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“I Shall Endeavor for Her Aims”: Women’s Alliances and Relational Figurations of Freedom

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Abstract: In oppressive cultures that marginalize various identity positions, a woman might find it difficult to imagine herself as autonomous or capable of self-definition. Forging alliances with other women offers opportunities for self-discovery, transformation, and autonomous agency. Considering Queen Elizabeth’s correspondence with Safiye Sultana and Phillip Massinger’s *The Renegado*, this essay argues that tropes of seeing, achieved either through material images or through vivid discursive descriptions, foster imaginative renderings of the possibilities of self-expression and agency. Both cases, one diplomatic and the other dramatic, demonstrate successful—even though temporary and politically motivated—alliances mediated through both patriarchal constraints and material markers of identity. Drawing on these epistolary and dramatic texts, this essay explores tropes of imaginative seeing, the materiality of identity, and physical spaces that enact women’s alliances invested in questions of women’s freedom across tributaries both political and dramatic.

Keywords: early modern literature; gender; women; power

1. Introduction

Alliances that are mutually beneficial are necessarily symbiotic, as people form bonds with each other for various kinds of positive outcomes. Such alliances can become quite complicated when between the parties there is an imbalance of power or unidirectional benefit only. As England’s monarch, Queen Elizabeth I had extensive networks of alliances that were variously constituted in terms of power relations. Her Privy Chamber, for example, the network of women who had access to the Queen and who formed bonds with her, negotiated the line between personal affinity and political alliance. In this case, there was a clear power differential, yet these bonds were mutually beneficial. During her reign, Queen Elizabeth also engaged in an epistolary relationship with Safiye Sultana, wife of Murad III, and, like England’s queen, a powerful woman in her own right. In both kinds of alliances—the Queen as allied with both the women of her Privy Chamber and Safiye Sultana—letter writing and gift giving are important contributors to bond formation. Moreover, such exchanges necessitate the imaginative envisioning of a future predicated on the success of the letter or the gift. In other words, letters often solicit requests, and gifts are given as signs of good will and friendship that not only imagine future relations but also forge a shared understanding of identity between giver and receiver. When gifts share aspects of the giver’s personal details, the receiver can then imagine and more clearly empathize with her, understanding her position, her plight, or her power. Women’s alliances also translate to the stage. In Philip Massinger’s *The Renegado*, for example, two women, one from Venice and the other from the Ottoman Empire, forge an alliance under life-threatening circumstances. The success of their bond relies on their ability to imagine the other’s predicament and act effectively. Although the alliance between Queen Elizabeth and Safiye Sultana is unlike that between Paulina and Donusa in Massinger’s play, both showcase the benefits of international cooperation among women. Moreover, both formations of alliances, one diplomatic and the other dramatic, involve

tropes of seeing, achieved either through material images or vivid rhetorical descriptions, that foster imaginative renderings of the possibilities of self-expression and agency.

2. “May You Too Always Be Firm in Friendship”: Women’s Diplomatic Alliances

Queen Elizabeth I’s alliances with women serve as models of the complex conjunction of the personal and the political. Her Privy Chamber, for example, included a carefully curated group of women who were her close companions and advisors. Not friends exactly, given the differences in rank, yet certainly allies, the women of the Privy Chamber and the queen enjoyed symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationships. Many of the Privy Chamber women “were married or otherwise related to important men of the court,” and others, like “Lady Katherine Carey Knollys and Katherine Carey Howard, later Countess of Nottingham, came from two or three generations of the queen’s Boleyn cousins from the Howard, Carey, and Knollys families” (Brown 1999, p. 132). These women enjoyed intimate access to the Queen, attending to her personal care, including such things as “supervising her linens, wardrobe, and jewels, assisting with dressing and personal hygiene, serving food, and nursing her during illness,” and they also acted in the political sphere, as they “had almost constant access to the center of power and held considerable power themselves because of their potential ability to influence the queen” (Brown 1999, pp. 132–33). Access to the women of the Privy Chamber could therefore potentially translate to access to the queen by proxy. Elizabeth A. Brown suggests that “Courtiers continually curried favor with or sought support from the Privy Chamber women, and staff members used their positions close to the queen to protect and promote the interests or careers of their friends and relations” (Brown 1999, p. 133). The women of the Privy Chamber thus had extensive reach, their influence and connections radiating out from the court and back again. Owing to the confluence of their constant presence in the queen’s life and their own familial relations, these women wielded power as attorneys, or agents, of these alliances. Drawing on Barbara A. Hanawalt’s work on Lady Honor Lisle, Brown notes that “such networks [of influence] required constant maintenance through letter writing and gift giving. A Privy Chamber gentlewoman was thus able to provide her relations and friends the advantage of her access to the queen and to important courtiers with obvious consequences for their social and political positions” (Brown 1999, p. 135). Like any power or network relations, these alliances needed to be tended and nurtured. Letter writing and gift giving are useful practices in maintaining such connections, as they not only communicate the writer’s or the giver’s desires or intentions but also insist on a response. Given these mechanisms of exchange and their attendant expectations or possibilities, establishing firm alliances is fostered by the ability of each party to imagine the other’s circumstance.

In “Imagining Oneself Otherwise,” Catriona Mackenzie explores “the connection between autonomy and the imagination by investigating the role played by imaginative thought in self-understanding, self-reflection, and practical deliberation about the self” (Mackenzie 2000, p. 124). Focusing on “imagistic or representational thinking,” Mackenzie considers the role of the imagination in establishing an integrated sense of self (ibid., p. 124). Owing to the necessity of both diversity and freedom for constructive self-development, Mackenzie establishes causal connections between “a restricted or oppressive cultural imaginary” and “an agent’s [limited] capacities for imaginative projection . . . self-definition, self-transformation, and autonomy” (ibid., p. 143). In such conditions, alliances or networks of influence are critically and mutually beneficial. What may prove difficult or perhaps insurmountable to be accomplished alone can more likely be achieved in such matrices of cooperation. This extends even to self-definition, as productively and authentically imagining another can foster the re-imagining of one’s own identity or its possibilities.

In 1593, with the encouragement of Edward Barton, English ambassador to the Turks, Queen Elizabeth sent letters and gifts to Safiye Sultana. As the wife of Murad III, with whom Queen Elizabeth had already established a political relationship, and the mother of Mehmet III, Safiye was a powerful figure in the Ottoman world. As Lisa Jardine argues, “Murad III’s and Mehmet III’s reigns were famously considered to be periods in Ottoman history when the state was ruled from

the harem" (Jardine 2004, p. 217). Establishing an alliance with Murad III's wife was an important step in strengthening England's martial and mercantile agreements with the Turks; the women's epistolary exchanges established what Jardine calls "a pledge of friendship between the queen mother in Constantinople and the sovereign queen of England" (ibid., p. 219). Among Queen Elizabeth's gifts to Safiye was her picture, elaborately embellished with jewels, and in return, both to acknowledge the English monarch's gift and accord with the propriety of gift exchange, the sultana sent her "a sute of princely attire being after the Turkish fashion . . . an upper gowne of cloth of gold very rich, an under gowne of cloth of silver, and a girdle of Turkie worke, rich and faire" (ibid., p. 219). The exchange of letters and gifts established a mutual affinity that developed diplomatic ties between nations, but it also mirrored each woman's wealth, power, and identity rooted in the material. Developing Richard Wollheim's theories of self-knowledge, Mackenzie argues that a "relationship between self-definition and imagining oneself otherwise" requires that "the repertoire on which we draw in . . . imagining must be as rich and complex as possible" (Mackenzie 2000, p. 129). The women's gift exchange allows for such rich imagining, as the nature of the gifts encourages visual identification with the other. In this case, epistolary friendship between two women develops their personal bond and advances diplomatic interests.

Like the English queen's initial correspondence with the sultana, Safiye's response to Elizabeth was encouraged by Edward Barton (Jardine 2004, p. 219). The women's alliance and imaginative friendship was therefore forged and fostered within a matrix of male influence. Nevertheless, because they were both women, they were able to establish bonds that accorded with gendered norms of propriety; consequently, their alliance contributed to increased trade and stronger ties between England and the Ottoman Empire in the late sixteenth century. Leslie Peirce observes that gender was a controlling factor in the success of this alliance, writing: "These queens appear conscious of—and perhaps deliberately cultivated—their special communication as women Certainly the Ottoman sultan, bound by the protocols of inaccessibility, could not have communicated with another monarch with the directness displayed by the women's letters" (Peirce 1993, p. 228). While it would be an overstatement to suggest that the two women were friends in a pure way, devoid of the possibility of personal and political gain, it is possible to consider the ways in which their relation contributed to their self-conceptions and perhaps also to a version of friendship. For example, Safiye, "imagining herself otherwise" and projecting Elizabeth's desires as her own, "urge[d] the queen to allow her to petition the sultan on her behalf. She [promised to] be the queen's intercessor, her voice at the Ottoman court" (Mackenzie 2000, p. 129; Peirce 1993, p. 228). Discursive and material exchanges lead the sultana to take on Elizabeth's political desires; collapsing the spatial distance between the two, Safiye speaks in the queen's voice, advocating her interests at court. For both writer and reader, the letter created a bond that began an alliance and developed the women's own identities in ways that might otherwise have been impossible.

In his work on Derridean and Foucauldian notions of friendship, David Webb considers the ways in which friendship shapes both present and future manifestations of the self, writing, "What gives a friendship strength is not the iteration of a presence that aims at the production of an ideal, the form of true friendship, but the regularities through which I both shape my self-relation in the present and discover new directions in the future" (Webb 2003, p. 137). Safiye's letters imagine such a future; she writes: "if [Queen Elizabeth] will never cease from [sending] such . . . letters which foster the increase of sincerity and love . . . I shall endeavor for her aims" (Peirce 1993, p. 228). The "sincerity and love" signify the development of both personal and political alliances and are preconditions for Safiye's continued representation of Elizabeth at the Ottoman court. Such a view of friendship aligns well with political alliances that are personal but that contribute to national identity and international diplomacy.

Given that the women's friendship was not based solely on mutual affinity, their friendship might seem a matter of political course only. However, even though it existed within a matrix of gendered and political influence, such mediation does not necessarily preclude a genuine bond. Webb suggests

that in fact “friendship [can be] an indirect or mediated relation” (Webb 2003, p. 138). Considering Foucault’s view of friendship and self-relation, Webb writes:

Friendship is an experience that arises in and through a shared practice in a complex and dynamic system of relations between conditions and conditioned. It would be wrong to see this rich background intruding on the relation of friendship ‘after the fact’, as though friendship existed first and foremost between two individuals abstracted from their specific involvements and the context in which they are played out. On the contrary, without this context, friendship would be quite artificial, for I cannot set out to make a friendship from nothing. It is only when I discover friendship already burgeoning, springing from something we share (however obscure), that I may choose to strengthen it through a particular gesture or act. (Webb 2003, p. 138)

Given this view of friendship, the complex web of political aims and expectations that gave rise to the women’s epistolary interactions and material exchanges forms the conditions of their friendship that are part of any social relations. What the queen and the sultana share are their gender and their relative autonomy; they are not wholly free to act independently in all circumstances, but their exchanges do reflect and shape their mutual affinity and their personal positions of power.

Visual representation is a powerful medium through which to communicate identity and to initiate recognition of likeness between viewer and image. As stated above, Queen Elizabeth sent to the sultana a series of gifts, among them her picture embellished with jewels, and the sultana sent in return a suit in the Turkish fashion. In both exchanges, the women visualize each other; the sultana sees the queen’s image, recognizing her as both woman and ruler, and the clothing she sends back allows the queen to envision the sultana as she herself wears the clothes, embodying Self and performing Other simultaneously. In a unique position as a queen, Elizabeth can communicate with the sultana; had the monarch been a king, such communication would have taxed the limits of propriety, since the sultan was the official, visible ruler of the Empire. Their homosocial relation was both discursive and imagistic, framing an empathic affiliation that had consequences both personal and international. Although Elizabeth’s gender offered her distinct opportunities for advancing England’s (and so her own) economic and political aims, neither she nor Safiye was acting independently. Immersed in cultural and political gendered matrices of influence, both women were relationally free to act in ways that developed their alliance and their own personal subjectivities.

3. “I Am Another Woman”: Women’s Dramatic Alliances

Female homosocial alliances that facilitate international relations were performed regularly on the early modern national stage. As many critics, such as Bernadette Andrea, Matthew Dimmock, and Susanne Scholz, to name just a few, have shown, English audiences were fascinated by dramatizations of the Ottoman world (Andrea 2008; Dimmock 2005; Scholz 2012). Material markers of identity facilitated Queen Elizabeth’s alliance with Safiye Sultana, as portraits and clothing aided their mutual imaginings; likewise, theatrical representations offer characters and audiences similar vehicles for visualizing identity. Given the material conditions of early modern theater, with all of the female characters played, embodied, by men, this would have required imaginings to which contemporary audiences would have been well accustomed. What’s at stake here, though, are characters’ identities, and therefore their alliances, rather than actors’ personal identities and cooperative networks.

In Philip Massinger’s *The Renegado* (1630), two female characters, Donusa, niece to the Ottoman emperor Amurath, and Paulina, Venetian captive of Asambeg, viceroy of Tunis, are initially at odds with each other; however, they eventually form a bond that frees them both from captivity and likely death. Early in the play, Donusa expresses her desire to understand English women’s customs, framing her questions to her eunuch, the English-born Carazie, in terms of women’s freedom: “I have heard/That Christian ladies live with much more freedom/Than such as are born here” (Massinger 2000, 1.2.16–18). Opening the scene by asking Manto, her servant, if she has seen “the Christian

captive/The great basha is so enamored of" (1.2.1–2), Donusa laments her own captivity at the hands of the "jealous Turks" who "never permit their fair wives to be seen/But at the public bagnios or the mosques, /And even then, veiled and guarded" (1.2.18–21). Donusa figures her limited freedom in spatial terms: women may not be seen in public; even in the baths, which are strictly homosocial spaces, the women enjoy only mediated autonomy and social interaction. In order to imagine possibilities for female liberty, Donusa asks Carazie, "What's the custom there [in England], /Among your women? Come, be free and merry: /I am no severe mistress, nor has thou met with/A heavy bondage" (1.2.22–25). Carazie is of course not free physically; having been captured and castrated in order to serve Donusa, he is no longer at liberty to act according to his desires. Her insistence that he be "free and merry" positions her as his empathic friend; both are confined within culturally determined bonds. Inviting him to be free discursively, she also threatens him with greater restrictions to his liberty; though she claims that he has not met with "a heavy bondage," her implication is that he might indeed should he deny her wishes.

The discovery of other women's opportunities for free movement and expression positions the subject in a conscious, imaginative relationship to those women. Such an imaginative process allows for a forward-thinking reconceptualization of the subject's own autonomy. *The Renegado* represents freedom as spatially demarcated: in England, women are free, and in the Ottoman Empire, women are restricted. Paulina's captivity illustrates this difference; Venetian by birth, she is Asambeg's prisoner and confined in Tunis. Donusa's interest in English women's freedoms reflects her own autonomous desires; Carazie fuels her imaginative projections by describing such liberties:

Women in England,
For the most part, live like queens. Your country ladies
Have liberty to hawk, to hunt, to feast,
To give free entertainment to all comers,
To talk, to kiss; there's no such thing known there
As an Italian girdle. Your city dame,
Without leave, wears the breeches, has her husband
At as much command as her 'prentice, and if need be
Can make him cuckold by her father's copy. (1.2.27–35)

Carazie's description of English women is circumscribed spatially first, as he distinguishes between "country ladies" and "your city dame." The women's liberties and activities align with their homes; however, both country and city women enjoy sexual freedom that, if they so choose, extends beyond their marriages. Donusa doesn't quite see herself in these women, so she asks, "But your court lady?" to which Carazie replies: "She, I assure you, madam, /Knows nothing but her will" (1.2.36–37). And, like the country and city women, the courtly lady's will is sexual; Carazie reports that "it is not only fit, but lawful, /Your madam there . . . should, to ease her husband, /Be allowed a private friend" (1.2.43–46). Implying that courtly women's sexual appetites exceed their husbands' capabilities to satisfy them, Carazie suggests that it is not only custom but law that allows wives extramarital "friends." Although the implication is that such friends are men, Carazie's description fails to denote gender specificity, leaving open the possibility that a woman's "private friend" might be another woman. An early modern audience would no doubt see through Carazie's descriptions as exaggerations meant to arouse Donusa's curiosity and perhaps jealousy; however, from her perspective, such descriptions allow her to "imagine herself otherwise" and to project her desires for freedom forward, imagining other women's autonomous figurations of self (Mackenzie 2000, p. 129). Melding her own sense of self with the discursive Other, Donusa has taken in an imagined "private friend" in order that she might re-shape her own future self.

Imagining alternate possibilities for self-definition leads Donusa to action, as she rehearses ways to exercise her liberty within confining Ottoman patriarchal boundaries. The action of Massinger's play moves between the royal palace, where Donusa may move without constraint, and the marketplace, where she may not be seen without guard. Challenging what she knows is expected of her, Donusa expresses a "virgin's longing" to visit the marketplace, "not [as] a buyer, yet a looker on/Their strange commodities" (1.2.114, 116–17). Concerned for her safety and reputation, Mustapha, the man whom she is expected to marry, insists that he attend her. Even so, Donusa asks for her veil and a secret, "unseen" escape from the palace (1.2.122). Once in the marketplace, she meets Vitelli, a Venetian gentleman disguised as a merchant and Paulina's brother, who offers her his wares, including a mirror, china, crystal, pictures—"the rarest beauties of the Christian world/And nowhere to be equaled" (1.3.135–36). There to look though not to buy, Donusa instead offers herself to Vitelli, unveiling and asking him, "Can you match me this?" (1.3.140). She is unmarried and as yet "unconfined"; however, her royal family expects her to choose Mustapha (1.2.91). In unveiling herself to Vitelli, inviting him to visit her room, and seducing him, Donusa enacts what she has been told of the English courtly lady's freedoms. Her "private friend" is at once the Englishwoman as her imaginative model of behavior and the Venetian gentleman as the vehicle through which she can actualize that custom. The friend is figured along national axes, allowing Donusa to "imagine herself otherwise."

Donusa's attempts to enact what she imagines to be Christian women's freedom are unsuccessful in Tunis; she is put on trial for her actions and faces execution unless she can convince Vitelli to "turn Turk," which he flatly refuses to do. Faced with her own fears of death and Vitelli's willingness to die for his beliefs, Donusa herself converts, integrating into her identity that which heretofore she had been performing. Vitelli invites her to "wear on [her] forehead/The sacred badge he arms his servants with" (4.3.141–42); baptism takes material form in a way analogous to Paulina's holy relic that she has been wearing to fend off Asambeg's advances. Francisco, a Jesuit, comforts Vitelli early in the play by reminding him that his sister, though captive, is protected: "I oft have told you/Of a relic that I gave her which has power, /if we may credit holy men's traditions, /To keep the owner free from violence. /This on her breast she wears and does preserve/The virtue of it by her daily prayers" (1.2.146–51). Once Donusa converts to Christianity, Paulina allies with her, promising to save them both from capture and death, though she does so by convincing Asambeg that she wishes to enslave Donusa, telling her, "Thou shalt not go in liberty to thy grave: /For one night a sultana is my slave" (5.4.173–74). Paulina's suit is successful because she persuades her suitor that she will swap identity positions with Donusa; the latter has "turned Christian" and she will "turn Turk." Imagining herself as a Turk, Paulina says that she will "triumph o'er this wretched woman. /I'll be myself her guardian. I will feast, /Adorned in her choice and richest jewels" (5.4.164–66). Discursively transposing her Christian relic for Turkish jewels, Paulina causes Asambeg to "imagine [her] otherwise," which affords her the opportunity to forge an alliance with Donusa. Both women are constrained in some ways, barred from enjoying authentic freedom and exercising their power as individuals, yet allied together, they can collectively pool their resources, their combined wit and creative thinking, to escape their captivity. As Brown explains, "Women might lack recognized positions of authority and might even be officially sanctioned from exercising authority, but their power nevertheless could manifest itself indirectly 'through personal relationships by women' (Kettering, p. 818)" (Brown 1999, p. 133). In this case, Paulina and Donusa's plan *directly* manifests their power, as they must cleverly and delicately negotiate their trajectory to freedom within a potentially quite dangerous matrix of masculine authority. Explaining her scheme to Donusa, Paulina frames her performative self-representation as one counter to her "nature" and anticipates the time when Donusa will be her sister, identified by "a nearer name" (5.5.7, 10). In the end, all of the Christian characters escape Asambeg's captivity under cover of night and sail back to Italy; it is on the Continent that Donusa can integrate her imagined sense of self with her actualized identity, marked by conversion and a "sacred badge." Identity and alliances are again figured spatially and materially.

The ideological bias of Massinger's play is only thinly veiled, if veiled at all; Paulina forges an alliance with Donusa only when the latter converts to Christianity and the Christian characters escape captivity, sailing to freedom under cover of night to Continental freedom. The play clearly touts Christian superiority as Paulina initiates their escape from Tunis by persuading Asambeg that she will "turn Turk," thereby discursively seducing him into allowing her freedom to act. The friendship struck between Queen Elizabeth and Safiye was also clearly political, their individual interests enhanced by mutual cooperation. Given the clear goals of both women's alliances, in each incarnation of cooperation, one diplomatic and the other dramatic, each woman gains access to a kind of freedom that may have proven impossible if attempted alone. Moreover, in both cases, tropes of seeing accomplished through the exchange of gifts, the materiality of identity, and imaginative projection, activated in the self as an empathic or knowing affective identification with the other. Such seeing allows for transformations that are personally and mutually beneficial. Although often circumscribed by patriarchal strictures of behavior, women are in unique positions to cooperate, accessing freedoms that might otherwise be prohibited.

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