

The focus of my study will be the collection of letters written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, with a particular care to the one concerning the social and legal emancipation of eighteenth-century women. These letters sent to her relatives between 1708 and 1762 reveal her most private emotions, draw the portrait of the first English woman letter writer, but also are a precious testimony on her epoch, a precise description of the world she lives in, and real travel chronicles. They follow the chronology of her expeditions and the rhythm of her life, and form a coherent set.

The collection of her fifty-two “Turkish Letters” published for the first time one year after her death in 1763, is the cornerstone of lady Mary’s thinking while it covers a two-year period (from 1716 to 1718) whereas her entire correspondence stretches on for more than fifty years and is constituted of nine hundred letters. In these « Turkish Letters », Lady Mary depicts all she discovered in Turkey: the habits and customs of its inhabitants and women’s place within this society, totally different from her milieu, the English bourgeoisie.

These letters prove to be of a high interest as lady Mary was the first European woman to penetrate the intimacy of Islamic women and she had the privilege to reach the Turkish baths, a place strictly forbidden to men. Writing these letters was first of all, a way for her to stay in touch with her family and friends that she left in England. Moreover, it spread a new point of view regarding the perception of Islam in the eighteenth century and the Ottoman society, but also concerning women’s condition in Turkey and allowed a reflection on women’s condition in England. These two years in Turkey were decisive in lady Mary’s life as she admitted years later that she had come back deeply changed by this experience, and decided as a result to flee once again England in 1739 and stay abroad, alone, during twenty-one years. The collection of letters she sent throughout her life can be considered as a travel journal, as they allow the readers to follow her throughout her different journeys, but also as a diary, as they reveal a lot about the writer herself. She is one of the first woman travel writer and participated in the birth of the genre in the nineteenth century. But above all, lady Mary deserves a place in women’s emancipation history and is considered as one of the founding mothers of feminism.