Title of Paper: THE “TERMINAL ESSAY” TO BURTON’S ARABIAN NIGHTS: TASTING THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT
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Abstract:

Richard Francis Burton was clearly more than the imperialist exploiter of the East described by Edward Said in Orientalism. However, when we look beyond Burton’s intellectual and religious life and move on to the territory of his personal and emotional predilections, it must be admitted that Said’s perspective seems more just—though by no means sufficient, in itself, to justify his overall view of Burton as a man who through his knowledge of Orientalist practices was able to exploit the East for his colonial masters. In the ensuing article, I will look at Burton’s often controversial views on sexuality as expressed in the ‘Terminal Essay’ to his translation of the Arabian Nights and later relate these views to Said’s portrayal of the East as a place where wayward and sexually frustrated Europeans might go or be sent for the purpose of gaining new and “forbidden” knowledge.

Keywords: Sotadic Zone, Burton, Arabian Nights, Edward Said, Terminal Essay, Orientalism

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Richard Francis Burton was clearly more than the imperialist exploiter of the East described by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. However, when we look beyond Burton’s intellectual and religious life and move on to the territory of his personal and emotional predilections, it must be admitted that Said’s perspective seems more just—though by no means sufficient, in itself, to justify his overall view of Burton as a man who through his knowledge of Orientalist practices was able to exploit the East for his colonial masters. Nevertheless, in the narrower context of his own emotional and sexual life, it is possible that Burton saw the East as a way out of the strait-jacket of conventional Victorian society and its views on sexual propriety.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that the perceived prudery of Victorian society hid many easy modes of access to sex and pornography. For example, throughout the nineteenth-century, London was filled with prostitutes and brothels that allowed Victorian gentlemen to move beyond the conventional restrictions of their “genteel” society. The famous Victorian sex narrative, *My Secret Life* shows conclusively, in its detail, that sexual pleasure was by no means out of reach for the average unmarried (or married) Victorian gentleman. Therefore, Said’s view of Burton as a man in search of sexual adventures in the “Mysterious East” must, at least to some extent, be tempered by the clear and easy availability of sex in Victorian London. Why travel to the Middle East for something that was freely available in London despite the facade of Victorian respectability?

In the ensuing discussion, I will look at Burton’s often controversial views
on sexuality as expressed in the ‘Terminal Essay’ to his translation of the *Arabian Nights* and later relate these views to Said’s portrayal of the East as a place where wayward and sexually frustrated Europeans might go or be sent for the purpose of gaining new and forbidden knowledge. I will suggest that at least some of the sexual adventures available to Victorian gentlemen in the East were—as earlier pointed out—also on offer in London itself. First, however, a few things should be said about the context of Burton’s translation of the *Arabian Nights* which resulted in the writing of the revealing “Terminal Essay”.

The various European translations of the *Arabian Nights* are based on a number of Arabic texts from Syria and India. These diverse and rough texts are clearly based on earlier originals. In the Egyptian desert, just after the Second World War, a fragment of the frame story was found dating from the ninth century AD. The Arab writer Al Mas’oodi who died in AD 956 refers to this book and reveals that it was known as *Alf Layla* (A Thousand Nights). This original book is lost and, although the framework story of Shahrazad (Sheherezade) has remained largely unchanged, there is little agreement over the origin of the individual stories in the collection. In the Middle East the stories were kept alive by professional storytellers from Arabia, Egypt and Persia.

The first European version of the *Arabian Nights* appeared in 1704, translated from the Arabic into French by Antoine Galland. This twelve volume work (*Le Mille e une nuits, contes arabes traduis en Francais*) contained stories not included in the Arabic texts. Moreover, these comprised some of the most
famous tales such as “Aladdin” and “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”. Galland himself insisted that he had heard these tales from a Syrian in Aleppo, but no one can feel absolutely sure that Galland didn’t invent them himself.iii Certainly, the Frenchman should be viewed as the real populariser of the tales in Europe.

The popularity of the Arabian Nights in French soon led to an English version in 1706, usually dubbed “the Grub Street” version and translated anonymously. iv After Jonathan Scott’s 1811 translation, the next significant work was that of Edward Lane who translated the tales between 1838 and 1840. This edition is well known for its anthropological notes and bowdlerisation of sexual content. iv John Payne published his more accurate and complete translation between 1882 and 1884. Although Payne tried to minimise the offense that would be given by the more licentious passages, he did at least attempt to contend with the sexual content of the tales in a way that Lane had refused to do. v Between 1885 and 1888 Burton published his own translation of the Arabian Nights in which he was at pains to portray faithfully the sexual eroticism of the tales. vi

This translation is reasonably accurate if somewhat archaic in its use of language. Nevertheless, in spite of its literal accuracy and popularity with a wide range of readers, Burton’s translation has been heavily criticised by Robert Irwin in his well-known book The Arabian Nights: A Companion. Irwin outlines his criticism of Burton as follows:

Burton was a man of many prejudices and they were vigorous ones. He was a racist (in an age when racism was acquiring pseudo-scientific pretensions). “Niggers”, Jews and Persians got rough treatment in the notes. He was also a misogynist with a particularly strong dislike for society women. He was anti-
Christian and he considered Islam, for all the faults he believed it had, to be a better religion, because it was more rational and more useful as an instrument of social control. The indices to Burton’s notes are extraordinary specimens of rostered bigotry: “Blackamoors preferred by debauched women...Blind notorious for insolence, etc. . . .”

Irwin’s criticisms of Burton may appear just, but one might question whether a preference for Islam falls into the same category as charges of racism and misogyny. He clearly has no emotional empathy for Burton as a crusader for scientific method on the front line of Victorian imperialist complacency. In particular, it is Burton’s focus on the sexual content of the tales together with the discursive nature of his footnotes that seem most to rile Irwin. Thus, Irwin complains that “Sex and farting apart, Burton’s footnotes are a parade of barmy erudition interspersed with snatches of autobiography”.

In spite of this clear lack of empathy with Burton, Irwin does do his best to see the good things in the translation. In particular, he praises Burton’s editorial practice (as against Lane’s selective procedures), his literary valuation of individual tales, and his scholarship in relation to the formation of the Arabian Nights:

Burton had provided a full edition of the tales, even to the point of including in the supplementary volumes variants of tales he had already translated. His judgement of the respective merits and failings of individual tales was on the whole good, and he had a much saner view of the likely history of the formation of the corpus of the Nights than Lane had.

Certainly, Burton’s version of the Arabian Nights is still one of the most famous editions of the text in English. In spite of its gleeful and sometimes heavy-handed obsession with unusual sexual practices, Burton’s edition is
It is certainly interesting that, after his lengthy work of translation on the *Arabian Nights*, Burton thought it necessary to write a long terminal essay explaining the reasons both why the *Arabian Nights* included so much about sexuality and unusual forms of sex and also why he himself had seen fit to interpret this sexuality so clearly for his rather faint-hearted Victorian readers. His own argument as to why he had included so much sexual content in his translation, boils down to one of literary and historical respect for an original source. He argues that there is no reason to spare the feelings of his readers in this regard, when there is already so much material available on the market of a far more vivid and colourful character. Furthermore, Burton suggests (somewhat contradictorily) that his work might actually be useful in liberalising and generally opening up the taboo subject of sex in his own society. Burton makes these points most clearly in his notes to *Those Who Attack Literary Free Speech or are Frightened at Scientific Sex Discussion*, to be found in the last volume of *Supplemental Nights* to the *Book of the Thousand and One Nights*:

I resolved that, in case of the spiteful philanthropy and the rabid pornophobic suggestion of certain ornaments of the Home-Press being acted upon, to appear in Court with my version of the Nights in one hand and bearing in the other the Bible (especially the Old Testament, a free translation from an ancient Oriental work) and Shakespeare with Petronius Arbiter and Rabelais by way of support and reserve. The two former are printed by millions; they find their way into the hands of children, and they are the twin columns which support the scanty edifice of our universal home-reading….And if the Nights are to be bowdlerized for students, why not….mutilate Plato and Juvenal, the Romances of the Middle Ages, Boccaccio and Petrarch, and the Elizabethan dramatists
one and all? What of the natural? How absurd to swallow such camels and to strain at my midge! "

This then is what we might call Burton’s argument for literary and historical accuracy in his translation for its own sake. He makes the point that many books and writers considered ‘classic’ at the time of writing, included far more blatant reference to sex in all its multifarious forms than anything to be found in his own translation of the Nights. However, in the same notes, Burton puts forward a second argument concerning why a faithful rendering of the sexual content of the Arabian Nights is important. We might call this the argument for why a greater knowledge of sexual matters is desirable in the Britain of Burton’s time, and how a proper and accurate rendition of the Nights might help that process:

The England of our day, would fain bring up both sexes, and keep all ages, in profound ignorance of sexual and intersexual relations; and all the consequences of that imbecility are peculiarly cruel and afflicting. How often do we hear women in Society lamenting that they have absolutely no knowledge of their own physiology; and at what heavy price must this fruit of the knowledge-tree be bought by the young first entering life. Shall we ever understand that ignorance is not innocence? ... Where then is the shame of teaching what it is shameful not to have learnt? But the ultra delicacy, the squeamishness of an age which is by no means purer or more virtuous than its ruder predecessors, has ended in trenching upon the ridiculous. ""

Here Burton rails against the British society of his time where sex was not a subject for polite conversation and in which young women often had only the sketchiest knowledge of their own anatomy. In these circumstances, suggests Burton, such books as his might be seen as a contribution to knowledge in an area where ignorance had previously prevailed.
In the ‘Terminal Essay’ itself, Burton goes on to spend much time and effort on a description of unusual and generally reviled sexual practices present in the Arabian Nights. There is homosexuality, with its precedents in ancient Greece and other societies (which was also raising its profile in the Britain of Burton’s own time \(^{1}\)), but, more controversially and potentially damaging for Burton, there is also the topic of pederasty. The latter is a form of sexuality that has been fairly universally despised by all advanced civilizations, and Burton has his work cut out for him in his ‘Terminal Essay’ to the Arabian Nights in trying to convince his reader that it is an appropriate topic for academic study. He attempts to give his work an acceptable intellectual framework by rather dubiously suggesting that forms of sexual activity that are usually regarded as ‘perverted’ are common in a particular geographical zone encircling the world. Burton famously gave the name “Sotadic Zone”, after the Greek poet, Sotades\(^{iii}\) to this hot and sexually diverse region.

Burton’s account of the “Sotadic Zone” is as follows:

1. There exists what I shall call a ‘Sotadic Zone,’ bounded westwards by the northern shores of the Mediterranean (N. Lat. 43 degrees) and by the southern (N. Lat. 30 degrees). Thus the depth would be 780 to 800 miles including meridional France, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and Greece, with the coast-regions of Africa from Morocco to Egypt.

2. Running eastward the Sotadic Zone narrows, embracing Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Chaldaea, Afghanistan, Sind, the Punjab and Kashmir.

3. In Indo-China the belt begins to broaden, enfolding China, Japan and Turkistan.

4. It then embraces the South Sea Islands and the New World where, at the time of its discovery, Sotadic love was, with some exceptions,
5. Within the Sotadic Zone the Vice 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 who, as a rule, are physically incapable of performing the operation and look upon it with the liveliest disgust.

Before entering into topographical details concerning pederasty, which I hold to be geographical and climactic, not racial, I must offer a few considerations of its cause and origin."

Thus Burton attempts to create a scientific framework for the study of pederasty in the hope that this will make his discussion more acceptable.

Burton next goes on to consider the past history of pederasty, laying particular emphasis on the Greeks and their enthusiasm for tutor-student relationships. Burton contends that this Greek enthusiasm for what he so often terms “The Vice” was passed on to the Romans, who in their turn diffused the practice throughout their colonies. In North Africa, the practice was continued by the Moors who, according to Burton, “are notable sodomites.” Burton informs us that Muslims of saintly houses openly keep catamites without in any way compromising their religiosity in the eyes of their disciples."

According to Burton, pederasty is common throughout North Africa and on all the cities of the South Mediterranean seaboard:

As in Marocco so the Vice prevails throughout the old regencies of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli and all the cities of the South Mediterranean seaboard, whilst it is unknown to the Nubians, the Berbers and the wilder tribes dwelling inland. Proceeding Eastward we reach Egypt, that classical region of all abominations which, marvelous to relate, flourished in closest contact with men leading the purest of lives, models of moderation and morality, of religion and virtue. Amongst the ancient Copts Le Vice was part and portion of the Ritual and was represented by
As so often with Burton, small details ("two male partridges alternately copulating") are here used to bolster a contentious argument. Burton continues to take us through the sexual history of his self-designated "Sotadic Zone" in the pages that follow. Syria and Palestine "borrowed from Egypt and exaggerated the worship of androgynic and hermaphroditic deities" while "The Jews seem very successfully to have copied the abominations of their pagan neighbours." We are told that the Sotadic Zone and Le Vice "covers the whole of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia now occupied by the 'unspeakable Turk,' a race of born pederasts," and is well known to Persia, Afghanistan, Sind and Kashmir. After India "the Sotadic Zone begins to broaden out, embracing all China, Turkistan and Japan. The Chinese...are the chosen people of debauchery, and their systematic bestiality with ducks, goats, and other animals is equaled only by their pederasty." In America, "we find that the Sotadic Zone contains the whole hemisphere from Behring's Straits to Magellan's." According to Burton, while pederasty was acceptable and frequent within the Sotadic Zone, countries outside its designated borders were certainly not untainted by "Le Vice":

Outside the Sotadic Zone, I have said, Le Vice is sporadic, not endemic: yet the physical and moral effect of great cities where puberty, they say, is induced earlier than in country sites, has been the same in most lands, causing modesty to decay and pederasty to flourish. The Badawi Arab is wholly pure of Le Vice; yet San’a the capital of Al- Yaman and other centres of population have long been and still are thoroughly infected.

After creating this intellectual, geographical and historical framework of
the “Sotadic Zone” and narrating its sexual history, Burton finally gets back to the subject of pederasty in the *Arabian Nights*:

The pederasty of The Nights may briefly be distributed into three categories. The first is the funny form, as the unseemly practical joke of masterful Queen Budur (vol. iii. 300—306) and the not less hardy jest of the slave princess Zumurrud (vol. iv. 226). The second is the grimmest and most earnest phase of the perversion, for instance where Abu Nowas debauches the three youths (vol. v. 64—69); whilst in the third form it is wisely and learnedly discussed, to be severely blamed, by the Shaykhah or Reverend Woman (vol. v. 154).

The “worst” of the three types of pederasty presented in the *Arabian Nights* is cited to be that of the poet Abu Nowas who, in Volume V, lures three handsome boys to his home, plies them with wine (which he also drinks extensively himself) and, in his befuddled state, falls to kissing and fondling them. At this point, Harun Al Rashid, Commander of the Faithful, calls to see Abu Nowas. At first, Harun Al Rashid threatens to have the poet executed, but soon he is laughing at his jests once again and all is forgiven.

Summarised in this bald fashion it is clear just how contentious a theme is being manipulated here for comic effect. The general tone of the tale is very light-hearted, and one is never in any serious doubt that the poet will be forgiven. Furthermore, the three boys are indulgent towards Abu Nowas and are happy to let him do as he wishes.

Certainly, no one is here portrayed as a “victim”: unless it is Abu Nowas himself, victim of the King’s wrath. The whole story should perhaps be seen as an example of how, in a hierarchical society, the wishes of important individuals are of paramount importance rather than any abstract ideas and principles. Abu
Nowas is a rich and important man, attending on the King every day, and the three boys (in a male-dominated society) might be happy to spend time with him in order to obtain a higher profile at court. Of course, none of this is mentioned in the story itself, where all the main characters act only due to their wish to have fun and enjoyment. Even the forgiveness of the King is only given after the poet has made him laugh. In one sense then, we are still in that strange never-never land of the *Arabian Nights*, where people are invariably activated by the most simple of desires.

Is this story buried in the fifth volume of Burton’s translation (and the other lighter references to pederasty), sufficient reason to write so extensively on pederasty and abnormal sex practices in the *Arabian Nights*? Isn’t Burton actually throwing a spotlight onto sections of his work that may have produced hardly more than a cursory glance from most critics of the time, well used as they were to Platonic and Greek models of a similar nature? Certainly, Burton’s own descriptions and explanations in his ‘Terminal Essay’ make for far cruder reading than anything in the story of Abu Nowas and the three boys.

With the brief description of pederasty in the *Arabian Nights* we have already looked at Burton’s long and controversial examination of pederasty ends. The rather perfunctory nature of these few lines hardly seem to account for the earlier fervour with which Burton justified his detailed description of homosexual practices and pederasty in the *Arabian Nights*—and even seemed to show himself in the robes of some contemporary sexual moralist, determined to teach his timid and recalcitrant society the truths about sex. As
the majority of Burton’s references to sex in the ‘Terminal Essay’ deal with
pederasty and its history (as depicted in terms of Burton’s own “Sotadic
Zone”), it would be difficult to see what sheltered and inexperienced British
maidens were supposed to learn from Burton of a sexually practical and useful
nature. The effort seems to finally peter out, as Burton makes a politic dash for
the moral high ground--after spending around a hundred pages minutely
describing the history of a sexual practice consistently held in abhorrence by
the vast majority of mankind during all periods of history:

Those who have read through these ten volumes will agree with me that
the proportion of offensive matter bears a very small ratio to the mass of
the work. In an age saturated with cant and hypocrisy, here and there a
venal pen will mourn over the ‘Pornography’ of The Nights, dwell upon
the “Ethics of Dirt” and the “Garbage of the Brothel”….This self
constituted Censor morum reads Aristophanes and Plato, Horace and
Virgil, perhaps even Martial and Petronius, because ‘veiled in the decent
obscurity of a learned language’….but he is scandalized at stumbling
blocks much less important in plain English. To be consistent he must
begin by bowdlerizing not only the classics….but also Boccaccio and
Chaucer, Shakespeare and Rabelais; Burton, Sterne, Swift, and a long list
of works which are yearly reprinted and republished without a word of
protest...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.

This is a fine panegyric on which to finish his anthropological essay, but does it
really hold water, in the sense of accurately portraying what the essential
motivations of the previous pages have been? Probably, the answer is negative.

There can be no doubt that Burton felt the need to justify and protect himself
from those who would only “point their unclean noses at a little heap of muck”,
but why does he assume the need to explicate so much about pederasty and
sodomy in an essay which was ostensibly written merely to explain and justify his faithful translation of the several instances of these sexual practices in the *Arabian Nights*? Certainly, the pederasty contained within the *Arabian Nights* itself, might come as something of an anti-climax after Burton’s long-winded justifications, and there is a suspicion that Burton was very much in his element when talking about sexual practices and, in particular, abnormal sexual practices.

The notes to his ten-volume translation of the *Arabian Nights* are frequently full of the most explicit sexual references. In his commentary on “King Shahryar and His Brother”, for example, Burton goes into anthropological and ethnographical detail about the reasons why “debauched women” prefer “negroes”. This is hardly necessary for a full understanding of the tale and the Queen’s secret love for Saeed, “the blackamoor.” Moreover, as one might suspect from the topic, unscientific opinion seems to be dressed up as fact in Burton’s notes:

Debauched women prefer negroes on account of the size of their parts. I measured one man in Somali-land who, when quiescent, numbered nearly six inches. This is a characteristic of the negro race and of African animals; e.g. the horse; whereas the pure Arab man and beast, is below the average of Europe. 

This gives an odd glimpse into Burton’s researches and suggests another side to his extensive travels. Frantz Fanon in his influential book, *Black Skin White Masks*, comments on this widely held belief in the superior size of the black man’s sexual organ—and comes to the conclusion that it is a mere fantasy designed to emphasise the bestiality of the coloured race.

In 1886, Burton had published his first translation of Sheikh Nefzawi’s
The Victorian

Arabic sex manual, *The Perfumed Garden*. Burton was later to make a fuller translation of this work, which Isabel Burton, controversially, destroyed. The first translation can give us a good idea of what Isabel probably disliked about the second. Charles Fowkes in his Introduction to the Park Street Press edition, touches on a point that goes a long way towards explaining Isabel Burton’s decision to burn her husband’s last work:

In many respects, Sheikh Nefzawi and Richard Burton are kindred spirits. Both were men of action: in addition to book learning there is clearly a great deal of first-hand experience in their descriptions of sexual behaviour.

Is it fanciful to suppose that Isabel, in the second extended version of *The Perfumed Garden*, was unable to come to terms with Burton’s encyclopedic sexual knowledge: a knowledge that he had most probably acquired during his travels in Sind, Arabia and Africa? Was this the reason that she destroyed the manuscript that a London publisher had already offered six thousand guineas for? There is no way of ascertaining the truth of this matter for sure, but perhaps Isabel had already showed herself a loving and understanding wife by not making any public complaints about the former work. Sexual techniques with names such as “The stab with a lance”, “The Archimedean screw”, “Driving in the peg”, and “Pounding the spot”, leave little work to the imagination.

From these examples then, which fairly represent a fascination with all forms of sexual behaviour in Burton’s works, it might seem that Burton was sometimes more than a little disingenuous in his protestations of concern for
literary fidelity and his contributions to educational improvement in his ‘Terminal Essay’ to the Arabian Nights. But why should this be so?

In order to answer this question, we need to look carefully at the nature of “Orientalism” itself as a Western academic discipline designed to explain the world of the East for Occidental consumption. Said suggests that many Westerners of the nineteenth century sought to escape the narrow sexual conventions of their own societies in the exotic and erotic “mysteries” of the East. In relation to Islam, there was undoubtedly a prevalent opinion in the West that Mohammed was the creator of a false religion that believed in polygamy, harems, etc. While, on the one hand, this was religiously deplored by the upholders of the Christian faith, there was also---and perhaps inevitably given the tight strictures on sexual relations in Western societies of the time—a sense that in the East a man could be free and live out his sexual fantasies in a way that would be impossible in the West. Said is particularly illuminating on this theme in his comments on the French novelist, Gustav Flaubert:

In all of his novels Flaubert associates the Orient with the escapism of sexual fantasy. Emma Bovary and Frederic Moreau pine for what in their drab (or harried) bourgeois lives they do not have, and what they realize they want comes easily to their daydreams packed inside Oriental clichés: harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherberts, ointments, and so on. The repertoire is familiar, not so much because it reminds us of Flaubert’s own voyages in and obsession with the Orient, but because, once again, the association is clearly made between the Orient and the freedoms of licentious sex...the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or traveled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest: Flaubert, Nerval, ‘Dirty Dick Burton’, and Lane are only the most notable.
“Dirty Dick Burton” then, according to Said, was one of many Europeans who sought to find a glittering world of sexual opportunities in the East that were no longer available in the convention-ridden West. Perhaps this is one reason why Burton’s appeals to literary integrity and educational urges to justify his explicitness on sex sometimes sound rather unconvincing in his writings (and particularly in the ‘Terminal Essay’ to the Arabian Nights). As Said suggests, Burton was one of a long line of Europeans who had embraced the East in a search for their own sexual nature. Is it surprising then that Burton’s heavily sexual nature frequently and happily expressed itself in his writings on the East? But how to justify it to his more prudishly inclined compatriots? This was the question that Burton had to resolve: and he did so, with the help of some fairly large helpings of disingenuousness and dissembling.

Said makes the point that Islam—and Arabia in particular—had long been associated in Europe with a liberality of sexual opportunities. This was partly based on misconceptions about the nature of “harems”, “polygamy”, and other things. However, it was also to some extent associated with the founder of Al Islam, the prophet Mohammed himself. Mohammed had been surrounded by wives and daughters all his life, having produced only one son, Ibrahim, who died in his early years—much to Mohammed’s own anguish. As Said observes, Dante even placed Mohammed in the eighth of his nine circles of Hell:

Maometto—Mohammed—turns up in canto 28 of the Inferno. He is located in the eighth of the nine circles of Hell, in the ninth of the ten Bolgias of Malebolge, a circle of gloomy ditches surrounding Satan’s stronghold in Hell. Thus before Dante reaches Mohammed, he passes
through circles containing people whose sins are of a lesser order; the 
lustful, the avaricious, the gluttonous, the heretics, the wrathful, the 
suicidal, the blasphemous...Mohammed thus belongs to a rigid hierarchy 
of evils, in the category of what Dante calls *seminator di scandalo e di 
scisma*. Mohammed’s punishment, which is also his eternal fate, is a 
peculiarly disgusting one: he is endlessly being cleft in two from his chin 
to his anus like, Dante says, a cask whose staves are ripped apart. 

Said is obviously correct in his linkage of a long line of nineteenth-century 
European travellers with a search for sexual opportunity in the uninhibited East. 
At the same time, Islamic society is actually extremely structured in familial 
terms and careful about relations between the sexes. Nevertheless, ideas about 
“harems”, and “polygamy”, prevailed. Furthermore, the East had been 
subjugated to the will of the superior West, so a white conqueror could, in the 
opinion of many of the European travellers of the time, twist the flexible reality 
of the East to whatever particular fantasy he had. According to Said, this 
connection between the East and sex--and general sensuality--is still prominent 
in Western perceptions about Arabs today. 

According to Said, then, for the European, Arab society exists only to be 
“ravished” by the Orientalist. Perhaps this idea takes us somewhere close to the 
perception that Burton and other nineteenth-century travellers in the East 
possessed about their adventures in the Orient. The Orient was a place of fantasy 
and dreams that could easily be twisted into whatever reality the white man 
wanted. The traveller, frustrated and possibly short of sex in his own convention-
bound, but more “civilized” and “superior” society, might journey to the East in 
order to realize his sexual nature by “ravishing” it. However, nothing in this 
subjugated world was to be taken too seriously and after realising his own nature
The scholar and Orientalist (if such he should be), in these exotic surroundings, could return to his country and pour out his Orientalist learning and insights for the benefit of his own peers and compatriots. A disturbing void in the traveller’s personal development had been filled and now, from a new Olympian height, he could better see and understand the kind of problems that his countrymen from similar backgrounds to himself had needed to overcome in their early trials. Following this line of reasoning, we could view Burton as a kind of inveterate rebel who always needed to find out new things for himself and in his own way, but was always and essentially concerned to return to Britain in order to pour out his esoteric and sexual knowledge for the benefits of his countrymen. In other words, Burton’s Orientalism was essentially a way of coming to understand himself and his own place in British society better than he had before. In order to reach a higher level of self understanding, the East needed to be “ravished” by Burton: its exotic and esoteric knowledge to be yielded up and disseminated for the benefit of the “civilized” world. In fact this is very near to Said’s interpretation of Burton.

According to this view, then, Burton is a rebel who, unable to find the knowledge that he needed at home, journeyed out both physically and metaphorically to the East in order to “ravish” it of its secrets and bring them back home for the edification of himself, Britain and Britons. He had discovered the truths of the East and now, on his return, was happy to communicate them to the compatriots he had earlier left behind in the search for esoteric knowledge. However, not all his compatriots wished to read of Burton’s successes in
The Victorian

“ravishing” the East, and he needed to present his material carefully and in accordance with accepted scholarly procedures in order to have any chance of seeing the old recalcitrant Britain learn from the strange and unusual knowledge he was now in a position to impart. Arguments about the propriety of discussing certain sexual matters in the ‘Terminal Essay’ to the Arabian Nights should perhaps, be viewed in this overall context.

Nevertheless, it should be well noted that while Said seems to accurately describe some important truths about the sexuality of European adventurers and their erotic deeds in the East, this is no more than a garish side show to his more important points about Orientalism, its general European significance and Burton’s overall relationship to it. In other words, Burton may well have journeyed to the East with the secondary intention of enlarging upon his opportunities for sexual experiences at home (though there is no actual proof of this), but this does not mean that Said is in the right concerning his more central contention that Burton was a mere Orientalist serving his colonial masters in England. It is also worth bearing in mind that Burton’s translation of the Arabian Nights was eventually very successful and, in consequence, his ‘Terminal Essay’ may have been read more widely than any of his travel writings. To this extent, it might be suggested that Said in Orientalism has created a Burton—sexually promiscuous and imperialistic—that would already have partly existed in the minds of many of his readers.

In conclusion, it is worth going back to a point made earlier in this
discussion. It is possible to exaggerate the unavailability of sexual intercourse for Victorian gentlemen of the period. As works such as *My Secret Life* and *City of Dreadful Delight* clearly demonstrate, Victorian London was full of sexual opportunities for the middle-class gentleman--even if a certain kind of personality might feel less guilt about satisfying such urges abroad in “uncivilized” places rather than in bustling London itself. Furthermore, in the East, dangers of scandal would have been greatly reduced. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to point out the fact that Said, in his view of Burton as “ravisher” of the East, underestimates the common ways in which a gentleman of the time might have satisfied his sexual urges without ever leaving London.
Judith R. Walkowitz writes that most Victorian prostitutes never resided in formal brothels. In spite of this, and even after a significant decline in numbers, there were still 410 brothels in London in 1857. See, Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 24. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman has pointed out the way that Victorian London was segregated into well known districts: Covent Garden was a common place to pick up a prostitute. Even one side of Regent Street was unofficially ceded to the prostitutes: “Prostitutes mingled discreetly with the bourgeoisie and were informally ceded one side of Regent Street on which to ply their trade.” See, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, *Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003) 53. Rosenman also indicates that while Covent Garden was for prostitutes, London’s pornographic pleasures were to be found in Holywell Street. (*Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience* 53).  

*My Secret Life* by “Walter” was published in Amsterdam in 1888 for private circulation only. This narrative gives the details of a bourgeois gentleman’s sexual adventures over a period of decades. It makes quite clear that a gentleman need never have gone without sex in Victorian London. It includes details of all kinds of sex and matters relating to it: sex from behind, face-to-face, three in a bed, details of male and female masturbation, primitive condoms, brothels, street prostitutes, and sexual disease. (See, *My Secret Life*, “Walter”, Privately printed in 11 Volumes, Amsterdam, 1888). It has been suggested that “Walter” may have been a pseudonym.
for Henry Spencer Ashbee, a scholar, bibliographer and collector of pornography.

However, James R. Kincaid in his introduction to a modern edition of *My Secret Life* expresses doubts about this: “But who is Walter?...There is an intriguing possibility floated by some experts, that the author was one Henry Spencer Ashbee, a fascinating scholar, bibliographer, collector, and tweaker of the righteous. It is my guess that Ashbee knew more about printed erotica than any man who ever lived: he published a remarkable three-volume listing . . . of nineteenth-century arousing material called *Bibliography of Prohibited Books*, and he possessed a good deal of erotica himself . . . But there really is no evidence to confirm his authorship outside of Ashbee’s undeniable devilishness, knowledge, and interest in the subject; all areas in which he was extraordinarily proficient but hardly alone.” See Anonymous (author), James R. Kincaid, Introduction, *My Secret Life* (New York: Signet Classics, 1996) 8. See Appendix E for the complete Preface to *My Secret Life*, which makes quite clear how easy it was for a Victorian gentleman to enjoy virtually every form of sex in Victorian London.


iv Irwin 50-51.

v Irwin 49.

vi Irwin points out the enormous influence of Galland in discovering,
The Victorian

popularising, and translating the Nights. Even the canonical stories were shaped by Galland’s preferences.

vii Irwin 17.

viii Irwin 22. Irwin refers to opportunistic Grub Street “hacks”.

ix Irwin 24- 25.

x Irwin 27. Payne was a friend of Foster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot and H.S Ashbee, two early collectors (and experts on) pornography. In spite of this, his translation of the Nights was fairly conservative in its portrayal of sexual content (though far more explicit than Lane’s earlier version).

xi Irwin 33-34.

xii Irwin, 33.

xiii Irwin 34.

xiv Irwin 36.


xvi The Supplemental Nights to the Thousand Nights 437-438.

xvii In 1897 Havelock Ellis had written the book Sexual Inversion with John Addington Symonds. This work celebrated same-sex love and saw no moral objection to love between a boy and a man. See Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume 2: Sexual Inversion (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2007) 26. “Jealousy is frequently aroused ... and even murder may be committed on account of a boy.”
“A native of Maroneia in Thrace ... flourished at Alexandria about B. C. 280. He wrote lascivious poems (called tyKvaxes or Kivaitioi) in the Ionic dialect . . . It would seem that Sotades carried his lascivious and abusive satire to the utmost lengths...According to Plutarch (Op. Mor. p. 11, a.) he made a vehement and gross attack on Ptolemy Philadelphus, on the occasion of his marriage with his sister Arsinoe, and the king threw him into prison, where he rotted for a long time. According to Athenaeus...the poet attacked both Lysimachus and Ptolemy, and, having fled from Alexandria, he was overtaken at Caunus by Ptolemy's general Patroclus, who shut him up in a leaden chest and cast him into the sea.” See William Smith, ed, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, Volume 3 (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1867) 887.


* The Sotadic Zone 56.
* The Sotadic Zone 57-58.
* The Sotadic Zone 58.
* The Sotadic Zone 63.
* The Sotadic Zone 64.
* The Sotadic Zone 66-67.
* The Sotadic Zone 68.
* The Sotadic Zone 70.
* The Sotadic Zone 75.
* The Sotadic Zone 80.

See Plato’s *Lysis, Phaedrus and Symposium*.

See note “30”.

*The Sotadic Zone* 81-82.


*The Perfumed Garden* 8.

*Orientalism* 190.


*Orientalism* 68-69.

*Orientalism* 311-312.


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