

“Impure Flames”: English Travelers, Eastern Women, and the Problem of Female Desire

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James Gillray’s cartoon “A2 Sale of English-Beauties in the East Indies” (1786) displays a connection that was, by the late eighteenth century, already common: the connection between prostitution and the culture and economy of Eastern civilizations.¹ In this image English prostitutes patiently endure the fondling and ogling of English and Indian men. The English courtesan was here visibly linked to the East, in both economic and sexual terms. This confirmed the observations of both English travelers abroad and English moralists at home concerned about the central problem of female desire for both Eastern and English societies. Through their heated sexual passions, Eastern and English women displayed the potential of each society to self-destruct.

Descriptions of Eastern women in travel accounts of the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries demonstrate that, for English travelers, these women in particular displayed the signs of an overheated, overly passionate, and excessive culture. But these dangers did not safely reside in warmer climes. They might also affect the unguarded European traveler and, as many travel writers pointed out, such excesses were not unknown in the West. Images of inflamed Indian and Persian women pervade English travel accounts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and suggest that not only were these torrid excesses indicative of the need for order in the East, they also reflected the desire to regulate such excesses among women in England.

With the establishment of the East India Company in 1600, the East had become a very popular destination among ambitious English travelers. The region labeled “the East” covered a wide geographical area, including Turkey, Persia, India, China, and all the various islands along the way. This study will focus on the women of Turkey, Persia, and the Indies who became representative of Eastern women in general.

By the mid-seventeenth century, enough had been published about “the East” that readers had clear expectations about how it would be depicted. The usual images included the harem or zenana, elaborate ritual displays of

wealth, and the practice of sati, where widows burned themselves alive on their husbands' funeral pyres. The recurrent images reveal the importance of the East as an exotic, distant, yet vaguely civilized repository for English anxieties about the nature and control of female sexuality and the potential for commercial and material excess at home. Each of these concerns manifested itself in images of Eastern women's bodies.

The East raised, in the minds of travelers as well as scholars at home, tricky questions about the nature of civilization. Easterners were clearly no strangers to government, as many African societies seemed to be. There were quite obviously vast empires, centralized governments, and complex networks of power and wealth in the East. In addition to their political systems, these societies had well-developed religious traditions, significant artistic accomplishments, and rich histories. They seemed, indeed, to possess the characteristics of civilization.

And yet, travelers saw the religions of the East as pagan or heretical, their governments as despotic, their economic systems as stagnant and wasteful, and their histories as revealing fundamental corruptions in the organization of society and government. The awe that the East had inspired in Europeans from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance was waning by the mid-seventeenth century. For European travelers, Eastern societies represented civilization in decay.² Travel writers commonly saw the errors of Eastern government, economy, and religion in Eastern management (or mismanagement) of gender relationships: women's bodies revealed the despotism of Eastern rule, the stagnation of its systems of wealth, and the idolatry of its religious practices.

The East seemed to travelers to represent a degenerate civilization—once great, but now in decline. By “reading” the bodies of Indian, Persian, and Turkish women, English travelers believed they could understand the fundamental errors Eastern civilizations had committed that had led to their downfall and that now justified their colonization.³ Perhaps, too, by reading and controlling the bodies of English women, they could ensure that their own civilization would not commit these same errors.

The portrayals of Eastern women that appear in English travel accounts of this period may seem at first somewhat contradictory. Descriptions of them tend to fall in one of two categories: either the woman is veiled, mysterious, and heavily guarded from the observer's gaze, or she is a public woman, a dancing girl, who wears only flimsy or transparent clothing and

displays her body provocatively for an audience. On their surface, these descriptions suggest that the two types of women represent opposite ends of a spectrum: one modest, the other indiscreet; one chaste, the other promiscuous. They also tended to separate the Muslim woman (sequestered and veiled) from the Hindu woman (public and displayed). However, travelers interpreted the clothing, behavior, and circumstances of both women to mean that they were immodest, lascivious, secretive, and potentially deadly. Two writers' impressions illustrate this point.

Daniel Beeckman, a ship captain who traveled to Borneo in 1718, painted a typical picture of the "lusty dancing girl" type of Eastern woman in describing a meeting with an opulent sultan. When he and his crew were seated on the floor, the show began, with several young and beautiful girls filing in to perform a provocative dance for the men. The women were elaborately dressed with all kinds of jewelry, but with clothing that revealed more than it concealed. Beeckman explained that the girls "fell into an odd fashion'd sort of Dance, which consisted chiefly in screwing their Bodies into several antick and lascivious postures, scarce stirring their feet from the ground." This dance lasted more than half an hour, he told his readers, "to our great Satisfaction."⁴ Beeckman's description fit well with certain European assumptions about the nature of Eastern women: they were eroticized objects of male desire, but also lustful and sexually available.

This view of the public, revealed Eastern woman sits in contrast to the other image of the veiled, mysterious, closely-guarded woman of the East. John Fryer, a physician who traveled to the East in the 1670s and 1680s, described this type of woman when he told a story about visiting a harem in Surat to attend a woman who was supposedly ill. He was escorted through the dark, secret inner chambers of the harem and had to examine the woman without seeing an inch of her--he touched only her wrist to feel her pulse, and did that through a veil of silk curtains.⁵

Despite the apparent differences, these two images of Eastern women—one as revealed and public, the other as veiled and private—represent merely two different ways of dealing with what was, for European travelers, the same kind of woman. The reason that some Eastern societies insisted on veiling women and segregating them from men in the harem, these travelers explained, was precisely because they were assumed to be promiscuous. The veil and the harem were seen as safeguards to prevent women from being tempted and from tempting others into sexual affairs. As the traveler Thomas Herbert said, "Their behaviour is silently modest, but full gorg'd (as

some say) with libidinous fantasies.”⁶ Despite any acknowledged differences of wealth or social status, women of the East were, to most English travel writers, undifferentiated in their excessive sexual passions.

Both the dancing girl and the veiled woman demonstrated to English travelers central problems of Eastern civilizations. The strict barriers between men and women indicated a lack of “civil” interaction between the sexes and an overreaction to female sexuality indicative of both women’s extraordinary desire and men’s overbearing jealousy. English travelers concluded that Eastern governments enforced the same tyrannical, oppressive, and exploitative control over the lives of Eastern peoples that men exercised over women. The East also seemed preoccupied by spectacle, entertainment, and the appearance of luxury—all of which merely papered over the fundamental corruptions at the heart of Eastern societies. Through such displays, Easterners squandered their wealth, prevented the proper circulation of money and goods, and neglected appropriate commercial activities. Women’s bodies fully exhibited all of these errors.

English travelers believed these errors were connected to the unremitting heat characteristic of the region. Geographers, political philosophers, and travelers alike connected a country’s climate to its inhabitants’ temperament, level of industry, and capacity for civilization. As a consequence of the geographic origins of these authors, no doubt, colder climes were connected with the virtues of modesty, industry, and civility, while hot climes were thought to produce people who were promiscuous, lazy, and barbaric. This view gained popularity through the eighteenth century, most notably in Montesquieu’s widely influential *Spirit of the Laws* (1748).

Although authors debated precisely why and how climate affected temperament—whether by altering the humors or exciting nerve endings—they agreed that hot temperatures produced passionate yet unindustrious people. For instance, Adam Ferguson explained in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* that the passions experienced by people in hot climates could be, in a manner of speaking, all-consuming, but a move to cooler climes moderated such passions to socially acceptable levels. He wrote,

The burning ardours, and the torturing jealousies, of the seraglio and the haram, which have reigned so long in Asia and Africa . . . are found, however, with an abatement of heat in the climate, to be more easily changed, in one latitude, into a temporary passion which ingrosses the mind, without

enfeebling it.⁷

The passion of Easterners was purely directed toward sexual intrigues—because of either the heat of sexual aggressiveness or the heat of jealousy—and material displays. This focus on physical and material indulgences left commercial, political, and artistic pursuits—those of a truly civilized nation—to stagnate and become corrupt.

Heat was seen as a particular problem for women’s bodies. Conventional medical wisdom asserted that excessive heat in women caused sexual and reproductive irregularities.⁸ Many medical directories and midwifery manuals suggested that infertility in women was often the result of an overheated temperament or hot sexual organs.⁹ Culpepper’s guide for midwives, for example, explained that “immoderate Heat of the Womb is also a Cause of Barrenness; for it scorseth up the Seed, as Corn sown in the Drought of Summer: For immoderate Heat hurts all the Parts of the Body.” The author continued, “If the Nature of the Woman be too hot, and so unfit for Conception . . . she is . . . very hasty, choleric and crafty; her Pulse beats very swift, and she is very desirous of Copulation.”¹⁰ A woman’s hot nature was, thus, revealed in her physical irregularities, her “crafty” behavior, and her exceptional desires. Too much sexual activity could also result in infertility.

Thus, even in cold, moist England, excessive sexual heat in women was considered an important problem. Most clearly this problem of “hot” women revealed itself in early eighteenth-century debates about prostitution in England. If sexual promiscuity of Eastern women was rampant, unchecked, and also linked inextricably to broader social, political, and economic decay in the East, then the prostitution problem at home gained new importance.¹¹ Solving such a problem became even more urgent in a developing imperial context.

To English travelers, prostitution seemed rampant in the East. Travelers often wrote about the numbers of prostitutes to be found there and the general openness about lustful activities.¹² Beeckman’s dancing girls are an obvious example of an Eastern image of prostitution. In *A Voyage to East-India* (1655), Edward Terry declared, “Here is a free toleration of Harlots” and that “those base prostitutes are as little ashamed to entertain as others are openly to frequent their houses.”¹³ Herbert made specific mention of the prostitutes who were clearly visible in Eastern cities, saying that they

infect this Town when seasonable weather . . . makes it the rendez-vous for Merchants and Travellers from most places; women I mean who as to their bodies are comely, but as to their dress and disposition loathsome and abominable.¹⁴

The East seemed an unabashed haven for prostitutes, women who displayed the material and sexual excesses of Eastern society, threatened the well-being of urban centers, and even lured in unsuspecting European travelers.

Images of Eastern prostitution were so compelling that writers commonly made explicit links between the East and prostitution within England. Erotic and pornographic literature often made these connections. Among other authors, the location of sexually hot and promiscuous women in the decayed civilizations of the East created an imperative to eliminate this type of woman at home. In reform literature, writers discussed English prostitutes using images of destructive fire; such women were both in flames themselves and spread their heat to unwary men.¹⁵ For example, the author of the pamphlet *The London-Bawd* (1705) defined a bawd as “the Refuse of an Old Whore, who having been burnt herself, does like Charcoal help to set greener Wood on Fire.”¹⁶ Another reformer admonished prostitutes that “*if those impure Flames be not quenched by the Blood of Jesus Christ, and the Tears of sincere Repentence, the Reward of your Impiety will be Unquenchable Flames.*”¹⁷ The unnatural sexual desires and activities of these women, it was widely noted, had to be quashed in order to prevent the disorders of the East from seeping into and destroying English society.

Tied closely to the vision of Eastern women as prostitutes—and thereby tied to discussions of English prostitutes as well—were warnings about their penchant for poisoning. Promiscuous women both abroad and at home could injure men most directly through the spread of venereal diseases. On this subject, Terry explained, “That foul disease . . . is too common in those hot Climates, where the people that have it are much more affected with the trouble it brings them than with the sin or shame, thereof.”¹⁸

English prostitutes also received more than their share of the blame for spreading venereal diseases throughout the nation. Comparing prostitutes to purveyors of poison, one reformer suggested, “When People go about the *Streets to vend Poison*, one might justly wonder who would be their Customers; but that there are in this City abundance of thoughtless, undistinguished Youths, perfect Tender, seizeable by the least and worst Spark.”¹⁹ Another pointed out that venereal disease was so common and “so seldom

fails to attend Whoring . . . that a hole, robust Constitution is esteem'd a Mark of Ungentility and Illbreeding.” This author further explained that the spread of such diseases even threatened the security of the nation: “Our Gentlemen of the Army . . . are hereby very much weaken'd and enervated, and render'd unfit to undergo such Hardships, as are necessary for defending and supporting the Honour of their Country.”²⁰ In *The Insinuating Bawd* (1658), a woman lured into prostitution mourned that her activities “have struck up such an unextinguishable fire in my most Pleasurable apartment, that I fear its past the power of Tunbridge-waters aqua-Tetrachimagogan, or the Pick-a-dilly Engineer to stop the flames from consuming the whole miserable Tenement.”²¹ She was herself engulfed by the flames of venereal disease, as would be any man who came in contact with her.

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These views of women and women's sexuality represent a male perspective—a perspective that highlights male anxieties about women of the East, as well as “hotter” women at home. Women weren't to be trusted, their power was to be feared, they needed to be properly managed—not as the Easterners did, by over-reacting to or exploiting overly hot women, but moderately, through the elimination of prostitution, and by maintaining a balance between the sexes that allowed for a range of interactions beyond the sexual. Male travelers, who were in the majority, generally condemned the utter reduction of a woman to her sexuality, and often viewed the veil and harem as instruments for the oppression of women.

But our one prominent example of a female traveler to the East in this period, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, turned these ideas on their head. Although she presented a contrasting image of Eastern women, she focused on the same anxieties about women's sexuality and power. She was very familiar with previous accounts of the East, and her claim of distinction was that, as a woman, she had special access to places from which men were excluded, like the harem and the Turkish bath.

When she described the East, and in particular the domains of women in the East, Montagu focused on cool elements, instead of on heat. Describing a harem, she noted that the trees in the pavillion “gave an agreeable shade.” She also used water imagery to reinforce the refreshing tranquility of the place.²² She portrayed women as being cool, polished, almost like beautiful classical statues (literally stone cold), and as clear expressions of refined civilization.

Significantly, Montagu denied that the veil and the harem were instruments of oppression and signs of Eastern degeneracy and lack of social control. Instead, she presented the veil and harem as avenues for female liberation—particularly sexual liberation. The veil disguised women, allowing them freedom of movement, and freedom from molestation in the streets, because of the anonymity it provided. She wrote, “This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery.”²³ For her, English and European ways were much more restrictive and oppressive, represented in the heavy clothing of Western fashion and particularly in the form of stays, which seemed to Eastern women to serve as a kind of chastity belt. When the women of the Turkish bath saw her stays, Montagu explained, “they believed I was locked up in that machine, and that it was not in my power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband.”²⁴ For Montagu, it was not the East that oppressed women, but the West—and she used her descriptions of Turkey to make a particular point about the constraints on women’s lives in England. When she compared East to West, she found the West lacking. She made a powerful political statement in arguing that English women had less freedom than women of the East—women who were widely reputed to be the victims of Eastern tyranny.

Clearly, the perspective of the English traveler to the East mattered quite a bit. But English travelers (whether male or female) when they “read” the bodies of Eastern women, saw the problems or the benefits inherent in Eastern societies. Male travelers tended to make the point that Eastern peoples, as one could see simply by looking at their women, were too preoccupied with sex, and their society, their culture, their government, and their economic structures suffered as a result. This, of course, suggested that this culture, so mismanaged by Easterners themselves, could benefit from greater control and influence by the English.

But the English, too, had to be careful. Not only could they be drawn into the sexual and material excesses of the East while they were there, their own society was not free from such troubles, and could very well find itself in a situation like that of Eastern societies. Montagu’s message, though quite different from that of male travelers, certainly shared some of their anxieties about women and sexual desire. When she looked at Eastern women’s bodies, she didn’t see the excessive heat and passion that male travelers emphasized, but the cool refinement associated with a civilization that provided instruments of sexual freedom, power, and selectivity for women. For all of these travelers, the East—and particularly the bodies of Eastern

women—provided a magnifying glass through which to study the problems of English society, underscoring the potential for widespread social, political, and religious decline if excessive passions were indulged.

NOTES

*Original spellings maintained in all quotations.

1. Peter Wagner, *Eros Revived: Erotica of the Enlightenment in England and America* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1988), 1-2.

2. P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: Perceptions of New Worlds in the Age of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 25-26. See also Marshall, "Taming the Exotic," *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 46-65, where he asserts that by the late eighteenth century, "India was now a second-rate civilisation by comparison with Europe" (60).

3. For more on the process of "reading" Eastern bodies, see Nandini Bhattacharya, *Reading the Splendid Body: Gender and Consumerism in Eighteenth-Century British Writing on India* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998).

4. Daniel Beeckman, *A Voyage to and from the Island of Borneo* (London, 1718), 78-79.

5. John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia. Being Nine Years' Travels, 1672-1681* (London: Hakluyt Society), I, 326-27.

6. Thomas Herbert, *Some Yeares Travels into Africa and Asia the Great* (London, 1665), 46.

7. Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Dublin, 1767), 172.

8. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 101-2.

9. For example, John Maubray, *The Female Physician, Containing all the Diseases incident to that Sex, In Virgins, Wives, and Widows* (London, 1724), 384-85, and *Culpepper's Compleat and Experienc'd Midwife* (London, 1718), 126-128. On the connections between temperature irregularities and infertility in sex manuals, see Paul-Gabriel Boucé, "Some Sexual Beliefs and Myths in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 37-38.

10. *Culpepper's Compleat and Experienc'd Midwife*, 132, 133.

11. Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 96-97.

12. For an analysis of nineteenth-century depictions of sexuality and prostitution in India, see Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

13. Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East-India* (London, 1655), 304.

14. Herbert, 121.

15. For instance, Wagner includes in his study a late eighteenth-century poem called "The Incendiary," which tells of a woman having an erotic dream by the fireplace who literally catches fire as the result of her passionate preoccupation. Wagner, 182.

16. *The London-Bawd: With her Character and Life: Discovering the Various and Subtle Intrigues of Lewd Women*, 3d ed. (London, 1705), 1.

17. *The Night-Walker*, epistle dedicatory "To the Whores of London and Westminster" (November 1696).

18. Terry, 244.

19. *A Modest Defense of Chastity* (London, 1726), 3.

20. *Satan's Harvest Home: Or The Present State of Whorecraft, Adultery, Fornication, Procuring, Pimping, Sodomy, and the Game at Flatts (Illustrated by an Authentic and Entertaining Story)* (London, 1749), 31.

21. *The Insinuating Bawd, and Repenting Harlot* (London: 1658), 4.

22. Mary Wortley Montagu, *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Written, during her Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa, To Persons of Distinction, Men of Letters, &c. in different Parts of Europe* (London, 1763), VII, 83-84.

23. *Ibid*, 33-34.

24. *Ibid*, I, 164.