II

Muslim women in the early modern era

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Representations: women between ‘East and West’

In the Ottoman East as in other societies, women’s lived experience and society’s representation of women seldom coincided. In early modern Istanbul and Damascus, as in London and Lyons, or for that matter ancient Rome and Athens, women’s lives were more complex and varied than their contemporaries were ready to concede. In Western and Mediterranean literary traditions, women’s daily lives, like the lives of most men, went unremarked. But unlike men, women tended to be aggregated into idealised or deplored versions of a collective self – women as they should be, set against the dire potential of the Eve within.¹ It is not that real women, individual and identified, lacked social validity in Ottoman consciousness. Rather, the integral category of ‘womankind’, though undifferentiated by class, vocation, or creed, was more fully realised and answered larger cultural needs. ‘Womankind’ comprehended a stock of images expressive of society’s anxieties and aspirations. Sometimes very good, sometimes very bad, women as womankind were staples of moralists and belles lettres alike. In those rare instances when ordinary women were permitted to touch ground in the literature, they were customarily limited to sexualised or domestic preoccupations.

For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the depiction of Ottoman Muslim women did not differ significantly from their representation in earlier times. All in all, it was a story that was rarely told, at least for the written record. Even the genre of the privileged, that of illustrious women, is thin in comparison to its counterparts in early Islamic and contemporaneous European societies; few women are included at all, within a scant few categories

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of representation. The pious benefactress, by definition a person of wealth and in practice one with political connections, stands out as the model of choice of Ottoman chroniclers and their audiences. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the philanthropic woman, usually a royal woman, was joined in the chronicles by the political queen mother (valide) and the helpmate princess counsellor. In the seventeenth century, the lives of the valides Kösem and Turhan spilled over from the chronicles’ commemorative necrologies to the centre stage of political events, because of their management – or, as it is reported, their misappropriation – of the sultanate. In the eighteenth century, the poet Fitnat Hanım – non-royal and a woman with a calling – and a half-dozen sisters or daughters of Ahmed III, Mustafa III and Selim III all have their brief turn in the historical literature. To the extent that other stories about other kinds of women were told, women tended to appear as a category unto themselves, enclosed in narratives fixed on their sexuality. It was women’s sexuality that gave force and malleability to the symbolism of ‘womankind’ to begin with.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary representations of Ottoman women occur in variant Eastern and Western forms. Both are in the main the product of male observation and, more problematically, of masculinist valuation. Like the societies that produced them, both representations are deeply invested in what historians of women have called ‘the ideology of women’s limited proper sphere’.\(^2\) Ottoman moralists and the classical authorities they relied on conceived of women in domestic and sexual terms. ‘Her contribution . . . is by both taking care of the house and by satisfying [her husband’s] sexual desire,’ al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111) says.\(^3\) The sixteenth-century catechism writer Birgivi, probably the most influential moralist of the early modern centuries, declares that ‘women’s obligations are within the home, to bake bread, clean up the dishes, do the laundry, prepare meals and the like’.\(^4\) Indeed, he maintains that responsibilities to the home are a matter of heaven and hell for a woman, for if ‘she does not do these . . . tasks, she is a sinner’.\(^5\) In more general terms, women are instructed to be obedient to male authority and to be unobtrusive – even invisible – to the unrelated public. Screened from outsiders, decent women should, and supposedly do, attend to the needs of husband,

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5 Ibid.
family and household. As for the European image of the Ottoman woman, the traveller’s-eye view was directed to the preoccupations, though not necessarily the meanings, that Ottoman society itself employed. The domestic woman, the obedient woman, the pious woman and their antitheses were templates for Europeans as much as for Ottomans.

Early modern travellers loved comparisons. Most also shared an inclination to superiority. Travellers to the Ottoman East routinely displayed an aptitude for the game, but by the late eighteenth century their accounts tended toward unrelieved disparagement. Over the centuries, European observers had shifted the weight of their criticisms away from armies and statecraft to economics and society itself. Their commentaries attacked Ottoman social practices and intimate family relations whether or not their authors or their sources had experienced such things directly. In the nineteenth century, travellers who took up the subject of women focused their animus on veiling, polygamy and the sex-segregation symbolised by the harem. The prototype of what has come to be called ‘Orientalism’ builds on the most negative outpourings of generations of memoirists – Sandys and Rycaut in the seventeenth century, d’Arvieux, de Tott and Habesci in the eighteenth, and countless Egypt-watchers in the nineteenth from the brother and sister Lane to Lord Cromer. More often than not Muslim women are portrayed as men’s chattels, boxed up in harems and repressed into ignorance and sexual depravity. The perception of women’s condition as a signature Islamic or Eastern barbarity, and the articulation of a comprehensive Western critique of the Ottoman Islamic social system, however, came into their own only in the later nineteenth century.


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Nonetheless, Ottoman society was not without its defenders. A minority of Western commentators, especially those writing before the mid-eighteenth century, put forward views that tended more towards curiosity and fascination than condemnation. Given that Europe did not give up burning and hanging witches until well into the eighteenth century, it is perhaps not surprising that Ottoman gender practices raised fewer European eyebrows before the nineteenth century. European visitors before the modern era were not much interested in the legal status of women, still less with the question of whether, by this or that practice, women as women were being wronged. The conceptualisation of misogyny as an evil did not engage early modern European thought much more than it did the Islamic East, or more than abolitionism and the evils of slavery did in either place. Despite the tendency in recent historiography to impose the totalised East–West polarities of the later nineteenth century onto all European observations, the East–West divide of the early modern period was permeable and unsystematic. Social practices were not seen as germane to the overall struggle, and were not often identifiable as Eastern or Western in any case.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s deeply felt consideration of Ottoman women, although standing alone in its sympathetic particulars, reflects the sort of cultural receptivity that was still possible in the early Enlightenment. Her account is not always the wise first-person reportage that later readers and Montagu herself make of it, but it injects a ray of empiricism into the


study of Ottoman women – by which Montagu meant ladies of the privileged classes – and dispels the grosser misrepresentations of other accounts. Chief among these misrepresentations was the act of representation itself, Montagu argued, inasmuch as it was the product of male ‘observers’ who, lacking access and understanding, could only pretend to knowledge of Ottoman women.

Montagu takes exception to the Europeans’ easy equation between veiling and enslavement. With her own class biases intact, she contends that the life of upper-class Ottoman women had much to recommend it – creature comforts, warm relationships with other women of the household, including servants and slaves, the possibility of loving marriages and advantageous protections afforded by the anonymity of veiling. In some of her musings, Montagu homogenises elite Ottoman women into veiled versions of European ladies, more sheltered and thus more prone to boredom, but similarly eager for diversion. Veiling, this ‘perpetual masquerade’, as she called it, was for Montagu the instrument of women’s liberation, a way out of the harem’s tedium through the protective disguise of anonymity. Montagu’s breezy cultural relativism overestimates Ottoman women’s mobility and the value women of whatever class might have put on ‘independence’ and the freedom of the streets. Nonetheless, her imputation of advantage and utility to the veil, and of personality and individuality to ‘harem women’, is a humanising corrective to the usual story. It also gives women’s social reality an uncustomary measure of complexity.

The value of the account lies not only in establishing these basic truths but also in suggesting the web of interests that made Ottoman women’s sexuality a charged issue in the eighteenth century. Issues of visibility and invisibility loomed large over matters of status and power in pre-modern history. They were central to the gender system of Ottoman society. Cultural preconceptions and textual authority, as well as the gender and class dimensions of observation and representation, are all ultimately about ‘seeing’ women. The ideal of concealment and the correlation between the unseen woman, on the one hand, and female purity and social order, on the other, were increasingly invoked by Ottoman authorities in the eighteenth century. For societies that assume sexual incitement in the meeting between unrelated men and women, ‘seeing’ is at best the precursor, and at worst the equivalent, of carnal knowing. ‘A look is an arrow of Satan’, ‘Looking constitutes adultery by the eyes’ and ‘Every eye is an adulterer’ are among many widely cited Islamic traditions

Muslim women in the early modern era regarding the perils of heterosexual seeing.\textsuperscript{12} Orwell reminds us that seeing also constitutes an act of recognition.\textsuperscript{13} Where women’s place and space are subordinate to men’s, seeing women in male space concedes them the right of access. The concealment offered by veils and \textit{feraces}, however, announced women’s presence in male space as temporary and provisional.\textsuperscript{14}

Pre-modern Eastern and Western narratives about Ottoman women converge on the theme of ‘seeing’ women – in the indigenous variant, the institutional exertions to keep women unseeable, and in the Western, the efforts of outsiders to see, know, or recognise. Whether or not Knolles, Rycaut and Hill ‘and all his brethren voyage-writers’ had misunderstood the harem and its denizens as much as Montagu and others contend, the problem of male travellers, and of their male hosts, was a certain inability to see women, literally or figuratively.\textsuperscript{15}

Ottoman and other sexualities

Recent scholarship on European imperialism and on the Western view of Middle Eastern (Ottoman/Egyptian/Arab/Islamic) sexuality focuses on Western authorship of the sexually imagined ‘Orient’. The image of the harem as a lascivious nest accordingly emerges as the outlandish product of Western imaginings.\textsuperscript{16} To a large extent it is. A millennium of Christian (or Western or European) anti-Islamic polemic centres on accusations of depraved and unfettered sexuality. Most Western literary and visual renderings of the harem in the Ottoman era consider Middle Eastern, ‘Oriental’ women from the same line of vision. Disregarding the harem’s familial, communal and spatial reasons for being, they dwell instead on sexual atmospherics – languorous women, carnality, undress. Nonetheless, imagining a harem in terms of sexually available women was not just a Western pastime. Westerners, however ill-informed or ill-intentioned, did not invent \textit{ab vacuo} the carnal dimensions of the harem, much less of polygamy and concubinage. Gender and sexuality were fundamental to the organisation of societies everywhere. In the


\textsuperscript{13} George Orwell, \textit{Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays} (London, 1950).

\textsuperscript{14} Mernissi, \textit{Beyond the Veil}, p. 140 and passim; Fatima Mernissi, \textit{Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory} (London, 1996), p. 41 and passim.


\textsuperscript{16} Ahmed, \textit{Women and Gender in Islam}, passim.
hierarchy-minded Ottoman system, they manifested themselves in strikingly concrete ways.

Sexuality was not a fit topic for polite Ottoman conversation, but it was a salient feature of Ottoman political and social governance. Institutions and practices that sought to remove things sexual from public consciousness inevitably trained a spotlight on them. Moralist insistence on sex segregation, veiling, strict gender codes and on female sexual purity as the measure of family honour was predicated on a dark vision of the dangerous volatility of heterosexuality. There was no allowance for innocence in the unsanctioned mixing of the sexes. According to Islamic tradition, when an unmarried man and woman are together, Satan is also present.\(^{17}\) The regulation of women’s clothing and physical mobility in the Ottoman seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as in numerous other Islamic states gave voice to similar fears. Many such laws singled out economic targets as well as women, but the theme of social disorder was most consistently expressed in gender-specific terms. In al-Ghazâlî’s foundational chapters on marriage and society, the calamity of social disorder follows from the failure to control women. It is women’s irresistible and assertive sexual nature which, if left uncontrolled, destroys social – particularly male – equanimity; chaos then ensues.\(^{18}\)

Al-Ghazâlî’s was the most comprehensive pronouncement on women’s potent sexual nature and his voice one of the most authoritative in the history of Islamic thought. He was widely read, or at least widely cited, in Ottoman learned circles, but the themes he sounded were particularly ‘Ottomanised’ through the assigned texts of the Ottoman medrese curriculum. Two of the mainstays of the curriculum, the Qur’anic commentary of Abdullâh ibn ‘Umar Baydâwî (Turkish, Kadi Beyzavi, d. 1286?), and its gloss by Shihâbaddîn al-Khafâjî (d. 1659), take al-Ghazâlî’s position on women’s physicality a step further. For them, a woman’s entire body is effectively pudendal (‘awra). Thus women must be completely covered, face and hands included, except within the circle of permitted relatives or out of absolute necessity, such as for medical reasons.\(^{19}\)

Men who undertook medrese training in the later Ottoman centuries were, by curriculum and vocational milieu, steeped in the twin traditions of gender segregation and male superiority. As budding exponents of the law, they

\(^{17}\) Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 42.
\(^{18}\) Farah, Marriage and Sexuality in Islam; Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, Ihya ‘ulum al-din, cited in Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, pp. 27–45.
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were invested in the continued regulation of gendered difference. Because of the centralisation of medrese education and of juristic employment – and unemployment – the medrese-trained were concentrated in the capital, which made them a potent force in both imperial and local politics. The moral and status interests of students and less well-off religious functionaries made the lower strata of the religious bureaucracy active players in the socio-economic disturbances of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet the medrese system was by no means the sole source of misogynist thinking; the poetry of the time afforded another arena for the inculcation of superior male virtues.

Although the legal enterprise as a whole – fetvas, court cases, legal treatises, the appeals process – dispensed conflicting messages on the subject of women, the medreses’ uniform curriculum, their reliance on limited and limiting texts and the system’s monopoly on education allowed little room in authoritative circles for a female-affirming counter-discourse.

As for the role of polygamy and slave concubinage in Ottoman women’s history, many travellers can be faulted for overstating the incidence of those practices in the population at large. The significance of polygamy and concubinage, however, was not a function of numbers. Their social resonance went well beyond the 5 or 10 per cent that polygamous households are thought to have represented. Both polygamy and slave concubinage presumed a


capacious male virility, and both sanctioned a special category of women – enslaved outsiders – to serve that virility if free marriage, even multiple free marriages, did not. Some polygamous households, perhaps most, were the product of legal marriages to free women. In other households slave women were their masters’ mates – whether legally married, ‘common law’ or casual – and sometimes the bearers of their children. But even when slave women were not sexually employed, they were critical accoutrements of great households and, given the elites’ domination of early modern culture, of society itself.

The labour of domestic slaves, like that of paid servants in less grand surroundings, gave leisure to masters and mistresses. But the worth of domestic slaves, especially of ‘above stairs’ slaves in the larger households, lay not in raw physical exertions or in capital skills but in intimate service and display. Ultimately, the value of the luxury slave was owed to her – or, less and less commonly, his – servile state. In the upper-class harems that opened up to Westerners like Montagu and, later, Julia Pardoe, the slave girls who plied visitors with sherbets, colognes and hankies created the signifying aesthetic of their owners’ class position. Despite, and to some extent because of, the higher maintenance costs of slave labour as compared with labour for hire, slave ownership demonstrated wealth and consequence. As wartime opportunities to acquire slaves diminished over the centuries, slave-holding more and more became a mark of the upper classes, those already possessing the money to make a market purchase. However, the seal of slavery’s value to Ottoman

‘prestige production’ was the long association between the Ottoman governing classes and slave-based households.

In wealthy households, where sex segregation was common practice whether or not the householder was polygamous, slave women were both screens against the outside and companions for the women within. In less wealthy families, a female slave might be the only full-time female servant in the household, in which case her role was more drudgery than adornment. But in any household, or where there was no household or family at all, female slaves, whatever their function and irrespective of their owners’ class or rank, were legally sexual objects; they were, for their male owners, ‘what their right hand possesses’. Contrary to some recent studies, a slave woman’s marketplace designation as household labour rather than potential concubine did not relieve her of a sexual role if her master desired it. Female slaves’ sexual availability – men’s slave alternative in a conjugal world – put all women on notice. The slave model of female obedience was no doubt only one of many calls to female propriety in Ottoman times, but it was enduring. The metropolitan nature of Ottoman slavery gave urban women a close sense of slaves’ vulnerability.

The construction of slavery as domestic slavery, and domestic slavery as essentially female, although not unique to the Ottomans or to Islamic systems, are associated with the southern and eastern Mediterranean in recent centuries, most especially the last two or three centuries of the empire. In Ottoman urban society, the social and cultural weight of female domestic slavery had increased over the centuries. In terms of slaves for purely domestic uses, females increasingly outnumbered males in urban centres and in the eastern Mediterranean provinces generally. But equally, the shift was conditioned on the status-affirming function of female slaves, especially in the light of the emulative drives of the rising bourgeoisie and, increasingly in the nineteenth century, the feminisation of domestic labour.

Female slavery’s embeddedness in Ottoman society became a matter of record in the nineteenth century. Having gone along with the international ban on the African slave trade in the middle of the century, the Ottomans clung

30 Hakan Erdem, Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and its Demise (London and New York, 1996); Ehud R. Toledano, Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East (Seattle, 1998).
31 Toledano, The Ottoman Slave Trade, pp. 7–11, 13.
for decades longer to the Caucasus trade and to slavery itself, both of which revolved around ‘the traffic in women’.  

32 Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the male ruling elites had gradually become decoupled from the enslavement process and, as a result of the nineteenth-century reforms initiated by Mahmud II and his successors during the Tanzimat, from the discourse of slavery itself. Government officials’ freedom from confiscation and execution after 1838 pushed forward the conceptualisation of male persons as essentially free. Slavery as domestic labour, and women – especially women of the lower orders – as domestic labourers enjoyed no such transformation. The elision between female and slave was to some extent always in play in Ottoman Islamic culture, but it was in the later empire that the distinction between slave and male was asserted. Although wealth and class position shielded many women from the harsher labour implications of these processes, women prior to the nineteenth century were at least nominally subject to a common sexual culture. The gendered inequalities of slavery, inheritance rules and childhood marriage, and the conflation of women with sexual services in the language of marriage, 33 established a hierarchised sexual culture. Its everyday signs in the urban milieu were obligatory veiling and obligatory sex segregation.

It goes without saying that Ottoman society was not monolithic. The state sanctioned certain hierarchical dichotomies – askeri over reaya, male over female and Muslim over non-Muslim – but these masked numerous informal variations. The members of each of the ascendant groups were nominally equal and unified, but differences in wealth and privilege produced unacknowledged subsets of insiders and outsiders. For the majority of Ottoman Muslims, even for many askeris, the finer things in life – meat and helva, or a new suit of clothes, or paid servants – were beyond reach most of the time. For most, too, luxuriant polygamy was culturally foreign, even exotic.

The polygamous confinement of women, which was favoured by wealthy Muslim families, was a matter of curiosity, envy, and sometimes resentment, for more than one category of indigenous have-not. The have-not factor was heightened for military and police affiliates. For one thing, apart from men with religious designations or titles – hacı (Arabic hajj), pilgrim; hafız, memorizer of the Qur’an; and şeyh (Arabic shaykh) – polygamy itself was more common – if

32 See Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*; Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition*; Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*.

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not most common – among military-administrative groups, especially the vizieral elite. For Ottoman troops who were paid neither well nor punctually, female captives were sexually and economically as good as gold. In the Wallachian campaign of 1060/1650, fifteen slaves – worth about 45,000 akçes – were captured for every two Ottoman soldiers; 81,000 captives were taken in the campaign of 1683 and 50,000 in 1788; many of these must have been female. The tulip craze of the early eighteenth century notwithstanding, it was the price of slaves, especially female slaves, that routinely topped the market. Even ordinary, not particularly ‘beautiful’, male and female slaves were like money in the bank. The female slave residents of great households, whether or not their owners intended them for sexual use, must have been the stuff of dreams, for Ottoman males on the margins of that world, as much as for Western outsiders.

Until the 1980s, the bulk of the work on women in the contemporary Middle East either collapsed the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries into an undifferentiated ‘traditional’ past, or read them forward into a prolonged nineteenth century of European domination and a reinforcing Orientalist ‘gaze’. Both periodisations assumed knowledge of the early modern period that is even now elusive. Both also subordinated internal Middle Eastern processes to East–West foreign relations. In fact, in the seventeenth century and in much of the eighteenth, when Western hegemony was not yet in place, the common male gaze on women was as determining as national origins. But, whatever their national loyalties – or their gender, Montagu notwithstanding – most observers were not inclined to move beyond the received wisdom of polarities. The West’s harem stories in the pre-modern era propose a binary world of East versus West. At the same time, they inadvertently put forward an alternative reading of one of the East’s stories about itself. The East–West frame on the subject of women overshadows a common tradition in which the diversity of women’s experience as social beings was not only unseen – which is to say unrecognised – but to a great extent denied.

Until recently, the least recognised of women’s activities arguably lay in the economic sphere. Studies in the kadi registers, however, have offered a sharp refutation of the unpropertied, economically inactive – in one word, negligible – woman. Ordinary women as well as women of the elites not only possessed moveable and immoveable property in appreciable amounts, but actively tended to their property rights. Women made and dissolved contracts. They sold, bequeathed, rented, leased and invested property, and they did so in substantial numbers. If women were not actively involved in safeguarding their wealth, as is sometimes argued, they need not have appeared in person in court, yet many women did so, often without male kin being present.

It is true that women were more often sellers than buyers of real property. Nonetheless, it is not clear that their behaviour weakened the potential for autonomy. On the face of it, women’s divestment of real property appears to undermine female heirs’ guarantees under the Islamic inheritance system by, in effect, facilitating the reversion of real property to male ownership. However, we do not know what unlitigated bargains women may have struck around such transfers. Female sellers may in fact have negotiated certain advantages as a result of their decision to sell. Women who transferred property to brothers or other male kin may have traded property for good will, in exchange for the right to make future claims to their siblings’ support and protection. As Annelies Moors has argued, the loss of property rights ‘often coincides’ with gains in other areas, for example in marriage arrangements. We are not surprised by a bargain for security, but the balance between choice and autonomy, on the one hand, and expectation and coercion, on the other, remains obscure.

A similar question of legal rights and social applications arises from dower right practices. Marriage contracts were sealed by the transfer or promise of transfer of a dower or mehr (also mihr; Arabic, mahr) to the new bride. In the Islamic East generally, it had long been the custom to divide the dower into two parts, the prompt mehr payable immediately, and a deferred portion,

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Muslim women in the early modern era generally a larger sum, payable upon demand, though usually upon divorce or the death of the husband or wife. The deferred dower held a number of advantages for the new couple in that the husband could start out married life with a future debt rather than a current deficit, and he could draw against the sum for the benefit of his married home. For the bride, her husband’s debt to her represented a cash reserve, ‘money in the bank’, until some hardship, such as divorce, necessitated its use. If the dower remained unpaid in her lifetime, it passed to her heirs upon her death. Mehr amounts in most cases were modest. Even in askeri families, among those whose dowers were entered into the court record, mehr was under 2,000 akçes. Women from lesser families were fortunate to have half that amount. Since amounts were pegged to the bride’s socio-economic status, they represented meaningful sums to the individuals involved. Among other things, a simple dwelling could be bought for 200 akçes, and a considerably better one for 2,000. Two thousand akçes could also secure the services of two housemaids for a year with cash to spare. And 4 or 5 akçes per day provided for the daily upkeep of a child of the lower classes.

Like most men, women acquired the bulk of their property through inheritance, usually as passed on to them from parents and spouses. Female heirs came into possession of as varied a range of inheritances as did men. Shares in shops and businesses, usufruct rights, and salary-bearing vakıf posts tended to be reserved in the first instance for male kin, but women are known to have inherited rights to all of these. In the case of vakıf posts, a wife, daughter or other female relative was sometimes a primary designee for the role of vakıf administrator (mütevelliye). Not infrequently, the female line was specifically excluded, but overall these were outnumbered by inclusive designations. And, of course, women were themselves vakıf founders. Yediyıldız’s sample from the 6,000 new acts of vakıf recorded in the Vakıflar Müdürlüğü for present-day Turkey in the eighteenth century reveals that 17 per cent (18 per cent of

44 İstanbul Müftülüğü (hereafter İstM), 2/178, fol. 8a, and 6/404, fol. 62b.
45 Öztürk, Askeri kassama ait, pp. 407–14; Duben and Behar, İstanbul Households, pp. 117–19.
cash vakıfs) were founded by women. Women’s share of charitable activities, however, varied widely over time and space. The stepped-up public presence of royal women under Ahmed III helped to raise the overall percentage of women’s endowments to 27 per cent of all new vakıfs in that reign. In Cairo, the figure for the eighteenth century as a whole was 25 per cent. In Aleppo, women created 30–40 per cent of new vakıfs in the eighteenth century. For the late eighteenth century through the early nineteenth, women’s percentage was 51 in Aleppo. Most female founders in the major cities were members of the imperial family or represented askeri lineages. But in some locales, such as Harput in the early nineteenth century, the high proportion of non-askeri founders, including females, gives evidence of wider access to significant agricultural and commercial sources of wealth.

Despite the disparities between the various studies’ findings, and the fact that we do not know how meaningful the Aleppo data are for any part of the territory that is now modern Turkey, a number of common features of Ottoman vakıfs do emerge. First, there was an overall rise in new vakıfs between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Women’s share as founders also seems to have increased relative to previous centuries. Yediyıldız calculates that the number of vakıfs had skyrocketed by the eighteenth century, with 82 per cent to be characterised as familial (ehli; Arabic, ahli) or semi-familial. These provided all or part of their revenues to the material comfort of the founder’s family. Women’s vakıfs were part of the larger trend, although not always or everywhere in identical proportions with men’s. As Yüksel argues, the rise in vakıfs generally, and the flight to family-aid vakıfs particularly, were tied to a concomitant rise in state confiscations (müsadere) of private property in the eighteenth century. The urge to protect family wealth was a response to the state’s growing appetite for the fortunes of individuals whose estates were not legally subject to seizure. Women’s inclination to the vakıf solution, like men’s, must be regarded in this light. The public side of endowments, however,
Muslim women in the early modern era cannot be discounted, even in the eighteenth century’s familial age. Although the percentage of new, purely public (hayri) foundations had dwindled by the eighteenth century, a sizeable majority, 75 per cent, of eighteenth-century vakıfs were semi-familial, and thus at least partly charitable, in nature. Their founders had more than just the security of their families in mind when they set up their endowments.

Among the occasional non-domestic functions available to them, women sometimes served as tax-farmers, most probably as a consequence of inheritance or, in the case of palace women, through imperial assignment. Like many males, women administered their tax-farms through subcontractors. For women the decision was less a convenience than a necessity. Women’s direct access to wealth in the public domain, in any event, was limited. Among other deterrents, they were barred from official government positions and the training institutions – schools, military units and the like – that led to them. Even when women served as vakıf administrators, they did so primarily on behalf of family vakıfs and smaller endowments in general. The great public vakıfs founded by men were on the whole out of reach; they were usually given over to the administration of an upright, titled member of the ulema or other official as specified in the vakıf charter. Since emoluments from imperial or vizier-founded endowments were considerable, women’s lack of access to official hierarchy posts was doubly disadvantageous in terms of the control of wealth.

The pattern of men’s superior access to wealth is evidenced by the much larger vakıfs that men endowed, and by the larger overall estates that men were able to leave to heirs. If the evidence for Istanbul and Aleppo is any gauge, even women’s largest vakıfs and estates seldom approached the prodigious riches of any number of male testaments. In both regards, the very richest male estates were not only more numerous relative to women’s in the highest brackets, but individually they were worth two or more times as much as the wealthiest female estates. To be sure, men’s and women’s estates reflected a similar composition, with residential dwellings predominating. The value of women’s estates, however, cluster at the lower end of the range of values.

It is a common finding of studies of women and property that women’s representation among the wealthy is inversely proportional to the amount of wealth at issue. Women’s control over property as both distributable

wealth and the management of assets was markedly less than that of men. And regardless of how much or how little property women held, property ownership itself was hardly universal. Debate will continue as to whether women’s visibility – that is, their now recognised economic and courtroom activities – alter the old view of women as not only unseen but powerless.

Family and identity

In the final analysis, women’s social latitude was conditioned on their place in the family and household. The central social fact in the lives of women and men in Ottoman society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was family – or, more accurately, was still family. Its configuration, its turns of fortune and most of all its loss or absence, more than any other feature of early modern experience, determined life’s chances. Whatever else conspired to rearrange individual lives – and for men such possibilities were greater than for women – it was as a family member that an individual’s social place was first reckoned.

The family, whatever its shape, was especially defining for women. It was in and of the family that women were truly seen. The natal family, and thereafter the marital family if they married – and most women did – were the source of women’s social networks and their education in religion and social conduct, the only schooling that the overwhelming majority of women ever received. Family relationships were the key to identity, within and beyond kin and household. It was as the ‘daughter of’ or ‘mother of’ that a woman was accorded primary recognition and value. Even slaves gained protections and a measure of social existence to the extent that they were incorporated into families.

Family households were anything but stable. Families are by nature works in progress, sloughing off and gaining members with marriage, divorce and mortality. Ideally the Ottoman family household grew from a parental pair and unmarried children to complex multi-generational arrangements of married and unmarried offspring, assorted spouses, maiden aunts and orphaned nephews – usually in a tumble of overlapping ages. In time all family households contracted. Some older or previously married women lived on their own, but they were few and far between. Economic dependency, the custom of male sponsorship and protection, neighbourhood concerns about unmonitored women and the tendency to remarry kept the number of female-headed

60 Marcus, The Middle East, pp. 195–201.
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households low and their duration short-lived. Economic insecurity accelerated the rate of remarriage for both widows and divorcées, but those who were still in their child-bearing years held the marital advantage, with divorcées favoured over widows. Women of greater means seem to have had less appetite for remarriage, but the evidence is scattered and points to an inclination rather than a predictable pattern. As for other incentives towards the married state, the near-universal conviction regarding the social and religious appropriateness of marriage and family worked against single householding for both men and women.

Court cases involving minor children offer abundant evidence of the elasticity of households. In disputes over child custody, the court acted not to validate household formations but to ensure that children had caregivers. Islamic law prefers males in the male line and stipulates precedence, starting with the paternal grandfather, for guardianship of the fatherless. Judges, however, frequently endorsed non-normative arrangements proposed by women. In Meriwether’s study of Aleppo in the eighteenth century, mothers, maternal grandmothers and maternal aunts, among other women, were named child custodians more than half the time despite male and male-line priority. Some decisions occurred when paternal relatives were dead or otherwise unavailable. A good many, however, took place despite males’ availability. When the choice was between a close matrilineal relative and a more distant patrilineal one and the woman in question presented herself as a suitable person, judges might favour the matrilineal side as better for the child’s interests. Since custodianship required the supervision of children’s estates, some of which were substantial in Aleppo, Meriwether argues that the choice of female custodians reflected confidence in women beyond their capacity for nurturing. A

The claims of upper-class women and women of the wealthy commercial classes, for example, were aided by the standing of their families, but upper-class women — women of the governing elites — arguably lived more sequestered, male-mediated lives. Claims made in their names may say little about female agency or the judicial validation of women as a whole. What remains unknown in all these calculations is the role of local and individual circumstances when litigants were ostensibly of the same class or status group and a judge ruled for one guardian or family over another.

The circulation of children within the orbit of family networks ensured that household forms would be fluid and that extra-household family ties would have a certain amount of life in them. The law imposed a legal and moral reality on such ties whether or not they were otherwise operative. Patriliny was preferred, but matrilineal ties were far from negligible. Relatives on both sides ‘counted’, in Meriwether’s phrase. The legal preference for male custodians and guardians, even over the claims of mothers, however, reinforced the cultural importance of male kin and the patriarchal ideal of male-directed families and households.

Thus the male ideal was widely upheld in practice, but as can be seen in the case of children, when misfortune struck, a good many could not find new homes in line with legal preference. Wars and demographic storms killed parents, grandparents and other potential custodians. Children’s gender was also consequential. In the broad-brush terms that become necessary in the absence of direct evidence, we are left to surmise that the cultural preference for boys and, with few exceptions, the higher economic value of dependent males left parentless girls more vulnerable than boys to neglect and other maltreatment. Girls were demonstrably more subject to child marriage, whose potential for abuse the *shari‘a* was at pains to prevent. The ‘option of puberty’ entitled girls upon reaching puberty to repudiate husbands contracted for them in their minority. The option’s affirmation of freely contracted marriage was nonetheless limited, since it did not extend to marriages arranged by a father or grandfather. If court records are representative, girls rarely challenged their

65 Meriwether, *The Kin who Count*.
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marriages upon coming of age. In any case, when they did so, they were not always striking a blow for independence. For one thing, they were only children when in legal terms they came of age. No doubt many girls acted with the support if not the urging of their natal families, sometimes because a more advantageous match had presented itself.

For women who became mothers, any number of circumstances could trigger shifts in roles as well as in residence. A new bride typically left her parents’ home for her husband’s, but subsequent moves were not likely to be in lockstep with patriarchy or virilocality. The impact of mortality and fertility, the wishes of both female and male family members and the discretion of the courts widened the distance between norms and behaviour. And then there was the early modern world itself. Famine, rural flight, infant mortality and early adult mortality were joined in the two centuries by devastating wars fought and re-fought against Iran, Venice, Russia and Austria-Hungary. In Istanbul great fires occurred on an almost yearly basis, destroying the dwellings of tens of thousands. At least once in the period, earthquakes levelled Erzurum, Aleppo, Diyarbekir, Ankara, Izmir, Izmit, Bursa and central Istanbul along with scores of surrounding villages whose losses will never be known. Lethal bursts of cholera, whooping cough, smallpox and plague swept thousands more away. Survival as a society tested the limits of family and the Islamic ethic of community. In such times of trouble, ‘family’ was not so much a matter of form or kin as of wider social solidarities in making room and making do. The line between family and friends cannot have been sharply drawn in a society that knew such trouble yet nonetheless was well known for its social coherence.

Although no household structure was the overwhelming standard throughout the empire or even in Anatolia and Thrace, the patrilocal, multi-generational extended family household – of grandparents, one or more married sons and one or more generations of unmarried children – was the aspiration and ideal. That it comprised less than a majority of households has been demonstrated for a number of locales. Indeed, historians have argued that even if most people spent part of their lives in extended arrangements, they could not have done so for long given the ebbs and flows of mortality and divorce. Small households were a by-product of the comings and goings of complex

households. In urban areas, they were also a preferred structure in their own right. Duben and Behar have shown that small households – including the nuclear form – accounted for 60 per cent of all households in Istanbul by the late nineteenth century. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries lack the nineteenth century’s census data, but impressionistic evidence points to the pre-nineteenth-century prominence if not prevalence of small urban households in the cities of the central provinces. Gerber has found no sign that extended families existed in Bursa in the seventeenth century ‘or ever’. Faroqhi’s study of housing stock in seventeenth-century Ankara and Kayseri suggests the preponderance of smaller housing units in central Anatolia, and thus the early establishment and wide distribution in Ottoman Turkish society of the pattern of smaller families living under one roof. In this regard, the principal Ottoman Turkish pattern – like Bulgaria’s – bears a greater resemblance to much of western Europe – whose families of few children and few grandparents together were well established long before the Industrial Revolution – than to Russia and much of eastern Europe. Although extended families persisted in western Europe as they certainly did in Ottoman Turkey and among Bulgaria’s Christian and Muslim populations, Russia and most of eastern Europe had an overwhelming preponderance of complex households.

Within the family setting, the harsher face of women’s subordination – of junior women generally and of outsider brides particularly – is associated with the gender and age hierarchies of intergenerational, complex or extended households, particularly in families that could not displace their regular labour needs onto servants and slaves. The existence of the nuclear family form, however, did not guarantee nuclear functioning, hardly practicable given that Ottoman legal and customary practice reinforced family mutuality and interdependence beyond the nuclear unit. The main lines of family law – custodial rights, inheritance rules and male divorce prerogatives – remained unchallenged prior to the nineteenth century. Movement towards egalitarian marriage was also checked by the weakness of transformative

69 Duben and Behar, *Istanbul Households*, p. 75.
72 Faroqhi, *Men of Modest Substance*, p. 20.
74 Madeline C. Zilfi, ‘“We Don’t Get Along”: Women and Hul Divorce in the Eighteenth Century’, in *Women in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Madeline C. Zilfi (Leiden, 1997),
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economics at the level of the family. Even when individual families differed from expectation, their behaviour was not generalised into a critique of the normative system itself. The extended or multiple ideal remained alive not just because families did often live in multiple arrangements, but because, irrespective of household structure, family ties and family-like ties had demonstrable utility for both men and women. Patterns of sociability, the obligations of relatedness, the many forms and expectations of parenting and care-giving, and religio-ethical values of inclusion and mutual responsibility were powerful arguments for investing in kin and fictive kin solidarities.

It can be argued that the family, broadly defined, was alive and well, but that marriage in the period was much less so. The added value placed on the extended family and on male priority within family relationships strained the conjugal bond. Middle Eastern society was a married society because early marriage, rapid remarriage and the idealisation of the married condition made it so, not because the conjugal bond was particularly strong. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *hul* (Arabic *khul*), divorce, whereby a wife materially compensates her husband in exchange for his consent to divorce, was a common practice in the empire from Istanbul to Cairo and points in between. There are no systematic counts of *hul* relative to divorce by male-initiated repudiation, *talak*, and the total number of divorces, i.e., *hul* plus *talak* dissolutions, remains unknown since husbands could repudiate wives without mediation or registration by the legal system. Even without *talak* data, the abundance of known *hul* cases already tells us that divorce by any name was an inescapable feature of eighteenth-century life. It was more prevalent in the cities, it seems, although it was unevenly distributed across the urban environment. The vast majority of the cases involved Muslims, the predominant population of the area, although cases concerning Christians and Jews can also be found here and elsewhere. In Istanbul, about a hundred

pp. 264–96; and for somewhat different findings, Abdal-Rehim, ‘The Family and Gender Laws’, p. 105.


Hul cases appear annually in the court registers for just the neighbourhoods adjacent to the Fatih Mosque. Hul cases are prominent in the records for Cyprus in the seventeenth century, while in Aleppo in the eighteenth century, the annual figure for hul was also high, probably between 300 and 400 in a population of 130,000.

The Fatih area of Istanbul, then as now, comprised some of the city’s most crowded neighbourhoods. Population density, however, does not explain why women streamed into court from these precincts in order to end their marriages. Money problems were a chronic factor in marital breakdown. The Fatih area had numerous economic vulnerabilities, but it was not unique in these regards. The vocational make-up of the population, however, is suggestive. Many of the husbands were affiliated with imperial military or policing units. This observation reinforces the case for a distinctive military-caste ethos and subculture, intersected in marriage matters by economic problems. Among the military cadres, the marital bond appears to have been particularly tenuous, by reason of serial monogamy among the lower ranks, and concubinage and polygamy among the higher-ups.

On the other hand, since hul is by definition female initiated, its high frequency implies a certain autonomy on women’s part, with women seeming to act in their own interests by pursuing the divorce option when their husbands might have wished to continue the marriage. However, one cannot go too far with the presumption of female autonomy. It is clear that some hul divorces in fact reflected husbandly rather than wifely strategy. By ceding the initiative, husbands could be rid of unwanted wives without having to pay a divorce stipend (nafaka) or the delayed dowry (mehr-i müeccel), both of which were incumbent upon him if he initiated the dissolution by invoking talak. Freed of divorce debt, husbands would enhance their financial position in seeking out another mate. Apart from personal advantages to either wife or husband, it is also possible that the hul process was a popular alternative to talak for larger, social reasons, in that society seems to have preferred the mutuality and consensual dynamics of hul over talak’s blatant unilateralism. There is good reason to believe that hul very often did operate as a disguised substitute for male-initiated talak.

The harmonious formulae of the hul declaration—‘We do not have a good life together . . . we acquit and absolve each other of any and all

78 Jennings, Christians and Muslims, pp. 27–8.
79 Marcus, The Middle East, pp. 205–6, 338.
debts . . . we renounce all claims’ – belie the fact that divorce broke families apart.82 Hundreds of court entries make reference to bitter and prolonged disputes of the sort that have kept courts busy the world over: child custody claims and support payments; dower balances; and the division of marital property.83 Ottoman women had reason to become cognizant of their legal rights. Newlyweds may not have entered marriage with such knowledge, but among families of ordinary means, women’s and children’s rights to financial support after divorce were matters of survival. A divorced woman’s relatives, those who were to take her in, would have encouraged her in her entitlements when the need arose.84

Not all of the women and girls who used the courts – whether for domestic entitlements or property transactions – did so in their own interests and of their own volition. We must assume, though, that most cases are what they seem – that is, that domestic cases had primarily to do with the expressed issue even if other concerns were in play. What we cannot discern is where and how family strategies intersected with wives’, sisters’ and daughters’ legal assertions. Be that as it may, contemporaneous calls to shari’a, raised in the expectation of justice and fair play, had a basis in fact in women’s lives as well as in men’s. Women, especially urban women of the middling and lower classes, were frequent users of the court’s services. Their legal undertakings parallel those of men, except in the revealing realm of divorce-related disputes, which often represented the lion’s share of female plaintiffs’ cases in larger urban areas. In any event, women sought the court’s intervention far more than strict sequestration and male sponsorship should have allowed, if both had regularly been practised. The high incidence of women’s court appearances, the variety of cases that brought women there and their courtroom demeanour – often appearing on their own to make declarations directly – indicate confidence in the legal system and in their own standing as legal persons.85 Although appeals to the law reflect the failure of private solutions, they nonetheless underline the vital role of the courts in supporting women’s social well-being.

83 İstM, 2/178, fol. 3a, 2/184, fol. 17b, 6/403, fols. 2a, 9b, 6/404, fols. 72b–94b passim.
84 See İstM, 2/183, fols. 7a, 14b, 20a, 21a.
It is difficult to assess the record of failed marriages against present-day claims that pre-modern society afforded women higher status and greater protections than in the modern era. Also, the reality of frequent divorce is not easily reconciled with the prescriptive literature’s vision of male-headed families as stable, harmonious and, for women, protective. The historical record presents a complex picture, and the record is incomplete, even for the times and places for which ample evidence survives. Nonetheless, the dense divorce activity in urban centres, especially among military-linked elements, points to the importance of class and status-group segmentation. In addition to differences in levels of income and sources of accumulated wealth, the vocations of male breadwinners supported distinctive socio-economic solidarities and distinctive masculine subcultures. Given the evidence of divorce-inducing socio-economic environments, polygyny in the higher military-administrative ranks and perhaps serial monogamy in the lower, as well as the military’s frontline access to captive women, the situation of women born or married into such families was more precarious than for the population generally, or even for non-military elements of the elite.

Old and new in family households

The size and mobility of urban populations made an eclectic mix of household types inescapable in the urban setting. At the same time that small-family households were on the rise, extended family lineages were pooling influence to dominate imperial and local provincial politics. Popular confidence in the extended family as a bulwark of security owes much to the durability and wealth of society’s prominent large families. Family names – the famous -zade (son-of) designations of the mid-seventeenth century through the early nineteenth – marked the expanding grip of ‘people with “known” names’, generation after generation of office-holders from the same family lines. The formalised valuing of family ties in male elite recruitment was remarkably pervasive after the late seventeenth century. It was not only the scale of the long eighteenth century’s family enterprise, but the unabashed use of family ties, especially patrilineal ties, as necessary and sufficient qualification for high rank in the governing elites, that distinguished the period. The upper reaches of the government in this period endorsed family-right recruitment. At the same time, the dynasty took to projecting a familial sovereign image to suit

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the aristocratic age and to reinforce the dynasty’s reliance on family power and a legitimacy grounded in social stability.  

The centrality of primary ties eased the incorporation of royal women into a number of imperial projects. Royal daughters, sisters and nieces, whose births and marriages were extravagantly celebrated, played an enhanced role in Ottoman ceremony, court life and urban culture. Royal women’s life passages figured prominently in the dynasty’s self-representation. While the matings of the dynasty’s males were palace affairs, the weddings of women of the Ottoman line, close relatives of the ruler, were for public consumption; they embodied, among other things, the dynasty’s wider social claims as the first family among many. Blood members of the dynasty, princesses projected Ottoman sovereignty without posing a political threat. Showcasing the marriages of princesses – and publicly appropriating the political and material capital of vizieral bridegrooms – offered spectacle and perhaps conciliation to the urban public.

Shirine Hamadeh’s study of architectural meaning in eighteenth-century Istanbul notes the transformative role of elite female ‘patrons of the urban space’. Royal women’s palaces were stylish residences, where sometimes before there had been no significant housing of any kind. Beginning with the way they dressed their own male and female attendants and decorated their palaces, royal women were also style-setters for the nascent consumerism of the eighteenth century. Theirs was a social world validated by visits from the sultan and others of the royal household. Princesses’ houses, with or without husbands in evidence, extended the imperial presence. Princesses Hadice, daughter of Mustafa III, and the two Esmas – the elder the daughter of Ahmed III and sister of Mustafa III and Abdülhamid I, while the younger was the daughter of Abdülhamid I – presided not only over their households but effectively over the surrounding neighbourhoods. The public fountains that royal women endowed also influenced urban settlement patterns. Both palaces and waterworks, Hamadeh suggests, contributed to an Islamising trend in the city’s development. Muslims gravitated towards the new installations. In another sense, though, women’s vakıf endowments, which frequently took the form of water provisioning, perhaps inadvertently reflected a wider, non-denominational, urban sensibility. Together with satellite courts, and dynastic

celebrations that rivalled those prescribed by the religious calendar, much of women’s architectural sponsorship pointed to the kind of secularist discourse that would dominate much of the nineteenth century.

Although royal women loomed large in the dynasty’s family portrait, their role was not especially active, much less directive. Initiatives, and the resources to sustain them, belonged to male rulership. The realities of Ottoman patriarchalism were underscored by the betrothal of toddler princesses to viziers, a practice that had taken hold in the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, opportunities and agency for the adult royal woman expanded in the eighteenth century.89 After a tentative start in the late 1600s, mature princesses commonly lived away from Topkapı Palace in mini-courts of their own. As in other centuries a number of royal women served as helpmates and counsellors to their reigning relative. Ahmed III’s daughter Fatima is said to have encouraged the regime’s francophilia, while his sister Hadîce, a long-time confidante, was at his side through several crises, even advising him on how to appease the rebels of 1730.90 For his part, Mustafa III doted on a favourite niece, the Hanım Sultan of the 1760s. He visited her daily, according to reports.91 The integrated eighteenth-century imperial family, although not without its own family quarrels and factions, stands in stark contrast to the internecine politics that destroyed the peace of the imperial household during most of the seventeenth century.

The greater visibility of the royal household mirrored the new prominence of non-royal elite families. Notwithstanding the longevity of elite lineages, little is known about wives, sisters and daughters. Charitable acts gave some women a public face. Otherwise the moneyed classes preferred obscurity for their women. The poet Fitnat was a notable exception. Born Zübeyde, Fitnat was the daughter, granddaughter, niece, and sister of şeyhülislams in the illustrious Ebu İshakzade line.92 She became a woman doubly famous, because of her family origins and because she had in her poetry a career of

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sorts. However, the little that is related about her personality and pastimes raises questions about her family as much as about the young woman who early on showed a flair for words. Fitnat’s natal family equipped her with an education and encouraged her poetry. She enjoyed a certain amount of recognition in her own time and apparently participated, in writing though not necessarily face to face, in the circle of celebrated upper-crust poets that included Haşmet Efendi and Mustafa III’s grand vizier Koca Ragıp Paşa (d. 1763). Her marriage, to the son of another eminent ulema family, was by all reports unhappy. Indeed, the record of Fitnat’s personal life all but disappears in these later years, until her death in 1194/1780. Her story is in many respects one of stifled promise, with the nurturing latitude of the parental home reined in by the strictures of marriage and an unsympathetic mate.

In terms of the here-and-now of the eighteenth century, Fitnat’s biography also hints at differing cultural dispositions within the body of the Ottoman elite, one represented by the culturally engaged household of Fitnat’s father, a religious scholar, poet and patron of the arts, and the other reflected in the Feyzullahzade family into which Fitnat had married, a family little known for pastimes outside the religious career track. Perhaps this is what the poet-kadi İzzet Molla had in mind when he referred to Fitnat’s husband as ‘that ass Dervish Efendi’. Marriage had the power to transform women’s lives, in Fitnat’s case apparently for the worse.

Subcultural variations within the elite occupations arose in part from differing mixes of compensations and punishments. Members of the secular elites – grand viziers, provincial governors and janissary commanders – had access to greater fortunes and power. However, banishment, execution and the confiscation of property were daily hazards in their world. Property comprised all forms of wealth, including slaves. The widely used confiscation process rent the fabric of home and household. With confiscation, the estates of disgraced masters, including any human property, were sold or distributed to others. Even legal wives and offspring were not always exempted from maltreatment. Until the reforms of the nineteenth century, forced dispossession occurred even when officials left office or died peacefully and honourably. In the worst of circumstances, when the urban mob or rural band acted out its version of justice, legal wives, well born or not, shared the fate of slaves. One of the most outrageous incidents occurred in 1688, when an Istanbul military mob, not satisfied with Grand Vizier Abaza Siyavuş Paşa’s removal from office, stormed his house and seized his harem of ninety-two women, including his wife. The

women were maimed and paraded through the streets. Siyavuş’s wife was freeborn, a member of the eminent Köprülü family, and guarded by armed servants and a courageous husband, none of which spared her from violation. Such outbursts were reminders of the fact that in extreme cases no official, irrespective of rank, was immune, and neither were his womenfolk.

The eighteenth century and legislative restraints

The connections between the vitality of the elite patriarchal family in the eighteenth century, the wave of social restrictions on women in the same period and the early inroads of market culture require more disentangling than can be attempted here. However, it is clear that women – metaphorical, productive and reproductive – were central to these processes or at least to contemporaneous perceptions of these processes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sumptuary regulations of the eighteenth century. Most of these decry consumer excess and visual disturbances to public order. True to the generalising mode of the prescriptive genre, they address women as a group – taife-i nisvan. Only then do they proceed to distinguish between Muslim and non-Muslim. The theme of the legislation was ostensibly women’s morality – the lack of it among some women and the need for it among all women. The textual detail, however, circles around the problem of communal boundaries and religious identity.

In the decrees, norms of modesty and simplicity are invoked for all women. Muslim women, however, are particularly called to account for sartorial and behavioural transgressions. Whatever the perceived faults – and these vary between reigns – women’s behaviour is denounced in both moral and social terms. Insisting upon the preservation of external distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim, the decrees rebuke ‘believing women’ for adopting clothing resembling that of non-Muslims. Those who deviate from Muslim women’s street uniform dishonour themselves, it is said, and by obscuring the boundary between religious communities, transgressors threaten the believing community itself. The various restrictions on women’s mobility in the eighteenth century are of a piece with the denunciations of women’s dress in that period. Regardless of the contingencies that lay behind individual regulations,

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sumptuary restrictions speak volumes about social anxiety. Apparently women’s transgressions were regarded as especially provocative by some, yet females were only one of many politically marginalised groups, including native Christian and Jewish merchants, whose physical presence – through new forms of dress or uncustomary visibility or mobility – increased social dissonance. Urban women – or, more accurately, women of the middle and upper urban classes, whose disposable wealth enabled them to experiment with fashion and leisure time – were a principal target of the legislation. Women certainly represented an old point of tension. But in the eighteenth century women from the emerging middle classes became visible in increasing numbers, representing a new element of social assertion. As for the laws, they inadvertently testified to women’s different, and changing, social realities. While the language of the law pronounced women a unified category bound by a single moral standard, with every new issuance the law’s own prescriptions repeatedly offered evidence of women’s diversity and society’s propensity to change.