EMBODYING ORIENTAL WOMEN: REPRESENTATION AND VOYEURISM IN MONTESQUIEU, MONTAGU AND INGRES

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This paper is a reading of three instances of the image of oriental woman in works of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, in other words, works set against the backdrop of at first nascent and later full-blown Colonialism. They are Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, (probably begun in 1717 and finally published in 1721), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Embassy Letters*, the manuscript of her correspondence with friends and literary acquaintances in England, when, from 1717-1718, she accompanied her husband, ambassador to the Sublime Porte, and lastly, Ingres' *Bain turc* of 1863.1

The very figure of oriental woman limits the representation of real middle eastern women to the privileged image of the Levantine/Persian harem woman, a figure which appears throughout Colonialism in almost every artistic genre. The fascination exercised by this figure undoubtedly derives from its *impossibility*: the inherent invisibility of the women who are portrayed. Oriental women fascinate because they are unknowable, immured within a harem or hidden beneath a veil. These structures of concealment frame a negative image, paradoxically proclaiming the existence of the secret which they are designed to protect.

The fascination can also be ascribed to a phantasy of containment, since harem and veil may be held to protect the essential or eternal feminine, morally and physically sheltering women from contamination by the masculine, public sphere. The fact that the women need to be concealed gestures towards desirability and value as well as reflecting male dominance. It is a crime punishable by death to look upon them, but the sight is all the more delectable for being forbidden. Indeed, in order to see oriental women, one must become a voyeur, a figure which appears in all three of the texts which I shall address. I shall argue that this voyeurism, generated by the absolute seclusion of women and reflecting male control, is in fact the locus of a destabilization of the series of oppositions and power structures which initially seem to govern the western depiction of oriental women.

Veiled women are one of the most immediately visible signs of alterity of Islamic culture, as well as its most secret dimension. The fact that they mark both the alterity and the authenticity of their
cultural context is one explanation of the drive, within the context of Colonialism, to represent them. In L’an V de la révolution algérienne, Frantz Fanon expresses the logic of the colonialist as "ayons les femmes et le reste suivra" (23). As the most visible (albeit invisible) of cultural attractions, oriental woman becomes picturesque or 'like a picture', neatly framed by the structures of containment. By extension, it could be argued that this marker of authenticity or of the nature of a culture itself depends on the mechanics of representation and depiction, or in other words, that which is generally construed to be inessential and inauthentic.

The first scene I would like to read in the context of this paradox is Letter III of Montesquieu's Lettres persanes. It is the first letter in this epistolary novel to be written by a woman - the fictional author is Zachi, one of the wives whom Usbek has abandoned in the harem during his voyage to Paris. The letter is a submissive lament over the absence of the master, recalling former happiness and in particular, past sexual gratification: Zachi emerges as a devoted wife, avid for the erotic attentions of the master.

In the course of these recollections, Zachi recreates for her reader a personal memory which also happens to be a stereotype of oriental polygamy (it also occurs in the letters of Mary Montagu, in spite of the fact that she generally tries to position herself as a debunker of this kind of lascivious image): Usbek, surrounded by wives jealously competing for preference, reenacts the judgment of Paris - which is of course a Hellenic myth. Initially, the women appear before him "après avoir épuisé tout ce que l'imagination peut fournir de parures et d'ornements," and Zachi reminds her husband that "tu vis avec plaisir les miracles de notre art." However, in order to choose between them, he commands his wives to "paraitre...dans la simplicité de la nature." At this point, the women shed all artifice and are unveiled -- they are literally undressed and denuded so that they appear in their natural or true form.

The correlate to this self-exposure or exhibitionism is, of course, the act of viewing, and Zachi recalls that from passive spectatorship, Usbek progresses to an investigative curiosity -- "tu portas tes regards curieux dans les lieux les plus secrets" -- which itself culminates in consummation or carnal knowledge. In this scene, not only are the carefully concealed, sacrosanct bodies of oriental women unveiled, but the most secret recesses of their femininity are also exposed to the penetration of the male gaze.

The scene is structured by a relation between exhibitionism and voyeurism which is most apparent in the relationship between the wives, particularly Zachi, who admits "je comptai pour rien la gudeur," and Usbek. However, in her remembrance of the scene as a scene,
Zachi remains detached from it, an observer, reader or voyeur sexually stimulated by a visualized past. In other words, Zachi is not simply the exhibitionist or the object of representation, she is also the voyeur and the representer, such that positions inside and outside the experience and its representation are destabilized. Widening the compass of this contaminating structure, the reader of the *Lettres persanes* is also placed in the position of being a voyeur of forbidden sights, and is thus involved in an exchange with Usbek and Zachi which, once again, complicates positions inside and outside the representation.

This instability is characteristic of the critical project of the *Lettres persanes*. In this satirical text, the 'veil of Orient' is deployed to mask a movement of self-criticism, with the topos of oriental despotism representing French absolutism, Islam standing for Catholicism and the oriental subjugation of women mirroring European constructions of gender. However, I would argue that this destabilization of the positions of self and other which gives the text its political force, exceeds both a deliberate, controlled exchange and the more regressively signed inevitable and uncontrollable projection of the self in constructions of alterity.

Surrounded by his naked wives, Usbek invites them to pose for him: "tu nous fis passer en un instant dans mille situations différentes." The presumed immanence of nakedness fails to capture the essential beauty of the women, and they are told to assume different postures as though they were models posing for a painter. Here there is a slippage away from the empirical experience of seeing which is central to the project of the *Lettres persanes*, as to many texts of the period, towards aestheticization. The movement of aestheticization could be said to collapse the difference between mere viewing and an active painting. This distinction can also be characterized as the difference between mimetic representation and figuration, or, by extension, between reading and writing.

Rather than exposing the truth of the natural body, what the undressing displays is a nude, in other words, a figure drawn from the repertory of art history and eroticism. Closely tied to the ideology of representation, the nude could be viewed as the figure of figure, the degree zero of the body which is always already figural and charged with value. The fact that the literal unveiling does not uncover a natural or real body but a figure or a proliferation of veils cast over the truth, finds its correlate in the later figural unveiling of Zachi and Usbek's other wives as deceitful, unfaithful or untrue women. In marked contrast to the one-dimensional sexuality which Zachi gives voice to in letter III, as early as Letter XXX she is caught in compromising situations, first with a white eunuch and subsequently
with a female slave. This image of a forbidden, polymorphous feminine sexuality is another characteristic of Western depictions of oriental women, a depiction which invariably reflects male concern about women in general. For example, in the *Traité des eunuques* of 1707, disturbed by the possibility of women having sexual liaisons with and even marrying eunuchs, Ancillon prefigures Freud in wondering what a woman wants --if not the phallus-- and worries "de quelle nature sont ces désirs, sont-ils permis?" Both questions are companions to the essentializing question "what is woman?" and like it, culminate in essentializing phantasms of containment, such as the harem.

Although the *literal* unveiling unveils only a figural body, it should not be assumed that the *figural* unveiling which exposes woman as perfidiously unfaithful supplies the truth: in fact, as I have suggested, it supplies only another stereotype or phantasm of nymphomaniacal sexuality. What is more significant is the destabilization of the opposition of the categories of truth and lie, literal and figural and interior and exterior of the body in its relation to representation. (To examine fully this movement in the *Lettres persanes* would require a much more comprehensive reading of the novel, focussing on Roxane as the character who tells the truth by lying, the Nietzschean figure of woman as the lie of truth.)

The second and parallel scene which I would like to examine occurs in Mary Montagu's travel letters. Although these letters present themselves as private and biographical rather than fictional, they actually almost certainly constitute a polished and edited composite of the original letters, all but one of which have been lost. The letters share both sources and influences and the representation of the Orient as a strategy for criticizing the West, with their fictional and public contemporary, the *Lettres persanes*.

In Montagu's letters, penetrations into the forbidden spaces of harem and hammam are presented as real events, with Montagu's aristocratic title, and more particularly her gender, attesting to the veracity of her representations. I shall focus on the first of two letters which narrate visits to the Turkish Baths. It describes the public baths of Sophia, and, at least on a primary level, is addressed to an unnamed Lady, and dated April 1st, 1717.

Both of Montagu's letters concerning the baths begin outside the building and describe the movement inside towards the centre occupied by the women, proleptically confirming Edward Said's characterization of Orientalism as an attempt to make everything visible by exteriorizing the interior in representation (19-22). Once inside the baths, Montagu is greeted by "some two hundred women." (The image of oriental women is typically plural because they are
Zachi remains detached from it, an observer, reader or voyeur sexually stimulated by a visualized past. In other words, Zachi is not simply the exhibitionist or the object of representation, she is also the voyeur and the representee, such that positions inside and outside the experience and its representation are destabilized. Widening the compass of this contaminating structure, the reader of the *Lettres persanes* is also placed in the position of being a voyeur of forbidden sights, and is thus involved in an exchange with Usbek and Zachi which, once again, complicates positions inside and outside the representation.

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veiled and therefore anonymous, or because they belong to a polygamous structure.) All are said to be "in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed." However, the lack of adornment of either body or prose soon gives way to the painterly perspective which we have already noted in the passage from the Lettres persanes: "There were many amongst them as exactly proportion'd as ever any Goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shiningly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair..."

In this aestheticization, oriental women are once again integrated into an occidental artistic tradition. The praise accorded here (as elsewhere in the Embassy Letters) to their white skin is one of several aspects of Montagu’s purported Turkophilia which suggest that what is appealing in alterity is ultimately a pleasing reflection of the self. The fact that this constitutes an inversion of the negative reflection of Europe in Montesquieu’s portrayal of oriental despotism, reflects the status of the Orient as a locus which is characterized by its capacity for exchanges or tropological reversals. Not only is the image of the bathers aestheticized in the sense that empirical perceptions are matched with cultural memory while description takes the form of painting or creation, but the unveiled naked body is represented as already figured or pre-figured to the extent that the women’s hair is portrayed as something supplementary, an adornment or veil, disrupting the concept of body or corpus as a self-enclosed totality.

The impression that a relation between models and a painter governs this passage is confirmed by the fact that despite the naked women’s invitation, Lady Mary, as outsider, insists on remaining clothed. However, this detached, external or voyeuristic position is itself complicated by the fact that she proceeds to invoke the presence of a real painter who is male: "I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr. Gervase could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improv’d his art to see so many fine women naked in different postures, some in conversation, some working..." (my italics). This moment in the text can be read as an allegory of the broader relation between a writing which represents visual experience, and painting or aestheticization. It also figures the relation between the text and the western male reader, here figured as invisible voyeur. As a Westerner, there is a degree to which Montagu assumes a masculine position towards an Orient which is often gendered as a feminine locus, an enigma or Sphinx to be interrogated and solved by male explorers and scholars. Borrowing Gayatri Spivak’s term "native informant," Montagu could be described as a 'female informant' who opens up or represents the baths for the voyeur.

However, unlike a painter or an orientalist ethnographer,
Montagu puts herself in the picture of the baths, going so far as to describe her costume and the women's reaction to it as a marker of her occidental alterity. It is interesting to note that several years earlier, she had herself modelled for Gervase who painted her in the costume of a shepherdess.

Thus, in this second scene of voyeurism and exhibitionism involving the naked, oriental female body, not only is there a blurring of the exteriority differentiating and segregating representor and represented, painter and model, but aestheticization invades representation and contaminates the real or the natural, and the naked body is, once again, already external to itself, pre-figured in and by representation.

In 1819, Ingres copied this passage—omitting the reference to Gervase—into his Cahier (IX), and it provided inspiration and documentation for a series of orientalist paintings of odalisques and oriental bathers. The debt is clearest in the Bain turc of 1863, which similarly portrays a large number of women, occupied like those in Montagu's account (for example, in braiding hair), almost all with luminously white skins. The darker-skinned women seem in fact to be servants: the belief that harem owners preferred light-skinned Georgian or Circassian women was a commonplace of contemporary descriptions of slave markets and its promulgation reflects, among other things, the self-projection involved in the occidental fascination with oriental alterity.

In two paintings of 1826 and 1828, both known as Petites baigneuses, there appears the figure of a turbanned woman drawn from an earlier painting, the Baigneuse de Valpinçon of 1808. In both Petites baigneuses the turbanned bather's gaze is fixed on an object—in the first, on another woman, and in the second, on a eunuch. In an article entitled "The Harem Dehistoricized: Ingres' Turkish Bath," the art historian Marilyn Brown has called this female figure a "surrogate voyeur"—a voyeur whose voyeurism mediates that of painter and viewer alike and thus defers the closure of the painting (60). She also suggests that this female figure can be read as an allegory of Ingres' relation to Montagu as a source of his image of otherwise invisible, inaccessible oriental women.

The same figure reappears in the Bain turc of 1863 as the mandolin player in the center foreground, who, though her back is turned to the viewer, is clearly exchanging glances with one partner of an embracing couple to her right, creating a triangle which can certainly be read as homoerotic. One aspect of Mary Montagu's aestheticization is that it effaces the erotic signification which it clearly bears. This resistance may be read in her denial of the presence of homoeroticism: the women were naked "...yet there was not the least
wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst 'em' (my italics). A similar play between eroticism and a chaste classicism is at work in the Bain turc, though the presence of a "surrogate voyeur" may suggest that Ingres himself read Montagu’s denial as an affirmation. 4

In 1859, Ingres began the Bain turc as a rectangle--the form in which it was first sold to the Prince Napoléon. Since his wife, the Princesse Clothilde found the scene lascivious, it was returned to the artist who transformed it into the tondo shape it has today. This change could be interpreted in many ways, for example, as a reflection of Ingres’ admiration for Raphael who also used the cameo form. For the purposes of this reading it is interesting that the oval shape, rather than suggesting a window on the outside world or simply aesthetic convention, resembles a key-hole or a mirror. The impression of a key-hole is certainly generated by the illicit nature of the scene and the voyeurism it both evokes and allegorizes, while the idea of a mirror suggests self-referentiality as opposed to "realist" representation.

I have already noted the self-reference tying the two Petites baigneuses to the earlier Baigneuse de Valpinçon and the later Bain turc. The latter painting is in fact the culmination of self-reference in Ingres, and draws on models (in all senses of the word) from a variety of earlier paintings. It also portrays a figure whom critics have variously identified as the painter’s first or second wife, and a woman who resembles his first, unrequited love who was also the cousin of his first wife whom he is supposed to have married because of the family resemblance....

In the broader historical context, the painting is not, conventionally speaking, referential, because it conveys a timeless image of the Levantine harem, already out of date after the reform period known as the Tanzimat. Before Ingres painted the Bain turc, legislation had abolished slavery in the Ottoman Empire and, for financial reasons, harems were declining. In 1861, while Ingres was working on the painting, Sultan Abdülaziz broke up the harem declaring that one wife would be sufficient! Ingres often had patrons in mind when painting, and the second buyer of the Bain turc was Khalil-Bey, a pre-Crimean Turkish ambassador to St. Petersburg, then resident in Paris. He was a conservative ‘old Turk’ and may perhaps have been nostalgic for the disappearing mystique of the harem.... Perhaps more interesting is the fact that in 1866 (the year after he bought the Bain turc), he commissioned Le sommeil, another voyeuristic scene of two women entwined, from Gustave Courbet.

Of course it could also be argued that the baths depicted by Montagu and Ingres had never existed. Montagu’s account is by far
the most aesthetically pleasing and potentially erotic account by a woman traveler in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Unlike various other women travelers, Montagu completely ignores the presence of children at the baths.

In mid-nineteenth century debates in art criticism, Ingres was both praised and criticized for his realism - his love of detail and his attempt to make everything visible and palpable (in contrast to the expressionism exemplified by Delacroix, the man who Baudelaire called his antipodes). He was also both praised and criticized for his classicism, or his deference to Raphael and to a repertory of classical forms which led him to perfect or correct nature. (A common criticism is that the bodies he painted were anatomically impossible, for example, that he added vertebrae to elongate the spine). In other words, Ingres was either too real or too artificial, and in Baudelaire’s extensive writing on Ingres, both complaints are voiced. For example, in Le salon de 1846 he praises Ingres’ faithfulness to the least detail of his model, suggesting that he likes women too much to change them, and bends himself to their form “avec une âpreté de chirurgien” (917), while in the Peintre de la vie moderne, he writes that Ingres’ great defect is to correct nature (1164-5).

In L’exposition universelle de 1855, Baudelaire writes that Ingres’ paintings evoke powerful and disturbing sensations because they evoke “un milieu fantasmatique,” or rather, “un milieu qui imite le fantasmatique.” This statement recalls, indeed, translates the expression mimesis phantasmatos, or copy of a copy, which Plato uses to characterize art in its distance from nature and the true forms. Baudelaire proceeds to say that Ingres’ paintings mobilize a population of automata “qui troublerait nos sens par sa trop visible et palpable extranéité” (962-3). This fear, close to Freud’s Unheimlich, is generated by both the figural dimension of art as the substitution of a substitution and its vertiginous closeness to naturalistic representation and palpable visibility. The polished forms seem real, but inevitably reveal themselves as artifice the nearer one approaches the canvas.

In this sense, the paintings resemble the descriptions of naked oriental women in both Montagu and Montesquieu, in that unveiling or denuding reveals, not the essence of femininity, the natural body or the real, but representation or figuration as the condition of referentiality.

In the three works I have mentioned, representation is associated with the structure of voyeurism, which unexpectedly contests the opposition between inside and outside (and indeed the very positions of exhibitionist and voyeur), deferring the closure of the text and permitting a tropological exchange of positions ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ structures of representation. As Gayatri Spivak has suggested, the
verb 'to represent' has at least two senses: to act as a proxy for the other, putting the self in his or her place politically (in German *vertreten*), and to imitate or figure (*darstellen*).\(^5\) Attempts to represent the oriental woman depend on the possibility, whether fictional or real, of putting oneself in her place, literally inside harem or baths, yet even non-fictional representations of this politically disenfranchised group are contaminated by representation in the alternate sense of giving a figure of the other. Representation as proxy depends on a substitution determined by tropological structures which belong to the order of figuration.

In 1862 Flaubert wrote in a letter to Sainte-Beuve that "...ni moi, ni vous, ni personne, aucun ancien et aucun moderne, ne peut connaître la femme orientale, par la raison qu'il est impossible de la fréquenter" (57-58). His own liaison with the Egyptian prostitute, Kuchuk Hanem, suggests that this inaccessibility is not to be explained by the empirical fact that, veiled and immured, oriental woman is socially and politically invisible. The obstacle is rather that the figure of "oriental woman" is a prosopopeia: a catachrestic trope giving face to a class which it in fact brings into existence as a class; the "Orient" as a whole could also be said to be catachrestic in this sense. A catachresis is also a figure for figure - a figure with no literal, but only a figural referent, a marker put in the place of seeing and knowing where there is nothing to see or know--its own truth or the abyss of truth.\(^6\)

The image of oriental woman evokes the classical figure of truth as a naked but veiled goddess: if the veil is removed, the truth should appear. However, as I have attempted to show, what the literal unveiling exposes is a proliferation of veils or representations. The veil associated with oriental women is characterized by the fact that it reveals the form without exposing it, resisting a clear opposition between inside and outside. I would argue that in the works we have considered, this indeterminacy extends to the relation between insiders and outsiders, objects and subjects of vision, in their mutual imbrication in the veils of representation.

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**NOTES**

1 I have used the edition of the *Lettres persanes* in the *Oeuvres complètes* edited by André Masson, and Robert Halsband's edition of the *Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*. The manuscript was first published posthumously in 1763, in accordance with the
author's wishes but against those of her family. The *Petite baigneuse* of 1826 is in the Phillips Collection in Washington, that of 1828, along with the *Bain turc*, in the Louvre.

2 This gendering can be read in Montagu's characterization of the masculine preserve of the Grand Tour in a letter to Lady Pomfret, March, 1740.

The *Bain turc* was completed in the same year as Manet's *Olympia*, a painting with an even more overt racial hierarchy between prostitute or courtesan and slave. Baudelaire attributes the oriental preference for fair-skinned courtesans to their coming from subjugated nations. However, in this period this is not, on the whole, echoed in Western prostitution and eroticism, which does not yet valorize the darker-skinned bodies of colonized women.

4 This is not the only letter of the *Embassy Letters* which can read as homoerotic. Cf. also Montagu’s fascination with the "fair Fatima," the Kahya's lady described in letters to Lady Mar of April 18, 1717 and March 10, 1718.

5 Cf. her discussion in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

6 Cf. Jacques Derrida's discussion of catachresis in "La mythologie blanche."

WORKS CITED


