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The Hidden and the Visible in British Orientalism: The Case of Lawrence of Arabia

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Two provisos are necessary. First, I titled this article ‘The Hidden and the Visible’ with the intention of discussing the ‘visible’ Arabist T. E. Lawrence, and the ‘hidden’ double agent, Harry St. John Philby, father of one of the most famous double agents of the twentieth century, Kim Philby. The original article would be too much, however, and so for now I have limited it to the ‘visible and hidden’ in the Lawrence legend and his well-known account of the Arab campaign of the Great War (World War I), *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. Moreover, we do not need Philby to investigate productively the ‘hidden’ in British Orientalism, for, as I argue here, the legend and writing of Lawrence is sufficient material for an instructive analysis and intervention.

It is worth noting at the outset also just how the ‘hidden’ and the ‘visible’ is a useful interpretive paradigm within much British Orientalist writing of the modern period and then how it functions at multiple registers. Following Edward Said’s understanding of the binary function and form of Orientalist discourse, consider how the hidden and the visible bleeds into more familiar pairings of ideas such as the private-public, elite culture and mass culture, moralism and sexuality.¹ For much of modern Middle Eastern history the binary of the hidden and the visible refers to a covert American or European agenda on the one hand and the overt/stated (and possibly contradictory) policies on the other hand.

The second proviso concerns the gist of the research that this paper entails. Simply put, there is nothing really new here for Lawrence scholars; rather the ‘newness’ of my approach lies within the context which, I insist, we must read Lawrence and the production of his legend, and, by extension, British Orientalism in the modern era. Underpinning my reading of Lawrence (the book and the legend) is a position on history, namely that there is a break in British Orientalism in the 1880s as a new mass readership emerges, hungry for writing about exotic places, such as Egypt and Syria, and for tales of foreign wars with Arabs and Islamists. Indeed, cultural studies critic and historian Gareth Stedman Jones

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¹ See further Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

argues that this period, 1880 to 1920, is perhaps the preeminent and overlooked period that marks the rise of mass politics and then popular culture as imperial culture, where empire concerns the circumstances and life at home as much as ‘over there.’²

Imperial culture at home brings us around to the role of fantasy, and how fantasy serves as a mediating and indispensable screen through which we in the West must see the ‘Orient.’ As for how we ‘see’ and ‘know’ the Orient, I turn to two metaphors that are key to much psychoanalytic thought, that is, the screen and the mirror. Although these are usually set at odds, with one school promoting the ‘screen’ and the other the ‘mirror,’ I maintain that both are useful here to demonstrate the function and form of Orientalist fantasy at an unconscious and conscious, or manifest level. Consider that Orientalism is a pre-existing discourse that the subject encounters as an ‘always already.’ To that extent Orientalism is a ‘screen’ or, perhaps better, a filter through which the subject ‘sees’ or knows the Arab and Muslim world. Yet, just as importantly, the process of knowing is not dialectical, for the already-knowing subject in turn is vetted or certified through this process. The subject ‘is’ due to the function of a kind of Orientalist mirror in which the subject is reflected back, that is, the West in key ways is ‘produced’ through the mimetics of Orientalism. I will develop these ideas shortly and also discuss the historical mediations that make this period, 1880 to 1920, so important for literary production as such.

Now, T. E. Lawrence’s international fame as Lawrence of Arabia developed from this moment and this literary tradition, and to this extent, he is a pop culture hero. We can ascribe Lawrence’s status as such to Lowell Thomas and his multi media stage show, which I will describe in a bit more detail shortly, and also to a key figure in British Orientalism in the 1880s, Richard Burton. The latter along with Charles Doughty comprise what I call the two tangents of British Orientalist writing in the period, with Burton’s the ascendant tangent, but Doughty’s still influential. Consider that in this period Burton shifted his writing attention to the translation and publication of Orientalist erotica, such as the *Kama Sutra* and his own ballyhooed translation of the *Arabian Nights*.³ Working with the pornographer and lawyer Leonard Smithers,⁴ and through a series of editions of his translation of the latter book, Burton contributed to a shift in Orientalist writing, feeding a popular market for tales of harems, captivity, sexual deviance and exotic practice, and the like. I will return to Smithers, for I maintain his influence as a purveyor of Orientalist pornography on British Orientalism and on Lawrence still has to be accounted for.⁵

In the same period Charles Doughty gained fame and status as an Orientalist with the publication of his *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, where he describes his journey on the Muslim haj disguised as Khalil, a Christian.⁶ Ostensibly, on a geological trip, his book

² See Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Working-class culture and working-class politics in London, 1870–1900: Notes on the remaking of a working class,’ in G. S. Jones (Ed.), *Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³ Richard Francis Burton (trans.), *Arabian Nights: A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments now entitled One Thousand and One Nights* (Benares, India: Kama Shastra Society, vol 1 and supplement, 1886).

⁴ See further James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

⁵ See the ‘Sexologist’ chapter in Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 206–247.

⁶ Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1953).

blends descriptions of the desert topography with requisite comments on Nabatean (pre-Islamic) inscriptions and ethnography. Also, notable was the violent reception Doughty received when he visited Kheybar, a town that has some significance in Islam. The result is a book, which was a favorite of Lawrence, who wrote the introduction to the (later) abridged edition edited by David Garnett. As more editions emerged, Doughty's influence spread, albeit to a smaller market than that of Burton's, but still very influential. By comparison with Burton's *Kama Shashtra* oeuvre, Doughty's text is moralistic with a certain abstemious and pious view of the Arabian landscape—the desert—and its people.

I maintain then that in Lawrence's text we find all of these tendencies, that is elite bourgeois Orientalism of the Royal Geographic Society (the hidden) in tension with Orientalism as mass culture (the visible), and then Burton and the text of Oriental excess (sex) versus Doughty's moral agenda in Arabia. The result is what I call a knot, for the strands are crossed and tied together but never fully intertwined to form a uniform cord. I argue that this is the best way to read *Seven Pillars* and the Orientalism we encounter today.

Finally, and with regard to Middle East studies as such, my project here is twofold. First, I want to argue that we never must overlook and indeed always must account for the fantasy of the Orient in Western thought. In some ways, for us in the West, this must be a part of procedure, a kind of intellectual catechism. Second I want to argue for the importance of popular culture studies within Middle East studies, indeed, for cultural studies in the Middle East, given the primacy of this keyword, culture, in the post-modern or late modern world today. The case at hand—the figure of Lawrence of Arabia—is just a small beginning, so perhaps later we can take up the question as to what to do with popular culture studies in the Middle East today from this starting point.

Lawrence as Action Hero, Savior and Martyr

I will build my argument about the two tangents in British Orientalism and the legend of Lawrence through several quotations from *Seven Pillars* that I have divided into two groups. The first group concerns the public Lawrence and his brush with mass culture. I have dubbed this the 'Lawrence as Action Hero, Savior and Martyr' group. The second group is about the private Lawrence and concerns the Deraa incident and other tortured aspects (excuse the bad puns) of his account in *Seven Pillars*, and, of course, the now infamous flagellation sessions with John Bruce. The latter is the hidden Lawrence, and, in an odd twist, I will link it to his antipathy to mass culture, his quietistic politics, and his great love for hand-made, fine press books. I have dubbed this second group 'Lawrence amidst his complexes and fine books.' In addition, with both groups I plan to pull Lawrence away from hagiography and psychobiography, and with attention to the production of his legend, set him squarely in a political and historical context.

In the preface to the 1926 George Doran edition of *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence offers a brief and well-known history of his text. It was already a legend itself prior to mass publication, and this is notable. There were three original pre-publication versions of the book, which he calls texts 1, 2 and 3. Text 1 was written in 1919 in London and Cairo and then lost somewhere at Reading Station. Some writers have disputed whether this story was true, but the lost version was followed by text 2, which Lawrence wrote from notes, his diaries, and the *Arab Bulletin*, which he had edited during the war. He improved this version with a third in 1921, written largely in Jeddah and Amman, and this version was

the basis for the first published edition of *Seven Pillars*, the famous Oxford edition of 1922 of which only a handful were published. The Oxford edition was in turn, with some modification, the basis for the subscribers' editions of 1926 and 1927, of which more than one hundred copies were published at a loss to Lawrence. For that reason, in 1927 he published an abridgement, *Revolt in the Desert*, with Jonathan Cape in London and George Doran in New York. I will return to the special editions of the book later, but for now, please take note of Lawrence's fetish for the book and for small-scale publication. This mode of production is contrary to the mass culture legend that boosted interest in and value of *Seven Pillars*; and it is notable that it eventually led to mass published versions of the same in one form or another anyway.⁷

In the opening pages of *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence, looking to the end of his book and toward his legacy, proclaims his cause in a good example of the stilted, if not pretentious prose, that marks key moments the book:

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did. I meant to make a new nation, to restore a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundations on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts. So high an aim called out the inherent nobility of their minds, and made them play a generous part in events: but when we won, it was charged against me that the British petrol royalties in Mesopotamia were become dubious, and French Colonial policy ruined in the Levant.⁸

As to the language of this passage, it certainly is contrived in a pretentious voice and archaic phrasing. It is a register at odds with other moments, the better part of the book, which either are spare reportage and description, or written in an enthusiastic style akin to that of contemporary boys literature. As for what he states, it is fairly obvious that Lawrence's posture here fits into a tradition of imperialist patronizing—we call it tutelage these days—though it is especially weird in that he inserts himself so distinctly: 'I meant to make a new nation' and 'to give twenty millions of Semites the foundations of their dream palace.' Now, Lawrence admits he failed in this last effort, but the language and posture surely distract from this key admission, sweeping the reader along with the gesture and its terms, the signifiers as it were, while the signified, the loss of Syria and Palestine, are buried beneath.

Guerilla Warrior and Secret Agent

In the second and third quotations I have selected, we find the guerilla warrior (assymetrical warfare) and secret agent (double agent)—that is, Lawrence, the man who will become the international star and cult figure, Lawrence of Arabia. Here he is in action later in *Seven Pillars*:

⁷ See further Jeffrey Meyers, 'The Revisions of Seven Pillars,' *PMLA*, 88(5), 1973, pp. 1066–1082.

⁸ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Anchor, 1991), pp. 24–25; subsequent in text page references are to this edition of *Seven Pillars*.

Just at that moment the watchman on the north cried a train. We left the fire and made a breathless race of the six hundred yards downhill to our old position. Round the bend, whistling its loudest, came the train, a splendid two engined thing of twelve passenger coaches, travelling at top speed on the favoring grade. I touched off under the first driving wheel of the first locomotive, and the explosion was terrific. The ground spurted blackly into my face, and I was sent spinning, to sit up with the shirt torn at my shoulder and the blood dripping from long, ragged scratches on my left arm. Between my knees lay the exploder, crushed under a twisted sheet of sooty iron. In front of me was the scalded and smoking upper half of a man. When I peered through the dust and steam of the explosion the whole boiler of the first engine seemed to be missing. (p. 431)

This last passage is from the second part of *Seven Pillars*, yet early on in the book is an equally important moment for the development of this new pop culture hero, Lawrence of Arabia. It is this scene that David Lean made much of in his film version of Lawrence of Arabia, when Peter O'Toole as Lawrence, changes in Arab garb:

Suddenly Feisal asked me if I would wear Arab clothes like his own while in the camp. I should find it better for my own part, since it was comfortable dress in which to live Arab-fashion as we must do. Besides, the tribesmen would then understand how to take me. The only wearers of khaki in their experience had been Turkish officers, before whom they took up an instinctive defence. If I wore Meccan clothes, they would behave to me as though I were really one of the leaders; and I might slip in and out of Feisal's tent without making a sensation which he had to explain away each time to strangers. (p. 126)

By now, it is well established that Lawrence of Arabia, that is, the celebrity guise of T. E. Lawrence, was not a 'natural' development. This persona did not emerge organically as news of his exploits spread. In fact this very persona deliberately was created by Lowell Thomas, the Princeton professor turned war correspondent, and later, impresario of travelogue and Cinerama fame. In 1919, with the help of Harry Chase, a photographer who accompanied him to the Middle East and who had worked with a certain Frank Roberson in an earlier stage venture, Lowell Thomas produced a multi media show, known as an illustrated travelogue about the exploits of Lawrence for sellout audiences in Covent Garden and Royal Albert Hall, and other cities in Britain. In the show, Thomas told the story of the whole desert war and so it was simply titled *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia*. Later, realizing that Lawrence was the aspect of the show that produced audiences of more than one million, Thomas changed the title and adjusted the material. To do so he asked Lawrence to pose for him at his house with Orientalist props and in his 'Meccan' clothing. Lawrence obliged and these are the photographs that made the image of Lawrence of Arabia. Chase was a top photographer, understood the idiom, and with so many different hand-tinted images, a series of projectors, and, by contemporary standards, elaborate dissolving effects, these images remain a landmark accomplishment in the history of mass culture. Though Lawrence attended the show several times in 1919, sometimes in disguise, and though his mother, brother, friends and comrades all saw the show and approved of it, he spent the rest of his life disavowing it and heaping opprobrium on Thomas. There is an interesting example of Lawrence's disavowal

of the Thomas myth from the Metcalf collection at the Huntington Library. A former comrade and fellow British soldier asked him to annotate a copy of Lowell Thomas' book, *Boys' Life of Colonel Lawrence*, and here he obliged.⁹ Still some of the inaccuracies and myths about Lawrence, which later were exposed, in fact were fed to Thomas by Lawrence himself. A good example is his alleged title of Sharif of Mecca. According to Thomas's notes and diaries, Lawrence's claim to be 'only white man ever made a sheriff and probably only one who ever will be,'¹⁰ as well as comments about his special ability to survive in the desert, were all told to Thomas by Lawrence himself, though the latter went out of his way to disavow these comments to friends such as Bernard Shaw and Robert Graves.

There were other shows like this, and I found the booklet that accompanied one such show produced by one of Lawrence's comrades, a man whom it was more difficult for him to disavow. Like Thomas, some of his comrades also produced books with photographs, including one by a lower level soldier, a driver of one of the Rolls-Royce armored cars.¹¹ Yet, as I stated earlier, Lawrence repeatedly disavowed Lowell's show and its creator, which made him an international star. In *Seven Pillars* he comments,

There was a craving to be famous; and a horror of being known to like being known. Contempt for my passion for distinction made me refuse every offered honour . . . The eagerness to overhear and oversee myself was my assault upon my own inviolate citadel. (p. 563)

It is easy to follow Richard Aldington and others and denounce Lawrence as a liar, hypocrite, and otherwise engage in moralistic critique.¹² However, Lawrence's disavowals are far more interesting and exceed such ad hominem commentary. First, consider that it is the visible, the public and mass culture image of Lawrence that is dominant, and it is the private, and troubled Lawrence who disavows this other persona to a small circle of friends. Second, we should emphasize the cultural aspect, that is, that this mass culture persona frightens the private Lawrence, the one his friends know, and he retreats to the shelter of his cottage and his fine books. More on the fine books later, but for now, we simply can leave it that mass culture for Lawrence is associated with excess and deception, and is something common, but nonetheless attractive and a source of pleasure. Perhaps there is an important sustaining dialectic then, between the public and private Lawrence, the visible and the hidden for, as we shall see, both are apparent in *Seven Pillars*.

Moving beyond the Lawrence personae, that is as warrior, savior and martyr, to the masses and mass publication, there is a link here between the Lawrence legend and an established tradition and market of popular fiction and non-fiction about the Arab world. I refer here again to the literary outburst that started in 1894 and continued on and off through the turn of the century and which was certainly the Orientalist context within which the Lawrence legend and *Seven Pillars* were conceived and produced. Folded in with General Gordon martyrology are many examples of popular fiction about the Sudan campaign of the 1880s

⁹ Lowell Thomas, *Boys' Life of Colonel Lawrence* (New York: Century, 1927).

¹⁰ Crawford, F. D. & Berton, J. (1996) How Well did Lowell Thomas Know Lawrence of Arabia? *English Literature in Transition*, 39(3), p. 306.

¹¹ See S. C. Rolls, *Steel Chariots in the Desert* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937).

¹² See further Richard Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* (London: Collins, 1955).

through 1898, all of which certainly prepared the market for the Lawrence story and influenced his account in some ways. Also, consider that some of those who led the Sudan campaign, such as Churchill and Kitchener were significant figures in the British military and foreign office by World War I. The titles I have in mind are G. A. Henty's *Dash for Khartoum*, the oft-filmed (six times by my count) *Four Feathers* by A. E. W. Mason, and a short political adventure novel by Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Tragedy of the Korosko*.

G. A. Henty, the late nineteenth century author of numerous novels for boys—he wrote a handful for adults—wrote historically based narratives wherein he instilled the Christian values of the Empire as he knew and supported them.¹³ Two of his best novels were *Dash for Khartoum* and *With Kitchener in the Soudan*. In addition, Henty was briefly the editor of the imperialist and jingoist boys' magazine, *Union Jack*, where he pushed his cause even harder, in addition to publishing some of his books in serial form. *Dash* was written in 1892, seven years after the fall of Khartoum, while *Kitchener* was written in 1902, some four years after the destruction of the Khalifate at Omdurman. Given that both novels are for boys, and my concern here is with adult audiences I will not address them at any length, except to note that both involve lead characters who go native, in this case Arab and dervish, either by staining their skin—*Dash*—or as in *Kitchener* by birth place, since the baby boy/hero is an English child born in Cairo. The key idea here is that though a Briton of good birth grows up in Cairo, or looks like an Arab, his good birth, his blood, will see him through and cause him to stand out and up in key moments. With reference to the Lawrence legend, this is first 'Urrens' in his Meccan outfit and then his series of disguises—as a gypsy woman, Circassian laborer and others. In general this plot element, the hero in disguise as a native, is not new, and not specifically tied to Orientalism, except to the extent that the 'dangers' of being mistaken for one of them are existential, while the triumph of rising above the color of skin and upbringing, is total. On the other hand, with Lawrence, the avowed and declared pleasure of disguise, and especially his acceptance as an Arab by Arabs, suggests a crossing over that a contemporary reader and Lawrence himself might link to the contradiction and tortured sensibility that underlies *Seven Pillars*. I will return to this point shortly.

Like Henty, Conan Doyle was a highly successful popular writer and in some ways it is not surprising that he pitched in, as it were, following the fall of Khartoum, and his own Nile tour in the 1890s. The result was *The Tragedy of the Korosko*, an adventure story about a group of British, European and American tourists, who, while on the Nile River, are taken hostage by a Mahdist Emir. Doyle deployed all of the elements introduced in the press coverage of the Sudan campaign in the early 1880s and in popular literature thereafter. The narrative is well worn, and there is no complexity of any sort in this novel, only stereotype. The spinster aunt from Boston, Miss Adams, constantly is concerned with cleanliness and complains about the dirty Sudanese and flies, while the Frenchman, Fardet, is whiny, duplicitous, arrogant, and disagrees with British foreign policy. Fardet's antagonist, Colonel Cochrane, recently retired from the British army, is also a type and, notably, he and the American, Headlingly, who eventually is killed by the Mahdists, agree that it is the 'unpleasant' duty of the English-speaking nations to take care of 'sick' countries, recently Greece and Spain, and now Egypt and the Sudan. As the American declares, 'Each has his own mission.'¹⁴

¹³ See further, Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991).

¹⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Tragedy of the Korosko* (London: Hesperus, 2003), p. 18.

With Mason's *Four Feathers*, written in 1902, we see the way the Sudan campaign was supposed to be remembered, rooted firmly in the lead up to the siege of Khartoum and then the martyrdom of Gordon.¹⁵ The story concerns Harry Feaversham's apparent betrayal of his friends. The story starts at a dance ball for the regiment when word arrives that the four friends are to be called up for the relief of Gordon. Harry, due to marry Ethne (certainly a suggestive name for the heroine in this novel about a war whose terms were racial and religious), already has resigned his post but did not tell his comrades. When they find out, they send him three feathers, which he receives in Ethne's presence, and she adds a fourth. The story centers around Harry's disappearance as he travels to the Sudan, disguised as a Greek busker, to find his comrades, assist them in some way, and return the feathers. This is a novel about love, about love lost and regained—lost cause corrected—as Harry eventually returns and Jack cedes his place in Ethne's life. In addition, it is even more about friendship—not just friendship between soldiers, but soldiers as boys and men, young and old. As I stated at the outset this is a good example of British Orientalism that is about 'home' and the values of home life as much as life 'over there.' For Lawrence and his literary milieu, this novel merged the adventure story with melodrama, something that was already evident in popular novels such as Hichens' *The Garden of Allah* though these were for a female readership and derived from dubious sources in tales of captivity and ravishment. This new blend with *Four Feathers* is akin to the romantic undertone—and I mean this in a poetic and literal sense—of *Seven Pillars*.

Also, and this is a note I have not developed fully yet, but I have learned that during World War I John Buchan, the early twentieth century adventure story novelist, was working in Cairo in the war propaganda office (they called it the information office), where he played an especially key role in facilitating Thomas's tour with Lawrence. It is striking to think that the author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, a first modern double agent and spy story, in turn was involved with the creation of another kind of agent, a British soldier who disguised himself as an Arab, our Lawrence.

Lawrence amidst his Complexes and Fine Books: The Desert of Men

So far, I have examined the 'visible' in British Orientalism and the Lawrence of Arabia legend. That is, how in the 1880s certain discourses became staples of popular culture as politics and culture combined in new mass formations. However, there also is the 'hidden' Lawrence, one with similar roots in British Orientalism, roots that predated the 1880s, but which survived in underground forms, also crossing from elite audiences to common consumers. I am referring here to Orientalist pornography, and it is through this tradition that we might see the Lawrence story—his sexuality in particular—in new ways, moving away from the formalism of psychoanalysis and the moralism of other interpretive modes.

Now, Richard Aldington perhaps is known best for the bitterness of his 1955 biography, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biography of Enquiry*, and especially his sensational 'outing' of Britain's twentieth century hero.¹⁶ Of course, there were obvious signs and indications of one form or another in Lawrence's work indicating his homoerotic, if not homosexual predilections, material which was extant even during his lifetime and more obvious and

¹⁵ Alfred Edward Woodley Mason, *Four Feathers* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

¹⁶ See Aldington, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry*.

legible than some sort of code. Thus, in some ways it is remarkable then that such a fuss was made over Aldington's book, and then that any fuss was made at all, as though this news was 'shocking, so shocking!' In the following passage, Lawrence makes it fairly clear what went on in the desert, though the description makes it seem tortured and guilt ridden, where sexuality is a burden to be sloughed off. Thus,

The public women of the rare settlements we encountered in our months of wandering would have been nothing to our numbers, even had their raddled meat been palatable to a man of healthy parts. In horror of such sordid commerce our youths began indifferently to slake one another's few needs in their own clean bodies—a cold convenience that, by comparison, seemed sexless and even pure. Later, some began to justify this sterile process, and swore that friends quivering together in the yielding sand with intimate hot limbs in supreme embrace, found there hidden in the darkness a sensual co-efficient of the mental passion which was welding our souls and spirits in one flaming effort. Several, thirsting to punish appetites they could not wholly prevent, took a savage pride in degrading the body, and offered themselves fiercely in any habit which promised physical pain or filth. (p. 30)

Indeed, his use of the verb 'slake' is surely anachronistic, even in the early twentieth century and reminded me immediately of its use in Andrew Marvell's poem, 'Clorinda and Damon' ('Damon: Might a Soul bath there and be clean,/Or slake its Drought')¹⁷ and then the pastoral elements which imbue so much of Lawrence's representation of desert life (following Doughty). To describe sexual urge as a 'thirst' and something to be rid of suggests a troubled disposition toward human sexuality as such and the ooze and excess of the human body. Most critics now feel that Lawrence in fact did have homosexual encounters during his war service and before. Moreover, Lawrence was very up front about his relationship with Dahoum, whom most consider the SA of the dedicatory poem of *Seven Pillars*. Lawrence met Dahoum in Syria before the war during his time at the Carcamesh dig, and scandalized the locals with his, in their minds, unthinkable close relationship. Lawrence even brought him to England before returning with him for the Arab campaign. Dahoum died in 1918 in Damascus, and some feel that his presence there played powerfully in Lawrence's conscious and unconscious thought as he plotted the entry to Damascus with Feisal. Unfortunately, Dahoum had died by the time Lawrence arrived in the Syrian city.¹⁸ Other liaisons might have included the two young men whom he retained as servants, Faraj and Abdullah, who were in turn inseparable in suspect ways. Nevertheless, the point is that the signs of his sexual tendency were always there, and never fully hidden—it seems for several decades readers just could not see, or read the signs.

Deraa

The Knightley and Simpson biography with its sensational accounts,¹⁹ as well as John Bruce's later confirmation of the whipping sessions at Clouds Hill cottage, are another

¹⁷ See George DeF. Lord, ed. 'Clorinda and Damon', *Andrew Marvell: Complete Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 11–12, lines 15–16.

¹⁸ See Harold Orlans, *T. E. Lawrence: Biography of a Broken Hero* (London: McFarland, 2002), pp. 20–24.

¹⁹ Philip Knightley & Colin Simpson, *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia* (London: Nelson, 1969).

matter. The latter's account is especially compelling, if this is the right word, because of the cover story Lawrence gave him and then the account of one session. As Bruce recounts, Lawrence told him that 'the Old Man', to whom he owed a debt, required that he be punished, hence the flagellation sessions. After one session, Lawrence told Bruce that the 'Old Man'—clearly a fictional figure—demanded that he be whipped again, since the first session was not sufficient. So Bruce laid a rug—Oriental?—over his back and birched his 'small buttocks' which brought Lawrence to a sexual climax and orgasm. Lawrence even asked Bruce to sign up with him in the Tank Corps, which he did, and they shared a room during this period.²⁰

All of the above served to confirm suspicions prompted by the infamous 'Deraa' section of *Seven Pillars*. Around the middle of the book, Lawrence recounts how he went off one day with only an old man to accompany him. He planned to spy on the Turkish battalion stationed in Deraa, and so disguised himself as a Circassian worker. He was stopped, however, by Turkish troops, who turned him over to the commandant. According to Lawrence's account, the commandant propositioned him for sex, and though he refused, the commandant started to touch and kiss him. Lawrence kned him in the groin—he describes this as 'jerking' his knee up into him, and writhing in pain the commandant called the guards and ordered them to beat Lawrence. After a beating while stretched over a bench, the guards pulled Lawrence to his feet. He continues,

I remember the corporal kicking with his nailed boot to get me up; and this was true, for next day my right side was dark and lacerated, and a damaged rib made each breath stab me sharply. I remembered smiling idly at him, for a delicious warmth, probably sexual, was swelling through me: and at then that he flung up his arm and hacked with the full length of his whip into my groin. This doubled me half-over, screaming, or, rather, trying impotently to scream, only shuddering through my open mouth. (p. 445)

After his beating, Lawrence was bloodied and dirty, and the commandant no longer was interested in him. He was locked in a makeshift cell from which he escaped, slinking, and broken, back to his camp.²¹

So, where do we go from this point, and what does this have to do with Middle East studies? For some readers, the Lawrence legend might have finished right there, given the sordid or possibly disturbing aspects of the story, and what this means for an up-to-date reading of, say, the Deraa narrative in *Seven Pillars*. I have selected three different responses to this that build on this new Lawrence, which are representative of recent trends in literary and cultural studies, and which explore the sexual, cultural, and textual dimension of his book. Indeed, far from nailing the last nail in the coffin of his reputation, these books of prurience instead enrich it further. Indeed, we late moderns or postmodern readers now find a level of complexity and compelling contradiction in Lawrence and the near tortured prose of *Seven Pillars* that in some ways elevates the significance of the book to an even loftier level than before.

²⁰ See Orlans, *T.E. Lawrence*, pp. 61–62 and 221–223.

²¹ In addition to Lawrence's own account in *Seven Pillars*, see Orlans, *T.E. Lawrence*, pp. 218–229. Also see Kaja Silverman, 'White Skins, Brown Masks: The Double Mimesis, or with Lawrence in Arabia,' *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 299–338.

A 'standing civil war,' is Lawrence's self-critique in one of those introspective moments we find in *Seven Pillars*, and it is a comment upon which Edward Said seizes for his brief essay in *Reflections on Exile*.²² I cannot account for the motivations, but Said draws our attention to the salacious accounts of Lawrence's sexual life and then side steps the implications, or public significance, of these same accounts. Instead, Said brings us back to the text with this idea, with which he subsumes the excessive sexual aspects of the Lawrence legend. This textual emphasis might be due to the fact that Said was prudish and did not want to lose this interesting and important figure to the gossips. Yet, Said makes more of Lawrence—he is not just any writer. Moreover, the activity of writing, as Said reads Lawrence, is central to understanding the man, his work, and what he wrought for the British Orientalist of the twentieth century the bricoleur modern and Arabist as existentialist. In his writing, Said tells us, Lawrence found a pied a terre, a small and temporary foothold. Of course the final house was realized as *Seven Pillars*, hence the metaphor, but Said is not as certain, for as he reads Lawrence, writing was a process of reconciliation, of making things fit in a way they did not in the world around him. He comments in the Lawrence essay,

What attracted Lawrence to the act of writing was what paradoxically frustrated him, although he was able to recognize how perfectly writing itself, viewed either as tight order, as mechanism, or as having no conclusive force over things, was an analogy for his own personality.²³

I think what we should make of Said's commentary on Lawrence is first the emphasis on his writing, that he wanted to be known as a writer, and then the kind of writer he wanted to be known as. I will get to this kind of writing shortly, but we also should consider that if writing is a 'tight order' that frustrates, it is also a form that conceals, hence the way the corners of truth and motive are rounded with such craft in *Seven Pillars*.

Yet writing—textuality—is not without its sexual dimension, and so even as Said fends off this libidinal dimension of a writer whom he admires, he and we cannot excise such stories fully from the now postmodern Lawrence of Arabia legend. To that end, Kaja Silverman, the Class of 1940 Professor in the celebrated Department of Rhetoric at Berkeley, proposes an intriguing psychoanalytic interpretation of the Lawrence legend in a chapter of her book, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. The chapter, entitled, 'White Skin, Brown Masks: The Double Mimesis, or with Lawrence in Arabia' explores what she calls an 'inverse desire' as, in this instance, the white Lawrence goes 'Arab.'²⁴ On the way to unwrapping Lawrence from his Arab garb, Silverman comments on his masochistic predilections that, she argues, call into question his ability to lead. She asks, how can we understand Lawrence's success? She explains a few pages later:

If the Lawrence of *Seven Pillars* is able to participate psychologically in Arab nationalism, that is in large part because his particular homosexuality promotes an erotic identification both with its leaders and its servants.²⁵

²² Edward Said, 'A Standing Civil War: On T. E. Lawrence,' *Reflections on exile and other essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 31–40.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁴ See Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, pp. 299–338.

²⁵ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, p. 305.

Yet the key point Silverman makes is that Lawrence's masochism is not feminine, since it is not resolutely passive, but is sacrificial, to such an extent that he knows he must fail as a leader. Therefore, his donning of Arab garb is related to his mediated, partial identification with his Arab comrades and key to Lawrence's military strategy and notion of Arab nationalism. A change of clothes necessarily follows a change of heart as Lawrence is engaged in an identification with the Arab Other, which as she writes, will end with a rewriting of his own subjectivity. In some ways Lawrence actually does that with which Burton and Blunt only titillated their audiences, and which Gordon resolutely refused, and in important ways for an Englishman, he crossed over to the other side.

As for being English, I should be precise here, and point out that Lawrence was born in Ireland, and so his nationalism always was shadowed by the contemporary colonial situation in Ireland and the bloody struggle for independence that peaked in 1916 as Lawrence was preparing to wage war in Palestine and Syria. Also, back to the birchings, it is unfortunate that Silverman overlooked some obvious aspects of this story, specifically that the Anglo-Irish Lawrence, of muddled upper class background, was birched by a Welshman, John Bruce, who was working class, while on holiday in a sparse cottage in a remote and harsh corner of Scotland. For good measure, this same Lawrence was introduced to the Arab world through his interest in the crusades, which leads us to knight errantry and medieval romance. Parsifal, Galihad, and many other legendary knights and the accompanying chivalric code demonstrate that Lawrence's military profile and posture, while not phallic as Silverman, or an American, might have it, is certainly well grounded in British and European lore, and neither unusual nor weak.

There is something more lacking in Silverman's smart psychoanalytic reading of the book and the issues it concerns. It is too formal and history is simply tacked on. Therefore, if a cultural and historical, and pointedly political interpretation of the Lawrence legend is needed, then Jonathan Rutherford's chapter on Lawrence in his *Forever England* would fit the bill. The gist of Rutherford's argument is that after the Great War, and the wartime death of the writer and public figure Rupert Brooke, mainstream English notions of masculinity changed in radical ways, due to the horrific losses associated with the conflict. To the contrary, Lawrence was a *Boys Own* story, he comments, full of pageantry and exotic appeal. Indeed Lawrence seemed to appeal to everyone, for after all he had a good war, unlike so many. Rutherford goes further, however, and links Lawrence's image to now unseemly politics—imperial and otherwise—of that time. First, Rutherford links Lawrence to the 'indirect rule' crowd in the foreign ministry. This was a group with links stretching back to Lugard and his book on how to govern Nigeria through local forms of leadership and rule, that is, using 'brown' people to rule for a 'white' empire. This is a familiar idea now, and we even see it in Iraq these days—and I do not apologize for such direct political commentary—but it was a theory also known as the 'Punjab Creed' and was most successful in application in India. Of course, this was how Lawrence and his superior, Winston Churchill, saw Feisal and the Hashemite kingdoms of the Middle East, and was inextricable from his advocacy of air power. Under the mantle of a discussion of Lawrence's sexuality, Rutherford brilliantly brings together this theory of the Punjab Creed with the RAF and finally Lawrence's dalliance with the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Indeed, the day he died he was returning from a trip to the post office,

having mailed a letter politely declining an invitation to speak to the BUF annual gathering.²⁶

I maintain that these three writers, Kaja Silverman, Jonathan Rutherford, and Edward Said have offered us the most interesting critique of Lawrence as the single-most influential Orientalist of the early twentieth century. Also, I maintain that the way I understand Lawrence brings all three strands—psychoanalytic, cultural historical, and cultural literary—together for the most powerful critique of the tradition then and now. Indeed, I read the homoerotic and Deraa sections of *Seven Pillars*, and the accompanying documentation of Lawrence's predilections as the expected, as just what a man in his tradition might do. Lawrence, after all, is a latter day Cannibal. By this I refer to the Cannibal Club, a mid to late nineteenth century secret subsection of the elite London Anthropological Society, which, as Lisa Sigel documents in her remarkable book, *Governing Pleasures*, was at the center of Britain's imperial venture.²⁷ The poet Swinburne and various members of the ruling class and government *nomenclatura* such as Lord Houghton, General Hodgson, and Lord Penzance all were members with, of course, Richard Burton. Their central activity was the production and distribution of colonialist pornography for their circle and other elite 'consumers.' However, and this is key for the formation of colonial and imperial ideology, they justified their activities as the pursuit of science and art, where pornography, or their pseudo-scientific combination of sexology-anthropology would serve to understand better the specific sexual practices and culture in the far flung reaches of the Empire.²⁸

Sigel points out that the Cannibal Club kept its pleasure for its members and in fact made a point of policing them, even as it helped them make a pretence of flaunting obscenity laws. The latter would include Richard Burton's frequent invocation of Mrs. Grundy, the fictitious Victorian prude and censorious authority, and the enemy of his Kama Shastra Society. However, in so many ways this pretence and pose was in bad faith, and worse—and this is where Sigel's analysis is most interesting, for far from challenging the letter of the Law, which they merely skirted using diplomatic pouches and other avenues, their activity actually reinforced the extra legal authority of the bourgeoisie, the Cannibal Club. In this way, and taking us back to Silverman's reading of *Seven Pillars*, we can better understand, say, Burton and others when they dally with the Other, going Arab or assuming native garb and darkening their skins. Their gesture is a complete cooptation of the Other in body and clothing.

As the nineteenth century ended, the viewing privileges of the Cannibal Club and other such elite groups was overturned as French and British companies began to mass produce 'dirty' postcards, many of which had a colonial or imperial image. Thus, 'These nature-oriented postcards stood at the intersection of pornography, science, and tourism and were less censorable because ideas implicit in them had been completely naturalized in late nineteenth-and early twentieth century Britain, thanks in part to the early work of the Cannibal Club.'²⁹ Moreover, and this point should be emphasized, these cards were

²⁶ See further Jonathan Rutherford, *Forever England: Reflections on Masculinity and Empire* (London: Wishart, 1997), pp. 70–103.

²⁷ See further Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 51–80 and 119–155.

²⁸ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, p. 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

affordable for working class consumers, bringing about a whole new audience for colonialist and imperialist culture and ideology. Indeed, in her groundbreaking book, *Imperial Leather* Anne McClintock calls these postcards and other such imperialist cultural forms—especially soap advertising—commodity racism.³⁰ Sigel reiterates this point but takes it further, noting that now the subordinated, the masses of Britain and Europe, could view forbidden images, something that the authorities found very unsettling.³¹

Fine Books

In addition to the flagellation sessions and his military duties, Lawrence's life at the Clouds Hill cottage mostly involved working on book projects. Lawrence truly believed in a William Morris inspired notion of the small press, hand press books, hence the early editions of *Seven Pillars* and the care he took with the illustrations by Kennington and Augustus Johns (for the limited editions of *Revolt in the Desert* too), as well as the production materials and process. This task entailed a great deal of labor, obvious when one opens one of the early limited editions. There is a vast difference between these and the later mass-produced copies. One special project was Lawrence's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* for a New York small press owned by the American Bruce Rogers.³² It is an amazing object, not a book, but an object, with scented vellum pages and gold embossing and special type. The checklist of books from Clouds Hill includes many by renowned artisanal presses such as Golden Cockrel, Whittington, and Corvinus, as well as parts of a press and rare type from defunct small presses.³³

Some mention of Leonard Smithers is also necessary, if only to cement Lawrence's connection to the underground publishing scene of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period Smithers, a middle class lawyer, set himself up in London as a discrete and discriminating publisher and seller of fine books and sophisticated erotica. The conjunction of the two is important, of course, since the elite associations of fine books with special and small presswork and materials, coupled with content for a 'discriminating' consumer, all served as a marketing device and a shield against the anti-pornography censors. Smithers is important for our tradition of orientalism because he worked so extensively with Richard Burton and Lady Burton, after her husband's death, and brought out a memorial edition of the great orientalist's work, as well as erotica such as Catullus' *Carmina* and an edition of *Priapeia* (which eventually was published with a disclaimer concerning Burton's role in the publication of the book). The list of books at Cloud's Hill does not contain any editions published by Smithers, although it is likely that Lawrence owned some of them. The point I want to make is that our hero's interests fall into a paradigm that some would like to see in distinction, separate from the sordid and effete reputation of Smithers. However, the latter, while married and otherwise a heterosexual man, published authors who were associated with the sexual scandals

³⁰ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

³¹ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, pp. 154–155.

³² T. E. Lawrence (trans.), *The Odyssey* (London: Walker, Meron & Rogers, 1932).

³³ See further Phillip O'Brien, *T. E. Lawrence and Fine Printing* (Buffalo: Hillside Press, 1980).

surrounding Oscar Wilde. The brief and brilliant run of the *art nouveau* and ‘decadent’ journal *Savoy* is the best example here.³⁴

Again, how does this mesh with the other private Lawrence we know, and then the Middle East. There is a connection, I maintain, and it is through culture. The binaries are once again, public/visible/mass culture on one side and private/elite/hand-made culture on the other. The word and its production, for Lawrence, is caught up ineluctably with a certain erotics of culture that sees the public texts and the show as somehow dirty, and the private texts as pure. The whipping sessions are then a cathartic process, a purification ritual. As to what this has to do with the Middle East, what we see here is less an ambiguity and series of regrets about his betrayal of Feisal and the Arab world, for all of this is displaced and then resolved through a dialectic of cultural production. Simply put, Lawrence’s guilt is about this public persona as such, not about the lies and deception, and especially his own role thereof. In the last instance the latter day follower of the Punjab Creed was not about to mutiny against his superiors and truly cross over to the other side.

Conclusion: Mass Culture and the ‘Orient’

I want to conclude by re-emphasizing the general theoretical points I made at the outset, those that take this project beyond Lawrence, and which underpin my project.

First, there is the importance to study mass culture and the 1880 break in British Orientalism. With the advent of mass culture and mass politics, policy and colonialization is ‘sold’ differently, and importantly to a new mass audience. This mass audience is not the working class, or exclusively so, but also includes middle class and civil service employees, both at home and abroad in the colonies. It is important that war and colonial policy be sold to new voters, and it is an electoral process that finally is underpinned by a commodity culture—Pears Soap and Jaffa Cakes—that appeals to these new masses in a most visceral and somatic manner. In addition, there is the tension between mass culture and private elite culture in the 1880 to 1920 period. Again, the culture of this period is for the most part a culture of empire and a mass culture that determines home life—labor, economic factors, and political discourse—as well as life overseas. Therefore, even in their complaisance and lack of engagement with the colonial policy, the working classes are complicit in more immediate and ‘hidden’ ways. My cultural and historical emphasis is set against other ways of interpreting—psychoanalysis and the legacy of Said in some respects.

The second point concerns Middle East studies and what this article and this project mean for the field. For me it is all about the study of fantasy in the popular culture of the West; a study of how it functions today, in popular culture in relation to the Arab-Muslim world. Examples are the sexy Egyptian pop star Roubi, the odd Hamas-like refugee camp militia in the recent film, *Children of Men*, the neo-liberal (and neo-conservative) discourse around films like *The Kite Runner* or the ballyhooed *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and their political ilk. These constitute our own Punjab Creed and so-called clash of civilizations. The first step, as good cultural Kantians is for all of us in the West to question

³⁴ Chapters 1–4 of J. G. Nelson’s book on Smithers are particularly relevant; see Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*.

how we know what we know, and in this instance to recognize that just saying ‘No!’ to Orientalism will not make it go away.

This brings us back to the mirror and screen of Orientalism. It is with great precision and rational procedure, the markers of Western scholarship and academic discourse, that we might carry out Said’s Gramsci-influenced injunction to inventory Orientalism and colonialism in general. Just as important, we need to consider this discourse as more than a screen, rather as a kind of mirror or Western subjectivity. The persistence of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice at the deepest levels of Western and American political and cultural discourse suggests that there is something more than mere ignorance and fear that must be cured. We have to consider that here we find enjoyment, in a sense as perverse as that of our Orientalist hero, Lawrence of Arabia.

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