French Orientalism
French Orientalism:
Culture, Politics, and the Imagined Other

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

“In Orientalism (1978), Edward W. Said wrote of the Orient as a “locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption. The Orient existed as a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, art, and commerce. Thus, whatever good or bad values were imputed to the Orient appeared to be functions of some highly specialized Western interest in the Orient.”¹ In other words, according to this theoretical approach, the notion of the Orient was structured by Occidental interests. Although Said provides many interrelated definitions of Orientalism, at the outset, he explains:

I shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurrent images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.²

As defined by Said, Orientalism is intrinsically Eurocentric and places the Orient in opposition to the European West as the quintessential Other, that which is purportedly most unlike, most foreign to Europe. In this sense, the West is supposedly able to define itself by gazing at the Orient as its inverse image. Furthermore, Europe’s presumed ability to cast the Orient as Other is also alleged to mean that the West has appropriated a central place of geopolitical power that is materially confirmed by European mining of the Orient through colonization.

Although Europe may be said to cast the Orient as the archetypal Other, this, as Said notes, necessarily entails deep conflict since the Orient, despite its purported foreignness, is also frequently recognized as the source of European civilization. For example, in the Description de l’Égypte (1809–28),³ Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Fourier (1768–1830) declares of antiquity:

Europe, today so civilized, at that time lacked solid laws and morals, but the light of the arts began to spread to the Occident. The Etruscan cities
Fourier depicts civilization as moving from East to West with Europe drawing on and assimilating civilizing elements from Egypt and the Levant. In this sense, the Orient is not the exterior, archetypically differing Other, but a constitutive part of the West, and this undermines the boundaries between Europe and the Orient, self and other. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection provides a useful method for approaching this conflict:

The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.

In the context of Orientalism as cast by Said and informed by writings such as those of Fourier, it is impossible for the West to articulate a complete separation from the East. As Elizabeth Gross observes, the abject must “hover on the border of the subject’s identity, threatening apparent unities with disruption and possible dissolution.” If the Orient is the opposite of the European “I,” then it is the abject, yet, because the Orient structured by the West is so deeply engaged in the civilization and self-identification of the Occident, it is not only homologous to, but indeed part of the West, and this vitiates the polar differentiation on which canonic Orientalism, as viewed by Said, is grounded.

In Orientalist discourse, one means of supposedly mitigating the Occident’s purported identity distress when faced with the Orient was to make the East known to Europe in terms that would assert and confirm relative power positions favoring the West. Indeed, Said posits the Egyptian Campaign (1798–1801) of Napoléon I (1769–1821) as the starting point of Orientalism and attributes particular importance to the Description de l’Égypte, which he credits with the birth of the modern notion of the Orient:

the Orient was reconstructed, reassembled, crafted, in short, born out of the Orientalists’ efforts. The Description became the master type of all further efforts to bring the Orient closer to Europe, thereafter to absorb it entirely and—centrally important—to cancel, or at least subdue and reduce, its strangeness . . . .
According to Said, the Orient emerged from the scientific structuring carried out in the *Description de l’Égypte*, which he casts as “that great collective appropriation of one country by another.” In other words, according to Said, France’s scientific definition, classification, and investigation of the Orient was essentially a process of annexation. The alleged French “appropriation” of the Orient through the political underpinnings of imperialist erudition resonates in the register of Kristeva’s theory where abjection rises from a “desire for meaning,” which in this context posits the Oriental Other as an entity, and this corresponds to Europe’s supposed will to know itself by at once objectifying and abjectifying the Orient.

In his comparison of Europe with the Orient, Fourier, having depicted the West as civilized, also casts the Orient, emblematized by Egypt, as fallen:

> The time came when Egypt could no longer resist the rival nations whose power had rapidly accumulated; she suffered the introduction of foreign customs... Superstitious errors have long deformed religion and the sciences... the capital cities were plundered and set aflame... the annals and monuments of literature were destroyed or dispersed. The Egyptians vainly attempted to free themselves from such odious domination, and these long efforts crowned their misfortunes.

As described by Fourier, Oriental civilization had faltered, much of its greatness had been plundered, despoiled, and destroyed. Fourier casts Europe as looking back to its origins while advancing and claiming its own preeminent place in world history. According to Said, this notion of Western progress in contrast to Eastern inertia was a fundamental element in the development of Orientalism:

> From roughly the end of the eighteenth century, when in its age, distance, and richness the Orient was re-discovered by Europe, its history had been a paradigm of antiquity and originality, functions that drew Europe’s interests in acts of recognition or acknowledgement but from which Europe moved as its own industrial, economic, and cultural development seemed to leave the Orient far behind.

In canonic nineteenth-century French Orientalism, Europe, although recognizing the origins of its civilizations in the East, nonetheless presumes itself to have surpassed them, and this supposedly permits the assertion of a privileged geopolitical vantage point, which, according to Said, defines relations between the West and the East.
Said argues that the roots of Orientalism lie in the foundations of Western civilization, which Others the Orient in a process of self-definition:

Indeed the very project of restriction and restructuring associated with Orientalism can be traced directly to the inequality by which the Orient’s comparative poverty (or wealth) besought scholarly, scientific treatment of the kind to be found in disciplines like philology, biology, history, anthropology, philosophy, or economics.\(^{11}\)

According to Said, all European writings on the Orient were essentially imperialistic, since, for him, imperialism was inextricably implicated in all Western erudition on the East. For example, Said asserts of the Bibliothèque orientale ou Dictionnaire universel contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connaissance des peuples de l’Orient (1697), compiled by Barthélemy d’Herbelot (1625–95) and completed by Antoine Galland (1646–1715):

In such efforts as Herbelot’s, Europe discovered its capacities for encompassing and Orientalizing the Orient. A certain sense of superiority appears here and there in what Galland has to say about his and Herbelot’s materia orientalia . . . Europeans could perceive that the Orient was being outstripped and outdated by Western science.\(^{12}\)

Although Said is perhaps correct to signal the Orientalizing elements of works such as Herbelot’s and Galland’s, it is also arguably the case that they are fundamentally different from those of nineteenth-century Orientalists since they represent an earlier stage of academic Orientalism that was not materially asserted through political hegemony.\(^{13}\) Indeed, an enforceable imperialistic agenda was largely lacking or incomplete in French discourse on the Orient before the Ottoman Empire went into decline during the eighteenth century.\(^{14}\)

If, as Said asserts, the imperialistic science of Orientalism did not fully flourish until the Egyptian Campaign of Napoléon I, then France holds a definitive leading role in the development of Orientalism, which raises the question of what constitutes French Orientalism. Canonic French Orientalism is theoretically distinguished from earlier French discourse on the East by the imperialistic underpinning of its scientific moorings. In this sense, the Description de l’Égypte, unlike Herbelot’s Bibliothèque orientale, was an element of a militarily imposed geopolitical sovereignty. As Zachary Lockman notes:

Scholarly institutions were often involved deeply in the colonial enterprise. The Société Asiatique, which Sacy had helped found, and the other new
learned societies and academic disciplines which sprang up in France and elsewhere in Europe around the same time to foster the study of non-Western peoples and cultures, generally took colonialism for granted. Western rule over non-Western lands was the reality that to a large extent shaped their intellectual horizons and framed the questions in which they took interest.  

Thus, it may be argued that imperialistic ends were implicit in nineteenth-century French erudition on the Orient. The foremost example of the close interrelation between French Oriental imperialism and scholarly enquiry is the Institut d’Égypte, the life of which parallels the military path of France in Egypt. When the Institut first met in Cairo on 24 August 1798, shortly after the beginning of the Egyptian Campaign, Napoléon I was its vice-president. In 1799, the year in which Pierre François Xavier Bouchard (1772–1832) discovered the Rosetta Stone, the institution decided to publish the research of its scholars as the Description de l’Égypte, and the final meeting of the Institut was held on 21 March 1801, a few months before Jacques-François de Menou (1750–1810) yielded to the British.  

Beyond the arguably imperialistic strategies of nineteenth-century French scientific work on the Orient, another fundamental aspect of canonic French Orientalism is the mission civilisatrice (“civilizing mission”) by which French intervention would purportedly restore life to the supposedly stagnant Orient. In French discourse, the Orient, particularly Egypt, still retained the fortunate disposition that had favored its earlier cultural progress. Cairo was a hub of communication between West and East, and Fourier declares: “[the land] from the sea to the borders of Nubia can be considered a vast garden suited to receive and conserve the richest products of the universe.” With this situation in mind, Fourier draws the conclusion:

Thus Egypt has conserved all the elements of her ancient grandeur, and these precious seeds of a new prosperity would develop rapidly if they were assisted by the genius of Europe and the blessings of a wise and powerful government. Fourier’s mention of Europe obviously refers to France, rather than to the Occident as a whole, and his assertion is part of a long tradition in which France is represented as the civilizing force in Europe and the light of the West. In this style of discourse, the Orient is not the abject Other in which Europe anxiously locates its roots. Instead, France, particularly following the Revolution, valiantly approaches the Orient, propagating
universal enlightenment. In 1838, the diplomat and homme de lettres, Édouard Alletz (1798–1850) declared:

France can keep nothing to herself; science, the arts, liberty, glory weigh upon her and elate her. She runs, she flies to spread light and life to all people: she will even force them, arms in hand, to suffer the weight of the gifts that she makes to them. In the exhilaration of her genius, she must tell all that she knows, and there are no secrets that do not escape her. Thus all the shores that she visits keep the luminous trail of her passage, and long after she leaves a foreign land, with astonishment one sees growing there the fruits of which the beneficent seeds fell from her hand.

In the theoretical context of the civilizing mission, the power positions asserted by the geopolitical ends of imperialistic Orientalist erudition were confirmed through France’s irresistible drive to illuminate the unenlightened and bring prosperity to foreign shores.

Canonic nineteenth-century French Orientalism mitigates the discomfort of finding the roots of European civilization in the perhaps abject Orient by emphasizing the modern world in which France, not the Orient, is cast as the civilizing power, and civilization is represented as now necessarily French. Thus the possibly abject Orient is unthreatening, its claim to cultural and military leadership superceded. In this context, the ancient Orient is cast as dormant, and, of all Western powers, the role of reviving the East purportedly falls to the civilization, arms, industry, and religion of France.

One symbol of the French civilizing mission was the Suez Canal, cast as an example of France reviving and improving an ancient accomplishment. The Description de l’Égypte contains an extended historical description of the “Canal des Deux Mers” [“Canal of the Two Seas”], discovered in 1799 by cartographers and engineers of the Egyptian Campaign. In 1854, during the reign of Napoléon III (1808–73), the diplomat and engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805–94) enlisted Egyptian cooperation, and in 1859 the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez began building a modern canal, completed in 1869, joining the Mediterranean and the Red Seas, thus purportedly opening the way for universal communication and enlightenment for which France claimed the lead. In 1862, the Académie Française announced a prize for a work in honor of the canal, which was won by La France dans l’extrême Orient of Henri de Bornier (1825–1901). The poem is essentially a summary of canonic French Orientalism confirming the relative geopolitical status of France and the Orient:
You will sleep no more,
O people! This is not the night,
It is only the end of the aurora,
And the true day has barely dawned;
In vain your guilty laziness,
So that it may forever disappear,
Lavishes its vows to the sun;
In vain you close your eyes,
God condemns you to light
And says to you: Rise! I wish it!

Soldier-peoples, apostle-peoples,
Pioneers of all roads,
Lighting the steps of others,
Preparing all tomorrows!
This glory is yours above all,
France, military and Christian
With a terrible and smiling eye;
It is you who were chosen by God
To rejuvenate old Asia
And wake the Orient!  

The reawakening of the Orient, effected by the rejuvenating influence of the Suez Canal, a French achievement and perfection of an ancient Oriental project, is cast by Bornier as a confirmation of the great French civilizing mission. This is the canonic French Orientalism that Said depicts rooted in the imperialistic science of Napoléon I’s Egyptian Campaign.

Said’s *Orientalism* has drawn much criticism and continues to do so more than thirty years after it was written. Although the issues are complex, Daniel Martin Varisco urges, “It is time to read beyond ‘Orientalism’.” One step towards accomplishing this, although Said’s theories will necessarily long remain a frame of reference, is to reexamine French Orientalism, the canonic aspects of which Said largely outlined, but to broaden the scope of enquiry, exploring the history and ideological strategies behind French formulations of the Orient in literature, theater, history, archeology, visual art, cinema, and constructions of gender and sexuality from the Middle Ages through the twenty-first century. Although Said’s Orientalist paradigm is not universally applicable, particularly when dealing with material from before the late eighteenth century, new theoretical, literary, historical, philosophical, and cultural perspectives provide the opportunity to apply, question, subvert, and resituate Said’s theories, revealing the continuing evolution and relevance of French
Orientalism as a theoretical notion with global stakes and material consequences.

Notes

2 Said, 1–2.
3 The *Description de l’Égypte* is a monumental collective work by more than 160 scholars who comprised the Commission des Sciences et Arts d’Égypte, the activities of which were publicized in France by the Institut d’Égypte, which was patterned on the Institut de France and established in Cairo by Napoléon I in 1798.
7 Said, 87.
8 Said, 84.
9 “L’époque était arrivée où l’Égypte ne devait plus résister aux nations rivales, dont la puissance s’était rapidement accrue; elle souffrit l’introduction des coutumes étrangères . . . Depuis long-temps des erreurs superstitionieuses avaient altéré la religion et les sciences . . . les villes capitales furent dépouillées et livrées aux flammes . . ., on détruisit ou l’on dispersa les annales et le monuments de la littérature. Les Égyptiens tentèrent vainement de s’affranchir d’une domination odieuse; et ces longs efforts mirent le comble à leurs malheurs.” Fourier, 1:xvii.
13 In the canonic period of French Orientalism addressed by Said, pioneering work was undertaken by, among others, Abraham-Hyacinthe Anqueteil-Duperron (1731–1805), who lived in India for six years and was a specialist in ancient Persian language and religion; Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), who held the chair in Persian at the Collège de France (1806–38), was president of the École des Langues Orientales (1824–38), and curator of Oriental manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Royale; Claude Savary (1750–88), who traveled in the Orient and translated Arabic works into French; and Constantin-François de Chassboeuf de
Volney (1757–1820), a historian, ethnographer, linguist, and specialist in Oriental languages. Notable earlier examples include Guillaume Postel (1510–81), who held the first chair in Arabic at the Collège de France, where he also taught Hebrew (1539–43); Barthélemy d’Herbelot (1625–95), who compiled the *Bibliothèque orientale ou Dictionnaire universel contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connaissance des peuples de l’Orient* (1697); Antoine Galland (1646–1715), antiquarian to Louis XIV and translator of works from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, including the *Mille et une nuits* (1704–11), and who completed Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque orientale*; and François Pétis de La Croix (1653–1713), Louis XIV’s translator of Arabic, a language for which he held the chair at the Collège de France (1692–1713).


17 “depuis la mer jusqu’aux limites de la Nubie, peut être considérée comme un vaste jardin, propre à recevoir et à conserver les plus riches productions de l’univers.” Fourier, 1:liii.

18 “Ainsi l’Égypte a conservé tous les éléments [sic] de son ancienne grandeur; et ces germes précieux d’une prospérité nouvelle se développeraient rapidement, s’ils étaient secondés par le génie de l’Europe et les bienfaits d’un gouvernement sage et puissant.” Fourier, 1:liv.


21 “La France ne peut rien contenir en elle-même; la science, les arts, la liberté, la gloire, l’oppressent et l’enivrent. Elle court, elle vole pour communiquer à tout peuple la lumière et la vie: elle les forcerà même, les armes à la main, à subir le poids des dons qu’elle leur fait. Dans l’ivresse de son génie, elle doit raconter tout ce qu’elle sait; et il n’est pas de secrets qui ne lui échappent. Aussi tous les rivages qu’elle visite gardent la trace lumineuse de son passage; et longtemps après qu’elle a quitté la terre étrangère, on y voit avec étonnement se lever les fruits dont le germe bienfaisant était tombé de sa main.” Édouard Alletz, *De la démocratie nouvelle ou Des mœurs et de la puissance des classes moyennes en France* (Paris: F. Lequien, 1838), 22.

22 Jomard, et. al., 11:352–70.
“Tu ne dormiras pas encore,/O peuple! Ce n’est pas la nuit,/Ce n’est que la fin de l’aurore,/Et le vrai jour à peine luit;/En vain ta coupable paresse,/Pour que jamais il disparaisse,/Au soleil prodigue ses vœux;/En vain tu fermes la paupière,/Dieu te condamne à la lumière;/Et te dit: Debout! je le veux!/.../Peuples-soldats, peuples-apôtres,/Pionniers de tous les chemins;/Éclairant la marche des autres;/Préparant tous les lendemains!;Cette gloire est surtout la tienne;/France militaire et chrétienne;/À l’œil terrible et souriant;/C’est toi qui par Dieu fus choisie;/Pour rajeunir la vieille Asie;/Et pour réveiller l’Orient!” Henri de Bornier, *La France dans l’extrême Orient* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, Fils, et Cie, 1865), 5–6.


Varisco, 9.
PART ONE

GENDERING THE ORIENT

Edward W. Said defines Orientalism as “A Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹ The strategies by which this geopolitical imperialism is presumably deployed are, according to Said, inherently gendered:

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony . . . The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be “Oriental” in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental. There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman . . . He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination . . . My argument is that Flaubert’s situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.²

Based on canonic Orientalist material of the nineteenth century, in this case the account of Kuchuk Hanem by Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), Said posits an image of gender and imperialism that he asserts to be typical of Orientalist discourse. As cast by Said, Europe, purportedly strong, wealthy, and male, is able to impose hegemony on the Orient, allegedly weaker and female. For Said, the presumed power relation between a commanding West and a submissive East is due largely to “historical facts of domination,” which he presumably considers to be grounded in economics and gender.

As Susan Fraiman notes, “the tropes Said mapped so unforgottably in Orientalism veil the East in a cluster of ‘female’ attributes. It is mysterious, sensuous, beckoning, undisciplined, and naturally subordinate to a West imagined in correspondingly ‘male’ terms . . . .”³ However, Said’s assertions regarding gendered power relations between Europe and the Orient have been challenged, particularly because Said does not
develop an extended discourse around his imperialist gender paradigm. Valerie Kennedy, for example, notes that “Said constantly raises and then disappoints any expectation that he will pay attention to gender,”⁴ and Elsbeth Locher-Scholten observes, “Women as authors or subjects of Orientalist texts or as agents in a colonized context are almost completely absent.”⁵ Daniel Martin Varisco remarks that “Orientalism is a man’s book”⁶ in which women are largely left aside.

Said’s approach to gender is implicit in his explanation of the methodology through which he addresses Orientalism in general:

It should be said at once that even with the generous number of books and authors that I examine, there is a much larger number that I simply have had to leave out. My argument, however, depends neither upon an exhaustive catalogue of texts dealing with the Orient nor upon a clearly delimited set of texts . . . I have depended instead upon a different methodological alternative—whose backbone in a sense is the set of historical generalizations . . . in this Introduction.⁷

Among the most notable examples of Said’s generalizations is his premise that Flaubert’s encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, emblematic of an Orientalist gender paradigm in which the “masculine” West sexualizes and possesses the “feminine” East, is fundamentally constant throughout Orientalist discourse:

Woven through all of Flaubert’s Oriental experiences . . . is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex. In making this association, Flaubert was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance of a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient. And indeed, the motif itself is singularly unvaried.⁸

Although the power imbalance exemplified in Flaubert’s sexualization of the Orient may be relatively unchanging in many Western representations of the East, the generalization can not be made for all such representations, and this is one problematic aspect of Said’s method. It is only accurate to assert relatively invariable depictions of the Orient for a limited number of works (even though they may be in the majority during a given period), and this conflicts with Said’s assertion that he does not limit his corpus.

The monolithic quality of Said’s gender paradigm may be one reason why it has proven so controversial. Perhaps because he presumes the overriding immutability of his model, Said forthrightly dismisses the necessity of explaining it:
Gendering the Orient

Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate: it is not the province of my analysis here.

Ironically, Said’s premise that Orientalism seeks to define, subject, and exploit the Orient for Occidental ends is confirmed by his choice not to elucidate how gender is implicated in this process. Varisco notes:

In *Orientalism* we are only permitted to see how Orientalist men gazed at the imagined Oriental woman for sexual fantasy. Said’s emphasis on the Western male’s gaze ... The exclusive focus on Flaubert’s prototype for later fictional exotica implies that there was no other voice to be found ... *Orientalism* offers no counter image. Thus, to the extent that “Oriental woman is an occasion and an opportunity for Flaubert’s musings,” she ultimately serves the same purpose for Edward Said’s thesis.

In other words, because Said posits a monolithic male Orientalist approach to discourses on the East and incorporates women only as a tool for confirming a gendered imperialist paradigm, his *Orientalism*, at least in terms of its views on gender, becomes part of the very discourse that it purportedly intends to deconstruct.

Said’s choice not to pursue an in-depth discussion of how gender is involved in the motivations and processes supposedly inherent in French imperialist Orientalism raises the question of why he avoided the issue and invites attention to the role of women in Orientalist discourse. As Jane Miller observes:

Said sets out ... the parallels and analogies developed in this field between colonial relations and sexual relations, and he shows how illuminating of the reality of the imperial adventure those parallels have been for both West and East. What he does not confront are the sexual meanings on which those illuminations depend. It is possible to feel that within his analysis it is with the distortions of male sexuality produced by the language of Orientalism that he is chiefly concerned ... If women are ambiguously present within the discourses of Orientalism, they are just as ambiguously present within the discourses developed to expose and oppose Orientalism.

Said’s assertion of gendered positions for the East and the West in Orientalist discourse may, as Miller suggests, be grounded in the gender stereotypes characteristic of the outlook of the nineteenth-century men that produced it, but women also played a part in elaborating and opposing this
discourse. Exploring material from outside of Said’s field of enquiry reveals some of the means by which this occurred.

One determining factor in Said’s clearly-drawn gender archetype is his choice to deal almost exclusively with material from no earlier than the late eighteenth century, a period when European imperialist expansionism was on the rise and the Ottoman Empire was in decline. In this context, it is possible to argue that Orientalism emerged from the standpoint of a strong Occidental hegemony grounded in socioeconomic factors. Sahar Sobhi Abdel-Hakim notes: “Said traces the orthodox male/female paradigm in the West/East construct, pointing to a basic similarity between the politics of domination at home and abroad.” However, the premise that Orientalism is inherently “male” and “masculine” and that it effectively reflects a complete imposition of “masculine” Occidental dominance over a weaker “feminine” Orient is open to question, particularly in relation to European views on the Orient from before the nineteenth century.

New historical approaches to Orientalism, particularly relating to gender, are required, since, as Kennedy notes, “By almost totally ignoring both Western and Eastern women, Said misses the opportunity to make his approach more sensitive to various historical specificities and thus more precise and complete as an analysis of the West’s relationship with the East.” Although Said’s gender paradigm may arguably reflect the views of a large portion of nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse, particularly that written by men, the historical aspects of Orientalism and its gender implications become increasingly complex when considering material that predates the Orientalist canon.

As Desmond Hosford reveals in “‘Regnorum Ruina’: Cleopatra and the Oriental Menace in Early French Tragedy,” during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, women and the “feminine” Orient were not necessarily construed as passive or submissive. For most of this period, the Orient, largely embodied by the Ottoman Empire, was an armed threat to Europe, and in France powerful women were cast as undermining the equilibrium of the legitimate monarchic state, which was dominated by men. Indeed, after the troubled regencies of Catherine de Médicis (1519–89) in 1560–74 and Marie de Médicis (1575–1642) in 1610–17, misogynist discourse, such as the *Alphabet de l’imperfection et malice des femmes* (1617) of Jacques Olivier, cast women’s purportedly imperious and irrational sensuality as jeopardizing the honor of men and the stability of kingdoms. Olivier, among others, alleged that women might deploy sexual enticement and seduction as a means to ensnare and dominate men. In this context, Cleopatra (69–30 B.C.), who reigned as the last pharaoh of
Egypt (51–12 B.C.), was cast as a multifarious threat to the Occident in tragedies from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including *Cléopâtre captive* (1553) by Étienne Jodelle (1532–73), *Marc-Antoine* (1578) by Robert Garnier (1545?–90), and *Cléopâtre* (1635) by Isaac de Benserade (1613–91). These works cast the “masculine” Occident, largely embodied by the Roman general, Marcus Antonius (83–30 B.C.), as conquered by the “feminine” Orient in the guise of Cleopatra and her reputedly lethal sensuality.

French Orientalist tragedy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is characterized by a gendered power structure that contrasts with Said’s nineteenth-century paradigm. Nevertheless, early French tragedy, which reflects the anxieties of a phallocentric Occidental political system, was written almost exclusively by men, an attribute that Said asserts as a defining aspect of nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse. Kennedy challenges Said’s claim that Orientalism was the province of men:

> Said seems to see the gender implications of Orientalism in at least two forms: the West’s feminization of the Orient in Orientalism and Western men’s textual and real exploitation of Oriental women. He nonetheless fails to see that Orientalism was not an exclusively male province, although of course it was men who defined its dominant discourse. However, there were also women writers and travelers, and not all of these adopted what Said characterizes as the classic Orientalist approach, especially towards Eastern women.17

Said presumes Orientalist discourse to be “masculine,” or at least proper to men, who are purportedly responsible for its elaboration, but an important corpus of women’s Orientalist writing also exists. Exploring these works opens new possibilities for understanding how Eastern and Western women view themselves, each other, and the geopolitical strategies in which they are imbricated.

In canonic Orientalist discourse, the stereotypical gender binary has moralizing implications. As Reina Lewis observes, “Orientalism establishes a set of polarities in which the Orient is characterized as irrational, exotic, erotic, despotic, and heathen, thereby securing the West in contrast as rational, familiar, moral, just, and Christian.”18 In Said’s Orientalist gender paradigm, the notion of a “rational,” “masculine” Occident dominating an “irrational,” “feminine” Orient is arguably prevalent, but this is frequently not the case in discourse from before the nineteenth century. If women and the Orient were both necessarily othered by Occidental men, which essentially enables the conflation of androcentric Western phobias concerning women and the East, the question arises as to how Occidental
women, who were already presumably othered in European men’s discourse on gender, viewed Oriental women with whom they might share, at least partially, the status of Other.

Lynn Karam explores alterity and seventeenth-century French women’s Orientalist writing in “One Woman Writes An(Other): A Western Gaze on the Oriental Other in Mme de Villedieu’s Mémoires du Sérail sous Amurat II.” Karam argues that discourse on women and the Orient by Marie-Catherine-Hortense Desjardins, known as Villedieu (ca. 1640–83), does not apparently emphasize difference, but similarity. This departure from the conventional approach of seventeenth-century men, who typically cast the Orient as the imperiling feminine, exposes one aspect of the multiplicity of early modern Orientalisms. As Lewis notes, “Thus, we can use women’s alternative ‘take’ on difference to throw light on the internal schisms within the fantasized unity of the sovereign imperial subject, as it was constituted by contemporary cultural discourse.”

Conflicts in Occidental discourse on the Orient, which is fractured from within by the othering of Western women by European men, are emphasized in the Mémoires du Sérail. Although Villedieu writes a tale of presumably Oriental women in the seraglio, these women, similar to those in early French tragedy, are not passive, and they appropriate the agency stereotypically deemed proper to men in order to advance their own interests. Challenging the well-established seventeenth-century theory that women are ruled by irrational passions rather than the logic of the reasoning mind that purportedly guides men, Villedieu depicts women as embodying a balance of emotion and intellect that challenges men’s claims to dominion. By veiling her critique in the guise of Orientalist discourse, Villedieu contests the conventional gender rules of her own society.

Canonical Orientalism as depicted by Said does not explore the role of women in the elaboration of its discourse. As Lewis observes:

For Said, in Orientalism at least, Orientalism is a homogenous discourse enunciated by a colonial subject that is unified, intentional, and irredeemably male... in Orientalism gender occurs only as a metaphor for the negative characterization of the Orientalized Other as “feminine”... Said never questions women’s apparent absence as producers of Orientalist discourse or as agents within colonial power.

Although Villedieu seeks to defend women by asserting their voices in the querelle des femmes, a polemic on gender that had been evolving in France since the Middle Ages, she nonetheless contributes to Gallocentric othering of the East by disposing of the seraglio as a stage on
which to represent the concerns of French women. According to Joyce Zonana, such strategies are a form of “feminist Orientalism”:

Specifically, feminist Orientalism is a rhetorical strategy (and a form of thought) by which a speaker or writer neutralizes the threat inherent in feminist demands and makes them palatable to an audience that wishes to affirm its Occidental superiority. If the lives of women in England or France or the United States can be compared to the lives of women in “Arabia,” then the Western feminist’s desire to change the status quo can be represented not as a radical attempt to restructure the West but as a conservative effort to make the West more like itself. Orientalism—the belief that the East is inferior to the West, and the representation of the Orient by means of unexamined, stereotypical images—thus becomes a major premise in the formulation of numerous Western feminist arguments.

Villedieu’s Orient is essentially passive in serving as a site for her staging of a contribution to an intellectual argument concerning French women. Politics, which had previously favored French tragedy’s depiction of the malefic “feminine” Orient during most of the seventeenth century, now increasingly supported representations of a complacent East. Villedieu’s Mémoires du Sérail was published in 1671–79, a period when disharmony between France and the Ottomans had been resolved, partly through the efforts of François Olier, marquis de Nointel (1635–85), Louis XIV’s ambassador to Turkey from 1670 to 1679, who in 1670 succeeded in renewing the trading privileges known as capitulations that had not been reconfirmed since 1607. Furthermore, as early as 1670, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) had drafted a plan for France to begin a conquest of the Ottoman Empire. In this context, Villedieu’s Mémoires du Sérail ostensibly subjugates the Orient (both men and women) in favor of European women, who do not dominate a gendered East in the sense of Said’s paradigm, but nonetheless appropriate it as a porte-parole for their own discourse.

As depicted by Said, Orientalism inherently projects the concerns and promotes the sociopolitical strategies of the West whose men (and women) are privileged as promulgators of imperialist discourse. Said addresses the significance of this discursive sovereignty:

The capacity to represent, portray, characterize, and depict is not easily available to just any member of just any society; moreover, the “what” and “how” in the representation of “things,” while allowing for considerable individual freedom, are circumscribed and socially regulated. We have become very aware in recent years of the constraints upon the cultural
representations of women, and the pressures that go into the created representations of inferior classes and races. In all these areas—gender, class, and race—criticism has been correctly focused upon the institutional forces in modern Western societies that shape and set limits on the representation of what are considered essentially subordinate beings; thus representation itself has been characterized as keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior.”

From Said’s perspective, because Orientalism is a European discourse bent on dominating the East, the subordination of the “inferior” gender (women), classes, and races is institutionally imposed by the West. However, because he does not provide an alternative model to canonic Orientalist gender conventions, perhaps one that would presumably exist without the imposition of imperialist European power structures, Said leaves little room for the Orient, and especially Oriental women, to speak for themselves.

Alessandra Ciucci explores the meaning of silence and the possibility of discourse for the Moroccan shikhat (professional women singer-dancers) and their repertoire of ‘aita in “De-Orientalizing the ‘Aita and Re-Orientalizing the Shikhat.” Although it may be argued that in canonical Orientalist discourse the West silences the East, one might also maintain that the Orient also silences the voices of its own women. Haideh Moghissi explains the role of women’s silence in Islam:

so important was a woman’s silence, so cherished that it became a key criterion of her beauty and desirability—the prerequisite of the ideal woman. The expression of Sangin o Samet [solemn and silent], still in abundant use to this day, defines an ideal woman who is self-effacing rather than self-promoting, enclosed rather than exposed, mute rather than vocal.”

As professional dancers and singers, the shikhat were unconventional and resisted the gender prescriptions of Moroccan society. According to Gen Doy, the popular definition of shikhat “women who do not want men to tell them what to do.” In traditional Moroccan culture, the male-imposed domination that the shikhat were purportedly resisting was not European, but an aspect of their own Muslim culture. In this sense, women were already engaged in a domestic power struggle grounded in gender and othering that had arguably been a part of Islamic culture long before the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1912. Judith Lynne Hanna notes:
Sometimes women outside a family entertain at Muslim marriages. In this case a female dancer usually regarded as immoral becomes licit. Because the Muslim world cordons off respectable women, women who perform before men outside their own families are seen as violating Islamic laws regarding the secluded, dependent place of women and are assumed to be advertising themselves for sale.\(^{30}\)

As performers, the *shikhat* balance on the cusp of licit art and prostitution, an unclear area of these women’s sexuality that Ciucci elucidates. In this context, the role played by courtesans is similar to that in which they are cast by Orientalizing discourse. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon observe, “For courtesans, art is never an extracurricular activity but one that permeates their lives. Always negotiating a complex dynamic, courtesans are forever producing themselves and being reproduced by the fantasies of their consumers.”\(^{31}\) Orientalist fantasies of the *shikhat*, according to Ciucci, cast them as prostitutes, imposing imperialist moralization.

Regarding Orientalism’s impact on the status of Eastern women, Miller asks of Said’s gender paradigm, “why does such an analysis not entail a concern for the women’s loss of political and economic status, in itself? Women’s history does not become part of the history which is being written.”\(^{32}\) In the case of the *shikhat*, Morocco’s independence from France in 1956 did not restore women’s history. Indeed, Ciucci exposes how the incorporation of the ‘*aita* into nationalistic representations has further silenced the *shikhat* as Moroccan institutions seek to reconstruct an image of these performers that suits a new cultural discourse, one that essentially re-Orientalizes them.

Gender plays complex roles in Orientalism that extend far beyond Said’s fundamental paradigm. Exploring writings on the East by French men and women from before the canonic period of Orientalism and attending to discourse by and around Moroccan women reveals views on the Orient, gender, and Orientalism that oppose, complement, resituate, complicate, or suggest origins for aspects of Orientalist discourse. As Lewis notes, “In order to avoid an account that marginalizes women as agents and readers . . . we must include women as agents in Orientalism without losing the complexities of their relationship to domestic discourses on both side of the Orientalist divide.”\(^{33}\) Indeed, readings of such discourses reveal that women and the Orient are not so invariably passive and willingly subjugated as Said’s insistence on the emblematic stature of Flaubert’s gendered account of the Orient would suggest.
Notes

2 Said, 5–6.
6 “Orientalism is a man’s book. The author is male; the vast number of writers and individuals analyzed in depth or mentioned in passing are men. A quick count of names in the index finds that some 440 men, mostly cited authors are listed. Only 10 women are to be found. For those who value statistics, a ratio of 44 to 1 would seem to lend credence to the complaint that Said does not penetrate the gender issue.” Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: The Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 155.
7 Said, 4.
8 Said, 188.
9 When Said refers to the Orient as a threat, he apparently refers to the Christian morality codes of Western men, as when he says that “Kuchuk is the prototype of Flaubert’s Salammbo and Salomé, as well as of all the versions of carnal temptation to which Saint Anthony is subject.” Said, 187.
10 Said, 188.
11 In response to criticism of his neglecting gender in *Orientalism*, Said states in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994): “studies of the Middle East... when I wrote *Orientalism* were still dominated by an aggressively masculine and condescending ethos.” (XXIV) Some scholars have expressed doubts about Said’s claim that his approach to gendering the Orient was largely determined by the nature of Middle East studies in the late 1970s, particularly since he did not reconsider his position on gender in later writings, despite gestures such as brief references to feminist writing (XXIV) and the women’s movement (218) in *Culture and Imperialism*. Of these and similar remarks by Said, Susan Fraiman notes, “The relegation of such glosses to parenthesis is telling, however—they are safely contained, and in no way reorient Said’s line of argument.” (48) Indeed, in his essay, “Jane Austen and Empire” in *Culture and Imperialism* (80–97), Said reads *Mansfield Park* as a colonialist text without considering implicated aspects of gender, such as how Austen engages as a woman with purportedly gendered aspects of imperialism.
12 Varisco, 160.
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16. Kennedy, 44.

17. Kennedy, 40.


19. Lewis, 4.

20. Lewis, 17.


32 Miller, 122.
33 Lewis, 21.
“REGNORUM RUINA”:
CLEOPATRA AND THE ORIENTAL MENACE
IN EARLY FRENCH TRAGEDY*

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According to Edward W. Said, who usually locates its beginnings at the end of the eighteenth century, “Orientalism . . . viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writings of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing.”¹ As an emblem of the women depicted in nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse, Said posits Kuchuk Hanem, a renowned Egyptian prostitute² described by Gustave Flaubert (1821–80) in accounts of his journey to Egypt (1849–51):³ “she could say—were she able to speak—‘Je ne suis pas une femme, je suis un monde’ [‘I am not a woman, I am a world’].”⁴ Egypt is the world of which Kuchuk Hanem would purportedly speak, and Said’s projection of her and of Egypt as a stupid, dumb prostitute, willingly passive, and available to the domination of Occidental men encapsulates his representation of canonical modern Orientalist views on women and of the Orient as a woman. In an overtly sexual invocation of gender stereotypes, Said declares: “the Orient was viewed as something inviting French interest, penetration, insemination . . . French scholars, administrators, geographers, and commercial agents poured out their exuberant activity onto the fairly supine, feminine Orient.”⁵ This image of the Orient turns on a cliché gender binary in which the purportedly passive, sensual, unthinking woman represents the “feminine” Orient, who, as a prostitute,

* I am grateful to my colleague Charles Wrightington at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York for his invaluable comments on an earlier version of this essay.
is not so much conquered as “penetrated,” “possessed,” and “inseminated” by the “masculine” Occident. Said posits that this “penetration” and “insemination” constituted a “mission civilisatrice” [“civilizing mission”] in which the “developed,” “masculine” West set out to tame and cultivate the supposedly wild, undisciplined, “feminine” East.

Casting the Occident as masculine and strong, the Orient as feminine and weak, Said extends this view beyond individual examples of imperialist Orientalist discourse. He argues, “Flaubert’s situation of strength was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West.” This overarching perspective that Said asserts regarding gender and the Orient has become a much-disputed commonplace. Although the image of the passive “feminine” Orient may arguably be prevalent in literature from the end of the eighteenth through the twentieth century, particularly beginning with the Egyptian Campaign (1798–1801) of Napoléon I (1804–31), it is not an accurate description of earlier French views on the Orient. As Nicholas Dew observes, “Much of our current understanding of what Orientalism means is based on the post-Enlightenment period, and there is therefore a risk of reading nineteenth-century concerns back into the early modern period.” Anachronistic notions of the “feminine” Orient are particularly misleading when they confound modern and early modern views on Egypt.

Dew notes that “in the established literature on the history of Orientalism . . . any period before the late eighteenth century is usually given cursory or dismissive treatment.” Indeed, Said says very little of history or literature from before the turn of the nineteenth century, and one reason for this may be that his Orientalist paradigm does not necessarily apply to previous eras. This invites an evaluation of earlier material reflecting Orientalisms with different parameters than that of Said, particularly regarding geopolitical gendering strategies. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the periods with which Said is primarily concerned, it was not difficult to align the Orient with the “passive” feminine. When Napoléon conquered Egypt in 1798, the Ottoman Empire to which it belonged was in economic and political decline. Since the Ottomans were not a military threat to France, Egypt could easily be cast as “feminine” and passive in contrast to the presumed virility of the conquering Napoléon, emblem of a “masculine,” advancing Occident. However, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire posed a powerful military challenge to Europe. As Said remarks, “Until the end of the seventeenth century the ‘Ottoman peril’ lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger.” The Ottomans were not decisively