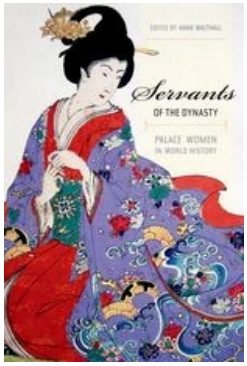

Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History

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CHAPTER

4 Beyond Harem Walls: Ottoman Royal Women and the Exercise of Power

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Abstract

For roughly 100 years, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, women of the Ottoman royal family exercised so much influence on the political life of the empire that this period is often referred to, in both scholarly and popular writing, as "the sultanate of women." This period is notable for the important role acquired by dynastic women, the queen mother in particular, in the symbolics of sovereignty: the ceremonial demonstrations of imperial legitimacy and the patronage of artistic production. The standard historical treatment of this salience of the imperial harem in Ottoman politics views it, in the framework of the Islamic polity and Islamic society, as an illegitimate exercise of power. This chapter corrects certain misconceptions regarding harems in the Ottoman Empire and explores the networks through which royal women in this gender-segregated society exercised power in the world beyond the walls of the harem.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, royal women, power, harems, politics, networks, queen mother

Subject: History of Gender and Sexuality, Political History, Medieval and Renaissance History (500 to 1500), World History

For roughly one hundred years, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, women of the Ottoman royal family exercised so much influence on the political life of the empire that this period is often referred to, in both scholarly and popular writing, as "the sultanate of women." High-ranking dynastic women, especially the mother of the reigning sultan and his leading concubines, were considerably more active than their predecessors in the direct exercise of political power—in creating and manipulating domestic political factions, in negotiating with ambassadors of foreign powers, and in acting as regents to their sons. In addition, this period is notable for the important role acquired by dynastic women, the queen

mother in particular, in the symbolics of sovereignty: the ceremonial demonstrations of imperial legitimacy and the patronage of artistic production.

The standard historical treatment of this salience of the imperial harem in Ottoman politics views it, in the framework of the Islamic polity and Islamic society, as an illegitimate exercise of power. The Ottomans, who established the longest-lived (ca. 1300 to 1923) and indisputably one of the greatest of Islamic states, were
p. 82 noted for their devotion to Islamic legal precepts and traditions.[1] ↳ One of the essential requirements of rulership in Islam, ideally conceived as successorship to the prophet Muhammad, is that the sovereign be male. Scholarly tradition, however, by denying the legitimacy of other channels of female political participation and influence, has taken a position with regard to the political roles of women that would have been congenial to the most conservative elements in classical Islamic and Ottoman thinking. In considering the interplay of public versus private and its role in the reading of gender in Islamic history, scholars have assumed that the segregation of the sexes, a prevalent feature of traditional urban upper-class Muslim society, created a gender-based dichotomy between easily discernible public and private spheres. Women are identified exclusively with the harem and denied any influence beyond its physical boundaries. Conversely, the harem is seen as a woman's world—domestic, private, and parochial. Its only commerce with the world of men is fundamentally sexual. Political activity by women is "meddling" in an arena to which females have no rightful access.

Within the context of Ottoman history, it has been particularly difficult to challenge this view because the rise of the imperial harem to political prominence took place principally after the death of Suleiman the Magnificent. The reign of this celebrated sultan (1520–66) has generally been accepted as the apogee of Ottoman fortunes, and the period initiated by his death one of precipitous decline from which the empire never fully recovered. The rise of the harem in the post-Suleimanic period has been attributed to the weakening in the moral fiber and institutional integrity of society traditionally accepted as the hallmark of this period. According to the conventional etiology of Ottoman decline, the "intrigue" and "meddling" of harem women is both a symptom of collapse and a principal cause of further corruption of institutions and customary practices.

Although it is certainly true that the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were a period of intense difficulty for the empire—militarily, economically, and politically—only recently have scholars begun to pay attention to the means Ottomans devised to adapt to changing circumstances and the ways in which responses that had their genesis in times of crisis were resolved into permanent solutions.[2] Combined with the contributions of feminist studies, this recent challenge in Ottoman studies to traditional views of post-Suleimanic decline has created a climate hospitable for taking a new look at the imperial harem. The aim of this essay is, first, to correct certain misconceptions regarding the harem institution, and, second, to explore the networks through which royal women in this gender-segregated society exercised power in the world beyond the walls of the harem.

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The Myth of the Harem

The persistence of the view that the exercise of public power by women is illegitimate derives largely from two basic misunderstandings of traditional Ottoman society. The first concerns the nature and function of the harem institution. In stark contrast to the historically persistent Western image of a group of concubines existing solely for the sexual convenience of their master, the harem of a household of means included women connected to the male head of household and to each other in an often complex set of relationships, many of which had no sexual component. The harem of a prosperous household would include the wife or wives of the male head of the household and perhaps one or more slave concubines,[3] children of the family, perhaps the widowed mother or unmarried or divorced sisters of the head of the household, and female slaves, who might be the personal property of the women or of the men of the family.

The imperial harem was similar but more extensive and its structure more highly articulated.[4] The mother of the reigning sultan was the head of the harem. The queen mother exercised authority over both family members—royal offspring; the consorts of the sultan, who might themselves acquire considerable power; and unmarried or widowed princesses—and the administrative/service hierarchy of the harem. During the second half of the sixteenth century, this latter organization grew rapidly in numbers and status.[5] High-ranking administrative officers of the harem—all of them women—received large stipends and enjoyed considerable prestige, especially the harem stewardess, chief of the administrative hierarchy. These women oversaw not only the large number of servants who performed the housekeeping tasks of the harem but also, more important, the training of select young harem women who would wait on the sultan or his mother. With the exception of the reigns of one or two notoriously uxorious sultans, few women of the imperial household occupied the sultan's bed. Indeed, as the more astute and well-informed Western observers commented, the imperial harem resembled a nunnery in its hierarchical organization and the enforced chastity of the great majority of its members.[6]

The word *harem* is one of a family of important words in the vocabulary of Islam derived from the Arabic root *h-r-m*. These words partake of one or both of two general—and obviously related—meanings associated with the root: "to be forbidden or unlawful" and "to declare sacred, inviolable, or taboo."[7] A harem is by definition a sanctuary or a sacred precinct and by implication a space in which certain individuals or certain modes of behavior are forbidden. Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities of Islam,
p. 84 are commonly referred to as ↳ "the two noble harems" *(haremeyn-i sherifeyn)*, and in Ottoman usage the interior of a mosque is known as its harem. Because Islamic law limits open contact between the sexes to a specified degree of kinship, the private quarters of a house and by extension the female members of the household are its harem. The word *harem* is a term of respect, redolent of religious purity and honor. With the exception of its reference to the women of a family, it is not gender-specific. Indeed, the residence of the Ottoman sultan contained not one but two harems: the other, the innermost courtyard of the palace, populated exclusively by males and containing private quarters for the sultan as well as the famed school that trained youths for government service, was known as "the imperial harem" or "the honored harem" *(harem-i hümayun, harem-i muhterem)* by virtue of the presence of the sultan, "God's shadow on earth."

A second misunderstanding of the nature of Ottoman society is the erroneous assumption that the seclusion of women precluded their exercising any influence beyond the walls of the harem or that women were meant to play only a narrow role within the family, subordinate to its male members. The segregation of the sexes created for women a society that developed its own hierarchy of authority. The larger the household, the more articulated was the power structure of its harem. Women of superior status in this female society, the matriarchal elders, had considerable authority not only over other women but also over younger males in the family, for the harem was also the setting for the private life of men.[8] Furthermore, female networks sustained through formal visiting rituals provided women with information and sources of power useful to their male relatives.[9] In both its sources and its effects, the authority enjoyed by female elders transcended

the bounds of the individual family. In a polity such as that of the Ottomans, in which the empire was considered the personal domain of the dynastic family and the empire's subjects the servants or slaves of the dynasty, it was natural that important women with in the dynastic household—particularly the mother of the reigning sultan—would assume legitimate roles of authority in the public sphere.

A further source of women's influence beyond the family was their ownership and exploitation of property. A woman's economic independence was derived from her rights under Islamic law to the dowry provided by her husband and to specific shares of the estates of deceased kin.[10] As property owners and litigants in property, inheritance, divorce, and other legal suits, women—or at least women of means—had access to economic and social power;[11] it must be admitted, however, that at present we lack the historical evidence to determine the extent to which women of different social levels were able to exploit these theoretical rights to their advantage. That prominent women often used their wealth to benefit other women is
p. 85 suggested by contemporary histories and testamentary ↳ documents, which show well-to-do individuals making provision not only for female family members and retainers but also for less fortunate women—orphans, paupers, prisoners, and prostitutes.[12] Through their practice of the charity incumbent on Muslims, women asserted the prerogative of claiming and organizing a sector of public life for their own welfare.

Thus in the Ottoman case, conventional notions of public and private are not congruent with gender. In fact, an examination of the structure of male society and the interaction of male and female networks shows that at least at the highest reaches of society, notions of public and private tend to lose meaning altogether. In many ways, male society observed the same criteria of status and propriety as did female society. The degree of seclusion from the common gaze served as an index of the status of the man as well as the woman of means. No Ottoman male of rank appeared on the streets without a retinue, just as a woman of standing could maintain her reputation for virtue only if she appeared in public with a cordon of attendants.[13] Poor men and poor women mingled in the city streets and bazaars, their cramped households and lack of servants preventing them from emulating the deportment of the well-to-do. At the highest levels of government, there were no public buildings set aside for the conduct of the state's or the people's affairs; instead, the household compound served as the locus of government. Ottoman society was thus dichotomized into spheres characterized not by notions of public/commonweal/male and private/domestic/female but rather by distinctions between the privileged and the common, the sacred or honorable and the profane—distinctions that cut across the dichotomy of gender.[14]

Sources of Harem Power

These observations will facilitate an examination of the reasons why dynastic women acquired a substantially increased role in the exercise of political power in the sixteenth century. There were two principal features that distinguished the careers of women during the reigns of Suleiman and his successors from the careers of their predecessors: greater physical proximity to the sultan and greater status within the royal family. Both resulted from a profound change in dynastic politics, a transformation from a decentralized to a centralized style of government. In this transformation, women of the dynastic family—the sultan's mother, his principal concubines, and occasionally his sisters—gained power as princes lost it.

According to custom that had prevailed for nearly a century before Suleiman's accession in 1520, if not longer, princes, princesses, and their mothers lived apart from the sultan. The royal offspring and their
p. 86 mothers (by the end of the ↳ fifteenth century virtually all slave concubines)[15] were housed in a palace separate from that of the sultan. When they reached puberty, the sultan's daughters were married to provincial governors and his sons dispatched with great ceremony to their own provincial governorates. Although the independence of princes was carefully circumscribed by the sultan, they were prominent political figures who functioned, after their father, as the most visible and important representatives of the

power and charisma of the dynasty. The system of succession that prevailed in this period—all princes were considered eligible for the throne and the heir was the one who could eliminate all other claimants—inevitably rendered them rival foci of political factions. Each prince was accompanied to his provincial post by his mother, who was expected to support her son's efforts to win the throne. The practice of fratricide (whereby, in the interests of security, a new sultan executed his defeated brothers and their sons) meant that both a prince and his mother had as their highest priority his political survival. Only the mother of a victorious prince would return to the imperial capital, as queen mother to the new sultan. The fate of a royal wife or concubine thus depended almost entirely on that of her son.

The sixteenth century witnessed a reversal of this policy of dynastic decentralization, as the royal family was gradually centralized in the capital and lodged in the harem quarters of the sultan's palace. This process began with two innovations introduced by Suleiman. In a reversal later political commentators were to lament as impolitic, he married his sisters, daughters, and granddaughters to top-ranking statesmen—whenever possible, to his grand viziers.[16] Since the duties of such statesmen required them to remain in proximity to the sultan, their wives lived in the capital rather than in the provinces. Suleiman also abandoned the practice of serial concubinage, hitherto regarded as a binding tradition; this practice appears to have been aimed at ensuring that the mother of a prince would have no more than one son so that no prince would be disadvantaged in the contest for succession. Suleiman raised one of his concubines, Hurrem, to an extraordinarily privileged position: he had five sons and a daughter by her, contracted a legal marriage to her, and established in his palace a permanent residence for her, where she remained when her sons were dispatched to the provinces.

The last support in the edifice of dynastic decentralization—the princely governorate—was dismantled by Suleiman's son and grandson. With the demise of their political role, princes became faceless individuals, strictly confined to the palace; there they were kept in a perpetual state of preadulthood, denied the right to marry or to father children by concubines. By the end of the sixteenth century, no members of the royal family except the sultan left the capital. Indeed, the only members of the family to leave the palace residence
p. 87 were ↳ married princesses. As a consequence, the imperial harem expanded greatly in size as it absorbed the suites of mothers and sons and acquired the requisite administrative structure.

More important, women of considerable status and political influence now pursued their careers and promoted those of their sons in close proximity to one another. The rise of the harem as the central arena of dynastic politics endowed royal women with considerably greater political leverage than they had previously enjoyed and more opportunities to exert it. In addition, women began to fill the vital role of publicly demonstrating the dynasty's legitimacy and magnificence, a role left empty by the departure of princes from the stage of royal politics. Where once princes' weddings were ceremonial occasions, the marriages of princesses were now lavishly celebrated. The sultan's mother, featured in numerous royal progresses in the capital and in surrounding provinces, became the most celebrated public figure after her son.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to do more than briefly list the factors underlying the transformation of dynastic politics outlined above. Suleiman's privileging of women has generally been seen as "indulgence," a personal weakness that opened the Pandora's box of female "lust for power" and "greed for wealth" that future generations were unable to shut. I suggest instead that his creation and exploitation of family-based networks is more properly viewed as a political strategy. This strategy was useful in building a personal base for the sultan's authority and creating a political force to oppose increasingly entrenched interests (for example, the Janissary corps) that might resist the sovereign.[17] The political roles made possible for women during the reigns of Suleiman and his successors were reinforced by a series of dynastic accidents in the first half of the seventeenth century. The six sultans who came to the throne in this period were either minors or mentally incapable of governing, and it became customary in such circumstances for the sultan's mother to act as regent. The enormous prestige enjoyed by two of these regent queen mothers, Kösem Sultan and her

daughter-in-law Turhan Sultan, helped transform the queen mother's relationship with her son from an essentially private one into one that encompassed the entire empire. Evidence of this broader relationship can be seen in the attribution to the queen mother of the honorific "mother of Muslim believers" *(umm al-mu minîn)*, a Qur'anic title bestowed on the wives of the prophet Muhammad.

Perhaps the most broadly influential factor in the transformation of dynastic politics was the closing around the mid-sixteenth century of the great age of Ottoman conquest and expansion. Suleiman continued to campaign until the end of his reign, but his successors found it more politic to downplay the martial role
p. 88 heretofore a sine qua non of sovereignty. Nevertheless, the wisdom of a ↳ peace policy was not always recognized by the sultan's subjects, who began to wonder if the sedentariness of their sultans was responsible for the problems plaguing the empire toward the end of the century. In these circumstances, it was wiser to remove princes, potential candidates for a forcible change of rulership, from the field. A further advantage of abandoning the princely governorate was freedom from the ravaging civil wars that had occurred among rival princes; the confinement of princes to the capital was soon followed by a change in the succession system to the principle of seniority (the throne henceforth went to the eldest male member of the dynasty, be he the brother, cousin, or son of the former sultan). The move from an expansionist policy to one based principally on maintaining the frontiers of the empire influenced the conduct of dynastic politics in another way: in promoting its claim to legitimate sovereignty, the dynasty now began to de-emphasize the role of warrior for the Muslim faith and to stress instead its propagation of the faith through piety and munificent support of the community of believers. Women were easily incorporated into public expressions of this latter policy.[18]

Networks of Power

Despite their often considerable influence, women of the imperial harem were inescapably confined to the palace. They left the royal residence only under the tight surveillance of the black eunuch guards of the harem. Only the queen mother appears to have had mobility outside the confines of the harem: in public ceremonials she might make herself visible from within her carriage or palanquin as she cast coins to onlookers or acknowledged their obeisances. She might also meet with high-ranking government officials in private conference if she were carefully veiled, but even she had no routine, face-to-face contact with men. Thus it was essential that harem women develop links with individuals or groups in the outside world. There was no lack of parties eager to cooperate, for as the harem came to enjoy a greater share of imperial authority, not only did its residents seek outside channels through which they might accomplish their political goals, but outsiders were anxious to form ties with potential patrons within the palace.

Like the sultans during this period, harem women built much of their networking on family-based relationships. It is crucial to recognize that the family was not limited to blood relationships but included the entire household, the vast majority of which, in the case of the dynastic family, was composed of slaves. Like the sovereigns of other Muslim states before them, the Ottomans based their authority on a military slave elite, which was recruited from outside the empire, converted to Islam and carefully trained, and
p. 89 instilled with loyalty ↳ to the dynasty. From the second half of the fifteenth century on, this slave elite came to dominate the ruling class, taking over administrative positions from the native Turkish elite, with the exception of the scribal bureaucracy and the religious hierarchy. What has gone unnoticed is the remarkable parallel between male and female slaves in the ruling class: the dynasty began to rely exclusively on slave concubines for its reproduction at the same time that the highest offices of the state began to be awarded to male slaves.[19] By the reign of Suleiman (possibly by the reign of his father, Selim), the only free Muslim women in the imperial harem were the sultan's sisters, daughters, aunts, and mother (originally a slave concubine, the latter, by virtue of having borne a child to her master, was freed according to Islamic law upon his death). Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the male "harem" in the imperial palace—the

third courtyard, where select young slaves were trained for the offices that would eventually be granted them—began slowly to be penetrated by native Muslims,[20] but the female harem appears to have maintained its exclusively slave nature.

For the members of the dynastic family, the harem served as residence. For female slave members of the sultan's household, it might best be described as a training institution, where the education given to young women had as its goal the provision not only of concubines for the sultan but also of wives for men near the top of military/administrative hierarchies (the highest-ranking officials would marry Ottoman princesses). Just as the third-courtyard school prepared men through personal service to the sultan within his palace for service to the dynasty outside the palace, so the harem prepared women through personal service to the sultan and his mother to take up their roles in the outer world. Once manumitted and married, these women, together with their husbands—often graduates of the palace school—would form households modeled on that of the palace. For both men and women, the palace system of training had as one of its fundamental goals the inculcation of loyalty to the ruling house. But because women as well as men sustained the ties that bound the empire's elite, the focus of the latter's loyalty was not only the sultan himself but the women of his family as well.

Within the imperial harem, the sultan's mother and favorite concubine or concubines were best positioned to build for themselves or for their sons factional support bridging the palace and the outer world. They were mothers not only of the sultan or potential sultans but of princesses as well. Moreover, their status and wealth permitted them to control the careers of a large number of personal attendants and to influence the careers of the harem's administrative officials. It was a meritorious act for a Muslim, male or female, to educate and manumit a slave. The manumission of a slave also worked practically to the benefit of the
p. 90 former owner, who enjoyed the loyalty of the former slave in a ↳ clientage relationship. The seventeenth-century historian Mustafa Naima praised the generosity of the queen mother, Kösem Sultan, who appears to have taken pains to cultivate close ties of patronage with her freed slaves: "She would free her slave women after two or three years of service, and would arrange marriages with retired officers of the court or suitable persons from outside, giving the women dowries and jewels and several purses of money according to their talents and station, and ensuring that their husbands had suitable positions. She looked after these former slaves by giving them an annual stipend, and on the religions festivals and holy days she would give them purses of money."[21] Manumitted slaves might act as agents for their former mistresses, just as princess daughters, when married, could help their mothers, who remained within the imperial compound. Both princess daughters and manumitted slaves might be counted on to influence their husbands to act as advocates; for this reason, harem women strove to exert as much control as possible over the choice of husbands for their daughters or slaves.

Several incidents related in contemporary histories demonstrate the extent to which members of a harem woman's suite acted as allies within the palace and might go on to become agents for her outside. The mother of Mahmud, the eldest son of Mehmed III (r. 1595–1603), was not sufficiently circumspect in her efforts to look after her son's interests. Mahmud and his mother were executed when the queen mother, Safiye Sultan, intercepted a message sent into the palace to the prince's mother by a religious seer whom she had consulted about her son's future. The message indicated that Mahmud would succeed his father within six months. The sultan, who had grown so fat and physically unfit that his doctors warned him against campaigning, was particularly threatened by this augury because of Mahmud's popularity with the powerful Janissary troops and his pleas to be allowed to take up arms against Anatolian rebels challenging his father's authority. A substantial number of harem women were implicated in the affair and suffered the same fate as the prince's mother. Their death by drowning at sea—a form of exemplary execution whose use for women can be explained by the fact that it upheld the principle of gender segregation by preserving the female corpse from the public gaze—was reported by Henry Lello, the English ambassador to the Ottoman court: "That nighte [the mother was] with 30. more of her followers wch they supposed to be interessed in

the business shutt up alyve into sacks & so throwne into the sea."[22] This affair vividly illustrates the clash of two royal mothers trying to protect the interests of their sons.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the transfer of loyalty from the palace to the outside world is found in the career of Meleki Hatun, originally a member of the suite of the queen mother Kösem Sultan. In 1648
p. 91 Kösem's second sultan son was deposed for mental incompetence, an event that should have ↳ brought her twenty-five-year career as queen mother to an end. But instead of retiring and permitting the succeeding sultan's mother to assume the position of queen mother, she was asked by leading statesmen to stay on as regent to the new sultan, her seven-year-old grandson, because of the youth of his mother, Turhan. When Turhan began to assert what she saw as her rightful authority, Kösem reportedly planned to depose the young sultan and replace him with another prince, whose mother she believed to be more tractable. At this point, Meleki deserted Kösem and betrayed her plans to Turhan, thereby enabling the latter to eliminate her mother-in-law (Kösem was murdered in a palace coup led by Turhan's chief black eunuch). Meleki became the new queen mother's loyal and favored retainer and was eventually manumitted and married to Shaban Halife, a former page in the palace training school. As a team, Meleki and Shaban were ideally suited to act as channels of information and intercessors on behalf of individuals with petitions for the palace: Shaban received male petitioners, Meleki female petitioners; Shaban exploited contacts he had presumably formed while serving within the palace, and Meleki exploited her relationship with Turhan Sultan. The political influence of the couple became so great that they lost their lives in 1656, when the troops in Istanbul rebelled against alleged abuses in government.[23]

High-ranking harem officers might establish important links outside the palace through family connections. Particularly valuable were the connections of the sultan's former wet nurse and the harem stewardess; in the stipends they received and in their ceremonial prestige, these two were the highest-ranking women in the harem after the royal family. A harem woman who lacked daughters might turn to one of these women to form a political bridge to the outside world, as did the mother of Mustafa I (r. 1617–18, 1622–23). No one had expected that Mustafa, who suffered from severe emotional problems, would become sultan. Within the imperial harem, his mother (whose name is lost to history) did not enjoy a position of much status: on the eve of her son's accession in 1617, her daily stipend was only one hundred silver pieces, while the newly deceased sultan's favorite concubine (the future queen mother Kösem) received one thousand and the former queen mother Safiye, now in retirement, two thousand.[24] When Mustafa was suddenly catapulted to the throne, one of the few political alliances that his mother was able to forge was with her son's sword-bearer, a high-ranking inner palace officer, who was brought out of the palace and awarded the prestigious and strategically vital post of governor of Egypt on condition that he marry the sultan's wet nurse.[25] Within a few months the pasha was brought back to Istanbul as grand vizier.

Probably the most important links with centers of power outside the palace were forged by harem women
p. 92 through the marriages of their daughters, the ↳ princesses of the dynasty, to leading statesmen. To become a royal son-in-law was a mark of high honor, conferred generally on the highest-ranking government officers or on promising younger officers. These weddings were lavishly celebrated state occasions, serving in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to demonstrate imperial magnificence and munificence, as the weddings of princes, now shut up in the palace and forbidden to marry, had done in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The royal son-in-law, known as *damad*, would be given an elegant palace and was likely to become grand vizier at some point in his career. Although he was not immune to dismissal or execution, he could get away with more than the non-*damad* statesman could.

The dynasty had always used the marriages of princesses for political ends; what stands out in this period is the frequency with which such marriages occurred. By the seventeenth century, serial marriages of princesses were common. The most extreme example of this practice was two daughters of Kösem Sultan and Ahmed I, Ayshe and Fatma, who were married six and seven times respectively; Ayshe was approximately fifty and Fatma sixty-one at their final betrothals.[26] Serial marriage was possible because

princesses might first be married at the age of two or three; by the time a princess reached puberty she could be in her third or fourth marriage because her husbands encountered many risks in high office, including death in battle or execution. These unions could be very happy: a sixteenth-century princess, Shah Sultan, and her second husband were said to be so compatible that they fell fatally ill simultaneously, lay side by side in their deathbeds, and expired at the very same moment.

Linking important statesmen to the royal family clearly worked to the advantage of the sovereign. With the greater seclusion of the sultan in the post-Suleimanic period, the strong personal bonds that had earlier existed between the sultan and his leading subjects, fighting together and sitting in the imperial council together, were no longer possible. Providing the hand of a princess functioned to seal the loyalty of statesmen to their sovereign. Bringing a pasha into the royal family as *damad* sometimes even served to control sedition, as in the case of the rebel vizier İbshir Mustafa Pasha, who became the final husband of the six-times-married Ayshe. The importance of princess–statesman marital alliances—and the consequent strategic interest in princesses as political contacts—is seen in the care taken by foreign ambassadors to keep track of who was married to whom[27] and in the lavish gifts they bestowed on these politically key members of the dynasty.

Obviously, not just sultans but queen mothers as well benefited immensely from this practice. Married princesses enjoyed relatively easy access to the imperial harem, their parental home, and could serve as
p. 93 informants, couriers, and ↳ political strategists. Because the interests of princesses and their mothers in the harem were harmonious—the goals of the former being to prolong the political careers, indeed the lives, of their husbands, and of the latter to secure loyal allies on the outside—the networks formed by the marriages of princesses were vital. It is surely no coincidence that the most powerful queen mothers were those with several daughters: Nurbanu (queen mother from 1574 to 1583) had three, Safiye (1595–1603) had two, and Kösem (1623–52) had at least three. Indeed, the efforts of queen mothers were largely responsible for the frequency of princess–statesman alliances in this period. The queen mother arranged the marriages not only of her own daughters but also of the daughters of her son and his concubines. Thus the Venetian ambassador reported in 1583 that Nurbanu planned to marry her son Murad III's second daughter to the head of the palace guards.[28] Kösem's long career gave her considerable opportunity to forge such alliances. In 1626 or thereabouts she wrote to the grand vizier proposing that he marry one of her daughters: "Whenever you're ready, let me know and I'll act accordingly. We'll take care of you right away. I have a princess ready. I'll do just as I did when I sent out my Fatma."[29] In the early 1640s, Kösem emerged victorious from a conflict with a concubine of her recently deceased son Murad IV over the marital fortunes of thirteen-year-old Kaya, daughter of the concubine and granddaughter of Kösem. The concubine was anxious for Kaya to marry one of her own political allies, the former sultan's sword-bearer, but Kösem's candidate, a pasha in his forties, won out.[30]

By creating and exploiting the variety of networks described above, a queen mother or a powerful concubine could work different sectors of public government. Through the marriages of princesses or the imperial wet nurse, alliances could be formed with the most powerful of statesmen and with the representatives of foreign powers. Through clientage ties with former slaves, contacts could be created with a wide range of middle-level public officials. It is important to recognize that this establishment of a constellation of contacts outside the palace was by no means surreptitious. Nor was it a uniquely "female" or "harem" paradigm for organizing political patronage and creating political influence. The governing class of the Ottoman Empire in this period operated not so much on the basis of institutionally or functionally ascribed authority—authority devolving from one's office—as through a complex of personal bonds and family and household connections. Functionally ascribed authority certainly existed, but more important was the web of individual relations—of patronage and clientage, of teacher and student, of kinship and marriage—that
p. 94 brought individuals ↳ to their offices and that they used in the exercise of their official power. Men as well

as women sustained their careers by means of such networks, and men and women played significant roles in the formation of each other's networks.

Only when the paradigm of rigidly separate public/male and private/female spheres is discarded can we begin to appreciate the ways in which the structure of the Ottoman ruling class enabled women to participate in the political life of the empire. Conversely, by understanding how women were able to acquire and exercise power, we obtain a clearer picture of the structure of Ottoman politics and society. For example, it is widely recognized that the household was the fundamental unit of Ottoman political organization in this period, but the role of women in the construction and maintenance of the household system has been ignored. Future research will demonstrate whether or not the essential role played by women in the Ottoman dynastic household was reflected in the organization and operation of households of lesser status.

Notes

1. Schacht 1964, pp. 89–90.

2. Two notable exceptions to the long-standing neglect of such questions are I. nalçik 1980 and Kunt 1983.

3. Islam permits a man four wives and an unlimited number of slave concubines. For the legal and social status of slave concubines, see Marmon 1983; Brunschvig 1960. The incidence of polygyny (multiple legal wives) varied from time to time and place to place in the Islamic world; it appears to have been confined to approximately 1 to 2 percent of the Ottoman middle and upper classes in this period (Barkan 1966, pp. 13–14; Gerber 1980, p. 232).

4. Peirce 1993, pp. 113–49.

5. The size of the imperial harem was exaggerated by Western travelers and scholars: in the mid-sixteenth century it consisted of approximately 150 women; in the midseventeenth century, approximately 400 women (Prime Ministry Archives in Istanbul: Ali Emiri Series, Register Kanuni 24; Kamil Kepeci Series, Register 7098; Maliyeden Müdevver Series, Registers 774, 1509, 1692).

6. Withers 1905, p. 339; Baudier 1631, p. 19; Tavernier 1681, p. 541.

7. For an excellent discussion of the concept of *harem*, see Marmon 1995, pp. 6–26.

8. On the Turkish family, see Duben 1985. On the influence that Turkic tribal women today derive from their separate social organization, see Tapper 1980.

9. On the subject of visiting among the female Ottoman elite, see Montagu 1965, 347–52, 380–87; F. Davis 1986, pp. 131–56.

10. For a brief exposition of the legal position of women, see Esposito 1982.

11. See Gerber 1980; Jennings 1975.

p. 95 12. Peirce 1993, pp. 201–3.

13. See the responses to queries on points of Islamic law *(fetva)* of the late-sixteenth-century Ottoman chief mufti Ebu Suud, in Düzdagğ 1976, p. 55.

14. For discussion of the importance of the division between privileged and common (*khass* and *amm*), see Mottahedeh 1980, pp. 115–29, 154–55; Lewis 1988, p. 67.

15. It was common for Islamic dynasties to reproduce themselves by means of slave concubinage, either exclusively or in

combination with formal marriage. On the Ottoman transition from interdynastic marriage to slave concubinage, see Peirce 1993, pp. 28–56.

16. Koçu Bey 1939, p. 61.

17. I am indebted to Roy P. Mottahedeh for suggesting a parallel in the exploitation of family-based political networks between Suleiman and the famed Abbasid caliph Hârûn al-Rashîd.

18. For a striking parallel in the incorporation of women into dynastic propaganda during a "sedentarizing" stage in the late Roman Empire, see Holum 1982. I am grateful to Peter R. Brown for drawing this work to my attention.

19. This parallel has been briefly noted by İnalçik 1973, p. 85.

20. Kunt 1983, p. 96.

21. Naima 1863–64 (A.H. 1280), 5:113.

22. Lello 1952, pp. 14–15, 57–58.

23. For the career of Meleki Hatun, see Naima 1863–64 (A.H. 1280), vols. 5 and6.

24. Prime Ministry Archives, Maliyeden Müdevver Series, Register397.

25. Naima 1863–64 (A.H. 1280), 2:159.

26. Uluçay 1980, pp. 50–52.

27. Alberi 1840–55, 1:117, 404–7; 2:354–58; 3:239–42, 288–93, 366–74.

28. Alberi 1840–55, 3:243.

29. Topkapi Palace Archives, Istanbul, Evrak 2457/2.

30. Barozzi and Berchet 1871–72, 1:370; Sieur du Loir 1654, pp. 124–26; Uluçay 1980, pp. 54–55.