

Preface

This book builds on an existing critical foundation, the reflection on the relationship between literary representations of the Orient and European colonial history first examined in depth in 1978 in Edward Said's seminal study, *Orientalism*. It focuses on a single but essential component of this relationship: the figure of the "Oriental woman" and the prevalence, in Orientalist representation, of gendered metaphors of race and culture. The chapters that follow ask how the interplay between race and gender in this corpus of texts participated in France's domestic cultural history, and in its changing colonial landscape, over the period stretching from the early eighteenth century to the latter part of the nineteenth. A principal goal of this analysis is to provide a genealogy of contemporary Western, and particularly French, attitudes to Islamic culture, in which issues of sexuality and gender relations continue to occupy a privileged place. This book maintains, in fact, that the character of these Western attitudes, along with Islamic responses to them, can only properly be understood within an historical perspective.

In its first form, as a doctoral dissertation, this project sought to nuance Said's account of the Orientalist literature by demonstrating the textual complexity of this corpus and by extension its political heterogeneity. The need for this kind of revision has largely been obviated by the appearance, in the 1990s, of several studies that offer more complex accounts of Orientalism and its political ramifications. However, as I read these new studies, I came to the conclusion that in certain respects, the debate over the political status of Orientalist scholarship, art, and literature has not progressed significantly beyond the preliminary recognition that Orientalism is a facet of Western

colonial power. That is to say, critical reflection on the French encounter with alterity has remained excessively abstract, attuned to theoretical questions but not to the specific ways in which Orientalist art and literature reflect, or fail to reflect, the changing circumstances of French colonial history.

Although critics writing in the wake of Edward Said consistently acknowledge the need to historicize, this book proposes that even the most recent studies of French Orientalism fail to read cultural representations against the specific contexts, domestic and colonial, in which they came into existence. In certain cases, this omission has produced significant distortions. For example, the notorious fascination of eighteenth-century France with things Oriental has typically been read as a rehearsal of the nation's expansion into the Orient at the end of the century. What such a reading does not take into account, however, is the relationship between Orientalist representation and France's *existing* colonies in the Atlantic world and Indian Ocean. I argue that we can trace in political and fictional accounts of the Orient in this period a marked displacement away from the old colonies and the slave trade that sustained them, toward the Oriental world. In the very different context of nineteenth-century French Orientalism, this book suggests that the failure to historicize has resulted in an anachronistic assimilation of colonial politics to other political ideologies, such that it is presumed, for example, that the left-wing attitudes of a writer such as Gérard de Nerval toward a number of domestic issues led him to criticize French colonial aspirations, whereas in reality, in the 1830s and 1840s, colonial expansion was primarily a project of the left-wing opposition, and one that Nerval, among other oppositional writers, fundamentally supported.

This book also tries to historicize in a second sense: by addressing the place of thinking on the Orient and the colonies within France's domestic history. For example, it considers connections between the almost obsessive representation of the enclosure of the Oriental harem in eighteenth-century France and the emergence of a gendered polarization of public and private spheres of life. Histories of colonialism and literary scholarship on Orientalist literature have tended to concentrate on Europe's impact on its "others" without engaging in substantial reflection on the reciprocal impact of the colonies on European culture. By contrast, I argue the necessity, at once historical and political, of working with a multidirectional model of

influence that challenges the long-standing opposition between domestic and global, metropolitan and colonial. This study takes a small step in this direction by examining the profound penetration of words and fashions borrowed from the Orient, and of raw materials imported from the colonies, into the terrain of French intellectual and material culture.

This project began several years ago as a doctoral dissertation; I am deeply grateful to Peter Brooks for getting it off the ground and for patiently guiding it through its first awkward stages. I am indebted also to my readers at Yale University, Chris Miller, Charles Porter, and Elena Russo, for challenging observations that mapped out ways in which this study could grow, and to Kevin Newmark, whose example as a teacher and writer was an inspiration.

My views on the correlation between representations of the Oriental harem and the domestic politics of gender coalesced during a 1996 National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar devoted to the topic of “Women’s Place in Eighteenth-Century France.” I would like to express my gratitude to the NEH for sponsoring this seminar, and to Carol Blum and Madelyn Gutwirth for both their exemplary leadership of it and their continuing encouragement and support.

Tulane University’s provision of a sabbatical leave greatly accelerated the completion of this book. I was fortunate to spend much of this leave in the idyllic setting of the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, where numerous drafts were written. I am grateful to Camargo’s Board of Trustees for providing me with a residential fellowship and to director Michael Pretina for his hospitality and support. The fellows in residence in spring 1998 became valuable interlocutors; Tip Ragan and Dennis McInnerney in particular listened patiently to my ideas and contributed their own in return.

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