

## Balzac and the Orientalist Imagination

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Balzac comme l'auteur des "*Mille et une nuits de l'Occident*": le cas de *La Peau de chagrin*.

Unlike Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Nerval or others, Balzac never visited the Orient. He was never seen as an author who wrote about the Orient, nor one who had interest in the Orient. In fact, Balzac was always known as a realistic author, and his *Comédie humaine* was considered by a number of critics, such as Georg Lukacs and Friedrich Engels, as a fundamental reference for the history of the first half of the nineteenth century. It was also considered a reflection of the image of society in this period.

This paper takes a different approach to previous studies done on Balzac and the Orient, which are in fact limited and general in nature. It attempts to show Balzac as an author who not only had an interest in the Orient but was also extremely influenced by one of its most famous works, *Les Mille et une nuits*. This influence was so pronounced that even Balzac himself referred to his *Comédie humaine* as the "*Mille et une nuits de l'Occident*". By focusing on one major work of *La Comédie humaine* - *La Peau de chagrin* - I will show evidence of this influence and will explain its metaphoric significance. I will also present inter-textual relations with specific stories of *Mille et une nuits*: *La Peau de chagrin* continuously reminds us of *L'Histoire d'Aladdin ou la lampe merveilleuse*. Balzac was fascinated by the fictional and symbolic world of *Mille et une nuits*, a world that contrasts with the reality of his own era. The chosen text represents a good example of this fascination and its implications.

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Lost Orient-ations: Balzac's "Une Passion dans le désert"

One of Balzac's rare engagements with an exotic location occurs in one of his oddest tales, "Une Passion dans le désert." This story of love between a soldier and a female panther (who represents woman) puts into play all three of the conference themes of empire, exoticism, and identity. First empire and exoticism: the main character is a Napoleonic soldier lost in the desert in Egypt. What are the political meanings of this loss of orientation, coupled with the soldier's love of, and temporary subordination to, the native panther? Here the third theme of identity comes into play as the dominance of the Egyptian panther-woman for a time puts into question the hegemony, and thus the identity, of male, French, and human on Egyptian soil. This questioning becomes more radical, however, when the tale does not remain contained in the exotic, "other" location of Egypt but moves into the frame of the story and into Paris. I will look at this transportation from the "Orient" to Paris in conjunction with Paquita's Parisian transplantation in *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and Esther's oriental heritage in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*. How does the displacement of these three exotic female characters into the heart of France affect the structure of male French power and identity? I will end with a discussion of a few scenes from the equally strange but fascinating 1998 film, *A Passion in the Desert*, to speculate on this resurrection of "oriental" colonialism in this modern take on Balzac's text.

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### Balzac's Desert Passions: Napoleonic Friendship and Colonial Conquest in Egypt

For Napoleon, the Egyptian Campaign (1798-99) was a great political victory. Back in France, the news of his mythic conquest in the land of the pharaohs paved the way for his successful coup d'état and rise to power as First Consul in 1799 and Emperor in 1804. But for the men of his invading armies, Egypt was an overwhelming military defeat. Despite their initial enthusiasm, Napoleon's soldiers were devastated by crippling heat, infectious plague, and fierce combat which claimed the lives of thirty-six thousand men. Those who survived looked to their comrades for mutual support and fraternal comfort in the sands of the Egyptian desert. Balzac's *Une passion dans le désert* (1830) recounts the adventures of one such soldier who depends on animal instinct and military friendship for survival in a desert oasis. As a tale of Napoleonic conquest, *Une passion dans le désert* can be read as an allegory on military and colonial occupation. But in its complex symbolic field of triangulated desire between a soldier, a panther, and a palm tree, Balzac's desert text can also be read as a metaphor for colonial eroticism, exoticism, and s/exploitation. Amid much critical emphasis on misogynist bestiality and Oedipal heterosexuality in the text, one might also read Balzac's story as a narrative on homoerotic military friendship. Published in 1830, following the French conquest of Algeria, *Une passion dans le désert* could thus be said to inaugurate a literary tradition—preceding Flaubert, Gide, and Barthes—on homoerotic desire in French colonial North Africa.

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### Domesticated Orientalism: The One-Woman Harem at Home

In Balzac's novel, *Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau*, Orientalism is, quite literally, a recipe for success during the Consulate. Stumbling upon Abdeker, a Paris doctor's combination beauty recipe book/Orientalist novel published 50 years before to great acclaim, César Birotteau decides to give a similarly orientalist cast to his cosmetics business—a move that brings him both fame and fortune. Indeed, the commerce in French cosmetics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came out of its slump in part by claiming to offer beauty secrets from the mysterious, exotic and timeless East.

Given Napoleon's 1799 expedition to Egypt and the era's Orientalist fascinations, one might well expect the two principal health and beauty manual authors of the early nineteenth century to have taken a page from Abdeker as well. In fact, however, in Dr. Marie de Saint-Ursin's *L'Ami des femmes* (1804) and Auguste Caron's *Toilette des dames* (1806), the Orient is almost nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, in this paper, I will be arguing that the absence of things Oriental is constitutive: it operates as both foil and as model for heterosexual gendering and patriarchal power style Empire. On the one hand, in these works, domesticating the proper French woman is designed to create a modern, enlightened alternative to Oriental despotism. On the other hand, they set up as an ideal a kind of one-woman harem at home. In it the wife/daughter, the "sultan"'s favorite, is also eunuch and slave. These health and beauty manuals "for" women have much to tell us, I propose, about the fears and desires of some French men sous l'Empire.