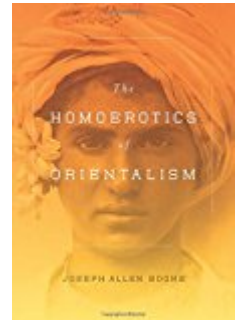




Joseph A. Boone. *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 537 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-15111-5.



Reviewed by Robert Aldrich

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Commissioned by Chiara Beccalossi (University of Lincoln)

In 1995, Joseph Boone published an intriguing article with the subtitle "The Homoerotics of Orientalism," and over two decades his research has grown into this substantial and fascinating book. Boone's volume is solidly grounded in travelogues, fictional and factual accounts (and those lying in between), and imagery, both that produced by Arabs, Turks, and Persians, on the one hand, and by Westerners, on the other. He discerns a major current of homoeroticism that runs through both Islamic life and letters and through Orientalism (in the old, academic meaning and Said's gloss on that term). There may have existed an enduring European fantasy about homosexual life in the Middle East and North Africa, but Boone shows that there was also a reality behind such dreams and nightmares: sex and the aesthetic representation of same-sex experiences.

Boone's work is especially rich in material about Persia and Ottoman Turkey. Indeed, he explores a large archive of writing about indigenous male same-sex attraction in the Middle East, as

well as in early voyagers' accounts of the region. He has unearthed a large corpus of miniature paintings with blatantly homoerotic themes, including stunning images of men and their partners communing in gardens, coffeehouses, and hamams--and he has been well served by his publisher in the reproduction, in black-and-white and in color, of these images. They give the lie to any declaration about the absence of a tradition of homosexual sex and love in the precolonial Islamic world, and they constitute some of the most stunning works in any gallery of homoerotic art. Boone also brings to light a number of interesting later works and their homoerotic texture, such as the multivolume (but unfinished) encyclopedia written by the Turk Resat Ekrem Koçu in the mid-twentieth century.

The variety of manifestations of homoeroticism is amply clear. Persian miniatures portray sex between older and younger men and between those of similar age; they depict a whole repertoire of sexual acts and courtship behaviours; and they aestheticise the practice of sodomy. Such va-

riety continues: in more recent imagery, a sheik sodomises Uncle Sam in one Western image, while homosexuality has begun appearing on the Arab cinema screen, and some tantalizing homoerotic photographs have been found in the ruins of a Taliban stronghold.

The tone of *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* is measured and thoughtful. Boone provides a salubriously critical reading of Foucault, who cared little about the non-European world, and Said, who expressed little interest in homosexuality. While never denying racist and colonialist undertones in commentaries on Middle Eastern culture, Boone is happily more concerned to identify and discuss homoerotic themes in literature and art than to fabricate an overarching political strategy behind them. Among these tropes are the beautiful boy, the hypervirile man, the effete pasha, and the eunuch.

Some of the material and figures that Boone covers is relatively well known from earlier studies, such as Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting of a boy snake-charmer and André Gide's experiences in and writings about North Africa. Some other well-known figures nevertheless get rather short shrift; there is very little on E. M. Forster, for instance. By contrast, Boone gives merited attention to such little-known writers as Carl Klunzinger and Jacob De Haan. There are two rich chapters on Egypt, though none on Algeria or Morocco. Boone usefully extends his discussion to present-day figures who have perpetuated or sometimes subverted the homoerotics of Orientalism, including directors of porn movies.

Furthermore, Boone subtly considers the relationship between various parts of the Islamic world, showing how Persia became the Orientalized Other of Arab-Islamic culture. He intriguingly identifies a strand of homoerotic Occidentalism in the way that handsome Franks and Greeks were depicted, and lusted after, in the Islamic world from early modern encounters onwards; this merits further study.

Any reviewer can quibble with certain aspects of a work. Some Muslims will no doubt strongly reject Boone's documentation altogether, maintaining that same-sex love should be viewed only as a metaphor for the yearnings of the human for the divine. The absence of a bibliography in the book is regrettable, despite the extensive notes. French titles and phrases could have been proofread more carefully. A few figures might have been added to the contemporary authors and artists; the cosmopolitan Ali al-Jabri is an example. To a historian, Boone's presentation of individual works of literature or art, and the bringing together of ones from very different genres and backgrounds, occasionally seems a bit divorced from the specific social, cultural, and political circumstances in which they emerge. Occasionally, Boone shies away from the personal lives of his subjects and the question of their sexual proclivities and experiences. He never really explains—but perhaps it cannot be adequately explained—why there is such a rich vein of homoeroticism in what he terms "Islamicate" culture and why Westerners were so eager to escape its menace or participate in its pleasures.

The Homoerotics of Orientalism will itself provide much pleasure and many insights for readers. It puts forward convincing arguments and displays a deft handling of an impressive variety of written and pictorial materials. Other than for the occasional bit of jargon ("diegetic" is one of Boone's favourite words), the work is agreeably written with a good momentum in the narrative. The book contributes valuably to a growing literature on the non-Western world that helps scholars reconceptualize the global history of homoeroticism and homosexuality, and shows that same-sex encounters provided a significant theme in international cultural exchange. The attacks on homosexuals that have taken place in many Muslim circles in the last years, not to mention aggression against women and women's sexuality, also point to the need to understand the ex-

istence and acceptance of varied sexual cultures in the Muslim world.

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