A BRITISH, MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN IN THE HAREM:
Emmeline Lott’s *The English Governess in Egypt:
Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* (1865)

by Elisabetta Marino

Citation:

Abstract:
Though, up until the first two decades of the nineteenth century, travels to West Asia were largely an "androcentric experience,” in his *Bibliotheca Cisorientalia* Richardn Bevis noted that, between 1821 and 1911, 241 travel accounts were penned by women writers, thus bearing witness to the increasing number of female travelers who ventured to Turkey, Syria, and Egypt. The reason for such a dramatic increase in output is partly grounded in the Victorian readers’ desire for tantalizing Oriental tales featuring harems and *hammams* –those private spaces inhabited by multiple wives, voluptuous odalisques, and submissive concubines –that were positively forbidden to men. Yet, far from indulging in a highly seductive portrayal of the female quarters, many nineteenth century women travel writers thoroughly frustrated the expectations of such armchair travellers; by depicting the *seraglio* as the mirror image of the middle-class British home, and by focusing on the manners and the morals of its residents, they succeeded in desexualizing and domesticating the alluring Orient. This paper is focused on one of those female writers, Emmeline Lott, who forcefully challenges both the conventional voyeuristic fantasies connected with a strictly feminine environment, and the familiar vision of household purity, absolute restraint and temperance conjured up in the accounts of Victorian women writers. Regardless of this, however, Lott transpires as a champion of British imperialism and Victorian values, turning both European high handedness and Oriental corruption to the making of a marketable image of herself as the representative of a higher civilization.

Keywords:
Emmeline Lott, Victorian, 19th century women’s travel writing, Orient, *hammams*, overness
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As Billie Melman writes, up until the first two decades of the nineteenth century, travelling to Western Asia could be considered an “exclusively androcentric experience” (31); hence, the related genre of travel literature was essentially cultivated by male authors, with a couple of notable exceptions, namely Lady Montagu and Lady Craven. Nonetheless, as Richard Bevis underlined in his Bibliotheca Cisorientalia (1973 – a comprehensive inventory of travelogues in English about the Near and Middle East), between 1821 and 1911, 241 accounts were penned by women writers (Melman 31), thus bearing witness to the increasing number of female travelers who ventured to Turkey, Syria, and Egypt (to name a few of the most popular destinations). The reason for such a dramatic increase in output is partly grounded in the Victorian readers’ desire for tantalizing Oriental tales featuring harems and hammams – those private spaces inhabited by multiple wives, voluptuous odalisques, and submissive concubines – that were positively forbidden to men. Yet, far from indulging in a highly seductive portrayal of the female quarters (closely resembling the mesmerizing paintings

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1 Lady Montagu’s Turkish Embassy Letters were posthumously published in 1763, while Lady Craven’s epistolary travelogue, entitled A Journey Through the Crimea to Constantinople: in a Series of Letters from the Right Honourable Elizabeth Lady Craven, to His Serene Highness the Margrave of Brandebourg, Anspach, and Bareith, was released in 1789. It should not pass unnoticed that both authors were aristocrats: their experience abroad (somehow connected to their respective husbands, their engagements and behaviour) was quite extraordinary.
of Ingres and Delacroix), many nineteenth-century women travel writers thoroughly frustrated the expectations of such armchair-travelers; by depicting the *seraglio* as the mirror image of the middle-class British home, and by focusing on the manners and the morals of its residents (women of all ages and children), they succeeded in desexualizing and domesticating the alluring *Orient* (Melman 99).

The peculiar and rather disturbing description of harem life in Egypt and Constantinople provided by Emmeline Lott in her travelogue – *The English Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* (1865) – forcefully challenges, as it will be observed, both the conventional voyeuristic fantasies connected with a strictly feminine environment, and the familiar vision of household purity, absolute restraint and temperance conjured up in the accounts of Victorian women writers.

Lott’s personal life is shrouded in mist: her very dates of birth and death are uncertain, even though Michael Wojcik argues that she was probably born in the 1830s or 40s (235). Nevertheless, the frequent references to Italy and India in her narratives (including topographic details, personal recollections, and curious hints at customs and traditions) indicate that she, at least, visited

2 See, for example, Delacroix’s “Odalisque allongée sur un divan” (1827–1828), and “Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement” (1834), and Ingres’s “La grande odalisque” (1814), “La petite baigneuse: intérieur de harem” (1828) and, later on, his famous “Le bain turc” (1862–1863), inspired by Lady Montagu’s description of the *hammam* in her letters.

3 A very good example of travelogue in which the *Orient* is completely desexualized is the account in two volumes entitled *The City of the Sultan; and, Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1836* (1837) by Julia Pardoe.

4 For example, in *The English Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* Lott mentions the dreadful “Italian banditti” (II: 221), “the Pitti Palace at Florence” (I: 90) – a city where she certainly lived (I: 5) – and “an elderly French gentleman” (I: 34), a relation of somebody she had met in Pistoia (Italy). She demonstrates her acquaintance with India by referring to the caste system (I: 14$), by comparing *hashish* with “the Bang drunk by the Sepoys in India” (I: 304), and by uncovering ominous similarities between the Turkish eunuchs and “the Thugs in India, adepts at strangulation” (II: 208). She also recalls “mud-built hut[s] in any of
those countries in her earlier years. In 1861, Lott was offered a two-year appointment as governess to Ibrahim Pacha, the five-year-old son of His Highness Ismael Pacha, the Viceroy of Egypt, and his second wife. After extensive negotiations (which included an escape clause in case of illness), she accepted the post, probably impelled by strictly financial reasons (her contract shows that she had been married, so she was probably a widow, needing to support herself in some respectable way – Wilkinson 61). Arriving in Egypt in 1863 (Roberts 93), she took residence in three different harems: first in Ghezire (near Cairo), in one of the Viceroy’s stately dwellings, then in Alexandria (in his summer residence), and finally in the imperial palace outside Constantinople. Poor health caused by an unbalanced diet and the unbearable conditions she was forced to live in prompted her to leave her position before time and to go back to England. Settled in Brighton, urged by economic pressure, she decided to capitalize on her disappointing experience in Egypt publishing *The English Governess in Egypt*, followed by two more literary endeavours: *The Mohaddetyn in the Palace of Ghezire, or Nights in the Harems* (1867), and *The Grand Pascha’s Cruise on the Nile in the Viceroy of Egypt’s Yacht* (1869).

As this paper sets out to demonstrate, by introducing her audience to a land of conspiracy, widespread corruption, and ethical as well as bodily degradation, Emmeline Lott, an obscure and self-supporting governess, employed her improvised writing skills to artfully fabricate a marketable image of herself as the representative of a higher civilization, and a valiant defender of Victorian values. Successfully drawing on the rhetoric of British imperialism in order to promote the sales of her account to her “gentle reader” (Lott I: 66), she regarded her profession as an enlightening mission, which also granted her some kind of social ascent, elevating her from the status of governess – a problematic borderline figure between classes and spheres – to the rank of lady, as she deliberately defined herself throughout her travelogue. This essay will first of all explore Lott’s hyperbolic portrayal of an obnoxious, depraved, and brutal *Orient*, much different from the paradise of pleasures fantasized by

the suburbs of Bombay, Madras, or Calcutta” (II: 277-78), thus showing her familiarity with the Indian environment.
many Romantic poets; then, it will analyze the clever construction of the writer’s literary persona, as both an authority in Eastern matters and the champion of British propriety, rectitude, and education.

Even before reaching Cairo, Lott gathers the first, ominous information concerning her future life in Egypt from two fellow-travelers (a Greek and a German-Jew) on a train. In their words, harems are “the hot-bed of intrigue, jealousy, and corruption” (I: 12); women, compared to attractive “caged birds” (I: 12), “are viewed as marketable commodities” (I: 18-19) and considered as “the mere slaves to their [masters’] sensual gratification” (I: 17). The system of bribery is so deeply ingrained and so widely practiced that Baksheesh (the term for tip or present) is the most powerful among the rulers of Egypt: virtually every citizen must pay a tribute to Him. When Emmeline Lott begins her stay in the Viceroy’s harem, she is terrified by the “hideous and ferocious” (I: 67) looks of the eunuchs, the guardians of the female apartments, those “spectre[s] of m[en]” (I: 68) that gratify themselves by tyrannizing over their captives “as despotically as they can” (I: 58). Later on, she will discover that women are actually much more dangerous than their repulsive keepers: child-killers, capable of destroying their own offspring, merciless “odalisques adopt[ing] all kinds of intrigues, plots, and often have[ing] recourse even to poison” (II: 245) to rid themselves of their rivals in the sultan’s favor.

As the author soon finds out, those vicious creatures could not be more distant from the stereotype of the youthful, meek and graceful Oriental beauty featured by Thomas Moore in his narrative poem entitled Lalla Rookh, which she explicitly quotes as a stringent example of feigned and unfaithful representation of the “ladies of the Harem” (I: 75). In Emmeline Lott’s vivid prose, “most of [the women’s] countenances were pale as ashes, exceedingly disagreeable; fat and globular in figure; in short, so rotund, that they gave [her]”.

5 Just to quote two of the most meaningful passages in the travelogue, as Lott underlines, their appearance was “totally at variance with that glowing myth-like picture that the prince of Irish poets, Tom Moore, gives of retired beauty” (I: 212); “the general appearance of this bevy of ladies was not, as Tom Moore, in his ‘Lalla Rookh,’ describes [... ] for they were indeed very plain—nay, ordinary, and some absolutely ugly” (II: 212-13).
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 [sic.]” (I: 75). The harem inmates are often associated with savages or animals: they “jabber away” (I: 215) and “make grimaces like monkeys” (I: 216); when they express sorrow, they never cry like humans, but “howl[!] like wild beasts” (I: 273); during their feasts, they dip their hands into the dishes “like savages” (II: 189) and, after tearing “the meat with their fingers like a set of cannibals” (II: 48), they lie down on the carpets and “[a]ll fast asleep, like wild beasts after a gorge” (II: 50). In the secluded “Castles of Indolence” (II: 296) of the Viceroy’s palaces, “there is no culture of the intellect or soul” (II: 296); never-ending conversations revolve around subjects “which in Europe,” as the writer sadly underlines, “are regarded as criminal, abominably indecent, filthy, and disgusting” (II: 290). The extensive consumption of tobacco, hashish and opium contributes to thicken the atmosphere of decay and stagnation that dominates the harem; princesses and concubines are so deeply affected by the free use of drugs that, at times, their facial features are deformed, their minds, deranged, while their idle bodies, devoid of energy, are enslaved by the dolce far niente: “their eyes glared, their eyebrows were knot closely together, no one dared to approach them. In fact, they had all the appearance of mad creatures” (I: 241). The use of wine, a beverage “so expressly forbidden by the Prophet” (I: 242), only worsens their already serious health condition.

Even the hammam is deprived of its traditional charm;6 in Emmeline Lott’s opinion, “the bath of the poets is a myth” (I: 79). She actually views the ritual of the bath as a form of self-inflicted punishment, since she contemplates with horror the prospect of being “scalded with boiling water like a dead pig, and then [being] kneaded about like a lump of dough until your whole body

6 Conversely, Lady Montagu’s famous hammam scene is extremely fascinating and exciting, as it can be noticed in the following passage: “To tell you the truth, I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr Gervase could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improved his art to see so many fine women naked, in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions” (59).
looks like a mummy” (I: 175). Cleanliness — signifying sexual purity to the Victorians, in connection with the ideas of social order and stability (Melman 130) — is not a virtue among the women of the harem. Despite the profusion of jewels, diamonds and other precious stones with which they adorn themselves, their muslin dresses are generally “dirty, filthy, crumpled” (Lott I: 235). Their hair, literally swarming with vermin, is only combed once a week, on the eve of their Sabbath (I: 238). Their heavy and grotesque use of cosmetics (to alter their natural — albeit disgusting — looks) reminds the writer of the infamous “Madame Rachel” (I: 260), a professional beautifier active in England in the 1860s who, under the pretense of selling miraculous concoctions and beauty treatments, was actually a quack, a petty criminal, and a brothel keeper (once again, harems and moral pollution are joined in Lott’s mind).7

Against this background of squalor, shame, and degradation, the author “is always at pains to establish her status,” (89) as Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklewright have pointed out, and to assert her Britishness and cultural superiority. Readers should not be misled by her unusual portrait (placed immediately after the frontispiece) in which, were it not for her name underneath the illustration, she would be unrecognizable, due to her veil and habarah (a large cloak, covering her whole body). In fact, as Ruth Brandon has emphasized, her voluminous robe and mantle “look distinctly crinoline-like” (203). Besides, far from indicating her intention to capitulate to the other and her willingness to blend in, her ethnomasquerade can be interpreted as a symbol of her privileged position (Roberts 81): living in the harem, she has the possibility to peep into forbidden domains without being noticed. She thus succeeds in “uplifting that impenetrable veil” (Lott I: viii) that, as the writer elucidates in her “Preface” to the first volume, had constituted an overwhelming hindrance for all the other European travelers, including Lady

7 Be it noticed incidentally, the writer’s reference to Madame Rachel establishes a subtle but powerful connection between the dark and ambiguous environments she describes in her travel account and sensation novels, often featuring villainesses and murderesses artfully disguised as angels in the house. In Armadale (1866) by Wilkie Collins, for instance, Madame Rachel may be recognized as the character of Maria Oldershaw, the devious business partner of Lydia Gwilt, the main protagonist and a treacherous criminal.
Montagu. Indeed, using a language that evokes images of colonial expansion, Emmeline Lott points out that harems had actually been “a terra incognita” (I: vii) even to her famous predecessor (a visitor but not a resident in the seraglio); hence, she herself, in her capacity as governess, is entitled to be acknowledged as the very first person to venture into the “all unexplored regions” (I: vii) of the female quarters.

From the opening chapters of her travelogue, the author’s lady-like demeanor is highlighted through the contrast between the baseness and brutality of the Ottoman women and her higher standards of living and decorous manners. While the odalisques are perfectly content with their scantily furnished accommodation, Lott laments the absence of “all the appendages necessary for a lady’s bedroom” (I: 85), such as a piano, pictures to adorn the walls, and a writing table. The ravenous appetite of the concubines and their addiction to smoke clash against her aversion to both cigarettes and the Arab dishes “swimming in fat” (I: 45) that she insists on eating using knife and fork. Taking her meals with the three German maids of the household is “a degradation” (I: 155) to her, as she respectfully explains to the Viceroy, thus managing at times to be served her food in a separate room. Totally indifferent to adulation, eager to avoid the jealousies and dangers of the harem, the writer politely rejects any insinuation that she secretly longs to become the Viceroy’s Ikbal – one of his favorites; as she states, “I have no desire to please the Viceroy in that manner; that is an honor I do not covet” (II: 139).

Very few lines of the account are devoted to the education of the little prince, also because, as Lott explains, she is not allowed to use textbooks or other didactic materials: the child is just supposed to pick up the English language by sharing his tutor’s company (I: 206). Consequently, readers are subtly induced to believe that, rather than being employed as a simple governess, Emmeline Lott, a true icon of Victorian propriety, had been invited

8 Far from being an innocent creature, even the little prince shares his countrymen’s brutal and uncivilized behaviour: “the prominent features of his disposition were three of the worst vices that a child could possibly demonstrate, namely, cruelty, avarice, and greediness” (I: 286).
to Egypt for a much deeper reason: to enlighten the uncivilized. One of the two travelers she meets at the beginning of her adventure (probably a purely fictional character), actually expresses this very wish: “you will, I hope, by the influence of your example, be able to graft a few civilized customs on their Arab and Turkish manners” (I: 13). Accordingly, the author (who even flaunts her acquaintance with the Queen, thus giving evidence of her elevated rank) begins to show her wardrobe of crinoline dresses, hats, and bonnets to the admiring women of the harem, to whom she even gives a practical demonstration of “how European ladies generally pac[e] up and down their rooms” (I: 97). As she remarks at the end of the first volume, “the whole of the inmates of the Harem soon began thoroughly to appreciate my European ways and habits […] and did their best, poor ignorant, deluded, and neglected creatures, to abandon any habits which I explained to them were repugnant to delicacy” (I: 266-67). A similar comment is placed at the beginning of the second volume, when Lott accounts for her interest in the young princesses, “poor dear neglected creatures” (I: 24): “I thought it was a pity that such noble females should be brought up in that barbarous manner, I took an interest in them, and began to teach them English, and to cause them to adopt many European modes and customs” (II: 25); “had we remained longer together, [they would] have become considerably Europeanized” (II: 24).

In the words of Narin Hassan, Emmeline Lott “participates in the inscription of colonized spaces as places of physical and mental deterioration and disarray” (32); in her utter isolation from her compatriots, the pioneering British lady fails to resist the corrupting power of the Orient. Recurrent fits of cholera, nervous fevers, and exhaustion prompt her to an earlier return to her motherland which, as Dr. Ogilvie (her English physician) explains, is the only treatment that could restore her immediately to health (II: 289).

Michael Wojcik has observed that the sales of her travelogues brought the writer “little profit or recognition” (235). The English Governess in Egypt was positively reviewed only by J.G. Maline of the Catholic World (in June 1868), given the contrast between Christian values and heathen immorality.

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9 As a child, she used to play at Windsor, in the gardens of “Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen” (II: 26).
explored in the text\textsuperscript{10}. Conversely, the anonymous reviewer of *The New York Times* (November 11, 1867) harshly criticized both her endeavor and her “badly written [and…] badly arranged” account: Lott “seems to us to have recklessly undertaken a mission in which success and comfort were alike impossible, and to have made very little use of the opportunities which her position gave her for observation” (nytimes.com). All the same, the obvious faults of her volumes (namely the excess of details, the reiteration of concepts, and her overtly biased perceptions) are, as well, the strength of her narratives: without Emmeline Lott, readers would have been deprived of a thought-provoking – albeit disquieting – insight into the cultural relationships between Egypt, Turkey and England at the time of Queen Victoria and Ismael Pacha.

\textsuperscript{10} According to Maline, Egypt was characterized by a stagnant and decaying atmosphere; progress and evolution were alien to the texture of the country, doomed to barbarism and corruption: “if on the title page [of Lott’s travelogue] nine centuries before the Christian era were substituted for the date of publication, instead of nineteen centuries after it, the change would be so unimportant in a chronological point of view, that no annalist would be aware of the anachronism” (408).
References


