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Dominique Jullien

## Oriental Disguise and the *Thousand and One Nights* in Nerval

Il me semble que j'ai vécu en Orient; et lorsque pendant le carnaval je me déguise en quelque caftan et quelque tarbouch authentique, je crois reprendre mes vrais habits. J'ai toujours été surpris de ne pas entendre l'Arabe couramment; il faut que je l'aie oublié.<sup>1</sup>

“Me voici en pleines *Mille et une nuits!*” exclaimed Gérard de Nerval, as he wandered around Cairo impersonating Caliph Harun Al-Rashid incognito in the streets of Bagdad. The legendary caliph of 9th-century Bagdad is the hero of a number of stories in the *Arabian Nights*, in which he sets out, disguised as an ordinary merchant, in search of adventures in the streets of his city. For 19th-century artists on their Grand Oriental tour, the *Nights*—extraordinarily popular and familiar to most Europeans, not just as children’s stories, but also through numerous stage adaptations—often served as a tourist guide, filtering their perceptions of the foreign reality, both an interpretative lens that colored travel experiences and a literary model that shaped travelogues. Arthur de Gobineau, in the introduction to his *Nouvelles asiatiques*, hailed the tales as the most accurate portrayal of the Orient: “C’est la vérité même” (III, 305). Travelers anticipated scenes and characters from the *Nights* and acted out the tales themselves. This included adopting the local costume, as Nerval, together with numerous other European visitors, would do in the course of his Oriental journey. These two paradigms—referring the oriental reality to the *Nights* and dressing as a local—coalesce into a recurring pattern, almost a cliché of 19th-century Oriental travelogues.

Nerval enthusiastically adopted these practices common to the Orientalism of his generation. However, as this study argues, while all the elements found in other Oriental travelogues are also present in

Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, there they compose a less controlled, more disturbing picture, one that goes to the heart of Nerval's identity crisis. By adopting the local costume, and by overlaying the tales over the 19th-century Oriental reality, Nerval was apparently conforming to what so many other Europeans before and after him would do. But, as we shall see, Nerval's use of these topoi was more complex than it would seem at first; for him it would lead to a more problematic engagement with the cultural Other and even more so with the other within himself.

### **Oriental transvestism**

Donning the local costume, as Nerval did in Cairo, was hardly original. Oriental transvestism prevails from the earliest accounts of Western travelers to the East. We have portraits of Jean-Baptiste Chardin and Lady Mary Montagu (who described her Turkish attire in loving detail in her letters) in Oriental costume. Later, in Pierre Loti's *Aziyadé*, the protagonist dons local dress and settles in the Muslim quarter of Constantinople. Of course, transvestism initially served a simple pragmatic purpose: J. J. Rifaud's *Tableau de l'Égypte*, one of the first guidebooks, published in 1830, recommended adopting the local costume as a safety measure.<sup>2</sup> Beyond being a precautionary measure, however, transvestism typically signaled the Western traveler's openness to the Oriental culture, a feeling that sometimes went far deeper than the dress (conversely, Chateaubriand's insistence on dressing as a Frenchman during his Oriental journey goes hand in hand with his rejection of Turkish culture).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in some cases travelers also embraced the lifestyle, customs, even the beliefs of their adopted country. Lady Hester Stanhope, mentioned by Nerval for her conversion to Druze beliefs (II, 522), was admiringly described by Lamartine in her "beau costume oriental" complete with turban, cashmere shawl, immense turkish robe and yellow boots.<sup>4</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, an ardent convert to Islam, dressed, not only as an Arab, but also as a man (calling herself Mahmoud Saadi), a gender-crossing disguise with obvious practical value (allowing her freedom of movement and protection from men during her adventurous travels) but which also manifested her Oriental persona, the itinerant scholar of Islam that she became in Algeria.<sup>5</sup> Edward Lane, in his less flamboyant manner, spent years in Cairo as Mansur Effendi, lived

as an Oriental and married an Oriental woman, Nafeesah. Nerval's character would follow in Lane's footsteps, appropriating the marriage plot, the Muslim lodgings, and the dress.

Of course, the paradigmatic case of Orientalist impersonation remains Sir Richard Burton, the Victorian-era Orientalist, explorer, and translator. In his travelogues, he tells of masquerading as a native and being humiliated by petty bureaucrats (who failed to recognize him as an Englishman) when requesting a travel visa; of delighting his Somali porters around the campfire with his recitation of the *Thousand and One Nights*,<sup>6</sup> of stealthily drawing a plan of the holy Kaaba on his white pilgrim's robe, during the prayer at Mecca, despite the danger of being recognized and killed.<sup>7</sup> Burton's pilgrimage to Mecca in disguise has been analyzed in recent criticism as a paradoxical assertion of the white man's superiority, since, although relinquishing the colonizer's outward appearance would seem to place him in an inferior position, yet it proved his mastery of the culture, language, even body language of the locals.<sup>8</sup> The journey to Mecca, and its account which would soon become a bestseller, was intended for the Royal Society and its goal was to propel Burton to a position of authority among English Orientalists.<sup>9</sup> However, this explanation, although convincing, leaves out a crucial dimension of Oriental transvestism: fantasy—the pleasure and fascination of being another, what Gail Low calls “a joyful inhabitation of another culture.”<sup>10</sup> Isabel Burton commented on her husband's love of disguise thus: “He liked it; he was happy in it, he felt at home in it.”<sup>11</sup> As Kaja Silverman puts it, talking about Lawrence of Arabia, a later Oriental impersonator, “imitation repeatedly veers over into an identification with the Arab Other.”<sup>12</sup>

It appears that cross-cultural disguise in the era of Orientalism served a complex set of purposes: it had to do with the perception of one's identity, mediated by the positioning of the traveler with regard to the locals, and by the sense of a rich history of European representations of Oriental culture. This was all the more complex in Nerval's case, who, acutely aware of being a belated traveler,<sup>13</sup> was perhaps only too conscious of the constraints of preestablished patterns and topical expectations, while also, being less in control of his circumstances, both external and internal, he displayed a lack of mastery over his own narrative that sets it apart from other Oriental travelogues.

Like Richard Burton, like Edward Lane, Gérard de Nerval too shared this powerful fascination with disguise and impersonation. But

unlike Burton and Lane (from whom he brazenly borrowed so much for his own Cairo narrative), Nerval had no knowledge of Oriental languages to support his attempts at transvestism. His desire to assimilate into the culture, while authentic, was repeatedly thwarted by obstacles of various kinds. One paradoxical obstacle was the fact that Nerval's desire for the Orient was deeply rooted in fantasy: the Orient was first and foremost for Nerval an inner space, a locus of youthful dreams and theatrical illusion, tinged by a nostalgic yearning for his Bohemian years in Paris. To a large extent, his experience of the journey and of Oriental transvestism in particular was shaped by his close friendship with Théophile Gautier (with whom he corresponded regularly during his journey, and who was at that time involved in the staging of the Oriental ballet *La Péri*). Perhaps Nerval is best described as precariously suspended between the desire for cultural immersion that so often underlies transvestism, and the kind of delight in surface, illusion and visual enchantment that characterizes Gautier's painterly Orient.<sup>14</sup> Torn between these two opposing attractions, Nerval can neither assimilate with the Other, nor objectify the Other in a pure image, but instead is caught in a game of mirrors that renders the boundaries between self and other indistinct. In Nerval's experience, I argue, cross-cultural dressing seldom leads to genuine intercultural communication, much less still to any sort of durable reverse assimilation, but rather remains a dreamlike adventure, an engagement less with others than with Nerval's own fragile sense of self.

### **“Un frac noir au milieu d'un bal masqué”**

Oriental dress, much more than a simple precaution, was, often, a source of delight for the European tourist. The paradigms of disguise, theatricality and exoticism are inseparably intertwined in the Orientalist's mind. Seen through the magic lantern of the *Arabian Nights*, the Orient was a paradise where the traveler could for a while play at being free of the constraints of European modernity, propriety, and adulthood.<sup>15</sup> Abandoning the ugly, uncomfortable black suit of the European man for the glamorous, colorful, voluptuously soft robes of the Oriental was thus a powerful fantasy, and it is not surprising that Nerval's complaint about the “affreux vêtements noirs d'Europe” (II, 284), echoes a major cliché in 19th-century literature, a cliché against which Baudelaire would attempt to define his more original theory

of “l’héroïsme de la vie moderne,”<sup>16</sup> although he was, in other ways, certainly no stranger to the lures of exoticism.

Théophile Gautier, who was very close to Nerval at the time of the Oriental journey, and who would also, a few years later, accomplish his own Oriental voyage, echoed this:

L'on se sent si misérable, si disgracieux, si laid dans ce hideux habit moderne que, bien qu'il soit une protection en Orient, on a hâte de le dépouiller, car l'on est gêné parmi cette foule éclatante où l'on fait tache, comme lorsqu'on tombe en frac noir au milieu d'un bal masqué.<sup>17</sup>

“Un bal masqué”: the thrill of cross-cultural disguise is explicitly connected with the spectacular, the theater, implying that in some way the spectacle of the Oriental street is a stage set, is somehow make-believe (we recall that the *Arabian Nights* were even better known on the stage than as a text). Both Gautier and Nerval (Gautier systematically, and Nerval in his letters to Gautier) constantly refer to the theater, to stage decoration, to set paintings, dioramas, panoramas, etc.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the fact that Gautier was in Paris staging an Oriental play while Nerval was visiting Cairo led them to play up the theatrical metaphor in their correspondence: “J’aurais bien voulu, mon cher Gérard, t’aller rejoindre au Caire, comme je te l’avais promis . . . J’aimerais me promener en devisant avec toi au bord du Nil . . . Ne pouvant te suivre, je me suis fait construire un Orient et un Caire, rue Le Peletier, à l’Académie royale de musique et de danse.”<sup>19</sup> The paradigm linking theatrical illusion and *Arabian Nights* is repeated throughout Gautier’s travel writings about the Orient, especially Constantinople:

Si jamais quelque chose a ressemblé à un récit des *Mille et une nuits*, si une cité de la terre peut réaliser cet idéal féerique que l’Europe a peine à concevoir, mais que l’Orient accepte sans peine, c’est Constantinople, à son premier aspect, quand on arrive par le Bosphore.

On dirait d’une immense décoration, et en cela on ne se tromperait pas tout à fait; il suffit de mettre le pied sur ce rivage étrange, de gravir ces rues étroites et montueuses, d’aborder ces palais fragiles, pour se convaincre qu’il n’y a là, en effet, qu’une perspective d’opéra.<sup>20</sup>

In this locus of theatrical illusion, the native dress naturally becomes a stage costume, a *domino*: “Sous cet accoutrement, qui n’était

pas une simple fantaisie d'artiste, mais une sorte de domino assurant la liberté de l'observateur parmi ce carnaval de costumes, Gérard de Nerval put circuler partout sans exciter la défiance . . . ”<sup>21</sup>

### “En Orient tout devient conte”

The costume paradigm is intimately intertwined with that of storytelling, since Nerval, Haroun-like, goes out incognito in search of adventures. Nerval, it has often been said, does not follow a typical tourist agenda, but rather relies on chance encounters. “J’aime à dépendre un peu du hasard,” he owns toward the beginning of *Voyage en Orient* (II, 182), later repeating in Cairo the wanderings around Paris he described in *Nuits d’octobre* and *Aurélia*.<sup>22</sup> In Paris he was a flâneur; but in Cairo the orientalized version of the flâneur became Haroun al-Rashid.<sup>23</sup> For Gérard these adventures are typically erotic quests; unifying these adventures is the (inconclusive) story of his marriage. As Aki Taguchi notes, “‘Voyageur recherche femme’: c’est le fil conducteur du récit.”<sup>24</sup> These quests, however, as we recall, all end in failure.

Upon his arrival in Cairo, “Gérard” rented a house in the indigenuous part of town, adopted the native costume, even bought a Javanese woman, Zeynab, at the slave market. Of course we know this is all fiction—the slave was bought not by him, but his travelling companion, Théodore de Fonfrède, who promptly sold her again.<sup>25</sup> Nerval was also freely borrowing elements from other travelers’ experiences and accounts, notably from Edward Lane, whose 1836 *Account of the Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* had already become a kind of tourist Bible, and of which several passages are blithely recycled in Nerval’s narrative, for example the fictitious requirement to marry (Gérard is told that in order to be permitted to reside in the native neighborhood he must be married).<sup>26</sup> For Nerval, it provides a useful narrative device that unites and justifies the narrator’s repeated and unsuccessful searches for a bride. Thus the recurring—even obsessive—motif of the veil in Nerval’s travelogue combines eroticism and mysticism. By veiling—disguising—himself and adopting an Oriental persona, Nerval hopes to unveil the mysteries of the Orient—its women, and more importantly, beyond them, its essence. The quest for a bride is metaphorically equivalent to the quest for a center, a stable self, something which Nerval, barely released from the psychiatric clinic of Dr. Blanche, is of course cruelly in need of.<sup>27</sup>

Along with his ethnographic study of Egypt, Lane also authored a translation of the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>28</sup> “En Orient tout devient conte” (II, 525), notes Nerval: like his British counterparts, Burton and Lane, translators of the *Nights* both, Gérard’s Oriental alter ego inevitably assumes the role of storyteller. Nerval’s adventures frame his Oriental travelogue, enclosing inset tales—“Histoire du Calife Hakem,” “Histoire de la reine du matin,” “Les deux dames voilées du Caire,” “Le photographe dans le harem,” and so forth—like a European’s sly variations on the *Nights*.<sup>29</sup> Nerval’s narrative closes on a reference to the story of Aboulcasem in *Les Mille et un jours* by Pétis de la Croix,<sup>30</sup> the first of Galland’s imitators. Imitating the *Nights* was after all a venerable European tradition—a tradition, in fact, dating back perhaps to Galland himself, in some of his best-loved tales (such as Aladdin or Ali Baba) which to this day have not found their Arabic original.

Like Burton telling stories to the Somali porters, then, it seems that Nerval is appropriating the typical Oriental skill of storytelling. But contrary to Burton’s confident mastery of the skill, in Nerval’s narrative things go awry. Towards the beginning of his stay in Cairo, Gérard, having got rid of his guide, goes in hot pursuit of two veiled women through the maze of streets, along the fabric shops, and into a palace guarded by a giant black slave, in the purest *Arabian Nights* style: “Me voilà en pleines *Mille et une nuits*,” he comments, comparing himself to the amorous merchant characters who feature in many of these tales . . . only to find that these ladies are actually French like himself: they are the wife and sister-in-law of a former soldier of Napoleon’s army who settled in Egypt after the fall of the Empire (II, 285–291). In all his quests, Nerval seems to encounter the opposite of what he seeks. The two women in the Cairo bazaar turn out to be French; the slave he buys expects him to hire servants to wait on her; the sensuous dancers in the café turn out to be men in drag (II, 308–309); all love affairs end in failure, whether his own (his failed engagement to the Druze girl Saléma takes up over 100 pages but proves a complete loose end: II, 512–600) or those told to him, like the story of the French page and the sultanness, which remains unconcluded both in the erotic and the narrative sense (II, 624–628). An unhappy climax of sorts comes during the boat trip from Egypt to Lebanon, when Gérard is pitted against a young Armenian man, his guide, infernal double and apparent rival for the affections of Zeynab.



Like him, the Armenian drogman is an itinerant writer and translator, but unlike him, he seems quite capable of entertaining the slave with his stories. Overcoming his initial jealousy, Gérard decides to give Zeynab away to the Armenian in a grand show of magnanimity: “Allons, dis-je en moi-même après un silence, montrons-nous magnanime, faisons deux heureux” (II, 451). But this, as we know, is yet another instance of cultural miscommunication: Gérard misread polite conversation as the signs of nascent love between the two young Orientals, whereas they turn out to have mutual disdain for each other, based on social and religious prejudice: “elle parut blessée . . . de la supposition qu’elle ait pu faire attention à un simple *raya* . . . une sorte de *yaoudi*” (II, 452). In a paradoxical twist analyzed by Sarga Moussa, the very character charged with facilitating intercultural communication, in this case the Armenian interpreter, is the one who garbles it.<sup>31</sup>

### The Daguerreotype and the Mirror

The initial “humiliating” adventure of the two veiled French women in the Cairo bazaar is echoed later in Turkey by the tale of the photographer, told to Gérard by his painter friend (II, 777–779). A French daguerreotypist follows a woman to a remote country house, hoping to photograph her and naturally also seduce her. Turning the tables on him, she kidnaps him, coerces him into taking a picture of her (which requires several days, as the light never seems right), refuses to let him go and ultimately forces him to abandon his daguerreotype when he escapes: “Un attachement si incommode finit par mettre à bout la patience du jeune homme. Il abandonna son daguerréotype, et parvint à s’échapper par une fenêtre pendant que la dame dormait” (II, 779). A man abducted by a woman, a European photographer forced to take a picture of a native female normally forbidden to foreign eyes, a traveler dispossessed of the emblem of ethnographic domination, and so on: this fable of the colonial power game gone wrong is a fitting climax to Nerval’s ambiguous rewriting of the *Nights* in the context of a travelogue marked by dispossession of self.<sup>32</sup>

But why, we may ask, do we have a daguerreotype? We know that Nerval traveled in the Orient with a daguerreotype, we also know that he failed to learn to use it properly, and did not produce pictures of his voyage.<sup>33</sup> Nerval’s “Story of the daguerreotype and the Turkish Lady” allows for a modern twist on the rewriting of the *Nights*, while it also

sets up a necessary dichotomy between darkness and light, night and day, which both parallels the narrative structure of the tales and connects thematically to the numerous night scenes in Nerval's travelogue.<sup>34</sup> In addition, it reinforces the doubling between Nerval and the painter Camille Rogier, allegedly the real source of this rather ridiculous seduction story. Nerval's host and guide in Constantinople, we know, was the Orientalist painter Camille Rogier, who had gone to the Orient with a commission to illustrate an edition of the *Nights*, and who ended up settling in Turkey for several years.<sup>35</sup> Both Rogier and to an even greater extent the enormously successful Orientalist painter Prosper Marilhat, whose lush exotic pictures triumphed at the Salon around the time of the *Voyage* and were highly praised by Théophile Gautier, were to be the writers' gateway into the fantasized world of the Orient.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, both painters provide a kind of umbilical cord that ties the Orient of Nerval's 1843 voyage to the happy Bohemian days of the *Rue du Doyenné*, since they were already all friends and roommates before the journeys. Marilhat painted palm trees on the dining room walls and Rogier threw Oriental costume parties with Parisian odalisques rented by the hour.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the similarities between Gautier's and Nerval's treatment of the Oriental picturesque, however, I would argue that there is nonetheless a crucial difference. The importance of images in their narratives has been extensively analyzed.<sup>38</sup> Fragmented into tableaux, Nerval's narrative is rather a sequence of discontinuous picture postcards, and as in Gautier, references to stage sets abound. Both Gautier's and Nerval's Oriental journeys are mediated by pictures and both texts are saturated by the pictorial and the unreal aspects of the Orient, with Orientalist painting authenticating the traveler's gaze, while the traveler tends to estheticize the Oriental landscape.<sup>39</sup> But whereas Gautier's Orient fluctuates between initial delight at the enchanted surface of the image and ultimately boredom at the impossibility to get beyond the surface, in Nerval the picturesque leads the narrator into a more disquieting relation of reflection and doubling.

Gautier's Constantinople, we recall, is an apparition from the *Arabian Nights*: "les contes des *Mille et une nuits* n'offrent rien de plus féérique, et le ruissellement du trésor effondré d'Haroun Al-Raschid pâlerait à côté de cet écrin colossal flamboyant sur une lieue de longueur."<sup>40</sup> Seen from a distance, all dream and surface, the city is "une

immense décoration [. . .] une perspective d'opéra."<sup>41</sup> The real Cairo is only to be found in Prosper Marilhat's paintings:

On se fait des villes que dès l'enfance on a souhaité voir et que l'on a longtemps habitées en rêve, un plan fantastique bien difficile à effacer . . . Nous, notre Caire, bâti avec les matériaux des Mille et une nuits, se groupait autour de la Place de l'Ezbekieh de Marilhat.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, this is also true in Nerval, for whom pictures are a more satisfactory substitute for a disappointing reality, as he confesses to Gautier: "Je retrouverai à l'Opéra le Caire véritable, l'Égypte immaculée, l'Orient qui m'échappe, et qui t'a souri d'un rayon de ses yeux divins. Heureux poète, tu as commencé par réaliser ton Égypte avec des feuilles et des livres."<sup>43</sup>

### **The Mad Caliph**

And yet things go much deeper in Nerval. Marilhat's *Mosquée du calife Hakem*, I propose, is Nerval's equivalent of the Place de l'Ezbekieh, which would be such a source of inspiration for Gautier. The story of Hakim, which occupies a long portion of the Cairo narrative, tells the story of the caliph who built the mosque, but it also rewrites a Romantic favorite, Galland's tale of the "Sleeper Awakened."<sup>44</sup> The story also pits two caliphs against each other and has one imprisoned in the insane asylum.

"Histoire du Dormeur Eveillé" tells of a practical joke of Harun al-Rashid, who has his dinner host, the commoner Abou Hassan, drugged, dressed up as the caliph, and brought to the palace. There, by order of Harun al-Rashid, who has staged this elaborate hoax for his own entertainment, he is treated by all the court as the real caliph when he wakes up. Drugged once again, Abou Hassan wakes up the following morning in his own house and insists on claiming that he is the Caliph, whereupon he is locked up in the madhouse:

on l'attacha dans une cage de fer; et, avant de l'y enfermer, le concierge, endurci à cette terrible exécution, le régala sans pitié de cinquante coups de nerf de bœuf sur les épaules et sur le dos, et continua plus de trois semaines à lui faire le même régal chaque jour, en lui répétant ces mêmes mots chaque fois: "Reviens en ton bon sens, et dis si tu es encore le Commandeur des croyants." (II, 459)

Despite the happy ending (the caliph ultimately makes full reparation to his victim, showering him with riches and honors), the tale is remarkable for the cruelty of the prank. In Nerval's modern variation on the tale, "Histoire du calife Hakem," inserted, in the manner of the nesting tales of the *Arabian Nights*, in the Druze episode (II, 525–565), the topos of Oriental disguise climaxes in the character of Hakim. The central episode takes place in the notorious Moristan, the insane asylum where Hakim was confined. The Cairo Moristan rewrites both the Bagdad madhouse where Abou Hassan, Galland's deluded protagonist, is thrown after his enchanted day in the palace, and the Parisian asylum of Dr. Blanche, where Nerval was interned in 1841, and after which episode his voyage to the Orient, we know, was meant to signal a return to complete sanity.<sup>45</sup> Early psychiatry was dominated by discussion of the therapeutic virtues of the asylum, and the Moristan, the first historical instance of a lunatic asylum, featured prominently in psychiatric literature. By situating one of the climactic episodes of his Oriental narrative in the insane asylum that was a constant reference in the medical debates of the time, Nerval writes into his story of the mad caliph a complex intertextual layering that points simultaneously to him and away from him. While Nerval had been obliged to acknowledge formally that he had been insane ("malade") in order to be released from the asylum, the story of a wrongly interned caliph offered a kind of fictional reparation.<sup>46</sup> In Juan Rigoli's analysis, the Moristan of the inset tale "Histoire du calife Hakem" is one of Nerval's "fictions d'asile" which can be read as "manières de répondre aux représentations courantes de l'écrivain en fou, par le truchement de figures qui sont et ne sont pas lui, travaillées jusqu'au vertige par les miroitements du double et du sosie."<sup>47</sup> Nerval's Hakim and Galland's Abou Hassan both point to the instability at the heart of disguise, impersonation and role-playing. While Abou Hassan is a commoner whose illusion of being the caliph lands him in the madhouse, Hakim is the real caliph but his disguise as a poor man enables the vizir to have him committed to the Moristan: "Au Moristan, ce fou qui se croit le calife!" (II, 545)—and he is forced to watch helplessly as Youssouf, his poor double, is married to the woman he loves, in the chapter aptly entitled "Les deux califes" (II, 555–562). Hakim, of course, is also really mad—like Nerval, and, we might remember, like Marilhat. Madness, real and supposed, is caught

in Nerval's game of mirrors.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the shadow of Marilhat's tragic destiny is hanging over the tale? Shortly after his greatest triumph at the Salon, 1844, when he exhibited eight pictures and received the *Grande médaille d'or*, Marilhat, having lost his sanity to syphilis, would be confined to an insane asylum, and there, in 1847, he would die aged just 36, the same age as Caliph Hakim and Nerval at the time of his journey.

It is perhaps no surprise that Nerval's inconclusive yet beautifully ambiguous fantasy of Orientalist disguise and story—telling finds favor with Edward Said's otherwise scathing commentary on European travel narratives: "Nerval invests himself in the Orient, producing not so much a novelistic narrative as an (. . .) antinarrative, a parapilgrimage."<sup>49</sup> Nerval's antinarrative ends, so to speak, with the enigmatic anecdote of the broken opals Gérard receives as a parting gift from his Persian friend—we are never really sure whether they are real or fake, dream or reality, or whether this man was mad—an appropriate ending for a book that thematizes the fragmentation of identity and stages a kind of holographic display of appearance and reality, reflection and refraction (II, 789–790).

Donning the Oriental costume quickly became a cliché both for the practice of travel and for the writing of travelogue. But for Nerval, less in control of his own fantasy, there was much more at stake. Playing with disguise, like other European travelers and also like caliph Harun al-Rashid, and playing up to Gautier's obsessive theatricalization of reality, were both more meaningful and riskier for Nerval than for others. In Nerval, the topos of Oriental disguise weaves together the *Arabian Nights*, the visual sources of inspiration, the shimmer and glamour of theatrical illusion, and the overarching theme of madness. Nerval was less a traveler reporting on his adventures with Orientals than a character in his own fiction. The common practice of Oriental transvestism, which he happily embraced in his journey and in his travelogue, provided him with an idiosyncratic outlet for what Laurent Demanze calls his "identité vacillante."<sup>50</sup> "Je suis l'autre": this caption Nerval wrote under his portrait (an 1854 drawing by E. Gervais, based on an earlier daguerreotype by A. Legros) captures the ambiguous doubling allowed by the exotic disguise.<sup>51</sup> In a key chapter of *Les Femmes du Caire*, in a kind of primal scene, Gérard

undergoes a thorough Oriental makeover. “Je sortis enfin de chez le barbier, transfiguré, ravi, fier de ne plus souiller une ville pittoresque de l’aspect d’un paletot-sac et d’un chapeau rond” (II, 331). For a brief epiphanic moment, the beautiful dream figure—reflection or daguerreotype, for, as we may recall, the daguerreotype uses a mirror as its reflecting surface—asserts itself against the relentless disappointment of reality which makes journeys a melancholy exercise in disillusionment, the experience, described in an earlier episode, of losing “ville à ville et pays à pays, tout ce bel univers qu’on s’est créé jeune, par les lectures, par les tableaux et par les rêves” (II, 189). The fragile miracle of metamorphosis through disguise offers a fleeting synthesis between dream world and real world, in which the dream caliph is, albeit briefly, the real caliph.<sup>52</sup> We close on this picture of Gérard gazing at his Oriental double in the barber’s mirror: detached from the Parisian Nerval, who is no longer master of disguise or role-playing, the face in the mirror, the Oriental Gérard, takes over and lives an autonomous existence in the pages of the *Oriental Journey*.

*University of California, Santa Barbara*

## Notes

1. Gautier 1985–92: 2. 41 (Letter 441).
2. Moussa 1995: 165.
3. In his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*, in Turkey, Chateaubriand refuses to remove his boots and weapons in the courthouse claiming that “un Français [suit] partout les usages de son pays” (195); he later praises Cairo for being welcoming to Europeans: “l’habit européen, loin d’être un objet d’insulte, est un titre de protection” (385).
4. Lamartine 169.
5. On Eberhardt’s cross-dressing and conversion, see Annette Kobak’s biography.
6. “Nor was it only in Arabia that the immortal Nights did me such notable service; I found the wildlings of Somaliland equally amenable to its discipline; no one was deaf to its charms and the two woman cooks of my caravan, on its way to Harar, were incontinently dubbed by my men ‘Shahrazad’ and ‘Dinazad’” (Burton 1885: Translator’s Foreword, I, ix).
7. Burton 1893: II, 207.
8. Anne McClintock discusses Kipling’s character Kim’s practice of cross-dressing as “a technique of colonial surveillance” (McClintock 69), while Gail Low quotes Kipling’s colonial sleuth Strickland, who, in imitation of Harun al-Rashid, disguises himself as an Indian in order to “have the gift of invisibility and executive control over many Devils” (Low 216).
9. On the ambiguities of cross-cultural disguise in Burton’s pilgrimage, see Kennedy 62–64, as well as Said 196: “Every scene in the *Pilgrimage* reveals him as winning out over the obstacles confronting him, a foreigner, in a strange place.”

10. Low 202.
11. Preface to the Memorial Edition, by Isabel Burton, in Burton 1893: I, xviii.
12. Silverman 312. See also Jullien 2008: 5–6.
13. On Nerval's "ideological split" between superficial Orientalist desire and a deeper desire for cultural immersion, see Behdad 18 ff.
14. On Gautier's Orient, fragmented "en une série de gros plans fixes, cadrés selon un code de peintre," see Berchet 17.
15. "The highly civilised man": Burton wrote this ironic caption across a photograph of himself in native dress, slumped in a most unbritish posture on the ground. The picture, and the caption, were used by D. K. Kennedy for his 2005 biography of Burton.
16. "De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne," Baudelaire 195–200.
17. Gautier 1877: I, 183.
18. Fröhlich 232.
19. Letter from Gautier to Nerval, 1843, quoted in Dahab, online publication.
20. Gautier 1880; rpt. 1978: III, 219.
21. Gautier 1877; rpt. 1978: II, 184.
22. On Nerval as *flâneur*, see Asahina 81–98.
23. On the intersection between the Harun Al-Rashid motif and the 19th-century motif of urban *flânerie*, see Jullien 59–70.
24. Taguchi, *Recherche de l'autre et conquête de soi* 185.
25. In a letter to Gautier, Nerval relates that Fonfrède "a acheté une esclave indienne et comme il voulait me la faire baiser je n'ai pas voulu, alors il ne l'a pas baisée non plus, nous en sommes là. Cette femme coûte très cher et nous ne savons plus guère qu'en faire" (Nerval I, 1396); quoted in Taguchi "La Figure de l'esclave" 2010: 33, note 7. On Nerval's borrowing of the Zeynab episode for his own travelogue, see also Schreier 55–57.
26. Lane prefaced his chapter on "Domestic Life—Marriage & the Hareem" with a similar anecdote (Lane 155–156). Guy Barthèlemey points out the anachronistic nature of the anecdote, since the requirement had been suspended for foreign residents since the 1830s, and no longer applied in 1843, at the time of Nerval's visit (Barthèlemey 2007: 144). Hugo Azérad argues that, even allowing for the citational nature of the travelogue as a genre, Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* pushes this feature "to its limits" (Azérad 66). On Nerval's complex intertextual borrowings, and on the resulting "uneasy mixture (. . .) or personal journal and fiction" see also Scott 98.
27. Nerval was institutionalized for the first time in Dr. Blanche's clinic in 1841; this first *descente aux enfers* into madness was followed by a rebirth graced by increased creativity, including the *Voyage en Orient*. On the connections between "Histoire du calife Hakem" and the earlier short story "Le roi de Bicêtre" (first published in 1839 and later collected in *Les Illuminés*), in which a madman, Raoul Spifame, usurps the identity of King Henri II, see Sylvos 93–111.
28. Originally published in 1838–40 as *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* and accompanied by a large volume of *Notes and Commentaries on the Text* (see Lane 1927).
29. According to Stéphane Gounel, Cairo, "la ville des *Mille et une nuits*, la capitale des califes fatimites" (Nerval II, 262), is experienced entirely through the *Arabian Nights*: "Les contes arabes, référence qui ponctue régulièrement le *Voyage en Orient*, deviennent le modèle de la représentation du réel" (Gounel 173).

30. II, 790. François Pétis de la Croix published his *Mille et un jours* in 5 volumes in 1710–1712, overlapping with Galland’s translation.

31. Earlier, during the boat episode, the same misguided “magnanimity” led to cultural misunderstanding: “avec la magnanimité d’un Européen” (Nerval II, 438), he had initially allowed the slave to go unveiled and speak to men, but this only encouraged her to rebel against her Christian master at the *hadji’s* instigation. On the various linguistic instances of cultural miscommunication in Nerval, see Moussa 2007: 554–67. Nerval’s *Voyage en Orient*, Moussa argues, “illustre de manière exemplaire ce qu’on peut appeler le paradoxe du drogman, personnage indispensable à la communication interculturelle, et qui est pourtant sans cesse accusé de brouiller celle-ci” (2007: 562). We also recall that the slave indignantly rejects her freedom: on the ironies of Nerval’s cultural relativism, see Barthèlemy 2010: 193–196.

32. Nerval complains that the new photographic technology competes with the writer’s skill and “lui coupe le paysage sous le pied” (variant, Nerval II, 1405). According to Juliette Fröhlich, all that is left to the writer, impoverished rather than enriched by the daguerreotype, is to narrate the story without the pictures (234). Ross Chambers interprets the daguerreotypist’s mishap as a variation on the punishment of Prometheus (308).

33. See Roubert, online publication.

34. “L’Orient est, tout entier, un espace-temps nocturne” (Sylvos 114).

35. Bouillier 1982: 17.

36. Bouillier 1982: 19.

37. Pouillon 58–60.

38. According to Juliette Fröhlich “le récit est structuré selon les principes scénologiques et scénographiques de la pièce à tableaux,” such that the entire book is “un livre d’images” (Fröhlich 228–229). See also J.P. Richard on Nerval’s “art de la carte postale” (Richard 16). More recently, on the links between Gautier, Nerval and Orientalist painting, see Amelinckx 1–11; Brahimi 295–301; and Pouillon 55–87.

39. On this paradoxical dialectical movement between art and reality, see Moussa “La double vue. Sur le voyage en Égypte (1869) de Théophile Gautier,” 2007: 37. Gautier himself is acutely aware of the importance of the travelogue’s picturesque qualities: “pour bien écrire un voyage, il faut un littérateur avec des qualités de peintre ou un peintre avec un sentiment littéraire, et Marilhat remplit parfaitement ces conditions” (*Revue des deux mondes*, 1er juillet 1848; quoted in Hartman 40).

40. Gautier 1883, rpt. 1978: VII, 92. See Barthèlemy 1990: 341.

41. Gautier 1880, rpt. 1978: III, 217.

42. Gautier 1877: II, 187; see Dahab, online publication.

43. *Journal de Constantinople*, 6 septembre 1843 (Nerval I, 766).

44. “Histoire du Dormeur Eveillé,” *Les Mille et une nuits*: II, 425. Nerval again alludes to this tale in the Turkish episode “Quatre portraits” (Nerval II, 633).

45. Gounel 171–74.

46. Nerval’s correspondence underscores parallelisms between fictional and autobiographical representations of madness: “On ne m’a laissé sortir et vaquer définitivement parmi les gens raisonnables que lorsque je suis convenu bien formellement d’avoir été *malade*, ce qui coûtait beaucoup à mon amour-propre et même à ma véracité. Avoue! Avoue! me criait-on, comme on faisait jadis aux sorciers et aux hérétiques . . .” Letter to Mme Alexandre Dumas, 9 November 1841 (Nerval I, 1383).



47. Rigoli 45. On the place of the Moristan in early psychiatric debates on the treatment of the insane, particularly in the writings of Esquirol, Esquiros and Moreau de Tours (the same physician who wrote *Du haschisch et de l'aliénation mentale* and who initiated Gautier and others into hashish at the hotel Pimodan), see especially Rigoli 64–73.

48. For Jacques Huré, Hakim “délivre le narrateur de la chaîne de la réalité” (Huré 1983: 14).

49. Said 182.

50. Demanze 105.

51. Bouillier 64. On the autobiographical “brouillage” in Nerval’s narratives, especially in *Voyage en Orient* where multiple selves occult the narrative, see Huré 1988: 21–24.

52. Guy Barthèlemey analyzes another similarly epiphanic moment in “Les Nuits du Ramadan”: Barthèlemey 2010: 202–204.

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