

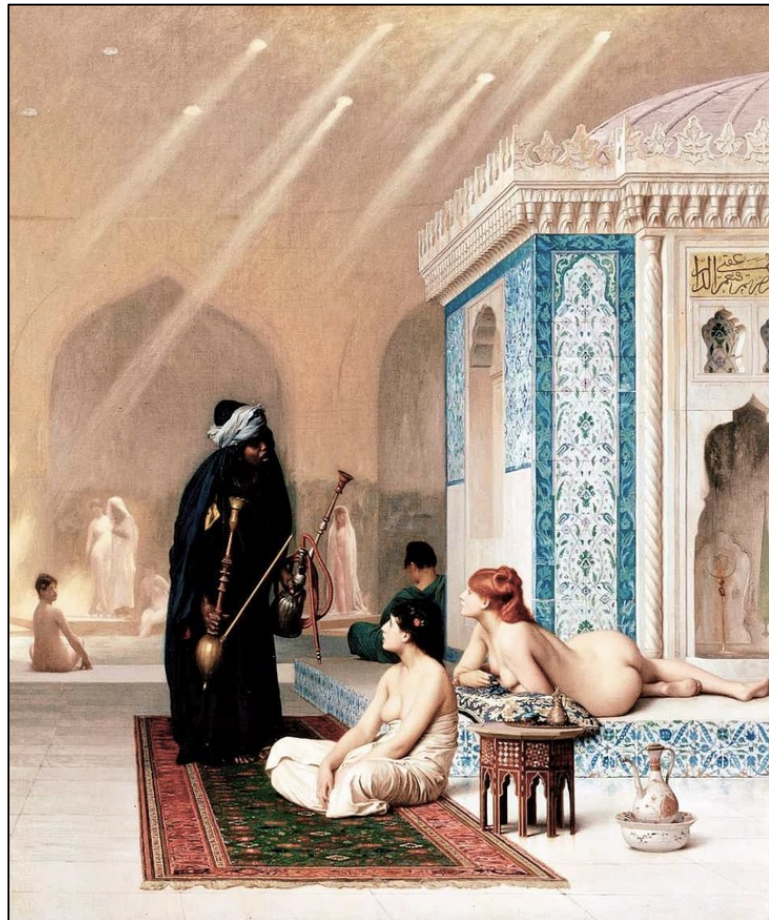
Lattice and Veil

By Kathleen Watt

TWO HUNDRED PORCELAIN-SKINNED BEAUTIES, in a delirium of exotic ethnicities, fair and dark, luxuriate in billows of silk, satin, silver-brocaded velvet, and diaphanous linen. They are dewy from the *haman*, an all-morning ablution of perfumed steam, pumice, and salt scrapes. In the *haman*, warmed water flows from brass faucets into marble sinks, and the women ladle it over one another with bowls of silver and gold. They are observed by their master, concealed behind a screen, where, taking his voyeuristic pleasure, he chooses a favorite concubine, who is then prepared and personally delivered to his chamber by his chief black eunuch.

Busy *odalisques*, draped only in pearls and gold, serve lemonade and coffee, quinces and melon, while their mistresses trade palace gossip, and ancient secrets of depilatories and hennas (the henna discourages perspiration, and the depilatory has made famous the luminescent bodies of harem women).

A hundred small apartments cluster about the arched columns of a colossal central courtyard. Furniture is spare, but for the low divans



After the Bath, Jean Paul Gérome, early 19th century

strewn with an extravagance of Persian carpets and cushions, and tortoiseshell serving tables erupt with sherbets and complicated confections named for the delicacies of the women who create them. Many recline to enjoy an aromatic *nargileh* (waterpipe) of the world's finest tobacco.

The walls of the court are resplendent in the blue-and-white mosaic tiles of Byzantium, and every window is covered in intricate latticework. Sunlight filters through in calligraphic patterns, setting to sparkling a swirling cloud of aphrodisiac spices—burning clove and ginger, frankincense, musk. Upon a zephyr from the sultan's kaleidoscopic garden wafts the fragrance of jasmine and walnut and dozens of intoxicating species unknown in Europe. In the romance of the harem, young women teach each other *sélam*, the language of flowers, in which to compose poems to each other, or send a message to a secret lover with a bouquet of well-chosen blooms. They entertain each other with shadow plays; they practice their erotic skills tenderly together; their games are children's games. And the master has given them a royal menagerie that includes peacocks, nightingales and gazelles within; elephants, lions and giraffes without.

Round about all there is the exhilaration of the sea. Seraglio Point overlooks the Bosphorous, the great South Asian strait that connects two seas and three continents, and the estuaries of the Bosphorous are the sultan's playground. The idyllic meadows of the Sweet Waters of Asia and the Sweet Waters of Europe are lined with gilded kiosks and leafy pavilions where women of the harem gather gleefully to *kayik* in the stream, and to picnic at spectacular feasts of corn-on-the-cob and lamb-on-the-spit, with puppet shows, fortune-telling and dancing bears, amid fields of tulips and hyacinths.

As daylight fades, the harem sinks into a tumescent night of *keyf*, ultimate fulfillment, induced in a long ritual of opium eating, in a perfumed pill, or a paste of opium and pulverized jewels. In the languor of sated senses the women forget other homes and other dreams, and drift in sweet insomnia until they are called to the duties of the sultan's bed, or until the sun rises on another day of indolent pleasures.

Okay, this is the movie. It's not the whole story.

From Valentino to Flynn, from Bond to the dream of Jeannie, Hollywood has been rabid to plumb the Turquophilia of eighteenth and nineteenth century Orientalists,

for a Western myth of the Eastern Eden. According to faithful journals and the correspondence of a few privileged Europeans who actually made it inside the harem, these images did all abound in very deed. But when the harem apartments of Topkapi, the Grand Seraglio of the Ottoman Empire, were opened to the public in the early 1970's, the scant remaining vestiges of the once-terrifying Empire whispered with four centuries of other ghosts.

The harem, which carries a connotation of both “forbidden” and “sanctuary,” was “home” for the women of the sultan. In Islam, it is said that a man’s heaven lies under the feet of his mother, of whom there will forever be only one. However, Koran allows him as many as four wives, and unlimited concubines and odalisques. In such a home order was maintained only with many daily mundanities and ritualized chores, and a young girl’s allegiance began with her capture.

Whether kidnapped, won as spoils of war, given up by impoverished parents, or purchased at slave auction, the course of any captive was strictly prescribed. She would first be inspected by trained eunuchs for physical imperfections. Next, she would be presented to the *valide sultana*, mother of the sultan, for approval. If found acceptable she would be assigned a Persian name, converted to Islam, and set upon an arduous training in palace etiquette and Islamic culture. Those specially favored by nature (and the sultan) were taught music, poetry, dancing, sewing and embroidery, practical erotica, and the fine art of making Turkish coffee. It was possible for a clever odalisque to rise through ranks to the highest level of the harem hierarchy, where she could enjoy great wealth and dizzying power. But her alternatives could be cataclysmic—the untalented or troublesome could be returned to the slave market at any time, the ascendant might be poisoned by her competitors or strangled by a palace eunuch for some infraction of Islamic law. Once, in a rage over a private frustration, Ibrahim I had his entire harem of 280 women tied up in weighted sacks and drowned in the Bosphorous.

Unexpected death in the harem was common.

The Ottoman Empire was one of the most brutal and repressive of all empires. Its principalities were never stable, and its sultans were often madmen. For example, Mehmed the Conqueror decreed that a sultan could head off civil war by killing all his brothers (one sultan murdered his nineteen brothers all at once). Or he might relent and

“keep” a favorite brother instead, in the *Kafes* (Golden Cage). This lavishly appointed and windowless apartment confined the unlucky prince for the rest of his life, in isolation save for the company of two or three sterilized concubines, and his hookah. The Golden Cage was guarded by two *halberdaries*, the guards who would neither hear nor repeat palace secrets—because their tongues had been slit and their eardrums pierced. Princes who survived the Golden Cage invariably lost their minds, but often ascended the throne anyway, completely unfit to rule. In the absence of leadership, Islamic law on which the empire was founded began to be perverted, and the sultanate slid into the ancient abuses of patriarchal domination.

Much in the style and quality of the lives of harem women was determined by the stubborn notion that the soul of man must be protected from the sexuality of woman—which is natural, potent, and inexorable. Thus the veil was imposed, not that the tender sex might be protected from the ravages of male marauders, but that the soul of a man might not be corrupted by the toxic effulgence of woman, should his eyes chance to fall anywhere upon her. This may not have been the intention of Mohammed’s revelation:

“Say to thy wives and daughters and the believing women, that they draw their veils close to them; so it is likelier they will be known, and not hurt.” (33:55)

Closely connected with the veil is the seclusion of women, based on another verse which refers to the wives of the prophet, and seems to suggest respect for rank or privilege:

“When ye ask them for any article, ask them from behind a curtain; that is purer for your hearts and for theirs.” (33:53)

Gradually the veil became a shroud, the curtain became a wall, and women became furtive shadows behind the lattice. When they moved about in the palace garden, it was not until all palace gates had been secured under eunuch guard. If ever they traveled to the bazaar or to the Sweet Waters, they first hid their finery beneath a dark *khافتan*, and then, gloved and concealed but for two eye holes in a hood, they passed between curtains hung from the gate to the carriage, that they might not be seen from the street.

Certainly, many harem women took comfort from the Koranic promise that:

“The fortunate fair who has pleased her husband will have the pleasure of appearing before him in paradise.”

But whereas Constanze could still contemplate the pleasure of pain, in her spectacular aria, *Marten aller Arten*, her harem sisters had somehow to endure the pain of pleasure. In 1914, one such woman risked her life even in keeping her journal:

“How can I impress upon you the anguish of our everyday life...you ask how we spend the day! Dreaming, principally. What else can we do? Often our life is too soul-crushing even for tears, and nothing but death can alter this. Night comes, and I tumble onto my divan and am soon fast asleep, worn out with the exertion that I have not even made.”

In Vienna in 1782, the European fantasy of the Oriental potentate included an image of the magnanimous pasha. It seemed to satisfy a chagrined longing for paradise lost, and appetite redeemed. So Mozart had Bassa Selim rise above the vengeance he expects of his European rival, achieving nobility and redemption in his act of clemency. Through the brilliant vaudeville with which Mozart answers him, we may hear, as well, the promise of the ancient prophet:

“Surely Allah ever watches over you.”