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Textual Odalisque: From Roxolana to Hürrem Sultan.

In many ways, Orientalism serves as a crux for much of the Western world's most celebrated works of literature and art, especially from the Mediaeval period onwards. As Edward Said asserted in his 1978 book *Orientalism*, the origin of Orientalism predates the modern notion of it by millennia. It was through “classical Greece and Rome geographers, historians, public figures... orators, and poets” (Said 57) that Europeans first imprinted their ethnocentric perspectives onto their Eastern neighbours, “separating races, regions, nations, and minds from each other” (Said 57). From Homer’s legendary depiction of the Trojan War to Herodotus’ fantastical overview of the Egyptians and Amazonian-Scythians (Yang 117, 121), Western culture has always favoured depicting its Eastern neighbours in a way that illuminated their differences and diminished their similarities. Ultimately, this helped justify their superiority over others (Said 57). This vogue for the mysterious and exoticized East has led to widely acclaimed and celebrated works of literature, such as Geoffrey Chaucer’s dream vision *The Legend of Cleopatra* (1386), William Shakespeare’s tragicomedy *The Tempest* (1610-1611), Bram Stoker’s thriller *Dracula* (1897), and Oscar Wilde’s tragedy *Salome* (1891). These works of European excellency often emerged out of speculative imagination, as “[f]rom the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent itself” (Said 283). This method of producing media left the representor and the represented distinctly isolated from one another.

While many of the aforementioned texts deal with figures and events from antiquity, Western playwrights have long expressed a deep interest in replicating the life of one enigmatic woman from the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Hürrem Sultan, more commonly known as Roxolana in the West (circa. 1502-1588), was the legal wife of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and the first Haseki Sultan, or Imperial Consort, of the Ottoman Empire. Her quick rise to power, coupled with her unprecedented marriage to the Sultan, fascinated European playwrights, who, starting as early as the late sixteenth century, adapted her life for the stage and portrayed her as everything from a witch to a Machiavellian conspirator who commits filicide. By propagating these largely falsified narratives, these European playwrights not only highlighted the “cultural differences” between the Eastern Ottomans and themselves but also proliferated the belief that Hürrem Sultan’s immorality was a result of her “Asian origin and [her] Islamic faith” (Yermolenko, “Roxolana” 36). Through the theory of Orientalism, it becomes evident that Hürrem’s portrayal in Western media, such as in Fulke Greville’s *The Tragedy of Mustapha* (1594) and Jean Desmare’s *Roxelana* (1643), is seldom more than a stereotypical caricature of an overly ambitious eastern woman; instead, she is a ploy used by Western playwrights as a means to exploit the commercial demand for an increasingly stylized East. This characterization, or lack thereof, of Hürrem is opposed by more recent reimaginings of her life, which are intrinsically linked to the notion of re-Orientalism, defined by Lisa Lau as follows: “how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether” (1). The discrepancy between early modern European works concerning Hürrem’s life and later reimaginings will be vital in identifying Hürrem Sultan’s emergence into European culture in the late 16th century as a consequence of politicised Orientalism. On the contrary, modern Ukrainian and Turkish media, including the Ukrainian opera *Roksoliana*

(by Denys Sichynsky, 1911), the Turkish television show *Muhteşem Yüzyıl (The Magnificent Century)*, 2011, Tims Productions), and the Turkish play *Gayri Resmi Hürrem (Unofficial Roxelana)*, by Özen Yula, 2003), can be analysed to examine how modern creators are decolonising the figure of Hürrem Sultan by questioning, critiquing, and dispelling irreconcilable and ahistorical Orientalist discourse.

The exact origin of Hürrem Sultan is still largely shrouded in mystery. The leading researchers on her life and impact in European culture, Galina Yermolenko and Leslie Peirce, validate the assumption that Hürrem was likely gifted to Suleiman the Magnificent upon his ascension to the Ottoman throne in 1520 and soon after joined his seraglio (Peirce 58). Nonetheless, the exact date and location of her birth, and even her birth name, are still up for debate and speculation. She was likely born in 1505 (Yermolenko, "Introduction" 2) in the Kingdom of Poland (modern-day Ukraine) and, according to Polish sources, was the daughter of a Ruthenian Orthodox priest named Aleksandra Lisowska (Peirce 58). She was then enslaved at the age of fifteen during a frequent incursion by Tatar raiders and, subsequently, was one of the hundreds of young girls sold at slave markets across the Mediterranean basin (Yermolenko, "Introduction" 2). Despite being commonly referred to as Roxolana, or any diminutive spelling of the name, in Europe, which, etymologically, references her Ruthenian origin (Peirce 59), she was given the name Hürrem (or Hürremşah (Güven 176)) upon entering the royal seraglio of Constantinople (Peirce 59). Hürrem's life within the seraglio was largely ostentatious until the execution of Prince Mustapha, the eldest son of Sultan Suleiman and his concubine Mahidevran, which led to the rise of defamatory rumors that attested to Hürrem's role in the Prince's downfall. Regardless of the ahistoricity that Hürrem conspired to manipulate the Sultan into executing his eldest son, countless European plays were produced detailing and glamorising this event, even during Hürrem's lifetime (Yermolenko, "Roxolana" 28). This pivotal event came to shape the way in which Hürrem

was depicted within the European tradition, as her role in the sudden and unexpected execution of Prince Mustapha became paramount to nearly every depiction of her life. The Mustapha cycle subsequently circulated throughout the Western world via entertainment outlets, such as novels and plays, producing alongside them a fictitious version of Hürrem.

In 1609, the British playwright Fulke Greville produced the closet drama *The Tragedy of Mustapha*, which presented Hürrem's ruthless role in the death of not only Prince Mustapha but also her own daughter Mihrimah and son Cihangir (Greville 5.2). While there is little evidence to suggest Hürrem had a role in any of the aforementioned deaths, especially of her own children who outlived her, her status as a "former slave of barbaric origin" (Yermolenko, "Roxolana" 28) made it easy for European playwrights and authors to pin the death of the famous and beloved Prince on her. Likewise, Jean Desmares's 1643 *Roxelana* sensationalises Hürrem's role in the death of Mustapha, though it deviates from Greville's production because it depicts his mother Mahidevran as a principal character in lieu of the Prince's on-stage absence. Unlike Greville, Desmares's Hürrem does not actively seek out to ruin the Prince, but instead his death is the result of a lamentful Mahidevran's decision to kill her son and herself upon learning of Hürrem's marriage to the Sultan: announcing that "Mustapha's blood will sign [the marriage] contract" (Desmares 236). While Desmares's depiction of Hürrem is one of the more humane approaches, insofar as she is not actively plotting the death of Prince Mustapha, her marriage to the Sultan is presented as the outcome of a dodgy plot, in which Hürrem successfully petitions for her manumission, reasoning that her enslavement blocks her desire to patron charitable endowments and religious infrastructure. With her newly found freedom, Hürrem is now both legally and sexually independent because religious law forbids any carnal relationship between the Sultan and herself (Desmares 232). In an attempt to avoid violating religious sanctity, Suleiman resolves to marry Hürrem, reasoning that "[Bayezid's] law is only human, but [he loves] a slave"

(Desmares 234). Although Desmares's play does not mischaracterize Hürrem as Prince Mustapha's principal adversary, it nonetheless mischaracterizes her as an ambitious and coy woman, feigning her adoration for the Sultan in the pursuit of power. Not only does this contradict Hürrem's own letters, in which she declares "my life, my Lord, my dear Sultan, my only prayer to Allah is to see your beaming face again" (Agency) before begging him to wear her tear-soaked garments, it also diminishes the hardships and maltreatment Hürrem endured while ascending through the seraglio hierarchy.

While many of these European works aim to rationalise the death of Prince Mustapha, in actuality, it was likely that Mustapha's ever-growing popularity amongst the Ottoman janissaries and successful political career, which made him "preferable to the aging and ill sultan" (Atcil 94), threatened Suleiman's rule, ultimately leading to his execution. Regardless, works such as Greville's and Desmares's did not exist as a personal vendetta against Hürrem Sultan but rather attempted to depict the "utter ruthlessness and moral depravity" (Yermolenko, "Roxolana" 30) of the Ottoman Empire. With the Ottoman Empire being perceived as a constant threat to both Europe and Christianity until the late 17th century (Yermolenko, "Roxolana" 37-38), documenting the supposed barbarity of the Ottomans on stage was in fashion for playwrights, who denigrated their practices of dynastic fratricide and seraglios on stage to the delight of bewildered audiences. As such, the average contemporary Western European's knowledge on topics such as Islam, the Ottoman Empire, and Hürrem Sultan was obtained by watching a "relatively large number of detailed events in the history of Ottoman Islam" (Said 60) on stage with little context or nuance. Plays often tried to emphasise the corrupting nature of Islam and the East, painting Hürrem's "embodiment of untrammelled passion which [led] to havoc" (Travistky 74) as ramifications of her ethnic, cultural, religious, and political identities. The caricature of a ruthless, power-hungry, cunning Eastern woman predates the Ottomans and Islam by centuries (Cleopatra,

Zenobia, Salome, Semiramis, Roxana, and even Theodora all serve as examples). However, the differences are minute and irrelevant, “since the figure was essentially the same” when examined through the lens of Orientalism (Said 286). By downplaying the individuality of Eastern women and classifying them as all alike, it allowed for the same Orientalist rhetoric to be applicable to all aforementioned examples, Hürrem included. As Western scholars and creators are often placed as “[authorities] over the Orient” (Said 3), the myths propagated by their works regarding Hürrem did not only have immediate consequences for the way the West conceptualised the East but also how Hürrem would be defined for centuries.

Nevertheless, by the middle of the 17th century, the Mustapha cycle fell out of fashion on the European stage, spurred by the execution of the Grand Vizier Ibrahim (Yermolenko, “Roxolana” 35). As a result, Roxolana slowly faded out of European theatre, and, by the unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1683, European powers failed to see the Ottoman Empire as anything more than an Eastern power in decline, thus stifling their depiction on stage at all (Yermolenko, “Roxolana” 37). The relatively short-lived infatuation with Hürrem spurred countless legends that persist to this day, even within Turkish media itself. European playwrights such as Desmares and Greville served as “intellectual [authorities] over the Orient” (Said 19); their plays became living textbooks, a visual representation of an alleged truthful adaptation of the East. While depictions of Hürrem Sultan and Ottoman dynastic disputes fell into obscurity in Western Europe, her diminutive name, Roxolana, lived on as an epithet “associated with upper-class European courtesans, who wielded great... political success through their sexual power” (Yermolenko, “Roxolana” 38). This pilfering of Hürrem’s identity can be seen in Daniel Defoe’s 1724 widely popular novel *Roxana the Fortunate Mistress*, in which Roxana is a “French courtesan” (Yermolenko, “Roxolana” 38) benefitting from the vogue for turqueire, a movement in Europe during the eighteenth century that saw a rise in desire for Turkish music, fashion, confectionery, and, especially, coffee and

tobacco (Yermolenko, "Roxolana" 39). Consequently, the name Roxolana detached itself from the figure it initially aimed to codify, Hürrem, and instead represented a form of fetishisation and colonisation of the Eastern body, which was perceived solely as "creatures of a male power-fantasy" (Said 207). The rise in turqueire in the West made it possible for Orientalists to benefit from and exoticize the Eastern world without the need to associate with it directly, thus allowing them "great collective appropriation" (Said 84) that enabled them to engross upon the Roxolana figure while disregarding its connection to Hürrem entirely.

After a lapse in interest in her story by Western Imperial powers, Hürrem reappeared in European culture in the late nineteenth century, primarily as a result of increased demand for Ukrainian national self-determination in the pre-World War I Austria-Hungary. These new adaptations of Hürrem centred her as both an oppressed figure and national liberator in the Ukrainian collective imagination. A thorough examination of the development of Hürrem's portrayal in Eastern Europe is offered by Oleksander Halenko, in which he points out that a Ukrainian identity did not exist during Hürrem's lifetime (113), being a phenomenon of a later, nineteenth-century national movement. The lack of a unified identity might explain her absence from early modern Ukrainian literature, but her story nonetheless persisted through oral tradition. A famous example of such oral recollections includes her role in brokering peace between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Ottoman Empire, including halting the enslavement of the former's citizens (Halenko 114). While it is not entirely clear how much influence Hürrem truly wielded in peace relations between the two great powers, she did exchange multiple letters with the Polish King Sigismund II, in which she shared her joy at the political relationships between the two powers, expressing that she takes "personal interest in it" (Halenko 115). Perhaps it was this long-standing tradition that changed the trajectory of Hürrem's depiction on the Eastern European stage.

Though the theory of Orientalism, and its successor re-Orientalism, are contemporary phenomena that developed out of the decolonization movement of the 1950s-60s, they can be used to critically examine past texts to further understand the motives behind their dissemination, as seen in the case of Greville's and Desmares's plays. Thus, as Lisa Lau asserts, the notion of re-Orientalism is entirely dependent on how those who originate in colonised, appropriated, and Orientalized cultures and nations depict their own culture. While Lau largely refers to Middle Eastern and South Asian authors, her theory can be extended to encompass Hürrem Sultan's depiction in Ukrainian letters of the early twentieth century. Composed between 1907-1908, Denys Volodymyrovych Sichynsky's *Roksoliana; Historical Opera in Three Acts with a Prologue* explicitly showcases the separation between Western and Eastern Europe, and subsequently Orientalism and re-Orientalism, as it pertains to Hürrem's figure. Sichynsky intrinsically subverts Western Orientalist discourse regarding Hürrem, which centres on "posing a positive image of the western Self" (Lau and Mendes 1) by depicting her and the Ottomans as morally deficient. His opera does not desire to propagate a colonial or imperial agenda but instead promote national efforts. Since the opera engages with Ukrainian tradition, Hürrem's appearance in the court of Suleiman halts the enslavement and massacre of her countrymen: "And these poor, unlucky people / are my brothers and sisters, / from the Ukrainian lands" (Sichynsky 247). After Hürrem relates this, Suleiman, "impressed with her beauty" (Sichynsky 247), promises to take her countrymen under his protection. Sichynsky undermines the 'othering' of Hürrem's character done by earlier European writers, who tried to emphasise Hürrem as belonging to the Middle East rather than Europe, and the supposed immorality that stemmed from it. Instead, Sichynsky's opera fully reclaims Hürrem, referencing Ukrainian oral folklore regarding her, such as being the daughter of an Orthodox priest and the protector of the Orthodox people, while simultaneously disregarding Western claims made about her, including her role in the death

of Mustapha. Hürrem's appearance on the Ukrainian stage conceptualises her character as distinct from English, French, or Spanish attempts, as the "Ukrainian memory [of Hürrem] is different than the [constructed][Hürrem] of Orientalism" (Kratochvil 71) and offers it a political dimension. However, while Ukrainian authors, such as Sichynsky, "can implicitly claim a larger degree of authenticity and validity" (Lau 258-259) due to ethnic, cultural, and historical proximity, works such as *Roksoliana* nonetheless "upholds that internal consistency of Orientalism" (Lau and Mendes 3). Insofar as works provide a fantastical and inauthentic experience dependent on the use of "popular caricatures of the Orient" (Said 108), they, such as *Roksoliana*, will always uphold an Orientalist perspective on the East. So, while Sichynsky's opera does not depict the Ottomans negatively for the same purpose as plays such as Greville's, it nonetheless still evilizes them in a way that mirrors Western Orientalist discourse as well as in other newly introduced narratives. For example, *Roksoliana* ends with Suleiman killing Hürrem (Sichynsky 253), a narrative absent from western European retellings of her life, which, despite their shortcomings, went to great lengths to emphasise Suleiman's unyielding passion for Hürrem, even going as far as to explain it as the result of an enchanted philter. The idea that Suleiman would kill his wife, while re-Orientalist in the sense that it undermines the standard Western Orientalist narrative, is nonetheless explicitly rooted in the doomed Christian girl-Muslim boy love stories, which "[show] clear traits of Russian orientalism" (Kratochvil 71). While not validating Western Orientalist discourse, Sichynsky's opera nonetheless introduces its own problematic ideological discourse. This discourse, in turn, diminishes *Roksoliana*'s re-Orientalist impact, as the opera's harmful ideological claims prove to be no different from Orientalist playwrights' exploitative assertions on Hürrem's character.

As previously mentioned, *Roksoliana*'s capability to challenge the Orientalist narrative is further challenged by the inclusion of the Christian girl-Muslim boy trope. This

trope, while unique in retellings of Hürrem's life, is common in Eastern Europe, as it is rooted in the actual historical interactions between Muslims and Orthodox Christians in regions such as the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia (e.g., Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1839) provides another example of this literary trope). This motif already existed within the Ukrainian literary and oral tradition, as seen in the legendary figure of Marusya Bohuslavka and the Cossack duma regarding her. Part of the Ukrainian collective memory from as early as the seventeenth century and integral to nation-building efforts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Kratochvil 69), these duma glamorised and idealised Ukrainian Cossack encounters with Crimean Tatars and the Ottomans. In one of these duma, Marusya Bohuslavka's life mirrors depictions of Hürrem Sultan in Ukrainian traditions, specifically Sichynsky's opera: "Maurisa is the daughter of an Orthodox Christian priest, who later becomes the concubine to a powerful Turk and enjoys all the pleasures of Turkish luxury" (Srinath). Much like Sichynsky's operatic version of Hürrem, who is "determined to save her compatriots" (Sichynsky 250), Marusya "frees 700 Ukrainian Cossacks from her Sultan's dungeon on the eve of Easter Sunday" (Kratochvil 72). Though the Marusya Bohuslavka duma predates works such as Sichynsky's by centuries, the Christian-girl and Muslim-boy trope, as established previously, belongs to a larger literary tradition dubbed as Russian, or more appropriately Slavic, Orientalism. As L. S. Zhigunova notes, while Slavic Orientalism is distinct from Western Orientalism in many ways, including its purpose, it nonetheless "clearly stems from the European tradition" (178), which exoticized Eastern and, by extension, Muslim women. While *Roksoliana* is ambivalent to Western Orientalist inserts, such as the use of magic, it nonetheless relies on its own indigenous form of Orientalism. The inclusion of such unique forms of Orientalism, including Suleiman killing Hürrem, thus places the opera within the scope of both Orientalism and re-Orientalism. This is because beliefs purported during the indigenous "[Slavic] Orientalist period have persisted even to

this day in the minds of both metropolitan and local cultures” (Zhigunova 186), making this unique retelling no different from Western Orientalism ideologically, which aimed to subvert cultural veracity for ideological agendas. Ukrainian depictions of Hürrem “would have never acquired such a significance for Ukraine” (Kratochvil 72) had the Marusya Bohuslavka-trope not already existed prominently in their collective literary tradition. As such, “Maurisa Bohuslavka became a prototype for the construction of the Roxolana image in contemporary Ukraine” (Halenko 122), reducing the identity and reality of a historical figure to coincide with that of the fictitious one, no different from the use of the name Roxolana to refer to courtesans during the 18th century in Western Europe. While, “[f]or [Ukrainians], she is first and foremost a champion and protector of the Ukrainian people, an example of loyalty and self-sacrifice in the name of the nation and even the Orthodox creed” (Srinath) and Hürrem’s appearance in the Ukrainian memory is distinct from Western Orientalism, it does not escape its own form of Orientalism adjacent its attempts at re-Orientalizing and reclaim her figure. Ukrainian works, such as Sichynsky’s, disregard and omit classic Orientalist motifs. However, they often rely on turning Hürrem into an amalgamation of already established literary conventions heightened with the notion that “Ukrainian female slaves were not expected to return home. Their mission was only to help male compatriots to flee back to Ukraine” (Halenko 120). As such, the death of Hürrem in *Roksoliana*, in lieu of attempts to reclaim self-identity, vividly demonstrates a perpetrating of Orientalism (Lau 589), in that the figure of Hürrem is appropriated to promote an ideology irrelevant to the real historical Hürrem. While *Roksoliana*’s intended purpose and audience differ significantly from either *The Tragedy of Mustapha*’s or *Roxelana*’s, the opera nonetheless fails to deconstruct the figure of Hürrem in its storytelling capacity. Marred by the same sets of ideological characteristics comparable to those of early modern Western Europe, Ukrainian portrayal and adaptations of Hürrem, while ambivalent to Western discourse and providing their own

narrative, nonetheless are not “interested in anything except proving the validity” (Said 52) of their narratives, thus suppressing any potential to provide a faithful adaptation of Hürrem’s life.

As previously emphasised, the Roxolana-figure waxed and waned out of an ever variable European consciousness. Nonetheless, Hürrem had a fixed, albeit small, continuous legacy within Ottoman and Turkish society. Though, as the Turkish scholar Özlem Öğüt Yazıcıoğlu, notes, unlike the grandness of the Roxolana figure, Hürrem’s legacy in Turkey was often minimised, mainly due to the nature of the seraglio system and Islamic culture, which was much more iconoclastic and conservative than Western Europe (142). Regardless, Hürrem has had an ever-looming presence in the Ottoman realm of influence; her portrait dating from 1533/1534 still hangs in the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul (Güven 180), and the construction of many of her philanthropic foundations, such as the Haseki Hospital-Mosque in Istanbul and a public kitchen and refectory in the Old City of Jerusalem, are still in use today (Peirce 146, 289). With the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Republic of Turkey, the glamourisation of the Ottoman dynasty fell into obscurity for many decades until the recent reforms by the string of conservative and Islamist presidents in what is often dubbed as the rise of ‘Neo-Ottomanism.’ As Gönül Bozoğlu and Christopher Whitehead note, the rise of Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey, a movement defined “as a nostalgic, revivalist phenomenon” (1) primarily associated with the powerful and hifalutin collective memory of the Ottoman Empire, often looked backwards towards what adherents consider the height Turkish civilization in Eastern Europe and the Middle East as a template for contemporary society. Confronted with the rise of Atatürkism, in which “secular ideals form the organisation of [the] state” (Bozoğlu and Whitehead 1), many Neo-Ottomanists lionised historical and semi-legendary figures in an effort to combat what they viewed as unfettered spread of atheism, westernisation, and secularisation. While Neo-Ottomanism takes form in

many strategic outlets, including sectors of society such as legislation, education, and fervorous religious reforms, it is also famously endorsed through, often state-backed, media. For example, the 2014 series *Diriliş: Ertuğrul (Resurrection: Ertuğrul)* and its 2019 sequel *Kuruluş: Osman (Establishment: Osman)* glamourize and sensationalise the hazy and poorly recorded rise of the Ottoman Empire through a display of Islamic masculine prowess. Neo-Ottomanists' reliance on revising the historical record to produce narratives that celebrate eminent masculine Turkish historical figures spread to encompass Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, whose reign marked the height of Ottoman land acquisitions and, by extension, his wife, Hürrem Sultan. One of the most renowned works of fiction which rose from what can be dubbed the Ottoman Renaissance of the 21st century is the television show *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, or *The Magnificent Century*. Airing from 2011-2014, *The Magnificent Century* was purportedly a television show which focused on the life of Suleiman the Magnificent, though much of the 139-episode show was dedicated to his wife and her rise through the seraglio system.

Ultimately, the show failed to garner success amongst the Neo-Ottomanist populace, as it raised concerns amongst conservatives for its liberal use of dance, sex, and costuming culture, even going so far as to receive condemnation from Turkish President Erdoğan for presenting the Sultan as “too often in the harem and too infrequently on the battlefield” (Bozoğlu and Whitehead 6). Regardless of complaints, the show became a massive success in Turkey, furthering debates on whether depicting the seraglio system's inner workings and a monarch's love life were acceptable forms of entertainment (Ergin and Karakaya 42). Notwithstanding the local controversies, the television show also became a global phenomenon garnering viewership from the Arab world, Balkans, Central Asia, and even Latin America (Özalpman and Sarikakis 251-252). Uniquely, the localization of *The Magnificent Century* often revealed its true star and protagonist of the series, emphasising

Hürrem's role or at least the seraglio system and subverting the Neo-Ottoman patriarchal pretext the series developed out of.¹ The show was demonstrably in the vein of retellings of Hürrem Sultan's life, beginning with her abduction by the Ottoman slavers. Though "the series celebrates its self-reliant central character Hürrem's ascent to power within a context of patriarchal domination" (Zorlu), the show also highlights the unique economic benefit of "perpetrating Orientalisms no less than 'non-Orientals'" (Lau and Mendes 1) when attempting to breakthrough on the global stage. As Lisa Lau states, re-Orientalism is how eastern creators come to terms with an increasingly Orientalist portrayal of their native culture and homeland. Though, in theory, re-Orientalism can be groundbreaking, dispelling centuries' worth of Orientalist discourse and reintroducing a more authentic East onto the world stage, it can also validate Western tropes by "emphasising the exotica elements" (Lau 588) that pander to the Western gaze. While *The Magnificent Century* makes strides to dispel some long-standing myths surrounding Hürrem Sultan, such as the absolute absence of her moniker Roxolana and the defence and demystification of the seraglio system, its success can be charged with its attempts to replicate other popular Western shows of the era, such as *The Tudors* and *Game of Thrones*, with it even being dubbed the "Turkish Tudors" (Veyisoğlu 23), to afford to enter the global drama market (Özalpman and Sarikakis 252). As such, a completely authentic and historical account of Hürrem Sultan was implausible from the start, especially due to the secretive nature of the seraglios, the focal setting of the series.

Thus, where Ukrainian works, such as *Roksoliana*, were ambivalent to the Western legacy surrounding Hürrem and instead relied on their own national recreation of her story, *The Magnificent Century* is not only aware of Orientalist motifs but actively validates them in an attempt to entertain and be seen as palatable in "more than 70 countries around the world"

¹ For example, in the Arab world, the show was marketed as حريم السلطان (*Hareem al-Sultan*, or *The Sultan's Harem*), in Afghanistan as حرم سلطان (*Hürrem Sultan*), in Japan as オスマン帝国外伝 ~愛と欲望のハレム~ (*Ottoman Gaiden: Harem of Love and Desire*) and in Ukraine as Величне століття: Роксолана (*A Great Century: Roksolana*).

(Özalpman and Sarikakis 253). Undermining the purpose of the Neo-Ottomanist context the show emerged from, *The Magnificent Century* is undoubtedly a series driven by character interactions rather than conclusive Ottoman victories on the battlefield. Much like how *Versailles*'s depiction of the wars between King Louis XIV of France and William of Orange is used as ploys to cause animosity within the palace of Versailles amongst the king's wife and mistresses, the battles fought in *The Magnificent Century* often still centre on the seraglio system. While Suleiman is away fighting against the Hungarians, for example, the show is much more focused on the infighting within the seraglio, which ends with an attempt on Hürrem's life (*The Magnificent Century*, episode 47), leading to Neo-Ottomanist's attempts to self-censor the show by including more battle sequences (Ergin and Karakaya 43). Further blurring the lines between Neo-Ottomanist historical retellings and Western period-dramas is *The Magnificent Century*'s replication of the Western characterization of Hürrem's person. Although *The Magnificent Century*'s Hürrem is much more well-rounded and nuanced than her counterparts in early modern European plays, with her acceptance into Turkish society being portrayed as gradual, many Orientalist tropes are nonetheless weaved throughout her characterization. Unsurprisingly, the principal tension in the series is Hürrem's contentious relationship with Mahidevran and, subsequently, her role in the demise of both Prince Mustapha and Ibrahim Pasha. While some aspects of their relationship, such as Mahidevran and Hürrem's physical altercation, stem from historical records (Romanets 136), others are entirely fictionalised for the sake of entertainment value. Likely mirroring the relationship of other famous rivals of the era, such as *The Tudors*' Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, *Game of Thrones*'s Cersei Lannister and Margaery Tyrell, and *Versailles*' Marie-Therese and Madame de Montespan, Hürrem and Mahidevran's animosity is heightened to nearly fantastical levels, including assassination attempts (*The Magnificent Century*, episode 23).

Other characteristics of the Roxolana archetype are imbued into *The Magnificent Century*'s portrayal of Hürrem: much like Desmares's play, Hürrem in *The Magnificent Century* is manumitted on the basis of the desire to build charitable endowments in the two Holy Cities. Upon gaining her freedom, she bars Sultan Suleiman from her bedchamber, subsequently securing her nuptial arrangements with the loves-tricken Sultan. In actuality, Hürrem's unprecedented marriage to the Sultan occurred much differently than depicted in either *The Magnificent Century* or earlier European works. Whereas the show presents Hürrem's marriage to the Sultan as occurring early in her life, before all her children were born, it also occurs before the death of his mother, the Valide Hafsa Sultan. While there is little in the historical record to suggest the Valide Sultan would reject the marriage or scorn Hürrem, as seen in the television series, it would have been improper for the Sultan to marry Hürrem while she was alive, as it would innately elevate a freed-slave to a position higher than the Valide Sultan (Peirce 116). This fact is omitted in the show in favour of heightening tensions between Hürrem Sultan and female members of the Ottoman dynasty, including his mother and sister Hatice Sultan, mirroring contentious female rivalries of the aforementioned Western period-dramas. In fact, much like how early modern European plays often frame Hürrem's marriage to the Sultan as rooted in attempts to secure power, *The Magnificent Century* presents Hürrem's desire to marry the Sultan as occurring after a fight with Hatice Sultan. During the altercation, she reminds Hürrem that, unlike her, she was "born as a Sultana and [will] die as a Sultana" (*Magnificent Century* 4:04), whereas Hürrem will always remain a slave. Beyond Orientalist tropes that were explicitly allocated to Hürrem, the show relies heavily on presenting an exoticised East. These stereotypes included the depiction of risqué belly-dancers, the throwing of the handkerchief, incest, magic, and unnecessary amounts of violence against women, including rape (Zorlu), all of which help "amplify the

country's exotic potential" (Furlanetto 238) and validate the Orientalist image while calling back to dramas such as *The Tudors* and *Game of Thrones*.

In an attempt, then, to be seen as a more global franchise, *The Magnificent Century* sacrifices authenticity in favour of a "fashionable alterity as a marketing strategy that repackages the Orient for global consumption" (Lau and Mendes 2). Much like the turquerie craze of the eighteenth century, *The Magnificent Century* bolstered commercial interest in the stylized Ottoman society they produced. After the success of the show, inspired by Hürrem's fashion, "women from different sections of society [wore] replicas of her jewelry" (Ergin and Karakaya), despite it largely lacking any similarities with the Ottoman fashion of the time. Thus, the re-Orientalism propagated by *The Magnificent Century*, insofar as it is a Turkish production recreating Turkish history and culture, is one that uses "all the Oriental clichés" (Veyisoğlu 30) to position itself adjacent to Western media. It imitates their plots, character arcs, and even fashion (Veyisoğlu 23). The demonstrably Western monarchic costuming, at least for the female characters, was chastised by President Erdoğan for lacking any origin in Turkish society and morals (Bozoğlu and Whitehead 6). As a global phenomenon, the show aims to pander as much, if not more, to a Western audience as to an Eastern one. Thus, while President Erdoğan condemned the European clothing style, the fashion of *The Magnificent Century* was celebrated by Western watchers (Izmir). As Turkish fashion designer Zuhul Yorgancıoğlu asserts, the fashion seen in the series is part of a broader trend in Turkish popular culture, which aims to "imitate Europeans" (Izmir), to the dismay of Neo-Ottomanists. The desire to include cultural elements that are more palatable to a Western audience in *The Magnificent Century* extends far beyond fashion choices. While the show is principally set in the seraglios of Constantinople, certain scenes are set within the Kingdom of Poland, the Kingdom of Hungary, the Republic of Venice, and even the Vatican, allowing Western audiences to experience familiar environments, which does not only appeal to their

sphere of cultural knowledge, but also centres Ottoman history as distinctly apart of Europe. Likewise, for example, the fictional character of Helena is introduced as the love interest of Prince Mustapha, who, upon learning her name, remarks that she is named after the “daughter of Zeus and Leday [*sic*], wife of Menelaus [*sic*]” (*Magnificent Century* 1:30). Subsequently, he retells the myth of the Trojan War, simultaneously explaining the myth to a Middle Eastern audience who may be unaware of it and allowing Western audiences to recognize the show as one created with them as the target demographic in mind.

By weaving elements of not only Western Orientalism but also Western culture throughout its narrative, *The Magnificent Century* positions itself not as a Turkish show made by Turkish creators for a Turkish audience but rather as a show aimed at helping Turkish media emergence onto the global scale, “thereby [attesting] the centrality of the West and show their intrinsic ambivalence, circulating ‘discourse which speaks as much to the West as for the East’” (Furlanetto 236). Topping off its desire to replicate Western media, specifically their affinity for fantastical uses of special effects, *The Magnificent Century* features Hürrem’s confrontation with a Dragon during a fervid mental breakdown, a recollection to *Game of Thrones*’ Daenerys Targaryen. Ultimately, “as a contemporary of Henry VIII, the reign of Sultan Suleyman was a perfect story to tell” (Veyisoğlu 24), and, to afford its financial backing and emergence on the world stage, *The Magnificent Century* propitiate the international desire for inter-generational political drama at the expense of telling an authentic, or at least more accurate, story. Thus the series created a “marketable commodity out of exoticizing the Orient or products from the Orient” (Lau and Mendes 2) validated by its culture of origin. The creation of such media authenticates Orientalist views, not only regarding Hürrem but also of Muslims and the Middle East. While Turkish media, such as the television show *The Magnificent Century*, strove to commend Ottoman society and culture, they nonetheless struggled to maintain a balance of authenticity adjacent to their

marketability. In the case of *The Magnificent Century*, this meant imitating Western styles of media, which “confers validity and authenticity on stories which may not be representative” (Lau 588) of actual historical figures and events, ultimately choosing entertainment value over authenticity.

Although *The Magnificent Century* has ostensibly been the most impactful modern iteration dealing with the portrayal of Hürrem Sultan, it is not the only one. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, many Turkish authors and playwrights have devoted their work to reimagining Hürrem Sultan’s time within the seraglio system (Yazıcıoğlu 142). A notable example is Özen Yula’s 2003 play *Gayri Resmi Hürrem* (Literally *Unofficial Hürrem*, but published in English as *Unofficial Roxelana*), whose play, according to Yazıcıoğlu, primarily focuses on “the problem of recording or representing truth or history” (145). While *Unofficial Roxelana* initially presents itself as a depiction of an ever-growing manic Hürrem during her final months, the ending of the play reveals that Hürrem was never present, and the play itself is an act being performed by concubines for the entertainment of Handan Sultan, the Valide Sultan of Sultan Ahmed I. As Yazıcıoğlu argues, this allows *Unofficial Roxelana* to point out the process of fictionalising history in order “underline the multifacetedness of truth” (143), by depicting a theatrical Hürrem as a means to extract historical truths. As Hürrem notes in the play, “I’ve not recounted my past to anyone. This is the source of my power” (Yula 46). As such, *Unofficial Roxelana* is much more concerned with analysing Hürrem’s life than creating an entertaining spectacle out of it. As a work interested in uncovering the true Hürrem, Yula’s play explores Hürrem’s recollection of her supposed past, as propagated largely by Western Orientalist literature, placing it in contrast to her own memory, in which she fails to recount episodes famously attached to her once asked to recall them. Lacking the commercial potential of a show such as *The Magnificent Century*, Yula’s play nonetheless actively highlights the “the rift between self and place... where the postcolonial identity crisis

is located” (Furlanetto 40) by actively separating the authentic figure of Hürrem from her literary companion Roxolana. The premise of Yula’s play, which is not revealed till the end, is that a group of concubines, including the future Kösem Sultan, who was the Haseki Sultan of Sultan Ahmed I from 1605-1622, are putting on a play for the entertainment of his mother Handan Sultan (Yula 103-104). By depicting Hürrem’s life as a stage show, *Unofficial Roxelana*’s narrative subverts the Orientalist trajectory. It initially does so by undermining the platform used to circulate Orientalist rhetoric – entertainment, highlighting its ability to misrepresent reality. While the play-within-a-play structure does not allow for the immense worldbuilding and glorification that a series like *The Magnificent Century* affords, it allows Yula to tackle essential concerns regarding the Orientalist characterisation of Hürrem Sultan. For example, *The Magnificent Century* portrays them as enemies, and most European plays omit her entirely; *Unofficial Roxelana*, on the other hand, explores the relationship between Hürrem Sultan and Valide Hafsa Sultan, showing the latter, presented as a puppet, as a sort of motherly figure which highlights the difficulties women in the seraglio system face, disparaging its sexual or luxurious appeal. While musing over history and the question of who will have a more impactful legacy in Ottoman affairs, Hürrem notes that “since they can’t recount what they do not know, they will scribble down a dreary, cold life built on hearsay” (Yula 91). Such statements once again emphasise Hürrem’s lack of agency in her public portrayal. This sentiment is echoed throughout the play, for example, when Hürrem laments that “they say whether something happened or not... they add to all something from their own existence” (Yula 59). In presenting Hürrem’s life as one coined by writers, inventive historians, and playwrights, Yula denounces the objectivity Orientalist authorities claimed by “making a spectacle of the East... rendering supposedly imperial truths” (Lau and Mendes 5) in the process, thus indicating that the audience should reconsider what they know about Hürrem.

Despite Hürrem's absence in the play, Kösem Sultan's portrayal of Hürrem offers a much more intimate look into the nature of her being and the seraglio system than any prior European depiction. Throughout the play, another concubine, also named Hürrem (Yuza 46), serves as a phantastic mirror to Kösem's Hürrem, and through their dialogue questions of authenticity and accuracy, for example, regarding whether Hürrem was "a rather unruly, ambitious, and calculating woman who determinedly [pursued] her self-centred goals" (Yazıcıoğlu 144), are placed into scrutiny. As Hürrem notes in Yula's play, "the legends [breed] legends" (Yula 46), and much of what the young concubine reveals about Hürrem's cult of personality is lost on her in confusion, such as her role in the death of Mustapha. By essentially portraying Hürrem in isolation, Yula is able to depict Hürrem in a much more humane fashion, in which her pain and anguish form the emotional bond of the play. Though *The Magnificent Century* attempts to illustrate the horrors Hürrem and other slaves endure during enslavement in the seraglio system, it is nonetheless overshadowed by the choice to play up the political and dynastic disputes. For Yula's play, dynastic and political intrigue does not overshadow Hürrem's story, as nearly all of *Unofficial Roxelana* is dedicated to her, leaving little room for dramatic and exoticised "Orientalist modes of descriptions in [its] self-representation" (Furlanetto 236). As such, Yula is able to produce a play that, rather than being filtered through an Orientalist lens, instead analysis centuries worth of Western discourse and commentary on Hürrem's characterization and how that impacts not only the lens in which Hürrem is assessed but also the entirety of the seraglio system.

So, while *Roksoliana* is ambivalent about Western discourse regarding Hürrem and the seraglio and *The Magnificent Century* validates many of their claims, *Unofficial Roxelana* actively critiques and condemns Orientalist insertions into Hürrem's figure. As previously touched on, for example, Yula's play subverts the normative Mustapha cycle by offering a much more nuanced examination of Hürrem's role in the Prince's death, providing a look

into Hürrem's genuine fear of coup d'état simultaneously adjacent the Sultan's initiation of the plot: "Have you also heard the rumours in the halls? My son Mustafa wants to take over the throne" (Yula 65). *Unofficial Roxelana* enters into a direct dialogue with the Orientalist legacy by projecting a new and more authentic perspective onto Orientalist averment. This is a vital component of decolonizing the figure of Hürrem Sultan in media, as it not only inverts the re-Orientalist efforts of *The Magnificent Centuries*' "[strong exotification of] Turkish culture and its 'indigenous' elements" (Furlanetto 238) but also actively converses with the early modern Western legacy. In doing so, *Unofficial Roxelana* does not only denounce these claims as fictitious but also disapproves of their uncritical sensationalization in the modern era. Therefore, Yula's re-Orientalism falls in line with Lau's assertion that some attempts at re-Orientalism "[displace] the primacy of the West and [call] for a new non-Eurocentric cultural mapping" (Lau and Mendes 8). Yula's thematic pursuit, the question of the real, is emphasised by the purposeful implementation of a common Western trope, one which is also present in *The Magnificent Century*. The inclusion of a lover other than Suleiman forms a crucial plot point in *Unofficial Roxelana*, where recollections of her liaison with the architect Mihal spurs her desire to escape from Constantinople and return home (Yula 71). Although there is no historical precedent for Mihal, its unapologetic inclusion in the play by the two concubines allows Yula to emphasise Hürrem's existence as forever "both real and fictive" (Yazıcıoğlu 162), in which aspects of her life will always be spurious due to a gap in the historical record.

Another aspect of *Unofficial Roxelana* that highlights a key component in decolonizing her character is the notion that Hürrem wishes to escape Constantinople to return to her home of Rohatyn in modern-day Western Ukraine (Yula 91), which is coupled with Hürrem's recollection of the trauma she endured in the seraglio system. While *The Magnificent Century* does provide glimpses at the horrors slaves were subjected to, it also

glamourizes the system by showcasing elaborate parties and luxurious gifts. This is unlike Yula's play, in which the lavish lifestyle as Haseki Sultan does not diminish the pain Hürrem experienced in the slave trade, nor does it minimize the grief she endures from the loss of her homeland and family. While this is also a motif present in other adaptations, *Unofficial Roxelana* presents this pain on a personal level, not reflective or impactful on a state level, such as when depicted in *The Magnificent Century*, where Hürrem's vision of her dead family encourages her to gain power in the seraglio. Likewise, Hürrem's ties to her homeland form the crucial backing of *Roksoliana*, but, unlike the opera, which exploits Hürrem's suffering for a political agenda, *Unofficial Roxelana* instead aims to illustrate the longing Hürrem experienced to return to her home, demystifying the notion that she, like many other concubines, were grateful at their enslavement because they were capable of rising to prominence in the seraglio system.

The issue of prioritising “storytelling over narrative, thus failing to challenge the narrative” (Lau and Mendes 12), which is the core of many previous works central to Hürrem's literary characterisation, is illuminated at the end of the *Unofficial Roxelana*. Once the audience is transported into the contemporary era, Handan Sultan chastises the two concubines for their fictitious claims; “isn't it wrong to make up this secret love affair, [Kösem]?” (Yula 105). By asserting that even if a story is enjoyable, its falsities warrant chastisement, Yula illustrates the way in which stories permeate into reality because “it is a story you tell among yourselves” (Yula 106) until it is repeated enough to be taken factually at face value. In this way, *Unofficial Roxolana* stands out against media such as *The Magnificent Century* because of its deep “focus on the complexity and ambivalence of Hurrem's identity” (Yazıcıoğlu 164). This focus highlights that nearly everything understood about her in the modern collective consciousness derives from inaccurate and exaggerated legends.

Most importantly, the end of *Unofficial Roxelana* provides an overview of an empirical facet of Hürrem's characterization that is often overlooked in nearly every adaptation and retelling of her life. By including the figures of Handan Sultan, Safiye Sultan, and, most notably, Kösem Sultan, Yula's play highlights Hürrem's integral role in ushering the Sultanate of Women, an era in Ottoman History which saw unprecedented female involvement in politics and society, capped off by the rule of Kösem Sultan from nearly 1623-1651. While *The Magnificent Century* does feature the aforementioned women, especially in its spin-off *The Magnificent Century: Kösem*, and other influential women of the era, it often positions themselves as enemies of one another, burdened by the reality that there is not enough room in Ottoman society for more than one influential woman. This animosity can be seen in the rivalry *The Magnificent Century* presents between Hürrem and Valide Hafsa Sultan, amongst others. While this heightened animosity, as previously argued, likely aims to mirror Western character interactions, the historical record suggests the relationships between these powerful women were often more akin to what is displayed in *Unofficial Roxelana* than *The Magnificent Century*. By characterising Hürrem as having a friendly and sympathetic relationship with women such as Valide Hafsa Sultan, who recounts that, before Hürrem, "the harem was not as influential in the affairs of the state" (Yula 89) and subsequently presenting her as a role-model to Kösem during her time as a lowly concubine, *Unofficial Roxelana* emphasises Hürrem's role in "[inspiring] women" (Yazıcıoğlu 163) and changing the way in which women functioned and lived not only within the seraglio system but the entirety of the Ottoman Empire. In emphasising this aspect of Hürrem, Yula removes Hürrem from the classical scope of Western Orientalism, which confined her solely to the role of Mustapha's assailant, and "[prompts] questions about the resurfacing of Orientalisms today" (Lau and Mendes 8) by forcing the audience to critically readdress their limited scope on who Hürrem Sultan is and what she accomplished based on the other forms of media they

consume. As aforementioned, early modern European adaptations of Eastern women often focused on their unparalleled sensuality and corrupting nature. By disconnecting Hürrem's character for critical theatrical narratives, such as bewitching Suleiman or orchestrating the downfall of Mustapha, Yula "attempts to redefine the role of women... within Islam" (Furlanetto 158) and Middle Eastern culture. Thus, *Unofficial Roxelana* "provides [the audience] with a range of women and a spectrum of different stories and experiences" (Lau 582), such as the mournful Hürrem, wise Hafsa, ambitious Kösem, ever-looming Safiye, and haughty Handan, who are not only absent in the early modern European adaptations but also are all depicted as power-driven and manipulative in *The Magnificent Century*. Ultimately, Özen Yula's *Unofficial Roxelana* does not aim at establishing a new Hürrem Sultan legend, but rather subvert the already established ones by forcing the audience to contemplate the role of entertainment in the propagation of Hürrem's characterization: did she truly murder Mustapha, or, as Handan Sultan asserts, was the lie fabricated and disseminated because it made for a better story?

Hürrem Sultan remains an enigmatic figure, ultimately unrealisable due to the ever-secretive nature of the seraglio system that she grew up in. Nevertheless, and perhaps even prompted by her ambiguity, she has always remained a muse of countless generations of writers, artists, and playwrights. Her appearance on the European stage was a single spoke in a long tradition of Orientalism, which favoured the fetishization and mystification of the Middle East over authentic recollections of its history and culture. Nonetheless, this initial appearance in European culture fundamentally changed the trajectory of her portrayal elsewhere, including in her native and adopted homelands of Ukraine and Turkey. Despite considerable shifts in politics, globalisation, and decolonial efforts in the past centuries, Hürrem Sultan's glamorized visage as a slave girl-turned-Empress has remained notably fixed, as seen in works such as *Roksoliana* and *The Magnificent Century*, that assert little

effort in undermining the already established Western narrative and, instead, corroborate it, either indirectly through omission, as in the case of *Roksoliana*, or through the replication of the narratives, as seen in *The Magnificent Century*. These forms of re-Orientalism serve to continue the obfuscation of Hürrem Sultan, espousing rhetoric that is contradictory to the historical record. Conversely, Özen Yula's *Unofficial Roxelana* subverts the Western gaze by reclaiming Hürrem Sultan. Yula successfully accomplishes this by having Hürrem Sultan actively dismiss various rumours while simultaneously acknowledging that these rumours will bequeath her true identity. By the end of *Unofficial Roxelana*, with the revelation that it is all a play in-and-of-itself, Yula brings attention to the fact that the Hürrem Sultan persona does not exist, and her identity, as propagated in Orientalist entertainment and media, is little more than fables reproduced for the sake of amusement.

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