Title of Paper: **Burton and Said’s “Gendered Axis”**
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Abstract:

In *Orientalism*, Said has much to say about the Orient and sex: the way in which the sexually restricted life and imagination of the European male was able to find fecundity and plenty in a far off place with a different culture and outlook on sexual matters. In particular, Said places the great French novelist Flaubert within this tradition and it is in the context of talking about Flaubert that Said’s thesis about Europeans, sex, and the Orient is made most apparent. A journey from the stiff-laced and bourgeois Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries represented for many middle class travellers an escape into a new unrestricted world of erotic sex and exotic places. Whether the Orient was really such a place is another question. Nevertheless, implicitly, Said suggests that the Orient could be moulded into whatever the sovereign European race wanted it to be. In consequence, artists and writers like Flaubert, Nerval, Burton, Lane, Gide, and Maugham, could make journeys to the East in the hope of finding sexual adventures that were scarce at home—and in the process, shape the Orient in their own image. I will suggest in the following article that not only Burton but—more surprisingly—Edward Said too, constructed a highly gendered and male dominated view of the East in their writings.

Keywords: Burton, Said, Lewis, gender, sexuality, anthropology,

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In *Orientalism*, Said has much to say about the Orient and sex: the way in which the sexually restricted life and imagination of the European male was able to find fecundity and plenty in a far off place with a different culture and outlook on sexual matters. In particular, Said places the great French novelist Flaubert within this tradition and it is in the context of talking about Flaubert that Said’s thesis about Europeans, sex, and the Orient is made most apparent. A journey from the stiff-laced and bourgeois Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries represented for many middle class travellers an escape into a new unrestricted world of erotic sex and exotic places. Whether the Orient was really such a place is another question. Nevertheless, implicitly, Said suggests that the Orient could be moulded into whatever the sovereign European race wanted it to be. In consequence, artists and writers like Flaubert, Nerval, Burton, Lane, Gide, and Maugham, could make journeys to the East in the hope of finding sexual adventures that were scarce at home— and in the process, shape the Orient in their own image. Thus, Said writes,

> Woven through all of Flaubert’s Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex. In making this association Flaubert was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance of a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient.¹

According to Said, in spite of its supposed highly charged sexuality, the East was also seen as a place that was finally barren (like the desert sands themselves), and, while sexual enjoyment was a permanent staple at the Oriental table, begetting off-spring was another matter altogether. Once again, Said derives this point from the life of Flaubert, quoting him directly in the context of
his relationship with the Egyptian dancing girl, Kuchuk:

Where is the heart, the verve, the sap? Where to start from? Where to go? We’re good at sucking, we play a lot of tongue games, we pet for hours: but the real thing! To ejaculate, beget the child! ²

Said also suggests that those Europeans who found sex particularly difficult in their own society came to the East as a place where they could shed their inhibitions. He writes,

Just as the various colonial possessions...were useful as places to send wayward sons...so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or travelled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest: ³

Said’s “herself”, which seems to come as an afterthought in the passage quoted above, is perhaps indicative of a blindness for the ways in which women contributed to the Orientalist discourse. According to Reina Lewis, Said in Orientalism consistently ignores the importance of gender in the construction of the Orientalist model, and in her book Gendering Orientalism ⁴ she suggests that women did have far more importance in the construction of Oriental models than Said is able to see in Orientalism:

For Said, in Orientalism at least, Orientalism is a homogenous discourse enunciated by a colonial subject that is unified, intentional and irredeemably male . . . in Orientalism gender occurs only as a metaphor for the Orientalized Other as ‘feminine’ or in a single reference to a woman writer (Gertrude Bell, in which he pays no attention to the possible effects of her gendered position on her texts). ⁵

Lewis goes on to argue that Said’s ignoring of women as active participants in the creation of an Orientalised reality is the result of a more general tendency by the West to minimise the importance of women in the
construction of history:

This [Said’s ungendered view of Orientalism] mirrors the traditional view that women were not involved in colonial expansion (itself a subplot of a masculinist view of history in which women, if they appear at all, are strictly marginal) 6

Lewis points out that women should not only be seen as passive victims of Orientalism, but also as contributors to the Orientalist position itself. She writes,

My focus here is on the role of white European women, as cultural agents within an analysis of the constitutive role of culture in the formation of imperial relations.7

Lewis sums up her position by declaring that attention to Said’s “gendered axis” might successfully “deconstruct” what she refers to as his “monolithic analysis”. She concludes that “it is clear that many women authors expended as much energy as their peers on creating the powerful narrative voice afforded by British colonialism.” 8

Bearing in mind Lewis’ strictures on gender then, let us return to Said’s points about Europe, sex and the Orient. First, the Orient, shaped as it was in the guise of European fantasy and domination, offered a place of unrestricted sexual activity to the bourgeois youth and gentry of the European world. However, it was particularly those Europeans who found sexual activity most difficult to obtain in their own countries who were more likely to come to the Orient in search of new erotic experiences. This “difficulty” might centre on problems of class and difference (as perhaps in Burton’s case), or on the moral and ethical complexities of the age which associated sex with a whole series of marital obligations. Thus, Said notes that
In all of his novels Flaubert associates the Orient with the escapism of sexual fantasy...the association is clearly made between the Orient and the freedom of licentious sex.  

Said suggests that of all sexual fantasists and predators in the Orient, “Dirty Dick” Burton was one of the worst. Certainly, Burton’s situation seems to fall within the scope of Said’s context of frustrated Europeans who, for one reason or another, were unable to satisfy their sexual appetites at home. However, trying to uncover Burton’s sexual nature has very great difficulties. He was not primarily an imaginative writer like Flaubert and most of his works are fairly dry, historical, anthropological, geographical and sociological in nature. Burton is careful not to give too much away about his personality and particularly about his sexuality. The problems are compounded by the strict Victorian morality of the time which permitted Burton to talk about such matters only under cover of learned works such as, most famously, his translation of the Arabian Nights.

It is true that in the class ridden Victorian society of his time, Burton was something of an outcast whose origins were on the lower fringes of respectability. His family spent most of Burton’s youth travelling from European water-hole to water-hole (thanks to the money brought to the marriage by a rich wife) and while this aided Burton in his phenomenal ability with languages, it also meant that he made few of the essential contacts necessary for an English gentleman during his childhood and schooling. When he eventually went to Oxford, as we have seen, he was mocked for his continental manners and survived for only a short time before begging his father to procure a commission for him in India.

It is possible that this peripatetic upbringing made Burton uneasy with
other English people of his class. It seems unlikely that he had sexual relations with any English woman other than his wife, Isabel Arundel. It is also worth adding that this latter marriage remained childless and, it seems, that for long periods in the marriage—especially as time wore on—the relationship seemed to be sustained more on a basis of friendship and mutual understanding than through sex.

Brodie in her biography of Burton, *The Devil Drives*, suggested that Burton was bi-sexual having both heterosexual and homosexual tendencies. His obsession with all things sexual is seen by Brodie as a substitute for the failure of his own sexuality in his marriage.

It was as if sheer quantity of facts about coital positions, permutations, aphrodisiacs and an infinitude of stories of love could somehow substitute for the act of loving or make up for the failure of sexuality in his own marriage. Married to a woman who could play skillfully at the role of wife, he came to accept her self-conscious and overpowering adoration as a substitute for sexuality. But he could not have been blind to the fundamental failure or to his own contribution to that failure—else he would not have fled so often from the marriage. 12

In his recent book, *The Highly Civilized Man*, Dane Kennedy also has much to say on this theme. His eventual conclusion is that Burton had such an intense interest in the subject of sexuality that it could not be contained within conventional categories such as “heterosexual” and “homosexual”. He notes that there are: ..."indications, however, that Richard was attracted to men and may have had sexual relations with them." But he also reminds us that: “Much of the evidence is admittedly ambiguous and open to the danger of reading homosociality for homosexuality”. Finally, he suggests that
We might make better sense of our man if we acknowledge that Burton’s curiosity about sexual matters, like his curiosity about so many other aspects of human experience, simply could not be contained within a single channel of expression.\textsuperscript{13}

This is an astute, if very general, interpretation. Certainly Burton was fascinated by human sexuality in all its forms as he was also fascinated, for example, by religion in all its forms. Brodie writes,

Burton’s capacity for loving intimately saw a turning outwards, and a scattering, finding its freest expression among exotic peoples...Hunger for the forbidden was with Burton always, and he indulged his appetite as a man just as he had when a child in gobbling up the forbidden sugar and cream, of Madame Fisterre. \textsuperscript{14}

In this context it is worth considering Burton’s obsession with pornography, castration, female circumcision and sexual expression. Burton himself, the ardent supporter of Darwin and his theories, would always justify such emphases by reference to the needs of scientific enquiry. Kennedy is informative on Burton’s fascination with pornography:

Burton also had a personal appreciation for those publications that British law deemed pornographic. His close friend Monckton Milnes had collected what was reputed to be the largest library of pornography in Britain...He was familiar as well with the formidable collection amassed by Henry Spencer Ashbee, author of the Index Librorum Prohibitorum (1877)\textsuperscript{15}

Brodie draws particular attention to

Burton’s preoccupation with castration, whether in the form of mutilation, circumcision, or clitoral excision...He may have been exorcising an unconscious anxiety of his own by plunging into meticulous examination of the subject—just as he exorcised his fears of death by courting it—or he may simply have been indulging his sadistic impulses.\textsuperscript{16}

Burton’s obsession with taboo sexual matters has been perceived by most
The biographers as evidence of a great sexual appetite which is usually regarded as having been satisfied in his life. Speaking of Burton and Speke’s dangerous safari through Central Africa, Rice writes,

> And there were always the women. One gets the impression that for much of this period in Central Africa, at each stop, fever or no, Burton was passing his time in a village bedding a woman.\(^{17}\)

> Actually there is no firm evidence for Rice’s speculations. If Burton was “bedding” lots of women, neither he nor Speke ever referred to the fact. Of course, in the moral climate of the day, that might not seem so unusual.

> On the other hand, many of Burton’s writings that dealt specifically with sexual subjects might also be seen as ways of satisfying an unfulfilled sexuality. The translations of the *Kama Sutra*, Sheikh Nefzawi’s *Perfumed Garden*, *Catullus*, and to a lesser extent the *Arabian Nights*\(^ {18}\) seem to point to a powerful need to indulge in a certain form of voyeurism. The translation of intimate descriptions of numerous positions for having sex would presumably have the same kind of stimulation on the receptive translator’s mind as the perusal of erotic pornography. Certainly Burton’s translation of Nefzawi’s work left little to the imagination:

> When . . . you see a woman’s lips tremble and redden, and her eyes become languishing and her sighs profound, know that she desires coition; then is the time to get between her thighs and penetrate her. If you have followed my advice you will both enjoy a delightful copulation which will leave a delicious memory.\(^ {19}\)

> Rana Kabbani in her book *Imperial Fictions*\(^ {20}\) claims that one reason that the *Arabian Nights* became so popular in Britain in the nineteenth-century was because the women depicted therein were clearly subjugated to the male will: as
were the women in the Victorian society of the time. However, while European and Christian good taste forbade too lusty a fascination with the female body in England itself, no such stricture applied to Oriental women:

Burton’s ideas about Eastern women never gained in depth even after he had spent decades in the East... The woman was chattel and sexual convenience; as such, she was necessary, but she could never attain the stature of true spouse. Although an anarchist in his superficial social behaviour, Burton always retained his age’s polarised view of women. They were either sexual beings who were whorish, or caring companions in the home, untinged by sexual ardour. Burton’s fascination with the Arabian Nights was greatly enhanced by the fact that they upheld his own views on women, race and class.21

Kabbani argues that women in the Arabian Nights fall into one of two categories: either they conform to negative stereotypes of women as demonesses, malign sorceresses, lewd prostitutes, etc., or they are asexual as pure virgins or religious wives and mothers. Kabbani connects this with Burton’s own sexual obsessions and particularly with his fascination with erotica and pornography. In this context, she cites Burton’s description of “Oriental” menstruation:

Orientals are aware that the period of especial feminine devilry is between the first menstruation and twenty when, according to some, every girl is a possible murderess. So they wisely marry her and get rid of what is called the “lump of grief”, the domestic calamity—a daughter.22

Kabbani argues that to view the East as a sexual domain was complimentary to the imperial world-view, reflecting both its racism and misogyny.23 She continues:

Burton used the Arabian Nights to express himself, to articulate his sexual preoccupations. He made it serve as an occasion for documenting all manner of sexual deviation: “tribadism” was only one, congress with animals, sexual mutilation, castration, all these were given prolonged attention.24
After making these extremely unpalatable assertions about Burton’s sexual nature, Kabbani concludes as follows:

While Burton was presenting his readers with accounts of sexual mutilation practiced abroad, his medical compatriots were performing sexual mutilation...at home. Clitoridictimy and ovary-removal were two operations carried out with disturbing frequency in Victorian England. The medical profession supported the values of patriarchy, and sought to aid in the enforcement of the acceptable image of woman...an image for which Victorian women were forced to pay very dearly.

Burton appended a ‘Terminal Essay’ to his translation of the *Arabian Nights* in which he dealt with the sexual nature of his subject matter. In particular he traced the origins of pederasty to the beginnings of history itself and quoted many references to “Le Vice” amongst the classical authors. Most famously, Burton postulated in this essay the existence of a Sotadic Zone around the Earth’s centre and equatorial belt where pederasty and sodomy were common. The name was derived from the Greek poet, Sotades, who dealt with homosexual themes.

No one has really given much credence to Burton’s hypothesis—and it is even possible that Burton himself was not truly convinced.

Victorian sexologist Havelock Ellis refers to Burton’s ideas in his *Sexual Inversion* and, while initially appearing to give some possible credence to Burton’s ideas, he concludes his comments in a strongly doubtful way:

The theory of the Sotadic Zone fails to account for the custom among the Normans, Celts, Scythians, Bulgars, and Tartars, and, moreover, in various of these regions different views have prevailed at different periods. Burton was wholly unacquainted with the psychological investigations into sexual inversion which had, indeed, scarcely begun in his day.

John Addington Symonds author of a history of the Italian renaissance as well as several writings on male love was even more
sceptical than Ellis:

The author endeavoured to co-ordinate a large amount of miscellaneous matter and to frame a general theory regarding the origin and prevalence of homosexual passions. His erudition, however, is incomplete, and though he possesses a copious store of anthropological details, he is not at the proper point of view for discussing the topic philosophically. 30

Symonds looks at the way in which Burton himself believed that French men in Algiers acquired the habit from locals, and concludes: “The phenomenon cannot . . . be regarded as specifically geographical and climatic”.31

Dane Kennedy has suggested that Burton’s claims for a “Sotadic Zone” may have been due to a wish to give a pseudo-scientific framework to his speculations while also distancing himself and his readers from the distasteful subject of pederasty.

Why does Burton bother to make claims for a Sotadic Zone when his own examples of pederastic practices so manifestly contradict its existence? These claims seem to have served several purposes. First, by pointing to the climate as the cause of pederasty, Burton seeks to naturalize the phenomenon, removing it from the realm of religious and moral strictures. . . . To open the subject to scientific scrutiny, however, demands the ability to overcome moral taboos. Hence the second purpose of Burton’s claim for a Sotadic Zone: it allows his readers to maintain some psychic distance from pederasty by presenting it as an Oriental phenomenon.32

Kennedy insists that the Terminal Essay’s tone is set in its opening pages where Burton gives details of his involvement with the investigation of male prostitution while in India as a young man in the male bordellos of Karachi.

Burton reveals that as a young officer in India he had investigated the male brothels of Karachi at the behest of General Napier. This audacious announcement is followed by a brutally candid account of what he found there, including details about the range of services offered and their costs. In words that retain their power to shock, he remarks that boys brought
higher prices than eunuchs because ‘the scrotum of the unmutilated boy could be used as a kind of bridle for directing the movements of the animal.’ The studied ambiguity that Burton creates regarding his own involvement in these activities gives a daringly intimate, even confessional, quality to the essay. 33

In his ‘Terminal Essay’, Burton also dwelt on the hypocrisy that existed about sexual matters in the England and United States of his day.

The mock virtue, the most immodest modesty of England and of the United States in the sixteenth century, pronounces the subject foul and fulsome: ‘Society’ sickens at all details; and hence it is said abroad that the English have the finest women in Europe and least know how to use them. Throughout the East such studies are aided by learned physiologists, by men of social standing and by religious dignitaries high in office. 34

In his views on sexual education and the need for more sexual knowledge, particularly on the part of women, Burton sets himself up as an early prototype of the modern sexologist. The Victorian woman, according to Burton, knows little about her own biology and he further insists that much of the frigidity and frustration in Victorian marriage is explained by the man’s lack of knowledge about how to bring a woman to orgasm. It is certainly a little ironic that Burton should see himself as such a pioneer in this field when, as we have seen, there is some evidence to suggest that his own marriage was largely sterile. Kennedy observes that

His translation of the Nights was intended to provide male readers with the insights of the Orient into the physical woman, to inform them of the erotic responsibilities they were obliged to shoulder in their relations with the opposite sex, responsibilities that an overrefined civilization had sought to repress. 35

Brodie, however, presents a more complex situation:

The intensity and almost frantic quality of his searching, especially on
matters sexual, would seem to indicate that Burton through most of his life was seeking to resolve an unfulfilled sexuality. Moreover, one should not forget that he was fascinated also with all forms of heterosexuality—which most male homosexuals find utterly repugnant—and that an extraordinary amount of energy went into his ‘field research’ as well as into his translations on the subject.36

Having looked at the subject of sex in Burton’s life in some detail, we now need to consider if Burton was indeed a young European fleeing from a place where he didn’t feel any sense of belonging to a mystified Orient for the sake of adventure and sexual intimacy? Was he a part of that European tradition, most clearly exemplified by Flaubert, who sought to leave behind their own sexual barrenness by becoming larger than life in an exotic and erotic Orient that could be moulded into whatever form the conquering European wanted? In answer to these questions, perhaps Said’s own words on Flaubert’s eventual failure to resolve his inner conflicts in an Oriental environment might be apposite:

The Orient threw him back on his own human and technical resources. It did not respond . . . to his presence. Standing before its ongoing life Flaubert, like Lane before him felt his detached powerlessness, perhaps also his self-induced unwillingness, to enter and become part of what he saw.37

It is easier to trace many of Flaubert’s obsessions than is the case with Richard Burton who, in many ways, was a very private Victorian citizen and scholar. Burton had no great wish to exorcise his inner demons by the writing of imaginative prose that would present his inner conflicts for future generations. However, it is clear that many of the obsessions that Flaubert struggled with were also important in Burton’s life. Excluded from the genteel bourgeois life of the
England of his time, both by temperament and circumstance, he sought to construct a new identity in the Orient. This certainly included—perhaps even as a prime motive—the throwing off of the sexual and social inhibitions that had dogged his early life. In many ways, it is clear that what he found in the Orient was more to his taste than what was on offer to him in his own country. However, Burton did not merely shape a malleable Orient to his own vision and imagination: he actually learnt from his Oriental experiences. Otherwise, we might say that Burton in this respect fits the general mould of European traveller that Said refers to in *Orientalism*.

NOTES

1 *Orientalism* 188.
2 *Orientalism* 188.
3 *Orientalism* 190.
5 *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* 18.
6 *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* 18.
7 *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* 22.
8 *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* 22.
9 *Orientalism* 190.
10 *The Tangled Web* 1.
11 *A Rage to Live* 25.
12 *The Devil Drives* 334.


14 *The Devil Drives* 338.

15 Kennedy, 208-209.

16 *The Devil Drives* 336.

17 Rice 382.

18 See bibliography for details.

19 Richard F. Burton, *The Perfumed Garden of the Cheikh Nefzaoui*

(Printed by the Kama Shastra Society of London and Benares for private subscribers only, 1886).


21 *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient* 85-86.


23 *Imperial Fictions* 101.

24 *Imperial Fictions* 104.

25 *Imperial Fictions* 105.

26 See Chapter 4.


28 *Sexual Inversion* 1, 2, 57, 58.

29 See bibliography.
30 Sotadic Zone 94-96.

31 Sotadic Zone 95.

32 Kennedy 239.

33 Kennedy 238.

34 Burton, Nights, vol. X, 200

35 Kennedy 236-237.

36 The Devil Drives 336.

37 Orientalism 188.
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