RETHINKING ORIENTALISM

Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem

Reina Lewis
FOR
Laura and Helena,
my sisters,
my friends
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CHAPTER FOUR

Eroticised Bodies: Representing Other Women

ORIENTALISM AND ORIENTALISATION

Whilst the evocative and detailed description of Orientalised women was an expected trope of material about the Orient, the emphatic use of the female body as a marker of racialised difference in the writings of Ottoman women was more than mere allegiance to cultural convention. This chapter focuses on the codification of Oriental women’s bodies as beautiful in a consideration of how the gaze is racialised and sexualised at the point of both production and of reception. Different types of ‘Oriental’ women are displayed for the reader in a highly visual style of literary description characterised by references to the ‘sister arts’ of painting and poetry. These ‘word portraits’ institute a regime of representation – the presentation of ‘Oriental’ women by ‘Oriental’ women – that can be analysed in relation to the dominant modes of Orientalist spectacle with which their readers would have been more familiar. The images also set up a series of racialised ethnic and national differences that splinter the dominant Orientalist version of a generic Orient or Oriental. Localised differences have a function in the construction of alternative Ottoman femininities important to the textual self-inscription of their authors. Beauty signifies in and through a series of looks that, in a number of different ways, gender and racialise both the objects of the gaze and the owners of the look. This is seen particularly in the books of Demetra Vaka Brown whose repeated commentary on the beauty of Ottoman women is too pronounced to ignore, particularly in her first book Haremlik where she returns to the intimate friends of her youth, now become grand hanıms.

Ottoman writers use descriptions of female appearance and beauty to present a series of racial and ethnic Ottoman identities that they evidently expect to be only partially comprehensible to their Occidental readership. Their efforts to explain regional Ottoman differentiations of race and ethnicity – that are unremittingly gendered and classed – to a readership of presumed outsiders is suggestive for an analysis of how the reiterative qualities that Judith Butler (1990) sees as essential to performative gender identities can be applied to identities based on race and ethnicity. Operating as mechanisms to incorporate subjects into social order, performative phrases or actions literally do, or enact, what they say as they are said: thus the doctor who says of the new-born baby ‘it’s a boy’ literally attributes a gender to the infant as s/he says it, just as a marriage comes into legal being as the official pronounces the words that name it. Butler uses
theories of performativity to emphasise how gender is constructed and non-natural, seeing it as an identification that is secured through the repeated performance of socially accepted signs of masculinity or femininity. Much of the interest generated by theories of performativity has centred on questions of gender identity and of theatrical spectacle, whether it be formal or informal drag performances, theatre, film or performance art (see Jones and Stephenson 1999 and Chinn 1997). I am going to use the emphasis on the instability of identity foregrounded by theories of performativity to think about the construction of racialised and ethnic identities in literary texts. In this and the following chapter I explore if and how performative statements are able to operate across cultures, where the consensus necessary for the recognition of performative actions may not be shared.

When the main claim to fame of Ottoman women’s books was that they could sell themselves as the ‘accurate’ revelation of a still largely hidden world authenticated by the ‘real’ Oriental status of their female authors, I want to ask how much manoeuvrability their authors had in relation to the types of identifications with which they aligned themselves? When they explicitly and implicitly invoke European visual art in their depiction of Oriental women, is it useful to consider their emerging representations in relation to discussions of the embodiment of performative spectacle? Do the authors’ fluctuating processes of identification with and separation from the variously racialised female subjects of their books show something new about the functioning of those contradictory and shifting processes of identification that have emerged as central to discussions about performativity (see also Brah 1996)? This chapter analyses the identificatory positions for authors and readers that are produced in and by these sources in relation to an Orientalist gaze that is conceptualised as plural rather than singular, and as polysemic in its potential to produce diverse positions of spectator pleasure and identification.

I want to return for a moment to consider the Orientalist discursive conditions in which these texts emerged. As discussed in Chapter One, the sexualised display of the Oriental female body was a central strand of Western Orientalism, fully developed and well known by the second half of the nineteenth century. But I would not want to characterise this as a display whose only audience was male. I agree with many other scholars in the field who argue that that the dominant codes of Orientalist art prioritise a male visual pleasure and that this is bound up in the construction of imperial identities and the subjective investment in imperial power relations (Nochlin 1983, Richon 1985, Tawadros 1988). None of that is contested: pictures by male artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Eugène Delacroix, John Frederick Lewis and Ludwig Deutsch were prevalent in the Salons and Academies of Europe. But women were also consumers, attending exhibitions, viewing Orientalist visual culture through the print and periodical reproduction that reached beyond the middle classes, and collecting colonial postcards (MacKenzie 1995, DeRoo 1998). Women as well as men looked at
Orientalised female bodies and were well schooled in the logic of the Orientalist fantasy harem.

Western women did not only consume Orientalist imagery, they also produced it. As I argued in *Gendering Orientalism* (Lewis 1996), there was a painterly female Orientalist gaze in operation in the nineteenth century, the products of which circulated in the same venues as paintings by Decamps, Ingres or Gérôme. More is now known about the variety of nineteenth-century women’s visual Orientalism (Roberts 2002, Cherry 2000). Whether they liked them or not, critics nearly always read a painting’s female point of origin as essential to its meaning. The terms of this gendering might be variable, but gender remained central to the reception of women’s art or literature. At the turn of the twentieth century, this was still the gender-specific context in which Ottoman women’s writings were received. Only now, merchandised in relation to their experience of the harem, their geographical/ethnic point of origin differently racialised the text. But if, as Melman has demonstrated, the European woman was inevitably positioned at one remove from the nascent superiority of the ethnographer’s gaze, then the woman coded as Oriental was situated even further from any space of cultural authority (Melman 1992). As Ottoman women inserted themselves into a Western representation system, one must consider the role played by their depiction of female beauty in this process of transculturation.

As discussed in previous chapters, the classification ‘Oriental woman’ was not straightforward and could encompass differences of religion, region and ethnicity in keeping with the heterogeneity of the Ottoman population. Yet the terms of this heterogeneity were not fixed in either their value or their meaning, operating as variable categories that were deployed, contested and remade in Ottoman sources. As Ottoman writers tried to reframe their gendered Ottoman identities for themselves in the context of books directed at a primarily Occidental audience, they struggled with the slipperiness of language and the liabilities of a mode of writing dependant on concepts of authenticity. In a transculturating movement their terms of identification shifted from a local to an international discourse as they sought to remake identifications for themselves whilst simultaneously trying to signify Orientalness for an Occidental readership. Transculturation moves both ways, and the terms available to Ottoman women were already by this period influenced by Western definitions of the Orient. The recognition of this continued to shock or surprise a West fond of imagining the Orient in general and the harem in particular as hermetically sealed.

This shifting set of identifications is important for an Orientalist discourse that sets such store by an authenticity whose guarantee rests on ethnic, Orientalist and gender allegiances. The concept of performativity is helpful for thinking through these varieties of racial and ethnic identity. In unpicking some of these complex positionings Vaka Brown, who was writing from the United States, emphasised her Oriental credentials by creating an affinity between herself and all that was best about Turkish Muslim female life. Thus, to her Occidental readership she might appear to be a reliable observer-participant (American enough to give
judgements, Ottoman enough to gain privileged access). But to Ottoman Muslim readers she might appear more partisan. As was evident in Chapter Three, Halide Edib objected to Vaka Brown’s version of harem life and to her romanticisation of polygamy. Edib wrote bitterly of the misery that polygamy brought to her childhood when her father took a second wife:

Although this dramatic introduction of polygamy may seem to promise the sug-ared life of harems pictured in the ‘Haremlik’ of Mrs Kenneth [Vaka] Brown, it was not so in the least … On my own childhood, polygamy and its results pro-duced a very ugly and distressing impression … (Edib 1926: 144–5)

Of all the writers I have read, Halide Edib had the least trouble establishing an ethnographic authority. As one whose identity meshed with all the variable terms that constitute the sign ‘Oriental woman’ – Ottoman, Turkish, Muslim, female – her claim to authenticity was powerful. She used her first-hand experience to dispute the ‘sugared’ vision of harem life for which Demetra Vaka Brown was nostalgic, and yet at the same time she stressed the relative autonomy of even segregated women. One consequence is that the question of contamination by the object of study (Melman 1992, Lewis 1996) is not as acute for Edib as it is for Vaka Brown. Against Edib, Vaka Brown’s status as Oriental was quite differently inflected. As a self-designated ‘child of the Orient’, she presented herself as an explorer in a bewildering display of association with and disassociation from other Ottoman women. Returning to Turkey after six years in the United States, she wrote:

I had returned to my native land with new ideas and a mind full of Occidental questioning, and I meant to find things out. Many of my childhood friends had been Turkish girls: them I now looked upon with new interest. Before, I had taken them and their way of living as a matter of course … I had lived among them, looking upon their custom and habits as quite as natural as my own. But during my stay in America I heard Turks spoken of with hatred and scorn, the Turks reviled as despicable, their women as miserable creatures, living in prac-tical slavery for the base desires of men. I had stood bewildered at this talk. Could it possibly be as the Americans said, and I never have known it? (Vaka 1909: 12–13)

Immediately the reader is told that she is like and not like the Oriental object of inquiry. What troubles her in this passage, is that the Turks are reviled by her new neighbours, the Americans. This resituating of her previously unproblematic partial identification with Turkish women continues to destabilise her narratorial position.

All the Ottoman women writers assume that ethnic difference exists and can be read from the body and behaviour. Sometimes they observe national charac-teristics in men or in children. Edib contrasts the brave endurance of Turkish soldiers to the ‘childishness’ of their Arab counterparts; she also detects obvious differences between Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian children. Vaka Brown, nota-bly in her fiction, paints a world that is split by ethnic and national divides as
much as it is by religion. Her 1911 novel *In The Shadow of Islam* is peopled by heroic but pleasure-loving Greeks, duplicitous Turks, betrayed Albanians and slimy, ‘wretched’ and irritating Armenians who, when not trying to fondle the heroine on the boat (he who so does is booted off the quay by her gorgeous, but strangely dangerous, Turkish suitor), are depicted as routinely cheating other foreigners in business transactions (Vaka 1911: 14, see also Chapter Three). But most often ethnic difference is registered through the representation of women and there are many references to a hierarchy of beauty which ran from Circassians down through Abyssinians (Ethiopians) to the least beautiful ‘Negroes’ (see Chapter Three).

The most conspicuous exponent of the construction of different female beauties is Demetra Vaka Brown, who institutes a gallery of female portraits that, even when they represent Turkish women as superior to American women, emphasise their difference. On her first visit to the polygamous harem of some old friends she enthuses:

> [they were both] sweet, commonplace women – not very different by nature from many commonplace American friends I have, whose lives are spent with dressmakers, manicures, masseuses, and in various frivolous pursuits … Except for the absence of men, I might almost have been visiting an American household. What difference existed was to the advantage of the Turkish girls. They were quite natural and spontaneous … They read a lot of French novels, without pretending that they did it for the sake of ‘culture’. They took everything naturally and enjoyed it naturally. There was no unwholesome introspection – that horrible attribute of the average half-educated European and American woman. They never dreamed of setting the world aright. (Vaka 1909: 28)

Vaka Brown’s descriptions become more and more Orientalised and eroticised. In the following scene she is trying to persuade her childhood friend Djimlah – to whose ‘vigorous and original mind’ she had been ‘attracted’ in her youth – that women do have a soul:

> She [Djimlah] laughed scornfully. ‘You little petal of a flower, woman has no soul … she is all emotions and senses.’

> If an ugly girl had spoken as Djimlah spoke, it would have been very repulsive; but the radiant loveliness of the girl could not fail to modify the impression made by her words. While speaking, she would clasp her hands above her head, the sleeves falling away from her white arms; she would half close her eyes, in a way that made the light shining through them softer; and her lips forming her words were fresh and crimson, like a rose with the dew on it. The Greek in me, looking at her, forgave her words – one of the judges who liberated Phryne, because she was so beautiful, may have been an ancestor of mine … . (Vaka 1909: 60–1)

Vaka Brown offers a sexualised description of the Ottoman woman posing as an odalisque. She draws on the inventory of physical characteristics – arms, white skin, eyes – whose synecdochical function (in which a part stands in for the whole,
here physiognomic detail standing in for Ottoman character, read as the cultural whole) had, as Melman (1992) demonstrates, been well established in women’s travel writing from the mid-nineteenth century. As well as physiognomy, details of costume also functioned synecdochically to stand for the entireties of caste, class or race and these, as Suleri argues in the case of writings about India, were sometimes easier to itemise than physiognomy; which ‘elicts the nervous terror of a possessor unable to record with any stability an understanding of what he may possess’ (Suleri 1992a: 109). In women’s travel writing, as Melman, and later Roberts (2002), have argued, detailed description of physical type and costume often served to code otherwise unrepresentable subjects, such as female sexuality or the author’s own sexual desires (see also Chapter Five).

Indeed, as Roberts demonstrates, Oriental female beauty had a particular function for Western women travellers: in contrast to the male fantasy assumption of limitless harem beauties, women argued that most harem women were not beautiful – abrogating to themselves the quest to find the elusive beauty in the harem. The obsessive detailing of Oriental female physiognomy and dress that this quest involved was, as Roberts suggests, a mechanism by which Western women were able to access a moderated version of the stereotypically masculinist scopic pleasure involved in the objectification of Ottoman women. This, whilst based on the ethnographic authority of women’s actual presence in the harem, was regularly transformed into a fantasy experience by their depiction of the harem in an evocative register derived from the popular tales of the *Arabian Nights*. In this guise, a space was permitted for a sexualised Western female gaze that rested on the appreciation of Orientalised female beauty. Vaka Brown engages in a comparable exercise half a century later, but she – herself part of the Orient – needs different mechanisms of observation and participation. And in this instance with Djilmah she aligns herself with a specifically male sexualised gaze by adopting the position of Phryne’s judges who forgave her crimes when her naked beauty was revealed to them (a motif also popular with Orientalist artists such as Gérôme). The fancy flourishes of ‘little petal’ and so on, which already by page sixty pepper the text to underwrite the reality of Vaka Brown’s Ottoman experiences, are simultaneously invoked as one of the pleasures of the Oriental *mise en scène* (honeyed language and excessive and exotic complement being expected tropes along with lovely ladies) and criticised in an invocation of stereotypical Oriental wiliness and duplicity. The reference to Phryne ends with the words:

And she [Djilmah] prefaced all her blighting remarks with such endearments as ‘little crest of the wave,’ ‘little mountain brook,’ or ‘flower of the almond tree’.

It was as if I were being taken to a slaughter-house through a rose-conservatory.

(Vaka 1909: 61)

Vaka Brown, who five lines earlier aligned herself with Phryne’s judges, now fancies herself the prisoner. But she does not only switch from judge to prisoner; later she becomes the agent who will enact the judgement or punishment when another Turkish woman, Aïshé Hanım, irritates her. Aïshé Hanım is the third
wife of Djimlah’s husband, given to the paşa by the sultan, in whose household she had arrived as a slave. Having the status thus of seraigli (one who has lived in the imperial harem) the woman was freed on marriage, as was the custom. But her husband—who did not approve of the gift wife system—maintained their marriage in form only. Denied access to a real marriage, Aïshé Hanım had taken great pleasure in her painting and had received instruction in Istanbul for some years. Yet she refuses to take seriously Vaka Brown’s suggestion that she pursue her painting studies in Paris. Her response to every suggestion or explanation of why she should leave home and seek fame abroad is a quiet ‘What for?’, which frustrates and angers Vaka Brown. Though Vaka Brown admits to being ‘somewhat afraid of’ the elevated seraigli (aware of the respect due to the station), at this point even the author’s intrinsic Greek appreciation of female beauty cannot save the Turkish woman from her punitive fantasy:

She was very beautiful; not of the Turkish type, but of the pure Circassian, with exquisite lines and a very lovely, musical voice, and of things on this earth I am most susceptible to physical beauty. At that particular moment, however, I should have derived great pleasure if I could have smacked her pretty mouth. (Vaka 1909: 102)

So Vaka Brown is positioned first as magnanimous judge/connoisseur of female beauty, second as sacrificial lamb and third as both judge and executioner. But the reader is not the only one who finds this confusing. After she leaves Aïshé Hanım, Vaka Brown goes to her room feeling

… rather bewildered. Orientalism was like a labyrinth: the more I advanced in it, the more entangled I became. One woman after another was confronting me with a new problem, a new phase of life; and I felt stupid and incapable of understanding them. It hurt my vanity, too, to find how small I was in comparison with them. I should have liked really to sell myself to them for a year, merely to be able to live with them continuously, to try to understand a little more of their lives. They interested and charmed me: there was so much worth understanding. There was so much of the sublime in them, which is lacking in our European civilization. I felt petty and trivial every time I found myself facing one of those conditions which they understood so well. (Vaka 1909: 127)

Vaka Brown’s attempts at an investigative social science protocol are thus regularly disrupted both by her desired closeness to her subjects and their bewildering ability to put her in her place. As Kalogeras (1997) argues, when put in the context of Vaka Brown’s vague advocacy of Paris—“Because,” I answered lamely, “when a person has talent she generally goes to Paris or to some other great artistic centre,”—Aïshé Hanım’s repeated ‘What for?’ can be seen to represent a challenge to the presumed cultural supremacy of the West (Vaka 1909: 101). Indeed, as she points out, Vaka Brown becomes so frustrated at her inability to construct a reasoned explanation that she has to abandon the French in which they had been conducting the conversation and, resorting to her childish Turkish, ends up on the older woman’s lap being comforted ‘as if I were a little bit of thing, and was to be coaxed out of my foolishness’ (Vaka 1909: 103).
Vaka Brown’s oscillating relationship to the Ottoman women she describes reveals the tensions of her position. Like any Westerner she can be ‘bewildered’ by the illogical maze to which the Orient was often likened, yet she is also drawn to Ottoman women and wants to identify with them. This potential loss of (Westernised) self is not simply the projective fantasy common to Western Orientalism since, for Vaka Brown, the Orient is already experienced as part of self. The contradictions of this situation are there in her interactions. In representing herself as enslaved by Turkish women’s sublime beauty Vaka Brown attests to the hold that the Orient has over her but, despite her alleged preference for the luxurious calm of Oriental life, she is not in Turkey to stay, and longs for the ‘bustle’ of the United States (Vaka 1909: 221). The passages’ high-blown language and emotive imagery of total surrender suggest an investment that is strongly libidinal, an element that comes through even more strongly later in the book.

**THE STRANGE LOVELINESS OF THE PRE-RAPHAELITE WOMAN**

The generic painterly references used for the odalisque-like Djimlah become more overt. This is Vaka Brown describing her first encounter with she whom she calls the ‘Rossetti lady’, at a bath-house party thrown in Vaka Brown’s honour.

I was especially attracted by a certain woman, whose type I had never met in flesh and blood before. To say that she looked like a Rossetti painting would be doing her scant justice, yet it was of the Blessed Damosel I thought when I saw her. (Vaka 1909: 234)

The woman begs Vaka Brown to visit her and of their next meeting Vaka Brown writes:

There was a pathos in her voice that I had not detected at our previous interview. Rossetti’s poem came back to me, and I said aloud, gazing at her beauty: –

‘Her body bore her neck as the tree’s stem
Bears the top branches; and as the branch sustains
The flower of the year’s pride, her high neck bore
That face made wonderful with night and day’

‘Why do you say those lines?’ my hostess asked.
‘Because you make me think of them.’
‘Do you mean that I look like Rossetti’s paintings?’
‘I rather think you look like his poems: you are the embodiment of them.’
‘And am I this to you?’
‘Yes, you are this to me. Ever since I first saw you I have been drawn to you. By rights I ought to be somewhere else tonight [Vaka Brown is meant to be travelling to Russia], but I am with you. It was of you I was thinking when you
came into my room. Do you know, I do not even know your name. That does not matter, though, for to me you are my Rossetti lady.’

The Turkish woman sat on a divan, near me, her fingers playing with my loose hair.

‘You are a sweet-scented little bride,’ she said irrelevantly. ‘Where is the bride-groom, little one?’

‘Your slave just gave me a heliotrope bath,’ I explained: ‘and as for the bride-groom, I am afraid his grandsire died heirless.’

‘Yavroum, you are a very dear person, and I hope some day you will know the joy of being a wife.’ She was silent for a long time, and then asked, suddenly: ‘Shall I tell you why I insisted so strongly at the bath-party that you should come to see me?’

‘Then it wasn’t because you liked me?’

‘Yes, indeed, little flower of the pomegranate tree. The minute my eyes met yours I knew that I liked you, and I knew that you belonged to us Oriental women. That is why I asked you to come. I wanted to ask you to do something for me, something which I can only trust to you … (Vaka 1909: 251–3)

How does one deal with the same-sex eroticism that seems so evident to early twenty-first-century readers and still establish what it might have meant to its original audience? Vaka Brown frequently depicts herself being touched and fondled by the Turkish women she spends time with (they hold her hand, sit close to her on divans, play with her hair) which, whilst it clearly activates the lesbian sub-texts that were a common feature of Western harem narratives, and which, though less so, were nonetheless present in women’s accounts (Roberts 2002), also disassociates the narrator and hence by implication Vaka Brown from any actual queerness. This is possible because, in the terms of this text, the homoerotic elements serve to emphasise the being-there-ness of Vaka Brown as narrator without tainting her as too sapphically Oriental. Whilst the text’s performance of the familiar lesbian codings associated with the Oriental woman is part of Vaka Brown’s presentation of herself as Oriental within the classification system recognisable to the West, she works to desexualise these most overtly masculinist stereotypes and to turn them to her own advantage. In her fiction and travel accounts, physical closeness is presented as typical of Oriental female manners: on a similar register of local authenticating detail to frankness in discussion and charming hospitality. Her ability to recognise all of these features as typical is one of the things that establishes the accuracy of her accounts. But, in seeking to authenticate herself as someone familiar enough with Oriental living and trusted enough by Oriental women to have valuable insider knowledge (in the context of a physical intimacy redolent of such titillating images as Ingres’ Turkish Bath 1862), Vaka Brown risks becoming part of the Oriental spectacle. And if she does become part of the spectacle, what happens to the distance necessary for the establishment of the ethnographic authority which, at other moments in the book, she clearly desires?

What type of position is Vaka Brown taking up in relation to this ‘Rossetti’ woman? What other regime of representation does the Pre-Raphaelite reference
introduce? The tragic vision of female beauty by which Vaka Brown is spellbound reconfigures the Orientalist trope of the unhappy odalisque within an Occidental Pre-Raphaelite mode of imagery noted for its exotic/Italianate vision of mysterious, if not doomed, passionate female beauty. What is intriguing here, is that the stanza Vaka Brown quotes comes not from ‘The Blessed Damozel’, a tale of a dead maiden who pines in heaven for her male beloved left alive on earth below, but from another long poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘A Last Confession’ (originally written in 1849, later revised and published in Rossetti’s volume of verse, Poems, in 1870). Although Rossetti painted two versions of The Blessed Damozel, there is no painting to accompany ‘A Last Confession’, so the confusion between visual and literary analogies applies to more than Vaka Brown’s reported conversation.

One of Rossetti’s best-known poems, ‘The Blessed Damozel’ was first published in the short-lived Pre-Raphaelite journal The Germ in 1850. It appeared again in 1855 when William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones published a new version in their Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. This republication of Rossetti’s poetry set the seal on his position as leader of the second group of Pre-Raphaelites. ‘The Blessed Damozel’ reached its widest audience when the final version appeared in Rossetti’s Poems in 1870. Despite repeated requests from patrons (Riede 1992) Rossetti did not paint The Blessed Damozel until 1871 (Bennet 1988). This first version, for William Graham, was not completed until 1877 at which point Graham asked for a predella to be added featuring the earth-bound lover whose obsession with his dead mate brings him to a state of death-like trance (Bock 1981). The second section was finished in early 1878 and The Blessed Damozel was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1883 (see illustration 1, p. 152). The painting was bought by the American collector Grenville L. Winthrop and donated on his death to the Fogg Museum, Harvard University, in 1943.2

That Vaka Brown was able to characterise the woman as ‘like a Rossetti painting’ is not surprising: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelite artists and writers were, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, known for a particular vision of a full-lipped, enigmatic but fleshly female type, whose monumental forms stared out from numerous paintings. Although Rossetti’s earlier works featured ascetic, thin and pale women, his late work, of which The Blessed Damozel is one, inevitably included the strong-jawed, long-necked female forms that were distinctive enough to be caricatured by contemporary observers. Henry James visited William Morris and his wife Jane (née Burden) and he describes the scene in a letter to his sister Alice in 1869:

Oh, ma chère, such a wife! Je n’en reviens pas – she haunts me still. A figure cut out of a missal – out of one of Rossetti’s or Hunt’s pictures – to say this gives but a faint idea of her, because when such an image puts on flesh and blood, it is an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. It’s hard to say whether she’s a grand synthesis of all the pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made – or they are a ‘keen analysis’ of her – whether she’s an original or a copy. In
either case she is a wonder. Imagine a tall lean woman in a long dress of some
dead purple stuff, guiltless of hoops (or anything else I should say) with a mass
of crisp black hair heaped into great wavy projections on each of her temples, a
thin pale face, a pair of strange sad deep, dark, Swinburnian eyes, with great
thick black oblique brows, joined in the middle and tucking themselves away
under her hair, a mouth like the ‘Oriana’ in our illustrated Tennyson, a long
neck, without any collar, and in lieu thereof some dozen strings of outlandish
beads – in fine complete. On the wall was a nearly full-length portrait of her by
Rossetti, so strange and unreal that if you hadn’t seen her you’d pronounce it a
distempered vision, but in fact an extremely good likeness. (James, in Stanford
1970)

The cumulative cultural references (Swinburnian eyes, a Tennysonian mouth)
reveal the cultural currency of not just Rossetti but of a more generic Pre-
Raphaelite ‘look’. Jane Morris was the great love of Rossetti’s later life and it is
her face, or a version of it, that stares out of so many of his later works, just as
did that of Elizabeth Siddall from his earlier oeuvre. Challenging a romanticised
response to this obsession with fascinating and unusual women, feminist critics
Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock (1984) have pointed out that the Pre-
Raphaelite investment in the figure of the woman as muse and in a vision of
femininity that was mysterious and unavailable said more about their own pre-
occupations than the actual women they so mythologised. What became the Pre-
Raphaelite ‘look’, often associated with specific women in the Pre-Raphaelite
circle such as Elizabeth Siddall, Jane Morris or Fanny Cornforth, was notori-
ously recognisable by the last decades of the nineteenth century and remained so
into the early twentieth century (Marsh 1987). As Barbara Munsen Goff dem-
onstrates, this was widely discussed in the cultural media. The ability to identify
this look did not apply only to the cognoscenti of the avant-garde; as a style it
would have had a broader circulation and take-up. Initially remarkable as a valor-
isation of individual women’s idiosyncratic appearance, the Pre-Raphaelite style
produced a visage that was in no way compatible with classical definitions of
beauty. Goff refers us to Mary Howitt in Household Words:

Only dress in the Pre-Raphaelite style and you will find that so far from being
an ‘ugly duck’, you are a full fledged swan. [The Pre-Raphaelites] have made
certain types of face and figure once literally hated, actually the fashion. Red
hair – once, to say a woman had red hair was social assassination – is the rage.
A pallid face with a protruding upper lip is highly esteemed. Green eyes, a
squint, square eye-brows, whitey-brown complexions are not left out in the
cold. In fact, the pink-cheeked dolls are nowhere; they are said to have ‘no
character’ – and pretty little hands occasionally voted characterless too. Now is
the time for plain women.3

It is not surprising to find such words of opprobrium in Dickens’ journal House-
hold Words, for his opposition to the Pre-Raphaelites was legendary and
vociferous. Although today the Pre-Raphaelites are commonly seen as typical of
Victorian painting, in their day they were regarded as counter-cultural,
challenging protocols in both technique and subject matter. Their early insistence on truth to nature, rather than the ideal, was a displacement of the Raphaelite insistence on classical beauty as the externalisation of inner purity that enraged many. Dickens, for one, was horrified by John Everett Millais’ painting Christ in the House of His Parents (1850) where the Holy Family, the highest in spiritual purity, were represented by figures whose physiology was read as ugly, common and deformed. The different ways in which the Pre-Raphaelite turn in art and literature was variously associated with a range of social ills from papism to degeneracy as they transgressed conventional links between beauty, morality and taste has been well-documented (See Riede 1992, Bullen 1998, Pearce 1991, Nead 1988). Yet, by the late nineteenth century the peculiar beauty of the Pre-Raphaelite ‘stunner’ – as Swinburne and others termed them – had become a type. It is this type that Vaka Brown invokes with the classification of the unnamed Turkish woman as a ‘Rossetti’ lady, further demonstrating her adroitness with Pre-Raphaelite language when she describes Aïshé Hanım’s little slave girl as one who will grow up to ‘make a stunner’, with ‘eyes that were that almond shape, the color, as Rossetti expresses it, like the sea and the sky mixed together’ (Vaka 1909: 124). Notably, neither the earlier nor the later Rossetti imagery was a vision of normative and reproductive femininity.

When ‘The Blessed Damozel’ and ‘A Last Confession’ were published in Poems in 1870, the tenor of the criticism of his work changed. Rossetti, who for many years had not exhibited his paintings in public and whose verse was previously known mainly only by the inner circle, had prepared the ground for the publication of his poetry carefully. Apart from trying to secure favourably inclined reviewers he also specifically toned down some of the Catholic imagery in the earlier versions of his poems to avoid the criticisms of papism activated by the earlier religious paintings (Riede 1992). However, this time the attack came from another front, with Robert Buchanan’s infamous assault on Rossetti as emblematic of the indecent and ‘fleshly school’ of art (published initially in 1871 in the Contemporary Review, and subsequently in pamphlet form in 1872). Unlike previous attacks that had criticised the ugliness of the ascetic and wan bodies in early Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Buchanan accused Rossetti of depicting bodies that were too beautiful and fleshly, seeing in this an indecent emphasis on the physicality of desire and the voluptuous fleshliness of the body. In ‘The Blessed Damozel’ even heaven is filled with reunited lovers, whilst the utterly corporeal and non-ethereal body of the Damozel is so warm that ‘her bosom must have made / the bar she leaned upon warm’. Buchanan’s diatribe against an immoral vision of flesh as flesh and not as an expression of the divine beauty of the soul, rekindled the debate started by Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads in 1866 and anticipated the art for art’s sake rationale of the final decades of the century. Rossetti, who always maintained that he was concerned with the soul and that he was as interested in content as in form (Ried 1992), was devastated by the assault. By the end of the century, after Rossetti’s death in 1882, the volatile status of his reputation had been somewhat codified by the influence that his life
and work exerted over following generations of the avant-garde, notably the Aestheticists and the Symbolists (although they were also accused of degeneracy and decadence by their opponents). As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the dominant motif associated with Rossetti was the monumental siren of his later works, such as *Lady Lilith* (1864–) and *Astarte Syriaca* (1877), whose now typical Rossettian looks were coded as variously otherwordly, be it ancient, medieval, allegorical or Eastern. So Vaka Brown’s allusion to Rossetti is the self-conscious invocation of what was by the early twentieth century a highly recognisable nineteenth-century image of femininity; one that was redolent of grandeur, transgressive passion, undying love and, often, tragedy.

By the time of Vaka Brown’s schooling in Paris and her sojourn in the United States, Rossetti’s reputation was riding high and he was the subject of several romanticised biographies (see Casteras 1990). Spurred partly by the dramatic disinterment of the early poems from Elizabeth Siddall’s coffin, and the self-revealing confessional read into the resultant volume of published verse, the myth of Rossetti as the romantic artist/hero, already developed in his lifetime, held sway for several years after his death in 1882. Vaka Brown assumes that her readers in America, Europe and the Ottoman Empire would be familiar with the name Rossetti and that the description of a character as Rossettian would make sense. As well as exhibitions in Britain, there were two large Pre-Raphaelite exhibitions in America prior to the publication of Vaka Brown’s book in 1909. The first Pre-Raphaelite show in the USA was in New York in 1857. Then in 1892 in Philadelphia, Samuel Bancroft, the other great American collector of the Pre-Raphaelites, loaned many of his works to a public exhibition, including Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith* and *Found* (Dickason 1953, Elzea 1997). But, although Bancroft owned *The Blessed Damozel*, the painting was not on display in either exhibition, even though the poem and the painting were seen as an important part of Rossetti’s oeuvre, featuring prominently (including a full-page engraving) in Theodore Child’s review of Bancroft’s collection in *Harpers Monthly* in 1890. Write-ups like this and the publicity for the American shows would have brought the Pre-Raphaelites to the attention of a public far wider than those who actually saw the exhibitions.

Both ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (poem or painting) and ‘A Last Confession’ are alluded to in Vaka Brown’s text. The Rossetti woman’s assumption that the reference to Rossetti’s paintings is generic, ‘Do you mean that I look like Rossetti’s paintings?’, indicates a familiarity with the Pre-Raphaelite female portrait as an easily recognisable type. At this point in the narrative, Vaka Brown does not know that the woman has spent time in Europe, but she does not seem at all surprised that an inmate of a Turkish harem should be so familiar with the concept of a Rossetti type. Nor does it seem at all remarkable that this woman is able to identify the author from the single, and misattributed, stanza that Vaka Brown recited to her. In this way the term Rossetti serves both as shorthand for a particularly allusive physical description, and as another example of the familiarity of Ottoman women with Western culture. The ‘Blessed Damozel’ that Vaka Brown
invokes (‘she looked like a Rossetti painting … the Blessed Damosel’) is, in fact, twice displaced: once by not being quoted, even though she refers to it by name (something she never does for ‘A Last Confession’), and again, by being sidelined when Vaka Brown redirects the woman away from the painting towards the poem, ‘I rather think you look like his poems: you are the embodiment of them’. What does this movement from one artistic form to another and from one story to another signify, especially in relation to the power of the gaze in the visualisation of the Oriental woman?6 To answer this, I need to discuss ‘A Last Confession’ in some more detail before I come back to the damozel that lurks uncannily in the background.

The stanza from which Vaka Brown quotes comes from the most intensely and overtly eroticised section of ‘A Last Confession’. The poem, set in the recent past of Austrian-occupied Italy in 1848, tells the story of an Italian freedom-fighter that makes his final confession to a priest. In garbled flashback he tells his story. He had, eleven years earlier, adopted an abandoned girl child, whom he raised and loved. The young soldier who had left his family to join the freedom-fighters and the child whose parents abandoned her because of famine became a family in the face of adversity. The quoted stanza comes just at the point in his narrative when the speaker tells of the moment when he realised that the girl he had rescued and raised had turned into a desirable woman. His paternal love – ‘the father’s, brother’s love’ – turns into a man’s love, as he notices for the first time that her body had matured and her beauty no longer reminded him of child angels but of lovely women. The stanza before Vaka Brown’s quotation concludes with his recognition of her growing maturity and a revelation of her developing breasts:

And when, remembering all and counting back
The time, I made out fourteen years for her
And told her so, she gazed at me with eyes
As of the sky and sea on a grey day,
And drew her long hand through her hair, and asked me
If she was not a woman; and then laughed:
And as she stooped in laughing, I could see
Beneath the growing throat the breasts half-globed
Like folded lilies deepset in the stream.

The next stanza continues

Yes, let me think of her as then; for so
Her image, Father, is not like the sights
Which come when you are gone. She had a mouth
Made to bring death to life, – the underlip
Sucked in, as if it strove to kiss itself.
Her face was pearly pale, as when one stoops
Over wan water; and the dark crisped hair
And the hair’s shadow make it paler still:–
Where the moon’s gaze is set in eddying gloom.
I put Vaka Brown’s quoted passage in context because the erotic charge of the material she has selected cannot be ignored – even if it is taken out of its context in one poem and attributed to another. It is after this section that the narrator murders his beloved, having subsequently heard her laugh in such a way that reminded him of the laughter of a prostitute he heard in the village square whilst he was hiding from the Austrian soldiers. From this coarse and womanly laugh – contrasted to her earlier naive and childish laughter – he ‘deduces’ that she is no longer an innocent and that she has given herself to the enemy soldiers. When she mockingly refuses the jewelled dagger he has bought her as a token of his love, he hears betrayal in her laugh and murders her with the gift weapon. Although I have previously characterised the typical Pre-Raphaelite heroine as unlike a normative regime of representation – which ran between the chaste and asexual bourgeois wife and mother, the angel in the house, and the cautionary tale of her counterpart, the fallen woman – ‘A Last Confession’ is clearly a poem concerned with a woman assumed to have fallen. It is also conventional in its outcome since here the fall does lead inexorably to death. This is in contrast to other Pre-Raphaelite versions of the fallen, or, as J. B. Bullen prefers to put it, ‘sexualised’ woman, such as Rossetti’s *Found* (c. 1855), *Bocca Baciata* (1859) or William Holman Hunt’s *Awakening Conscience* (1853), which are not straightforwardly condemnatory of women that a dominant discourse would have seen as sexually deviant (Bullen 1998, Faxon 1989, Pearce 1991, Flint 1989). Bullen argues that paintings such as these acknowledge the possibility of a ‘whole category of women in whom the expression of sexual desire or the possession of sexual attractiveness might be perceived as both powerful and enhancing’ (Bullen 1998: 50). Pre-Raphaelite openness about the results of the fall central to so many moralised Victorian narratives puts in the foreground the potential erotic investment in the *event* of the fall. This explains the incitement of male desire, which structures these sexualised images of women. Yet it still says little about the active desire and agency of their female protagonists. The absence of any investigation of the woman’s sexuality (aside from the narrator’s projections) in ‘A Last Confession’ is, then, akin to the young male narrator in Rossetti’s poem ‘Jenny’ (1857) who, revealing more about his masculinity than about her sexuality, cannot avoid eroticising the young prostitute even as he bewails the cruelty of her fate and yet still never wakes her to ask her opinion (Riede 1992, Bullen 1998).
But the female interest in Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites shows that for both men and women there were potentially counter-cultural meanings in some of Rossetti’s self-absorbed phallic sirens. At this point analysis must consider narcissism, the phallic woman and revenge. Bullen (1998) likens the ‘curious anonymity’ of the narcissistic woman in ‘A Last Confession’ to the similarly anonymous female characters in some of Rossetti’s paintings in the 1860s, such as Woman Combing her Hair (1864), Lady Lilith (1864–) and Fazio’s Mistress (1863). These images of sexually alluring women narcissistically absorbed in the contemplation of their own beauty, he suggests, leave the male viewer spell-bound but frozen out. Rossetti’s late works are regularly discussed as narcissistic or phallic sirens and were seen even at the time as the result of a fascination with the ‘female principle’. Just as the woman in ‘A Last Confession’ takes pleasure in her own beauty and in the narrator’s growing appreciation of it (note the auto-eroticism of the ‘underlip / sucked in, as if it strove to kiss itself’), the female images in these paintings represent a phallic female body that is complete in itself, functioning for a male viewer as a fetish which both denies loss and constantly reinvokes it. Created by men as an absolute in female beauty, the Pre-Raphaelite siren does not provide the gratification her designers seek; instead her self-absorption and phallic potency destabilise masculinity, reactivating the uncertainties that the images were constructed to ameliorate. In ‘A Last Confession’, the woman’s mocking laughter as she refuses the narrator’s token of love, the obviously phallic dagger he then buries in her heart, is a sexual rejection of a magnitude that Bullen even calls a ‘castration’. The sexual rejection also signifies a national betrayal – signalled by her earlier desertion of the previously beloved old Italian Madonna in the church in favour of a recent German import. By associating with the interlopers she uses her beauty against the narrator and against her country, and thus deserves to die. Whilst it is possible to read the narrative in this way, I think the poem leaves things more open. I am not convinced that her perfidy is confirmed. The poem presents it as possibly a misapprehension on the narrator’s part. She may indeed spurn his love, but there is no evidence beyond his fevered imagination that she has been impure. The moment of the stabbing is tied to her refusal of the gift of the dagger and to his own lapse in self-control. This suggests that it is his social death, his loss of a sense of self that leads to her physical demise, not a judicious weighing up of guilt.

‘Take it,’ I said to her the second time,
‘Take it and keep it.’ And then came a fire
That burnt my hand; and then the fire was blood,
And sea and sky were blood and fire, and all
The day was one red blindness; till it seemed,
Within the whirling brain’s eclipse, that she
Or I or all things bled or burned to death.
And then I found her laid against my feet
And knew that I had stabbed her, and saw still
Her look in falling. For she took the knife
Deep in her heart, even as I bade her then,
And fell; and her stiff bodice scooped the sand
Into her bosom.

As he stabs her in the ‘brain’s eclipse’ the boundaries between him and her and
the physical world, ‘she or I or all things bled’, are dissolved in an experience of
blood and burning, the ‘red blindness’ of total self-obliterating rage. The narrar-
tor’s trauma is not just at his unlicensed killing, nor at the loss of his beloved, but
at the loss of his own narcissistic sense of righteousness – essential to a soldier
who sees himself as a freedom-fighter – and the threat of divine judgement. ‘Tell
me’ Father, he pleads

… tell me at once what hope
Can reach me still. For now she draws it out
Slowly, and only smiles as yet: look, Father,
She scarcely smiles: but I shall hear her laugh
Soon, when she shows the crimson steel to God.

The laugh that he had interpreted as a sign of her fall may now signal his own
fall from grace, as she shows the bloody evidence to God and her laugh becomes
one of revenge. Adding the element of the revenge or vindication of the (possibly
not) fallen woman to the general idea of a Rossettian beauty, opens up the
multiple functions of the Rossetti woman in Vaka Brown’s writing. But to what
extent is this phallic, narcissistic image of femininity, ‘significantly, if damag-
ingly, empowered’ (Bullen 1998: 147), pleasurable for the woman viewer/
reader? Since the sexualisation of women in these images has so often been
understood as inciting male sexual desire rather than signifying an active female
desire, I want to consider why Vaka Brown chooses to invoke two poems which
both deal with the (doomed) beauty of a dead woman. Elizabeth Bronfen locates
the Pre-Raphaelites within a wider European cultural obsession with what was
seen as the heightened beauty of the sick woman (Bronfen 1992). But, whilst it is
evident that some women cultivated, indeed enacted, the cult of the sick and even
dying woman as muse to a male artist (some would cite the consumptive and per-
etually ill Elizabeth Siddall as a case in point), Bronfen says little about the
female consumer of such ‘deanimated’ images. To what extent was the Pre-
Raphaelite obsession with doomed or even dead female beauties available to
women? Although the Pre-Raphaelites rarely ventured into overtly Orientalist
subjects, the trope of the enigmatic and fated woman could be combined with the
morbidity stereotypically attributed to Oriental woman, as could the idea of a
death-inducing passion. Certainly, as Derek Stanford argues, Pre-Raphaelite
poetry and, under its influence, Aestheticism, can be attributed a particularisation
of beauty that led to a new definition of the beautiful. The ensuing cult of ‘inten-
sity’ produced ‘poetry which was often passionate [and] melancholy’, whose
potential for an Oriental setting is clear (Stanford 1973). So Vaka Brown’s mix-
ture of the Orient and the Pre-Raphaelite could meld two cultural currents
together. But, her Rossetti woman is not doomed; so to what is she alluding with
the introduction of Rossetti into her Oriental scene?
In response to feminist critiques that Rossetti’s phallic sirens lack any sign of female agency, Bullen emphasises the potentially destructive power of the phallic woman. He argues that, because the fatal wounding of the narrator in ‘A Last Confession’ is tied to his murder of the woman, she displays ‘an independence which brings death, not only to herself, but also to [him]’ (Bullen 1998: 147). Raised by a man and made in an image of his own desire, the phallic woman problematises his masculinity rather than desiring it. Similarly, Lynn Pearce, in a discussion of \textit{Beata Beatrix}, argues that the image of the beautiful dying woman suggests a masculinity that, unable to resolve the virgin/whore contradiction, can only love the Beatrix who dies whilst still a virgin and therefore incontrovertibly pure. She wonders if this avoidance of an active female sexuality might leave a space for a female viewer’s pleasure that is other than masochistic (the result of a cross-gender identification with the male character’s sadism); possibly in the compensatory knowledge that male power has its limitations and is in the end frustrated, even if at the cost of the woman’s life (Pearce 1991: 54–5). I agree with Pearce and Bullen that \textit{Beata Beatrix} and ‘A Last Confession’ reveal the unsustainability of male fantasies and the instability of masculinity, but where Bullen sees the double death at the end of ‘A Last Confession’ as testament to the phallicised woman’s deadly power, I see the possibility that he has killed her wrongly, as it were, that she has not betrayed him with the Austrians. Rejection, yes, but betrayal, no: to conflate the two is to see the narrator as more reliable than he is. The hallucinatory quality of parts of his narrative, the instant association of her laugh when she spurns the dagger with that of the prostitute in the market place, do not make for reliable witnesses. This poem tells of a woman accused, possibly wrongly, who is not given the chance to defend herself or to be forgiven.

But the woman who prompts Vaka Brown to declaim Rossetti’s lines, is guilty of perfidious adultery, yet she is forgiven. The Rossetti woman, relatively happy in her marriage and with three children, was wooed by Edgar, an English nobleman, whilst her husband was away, and ran away with him. They had a daughter, but after two years the woman repented and wrote to her Turkish husband begging forgiveness. He travelled to Scotland to reclaim her and although Edgar visited her in Istanbul pleading with her to return, she refused; at which point the Englishman committed suicide. Her husband then took the new daughter into his care as part of his family. The problem she now faces is that Edgar’s mother, the duchess, wants her granddaughter to return to England (or Scotland). The Rossetti woman wants Vaka Brown to write to the duchess explaining that the girl will be raised in Turkey as an ‘Osmanli noblewoman’, and may return to England as an adult if she wishes. Vaka Brown offers crucial deviations from both the conventional narrative of the fall and from Rossetti’s poems. Unlike ‘The Blessed Damozel’, the dead lover in this instance is the man, not the damozel, and unlike the woman in ‘A Last Confession’, this Rossetti woman is presented as having made a happy romantic alliance on her own terms, despite the potentially destructive implications of her illicit passion. Perhaps Vaka Brown
EROTICISED BODIES: REPRESENTING OTHER WOMEN

switches to a generic Pre-Raphaelite position of sympathy for – yet eroticisation of – the fallen woman, rather than sticking to the details of either named painting or poem? Certainly, she responds only positively to the forgiveness offered to her Rossetti woman by the wronged husband.

Many women experienced the Pre-Raphaelite vision of femininity as enabling. Stanford concludes that the essence of its appeal ‘lay in the nourishment it offered to the forces of feminism’, noting that Max Beerbohm identified the Pre-Raphaelite fan base in 1880 as one in which ‘the keenest students of the exquisite were women’.9 As Henry James and Mary Howitt make clear, the Pre-Raphaelite vision of female beauty offered an alternative mode of taste and female behaviour that many women, trying to be unconventional in whatever way, found attractive and attempted to emulate (see also Shefer 1985). Goff insists that it is wrong to see the working-class women who were taken up by the Pre-Raphaelites as simply victims, patronised and remade in the image that their artist lover/husband desired (see also Marsh 1987, Marsh and Gerrish Nunn 1997, Faxon 1989). Making these women with their non-classical looks emblems of a new beauty, the Pre-Raphaelites valorised a mode of female appearance that was not the middle- and upper-class norm. Since the early criticism of Pre-Raphaelite works focused precisely on the ugliness of such unclassical bodies, this new look had come a long way to be accepted as a new (liberating and more inclusive) standard of attractiveness.

It was not just that a new definition of female beauty was emerging and being given cultural space: the ‘cult’ of this particular type of female beauty endowed her looks with more than a mere physical significance. The Pre-Raphaelite icon, as Rossetti’s fans discovered (according to Stanford), had both a ‘strong but refined sexual attraction’ and ‘the sense of woman as a vehicle of the divine; a creature affording man the means of identification with the cosmos’ (Stanford 1970: 29). This ‘splendid advertisement for woman’ (Stanford 1970: 29) was, he argues, psychologically intriguing to men as well as to women. I like Stanford’s point that women were attracted to the Pre-Raphaelite ‘cult’ of women because its championing of non-standard, enigmatic beauty enhanced their marriagability – the Pre-Raphaelite painters were held to be ‘the plain girl’s best friend’ by Eliza Haweis in 1878.10 But I want also to consider the pleasures possible for women in the consumption of these images and in the enactment of an identification with them. As Macleod (1995, 1997) has demonstrated, women were active in the patronage of the Pre-Raphaelites; either collecting in their own right (such as the rare example of Ellen Heaton) or, more often, collaborating with their husbands (such as Julia and George Rae) in a joint process of commissioning, acquisition and display. The materiality of this Pre-Raphaelite consumption came to constitute ‘an integral aspect of their lives together’ (Macleod 1997: 109). The installation of Pre-Raphaelite work in their homes was an integral part of its pleasure and women were often able to add to the purpose-made Pre-Raphaelite environment through the arrangement of interior furnishing and their own sympathetic self-display in Pre-Raphaelite mode. The Pre-Raphaelite literature and
art that Vaka Brown adopted at the turn of the century had for some time offered women an opportunity for a profoundly aesthetic experience.

Stanford charts the change from earlier images that were ‘sensual and refined’ to the ‘darkling Venus’ of the later works by Rossetti and the later generation of Pre-Raphaelite or Aesthetic painters, Edward Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon and Aubrey Beardsley. The sirens in Rossetti’s later works are no longer docile as in *Ecce Ancille Domine* (1850) or transcendent as in *Beata Beatrix* (1863) but are devouring, as seen in *Astarte Syriaca* (1877) or sultrily narcissistic as in *The Bower Meadow* (1883) (Stanford 1970: 30). Stanford points the reader towards Arthur Symons’ writings on Rossetti in the 1920s where Symons ponders this transition with some perplexity:

… as his dreams overpower him, as he becomes the slave and no longer the master of his dreams, his pictures become no longer symbolic. They become idols. Venus, growing more and more Asiatic as the moon’s crescent begins to glitter above her head, and her name changes from Aphrodite into Astarte, loses all the freshness of the waves from which she was born, and her own sorcery hardens into a wooden image painted to be the object of savage worship. Dreams are not longer content to be turned into waking realities, taking the color of the daylight, that they may be visible to our eyes, but they remain lunar, spectral, a dark and unintelligible menace. (Symons 1923: 130–1)

What to Symons was unintelligible is now clear as a precursor of the vamp and the femme fatale; images of dangerously active female sexuality that were to dominate the *fin de siècle* and the early twentieth century. In the case of Vaka Brown both the quoted poem and the two paintings of *The Blessed Damozel* locate her interest in the later works. So what is enabled by the invocation of the fleshly Rossettis? One obvious answer would be to concentrate on the reconsideration of female beauty allowed by this new aesthetic. This would be attractive to a writer who wanted to endorse the beauty of non-European, Oriental female bodies. This might not apply to Vaka Brown herself, who as Greek can also claim a European – indeed classical – genealogy, but for the women she admires in the harems the Rossetti motif can stand as an absolute marker of individuated beauty. In contrast to her many other detailed female portraits, the Rossetti lady is never described: the allusiveness of the Rossetti label is enough. ‘Rossettian’ presumes a particularised beauty that, although it had become a stereotype by the later nineteenth century, still signalled a ‘stunner’ who was not in the common run of things. It is this exclusivity and specialness that Vaka Brown attaches to the woman about whom she is most admiring.

This new fleshliness is distinctly racialised. Symons’ reference to the primitive and savage signalled by the movement to a pre-classical Syrian Venus, the *Astarte Syriaca*, echoes the language of Rossetti’s brother William, the chronicler of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Writing of the paintings done by Dante Gabriel after the publication of *Poems* in 1870, William acknowledged the validity of some criticisms of this later work, which took ‘against the outre point of [his] style in painting – especially the peculiar and almost mulatto forms of his

Similarly, Sidney Colvin in the Magazine of Art in 1883 (when the Liverpool Damozel was shown at the Burlington Fine Arts Club), lamented ‘… what a decay of the colour-sense is shown in the unwholesome pink stars and haloes, the dusky hotness and livid colours of the “Blessed Damozel!”’ (Colvin, quoted in Bennet 1988: 179, my emphasis). The readiness to use a racial lexicon to describe these unusual female forms illustrates the unspoken whiteness inherent in normative, or even less obviously excessive, figures of female beauty. It also links the primitive or miscegnerated with deformity and disease, not only returning to the medical discourse of disease and deformity utilised in early criticism of the Pre-Raphaelites, but also linking the racially indeterminate to the psychosexual discourse of deviancy and degeneracy that Bullen identifies as the dominant mode of critical response to the late Pre-Raphaelites and Aesthetics.

I do not know if Vaka Brown was aware of the Astarte Syriaca, but, as she was someone familiar with Rossetti’s work, it is highly likely that news of a preclassical Middle Eastern Venus would have caught her attention. Although interest by an artist she clearly admired in a non-European model of female desirability must have been attractive, it is unlikely that the negative associations of the primitive in Rossetti’s later work would have been entirely welcome. She was, after all, partly associated with the non-European herself. Unlike Pierre Loti’s Turkish female protagonists in Les Désenchantées who repeatedly explain that they are all ‘little savages’ at heart, Vaka Brown does not impute this to herself or very much to the Turkish women she represents herself living among. Whilst the primitive or atavistic connotations of these sirens were evident to some critics, the fact that self-presentation à la Rossetti remained popular with many women indicates that these associations were by no means dominant. The reaction to these ‘whitey-brown’ sirens could go either way and the evidence that some viewers did not see racial indeterminancy as a disadvantage suggests the potential that a Rossettian regime of representation could offer a writer like Vaka Brown. Jan Marsh, who wonders if ‘Rossettian’ had become a code for an attractive woman, notes that it could mean either a visual look or a feeling. If this were the case, and Vaka Brown clearly assumes that her readers get the gist of the Rossetti reference, then the passions and transgressions of Rossetti’s love life that were so well-rehearsed in the romanticised biographies popular at the turn of the century (that would doubtless have appealed to so romantic a writer as Vaka Brown) also come into play as her purple-tinged prose builds up the erotics of her fascination with the Rossetti lady. Does the non-standardised particularity of the Pre-Raphaelite mode of beauty provide any other way in to thinking about the pleasure available to the female consumer of an image whose male projective fantasies of the phallic woman seem often to override the idea of an active female sexuality?
PERFORMATIVITY: SEXUALISATION, RACIALISATION AND TRANSCULTURATION

It is very significant that at the culmination of the highly charged exchange between Vaka Brown and the Rossetti lady, the Turkish woman identifies and claims Demetra Vaka Brown as ‘belong[ing] to us Oriental women’. The problem that plagues Vaka Brown throughout her book is whether her ethnic and racialised identity is stable and is recognisable – to herself, to the characters in the book, and to the book’s readers. Whilst it is precisely her ability to perform both Occidental and Oriental identifications that made her book a marketable product, it is also quite obviously troubling to the narrator to be so insecure and unstable. The authorial identity constructed within the text requires both a closeness to and a distance from the Orient and Orientalised femininity: the proximity is simultaneously one which the narrator desires, not least on behalf of her readers, and something to be avoided, or else she will be one of them and will risk being denigrated along with the Turks.

It is for this reason that Vaka Brown tries repeatedly both to invoke the stereotypes that make the Ottoman woman recognisable and to challenge and invalidate their negative aspects. Her distressed bewilderment in the passage I quoted earlier – could it have been like this all along ‘and I never have known it’ – is reminiscent of the impact of shame discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993). She draws on Silvan Tomkins to argue that shame is an affect central to the formation of identities. Although what is considered shaming will vary across cultures, the result, she suggests, is the same: if shame ‘is a bad feeling attached to what one is: one therefore is something in experiencing shame’ (Sedgwick 1993: 12, original emphasis). Most importantly for my analysis, the effect of shame is not only prompted by shame at one’s own behaviour but may also be activated by witnessing the shaming of another. In this light, the shame Vaka Brown feels at the belittlement of the Turks sets up the problematic of her book. Is she an Oriental or Ottoman woman or not? Can she risk this identification, when the shaming instance of having Turks re-presented to her through American eyes (as well as her own ambivalence about identifying with the Orient) has actually tarnished a previously acceptable identification? Her ambivalence about being identified with the Turkish women is not just another example of the problems of contamination faced by Occidental women travel writers as they attempted to claim the objectivity of an ethnographic authority. Rather, it signals the distress of a subject in the making that is under threat of being forced to give up an already only partial identification with a desired (and, in the context of her teenage emigration to the United States, nostalgic) Orientalised self. The customs of the Turks were only looked upon as ‘quite as natural as my own’, they never actually were her own.

But this partial ownership was a source of pleasure and pride. Her decision to write this, her first, and subsequent books speaks to a strong desire to retain the Ottoman self that has been partially diluted by her emigration to the United
States; yet Vaka Brown must also perform as an American and enact her new diasporic identifications in terms that her host country could tolerate. The threat of contamination by the East is indeed present in Vaka Brown’s account. But here contamination works two ways: she also risked having her Ottoman-ness contaminated by too much American-ness. It is in this light that the eroticised conquest of her by the Rossetti woman needs to be seen: it is not just that Vaka Brown wants her to like her, but that she wants her to claim her, and, to claim her in such a way that her Oriental and Occidental qualities are recognised. It is important to note that the Rossetti woman has sought her out to help in a custody case over her daughter – something that she feels only a liberated part-Occidental woman could manage. Thus, for the twice-displaced Vaka Brown, already somewhat ‘other’ as a Greek in Turkey, and then again as an Ottoman in America, comes proof that her performance of a complex racialised identification has been properly recognised. The display of Ottoman femininities offered in the book serves to mark out for an audience assumed to be less than expert the reiterative elements essential to the racialised and ethnic performative identifications in relation to which Vaka Brown wants to be situated.

The ambivalence of her identification as Greek and Christian, which was tolerable in Istanbul because there was a context for the comprehension of those identifications (see Chapter Two), is rendered troublesome once she is relocated to America. There she is interpellated as Oriental within an Orientalist discourse that cannot recognise her differentiated Ottoman subjectivity. Shamed by the prejudice against Turks, which also threatens to envelope her if Americans persist in failing to recognise her performance of a nuanced Greek-Ottoman identification, Vaka Brown proffers a defence of Turkish women that is successful enough partially to redeem her Oriental roots, without capitulating entirely to the lure of the harem and too much contamination. In the context of emergent anti-immigrant prejudice directed at the Greek American community (Kalogeras 1989) Vaka Brown began to build her own version of an American identity, consolidated after her 1901 visit to Turkey by her marriage to Kenneth Brown in 1904.

Paradoxically, this American identity was unsettled in 1917 by shame at the actions of the Greek government, when she was distraught at King Constantine’s abandonment of Greece’s ally Serbia in the face of Bulgarian aggression. Writing in In the Heart of German Intrigue Vaka Brown reveals how her desired internationalism was under threat from an upsurge of bewildering race feeling:

At that moment all my previous conceptions of my real state of mind fell away from me, and I stood revealed to myself as Greek and nothing but a Greek. A sense of shame overwhelmed me, as if I were personally responsible for this act of the race whose blood flowed in my veins. (Vaka 1918: 4)

Her Greek heritage now shamed her and interfered with her desired Americanness; an immigrant identity based on being not too much associated with the Greeks in America. Like all Greeks she maintained a diasporic loyalty to the
Hellenic dream of a unified Greece, but she also distanced herself from the Greek immigrant community, writing in English and living largely in American society: ‘I gradually became an American in thought and in spirit … I did not care to go with people of my own race’ (Vaka 1918: 1). The misadventures of Greece under Constantine jolted her back into a ‘race’ identity that linked her more than she liked with the American Greek community (itself vituperatively split between Constantine and Venizelos, see Saloutos 1964). The un-heroic role of Greece on the world stage also interrupted her ‘pro-Hellenic’ affiliation to the classical Greece of the Phryne legend that, in the tradition of Western Orientalism, also preferred to erase the troublesome modernity of contemporary Athens in favour of the classical past. This could only be resolved by another journey of ‘return’, this time to Greece, after which, relieved to see Greece under safe leadership, she could once again associate herself with the valued elements of the Hellenic or the Byzantine that, along with her Ottomanism, coloured her chosen American identification.

In this context, aware of how shame could threaten the balance of her Greek and Ottoman affiliations, writing up her subsequent visits to the region caused further problems for her multiple identifications. When she returned to report on the Young Turk reforms in 1921, Vaka Brown rarely welcomed the sight of Turkish women working unveiled in the streets, offices and shops. Though this may seem contradictory, given her commitment to forging an independent life beyond the domestic, it makes sense since it was through an alignment with the old lifestyle of the elite harems that she could best demonstrate the particular Orientalised identification that she craved. Her displeasure with the unveiled Istanbul shop-girls in her account of 1923 takes a tone of such personal affront precisely because of the psychic loss she feels at the demise of a system of segregated life that was never hers in the first place, but in which she clearly had an over-determined investment (see Chapter Three).

Butler argues that performative actions only stand any chance of success if they have accumulated ‘the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices’ (Butler 1993: 19, original emphasis). Following Derrida, she insists that the performative statement relies for its success on conformity to an ‘iterable model’; in other words, the norms through whose reiteration performativity works must have a history and be recognisable. The sources I have been discussing raise the question of whether performativity can work across cultures and languages and in terms of racial and ethnic identifications. This is not to say that a different culture will not have the regulatory and discursive modes of power that spur reiterative performative actions, but that, in trying to enact new identities, subjects risk remaining unrecognisable if their codings do not translate across cultures. Apart from the Western Rossetti reference, the history of the identificatory terms reiterated by Demetra Vaka Brown and the other Ottoman writers were largely unavailable to their Occidental audience. This rendered them either meaningless or inaccurate. Vaka Brown was trying to give voice to a different form of Ottoman femininity than that standard-
ised by dominant Orientalist discourse. Yet the terms of intra-Ottoman differentiation, which were so important to her vision of her particular racialised space, had no comparable iterative history and hence no meaning in the Occident. Whilst some designations, like Circassian, might be familiar in the West (see Chapter Three), their particular histories would have carried different resonances in the Orient. There, their power as a distinguishing term among regional identifications was not overlaid with the same force of Orientalism, which attaches to each and every Oriental identification a similarly charged racialisation. In trying to use these terms Ottoman writers found themselves stuck between explaining the nuances of the classifications as they saw them and simultaneously challenging the blanket deformations of Orientalist structures of comprehension. In this light, Vaka Brown’s oscillation between being of or separate from the Orient reveals both the lure of performative identificatory processes and the limits of the performative once it attempts to transculturate.

This is where the problem of authenticity returns. If authenticity is considered as performative, it becomes clear that the set of previously sanctioned codings whose reiteration signals authenticity will be differently constituted for different audiences. Halide Edib’s condemnation of Vaka Brown typifies this dilemma. Edib is simultaneously trying to present herself to an Occidental readership as an authentic ‘Oriental’ woman (which requires that she reiterate and reconfirm signs of Orientalness that the West can recognise) and at the same time trying to discredit Vaka Brown’s performance of Orientalness, by arguing that Vaka Brown’s signs of belonging would not be recognised by an Ottoman audience. Edib is not only struggling because she is trying to codify herself within two overlapping but separate discourses: to be an authentic Ottoman in both regional/Oriental and Occidental terms. The problem is generic. Like the deadening effect of repeating a stereotype (in which one can only ever approximate but never quite fit a previously set classification), the invocation of authenticity will each time slightly miss the mark. Since the iterative elements of a performative action have to be familiar to the viewer before they can make sense, the ‘authentic’ Ottoman woman who wants her performance to be recognisable to the West must relate herself to a series of already available stereotypes operating within a previously existing Western classification system. Since every performative repetition is a dynamic intersubjective event, it will succeed or fail depending on who is involved and which histories and individual qualities they bring to their participation in the event. Furthermore, such stereotypes, as Emily Apter highlights (1996), are the Achilles heel of performativity. Using Homi Bhabha’s emphasis on the stereotype’s role in processes of subjectification, Apter argues that each new attempt to repeat the stereotype will, qua Bhabha, be a ‘deadening’ mismatch. The experience of not quite matching will alienate the subject from the image rather than tie them securely to it. Regarding authenticity as performative opens up the idea of the reiterative as not only referring back to but as also always misfitting, not quite matching, a prior or imagined ‘original’. The difficulty of trying to be authentic is that one can never actually make a match, one
can only ever approximate. And it is this dilemma that is so clearly manifested by these writers. Vaka Brown and Edib underscore the impossibility of totally reproducing a prior model – since, when this is combined with a transcultural scenario, the inbuilt problem becomes even more complex.

It is not just that cross-cultural iterations (like all iterative elements) need an interpretive community that can recognise and understand them. The gap between the Ottoman performer and the Occidental viewer/reader emphasises the always intersubjective quality of the processes by which a performative action is decoded. Where the different agents do not share a set of codings, the performance breaks down. The ways in which the stereotype misfits will not only be different each time, but the gaps and frayings from the original will themselves be differently recognisable to differently formed subjects. Hence, Edib’s rejection of Vaka Brown’s claim to fit the mould of the authentic harem respondent is couched both in terms of the mismatch of Vaka Brown’s performance to Edib’s own experience (coded as truly Ottoman) and in relation to Edib’s own attempt to remake the mould of the real Ottoman or Turkish woman to which she aspires. This quest to create alternative iterable qualities for a new type/image of Oriental women is also addressed to a ‘home’ audience of Ottoman/Turkish readers who will be able to read her self-representation within a different classification system. But, can the Western-educated and European-dressed Edib alter the terms of an Orientalist frame sufficiently for her primary Occidental audience to recognise the performative qualities she reiterates, without herself being deadened by the powerful stereotypes she must invoke in order to replace them?

**SAPPHISM, DIFFERENCE AND DESIRE**

It is in this light that the erotics of Vaka Brown’s interaction with the Rossetti woman can be rethought. Like Edib, Vaka Brown has to operate within already existing codes and sometimes risks being overpowered by the stereotypes she invokes (in this case the lesbian overtones of the homoerotic Rossetti scenario). Activating the lesbian theme familiar to Orientalist representation may in part serve to mark her authenticity because she reiterates a code easily recognised in the West. But, because the lesbian codings come through most clearly in relation to the Rossetti woman, this section intermingles the two overlapping but differently inflected discourses of beauty and of looking that operate simultaneously in Vaka Brown’s book.

The first is a (necessarily feminised) version of a conventional Orientalist gaze, operating as a classificatory surveillance of Ottoman populations: in this Vaka Brown, like most Western sources, presents a gallery of racialised images of Ottoman women which identifies them as objects of a desirous but largely superior gaze. The earlier sections of *Haremlik* are closely aligned with a typical Orientalist range of imagery that generically presumes a male point of view but
that, particularly when operating through an experiential description of female beauty, was also available to Occidental women observers. However, Western women were still faced with problems in adapting for themselves this masculine coded position – seen most often in the ways that their gender interrupted the establishment of the distance necessary for the maintenance of Orientalism’s ‘positional superiority’ (Said 1978: 7). For Vaka Brown, whose portraits of women such as Djimlah and Aïshé Hanım seek to present them as exoticised beauties within well-established Orientalist conventions, it is ethnicity as well as gender which connects her so closely to the object of enquiry as to leave her ‘bewildered’. This bewilderment is a symptom of the attempt to graft herself onto a Western and largely masculinist Orientalist viewing position signalled by the use of generic Orientalist tropes (remember the odalisque pose adopted by the hapless Djimlah?).

The second discourse of beauty owes its allegiance to another Western regime of representation that was already acknowledged as pleasurable and empowering for women. This utilises Pre-Raphaelite imagery to validate an alternative mode of female beauty. Just like her nineteenth-century Western predecessors who used the Arabian Nights to signal the fantastic, Vaka Brown by invoking Rossetti – especially through so loose and evocative a chain of association – enters into a realm of fantasy that was already highly sexualised and gratifying for female consumers. This connection to Rossetti in the context of her presence in the harem recasts the experiential as fantasy in a way that allows her access to a gender and ethnic specific sexualisation. Unlike some of the Ottoman terms that cannot translate for the West (Perote, harem) the Occidental Pre-Raphaelite terminology is presented as translating unproblematically to the Orient. This not only emphasises the Westernised knowledge of the harem women, but also points to the wish-fulfilment projective qualities that the Rossetti woman has for Vaka Brown: she shares Vaka Brown’s cultural framework and can also read her mind to make an instant link between poem, painting and mood. Whilst I have previously used the term stereotype to describe the cumulative image of the Pre-Raphaelite woman, it does not operate in the same way as a stereotype relating to a social category such as race.

Apart from the obvious potential of a very particularised (not to mention dusky or sultry) vision of feminine loveliness for a non-European setting, the Pre-Raphaelite woman was frequently associated with a non-normative set of female behaviours and appearances. This potential to break with Western gender conventions gives Vaka Brown a space in which to assume an active viewing position that can avoid some of the masculinist sadism of the previous mode of viewing (‘I could have smacked her pretty mouth’) and allow for a female pleasure in looking that can play across the divide between voyeurism and narcissism. But the sapphic Orient is a dangerous trope to perform as it risks coding Vaka Brown as a sexualised object within the depicted scene. The text is partly successful in securing Vaka Brown as the observer and not the observed, which is one of its aims. But this separation from the Oriental object is put at risk once the
Rossetti woman fulfils her other purpose by identifying and claiming Vaka Brown as an Oriental woman. The dangers of being located as part of the (in this instance sapphic) Orient are clear. Although Vaka Brown wants her performance of Orientalness to be recognised, she wants it to be nuanced and remade in her own terms; not just to exist as an endlessly alienating mismatch of existing Orientalist stereotypes. The adoption of an objectifying gaze that classifies and evaluates the beauty of the Ottoman women she surveys is one way that Vaka Brown can claim authenticity on both (feminine) experiential and (masculine) objective grounds. This lets her occupy a more validated knowledge position through which to authenticate herself, while at the same time she is recognised as the owner of a body of knowledge that is self-experience. The Rossetti woman fully understands the nature of Vaka Brown’s Ottoman identity. It is the intense desire of the text that this be recognised – at the very moment when Vaka Brown’s appropriation of an eroticising gaze is at its most pronounced and most interactive – that produces the libidinal charge of the narrative. In an earlier version of this section I have argued that this eroticising gaze was masculine-coded and that it was this that produced the queerness so evident to modern eyes (Lewis 1999a). Although I still think that the assumption of an active gaze in a book bound by gender-specific authenticating conventions that can never overlook Vaka Brown’s femininity will produce a masculinisation of sorts (since to do otherwise would sit at odds with the organising principle of the book’s production and circulation), I now no longer see this binary as so absolute. The position of active desire that Vaka Brown takes up in relation to the Rossetti woman is able to traverse the continuum that runs between masculine and feminine, voyeuristic and narcissistic. This is because it is structured by the acknowledgement of differences other than sexual difference which, played out through her repeated stress on the differences between women, complicates any assumption of a narcissistic mirroring or matching.

Jackie Stacey (1988), on the visual pleasure of women film viewers, writes about the importance of such differences. Discussing how viewers are often fascinated by women characters in a film she notes that their fascination is not just one of identification (wanting to be like the female characters) but extends to a deep interest in the interactions between women in the movie. Arguing that such filmic relations between female characters often emphasise the differences between women on screen, Stacey demonstrates that viewers’ ‘fascinations … are precisely about difference – forms of otherness between women characters which are not merely reducible to sexual difference, so often seen as the sole producer of desire itself’ (Stacey 1988: 122). Stacey suggests that what is often understood as simply a desire to be like the women in the film can be repositioned as a more complex desire to make an identification in the context of their differentiating interaction in the movie. Moreover, she suggests, the structure of films often disrupts identificatory fantasies even as they occur: in the film Desperately Seeking Susan (dir. Susan Seidelman 1984), for example, Roberta’s (Rosanna Arquette) desire to become like Susan (Madonna), the object of her
fascinated female gaze, is offered only a ‘temporary narrative fulfillment’ because ‘the pleasures of this female desire cannot be collapsed into simple identification, since difference and otherness are continually played upon, even when Roberta “becomes” her idealised object’ (Stacey 1988: 129). Just as the film repeatedly contrasts the dissimilarities of the two female protagonists, so too does Vaka Brown’s book construct endless points of differentiation between herself and the Ottoman women who so fascinate her. With the Rossetti woman, to whom she is most drawn, the differences are emphasised even as the physical closeness between them develops. That these differences are ‘not reducible to sexual difference’ (Stacey 1988: 122) is axiomatic to the project: it is precisely the differences between racialised modes of femininity that are important here.

For all that Rossetti’s paintings and poems reveal and revel in the full fleshliness of the female form, psychologically they were, as Stanford declares, ‘enigmas; ideally intriguing, not the least to their own sex’ (Stanford 1970: 29). Vaka Brown’s Rossetti lady is precisely such an enigma: she draws Vaka Brown to her despite her previously made plans to leave Istanbul, and whilst she eventually reveals the mystery of her past she remains a cipher to the reader since, as with the characters in ‘A Last Confession’, her name is never revealed – nor is she described in any detail. The repeated reference to her as ‘my’ Rossetti lady is too emphatic to ignore and suggests a level of erotic investment that is only just held in check by the chapter’s heterosexual alibi. Her husband is met by Vaka Brown and described as suitably handsome and charming. The Rossetti lady constantly avows her love for him, her desire to repent her sins and her intention to fulfil the role of loving and obedient wife and mother. But Vaka Brown’s desirous gaze at the Rossetti woman cannot be reduced to either an only masculinist objectifying gaze (built on an emphasis on difference) or a narcissistic gaze (built on the collapse of difference). She does both and it is the interaction between these two modes which creates the particular identificatory space she seeks. In this passage, Vaka Brown is invited to join the husband in admiring his wife’s beautiful hair, again staging an identification with the man as owner of the desirous gaze rather than as woman as its object:

As we sat on the divan, my Rossetti lady had her hair loose on her shoulders, except for a ribbon holding it back from her face. Ahmet Pasha [the husband] gathered a strand of it in his fingers, and turned to me.

‘Did you ever see anything more exquisite in your life?’ he asked.
I had to admit that had I never had never seen anything equal to it.
‘Nor is there a woman more charming,’ he said, his Turkish politeness not permitting him to declare in the presence of another that she was the most charming of all.

My Rossetti lady took his hand and kissed it in silence; and I thought I saw, together with love, the gratitude of a woman who has sinned and been forgiven. (Vaka 1909: 271, original emphasis)

Vaka Brown shares in Ahmet Paşa’s appreciation of his wife’s beauty and neatly deflects his compliment to her, by identifying with his unspoken
assessment that the Rossetti lady is the most charming woman present. Yet earlier in the visit she had exclaimed when the Rossetti lady depreciated her beauty as now faded by age: ‘Mashallah! Are you not [beautiful] now? … I would give my soul to look like you’ (Vaka 1909: 254). I am inclined to read this not only as an expression of envious identification but also as an insistence on the woman’s beauty as the object of Vaka Brown’s reverent gaze that highlights the difference between them, the other woman being older and more beautiful. In the extract above, Vaka Brown again resists a narcissistic identification with the Rossetti woman in favour of a partial identification with the husband as legitimate owner of the objectifying gaze. Her apparently selfless deflection of his well-intentioned compliment, along with the ownership implied by the oft-repeated nomenclature ‘my Rossetti lady’, serves to create a distance from rather than only an identification with the Oriental woman whose looks are so admired. This distance is necessary to puncture an overly close narcissistic dynamic, for it is just as important to Vaka Brown that the Rossetti woman can look at her and recognise her distinct forms of identification as it is that she is able to delight in the Ottoman woman’s beauty. Like the movies discussed by Stacey, this is a moment depicting a female fascination with another woman where the attraction is partly identificatory, but where difference is also repeatedly demonstrated. The gallant attempt of the husband to position Vaka Brown also as an object of the admiring male gaze is rejected. This emphasises the differences between his wife and Vaka Brown, whilst not interfering with Vaka Brown’s fascinated perusal of the woman whom they both know is really the ‘most charming’, The Rossetti woman’s triumphant claiming of a kinship with Vaka Brown, much as it is desired, is always only partial.

The narcissistic element in Vaka Brown’s chapter is not simply a desire for the same, but a desire to be seen for what one is, or feels oneself to be, or wishes one were, or were recognised as (which in this instance is a gendered ethnic identity structured by differentiations that are not always easily decodable), by someone who reminds one of the experience of an earlier and unconditional love (Freud 1914). This earlier love, typified as the maternal–child dyad, is located in the pre-Oedipal prior to the recognition of sexual difference, hence the often troubling labelling of homosexual relations as pre-Oedipal and immature. But this does not have to have a negative gloss nor, as Stacey emphasises, do narcissism and voyeurism have to be conceptualised as polar divides (see also Evans and Gamm 1995, Lewis and Rolley 1996). Vaka Brown sets up a dynamic between the two women that is simultaneously narcissistic and differentiating because it can allow for a recognition of different types of femininity and of different ethnicities.

Macleod’s argument that ‘[w]ays of seeing, like eating or speaking habits, are learned mannerisms’ conditioned by location, gender and class helps to dissolve the idea of a singular gaze. Instead, ‘individuals acquire a variety of spectatorship practices [in which] women in particular, because of the diversity of roles they are called upon to play in their lives, shift between a multiplicity of gazes from the dutiful and maternal to the pleasurable and transgressive’ (Macleod
It is in the context of observing dress and female beauty that the female Orientalist gaze is most often reversed as Western women find themselves, their bodies and their clothes to be the object of Oriental women’s curious gaze (Melman 1992, Roberts 2002, Ghose 1998). These moments of Western objectification occur most often in the harem or, notably, given where Vaka Brown is first solicited by the Rossetti lady, in the bath-house. Examined in this way Western women become spectacle for Oriental women and for their readers. Their accounts present them looking and being looked at within a play of gazes in which the Western women ‘look [at Oriental women] vicariously from a male point of view, but they also derive their own pleasure from the sight – a pleasure that may well be inflected by homoerotic desire and that is, above all, attributable to the erotics of difference’ (Ghose 1998: 60). But, whilst these Western accounts demonstrate the experience of Oriental scrutiny, their Western authors are able (often by using textual registers of fantasy) to reassert a Western superiority when needed. For the Orientalised female subject, speaking for herself rather then being spoken for, the range of viewing positions has to work differently. Vaka Brown’s Rossetti interlude relies on a combination of (sometimes clashing) culturally and historically contingent habits of viewing whose mixture is essential to the author’s identificatory practices. It is not enough simply for Vaka Brown and the Rossetti woman to have a touching moment of Pre-Raphaelite recognition. This must also be joined by the husband’s invitation to Vaka Brown to join in an Oriental appreciation of Oriental female beauty that underlines that she is involved in an Ottoman consumption of the Pre-Raphaelite woman. This in turn permits to Vaka Brown an activation of the same-sex erotics long associated with the homosocial and homosexual function of Pre-Raphaelite images that were more often understood to operate on a male rather than female axis of desire (Morgan 1996, Dellamora 1990, Cruise 1995). The Oriental setting facilitates Vaka Brown’s involvement in a reciprocal display of Oriental, Western and Pre-Raphaelite modes of viewing. Seeing and being seen in these ways allows her to demonstrate and integrate the diversity of differences on which are built her multiplicity of roles. Understanding difference in this, its widest sense, lets the Rossetti trope read as something that allows Vaka Brown a satisfying resolution to the questions of racial or ethnic difference that possess her writing.

This is where the reference to ‘The Blessed Damozel’ comes into its own once more. The damozel is described and painted as a woman looking down from heaven at her lover dreaming about her on earth below. In the painting, the monumental and typically Rossettian female figure (here modelled on Alexa Wilding) gazes out of the picture plane at, but not meeting the gaze of, the lover in the predella panel beneath. Separated from him in the poem by the ‘gold bar of Heaven’ she is divided from him in the painting by the frame that holds the two separate panels in place. Many times smaller than her and pictured lying prone on the ground, the male lover is almost of a size that could fit in her loosely clasped arms, like a child or a baby. So perhaps this is what Vaka Brown was thinking of when she confused the two works by Rossetti? The immense and
otherworldly damozel is indeed phallicly replete and does offer a narcissistically pleasurable identification (to be that lovely and to be loved that much) but the picture and the poem are as much about the woman looking as they are about her being looked at or thought of. In this way, Vaka Brown’s pleasure in the Rossetti woman is that the latter can really ‘see’ her for what she is, can recognise her as an Oriental woman, not as one who is the same as she is – whom the husband and Vaka Brown adore as the height of feminine desirability – but as one who is Oriental enough to communicate with her and Occidental enough to help her. The narcissistic allure of identification with the Rossetti woman, ‘I knew that you belonged to us Oriental women’, is one that can contain difference as well as similarity. This narcissism is also a desire to experience being looked at/adored as is the Rossetti lady – in the full recognition of her shortcomings – by both Vaka Brown and her husband. Vaka Brown does not want to be the object of a (Oriental) masculine gaze alone, but she can contemplate being, as the Rossetti woman is, the recipient of a combined male and female appreciation. The wish to be the object of such a pair of desirous gazes thus meshes gendered, sexualised and racialised positionings and allows for Vaka Brown the fantasy of a complete and resolved subjectivity, endorsed by a sympathetic recognition from others. The Rossetti woman is so important because she sees the ways in which Vaka Brown is at one with ‘Oriental’ women, without ignoring the things that make her different. Unlike the Turkish feminists (see Chapter Three) who value Vaka Brown’s Occidentalness in all the wrong ways and for all the wrong reasons, thereby irritating her, the Rossetti woman instinctively responds to the best of both; loving her for the combined self Vaka Brown once was (or imagines/remembers she was), that is now experienced as under threat from both the newly strange Orient and the never-quite home of the United States.

The Rossetti woman is invoked as both The Blessed Damozel and the nameless heroine of ‘A Last Confession’, this latter being the narrative of a sexualised woman who is not forgiven for her (possibly imagined) fall. Perhaps this is where the narcissism of the nameless woman in ‘A Last Confession’ re-enters as a pleasurable point of identification for women consumers? The forgiveness accorded to Vaka Brown’s Rossetti lady corrects the unfair treatment meted out by Rossetti to his original creation. It is possible that part of women’s pleasure in making narcissistic identifications with women represented as phallic is revenge against those who judge women wrongly; since male pleasure in the phallic woman is inevitably tinged with the pain of the castration (loss of power) it is intended to disavow. The ultimately phallic and Orientalised of Rossetti’s images is the Astarte Syriaca, modelled on the unobtainable Jane Morris, whose type Bullen sees in the description of the woman in ‘A Last Confession’ and whose features David Riede detects in The Blessed Damozel, where the model Alexa Wilding is made to look as much like Morris as possible (Bullen 1998, Riede 1992: 158). Just as the married Jane Morris is always a (partially) thwarted object for Rossetti, so too are the women of the Oriental harem for Occidental men. Yet to Vaka Brown, with her complex gender and ethnic identifications, the
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Harem and its women are available as points of both identificatory/narcissistic and differentiating/voeyeuristic desire.

The difficult to translate iterative elements of Orientalist stereotypes were open to a series of interventions that reveal glimpses of the different status that these performative tropes might have had in different discursive situations. In this light, claims to authenticity destabilise not only the stereotypes of the West – even as writers who invoke them risk being incorporated into them – but also hint, as I go on to discuss in Chapter Five, at the different histories and cultural meanings that could be attached to those performances. The possibilities offered by a homoerotic or homosocial engagement between Orientalised subjects in an Oriental setting can only be guessed at when represented in a source such as that published by Demetra Vaka Brown. Her mainly Occidental readership would have been ill-equipped to read her interaction with the Rossetti woman beyond the Western associations of the iterative terms she deploys. This is why Vaka Brown conspicuously plays up the fantastical nature of the Rossetti interlude (thus heightening its sexualisation) whilst simultaneously emphasising her own distinctly non-‘Asiatic’ racialised positioning. Meeting the Rossetti woman at the end of her trip (and the end of her book) the fascinated Vaka Brown is literally breathless with anticipation to hear her story, framing it as the fulfilment of her Orientalist fantasies:

Every word she spoke seemed to add to the romance of the situation. I was to learn the story of my Rossetti poem, and I felt sure it could be nothing less than a wonderful love story. Bits of all the Oriental tales I knew came thronging to my mind. I was afraid to utter a word, lest I should break the spell and she should withhold her confidence from me. In my sojourn among the Turkish women I had always been expecting to come across some wonderful, out-of-the-common romance; but their lives, when seen near at hand, were generally as uneventful as the most conventional Western life. Now, at length, I felt that I was to learn of one that would come up to my expectations. (Vaka 1909: 254)

Yet though the story is as good a romance as Vaka Brown (and her readers) could desire; a glorious narrative of international aristocratic love, death and intrigue such as one could lose oneself in, and, despite the Rossetti woman’s satisfying recognition of Vaka Brown’s Oriental credentials, the text still underlines the gulf of difference between the two women. The sticking point for Vaka Brown is her doubts about the Rossetti woman’s daughter remaining in Turkey. She feels compelled to challenge her Rossetti lady:

‘She is English through her father, and she is the only child that grandmother has.’

My Rossetti lady’s face was again nearly as horror-stricken as before.

‘Give the child to be brought up among that godless set of people. No! no! I could not do it!’

Vaka Brown writes that she ‘protested, rather feebly’,

I was not happy in the situation. I had had my fill of romance, to be sure; but I had been dragged into playing a part in it that I did not particularly approve of,
although I knew the futility of trying to play any other part than that assigned to me. I looked out of my latticed window upon the Bosphorous, and as I looked the mystery of the East again stole over my senses. I turned my eyes to the woman, slim and graceful, and of a beauty that I could well believe had inspired the love it had in two men of alien races, and my Western prejudices fell from me.

The fantasy offered by the scopic pleasures of Oriental female beauty are able to see off the unwelcome realist intrusion of Vaka Brown’s sense of Western (and Christian) responsibility. All resistance fades as she gazes at the Rossetti lady, now lying across a divan with her hands held up in prayer to Allah.

… It seemed all in keeping with the night and the woman, looking more than ever like the embodiment of a poem, a greater poem now than Rossetti ever wrote. She was the East itself: the mysterious East, with its strange ideas of love, and death, and of religion. (Vaka 1909: 266–8)

Despite Vaka Brown’s attempt to remind the child, Hope, of her English heritage the little girl prefers to be addressed by her new Turkish name and shows no desire to leave her mother. In the end Vaka Brown agrees to carry a photograph and a letter concerning the child’s well-being to be posted from America. Of course, on the boat home she meets an Englishman who turns out to be Edgar’s cousin, sent by the broken-hearted duchess to find her granddaughter. On the last leg of her journey and the last page of her book, Vaka Brown thinks of her complicity in the struggle over the child’s social and racialised place in the world and writes, on hearing of the Englishman’s failed mission, ‘I thought of the addressed envelope down in my trunk, and of the miniature and the photographs of an English child. But this was not mine to tell, nor would it have helped him if I had’ (Vaka 1909: 275). As the book closes, hybridity is put in its place. The Englishman assumes Vaka Brown to be Occidental and speaks to her in English about the problems he has encountered with the Turks, and the little girl, who a few pages earlier had a mixed heritage, is now identified as solely ‘English’: a child sacrificed to the ‘true faith’ that dominates the Orient and represents the unbreachable chasm between West and East. Up on deck Vaka Brown (the only other first-class passenger) passes as not Turkish and possibly not even Ottoman whilst, down below, the sealed envelope stays in the trunk; its safely hidden secret standing in for her camouflaged shifts in subjectivity, just as its eventual journey will seal her hybridity as envoy between Orient and Occident. Although this final passage seems to close down the opportunities for the recognition of multiple racial and gender identifications so fruitfully exploited in the Rossetti passages, this is not quite the case. Instead, the Englishman’s inability to see beyond Vaka Brown’s Westernised appearance, just as he had failed to discern that the Rossetti woman was Turkish when he met her previously in Europe,14 underlines that the fluidity of racialised and sexualised identifications can only be seen by the perspicacious eye of a subject whose own identifications are/have been forged through similarly transculturated performances.15
identification as English renders him unable to detect the nuanced racialised identifications enacted by both Vaka Brown and the Rossetti woman.

NOTES

1 On male homoerotics in Loti see Barthes (1971), and on visual Orientalism see Boone (1995). On the place of the harem in Western erotica and the role of ‘Oriental’ homosexuality (male and female) see Schick (1999). See also Manton (1986) on lesbian harems in Orientalist pornography.

2 The second version, a replica of the first with some small modifications, was eventually bought in 1881 by F. R. Leyland, Rossetti’s other main patron in the later period. This version now resides in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. The second painting was begun at about the same time as the Fogg version, though not finished until after 1879 (Surtees 1971: 144).


4 Though, according to Ernest Vizetelly (1915), Buchanan later regretted the tone of his criticism.


6 On the optics of the Pre-Raphaelite movement between verse and painting see Smith (1995).


8 Rossetti described Lady Lilith as an example of the perilous female principle; an image of ‘self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle’, Rossetti, Letters, vol. 2, p. 850, quoted in Riede (1992: 103).


11 I thank Jan Marsh for discussing these points.


13 Marsh, however, comments that by the 1870s Rossetti’s paintings were ‘so similar in composition and execution that there is little to distinguish one sitter from another’, Marsh (1987: 56).

14 It is not only Vaka Brown whose Orientalness can be invisible; the Rossetti woman kept her Turkishness secret, known only to Edgar and his mother, whilst being squired around European society. The cousin, who had met her in Europe, and found her to be ‘the kind of woman a man would go mad over’, only learned of her ethnicity after Edgar’s death.

15 On Vaka Brown’s troping of ethnic history as romance rather than tragedy and her narratorial performance of gender, racial and ethnic transvestism in Child of the Orient (1914), see Kalogeras (1991).