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Home and the Harem: Early Nineteenth-Century Orientalist Representations of Women by Women

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<1> In examining two Orientalist verse narratives by women in the early nineteenth century, this paper seeks to examine two cultural shifts, ostensibly unrelated but—in these poems at least—brought directly to bear upon each other. Both shifts have been well documented, and are amply represented by formidable bodies of literary and historical scholarship. The first is what we now call Orientalism, that reductionist construction of the societies to the East and South of Europe as inimical and inferior, and therefore in need of dissolution as other and incorporation into the European self. The second is the cult of domesticity, best articulated as the rise of “separate spheres” ideology, that increasing emphasis on the role and responsibility of women in the home, as distinct from—but mutually complementary to—the public (for public, read political, commercial, industrial, or manual) activities and exertions of men. These two phenomena have been analyzed and distilled into critical commonplaces, sometimes themselves oversimplified in the process. Yet, that these shifts occurred, broadly speaking, is little in doubt. What is interesting, for the purposes of this paper, is that the conjunction of these two major socio-historical trends has attracted little analysis.

<2> I hope to demonstrate how, in women’s literary and extra-literary writings of the first half of the nineteenth century, the easy construction of the Islamic East as inferior and alien could provide a way to contrast, to boost, even to celebrate British gender dynamics. An understanding of Islamic gender relations as a corruption of naturally and divinely sanctioned—and ideally British—domestic arrangements could be used to install the woman at the heart of these arrangements, to take her for granted as a guarantee of national stability and right. What I am suggesting, of course, is that Islam is not so much represented as put to use in a project of consolidating domestic or “separate spheres” ideology, and its central construct—the domestic woman. Unsurprisingly, it is the harem that becomes a foil to and an alibi for the consolidation of domestic womanhood, and could even offer itself in Orientalist narrative as a space in which to valorize it.

<3> Before examining these women’s verse narratives, it is worth noting that such a construction of domestic womanhood is already discernible in the writings of arguably the most influential commentators on the role of women at the beginning of the nineteenth century—Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More. Writing in the last decade of the eighteenth century—Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and More in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799)—these two women reveal how Islamic gender relations could move from what I have called foil to alibi when it came to constructing a role for women at the centre of British society. Wollstonecraft’s attitude to slavery and women is familiar territory. She recurrently labels women “slaves of power” (288) and compares this enslavement to

life “in a seraglio” (113); she accuses, memorably, the arch-puritan Milton of writing “in the true Mahometan strain, [...] to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the sense of man” (100-01). When More has recourse to this alignment of the condition of Islamic women and the state of slavery, however, she transforms this into a direct contrast between Islamic and British gender dynamics, galvanising Wollstonecraft’s critique of Western gender relations in order to depict the rights that Western women apparently already enjoy and to comment hopefully on the potential enjoyment of more such rights:

To use their boasted power over mankind to no higher purpose than the gratification of vanity or the indulgence of pleasure, is the degrading triumph of those fair victims to luxury, caprice, and despotism, whom the laws and the religion of the voluptuous

prophet of Arabia exclude from light, and liberty, and knowledge; and it is humbling to reflect, that in those countries in which fondness for the mere persons of women is carried to the highest excess, *they are slaves*; and that their moral and intellectual degradation increases in direct proportion to the adoration which is paid to mere external charms.

But I turn to the bright reverse of this mortifying scene; to a country where our sex enjoys the blessings of liberal instruction, of reasonable laws, of a pure religion, and all the endearing pleasures of an equal, social, virtuous and delightful intercourse: I turn with an earnest hope, that women, thus richly endowed with the bounties of Providence, will not content themselves with polishing, when they are able to reform; with entertaining, when they may awaken; and with captivating for a day, when they may bring into action powers of which the effects may be commensurate with eternity. (original emphasis; I, 2-4)

More's position seems a decidedly positive heuristic when read alongside Wollstonecraft's negative one. For More, the Muslim woman, here implicitly depicted as a harem inmate, is appreciated simply for her outward appearance and therefore enslaved by masculine lasciviousness, but her British counterpart is fortunate indeed to be valued for an inner beauty founded on her moral and intellectual capacities. Yet, both Wollstonecraft and More have in common their insistence that women—specifically, British women—are inherently rational and ethical beings, whose abilities are easily conveyed by invoking the spectre of Islamic gender dynamics, the shorthand for which is the harem.

<4> This intellectually and morally superior kind of womanhood demanded by Wollstonecraft and projected by More offers a model for British female behavior in poetry and fiction into the nineteenth century. As Mitzi Myers suggests, “at the heart of both More's and Wollstonecraft's works lies a pattern of female domestic heroism” (204). The domestic woman—that queer, composite being that emerges in women's writing of the period—is defined by her position in a society of separate (and, crucially, complementary) spheres. Linda Colley, describing eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century gender relations as a time of “womanpower,” notes how these relations were “profoundly contractual. Women refrained, at least in theory, from invading the public sphere, the realm of action, on the understanding that their moral influence would be respected and recognised” (*Britons*, 277). Yet, because she transforms her husband's income into home comforts, exerts a moralising influence on his political or commercial decisions, and oversees the formative education of his children, the domestic woman is essential not just to her specific sphere of activity but to society at large. More's insistence on women's ability and duty to “reform” and “awaken” is an expression of this. More proclaims elsewhere, “we are responsible for the exercise of acknowledged *power*: a power wide in its extent, indefinite in its effects, and inestimable in its importance” (original emphasis; I, 59).

<5> But what makes a woman capable of being, specifically, a domestic woman? When Nancy Armstrong remarks that “the female character and that of the home became one and the same as she translated her husband's income into the objects and personnel comprising his household” (83), she reminds us that at the heart of this transaction lay a belief in the inherent commonsensical and moral capacity of women. Similarly, More, in describing the domestic woman in terms of her relationship with her husband as “a being who can comfort and counsel him; one who can reason and reflect, and feel, and judge, and discourse, and discriminate; one who can assist him in his affairs, lighten his cares, sooth his sorrows, strengthen his principles, and educate his children” (I, 98), refers us to a uniquely female inner strength and purity; a natural tendency for constancy and concern for others; an availability for companionship, emotional support, and active selflessness.

<6> Finally, it is worth remembering that such a model of female behaviour emerges out of ongoing construction throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In their conduct-book examples and fictional heroines, women writers posited an optimistic account of gender relations that was both “ideal” and “natural”. Such “exemplary narratives,” according to Eve Tavor Bannet, suggested to their readers how they *should* behave, rather than describe how they *did* (62-63). The domestic woman therefore is both wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecy, brought into being through the act of writing (as female writers positioned themselves within her parameters) and reading (as the construct assumed a discursive reality).

<7> Where, then, does the domestic woman sit in the history of Western depictions of Islam and

the East? Wollstonecraft and More are, in Malcolm Kelsall's memorable phrase, "acting merely as a lightning conductor for ideas elementally diffused" (316). In this instance, Kelsall is describing Wollstonecraft's association of the harem with the unequal treatment between women and men in the West, yet it is worth broadening this statement to suggest that both Wollstonecraft and More also reflect a larger tendency of their time to contrast Islamic polygyny with monogamous marriage, construed simultaneously as Christian, Western, civilised and enlightened. And both writers anticipate a specific utilisation of the harem in the nineteenth century—which I wish to explore here—as deviant in order to argue for the efficacy of the separate, domestic sphere and the one woman within it. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell suggests, the harem becomes even more tantalising a prospect for contemplation by Western men when "European culture itself was placing increasing stress on the monogamous couple—when persons of both sexes were being encouraged to concentrate all their emotional and erotic energies on a single partner" (5). Yeazell's words refer us back to the rise of separate spheres ideology: as she puts it, "the culture of affective monogamy took greatest hold among middle-class Britons from the later eighteenth century through the nineteenth century" (5). Her suggestion is corroborated in psychoanalytical terms by Alain Grosrichard's influential 1979 study, *Structure du sérail* (translated into English in 1998 as *The Sultan's Court*). Grosrichard identifies the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' fascination with Eastern despotism as a repression of anxiety about the possibility for tyranny at the heart of Western Enlightenment egalitarianism. Importantly, he specifically locates this repression in attitudes to the harem, since the harem is the projection of everything elided by the fantasy of "the couple," and "the couple" is the starting point for Enlightenment egalitarianism. According to Grosrichard, "Reinventing man and woman, offering a formula for their relationship, finally showing that this relationship quite plainly produces all others (parents-children, State-citizen, etc.), means a foundation for the double-sided unity which will be political subject as the guarantee of a State preserved, if not from injustice, at least from the risks of despotism" (179). For Grosrichard, the trope of "the couple" is a means of "bypassing the intolerable dilemma which is phantasmically uncovered by the seraglio" (179), that is, the reality which we refuse to acknowledge, that essential union and harmony—sexual or otherwise—are unachievable. In other words, a certain construction of Islam and the harem allows for inexpressible ideas of sexual and social disorder to be othered, distanced, and demonised, while as compensation the order of separate spheres is established and manifested in writings about (and apparently by) the women who held the power in one of these spheres.

<8> It is worth rehearsing, then, the brief pre-history of Western representations of Islam, particularly their connotations of sexual tyranny and despotism. Persia and the Ottoman Empire exert a presence in Western consciousness from the early modern age, for they constitute the locus of that other great monotheistic religion that is Islam, increasingly understood as the polar opposite of Christianity. They thus help to define the bounds of Europe, to the East in what is now Turkey and to the South in the Maghreb, which includes modern-day Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The defeat of the Ottomans at Vienna in 1683 allowed a regulation of and increase in diplomatic and trade contacts with the Empire and beyond as well as a greater flow of information, already evident in traveller's reports such as Paul Rycaut's *Histoire de l'état présent de l'Empire Ottoman* (1668) and Jean Chardin's *Voyages en Perse* (1686-1711). Such accounts influenced overtly fictionalised versions, such as Racine's harem tragedy, *Bajazet* (1672) and, more directly, Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721). Real-life travel led to both translating and fictionalising the East in the case of Antoine Galland, who served as secretary to the French ambassador in Constantinople and famously produced the *Mille et une Nuits* (1704-17), which appeared in English as the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* soon after. There is no shortage of British writers and travellers at this time either, not just Lady Mary Wortley Montagu with her *Turkish Embassy Letters* (written 1721 but published 1763), but the writings to which she sought to provide a corrective, such as Aaron Hill's *Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1709), itself implicitly a response to Rycaut. What is remarkable about these writings is not just their interest in the spaces of the Islamic East but their sometimes jostling intentions to outdo previous writings in accurately and comprehensively describing these spaces. This ethnographic intensity is most acute—and often most anxious—when dealing with that least accessible site of the harem. The result is a constant falling back on previous historical accounts and thus the perpetuation of tropes and the creation of myths. "Myths," notes Yeazell, "have a life of their own, and the history of Europe's myths about the harem is a history of persistence as much as change" (7). Such myths include: the portrayal of all Muslim men, not merely those who owned harems, as sexual tyrants, and of their excessive authority as paradoxically enervating and effeminising; the idea that the enslavement of women originates in an oft-cited Muslim belief that they lack souls; and the construction of Muslim women within the harem as uneducated and unstimulated, and therefore prone to childish jealousy and vanity.

<9> Thus, in Orientalist narrative into the nineteenth century, the British domestic woman, appreciable for her inherent virtues, defined by her companionability in a monogamous relationship, could be presented as the superior alternative to the Muslim harem slave. Yet, this is not to say that the Muslim woman appears as an avatar to domestic womanhood—a ready example of undesirable, inferior feminine behaviour. The construction of the harem inherited from Wollstonecraft and More is so much about British gender dynamics, and so much about an idealised and superior code of behaviour for the women of Britain, that the Muslim woman is altogether absent. The women who inhabit these early nineteenth-century female constructions of Islamic gender relations are always Christian and therefore always able to be aligned with British women. As Joan DelPlato's comprehensive analysis of visual depictions of the harem suggests, the trope of Christian slaves in the harem is a cliché of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and French art. This trope manifests itself in a foregrounding of and interest in fair-skinned female slaves in contrast with darker, more servile women and eunuchs. It is based on "a pseudoknowledge" about Circassian and Georgian slaves, who were erroneously believed by Western commentators to be Christian and were portrayed in art and literature as "the premium, most desired slaves, who, because of their rarefied light skin or eyes, were more likely to be promoted within the harem to the rank of wife" (DelPlato 39). As DelPlato notes, the Circassians and Georgians represent "on the basis of their alleged race and religion (white and Christian) [...] the closest parallel to the western Self and thus could be constructed as the repository for a western projection, a proxy westerner who maintains a distance from the harem life in which she is forced to participate" (42). The depiction of women as Christian captives of Muslim men in these narratives allows—to return to Grosrichard's terms—a phantasmic replay of both a return of and a victory over the repressed fear of sexual tyranny and promiscuity. That is, it enables a contest between Muslim men as perpetrators of polygyny and the domestic woman as the standard-bearer of British and Christian monogamy. It is worth noting too that the grounds for this trope are an assumption of the centrality—not even to say superiority—of British women over their Muslim counterparts. Thus, the domestic woman becomes not just a heroine but the only possible locus for heroism; she vanquishes masculine excesses—as signified by the lascivious Muslim man—and vanishes feminine excesses—as implied by the Muslim woman in the harem.

<10> In other words, what Joyce Zonana calls "feminist Orientalism" is alive and well in the early nineteenth century. Zonana discusses "feminist Orientalism" in Victorian fiction and defines it as "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" (594). What I want to argue here is that the rationale behind such a phenomenon is specifically locatable in the rise of domestic womanhood in the decades before Victorianism. What is more, the alterist ethnographic constructions of Islam by female artists in the later nineteenth century—documented by, among others, Billie Melman and Reina Lewis—were yet some way off. The programme of consolidating women's authority in the domestic sphere demanded in the first half of the nineteenth century a certain ideological one-sidedness in order to ensure its success.

<11> This is evident in these two verse narratives by women poets. They are both broadly definable as Orientalist, advertising themselves as types of the genre of what Mohammed Sharafuddin calls—and somewhat optimistically celebrates—as "realistic Orientalism" (vii), in their provision of notes to the narrative in order to prove the veracity of their descriptions of the Islamic world (Yeazell 33-34). Most importantly, they put the Islamic East to work to similar ends, depicting lands—Algiers and Egypt—that are geographically distinct but construed as identical in terms of ideology.

<12> *The Crescent* (1816) by Maryanne M'Mullan (or McMullan), deals with the battle of Algiers of 1816, in which the British navy successfully attacked Algiers, then a territory of the Ottoman Empire, in an apparent bid to end piracy on the Maghreb (or—to use the popular denomination of the time—the Barbary Coast). M'Mullan's own interests in writing this poem are a mix of financial necessity and patriotic fervour. The preface anticipates criticism of the poem by pleading that it has been "rapidly accomplished, amidst the avocations of a busy and very anxious life." A naval widow, identified on the title page of the first edition of her poem as the "relict of W. M'Mullan, Esq., M. D. Royal Navy," M'Mullan took to publishing her writing to support herself and her family upon her husband's death. Her other productions are primarily verse collections, such as *The Naiad's Wreath* (1815), and *Britain: or Fragments of Poetical Aberration* (1818), which contains a poem on a similar theme entitled "On the Algerine Expedition" (70, 70).

(1816), which contains a poem on a similar theme entitled “On the Algerine Expedition (1812)”. The nationalistic sentiments suggested by both *The Crescent* and *Britain* are undergirded by their dedications to the Prince Regent and the memory of Princess Charlotte respectively. Indeed, M’Mullan’s first published endeavour, the anonymous novel, *The Wanderings of a Goldfinch* (1816), included in its list of subscribers the Queen and other members of the immediate Royal family, along with Joanna Baillie, Lord Byron, Humphrey Davy, Thomas Moore, Amelia Opie and William Wordsworth. For all her aspirations to aristocratic patronage and the promise of acceptance by the literary elite, however, M’Mullan seems to have been in dire financial straits for much of her life, supporting not only her children but her aged mother and aunt. Her long and miserable correspondence with the Royal Literary Fund over thirty-five years paints a picture of regular periods of destitution, requiring increasingly desperate measures, from providing tuition to young girls (whose parents, her letters state, subsequently cheated her of fees) to the forced sale of the contents of her cottage and a bout as a debtor in the King’s Bench Prison.⁽¹⁾ Perhaps apart from its hardly necessary reminder of how precarious existence could be for women who found themselves outside the social order of separate spheres, M’Mullan’s circumstances—when read alongside her works’ insistent textual and contextual jingoism—demonstrate to us that domestic womanhood was an ideal usually strategically and discursively adopted rather than truthfully lived by those who wrote of it.

<13> Domestic womanhood emerges—and emerges triumphant—in *The Crescent*. Although the poem is about naval warfare, Islam as the object of that warfare provides ample opportunity for commentary on British gender dynamics. M’Mullan uses the occasion of the British victory to narrate the experiences of Christian prisoners in Algiers and uses these stories to remind us whose version of marital and familial relations—British or Islamic—is the superior. Needless to say, in this depiction of Islam, several common Orientalist tropes are exploited, from the recurrent imagery of red as simultaneous signifier of Islam, connecting it with warfare and blood, to the serendipitous ease with which the term “Barbary” could be confused with “barbarian” (Colley, *Captives*, 44). The poem relates in two cantos the conditions of Christian slaves before launching into a climactic full-scale celebration of the British bombardment of Algiers; most importantly, it sets up, in moving from Cantos I to II, a narrative underlined by the Christian values of monogamy. In Canto I, the text details the horrors faced by two Christian captives, who are, significantly, in despair over being separated from their wives. Indeed, the pleasure of married life forms the subject matter of their last conversation before death. An unnamed Spanish prisoner asks a Venetian, Enrico, to:

Speak of thy country, speak the bliss of home
 If for thy loss a Mother’s grief is heard,
 If on the beach a drooping Sire appear’d;
 Did love fraternal cheer thy early life?
 Or mourns for thee, that more than all—a *Wife?*” (original emphasis; ll. 276-280)

The shared lament that follows underscores a similarly shared sentiment: that wife is more than mother, father or brother put together. This sets the terms of contrast too between Christian monogamy and Muslim barbarity, for this lament is the precursor to the full horrors faced by a Christian woman in captivity. This episode—the threats of rape made but never realised against a Spanish woman named Armide—is told in fragments. Such fragmentation could be an allusion to Byron’s treatment of the narrative of “The Giaour” (1813) as a dream-like, half-remembered tale. However, we are warned, in Canto I of *The Crescent*, that sensationalistic celebrations of the Orient in the style of Byron have no place in this narrative: “Rapine and Murder, Slavery and Crime, / The Muses turn from, with unfeign’d disdain / [...] / Though Byron wooed them to the Turkish shore” (ll.148-50). Thus, the fragmented narrative instead functions here as proof of how difficult it is for a civilised Christian and female poet to describe Islamic barbarism in detail. Fortunately for the modesty of both poet and reader, the rape does not occur. Significantly, just as Armide’s memories of her husband are interrupted by the approach of the assailant—once more contrasting Islamic barbarity with Christian monogamy—she collapses and “dies a spotless bride!” (ll.539-46).

<14> These two episodes involving both male and female captives present implicit praise to domestic womanhood. The bridge between them is an explicit celebration. It occurs in the opening lines to Canto II, which are worth quoting at length in order to demonstrate this:

From the antarctic to the arctic pole.
 Where’er the winds may breathe, the waters roll,

Since female voice was first in Eden heard,
 Since female form to lordly Man appear'd
 Is there a bliss dispensed to Earth below?
 Is there a balm to lessen every woe?
 Is there a voice to cheer, a form to bless?
 To perfect happiness, to soothe distress?—
 'Tis Woman charms, her virtues are the theme,
 Where'er Man wander, or whate'er he dream.
 She rears the infant, she instructs the youth,
 Her words are Music—and her counsels Truth!
 She blesses manhood, she consoles in age,
 Her light illumines through life's dullest stage,
 Subdues Asperity and softens Wrath,—
 Guide of Man's life and charmer of his path,
 Without her smile what bliss could worlds impart?
 So dear is Woman to the manly heart! — (ll.481-497)

Here we have a veritable catalogue of domestic woman's special powers—her moral wisdom, her good-natured solicitude, her constant capacity for emotional support. Without these, man remains unguided, uncharmed, unsoothed, unsubdued, and, indeed, unblessed. Yet, woman's specialness goes unrecognised in the Islamic world, for this celebration of domestic womanhood ends with the potent threat that is Islam: "Never did Woman's voice in vain implore, / Till Woman knelt on abject Barbary's shore!" (ll.511-512). Significantly, M'Mullan ensures that a note at the end of the poem supports this final couplet. Here, she perpetuates accusations of Islamic abuse of women, recalling accepted notions of Islamic beliefs in female soullessness and the practices of the harem, and underlines these by invoking the spectre of such abuse being extended to captive—and presumably Christian—women:

The religious prejudices of the Algerines, in common with all Mahometans, degrade women into mere automatons for their gratification. It cannot, therefore, be presumed the female Captives could hope [for] mercy from any cause but the most shocking alternative. Blaquiere's letters fully support the Episode I have introduced. (58)

M'Mullan readily participates in the intertextual pretenses of Orientalist scholarship and poetry, referring the reader for verification to an ethnographic source, in this case, Edward Blaquiere's *Letters from the Mediterranean, Containing a Civil and Political Account of Sicily, Tripoly, Tunis and Malta* (1813). Blaquiere's remarks on women on the Barbary Coast include a commentary on the "shocking life prescribed to the unhappy women of this country" (in this case, Tunis, not Algiers). Blaquiere notes of such women that:

In the streets, when permitted to go out, they are observed to gaze with admiration on Christians, and often heard to exclaim in terms of warm approbation of our dress and general appearance. [...] The advocates, if there are any, for a plurality of wives, have only to visit Barbary, in order to be convinced of the ruin attached to, and the irrationality of, that fallacious system, for the most violent means are continually resorted to for the suppression of that offspring which it is out of their power to support, while the liberty of shutting up several ill-fated females, for the gratification of one person, is not only destructive of personal happiness and social order, but often fatal to thousands of a sex, which if permitted to assume the rights of nature, *or their natural right*, would tend at once to charm and humanize their savage companions. (original emphasis; II, 65-66)

Blaquiere not only supports M'Mullan's assertion about the excesses of Muslim masculinity and the contrasting of these with Christian monogamy, he locates these excesses and deviances in the harem. Thus the harem offers itself as the locus of a culture in which masculinity rages rampant, unchecked by civilising femininity, in which the "*natural*" order of separate spheres is absent. The women of the harem are, it is inferred, incapable of offering such a check, having been long immured within Muslim gender relations and, when "permitted to go out," able only to gaze admiringly at Christian women. Elsewhere, Blaquiere offers material to furnish M'Mullan's fantasy of the resistance of Christian women to Muslim masculinity in her Armide episode, for he retails the narrative of Lorenza Lena, a "native of Pantalaria," whose beauty attracted the notice of the Bey of Tunis, but whose "virtuous determination" saw her choose the punishment of "one thousand bastinadoes" over the advances of "a monster of the most refined cruelty, and a perfect

demon in the diabolical and nefarious indulgence of a *well-known Moorish appetite*” (original emphasis; II, 212).

<15> The poem’s narrative and polemic trajectory requires that Islam be not only demonized but defeated. Britain and all it represents win both military and ideological battles. Importantly, then, the victims of Islam in this poem are Spanish and therefore Christian in the broadest sense; they are never British. Although this reflects the statistical fact that the majority of captives were Spanish, it was the experiences of captured Britons that allowed the horror of Barbary captivity to resonate so strongly in British consciousness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Colley, *Captives*, 73-81; Matar 4-5). It is therefore significant that M’Mullan’s poem chooses not to depict any British slaves, even while it allows an identification between British domestic women and the Christian women of her narrative. It means Britain may be construed as defenders of the faith and it enables M’Mullan too to invoke her dedicatee the Prince Regent as the leader of these defenders. Apostrophising Britain, the poet states: “Thy patriot prince, thy Senate heard the cry, / While neighbouring nations heed not slavery’s sigh” (ll.167-68). That Britain condescends to rescue even Roman Catholics from the clutches of supposed Islamic barbarity demonstrates further the trend—identified by Colley (*Captives*, 125), for example—that saw, over the course of the eighteenth century, Islam replace Catholicism as Protestant Britain’s ideological bogey.

<16> By the time M’Mullan writes, then, Islam is a logical foil in her promotion of British domestic womanhood. Her poem ends with a paean to a Britain defined by what looks like a list of positive attributes, but is also readable as a gendered binary:

Her martial spirit, and her arts, her arms,
Her manly guardians, and her female charms,
Her naval trophies, and her warlike train,
Her hills, her rivers, and her fruitful plain (ll.903-06)

The most obvious dichotomy, made clear by that initial caesura in line 904, is that between the masculine guardianship of Britain and its feminine beauty. Although the emphasis overall is on military might, with a glance at the arts, these masculine fields of endeavour are contrasted with that which they defend, not just the charms of British women but the feminised landscape—for example, the “fruitful plain” of Britain. Of course, Britain itself is persistently personified as female. M’Mullan—as has been noted above—is positioned on the title page as a military widow, the woman who waits at home; here, her poem ends with vignettes of a man who “roams” abroad from this feminised home and of men who defend it. Britain is, in this construction, the equivalent of its domestic spaces presided over by domestic women. The British domestic sphere functions in this poem as the unspoken but underlying context, cause and catalyst of the attack on Islam.

<17> The hallmarks of domestic womanhood established here—inherent virtue, steadfast loyalty, the ability to harmonise and soothe masculine excess, and near divine powers of salvation—occur too in the narrative trajectory of Eleanor Dickinson’s *The Mamluk* (1830), which sets the domestic woman firmly in opposition against the sexual power structures of Islam. Little is known about Dickinson, apart from the fact that both she and her husband were Quakers at the Springfield Academy in Liverpool (Jackson 104). Her one other poetical production was *The Pleasures of Piety, with Other Poems* (1824), whose title alone suggests the same impulse of Christian conservatism that informs *The Mamluk*.

<18> Dickinson’s poem, like M’Mullan’s, makes use of notes, not least to emphasize her narrative’s basis on historical events. Set during the reign of the Mamluk (or “Mamluke”) rulers of Egypt in the eighteenth century, her poem has as its eponymous hero the Mamluk sultan Ali Bey, Christian by birth and adopted by a Muslim pasha. Her heroine, Aza, is a Christian kidnapped and sold into the harem of the Sultan, where she narrowly escapes murder by the Sultan’s jealous queen. When the Sultan dies and Ali ascends to the throne, Aza and Ali are revealed to have been childhood sweethearts and are reunited. However, their connubial happiness is short-lived for, as Ali rises to political supremacy, he is driven by revenge and bloodlust. War eventually proves fatal. It is Aza who, coming to his deathbed in the enemy camp, restores him to his better self before he dies.

<19> Aza, as a Circassian, functions easily as a type of the British woman. As we have seen, the frisson and the outrage implicit in the idea of Christian female chastity threatened with sexual assault occurs in both M’Mullan’s verse narrative and Blaquiére’s traveller’s account; it appears in this case in a rehearsal of the myth of the routine abduction of Circassian women by Muslims.

Aza's first encounter in the harem raises immediately the superiority of British/Christian to Muslim femininity. In her initial meeting with the harem queen Zaide, Aza wins a battle of minds. Although Aza's physical attributes are described in detail, it is her "mild, sweet, artless air / Breathed from the spirit's purity" (18) that alerts us to the fact that she possesses that "dignity of soul / Which owns not slavery's control" (18). In other words, she possesses the inner moral superiority of the domestic woman. In marked contrast, Zaide is consumed by the jealousies and passions roused by polygamy. This immediately sets up a dichotomy of Islamic immorality and Christian constancy, chastity and virtue. Of Zaide and the Sultan, we are told:

They loved,—but not the mild pure light
Around their spirits shed its beam,
That glows when hearts together plight
The mutual vow of fond esteem.
That nameless sympathy of soul,
Caught not from transient beauty's smile,
Which lives beyond its weak control.
Through time, and lives unchanged the while. (19-20)

Unsurprisingly, Zaide is easily driven into a murderous rage, and instructs her eunuch to kill the young rival. Yet, Aza's virtuousness moves the servant to pity, and her life is spared. In the first round between the domestic woman and Islam, in other words, Aza's purity of mind and heart wins out.

<20> When Aza is saved by Ali, the poem's plot is further refined into a story of femininity providing spiritual salvation for intemperate masculinity. In order to achieve this, however, the poem must effect some sleight of hand, for Aza's domestic womanhood should ideally be achieved within the bounds of Christian monogamy. Thus, once he marries Aza, Ali is momentarily depicted as more Christian than Muslim. In their moment of reunion, he resumes his Christian name, Hadar, and throws his turban on the ground in a gesture of defiance and proof of love. Moreover, the text refuses for some while to clarify Ali's religious persuasion. When the Ottomans declare war on Egypt, they are presented as Muslim aggressors, and the Egyptians led by Ali, in a questionable leap of logic, become defenders against Islam. Ali, we are told, "Longed to wrest that land of bloom, / And sacred record, from the gloom / Of Paynim darkness" (82). Furthermore, once they are married, Aza pleads with her husband that they return to Circassia. Although her wishes are not met, her insistence that a Christian marriage should be lived in a Christian land is significant. It suggests that it is because the couple remain in Egypt that they cannot achieve connubial happiness. Ali is increasingly marked by the revenge and belligerence associated with Muslim excess. As "passion's slave" (103), he is marked too by the notion that Islam's gender structures enslave not just its women but paradoxically turn its despotic, unfettered men into slaves of the passions (Yeazell 68).

<21> The poem's positioning of Aza and Christianity on the one hand and her husband and Islam on the other is most obvious in its recurring motifs. For example, in the lines that directly precede Ali's assumption of the throne, Islam is pictured as an uncontrollable defiler of the Egyptian landscape. It is therefore directly aligned not just with masculinity but specifically with masculine aggression:

Pity, that Paynim tyrant dwells,
In land so fair, in clime so blessed;
That slavery through her grots and dells,
Trembling obeys his high behest,
Nor veiled alone in Afric's night,
Her cheek, and eye, and brow appear,
But as the pearl of ocean bright,
With sapphire glance and sunny sphere
Of cheek, and lip of deepening bloom,
She smiles like Peri through the gloom.
Pity, that fierce contentions rise,
That carnage plants his gory foot,
That warfare's crimson banner flies.
Oh! that beneath such glorious skies
The jealous doubt and dark surmise,
Should cloud the sun-light of the soul

Shed the sun light of the beam,
And deepen into sin the whole!
Revenge! how thy fell blighting ray
Withers the heart from whence it steals
Like fires which flame till their decay
The blackened wreck around them seals! (101-02)

Significantly, these lines also invoke, through repetition and parallelism, a contrast between the natural beauty of the landscape, described in terms of pure whites and blues, and the waywardness of Islam, all lurid reds and intemperate heat and fire. This evokes the contest between Aza's feminine powers of salvation and the masculine intemperance and vengefulness betokened by Ali as an Islamic warrior, when we consider that Aza is consistently depicted in the same glowing terms as these natural surroundings. Her physical characteristics are often described in detail, as we have noticed above, and—what is more—these descriptions all share an association with natural light and purity. Our first vision of her by moonlight is of a figure who seems, in reflecting the light, to emit it herself:

Ah! who like Peri's form of light,
Or genius of this lovely night,
There lingers wrapped in veil of white?
So mute and motionless her air,
'T might be fair statue of despair,
But for the light upon her eye,
Caught from a moonbeam of yon sky (5)

One could argue that the comparison between Aza and the Peris—those heavenly virgins who are part of the Muslim man's reward after death—is counter-productive to an alignment of her with Christian domesticity. Nonetheless, the idea of the ethereal Peri is popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and art, DelPlato reminds us, as an evocation of the virginal and spiritual, as opposed to the physical, attributes of woman (204-05). Moreover, quite apart from this and the obvious reliance on the moon as a symbol of chastity, these lines are significant because they introduce what becomes the poem's central motif—the alignment of Aza with light and salvation. This alignment happens almost too often in the poem to bear chronicling. In the confrontation between Zaide and Aza, for example, Aza, with her “bright blue eye” recalling “the deep, cerulean sky” and the way in which, “from her neck, the sunbeam's gold, / In clustering ringlets softly rolled” (18), is imaged as shining, bright, fair, and, therefore pure.

<22> Aza's apotheosis as domestic woman into bright and pure saviour of her husband's Muslim soul is complete when she goes to him on the battlefield, upon learning he has been fatally wounded. That “Resolved at once [she] fled to prove / A woman's faith, a woman's love” (162) suggests that, away from the harem and bowers of the palace, Aza is able to exert the full extent of her inherent feminine powers of salvation on Ali. She comes to save his soul, if not his life. Ali is therefore finally able to renounce the mad fiery passion of revenge and embrace his wife's pure light of virtue and reason:

He gazed upon her lovely face,
Tinged with hope's last reviving trace,
Which shed a sweet, yet hectic glow,
Cast like the morning's blush on snow;
And lighted up her eye's soft blue,
To heaven's own tints of azure hue;
Where Pity, like an angel shone,
The dying sufferer, upon. (163)

Ali's salvation is enacted through looking at Aza, and being looked upon by her. In a kind of ocular blessing, the pure, consistently white light of divine reason, practically emanating from Aza's eyes, extinguishes the fiery, presumably red, and therefore Islamicised, passions of her husband: “Now see that passion's fire is gone; / Which with a blaze of wildering light, / Veiled reason's chaster rays in night” (164). With this, the domestic woman—loyal, loving, pure, steadfast—emerges victorious over the lusts of Islam.

<23> The typical rubric of Western male Orientalist fantasy has been memorably described by Gayatri Spivak as “White men [...] saving brown women from brown men” (296). In these

fantasies of the Orient constructed by British women, however, the harem and all that it signifies offer a useful antithesis to domestic woman's domestic sphere, and Islam becomes a yardstick against which to measure her authority. The Islamic harem—byword for sensuousness and promiscuity—conveniently throws into relief the domestic woman as purveyor of monogamous constancy and active charity. This Orientalist poetry facilitates, in other words, the idealizing and heroicizing of the domestic woman. Just as with any masculine appropriation of the Orient, it must be said, these writings forego any attempt to reach an authentic understanding of the Islamic other. Nonetheless, it would seem that Spivak's formula must be rewritten if it is to be reapplied to the women's Orientalist verse examined here. These poems are not, after all, about white men saving brown women from brown men; they are about the alleged ability of British women to save all men—from themselves.

Endnotes

(1) See the letters written by M'Mullan, archives of the Royal Literary Fund, File 377, M1077/10, Manuscripts Department, British Library. (△)

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