Title of Paper: BURTON’S PERSONAS: IMPERIALIST DISSUMLATION OR PARODY/HYBRIDITY?
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Abstract:

It is, perhaps, the noun “disguise” that best sums up Richard Burton’s life and works. Most famously, he disguised himself as a Muslim from India, born to Afghan parents, in his celebrated Pilgrimage and took the same Muslim identity a few years later during his journey to Harar in West Africa—even if, finally, the disguise was discarded before he actually entered the forbidden city. But clearly, Burton’s penchant for disguise manifested itself in lots of other ways too. Where, in fact, did impersonation end and reality begin? Was Burton playing a role when he was ostensibly the Victorian English Gentleman? Was the wandering traveller the real Richard Burton? Did a real Richard Burton exist? Or was Burton a kind of consummate actor playing many different parts, but never revealing his true self?

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It is, perhaps, the noun “disguise” that best sums up Richard Burton’s life and works. Most famously, he disguised himself as a Muslim from India, born to Afghan parents, in his celebrated *Pilgrimage* and took the same Muslim identity a few years later during his journey to Harar in West Africa—even if, finally, the disguise was discarded before he actually entered the forbidden city. But clearly, Burton’s penchant for disguise manifested itself in lots of other ways too. Where, in fact, did impersonation end and reality begin? Was Burton playing a role when he was ostensibly the Victorian English Gentleman? Was the wandering traveller the real Richard Burton? Did a real Richard Burton exist? Or was Burton a kind of consummate actor playing many different parts, but never revealing his true self?

Said seems to take the somewhat romantic view that Burton was a master of disguise, who could easily dissemble his true identity in the East due to his innate understanding of the rules that govern society and—by implication at least—his command of the body of knowledge known in the West as “Orientalism”. Said’s Burton was essentially an adventurer in the service of empire. However much Burton might have understood the Muslim world, all his real and essential loyalties lay with the imperial masters from his country of birth.

During his time in Damascus as Consul, Burton often used to dress in Arabic robes and pretend to be an Arab. However, at least one Arabic observer has gone on record as stating that the whole pantomime was rather amusing as, due to his accent, everyone knew that Burton couldn’t be a real Arab. ¹

Is it possible that Burton dressed as an Arab because that was how he
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always felt most comfortable? Burton’s biographer Edward Rice goes as far as to suggest that Burton was a secret Muslim practicing ‘taqiya’ for all his life after he left Sind--and that requests he made to his wife, Isabel, such as not to cremate his body after death, should be seen in this light. However, it is hardly necessary to take such an extreme view in order to believe that Burton used both his knowledge of disguise and of the Orient for what were, essentially, profoundly personal ends.

Kennedy has pointed out that Burton’s famous disguise during the time of his Pilgrimage was not perhaps as successful as we might at first think. He also suggests that Burton’s reasons for using a disguise at all, could have been more bound up with his concern for fame at home than any real need to trick the local populace.

His subterfuge was not in fact necessary to gain entry to Mecca…Why Burton chose instead to carry out his elaborate deception says something about the complex array of professional ambitions and social pressures that influenced his judgement.

Kennedy concludes:

There was one further consideration that made any thought of undertaking the pilgrimage as a self-professed English convert to Islam impossible: it would invalidate his accomplishment and destroy his reputation in the eyes of the British public.

If this alternative and less heroic view is accepted, Burton was hardly a master of disguise and of the codes according to which diverse societies operated. Rather, he was providing himself with a disguise primarily for home consumption. Perhaps it really wasn’t too important, most of the time, if his disguise was also accepted by his fellow travellers on the path to pilgrimage or
not. Certainly, we have some reason to doubt just how effective Burton’s disguise was with the various types of Muslims that he met on his travels. Kennedy is again helpful on this point:

However well suited to his circumstances, Burton’s disguise was by no means impenetrable… The most serious threat to his subterfuge… came from the Meccan youth Mohammed el-Basyuni… Early in the journey, Mohammed discovered among Burton’s belongings a sextant, a scientific instrument that he rightly regarded as signifying a secret identity and purpose.  

Kennedy goes on:

Did Burton’s fellow pilgrims decline to act on the Meccan youth’s accusation because they found it implausible or because they found it inconvenient?…If he was subsidizing their journey, what incentive did they have to see him exposed?  

Thus, the reasons for Burton’s various disguises were most probably a mixture of the practical and the personal. Rana Kabbani makes the point that Oriental travellers such as Lane and Burton also had to think about the strict regimentation of Victorian society and understand that mixing with Orientals as equals, in their own guises, would very likely result in ostracism:

The disguise permitted its wearer to move from one racial category to another as if by magic. This move, with its accompanying implication of moving downward in human worth and in social acceptance, was stimulating as a game; in reality, however, it was reflective of the severe regimentation of Victorian society, where any serious divergence from the consecrated hierarchies would lead to complete ostracism.  

Kabbani goes on to suggest that by dressing in Arab clothes Western travellers were throwing off the inhibitions and conventions of the Victorian society to which they belonged, and that the active pleasure which this gave, goes a long way to explaining the enthusiasm with which Burton and others took on
the guise of the Arab. However, as she goes on to point out, none of these
disguised Victorians actually preferred the company of natives to that of their
own compatriots:

However, no European ever wished to actually become Oriental in
emulating Oriental speech, dress and habits. Nor would any European
prefer the society of Orientals to that of Europeans unless, as in Lane and
Burton’s case, that society helped in furthering his goal of accumulating
facts. 7

Perhaps this wish to throw off the inhibitions and conventions of
Victorian society and enjoy, at least for a short time, the freedom of being
Oriental, goes some way towards explaining those occasions when Burton and
Isabel, during their time in Damascus, diverted themselves by dressing in local
clothes and practiced the deceit that Isabel was Burton’s son. Kennedy suggests
that there was an also an element of wishing to ‘transgress’ present when Burton
and his wife dressed in this way:

Whether the British penchant for disguise and cross-dressing took public form
in pantomimes and other theatrical performances or found private expression in
dress, demeanor, or sexual preferences, it gave expression to what was viewed
by conventional standards as transgressive behavior. 8

In many ways, as Fawn Brodie suggests, Burton had a dual nature and
this too was acted out in a symbolic way through his fascination with disguise:

At its most obvious the war waged between the man of action and the scholar,
the swordsman-poet and the soldier, the bawdy brawler and libertine versus
the tormented searcher for the secrets of sexual vitality. 9

Brodie also draws attention to Burton’s comparison of Disraeli and
Byron, noting that both had “that exceeding sensitiveness, that
womanly…softness of heart which finds safety in self-concealment from the coarse, hard, and cruel world that girds it.”

Were Burton’s disguises then also connected to his own “feminine” side? Is it possible, furthermore, that disguise may also have been a refuge from a latent homosexuality in Burton himself? Brodie, like other interpreters, certainly believes that Burton did possess an element of repressed homosexuality in his nature. In any case, it would certainly seem that in spite of his academic obsession with sex, his own heterosexual sex life was conducted almost exclusively abroad with prostitutes, native women and passing strangers.

For Edward Rice the essential reason for why Burton felt so comfortable in Muslim dress was because he had become a secret convert to Islam. His frequent use of disguise in Sind was a realistic enactment of what lay within his heart. If he put on a disguise for the natives, he was no less in disguise when mixing with his fellow officers and other soldiers. A fundamental change had taken place within his heart and only Burton was truly aware of what had happened.

He could pass himself off as a trader or a laborer, or, what particularly pleased him, as a dervish, for among the natives Burton was now acting out the role of a Muslim, not only externally but in inner belief, for sometime during this period he seems to have converted to Islam.

Dane Kennedy is far less sure than Rice about any fundamental change in Burton’s religious outlook which he sees as having been relativist and comparative in nature—though he does not deny Burton’s deep respect for the tenets of Islam. However, Kennedy sees no connection between Burton’s love of disguise and his religious beliefs, doubting if any long-
lasting conversion ever took place. He writes:

Was it true? Had Burton converted to Islam? The answer has to be “no” if conversion is understood in terms of strict observance of prayer and other demonstrations of faith. If, on the other hand, it is understood as a way of life, a set of values that informs one’s outlook on the world, then Burton may well have viewed himself as a Muslim—at least for a period of time. 12

It is at least interesting to note that Kennedy is prepared to go along with Rice’s idea to the extent of believing that Burton may--at least for a short time--have believed himself to be a Muslim. If this is true--as it may well be--then this deceit might reasonably be regarded as Burton’s most fundamental and important disguise during his life.

At this stage in the discussion it might be useful to look at Burton and disguise from the point of view of “mimicry”. This term represents a concept that has acquired importance in post-colonial theory since Homi K. Bhabha’s book, *The Location of Culture* was published in 1994 13. In that work, Bhabha devotes an entire chapter to his concept of mimicry (and, indeed, the idea of mimicry is present throughout the whole book) which is seen as a subtle way in which colonial authority may be undermined. At the root of Bhabha’s idea is the concept that when the colonised people copy their imperial masters an “ambivalence” is created because the copy can never be exactly like the original. It is: “Almost the same, but not quite” and “a problematic of colonial subjection.” It is problematic because mimicry is never far from mockery--and mockery poses a threat to imperial dominance. In Bhabha’s own words:

The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry--a difference that is almost nothing but not quite--to menace--a difference that is almost total but not quite. And in that other scene of colonial power, where history turns to farce and presence to ‘a part’ can be seen the twin figures of
The mimicry of the post-colonial subject is therefore always potentially destabilizing to colonial discourse, and locates an area of considerable political and cultural uncertainty in the structure of imperial dominance. 15

It is interesting to consider how all this relates to Richard Burton and his penchant for disguise. It would seem that the activity of Burton and other Victorians who dressed as Arabs turns the idea of mimicry inside out. Instead of being a colonial subject mimicking the imperial masters, Burton and the rest are members of the colonising race pretending to be natives. Perhaps it might be said that this preoccupation with native dress on the part of English Orientalists was akin to “parody” rather than “mimicry”. Parody, presumably, would not be menacing like mimicry, as the person disguised was already in a condition of superiority in relation to the watching native. Even if the disguise was penetrated, the Westerner’s superiority still remained: and his wish to dress as a local was, no doubt, viewed only as a mere whimsy of the colonialist (though the superiority that goes along with parody might also include an element of surveillance). Rana Kabbani stresses how disguise was also an entertainment and a release for people used to the repression of Victorian society:

The disguise...came to serve as leisured play-acting for the wealthy. It appealed to a jaded Victorian imagination by making a journey East more exotic, and it seemed to allow the traveller a deeper access to a cloistered world which he assumed guarded its secrets closely. The more difficult the journey could be made to appear, the more exhilarating would become the actual act of embarkation. Burton’s journey to Mecca is a
particularly good example of such a fascination with danger. One of his self-confessed reasons for embarking on the “pilgrimage” was the need to put his powers of disguise to the ultimate and most dangerous test.16

As we have already seen, it is quite possible that Burton’s disguise was discovered during his Hajj, with his Muslim companions deciding to stay silent due to the ample financing a Westerner could bring to the completion of a difficult and long journey.

Kabbani also emphasises the ways in which the ability to deceive his companions appealed to Burton:

The disguised person enjoyed the effect that his going native had on his compatriots. Burton recounts how he was cursed by two colleagues in the Indian army (who had not recognised him) and called an ‘upstart nigger’ for venturing too near. 17

It seems that the dual benefits that Arabic dress gave for entertainment and espionage came to make it, in Rabbani’s words: “the classic method through which the British related to the Arab world.” 18 Leila Ahmed has suggested that this mode of disguised penetration perpetuates in its very lineaments the condition of enmity, aggression, and rivalry that subsisted between the West and Islam when that mode was first devised: by the West. Consequently, aggression and cultural rivalry are always latent in it. 19

Perhaps it might reasonably be suggested that Burton, far more than Lawrence, Doughty, or Thesiger actually became an Arab and a Muslim--possibly even in his own mind. However, it is also true that whenever the disguised Burton was able to obtain any information that he thought might aid Britain in its colonial enterprise, he immediately turned it over to the authorities.
For example, during his trip to Makkah disguised as a Pathan, Burton heard news from a fellow-traveller of riots being planned to take place in India, and telegraphed the details back to Britain as soon as he was able to.  

Rana Kabbani concludes that by travelling to the East the inhibited Briton was able to locate another self.

The journey Eastward (and the desert journey in particular) provided an alternative self for the English traveller to inhabit, one that he could put aside once it had provided him with the necessary distraction. A haven from the bourgeois parlour, it was a place where inhibitions and social obligations could be shed.

Nevertheless, although there is much of an enlightening nature in Kabbani’s words and ideas which go far towards explaining the fascination of a Lawrence, a Doughty, or a Thesiger with the East, they do not, I think, entirely explain Burton’s whole-hearted commitment to the Arabic and Muslim world. The kind of subtle identification with Easterners and, specifically, Muslims that Burton possessed seems to suggest a nature that viewed a deeper understanding of himself and the world around him as the primary goal of life. He possessed an almost inexhaustible curiosity for the world and everything that happened in it and the frequent use of disguise throughout his career is best seen as an embodiment and extension of this tendency to take every iota of experience from each new situation that he faced. We can see the reason why Said takes the line he does towards Burton in Orientalism, but in his eagerness to prove his theory that nothing good ever came out of Orientalism and that all those who shared in this biased body of knowledge were inevitably themselves also biased, he did a great disservice to the life and works of Richard Burton, who was far too
complex and original a figure to be straight-jacketed within the confines of such a theory.

NOTES

2. Kennedy 64-65.
5. Kennedy 73.
6. Imperial Fictions 144.
7. Imperial Fictions 144.
10. The Devil Drives 276.
12. Kennedy 81-82.
14. Location of Culture 131.
16. Imperial Fictions 144-145.
17. *Imperial Fictions* 146.

18. *Imperial Fictions* 147.

19. *Imperial Fictions* 147.

20. *Imperial Fictions* 146-147

21. *Imperial Fictions* 150.
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