



Textual Odalisque: From Roxolana to Hürrem Sultan

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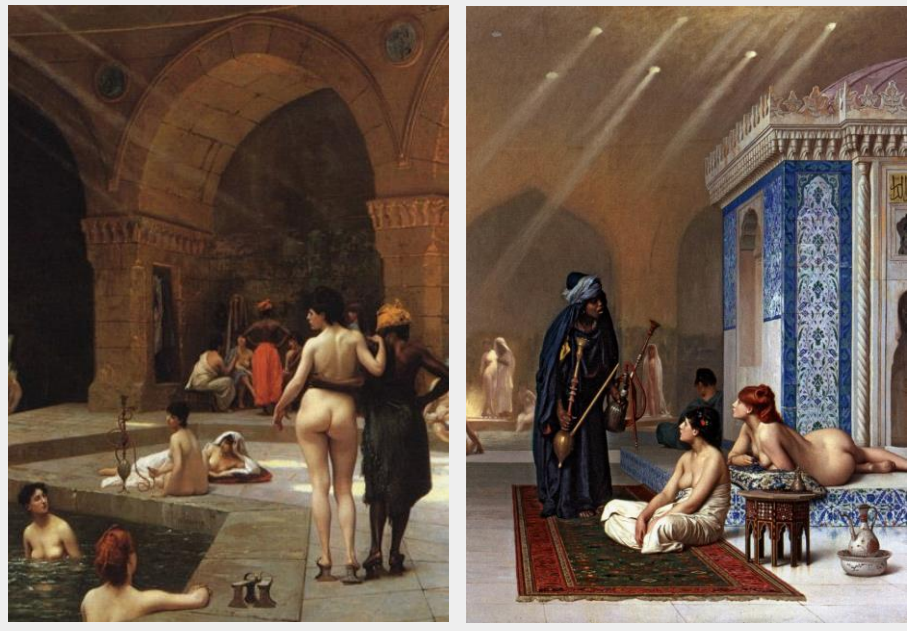
Who Is Hürrem Sultan?



“Any study of the West’s relations with the harem must be in large part a study of the imagination”

Ruth Yeazel, *Harems of the Mind*, 2000, 1.

Western portraits, such as Titian’s 1550 *La Sultana Rossa* (left) and the 18th century *Suleiman’s Wife, Roxolana* (right), were largely speculative and were not based on any real image of Hürrem Sultan.



Details from Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1885 *The Great Bath of Bursa* (left) and 1876 *Pool in a Harem* (right). Foreign men were forbidden from entering the harem, so paintings, such as those above, were largely based on the Western imagination.

On Orientalism



“Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”

“Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind, say, from ordinary historical knowledge”

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978, 3 & 72.

On Re-Orientalism



“How cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing with them or by discarding them altogether”

Lisa Lau, *Re-Orientalism*, 2009, 1.

Ultimately, how do these works challenge, ignore, or validate Orientalist discourse?



Meryem Uzerli (“Hürrem Sultan”) poses for [promotional material for *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*](#) (left). *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* costuming was criticized for mimicking Western European fashion. For comparison, a [17th century miniature](#) (right) shows the clothing of a fashionable Ottoman woman.

The Magnificent Century and Re-Orientalism



“[Maintaining] the centrality of the West... [by] circulating ‘discourse which speaks as much to the West as for the East’”

Elena Furlanetto, *Towards Turkish American Literature*, 2017, 236.

The Magnificent Century not only reimplemented Orientalist tropes coined by 16th and 17th century European writers, but also aimed to imitate successful Western media. Compare [its promotional image](#) (left) with that for *The Tudors* (right).



Unofficial Roxelana and Re-Orientalism



“Since they can’t recount what they do not know, they will scribble down a dreary, cold life built on hearsay”

Özen Yula, *Gayri Resmi Hürrem*, 2003, 91.

Yula’s play directly condemns Orientalist inserts into Hürrem’s life by actively displaying theatre and the arts as a platform for misinformation while simultaneously having Hürrem acknowledge she has no agency in her portrayal in media.

From Roxolana to Hürrem Sultan

Hürrem Sultan's emergence as a literary and cultural phenomenon is rooted deeply in Orientalist imagination of the late 16th and 17th century. Western European artists, authors, and playwrights routinely depicted her as a cunning, malicious, and cruel woman - a depiction largely antithetical to the historical record.

This legacy proved popular, with many of these Orientalist accusations superseding the actual historical Hürrem. This is most evident in modern media, such as *The Magnificent Century*. Despite being a Turkish production, *The Magnificent Century* validates many Orientalist claims regarding Hürrem, including her supposed use of magic and witchcraft, in an effort to gain viewership in the Western world.

Despite *The Magnificent Century*'s unfavourable re-Orientalization of Hürrem's character, some plays, such as *Unofficial Roxelana*, actively condemn Western Orientalist discourse by not only aiming to produce more authentic adaptations of Hürrem's life, but also by highlighting the way in which art and media can misrepresent.





Selected Bibliography



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