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## Ripped from the Headlines: Teaching Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Letters in the Context of 21st-century Controversies

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## Ripped from the Headlines: Teaching Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Letters in the Context of 21st-century Controversies

### Abstract

In the long shadow of 9/11 and the ongoing COVID pandemic, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* connect with the lived experience of today's students, especially the cluster of eight letters dated 1 April 1717. By emphasizing parallels between Montagu's observations and the students' own lives, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* can add a modern dimension to the eighteenth century in general, challenges of gender, and texts written in and about the Muslim world.

### Keywords

Mary Wortley Montagu, Turkish Embassy Letters, Orientalism, Islamophobia, seraglio, inoculation, pandemic, smallpox

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### Cover Page Footnote

The author wishes to express her gratitude to ABO's anonymous reviewers, whose enthusiasm and constructive criticism helped restructure this essay and improve its content. Thank you!

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* are a reliable classroom hit. The letters' lively, informal tone and defiance of society's conventional restrictions have irresistible appeal for modern readers, who can enjoy them with or without a strong background in eighteenth-century British history and literary culture. In class discussion, Montagu's stance as an informed but inexperienced observer empowers students who sometimes feel unqualified to express their opinions on more erudite works, especially satirical responses to the current events of long ago, as written by her contemporaries.

In light of today's conflicted social climate, however, I have found that Montagu's accessible style is no longer the primary attraction. Much of the letters' content parallels markedly with the lived experience of today's students. The cultural fallout from two historic crises in particular—the 9/11 attacks of 2001, which still impact our society despite having occurred before many of our undergraduates were born, and the COVID-19 pandemic of all too recent memory—can help us relate to Montagu's observations on an empathetic as well as an intellectual level, providing a gateway to a period that might initially seem distant in both time and relevance.

I first started including selections from the *Letters* in my English survey classes in 2002, in the midst of post-9/11 reactions against the Muslim world; in the following years, as veterans of the wars in Middle East returned to finish their university degrees, many of them were eager to share their own stories of East-West encounters. Montagu's remarks served as a helpful springboard for group discussions about misconceptions versus reality. Two decades later, on the three hundredth anniversary of the transatlantic smallpox pandemic of 1721, Montagu's role in introducing Turkish inoculation practices to western Europe turned her into a popular cultural icon. A new crossover biography by the British author Jo Willett was published in May 2021, and in September the undergraduate-friendly [History Chicks](#) devoted two ninety-minute biographical podcasts to her. The first episode opened, not with Montagu's birth, but with the year she contracted smallpox, a personal crisis that would lead her to “save lives and transform the entire world.”<sup>1</sup>

Instructors can take advantage of Montagu's enhanced popular profile to supply students with a new set of tools for reflecting critically upon the ways historical and modern accounts illuminate one another, even in context that might seem exactly and exclusively “now.” In this case, different contexts also dovetail informatively. Classroom discussions about racial and religious prejudices illuminated by Montagu's letters, for instance, might now extend beyond post-9/11 Islamophobia to touch upon recent media (and physical) attacks on people of

East Asian descent. Knowing that the same hateful rhetoric surrounding pandemic disease has a [long history in western society](#) helps situate where it comes from—and, thus, suggests how to challenge new instances. Such challenges are not just an exercise in critical thinking, but a form of civic engagement in the face of potential violence and misleading statements concerning public health.

I propose here three headline-derived avenues by which *The Turkish Embassy Letters* can be explored to elicit this critical process in our students: Orientalist assumptions and Islamophobia, inoculation hesitancy, and the nature of truth in politicized discourse. Each section is briefly outlined, and then I propose a grouping of letters, all dated the same day, as a representative selection of Montagu's engagement in intellectual exchange on these issues.

Finally, I will briefly describe how I have taught the *Letters* in my World Literature classroom in conjunction with Montesquieu's epistolary novel *Lettres persanes*, or [Persian Letters](#). Although I usually avoid Anglophone works on my World Literature syllabus, as so many major writers in English are already covered in the British and American surveys, the *Letters* provide an excellent bridge to multiple genres popular in Early Modern global literature, being organized like a combination of a journal, a travel narrative, and an epistolary novel. Montagu's position as an outsider looking in, actively working to understand a culture different from her own, is similar to the position of most of the students themselves.

### **Orientalist assumptions and Islamophobia**

The best-known context in which Montagu engages in her own challenge to popular misunderstanding is her vigorous opposition to falsehoods about life in a Muslim country, particularly the unique powers of women. Noting how Montagu makes explicit her role as cultural counter-narrator is a useful starting point: in a letter dated [17 June 1717](#) (Letter 37/38), she remarks to one correspondent that “Your whole letter is full of mistakes, from one end to the other,” derived from a typical western male writer who “wrote with equal ignorance and confidence.” A more detailed description of popular misassumptions about treatment of women in the Turkish seraglio is dated [10 March 1718](#) (Letter 39/40). Despite her attempts to correct such stereotypes, they remained remarkably persistent even centuries after Montagu's death.

A surefire conversation starter is a [cheesy trailer](#) for the 1989 film *Intimate Power*, based on a dubious but persistent legend that the Empress Josephine's cousin was kidnapped by pirates in 1788 and installed in the Turkish seraglio,

where her influence convinced the Sultan to embrace western ideas. Although it elicits laughter, this short video demonstrates multiple harmful clichés that Montagu ultimately failed to refute, despite the contrary evidence she provided from first-hand observation. I question my survey students why clichés like this endure in the popular imagination, and challenge them—either in discussion or, for less talkative classes, as written homework—to suggest strategies that might be successful in finally putting an end to them. Upper-level and graduate seminars can also benefit from the *Intimate Power* trailer in conjunction with Montagu's *Letters* as an introduction to the study of postcolonial theory and its objections to Orientalism and Eurocentrism, here on convenient display in one two-minute package.

### **Inoculation hesitancy**

Beyond the issue of battling cultural assumptions, Montagu's difficulties in introducing smallpox inoculation to London society and obtaining royal patronage for the procedure have significant parallels with public reactions to COVID-19. Several scholars, most notably Isobel Grundy in an [interview](#) for National Public Radio, have noted similar behavior in today's vaccine hesitant and their counterparts in eighteenth-century England. During the pandemic of 1721, Montagu took active measures to combat disinformation, often purveyed by respected physicians who had a vested financial or reputational interest in treating smallpox cases. Complaints that the treatment was too novel and untested—despite demonstrated success on thousands of Turks—were countered by a very public display of the inoculation and recovery of Montagu's four-year-old daughter, not unlike coverage of high-profile figures who received a COVID vaccine and recorded their experience of the shot and its aftereffects on Facebook or TikTok.<sup>2</sup>

Montagu's famous description of observing the inoculation procedure in Turkey is one of a cluster of eight letters that all bear the date 1 April 1717 and are addressed from the temporary establishment of the Sultan's court at its secondary capital, Adrianople. The eight letters are located at the literal and rhetorical center of the collection, preceded by twenty-four letters describing the journey to Turkey and followed by twenty more that make further comment on what has come before, concluding with the family's return to western Europe.

### **The question of truth and reliability: Alternative facts?**

Although Montagu's role as an inoculation influencer came years after her return from Turkey, and thus postdates the setting of the *Turkish Embassy Letters*, it's useful to note that because the collection was published posthumously and underwent edits throughout the author's life, events outside the 1717-1718 time frame of the *Letters* may well have affected the final form of at least some of them, and certainly the arrangement of the book. Such contextual considerations can be brought up in class lecture or discussion without assigning additional primary texts. For a survey's tightly-packed syllabus, the April 1 letters make a satisfactory unit for one or two class periods.

These eight letters are especially helpful for tracking Montagu's shifts in narrative voice, as they are pitched to a variety of recipients with whom she has varying degrees of familiarity. Students can work independently or in groups, with each scrutinizing a separate letter, to examine clues in these examples as an exercise in narrator reliability. Novels disguised as travel narratives in the early eighteenth century often included false assertions of complete veracity to lend authenticity (the preface to *Gulliver's Travels* comes to mind); I ask the class, is it possible that an ostensibly true account might also contain kernels of distortion? Since we can't fact-check from her personal journals, which were burned upon her death, and recipients' copies of most of the original letters did not survive, we might wonder what was lost in translation as Montagu reshaped her writings for publication. Our limited perspective suggests caution, and a reminder that for all its intimate feel, the *Turkish Embassy Letters* is a public-facing text that the author looked upon as a legacy. Yet modern readers tend to accept the *Letters* at face value. Montagu's contemporaries, more familiar with the hybrid nature of such works in their own time, might have been less inclined to do the same.

Recognizing the artificiality of the *Letters* invites speculation. Students with an interest in creative writing are especially intrigued by questions such as the following, which can be discussed in class or issued as potential prompts for a reading journal: Is Montagu's adoption of popular generic conventions to make the work more enjoyable to a broad audience likely to determine the content, as much as the other way around? Do you consider that a valid reason for altering documents that are marketed as nonfiction? What is Montagu trying to accomplish as she addresses each recipient, and how does her language reflect her goal? If the arrangement of the *Letters* is meant to form a cohesive narrative, do the addressees feature as characters in their own right, especially if—as several critics have remarked—some of these people haven't been identified and may in fact be fictional or at least conflated personae?<sup>3</sup>

### The April 1 cluster

Below, I note four of the April 1 letters that have engendered fruitful discussion both in print and in my classroom, with a sense of how they might be used in breakout groups or class discussion. Because they all have the same dateline, I have used numbers to differentiate them. Jack Lynch's [online edition](#) assigns the letters consecutive numbers, but the Broadview print edition edited by Teresa Heffernan and Daniel O'Quinn employs the order that Montagu used in the manuscript on which the *Letters* is based, which inexplicably leaves out number 22 and skips straight from letter 21 to 23. Since these are the two sources an instructor is most likely to draw upon for assignments, I'll use both number sets. I will also include additional reading suggestions for furthering the conversation.

#### Letter 26/27: To the Lady ----- (unidentified).

Montagu's visit to a women's bath house provides a locus from which several main themes of the *Turkish Embassy Letters* radiate: the refutation of Orientalist notions of the restrictions of seraglio life, the concept of Islamic countries as backward and uneducated, and hackneyed assertions about sexuality, gender identity, and social class. She establishes authority immediately, explaining she was only permitted entry because of her sex and rank as the wife of England's ambassador, privileges impossible for male professional authors: "You will perhaps be surprised at an account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common voyage-writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don't know." The bathers she describes are educated and congenial, productively engaged in work or conversation: "In short, 'tis the women's coffee-house." Since ladies were excluded from the intellectual pleasures of coffee-houses back home, this pointed observation suggests that Turkish women enjoy a privilege that their English sisters do not.

In *Women, Writing, and Travel in the Eighteenth Century*, Katrina O'Loughlin points out that throughout the Letters, "conversation and intellectual exchange trump simple sumptuary display" (53), creating an overarching narrative thread and a link to letters 1 through 24. For example, O'Loughlin connects Montagu's use of the term "machine" in Letter number 9—a reference to artificial frames Viennese ladies used to augment their natural hair, to comply with extravagant styles in fashion at court—with the bathers' amazement at Montagu's corset: "they believed I was locked up in that machine, and that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband." Her comment is a dig at the restrictive fashions imposed on western women (soon after arriving in Turkey, and occasionally after she returned to England, Montagu adopted

Turkish dress) and a reflection on the inequities created by the expense and discomfort of European fashion. Nudity in the baths is an equalizer, obscuring distinctions in rank between powerful women and their enslaved companions.<sup>4</sup>

Letter 26/27 is widely accepted as the inspiration for *The Turkish Bath*, as Ingres had copied the letter in full into his notebook. Students are taken aback when confronted with the painting, as its languid, eroticized subjects bear little resemblance to Montagu's description of the baths as a hive of activity—it is, in fact, much closer to the imaginary seraglio of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and other Orientalist fictions.

### **Letter 29/30: To Lady Mar.**

Letter 29/30, addressed to Montagu's sister Lady Mar, extends the idea of Turkish women's freedom, emphasizing the apparent paradox of that ostensible symbol of female oppression, the veil. Montagu describes life under the veil in terms of "perpetual masquerade," thus associating it with a familiar European pastime notorious for its sexual licentiousness. The veil's masking function provides the wearers "entire liberty of following their inclinations, without danger of discovery." The "great ladies seldom let their gallants know who they are" and can conduct romantic liaisons secure in knowing that even the most indiscreet lover will be unable to sully their reputations. At the same time, "no man dare touch or follow a woman in the street." Like the naked bathers in 26/27, veiled women are not subjected to a male gaze that casually objectifies western women—a statement I have heard from veiled international students from conservative Muslim countries when asked why they continue to cover their faces in a society where it is neither required nor expected. Montagu also mentions the protection afforded by Muslim women's retention of control over their dowries, a practice contrary to the British law that conferred married women's property on their husbands.

If there's enough space on the syllabus to include additional letters, 29/30 parallels well with another letter to Lady Mar, number 39/40 (10 March 1718), where Montagu uses her insider status to debunk accepted truisms about seraglio sexuality. She particularly focuses on the claim that the Sultan indicated his chosen partner for the night by tossing a handkerchief in her direction, and that the recipient of this attention was required to enter his bed by "creeping in at the bed's foot."<sup>5</sup> Citing firsthand information from Sultana Haftén, "favourite of the late Emperor Mustapha," Montagu boldly contradicts popular male authors' histories, travel accounts, and Oriental fantasies. Throughout the *Letters* she



characterizes Turkish women as confident, valued family members who are unwilling to put up with disrespect from anyone, including their men.

On the other hand, a darker implication of the veil is revealed in 42/43, sandwiched between a rapturous description of a wedding and a praise of Turkish inheritance laws, with the story of a murder victim who had been discovered “not very far from my house” two months earlier, “but it was not possible for any body to know her, no woman's face being known.” One might ask students to discuss, what is the impact on the reader of her inclusion of this anecdote? In a broader context, how might Montagu’s remarks about veiling be compared or contrasted with O’Loughlin’s observations about her implied criticism of western “machines,” or with the restrictive, ostensibly protective patriarchal normal of eighteenth-century English discourses on modest women’s dress?

### **Letter 30/31: To Alexander Pope.**

The letters to men—Pope and Montagu’s Italian friend, the Abbé Conti—are significantly more erudite than the letters to women, despite Montagu’s frequently expressed stance that women are men’s intellectual equals. This one connects with Pope’s *Iliad*, which he was working on at the time, and is rife with classical allusions, a direct contrast to the “feminine” letters.

The passages on Ibrahim Pasha’s passionate love poem to his bride, which feature a literal translation provided by Montagu’s translators and her own adaptation into heroic couplets, invites questions of translation and how our native language and country of origin—and, perhaps, our century of origin—affect our perception of what makes good poetry. Although this is a discussion that one must always initiate at some point in the World Literature classroom, it is also fruitful in a British Literature class, where students are prone to dismiss neoclassical poetry as impenetrably formal and rule-bound.

Students might be asked to compare Letter 30/31 to Letter 28/29, addressed to Lady Bristol, which takes a less romantic view of fifty-year-old Ibrahim Pasha’s courtship: “He is indeed a man of merit, and the declared favourite of the Sultan...but that is not enough to make him pleasing in the eyes of a girl of thirteen.” Does this knowledge impact our impression of the love lyric’s quality? Should it?

For a further exploration of Montagu’s engagement with Turkish poetry, one might bring in Letter 40/41, dated approximately a year after the letter to Pope (16 March 1718), in which she provides a detailed key to metaphorical language.

Letter 40/41 addresses the anonymous recipient of Letter 37/38, whose correspondence was “full of mistakes.” If we view this addressee as an ongoing character in Montagu’s narrative, one might ask why Letter 40/41, like 37/38, is so much more didactic in its approach than Letter 30/31. Is it merely the passage of time, which has improved Montagu’s grasp of the language and Turkish poetic tradition? Or is this letter’s tone tinged with gendered expectations?

I have found it useful to ask students, especially those who compose poetry themselves, to compare Montagu’s translations with modern renditions of similar works, especially lyrics by [Nedîm](#), a professional court poet in Constantinople while the Montagus were in residence.

### **Letter 31/32: To Sarah Chiswell.**

Montagu’s brother died of smallpox in 1713 and she herself was seriously disfigured by the disease, so her interest in prevention was deeply personal. The famous description of the inoculation procedure in Letter 31/32 is interesting in itself, but takes on additional relevance if it is combined with a digression on the pandemic of 1721 and the first inoculation clinical trials in Britain, which Montagu sponsored alongside the Royal Society and the Princess of Wales.<sup>6</sup> Her incursion into a male-only domain based on scientific learning and formal education led to personal attacks on her credibility, especially because she was advocating a process imported from a Muslim country, generally performed by female practitioners.

The society physician William Wagstaffe managed to combine a perfect trifecta of prejudices against gender, race, and class into a single sentence:

Posterity perhaps will scarcely be brought to believe that a method practised only by a few *Ignorant Women*, amongst an illiterate and unthinking People should on a sudden, and upon a slender Experience, so far obtain in one of the Politest Nations in the World as to be received into the *Royal Palace* (Wagstaffe 5-6).<sup>7</sup>

In response, Montagu published an anonymous letter defending inoculation to the Whig newspaper *The Flying-Post*, “A Plain Account of the Inoculating of the Small Pox by a Turkey Merchant.” This unusual example of Montagu writing in an ostensibly male voice can segue into discussion of the masculine genre of “pamphlet wars” that dominated political discourse during the early years of the eighteenth century. The purpose and circumstances of this letter—a direct plan of action published in the midst of social disruption—provide an obvious foil for the

carefully crafted *Letters* composed for posterity, opening further possibilities for questions about how an author's style might be impacted by the intended audience.

By assuming the guise of a middle-class male, Montagu tapped into a common trope—the character of the “Turkey Merchant” was a familiar persona in popular media of the time, similar to character types adopted by Addison and Steele—which enabled her to concentrate on the critics' objections to inoculation rather than their personal attacks on her sex and class. Since similar smears were what she anticipated when she decided on posthumous publication for the *Turkish Embassy Letters*, her “Plain Account” is a useful inclusion for the sake of comparison.

### **Recommended resources for teaching the *Letters***

Broadview Press's *The Turkish Embassy Letters* is an affordable paperback that can be assigned as a required text for a seminar on woman writers, travel writing, or the global eighteenth century. In a course focused on the rise of the novel, it could be swapped in to replace a more traditional choice to lay the groundwork for teaching epistolary fiction. The Broadview volume includes excellent editorial apparatus and additional letters written both to and from Montagu, including the “Plain Account” epistle, which is not available online. Selections from primary texts offer multiple points of view regarding Islam and Orientalism, as well as a section on smallpox and inoculation.

Lisa Lowe's chapter on “Travel Narratives and Orientalism: Montagu and Montesquieu” in her groundbreaking study of *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* situates both the *Turkish Embassy Letters* and *Persian Letters* within their contemporaneous context and summarizes differing opinions of major critics up to the time at which Lowe was writing—thirty years ago, but it's a good foundation to build upon. For anyone teaching Montagu and Montesquieu together this chapter is a must-read, and the style is accessible enough to be assigned as additional reading for advanced undergraduates and graduate students who are studying travel narratives or the epistolary format. An open access edition of Lowe's book is available.

Katrina O'Loughlin's *Women, Writing, and Travel in the Eighteenth Century* opens with a thoughtful chapter that examines *all* of the *Turkish Embassy Letters* as a coherent narrative, a departure from critics who concentrate only on those best-known letters clustered in the middle.

Other good choices for outside reading are Isobel Grundy's collection of the most significant *Selected Letters* and Grundy's definitive 714-page scholarly biography *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment*.

Reliable information about Montagu's role in the inoculation controversies can be elusive. An article I've found especially useful is Diana Barnes's "The Public Life of a Woman of Wit and Quality." For further historical context, see my open-access article "[Variolation to Vaccine](#)."

Patricia Fara's brief but fact-filled [review](#) of Willett's *Pioneering Life of Mary Wortley Montagu* with focus on the inoculation controversy, short enough to be photocopied and distributed to students or posted as a PDF to a class online platform, was published in the venerable medical journal *The Lancet*. Willett's biography draws heavily upon Grundy's work, but although its short chapters are undergraduate-friendly, Willett's indiscriminate use of random detail and vagueness about dates render it inappropriate for upper division and graduate students.

Those who wish to teach the *Letters* in a postcolonial context, especially if Montagu's book has been assigned in full, might want to consider Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "[Can the Subaltern Speak?](#)"<sup>8</sup> Spivak's theory complements Montagu's apparent inconsistency in her account of Tunisian women celebrating Ramadan in Letter 44/45. This letter (addressed to a male recipient, the Abbé Conti) uses jarringly racist language that appears to contradict the open-mindedness of what has come before. As voiceless characters for whom Montagu provides her own subjective narrative on the reader's behalf, the Tunisian celebrants are a perfect illustration of Spivak's subaltern. Ordinary women, whom she describes as "country people," had no place in the circles of power that Montagu inhabited in Turkey, and her dehumanization of them is deeply disturbing after so many feminist professions of solidarity with her Turkish contact. Two paragraphs later she extols the beauty of "the ruins of Carthage," resituating herself on her journey home in the patriarchal neoclassical western tradition that frames the *Turkish Embassy Letters* between two storms at sea in the first and this penultimate letter, thematically and rhetorically echoing Aeneas's shipwreck on the Carthaginian shore in *Aeneid* 1-4.<sup>9</sup>

### **Montagu's *Letters* in a world literature context**

In the World Literature classroom, *Turkish Embassy Letters* pairs well with many different works, both eastern and western. I have had excellent results combining selections from the *Letters* with selections from the journals of the Mughal

emperors Babur and Jahangir, for instance; Jahangir's policies of religious tolerance and open curiosity about other cultures have obvious echoes in Montagu's remarks, and a contrast of the cosmopolitan Mughal Empire with its much more conservative Ottoman contemporary offers a useful lesson in resisting the temptation to pigeonhole "Islamic Empires of the Early Modern Period" into a single monolithic category rather than the diverse societies they actually were.

Especially, Montagu's *Letters* can be compared or contrasted on several levels with Baron de Montesquieu's openly fictional *Lettres persanes*, or *Persian Letters*, coincidentally published in 1721—the year of the smallpox pandemic. Since Montesquieu's diction is fairly elevated to begin with, the 1899 public domain [translation](#) by John Davidson holds up well and has the advantage of being readily available. Ostensibly the story of the exiled "Persian" Usbek, who relays his impressions of Europe to his family back home in the seraglio, the book is a thinly-disguised satire on French society rather than an attempt at accurate depiction of Middle Eastern customs. Of particular interest is [Letter 26](#), in which the protagonist contrasts his favorite wife Roxana's "chaste" nature and lack of agency with the lascivious Parisian women who "have lost all reserve: they appear before the men with their faces uncovered, as if they sought their overthrow." Montesquieu's use of "seraglio," a Turkish word, indicates that despite his book's title he is playing on western impressions of the Ottoman court. Yet Usbek is as much a victim of Orientalist stereotyping as any westerner: the final letters, 151-161, explode every one of the illusions he has embraced when Roxana spearheads a seraglio-wide revolt against his patriarchal authority.

Montesquieu's letters 151-161 caution us against assuming that all of Montagu's male contemporaries accepted Orientalist fabrications. They can also serve as a caution against making broad assumptions about a text on insufficient evidence. Our World Literature textbook for years was *The Longman Anthology*, which included Usbek's Letter 26 but omitted the later examples; on the syllabus, I assigned the selections in the anthology and on the day of discussion distributed copies of the final letters that describe the women's rebellion. Reading them in class together opened up a learning opportunity about excessive reliance on anthologized excerpts. This is important to establish long before the research paper is due or even the first midterm exam; too often, an inexperienced researcher extrapolates the plot of a longer work from whatever selections an anthology editor has seen fit to include.

It can be tempting to make a similar mistake with the *Turkish Embassy Letters* themselves, with their multiple recipients and occasional inconsistencies, if we view them too narrowly through the lens of our personal experience. Though only

one of the many avenues worth exploring in this delightfully complex literary work, the “ripped from the headlines” approach described here, used with such caveats in mind, is a highly effective method of engaging students’ attention and helping them to discern the significance of Montagu’s letters specifically and of letters generally in literary study—as a form of literary narrative in itself, not just background or supplementary material.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The History Chicks’ format is “an introduction, an overview and a little push to explore and learn more on your own.” The web page for Part Two includes recommendations for exploration in print and online. I learned about this resource from an undergraduate behind the circulation desk at our university library, who exclaimed “Lady Mary! She’s awesome!” when I was checking out books to prepare for this essay. I’d never heard that statement before from a student who wasn’t enrolled in one of my classes. Upon inquiry, she informed me she’d never read any of Montagu’s work, but became acquainted with her life story through the podcast.

<sup>2</sup> In the United States the White House proactively [harnessed the power of online influencers](#) and released images of the President and Vice President receiving their shots on [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#).

<sup>3</sup> In the twenty-first century, we tend to take a harder line than our eighteenth-century forebears regarding expectations that writers of a given genre should stick to their lane. An example would be the spectacular rise and fall of the humanitarian author Greg Mortenson, whose *Three Cups of Tea* (2006) appeared on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction bestseller list for over four years running and earned him millions of dollars as a public speaker, as well as a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. When journalists revealed that the book was an amalgam derived from his experiences and encounters rather than a straightforward account of events as they actually happened, the resulting scandal nearly ruined him. Jon Krakauer’s revelatory exposé *Three Cups of Deceit* condemns Mortenson’s book as “an intricately wrought work of fiction presented as fact” (7). One wonders what Krakauer might have said about the *Turkish Embassy Letters*, or about Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*.

<sup>4</sup> One of O’Loughlin’s central arguments is that Montagu’s liberal Whig sensibilities underlie most of her reactions to the situations she encounters in her travels. Yet two of the most important letters to Montagu’s sister, 29/30 and 39/40, revel in describing expensive jewelry and clothing that only fabulously wealthy aristocrats could afford. Such contradictions invite discussion when a class has been assigned the entirety of the *Letters*.

<sup>5</sup> In an appendix, Heffernan and O’Quinn trace the source of this legend to Robert Withers’ *Description of the Grand Signor’s Seraglio or Turkish Emperour’s Court* (London 1650) and show how it was picked up by others, most influentially in Sir Paul Rycart’s *Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1668). It’s still circulating out there. Not long ago, I encountered the handkerchief-and-creeping-into-bed incident in an historical novel that claimed to be “based on a

true story”—which was, in fact, the *untrue* story of Empress Josephine’s cousin that was also recounted in *Intimate Power*.

<sup>6</sup>The London experiments in 1721 were carried out on condemned criminals in Newgate Prison, who were promised a full pardon if they volunteered. This is, of course, against any modern notions of medical ethics, though still more horrifying was the situation of the enslaved people who were enlisted as subjects at the same time in Boston, often without their consent and with no such assurance of liberty after the procedure.

<sup>7</sup> A PDF of the original document, 69 pages plus appended letters from Wagstaffe’s American colleagues about the state of the pandemic in Boston, can be found online at <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/zjv2gx4k>.

<sup>8</sup> Spivak’s essay originally appeared in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg’s *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988), but the author’s revised version with supporting material in Rosalind C. Morris’s 2010 *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* is a better resource for instructors and students. Spivak’s style can be somewhat daunting, especially for undergraduates; the supporting introductory material and additional essays provided in Morris’s collection can clarify points that are difficult to comprehend.

<sup>9</sup> A discussion of Virgilian echoes in the *Turkish Embassy Letters* as a feminist reframing of the Homeric glorification of violence (as demonstrated in Pope’s translation of the *Iliad*) can be found on pages 30-31 of the Broadview edition’s introduction.

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