This paper seeks to explicate the imaginary geographies of Mary Wroth’s *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* (1621) by tracing conflicting early modern genealogies of the Tartar—conventionally represented as issuing from Central Asia during the Middle Ages and threatening Western Europe up to the early modern period—in relation to English engagement with the Ottoman and Safavid empires around the turn of the seventeenth century.¹ Wroth’s *Urania* is significant as the first original, as opposed to translated, prose romance by an English woman to appear in print.² She was forced to withdraw the first part from circulation shortly after its initial publication under pressure from powerful men for whom her depictions of the patriarchal abuse of wives, daughters, and servants struck too close to home; however, she continued with an equally substantial second part, which remained in manuscript until its publication as a scholarly edition in 1999.³ In this second part, Wroth shifts from the classical emphasis of the first part to an increasingly belligerent assertion of a universalistic Christian identity, albeit one primarily in service of political expansionism and not presented as a spiritual practice or doctrine.⁴ Ultimately, the *Urania* links this identity to a polity encompassing
“East” (Asia) and “West” (Europe) under the auspices of an imaginary Holy Roman Empire, which in Wroth’s era was “a phantom” of “a universal imperialist hope” for Western Europeans and not a political reality.5

The notion of an imaginary or “imaginative geography” derives from Edward Said’s seminal, if contested, study, where he defines it as “one of the chief characteristics of Orientalism.” Specifically, it is “a fixed, more or less total geographical position” taken “towards a wide variety of social, linguistic, political and historical realities.”6 Said has been critiqued for his own lack of historicity when considering Western European attitudes toward the East (a malleable term covering Biblical lands, Islamic regions, and Asia as defined by the ancient Greeks), especially during a time when “England was not a colonial power—not in the imperial sense that followed in the eighteenth century.”7 Certainly, Wroth’s representations of Asians—Tartars, Persians, and residents of the regions ruled by the Ottomans—cannot be confined to the East-West dichotomy characterizing the nineteenth-century peak of Western European imperialism that primarily concerns Said. Nonetheless, Said’s theorization of “imaginative geography” as “a set of representative figure, or tropes” constituting “the Western approach to the Orient” remains useful for analyzing Wroth’s romance, which took shape during the period Richmond Barbour reassesses through the prism of “proto-orientalism.”8 The “precolonial engagements” of the English with the “East,” especially the empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, involved “more pliant, polyvalent attitudes towards various ‘others.’”9 These attitudes were premised on a mixture of admiration and fear, with England’s marginal position in the global imperial circuits at the turn of the seventeenth century not allowing for the scorn associated with full-fledged Orientalism.10 In Wroth’s case, her encounter with these “others” was enabled by contemporary reports in influential collections such as Richard Hakluyt’s The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation (1599–1600)11 and histories such as Richard Knolles’s The Generall Historie of the Turkes (1603), with her family having an unusually close connection to early ventures in Russia, Central Asia, and Persia.12

Yet, by ignoring praise for Tartars in these influential seventeenth-century sources, critics have considered Wroth’s representative Central Asian, Rodomandro, “the great King of Tartaria,” an anomaly.13 His origins have been located in a “region . . . said to be filled with barbarous persons who display despicable habits,”14 drawing on “the ancient tripartite divisions of climatic regions” into “northern, southern, and temperate zones” that informed the Greco-Roman and Renaissance humanist discourses of empire.15 Concomitantly, he has been described in terms of “blackness” as a “secondary status,”