Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature (review)

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atre of the Book is anything but exhaustive, and that it is heavily dependent on less-than-complete knowledge of secondary scholarship. This study synthesizes earlier work to create an overview of its territory, without much exploration of known primary sources, let alone any attempt to find new ones. One must give Peters credit for honesty in citing quotations from Dennis, Rymer, and Gildon (for example) from recent critical books (e.g., 397 nn. 87, 91; 420 n. 26), while still wishing that she had bothered to look at these important critics directly—Dennis and Rymer have been the recipients of excellent modern critical editions.

One may fairly call this a sensible, highly erudite, bibliographically accurate survey of theater and print over a period of four centuries throughout most of Europe. Seen from the vantage point of a specialist in any part of the territory covered, I suspect that it will seem thin and patchy. I have enjoyed reading the book (written in a generally clear and unpretentious style) and in the realms beyond my own specialist competence I have learned all sorts of interesting things from it—the publication problems of Molière, Lope de Vega, and Corneille have only remote relevance to "my people," but I am glad to know what was going on elsewhere in Europe. I would have been glad to see more than tangential discussion of such subjects as antitheatrical literature, and the actor and playwright biographies and autobiographies that become a booming business toward the end of the eighteenth century in England. If the conclusion is essentially that there is not much of a general conclusion to arrive at, we can at least be grateful for the author's refusing to try to produce one out of a hat. Demonstration of the particular impact of print upon theater is, I suspect, best attempted at the level of nitty-gritty detail in one country over a limited period of time.

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Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature. By Ruth Bernard Yeazell. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000. xii + 314 pp.

The first sentence of this book cautions that "any study of the West's relations with the harem must be in large part a study of the imagination" (1). As a beginning, this rings true. Ruth Bernard Yeazell quotes the seventeenth-century traveler Jean Tavernier, who writes his chapter on the women's quarters at Topkapi "only to persuade the reader of the impossibility of really knowing them" (1). Early Western harem fantasies are, indeed, largely salacious speculations about Islamic forms of sexual segregation that thrive on the peculiar dialectics of minimal information spirally processed into maximal delusion.

Edward W. Said has suggested that orientalism is "after all a system for citing works and authors," marked by a strong impulse toward authority derived through iteration.[1] This observation puts studies of orientalism—or delusion studies—on treacherous terrain. What differentiates anti-orientalist excavation (or Said's Foucauldian "archaeology") from neo-orientalist edification? When does necessary citation give way to reiterative performance? There is a clear danger that scholarship about orientalism, however virtuous its intentions, may lapse back into the morass that is orientalism itself.

Revealing the paradox of frustrated liberal intentions, Yeazell's study labors under the constraints of accounting for an aesthetics that she questions thematically but whose terms of representation she fails to unsettle except with the occasional local reading. Indeed, Yeazell acquits herself honorably as an erudite critic. While her readings are largely apolitical, she certainly could not be accused of wanting to oppress the other. However, the critical foreclosures of the study eschew the referent for the representation, replicating the central problem that renders orientalism impervious to comparisons of its findings with the predicament of "historical" "Orientals." As a disciplinary formation that subsumes individualized intentions into a network of cross-referenced representations, orientalism is a kind of power/knowledge. In that context, the adoption of an "images-of" model of literary criticism is not as innocuous as it is elsewhere, and the evasion of responsibility toward those who are represented is unfortunate in what is otherwise a strongly researched, liberal-minded literary and art history. Some direct engagement with the interventions made by several feminist investigations of orientalism after Said—including those by Leila Ahmed, Rana Kabbani, Reina Lewis, Lisa Lowe, Jane Miller, Billie Melman, Fatima Mernissi, Felicity A. Nussbaum, Leslie P. Peirce, and Meyda Yeğenoğlu—might have made the close readings in this book more theoretically responsible.[2]

[1] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 23.

[2] Many of these studies are indeed cited—sometimes repeatedly—in Yeazell's notes, but never in the main body of her study. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Jane Miller, *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Billie Melman, *Women's Orients, English Women, and the Middle East, 1718–1918: Sexuality, Religion, and Work* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford Uni-

The thematization (and subthematization) of narrative foci is this book's strength and also, ultimately, its greatest weakness. Yeazell's study is divided into six parts, each composed of two to five chapters. Several key authors, such as Montesquieu, Byron, and Loti, and painters such as Delacroix, Ingres, and Gérôme are taken up over many of the parts, along with a cast of minor characters that testifies to Yeazell's patient documentation of thematic contiguities. Specific discussion of important texts or works tends to be brief and is often interrupted by a citational desire to examine related works and quotations dealing with the same subtheme. The closed patterning and attentive self-referentiality of mental harems offer tremendous breadth but insufficient depth. Scholarship echoes its object in this hermeneutic ethos. No discussion of any work is ever concluded. The same work is often returned to in another aspect when the book moves on to a different subtheme in another section. But these continual returns—or imitative arabesques—rarely advance an argument or a consistent interpretive position in relation to the given text or painting, author or painter. Rather than cumulative interpretation, the structure of the study favors a kind of commentary whose eventual goal is evacuative and classificatory. But this effect is not unanticipated by Yeazell: early on she self-consciously glosses harem fiction as a "passage," not just geographically eastward but also in the sense of a literary episode or digression. As the book's subtitle suggests, mental harems form a repetitive cycle of passages, whether as dreamscapes, voyeurisms, or ornamentalisms. Suffused with the virtual but vanishing power of chimera, mental harems leave behind a signature effect. Yeazell describes this effect well in relation to Ingres's famous *Le bain turc*, a painting that at once invites and withholds, evokes and frustrates (28). However, to what extent should studies of mental harems be wedded to ambivalence, an intransitive remainder of all this transitory fantasy? *Harems of the Mind* rarely breaks free of symptomaticity when confronted with the object of its analysis.

The book's six parts consolidate several aspects of European harem writing and painting. The first part, "Inside Stories," deals with literary representations of harem interiors from Paul Rycaut to Pierre Loti and visual images of the harem, especially by Delacroix and Ingres. For there to be an inside story, there has to be an insider who has come out, or an outsider who has managed to sneak in. Yet many of the inside stories, such as the one contained in Loti's *Les désenchantées*, are probably elaborate hoaxes perpetrated on credulous fantasists, such as Loti and his equally gullible readers, of whom there is a very good discussion (47–50). The second part, "Confinement and Liberation," takes further the various analogies that were made between the

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versity Press, 1993); and Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

harem and other carceral institutions, such as brothels, cages, and prisons. Racine's *Bajazet* and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* are of importance here, as are the writings of European women writers who criticize harems as tyrannical (as do Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, and Florence Nightingale) or, occasionally, praise them as liberatory (as does Mary Wortley Montagu). The third part, "Sex and Satiety," examines some of the most popular representations of harems as sites of sexual depravity and excess, whether in Rowlandson's satiric prints or Sade's pornographic *Aline et Valcour*. The range of sexual phantasmagoria that Yeazell documents is immense, from Johnson's *Dictionary*, which defines *seraglio* as a brothel, to the luxuriant decadence of sexual violence and massacre as depicted in Delacroix's famous tableau *Mort de Sardanapale*. Here is an opportunity to decenter the conclusion that polygamy was only Islamic, but it is pursued only in gingerly fashion by fleeting references to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Martin Madan's *Thelyphthora*, and the Mormons. However, Byron's lasciviously misogynist wit regarding harems in *Don Juan* is an important resource for quotation and occasional commentary in this and several subsequent sections.

The next two parts examine different aspects of domesticity when contrasted with the harem. The fourth, "The Couple versus the Harem," returns to Racine and Montesquieu and Byron's *Don Juan* but also examines musical texts such as Mozart's opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and Haydn's Symphony no. 63, otherwise known as *La Roxelane*, as well as Rossini's *Italiana in Algieri*. Other lesser-known texts discussed with some verve are Marmontel's *Contes moraux*, Favart's *Les trois sultanes*, Bickerstaff's *Sultan; or, A Peep into the Seraglio*, and James Morier's *Ayesha*. All these texts demonstrate how love opposes the harem and how it has to burst out of the confines of its inhuman restraint. The fifth part, "Rivalry, Community, Domesticity," takes the opposite tack: how harems cultivate and maintain the important emotions of rivalry and jealousy among women. In addition to Yeazell's familiarity with key works by Chardin, Racine, and Montesquieu, this part presents newer topics, such as Saint-Foix's *Les veuves turques*, Hume's "Of Polygamy and Divorces," Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, James Morier's *Adventures of Hajji Baba, of Ispahan*, and Emmeline Lott's *Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople*. These selections are fertilized by Yeazell's occasional return to earlier texts spun off from *The Arabian Nights*, such as Mary Delarivier Manley's *Almyna; or, The Arabian Vow* and Thomas Gueulette's *Mogul Tales*. Surprisingly, *Harems of the Mind* conducts little analysis of *The Arabian Nights*, arguably the ultimate harem fantasy, involving virgin brides, murderous sultans, and many "passages" of endlessly deferred narrative interpolation. Yeazell makes an early mistake in this regard, stating that "the *Arabian Nights* themselves belong primarily to the literary tradition of the East rather than the West" (5). All the evidence points to a much more garbled origin and reception history, as scholars have often shown that the *Nights* was accorded folkloric but not lit-

erary status in Arabic until Galland's translation, and the nearly three centuries of subsequent interest resulted in propelling the text to the center of European—and then global—imagination. The multiple imaginative consequences this urtext has had for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe—from Galland to Potocki to Burton and from the invention of the subgenre of the oriental tale to the hypothesis of a Sotadic zone in nineteenth-century pseudoanthropology—have yet to be fully investigated. The opportunity is missed again when a casual reference to harems in Joyce's *Ulysses* might have been pursued into something more substantial, especially given Joyce's interest in Scheherazade (202).

All the same, the range of Yeazell's reference—from the seventeenth to the twentieth century but mostly from the mid–eighteenth to the late nineteenth century—is impressive, even if it sometimes swings into unfettered free association. English arabesque painters such as Henriette Browne and John Frederick Lewis are central to the latter portion of this study, and the analysis of Lewis's painting is a major contribution. Yeazell's evaluation puts Lewis on a par with Delacroix and Ingres, although it is not quite clear what she means by suggesting that Lewis "associates his harems with home" (227). Presumably, all harems were home to a number of their inhabitants. But more has to be said about how harem exoticism, through imaginative projection and narcissistic recuperation, can result in confusing English domesticity with domesticity per se, by artist and critic alike. In Lewis's paintings, "what remains of the cloistered harem, ironically, is above all the memory of interior light; and what remains of the fantasy of leisure, a pleasant sleep" (230).

The sixth and final part, "Harem Times," circles outward through indirect harem references in texts such as Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* and James's *Spoils of Poynton*. The harem has become a phantasm of a phantasm by this point in time. Even earlier representations played with this delirious provocation, as in Byron's imagining of all the women in the harem combining to possess one mouth, or the "irrealizing effect" of Ingres's keyhole fantasy, *Le bain turc*, which the artist constantly reworked until he was eighty-two. Ingres believed in imitating himself, and most of the figures in his famous *tondo* can be traced to female associates of his or to gestures and figures from previous paintings. If painting concentrates what history separates, even commentary occasionally refocalizes what art disperses. The book ends on a strongly provocative note, with a brief discussion of Sylvia Sleigh's witty 1973 painting *Turkish Bath*, which "replaced Ingres's bathers with a collection of naked men, including her [Sleigh's] husband, all of whom happened also to be art critics" (254). Would that this book had begun with the retroversion with which it ended, as it might have gone on to much greater and riskier provocation. For the most part, through learned restatement, *Harems*

of the Mind reveals already existing Western harem fantasy as one gigantic déjà vu in the manner of Ingres's *tondo*, and its scholarship on the topic substantially re-cites (but does not adequately re-site) the existing orientalist archive.[3]

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[3]Mieke Bal argued this point with greater theoretical amplitude more than a decade ago, in her essay "The Politics of Citation," *Diacritics* 21 (1991): 25–45. Bal demonstrates that Malek Alloula's Barthesian exercise in *The Colonial Harem*, despite its overt opposition to colonialism, is far too complacent in its reproduction of the voyeuristic aesthetics of the postcards of scantily clad Algerian women sent home by French soldiers. See Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).