottoman studies? This article reveals that these accounts contain a mix of fact, hearsay, and fantasy, and should be assessed critically, but they should still be taken into consideration. Narratives about the harem produced over a long period were not homogeneous and constant. Generally, authors tended to read and copy previously written works and bolstered the stereotyped, clichéd images of the harem. Some authors, however, repeated the previous narratives to some extent, but supplemented them with information from contacts related to the imperial court. Therefore, given the nature of the Ottoman sources, we may conclude that the additional European accounts contribute to a better understanding of various aspects of the Ottoman Seraglio. Ottoman sources, including court records, archival documents from the state archive, and chronicles are valuable in reconstructing the harem hierarchy, and they provide some information about the harem's organization, its functioning, and the lives and personal experiences of the members of the harem. Still, these sources do not allow us to reconstruct every aspect of the theme. Ottoman sources have limitations due to their official character. Subjects were registered within certain standards, and these sources are silent or offer only limited and

89 Hobhouse, Journey, vol. 1, pp. 847–856.

90 Beauvoisins, Notice, pp. 24–26; Habesci, Present State, p. 169; Hill, Account, p. 164; Hobhouse, Journey, vol. 1, p. 853; Melling, Intérieur, s. p.

91 Habesci, Present State, p. 167.

superficial information about some issues. These sources generally do not allow us to hear the personal voices of women, to follow every phase of their lives, or to see how they reacted to various situations.[92] Thus, some European accounts provide supplementary information about the harem which may be lacking in the Ottoman sources. Additionally, certain visual materials related to the women of the Seraglio and the imperial harem appearing in the European accounts are valuable in visualizing and understanding the physical environment, daily life, customs, material culture, clothing style, as well as the impact of status and rank in the imperial harem. Consequently, these European accounts should be used in conjunction with other historical sources, comprising written sources, oral sources, visual materials and material objects.

Further research is needed for a reassessment of European accounts as historical sources in reconstructing various aspects of Ottoman history such as social structures, culture, lifestyles, manners, social life, and material culture in the Ottoman Empire, including those of women and children of various statutes, ethnicities, religions and regions.

92 For an evaluation of the Ottoman sources on this issue see İpşirli Argıt, Life after the Harem, pp. 27–30.