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THE DE-SEXUALISATION OF THE HAREM

How Europe's female artists resisted and embraced the male gaze on the harem

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ABSTRACT: In a discourse consumed by the paintings and writings produced by the male gaze, female reproductions of the Orient remain a largely undiscovered facet of colonial history and discourse. Female contributions to the European image of the Oriental are evidence of their active role in imperial power relations, establishing her firmly in an intersection between race, gender, and colonialism. Thus, as this article traces the female gaze on the harem, the inclusion of women in the masculine phenomenon of imperialism and colonialism will also be revealed. By analysing paintings produced from 1850 to 1900, the female creator becomes a focal point in Oriental history.

KEYWORDS: Orientalism, imperial project, female gaze, eroticism, de-sexualisation.

Introduction

> *"Only women should go to Turkey - what can a man see in this jealous country… For a woman, on the other hand, the odalisque opens itself, the harem has no more mysteries; those no doubt charming faces for which the bearded tourist searches in vain, she contemplates stripped of their veil"* (Lewis 1993: 57).[1]

Alongside the body of art produced by European men, which circulated colonial society, stood a small but significant body of work produced by their female counterparts. For these women, "the odalisque opens itself, [and] the harem has no more mysteries," enabling her to capture the Orient as it existed, devoid of the fantasies and exoticism that fuelled the male imagination (Lewis 1993: 57). That is not to say that woman captured the Middle East as it was, but instead reconstructed a nuanced version of Europe's perceived reality based on imperialist and colonialist ideologies. From 1850 to the turn of the twentieth century, female artists explored the undiscovered facets of the Orient and produced work responding to these sights. This paper will trace the work of artists Henriette Browne, Margaret Murray Cookesley, and Eliza Florence Bridell-Fox. The selection of these women was not arbitrary; they come from countries with strong colonial ties to the Middle East, namely Britain and France. Moreover, these women visited the region, allowing them direct access – or perceived access – to the harem. This analysis is not an attempt to contrast the male to the female gaze but rather to explore the nuances the female gaze may add to the conceptualisation of the harem. Moreover, I recognise the importance of male Orientalist artwork and do not attempt to deny its place within Orientalism.

By critically examining women's reproductions of the Oriental harem, this paper aims to understand the female contribution to the imperial project. The imperial project is referred to as the construction of a national imperial identity that contrasts the 'other', or in this context, the Orient

[1] Original quote from Theophile Gautier but I have drawn on the translation by Reina Lewis in: Lewis, Reina. 1993. "'Only Women should go to Turkey' Henriette Browne and Women's Orientalism." Third Text 7 (22): 57. For original text see: Gautier, Theophile. 1861. Abécédaire du Salon de 1861 / par Théophile Gautier. E. Dentu: 72-73.

against the West (or the Occident). Through a gendered analysis of their work, I aim to discern how women add to or challenge the male-dominated Orientalist discourse. First, I will explore the social context of these female artists to understand the intersection between imperialism, culture, and gender. In doing so, I want to dismantle the complexities, contradictions, and oppositions inherent within this relationship. I will analyse the paintings produced by both British and French artists to discern, across two colonial contexts, the resonances and dissonances in the female representation of the Orient. Thus, this paper hopes to establish where women sit within the relationship between imperialism, gender, and race through their influences on the Oriental discourse.

This paper will draw on the intersection between postcolonial and feminist theory as a critical lens which expands the historical understanding of colonialism and imperialism (Parashar 2016). The common association between postcolonial theory, which covers ideas of imperialism, race, and power, and masculinity, is directly challenged through this intersection with feminist theory (Lewis & Mills 2003). To converge such contrasting theories will "decentre the presumed privilege of a normative male subject" replacing him with the nuanced ways women contribute and are involved with colonialism (Lewis & Mills 2003: 2). This essay defines the *harem* as both a construction of Western fantasies and the "sociopolitical institution of the harem which serves as a rich site for investigating some of the complexities of female power" (Jarmakani 2011: 195). Finally, I will refer to the female subjects in the paintings as the artist's 'Oriental woman'. This demonstrates they are part of the Oriental imagination rather than depictions of real women.

Historiography

Orientalism is a well-documented and thoroughly researched facet of history. Edward Said conceptualised the term Orientalism, defining it "as a way of coming to terms with the Orient based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience," in his 1979 seminal text *Orientalism* (Said 1979: 25-26). Said's text distinguishes Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, structuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1979: 26-27). In other words, Orientalism is a form of the imperial project. Interestingly, Said limits his scope to Britain and France, concluding that other European powers lack a significant colonial tie to the Middle East (Bohrer

1988). Said's *Orientalism*, while attentive to questions of race and imperialism, avoids issues of gender. The Oriental woman is largely described in his work through the writings of Gustave Flaubert – and other *male* Orientalists – as "no more than a machine," obsessed by her sexual temptations (Said 1979: 209-210). Said neglects to critically evaluate this erotic description, allowing it to sit unaccounted for.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed several pioneering studies that responded to the gender issue in Said's work. Rana Kabbani, Irvin Schick, and Reina Lewis are among the many researchers who shifted the trajectory of Orientalist studies (Kabbani 1986; Schick 1990; Lewis 1996). Kabbani explores the role of nineteenth-century British travel literature in establishing the image of an erotic East (Kabbani 1986). In analysing the popularity of travel literature, Kabbani then assesses how travel literature was used as an imperial tool to distinguish the East from the West through the sexualised depiction of the Oriental woman (Kabbani 1986). Similarly, Schick utilises the frameworks of gender theory to understand how an intersection between art history and classical colonial history can strengthen understanding of the imperial, Oriental discourse (Schick 1990). He explores how the production of the Oriental woman captures the power relations between the Orient and the Occident (Schick 1990). Shifting away from the male gaze, Lewis draws attention to the lesser-known productions of Orientalism, analysing the contribution of Henriette Browne to the Oriental discourse (Lewis 1996). Her study was the first of its kind in analysing the specific contribution of women to the Oriental discourse. However, Lewis recognises its limitations as Browne's was only one "among a number of competing alternative discourse[s]" (Lewis 1996: 237).

The most recent scholarship on Orientalism has seen the studies expand further into the spheres of gender and art history. As seen through the writings of Ulrike Brisson, Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Anja Wieber, and Geoffrey Nash, the topics of gender and imperialism continues to hold poignancy in twenty first century society (Brisson 2013; Carlà-Uhink & Wieber 2020; Nash 2019). That said, this essay will continue the research undertaken by feminist theorists in the late twentieth century. Specifically, I will build on the work of Lewis who has demonstrated the existence of female Orientalist artists. The twenty-first century has brought with it an increased availability of important primary sources as the works of female Orientalist painters are rediscovered. Consequently, the

discussions Kabbani, Schick, and Lewis began can now be expanded, considering the increasing availability of sources. As such, this paper will return to the arguments of these foundational texts, utilising them to propel the studies of gender, Orientalism, and colonialism further to understand the role of European women in the imperialist project.

Gender and orientalist art: The environment surrounding female artists

To truly understand and analyse the female contribution to the imperial discourse, it is necessary to appreciate the realm these female painters and writers were creating within. Orientalism, by the second half of the nineteenth century, was a well-known phenomenon and referred to (male) artists who engaged with the subject of the East (Benjamin 2003: Marino 2013). The painters frequently associated with the genre at the time include Jean-Léon Gérôme, Rudolf Ernest, and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. Orientalist art thus became regarded mainly "as a male preserve" (Lewis 1993: 53).

Gérôme's *Pool in a Harem* (1876) and Ernest's *The Harem Bath* (n.d.) are both depictions of the female bathhouse, painting their Oriental women in hazy, seductive lights as she allows the viewer to inspect her semi-naked body. Ingres was fascinated by depicting the *odalisque*, painting her naked, reclining body in sensual detail in *Odalisque with Slave* (1839). Underlying all their paintings – and indeed many more male Orientalist artists – is the desire to sexualise and eroticise the Oriental woman. Their political significance and contribution to the establishment of colonial power relations are clear (Marino 2013).

The space women occupied within the art world was holy different, defined by the nineteenth-century material and ideological constraints placed on women. Only in the 1860s were women admitted to the Royal Academy in Britain (Bluett 2021). Thirty years later, in the 1890s, women were accepted into the Parisian École des Beaux-Arts (Royal Collection Trust n.d.). Both schools were considered the top art institutions of their time. For such prestigious schools to delay the admittance of women reveals the gender divides within European art. Consequently, opportunities

were limited to women, and only those from the upper ranks of society could access these facilities and establish themselves among the hallmarks of male artists (Royal Collection Trust n.d.). As described by Reina Lewis, there existed a "critical tendency to read paintings in relation to the person of the artist [which] relentlessly tied the assessment of women's work to their gender" (Lewis 1993: 54). Lewis captures the limited access female artists had to realms outside the "womanly, tender, delicate" spheres of art (Lewis 1993: 54). Orientalism was unique in that female artists could continue painting within the domestic narrative despite being far from the realm of European domesticity. As this paper will explore, their gender enabled them to produce harem paintings that became favoured over the male reproductions of the restricted site. Far from the realms of the domestic sphere, women could engage with the representation of colonial relations in the Middle East in a nuanced way. Orientalism showcases the unique intersection between gender, race, and imperialism. Due to their unique social context and gendered expectations, women's Oriental art forms a distinct strand within the genre of Orientalism.

Europe's female orientalist painters

Henriette Browne, a notable nineteenth-century French painter shifted the trajectory of her artwork after visiting the Orient. Browne is one of the few French female artists from the time whose paintings as well as their critical receptions, remain accessible today. Browne began her career by painting the domestic narrative (A. B. 1860). In the late 1850s, Browne accompanied her husband to the Orient as part of the "French diplomatic presence" (Lewis 1993: 53-56). Consequently, Browne had access to guides and valuable introductions allowing her entry to restricted spaces, including the harem (Lewis 1993). Upon her return to France, Browne's artistic trajectory shifted. From her paintings of nuns and children's portraiture, Browne exhibited two distinctly Orientalist paintings at the Paris Salon in 1861 (Lewis 1993). This paper will analyse *A Visit* and *A Flute Player*, both of which were painted in response to her recent journey to the East. Inconsistent with her early oeuvre, Browne's Orientalist paintings stimulated conversation in the art world as their beloved "respectable lady artist" began to engage in the "morally contentious field of Orientalism" (Lewis 1996: 127).

Figure 1. Henriette Browne. A Visit: A Harem Interior, 1861. Oil on canvas, 29.5cm x 41cm.[2]

Perhaps Browne's most well-known Orientalist painting – and conceivably the most well-known painting across her entire oeuvre – *A Visit* captures the interior scene of a harem. The contrast between the women's vibrant dresses and the plain, modest interior of the harem draws the viewer's eyes. Neither are particularly extravagant nor lavish. The women's clothing is simple and contrasts the scantily dressed Oriental women in Ingres and Rosati's harem depictions.[3] Consequently, Browne depicts her Oriental women as modest, respectable ladies. Moreover, she paints the women in different colours, suggesting their individuality. The harem as a physical space is minimalist and favours functionality over aesthetic value. The plain, unfurnished room functions as a backdrop to demonstrate the sociability of these women rather than reducing its subjects to a dehumanised detail

2 Sotheby's. n.d. "Henriette Browne | A Visit: A Harem Interior." Accessed February 26, 2025. https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2020/the-orientalist-sale/henriette-browne-a-visit-a-harem-interior.
3 I refer here to Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Odalisque with Slave*, 1839 and Giulio Rosati's *The Harem Dance*, date unknown.

within an exotic landscape. The incorporation of ideas of motherhood through the symbolism of the child provides an iconographic link between the Orient and the Occident as the space becomes emblematic of a Western domestic sphere. As Lewis summarises, Browne "sidesteps the myth and socialises rather than sexualises the harems petrified space" (Lewis 1993: 62). Imperial society received Browne's painting with both criticism and endorsement.

The perception of Browne's paintings largely depended on the belief that she visited a harem. Whether she attended these spaces remains uncertain. However, this perceived knowledge distinguishes Browne from her male counterparts as her access to these restricted spaces enabled her to paint beyond her usual domestic, European subjects. After the painting's showcase in the Paris Salon, critics swarmed to both endorse and denounce her bold "threat to long cherished fantasies" of the Oriental harem (Lewis 1993: 56). Hector de Callias reproaches "the artist for opposing herself to Decamps' encrusted and engraved walls," criticising Browne's depiction of a minimalist interior as opposed to the lavish interiors painted by Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (Callias 1861: 241-242)[4]. In contrast, Théophile Gautier claims that "*A Visit* finally shows us the inside of a harem by someone who has seen it, a rare and perhaps unique thing, because, although male painters often paint odalisques, none of them can boast of having worked from life" (Gautier 1861: 73-74)[5]. Gautier goes on to analyse her technical skill; however, it is his attention to her role as a *female* Orientalist artist that is more telling. By contrasting her perceived intimacy with the harem against the fantasies of her male counterparts, Gautier presents *A Visit* as a visual report and accurate depiction of the space. Browne's 'objective' depiction of the harem positions it as a social space which imbues a sense of normalcy rather than exoticism because of her gendered interaction with the Orient. Moreover, the public fascination with a womanly depiction of a womanly space reiterates the intersection between gender, race, and imperialism that works to create a new, feminine genre of the Orientalist imperial discourse.

4 Translation provided by Reina Lewis in her article "Only Women should go to Turkey," from 1993, 57-58.
5 Translated from French to English via DeepL.

Figure 2: Henriette Browne. A Flute Player, 1861. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown.[6]

A Flute Player similarly captures the sociability of the harem. Modestly dressed women gather around a female musician as she entertains them. Notably, the entertainer is also fully clothed, unlike other paintings of similar scenes by men.[7] Unlike her other paintings, the Oriental clothes in *A Flute Player* are more pronounced with the addition of face coverings and simple turban head accessories. While Browne is consciously de-sexualising her Oriental women, she simultaneously distinguishes them from European society by signifying their exotic dress. Browne paints the harem as a social area where women can engage in entertainment and conversation. In doing so, Browne situates the harem as a space where women lived their everyday lives, albeit in a different manner to European women. Moreover, the entertainer's presence contradicts the idea that Oriental women were secluded from the world (Lewis 1993). Interestingly, Browne's Oriental women seem bored and dejected. Consequently, Browne does not challenge the male narrative that depicts Oriental women as idle, unintelligent individuals. Browne clearly distinguishes her harem representation from the

6 Image via Julia Kuehn's article "Exotic Harem Paintings: Gender, Documentation, and Imagination," from 2011, 38.
7 I refer here to Giulio Rosati's *The Harem Dance*, date unknown.

erotic, sexually charged male depictions. However, Browne's exoticisation of the harem reveals the influence of the Western gaze on her reproduction of the Orient.

A Flute Player received similar mixed criticism. Luc-Olivier Merson, a French academic and critic, rather than question her access to the harem, attempts to reduce the influence of her work by noting it was one among many Orientalist paintings (Merson 1861).

> "Instead of diamond palaces and rejuvenated Alhambras, marble basins and gushing fountains, sumptuous rugs and naked odalisques rolling about in their pearled costumes, on piles of cushions or mosaics, we see a room that is austere and serious, without ornamentation, with colonnettes and white-washed walls, a mat unwinding on the flags, a divan dominating all around, and populated with silent women, bored, somnolently graceful, chaste in the muslin of their long robes which outline their fragile and languid bodies" (Merson 1861: 275-276).[8]

Merson's critique is explicit – she has broken the unspoken rules of Orientalist representation by which men had adhered before her. Browne's 'deviation' from Orientalist conventions is what critics frequently return to, as seen in comments on her minimalist interior. Merson concludes by "confess[ing] that these pictures disturb our Oriental dreams a little" (Merson 1861: 276).[9] It becomes clear just how reluctant the male-dominated art world and imperial discourse were to give up their 'Oriental dream'. Female Orientalist artists were faced with a double-edged sword – not only were they encouraged by critics such as Gautier for their invaluable insight, but they were also resisted by others for their opposition to the everyday discourse. Browne's Orientalist paintings are evidence of one of the first female ventures into the male-dominated imperialist discourse (Kuehn 2011a). Her (perceived) access to and reproduction of a site forbidden to European men signifies an intervention in the imperial male Orientalist fantasy. Browne's success stems from her high status within the French art scene and her ability to continue painting within the domestic narrative. Browne's painting forced critics to recognise her ability as a woman to contribute uniquely to the Oriental discourse. The mixed reception of her work demonstrates the conversation her painting

[8] Translated from French to English via DeepL.
9 Translated from French to English via DeepL.

produced regarding the role of women in a male-dominated landscape. Browne was not alone in painting the Oriental harem as seen through the works of Margaret Murray Cookesley.

British painter Margaret Murray Cookesley travelled to the Middle East at the end of the nineteenth century. Consequently, she produced an extensive oeuvre centred around Orientalism, challenging the conception that British Orientalist art was "lesser known" and "less prolific" (Kuehn 2011b: 169). Where Browne's work found its way into art galleries, Cookesley's extensive collection, as well as being exhibited in the Royal Academy, was intended for the mass market. With less pressure to conform to the expectations of the orthodox French art scene, Cookesley created a substantial oeuvre of Oriental women which challenged the male eroticised aesthetic.

Figure 3: Margaret Murray Cookesley. *Entertainment in the Harem*, 1894. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown.[10]

[10] Image via Julia Kuehn's article "Visual Hybridity: Margaret Murray Cookesley's Orientalist Aestheticism," from 2011, 183.

Figure 4: Margaret Murray Cookesley. *Idle Moments,* 1894. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown.[11]

Both *Entertainment in the Harem* and *Idle Moments* reveal something Browne's paintings never did. Cookesley was intent on capturing the emotions of the Oriental woman (Kuehn 2011b). Her aesthetic vision was to express ideas of contemplation, passion, sisterhood, and belonging (Kuehn 2011b). Both scenes exude a sense of humanity and platonic intimacy as the women converse and entertain one another. The result is a gendered, feminine development of the harem genre, which aims to humanise rather than eroticise its subject. Similarly to Browne, Cookesley depicts the harem as a simple, modest space that facilitates the social interaction of the women who reside within it. However, contemporary scholars including Reina Lewis, criticise her work for "reproduce[ing] the generic codes of Orientalism that were challenged by the work of other women artists like Browne" (Lewis 1996: 118). I would challenge this judgment. While the painting undoubtedly leans into Orientalist tropes – the women are handsome, and their skin remains exposed to the viewer – particularly in comparison to the modestly dressed women in Browne's paintings. However, situated

[11] Image via Julia Kuehn's article "Visual Hybridity: Margaret Murray Cookesley's Orientalist Aestheticism," from 2011, 183.

within the domestic setting, which alludes to harmony, sisterhood, and community, the physical representation of the Oriental woman lacks the same sexualisation and eroticisation of male reproductions. Cookesley simultaneously animates and humanises her Oriental women, providing an alternative to the passive, lifeless oriental woman.

The Art Journal recognised Cookesley's work for its intensely humanistic value, seen in the women's "swollen features, glazed eyes and a certain ecstatic insincerity" (Kuehn 2011b: 178).[12] While there is a condemnatory undertone to the response, the critic betrays their acknowledgement of Cookesley's artistic abilities to express emotion and thus humanise rather than sexualise the Oriental woman. Reina Lewis considers Cookesley's reception in the Royal Academy as "quietly received" (Lewis 1996: 118). However, Cookesley's paintings *did* find their presence firmly within the private buyer's market. Even today, Cookesley's paintings continue to make appearances in auction houses around Britain and France, revealing the continued recognition of her work since the nineteenth century.[13] Thus, while Lewis harshly criticises her work, I would suggest Cookesley made a significant contribution to the British Orientalist narrative. Not only did she successfully restore a sense of humanity to the eroticised and mindless Oriental woman, but Cookesley's reimagined harem found its place within the buyer market, revealing its role in the imperialist discourse as a widely consumed, popular artefact of Orientalist expression.

Eliza Florence Bridell-Fox was an upper-class Englishwoman. As the daughter of an esquire and member of parliament, Fox had access to a good education and went on to study at Sass's School (Clayton 1876). The Royal Academy showcased her work, quickly establishing her name within the British art scene (Clayton 1876). Like Browne, Fox's early work was concerned with the domestic narrative. After her husband's death, Fox travelled to Algeria, a French colony, to study the "native Arab life" (Clayton 1876: 86). Only one of her paintings produced during her time in Algeria was showcased around London galleries, yet its influence on the primitive British female art scene

[12] The Art Journal as quoted in Kuehn's article "Visual Hybridity: Margaret Murray Cookesley's Orientalist Aestheticism," from 2011. Restricted access to original source therefore this indirect quotation is used.
13 See auction website: https://www.invaluable.com/artist/cookesley-margaret-murray-yvkz0jr5kc/sold-at-auction-prices/?srsltid=AfmBOoqQbcSeXk3v0CE1A3DL6eHkLq208ngjdAc0OlpdFO83XRvDrRG3. Provides records of Cookesley's paintings in circulation across auction houses including Christie's, Sotheby's and Tajan.

remains significant. Unfortunately, of her vast oeuvre of Algerian portraits, few remain accessible. Consequently, this essay is limited to analysing only one of her paintings.

Figure 5: Eliza Florence Bridell-Fox. *Untitled*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 49.5 cm x 42 cm.[14]

As the painting was never titled, there are limitations to what can be presumed of this work. However, the painting was likely inspired by Fox's visit to Algeria, during which she painted many portraits of local Algerian women (Mayfair Gallery n.d.). Fox paints the woman within the seclusion of what appears to be a harem or *riad*, the garden courtyard typically associated with Moroccan and Algerian architecture (Oxford English Dictionary 2023). Again, the truth of the subject is not what matters – rather, Fox painted an Oriental woman as she lounged in her private, domestic sphere. The space is light as the sun filters in, and similarly to Browne and Cookesley, the walls are plain. The only decoration is the tapestry or rug beside the modestly dressed woman. The lack of idealisation makes the painting stand apart from other Oriental works. Interestingly, the colour

[14] Mayfair Gallery. n.d. "Antique Orientalist Oil Painting By Bridell-Fox, 1865." Accessed December 30, 2025. https://www.mayfairgallery.com/antique-orientalist-oil-painting-bridell-fox-1865.

palette parallels Browne's as the two artists paint their Oriental women in natural and un-exotic tones to avoid placing her within a fantasy realm. Unlike Browne and Cookesley's paintings, Fox has only one subject rather than a bustling scene of socialising Oriental women. Likely due to her skill in portraiture, Fox's choice to paint the singular Oriental woman is striking for two reasons (Clayton 1876). Not many female artists, besides two paintings by French artist Louise Mercier, chose to paint their women alone, deciding instead to depict them in a social setting.[15] Secondly, unlike most portraits of Oriental women, Fox's subject is neither in the nude nor reclining seductively (Syed 2021; Roberts & Thomas 2007). Instead, she sits in a natural pose, dressed in unassuming attire, and she is neither staring in seductive challenge nor in shy dejection. The subject appears natural, almost akin to European portraiture, minus the Oriental backdrop and clothing.

A publication in The English Leader notes the exhibition of Fox's and Madame Bodichon's "Algerian pictures" (The English Leader 1866: 346). The brief review commends the exhibition for the "Algerian and Kabylian scenery, and the manners of the people are rendered by these paintresses with power and truth" (The English Leader 1866: 346). The critic goes on to note the fundamental role of women in painting the Oriental woman as male "artists in the East who attempts to make a sketch of a person in the street, is in danger of being knocked down" and "[o]nly the tact of women could enable them to get possession of the interesting pictures to be found in this exhibition" (The English Leader 1866: 346). The critic implies that all male reproductions of Oriental women came from the imagination and only *female* artists could paint their likeness. This reaction to Fox's painting betrays a broader acknowledgement of the unique space female artists occupied within the imperial discourse. Unlike Browne and Cookesley, Fox was mainly known as a portrait artist rather than an explicitly Orientalist one. Despite this, the reception of her painting demonstrates the valued role she and other female artists had in the broader scope of Orientalism. Where male artists would devote their entire profession to painting the Orient, women such as Fox were valued for their singular contributions. Their ability to render the restricted site of the harem extended the boundaries of Orientalism to include the productions of 'amateur' female artists due to their unique

15 Paintings referenced are Louise Mercier's *Portrait d'une orientale de Tanger*, 1883 and *Le repos de l'odalisque*, 1880.

gendered interaction with the Orient (Lewis 1996). Fox's contribution to the Orientalist narrative was discrete and yet possessed the ability to situate the importance of female Orientalist reproductions within the British imperial discourse in a single painting.

Conclusion

All three artists worked to shift the textual attitude of Orientalism away from the erotic image of the East. Due to their perceived access to the harem, these women were able to challenge the imperial male Orientalist fantasy. Consequently, Europe's Orientalist illusion could no longer function on the same models of mystery that had fuelled its construction. Moreover, through analysing the reception of their paintings, this essay has uncovered how gender became a point of discussion within the Oriental discourse. Female artists were not always homogenous in their depiction of the harem. As predicted by Lewis, "fragment[ation] and fray" existed at the ends of this "apparently neat counter-discourse" (Lewis 1996: 236). The diverse gendered response to the harem is captured through the unique paintings of Browne, Cookesley, and Fox.

This essay has revealed the diversity in the female Orientalist gaze, and how, just like men, women utilized their creative license to depict the Orient in response to their own experiences and views. Browne contributed to the French nationalist imperial identity, exhibiting her work in large galleries to nuance the national perception of the harem. Where Browne favoured a passive, almost muted depiction of the harem to explore its normalcy, Cookesley intended to capture the human emotions she found within its walls, including passion, curiosity, and compassion. Moreover, Cookesley found her strength in reimagining the popular Orientalist narrative through her significant contributions to the private market. Fox found her expression through portraiture, abandoning ideas of sociability to contemplate the more subtle ideas of humanity. In their unique ways, each artist has socialised rather than sexualised the harem, revealing the interplay between gender, race, and imperialism within the Orientalist narrative.

While their depictions may have differed, Browne, Cookesley, and Fox upheld their social credibility by continuing to paint within the domestic narrative. Interestingly, it was through their (perceived) unrestricted access to the harem that, because of their gender, women were almost required to paint

what no man could. Consequently, the Orientalist narrative invites female reproductions of the harem, a unique gender space that, for once, favours the input of women over men. While they were physically far from the European domestic life, their paintings continued to depict the intimate, feminine, motherly scenes within the Oriental harem. As such, they were poised, above their male counterparts, to capture the most mysterious aspects of Orientalism.

Finally, this essay has revealed the undeniable role women play in imperial discourse. Regrettably, before I began this research, I idealised the capabilities of the Western woman, anticipating her work would not engage in the objectification of Oriental women. While these women were caught within a unique gendered relationship with their subject (the harem), they were also part of a broader intersection between gender, race, and imperialism. Consequently, their Oriental reproductions cannot be separated from the respective French and British imperial interests. In varying degrees, the Victorian imperialist narrative can be found behind each artist's work, inextricably linking women to the colonialist discourse. Moreover, these female painters could not surrender the Western standard through which they viewed the harem. As such, the female Orientalist oeuvre this essay has analysed upholds ideas of imperialism, subjugation, and cultural superiority, *alongside* its successful de-sexualisation of the harem.

Thus, two things can be gleaned from this research: women were engaged in an active de-sexualisation of the harem *and*, in doing so, they established themselves in a relationship between gender, race, and empire. European women contributed to the imperial power relations by presenting their Oriental women as the 'other'. Consequently, while imperial society commissions European women to capture the truth of the harem, they simultaneously signposted the female culpability in upholding colonial power relations. The woman becomes a focal point in Oriental history as she sits at a crucial intersection between race, gender, and imperialism. These womanly depictions of womanly spaces thus become an important point through which history can reveal the involvement of women in the masculine phenomenon of imperialism and colonialism.

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