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**Randall, Vicky ORCID: 0000-0002-4923-3070 (2021)  
Orientalism, Islam, and Eroticism: Captain Sir Richard Francis  
Burton and the Arabian Nights. Victorians: A Journal of  
Culture and Literature, 139. pp. 1-17.  
doi:10.1353/vct.2021.0001**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/vct.2021.0001>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/vct.2021.0001>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/12414>

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## **Orientalism, Islam, and Eroticism: Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton and the *Arabian Nights***

**ABSTRACT:** The year 2021 marks the bicentenary of Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890). This discussion assesses Burton’s career as a Victorian soldier, explorer, and writer through the theoretical framework of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Burton spent years immersed in the languages and cultures of the Arab-Islamic world; while serving as an agent in the British Empire, he also challenged assumed western social and moral superiority to eastern cultures. Burton’s controversial translation of the *Arabian Nights* (1885–1888) reveals his resistance to British sexual norms by presenting the East as a site of erotic liberation. Defying censorship laws, Burton delighted in displaying his knowledge of eastern pornography and homosexual practices. As a landmark of European scholarship and a book considered shockingly explicit by contemporaries, Burton’s *Nights* proves to be the major work of an *enfant terrible* of the Victorian *fin de siècle*.

**KEYWORDS:** Richard Burton, *Arabian Nights*, Orientalism, eastern and Arab-Islamic cultures, pornography, homosexuality, morality, Victorian era, *fin-de-siecle*, Edward Said, *Orientalism*, British imperialism

This year marks the Bicentenary of Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890). Born in Torquay, England, Burton’s start in life was inauspicious—a disobedient child and intelligent but rebellious youth, he was expelled from Trinity College Oxford without a degree in 1842.<sup>1</sup> Following his father into service, Burton enlisted in the East India Company in the belief that he was “fit for nothing but to be shot for six pence a day” (Burton, *Falconry* 93). After serving in India, he went on to travel the world, including the Middle East, Africa, Brazil, and the United States. As an explorer, scholar, and undercover agent of the British state, Burton applied his “near genius” (Lovell xxvii) to the study of languages and the publication of about forty books (travelogues, ethnological surveys, translations of erotic eastern literature, and poetry).<sup>2</sup> By the time of his death in Trieste, Burton was a celebrity, an infamous and scandalous figure. As Dane Kennedy observes, “[f]ew Victorians covered so much ground, both literally and figuratively, touching on such varied manifestations of difference in such a probing and provocative manner” (2–3). Edward Rice adds, “If a Victorian novelist of the most romantic type had invented Capt. Sir Richard Francis Burton, the character might have been dismissed by both the public and critics . . . as too extreme, too unlikely” (1).

There is no doubt that Burton was an outlandish individual who had some extremely unlikely experiences—for instance, being speared through the head by an African tribesman.

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1. On Burton’s early life, see Brodie.

2. In Karachi (1840s), Burton worked undercover gathering information for General Napier and the British government. He opened several clothing and tobacco shops, with the aim of enquiring about, and reporting on, sex work in the region. See Rice (164–65).

The purpose of this article, however, is to employ theoretical frameworks to situate Burton more clearly in Victorian intellectual and historical contexts. Burton's active career spanned fifty years, tumultuous decades during which British society and culture underwent rapid changes. These included the impact of the Industrial Revolution and urbanization; intense debates on religion, science, and race; the expansion and destabilization of the British Empire; the ascendancy of the middle class and increase in class antagonism; the spread of democracy following the Second (1867) and Third (1884) Reform Acts; and the emergence of first-wave feminism. Burton addressed these issues in different ways, while working as an Orientalist immersed in the supposedly static world of the East. As such, Kennedy notes, Burton was "very much a man of his time, a product of nineteenth-century Britain and its imperial encounter with the world" (2). He was also a contrarian who "snubbed social conventions, . . . professed estrangement from his homeland," and acted as an "important harbinger of the modernist assault on Victorianism itself" (5).

Approaching Burton's prolific and contradictory output is a daunting task, and his biographers have understandably tended to emphasize some aspects of his career over others, usually adopting a chronological methodology. This analysis offers a more critical and thematic treatment, beginning with an overview of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978) and his brief comments on Burton. Said's insights lead to a nuanced consideration of Burton as an academic Orientalist who was also a racist, an Islam sympathizer who was also a chauvinist, and a colonial employee who was also a critic of imperialism. The discussion reveals Burton as an *enfant terrible* of the *fin de siècle*—the editor of a subversive translation of the *Arabian Nights* (1885–1888)—who further provoked reigning moral sensibilities by addressing such transgressive causes as women's rights and sexual emancipation, pornography and homosexuality.<sup>3</sup>

### Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Burton

Burton makes a brief appearance in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which argues that prejudices against the East have always distorted European representations of the Orient, and that western Orientalism and imperialism are inextricably linked. Said argues that Orientalist discourse has existed for over two-thousand years. While Burton's engagement with the East was ambiguous, he was nevertheless among the most sympathetic and knowledgeable western *habitués* of the Arab-Islamic world.

Said employs the term Orientalism to refer to a variety of practices and domains, all of which are interdependent and overlapping (2–3). First of all, Orientalism refers to the academic discipline founded in the West to study eastern societies, cultures, and languages (2).

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<sup>3</sup>. See Sally Ledger, *The Fin de Siècle: A reader in Cultural History, c. 1880–1900* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

Said traces the emergence and development of this discipline from early biblical scholarship of the medieval and Renaissance periods through the twentieth century. Originally restricted to a Christian concern with the Semitic languages or with Islam, the scope of Orientalism vastly expanded in the late eighteenth century, when the research of Abraham Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) and Sir William Jones (1746–1794) revealed the diversity of eastern languages and texts for the first time (51). Throughout the nineteenth century, Orientalism gained in prestige as the reputation of institutions such as the Royal Asiatic Society grew, the number of Professorships in Oriental studies increased, and the quantity of knowledge expanded (43). With the establishment of Orientalism as a discipline, Said argues, “the Orient, the Arabs, or Islam . . . were supposed by mainstream academic thought to be confined to the fixed status of an object frozen once and for all in time by the gaze of Western percipients” (“Orientalism Reconsidered” 92).

Related to the discipline of Oriental scholarship is a more general meaning for Orientalism which applies to western attempts to represent the East and denotes a variety of “ideological suppositions, images and fantasies about . . . the Orient” (Said, “Orientalism” 90). European accounts of the East are always incomplete and distorted, even when the individual observer aimed to reveal the “real” meaning of the Orient. Such accounts consistently assume and serve to reinforce a regular series of distinctions which are drawn between Europe and the East. Initially, the discourse of Otherness centered on religion, with the assumption that Islam was an inferior and fraudulent version of Christianity. From the eighteenth century forward, however, certain secularizing tendencies, combined with increased familiarity with the East, served to widen the scope of Orientalism (*Orientalism* 52). While there was a “release of the Orient generally, and Islam in particular, from the narrowly religious scrutiny by which it had hitherto been examined (and judged) by the Christian West” (120), Said sees no break in the continuity, constancy, or coherence of European thought. Rather, “theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West” were simply accommodated to new structures of thought, and “most easily associated themselves . . . with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality” (121). In this way, modern Orientalists established themselves as central authorities on the East and, in legitimating a special kind of specifically coherent Orientalist work, put into circulation a form of discursive currency by whose presence the East henceforth was represented (122).

By imposing a “muteness” on the East as an object, the modern Orientalist not only excluded a potential dialogue between the Orient and the Occident, but also prevented any critical dialogue among Europeans that could lead to different and disparate views on the Orient (Said, “Orientalism” 93). As material for study or reflection, the East now acquired all the marks of an inherent weakness and became subject to the vagaries of miscellaneous theories that used it for illustration (*Orientalism* 152). For Said, the consistency and cohesion in the European production of images of the “silent Other” meant that Orientalism could be easily “implicated in the long history of the West’s material and political domination of the non-western world” (3). Orientalism and imperialism are therefore linked in Said’s analysis: as “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (7–8), so the hegemony of the West over the East was established, and so European imperial power gained its rationale. In short, Orientalism became a “style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3).

Said's short analysis of Burton (194–97) rightly points out Burton's complicated position within the discourse. In relation to the definition of Orientalism as a scholarly discipline, Said duly notes Burton's credentials, observing that he "could hold his own with any academic Orientalist in Europe" and took pleasure "in demonstrating that he knew more than any professional scholar, that he had acquired many more details than they had" (*Orientalism* 194). But as a style of thought based on the distinction between the "self" and the inferior "other," Orientalism does not quite fit Burton. Far from being the commentary of an outsider making generalizations about the East, Burton's writing is "the result of knowledge acquired about the Orient by living there, actually seeing it first-hand, truly trying to see Oriental life from the viewpoint of a person immersed in it" (196). Indeed, "Burton's freedom was in having shaken himself loose of his European origins enough to be able to live as an Oriental . . . [he] took the assertion of personal, authentic, sympathetic, and humanistic knowledge of the Orient as far as it would go" (196–97). Still, Said considers Burton complicit in the final Orientalist-imperialist agenda: his work "radiates, a sense of assertion and domination over all the complexities of Oriental life" and shows a consciousness of "a position of supremacy over the Orient" (196). In this sense, "we must recognise how the voice of the highly idiosyncratic master of Oriental knowledge informs, feeds into the voice of European ambition for rule over the Orient . . . From being a place, the Orient became a domain of actual scholarly rule and potential imperial sway" (196–97).

### **An "Amateur Barbarian": Burton as Orientalist**

Said's insights on Burton are both intriguing and allusive. He is correct in identifying the fundamental tension, even contradiction, in Burton's career, as "Burton thought of himself both as a rebel against authority (hence his identification with the East as a place of freedom from Victorian moral authority) and as a potential agent of authority in the East" (*Orientalism* 195). But in his treatment of Burton, Said himself barely touches on these issues; as Kennedy cautions, "[t]o identify Burton with Orientalism is to thrust him in the midst of what has become a complex and contentious debate over the meaning and uses of the term" (26). A more detailed understanding of the "Orientalism" of the man who liked to describe himself as an "Amateur Barbarian" is needed before analyzing his *magnum-opus*, the *Arabian Nights* (Rice 3).

Certainly, Burton can be understood as an Orientalist in the sense of Said's first usage of the term: he was an expert scholar who produced information about the East. In his first official post in the British East India Company (1842–1849), Burton was taught by "the finest language-master" in Bombay—a Parsee priest named Dosabhai Sohrabji—who boasted that his student "could learn a language running" (Brodie 49). Burton quickly became proficient in Hindustani, Gujarati, Marathi, Persian, Sindhi, Punjabi, Arabic, Armenian, Portuguese, Pushtu, Telugu, Toda, Turkish, and Sanskrit. Over the course of his career, he learned twenty-nine languages and about forty dialects, becoming so fluent in eastern tongues that his friend, Walter Abraham, claimed "that a stranger who did not see him and heard him speaking would fancy that he heard a native" (qtd. Rice 191). Like his predecessors, including William "Orientalist" Jones, Burton used his command of languages to bring the life and literature of the East to European readers. His writing includes such landmark pieces of Orientalist scholarship and translation as *Scinde: or, the Unhappy Valley* (2 vols., 1851); *Sindh, and the Races that inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (1852); *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Madinah and Meccah* (3 vols., 1855, 1857); *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana* (1883); *Kama-Shastra or the Hindoo Art*

of Love (1885); *The Perfumed Garden of the Cheick Nefzaoui: A Manual of Arabian Erotology* (1886); and the *Arabian Nights* (1885–1888). Burton later turned away from the academic Orientalist tradition which emphasized linguistics and culture, and towards the less-reputable speculations of physiology and biological racism. Leaving behind his beloved Islamic communities in India and the Middle East, Burton had distinctly negative experiences in Somaliland (1854–1855), West Africa (1861–1864), and Brazil (1865–1868), and became extremely critical of Africans. In his works from this period, Burton shared in the contemporary enthusiasm for phrenology, discussing the shapes and sizes of heads and noses of peoples he encountered—an interest which led him to collect African skulls (later donated to the Royal College of Surgeons).<sup>4</sup> During this time, Burton was also key to the institutionalization of the “scientific” study of race in Britain, co-founding the Anthropological Society of London with James Hunt in 1863. Promoting the polygenist theory that Africans constituted a separate species of humankind and endorsing the racist views of Hunt and various European thinkers, Burton stated his opinions bluntly in *A Mission to Gelele: King of Dahome*: “I believe in the inferior genesis of the negro, and in his incapacity for improvement, individually and *en masse*” (2.203).

This leads to a consideration of Burton in relation to Said’s second definition of Orientalism, and the extent to which he either elided or maintained the distinction between “self” and the supposedly backwards “other.” Given the many years Burton spent in India and Arabia, it is possible that he became an “outsider to his own people” (Rice 131). A sense of the extent to which Burton “was able to become an Oriental” (Said, *Orientalism* 195) is conveyed in the description of his manners and dress given by Abraham in 1847: “one would scarcely be able to distinguish the Englishman [Burton] from a Persian, Arabian or a Scindian. His habits at home were perfectly Persian or Arabic. His hair was dressed à la Persian—long and shaved from the forehead to the top of his head, his eyes, by some means he employed [kohl eyeliner], resembled Persian or Arabian” (qtd. Rice 191). In India, Burton used opium and other drugs, had relationships with local women, visited nautch dancers and boy brothels, and became acquainted with the practice of polygamy. Most significantly, Burton immersed himself in Islam—undergoing circumcision, learning the Qur’an by heart, and practising daily ablutions and prayers. So complete was Burton’s transformation that, in 1853, he passed as a Pathan Sufi named Shaykh Abdullah during a pilgrimage to Medina and Mecca—an extremely dangerous enterprise, given that the *Hajj* was prohibited to non-Muslims and punishable by death at this time. Whether or not Burton formally converted is contested among biographers, but it is clear that he “found Islamic faith and culture appealing at a deeply emotional level . . . there is no appreciation in his writing of any faith but Islam.”<sup>5</sup>

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4. On Burton’s racism, see Kennedy (131–64).

5. Rice (69–70) maintains that Burton embraced Islam and fully converted; Kennedy disagrees (128).



In the account of his *Hajj* given in the *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Madinah and Meccah*, Burton defended Islam and criticized Christianity. Describing the rituals of the pilgrimage, Burton rejected the accusation that Muslims were especially superstitious: “I must hold the men of Al-Madinah to be as wise and their superstitions to be as respectable as the others . . . Europe, the civilized, the enlightened, the skeptical, dotes over clairvoyance and table-turning” and indulges in ceremonies of “old idolatry” such as the “English mistletoe, the Irish wake, the pardon of Brittany . . .” (1.428, 2.237). Regarding the suggestion that the education offered in mosques was limited, he countered: “Would not a superficial, hasty, and somewhat prejudiced Egyptian or Persian say exactly the same thing about the systems of Christ Church and Trinity College?” (1.110). Aware that the position of women in Islam was a key target for European detractors, Burton notes that “Certain ‘Fathers of the Church’ did not believe that women have souls. The Moslems never went so far” (2.92). Celebrating Middle Eastern love-poetry, Burton also argued that women were held in high esteem in Islamic lands and that polygamy, far from being oppressive, liberated the wives through shared sexual and domestic obligations (2.91–92). In the preface to the third edition, Burton maintained that “the Moslem may be more tolerant, more enlightened, more charitable, than many societies of self-styled Christians” (1.xxv).

While Burton’s admiration for Islam and appropriation of Muslim manners and customs may seem to demonstrate that he overcame the Orientalist tendency to depreciate the inferior Other, Parama Roy has persuasively argued against this reading. Instead, Burton’s “performance” and “impersonation” exemplify both the security of his western identity and the chauvinism of empire (200):

Burton’s easy transition between varied identities underwrites imperialism’s avowal of faith in a stable and coherent colonial self that can resist the potential pollutions of this trafficking in native identity. If the colonial self is stable and unassailable, then it should follow—in contradistinction—that the native self is, like all the blank or dark spots on the map, a void, an uninscribed and infinitely malleable space . . . [L]inked to this notion of native permeability, malleability, and lack of essence is the notion that the native is an opaque entity who must be known, categorized, and fixed in the completest possible way. (197–200).

Burton was not only arrogant in showing off how well he could mimic the Muslim—outdoing the native at being native—but his pilgrimage to Mecca actually bolstered his position as a western colonial observer (201). Roy is correct to point out that in the *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage* “we are never allowed to forget . . . Burton’s sense of his own separation from the collective cultural experience of pilgrimage; this experience, however persistently coded as authentic, is always also raw material to be organized into a narrative for Orientalists, ethnographers, and the reading public in England” (207).

Finally, then, Burton is an Orientalist in terms of Said’s third meaning, which holds that westerners studied the East in order to dominate it. Once again, the contradictions are stark. On the one hand, and fundamentally, Burton was an employee of the East India Company and a soldier in the British army. He was encouraged to develop his exceptional linguistic skills by a colonial state which recognized the value of having a man on the ground who could move undetected

among locals and gather intelligence on areas of strategic importance. Certainly, his work on the Sind Survey over several years yielded vital information for imperial authorities on everything ranging from geography, climate, and natural resources to agricultural practices. In many ways, he was “a model officer” (Kennedy 32). On the other hand, Burton could be critical of the East India Company (especially in the years preceding the Indian Mutiny of 1857) and of the empire more generally. In an extremely eccentric poem titled *Stone Talk* (1865), Burton included a far-reaching and scathing attack on the British Empire, denouncing colonial practices in China, India, America, Australia, and New Zealand as immoral and even genocidal. The below passage is typical of the tenor of the work:

Look at th’ unfortunate Chinese,  
Who lost their Sycee<sup>6</sup> and their  
teas Because they showed some  
odium To Fanqui’s<sup>7</sup> filthy opium;  
See India, once so happy, now  
In scale of nations sunk so low—  
That lovely land to which was  
given The choicest blessings under  
heaven, Till ravening Saxon, like  
simoom,<sup>8</sup>  
With fire and sword brought death and doom. (qtd. Kennedy 165)

Burton himself felt that his failure to gain promotions or to be assigned more attractive postings was due to his “impolitic habit of telling political truths . . . upon the subject of Anglo-Indian misrule” (qtd. Rice 233). The knighthood he was awarded at the end of his career in 1886 can be considered a “tardy recognition” of forty-four years of service and a “grudging gesture” by the government, given only after much campaigning by his wife Isabel (qtd. *Life* 2.625). This reluctance might also be understood in light of the fact that Burton had begun to publish his scandalous edition of *Arabian Nights* the previous year; he had already guessed that his “literary labours, unpopular with the vulgar and the half-educated, are not likely to help a man up the ladder of promotion” (qtd. Rice 580). The periodical newsletter *Court Society* agreed, finding it necessary to reassure its readers “that his translation [of the *Arabian Nights*] has nothing to do with the distinction conferred upon him” (qtd. *Life* 2.626).

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6. Sycee is silver bullion.

7. Fanqui: derogatory Chinese term for a European. Burton here criticizes the Opium Wars resulting from Britain’s forcing Opium consumption on China against its wishes.

8. Simoom: a fierce desert dust storm.



### Burton's "Oriental muck-heap": *Arabian Nights*

Burton's complexities, as a colonial soldier whose Orientalism held him back, and as some-one who identified with the East even as he displayed its exoticism to European readers, are neatly captured in a passage where he describes his life-long research into the *Arabian Nights*:

During my days of official banishment to the luxurious and deadly deserts of West Africa, and to the dull and dreary half-clearings of South America, it [the *Arabian Nights*] proved itself a charm, a talisman against ennui and despondency. Impossible even to open the pages [of the Arabic manuscript] without a vision stirring into view From my dull and commonplace and "respectable" surroundings, the Jinni bore me at once to the land of my predilection, Arabia, a region so familiar to my mind that even at first sight, it seemed a reminiscence of some by-gone metempsychic life in the distant Past. Again I stood under the diaphanous skies, in air glorious as ether, whose breath raised men's spirits like sparkling wine Then would appear the woolen tents, low and black, of the true Bedawin, mere dots on the boundless waste of lion-tawny clays and gazelle-brown gravels, and the camp-fire dotting like the glow-worm the village centre. (qtd. Rice 579)

Burton's *Arabian Nights* is the work of an individual who stood "at the interstices of the great cultural divide, claiming a liminal status exempt from the codes and conventions that separated ruler from ruled" (Kennedy 52). Analysis reveals that the translation is responsive equally to the Oriental traditions in which Burton immersed himself, and to the Victorian world that shaped and constrained him.

The specific climate in which Burton was writing is significant, as the *Arabian Nights* represented a bold and conscious challenge to the high Victorian consensus on issues relating to sexuality and gender. By the mid-nineteenth century, moralistic and puritanical attitudes towards sex had been enshrined in law, with material judged explicit or pornographic subject to the Obscene Publications Act (1857) and the Customs Consolidation Act (1876); both gave the government wide-ranging powers to censor "offensive" material and to prohibit its importation. Two extremely active organizations existed to better ensure compliance with this legislation: Society for the Suppression of Vice and the National Vigilance Association (established in 1802 and 1884 respectively). Importantly, in the "prosecutorial climate" of the 1880s, these acts had teeth, leading, for example, to the imprisonment of the publisher Henry Viztelly in 1889 for translating and selling the novels of Emile Zola (Kennedy 219). The bodies and sexualities of males and females similarly fell under the purview of legal restrictions at this time. For the Victorians, it was axiomatic that women were incapable of sexual desire, therefore they ought to occupy a "separate sphere" from men which would be untroubled by the excitement of the public domain. As such, any stories touching on females and sex were likely to cause a scandal, as was the case with the controversy over the Contagious Diseases Acts (1865–1886) and W. T. Stead's investigation into the between males and provided the legislative framework for the incarceration of Oscar Wilde for sodomy in 1895. It was against this background that Burton came to see his *Arabian Nights* "not merely as [a contribution] to an erotic literary genre that offered titillation to men like himself, but as evidence of a superior sexual prostitution of young girls in London, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon"

(*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1885).<sup>9</sup> The latter exposé led to raising of the age of consent for girls under the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885). The Act also included the infamous Labouchère Amendment, which criminalized sexual relations knowledge that offered freedom to a society afflicted by emotional repression. What had been the source of private amusement became the basis for a public crusade” (Kennedy 218). Burton was not the first to introduce English readers to the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>10</sup> The tales had been translated into French by Antoine Galland (12 vols., 1704–1717), and several English editions based on Galland’s work were available during the eighteenth century. Original translations and compilations had subsequently been published in English by Edward Lane (3 vols., 1840) and John Payne (9 vols., 1882–1884).<sup>11</sup> Burton’s volumes were, however, uniquely unexpurgated and subversive. As is clear from his personal correspondence, Burton reveled in their salacious content and in the prospect of offending “Mrs Grundy,” the fictional personification of censorship. In a letter to John Tinsley on 24 September 1883, for example, Burton announced that his *Arabian Nights* would be

a marvellous repertory of Eastern wisdom; how eunuchs are made, how Easterners are married, what they do in marriage, female [techniques] etc. Mrs Grundy will howl until she almost bursts and will read every word I write with intense enjoyment. (qtd. Lovell 873)

Burton wrote in similar terms to the publisher Bernard Quaritch, emphasizing the novelty of his own translation in comparison with Payne’s almost contemporaneous edition of the *Nights*:

I may tell you that the work will be a wonder. Payne was obliged to “draw it mild” and it was not in his place to explain by means of notes. I have done the contrary – the tone of the book will be one of extreme delicacy and decency now and then broken by the most startling horrors like “The Lady Who Would be Rogered by the Bear.” It will make you roar with laughter What *will* Mrs Grundy say? I predict [she’ll] read every word of it and call the translator very ugly names (qtd. Lovell 670)

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9. Britain’s Contagious Diseases Acts addressed moral panic about the spread of venereal disease in both military and civilian life. Because women were held responsible for its transmission, medical examinations were compulsory for any woman suspected of being a prostitute. Early feminists, led by Josephine Butler, denounced the Acts as “institutional rape” and argued that many who were not prostitutes would be wrongly subjected to invasive procedures. The Acts were repealed in 1886, a success for first-wave feminism, despite social conservatives’ shock over women’s public participation in discourse relating to sexual matters.

10. On the history of the origin and compilation of the *Arabian Nights*’ tales, see Irwin.

11. On the various translations of the *Nights* in Europe see Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum (Eds.), *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008); and Paul McMichael Nurse, *Eastern Dreams: How the Arabian Nights Came to the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

Burton failed to find a publisher who would risk printing a potentially illegal work. As such, he raised funds to distribute the *Arabian Nights* by subscription only.<sup>12</sup> Where previously he had brought out erotic works anonymously, using the subterfuge of his “Kama Shashtra Society,” Burton proudly attached his name to the *Arabian Nights* and included an “Author’s Preface” in which he defended his decision to include explicit material. Addressing “a matter of special importance in the book,” Burton declared that he had no intention of reproducing the *Nights* “*virginibus puerisque*” (for boys and girls) and so included “*turpiloquium*” (dirty-talk), regardless of how “low it may be or ‘shocking’ to ears polite” (1.xv–xvi). Using the language of cultural relativism, Burton explains that obscenity is a question of context:

[T]he European novelist marries off his hero and heroine and leaves them to consummate marriage in privacy . . . But the Eastern storyteller must usher you, with a flourish, into the bridal chamber and narrate to you, with infinite gusto, everything he sees and hears. Again we must remember that grossness and indecency are matters of time and place; what is offensive in England is not so in Egypt. (xvi)

In any case, Burton contends, the coarse sections of the *Arabian Nights* are no worse than “many passages of Shakespeare, Sterne, and Swift,” and the forthright attitude of the East is preferable to the false decorum of the West. The “free and naked” language of the tales precludes the possibility of any “subtle corruption” or “covert licentiousness” (xv, xvii). As such, he maintains that “we find more real ‘vice’ in many a short French [book] and in not a few English novels of our day than in the thousands of pages of the Arab” (xvii). In the *Arabian Nights*, we have nothing of that most immodest modern modesty which sees covert implication where nothing is implied, and “improper” allusion when propriety is not outraged; nor do we meet with the Nineteenth Century refinement; innocence of the word not of the thought; morality of the tongue not of the heart, and the sincere homage paid to virtue in guise of perfect hypocrisy.

From the outset, the *Arabian Nights* included tales that were likely to offend Victorian moral sensibilities. The framing narrative, the “Story of King Shahryar and his Brother,” provides the structure for all that follows, and its major themes are sex, infidelity, and violence. In the story, Shah Zaman visits his elder brother, the King Shahryar, and is gazing out of a window at the garden, where he sees his brother’s wife surrounded by twenty slave-girls. At that moment, the girls strip naked, and it is revealed that half of them are female and half are, in fact, male. They pair off and begin to have sex with each other, while the Queen calls out for “Saeed.” From out of the trees there appears “a big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes which showed the whites, a truly hideous sight” (6). Saeed walks over to the Queen, and the two proceed to participate in the orgy:

[He] threw his arms round her neck while she embraced him as warmly; then he bussed her and winding his legs round hers, as a button-loop clasps a button, he threw her and enjoyed her. On likewise did the other slaves with the girls till all had satisfied their passions.

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12. One thousand copies of Burton’s *Arabian Nights* were originally printed for private distribution.

When Shah Zaman tells King Shahryar of his wife's infidelity, the King slays her and all the concubines before making a vow: he will marry a woman to have sex with on their wedding-night and kill her the next morning to protect his honor. For three years, King Shahryar marries women and murders them, until he takes Shahrazad for his wife. To distract the King, Shahrazad tells him stories. For 1,001 nights, Shahrazad entertains the King with her spectacular tales, and—in recognition of her talents—he ultimately agrees to let her live. Within the collection of 468 stories Burton includes in his sixteen-volume *Arabian Nights*, there are many instances of male and female promiscuity, of homosexuality, and of pederasty (Irwin 2). For example, volume one contains the tale of “The Porter and the Three Ladies of Bagdad,” which narrates an orgy between an unwitting servant and three women who drink wine with him and seduce him: “they ceased not drinking (the Porter being in the midst of them), and dancing and laughing and reciting verses and singing ballads and ritornellos. All this time the Porter was carrying on with them, kissing, toying, biting, handling, groping, fingering” (1.90). The women then undress and bathe in turn, and tease the Porter by asking him to name their genitalia:

[One woman] doffed her clothes till she was mother-naked . . . and took water in her mouth, and spurted it all over the Porter, and washed her limbs, and between her breasts, and inside her thighs and all around her naval. Then she came up out of the cistern and throwing herself on the Porter's lap said, “O my lord, O my love, what callest thou this article?” pointing to her slit.

It is likely that this particular story appealed to Burton for its display of Middle East women as open and frank about their bodies, and as capable of enjoying the pursuit of physical gratification. In this sense, Burton celebrates the perceived sexual freedom of the Orient while presenting a pointed rejoinder to the oppression of women he observed and loathed in British society.

Volume three's “The Tale of Kamar al-Zaman” again features a confident and empowered woman while dealing comically with the subjects of cross-dressing and homosexuality. In this story, a husband (Kamar al-Zaman) and his wife (Budur) become separated; Budur subsequently dresses as a man, marries into royalty, and becomes a King. Kamar al-Zaman later arrives at the palace and is showered with attention by “King” Budur, remaining un-aware of his host's true identity. The King demands that Kamar al-Zaman have sex with him, and the narrator delights in how the story unfolds:

. . . and [Kamar] doffed his bag-trousers, shamefull and abashed, with the tears running from his eyes for stress of affright . . . Then she turned to him bussing and bosoming him and bending calf over calf, and said to him, “Put thy hand between my thighs to the accustomed place; so haply it may stand up to prayer after prostration.” He wept and cried, “I am not good at aught of this,” but she said, “By my life, an thou do as I bid thee, it shall profit thee!” So he put out his hand, with vitals a-fire for confusion, and found her thighs cooler than cream and softer than silk. The touching of them pleased him and he moved his hand hither and thither, till it came

to a dome abounding in good gifts and movements and shifts, and said in himself, "Perhaps this King is an hermaphrodite, neither man nor woman quite", so he said to her, "O King, I cannot find that thou hast a tool like the tools of men; what then moved thee to do this deed?" Then loudly laughed Queen Budur till she fell on her back, and said, "O my darling, how quickly thou hast forgotten the nights we have lain together!" Then she made herself known to him, and he knew her for his wife, the Lady Budur. (3.305–06)

As a final example, volume five contains a story of pederasty titled "Abu Nowas with the Three Boys and the Caliph Harun al-Rashid." Here, the lead character, Abu Nowas, is in the street when he sees three "handsome and beardless" youths, and "yearned with desire to the swaying of their bending shapes" (5.64). The narrator explains that Nowas "was given to these joys and loved to sport and make merry with fair boys and cull the rose from every brightly blooming cheek." Nowas duly invites the boys back to his house, where they drink wine and have sex with each other: "Presently, the drink got into [Abu Nowas'] noodle, drunkenness mastered him and he knew not hand from head, so that he lolled from side to side in joy and inclined to the youths one and all, anon kissing them and anon embracing them leg overlying leg. And he showed no sense of sin or shame" (66–67).

While Burton's translation of such tales secured *Arabian Nights* the status of a landmark in European scholarship, it is "the famous, or notorious, 'Terminal Essay' that many readers turn to first" (Rice 588). Appended to volume ten, the Essay includes a discussion of pornography and a forty-nine-page section titled "Pederasty." Burton begins by defending pornography in general, and by criticizing European attitudes towards sex as emotionally harmful and unenlightened. In Britain, Burton argues, the "Empire of Opinion" holds that sex is a shameful and disgusting subject, and this has led to the suppression of erotic material (10.202). The war against pornography has meant that youths suffer an enforced ignorance about sexual matters, and this has resulted in the infliction of "untold miseries upon individuals, families, and generations" (199–200). In the East, on the other hand, the sexual education of boys is "aided by a long series of volumes, many of them written by learned physiologists, by men of social standing and by religious dignitaries in high office" (200). While such "pornographic literature" includes explicit illustrations of sexual positions, Burton maintains that it is not "purely and simply aphrodisiacal" but provides "correct and practical" guidance on intercourse (202).

Burton next develops the argument in the "Author's Preface" that his *Arabian Nights* is not pornographic. Defending his uniquely unexpurgated and authentic translation, Burton turns the charge of obscenity back on his detractors. He here suggests that his critics have purposefully sought out the titillating material, which makes up only a small portion of the whole work: "To those critics who complain of these raw vulgarisms and puerile indecencies in The Nights, I can reply only by quoting the words said to have been said by Dr Johnson to the lady who complained of the naughty words in his dictionary—'You must have been looking for them, Madam!'" (10.204). On one taboo subject, however, Burton is keen to expand, and this is on the practice of the so-called "*vice contre nature*"—as if anything can be contrary to nature which includes all things." It



is Burton's intention, in the next section of the Essay, to offer a detailed study of anal sex and pederasty, and to treat the topic "sérieusement, honnêtement, historiquement; to show it in decent nudity not in suggestive fig-leaf" (204–05). This was a particularly brave decision on Burton's part, as rumors of his own homosexuality had hampered his career since he had written a report on boy brothels in Karachi in the 1840s, and these had been compounded by his close relationship with the openly gay decadent poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne, who he had first met in 1861.<sup>13</sup>

As Rice notes, Burton's study of homosexuality was "probably the first such discussion . . . to appear before the general public" (589). In the section on "Pederasty," Burton advances his theory that there exists a "Sotadic Zone"—a term which he derived from the name of the Greek poet Sotades (3rd century BCE), who wrote satirical verses on sexual relationships between men and boys. In the "Sotadic Zone," Burton contends that pederasty is "popular and endemic, held at the worst to be a mere peccadillo, whilst the races to the North and South of the limits here defined practice it only sporadically amid the opprobrium of their fellows" (206–07). The Sotadic Zone includes the regions of Greece and Italy; Africa; Morocco; Egypt; Asia Minor; Mesopotamia; Afghanistan; India; China; Japan; "Turkistan"; the South Sea Islands; and the New World. Speculating on the causes of the proclivity towards anal sex in these regions, Burton vaguely suggests that links are "geographic and climatic, not racial" (207). His best conjecture is that "within the Sotadic Zone there is a blending of the masculine and feminine temperaments . . . Hence the male *féminisme* whereby the man becomes patiens [the one who is penetrated] as well as agens [the one who penetrates]" (208). Content to accept that anal sex is simply "one of the marvellous list of amorous vagaries" that have developed among human beings, Burton proceeds to chart the spread of pederasty in ancient and modern civilizations.

Burton asserts that "the love of boys has its noble and sentimental side," and that pederasty is often integral to the socio-cultural functioning of communities within the Sotadic Zone (209). In the ancient world, pederasty was almost a form of religious worship:

The Platonists and pupils of the Academy, followed by the Sufis or Moslem Gnostics, held such affection, pure and ardent, to be the beau ideal which united in man's soul the creature with the Creator. Professing to regard youths as the most cleanly and beautiful objects in this phenomenal world, they declared that by loving and extolling the chef-d'oeuvre [master-piece], corporeal and intellectual, of the Demiurgus [Creator], disinterestedly and without any admixture of carnal sensuality, they are paying the most fervent adoration to the Causa causans [gods]. (207)

In Classical civilizations, sexual relationships between men and boys were judged to have a purity which heterosexual relationships did not have, because the affection involved in pederasty was "far less selfish than fondness for and admiration of the other sex which, however innocent, always suggest sexuality." Finally, Burton argues

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13. Biographers are divided about the nature of this friendship. Kennedy believes it was likely sexual; Lovell disagrees. Rice asserts that there is no conclusive evidence about whether or not Burton was homosexual.



that the ancient “system of boy-favourites” facilitated the education of youths in matters of morality and politics, and fostered a sense of social responsibility (207–09). Burton quotes the Greek philosopher Hieronymous (c290–230 BCE), who advocated pederasty because “the vigorous disposition of youths and the confidence engendered by their association [with older men] often led to the overthrow of tyrannies” (208). He also records the declaration of Socrates, that “a most valiant army might be composed of boys and their lovers; for that of all men they would be most ashamed to desert one another.”

According to Burton, the Romans adopted the practice of pederasty from the Greeks and extended the custom throughout their colonies, where it took root particularly in North Africa and Morocco. From there, pederasty spread throughout the Arab-Islamic world, and received no impediment from the teachings of the Qur’an, as “Mohammed seems to have regarded [it] with philosophical indifference” (224). Burton believes that “Sotadic love” is common in Persia because of “paternal severity,” which ensures that boys are circumcised and girls remain virgins until married (233):

Youths arrived at puberty [in Persia] find none of the facilities with which Europe supplies fornication. Onanism [masturbation] is to a certain extent discouraged by circumcision, and meddling with the father’s slave-girls and concubines would be risking cruel punishment if not death. Hence they [boys and men] use each other by turns.

Throughout the East, Burton observes, pederasty is widespread, houses of male prostitution are more common than female brothels, and “boys are prepared with extreme care by diet, baths, depilation, unguents and a host of artists in cosmetics” (234). Having outlined the history and geography of pederasty and demonstrated that the practice extends “over the greater portion of the habitable world,” Burton declares that he has now concluded “this part of my subject, the *éclaircissement des obscénités* [clarification of obscenities]” (210, 253). Burton was not content to end the appended “Terminal Essay” without one final defence of the *Arabian Nights* against charges of indecency. Here, he is specifically concerned to counter attacks launched by the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Edinburgh Review* over the course of the previous year.<sup>14</sup> As soon as the first substantive volumes of the *Arabian Nights* appeared in 1885, Stead’s *Pall Mall Gazette* denounced it as the “garbage of the brothel . . . [a] revolting obscenity” (“Occasional” 3). Journalist and Liberal MP John Morley wrote two particularly scathing reviews for the *Gazette* under the pseudonym “Sigma.” “Pantagruelism or Pornography?” argues that the obscenity of Rabelais’ novels, *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (five vols., c1532–1564), paled in comparison with Burton’s “filth” (2). Morley worried that the *Arabian Nights* would pass into the hands of “unripe youth” and “unsuspecting maidens,” or perverts who had no “legitimate interest” in the literary qualities of the work. He concluded that the volumes “can do no possible good and may do boundless harm.”

Morley’s follow-up, “The Ethics of Dirt,” refers to Burton’s translation as an “Oriental muck heap” (2); its volumes exemplify “esoteric pornography” which was all the more dangerous for attempting to hide crudity behind a “mask of scholarship and culture.” In the following year, the *Edinburgh Review* joined in the condemnation of Burton with an article by Stanley Lane-Poole (nephew of Edward Lane, who had published an edition of the *Nights* in 1840). Lane-Poole described Burton’s work as a “varied collection of abominations” and an “ocean of filth” (183, 185). Comparing the

various editions of the *Nights* which were then available to European readers, he concluded: “Galland for the nursery, Lane for the library, Payne for the study, and Burton for the sewers” (184).

Burton responded angrily to these criticisms, arguing that they were typical of “an age saturated with cant and hypocrisy” (*Arabian* 10.253). Decrying the “venal pen” which “will mourn over the ‘Pornography’ of The Nights, dwell upon the ‘Ethics of Dirt’ and the ‘Garbage of the Brothel’ and will lament the wanton dissemination . . . of ancient and filthy fiction,” Burton once again rejected the literary double-standards of Victorian Britain. He suggests that, to be consistent, his censoring critics should also turn their attention to Shakespeare and Chaucer, and purge the Old Testament of its references to adultery, sodomy, and bestiality (254). Burton also replied to Lane-Poole directly, in a passage dripping with sarcasm and derision. “To the interested critic of the *Edinburgh Review*,” he wrote,

I return my warmest thanks for his direct and deliberate falsehoods:—lies are one-legged and short-lived, and venom evaporates. It appears to me that when I show to such men, so “respectable” and so impure, a landscape of magnificent prospects whose vistas are adorned with every charm of nature and art, they point their unclean noses at a little heap of muck here and there lying in a field-corner.

In the final sentences of the *Arabian Nights*, Burton develops this representation of himself as an embattled scholar, whose work constituted a “protest” against the West’s wilful and prurient “ignorance” of sex (301):

In this matter, I have done my best, at a time when the hapless English traveller is expected to write like a young lady for young ladies, and never to notice what underlies the most superficial stratum. And I also maintain that the free treatment of topics usually taboo’d and held to be . . . unknown and unfitted for publicity will be a national benefit . . . Men have been crowned with gold in the Capitol for lesser services rendered to the Respublica.

Mary S. Lovell writes that “Richard Burton’s lively style and his contagious delight in his subject, so apparent . . . throughout the *Nights*, hide the fact that they were written by a man not only in physical decline but often in acute pain” (678). The *Arabian Nights* was Burton’s last published work before his death of a heart attack on the morning of 20th October 1890, leaving uncompleted a new translation of the Arabic sex manual *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight (Scented Garden)*. This late literary venture was never seen by the public, as Isabel Burton burned the manuscript in a fire—along with many of Burton’s journals and letters—in an effort, she claimed, to protect her husband’s memory (2.438–89).<sup>15</sup> Burton’s niece, Georgiana Stisted wrote scathingly of this “mad act”:

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14. See Colette Colligan, “‘Esoteric Pornography’: Sir Richard Burton’s *Arabian Nights* and the Origins of Pornography” (*Victorian Review* 28.2 [2002]: 31–64).

15. Isabel Burton later regretted this act, calling it “the greatest mistake in the world” (438).

Isabel, who knew exactly how he had been engaged until the last day of his life, and who was assisting him by every means in her power, took the pages from the desk in which he had carefully locked them, deliberately read through pages which probably she only half understood, and then, inspired by what seems to have been a fit of hysteria and bigotry, flung them leaf by leaf into the fire . . . Men whose wives differ from them so vastly in religious views should leave special instructions with regard to their papers. (404)

## Conclusion

In assessing Burton's adventurous career and prolific output at his bicentenary, the initial insights of Edward Said have been invaluable. Framing Burton within Said's definitions of Orientalism enables his complexities to be drawn out and explored in further detail. Burton was both an eccentric individual and a man of his time, immersed in the languages and culture of the Arab-Islamic world, while also acting as a tool of British imperialism in the East. He "contributed more than most to the vast body of knowledge about other peoples and practices that constituted the Victorians' 'imperial archive'" (Kennedy 8). In the final analysis, it may be said that Burton sought liberation in the Orient—finding in Islam an alternative to Christianity, and in Arabic sexuality a means of combating the oppressions of Victorian morality. Throughout all his works, from *The Personal Narrative of a Pilgrim- age* to the *Arabian Nights*, Burton's extensive learning is documented and demonstrated, as he displayed the extent to which he was both enthralled by, and master over, the Orient.

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