

**Title:**

*The Meanings of Oriental Masquerade in T.E. Lawrence's Arabian Ventures*

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**Abstract:**

This article explores the changing trajectory of T.E. Lawrence's interaction with the Arab East on the eve of modernity. It traces his pre-First World War scholarly interest in Levantine antiquities (his archaeological expeditions in Syria), through to his subsequent military engagement in the Arab Revolt (1916-1918).

An analysis of Lawrence's adoption of various forms of Middle-Eastern attire provides a narrative of the events that led to his metamorphosis from a passive scholar into an active soldier.

The article examines the homoerotic strands in Lawrence's assumption of Oriental disguise and highlights its metaphorical significance *vis-à-vis* the political marriage of British imperial interests and Arab nationalist ambitions in the Arab campaign.

The article finally draws on the implications of the Anglo-Arab alliance and its impact on changing the region and altering the image of the 'Unchanging East'.

### **Keywords:**

T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, Orientalism, homoeroticism, Uranianism, masquerade, modernity, Anglo-Arab Travel Writing, Dahoum, Selim Ahmad, First World War, Ottoman Empire, Arab Revolt, Arab nationalism, cross-dressing, pornography.

### **Main Text (The Article):**



Figure 1: *Lawrence in Arab Dress Seated on the Ground* (1918): Lawrence clad in the iconic Sharifian robes. The original photograph is in the Imperial War Museum, London: © IWM (Q 73535).

A stranger must, indeed, have something extraordinary about him to attract attention in the streets of the Holy City. But as this young Bedouin passed by in his magnificent royal robes, the crowds in front of the bazaars turned to look at him. It was not merely his costume, nor yet the dignity with which he carried his five feet three, marking him every

inch a king or perhaps a caliph in disguise who had stepped out of the pages of 'The Arabian Nights'. The striking fact was that this mysterious prince of Mecca looked no more like a son of Ishmael than an Abyssinian looks like one of Stefansson's red-haired Esquimaux; Bedouin, although of the Caucasian race, have had their skins scorched by the relentless desert sun until their complexions are the colour of lava. But this young man was as blond as a Scandinavian, in whose veins flow Viking blood and the cool traditions of fjords and sagas.<sup>1</sup>

Best known for his role in the Arab Revolt, T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935) was Britain's imperial agent in its campaign against the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. As the Ottoman Empire joined forces with the Central Powers of Germany and Austro-Hungary, the British and the French (the Allies) made the strategic choice of supporting the Arab Revolt (1916-1918), which was initiated by Sharif Hussein bin Ali in Mecca as an independence movement aiming to depose Ottoman-Turkish rule and establish a unified Arab kingdom that would stretch from Aleppo in the north to Aden in the south. The Arab Revolt itself was the culmination of decades of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism dating back to the nineteenth century. By supporting the Arabs, the Allies were able to gain crucial insider help from the Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire. The Revolt itself had the ambition of restoring the Caliphate to 'Arab hands', although this aim was not necessarily shared by the more secular strands of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism. The promise of Britain's support was essential for the Revolt's instigation; the British became increasingly concerned over the Ottoman Sultan's declaration of Jihad, which, they feared, would risk igniting a Muslim insurrection in Egypt and India:<sup>2</sup> Britain '[...] decided to intervene in Arabian tribal politics and foment a revolt designed to divide Islam by giving the Hijaz – the holiest region of the Muslim world – its independence'.<sup>3</sup> This decision came after initially ignoring Sharif Hussein's earlier appeal, for Britain had been supportive of the Sultan's role as 'Caliph': the spiritual leader for all Muslim subjects, including those in its colonies.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of Lawrence's role lies in his remarkable diplomatic skills and his ability to bridge cultural and political gaps between the British and the Arabs. Scholar, antiquarian, soldier and writer, Lawrence possessed an exceptional ability to embody the various roles he assumed in his Middle-Eastern venture. In this article, I will examine the trajectory along which Lawrence appears to have evolved from a 'passive scholar' into an 'active soldier', as he interacted with the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia*, pp.19-20.

<sup>2</sup> Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T.E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-18*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

Arab East on the eve of modernity. By drawing on the political circumstances that were shaping the new constellation of power relations in the region, I highlight certain strands in Lawrence's use of Oriental attire in general, and in his adoption of the iconic Sharifian Arab dress (Figure 1 above) in the Arab Revolt in particular. The latter is situated within Lawrence's delicately choreographed self-fashioning in the Arab Revolt as the representative of Anglo-Arab mutual interests in their coalition against the Ottoman-Turks in the First World War.

Much of Lawrence's fame and enduring popularity in public discourse stems from Lowell Thomas's creation of the image of 'Lawrence of Arabia', or what he dubbed as the 'blond Bedouin'.<sup>5</sup> Thomas, an American journalist, accompanied General Edmund Allenby in Palestine, where he met Lawrence in Jerusalem in 1918. He brought his New York travelogue, 'With Allenby in Palestine', to London in 1919 and put on a multimedia show, which introduced Lawrence to the public using film slide material and narrative commentary; he presented Lawrence in Arab dress.<sup>6</sup> The show, which played at the Royal Opera House and the Royal Albert Hall among other major venues in London, proved very popular; over a million spectators were said to have seen it by November 1919.<sup>7</sup> Lawrence publicly distanced himself from it and refused to give it a personal endorsement, although it may have half-appealed to him as he was spotted attending the show quietly on a few occasions.<sup>8</sup>

The image of 'Lawrence of Arabia' in Thomas's staged creation remained an icon of Orientalist exoticism that continued to fascinate the public, despite its bearer's own ambivalence about it. In an attempt to become his 'own judge',<sup>9</sup> Lawrence presented his 'personal narrative' of the events of the Arab Revolt in his masterpiece, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922). Lawrence's admittedly subjective narrative was a sophisticated literary bid to rectify Thomas's sensationalist creation; yet in the book, much like in Thomas's slideshow, Lawrence's self-fashioning as a hybrid Anglo-Arab sheikh remains one of the most prominent features of the hero of the work. This is echoed in David Lean's cinematic adaptation of the myth of the 'blond Bedouin' in his famous 1962 production of *Lawrence of Arabia*, which was digitally re-mastered in 2012. Peter O'Toole's re-enactment of T.E. Lawrence's role in the Arab Revolt in the film is encapsulated through reimagining the latter's desert campaign, in which the iconic Arab robes become a powerful signifier of the hybridity of the figure of the 'English sheikh'. The undying resonance of the image of 'Lawrence of Arabia' stems from Lawrence's endeavour to create a composite persona by putting

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, p. 6.

on an elaborate act of cultural cross-dressing that stands in contrast with the lack of any attempt to conceal his stereotypically Nordic features. The result is an uncanny figure of a seemingly displaced 'blond Bedouin', defiantly posing as an 'English sheikh'.

Lawrence's Oriental masquerade, which articulates his 'Arabness' by half-heartedly attempting to camouflage his Englishness, is the greatest marker of his much-celebrated hybridity; indeed, this is echoed in Thomas's above-mentioned quotation, where the emphasis is not merely on Lawrence's 'magnificent royal robes', but on the pronounced racial features of this 'mysterious prince of Mecca': it is precisely the striking juxtaposition of the impeccable Arab dress and the strong ethnic features of this blond-haired, blue-eyed Englishman, whose immaculate masquerade made no attempt to disguise his ethnic background. This attire-based hybridity characterises much of Lawrence's self-fashioning throughout his interaction with the Arab Orient, before and during the First World War, as I will show in the course of this article.

It is important to situate Lawrence within a particular tradition of masquerade in Orientalist discourse. Lawrence was, by no means, the first Orientalist to resort to disguise while travelling in the Arab East. There is a well-established history of earlier Orientalists who not only masked their Western identities, but also passed for 'true' Orientals. One can think of Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890), who had a very successful career of dressing up and travelling in parts of India and the Arab world. Burton is remarkable for going on pilgrimage in 1853 to Mecca, where he performed the Islamic rite of Hajj under the elaborate disguise of his Muslim persona, Hajji Abdullah, a hybrid Arab-Iranian. Burton's linguistic skills as well as his sophisticated disguise techniques enabled him to 'pass' as a genuine Muslim-Oriental and earned his persona the title of '*Hajji*', or pilgrim. Burton published his account of the Hajj experience, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, in two volumes in 1856. Unlike Lawrence, Burton was a linguist, who possessed a native-like fluency in Oriental languages and dialects; he dyed his skin with henna and even circumcised himself in order to fully embrace the body and appearance of an 'authentic' Muslim Oriental. One can also think of Jane Digby (1807-1881), an English aristocrat, who embarked on a series of scandalous affairs and marriages, the last of which was in Syria, where she married an Arab sheikh, learnt Arabic and adopted Arab dress. Digby befriended Richard Burton and his wife, Isabel, when Burton was the British consul at Damascus. Another Orientalist, who is more contemporary with Lawrence, is Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904). Eberhardt similarly adopted the male persona of Si Mahmoud Essadi and travelled as a Muslim man in North Africa at the *fin de siècle*, enabling her to achieve a double act of racial 'passing' and gender cross-dressing. More recently, one can think of Sir Wilfred Thesiger (1910-2003), also known as Mubarak bin London, whose passion for the Arabian desert drove him to adopt Arab dress and famously cross the inhospitable Rub' al-Khali (Empty Quarter) in Arabia twice, between 1946 and 1948.

There is indeed no shortage of Orientalists whose attraction to the Arab East led them to adopt Arab custom and costume; yet Lawrence belongs to a particular category of Orientalist writers who, in the words of Iran Jewett, 'used the Near East not as an area but as a literary theme'.<sup>10</sup> Tabachnick points out that the tradition of Anglo-Arab travel writing began with William Kinglake's *Eothon* (1844) and recurred in other writers' works: 'By making the writer more important than what he sees during his travels, Kinglake developed a literary technique inherited by Charles Doughty, author of the monumental *Travels in Arabia Deserta* [(1888)], and by T.E. Lawrence, whose epic of Arabian adventures, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, becomes a searing confession of character'.<sup>11</sup> Doughty, whose book greatly influenced Lawrence, would also touch upon an important point that seems to strike resonance with Lawrence's approach to the Arab East: the tendency to present the Arab Orient as an alternative reality to the 'unsatisfactory' conditions in British society. Doughty admitted in 1913 that 'The *Arabia Deserta* volumes had necessarily a personal tone. A principal cause of writing them was besides the interest of the Semitic life in tents, my dislike of the Victorian English; and I wished to show and thought I might be able to show, that there was something else'.<sup>12</sup>

This chimes with much of Lawrence's approach to the Arab East. It is worth pointing out that Lawrence was to be credited with much of the enthusiasm surrounding the rediscovery of Doughty's book in 1921, when he wrote an introduction to a new edition of *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, praising it as 'one of the greatest prose works in the English language, and the best travel book in the world'.<sup>13</sup> Lawrence's own book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, published a year later, bears significant signs of influence from Doughty's style, positioning him within the continuum of Anglo-Arab travel writing. The literary travelogues of these Orientalists share a romanticised vision of the Arab East that does not necessarily depict it factually, despite their narrative authority as 'Arabian travellers'. Michael Foss writes:

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<sup>10</sup> Jewett (1964), cited in Tabachnick, 'Two "Arabian" Romantics: Charles Doughty and T.E. Lawrence', p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Tabachnick, 'Two "Arabian" Romantics', p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Tabachnick, 'Two "Arabian" Romantics', p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

Those who followed Burton's guide were likely to enter into a world of subtle unreality designed to satisfy a poet's need ... Arabia continued to be illumined by the poet's shifting light. For the rest of the nineteenth century, the men who informed England most successfully of the frontier land were poets all - Palgrave, Blunt and Doughty ... Perhaps the English public could accept no other presentation; for whereas explorers of unknown countries started with few preconceptions, the Arabian traveller from Europe took with him the historical memories of over a thousand years of conflict with Islam. He necessarily entered into the 'fabled' land of the Arabian Nights.<sup>14</sup>

Although Lawrence belongs to this group of Anglo-Arab travel writers, aspects of his intricate relationship with the Arab East set him apart from many of his fellow Orientalists. His complex use of Oriental masquerade signifies many of these differences, as does his rendition of the role of Islam in the Arab nationalist movement, as argued later in this article.

Lawrence's Sharifian robes remain the hallmark of the hybrid figure of 'Lawrence of Arabia' and the embodiment of Anglo-Arab collaboration in the First World War. What is less remembered, however, is the series of various Levantine costumes with which Lawrence experimented in his pre-War expedition in Syria. In what follows, I will explore Lawrence's pre-War experimentalism with local Syrian attire and situate his social conduct and self-fashioning within the trajectory of political events that led up to the region's ushering into the First World War. The aim is to highlight the connection between Lawrence's pre-War forms of masquerade and his nominal coronation in the Arab Revolt as a 'prince of Mecca', dressed up in Feisal's Sharifian robes.<sup>15</sup>

### **Crusaders' Citadels and the 'Unchanging East'**

Lawrence's attraction to the Arab East began well before the War; in 1909, he was roaming parts of the Levant studying the architecture of the Crusaders' citadels in Syria and Lebanon. This study would eventually win him a distinction for his undergraduate thesis at Oxford, in which he proved that 'all that was good in Crusading architecture hailed from France and Italy'.<sup>16</sup> His discovery 'overturned the prevailing assumption that Crusade castles had borrowed stylistically from the Byzantine East'.<sup>17</sup> The roots of Lawrence's obsession with medieval culture, however, can be traced back to his boyhood. From mastering brass-rubbing to touring parts of England and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Prince Feisal bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi (1885-1933) is one of Sharif Hussein's four sons. He played a vital role in the Arab Revolt and led his father's Arab army. Lawrence and Feisal's cooperation in the Revolt was behind much of its success.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p.56.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



France in search of traces of medieval antiquarian objects and castles, Lawrence's passionate interest turned into a zealous study, which, in the words of Lawrence James, 'fused the romantic with the intellectual'.<sup>18</sup> There had also been a literary aspect to this interest; apart from his childhood passion for Tennyson's Arthurian verse, Lawrence was particularly drawn to the chivalric literature of early and high medieval France. This literary fascination with medieval chivalric culture remained with him even when he was in combat in the Arab Revolt – Lawrence's companion in the desert campaign was a 'small red book': Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.<sup>19</sup>

It is important, however, to emphasise the scholarly basis of Lawrence's initial encounter with the Arab East, which is often overshadowed by his role in the Arab Revolt. It was Dr David Hogarth, the prominent British archaeologist, who spotted Lawrence's gift and introduced him to the Levant to conduct his research in the first place. Hogarth, who believed that Lawrence was 'more at home in the past',<sup>20</sup> was also aware of the advantage of employing Lawrence's scholarly expertise and natural appetite for historical research in another archaeological expedition in northern Syria shortly before the outbreak of the First World War: this period saw the height of European imperial rivalry over the archaeology of the Near East. German archaeologists capitalised on the growing relations between the German Kaiser and the Ottoman Empire and started digging for their research on the ancient Hittite civilisation at Karkamis,<sup>21</sup> a small town on the Syrian-Turkish border. Hogarth, who believed that the 'ancient monuments' of the Near East 'conspicuously exalt[ed] the past at the expense of the present',<sup>22</sup> wanted to ensure that the British would have their share of this excavation effort at the site. Thanks to Hogarth, Lawrence joined the site shortly before the War, where he also learnt much about the conditions of the local Syrian peasantry.

Lawrence's scholarly sojourn in Syria provided a double gateway into the Levant's ancient history as well as its contemporary social and political reality; his academic interest in the region's distant past was to take a turn as his social interaction with the locals began to shape his future conduct upon the outbreak of the War. The insight that Lawrence gained in Syria had a great impact on the trajectory of his Oriental venture, which effectively turned from a learning expedition into a military campaign; it was to transform the geopolitics of Ottoman Syria and usher the region

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<sup>18</sup> James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Garnett, *The Essential T. E. Lawrence*, pp. 17-18. This observation was made by Sergeant W.H. Brook, who witnessed Lawrence's conduct in the Arab Revolt. Lawrence makes references to reading Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* while in the desert campaign, in *Seven Pillars*.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> On his historic visit to Damascus in 1898, the Kaiser declared, 'The Sultan and the three hundred million Muslims who revere him as their leader should know that the German Emperor is their friend forever' (cited in Barr, p.10).

Interestingly, the Kaiser 'gave the city an overblown gilt wreath to bolt on to the tomb of Saladin, the Muslim warrior lionised for defeating the Crusaders seven centuries before' (Barr, p.10).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

into the modern era by the end of the First World War. Lawrence's scholarly sojourn in the Levant is contextualised within the encroachment of European modernity on the one hand, and Orientalism's romanticisation of the East's connection with the past, on the other. The imperial-led epistemological enquiry into Middle-Eastern archaeology at the turn of the century can be seen similarly: a trip into 'antiquity' that had been preserved in the museum of the 'Unchanging East'. The notion of the 'Unchanging East' recurs frequently in Orientalist literature and often bears romantic and nostalgic connotations, particularly for Arabian travel writers. As Edward Said argues, 'The Orient [...] existed as a set of values attached, not to modern realities, but to a series of valorised contacts it had had with a distant European past'.<sup>23</sup> This statement would bear special resonance for Lawrence: his initial object of research, the Crusaders' military architecture in the Levant, was an obvious reminder of these 'valorised contacts' the Muslim Orient had had with a 'distant European past'. Lawrence's escape to the 'Unchanging East', which is fundamentally connected to his scholarly and literary interest in medieval culture and literature, remains, partially at least, a romantic, nostalgic flight from European modernity.

The political reality of Lawrence's contemporary East, however, was very different from that of the medieval period, in which Crusaders fought Saracens over the Holy Land: 'Lawrence was the chance witness to a society in its last days',<sup>24</sup> as power relations between the contemporary empires were being reshuffled and rearranged on new political – not religious – lines. In 1909, Lawrence had already learnt about the dreams and ambitions of Arab nationalists for a partnership with the Turks, even independence.<sup>25</sup> His Arabic tutor, Fareeda al-Akle, provided him with an important insight into the aspirations of Arab nationalists in Syria at the time.<sup>26</sup> Lawrence also learnt about the socio-economic structure of Syrian society, whereby the 'ancient rights' of feudal landlords had been protected under Ottoman rule, adding to the misery of the local peasantry. As a medievalist, Lawrence saw parallels between the helpless conditions of the Syrian peasants and those of medieval European society.<sup>27</sup> These social injustices triggered an interesting reaction in Lawrence, the learned medievalist-turned-Orientalist, as he began to envisage himself as 'a

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<sup>23</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> James, *The Golden Warrior*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> The history of the Arab anti-Ottoman nationalist movement is far more complex than can be related here; however, it ought to be pointed out that not all nationalists sought independence from the Ottoman Empire; decentralisation was a desirable solution for some; nonetheless, the quick progression of events and Ottoman crackdown on the Levantine intelligentsia and their literary and cultural societies, which culminated in the execution of 15 activists in Beirut in 1914, persuaded many that independence was inevitable. See Hourani (2005) and Choueiri (2005) for an overview on Levantine intelligentsia and Arab nationalists and their demands in relation to the unity of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

guardian justiciar',<sup>28</sup> and a 'local squire'.<sup>29</sup> He wrote to his parents in 1911: 'I feel on my native heath [...] and am on the pitch of settling in a new Carcemish as a sheikh'.<sup>30</sup> His brother, Will, who visited him in 1913, observed how he had become 'a great lord in this place'.<sup>31</sup> There is evidence to suggest that Lawrence may have genuinely cared about the welfare of the local Syrian peasantry; however, his ability and willingness to 'help' is fundamentally connected to his privileged status as an Orientalist scholar, whose attraction to Middle-Eastern archaeology is fuelled by a medieval chivalric fantasy that induces much of his self-imposed estrangement from Europe and modernity.

Lawrence's engagement in the political and socio-economic conditions of late-Ottoman Syria signals a desire to move beyond the confinement of his academic endeavour and merge into a scene, reminiscent of aspects of European medieval society. Lawrence's assimilation into Syrian society is carefully orchestrated, however; his assumption of the role of the 'local squire' sheds light on latent tendencies that would soon come to full fruition as he embraces the role of 'co-leader' in the Arab Revolt. It is important to note the set of contextual circumstances that triggered Lawrence's metamorphosis from a 'passive' scholar into an 'active' soldier: while the outbreak of the First World War created the ideal conditions for Lawrence to fuse the heightening of anti-Ottoman sentiment with his personal chivalric fantasy, his awareness of the aspirations and contextual circumstances of Arab nationalism rekindled another childhood fascination; Lawrence had been captivated by nationalist movements since he was a schoolboy. At school, he learnt about the unification of Italy in the 1860s;<sup>32</sup> he was later to express his desire of wanting 'to be at the mainspring of a national movement'.<sup>33</sup> In fact, this was one of the reasons he gave when asked why he took part in the Arab Revolt.<sup>34</sup> In short, it was a peculiar combination of circumstantial factors that triggered Lawrence's metamorphosis from scholar to soldier. Yet this transformation is a gradual process; a closer examination of his pre-War expedition and interaction with the local population in Syria exposes particular threads that seem to correlate with his wartime self-fashioning in Arabia. Lawrence's conduct in pre-War Syria bears homoerotic connotations that would also offer an insight into much of his behaviour in the Arab Campaign as well as his

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 40. This was the fourth reason Lawrence gave to George Kidston when the latter asked him about the rationale for his close involvement in the Arab Revolt. Lawrence referred to it as 'intellectual curiosity' as opposed to his first 'personal' reason - his liking for a 'particular Arab', as will be explained later in this paper.

inclination to various forms of Oriental disguise, which accompanied and signalled his gradual integration into the Oriental scene.

### **Lawrence's Masquerade: An Uncovering of Desire**

This section explores the homoerotic connotations in Lawrence's adoption of masquerade, which culminate in his final embodiment of the figure of 'Lawrence of Arabia' in the iconic Sharifian dress. Examining his less-known pre-War forms of Oriental attire, however, shows how his early inclination to cultural cross-dressing had been characterised with a touch of the homoerotic from the beginning. Lawrence's sexuality has been subject to much scrutiny and speculation. He was close to a circle of Uranian poets at Oxford: Leonard Green, Lord Alfred Douglas and F.W. Rolfe. The Uranians, a largely clandestine group of poets, wrote between the mid-nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Older men's attraction to adolescent boys' innocence and sensuality were recurrent themes featuring in their poetry, which was inspired by an idealised vision of pederasty in Ancient Greece. Lawrence included two Uranian pieces in his collected anthology of minor poetry in the 1920s.<sup>35</sup>

Many scholars have speculated on Lawrence's homosexual inclinations; his views on homosexuality (and sexuality in general), however, remain rather ambiguous, if not contradictory at times. What is indisputable, nonetheless, is the strong homoerotic undertones in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; certain passages provide striking portrayals of erotic tension characterising the Arab fighters' intimate interaction on the battlefield. Lawrence's depiction of Arab homo-sociality is unmistakably homoerotic: it glorifies the men's solidarity while stressing its purity and spontaneity; he links this form of 'sublime' same-sex desire with the 'noble' cause of the Arab nationalist movement. Relevant to this is his rendition of gender relations in Arabia; Lawrence elevates male intimate camaraderie above what he regards as the practicality of heterosexual marriage:

The Arab was by nature continent; and the use of universal marriage had nearly abolished irregular courses in his tribes. The public women of the rare settlements we encountered in our months of wandering would have been nothing to our numbers, even had their raddled meat been palatable to a man of healthy parts. In horror of such sordid commerce our youth began indifferently to slake one another's few needs in their own clean bodies – a cold convenience that, by comparison, seemed sexless, even pure. Later, some began to justify this sterile process, and swore that friends quivering together in the yielding sand

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<sup>35</sup> See James (pp. 34-38) for details on Lawrence's Uranian-inclined acquaintances and themes of interest.

with intimate hot limbs in supreme embrace, found there hidden in the darkness a sensual co-efficient of the mental passion which was welding our souls and spirits in one flaming effort. Several, thirsting to punish appetites they could not whole prevent, took a savage pride in degrading the body, and offered themselves fiercely in any habit which promised physical pain or filth.<sup>36</sup>

The collective articulation of homoerotic desire in the Arab army renders the men's fellowship self-gratifying and autoerotic. Lawrence presents gender segregation as a 'cultural particularity', which he uses to support his discursive imbuelement of the homoerotic with the heroic: the banishment of women seems to strengthen the nationalist unity of this all-male fellowship of freedom fighters. Lawrence's fusion of the heroic and the homoerotic, however, is best illustrated in the micro-narrative of Daud and Farraj, the two Arab boys who join the Arab campaign uninvited and die heroically in action; the boys' anecdote epitomises Lawrence's celebration of 'the Eastern boy and boy affection'.<sup>37</sup>

Lawrence conversely condemns homosexual behaviour in the Ottoman army and regards it as a sign of the latter's degeneration, savagery and cruelty; James observes that '[f]or the Turks, Lawrence had nothing but vilification':

An intemperate and bitter hatred of the Turks runs throughout the *Seven Pillars* which is unequalled in any other account of the war on this front. While he could have found abundant support for his views from the well-known evidence of the Armenian massacre, Lawrence chose to base his vituperation on a bogus assertion that half the Turkish army was infected with venereal diseases transmitted by sodomy.<sup>38</sup>

Lawrence seems to assign paradoxical values to same-sex desire: on the one hand, it can be 'elevating' and 'sublime' when combined with the 'heroic' fight for nationalist struggle; on the other, it can signify 'degeneration', 'aggression' and 'moral decay' when practised by an imperial army seeking to suppress a people's 'just' rebellion. Homosexuality, for Lawrence, can signify contradictory values that are subjectively determined by a set of contextual circumstances; this is echoed in his rendition of his rape by the Ottoman Bey at Dera'a. The infamous episode, in which he is allegedly captured, tortured and raped, is presented in explicit, pornographic-like detail; it

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<sup>36</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Loc. 3277-86. See Alkabani (2016) for an analysis of Lawrence's fusion of the heroic and the homoerotic in the micro-narrative of Daud and Farraj.

<sup>38</sup> James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 74.

offers an alternative insight into what 'homosexuality' may also denote to Lawrence.<sup>39</sup> It is worth pointing out that the ambivalence surrounding Lawrence's views on homosexuality is echoed in his attitude towards sex and sexuality in general; Lawrence would often shrink from physical sex and liken it to other bodily functions. Robert Graves believed that Lawrence had no sexual experience by the time he joined the RAF after the War;<sup>40</sup> yet, later in his life, Lawrence was reported to have hired a Scotsman to beat him across his naked buttocks until he ejaculated in an act that exposes masochistic tendencies, whose roots may have originated in his alleged rape during the War.<sup>41</sup>

It would be reasonable to contend that Lawrence's sexuality is complex and unorthodox in many ways; the homoerotic overtones in *Seven Pillars* highlight his intrigue in homosexual experiences, which, for him and for other Orientalists, seemed more freely available in the Arab East. Where Lawrence's narrative differs, however, is in its discursive linkage of the homoerotic with the heroic in his depiction of gender relations, homo-sociality and nationalist struggle in wartime Arabia on the one hand, and contrasting that with the imperial aggression of the Ottoman army, which was translated into sexual and sadistic terms, on the other.

Lawrence's wartime experiences may have been formative in that they probably influenced his sexual orientation, although allusions to his Uranian interests had already manifested themselves prior to his engagement in the War. Lawrence befriended Selim Ahmad, or Dahoum, a 14-year-old Syrian 'donkey-boy', who was employed at the digging site in Karkamis. Dahoum stood out from the other labourers as he could read and write; Lawrence admired him and took him as a servant and a travelling companion: the two went on a cruise along the Syrian coast. Lawrence took Dahoum with him to England in 1913 and showed him off to his friends who 'were much taken by his beauty'; one of them commissioned a painting of the boy.<sup>42</sup> Lawrence erected a naked statue of Dahoum on the roof of his house at Karkamis after convincing him to pose naked – an incident that scandalised the villagers.<sup>43</sup> It was through Dahoum that Lawrence was first

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<sup>39</sup> The historicity of this episode is in much doubt, due to discrepancies between Lawrence's account and other sources (Barr, pp. 193-197). Aldrich (2003) has misgivings on Lawrence's ability to escape and reach safety three hundred miles away, considering the alleged seriousness of his wounds; he also points out that there had been no report of the incident in British military sources (p. 78). Whether Lawrence was really raped or not is immaterial, however: *Seven Pillars* is meant to be his 'personal narrative' of the events of the Arab campaign. As far as Lawrence's psychosexual fantasies are concerned, the episode represents an important differentiation in his portrayal of Oriental homosexuality, highlighting the multitude of significances it held and the discursive way in which he presented it.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 35. Graves concluded that Lawrence did not know how to 'fuck'. See James (p.35) for analysis of Lawrence's strict upbringing and its impact on his sexuality.

<sup>41</sup> See Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 69.

introduced to Oriental cross-dressing when the pair exchanged attire for the first time:<sup>44</sup> an act that marked the beginning of Lawrence's experimentation with Oriental costume (see Figure 2 below).



Figure 2: *Dahoum and Lawrence Exchanging Attire*. Figure 2a (left) *Arab Water Boy*: Dahoum dressed in his local attire, holding Lawrence's pistol. Figure 2b (right): Lawrence dressed up in Dahoum's attire. The original photographs are in the British Library, London:

© The British Library Board, Add. 50584 A, photo 115

© The British Library Board, Add. 50584 A, 116.

The exact nature of Lawrence's relationship with Dahoum has been subject to much speculation. James argues that 'Dahoum was to Lawrence as a squire was to a knight',<sup>45</sup> while Aldrich contends that the pair grew 'inseparable', suggesting a romantic and physical bonding between the couple.<sup>46</sup> The extent to which the couple's relationship may have been romantic (and how that may have manifested itself) remains subject to conjecture; it would be difficult, nonetheless, to disregard the Uranian undertones enshrouded in it. Lawrence's love for Dahoum is

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>46</sup> Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, p. 75.

explicitly declared in the opening poem in *Seven Pillars*, dedicated to the boy's memory: he died prematurely before Lawrence and the Arab army reached Damascus in 1918. The poignant poem, which laments the youth's death, has been described as 'one of the most moving tributes to young love ever written'.<sup>47</sup> Tracing Lawrence's deep affection for Dahoum in the poem would also tally with Robert Graves's statement about Dahoum being the 'only person with whom he [Lawrence] had ever been in love'.<sup>48</sup>

The nature of Lawrence's love towards Dahoum is rather complex. Dahoum seemed to represent Lawrence's vision of the Arab national struggle and the aspirations of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism at large. Lawrence admits that one of the reasons for his participation in the Arab Revolt was because he 'liked a particular Arab [Dahoum] very much and thought that freedom for the race would be an acceptable present'.<sup>49</sup> Lawrence cared for Dahoum's education and provided him with learning materials, 'contaminated' by western ideas. Lawrence wanted to preserve Dahoum's 'innocence', for he despised what he called 'the perfectly helpless vulgarity of the half-Europeanised Arab' and thought it was 'appalling':<sup>50</sup> 'Better a thousand times, the Arab untouched. The foreigners come out here always to teach, whereas they had very much better learn, for in everything but wits and knowledge, the Arab is generally the better man of the two'.<sup>51</sup> This attitude typifies imperial authority and the Orientalist's desire to represent, decide and speak for the Oriental; notwithstanding, it tallies with the Lawrence's emphasis on preserving a particular vision of the Arab East and preventing modernity from corrupting it. It also represents aspects of his integration in the scene he had been studying and his attempt to maintain its historical continuity, albeit with the 'right' amendments stipulated by a personal vision: the focus was to conserve the 'Unchanging East' and protect it from the 'monstrous' encroachment of European modernity, from which he, himself, had fled in the first place.

Lawrence's adoption of local costume after his sartorial exchange with Dahoum signals his desire to metamorphose from a detached European scholar into an engaged 'Syrian chieftain', whose new appearance is a clear indicator of whom and what he wants to be seen as. Capitalising on his imperial privilege, this hybrid 'Orientalist-Chieftain' was determined to 'ameliorate' the social and political conditions for 'his' adoptive people; on one occasion, Lawrence challenged the

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<sup>47</sup> Asher, cited in Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, p. 77.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in James, *The Golden Warrior*, p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



bullying of the German overseers who had beaten Dahoum when the latter asked for his pay; Lawrence was successful in obtaining an apology after threatening to 'thrash' the individual responsible.<sup>52</sup>

Lawrence's behaviour was quite untypical of the general conduct of British colonial officials from his background: the thought of dressing up as an Arab was simply out of the question for most British officers. Cyril Wilson, Britain's appointed Pilgrimage Officer at Jeddah in 1916, was horrified at Sherif Hussein's suggestion that he should wear the Arab attire he was given while travelling out of town. In a letter to Sir Reginald Wingate, High Commissioner of Egypt (1916-1919), Wilson conceded: 'The Sharif is sending me down a silk scarf and the Bedouin rope thing which I will wear over my helmet [...] [But] I absolutely refuse to disguise myself as an Arab [...] If I'm scuppered I propose to be scuppered in my own uniform'.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, another British officer, Major Herbert Garland, found Arab dress to be more of a hindrance; Garland reportedly described the Arab clothing as 'most annoying and encumbering', having discovered that the 'slightest breeze caused the ends of his headscarf to flick the cigarettes out of his mouth'.<sup>54</sup>

Lawrence, on the other hand, genuinely embraced the idea of dressing up in local costume. Picking on his peculiar inclination to Oriental attire, Mrs Winfred Fontana, the wife of the British Consul at Aleppo, wrote of Lawrence's appearance among the Arabs and Kurds in the city:

Lawrence cast off much of his absorbed and discomforting aloofness, together with his visiting clothes and, clad in shirts and a buttonless shirt held together with a gaudy Kurdish belt, looked what he was: a young man of rare power and considerable physical beauty. The belt was fastened on the left hip with a huge bunch of many-coloured tassels, symbol, plain to all Arabs, that he was seeking a wife. I have not seen such gold hair before – nor such intensely blue eyes.<sup>55</sup>

Lawrence's exuberant self-fashioning automatically sets him apart from the average imperial officer. Mrs Fontana's account provides an earlier insight into aspects of Lawrence's masquerade technique; the ebullience, exuberance and flamboyance implicit in the iconic image of 'Lawrence of Arabia' can be traced back to this instance of pre-War experimentation with Oriental dress. Mrs Fontana, much like Lowell Thomas (cited at the opening of this article), seems mesmerised by the striking paradoxes in the uncanny figure of the 'Anglo-Oriental' hybrid, whose selective accentuation of certain elements in his Oriental outfit is bluntly juxtaposed with his prominent racial

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Garnett, *The Essential T. E. Lawrence*, p. 15.

features (golden hair, intensively blue eyes); both writers' bewilderment stems from the visual polarisation between the traditional costume and its outlandish wearer.

The various forms of Lawrence's masquerade derive their striking power from the exaggerated gap between the wearer's immaculate attention to detail in assembling the Oriental disguise and the lack of any attempt to camouflage his ethnic background. The outcome of this elaborate effort is not a well-disguised Englishman, but a flamboyantly dressed-up English eccentric, flaunting a carefully choreographed 'fancy dress'. The iconic image of 'Lawrence of Arabia', which epitomises Lawrence's experimentalism with Oriental costume, speaks for itself: what it denotes, however, is far from a convincing emulation of what an Arabian fighter looks like; instead, it showcases an ostentatiously dressed-up English maverick, who stands out in every way. Lawrence's masquerade is not an attempt to disguise his English identity; it is a defiant celebration of his Anglo-Arab hybridity, which serves to undermine narratives of imperial superiority. Lawrence, as an agent of empire, was in a privileged position that paradoxically afforded him such liberties, permitting him to choreograph his self-fashioning; his choice to celebrate his hybridity positions him, nonetheless, in direct opposition to conventional colonial notions of European racial and cultural superiority, as is indeed manifested by his fellow officers.

Unlike the indifference (if not hostility), which would typically characterise the relationship and dealings between European officers and the indigenous populations, Lawrence was received and perceived differently. This is evident in the accounts of the Arabs he befriended before and during his engagement in the Arab Revolt. Dahoum reportedly said to Fareeda al-Akle, Lawrence's Arabic tutor in Syria:

You ask why we love Lawrence? and who can help loving him? He is our brother, our friend, and leader. He is one of us, there is nothing we do he cannot do, and he even excels us in doing it. He takes such an interest in us and cares for our welfare. We respect him and greatly admire his courage and bravery: we love him because he loves us and we would lay down our lives for him.<sup>56</sup>

Lawrence's legacy remained intact in the Levant, even after his death in 1935. This is illustrated in the affectionate way with which he was remembered by Sheikh Hamoudi of Aleppo, the foreman at the digging site in Karkamis; upon hearing of Lawrence's death, the Sheikh expressed his grief in the following statement:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

Oh! If only he had died in battle! I have lost my son, but I do not grieve for him as I do for Lawrence ... I am counted brave, the bravest of my tribe; my heart is iron, but his was steel. A man whose hand was never closed, but open. Tell them ... tell them in England what I say. Of manhood the man, in freedom free; a mind without equal; I can see no flaw in him.<sup>57</sup>

The fondness afforded Lawrence gives him a unique position. The extent to which his adoptive costume may have played a role in this may be debatable; however, it forms an important part of his idiosyncratic self-fashioning, through which he gained the trust of his Arab friends and defied colonial attitudes and protocols of inter-racial relations.

There is an inherently subversive strand in Lawrence's unconventional manipulation of Oriental masquerade. Unlike other Orientalists, for whom cultural cross-dressing meant a full disguise, Lawrence's assumption of Oriental dress was more of an experiment with inter-cultural crossbreeding, which granted him a multifaceted sense of agency unparalleled by other Orientalists. The afore-mentioned Sir Richard Burton was able to go undercover and inhabit an Oriental persona almost perfectly, thanks to his 'immaculate' disguise; however, he had to switch between the two, his English self and his Oriental 'alter ego', Hajji Abdullah. One can also think of the conventional use of disguise in Orientalist literature; E.M. Hull's *The Sheikh* (1919) is a fine example of a desert romance illustrating the freedoms and seductions offered by Oriental masquerade. Set in the Algerian desert, the novel depicts the story of Diana Mayo, a well-to-do young Englishwoman, who is seduced and abducted by Sheikh Ahmed Ben Hassan, a local 'Arab' chieftain, who turns out to be the son of an English aristocrat. An unconventional woman, Diana finds the 'civilised passivity' of European men unattractive; she is, instead, attracted to the Arab Sheikh's 'primitive savagery', even when he imprisons her and rapes her repeatedly. Diana and Ahmed fall in love in the course of the novel, but she is shocked when she realises that Ahmed is actually English, which strips him from the 'exotic allure' and hyper-masculinity that attracted her to him in the first place. Elizabeth Gargano argues that Ahmed's eventual acknowledgement of his English identity somehow diminishes him; she highlights the significance of his Arab disguise in allowing him to play a role that is somehow interrupted when his cover is blown.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Gargano, 'English Sheikhs and Arab Stereotypes', pp. 182-183

Unlike the fictional Sheikh Ahmed and the 'true' impersonator Richard Burton, Lawrence need not choose between his English self and an Oriental persona; he is, for the most part, able to 'exist' pluralistically and 'act' simultaneously as an 'Arab' and an 'Englishman'. This unconventional rendition of Oriental masquerade challenges the traditional meaning and functionality of disguise and affords him exceptional liberties, which he uses strategically. Lawrence is, nevertheless, aware of the 'imperfection' of his outfit and the paradoxes imbedded in it:

In my case, the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was affection only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith.<sup>59</sup>

Cross-dressing complicates Lawrence's agency endowing him with a comparative perspective, which renders him more critical and cynical.<sup>60</sup>

Despite his scepticism, Lawrence is conscious of the strategic usefulness of his hybridity, whose symbolic significance denotes wider political implications: Lawrence's celebrated Sharifian dress is in fact Prince Feisal's own royal wedding garment, which was sent to him by his aunt in Mecca. Consequently, Lawrence's embracing of the matrimonial garment can be read as a symbolic declaration of the metaphorical marriage of British imperialism and Arab nationalism, brought together by the hybrid figure of 'Lawrence of Arabia'. Lawrence recalls the moment he was offered Feisal's wedding garment in *Seven Pillars*:

Suddenly Feisal asked me if I would wear Arab clothes like his own while in the camp. I should find it better for my own part, since it was a comfortable dress in which to live Arab-fashion as we must do. Besides, the tribesmen would then understand how to take me. The only wearers of khaki in their experience had been Turkish officers, before whom they took up an instinctive defence. If I wore Meccan clothes, they would behave to me as though I were really one of the leaders; and I might slip in and out of Feisal's tent without making a sensation which he had to explain away each time to strangers. I agreed at once, very gladly; for army uniform was abominable when camel-riding or when sitting about on the ground; and the Arab things, which I had learned to manage before the war, were cleaner and more decent in the desert. Hejris was pleased, too, and exercised his fancy in fitting me out in splendid white silk and gold-embroidered wedding garments which had been sent

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<sup>59</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p. 10

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence's scepticism also tallies with his views on Islam: while he never converted to Islam, Lawrence was generally appreciative of its historical role and symbolic value for the Arab nationalist movement. Lawrence makes references to certain occasions on which he prayed with the Arab army in *Seven Pillars*.

to Feisal lately (was it a hint?) by his great-aunt in Mecca. I took a stroll in the new looseness of them round the palm-gardens of Mubarak and Bruka, to accustom myself to their feel.<sup>61</sup>

It is significant that Lawrence draws on his pre-War experience of wearing Oriental clothes as well as the fact that his new attire is identical to that of Prince Feisal, the 'Arab' leader of the Revolt. Lawrence's joy at embracing the Prince's matrimonial outfit is highly symbolic, considering the concurrent reallocation of power relations and the new political alliances in the First World War. Donning the 'splendid white silk and gold-embroidered wedding garment' created a remarkable 'English sheikh' (a hybrid) and helped Lawrence fashion his multifaceted agency in such a way that facilitated this unorthodox political coalition between British imperial interests and Arab nationalist ambitions, despite their divergent narratives, which he strove to balance and embody.<sup>62</sup> Yet it would be equally reasonable to contend that Lawrence indeed manipulated the Arab Revolt as well as his country's imperialist intervention and used them both as a convenient point of convergence for his personal agenda.<sup>63</sup>

Apart from its symbolic political significance, Lawrence's adoption of Prince Feisal's matrimonial dress emanates strong homoerotic overtones that resonate with aspects of his pre-War experimentation with Oriental attire with Dahoum. To be garbed in a man's wedding garment and co-lead an army 'hand-in-hand' with him is playfully suggestive, but to portray the Anglo-Arab political union in terms more suitable for a wedding ceremony is rather daring. Describing Feisal's force's ceremonial march to Wejeh, Lawrence explains how he was taken by the Arabs' style of marching, which was 'rather splendid and barbaric', and the two wings of the Arab army that were taking turns in singing to one another.<sup>64</sup> Lawrence 'rode behind Feisal, dressed in the white wedding clothes and a scarlet headdress'.<sup>65</sup> Behind the Sharifian royally-dressed couple marched a jubilant procession, which, in Lawrence's words, consisted of

three banners of faded crimson silk with gilt spikes, behind them the drummers playing a march, and behind the wild mass of twelve hundred bouncing camels of

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<sup>61</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, Loc. 1568-76.

<sup>62</sup> The the Anglo-Arab coalition against the Ottomans would prove short-lived, thanks to the implementation of the controversial Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided Greater Syria between the British and the French. The existing borders of the current countries in the region are largely the result of this agreement. Of course, this goes against the principals of the Arab Revolt and anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism, whose aim was to secure autonomy for all of those who spoke the Arabic language.

<sup>63</sup> See Ch. 3 in Alkabani's *Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence and the Cult of Homoerotic Desire* (2016) for an analysis of Lawrence's motives in the Arab campaign.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 89.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

bodyguard, packed as closely as they could move, the men in every variety of coloured clothes and the camels nearly as brilliant in their trappings, and the whole crowd singing at the tops of their voices a warsong in honour of Feisal and his family.<sup>66</sup>

The heightened joviality of the all-male crowd underscores the homoerotic overtones in the scene, which is, indeed, reminiscent of a wedding ceremony. This is particularly significant when considering Lawrence's fascination with (if not attraction to) Prince Feisal from the beginning. Lawrence remembers how he was struck by Feisal's charm upon casting sight on him for the first time:

I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to Arabia to seek – the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory. Feisal looked very tall and pillar-like, very slender, in his long white silk robes and his brown head-cloth bound with a brilliant scarlet and gold cord. His eyelids were dropped; and his black beard and colourless face were like a mask against the strange, still watchfulness of his body. His hands were crossed in front of him on his dagger.<sup>67</sup>

Lawrence's portrayal of Prince Feisal is imbued with a touch of the homoerotic, evident in the phallic imagery used (tall, pillar-like, slender, dagger).

Prince Feisal is, nevertheless, his people's 'true' nationalist leader; his Arabian aesthetics and masculinity were the model upon which Lawrence fashioned himself in immaculate detail. By so doing, Lawrence was also experimenting with gender constructions that would become problematically blurred when considered cross-culturally. The Sharifian dress may signify status, nobility and chivalry for the Arabs; however, the 'white silk and gold-embroidered' robes do not quite conform to British ideals of masculinity. Drawing on the connotations of Lawrence's disguise in relation to his identity as a British hero in an 'exotic "Oriental"' locale, Graham Dawson highlights the 'transgression of gender fixities' implied in Lawrence's embodiment of the role of the soldier, 'the most masculine of men', who is also 'elaborately arrayed in flowing skirts'.<sup>68</sup> Lawrence appears to be signifying potentially problematic gender perceptions to his different audiences, the English and the Arabs. Yet he is at ease with his hybrid subjectivity and its paradoxical connotations.

Lawrence's assumption of Oriental attire is replete with subversive transgressions that undermine the hegemony of hetero-normativity, which he achieves by manipulating British imperial interests and Arab nationalist ambitions. From his boyish exchange with Dahoum to his

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<sup>66</sup> Lawrence (1917), cited in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 89.

<sup>67</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, Loc. 1038-41.

<sup>68</sup> Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 167.

metaphorical betrothal to Prince Feisal, Lawrence's adoption of Oriental dress is imbued with striking homoerotic undertones, which paradoxically defy the meaning of disguise. Lawrence's masquerade 'outs' him; his 'cover' uncovers his unorthodox tendencies and grants him an open platform to express and act on his sexual and fantastical inclinations, under the guise of a hybrid 'English sheikh': a self-fashioned diplomatic representative of British and Arab mutual interests.

### **Evolutionary Strands: from the Homoerotic to the Heroic**

Lawrence's conscious self-fashioning after Prince Feisal epitomises his experimentation with Oriental dress: not only does it grant him a powerful symbolic role, but it also bestows pragmatic benefits upon him. Lawrence alludes to his pre-War experience of wearing Arab clothes, indicating their suitability for riding. He is also aware of the significance of attire in determining his acceptability and status among his 'adoptive people'. From embracing the role of a 'local squire' in pre-War rural Syria to becoming the personification of the Anglo-Arab political alliance in the Arab Revolt, Lawrence's claim to success and leadership is partially achieved through his manipulation of Oriental dress and the ways in which he used it to signify his status.

'I want to rub off my British habits', Lawrence tells a colleague.<sup>69</sup> This attitude cannot be further from those of his fellow British officers, whose insistence on dealing with the Arabs and Bedu in strictly colonial ways was behind much of their failure. Barr notes how '[u]nlike Newcombe,<sup>70</sup> who arrived in the Hijaz with the impression he was to be the Arabs' commander-in-chief, Lawrence always knew that he was an adviser, rather than a leader. And he knew that there was no way of changing the Bedu's style of fighting'.<sup>71</sup> He goes on to cite further examples of British officers' frustration at their inability to deal with the Bedu who 'were remarkably intractable':

Henry Hornby reported "a pretty strenuous and exasperating seven days" to Newcombe,<sup>72</sup> in which his Ageyli dynamiters had managed to waste most of their explosives: "How you stuck it for so long, beats me!" Garland was more philosophical:<sup>73</sup> "I am not sure that the taking of Bedouin parties is a white man's job. They always leave you in the lurch." Newcome moaned about his inability as an adviser to enforce any discipline: "A man has but to refuse to do a thing and he is

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<sup>69</sup> Cited in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 102.

<sup>70</sup> Major Stewart Newcombe was the Sinai expedition leader in 1914; he also served with Lawrence in Arabia later.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 116

<sup>72</sup> Henry Hornby was an engineer who joined Newcombe in Arabia.

<sup>73</sup> Herbert Garland, a metallurgist, coordinated the Arabs' defences at Yanbu; he also helped train the Bedu in Hejaz to use explosives (Barr, p. 77).

petted and patted and given *bakhshish*. I am not allowed to punish anyone and cannot send a man back or take away his rifle. Everyone knows this; hence the trouble".<sup>74</sup>

Lawrence faced none of these difficulties, as documented in the testimonies of his fellow senior British officers, who admired his abilities and acknowledged his crucial role in winning the Arab campaign.<sup>75</sup>

The ease with which Lawrence conducted himself was evidently aided by his appearance and the impression he made on those he interacted with. On a personal level, his adoption of Prince Feisal's robes officially announces his metamorphosis from a scholar (in pre-War Syria) to a full-blown soldier in the campaign in Arabia; the elaborately choreographed outfit is also a bold statement intimating much about his inner desires and the ways in which he manipulated the Anglo-Arab alliance in order to advance his personal vision. The garment itself can thus be read in evolutionary terms, in so far as Lawrence's earlier Oriental costumes are concerned. Not unlike his Syrian costumes, the Sharifian outfit did not fully camouflage his Englishness; it did, however, bestow kudos on its wearer, which proved vital in his co-leadership of the Arab rebellion. Barr observes how Lawrence's white silk garment highlighted his special standing among the Bedouins '[...] who dressed in russet, brown and indigo-dyed robes, these [gold-embroidered white silk robes] made Lawrence anything but inconspicuous [...]'.<sup>76</sup> The outfit, Barr argues, was '[...] designed to give Lawrence a status that would make his permanent presence in the camp unquestionable'.<sup>77</sup> The Sharifian dress thus holds a symbolic value, beyond its practical suitability for the desert; it, nonetheless, confers a sense of intrinsic pragmatism on its willing wearer, who coveted to become an 'English sheikh'. This powerful combination of the right attire and desire endows Lawrence with an invaluable insight into tribal Arabian life, which proves vitally functional in his campaign.

Lawrence recites how, having been entrusted with the company of 'queer fellows' by Prince Feisal,<sup>78</sup> he has had to live up to this responsibility and enact the desert's code of justice in the manner of an 'authentic' sheikh. He relates the story of Hamed, the Moor, who shot dead Salem, one of the Ageyl, after a fight broke out between the two men. Weighing up the potential

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<sup>74</sup> Cited in Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 139

<sup>75</sup> Admiration for Lawrence's exceptional abilities can be seen in the remarks of Pierce Joyce, George Lloyds and Cyril Wilson; see Barr (2007, p. 139).

<sup>76</sup> Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, Loc. 2365. Lawrence is referring to the tribal diversity of his travelling party, which consisted of 'four *Rifaa* and one *Merawi Ju-heina* as guides, and Arslan, a Syrian soldier-servant [...]; four *Ageyl*, a Moor, and an *Ateibi*, Suleiman' (Lawrence, *Seven Pillars* Loc. 2365). The party was marching out of Wejh.



consequences of the deed and the endless reprisals the inevitable act of feud killing may trigger, Garbed in Feisal's Sharifian dress, Lawrence decides to revert to tribal law and see to its application in person:

We held a court at once; and after a while Hamed confessed that, he and Salem having had words, he had seen red and shot him suddenly. Our inquiry ended. The Ageyl, as relatives of the dead man, demanded blood for blood. The others supported them; and I tried vainly to talk the gentle Ali round. My head was aching with fever and I could not think; but hardly even in health, with all eloquence, could I have begged Hamed off; for Salem had been a friendly fellow and his sudden murder a wanton crime. Then rose up the horror which would make civilized man shun justice like a plague if he had not the need to serve him as hangmen for wages. There were other Moroccans in our army; and to let the Ageyl kill one in feud meant reprisals by which our unity would have been endangered. It must be a formal execution, and at last, desperately, I told Hamed that he must die for punishment, and laid the burden of his killing on myself. Perhaps they would count me not qualified for feud. At least no revenge could lie against my followers; for I was a stranger and kinless. I made him enter a narrow gully of the spur, a dank twilight place overgrown with weeds. Its sandy bed had been pitted by trickles of water down the cliffs in the late rain. At the end it shrank to a crack a few inches wide. The walls were vertical. I stood in the entrance and gave him a few moments' delay which he spent crying on the ground. Then I made him rise and shot him through the chest. He fell down on the weeds shrieking, with the blood coming out in spurts over his clothes, and jerked about till he rolled nearly to where I was. I fired again, but was shaking so that I only broke his wrist. He went on calling out, less loudly, now lying on his back with his feet towards me, and I leant forward and shot him for the last time in the thick of his neck under the jaw. His body shivered a little, and I called the Ageyl, who buried him in the gully where he was.<sup>79</sup>

Lawrence's enforcement of Arabian tribal code is empowered by his carefully choreographed embodiment of the figure of an Arabian leader. His subtle ambivalence about the actual act of executing Hamed is swiftly dismissed by his determined personification of the figure of a 'sheikh', whose 'native' code of justice proves stronger than the 'civilized man's' horror at the prospect of having to serve justice in person. His acceptance among the Bedouins would be an acknowledgement of his success. Applying the 'blood-for-blood' principle, would, in this instance, be seen as the embodiment of the responsibility assigned to him by Feisal.

Lawrence is aware of the subtle prerequisites of attaining the rank of a 'sheikh'. He is given a golden opportunity, on this occasion, to prove it as Feisal's own appointed aide-de-camp. Contrasting the far easier choice of limiting his company to Newcombe, who preferred to stay in his private tent, Lawrence explains the subtleties of accomplishing the status of an Arabian leader:

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Loc. 2409-32.

'[a]mong the Arabs there were no distinctions, traditional or natural, except the unconscious power given a famous sheikh by virtue of his accomplishment; and they taught me that no man could be their leader except he ate the ranks' food, wore their clothes, lived level with them, and yet appeared better in himself'.<sup>80</sup> Lawrence's yearning to 'appear better in himself' was cleverly choreographed through his hybridity – an 'Arab' sheikh and an Englishman (a foreigner) – which was often manipulated throughout his campaign, proving vitally strategic at times. His insistence on seeing to Hamed's punishment in person sheds light on his exploitation of his 'schizophrenic' agency. Lawrence is capable of enhancing his image as a credible 'sheikh', willing to serve justice, while acknowledging his 'outsider's position', which would prevent an endless cycle of feud killings.

Lawrence's Oriental masquerade is a sophisticated device; he uses it as a two-way communication channel, enabling him to transmit seemingly paradoxical messages to his audiences. From flaunting the 'gaudy' Kurdish costume to his sartorial exchange with Dahoum and eventually adopting Prince Feisal's wedding garment, Lawrence's manipulation of Oriental masquerade emerges with a distinctive pattern that correlates the heroic with the homoerotic. This is especially discernible in his association with Dahoum and Feisal, whose clothes he eagerly adopted. It is important to reiterate the evolutionary significance of Lawrence's use of Oriental attire in relation to articulating his homoerotic desire. Elements of the suggestiveness and erotic tension shrouding Lawrence's relationship with Dahoum in pre-War Syria seem to find their way in his wartime interaction with Prince Feisal. It would be contentious, nevertheless, to suggest that Lawrence's romantic enchantment with Dahoum and Feisal may have amounted to a physical relationship. The only proven bodily contact Lawrence had with both Arabs was an indirect (yet an intimate) one: through cloaking himself in their clothes, Lawrence was taking on a 'second skin' that closely enveloped his own, framing his naked 'European body' with an 'Arab' outline.

Lawrence's desire to be clad in flowing Oriental garbs can also be linked to his animosity towards European modernity and its non-chivalric approach to warfare. Lawrence observes an Arab boy's bewilderment by the British soldiers' uniform. The boy points out the importance of attire for the Arabs and its central role as an identity marker that helps identify every individual in one's tribe. In Lawrence's words, the boy observes how

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<sup>80</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, Loc. 2051-57.

[...] each soldier carried himself apart like a family, and that he felt something of defence in their tight, insufficient clothes and laborious appearance. He was fluttering in skirts, head-cloth and cloak. They had only shirts and shorts, puttees and boots, and the breeze could take no hold on them. Indeed, they had worn these things so long day and night in heat and sweat, busied about the dusty oily cars, that the cloth had set to their bodies, like bark to a tree. Then they were all clean-shaven, and all dressed alike; and his eye, which most often distinguished man from man by clothes, here was baffled by an outward uniformity. To know them apart he must learn their individual, as though naked, shapes. Their food took no cooking, their drink was hot, they hardly spoke to one another; but then a word sent them into fits of incomprehensible crackling laughter, unworthy and inhuman. His belief was that they were my slaves, and that there was little rest or satisfaction in their lives, [...].<sup>81</sup>

Through the boy's narrative, Lawrence presents a valorised comparative assessment that champions the romantic individuality of traditional Arab dress *vis-à-vis* the mechanical uniformity of the modern British army's apparel; his juxtaposition of the two signals the dichotomy between the two worlds. His initial encounter with the Arab East was, after all, a flight from the encroachment of modernity in Europe; his embodiment of the romantic figure of the 'Lawrence of Arabia' was, in the words of Rory Stewart, an attempt to 'be an archaic classical hero in the modern age'.<sup>82</sup>

Whether or not Lawrence succeeded at becoming a 'classical hero' may be debatable; it would be interesting, however, to view the implications of his intervention in the region's politics *vis-à-vis* his initial perspective on the 'Unchanging East'. By manipulating the contextual circumstances and acting upon certain visions and impulses, Lawrence helped facilitate a marriage of convenience between the British and the Arabs in their strategic collaboration against the Ottoman Turks in the First World War. This coalition was to result in the demise of the Ottoman Empire, whose centuries-old religious and ideological ties with the Arabs were shattered by the new constellation of regional power relations on the eve of modernity. This was ironically the very modernity from which Lawrence had escaped in the first place. The end-result of his intervention was, nonetheless, an inevitable change that redrew the map of the region. The extent to which Lawrence has succeeded in fulfilling his personal vision of the Arab Revolt is debatable: although he took part in deposing the Ottoman Empire and achieving Arab independence, he was also responsible, albeit indirectly, for the implementation of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided the Levant between France and Britain. The agreement is still held by many as evidence of European colonial treachery.

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<sup>81</sup> Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, Loc. 8149-56.

<sup>82</sup> Cited in *Lawrence of Arabia: the Man and the Myth*.

The Arab Orient, into which Lawrence made his first steps on a scholarly expedition to study the Crusaders' ruins preserved in the museum of the 'Unchanging East', had now changed beyond recognition. Lawrence himself would dwell on this irony in an amusingly titled essay, 'The Changing East', which he published in *The Round Table* journal in 1920: 'A picture-writer once coined a phrase, "The Unchanging East", and Time has turned round and taken revenge upon him. The East is to-day the place of change – of changes so great and swift that in comparison with it our Europe is standing still'.<sup>83</sup> The 'picture-writer' may well be Lawrence's allusion to himself: he was equipped with a camera and a tripod to photograph the Crusaders' citadels in Syria. The passage is, nonetheless, a clear (perhaps ironical) acknowledgement of the reality of the change in the East and his 'masquerade-aided' role in effecting it.

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<sup>83</sup> T.E. Lawrence, 'The Changing East', cited in A.W. Lawrence, *Oriental Assembly*, p. 7.

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