

## The House of an Eccentric: Pierre Loti's conflicted recreation of the "Orient"

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Seen from the street, Loti's<sup>1)</sup> house in Rochefort is quite unremarkable. Once inside, however, visitors are confronted with an astonishingly remodelled interior of exotically themed rooms. This transformation of the house began in 1877 with the creation of the 'chambre turque' (Turkish room), and then continued for more than 40 years. Loti saw the house as an ongoing work of art, but it also functioned for him as a symbol of security. In his *Journal intime* in 1881, he describes it as 'mon logis fixe, [. . .] celui où je suis né, celui où, de temps en temps, je reviens me poser' (my fixed abode, [. . .] the place where I was born, and where, from time to time, I come back to rest) (Quella-Villéger: 344). Its importance to him is clear, but it is also of note that he only stayed there occasionally. It was his family, his mother, his wife, and various female relatives, who were permanently in residence. Alain Quella-Villéger remarks that 'cette maison semblerait faite pour un égocentrique plus que pour une famille' (this house would seem to be made for an egocentric person rather than for a family) (361). Not only did these women have to cope with the almost permanent presence of builders doing the alterations that Loti had dictated, but were forced to live in the discomfort of a house with no electricity or gas, and with toilets situated at the bottom of the garden. To devote so much time and money to the creation of so many elaborately decorated rooms, and yet to do nothing to improve on such conditions of discomfort and inconvenience suggests a conscious decision

by Loti to preserve the primitive nature of the amenities. A simple explanation is to be found in his horror of the modern. However, the fact that he himself spent very little time there, and forced such avoidable misery on his family, would seem to argue a more complex explanation.

To understand Loti's passion for architectural alteration and interior decoration in the context of his ambivalent relationship with his family, it is useful to look at theory that links attitudes to housing with the creation of gender roles. Mark Wigley analyses this relationship and 'the patriarchal construction of the place of woman as the house' with reference to Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (Wigley: 330). Alberti describes architecture's complicity in the exercise of patriarchal authority by confining women 'at the greatest distance from the outside world while men are to be exposed to that outside' (Wigley: 332). This follows the logic of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, which naturalizes and spatializes gender: 'The gods made provision from the first by shaping [. . .] the woman's nature for indoor and the man's nature for outdoor occupations' (Xenophon: 229). No possibility is given for 'any confusion of this gender-space division', as the 'spaces literally produce the effect of gender, transforming the mental and physical character of those who occupy the wrong place' (Wigley: 334). According to Xenophon 'compelled to sit indoors, the body becomes effeminate and the mind loses its strength' (Xenophon: 213). Wigley shows how in this way 'spatial confusion is explicitly understood as sexual and is identified with femininity' (Wigley: 335). The implications are, however, even more far-reaching, since 'being in the wrong place is not just the feminization of the man, but the feminine per se.' Women do not become masculine if they go outside the house, they become 'more dangerously feminine', as they are now 'implicitly sexually mobile.' The house controls their sexuality. Women can only maintain self-control by 'obedience to external [laws]', such as marriage. The house is of course central to the domestication of marriage, and with its involvement

in 'the production of the gender division', acts as a mechanism of patriarchal control (Wigley: 336).

This view of the role of the house as feminising men who stay inside is interesting with regard to Loti/*Loti*, as he resented the overly protective way in which his family treated him as a child. *Loti* describes this feeling in *Le Roman d'un enfant* (*The Novel of a Child*): 'je poussais comme un petit arbuste trop soigné en serre, trop garanti, trop ignorant des halliers et des ronces...' (I grew like an over-cared for little shrub in a greenhouse, too protected, too ignorant of thickets and thorns...) (*Enfant*: 64). The view of the house as a means of controlling female sexuality is also applicable. Loti's 'maison natale' (house of birth) and the women in it are representative of traditional morality to him. This idea is subverted by the alterations he made to the house, introducing the depravities of the outside world into what had been an enclosed and secure one. Quella-Villéger comments on this strange intrusion of the Orient into previously sheltered lives, citing the occasion when Loti enlisted his family's help in making the Oriental decoration for the 'chambre turque': 'Etrange scène que cette intrusion de l'exotisme ensoleillé sous leurs doigts habiles à manier des étoffes sombres !' (The strange scene of this intrusion of sun-soaked exoticism under fingers skilled in handling sober materials!) (Quella-Villéger: 349-50). The intrusion is indeed incongruous as the strictly Calvinist women were being deliberately confronted with images evocative of exotic sexuality.

The idea of the house as a protection against dangerous sexuality also extends to Loti's treatment of space elsewhere. In *Aziyadé* his sexual liaisons take place outside in cemeteries, and initially with *Aziyadé* herself in a boat, erotically described as 'un lit qui flotte plutôt qu'une barque' (more of a floating bed than a boat) (*Romans*: 22). When *Aziyadé* finally escapes from her husband's harem and comes to live with *Loti*, however, she is hidden away in his house, which is in effect

another harem protecting her from the outside world. The house guards against unwanted visitors and no prying eyes can penetrate within:

Point d'intrus d'ailleurs, point de visiteurs inattendus ou déplaisants. Si quelques Turcs me visitent discrètement quand je les y invite, mes *amis* ignorent absolument le chemin de ma demeure, et des treillages de frêne gardent si fidèlement mes fenêtres qu'à aucun moment du jour un regard curieux n'y saurait pénétrer.

Les Orientaux [...] savent seuls *être chez eux* ; dans vos logis d'Europe, ouverts à tout venants, vous êtes chez vous comme on est ici dans la rue, en butte à l'espionnage des amis fâcheux et des indiscrets ; vous ne connaissez point cette inviolabilité de l'intérieur, ni le charme de ce mystère.

Moreover there were no intruders, no unexpected unpleasant visitors at all. If a few Turks visit me discreetly when I invite them, my *friends* are completely unaware of the way to my house, and wooden lattices cover my windows so faithfully, that at no moment of the day would a curious look be able to penetrate it.

Oriental [. . .] know how to be *at home*; in your European houses, open to all comers, you are at home as we are here in the street, the object of the spying of annoying friends and the indiscreet; you have no idea at all of this inviolability of the interior, nor of the charm of this mystery.

(*Romans*: 80)

Having gained possession of Aziyadé, *Loti* maintains control of her through the house. The house in Rochefort copies this Oriental secrecy, looking in on the courtyard, but not at the street outside. It is, as Quella-Villéger puts it, 'une maison pleine de recoins et de secrets, où le jour n'entraît que voilé' (a house full of nooks and secrets, where daylight entered only veiled) (Quella-Villéger: 362). In the light of his stated desire for privacy, it is ironic that, for *Loti*, the house in Rochefort

served as a venue for his themed parties in which it was thrown open to hundreds of guests. If the house is seen as a mechanism of patriarchal control, controlling and protecting the women inside, Loti must be seen as subverting this system through his introduction of symbols of exotic sexuality, and his deliberate opening of its doors to all comers. The contradiction inherent in the opening up and display of a house whose Oriental design suggests it should remain closed is reflected in Loti's dissatisfaction with his creation of the 'chambre turque': 'Ce n'est pas l'Orient, et ce n'est pas davantage le foyer ; ce n'est plus rien. Je regrette à présent d'avoir détruit ce qui existait avant, [ . . . ] qui était plein des souvenirs de mon enfance' (It isn't the Orient, and it is no longer home ; it is no longer anything. Right now I regret having destroyed what there was before, [ . . . ] which was full of memories of my childhood) (*Nouvelles*: 48). The guilty feelings at having destroyed cherished memories, and at having replaced them with an image of the eroticised Orient, are indicative of a masochistic urge, but the dissatisfaction with the Oriental effect is rooted in the contradiction of making a display of what is, in essence, the very antithesis of such exhibitionism.

Wigley shows how the role of architecture becomes 'explicitly the control of [women's] sexuality' as the house functions as a 'system of surveillance' (Wigley: 336). He cites Alberti's comparison of the man of the house to a spider sitting alert and watchful in the centre of his web: 'Let the father of a family do likewise [ . . . ] so that all are directed by him and by him attached to secure foundations' (Alberti, *The Family*: 206). This, however, creates an ironic contradiction, as the man of the house 'cannot simply occupy the centre of his web, the interior of the physical house, without losing his masculinity. The woman stands in his place' (Wigley: 339). Without the woman to oversee his home, the man of the house cannot with confidence engage in his more public life outside. His wife, in this sense, becomes guardian and overseer of his property, ironically assuming some of his masculine

virtues – and is ‘given command over the interior spatial order.’ She is herself, however, one of the possessions that the house contains, and her containment is a requisite of her empowerment.

In Loti’s case, his house was left in the control of his mother and family. He took control of the house by redesigning it, but only visited from time to time, content in the knowledge that it would be kept in order whilst he continued his wanderings. The women were left in charge, but the Oriental rooms served as a constant reminder of whose house it really was. Loti saved the family home from being sold, giving his family financial security, but in so doing established authority over them. They were able to keep their home, but were subsequently accorded a different, subservient status within it. Their independence came at the price of this transfer of authority, their ‘empowerment’ only being possible through their dependence on him. The redesigning of the house, with its emphasis on the exotic rather than the practical, symbolises this power-relationship.

Aziyadé’s position with regard to *Loti* is also a subservient one, and is symbolised through the way in which she is treated as a possession, and hidden away in the house in Eyoub. When *Loti* finally decides to leave he disposes of his belongings, an act symbolic of the cold disposal of Aziyadé. His emptying of the house makes her position shockingly clear: ‘Quand Aziyadé vint, elle trouva des murailles nues, et tout en désarroi ; [ . . . ] elle ne put [ . . . ] supporter l’aspect de cette chambre dénudée, et fondit en larmes’ (When Aziyadé came, she found bare walls and all in disarray; [ . . . ] she couldn’t bear the way this empty room looked, and burst into tears) (*Romans*: 106). *Loti* has disposed of all his possessions, and Aziyadé’s turn is next. The house was a symbol of their relationship which is now quite obviously over. Faced with this humiliation, Aziyadé temporarily reasserts herself, in an act of deliberate rebellion against the confinement that effectively reduced

her to the status of being just another belonging. She defies all conventions by discarding her veil and opening up the house to hold a wild dancing party, inviting total strangers and even serving alcohol: 'On n'avait jamais vu dans le saint quartier d'Eyoub pareille scène ni pareil scandale' (No one in this holy part of Eyoub had ever seen such a scene or such a scandal). In throwing away all caution, Aziyadé is reasserting herself. She is no longer hidden away behind a veil in a shuttered house. The danger that is invoked is from the offence her conduct gives to Muslim morality, and her defiance of this can be seen as a defiance also of *Loti*. His treatment of her as a possession, to be contained in his house, parallels her treatment in her husband's harem, and seems to be a result of *Loti*'s attempts to assimilate himself into Turkish society and Islam. In *Loti*'s house she is free to live out the romantic dream of a life together, but only for as long as he is inclined to grant her this pleasure. When he takes this dream away, she reacts against her submissive role, rejecting the patriarchal control that the house and her veil represent. That *Loti* does not attempt to stop her, in spite of the danger he emphasises, shows his recognition of the fact that he is impotent to do so. In breaking out of her confinement, Aziyadé has, at least temporarily, achieved a real form of empowerment.

The role the house plays in *Loti*'s exploitative treatment of Aziyadé closely parallels that outlined by Wigley, and would seem to follow the same pattern of patriarchal control. It varies from this, however, in two ways. Firstly, in creating his own harem and behaving like a Muslim, he seems to be adopting a very similar patriarchal attitude to that displayed in Alberti's model. This is not the case though, as he is actually subverting Muslim morality, by stealing another man's wife, and installing her in his house as his mistress. He is making a mockery of the moral order he appears to be following. This is very apparent in his final inability to control Aziyadé, and in his fear of the scandal she causes. In subverting the moral order, he loses the power over her that this order would otherwise confer on him.

He is powerless to stop her protest, and vulnerable to the retribution that may follow once the neighbours realise how far he has betrayed their values. He has succeeded in denying himself power as a man in their society, and as a man over Aziyadé, whilst inadvertently empowering her within their relationship. Secondly, whilst *Loti's* behaviour could be interpreted as representative of a callous colonialist version of patriarchal control/exploitation, this can also be seen to be a part of his masochistic urge. Within this compulsion of moral masochism, paternal authority is being rejected, and to quote Gilles Deleuze, '*Ce n'est pas « un enfant », c'est un père qui est battu*' (*It isn't "a child", but a father that is beaten*) (Deleuze: 59). When applied in a colonial context, it is colonialist authority that is being rejected and metaphorically beaten. The overwhelming guilt *Loti* suffers from for his selfish treatment of Aziyadé acts as a punishment of the patriarchal colonialist exploitation of the Orient that is typified in his rejection of her. *Loti's* possession of Aziyadé and subsequent discarding of her are symbolised in the shuttered secrecy of the house and in his emptying of it. This provides a link with the house in Rochefort, and the role his family plays, as his domination of them through control of the house acts as a similar guilt-inspiring mechanism. The assumption of the role of man-of-the-house involves the introduction of the eroticised exotic, and thus also implicitly invites condemnation. In this way, whilst *Loti* can on one level be seen to be following the patterns of patriarchal control, when this is viewed in the light of his masochistic urge, his behaviour with regard to houses and the control they represent becomes quite the opposite.

Wigley also discusses Alberti's theory of harmony, to show how architecture represents social order through 'the general control of the feminine' (Wigley: 352). The rhetoric of architecture becomes that of 'husbandry'. An architect must 'consider whether each element has been well defined and allocated its proper place [...] to take care that nothing is included except what is choice and well proven'



(Alberti, *Building II*: 37). The idea of unnecessary excess as expressed here 'is understood as sensuality, an improper pleasure to be regulated and displaced into the intellectual pleasure of the regulations themselves' (Wigley: 352). In this way '[the] building itself is subjected to the economic regime it enforces. Just as the house is a mechanism for the domestication of women, it is itself understood as a domesticated woman' (352-3). The house is seen as feminine, and its 'excesses [must be] controlled by the architect' (353). For Alberti, 'the masculine mind of the architect [...] controls the feminine body of the building', a 'beautiful body [which] is "regulated" in a way that immediately "arouses" [. . .] the reasoning faculty of the mind' (Alberti: *Building, Book IX*, 302). Arousal 'comes from the order that controls the sensuous surface.' The dignity created originates in the architect's 'law, [so that] the beauty he desires is his own.'

To see the house as not only a means of controlling the women it contains, but as a feminine body itself, is also useful in understanding *Loti's* obsessive interest in the 'décors' (interiors) he creates. In *Aziyadé*, *Loti* describes the pleasure he feels at being able to blend into the Oriental scenery, 'être soi-même une partie de ce tableau plein de mouvement et de lumière' (to be oneself a part of this tableau full of movement and light) (*Romans*: 49-50). However, both his costume and the 'tableau' must conform to an idealised image. In *Suprêmes Visions d'Orient* this is made clear, when *Loti* describes the care he takes in the decoration of his Spartan lodgings. He wants something to decorate the bare walls, but his servant Osman politely tries to remind him 'qu'il y aurait peut-être des emplettes plus pressées' (that there may perhaps be more urgent purchases to make) (*Suprêmes*: 90). They have nothing to wash in, but for *Loti*, Oriental authenticity takes precedence over practicality. The sense of priorities that leads him to accept such discomfort is summed up in a concise dismissal of Osman's concerns: 'Il n'y a d'urgent que le décor. Apprends que l'on peut toujours se passer du nécessaire et du convenu' (The only urgent

thing is the decor. Learn that one can always do without what is necessary and conventional) (90-91). This desire for authenticity echoes his reluctance to add modern conveniences to his house in Rochefort. The ‘décor’ must correspond with his preconceived image. That this image is an idealised one is of central importance. He is showing what he feels the Orient should be like. This control through representation is, as Edward Said has shown, illustrative of how Orientalist attitudes consider the Orient to be ‘incapable of defining itself’ (Said: 301). Both the house, and the Orient it incarnates, are made desirable through their subordination to Loti’s control. They are, in essence, treated like ‘domesticated [women]’, and it is through the imposition of Loti’s ‘husbandry’, that they become attractive. Control of the house and the Orient it represents is, of course, another example of how Loti behaves in what appears to be a classically paternalistic authoritarian way. Through his exotic transformation of the house, and the destruction of the childhood memories that this entails, he is, however, inspiring feelings of guilt. It is just this paternalistic attitude for which he is asking to be metaphorically beaten.

An interesting parallel with Loti’s creation of an artificial Orient in his house in Rochefort, is seen in Huysmans’ *A Rebours (Against the Grain)*. The main character Des Esseintes finds imagination to be far superior to anything nature has to offer. Staying in his house, in his own carefully constructed world, he avoids the inevitable disappointment that venturing outside will bring. *Loti’s* experience is remarkably similar. Disappointment inevitably marks his descriptions of places when they do not correspond to his idealised image of them. Des Esseintes expresses his disillusion when faced with his discovery on a rare excursion to the outside world saying that Holland is ‘un pays tel que les autres’ (a country just like any other) (Huysmans: 182), echoing Loti’s frustration with the spread of a Westernisation, which renders everywhere the same. In his house, such irritations do not have to be faced. Loti is in ‘son propre univers : orient recréé, histoire maîtrisée, Asie revue et

corrigée' (his own universe : a recreated Orient, history controlled, Asia seen again and corrected) (Bault: 15). The Orient, which in modernising is beginning to assert itself, can be kept under control only within the realm of his artificial creation. This control is, of course, merely an illusion. Des Esseintes is eventually so weakened by his withdrawn lifestyle that he is obliged to leave his house and return to society. Loti similarly was unable to spend much time in his house. Staying in the house leads to the weakening and feminisation that Alberti refers to. The initial control of the house becomes reversed, with the house taking away the authority of the master. For Loti, the house, and the Orient it embodies, ends up reasserting itself by weakening him through his too close association with it. By desiring the mother that this Orient represents, he has to identify with himself as he once was, in other words as a feminised little boy. The dominant position in this relationship is with the phallic mother, meaning that the Orient he seemed to be controlling through his design of the house has reversed the relationship and reassumed the authority he was attempting to deny it.

That ultimate authority over the house and in the relationship it symbolises remains with his mother, is suggested by the fact that Loti, in spite of all the exotic alterations he made to the house, never touched his mother's room. Loti's own room also fits in with this idea. The startling contrast it presents with the rest of the house is captured by Alain Buisine: 'Au sein de toute cette magnificence [. . .] subsiste encore une autre pièce sans rien d'historique ni d'exotique, des plus austères en vérité, la chambre-cellule de Pierre Loti, extrêmement simple, dépouillé, monacale. Murs blanchis à la chaux, absolument nus' (In the heart of all this magnificence [. . .] still remains another room with nothing historical or exotic about it, in truth very austere, the room/cell of Pierre Loti, extremely simple, bare, as in a monastery) (Buisine: 212). These two privileged rooms, the one a shrine to his mother and the other a simply furnished bedroom reminiscent of the Calvinist upbringing

he was given, would seem to symbolise an essentially unchanged mother/son relationship. No matter what he does to rebel against her, as symbolised by the exotic transformation of the rest of the house, the importance attached to these two rooms suggests that Loti ultimately remains in the same position in relation to her that he occupied as a boy. His creation of exotic ‘décors’ for his house as a grown man merely echoes the elaborate and time-consuming decoration of his toy ‘Peau-d’Ane’ (Donkey-Hide) theatre as a boy, the two processes differing only in scale. Both represent the same escapist urge, but it is an urge that remains firmly within the sphere of maternal domination.

## Notes

- 1) To avoid confusion over identity in the use of names, ‘Loti’ will be used to indicate the position of implied author and public persona, and ‘*Loti*’ to designate his protagonist/narrator. All references to a cited text will appear after quotations; passages without page reference are from the last-cited page. All translation and ellipses are mine.

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Pierre Loti transformed his house in Rochefort into a very personal museum, styling each room after a different country in an attempt to preserve images of his experiences and love affairs in far-flung corners of the world. Using theory that links attitudes to housing with the creation of gender roles, I analyse the unconscious motives that lie behind the creation of Loti's 'chef d'œuvre' in Rochefort and the portrayals of houses throughout his work. I argue that an understanding of these motives can be used to reconcile the often contradictory attitudes he displays towards his family and his exotic/erotic memories of his travels. The house becomes a symbol of apparently contradictory urges, transgressive desire for the Orient becoming inseparable from expression of love for his mother and the cherished childhood memories she embodies. The contradiction inherent in this is explained in a masochistic urge, through which he deliberately transgresses his mother's moral code in order to arouse the feelings of guilt that are an essential part of his experience of desire. His Oriental love affairs and redecoration of the house in Rochefort are manifestations of this deliberate transgression, and I argue that it is for this behaviour, representative of Western sexual exploitation of the Orient, that he unconsciously wants to be beaten. Whilst Loti's behaviour may appear to be exploitative, and his house may seem to be an example of typical exoticism, in symbolic terms such behaviour and the house that embodies it, themselves become an attack on the attitudes that they apparently represent.