



The Exotic Woman in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction and Culture: A Reconsideration (Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies)

Piya Pal-Lapinski

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Since the first reports of travelers returning from visits to the Ottoman and Mughal empires in early modern times, European culture has been obsessed by the figure of the odalisque. The term initially used to describe a woman living in a Turkish harem or Indian zenana, gradually broadened to include and connect various iconographies of the exotic woman in the West. Many of these constructions, while rooted in the harem odalisque and sharing some of her attributes, move beyond her to connect with other aspects of European culture.

Pal-Lapinski, using “odalisque” interchangeably with “exotic woman,” sees these terms as fluid, shifting categories that transform themselves continually. Concentrating on images of exoticized women within British culture and fiction with close links to the French tradition of the odalisque, she takes up a range of representations of exotic women—the female poisoner in Wilkie Collins’ *Armada* (1866); the colonial courtesan and professional dancer in an Indian setting; the vampire and New Woman; jewelry design and ornamentation in the work of René Lalique and in Bram Stoker’s Egyptian fantasy, *Jewel of Seven Stars*; and the positioning of the Italian opera singer within the London operatic arena in Bulwer Lytton’s *Zanoni* (1842) and Vernon Lee’s *A Wicked Voice* (1890), fiction set in Naples and Venice, respectively.

Exploring decorative arts, medicine, and opera, as well as literary texts, Pal-Lapinski shows that constructions of exotic femininity in nineteenth-century British culture must be approached through an interdisciplinary perspective in order to fully understand their complexity. And by shifting and expanding the parameters of the odalisque as a category of analysis, the author firmly establishes her as a richly multivalent trope. As the author writes, “To see the exotic woman as a figure which plays a crucial role in the emergence of certain formulations of modernity instead of as a product of a totalizing gaze, to decouple it from imperial hegemony in several important instances, is to . . . recognize the revolutionary otherness of the past.”

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