

“ORIENTS” OF THE MIND: DEVIANCE, SEXUAL  
ENLIGHTENMENT, AND TRUE LOVE IN FREDERICKS’S  
*DEGENERATE EMPRESS*, VYNNYCHUK’S *ZHYTTIE  
HAREMNOIE (LIFE IN THE HAREM)*, AND PARKER’S  
*ROXELANA & SULEYMAN*

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The Ottoman Empire, as a privileged, elastic trope that inspired a liberating cultural vocabulary, with Istanbul as a site of erotic crossings, sensuous overflow, and multi-directional exchanges, has been haunting the European heterotopic imagination from the late eighteenth century onwards (Irwin 20). Although, as Edhem Eldem contends, Turkey and the Turks “were spared much of the weight of the Orientalist discourse so strongly criticized by Edward Said,” the culture, history, and political environment of the Ottoman world were without a doubt consistently described according to Orientalist mythologies (89). Within a vast repertoire of heterogeneous Orientalist discourses, including Turkish-themed theatre, fiction, and painting, the Ottoman Imperial Harem has long been a key locus for “variations on a particular set of plots and intrigues” (Bevilacqua and Pfeifer 109). As one of the most recognizable icons of Orientalism, it mirrored Western psychosexual needs and provided a space on which to project fantasies of illicit eroticism and extravagant fancies. In the imaginary of the dominant Orientalist discourse, the

harem figures as a polygamous space animated by different forms of tyranny (from despot to women, from eunuchs to women, from mistress to slave, from favorite to rival); of excess (the multitude of women, the opulence of the interior, the passions of the despot); and of perversion (the barbarity of polygamy, the violence of castration, the sapphism of the women locked up without “real” men, and the illicit affairs carried out behind the despot’s back). All these things are found deplorable and enticing by turn. (Lewis 182-83)

A *locus sensualis* in Western culture, it entertained voyeuristic urges abounding in images of the exotic and erotic, the primitive, the savage, and the noble. By the nineteenth century, Despotic Turks had made room for Lustful Turks “with enormous sex organs,” which solidified into an important stock character of Victorian pornographic literature (Quataert 10). In her analysis of English translations of Oriental texts, Rana Kabbani notes that the mesmerizing, overamplified powers of the great Seraglio, entrenched in the European imagination, influenced the “perception of even the most gifted scholars” (66). In fact, however, as Leslie P. Pierce states in an examination of major myths about the Ottoman Empire, sex was not the fundamental dynamic of the harem, which was, rather, ruled by family politics (3). Pierce notes that, according to the less enticed and more informed European observers, the “imperial harem was more like a nunnery in its hierarchical organization and the enforced chastity of the great majority of its members” (6).

96 Here I attempt a comparative reading of three contemporary texts that draw on the erotic charge of the harem, employing Orientalism as a transhistorical constant: David Fredericks’s *Degenerate Empress* (1968), Yuriy Vynnychuk’s *Zhytjie haremonoie (Life in the Harem)* (1996), and P.J. Parker’s *Roxelana & Suleyman* (2011). They represent this decadent repository of exoticism and sexual excess from, respectively, Western European, Eastern European, and Australasian perspectives. I am interested in how these authors shift, adapt, and reorganize classic, once hegemonic Orientalist fantasies for their own purposes. My inquiry goes beyond the restrictive dichotomy of confrontation between West and East and intends to trace ways in which “[a]ll kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space” (Said 54) outside Fredericks’s and Parker’s own territories during the pre-Ottoman stage of their imaginative journeys to Istanbul.

These three novels can be seen as historiographic pnofictions, as all three writers deal with the Süleymanic period (1520-66) of the Ottoman Empire, which embraced a vast territory and diverse peoples. All focus on a historical figure, Roxolana<sup>1</sup> (Nastia Lisovska) (c. 1504-58), the most cherished concubine of Süleyman<sup>2</sup> the Magnificent, who was captured by Ottoman vassals during their slave raid into Ukraine in 1520 and donated to the Imperial Harem; she legally married the Sultan, thus becoming the first truly powerful woman in the Ottoman dynasty. Pierce writes that the sixteenth century, termed an age of kings, was also an “age of queens—among them Anne Boleyn, Margaret of Navarre, Elizabeth I, Catherine de Médicis, and Mary Queen of Scots. The Ottomans too produced a ‘queen’ in Hurrem Sultan,” who rose to the position of great prestige and influence and whose unprecedented alliance with the sultan was a “symptom of a more profound change within the dynasty” involving the issues of monarchy, family, and power (58). It is with Roxolana that the period known as the “Sultanate of Women,” during which women of the Topkapi Palace gained unparalleled access to political power and which lasted for over a century, began (Andrews and Kalpaki 244). Furthermore, as Hsu-Ming Teo contends, her name has become emblematic of female empowerment, as “Europe had a two-

century-long tradition of associating strong harem women—often European—with variations of the name Roxane or Roxelane” (“Eroticizing” 32-33).

Though the writers under discussion lay their scenes in the Imperial Harem, none of them attempts to present it as the locus of power in the Ottoman Empire, with an extremely organized system of administration and hierarchy. Instead, by subscribing to the “ideal harem of the generic stereotype” (Lewis 183), they portray it as a lascivious sexual playground, drawing on nineteenth-century pornographic convention that conceptualizes the imaginary harem as a “garden of delight.” When fabricating Roxolana’s memoir, Vynnychuk imports the Western pornographic tradition, including, among other elements, such narrative strategy as “life-writing,” which proliferated in the form of confessional letters, diaries, and memoirs in nineteenth-century master texts. Because of its perceived immediacy and authenticity, the first person narrative has become, as Steven Marcus asserts in his influential *The Other Victorians*, one of the persisting conventions of pornography at least since the end of the eighteenth century (204). Fredericks’s re-enactment of the eroticized, pornographic Orient of colonial discourse, which luxuriates in taboo and illicit sexual practices, replicates the nineteenth-century British “representations of Oriental sexuality as perverted and deviant” (Teo, “Eroticizing” 38). He also draws on a sizeable storehouse of Western Orientalist characters and themes by focusing on the “figure of the powerful concubine exemplified in the French Roxane/Roxelane tales of the eighteenth century, whereby the irresistible concubine Roxelane tames and makes monogamous the sultan Soliman” (Teo, *Desert* 7). Furthermore, by making her a “degenerate empress,” Fredericks follows Orientalist tales of the harem in which the name Roxelane, or Roxane, was increasingly associated with a concubine who used sex to achieve her ambitions, and thus became “synonymous with whore, and the harem assumed in many minds the characteristics of a brothel” (Cavaliero 37). In contrast to Fredericks’s “hardcore” version of Roxolana’s ascent to power and both his and Vynnychuk’s unidirectional Roxolana-Süleyman plotlines, Parker creates heterosexual as well as homoerotic intrigue by introducing an additional male character from Roxelana’s pre-Ottoman past, with his own rite of passage that takes him from Ukraine to Istanbul. The publication of *Roxelana & Suleyman* seems also to be concurrent with resurfacing Orientalist narratives and their staple figures in the romance novels since the beginning of the new millennium, particularly after 11 September 2001 (Jarmakani vii).<sup>3</sup> In addition, Parker’s “homosexualization” of eroticism coincides with the recent upsurge in scholarship on “historical constructions of same-sex Islamic sexual sexuality” (Boone xxii).

Despite their similarities, these three texts diverge considerably from one another, primarily in terms of which characters become orientalized and to what degree. The most evident disparity is in their portrayals of Roxolana’s origin, which signifies the starting point in her exoticization, and which happens prior to her captivity and appearance in the Imperial Harem. Vynnychuk identifies ethnically with Roxolana, who was born in Western Ukraine; her story has captivated the collective imagi-

nation of Ukrainian writers, composers, and artists, who created a male cult of an eminent Hurrem Sultan and established her as an icon of heroic Ukrainian womanhood.<sup>4</sup> This reinvention started in the nineteenth century, during the Ukrainian cultural revival, and formally coincided with the popularity of Oriental narratives in Western Europe. In contrast to Vynnychuk's "insider" vantage point, both Fredericks and Parker homogenize the empress's foreignness and Otherness—which are decidedly not Western European—into a sub-oriental, white-but-not-quite image, thus presumably taking the nineteenth-century British point of view that the geographies and cultures signified by the term "Orient" include not only Asia and North Africa, but also Eastern Europe (Stillinger and Lynch). This generic orientalization has its counterpart and supplement in the commonly-accepted idea in the twentieth century that everything within the Soviet border is "Russia."

98 Orientalist pornographic literature, like pornography in general, represents sexual fantasy, aims to titillate, and transgresses prevailing codes of sexual representation, thus rendering historical or geographical details irrelevant. Even so, the inner logic of a text still seems to be essential, especially since Fredericks consistently includes references to historical events and figures in his narrative, and Parker's novel embraces an extensive historical background.<sup>5</sup> It is ironic, though, that while researching the mores and manners of the Ottoman court, and paying attention, for example, to such details as the "passion of Ottomans for the tulip [that] was a symbol of a sacred world which revolves around The Woman" (Cavaliero 32) and had explicit erotic connotations<sup>6</sup> by metonymically using the flower to address Roxelana in *Roxelana & Suleyman*, the authors dispense with the pre-Ottoman part in both pornofictions with several casual strokes.

Thus, Fredericks describes Roxelana interchangeably as both "Russian" and "Circassian," and russifies the name of Roxelana's hometown, which was originally part of Galician Rus' (Western Ukraine), was under Polish rule during Roxolana's lifetime ("Rohatyn"), and was annexed by the USSR (Russia in "standard" Western perception) only in 1939, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union. While Roxelana's "Russianness" situates her in Subcarpathia (the Carpathians are a mountain range in Central and Eastern Europe), her "Circassianness" takes her to the Caucasus Mountains, located at the furthest eastern confluence of Europe and Asia. Moreover, Circassia was not designated as a Russian province until 1785 ("Circassian"), long after Roxolana's death in 1558.<sup>7</sup> Roxelana's father is similarly hybridized, seemingly inhabiting both spaces as a result of this geographical confusion; he is a "local religious leader of the Eastern Orthodox faith" (Fredericks loc. 88) who is, paradoxically, a connoisseur of Islamicate thought (Circassians are Sunni Muslims). Although Parker places his Roxelana (a.k.a. Aleksandra in her pre-Ottoman life) in the Principality of Galicia against an extreme Gothic landscape of subliminally steep mountains, precipitous ravines, thick forests and a towering castle, his heterotopic mind's eye lodges her in Lviv, which he calls the "village of Lvov" (the toponym used in Russian<sup>8</sup>). However, Lviv was not a village in

the early 1400s (a century before Roxolana's birth), as it was home to approximately 10,000 inhabitants, supported thirty-six different professions grouped in fourteen guilds with over 500 master craftsmen enrolled in them (Subtelny 87-88), and was granted Magdeburg Law in 1356 (Subtelny 84). In terms of Roxelana's lineage, Parker features her father as a moral authority and a "stabilizing influence for the town-folk from his High Street Kirk" (15), as if implicitly alluding to the Kirk of Scotland and thus "translating" Roxelana's birthplace near the Carpathian Mountains into a recognizable location similar to the Highlands in the British Isles.

The Circassian theme of Roxelana's origin in Fredericks appears to reflect the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fascination with the idealized image of "Circassian beauty," which represented European erotic fantasies and "dreams of perfectibility" (Figal 173). These iconic beauties were celebrated in European narratives, "whether in travel literature, anthropological treatises, natural history texts, novels, plays, or philosophical essays, as the most beautiful human beings in the world" (Figal 166). Furthermore, Circassia acquired an exotic reputation in Europe because, traditionally, "white female slaves came primarily from Circassia" (Robinson-Dunn 17). In the real world of human trafficking, Circassian women were highly desirable, "being legendary for their pale beauty and much sought after for elite harems and the palace" (Lewis 132), and thus had the highest value on the Ottoman slave market (Figal 163) as fetishized status symbols and valuable possessions. Moreover, Circassians had their own traditions of parents selling their children into slavery, or young girls volunteering, "since to many the prospect of life in an elite Istanbul harem was preferable to a hard life in the Caucasus" (Lewis 132).

However, the historical Roxolana did encounter a rival Circassian beauty, Mahidevran, Süleyman's chief consort, upon her "relocation" to Istanbul (Piers 59). Having turned the Circassian into the "blond Russian beauty" (loc. 364), Fredericks presents Mahidevran's exile to the remote part of the empire as a result of Roxelana's intrigues and sexual manipulations of the Sultan into banishing her adversary in exchange for reinstalling a "special brand of soul-searing sexual stimulation" (loc. 364), fellatio, that she was withholding because of the conflict. Vynnychuk's final chapter, relating how Roxolana became Haseki Hurrem Sultan (99-102), also refers to the elimination of Roxolana's main competition; he closely follows the 1553 account of the Venetian ambassador to Turkey, which reveals Roxolana's "ability to manipulate the protocol of the harem to her advantage" and explains how she won the Sultan's affection (Pierce 59). According to the ambassador, Roxolana was violently attacked by the jealous Circassian, and refused to appear before Süleyman after the assault due to her blemished appearance. Repulsed by the Circassian's violence and her defiant claim of supremacy over the other women, the Sultan redirected "all his love" to Roxolana (Pierce 60). Vynnychuk recounts this dramatically tense episode as a triangle of appropriative rivalry, after which Mahidevran is banished from the imperial palace and Roxolana steadily rises to a position of uncontested power.

Although contrasting sharply with Fredericks's brief summary of the "simple"

sexual solution that Roxelana devises, Vynnychuk's version concurs with Parker's depiction of the rivalry between Roxelana and Mahidavran,<sup>9</sup> the beauty with "shimmering black hair" and "eyes that glistened like exotic black pearls" (Parker 120). Parker elaborates on the dynamics of their relationship in detail, building up the tension between the two favorites to culminate in an extremely ferocious final confrontation. Whereas in the account of the Venetian ambassador and in both twentieth-century narratives, the clash merely involves a scratched face and pulled-out hair, in *Roxelana & Suleyman* Mahidavran punches her pregnant adversary in the abdomen: "As convulsions began to wrack her body, Haseki stared in horror at the pavement about her. The wetness of broken waters—streaked with a stream of dark blood—soaked her robes and spread across the marble" (Parker 429). After the Sultan finds her paralyzed with panic and pain, he orders the assailant to leave Istanbul immediately and forever.

100 It is interesting that sexual fantasies in *Degenerate Empress* are accompanied by no less fanciful intellectual ones, both being stereotyped in Orientalist pornographic novels. Thus, in *Degenerate Empress*, Roxelana has received an extensive education prior to her captivity. In addition to being fluent in Greek and Latin, as the historical Roxolana has been credited with knowledge of these two languages (Makhun), she also knows Turkish, Arabic, and presumably Kipchak (the Crimean Tatar language). She is an accomplished musician, who plays the sitar, the lyre, and the lute, and a refined intellectual, who has studied the works of Eastern philosophers and poets (Fredericks loc. 280). And, on top of all these accomplishments, she surprises Suleiman "by quoting, verbatim, many long and difficult passages from the various works of some of the famed Oriental poets" (Fredericks loc. 280). By making Roxelana a polyglot, Fredericks employs certain nineteenth-century pornographic scenarios, while reversing their assigned gender roles; for example, the Lustful Turk of the eponymous novel is fluent in English, Greek, French, and Turkish (Marcus 198). However, as a hybrid, she also invites another analogy, to Shahrazad in *The Arabian Nights*, "who had read the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and maxims of sages and kings. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined" (qtd. in Massad 357). Conversely, Parker's Roxelana does not demonstrate any knowledge, training, or accomplishments prior to entering the harem, and she is eager to learn Turkish and Persian, take lessons in singing and various instruments, and receive "much tutelage in the finest methods of embroidery and sewing as well as intricacies of history, mathematics, and geography" (Parker 74) that are offered to the harem inhabitants at the time of her arrival. Vynnychuk also addresses such differentiating cultural markers as language. However, unlike Fredericks, whose newly arrived multilingual concubine converses with the Sultan in his own tongue, or Parker, who does not recognize the existence of any language barriers, Vynnychuk attempts to preserve the memoir's "authentic" ring and explains that Süleyman addresses Roxolana in Slovenian, lending further verisimilitude to the Sultan's use of

a Slavic language by explaining that his mother is Bosnian (Vynnychuk 23).<sup>10</sup>

Besides being coached by authority figures and designated educators, Vynnychuk's Roxolana receives informal tutelage in the art of love from her fellow odalisques. It is noteworthy that in his representation of the harem occupants, Vynnychuk seemingly reflects Istanbul's "protean diversity" that encompassed "multiple ethnicities, religions, and populations" (Boone 114). It is intriguing to recognize that his construction of the harem's sexualities is based on a circulating set of tales and references involving religious, linguistic, and biological amalgamation. Yet, within this cross-cultural inclusivity and linguistic diversity, he segregates white women—the Serbian, Macedonian, Bosnian, and presumably Polish concubines—from racial others, the Slavic factor being an additional axis of separation. In so doing, Vynnychuk implicitly combines Western assumptions that the "darker races" were always "desirous of white people" (Loomba 134) with racial concepts that accord privilege to fair-skinned bodies in Orientalist representations (MacKenzie 46), and superimposes the racism inherited from Soviet society, in which it was deeply rooted, onto biologically essentialist stigmatization of interracial relations, which crystallized during the nineteenth-century French and British colonial expansion into the Middle East (Teo, "Eroticizing" 45-46). He also shifts the focus from Roxolana's experiences by introducing the inlaid stories of the other occupants of the harem to provide variegated routes for excursions into Ottoman sexscapes, on the one hand, and to distance Roxolana from "inappropriate" sexual indulgences, on the other. These stories motivate her to embark on a literary project of disseminating her acquired sexual wisdom for the public good:

Читала юж-єм писанія о коханню од грекинь списані, од сарацинок також, іно нігде не чула, жеби русинка тоє писала. Прето будучи в зупольной пам'яті і цілому розумі, сим хочу прислугу вчинити для всіх, которіі в коханню знаходять радість і втіху, ажеби надалі то еще кунштовній справовали і не гляділи на тоє спросно (себто не вбачали розпусту). (Vynnychuk 6)

(I have read writings about love transcribed from Greek women and also from Saracen women, but never have I heard about a Ruthenian female writing such things. That is why, with my memory sound and my reason intact, I want to do a favor for all those who find joy and delight in love, so that later they will refine lovemaking and not look at it askance [that is, regard it as licentiousness]).<sup>11</sup>

Here Vynnychuk utilizes the conventions of *bāhnāme*, "part-medical, part-erotic treatises covering a wide range of subjects from taxonomies of genitalia, to catalogues of sexual positions, aphrodisiac recipes to risqué anecdotes, contraceptive measures to means of ensuring conceptions" (Artan and Schick 157). However, the ironic playfulness of Roxolana's self-revelations also suggests associations with a pornographic treatise by the Ottoman poet, courtier, "legal scholar and pornographer" (Andrews and Kalpaki 239) Deli Birader Gazali, *The Book That Repels Sorrows and Removes Anxieties*, which has been called "a send-up of the genre of the erotic instruction manual" (Boone 113). These Turkish erotic guides gained popularity in Europe in the

nineteenth century, along with the Indian *Kama Sutra* and the Arabic *The Perfumed Garden*. It is also noteworthy that Vynnychuk himself refers to *Zhyttiie haremmoie* (*Life in the Harem*) as a manual for a happy family life, and highlights its “educational” value by mentioning one of his female readers for whom the book became an eye-opener after twenty years of married life (Kyrychok).

In contrast to Vynnychuk’s strategy of bricolaging erotic narratives, Fredericks’s text introduces performances of sexual deviance staged by Ibn Ben ad-Zaid, who arrives from Arabia, the “cradle of erotica, where rampant sensuality and every carnal deviation, every weird variation of wanton lust known to man was born” (Fredericks loc. 743). Although both authors describe a wide variety of sexual practices (heterosexual, anorectal, fellatory, cunnilingual, lesbian, homosexual, orgiastic), Fredericks pushes his sexual fantasy farther than Vynnychuk does by including incest, sadism, and bestiality, which violate taboo subjects to different degrees, as, for example, incest occurs in pornography “with about the same frequency as marriages occur at the end of English novels” (Marcus 245). Thus, Ibn Ben ad-Zaid, whose scenarios performed by specially trained Arab girls, young men, and animals satisfy Roxelana’s demonic cravings, supports and enhances the Orientalist stereotype of the Arabic world as a site of inconceivable sexual excess and violence. An analogy thus emerges between racial and gender deviance, as does the image of Arabian men as “most rapacious” (*Lustful Turk* 24) that appears in the nineteenth-century pornographic classics.

Furthermore, Fredericks’s representations of deviant Arab sexuality can also be traced back to numerous translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* that had kept the European imagination spellbound since the eighteenth century and which culminated with Sir Richard Burton’s *Arabian Nights* (1885-87). Radically different from earlier publications, Burton’s unexpurgated, sexually explicit version is supplemented with anthropological observations: ten volumes of the *Nights* are accompanied by “six or seven volumes of the *Supplemental Nights*” (Sallis 4). The latter include observations on “Arab sexual practices such as bestiality, sodomy, eunuchism, clitoridectomy, and miscegenation” (Colligan 32). Burton’s “cataloguing [of] supposedly Arab sexual practices” (Teo, “Eroticizing” 38), which reappear in Fredericks’s taxonomies of deviance, is explicitly structured along the civilized-barbarian, human-animal, masculine-feminine, Caucasian axes, as well as the racial divide (Colligan 32). It is also noteworthy that Burton’s controversial translation, which violently disrupted the then-Orientalist imagination, propelled the continuing debate about “pornography,” a term that entered the “vocabulary of international moral campaigners by the early 1880s” (Colligan 33) and which has become a main source of the Western erotic imaginary (Nishio 156), thus solidifying its reputation as a repository of loose morals (Sironval 237). All these reiterative narratives contributed to establishing a long-lasting stereotype that has refined the “Arab down to his quintessential attributes” (Said 230) of the “impossible creature whose libidinal energy drives him to paroxysms of over-stimulation” (Said 312).

It is not the views on lovemaking as an “aesthetic, explorative adventure”

(Bouhdiba 145) expressed in Sheikh Nafzawi's sixteenth-century manual of Arabian erotology, *The Perfumed Garden*, and other texts on erotic subjects, whose authors excelled in the use of classical Arabic in their "descriptions of the art of lovemaking" (Akande 14), that come into play in Fredericks's lubricated fantasy world of voluptuaries and degenerates. His representations clearly draw, not without a twist, on the body of Orientalist literature featuring the harem and the seraglio, which obsessively conjured up images of sultans spending all their time among seductive women and over-indulging "in every conceivable kind of vice that the united brain of jealous, sex-starved women could invent for the pleasure of their lord" (Penzer 13). However, *Degenerate Empress* violates the aforementioned formula of women's insatiable sexual servitude, which casts them as instruments of male pleasure in its inversion of gender and sexual hierarchy. As a spectacle of female sexual excess, Fredericks's Roxelana is a creature of violence, with an anomalous, sybaritic sex drive; a monstrous subject of erotic desire whose pathological deviance can outscore any "united [female] brain."

It is interesting, however, that Vynnychuk makes use of Arabian erotology as, in a condensed intertextual gesture, he has the Sultan reading Roxolana a poetic glossary of names for sexual organs in the arbor of love, thus replicating the movement of three chapters of *The Perfumed Garden*, in which the sheikh lists a series of words that "designate the organs of generation" (Bouhdiba 147). In addition, Süleyman recites erotic poetry by al-Suyütī, a prolific Arab religious scholar and author, who also wrote several treatises on erotology (Bouhdiba 144), and concludes their reading session with frivolously diverse descriptions of vaginas of Byzantine, Spanish, Indian, Finnish, Iraqi, Syrian, Persian, Nubian, Turkish, and Balkan women (Vynnychuk 94-95). In addition to these borrowings and allusions, the poetic aspect of the relationship between the Sultan and Roxolana as portrayed by Vynnychuk is rooted in history, as, on a more serious note, "Süleyman's passionate attachment to Hurrem shines in his poetry, especially in the [...] well-known verse letter written under the sultan's pen name, Muhibbi (the Affectionate/Lover)" (Andrews and Kalpaki 243).

Compared to Fredericks's and Vynnychuk's pornographic romps, Parker produces a more extensive narrative by supplementing Roxelana's and Suleyman's story with that of Dariusz, a young boy from Roxelana's homeland. Even though, during the calamitous Tatar raid, he is "killed" and mourned twice prior to his voyage to the Ottoman Empire, in the best traditions of sensation novels, he miraculously survives, follows his beloved to Istanbul, and ends up, as a janissary, in the personal service of the Sultan. However implausible Dariusz's survival is, his successful career does not seem very bizarre, as the ranks of the Sultan's palace administration and janissary guard were staffed by Christian youth from conquered territories (Boone 115). As a "corps d'élite at the personal command of the Sultan, [...] they became a feared and favoured army open to talent and sensational promotion" throughout the sixteenth century (Cavaliero 6). It is during his service at the court that the spectre of homoeroticism begins to overshadow Dariusz's grand heterosexual passion for Aleksandra/Roxelana, which is so overwhelming that upon his arrival in Istanbul, he is even

ready to be castrated in order to obtain a eunuch position in the Imperial Harem and thus be in close proximity to her. This adds yet another enticing stroke to his sexual persona, since a eunuch as a “sexual category associated with the Middle East” both horrified and fascinated Europeans (Boone 405). Simultaneously, his position in the Sultan’s janissary guard enables his homoerotic drive because janissaries have been historically associated with homosexual behavior (Boone 86). Passing through various narrative twists and turns, Dariusz finally lands in a scenario of triangulated desire as, in addition to being in love with Roxelana, he also falls in love with Suleyman, and is loved by both of them. Renamed Davud, he enjoys their ménage à trois, sacrifices his life to protect Roxelana and, presumably, his child during the Grand Vizier’s attempted coup d’état, and dies in the arms of the grieving Sultan and Roxelana. Neither of them exhibits stereotypical Oriental jealousy; Suleyman and Davud have an explicitly homoerotic liaison at the same time that they both have heterosexual relationships with Roxelana, who feels “secure between the warmth of the two men of her life. She was the diamond between the two emeralds of Europe and Asia. She was Istanbul” (Parker 425). This sexual metaphor that effeminizes Istanbul, once possessed by Europeans, then conquered by the Turks, later to be inseminated by both cultures, clearly articulates the intertwined implications of sexuality and power in Western constructions of the East in general and Parker’s in particular.

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It is worth noting, however, that the historical Süleyman’s half-century reign dominated what is known as the Age of the Beloveds in the Ottoman Empire, and this period, in turn, was “dominated by the shadowy subtext of the sultan’s love” for Ibrahim and Hurrem/Roxolana (Andrews and Kalpaki 238). The stories of Roxolana’s and Ibrahim’s ascendancy—to the position of the most powerful woman in the empire and to the highest secular position of Grand Vizier, respectively—become counterparts of each other and constitute what Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaki call the “life-stages-of-love” progression throughout Europe—from Istanbul to London—during the sixteenth century:

A young man, hot-blooded and somewhat wild, is first devoted to the love of other young (or younger) men; then, as he ages, he turns to women and the life of family and children. In the phallogocentric context of early-modern times, this progression is imagined as a movement from a very virile, manly period, in which the erotic focus is on the masculine, toward a more effeminate period, in which the erotic focus is on the feminine and a man turns to a more contemplative, sedate, and inactive life. (244)

The act of removing Ibrahim from this erotic equation or, rather, extending the virile stage of Suleyman’s love into the feminine one by replacing him with Davud as a younger object of the Sultan’s homoerotic desire and thus making two stages overlap, reinforces Parker’s pornographic fantasy of the erotic commerce between East and West. Yet, this is not the only case of the author’s variations in taxonomizing desire to create the allure of erotic plentitude. Suleyman has sexual relationships with his childhood friend, Ibrahim, who becomes Grand Vizier and with whom Suleyman falls out of love; with Hafsa, his mother, thus breaking the taboo on incest; with

Davud and Roxelana, being in love with both and forming heterosexual and homosexual duets and mixed trios; and with the odalisques in the harem. In addition to erotic configurations delineated as "life-stages-of-love," Suleyman's relationship with his mother represents a warped re-enactment of Oedipal fantasy. Although he does have sexual relations with the parent of the opposite sex, it is his mother who eliminates Sultan Selim, his father, to pave Suleyman's way to the throne. Furthermore, besides her incestuous liaison with Suleyman, which he ends upon becoming sultan, Hafsa has sex with Ibrahim, thus crossing the generational line and creating another triangle. However, because Suleyman and Ibrahim have been very close, like brothers, since childhood, she enters into a semi-incestuous relationship here too. While the novel's action devolves into a series of heterosexual and homosexual encounters, homoeroticism reigns supreme among them, as multiplying manifestations of male erotic desire occur pervasively in every location and on every occasion described in the novel: the palace, on battlefields, in military pavilions, in parks and gardens, and at waterfronts. The overabundance of these encounters and pages lavished with details about various types of hardening "manhoods" exemplify what Joseph Allen Boone sees as the "phantasmic intensity with which Western imaginations have associated the Muslim world with male homoeroticism" (xx), adding that "no other geographical domain into which the Anglo-European gaze has fixed its sometimes imperial, sometimes covetous, sometimes simply curious eye has been so associated with the specter of male-male sexuality over the centuries" (xx).

While both Parker and Fredericks uninhibitedly depict slavish "lusts of an unknown and prodigious nature" (Boone 118), Vynnychuk's attitude to same-sex erotic relationships draws on heterosexual and homophobic articulations of homoerotic desire as debasing and offensive. For example, as the appointed avatar of compulsory heterosexuality, Süleyman's mother calls the Turkish rulers' love of boys an "ancient Greek disease" ("davnia hrets'ka khoroba" [Vynnychuk 79]), and emphasizes that her son is the first sultan who is not interested in boys. However, contrary to Orientalist homoerotic fantasy, which has been deemed transgressive within the European erotic imaginary, homosexuality was not regarded as deviant in the Ottoman world of the time, and, according to scholars like Dror Ze'evi, "homoerotic or pederastic passion did not bear the stigma of abnormal behavior that it came to bear in modern Western cultures" (2). Furthermore, *bāhnāmes* often made at least passing references to homosexuality, "particularly male, and some were exclusively homoerotic" (Artan and Schick 158). As Boone demonstrates by drawing on numerous historical and literary examples, "erotic—and often homoerotic—abundance," yoked to the empire's diverse plenitude, was featured in "Ottoman representations of its vibrant culture over a period of several centuries" (115). This "normality" of homoerotic desire can profoundly problematize conservative norms of masculinity, with its provenance of heteronormativity; because of this potential disruption of post-Soviet male beliefs, Vynnychuk categorically excludes any homoerotic innuendoes. Although Ukraine was the first among the former Soviet republics to

decriminalize homosexuality, homophobia still remains a challenge in Ukrainian society (Martsenyuk 52-53).

Parker's profusion of orgasmic male bodies, congregating on an imaginary escapist site packed with Oriental clichés, seems to lack exemplary hypermasculinity. It is ironic that his Suleyman is not so much a warrior on the battlefield—war episodes are replete with details of homoerotic temptations and lust—or a mythical Oriental despot, but a paragon of magnificence and splendour. Furthermore, he does not fit comfortably into the topos of the Lustful Turk either; rather, he belongs to what I would call the Amorous Turk, a category that harmonizes perfectly with the Age of the Beloveds and his passion for Ibrahim, Roxelana, and Davud, and with the pseudonym that the historical Sultan used for his literary exploits. In representing the Sultan this way, Parker follows the eighteenth-century turquerie tradition, which “gained its power from a deep admiration for the Ottoman elite” in opposition to later representations, which served “to establish European superiority over Ottomans” (Bevilacqua and Pfeifer 110). Where the Ottoman section of the novel begins as a romance of sumptuous quasi-idyll set in a place of luxury and sensual opulence, it ends with scenes of bloody carnage and devastation, a backdrop against which the Sublime couple and the dying Davud sentimentally proclaim their eternal love.

Although all three novels partake in an ongoing collective Orientalist fantasizing about foreign cultures, with the harem as one of their major myths, essentially unchanged over a century—“timeless, violent, erotic, and primitive” (Steet 154)—they differ as to the ways in which they use the vast and often contradictory repertoire of Orientalist tropes. By placing Roxolana, who holds a special status in the Ukrainian collective imaginary, in the harem setting that she truly enjoys, Vynnychuk plays with Ukrainian cultural symbols and makes a peculiar contribution to his “imaginary history” of Ukraine. Fredericks, in contrast, draws on numerous Western narratives that vilify the empress (Yermolenko 1) and translates them into pornographic discourse, simultaneously positing absolute, insurmountable civilizational distance by orientalizing her twice over, as Eastern European and Ottoman, into a fundamental Other that epitomizes sexual aberration and excess. Whereas he pictures his Roxelana with a proclivity for sexual indulgence so promiscuous as to border on the bestial, Vynnychuk's fake memoir playfully positions her as the first Ukrainian grande dame of sexual liberation. Parker's novel complements Roxelana's story with multidimensional erotic vectors, combining such genres as sensation and Gothic novels, romance, and historical fiction. In spite of these differences, these texts seem to have been generated by somewhat similar sociocultural energies instrumental in provoking often unsettling discoveries related to previously unarticulated aspects of social identity. *Degenerate Empress* is influenced by the 1960s sexual revolution, which signified the expression of sexual beliefs and practices that were more susceptible to radical shifts than economic and social structures in the West. However, Fredericks counterbalances this progressive vector by his compliance with the nineteenth-century Orientalist literary tradition in which women, according to

Said's observations, are "creatures of a male power-fantasy," relentlessly exhibiting "unlimited sexuality" (207). Ukraine, as part of the totalitarian USSR, "missed" the 1960s phase of sexual liberation and made up for lost time in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet regime, as reflected in *Zhytjie haremnoie* (*Life in the Harem*). On the one hand, this work exposes, not without a touch of sensationalism, the hypocrisies of the there-is-no-sex-in-the-USSR state, and, on the other, awakens society, which had accepted its hideous conditions of servitude by subjecting itself to repressive totalitarian body politics, among other numerous forms of oppression. *Roxelana & Suleyman* reflects the rapidly changing current sexual scene that demands both revisiting foundational mythologies of erotic pleasures and their re-inscriptions on desiring bodies. Parker's "homeroicizing" of both Orientalism and the Harem as a fantasy site for cross-cultural sexual relations further develops an already established convention in gay male pornography, which incorporates Orientalism as its important constitutive part.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

1. In this essay I use the spelling "Roxolana" except when discussing Fredericks's and Parker's novels, for which I use their spelling, "Roxelana."
2. I use the Turkish spelling "Süleyman" throughout this paper, except when discussing Fredericks, who spells it as "Suleiman," and Parker, who spells it as "Suleyman."
3. For the cultural lineage of such "desert romances" from the twelfth to the twenty-first centuries, see Teo, *Desert Passions*.
4. For a more detailed discussion of the Roxolana cult in Ukrainian culture, see Romanets, "Roxolana's Memoirs as a Garden of Intertextual Delight," and Halenko, "How a Turkish Empress Became a Champion of Ukraine."
5. See the "Acknowledgements," specifically referring to the sources he used (Parker 509-10).
6. "The six petals of a perfect tulip formed close guard round its anthers and ovaries only to open in the privacy of the private gardens to expose its vulva-like calyx and erect and arrogant pistil, awaiting the orgasmic triumph that set hearts racing" (Cavaliero 32).
7. For a more detailed discussion of ethnicity, see Romanets, "An Ethno-Reading of the Imperial Harem in David Fredericks's *Degenerate Empress* and Yuri Vynnychuk's *Zhytjie haremnoie* [*Life in the Harem*]."
8. Similarly to Rohatyn, Lviv, like all of Western Ukraine, was never part of Russia, as it was annexed by the USSR in 1939.
9. This is how Parker spells her name, although it is Mahidevran in the literature.
10. According to several historical accounts, she was either Serbian (Makhun) or the daughter of the "Khan of Crimean Tatars" (Bridge 110).
11. All translations from Ukrainian are mine.
12. See Todd D. Smith, "Gay Male Pornography and the East: Re-orienting the Orient."

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