

**AN ETHNO-READING OF THE IMPERIAL HAREM IN DAVID
FREDERICK'S *DEGENERATE EMPRESS* AND YURI VYNNYCHUK'S
ЖИТТЄ ГАРЕМНОЄ [LIFE IN THE HAREM]**

*By focusing on the discursive spaces of the Imperial Harem in an ethno-cultural framework, this article inquires into two twentieth-century historiographic pornofictions *Degenerate Empress* and *Життє гаремноє* that draw on the figure of the most powerful woman of the Ottoman Empire, Roxolana. This article explores how Orientalist dynamics of representations embedded in the past are still active in contemporary culture.*

Key words: *Orientalism, orientalization, exoticism, otherness, historiography, ethnic, marker of ethnicity, harem, eroticism, pornography.*

Within a vast repertoire of heterogeneous Orientalist discourses, the harem has long become a key trope as one of the biggest mystifications of Orientalism, which mirrored Western psychosexual needs and provided the space on which to project fantasies of illicit eroticism. 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” [8, p. 182–83].

The mesmerizing, overamplified powers of the great Seraglio entrenched in the European imagination arrested, as Rana Kabbani writes in her analyses of English translations from Oriental texts, the “perception of even the most gifted scholars” [7, p. 66]. In fact, however, as Leslie P. Pierce contends in an examination of major myths about the Ottoman Empire, sex was not the fundamental dynamic of the harem, which was ruled rather by family politics [13, p. 3]. Pierce continues that, according to the less enticed and more informed of 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” [13, p. 6].

I attempt here an ethno-reading of two twentieth-century texts that draw on the erotic charge of the harem—David Fredericks’s *Degenerate Empress* (1968) [5] and Yuriy Vynnychuk’s *Життє гаремноє* (1996) [19]—which represent this decadent depository of exoticism and sexual excess from West European and

East European perspectives respectively. I term these novels historiographic pornofictions as both writers deal with the Süleymanic period (1520–1566) of the Ottoman Empire, embracing vast territory and diverse variety of peoples. Both focus on a historical figure—Roxolana¹ (Nastia Lisovska¹ (c.1504–1558)—the most cherished concubine of Süleyman² the Magnificent who was captured by the Ottoman vassals during their slave raid into Ukraine in 1520 and donated to the imperial harem, and who legally married the sultan and became the first really 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 [13, 58].

Having laid the scene in the Imperial Harem, neither writer 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” [8, p. 183], both turn it into a lascivious sexual playground. Both draw on the nineteenth-century pornographic convention in the manner of *The Lustful Turk* (1828), *The Seducing Cardinal's Amours* (1830), and *Scenes in the Seraglio* (between 1820 and 1830), wherein the imaginary harem as the “garden of delight” is featured as a staple concept. When fabricating Roxolana’s memoir, Vynnychuk imports the Western pornographic tradition by employing, in addition to its other key elements, the confessional letter, which is used as a narrative strategy in the above novels [16, p. 42]. Fredericks similarly utilizes a sizeable storehouse of Western Orientalist characters and themes by focusing on the “figure of 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” [18, 7].

However, alongside these convergences, the texts demonstrate considerable divergences, primarily in terms of which of the characters get Orientalized and to what degree. The most evident disparity appears with the figure of Roxolana, with whom Vynnychuk ethnically identifies as she was born in Western Ukraine. Her spellbinding story has exerted its allure on the collective imagination of Ukrainian writers, composers, and artists, who created their male cult of an eminent Hurrem

¹ I use “Roxolana” throughout my discussion and when dealing with Vynnychuk’s memoirs. I adhere to Fredericks’ spelling, “Roxelana,” when examining his novel.

² Similarly, I use “Süleyman” all the way through, except when discussing Fredericks, who spells the name as “Suleiman.”

Sultan, turning her into an icon of Ukrainian womanhood.³ Contrary to this “insider” vantage point, Fredericks homogenizes a famous empress’s foreignness and Otherness—things decidedly not West European—into a classic “Oriental” image, thus presumably drawing on the nineteenth-century British point of view according to which the geographies and cultures signified by “Orient” include not only what is east of Europe and the Mediterranean, but everything east of the English Channel. This generic Orientalism is supplemented with the commonly accepted twentieth-century idea that everything behind the Soviet border is Russia; thus, Fredericks’ Roxelana is interchangeably called both “Russian” and “Circassian.” To make the name of Roxelana’s hometown sound Russian, Fredericks adds a typically Russian inflexion to the Ukrainian place name, Rohatyn (Rogatin), turning it into “Rogatino,” even though Rohatyn, originally part of Galician Rus’, which developed under Polish rule into an “important trading and manufacturing town” [15] during Roxolana’s lifetime, was annexed by the USSR (Russia in “standard” Western perception) only in 1939.

Fredericks’s orientalizing geographic imagination boldly adds an extra identity-forming sequence to Roxolana’s native Subcarpathia by including another mountain range at the farthest eastern confluence of Europe and Asia, the Caucasus, as Circassians reside in its northwestern region. Although these Caucasian people are Sunnite Muslims by faith, Fredericks refers to Roxolana’s father as “the pope, a local religious leader of the Eastern Orthodox faith” [5, loc. 88], evidently utilizing what he might have seen as an ethnic Russian “touch” of sorts (“pope” resembles Russian “поп” [pop], a word for priest). In addition, this Orthodox priest is paradoxically a connoisseur of Eastern thought. Further, Circassia, having experienced successive influences or direct control of the Romans, Khazars, Mongols, Crimean Tatars, and Turks, was not designated as a Russian province until 1785 [4], with a subsequent migration of Ukrainian Cossacks (Slavic influx) that officially started in 1792 [12], long after Roxolana’s death in 1558.

It is also interesting that, according to the 1553 report of the Venetian ambassador to Turkey, it was Roxolana’s rival and prince Mustafa’s mother who was a Circassian [13, p. 59]. However, in *Degenerate Empress* the Circassian becomes the “blond Russian beauty” who ends up, together with the sultan’s firstborn, in a “remote province of the empire” because, being devastated by the new concubine’s continuous refusal to perform her “special brand of soul-searing

³ For a more detailed discussion of the Roxolana cult in Ukrainian culture, see my “Roxolana’s Memoirs as a Garden of Intertextual Delight,” in *Roxolana in European History and Culture*, ed. Galina Yermolenko (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 125–39, and Oleksander Halenko’s “How a Turkish Empress Became a Champion of Ukraine,” in the same collection, 109–23.

sexual stimulation,” [5, loc. 364], fellatio, until he banishes her adversary, lustful Suleiman reluctantly surrenders. Vynnychuk similarly refers to the episode of eliminating Roxolana’s major competition in the final chapter titled “О тім, як я стала гасекі гурем (царицею гарему).” Here he closely follows the account of the Venetian ambassador, which reveals Roxolana’s “ability to manipulate the protocol of the harem to her advantage” and explains how she won the sultan’s affection [13, p. 59]. According to the ambassador, Roxolana was attacked by the jealous Circassian who scratched Roxolana’s face, ruined her clothing, and insulted her. Roxolana refused to appear before Süleyman because of her damaged looks but eventually told him about the assault. The Circassian’s defiant claim for supremacy over all other women “inflamed the sultan even more for the reason that he no longer wanted her, and all his love was given to this other [Roxolana]” [qtd. in 13, p. 60]. Vynnychuk recounts this dramatically tense episode through the confrontation within a triangle of appropriative rivalry, after which the Circassian is exiled from the imperial palace and Roxolana steadily rises to the position of unparalleled power in the Orient. Vynnychuk’s version contrasts sharply with Fredericks’s brief summary of the “simple” sexual solution Roxolana administers.

While Fredericks’s ethno-hybridizing drive may be partially accounted for by his desire to push Roxolana’s otherness to the next level as orientalization tends to come in series running from west to east, Circassia also acquired an exotic reputation in Europe because traditionally “white female slaves came primarily from Circassia” [14, p. 17]; women “from the Caucasus regions of Georgia and Circassia were very important to the harem slave trade;” and Circassian women were highly desirable, “being legendary for their pale beauty and much sought after for elite harems and the palace” [8, p. 131]. Moreover, Circassians had their own traditions of slavery: 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” [8, p. 132].

It is this latter motivation that surfaces in Fredericks’s novel, wherein Roxolana nonchalantly discusses the death of her father, “chopped up” by the Tatars, with their leader and concludes, “I’m disgusted with filth and drudgery, tired of boredom, sick to death of hard work and mud huts and rough clothes, never enough to eat and being half-frozen through the winters” [5, loc. 111]. This statement seems at odds with her family status; as a priest’s daughter, she is socially privileged since the clergy belonged to influential strata of society. Furthermore, in *Degenerate Empress* she receives an impressively extensive education, being fluent in Greek, Latin (two languages with the knowledge of which historical Roxolana has been credited [11]), Turkish, Arabic, and presumably Kipchak (a Turkic language spoken by Crimean Tatars) in which she converses with her captors. She plays the

sitar, the lyre, and the lute; studies the works of Eastern philosophers and poets; and finally surprises Suleiman “by quoting, verbatim, many long and difficult passages from the various works of some of the famed Oriental poets” [5, loc. 280]. Complemented with dreams of grandeur, which she has had since she was a “small child” and which derived from “books of adventure and intrigue and power” [5, loc. 145], such accomplishments do not unproblematically factor into the life full of depravity and “hard work.” Even though pornographic production of Orientalist brand, as porn in general, represents sexual fantasy, centers on sex, aims to titillate, and transgresses prevailing codes of sexual display and representation, thus deeming historical or geographical details irrelevant, an inner logic of the text still seems to be essential especially since Fredericks consistently includes references to historical events and figures in his narrative.

Vynnychuk also addresses such markers of ethnicity as language. However, unlike Fredericks, who makes a newly arrived polyglot concubine converse with the sultan in his tongue, the Ukrainian author attempts to keep the “authentic” ring to the memoir and explains that Süleyman addresses Roxolana in Slovenian, which she has no difficulty understanding. He furthers the verisimilitude of the sultan’s use of one of the Slavic languages stating that his mother is Bosnian [19, p. 23] although, according to several versions of the vâlide sultan’s origins, she was either Serbian [11] or the daughter of the “Khan of Crimean Tatars” [3, p. 110]. While being used to make a careful selection of those who would be offered to the sovereign as possible consorts [6, p. 86], the vâlide sultan singles out the novice and designates her to the role of Süleyman’s future confidant and advisor and plans the transference of her own power to the young concubine.

In addition, Vynnychuk’s Roxolana is instructed in the art of love by her fellow odalisques. In his representation of the harem ethnic composition, the writer segregates white women—the Serbian, Macedonian, Bosnian, and presumably Polish concubines— from racial others (Slavic factor being an additional axis of separation). In so doing, he implicitly combines Western assumptions that the “darker races” were always “desirous of white people” [9, p. 134] with racial concepts that privilege the fair-skinned body in Orientalist representations of bath and harem scenes [10, p. 46] and with the racism inherited from Soviet society in which it was deeply rooted. He also shifts focalization away from Roxolana’s experiences by introducing the inlaid stories of other inhabitants of the harem to provide variegated routes for the excursions into the Ottoman sexscapes. These stories motivate Roxolana to embark on a literary project, both an erotic confession of her personal experiences and a set of instructions in lovemaking for public use, seemingly utilizing the conventions of *Bahname*, the Turkish sixteenth-century erotic guide made popular in Europe in the nineteenth century: “Читала юж-ем

писання о коханню од грекинь списані, од сарацинок також, іно нігде не чула, жеби русинка тоє писала. Прето будучи в зуполной пам'яті і цілому розумі, сим хочу прислугу вчинити для всіх, которіі в коханню знаходять радість і втіху, ажеби надалі то еще кунштovníй справовали і не гляділи на тоє спросно (себто не вбачали розпусту)” [19, p. 6].

Contrary to Vynnychuk's strategy of bricolage 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” [5, loc. 743]. Although both authors describe a wide variety of sexual numbers (heterosexual, anorectal, fellatory, cunnilingual, lesbian, orgiastic), Fredericks pushes his sexual fantasy farther by including incest, sadism, and bestiality. Thus, the character of Ibn Ben ad-Zaid, whose scenarios performed by specially trained Arab girls, young men, and animals satisfy Roxelana's demoniac cravings, supports and enhances the Orientalist stereotype of the Arabic world as a site of inconceivable sexual excess and violence, wherein an analogy emerges between racial and gender deviance, and of Arabian men as “most rapacious” [1, p. 24], as characterized in the earlier mentioned nineteenth-century classic of the porn genre.

Thus, Fredericks apparently disregards the world of the famous sixteenth-century manual of Arabian erotology, *The Perfumed Garden* of the sheikh Nafzawi translated into English by Sir Richard Burton in 1886, and other texts on the art of love-making as an “aesthetic, explorative adventure” [2, p. 145]. As opposed to Fredericks's monocular vision, Vynnychuk, when making the sultan read Roxolana a poetic list of names for sexual organs in the arbor of love, replicates, in a condensed manner, the movement of three chapters of *The Perfumed Garden*, in which the sheikh gives the series of words that “designate the organs of generation” [2, p. 147]. In addition, the sultan recites erotic poetry by al-Suyuti, a prolific Arab religious scholar and author, who also wrote several treatises on erotology [2, p. 144], and concludes their reading session with frivolous, ethnically diverse descriptions of vaginas of Byzantine, Spanish, Indian, Finnish, Iraqi, Syrian, Persian, Nubian, Turkish, and Balkan women [19, 94–95].

Although both novels draw on Orientalist representations of the harem, which Linda Steet considers essentially unchanged over a century, “timeless, violent, erotic, and primitive” [17, p. 154], they diverge as to how Orientalism's large and contradictory repertoire of tropes is utilized. By using Roxolana, who holds a special status in Ukrainian collective imaginary, in the harem setting that she truly enjoys, Vynnychuk plays with the cult of Ukrainian cultural symbols and provides a highly peculiar page of his “imaginary history” of Ukraine. Fredericks,

in contrast, draws on numerous Western narratives that vilify the empress [see 20, p. 23–32] and translates them into pornographic discourse, simultaneously positing absolute, insurmountable civilizational distance by orientalizing her into a fundamental Other. While he pictures his Roxelana as given to a lascivious venery so promiscuous as to border on the bestial, Vynnychuk’s fake memoir playfully positions her as the first Ukrainian grad dame of sexual liberation of sorts. In spite of these divergences, both texts seem to have been generated by similar socio-cultural energies: *Degenerate Empress*, by the 1960s sexual revolution in the West, which Ukraine, as part of the totalitarian USSR, has “missed” and for which it was making up in 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet regime, as reflected in *Жуміє*.

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**Етно-прочитання імперського гарему в романах Девіда Фредерікса
«Розпусна імператриця» та Юрія Винничука «Життя гаремное»**

Зосереджуючи увагу на дискурсивному просторі імперського гарему в етно-культурному вимірі, в цій статті досліджуються два історіографічних порноромани двадцятого століття – Розпусна імператриця і Життя гаремное, які звертаються до постаті наймогутнішої жінки Оттоманської імперії, Роксолани. В статті аналізується вкарбована в минулому орієнталістська динаміка репрезентації, що активно діє і в сучасній культурі.

Ключові слова: орієнталізм, орієнталізація, екзотика, інішість, історіографія, етнічність, маркер етнічності, гарем, еротизм, порнографія.

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**Етно-прочтение имперского гарема в романах Дэвида Фредерикса
«Распутная императрица» и Юрия Винничука «Житие гаремное»**

Дискурсивное пространство историографических порнороманов двадцатого века – «Распутная императрица» Дэвида Фредерикса и «Житие гаремное» Юрия Винничука – является предметом этно-культурного исследования этой статьи. Также анализируется запечатленная в прошлом ориенталистская динамика репрезентации, активно действующая и в современной культуре.

Ключевые слова: ориентализм, ориентализация, экзотика, инаковость, историография, этничность, маркер этничности, гарем, еротизм, порнография.

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ГУМОРИСТИЧНА МОДАЛЬНІСТЬ СУЧАСНОЇ ДИТЯЧОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ, АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ, ФРАНЦУЗЬКОЇ ДИТЯЧОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ КІНЦЯ ХХ – ПОЧАТКУ ХХІ СТОЛІТЬ)

Стаття присвячена дослідженню гумористичної модальності творів дитячої літератури на матеріалі української, англійської, французької дитячої літератури кінця ХХ – початку ХХІ століть. Проаналізовано прозові твори, видані з 1980 по 2013 р.р., і визначено засоби досягнення гумористичного ефекту.

Ключові слова: сучасна дитяча література, гумористична модальність, гумористичні ситуації, стилістичні засоби.

Метою статті є дослідження гумористичної модальності творів української, англійської та французької дитячої літератури кінця ХХ – початку ХХІ століття.

Нами поставлено такі **завдання**: вивчити поняття гумористичної модальності; розглянути мовні засоби створення гумористичного ефекту; дослідити прозові твори дитячої літератури кінця ХХ – початку ХХІ століття, визначити гумористичні ситуації та стилістичні засоби, якими створюється гумористична модальність в сучасній дитячій літературі.

Матеріалом дослідження слугували тексти українських, англійських та французьких художніх прозових творів для дітей, видані з 1980 по 2013 роки.

Актуальність і наукова новизна дослідження. Актуальність теми обумовлена відсутністю у вітчизняному літературознавстві цілісного ґрунтовного аналізу гумористичного жанру в дитячій літературі кінця ХХ – початку ХХІ століття.

В історії мовознавчої науки є багато праць, присвячених дослідженню категорії модальності, та виокремлення текстової модальності в окрему категорію є новим напрямом лінгвістичних досліджень.