

“The Rhetoric of Unreality: Travel Writing and Ethnography in Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco*” In *Mobile Narratives*. Eleftheria Arapoglou, Monika Fodor, Jopy Nyman, eds. London: Routledge, 2013. 87-103.

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The Rhetoric of Unreality: Travel Writing and Ethnography in Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco*

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When referring to her novels, Edith Wharton called herself a “drawing room naturalist.” Her novels are ethnographically oriented studies into the behavior patterns of an elite NYC social class. But she is not just a novelist of manners, since she also wrote several books based on her travels, mostly in Italy and France, which constitute studies of European culture. As part of this interest, she published a book on Morocco in 1919. Wharton’s travelogue is the first guidebook to Morocco in English, written well before the country became independent of colonial rule in 1953. Wharton’s aim in this volume is to evaluate Moroccan ways of life mainly untouched by European influence. This isolated position is the reason for Wharton’s main interest: the presence of the past in Morocco, a medieval past that she suspects is soon to be lost through modernization. At the same time, her aim in this alluring book is to draw the very tourists who embody Europeanization into the country.

In this chapter, I look into the problem of how Wharton wishes to preserve the work of the past and also to produce an attractive report about the Morocco of Oriental mysteries by focusing on the author’s description and sensationalization of matters Moroccan. I argue that Wharton uses two discourses in her travelogue to achieve her aim. On the one hand, the discourse of history is concerned with the loss of the past. On the other hand, the discourse of tales from the Arabian nights is concerned with the dreamlike quality apparent in most instances of Moroccan life. I will claim that in Wharton’s book the discourse of history and the discourse of tales interact and construct a knowledge of Morocco that is ethnographically oriented but at the same time relies on

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a strong premise of the Orient as a dreamlike, ambiguous space embedded in the past, a cultural position that is to be improved by French colonial influence. As I will illustrate, while Wharton claims to write in order to preserve bits of Moroccan culture from effects of Europeanization in the first place, she in fact supports colonization and produces a Europeanized body of knowledge about Morocco as a place of mystic and medieval life to be enlightened and improved. The main challenge in this chapter lies in showing the way she produces such an account. More specifically, although she constructs a conscious interplay of discourses that appear to indicate her difference from a standard nineteenth-century male voice on the Orient, she actually does not manage to criticize her premises of the Orient through this deceptively self-conscious rhetoric.

The chapter is divided into three parts as a means of better structuring its argument. Hence, in the first part, I will introduce the historical context of Wharton’s book and explain briefly the idea of a gendered discursive production of knowledge pertinent to travel literature. Second, I will study the two discourses Wharton uses in her account and discuss the effects of their interaction. Third, I will analyze the effects of the interplay in Wharton’s representation of one specific religious ceremony. The study of the discourses will show how an orientalized mainstream idea of Morocco is constructed in the book.

Discourses of Travel

Wharton’s *In Morocco* is a 1919 report on the author’s 1918 visit in Morocco. The actual historical context of the book is Morocco’s status as a French colony in North Africa from September through October, 1918 when World War I is not yet over in Europe. World War I, triggered mainly by Germany’s claim for the redistribution of European colonial power, surely left an indelible mark on the country. Morocco had been a French Protectorate from 1912 on, as

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its Sultan invited the French army to restore internal political order and prevent colonization by other powers. The country was sealed from the influx of Europeanization by colonial regulations of the Protectorate, and in 1918 Wharton is able to travel there as the guest and protégé of the French governor, General Leyutley (Wright 106; Goodwyn 164). Naturally, her American account of Moroccan life was influenced by the French colonial view of the country as well (Said 5).

Another premise to be made clear concerns the approach to Wharton’s travel book as a piece of rhetoricized discursive production. Wharton is producing a scientifically oriented description of Moroccan culture (Bentley, “Wharton, Travel” 148). As her account focuses on Moroccan social and cultural life and she represents and interprets Moroccan use of symbols, she relies on a semiotic approach to culture (Geertz 28–29). At the same time, her account is also an act of interpretation, a piece of literary ethnography (Clifford 6; Campbell 265). Writing about *In Morocco*, Sarah Bird Wright has identified how Wharton integrates scholarly and imaginative approaches to travel for the sake of her audience (Wright 3). Wright mainly focuses on the charms of being an amateur and an analyst at the same time. Stephanie Batcos provides a more complex view of the interplay between the roles of amateur and analyst in the text by claiming that Wharton always links Morocco’s imaginative timelessness (in her role as an amateur) with her actual experience (which forms part of an analyst’s view) (Batcos 179). In this chapter I am interested in the act of interpretation that takes place in Wharton’s *In Morocco* through the process of linking timelessness with the actual. My analysis of Wharton’s both mystifying and historicizing account of Moroccan life will be based on a rhetorically oriented analysis of her travel texts, as I see that Wharton performs the duality of timelessness and actual as a rhetorical strategy.

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Writing about possible ways of analyzing travel texts in 1992, Mary Louise Pratt claims that up to that point travel writing has conventionally been studied and discussed in three basic ways (10). Firstly, travel commentary has been examined as celebratory, recapitulating exploits of the authors. Secondly, it has been examined as documentary, drawing on the text as a source of information. Thirdly, it has been examined as literary, when texts by literary figures are studied in order to point out their artistic and intellectual dimensions connected to the authors’ “main” work (Pratt 10). Pratt quickly distinguishes the method of her enterprise from all these approaches and claims that she investigates conventions of representation that constitute European travel writing, suggests ways of reading, and focuses on rhetorical analysis (11). Pratt’s essentially chronological survey identifies three general representational strategies of European self-consciousness in travel writing between the second half of the eighteenth and the twentieth century. Firstly, she investigates the second part of the eighteenth century, studying representational strategies of travel writers influenced by natural history. The second strategy is, in her view, informed by Humboldt’s poetics of science in the first part of the nineteenth century, while the third strategy she terms “Victorian verbal painting,” a strategy originating in the second part of the nineteenth century. While Pratt is interested in how certain representational strategies are constructed in the contact zone between the culture of the Western traveler or colonizer and that of the viewed or colonized, she also studies possible ways of transculturation, ways in which local perspectives can be inscribed into a European body of knowledge. It would be difficult to place Wharton’s strategy among the three Western discourses of travel Pratt distinguishes, but it is useful to apply Pratt’s overall approach to travel texts to Wharton’s text in particular, and see Wharton as a writer from the contact zone.

Another argument for using Pratt’s theory comes from accounts of Wharton’s fiction as social discourse, because these readings open up the question of how Wharton’s non-fiction can be

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analyzed as social discourse. Nancy Bentley’s *The Ethnography of Manners* (1995), Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), and Jeannie Kassanoff’s *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (2003) all approach Wharton’s fiction as social practice that produces a discourse of culture (Bentley, *Ethnography* 3; Kaplan 7; Kassanoff 4). Moreover, they all find a double strategy at work in Wharton’s texts. For one, Bentley asserts that Wharton’s fiction performs an ambiguous strategy of representation, as her texts both “critique and preserve the authority of the late nineteenth century elite class, a double strategy that finally serves to accommodate the very social changes the class appeared to oppose” (“Hunting” 49). Similarly, Kaplan locates a double strategy in Wharton’s early short stories about women artists that represent her attempt “to write herself out of the private domestic sphere and to inscribe a public identity in the marketplace” (Kaplan 67), neither being active against a male tradition of writing nor being a representative of a separate sphere of women’s writing. Instead, she wrote realistically as part of her struggle to define the nature of professional female authorship by relying on traditional male genres and rhetoric. More recently, Kassanoff identifies Wharton’s conservative theory of race and also attests to the hybrid force of her texts that fails to authenticate Wharton’s conservative notion of American (racial) identity (Kassanoff 7). Accepting this approach as being able to address the specificities of Wharton’s fiction, Wharton’s travel text can be seen as a social discourse possibly engaged in the construction of a gender-specific double rhetoric.

The problem of gender and travel writing is key to a discussion of Wharton’s account of Morocco, as the text obviously engages in an Orientalist enterprise presented from a female perspective of the connoisseur. Critical accounts of female travel writing have been preoccupied with the way female voices are constructing a different discursive space from the one created by male travelers. As a case in point, British women travelers in the age of the British Empire

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struggled with the legacy of Oriental discourse and represented their experience as more personalized, one directed at persons as individuals, as Sara Mills argues (3–4). In her analysis, Mills also argues for the need to acknowledge the diversity within texts by female authors (30) – as not all of them are middle class and not all represent the same ideological position (Bassnett 228; Lewis 3). To what extent does Wharton’s view of the Morocco of Oriental mysteries represent a different discourse – different from the male mainstream and also from an alleged female Otherness?

Examining Wharton’s travel narrative from the perspective of gender and travel, I claim that her account does not fit into a specifically “female” non-scientific, personalized way of speaking about everyday matters. Rather, I will argue that she relies on at least two different rhetorics: one of history and facts and one of tales. She weaves these two discourses in a way that seems to refute the stereotypical European image of an Arab country as a mysterious, dreamlike, and colorful Oriental place: the aim of the discourse of the historian is to explain mysteries in a rational fashion. As a result, her account is able to accommodate the male discourse of the Orient and is “different” via her adherence to the male example rather than through her focus on the actual.

The Discourse of History and the Discourse of Dreams in In Morocco

Wharton uses two distinct voices in creating her account. The most obvious voice present is that of the historian who is concerned with the presence of the past in Morocco and the possibility of losing these manifestations of the past soon, when the country becomes open for European economic and cultural influence. However, this scientific concern for the past is paired with references to the fictional world of Arabian nights, a concern with mystery.

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The introduction sets the tone for the concern with history. A visit to Morocco is likened to a trip by Crusaders contemporary with the Caliphate of Baghdad, as visitors today are to find a medieval life the Crusaders must have seen as well (Wharton x). The general idea of a perpetuated past comes up in several instances of Wharton’s travel. In Fez, strolling along the narrow streets of the old city, the spectator feels to be walking into the past, becoming absorbed in it (Wharton 28). The same experience is repeated in Marrakech where when riding on mules in the city Wharton describes the queer feeling that “the mules carried us out of the bounds of time,” (Wharton 84) into a perpetually prolonged past. As Wharton metaphorizes this as an overripe fruit that is soon to fall off (85), she worries over how long this past can be perpetuated. It also turns out what kind of a specific instance of the past is being held out here: it is a medieval past that constitutes the present. This medieval past is manifested in many forms. In architecture, for example, medieval floor plans and decorative patterns are produced at the time of visit. The social structure of the society seems out of contact with the present for the traveler, too: the way women are locked away at harems cannot be changed into a modernized version, and the way Jews are compelled to live under dire conditions in unwelcoming ghettos resembles their conditions in medieval France and Germany (Wharton 114). Furthermore, cities and roads look the way they must have looked like in medieval times. No wonder Wharton the traveler identifies with the position of medieval travelers, especially Crusaders (18), and within that, Venetians (68).

The perpetually prolonged past represents a standing danger for the modern traveler, because where it is present, the Europeans can lose their link to the present any time. Early in the book Wharton explains this borderline situation when she comments on their motorcar’s breakdown. The company sits in the blazing African sun, waiting for some miracle to happen and save them, but there seems none in sight. Wharton admits a feeling of being lost, and she expresses the

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desire for a djinn’s carpet that would fly them to their destination (14). When facing another problem with the car (41), she feels the same and becomes expectant of some miracle. In both cases, Wharton claims that they are lost for European civilization: throughout the trip it is only their carefully planned itinerary that saves them from being immersed in the state of being lost in the Moroccan prolonged past like a medieval traveler, for whom “civilization vanishes as though it were a magic carpet rolled up by a Djinn” (14). Thus, being immersed in the past, which is a constant possibility in Morocco, also stands for the constant possibility of being lost in the past and losing contact with modern civilization. So is the invocation of the past connected to the invocation of the magical element: it is a djinn from the past who rolls up the carpet of civilization; however, when the car breaks down, even an old djinn’s carpet becomes a joking option for an escape. In other words, to be lost in the past also implies a loss of magic and mystery.

The discourse of tales from the Arabian nights accompanies the discourse of history, because the Moroccan prolonged past is presented as a miracle. Wharton uses textual markers to indicate the times when the dream world becomes visible for the European eye (Batcos 174). The light of twilight hours evokes the dream world in its golden haze at dawn, or when the miracles of the sunset begin:

Dawn is the romantic hour in Africa. Dirt and dilapidation disappear under a pearly haze, and a breeze from the sea blows away the memory of fetid markets and sordid heaps of humanity. At that hour the old Moroccan cities look like the ivory citadels in a Persian miniature, and the fat shopkeepers riding out to their vegetable-gardens like princes sallying out to rescue captive maidens. (36–37)

This image is characteristic both because of the golden light and because of what that light enhances and conceals. Elements of an unpleasant reality recede into the background while

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elements of a normally tacit, romantic, fairy-tale background come to the fore. Wharton relies on this topos of the golden light to indicate a change in the perspective/vantage point of the observer all along her journey from Salé (36) through Moulay-Idriss (52) to Fez (93) and Marrakech (127).¹

It is also important to notice that the impressions from these moments often also become aestheticized in the form of elaborate similes to old, valuable, and/or beautiful objects. The reference to the ancient Persian miniature (36) in the quotation above is a case in point, comparing the city with one in a Persian miniature. The city of Salé is compared to an elaborate piece of Oriental velvet (24), youth weaving baskets become part of a decorative frieze of an Etruscan vase (48), while the market in Marrakech is described as a Venetian painting by Bellini or Carpaccio. The actual objects receive their significance according to the matrix of European art history in which they are placed by Wharton, a placement that both naturalizes them and marks them as objects of aesthetic value.

The result of the experience in the golden light also brings about reflections on the relation of the real and the world of dreams. As Wharton puts it: “The light had the preternatural purity which gives a foretaste to mirage: it was the light in which magic becomes real, and which helps to understand how, to people living in such an atmosphere, the boundary between fact and dream perpetually fluctuates” (38–39). At this point, Wharton sets out to explore this coexistence of fact and dream in the Moroccan atmosphere.

¹ Jeffrey Melton has written extensively on Twain’s use of light as a romanticizing agent that transforms elements of the ‘real’ into the truth of the heart and of the traveler, the same way as the romance writer is instructed to transform his vision of real life into the truth of the human heart by Hawthorne in his preface to *The House of Seven Gables* (Melton 86–88).

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Interaction

Wharton represents the coexistence of fact and dream by interposing the discourse of history and the discourse of dreams within the description of the same experience. In these, it looks as if the teller was watching the magical Moroccan atmosphere as an outsider. She has no intention to disappear in the magic Moroccan past, and uses the factual voice to control and criticize the effect of the magic one.

The most spectacular instances of the interposition of the two voices puncture the dream for a comic effect. She begins with this already in the introduction, where she mentions that she only had a month for travel before the rainy season, and had she been able to use the help of a djinn’s carpet she could not have produced a clear impression of the land (viii). Then, she makes her joke by saying that it was a military motor that was the next-best thing to a djinn they had at their disposal, and elaborates on the problems of motoring in Morocco, a realistic counterpoint to the djinn travel theme. She presents the Sultan from this perspective, too. Having described him as the symbol of atemporal power at a ceremony, she then shows him in his harem as a jovial elderly man using the phone as any businessman calling his office.

Similarly, one day in the small hours, waking in her rooms in a palace in Marrakech, she has a vision of eight “negresses” from the Arabian nights dancing through her apartments:

One morning just at daylight I was waked by the tramp of bare feet, and saw, silhouetted against the cream-colored walls, a procession of eight tall negroes in linen tunics, who filed noiselessly across the atrium like a moving frieze bronze. In that fantastic setting, and the hush of that twilight hour, the vision was so like the picture of a “Seraglio Tragedy,” some fragment of a Delacroix or Decamps floating up into the drowsy brain, that I almost fancied I had seen the ghosts of Ba-Ahmed’s executioners revisiting with dagger and bowstring the scene of an unavenged crime. – A cock crew, and they vanished. (132–33)

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The dream vision of the past disappears suddenly and without a sound, and upon inquiry she is informed that the negresses were the servants who fill the lamps of the palace every morning, passing through all the rooms in doing so. The comic effect comes into being by taking the dream situation for granted and then revealing the facts, thus providing the “real” interpretation of the scene.

A second example of this rhetoric takes place when the contrast of a general belief and some common or dreary instance of reality is revealed in the coexistence of fact and dream. For instance, when she describes buildings in terms of architectural styles and points out the prolonged presence of the past in them, she stops to wonder whether these are actual dwellings of actual people or ghosts: “[W]ere all these the ghosts of vanished state, or the actual setting of the life of some rich merchant with “business connections” in Liverpool and Lyons, or some government official at that very moment speeding to Meknez or Casablanca in his sixty h. p. motor?” (84). In so doing, she applies the general idea of the past in Morocco to convey her impression of the houses, then turns the idea around to give a more common sense explanation, aiming to question the general idea of the presence of the past. Wharton also uses the metaphor of an overripe fruit soon to fall of its own weight for Moroccan civilization in general. Here, again, she juxtaposes the dream effect with her sense of doubt and impression of the overripe fruit, suspecting a quick end to the dream of a prolonged past.

She repeats this structure in her description of the Jewish ghetto by contrasting the general opinion with her eyewitness account. It is rumored that in their overcrowded, dark, filthy ghettos, Jews are hiding European-style apartments of immense wealth that are buried under the outer layer of squalor. Wharton records this and goes on to say there was no way to ascertain this information. What can be ascertained, however, is that the clothes are ragged, people grow old

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quickly, and in this quarter babies are nursed on date brandy and so are old people – the real instance here is far drearier than any imagined version of it.

Frequently, Wharton interposes the language of dreams and the language of facts as an observer of an artwork or artistic performance. In the simplest instances, the scene to observe is similar to a work of art, like the market at Fez is seen as a picture by Carpaccio, the Chella boys dancing are compared to angels in a picture by Fra Angelico, and a child from the harem is likened to a child-Christ by Chinelli (78, 149, 204). Here Wharton describes the scenes according to the ready-made panels from European art history. Also, art performances are to be observed all around: the negresses resemble characters from the Seraglio Tragedy (133), the Cleuth boys’ dance is a well-organized performance (148), and the members of a rich harem look like characters from a pageant (184–85). Wharton is watching and criticizing the scenes in terms of works from European art that have already made the East and its magic effect available for the cultured European eye.²

The Rhetoric of Unreality in the Hamadchas Blood Rite

The rhetoric of using the language of facts and dreams in the description of a performance is also used for reporting on a spectacular religious ceremony, the blood rite ritual of the Hamadchas, a religious sect. The discourse of dreams is evoked by the aestheticization of the scene.

² Sinister magic forms a core element of different Orientalist accounts of the Far and the Middle East, its mystery centered around the space of the harem as a realm of deviancy, cruelty, and excess. In her *Rethinking Orientalism* Reina Lewis shows early twentieth-century examples of auto-ethnography in which women who had witnessed the everyday life of a harem provide analytical, demystifying reports about it in order to stress the point that Ottoman women of the harem did practice forms of social and cultural agency (Lewis 96–97).

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Interestingly, however, the critical comments on the performance do not diminish its magic effect.

Wharton evokes the atmosphere of dreams in the way she describes the ceremony. The sounds of the ceremony are familiar to Wharton before she sees any of it: the Aissaouas in a Kairouan chant are like them. She is told that this is another sect and she knows instantly where to put them: the Hamadchas are much wilder and she wonders whether she can take in the repulsive scene to come. It is only after this that they arrive at the market square where the ceremony takes place. Bathing in the golden light of the afternoon that, as we know, marks the tale quality of the scene, Wharton, once again, relies on the discourse of dreams to frame her story. The scene of horror becomes a scene of beauty and takes on the “air of unreality” (52) as Wharton puts it: “The spectacle unrolling itself below us took on a blessed air of unreality. [...] In that unreal golden light the scene became merely symbolical” (52–53). In other words, the scene becomes a symbolic performance to be analyzed, not a scene of human suffering and bestiality.

What are the reasons for this aesthetization? Firstly, the golden light of the afternoon conveys the atmosphere of the past. At first sight already, the whole scene seems like a scene of a performance, one of an extravagantly staged ballet (52) with musicians, dancers, stage decorations, and a soloist. The drums are pounding frantically and the choreography seems perfect: “[T]he dance unrolled itself in a frenzied order that would have filled with envy a Paris or London impresario” (Wharton 53). The dancer in the center, looking inspired, sets the rhythm of the convulsions. At the same time, a tall person in a cap moves “gravely around, regulating the dance: stimulating or calming down” dancers who toss too much. He is the valve of the situation, “holding his hand on the key that let loose such crazy forces” (Wharton 54), acting as a director onstage.

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The actual events of the present (again) seem to belong to some prolonged past and have symbolic value. As Wharton comments, they are “like one of those strange animal masks which the Middle Ages brought down from antiquity by way of the satyr plays of Greece, and of which the half-human protagonists still grin and contort themselves among the Christian symbols of Gothic cathedrals” (53). There is no need to worry about human suffering, as the scene is only a performance, and the characters half-human. At the same time, the comic effect is also included in the description to relieve tension further: “Two or three impish kids bobbed about with fixed eyes and a grimace of comic frenzy, solemnly parodying” (Wharton 54) the contortions of the main dancer. The tall man regulating the dance is sinister as opposed to all the frenzy. A generous amount of blood is about to flow, and Wharton comments that she noticed it was mainly blood from the blue-shirted black Africans. She adds how she found out it was, because of the founding myth of the cult suggesting that it had two role models, one for free men and one for slaves, and only the one for slaves included the bodily sacrifice expressed in the free flowing of blood during the ceremony. She continues that this reading is surely not a placement of the ceremony as the one Frazer provides in *The Golden Bough*: it is not an ethnographically oriented account of the ceremony. As a result she mobilizes an array of methods to distance herself from the frenzy: she is a spectator who watches a symbolic performance, identifies the elements of the performance, adds a comic effect, and briefly criticizes the social and racial aspects involved in the scene.

I call the rhetorical strategy Wharton uses here “the rhetoric of unreality.” This rhetoric relies on a conscious coexistence of fact and fiction on a verbal level. In this way the actual events of the present seem to belong to some prolonged past and take on a symbolic value, with the added awareness that the symbolic value is a complete illusion. However, in the interaction of the two discourses, the storyteller’s maneuvers to prove her awareness of the real become insignificant.

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The dreamlike quality described in these scenes becomes part of the objects, situations, and atmosphere shown, despite the fun and despite the common facts that are also pointed out.

Conclusion

It is an atmosphere of the Orient that Wharton constructs in the double discourse of dreams and facts, the rhetoric of unreality. The discourse of facts cannot validate the modern world of the present complete with rational explanations. The discourse of facts can only present a contrast to the prolonged past of the other civilization it is trying to understand and feels threatened by. Oriental life presents dualities unfathomable for a European mind: a mix of agitation and inertia, an eagerness to build and an unwillingness to restore, market scenes colorful and gloomy, views picturesque and sordid, rulers grand and nomadic. On the basis of this account, oppositions appear to work in a different way in an Oriental world, and it is not only the line between real and dream that is blurred but also that between past and present, fact and fiction.

This coexistence is not only a Moroccan phenomenon, but it is one linked to the Orient in general of which Morocco is a part here. Morocco presents a wild version of the Orient because of the African influence, and this is how a general Europeanized knowledge of Morocco emerges in the text. By doing so, Wharton, the scientist of manners, conforms to, rather than defies, a colonial discourse of the Orient by her presentation of an extended medieval past to be made sense of as an aesthetic object through the lenses of European art history.

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