

Molly Youngkin  
Professor of English  
Loyola Marymount University

Abstract

**British Women Writers and the Reception of Ancient Egypt:  
Imperialist Representations of Egyptian Women, 1840-1910**

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This book examines how white, British women writers encountered and responded to images of ancient Egyptian women from 1840-1910. These encounters (which were both direct, physical encounters through travel and indirect encounters gained from reading about ancient cultures) illustrate the ways in which British imperialism influenced women writers' visions for their own emancipation. Expanding Deidre David's assertion in *Rule Britannia: Women, Empire, and Victorian Writing* (1995) that "Victorian culture placed women in imperial spaces and authorized their function within those spaces" (6-7), this book shows how white women writers' views about their own emancipation were contingent on denying emancipation to women of color (who were still subject to the imperialist views and practices of white women). These women writers' encounters with ancient Egyptian women were particularly important, since Egypt was a key location in imperialist development and a site for British women to negotiate their relationship to "women of color." In fact, Egyptian encounters defined the limits of British women writers' willingness to incorporate other women into their visions for emancipation, marking the overwhelming influence of imperialism, even in more progressive British minds.

Canonical women writers such as Florence Nightingale and George Eliot—and less canonical figures such as Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper (who wrote poetry and drama together under the name "Michael Field") and Elinor Glyn (best known for turning her controversial romances into successful films in 1920s Hollywood)—avoided incorporating their knowledge of ancient Egyptian women's cultural power when presenting their visions for emancipation in literary works such as novels, poetry, drama, romances, and fictional treatises. Often, they represented ancient Greek women or Italian Renaissance women (who possessed many of the qualities of ancient Greek women) rather than ancient Egyptian women, since Greek and Italian cultures were more familiar and less threatening to a British audience. In thinking through their visions for emancipation, British women writers reflected upon the powerful status of Egyptian women such as Isis, Hathor, and Cleopatra (who presented herself as possessing the power of ancient Egyptian women even if her cultural heritage cannot be definitively determined), yet they often did not incorporate representations of these women into their literary works, following the boundaries of imperialist discourse, which presented contemporary Egyptian women as oppressed and overlooked the power of ancient Egyptian women.

Chapter 1

Bound by an English Eye: Ancient Cultures, Imperialist Contexts,  
and Literary Representations of Ancient Egyptian Women

This chapter lays out five broad historical and cultural contexts to facilitate a clear understanding of how British women writers approached their encounters with representations of ancient Egyptian women. First, it explains why ancient cultures, especially Greek and Roman cultures, were compelling to nineteenth-century Britons, and how as the century progressed, ancient Egyptian culture was increasingly of interest as well, particularly as travel to Egypt became more accessible. Second, it indicates how British women writers accessed knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture, including through the periodical press, which typically focused on

contemporary Egyptian political issues but also included articles that emphasized the role of ancient Egyptian women as creators and shapers of culture. Third, it examines the nature of imperialist discourse about Britain's presence in Egypt during this period, since this discourse discouraged British women writers from fully engaging Egyptian culture and encouraged a turn to ancient Greek culture instead, and fourth, it shows how British women writers typically followed the denigration of contemporary Egyptian women perpetuated by imperialist discourse but sometimes found inspiration in the roles played by ancient Egyptian goddesses, especially their involvement in love, marriage, and childbirth, roles that appealed to British women writers even as they worked to transform roles for women in their own culture. Finally, this chapter highlights how other British writers, both women and men, represented ancient Egyptian women according to the imperialist discourse that influenced Nightingale, Eliot, Field, and Glyn, as a way to compare representations across a wider group of writers. Rather than exoticizing Egyptian culture as a way to tantalize their audience, as was more common among their male contemporaries and anti-feminist female contemporaries, these women writers avoided references to Egyptian culture as a tactical maneuver to appeal to a British audience while still expressing their visions for women's emancipation.

## Chapter 2

### Acting as "the right hand . . . of God": Christianized Egyptian Women and Religious Devotion as Emancipation in Florence Nightingale's Fictionalized Treatises

Florence Nightingale—whose treatise *Suggestions for Thought* (1860) was written shortly after her return to England from Egypt in 1850—encountered and assessed women of color in Egypt according to ideals for women she had developed by viewing art in Italy in 1847-48, ideals that assumed Eastern women could be emancipated only by adopting Western Christianity. In Italy, Nightingale was exposed to artistic works that affirmed her Christian spiritual beliefs and developed her religious philosophy, in which artists played an important role in revealing God's perfect form to humans and in which women's spiritual development was the result of struggle to recognize this perfect form. Nightingale was particularly struck by Correggio's *The Magdalen* (c. 1518-19), an image of Mary Magdalen in the desert after she has repented of her sins, and she incorporated this image into the fictional draft version of *Suggestions for Thought*, which tells the stories of two repressed Victorian women: the English Fulgentia, who is not present in the final draft, and the Italian Nofariari, who is transformed into the Greek prophetess Cassandra in the final draft.

Nightingale's reactions to Italian art reveal how her emerging religious philosophy relied on race hierarchies (the privileging of one race or ethnicity over another), and her reliance on hierarchies developed more fully during her time in Egypt, where she experienced a more intense intermingling of Eastern and Western cultures. She negotiated this experience by assessing visual representations of Egyptian women she saw in temples according to her religious philosophy, which acknowledged the role of Eastern religions in the development of Christianity but assumed a progression toward a Christian view of God. Representations of Isis, Hathor, and Nefertari presented women as integral to the expression of God's perfection, and Nightingale drew parallels between the status of women in Western and Eastern religion, parallels important to her thinking about women's emancipation as she wrote *Suggestions for Thought*. However, while Nightingale retained some references to Egyptian culture in the final draft of her treatise, she favored Italian Renaissance representations of women over Egyptian ones, resulting in a vision for emancipation that excluded Eastern women, unless they embraced Christianity.

## Chapter 3

### "[T]o give new elements . . . as vivid as . . . long familiar types": Heroic Jewish Men, Dangerous Egyptian Women, and Equivocal Emancipation in George Eliot's Novels

This chapter examines George Eliot's deep reading of linguistic, historical, religious, and mythological theories that emphasized the Eastern origins of Western culture and presented ancient Egyptian women as experiencing better privileges than ancient Greek women. While Eliot travelled extensively on the Continent and incorporated her knowledge of the visual arts into her writing, she did not travel beyond the boundaries of the Continent to view representations of Eastern women that might have influenced her work. She wished to travel East to gather material for her most Eastern novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876) but was unable to go because of ill health, so her knowledge of the Eastern world was developed via books she read rather than first-hand observation. As evident in her notebooks, Eliot understood the power of ancient Egyptian women, but anxious that *Daniel Deronda* would be perceived as too "foreign" by a British audience, she avoided associating the central women characters in this novel with powerful Egyptian women, since to do so would have been dangerous in British culture, which still sought more familiar models for women's emancipation.

In *Romola* (1862), which provided the model for Victorian womanhood echoed in *Daniel Deronda*, the primary women characters have access to the East through their relationships with the pagan scholar Tito Melema, but Eliot does not give these women the attributes of powerful Egyptian women, and *Romola*, in particular, is represented as upholding Western, Christian ideals after she converts from paganism to Christianity. In *Daniel Deronda*, controversial among Christian readers for Eliot's attention to Jews in English culture but well received by the Jewish community, Daniel's character is developed through direct references to Egypt, while Eliot avoids associating Gwendolen Harleth with powerful ancient Egyptian women, referring to her as an Egyptian mummy instead. Daniel suggests that Gwendolen follow a model for womanhood set forth in *Romola*, yet Gwendolen's inability to follow this model is established primarily through direct references to Greek rather than Egyptian mythology. While Eliot sometimes uses open-ended symbolism that allows readers to infer an Egyptian context for interpreting Gwendolen's actions, she avoids directly associating Gwendolen with Egyptian goddesses, since to do so would have been threatening to a British audience already wary of a novel that focused on "foreign" elements such as Judaism.

#### Chapter 4

"[W]e had never chosen a Byzantine subject . . . or one from Alexandria": Emancipation through Desire and the Eastern Limits of Beauty in Michael Field's Verse Dramas

Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper ("Michael Field") approached their encounters with Eastern women according to the artistic principles they learned through strict training in European, especially Italian Renaissance, art. Their affinity for Victorian aestheticism, which privileged Greek culture over that of Egyptian culture, also contributed significantly to their approach to these encounters. Although Bradley and Cooper were aware of the Egyptian presence in art, since they commented on photographs of Egyptian temples and paintings with Egyptian subjects in their collaborative journal, they more closely followed the European ideal of beauty established in their conversations with the art critic Bernhard Berenson, who used his instruction of Bradley and Cooper as the basis for his books about Italian Renaissance art, such as *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896). As a result of their training with Berenson, Bradley and Cooper adopted a Graeco-Italian ideal for beauty, which they used in their 1892 collection of poetry *Sight and Song*.

*Sight and Song* uses an Italianized version of the Greek goddess Venus to challenge traditional Victorian notions about sexual desire, with this Venus bringing together the sexual desire evoked by Greek beauty and the softer, more familiar qualities of Italian beauty. Bradley and Cooper retained this model, which expressed same-sex desire but still was accessible to their European audience, as they more fully engaged Egyptian culture in their later plays, especially

*Queen Mariamne* (1908), in which the Graeco-Italian qualities of Mariamne are privileged over the Egyptian qualities of Cleopatra. Although Cleopatra is characterized in relation to the Egyptian goddess Isis in the play, she is a thoroughly unsympathetic character, and it is Mariamne, referred to in relation to the Greek Venus in the play, who is the true heroine. Like Nightingale and Eliot, Bradley and Cooper were unable to fully embrace the positive qualities of ancient Egyptian women, and their attachment to all things Greek contributed to their negative representation of women from the deep East.

### Chapter 5

#### The “sweetness of the serpent of old Nile”: Revisionist Cleopatra and Spiritual Union as Emancipation in Elinor Glyn’s Cross-Cultural Romances

This chapter examines the romances of Elinor Glyn, produced when the British Empire was at its height and about to begin its descent. Glyn—who saw the romance as a model for emancipation, since it was a genre that could emphasize “spiritual” rather “physical” unions between men and women—used her knowledge of ancient cultures to develop these romances as cross-cultural narratives, in which experience with other cultures was a key element in romantic relationships. As an early-twentieth century, aristocratic Englishwoman, Glyn did not have access to the formal education enjoyed by her male peers but did have access to more informal methods of educating herself about ancient cultures, including her family’s library during childhood and the company of upper-class men such as the Viceroy of India Lord Curzon and the Oxford philosophy professor F. H. Bradley during adulthood. As a result, the sources for her romances were popular children’s narratives such as Charles Kingsley’s *The Heroes* (1856), and she developed a commodified view of ancient cultures, in which her knowledge of these cultures was strongly shaped by the imperialist views of her social circle.

In *Three Weeks* (1907), controversial because it acknowledged sexual relations outside marriage, Glyn intermingles aspects of Greek and Egyptian culture, representing the lead woman character, “the Lady,” as an imaginary Eastern goddesses who influences her English lover, Paul Verdayne, without threatening his British masculinity. Cognizant of earlier representations of Cleopatra as manipulative, especially Shakespeare’s characterization of her in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Glyn significantly revises these representations by positively associating the Lady with the more loving qualities of Cleopatra seen in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American poems by William Wetmore Story. Yet, by the end of the romance, the Lady has not only been recast as a Greek goddess, who has the softer qualities of Hera, but she becomes a procreative mother modeled on a British rather than an Egyptian or Greek ideal. Glyn returns to a physical rather than spiritual version of the romance and, like the other women writers discussed in this book, provides a limited view of women’s emancipation, possible only through imaginative romance and not sustainable once her characters return to their daily lives.

### Chapter 6

#### “My ancestor, my sister”: Ancient Heritage Imagery and Modern Egyptian Women Writers

Only in the latter half of the twentieth century did literary visions of emancipation come to include Egyptian women, as Egyptian women writers undertook the important task of “writing back” against British imperialism and creating more inclusive visions for emancipation. This chapter traces the development of feminist awareness in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and recognizes key twentieth-century Egyptian women writers who “wrote back” against imperialism. It highlights Latifa al-Zayyat’s important contribution to Egyptian feminism with her 1960 novel *The Open Door*, the story of a young woman whose emancipation comes from her participation in the political resistance to England’s control of the Suez Canal in the 1950s. Employing a social realist style, al-Zayyat presented Egyptian women as thoroughly

engaged in *present* Egyptian culture rather than in relation to ancient Egyptian history, yet in the late twentieth century, even al-Zayyat has recognized the advantage of drawing on ancient Egyptian imagery. This chapter then turns to other Egyptian women writers who have returned to what Marilyn Booth calls “heritage imagery,” imagery from Egyptian history that expresses Egyptian women’s desire for emancipation. It briefly discusses the work of Sahar Tawfiq, Alifa Rifaat, and Nawal el Saadawi and then turns to more extensive discussion of Ahdaf Soueif’s, Radwa Ashour’s, and Iman Mersal’s work, since their post-structuralist approach to literature most thoroughly revises the imperialist-influenced representations of ancient Egyptian women seen in the work of Nightingale, Eliot, Field, and Glyn and provides a new direction for twenty-first-century feminism. By examining the work of recent Egyptian women writers next to that of nineteenth-century, British women writers, we can see more clearly the limits of Nightingale’s, Eliot’s, Field’s, and Glyn’s *nationalist* visions for emancipation and more fully envision an *internationalist* form of feminism that includes women of color. The emphasis on how feminism has evolved from nationalist to internationalist provides readers the opportunity to think about their own contributions to gender equality in the twenty-first century and to use the literary-historical background laid out in this book to advocate for a more internationalist approach.