

By: Sydney Foster

During the Victorian Era, the British Empire was expanding its influence into the Ottoman Empire, increasing the public's interest in the "orient." Due to their secrecy, harems were of particular interest; men were not allowed inside, leading to an abundance of erotic harem fantasies. English women with the means to do so traveled to these harems, with some publishing travel narratives about their trips. Their depictions of the harems changed as the genre grew and women's rights evolved. Reviews of narratives and periodical literature provide information about women travelers and more broadly ideas about women's roles. I argue that, while Victorian ideals specified that a woman's place was in the home and that proper women's sexuality should remain hidden, the reviews and success of these books reveal a more complex viewpoint in practice. In addition, these women revealed their own opinions on women's rights and roles at home through their analysis of what they saw and the biases they revealed, even when they stated that they were trying to leave their western prejudices behind. Even today we must recognize the contrast between our ideals and our reality, and that our view of others is shaped by our own lives.