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The Correspondence of Ottoman Women during the Early Modern Period
(16th-18th centuries): Overview on the Current State of Research,
Problems, and Perspectives

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Abstract

My main goal is to investigate problems and possible perspectives related to studies in Ottoman women's epistolarity (16th-18th centuries). The paper starts with a review of the current state of research in this area. I then go on to discuss some of the major problems confronting researchers. Ottoman female epistolarity also offers many directions that future research may take. A socio-historical approach contributes to shed new light on the roles Ottoman women played within the family and society. A cultural approach or a gender-based approach can also provide interesting insight into Ottoman women's epistolarity. Moreover, the fast computerization of scholarly activity suggests creating an electronic archive of Ottoman women's letters in order to attract the attention of a wider scholarly audience to this field of research.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years researchers working in the field of gender studies have started to pay special attention to the place that letter-writing held in early modern women's lives. As a source, letters provide, indeed, an incomparable insight into women's thoughts, emotions and experiences, and help to make important advances towards a better understanding and evaluation of female education and literacy, social and gender interactions as well as roles played by women within the family circle, in society and, often, on the political stage. Research in early modern women's letter-writing activities can therefore help to make a valuable contribution to the study of women's history by locating and analyzing primary source documents.

Down to the present day, the vast majority of scholars have confined their attention almost exclusively to Western, especially Anglo-Saxon, female epistolary production, with a host of publications of letter collections, scholarly books and articles, appearing regularly in the past decades. While most present-day research in this field focuses on letter-writing by Western women, this paper adopts a different, but complementary perspective in examining Ottoman women's epistolarity during the early modern period – roughly from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries - as this is an area of research that has to be looked at more closely than has hitherto been the case. The constraints of space make it impossible to carry out a full-scale research study. Instead, the goal here is to present a general overview on the current state of research in the epistolary habits of early Ottoman women, followed by an investigation of problems and possible perspectives related to the subject. This paper addresses both Turkish and non-Turkish scholars, and it is hoped that sharing these results will add to a growing interest in women's use of the epistolary genre.

OVERVIEW ON THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

The topicality of research depends not only on the importance of the research subject, but also on the fact that this subject has not been sufficiently studied. It is worth noting that there are virtually no scholarly works – in Turkish or international research –

dealing specifically with the early Ottoman female letter-writing. Thus, researchers working on this subject have to contend with rather scarce sources to draw upon. This situation is rather surprising, for modern research shows close interest in issues relating to early Ottoman women. In these publications special attention is given to the role of women in the imperial harem. There also exist certain works centering on individual Ottoman women, especially sultan's wives and *hasekis* (favorites) who exerted great influence on political life of the Ottoman Empire, the most important of them having lived during the so-called Kadın Sultanatı (The Sultanate of Women).¹ However, it must be admitted that many of these publications are nothing but romanticized biographies, far from serious research.² No book-length scholarly study even of such important women as Hafsa³, Hürrem⁴, Mihrimah⁵, Nurbanu⁶, Safiye⁷ or Kösem⁸ has been published up till now. Let us, nonetheless, list the most relevant works on the topic. Aslı Sancar (2007), in *Ottoman women: myth and reality* underlines the great freedom of Ottoman women, a view which evidently goes contrary to the widespread opinion on the subject, especially in Western thought. The author often cites primary sources, most of them being, however, letters and journals of Western women travellers who saw Ottoman culture first-hand. The fundamental work by Leslie P. Peirce (1993), *The imperial harem: women and sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* focuses on the reasons of the unprecedented power of the royal Ottoman women in the 16th and 17th centuries. The research is based on solid source material, and an impressive bibliography on both primary and secondary sources is given at the end of the book. The role of royal Ottoman women as patrons is addressed in the recent work by Lucienne Thys-Şenocak (2006), *Ottoman women builders: the architectural patronage of Hadice Turhan Sultan*, where the author explores the different ways in which high-ranking women of the Ottoman

¹ An approximately 13-year period during the 16th and 17th centuries when the Ottoman imperial women exerted significant political influence.

² Among such works can be cited the following books: Bell, J. (1998). *La dame de Topkapı*. Paris: Seine.

Chamberlin, A. (1998). *Reign of the Favoured Women*. New York: Saint Martin's Press.

Çetiner, Y. (2001). *Haremde bir Venedikli: Nurbanu Sultan*. İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi; Ergul, T. (2000). *Nurbanu*.

İstanbul: İnkılap Kitabevi; Thibaux, J.-M. (2002). *La Princesse de lumière*. Paris : Editions Anne Carrière.

³ Hafsa Sultan (1479-1534), Ottoman sultan Selim I's wife and Süleyman the Magnificent's mother.

⁴ Hürrem Sultan (c. 1510-1558), wife of Süleyman the Magnificent of the Ottoman Empire.

⁵ Mihrimah Sultan (1522-1578), daughter of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent and Hürrem Sultan

⁶ Nurbanu Sultan (c. 1525-1583), née Cecilia Venier-Baffo, the most favored wife of Sultan Selim II and mother of Sultan Murad III.

⁷ Safiye Sultan (c. 1550 – c. 1605), wife of Ottoman Sultan Murad III and mother of Sultan Mehmed III.

⁸ Kösem Sultan (c. 1589-1651), mother of Murad IV and Ibrahim I.

court used architecture as a means of power and self-expression. In spite of its promising title, *The private world of ottoman women*, the book by Godfrey Goodwin (2007) does not say much about Ottoman women *per se*, the researcher having preferred rather to focus on domestic life of the sultans and members of their households. However, Goodwin admits that his study was hindered by the very limited availability of primary texts (eg. letters and diaries), written by women.

A rapid review of available publications on the subject leads to the conclusion that, first, researchers concentrate mainly on Ottoman women living in the later Ottoman Empire,⁹ and, secondly, it seems that female-authored primary sources were not used sufficiently in the mentioned works.

The topic of this paper has been studied even less, although scholars have noted the major importance of women's letters. Thus, Thys-Şenocak (2006) stresses that:

In the archives of Istanbul, Paris, Venice, and London, letters between royal women... attest to an active diplomacy that was conducted between European and Ottoman courts. Imperial women of the Ottoman house, often assumed to have been sequestered and devoid of influence did in fact initiate and maintain extensive contacts with the world outside the Topkapi Palace... Letters and palace agents were among the main vehicles which Ottoman women used to procure information, communicate with officials outside the harem, and extend influence beyond the palace walls... Many royal Ottoman women were active correspondents. (p. 56)

It is possible to separate into two categories the publications on Ottoman female letters. Various collections of letters make up the first category. Publications, in which letters are drawn upon only as a secondary source of information constitute the second category.

Among the works of the first group two books stand out, both by the Turkish scholar Çağatay Uluçay, *Osmanlı sultanlarına aşk mektupları* (Love letters to Ottoman sultans, 1950/2001), and *Haremden Mektuplar* (Letters from the Harem, 1956). Both research works present precious primary source materials, essential to any researcher

⁹ See Zilfi, M. C (Ed.). 1997. *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the early modern era*. Leiden: Brill. Even in this collection of articles all of them deal with women from the 18th century.

working on the present topic. Neither of these books has been translated into other languages. Another collection of letters can be found in the book by the French scholar Jacques Pérot, translated into Turkish by Ela Güntekin (1991/2001) under the title of *Hatice Sultan ile Melling Kalfa Mektuplar* (Correspondence between Hatice Sultan¹⁰ and Melling Kalfa). It features the correspondence between the French artist and the sister of an Ottoman sultan. This study deserves to be called exemplary, as it gives the full collection of letters exchanged between the two correspondents and includes a detailed introduction, colour facsimiles of all letters as well as translations into French and modern Turkish. This kind of presentation opens up an excellent opportunity to conduct a truly interdisciplinary study of these letters, adopting palaeographical, manuscript, lexical and other approaches. Another similar investigation was carried out by Skilliter (1965) in the article *Three letters from the Ottoman “Sultana” Safiye to Queen Elizabeth I*. In addition to Safiye’s letters to the English queen, Skilliter also included in her investigation Safiye’s letters to the Doge of Venice as well as a letter from Safiye’s *Kira* (servant) to Elizabeth I. The study presents black-and-white facsimiles, Arabic transcriptions, contemporary translations into Italian and modern translations into English. Every letter is followed by a brief but informative historical commentary. Skilliter later (1982) published a similar study, this time taking as her subject Nurbanu’s letters to Venice (*The Letters of the Venetian ‘Sultana’ Nûr Bânû and Her Kira to Venice*). In this study, the scholar did not include, however, the facsimiles of the letters, thus making their palaeographical analysis impossible. Another imperial Ottoman woman whose correspondence became the subject of scholarly interest was Hürrem, better known in the West as Roxolana, the wife of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. Her letters were published for the first time in the Polish journal “Kwartalnik Historyczny” by Szymon Askenazy (1896). This publication, *Listy Roxolany*, can hardly be called a serious research paper, for its author contended with a very general biography of Roxolana, stressing her Polish origin, and a publication – in French translation - of two of her letters to the Polish king Sigismund II, without providing any further comments. A better publication on the same subject is the relatively recent article by N.R. Uçtum

¹⁰ Hatice Sultan (1768-1822), Sultan Mustafa III’s daughter and sister of Selim III.

(1980), *Hürrem ve Mihriimah Sultanların Polonya Kralı II. Zigmund'a Yazdıkları Mektuplar* (Letters written by Sultanas Hürrem and Mihrimah to Sigismund II, King of Poland).

The publications making up the second group are much more numerous, that is why only the most important ones will be cited here. The already mentioned book by Thys-Şenocak (2007) should also be mentioned here. In spite of the fact that this study concentrates mainly on Turhan Sultan's¹¹ role as a patron, several pages are dedicated to her correspondence with top officials of the Ottoman Empire. The author also included facsimiles of various documents authored by Turhan Sultan, even providing them with transcriptions in Latin letters. Thys-Şenocak (2006) particularly stresses the fact that many of the letters she gives in her book are published for the first time and expresses hope to publish, in the near future, an article dedicated exclusively to the "analysis, Ottoman transliterations, English translation, and historical contextualization of this collection of letters" (p. 41). Although such a study has, unfortunately, not been published yet, attention to this topic on the part of scholars cannot but inspire hope. Finally, Peirce (1993), in her *Imperial Harem* also cites several translated excerpts from the letters by Hürrem and Safiye Sultans, but limits herself to a very general presentation of the subject, without going into details.

From this rapid overview on the available bibliography on the subject of Ottoman women's letter-writing, one can see that considerable work has already been done. The list of publications mentioned on the preceding pages may not be exhaustive, but it suffices to give a general idea of the present state of research. Correspondence of individual women and various aspects of the correspondence have also been touched upon by scholars. In many cases, published letters have become for the first time the subject of a separate study. However, it must be admitted that the research on the subject is still very limited. This demands some clarification on the possible directions in this field of research, but, first, it is important to identify problems that may confront those wishing to carry out a serious study of Ottoman female letters.

¹¹ Turhan Hatice Sultan (c.1628 – 1683), one of the *hasekis* ("favourite") of the Ottoman sultan Ibrahim I and the mother of his successor, Mehmed IV.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS IN OTTOMAN FEMALE LETTER-WRITING

One of the major problems facing the researchers lies in the lack of available or easily accessible sources. This section of my paper is an attempt to synthesize most serious source-related problems that can be encountered during research. Foremost among these is the question of the survival of documents. Most hand-written letters are preserved in several types of archive, such as government state papers, various institutional records, and in private archives. For instance, while working on his book *Osmanlı sultanlarına aşk mektupları* (1950) Çağatay did extensive research on primary sources in Topkapı Palace Museum Archives (TPMA). Thys-Şenocak (2006) also discovered many of Turhan Sultan's letters there. Letters written by Safiye and Nurbanu to the Doge and other officials of Venice are known to be stored in Venice's State Archive (Archivo di Stato). As for Hatice Sultan's correspondence with Antoine Melling, it has been carefully preserved in personal archives in France. As no project aiming at creating an extensive catalogue of Ottoman women's letters has been undertaken so far, it seems extremely problematic to evaluate how many letters written by Ottoman women survive today from the 16th-18th centuries. Undoubtedly, a great many manuscript letters have been lost forever, and the exact number is unlikely to ever be known. However, we can sometimes learn about the existence of certain letters from indirect sources. Such is the case with the lost letter of Safiye's *Kira* (Servant) Esperanza Malchi to Queen Elizabeth I of England, the text of which was reproduced by H. Ellis (1846) in his *Original letters, illustrative of English history*. Skilliter (1965) may complain of Ellis' (1846) faulty and inaccurate transcription and translation of the letter, but, after all, the importance of this document should not be underestimated, as it appears to be – at least, for the time being - the only real evidence we have of the existence of the letter in question.¹² Why “for the time being”? The reason is that *Kira*'s letter – as well as many other letters considered lost today – may well not have been destroyed altogether, but may be waiting quietly in some archive. This is what happened to the three diplomatic letters from Safiye to Elizabeth I. Although the first letter enjoyed considerable fame

¹² Skilliter (1965) explains the disappearance of Esperanza Malchi's letter in the following way: “For some reason Ellis, contrary to his usual practice, omitted to quote the press-mark of this document and unfortunately, the original has not yet been found again”. (p. 141)

right after its arrival in England, due to the fact that it was printed by R. Hakluyt (1890) both in Italian and English languages in *The principle navigations, voyages, traffiques and discoveries of the English nation*, the actual Turkish original remained undiscovered until the mid-twentieth century when Professor P. Wittek conjectured that the letter might be stored in the British Museum. This finally led to its discovery there by S. Skilliter. As a matter of fact, researchers are forced, on many occasions, to rely on pure chance to track down original manuscript documents. Thus, the other two letters by Safiye are now at our disposal thanks to their discovery by Prof. Akdeş Nimet Kurat in the Public Record Office of the United Kingdom. As for Safiye's letter to the Signoria of Venice and the copy of a letter supposedly from Nurbanu to the Doge of Venice, S. Skilliter came across them by a stroke of luck when searching for two completely different letters, which, by the way, she did not find.

As is evident from the foregoing account, the paucity of research on the subject of Ottoman female correspondence is in part accounted for by difficulties scholars encounter when it comes to working with primary sources. To the source-related problems listed above should also be added another one, namely, the often poor state of preservation of certain letters which makes it difficult to work with them. Not all letters were fortunate enough to get down to our days having suffered no damage whatsoever, as it is the case, for instance, with the beautifully preserved Hatice Sultan-Melling correspondence. Some letters present an extremely pitiful state, due to both natural disasters and human carelessness. The relatively recently found first letter from Safiye to Elizabeth, notwithstanding its great importance as a sample of official diplomatic correspondence between Ottoman and English courts, seems to have endured all imaginable hardships, colourfully described by Skilliter (1965):

Damp, resulting from the 1731 disaster has mottled the paper with patches of purple mould and has so much affected the passaged in blue ink that they have become to a great degree illegible and have in some places entirely disappeared... The sheet of paper had been folded in half horizontally... Later it was folded in half again, this time across... Due to the vagaries of fortune, with the text damaged and in part irrevocably lost, the Sultana's letter, once an outstanding specimen of Turkish calligraphy,

today affords only a pitiful reminder of its beauty and colour at the hour of its presentation to Queen Elizabeth. (p. 122)

Fortunately, the reconstruction of this particular letter has been made possible thanks to the existence of a contemporary Italian translation. But, generally speaking, the letters that have survived seem to be in a relatively good condition. For instance, neither Uluçay (1956) nor Skilliter (1965) dwell much on their state of preservation, publishing texts which contain very few dotted lines.

However, even if a letter has not been lost or seriously damaged, researchers may still be confronted with the problem as to who is the author of the letter. This is not always clear from the context, many letters bearing no date and just the first name of the sender. Thus, when he cites the letter from a certain Ayşe (Top. Ars. No. E. 11614) complaining about the miserable state she has fallen in, Uluçay (1956) observes that it may have been written either by Ayşe, the daughter of the sultan Bayezid II, or by some concubine, Ayşe by name, who, released from the harem, may have been leading a miserable life outside of its walls. In fact, both hypotheses seem to be plausible. For one thing, we know that Bayezid II often received letters from his wives and, especially, daughters, married to high-ranking officials who were then appointed governor-generals in various provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, after the death of her husband, Güveyi Sinan Paşa, Ayşe did meet serious financial difficulties, which is evident from her other letters to her father. Taking these facts into consideration, it is indeed possible to make the assumption that the above-mentioned letter was written by the daughter of the sultan, but, a closer look at the letter's contents calls such assumption into doubt. Can we really imagine a padishah's daughter writing the following lines: "Beslemeye takatım kalmadı. Bugün, yarın yiyecekleri dahi yoktur"?¹³ (Uluçay, 1956, p. 43). Ayşe, the daughter of the sultan, was probably trying to move her father to pity by describing how desperate her state was, but this does not rule out the possibility of the letter having been written by someone of a much humbler social position, for example, a concubine - just like Uluçay (1956) suggested - whose life outside the harem walls might have driven her to despair. Uluçay (1956) cites some other letters by Ottoman women whose authorship has not yet been established. Such is a letter (Top. Müz. Ars. No. E. 11999) from Sofu

¹³ "I have no power to feed left. Today, tomorrow there isn't even anything to eat" (my translation).

Fatma (or maybe, Hançerli Fatma) to the sultan Bayezid (or, possibly, Yavuz, or even Süleyman the Magnificent). The absence of the date makes it difficult even to establish the person to whom the letter was addressed. There seems to be no perfect solution to the problem discussed here, but a careful palaeographic inquiry and a stylistic analysis could be part of the answer to the question “Who is the real author of this letter?” Thus, when analyzing the letter from a Fatma (Top. Ars. No. E. 7696), Uluçay (1956) expresses a strong conviction about its being written by Sofu Fatma to her father, sultan Bayezid II, to which points the fact that this particular letter bears – from a stylistic point of view – an obvious resemblance to Sofu Fatma’s other letters.

A palaeographic and stylistic analyses are useful, if not inevitable, when a researcher intends to determine whether letters were written in a woman’s own hand or whether the actual act of writing was performed by an amanuensis, in other words, a secretary or a scribe writing down what a person says. Defining the scribal status of a female letter – another problematic issue for researchers to keep in mind – is closely connected to a wider circle of methodological problems about what makes a woman writer. These problems, addressed so far mainly by Western feminist scholars working on Western texts, also confront anyone exploring Ottoman women’s letters, first of all, because it is important to determine the degree to which a woman participated in the writing process, as many supposedly female texts were, in fact, executed by male scribes.

To illustrate this point, let us compare the 1st and 2nd letters from Safiye to Queen Elizabeth I. The first letter is written in a very beautiful, accurate calligraphic *naskh*, which Skilliter (1965) calls “an outstanding specimen of Turkish calligraphy” (p. 122). Besides, the letter is composed “in a very involved and flowery rhyming prose (*saj*) with many poetical comparisons (*tasbih*)” (p. 122). It is hardly imaginable that Safiye had written such a letter all by herself, without resorting to the help of a professional scribe. The second letter is much less elegant both in style and writing and appears to be a personal letter of Safiye, composed and maybe even written by the *Walide* herself, wishing to personalize her relations with the English queen by making their correspondence less detached and less official.¹⁴ A more accurate information about who

¹⁴ Skilliter (1965) suggests that the letter was written by one of Safiye’s women. This suggestion is based solely on the account of an English witness, John Sanderson, according to whom the letter was “written by the sam partie (some

wrote the letter might be probably gained from comparing the handwriting of this letter with that of Safiye's letters of more certain attribution.

Another interesting example showing how difficult it may sometimes be to determine who actually wrote the letter can be taken from Hatice Sultan-Melling correspondence. It is known that their correspondence was conducted in Turkish with the use of Latin script.¹⁵ We also know that Melling taught Latin alphabet to Hatice Sultan, so it appears, at first sight, perfectly acceptable to suppose that letters were written in Hatice Sultan's own hand. Pérot (1991/2001), the editor of the correspondence, expresses, nonetheless, doubts as to the identity of the scribe. He calls in question the ability of Hatice Sultan, who had just learned the Latin alphabet, to write letters in such orderly, calligraphic manner. Pérot (1991/2001) argues that the scribe to whom Hatice Sultan would dictate her texts must have been someone from her surroundings. Who could it have been? According to Pérot (1991/2001), this person could have been some educated non-Turkish scribe, probably an Arab. This assumption is made on the basis of the constant use of the letter "u" instead of "o" (in Arabic language, both "u" and "o" are written alike). However, this is nothing but a hypothesis, and Pérot (1991/2001) recognizes it, by concluding that "o yerine u yazan kişinin kimliği konusundaki sorumuz yanıtız kalıyor."¹⁶ (p. 24)

SOME DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Having outlined the major problems that might get in the way of research on Ottoman female epistolarity, let us now turn to some possible directions research on the given topic could take. Adopting different approaches – socio-historical, cultural, gender-based among others – can add a new depth and richness to our knowledge of the role and place the Ottoman woman had within the family and in society.

Letters have long been recognized as a valuable source for social history, and letters written by women should in no way be thrown aside. Investigating the range of

woman in the seraglio)...” (p. 151). But, considering that J. Sanderson certainly was not allowed to visit the imperial harem, we may doubt the accuracy of his report.

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that this seems to be the first time when Latin letters were used to write a Turkish text, that is, about 150 years before the official adoption of the Latin alphabet in the Turkish Republic.

¹⁶ “Our question about the identity of the person writing “u” instead of “o” remains without answer”. (my translation)

letter-recipients as well as the purposes of women's correspondence helps us gain a more thorough understanding of the many facets of women's lives.

First of all, it is essential to determine the range of correspondents documented by the letters by Ottoman women. Most letters preserved in archives were written by high-ranking women, such as wives of the sultans or other women from his circle (sisters, daughters, mother, cousins, etc). The more important a woman's social position was, the wider range of correspondents she had. Thus, Hürrem is known to have had correspondence with her beloved husband, Süleyman the Magnificent, with Sigismund II, the King of Poland, with the sister of the Safavid monarch Shah Tahmasp. Nurbanu corresponded with the Republic of Venice and Catherine de Medicis of France. In order to be able to better grasp the personality of each of these women, we must have at our disposal their full correspondence, something which is not yet available for any Ottoman female letter-writer. Researchers tend to either concentrate on one aspect of a woman's correspondence (eg. Hürrem's love letters to her husband) or on a letter-exchange between an Ottoman woman and one particular correspondent (eg. edition of correspondence between Hatice Sultan and Melling). Whichever the case, the scholar is never given an opportunity to have an overall view of the correspondence of an individual Ottoman woman. Of course, it is impossible to publish the complete correspondence for each Ottoman woman whose letters have survived as a separate publication, because, for most women, we have only a few letters available. However, it is my profound conviction that at least women of great importance in Ottoman history (Hürrem, Nurbanu, Safiye, Kösem, Turhan) deserve to have their letters published in a separate edition.

Exploring the nature and purposes for which Ottoman women utilized letters helps further to illuminate the scope of women's activity, indicating their interest in areas often labeled as "masculine": war, diplomacy, finances, rebellions, etc. Hürrem is, undeniably, one of the most famous imperial Ottoman women to take a very active part in political life of the Ottoman Empire, and her correspondence fully reflects the keen interest she showed for diplomacy and politics. Hürrem acted as a political adviser and confidant to the sultan Süleyman and played an important role as an invigilator over affairs in the capital, Istanbul, while the sultan was out of town on one of his numerous

campaigns. Peirce (1993) mentions that Hürrem's letters convey news about important events taking place in the capital:

During Suleyman's absence in 1537 she informed him that an epidemic illness was still affecting Istanbul, but not as severely as before, and that knowledgeable people agreed that it would end "when the autumn leaves fall". (p. 64)

Turhan was also involved in the political affairs of the Ottoman Empire, succeeding, as Thys-Şenocak (2006) puts it, "in pulling the empire back from the brink of political chaos and economic turmoil" (p. 45). Her concern about the financial situation of the empire is reflected, for instance, in her letter to the vizir concerning the salaries of the troops:

You have requested money for the salaries from the treasury. As you know there is no money in the treasury. We have shown you book after book for you to see how much they took... There is no help for you from the inner treasury. Now, wherever there is money in the provinces, you should fetch it.¹⁷ (p. 42)

As a matter of fact, a substantial portion of Ottoman women's correspondence is of highly pragmatic nature, money matters being one of the most frequent topics in the letters, but no special study has been devoted to this important subject, to my knowledge. Letters inform us of the role and uses of money in everyday life of an Ottoman woman. Some would complain of the lack of money, as is the case with Ayşe, the daughter of the sultan Bayezid II. Her husband, Güveyi Sinan Paşa, having gone to war against Cem, the rebellious brother of the sultan, Ayşe was left with no money at her disposal which forced her to take and spend public money. When the truth finally came out, Ayşe did her best to justify herself in the eyes of her father (Top. Arş. No. E. 5514). Other women, like Hatice Sultan, the sister of Selim III, act as patrons and write letters in a very business-like manner. This can be seen from many of Hatice Sultan's letters to Melling who was charged with the interior decoration of the neoclassical Beşiktaş Palace. Her letters are extremely short and dry and deal with nothing but expenses related to the new palace. In one of her letters, for example, Hatice Sultan declares: "Melling Calfa, kave ortusi ve

¹⁷ TSMA 7002168

makramasi bu acscam ghelceji malumum ildi aman bu akscam isterim, pescin para ile alirim vallahi...”¹⁸ (Pérot, 2001, p. 47)

Women also actively participated in diplomatic correspondence, their main role being to negotiate and maintain peace and good relations between the Ottoman Empire and other nations. Peirce (1993) indicates that “participation in interdynastic diplomacy was not an unprecedented activity for royal women in states of Turkish origin. It was an old Turkish custom for the ruler to send a female elder of the dynastic family, especially his mother, as emissary to intercede with other rulers” (p. 219). This is, indeed, contrary to the wide-spread image of the Muslim woman as nothing but an objet for men’s pleasure locked behind the walls of the harem. Correspondence constitutes an important part of diplomatic contact, and imperial women of the Ottoman court proved themselves to be masters in this field. From their letters we can perceive the confidence with which women like Safiye, Nurbanu or Hürrem addressed foreign monarchs. Nurbanu did not hesitate to demand – in a rather peremptory tone – the liberation of an Ottoman subject, Kara Ali, taken prisoner by the Prince of Palermo at the battle of Lepanto on account of Ali’s being a Muslim. When needed, women could also be effusively polite. Hürrem writes in the following terms to Sigismund II who sent to the sultan his assurances of friendship:

We have received your friendly letter which, in reaching us, brought us an immense pleasure and satisfaction, of which it is impossible to draw a comparison in order to describe it... So, may God protect you and may you never stop from always being in joy and satisfaction... Let Your Majesty know that whatever may be your affair to His Majesty the Emperor and which he mentions, I will take interest in it and speak of it ten times in favour of Your Majesty.¹⁹ (Askenazy, 1896, p. 116)

Some women even feel free to show almost total disrespect for their correspondents, no matter how high a rank they held. Here is a sample taken from Safiye’s correspondence with the Republic of Venice, in which she thus declares her will to the Doge:

¹⁸ “Melling Kalfa, it has become known to me that the brown cover and makrame will arrive tonight. God, I’d love (to get them) tonight, I shall pay in advance, I swear...” (my translation).

¹⁹ My translation from the French copy of the letter cited by S. Askenazy (1896).

What is necessary is this: since you have made peace with and are friendly towards the Padishah, do practise a proper friendship! Do not interfere in all kinds of matters, for as much as you do not remain quiet neither will the Padishah let you get away with it like this. As long as you keep within your limits the Padishah for his part will do you no harm. Well then, keep quiet so that the friendship may be lasting and upright!²⁰ (Skilliter, 1965, p. 157)

Even though it is clear that Safiye speaks this way with the consent of her royal husband, the tone of the letter cannot but surprise by its sternness.

Letters also offer a fascinating glimpse into Ottoman women's private life and are all the more important because it is the closest we can get to perceiving the inner world of these women, hidden from all eyes. Letters act as unique records of women's everyday experiences and can tell us a lot about their deepest feelings and emotions, joys and worries, constituting an important basis for any socio-historical study. We have a great many letters, first, from sultans' wives, who must have seen correspondence as the only way to keep in touch with their often absent husbands. This is the case of Hürrem whose letters to Süleyman the Magnificent are full of expressions of love and longing. Hafsa Sultan's letters to her husband, the sultan Yavuz, are similar in content to those of Hürrem. Expressions of love were not the only topic in the letters of the sultans' wives. If we take a look at the letter of Gülruh to her husband, Bayezid II (Top. Sa. Arş. No. E. 5499), we shall see the genuine sorrow of a mother complaining of her son Alemşah's bad habits - alcoholism and debauchery - which would eventually lead him to death despite Gülruh's efforts to make her son give up his debauched way of life.

The daughters of the sultans, usually married to high officials whom the sultan would then appoint governor-generals in remote parts of the Ottoman Empire, had to follow their husbands and were, for this reason, deprived of the opportunity to see their parents and relatives. This explains why these women wrote so many letters. Such a situation is especially true for the numerous daughters of Bayezid II. The reasons for their writing are countless. Some complain of local officials, others wish they had been granted more land, still others express their concern for the sultan's health or simply

²⁰ Venice, Archivio di Stato, Documenti turchi, Busta VII. 2 (4).

congratulate him on the occasion of some holiday. These letters present, in a word, a very promising and rich field of study in terms of content and style. Women not only transmit information, but also often express their emotions in a most vivid and touching way, making us almost hear their voices. Here, for example, Fatma, the daughter of the sultan Yavuz and wife of Mustafa Paşa, governor-general of Antalya, complains to her father that her husband is gravely offending her by publicly showing his homosexual inclinations. The young woman expresses her despair in the following expressions:

“Benim devletlû Padişasım, bir yıldır bunda gelelidenberu bir gün bir saat gülmedim...Dul avret gibi dirilirüm. Benim devletlû ve saadetlû Sultan babacım, benim halim kalem birle tahrir olunmaz”.²¹ (Uluçay, 1956, p. 45)

In addition to socio-historical approach, a cultural approach can be applied to the study of Ottoman feminine epistolary production. What differences and similarities exist between letters written by an Ottoman woman and those written by an English or French woman of the same social rank and who lived during the same time period? Are there any significant differences in the content of letters; in other words, how different or similar were the subjects interesting these women? How free are women from different countries to express their emotions when writing to their husbands or other family members? A clue to this last question may, for instance, be found by comparing the opening section of Ottoman and European female letters. Letters written by early modern English noblewomen open with fairly conventional, reserved and formal phrases even when they are addressed to friends and family; the modes of address are anything but personalized, affectionate greetings. The analysis of Ottoman female letters shows the same degree of conventionality as to the choice of words used in the opening of a letter, but, on the whole, it can be said that Ottoman women were much less reserved than their European counterparts in expressing their emotions. Thus, it is unlikely to find in a European woman’s letter such flowery lines as those taken from a letter by Hürrem to her husband:

My sultan, there is no limit to the burning anguish of separation. Now spare this miserable one and do not withhold your noble letters. When your noble letters are read, your servant and son Mir Mehmed and your

²¹ Top. Müz. Arş. No. E. 11999 . “My royal padishah, I have not smiled for one day, for one hour since my coming here a year ago... I am going mad as if I were a widow. My royal sultan, my dearest dad, my state cannot be expressed with a pen” (my translation)

slave and daughter Mihrimah weep and wail from missing you. Their weeping has driven me mad, as it is as if we were in mourning.²² (Peirce, 1993, p. 64)

A stylistic analysis is not to be neglected when comparing female letter-writing from a cultural point of view. Exploring reasons why women sometimes chose to write in their own hands and sometimes to delegate the task to scribes is another question that a cultural approach may help to answer. According to Daybell (2006), English women personally wrote letters when the relationship between sender and recipient was particularly intimate, or when a woman pursued the objective of showing herself as sincere and trustworthy as possible, for “documents produced in a person’s own hand were apparently considered more binding than those that were merely signed” (Daybell 113). Whether Ottoman women had the same reasons for writing holograph letters – that is, did they feel reluctant to express intimate feelings through a third party? - is a question that has yet to be answered. However, first of all, research must establish what Ottoman female letters are holograph and which ones were penned by amanuenses; here, assessment relies mainly on palaeographic analysis of letters. Seeking the answer to this question could be the subject of a major study, all the more important because, as far as I know, no such study has ever been undertaken.

In addition to the critical approaches to the study of women’s letter-writing that have just been mentioned, a third one can be added, namely the gender-based approach. Most Ottoman women – just like European ones – actively used the rhetoric of submission. Central to this approach is the question of how to read women’s use of submissive language. Did women’s letters just follow conventional rhetoric, using formulaic phrases of obedience and words that served only to produce images of traditional female weakness? Or, could these letters reflect women’s feelings of inferiority to men? Another issue to be explored is the degree to which women’s writing was affected by the gender of recipients. In other words, in what manner did Ottoman women write to other men? Did they always demonstrate conventional humbleness and deference to men or did the tone and stylistics of a letter show women’s awareness of values of patriarchy, but also, more importantly, of social hierarchy? How did Ottoman

²² TSMA E 5662

women address social equals and subordinates? To what degree do letters – even those that follow the accepted humble style – express women’s real feelings, and could it be that these letters are sometimes not exactly what they seem to be? An example of this double nature of female letters can be drawn from Turhan Sultan’s correspondence presented by Thys-Şenocak (2006) as follows:

In most of her letters, Turhan Sultan invokes the name of her son, *aslanım* (my lion), to add weight and legitimacy to her replies, but occasionally there are replies where it appears the *valide* is acting independently, and even against the wishes of, or without her son’s knowledge. In a letter concerning the appointment of various officials to posts throughout the empire and the supply of copper to the royal cannon works, we learn of a palace steward by the name of Hasan Ağa who, having committed some heinous crime, was sent into exile. Unhappy with his fate he requested permission to remain on royal property in Edirne. Turhan allowed Hasan Ağa to stay on the land but added that this should not be advertised because this act of leniency required official permission from the sultan (pp. 42-43)

While seeming to be obedient in her every move to the will of her reigning son the sultan, Turhan did not hesitate to actually act independently, as it is evident from her letter.

By investigating how women of the Ottoman court wrote to individuals of different social ranking, to men and to women, it will be possible to gain a deeper understanding of the balance of power in a wide range of relationships these women maintained.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

By the mid-16th century, letter-writing by Ottoman women had become a widely used way of transmitting information, maintaining relationships, of expressing concern with family life, international diplomacy, palace affairs and other. Correspondence reveals an upper-class Ottoman woman’s exercise of power in both private and public spheres, thus reinforcing the importance of women in the Ottoman Empire. An in-depth

study of letters could throw a new light on the real role the Ottoman woman played within society.

In the present article, I have tried to define the main problems and challenges which await the scholars venturing into the world of Ottoman female letter-writing, as well as to suggest some possible directions research in this field might take. Let us conclude with a wish and a hope, that, in the not too distant future, a catalogue will be created – preferably, an electronic one – that will make all known Ottoman letters written by women available to scholars not only in Turkey, but also worldwide, thus saving them the trouble of searching again and again for primary sources scattered in difficult to find and/or rarely republished publications. The fast computerization of scholarly activity nowadays would make such a catalogue, made up of electronic editions of letters, searchable databases, digitized facsimiles among other, especially welcome. The fact that many of the letters are stored in archives outside Turkey also creates a need for involving into research projects foreign scholars experienced in dealing with women-authored texts, as this would allow to carry out a more extensive and in-depth research.

Last but not least, it is essential to have Ottoman female letters translated into major foreign languages, for only through translation will these letters become known to scholarly circles throughout the world and occupy the place they deserve within historical and, more specifically, gender studies.

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