French Harems: Images of the Orient in Cosmetic Advertisements, 1750-1815

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In eighteenth-century French popular imagination, the Eastern harem was populated with sensuous white beauties captured by the fearsome Ottomans. Travel writers, who had no direct access to this inner sanctum, filled their works with anecdotes depicting these captives as the perfect representations of European femininity.¹ This fictional vision was based on the reputation of Circassian and Georgian women as the most beautiful and thus whitest women behind closed doors.² The translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* in 1704, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and their countless imitations, as well as engravings and paintings brought this sensual and dangerous harem into the homes of French elites. This paper will examine


how these images of the exotic were translated in mid-century from literary and artistic eroticism primarily linked to the aristocracy to a powerful marketing tool for the sale of beauty products aimed at a wider audience.

By the mid-eighteenth century, cosmetic products were under attack for producing false visages and leading the wearer to a life of sin. Sellers of rouge, face-paint, powder, and creams had to find ways to counter the association of their products with the artifice of the French aristocracy. One means of separating a beauty product from accusations of corruption was to relocate its origins to a sphere where beauty was pure and unquestionable: the oriental harem. Advertisers co-opted the imagery of the harem to redefine their commerce as legitimate. They created a commercial image of the harem that reinforced French expectations of true beauty that could be bought by willing consumers.

The texts of advertisements domesticated the orient into a mirror image of the potential French client, white and respectable, while stressing the role of male entrepreneurs who had gone to great lengths to capture these miracles. By the early nineteenth century, the French harem was fully appropriated as the creation of French colonial innovation, turning what had been a foreign sphere into a national one. Yet in doing so, advertisements for cosmetics left an unresolved contradiction between the exotic names and locales and the images of respectable French commercial capital and customers. Oriental cosmetics promised buyers authentic beauty in the form of a safe commodity, yet this commodity also inherently contained the seeds of exotic threat, never fully captured or tamed. In an effort to separate cosmetics from corruption, advertisers unwittingly reinforced the sexual connotations of both the eastern woman and her French counterpart at her toilette.

In the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu distinguished
between the false and deceitful attempts at beauty made in the French salons and the exotic, sensual practices of beautification taking place in the harem. Usbek, the traveling sultan, was shocked by the behavior of French coquettes who wore thick layers of paint to attract gullible men. These women primped well into old age, their vanity making them believe that rouge and paint could hide their wrinkles. For Usbek, French women's ability to manipulate makeup and "the desire to be attractive which continually preoccupies them, simply detract from their virtue and are an affront to their husbands."³ Like many eighteenth-century commentators, Montesquieu used cosmetics, especially rouge and powder, as a metaphor for the degradation of French mores as well as a trenchant attack on the frivolous pastimes of loose women.

In contrast, the oriental odalisques were portrayed as unquestionably attractive, even when they deceived their despotic master.⁴ The sultan's favorite brought "out the beauty of [her] complexion with the finest shades of color" and applied "the most precious lotions," taking advantage of secret oriental cosmetics to enhance her natural traits.⁵ These naturally beautiful women of all races partook in lascivious sexual acts and violently rebelled against their master but never attempted to conceal or invent their charms. Montesquieu contrasted a true oriental beauty redolent with eastern essences and sexual threat to an artificial and sterile European femininity covered in hideous paint.

Supporters of cosmetic use appropriated this association of true oriental beauty enhanced by paint. Since French

⁴ Ibid., letter #7, 36.
⁵ Ibid., letter #26, 76-77.
women were under attack for wearing false artifice, cosmetics themselves had to be redefined as foreign and thus authentic. In 1754, Antoine le Camus, a well-respected doctor, published *Abdeker ou l'art de conserver la beauté*. This two-volume work is both a repertoire of cosmetic recipes and an elaborate oriental tale in which to contextualize this beauty advice. Le Camus informed his female readers about the uses of cosmetics in the guise of lessons by Abdeker, the harem's doctor, to Fatme, the most beautiful woman of the harem. While the doctor spent hours teaching her the secrets of beauty and health, they inevitably fell in love. These new emotions caused Fatme to lose natural coloring and blush at the most inopportune moments. Abdeker "wanted to spread artificial colors that could serve as a mask for the natural colors which shone on the Sultana's skin." Thus, he invented makeup in order to mask her moods; the application of rouge hid her true feelings from the pesky eunuchs. The lovers could now meet and interact right under the nose of the evil sultan.

Le Camus' story was a means of entertaining his female readership. But he also repositioned the invention of cosmetics in the harem, a move that turned artifice into a tool for both true beautification (in opposition to Parisian salons) and one white woman's resistance against despotism and uncontrolled sexuality (the sultan turned out to be her half-brother). Fatme's lessons were not meant to create beauty where there was none, but rather to enhance and sustain the natural beauty she already possessed. Le Camus created a world of the toilette that eulogized the skills of the East while reforming the values of the princess to fit European norms. The real needs of French women

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were reflected in this realm of exotic beauty. The standard of beauty upheld in his harem was the same as that of the Parisian boudoir: "a very white skin on whose surface is found a veneer of rose."\(^7\) The stress on smooth, light skin created for European readers a harem filled with women like themselves. It was no surprise that the heroine turned out to be a Christian all along, in her heart if not in her practices. Le Camus' harem was a space both mysterious and strangely familiar. Fatme, at the end, was easily transformed into a European wife when she married Abdeker and they fled to Italy.\(^8\)

Both foreign and familiar, Le Camus' image of the harem intrinsically linked pure beauty, cosmetic goods, and the Near East. Very influential in the genre of beauty advice, his example also permeated the world of commerce. *Abdeker*'s references to the beauty of odalisques made concrete the French buyer's perception that beauty products originated in the East. This perception was not completely false as many of the key ingredients in cosmetics were originally imported from the Near East. The French had long prized the perfumes and minerals that originated in the Ottoman Empire, though the shift in trade away from the Mediterranean and towards Asia in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries diminished these imports.\(^9\)

Exotic goods used in beauty products such as cinnabar,

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\(^7\) Ibid., 1:158-59.

\(^8\) The fact that Fatme was found to be the Sultan's sister did not seem to alter her skin color because her mother was a Christian kidnapped by the Sultan's father.

tartar, musk, gray amber, and carmine, as well as countless spices, were shipped to French ports to be disseminated throughout the country and then packaged for consumption by apothecaries and grocers. The rarity of many of these ingredients led to the creation of populuxe copies—cheaper reproductions of expensive goods. Despite accusations that unscrupulous Muslim merchants were adulterating their goods to dupe naive French buyers, most falsification was done by local artisans hoping to profit from the popularity of exotic references. Affordable goods from the orient, whether fully authentic or not, entered the homes of the middling classes through the ingenuity of peddlers or local retailers.

Artisans who marketed their goods as "oriental" in provenance and spirit appealed to popular conceptions of the exotic East found in stories and images. Women who wore these oriental goods could achieve the allure of true exoticism not offered by French-made goods. Yet, by incorporating the harem into publicity, advertisers transformed its meaning. The harem was no longer a sphere of threatening sexual passion and despotism, but a safe yet exotic warehouse full of useful and desirable products. By using the orient as a marketing tool to sell populuxe goods, advertisers distanced themselves from accusations that makeup was a sign of falsity and vanity since these goods were proven to help create true beauty. They both rehabilitated the French practices of beauty, while at the


same time making the sensual East palatable to their buyers.\textsuperscript{12}

Advertisers depended on their readers' association of their goods with literary and artistic "orientalism" which stressed exoticism, yet their products themselves could be bought without fear of any actual threat. Readers of advertisements were meant to link "pomme de la sultane" and "eau du sérail" with references found in paintings and novels. Advertisements for "l'eau Georgienne" and "pomme Circassienne" referred to the locations from which the most beautiful concubines were captured. The "essence Roxelanne" alluded to the famous French sultana depicted in the popular play \textit{Soliman II or the three sultanas}.\textsuperscript{13} One advertiser even claimed that his invention could bring to life the miraculous transformations described by Le Camus, helping to turn French women into Fatme.\textsuperscript{14} Advertisers evoked the East in order to make their customers' dreams come true: authentic beauty and not artificial paint.

French women were being offered an irrefutable deal: at a reasonable price they could purchase all the proven advantages of oriental beauty without the disadvantages of the harem. For instance, one beauty cream was advertised

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Perrin Stein argues that the eighteenth-century literary and artistic depictions of the East reflected contemporary concerns with Louis XV's mistresses, aristocratic spending, and feminine dominance over social and political spheres of power. Perrin Stein, "Amédée Van Loo's \textit{Costume Turc}: The French Sultana," \textit{Art Bulletin} \textbf{78}:3 (Sept. 1996): 417.
\item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{Journal de politique et de littérature} (Nov. 1774): 155. Charles-Simon Favart's play was first performed in 1761. Perrin Stein, "Madame de Pompadour and the Harem Imagery at Bellevue," \textit{Gazette des Beaux-Arts} \textbf{123} (Jan. 1994): 38.
\item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{Annonces, affiches et avis divers} [hereafter \textit{AAAD}], 3 Jan. 1792, 42.
\end{itemize}}
as giving "Circassian and Asian women in general . . . that brilliance, that freshness and that whiteness of skin for which they are renowned."\textsuperscript{15} The seller of the "Crème Ekmecq" reprimanded French women for taking less care of their beauty than did oriental women.\textsuperscript{16} In a marketing tactic meant to disassociate cosmetics from criticisms of artifice and aristocracy, French women were advised to abandon their old products and learn from their more beautiful sisters of the East. Since these products had already been proven effective for the odalisques, it was "now up to French women to procure this advantage."\textsuperscript{17}

The utilization of an unquestionable exotic "other" to market cosmetics helped create a sphere of artifice outside the traditional Parisian and provincial markets. Most of the advertisers who adopted names from the orient were non-guild members who hoped to secure a consumer market for their goods distinct from the legitimate corporate one.\textsuperscript{18} These advertisers could refashion both their products and themselves as part of a foreign world of goods, while also promoting the ingenuity of French adventurers and entrepreneurs. Publicity for the "Eau de sultane" asserted that its recipe was stolen from the harem by an "officer" of

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 10 Pluviôse An II (30 Jan. 1794), 5919.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Le Mercure de France}, July 1770, 212.
\textsuperscript{17} AAAD, 10 Pluviôse An II (30 Jan. 1794), 5919.
\textsuperscript{18} Out of thirty-nine advertisers from 1750-1791 who use oriental references, only five were connected to the perfumers' guild. The others were tobacco merchants, botanist-chemists, apothecaries, "marchandes de modes" or not associated with a guild at all, selling their goods in a bookshop, at the door of a church, a food store, or the lottery bureau. These sellers, however, were adept at gaining medical patents for their imports. Out of a list of twelve patent holders, six were for "oriental" goods. Roze de Chantoiseau, \textit{Essai sur l'almanach général d'indication d'adresse personne et domicile fixe des six corps, arts et métiers} (Paris: Vve Duchesne, 1769).
the seraglio, presumably a eunuch, and sold to a French sailor in Constantinople.\textsuperscript{19} The underlying theme in these advertisements was not only Eastern secrets, but Western abilities to harness these secrets. Entrepreneurs promoted themselves as adventurers who had gone to great risks to make their new and exciting findings available to the French public.

The public was familiar with this genre of adventuresome traveler. In a long letter to the editor of the \textit{Annonces, Affiches et Avis Divers}, which reads much like its advertisements, a subscriber assured consumers that the perfumes and creams sold by the Parisian merchant Hebert did truly originate in Constantinople. He was sure of this because on his own voyages to the Near East he had studied and examined the products of each country. He found the perfumes of Constantinople to be of the highest quality and was amazed to find this same quality available in Paris on his return. He hoped to "serve the public by warning them that counterfeit essences could be smuggled into France" but promised that "the true one" was to be found chez M Hebert.\textsuperscript{20} In this "public service announcement," multiple marketing ploys combined to win over the reader: the trustworthy voyager, the cunning entrepreneur, and the authentic creation.

Cosmetic advertisements played on literary and artistic depictions of authentic white harem beauties while assuring readers that the ultimate responsibility for the safety and authenticity of these goods rested with French male adventurers. The insertion of oriental imagery into publicity changed its meaning. The values of efficiency, trustworthiness, and consumer availability were appended

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{AAAD}, 21 Jan. 1777, 84.  
\textsuperscript{20} Hebert had been selling this product for nine years. \textit{AAAD}, 1 Jan. 1807, 7.
to the sensual imagery of the *Thousand and One Nights* or the paintings of Van Loo. Unlike the secretive and titillating descriptions of the harem in earlier literary works, both Le Camus’ recipes and the cosmetics advertised were commodities whose mystery had been completely revealed for the good of French women. Any wearer of cosmetics could now safely buy a piece of the orient. In the world of commerce, the profitable secrets of the harem were not corrupt sexual techniques but fruitful and necessary beauty goods sold at an affordable price. From a mysterious and unfamiliar lifestyle, advertisers created a desirable and purchasable commodity, appropriate as part of respectable French women's toilettes.

In this shift in emphasis from Eastern woman to her products, the harem's meaning was filtered through the lens of commerce as much as eroticism; it was the astute entrepreneur who had ferreted the secret goods out of the East and into the arms of French women, who in turn became the real owners and users of these goods. Though for Montesquieu and other earlier travel writers racial difference appealed to a sense of danger and eroticism, late eighteenth-century images of the harem showed it as a playground where European women could dress up in exotic finery. Similarly, advertisements inserted French women into a safe sphere of personal pampering and grooming. An advertisement for the famous "Serkis du Séral," a cream meant to whiten the skin and replace more artificial face paint, recreates an Eastern harem, yet its emphasis is fully European. In this image, a sultan smilingly offers gifts to his sultana, surrounded by benign servants. The tone of the advertisement is lightly flirtatious. The sultana is a European dressed up in fancy clothes,

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21 Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale [hereafter BN].
receiving harmless luxuries, not sexual propositions.

When the company that manufactured the "Serkis du Sérail," Dissey et Piver, chose to illustrate its advertisements during the Napoleonic period, they no longer needed to represent the harem or its women to evoke the link between beauty and the East.22 Instead, the picture focuses on the male go-betweens who purchased and marketed the goods harem women wore to enhance their looks. A French entrepreneur haggles with a Turk in a busy port. French power, represented both by sailing ships and the Napoleonic columns anchoring the picture, has come to haul away the fruits of eastern knowledge, repackaging and re-labeling them for their own customers' tastes and needs. This is a man's world. The actual harem and the sultana whose favorite product this is appear only in the text in the middle. The text is the same Dissey and Piver used in newspaper advertisements, although the addition of imagery has shifted the focus away from the potentially questionable activities of the harem women to the work of the gentlemen who collect and discover their secrets for French women.

An even more obvious association of French nationalism, imperialism, and commercial dissemination of cosmetic goods can be seen in a bizarre advertisement for Lagoutte Parfumeur listing a variety of goods, most prominently Eau de Cologne Nationale.23 In this advertisement Napoleon's disembodied head, encircled with rays of light, hovers over a scene of French industry, represented by distillation equipment. His presence and his domination of the world legitimate French perfumery. It too can conquer and appropriate for itself the cultures and

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
profits of other nations and peoples. This extreme image of national commercial might is tellingly surrounded by two Egyptian obelisks, whose material grandeur Napoleon had no problem literally appropriating. On the columns the company advertises some of its many products, most tellingly "Epilatoire du Sérail" and "Crème de Perse," which was touted as used throughout Asia by women who appreciate beautiful skin tone. Though invisible, the women of the harem continue to give away for free the secrets of their authentic beauty aids, brought to the women of France thanks to the projects of the Emperor.

Advertisers by the early nineteenth century no longer felt it necessary to picture or refer directly to the well-known characteristics of the harem. Instead, they chose to elevate and promote French commercial and imperial dominance, reassuring consumers of the appropriate nature of their purchase. The association of the harem woman and the French buyer of cosmetics was initially meant to disprove accusations of corrupt artifice. Yet this relationship was first mediated by the goods themselves which were less threatening than the sexualized odalisque, then by the entrepreneurial French male promoter. These commercial references to the harem were not so much bereft of sexual exoticism as focused inward on personal satisfaction: that of the Eastern toilette and its applications in a Westernized setting. The ultimate "seduction," consumerism, was meant to placate any fears of corruption by Eastern goods.

Though these advertisements no longer pictured the odalisque, they could not sell cosmetics without evoking her name. The attraction of these goods over beauty products linked to Canada (like bear grease) or England (like toilette soap) was the promise of authentic, uncorrupted beauty. Only the East could make that promise.
unconditionally. French women bought this promise in hopes of maintaining their whiteness in a period when face paint was attacked for falsity and immorality. They hoped to appropriate products that could be separated from French aristocratic decadence, while at the same time mimicking the fictional pampered, secluded lifestyle of the harem. French advertisers recreated the harem as a white, passive space for beautification, meant to lend an air of foreign trustworthiness to cosmetic goods. Yet, the products they created to distinguish themselves from traditional French artifice were appealing precisely because of their association with the sexual and political corruption that made the harem so titillating to readers of oriental tales. In contemporary minds the orient still referred to the corruption of mores, as did the wearing of makeup. Ultimately, advertisers may have sidestepped the immoral taint of French artifice, but they still sold eroticism on the side and with it the unspoken possibility that their cosmetics might be more radically transformative than even their critics could envision.