

# Introduction

IN 1851, at the Crystal Palace in London, the American artist Hiram Powers exhibited *The Greek Slave* (1846) (plate 1), his life-size sculpture of a slim, idealized female nude. Wrought of the whitest marble, the sculpture is a powerfully iconographic representation of race and desire. The statue's head is shamefully, gracefully, inclined, her eyes averted from the Turkish marketplace in which she stands for sale. A paradigm of modest, sexually vulnerable "innocent white womanhood," the image of the Greek slave was used to raise sympathy and money for the defense of Greece against the Ottoman Turks.<sup>1</sup> The Greek woman sold into the slavery of the Turkish harem was a metaphor for the sacking of classical values; her sexual violation by the "bestial" Turks represented the ultimate desecration of Western civilization itself.<sup>2</sup> Powers's image of the Greek slave was used to raise money for the abolitionist cause in England and in America. There, ironically, the image was also used in Confederate states to raise money for Greek independence.

Those moved by the statue found the perversity of slavery especially dramatized in the figure because she was white. Her degradation and violation seemed the more pernicious to Frederick Douglass, for example, because her master was imagined as a Turk or "Mussulman," an "infidel" who was profoundly Other to Westerners.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the nude statue itself, so idealized as to be literally smoothed of the marks of adult sexuality, is not erotic, but prim, chaste, and childlike in her marble purity. But although the slave is not herself a desirous subject, her viewer is. Desire belongs to her buyer and in the act of looking, the viewer mimics his "cruel" role. Approaching the statue, then, one simultaneously steps into a representation of the Turkish marketplace and into the boundaries of Victorian sex roles. Chastity and nondesirous innocence are powerfully represented as white, Christian, and female; sexual experience and desire are as powerfully represented in the mind's eye of the viewer as dark, "infidel," and male, the subject position which the viewer shares.<sup>4</sup> The tragedy of the Greek slave lies not just in her violation by the "Turk," but also in her future captivity

in a buyer's harem where she might become one among many of her master/husband's sexual partners: Powers's "*Greek Slave* pauses on the threshold of a momentous change in her life; her future in the harem is the great unstated drama that gives the sculpture its poignancy."<sup>5</sup> Painted almost obsessively by Delacroix, Gérôme, Ingres, Renoir, Matisse, and others as a variation on the Orientalist theme of the odalisque, the nude, white captive highlights a veritable phobia of the nineteenth century: the violation of an exposed or partially veiled white woman captive whose whiteness is exaggerated in contrast to the body of a "dark" attendant of the harem or amongst the bodies of many dark women.<sup>6</sup> Such representations in nineteenth-century Western art act, Meyda Yeğenoğlu writes, to indict the "cultural practices and religious customs of Oriental societies which are shown to be monstrously oppressing women. Hence the barbarity of the Orient is evidenced in the way cultural traditions shape the life of its women."<sup>7</sup> The statue, like many nineteenth-century Orientalist representations, made human desire publicly visible, allowing "viewers" to "confront their own erotic impulses," while "the device of the imaginary Turkish captors enabled [Hiram Powers's] audience to participate in the gaze of sensuality and to distance themselves from it simultaneously."<sup>8</sup> Envisioning the captive woman on the "threshold" of her sexual violation then indicts the "barbarism" of the Other and reifies the "purity" of the white subject, reclaiming and racializing her innocence or her violation as white.<sup>9</sup>

Accompanied by John Chapman, a man with whom she had shared some degree of intimacy, Mary Ann Evans visited the Great Exhibition where *The Greek Slave* was prominently displayed. The visit articulates the vast abyss between Victorian representations and Victorian realities. Having ended the intimacy which had provoked much unhappiness between Chapman, his wife, his mistress, and Evans herself, the two met at the exhibition on new terms and neutral ground.<sup>10</sup> For the postcolonial critic, it is tantalizing to wonder what Mary Ann Evans made of the statue if she encountered it that day; certainly, its celebrity made *The Greek Slave* difficult to avoid.<sup>11</sup> As George Eliot would later write in *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866), of an "Oriental" Englishman who had purchased his own Greek slave for a wife, it is tempting to speculate. Of course, Eliot's frequent visits to galleries, exhibitions, and museums in London and Europe would have made the popular genre of the Turkish slave market and its "human wares" very familiar to her (*JGE*, 47). However, the impres-

sion of the statue, if indeed Eliot ever recorded one, is gone, ephemeral as the cut leaves of Chapman's diary wherein he recorded the details of his "love" for three women with whom he shared a large house in London.<sup>12</sup> Still, the irony of the moment resonates. So far from the statue's image of girlish white innocence and darkened male desire, the lives of these Victorians speak to the subtext of sexual transgression which was very much alive under the rigorously drawn morality of their day. For all the recent interest in the statue as an icon of Victorian sexual and racial politics, *The Greek Slave's* insistent naïveté contrasts almost crudely with the sophisticated complexities of two such actual people as Mary Ann Evans and John Chapman.

Powerful representations of an Other's "desire" for chaste "white" femininity through such commodities as *The Greek Slave* become crucially important to understanding Victorian fashionings of "desire" and their impact on forms like the novel as well as on the culture as a whole. In this book I will make the assumption, with materialist feminists and cultural historians, that sexual "desire" or erotic longing is shaped and developed by social experience, particularly through heteronormative encounters such as "the individual's encounter with the nuclear family and with the symbolic systems" which saturate "social arrangements." Representations of such encounters in Eliot's fictions seem an important record of what we "need to know" about "how women have come to be who they are though history" and particularly through heteronormative courtship narratives.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as Nancy Armstrong argues, in such narratives the representation of sex "determines what one knows to be sex, the particular form sex assumes in one age as opposed to another, and the political interests these various forms may have served."<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Eliot's representations of desire represent a process through which Western women have fashioned their sexuality or have had their sexuality fashioned for them as a category opposing the "desirous," acquisitive sexuality of Other peoples.

Negotiating the conservative mainstream in her fiction, as she had in life, George Eliot became deeply engaged in representations of desire which often question and subvert the *status quo* of white innocence and dark desire as it is represented in the most conventional nineteenth-century images of racial and ethnic otherness like *The Greek Slave* or other Orientalist visions of the harem. Eliot's interest in representing the "captivity" of both women's and men's desire has long been

remarked upon; however, the intersections of race and gender in her work remain a rich field of investigation.<sup>15</sup> Eliot's narratives often refuse the clarity of her contemporaries' representations of Otherness. "Dark" desire in her work may subsume representations of white innocence, constructing multiple discourses of resistance within the "borders" that bind her poetry, fiction, and essays.<sup>16</sup> Eliot's dark-haired, black-eyed heroines, like the "Gypsies" Maggie Tulliver of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) or Fedalma of *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), are "dark," "rough" questions posed to the smooth assumptions of Victorian images of chaste whiteness like *The Greek Slave*.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, like her contemporaries, the painter Henriette Browne (1829–1901) or the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), who used the school of Orientalism to explore, respectively, the education of girls and the experience of maternity, George Eliot's use of Orientalism and racial Otherness often explores themes absent from the odalisesques of male artists like Powers. Reading Eliot's work against the work of other women artists of her time can reveal the extent to which she too may be revising the extant traditions of Othering to address her own concerns about female agency.

The questions I will explore in this study similarly challenge many of our own postcolonial assumptions about the imperialist agenda of the Victorian novel. In her consistent narrative attraction to the ethnic or racial other, the novelist of the Midlands questions not just stereotypes of white innocence and dark desire but also the stereotype of the British novelist as a wholeheartedly committed participant in the national project of empire. Eliot's Others reveal just how conflicted such participation can be. If the emphasis of much recent work is to argue for or against the novelist as an agent of empire, my goal is not to rehabilitate Eliot as a resistor to that project, for I agree that "[b]y contemporary standards, all Victorians would stand accused."<sup>18</sup> Rather, I want to begin to unfold the multiple discourses and epistemologies Eliot constructs within her representations of the desirous English self and the racial or ethnic other.

Studying Victorian notions of race necessitates an explanation of my own use of the term "Other." The dangers of the trope of the "Other," as Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues, are still too much with us. For that reason, it is essential to note that the terms "race," "blood," "exotic," "Gypsy," and "Oriental" are always used here with the knowledge that they are particular constructs. In studying their particularities, George Eliot's particularities, and those of her contem-

poraries, I, as Gates urged in 1985, demarcate these terms with quotation marks when their cultural constructedness is not otherwise overtly stated. I am assuming that since the publication of Gates's landmark *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (1986), I am addressing a community that is also aware of the socially, culturally, and historically constructed aspects of these terms.

In my use of the terms "cultural Other" and "Other," I write from a perspective which recognizes Otherness as an invention of a dominant culture, here the culture of Victorian England. I capitalize the first initial of "Other" in order to suggest its constructedness. Indeed, in using this term I wish to invoke and emphasize, not share, the sense of distance and strangeness with which Victorians viewed non-English peoples. In my use of this word, as in my use of the terms "race" and "blood" I demarcate their socially constructed quality with quotation marks when their quality as cultural constructions is otherwise unclear. Since the publications of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, the very denotations of these words have changed to include an awareness of the racial stereotypes and false assumptions that the British and Westerners have applied to people of other cultures and races.

Finally, even as George Eliot practices reverse Orientalism or reverse discrimination where value is ultimately placed on the Other over the English, she takes liberties with those Others themselves, appropriating their stories for her own purposes. She is, perhaps like all of us, self-interested. While she considered herself "a foreigner on the earth," she remained indisputably English in the details of her social-realist landscapes (*GEL*, 1:335). Her career-long interest in Otherness, and her championing of the Other, however, often seek less to reinscribe than to reinvent the rigid boundaries, the cultural prisons, which bind us all.