Our students are immersed in Orientalist imagery. They have grown up on Disney’s *Aladdin* and CNN coverage of Gulf wars. However, few students are likely to see patterns of representation uniting media accounts with children's films, and fewer still will have any sense of the genealogy of such representations. Beginning in the eighteenth century, when greater numbers of Europeans began traveling in the Ottoman Empire, both elite and popular entertainment forms have provided highly detailed representations of the people and institutions of the eastern Mediterranean, formulating and disseminating a remarkably consistent and coherent image of the East. The challenge for teaching Orientalism is to encourage students to question and historicize patterns of representation that seem natural and unavoidable, and this is best accomplished when we teach across genres and periods.

Such teaching poses significant challenges for selecting course materials, structuring conversations across periods and genres, and encouraging students to chart genealogies of Orientalist entertainments. Enlist students to create their own archive of Orientalist imagery. Start by spending a class session examining harem painting and Bedouin depictions. If you do not have access to a slide library, go to www.artcyclopedia.com/subjects/Orientalism.html—better yet, send the students to the Web site. Then ask students to find similarly staged images (whether or not Arabs are specifically depicted) in contemporary films or fashion magazines. Any student with access to a video store or newsstand can bring in teaching materials for several class sessions. There is also a long list of action-adventure films with Arab villains. It is similarly simple to make available to one’s students Orientalist imagery in elite entertainment forms such as opera and drama. There are several videos
of Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio* (one of fourteen harem-abduction operas staged in the second half of the eighteenth century) and the 1992 videorecording of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden production of Strauss’s *Salome* is particularly rich in Orientalist imagery. While most of the dozen or so Orientalist ballets of the Romantic period have fallen out of the repertory, there are commercially available videorecordings of several versions of *La Bayadère* and *Le Corsaire*. There are a great number of dramas depicting the eastern Mediterranean that are available in any research library. Working backward from contemporary manifestations, students will begin to see how our entertainment industry repeats tropes that developed over centuries in galleries and theaters.

This leads to a teaching that moves between genres and across periods. The class is free to examine Ida Rubinstein’s dancing in *Cléopâtre* as well as Douglas Fairbanks’s silent acting in *The Thief of Bagdad*, Verdi’s *Aïda* and MGM’s *Kismet*, French Orientalist painting, and American Orientalist fancies. This is not to equate all Orientalists’ works from all periods. The meaning of a work exceeds the individual tropes it contains. It would be ludicrous to read Voltaire’s *Mahomet the Prophet*; or, *Fanaticism* and ignore the work’s implicit criticism of Christianity. However, it would also be a mistake to ignore the fact that Voltaire makes this critique by recourse to the image of the Oriental despot who conflates religion, sex, and violence—an image that predated the play and continues to circulate in popular culture. Moreover, productions (and the censorship of productions) invariably reflect their social and political context and this, too, needs to be a part of classroom discussion. In the eighteenth century, Voltaire’s *Mahomet* was opposed by Jansenist Catholics who recognized the object of Voltaire’s criticism. In the contemporary age of immigrant labor, it was Muslim groups who blocked a 1994 production of the play in Geneva.

A student who recognizes Orientalist tropes is not only able to see their perpetuation but also how these tropes are manipulated and resisted. One of the finest examples, Lessing’s remarkable *Nathan the Wise*, which at first appears to be a story of Eastern sectarian revenge only to transform into a story of tolerance, continues on the German stage. Arguably, the modernist period saw the most radical manipulation and transformation of Orientalist tropes. While many modernist theater practitioners, in a search for a distinctive voice, turned to Orientalist imagery that was already divorced from a “real” referent (*Salome*, *Sumurun*, *Schéhérazade*), other modernists were inspired by actual Eastern performances (*Brecht’s discussion of Mei Lan-fang, Yates’s fascination with Noh, Artaud’s response to Balinese dance, Grotowski’s use of Kathakali methods*). The process of theatrical borrowing has itself been examined and problematized by
such important contemporary practitioners as Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson, Elizabeth LeCompte, The Builders Association, motiroti, and Peter Brook, and there has been no shortage of writing on their work. In fact, the MLA bibliography lists twenty-two journal articles on Peter Brook’s production of *The Mahabharata*.

As this brief description shows, it is a relatively easy matter to direct students to depictions of the Orient in canonical theater, opera, and dance and depictions in film and contemporary advertising. This can result in a misrepresentation of the history of Orientalism and can reinforce an unhealthy division of classroom labor: past Orientalism appears confined to high art, present Orientalism is confined to popular entertainment; the teacher has access to the past, the student has access to the present. To the contrary, popular entertainment prior to the twentieth century was a principal medium through which images of the Arab world have been formulated and disseminated in Europe and the United States. And if students are to own the genealogies charted in the class, they must be responsible for researching both past and present representations. This is particularly the case as time allows us to more clearly see the entertainment industry’s influence on government policy.

I offer an example on which I have written elsewhere. After the loss of Khartoum and the death of Maj. Gen. Charles Gordon at the hands of Sudanese rebels in 1885, music hall songs transformed Prime Minister Gladstone from the G.O.M (Grand Old Man) to the M.O.G. (Murder of Gordon). A number of songs celebrated Col. Fred Burnaby, the popular officer and explorer who died at Abu Klea. The image of Burnaby bravely resisting native onslaught had become such an ingrained image that eight years later when Drury Lane dramatized the British victories in Burma, the stage directions explained that the hero stood “in a conspicuous place à la Captain Burnaby, coolly reloading and picking off the enemy.” Of course, the greatest number of music hall songs focused on the death of Gordon, the most famous being G. H. MacDermott’s “Too Late! Too Late!” At least one music hall devoted an entire bill to the fall of Khartoum, when the Royal (later known as the Holborn Empire) staged *Shadows of Fate; or, Heroes of the Soudan*, a “Grand Spectacular Entertainment with scenic effects, descriptive war songs, and original music.” Several imperial melodramas, unwilling to acknowledge defeat, depicted British victories at Khartoum in defiance of actual events.

Such entertainments not only contributed to the weakening of the Liberal Party and Gladstone’s resignation in June 1885, they informed future policy in the region. The entertainment industry translated events of the war into deeply felt and memorable tableaux, act closers in a melodrama
in which virtue inevitably vanquished villainy and both were immediately identifiable. Not surprisingly, melodramatic convention would later shape justifications for the reconquest of the Sudan, culminating in the bloody Battle of Omdurman in 1898. As Angela C. Pao has written of French imperial melodrama of the same period, “If dramatic authors did indeed rely heavily, even exclusively, on dispatches and commentaries published in the daily papers for their plot outlines and composition of scenes, journalists just as consistently organized their reportage in terms of dramatic scenarios.” In the case of the Sudan, the entertainment industry perpetuated the belief that the expected denouement had been delayed, prompting both the press and the government to present the 1898 war as a long-awaited final act.

Students often recognize the reciprocal influences of Victorian press and popular entertainment but are more inclined to view their own media as an unmediated presentation of events. Nineteenth-century press artists had complete control over the images they created; newspapers could further select or delete elements when creating engravings; theaters and music halls explicitly reproduced images from the illustrated dailies; and types of images common in popular entertainment (such as the last stand) became more frequently and prominently presented in dailies. By contrast, a modern-day embedded reporter, according to some students, is simply recording events as they happen; the camera does not lie. Simply identifying jingoism in past Orientalisms does not necessarily help the student become a more critical media consumer. Our media is much more balanced and objective than theirs, the student may counter, and much less influence by the entertainment industry; our justifications for war are much more legitimate.

However, it is precisely that the grounds for war in the 1880s and 1890s were so compelling to a large portion of the population, and that war reporting was seen as unbiased, that is pertinent to our present situation. In addition to avenging Gordon, the 1898 war was depicted as an attempt to end the slave trade and the persecution of women. Melodramas such as Freedom had already made the case that the 1882 occupation of Egypt had been prompted by the desire to protect Arab women from Arab men, and a similar claim was made for the British defense of Khartoum in the 1885 melodrama, Khartoum! Or, The Star of the Desert. When the claim that Oriental despots victimized their women was again advanced by the press and entertainment industry in 1898, its aura of authenticity had been bolstered through frequent repetition. The point is not that these claims were groundless, though it is hard to see how the death of eleven thousand Sudanese at Omdurman in a battle that cost forty-eight British lives improved the lot of Sudanese women. (The assertion that the British were liberating Egyptian and Sudanese women is particularly striking given that British women
lacked voting rights until 1918 and that, arguably, the British occupation of Egypt created new obstacles to female education.) Instead, the question is why this claim to protect brown women from brown men had (and has) such power even though repeatedly the mission of female uplift quickly recedes once fighting is done.

Of course there is no single answer to this question, nor should a teacher try to provide one. To speak of a psychology of imperialism is to invoke a web of conflicting and shifting desires. Yet, despite this, one can speak of frequent tropes in Orientalist entertainments. Among the most prominent is the depiction of nonproductive excess secluded from view until a hero slips through cave openings, guarded gates, or closed markets. In this sense, the East is a harem inviting intervention. In the repeated depiction of abductions from seraglios in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Europe rehearsed the role it would play in the Arab world in the following decades. When I teach Orientalist entertainments, harem imagery threads its way through the semester and students are asked to explore the range of media that invoke this phantasm of the imperial imagination. By beginning the class with examinations of Orientalist art and its contemporary echoes, students are introduced to harem imagery and are encouraged to see its repetition and transformation in different media and periods.

A particularly important site for this teaching has been the study of pseudo-ethnographic displays of living exotics, a subject that I encourage students to research on their own. In Britain, this phenomenon grew particularly pronounced in 1851, and prompts us to reread the Great Exhibition of that year. In one class, I directed students to examine the depiction of foreign peoples at the Great Exhibition or in competing venues. I broke students into teams and assigned each team a four-month stretch of either the Illustrated London News or the Times (both of which are available on microform). A seventh group was asked to examine Henry Mayhew and George Cruikshank’s novel, 1851, or, the adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and family: who came up to London to “enjoy themselves,” and to see the Great Exhibition (1851). All groups then reported back on particular accounts they encountered and why they found these accounts significant. I gave students this assignment at the same time that I was researching these and other texts for a chapter in my book The Orient on the Victorian Stage. As often happens, the teaching and writing fed one another. The writing that follows here is derived from both my memory of a successful teaching and the writing that that teaching helped generate.

Because I was researching the subject matter, I was able to alert students to potentially interesting coverage and augment their research with my own. In the process, students came to understand themselves as historians of
popular entertainment, and came to recognize the diffusion of Orientalist imagery in various art and entertainment forms across centuries. Part of the objective of this assignment is to develop a vocabulary for understanding exotic display. I had resisted the temptation to assign theoretical texts at the start of the semester, but instead regularly brought short extracts from theorists such as Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Emily Apter, and Ann Laura Stoler that I thought would be relevant. This is a strategy I regularly use because it helps students see theory as a valuable tool for understanding specific practices. Students are immediately able to access what is, or is not, useful for their analysis. I prefaced this assignment with a discussion of ethnography. Though the term “ethnology” was probably coined in the 1830s, London’s Ethnological Society was not founded until 1843 and the first ethnological display probably dates from 1845 when the British Museum’s collection of Natural and Artificial Curiosities was reorganized as an “Ethnological Gallery.” The term gained greater prominence after the Great Exhibition. Several guidebooks used the term to describe features of the collection, and when the exhibition building was transferred to Sydenham in 1852, an ethnological section was added.

Exotic people were displayed in London well before the exhibition year; however, the significance of such displays changed radically with these new midcentury vocabularies. From the middle of the sixteenth century onward, American and African natives were regularly featured in London exhibits. These peoples were invariably advertised as fantastic and unusual. Far from asserting the characteristic nature of the displayed peoples, showmen more often asserted that their natives were noblemen or paragons of savage conceptions of beauty. Moreover, the uniqueness of the displayed person was not attributed to their behavior or customs. The Inuit people displayed by Capt. George Cartwright in 1772 continued to attract crowds even after trading their skin dresses for broadcloth. The Tahitian youth Omai, who was brought to London after Cook’s second voyage, was lauded precisely for his ability to adopt European dress and social manners. Whether displayed peoples were presented as noble savages or as distinct species (as would increasingly be the case), they were valued for a rarity that was defined as immanent to their person. By the Victorian period, however, the objectives and strategies of display had changed. As Tony Bennett has noted, collections in this period “were rearranged in accordance with the principle of representativeness rather than that of rarity.” No longer was the collection a place for displaying the wondrous. Instead, the collection served to reveal the structure of the natural world and social institutions through the careful manipulation of commonplace objects. In other words, the collection illuminated the rule and not the exception. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett
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has remarked, nineteenth-century natural historians “were interested in taxonomies of the normal, not in singularities of chance formation.”

This evolution in display strategy coincided with the reorientation of Britain’s imperial ambitions from the west to the east. The Eastern objects, animals and peoples that became common attractions in entertainment venues at this time, reveal changing ideas on native display. From at least the Romantic period, exotic people were presented not as mere oddities but as performers. This continued into the Victorian period, but increasingly these performances were accompanied by ethnographic analysis. For example, an *Illustrated London News* review of the two Egyptian snake charmers who performed at the Regent’s Park Zoo in 1850 contrasted Egyptian and Indian snake charming, explained that the Egyptian snake charmers were of the Rufaiah tribe, that they cited Rufais as the founder of their craft, and that he “appears to have been a Mussulman saint” with a tomb in “Busrah.” The paper’s accompanying illustration was remarkably untheatrical and seems more interested in delineating the performer’s clothing than capturing the performance (fig. 10).
The belief that people present pictures of their native lands through their dress and behavior augmented the attraction of the Great Exhibition. The exhibition (commonly known as the Crystal Palace because of its giant glass and iron exhibition building) was thought to have drawn people—as well as products—from all corners of the globe. Newspapers regularly reported the presence of foreign dignitaries at the exhibition. As Paul Greenhalgh explains in his analysis of the human displays at world’s fairs, “the actual presence of peoples at exhibitions went back to 1851, when representatives of most nations of the British Empire were constantly in attendance at the Crystal Palace.”

Even before the exhibition had opened, the *Times* announced that “the whole world is in our streets” (April 30, 1851, 4). Like other nineteenth-century commentators, John Tallis describes both products and peoples in his three-volume account of the exhibition. Relating the days preceding the opening, Tallis seems to forget which of the two were actually on display: “Now rapidly congregated on British ground the representatives of the different nations, with their respective productions and wares, who had been invited to take their place in the great industrial mart. . . .” In a revealing reversal, foreign people take their place in the “industrial mart,” accompanied by productions and wares almost as an afterthought. Even before the exhibition opened its doors, writers commented on the influx of foreigners who accompanied the goods shipped for display. Tallis quotes one writer as explaining that

> not a packet showed its flag on Southampton Water that was not crowded with a living freight of dusky Spaniards, and duskier Portugese; of swarthy Moors, and swarthier Egyptians; of cane-coloured East Indians, and copper-coloured Tartars; of Mulattos, with complexions of a lively brown, and of Haytians, with countenances—such as Solomon loved—of a lovely black.

(1:19)

Just as the British arranged their products and industry according to an elaborate typology, the “living freight” that streamed to London was similarly organized in progressively darker hues.

The Mayhew and Cruikshank novel provides students with a similar taxonomy of races at the Great Exhibition. The novel opens with the assertion that the Great Exhibition attracted “the sight-seers of all the world” and then presents a long list of attending peoples. Beginning with the exotic, the novel describes Africans arriving on ostriches, caravans from “Zoolu to Fez,” as well as Eskimos, Senegalese, Egyptians, East Indians, and indigenous people from New Zealand and elsewhere. The exhibition’s comprehensive
Chapter 1 displays are mirrored in an equally comprehensive attendance. In fact, from the novel it is not clear what constitutes a “sight-seer” and what constitutes a sight. One of the novel’s attendees was a well-known object of display—the Hottentot Venus, a South African woman presented to Piccadilly audiences in 1810—muddying the distinction between viewer and viewed. After completing this confused litany, the novel then explains that St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey had been transformed into theaters for the exhibition of the “Black Band of his Majesty of Tsjaddi” along with:

The Musicians of Tongoose; the Singers of the Maldives; the Glee Minstrels of Paraguay; the Troubadours of far Vancouver; the Snow Ball Family from the Gold Coast; the Canary of the Samoiedes; the Theban Brothers; and “expressly engaged for the occasion,” the celebrated Band of Robbers from the Desert.\(^\text{10}\)

The Great Exhibition extends out from Hyde Park to consume the entire city. Even religious monuments became adjunct exhibit rooms, and the dis-

Figure 11. Visitors to the Crystal Palace, from Henry Mayhew—George Cruikshank’s 1851, or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and family: who came up to London to “enjoy themselves” and to see the Great Exhibition. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of New York University.
Figure 12. Tunisian Court, from the Illustrated London News, May 21, 1851. Image courtesy of The Rare Books and Manuscripts Library of The Ohio State University Libraries.
play of the world’s industry is complemented by the display of the world’s inhabitants.

As a class on popular entertainment, a principal goal is to encourage students to analyze visual representations and the novel’s frontispiece provides such an opportunity. The illustration shows the Crystal Palace perched atop the globe as people from every region stream upward. Arabs, Indians, Native Americans, and Africans all make their way up—suggestive of both the perceived internationalism of the exhibition’s visitors as well as the belief that the exhibition would raise up the ruder nations (fig. 11).

The *Illustrated London News*’s depiction of the attendant of the Tunisian Court from May 31, 1851, is another interesting image (fig. 12). Heightened attention to exotic people prompted visitors to examine the displays of Eastern nations as ethnographic context, rather than simple examples of industry and manufactures. The Tunisian Court received an award even though most commentators seemed to agree with the *Illustrated London News* that the objects displayed there were “more remarkable as matters of curiosity than for their intrinsic value or importance” (May 31, 1851, 493). However, these same commentators were quick to praise the exhibit’s “bazaar-like fittings.” More importantly, the feature that set the Tunisian exhibit apart from other “picturesque” displays would appear to be its native attendants. When the *Times* described the objects displayed in the Tunisian Court, its first entry was “Moorish attendants” (May 15, 1851, 5). The *Illustrated London News* implied that the Tunisian Court was required viewing primarily because of its attendant, alternately described as a “good-natured Turk” and an “extremely picturesque and obliging native custodien.” The image suggests a natural simplicity, surrounded as he is by objects that the paper described as “of the rudest description, but all admirably calculated to afford illustration of the *ménage* and *convenances* of the North African tribes.” In this context, the attendant emerged as a specimen of the North African tribes and the surrounding objects became props intended to heighten the realism of the human display environment.

Ethnographic displays in both the Fine Art Court and the Indian courts further prompted visitors to read certain foreign displays as cultural documents. These courts contained wax models of native North and South Americans and Mexican peasants in “proper costume and displaying their characteristic customs.” An even more extensive series of models was displayed in the Indian Court. These clay and plaster models featured elaborate reproductions of village life with rows of wooden houses and shops. One collection cited for praise included upward of sixty groups purportedly illustrating the various castes and professions of the Hindus. While the organizers of the exhibition did not devise an ethnography section, commenta-
tors like John Tallis adopted this term as a heading when describing the exhibition’s collection of human models. In any case, the lack of an ethnology section was corrected when the Crystal Palace was removed from Hyde Park and reerected at Sydenham the following year. The *Illustrated London News* announced that at the new Sydenham Crystal Palace, “one of the most conspicuous and attractive sections will be that of Ethnology” (August 21, 1852, 150). Recognizing that exhibition crowds were interested in racial—as well as industrial—display, the private organizers of the Sydenham exhibit devoted extensive resources to depicting exotic peoples.

While ethnological human display was at most an implied entertainment at the Great Exhibition of 1851, it became a salient attraction at competing venues. My students responded with a combination of intrigue and anger on encountering the *Illustrated London News*’s account of the Algerian family on display at the Vauxhall Gardens. In an attempt to attract exhibition audiences, Robert Wardell of Vauxhall Gardens arranged for an Algerian family to reside at the pleasure garden and to display themselves for a small additional admission price. According to the *Illustrated London News*, “the
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World’s Fair and the mighty expectations it elicited induced Youssoff [the head of the household] to visit London with his interesting dependents.” Here was an example of the streaming horde of natives depicted in Cruikshank’s illustration for the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys. Though visitors to the Great Exhibition might not be lucky enough to spot one of the visiting exotics, they were assured of seeing an entire family at the Vauxhall Gardens. The family wore “the Arab costume” and were displayed on a “gorgeous divan” specially constructed for their exhibition. As added proof of authenticity, the paper reported that the family professed Islam, though “divested of its fanaticism” (July 12, 1851, 43). Youssoff, the paper explained, had served fifteen years in the French army as a soldier and interpreter. Perhaps it was this Western contact, culminating in a trip to the Great Exhibition, that had civilized the family’s religious beliefs. For the exhibitor, however, the native could absorb only so much civilization before losing value as an ethnographic object. This tension is evident in the paper’s illustration of the family (fig. 13). Youssof turns to the illustrator in half-profile, flanked by his demurely seated wife and their three children. It is a typical bourgeois family portrait, except for the elaborate “arab costume.” This is the comfortable ethnology of the pleasure garden; natives check any disturbing habits at the entrance and show their receptiveness to Western civilization while retaining the characteristic costumes that conjure the East.

The growing significance of ethnological performance in human displays is illustrated by the troupe of Syrian natives who performed as part of the Holy Land panorama at the Egyptian Hall during the summer of the Great Exhibition. The Middle East had long been a popular panorama subject, and three panoramas of the Holy Land were on view that summer. In response to a competitive market, panorama managers had been incorporating live performance into their exhibitions in recent years. For example, the Egyptian Hall’s Nile panorama of 1849 featured “characteristic musical illustrations” including “the famous boat-song, ‘Hèy, hèy, hò, Hellèysa,’ a barcolle with which the boatman of the Nile cheer their voyage.” Originally, the Holy Land panorama of 1851 at the Egyptian Hall was accompanied by Hebrew Melodies; however, as ever larger crowds flooded London, the Egyptian Hall turned to a more compelling illustration of Eastern life. The Syrian troupe that replaced the Hebrew choir clearly had greater ethnological value; as the Athenaeum explained, the attraction of the Syrians was simple—they “exhibit[ed] the manners and customs of their country” (August 30, 1851, 932). In a series of scenes and tableaux, the troupe recreated Arab marriage customs, including a musical performance on native instruments and a marriage procession, followed by a scene in a coffeehouse. The Athenaeum was particularly impressed that “before the termination of each performance,
one of the company of Syrians got up and explained, in very good English, the whole of the matter in hand.” It was probably this level of explanation that enabled the Athenaeum reviewer to explain the significance of the scenes, provide Arab terms, and include obscure historical details such as the fact that the wax tapers held during the procession replaced the oil lamps used eighteen hundred years ago. Even the review in the Illustrated London News included transliterations of the Arabic names of the musical instruments in the performance.

Despite this attention to ethnological detail, human displays in the year of the Crystal Palace preserved a fanciful exoticism and sensuality that had long characterized the East of West-end entertainment. In describing the Algerian family at Vauxhall, the Illustrated London News alternated between stressing the quotidian nature of the Algerian family and presenting them as objects of wonder and desire. Their divan was “gorgeous,” the Arab costume was “remarkable for its beauty and gorgeousness,” and (in a rather suggestive tone) the paper concluded that “the crowds who nightly visit them” all assert that “the personal attractions of the females, with the extreme novelty of their appearance, render the exhibition very gratifying.” The family is framed by a sumptuous setting, indication of both visual pleasure and authenticity. The divan, while clearly Wardell’s creation, referenced the countless Orientalist fancies of London’s theaters and—paradoxically perhaps—gained authenticity in the process.

In discussing examples such as this I sometimes introduce Edward Said’s discussion of “the restorative citation of antecedent authority” in order to approach how the entertainment industry, no less than Arabists, derived legitimacy by rewriting and piecing together past performances just as “a restorer of old sketches might put a series of them together for the cumulative picture they might implicitly represent.” Newly acquired images of the East were adapted to existing expectations. Said explains, “From these complex rewritings the actualities of the modern Orient were systematically excluded,” especially when new details detracted from the sensuality of past representations.13 The Algerian family’s bourgeois configuration was not allowed to undermine their inherent sumptuousness; their gorgeous clothing and setting reveal that they are true Arabs. In the most telling move, the two girls (aged fourteen and sixteen respectively) and their mother were refashioned as “the females” whose “personal attractions” and “novelty of appearance” rendered gratification to the nighttime viewer. This Westernized family was simultaneously an example of an Arabian harem. Contradiction was at the core of these Orientalist displays in which the harem—the space that is, by its name, forbidden—lavishly invited the spectator’s gaze.

Prior to this assignment, the class had read William Dimond’s The Bride...
of Abydos (a combination of the poem of that title and The Corsair, both by Byron) and this 1818 play provides an early precedent for staging the harem:

Zuliaka’s apartment [within the harem]. Female slaves advance joyously, some with musical instruments others employ themselves in disposing strands of flowers. While the center of the stage is occupied by dancers how pursue each other for the bridal veil and by turns possess it. Zuliaka in a glittering habit enters during their sports and reclines herself disconsolately. At the end of the dance the slaves dispose the veil into a canopy above her.

(2.2)

Though significantly more chaste than the theatrical harems that would follow, the scene contains tropes that would be seen repeatedly: native instruments and music that intensify the sensualization of female bodies; sapphic play that reads as both innocent and provocative; the careful staging of segregation and enclosure in the midst of public display; and at the center, the languid (here disconsolate) odalisque consumed by secret thoughts.

In the context of this tradition of theatrical Orientalism, not only does the Illustrated London News’s description of the Algerian family at Vauxhall suggest harem iconography, even the Athenaeum’s self-consciously ethnographic account of the Syrian troupe at the Egyptian Hall conjures a familiar world of Eastern pleasures and excess. The Athenaeum explained that bridegroom and mother wore “the richest silks of Damascus” and sat on “a well-furnished divan” as they awaited congratulatory visits. Their female visitors emitted a “gurgling shriek” as the group grew, until the musicians arrived, took their places on the ground, and performed. The Illustrated London News added that coffee and pipes were “amply supplied” to the guests throughout. The Athenaeum then explained that the scene was followed by a marriage procession, at the end of which the bride finally made her appearance with her attendants. The papers painted images of Eastern luxury; a beautiful setting and costumes combined with shouting women, music, pipes, and coffee to reproduce images of Eastern excess that were common in the theater. At the climax, she enters surrounded by her women—simultaneously chaste bride and odalisque.

These human displays evoked another important element of theatrical Orientalism, the fantastic. The Thousand and One Nights (also known as The Arabian Nights) enjoyed a huge popularity in England from the time English versions of André Galland’s French translation began appearing in London at the start of the eighteenth century. During the Victorian period, Sinbad and Aladdin were regularly featured on the pantomime stage in
increasingly lavish productions. It is not surprising, then, that the *Illustrated London News* praised the Syrian troupe for their creation of “a scene in a coffee-house, in which a dwarf tells a tale from the ‘Arabian Nights’” all the while “taking whiffs from the pipes of the customers, by way of recompense.” The *Athenaeum*, in typically contradictory terms, stated that the storyteller’s “gestures and grotesque figure were admirable.” The fantastic and the grotesque, as much as the gorgeous and luxurious, were expected features of Eastern displays. Consequently, a sideshow fascination with the storyteller’s “grotesque figure” could masquerade as critical assessment of the accuracy of an Eastern display and the presence of fantastic tales served as proof of authenticity.

Students often wish to measure these entertainments according to their adherence to or departure from indigenous practice. “Do storytellers in Syria recite tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*?” students will typically ask. The practice of *hekowati* continues in Syria, though now confined to Ramadan and only in a few venues, and it was much more common before television. However, whether or not these are “real” or invented practices has little to do with the power of such images to the British imagination. These performances facilitated established tropes of Orientalist discourse even as they were framed by presenters and reviewers as examples of ethnographic display. As the *Illustrated London News* explained in its review of the Syrian troupe:

> All this, it must be acknowledged, is as novel as it is genuine; and as we witness these native musicians, singers, and story-tellers in their Oriental costume, we feel that a real addition is made to the knowledge of the fireside tourist, who need not go far from his chimney-corner to behold the very persons and manners of which he reads in books of adventure and modern travel. (*Illustrated London News*, August 30, 1851, 266)

In Orientalist displays, the “novel” and the “genuine” went hand in hand, illustrating a world familiar from both travel narratives and adventure stories. Even as native performance was increasingly seen as a means of recreating distant places for the fireside tourist, these performances continued to be valued for their exotic playfulness—for their delightful mix of music, singing, and extravagant costume.

Even commentators on the Great Exhibition similarly invoked an East of fantastic and sensual excess when discussing the Eastern courts, often citing *The Arabian Nights* and Oriental romances as illustrations of what visitors could expect. For example, Tallis gave special attention to an apartment in one of the India courts that was furnished like an Indian palace,
explaining that it “realised all that the Arabian Nights, and other romances, have detailed with respect to their gorgeous and costly luxury.”

It was apparently unimportant that *The Arabian Nights* are set Baghdad and not India. *The Nights* authenticate the recreation of Indian architecture at the Crystal Palace, not because the text has any relation to the exhibit, but because *The Nights* had become shorthand for the strategies by which sensual and extravagant displays were contained within the safe parameters of the East. As Tallis himself explained, “Oriental magnificence is still a proverbial mode of describing a degree of splendour and artistical richness, which is not found among ourselves” (1:37).

Just as human displays combined a newer ethnographic vocabulary with an older romantic vocabulary of Eastern sensuality and fantasy, the exhibition similarly reveals a dialectical relation between seemingly antithetical Orientalist discourses. Visitors to the exhibition frequently contrasted the unceasing progression of Western civilization and the perceived stasis of Eastern civilization; however, at the same time, commentators invoked images of Eastern excess in order to praise the bounty of industrialization. British manufacturers were often arranged to illustrate progress and improvements over time. Leaving British manufacturers, visitors found that most of the contributions from the colonies were in the Raw Materials section, with the exception of the separate India courts. Even the Indian displays stood in marked opposition of the story of progress told in the manufacture and machinery sections. A writer for the *Illustrated London News* posed a common question when he asked why, in the Indian agricultural and manufacturing arts, “no advance should be made for centuries.” Influenced by theories of environmental determinism then prominent in ethnological and historical thought, the writer turned to climate and geography to explain why “this people have made so little progress” and why “the great bulk of them are in the same condition, moral, social, and intellectual, that they were in 300 years ago” (*Illustrated London News*, May 31, 1851, 489).

Outside of Europe, visitors encountered savage lands capable of producing little more than raw materials or the crudest manufactures (a Bedouin tent was a prominent feature of the Tunisian exhibit). Even the relatively civilized peoples of the East (as they were represented by the British) were depicted as frozen in time, their limited industry demonstrating a “moral, social, and intellectual” paralysis.

While the exhibition proclaimed a commitment to “progress,” and identified itself as a “rational amusement,” its real attraction was an opulence and scale that bordered on excess. In highlighting these qualities, the exhibition turned to tropes associated with the Eastern civilizations that appeared static or declining when framed within the Crystal Palace. In describing the open-
ing of the exhibition, Tallis employed the images of “oriental magnificence” that were supposedly absent from England:

And, unquestionably, neither Eastern fairy tale, nor *Arabian Night’s* wonder, could surpass, or even emulate the gorgeous reality that greeted the delighted gaze of the assembled spectators, as the royal party and brilliant cortège advanced through the bronze and gilded gates that led into this hall of enchantment; fragrant exotics bloomed and shed their soft perfume around, [and] crystal fountains threw up their sparkling waters. . . .

Tallis painted an image of an opulent Eastern palace and not without cause; Owen Jones, who was responsible for the interior decoration of the Crystal Palace, designed the iron railing around the building in a Moorish fretwork and based his paint colors and application on the Alhambra. (Jones had published a study of the Alhambra seven years earlier.) In fact, Jones had wanted to hang large carpets above the mezzanines and arched arabesque paintings over the central aisles, giving “the impression of a bazaar, and . . . further emphasis[ing] the impression of eastern atmosphere” in the opinion of one design historian (Darby, 105). It was perhaps Jones’s design that prompted the *Times* to compare the exhibition building to “an *Arabian Night’s* structure.” The East served as the squalid example against which British plenty was defined; at the same time, however, the East provided the metaphors by which Britain could assess that plenty. While the Eastern exhibits were overshadowed by the displays of British industry in the minds of most commentators, in point of fact, the exhibition ceaselessly presented an East of its own fashioning.

Framed within this lavish architecture, the exhibition fetishized works of industry in much the same way that human displays and theater fetishized Eastern women. The exhibition imagined itself as an elaborate harem. Its array of commodities and machinery posited a world of impossibly endless availability. As Prince Albert said at the opening ceremony, “[T]he products of all quarters of the globe are placed at our disposal, and we have only to choose which is the best and cheapest for our purposes” (quoted in Richards, 28). In this fantasy world of availability, one need only select from a throng that simply awaits his choice. Britain turned to an East of its own creation for the imagery that would give a material form to this idea of availability. The Crystal Palace, with its Moorish fretwork and Alhambresque coloring, was another of London’s gorgeous divans and the personal attractions and novelty of the displayed objects similarly promised gratification. Islamic ornament and color were the raw materials from which Britain constructed its monument to surplus. In the process the exhibition referenced the East
appearing in the foreign courts and at Vauxhall Gardens, which were read in light of theatrical Orientalism. In pleasure gardens and foreign courts, theater-savvy spectators looked past muslin veils and damask cloth to discover sweetmeats and coffees in the hands of convivial old Turks and alluring Algerians. Here, then, was the “real” East, more tangible than decorative patterns or color combinations, more engaging than a bale of cotton or a sack of dates. This was the East as Eastern body, a world that invited Western industry and intervention with the languid desire of an odalisque.

“These girls were slaves, they are free! England has decreed it, and in England’s name I speak.” Flash forward to 1882. Shortly after Britain began its occupation of Egypt, Drury Lane mounted the imperial melodrama Freedom. Earnest Gascoigne, captain of Her Britannic Majesty’s gunboat Arrow, makes his entrance preceded by the horde of slave girls he has just liberated from a slave trader’s boat (2.2). In the scenes that follow, the villain foments a nationalistic rebellion only so that he may abduct the daughter of a British financier and imprison her in his harem. The financier had come to Egypt looking for open markets, but instead the atavistic Egyptians sought to shield their nation from British “progress” just as they segregate their women (and any unfortunate white women they should get their hands on). Fortunately for both Egyptian women and British financiers, the HMS Arrow is on hand bearing freedom. This same promise to liberate women from the practices of Islam marks the melodramas depicting subsequent interventions in the Sudan. Not only do I want my students to examine why this justification was compelling in its day, I want them to examine why similar justifications remain compelling today.

NOTES

3. The Orient of the Boulevards: Exoticism, Empire, and Nineteenth-Century French Theater, 123.
4. Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate, 153.
8. Paul Greenhalgh, Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions
and World’s Fairs, 1851–1939, 85.


10. Henry Mayhew and George Cruikshank, 1851, or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and family: who came up to London to “enjoy themselves” and to see the Great Exhibition, 2.


15. Ibid.


17. Quoted in Tallis, 1:19.