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# Orientalism and the Reception of Powerful Women from the Ancient World

EDITED BY  
**FILIPPO CARLÀ-UHINK  
& ANJA WIEBER**



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ORIENTALISM AND THE RECEPTION  
OF POWERFUL WOMEN FROM  
THE ANCIENT WORLD

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# ORIENTALISM AND THE RECEPTION OF POWERFUL WOMEN FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD

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*Edited by Filippo Carlà-Uhink & Anja Wieber*

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# INTRODUCTION

*Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Anja Wieber*

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## Women and the Orient: A ‘double estrangement’

In 1932, Grace Harriet Macurdy, Professor of Greek at Vassar College, wrote about Cleopatra’s and Marc Antony’s lifestyle in Egypt:

In a manner of living as though taken from the Arabian Nights Entertainment, they gambled, drank, hunted and fished together, and wandered about Alexandria by night in disguise. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Even Macurdy – the author of a pioneering study on Hellenistic queens and ‘woman-power’, in which she stressed the necessity of evaluating powerful women by the same standards as their male counterparts – could not avoid using an Orientalist flair when describing the most famous Ptolemaic queen.<sup>2</sup> It is the aim of this book to show that Macurdy was and is anything but alone, and that discourses and images developed by the Orientalist imagination have dominated the ways in which powerful ancient women have been represented in modern reception.

The reason for this, we argue, is a process that can be defined as ‘double estrangement’: as both the feminine and the Oriental<sup>3</sup> are perceived as Others to a normative, masculine, Western point of view, modern reception has structurally aligned these two forms of Alterity. There is thus an overwhelming presence of Orientalist stereotypes (which have at times developed independently from the stereotypes on Antiquity) in how not only an Eastern queen such as Cleopatra has been represented, but also Roman women such as Fulvia and Messalina, or the empress Theodora. Most of the surviving ancient sources were written by men;<sup>4</sup> as a consequence, ancient authors write about women as the opposite sex, shaping their identity in the process.<sup>5</sup> When the object of their description is a woman in a position of power, this is perceived as something that breaks the norm, and is thus negatively described, the Alterity ‘breaking loose’ and disrupting the normal social and political order.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, as Elke Hartmann has noted, in most cases ancient sources do not even mention how power is exercised by women: their being in power is automatically an indecent ambition and, significantly, above all a sign of weakness in their male relatives, who should exert power of their own (including over the women), but end up being influenced and dominated by them, again a subversion of what is perceived as the social and political norm.<sup>7</sup>

No less topical is the definition of the ‘Orient’ in Classical Antiquity. As is well known, at least since the fifth century BCE the Greeks defined themselves in opposition to the barbarians (who were embodied by the Persians), while also shifting their representation

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of the Trojans to transform them into ‘ancestors’ and a prefiguration of the Eastern enemy.<sup>8</sup> The East, epitomized by luxury and softness (for which they offered scientific and even climatic explanations)<sup>9</sup> thus became not only the Other, but also ‘the Fiend’ – those who wish to subvert the social and political norm.<sup>10</sup> Even the Samnites, normally portrayed as warlike, could thus be cast as Orientals when dangerous to Rome.<sup>11</sup> In general the Romans not only inherited Greek concerns with ‘the East’, but also amplified them: ‘the preoccupation of Rome with the Orient was obsessive – and as such a powerful element in the cultural process of shaping and re-shaping Roman identity throughout imperial times.’<sup>12</sup> The Oriental was in Rome ‘a dazzling figure’, both feared and admired, a paradigm of wealth and luxury, while at the same time one of submission and slavery to autocratic monarchs – in a way which is not entirely dissimilar to how early modern Europeans viewed the Ottoman empire.

When he developed the concept of Orientalism in 1978, Edward Said argued that its significance went far beyond describing the European approach to the Ottoman empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (on which he focused), and that it represented a very long-lasting form of discursive construction of Alterity:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.<sup>13</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that Orientalism was in Antiquity already affiliated with gender, with stereotypes that lasted well into Late Antiquity and far beyond: Oriental men were effeminate and weak; Oriental women, generally subordinated and enslaved by the autocratic system of those regions, could take advantage of such masculine weakness and become, in a complete reversal of the accepted norm, strong and dominant.<sup>14</sup> The result was a typical form of political despotism, in which female rulers could be represented as ruthless, cruel and sexually voracious: from the East came both the eunuchs and the Amazons.<sup>15</sup> The resulting characters can be mythical, as in the case of Omphale, who forced Hercules into cross-dressing;<sup>16</sup> quasi-historical, as with Semiramis, who would even have invented castration;<sup>17</sup> or representations and portrayals of actual historical figures, as is the case with Cleopatra, whose ‘Orientalization’ began immediately with the Augustan propaganda directed against her.

Fulvia, a noble Roman woman of no Eastern ancestry, even appears in contemporary sources to be ‘Orientalized’ in order to delegitimize her political activity, as well as that of the men around her, as Peter Keegan clearly demonstrates in his chapter within this volume. All of these figures function as negative exempla, intended to show what happens when the gender roles are reversed, when men lose control and women gain it.<sup>18</sup> This applies, rather obviously, to both historical figures and those from myth, as well as figures connoted as enemies; Orientalist stereotypes do not appear, for example, when the current queen or empress must be praised and celebrated.<sup>19</sup>

## Orientalisms

Said's definition of Orientalism has not, in the last forty years, been exempt from corrections and criticism. This is certainly not the right place to thoroughly discuss the characters or limits of this concept, which has completely revolutionized the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences since its very first appearance with the homonymous book that was translated in thirty-six languages.<sup>20</sup> Above all, however, it has been noted that while Orientalism is a long-lasting phenomenon, stretching from Antiquity until the modern day, it is not unchanging – something that Said clearly recognized: 'neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other.'<sup>21</sup> Specific studies are needed for specific times and contexts,<sup>22</sup> including in relation to the various Western countries<sup>23</sup> (which produce different forms of Orientalism), as well as for the different genres in which Orientalist discourses are produced.<sup>24</sup> As we will see below, there is also a different gaze on the Orient by Western men and Western women. For all these reasons, it is more appropriate to follow Malini Johar Schueller and speak of Orientalisms in the plural.<sup>25</sup> As formulated by McEnroe, 'today Said's broad equation, scholarship = power = colonialism, seems overly simplistic. His structuralist framework of binary opposites (East/West, We/They, Ourselves/The "Other") does not adequately explain the complexity of the situation. Neither "East" nor "West" are monolithic concepts. Rather, within each of these categories there were and are multiple points of view. As a result, the discourse between East and West was not a simple dialogue between two opponents but a complex conversation including many voices.'<sup>26</sup>

And yet, things are even more complicated: even apart from the differences and nuances that depend on the observer, we must also differentiate from the perspective of the observed. As was the case in Antiquity, it is not only the process of inclusion and exclusion in and from the Orient that shifts and forever changes – there are also various gradations of Orient, both for the Western observer and within the Orient itself. From a Roman perspective, for instance, Greece was Oriental, but less so than Persia; the Greeks, in turn, would have perceived Persia, but not themselves, as Oriental. To explain this series of constructions, Milica Bakić-Hayden has introduced the concept of 'nested Orientalisms', using it to explain how different Balkan nations in modern times have perceived their neighbours as more or less Oriental.<sup>27</sup>

A further crucial aspect is what has been called 'reverse Orientalism', or more appropriately 'Occidentalism', i.e. the ways in which the East has described and discursively constructed the Occident. Reversing Orientalist stereotypes, discourses have been developed in the East which present the Occident as a sphere of corruption and alienation, void of moral values, opposed to the healthy morality and tradition of the East.<sup>28</sup> The complex interactions between all these layers have led Schnepel to identify eight different kinds of potential discourses: Orientalizing discourses by the West; Orientalizing discourses by the East itself; Occidentalizing discourses by the East; Occidentalizing discourses by the West itself; Orientalizing of the West by the East; Orientalizing of the West by itself; Occidentalizing of the East by the West; and Occidentalizing of the East by itself.<sup>29</sup>

## **Orientalism and the Reception of Powerful Women from the Ancient World**

What's more, all of these interact on a deeper level with representations of Antiquity, thus developing a huge breadth of historical exempla and historical arguments in support of the various discourses of Orientalization and Occidentalization, often in direct reference to each other. Irene Madreiter demonstrates a perfect example of this complexity within her chapter, by analysing how the figure of Shirin has been represented within modern Iran and embedded into the complex discourses surrounding the Occident, the Orient and Iranian specificity.

### **Ancient powerful women and the Orientalizing gaze**

The bias of the ancient sources has, for an extremely long time, also extended into historiography; following the descriptions contained in the available (literary) sources, ancient powerful women basically continued being described in the ways of which the quote at the beginning of this chapter provides a significant example (even though Macurdy also extensively used non-literary sources). Scott has identified three ways in which women have been marginalized by scholarship on Antiquity:<sup>30</sup> through exclusion, in particular in the field of political history, strongly assumed to be a purely male prerogative; through pseudo-inclusion, which is to be mentioned only in the margins and without depth; or through alienation, which is the inclusion of women only in relation to men, in particular when women's roles and actions are highlighted, as they do not conform to the male ideal of correct female behaviour, but are passed over when they do.

The connection to the topic of this volume should immediately be clear: it is exactly this marginalization that explains how, when women are present on the political stage, they must be explained as 'abnormal' and 'deviant' cases through strategies of Othering. Alienation is the most crucial mechanism of Othering, that which leads to a convergence with other discourses such as Alterity, and particularly Orientalism. 'Common sense assumptions', along with the idea of anthropological constants, i.e. that women's identity is static throughout the ages, have – especially in the case of Classical Antiquity, perceived as the foundation of Western civilization – hindered a critical rereading of the sources and their *topoi*.<sup>31</sup>

Our view of ancient women, their actions and their roles, has quite obviously been shaped at every turn by contemporary debates about gender roles.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, these (at times very famous) stories surrounding ancient women have been continuously re-activated and repurposed for modern aims, in a continuous dialogue between Antiquity (especially Classical Antiquity, to which the Western world generally draws a genetic line of derivation) and modernity. In his 1911 book on the wives and daughters of the Roman emperors, for instance, Guglielmo Ferrero notes that the Romans were keen to solve 'the problem of woman and her freedom, a problem earnest, difficult, and complex which springs up everywhere out of the unobstructed anarchy and the tremendous material prosperity of the modern world'.<sup>33</sup> And Ferrero was again regressing to stereotypes of Oriental women, attempting to demonstrate that the Romans behaved

differently by bestowing too much liberty upon women: 'Rome was unwilling to treat her (i.e. the Roman woman) as did the Greek and Asiatic world, but it did not on this account give up requiring of her the same total self-abnegation'.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, all this applies not only to historiography, but also to all fields in which Antiquity is quoted, used, and 'received'. The best way of portraying the Alterity of non-normative women is connecting them, via the idea of 'double estrangement', to what is probably the most important and longest lasting strategy of Othering in Western cultures: Orientalism.<sup>35</sup> After Antiquity, the early modern period (or more precisely the end of the Byzantine empire) marked an important turning point in the development of Orientalist discourses.<sup>36</sup> From this point until the twentieth century and European imperialism, Orientalism shaped every discussion about the East; logically, this also had an effect on the reception of the ancient world, as historical examples were deployed as arguments to legitimate modern European territorial claims in Africa and Asia.<sup>37</sup> The 'Great Game', the British battle with Russia over control of Central Asia, could for example be equated with the Persian Wars, as well as with the war fought by the emperor Aurelian against an Oriental queen, Zenobia of Palmyra (see the chapter by Anja Wieber in this volume for more on Zenobia's reception).<sup>38</sup>

As in Antiquity, the Orient – now stretching from North Africa to the Near and Middle East, following the extension of the Ottoman Empire – is imagined as a woman;<sup>39</sup> the double estrangement continues to be productive, as in the Graeco-Roman world, and continues to generate discourses and visual images. One example will suffice: in the 1920s, the cover of a book from the series '*Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Carthage et des Villes d'Or*',<sup>40</sup> a French society for the preservation of Roman Africa, presented a hyper-Orientalized woman in art deco style, a diva semi-clad in a costly transparent dress and long cloak, showing her bare breasts and arms (Fig. I.1). The entire design, along with her jewellery and hairstyle, is a mixture of the fantastic with ancient Egyptian attributes (a moon boat and the eye of Horus), whereas the upturned toe sandals and the incense burner clearly evoke harem fantasies. The woman is not a historical figure, but an allegory of Algeria, where the original ancient Roman culture must be reinstated by the French colonial rulers, the true heirs of that culture:<sup>41</sup> the Orient awaits to be civilized, i.e. penetrated by the West.<sup>42</sup> The pervasiveness of this imagery is such that even the Wild West is sometimes represented, in North American culture, through Orientalist stereotypes.<sup>43</sup>

The connection between Orientalism and gender politics continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, including during the Western women's emancipation movement and its demands for equality and suffrage. In modern times, highlighting the role of Oriental women and their discrimination within their societies often serves 'to solidify and legitimize patriarchal gender relations in the West',<sup>44</sup> while the image of the ruthless Oriental woman in power functions both as a powerful scare tactic to oppose equality, and to open up the political field to women. Maria Wyke has shown clearly, for instance, that Orientalized images of Cleopatra in cinema have been powerfully deployed in connection with the suffrage movement, as well as racial issues, as a reaction to 'waves of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe'.<sup>45</sup> Once again, products of reception



**Fig. I.1** Book cover of *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Carthage et des Villes d'Or*, Paris (Georges Rochegrosse, 1920s). Author's collection.

and scholarship are entangled in the discourses and ideas of their age: as demonstrated by Beate Wagner-Hasel, the idea that ancient Greek women were 'secluded' was developed, based on an Orientalist stereotype, precisely when the European powers supported the struggle for Greek independence: 'they banished or abandoned the female half of the ancient culture they admired to the East', thus commenting on the expected role of women in modern bourgeois society.<sup>46</sup> It should be noted at this point that this continuous entanglement and dialogue between scholarship and other forms of reception is exactly the reason why we have renounced any kind of division between 'primary sources' and 'secondary literature' – both scholarship and literature can play dual roles at the same time, as a reflection on Antiquity as well as a source for how Antiquity has been understood, repurposed and reproduced at various moments.

Interestingly, the double estrangement can at times become triple, since the twentieth century, when a further crucial form of Otherness appeared on stage: the technological.

As highlighted by Rosi Braidotti, 'the ambivalence of fear and desire towards technology is re-cast in the mode of an ancestral patriarchal suspicion towards powerful women and women in positions of power';<sup>47</sup> this does not, however, detach 'female Alterity' from 'Oriental Alterity'. Unsettling figures in this sense, such as the female machine from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) and other cinematic productions, clearly continue to develop Oriental stereotypes, and they do this in continuous recourse to their ancient origins.<sup>48</sup> Irene Berti demonstrates a clear example of this in her chapter of this volume, by analysing a post-apocalyptic sci-fi graphic novel which refers to an ancient woman, Artemisia, both in the title and in many other aspects. Even if her case study casts the female protagonist in the positive role of 'saviour' (and consistently deploys a famously 'virtuous' woman as an ancient model), we nonetheless once again have a dystopic (and future) Orient of oppression and slavery.

### Visualizing the ancient (Oriental) world

The 'double estrangement' is, as already noted, highly productive on both a discursive and a visual level, at times in a very conscious way, not only for the (many) artists who have painted both Classical ruins and Orientalist scenes, such as Lecomte de Nouy.<sup>49</sup> The argument, elucidated particularly clearly by the Orientalist painters of the nineteenth century and explicitly formulated by Eugène Delacroix, derives substantially from the colonialist prejudice of increased 'primitivity' in the Orient: for the famous painter, travelling to North Africa – at this point an integral part of the Ottoman Orient – meant 'time travelling', becoming closer to Classical Antiquity. This was due in part to the many ancient ruins preserved there, but far more to the 'backwardness' of the region, which reveals to the Western observer what the more archaic life conditions of Antiquity may have looked like.<sup>50</sup> When visiting Alger in 1832, significantly, the French painter was keen to understand the life of the harem, of which he had a typically Orientalized image (in 1834 he would paint *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*). According to a witness, in conversation Delacroix once exclaimed: 'It is beautiful! It's as in Homer's time! The woman stays in the gynaecium, taking care of her children, spinning wool or embroidering wonderful fabrics. This is woman, how I figure her'.<sup>51</sup> Even much later on, for Tessa Korber, travelling to North Africa was one of the main inspirations for writing a novel about Antiquity published in 1998 – which was (interchangeably) set in Syria, more precisely on Zenobia of Palmyra.<sup>52</sup>

The artistic consequence of this Orientalization is the frequent insertion of Oriental elements in historical paintings, and of ancient elements into representations of the Orient: Théodore Chassériau, for example, in his *Tepidarium* (1853) presents a Roman bath with certain Pompeian features, but which definitely bears a greater resemblance to a hammam;<sup>53</sup> in his harem scenes, he uses the Venus de Milo as a prototype for the representation of naked women.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the harem is one of the most important signifiers for the Orient in literature and the visual arts; or rather, the entirely false representation of a harem that is common in the West, which transforms the part of the

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house reserved for women (and with limited access for men) into a place of erotic fantasies.<sup>55</sup>

Chassériau is certainly not the only one to represent nudity in the Orient: in the prudish society of the nineteenth century, nude figures were tolerated only if they were depicted as representatives of Otherness, of societies that did not share the moral values of the West. On a visual level, the connection between eroticism and the Orient in this way gains further strength and becomes completely institutionalized: 'the Orient shifts back the boundaries of Western morality'.<sup>56</sup> In nineteenth-century Europe, many upper-class smoking rooms (to which only men had access) were decorated in the Oriental style.<sup>57</sup> Could there have been a more comfortable place for men from the Occident to imagine the taming of women as the embodiment of the Orient than in the typical retreat of a gentleman?

The same applies, unsurprisingly, to Antiquity, where the use of ancient elements and settings even became a way of legitimating early erotic (and homoerotic) photography,<sup>58</sup> as happened with Oriental settings.<sup>59</sup> Stereotypical elements from both visual worlds were also frequently mixed, as one can see in the photographs of Wilhelm von Gloeden, for example. The Otherness represented by women and the Otherness of male same-sex desire also conflate into a multiple-layering of the estrangements, often in an Oriental and/or ancient setting, as Ann-Cathrin Harders clearly shows in her contribution to this volume.

This association of Antiquity with Orientalism at a visual level remained strong and productive in cinema. This was partly because in the new medium, 'outsourcing sin' was a way to avoid censorship, but mostly because the association of the Oriental with the ancient had become firmly rooted in popular culture and thus reached a very high level of recognisability.<sup>60</sup> Quite expectably, this is particularly visible in representations of Late Antiquity: here, the Orient is represented by the idea of Byzantium, along with the luxury and decadence that characterized the Late Roman and Byzantine courts. These conflate into representing a world of eunuchs, cruel tortures and prostitutes becoming empresses (e.g. Theodora, whose reception is analysed in this volume by Filippo Carlà-Uhink). It little matters that Ravenna is not Byzantium – the former could also become a place for Eastern decadence, a court in which Valentinian III, for instance, takes pleasure in petting his leopard before unleashing him on the poor dancers (*Attila*, Pietro Francisci, Italy 1954).<sup>61</sup>

## Women and the Orient: The female gaze

Oriental nudes and semi-nudes are most certainly conceived of as objects of the Western male gaze;<sup>62</sup> yet, the images provided by these Orientalist stereotypes could also be appropriated into the twentieth century by women, as revealed by the boom in Orientalizing beauty products, or by the success of 'Oriental dances'. Many American women took such dance classes in the 1920s, surely to find through dance, and through the Orient, their freedom and self-expression.<sup>63</sup> Once again, this was not new, but derived from a connection between the Orient and luxury on the one hand (commodifying the

Oriental/ancient style was very popular in eighteenth-century USA, for example),<sup>64</sup> and from the narratives of powerful Oriental queens on the other. In a speech held at the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia in 1793, for example, Priscilla Mason presented the Roman empress of Syrian origin, Julia Soaemias (one of the 'Severan empresses' whose reception is analysed in this volume by Martijn Icks) as a model of education and good taste, referring to the *senaculum*, a 'feminine Senate' who advised the empress, as noted by ancient sources:<sup>65</sup>

Heliogabalus, the Roman Emperor . . . made his grand-mother a Senator of Rome. He also established a senate of women; appointed his mother President; and committed to them the important business of regulating dress and fashions. And truly methinks the dress of our own country, at this day, would admit of some regulation, for it is subject to no rules at all – It would be worthy the wisdom of Congress, to consider whether a similar institution, established at the seat of our Federal Government, would not be a public benefit. We cannot be independent, while we receive our fashions from other countries; nor act properly, while we imitate the manners of governments not congenial to our own. Such a Senate, composed of women most noted for wisdom, learning and taste, delegated from every part of the Union, would give dignity, and independence to our manners; uniformity, and even authority to our fashions.<sup>66</sup>

There is, therefore, a female gaze on the Orient, and on Antiquity, which is different from the male, even if it generally builds upon the same stereotypes. Molly Youngkin has recently shown how female Victorian writers presented historical and mythological ancient Egyptian figures as models for their own emancipation, while at the same time insisting on the distance that separated them from modern Egyptian women, seen in purely Orientalist fashion.<sup>67</sup>

The same figures and examples, the same anecdotes and historical narratives could be repurposed in this way, losing the role of 'scaremonger' for the breakdown of social and political order connected to a reversal of gender roles, and becoming instead antecedents, models and referents for emancipation, often in a provocative way. Jennie Churchill, for instance, Winston Churchill's American mother, embraced the critiques of her emancipated lifestyle and proudly presented herself as the empress Theodora of Byzantium – even being represented as such in a bronze statue.<sup>68</sup> Mary Hamer investigates an analogous case in her chapter of this volume, showing how parallels with Cleopatra were used with dismay about Emma Hamilton, but were appropriated for self-description by Catherine Stepney.

## Cleopatras

Cleopatra is, as is to be expected, a particularly recurrent figure, who is also correspondingly well studied in scholarship.<sup>69</sup> Extremely famous, highly present in

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reception (essentially ever since her death), Cleopatra was already the subject of Orientalization – in spite of her Macedonian ancestry – in Antiquity, when Octavian presented the war against her and Antony as a war against Oriental Egypt. She was contrasted with the good, normative, Roman Octavia; she was Omphale subjugating Antony-Hercules.<sup>70</sup> An ever-present reference, Cleopatra has been appropriated in all possible forms and from all possible perspectives.<sup>71</sup>

As early as 1863, the women's rights activist and artist Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon wrote, in a letter from Algeria, the following lines on Cleopatra, which reveal both the extent of her Orientalization as well as her admiration for the ancient, 'emancipated' queen:

I mean that serpent of old Nile, that Gipsy, that wonderful piece of work whom it would have discredited Mark Antony's travel not to have seen, and who, being seen, still discredited him very much; this wonderfully clever and beautiful woman killed herself, and left some children behind her.<sup>72</sup>

Cleopatra enjoys great popularity from her role in ancient history, and the abundance of sources that deal with her, from Horace's invitation to drink to celebrate her death (*Od.* 1.37), to her powerful description in Plutarch's *Lives* of Caesar and of Antony. Her popularity and her value as a paradigm derive from the specific role that Egypt plays within the sphere of Orientalism.

In Antiquity, Egypt was the subject of a process of 'Orientalization from the East' (to return to the layers described above), when the Ptolemies adopted forms of pharaonic and Persian self-representation, then Orientalized from Rome in the defaming campaigns against Cleopatra.<sup>73</sup> Until the present day, it has experienced a multiple series of diverse Orientalizations, which generally mix together and are moulded into one generalized, ahistorical image of both the Egypt of the pharaohs and that of the Hellenistic monarchy of the Ptolemies. These aspects have been further complicated since the nineteenth century, predominantly through the European 'Egyptomania' that developed in the eighteenth century, which was further spurred by Napoleon's campaign on the Nile and remained very strong throughout the Western world during the nineteenth century (to mention just two of the most important aspects of the story).<sup>74</sup> At the same time, while Europe and the West were orientalizing Egypt as a central facet of the process of colonization,<sup>75</sup> 'internal' mechanisms of self-defining the Egyptians deployed the ancient history of the region to differentiate it from the rest of the Arabic world:

Learning about archaeology primarily from the Europeans, Egyptians gradually came to realize that it could be turned to their own ends. Once persuaded of the vital role archaeology could play in shaping their modern national identity, Egyptians began searching for ways to train their own archaeologists. This set the stage for nationalist challenges both to European control of Egypt's archaeological institutions and to Western imperialists' interpretations of its history.<sup>76</sup>

Cleopatra, ancient and Oriental, thus continued to occupy Western imagination: in 1930, Oskar von Wertheimer called her ‘the most ingenious woman of Antiquity’ – a definition meaningfully changed in the English translation of the book to ‘a royal voluptuary’.<sup>77</sup> The Ptolemaic queen is at the same time both the personification of the Orient and of sexuality; it is enough to read how the author describes the city of Alexandria, to correctly place the queen in her imaginary cultural milieu:

Through them [the hetaerae] the open sensuality of Greece was combined with the more feverish eroticism of Egypt and the East. Far wilder orgies were celebrated in the service of Aphrodite as she was worshipped in Syria than any that took place in Greece, even in Cyprus and Corinth. The Persian king Cambyses heard that Egyptian women were so skilled in the art of love that he wished to have an Egyptian princess as wife. Sensuality to the Greeks was the most stimulating side of life, but vice, which should have never been allowed to descend to the depths of pederasty, hailed from the East. In Alexandria love soon acquired a coarse, morbid, and decadent character.<sup>78</sup>

Also, ‘films set in Alexandria tend to overlook the fact that the city was Greek in foundation. Accordingly, the characters that populate the cinematic city, led by Cleopatra, are commonly associated with Egypt and not with the Greek Ptolemies, which explains – with a few exceptions – the general preference in film for the use of Egyptian iconography and settings as cultural identifiers’.<sup>79</sup>

The cover for a reprint of von Wertheimer’s book, realized in the 1950s by the expressionist German artist Walter Schmock, shows a portrait of the queen that is consistently centred on exoticism and Orientalism, which at that point implied the insertion of visual referents connected to the Far East (Fig. I.2). The background is marked by a red sun and bamboo, while Cleopatra’s necklace evokes Indian artefacts, and her hair identifies her as the Egyptian queen by recalling the style of Claudette Colbert in Cecil B. DeMille’s *Cleopatra* (1934).

The Ptolemaic queen thus at times becomes a harem woman, and as with most harem women in Orientalist imagination, she has a fair, Western complexion (and is thus an ‘odalisque’);<sup>80</sup> at times she also performs a belly-dance.<sup>81</sup> Even her representation in the famous comic *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (1968) signifies her Orientalization: as the Greek and the Hellenistic are not Oriental, or rather not Oriental enough, she is drawn with the elements and motifs of pharaonic Egypt. Additionally, in many jokes throughout the album, Greek architecture is presented as ‘modern’ (and thus disliked by the architect Numérobis), while the ‘traditional architecture’ that both he and the queen pursue is inspired by pharaonic architecture, and strongly Orientalized.<sup>82</sup> Once again, the Orient is the pristine, the archaic, the ‘traditional’, to which Cleopatra – the uncontrollable, unforeseeable, strong-willed and dangerous woman in power – belongs.

From a Western perspective, against the background of Egypt as a country of an ‘infinite variety’<sup>83</sup> of sexual pleasures, of magic and of unknown and uncanny superhuman powers,<sup>84</sup> Cleopatra’s story is thus an irresistible topic, especially since order in politics



**Fig. I.2** Book cover of Oskar von Wertheimer, *Kleopatra – Die genialste Frau des Altertums*, Berlin (Walter Schmock, 1950s). Author's collection.

and gender relations is ultimately restored by her tragic fate. It is thus no surprise that her death has been one of the most beloved themes of historical paintings (and to a lesser extent sculptures). The death of the queen unifies all the strings that we have been pulling on up to this point: the Oriental setting; the uncommon method of suicide, implying a highly erotic component derived from the contact of the snake with the naked breast (not forgetting the immediate connection with Eve through the snake);<sup>85</sup> and the soothing message that the established order, i.e. male domination, would return with Octavian. It has been noted that even in the painting by Artemisia Gentileschi, the famous paintress represented Cleopatra, with resignation, as 'the abandonment of the woman to her destiny as a victim, without hope of help or of redemption'.<sup>86</sup>

When historical paintings assume motifs and themes from Orientalist painting, another element very often appears: a tiger or leopard skin on the couch, upon which the queen lies – for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a very offensive signifier of female sexuality and the art of seduction.<sup>87</sup> The most famous representation of this theme is thus unsurprisingly the painting by Hans Makart (1875), very often used as a book cover for biographies of Cleopatra: the tiger skin is directly in front of the couch, and upon it lies a dead servant; another cries while the queen, adorned in jewels, strong and determined even in death, brings the snake to her naked breast (Fig. I.3). One year before, Jean-André Rixens had decided to represent a later moment: Cleopatra, entirely naked but for the jewels, is already dead, and lies on her bed; an Egyptian slave with a dark complexion sits next to the corpse, while another slave lies dead at her feet. The room is decorated entirely according to the Egyptian taste, with a leopard skin once again in the forefront.

To give just one further example, Juan Luna (1881) moves the scene into the setting of an ancient Egyptian temple, with giant statues, columns decorated with huge hieroglyphs and, of course, a leopard skin (see book cover). With this example it is particularly relevant to stress, once again, the complex, multi-layered nature of the estrangements: Juan Luna, born in the Philippines, had come to Europe to study art, visited and lived in various European countries, and finally moved back to the Philippines, where he was



**Fig. I.3** Hans Makart, *The Death of Cleopatra* (1875). Public Domain.

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involved in the revolution against Spain for the independence of the insular country. His Cleopatra is not his only painting portraying the Classical world: among his other works are *Las damas Romanas* (1882), clearly influenced by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and *Spoliarium* (1884), featuring dead Roman gladiators, a representation of the persecution of the Christians. At the same time, Luna does not shy away from themes that are dear to Orientalist painting, as in the *Odalisque* (1886).<sup>88</sup> We can thus see in him the Orientalism of a Far East Oriental imbued by the Western artistic tradition, as well as a Catholic spirit that allows him to entirely espouse the negative approach towards the Ottoman empire; all of these coexist with his anticolonial stance, which makes him in the Philippines a national hero.<sup>89</sup> His interest in European women, a recurring theme of his art, is simultaneously a product of both fascination and disdain for what he perceived as the immorality and depravation of the 'modern woman'. This is not so different from the approach of his French colleagues, with the addition of a clear sense of Occidentalism disdain for the modern, upper-class, powerful woman. This came to the fore in both his paintings and his dramatic biography: Luna could not cope with his wife's modern, 'Parisian' social life (nor the fact that he was dependent on her money), and killed both her and her mother.<sup>90</sup> However, this did not contradict his Orientalism expressed towards the Islamic Near East, nor his Orientalized Antiquity, as the death of Cleopatra – Luna's first major work – clearly demonstrates.

## Contents of this book

'One who goes too far East, because of geography, arrives in the West. The reverse is also true,' says the Turkish poet Ece Ayhan, commenting on how descriptions of the Other actually say much more about the Self than about the 'real' Other. In the previous section we dwelt a little longer on the example of Cleopatra, as the most famous and most frequently represented ancient queen allows us to perfectly elucidate the principal points we wish to highlight. First, the mechanisms of 'double estrangement', which from Antiquity until today have created a structural vicinity between the Oriental and the Feminine, thus leading to a representation of non-normative women (and women who held power in the Western world were, until the twentieth century at least, non-normative) as Orientalizing. The dynamics of Orientalist discourse are also so pervasive that even nuances or reactions to them, such as Occidentalism stereotypes and nested Orientalisms, are essentially derivations and variations of Orientalism itself, deploying the same strategies and very often the same topoi.

What this volume aims to do, therefore, is to demonstrate through analysing a broad and varied series of case studies how Orientalist stereotypes have been constantly deployed, reformulated and repurposed in the representation of ancient women, especially women who achieved (or were supposed to have achieved) a position of power. These case studies stretch from the ancient Near East (Semiramis) through to the seventh century CE (Shirin), and the various authors analyse extremely diverse forms of reception, geographically (from the United States to Iran), chronologically (from the

seventeenth to the twenty-first century) and across a very wide spectrum of genres, including novels, movies, paintings, opera, comics and poetry, as well as scholarship.

Precisely because our main concern is to show the complex web of estrangements and of Orientalisms across a range of geography, history and media, we have decided against organizing the chapters into sections, instead creating a purely chronological order, as to follow the timespans of the ancient women represented. We are confident that all the case studies analysed clearly reveal how the double estrangement works, and how deeply rooted it is in all contexts, even for authors and artists who try to challenge and reverse it. Through all their declinations, Orientalism and gender issues are so deeply entangled that it is impossible to investigate one without the other. Antiquity plays a crucial role in providing the themes, paradigms and topoi for this connection; ancient women, through their multi-layered Orientalization, still function as powerful exempla.

# CHAPTER 1

## SEMIRAMIDE IN INDIA: THE RECEPTION OF AN ANCIENT ORIENTAL WARRIOR QUEEN IN BAROQUE OPERA<sup>1</sup>

*Kerstin Droß-Krüpe*

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In the early twentieth century, Mitchell Carroll, professor of classical languages at George Washington University, judged Semiramis as follows:

Those who look upon the present as the emancipation period in the history of woman have surely forgotten . . . Semiramis, who led her armies to battle when the Great King, Ninus, had let fall the sceptre from his weary hand, and who ruled her people with wisdom and justice . . . I do not believe that the present Empress of China [i.e. Empress Dowager Cixi], strong woman as she is, is greater than Semiramis, or that even Elizabeth of England was the equal of the warrior-queen of Babylon.<sup>2</sup>

But Semiramis, the legendary female ruler of Assyria and renowned sovereign of Babylon, was far from being seen that positively by everyone throughout the ages. For more than 2,500 years, she has oscillated between the image of a *femme forte* and a *femme fatale*. Until the early twentieth century, Semiramis was one of the most prominent female figures of Antiquity in cultural memory.<sup>3</sup> Ancient sources alternately describe her with admiration and deep loathing. She subsequently evolved into the archetypal figure of a female Oriental sovereign, *esempio di ben* or *esempio di mal*, long-lived and much cited as an example. Her figure found its way into all genres of literature and art during medieval times and the Early Modern Age. One might even state that the figure of Semiramis has emanated such fascination for the European world of literature and theatre through the centuries that she has become a type of 'general oriental archetype'.

Academic publications about Semiramis are numerous and come from a great variety of disciplines.<sup>4</sup> However, comprehensive studies on her person in terms of the historical reception are still a lacuna in the research, although there are some tentative approaches.<sup>5</sup> But in most studies on the reception of Semiramis, stage texts have hardly been explored or just been considered marginally. The notable exception is Cesare Questa, who has attempted to follow references to Semiramis on the opera stages.<sup>6</sup> Opera as a genre preferred to adopt topics related to Antiquity from the moment of its creation and offers a very special medium of projection and reception in early modern times. It offers unique possibilities of expression, rife with clichés, bombast, and a kaleidoscope of exotic, fascinating, albeit completely unrealistic stories. Baroque opera especially was not only

an entertainment industry but quintessentially a political medium – a site for both political and social representation. It functioned simultaneously as a place for moral and pleasurable edification, and as an entertaining didactic stage for the legitimate organizations and consequently the rendition of the social standards sanctioned by the society of the era. Based on about one-third of the available libretti that are connected to the figure of Semiramis, Questa provides a material or motif history of selected aspects. But Questa ignored one motif that was very present in relation to Semiramis in the ancient literature – namely, her military ambitions. Yet, Semiramis as a female warlord plays an important role in several opera texts.<sup>7</sup>

Within the scope of this chapter, the objective is to trace the military traits that transform Semiramis into a fascinating figure for classic Antiquity but also for the medieval and early modern Western world and particularly the Baroque opera. The focus is primarily on Semiramis' campaign against the Indian king and its representation in the opera *Semiramide in India* (1648/9).

### **Semiramis in India – main sources and narratives from Antiquity to early modern times**

In the *Histories* of Herodotus, Semiramis does not have a prominent role. His interest is directed towards other female figures such as Nitocris, whom he considers the founder of Babylon.<sup>8</sup> The name of Semiramis is also mentioned in context with Nitocris: according to Herodotus, she ruled five generations before Nitocris. This is based on the idea of a glorious, great empire that was ruled from Babylon and of which Cyrus as its conqueror became a legitimate successor.<sup>9</sup> Herodotus does not mention any military expeditions by Semiramis.

In the work of Ctesias of Cnidus, on whose description the later fame of Semiramis is based, the situation is entirely different. He discards Nitocris and the idea of an empire ruled from Babylon. Instead, he makes Semiramis the founder of Babylon – probably to highlight the subordination of Babylonia to Assyria<sup>10</sup> – and he conceives her as a major military leader who only fails in the conquest of India. Unfortunately, his description of Semiramis, which was part of his main work, the *Persica*, is lost and only handed down by third parties. Episodes from Ctesias' work have been integrated by later intermediaries into their writings, and they often reshaped them according to their own intentions.<sup>11</sup> Jan P. Stronk emphasizes that this involved 'an interpretation and/or adaption – or at best an unbiased and reliable quotation or epitome' in all cases.<sup>12</sup> This is even more regrettable since Ctesias' *Persica* developed quite an enormous impact on ancient (and consequently Western) images of the Orient. It is the origin of the Western idea of Oriental rulers as decadent and effeminate despots, as well as other 'facts' of Oriental life that have become familiar by now, such as polygamy or the proverbial wealth of the Orient.<sup>13</sup> Ctesias' description of Semiramis' campaign against the Indian king Stabrobates is extensively explained by Diodorus, who mentions Ctesias several times as his source of information.<sup>14</sup> After a multitude of successful campaigns, Semiramis decided to prepare for war against

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India, which was considered to be the biggest and most beautiful country, blessed with abundant gold, silver, gemstones and the like.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the queen's other military expeditions, Diodorus makes the point – and this appears to be his own addition – that her campaigns against India were not the result of political considerations but were solely motivated by Semiramis' towering ambition<sup>16</sup> and the prospect of spoils.<sup>17</sup> This is one of the few moments in Diodorus' description of the Babylonian queen putting Semiramis in a negative light: it creates the image of a militant, but also self-indulgent, and luxury-loving ruler. Diodorus provides a detailed description of the war preparations on both sides, which lasted for two years. In the first clash with the Indian king, the victory belongs to Semiramis. The second battle goes back and forth for a long time and claims many victims.<sup>18</sup> Semiramis is ultimately defeated and flees back to Babylon with major losses.<sup>19</sup>

The extent to which Diodorus distanced himself from his reference text by Ctesias is difficult to decide, even if there are clear indications that he puts the Babylonian queen in a distinctly more positive light than his source.<sup>20</sup> That a woman and an Oriental could achieve something as unbelievable as a war against India at the perimeter of the populated world inspired and impressed both Greek and Roman authors. This especially applied to the Alexander Historians:<sup>21</sup> Nearchos mentioned Semiramis' expedition as the decisive motivation for Alexander's campaign against India.<sup>22</sup> He supposedly wanted to achieve something that even Semiramis and Cyrus could not accomplish or only achieved with great losses. Curtius Rufus also reports Alexander's admiration for Semiramis,<sup>23</sup> whom he wanted to outdo.<sup>24</sup> Based on a reference to Megasthenes,<sup>25</sup> Strabo claims that Semiramis did not conduct the campaign against India at all, since she had already died during the war preparations. Megasthenes' *Indike* is not aware of any other foreign rulers of India aside from Alexander (before Alexander, only Dionysus and Heracles entered Indian territory) – a description that becomes even clearer with the contemporary background of the Diadochi Wars and the Seleucid reign: the military magnitude of the Oriental Semiramis is devalued here in favour of Alexander's military greatness.<sup>26</sup>

Roman sources such as Ampelius<sup>27</sup> or Pompeius Trogus/Justin are also familiar with Semiramis' Indian expedition.<sup>28</sup> From these sources, Semiramis found her way into Paulus Orosius' *Historiae adversus paganos*. This universalist history from an apologetic Christian perspective greatly contributed to the eerie and gloomy image of Semiramis, which also included her campaigns – and these were now given a thoroughly negative evaluation.<sup>29</sup> Based on Orosius, Semiramis also has a significance for the Christian world beyond Antiquity since her rule is seen as parallel to the birth of Abraham. All subsequent Christian authors have seen her entirely as a negative image of both an Oriental and a woman. Apart from her licentiousness, they particularly criticize her bloodthirsty and war-like activities. Augustine reported that she attacked India;<sup>30</sup> Otto of Freising, who follows Orosius' description in many points, even claims in order to emphasize how completely inappropriate female rule is that Semiramis assimilated India into the Assyrian empire.<sup>31</sup>

Even if the sources do not agree as to whether Semiramis just planned a campaign against India or actually executed it, and whether such a campaign was successful or not,

the tradition that linked Semiramis with India was maintained during Humanism and the Renaissance and into the Early Modern Period. For example, Francesco Petrarca includes her as the only woman in his work *De viris illustribus* and reports: 'Indiam infesto agmine ingressa est, quod ante illam nulli, post illam paucis accidit.'<sup>32</sup>

But there are also more positive voices. In the Late Middle Ages, a group of nine virtuous, legendary men was established, the *Neuf Preux* or *Nine Worthies*.<sup>33</sup> Following the model of these *Neuf Preux*, female Worthies (*Neuf Preuses*) began to accompany the male Worthies, and these included Semiramis. Due to their military merits and virtues, these women were highly praised; they all embodied the chivalrous ideal of *prouesse* (worthiness). Although many depictions of these exemplary women of Antiquity exist,<sup>34</sup> only one narrative work is dedicated extensively to them: *L'Histoire des Neuf Preux et des Neuf Preuses*, which was written between 1460 and 1468 by the French cleric Sébastien Mamerot.<sup>35</sup> Semiramis' Indian expedition assumes a prominent role within this context.<sup>36</sup> Semiramis and the Indian king Stabrobates are likewise mentioned in English drama, e.g. in Robert Greene's *The Scottish History of James the Fourth* (1594).<sup>37</sup>

It seems that from the fifth century BCE up to the sixteenth century CE, the view that no one except Semiramis and Alexander had succeeded in invading India remained unchanged in its essentials and was firmly anchored in the cultural memory of the Renaissance. The war-like Semiramis and India apparently belonged together for the 'Western' cultural memory, Semiramis was consistently perceived as a conquering female ruler.

## Big opera – Semiramide in India

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that Semiramis' relationship to India also appeared on the opera stages of that era.<sup>38</sup> The first opera stages of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were at princely courts and royal houses; the initial sponsors of this new art form were the rulers. Far into the nineteenth century, the opera never entirely lost its bond with the ruling monarchs (of both genders). But soon Baroque opera was opened for a broader audience. In March 1637, the very first public opera house opened in Venice with the Teatro S. Cassiano. It proved to be such a success that within a few years, further public opera houses opened their doors to the middle class, as well as to the many people who travelled to Italy and stopped to visit Venice. This led to the creation of the Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo (1639), the Teatro S. Moisè (1639) and the Teatro Novissimo of the Accademia degli Incogniti (1641).<sup>39</sup> During the course of the later seventeenth century increasingly more opera companies established themselves throughout all of Italy, offering admission – albeit separated by class – to the broad public for the payment of an entrance fee. This development did not fail to have its effects on the themes which were used in the operas and the manner in which the performances were presented on these courtly and public opera stages. While an opera on the courtly stage was usually just performed one single time, the public stages tried to draw the largest possible circle of spectators – after all, the survival of the whole opera company depended

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on the collection of entrance fees. On the one hand, this meant that a successful opera was now performed repeatedly; on the other hand, it brought a distinctly larger number of operas to the stage. It became necessary to continually develop new material that appealed to the taste of the audience. There was no repertoire system in the modern sense: the Baroque opera was a 'premiere theatre' by nature. And if the programmes occasionally did not offer any premieres, adaptations of operas that had recently been staged successfully elsewhere were modified by exchanging, adding or eliminating scenes. On the other hand, it was highly uncommon to do revivals. With these facts as a basis, historians can draw conclusions as to which material was put on stage, how this material was interpreted, which topics were successful with the audience and which were not, and thus illuminate the history of culture and mentality.

As an independent drama, the topics related to Semiramis first appeared in Italy in 1593 in a concept by Muzio Manfredi.<sup>40</sup> This had been preceded by an adaptation for the Spanish theatre stage by Cristóbal de Virués<sup>41</sup> and was followed almost simultaneously by two very different versions for the French theatre.<sup>42</sup> However, in 1648/9, Semiramis first stepped onto the opera stage, where the image of a warrior female had only seldom appeared before.<sup>43</sup> Maiolino Bisaccioni, a member of the Accademia degli Incogniti,<sup>44</sup> wrote the libretto, and Francesco Paolo contributed the music, which is now lost. Under the title of *Semiramide in India*, the opera was performed during the carnival season of 1648/9 in Venice.<sup>45</sup> This is only six years after historical figures from Antiquity had first entered opera stages with Claudio Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (composed after a libretto of Giovanni Francesco Busenello), a stage that had previously been dominated by mythological themes.<sup>46</sup> As was customary in Baroque opera, Bisaccioni as the librettist was of greater importance than the composer, since he was the one who determined the overall form of the opera through his texts. This applied to both the content and the structure, since the verses of the libretto determined the placement of arias (in *versi lirici*) and recitatives (in *versi sciolti*).<sup>47</sup> The opera text was usually available in print at the performance, as in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the printed libretto fulfilled the function of a modern programme. In addition to a dedication, it contained an index of persons and cast members, and, if necessary, the *argomento*, i.e. a brief summary of the opera's contents and sources,<sup>48</sup> as well as the complete opera text. The audience could read along during the performance since the lights in the house were not dimmed during the performance until far into the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

The opera involves the following roles:<sup>50</sup>

- *Semiramide, regina degli Assiri*
- *Nino, suo figlio*
- *Serpillo, paggio di Nino*
- *Argillante, capitano generale di Semiramide*
- *Capitano della guardia di Semiramide*
- *Egilda, principessa del sangue di Semiramide*
- *Arimeno, principe degli Indi*

- *Euroneo, suo consigliere*
- *Caristo, pastorella*
- *Climene, suo padre putativo.*

A preserved libretto print in the Venetian Bibliotheca Nazionale Marciana provides an impression of how the militant Oriental woman is going to be presented in the opera in its frontispiece (Fig. 1.1): Semiramis is shown sitting in front of a war tent. She wears



**Fig. 1.1** Frontispiece of M. Bisaccioni, *Semirade in India*, Venice 1648/9. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, DRAMM 915.5; courtesy of Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo.