



Sultan's Court

Alain Grosrichard

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Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been much praised for its account of Western perceptions of the Orient. But the English-speaking world has for too long been unaware of another classic in the same field which appeared in France only a year later. Alain Grosrichard's *The Sultan's Court* is a fascinating survey of Western accounts of "Oriental despotism" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It focuses particularly on portrayals of the Ottoman Empire and the supposedly enigmatic structure of the despot's court—the seraglio—with its viziers, janissaries, mutes, dwarfs, eunuchs and countless wives.

Drawing on the writings of travellers and philosophers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau and Voltaire, Grosrichard goes further than merely cataloguing their intense fascination with the vortex of capriciousness, violence, cruelty, lust, sexual perversion and slavery which they perceived in the seraglio. Deftly and subtly using a Lacanian psychoanalytical framework, he describes the process as one in which these leading Enlightenment figures were constructing a fantastic Other to counterpose their project of a rationally based society. *The Sultan's Court* seeks not to refute the misconceptions but rather explore the nature of the fantasy and what it can reveal about modern political thought and power relations more generally."

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