

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

The Athenian harem: Orientalism and the historiography of Athenian women in the nineteenth century

Journal Item

How to cite:

Brown, Jo (2011). The Athenian harem: Orientalism and the historiography of Athenian women in the nineteenth century. *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies*, 6 pp. 1–12.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2011 Joanna Brown

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/newvoices/Issue6/Brown%20Final.pdf>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

**THE ATHENIAN HAREM: ORIENTALISM AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF
ATHENIAN WOMEN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

© Joanna Brown, University of Reading

The majority of the scholars have described [Greek women] as despicable in the eyes of the other sex, their life as a species of slavery, and the gynaeconitis as a place of duration little differing from the Oriental harem; while a few writers have stoutly contended for the historic emancipation of the fair sex among the Greeks...As usual, the truth lies between the contending parties. (Becker 1866: 462)

The family life of Greek women widely differed from our Christian idea; neither did it resemble the life in an Oriental harem, to which it was far superior. (Guhl and Koner 1994: 185)

In the nineteenth century, the Athenian woman became a subject of scrutiny for classical historians, who sought to define her social 'position' in classical Athenian life.¹ In the two examples heading this article, the authors draw an explicit comparison between the Athenian citizen wife and two other historically or geographically situated women: the inmate of the imagined 'oriental' harem, and the modern Christian woman. In the first excerpt, the Athenian woman is argued to have been unreasonably placed by other authors in the 'oriental' or the modern categories, when she is really to be found elsewhere, situated as 'the truth' between two extreme points of female existence. In the second excerpt, the authors assert the difference between the Greek woman's family life and both the modern 'Christian idea' of the family and the existence of the harem dweller. In both examples, a conceptual continuum of female emancipation is formed, with the harem woman at one end, signifying complete subjection and servitude, and at the other, the modern Christian woman whose 'emancipation' rendered her an opposite to her oriental sister. Between these two poles, the authors place the Athenian woman, neither as degraded as an oriental nor as free as a Christian.² This 'index of female liberation' (Lewis 2004: 96) is formed by assessing the attitudes of Athenian men towards their wives.

These excerpts are taken from handbooks on the subject of Greek social life which proliferated throughout the nineteenth century. The first is from Wilhelm Becker's 1845 *Charicles: or Illustrations of the Private Life of the Ancient Greeks*. Called by Norman Vance 'among the most heavily footnoted "novels" ever published' (Vance 2007: 89). Becker's *Charicles* consists of a fictional account of a fourth-century Athenian boy named Charicles, supplemented by various 'excurses' on topics of Athenian life that are alluded to in the story. *Charicles* was widely used in public schools until late in the century, and went through many editions. The second is from Karl Guhl and Wilhelm Koner's *The Life of the Greeks and Romans*, first published in 1875.³ In this article, I will also look at two other popular works on social history, namely J. P. Mahaffy's 1874 *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* and Hugo Blümner's 1892 *The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks*.⁴ From the introductions to the books, it is clear that they were written for audiences ranging from students of classics to lay readers, with the idea of 'infus[ing] additional zest into the student's survey of their [the Greeks'] life as a nation' (Metcalf 1866: vii). The predominant aim is one of increasing interest in the classical Greek world and in classical study by making the Greeks themselves more accessible and more human. For example, Mahaffy argued that studying Greek social history proved that Greek literature represented the 'writings of men with like culture with ourselves [who had] worked out social and moral problems like ourselves...in short, they are thoroughly modern' (Mahaffy 1925 [1898]: 1). Similarly, a reviewer praised the translator of Blümner's *Home Life* as giving the 'general reader' data about social life 'by the aid of which he can reclothe the dry bones of antiquity and learn to look on the Greeks as people who

lived and moved, much as we do' (Anderson 1894: 214). The literate gentleman reaches out from nineteenth-century Britain and finds his counterpart in fifth-century Athens. The interest inspired is fuelled by a postulated sympathy between two different groups of educated men, and the concerns they share.

The nineteenth century in Europe was the age of the 'Woman Question,' which consisted of an ongoing debate as to the status and 'mission' of women, as well as to their correct level of emancipation. Fittingly, an essential component of any social history of the classical Athenian world included a discussion of the 'position' of women, which often took the form of an evaluation of the Athenian male's attitude towards them. The relationship between men and women was conceptualised as that between the public and the private, with women standing in for the non-political, personal aspects of men's lives. Modern scholarship uses the phrase 'separate spheres' to indicate this Victorian ideology. Deborah Gorham has suggested that the 'cult of domesticity' was used to reconcile the ideals of Christianity with the harsh realities of capitalism, arguing that '[t]he idealisation of the home meant that, at least in theory, some refuge from the harsh public world was possible' (Gorham 1982: 4). The home was regarded, as Eric Trudgill notes, as having 'a solid foundation deep in the ancient past,' and remaining timeless and stable while the historical and political world was constantly in flux (Trudgill 1976: 41). The idea of the home as stable and timeless fixed it, and with it the Victorian woman, outside historical change. Women's domestic work was seen as 'a nonalienated expression of selfless self' (Poovey 1989: 14), in contrast to the brutalising work of the commercial sphere undertaken by men. The 'Woman Question,' as an ongoing debate, held this ideology up to scrutiny.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the 'Woman Question' surfaced as a straightforward debate between feminists and conservatives, with the former trying to destroy the 'separate spheres' and the latter seeking to preserve them. The complexity and flexibility of views of women's domesticity are clear from literature discussing the subject. It has been remarked that '[t]he predominant form of Victorian writing about women is not pronouncement, but debate,' and this debate took place in periodicals, novels, poetry and historical works (Helsing, Lauterbach Sheets and Veeder 1983: xi). Mary Poovey notes the amorphousness of the 'separate spheres' ideology, commenting that it was 'both contested and always under construction...it was always in the making, it was always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formulations' (Poovey 1989: 9). The unchanging domestic sphere was in fact the site of constant disputes and ideological defences which were necessary to re-make, or reinforce the construct of the peaceful home and its angel. The 'Woman Question' is under constant construction, as is the 'position' of the classical Athenian woman.

A recurring theme in nineteenth century western European literature is pride in what it believed to be its decent, Christian, treatment of women and its proper valuation of female virtue and abilities. Feminists, however, destabilised this picture by drawing attention to the legal and social iniquities suffered by women in Victorian England and classical Athens alike, and used the 'index of women's emancipation' against its creators. In the midst of this and the spread of classical learning, texts were made available that sought to explain and classify the 'position of women' in fifth-century Athens, characterising the differences and similarities between Athens and England in terms of female subjugation. The discussion of Athenian women's 'position' and life experiences should be considered not just as a discourse taking place beside the 'Woman Question,' as something that requires an elucidation of nineteenth-century feminism for 'context,' but as part of that debate. The image of the harem, which is explored in this paper, was utilised as a tool in discussions of modern women and classical Athenian women.

I will begin by summarising recent scholarship on the image of the harem in western literature, in order to apply its insights to the prose of Victorian classicists. I will in particular

draw attention to recent work on the use of the harem, and orientalist themes generally, in nineteenth-century feminists' analyses of their contemporary world. In the second section, I will discuss recent treatments of the theme of the classical Greek concept of domestic and public space. After this, I will discuss the use of the harem in two texts which assert the superiority of the Greek *gunaikonitis* to the harem, namely the relevant sections of Becker and Guhl and Koner. After this, I will analyse the works of Mahaffy and Blümner, arguing that they use the harem trope in order to condemn Athenian misogyny, whilst also insisting that woman-hatred cannot be defined as Greek. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about the similarities between harem and home that are suggested in these works, using Katherine Kearns' imagery of the historical wall to describe the enclosure and definition of inner and outer space of the walls of harem, home and *gunaikonitis*.

'HAREMS OF THE [WESTERN] MIND'

The harem, which literally refers simply to a part of a house set apart for female use (Yeazell 2000: 1) has been identified by subsequent scholars as a site of desire and curiosity for westerners.⁵ The heading for this section comes from Ruth Bernard Yeazell's book on the imagery of the harem in western literature and art. In her remarkably broad study, Yeazell argues that descriptions of the harem by westerners are 'imaginative projections,' as '[t]he blank walls of the harem have long constituted an imaginative provocation to the European mind.' (Yeazell 2000: 8, 13). The various accounts of travel in the Orient, written from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, Yeazell argues, betray 'a similar promise: no one – at least no one like the writer – has ever seen this sight before, or those who claim to have done so have seen it all wrong.' This is the promise of travel literature in general, but it is especially common when it comes to descriptions of the harem. The accounts are moved by 'the impulse to claim that *this* traveller had really penetrated to the truth of the harem' (Yeazell 2000: 21). When the term 'harem' or 'oriental' is used in nineteenth-century classical histories, it is usually employed without specific reference to time or place, because as 'structures of fantasy' these harems of the western mind are places 'in which time and action are suspended', and do not 'occupy a very fixed place on the map' (Yeazell 2000: 59, 63). As such, the words themselves, without the elucidation of further context, are enough to draw on a supply of associations in the reader's mind. When the classicist argues that the *gunaikonitis* is or is not like a harem, he draws upon these conceptions.

Yeazell draws attention to the use of the prison as an image recurring in western discussions of the harem. The westerner perceived the oriental woman as someone enclosed inside impenetrable walls, oppressed and imprisoned in a jail she shared with other women. Yeazell argues that in western discourse, 'to be immured in the harem was perforce to be a slave, while to be a certain kind of slave was perforce to be immured in the harem' (Yeazell 2000: 59, 63). The very condition of living behind harem walls evoked connotations of servitude and dependency in the western mind, and the very condition of being an oriental woman signified being a sexual slave.⁶ Similarly, Marilyn Booth has demonstrated that thought about harems involves 'thinking about space not as passive or neutral in its familiar contours, but rather as humanly formed' (Booth 2010: 7), in this case, behind enclosing walls. Rana Kabbani refers to the imaginary harem as 'the bourgeois drawing-room's foil,' a phrase which draws upon the conceptual connection between Victorian home and harem. She points out the usefulness of the concept of the imprisoning harem to the European imperialist, noting that it 'distinguish[ed] between the barbarity of the Eastern male and the civilised behaviour of the Western male. One tied women up and sold them at slave auctions; the other revered them and placed them on pedestals' (Kabbani 2008: 121, 128-29). As the westerner's 'impossible other,' the imaginary easterner stood for all the various oppressions from which the westerner believed he had saved his women. Yet at the same as the westerner expressed disgust at the harem and the associated Ottoman slave trade in women 'depictions of it were

coveted by a genteel bourgeois public' (Kabbani 2008: 130). The 'harem of the mind' was fascinating.

Meyda Yeğenoğlu has argued that it is the status of the oriental woman as fundamentally unseen, as impenetrable to the western eye, as that which renders her, in the western mind, objectified and pathetic. Yeğenoğlu concentrates her analysis on the issue of the oriental veil and occidental reactions to it; she notes that the veil constitutes a 'barrier between the body of the oriental woman and the Western gaze' which frustrates the male western viewer. In response, the westerner 'subjects [this figure] to a relentless investigation,' and authors 'countless representations of the veil and veiled women...all made in an effort to reveal the hidden secrets of the Orient' (Yeğenoğlu 1998: 39). The oriental woman becomes a trope for the 'hidden secrets,' and is herself an object of investigation to be uncovered before the eyes of the west. As Yeğenoğlu notes, this obsession with unveiling is frequently cast in the language of 'liberation,' with the transparency of access to the Oriental woman being associated with that woman's personal freedom and agency (Yeğenoğlu 1998: 46). To be 'liberated,' the Oriental woman must be 'seen'; similarly the Athenian woman must be seen for Greek society to be understood. Yeğenoğlu's comments can be applied to the Western classical scholar's interest in the Athenian women. The walls of the *gunaikonitis* (Athenian women's quarters) or harem play the same role here as the veil in orientalist literature; the walls conceal the Athenian woman from view, and frustrate the classical scholar's desire to 'see' her clearly.⁷

Joyce Zonana's description of 'feminist Orientalism' is a useful conceptual tool in this context. Zonana describes how from the eighteenth century 'images of despotic sultans and desperate slave girls became a central part of an emerging liberal feminist discourse about the conditions of women not in the East but in the West' (Zonana 1993: 593). She notes that this coincides with the popularity of European tales about travels in the east, and is used as imagery in the works of feminists. Harem imagery is used to critique the lives of women in the West, and thus 'displaces the source of patriarchal oppression onto an 'Oriental,' 'Mahometan' society, enabling British readers to contemplate local problems without questioning their own self-definition as Westerners and Christians' (Zonana 1993: 594). The threat of feminism is mitigated, and the project is newly defined as 'the removal of Eastern elements from Western life. Zonana's comment that 'the very casualness of these [oriental] allusions suggests that the writers are drawing upon a fully developed cultural code implicitly shared with their readers' applies as much to the work of the classicists under consideration here as it does to Victorian feminists (Zonana 1993: 593, 594). The reader knows that 'oriental seclusion' or 'harem life' refers to the subjection and objectification of women that occurs elsewhere. Using it as an explanatory tool, the classicist can define the nature of Athenian women's lives as more or less like those of harem inmates, and as more or less 'modern,' Christian or western.

GREEK DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE: MODERN STUDIES

Victorian studies of female life within classical Greek domestic space conceptualised both the *gunaikonitis* and the harem as physical, walled structures that contain women and exclude them from public life. This scholarship assumes that the Greek house was specifically built with rooms for separate male and female usage – the *gunaikonitis* and the *andron*. Recent studies of public and private in the Greek world, however, have challenged this. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, for example, argues that case studies from the modern Islamic world can provide insight into the Greek conceptions of domestic space, while western ideas may mislead. Llewellyn-Jones suggests that the Greeks did not define 'private space' in terms solely of physical structures, but rather as 'separation from the public' which could be achieved through veiling (Llewellyn-Jones 2003: 192). The courtyard house of the Greeks has become a focus of attention in this context. As Ruth Westgate has noted, 'the development of domestic architecture is shaped by the interplay between universal needs and particular

symbolic or ideological requirements.' Westgate focuses her analysis on the classical house's 'blank façade', arguing that its plainness spoke of the chastity and modesty of its female inhabitants (Westgate 2007: 241, 236). The arrangement and appearance of architecture communicates relations between the genders and is an emblem of civic status, but this does not necessarily entail the existence of rooms permanently marked as male and female.

In her 2010 study *The Classical Greek House*, Janett Morgan notes the ambiguity of the relevant textual evidence as regards female seclusion, an ambiguity with which our Victorian authors battled. Morgan points out that while some ancient texts 'reinforce the notion that gender separation was an ideological construct, others indicate that the division had an architectural basis' (Morgan 2010: 118). Morgan argues convincingly that male and female space in Greek houses was governed by 'flexibility'. Rather than denoting a set physical space, the *gunaikonitis* appears in texts as 'an expression of gender ideology.' As such, 'it is highly probable that gender segregation was a temporary state of affairs, and achieved through simple, temporary arrangements in the use of space' (Morgan 2010: 122, 123, 142). Similarly, Morgan points to evidence that the term *andron* was used to describe the large male spaces used by mythical kings and tyrants. Rather than being, as the Victorian authors would have it, a physically defined space within the classical house, an *andron* was the prerogative of wealthy men with 'eastern manners' (Morgan 2010: 125, 126). In Athenian literature, the *andron* 'is used to evoke ideas about eastern grandeur rather than Athenian domesticity' (Morgan Forthcoming). The Victorian perception of the classical Greek home, however, included the *gunaikonitis* and the *andron*, both walled-in, permanent spaces dividing the sexes.

THE ATHENIAN HAREM: NOT A HAREM

The first two texts I wish to look at make use of the harem trope in order to distance the *gunaikonitis* (and implicitly, the modern Christian home) from 'oriental' oppression. In the excerpt I began with, Becker had characterised the views of scholars who preceded him as falling into one of two extremes: either they depicted the Athenian woman as the unhappy inhabitant of the harem, or they argued for her 'historic emancipation.' These scholars, Becker suggests, strayed to unreasonable extremes while 'the truth' is never extreme, but 'as usual...lies between' (Becker 1866: 462). Becker gives himself an aura of rationality by placing himself here, and distances himself from his predecessors. However, in his following description of the Athenian woman's life, a tension appears between his assertion of his occupation of the middle ground and the starkness of his analysis, as he argues that 'in the historic epoch, and in the very focus of civilisation, the women were regarded as a lower order of beings' who were 'fitted only for propagating the species and gratifying the sensual appetites of men' (Becker 1866: 462). Rather than seeming to occupy a mid-point on the continuum, in Becker's Athenian woman looks more like the stereotypical harem inmate.

On the following two pages, Becker cites examples of the ways in which the activities of Athenian women were circumscribed by Athenian men, using the works of Plato, Plutarch, Thucydides, Demosthenes and Euripides. He argues that Athenian women lacked education, were physically confined to the house, had no independence and were emotionally distanced from men.

[T]he gynaeconitis, though not exactly a prison, not yet an ever-locked harem, was still the confined abode allotted, for life to the female portion of the household... This applies especially to maidens, who lived in the greatest seclusion till their marriage, and so to speak, regularly under lock and key (Becker 1866: 465).

Utilising another scale of oppression, Becker refers to the *gunaikonitis* as highly restrictive, but not as bad as a prison, and certainly not as bad as a harem. The 'harem' is placed at an extreme further removed from the 'prison', as though it represented a heightened version of

captivity. While young girls were 'so to speak' locked up, wives were not. The difference between *gunaikonitis* and harem is located in the lock: the harem is by definition locked, but the *gunaikonitis* only sometimes. Becker argues that modern scholars have taken the significance of individual Greek misogynists too seriously as while 'a jealous and suspicious man might now and then have ensured his wife's fidelity' by imprisoning her, the textual evidence does not prove this to have been routine (Becker 1866: 470). Husbands so jealous as to lock in their women were aberrations, and normal Athenian practice cannot be judged by these extreme examples.

The next text, Guhl and Koner's *Lives of The Greeks and Romans*, uses a similar 'index of emancipation.' Guhl and Koner explicitly note the difference between the modern western man and the oriental, between 'us' and 'them', using the Athenian woman as a mid-point on the scale:

The life of married women, maidens, children while in the care of women, and of female slaves, passed in the *gunaikonitis*, from which they issued only on rare occasions. The family life of Greek women widely differed from our Christian idea; neither did it resemble the life in an Oriental harem, to which it was far superior (Guhl and Koner 1994: 185).

Guhl and Koner set up their description of Athenian women's lives by relegating them to the *gunaikonitis*, 'from which they issued only on rare occasions.' This semi-permanent imprisonment could be interpreted as forming the conditions of the harem, and the authors refer later to her seclusion in that space. However, the first sentence is modified by the second which seeks to locate Greek women on the familiar index: her life was not as bad as that of an oriental harem inmate, nor as advanced as 'our Christian idea.' As in Becker's work, the Athenian woman occupies a mid-point between the two extremes. However, the description of her life that follows is reminiscent of that of an oriental woman in nineteenth-century literature.⁸

Guhl and Koner's young Greek girl lives a 'monotonous existence' with no 'intellectual intercourse with the other sex' and with only her appearance to attend to. Marriage 'did not change this state of things' as she only exchanged one *gunaikonitis* for another. So far, the description is entirely negative, depicting a miserable experience. However, in her married home she was 'the absolute ruler...of her limited sphere' (Guhl and Koner 1994: 185). Unlike the stereotypical harem woman, who was simply one slave among many (DeIPlato 2002), she was the sole wife and so the ruler of the domestic sphere. Yet she was also unlike the modern woman in that 'she did not share the intellectual life of her husband – one of the fundamental conditions of our family life' (Guhl and Koner 1994: 185-86). The Christian home is defined by its granting to the wife an 'intellectual life,' which was gained from her partner. Without the wife's inclusion in her husband's scholarly interests, Guhl and Koner suggest, modern family life would be untenable.

The passage on women is notable for its shifts between the two extremes of harem and home. Having set up the Athenian woman midway between the two, she is then described as virtually imprisoned in her own home (like the oriental woman), then as a domestic leader (like the Christian woman), and finally as a non-intellectual (like the oriental woman and unlike the Christian woman). A further shift towards the oriental designation occurs with the authors' assertion that she was surveyed by her husband 'with jealousy' and 'sometimes even by means of lock and key.' While good behaviour preserved her from the violence of others 'her position was only that of the mother of the family' (Guhl and Koner 1994: 186). In opposition to Victorian texts that claimed motherhood as the pinnacle of female existence, and the only thing to which women should aspire, Guhl and Koner imply that it is not enough for the modern woman. As with the passage from the earlier text, the ascription of Athenian women to a mid-point between oppression and liberation is undermined by the

almost completely negative portrayal of the Athenian woman's existence. It 'widely differed' from 'our Christian idea' as women lacked intellectual stimuli and lived a cloistered lifestyle, but how far it was 'superior' to the imaginary harem is hard to see.

THE ATHENIAN HOME: LIKE A HAREM

In our final two texts, the authors make use of the harem trope but utilise it in a different way from Becker and Guhl and Koner, to suggest that the Athenian *gunaikonitis* is similar to a harem. Their use of the image, however, depends upon the same logic and that of our previous authors, and appeals to the same set of assumptions about what it means to be an oriental woman, and what it means to live in a harem.

In his 1875 *Social Life in Greece*, J. P. Mahaffy presents the separation of the sexes in classical Athens as something that requires an explanation. Mahaffy praises Athenian literature, but argues that Athens' primacy in Greek politics meant that 'private life was despised' by the Athenian, as he 'sacrifice[d] private ends to the call of the state' (Mahaffy 1925: 135). As such, despite its achievements, the fifth century in Athens was a period of 'social and moral stagnation' which included the propagation of 'a certain contempt' for females that was more intense than in any other region or time period of Greece (Mahaffy 1925: 141, 142). Mahaffy puts the segregation of the sexes down to the development of democracy in which '[o]ld age and weaker sex were pushed aside' (Mahaffy 1925: 146). The enfranchisement of citizen males was the cause of an artificial separation of the sexes, relegating women to private life alone.

However, while this explains the sexes' physical separation, Mahaffy believes that this is not enough 'to explain the really Asiatic jealousy with which women of the higher classes were locked up in imperial Athens, and the contempt with which they were systematically treated' (Mahaffy 1925: 147). The jealousy of the Athenians towards their women, Mahaffy suggests, is so extreme that it merits the qualifier 'Asiatic.' Athenian attitudes towards women in this era cannot be put down to Greek influences alone; the origins of this contempt must be sought elsewhere. Mahaffy suggests that 'a visit to Asia Minor [was considered] just as necessary as our young noblemen once considered a visit to the French court.' These visits to the wealthy and luxurious East came with severe consequences. Once the Athenian male had come back from his Grand Tour, he returned

with an altered view on the rights and privileges of women, and thinking that after all the hareems of the Asiatics were the best arrangement for men, inasmuch as it left them full liberty to follow their own pleasures, without hindrance and without criticism from mothers, and wives, and sisters (Mahaffy 1925: 148).

Misogyny bleeds into Athens from her connections with the eastern world, and young Athenians eagerly carry out the 'Asiatic' plan in their own houses. The Athenian *gunaikonitis*, then, is set up precisely on an 'oriental' model to facilitate the poor behaviour of Athenian men. With their women safely locked away, the Athenian men 'follow their pleasures' without the irritant of female dissent. The *gunaikonitis* comes into existence for the same reasons as the harem.

In Mahaffy's text, the men of 'like culture with ourselves' have placed their women in harems that they may themselves live licentiously (Mahaffy 1925: 1). Mahaffy, having read Athenian literature, concludes that Athenians hated women and seeks an explanation for this. As the Greeks are of 'like culture' with modern Europeans, their misogyny cannot be located in what Greeks and moderns share. Using the trope of the harem, in which misogyny is related to the eastern elsewhere, Mahaffy posits oriental influence on Athens as the explanation. Athens was compromised by her relationship with the east which 'certainly introduced lower notions concerning the social position of women' (Mahaffy 1925: 147-48).

Misogyny seeps into Athens from its surroundings, through impressionable young men who have no qualms about introducing harems of their own. Even though the nefarious ideas come from the east, Mahaffy's young Athenian men are extremely susceptible to receiving them. There seems to be no resistance, no moral qualms on the part of the men, who simply absorb the foreign customs and attitudes as they travel, and become ersatz 'orientals.'

Hugo Blümner's *Home Life* uses the harem theme in a similar fashion to Mahaffy. The word 'oriental' first appears in the text in the context of female education.⁹ Athenian women, he argues, did not have access to intellectual education, and so Athenian men sought out educated *hetairai* (courtesans) for companionship. 'The fault was, of course, their own' and was a direct result of 'the semi-Oriental system of shutting women out from the outer world and degrading them into mere managers of the household.' The *gunaikonitis* arrangement is partially oriental, and deprives women of education and men of suitable intellectual women (Blümner 1893: 129, 130). In his chapter on 'Marriage and Women,' Blümner claims that women rarely left their area of the house: 'this custom, which resembled the Oriental...was probably introduced by the Ionic Greeks from Asia Minor' (Blümner 1893: 133-34). This system, similar to that of the east, is not indigenous. Misogyny is imported from the oriental elsewhere.

While Blümner cautions the reader against taking too seriously 'the exaggerated descriptions of Aristophanes or the sarcastic tirades of misogynists like Euripides' (Blümner 1893: 134), his summation of the Athenian woman's life is bleak:

The position of women in the Ionic states bears a more Oriental character and here it is the wife who addresses the husband as 'Master.'¹⁰ The Athenian regarded his wife as a subordinate being, who would bear him children and keep his house but was incapable of rising above this sphere (Blümner 1893: 147).

The Athenian (or 'Ionic') wife refers to her husband as 'master' in an arrangement described as 'more Oriental.' She is mired in her physical existence of domestic and childbearing labour, having no access to the education that would render her more interesting and companionate to her 'master.' It is this that constitutes the 'oriental' aspect of Athenian attitudes, negating any possibility of a companionate marriage in which the partners conceived of each other as equals. From here, Blümner proceeds to enumerate all the Athenian woman's legal disabilities in marriage, noting that even where for her 'there is an appearance of justice...in reality the men had the advantage.' Women would rarely leave abusive husbands because their alternative was to 'return to a state of tutelage under her father' (Blümner 1893: 149).

Blümner frequently stresses the Athenian woman's poor education as a factor that allows the Athenian male to be considered 'semi-oriental.' Placed in the *gunaikonitis*, the Athenian girl had no access to education, and so was denied the intellectual world that may have made her life more bearable. However, despite this neglect, '[s]ometimes a sensible man succeeded in educating and raising to his own level a really intelligent wife...[to] make her his partner in the true sense of the word.' (Blümner 1893: 147). The only chance of education for the Athenian woman was found in the attitude of her husband; a man seeking a meaningful relationship with his ignorant wife would, like Xenophon's Ischomachos, act as the teacher of his wife. Nonetheless, Ischomachoses were few and far between, and the lack of education of Athenian women drove men into the arms of *hetairai*, thereby 'loosen[ing] the bonds of marriage' (Blümner 1893: 148). The Ionians had become orientalised, and so happy, modern companionate marriages were nearly impossible. Blümner's depiction of subjected Athenian women whose education was down to the chance interest of her husband is reminiscent of complaints about women's education in Victorian Britain, particularly before the improvements in schooling and founding of women's colleges. The result of such paucity of education, and of the reduction of women to their domestic and reproductive functions, is a

society of 'oriental character' in which wives languish, and bored men are drawn into the company of *hetairai*.

In the examples given, the familiar image of the harem appears as a tool with which to evaluate the virtues and vices of the *gunaikonitis* of the Athenians, and comparisons between the two form analyses of the oppression or acceptable domesticity of the latter. However, despite the frequent assertions that the *gunaikonitis* was not a harem, the descriptions given by classicists of the Athenian women's quarters render it eerily similar to the oriental prison. They place the *gunaikonitis* halfway on a scale between the two functions so as better to define the harem against the Victorian home, and insist upon the role of Christianity or modernity in improving women's lives. The word 'oriental' is used in two different, but connected, ways in this discourse: it either differentiates the Greek from the misogynist (the Greek was not a Christian, but also he was not an 'oriental') or is used as a signifier for 'backward' elements in Greek society (misogyny in Greece is the result of external, eastern sources).

WALLS

The stone wall marks a place, arbitrary and definitive; language falls on either side...The historian, whose business it is to mark permanence out of change, may recognize but cannot celebrate the sheer intransigence of the things – material and linguistic – with which he works (Kearns 1997: 1, 2, 3).

One of the defining features of the harem, or rather, the Western fantasy of the harem, is its enclosing walls. The harem as a physical structure *walls in* its inhabitants, as walls separate domestic from public space. The references to women's enclosure in the texts I have looked at refer back to the imaginary harem as a walled and guarded prison for female inmates. The wall, in Kearns' analysis, as also a structure made from language, is the historian's achievement. The historian builds his wall, constructing 'permanence out of change.' However, the harem and the *gunaikonitis* walls confound him, refusing him access to the women inside. He is faced with 'the sheer intransigence of the things...with which he works,' among those 'things' being classical texts that can be interpreted in many different ways and cannot solve the Athenian 'Woman Question.' Searching for the literature that falls on the domestic side of the wall, the historian constructs his image of what lies within. Like Yeazell's oriental traveller, he seeks to displace other historians, insisting that 'no one...has ever seen this sight before, or that those who claim to have done so have seen it all wrong' (Yeazell 2000: 21).

The lines between Athenian *gunaikonitis*, oriental harem and modern Christian home were not as clear as the dominant discourse would openly admit. Feminist orientalism and these classicists' texts may have distinguished between them, but the very fact they could use the comparison meaningfully suggests a conceptual similarity. The Victorian woman's home had walls no less than did the harem. Modern historians have noted that despite the advice given to women to turn their homes into refuges for their husbands, 'the courts allowed it to become a prison where [wives] could be forcibly confined' (Helsing, Lauterbach Sheets and Veeder 1983: 3). John Stuart Mill, in a speech to parliament advocating female suffrage, suggested that women's abilities had been damaged by their confinement. Asserting that as 'women and men for the first time in history are really companions' it could not be beneficial to husband or wife if the latter were 'studiously kept inferior to' the former, and her 'earthly interests...forcibly restrained within four walls' (Mill 1868: 234). The power of husband over wife approached that of Oriental despot over harem inmate as the fact that 'men in general do not inflict...all the misery which could be [legally] inflicted' on their women' was not 'any kind of apology for despotism' (Mill 1991: 506). Classical scholars used the 'harem' to describe what the *gunaikonitis* was *not*, in so doing they intimately related the two. The Victorian house and the Athenian *gunaikonitis* come to sound like each other and like the 'harem of the

(western) mind', with the distinction lying only in what the master or despot chooses to do with his irresponsible power.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Becker, W. trans. F. Metcalfe 1866. *Charicles, or Illustrations of the Private Life of the Ancient Greeks with Notes and Excurses*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Blok, J. 1987. 'Sexual Asymmetry. A Historiographical Essay' in J. Blok and P. Mason eds. *Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society*. Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben. 1-58.
- Blümner, H. trans. A. Zimmern 1893. *The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks*. London, Paris and Melbourne: Cassell and Co: London.
- Booth, M. 2010. 'Introduction' in M. Booth ed. *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 1-19.
- DelPlato, J. 2002. *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800-1875*. London: Associated University Presses.
- Gorham, D. 1982. *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. London and Canberra: Indiana University Press.
- Grosrichard, A. 1998. *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*. London and New York: Verso.
- Guhl, E. and W. Koner, trans. F. Hueffer 1994. *The Greeks: Their Life and Customs*. London: Senate.
- Helsing, E., R. Lauterbach Sheets and W. Veeder 1983. *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837-1883: Volume 1: Defining Voices*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kabani, R. 2008. *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient*. Second Edition. London: Macmillan.
- Kearns, K. 1997. *Psychoanalysis, Historiography and Feminist Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, R. 2004. *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel, and the Ottoman Harem*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris and Co.
- Lewis, R. and N. Micklewright eds. 2006. *Gender, Modernity and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women's Writings: A Critical Source Book*. London and New York: J. B Tauris and Co.
- Llewellyn-Jones, L. 2010. "'Help me, Aphrodite!'" Depicting the Royal Women of Persia in *Alexander*' in P. Cartledge and F. Rose Greenland eds. *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. 243-79.
- Llewellyn-Jones, L. 2003. *Aphrodite's Tortoise: the Veiled Woman of Ancient Greece*. Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales.
- Mahaffy, J. 1925. *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Metcalfe, F. 1866. 'Translator's Preface' in W. Becker, trans. F. Metcalfe *Charicles, or Illustrations of the Private Life of the Ancient Greeks with Notes and Excurses*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. vii-x.
- Morgan, J. Forthcoming. 'Drunken men and modern myths: searching for the *andron* in classical Greece,' in S.D. Lambert (ed.) *Sociable Man. Essays in Greek Social Behaviour in Honour of Nick Fisher*. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales.
- Morgan, J. 2010. *The Classical Greek House*. Bristol: Bristol Phoenix Press.
- Mill, J. 1868. 'Suffrage of Women' *Friends' Intelligencer* 24: 234-35.
- Mill, J. 1991. *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford and New York: Oxford World Classics.
- Poovey, M. 1989. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian Britain*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Schick, I. 2010. 'The Harem as Gendered Space and the Spatial Reproduction of Gender' in M. Booth ed. *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 69-84.
- Trudgill, E. 1976. *Madonnas and Magdalens: The origins and development of Victorian sexual attitudes*. London: Holmes and Meier.
- Vance, N. 2007. 'Victorians' in C. Kallendorf ed. *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*. London: Wiley-Blackwell. 87-100.
- Westgate, R. 2007. 'The Greek House and the Ideology of Citizenship' *World Archaeology* 39/2: 229-45.
- Yeazell, R. 2000. *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Yeğenoğlu, M. 1998. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zonana, J. 1993. 'The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*' *Signs* 18/3: 592-617.

¹ I would like to thank Susanne Turner and Janett Morgan for their considerable help in finalising this article, and Helen King and Barbara Goff for their valuable advice.

² See Blok (1989) for a discussion of the development of nineteenth-century works on 'the status of Athenian women.'

³ The quotes from Guhl and Koner are taken from the 1994 edition of the Greek half of their work, which was published separately as *The Greeks: Their Life and Customs*. This text is still available today. The dates of texts cited refer to the date of the edition used, rather than their original publication date.

⁴ The works by Wilhelm Becker, Guhl and Koner, and Blümner were all originally written in German, and are referred to here under the names of their original German authors. However, in their English forms they became extremely popular as works on Greek social life, and so this article refers to the English texts as texts in their own right prepared by translators for an Anglophone audience.

⁵ Llewellyn-Jones (2010) argues that in present day commentaries the word 'harem' is misunderstood, and that in its original meaning (when divorced from orientalist prejudices) it is applicable to ancient Persian institutions of gender separation. He argues that the word applies to a particular space and those people who occupy it, and that it is not synonymous with repression.

⁶ Ruth Yeazell (2000: 213) notes, however, that alternative visions of the harem were available in this period, and that details about real harems 'that destroyed the romance of the harem for some imaginations enabled others to discover a more commonplace domestic ideal'. See also Lewis and Micklewright (2006) and Booth (2010: 2). This paper focuses on the dominant perception of the harem as a prison for oriental women, as this is the cultural myth drawn on by the Victorian classicists studied here.

⁷ Llewellyn Jones (2003: 191) argues that the Greeks conceived of a connection 'between the covering created by dress and the covering created by a house.' Words in the Greek language that designated veiling and concealing could also refer to physical structures (194-95).

⁸ In a different context, Irvin Cemil Schick (2010: 76) draws attention to a fifteenth-century description of the classical Athenian house, noting its similarity to generic descriptions of oriental harems.

⁹ Blümner's work was translated by Alice Zimmern, a suffragist and advocate of female education. Zimmern translated *Home Life* principally for use in girls' schools, and perhaps saw Blümner as suitable material because of his emphasis on Athenian education.

¹⁰ Blümner (1893: 146) compares the Athenian woman who calls her husband master to his Spartan husband who calls his wife 'Mistress'.