

# Visualizing and Textualizing Algeria: Description and Prescription as a Strategy for Redefinition

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In 1875 travel writer Isabella Arundell Burton wrote in a prefatory note to her book *The Inner Life of Syria*: “I wish to convey an idea of the life that an English woman can make for herself in the East.”<sup>1</sup> Arundell Burton was one of the many British women who sought travel abroad during the nineteenth century and this passage divulges the opportunities that travel abroad opened to British women. The idea that Burton tacitly conveys is that women could not make a living or a life “for themselves” in Britain. Unmitigated travel, which stemmed from the very act of colonization, provided women with the authority to both create and escape their own particular environment. Such is the case with British landscape painter and egalitarian feminist Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827-1892).<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon made her life in the French colony of Algeria and provided visual representations of the world she envisioned. Throughout her lifetime Bodichon exhibited more than 150 pictures of Algeria. Her Oriental paintings account for more than half of the work she publicly exhibited. While most of Bodichon’s Algerian works were landscape paintings, her private sketches and few figural works reveal the imagined social space of a feminist Algeria. An examination of these works amount to the visualization of a feminist “utopia” in which women were free to work, own land, and paint without the impediments of social constraints.

This, of course, refutes the notion that white women were merely “figures of colonial alterity” or “complicit” in the act of imperialism.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, when we deny their cultural agency, we deny the important institutional role they played in what

Edward Said has termed “the dominate discourse of empire.”<sup>4</sup> This paper, therefore, will investigate the manner in which Bodichon actively employed an imperialist voice as a means of obtaining political and social equality. The dynamics of imperialism provided Bodichon with a series of positional and artistic superiorities in which she and her feminist counterparts were given the authority to judge and represent that which the traditional codes of femininity denied her. Essentially, Bodichon’s Algerian subjects reveal the function of Algeria itself, a sort of “brave new world” in which the British militant could realize her desires of visual and political equality. In doing so, Bodichon supplants imperial relations with the English notion of the separate spheres that defined women’s political and artistic mobility.<sup>5</sup>

Recent feminist theory has called attention to the ways in which visual images can construct an imagined social space, an arena whose map opens certain roads of individual action. The acts of visualization and representation can be processes of negotiation and in themselves strategies for redefinition.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Bodichon’s works “redefinition” is set within a referential binary—simultaneously representing both Algeria and Britain. Bodichon’s visual space of the colonial encounter is that of imagined space, one in which Western women are inscribed upon Algeria as images of female autonomy. If, for painters like Eugène Delacroix, Algeria signified the “prostituted space”<sup>7</sup> of the harem, for Bodichon Algeria promised to fulfill feminist desires for unconstrained freedom of movement. As a liminal space, Algeria became the proving ground for the English militant’s attempts at equality with English-

This paper developed out of a course under the direction of Dr. Adam Jolles. I would like to thank him for his advice, encouragement, and enthusiasm with the development of this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Neuman for his helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Billie Melman, ed. *Women’s Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996) 409.

<sup>2</sup> Little scholarship exists regarding Bodichon’s artistic output. The two biographies of Bodichon focus primarily upon her political actions. Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (London: Pimlico Press, 1999); and Sheila Herstein, *A Mid-Victorian Feminist, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Lane, “Redressing the Empire: Anthony Trollope and British Gender Anxiety,” *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature*, Eds Philip Holden & Richard Ruppel (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003) 64. For further discussion in this vein see also Deborah

Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900* (New York & London: Routledge, 2000) 77.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993) 12.

<sup>5</sup> Recent feminist theory has rejected the notion of separate spheres as being strict and impermeable. Here, however, the term is invoked within its socio-historic usage; Bodichon herself seemed keenly aware of Victorian construction of gendered space. In her tract *Women and Work*, Bodichon’s argument reaches its conclusion by claiming that “God only knows what is the sphere of any human being.”

<sup>6</sup> See for example Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, “Orients and Colonies: Delacroix’s Algerian Harem,” *The Cambridge Companion to Delacroix*, Ed. Beth S. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 81.

men, their superiority over colonized men, and their ability to be a part of the project of empire conceived of as a heterosexual and masculinist project.

Images of unconstrained movement filled Bodichon's letters sent back to friends and sympathizers in England. In a sketch from 1857, Bessie Rayner Parkes, author and fellow Suffragette, explores Algeria freely and independently, apparently with no accompaniment except that of the artist herself (Figure 1). In the imagined space of Algeria, Parkes is unencumbered by the crinoline and corsets worn by women in Britain. Rather, she wears the shorter skirts and Balmoral boots which reflect Bodichon's rhetoric in her published tract *Women and Work*, in which Bodichon advocated the necessity of sensible clothing for women who wanted to be actively involved in learning and working. The colonial landscape of Algeria provided Bodichon with the authority and autonomy to create a visual language essential to the imaging of the feminist body.

Images like that of Parkes were visual components to Bodichon's letters home. Gayatri Spivak has noted that Western texts often "take for granted that the 'European' is the human norm and offer us descriptions and/or prescriptions."<sup>8</sup> Spivak's concepts of "description" and "prescription" perform in conjunction with "redefinition," enacting binaries between an imperialistic context and also within a context of locational politics. Clearly intended as visual "descriptions" they are equivalent to the text of the letters and need to be situated within the gendered perspective of representation and visualization. This sketch of Parkes is a consciously-constructed space providing Bodichon and other feminist/militants the vocal superiority that eluded them within the European political discourse and which could be appropriated by proxy within the visual domain of the Orient.

If white women transgressing the barriers of social space were central to Bodichon's Algeria, the colonized women of Algeria are largely absent. The canonical harem women of Delacroix's Algeria are replaced with images of colonized men. In a letter of 1856 to the novelist George Eliot, Bodichon inserted a self-portrait into the image, representing herself sketching Arab men as well as the landscape (Figure 2). Images like those included in Bodichon's letter would later become finished products; her images of colonized men were featured in a number of popular publications. *Arab Draught Players* accompanied Bessie Rayner Parkes' article in the March 1858 edition of the *Illustrated Times* (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> Bodichon's self-portrait contravenes the Victorian model of a "lady artist" which was situated in the interplay between representation, spectatorship and signification. Thus, if vision itself is a strategy for redefinition, in this case it seeks to undermine the "targets appropriate for the feminine gaze."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 312.

<sup>9</sup> The *Illustrated Times* was a monthly newspaper that commissioned works from a number of artists illustrating contemporary events. Most notably, the *Illustrated Times* employed Constantine Guys to provide illustrations of the Crimean War.

If mid-nineteenth-century women artists were expected to set pictorial transcripts within personal experience, clearly, then, their points of departure were domestic life and household scenes that distinctively designated the province of middle-class women. It was these spectators, positioned in the "feminine," who were expected to bring high-cultural representations of domesticity to visualize their own experience—an experience that was socially constructed and historically formed for British women. Bodichon's self-portrait is not only a question of the production of an image of an individual artist but also the mobilization and renegotiation of the category of woman artist.

Emily Mary Osborn's *Nameless and Friendless* (1857) reflects the visual field that codified woman as painted rather than painter (Figure 4). Like Bodichon's self-portrait, Osborn's image is characterized by a variety of looks and glances that epitomize the socially-coded differences of gender and race. Osborn's artist looks down as the men in the shop look up from the picture of a ballerina, extending their gazes to the artist herself. Osborn's artist must avert her gaze.

Clearly, Bodichon inverts the gaze to the extent that the gaze is dependent upon the notion of inequality, making it possible for the act of imperialism itself to provide Bodichon with the foundation for the visual troping of the colonized *Other*. Bodichon's self-portrait discredits British constructs of the "lady artist" and also the sexualized manifestation of the male gaze upon white women. If Osborn's image is, as Linda Nochlin notes, founded on a pictorial discourse of vulnerability or powerlessness, then Bodichon's image is visually dialectic.<sup>11</sup> The situation that Bodichon presents—a female artist free to choose from and paint a multiplicity of subjects—is as exotic as the other Algerian sights depicted in the letter.

Bodichon's figural sketches vacillate between the artistic categories of portraiture and self-portraiture in order to enact political representation. Bodichon's images function as a description of Algeria, while at the same time alluding to pictorial descriptions of female artists in Britain. Allusion operates within Spivak's contention of "prescription," enacting a discourse with images such as Osborn's *Nameless and Friendless*. While Osborn's painting represents the plight of powerlessness, Bodichon's self-portrait is an alternative or visual prescription in which the colonized space of Algeria provides structural empowerment. Within the context of British politics, fellow feminists who received Bodichon's letters would have recognized her images as an imagined space—one that only marginally existed within Britain's social strata. Representation and vision became strategies for redefining women's artistic and political positions in England.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) 202.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988) 16.

Bodichon's sketches often served as studies for her completed paintings and the same artistic and political concerns evident in them must also be apparent in finished projects. Thus, in order to establish the relationship, I would like to discuss Bodichon's painting *Sisters Working Our Fields* (1858-9) in conjunction with *Women and Work* (Figure 5). Drawing upon characteristic landscape techniques of the picturesque—diminutive figures surrounded by the vast terrain of Algeria—the title of the work directs the viewer's focus to the occupation of the women who inhabit the foreground of the canvas. The title of the painting indicates Bodichon's primary interest; the landscape serves merely as a backdrop to the figural representation.

Bodichon's approach to the Algerian landscape is a stark contrast to the manner in which her male counterparts envisioned the Orient. In Jean-Leon Gérôme's "picturesque" views of the Orient one of the defining features is their "dependence for its very existence on the presence that is always an absence: the Western colonial or touristic presence."<sup>12</sup> If, for painters like Gérôme, the gaze of the white man "brings the Orient into being," then for Bodichon the Orient is "brought into being" by white women's working interaction with it. Bodichon employs the "picturesque" as a stylistic strategy to insert figures of working women into the Algerian landscape. Two sisters of the Order of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul are portrayed working upon land owned by Bodichon herself. Her invocation of labor reflects the rhetoric she employed in *Women and Work*. Advocating the necessity of work for all women, *Women and Work* draws upon the examples of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and Madame Luce, a teacher, both of whom set their missions within Algeria. Algerian women are largely absent from Bodichon's artistic production yet they feature prominently in her textual output. She describes their existence under "social tyranny" resulting in their "utter debased ignorance."<sup>13</sup> In the text, Algerian women serve, obliquely, as literary foils—providing Bodichon with a set of positional superiorities that allow her to judge the plight of Algerian women and thus enable her to judge, and represent the social conditions of British women. Drawing upon a well-established imperial voice, *Women and Work* is a discourse built on the difference between white women and their colonized counterparts. The tract "describes," like Bodichon's paintings, the situation of Algerian and British women, but also performs within the model of "prescription." If, accord-

ing to Bodichon, Algerian women must learn "somewhat of the civilization of the conquering race," then it is the duty of white women to provide schools and education. Thus, the Algerian landscape provides women with Bodichon's demands of "work—not drudgery—but work."<sup>14</sup>

The function of Bodichon's Algeria is a backdrop—both visually and textually—a consciously constructed space in which women are saved from "idleness" by work. Furthermore, Algeria serves as a mirror in which Britain itself is reflected. "Women's mission to women" is in itself a function of England's social mission and a fundamental element of cultural representation of England to the English. Bodichon writes, "Women are God's children equally with men. In Britain this is admitted; because it is a Christian country; in Mahomedan countries this is denied. We admit it as a principle, but we do not admit all that can be deduced from it."<sup>15</sup>

Bodichon's comparison relocates women's inequality from "Mahomedan" countries to their "Christian" counterparts, partaking in a discourse of locational politics. Bodichon's contrast of empire to colony allows Bodichon to control and share the masculinity of empire that is essential to the construct of English nationhood. If white women's duty within Algeria is essentially "women's mission to women" then both the British notions of femininity and Algeria's treatment of women are simultaneously remedied. Indeed, literary theorists have maintained that possession or control can be achieved via the act of writing—furnishing verbal agency to both the author/artist and to the reader/viewer.<sup>16</sup> Thus Bodichon's strategic employment of "women's mission to women" is used to enact a political discourse in order to possess or create a broader political constituency sympathetic to the movement that she has assigned to white women. Bodichon's representation of the Sisters of Charity serves a similar purpose.

Bodichon's feminist invocation of the Sisters as exemplars of the virtues of work for women is further explicated when compared to the French painter Henrietta Browne's *Sisters of Charity* (Figure 6). Browne's *Sisters of Charity* (1859) depicts a nun from the same order with a small child resting upon her lap. Such a display of "maternal solicitude"<sup>17</sup> was reflective of the suitability of middle-class women to the higher points of mothering, and her painting sets pictorial transcripts within the scope of domesticity. Conversely, Bodichon's *Sisters Working Our Fields* is used to convey the tenets of egalitarian feminism as evidenced in *Women and Work*. However,

<sup>12</sup> Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 36.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Bodichon, "Women and Work," *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and the Langham Place Group*, Ed. Candida Lacey (New York & London: Routledge, 1987) 89.

<sup>14</sup> Bodichon 91.

<sup>15</sup> Bodichon 92.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Heather Glenn, "Shirley and Villette," *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, Ed. Heather Glenn (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) and Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986). Similar usages of the Orient persist in contemporary women's literature as well; perhaps most notably Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette* which is suffused with Orientalist references and metaphors.

<sup>17</sup> For discussion of this work as well as other French women working in the Orient see Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996) 95.

Bodichon's painting breaks with domesticized modes of representation and, like her sketches, movement is again assigned solely to western women.

For those interested in what George Eliot called "the woman question," the Orient offered a multiplicity of beneficial metaphors. It was in the representation and exploitation of difference that white women like Bodichon could question the social spheres that created and propagated the stereotypes ascribed to the feminine. Bodichon's visualization and textualization of Algeria destabilizes the characteristic homogeneity and omnipotence that Edward Said has ascribed to the Orientalist gaze. This is not to say that women involved in the project of empire can be regarded as more pure, truthful

and non-imperialist than men—nor more susceptible to fantasy. Instead, we might identify them as cultural agents whose construction of Algeria is inherently gendered because of the restraints of representation placed upon them.

There is no homogeneity of women's involvement in the project of empire, but rather an existence of competing and alternative discourses. The work of Barbara Bodichon reveals a specific trope utilized for an individual purpose and different from that of Henrietta Browne. The strategic deployment of this trope provided Bodichon—and her audience—with a series of positional superiorities utilized to renegotiate existing standards of "feminine" representation.

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Figure 1. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *Bessie Rayner Parkes*, c. 1850s, pencil on paper. Reproduced by permission of the Mistresses and Fellows of Girton College.

Figure 2. [right] Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *Letter to Marian Evans (George Eliot)*, 1852, ink on paper. The George Eliot and George Henry Lewes Collection, The Beineck Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Figure 3. [below] Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *Arab Draught Players*, c. 1857. Reproduced by permission of the Mistresses and Fellows of Girton College.





Figure 4. Emily Mary Osborn, *Nameless and Friendless*, 1855, oil on canvas, 825 x 1042mm. Private Collection. Image courtesy of The Courtauld Photographic Survey.



Figure 5. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *Sisters Working Our Fields*, c. 1859-60, watercolor and body color on paper, 250 x 460 mm. Private Collection. Reproduced by permission of John Crabbe.



Figure 6. Henrietta Browne, *Sisters of Charity*, 1859, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 78.7 cm. ©1992 Sotheby's Inc.