

“Encoded” Communication with Ladies in a Turkish Harem, 17th-Century Style

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Abstract

The Duke August Library in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, preserves a treasured French-Turkish manuscript with an intriguing (translated) title: “Silent Letters, or a Method of Making Love in Turkey without Knowing How to Read or Write.” This unusual piece was prepared in 1679 for Jacobus Colyer, the enterprising 22-year-old son of the Dutch representative to the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. The first and longest of 3 parts consists of an extensive explanatory section in French in which the author details the Turkish system of sending messages (not only to ladies in the Sultan’s *Harem*), so-called *Selams*, “welcome greetings” or “peace wishes” that are remotely similar to the Oriental “language of flowers.” These messages are encoded according to a well-defined system. Without any extant “code books” beyond what the 1679 Wolfenbüttel and scarce later sources yield it becomes clear that the meaning of such encoded *Selam* messages was common knowledge among interested parties—in particular in the Sultan’s *Harem*.

The following analysis will detail this system and also branch out to show how in 1688 this manuscript was adapted in two initially identical publications with totally different endings. Both of them include a reference to the “*Langage muet*”, an early sign language used at the Sultan’s court—*de facto* a second cryptological example associated with the Wolfenbüttel manuscript and an ingenious re-use of the same material for different audiences.

1 Preliminaries

In what was to be a presentation of 17th-century material at HistoCrypt 2020 I want to analyze a cryptologic manuscript that I unearthed some time ago in the holdings of the Duke August Library in

Wolfenbüttel, Germany, a treasure house of such materials due to the Duke’s own interests in the field of secret communication. Before taking a closer look at this fascinating—and also amusing—manuscript here is an overview of the presentation:

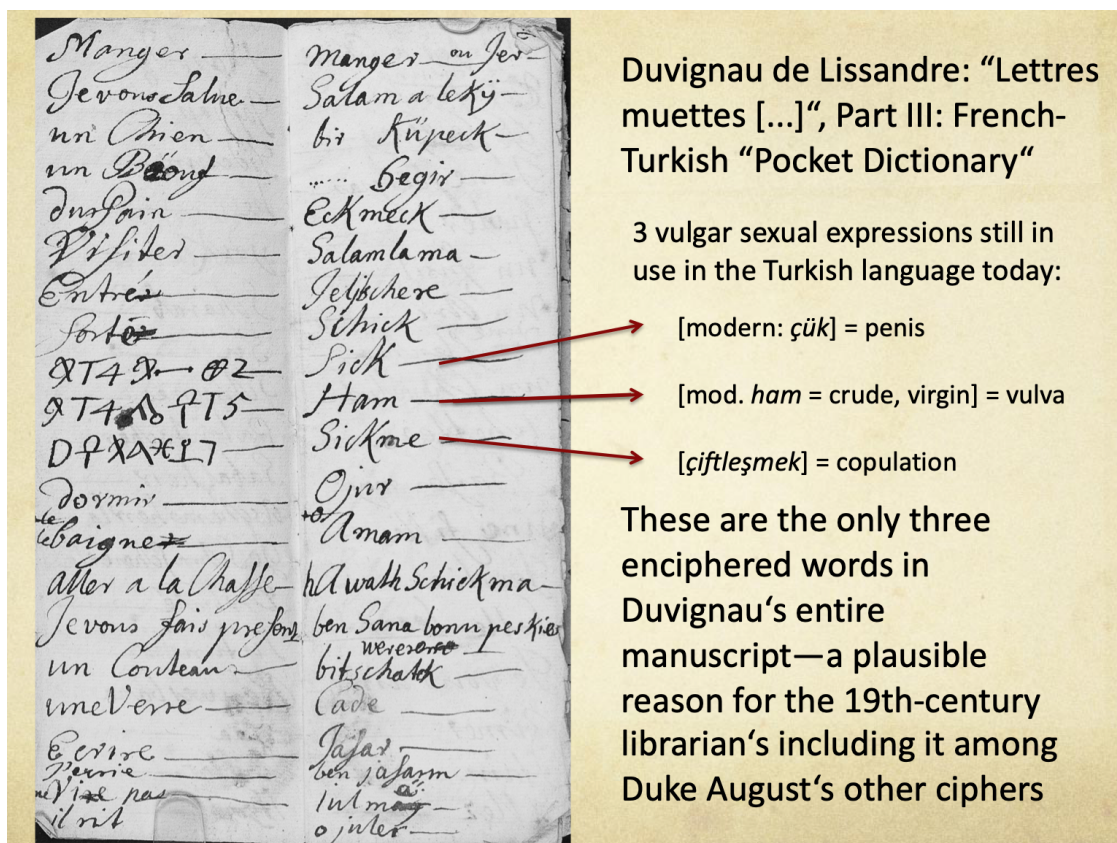
1. Preliminaries – Description of manuscript, its dedicatee, its author
2. Characterization of the “Language of Flowers” and the “Language of Symbols”
3. Overview of the subsequent twenty-one encoded messages in Part I of the manuscript
4. The remainder of this manuscript
5. Confirmation of these *Selams* in later sources
6. The practical application of such non-verbal communication in the two divergent endings of the *Histoire Galante* of 1688 – with an inserted “Excursus” presenting a second cryptographic means of communication, “*Langage muet*” or “*Silent Language*”, an early kind of sign language
7. Closing analysis

Let me now set the stage: The manuscript in question is titled “*Lettres muettes*”—or, to list here its full designation, *Lettres muettes, ou la maniere de faire l’amour en Turquie / Sans Scavoir ny Lire ny Ecrire* (Silent Letters, or the Manner of Making Love in Turkey / Without Knowing how to Read or Write) (Fig. 1).

The manuscript is kept in a folder containing “*Cryptographica*”, which holds a number of ciphers and nomenclators dating from the latter part of the 17th century.¹ The librarian who catalogued this material a long time ago may have included the *Lettres muettes* for three enciphered “sexually allusive” French words in the third part of the manuscript (their Turkish equivalents show the words in 17th-century vulgar Turkish usage ...) (Fig. 2).

¹ Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 389 Nov. 2°. Part (a) contains the various ciphers and nomenclators; (b) is the manuscript in question, the “*Lettres muettes*” (referred to in the text as “*Lm*”, with each of the 3 parts listed before the folio numbers). It consists of 3 parts: Pt. I, 18 pages; Pt. II, 14 pages;

Pt. III (separately listed as (c), 20 pages. Part I is a careful copy, the other two are hastily penned down originals. See Strasser (1988), pages 511-514.



This third section is a homemade French-Turkish “pocket” dictionary, and the librarian may not necessarily have realized that the important first part relies totally on encoded messages. For different reasons all three parts are equally interesting from the point of view of the history of cryptology; of early sign languages; of cultural history in general, and lastly for linguistic matters as the Turkish language used represents a somewhat earlier stage that is not frequently documented.

For the purposes of this discussion the first section—addressed in a beautiful hand to “Trés Noble & tres [sic] Illustre Jacob Colyer” —represents the most intriguing material. The dedicatee was the 22-year-old son of the Dutch representative to the Sublime Porte, Justinus Colyer (1624-1682), who in 1668 was accredited by Sultan Mehmet IV (1642-1693; r. 1648-1687). In 1682, just before his death, Justinus appointed his son Jacobus (1657-1725) to the position of secretary to assure continuity in the Dutch representation. Two years later the States General promoted Jacobus Colyer to ambassador, a function he held until his death. In 1679, when the manuscript was dedicated to him, he had already spent more than a decade in Constantinople and not only mastered Ottoman Turkish, Greek, French and Italian but was apparently also rather knowledgeable in the ways in which contacts with Turkish women could be established in a culture that virtually secluded them from the outside world.

For this very reason an encoded language had developed that may have originated in the “language of flowers” (Cornelissen, 2005; Kakuk 1970; Kakuk and Öztürk, 1986). A nineteenth-century editor of some forty samples of such communication described the situation of Turkish women in his day as follows:

All Turkish women wear a burqa or robe that covers them from head to toe. They cannot be recognized but see everything and everyone. Unfortunately, they have no way of expressing their feelings to whomever their heart would select. They cannot write and are not allowed to speak with strange men. Thanks to their ingenuity they nonetheless created a well-tried means, the “language of flowers” or, to be precise, the language of symbols. In this silent conversation not only various flowers can signify a word but all visible objects that you can carry on you. When a man or a woman hands over an object to his or her beloved the recipient has to pronounce the name of the

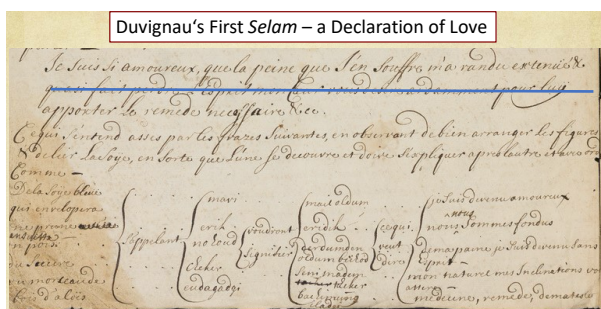
object and find a saying that rimes with it and fits the occasion. But how is this possible? When we take into consideration that the Turkish people assign a special meaning to the individual objects and phenomena of this world, that they like to play with rimes and at any given moment are ready to pose or solve a riddle then we will hardly find this matter impossible (Hutter, 1851).

These mid-nineteenth-century observations describe the use of the “language of symbols” (Hutter’s term) in a manner that eliminates the need for “intermediaries” or go-betweens, which is indispensable in contacts initiated according to the Wolfenbüttel manuscript. This document is almost 200 years older and describes the “language of symbols or objects” for the first time in the west. It was prepared by a certain Duvignau de Lissandre, who allegedly was a secretary of the French ambassador for almost a decade, traveled extensively in the Orient and in 1687 wrote insightful, highly critical books on the Ottoman powers (Duvignau, 1687; 1688a). He also—anonously—exploited the material prepared for Colyer in two other publications that incorporated this “language of symbols” in a novellistic fashion, which will be discussed later in a detailed analysis (Duvignau, 1688a; 1688c). It is puzzling that the name “Duvignau de Lissandre” or “Sieur Du Vignau”—a diplomat who prided himself on having been in the service of “one of the ministers of the greatest king on earth”—cannot be verified in the archives of the Quai d’Orsay, the Foreign Ministry. A few years ago, a French researcher finally established the true identity of Duvignau de Lissandre—which turns out to be a pseudonym of Edouard de La Croix (1640/45-1704), who in fact in 1670 became the second secretary of the newly appointed French envoy to the Sublime Porte in Istanbul (Thépaut-Cabasset, 2007). In 1675 he was promoted to first secretary and returned to Paris in 1680; the manuscript in question—written in 1679—would therefore have been produced while he was still in Istanbul. And while there are several critical publications—highly compromising of the Turkish sultan’s court, public policy, and economy purportedly authored by Duvignau since Edouard de La Croix did not want to be identified with these materials—there are the two-volume memoirs published under Edouard de La Croix’s full name (1684), which describe his years of service in Istanbul.

2 Characterization of the “Language of Flowers and the “Language of Symbols”

Let us return to the manuscript, which features Duvignau’s presentation to Jacobus Colyer. After a detailed introduction highlighting the history and merits of this encoded communication, called *Selam* in Turkish or “welcome greetings” and/or “peace wishes”, Duvignau begins a listing of the various items needed in such exchanges. It turns out that such communication is based entirely on the sending of a few items that have clearly encoded meanings within each group, a system that certainly falls within the purview of a conference like “HistoCrypt.” This “Dictionary of Love,” as one could call the listings, is always arranged in the same way (Fig. 3): There are four columns where in the very left one the French items required to convey a particular meaning are lined up, followed by their Turkish equivalencies. Next to the Turkish name for each item (column 2) is the “encoded” Turkish meaning of each of these items, which in column four is followed by an elaboration of this meaning in French. The more effusive “interpretation” of these French translations follows in the later 21 sample letters on the right but is written in this model above the four columns. While not particularly mentioned by Duvignau, the lines in this example and the later 21 letters need to be properly read horizontally, which is at times rather difficult.

Duvignau's First *Selam* – a Declaration of Love



Blue silk that contains a prune, together with	mavi erik	mail oldum eridik	I have fallen in love we have fallen for each other (literally: we have “melted”, blended)
a pea,	nohoud	derdumden oldum	I have lost my mind in my pain
a piece of sugar, and	cheker	seni madem tcheker	my nature, my inclinations attract you
a piece of aloe wood	eudgadgi	bachimung iladgi	medicine, remedy of my head

Figure 3: Duvignau’s first *Selam* with the transcription of the material in the four columns (the French in the first and last ones translated into English).

² I have fallen in love so much that the pain that I suffer [from that] has made me look emaciated and has made me lose my mind, so to speak[.] My heart desires you like a

The fifth and last section expresses the concise statements in the fourth in much more elaborate terms and almost reads like a piece taken from *A Thousand and One Nights*:

*Je suis si amoureux que la peine que j’en souffre m’a rendu [!] extenué & quasi fait perdre l’esprit [.] mon Cœur vous desire ardemment pour lui y apporter le remede necessaire.*² The 1688 English edition of *The Turkish Secretary* (Du Vignau, Sieur des Joanots, 1688) shows this very same material in a rather close translation (Fig. 4).



A Grape.	Usum.	J'ai glazum	My Eyes.
Blew Silk.	Mabi.	Hail oldum	I am fall'n in Love.
A Plum.	Erik.	Erisk.	We dissolve away.
A Pea.	Nohoud.	Derdumden oldum be-houd.	My torment makes me mad.
Sugar.	Cheker.	Seni ma-dem tcheker.	My Bosom longs after you.
Aloe Wood.	Eud Agadgi.	Bachimung iladgi.	Physician, Remedy of my head.
Selam.	Or a thing that is sent.	Whole Signification is	Which in English is literally
	Names.	Significa-tion.	Confirma-tion.

Figure 4: Close English translation of the first four columns of Duvignau’s model exercise.

At this point we need to differentiate the “language of flowers” per se from this system of *Selam* or “welcome greetings” (*selam*, Arabic *salām*, meaning “peace”); it may have existed in ancient China due to early pictograms incorporating floral designs—something that would even hold true for Egyptian hieroglyphs (Goody, 1993; Heilmeyer, 2006; Strasser, 2016) — and began to be known in the west in the 18th century.

In the Victorian age, in particular, when verbal communication of sentimental matters was not acceptable in higher circles of society, the significance of such floral greetings became an indispensable means of “silent” exchanges. Not only individual flowers had their encoded, well-known meaning, which to an extent has survived into the 21st century (red roses—I love you more than anything or anyone else; an anemone—I want

burning flame so that you can bring to it the necessary remedy. (Transl. G. F. St.)

to be with you forever; but also a dahlia—I am bespoken), and a combination of flowers eventually took on an even more complicated meaning that required written booklets for their decoding. An American custom going back to those days may well be the corsage that young men will present their partners at fancy balls or festive occasions—but even there the way the Victorian lady would pin these flowers on her garment already had an encoded meaning: close to her heart signified mutual feelings while a corsage put in her hairdo was tantamount to a verbal rejection. A German example from 1853 lists an ear of wheat (*Weizenähre*) that was encoded to mean “*Ich bin glücklich, denn du liebst mich wieder*” (I am happy for you love me again)—a meaning that may have survived in the third wedding anniversary in German called *Weizen-Hochzeit* (wheat wedding [anniversary]).

As can be seen in Duvignau’s example, the Turkish *Selams* went one major step beyond the customary language of flowers: The incorporation of a prune, a pea, a lump of sugar and a piece of aloe wood indicates the opening of this non-verbal system to a method in which all sorts of objects were added in, expanding it to a “language of symbols,” if you wish. The expansion seems to be a Turkish invention, and in the latter part of the 17th century this system was obviously well known. Nonetheless Duvignau cautions Colyer when he elaborates: “yet while a certain number of figures of this love cipher may be known among interested parties there is a much larger number [of such figures] with which only the experts are familiar, and which can only be learned through long practice in this art or with the help of those who know the most about them” (*Lm*, I, fol. 2v^o). The author continues with a list of items that could be wrapped in a silken handkerchief (*mendil*), whose color has an encoded meaning to begin with while the size of the piece of silk, often beautifully embroidered, indicated the quality of the compliment (Hammer[-Purgstall], 1834-36; Peirce, 1993; Penzer, 1966; Walther, 1997; Coco, 2002; Roberts, 2007). This silk wrapping could include pieces of wax, iron, bread or any other items from which a word or a phrase may be gleaned that rhymes with the respective item in the beginning or end of the word or expression. This is an important mnemonic aid which has to come into play when such an object is presented, whereupon its name can jog the recipient’s memory, as the 19th-century quotation spelled out: In his introductory material (see Fig. 3) Duvignau refers to the “blue color of the silk cloth,” which is *mavi*

in Turkish with the meaning *mail oldum* and signifies “I have fallen in love.” Here the rime—sometimes just an alliteration—is in the beginning of the two words, he continues, namely in “*ma*”, which occurs both in “*mail*” and in “*mavi*.” For the opposite riming scheme at the end of words Duvignau lists the example in the fourth line, namely *cheker* (sugar), which rhymes with *tcheker* to elicit the metaphorical meaning of the phrase *semi madem tcheker* as “my nature, my inclinations attract you.”

This symbolic language, the author warns Mijnheer Colyer, becomes even more complicated when objects are combined with different other items. His prime example is a piece of string—Turkish *sidgim*—with the extended meaning “your itching is not yet over.” When combined with a slice of onion—*sogan*—this changes for the worse to express “get lost you daughter of a whore,” and even worse when combined with an olive, “that your bier, your dead body be paraded in front of me.” Yet an entirely opposite meaning may also occur: combined with a piece of a brush or a tassel—Turkish *supurghé*—this changes to an imploring “for once have pity with [or on] me.” All this, Duvignau implies, requires an almost total mastery in the encoding of *Selams*—this is where his manuscript becomes indispensable. He also stresses that there is no gender difference in Turkish between French “*ami*” and “*amie*”, between male and female lover.



Figure 5: A Turkish *Harem*, attributed to Franz Hörmann and Hans Gemminger, 1654. Courtesy Pera Museum, Istanbul.

There is yet another, all-important detail that needs to be observed in this encoding process. It is mandatory that the overall sequence of the items in the silken kerchief be strictly observed: These objects, the author spells out before giving his example, have to be properly arranged in the

silken wrapping so that one item can be discovered after another, and in this order (which means that they will be tied together with a silken string to reflect this important order). There remains the overarching question—not addressed in Duvignau’s preface but spelled out in his later *Histoire Galante*—as to how these *Selams* would reach their intended recipients. In this novellistic piece—as in actuality—the delivery of such silken kerchiefs was entrusted to older women—often Jewish—who customarily purchased necessities and trinkets for the ladies in the Sultan’s *Harem* and therefore passed the eunuch gatekeepers without suspicion, “go-betweens” in a literal and metaphorical sense, as will be discussed later. The exclusive attribution of part of a Turkish house to women is highly relevant to the purposes of Duvignau’s manuscript since the *Harem* or *haremluk* meant the “inviolable section of the building where all the female members of a family and their servants were living.” The remainder of the house, the *selamluk*, was reserved to men and was the public part of the building. It follows that the Sultan’s *Harem* (Fig. 5)—by the end of the 17th century already located in the *Topkapi Palace*—was not as singular a setting as one might believe; wealthy Turkish families lived in a house set up this way. Nonetheless the Sultan’s was nowhere surpassed in its importance—and in the sheer number of beautiful women within its heavily guarded walls. Leaving the Sultan’s Harem was virtually impossible while it was feasible for women of the lower classes to go to the *hamam* or public baths but only when accompanied by one or two of her servants (Fig. 6). It seems that women’s leaving their homes depended to a great extent on the local observance and interpretation of the Quran: 17th-century travelers to Persia report that women there were strictly forbidden to leave their homes while in mid-century an Italian nobleman observed the relative ease with which Turkish ladies could be seen in the bazaar in droves (Olearius, 1671; della Valle, 1674). In view of the obvious intentions for which the Wolfenbüttel manuscript seems to have been prepared this more relaxed religious observance of the Quran in a city like Istanbul is of prime importance.



Figure 6: Francis Smith, A Turkish Lady going to the Bath with her slave, c. 1763. Courtesy Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

3 Overview of the Subsequent Twenty-One Encoded Messages in Part 1 of the Manuscript

What follows on the next six folio-size pages (*Lm*, I, fols. 3v°- 6v°) is Duvignau’s listing of 21 exchanges that were to put his prefatorial account to the test. The arrangement in five columns (Fig. 7) is retained and headed as “*Selam*” – “*Nomenclature* [nomenclature, list of object names in Turkish] – *Mané* [modern Turkish *mana*] ou *Signification* – *Interpretation a la Lettre* [the literal interpretation of the encoded meaning in French] – *Lettre Française premiere* [the first of the 21 letters in French].

Beginning of the Exchange of 21 Letters – Explanation of Columnar Arrangement				
Selam	Nomen- ture	Mané ou signification	Interpretation a la lettre	Lettre Française (premiere)
Selam	Nomen- clature	Mané or meaning	Literal Interpretation	(First) French letter
(List of Objects, object names French)	(List of In Turkish)			
<u>Selam</u>	<u>Mané ou signi-</u>	<u>Interpretation a la</u>	<u>Lettre Française premiere</u>	
	<u>cation –</u>	<u>Selam</u>		
maison	evim	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
gambel	gambel	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
flame	al	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
Drop	halka	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
Garden	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
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High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je suis
High	hikmet	High house	Maison de Selam	Ma maison rend deves d'aver que je

Figure 7: *Lettres muettes*: Beginning of the Exchange of 21 “sample” letters.

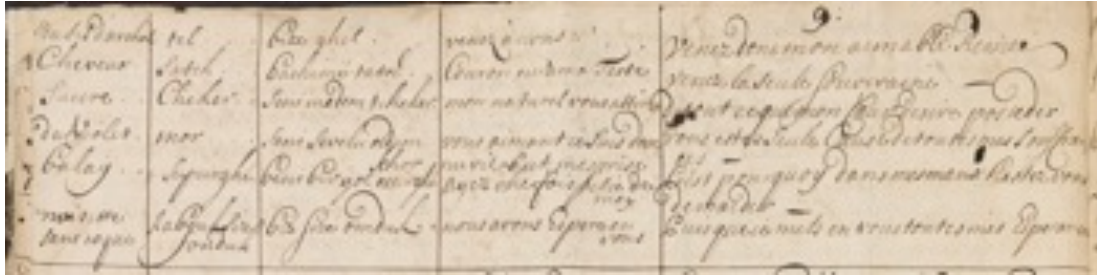


Figure 8: The 9th Letter—a description of the lover’s sufferings.

The correspondence (and we shall assume here that a man addresses a lady) begins with a declaration of love: a raisin, ginger, something white, a piece of cloth, coal, white silk with alum, something yellow, and aloe are needed to encode a lengthy amatory piece that opens with the glowing admission: “My eyes—as you should know — I have hopelessly fallen in love with you,” the lover says, almost stuttering in this first sentence. He ends his mellifluous lines by asking for a “*billet*” in return that would encourage him to hope for the lady’s embraces. But the first response is a clear rejection—the lady, very much in rage (*très* [!] *en colere*) calls him a liar. He backpedals in his second letter and offers any “reparation” that might please her—he even offers her his life and will be her slave. Yet the lady still is not satisfied; her assembly of ten items—beginning with cabbage and ending with a sugar cane—encodes her determination when she calls him two-faced (*à deux visages*) and a fake from whom she does not want to hear any further protestations until he would give up his long-standing love affairs.

The exchange continues in this vein—he calls her tyrannical, repeats his “protestations” (5) and describes himself as a mere skeleton of himself. In vain (6)—the lady just considers all this frivolous since he has not offered any proof of his feelings. (7) Disappointed that the beloved does not yield and remains utterly cruel the gentleman—in a last-ditch effort, it seems—reminds her that she is still the sovereign of his soul while he has resigned himself to sacrifice her. And—what a surprise—the lady begins to believe in the sincerity of his promises and admits that she cannot defend herself any longer from his desires—indeed, the fire of his love is felt all the way to her heart. And thus, an eternal correspondence is in the offing.

The gentleman stammers in his response (9) (Fig. 8) and begs her to help him in his sufferings—this time a brass thread, hairs, sugar, a violet, a tiny broom, and a nut without its shell suffice to encode this shorter message. (10) And now the technicalities of a first meeting begin to be discussed: She cannot come to see him but welcomes him to her abode in order to offer him the rightful place in her heart. And she will allow him to do with her whatever his heart desires But hold your horses, Duvignau implies—life just is not that easy (11): Unfortunately, the gentleman cannot find her lodging and humbly begs her to come and spend some time at his place, where he will be in an even better position to satisfy her. Out of pity (12)—and now totally infatuated—the lady suggests that she could come to his abode the following day after her stay at the public baths, the *hamam* (Fig. 9), virtually the only occasion for which Turkish women could leave their houses, as we have seen (the *hamams* being reserved for men after dark).



Figure 9: *Hamams* or Turkish Baths.

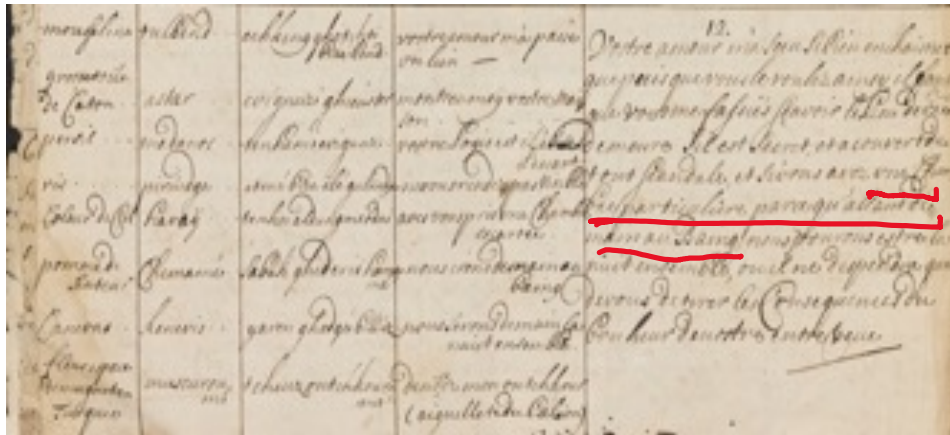


Figure 10: The lady's willingness to spend the night with her lover "at a secret place".

And—lo and behold—the lady is willing to spend the night with him (*nous pourons* [sic] *estre la nuit ensemble*) (Fig. 10)!

With such an encouragement the gentleman now assures his beloved (13) that he would take her to a secret place where all sorts of entertainment—games and dances—would be provided so that she could make him “the happiest of all men.” (The “*verd seladon*” in the *Selam*, a precious piece of celadon ceramics, is the code for an amusement with dancers). Duvignau closes this lengthy letter with a terse statement, “*Correspondence établie*,” an indication that the difficult exchanges at long last led to a physical union of the two lovers.

There follow effusive love letters on the gentleman's part (14): a first, concerned inquiry into the lady's health (15)—the easiest explanation for the lack of contact, which leads him to total martyrdom (*mon martire*) (16). He cannot find solace in anything else, he professes in his next piece (17), having been abandoned by the rest of the world with all his lovesickness, for which there is only one true cure (*la Veritable guairison de / mes Maux*).

Duvignau clearly provides templates for letters for all imaginable circumstances—the four preceding, pleading missives, he obviously imagines, could become handy tools. But the situation changes dramatically with the 18th letter: The lady finally responds, and her answer is both an admission of guilt and a list of accusations on her part. There are seven objects needed to encode this communication ranging from pistachios and other nuts to precious velvet and silk, and they convey an ambivalent message: In the letter—ominously titled “*De rupture*” (Fig. 11)—the lady furiously accuses her lover of having stalked her and

surprised her—with another woman (*que vous m'avez surprise*).



Figure 11: The downside of the relationship—Break-up and, finally, Offenses and Insults.

That he ridiculed her does not offend her as much as his own reaction, she cries out: He sought solace in the arms of another woman, the traitor, she retorts in closing, wishing him continued pleasure in this new relationship.

The author has created an intriguing situation—Balzac in his *Comédie humaine* could not have done better almost 200 years later. What is the gentleman to do in such a botched condition? His contrite response (19) is encoded in a singular fashion by means of a string (*sidgim*) that the author had earlier used as an example of the two-sidedness of associations with some of these objects: Here its use bodes ill and introduces an exclusive list of plant-related items, from nuts to vines to leaves of olive trees. And their encoded message is to convey utter contrition—he is not worth the dust on which his lady walks, he professes in Oriental humility (*la poussiere sur laquelle vous marchez*), all the while overlooking the lady's initial breach of trust. Yet the lady prefers not to respond; there is one final piece on his part, truly a last-ditch effort (20). This time there are only two items in the *Selam* to encode a message of contrition, namely a large piece of wool

cloth and a swatch of crude linen, which seemingly anticipate the dismal content of the letter: More self-accusations followed by his fear that he will not be heard.

Duvignau concludes this exchange—which had reached a dead end, it seems—with one last letter (21) to the lady that he titles, “*Derniere Lettre d’imprecations et iniures*” (Fig. 12).

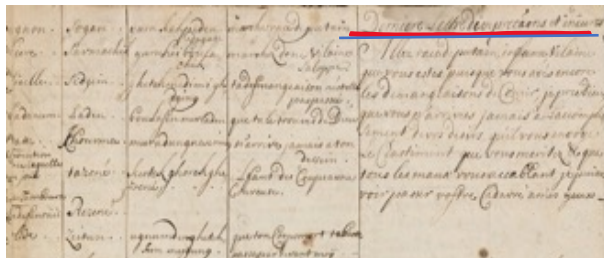


Figure 12: The last of 21 “sample” letters—a list of imprecations hurled at the lady...

By now we should be prepared for the items encoding these verbal assaults: From an onion to the ominous string to an olive we find familiar ingredients to such a dismal message, which indulges in abuses like “brood of whores” (*race de putain*) and culminates in the supreme insult (familiar by now) of wishing to see the corpse (*cadavre*) of his former beloved paraded before his eyes. Like a thunder clap Duvignau comes to a close of what for half of the exchange of letters seemed to be most promising—yet (and he later proved his mettle as an astute author) he did not necessarily believe in Hollywood-style happy endings, as we shall see in one of the print versions of this material.

4 The Remainder of this Manuscript

This exchange of 21 messages is certainly the most intriguing section of the three-part manuscript. In the second half of the first section the set-up changes; Duvignau now lists the Turkish object first, followed by its French equivalent. Just like earlier we then have the Turkish association followed by a rather literal French translation but no more effusive French elaborations. These five folio pages (*Lm*, II, fols. 6r° - 8r°) can be used in

³ Apparently there was a second manuscript edited by the author one year later (1680). Unfortunately—and I thank Mme Michèle Neveu, Bibliothèques municipales de Chartres for this information—it was kept there but was lost in a fire in 1944. It was titled, “*Lettres muettes ou la manière de faire l’amour en Turquie sans sçavoir lire ni écrire. Ouvrage reveu, augmenté par l’auteur [Du Vignau de Lissandre]. 1680, 68 pages, 16x22,3 cm, quarto size (Omond, 1890).* – The

the decoding of Turkish items contained in a *Selam*, but they are difficult to work with as they are not alphabetized. As if to add weight to the material prepared for Jacobus Colyer the author closes this first section with a number of affidavits (Fig. 13) given by men and three women from Constantinople who certify that the material here presented was indeed in common use and practiced by “the most delicate persons.”



Figure 13: Affidavits of three women on the last, signatory page of the *Lettres muettes* manuscript.

As convincing as these affidavits may appear—especially those of the women in the lower half of the page—the fact that their signatures appear in the same writing as the rest of this first section can either mean that Duvignau “created” these witnesses and their signatures as part of his fiction. It could, however, simply mean—and this would be the kindlier interpretation—that the entire section is a copy from a now-lost original.³ Since we have no other writing samples of Duvignau’s this question remains unanswered. What also is highly doubtful—and this is a serious concern, of course—is the matter of practicality. While it may have been entirely acceptable to enter into all sorts of communication in this fashion “between the sexes” in order to exchange (non-) verbal declarations of love and more, so to speak, the actuality of a married lady spending the night at another gentleman’s house may have been highly improbable given the strict mores of 18th-century Turkish society. If caught, both partners would have faced the death sentence....

existence of a second manuscript is important as far as the authenticity of the Wolfenbüttel manuscript from 1679 is concerned as it would at least confirm the date. As we can see from the various signatures on the last page—all of them in the same hand—the Wolfenbüttel piece cannot be an original.

Second Part of the Manuscript – to be used for the decoding of the extended meaning of the Turkish items assembled in a *selam*: “Les mots dans le *Manes* et leur Signification, pour faire L’amour a la Turquie, sans parler our escrire ...”

Les mots dans le <i>Manes</i> et leur Signification, pour faire L’amour a la Turquie, sans parler our escrire ...		
Kacdenek -	Millere -	ajjaflannmo de nos pieds j'embrasse entrelacés.
Arna .	Miroir.	Konban claim Je ferois esclaver a votre Col.
		Yuzum Je frotterais mon visage a vos pieds.
Ingir -	me fope.	bon fimele agit. qui a compassion de moy.
		ghientung gh... Je n'ai de da man ge.

“our feet/ legs intertwined”

“I shall be a slave at your neck”

“I will rub my face at your feet”

“... who shows compassion with me”

“your ass itches you ...” (you have an itch in your ass ...)

The third and last part, written hurriedly in the same hand (*Lm*, III, fols. 3v^o - 6v^o) is a French-Turkish dictionary, bound in a tall, narrow notebook that clearly was intended for use “in the heat of the battle.” There are attempts at grouping the entries, and in three lines (fol. 4 r^o) the French words are enciphered (Fig. 15)—which may have caused the Wolfenbüttel librarian who catalogued the manuscript a century ago to title it a “French-Turkish Love Cipher.” The Turkish terms (which the librarian certainly would not guess at) are vulgar sexual expressions for “penis”, “vulva” and “copulation” still in use today....

Beginning and 3rd Page of Part III — the French-Turkish "Pocket Dictionary"

5 Confirmation of these *Selams* in Later Sources

It is reassuring to find several accounts in somewhat later (western) literary sources well before the 19th-century materials cited earlier as they prove the value of this manuscript for the cultural history of the Ottoman empire, for the lives of western diplomats at the Supreme Porte but also for the history of cryptology. Some twenty years after Duvignau's account another Frenchman, Jean Dumont (1696) mentions in his writings "Monsieur Collier, the Dutch Ambassadors, whose Reasons made the greater Impression upon [the Grand Visier]", in other words, the same Jacobus Colyer to whom this manuscript was addressed, and who by 1694 had become the Dutch ambassador upon the death of his father. Dumont describes the method of encoded communication that I have just presented as if he had had access to this manuscript:

When [Turkish women] are in the Humour, and have chosen a promising Play-fellow, they send him a Declaration of Love by some old Confident. But wou'd you not be surpriz'd instead of a Billet-doux to find nothing but Bits of Charcoal, Scarlet Cloth, Saffron, Ashes, and such like Trash, wrapt up in a Piece of Paper. 'Tis true these are as significant as the most passionate Words; but 'tis a Mystical Language that cannot be understood without a Turkish Interpreter (Dumont, 1696).

In the French original Dumont more candidly said of this exchange of messages by means of encoded objects, “*mais il faut être Turc pour l’entendre*” (Dumont, 1694) (but you have to be a Turk to understand it—which implied that he himself did not grasp it).

The most extensive—and informative—report, however, occurred in fictional letters written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), the wife of the English ambassador to the Sublime Porte (Fig. 16). Today she may be best known for introducing the smallpox inoculation in England seventy years before Edward Jenner developed the safer vaccination. In 1719, upon her return to London, she wrote down her experiences in Turkey in epistolary form. In her “Turkish Embassy Letters” she specifically referred to the custom of “Turkish Love-letters.”



Figure 16: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and title page of her collection of *Letters*.

In this system, she reports,

there being (I beleive) [sic] a million of verses design’d for this use. There is no colour, no flower, no weed, no fruit, herb, pebble, or feather that has not a verse belonging to it; and you may quarrel, reproach, or send Letters of passion, freindship [sic], or Civillity, or even of news, without ever inking your fingers.

While Lady Mary’s observations date back to 1719, they were only printed in 1763. Much earlier appeared related comments by Aubry de La Mottraye (1727), who had seen “bloody gallantries” by young Turkish men who slit their arms as a token of admiration for their beloved (who witnessed such testimonies from behind a barred window) (Fig. 17). But there seems to be a

much more gentle way of expressing such affection, La Mottraye explains, “*de se faire l’amour, sans se parler ni se voir*”—an almost literal allusion to the title of the *Lettres muettes* manuscript. Last not least—he observes—even the “Odaliques” in the Sultan’s Harem were well versed in various arts of courtly entertainment but could not read or write, which brings him to the conclusion that early on young Turkish women in general learned the art of non-verbal communication as he described it (a remark relevant to the use of such *Selams* in the *Histoire Galante*).



Figure 17: “Turkish Gallantries”—men slitting their arms in front of their beloved as a token of their affection.

6 The Practical Application of such Non-Verbal Communication in the Two Totally Different Versions of the *Histoire Galante* of 1688

As has been briefly mentioned the system of *Selam* exchanges, of the sending of such non-verbal messages, is reflected in two different publications that appeared in 1688. A small book authored “Par le Sieur D. L. C.” came out in Holland in 1688; the acronym has been associated with “Duvignau de Lissandre, Chevalier” since Edouard de la Croix did not want to be identified with these imprints. In part its title is almost identical with that of the Wolfenbüttel manuscript: *Le Language* [sic] *müet ou l’Art de faire l’Amour sans parler, sans écrire & sans se voir* (Duvignau, 1688): Here, however, the transmission mode—if I may put it that way—is expanded by stating that making love would not only be possible without talking or writing to the beloved but also without seeing the object of one’s desire.

As it turns out this 100-odd-page booklet in its first part provides a detailed description of what we have called the “language of symbols” as seen through the critical eyes of a foreign observer, material that is very similar to the introductory section of the manuscript: While men in many nations are free to express their feelings in a conventional manner to the women whom they admire, the author posits that Turkish men—who for the most part do not know how to read or write—are nonetheless not “insensible.” To the very contrary, he affirms, they express their passion in totally unconventional ways (*Lm* 1688, fols. § 4 r° and v°) and even slit their arms, just as we have seen in the illustrations taken from early 18th-century publications. This first section then begins to describe the “*Amour Müet*”—literally silent love(making)—as illustrated in “*une Histoire Galante et véritable*”, a courteous and truthful story, the author assures us. In order to enable his reader to understand the numerous *Selams* needed for this kind of communication he inserts a “*Dictionnaire [sic] Alphabétique du Language Müet contenant / Le nom, la signification, la valeur & l'Interprétation [sic] des Selams*” (Fig. 18).

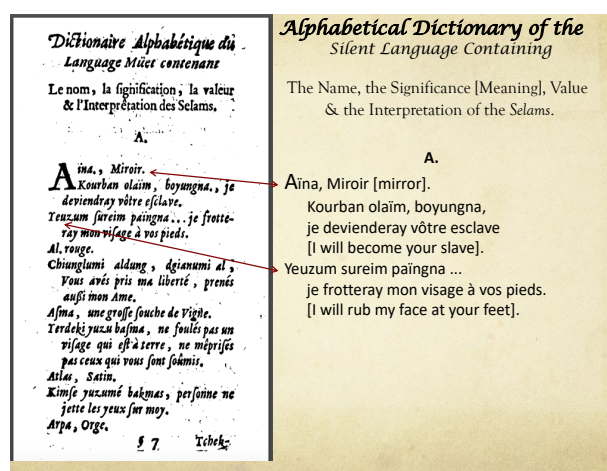


Figure 18: Beginning of the “Alphabetical Dictionary of the Silent Language” in the 1688 imprint titled, *Le Language müet*.

On the next 24 pages we have an alphabetized listing of exactly the names of all the objects that the manuscript contains, beginning with “*aïna*”, its French translation (mirror), the Turkish metaphorical “value” of this object, and again its French equivalent. The first example is particularly

interesting as it not only offers a second Turkish meaning of the same object (*Yeuzum sureim paingna ...*) whose signification (“I will rub my face at your feet”) is compatible with that of the first, “I will become your slave,” it also exemplifies the rarer riming scheme at the end of the entire Turkish expression, which enhances its mnemonic value—*aïna* rimes with *boyungna* and *paingna*. (It is quite obvious that any memory aids such as the riming expressions for the “code words”—to employ this cryptological term—are essential since the users of this system cannot rely on written code lists but have to depend on their mnemonic retention).

After this elaborate dictionary listing the author finally begins an intriguing novelette with the promising title, *Histoire Galante (HG)*. It turns out to be the ideal vehicle for a goodly number of *Selams* which are introduced after the two young protagonists, Issouf and Gulbeas (“White Rose”), both growing up in the same close-knit quarter of Istanbul where Issouf (the son of a wealthy man with his own “*Palais*”) is sitting in on lessons in reading, writing, and musical entertainment given to Gulbeas (the servant of a neighbor) by an old Jewish scholar. The two young people are enjoying each other’s rather restricted company when suddenly Gulbeas is given by her master to the *Sultana Validé*, the mother of the reigning Sultan.

A perfectly normal story of fledgling love, told by Gulbeas and at the end by her intimate friend, Patma, so far is nowhere suggesting the need for encoded communication through *Selam*-messages. Yet with Gulbeas’s sequestered life in the Sultan’s *Harem* the novelette suddenly takes a dramatic turn: While the “White Rose” is preoccupied with her new environment Issouf becomes increasingly desperate and begins to look for ways that could reconnect him to his beloved. At this point a Jewish woman—one of the many who were catering to the needs of the ladies of the *Harem* and bringing rare fruit, toiletries and the like to the hundreds of females inside—offers her services to Issouf. These Jewish women—and research has corroborated this important element in the story⁵—pass through the gates of the *Seraglio* without being checked by the eunuchs, the ruthless gate keepers (Fig. 19). Boullaster, nicely paid for such services, suggests that she could bring *Selam*-messages to Gulbeas. She manages to introduce

⁵ See, for instance, the detailed description of these “women-servants of the harem; [...] some of these female servitors lived outside the Imperial Palace and could easily meet foreigners, acting as their contact with the world

outside the harem; they were usually called *kiras*, from the Greek word meaning ‘lady’” (Pedani, 2000).

herself to Gulbeas, shows her precious jewelry which she carried in a box that—lo and behold—also contains a “*billet doux*”, a love letter that Boullaster (knowing that Gulbeas could read it) had written on behalf of Issouf. Hidden deeper in the box Gulbeas also discovers a *Selam* (HG, 13), but assuming right away that the note might be a declaration of love curious Gulbeas proceeds to read it first. Its text, embellished with effusive oriental emotions and covering more than one page of the booklet (HG, 11-12), speaks of overboarding feelings that Issouf had harbored for several years when he was listening to Gulbeas in a corner of the garden next to hers as she sang and played her instruments, an occasion he used to sometimes talk to her.

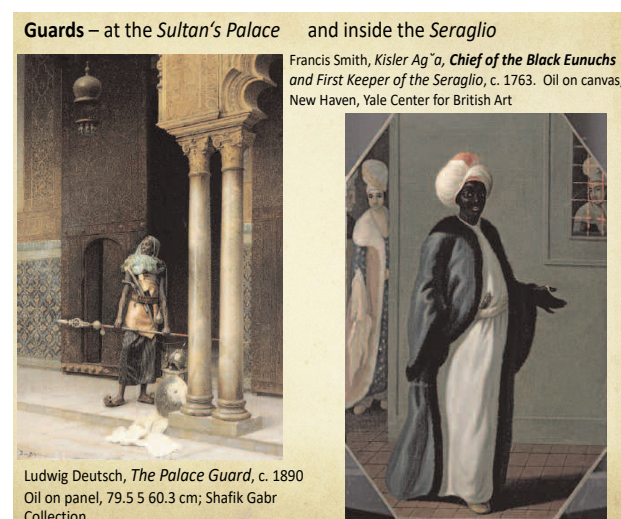


Figure 19: Guards at the Sultan's Palace and the Seraglio.

To recreate such moments Issouf proposes to have Boullaster manage his good fortune while at the same time protect Gulbeas' reputation. With heightened emotions or curiosity Gulbeas then proceeds to “develop the *Selam*” and carefully unwrap it. In this first of five Selam-messages we not only see the French text along with the various items needed to build this *Selam* but also the equivalencies to these items as listed in the preceding *Dictio(n)naire Alphabétique*. It is intriguing to read how the author has worked these five expressions into the embellished prose text whose “interpretation” begins with the translation of the Turkish metaphorical expression for “raisin”, namely “(two) eyes” (Fig. 20).

While pretending not to be satisfied with this “déclaration” that she considers somewhat too explicit Gulbeas listens to her heart that praises Issouf's qualities. And although Boullaster would

just as soon have wanted to introduce him to her apartment Gulbeas—after numerous entreaties—agrees to at least see him in the gardens below from a latticed window. And contrary to what “honor and reason” would have dictated she opts to prepare a *Selam* that is to convey to Issouf that “his passion did not displease” her. Gulbeas does not tell us which objects the *Selam* assembled, but she stresses that they were wrapped in a silken kerchief that she herself had embroidered with gold threads.

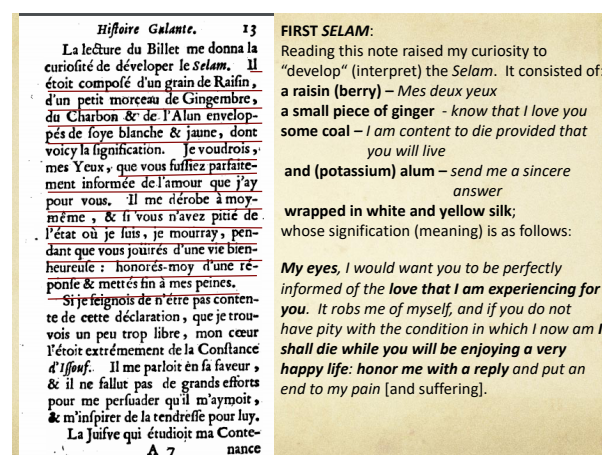


Figure 20: The first *Selam*-message.

Issouf is elated when Boullaster informs him of Gulbeas' feelings for him, drenches the silken kerchief of the *Selam* with his tears of joy and finally opens it: “(precious) silk ‘Isabelle’, a strand of jasmin, a small piece of sponge, mint and myrthe” (HG,16-17). Issouf is overjoyed and eagerly explains it, prodded by Boullaster, who (it seems) does not manage to interpret the *Selam*: “I accept your vows & (please) be convinced of my truthfulness, provided that you yourself are faithful I shall pray to Heaven that He will give you to me, & that our souls be inseparable”.

This now opens an even more problematic chapter in the relationship: How is Issouf to enter the forbidden *Seraglio*? Tormented by these thoughts he finally remembers that Mehemet, a gardener who is indebted to his father, might help him get access to the beautiful terrace below the *Sultana Validé*'s apartments (HG, 18-21). Issouf informs Gulbeas of this ploy in a third, “small” *Selam* (HG, 21), and after carefully assessing the dangers involved in such a “visit” she agrees to wait for him behind a latticed window in a room adjacent to the garden. Appropriately camouflaged as a lowly gardener Issouf appears, and after a long wait the two finally manage to communicate—but (and here to novelette takes another unexpected turn) in view of the proximity to the *Validé*'s

apartments in the *Langage müet* (Fig. 21), which both of them master.

Excursus: The “Silent Language”

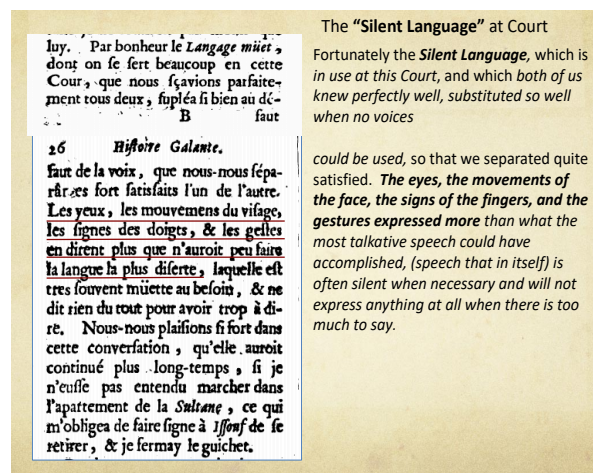


Figure 21: The concise description of the “Silent Language” in use at Court—and between the lovers.

This is the only major departure from the Wolfenbüttel manuscript, for otherwise the *Histoire Galante* uses exactly the material that was prepared for Jacobus Colyer. The excursus in the narrative, while unexpected, is perfectly plausible: This sign language, as it can be called (certainly in one way or another anticipating modern-day sign language used in communication with the hearing impaired), was used and taught at the Sultan’s court where the protocol demanded perfect silence—which means that high-level courtiers, eunuchs, and the Sultan’s favorite dwarfs had to use a non-vocal way of communicating (Fig. 22). Apart from the cryptographic aspect inherent in *Selam* exchanges this *Langage müet* is the second, highly relevant cryptographic example in the novelette.⁶ That Gulbeas and, in particular, Issouf would master this complicated sign language is yet another miraculous detail in our romantic novelette (it is well documented that the *Langage müet* was taught by eunuchs inside the *Seraglio*, and we can only speculate how Issouf might have learned it)—yet its use fulfills the very same purpose that the 13th letter of the sample exchange in the manuscript summarizes in the taut statement, namely, “Communication established.”

⁶ In the second—and initially parallel—narrative that will be discussed on the following pages (see below, pp. 14-15) this communication method is called “le langage par

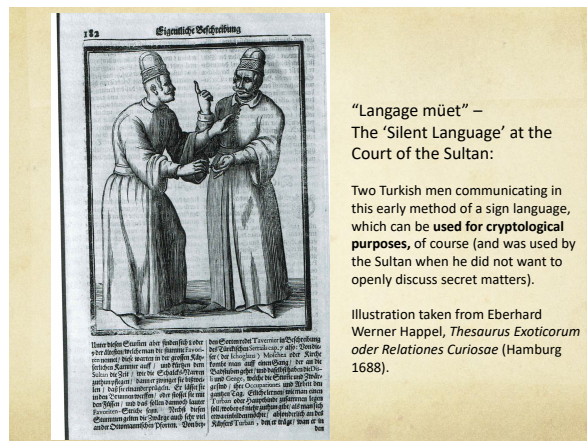


Figure 22: Two eunuchs communicating in the *Langage müet*.

Encouraged by this first, silent meeting, the two lovers contemplate a second get-together—this time, however, inside the *Harem*. Once more well-bribed Boullaster conveys a *Selam* to Gulbeas that lovelorn Issouf has prepared, which—together with Boullaster’s entreaties—results in Gulbeas’ putting together the fifth and last such message in the novelette. And despite the “slippery slope” that “White Rose” was about to take—as Patma, who is narrating this last part of the story, calls the undertaking—Boullaster’s suggestion deemed feasible: Issouf was to enter the *Harem*’s premises disguised as a young girl (fortunately, Patma adds, Issouf did not yet have a beard); the young man could thus pass as Boullaster’s daughter. Little did he know, Patma continues, that he was to meet his own death in this rendez-vous as his beloved Gulbeas had contracted the plague (*HG*, 31-32).

We have reached the moment when the narrative develops in two totally opposite directions. In the *Histoire Galante* Issouf enters Gulbeas’s bedroom only to find her stricken by the deadly disease (*HG*, 34-35)—I shall spare you his heart-rending testimony of love where he suggests that he would gladly die if his beloved were spared. And this is exactly what happens: Upon the difficult return to his own “*Palais*” (*HG*, 37) (guards at the exit of the *Harem* had stopped Boullaster and Issouf when they noticed Issouf’s gait that was by far too clumsy for a young girl) he immediately took to his bed, sent Gulbeas their engagement ring along with a last, heartbreaking note taken down by Boullaster—and died of the disease after three days. In return poor “White Rose,” who had

signes,” a better and more descriptive definition that anticipates modern sign languages.

actually recovered from the plague after their fatal encounter, became increasingly so depressed after having received Issouf's last tokens of love that she pined away and—as Patma reports on the last pages of the *Histoire Galante* (43-44)—showed no signs of ever regaining her health.

In the same year (1688) he published the Colyer manuscript material anew in a totally different, highly informative book. Once again its title—*Le Secretaire Turc, contenant l'art d'exprimer ses pensées sans se voir, sans se parler & sans s'écrire* [...] (Fig. 23)—re-uses part of the Wolfenbüttel manuscript title, but the 340-page quarto-size publication devotes almost half to a detailed description of the life at the Sultan's *Seraglio*. In a long introduction (*ST*, 1-36) the author explains the *Selam* communication method spelled out in the title and sees its roots in Egyptian hieroglyphs (*ST*, 10-11) that, he feels, were also precursors of the written word. One charming detail not reported so far is that Turkish *Selam* users often have what one might call a “toolbox” where they keep the most important objects required for their messages. And contrary to the *Langage muet* with the ancillary materials preceding the *Histoire Galante* a “Catalogue” of 179 objects (*ST*, 158-211) needed to send a *Selam* now follows the “*Histoire de Youssuf-Bey et de Gul-Beyaz*.” Duvignau introduces the piece as “l'*Histoire de la vieille Juifve*” (The Story of the Old Jewess) for her rôle in this narrative that is even more important, as we shall see.

For over one hundred pages (*ST*, 37-147) the two familiar protagonists, Issouf and Gulbeyaz, go through very much the same painful love relationship. A closer comparison of the two versions would show that in the *Secretaire* Duvignau at times uses textual material verbatim, introduces the same episode where the “*langage par signes*” is the only possible communication method (*ST*, 109-110), presents some of the same *Selams* but has Boullaster take an even more active rôle as a go-between and organizer. Issouf himself is presented as a very wealthy and well-connected young man who—and here the two versions begin to differ—proposes to make every effort possible to withdraw Gulbeas from the Harem and marry her—as Fatma (formerly Patma, here, however, the narrator throughout) confirms “after both of them had been exposed to the most dangerous proofs of their love” (*ST*, 112), she wistfully adds.

⁷ The extensive title is most descriptive: [...] avec les circonstances d'une Avanture Turque, & une Relation très-

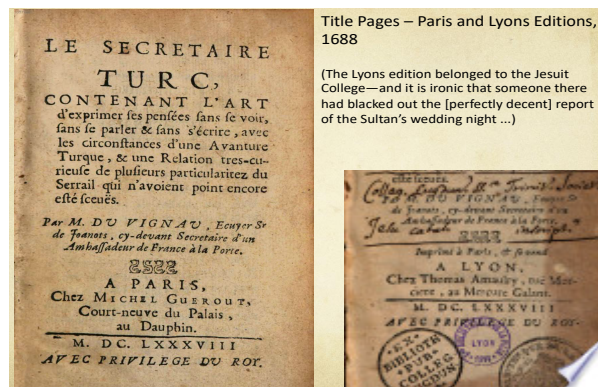


Figure 23: Title pages of the Paris and Lyons editions of *Le Secretaire Turc*.

These dangers—elaborated on on somewhat familiar pages (*ST*, 120-141)—are once more Gulbeas' plague contamination, Issouf's infection during their fateful rendez-vous at her bedside—but finally his miraculous cure and Gulbeas' similar recovery. Issouf's connections to high nobility—and here Duvignau astutely prepares the ground for his discussion of the Sultan's court in the second part of *Le Secretaire Turc*—will indeed extricate Gulbeas from the Harem and result in an elaborate wedding. Contrary to the *Histoire Galante* with its rather “ungallant”, fatal ending this second version of the manuscript material presents a Hollywood-style “happy ending” that clearly serves one purpose: Duvignau wants to raise the curiosity of his readers to delve further into the latter half of the book, where the author continues his insightful look at Turkish nobility as witnessed in the wedding, and where he presents intimate details of hitherto unknown goings-on in the Sultan's *Seraglio* (*SF*, 212-340).

7 Closing Arguments

This happy ending to materials based on a unique manuscript from the Herzog August Bibliothek may serve as an appropriate way to close a discussion of historical materials that hopefully has offered a glance at two rare 17th-century means of communication. While the exchange of *Selam* messages has allowed some insight into this earliest piece of information in the west on a different kind of cryptology, namely an encoding system of numerous objects, the two novelettes also introduced to western readers another and perhaps even more unexpected method used in

curieuse de plusieurs particularitez du Serrail qui n'avoient point encore esté sceuës.

non-verbal, secret exchanges: The *langage muet* mandated at the Sultan's court and practiced by the two lovers in a somewhat unconventional fashion grants at least a glimpse at one more fascinating piece of Turkish and Oriental cultural history, an early sign language that was an important element of secret communication in ruling circles.

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