Fragrant Musings: Perfumes and Femininity in Western Representations of the Orient

Abstract This paper explores the relation between female sensuality and the Orient between the 18th and the 20th century from an olfactory perspective. Taking literature, poetry and perfumery as its focus, it shows that olfactory representations of the Orient do not merely reflect the dogma of imperialist society as argued by Said (2003), but that they form a historical *trait d'union* between Western nations and the Orient, as well as representing a sublime alternative to modern Western *ennui*.

by Marcello Aspria
January 26, 2009

Romanticism and the Orient were deeply intervowen in 18th and 19th century Western literature, poetry and painting. Many artists chose Northern Africa and the Near and Middle East as a source of inspiration, a setting for their stories, and sometimes even as their travel destination. Sensuality and the erotic imaginary were frequently recurring themes, resulting in a great variety of exoticized portrayals of female dancers, slaves, harems, and hammams in Western art. Had they been depictions of unbridled pleasure in the artists' homelands, such representations would have caused moral disapproval in their days; but through the Oriental lens, which mirrored many hidden aspects of Western life, they gradually gained acceptance among their main audience. Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (1851), with its descriptions of Ghawazee dancers in Egypt, and Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* (1862) are just arbitrary examples of this widespread phenomenon in literature. This interest in the 'Other', which was particularly prominent in France and Britain, was not merely viewed as an excuse to savor secret or forbidden passions; it was legitimized by many artists as a serious object of study. In his introduction to *Les Orientales* (1829), Victor Hugo famously advocated for a serious interest in Oriental cultures, as the academic knowledge in this field was rapidly increasing: "Au siècle de Louis XIV on était helléniste, maintenant on est orientaliste" (Hugo, 2000: 52).[1]

Explorations of exoticness in the Orient can also be found in music – think of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782) and Bizet's *Djamileh* (1872) – and in

[1] "In the age of Louis XIV one was a Hellenist; now one is an Orientalist". Regarding his appreciation of Arab poetry, Hugo noted: "C'est beau autrement que Job et Homère, mais c'est aussi beau" ("It's beautiful in a different way than Job and Homer, but it's equally beautiful) (Hugo, 2000: 19; *my translation*).

figurative paintings, where scenes depicting odalisques[2] and bathing practices, as in the work of Ingres and Gérôme (see Appendix), became very common. Although the aforementioned examples of Orientalism are limited to the Islamic world, in the course of the 19th century the geographical area of interest extended to India, China, and Japan. The purpose of this paper is not to repeat existing debates on sensuality and the Orient, but rather to suggest a different angle from which the subject can be approached. Hence, I will explore the relation between feminine sensuality and the Orient from an olfactory perspective, and find out whether these should be interpreted as a symbol of Western imperialist superiority, or as a *trait d'union* between East and West.

1 Olfactory representations of the Orient

From the 19th century onwards, olfactory representations of Near and Middle Eastern cultures were profuse in many art forms. In paintings and poems for example, odors were often conveyed through bathing practices or similar types of body cleansing and adornment. I will argue that although perfumes had long been connected to femininity in Western culture, in the Oriental context they came to symbolize an explicit form of female sensuality, as if they were indissolubly tied to femininity. Much like the Orient itself, perfumes were perceived as luring and seductive on the one hand, and frivolous, trivial, and effeminate on the other: they effectively represented two sides of the same coin. The use of heady and sweet perfumes was reminiscent of an uncivilized, almost animalic demeanor that had no place in Western public life; it served as a metaphor of sexual transgression in the collective imaginary.

1.1 Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*

Many explicit references to female beauty and sensuality can be found in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), an imaginary exchange of letters between two Persian noblemen in France, and their friends and wives in Persia. It is a satirical work, meant to offer a critical view of contemporary French politics and culture through an Oriental gaze; but it also provides an interesting Western view on Persian gender relations, which Montesquieu depicts as brutishly oppressive in some instances, and deeply passionate in others. In intimate contexts, the author attributes an important role to female body adornment, from which the use of perfumes is indissociable. In Letter VII, for example, we find an intimate and erotic passage where Fatmé expresses her feelings to her husband Usbek as follows:[3]

> "Ne pense pas que ton absence m'ait fait négliger une beauté qui t'est chère. Quoique je ne doive être vue de personne, et que les ornements dont je me pare soient inutiles à ton bonheur, je cherche cependant à

[2] In the Ottoman Empire, an odalisque was a female slave who lived enclosed in a seraglio (a sequestered quarters in the sultan's palace) as an assistant or apprentice of the sultan's concubines and wives.

[3] Usbek is one of the traveling noblemen.

> m'entretenir dans l'habitude de plaire. Je ne me couche point que je ne me sois parfumée des essences les plus délicieuses" (Montesquieu, 1992: 20).[4]

Even in Usbek's absence, Fatmé continues to wear her sweet essences to bed. It is a ritualized, rather than functional use of perfume, and a symbol of her devotion for her husband. Perfume plays a similarly sensual role in Usbek's perception of his wives. In Letter XXVI he imagines Roxane[5] doused in precious fragrances, dressed in the most expensive garments, dancing and singing gracefully:

> "Quand vous relevez l'éclat de votre teint par les plus belles couleurs; quand vous vous parfumez tout le corps des essences les plus précieuses; quand vous vous parez de vos plus beaux habits; quand vous cherchez à vous distinguer de vos compagnes par les grâces de la danse et par la douceur de votre chant; que vous combattez gracieusement avec elles de charmes, de douceur et d'enjouement: je ne puis pas m'imaginer que vous ayez d'autre objet que celui de me plaire [...]" (Montesquieu, 1992: 60-61).[6]

The phrasing related to perfumes in these two passages is so similar ("parfumée des essences les plus délicieuses", "parfumez tout le corps des essences les plus précieuses") that it can almost be regarded as a stylistic device. Rethorical or not, throughout the book the use of perfume is always paired with feminine beauty and seduction, and integrated in other pleasurable habits such as dance, which was also strongly associated with the Orient. As noted previously, it must be emphasized that eroticized olfactory representations of femininity are not unique to Oriental cultures, but that their frequency in Western representations of the Orient is very high indeed.

1.2 Hugo's *Les Orientales*

Hugo's *Les Orientales* depicts a passionate, violent, and sensual Orient similar to that of Montesquieu, but it features several lighthearted poems with beautiful olfactory descriptions as well. One example is 'Sara la baigneuse', in which a bathing girl daydreams about living like a queen. In the verses below, she imagines lying in an amber-scented bath, and then resting on soft velvet cushions emitting "perfumes that inspire love" (Hugo, 2000: 140):

---

[4] "Do not think that your absence has led me to neglect those charms which have endeared me to you: although I may not be seen by any one, and the ornaments with which I deck myself do not affect your happiness, I strive notwithstanding to omit no art that can arouse delight; I never go to rest until I am all perfumed with the sweetest essences." [transl: John Davidson. London: Gibbings & Company (1899)]

[5] Roxane is one of Usbek's five wives.

[6] "When you heighten the brilliance of your complexion with the loveliest colour, when you perfume your whole body with the most precious essences, when you clothe yourself in your most beautiful garments, when you seek to distinguish yourself from your companions by your gracefulness in the dance, and the sweetness of your song, as you gently dispute with them in beauty, in tenderness, in vivacity, I cannot imagine that you have any other aim than to please me [...]." [transl: *ibid.*]

"Oh ! si j'étais capitane,
Ou sultane,
Je prendrais des bains ambrés,
Dans un bain de marbre jaune,
Prés d'un trône,
Entre deux griffons dorés !

J'aurais le hamac de soie
Qui se ploie
Sous le corps prêt à pâmer ;
J'aurais la molle ottomane
Dont émane
Un parfum qui fait aimer." [7]

If the examples from Montesquieu evoked a largely male, heterosexual fantasy, in these verses the object of desire remains interiorized and undisclosed; by contrast, the rest of the poem contains very vivid depictions of Sara's naked body in the open air, in a manner that seems to suggest the presence of a male gaze. The soft and sweet scent of resins and spices, typically associated with the Orient, is also featured in the famous 'La captive', in which a female slave wishes she were free to share the fragrant and beautiful scenery with a virile young man (Hugo, 2000: 109).[8] Another passionate allusion to sweet odors is present in 'La sultane favorite'.

In the preface to *Les Orientales*, Franck Laurent warns the reader not to reduce Hugo's Orient to a mere exotic fantasy, or a remote literary space that serves as a harbor of "pure poetry". In Hugo's view it represented the cradle of a new Europe,[9] a culture not far removed from the West, and one that was well worth discovering through literature (Laurent in Hugo, 2000: 18-19). While the brief examples reported here cannot do justice to this underlying motivation, it is an important issue that seems to be overlooked by the main critics of Orientalism, and that will be addressed again in the final part of this paper.

1.3 Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*

If Hugo's active interest in the Orient allowed him to create a new poetic rythm and form (Gosselin in Hugo, 2000: 407), it is the work of Charles Baudelaire that is most renowned for its exotic olfactory representations. His *Fleurs du mal* (1861) contain a great wealth of poems in which perfumes play a central role. Like all 'flowers of evil' they are associated with artifice, decadence, and eroticism; but they also represent the smell of the

---

[7] "Oh, where I a capitana, / Or sultana, / Amber should be always mixt / In my bath of jewelled stone, / Near my throne, / Griffins twain of gold betwixt. / Then my hammock should be silk, / White as milk; / And, more soft than down of dove, / Velvet cushions where I sit / Should emit / Perfumes that inspire love" [transl: John L. O'Sullivan (1888)]

[8] "J'aime de ces contrées / Les doux parfums brûlants, / Sur les vitres dorées/ Les feuillages tremblants" ("I love the burning odors / This glowing region gives; / And, round each gilded lattice, / The trembling, wreathing leaves;") [transl.: W.D., *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*]

[9] Note that several poems in *Les Orientales* are situated in Greece, Moorish Spain, or along the Danube.

'Other', as is clear in the comparison between a fragrant Oriental box and a deserted house in the following verses from 'Le Flacon' (Baudelaire, 1972: 65):

II est de forts parfums pour qui toute matière
Est poreuse. On dirait qu'ils pénètrent le verre.
En ouvrant un coffret venu de l'Orient
Dont la serrure grince et rechigne en crian,

Ou dans une maison déserte quelque armoire
Pleine de l'âcre odeur des temps, poudreuse et noire
Parfois on trouve un vieux flacon qui se souvient,
D'où jaillit toute vive une âme qui revient. [10]

Here Baudelaire draws a parallel between the Orient and distant memories, using the strength of exotic perfumes as a bridge between them. With their ability to permeate matter and transcend time, these heady perfumes connect the present West with the temporally and spacially remote Orient. Their link to sensuality is further explored in 'Parfum exotique' (Baudelaire, 1972: 37):

"Quand, les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud d'automne,
Je respire l'odeur de ton sein chaleureux,
Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux
Qu'éblouissent les feux d'un soleil monotone [...]" [11]

Instead of representing the female breast visually, the poet closes his eyes and inhales its odor, feeling its warmth. These olfactory and tactile impressions of femininity suggest a very direct and unmediated experience of sensuality, confirming Bernheimer's analysis that Baudelaire makes a "crudely stereotypical distinction between female flesh and male spirit" (Bernheimer, 1989: 132). This rigid gender difference articulated in Baudelaire's work leads to a representation of all women as mistresses; Oriental women, like Delacroix' *Aline la mulâtresse* (see Appendix), are depicted as pure objects of desire.

1.4 Flaubert in Egypt: the scent of the brothel

Whereas in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* – as in the works of many of his predecessors – the Orient is still largely an imaginary world (neither Baudelaire, Hugo or Montesquieu had ever visited the lands they described), many first-hand accounts of exotic female sensuality are offered by Gustave Flaubert in his Egyptian travel notes. Known for his

[10] "There are strong perfumes for which all matter / Is porous. One would say they go through glass. / On opening a coffer that has come from the East, / Whose creaking lock resists and grates / Or in a deserted house, some cabinet / Full of the Past's acrid odor, dusty and black, / Sometimes one finds an antique phial which remembers, / Whence gushes forth a living soul returned to life." [transl: William Aggeler, Academy Library Guild (1954)]

[11] "When, eyes closed, on a pleasant autumn night, / I breathe the warm scent of your breast, I see / Inviting shorelines spreading out for me / Where steady sunlight dazzles in my sight [...]" [transl: James McGowan]

demeaning and crass attitude towards women (see Bernheimer, 1989: 129), as well as for his frequent visits to prostitutes,[12] Flaubert wrote at length about his encounters with Kuchuk Hanem, a dancer and courtesan he met in Wadi Halfa in 1850 (Flaubert, 1972: 113).[13] Although her dancing is by far the most important element in Flaubert's portrayal of sensuality, her use of perfumes is very prominent in the narrative:

> "She had just come from the bath, her firm breasts had a fresh smell, something like that of sweetened turpentine; she began by perfuming her hands with rose water." (Flaubert, 1972: 114)

Like the bazaars, which are permanently enveloped in the smell of coffee and sandalwood (Flaubert, 1972: 110), the scents of the brothel serve as signifiers of Flaubert's relationship with the Orient. In his description of prostitutes standing in doorways and sitting on straw mats, he mentions the odors of spices that accompany "loose garments fluttering in the hot wind" (Flaubert, 1972: 128). His olfactory representations may not be as sophisticated as in Baudelaire's poetry (or in later French authors such as Zola, Huysmans, or Proust), but they serve the same purpose of accentuating unbridled, hedonistic pleasure and passion.

Flaubert's pornographical and sexist depictions of prostitutes – and of Kuchuk Hanem in particular – had sparked a furious reaction in his muse Louise Colet, who deemed them utterly unacceptable and degrading. Flaubert defended himself by de-victimizing the women he had frequented:

> "As for Kuchuk Hanem, ah! Set your mind at rest, and at the same time correct your ideas about the Orient. Be convinced that she felt nothing at all: emotionally, I guarantee; and even physically, I strongly suspect. She found us very good *cawadjas* (seigneurs) because we left a goodly number of piastres behind, that's all. [...] The Oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another man." (Flaubert, 1972: 220).

Steegmuller argues that Flaubert's reply was written long after his return to Croisset (around the time that he was working on Madame Bovary), and that it does not necessarily reflect his state of mind in Egypt (Steegmuller in Flaubert, 1972: 221). But according to Bernheimer's analysis, Flaubert perceived femininity as a male construction and a product of civilization; from this follows the idea that women do not exist "in countries where there is no intellectual culture" (Bernheimer, 1989: 133). While Egypt had become more or less a homeland to Flaubert (Steegmuller in Flaubert, 1972: 12), in his degrading portrayal of Oriental women as insensitive sex machines, he indeed discriminates them from women in the West. Whereas the latter are merely "facticious works" created by men, the former are totally absent from his preoccupations (Bernheimer, 1989: 133).

---

[12] " 'It may be a perverted taste, [...] but I love prostitution. [...] One learns so many things in a brothel, and feels such sadness, and dreams so longingly of love!' " (Flaubert, 1972: 10)

[13] 'Kuchuk hanem' was not her real name, but a term of endearment meaning 'little lady' or 'dancing woman' in Turkish (Steegmuller in Flaubert, 1972: 113).

2 The Orient in perfumery

Sofar I have focused on Western portrayals of femininity in the Orient through odors and perfumes. Equally interesting is a phenomenon that takes us in the opposite direction, namely the influence of the Orient on Western perfumery. It is widely known that the Orient – and the Middle East in particular – plays a central role in the origins of perfumery. Its historical roots in Egyptian, Arab and Persian culture are described at length in Morris (1999) and Le Guérer (2001, 2005), while Sagarin (1945) and Laruelle (1993) provide an extensive overview of the methods and techniques in perfumery in ancient times. In short, the first use of fragrant materials can be traced back to the Mesopotamian region, around 7000 years ago, where resinous woods were burned in public religious ceremonies and during prayer.[14] The use of aromatic products for the body followed later: in contemporary southeastern Iran and Afghanistan, small bronze jars have been found that may have served as containers for perfumed oils or cosmetics. They are dated as far back as the third millennium BC (Morris, 1999: 16-17). Fragrances were used for embalment purposes in Egypt, and the use of perfumed ointments in Greece and Rome has been described in detail by classic authors like Theophrastus of Athens and Pliny the Elder. All these products were different from perfumes as we know them today (blends of fragrant oil and water mixed in alcohol);[15] but what matters here is their cultural role in the Middle East, especially in Islamic societies from the 7th century onwards:

> "Scents were worked into the tissue of everyday life in Islamic culture. Incense was burned in braziers in homes, in palaces, and in desert tents. The aroma of incense was always present at ceremonies for weddings and births" (Morris, 1999: 41).

Oriental culture still reverberates strongly in modern, Western perfumery. As far back as 1872,[16] the British house Penhaligon's introduced an opulent rose scent called *Hammam Bouquet*; the rose has always been held in high esteem in Islamic culture, where it was used by men and women alike. The founder of Penhaligon's was a barber who had started his career in the fashionable Turkish baths in London's Jermyn Street; it is said that this perfume was created for a Turkish sultan. Whether or not this is historically accurate, many European houses included perfumes inspired by the Middle- or Far East in their product range. Perhaps the most well-known examples in this context were made by the French perfume house Guerlain.

---

[14] The term *perfume*, a modern latinism, conveys the concept of divine adoration through smoke ("per fumum").

[15] The perfection of the distillation technique of alcohol has been attributed to Arab chemists in the 11th century. The first alcohol-based perfume (known as *Eau d'Hongrie*, or *Eau de la Reine d'Hongrie*) was produced in 1370 (Morris, 1999: 9).

[16] This is actually before the start of modern perfumery, which is usually placed in 1881 (with the launch of Houbigant's *Fougère Royale*) or 1889 (Guerlain's *Jicky*).

2.1 Guerlain

A very popular perfume inspired by the Far Orient is Guerlain's *Mitsouko* (1919), which is still widely available today in a reformulated guise. The name was borrowed from the main character in Claude Farrère's *La Bataille* (1909), a novel set in Nagasaki during the Russo-Japanese War (Edwards, 1998: 34). Although the story revolves around a Westernized Japanese couple, it is a reference that exemplifies a widely supported European fascination for Japanese women and Far-Eastern culture during the first decades of the 20th century. The composition of *Mitsouko* bares similarities to Coty's *Chypre* (1917), and is nowadays classified in the 'chypre' fragrance family. It is not considered an 'oriental' perfume, in that it does not contain the sweet, warm, and ambery notes by which the latter category is defined. The oriental family in perfume classifications can be traced back to *Shalimar* (1925), named after the eponymous gardens that emperor Shäh Jahängir created for his favorite wife Mumtaz Mahal.

According to Philippe Guerlain, his family has a great fondness for India and South-East Asia because it represents the corner stone of perfumery, and because its civilizations transmitted the art of perfumery to the Arab world (Edwards, 1998: 55). But the Shalimar gardens were also imagined as an erotic place to Jacques Guerlain, who used a high dosage of ethylvanillin (a potent vanilla note) as a marker of exoticness and sensuality. His grandson Jean-Paul, also a famous perfumer, comments as follows:

> "My grandfather Jacques taught me to appreciate vanilla because it adds something wonderfully erotic to a perfume. It turned Shalimar into an outrageously low-cut evening gown." (quoted in Edwards, 1998: 56; *my translation*)[17]

The combination of sweet vanilla and warm amber became known as the 'oriental' style in perfumery, a typology that was later subject to political debate. In recent decades, marketing specialists came to recognize connotations of imperialism in the Western-centrist concept of 'Oriental'; with the 'Orient' being an important market for perfumes, politically sensitive terminology was best avoided. While people in the industry still speak of 'oriental' perfumes as a concept, the term 'amber' is now used to designate this fragrance family in most perfume classifications. Other classic Guerlain perfumes that evoke Oriental culture are *Djedi* (1926), alluding to Egyptian papyrus, *Liu* (1929), named after the Chinese heroine in Puccini's opera Turandot, *Nahéma* (1979), referring to an ancient Arabian tale about two princesses, and *Samsara* (1989), a Sanskrit name; in the latter case, the marketing concept (which revolved around exotic fantasy and spirituality) preceded the actual creation of the perfume (Edwards, 1998: 254).

These are just arbitrary examples created by one single perfume house. But there are many contemporary perfumers to whom the Orient represents a great source of inspiration, as well as an important part in their professional education. Three cases will be presented here: Serge Lutens, a French-born art director who resides in Marocco; Lorenzo Villoresi, a Florentine perfumer who made extensive travels in Egypt and other

[17] "Mon grand-père Jacques m'apprit à aimer la vanille parce qu'elle ajoute quelque chose de merveilleusement érotique à un parfum. Cela fit de Shalimar une robe du soir outrageusement décolletée."

regions of the Middle East; and Isabelle Doyen, who created four perfumes under the name *Les Orientalistes* for the brand Annick Goutal.

2.2 Serge Lutens

A very clear and strong Arabic influence is present in the perfumes conceptualized by Serge Lutens. Born in northern France in 1942, Lutens started his career at Christian Dior in 1968, where he was commissioned to create a makeup line. In this period he collaborated with several famous fashion photographers, from which he developed an interest in photography. In 1980 he became an art director for the Japanese cosmetics brand Shiseido; under his direction, Shiseido launched their perfume *Nombre Noir* in 1982. Ten years later, Shiseido and Lutens created a new perfume line, for which they opened a boutique in Paris called Les Salons du Palais Royal Shiseido. The launch of the Serge Lutens brand followed in 2000.

In close cooperation with perfumer Christopher Sheldrake, Lutens produced a wide range of fragrances that evoke the Arab world both in name and composition, such as *Bois Oriental* (1992), *Ambre Sultan* (1993), *Cuir Mauresque* (1996), *Rahät Loukoum* (1998), *Muscs Koublaï Khän* (1998), *Arabie* (2000), and *Fumerie Turque* (2003). In an interview with perfume expert Annick Le Guérer, he describes Islam as the only religion in which a direct link is made between pleasure and perfume:

> "It is mentioned in the Koran and is used from birth to death. Other religions make use of perfumes as well, for instance to scent their churches, but they keep them separated from pleasure; they are not considered an intrinsic part of life." (quoted in Le Guérer, 2002: 299; *my translation*)[18]

Lutens, who now lives in Marrakech, is of the opinion that perfumes are not about frivolous seduction. This is not a unique viewpoint in the industry, since many perfumers perceive their work as an art form; but if most reject associations of sensuality and eroticism as a marketing ploy, Lutens's criticism is more metaphysical. In his view, perfumes are meant to convey a sense of purification and harmony with the world, which is deeply inscribed in Arab culture:

> "It is the blood of the Arabs, and certainly not something one indulges in to seduce someone before going to the restaurant. Its purpose is to elevate the spirit and the individual." (quoted in Le Guérer, 2002: 300; *my translation*)[19]

Rather than the rigid Cartesian division between mind and body, Lutens sees the use of perfumes as an integral and indissociable part of culture. Not surprisingly, he distances

[18] "Il est présent dans le Coran et on l'utilise de la naissance à la mort. Les autres religions sont parfumées, on parfume les églises, mais le parfum est séparé de la jouissance. Il ne fait pas partie de la vie."

[19] "C'est le sang des Arabes, surtout pas quelque chose dont on s'arrose pour séduire avant d'aller au restaurant. Il doit élever l'esprit et l'individu."

himself from the great 20th century perfumer Edmond Roudnitska, who was renowned for his clean and lucid compositions:

> "I am an oriental, far removed from Edmond Roudnitska, whose perfumes I dislike. His approach to perfumery gave birth to a clean style in perfumery, disembodied and without any memory; it is smart in a preppy manner, and doesn't evoke anything in me. Perfumes must belong to our roots, our sweat, our past, even our decadence." (quoted in Le Guérer, *ibid*.; *my translation*)[20]

This view can be interpreted as a criticism of the Western commodification of perfume culture, which is also a *leitmotif* in the work of Lorenzo Villoresi. The latter, however, has a slightly different way of integrating Oriental influences in his work.

2.3 Lorenzo Villoresi

Villoresi was born in 1956 and raised in relative opulence, spending his time between the family's old *palazzo* in the historical heart of Florence, and their villa in the Tuscan countryside. In his book *Il Profumo* (1995) he describes how he developed a connection with the rural, outdoor life at a young age, and that his father taught him to appreciate the beauty and therapeutical qualities of the plants and herbs in their gardens. His interest in the Arab world was awakened when his mother opened a small boutique in Cairo after World War II, where she sold artisanal products from Florence. During his adolescence Villoresi was intrigued by his mother's recollections of Egypt, and his fascination grew stronger as he prepared his academic thesis on the role of death in ancient Judaic and Hellenic traditions.

He started a cosmopolitan life that would periodically draw him back to Northern Africa and the Middle East. He followed the traces of Hebrew, Egyptian and Mesopotamic cultures by making long and distant travels, often without any specific goal. Moving between the bazaars in Cairo and the market places in Jerusalem, Villoresi found himself exposed to what he describes as the 'cradle' of the culture of fragrances. It was in the Middle East that his love for essences and perfumes took shape, as well as his desire to reinstall the old, faded tradition of Florentine perfumery.

Villoresi writes about the pleasant, inviting, and calm atmosphere he encountered during his travels. The natural hospitality of the people in Egyptian perfume shops made him feel at ease, and he noticed how the fragrant products on display were anything but ostentacious: small containers filled with essential oils, and great varieties of fresh spices stored in bags and jars. He appreciated the extensive time and attention that Arab hosts take for their guests, describing it as a quality that is lacking in the West. Like Lutens, he comments on the different attitude towards fragrances in the Orient:

---

[20] "Je suis un oriental, très éloigné d'Edmond Roudnitska dont je n'aime pas du tout les parfums. Avec lui, c'est le début d'une parfumerie nettoyée, sans corps et sans mémoire, bon chic, bon genre et qui, en moi, ne déclenche rien. Il faut que les parfums appartiennent à nos racines, à notre sueur, à notre passé, à notre décadence même."

> "From Northern Africa to the Far East, the attitude towards the world of perfumes is different from that in the West. They have a keen taste for fragrances, and draw sensual pleasure from them, especially from pure (undiluted) essences. Men and women alike have a more resilient, open and free relationship with their body, and with any type of fragrance." (Villoresi, 1995: 26; *my translation*)[21]

When Villoresi set up his own perfume business in 1990, the Orient was a major source of inspiration to his work. But whereas Lutens's signature in perfumery is distinctly Arab, Villoresi's work is rather a hybrid between Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern cultures, in which different styles are fused together.

2.4 Les Orientalistes, Annick Goutal

In the winter of 2007, French perfume house Annick Goutal launched a trio of perfumes (*Encens Flamboyant*, *Myrrhe Ardente*, and *Ambre Fétiche*) under the collective name *Les Orientalistes*. I was at the Parisian laboratory of perfumers Isabelle Doyen and Camille Goutal[22] in May of that year; the fragrances had just been made ready for production, and the marketing department was about to start the development of the product names and visual concepts. The idea behind *Les Orientalistes* (later joined by a fourth perfume, *Musc Nomade*) was to symbolize the three gifts brought by the Magi.[23] In an informal meeting with Nicolas Olczyk, an independent perfume consultant who visited the laboratory to sample the new fragrances, the latter suggested the name *Myrrhe-et-une-Nuits*, a word play on the Arabian *Tales of One Thousand and One Nights*. Although it was met with great enthusiasm at the laboratory, it was eventually rejected by the marketing department.[24]

If the script for the products as crudely presented here may sound trivial to some, the press kit takes it a step further, in that it evokes the "enigmatic, sensual and assertive" character of scents from a distant time and an exotic place:

> "Like the artists of old, abandon yourself to a myriad of exotic dreams... Envisage paintings of oases, hunting scenes, harems and odalisques. Delight in their warm tones, shimmering colors, intense contrasts... and let yourself be carried away." (press kit to Annick Goutal's *Les Orientalistes*, 2007)

References to the Arab world are made through pictorial illustrations of what I assume to be odalisques and concubines, who appear to live a peaceful and graceful life in an idyllic

---

[21] "Dal Nordafrica all'Estremo Oriente, l'atteggiamento verso il mondo dei profumi è diverso da quello occidentale in generale. C'è un gusto e un godimento sensuale delle fragranze e, soprattutto, delle essenze allo stato puro. Esiste un rapporto con il corpo più morbido, aperto e disinvolto, da parte di uomini e donne e verso ogni tipo di fragranza."

[22] Camille is the daughter of Annick Goutal, who passed away in 1999.

[23] Gold, incense, and myrrh. The perfumers chose the warm scent of amber to represent the radiance of gold.

[24] Their motivation for this rejection remained undisclosed.

seraglio. But given the commercial purpose of this press kit, the lack of realism in these depictions should not be surprising.

Marketing narratives aside, the composition of these perfumes requires a good amount of preparation and affinity with Oriental cultures. It does not suffice for a perfumer to rely on technical skills alone. Isabelle Doyen made many travels to the Middle East, accompanied by her Iranian husband, and studied the local raw materials as well as the cultural history of the places she visited. The result of these efforts need to be experienced in the perfumes: they can never be conveyed by press materials issued by the marketing department, as elegant and well-meant as they may be.

3 The odor of Orientalism: a critical roundup

Without exception, the examples in literature, poetry, and perfumery featured here connect olfactory representations of the Orient to female sensuality and eroticism. There are notable differences in the portrayal of oriental women as either submissive and dependent (*Lettres Persanes*, *Les Orientales*) or uninhibited and insatiable (*Flaubert in Egypt*), but in either case, they are clearly marked as 'different' from women in the West. The fact that Oriental men are rarely represented as fragrant in these narratives does not imply that the use of perfume was exclusive to women; in many parts of the Arab world, the use of rose water was widespread among men as well. In my view, this differentiation between male and female sexuality is more likely a Western bias, that reflects the strong association between perfumes and femininity in the West (Aspria, 2007: 15-17); attributing the use of perfumes to a male character would indeed be considered as a marker of effeminacy by Western readers.

This bias is one of the central themes in the debate on Orientalism, initiated by Edward Said in his eponymous book (first published in 1972). Like other critics before him, Said argues that from the late 18th century onwards, the Orient had become a place for sexual experience that was unobtainable in Europe. Authors like Flaubert, Nerval, Burton, and Lane were attracted to the Arab world, where sexual encounters were not as limited by strict rules and prohibitions:

> "What they looked for often – correctly, I think – was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden [...]. In time 'Oriental sex' was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture, with the result that readers and writers could have it if they wished without necessarily going to the Orient." (Said, 2003: 187)

Said mentions Flaubert's portrayal of Kuchuk Hanem as a case in point: she is a verbally inexpressive woman, representing little else than "carnal temptation" (Said, *ibid*.). Olfactory representations of femininity may indeed contribute to this objectification of women: their non-discursiveness force their subject into a passive role. As we have seen earlier, they also suggest very direct sensual experiences, in which women represent flesh, and men are elevated to spirit. In the narratives discussed here, perfumes serve as a signifier of the female body, be it her skin or her hair. By emphasizing that "Orientalism itself [...] was an "exclusively male province", Said implicitly suggests that Baudelaire and Flaubert's sexist attitude towards Oriental women was not coincidental:

> "This [phenomenon] is especially evident in the writing of travellers and novelists; women are usually the creatures of a male-power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (Said, 2003: 207)

It is a manifest, conscious representation of women and femininity that Said observed in Orientalist art, literature, and poetry; yet one must wonder if indeed all artistic expressions of Orientalism can be analyzed as such. Delacroix' *Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Turban* (see Appendix) represents a decidely different depiction of femininity from the aforementioned *Aline la mulâtresse* or the *Odalisque with a Slave*; the former bares none of the sensual and erotic connotations found in the latter two, and can not be said to look particularly "stupid" or "willing".

This is a general problem in Said's critique, that has been addressed at length by Robert Irwin (2006). In his view, Said's polemic on *Orientalism* is highly selective and historically inaccurate. Furthermore, it gives the false impression that everyone who set out to explore the Orient, did so with the same intention: "[Said] believed that all these groups participated in a common Orientalist discourse" (Irwin, 2006: 281-282). The literary examples presented here are too limited in scope to confirm Irwin's objection; however, if the olfactory representations in these narratives can be said to confine Oriental femininity to the body, it is also true that they provide an alternative to the rigid visual paradigm in 19th century art. As mentioned before, smell mediates between time and space, where old memories from remote lands are projected onto the present. As such, olfactory metaphors contributed in relieving some of the general feeling of dissatisfaction and *ennui* that typified the late 19th century West, which eventually led to the Modernist movement. In Western representations of the Orient, smell is thus a marker of gender difference, as well as a bridge between different cultures.

This form of escape is also present in the perfume narratives presented here. Whether perfumers view the Orient as a source of inspiration (Guerlain), appropriate it as their own (Lutens), or balance between the two (Villoresi and Goutal), there is a pluriformity of Orientalist discourses that show a common fascination for the exotic, but rather different views on its relation to female sensuality. For example, Guerlain's comparison of *Shalimar* to a low cut evening gown is irreconcilabe with Lutens's dislike of frivolous sensuality. And while the view of the Orient as the irrational, weak, and feminized "Other" (as diametrically opposed to the rational, strong, and masculine West) can indeed be recognized in many perfume narratives, this is a general characteristic of markting texts that must be dissociated from the intrinsic qualities of the products themselves.

It would be easy to dismiss a perfume composition inspired by the Orient for being essentially Western; one must then ask the question if a 'faithful' or true artistic representation of the Orient would be possible at all. Both Said and Irwin seem to imply that this is the case, but I have some reservations on this point. In the case of olfactory representations, it would be just as impossible to envisage a composition that exudes "the Orient" without resorting into stereotypes, as it would in case of "the West". It can be argued here, that while both Said and Irwin stress the pluriformity of the Orient, unintentionally they both risk to essentialize it. Moreover, these olfactory representations cannot always be reduced to a mere exotic fantasy: just like Hugo's interest for the

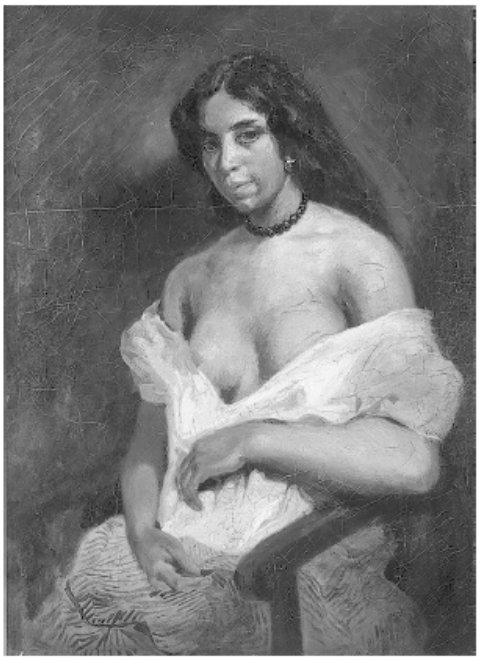
Orient, which had deeper underlying motivations than his poems may have suggested at first glance, the same is likely true for many of his contemporaries as well.

Conclusion

The examples in literature, poetry, and perfumery featured in this paper connect olfactory representations of the Orient to female sensuality and eroticism. While there are notable differences in the portrayal of oriental women as either submissive and dependent or sexually uninhibited and insatiable, in either case they are clearly marked as 'different' from women in the West. Smell serves as a marker of gender difference in Western representations of the Orient, but it also represents a bridge between cultures, evoking distant memories that provide an escape from (or an alternative to) feelings of dissatisfaction and *ennui*. Perfumes can be effective metaphors of sexual transgression, and therewith to some extent symbolize Western imperialist superiority *vis-à-vis* the Orient (think of Flaubert and Baudelaire). At the same time, they can also serve as a *trait d'union* between East and West, inspiring genuine curiosity and fascination for Oriental cultures.

The mix of brutishly oppressive depictions of women with highly passionate portrayals of female sensuality is common to many Romantic novels and poems, and a similar phenomenon can be discerned in painting. In both areas, olfactory representations of female sensuality cannot be said to emphasize either one or the other. If allusions to perfumes contribute to a perception of the Orient as the irrational, weak, and feminized "Other", this must be traced back to the common Western association between perfumes and feminine frailty, and therefore be regarded as a social construction as well. Serge Lutens's narrative represents an alternative view, where perfumes are perceived as transcending gender, or being inherently genderless: it shows that olfactory metaphors and representations can also be constructed as dissociated from the feminized and sexualized body.

Appendix



Eugène Delacroix
Aline la mulâtresse or *Portrait d'Aspasie la Mauresque* (c. 1824)
Musée Fabre, Montpellier

Eugène Delacroix
Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Turban (1827)
Dallas Museum of Art

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
Odalisque with a Slave (1840)
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
The Turkish Bath (1862)
Musee du Louvre, Paris

Jean-Léon Gérôme
A Moorish Bath or *Turkish Woman Bathing* (1870)

Jean-Léon Gérôme
Slave for Sale (1873)

Bibliography

Aspria, Marcello, 'Geuren van mannelijkheid. De verbreiding van parfumgebruik door mannen in de twintigste eeuw'. In: *Sociologie*, vol. 3, issue 1, pp. 12-32. Amsterdam/Meppel: Uitgeverij Boom (2007)

Baudelaire, Charles, *Les Fleurs du mal*. Introduced and annotated by Yves Florenne. Paris: Librairie Générale Française (1972)

Bernheimer, Charles, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1989)

Edwards, Michael, *Parfums de légende: un siècle de créations françaises*. Translated by Guy Robert. Levallois-Perret (1998)

Flaubert, Gustave, *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*. Translated and edited with an introduction by Francis Steegmuller. London: Penguin Classics (1996)

Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* [1976]. London: Penguin Books (1998)

Guérer, Annick Le, Sur les routes de l'encens. Paris: Editions du Garde-Temps (2001)

Guérer, Annick Le, *Le Parfum : des origines à nos jours*. Paris: Odile Jacob (2005)

Hugo, Victor, *Les Orientales / Les Feuilles d'automne*. Introduced and annotated by Franck Laurent. Paris: Librairie Générale Française (2000)

Irwin, Robert, Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents. New York: The Overlook Press (2006)

Laruelle, René, (ed.), *L'Art du parfum*. Paris: Le Temps Apprivoisé (1993)

Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de, *Lettres Persanes* [1721]. Édition de P. Vernière. Paris: Bordas (1992)

Morris, Edwin T., *Scents of Time. Perfume from Ancient Egypt to the 21st Century*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Bulfinch Press (1999)

Sagarin, Edward, *The Science and Art of Perfumery*. London/New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company (1945)

Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* [1978]. London: Penguin Modern Classics (2003)

Villoresi, Lorenzo, *Il Profumo: Cultura, storia e tecniche*. Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie (1995)