

The Gaze Between: What Happens when the Egyptian Harem Returns the Gaze of an Englishwoman

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When nineteenth-century Englishwomen travellers recorded their adventures in the British Empire, they generally imagined the imperial trajectory in two opposite ways. On the one hand, they envisioned the British Empire as inwards, moving out. This model emphasized the way in which the empire moved outward, conquering lands and ‘civilizing’ foreign peoples, and thereby extending its rule far beyond the border of England’s shores. On the other hand, they imagined the imperial project as a process moving from the outside in, as when the British empire usurped colonies and colonial goods into its power in order to build wealth and prestige in England. In either construction, an inside/outside dichotomy is central and necessary to the process. England stays English, forcing its ‘superior’ cultural practices on native inhabitants. The native inhabitants, in turn, remain Others, no matter how domesticated or civilized the empire declares them to be. The Englishwoman traveller situates her story within this construction by establishing her white female body as a symbol of English purity and insularity. As she ventures beyond the metropole, she must maintain the purity of her domestic sphere and her female body as a refuge from foreign influence. Criticism of Victorian women’s travel literature since Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*, has pointed out the ways in which this inside/outside dichotomy cannot be taken for granted. The ways in which the Other is described are in fact constructions and revelation of the self. The two concepts, self and Other, are interwoven in ways which make attempts to draw sharp distinctions between them problematic at best. This article argues that the Victorian Englishwoman, writing about her travels, was not unaware of this complication, and that she utilized the inside/outside dichotomy as a rhetorical strategy to bolster boundaries she saw dissolving under her imperial gaze. Through a close reading of the gaze in harem literature, this article explores the ways in which the Englishwoman was in fact well aware that the inside/outside dichotomy of the British Empire relied on a carefully constructed performance. She performed her femininity for English readers in the metropole whom she wanted to impress with her authority, and her whiteness to the Eastern women she sought to domesticate and civilize. With each performance, the Englishwoman traveller became conscious that the tenets upon which empire was founded were tenuous at best.

In Sophia Lane Poole’s 1845 *The Englishwoman in Egypt* and Emmeline Lott’s 1866 *The English Governess in Egypt*, the Englishwoman’s body is exposed to the gaze of both the Englishwomen to whom she reports her observations and the Egyptian women whom she observes. In this gaze between cultures, the Englishwoman’s body becomes not only a zone of interracial interaction, but also a site where the very idea of Englishness is called into question. Poole and Lott insert themselves into the most intimate moments of harem life, from childrearing to eating, from nude bathing to dressing, asserting both their femininity and their Englishness as their authority for observing and reporting. In the very act of establishing this authority, however, it quickly becomes apparent that both their femininity and their Englishness are a complex performance that fails to withstand the scrutiny of the reciprocal gaze. Everywhere in these writings,

the boundaries between self and Other collapse and, with them, the very tenets on which empire relies. While the complexity of boundary breakdown is more explicit in Lott's writing, Poole's *The Englishwoman in Egypt* offers an important starting point because it lays the groundwork for much of what Lott grapples with. Poole pays careful, though implicit, attention to how her English audience is observing her intimacy with Egyptian life and how this intimacy might compromise her femininity in the eyes of her English readers. The more intimate her interaction with the Egyptian women, the more emphatic her descriptions of physical discomfort and self-restraint in this environment become. Imagining how her English audience might question her behaviour, she is sure to mark her difference from the Other, and thereby reinforce the womanliness of her own English body. This need to establish difference offers an implicit question of what it means to be English at all – if her superiority over the Eastern woman depends on how Poole can manipulate her body in a more feminine manner, it would seem that Englishness is not an automatically superior position which she can take for granted, but a spectacle to be performed.¹ And yet, Poole is able to maintain a strong sense of her authority as an *Englishwoman* throughout. Though the text seems to call this confidence into question, Poole herself never seems to doubt that she, as a white European, is superior to the Egyptian women and deserving of every honour they choose to bestow.

Lott, on the other hand, gives voice to the questions which only tacitly emerge from Poole's writing. Hyperaware of the gaze, not only of her English readership, but also the Egyptian women themselves, Lott imagines how she is seen by these women as the Other, herself. In so doing, she is unable to maintain the assumption of her own superiority over them, a superiority which she becomes increasingly desperate, and unable, to assert. Lott soon finds herself the object of the same extreme criticism with which she observes the Egyptian women. In these moments, Lott sees herself, not as a paragon of the ideal Englishwoman, but as "a wild beast," a "wild animal," notably, "from the depths of the Indian forest" (75). Under the gaze of the women whom Lott has marked as Other, the vantage point of her perspective is displaced. What she feels to be her privileged position as an insider, a woman of England, shifts dramatically, and she suddenly sees herself as an outsider. In "The Imperial Feminine: Victorian Women Travellers in Egypt," Melissa Lee Miller rightly notes that "[a]ll travellers experience a certain degree of subjective disruption" but argues that, for Victorian women immersed in Arab culture "gender issues were quickly overridden by racial and nationalist interests" (229). While it is true that Lott seeks and asserts refuge in her racial superiority, I argue that this practice cannot be seen as separate from gender issues. Concerns about gender issues, such as how Poole defines and asserts her femininity to Englishwomen readers, leads to a sense of insecurity about racial and nationalist issues. When the Englishwoman finds the male imperial gaze she has assumed returned by the harem

¹I use the term "spectacle" invoking Monica Anderson's use in *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914*: "ideas of Englishness, frequently written in terms of masculine valour, steadfastness and heroic activity, were not only central to the public spectacle of nineteenth-century British colonial activity, Englishness was also a map that aimed to organize and domesticate any given area by 'defining all other points in relation to it.' As national subject the Englishwoman is drawn into the discourse of Englishness as representative body, as the 'other within,' and as problematic and independent participant-observer" (2324). Like Anderson, I am interested in the ways in which Englishness is both spectacle and active process. Part of my intervention, however, is to observe how the Englishwoman is not only passively "drawn into the discourse of Englishness" but also actively constructing that discourse so as to counteract what she recognizes as problematic about her position. Poole and Lott's attention to the gaze reveal an awareness of a collapse between self/other and participant/observer. This awareness leads them to make calculated rhetorical moves to maintain the spectacle of their English identity even as they see the fragility of that identity.

women, she is confronted with an idea of herself as inferior Other. This is a serious challenge to her faith in the inviolability of Englishness and the inevitability of empire.

Before getting underway, I would like to clarify that I realize the inherent tension in this article between observing the breakdown of boundaries and initially taking those boundaries as a starting point from which to observe the breakdown. There is a way in which my attention to Poole and Lott's accounts of harem life places whiteness at the centre of my argument, even as I try to show the instability of that very category. I therefore briefly offer the clarification that I assume Poole and Lott's perspectives in order to show how quickly they break down under their own premises. I also explore the consequences which follow as Poole and Lott become aware of and grapple with that breakdown. I am not trying to other the Egyptian woman in order to focus back on what happens to the white woman. Rather, I take up the call Najmi and Srikanth set forth in their introduction to *White Women in Racialized Spaces* "to see how the practice of whiteness plays itself out in manifestations of power" (2). Attention to the gendered gaze in harem literature reveals ways Englishwomen travellers assumed that their position as white Englishwomen entitled them to the privileged perspective of the male imperial gaze. At the same time, when these women found themselves the object of the harem gaze, they began to actively perform whiteness, both for their English readers and harem hostesses, out of a self-conscious suspicion that whiteness was not a given position but a calculated practice. By extension, Victorian women began to suspect that England's imperial power was not a given, and that not only they, but England itself, might be vulnerable to (dis)integration.

The Englishwoman in Egypt

The Englishwoman in Egypt depicts a series of events and insights which Poole herself describes as shocking to English feminine propriety. From trespassing into the inner sanctum of mosques disguised as a harem woman to bathing with naked bodies, black and white, Poole is eager to explore what no Englishwoman or man has seen before. She turns her gaze outward and then reports her findings back to the interior in the format of "a series of familiar letters to a friend" (vi). The gender of this gaze is complex. While, as Anderson notes in *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914*, Englishwomen travellers "looked at the foreign worlds they visited through white masculine eyes," it is specifically Poole's feminine body which gives her access to sights as yet unseen by those masculine eyes (24). The conquering male gaze can see no farther than the Englishwoman traveller is willing and able to go. Anderson explains how this might be perceived as threatening, writing: "as both woman and independent traveler, the nineteenth-century Englishwoman registers how parts of the body (politic) have, literally, escaped discipline" (35). Specifically, Poole escapes the discipline of gender norms insofar as she adopts the imperial gaze to view and map parts unknown. Poole makes every effort to mitigate this threat by subverting the power of her female body and insisting on her feminine obedience to her brother. In so doing, she tacitly admits that even an Englishwoman's femininity cannot be taken for granted.

Poole explains in the first paragraph of her preface that she is motivated first and foremost by her "beloved brother" who has inspired her curiosity through his own publications and encouraged her to take advantage of the opportunity "of seeing many things highly interesting in themselves,

and rendered more so by their being accessible only to a lady [...] and [to] collect much information of a novel and interesting nature” (v, vi). That is, the novel and interesting information made available by her female body’s ability to penetrate as yet unknown spaces is meant to be understood as a supplement to her brother’s work, taken up in feminine obedience to his will and inspired by his prior knowledge. She further notes that she only publishes this information at his behest within the decidedly feminine genre of familiar letters.² By emphasizing that she writes at the prompting and under the authority of her brother, Poole shows an immediate preoccupation with whether or not her English readers will be able to comprehend her as an Englishwoman in a foreign territory. Anticipating that her readers might question what kind of woman would take on such an exotic adventure, Poole constructs a very specific context in which it is acceptable for her female body to temporarily adopt the masculine gaze – in the service of supporting and complimenting a male perspective.

Poole adds an additional, credible motivation for her writings – patriotism. These letters are a report on Egyptian life, meant for the domestic English hearth, written by “one to whom Egypt has become *almost* as familiar as England” (vi, emphasis added). This, almost, but not quite, squarely situates Poole’s alliance with England, with the Englishwomen for and to whom she is writing. Thus, from the outset, Poole establishes an us/them, familiar English/unfamiliar Egyptian, dichotomy. She wields her gaze to delight her readers but only under the authority of her brother. In this way the forwardness of her action is safely couched within the proper feminine values of the Englishwoman. Her work is interesting because it looks outward at what is yet unseen. At the same time, she asserts, her work can be trusted because it is a voice from within – a voice which embraces the discipline of patriarchy. This is the inside/outside logic on which empire relies. Very quickly, Poole foregrounds her physical discomfort in this almost, but not quite, familiar land, in an effort to emphasize that she is too thorough an Englishwoman to belong in this foreign space. This emphasis becomes a calculated performance of race and gender which calls her inside/outside logic into question.

The performativity of Poole’s Englishness is exemplified in the scenes in which she disguises herself in Eastern dress in order to gain access to the Egyptian harems. The excitement and pleasure she derives from this adoption of eastern dress is palpably titillating, heightened by her emphasis on the dangers of what might happen if she and her party are discovered to be Western. In these moments, Poole does not take for granted that her “Dear Friend” reading by the English hearth will take the inviolability of her Englishness for granted. She qualifies moments of intense emotional pleasure with complaints of physical discomfort in order to remind her reader that she does not, after all, belong in this world. Note for example, the way in which Poole describes wearing “Eastern costume”: “There was no small difficulty in this ceremony, and when completed, it was stifling to a degree not to be forgotten [...] Nothing can be more awkward and un-

² In “Travel Writing and Gender” Susan Bassnett discusses the gendering of the travel writing genre: “It is rare to find the kind of serious, anthropological monograph with extended footnotes like those produced by many male writers, which may be due to the exclusion of women from scientific professions in the nineteenth century” (231). Bassnett further notes that publication format and intended audience were heavily influenced by the gendering of separate spheres. It was acceptable for men to intend publication for a wide audience from the outset, while women were expected to assume a more private and/or supportive role, and thus often initially adopted the genre of letters, diaries, or sketches rather than monograph (232).

comfortable than this riding dress; and if I had any chance of attaining my object without assuming it, I should never adopt it; but in English costume I should not gain admittance into many hareems [sic]" (41). The emphasis Poole places on her physical discomfort in the outfit focuses her reader's attention on the strangeness of the attire, on the unnatural situation of placing an English body in Eastern clothing. Distracting the reader from how this transgression might call her Englishness into question, the physical discomfort Poole records suggests that her English body automatically rejects this foreign "costume."

Poole's strategic move to emphasize physical discomfort when wearing "Eastern costume" is perhaps best understood within the framework Athena Vrettos establishes in *Somatic Fictions*. She writes of the body in the Victorian imagination:

On the one hand, the human body was perceived as a private domain, a concrete foundation for the self that preceded the violence of culture and linguistic appropriation. On the other hand, the body seemed unable to sustain this fiction of self-sufficiency. The permeabilities of its boundaries (implicit in actions such as eating, copulating, or giving birth) were made explicit in the presence of disease, for disease constituted a breakdown in corporeal integrity, wholeness, or control. (5)

It is through her assertions of discomfort that Poole attempts to maintain the corporeal integrity, wholeness, and control over her English body. Though it may be temporarily subject to the customs and costumes of Egyptian women, it is still an English body, preferring its own customs and habiliments. Yet, in her very need to mark this discomfort, and so mark her Englishness, Poole reveals a concern that her body is, in fact, permeable, or will be perceived so by her readers. It is as though Poole's Englishness is so precarious that, to feel comfortable in foreign dress might betray a foreignness within.

This scene and theme are echoed later in the text when Poole and her party, "extremely anxious to see the interiors of the principal [sic] mosques," decide as a group to follow her brother's Caireen friend and pass themselves as Egyptians in order to elude detection from Arab and Turkish locals (91). In addition to wearing customary garments, Poole takes the additional precaution of following her brother's friend, pretending to be "the chief lady of his hareem," riding ahead of her sister-in-law and the man's true wife (91). Here, Poole frames these precautions as necessary, a matter of safety, that will prevent her from being "loaded with reproach and insult" if she and her party were discovered to be English trespassers (92). Poole is momentarily awed by this transgressive experience, and seems to be transformed by it, noting, "Never did a submissive wife walk more meekly after her husband than I followed the steps of my governor *pro tempore*" (92). Poole is not just pretending to be a lady of the harem, she is the most submissive lady of the harem. Of course, such transformation would be nothing short of scandalous, and so Poole again turns to physical discomfort to counterbalance the obvious delight she takes in her role: "the walking-dress in itself is so exceedingly cumbrous, and requires so much managing, that two hands are scarcely sufficient to preserve its proper arrangement" (92). Again, the claim is clear; Poole's English body is not adept at wearing this clothing and physically rejects it.

The tension between Poole's intimacy with Egyptian women and preservation of her own English identity is also prominent in scenes of eating. Here, the same rhetorical strategy is used. As her relationship with upper-class women becomes more intimate, Poole feels the need to assert

differences between her body and theirs. Importantly, this impulse is not motivated solely by concern for her personal reputation. As Poole emphasizes the physical differences between herself and her hosts, she participates in the discourse and practice of empire. As Vrettos has shown, as greater understanding of contagion and the permeability of the body's boundaries began to emerge in the nineteenth century, the pursuit of health quickly became equated with the pursuit of empire (125). In order to maintain a clear distinction between the British empire and its colonies, it was important to establish physical superiority. But, at the same time, the Victorian imagination was hyperaware of its own permeability and, in its own eyes, fragility. Vrettos notes that nutritional habits, specifically, "had entered the popular imagination as signs of both moral behavior and racial identity" (168). Thus, maintaining healthy dietary practices over one's individual body was ultimately considered a patriotic duty (Vrettos 125). Emphasis of bodily restraint regarding diet is a clear engagement with the larger project of asserting racial superiority as an Englishwoman. Poole writes:

The chief lady of the house, to do her guest honour, presents them with morsels of her own selection, with her own fingers; and in some cases repeats the compliment frequently. It would be a positive affront to refuse these; and I am quite sure that no Englishwoman can so far strain her politeness as to eat as much as her hostess, in her excessive hospitality, desires, though the latter sets her a wonderful example. I have really seen the ladies of this country eat as much as should suffice for three or four moderate meals at one sitting ... thus I removed the impression which was immediately formed, that the dinner was not dressed agreeably with my taste: and induced only the remark, that "the English eat so much less than the Easterns." (134-135)

To be fed by hand, to allow one's lips to brush the fingers of the woman as she places morsels of food on one's tongue, is an erotic image of connection. In such a phallogocentric moment, Poole nearly incorporates the Other within her own body. This, far more so than wearing a foreign garment, challenges the porousness of the Englishwoman's body and, in turn, the purity of Poole's Englishness. The scene raises the question: in consuming food with the Other, is Poole consuming the Other, and so losing who she is?

Poole must therefore mitigate the intimacy of the moment before her English readers can dwell on this question for too long. Drawing a stark distinction between the amount she is able to consume in comparison to the gross appetites of the Egyptian women is an attempt to set the record straight. However close she may get to these women they are always Other, and she is always English. This rhetorical strategy would not have gone unnoticed, and it is not a unique invention of Poole's. In *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East*, Billie Melman points out that this is a standard motif in harem literature, a means by which Englishwomen "used human features and expressions and the human physique to judge oriental 'nature', whether the character of individual oriental women, or the moral state of Middle Eastern society" (113). The Egyptian woman's inordinate consumption of food would specifically signal her sinful sexual appetite, and Poole's restraint a feminine chastity (Melman 123). Nancy Armstrong argues that novels were making a similar move, training readers to determine whether a character was "more or less English according to how they met or failed to observe forms of self-containment aimed at maintaining a stable social order. Being British consequently ceased to refer to one's place of birth, native language, or home and became instead a set of obligations and constraints that people could carry with them to other countries" (54). Thus, even if Poole never explicitly registers

concern regarding her superiority over the Egyptian women, her careful construction of scenes to mark physical and moral difference between her English body and their Egyptian bodies would not have gone unnoticed by her readers. As she keeps native food outside her body, she simultaneously gives her English readers an insider's view of the dinner while also affirming that she is still a comparative outsider in Egypt.

Poole's eagerness to prove her Englishness also manifests itself in descriptions of the Egyptian women's bodies as bizarre and foreign. Poole writes of one Egyptian woman: "She was in one respect strangely disfigured; her eyebrows being painted with kohl, and united by the black pigment in a very broad and most unbecoming manner. Many women of all classes here assume this disguise" (213). On one level, this is a simple description Poole offers to her familiar English reader of how the foreign Other expresses her femininity through customary makeup rituals. The "disfigured" and "unbecoming" woman is interesting to report because she is decidedly not English and because she presents herself in a way no Englishwoman ever would. On the other hand, in this very attempt to mark what is unfeminine and not English, Poole reveals her expectations of what is feminine and English. In "Conflictive Gender Representations" Guégan states that,

the woman, as "disfigured" and "unbecoming", reveals what Poole believes is unnatural in a woman's appearance, and therefore what Englishwomen should look like; by describing what is unattractive, Poole implies what is aesthetics and what convention. Her personal opinions create a representation of the Orient that also defines the Englishwoman as opposite to the Eastern women (101).

In other words, Poole's attempt to record the strangeness of the Other simultaneously constructs the Englishwoman which she and her audience are supposed to be. Her report, which is meant to offer Englishwomen, as insiders, a glimpse outward, relies on the Other to define who is "in." Whether trying to assert her feminine deference to her brother's authority or the unattractive makeup practices of the Egyptian women, the result is the same; Poole shows a tacit concern that she must assert her femininity to compensate for her adoption of the male imperial gaze. The emphasis on her femininity becomes a rhetorical strategy performed for her English audience which ironically undercuts itself. The more she tries to stress her Englishness and femininity, the more the stability of those qualities is called into question.

Poole's observations of the baths provide a final, intriguing scene in which to contemplate the complexity of the gaze in undercutting assumptions of empire. Here, Poole observes and describes in detail the bathing of "at least thirty women of all ages, and many young girls and children, perfectly unclothed ... Persons of all colours, from the black glossy shade of the negro to the fairest possible hue of complexion" (226). This is, perhaps, the most intimate experience Poole shares with the women, and one which most explicitly challenges the tenets of empire, in so far as bodies of very different races luxuriate together in naked "nonchalance" (227). It is also, surprisingly, the scene in which Poole makes the least effort to establish her own superiority. One might imagine the emphasis she could easily place on the comparative whiteness or slenderness of her own body or, to avoid exposing herself so openly, the disgust with which she might record the darkness and obesity of others. Nevertheless, after openly stating that these differently raced bodies intermingle, she inserts herself directly into the mix. The bulk of this letter details the luxuries of the bathing experience and the many variations of the ritual which other women practice. The brief, almost parenthetical, asides in which she tepidly disparages the experience

thus stand out awkwardly as moments when she seems to be fulfilling a rhetorical, patriotic duty, rather than genuinely recording her thoughts.

Consider, for example, the following words: “I cannot describe the bath as altogether a beautiful scene; in truth, in some respects it is disgusting; and I regret that I can never reach a private room in any apartment without passing through the large public apartment” (227). Poole here makes the obligatory move of labelling the bathing scene “disgusting,” but offers little evidence that she truly finds it so. Indeed, her claim to regret that she must pass through these public areas is negated by the lingering observations she makes of the women “conversing as though full dressed, with perfect *nonchalance*, while others were strolling about, or sitting round the fountain” (227). Her protracted gaze suggests that she enjoys the sight and finds it, if “astonishing,” far from disgusting (226). She goes on to describe “the more agreeable subject” of how the women are bathed, calling the process “luxurious” and detailing the variety of ways that the women are kneaded, rubbed, lathered, and washed, making clear that she speaks both from her own experience and her witness of other women being bathed. That is, she herself becomes one of the naked bodies, in close proximity with the naked women’s bodies, being intimately touched and pampered by them. This, one might expect, would spark the most shock and concern in her Dear Friend the English reader, but Poole unabashedly claims the entire process “quite a luxury” and “highly salubrious” (228).

It is important to note, however, that, as pleasurable as Poole seems to find the bathing experience, she breaks from the masculine tradition of erotically fantasizing the harem women. Guégan argues that this break makes for a uniquely feminine perspective, writing, “[h]er relationship with the Orient – witnessing it with her female position – and realizing and destroying stereotypes – creates a varied description based on grounded exploration. Her writing is personal and uniquely feminine; it does not present the Orient as a ‘fantastical’ exotic and erotic East created by the writing of a male-dominated society” (101). I agree that it is important to note how Poole’s perspective differs from the erotic stereotypes of “a male-dominated society.” Poole is granted access to this place which men have not seen because of her female body, and her observations are the result of knowledge gained “in participatory fashion” (Pratt 162). Yet, to say this perspective is “uniquely feminine” is complicated by the fact that Poole adopts the authority of the male imperial gaze in order to assert her right to view and record the scene. As we recall from her preface, Poole exhibits concern that such observations will call her femininity into question. Anticipating how her Englishwomen readers will gaze at her, Poole repeatedly makes the rhetorical move of distancing herself through disapproval of the scene. Rather than celebrate her female body, which enables the proximity with the Eastern women, Poole exhibits concern about how this proximity will have an impact on the way her femininity is perceived. The only reason she has been allowed to share this experience is because she is a woman, but she fears the experience might invite her reader to call her womanhood into question. Poole therefore closes the letter with a half-hearted attempt to mitigate any questioning of womanly propriety by claiming that, after “the rest and refreshment” of the baths she had time to “reflect upon the strange scene [she] had witnessed” (228). She concludes that “the eyes and ears of an Englishwoman must be closed in the public bath in Egypt before she can fairly enjoy the satisfaction it affords; for besides the very foreign scenes which cannot fail to shock her feelings of propriety, the cries of the children are deafening and incessant” (228). This fails to be compelling, not least because she has just gone to such extravagant lengths to open the Englishwoman’s eyes to this very scene, has inserted her own, female, English body into this scene, and described it in such detail

as to make the reader deeply familiar with it. If Eastern bathing is “perfection,” as Poole claims it to be, then any qualms she has with the experience seem to lie, by her own account, not in any violation of her own feminine propriety but, rather, in the squalls of children which inhibit a full-sensory immersion into the experience.

Poole’s account of her interactions with Egyptian women is relatively uncomplicated insofar as she maintains a confident sense of her own superiority as a white European, even among the highest ladies of the harem. She does not question her authority to trespass into harems, record a private dinner party or a bathing ritual, or to give her English audience an insider’s view of these moments, as long as this authority is sanctioned by her brother. However, Poole’s repeated emphasis on physical discomfort and her feeble attempts to mark physical difference between herself and the Other in order to insist upon her own femininity participates in a discourse devoted to maintaining the inside/outside dichotomy of racial separation on which empire depends. Poole’s need to emphasize difference and assure her reader that her femininity has not been compromised reveals that this separation was not always taken for granted and, even more problematically, that there were concerns regarding how different English-self and foreign Other actually were. Two decades later, when Emmeline Lott begins her project, these concerns reach a critical climax. Poole’s attention to physical proximity reveals tacit concern about how her English audience might perceive her, might question her femininity and wonder if, in her intimate contact with the Other, she has been compromised as an Englishwoman. Although she is ostensibly confident in her right to adopt the male gaze (as long as it is at the discretion of her brother) her writing reveals concern that her readers will question whether the female body can perform the gaze unproblematically. She therefore adopts the gaze while putting emphasis on how her female body can stay womanly and British. Lott’s account, in addition to grappling with the perceived dangers of physical proximity, also acknowledges that her gaze is returned, that she is visible to the Other. With this additional acknowledgment, the boundaries on which empire relies are not merely questioned: they crumble.

The English Governess in Egypt

When Emmeline Lott began writing *The English Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* it was in the spirit of a white Englishwoman looking outward from her insulated position into the intimate lives of the foreign harem women. She prefaces her unusual 1866 account of her experiences as a governess to the Grand Pacha Ibrahim, the first son of the Egyptian viceroy, by stating that she has been afforded an “unheard of [...] opportunity [...] [of] uplifting that impenetrable veil which had hitherto baffled all the exertions of Eastern travelers” (xxii-xxiii). “The object of the following work,” she claims, “is to disclose to European society ‘Life in the Harems of Egypt and Constantinople’” (xxii-xxiii). There is a clear assumption in this preface of an us-them dichotomy, in which Lott asserts to her English peers that she will be reporting on what is strange, as yet unseen, that which is decidedly not-English. This is immediately complicated by Lott’s insistence on *why* her account is so unique. Lott asserts that her record is privileged because she has seen the women of the harem, not as they display themselves for outsiders, but as they are “at home” (63). As governess to the first son of the Egyptian Viceroy, Lott sees the Egyptian women eating, bathing, and simply living. That is, Lott’s English public should trust her descriptions of harem life, not based on the authority of her Englishness,

but based on how close she has come to residing “at home” in the harem – how intimate she has become with these outsiders. This intimacy is, of course, predicated on the fact that she is a woman, able to view and map a feminine domestic sphere forbidden to the male gaze. But even compared with other women Lott’s position is privileged. As Judy Mabro explains in *Veiled Half-Truths*, “‘harem’ (coming from ‘haram’, forbidden) means either the rooms of a house where women and children spend their time – and from which men are excluded apart from the husband and certain close relatives – or the women of the house” (7). Lott’s intimacy is therefore doubled. The harem is a place that forbids not only strange men, but also strange women. Lott is present in their living quarters, seeing behind the scenes, and helping to raise one of the children.³ She is, at least partially, a woman of the house. Lott’s writing therefore reveals a powerfully complex interplay between the gaze of insider and outsider: a gaze so powerful that those very boundaries begin to come undone before her very eyes.

Like Poole, Lott breaks from the tradition of erotic discourse, attempting to remove the harem women’s erotic appeal and even their womanhood. Lott’s descriptions spare no effort to make the ugliness and barbarity of the Egyptian women apparent. She writes, “I failed to discover the slightest trace of loveliness in any of them. On the contrary, most of their countenances were pale as ashes, exceedingly disagreeable; fat and globular in figure; in short, so rotund, that they gave me the idea of large full moons; nearly all were passé. Their photographs were as hideous and hag-like as the witches in the opening scene of *Macbeth*” (Lott 63). Such a disparaging review reveals essential information about how Lott understands the function of the gaze. In the first place, Lott is setting the record straight for her Englishwomen readers. These harem women are not lovely, are not womanly, are certainly nothing to be jealous of. In their hideousness, they are barely even human. Dismissed as hag-like witches, they are not to be compared to an Englishwoman in humanity, let alone loveliness. But, again, what enables Lott to share this intimacy is her female body. Other writers, especially men, were never allowed to be this close. They gazed upon an artificial spectacle which the harem women worked to project, never lifting the veil to see beneath. The intimacy Lott asserts sets up an ongoing and ironic tension through the rest of her record.

Even as Lott feels herself infinitely superior to the Egyptian women because of her race, and even as she describes their grotesquely fat bodies as a clear marker of their inferiority, she, like Poole, begins to reveal an insecurity about how her English audience is gazing at *her*. Lott repeatedly describes herself rejecting the native food and suffering various bodily illnesses because she lacks her own English diet. She is also quick to insist that the harem women recognize her superiority and express it in their admiration for her beauty and her European mannerisms. She writes, for example: “At the earnest request of some of the ladies of the Harem, I rose from my

³ It is important to acknowledge that Lott’s position as a governess also makes her position of intimacy problematic. She is, ultimately, hired help. Just as in England, the position of governess is one of extreme vulnerability, and Miller is right to emphasize that Lott is “objectified, demeaned, and placed at serious physical risk” (232). Interestingly, however, Lott in no way acknowledges the position of governess as inferior. She is repeatedly affronted if she is treated as a servant or slave and riots when she finds she is expected to have meals with a German laundress. As Michael Wojcik notes in *British Travel Writers*, “Clearly she felt that her position placed her close to, if not among, the ranks of Ismael’s wives and the other women of importance in the harem” (236). This makes the gradual fracture of her confidence in this superiority all the more interesting.

seat, and walked up and down that noble hall, in order that they might see how European ladies generally paced up and down their rooms” (74). Lott seems to enjoy the performance, and her tacit implication is that harem women acknowledge that she is physically superior to them. By accentuating the difference between herself and the harem women, and their confirmation of that difference, Lott reminds her reader that her intimacy is not to be confused with inferiority. In so doing, she reveals a concern that her English readers might not take the superiority of her British womanhood for granted.

This insecurity is quickly compounded when Lott experiences yet another gaze – the gaze of the women returning hers over dinner. Lott writes, “While I was endeavoring to partake of this specimen of viceregal hospitality [...] they kept gazing at me in as much astonishment as a child looks at the wild beasts at their feeding time in the Zoological Gardens in the Regent’s Park, and watched the manner in which I used my knife and fork and ate my unpalatable refreshment, as if I had been a wild animal out of the depths of the Indian forest” (75). She imagines that the women see her as a “wild beast,” “a wild animal” notably, from “the depths of an Indian forest,” far from an exemplar of the domestic ideal (75). Under the gaze of the Other, the vantage point of Lott’s perspective becomes displaced. As she looks outward at the Other, what she felt to be her privileged position as an insider, a woman of England, shifts dramatically, and she suddenly sees herself as an outsider. This is a further rupture of English identity than Poole acknowledged because, in this complex observation of self, it is not just that Lott sees her Englishness as a fragile identity which might be permeable or corruptible. Here, it is her *Englishness* specifically, the precise way in which she struggles to apply her English utensils of knife and fork to foreign food, which Lott sees as wild, foreign, Other. She cannot escape this perspective through physical constraint or limited indulgence. Anderson’s definition of the “model imperial spectator” helps us appreciate how radical Lott’s insight is here. Anderson argues “the model imperial spectator constructs a specifically male gaze where the object of the gaze is locked into the colonizer’s patterns of Englishness” (61). In this moment, Lott finds that her imperial gaze is returned by harem women and she imagines how *she* does not fit into *their* patterns. This is profound. Lott, if only for a bemused moment, conceives of herself as an Englishwoman outside herself. In making her argument, Anderson references Gikandi’s claim in *Maps of Englishness* that, when exploring foreign spaces, England was “the stable point of reference...defining all other points in relation to it” (Anderson 60). As this passage shows, when Lott imagines how the harem women return her gaze, England is no longer the stable point of reference. Lott imagines how she looks outside of the English context and, in that moment, is unable to maintain for herself the claim that Englishness is inviolably superior.

Incredibly, in addition to finding her own Englishness racialized, made foreign and bizarre to her own eyes, the harem women in this scenario are given the privileged viewpoint of the English. They are the children in Regent’s Park, observing in astonished freedom the caged, foreign animal that Lott has become. In this moment, boundaries between self and Other are not merely crossed, they are dissolved, then re-established in a radical reversal. Englishness is a strange concept, and those who gaze upon it see it for what it is: spectacle. Anderson’s discussion of self and space is helpful in appreciating the significance of this dynamic. She writes, “postcolonial critics since Said are arguing [...] that, in traveling to the strange regions of the world, Euro-imperial (British) travellers, women and men, were confronted with nothing so much as an image of themselves that exalted them as colonial representatives yet at the same time humbled the colonized indigene” (61). When Lott imagines herself the object of the gaze of the harem women,

they are exalted and she is humbled. If she is still a colonial representative in this moment, that role is not superior, but strange, and potentially inhuman. It seems that Lott finds this gaze overpowering, as she writes, “after I had partaken of a few mouthfuls, I made a sign that I had finished” (75). Through this brief gesture, again asserting how little she partakes of their food in order to insist upon her English femininity, Lott attempts to cut off this gaze, this jarring new perspective. In the very next scene, however, she finds herself in a similar position.

Lott learns that her baggage has arrived and again finds herself the object of the gaze, this time of “half a dozen black slaves, certainly not very prepossessing creatures,” and an “Ethiopian” (77). Here, the gaze of these women seems even more powerful in its ability to undermine Lott’s sense of self, as it renders her a literal object. She records

Upon seeing me the whole of them stood by while I arranged my things, staring at both myself and luggage as if I had just been imported from the Gold Coast. Assuredly both myself, habiliments, manners, habits, and customs were a source of great novelty and amusement to them, so that I made all due allowance for their curiosity, and took their inquisitiveness in good part (77).

Narin Hassan’s analysis of this moment in *Diagnosing Empire: Women, Medical Knowledge, and Colonial Mobility* emphasizes the alienation, and even commodification, Lott feels. Hassan writes, “Observing her own position as an ‘import,’ and exposing her own precarious position in the harem, Lott describes the ways that, in her position, to travel was not to immerse oneself in the luxury of viewing and recording the lives of others, but to actually be the Other – the circulating object – like her circulating luggage and medical chest” (33). Hassan is right to direct our attention to the ways in which Lott’s self-description reveals “her own precarious position in the harem.” I would like to note, however, that this scene also exposes her precarious position as an English woman. Lott describes herself not as a circulating object from the British coast, but the Gold Coast. She immediately racializes her commodification. The “habiliments, manners, habits, and customs” which provide such novelty and amusement for the women are, presumably, familiar English postures, but Lott sees them as strange. She displaces her objectification – if she is a circulating object, she is also a colonial object, imported from Britain’s African shore. Far from preserving the integrity of her Englishness, this moment already calls that integrity into question. If she, too, can be observed, imported, commodified, is there anything superior in her Englishness after-all? In this scene, at least, Lott seems unruffled by this predicament, submitting to scrutiny “in good part.” Her experience as the object of the gaze is novelty enough to distract her from such larger implications.

Lott’s ostensible indifference to being the object of the gaze is belied, however, by an abrupt cessation of recording any other such experiences. The examples discussed here take place early on in the text, when she is newly arrived in the household. Though her eviscerating descriptions of the Egyptian women continue in great detail, and though she repeatedly asserts her superiority as an Englishwoman (refusing to eat with the servants and demanding privileged treatment due to her English status) it is as if she can no longer cope with the identity crisis the gaze inflicts. She continues to make note of times she is observed, but no longer does she imagine what that gaze observes. For example, she describes a time when she is observed praying and, rather than engaging in the question of collapsed boundaries simmering beneath the surface of her description, she uses it as an occasion to affirm her own beauty. She writes:

woman like, their curiosity was excited to learn how I prayed; and what my bible (Koran, as they termed it) was like. When I performed my devotions before them, and read aloud the Holy Scriptures, upon me was fixed many a sly eye, but on the whole they behaved most decorously; not a smile, not a syllabus was uttered. But when I had finished, a whole chorus of voices exclaimed, “*Quiyis! Quiys!* (Pretty! Pretty!) *Gruzel! Gruzel!* (Beautiful! Beautiful!).” (158)

Lott’s emphasis on their “woman-like curiosity” seems to build familiar ground, and yet, as she goes on it is “many a sly eye” observing her. She therefore implies that while her curiosity about them is woman-like, their curiosity, perhaps even audacity to observe her, is sly and sneaking, forgivable only when, rather than smiling at and commenting on her rituals, they vociferously affirm her physical superiority. Though she draws explicit connections between her Bible and their Koran, and explicitly describes this scene as a *performance* of devotions, she makes no effort, as she has previously done, to suppose how strange or foreign this performance might look. Instead, she endorses their affirmation, which seems hardly believable, let alone sincere. But Lott does not admit a sense of potential irony in their words.

Later in the text, her patience wears still more thin. She angrily records instances when her authority is undermined as slaves “take every opportunity of annoying” her and refuse to grant her privacy (297). She records with indignation, “Often when I held my finger up to them, as was my custom at Ghezire, and told them to leave my room, instead of obeying my injunction, they stared and grinned at me like idiots” (297). Gone here, is the attempt to see what she must look like to them, in her foreign costume, wagging her white finger, helpless to gain respect and authority over those she deems as “low-cast” slaves (297). Rather than grapple with the idea that she, as an English governess, is dismissed as the lowest caste of them all, Lott dismisses the slaves as “idiots” and refuses to imagine what they might be grinning at.

If Lott’s patriotic, imperial duty has been to assert the superiority of her white English body over the harem women, here, her project entirely collapses. Worse than imagining that they might see her Englishness as foreign, Other, animalistic and strange, Lott is openly dismissed by the slaves of the harem women as exactly that. Their “idiotic grins” seem to confirm that they see Lott as no different than themselves, and, perhaps, lower in status. So long as the idea of being a foreign spectacle is hypothetical, Lott seems able to record it with interest and even humour. It is a comical novelty, unsettling but also, she hopes, untrue. By the end of the text however, she no longer meets this gaze, no longer acknowledges the collapse of boundaries between self and Other and the complex breakdown of the boundaries of empire it implies. Perhaps most fascinating of all is that Lott seems to validate the insight of the gaze of the Egyptian women, even as she refuses to engage with it by the end of the work. After hearing a story in which a white man dresses as a woman in order to gain access to the interior of the harem, Lott writes “silly, silly young man, how little did he know the power of the Arab, or Turkish woman’s eyes, or how quickly they can detect an imposture of that kind” (225). By openly acknowledging the acuity of the Eastern woman’s gaze at detecting imposture, and simultaneously growing in anger and resentment as she finds herself the object of the gaze, she unwittingly reveals the insecurity that her Englishness may be an imposture after all.

Conclusion

In *Women's Orient* Melman argues that harem literature “presents the most serious challenge to Orientalist and patriarchal authority. For what characterizes the women’s representations of the different is a sense of familiarity and sympathy with the other” (17). I argue that this work to build familiarity undercuts the project of empire, not because it builds sympathy, but because it exposes how vexed this familiarity is. Poole takes for granted that by emphasizing her brother’s approval of her adoption of the male imperial gaze she will be justified in testing the purity of her English womanhood in foreign territory. She assumes that emphasizing her femininity will insulate her from criticism. At the same time, her insistence on the differences she finds between herself and Egyptian women, and the discord between her English body and local customs and costumes reveals a lurking concern that her position as an Englishwoman is not so insulated that it could not be irrevocably tarnished. Her Englishness is not an inherent quality she can take for granted, but a carefully crafted script to be performed for the gaze of the women reading her words in England. Lott, on the contrary, grounds the privilege of her gaze in her familiarity with the women of the harem. She finds, however, that when her gaze is returned by the women of the harem her insulated English position is complicated and undercut. Lott cannot simultaneously offer a feminine insider’s view of the foreign harem *and* take the privileged position of her Englishness for granted. She cannot meet the return of her imperial gaze without seeing her assumed Englishness and superiority questioned, laughed at, and dismissed as equally foreign, strange, and Other. In short, attention to the power of the gaze, whether from the Englishwoman reader in Poole’s work or the Egyptian women in Lott’s, reveals that it has the power to make the English woman unfamiliar to herself.

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