The Highly Civilized Man

Richard Burton and the Victorian World

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The Impersonator

Richard Burton burst onto the British public scene in the early 1850s. His decision to enter Mecca in the guise of a Muslim pilgrim in 1853 was carefully calculated to attract the attention of his countrymen, and it succeeded beyond his wildest expectations, bringing him the renown his flurry of books about India had failed to produce. The enterprise was couched in earnest terms as a disinterested inquiry into knowledge of another land and its people, but it tapped into a far more complex array of enthusiasms and emotions on the part of his Victorian audience. Their Christian piety fed a fascination with the Holy Lands and harbored a fear of Islam; their Indian empire and East Asian trade made the Arabian region a focus of strategic interest; their affinity for the theater and its world of fictive identities nurtured a fondness for cross-cultural role playing. Burton's adventure was perfectly fashioned to appeal to these interests, and it succeeded in bringing him into the national spotlight.

The pilgrimage to Mecca was not without its risks, however. It required a high-stakes masquerade that was vulnerable to exposure at different levels by different parties. On the one hand, Burton ran the risk that his disguise would fail to deceive the Muslim peoples he encountered on his journey. On the other hand, he ran an equally serious risk of failing to persuade the British public that his embrace of Islam was nothing more than a performance. The pilgrimage was not an unqualified triumph in either regard.

There is some evidence, for example, that he was less successful in hiding his English identity from his fellow pilgrims than his audience at home was led to believe. By the same token, some Christian critics wondered whether his Muslim persona really was the sham he made it out to be. In the final analysis, these doubts were traceable to his own reluctance to commit to a stable and readily identifiable identity, a reluctance rooted in the emotional and intellectual satisfaction he received from transcending the conventional boundaries of religion and race.

With his medical furlough drawing to a close in 1852, Richard Burton had little desire to return to his regiment. A military career in the Bombay presidency offered him far less freedom to operate as he pleased now that his patron Napier had departed and the administration of Sindh had become more bureaucratized. In April he managed to delay his departure for six months by claiming his health remained fragile. Soon thereafter he hit on an expedient that offered a more intriguing means of escape from his regular duties, one that also promised to put the linguistic skills and ethnographic expertise he had acquired in India to good use. The Royal Geographical Society was offering £200 to anyone who would explore the interior regions of Arabia. Burton leaped at the opportunity, thereby launching himself on an adventure that offered the personal liberty and public attention he craved.

Burton initially proposed to travel across southern Arabia from Aden, the British protectorate at the mouth of the Red Sea, to Muscat, the Omani port near the entrance to the Persian Gulf. In his letter requesting approval from the India Office, he detailed his qualifications: "I have devoted eight years to the study of Oriental manners customs & literature, I served nearly four

years in the Scinde Survey, can sketch & model, speak the Arabic language and have a superficial knowledge of medicine, besides which I possess the bodily strength and activity necessary for a traveler in wild countries." He also explained how he intended to make his way through a region that was well known for its dangers to outsiders, especially non-Muslims. "I propose to pass for a petty trader & physician, the safest character that can be assumed in those regions. Moreover, I doubt not that by virtue of my knowledge of the Muslim Faith and personal appearance, I should be mistaken for an Arab even in the midst of Mecca."[1] Burton, in effect, was proposing to turn the skills he had developed in Sindh to use in Arabia.

The itinerary that Burton mapped out was intended to appeal both to the Royal Geographical Society, which wanted to fill in the blank spaces on its maps of the region, and the British East India Company, which had a strategic interest in the sealanes around the Arabian peninsula. But the Company's Court of Directors turned down Burton's request for a two-year leave of absence to carry out the journey, citing its inordinate risk. It did, however, grant him one year of leave, ostensibly to spend time in Egypt and Arabia improving his Arabic. Burton reassessed his plans accordingly, deciding that he would use his knowledge of Islam and talent for disguise to undertake the pilgrimage from Cairo via the Red Sea to the Muslim holy city of Mecca.[2]

This decision was an inspired one. From a political standpoint, it played on the British preoccupation with the strategic corridor that ran from the Nile Delta through the Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. This region was increasingly viewed as a chokepoint in trade and communications between Britain and its Asian possessions. In 1839 the British proclaimed Aden a protectorate, thereby establishing a naval presence at the mouth of the Red Sea. In 1841 the Peninsular and Oriental Steam

Navigation Company acquired a concession at the port of Suez, instituting a regular route to Bombay that cut months off the standard voyage around the South African cape. Though passengers had to cross the isthmus by land, there was growing talk of a canal being cut between Suez and Port Said. In 1854, the year after Burton's pilgrimage to Mecca and just before the publication of his *Personal Narrative,* Ferdinand de Lesseps obtained his concession to build the Suez Canal. All of these developments heightened the public interest in Burton's adventures and observations.

Burton also tapped into a fascination with the Near East that was deeply rooted in Victorian culture. It derived above all from the Bible and the images it conjured up of Christianity's birthplace. It also entered the popular imagination through the tales of the Arabian Nights, a staple of British children's literature in that period. From the late eighteenth century onward, many British intellectuals made reference to the region and its inhabitants as a counterpoint to their critiques of Western society. Enlightenment figures such as William Jones and Edward Gibbon looked upon the Bedouin of Arabia as savage savants who possessed a natural instinct for political liberty. Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and other Romantic writers regarded the Near East both as a region oppressed by Ottoman despotism and a site associated with heightened feeling, a realm where Romantic sensibilities could find free reign. For Victorian sages such as Thomas Carlyle, the desert domain of the Arabs harbored an innate spirituality, a view that Benjamin Disraeli racialized in his novel *Tancred* (1847), with its claims that Semitic peoples possessed a heightened religious sensibility.[3] Among the many readers enthralled by Disraeli's mystical evocation of the region was Richard Burton's future wife, Isabel Arundell.[4]

By the early nineteenth century, a small but steady stream of

Britons had begun to venture into Egypt, Palestine, and surrounding territories, publishing accounts of their travels that fascinated the reading public at home.[5] Perhaps the most successful example was Alexander Kinglake's *Eothan* (1844), a charming account of his journey through the region in 1835. David Roberts's paintings of Egypt and Palestine, which he toured in the late 1830s, were greeted with similar enthusiasm. Regular steamship service was instituted between Marseilles and Alexandria in the 1830s and between Southampton and Alexandria in the 1850s. Travelers to Egypt could follow a standard tour route that took them from Alexandria to Cairo, then up the Nile to view the ancient ruins at Thebes. An array of prominent Britons made this journey, among them Florence Nightingale, Francis Galton, Harriet Martineau, and Richard Monckton Milnes. Writing from Cairo after his return from Mecca, Burton noted the numerous tourists on the streets and observed sarcastically: "No end of gents who keep journals & will doubtless commemorate their Nile boats & Dragoman in mortal prose."[6] Not all of the British in Egypt were transient sightseers, however. Some of them took up extended residency in Cairo, adopting the dress and lifestyle of the Turkish ruling elite and immersing themselves in local Egyptian culture. The most noteworthy of these figures were Gardner Wilkinson, an early Egyptologist who published the *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1827), and Edward Lane, who adopted the alias Mansur Effendi to aid him in his research into the *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836). Lane also produced the first English translation from Arabic manuscript sources of the tales of the Arabian Nights. In addition, cultural brokers such as Osman Effendi, a Scottish soldier who had converted to Islam after his capture and enslavement by Muhammed Ali's forces in 1807, operated on the fringes of this British Egyptian community.[7]

The Victorian image of the Middle East was intimately bound up with its impressions of Islam, the dominant influence on the region's social and cultural character. As Christendom's historic rival, Islam remained a strange and menacing faith to most Britons, known mainly in terms of Orientalist stereotypes about polygamy, harems, and other exotic practices. Its mysteries were magnified by the prohibition against the entry of non-Muslims to Mecca, Islam's center of worship. For all the European tourist traffic through Egypt and other parts of the Middle East, Mecca remained for the most part free from the prying eyes of unbelievers. Burton saw an opportunity to tap into this rich vein of curiosity by undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca and exposing the city and its Muslim faithful to the scrutiny of his Christian countrymen.

Burton was not the first European to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Various others had done so over the centuries, and at least half a dozen had published first-hand accounts of the journey and the holy city at its terminus.[8] Burton carefully studied what his predecessors had written in preparation for his own trip, later including generous selections from some of their works as appendices to his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Meccah* (1855). The most recent and informed of his precursors was Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, the Swiss-born explorer who traveled through Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and the Nile valley on behalf of the British-based African Association between 1812 and 1817. Disguised as an Indian Muslim merchant, he managed to enter Mecca in 1814–15 (accompanied by Osman Effendi), and although he died before he could return to Europe, his journals describing the journey were published posthumously in 1829 as *Travels in Arabia.* Burton, though duly appreciative of Burck-

hardt's accomplishment, praising his audacity and knowledge, also took pains to point out instances where his own efforts and observations surpassed those of the great Swiss adventurer. He was acutely conscious of the need to demonstrate that he had seen and done things unmatched by his predecessors and peers, understanding that this was the currency that would buy him fame.

From the perspective of a practicing Muslim, of course, there was nothing remarkable about the journey he prepared to undertake. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of pilgrims made their way to Mecca every year, many of them from far greater distances and with far fewer resources than Burton. Even though Islam's holiest city remained shrouded in mystery to most Europeans, it was at the center of a global community of believers, the *umma,* who shared a common faith, law, and language. The pilgrimage itself strengthened that *umma,* supplying those who undertook the journey with a richer, more cosmopolitan view of the *dar al-Islam* (the world of Islam). For Muslims, in other words, the pilgrimage to Mecca carried a completely different meaning than it did for non-Muslims.[9] Burton could scarcely have dared to launch such a risky undertaking were it not for the fact that the hajj attracted pilgrims from such varied corners of the *dar al-Islam,* making variations of speech, dress, and customs the norm, not the exception.

It must be understood, however, that Burton's decision to undertake the hajj in an "Oriental" disguise was directed as much at a British audience as it was at the Muslims with whom he associated during the journey. His subterfuge was not in fact necessary to gain entry to Mecca: he could have gone there freely and openly had he simply proclaimed his conversion to Islam, which was in any case the sine qua non for the disguise he adopted. As one Arab commentator later observed, "On the pilgrimage to

Mecca, Burton would be known as a devout British Muhammedan just as easily as we recognise an Arab convert on a missionary platform."[10] Why Burton chose instead to carry out his elaborate deception says something about the complex array of professional ambitions and social pressures that influenced his judgment. First, he still harbored a desire to go from Mecca into Arabia's Empty Quarter, which would have been difficult to do as an Englishman, even one who had sincerely converted to Islam. Second, he believed that an "Oriental" persona would give him greater access to the intimate world of the peoples who inhabited the region, much as it had done in Sindh. Third, he understood that his adventure would be measured against the achievement of Burckhardt, who had entered Mecca and Medina in disguise. He could do no less.

There was one further consideration that made any thought of undertaking the pilgrimage as a self-professed English convert to Islam impossible: it would invalidate his accomplishment and destroy his reputation in the eyes of the British public. A genuine conversion would place him beyond the pale of respectable society, extinguishing any prospect of making a name for himself as a national hero.[11] Even a sham conversion would be seen as an act of abasement to an inferior faith and culture if carried out while he maintained his identity as an Englishman. Indeed, for some Victorians, any sort of masquerade was regarded as socially deceitful and morally repugnant. It carried associations with sexual license and libertinism, which derived from the notorious aristocratic masquerades in the eighteenth century and persisted in the nineteenth-century theater's reputation as a haven for prostitution and pornography.[12] Evangelicals in particular objected to any form of impersonation, viewing it as a vehicle for escaping personal moral responsibility.[13] It made no difference to these devout Christians that Burton's acts of obeisance to an alien faith were

Burton in Arab dress. His impersonation of a Muslim pilgrim brought him fame and played a central role in his persona.From Richard F. Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah,* Memorial Edition (London: Tylston and Edwards, 1893). This lithograph reproduces an original oil painting (ca. 1853–54) by Borgo Cassatti, now in the collection of the Orleans House Gallery, Twinkenham, England.

carried out in his role as an "Oriental": he remained an Englishman whose actions were seen as sullying himself, his country, and—a presumptive element of his national character—his Christian faith. "There is something indescribably revolting to our feelings," railed the *Edinburgh Review,* "in the position of an English officer . . . crawling among a crowd of unbelievers, around the objects of their wretched superstition."[14] The Arabian traveler and evangelical Christian Charles Doughty shared this opinion: he refused to read the *Personal Narrative,* despite its potential value in preparing for his own journey into the region, because of his moral objections to Burton's masquerade as a Muslim.[15]

For most of his countrymen, however, the decision by Burton to pass himself off as an "Oriental" made all the difference in the world. It transformed him into an actor, and the theater held such a prominent, if contested, place in Victorian life that most of the public was culturally conditioned to draw the distinction between the person and the performance, and to applaud the latter when carried off with aplomb.[16] Burton enjoyed socializing with prominent actors such as Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, and he possessed an instinctive flair for the theatrical, as many of those who met him over the years observed. His doctor, Grenfell Baker, noted "his lifelong obsession for assuming poses."[17] His journey to Mecca and Medina was staged in effect as a performance, a demonstration of his skills at impersonation. And, as such, it elicited an enthusiastic reception from a significant portion of his British audience. They admired the audacity of his undertaking and the ingenuity that allowed him to pull it off. The prospect that he might have been exposed as an imposter gave his performance dramatic tension, the frisson of danger that kept his audience on the edges of their seats. The fact that he was able to deceive the guardians of Islam's holiest shrines and gain access to

their inner sanctums supplied the story with its triumphant resolution, its proof of his thespian talents. Not only did it generate admiration for the quasi-magical powers exhibited by the successful actor; but it also inspired a chauvinistic sense of pride, a feeling that the ability to assume the external attributes of the native demonstrated the superiority of the English character.

The role that impersonation played in Burton's pilgrimage has attracted renewed attention in recent years. Though biographers have generally taken his effort to pass as a Muslim pilgrim at face value, accepting his explanation that it was necessary to gain entrée to a world he could not otherwise have come to know so intimately, other scholars, particularly specialists in literature and literary theory, have evaluated his adventure in very different terms, raising intriguing questions about its implications for self-representation and identity. Informing these questions are several related theoretical presuppositions—a postmodernist understanding of the self as a shifting, contingent category and a postcolonial preoccupation with mimicry and hybridity as manifestations of this unfixed self. Much of this scholarship, following the lead of Homi Bhabha, has referred to mimicry as a strategic maneuver by the colonized to subvert the authority of the colonizer, while hybridity is taken to be the preeminent expression of the postcolonial disintegration of colonial categories.[18] What, then, is one to make of Burton's use of mimicry and hybridity? Here we have the problematic case of an agent of imperialism wielding what are widely regarded as the weapons of the weak. This poses the question of what ends are being served by this appropriation. The answer most frequently proposed by postcolonial critics is the one Anne McClintock gives in her analysis of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim,* the famous novel about an Anglo-Irish youth who passes as an Indian in order to gather intelligence for the British Raj. Kim, she states, used "mimicry and cross-dressing as a tech-

nique not of colonial subversion, but of surveillance."[19] This interpretation can certainly be applied to Burton. We have already seen that he conducted surveillance missions for the colonial regime in Sindh, and his pilgrimage to Mecca promised to contribute valuable intelligence on a region that held considerable strategic interest for British authorities. Moreover, Burton himself affirmed the political value of his observations, which were punctuated by editorial remarks of the following sort: "Egypt is the most tempting prize which the East holds out to the ambition of Europe."[20]

Still, we would do well to distinguish between the justifications that Burton supplied for his masquerades and the motivations that actually inspired them: the latter were shot through with ambiguities. The problem, as Kaja Silverman has noted in reference to T. E. Lawrence, another Englishman who reveled in his ability to impersonate an Arab, is that "imitation . . . veers over into identification."[21] The line between the one and the other is especially difficult to delineate in the case of Burton. Edward Said, for example, credits Burton, almost alone among his countrymen, with being "able to become an Oriental . . . to penetrate to the heart of Islam," an accomplishment that he attributes to Burton's "having successfully absorbed its systems of information and behavior" and "shaken himself loose of his European origins."[22] Parama Roy is more critical in her assessment of his intentions, which she believes were inextricably associated with imperial designs, but even she concedes his "heterogeneous affiliations."[23] Burton's contemporary critics wondered with some justice where his real loyalties resided. Whatever success he attained in his efforts to pass himself off as a born-and-bred "Oriental" derived from his determination to go beyond the surface markers of identity, the signifiers exemplified by dress and speech. It is clear that he found Islamic faith and culture appealing at a deeply

emotional level, and he immersed himself in this worldview. At the same time, he maintained his ideological attachment to the British empire, to the imperatives of power and the opportunities it presented for personal advancement. In this regard, as in so many others over the course of his long and eventful career, he staked out a position so rich in ambiguities, so riven with contradictory commitments, that contemporaries found it difficult to identify exactly where he stood or, more to the point, who he really was. This determination to resist definition, to keep his own identity in continuous play, is in fact what makes him such a profoundly modern figure.

Burton left his British self behind when he boarded a ship bound for Egypt in April 1853. It had been at least four years since his previous effort to pass as an "Oriental," and his skills in Arabic and instincts for dissimulation were rusty. He tried out several different personas before he hit upon one that seemed to suit his needs. The first experiment in otherness came during the voyage from Southampton to Alexandria, when he disguised himself as a "Persian Prince" traveling in the company of his friend, Captain Henry Grindlay, a Bengal Army officer. Although he never explains what motivated this choice of identity, the shipboard segregation of passengers along economic and ethnic lines was almost certainly a consideration. As a "prince" with a British officer to vouch for him, Burton could book a first-class berth, which was desirable not only because of its comforts, but because it was much easier for him to maintain his masquerade among the fellow Europeans who traveled first class than it would have been among non-Europeans, most of whom were pressed together in steerage. The two-week voyage allowed him to get "into the train of Oriental manners" without worrying overmuch about the

threat of exposure. Even so, his disguise was far from foolproof: a Turkish acquaintance traveling on the same ship recognized Burton.[24]

When he arrived in Egypt, Burton spent five weeks in Alexandria, rooming in the garden guesthouse of a friend, John Larking, who himself "lived in half-Oriental style."[25] Here he dropped the princely masquerade and took up a new identity as Shaykh Abdullah, a Sufi from Persia who dispensed medical advice and tonics.[26] Acting as a nostrum-peddler appealed to him because it provided access to the intimate lives of those who came to him for cures, and he thought that he could do no more harm than British army surgeons, especially to "uncivilized peoples" who in his view tended to suffer uncomplicated ills. Adopting the role of a Sufi also had its attractions: "No character in the Moslem world is so proper for disguise as that of the Darwaysh [Sufis]," he declared, equating them to "Oriental Freemasons," whose bonds of fellowship extended across territorial and cultural boundaries. Furthermore, their wandering ways and reputations as eccentric mystics made any anomalies of behavior by Burton less likely to arouse suspicion, and if suspicion should arise, "he had only to become a maniac, and he is safe." He was well versed in Sufi beliefs and poetry from his days in Sindh, and, indeed, claimed that he had been initiated in the Kadiriyah order while he was there, offering as proof a diploma that pronounced his attainment of "the proud position of a Murshid, or Master."[27]

Burton worked to refine this identity during his initial immersion in local life, first in Alexandria, then in Cairo, where he spent an additional six weeks improving his fluency in Arabic by conversing with the patrons of coffeehouses and bath houses and his knowledge of the Qur'an through study with imams in local mosques. He made several friends, the most important of whom was Haji Wali, a Russian-born merchant in Alexandria, with

whom he fasted during Ramadan and shared a fondness for hashish. Wali soon saw through Burton's disguise, but instead of expressing shock at the deception, he offered advice on how to improve it. He urged Burton to abandon his pretense of Persian origin, which was too risky given the prevalence of Persian pilgrims and the antagonism their Shiite beliefs stirred in the Sunni majority. Burton was encouraged instead to adopt a more complicated heritage that better accounted for his oddities of accent and experience. Henceforth, Burton became a wandering Sufi of Pathan origin, born to Afghan parents in India but educated in Rangoon: this pedigree was meant to account for his passable, but by no means native-spoken, Persian, Hindustani, and Arabic.

This third and final iteration of his "Oriental" identity took hybridity about as far as it could go. Its very heterogeneity is what made it such an attractive alias for Burton—it defied efforts to trace it to an essential, irreducible core. At the same time, it presented a paradox for his claims of authenticity. As Parama Roy has observed, the "marginality" of Burton's position made him "an outsider who can pass as an 'Oriental' because of his unknowability rather than his familiarity or, more properly, an unknowable familiarity."[28] He could succeed in this paradoxical role because it was carried out in an environment where the traditional forces that bound person to place were undermined both by the destabilizing effects of British imperialism and by the cosmopolitan influence of the Muslim pilgrimage itself.[29]

However well suited to his circumstances, Burton's disguise was by no means impenetrable. Several times in the course of the journey he found himself at risk of exposure. Once he crossed paths with a Pathan pilgrim who showed an unwelcome curiosity about his origins. On another occasion, his covert efforts to sketch scenes along the pilgrimage route were observed, arousing suspicion. The most serious threat to his subterfuge, however,

came from the Meccan youth Mohammed el-Basyuni, a member of his traveling party who "suspected me from the first of being at least a heretic"—meaning a Shiite. Early in the journey, Mohammed discovered among Burton's belongings a sextant, a scientific instrument that he rightly regarded as signifying a secret identity and purpose. Unbeknownst to Burton, Mohammed denounced him to the other members of the party as "one of the Infidels from India," but after some discussion they dismissed his charge as unfounded. Burton claims that he learned of the incident after he had returned from the hajj to Cairo, where he had a chance encounter with one of his erstwhile travel companions, Omar Effendi.[30]

What makes this incident so intriguing is what it leaves unexplained. Did Burton's fellow pilgrims decline to act on the Meccan youth's accusation because they found it implausible *or* because they found it inconvenient? Is it possible that they already suspected or even knew his true identity? Naturally, Burton insists that his knowledge of Muslim theology and other demonstrations of authenticity overwhelmed any doubts raised by Mohammed. To suggest otherwise could have caused his readers to question the entire premise of his adventure, which presumed that it was both necessary and possible to pass as an "Oriental." In a footnote, however, Burton concedes that Effendi "must have suspected me" at the time. He also notes that he had made loans to Effendi and the other members of the party, causing them to be "affectionate and eloquent in my praise" and supplying a plausible motive for rejecting his accuser's charges. If he was subsidizing their journey, what incentive did they have to see him exposed? The absence of evidence from any sources other than Burton himself makes it impossible to confirm that his companions knew more about his deception than he appreciated at the time or acknowledged after the fact. But it seems reasonable to

entertain the possibility that the other members of Burton's travel party conspired to keep their suspicions about his identity to themselves, engaging in effect in their own deception vis-à-vis the person who sought to deceive them.[31]

Burton began his journey to the heartland of Islam in early July 1853, some three months after he had first arrived in Egypt. His itinerary was a common one for pilgrims from North Africa. He and his traveling companions rode camels from Cairo to Suez, the port town at the northern end of the Red Sea, where they boarded a vessel overcrowded with pilgrims for a twelve-day voyage to Yanbu', the main point to entry to Medina from the west. Here they joined a large party of pilgrims for the treacherous trek inland. Burton lingered at the second city of Islam for a month, visiting local shrines and regaining his strength. When a large caravan from Damascus set off on the ten-day journey from Medina to Mecca, he attached himself to it. His arrival in Islam's holiest city in early September marked the culmination of his high-stakes journey, and after fulfilling his obligations as a pilgrim—and making observations as an outsider—he left for the port of Jeddah, where he obtained passage back to Egypt.[32]

Although Burton faces various hardships and dangers over the course of the journey, including intense heat and dehydration, a seriously infected foot, and attacks by Bedouin bandits, he clearly considers the experience an exhilarating one. He glories in the openness of the desert and the sense of freedom it inspires: "Your *morale* improves; you become frank and cordial, hospitable and single-minded: the hypocritical politeness and the slavery of civilization are left behind you in the city. Your senses are quickened: they require no stimulants but air and exercise . . . There is a keen enjoyment in mere animal existence." He finds the Arabs an at-

tractive, congenial people: "they are of a more affectionate nature than the Persians, and their manners are far more demonstrative than those of the Indians." Like many of his countrymen, he voices particular enthusiasm for the Bedouin, "a truly noble compound of determination, gentleness, and generosity." He compares the Bedouin favorably to the American Indian, often regarded by Europeans as the archetypal noble savage, claiming they share similar characteristics, including "the same wild chivalry, the same fiery sense of honour, and the same boundless hospitality," while insisting that the Arab ranks higher "on account of his treatment of women, his superior development of intellect, and the glorious pages of history which he has filled."[33]

Burton attempts to break through his Western readers' ingrained prejudices against the Islamic world by pointing out that many of the criticisms lodged against it can be turned with equal effect against the West. He insists, for example, that Muslims are no more susceptible to superstition than Christians: "Europe, the civilized, the enlightened, the skeptical, dotes over clairvoyance and table-turning . . .—I must hold the men of Al-Madinah to be as wise and their superstitions to be as respectable, as that of others." To those who dismiss the rituals associated with the pilgrimage as crude exhibitions of idolatry, he responds: "What are the English mistletoe, the Irish wake, the Pardon of Brittany, the Carnival, and the Worship of Iserna? Better far to consider the Meccan Pilgrimage rites in the light of Evil-worship turned into lessons of Good than to philosophize about their strangeness." He defends the education offered in mosques against its Western critics by asking, "Would not a superficial, hasty, and somewhat prejudiced Egyptian or Persian say exactly the same thing about the systems of Christ Church and Trinity College?" And he counters objections to Muslim attitudes toward women by observing: "Certain 'Fathers of the Church,' it must be remembered,

did not believe that women have souls. The Moslems never went so far."[34]

How Muslims treat women is in fact one of the defining issues that sets Burton at odds with his countrymen. The Victorians held that the level of civilization attained by a society could be measured in terms of the status it accorded women.[35] Burton shares the evolutionary assumptions that underwrite this evaluation,[36] but he disputes its derogation of the Muslim world as inferior to the West because of the sanction it gives to polygamy, veiling, and other practices that seem to subordinate women. The notion "that women in Muslim countries want liberty," he sighs, "seems burned into the European brain, but it is simply absurd, the effect of misrepresentation and a most superficial study."[37] He insists that Muslim customs support stable, loving relationships and provide women with satisfactions and freedoms unrealized by their Western sisters. He tries to demystify polygamy and harems, claiming that "jealousy and quarrels about the sex are the exception and not the rule of life" in polygamous households and suggesting that the harem "often resembles a European home composed of a man, his wife, and his mother." He challenges his readers to identify any European literature that can match the depth of feeling for women expressed in Arab love poetry. He praises the veil as "the most coquettish article of woman's attire." Even the objections he raises to certain features of gender relations in the Muslim world undermine prevailing Western assumptions. For example, he laments the fact that Egyptian women can obtain government protection from abusive husbands, fearing it has made them "unruly."[38]

The position that Burton stakes out with regard to women in Muslim societies can be interpreted as a reactionary defense of patriarchal authority, which was beginning to come under challenge in England from feminists. Rana Kabbani makes a forceful

case for this view, arguing that Burton constructed a myth of the Orient that derived from his desire for a "master-slave relationship" between the sexes, with women serving as "chattel and sexual convenience."[39] Scattered comments in Burton's corpus of writings lend some support to this analysis. To dismiss Burton as a male chauvinist, however, is to neglect the subversive undercurrents that course through his opinions on relations between the sexes, losing sight of their unsettling effects on his British readers. In the books and articles that follow *Personal Pilgrimage,* Burton returns repeatedly to the issue of polygamy and other gender practices in Muslim societies, challenging his countrymen's conviction that their effects on women are oppressive. Polygamy, he insists, does not derive from the lust of men, as European critics claim, but from the social and economic interests of both sexes. Commenting on its practice in West Africa, he concedes that a "multitude of wives ministers to the great man's pride and influence, as well as to his pleasures and to his efficiency," but argues that the wives benefit too: "after feeding their husbands, what remains out of the fruits of their labours is their own, wholly out of his reach—a boon not always granted by civilization." Hence, "polygamy here has not rendered the women . . . a down-trodden moiety of society; on the contrary, their position is comparatively high."[40]

Burton's interest in polygamy drew him in 1860 to the newly established Mormon settlement at Salt Lake City, which he referred to as the "young Meccah in the West."[41] In *The City of the Saints,* his account of this visit, he makes his most sustained case for polygamous marriage, which in this instance has been adopted by persons of European ethnicity, including a considerable number of English converts. Once again he stresses its benefits to women, suggesting that it lightens the burdens of domestic labor for individual wives and reduces their sexual obligations to

their husband, thereby promoting harmony within the household, though diminishing romantic sentiments. It is not clear, however, how he reconciles what seems his rather conventional Victorian notion that wives want less sexual attention from their husbands with the argument he makes at other times that women are more highly sexed than men. Similarly, his concession that amatory feelings are less pronounced in polygamous marriages seems inconsistent with his earlier praise of Arabic love poetry. Burton's main purpose, however, is to refute the European charge that polygamy is a license for licentiousness: he stresses that a strict Mosaic code against adultery and emphasis on female modesty and celibacy by single males operate both in Mormon and in Muslim societies. He also tries to place polygamy beyond the reach of Western moral censure by sketching out a social-scientific interpretation of its intent, suggesting that among peoples in thinly populated regions it is the most effective strategy for producing progeny. By contrast, he suggests, the densely populated, purportedly monogamous societies of Europe keep their numbers under control through widespread resort to prostitution, which he argues is in effect a polyandrous practice far more degrading to women than polygamy.[42]

Burton presses his case in favor of Muslims' treatment of women in still another area—that of legal safeguards. He gleefully notes that women under Islamic law enjoy rights denied their Western counterparts. "Nowhere," he asserts, "do women hold a higher position, or enjoy such true liberty, as in Moslem lands; and it is curious to hear the assertion made in England, where by statute a man may beat his wife moderately, force her by law to submit to his loathed companionship, and dispose of her property as well as her person."[43] In another work he again points out "the superior liberty of the sex amongst Moslem races. . . . She has immense advantages in the management of children, property, and

servants, and in real freedom, despite apparent seclusion, which in modest women is always voluntary."[44] Nor can he resist observing that Parliament's passage of the Married Women's Property Act in 1882 granted modern British women rights to property and inheritance that the Qur'an had made available to Muslim women centuries earlier.[45]

By defending Islam against what its Western critics see as its most vulnerable feature—the status it accords to women—Burton makes clear his sympathies for the faith. No one can read the *Personal Narrative* without recognizing that its author has great respect for the doctines and rituals of Islam. Here is how he describes his feelings when he arrives at the sacred heart of Mecca, the Ka'bah: "I may truly say that . . . none felt for the moment a deeper emotion than did the Haji from the far-north. It was as if the poetical legends of the Arab spoke truth, and that the waving wings of angels . . . were agitating and swelling the black covering of the shrine." After attending a prayer service at a mosque, he declares: "I have seen the religious ceremonies of many lands, but never—nowhere—aught so solemn, so impressive as this." And in the preface to the third edition of the *Personal Narrative,* which appeared in 1879, he declares in bitter defiance of his critics that "the Moslem may be more tolerant, more enlightened, more charitable, than many societies of self-styled Christians."[46] Thus while Burton remains a relentlessly gimlet-eyed observer who readily heaps abuse on particular individuals and practices, he never directs his scorn toward Islam itself.

His affinity for the Islamic faith carries through to his subsequent writings as well. In *First Footsteps in East Africa* (1856), the account of his journey to the Ethiopian city of Harar, he recalls the sense of peace that came over him when he again heard the call of the muezzin: "no evening bell can compare with it for solemnity and beauty. . . . I fell asleep, feeling once more at home."[47]

In *The Guide-Book: A Pictorial Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina* (1865), a pamphlet he wrote to accompany an exhibition about the journey that had made his name, he sought to demystify Islam for the British public, giving a respectful account of its origins, doctrines, and rituals. At the same time, he indicated his own sympathies for the faith, most notably in a passage that mirrored the one in *Personal Narrative* about his visit to the Ka'bah.[48] In a lecture he gave to an audience of Brazilian Catholic dignitaries on his pilgrimage to Mecca, he insisted that Islam is "a creed remarkable for common sense."[49] Perhaps his most outspoken defense of Islam, however, came in a review essay he wrote in response to a German work of anthropology that had criticized the influence of Islam. His frustration welling to the surface, he declared that "nowhere in El Islam appear the disgraceful excesses of Christendom." Islam is in fact "the first and greatest reformation of the corrupted faith called Christianity; and its effects have endured till this day." Those who adhere to its doctrines are superior to Christians "in morality and manly dignity," not to mention "in industry and honesty."[50] Though Burton toned down his rhetoric in later years, he continued to express his admiration for Islam. Among his posthumous publications is an essay on Islam that reiterates earlier arguments in its favor, praising Mohammed as a sincere prophet who "bequeathed to the world a Law and a Faith . . . whose wide prevalence—wider indeed than that of any other creed—alone suffices to prove its extrinsic value to the human family."[51]

It is hardly surprising that critics often accused him of being a convert to Islam. During a heated Anthropological Society debate about the missionary endeavor in Africa, one antagonist characterized him as one who "stands up for Mohammedanism in opposition to the Christian faith." (Burton interrupted: "This is personal.")[52] Reviewers of his books often expressed outrage at

his opinions on Islam and the practices associated with it, most notably polygamy. In its review of *Abeokuta and the Cameroons Mountains* (1863), the *London Review* indicated its dismay at "so zealous an advocacy—or rather an apology—of polygamy," and wondered what Burton's wife thought of his views. Isabel made her feelings publicly known several years later when she appended a personal preface to Richard's latest book, *Explorations of the Highlands of the Brazil* (1869), which he had left her to shepherd through the publication process while he took up his new posting in Damascus. Deeply offended by his defense of polygamy and criticisms of her own faith, Roman Catholicism, she announced that she "protest[s] vehemently against his religious and moral sentiments." Her public objections had no discernible effect, however, on his determination to voice controversial views. A year later, *The Echo* observed that Burton "seems more convinced than ever that the happiness of future generations depends in great measure on the spread of polygamic principles." *The Spectator* excoriated *Two Trips to Gorilla Land* (1876) for its "bad taste" and anti-Christian views, complaining that Burton's "tone is so aggressive against decency that one has hardly patience to seek for his facts." The *Saturday Review* described Burton as "an orthodox Haji and Dervish" in its review of his *Gold Mines of Midian* (1878). And a lengthy, unidentified review essay on two of Burton's books about West Africa concluded that his "coarse vein of sensuality and indecorum," his "proclivities in favour of polygamy," and his defiance of "all notions of Christian decency" demonstrated that he must be a Muslim: "Captain Burton would have acted more openly and honestly towards his readers, if he had added to all the other titles that trail along after his name, the words, 'An English Gentleman, converted long ago to El Islam.'"[53]

Was it true? Had Burton converted to Islam? The answer has

to be "no" if conversion is understood in terms of strict observance of prayer and other demonstrations of faith. If, on the other hand, it is understood as a way of life, a set of values that informs one's outlook on the world, then Burton may very well have viewed himself as a Muslim—at least for a period of time. He clearly found Islam's ethical doctrines and codes of conduct more edifying and socially purposeful than any of its rivals', though there is little evidence that he personally abided by them. He also felt a genuine affinity for the sentiments expressed in Sufi poetry and practice, though this association raises questions of its own about the depth of his commitment to Islam. The British Orientalists who originally encountered Sufism in India in the late eighteenth century—and, indeed, coined the term—believed that it had "no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam," viewing it instead as an Eastern form of freethinking.[54] Burton saw it in a similar light, adopting a Sufi perspective, persona, and poetic style for his own freethinking manifesto, *The Kasîdah* (1880).

What this suggests is that Burton's feelings toward Islam must be framed in the context of his attitudes toward Christianity. He was drawn to Islam because it gave him a vantage point from which to point out the limitations of his own European Christian heritage, not because it possessed in his mind any unqualified truths or virtues. He was most fervent in his advocacy of Islamic beliefs and Muslim practices during the decade—the late 1850s to the late 1860s—when he was most actively engaged in a polemical campaign against the universalist claims of evangelical Christianity. His dismay at what he regarded as the destructive effects of Christian missionary activity among the West African peoples with whom he came in contact during his years as British consul in Fernando Po (1861–1864) made him especially outspoken in his praise of Islam. Not only did he argue in his books on the region that Islam was better suited to the needs of Africans than Chris-

tianity, but he also referred to himself as a Muslim in private communications and conversations. In letters from West Africa to his friend Monckton Milnes, he wrote that he was taking "'sweet counsel' together" with his "Moslem brethren" and wishing "for a little of the 'Higher Law' (viz that of Mohammed)."[55] Soon after his return from West Africa to England, he spent a weekend at the country home of Lord John Russell, where his hostess reported in her diary that he "calls himself openly a Musselman." His host, however, qualified Burton's provocative affirmation of faith, noting that he "believes in no particular religion, though calling himself a Musselman."[56] This gets us closer to what Islam meant for Burton—not an expression of faith in its own right, but a means of challenging the unquestioning faith of his countrymen.

Burton exhibited an intellectual curiosity in religions of all sorts, but this curiosity never carried over into the unquestioning commitment of the devout believer. While in India he was intrigued not only by Islam, but by Roman Catholicism, choosing its services over those of the Anglican chapel while he was stationed in Baroda, and by Hinduism, claiming that his intensive study of the faith had been rewarded by the privilege of wearing "the *Janeo* (Brahminical thread)."[57] He gave a sympathetic hearing to the doctrines of Mormonism during his visit to Salt Lake City, concluding that Mormon theocracy was "the perfection of government."[58] He even had something good to say about what he termed the "fetish" beliefs of West Africans, which avoided the objectionable "anthropomorphism" that afflicted Christianity. "The Negro Deity, if disassociated from physical objects, would almost represent the idea of the philosopher," by which he meant "a pure theism."[59] Late in life he became interested in the claims of Spiritualism, finding in its eclectic "mix of rationalism, experimentation, and anti-Christian secularism" a perspective much to

his liking.[60] Ironically, what motivated this catholicity of interest was his deep skepticism about any religion's claims to absolute truth. Ever the ethnographer, he understood that every theological system provided its believers with a set of codes for governing behavior, and he appreciated this social purpose. He also admired the philosophical insight and elegance of different religious doctrines, though he ranked some much higher in this regard than others. But he was unable to embrace any of them with the unquestioning devotion they demanded. A question he posed regarding Catholicism pointed to his dilemma: "is there any middle term between the God-like gift of reason or the un-reason of Rome?"[61] Much of his intellectual life was spent in search of that "middle term." His wife, Isabel, whose desperate desire to convert him to Catholicism caused tensions in their marriage and controversy after his death, probably understood better than anyone the impetus that drove him on his religious odyssey. After she had arranged for his burial in a Catholic cemetery by claiming his death-bed conversion to the Roman faith, she acknowledged that he had "tried religions all round. . . . In each religion he found something good, and much that disappointed him; then he took the good out of that religion, and went away. He was sincere with the Mohammedans, and found more in that religion than in *most*."[62]

After his return from Mecca, Burton lingered in Cairo as long as his leave would allow. His professed purpose was to squirrel himself away so he could write an account of his journey while it remained fresh in his mind. Some of the *Personal Narrative* was drafted during those uninterrupted months in Cairo, though he did not complete the manuscript until after his return to India.

But he remained in Cairo for another, more personal reason: he was reluctant to divest himself of his "Oriental" identity, which gave him a kind of freedom—not least with regard to sexual conduct—that he never could have enjoyed as a British officer in Egypt. In a series of letters to Norton Shaw of the Royal Geographical Society, he described his continued masquerade in terms that appear especially telling in light of the later accusation in his reminiscences that his fellow officers in India had referred to him as a "white nigger." "I was quite a *nigger* in Cairo & saw no English," he wrote in October 1853. A month later he reported that he was "still dressed Nigger fashion and called the Haji." He boasted that he inhabited "a precious scene of depravity; showing what Cairo can do at a pinch & beating the Arabian Nights all to chalks! That too when the Pacha has positively forbidden fornication." This letter was signed "Shaykh Abdullah."[63]

Burton was already campaigning to undertake another mission. This time he set his sights southward, inspired in part by reports from the German missionary Johann Krapf of snow-capped peaks in the East African highlands. Krapf, he proclaimed with conscious irony, was "my John the Baptist."[64] Burton proposed that he launch a probe into the interior of the continent from Somalia or Zanzibar, both of which were still within the Islamic sphere he knew best, albeit on its margins. He also broached the idea of a journey across equatorial Africa to the Atlantic, an ambition that had attracted the interest of other explorers.[65] His Arabian achievement gave him the ear of East India Company officials, who had their own economic and geopolitical reasons for supporting British probes into the East African hinterland. He accompanied Lord Elphinstone, the governor of Bombay, on a visit to the pyramids and found a patron in James Grant Lumsden, a member of that presidency's governing council, who

provided him with accommodations in his Bombay home while Burton was completing his book on the pilgrimage to Mecca. The Company soon granted approval for an expedition intended to carry out a reconnaissance of Somalia, a territory that interested Bombay officials because of its strategic location near the Red Sea's southern entrance, a choke point for seaborne traffic passing to and from India.

For the first time, Burton found himself in sole command of other Europeans. His party consisted of William Stroyan, an officer in the Indian navy and old friend from the Sindh Survey; G. E. Herne, another acquaintance from the Survey and a lieutenant in the 1st Bombay European Infantry; and John Speke, a Bengal army lieutenant who was brought on board at the last minute after the unexpected death of another member of the party. Burton, however, was temperamentally unsuited for his role as supervisor of the expedition. He immediately broke up his party, sending Stroyan and Herne to report on commerce and the slave trade in the area around the market town of Berbera, dispatching the newcomer Speke to investigate reports of gold and other natural resources in a region known as the Wadi Nogal, and reserving for himself a daring scheme to gain entry to the mysterious walled city of Harar, supposedly closed to non-Muslims, which was located in the highlands of what is now Ethiopia. Interest in this land had recently been stirred by the publication of Mansfield Parkyns's *Life in Abyssinia* (1853), which described the years he spent living among the Ethiopians. Burton saw an opportunity to replicate the achievement that had made his Arabian adventure such a success, intending once again to use his skills at deception to seek entry to a forbidden city. This was nothing less than another bid for personal fame: he cared little about the activities carried out by the other members of his party, and the

East India Company cared little about Harar, an obscure, enfeebled, land-locked city-state. Even at the purely personal level, however, Burton badly misjudged the benefits that might accrue to him from the adventure. In Britain, everyone had heard of Mecca; no one had heard of Harar. Whatever the risks entailed in seeking entry to the city, it simply did not evoke the same interest from the British public as had the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Harar episode was that it demonstrated to Burton that nature had placed limits on his ability to pass as a "native." He began his journey in the familiar guise of Haji Abdullah, now a Muslim merchant. He also ordered Stroyan, Herne, and Speke to dress as Arab traders. Speke, who believed Burton wanted them to "appear as his disciples," sloughed off his turban and robes almost as soon as his commanding officer was out of sight, finding them uncomfortable and unbefitting an English gentleman.[66] Stroyan and Herne probably did the same. And Burton's own disguise as the trader Abdullah quickly unraveled. It was impossible to conceal his identity from his own Somali travel party, which consisted of twenty armed guards and two female cooks, and their knowledge of his identity was bound to spread to peoples along the way. But Burton faced a more fundamental problem: his white skin attracted the sort of notice he had never encountered before. Rumors swept the region about this white stranger and his ominous intentions. Some locals ran screaming in fear when they laid eyes on him. Others no doubt understood that "the jocose idea of crowning me king of the country," which Burton and his majordomo acted out in a mock ritual at one point in the journey, gave nascent expression to British imperial designs on their country.[67]

Burton soon began to receive warnings that "they will spoil that white skin of thine at Harar!" By the time he reached the

outskirts of the city, he knew the game was up. He discarded his disguise and entered Harar as a British officer. He claimed that his decision was motivated by two factors: the belief among local peoples that hiding one's origins in the face of danger was cowardice and the concern that his light skin might cause him to be mistaken for an agent from Turkey, "a nation more hated and suspected than any Europeans, without our *prestige.*"[68] These considerations cannot be discounted: Burton certainly would have sought to resist any imputation of cowardice and he is correct in claiming that local peoples regarded the Turks (and Egyptians) as a more serious threat to their interests than the British.[69] But even if we accept Burton's assertion that he abandoned his masquerade of his own free will, the fact remains that his action amounted to a concession that its purpose had failed. He had discovered that his white skin left him an outsider, reducing the matter to the choice of whether he wished to be mistaken for a Turkish outsider or acknowledged as a British one.

Just as Burton had feared, his white skin did place him in danger, though not in Harar itself, which proved disappointingly drab and torpid. He spent ten uneventful days in the "forbidden city" before reconnoitering on the coast with the other members of his party. They had gathered at Berbera to launch a further probe into the country when Somali tribesmen launched a surprise night raid on their camp. The attack most likely came in retaliation for Burton's decision to arrest an *Abban,* or tribal official, whom Speke had accused of obstreperous behavior when he was his guide to the Wadi Nogal. Stroyan was killed in the assault, Speke was seriously wounded, and Burton had a javelin thrust through his face, entering his left cheek and exiting the right. The desperate survivors fled to the British base at Aden for medical treatment.[70] An official investigation of the incident charged Burton as commanding officer with negligence in his prepara-

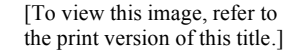
tions for the camp's defense, a humiliating reprimand for a man who prided himself on his military skills.[71]

The strategy Burton had used in India, Egypt, and Arabia to gain entrée to the intimate lives of other peoples had failed him in Somalia and the implications of that failure extended across sub-Saharan Africa. However much he might have supposed black skin to be a "garb"—the term he uses to describe it in the early pages of *First Footsteps*—it was not possible for him to don it as a disguise.[72] His pale appearance exposed him unmistakably and irrevocably as an outsider. For a man whose understanding of others derived from his ability to pass as one of them, this obstacle presented a formidable challenge, compelling a reconsideration of the meaning of race itself. In the aftermath of this journey, physical traits began to assume the sort of significance for Burton's understanding of race previously held by cultural traits such as language, religion, and custom. When he launched his next expedition into the lake region of central Africa in 1857, he did so as a British officer, knowing full well that any effort to assume a "native" persona was doomed to failure.

Only when Burton returned to the Near East as British consul at Damascus in 1869 did he again have an opportunity to indulge his penchant for disguise. Six months after his arrival, he wrote to a friend that he intended to "dress as a Bedouin . . . & ride right off to Nejd—a part not yet visited by any European."[73] The British ambassador at Constantinople received word later that year that Burton had been seen in a hotel in "the costume of an Arab Moslem Sheikh."[74] Isabel Burton states that she and her husband would sometimes don Arab dress to wander through the streets of Damascus or make excursions through the desert. Did they do so merely for the thrill of dressing up or with some ulterior pur-

pose in mind? Isabel claims that she went to the bazaar or the mosque dressed "like a Moslemah . . . that I might hear all the gossip, and enter something into their [Muslim women's] lives."[75] It is difficult to believe that a woman who spoke little Arabic and who was married to one of the city's most prominent public figures could pass herself off as a local resident, her duplicity undetected by those around her. Much the same skepticism applies to Richard as well. An Arab who knew him in Damascus reports that "his attempts to pose as a native were a constant source of amusement to all with whom he came in contact," mainly because his accent was so unmistakably foreign.[76] Once again, we are left to wonder, as we did in the case of the relationship between Burton and the other members of his pilgrimage party, who was deceiving whom.

In the end, this valedictory excursion into the alternative self that masquerade made possible has to be understood in terms of the psychic satisfaction it gave Burton and his wife. Isabel says that when she and her husband went out in the desert together, she often dressed in male clothes. Though donning men's apparel was not uncommon for Western women traveling in the Near East, it took a strange turn for the Burtons, who maintained the pretense that Isabel was Richard's son.[77] We cannot possibly plum the psychological depths that inspired such role playing. All we can do is observe that the Burtons were hardly alone in their affinity for cross-dressing, a practice that was deeply engrained in British culture. Here again we return to the intriguing connection between the Burtons' enthusiasm for "Oriental" disguises and their fellow Victorians' fascination with theatricality. What they shared was that sense of freedom that derives from the adoption of a different identity, an invented self. Whether the British penchant for disguise and cross-dressing took public form in pantomimes and other theatrical performances or found private



This mausoleum, a full-sized stone replica of a desert tent, was designed by Isabel Burton to memorialize her husband's love of travel. It holds the remains of Richard and Isabel in the Catholic cemetery at Mortlake, west of London. From Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893).

expression in dress, demeanor, or sexual preferences, it gave expression to what was viewed by conventional standards as transgressive behavior.[78] There is little doubt that Burton too was attracted to impersonation precisely because it provided a way of transgressing against the codes and conventions that governed society, challenging the psychic shackles imposed by civilization.

For Burton, the desert became the primary locus of this freedom, the place where he could escape "the hypocritical politeness and the slavery of civilisation."[79] He, perhaps more than any other person in British letters, was responsible for romanticizing the desert, portraying it as a place of purity where the constraints of civilization could be sloughed off like soiled clothes, where "Nature" could be experienced "in her noblest and most admirable form—the Nude."[80] The power of this eroticized trope drew to the Arabian desert a distinguished parade of British travelers who wrote with memorable feeling about the exhilaration they felt in this harsh landscape: Charles Doughty, William Gifford Palgrave, T. E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, Harry St. John Philby, Freya Stark, Wilfred Thesiger, and others. All of these individuals shared Burton's ambivalence about Western society and his sense that the desert offered a return to a more pristine existence, cleansed of what they considered the polluting effects of civilization.[81] When Burton died, his widow designed a tomb that evoked these Romantic longings in a wonderfully evocative fashion. She had his body interred in a dazzling white, full-scale stone replica of the tent that served as their home on their desert travels, a string of camel bells strung across its interior.