Chapter 2

The ‘What If?’ of the Ottoman Female: Authority, Ethnography, and Conversation

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It all started with “Lady Tragabigzanda”, the Ottoman woman whom the infamous Captain John Smith, later governor of Virginia, claimed as a love conquest long before he met Pocahontas. Taken captive while fighting on the side of the Habsburg emperor in the early seventeenth century, Smith claimed he was sold in a Balkan slave market. He “fell to the share of Bashaw Bogall” who sent him in chains to Istanbul, “to his faire Mistresse”, the lady Charatza Tragabigzanda. The veracity of Smith’s account has been debated across generations of scholars. But what interests me here is his brief account of his stay in Tragabigzanda’s household.

This Noble Gentlewoman tooke sometime occasion to shew him to some friends, or rather to speake with him, because she could speake Italian, would feigne her selfe sick when she should go to the Banians [baths], or weepe over the graves, [in order to stay at home and question Smith about his imprisonment]…; and [ask] if he were as the Bashaw writ to her, a Bohemian Lord conquered by his hand, as he had many others,… whose ransomes should adorne her with the glory of his conquests.

But when she heard him protest he knew no such matter, nor ever saw Bogall till he bought him at Axopolis, and that he was an Englishman,… To trie the truth, she found means to find out many could speake English, French, Dutch, and Italian,… she tooke (as it seemed) much compassion on him; but having no use for him, lest her mother should sell him, she sent him to her brother, the Tymor Bashaw of Nalbrits, in the Countrey of Cambia, A Province of Tartaria.¹

This brief vignette challenges a series of assumptions about the ‘sheltered’ Ottoman female and her role in the household. In Smith’s retelling, Tragabigzanda mobilizes a series of associates to gather information, makes decisions about the disposition of a slave, and basks in the glory of a paşa’s conquests. She foregoes visits to the bath and the cemetery to stay home and “speak” to a foreign male. Some years back, I asked Leslie Peirce, a prominent authority on Ottoman women, about Tragabigzanda. Did she think such conversations could have occurred? She answered, “Why not?”

“Why not?” is an important question for us in the assessment of the Ottoman female, her roles and visibility. It helps us get at the possibilities. Somewhere between the erotic fantasy of the harem concubine and the anti-colonial discourse of the autonomous female political actor, is a flesh and blood, evolving, Ottoman woman with personal idiosyncrasies and networks of relationships. Her authority and movement were circumscribed, but they varied by status, place, and the nature of the narratives used to define her. I propose that if we apply the question “What if?” to our vision of the Ottoman female and to the sources we employ for the early modern era we find a complex set of options for women in which conversation plays a critical role. This chapter addresses the historiographic construction of early modern Ottoman women, the ways in which their options and roles have been perceived and presented. It juxtaposes those perceptions (for example, visions of the limits of accessibility and sociability) to the evidence from various types of early modern sources. I ask who exactly is included in the category “Ottoman female”. I raise the question of regional and narrative variations, suggest a typology, and provide case studies from the literature of encounter to illustrate, among other things, that ‘fact’ and ‘fancy’ are not our only options, and to suggest that there was considerable scope for variation in women’s behaviour in the multi-layered public space. In this paradigm, early modern Ottoman females have a central role in the household, exercise authority beyond the domestic sphere, and

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3 van den Boogert, Maurits H., “Freemasonry in eighteenth-century Izmir? A critical analysis of Alexander Drummond’s Travels (1754)”, in Ottoman Izmir: Studies in Honour of Alexander H. de Groot, Maurits van den Boogert (ed.) (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor Het Nabije Oosten, 2007), p. 113, gives us the account of Alexander Drummond, English civil servant and consul in Aleppo, who claims to have offered his services in 1754 as diplomatic escort on a French ship sailing from Cyprus to Alexandretta bearing “part of the Harem, or ladies belonging to the Seraglio of the paşa of Aleppo”. Did these women stay locked in their cabin(s); or did they converse with the consul? Drummond does not make the level of association clear.