

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

November 1, 2016

Kate Fleet and Ebru Boyar, eds., *Ottoman Women in Public Space*, Brill, 2016, xii + 294 pp., \$149.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9789004316430.

The contributors to *Ottoman Women in Public Space* came together at a workshop held at the Skilliter Centre at Cambridge over a shared desire to challenge entrenched views on Ottoman women. In particular, they wanted to challenge the stereotype of the secluded, veiled Ottoman woman who rarely made an appearance in public; though others have chipped away at this stereotype in recent years, it continues to survive in both popular and scholarly representations of the Ottoman Empire, and simultaneously continues to inform assumptions about the significance of women to Ottoman life. To pose this challenge, they formed a collective of researchers from different backgrounds who, using a variety of sources, would “disprove” the notion that Ottoman women were invisible in public space—rather, they were both highly visible and actively influential in shaping Ottoman society.

In arguing this, the authors also make strides towards the theorization of the category of analysis of “visibility,” which drives the research and structure of the book. Visibility in this context can refer to women’s agency—e.g., when women went out in public, rode donkeys, shopped for goods—or even when women appeared to lack agency—e.g., when slave women were put on the market. Perhaps more interestingly, in the introduction (Chapter 1) the authors significantly expand the category of visibility to include phenomena normally thought to be non-visual by citing the work of Nina Ergin to show how visibility can also be audible, olfactory, or even “by reputation.”<sup>1</sup> Women themselves may not have been literally visible to society, but the music they played, the perfumes and odors they gave off, and their good or bad reputations carried them out into the public sphere. In this sense, visibility could also mean simply “presence,” and the authors use the two terms somewhat interchangeably.

“Visibility” thus refers to all forms of recognition by society, participation in the daily social fabric, and the ability to effect change in the political, economic, and social sphere, or at least the *expectation* that this was possible. Yet the category can become muddled when it comes to include so much: what are the limits of visibility? Is visibility power? Can we consider the extreme ends of the spectrum of visibility as parts of the same category: e.g., is an upper-class woman on a hammam route *visible* in the same way that a slave woman being led to market is? Though it does not necessarily provide answers, this collection allows us to

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Ergin, “Ottoman Royal Women’s Spaces: The Acoustic Dimension,” in *Journal of Women’s History* 26:1 (2014), 89-111.

think through these categories, and even at times destabilizes the categories it uses: for example, in the chapter on slave women, which argues that unlike other Ottoman women, slave women could not make choices about their own level of visibility.

Also notable is the fact that this is not a typical edited collection, but rather a “multi-voiced book” by a collective of contributors, headed by Kate Fleet and Ebru Boyar. This multi-voiced model is a novel one and produces a work that is much more coherent and cohesive than most edited volumes. Each chapter builds on the one before it, and the purpose and argument are clear throughout; taken together, the research of these eight chapters produces a mountain of compelling evidence for the visibility and vitality of Ottoman women’s lives throughout the empire. The second chapter, “The ‘What If?’ of the Ottoman Female: Authority, Ethnography, and Conversation,” by Palmira Brummett, opens up the interrogation of Ottoman women’s lives by focusing on their ethnographic representations in the early modern period, specifically in travel narratives largely authored by European men. The point of this approach is not to take the men’s representations at face value; rather, it is to begin at the beginning, to examine how Ottoman women appeared in the literature from an early period and to access their lives through “conversations” they conducted with their European interlocutors. Brummett poses the question “What if?” to present these narratives not as closed texts, but as sources that open up the possibilities for the ways we think about Ottoman women’s lives.

Beginning with an anecdote about John Smith (of Pocahontas fame) and his enslavement by a rich Ottoman woman, Brummett shows us how Smith’s observations into “Lady Tragabigzanda’s” life should not be discounted as mere Orientalist male fantasy. Rather, foreign men like Smith were afforded a personal glimpse into the daily activities of these women, and in many ways a closer reading of such outsider accounts helps to undermine the stereotype of the passive Ottoman woman. Smith claims to have witnessed Tragabigzanda gathering information, making decisions, conversing with foreign men, and generally being a proactive and influential member of her household.

In particular, Brummett wants to highlight the role that “conversation” plays in the lives of these Ottoman women: far from being idle or meaningless, conversation was the means by which the European men who wrote accounts gained limited access to these women, and indeed the very fact that they could and did converse with them subverts images of the sequestered female. European writers like John Covell and Wenceslas Wratishlaw emphasized the conversations they had with various Ottoman women: landladies’ daughters, relatives of friends. They also made nuanced distinctions between women of different classes and ethnicities, recounted anecdotes and legends heard from Ottoman interlocutors about remarkable Ottoman women, and discussed changing behavior such as the growing trend of young women requesting to speak to their suitors rather than enter sight-unseen engagements.

Brummett’s chapter not only engages the reader in the specific topic of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European travel narrative representations, it also becomes a second entry point into the collective work of *Ottoman Women in Public Space*, after the jointly authored introduction (Chapter 1). Brummett provides a set of “What if?” premises for her chapter which can also apply to the rest of the book, including: What if we think of the Ottoman female as central to the household in the same way we think of the Ottoman male? What if we think of Ottoman women as commercial actors: laborers, producers, and consumers? These questions challenge the reader to reconsider the very category of “Ottoman women” and invert the tendency to think of them as secondary actors in society. This, also, is what the rest of the essays in the collection achieve.

The next two chapters highlight Ottoman women's roles in the economy: whereas Svetla Ianeva discusses Ottoman women as laborers and producers of wealth, Kate Fleet approaches Ottoman women as consumers. Taken together, they highlight the vibrant economic and commercial life that Ottoman women were engaged in and how central they were to the everyday functioning of both the local and empire-wide economy. Ianeva's area of expertise is the late Ottoman Balkans, and her research is focused on this area, though she also brings in evidence on women's economic lives from Donald Quataert's studies of the economies of Istanbul and Anatolia.<sup>2</sup> Ianeva traces the myriad ways in which women were visible as laborers and wealth producers: in agriculture, in industry, in real estate, as entrepreneurs and money lenders, and as charitable givers. Some of these entailed a physical visibility: the presence of women in the streets, in the fields, or on the factory lines. Others entailed the kind of indirect visibility explained above: the names of well-known women artisans, the reputations of women sponsors of religious and public institutions.

Kate Fleet expands on Ottoman women's economic roles by focusing on their power as consumers, with the compelling opening premise that, regardless of time or place within the history of the Ottoman Empire, women shopped. Economic consumption was not only visible, it constituted its own kind of power, as Ottoman women's consumption patterns both directed the market and posed potential challenges to the state. In quotidian practice, women's roles as consumers made them highly visible in public space: women bought vegetables and foodstuffs at the market, waited in breadlines, and traveled to and from the hammam, all of this even as they were supposedly segregated out of public life. As Fleet points out, women's "hammam routes" became lined with kabab and drink shops that they could stop at along the way, opened by enterprising vendors seeking their business. This shows that women were desirable customers, and indeed that their consumption patterns could literally change the urban landscape. Fleet also highlights fashion as a major area of consumption for women, as well as an avenue for influence: imported European goods became very trendy in the eighteenth century, and this proved to be a source of anxiety for the Ottoman state, which promoted domestic products and tried—unsuccessfully—to regulate women's clothing.

Like some of the other authors, Fleet gestures toward a major shift in women's public roles in the nineteenth century, while shying away from marking it a disjuncture. The chronology of the book is hence slightly fuzzy: while we see a range of works with different chronological focuses, the majority of the examples are taken from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Consequently, although the stated aim of the collection is to show that across space and time, Ottoman women were more visible than previously thought, and to not focus on a particular era, the authors suggest through their choices of examples that the major shift occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is a natural thing to address: undoubtedly, in the modern era major transformations in the public sphere, technology, global engagement, nationalism, and print culture, as well as a series of crises befalling the empire, did shift what things looked like for women. However, this point coexists with the more overarching aim of the collection, which is to show that even before the modern era, women were present, visible, and exercised hidden agency.

The next chapter, also by Kate Fleet, highlights a group that can often be overlooked—slave women—and while the chapter is one of the shortest, it fills a necessary lacuna and

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire 1550-1922: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

reminds the reader of the utter diversity contained in the category “Ottoman women.” For obvious reasons, we need to rethink certain norms of visibility when considering slave women, who in many ways were far more visible than free Ottoman women while also possessing far less agency. Slave women were paraded freely in the open in markets and in slave dealers’ houses; they could be “rented out” as prostitutes by their dealers; and they could be poked and prodded like livestock by potential buyers, all boundaries of respectability, visibility, and even tactility that were unthinkable for most non-slave women.

Yet the category of “slave women” itself can be disambiguated, as Fleet shows. The slave women of the sultan’s harem, for example, occupied a high level of privilege, respectability, and power. Slave women also afforded their owners honor and respectability: slaves served as both status symbols for upper-class Ottoman women and as companions that allowed them to move through public space while retaining their honor—what Fleet dubs “honorable mobility.” However, even as slave women were often absorbed into the households of their owners, acquiring to some extent the respectability and visibility of the free women of the house, they continued to exist under different conditions. A female slave’s status could switch easily from possession, to commodity, to possession again, as she could be put back on the market at any time. She was always “exposable,” and her honor was never her own: it belonged to those who owned her, and could be revoked at any time. Thus, Fleet argues, the major difference between the diverse categories of Ottoman slave women and Ottoman free women was the absolute lack of agency that the former had in guarding her own respectability and visibility.

It is also in Fleet’s chapter on slave women that we see the only mentions of race in the collection. She discusses, briefly, the ways that black female slaves were very often used as singers, dancers, and prostitutes, presumably more so than white female slaves. She also gestures to the different ways in which slaves arrived in the heart of the empire, depending on their geographical origins. Yet otherwise race is entirely absent from this collection. The focus, rather, is on “women” as a category, as shown here including slave women (and, later, gypsies), but no further intersectional analysis is attempted, nor any reference to other works which discuss the construction of race in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Despite some disambiguation of the category of “women,” the collection aims more at erasing differences between women rather than pointing them out. This may be something that can be left for future scholars to pick up: How did the perceived race or ethnicity of women affect their experiences? What minority identities were necessarily overlooked in this analysis?

Chapter 6, “Frivolity and Flirtation,” by Edith Gülçin Ambros, compellingly utilizes cultural texts to extract information about “flirtatious” and illicit behavior between women and men in Ottoman public spaces. Ambros argues that looking only at state and official documentation would lead one to believe there was no contact at all. In reality, public spaces provided young men and women with many opportunities to be visible to each other, interact, and engage in flirtation, in spite of state and societal prohibitions. Ambros thus examines cultural texts like folk songs, folk literature, and *divan* literature to gesture at this “real” history of flirtation in public space. She addresses the fact that most literature was composed by men and thus contains a gendered bias, and lays out for the reader how she attempted to limit her choice of sources to certain genres or to content that could be

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<sup>3</sup> While it is somewhat outside of the geographic and temporal scope of this work, Eve Troutt Powell’s work on race and empire in Egypt and the Sudan is excellent for investigating the construction of racial identities in the Islamic and imperial context, including its relationship to slavery (*A Different Shade of Colonialism* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003]).

corroborated by extra-literary sources on travel, setting, and communal values. In this way she is practicing a form of cultural history that is firmly grounded within a framework of social and political history.

As other authors in the collection also point out, the *maballe* or neighborhood within the Ottoman city could serve as a permeable boundary between public and private space. It was more public than the home, yet more private than the bazaar, and people within a *maballe* tended to have close neighborly relations. Thus, both the *maballe* and the small rural village were semi-public spaces in which illicit contact between the sexes frequently occurred. Ambros also emphasizes the public garden as a major site of illicit contact: due to its seclusion and its marking as a place of leisure (as opposed to the market), there are many accounts of flirtation between men and women out for a stroll. She quotes literary narratives and folk songs that describe the flirtation and amorous overtures that occurred in these spaces. Her conclusion is that, despite political and societal edicts that forbade unregulated contact between unmarried men and women, such contact occurred, and probably quite frequently. In particular, women had many ways of communicating their desire towards men in coded ways—furtive gazes, swaying walks, “flower language”—that circumvented societal codes of honor. In a sense, flirtation was a form of agency and resistance for Ottoman women otherwise highly circumscribed by their social roles.

Ebru Boyar’s next chapter, “An Imagined Moral Community,” expounds on the theme of honor that is so prevalent throughout the collection. In particular, she examines how female honor was part of a system of social control that was collectively imposed on women not just by the state, and not just by men, but by every member of society. Women’s behavior and reputation were seen as things that needed to be regulated, not so much for the good of the women themselves as for the good of society. Indeed, unruly women were seen as threatening to the very social order. This included the concept of “collective honor” ascribed to a *maballe* or village, which bound the honor of every individual in the community. As such, Boyar shows how people at all levels of society worked to control women’s behavior, from gossip and shaming to raids of the woman’s house, violent collective acts that destroyed the security of the public/private divide. A woman could become the target of any of these acts if she was suspected of immoral behavior, and in extreme cases could be labeled a prostitute and an unvirtuous woman, effectively excising her from the moral community.

Boyar also highlights the existence of marginal groups who experienced this moral community quite differently, which in some ways continues the work Kate Fleet began in her chapter on slave women. Boyar discusses gypsies, actresses, and saintly madwomen as examples of “acceptably” marginal women—i.e., they were never seen to fully belong to the moral community in the first place. She goes into greater detail in her discussion of prostitutes. In many ways, prostitutes were outside of the moral community, at the same time that they were a necessary and highly visible part of society. Though prostitution was generally illegal throughout the life of the empire, it nevertheless thrived, and the boundaries of its illegality were fuzzy. Prostitutes and brothels were at many points empowered and legitimized by guilds, registrations, and special taxes, and, in the nineteenth century, a state project of regulation surrounding concerns over sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis, rendered prostitution *de facto* legal.

Boyar’s chapter is well-argued and gives the reader a much fuller picture of both the spectrum of female respectability and the entrenched social controls that regulated it. However, perhaps more than other chapters in the collection, it also calls into question the viability of the category of analysis of “visibility,” as noted earlier. To illustrate the impact

that prostitutes had on society, she cites an example of six “famous” prostitutes who, due to their well-known reputations, were singled out by Sultan Selim III in his campaign to eradicate prostitution in the capital. He had these six women strangled, put into sacks, and then hung from various gates of the city. While Boyar’s point is well-taken—that the existence of “famous” prostitutes who could be made examples of gestures to the high level of visibility and impact that such women had in Ottoman society—this jarringly violent anecdote feels somewhat out of place. Their fame is a form of visibility; is their spectacular death also? If so, how can we think about “visibility” if it runs the gamut from the power and agency some women exercised to the forcible, coercive, and dehumanizing ways other women were displayed?

The final chapter in the collection, which also serves as the conclusion, is Ebru Boyar’s study of women’s formal and informal participation in the Ottoman political sphere. It is a fitting topic to close the collection: for one, the political sphere is a significant site of visibility, and one that a volume such as this is almost expected to address; yet this collection foregrounds the social and the cultural, and so leaving the political to the end reinforces that focus. Secondly, women’s “formal” political participation expanded greatly in the nineteenth century, which much of this chapter focuses on, allowing the collection to have a rough chronological arc, from the sixteenth century in Chapter 2 to the nineteenth century in Chapter 8.

As Boyar demonstrates, women could be political agents in the traditional sense often utilized in male-centered histories, and previously explored by scholars like Leslie Peirce and Judith Tucker.<sup>4</sup> Women of the harem and in particular the *valide sultan* could effect policy, negotiate with foreign rulers, take bribes, and sponsor the construction of charitable buildings that would bear their names. Lower-strata women participated in protests and revolts, including an incident in late nineteenth-century Istanbul when women stormed the Ministry of Financial Affairs to protest delays in their husbands’ wages. Women also regularly went to court to demand or protect their rights, and circulated petitions to the sultan. Gesturing to Kate Fleet’s earlier chapter, Boyar also mentions how women could protest the state’s dress code by choosing their own fashions.

Yet Boyar does not only want to focus on women as legible and proactive political actors, but also wants to highlight the more subtle ways in which they effected or were affected by political change, including serving as symbols of state ideology. Displaying a passive kind of agency, they were the objects of strategic marriage alliances amongst the royal family and provincial dignitaries. In the modern era, they could also be tools of propaganda, particularly as motherhood began to be seen as a nationalist duty.

Indeed, the modern era becomes a major focus of the chapter, due to the greatly expanded opportunities for women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their consequent increase in public visibility. Boyar discusses the ways in which the numerous crises the Ottoman Empire faced—war, migration, revolt—created spaces for women to be pushed into the spotlight: for example, when the Ottoman government compiled an album of Russian war atrocities, they included many photographs of wounded women and women refugees to serve as propaganda. Other women actively contributed to the war effort, through making bandages or even dressing as men and enlisting (in limited instances).

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Judith E. Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Simultaneously, the rise of Ottoman nationalism opened up opportunities for women in education and work, and the women's press began to flourish.

Ultimately the collection is a rich offering of evidence, from a range of sources, places, and times, that decisively refutes the notion of Ottoman women as inconsequential, invisible, and wholly passive actors in Ottoman history. The decision of the authors to focus on both individual incidents and broad patterns, using cultural texts as well as social, economic, and political evidence, allows us access into the everyday lives of Ottoman women, not just the higher echelons of the Sultan's harem. At the same time that it answers the question—decisively, women shopped, women flirted, women went to court—it raises others, which can undoubtedly be taken up by future scholars. Among them: How can we think about visibility and presence as a form of agency or power? How can we further disambiguate the category of “Ottoman women” to understand the different ways they experienced this visibility? Hopefully others will be motivated to further explore the niches of the vivid tapestry which the authors of this volume have so well illustrated, and enrich our understanding and awareness of Ottoman women's lives across space and time.

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Citation Information

Matsushita, Elizabeth, Review of *Ottoman Women in Public Space*, *SCTIW Review*, November 1, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1304>.

ISSN: 2374-9288