

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

---

2006

## The Female Captivity Narrative: Blood, Water, and Orientalism

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, [diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu](mailto:diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/english\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hoeveler, Diane, "The Female Captivity Narrative: Blood, Water, and Orientalism" (2006). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 81.

[https://epublications.marquette.edu/english\\_fac/81](https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/81)



## CHAPTER 2

# The Female Captivity Narrative

### *Blood, Water, and Orientalism*

DIANE LONG HOEVELER

It is in the Orient that we must search for the highest Romanticism.  
—Friedrich Schlegel

#### I. History

The story of how Europeans institutionalized, commodified, and controlled their anxious projections about Muslim “Others” is a long, complex, and ultimately tragic saga that the term “Orientalism” only partially conveys. Historians as well as literary, religious, political, and cultural critics have attempted for close to four hundred years to come to terms with the meaning of Islam and more broadly with the challenges that the Eastern world presents to the West. More importantly for the purposes of this essay, it is necessary to recognize that the binary model (Self/Other) adopted by Edward Said to define Orientalism has been challenged and modified by recent feminist literary critics as both gender and class-blind. Famously, Said has defined his understanding of the cultural practice of Orientalism as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3), while he has asserted that Orientalism is a discourse system that cannot be understood apart from recognizing it as “the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (3). For Said, there has never been an innocent use of the *topos* of the European in contact with Indians, Arabs, Turks, or Moors, for such a representation automatically places the spectator/reader in a binary system of difference and Otherness intended to “safeguard the legitimate interests” (100) of the West and contain, denigrate, or demonize the Oriental or, for my purposes in this essay, the Muslim. But Said certainly has had his critics and a number

of them have taken him to task for his blindness in regard to issues of gender, class, and methodology. For more recent critics like Lisa Lowe or Sara Suleri, Orientalism is not simply a rigid discourse system that remains static over long periods of time and space, or that privileges Self over Other, but instead Orientalism is a complex, multivalent, indeterminate, and heterogeneous narrative that needs to be situated in specific historical moments and national traditions in order to be understood.<sup>1</sup>

There is no question that Orientalism as a discourse system—whether viewed as binary or multivalent—is so vast and complex as to be intellectually unwieldy. But by narrowing one's focus to British (and to some extent French) Orientalism from approximately 1750 to 1800 one can examine at least one nexus of texts. This essay will address some of the texts written during this period by women or about women as captives of Muslims, and doing so, I think, will reveal a strong element of Christian anxiety and superiority as well as clear if not virulent anti-Islamic sentiments. Obviously an essay of this length cannot address all aspects of the non-Western world, nor do I have the space to consider Hinduism or the impact of Hinduism on Europe post-William Jones.

As Daniel J. Vitkus has recently noted, the early modern period (from the late sixteenth century through the seventeenth century) was characterized by a "violent contradiction: the old forces of ethnocentric, sectarian and nationalist feeling produced a repulsion for the alien, while at the same time the attractive forces of colonial land, valuable commodities and the general appeal of the exotic drew English culture out to mix with other cultures beyond their shores." For Vitkus, English culture during this period "produced representations of exotic, cross-cultural encounters and conversions that sought desperately to define English identity in an increasingly unstable context. For the early modern English, one of the most anxious and conflicted cross-cultural exchanges was the encounter with Islamic culture, in both the Ottoman dominions and in the Barbary States of North Africa" (1999, 23). Viewed as a false system of belief founded by a false prophet, Islam was demonized as the dark and yet seductive and attractive "Other" to Christianity, reflected in a variety of literary texts as if in a distorting fun-house mirror. If Christianity was the true religion of the blood, then Islam was presented as a cult built on water: ephemeral, fleeting, and ultimately deceptive.

This essay will take up what I will call the story of blood and water in 1479, when the coregents Ferdinand and Isabella, in their intense desire to unify the warring factions and contentious states of Spain, attempted to impose religious conformity throughout their territories. In short, they revived the Spanish Inquisition in Seville, a city that the Orientalizing Byron

would celebrate in 1818 as the birthplace of Don Juan, his last poetic alter ego. The first targets of the Spanish Inquisition were Jews, and specifically the issue that concerned the Inquisition was the suspect sincerity of Jews as recently converted Christians (called alternately *Marranos* or *Conversos*), whose only chance of remaining in Spain required a sudden change of heart about their hereditary religious and cultural allegiances. In 1481, Muslims living in Spain became the next target, and by 1492, when Granada, the last Moorish stronghold on the peninsula, fell to the Catholic monarchs, the Muslims found themselves outcasts in the country they had ruled since 711 CE. Like the Jews, Muslims initially had the option to convert to Christianity and become what was known as *Moriscos*, but again their original religious identity was believed to be inscribed in their blood, and as such, they, like the Jews, were viewed as possessing “tainted blood” (the word *marrano* originally meant “swine,” but in the Arabic root the meaning is actually “prohibited thing” or “outsider,” or one who refused to eat the prohibited thing, pork; Crow, 142–44). Although there was a widespread practice of intermarriage between “old” Christians and *Moriscos* or *Marranos*, the possession of *sangre pura* (or untainted blood) became the new standard by which class status and national loyalty were defined in Spain (Crow, 144). From this point on, “blood” becomes shorthand for not simply family heredity and lineage, but for nationality and full political and religious membership in the newly modern nation-state and, as such, it assumes privileged status in not just Spanish consciousness, but throughout Christian Europe as well.

All Jewish-*Marranos* (at least 150,000) were expelled from Spain in 1492, and the ax fell on Muslim-*Moriscos* in 1609, when they were herded onto ships, transported to Morocco, and unceremoniously dumped there (Crow, 224). This horrific scene actually was a reversed mirror image of the events of 1126, when the Muslims, then rulers of Spain, deported thousands of Christians to Morocco as slaves (Carr, 84). The Muslim presence in Spain had been strong for over seven hundred years, so strong in fact that the forces of the Islamic Umayyad dynasty pushed to within two hundred miles of Paris and were finally defeated in their bid to control France by Charles Martel in 732 at the Battle of Poitiers. In short, Spain—and by extension Europe—lived with a powerful Islamic presence within its midst until the sixteenth century. Sometimes referred to as the “Asiatic tidal wave,” Islam was more technologically advanced than Rome and its mathematical and technological discoveries threatened to leave early modern Christian Europe a backwater (Said, 74). As Albert Hourani has noted, Westerners considered the Muslim East threatening because it embodied an alternative culture that was frighteningly close to home (10–11). The persistent presence of Oriental despots, corrupt prophets, religious fanatics, noble Arab nomads, and las-

civious Oriental houris could be seen on the London stage throughout the Renaissance, as all of them were featured endlessly in a number of dramatic productions (cf. Chew; Barbour). But in addition to these flat and stereotypical characters there were also portrayals of the renegade, the convert, or the shepherd turned emperor, "all figures that embody cultural flexibility, mobility, and adaptability. In the early modern period, the cross-cultural exchanges that took place in the Mediterranean were particularly paradoxical in their fusion of oppositionality and mutuality, autonomy and dependency. . . . [V]arious binarisms (English-foreign, friend-enemy, black-white, Christian-infidel) are broken down and deconstructed as often as they are upheld" (Vitkus 2003, 22–23).

In 1571 the Ottoman Empire was finally dealt a serious blow by the Spanish navy at the Battle of Lepanto, a siege also famous for the presence of Cervantes as a foot soldier (Carr, 161). Although not yet exactly the "sick man of Europe," the Ottoman Empire never fully recovered from this defeat, at least as a power in the West, and from this point on it existed uneasily on the fringes of European borders as well as its consciousness. Certainly its continued presence as a threatening, hyperbolic construction in a variety of literary texts suggests the persistent historical power of this once-powerful and feared anti-Christian force. As Alain Grosrichard has observed, by the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth century, Christian critics

[v]ied to discredit it [Islam] as a religion and set it in opposition to the "true religion." But anathema and insult were replaced by arguments and explanatory accounts of a historical, geographical, climactic, sociological or political nature. If Mahomet was able to install this power wherein an entire people were enslaved to the letter of his Law, it was because he was able to turn skillfully to his own advantage a situation of division, and exploit the character and natural inclinations of those who heard him: a burning-hot climate, making them tend towards a laziness of mind and a lasciviousness of body, had ever prepared them to accept the doctrine of predestination, and to propel them fiercely towards a belief in a purely carnal paradise, to the point where they wished to die for their religion in order to reach it all the more quickly. (Grosrichard, 106)

Faced with a religion that would encourage political martyrdom for the sake of sexually possessing virgins in the afterlife, Christians viewed Muslims as irrational fanatics, as antithetical to membership in a system of rationalistic, secularized nation-states. Further, Grosrichard reveals how Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau presented Islam as not simply an authoritarian religion, but also as a politically despotic system. For the Western Enlightenment

political theorist, it was necessary to construct an elaborately seductive and phantasmagoric Orient (the sultan's court, the seraglio, oriental rugs, perfumes, spices, etc.) to serve as an analogy to the corruption that could also be found in Western despotic monarchies (specifically the courts of Louis XIV and Louis XVI). But by doing so, they created in their writings a new Enlightenment ideal, a constitutional government that could be set against and above both the Western absolutist monarchies and Eastern corrupt feudal states.

There is a certain amount of persistent bad faith, however, in both the British and French attempts to position themselves as crusaders against the dark and basely primitive forces of Islam. Both countries had long been practitioners of slavery themselves, while Napoleon had restored slavery and the slave trade in the French colonies in 1802 and the British did not abolish the slave trade until January 1, 1808. My contention is that in many ways Orientalist texts written in the late eighteenth century were specifically written to function as distracting mechanisms. By demonizing Islam and highlighting its sinister crimes and by employing the rhetorics of suppression and displacement, these texts became an effective means of allowing their readers the luxury of avoiding an honest and critical examination of their own society's flaws. In other words, female captivity narratives or narratives about white women living as captives in Islamic harems constituted a way of refusing to address forms of racial, social, and sexual discriminations that were actually endemic within the body of Europe itself.

Not all Orientalist texts, of course, avoided the ugly and unpleasant subject of slavery. Hannah Cowley's *A Day in Turkey; or Russian Slaves: A Comedy* (1791) ostensibly explores the complicated political maneuvering conducted by Russia, France, Turkey, and Britain during the earlier part of 1791 when Russia seized the Crimea and the Ottoman Empire sunk further into its status as "the sick man of Europe." Using conventional Orientalist tropes borrowed from Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Sultan* (performed 1775; published 1787), Cowley's play differs from that earlier work by addressing the subject of slavery straightforwardly. At one point in the play one of the Turkish characters notes that Christians themselves own slaves "in one of the northern islands" and that such a fact proves "by act of parliament that freedom is no blessing at all" (10; quoted in Cirakman, 163). Another Turk sarcastically observes that Christians have proven that slavery has a sexual as well as an economic motivation and that it suits only those with dark complexions, not whites: "Pretty creatures as this [a Circassian, a white Russian slave] they'd think it a blessing to give every freedom and take every freedom" (10; quoted in Cirakman, 163). Although the play uses some of the same devices that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had employed earlier in

her *Letters*, pointing out the analogies between East and West, *A Day in Turkey* goes further in confronting London audiences with their own political, social, racial, and sexual hypocrisies. As such, it caused a critical furor and never gained a royal audience (O'Quinn, 19).

## II. Vignettes

Villain, I fear you not, I'll sacrifice you to preserve my Vertue; die Infidel, and tell your blasphemous Prophet, when you come to Hell, a Christian spilt your Blood.

—Penelope Aubin, *The Noble Slaves* (1722)

In the autumn of 1678 the French playwright Jean-François Regnard (1655–1709) was enjoying a pleasant sea voyage aboard a British Royal Navy frigate sailing along the Italian coast. Regnard thought he was making his way to Marseilles from Rome, but off the coast of Corsica, his ship was attacked by Saracen pirates, and Regnard and a French noblewoman on board the ship, Madame de Prade, were taken to Algeria and sold as slaves to the sultan, Achmet-Talem. In addition to being the successful author of *Le Légataire universel* (*The Sole Heir*), Regnard luckily possessed culinary skills, and he was immediately employed in the sultan's kitchen; in addition, he had a resourceful family that within ten months was able to raise the twelve-thousand-pound ransom necessary for his release and return to France. The fate of Madame de Prade, however, was not so fortunate. Consigned to the sultan's harem and never heard from again, her figure haunted the margins of French and British culture, so potent that more than one hundred years later the British hypochondriac Tobias Smollett refused to travel by sea to Nice, preferring to take a donkey overland instead (Ted Jones, xii–xiii, 212).

The horrific example of women like Madame de Prade could not have survived in British cultural consciousness, however, without the literary assistance of Penelope Aubin (1679–1731), one of the most potent exponents of the plight of the besieged and sexually ravished noblewoman. Aubin was the author of *The Noble Slaves: Being an Entertaining History of the Surprising Adventures, and Remarkable Deliverances, from Algerine Slavery, of Several Spanish Noblemen and Ladies of Quality* (1722; six printings), so popular that it was reprinted in both England and America over the next two hundred years. Almost as successful and sensational were her *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil and His Family; Being an account of what happened to them whilst they resided at Constantinople* (1721; three printings), as well as *The Life and Amorous Adventures of Lucinda* (1722) and *The Life of Charlotta*



*Du Pont* (1723), all of which employed a few choice scenarios of disaster on the high seas: kidnappings, as well as extended stints in Algerian harems or slave markets as part and parcel of these women in jeopardy narratives (cf. Baer). As Snader notes, Aubin “focuses on continental captives, especially passive noblemen, proselytizing priests, and women, character types that are essentially absent from factual accounts of Barbary captivity” (2000, 149). In doing so, she created a new genre of female-authored captivity narratives that sought to present female mastery over Oriental culture by heroines who adapt their clothing, alter their skin color, and skillfully outwit and outmaneuver their Muslim captors.

But Aubin’s novels are not simply innocent escapist fare. Like the Barbary captivity narratives that had been published in England since the 1580s, Aubin’s later novels attempted to represent Islam as a threat to British shipping and trading interests in the Mediterranean, and they developed a highly insular, self-assertive, self-controlled, and individualistic heroine who was complicit with the British colonialist agenda (Snader 2000, 149). According to Snader, Aubin’s *The Noble Slaves* was the first female-authored work to advance the nationalistic and individualistic ideologies of the British as opposed to an Orient that was a zone of “polymorphous, uncontrollable, and predacious sexuality” (2000, 150). In her preface to the novel Aubin makes this explicit when she observes:

In our nation, where the Subjects are born free, where Liberty and Property is so preserv’d to us by laws, that no Prince can enslave us, the Notion of Slavery is a perfect Stranger. We cannot think without Horror, of the Miseries that attend those, who, in countries where the Monarchs are absolute, and standing armies awe the People, are made slaves to others. The Turks and Moors have been ever famous for these Cruelties. . . . There the Monarch gives a loose to his Passions, and thinks it no Crime to keep as many Women for his Use, as his lustful Appetite excites him to like. (x; quoted in Snader 2000, 150)

Eliza Haywood quickly followed Aubin into the field, producing a series of novels that presented still more variations on the captivity plot, and sometimes showed Oriental captors to be more humane than Europeans. In such works as *Idalia* (1723), *The Fruitless Enquiry* (1727), and *Philidore and Placentia* (1727), Haywood highlights the skills of an aggressive female heroine who finds herself sometimes at the mercy of Oriental despots or who sometimes welcomes their kindnesses after brushes with European brutes. The variety in her works, however, belies a consistent theme: “[T]he European woman in the seraglio appears not as a suffering protagonist, not





**Figure 7.** French postcard of Algerian woman.  
Reproduced with kind permission of the University  
of Minnesota Press.

as a determined captive fighting for her chastity and national integrity, but as a figure of illicit carnality and despotism, corrupted and empowered by a dangerous sexual system” (Snader 2000, 160).

Other critics, notably Michelle Burnham and G. A. Starr, have tried to trace the origins of captivity narratives to either the rise of the sentimental genre, the secularized spiritual autobiographical tradition, or to the capitalist, progressive ideologies emerging at this time. Given the wealth of cultural, religious, social, and economic influences that were converging, I would argue that the female captivity narrative (fact or fiction) participated in a larger ideological and cultural project: making the world safe for British Christians who happened to find themselves traveling to foreign ports, that is, engaged in imperialistic enterprises that were by definition risky business. In short, British women writers—so pointedly ignored by Said—were complicitous in advancing what I would label a female imperialist *gaze* toward the Oriental sphere. This female *gaze* is complicated, however, in its assumption of two contradictory positions. On one hand, it is imperialistic, not simply in its support for British naval outposts throughout the Mediterranean,

but also in its sarcastic and derogatory contempt for the social, religious, and political organization of the Muslim world. More specifically, British middle-class women writers like Aubin, Haywood, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Elizabeth Marsh were particularly critical of Islam's perceived denigration of women. On the other hand, the Western female *gaze* is exotic, erotic, and deeply masochistic in its presentation of women's bodies as dehumanized, fetishized, part-objects designed to appeal to an aggressive Islamic male *gaze*. Perhaps no better visual depiction captures this second, abjected position better than figure 7, a late-nineteenth-century picture postcard produced in Algeria and intended for French male tourists.<sup>2</sup>

There certainly can be no doubt that Europeans experienced a very real fear of the Muslim world, but fear is less than half the story. In addition, there was throughout Europe an intense vogue for all things with an Orientalist flavor and this can be seen by considering yet another telling historical vignette. In 1781, Emperor Joseph II began to prepare for a state visit from Grand Duke Paul Petrovich of Russia, with whom he was to negotiate a secret agreement that would enable Russia and Austria to claim parts of the Ottoman Empire for themselves. In order to entertain the visiting Russian, Joseph requested that Mozart write an opera with a Turkish theme, and the result was Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*). Adapting Christoph Friedrich Bretzner's earlier story *Belmont und Constanze*, Mozart and his librettist Gottlieb Stephanie the Younger created a light-hearted romp through a harem, complete with an endangered and kidnapped heroine, Konstanze, sexually threatened by the pasha and rescued by her lover, Belmonte, only to become captive once again when she falls into the clutches of the evil and scheming overseer of the harem, Osmin. As Nicholas Till has observed, the opera was commissioned with the express intention of inflaming the Russian diplomat, and "would serve the emperor's propagandist campaign against the Turks." The locus of the most intense popular interest in the opera was precisely in its campy presentation of the Turkish harem, fascinating and terrifying in its configuration as a highly charged, polygamist site of the polymorphously perverse. Mozart's opera was tremendously popular upon its premiere, and its tropes of capture and escape were, of course, repeated in such gothic rescue operas as Cherubini's *Lodoiska*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Rossini's *Italian in Algiers*, and Weber's *Oberon*.<sup>3</sup>

If Orientalist opera was one potent site of ideological struggle between the European and the Muslim worlds, literature was another, earlier venue for the spread of Orientalist sexual stereotypes. For instance, Frances Sheridan's *History of Nourjahad* (1767) is one of many examples of the literary Orientalist fantasy so popular in England throughout the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. Nourjahad, Prince Schemzeddin's favorite courtier, finds himself under what he thinks is the enchantment of immortality. He cannot die, but only periodically sleep and awake after many years, suddenly finding his young harem women have become old crones while he himself is perpetually young and hence continually forced to be on the market for new flesh. This particular Orientalist fantasy indulges in gross Eastern stereotypes and some very heavy-handed Western morality, but finally it is less about the Orient than it is about a Western woman's fear of aging and finding herself replaced by the next season's new and improved model of female flesh. In short, by the time Sheridan was writing, the Oriental tale had become so conventional that it essentially functioned as a blank screen onto which British authors could project their own particular political, social, religious, or sexual anxieties. Like Beckford's *Vathek* or Byron's *Giaour*, the Oriental tale constructed an abjected territory, an alien Eden that was fallen, sinful, and perverse.<sup>4</sup>

The situation was not much different in France, as witnessed by the fact that Voltaire's most popular drama, *The Tragedy of Zara* (1733), is an Orientalist saga concerned with a family of kidnapped Christian slaves living uneasily in a Turkish compound. The protagonists, Zara and her brother Nerestan, were captured as children and forced to convert to Islam, although Zara continued to wear an ornamental cross around her neck as a talismanic reminder of her true identity. Nerestan was never willing to forfeit his Christian identity, however, and as a young man requested permission to return to France in order to raise the funds necessary to ransom ten of the Christian slaves being held, including his sister and an elderly man he knew only as Lusignan, descended from the ancient kings of Jerusalem. In her brother's absence, Zara has fallen in love with Osman, the sultan's son, and agrees to marry him when he promises that Zara will be his only wife and empress. The plot takes both gothic and melodramatic turns, however, when Lusignan recognizes the cross around Zara's neck as the one worn by his long-lost daughter, while the scars on Nerestan allow the old man next to identify his son as well. With the family circle now complete, both father and son are appalled at the idea of Zara marrying a Muslim, and they insist that she be baptized (again?) in secret before her marriage takes place. Suspicious about her request to delay their nuptials, Osman follows Zara to her clandestine baptism, thinks she is meeting another lover, and stabs her, declaring: "This to thy heart—'Tis not the traitor, meet thee, / 'Tis the betray'd—who write it, in thy blood" (V.i.60). Blood is foregrounded again shortly later when Osman needs to see and touch Zara's blood in order to believe that she is truly dead. At Nerestan's reappearance, he also focuses on the primacy of his blood in understanding the monstrosity of his sister's murder by the Mus-

lim: "She was my sister—All, that, now, is left thee, / Dispatch—From my distracted heart, drain, next, / The remnant of the royal, christian, blood" (Vi.61). Lusignan dies immediately from grief upon hearing the news of his daughter's murder and, unable to forgive himself, Osman commits suicide, declaring: "Tell 'em—with this, I murder'd her, her, I lov'd; / The noblest, and most virtuous, among women! / The soul of innocence, and pride of truth! / Tell 'em I laid my empire at her feet; / Tell 'em, I plung'd my dagger in her blood; / Tell 'em, I so ador'd—and, thus, reveng'd her" (Vi.62). Loosely translated into English by Aaron Hill three years after its French premiere, *Zara* was performed well into the mid-nineteenth century throughout England.

Another one of Voltaire's Orientalist dramas, *Mahomet: ou le Fanatisme*, also bears scrutiny as a point of contrast to *Zara*. *Mahomet* was not as popular, and, indeed, it was censored not simply in 1742 but again in 1994 when a revival was attempted in Geneva. Many literary critics have claimed that Voltaire was not attacking Mohammed in this play, rather that his main targets, thinly disguised, were religious fanatics in general, and Christian fanatics in particular. When the play was first performed in Paris on August 9, 1742, Catholic Jansenists suspected that they were actually the intended objects of Voltaire's barbs, and they complained to the authorities who quietly pressured Voltaire to close the production. But there is also no denying the fact that *Mahomet* is presented in the play as a fraud, a lecherous adulterer, and a manipulator of people weak enough to be duped, and it was—significantly—Muslims who censored the 1994 performance, not Christians. As Voltaire observed about his creation of the antihero *Mahomet*:

I have made *Mahomet* in this tragedy guilty of a crime which in reality he was not capable of committing. The count de *Boulainvilliers*, some time since, wrote the life of this prophet, whom he endeavored to represent as a great man, appointed by Providence to punish the Christian world, and change the face of at least one-half of the globe. Mr. Sale likewise . . . has given us an excellent translation of the Koran into English. . . . [But] for a driver of camels to stir up a faction in his village; to associate himself with a set of wretched Koreish . . . to boast that he was carried up to heaven, and there received part of that unintelligible book which contradicts common sense in every page; that in order to procure respect for this ridiculous performance he should carry fire and sword into his country, murder fathers and ravish their daughters—this is surely what no man will pretend to vindicate, unless he was born a Turk, and superstition had totally extinguished in him the light of nature. (*Mahomet*, 10)

For Voltaire, all manner of “superstition” is heinous, but clearly Islam is demonized for both its military (“murdering fathers”) and its sexual practices (the “ravishing of daughters”), two emphases that recur throughout British fictions published in this period. Seeing the play as a successor to Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (*Persian Letters*, 1721), Angela Pao recognizes that *Mahomet* “criticize[s] aspects of contemporary French society [and also] participat[es] in a pre-colonial Orientalist discourse that would eventually be used to support the French invasion and colonization of the Middle East and North Africa” (59). And certainly it is no surprise that British Orientalist works of the same period were used to shore up Britain’s claims to Gibraltar, Mallorca, and Minorca, and eventually led to an empire that stretched around the globe.

### III. Theories

The Islamic claim to supercede a flawed and incomplete Christianity was an unthinkable phenomenon, and so it was denied in various ways, including a definition of Islam as a “pagan” misbelief akin to other forms of idolatrous paganism that Western Europeans associated with the Middle East.

—Vitkus 1999, 208

Religion clearly stands as one of the central issues in much Orientalist literature, but I intend now to focus on the representations of women within this displaced religious discourse, women as objects of the Islamic male gaze, as well as Western women as gazers on the harem, the site of privileged male activity. Emily Apter has argued that the harem genre itself functioned as a “cultural supplement” for the West, a site of voyeuristic and scopophilic fulfillment of desires that were repressed in Europe (“Female Trouble,” 219). For Reina Lewis, the harem genre “mirrors the ambivalence of colonial discourse itself—simultaneously shoring up and challenging a vision of absolute phallic power” (2002, 112), while Sarah Mills claims that women who produced Orientalist travel accounts were already influenced by the “always-mediated nature of representation,” so that they could only depict women travelers as empathetic, personal, and emotional rather than objective, scientific, and rational (99). These various attempts to understand the complex representation of the harem are certainly provocative and useful, but none of them addresses the class or religious—the *sangre pura*—issues in the way that I think they need to be recognized.

I would claim instead that this fabulously constructed Eastern harem was also the literary site of a highly charged ideological struggle between

upper- and middle-class British writers, all of whom attempted to appropriate this contested sexual and religious terrain for their own purposes. For an aristocratic writer like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu arriving in Turkey in 1717, women in Eastern harems were “free,” powerful, and independent (see Dubino’s essay in this volume), while for a distinctly middle-class woman writer like Elizabeth Marsh, author of the little-known *The Female Captive*, women in the Eastern harem were either pawns or abused sex slaves. Writing to her sister Lady Mar, Montagu waves the banner of religious tolerance by proclaiming, “As to their Morality or good Conduct, I can say like Arlequin ’tis just as ’tis with you, and the Turkish Ladys don’t commit one sin the less for not being Christians.” She went on in the same letter to observe:

’Tis very easy to see they have more Liberty than we have, no Woman of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets without 2 muslims, one that covers her face all but her Eyes and another that hides the whole dress of her head. . . . This perpetual Masquerade gives them entire Liberty of following their Inclinations without danger of Discovery. . . . Neither have they much to apprehend from the resentment of their Husbands, those Ladys that are rich having all their money in their own hands, which they take with ’em upon a divorce with an addition which he is oblig’d to give ’em. Upon the Whole, I look upon the Turkish Women as the only free people in the Empire. (*CL*, 327–29)

Montagu actually went further, claiming that the slave market was no different from the marriage market in England: “In my opinion [women] are bought and sold as publickly and more infamously in all our Christian great Citys” (*CL*, 406). Ironically, the class privileges—not to mention the anti-Catholicism and Latitudinarianism that buttressed Montagu’s life—extended even to her view of women in Istanbul. As Dobie has recently noted, Montagu is part of a “feminocentric” tradition that challenges received beliefs about the Orient, including the (still widely held) view that “Islam is uniformly oppressive to women” (127). In fact, there is a certain contrariness in Montagu’s *Letters*, as the epistolary descriptions of visits that Montagu made to a variety of harems are eroticized and romanticized to a degree that the modern reader (at least this reader) finds more than slightly suspicious. Characterized as a series of highly displaced sexual scenes and almost perverse attempts to deny the oppression staring her in the face, Montagu’s *Letters* exemplify what Mary Louise Pratt has called the narrative of the anticonquest in which imperial relations are depicted as a harmless and in fact a benign process of reciprocity and mutual exchange (5–7). Montagu’s logic of anticonquest seems to be based on this unstated assumption: if I am



free to write as I please and to live a comfortable and safe life in the Turkish embassy as the wife of the ambassador to Turkey, then all women living in Eastern patriarchal societies must also enjoy the same freedoms I do.

Montagu's position, informed by her early-eighteenth-century aristocratic attitudes, seems to have truly offended later and decidedly middle-class writers like Robert Bage and Elizabeth Marsh. The literary commodification and codification of the white British female captive, sold into sexual slavery to live in a harem or seraglio presided over by a tyrannical and polygamous Muslim, became an effective tool in the hands of a variety of disparate writers with an even wider set of political, social, and religious agendas.<sup>5</sup> Both Bage and Marsh would appear to be composing what I would label Christian Orientalist texts in order to counter Montagu's smug assessment of the free and independent situation of women in Eastern harems (Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* was published posthumously in 1763 and Marsh's novel in 1769). This move actually replicates Montagu's own earlier motivation, for she had written her *Turkish Letters* as a counter and opposing view to those put forward by Aaron Hill in his vehement denunciation of Islam in *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1709).

#### IV. *The Female Captive*

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.

—Leviticus 17:11

Only recently have we been able to locate information about the life and travels of Elizabeth Marsh, author of *The Female Captive* (1769), the only Barbary captivity narrative written and published by a British woman in the eighteenth century (Colley 2003, 139). Prior to Linda Colley's research, all we knew about Marsh were the very scanty pieces of information recorded by Sir William Musgrave on the flyleaf of one of the three surviving copies of her two-volume novel (fig. 8 provides a sample of his handwriting). This copy of the novel, now in the British Museum, was once the property of Musgrave (1735–1800), a onetime neighbor of the Marsh family and compiler of the very useful *England, Scotland, Ireland: Musgrave's Obituaries Prior to 1800, with reference to the books where the persons are mentioned, and where some account of their character is to be found*. According to Musgrave, the novel is an accurate transcription of events that took place when Marsh actually was a captive off the coast of Barbary (North Africa) in 1756, where





Figure 8. Flyleaf from *The Female Captive*

she was living with her father, Milborn Marsh, a naval dockyard administrator stationed at the British outpost of Gibraltar. After 1748, Britain was engaged with Spain in a series of skirmishes in which Spain attempted to regain control of both Gibraltar and Minorca. Although Spain's Charles III kept Gibraltar under siege for more than a year, the British managed to hold onto Gibraltar; after the 1779–83 campaign, Spain regained Minorca from the British (Carr, 175).

Musgrave's handwritten annotations throughout this copy of the novel inform us that Marsh later married a Mr. James Crisp, a London merchant who appears in the narrative as a "friend" who travels with and assists the heroine. He also informs us that Mrs. Crisp eventually moved to India with her husband where she died, leaving behind this novel as a record of her earlier adventures (fig. 9). What is most interesting about the novel—apart from Musgrave's compulsive need to fill in every dash in Marsh's text with the missing name or place—is its very direct, first-person, eyewitness appeal to its readers. Marsh insists continually throughout the text that her story is true and based on events that she personally experienced, and not "embellished by any Ornaments of Language, or Flights of Fancy" (3). Class-

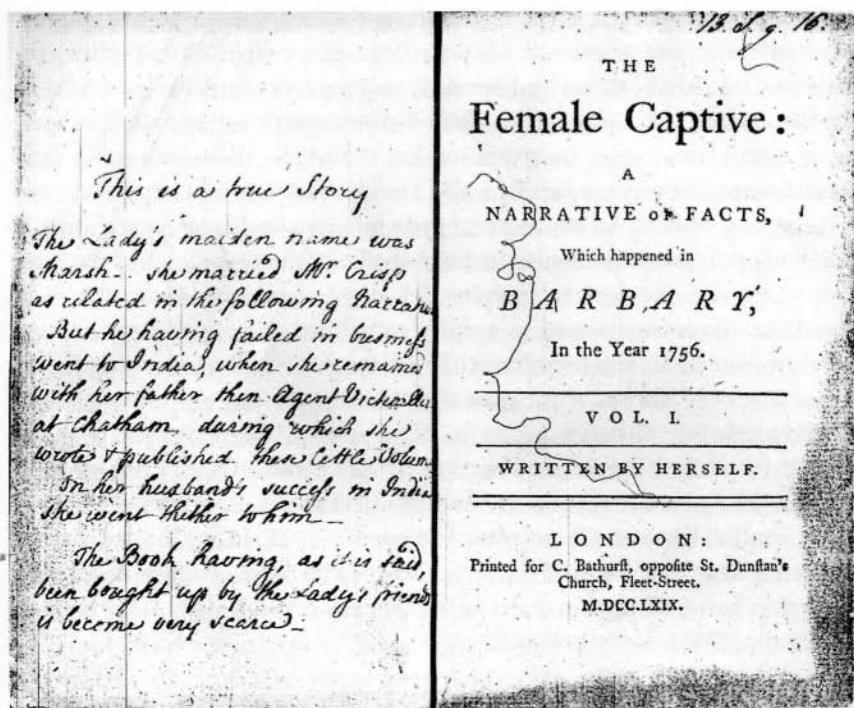


Figure 9. William Musgrave's annotations to *The Female Captive*

consciousness as well as self-consciousness about class is evident throughout the text, but Marsh also seems almost to be bragging that her narrative is the more reliable and truthful for her lack of poetic or linguistic skills. Forced to flee after the port of Minorca falls to the French in 1756, Marsh very quickly finds herself a captive of the Moors, by whom she is held for four months, and they are originally interested in using her as an object of barter with the British garrison stationed in Gibraltar. Once she returned to England, married Crisp, and had two children, Marsh found herself strapped for cash when her husband went bankrupt in the mid-1760s. She appears then to have decided to turn her hand to writing and she traded on the one extraordinary experience of her life: her brief captivity (Colley 2002, 43). Deciding that she had a credible eyewitness vantage point, Marsh writes first an early draft of her experiences (now in the Young Research Library, UCLA) in which she gives free rein to her double-barreled agenda. It becomes clear throughout the earlier as well as the later published text that Marsh is anti-Muslim for two reasons: because of the religion's beliefs as well as its treatment of women. But in the final analysis, these issues actually appear to be one and the same.

The presentation of Islam in Marsh's published female captivity narrative centers on one continual fixation: Islam is a religion that permits the legal practice of polygamy and hence it sanctions the buying and selling of women. As much as Montagu and later Wollstonecraft would make the same point about the corrupt marriage market in Europe, there was also a need on the part of bourgeois British writers to establish Christianity as the only force strong enough to counter the evils inherent in Islam. In addition to justifying polygamy, Islam also fostered the belief that women had no souls and hence did not deserve humane, let alone equal, treatment. For both positions, Islam was viewed as a dangerous form of cultural regression; a primitive, atavistic, and hypermasculine force that needed to be suppressed, if not destroyed, for social progress and the very survival of women and the bourgeois family to occur. I have to differ from Colley, however, who has argued that Marsh's published version of *The Female Captive* differs from the manuscript draft version in "omit[ting] virtually all references to religious conflict between Christianity and Islam" (2002, 127). Colley, who has studied the earlier version of the text, notes, for instance, that Marsh actually quoted in her draft version from John Hughes's popular drama *The Siege of Damascus* (1715) the following lines:

Now in the name of Heav'n, what faith is this  
That stalks gigantick forth thus arm'd with terrors  
As if it meant to ruin, not to save?  
That leads embattel'd legions to the Field,  
And marks its progress out with blood and slaughter. (Quoted in Colley 2002, 127)

Marsh may not have included this passage in the final published version of *The Female Captive*, but she certainly retained in the central trajectory of her narrative the emphasis on Islam's tendency to "blood and slaughter." In fact, I would argue that religious conflict is central to *The Female Captive*, and that blood is at the very forefront of the dispute.

After one full volume of camel rides and abortive boat trips, Marsh finds herself in the Moorish prince's seraglio. At this particular and very crucial juncture, she is befriended by a Frenchman who is inexplicably living in the harem, and his interference is just the beginning of her very serious problems. This Frenchman (and anti-French, anti-Semitic, and antiblack statements suffuse the text) encourages Marsh to try to repeat some of the words that are being spoken in the harem by the women. Without intending anything more than simply trying to mimic the accents of the harem women, the heroine-author suddenly discovers that she has just verbally declared her belief that

Islam is the only religion and Allah is the only god (2:27). This statement is known as the Shahadah, or the Tawhid, a declaration of faith in the oneness of Allah and all that is necessary to make one a Muslim. From this point on, Marsh's ability to leave Morocco is compromised because witnesses declare that she has renounced her Christian faith and become a Muslim. Very shortly she is informed that she must immediately attend Sidi Muhammad, the Moorish prince, and with only an interpreter in his private quarters.

This is, of course, the moment we have been expecting since the title page. The well-rehearsed signs of the Orient, the heavy use of ideological codes of representation in this passage, suggest that even by the mid-eighteenth century the Oriental harem had become a cliché. Descriptions of Persian carpets and mosaic columns come thick and fast as Marsh makes her way to Muhammad's den and he makes his offer: "[H]is Imperial Highness wished to know if I would become a *Moor*, and remain in his Palace; desiring me to be convinced of his Esteem, hoping that I would properly consider the Advantages resulting from doing as he desired, and promising me every Indulgence that he could possibly favour me with" (2:36–37). What is most interesting about this scene is that it is less a sexual threat than it is a religious temptation; in fact, this scenario is strongly reminiscent of Satan's temptation of Jesus after Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. After refusing the prince's offer to convert, Marsh informs us that he "was disgusted with my Answer, from his remaining silent for some Minutes, throwing off the Mask he had hitherto worn, he cruelly informed me, that I had that very Morning, renounced the *Christian* Faith, and turned *Mahoteman*; and that a capital Punishment, namely, *Burning*, was, by their Laws, inflicted on all who recanted from, or disclaimed *their* Religion" (2:38–39; original emphasis).

Forced to flee for her life and after many scenes of flight and rescue, and mob cries for her capture, as well as escaping in the nick of time, the heroine finally finds her way back to Mr. Crisp and the British contingent. Only after she becomes so ill that she is bled by a British doctor does the prince relent: "Bleeding in that Country, being looked on as very extraordinary, and never practiced but in Cases of Extremity" (2:46). Shortly thereafter a dark-skinned man, an intermediary named Muly Dris, appears to reassure Marsh that all is going well in the negotiations to rid herself of the prince. Marsh describes Muly Dris somewhat curiously as "a Prince of the Blood" (2:51). The fact that he speaks Spanish in all of his exchanges with Marsh and her friends suggests that he is, in fact, a *Marisco*, an Islamic Spaniard (a Moor) living in Morocco and attempting to mediate between Christians and Muslims in the country. The term "Prince of the Blood," however, also suggests that Muslims define themselves by their heritage, their blood, their religion as thoroughly as do Christians. But in fact, it is the shedding of Marsh's

blood that liberates her from Muslim clutches. The prince is finally willing to forego his dangerous sexual and religious designs on her and accepts in lieu of either the knowledge that her blood has been shed.

Islam, like other desert and tribal religions, privileges water, but in a manner that is distinctly different from Christianity. Water fountains are at the center of Islamic buildings, towns, and the Moorish baths that were notorious throughout Christianized Spain as identificatory tags associated with Muslim-*Moriscos*. Water is not sacred to Muslims, however, the way it is to Christians. Whereas Christians use water to ritually purify and baptize, Muslims have placed their baths in public areas, desacralizing them, and using water in strictly secular ways. But blood sacrifice continues to be practiced by Muslims even today, although only in relation to ritual animal sacrifice, an annual ceremony called the sacrifice of the sheep, one of the four great Muslim rites. Witnessed by Edith Wharton when she visited Rabat, the blood-sacrifice is not based on Koranic injunctions, but on the "Souana" or record of the Prophet's "customs." As Wharton notes, "the Moslem blood-sacrifice comes, by way of the Semitic ritual, from far beyond and behind it; and the belief that the Sultan's prosperity for the coming year depends on the animal's protracted agony seems to relate the ceremony to the dark magic so deeply rooted in the mysterious tribes peopling North Africa long ages before the first Phoenician prows had rounded its coast" (190).

Although this is not the venue to discuss the anthropological and sociological similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity (and by extension Judaism and Hinduism), it is important to note that Muslims still perform a ritual animal sacrifice on the day of the Great Feast, *Id al-Kabir*, to commemorate Abraham's sacrifice of the ram instead of his son (Benthall, 260). In fact, Islam and Hinduism are the only major religions to continue to practice ritual animal sacrifice and to shed literal blood in their ceremonies. The crucifixion of Jesus, demanded by His father, can be understood as a regression to that earlier form of ritualized human sacrifice, and since that time the sacrament of communion within the Christian community has been designated as a symbolic, metaphoric reenactment of the earlier ritualistic blood sacrifice of a human being.<sup>6</sup> Although all four major religions (Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) privilege blood and water in contradictory fashions, as alternately both unclean and as sources of purification (see Leviticus 15:19; 17:11), I would suggest that there are certain perceived differences between the religions that became pronounced in the Orientalist texts of the eighteenth century. Christianity became for the Western mind a religion that privileges blood in its metaphorical and purely human (rational, symbolic, and decidedly not animal) associations, and it represented that blood primarily through familial descent, patrilineal

claims, and more complex kingship systems. *Sangre pura*, a concept actually based in the earliest kinship-based societies, was revived in this period and became implicated in modern nation-building, in the attempt to produce pure racial stock that was understood as untainted Christian descent (i.e., as we have seen in the example of Spain). What appears finally to be at issue in the Western bourgeois female captivity narrative is the threatened circulation of female blood and control of bloodlines. Ergo, the valorization of monogamy within Christianity.

Billie Melman has argued in her work on nineteenth-century British women's writings on the Orient that collectively these works actually desexualized the harem, domesticating it in order to create the *haremluk* (the segregated quarters of women and children) as an "image of the middle-class 'home': domestic, feminine and autonomous" (1992, 101). According to Melman, women writers edited out evidence of the oppression of Muslim women in order to preserve the "domesticated" image of the harem as a locus for Western women to condemn (1992, 308–9). But such would not appear to be the case with Marsh's narrative. She obsessively focuses on the subjugated female bodies within the harem and the imminent sexual threat posed to a young British virgin by the demands of an irrational Muslim. Such a focus actually works to stabilize the position of the Western woman as a victim of the Orient's rapacious and perverse demands. The fact that Marsh escapes only because her blood is shed suggests that in Muslim eyes she has assumed the position of a sacrificial animal (the sheep), and therefore is an unclean object for an Islamic male. As Snader has argued, all of the Barbary captivity narratives were always imperialistic, Orientalist, and "enforcing [of] an expansionist ideology" (1997, 268), and certainly Marsh's text is no exception. The female imperialist gaze at work here, however, is a distinctly and muscicularly Christian one, not a purely masochistic female gaze (Mulvey, 12–13). Although Marsh comes dangerously close to enslavement in the harem, she escapes through the timely intercession of good British soldiers and her own spilled blood, which paradoxically establishes her in the status of a victim and thereby seems to soil her in the eyes of the prince.

## V. *The Fair Syrian*

Sacrificially constituted descent, incorporating women's mortal children into an "eternal" (enduring through generations) kin group, in which membership is recognized by sacrificial ritual, not merely by birth, enables a patrilineal descent group to transcend mortality by the same process in which it transcends birth. In this sense, sacrifice is doubly a remedy for having been born of woman.

—Nancy Jay (297)



Robert Bage's *The Fair Syrian* (1787) is another one of many little-remembered Orientalist titles published in Britain around the middle of the eighteenth century. Ironically, Eliza Haywood had composed a seraglio tragedy entitled *The Fair Captive* in 1721, with an epilogue written by Aaron Hill warning women that they will lose their power in England if their husbands ever learn of the Islamic model of polygamous marriage. The title of Bage's novel plays then on Haywood's earlier drama as well as Marsh's novel, recalling them both and situating itself within a century-long dialogue of Orientalist discourse. Bage himself (1720–1801) was originally a Quaker who eventually became a sympathizer with the French Revolution and a freethinker deeply influenced by the theories of Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire. But unlike his *Hermesprong, or Man as He Is Not* (1796), his *Fair Syrian* became so obscure that at one point it was easier to find French translations of the work in England than to find it in its original English version.

Like Marsh's *The Female Captive*, *The Fair Syrian* employs the rhetoric of the slow tease, the first volume building ponderously to the young British virgin's kidnapping and descent into the clutches of the Moroccan prince or, in Bage's case, the Syrian Saif Ebn Abu. Also like *The Female Captive*, the heroine of Bage's novel, appropriately named Honoria Warren, is rescued in the nick of time before she is subjected to the sexual and religious indignities that the text has been teasing us with for the first two hundred pages. It is necessary, however, to recognize that damsels in distress in Damascus are nonetheless still damsels in distress, and that a large portion of the general reading public in Britain would have recognized certain sentimental genre conventions operating in the bourgeois female captivity narrative. The differences, I think, occur when the issue of an alien religion is factored in, and these texts do make much of the peculiarities of the Muslim religion, particularly polygamy and the ability of Muslim men to buy and sell female sexual slaves because women are believed to be soulless. The disparate use of these themes, however, played into the agendas of both conservative and liberal writers of the day. It seems clear that Marsh's text is decidedly conservative and ideologically intent on enforcing British expansionism as a religious right and duty. The subscribers who paid to have Marsh's book published and whose names are listed at the front of the volume provide us with an interesting perspective on how keen the middle and professional classes were to keep Britain as a world power because that was where money and trade could be found. A liberal like Bage, however, had a different agenda. If Montagu pointed out the similarities between the aristocratic marriage market and the harem system, Bage was intent on attacking and reforming both the aristocratic and the bourgeois marriage markets.

In *The Fair Syrian*, Honoria is aggressively pursued by the aging and



lecherous aristocrat, Lord Bembridge, at the very time she is living under the protection of his wife, Lady Bembridge, sister of the man who intends to marry Honoria, Lord John Amington. Lord Bembridge is later killed in a duel caused by one of his many infidelities; Lady Bembridge is pleased to be free of her British harem master; Honoria and Lord John marry and live in monogamous, mixed-class harmony with her long-lost father, who turns up in Constantinople and finally is able to return home to England. Bage's novel may be liberal on the question of marriage but it is decidedly conservative when it approaches the issue of religion. Like Marsh's novel, Bage's text also presents what I would identify as the conservative or religiously imperialist ideological appropriation of the Orientalist agenda. Bage's work repeats the charge that the existence and the spread of Islam stand as direct and dangerous threats to Christianity and what is seen as the civilizing process of Christian values and beliefs on all societies.

In *The Fair Syrian*, at one point the Saif visits Honoria's home and proposes to make the beautiful Christian his first and most important wife if she will "make outward profession of Islam." Mr. Warren explodes, "Assuming coxcomb! Change her religion, to be thy wife! . . . Wretch! leave my house—I will kill my daughter with my own hands, rather than she should have any connection with a base, unprincipled, abandoned man such as you." To which the Saif replies, "Yes, Christian dog, I will go to thy destruction" (2:47–48), and very quickly financial ruin, kidnapping, and slavery ensue for the Warren family. The notion that one's daughter would be better off dead than Muslim is a variation on the theme of the need for honor killings that occurs throughout these texts. The stakes are so high for both sides, not simply because virginity and the shedding of female blood are at risk, but because two warring religious worldviews have been put in competition with one another for imperial domination and control of both property (lands and goods) and women.

It is also important to note that Bage's novel employs rhetoric that is adapted virtually verbatim some ten years later by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1791) as well as in her *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798). Bage's heroine, Honoria, is traded from Damascus to Basra and finally finds herself sold into a harem in Aleppo. Here she becomes the property of what she describes as a typical Turk: "To smoke tobacco with aromatics, to drink coffee, to chew opium, and repose upon a sofa were the regular occupations of the day. Add to these, luxurious suppers, wine, and women, and you have every thing a Turk thinks of value upon earth. I have been told, the love of wine increases with the use; the love of woman, not. Our master, at least, was no instance to the contrary. His sickly appetite called for a perpetual variety of women, whilst his passions were

never sufficiently alive to make him give himself the trouble of selection. This was the business of the eunuchs" (2:86–87). In short, the Syrian harem in Bage's novel is consistently compared to the sorry state of Western bourgeois marriages as later depicted in the novels of Mary Robinson, Thomas Holcroft, Charlotte Smith, Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin. In fact, what has been termed Wollstonecraft's "feminist Orientalism" derives from this very practice of exploiting Eastern stereotypes in order to argue the feminist case in the West (Yeazell, 78).

The liberal appropriation of Bage's Orientalist agenda leads directly to Wollstonecraft's statements in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she alludes to "the husband who lords it in his little haram" (73) or to those women, "weak beings" whose educations have caused them to be "only fit for a seraglio!" (10). Mimicking Bage almost to the word, Wollstonecraft states that "the epicure must have his palate tickled, or he will sink into apathy; but have women so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition?" Wollstonecraft very interestingly reverses the critique, however, and goes on to compare bourgeois women to Oriental harem sex slaves, noting: "Can they supinely dream life away in the lap of pleasure, or the languour of weariness, rather than assert their claim to pursue reasonable pleasures and render themselves conspicuous by practicing the virtues which dignify mankind? Surely she has not an immortal soul who can loiter life away merely employed to adorn her person, that she may amuse the languid hours, and soften the care of a fellow-creature who is willing to be enlivened by her smiles and tricks, when the serious business of life is over" (29).

As numerous critics have noted, Wollstonecraft uses the term "Mahometanism" as a veiled charge against the British patriarchy itself, a system that she sees as denying women their equal status as political, intellectual, and spiritual beings.<sup>7</sup> For Wollstonecraft, Rousseau's writings are composed "in the true style of Mahometanism, [for women] are treated as a kind of subordinate being, and not as a part of the human species, when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural scepter in a feeble hand." So if men hold illegitimate power it is because they have subjugated women, turning them into beasts of burden that have been effectively "Othered" out of their fully human and spiritual identities. And for Wollstonecraft, Christian men living in the great cities of high European culture are as guilty of this offense as are the Muslim harem-masters.

But finally there is a flaw in the Orientalist agenda of Wollstonecraft and other liberal supporters of the rights of women. If one opposes Islam because it is one of the representatives of the tyranny of religion, then isn't one also forced to see Christianity as yet another tyrannical religion? And

if one does condemn Christianity, as surely Voltaire, Godwin, and Holcroft did, what does one place against Islam as a counterweight? Montagu would have endorsed Protestant hegemony and the efficacy of the 1699 Act of Toleration, which excluded Catholics from political positions. But by the time Wollstonecraft is writing, the situation is considerably more complicated. Unable to embrace one politically stable form of Christianity, the liberal Orientalists found themselves impotent, railing against a system for which they had no effective antidote.

The middle-class political and religious Orientalist agenda reached a dead end in the writings of Wollstonecraft, and from this point on the abjection of the Orientalized Western woman took on a distinctly different appearance. With the military containment of the Ottoman Empire, and no longer able to effectively condemn Muslims as an aggressive religious and political threat, women writers turned increasingly to a purely sexual focus on the East. Mary Shelley's portrait of the Turkish Safie in *Frankenstein* (1818) is a picture drawn straight out of her mother's Orientalist feminist agenda. Escaping a tyrannical and morally and financially corrupt father, Safie seeks rescue in the arms of the De Laceys, a substitute and idealized Christian family whose son Felix ("happiness") promises monogamy. In contrast, Charlotte Brontë's portrait of a fleshy and voluptuous Cleopatra in *Villette* (1854) bears strong witness to how thoroughly the Orientalized woman had become a figure of sexual nausea and dread for the female British imagination by mid-nineteenth century (cf. Zonana). And by the time that Edith Wharton visited harems in Fez (1919), the attitude had become one of barely concealed hostility and condescension. Taken into their innermost sanctuaries, Wharton views these women as "cellar-grown flowers, pale, heavy, fuller but frailer than the garden sort. . . . But what struck me was the apathy of the younger women." Later, after trying in vain to talk to them, Wharton notes, "[T]here are few points of contact between the open-air occidental mind and beings imprisoned in a conception of sexual and domestic life based on slave-service and incessant espionage" (204). So we return yet again to the leitmotif of slavery, and the easy and comfortable posture of condemning in Others what we have ourselves just recently practiced.

Clearly, by the early to mid-nineteenth century the works of the female Orientalists had become a heterogeneous, polyglot language, no longer fixed firmly in either religious condemnation or imperialistic fantasies of superiority and conquest. British middle-class authors were working out a number of class and religious anxieties within their own culture when they gazed on the "Other" that they had made of the Orient. As Lewis has noted, the accounts we have of Oriental harems and female captives can only be understood as a series of "heterogeneous and contradictory" texts: "They offered

clashing commentaries based on differing amounts of access and expertise, and, though marketed on the 'truth factor' of their having actually been in a harem, must not be read as simply realistic, unmediated or unembellished. Their writings were historically contingent, so that whilst they all contributed to a shift towards a comparative social evaluation of the harem, the terms of their interest changed according to their own domestic concerns" (2004, 13). Clearly, the concerns of Marsh were different from those of Montagu, even though both had spent time in actual harems and both were in a position to claim that they were speaking from a position of "truth." I would like to conclude with a particularly apt observation made by Eric Meyer who has noted, "[W]hat we see when we look at the other, then, is our own disfigured image as it is revealed in the blind spots of our cultural field of vision, its incoherences, its contradictions, and its two-facedness in (mis)perceiving its veiled imperial desire" (693). An intricate dance of domination and demonization characterized the West's literary commodification and appropriation of the Muslim, as well as the Western woman. In short, one does not simply project onto the Other without at some point becoming the Other, and that is the point at which the binary breaks.



## NOTES

1. In addition to the critiques of Dobie, Lowe, Melman, and Suleri, see, for instance, the cultural critique by MacKenzie and the religious and nationalist critiques by Vitkus, Cirakman, and Sardar. Porter claims that the "fundamental contradiction" at the heart of Said's study, that all representation is misrepresentation, is due to the inherently contradictory positions of the two dominant theorists that Said uses, Foucault and Gramsci (151).

2. See the final visual plate in Allouah's collection (fig. 7) for an extended discussion of this provocative image. Allouah observes: "To track through the colonial representations of Algerian women—the figures of a phantasm—is to attempt a double operation: first, to uncover the nature and meaning of the colonialist gaze; then, to subvert the stereotype that is so tenaciously attached to the bodies of women" (5).

3. Nicholas Till, quoted in [www.mozartproject.org/compositions/k\\_383\\_.html](http://www.mozartproject.org/compositions/k_383_.html) (accessed March 1, 2004). According to Wilson, there were at least fourteen harem-abduction operas produced during the last half of the eighteenth century. Also see Hoeveler and Cordova for a more extensive discussion of gothic "rescue" operas as a genre.

4. Richardson's new Riverside edition contains the three specifically named titles. Barrell has argued that the erasure of Asian cultures within Orientalist texts created the very "blank screens" on which Westerners could project their own wishful fantasies (8).

5. Marsh's novel has recently (and rather inexplicably) been reprinted in an English paperback edition by an Islamic publishing house in Rabat, Morocco. All quotations from the novel will be from the original two-volume book. My sense of the complexity of Orientalist tropes builds on the work of Marilyn Butler, who identifies the British literary construction of Orientalism in the 1790s as "intellectually ambitious." Disagreeing with Said's argument that the West created the East as "effeminate" and "weak," and therefore easily controllable, Butler claims instead that the literature of the romantic period constructed a complicated discourse around the question of the East that was "powerfully imaginative" and constituted "an intellectually ambitious strain of Romanticism" (397-98).

6. The subject of blood ritual and sacrifice in religious worship is tremendously complicated and beyond the scope of this essay. According to Jay, cultic blood-shedding appears to have a gender-related organization and to be found most frequently in precapitalistic societies with some degree of technological development so that rights to durable ("real") property are highly valued and kinship is determined through patrilineal descent groups (289). For a useful summary of other theorists on the subject, see Gilders. For a discussion of the communion service as a "narcissistic sacrifice," see Beers.

7. Wollstonecraft was most likely familiar with the writings of M. Aikin, L.L.D., who identifies Mahomet as an "Imposter" in his *Memoirs of Religious Imposters, from the Seventh to the Nineteenth Century* (London: 1822), but originally published as essays by a variety of authors between the 1790s to 1814.